









Prologue

Chapter 1: Flarette

Interlude

Chapter 2: Pandæmonium's Pinky

Interlude

Chapter 3: Governor of the Fourth

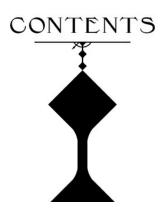
Interlude

Chapter 4: Ability Control

Interlude

Chapter 5: Pure Concept "Time"

Epilogue





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The Executioner and Her Way of Life 7

Mato Sato

TRANSLATION BY IENNY MCKEON & COVER ART BY NILITSU

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SHOKEI SHOUJO NO IKIRU MICHI (VIRGIN ROAD) Vol.7

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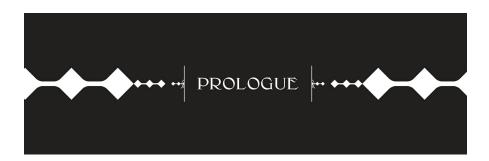
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Contents

| Cover |
|-----------------------------------|
| <u>Insert</u> |
| <u>Title Page</u> |
| Copyright |
| <u>Prologue</u> |
| Chapter 1: Flarette |
| <u>Interlude</u> |
| Chapter 2: Pandæmonium's Pinky |
| <u>Interlude</u> |
| Chapter 3: Governor of the Fourth |
| <u>Interlude</u> |
| Chapter 4: Ability Control |
| <u>Interlude</u> |
| Chapter 5: Pure Concept "Time" |
| <u>Epilogue</u> |
| Afterword |
| Yen Newsletter |



The girl had a dream alone.

The world was silent, so very quiet that one could even hear the beating of the wings of the butterflies gathered on her black hair. She was all alone, eyes closed, dreaming up visions on the backs of her eyelids.

The girl was crouched, a pure white blade sticking from her chest. The fabric around the blade had crumbled away, revealing a glimpse of soft skin.

The Sword of Salt.

The girl's time had stopped to resist the fragment of the white blade that reduced everything it cut to salt. She wasn't dead, nor was she alive. Her mind was closed off just outside of time, her eyes closed tight in a silent and tranquil world where nothing could harm her.

Yes, she was undoubtedly dreaming.

Waiting for when she would reawaken.

Akari Tokitou was surely lost in a lucid dream.



A chilling wind blew down the main street running from the station.

Throughout the town, the air was bitingly cold. All the passersby who walked the cobblestone street wore heavy overcoats, and the occasional Guiding carriage carrying some wealthy Noblesse let off Guiding Light as it raced past. While some snow still lingered on the sides of the road, the harsh weather that might have buried the street in snow had passed.

A young girl poked her head out onto the busy main street from a connecting alley.

"It's gotten quite a bit warmer."

The girl commenting on the weather in this northern town looked no older than twelve or thirteen.

Though it was still cold enough to set most people shivering, it was warm enough for the locals to know that spring approached. The girl was a member of the world's third and most populous caste, the Commons. Her arms and gloved hands held a large cylindrical object. She walked with thickly padded boots slicked in a snow-thawing substance.

The object she carried was a Guiding vessel for heating a home, a necessity for life in the northern part of the continent. Once connected with the Guiding Force lines that ran to each home from the earthen vein, a single one of these vital objects could heat an entire home.

Her family's heating vessel had been malfunctioning for the past few days, so the girl had taken it apart and attempted to fix it, only to break it entirely. Although they had spares in case of emergency, her mother still gave her an earful for breaking the expensive Guiding vessel. As penance, she was told to bring it to a workshop to get it fixed, and now she was lugging the considerably heavy Guiding vessel down the road.

Barely ten minutes had passed since she left, and she was already running short of breath. Lugging the tool around was an onerous burden for one small girl.

Of course, that was part of the punishment. Since the girl's attempt at disassembling the Guiding vessel was the reason it was broken, she could hardly complain. Thus, she carried the heavy thing as best she could while trudging down the street.

Unfortunately, the main street was more than a little crowded. No great event had brought the townspeople out of their homes. Rather, since winter was near its end, more tourists were arriving to see the sights.

Identifying an outsider by their clothes was easy for a local. There were two main variations: those who'd underestimated the north's low temperatures, and those who'd clearly purchased as much warm gear as they could find in the central part of the continent.

"The central folks must have lots of time on their hands to come all the way through the Wild Frontier when they're not even on a pilgrimage," the girl grumbled.

If you looked up outside, you'd see the sky. Whether sky blue, cloud white, sunset red, or night black, everyone understood that if you gazed upward, you'd see the sky.

However, that assumption didn't hold true in the north.

"What's so fun about looking at that stupid thing?"

In the north sky, the only thing visible overhead was a giant sphere surrounded by flowing white liquid.

The luminous white sphere moved across the sky with the leisurely pace of a heavenly body. Although the movement was too slow to recognize by tracking it constantly, it was apparent when comparing the sphere's position by the hour.

This one passing over the girl's town wasn't the only sphere known as Starhusk. There were seven in total, circling in the sky above the northern continent in an elliptical orbit. According to one excitable researcher, their route followed the heavenly vein.

While the spheres of Starhusk were remarkable enough to attract tourists, the girl wasn't impressed or interested. They had been floating above all her life, and frankly, she was sick of looking at them. Her local errand was far more important to her than some globes that existed for no readily apparent reason.

"You know, it'd be a waste just to drop it off and leave. This time I'll get them to show me how it's done. Maybe they'll even make me an apprentice!"

The girl had long been interested in the occupation of conjuring engineer. In fact, she was interested in conjuring in general, but a Commons girl hoping to become someone capable of such things would know many rivals in the Faust and Noblesse. Conjuring was a difficult profession with high prerequisite qualifications and few job opportunities, which meant most Commons conjurers would become adventurers at best.

However, conjuring engineers were different. Their work with everyday Guiding vessels was closely linked to the Commons. While it wasn't glamorous labor, there was no shortage of demand. Between combining materials and repairing crests, being a conjuring engineer was one of the few ways a Commons citizen could be a part of the conjuring world, albeit in a backstage sort of fashion.

The girl was a regular customer at the workshop she headed for, all the more so because it was close to her home. The taciturn male conjuring engineer who ran the place treated her as an annoyance, but she carried on pestering him in hopes of laying the groundwork to eventually become his apprentice.

Even if that wasn't likely to happen today, she hoped to at least learn what had gone wrong with the heating Guiding vessel and the proper way to fix it. She would slowly but surely learn his techniques and position herself as the perfect student.

It was a flawless plan. Even as her labored breath came out in white puffs, she determinedly pushed forward. Then she heard a loud voice.

"Extra, extra! Big news! We've got a huge scoop— Ah, hey, wait, form a line... Line up, I said! Come on, single file... Ah, dammit. Fine, whatever, just take 'em all!"

People were clamoring all around the newsboy. The headline had to be

interesting. Rather than hand out the papers among the surprisingly large throng, the boy gave up and tossed them into the air.

In a bit of misfortune, one of the papers landed right on the girl's face.

"Oof!"

She shook her head to dislodge it, but the wind kept it stubbornly glued to her face. Reluctantly, the girl put down the Guiding vessel to peel the paper away.

Grisarika Kingdom in the East Declares Revolutionary Class System Reform Due to Fourth Ideology!

The headline proved to be very sensational indeed. Grisarika Kingdom was famous, even in the north. It was the biggest nation in the east and was home to one of the few royal family lines that had persisted for more than a thousand years. For such a major kingdom to side with criminals really was an upset. No wonder the paper had issued an extra edition.

Her interest piqued despite herself, the girl skimmed the article.

Rejecting the holy first caste of the Faust and steadily dismantling the second caste of the Noblesse, the kingdom claims that it will open all occupations to anyone and reconsider taboo conjurings on a case-by-case basis. The royal family has also declared protective custody of Governor Sahara, a new Fourth leader, as well as Menou, aka Flarette, a criminal wanted for the destruction of the holy land.

"The Fourth and Flarette... They're just a bunch of terrorists! What in the world is that kingdom thinking?!"

The Fourth governor and Flarette. Those scoundrels were known for their heinous crimes even in the north.

Sahara, the Fourth governor, was an especially hot topic among the Commons. The Fourth had once been scattered and reduced to a small-time terrorist group, but it had since regained its strength under Sahara. Previously, the Fourth had been an ideological group spread across the continent. Now it used Grisarika Kingdom as its base to aggressively expand as a major organization.

As for Flarette, the wanted criminal who'd temporarily brought down the holy land, there were rumors that she'd fought the Inquisitors a few months ago. One or two ships that traveled the bay linking the northern and central regions of the continent had been sunk. Supposedly, Flarette had died there, because no one had seen her since. Apparently, she'd been hiding out in Grisarika Kingdom all along.

While the girl huffed in indignation, this had nothing to do with her or her homeland. She wasn't seriously upset.

An inland sea almost entirely separated the central and northern regions. While there was a thin land route that just barely connected the two, Grisarika Kingdom was still a far-off eastern nation beyond the sea and the Wild Frontier. And since the only way to get there was by paying an obscenely high price to make the trip, it may as well have been a world away.

The girl enjoyed the news as a piece of gossip, but she still folded up the paper and stowed it in her pocket instead of tossing the extra aside. With her break ended, she heaved up the Guiding vessel and resumed her trip.

Before long, she reached the workshop that was her destination.

In a strange sight for the season, a dragonfly rested on the plain signboard that hung outside the workshop. The girl was impressed that the bug managed to stay alive when there was still snow on the ground. She entered the open workshop door with the vessel clutched in her arms.

"Hey, mister, can you fix this..."

The girl trailed off. The brusque engineer usually tinkering with a Guiding vessel was nowhere to be seen. Assuming he was in the back, the girl hurried to find him, but she stopped when she heard voices from deeper inside.

Evidently, she would have to wait her turn. The girl secretly listened in, hoping to get an idea of how long this would take.

"I thought you said you'd never come back. Don't try to tell me you're sightseeing."

"Actually, that's exactly why. I'm very interested in the Starhusk. And while I was here sightseeing, I figured I'd drop in on the talented engineer who left

such an impression on me."

"Cut the crap. Engineers with my skills are a dime a dozen. And it doesn't explain why someone like you would come around these parts."

The usually stoic man was being surprisingly talkative. And judging by the other person's voice, his visitor was a young lady.

Maybe they had a special relationship?

Being a curious adolescent, the girl couldn't help but peer in through the cracked-open door.

The engineer spoke to a young woman with plain features and a yellow mantle. Having imagined a more romantic figure, the girl felt somewhat disappointed.

"Besides, I figured you must be curious about what's going on in the east. Am I wrong?"

"...This is nothing like the equipment you brought in before. Is stuff like this common in the east these days?"

"No, I wouldn't say that. My equipment is custom-made."

Clearly, the conversation concerned Guiding vessels. The man returned an object the girl must have shown to him. It looked like a cutting instrument with an unusual grip, although the details were too difficult to make out. As someone aiming to be a conjuring engineer, the girl listened even more eagerly.

"It's still in the experimental stage, since the restrictions on technology have only recently been lifted. You're aware of the two different kinds of taboo, correct?"

"Obviously. There's the concept kind, which is way too dangerous to handle. And then there's the tech that's restricted to keep humanity from advancing too quickly."

"Correct. The east is slowly lifting bans on some parts of the latter, that's all. Dangerous taboos like Concepts of Original Sin are still strictly forbidden. Any engineer who goes against those morals is still a criminal in the east."

"Beats me who decided on those morals...but if you're telling the truth, then

easterner engineers have gotta be overjoyed. The Faust had a monopoly on good tech for too long. Thanks to you, engineers with real skills are—"

The young woman suddenly put a finger to her lips.

Immediately, the man shut his mouth. He followed the young woman's gaze to the crack in the door and noticed the eyes of an eavesdropping child.

"S-sorry...!"

Her peeping discovered, the girl shuffled sheepishly into the workshop.

The young woman inside didn't seem especially troubled by the girl's presence.

"Is this a regular customer of yours?" she asked.

"Uh, yeah. The kid lives nearby... What brings ya here?"

"R-right, um... I wanted to ask you to fix this heating vessel..."

As the girl held out the Guiding vessel, she stole a glance at the young woman. Unlike the flustered engineer, she seemed cool and collected, even smiling back at the girl.

For some reason, the girl's heart skipped a beat.

She felt something like a premonition, yet with none of the discomfort of a bad omen. The girl had never experienced this feeling before. She didn't know what to call the stirring in her heart.

"All right. Leave it over there. Come back in three days. We'll settle payment then."

"Okay..."

The girl carefully put down the Guiding vessel as instructed. She found herself watching out of the corner of her eye for a reaction from the young woman, who only watched quietly with that same gentle smile.

After placing the broken heating vessel, the girl bowed her head in thanks and left the room. As she closed the door, she looked at the young woman one last time and saw that she was still staring at her.

The girl rushed out of the workshop.

The cold outside felt more intense coming from the warmth of the workshop. Oddly enough, the girl's heart was pounding. She still felt the young woman's eyes on her for some reason. Feeling increasingly frantic, she headed home, spurred to a jog by her racing heart.

Then, as she turned the corner into an alley, she bumped right into someone.

"I-I'm s... Eek!"

Her apology quickly turned into a little shriek upon realizing who she'd bumped into.

It was a group of very out-of-place priestesses.

There were four in total. One wore indigo robes, while the other three were dressed in the white of assistants. All four wore hooded cloaks to shield them from the cold.

"Did you come from that workshop?" the priestess at the head of the group asked abruptly. The girl spied a large scar beneath the lead priestess's hood.

She was undoubtedly a holy woman of the Faust, yet she was a far cry from the gentle women who worked at the church. The girl shook her head, frightened.

"See anything strange in there?" the priestess with the scar pressed.

The girl still couldn't speak. There wasn't anything particularly threatening about the priestess's tone, yet it struck the girl with terror. The priestess seemed cold, almost inhuman, and meeting her eyes made the girl's skin prickle and her throat tighten. She felt compelled to deny everything and kept shaking her head frantically.

The scarred priestess narrowed her eyes darkly.

"Take her away. Find out what this child knows, even if you have to get a bit rough with—"

The priestess paused at the sound of footsteps.

"Good evening, gentle allies of the Common people."

It was the woman in the yellow mantle who'd been speaking with the engineer. As she stepped into view and addressed the priestesses in a friendly tone, all eyes went to her.

"I'd like to say I'm impressed you tracked me down as soon as I left Grisarika... but I couldn't help but overhear something that sounded downright wrong. You want to take her away, perhaps even hurt her? Surely, that was just my imagination."

The young woman moved closer, and as she did, her features blurred.

It was like the flickering of a Guiding lamp with a faulty Guiding Force connection. While her clothing stayed the same, a mask of light melted from her face. By the time she walked past the girl, the young woman's plain facade was gone, revealing someone new.

"The Faust would never dream of interrogating an innocent Commons child, right?"

Now her appearance was anything but ordinary. She was a beautiful young lady, with light chestnut hair tied up in a black scarf ribbon. Her almond-shaped eyes complemented the rest of her face, and their color was breathtaking.

After seeing her Guiding Force disguise fade, the girl immediately reached for the newspaper extra in her pocket.

"Making a child cry is an utter disgrace to the name of pure, noble, and strong priestesses."

Even the girl recognized the face of this young woman so unfazed by the hard glares of the priestesses.

"...Flarette."

The quiet word from the scarred priestess removed all doubt.

This was none other than Menou, Flare's successor.

She was wanted all across the continent for inflicting untold damage to the holy land. She cut a more vivid impression in person than as an image in the paper.

"You've finally left the east, then. What is your goal in the north?"

"I'm just doing a little Starhusk sightseeing. What's wrong with that?"

"Do you really have to ask? Consider the past six months. The pinky finger of Pandæmonium that escaped from the fog, the loss of the Sword of Salt, and the Mechanical Society's conjured soldiers—every time you come close to one of the Four Major Human Errors, some new change occurs."

The priestess in indigo robes pulled down her hood.

"I don't know what you want with Starhusk, but we can't let you get mixed up with another Major Human Error."

The girl heard Flarette take a sharp breath.

"Teach...?"

"Been a while. You've come a long way since you were that little nun girl."

With her hood removed, the girl saw that the priestess was a woman in her late thirties. Evidently, she knew Flarette, who looked somewhat shaken.

"Why is an instructor priestess out in the field...? What is going on with the monastery leadership?"

"The Executioners have been left in a difficult position because the worst traitor in history came from our ranks."

"A difficult position?" Flarette chuckled as though she'd heard a joke. "Yes, I'm sure it's gotten more difficult, but so what? We never had much of a 'position' in the first place. We always operated in the shadows, treated like we didn't exist. What Executioner isn't prepared to be discarded someday?"

Anger seethed from the white-robed priestesses standing behind the one Flarette had called Teach. They drew their weapons and readied their scriptures. As devout servants of the Lord, the members of the Faust had powerful crests, even in their robes. The scripture was an especially complicated and powerful conjuring tool that seemed unbelievably advanced to anyone in other castes.

Teach gestured for her subordinates to lower their weapons, even as she scowled at Flarette.

"Don't act like you're still one of us, traitor. Our deeds are nothing to be

proud of, but our lives still have meaning."

"Yes, of course. I'd never deny that."

With that, Flarette cast off her yellow mantle.

Beneath were the priestess robes from her wanted picture, although they'd been altered, possibly because of her fall from grace and pursuit by the Faust. She wore black underclothes beneath the indigo robes and small shorts. Tight garter belts around her thighs held up her high socks, lending an extra allure to her long legs.

"However, that's not enough to justify what the Executioners are."

Flarette drew a weapon from the holster on her left thigh.

Teach's eyes widened in evident surprise. "Is that...a Guiding gun...?"

"Correct."

The weapon in Flarette's hand was no ordinary Guiding gun, though.

It was a dagger with a hilt shaped like the gun's grip. While Guiding guns worked by automatically hardening the user's Guiding Force into bullets and firing them at high speeds, the weapons were useless without actual barrels.

How the strange device operated only became apparent when Flarette sent Guiding Force into it.

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

The missing barrel of the gun began to take shape, thanks to the Guiding Branch crest conjuring carved into the dagger. By changing the shape of the Guiding Force branches, the dagger with a seemingly useless gun grip turned into a Guiding gun with a glowing barrel in the blink of an eye.

The priestesses cautiously kept their distance. They had never seen this kind of Guiding gun before and wanted to gauge its power.

Flarette pointed the muzzle at them and fired.

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

The Guiding Force bullet bounced off the priestesses' barrier conjuring.

While Guiding guns were convenient, since anyone with Guiding Force could use one by pulling the trigger, they were unfortunately useless against experienced conjurers.

A bullet formed of a small bit of Guiding Force wouldn't even pierce a basic crest conjuring. In fact, if someone with a large amount of natural Guiding Force employed Guiding Enhancement to strengthen themselves, a direct hit from such a bullet would accomplish as much as a peashooter.

The bullet Flarette fired was no exception. It failed to break through the priestesses' shield. While the weapon's barrel was unusual, it was clearly no stronger than any other Guiding gun. Perhaps that was why one of the whiterobed priestesses leaped to attack Flarette.

"Wait!"

Flarette was on the move before the indigo-robed priestess could stop her subordinate.



Guiding Force flowed through the dagger that formed the core of the Guiding gun, setting a crest conjuring into motion.

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

When Flarette pulled the trigger, the gun fired a bullet infused with the properties of *Thunderclap*.

"Egh?!"

The white-robed priestess who'd foolishly assumed it was an ordinary Guiding gun she could handle with Guiding Enhancement took a direct hit. While she was stunned and vulnerable, Flarette delivered a swift kick to her forehead.

That one blow from a slender leg was enough to knock the priestess unconscious. Teach clicked her tongue at her inexperienced subordinate. Flarette's special Guiding gun could turn crest conjurings into bullets and fire them. Clearly, it wasn't a weapon to be underestimated.

"Surround her."

Even a woman down, Teach kept calm as she delivered her order. The remaining two white-robed priestesses reacted promptly. Without moving from where they stood, they opened their scriptures and worked conjurings.

Flarette moved to retreat, but Teach wouldn't allow it. She drew a rapier with her right hand and lunged with a quick thrust. Forced into close combat, Flarette drew a dagger from her right thigh. A dagger in one hand and a Guiding gun in the other made for an unusual fighting style. She used the former as a shield to parry the rapier as she fired with the latter.

Her expression unwavering, Teach expertly employed her *Barrier* to deflect the bullet while aiming for Flarette's vitals with sharp strikes. The pair appeared evenly matched.

The difference was one had allies.

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

After a few moments, the two white-robed priestesses simultaneously invoked a scripture conjuring.

Walls of pure Guiding Light erupted in front of and behind Flarette. They were using a powerful defense conjuring to block off the alley. While Teach worked to keep Flarette locked in battle with her rapier, she charged her scripture with Guiding Force. A strong thrust from her forced Flarette to block, locking their blades.

Suddenly, the battle came to a standstill. Seeing the scripture shine with Guiding Light in her opponent's hand, Flarette flashed a bitter look.

"You would really go that far?"

"At this point, taking you down with me would be an ideal victory." With that, Teach activated the scripture conjuring behind her back.

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

A bell of Guiding Light appeared. Buildings on the left and right formed the alley, while barrier conjurings closed off the front and rear and Teach's attack loomed above.

Flarette was surrounded. There was nowhere to run. Since she no longer had a scripture, she wouldn't be able to produce a conjuring strong enough to break free.

However, Teach was in range of her own conjuring.

"Die with me and pay for your sins."

Faced with an attack meant to destroy them both, Flarette pointed the muzzle of her glowing gun at the sky.

Teach furrowed her brow. Shooting the scripture conjuring with a crest-conjuring bullet wouldn't be enough to destroy it. Even for a last resort, this seemed poorly thought-out.

"...Triple Speed."

After a whisper from Flarette, the Guiding Branches that formed the barrel of her gun changed shape.

Creaking and snapping, the Guiding gun became thicker and rougher as it drew a different kind of Guiding Force from within her.

Guiding Force: Connect—Improper Communion, Pure Concept [Time]—Invoke [Decay Acceleration \rightarrow Guiding Bullet]

She pulled the Guiding gun's trigger.

A low booming sound tore through the air. The bullet from the Guiding gun fired at a far higher rate of rotation and speed than before, blowing the conjured bell to pieces.

The afterglow of the conjured phenomenon rained down in a harmless shimmer.

The inexplicable sight of a scripture conjuring being destroyed by such a weak weapon stunned the white-robed priestesses. Even Teach, the only priestess who understood what had occurred, stared in bewilderment.

"It can't be..."

The inexperienced white-robed priestesses and the spectating girl had no way of comprehending, but Teach knew the shocking truth.

Flarette had used a Pure Concept.

Pure Concept conjurings were only usable by Otherworlders. Flarette shouldn't have had access to them.

"What did you do...? What kind of taboo allows you the power of a damned Pure Concept?!"

Her shock swiftly turned to fury. No human of this world had ever managed to acquire a Pure Concept, no matter what dreadful taboos they attempted.

Not Genom Cthulha, the conqueror of the eastern Wild Frontier. Not Orwell, the fallen archbishop who once bested a dragonblight. There weren't even records of anyone achieving it during the time of the ancient civilization, the peak of humanity.

And yet Flarette had just flagrantly demonstrated the use of a Pure Concept.

"Impossible... What did you sacrifice?! What kind of price did you pay to gain a Pure Concept?!"

"...My dearest friend." Flarette's voice was quiet and cool. She pointed the

shining barrel at her opponent. "So I'm going to get her back, no matter how much *Time* it takes."

The barrel, leveled squarely at Teach, grew even larger. Since it was made with the crest conjuring Guiding Branch, Flarette could change its shape however she pleased.

"Quintuple Speed."

Teach's face turned pale when she heard these words.

There was another reason the barrel of Flarette's gun was made with Guiding Branches. No ordinary one could withstand the force of a bullet enhanced by a Pure Concept. The gun's body had to be expendable and reusable, and so it was built and altered with Guiding Force manipulation to take the perfect shape for the accelerated bullets.

If Flarette's words were to be believed, she destroyed the scripture attack conjuring by accelerating the Guiding bullet to triple speed. If she fired one at an even higher level, it might pierce through a defensive scripture conjuring, too.

"Dammit!"

Guiding Force: Connect—Rapier, Crest—Invoke [Thrust: Expansion]

The Guiding gun was now a far more terrifying weapon than any scripture conjuring. Teach quickly invoked the crest conjuring in her rapier and attacked with a diagonal cut, desperately trying to stop Flarette from firing. The rapier was enveloped by a blade of Guiding Light that extended its range as it plunged for Flarette.

However, the Guiding gun was only a diversion.

Flarette, who'd deliberately demonstrated the Guiding gun's power to destroy a crest conjuring to frighten her opponent, smoothly stepped forward. She dodged the rapier thrust and closed in on Teach, charging the dagger in her right hand with Guiding Force.

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

The crest conjuring activated as Flarette threw the dagger, and a blast of air drove it right into the shoulder of one of the white-robed priestesses. Teach, who'd been counting on backup from her subordinates, reacted a second too late.

That brief delay sealed her fate.

Before Teach could pull back her rapier, Flarette closed the distance between them, pressed the muzzle of her gun to the pit of Teach's stomach, and fired point-blank. There was no time to activate a barrier crest conjuring. Even with Guiding Enhancement, the impact was too great for Teach to stay conscious.

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"Damn you..."
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"Too slow."

The two white-robes flew into a rage at their leader's defeat, but Flarette was too much. She moved more quickly than they could react, striking each woman on the side of the head with the hilt of her dagger to knock them out.

Flarette had won without so much as a scratch. In the middle of retrieving her mantle, she suddenly looked at the girl who was sitting nearby, stunned.

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"Let's see... You're not hurt, are you?"
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"N-no."

"Thank goodness. That must have been frightening, though."

Flarette smiled brightly.

The girl got a close look at her face—perfect bone structure, long lashes framing lovely eyes. As the girl became increasingly aware of Flarette's shocking beauty, her heart pounded in her ears.

Flarette reached out and gently prodded the girl's nose.

"From now on, you mustn't let your curiosity get you mixed up with bad people like me, understand?"

Despite the warning, the young woman's attitude was incredibly gentle and kind.

With one last smile at the girl, who couldn't manage a response, Flarette

walked away.

Once she was alone, the girl finally stood, her face still flushed.

A back-alley battle. A clash between priestesses and a wanted criminal. Her pulse raced after experiencing excitement unlike anything she'd known in her normal life. Her cheeks felt warm despite the cold wind.

Before she knew it, she was walking, but not for home. Her motivated feet took her to the engineer's workshop.

The engineer was just beginning to work on the heating vessel she'd left there when she entered.

"Now what? Did you forget something or—"

"Please, make me your apprentice!" the girl shouted, bowing deeply.

"Uh... What?" The engineer blinked in surprise at the sudden plea. "Where'd this come from?"

"Duh!" The girl raised her head urgently. "If I work here, I might get to see that lady again!" Her eyes sparkled.

The man's expression hardened. "Forget it. Trust me, it's for your own good."

"I won't! I'm going to be your apprentice! Looking forward to working with you, boss!"

"Whaddya mean, 'boss'? Seriously, give up alrea— Hey, don't grab on to me!"

"I won't give up! Never! Not until you make me your apprentice! I swear it!"

The girl clung to the conjuring engineer, even as he tried to push her away.

Someday, Flarette would be in for a surprise when she saw this pair, but that is a story for another time.

Unbelievably large spheres of white liquid floated overhead.

Spheres of all sizes orbited around the largest one in the center as they traveled across the sky. The massive shapes, not unlike a planetary system in appearance, were far too large to defy gravity. If even the smallest one fell, it could easily crush an entire town.

The miniature cosmos floating in the sky made for a truly stunning sight.

"So that's the Starhusk..."

The young woman who'd defeated the priestesses in the back alley—Flarette, also known as Menou—whispered the name of the phenomenon floating overhead.

These giant spheres were, together, one of the Four Major Human Errors that had wreaked irreparable damage on this world. They made for an intimidating sight, but they actually hadn't caused any harm in recent memory. The Starhusk seemed more benign than the other three, and it was considered harmless despite being a remnant of one of the Human Errors that destroyed the ancient civilization.

However, these same spheres had once gouged a massive hole in the center of the northern continent.

Menou had always thought that disaster was the result of a Pure Concept running wild—an Otherworlder who'd become a Human Error.

But now she had a different view.

According to someone who'd witnessed the events of a thousand years ago, the floating white spheres known as the Starhusk were actually a massive weapon.

During the time of the ancient civilization, when human technology was at its peak, this conjured weapon of war was built to be even more powerful than Otherworlders, to keep them in check. It was named the Starhusk because its invoked conjuring could reduce heavenly bodies to empty shells.

Why would anyone create such a thing?

"I wonder what it must have felt like to see the future..."

Star had been the wisest of the Pure Concepts. While thinking of the person who developed the Starhusk a millennium ago, Menou turned her gaze from the sky to the path ahead.

A conjured weapon developed to outclass Human Errors might be the only way to destroy Hakua Shirakami. Menou's thoughts strayed to the mortal

enemy who shared her face as she made for the edge of town.

By fighting Teach and the other Executioners, Menou had given away her location. The priestesses would undoubtedly report in as soon as they woke up. Even if Menou had killed them, the end result would be the same. The Faust would realize something was amiss when the group's regular report didn't come in.

Killing them to buy a little extra time wasn't worth it.

"I'm not an Executioner anymore, after all."

Menou sighed a puff of white air, yet she felt no agitation or regret. She would save anyone she could and refrain from murdering anyone unless necessary. She had no desire to kill people just for her own benefit.

She would live without shame so that she could say *Good morning* with a smile when her dear friend finally woke from her sleep.

"This is the best way forward. Right, Akari?"

There was no one to reply, of course.

Carrying both right and wrong with her, Menou left town to find a woman in goggles who waited for her. The woman, who had olive-brown skin and looked to be in her early twenties, gave Menou a friendly wave.

"Heya, li'l Menou!"

The pale violet hair that came down past her waist fluttered in the wind. She was alluringly beautiful, with relaxed and youthful features. Clad in vertical-striped pants and a very short jacket, she showed a considerable amount of her bronze skin despite the bitter northern chill. A tattoo of a cog sat below her navel, an odd fashion statement, perhaps.

"I saw the whole thing, kiddo. Leave it to you to drop everything and rescue some random girl, even though we're supposed to be avoiding combat of any kind."

Despite her aggressively glamorous looks and curvaceous adult figure, the woman wore a very childlike grin as she spread her arms wide.

"You're such a nice girl, Menou! I'm so proud! Now, come on, give your big

sister a hug! Let me squeeze you and tell you what a good girl you are!"

"Thanks, but I'll pass, Abbie."

"Whaaat? You don't wanna? C'mon, let me soothe your soul, sweetie!"

Menou evaded the woman's grasp, causing her to slump dejectedly. Her name was Abbie, and she had appeared six months ago, shortly after Menou fled the holy land. At a glance, she was a gorgeous woman who happened to be a little strange. But in truth, she wasn't human at all.

She was a conjured soldier, one of the intelligent beings said to be part of an advanced form of humanity created by one of the Four Major Human Errors, the Mechanical Society.

"Honestly, I don't know why you insist on treating me like a child," Menou said.

"I'm a big sister figure, and it's my duty to treat all you kiddos like my little siblings and reward you for being good! Children are the future, you know. It's important to treat youngsters right! Don't you get it?!"

"No, and it's frankly disturbing. Even Sahara was afraid of you."

Abbie didn't seem discouraged beneath Menou's unamused look. She put a hand to her ample chest, which was sure to draw stares from men and women alike. "So you say, but you still rely on me like a big sister, Menou! I was right! I've got to coddle you! Bring it in, kiddo!"

"I wouldn't say I rely on you, it's just... You're very useful."

"Ugh, a kid treating me like a tool... Well, it doesn't feel half-bad! You can rely on your useful big sister as much as you want, little sis!"

"I'll do my best not to, thanks. This is giving me the creeps."

Half a year had passed since Abbie showed up, hanging off Sahara, and Menou's opinion of everything about her, excluding her particular talent, dropped by the day. Abbie was strangely obsessed with treating all her juniors like little siblings, to the point that her reason for helping them was "because you're fighting Hakua, who's old." It was an intense and bizarre fixation.

"Also, there are no adult dragonflies at this time of year. You ought to pick a

better creature for spying."

"Ohhh. Got it... I forgot organic life-forms have life cycles that depend on seasons and all that. I haven't gotten used to this environment yet."

Abbie scratched her cheek sheepishly.

A dragonfly rested on her fingertip. Although it wasn't noticeable from far away, one could see on very close inspection that it was actually an inorganic creation formed of cogs and other tiny parts.

It was a conjured soldier, if a very small one. The facsimile insect wiggled under Abbie's olive-brown skin and disappeared, fusing back into her.

Abbie's conjurings were of a different nature from the ones Menou used.

They were Concept of Primary Color conjurings.

These miraculous conjurings employed the purest colors in the world—red, blue, and green—as materials to produce anything imaginable. These Pure Concepts were the closest one could get to a divine creator, seemingly making something out of nothing.

"So how was the Guiding gun your nice big sister gave you? Looked like you gave it a trial run in the fight. Does it need any fine-tuning?"

"I think it should be fine as is for now." Menou patted the dagger gun stowed on her left leg through her coat. It was made from the crest dagger that had belonged to Menou's parental figure, Flare, retaining the crest functions while adding the Guiding gun functionality. "It operates well as a ranged weapon and synchronizes with the dagger crests perfectly."

It had been a little over six months since her final showdown with Flare in the holy land, and Menou had changed dramatically.

She and Akari had made a Guiding Force connection in the land of salt. Ever since, Menou had been able to tap into Akari's Guiding Force, increasing the amount at her disposal significantly. And it wasn't just her pool of Guiding Force that had been enhanced.

Menou was now able to use Akari's Pure Concept, something normally only accessible to Otherworlders.

By linking their souls together, two people could essentially become one. In terms of conjuring, Menou was now united with Akari, which meant she could manipulate *Time*. However, controlling a Pure Concept was difficult, even for someone as skilled at Guiding Force manipulation as Menou.

After some six months of trial and error, she had reached the solution—altering a dagger into a special Guiding gun.

"It seems I can control the Pure Concept well enough now. I shouldn't have to worry about it eating away at my soul."

"Heh-heh. Your big sister knows what she's doing! My work is nothing like an ordinary Guiding gun!"

Menou had first set her eyes on Guiding guns based on their ability to automatically draw out the user's Guiding Force and fire it.

This Guiding gun, altered to suit Menou, served as an intermediary to automatically pull the Pure Concept out from her connection with Akari. That way, Menou could focus on constructing the *Time* conjuring without distraction.

"At any rate, we'd better get moving. Now that I've fought with the Faust, they'll know we've left Grisarika for the northern continent. We need to get away before anyone else comes after us."

"Okay, fiiine."

Abbie's hand glowed with pure blue Guiding Light.

She pressed her glowing palm to the cog symbol on her abdomen.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Primary Blue Stone, Inner Seal Conjuration— Activate [Primary Blue, Arachnid Rider]

BOOM, BOOM... The materials drawn from within Abbie rumbled eight times, shaking the ground, until thick metallic legs reflected the Guiding Light.

"C'mere, little sis. Hop on board!"

Sitting astride the giant blue armored spider, Abbie beckoned Menou cheerfully.

Conjured soldiers created in the eastern Wild Frontier with all three Primary Colors were the only intelligent life-forms on the level of humanity, and they were highly skilled conjurers from the moment of their creation. Without being taught by anyone, Abbie and her kind could create unique Guiding vessels. They naturally absorbed materials as they grew, combined them within their bodies, and released them, allowing them to make exceptional conjured objects with far more speed and skill than any human.

Since Menou had entered the Mechanical Society in the eastern Wild Frontier in the past half a year and traveled under Abbie's guidance, she was uniquely aware of conjured soldiers' terrifying ability to create.

"You can steer, Menou, and I'll ride in back. It can be left to drive itself, too, but it's also designed so that you can command it with Guiding Force manipulation from the outside. And don't worry, your big sis will provide the materials to keep its Guiding engine running!"

"You really are awfully useful, Abbie... I need to make sure not to rely on your help too much."

"Awww, whaaat? I'll be sooo sad if you don't depend on me like a sister. Sob, sob. You're so independent that it's hard to coddle you... But kids like you make me want to convince you to lean on me so much that you'll be totally lost without me!"

As soon as Menou climbed aboard, Abbie latched on to her from behind. Her body felt no different from a human's. There was no indication of the massive amounts of material and Guiding Force contained within. It was truly a near-perfect mimicry.

The spider-shaped conjured soldier began to move. Through some feat of engineering, there was surprisingly little shaking for the riders.

Their destination was the largest sphere at the center of the Starhusk.

"It took six months to prepare for this."

The Lord had the greatest power on the continent. In truth, she was Hakua Shirakami, an Otherworlder with the Pure Concept of *Ivory*.

In her efforts to fight back against this formidable foe, Menou had joined

forces with Ashuna, the youngest princess of Grisarika Kingdom, to bring about change to ensure that the kingdom wouldn't fall into Hakua's grasp.

Menou reached up toward the sky and clenched her fist tight, as if to grab the white sphere overhead.

Her goal was somewhere in that cloudy white liquid.

"First, we're going to take the Starhusk for ourselves."

The white spheres that traversed the northern sky were one of the Four Major Human Errors, given form by making the center of the northern region float and wander through the air. They were also a superweapon from the ancient civilization. Menou and company had come here to steal the Starhusk and make it their own.

"Mm-hmm, that's all well and good, li'l Menou. But now that we're in the north, there is something I wanted your opinion about."

"What is it?"

It was unusual for Abbie to ask for another's thoughts on anything. As Menou looked at her, Abbie abruptly removed her goggles. Her irises were an unbelievably clear marine blue, while her sclerae were pure black. With her mythically beautiful eyes revealed, Abbie put a hand on her own shadow.

The hand promptly sank right into the shadow. Menou had grown familiar with this seemingly inexplicable phenomenon. She raised an eyebrow in trepidation.



With one swift tug, Abbie pulled a little girl out of her shadow like she was lifting a cat by the scruff of its neck.

"Seems like something tagged along with us. What do you want me to do with it?"

Abbie held out the girl, who looked no older than ten. The apparent stowaway wore a white kimono over a dress with three holes in the chest. She glared at Abbie with her cheeks puffed up in obvious displeasure.

"Hey. Let go of me, will you?"

"It's not like I really wanna touch you, shrimpy."

The two promptly started bickering, but Menou was in no mood to mediate.

"Mayaaa?!"

This girl was Maya Ooshima, the former pinky finger of Pandæmonium. Menou, who thought she'd left this girl behind in Grisarika with Sahara, let out a shriek at the sight of her.

Meanwhile, in the alley where Menou battled the Executioners...

A new priestess stepped onto the scene while Teach looked after the whiterobes still immobilized.

The young woman had a very austere appearance, her commonplace brown hair bound with string. She held a scripture in her left hand and carried a simply designed broadsword with a somewhat rounded tip on her back. Although its size was unusual, it was nonetheless an Executioner's blade designed for beheading. Her priestess robes had been modified to allow for freer movement, and she wore an oddly eye-catching band on her left arm. It was the symbol of an Inquisitor, a member of the Faust branch charged with meting out justice.

Taking in the sight of the alleyway, she narrowed one eye in vexation.

"You incompetent fools."

Rather than aid the injured, she gave them a sharp glare and a short insult.

"You just had to jump the gun when you learned of Flarette's whereabouts, and this is the best you can do? Did you not even have the sense to simply

watch and wait until I arrived? You so-called Executioners have an awful lot of pride for a useless bunch only good for fighting."

"Nngh..."

Teach gritted her teeth at the one-sided lecture. She was a seasoned, veteran priestess and had fought and won countless battles as an Executioner, yet now she was being scolded by a girl who looked to be less than twenty.

As humiliating as it was, she couldn't argue. Her group had launched a surprise attack without permission and failed without gaining anything in the process. The Inquisitor was right: They'd jumped the gun.

However, Teach had needed to prove herself useful as an Executioner, even if it meant acting without orders.

"Perhaps this failure will serve to show you once and for all how useless you really are. From now on, you Executioners will be under my command."

Teach bit her lower lip hard enough to draw blood at Michele's cold words.

For the past six months, Executioners had been met with nothing but cold treatment. The position of Executioner was even beginning to be dissolved, absorbed into the Inquisitors as low-level subordinates instead.

At this rate, the long-secret job of Executioner would cease to exist entirely. Feeling threatened by this development, Teach had brought her few remaining pupils on a mission to take down Flarette and prove their worth.

"W-wait. We didn't lose for nothing. We found out during the battle that her goal is related to the Starhusk, and we gained information on her weapons and abilities. If we just had one more chance, I'm sure we could—"

"That is not for you to decide. Nor I, of course." Interrupting Teach's desperate justification, Michele held out the scripture in her right hand. "Only the Lord can say."

It was true. The Lord written of in scripture was the one who guided the Faust.

"All that remains for you useless Executioners to do is to join my unit and serve the Lord's Own Army. You should be honored to serve as the Lord's hands

and feet."

"Why should we Executioners have to work together with scum like them?!"

Michele's words were so haughty that Teach couldn't stop her outburst. Being treated as a subordinate of the Inquisitors was tolerable, if only barely. Teach wasn't foolish enough to mess with the chain of command purely out of pride.

However, she took umbrage at being added to the ranks of the so-called Lord's Own Army. Its personnel were objectionable, to say the least.

"We are still Executioners, hunters of the taboo. Members of the Faust and protectors of the people! I cannot in good conscience abide the insanity of inviting the wicked to join us!"

The Lord's Own Army had formed around the newly arrived Inquisitor Michele in the past six months, and it was made up of strange members. Setting aside that the organization was led by a girl who appeared to be in her teens, the group's members were heretics. Supposedly, they'd been gathered to hunt taboos.

That was the only way to describe the people who made up this new unit. The Lord's Own Army issued reassignment orders that ignored the Faust's customs, and it even hired others from outside. Some of these newcomers were even of the sort that Executioners normally eliminated. Although the ranks of the Lord's Own Army were technically separate from the Faust for now, they already strutted around like they were superior, infuriating Teach.

Michele's expression didn't change.

"Tell me, what is taboo?"

"It's anything that causes serious harm by its mere existence!"

"Incorrect. Taboo refers to anything outside of the Lord's guidelines. Therefore, if our Lord wills it so, anyone can be made an exception."

Teach was aghast at Michele's refusal to see reason.

The two women had vastly different moral values. Normal members of the Faust believed that the Lord's words were just a convenient way of communicating the collective will of the top brass.

Yet Michele acted as though the Lord was an individual who genuinely existed. From Teach's perspective, she seemed like a zealot with far too much blind faith.

"Will you not submit and cooperate?" Michele asked.

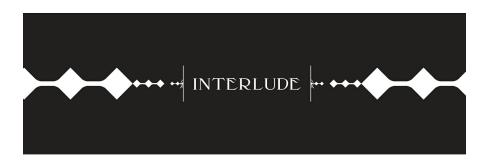
"Absolutely not! I refuse to rub shoulders with heretics and sink to the dregs of the Faust!"

"I see. Then begone from my sight. You are to live out the rest of your days in obscurity in some distant church."

With this implied promise to reassign Teach, Michele turned on her heel. An Inquisitor's authority outranked an Executioner's.

However, the flames of defiance still burned in Teach's eyes.

She glared hatefully at Michele until the young woman was out of sight.



She missed her mother so much.

The little girl could no longer tell whether she was alive or dead. All she knew was homesickness.

Her five senses had mostly abandoned her, and everything was dulled even when she was semiconscious. Her body felt in perpetual want, leaving her without the strength to pull her foggy thoughts together.

The girl was so young, yet her body had been bled dry.

As an Otherworlder, her physical form was apparently a revolutionary test subject to the researchers.

Addiction, brainwashing, mind-wiping, forced truth-telling, hypnosis...

Her body hid the possibilities of anything that could have a negative influence on the human soul and spirit. The Pure Concept that was attached to her soul possessed the rare property of consuming her very flesh. By taking pieces of her body and making conjuring adjustments, the researchers could produce all kinds of evil drugs with powerful effects without needing to do any complicated conjurings of their own, much to their excitement.

The tubes attached to her arms continuously drained her blood, and sometimes parts of her body were cut off as well. She had grown weary of screaming in agony, and she was too tired to feel the fatigue. She'd long since passed the point of wishing for death and could tell that her mind was becoming detached from her body.

Worst of all, she wasn't able to die.

The moment she died, a Pure Concept conjuring brought her back to life. Her only escape would be losing all her memories and becoming a Human Error that wouldn't understand what she was going through.

Each time she died and was revived, more of her memories vanished. Yet

right when it seemed she would be free from it all, her memories were all restored.

The people researching her Pure Concept didn't want their precious test subject to become a Human Error. They were determined to keep their endless source of materials. Unable to die or even lose her mind, the girl finally sank into total despair.

The world that tore her away from her mother was hell itself.

She seethed with hatred and anger. It grew into a deep-seated grudge, a curse.

Her negative feelings only pushed her conjurings to a new stage. The researchers' joy served to deepen her hopelessness. Even resignation and indolence only gave them access to new Original Sins.

And then, after an untold amount of time had passed...

Her eyes, ears, nose, and mouth were all covered, and all she could sense were the vibrations on her skin.

"How horrible..."

When she first heard the voice, she wasn't aware of the surrounding world. When someone freed her from her fetters, her five senses were so terrified that they refused to acknowledge anything.

Any new change meant the start of a fresh level of hell.

Differences frightened her. She only saw hope as the prelude to despair.

"Ryuunosuke." A girl clad in a sailor uniform spoke to the boy behind her with a voice that shook from rage. "Destroy this awful lab."

"Yup."

The ground shook violently.

Something shattered, and there was a sensation like the floor dropping away. As the girl began to fall, someone caught her, and she felt herself rising.

The next moment, the girl was flying. She was sitting atop something so very, very large that one look wasn't enough to see it all.

The being she rested on resembled something she'd seen in picture books.

A dragon.

It was only later that she would learn that this massive mythical creature casting a shadow on the ground was the boy transformed. The dragon carrying her on his back used his giant body to destroy the laboratory. Even the counterattacks from conjured weapons couldn't damage his scales.

"I'm sorry we're late."

She was outside. It was only upon realizing this that she opened her eyes. Her mind had finally caught up to the fact that she'd been set free.

She looked up and saw a person.

It wasn't one of those horrible people who'd been researching her. It was a girl in a sailor uniform that made her place of origin apparent.

The girl in the sailor uniform's black hair fluttered in the wind; her face was elegant and cool.

After so long, light brought tears to the freed prisoner's eyes. "I wanna go home..."

When she beheld her savior, a wish she'd long since abandoned forced its way out of her mouth.

She was sick of this place, this stupid world.

She'd been locked away, experimented on, and drained. As she clung to the girl who'd rescued her from that terrible situation, she wailed and sobbed.

"I wanna go home to my mommmyyyy...!"

She wished to return to her mother, who'd loved and needed her unconditionally.

The girl in the sailor uniform patted Maya's head gently.

"I know. You've got someone waiting for you, right?"

This became a memory she couldn't forget.

No matter how many times she used her Pure Concept, this moment

remained carved into her heart.

Even after becoming a Human Error for a time, she remembered the person she adored.

"Let's go home together."

This happened about a thousand years ago.

It was the moment Hakua Shirakami saved Maya Ooshima.

"Home...to Japan."

Undoubtedly, Hakua was Maya's hero.



Menou opened her eyes in a dream.

The first thing she saw was a somewhat dirty floor, the wax worn off here and there.

Lifting her head to better discern where she was, she saw rows of identical desks and chairs uniformly spaced in front of a lectern. Menou's mind was foggy, like she'd just woken up, as she looked around.

She was in a classroom in Japan.

Menou had never been here before, and yet there was something familiar, even nostalgic, about the imagined place.

There were no students anywhere in the classroom. Menou sat alone in the center, clad in her priestess robes. She looked and felt very out of place in the Japanese classroom. And she wasn't even a priestess anymore. Clearly, some part of her was having a hard time letting go. Menou shook her head ruefully as she touched the fabric of the robes.

Turning her gaze forward, she saw that someone was standing in front of the chalkboard. As soon as she laid eyes on the person standing at the teacher's platform, Menou was even more confident that this was a dream.

It was a tall woman with short hair the dark color of blood. She, too, was clad in priestess robes, and she was glaring at Menou.

"Yeah, you're dreaming, all right."

Had she read Menou's mind, or was she a manifestation of Menou's innermost thoughts?

The woman at the podium, Master Flare, was evidently aware that this was a dream.

"Just so you know, this version of me you see isn't a piece of the real Master

Flare or any such nonsense. There's no way my soul got mixed up with yours, either, since I never let your Guiding Force touch it. This vision is just an illusion created by your subconscious."

"Right."

This was far from the first time Master Flare had appeared in Menou's dreams.

In Menou's less than twenty years of life, Master Flare was the person she had most respected, looked up to, relied upon, clung to, and feared, even when Menou challenged her in battle and ultimately claimed her life.

Master Flare had vanished from this world.

The figure talking to her now was Menou's desire given shape. And since Master Flare was always pragmatic, this version still threw harsh reality at her pupil.

"Menou. Why do you think I still show up in your dreams?"

"Because you're very important to—"

"Nope."

A conversation within a dream was mere soliloquy. Menou's subconscious was using the figure of Master Flare to assess her situation from a neutral perspective.

"It's because you killed me after Akari Tokitou's consciousness disappeared."

As the two spoke, people returned to the classroom one by one.

They all wore different school uniforms. Menou recognized their faces, yet she didn't know a single one of their names. They were all young men and women Menou had slain before ever learning that basic quality about them.

"Unlike all the murders surrounding you right now, the fact that you killed me is yours alone to carry. It's your sin and no one else's. Not even Akari Tokitou knows."

Master Flare, who should be resting in eternal slumber in a graveyard at the western edge of the continent, pointed out the weakness in Menou's heart.

"Your sins are supposed to be yours to bear alone. That's not unique to you, either. The only person who can forgive one's sins is themselves. In the end, such transgressions are no one else's problems but your own."

Menou's sins.

She'd fought taboos and disposed of them. As an Executioner, she carried out her duty to kill innocent Japanese people who came from another world. Her actions were unfair, but not unnecessary. In truth, the powers of Otherworlders were dangerous, and if they became Human Errors, they could easily destroy whole towns.

There was a clear meaning behind the Executioners' responsibilities.

"And your point is?" Menou asked.

Master Flare was right—these were all excuses. Menou's actions were ultimately unforgivable.

"When you carry the burden of having killed, there's nothing you can do to atone. Lives that have been taken can never be returned, as obvious as that sounds. That's why I taught you that we murderers are villains—at least, I tried."

Master Flare had never been able to feel guilty about anything.

She had been the perfect Executioner. Whether she killed innocent people, her friend, or her apprentice, she was unable to feel remorse. At the same time, she'd despaired over her emotionlessness. Master Flare had not feared death, and when she died without ever being punished for her crimes, she left behind a final message that lingered like a last request, or perhaps a curse.

"Now...it's your turn..."

"You made yourself one with Akari Tokitou."

In the far west, before Menou crossed blades with her master in the land of salt, she connected her Guiding Force to that of her best friend, Akari. At the time, it was Menou's natural aptitude as a conjurer that allowed for this normally impossible connection.

"Normally, people can't unite like that. But you and Akari Tokitou have the

unusual power to join the three components of life—body, soul, and spirit—with a Guiding Force connection, temporarily making you the same human being in a sense. You were able to share your sins. For better or worse. Connecting your spirit to someone else's, having a mutual sympathy between souls...the feeling that you're not alone must have been really satisfying."

It had, in fact, been a moment of awakening for Menou, one of rebirth.

"How's it feel to have had all that and lost it?"

Menou's thoughts in the shape of Master Flare struck right where it hurt, the hole in her heart that missed its other half.

"The satisfaction you gained was only temporary. I guess it might've been different if Akari Tokitou was with you, but you left her with Momo. You never learn, apparently. Did you really think you could do anything alone?"

"I have to forge my own path. In these past six months, I've acquired tools for defeating Hakua and saving Akari."

Hakua Shirakami was the Lord of the Faust, and the strongest Otherworlder of all time.

She was a singularly dangerous individual who'd nursed a dark obsession to return to her world with Akari for a thousand years. Menou had been working with Ashuna for the past half a year to build up Grisarika Kingdom as an opposing force to help fight Hakua. Now armed with that powerful ally, Menou had come to the north to seek the power known as the Starhusk.

This had to be the right path. Fighting Hakua meant taking on the entire Faust and more. It would take a lot to deal with Hakua's impossibly strong abilities.

However, Menou acknowledged that by seeking allies, she'd also involved far too many people in this conflict.

"And what's going to happen if you continue as you are? Long ago, you walked behind me. And even that way of life was too hard for you. You don't have Akari Tokitou to share your life with or Momo to dump all your problems on. Do you really think you can keep moving forward all by yourself?"

"I can, and I will. My goal is in sight."

"Idiot." The woman with the dark red hair threw back her head and laughed. "If you continue on the route where I died, you'll only know new agony."

Menou looked up and saw that every seat in the classroom was full.

These people were lost ones from Japan, a place in another world.

She looked around the classroom again. Unlike the recurring dreams she used to have, Akari wasn't in this one. Menou was surrounded by her sins with no one to forgive her.

There was no warmth in this classroom anymore.

Without a word, the people around her began to melt away. They became a sticky black liquid that filled the classroom, creeping up to submerge Menou.

"Seeking more power never led to anything good."

Those were the last words Menou heard before she gave in to the sensation of drowning.

Knowing that this wouldn't atone for her crimes, that there was no way to make amends, she still let the vestiges of her victims twine around her and drag her down.

If suffering through hell meant that she could see her best friend's smile again on the other side, she was fine with that.

And so, Menou curled up in the dark, ready to embrace her punishment.

The sensation of her soul falling signaled Menou to wake up.

Her body spasmed as she jolted awake. It was like missing a step going down the stairs. Roused distressingly, Menou looked out the window without sitting up.

The peek of sky through the curtains was still dark. It was barely morning, with the sun yet to show its face.

"...Ugh."

Menou sighed and tugged at the fabric of her shirt. Thanks to the nightmare, she was soaked with sweat. Her nightclothes clung to her skin unpleasantly.

"I need to take a shower..."

Menou dragged herself out of bed.

She was in a house on the outskirts of the town they'd arrived in the day before. This was one of the hideouts they'd prepared throughout the continent, inherited from the Director, who originally formed the Fourth. For some reason, he was assisting Ashuna in Grisarika Kingdom.

Menou removed her clothes and stepped into the bathroom, the coolness of the tile floor sending a chill through the soles of her feet and up her spine.

She shivered; her bare skin prickled. Once she turned the tap, a hot shower rained warmth on Menou's face.

As she closed her eyes and felt the flowing water, the droplets against her skin outlined her shape. Water slid down her neck and across her rounded shoulders, moving from her shapely chest to the curve of her hips, down the perfect line of her thighs to her feet, and into the drain.

Menou relaxed, letting the water rinse away her sweat and, more importantly, her physical and mental exhaustion.

"...Y'know, you really do have a great body, Menou."

The words of her dear friend suddenly echoed in her mind.

It was a fragment from a time that had been repeated over and over. The rest of the memory played out in Menou's mind. It was a conversation they'd had while enjoying a public bath in the port city of Libelle, at the southernmost tip of the continent.

"Stop ogling me. You wouldn't like it if someone told you 'You've got a great rack' or something, would you?"

"Hmph. I don't mind if it's you, Menou!"

"Now! Please describe your opinion of my body in two hundred words or less!"

"How stupid are you?"

"Very!"

At the time, Menou had thought it was all part of an act. She'd convinced herself she was playing along, rolling her eyes at Akari's thoughtless babbling,

smiling and laughing together without a care.

Only now did Menou realize how precious those warm moments had been.

And here she was, wallowing in those bittersweet memories even though Akari was no longer at her side.

"…"

Menou wiped the steamed-up mirror clear with her palm. The uncovered surface reflected her exposed body. Without clothes or weapons, her naked self looked slim, fragile, and terribly helpless.

Droplets of water slid from Menou's reflected eyes. She chuckled sardonically.

"I always fall to pieces when I'm on my own..."

Why was she still like this, even after fighting her own parental figure to the death and emerging victorious? Though some called her Flarette, Menou could never be a true successor to someone as unshakeable as Master Flare.

No matter how much she washed or scrubbed, Menou was stained with sin.

Without her dear friend Akari, her heart lost its way quickly. Without her assistant, Momo, who Menou depended on more than anyone else, she couldn't manage to put on a brave face.

There would be no more turning back time. By defeating Master Flare, the biggest obstacle that had claimed Menou's life countless times, she'd finally escaped the three-month loop.

Menou had learned of Akari's devotion, finally joined hands with her, and made her very first best friend.

Yet after the two of them overcame so much together, the "self" that Menou encountered on the other side brought nothing but despair.

It turned out that Menou was really an artificial being, a reproduction of Hakua Shirakami, an Otherworlder who came to this world a thousand years ago.

This didn't particularly bother Menou, but how would the people she'd killed feel about this information?

She had no parents and no hometown. She was nothing but a lie. Yet despite being only an imitation of a human, she had taken lives. Now that Menou was no longer an Executioner, she couldn't hide behind the grand cause of safeguarding the world.

Menou saw the memories every time she closed her eyes. The faces of innocent victims in utter disbelief, too surprised to understand what was happening, crying that they'd been betrayed as they died.

Her old self might've been crushed under the weight of that guilt.

However, Menou had someone she needed to see again, and that kept her going despite the despair and resentment of the dead.



"...Akari."

Her one and only close friend, who was summoned from another world. Menou had chosen someone she could drag into her bloodstained life. She'd made the choice, despite herself. And miraculously, Akari chose the same thing Menou had.

The Guiding Force connection that flowed from their souls into their bodies brought down the boundary between Akari and Menou. They were able to share their lives with each other through that link. It was an experience that left Menou born anew. She was supplied with everything she'd lacked on her own and discovered a new way of life.

For a brief moment, Menou became Akari.

Now that they had shared their memories and experienced the other's life, Akari was the only one who could truly feel the weight of Menou's sins. Likewise, Menou felt Akari's courage as she rewound time repeatedly, knowing her Pure Concept wore her memories away.

Menou wouldn't hesitate to risk her life if it meant saving the girl who'd relived the same events so many times to ensure Menou lived.

Menou had three goals: Defeat Hakua, prevent any more Otherworlders from coming to this world, and save Akari.

She would remake the world into a place where she and Akari could exist together.

Not as the Executioner Flarette and the Human Error that resulted from a lost one, but simply as Menou and Akari.

Menou and her best friend would smile and hold hands. They would reclaim those precious times.

The corners of Menou's lips quirked up at the selfish wish.

"I can be surprisingly stubborn, as it turns out."

When had she become so greedy? She had trained all her life to survive alone, yet she wanted nothing more than a life with someone else. She'd strayed quite far from her master's teachings, that much was certain.

"But that's just who I am."

And that was fine.

Menou could accept her contradictions. She wouldn't lie to herself about her feelings. Menou still had plenty of life in her. No matter what came next, she would keep fighting to survive and to see Akari again.

Menou turned off the shower, smoothed back her hair, and looked at the mirror one last time.

Her own reflected image stared back at her with determination, almost like a challenge.

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"...I told you... and again..."
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"...but no thanks! In fact..."

As Menou stepped out of the bathroom, she heard snatches of an argument from the drawing room. They were shouting so loudly that it echoed in the changing room, penetrating the walls.

The voices reminded her of the inconvenient discovery she'd made the day before.

"It's always something with those two..."

Although she couldn't hear much of the conversation, she could imagine their argument all too easily.

Even Momo and Akari had managed to cooperate somehow, despite fighting like cats and dogs. However, these two were truly incompatible. Menou donned shorts and a thin tank top before opening the door to the drawing room.

"You. Can't. Have. Any. I'm going to feed these to my sweet little Menou, got that? It's not for a shrimpy old lady whose Guiding Force is connected to some nasty underworld, thank you very much."

"Excuse me? You're just a big bully. And should you really be making fun of me? I might be weak, but I won't lose to the likes of you, Abbie. The Concept of Primary Colors is a joke—all I'd have to do is touch you, and I'd win, you know."

"Grrr, you little pest! Is that a threat? This is why I hate you oldies!"

The scene was exactly as Menou had pictured. Abbie held a plate full of baked treats high in the air, while Maya grasped after them desperately.

Abbie was a conjured soldier who originated from the Mechanical Society. She was so friendly to all humans that it could be downright off-putting, but she didn't get along with Maya at all. They sniped at each other over every little thing.

In this case, Abbie must have gotten a head start and stolen the snacks that were placed in the drawing room. Still steaming from the shower, Menou walked over to where Abbie held the sweets up high and gave her a light chop to the head.

"Owwwie!" Abbie cried. But while she held on to her head and trembled, Menou knew that she probably hadn't felt any pain from something so innocuous.

"Eh... Eh-he-he-he... Even a chop from my little sister still feels like a treat!"

"That's enough out of you already."

Evidently, Abbie was trembling from joy, not pain. It was a true mystery to Menou why Abbie acted this way. Menou had met other Primary Color lifeforms during her few trips to the Mechanical Society in the past six months, and none of the others had this weird obsession with younger people.

Menou took the tray of sweets away from the creepily mumbling Abbie and handed it to Maya.

"Here."

"Oh my, Menou, going to all that trouble for little ol' me? You're too kind."

"I don't want to hear it from you, either, Maya."

Sitting on the sofa, Maya shoved a pastry into her mouth and smiled blissfully at the sweetness. Menou sat down across from the girl and crossed her legs in preparation to scold her.

"So, I wasn't able to ask you yesterday since we had to travel quickly. How in the world did you follow us here?"

Menou had never intended to bring Maya to the north. The girl was supposed

to be holding down the fort with Sahara in Grisarika Kingdom, where Ashuna could guarantee their safety.

"Oh, I just hopped into the shadow of that piece of scrap metal there." Maya pointed at Abbie. "I don't know why she didn't notice me. Maybe she's getting a little rusty? Or does that just mean that I'm officially better than her? Hehheh. It's so clever of you to pretend to scold me so you can secretly compliment me, Menou."

Menou knew that Maya could use shadows to enter and exit a separate dimension. She had been inside that place once, and the experience was less than pleasant. Now she was both disturbed and impressed that Maya had endured that place for most of Menou's journey.

Still, that could only mean one thing. Menou turned a pointed look at Abbie.

The conjured soldier should have noticed a Concept of Original Sin in her shadow.

"Abbie? Care to give your excuse?"

"I just couldn't bear to leave my most adorable little sister in the whole world alone with the garbage of the south," Abbie confessed, her expression meek. "I figured if she came with us, maybe you'd let me get rid of her once and for all."

Abbie was a clear example of honesty not always being the best policy. She was far too quick to admit her dangerous wants and motivations.

At any rate, now Menou knew how Maya had managed to follow them here. However, she still didn't know why the girl wanted to follow them in the first place.

"Well, there's nothing we can do about it now that you're here... But why did you follow us?"

"I mean, why not? I'm allowed to do whatever I want."

Maya smiled primly and shoved another pastry into her mouth. Menou pressed her anyway, determined to make her see the danger.

"This journey isn't safe. As much as we're allowed to walk around freely in Grisarika Kingdom, we're wanted criminals everywhere else."

"I know that, Menou, but don't you know who I am?" Maya's voice took on a dramatic tone. "I'm Maya Ooshima, a former member of the hero's party! I've been accustomed to danger for a thousand years."

Maya struck a pose, prompting a groan from Menou. Obviously, there was no getting through to this girl.

"Besides, who do you think gave you the information that sent you off to the north in the first place? You can't leave me out of the fun when I'm the one who gave you the idea."

It was true that Maya had told Menou some details about the Starhusk. However, she wasn't the only one. Menou had also drilled Director Kagarma, another individual who'd been alive a millennium ago, for all kinds of data. She'd ultimately determined that the Starhusk might be a weapon that could defeat Hakua.

Maya went on to casually reveal a new fact. "I'm not letting you leave me out! Besides, how do you plan to talk to the Astrologer without me?"

"What?"

Maya grinned triumphantly at the momentary confusion on Menou's face.

"Seeee? That's what you get for trying to ditch me. So, Menou. What's your plan? If you tell me, I might just let you in on what I'm talking about."

"Ugh... All right, you win."

Once she realized how dangerous things would get, Maya might get scared and back down. In the meantime, Menou decided to review all the information.

"First, let's go over what we already know. We've come to the north to take control of Starhusk."

Menou looked to the others before speaking, hoping to ensure they were on the same page and, ideally, to convince Maya to give up on tagging along.

The Starhusk was a powerful weapon. Supposedly, it was created by the Otherworlder who held the Pure Concept of *Star*, said to be the greatest of all, during the time of the ancient civilization.

The Starhusk had a singular purpose.

"It's a conjured weapon that can hollow out planets and was designed as a deterrent. The apparatus can take in Japanese people who have become Human Errors."

Maya, who was there a thousand years ago, explained the workings of the conjuring that was inconceivable by modern technological standards. "The *Star* person was said to be the most talented of all of us, especially when it came to Guiding Force knowledge. I don't know the details, but I'm told *Star* wasn't trying to make a weapon. It was a total accident that it wound up as a device capable of swallowing Human Errors."

"Then it's a conjured weapon that uses the phenomenon of Human Errors, not just Pure Concepts? The ancient civilization's technology never ceases to amaze," Menou remarked.

"Yeah, yeah," Abbie cut in. "They were great with Guiding Force technology back then, I know... But listen, shouldn't that white liquid have seeped in and broken it by now? That stuff is material that can blanch most conjuring constructions into nothingness, right?"

"What? No, it's not broken." Maya, who knew the secrets of a thousand years ago, was unfazed by Abbie's interruption. "If the Starhusk broke, it would fall." That was simple enough logic.

"I'm guessing that the white liquid only surrounds it on the outside. It doesn't touch the Starhusk's interior."

Menou nodded. "Yes, that makes sense. I've seen for myself a weapon that still works after a thousand years." At the end of the battle in the land of salt, Master Flare had activated a satellite weapon. That, too, had been manufactured by the ancient civilization. "So if we can steal the Starhusk, it should give us a means of attack effective against Hakua.

"To that end, to acquire authority to use the Starhusk, we first need to meet with the Astrologer to get anywhere."

Abbie and Maya nodded. The Astrologer was one of the Elders who followed Hakua. It was said that the Astrologer acquired immortality solely to manage the Starhusk. And they already knew exactly where to find this Astrologer.

"Given that I fought Executioners in the last town, we'll have to proceed even more carefully... However, for the most part, our plan remains the same. And since it doesn't seem like we've been followed, I imagine their next move will be to establish checkpoints and try to ambush us."

Menou spread out a map of the northern lands on the table.

"Our current location is here, toward the eastern side of the north."

This region was roughly in the shape of a trapezoid, with a thin stretch of land connecting it to the western part where the holy land stood. Menou and company were on the opposite side from that. They'd arrived by traveling across the inland sea that separated the north and the east.

"Our current destination is here."

Menou pointed at the center of the northern region, which was completely blacked out.

"The City of Ruins lies underground in the Wild Frontier. We need to get there to meet the Astrologer, who manages the Starhusk...but it won't be easy."

The Wild Frontier regions to the south acted as borders between nations in the center of the continent. Here in the north, however, the Wild Frontier was a section of land carved out by the Starhusk.

The great hole was a neat semicircle, almost like the ground had been gouged out with an ice cream scoop. It was nothing but barren ground and mountains of rubble, since the Guiding Force there had died. Menou was bound for the ancient ruins beneath that wasteland.

"The church at the border of the north's Wild Frontier manages the entrance to the City of Ruins."

Menou watched for Maya's reaction as she outlined the obstacles ahead.

Maya, however, stared at a point on the map, hardly listening to Menou's explanation.

"But that was the central city... So I guess it really did end up... Hmm. And the location of this church is right where..."

"The central city?"

When Menou repeated the unfamiliar phrase, Maya jumped as she came out of her thoughts, then she turned away rudely. Just like the Astrologer situation, she seemed intent on refusing to give any clear answers. Menou shrugged and continued her review.

"There's essentially only one entrance to the City of Ruins. There's a hole that leads underground as well, but the church is built to cover most of that."

The northern Wild Frontier was also where Master Flare and the Otherworlder with the Pure Concept of *Light* had traveled together. According to Kagarma, who'd faced off against them in his younger days, the pair met the Astrologer in the City of Ruins and learned the truth about returning to the other world.

Menou was still following in her old mentor's footsteps, even after Flare's death.

Approaching from the remote east, Menou and company had a few different options to reach the church that held the entrance to the City of Ruins. However, Menou was a wanted fugitive. Now that she'd left Grisarika Kingdom, she would have to be careful where and how she traveled.

"We could get to the church by train, but..."

"No such luck. There'll be guards at all major transport points. Obviously, that includes every train station. It seems like they caught on the second we set foot outside Grisarika, just as we thought. This big sister is happy to know there are so many talented youngsters, though, even if they're enemies. The future of the world is in good hands. Mm-hmm!"

"What is this walking pile of scrap getting excited about? She really is broken."

"Just ignore her."

Menou and Maya rolled their eyes. Abbie, who'd deployed scouts in advance, drew red X marks on various parts of the map. With her ability to create insectoid conjured soldiers to gather information, no one was better suited to reconnaissance.

"From what I saw, it's all just little knights at the inspection points. We'd be

able to fight our way through, if necessary. However, there are a few spots where someone on the level of a bishop might show up if they call for backup... That'd be here, here, and here."

Every member of the Faust was a skilled conjurer, without exception. Anyone experienced enough to reach the rank of bishop or higher was bound to be strong enough to possibly best Menou and Abbie.

Looking at the routes that were crossed out, Maya furrowed her small brow. "Hey... Is it just me, or are there no normal roads we can take?"

"Nope. Of course there aren't. Why would they leave any roads unguarded?"

When the Faust and the Noblesse combined forces to form a united front, they had plenty of personnel to spare. That meant they blocked all escape routes, at least within national lines.

"Which means we're going to have to take a route without any roads! That won't be a problem with your big sister's specially made conjured soldiers, though." Abbie puffed out her chest proudly.

They'd already come this far on the backs of her conjured soldiers. Abbie's Primary Color creations could carry three people without issue.

"Speaking of enemies, how do we know Hakua won't show up? Isn't Menou her mortal enemy now?" Maya asked.

"Hakua won't leave the holy land. That's a definite."

Hakua was stationed in the Star Memory, a library that recorded all of humanity's memories. For all her extraordinary circumstances, she was still an Otherworlder with a Pure Concept. If she left the memory storage, her lifeline, she could lose her memories and become a Human Error.

However, even if Hakua couldn't leave, she still had her position as the Lord that she had built up over a thousand years and all the power that came with it.

"Okay, then what about...Michele, was it?"

Menou and Abbie both grimaced when Maya mentioned that name.

Michele the Inquisitor.

Since the brief fall of the holy land, that priestess had pursued Menou and her allies on Hakua's orders.

Though she appeared to be a young priestess in her teens, Menou and the others had learned of her true identity over the past half year.

She was the same person who'd previously been known as Elcami, the archbishop of the holy land. For nearly a thousand years, she'd changed names countless times, having her youth restored and memories reset to serve as one of Hakua's Elders.

"I couldn't figure out where she is. At the very least, she wasn't camping out at any of the checkpoints. It'd be great if she's not around at all...but realistically, she's probably at the entrance to the City of Ruins already," Abbie said.

"Most likely. Teach knew we were here, so I have to imagine Michele's in the north somewhere, too. I have to imagine she's waiting at the church for us."

Half a year ago, they'd fought Michele several times before reaching Grisarika Kingdom, so they knew that she possessed nearly inhuman amounts of Guiding Force. In terms of raw power, she possibly outclassed an average Otherworlder. Whether Menou and the others sneaked past the guards or fought their way through, defeating Michele was likely to be their final obstacle.

"We'll stay at an inn tonight. First thing tomorrow morning, we'll buy supplies for the journey," Menou stated. With the plan set, she looked to her companions, especially Maya.

It was time to try to convince her not to come along.

"Maya. You realize now how dangerous this is, right? You can just go home, you know. And even if you insist on coming with us...if things look bad, I want you to return to Sahara using a reverse summon right away."

Maya's mentality was mostly that of an ordinary ten-year-old girl. Menou didn't think letting her get mixed up in this difficult conflict was right. Since she could use summoning-based conjurings that ignored distance, Maya could return to Sahara in Grisarika Kingdom at any time.

"Yep, exactly. A weak little twerp like you is just going to drag us

dooOOOWWWn!"

"Stop that! I told you to be quiet!"

Menou pounded Abbie into silence with her fists. But it was too late—her unnecessary insults had already put Maya into a sulk.

"Why would you even say that?" It was clear from her tone that she was upset. Menou braced herself for another fight between the two, then realized with surprise that she was the object of Maya's glower.

"I'm not going back, no matter what you say!" Standing in a huff, Maya stomped loudly out of the drawing room.

Menou stared after her blankly, then sighed at the stubbornness of children. She turned a glare on Abbie.

"...This is all your fault."

"Whaaat? Are you sure about that?"

Abbie looked utterly unrepentant, her blue eyes glittering mischievously.

"You know, li'l Menou, you're actually not very empathetic."

"What does that mean?"

"Exactly." Abbie smirked at Menou's confused reaction. "But that imperfection is what makes you a truly adorable youngster."

With that mysterious remark, Abbie left the drawing room.

Menou had no idea what Maya or Abbie were trying to tell her. In the end, she was left with more concerns than ever.

Alone in the drawing room, Menou sighed heavily at the chaos of her current traveling group.

The next morning, Menou was greeted by another troubling scene.

"Sightseeiiing! Let's go sightseeing, li'l sis!"

Menou was being violently shaken. Abbie had seized her by the shoulders and was making a ruckus. While the woman appeared to be in her twenties, she shook Menou so excitedly that she seemed like a child.

"Come on, just for one day! We're finally out of Grisarika. And yesterday we had to keep moving because you went and started a fight, remember? Your big sister wants to see what all the cute little human children have built!"

"Ahem."

"Fwah?!"

She was being so loud and annoying that Menou decided to throw her mantle over Abbie's face. Her goggles completely covered, Abbie flailed around in blind confusion.

"...Why does she always have to make such a big scene? As if we'd seriously go along with her silly little demands."

Menou had to agree with the former Pandæmonium, even if she looked like a child herself. *She's so much more mature than Abbie*, Menou thought with relief, then froze when she saw Maya's expression.

She beamed so sweetly that it could only be described as "angelic."

"So, Menou. You're going to take care of me, right? Adorable little girls like me deserve to be spoiled, so why don't you start by buying me some sweets? A cake would be nice. I don't know where you'd get one around here, but make sure it's a really good one, okay?"

Where had her sour mood from the night before gone? This was equally difficult in its own way.

Maya's pure, innocent eyes were full of sincere faith that people caring for her was part of the natural order. It was as if she just assumed that all adults ought to do whatever she asked, no matter who they might be.

"Do you two understand our situation? I thought I explained all of this to you just last night!"

"I don't caaaare!" Abbie gave an immediate and ridiculous answer. Menou's face twitched despite her usually flawless self-control. "I want to go around and see the youngsters of humanity working and living to the fullest! I ran away from the White Night barrier so I could see those hardworking kiddos live their best lives, you know! I want to see for myself that this world is full of cute little

siblings!"

"Listen to me, will you? We're in enemy territory. We don't have time for any __"

"Huh? That's all the more reason to do what I say. Since we left Sahara in Grisarika Kingdom, you obviously have to take care of me, Menou. It's important to protect cute, fragile little girls like me, you know. Do you really not understand that, silly-head?"

While Abbie's selfish demands were a straight, direct pitch, Maya's impressively high self-esteem made for more of a curveball.

What was Menou supposed to do with these two? They were treating this important journey like a vacation. Perhaps it was because this was their first time outside Grisarika Kingdom in half a year.

That's it, she decided.

She would just have to ignore their demands. It was the most effective way to deal with the pair.

"Hey, Menou, tell me. What are the local specialties around here? Are they yummy? There must be sweets, right?"

"Later... Later, I said!"

"What a sight for sore eyes... Just look at all these cute little youngsters! The world is so full of hope! Ah, a big crowd is headed that way! Can we go look, Menou?!"

"Absolutely not! There's a church over there!"

Menou dragged her two useless companions along as she tried to shop for supplies.

"Oh dear. Menou and that idiot got lost."

Maya's mouth was covered in crumbs, and her remark was lost among the calls from the food stall hawkers.

She stood in the middle of a busy street, munching on the remaining half of a tart. This was her treat for today. Menou was used to being broke, making her

needlessly stingy, yet Maya had wheedled a purchase out of her.

Food was one of Maya's few pleasures.

A thousand years ago, this world's technology was at least as advanced as modern Japan's, perhaps even more so. Now that Maya had her memories back, she understood that it had seriously declined, culture and all. Recording and communication methods were especially affected, and there was no kind of broadcasting whatsoever. For Maya, who'd grown up glued to a TV, this made things terribly boring.

Folding the now-empty paper bag neatly and tucking it into the sleeve of her kimono, Maya pouted.

"My goodness. Doesn't Menou realize she's much too old to be getting lost?"

It was obvious to everyone but Maya that she was the one who'd gotten lost. However, her high self-esteem prevented her from recognizing that.

Maya was widely acknowledged to be a beautiful girl. When she lived in Japan, she was able to get work as an actress thanks to her sheer cuteness. Adults did whatever she wanted. It was only natural that everyone should love her.

Maya walked down a narrow alleyway in what she vaguely remembered as the direction of the main street.

"Menou is so careless, taking her eyes off me like that. A cute girl like me turns everyone's heads just by walking down the street, especially in this world that doesn't have cars. Doesn't she know I need to be protected? I'll have to give her a good talking-to later."

Suddenly, Maya remembered what Menou said in the parlor the night prior.

"You can just go home, you know."

Menou had meant the words to be kind. However, that's what made them so hurtful. Maya had been with her for half a year, yet the girl who looked exactly like Hakua only saw her as someone to be protected.

It was no different from a thousand years ago. The group had always left Maya out of things because she was young, keeping her far away from anything important.

They didn't get it.

Not one person understood how Maya felt.

"They all look down on me... I'll show them, no matter what it takes!"

She was no ordinary child, not anymore. She was a unique exception who'd been restored from Pandæmonium, one of the Four Major Human Errors.

Her determination and self-awareness burned so brightly they could have illuminated the dark alley she walked down.

"Miss Maya." A cool voice stopped the girl in her tracks.

Had Menou finally found her? Maya whirled around to give her a scolding, then gasped.

A girl who looked to be in her late teens stood before her.

She wore priestess robes modified for mobility and the armband of an Inquisitor. Her commonplace brown hair was tied to prevent it from getting in her way. Her expression was intensely serious.

This was Michele. The woman they had to be most wary of on this journey bowed her head.

"I am honored to see you again, Miss Maya."

"What are you playing at? How were you able to find me?"

Where was Menou?

Maya slowly stepped backward as she spoke to the priestess.

"That incompetent bunch who failed at a surprise attack informed me that you were traveling with Flarette, so I set guards at the best bakeshops in the nearby towns. You've always had a weakness for sweets, after all."

Maya and Michele had a history, although Maya had kept that a secret from Menou. It went back to before Maya became a Human Error. A thousand years ago, when she worked with Hakua to try returning to Japan, Michele had been there, too.

She'd only been a nameless mercenary, but by some twist of fate, she'd joined forces with Maya, Hakua, and the others. Back then, Hakua had been gaining a reputation as the *Ivory* hero, and Michele had been one of her greatest admirers.

Maya had known Michele long enough to be utterly unsurprised that she had been serving Hakua for the last thousand years as an Elder.

"What do you plan to do with me?"

"I bear no ill intent. I simply wanted to pay my respects to you first."

"Respects?"

Maya remained on guard against Hakua's faithful servant, but Michele made no hostile movements. She even placed her sword and scripture on the ground to show she meant no harm.

"When I first saw you a few months ago while chasing after Flarette, I was so surprised that it took my breath away. I was under the impression that you had become a Human Error as well."

Michele was referring to when Maya and the others had fled to Grisarika Kingdom from the holy land by way of the north. Michele must have learned that Maya was with Menou then and reported it to Hakua.

"Were it not for your presence, I would not have hesitated. I doubt I would have let that *imitation* escape to Grisarika. That place...is home to a troublesome creature that has nested there for a thousand years. Between dear Miss Gadou's Human Error the Mechanical Society and the Guardian who lurks in Grisarika Kingdom, our reach is more limited than ever."

The "imitation" Michele referred to was probably Menou. Her voice dripped with contempt and loathing for the being created for Hakua to possess.

"And what does my existence have to do with your hesitation?" Maya asked.

"Isn't it obvious? I cannot fight you." Michele raised her head and put a hand to her chest, looking sincere. "I cannot bear to hurt you when you know the same pain that I do."

"..." Maya answered Michele's serious declaration with silence.

They did indeed have something in common.

Both were victims of the cruel human experiments conducted by the ancient civilization a thousand years ago. Although they were subjected to different experiments, both had been put through suffering that no one was meant to endure.

"Don't you remember? You're the one who gave me the name of an angel, where once I had none."

"...I've forgotten all that."

Maya averted her eyes but caught Michele smiling at her. It was a genuine expression, and a rare sort for the straitlaced priestess.

Her attitude was the same as it had been a thousand years ago. She was always respectful to Maya, even though she was a child. Michele pointed at the scripture on the ground.

"I'm told you're after the Starhusk. When I heard that you were here, I contacted Lady Hakua."

Upon hearing that name, Maya felt blood rush to her head. In a sense, Maya owed her resurrection to Manon outmaneuvering Hakua. However, Hakua had destroyed Manon immediately afterward.

"If you want to do something about me, why not just take me with you by force?! I'm sure you're well aware! I'm just—"

"There's no point in results achieved by means that disregard someone's wishes."

Michele sounded resolute. She had complete faith in her own righteousness, and in Hakua's as well.

"I have been entrusted with a message for you in case we ever met. Please listen and decide for yourself."

Maya opened the scripture that was offered to her with shaking hands.

She flipped through the pages, and Guiding Light beamed out and formed a small figure.

"Hey... It's been a while, Maya."

The scripture conjuring played back a recorded video from a former friend. It was the first time Maya had seen her in nearly a thousand years.

"I didn't realize that you'd woken up. I couldn't believe my ears when I heard about it six months ago. Michele told me that you left Grisarika Kingdom. I'm heading your way now."

Maya's eyes widened at the unexpected message. Hakua was actually leaving her lifeline, the Star Memory, to see Maya. The girl looked up in surprise, and Michele nodded.

Hakua really wanted to see her former friend that badly.

"Since we were old friends, I don't want you to misunderstand what's going on. I want to see you and talk face-to-face. I'd like to do it one-on-one, since... Menou will probably get in the way if she's around. After we talk, it's up to you whether you want to forgive me or not. So let's meet in the place where we parted ways for good a thousand years ago."

Maya's chest tightened at the nostalgic sound of her old friend's passionate voice.

"I'll be waiting where it all happened."

At this, the scripture's displayed image changed to a map.

It was a map of the north. There was a date and a symbol on a certain spot. It just so happened to be the church Menou was bound for, the one she'd called the entrance to the City of Ruins.

More importantly, it was the place where Maya and Hakua saw each other for the last time, a thousand years prior.

It was obvious from a glance at the map. The entrance to the City of Ruins was on the very spot where Hakua had betrayed Maya and the others.

"Why there, of all places?"

"Lady Hakua has left the holy land, despite the considerable risk. It has been more than ten days since she departed the Star Memory. Given the amount of time needed for travel, there is no other choice but to meet then and there," Michele explained.

"...I see."

Maya slowly raised her head, glaring at Michele from her much lower height.

"This is a trap, right? Did you really think that I'd be stupid enough to fall for an invitation like this? Really. You must think very little of me." There was a significant reason she didn't trust Hakua. "Hakua killed Manon! Why would I ever do what she asks?!"

"Lady Hakua only wishes to speak with you. As I have no memories of the past millennium, I am not entirely clear why you are no longer on good terms, but there seems to have been a misunderstanding."

"A misunderstanding?" Maya smiled in a mocking way that suited her young and elegant features. "There most certainly isn't!" She shouted as angrily as her small body could manage. "She betrayed me! She killed my family!! She ruined all of our hard work! That's all there is to it!"

"...Please, try to get along with her as you once did. That's all I ask."

Michele didn't argue. She bowed politely and walked away, leaving the scripture behind.

Maya tore out the page that reproduced Hakua's voice and crushed it in her fist.

This had to be a trick. It could only be a trap. Maya had no reason to trust Hakua after all this time.

A thousand years ago, Hakua had suddenly betrayed the rest of the group.

It had been completely unexpected.

So much so that Maya had never doubted for a second that Hakua was her friend until it happened.

She bit her lip.

The turmoil in her churned even after Menou found her.

The sound of flipped pages whispered through the room.

Late at night, while every other soul was asleep, Menou leafed through a

book in her bedroom at their base. The faint noise each time she turned a page only made the silence that much more pronounced.

It wasn't a scripture, of course. Menou had given up that book she carried everywhere when she left the Faust. Although it was an advanced conjuring tool that served as a very useful weapon, the risk that it might be connected to its creator, Hakua, was too great.

Menou was writing in an ordinary diary that could be bought at any general store.

"What an exhausting day..."

In the course of one afternoon, she'd been forced to fend off Abbie's and Maya's selfish demands constantly as she went about her business. At one point, Maya even got separated from the group.

Menou recorded the day's events, then turned back to the earlier pages.

The diary contained all of her past, detailing things as far back as her memories went.

From her journey with Master Flare that began in a crumbled white town, to her time in the monastery where she met Momo and Sahara, to becoming the youngest Executioner of all time, and beyond.

"I haven't seen Momo in quite a while now."

How long had it been since she and her loyal assistant were separated for this long? Menou had forced herself not to check what Momo was up to. In the current situation, making contact was too risky.

Menou had asked Momo to look after Akari's body.

Few people knew of Momo and Menou's relationship. Since the activities of Executioners weren't recorded anywhere, there were no documents to prove that Momo was Menou's assistant, and Menou had exclusively trained with Master Flare during her time at the monastery. Most of the other instructors didn't know anything about Menou. With the monastery documents destroyed, Momo should be an unknown to Hakua and her servants, making her the person Menou could trust the most.

Momo would be able to evade Hakua's extensive surveillance network and keep Akari safe. Hakua likely assumed that Menou was hiding Akari's location, but in truth, even Menou didn't know exactly where she was.

"I really do rely on Momo far too much."

From when she still wore white robes to when she donned the indigo ones and Momo became her aide...

Menou flipped the pages of the diary. Memories of her travels with Akari largely dominated the journal.

Since it included records of the many times their journey had been repeated by way of the Pure Concept of *Time*, more than half of the diary—which was meant to contain ten years or more—covered the trip with Akari.

Menou read over the section detailing when she'd given Akari a gift in Garm.

"Ah, right."

She closed her eyes and recalled the scene.

Menou had intended to make scrunchies as a present for Momo. However, when they'd stopped at a stall on a whim, Akari had begged, pleaded, and thrown a tantrum, until Menou gave in and attached a flower to her headband.

"Ha-ha..."

Menou smiled softly, an expression she never wore in front of her current traveling companions.

What had happened next? This little scene had come after a day of carefree sightseeing. It was right before the fateful battle with Orwell, an enemy too formidable to forget.

Menou, Akari, Momo, and even Ashuna had been caught up in that battle. Out of all the incidents in the three-month loop, that had been one of the direst.

Menou closed the diary. She'd sensed someone's presence. There was a gentle knock at the door.

"Come in."

Menou could already tell who it was from the sound of their footsteps.

Sure enough, Maya entered.

"What's the matter?"

"Menou... About this afternoon..."

"What about it?"

"Well... Remember when you got lost for a while? You see, something happened..."

All this trailing off was uncharacteristic for the usually confident Maya. She was oddly hesitant as she reached for something in her sleeve.

Even though it was late at night, a light shone through the window.

It was Guiding Light, gleaming brighter than the sun as it poured inside.

Guiding Light always heralded a conjuring phenomenon, and its intensity was proportionate to the scope of the invoked conjuring. So this brilliance that looked like daylight had to indicate something truly powerful.

Given that their hideout was obviously under attack, Menou jumped up so fast that she knocked her chair over.

"Maya—ah?"

She reached out to protect the girl, only to touch nothing but air.

Maya's body had been enveloped for a moment in crimson Guiding Light, then completely disappeared. The object Maya had been trying to retrieve dropped to the ground.

It was a scripture.

Why was Maya carrying a scripture? Before she could come up with an answer, Menou and the entire building were engulfed in Guiding Light.

Falling rubble thundered.

The house on the edge of town was utterly destroyed. No part of it survived intact. An excessive amount of Guiding Force had been pushed through the earthen vein channel connected to the house to power its Guiding vessels. The

resulting internal pressure caused the channel to burst from the foundation.

This was Michele's work. She'd used the scripture she gave to Maya as a Guiding Force signal to lead her straight to Menou's hideout. Right before Michele had attacked and destroyed the building, she moved Maya to safety. Her method had been exceedingly simple.

"Monstrine, huh?"

The crimson pill Michele had used as a sacrifice to summon Maya out of harm's way disintegrated in her palm and vanished.

Monstrine was the drug once distributed in Libelle, the port city on the southernmost tip of the continent. It was made from a piece of Pandæmonium's body, and Maya was a piece of that same Human Error. Large quantities of monstrine were confiscated after the incident in Libelle, making it easy for someone in Michele's position to acquire some.

The body of an Otherworlder made for an excellent material. Naturally, it was also compatible with Maya's Guiding Force, allowing Michele to summon her to the simple circle she'd also created with monstrine.

"It pains me to deceive her in this way...but now Miss Maya will be safe. All that remains is to dispose of the criminals who kidnapped her."

Michele returned her attention to the ruined building. She was accustomed to far worse destruction. Whether it was her doing or her enemy's, an attack of this scale was nothing to be surprised about.

However, very few individuals in this era could cause so much damage with a single attack.

"It's remarkable how much technology has regressed."

Guiding Force technology had drastically declined compared to the era this young woman had lived in long before she started calling herself Michele. During that peak of civilization, there had been endless conflict all over the world. Pure Concept conjurings had been used often and aggressively, Guiding weapons were developed to combat them, and entire cities were razed on at least one occasion.

And how did this modern era compare?

"It's so peaceful now. And it's all thanks to Lady Hakua."

The continent's population had been radically reduced, and culture and technology had declined sharply. When compared to the old days, it could seem like a downgrade.

But it was better this way. Excessive Guiding Force technology only led to the creation of living weapons like Michele herself.

Michele was a victim of the ancient civilization's human experiments. They'd used *Dragon* as a template to attempt expanding the limits of human strength, sacrificing a great number of specimens in the process. Michele was the sole survivor, the only one compatible out of several thousand. Most likely, the researchers hadn't expected her to gain immortality as a result of their attempts to surpass the limits of the human body.

With the power Michele gained, she'd destroyed the research lab and escaped, wandering aimlessly thereafter. As a test subject, she'd never had so much as a name. Later, she'd met Hakua and her companions. She'd been deeply impressed by their noble efforts to change the world.

Some conjurings, especially Pure Concepts, were beyond humankind's ability to handle. It was better to thoroughly restrict such technology.

Besides...

Some of the rubble stirred, and Michele returned to the present.

She narrowed one eye in a show of irritation. Debris was thrown aside to reveal an eight-legged conjured soldier with deep blue armor. The spider-shaped thing approached with a nimbleness that belied its appearance, though its weight did send a tremor through the ground when it brought its two forelegs down to crush Michele.

A Primary Color—based conjured soldier. Judging by its all-blue construction, it had to be a mindless weapon that simply carried out orders.

Michele's entire body glowed from a Guiding Enhancement. Using the plentiful Guiding Force drawn from her soul to greatly improve her physical

abilities, she raised her leg up just as the conjured soldier attacked.

Michele's slender limb collided with the spider's sturdy ones.

Despite the visible difference in mass between them, Michele's leg won the clash. The conjured soldier's legs were thrown back, knocking it over. When it landed, Michele stomped on its abdomen hard enough to destroy it and crack the earth beneath.

Michele had taken on endless numbers of these unmanned conjured soldiers in the past. She didn't need any conjurings to take down opponents of this caliber; even a group of them was no threat.

Unsurprisingly, this one was only a diversion.

Michele swung her broadsword behind her back to block the attacker who had sneaked up and leaped at her soundlessly. The impact sent a tremor through Michele's hand clutching the hilt of her weapon. The blow was far stronger than what a normal human could achieve.

"So some like you still remain."

She was a humanoid conjured soldier with light-brown skin and black sclerae.

Born of the Concept of Primary Colors, this was a hostile being that would have been considered a major threat even a thousand years ago, when Pure Concept abuse was rampant.

Such a creature could not be permitted to exist in a civilization that had been regressed to keep the peace. Michele needed to defeat this enemy.

"For the sake of world peace, any technology that goes against Lady Hakua's will must be exterminated."

"Exterminated is right! The world doesn't need anyone old except me! I'll destroy 'em all and become everyone's big sister!"

Michele, the Magician, was a living weapon born a thousand years ago.

Abbie was an intelligent Primary Color life-form, a superior form of humanity created by the Human Error now known as the Mechanical Society.

Two forces that far surpassed human understanding met in battle.

Menou had survived the building's collapse with a multi-barrier crest conjuring built into her clothes. She looked over her surroundings.

The considerably sized house had been reduced to rubble in a single attack. It had probably been accomplished by twisting the earthen vein that ran beneath the city, but Menou hadn't sensed any scripture conjuring. She could think of only one person capable of interfering with the earthen vein without using a scripture or conjuring ceremony.

It had to be Michele. Menou had let their strongest enemy get a preemptive strike on them.

"Where's Maya?"

The girl was nowhere to be seen. Menou thought back to what she'd seen just moments before.

Right as Michele struck, Maya had been surrounded by crimson Guiding Light and vanished. Judging by her surprised expression, she hadn't activated the conjuring of her own volition.

"She summoned Maya somewhere else to...kidnap her? No, that can't be it."

Going to such lengths to abduct Maya didn't make sense. Michele must have made contact with her beforehand. That explained why Maya had been carrying a scripture. And if Michele had only been after Maya, she could have made off with her whenever they met before.

Menou could only guess at Michele's motivations. There was no way she'd come up with an answer right now. Setting such thoughts aside, Menou crawled from the rubble to find Michele and Abbie locked in battle nearby.

Their fight was truly astounding to behold. Each attack and block sent out a shock wave when they met. Abbie's attack scratched Michele but didn't draw blood. Instead, Guiding Light poured out of the wound. Even the slightest scrape was immediately healed by Guiding Force, which restored Michele's flesh to its ideal condition.

Her body wasn't wrapped in Guiding Force. Rather, the entity known as Michele was Guiding Force enveloped in a human body.

She was the ultimate Guiding Force life-form. Even if her body died, her mind would survive as long as her core of Guiding Force remained.

She wielded an unusual broadsword with a rounded tip. It was a Sword of Judgment, an Inquisitor weapon meant solely for decapitating heretics. Often, such a weapon served primarily as a symbol for those with the authority to wield one, but it became a fearsome weapon in the hands of a conjurer as skilled as Michele.

"So you're still alive," Michele remarked upon noticing Menou.

"No thanks to you."

Michele glared at Menou, irritated by her survival.

She wasn't looking at her like an enemy, merely like an object that needed to be removed.

The only way to defeat a Guiding Force life-form like Michele was to force her to exhaust the supply of Guiding Force coming from her soul. But as far as Menou knew, Michele's supplies were virtually endless. She'd served the Lord for a thousand years and had earned the title of Magician by being far beyond any ordinary conjurer.

Her Sword of Judgment glowed with Guiding Light.

"Abbie!"

"Aye, aye!"

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Primary Triad, Pseudo-Concept of Primary Color—Invoke [Progenitor, Primary Color Insect Egg]

Abbie reached into the gear design on her abdomen and pulled out an elliptical sphere made up of honeycomb shapes.

The strange object emitted cracking and ripping noises, and colorful flying insects burst out. The swarm of beelike creatures plunged toward Michele, who was trying to invoke a crest conjuring.

Her invocation interrupted, Michele brandished her sword at the swarm. Menou shuddered as she watched. One of those conjured soldier insects was enough to defeat the average priestess. She used the grip of her dagger gun to activate and reshape Guiding Branches.

The barrel of Menou's gun began to expand.

"Quintuple Speed."

Guiding Force: Connect—Improper Communion, Pure Concept [Time]—Invoke [Decay Acceleration \rightarrow Guiding Bullet]

The Guiding bullet inside the barrel began to rotate.

It spun so fiercely that the Guiding Branches forming the barrel heated up. Such a powerful shot could easily backfire. If she didn't keep it precisely controlled, the explosion would probably reduce Menou to smithereens.

However, Menou maintained perfect control over the urgently raging Pure Concept and fired the *Accelerated* bullet.



The shot sent out flames as it was fired at five times the usual speed and rotation. A boom louder than what anyone might expect from a projectile of its size roared. The ground cracked under Menou's firmly rooted feet from the recoil.

Michele didn't even attempt to dodge.

Gauging the bullet's trajectory, she swung her sword when Menou pulled the trigger.

The Guiding Force bullet was sliced neatly in half, the pieces flying past Michele. They carved holes in the ground and sent up clouds of dust, leaving Michele unharmed. Abbie, who'd created the Guiding gun, was just as stunned as Menou.

"This is the best you can do, even using a Pure Concept?"

Michele had sliced the quintuple-accelerated bullet apart with a mere flick of her sword. The shot had been powerful enough to pulverize a small building, yet she'd neutralized it with nothing but Guiding Enhancement and skill. Michele readied her sword again, without even the slightest show of pride.

"You and this Primary Color life-form disappoint me. You don't even measure up to the most common weapons of a thousand years ago."

"Yikes. I guess you really are a living weapon masterpiece from the ancient civilization. You aren't even pretending to be human anymore."

"Amusing words from a mere conjured soldier."

Michele's eyes blazed, and her voice dripped with disdain. She charged the weapon in her grip with Guiding Force, clearly intent on killing this time.

Guiding Force: Connect—Sword of Judgment, Crest—Double Invoke [Current, Compression]

As she invoked the crest conjurings, she raised her sword high in the air.

Menou and Abbie both reacted immediately to the movement of the roundedged Sword of Judgment.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Primary Red Stone, Pseudo-Concept of

Primary Color—Invoke [Primary Color Type: Insect-Shell Armor]

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

Abbie transformed both of her arms into glittering ruby-red armored shells and took a defensive stance, while Menou's multilayered barrier appeared in front of them.

Both were sufficiently strong enough to weather any normal scripture conjuring.

However, they could not withstand Michele's attack.

"What...?" Menou whispered in disbelief as the two layers of defense were cleaved through. When Michele brought down her blade, a slash rent the air and sent Abbie's head flying.

Menou's eyes widened. Water droplets speckled the ground. Michele had used a high-pressure water current to extend her range. By timing the release with the stroke of her sword, she'd cut through Abbie's neck from beyond the normal distance.

With a loud snap, Abbie's body splintered and fell apart.

She was reduced to dust and scattered—only for an unharmed Abbie to appear on the same spot a moment later.

"Ahhh! I lost a life! This sucks!"

Michele didn't look surprised by Abbie's abrupt return. She only squinted one eye in a show of irritation.

"Primary Color life-form. You manifest in this world by splitting your soul and segmenting your spirit to control an artificial body. The enormous amount of material used in exchange for the body must come from Primary Color space... making you similar to Guardian, as I suspected. Annoying though it is, I will simply have to seal all of your connection pathways one by one."

"Yikes. That's not very nice, you know. Have you ever thought about how it feels to be the one locked up in that boring place?"

"As if I care. Rot for eternity."

Abbie, whose laid-back attitude showed through even in battle, wrinkled her nose at Michele.

She was only able to revive because the part of her that existed here was like a terminal. If the pathway connecting her Guiding Force was closed, her real self in a separate dimension would no longer be able to interact with this world.

Michele's strength really was abnormal, especially considering that a freshly made Primary Color Triad conjured soldier had once beaten Ashuna and Menou singlehandedly in the desert. However, if Michele had a weakness, it was that she didn't carry a scripture.

"What happened to your scripture?" Menou asked.

"I have no need for it against the likes of you. That's all," Michele replied without hesitation. However, while her claim was true, that was hardly a reason to deliberately leave behind such a powerful weapon. If she had access to the many effects of scripture conjurings on top of her own pure strength, Menou and Abbie might not be standing now.

The scripture that Maya dropped right before the attack must have been Michele's.

Menou tossed out another question.

"Is Hakua still after me?"

"Don't be so full of yourself. Lady Hakua no longer has any use for an imitation like you."

Menou had already suspected as much, considering Michele's obvious intent to kill. Evidently, Hakua had reasoned that she no longer required Menou's body.

That was strange, since Hakua wanted Menou because of her Guiding Force connection with Akari.

Hakua's goal was to return to Japan with Akari, which meant she needed to become one with her in terms of Guiding Force. To that end, she'd tried to acquire Menou's body just half a year ago.

But now Michele was trying to kill Menou, to the point that she'd gone out of

her way to separate Maya before the attack.

Those two facts led to one conclusion.

"Abbie. Maya's probably off on her own right now. Our top priority is to find her," Menou said.

"What? Nooo! Why should I do anything for her?! Can't we use her as bait to escape instead?!"

"Quit whining! I thought it was your duty as a big sister to protect the young!"

"But she's older than meee!"

"I know, but still!"

Since Maya had turned into a Human Error a thousand years ago, even if she'd only recently regained her sanity, she was undoubtedly older than Menou and Abbie.

"But she's still a child, you know."

"Li'l Menou, you underestimate that nasty creature's disposition. I do wish you'd listen to your big sister's warnings."

"I'm sorry. But it's only because I don't trust you in the least."

"After all I've done for you?!"

Ignoring Abbie's whining, Menou focused on her battle with Michele.

This was the Magician, an obstacle on the path to killing Hakua.

Menou readied her dagger, hoping to gain even a little bit of information from this battle.

Maya was completely dumbfounded.

She'd been summoned somewhere right before that surprise attack blew her away. Now she found herself in an empty alley not far from the house. Even at night, the city wasn't dark.

In this world, where Guiding Force was an integral part of technology, light was the most common application of Guiding Force.

The Guiding Light produced as an aftereffect of any Guiding Force

phenomenon was widely employed to illuminate homes and streets.

Maya stood in the light of a Guiding lamp. She heard what sounded like a battle nearby, so she couldn't be far from the house. But even if Maya went back, there wouldn't be much she could do to help.

"Well...I'm sure they're all right."

Maya's main problem was what to do next. Though she worried for Menou's safety, Maya wouldn't be any use in battle.

Maya had hoped to ask for Menou's advice just moments ago, thinking she would handle Hakua's invitation and the scripture. But now the situation had changed drastically. Maya wondered what to do, until something clicked.

"You can just go home, you know."

"Please, come see me."

Two lines with opposite meanings flashed through Maya's mind. The contrast between the two messages, spoken by girls with the same face, gave Maya a flash of insight.

"That's right."

Maya hurried off in the opposite direction of the battle with Michele.

"I'm not going to be totally dependent on anyone... Never again!"

Maya had a piece of paper clutched in her hand, the one torn from the scripture. The book had fallen from her hand when she was summoned here, but she still had the page she'd tucked into her sleeve.

If Hakua really was coming just to see Maya...

Then there was something she, and she alone, could do.

Maya's pace gradually quickened into a run. She couldn't use normal conjurings and dared not use her Pure Concept of *Evil* and deplete her memories.

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"Huff...huff...!"
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Without Guiding Enhancement to help her, Maya's young legs could only carry her so far. Fortunately, no one was chasing her. People regarded her

oddly when she bought a ticket, but only because she was a child riding the train alone.

"The third line...third line..."

Maya repeated the words under her breath as she searched for the train that matched her ticket. It wasn't easy, since she was used to Menou leading the way, but she managed to find the stopped train that was emitting Guiding Light from both ends.

The train departed almost as soon as Maya boarded. The seats were almost entirely empty, probably because it was so late. Maya took a vacant seat while the train rocked gently.

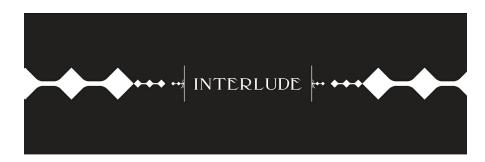
Just as her frazzled feelings finally calmed down, she caught a glimpse of her pale reflection in the window, mirrored over the dark night.

It reminded her that she'd made a choice that left her alone.

"I can do it...all by myself!"

The train's vibrations shook Maya's small frame back and forth. By now, its steadily moving wheels were carrying her forward whether she liked it or not.

In stark contrast with her determined expression, the clunking train made her tiny body look like it was trembling.



"Why did you bring a little kid here, hmm?"

The girl with Guiding Light sparkling in her eyes shot a snide look at Maya, who followed behind Hakua. She wore a white jacket over a light blue sailor uniform; her unusual eyes seemed to pierce Maya through.

"Just dump her off at the base. A kid like that will only get in the way if we bring her along on our journey."

"I think she's scared of adults, though. It seems cruel to leave her at the base, don't you think?"

Hakua glanced at Maya, who hid behind the enormous Ryuunosuke. He was nearly six and a half feet tall, though he was only seventeen. In fact, everyone here but Maya was in their teens.

"Besides, her Pure Concept is really unique. They're after her just as much as you and Gadou. It's safer to bring her with us than to leave her somewhere and hope for the best."

"Don't try to sound so sensible. Those are just excuses you made up after the fact, aren't they?" The girl sighed and shrugged at Hakua's insistence on bringing Maya along. "You're such a softie. How are we supposed to save the world if we keep worrying about every stray you come across?"

"I can't just ignore someone who's suffering. If I did, I wouldn't be able to look my best friend in the face when we get back to our world."

"That's not the point, Hakua. You bringing this girl here has already had a negative effect."

The girl in the white coat and light blue uniform smacked a strange spherical object nearby with her palm, and the star-shaped Guiding Light in her eyes shimmered brightly.

"See? Look at this! Kaa's gone and clammed up."

"Kaa"? Maya blinked quizzically at the nickname the girl called the strange object.

At a glance, it only seemed to be a mysterious orb floating in the air. If the girl addressed it by a name, then was it actually a person? Size-wise, it was just big enough to hold someone curled up into a ball.

Ignoring Maya's confusion, the girl went on, eyes shining even more intensely. "Today was our anniversary, you know. It's been a year since I met Kaa. I've been slowly closing the emotional gap between us. Lately, we've finally gotten to the point where we can make eye contact for almost three seconds a day! But Kaa is very sensitive to environmental changes! Kaa's delicate mental state can't handle a new member joining us! Listen, Hakua. You've got to be more careful about Kaa's fragile glass heart!"

"Well, tell Gadou that the next time she uses her Pure Concept for something stupid, I'm going to break that shell open myself."

"See?! This is exactly what I'm talking about! You've got to stop being so cold! Kaa's shell is hardening even more!"

The white coat—clad girl smacked the inexplicably floating orb.

"Honestly... You haven't forgotten that using a Pure Concept erases your memories, have you?"

"Not to worry. You've got me, remember? We don't need to worry about losing memories. Who do you think I am, huh? I'm the leading expert in World Connection, which taps into the roots of the planet itself. I'm the first to ever add an immortality structure to a complete Guiding Force circuit! They call me Nono, the flawless magical girl genius!"

After delivering an introduction no one had asked for, Nono puffed out her flat chest.

What in the world was this exchange about? Maya, who'd been cowering behind Ryuunosuke as she watched, looked up at him with doe-like eyes.

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"So, um...they're pretty strange, huh?"
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[&]quot;Yup."

"Maya, there's no point trying to talk to Ryuunosuke," Hakua informed her. "He only says things like 'Yup' and 'Uh-huh.'"

"What? Really?"

"Uh-huh."

Ryuunosuke nodded, looking oddly satisfied.

These people truly were strange. As Maya's eyes widened, Hakua patted her on the back.

"Don't worry. They might be idiots, but they'd never take anything away from anyone." Hakua's words, spoken with a smile, rang true at the time; they would become a lie one day.



"...iss? Little miss, aren't you getting off here?"

A voice calling to her prompted Maya to open her eyes.

She was on a train in the middle of the night. Her body must have been exhausted after the earlier chaos. She'd passed out in her seat, even knowing someone could be chasing her.

Lifting her heavy eyelids, she saw a train conductor in uniform. He'd checked her ticket earlier and evidently remembered her destination, for he'd gone out of his way to rouse her at her stop.

"Are you all right? Where are your mommy and daddy?"

"Of course I'm all right. Don't treat me like a child. I'm perfectly fine on my own."

Maya snapped sharply at the man and stood from her seat in a huff. The friendly conductor looked bewildered by her attitude but brushed it off as a child's unpredictable behavior.

Her oversized white kimono fluttered as she stepped off the train and onto the shabby platform.

The north wind blew through, rustling her kimono's sleeves. Maya was dressed far too lightly for the weather, especially for a child, which made her stand out all the more. Locals never neglected their cold-weather clothing.

The people at the station looked Maya's way with confusion and concern, not suspicion.

She clutched the sleeves of the kimono with her small hands.

A night had already passed since Michele's attack.

Maya wasn't worried about Michele chasing her. Hakua had invited Maya to

visit her. Someone as loyal to Hakua as Michele wouldn't interfere with the Lord's request.

However, Maya had been traveling with Menou. Her description might have already been sent to neighboring towns. Maya had to be cautious of the Noblesse knights, who weren't part of the Faust chain of command.

Maya was painfully aware of her own weakness.

First, she had to dress in a way that wouldn't draw attention. Even she knew that her current outfit stood out here.

Maya slipped into an empty alleyway and touched her hand to her shadow.

Her hand slipped easily into the bit of darkness on the wall, into the Concept Dimension of Original Sin.

This was the source of the Pure Concept of *Evil* lodged in Maya's soul. Summoning power through a connection made by the Guiding Force that existed in both this world and that dimension was the foundation of Concept of Original Sin Conjurings.

Maya drew out a hooded robe from this dark dimension. The world linked through her shadow was almost like a part of her body. While some people compressed such dimensions to use as weapons, others like Maya used them as a storage space. She was capable of hiding inside it as well, but since the shadow was fragile enough to be broken by a child's careless step, she could easily wind up trapped inside.

After pulling up the hood, Maya returned to the main street. There was more than enough money in her coin purse. She had nothing to worry about.

"...I want something sweet."

The sun was already nearing the center of the sky. Maya entered the first restaurant that caught her eye, despite not feeling hungry. She got confused looks for being a child alone, but she was led to a table without comment.

Maya ordered a sweet sponge cake. Once she'd tasted the treat, she let out a sigh.

That calmed her a little. She'd been on edge this whole time, but after

considering the situation rationally, she realized there wasn't anything to be panicked about.

"Three days until the appointed time..."

Maya recalled the appointed date and time. She steadied her resolve. In three days, she would meet with Hakua.

"That's right. I'm allowed to do whatever I want. There's no reason I need to listen to Menou. I'll make her regret thinking I'm useless!" Maya whispered, kicking her legs, which didn't reach the floor in this chair for grown-ups. Now that she felt more relaxed, her cheeky overconfidence was back.

"Menou treats me far too much like a child. Except she still won't do anything I ask, and she's always so..."

Her complaints trailed off when the door to the restaurant opened.

The person who approached the host wore a sword at his hip. Only Noblesse knights, who were charged with maintaining the peace, were allowed to carry weapons openly within city limits. His arrival was likely just a coincidence unrelated to Maya. If they knew who she really was, they would've sent more than one person.

Still, Maya's face tensed.

And the knight noticed her expression.

"You there...," he called to her.

For now, his tone remained more kind than accusatory. Perhaps he thought Maya, a child here alone, had gotten lost. The knight must have concluded he should make sure she was all right.

However, Maya's reaction was extreme. She was wary of pursuers, after all. Considering her weakness, she wouldn't be able to escape if she was captured.

So what was she supposed to do?

"Nngh!"

Maya hopped out of her chair, hesitated briefly, then bit into her pinky finger with a canine.

Blood welled up from the wound, and a few droplets spilled to the floor.

"What in the world?!"

Ignoring the knight's confusion at her sudden act of self-harm, Maya focused the spirit within her body. She drew Guiding Force out of her soul, which resonated with her spilled blood.

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Chaos Collusion, Pure Concept [Evil]—Summon [Roly-poly Rocks, Rolling Heads]

The blood turned into red Guiding Light and spread across the floor like a corrosive acid.

Then the ground pulsed.

The brick flooring swelled and shifted, changing shape. Despite being inorganic matter, it moved as lithely as a living thing as soon as it absorbed Maya's blood.

A stone statue powered by a Concept of Original Sin. It was a monster known as a gargoyle.

"A-a monster?! Was that a Concept of Original Sin?!" the knight exclaimed in shock.

Maya couldn't spare any attention for his reaction. When she used the Pure Concept, she felt a sliver of her soul get shaved away. A memory had been consumed. The exceptionally powerful Pure Concept conjurings used by Otherworlders came at the price of their memories.

What had she just forgotten?

And what would she become when she forgot everything completely?

The sights inside the fog still clung to her mind, faint yet unmistakable.

She never wanted to return to Pandæmonium again. Maya shouted to suppress her fear and anger.

"Go!"

The gargoyle obeyed Maya's order and attacked. While the knight defended himself, Maya broke into a run. As she fled past the unfolding battle, she caught

a glimpse of the terrified faces of the crowd.

"Ah!"

It was shockingly painful to have people fear her. She knew that her sister wasn't here to save her. No one in this world would protect her without asking for anything in return—not anymore. And not just here, either.

No one like that remained in her old world, either.

She was utterly alone.

"Ah..."

This wasn't like Japan, where she was unconditionally adored. The pain of Maya's loneliness made her chest ache.

It was because she was so alone that she wanted to know. She wanted to believe.

She wanted to hear that what she saw a thousand years ago was some kind of mistake.

She wanted Hakua to say it to her face.

A girl relaxed and ate snacks on a luxuriously soft couch in a sumptuously furnished room.

A soft cookie crumbled in her mouth, releasing rich butter and sweet sugar that tickled her taste buds. While she enjoyed what could only be described as life in the lap of luxury, the girl had only one thing to say.

"At this rate, I'm going to get fat."

She did nothing but eat and sleep, like a symbol of sloth and depravity. Sahara found herself growing bored of all the extravagance.

She was currently in Grisarika Kingdom, a region that had recently undergone a revolution thanks to the surge in popularity of Fourth ideology.

It might not even be a kingdom for much longer. The Noblesse royal family could be a thing of the past soon. The caste system that had been in place for a thousand years was being cast off.

"I have to admit, Menou's shamelessness amazes me sometimes..."

As she sipped on black tea, Sahara marveled from an outsider's perspective at how skillfully she'd manipulated things to keep the unease in Grisarika Kingdom to a minimum. Menou had reassured the people by publicly announcing that the late Archbishop Orwell, the most respected figure in Grisarika, had been preparing for this reform before her death. Even Sahara had been impressed at how Menou utilized the name of someone she'd killed.



"Well, it's impossible to reform anything if you're too concerned over the little stuff. I must admit, it's worked out well enough for me, since I get to spend time with such lovely young ladies. Ha-ha-ha! How do you like today's treats? I prepared them for you personally."

"...I would've preferred to enjoy them without you around."

Sitting directly across from Sahara was a portly middle-aged man in a gentleman's suit. As if his words weren't creepy enough, something about his physical presence was viscerally repulsive.

This was Director Kagarma Dartaros, a morally bankrupt man who preferred sneaking in the shadows. Incidentally, Sir Experion Riverse, a knight said to be the strongest man on the continent, was downstairs. Both of them happened to work for Ashuna Grisarika, who was now a close collaborator with Menou.

Sahara hadn't wanted anything to do with the massive upheaval those troublemakers were causing in this kingdom. If anything, she wished to run away, a thought that made her poke her head out the window and peer around at their present situation.

Sahara was currently in a tower in Grisarika Kingdom where Kagarma had been kept for a very long time. It was in a particularly remote part of Grisarika and had been deserted until recently.

But now, for whatever reason, people were gathered outside. The strangers down below stirred with excitement when they caught a glimpse of Sahara.

"Lady Sahara..."

"It's Lady Sahara! The new world leader, who rebuilt the Fourth after it was reduced to a shell of its former self for years!"

"She's the key figure who invited Flarette here and became a sworn friend of Princess Ashuna!"

"I've heard that she's also the hero who brought about the ceasefire on the front lines of the eastern Wild Frontier!"

"They say even conjured soldiers obey her, and she can control most monsters, too!"

"Lady Saharaaaa!"

The brief appearance of Sahara's face at the window was enough to cause an uproar. Many whispered what were undoubtedly exaggerated rumors, but those were less concerning than the handful who let out impassioned cheers.

These people weren't citizens of Grisarika. They were people who'd just immigrated here recently. Lured in by the promise of a new world that abolished the caste system, they rallied around Sahara and settled here in what had recently been little more than a deserted village. In just half a year, they had expanded the place into a decent-sized town.

Sahara slowly sank back out of sight and pretended she hadn't seen anything.

When she turned her gaze back to Kagarma, he smiled quite amiably.

"Goodness, you're popular. It's no wonder Her Highness doesn't want to let you go."

"Ugh. These people have too much time on their hands."

The world at large must have had far less to do than Sahara thought. It was much better to be bored than busy, she supposed.

That incident half a year ago, when she got mixed up in the destruction of the holy land, was certainly an awful experience. She never wanted to deal with anything like that again.

"Yep, peaceful is best..."

Try as she did, though, Sahara didn't feel pleased in the slightest.

It had to be because of this utterly incomprehensible situation. Sahara groaned and flopped down on the sofa.

"Your popularity shows you have talent, you know. Manon wasn't nearly so well-liked. Come to think of it...I suppose it's because she had no interest in other people. She was already freer than any of them. And her freedom had no need for anyone else."

Kagarma spoke so sincerely about Manon. While it appeared to be meant as a compliment, it bothered Sahara.

"Shut up. You're gonna betray me, just like you ditched Manon."

"Ha-ha-ha. I have lived quite a long time, you know. Besides, I didn't abandon Manon. She did as she wished, and it led to her downfall, that's all."

He was basically admitting that he had no interest in preventing someone's demise, even if he was with them.

"It's Menou's fault... Every single thing is Menou's fault...," Sahara grumbled.

She was the one always pushing her accomplishments off onto other people. For some reason, Menou had assigned Sahara all the credit for her achievements in Grisarika.

At first, Sahara had generously accepted any accolades she could get for free, and for some reason, the more she sat around doing nothing, the more popular she became. Feeling anxious about her position, which soared to new heights in less than a month, Sahara had approached Menou at one point to ask if they could call it quits.

"Hmm? I thought you wanted to be special, didn't you?" Menou had replied.

I'll kill her, Sahara had thought at the time.

Did she enjoy dredging up the embarrassing remarks people made in their darkest, most vulnerable moments? Surely she didn't seriously intend this as a gesture of goodwill, yet it seemed much too cruel for a joke.

Sahara had only refrained from attacking Menou then because she knew she wasn't strong enough to win. Also, she had to admit it was a little fun being worshipped by the masses.

Ultimately, the people who gathered to admire Sahara managed to build this empty place into a flourishing town.

It was unavoidable, really. Sahara had always harbored a deep desire for approval. There was no way she could resist letting all that attention get to her head.

"Hmm... I wonder if there's anything I can do about this, though."

Concluding that her current situation was inescapable, Sahara raised her Guiding prosthetic right arm.

Once, Sahara had been a nun, as her attire still suggested. During that time, she'd gotten too deeply involved with the Mechanical Society of the eastern Wild Frontier and lost her right arm, which was replaced with a conjuring-enhanced artificial limb. Since it was connected to her spirit through her flesh, it moved as freely as a natural body part.

After some more tribulation, the arm basically became the core of Sahara's body. Its pinky finger was fitted with a black ring in the design of a little lizard. Cute as it looked, this was no mere accessory. As if to demonstrate this, the lizard raised its head to meet Sahara's gaze.

"Kagarma. Can't you get rid of this thing?"

"I'm afraid that's far beyond me. Especially now that little Maya is off with Menou."

"Pretty useless for a so-called Elder. You really don't live up to the stories."

"Ha-ha-ha! You're far from the first to tell me that. Her Highness scolded me recently, too."

The moving ring, which might even look charming if one got used to it, was actually a Concept of Original Sin curse.

She'd gotten it from Maya, the pinky finger of Pandæmonium who'd regained her sense of self and sanity.

Sometimes, Sahara wondered if cutting her finger off would do the trick, but the ring had a tendency to move on its own. It would probably activate somehow if Sahara tried to escape the curse. The most frightening part was that she had no idea what kind of effects it might have.

Just thinking about it was starting to scare her. Sahara buried her face in the sofa instead.

"On that note, Sahara, shouldn't you have tried to stop little Maya?"

"Of course not. Now I don't have to take care of that twerp anymore. If I'm lucky, I'll sit around doing nothing like this forever."

So long as she ignored the crowd of admirers growing because of a reputation that really had nothing to do with the actual Sahara, she was in quite a

fortunate position. She didn't have to fight or think. She could laze around all day long.

If anything, all this free time was a blessing. The clear sunlight beaming in through the window showed signs of an early spring. Sahara yawned, which suited her naturally sleepy-looking eyes.

Suddenly, her shadow dragged her into the abyss.

"Fwah?!"

Sahara dropped with a sort of splashing sound, seemingly sinking right into the sofa.

Since she was in the middle of a yawn when it happened, she let out a strange exclamation of shock. Sahara and her scream were swallowed and vanished.

"...Oh my."

Kagarma raised his eyebrows at Sahara's abrupt exit.

He poured more black tea into his mug without any particular hurry or panic. The man considered himself a proper gentleman.

"A summoning... Well, Maya's shadow is connected to Sahara's, after all. I assumed she'd be summoned away eventually, although that was much sooner than I'd expected. Ah, yes, the Starhusk and the Astrologer... Back when Flare and the *Light* girl went north, they learned the truth about the otherworld repatriation circle and gained management authority over the satellite weapon. Now, then..."

He savored the scent of the tea, thought fondly on the past, and reflected on this generation's youth.

"This new group of girls is bound to make quite a stir, too."

By the time Sahara realized she'd been summoned, there was already a little girl in front of her.

She wore a large kimono tied with a belt over a white one-piece dress with three holes down the chest. It was Maya. The girl was breathing hard as she glowered at Sahara, who she'd pulled from her shadow. "Glad...you could make it...Sahara, you lazy bum."

Only someone with the Pure Concept of *Evil* had the unique ability to summon another to their side if they met certain conditions.

"I heard the whooole thing, you know. Awfully full of yourself for being one of my underlings, aren't you?"

"Oh, um, when I said I was bored, it was only...a figure of speech, like..."

"Not now. I'm in big trouble here!"

Maya completely ignored Sahara's mumbled excuses, looking around nervously as she tried to catch her breath.

From what Sahara gathered, Maya was being chased. Alarm bells sounded in Sahara's head immediately.

"Uh...what're you doing?"

"Can't you tell? You're so dense, Sahara."

Maya stepped behind Sahara and pushed against her back, like she planned to use her as a human shield.

"Well, I can see you're running away..." Sahara only had a broad idea of what Menou and company were doing in the north. Logically, however, there was no way Maya should be out on her own when she was virtually powerless. "...from home, I guess?"

Maybe she and Abbie had finally duked it out during the journey.

Maya and Abbie got along extremely poorly. One was based in a Concept of Original Sin, the other a Concept of Primary Colors. Similar as the two sounded, they were practically opposites, to the point where there didn't seem to be a chance they would ever be on good terms.

If Maya had run after a fight with Abbie, then Sahara wasn't in any danger. Abbie called her "li'l sis" and doted on her to a disturbing degree, so it was doubtful that she would attack her. Sahara wondered if Abbie and Maya might do her the favor of destroying each other. Her hopes were dashed not a moment later.

"I'm surrounded by knights. Fix it."

"Come again?"

It was an incredibly vague order, not that Sahara was surprised. Menou was a highly wanted criminal; they would come after her in full force if they caught sight of her. Since Maya was known to be traveling with Menou, that probably applied to her, too.

Sahara looked around for her old classmate from the monastery, yet there was no sign of the pretty face that was Menou's one and only redeeming quality.

"Where's Menou?"

"She's not here. I'm on my own right now. You're my servant, so fix it."

"Sorry?"

When she heard that their leader wasn't around, Sahara's expression went blank.

The situation was worse than she'd thought. Having been told a second time to "fix it," Sahara covered her face with her Guiding prosthetic right hand.

They were surrounded by knights, the enforcement officers of the Noblesse, with no support from Menou or Abbie. Why in the world had Sahara been dragged into such a losing situation?

"...Why did you summon me? If you'd come to me instead, you would've gotten away safe and sound. That makes a whole lot more sense."

"But then I'd be in Grisarika Kingdom, silly. I wouldn't be able to get back here."

"Well, yeah, but why do you need to be here at all?"

Maya and Sahara's summoning connection worked by way of their shadows. Maya could use her own shadow as an entrance to Sahara's shadow, no matter how far apart they were.

Only this child of Original Sin, holder of the Pure Concept of *Evil*, could perform such a feat.

While this power had the incredible benefit of being able to summon from a long distance without a sacrifice, Maya couldn't send the summoned person back where they came from, since she was using a Concept of Original Sin connection through her shadow and Sahara's.

In other words, if the two of them were captured, they'd have no means of escaping. All Maya's summoning accomplished was turning Sahara into another victim.

After all, Sahara had no motive to help. She lacked a reason. She might not even have the strength to aid Maya.

"Because I have business to take care of here, obviously. Do you even need to ask?" Maya frowned. "Menou is trying to steal the Starhusk to save her friend... Um, Akari, was it? But I don't know this friend of hers at all. Even if she's trying to beat Hakua, this way is too indirect!"

"Really? Akari's a nice girl, you know. Personally, I'd like to see her rescued."

"Well, I don't care!"

Sahara was mostly interested in seeing the pink-haired pipsqueak's face when her place at Menou's side was finally stolen for good.

"Sahara! There's somewhere we just *have* to go, even if it means beating Menou to the punch!" Maya's eyes burned with determination.

We.

Sahara turned pale as she realized she was already included in Maya's plan.

The knights slowly closed in on their target.

Their goal was to capture the dangerous individual who'd suddenly appeared in town.

Although the target resembled an innocent child, that was only a disguise. She was able to use a Concept of Original Sin, which meant she'd strayed from the path of humanity. Somehow, she was able to repeatedly summon monsters that would normally require multiple living sacrifices.

Or perhaps the thing wasn't human at all, but a person transformed by a Concept of Original Sin—a demon.

When news of this came in, all of the knights in the city were mobilized at once. They'd followed the girl's path from the station, repelled the monsters she summoned, and now they had finally cornered her in an empty alleyway.

"Is the evacuation underway?"

"Yes, sir. The Commons in the vicinity have already taken refuge. We have the go-ahead to engage."

"And the alley is completely sealed off?"

"Yes, sir. Just to be safe, we've also positioned troops on the rooftops. Even if a flying monster is summoned, we should be able to strike it down immediately."

"Good."

They had her completely surrounded.

Fortunately, the monsters she summoned were weak. The Commons citizens who lived nearby had already been ushered to safety. There was no need to worry much about any damage from the battle. The target's capture was surely only a matter of time.

Thus, the knights were too stunned to react immediately when a girl in a nun's habit suddenly jumped out from the back alley.

"What the?!"

"A nun?"

"Who is that? Backup? No, I think not."

The knights looked at each other and traded thoughts quietly.

This new arrival appeared to be sixteen or seventeen. She had silver hair that fell in loose waves, and she wore the habit of a Faust trainee. Although she had decently good looks, the feature that drew the eye most was her right arm, which was a Guiding prosthetic.

She didn't resemble the young girl they'd been chasing at all, and the fact that she wore the garb of a fledgling member of the Faust, the highest-ranking caste, gave the knights pause.

"A nun with silver hair and a prosthetic arm... C-could it be?!"

While most of the knights were baffled by the sudden new arrival in an alley that had been empty save for their target, one among their ranks recognized her face and gave a shout of surprise.

"That's...Sahara, the governor of the Fourth!"

A wave of shock ran through the group of knights. His subordinate's realization jogged the captain's own memory of the newcomer's face.

It truly was Sahara. Her fame even reached as far as the northern region of the continent.

"What is the leader who completed the Director's Fourth project doing all the way out here?!"

"Okay, guess I'm killing you first."

Evidently, this observation had touched a nerve. "Governor." Sahara promptly began charging her artificial arm with Guiding Force.

Guiding Force: Connect—Prosthetic Arm, Inner Seal Conjuration—Activate [Skill: Silver Gauntlet]

The conjuration carved into the prosthetic limb reacted to the Guiding Force and activated, transforming the arm into a battle-ready weapon in the blink of an eye. Raising her Guiding Force input, Sahara swung her fist straight into a knight and sent him flying.

"Dammit... What's Governor Sahara doing in a place like this?! I thought she was in Grisarika Kingdom. There's no way she could have gotten here so quickly! Unless..."

While his compatriot went down, another knight exclaimed, "Did she somehow acquire the legendary ancient relic of long-distance teleportation from the ancient civilization?!"

"Got it. So you're next, huh?" Sahara had chosen her next target.

For once, her usually sleepy-looking eyes had a violent glint. Sahara had been the subject of too much special treatment lately, to the point that she now felt murderous urges toward anyone who tried to treat her as such. Under Sahara's piercing glare, the shaken knight readied his sword. "I-if you're trying to silence me, then I must have guessed right! What dastardly deeds are you plotting?!"

"Ugh, pipe down. You people are always blaming stuff on me, adding madeup stories to my criminal record... Plus, the Dragon Gate was rooted in the earthen vein. It's not the kind of thing you just carry around. In other words, I'm innocent. I had nothing to do with what happened in the holy land at all. In fact. Just leave me out of it."

Sahara's matter-of-fact attitude only disturbed the knights even more.

"Dragon...Gate? Is that the name of the ancient relic of teleportation?"

"She speaks as if she knows its true name and nature... Then she must really be..."

"I've heard whispers before that it might be in the holy land, but... Wait, does that mean the real reason Flarette destroyed the holy land was so the governor could acquire the ancient relic and—"

Guiding Force: Connect—Prosthetic Arm, Inner Seal Conjuration—Activate [Skill: Guiding Shot]

"Gaaaaaaah!"

As a trio of knights tried to pointlessly string a new story together, Sahara blew them all away at once. Their intense battle training failed them in the face of this confusing and alarming situation. The Guiding Shot from Sahara's prosthetic arm hit them head-on.

Although the compressed Guiding Force attack looked flashy, Sahara kept its lethality restrained. She jumped on one of the defeated knights, grabbed him by the collar, and slapped him repeatedly across the face.

"Listen. If you wanna live, go back and relay this message for me: 'Sahara is no big deal, she's just an ordinary nun. She clearly doesn't live up to the title of governor. The stories going around about her are obviously misinformed and exaggerated.' Got it? Repeat it back to me. Go on, let's hear it."

"Grrr... You might have bested us this time, but we're still knights, entrusted

with the noble mission of keeping the peace in all human settlements. We'd never carry false information for you, no matter how you threaten us! We'll relay everything we learned here, even if it costs ou—aAGHHH?!"

The knight's dramatic speech of valiant determination was cut short by a merciless headbutt that knocked him out cold.

"Stupid bastard."

Sahara dropped the unconscious knight to the ground and cursed.

At this rate, she was going to become the mastermind who'd arranged the destruction of the holy land to acquire the ancient teleportation relic known as the Dragon Gate. The rumors about her were already exaggerated beyond any semblance of the truth, and now they might get blown even further out of proportion.

The whole thing was ridiculous. Sahara had barely committed any criminal acts.

She'd only abandoned the front lines of the eastern Wild Frontier without permission because she'd happened to run into Genom Cthulha, the monster of the Commons, leaving her with no other choice. And her attack on Menou was excusable, considering she'd lost all emotional stability because of the Mechanical Society affecting her spirit. Surely, these extenuating circumstances would excuse Sahara from criminal responsibility. As for her so-called role as governor, that had never been true.

Sahara was focused on self-justification, all to prove she'd done nothing wrong.

"People are always trying to pile blame onto the innocent."

Sahara still clung to the faint hope that she, unlike Menou and the others, might still be able to return to a normal life. As such, she couldn't afford to give herself a bad name by killing knights.

Maya, meanwhile, hid in Sahara's shadow. Wherever Sahara went, the girl would follow. It was certainly convenient to be able to latch onto someone's shadow while staying out of sight, but it was surprisingly easy for attacks to affect the shadow space, so she had to be careful.

Still sulking, Sahara looked around and saw that there were still a lot of knights standing. At most, Sahara could take on five at a time. Ten or more meant that she would be hopelessly overwhelmed.

Whatever Maya did must have been bad, because no fewer than thirty had gathered to stop her. Worse, all escape routes had been sealed off, and the knights had the home field advantage.

It was enough to make Sahara want to throw in the towel on the spot.

She was a nun who'd trained to become a priestess. Sadly, though, she'd never even attained the level of a white-robed assistant. She certainly wasn't overconfident enough to think she could best thirty trained warriors alone.

Apparently, this was where her cursed luck ran out.

Sahara smiled brightly, feeling strangely relieved by the vast disadvantage.

"Give me all you got—you'll learn who's weaker soon enough."

Sahara was trying to convey that she wasn't any kind of threat. She dared to hope that being caught here would finally put all the exaggerated rumors to rest.

However, her relaxed attitude only gave the knights the opposite impression. As the girl in a nun's habit took an easy battle stance, her opponents recoiled so dramatically that their formation fell into disarray.

"Is she claiming she's stronger than a squadron of this size?"

"S-such confidence..."

"Acting as if the Noblesse couldn't possibly touch her... She really is the governor of the Fourth who singlehandedly abolished the caste system in Grisarika Kingdom...!"

"Amazing. You really are the perfect fit to be my servant, Sahara! I love the way you turn a situation around! Keep it up! Let's see what else you can do for me!"

This last bit of instigation came from Maya. Sahara's expression grew increasingly sour as the misunderstandings deepened.

Her displeasure came from the fact that, between her taking out a few knights with that first surprise attack and this fresh disturbance, the ranks surrounding her were so broken that she might actually be able to escape now. Sahara was at least trained enough to know better than to miss an opening like that.

"It's Menou's fault... Menou's fault... This is all Menou's fault!"

Cursing to herself, Sahara launched into battle against the knights to break through the gap in their formation.

"Damn it all!" Teach, an instructor priestess from the Executioner-training monastery, shouted in frustration and kicked the ground in a back alley.

A week had passed since she'd received information that the Faust traitor, Flarette, had left Grisarika Kingdom.

Flarette had assisted in the revolution in Grisarika Kingdom to gain support, and Ashuna Grisarika had readily accepted this. Grisarika Kingdom was a large and powerful nation. After the revolution, even the Faust couldn't easily meddle within its borders. Thus, Flarette stepping out of that safe zone was a perfect opportunity. Destroying her was the best chance of restoring the honor of Executioners.

Ever since the fall of the holy land, Teach had been gradually losing authority and having her personnel taken away. She'd gathered a handful of loyal students she'd personally raised and set out to destroy Flarette. Teach knew how strong Menou had been as an Executioner in training. She certainly possessed a special talent for stealthy kills, but like her master Flare, her skills in head-to-head combat were more limited. Teach had no doubt that if they caught her unawares, they'd be able to kill her and restore the Executioner name.

But it had all gone wrong.

"A Pure Concept... But how?!"

Flarette, who'd always specialized in assassination, had somehow acquired the unusual power of a Pure Concept. Teach's plan had ended in failure because of an unexpected counterattack. Worse yet, Flarette had clearly held back against them and even spared their lives.

"How dare she make such a mockery of me!"

Now Teach knew Flarette's abilities.

She was certain that she'd complete her mission next time. However, Michele had come and snatched that chance away.

Teach touched a hand to her right cheek.

There was a large scar on her face where a dagger had once pierced through her cheek.

The old wound had not come from an enemy.

"Hah! What are you teaching these brats, you incompetent fool?"

The memory of a woman who laughed with her mouth thrown unnaturally wide-open flashed through her mind.

Teach had once been an Executioner herself. She'd erased many taboos in the name of protecting world peace.

After surviving those hellish days and becoming an instructor, she sought to pass down her hard-earned Executioner's pride and dignity to her pupils.

"The pride of an Executioner? Are you stupid or what? There's only one reason we kill people."

The merciless hunter of the most taboos in history—she was the ultimate Executioner.

Master Flare.

She'd been reassigned and was supposed to learn how to be an instructor from Teach. Instead, she'd jabbed her dagger into Teach's cheek and taught her a lesson of her own.

"Because we're villains, that's why."

"...!*"*

Teach dug her nails into her palm.

She'd always believed that her work was meant to protect the peace. But

Flare, an Executioner with far more outstanding accomplishments, had rejected that notion outright.

Ever since, Teach's pride had been broken. She'd spent her hollow days simply instructing children how to fight, precisely as she was told.

"And now...Flare is dead."

Flare was dead, and Teach was still alive.

She didn't know exactly what happened, but that was the result. Flare had been killed by her own student, and now Teach was free to instill the pride of Executioners in her charges as she'd wished.

But then Michele appeared, a woman who threatened to dismantle the very existence of Executioners. The position had to endure. Executioners couldn't vanish just because Flare was gone. The only way to stop this was by producing inarguable results.

Although loath to admit it, Teach couldn't imagine defeating Flarette in a straight fight. The young woman had become so strong she was like an entirely different person, even without her scripture.

But battling fair and square was never the nature of Executioners.

"I swear I'll get her back for this..."

Flarette had gone soft, if letting Teach and her students live was any indication. Undoubtedly, she had plenty of weaknesses.

Teach needed to prepare. She would form a plan, gather information, and gain an advantage over Flarette.

Flare was dead, and her successor, Flarette, had betrayed the Faust in the worst way possible.

This was Teach's chance.

"I'll prove that I was right... That this world needs Executioners!"

Teach thought she heard the echo of a woman's wide-mouthed laugh when she spoke.

Roughly half a day had passed since Michele's surprise attack.

Having acquired a room in a cheap hotel, Menou stared grimly out the window.

After the showdown with Michele, Menou and Abbie made it look like they were fleeing town, then secretly returned to search for Maya.

However, they couldn't find her.

"We're going back to the ruins of the house," Menou declared.

Abbie rolled her eyes beneath her goggles.

"Do we really still have to look for her?"

"We do."

Menou curtly shut down Abbie's whining, causing the latter to sulk.

"Come onnnn..."

"I will not 'come on."

She was having none of Abbie's whiny objections. Menou donned her mantle and prepared to depart.

"They're after Maya. You must have noticed that much during Michele's attack. Whatever they plan to do with her can't be good."

Menou and company didn't have any means of long-distance communication. When she was a priestess, Menou had been able to use her scripture to send messages to connected scriptures. Now that she lacked communication conjurings, it was far more dangerous for any of them to go off alone.

Menou and Abbie could still figure out ways to meet up, if necessary, but not Maya. She had no combat training and lacked the skills required to track down others. And if she used her Pure Concept, she could lose her memories and invite terrible danger.

Of the three of them, it was most important to keep track of Maya.

"First, let's go back to the house. Maya was acting strange after she got separated from us yesterday. I think she had Michele's scripture at the time of the attack. If it's still there, we might be able to gain some insight into what happened."

"Hear me out, though. Is it really a problem if someone disappears when the world is better off without them? It's best to abandon her for the greater good."

"..." Menou furrowed her brow.

Abbie would be invaluable in locating Maya. Unfortunately, she made no attempt to disguise her disinterest in assisting. At this rate, it was entirely likely that she would claim she couldn't find anything if Menou pushed her to help.

"We're better off without her. Why are you even trying to find her, Menou? Let's just forget it and focus on getting information about the Starhusk. Heck, let's just decide Maya was a decoy!"

"...Abbie."

"Whaaat? Listen, no matter what you say, I'm not..."

Upon realizing that she would have to take a different approach, Menou cleared her throat.

Despite appearances, Menou was actually quite good at acting. She gave Abbie a calculated puppy-dog look, complete with tears in her wide eyes.

"Please, won't you help me, big sis?"

"I'll help you!! I'll do whatever it takes!"

Abbie immediately created conjured soldier insects and sent them out to scan the area. Menou was aghast at the immediate about-face she'd produced just by swallowing her pride a little.

"...I didn't actually think that would work."

"I'm not stupid, okay? I know that was just an act, but...my heart can't deny a request from a cute little sis like you!"

During their absurd exchange, Menou and Abbie deliberately chose a more crowded street as they approached the site of the previous day's battle.

"We gotta talk about Michele. What kind of monster is she, exactly? I've been wondering ever since we first ran into her on the ship to Grisarika Kingdom half a year ago... How can she do all that without a scripture?"

"We're just lucky she didn't have that priestess partner with her."

"Ah, the one with the glasses... You're right. It's impossible to handle the two of them combined. We only scraped by the first time because we were at sea. We'll be done for if they use the earthen vein against us."

Michele boasted an inhumanly large amount of Guiding Force and the ability to control it with perfect finesse.

Guiding Enhancement, crest conjurings, scripture conjurings, combat techniques...

She excelled at every imaginable form of Guiding Force control, and her skills didn't stop there. She had no weaknesses to exploit. There was no way to beat her in a head-on fight. Her flawlessness as a conjurer earned her the nickname *Magician*. She was, without a doubt, the strongest of the Elders that served Hakua.

The only reason Menou and Abbie had escaped her at all was because they'd encountered her in town. Michele had refrained from using her greatest conjurings out of fear of harming passersby.

She could reduce everything in sight to a wasteland with her massive Guiding Force capabilities if she truly desired it.

Before long, Menou and Abbie arrived at the wreckage of the house where they'd been hiding. There were several guards stationed around the rubble. Appearances suggested they were hired Commons, not priestesses or knights.

"Abbie?"

"Don't worry. It's not a trap."

Abbie had already confirmed this by sending her insects to investigate. Evidently, Michele wasn't lying in wait.

"All right. Let's do some digging."

"Do you even have any idea where to look?"

"Of course I do. Maya came to my room last night, and she was carrying a scripture. I think it must have been Michele's. Remember when Maya got lost yesterday? I think Michele must have given it to her then for some purpose."

"Uh-huh..."

Abbie obviously had no interest in discussing Maya. Menou had her wait on standby and used Guiding Camouflage to conceal herself and slip past the guards.

She pushed through the debris in the area where she'd been staying last night, removing it carefully so as not to catch the attention of the men keeping watch. Before long, she found the object of her search.

Sure enough, it was a scripture.

Menou touched it and let some Guiding Force flow through her hand. There was no conditionally activated trap. It was just a normal scripture. Hakua might detect Menou through the scripture, but there was little point in worrying about that when Michele had already run into them. Menou opened the scripture and found that a page had been torn out.

Using Guiding Camouflage to move past the guards, Menou returned to Abbie.

"Can you reproduce this page?"

"Mm-hmm. Just leave it to your oh-so-convenient big sister."

Abbie took the scripture and held it against the gear design on her abdomen.

Her tan skin absorbed the scripture easily. Her conjured soldier's body, constructed from a Concept of Primary Colors, was connected to a separate dimension. More accurately, the part of Abbie that was here with Menou was really only a terminal.

"Mm, delicious... Oh? Oh my."

While analyzing and reconstructing the scripture in the space within her body, Abbie made a bemused sound. For some reason, she thrust a hand into her stomach and drew a piece of paper out like a magic trick.

"Here you are, the piece that was ripped out. The reconstruction I whipped up won't even last five minutes, so read it quickly."

She handed Menou a re-created scrap. Menou inspected the Guiding Light image it produced and checked its contents.

This confirmed her suspicions. Michele had given Maya this scripture to lure her away to Hakua.

"So she betrayed us, hmm?"

"...I don't think it's gone that far, at least not yet."

If she'd betrayed them right away, Maya would have worked with Michele the previous day.

"I'd say it's more like she's been tempted into evil."

"Ah-ha-ha! That's ironic, when she has the Pure Concept of *Evil*," Abbie cackled, still openly hostile toward Maya. Menou frowned, voicing a doubt that arose as soon as she understood the situation.

"I can't imagine Hakua would really leave the holy land, even to lure Maya..."

Was she missing something? Menou turned over the facts, trying to think outside the box.

Maya's nature, Hakua's goal, the Starhusk, and what she knew about the abilities of the Pure Concept of *Ivory*—something felt off while she reviewed each. She dug deeper into the feeling, until realization struck like a bolt of lightning.

"...Oh no."

"What's up, li'l Menou?"

Menou didn't respond to Abbie's question, instead only staring at her while rooted in place.

It couldn't be.

Anxiety burned in Menou.

If her prediction was right, then she'd realized it much too late. They should never have let Maya leave Grisarika Kingdom, and if they had to let her tag along, they ought to have watched her every waking second. Letting her slip away long enough to run into Michele had been a fatal error.

If it unfolded as Menou feared, everything they'd done in the past half year would be for nothing. Perhaps it was already doomed beyond any hope of

recovery.

"Abbie!"

"Bwuh?!" Abbie exclaimed in surprise.

"We have to leave right now! Protecting Maya is all that matters!"

They could no longer afford to be careful. Menou had been trying to cause as little commotion as possible, but that was off the table now. Depending on the circumstances, they might need to launch a surprise attack. They had to rescue Maya, no matter the risk.

"You know, Ii'l Menou, you're actually not very empathetic."

Menou still didn't know what she'd said to upset Maya last night.

Another emotion arose to join the anxiety. It landed in her chest with a heavy thud, settling there like an unmovable weight.

What was Menou, who'd killed lost ones as an Executioner, supposed to do about this Otherworlder?

Half a year had passed since she'd met Maya. Soon, she would have to face a problem she'd been avoiding all this time.

"You're not falling for that old trick, are you?" Sahara quipped. After escaping the circle of knights, Maya had explained the situation to Sahara, who'd criticized her immediately. "I mean, that's super sketchy. Everyone knows that 'come alone' always means it's a trap unless it's a love confession. How could you possibly believe her?"

"I know, but..."

Maya had no argument. She just pouted at the girl with wavy silver hair and a nun's habit. Her sleepy-looking eyes gave her the illusion of a languid young beauty, but Maya knew the truth. Sahara was just lazy and unmotivated.

"Well, it *could* be the truth. Besides, it's not your place to comment on your master's decisions, you cheeky underling. All you need to know is that I have to see Hakua. So we've got to stay away from Menou and get to the City of Ruins by the appointed date."

"Oh yeah? Well, given how long it would take to travel from the holy land, and our current speed, I guess this is the only date that makes sense for a meetup... Hey, if that's where you want to go, I'm not gonna stop you."

Sahara nodded once and offered no further thoughts. She didn't seem terribly interested.

Maya gripped her kimono sleeves. Sahara only obeyed Maya because of a threat, the ring the child had affixed on her pinky finger.

Sahara wasn't Maya's ally, or her friend.

In truth, there was hardly any curse on the ring at all. It only served as a mark that enabled Maya to create a link between their shadows and perform the summoning.

If Sahara knew that Maya lacked the power to really harm Sahara, it was obvious what such a careless, flaky girl would do. She'd run off immediately.

"As long as you understand. You're my servant, so you need to do what I say."

"Right, right."

Thus, Maya couldn't afford to show Sahara any weakness.

The two of them were walking along a path beside the railroad tracks. Occasionally, a Guiding train passed by, shaking the ground and scattering motes of Guiding Light.

It would've been faster to travel by train, of course, but they had to assume that all the stations had guards. Unlike Menou and Abbie, Maya and Sahara couldn't disguise their appearance, which left them with no choice but to walk and keep hidden.

As they proceeded in silence, white powder floated past their faces.

It was starting to snow.

"Ugh... I hope this doesn't turn into a storm," Sahara groaned. She and Maya were wanted criminals and couldn't take the train, so a snowstorm posed a severe threat. If it came down too heavily, they wouldn't get anywhere quickly, if at all.

With Sahara involved, their pursuers would take them all the more seriously. The rumors about Sahara had gotten impressively out of hand. It didn't help that Menou sometimes disguised herself as Sahara to cover her tracks. At this point, it was no exaggeration to say that members of the Faust and Noblesse who didn't have inside information viewed Sahara as public enemy number one.

If Sahara was alone, she could have evaded detection by navigating rocky, undeveloped territory. However, Maya lacked the stamina for such a journey. They needed to stick to even ground if they wanted to get anywhere on foot.

"I knew it."

There was a security checkpoint up ahead. A group of knights inspected the faces of everyone who passed on the road.

It wasn't a bustling area, so there were only three knights at the checkpoint. Menou or Abbie could've handled this easily. Maya raised her head to look at Sahara, wondering what she would do about it.

Eyes trained on the knights, Sahara said, "Maya. Stay calm and answer me one thing, okay?"

Sensing that this was serious, Maya responded tensely. "Okay."

"Where are we, exactly?" Sahara asked after a pause.

A chill wind blew with a whistling sound.

Maya's mouth dropped open. Sahara had been leading the way with such confidence that Maya had never expected her to inquire about such a thing.

"Sahara...you're joking, right?"

"Think about it." Maya's lips quivered while Sahara explained with a deadly serious expression why she wasn't at fault. "I was just relaxing in Grisarika Kingdom when I was suddenly summoned here, and then we were immediately on the run, remember? How would I have any idea where we are?"

"Wh... Then why did you lead the way...?"

"I walked down the first road I saw, that's all. I guess you could say I left it up to chance."

Maya's entire body trembled as Sahara spoke without the slightest hint of remorse. And no, she wasn't shaking because she was cold.

"I mean, who could blame me? I have no map, we can't take the train, and I've never been to the north. I don't know the first thing about the geography around here."

Having given her defense without hesitation, Sahara pressed her artificial hand to her chest.

"In other words, it's not my fault."

"SAHARAAA!" Maya screeched. "Why are you always like this?! You just go with the flow! So thoughtless! Totally irresponsible! Aren't you ashamed of yourself?!"

"Of course not. Nothing is ever my fault, after all."

"How can you possibly believe that?! I don't get it! Now sit right there so I can punish you!"

"Yeah, no thanks. I do have some dignity, you know. I'm not going to just sit on the dirty ground."

"Forget about your stupid pride! Or do you want me to activate that thing on your finger?!"

"I'm sorry. I'll learn from this mistake and do better moving forward."

"Don't give me some phony apology! What are you, a politician?! You make me so mad!!"

Maya was shouting. She'd forgotten to keep her voice down. From an outsider's perspective, a nun was being scolded by a little girl. The pair stood out like a sore thumb.

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"Isn't that ...?"
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"No, it can't be..."

"I want to say that's impossible...but maybe not?"

The knights spotted Maya and Sahara immediately and whispered to each other, confused.

Their clothes and appearances matched the descriptions, but they drew too much attention to themselves and argued loudly over something too trivial to be a falling-out among criminal masterminds. The knights couldn't believe that the famous governor of the Fourth would be lectured by a child.

As the knights stood around stealing glances and wondering whether these two were merely uncanny look-alikes, the girls eventually realized they'd been spotted and fell silent. The little girl turned somewhat pale.

Their reaction finally confirmed the knights' suspicions.

"We've spotted the governor of the Fourth!"

"Call for backup! Keep your distance and don't lose sight of the targets! Don't do anything stupid before backup arrives! Just keep your eyes on them until we have enough men to overwhelm them with numbers!"

Once they made a decision, knights were always quick to act. A messenger went running, and the rest fanned out to keep Maya and Sahara in their sights. They were intently focused, making sure that they wouldn't take their eyes off the two until backup arrived.

Maya turned bright red as she watched the situation take a turn for the worse.

"Sahara, you useless piece of junk! You big stupid nincompoop!"

"What, you think this is my fault?"

"Of course it is, dummy! Michele's not attacking us thanks to me, but now the knights are all over us because of you!"

"Uhhh... Then maybe you shouldn't have summoned me."

"Now you're just splitting hairs!!"

Maya shouted at the unimpressed Sahara while the two were forced to flee from knights yet again.

A woman was being dragged out of the church by the collar of her priestess robes.

She had dark jade-tinted hair and glasses. The small sword hanging from her

belt indicated that she was an Inquisitor, though its hilt was so sparkling clean that it was doubtful whether it had ever been touched. Unlike Michele's, which was wielded as a genuine weapon, this one was mere decoration.

"Michele, please slow down..."

The creases in the other priestess's brow deepened when she heard her name. Her would-be comrade's lighthearted tone hardly seemed appropriate for an Inquisitor, let alone one who was older than her.

Michele continued dragging Hooseyard, who was technically her senior, while the latter continued whining.

"I really don't want to leave this town yet. There's still lots of work to be done, like examining the Guiding Force lines we drew from the earthen vein and finishing up and submitting a maintenance plan. It's not often that we get permission to connect directly to a town's Guiding Force lines, so it'd be a shame to let this chance go to waste, don't you agree?"

"Is that part of your job?"

"Well, it's more like a hobby... Yeek?!"

Michele smacked the dawdling Hooseyard on the back.

While Hooseyard clearly lacked any enthusiasm for the job of Inquisitor, she possessed a unique ability. She was an expert at ceremonial conjurings, with supernatural proficiency that likely surpassed even Michele's.

That made her perfect for the unit of talented individuals Michele was gathering to serve under the Lord directly.

Michele's only weakness was a lack of personnel. She didn't have enough pawns to chase down enemies who kept hiding and running away.

That was why she sought to bolster her unit by bringing the Executioners under her command. They were losing their position thanks to Flare's death and Flarette's betrayal anyway.

"First, we'll use the Executioners to drive Flarette into a corner. You know the plan, yes?"

"...I really don't like it. I feel very guilty... I don't want to do this."

"Oh? If you want to go on the front lines, just say so. I'll ship you out right away."

"I'll do my best here, thank you very much!"

Hooseyard straightened up.

As far as Michele was concerned, Menou had to be eliminated before she reached the City of Ruins. Now that she'd been separated from Maya, there was no reason not to erase her as soon as possible. Hooseyard had located her after she'd escaped the initial attack.

"Oh dear... I'd hoped to spend some time meddling with the earthen vein some more..."

The first concern when building a settlement was securing a stable supply of Guiding Force, for it was the fundamental energy source. It kept streetlamps lit, citizens warm, and towns running smoothly.

So larger towns and cities especially were almost invariably built above the earthen vein.

A church at the center of the town drew energy from the earthen vein, then distributed to other places by way of conductive materials that created a manmade network of Guiding Force lines. Miniature shrines were strategically placed at important points along the network to channel the required amounts of Guiding Force into homes, businesses, and so on. These Guiding Force lines were carefully laid out and managed, powering lives and industry.

Hooseyard had borrowed the ceremonial conjuring device used to control the Guiding Force lines from the town church, singlehandedly operated a system that normally required dozens of conjurers, and used it to locate Menou and company.



Now the priestess who thought nothing of using ceremonial conjurings in a way that no one else could manage slouched dejectedly at Michele's harshness.

"Those people who used to be Executioners didn't seem like they'd listen to you at all," Hooseyard mumbled. "I don't know how you thought of a plan like this in the first place."

"Even the most witless fools have a use. Besides, it's up to them to make the choice."

"That's so like you, Michele. You always manage to find a way to kill two birds with one stone and force your goals to succeed."

"Don't be absurd. You don't know anything about me."

"Hmm..." Hooseyard tilted her head. "That's how my former boss was, so I figured you might be the same. You're from the holy land, too, aren't you? Surely you've heard of Archbishop Elcami?"

"…"

Michele sank into silence at Hooseyard's innocent question.

Archbishop Elcami of the Faust's holy land.

In truth, Elcami was Michele's previous self. She went by "Michele" now, but the woman had restarted her life many times in service of Hakua.

She had no memory of her lives before the latest restart. However, from what she was told, her pathetic previous self had failed to defend the holy land where Hakua dwelled, thus failing the Lord she was sworn to serve.

This version of her would never do such a thing.

"...And why would your former boss's personality have anything to do with me?"

"Who knows?" Hooseyard's smile was almost miraculously pure. It reminded Michele once again that this woman had never dreamed of dealing in taboo.

"Maybe I'm sticking with you so I can find out."

"You're sticking with me because it's your job."

"Well, yes, but..." Hooseyard sighed at her junior's excessively cold and serious attitude. "So we're going to the City of Ruins, hmm? I've seen it before, so I can't say I'm terribly excited to go back..."

"That's surprising. I would have thought a freak like you would jump at the chance to see the place."

"Well, of course, it's an important astral vein point. Our current conjuring technology has no way of connecting to it, but if materialogy develops further, it'll be a fascinating place for sure. The thing is...it's just not quite right, you know?"

Hooseyard used Guiding Force to activate the Guiding Vision crest in her glasses. Using the crest conjuring to view the flow of Guiding Force through her lenses, she peered up at the Starhusk floating in the sky.

"The Guiding Force there should have combined with the Starhusk already. I don't really like the astral vein in the northern continent, especially around the City of Ruins, because there's nothing to be gained by fiddling with it. I'd rather play with the Guiding Force lines in town..."

When Michele realized the meaning behind Hooseyard's seemingly nonsensical observation, she was stunned into silence.

Hooseyard's observation was exactly right. Few other conjurers could make that assessment merely by looking at the Starhusk. In fact, even a thousand years ago, when Guiding Force technology was rapidly developing, almost no one had reached the conclusion Hooseyard had.

Hooseyard had deduced the conjuring theory behind the Pure Concept *Star*, said to be the very best of all in the ancient civilization, despite growing up in a culture with a more primitive understanding of Guiding Force. No one could have reached that understanding without an enormous amount of knowledge and intuition about Guiding Force.

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"How do you..."
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[&]quot;Mm? What?"

[&]quot;...Never mind."

Michele shook off the chill that ran down her spine.

Hooseyard's strength in combat didn't matter much since she was a genius. Ultimately, brilliant talents like her were born to lead the world forward.

As conjuring techniques advanced, they would surpass any military technique. Michele was living proof. She'd only been a nameless foot soldier a thousand years ago.

The Starhusk that floated overhead was a deterrent against many Human Errors. It had the power to move the world, and the right to use it was entrusted only to the Astrologer. It couldn't be allowed to fall into the hands of anyone else, least of all Flarette.

"Remember to stay in my sight at all times. Even when your role in this is done, I'm not letting you go."

"Oh goody. I'm glad my junior likes me so much."

Hooseyard delivered this line with a gloomy, deadpan tone while Michele dragged her all the way to the train.

An old, broken-down chapel stood tucked into a corner of town. A meeting of Faust members secretly called by Teach was about to begin. Many priestesses were gathered there, white and indigo robes alike. There were too many to fit into the pews, so the rest stood in the back and aisles.

They were essentially the members of an anti-Michele faction. Most of them were priestesses who'd dirtied their hands as Executioners for many years. To these women, the systematic dismantling of their positions, something largely spearheaded by Michele, was tyranny that could not stand.

The sound of footsteps clacking briskly to the pulpit echoed through the unnatural silence.

The priestess who stepped up to the front of the chapel had a large scar on her cheek. It was Teach, a former instructor at the monastery for training Executioners.

"Thank you all for coming today. We have only one matter to discuss: Michele, the Inquisitor who seeks to rule us with an iron fist."

Her steady voice resounded through the chamber.

"I acknowledge that Michele is a capable priestess. Had she risen through the ranks of the Faust by respectable means, we would follow her without question. However!"

She raised her voice, her face twisting with hatred.

"That woman has brought taboo into the Faust!"

There was a heavy quiet, but not from a lack of reaction from the crowd. It was the weighty silence of the calm before the storm.

"Michele's unit created in supposed service to the Lord is a band of heretics. Forcing personnel to transfer into her unit is one thing, but she's even taken in those who committed taboos. Even the infamous Priestess Killer Genom Cthulha is among her recruits!"

The second she spoke Genom's name, murderous rage rippled throughout the chapel. The hatred from the priestesses in their thirties or older burned exceptionally bright.

It was during their generation that Genom had earned the nickname Priestess Killer. They knew firsthand how many had fallen to the monster born of the Commons.

"Even if it's not public knowledge, I know for a fact that Michele personally invited Genom to join her after he left the Mechanical Society. What further proof do you need that she is the enemy? We must drag Michele down from the position of Inquisitor, no matter what it takes! And how better than by capturing the traitor Flarette ourselves and leveraging that achievement to have Michele answer for her transgressions?"

Shouts of agreement rose from the crowd.

Their anger at Michele for trying to take away their place as Executioners, their loathing of her forces, and their hatred of Genom Cthulha all boiled over. The priestesses gathered in the chapel vented their rage. They resembled an angry mob.

Occasionally, negative emotions could invite Evil.

Conjurings seldom occurred spontaneously, of course. However, by fanning the flames of dark emotions in so many people, it became easier to summon *Evil* through human means.

One of the white-robed priestesses was acting slightly strange. She produced a red capsule from her robes. It was monstrine, the illegal substance that had spread in Libelle not long ago.

"Goodness me... The Magician is much too lenient."

When Manon Libelle had used the substance, it was for the express purpose of infecting people and transforming them into monsters. However, monstrine was actually extracted from the body of an Otherworlder—from Pandæmonium.

The bodies of Otherworlders made for excellent conjuring materials.

And monstrine was no exception.

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Monstrine, Pseudo-Concept—Summon [Original Sin Fiend: Invidia]

A spirit of malice was summoned by an Original Sin Conjuring. The process was so stealthy that none of the gathered priestesses noticed.

Hidden amid the heated fervor of the Executioners, a dark red fog formed above Teach's head as she stood at the pulpit. The fumes slipped into her body through her ear and disappeared without a trace.

"Now, that should do it. This should cause some trouble for all involved."

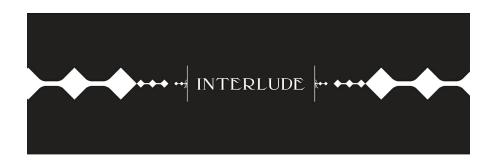
As she watched the results of her conjuring, the white-robed priestess sneered coldly with outright contempt for the world. She closed her eyes, then her jaw suddenly dropped open.

It looked as though she'd fallen asleep on her feet.

Awakening with a start, the white-robed priestess looked around nervously. Noticing the bizarre energy emanating from her assembled peers, she hurriedly left the chapel.

This white-robed priestess was no Executioner, nor had she been invited to the meeting. She was simply a virtuous priestess who lived in town. She'd never invoked an Original Sin Conjuring and had no memory of touching monstrine.

Unaware that such a priestess had been among them, the anti-Michele priestesses planned their attack on Menou to reclaim their standings.



"You're so weak," Nono said, her white coat fluttering over her light blue sailor uniform.

Maya hung her head. "....."

Ever since Hakua saved her, Maya had been painfully aware of her weakness.

"Your Pure Concept's ability to transform organic matter is fascinating for a conjuring researcher, but it's absolutely useless in battle."

Maya's Pure Concept was Evil.

While the name sounded ominous, Maya's conjurings were virtually powerless compared to those of other Pure Concepts. She could summon things from a separate dimension. However, the monsters this created were so weak that any security force armed with Guiding vessels could defeat them, let alone the likes of Hakua and Ryuunosuke.

There were probably no other Pure Concepts as weak as Maya's. She had never once been able to help Hakua and the others since joining them. She was only a burden to be protected.

That's why Nono's next statement surprised Maya so much.

"That's what's scary about you."

"Huh?"

"Who knows how horrifying you'd be as a Human Error?"

A Human Error.

The term described what became of a Japanese person when they lost all their memories. Pure Concepts claimed some memories that made up one's spirit in exchange for their powers. If someone continued using a Pure Concept without countermeasures in place, their Pure Concept would consume their spirit. They would become the concept incarnate, a harbinger of destruction.

"B-but...I'm weak, remember?"

"But you're also special," Nono countered. "Japanese people summoned to this world get a concept attached to them as they pass between dimensions. These Pure Concepts are connected to something that already exists. They invoke a phenomenon that follows the existing rules of this planet by way of Guiding Force. This law of conjuring phenomena applies to me, Ryuunosuke, and even Hakua. Our conjurings are powerful, but they still exist within the realm of possibility."

The star-shaped Guiding Light in Nono's eyes hovered on Maya. "But you and Kaa's Pure Concepts can create things from nothing."

Maya didn't quite understand what Nono was trying to say.

Yes, her conjurings summoned monsters from a place outside this world. No one knew why the space the researchers had dubbed the Concept Dimension of Original Sin existed, or why there were monsters there.

"Kaa is the second *Vessel* to exist in history. A long time ago, the first *Vessel* became a Human Error and was subdued, so the Pure Concept has been unevenly distributed since before Kaa, who refined it even further. Honestly, Kaa's mastery of that Pure Concept is on an entirely different level compared to the first *Vessel*. As for you, Maya... You're the first person to have the Pure Concept of *Evil*."

The awe in Nono's eyes was obvious. "Your Concept Dimension of Original Sin and Kaa's Primary Color Storage Space—your Pure Concepts draw power from dimensions outside of this world. Of course, they're not connected to Earth, either, since conjurings don't exist at all there. Which means your concepts could probably become the seeds of some other worlds."

"The seeds...of worlds?"

"Right. Your power deals in organic matter, while Kaa's is inorganic matter, but your Pure Concepts both contain entirely different worlds. And since you both have the potential to become creators of new worlds, your Human Errors could be unbelievably disastrous. At least, that's how I see it."

This was making Maya increasingly nervous.

"Is that...a prediction?"

Nono Hoshizaki had a gift.

The Pure Concept of *Star* that dwelt in her eyes was famous for its precognition. Although the Guiding Force technology of this planet surpassed anything in modern Japan, there were many who still desired her unerring predictions.

"Hmm? Oh, no." Nono shook her head. "Even with a Pure Concept, the human brain can't calculate information about the future. All I can do on my own is extract bits of data, not analyze it to the point where I can make a completely accurate foretelling. I might be the world-famous magical girl genius Nono, but I can't make predictions like that on my own."

"Huh? Th-then what..."

"Hee-hee. How do I make predictions if I, a supergenius, can't do them on my own? Well, that's where Kaa here comes in!"

That wasn't at all what Maya intended to ask, but it was impossible to stop Nono once she got worked up. She smacked the mysterious floating object, also known as Gadou, the holder of the Pure Concept of *Vessel*.

"Kaa here is amazing! She can even create a one-off quantum computer with pure blue Guiding Force circuits that have ultra-high-speed operation abilities! Kaa's conjuring operation circuits analyze the future information I receive, completing our great Divination conjuring! In other words, all my predictions are products of the loving bond between Kaa and me. You could call them our children!"

"Oh? And that's really that amazing?"

"Of course! I don't love that the computation unit is a tan, busty babe, but Kaa really is incredible! The conjuring device we're making in the north right now wouldn't exist without Kaa's Astrologer, either!"

Maya still wasn't sure what was so amazing about all this. From her perspective, Ryuunosuke's ability to become as big as the moon and Hakua's strength, which eclipsed even that, were far more impressive.

While Maya blinked uncertainly, Nono nudged the mysterious floating object with a lab coat-clad elbow. The object that supposedly contained Gadou changed shape occasionally. It had chosen to be a cube today.

"Ha-ha-ha, you're blushing, Kaa. Don't be shy. You really are amazing, you know. You oughta be proud of yourself! Heh-heh, you're getting so warm, you must be really... Ow! Hot!"

Nono's sleeve suddenly caught fire.

The bright red color and heat looked more like anger than embarrassment to Maya. Nono must have gotten on Gadou's nerves.

"F-fire...! Um, Kaa?! Why did — Gwaaaaaah?! Put it ooout!"

As Nono's good mood literally went up in flames, she rolled around on the floor, screaming.

Whether out of friendship, mercy, or just to add insult to injury, the mysterious floating object turned partially blue and sprayed Nono with water before the flames spread too far.

"Whew. Thanks, Kaa. I knew we had an unbreakable bond."

As soon as the fire went out, the now-drenched Nono beamed brightly, dripping water.

"At any rate, as long as the magical girl genius Nono exists, you don't have to worry about becoming Human Errors. Even without the memory-restoring device, I can always use my *Star* power to draw from the memories of the world itself."

Nono had the rare ability to supplement memories using her Pure Concept. Despite being a Pure Concept holder, she was uniquely destined never to become a Human Error.

"It was my great idea to turn the memory supply Guiding vessel into cloud storage, too, you know? Similar vessels have been made before, but you had to record memories in them in advance. They were like the good old-fashioned save game and load game system, where you have to manually overwrite your file each time. If something goes wrong, boom! You lose it all!"

"That's old-fashioned?"

Maya thought manually overwriting your save data was standard for video games. The stars in Nono's eyes glittered.

"Ohhh. Were you born early in the Heisei era, Maya?"

"So what ...?"

"I was born later, in the Reiwa era. I came from Japan around half a century after you did."

Maya's eyes widened in surprise upon learning that the other girl was from the future. Nono chuckled and puffed out her chest.

"The conditions for being summoned from Earth are fairly limited, you know. Based on the statistics, it's always from Japan, and only from the mid-Showa era to late Reiwa. I do have a theory as to why... Do you want to hear it?"

"Not at all. Your theories are always so hard to follow."

Maya wasn't up for another long, complicated explanation. Nono, who obviously wanted to launch into another deep dive, looked disappointed by this response.

"Awww, okay... Well, as I was saying, my Pure Concept of *Star's* World Connection system exists to read the future. It provides a superior kind of link for reading information recorded in the Guiding Force that exists throughout the planet!"

To discern the future, a user needed to know everything leading up to the present. In other words, Nono's ability to draw out memories was basically a by-product of her Pure Concept's main power.

Now finished explaining her abilities, Nono gently patted Maya on the head.

"Anyway, since I have access to all the planet's data, I also know that you've been through some really awful stuff, Maya. If you're ever having a hard time, you can always confide in me."

"...Nono."

"What is it?"

"Don't touch me with your wet hand. You'll ruin my cute hairstyle."

"I swear, you're not cute at all!"

Nono and the others who'd saved Maya, protected her, and sometimes talked and laughed with her... They were all her friends.

She still remembered.

While sorting through her memories as they walked, Maya breathed a sigh of relief.

When the knights were chasing her, she'd used her Pure Concept several times before she'd summoned Sahara. Now she was going over her memories individually to figure out what she'd forgotten in exchange.

The process of a Pure Concept—using Otherworlder becoming a Human Error was far from fixed. It varied between individuals. Most of all, the degree of the Pure Concept's corrosion depended on how much the lost memory had shaped the user's personality.

Parents, siblings, friends, strangers...

The more one forgot about the people important to them, the faster their spirit was worn down. As soon as the sense of self that held the memories together disappeared, the process greatly accelerated. When one lost core memories that shaped their consciousness, their character altered, their personality fell apart like an avalanche, and they'd soon be entirely consumed by the Pure Concept.

Maya was still fine, for now.

She still had her most precious memories. Reassured that she was still herself, Maya raised her head and looked around.

Fortunately, she and Sahara had made it to town before the snow worsened.

When they were spotted at the roadside checkpoint and a battalion hurried to capture them, Maya was sure the jig was up. However, the search party started slacking off partway through the process. Perhaps something more pressing had occurred, and they hadn't been able to waste time on Maya and company. That's what Maya gathered from their exclamations about the knight

headquarters and something major happening in town anyway.

"Whew. That was one stressful chase."

As for Sahara, she was making a big show of wiping sweat from her brow, as if to demonstrate how hard she'd been working.

"That's the second time we've escaped the knights. I got us out of that town when they had us surrounded, and now we've slipped through a security checkpoint, too. Our luck even held long enough for us to reach town before the weather turned foul. Not bad, if I say so myself. Maybe you could reward me a little? Like, for instance, removing the curse ring on my finger..."

Sahara grinned boastfully and made a bold request, but Maya stared blankly.

"Wait..." The town they had just reached was all too familiar. "We came back."

"…"

Sahara's eyes widened as she realized what Maya meant. Then she awkwardly averted her gaze. Maya tugged insistently on the sleeve of Sahara's habit.

"Did you hear me, Sahara? We're back where we started. This is the town where I left Menou. How did this happen? I thought we were moving forward, not backward. Answer me, Sahara!"

"Well, that's life for you. Three steps forward and two steps back."

"Is that your best excuse?!"

"Owie, owie!"

Standing on tiptoe, Maya pinched Sahara's cheeks with both hands. Her short stature meant she pulled down to lift herself up, resulting in some fairly painful punishment.

"What are we going to do?! We'll never make it in time! There's no way we can get to the meeting place on foot before the deadline now!"

"Maybe we should just head back to Grisarika Kingdom, then?" Sahara suggested.

"Absolutely not!" Maya exclaimed, furious over Sahara's open lack of

motivation.

Two days remained until Hakua's appointed meeting day. It was a five-day trip to the City of Ruins on foot, no matter how hard they might try. On top of that, it was snowing. Leaving town without any gear for the inclement weather was inviting disaster.

Maya's chance of making the meeting on time was zero. Sahara continued to justify this blunder, looking downright triumphant.

"Hey, just think positive. This is for the best. I dunno what you were hoping for, but it was definitely a trap."

"How dare you! You're just my servant! You don't get to mouth off to your master like that!"

"Well, if you're my master, maybe you should start providing for me. Then we'll talk about mouthing off."

"You want a little girl like me to *provide* for you?! Where is your pride, Sahara?!"

"I don't really care, as long as I get to take it easy... And on that note, Maya. I don't know if we'll be able to stay the night anywhere in this town, let alone travel anywhere else."

Maya gulped, swallowing her words.

The Fourth hideout had been destroyed, and even if they found somewhere to sleep, their descriptions were undoubtedly circulating through the town. If they strolled around without disguises, they'd be reported before long. They could brave the night outside, but in this weather, they'd be a pair of frozen corpses by morning. At this rate, the two wouldn't survive the night, much less make it to their destination.

"E-excuse me..."

As they stood wondering what to do, someone called to them.

They turned around and saw a girl. She was older than Maya, but still quite young. She had a newspaper clipping in her hands with portraits of Menou and Sahara.

This wasn't good. The two tensed.

This girl obviously recognized Sahara as the governor of the Fourth. If she was an upstanding Commons citizen, she'd call for the local law.

"W-wait a minute, please! Miss Flarette saved my life!" As Sahara turned to run without waiting for permission from Maya, the girl hurriedly called out. "Pplease let me repay her by offering you shelter!"

The local girl, wearing a heavy coat over a jumpsuit, bowed politely.

Ants swarmed around unconscious knights in a dilapidated building.

These were knights in the town where Maya had summoned Sahara. After the pair had escaped, the knights had strengthened security on the nearby roads, hoping to catch Sahara.

Their efforts were soon rewarded when word arrived that the governor of the Fourth had been spotted nearby. The knights prepared to deploy based on the message, determined to catch the fugitive this time, only to be hit by a surprise attack that dashed their hopes.

Menou and Abbie were the culprits this time.

"Honestly. What bad boys and girls, trying to attack my little sister. If you weren't youngsters yourselves, I'd strip you down to the bone and have myself a nice little feast of red materials! Bad! Have you learned your lesson?"

"They're all unconscious, Abbie."

The creatures crawling over the knights were insects made of small artificial parts. They were dismantling the knights' Guiding weapons and carrying them away piece by piece, not to an anthill, but to Abbie's feet. As a conjured soldier of all three Primary Colors, she was able to absorb the materials they brought into her brown skin.

This simultaneously disarmed the knights and replenished Abbie's resources. Once she'd devoured all their weapons, she patted the gear symbol on her abdomen.

"Hmm. Not much, and not great material, either. It's not nearly enough to make up for the life I lost to that darn Magician, that's for sure. Big sis isn't very

happy with you kids."

Once she learned that Maya had been lured away to Hakua, Menou's first course of action was to have Abbie bug the nearest knights' station in town.

Even with Abbie's advanced enemy-detection abilities, there were only so many insects she could send out in winter without drawing attention. Thus, it was best to spy on enemy groups that already possessed information networks. With her Concept of Original Sin, Maya was bound to cause a commotion eventually. So Menou and Abbie kept watch on the knights and priestesses who would likely be deployed when there was an incident.

It was the knights who served as this town's peacekeepers who discovered Maya first. Menou and Abbie came running right away, but Maya had already left by the time they arrived.

Fortunately, they did manage to get some slightly reassuring information.

"I'm glad Sahara is with Maya, at least," Menou said. That's what the knights had said. Maya must have given up on trying to get around alone and summoned Sahara. It was good news, as far as Menou was concerned. Maya was wanted by local law enforcement, but at least she had someone to help.

On the other hand, Abbie didn't like this news one bit.

"This is awful. Just awful. I can't believe that piece of trash is dragging my cute li'l sis around! An old lady like her forcing a youngster to protect her is just wrong, if you ask me!"

"I guess that is one way to look at it..."

Menou nodded, although not in actual agreement. She preferred to brush off Abbie's absurd logic rather than get caught up in another annoying conversation.

"Hopefully, Sahara will do some good, but it would still be best if we caught up to Maya ourselves. If she reaches Hakua first, we'll be in serious trouble."

Menou was worried about more than just Maya putting herself in danger.

"Hakua is after Maya's Pure Concept of Evil. I'm sure of it."

The Pure Concept attached to Maya's soul was more dangerous than most.

Menou wasn't worried about *Evil* running wild. Maya had spent the past half a year fearing her own Pure Concept. It was unlikely that she would use it enough to become a Human Error, especially with Sahara around. Even if *Evil* did take over, Maya was only a pinky finger, sufficiently weak for Menou to handle at her current strength.

That wasn't the true concern.

"Abbie. We were only able to stand with Princess Ashuna against the Guardian in Grisarika Kingdom because of you and your forces."

"Heh-heh. I'm not that childish old bat!"

Ashuna Grisarika had spearheaded the revolutionary changes in Grisarika Kingdom. However, Abbie and her fellow Primary Color life-forms had greatly impacted the outcome. They were why Grisarika Kingdom now possessed enough military might to ward off Hakua.

Conjured soldiers with intelligence were terrifyingly strong and clever.

However, Concepts of Primary Colors were weak to Concepts of Original Sin.

The Primary Color space that served as the source of the three Primary Colors could be influenced and taken over by a Concept of Original Sin almost just by touching it. It wasn't even a matter of which was stronger; Concepts of Original Sin simply had a natural advantage.

"If Hakua gets her hands on *Evil*, Grisarika will fall, along with the Mechanical Society."

"See, I told you that you were taking the nature of that polluted monster too lightly. It's cleansing time! Let's get rid of her once and for all!"

Menou ignored Abbie.

Hakua luring Maya to her side could prove fatal for Menou's goal, too.

The Pure Concept of *Ivory* could mimic other concepts. If Hakua acquired the use of *Evil*, which was lethally effective against Concepts of Primary Colors, the Mechanical Society conjured soldiers that made up most of Grisarika Kingdom's defensive force would fall, and Menou's only base would vanish. If that happened, she and the others would be crushed by the sheer numbers of the

Faust before they could ever reach Hakua, no matter what powers they commanded.

However, Maya running off on her own wasn't all bad.

Michele was powerful enough to almost certainly defeat Menou and Abbie, and she had enough of an information network to know when they left Grisarika Kingdom. Surely, she could strengthen defenses around the City of Ruin, which would be a worst-case scenario for Menou.

She was here to get the Starhusk, so her first and greatest challenge was figuring out a way to get past Michele and her defenses at the only entrance to the City of Ruins.

However, Hakua had made that place her rendezvous point with Maya. Michele couldn't take the strongest option anymore. Instead of waiting there for Menou and Abbie, she had to go on the offensive to keep them away from the City of Ruins.

On top of that, Menou's encounter with Teach had revealed internal strife within the Faust. Michele was rapidly rising in power, but there was a faction of priestesses who refused to support her, mainly former Executioners. Their goal was likely to capture Menou, who'd destroyed the holy land, to improve their standing in the Faust.

Menou and Abbie. Maya and Sahara. Michele and Hakua. Teach and the former Executioners.

Several factions were in play; perhaps Menou could turn the situation to her favor.

"It seems...Maya has returned, for some reason." Menou raised an eyebrow, as though she didn't believe her own deduction based on the intel gathered at the knights' base she and Abbie raided.

Maya and Hakua's meeting place was definitely the entrance to the City of Ruins. Yet Maya and Sahara were backtracking.

"Perhaps they got lost? If this means they'll miss the appointed day, that works out just fine..."

"Oh, Menou, you're such a softie. Why bother trying to rescue someone who was so quick to be led away by a few honeyed words from her former friend?" Abbie's cold tone didn't match her usual attitude. "Tell me, li'l sis, what's the thought process behind trying to save that twerp?"

"The thought process...?"

"I mean, I don't want Grisarika Kingdom to fall, either, so I'll help you get her back for now. But I'm talking about what happens after that." Abbie snuggled up to Menou while she spoke. "We won't need her after that, right?" Abbie's words and faint smile were cold as ice. "You understand how dangerous that creature is, so allow me to tell you the best option: Save her now, then get rid of her."

It was obvious that she meant Menou should kill Maya.

Menou stared back at Abbie silently. There was no hesitation in the glittering eyes behind those goggles.

"It'd be one thing if the positives outweighed the negatives, but as it stands, it's nothing but risks. She does whatever she wants. She withholds information. She's afraid of her own powers, yet if those powers fall into enemy hands, we'll be in big trouble. Most of all, I don't like that she acts so frightened of not being worth anything anymore."

Maya's information from a thousand years earlier had been useful. The fact that she'd recovered from being a Human Error gave Menou hope. But that was all.

Maya was just a child who happened to possess a Pure Concept.

And Maya was well aware of that.

As a child, she couldn't create more worth for herself. She had no friends or allies in this world. All she could do was dangle information she had from a thousand years ago.

"Ugh, I do hate how she demands to be protected even though she's the older one. Old folks throwing around their so-called cuteness make it harder for adorable youngsters to live their lives. I wish they'd all die. Menou, let's get one thing straight, okay?" Having explained the logic of risk versus reward, Abbie

posed the question to Menou again. "Is she really worth protecting?"

"...I admit it was wrong to delay my decision about Maya for six months. You're absolutely correct."

Abbie's logic was inarguable. Maya was a thorn in Menou's side.

She was a child and deserved to be protected. Yet she was also an Otherworlder, and Menou felt she had no right to save her. To make matters worse, her history as a former comrade of Hakua's and her nature as a piece of Pandæmonium placed her in a precarious and important position. Menou couldn't quite decide which of these factors she should prioritize when dealing with Maya.

Most of all, Menou didn't know how to face the girl who reminded her of her own sins. So all her interactions with Maya were half-hearted. Menou entrusted the girl to Sahara's care whenever possible.

Abbie had said as much before Michele attacked their hideout.

"You know, li'l Menou, you're actually not very empathetic."

She was right. Menou had neglected Maya and her feelings.

Everything Menou did was for Akari. She had yet to find a way to bring Akari back now that she'd been consumed by the Pure Concept of *Time*. If they defeated Hakua, she could use the Star Memory to restore Akari's mind, but that still left the matter of the Sword of Salt, itself a powerful concept weapon.

Menou had asked Momo to look after Akari's body, which was trapped in time and salt. Momo could be trusted, so Menou focused all her efforts on gaining the power necessary to defeat Hakua.

As long as Hakua sought Akari, there was no avoiding a showdown with her. That's why Menou had made sure to cut Grisarika Kingdom off from the Faust. If she could gain management authority of the Starhusk, she'd have a way to fight Hakua. That's why Menou had left for the north in the first place. And now, Maya was unintentionally putting all of Grisarika Kingdom in peril.

Menou would have to deal with her.

But what did Maya want? What was she after?

Menou had been so distracted by all the girl's labels that she'd ignored her feelings. Now it was time to face what Menou had refused to acknowledge all this time.

"Once we catch up to Maya, I'll be sure to talk things out with her properly. You know, Abbie, I still don't trust you."

"Whaaat? Even though I'm such a nice, helpful, generous big sister?"

"And yet you used Akari as part of your camouflage."

Abbie froze in place.

Her face was suddenly solid as a mask, lacking even involuntary muscle twitches. It was a very unnatural suspension of movement.

Conjured soldiers, particularly intelligent ones like Abbie, could remake themselves and change their forms. However, they couldn't alter their appearances however they pleased. There were certain conditions.

They had to capture whatever they imitated, it was the only way to complete the disguise.

"Um, what do you—"

"It's so obvious. Your speech and mannerisms are just like hers. Even your face and figure resemble an adult Akari's. Did you honestly think I wouldn't notice?"

Menou stared at her coolly.

Abbie's glamorous, curvy frame. The body of a mature adult woman, yet with a certain sweet roundness to the face. Her overly friendly attitude and bright smile. If the sixteen-year-old Akari grew by a few years, she would probably look very much like Abbie.

"Since we're on the subject, let me ask you point-blank. Why do you have Akari as a component of your human disguise?"

"Menou...are you mad at me?"

"...What a very Akari-like thing to ask."

Menou removed Abbie's goggles.

Without them, her eyes were completely exposed, complete with their black sclerae. Within that darkness were marine-blue irises, glittering so beautifully that anyone who saw them would be tempted to relinquish all of their riches.

These eyes made it easy for Menou to recognize that the person before her was a conjured soldier.

"Listen, Abbie...or rather, Ability Control, admin of zone twelve of the Mechanical Society, ruler of the skills of the eastern Wild Frontier." Menou peered straight into those inhuman gemstone eyes. "If you were in the Mechanical Society until we met, if you only ventured into the outside world six months ago, then what's your connection with Akari? What's the real reason you made contact with me? While I certainly hope this isn't the case...did you do anything to Momo?"

"Umm..."

Abbie turned away at first, then looked back at Menou.

"I'm sorry. I can't tell you. It's connected to why I'm able to exist here as your big sis."

"...I see."

Abbie had just admitted to keeping a secret. At the very least, her confessing that much and not denying a connection to Momo was enough of a show of good faith that Menou relented a little.

Menou already had a theory about her own questions anyway. Momo and Akari were likely safe. Menou didn't know how it had happened, but she was impressed that Momo had found such an incredible hiding place for Akari.

"I still have a lot of doubts, but I'll let you off the hook for now."

"Sheesh. You're so darn distrustful, Menou..."

Ignoring Abbie's crocodile tears, Menou directed her attention to their surroundings. The pair had laid waste to a knights' station to draw attention away from Maya and Sahara. The Faust would surely send backup soon. Menou wouldn't be surprised if Michele herself showed up.

Menou considered her best course of action.

First and foremost was meeting up with Maya, of course. Menou knew where she was headed. Perhaps it'd be better to wait at the destination indicated by that scripture page than to chase her around.

But at this rate, Maya might not reach the City of Ruins entrance at all. In that case, splitting up would be better for her and Abbie. However, something about this predicament still troubled Menou.

"I really don't think Hakua would actually leave the holy land..."

Hakua showing her face in the north, where she couldn't resupply her memories, was a once-in-a-lifetime chance to deal her a serious blow.

Menou sank into thought until a cool sensation prompted her to raise her head.

"...It's snowing."

The coldest part of the season had passed already, but winter in the north was far from over. Menou caught a crystalline snowflake in her palm, then closed her fist and melted it.

She knew what to do.

"We're going to split up. And on that note, I have a question for you, Abbie." Menou's mind was busy formulating a plan to outwit Michele, her current worst enemy. "How much material information do you need to camouflage yourself as someone?"

As snow blanketed the town, a lone priestess walked down the road with unsteady footsteps.

It was Teach, the leader of the anti-Michele faction of priestesses. She barely noticed the snow beginning to pile up around her as she stewed in her thoughts.

An informant had tipped her off to Menou's next course of action. She'd gathered enough forces. Everything was going smoothly. Even Teach's own power felt more abundant than usual.

"I will... I swear... I will destroy Flarette and restore the honor of the Faust...

My sacred duty..."

As she muttered darkly to herself, other passersby looked at her and hastily gave her a wide berth. Teach's focus was so intense that she didn't even notice the adverse reactions of those around her.

Ever since she gathered the priestesses for a secret meeting and formed the anti-Michele faction, she'd been in such rare form that it was almost bizarre. It felt as if there were eyes and ears all over her body. Her senses were sharpened to the extreme, yet she also felt so tough that the piercing cold didn't bother her.

What Teach didn't realize was that there really were eyeballs sprouting and earholes opening all over her skin underneath her robes. Her brain was on overdrive to the point that her synapses might burn out as she analyzed the situation around Menou and her allies.

"Sahara showed up... Surely she can't have a long-distance teleportation device... Then it must be a summoning. An Original Sin Conjuring... So the child who was spotted before her must be...and Flarette is chasing her? No, that doesn't seem... In which case... I see. If she has a conjured soldier with her..."

Within moments, Teach had determined the details of Menou's complicated plotting. Her mind was terrifyingly clear. It was as if she were back in her prime, or perhaps even better. Right now, she wouldn't lose to anyone. Unaware of the increasingly grotesque changes in her body, Teach sent a signal to her comrades through a scripture communication conjuring as she walked.

She would take on Flarette and her Pure Concepts, and even Michele and her freakish strength. A sense of overwhelming power filled Teach with baseless confidence in her own victory.

"I see through their plans now... If she's alone... With all these priestesses on my side...we could crush Flarette to a pulp using numbers alone..."

Hah!

She thought she heard a mocking laugh.

"…!"

Teach whirled around.

However, the tall red-haired priestess was nowhere to be found. All she saw was the powerless Commons citizens, watching her erratic behavior with a mixture of suspicion and fear.

Teach was just hearing things, but she couldn't differentiate between illusion and reality anymore.

"Is this still not enough...Flare?"

She squinted, trying to see what wasn't there.

There was no response, of course. Still, Teach understood as if there had been. This plan, with her power at its prime and a gathering of average priestesses, would not be enough to defeat Flarette. The haunting laughter told her that all that wasn't sufficient to prove the value of Executioners.

Teach ground her teeth loudly.

The woman laughed at her because she lacked sufficient strength. And if she didn't have enough, she would have to find more.

The scar on her cheek throbbed.

Teach entered a cheap hotel. There, she found some white-robed priestesses who were her former students. Foolishly enough, they were trying to join that Inquisitor's heretical band. They were traitors to the name of Executioners and hadn't answered Teach's summons.

"Teach? Where have you—"

"You..."

They had power.

If their opinions differed from hers, she only had to make them the same.

Executioners had value. They were the ones who'd kept peace in the world for so long.

She couldn't let Executioners come to an end.

Teach reached out toward them. The students gasped as the countless eyeballs on her arm spun to look at them.

She couldn't grab them all with her hands alone. As soon as the thought crossed her mind, her arm naturally split open into two halves. Jagged teeth lined the newly formed opening.

The giant mouth on her arm opened wide and swallowed one of the whiterobed priestesses whole. Teach wasn't even aware that she had just killed a former subordinate. In her mind, she had simply brought her under her command.

After a few minutes, the screams fell into silence.

The only person who emerged from the room was a lone priestess in indigo robes.

Teach's power had swelled to even greater heights. It was as though she'd been filled with three times her normal strength, and with her mind sharpened to process multiple thoughts at the same time, she felt capable of predicting the future.

She had found an answer to her lack of strength.

"I see... Just chasing Flarette isn't enough... Michele...that damned little upstart! How dare she do this to me, to the pride of Executioners, curse herrrrr!"

At this point, her volume had gone from muttering to shouting as she stalked the streets. More and more, the people who saw Teach on the streets stared at her in outright horror or disgust.

"Huff, huff... Damn yooou... I won't let you ever...get your wayyyy!"

With the Original Sin Conjuring taking over her mind and body, Teach narrowed her eyes with contempt and stormed out of the city, heedless of the falling snow.

Snow piled on the ground in earnest.

A coat of pure white blanketed the town. Streets grew quiet as the air turned icy.

Sahara watched the scene from inside a certain conjuring workshop.

It was warm inside. A Guiding heating vessel heated the room, and the double

windows and densely insulated walls of a structure designed for a snowy region prevented heat from escaping. While enjoying this modern convenience, Sahara spoke.

"Are you sure about this? We're considered criminals by most, you know."

"Yes, of course."

The girl who nodded in reply couldn't have been older than twelve or thirteen. She wore a matching jumpsuit as she held out a newspaper extra she must have acquired somewhere.

"I won't let this biased reporting fool me!"

Her rather determined expression shifted to one of slight embarrassment, although hope shone in her eyes as she looked at Sahara.

"So, um... Eh-he-he. If you wouldn't mind, Miss Governor of the Fourth, would you please tell Miss Flarette about me?"

"…"

Menou was making a mess of things again.

The girl shyly pressed her forefingers together, and Sahara cursed inwardly. No wonder Master Flare once said that Menou's only valuable asset was her pretty face. What kind of impression had she made on this girl at such an emotionally tender age? It was downright terrifying how Menou won people over even more with unintentional encounters than with intentional acting.

But if she could save herself by wielding Menou's influence and giving a little promise, she would gladly do so. Sahara reassured herself that she wasn't the one who'd tricked this girl, despite taking advantage of her kindness.

"Thank you. And hey, since you saved me, I'm sure Menou will be happy to do you a huge favor."

"Really?! O-oh my goodness! A huge favor... You mean like..."

"Oh, sure, whatever you want, probably. So would you mind helping us get out of town? We're trying to get to the City of Ruins. If you help us, we'll thank you by doing anything you want. And by we, I mean Menou."

"Did you say *anything*? Wait—the City of Ruins?" When she heard Sahara's intended destination, the girl blinked in surprise. "I'd really like to help...but it depends what my boss says."

"That's fine." A short statement of approval came from beyond the door. The boss of the workshop entered the room. "Are you really going into the Wild Frontier? What's this so-called sightseeing Flarette mentioned really about? You were in Grisarika Kingdom, right? That's close to the Mechanical Society, and there are better resources to be found there."

"It really is just to sightsee, I swear. I've always wanted to see the world's most intact remains of a city from the ancient civilization, or whatever." Sahara lied smoothly. Recognizing this, the boss simply nodded and didn't press further.

"I see. Well, you're in luck. We load packages onto the train heading toward the City of Ruins almost every day. I'll make a false bottom for you two to hide in. Ride the freight train for half a day, and you'll arrive at the nearest drop-off point."

"Much appreciated...but your help won't come free, right?"

The boss likely wasn't nearly as naive as the jumpsuit-clad girl who'd first come to Sahara and Maya's aid. Sure enough, the man had a price.

"Help me get settled when I go to the east."

"The east? You're moving to Grisarika?"

"That's the plan."

"Hmm."

Sahara didn't ask why he was moving. She looked around the workshop.

Amid the Guiding vessels that the Commons used every day for things like heat and lighting, there were a few devices with technology that only barely stayed within regulation. Inner seals with multiple crests, textbooks that hinted at advanced knowledge of materialogy... There were no obvious violations, but these things stood right on the border. They were bound to attract the Faust's attention. He'd be able to conduct much deeper research in a place where they

couldn't keep watch on him.

If a conjuring engineer with interest in combining advanced materialogy and crestology said he wanted to go to the east, where regulations were being abolished, he was probably telling the truth.

"No problem. You can use my name as much as you want when you get to Grisarika Kingdom," Sahara replied. This was an easy enough request for her to grant. If this man made it to the east on his own, she could just get someone else to help him. Ideally, Sahara would drop the work right in Menou's lap.

Upon hearing her boss's plans, the girl in the jumpsuit raised her hand and hopped up and down. "Me too! I'm going, too! Grisarika Kingdom is Miss Flarette's home base, isn't it?!"

"Uh, hang on...," the boss said. "You can't be serious, right? What about your family?"

"When I became your apprentice, my mother said not to come back until I'm fully fledged! So it'll be a field trip to help me get more fledged!"

"Damn, your old lady's got guts!"

Evidently, the apprentice girl had won this argument. Sahara turned her back on the negotiation between teacher and student, holding a steaming mug in both hands.

If this taciturn engineer and his weird little apprentice came to Grisarika Kingdom...and if Menou happened to meet them...she would certainly be thrown for a loop.

Picturing Menou's perturbed expression, Sahara blissfully wandered up to the second floor.

Maya was out on the veranda on the second floor.

The snow fell in greater quantities with each moment. All she could see in front of her was white.

As she gazed at the pure ivory scene, she couldn't help but think of someone —Maya's hero, who had the same face as Menou.

Hakua Shirakami.

A thousand years ago, she had betrayed them.

Yet now she claimed she wanted to see Maya.

Sahara said it had to be a trick. Maya herself was half-certain that Hakua was up to no good.

That's why she'd come up with something to do about it, a method of exacting revenge on this world that had constantly betrayed her.

"But...what if..."

Maya had thought she'd made up her mind, yet still couldn't totally give up on the one-in-a-million chance.

What if Hakua had some secret reason that would allow Maya to forgive her? Perhaps things could even be like the old days?

Maya wanted to believe such a truth existed, even though she knew it didn't.

She stood awhile on the snowy veranda. Her body didn't feel the cold. Her breath didn't come out white. These small but unmistakable qualities served as reminders.

Ah, right. I'm not really human anymore.

Maya was no longer qualified to go back to Japan. She was painfully aware of how different she was.

Now that her body was no longer human, she could truly never return to her old world.

"...Not that I have any reason to go back anyway."

The bitter smile on her lips was far too familiar.

Even if she managed to reach Japan, no one awaited her. The mother she'd sacrifice anything to see again wasn't there.

This wasn't like a thousand years ago, when Maya was desperate to get back to a place where she felt needed.

The world that needed Maya was gone, and the part of herself that had become a Human Error was still coiled in the south.

She hummed a tune quietly.

Not a lullaby, of course. It was an up-tempo song that had been popular when Maya was in Japan. She still remembered the choreography, too.

She'd loved singing.

And dancing.

Maya became a child star when she was little, and her mother was delighted when she appeared in a movie. While her mother was excited that her daughter might grow up to be an actress, Maya longed to be a pop idol. She wanted to be one of those shining stars who were adored for their cuteness.

She never even got the chance to admit that to her mother and argue about it.

"That's a nice song."

The double window that looked out on the veranda opened. It was Sahara. Maya stopped humming and turned to look.

Sahara's breath came out white.

"You're not cold?" Unlike Maya, Sahara was layered up for the wintry weather. "In this snow, you'll catch more than a fever dressed like that, you know. You could seriously freeze to death."

"I'm not cold." For once, Maya wasn't just putting on a brave face. "Ever since coming to this world, I don't feel that kind of thing anymore."

The Pure Concept of *Evil* that Maya gained when she was summoned here adhered more to her body than her soul.

She hardly felt any difference in temperature. Her body was so adapted for Concepts of Original Sin that her health was always perfect. She never got sick in the slightest. In fact, Maya didn't even get hungry. Whether she ate or not had no effect on her life span.

Even the advanced Guiding Force technology of a thousand years ago couldn't solve the mystery of how Maya's self-summoning method of sustaining herself actually worked.

As compensation for being immune to most discomforts, Maya lost most of her physical senses, too. There were countless researchers who fixated on this physical nature of Maya's Pure Concept and searched for a way to use it to their advantage.

"I see."

Not knowing any of this, Sahara simply accepted that Maya could function in the freezing cold wearing only a one-piece dress and a kimono.

"So what are you gonna do now?"

""

Maya fell silent. She wasn't ignoring Sahara. She just didn't know how to answer.

By accidentally backtracking, they had gotten farther away from their destination, the entrance to the City of Ruins. It was impossible to make up the distance on foot now. If Maya summoned a monster for travel, it would probably cause an uproar like it did in the previous town. Besides, she didn't want to use up any more memories with her Pure Concept right now.

It wasn't time to use it, not yet.

"...I'll take my chances on the Guiding train. At least I'll make it to Hakua in time that way."

"I don't think that's a great idea." Sahara handed Maya a mug of hot cocoa.

While Maya's sense of touch had changed the most, her taste had been altered substantially, too. The only flavor that came through anymore was sweetness. That's why Maya had eaten nothing but sweets since arriving in this world.

The Starhusk that floated in the sky was visible even in the snow. It let off a faint glow of Guiding Light and stood out through the white haze, making the scene look even more mystical.

Presently, the situation revolved around that thing and its strength.

Unlike Maya, who'd been shunned because of her weakness.

That's why she'd decided to separate from Menou and move on her own, to get the jump on everyone and prove them wrong.

"Do you have any bright ideas, Sahara?"

"Well, we can sneak onto the freight train. Apparently, there are lots of material transport lines running to the center of the northern continent."

"What?! Your plan's no better than mine, then."

"Excuse you. I already talked to the boss-man here. He says he can smuggle us on with his packages."

Unlike Maya, who'd picked a last-ditch effort, Sahara had a strategy in place. Maya pouted.

"...If you already had that much figured out, then why did you ask for my ideas? I would have praised you if you'd just come out and said so in the first place."

"Well, I was kinda hoping you might give up and call the whole thing off," Sahara responded bluntly.

Since Sahara had been summoned into this whole situation against her will, she had no motivation to continue this journey in the first place. She wasn't interested in Menou and Maya's quest for the Starhusk, let alone Maya's impromptu solo outing into what was most definitely a trap.

"I want to go back east as soon as possible. Let Menou handle the big search for the Astrologer in the City of Ruins. We can hide out here for a while, then head back to Grisarika Kingdom as soon as things cool off. And ignore that sketchy invite of yours. See? Solves all our problems."

"If you're so set on going home, then leave. I have something I need to do."

"You're the one who summoned me, Maya. You can't turn around and tell me to go now."

"How dare you..." Sahara's deeply irresponsible words set off a sudden flare of emotion that surprised even Maya. "How can you say things like that to me when you didn't save Manon while you had the chance?!"

Sahara's eyes widened at this unexpected accusation.

"Manon said you were her friend, Sahara! Why didn't you stop her when she went to the holy land?! What she did... It was obvious she was going to get herself killed!"

"Hey, now..."

It didn't make sense to blame that on Sahara. She opened her mouth to snap back in annoyance at the unreasonable claim, but her voice got stuck in her throat.

Tears were pouring down the cheeks of the little girl in front of her.

Maya...was crying.

"If only she was still here...then I—I wouldn't be alone! There used to be someone who needed me, and now she's gone!"

Sahara couldn't reply. The silence turned painful.

"...Let me ask you one thing, while we're on the subject," Sahara said quietly while the snow continued to fall. "Maya... how much do you remember from when you were a Human Error?"

Human Errors were what happened when an Otherworlder used up all of their memories, their original personality fell away, and they acted based solely on the Pure Concept that ruled their soul. Just as Pandæmonium was nothing like Maya, Maya likely didn't retain any awareness of when she was a Human Error.

But there were signs that Maya did recall some of her actions when she was Pandæmonium's pinky finger.

"...Almost nothing."

Were Maya burdened with a thousand years' worth of memories as Pandæmonium, she would've had an immediate mental breakdown. The inside of the Pandemonium fog barrier in the south was essentially hell itself. No human mind could handle memories of living in the midst of horrific monsters for a millennium.

"But when my memories came back...Manon's memories came with them."

Sahara nodded. That explains it, she thought.

Maya had reclaimed her memories of a thousand years ago, and of the time when Manon was with Pandæmonium.

"I see. Well, I don't know if we were friends, but I definitely didn't dislike Manon or anything."

"Then why—"

"But I also didn't think it was my job to help her."

Manon Libelle, the girl who wore a kimono that made her look Japanese, had known her life was broken. Yet she'd never hesitated to get others involved in that broken, twisted life.

"Because she didn't seem like she needed help."

Manon hadn't acted like she valued her own life, either.

Why did a girl who'd been willing to drag everyone into her schemes and plunge the world into chaos risk her life to restore Pandæmonium, albeit just her pinky finger, to sanity? Sahara didn't understand.

Either way, it was probably for the best that Maya and Manon never met.

Maya was a very normal little girl. She likely wouldn't have been able to tolerate Manon's appetite for destruction. Sahara knew this firsthand after just a little bit of interaction with Manon.

That girl had been devoted to Pandæmonium, not Maya.

Sahara drained the rest of her now-cold cocoa. The remaining powder that hadn't quite dissolved clung to the bottom in a sticky sludge.

"Maya, why are you going to meet the Lord, Hakua Shirakami? You don't really believe that she wants to make amends, do you?"

"Not really. I'm sure she's just trying to trick me."

"Then why?"

"I want..." Maya gripped the sleeves of her kimono. To her, it was a memento of someone with whom she shared a deep bond. Their connection was like a last thread of hope in this world where she had nowhere left to turn.

"...I want to be needed."

She wanted to be loved. To be showered with praise. To be told that she was needed, that no one else would do.

Maya had clung to that wish for more than a thousand years, even before she was summoned here.

All she could do to stave off her loneliness was keep moving. A thousand years ago, she'd wanted to return to the mother who loved and needed her. But she knew now that her mother was long dead.

If she let the loneliness catch up to her, she wouldn't be able to move.

Which was why, when Hakua beckoned her, she resolved to see her out of necessity.

"There's no world for me to return to...so I'm going to prove that this world needs me by meeting with Hakua."

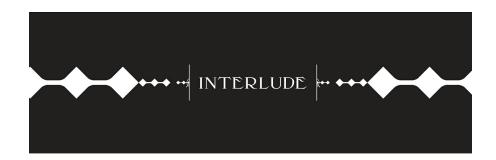
She had to do this while she could still move.

"...I see."

Sahara's eyes wandered. What was she supposed to say at a time like this? Unable to find an answer, she looked away instead.

Sahara wasn't used to these kinds of heart-to-hearts with other people. She'd never loved anyone, never complimented someone and actually meant it, and never needed anyone else. The only thought that came to mind was the escapist notion that Menou would probably say just the right thing if she were here.

The snow kept falling as if to fill the silence of their lapsed conversation, to fill the yawning gap between them.



She didn't know how it came to this, but it was the end.

They'd come to the northern capital to foretell the outcome of their plan to return to Japan.

Hakua's hand had just pierced through Nono's chest.

All Maya could see was Hakua copying the ability from Nono's body. The Pure Concept of *Ivory* could make other Pure Concepts its own. But since she had to blanch the Otherworlder's spirit to copy their ability, anyone whose ability was copied by *Ivory* would become a Human Error.

"Let me ask you one last thing..."

Nono's face was twisted in pain, but no surprise colored her expression. She didn't seem to resent the person who'd hurt her; if anything, her attitude conveyed that this was the obvious outcome. Perhaps she'd known her own fate all along.

"...How long have you been planning to attack us?"

"Since the very beginning."

"Ah, I see."

When Hakua withdrew her hand, blinding light beamed from the stars in Nono's eyes. The Guiding Light spread rapidly, enveloping her body and carrying it into the air.

She was about to become a Human Error.

Before she turned into the Human Error of *Star*, a disaster that was supposed to be impossible, Nono had only one thing to say.

"Dammit... I knew we should have just killed you."

With that, her body was wholly absorbed by the light from her eyes.

The light beamed into the sky, toward the giant transparent Starhusk spheres floating high above.

"Now Star is finally...ours... No, hers... Theirs? No, no. It's mine."

As a side effect of copying the ability, Hakua's murmuring became briefly confused before she regained her sense of self.

However, before she could recover completely, something odd happened. The Starhusk absorbed the light that had once been Nono and began to glow. Complex conjuring circles appeared on the spheres, and Guiding Light filled the area in response to a massive amount of Guiding Force. Everything in sight was drawn toward the Starhusk, even the ground.

"Is this the Human Error of *Star*? No, it must be the Starhusk. Damn you, Nono. You must've set this up on purpose. You planned to kill me here even if you had to sacrifice yourself. Guess I should use some kind of conjuring to stop this... No, wait."

Hakua looked away from the Starhusk, even as it began to activate. Her gaze went to Maya, who still didn't understand what was happening.

"I should secure *Evil* and *Vessel* first. Better to acquire useful Pure Concepts while I have the chance."

Hakua's eyes were unbelievably dark, cutting a stark contrast to how they'd seemed until recently.

A giant form blocked Hakua, protecting Maya. It was Ryuunosuke. His normally calm demeanor was gone, replaced with a fearsome glare.

"Would you mind getting out of my way? I'm not interested in the Pure Concept of *Dragon*."

Maya had never seen Ryuunosuke ignore Hakua's orders before. With a roar, he activated his Pure Concept and swelled to an enormous size.

That was the last thing Maya saw.

As she stood frozen in shock, a slender arm reached out of the cylinder next to her and pulled her inside. Although barely large enough on the outside to hold someone curled in a ball, the interior was the size of a studio apartment.

Since Maya also had a separate dimension in her shadow, she realized at once that this had to be the dimension of Gadou, holder of the Pure Concept of *Vessel*.

"Escape. Maya. Together. That's it. Promised. Nono. I'm Ran..."

The person in the small, shadowy space spoke in mumbled fragments. Only now did Maya learn that Gadou was a girl named Ran.

"W-wait! What do you mean?! What's going on?! Tell me!"

As soon as Maya pressed closer and tried to look her in the eyes, Gadou flinched and covered her face with a blanket. From the brief glimpse, Gadou's face looked as perfect as a doll's, but she trembled in the blanket and refused to show herself again.

However, she managed to choke out a few unhappy words.

"H...Hakua. Gone. Too late. Bad."

The two of them barely escaped from the north with their lives. Unfortunately, their flight didn't last long.

Gadou left Maya in the south and headed east. Hakua turned Ryuunosuke to salt in the west and chased after them. Gadou, who was even more cowardly than Maya, went east to draw Hakua away. Mostly likely, Hakua stole her Pure Concept and turned her into a Human Error.

Now that Maya was alone, she saw the truth far too late.

She didn't know anything. And because she'd always been protected, she didn't think she needed to know.

So now there was nothing Maya could do.

She hadn't learned or gained anything in this world.

There was nothing left to keep Maya's heart from breaking. In the end, her memories were stolen by her own Pure Concept before Hakua could even copy it from her.

Maya Ooshima became Pandæmonium and devoured the southern islands.

Sword of Salt. Starhusk. Mechanical Society. Pandæmonium.

| Thus were the disasters known as the Four Major Human Errors born. |
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In the center of the north, in the Wild Frontier, stood the City of Ruins.

The region was unsafe and considered uninhabitable by humans, although the Wild Frontier occasionally offered unique resources. Reckless people known as adventurers, mostly members of the Commons, braved its dangers to search for materials and ancient relics that could be sold for a high price.

While seeking treasures that would make them a fortune, they sometimes dealt in illegal items in the process.

The taciturn engineer who helped Sahara and Maya was at least partly involved in such illicit business. He employed distribution channels that skirted the eyes of law enforcement to reach the Wild Frontier.

While the Faust had spread warnings that terrorists like Flarette and the governor of the Fourth had infiltrated the north, its members couldn't very well check every package on a transport carrying illegal items. Even if they did, this freight train had found a way to avoid inspections.

One of its current packages shook with a quiet clunk.

"There we go."

A head of wavy silver hair poked out from a wooden crate inside a shipping container. Sahara had managed to sneak on board because the engineer had made a false bottom in one of the boxes. It had been very cramped inside. Sahara inhaled deeply, looking relieved.

"Okay...looks like we're clear."

Fortunately, there was at least some space inside the shipping container. Either the engineer had left things out to make room, or he hadn't had much to ship in the first place.

Sahara and Maya were on a freight train that mostly carried contraband, so it

obviously wasn't very comfortable. The air was dusty, and there were no seats, so they had no protection from the clattering and shaking of the train on the tracks. There was a serious draft, too, since this wasn't a passenger car. The only rule of design was that it had to keep shipments from falling off.

Naturally, spending half a day in such an environment was less than pleasurable. The shipment with Sahara and Maya was bound to be transferred at some point, but the next train wouldn't be much better. Sahara activated the borrowed Guiding heater included in the container, then tapped on her shadow.

"We did it. Now we just need to make sure we don't freeze to death."

A little girl crawled out of Sahara's shadow. There was only enough room for one person inside the wooden crate.

"Are you taunting me?" Maya glowered and turned away from Sahara in a huff. "You're lucky you can still feel heat, Sahara. Warmth is such a nice feeling, you know. Why don't you really soak it up and enjoy it, hmm? Must be nice to be more like a real human being than me."

The girl was obviously sulking, each sentence a pointed jab. Sahara winced at her verbal misstep and fell into sheepish silence.

Ever since Maya had an emotional outburst at the workshop, things had been very awkward between the pair.

After accidentally showing her weakness, Maya put on a stubborn attitude that she refused to drop. It was essentially a defense mechanism against the loneliness that had haunted her since the traumatic betrayal that ended her friend group a thousand years ago. Maya was too young to stop being rude to others to protect herself.

Sahara had never been considerate enough to understand the subtleties behind other people's words and actions. She understood that Maya was angry, but she couldn't quite grasp the cause, and she was sorely tempted to just dismiss the whole thing as a pain in the butt.

The result was hours of silence between Sahara and Maya, who sat facing away from her with her knees drawn to her chest.

What was she supposed to do in a situation like this? Sahara still had no idea. They were going to have to travel like this for half a day. Sahara groaned inwardly at the uncomfortable conditions and awkward silence.

How long had the train been jolting them around?

Sahara woke up when she felt the freight train beginning to slow. She and Maya had barely spoken at all the entire time. They'd left around noon, and now it was nighttime. Maya was dozing quietly.

At last, the train stopped.

This had to be the station where the shipment would be transferred. Maya's eyes opened as the train car shook loudly. She blinked a few times, then looked at Sahara. Their gazes met for a few seconds. Then she hurriedly turned away, probably remembering that they were fighting.

Irritated that a weakling was putting on such a strong front, Sahara ignored the girl and peered through the gaps in the wall to the outside. The transfer would probably begin soon. She'd been told that the entire shipping container would be moved at once, but it was safest to hide in the wooden crate.

"...Hmm?"

Just as she moved to hide in the luggage, she heard a commotion outside. Listening closer, she could tell that there was some kind of argument.

Was it their pursuers?

Sahara hesitated, unsure what to do. Maya picked up on the predicament and stiffened.

If they fled from the freight train, there'd be no chance to meet Hakua in time. But there was no point trying to fight their pursuers, either. Even if they fended off their enemies, the freight train obviously wouldn't let them back on board once they realized there were stowaways.

Would they have to simply hide in the box and pray that no one found them?

Sahara couldn't think of any other options, but then another plan suddenly crossed her mind.

What if she went out there as a decoy?

It seemed like a surprisingly good plan.

Were Sahara to let herself get caught, it would make for the perfect diversion. The people who didn't know the whole story were more worried about finding Sahara than Maya. They didn't know that Maya was an Otherworlder, much less a unique offshoot restored from a piece of Pandæmonium, one of the Four Major Human Errors.

All Sahara had to do was leave Maya here and distract the pursuers until the transfer was complete.

Even if Sahara were caught, Maya could still accomplish her goal as long as Sahara didn't give up any information about her.

While she considered the idea, Sahara suddenly cocked her head.

"Wait... Why would I do that?"

As soon as she asked herself the question, she realized the idea was laughably ridiculous.

Why in the world would she accept a plan like that? It would be one thing if Maya had ordered her to do it under threat from the curse, but it didn't make any sense to sacrifice herself unbidden.

Besides, Maya was definitely marching toward a trap. Getting stopped here might even work out for the best.

More than anything, Sahara wanted to live. She didn't want to get hurt. She was always looking out for number one, and that had never seemed like a problem to her.

She had to survive and get stronger.

Maybe then she could be a beautiful person like Menou, who could do things for others...

"That's so stupid."

Sahara shook her head to dispel the idea from her mind.

Really, she only longed to become that kind of person because it was impossible for her. She'd learned that the hard way when she fought Menou in

the desert and lost hopelessly.

Sahara could never be a beautiful person like Menou, even if she died trying.

It was better to know one's place. Sahara lowered her eyes...and found herself looking at a trembling child.

This girl couldn't open her heart to anyone. She wore a bold facade because she had no one to depend on. Although she lamented her lack of strength to accomplish anything by herself, she could only get her way by wielding her weakness like a weapon.

That child was sitting right in front of her.

"...I want to be needed."

For some reason, that moment of vulnerability stuck out in Sahara's memory.

She didn't know what she was thinking.

Sahara stood up unsteadily. She turned away from Maya and reached for the door of the shipping container. What was she doing? A part of her observed her own actions as though from afar, trying to stop this. Sahara knew her logical instinct was right, yet she couldn't stop.

"S...Sahara?"

Maya called to her faintly, looking distressed. The terror of possible abandonment was written all over her face, which annoyed Sahara a little.

"Where...do you think you're going?"

"Huh? Oh, um, yeah. Just, uh..."

She couldn't come up with a good excuse. If she said she was going to make a distraction of herself to save Maya, the little girl probably wouldn't believe her. After all, Sahara didn't even believe it herself.

Instead, she blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

"G-gotta use the bathroom."

"Huh?"

Maya was at a loss for words in the face of this unexpected response. A wave

of self-loathing washed over Sahara as the girl stared at her with utter confusion. Surely, she could've come up with something better than *that*.

Sahara couldn't even pretend to be cool.

Her shoulders slumped with slight despair over her inability to be the person she wanted, Sahara opened the door of the shipping container to where their pursuers were presumably waiting.

A glow of Guiding Light was drawn across the dense forest.

The white Guiding Light of the Starhusk in the sky didn't penetrate the thicket of trees. The source of this radiance was an ephemerally beautiful young girl with her cream-colored hair tied up in a black scarf ribbon. As she ran through the forest, she used Guiding Force to enhance her physical capabilities, making her stand out in the dark.

A flock of priestesses pursued her, like moths drawn to a flame.

They were all Executioners, most of them in indigo robes, an indication they'd proven their skills as conjurers. These women, all of whom had answered Teach's call, used the information from their scriptures' communication conjurings to attack this wanted criminal.

It was a high-speed chase, many against one, and all of the Executioners were proficient enough not to be slowed by the snow. Yet this group of hardened conjurers still struggled against their lone opponent.

"Dammit, how can she be this strong?!"

A crest conjuring flashed and repelled their scripture conjurings. Her strength was far too overwhelming. It felt as though they were up against something inhuman.

Those movements were simply on another level. How was she able to produce such intense Guiding Enhancement? Taken aback by her unexpected strength, the priestesses nevertheless persisted and made their way out of the woods. One of them used Guiding Force with the scripture in her left hand to activate a conjuring.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 1:4—Invoke [The Lord's will is relayed

through all of heaven and earth, reigning far and wide.]

This communication conjuring was one of the many scripture conjurings the priestesses commanded. Through it, they could converse in detail with comrades over long distances.

Once they had a better vantage point, they would engage their target. The priestesses were occupied with silently communicating via their scripture conjurings when something changed.

Flarette suddenly changed directions.

"What?!"

With a quick leap, Flarette kicked off a nearby tree trunk to launch herself into the air. The tree shook, dropping snow from its branches. The abrupt, near about-face gave the priestesses chasing her pause.

It was only a momentary delay, but it still proved fatal. Flarette's fist struck immediately.

"Gah?!"

With a scream, a priestess went down. That made more than ten dispatched. Despite their overwhelming numerical advantage, the difference in their strength was clear.

"Here she comes!" one cried.

An instant later, Flarette accelerated. Her body glowed with faint blue Guiding Light, and her speed exceeded anything they could have predicted. She used the trunks of trees to bounce around unpredictably, striking and then jumping away repeatedly. Soon, her fist brought down the last priestess.

"Phew."

Having turned the tables on her would-be attackers, Flarette let out a long breath. Somehow, her stamina was such that she wasn't even winded.

She was currently acting alone.

After defeating the knights and learning of Maya's location, Menou and Abbie had split up. One would head for Maya's destination, the entrance to the City of

Ruins, while the other aimed to catch up to Maya and Sahara.

Menou had been set upon by Executioners while pursuing Maya and Sahara. She'd expected that, though, and had already defeated most of them.

"Now, then... I have to find them right away."

Flipping back her chestnut-colored ponytail, she broke into a run again, her breathing still perfectly steady.

A railroad track ran beyond the grove. Maya and Sahara were likely at the station ahead.

There was just one problem.

Maya slowed to a stop in a field of snow that gleamed under the moonlight.

The enemy she'd been expecting was waiting for her.

It was apparent all along that the Executioners sent after her with precise knowledge of her location had been meant to drive her to a specific spot.

Menou had known this, yet hadn't been able to avoid it. Not if she wanted to reach Sahara and Maya quickly.

Now she glared at the woman waiting for her.

"...I take it you were the one who riled up those Executioners."

"That's right." Michele, the strongest Executioner, nodded curtly. "Those fools gathered to try and oppose me, so I leaked information about your whereabouts to them. That way, I could expend your energy and get rid of the rebel faction in one fell swoop. No one will sympathize with morons who decided to act without permission and got beaten for it. This will reduce the number of those who dare rebel against me."

"I certainly pity those poor youngsters who were used by an old bag."

"Ridiculous. What better use could there be for incompetent fools who don't know their place?"

Michele raised her broadsword. The snow whipped around her, glittering from the Guiding Light she produced.

Although lacking her scripture meant she was short a powerful weapon, she

was still a far more deadly foe than all of the priestesses.

"Enough talk, Flarette. I'll make sure this is your last stop."

The strongest Elder—the Magician.

Michele, who'd sworn loyalty to Hakua, narrowed one eye as she spoke.

A priestess with a scar on her cheek walked through a freight train station.

The place was used primarily to store materials extracted from the City of Ruins and the goods that adventurers aiming to explore that place would need. Wooden storage containers lined the entire area, with small paths between the stacks of packages. Containers that had come in on the latest train were being lifted to their appointed place by people wearing exoskeleton-like Guiding Enhancement armor.

Teach had gathered the Executioners who supported her cause to form an independent squadron. They'd managed to get ahead of Michele and track down Flarette first.

The Primary Color life-form that was traveling with her was nowhere to be seen; they must have split up. Flarette was on her own. Teach saw her comrades in arms fighting in the distance. They were too far away to be seen without a telescope normally, but Teach watched them with perfect clarity.

It was because she was in her prime. Teach didn't question her own condition for a moment.

However, that alone hadn't been enough.

The green-haired priestess with glasses who'd supplied Teach's squadron with Menou's location wasn't participating in the attack. She'd cut off contact.

"I knew it... She's a spy..."

The priestess, whose name was Hooseyard, had been placed under Michele's direct supervision but had claimed to take issue with her leadership. It certainly seemed like Michele gave Hooseyard a hard time on a regular basis, and she didn't seem to be lying when she complained about not wanting to be an Inquisitor. Most of all, the information Hooseyard had obtained by dropping her spirit into the earthen vein and surveying the area with ceremonial conjurings

was extremely accurate.

Michele must have leaked information to Teach intentionally so that her group would wear down Flarette, enabling Michele to swoop in and finish them all off herself.

"Don't make me laugh..."

Teach was fine with letting Michele think she was in control. Flarette wasn't Teach's only enemy.

She would play along with Michele's plan for now and sacrifice the comrades she'd gathered, pretending to fall to Flarette as Michele expected. Then Michele and Flarette could fight.

Then Teach would finish off whoever survived.

"Executioners have always been independent... Did you think we'd let you have your way?"

While Michele and Flarette dueled, Teach would accomplish another goal. The governor of the Fourth would make a fine target for the Executioners. For reasons she didn't understand, Teach could detect Sahara's location like some kind of sixth sense. The Concept of Original Sin slowly consuming Teach was drawn to Maya, who was in the same place, but she didn't realize that.

"Hey, you. This area's for authorized personnel only."

As Teach strode deeper into the storage yard without permission, several men approached to stop her. They looked like rough-and-tumble has-been adventurers who'd probably been hired for security. Or perhaps they were current adventurers who traded in contraband.

The men glanced cautiously at the priestess robes that showed beneath Teach's cloak.

"Faust or not, you can't just go poking your nose wherever you w—ah?"

Teach promptly drew her rapier and thrust it into the man's heart. The man looked at the blade piercing his chest with an expression of disbelief.

She pulled the rapier free, and the man slumped to the ground.

Teach narrowed her eyes. Kill anyone who interferes. That was the way of the Executioner.

Guiding Force: Connect—Rapier, Crest—Invoke [Thrust: Expansion]

The crest conjuring opened a hole in another man's forehead. In the unnatural silence that followed, the victim crumpled to the floor.

"Get out of my way...or else you die."

That's when the screams began.

Sahara heard the shriek when she stepped from the shipping container.

"Hmm?"

She cocked her head. At first, she thought someone must have discovered some illegal items instead of her and Maya. However, the tone didn't seem right for that. There was a slight trembling in the ground. She heard exclamations like "Why?!" and "Call for backup—" and "No, just run!" All of which were cut off abruptly. As the confusion of increasingly hectic noise surrounded her, she felt the rumbling beneath her feet getting closer.

The source of the intermittent tremors was coming right for her. She turned to face the cause, wondering what in the world it might be.

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

A Guiding Light bell rang, and the first car of the freight train Sahara and Maya had ridden was blown away.

The scripture conjuring had come with no prior warning. Sahara was stunned. The attack smashed the engine car on the Guiding train that would have been her first method of escape.

As the bell of Guiding Light faded away, a priestess appeared in its place. Her robes were indigo. Judging by the color of the stripes on her chest, she had to be exceptionally powerful, enough to rival a pastor.

Clearly, someone had found Sahara and Maya, pinpointing their exact location.

"Sahara... Alone, are you? No... The other one, the taboo, Pandæmonium's pinky finger, must be here, too..."

The priestess threw her cloak aside. Sahara recognized her scarred face.

"...Teach?"

She was the head instructional priestess at Sahara's old monastery.

However, the woman hardly looked as Sahara remembered. Eyes and ear canals dotted her bare arms, and unnatural bulges and bumps covered her back. The robe had just barely concealed them. Without it, her abnormal transformation was obvious.

"What's this? A new look? Well, far be it for me to criticize someone else's taste."

"Ah. So you're going to defend Flarette, too, are you?"

She responded as if she hadn't really heard Sahara.

Clearly, a Concept of Original Sin was taking over her spirit. She was no longer in her right mind. Sahara answered her cautiously.

"What do you mean? I've never once tried to defend Menou. If selling her out will save my skin, I'd be happy to tell you whatever you want to know."

Having been summoned to the north by Maya, Sahara didn't actually know Menou's current whereabouts, but it didn't seem like Teach would believe that.

"...Governor of the Fourth, Sahara. You and Flarette were in the same class back at the monastery, weren't you?"

"Sure. We were there together for less than a year, though."

Sahara and the other prospective Executioners in her year were released at Menou's request. Only Momo and a few other rare exceptions had stayed behind. Sahara had resigned herself to her lack of talent and became a nun in a rural area to train as a normal priestess.

Apparently, this tenuous past connection seemed suspicious to Teach.

"And you've been conspiring with her since?"

"Not at all. Could you stop reading into things so deeply?" Sahara frowned. As

far as she was concerned, this misunderstanding was highly inconvenient and borderline insulting. "I've never gotten along with Menou. Don't try to make up some stupid bond between us."

"When Flarette left the monastery, she burned all of the records...but one thing remains clear," Teach went on, ignoring Sahara. The eyes all over her body narrowed to angry slits.

"From what I gathered, right around when you started doing poorly in training, Flarette began getting top marks. Did you two cut some kind of deal?"

"Uh...nope, not even close..."

Sahara had displayed early promise only to fizzle out quickly. That was all. Meanwhile, Menou had rapidly improved thanks to her one-on-one training with Flare. Sahara would've preferred not to revisit depressing moments.

"No response, eh? So the information Flarette tried to cover up when she burned the documents at Flare's monastery after destroying the holy land... must have been your connection to her."

"We had no deal, we have no connection, and I'm not the one Menou was trying to hide, okay?"

Menou had destroyed those records to conceal her relationship with Momo. She'd erased any trace of their history so Hakua wouldn't realize that she'd entrusted Akari to Momo. While Sahara was aware that Menou's goal had been to ensure Momo's safe return to the Faust, what she *didn't* know was that Menou had deliberately left behind traces of the records of her history with Sahara to draw attention from Momo.

"I see now. While Flarette worked as an Executioner, you pretended to be an ordinary nun...sharpening your fangs in the eastern Wild Frontier, laying the foundations, then deserting to reunite with Menou as soon as your preparations were complete."

Teach was obviously piecing together an imagined conspiracy theory in her mind. Sahara wished she'd realized that not everything in life was necessarily that grandiose. Her life had always been guided by coincidences, emotions, and just generally going with the flow.

Thanks to that, she felt like she'd wound up in a whirlpool from which there was no escape.

"Listen, Teach. I dunno if there's any getting through to you at this point, but lemme ask you this... How many people have you eaten? You've obviously gotten involved with a Concept of Original Sin."

"You dare insult me? Original Sin? No proud Executioner would meddle in the taboo!"

Teach's temper suddenly flared.

While Sahara was taken aback by the overreaction, it also made one thing clear. Teach didn't even realize that her body had been transformed into that of a demon by a Concept of Original Sin.

She had lived her life as an Executioner who hunted taboos, survived countless battles, and was chosen to train new Executioners at the monastery. Now that pride was twisted up with her altered spirit.

The bulges on her back bubbled. Giant arms that were easily the length of an adult man's burst from her skin, ripping through her priestess robes. There were three on each side—six in total. Each one looked like an entire person had been mashed into the shape of a limb with the crudeness of a child playing with clay, yet they all moved just fine.

"Sahara, what's going... Huh?!"

The front car of the train they were hiding on had been blasted off, so naturally, Maya noticed something was amiss. She peeked out nervously from the container door Sahara had opened, then gasped when she saw Teach. Fear showed plain on her face, although whether it was because an enemy had found them or because of Teach's grotesque appearance was unclear.

Sahara gasped, too, though for a different reason.

The three left arms sprouting from Teach's back had scriptures embedded in their palms.

"No way..."

A scripture was a priestess's strongest weapon. Including Teach's own, that

made four at her disposal. Given the complexity of a scripture conjuring, it didn't seem possible that she could use them on her own. However, Sahara's worst premonitions always turned out to be true.

"Governor of the Fourth, and Pandæmonium's pinky finger. I'll take you two out before I deal with Flarette and Michele."

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 8:12—

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 8:12—

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 8:12—

The three embedded scriptures all emitted Guiding Light at once.

"You've gotta be kidding me."

Sahara's body reacted automatically, even though part of her had already given up hope in the face of this threat. The light of Guiding Enhancement surrounded her body as she scooped Maya into her arms and jumped into the air, landing behind the shipping container on the freight train and out of Teach's line of sight.

Invoke [Kneel before the gate, for it is the path to the Lord.]

Invoke [Kneel before the gate, for it is the path to the Lord.]

Invoke [Kneel before the gate, for it is the path to the Lord.]

Three scripture conjurings took shape at the same time.

Gates appeared at three equidistant points. They each gave off a powerful magnet-like pull, dragging the rear car away from where Sahara hid.

The scripture conjurings quickly tore the train car to pieces, scattering them across the piles of stacked storage containers. Sahara would never be able to defend against such a powerful attack. She couldn't help shuddering at the attack that could easily have ripped her body apart.

"The world needs Executioners... We've always protected the peace... No sacrifice is too great if it will preserve our existence. I will destroy you both, kill Flarette...kill Michele, too...and then, once I've done all that, surely... Executioners... My worth will be... I'll..."

Peering at Teach, Sahara saw the scripture-embedded arms writhing. That's when she realized what the lumps at the base of each horrific arm must be.

They probably contained harvested brains. The Concept of Original Sin had taken over human brains, wiping away all thoughts and personality and turning them into living Guiding circuits for the sole purpose of operating the arms and constructing conjurings. Based on their weapons and scriptures, they had originally been priestesses.

Teach used her own hand to stroke the scar on her cheek as her eyes, long since devoid of all sanity, locked onto Sahara.

"I'll never let her laugh at me again! Ever!!"

Sahara steeled herself. She didn't see any way of escaping this monstrously transformed Teach. Perhaps she could get away if she were alone, but for some reason, she couldn't bring herself to abandon Maya.

Guiding Force: Connect—Prosthetic Arm, Inner Seal Conjuration—Activate [Skill: Silver Gauntlet]

She transformed her Guiding prosthetic right arm into a weapon.

Her opponent had a scripture. It would be foolish to try fighting from a distance. If Sahara could just get close enough, Teach wouldn't be able to use wide-range scripture conjurings against her.

"Maya. Do you see that freight train over there? The one that's preparing to depart to run from this disaster? Hop on, and it'll take you to the entrance to the City of Ruins."

Maya's small body was trembling in Sahara's arms. The battle had left her terrified.

Sahara winced. This wasn't good.

She was trying to get Maya to escape to the freight train and go to the City of Ruins on her own, but the child was petrified.

"Listen, about yesterday... The truth is, I have no idea how you feel. I don't get why you'd run off on your own to try to do this without Menou, either."

As she tried to figure out what to do, Sahara began rambling about the

argument from the previous day. "I mean, I don't have anywhere to call home, and I've never been close enough to someone to fear losing them. I've never trusted anyone from the bottom of my heart, either, so I've never really been betrayed."

Sahara didn't harbor any strong feelings for her parents, whom she'd lost at a young age. She hadn't felt at home in the Faust, either. When she'd lived in the monastery, she only thought about fighting and beating the other kids. Even when she fought on the front lines of the eastern Wild Frontier as a nun, she never felt like there was someone she wanted to protect.

There was only one person she'd ever admired.

Flare.

Sahara wanted to learn to be that cool and aloof, but instead, Flare chose Menou as her star pupil.

Sahara hadn't been chosen. Her ideal was forever beyond her reach. Her overwhelming inferiority complex made her so miserable that she ended up fighting Menou.

Sahara's life was full of compromise and jealousy, and she was incapable of lying to herself, so she'd fallen into corruption easily.

"I'm no good at trying to understand or sympathize with other people. I only know how to live for myself. So I'm sure I'll never end up needing you, not once in my whole life."

"S-so what? You're just my stupid servant, Sahara..."

Maya's eyes filled with tears at what must have seemed like random cruelty. But the little girl's distress didn't particularly wound Sahara. In fact, she found it far more annoying than anything else.

"But you know..."

Sahara only looked out for herself and couldn't comfort others with her nonexistent sympathy. Even now she had no idea if her words would help Maya, but she smiled at the girl awkwardly.

"...I'm sure Menou can make you feel needed, even if I can't."

"What?"

Sahara didn't understand how, but Menou would probably figure it out.

Hearing Sahara invoke Menou in her effort to comfort her, Maya stared with her mouth agape.

"...Are you serious?"

At first, Maya couldn't believe it, but then her body began to shake with barely suppressed laughter. Despite the looming danger, her slim shoulders shook at the out-of-place hilarity.

"Ah-ha...ha-ha! M-Menou can take care of it, huh? Sahara, you are just so, so... Ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Maya couldn't stop laughing at Sahara's habitual tendency to shove responsibility onto others.

It was so unbelievably funny that Maya laughed harder than she could remember laughing at anything before, even a thousand years ago. A new memory settled in her stomach, and she wiped away tears of laughter from her eyes.

Sahara, who thought she was giving a serious speech, pursed her lips.

"...Was what I said really that funny?"

"It really, really was." Maya's grin was full of impish charm. "But...I suppose you have a point. I'll have to find out if your words are true. So you'll have to work just a little bit harder for me, all right? If you can manage this last push, I'll reward you."

"Ugh... That's not really what I meant. It's not my way to take responsibility for things, you know... Can't we resolve this in a way that doesn't require me to do anything?"

"No, we can't. Stop complaining!" While scolding Sahara, Maya stealthily touched the lizard-like ring on her finger. The jet-black creature slithered back into Maya's shadow.

Nothing was wrong with an advance reward for a servant who didn't seem to need a curse anymore.

Sahara patted Maya's head with her flesh-and-blood left hand, failing to notice that the ring had disappeared from her right one.

"All right, I'll go take care of things. When I get back, you better be prepared to provide for me."

"Are you sure about this?"

"Mm-hmm, don't worry. I'm not gonna lose." Strangely enough, the words rolled off Sahara's tongue even though she didn't believe them. When Maya nodded and looked ahead tensely, Sahara got the feeling that she might actually pull this off, just like Menou would. "So you better do your best, too."



Sahara sent Maya off, who ran as hard a she could. Sahara watched her leave, then emerged from her cover to find Teach standing motionless for some reason.

It was then that Sahara realized the attacks had paused during her conversation with Maya.

"How could you..."

"Were you eavesdropping? Wow, I'm so embarrassed."

"You must know what will happen if that thing uses its Concept of Original Sin, loses its memories, and becomes a Human Error, don't you?"

The Pure Concept of *Evil* was one of the most terrifying of the taboo conjuring types. How many humans had sold their souls and become demons? How many innocent civilians had become victims of the monsters that roamed the world?

"Killing that thing is the only just recourse... So why would you try to save it...? How could you protect it?!"

Sahara blinked, her reaction suggesting she'd never considered that before.

"Huh? I dunno. It'll probably be fine, right?"

"What...? You really think you've got things under control? Can you take responsibility if the worst-case scenario comes to pass?!"

"Who, me? Don't be ridiculous." Sahara shrugged with unbelievable indifference. "Menou's the one who handles things like that, obviously."

As far as Sahara was concerned, nothing was ever her responsibility. She'd learned through experience that it was easier to live her life with that mentality.

"Besides, look at this."

Sahara held out her prosthetic arm, brandishing the finger that wore the lizard ring, to further demonstrate her innocence.

"That girl threatened me with a cursed ring. Which means no matter what dangers Maya might bring on the world, it's not my fault, 'cause she made me do it."

"...There's nothing there, idiot."

"Huh?"

After blinking a few times, Sahara examined her pinky. There was nothing on it. Maya had removed the curse just moments ago.

"...Hey, you're right. Life is full of crazy surprises, huh?"

"Are you messing with me?! You're just a nobody, dammit! I'm the one in the right, not you and your nonsense!"

Teach bellowed with rage. It was clear that her soul had been taken over in addition to her body. Sahara felt a rare pang of sympathy for Teach's loss of control.

Teach hadn't betrayed the Faust. When she was an Executioner, she'd followed orders and hunted taboos, carrying out her missions to the letter. She'd never taken a wrong step as an Executioner in all her life.

Yet even though she hadn't willingly wavered from her way of life, she'd somehow fallen onto the wrong path.

Just like Sahara had when she fought Menou.

Yet although they shared that quality, there were obvious differences between them.

"I can still get it all back...if I just kill that blasted Flarette! I can fix it all!"

Master Flare only began teaching prospective Executioners at the monastery after she took in the young Menou. There was a clear difference in the beliefs of Executioners before and after Flare's era as a teacher.

"The pride of the Faust...of we Executioners! I'll restore it with my own hands! And I'll make everyone see what we've done for this world—they'll all see!!"

Teach was an Executioner from the previous generation. That's why she cared so deeply about the so-called pride of Executioners.

Sahara lacked the same direct education Menou had received from Flare, but she'd never thought there was any pride to be found in murdering people.

"Listen, Teach. There's one thing you'll never be able to beat Menou at. She's got such a gift in that one specific quality that even Master Flare acknowledged

it."

"What is it? Tell me!"

Teach's eyes were bloodshot—and by now she had too many eyes to count. No trace of reason survived in any of them.

It was much too late for Teach, but she still longed to know why she'd ended up like this and how she could escape her hopeless situation.

It was pitiful.

There was nothing to be gained or reclaimed by killing someone. Sahara watched this woman who'd been left behind by the times cooly. She pointed at her own face as she replied, offering a single word.

"Looks."

Teach's expression went utterly blank.

"She's had a naturally pretty face from the day she was born. It's so unfair."

Teach's face slowly turned bright red with fury. She touched the scar on her cheek. With lips drained of color, she answered "...Die."

All other emotions had died, and now, only murderous rage remained.

Guiding Force filled the four scriptures Teach held. The conjuring she constructed was meant to form a pseudo-church to trap and kill Sahara.

While Sahara had never made it past the rank of nun, her opponent was a highly experienced priestess, one whose power had been amplified by a Concept of Original Sin. However, Sahara grinned in the face of this overwhelmingly hopeless situation.

She'd always hated Menou. And she hated herself even more for being so twisted that she couldn't help but hate someone so beautiful and pure.

But oddly enough, in this moment, she felt like she could forgive herself for hating Menou.

"Still, though... This really isn't my style."

With just a bit of regret for staying behind to fight for Maya's sake, Sahara still focused her efforts on the fight against Teach.

A broadsword sliced through the air.

It was nearly as long as a full-grown man was tall, graceful with a rounded tip. Any average adult would've had difficulty lifting it, even with both hands, yet Michele swung it in one with the glow of Guiding Enhancement around her.

Her swing looked almost casual, not propelled by brute force. In the middle of an upward cut, she changed the blade's direction to a horizontal swipe with the flick of her wrist. Her sheer skill was overpowering, and her weapon cut close to her target.

"I'm amazed you dodged that."

Michele's muttered words were tinged with annoyance, not admiration. Somehow, perhaps thanks to Guiding Enhancement, Flarette was keeping up with Michele's movements in close combat.

Michele obviously had the advantage. There was no reason to waste any more time, and no point in obsessing over trying to finish her opponent in melee range. Michele hadn't received a replacement for the scripture she gave to Maya in time, but that wasn't a problem. She sent Guiding Force through the crest in her broadsword.

Guiding Force: Connect—Sword of Judgment, Crest—Invoke [Current]

A wave of water surged from the crest carved into her broadsword.

The torrent was so powerful that it could almost be mistaken for a flash flood. Flarette dodged a direct hit by jumping high into the air.

That was exactly what Michele wanted. She was about to use the Compression conjuring to focus a high-pressure blast of water, certain that Flarette couldn't dodge in midair.

Then a loud blast shook the ground, the sound emanating from the train station in the distance.

"What?"

The unexpected distraction stopped Michele's swing short. Flarette landed safely and retreated a bit.

Michele stole a glance toward the freight station. The train carrying Maya

should've been there. Michele had revealed Flarette's location to Hooseyard, who she was forcing to spy on the rebel Executioners. Hooseyard, in turn, had told the Executioners, luring them into the open. However, Michele had kept Maya a secret.

And yet it was clear from a distance that a battle had broken out at the station.

Who could it be? Her mind raced. Flarette and company had taken down the local knights on their way here, and the Executioners had been wiped out, too. There shouldn't have been anyone left to chase Maya. Only now did Michele realize she hadn't seen Teach among the Executioners chasing Flarette earlier.

"Don't tell me that incompetent fool went after Miss Maya..."

That wasn't part of her plan. She couldn't let Teach harm Maya when the Lord was so close to her destination. Michele sincerely wanted Maya and Hakua to make amends.

Unfortunately, her current target stood in the way, becoming an obstacle that prevented her from running to Maya's aid.

"Getting distracted, are we?"

Flarette's blade cut into Michele's side, but there was no spray of blood. Luminous Guiding Force bled from the wound instead. The circulating power that kept Michele's existence anchored in this world healed her flesh in the blink of an eye.

"You're the one who tried to ambush *me*, and now you're barely paying attention. What's got you so worked up?"

"Tsk!"

Michele's eye twitched in annoyance at the taunt.

After all her carefully arranged plans to take down Flarette, she was getting flustered about an unexpected attack elsewhere. The feeling that the tables had turned on her only heightened her aggravation.

"Shouldn't you be more concerned? Your friend's being attacked," Michele said.

"If you're that worried, maybe you should've been nice enough to leave us alone in the first place," Menou replied.

"Silence. You're a former Executioner, Flarette. What right do you have to call yourself a comrade of Miss Maya's?" Her voice sharpened to shake her opponent. "Maya is an Otherworlder."

Maya Ooshima was a lost one, even if her past as Pandæmonium made that easy to forget. She was an innocent Japanese person who'd been summoned against her will, used, and ultimately turned into a Human Error.

"She's essentially no different from the people you've killed. And you would still try to save her? Are you trying to protect Otherworlders despite all the harm you've done them, the pile of their corpses you've created?" Michele spoke acidly. "Meanwhile, Lady Hakua has been trying to save Otherworlders for the past thousand years."

"What are you talking about?" Menou asked. "Hakua is the one who created the Faust. I don't know how you can claim she tried to save Otherworlders when she's the one who made them taboo."

"Hah!" Michele snorted. "Why do you think Lady Hakua and her companions created the Starhusk? Isn't that why you people are after it now?"

"It's a weapon of mass destruction, isn't it? The hole it created in the northern continent certainly gives me an idea of its use."

"What? Wait, don't tell me..." Michele looked doubtful. "Do you people actually believe the Starhusk is just a weapon?"

Flarette's movements momentarily slowed at the implications of Michele's words. Despite herself, she listened to what her opponent had to say in the midst of their battle.

"So I was right. I can't believe you really thought the Starhusk was exactly as it appeared on the surface. Although, I suppose the Director and Miss Maya never knew the true purpose behind its construction. The hole it carved in the northern continent was an incidental side effect."

Michele wasn't foolish enough to miss the opening in her opponent's guard. Even as she spoke, she leaped forward. Flarette managed to evade, but the decoration that hung off the broadsword's hilt connected with her face.

It could hardly be called an attack. Indeed, it was probably because it didn't seem intentional that Flarette didn't register it as one.

She must have forgotten what kind of crests were carved into the Sword of Judgment.

Guiding Force: Connect—Sword of Judgment, Crest—Invoke [Compression]

The crest conjuring focused Guiding Force on the point of contact, producing enough pressure to turn liquid into a blade. The water struck Flarette, crushing her face with an unnatural squelching *snap*.

"What an unworthy enemy for Lady Hakua—what?"

Michele's victory was short-lived.

There was no blood. Cracks ran across the body that had lost its face. This was no human. It was a conjured soldier disguised as one. The glittering corpse disappeared in a flash of blue Guiding Light.

"Ohhh, thanks for the info! Ah-ha-ha! You really thought I was li'l Menou, didn't you?" came a new voice.

With the body that had let her manifest in this world broken, she changed in new parts from the massive amount of material her real body contained, reconstructing in her original disguise. The pearly white skin and light chestnut hair were gone. Instead, there was a glamorous dark-skinned woman with unruly hair that went down to her waist.

"Too bad! It's me, everyone's big sis!"

Abbie, who'd disguised herself as Menou to entice Michele, grinned with satisfaction.

Michele looked Abbie's true form up and down slowly, staring as if she'd seen a ghost.

"Oh my, what's the matter, hmm? Can't take your eyes off my flawless figure?"

"...How long?"

"Mm? I can't heeear you. It's sooo hard to tell what old people say sometimes."

Abbie exaggeratedly put a hand to her ear, causing her opponent to snap with rage.

"How long have you been posing as Flarette?!"

The conjured soldier smirked slyly.

"Ever since we taught those nasty little knights a lesson at their headquarters. It's obvious when you think about it, right?"

Michele ground her teeth.

She genuinely believed Maya and Hakua's reunion was for the best. Menou threatened to obstruct that meeting, so Michele had focused on her, forgetting Abbie, and they'd used that against her.

"Where...is the real Flarette?"

"I suppose I could tell you...since it's too late for you to get there in time anyway."

Abbie put a hand to the gear symbol on her abdomen. A dragonfly-shaped soldier crawled out of her skin. Its compound eyes projected a live feed from another insect that was with Menou.

Teach had her subordinates attack Sahara.

The student at her back moved with far more obedience and skill than ever before, but Sahara dodged and deflected with her Guiding prosthetic. While Sahara was a nun who'd failed to become a priestess, she was evidently still too strong to fall to simple attacks. Teach gave orders to another student and lifted one of the storage containers piled around the area.

"Yikes..."

Ignoring her opponent's reaction, she flung the container. The giant box smashed into the ground right before Sahara, shattering to splinters.

Sahara froze in place for a moment from the shower of flinders, and a third student moved at Teach's command to strike with a precisely aimed scripture conjuring.

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

A stake of Guiding Force erupted from below. Sahara just barely dodged the attack from underfoot, rolling into a defensive stance as the force of the conjuring knocked her back.



Guiding Light ran along Sahara's Guiding prosthetic as she leveled it at Teach.

Guiding Force: Connect—Prosthetic Arm, Inner Seal Conjuration—Activate [Skill: Guiding Shot]

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

Teach blocked Sahara's attack with a defensive scripture conjuring, but Sahara charged her before the wall of light faded.

Teach analyzed Sahara's skills as they fought.

Her Guiding prosthetic used a Primary Colors Concept, and she drew firepower from the Concept Dimension of Original Sin. She didn't have a single respectable ability. While she'd been a quick study with conjurings when she was young, she'd clearly developed in a warped direction.

Until a few days ago, Teach would've kept cautious in a battle like this. She would've used feints and diversions, looked for an opening, and determined the limits of her foe's abilities before striking back accordingly.

However, she had no need for such roundabout tactics now.

An arm growing from her back extended unnaturally, the first of three attacks. Sahara dodged as it swung down for her. The ground caved beneath the strike. The blow was pure brute force without any Guiding Enhancement.

Power. All Teach needed to win was pure power.

"You've really become a monste—ngh!"

Sahara had evaded the first limb and blocked the second. The third had only been meant to distract her from Teach's thrown rapier, which pierced her through.

The girl coughed up blood. The blade had found its mark, stabbing into Sahara's chest and crushing one of her lungs. It was a fatal wound. As Teach approached to snap her neck and crush her skull, Sahara suddenly looked up.

"Hey, Teach... You realize you seem really pathetic to almost everyone else, right?"

Despite Sahara's obviously fatal injury, she activated her Guiding prosthetic at point-blank range.

Guiding Force: Connect—

Before Teach could withdraw, Sahara completed a conjuring.

"But I would never laugh at you."

Prosthetic Arm, Inner Seal Conjuration—

"Because I get it. I know how it feels to be so jealous of someone that you feel like you might go crazy."

Activate [Skill: Pile Driver]

Sahara poured all of her Guiding Force into the attack, driving a stake through Teach's heart.

The pile bunker–style strike at point-blank distance gouged a huge hole in Teach's chest. The light faded from the monstrous woman's eyes almost immediately.

"You wanted to prove your life had value, not to the world...but to Flare."

Having just barely eked out a victory against a far stronger priestess, Sahara dropped to her knees. She was painfully familiar with how Teach let her jealousy control her, and she found herself wondering if there was a better way for Teach to live, and for herself as well.

"I guess this was a draw..."

With that, the life left Sahara's body. Her corpse turned into dust and scattered on the wind. The spirit that held her personality passed through the flow of Guiding Force into a space separate from this world, and the stored materials there created a new body for her. Her soul entered this new spare body, and she was pushed back into existence.

"...Except I had an extra life, so I'm not actually dead."

Thus reborn, Sahara stretched and flexed her Guiding prosthetic.

"Man... I've only got one life left, though. I better not die until I can replenish."

Sahara's fuel consumption wasn't as efficient as Abbie's. Concepts of Original Sin and Primary Colors coexisted in her body, and as a result, the separate space she had access to was exceptionally small.

"Maya's train...left already, of course."

If Sahara chased the train using Guiding Enhancement, would she make it in time to save Maya from the trap that surely awaited her? Sahara considered it for a bit, until someone croaked behind her "Not...yet..."

Sahara's eyes widened. It couldn't be. Even transformed into a demon by a Concept of Original Sin, she couldn't have survived after her heart, the demon's core, had been destroyed.

Yet despite all reason, Teach was still alive.

"What? How?"

Sahara stared in disbelief. She knew she'd blasted a hole in Teach's chest so large that one could see through to the other side.

Yet it had closed up. Teach had absorbed something nearby and made it a part of her body to replace her lost heart.

It was the thing she'd sent flying when she first appeared, a train's power source, ripped from the front car's engine room.

Teach had assimilated the Guiding engine as a replacement heart.

The running engine revved and chugged loudly. With Teach's demonic ability to absorb and consume organic and inorganic matter, she'd kept herself alive and even grown stronger.

The machine fused with her in place of a heart distorted Teach's silhouette further. Previously, she'd at least maintained the bare semblance of a human. Now there was no mistaking it. She was a horrific monster.

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

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

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

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 8:12—Invoke [Kneel before the gate, for it is the path to the Lord.]

Four different scripture conjurings activated at once.

A pseudo-church appeared, large enough to envelop the entire station, its arrival heralded by the sound of a conjured bell. The building collapsed under its own sheer weight. Rubble came thundering down, swallowing Sahara before she had a chance to resist.

Fire blazed around her.

The pseudo-church attack had destroyed the trains, the piled-up containers, the machinery, and virtually everything else around the station. Most of the people nearby had already fled when Teach started rampaging, but a few weren't lucky enough to escape in time and died to the monster.

Something in the containers must have been flammable, because a fire had started in the station wreckage. Soon, the entire area was in flames.

Teach stood among the detritus. The heat didn't bother her.

She'd won. She'd survived. When someone died, so did their beliefs. Which meant *her* beliefs were correct.

Power was all she required. With enough, she could crush her enemies and prove herself right.

Yet despite all that...

"Hah!"

That laugh wouldn't stop ringing in her ears. She still heard the voice mocking her.

It still wasn't enough. What more did she need to do?

"Are you stupid or what?"

She turned around, searching for the source.

A shadow hovered amid the flames, flickering. Teach stared dumbfounded at

the silhouette that blocked out the light.

It was a monster. What the hell is that thing? Only when she tried to voice this question aloud did Teach realize her vocal cords were gone.

Now it all made sense.

It was her shadow.

Whatever made Teach who she was had been eaten away. There was no doubt about it. She'd been taken over by a Concept of Original Sin. Soon, she would lose what little strength of reason she had left and become a monster that blindly attacked people.

Who'd turned her into this horrible thing?

The scar Flare had left on her face throbbed. She touched its rough surface. Of course. That was when her pride as an Executioner had been wounded. Those words had cut to her core.

"You incompetent fool."

Michele's voice and Flare's echoed together in her memories.

"Rrgh!"

Seething rage shattered Teach's spirit to pieces.

Before Teach lost herself completely, she concentrated the splinters of her mind on neither the governor of the Fourth nor Flarette.

"MIIICHEEEEEELE!" the monster howled. By this point, it was closer to the sound of a Guiding engine roaring than a human voice.

The eyeballs across Teach's body swiveled to stare at a single point.

In a field not far from here, Michele and Abbie were fighting. The monster broke into a charge. Running on two legs was too much of a hindrance now. It used the six arms sprouting from its back, galloping like a beast, but with a form and drive far more sinister.

Maya ran as though propelled by the light of the rising sun.

After she transferred to the next train, she reached the station nearest to the City of Ruins in about thirty minutes.

This wasn't like when she'd left Menou and the others. She hadn't been lured away. She ran with a firm goal in mind.

She'd been lost all this time, ever since meeting with Michele and hearing Hakua's voice.

Maya wanted to be needed. Hakua's invitation knowingly played on that weakness. Now that Manon was gone, Maya didn't care who she betrayed. In a world where her mother had died, she was willing to sacrifice anything.

Because the only person who'd needed Maya wasn't around anymore.

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"Huff... Huff...!"
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Finally, she reached an area that was nothing but downward sloped wasteland as far as the eye could see.

"There really is nothing left here..."

Once, this place had been a city. The largest and most advanced megalopolis in the world.

Shaking off the emotions the utterly transformed landscape stirred within her, Maya set her sights on the church, Hakua's indicated meeting place.

It stood atop a massive hole in the earth, one wide enough to swallow a small village whole. Several bridges spanned the gap to support the church suspended at the center of the yawning crater. Where a normal church had a steeple that rose into the sky, this one's ran down into the abyss. The inverted spire was the path to the City of Ruins.

Maya could see no one else around. Hakua had likely sent them all away. Maya walked across the unguarded bridge and entered the church built in midair.

While Sahara had repeatedly told her this was a trick, Maya believed there was a good chance Hakua would come in person, if nothing else.

After all, Hakua had no reason to fear Maya.

Whether this was a trap or not, it was entirely possible that Hakua would appear to someone so weak as not to register as a threat.

"Hakua! I'm here!"

When Maya entered the place of worship, she spotted a girl waiting inside.

Her black hair was far too long. Instead of a sailor-style school uniform, she wore a simple, sleeveless white dress. Her face looked just like Menou's. This had to be Hakua Shirakami.

"I knew you'd come. It's been a long time, Maya."

"Yes. I certainly did. And I'm alone, as you requested."

"Mm-hmm, I see. You haven't changed a bit. You look just like you did a thousand years ago. Unlike me—I'm completely different."

"I can't believe you left the holy land," Maya said.

"Ha-ha... I didn't," Hakua replied, dismissing the very idea.

Michele truly believed that Hakua had departed from her sanctuary for Maya, but she'd done no such thing. The person before Maya was and wasn't the real Hakua.

"After I let Flarette escape, I made myself a backup body in the holy land. Since time has stopped for my dear Akari, I actually have more time to spare now. Enough to make brand-new material that can become one with Akari again, although it'll be a lot of work. This body is a prototype that I control with my spirit using *Possession*. It's kind of like a body double, except..."

Hakua held out her hand. The fingertips had turned pure white. There was no sign of life in the alabaster flesh.

"It's not quite a perfect match, I guess. My Pure Concept is slowly consuming this form."

That explained the time limit on this meeting.

Once the white had spread across the host's entire body, this so-called double that housed Hakua's spirit would cease to function.

"I don't really care if your body is the real thing or not," Maya said.

"Oh yeah?"

"Not at all. I came here so you'd tell me about what happened a thousand

years ago. That's all that matters."

"Well, not to worry. This is unquestionably my real spirit."

That suited Maya just fine.

The place where they stood had once been the city center. Hakua copied Nono's Pure Concept and turned her into a Human Error a thousand years ago on this very spot. At that same time, the Starhusk had been completed in the truest sense.

"Tell me, Hakua. Why did you betray Nono? Why did you betray all of us? Did you have a reason?"

When Maya forced out the all-important question, Hakua regarded her with empty black eyes.

"Do you remember what happened here?" she asked.

"Of course I do! How could I possibly forget?!"

"Gotcha." The girl who'd lived for a thousand years spoke in a hollow tone. "You see, I've already forgotten."

People can't outrun time, no matter how impactful an event might have been. Only one human in this world had been given the right to challenge time itself.

Only the Otherworlder with the Pure Concept of *Time* in her soul, Akari Tokitou, could do that.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Sanctuary, Church Architecture Conjuring, Crest—Invoke [Multi-Wall Sanctum Barrier]

The barrier conjuring that all churches kept at the ready activated.

While the barrier defended against outside attacks, it also trapped people inside. Now Maya couldn't escape.

Hakua reached out the hand of the temporary body she controlled.

She touched Maya's chest, just as she had done to Nono Hoshizaki beneath the Starhusk so long ago. Those pure white fingertips touched the skin that was exposed by the hole in the center of Maya's one-piece dress.

"All I remember is that I missed my chance to collect something important

last time—your Pure Concept of Evil."

Maya stared directly at Hakua's face.

"So...you don't even remember why you tricked us?"

"That's right. I don't care about the past. I'm only here because your Pure Concept will be useful for taking down Grisarika Kingdom." Hakua nodded without a shred of guilt. Her gaze was fixed on something distant. She dug through the memories that had become mere information to her, trying to find emotion, only to be disappointed by her unmoved heart.

"...Yeah, that's it. All I remember is that I fooled you all from start to finish. I didn't really care how or why anymore. I can't." After giving that emotionless statement, she activated her Pure Concept. "That is my crime, and my punishment."

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

Hakua's Pure Concept of *Ivory* could use a conjuring called *Blanch* that interfered with the soul and erased all traces of mind and personality. It was especially powerful against Otherworlders, who became Human Errors when their memories were consumed.

Yet Maya didn't look concerned at all.

Hakua seemed puzzled by her conjuring's lack of effect. Was it because she was using her Pure Concept in an imperfect body, even though it contained her soul? Or perhaps it had something to do with the unique properties of the Pure Concept of *Evil* Maya carried? Normally, the conjuring erased all the victim's memories instantly, but it seemed to be working very slowly, if at all.

"You said that this is your real spirit, if not your body, didn't you?" Maya asked.

"Yeah, so what?" Hakua replied.

Even knowing the truth of Hakua's betrayal from a thousand years ago, Maya wasn't terribly disappointed. It had been evident from the beginning that Hakua was luring her into a trap.

As the *Blanch* slowly ate into her, Maya grabbed Hakua's hand that touched her chest.

She'd been waiting for this, the moment that Hakua would touch her, unguarded, to access her Pure Concept of *Evil*.

Maya smiled fearlessly. "So you're not the only person who can use conjurings that affect the spirit, that's what."

She knew right away that Hakua desired her Pure Concept.

Hakua had known how weak Maya was a thousand years ago, so Maya had suspected she'd show up in person to steal her Pure Concept.

Maya had gotten an idea when she'd received Hakua's message asking to meet one-on-one.

"My Pure Concept of Evil can erode the soul, too."

Maybe, just maybe, her Pure Concept would be able to defeat Hakua.

Guiding Force: Connect—

Chaos Collusion, Pure Concept [Evil]—

"Wai-"

"No way."

Maya wrapped her fingers around Hakua's hand when she tried to pull it away and held on tightly.

If she used all her power here, she could beat Hakua without Menou or the Starhusk. She could get back at the world that had wronged her over and over by saving it all by herself, proving everyone wrong.

Maya had come here alone, betting on a possibility that no one else had seen in her, to outwit everyone.

Erosion [Pure Concept: Evil]

Maya's hands slipped into Hakua's flesh. There was no pain, only slight discomfort and the strange feeling of goose bumps running all over her body. She endured it and tracked down the spirit trying to escape.

"Nn...gh...!"

Hakua's spirit wriggled and resisted. The *Blanch* conjuring offset the encroaching Concept of Original Sin. A conjuring that had consumed countless other conjuring phenomena could stand against the assault from the Concept of Original Sin, if only barely.

Maya wasn't confident that she could win, though. *Blanch* was the worst possible conjuring for an Otherworlder to face. It was far more likely that Hakua would manage to absorb Maya's Pure Concept, and that would be the end for her.

Even so, she fought.

Maya gave everything she had to try to change the world on her own.

"Nnn... Nooooo!"

She poured the Guiding Force attached to her soul into her connection with Hakua, filling it with all of the memories she'd received from Manon and built up with Sahara and the others.

What was the root of all *Evil*? What was a Concept of Original Sin? Maya couldn't answer those questions.

There was an underworld that had always existed separate from this world, and when Maya was summoned as an Otherworlder, it used her as conjuring materials to form a connection.

Maya didn't create Concepts of Original Sin. They had existed since long before humanity first walked this planet. Essentially, the world of Original Sin was full of power without physical form. The Guiding Force there was akin to a life-form with no will of its own.

When people gained Guiding Force, it took on their will. The eroding force of Original Sin Conjurings only ever attempted to make the laws of this world match the natural workings of its own.

Now that force used Maya's body as an entrance to consume Hakua.

"Why...would you do...this?! Aren't you afraid...of reverting to...a Human Error?!"

"Of course I am. But I made up my mind. I'll never, ever forgive you for betraying us, or for killing Manon. So I've decided to get revenge." Maya glared with intense resolve and emotion. "My power isn't weak."

The Pure Concept of *Evil* had never been the worst of its kind. When it became a Human Error, people whispered of it with hushed terror worldwide.

"I can give things to people, not just take."

Maya's concept had created a conjuring that gave people a semblance of life, just as it provided Sahara with a body when she was reduced to only a spirit. Even if it seemed like a repulsive power, it could be beneficial depending on how it was used.

Had Maya come to terms with her Pure Concept sooner, perhaps her future would've been different. She'd assumed her power was nothing but a terrifying ability to summon life from the underworld, life that would erode and transform everything into horrors. Still, it might have been useful if she'd only allowed it to be.

A thousand years ago, Maya hadn't thought she'd ever be of help to anyone. The experience of being used as an unwilling Pure Concept specimen had traumatized her. She'd been terrified of what her powers might do if she became a Human Error. She didn't dare test them by accessing her Pure Concept and depleting her memories.

"And I can change myself, too."

Maya wasn't the same girl she used to be. She wasn't the pitiful Maya Ooshima who'd been captured and tormented. After enduring so much, she'd made up her mind.

She would offer herself in exchange to stop Hakua Shirakami, who would do more harm than any Human Error.

"I get it..." The Concept of Original Sin was moments away from overtaking the blanching phenomenon. And that's when Hakua smiled softly. "You've changed. You used to be so weak. You must have met someone really special."

Maya drew back in alarm.

She'd accepted that she would lose herself. What attachment did she have to this world anyway? Why not return to being a Human Error? There was no one left who needed her. Defeating Hakua, the one who'd betrayed her and killed Manon, would make it worthwhile.

Maya had never imagined...

"I'm sure Menou can make you feel needed, even if I can't."

...that Sahara would say something like that.

It was so silly, so ridiculous, that Maya felt tempted to believe it. Perhaps she could have what she wanted, after all. Someday, there might be someone who needed Maya precisely the way she was.

Her short time with Sahara had left her wondering.

"That's right, Maya. You're still so young, full of promise..."

Hakua's gentle voice reminded Maya of her lingering attachments to life.

Instantly, her resolve to take Hakua down with her crumbled. The feeling of loss as she exhausted her memories became too much to bear, and soon, *Blanch* had the upper hand. By becoming aware of the connection she'd found on the trip here, Maya had a new reason to fear becoming a Human Error.

"...And that's why you're so weak."

No matter how determined Maya believed herself, or how much she'd accepted her Pure Concept, she was still only a child.

If Maya didn't have any remaining attachments to this world, perhaps she would've been able to win against Hakua. Her Pure Concept had successfully captured Hakua's spirit, even if it was housed in a mere double.

Unfortunately, Maya was still hopelessly weak.

So much that if there was someone who still needed her, she couldn't help but want to live.

Maya stopped the erosion while she still had enough memories remaining.

"Ah..."

Immediately, the blanching phenomenon spread across her body. Hakua

reached out again to claim the Pure Concept of Evil for herself.

"It was a good try, Maya. You almost—"

The church trembled before she could finish her sentence.

It was an attack from outside. Hakua's hand stilled.

"What?"

A barrier was in place around the church, one that used the structure and supporting bridges as a conjuring circle. It wouldn't strain and break easily.

Another attack struck. The barrier shook a second time, then a third. By the fifth hit, the Guiding Light that protected the church finally cracked and shattered.

A wall was blown open, and light poured in from outside.

In stepped someone with Hakua's face. She held her yellow mantle over her mouth to keep from inhaling dust as she entered the heart of the church and took Maya from Hakua in one smooth motion.

"For someone who loves sneaking around and scheming, you're not very thorough with the finishing touches, are you? I certainly hope that habit of cutting corners hasn't affected me just because I was created based on your sorry self."

Hakua scowled when she saw who'd come to rescue the lost child who'd dared to challenge her.

Maya, who'd meant to fight Hakua alone, was astonished. Her eyes went wide.

"Menou?!"

"That's right." Menou smiled gallantly at Maya to reassure her. "I've come to rescue you."

Michele was turning pale.

She was focused solely on the projection, no longer trying to fight Abbie. Even Abbie was taken aback by the unexpected effect the display had on her opponent.

"It can't be..."

Michele had wanted Hakua and Maya to make amends. For someone who had complete faith in Hakua, the sight of her Lord attempting to harm Maya was shocking beyond words.

And there was something even more unbelievable.

"Lady Hakua...attacked Miss Maya...? And this *Possession* she mentioned...," Michele muttered, dazed.

The feed cut off there.

"Ah."

Abbie gave a small sound of surprise. A monster had landed between her and Michele with a resounding *thud*, stomping on the projecting insect.

"MIIIICHEEEEEEEELE!"

The shrieking creature had six freakishly long legs. There were countless eyes and ears on its body, and its distorted torso contained a train's Guiding engine in place of a heart.

There was barely any evidence that the creature had once been human. Michele's eye twitched with irritation as she beheld the abomination.

"Of all the... How did you turn into a monster?! Surely this wasn't Miss Maya's work!"

She cursed this bizarre development.

A low howl rang out. Opening her mouth, the monster that was once Teach spewed out Guiding Light from the engine and began to charge. Although she'd lost all reason, Michele was clearly her target.

That meant Abbie was now free to do as she pleased. She leaped on top of Teach, touching a hand to the Guiding engine that was the monster's heart.

"Ha-ha! Since this soul's been taken over by a Concept of Original Sin, it doesn't matter what I do with this, right?"

"Wait! Stop!!"

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Ability Control—Invoke [Confer Skill:

Berserker]

The gear symbol on Abbie's lower stomach rotated with a *clink*. She poured a generous amount of material into the Guiding engine, turning it from the motor that powered a locomotive to a Guiding furnace that would power a city block. There was an ear-piercing sound that could've been mistaken for a human scream or a machine going into overdrive. The heat from the furnace blasted out and vaporized the surrounding snow.

"I still can't get the Guiding Force to circulate like my li'l sis does... Oh well. That should be enough to slow you down."

Unable to keep up with the heat from this increased output, Teach's body began to melt away. Bereft of a conscious mind, Teach was driven purely by passion and readied her scripture conjurings. Michele turned to face her, recognizing that this was a threat that couldn't be ignored.

Abbie cackled delightedly while watching from a safe distance.

"You reap what you sow, huh? All that scheming, yet you fell prey to someone else's plan instead! How's it feel to be outsmarted and stopped by the people you were trying to beat?" Abbie stuck out her tongue with glee. "Serves you right!"

The conjured soldier with a strange relationship to humans laughed mockingly at Michele, who was older than her.

Guiding Force: Connect—Improper Communion, Pure Concept [Time]—Invoke [Regression]

Seeing the blanching phenomenon spreading across Maya's check, Menou immediately invoked *Regression* without using the Guiding gun as a medium. She felt a sizeable piece of her soul being expended in the process but paid that no mind, focusing on controlling the Pure Concept of *Time*. Given the power of *Blanch*, it was possible it wouldn't work. Fortunately, perhaps with help from the Concept of Original Sin in Maya or because Hakua was working through a host body, the *Regression* canceled out the blanching and restored Maya's skin to normal.

Though she kept a calm expression so Hakua couldn't tell what she was

thinking, Menou was relieved. Maya was safe. The girl had been far more heroic than Menou expected. She'd fought against Hakua alone and nearly won.

Maya had faced her fate and battled without fear of her Pure Concept. It was far from Menou's assumption that Maya had fallen for a trick.

Menou had thought Maya was a weak child who couldn't fight. She'd come running thinking to save her from a trap, unaware that was condescending.

"I really am dense sometimes." Now she realized that her judgment had been clouded.

"Maya..." She couldn't talk down to the girl like a guardian. "I'll take it from here."

Menou made it clear that she was continuing a battle that Maya had started. The girl nodded with tears in her eyes.

Standing in a derelict church, Menou faced her mortal enemy for the first time since the destruction of the holy land. The smile she'd given Maya was gone, replaced by an icy expression. She aimed her Guiding gun at her opponent.

"You have some nerve, trying to trick my friend. I hope you're prepared to face the consequences."

"Maya is my friend, not yours," Hakua replied.

"Even though you tried to hurt her? Don't forget she nearly took you down. Hardly sounds like a friend."

Menou smirked with gratification, and Hakua scowled. It was deeply satisfying to know that Hakua had tried to lure Maya into a trap and suffered a serious counterattack for her trouble.

"What happened to Michele? I doubt you're strong enough to get past her alone."

"Why should I tell you anything? It's upsetting enough just having to look at your face. Disappear already, will you? Though even if you do...I'm sure that's not your real body."

"That's right. It's a double. My Pure Concept is a lot weaker than when I'm in

my real body, you know." Hakua gave a cold smile. "This body is a lot like you."

It was an obvious jab, but Menou was unperturbed.

"I'm not looking to chat with you. Right now I'm only interested in talking with Maya... Oh, while we're here, though, I should probably thank you." Menou grinned. "Since you didn't station Michele at the entrance, we'll be able to get into the City of Ruins much more easily than I'd anticipated."

"You don't know anything. Meeting with the Astrologer will be the beginning of the main event."

"Oh? Well, you won't be around to see it. It's a shame you'll be left out of your own story."

"...True. This body is already at its limit."

Between the erosion from the Concept of Original Sin and the backlash from her own conjuring, Hakua's body double was starting to fall apart.

That was how difficult it was to create a form that could withstand a Pure Concept.

However, Hakua still had enough strength left for one last Pure Concept conjuring attack.

"If you survive this, you can go ahead into the City of Ruins—if you're still in one piece, of course."

Hakua began constructing a conjuring, muttering ominously.

Guiding Force: Connect—

It was slow and deliberate, like she was making a show of it. But the way she gathered more and more enormous Guiding Force, forming an overwhelmingly powerful conjuring that struck fear into the hearts of all who saw it, was just like the attack she used when they'd fought in the land of salt.

Perfect Attachment, Pure Concept [Ivory]—

Last time, all Menou could do was desperately try to avoid Hakua's Pure Concept conjurings. She'd been paralyzed with fear, assuming she could do nothing, a cowardice she'd later regretted.

Half a year had passed since, and Menou had found new strength.

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

Menou aimed the Guiding gun and activated the crest, transforming the bullet into a concentrated *Thunderclap* attack. Then the weapon in her hands changed shape. The Guiding Branches that formed its barrel twined up Menou's left arm as though fusing to her, creating a massive, shining muzzle.

"Pure Acceleration."

She spoke aloud to focus on the conjuring, sinking her spirit deep into her soul.

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

When it touched Menou's spirit, the Pure Concept of *Time* stole something away from her, something that supported her very self, made all the more important because she couldn't see it. Once lost, it could never be regained.

For some reason, the sensation assaulting her heart tinted her vision a pale blue. The pathway connected to Menou's soul was taking a piece of her consciousness to a distant place.

It was a very quiet world.

A small and self-contained realm, like a garden or a playset. There was perfect peace and quiet there. That world, as beautiful as a jewelry box locked away in a cupboard, existed solely for one girl.

She sat crouched, hugging her knees. A pure white blade protruded from her chest. The headband she wore on her journey with Menou was gone. In its place, blue butterflies rested on her head like hair ornaments. The gentle fluttering of their wings was the only movement in the world.

It was her.

"Aka..."

Menou started to speak her dearest friend's name and reached out with a hand.

"...ri."

The small world vanished, and Menou's mind came back to reality.

Her glimpse of Akari came and went in a blink. Hakua and Menou faced each other, each about to let loose a conjuring.

There was only Menou's worst enemy now. Menou kept a tight hold on the reigns of *Time* and sent it flooding into the *Thunderclap* she had loaded in the Guiding gun.

"Someday, I'll kill your real body, too," she said sharply. "So prepare yourself for death."

"Not a chance. I'm going to take Akari back."

Hakua finished preparing to use her Pure Concept, and Menou pointed the glowing gun made of Guiding Branches.

Invoke [Chaos]

Invoke [Acceleration → Guiding Bullet]

As Hakua's conjuring took shape, she held out her palm, dyeing all before her hand white. Menou watched the phenomenon that overwrote the world and reset it to whiteness spread toward her as she pulled the trigger.

Lighting lanced forward at the speed of light.

The recoil knocked Menou's arm back. The Guiding Branch barrel shattered. Accelerated beyond any measurable number, the *Thunderclap* smashed through Hakua's conjuring. There was no struggle for supremacy, no question if they'd negate each other. The conjured lightning ripped right through the *Chaos* conjuring and into the body containing Hakua's spirit, mercilessly shattering it to pieces, then continued and blew off the roof of the church.

Menou's lightning turned the indoors into the outdoors, destroying the building and carving a line through the ground. It even melted a layer of snow around the area from the sheer heat.

It was an unquestionable victory. Menou stretched, released the Guiding Branches that had formed her gun's barrel, and beamed brightly.

"Ahhh, much better! That really felt great."

Her smile was almost uncharacteristically cheerful. She'd seen for herself that she had grown enough to fight back against Hakua, and she'd even gotten a glimpse of her best friend's face, though that could have been a hallucination. This was likely the first time she'd felt so good after defeating a foe.

Still wearing a sunny smile, Menou knelt to look Maya in the eyes.

"Now then, let's get going. We're so close to the City of Ruins."

"Y-you're not going to get mad at me...?"

For once, Maya looked sheepish. While she'd have some chance of winning against Hakua, it didn't change the fact that she'd gone off on her own. If Hakua had gotten ahold of Maya's Pure Concept of *Evil*, Abbie and the rest of the conjured soldiers would've been at a serious disadvantage. Hakua had been moments away from gaining the power to take down Grisarika Kingdom without any real difficulty. If that happened, Menou would lose her only base and be crushed by the sheer numbers of the Faust before she could ever reach Hakua.

"Listen, Maya. I'm the one who should apologize. I'm sorry."

"Huh?"

"I admit, I did think you were weak. I only saw you as a child who needed to be protected. I couldn't think of you as anything but an Otherworlder, and I thought I needed to make amends to you for my past misdeeds."

Menou hadn't seen Maya as someone she could count on. She had been a child to be protected and an Otherworlder to atone to. There'd been too many barriers to treat her like an equal. Menou had viewed Maya as a symbol of her own guilt.

Now Menou met Maya's gaze steadily instead of looking away.



"But you fought hard. And because you did, we have a clear path to the City of Ruins. So tell me one thing, will you?"

Menou reached out and pressed her hands firmly into Maya's squishy cheeks. She hadn't promised she wouldn't get mad. Menou's lovely eyes narrowed as she leaned in closer.

"How could you do something so reckless?"

The girl with Hakua's face was berating her.

For some reason, the sudden show of anger filled Maya's eyes with tears. It must have been because Menou squeezed her face so roughly. Maya thought up excuses while she tried to speak.

"Because...I..."

Not long ago, she wouldn't have been able to answer honestly. But Menou had come to her rescue like a hero. If that was all, then Menou's shared similarities with Hakua might still have given Maya pause, but Sahara's words had given her courage.

"I was...lonely." Quietly, timidly, she laid bare the fragile feelings deep in her heart. "I got betrayed a thousand years ago, and now Manon is gone, and my mom is dead, and there's no reason for me to go back to Japan anymore... I felt so alone, and so sad..."

She wanted to feel important. If this world didn't need her now that her mother and sister were gone, it wouldn't matter if she disappeared. That's why she'd hoped to see Hakua, talk to her, and settle things once and for all.

"I just wanted someone to need me... I thought if I could beat Hakua, everyone would finally have to admit I was useful, even if I turned into a Human Error! I wanted to prove...that there was something I could do by myself!"

Tears streamed down Maya's cheeks. She stood there sobbing, baring her soul.

"Is that really so wrong?"

Sahara had accepted Maya's feelings but refused to offer a solution. Would Menou be able to find an answer for her?

"...Maya." Maya looked up with a mixture of hope and worry, watching closely as Menou searched for the right words. She seemed someone pleading for salvation. "That loneliness will surely follow you for the rest of your life. If you only trust in other people's kindness, if you're always looking for someone to save you, then you'll never escape that sadness."

Menou's words were far from gentle and comforting. If anything, they were more like a reprimand.

"I think the loneliness in your heart must be like the guilt in mine. It'll haunt you forever. There's no way to resolve it. I know it'll be hard because you don't like being lonely, but I promise it'll be all right."

Menou spoke as if she were addressing herself as much as Maya. She tapped the hole in Maya's dress.

"Because you're strong." The words she offered the girl weren't coddling, comforting, or even compassionate. "You have the strength to make anyone turn and face you. There's no need to wait around and count on their kindness."

Maya had the ability to find someone who'd stay with her and get them to look her way.

Even on this short journey that she'd joined without permission—Menou, Sahara, Abbie, Michele, and Hakua had all been at the mercy of this child's whims.

"So, Maya. Please don't give up on this world, even after all it's put you through."

Menou's voice softened, and she gently patted Maya's head.

"It really needs you."

Suddenly, it all struck Maya as very funny. Menou's speech was pretty and precise. Convincing, too. But just like Sahara, Menou didn't offer to take care of Maya or be her support system.

A thousand years ago, Hakua saved Maya and gave her a place to belong. She'd done it so naturally that the weak Maya hadn't needed to express her

thanks. Hakua had spoiled Maya as much as she wanted.

As a result, Maya was still a dependent child when she wound up alone.

But Sahara had given her a necessary push. Menou had put real trust in her. This group of somewhat awkward companions, so different from her friends of a thousand years ago, was so endearing that Maya found herself oddly glad.

"You really are...such a silly group."

"...What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said." With an even expression, Maya offered her pinky finger. "I suppose I can accept that and let you off the hook. In exchange, will you make me a promise? Pinky swear that you'll work with me. We're going to fight side by side from now on."

"Yes, of course. I'll be counting on you."

Menou and Maya linked their pinky fingers.

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

It was the same chant Maya had recited with Sahara not so long ago. But this time, there was no need for a curse.

"Pinky promise!"

The two girls exchanged their vow while releasing the gentle hold of their fingers.

"Ha-ha," Abbie laughed quietly while listening in on the pair's conversation through one of her insects.

She was carrying Sahara on her shoulder, having dug her out of the rubble and retreated from Michele.

Recently, Abbie had been formulating a theory about the Starhusk. After her battle with Michele, she was certain. That remark about its destruction being a side effect erased all doubt.

However, she didn't intend to tell Menou. Not for the moment anyway. Whether intended or not, the Starhusk was still a weapon that could inflict serious damage depending on how it was used.

"I'm glad I let that awful creature follow me. If it were just li'l Menou and me, the situation would be much too stable. She certainly stirred things up nicely."

Maya had only been able to tag along because Abbie had pretended not to notice the girl was hiding in her shadow. While tolerating Maya's presence was unpleasant, Abbie had to admit that she'd produced results.

"Thanks to her, li'l Menou was forced to use *Time* a lot more. It was certainly worth ceding that territory to Momo for what I got in return... It won't be long now. Just hang in there a little longer."

With a gentle smile, Abbie stroked the gear mark on her abdomen.

"Soon we'll destroy this whole stupid world," the conjured soldier muttered with determination.

Sahara, who had one eye cracked open, quietly closed it and continued pretending to be unconscious on Abbie's shoulder, wishing with all her might that she hadn't heard anything at all.



Hakua knew she'd failed when she sensed her double's defeat.

"Tch."

She clutched her forehead, surrounded by books containing people's memories. It was the recoil from losing the piece of her spirit that she'd put in the body she'd sent to the north. Covering her face to fend off the dizziness, she muttered darkly, "...Like I care."

It was a shame that she hadn't been able to get Maya's Pure Concept of *Evil*, but Flarette had still lost more in this battle than she did. Hakua noticed the strength of Flarette's *Regression* on Maya. That couldn't possibly have come without a cost. Even Hakua's last attack had been meant to provoke Menou into using a stronger Pure Concept conjuring.

The power Menou had gained over the past half a year was only thanks to the Pure Concept. As long as Hakua was encamped in the library of the Star Memory, her advantage was secure. The only problem was where Menou had hidden Akari's body. For better or worse, Akari was frozen in time. Hakua could dispatch Menou and take her time searching for her friend. That's why she was laboring to create duplicates that could handle *Possession*.

"You've let another piece of yourself get worn away, eh?"

A voice echoed in the room, though Hakua was alone.

Noticing that her long-distance communication device was active, Hakua scowled.

"...Guardian." There was obvious loathing in Hakua's voice. "What do you want? I thought we'd agreed not to associate. Plus, you've been letting Flarette do whatever she pleases in Grisarika Kingdom."

"I am getting on in years. Those whippersnappers got the jump on me with all that energy of theirs. To make matters worse, the Director is baring his fangs at me. I'm at my wit's end."

"Liar. I'm sure you're up to something...and you purposely interfered in recent events, too, didn't you?"

"Hmm? Oh, that old thing? The Magician was being too lenient, that's all. She's always terribly naive when she's young, eh? If you're going to use someone up, you've got to really get the most out of them."

A wheedling laugh echoed through the library. But Hakua had a suspicion as to the real reason the Guardian had inserted herself into events.

"...You're jealous of that nun girl, aren't you?"

"Jealous? But of course I am. That metal arm is a splendid thing." The Guardian didn't bother denying it. "Why, with its circulating fusion of Concepts of Original Sin and Primary Colors, it's essentially a successful perpetual motion machine of a new kind. If it really does work, then it won't have the imperfect immortality we Elders suffer from. It could even be the sword that breaks entropy and frees us from the arrow of time."

The Elders didn't die of old age. However, there were still ways to kill them. That was why the Guardian continued to search greedily for immortality in its truest form.

"Just look at those fingers of yours. They've been eroded by Evil."

At this, Hakua glanced at her hands and found that her pinky finger had turned black. She'd assumed that any damage would only affect the body double, but the erosion had reached her real body by way of her spirit. Though there was no pain in the corrupted finger, Hakua cut it off without hesitation. She could restore such a minor loss in no time.

"That *Evil* girl has more fight than I expected. Anyway, Guardian, I'm surprised you haven't moved on to your next replacement yet. I thought you had a favorite picked out?"

"I want to make sure everything is in tip-top shape first. You remember what a mess it was last time, don't you?"

"...Yeah."

For generations, the Guardian had chosen a member of the Grisarika royal family to possess. The woman whose body currently contained Guardian's consciousness had learned of the fate that awaited her as a Grisarika royal and accepted it...only to drink poison right before she was taken over.

"It was ridiculous, if I do say so myself. No normal person would ever think to do such a thing... Sadly, my dear little sister might very well take the same path. If I'm not careful how I win, she might decide to kill herself and take me with her. I've gone to great lengths to prepare to break her heart thoroughly so she won't have the will to rebel."

The Guardian was a spirit-based being that specialized in *Possession*, particularly fusing with a host's mind. By merging the claimed person's memories and personality with their own, Guardian could greatly reduce the possibility of a transplant rejection. Since each new generation was a step further from the progenitor, even if they were blood related, such drastic precautions were absolutely necessary.

"In that respect, Orwell really was most excellent. She used pilfered materials to make a host body with no chance of complications whatsoever. But that body went to you instead. It seems you've had some trouble with it, though, hmm?"

"...Not really. It's nothing for you to worry about. Besides, Flarette is nearing her limit. I doubt I'll need to do anything."

The Lord of the west told the Guardian of the east, who'd been conspiring with her for a thousand years, that Menou was doomed.

"Heyyy, I found the stairs! These must lead right to the City of Ruins!" Abbie called out in a bright voice. Not long after repelling Hakua, Menou and Maya had managed to meet up with Abbie, who was carrying Sahara.

Although Menou had blown away the aboveground portion of the church, the inverted steeple leading to the City of Ruins remained intact. As the reunited group of four descended, they found a spiral staircase built along the walls of the inverted steeple. It ran down the length of the spire, so long that it seemed to go on forever.

"So this is the entrance to the City of Ruins."

In a surprising turn of events, Sahara had seemingly had a change of heart. She was actually being proactive, even though she'd initially been brought here against her will. When Menou looked at Sahara, she thought the girl's expression seemed somehow clearer than before.

The City of Ruins awaited beyond the great, winding staircase.

"That's an awful lot of steps... I'm so tired of walking already. Sahara, you'll carry me, right? Since you're my servant and all."

"Huh? That's not right. What happened to your promise to provide for me?"

"You want your big sis to provide for you?! Oh my gosh, I finally get to take care of you?!"

Maya and Abbie had been getting along better since reuniting, mostly by keeping Sahara between them. Though the events of the past few days had been dangerous, the group had managed to drive back Hakua's body double and damage her, get by Michele, and reach the entrance to the City of Ruins. The first hurdle toward their goal was seemingly behind them.

"By the way, Maya, what did you mean by the question from earlier?" Menou said.

"What question?"

"You asked how we planned on talking to the Astrologer without you. Do you mean you're confident the Astrologer will speak with you if we find them?"

"Oh, that? It's simple. We were really close, you know." Maya answered easily. She'd secured a position for herself. There was no reason to hold back information to use as leverage, so she willingly revealed the Astrologer's identity.

"The Astrologer's a conjured soldier, but not one like this piece of scrap. She's really shy and only talks to people she trusts, but she's very sweet."

"Excuse me? I've got way higher specs than some conjured soldier from a thousand years ago, just so you know," Abbie protested.

"Is there a big difference between— Hmm?"

While they chatted and approached the steps, Menou felt a tug on her

ponytail, like someone had grabbed her hair. She stopped and discovered that her ribbon was caught on part of the entryway to the stairwell.

"What are you doing, Menou? You're so silly," Maya said.

"My ribbon got stuck, that's all... I'm sorry. You three go on ahead and make sure the path is clear."

Menou flashed a light smile at her companions, then touched the black scarf ribbon. As she detached it from where it had snagged, being careful not to rip it, she tilted her head thoughtfully.

She'd always used this scarf ribbon...but where and when did she get it, exactly?

"…"

Menou dug her diary out of her bag and flipped through the pages, fighting back an indescribable feeling of loss.

"...Yes, that's right. I have an assistant...a girl named Momo. And she...gave me this ribbon."

She confirmed this to herself in a halting whisper.

One of the more recent pages of the diary had a note warning Menou to never let this assistant "Momo" know she'd forgotten her. It claimed that if Momo discovered Menou was losing her memories, she would try to stop her.

"She really cares about me a lot, it seems."

And Menou must have cared a lot about her, too. After all, she'd trusted her so completely that she'd entrusted Akari to her.

The events recorded in the diary made that clear. This assistant had been very dear to Menou. It was frustrating she only knew that by reading about it.

Menou ran her hand along the ribbon. It had to be very precious if it was a gift from that girl. She knew it was important, even if she didn't feel that way anymore.

If this Momo was an adorable younger girl, maybe she was something like what Maya was to Menou now.

Menou had used the Pure Concept many times to get here.

How much a Pure Concept wore away at a spirit varied from one individual to the next. Akari and Maya seemed to be on the slower end. Some were affected after a single use, while others were able to use theirs for many years.

And Menou...was about average, she supposed.

In the past six months, she'd used the Pure Concept more than just once or twice.

Generally, she'd staved off the worst of the memory loss by using the Guiding gun as a conduit and weakening the Pure Concept's power. But the *Regression* she'd called upon to save Maya and the *Acceleration* necessary to destroy Hakua's false body had consumed many of Menou's memories.

It wasn't enough to affect her personality yet. At the very least, Menou felt fine.

She could make it for now.

At least until she saved Akari.

"It'll be more than enough."

She couldn't let the others catch on, not yet.

Her wish to save Akari and her desire to settle the score with Hakua were feelings that bordered on obsessions, subconsciously driving Menou's motivation and decisions.

Menou knew what would remain as she continued to lose her memories.

Eventually, she was bound to forget about Sahara, Maya, and Master Flare.

Only her greatest ally and worst enemy would remain in the end.

And when that time came, Menou would have to kill again.

To take one more life before it became a Human Error—her own.

Sahara returned from checking the stairwell. "Hey, Menou. Looks like the coast is clear. That's what Abbie says anyway."

"Good. Sorry for the wait. I'm coming."

She'd kept them for too long. Donning a sheepish smile, she closed the diary and tucked it into her bag.

No matter what she lost in the process, if she could defeat Hakua, stop Otherworlders from being summoned, and greet Akari with a smile that held no regrets...

That way, Menou could enjoy one last warm moment before meeting her end.

"Let's go get the Starhusk."

Having long since made up her mind, Menou hurried to rejoin her friends.

Michele stood alone in the charred remains of the freight train station, lost in thought.

Before her was the corpse of what had once been Teach. Due to the nature of Concepts of Original Sin, which could revive for each sacrifice they had consumed, it had taken a while to defeat the monster for good. It had been reduced to a heap of flesh with no discernable shape. Michele would never lose to an abomination, even if it was a bit more challenging without her scripture.

That wasn't what troubled her. Not at all.

"She was possessing a body double?" Michele muttered to herself as the scene Abbie had showed her replayed in her mind.

The conflict between Maya and Hakua had been shocking enough, but Hakua's method of coming to the north worried Michele even more.

Dividing her spirit and using *Possession* to put a piece of it in someone else to control them didn't seem like something the Hakua Shirakami she knew would do. If anything, it reminded Michele of one of Hakua's enemies. Namely...

"Impossible. It's been a thousand years."

Michele shook her head, dismissing the notion.

Nothing remained unchanged after that much time. Michele herself was proof. She'd renounced the idea of maintaining her consciousness continuously for those thousand years. Despite her vow of loyalty to Hakua, she'd chosen to live fifty years at a time, then erase her memories and regain her youth when

her body started to decline.

That was how difficult it was to bear such a long existence.

A human spirit was designed to break after a mere century or so.

Since she'd abandoned the idea of experiencing a thousand years herself, Michele had no right to criticize the Lord's changes or betrayals. Dividing one's spirit was obviously an excellent ability to have. Of course she'd sought to learn it herself, even though it was the technique of her worst enemy.

"...Yes, of course."

Once, it had been the preferred method of the person who managed the research institution that summoned Maya Ooshima and bled her dry. That same person had funded the facility where Michele was used as a specimen, used wealth to gain power, summoned and taken possession of Otherworlders to gain as many Pure Concepts as possible, and managed the Grisarika Conglomerate that oversaw countless tests in search of immortality and eternal youth.

"Nothing Lady Hakua does could ever be wrong."

Doubting her savior was deeply disrespectful.

As Michele reminded herself of this, she turned her gaze to the great crater directly beneath the Starhusk.

Beneath the surface of the Wild Frontier, a vast expanse bereft of the flow of Guiding Force stood the City of Ruins. That mysterious place was home to the Astrologer, another Elder who served Hakua like Michele.

Michele's plans thus far had gone awry, owing to too many unpredictable factors. However, she intended to enter the City of Ruins with her direct subordinates. Next time, no rebellious Executioners would get in her way.

The people Michele selected for the Lord's Own Army included some individuals that would shock any sensible member of the Faust. Her quest to gather the most useful personnel had found many taboos.

But there were plenty of perfectly normal priestesses among the group's ranks, too. Hooseyard was far removed from anything taboo, and there were

others like her.

As it happened, the priestess approaching Michele now, dragging a white suitcase after her, was incredibly skilled and bore no links to anything heretical.

"You made it."

"Sorry I'm laaate." She called back in a sweet drawl. This girl was the most talented of all Michele's subordinates. Clad in indigo priestess robes, she listened as Michele outlined their next order of business.

"We're going to kill Flarette in the City of Ruins. You've familiarized yourself with the target, I assume?"

"Of cooourse. Once we meet up with the trash waiting for us, this mission will be a piece of caaake." Two scrunchies held the girl's pink hair in pigtails. "...As she is she now, I don't think I'll need to hold back anyway."

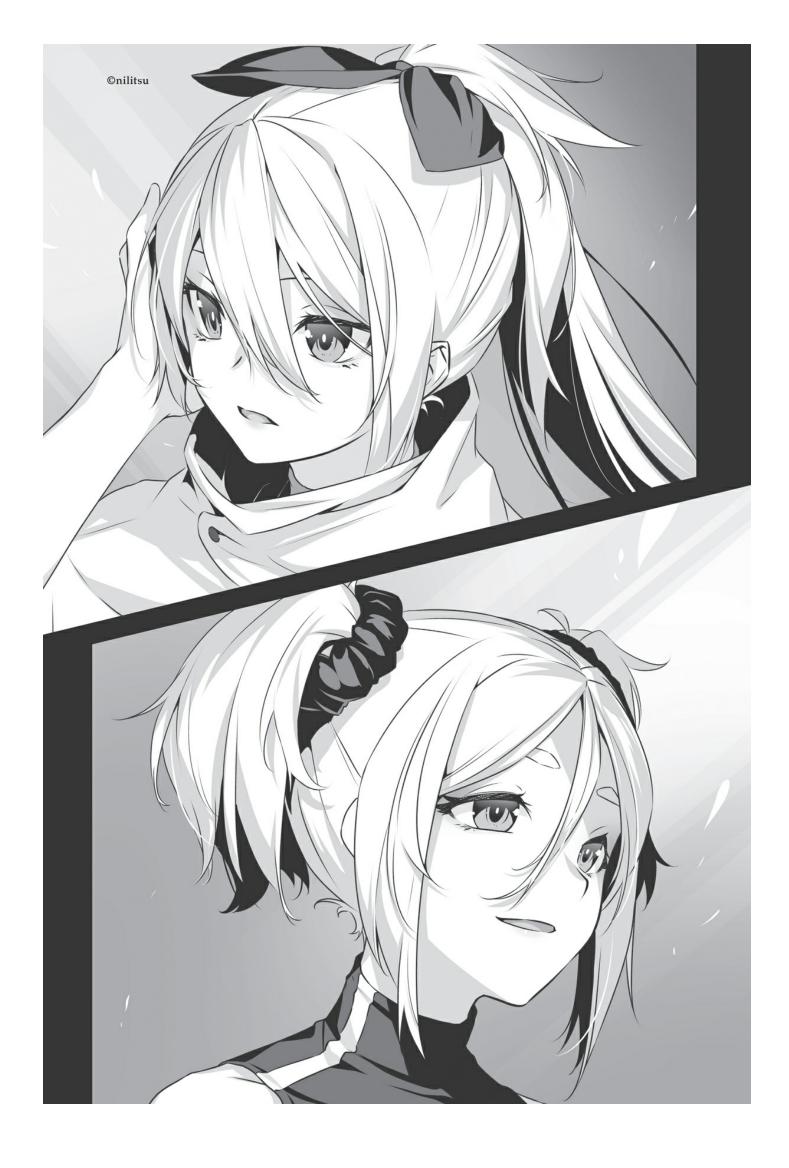
"Hold back?"

"Oh, nooo. It's nothing at aaall. Don't you worry about a thiiing, my darling Michele!"

The girl smiled innocently. She was a member of the Lord's Own Army, brought in under Hooseyard's recommendation.

"Once I bring Flarette down for goood, be sure to shower me with praise, darliiing!"

Momo, who'd always been Menou's faithful assistant, gave her new boss an adoring smile.





Hello, I'm Mato Sato. The long-awaited anime adaptation of this series finally began airing on April 1!

My story is moving! The characters are speaking! The conjurings are being invoked!

I was initially astonished by the sheer number of people involved in an anime adaptation, but I've been learning a lot from the many expressive artists working on it, and now I'm thoroughly enjoying my firsthand experience with anime creation.

The third volume of Mitsuya-sensei's comic adaptation will release on March 25. All in all, I feel very fortunate to have such wonderful multimedia adaptations.

I want to thank nilitsu, whose magnificent illustrations have helped expand the world of the story, particularly this time with the new outfits. I'd also like to thank my editor, Null, who puts in so much effort that I can't help but think they're some new breed of workhorse! And finally, thank you to everyone involved in the creation of this book. I'm very, very sorry for causing you all so much trouble.

As we begin a new arc, the characters also walk new paths for themselves.

After reading the events in the epilogue of this volume, my editor commented, "You really want to make poor Menou suffer, don't you?" But I swear that's not true at all. As the author, I simply believe that Menou is strong and determined enough to overcome any challenges a silly writer like me might impose on her and still find a way to be happy.

I dearly hope you readers are enjoying this story, and I look forward to meeting again in the next volume.

Until then, farewell.



Vanishing memories,

unfading feelings.



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