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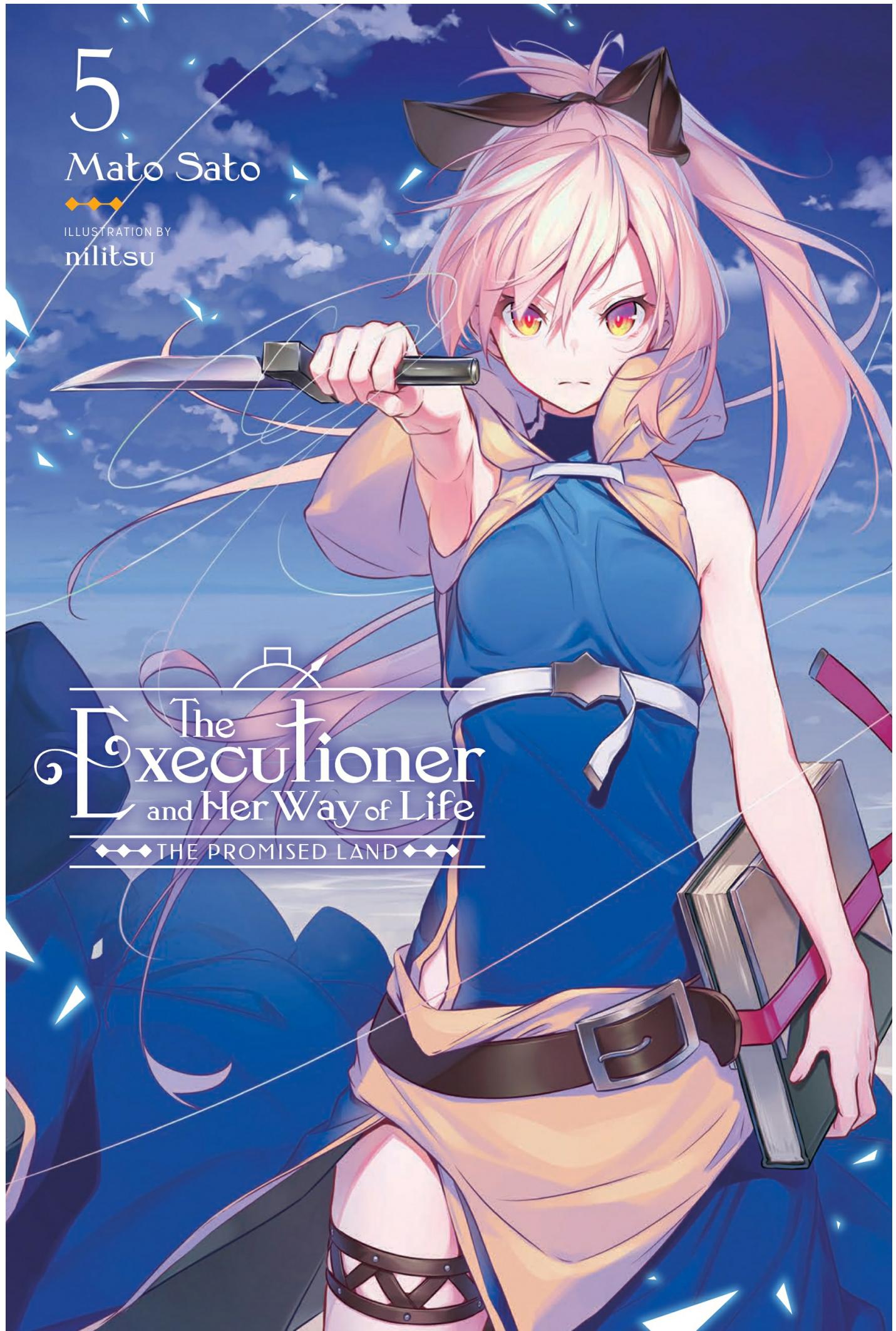
Matō Sato



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The
Executioner
and Her Way of Life

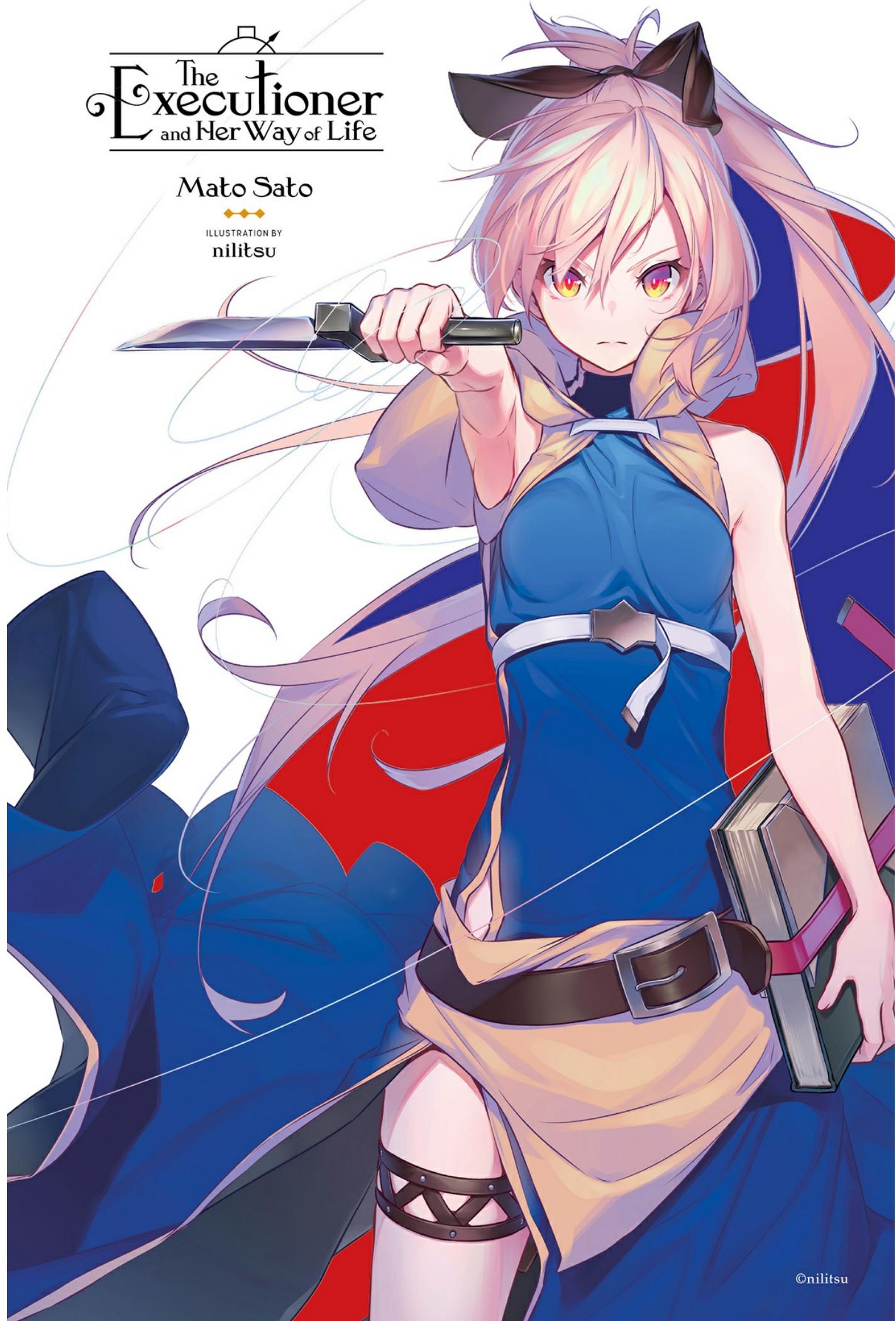
◆◆◆THE PROMISED LAND◆◆◆



The Executioner and Her Way of Life

Mato Sato

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Prologue

Chapter 1: Invading the Holy Land

Chapter 2: Unrest in the Holy Land

Chapter 3: Chaos in the Holy Land

Chapter 4: Despair in the Holy Land

Chapter 5: The Land of Salt

Epilogue

CONTENTS









The Executioner
and Her Way of Life

◆◆◆ THE PROMISED LAND ◆◆◆

5

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The Executioner and Her Way of Life 5

Mato Sato

TRANSLATION BY JENNY MCKEON ♦ COVER ART BY NILITSU

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SHOKEI SHOUJO NO IKIRU MICHI (VIRGIN ROAD) Vol. 5

-YAKUSOKU NO CHI—

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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1: Invading the Holy Land](#)

[Chapter 2: Unrest in the Holy Land](#)

[Chapter 3: Chaos in the Holy Land](#)

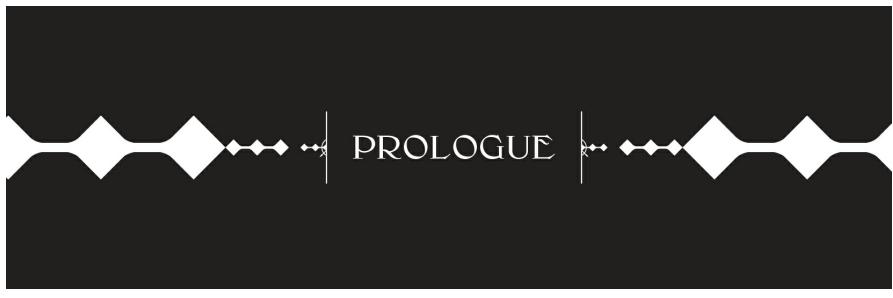
[Chapter 4: Despair in the Holy Land](#)

[Chapter 5: The Land of Salt](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)



PROLOGUE

For the first time in forever, she had a dream.

It was about a classroom in Japan that didn't exist.

Everyone was wearing different uniforms. Jackets, blazers, sailor suits... They didn't go together at all, but for some reason, nothing seemed out of place.

Strangest of all was her own outfit. For some reason, she was wearing priestess robes.

Why would she be wearing such a cosplay-like getup at school? It should've felt strange, but nobody said anything about it.

As she smiled and chatted with all her friends in the class, a boy in a school jacket came up to her and casually asked a question.

"Hey, when's that girl coming back?"

That girl? She tilted her head, uncertain who she was being asked about.

"You know, the one who sits there."

The boy pointed at the one empty desk in the classroom.

She walked over to the desk and saw a flower on it. A simple, fake blossom, made out of white cloth.

Who was supposed to sit here...?

Ah yes.

She smiled and responded.

"I'll bring her in soon, don't worry."

And myself along with her, she thought. Then we can introduce ourselves.

She chatted about her best friend as they all waited within the dream for class to start.

At the farthest western reaches of the continent, deep within the cathedral that towered over the holy land...

In the inner sanctum that outsiders were forbidden to enter, the head of the Faust, Archbishop Elcami, knelt on the floor to pray.

"O savior of our world, restorer of civilization...our great Lord. Preparations for the ceremony of thy glorious return are proceeding smoothly."

She placed her scripture in front of her, and glowing letters of Guiding Force began to form.

A communication conjuring.

Elcami read the words...and began to tremble.

Soon, the seals of the Four Major Human Errors shall be broken.

All four of the Major Human Errors, set free?

Not long ago, a single pinky finger had escaped and wrought unspeakable damage across the land. What would happen if that seal broke completely?

The west was all well and good. The largest and fastest of the four, the Pure Concept *Dragon*, had been completely eradicated, turned to white salt. The Sword of Salt that did the deed was being watched over with great care by the highest caste, the Faust. In fact, with its warden gone, the astral vein occasionally came close to causing the phenomenon known as dragonblight, but that was only a vestige of the disasters *Dragon* could have caused—well within the acceptable range. There were no problems with the *Star* in the north, either.

However, in the east and south, the Human Errors were still alive and well.

Suddenly, one of the holy statues standing over Elcami began to laugh.

These were no ordinary sculptures. Like the altars found in all the churches, they were Guiding vessels that could facilitate long-distance communication.

Wherever they were, the person who was sending a transmission spoke casually to Elcami.

"Must be tough for you, eh? Bootlicking your way into becoming an Elder and

all... Truly a laudable effort.”

This was obviously meant in mockery, and Elcami silently ignored it.

But the person speaking through the statue—undoubtedly another Elder, since no one else could make contact with this room—went on anyway.

“I can’t move, you know. Couldn’t you at least entertain me with conversation? Go on.”

Her manner of speaking had changed, and her voice was different from the one Elcami knew, yet there was no doubt about it.

“...Guardian, is it? What of Grisarika Kingdom?”

“Oh, I’ve finished cleaning up there already. Honestly, that woman’s successor did us all a favor, killing Orwell when she did. Repeating things over and over was a pointless farce. Now I need only wait for my darling little sister to return and see how she’s grown on her travels.”

Orwell was dead.

The death of a fellow holy woman, an archbishop like herself, gave Elcami no small amount of sentiment.

“You’d better step up the good deeds in her place, Magician. I’m quite busy here, you know.”

Having said all she cared to, she promptly hung up. Anger bubbled in Elcami’s stomach at the selfish behavior.

“Every last one of them is so...!”

Infuriating. It was all so infuriating.

Archbishop Elcami had nothing left to believe in anymore. From the moment she’d become an Elder, everything and everyone was against her. Still, she went on to boast to the empty room.

“Just you watch from the other side, Orwell.” She spoke to her late comrade who’d been unable to become an Elder. “This world is just getting started.”

Invading the Holy Land

It was raining.

The sun was beginning to peek over the horizon. Faint golden shafts pierced the clouds, which wept on the earth below. The precipitation and morning fog muddied visibility, yet a soaked priestess trudged through the unwelcoming weather regardless.

The robes under her raincoat were white, indicating she was an aide to an official priestess. Many of her kind roamed the continent like this, combining pilgrimage and training in one. Since her face was covered by the hood to keep water off, it would've been difficult to identify her if she were wearing ordinary priestess robes.

However, hers had been altered quite significantly from the standard design.

The skirt that would typically have concealed her legs was hiked to halfway up her thighs and lined with adorable frills. Black tights covered the skin beneath the hem of her robes. There was only one member of the Faust in all the continent who dressed like this.

It was Momo, assistant Executioner and shamelessly self-declared faithful servant to Menou.

“...This rain is downright awful.”

She glanced up with a round face that was true to her age of fourteen, gazing at the dark clouds.

She'd had misgivings about the ominous weather since last night, but of course the more one hoped to be wrong about a premonition, the more often it was correct. Before dawn, the heavy clouds had already darkened from white to near black, loosing their accumulated water.

Rain was a serious trial for anyone traveling on foot.

Unlike a town with cobbled roads, the unpaved ground became sticky mud that clung to your feet. Precipitation drenched your clothes and mercilessly leeched the warmth from your body. The constant din made it difficult to tell if anyone was approaching. Failed adventurers turned thieves, monsters, conjured soldiers... There were many potential dangers in the area, and the curtain of rain concealed them all.

An excursion in such inclement conditions was infinitely more difficult than on a clear day.

No traveler who dared enter the undeveloped Wild Frontier would underestimate rain's dangers.

Most would be reluctant or even delay their departure, but Momo considered the storm a blessing.

The constant sound was perfect for hiding her presence. Since she was trying to stay undercover, this was both a blessing and a curse.

Momo had finished her preparations and set out from the pilgrimage inn as soon as the rain had started.

She had very good reason to both be in a hurry and keep wary of being sighted.

Ever since she'd decided to act separately from Menou and departed from the mountain hot springs town to travel toward the holy land alone, a terrible stalker had been following her.

“...Tch!”

Just picturing the person who was chasing her was enough to elicit a nasty sound that didn't suit Momo's adorable face.

Since there were no knights to punish crimes in the uninhabited Wild Frontier, all kinds of illicit activity was conducted here. Kidnapping, sales of prohibited items, research into forbidden conjurings... Anything that was forbidden in the civilized nations was bound to be widespread in the Wild Frontier.

But even most hardened criminals who dealt in taboos would refrain from messing with a priestess of the Faust. If anything, they would go out of their

way to avoid someone with the right to arrest them for their transgressions. Unfortunately, there was an exception to every rule.

The person tailing Momo was one such irregularity.

“Really, what a little...!” Momo muttered with irritation. Reminding herself that even thinking about that person was bad for her health, she shook her head, chasing the image away.

She’d left in the middle of the night during a storm in an effort to ditch her pursuer, yet her sharp instincts informed her she was being followed. Evidently, the rain wasn’t enough to deter the stalker, and they were tough enough that the weather didn’t slow them.

At this rate, Momo would be overtaken. Upon realizing this, the assistant Executioner began to scheme up more violent solutions.

She quickly looked over her shoulder.

Her steps left deep and obvious prints in the muddy earth. With no other travelers around because of the weather and unusual time, her tracks were all the more obvious. Undoubtedly, her shadow was following these tracks.

Still, all she had to do was outwit her opponent. Carefully, Momo began to walk backward, matching her own footsteps perfectly. About fifteen steps back, there was a tree on the side of the road that would fend off the rain quite nicely.

“Yes, that ought to do it.”

Momo reached into the frills of her skirt and retrieved a hidden coping saw. It was a weapon engraved with a crest that could invoke a conjuring.

Snapping the wirelike saw like a whip, she lashed it around one of the tree’s branches. A few tugs confirmed it would support her weight, and once she felt certain, Momo carefully lifted herself up. Then she used her arm strength to climb onto the branch.

Along the way, she paused to look down. Not a step out of place. Perfect.

“...Mm-hmm, I’ve outdone myself yet again.”

Momo peered down from her spot in the tree.

The only footprints in sight were her own. Since she'd walked backward along her own tracks, her trail now appeared to end abruptly.

This was a diversionary tactic. Even wild animals utilized this simple backtracking technique, but that was because it was effective. Momo had been careful not to disturb the impressions when she leaped to the branch, too, so it would be challenging to see through the deception.

In theory, she could leave and take another route now, but Momo elected to stay hidden.

She would wait for the brief moment when her stalker paused in confusion at the abrupt end of the footprints and use that opportunity to strike.

Merely hiding from her pursuer wouldn't fix the problem. The only solution was to finish them off for good.

Momo silently honed her murderous intent. She wasn't foolish enough to let her target sense her bloodlust. Instead, she narrowed her presence until it was finer than thread and keener than a knife.

After a short time, her follower came into view. The dark of the early morning and the rain disguised everything but the vaguest outline, but that tall figure was unmistakable.

They were walking without looking up, eyes focused on Momo's footprints. It was as if the idea of stealth had never occurred to this particular stalker.

Momo's tension heightened as the person came into view. She took care that even the faint sound of her breathing was lost in the rain. Her pursuer was a skilled hunter. The slightest move could give her away.

The stalker walked under the tree where Momo was hiding, then stopped.

"Aha."

Suddenly, the person pulled their gaze away from the ground and looked up.

"Found you, Momo."

Although the confident voice possessed a masculine edge, the speaker was undoubtedly a woman. She drew her broadsword, an advanced Guiding vessel engraved with crests, from her belt. Then, without hesitation, she drove it into

the earth and charged it with Guiding Force.

Guiding Force: Connect—Royal Sword, Crest—Invoke [Flameburst]

The crest conjuring sent an explosion through the ground.

She had likely kept the power to a minimum, but its effects were far from small. Mud flew in all directions. On top of that, the conjuring seemed to have been imbued with directionality, as it all flew toward the tree Momo was perched in.

SPLOOSH! Mud drenched the assistant Executioner's entire body.

"Was that really the best you could do? Sure, you matched your footprints, but the ones you stepped in twice are obviously deeper. I expected better from you, Momo."

Naturally, Momo was less than thrilled to be both scolded and covered in mud. She wiped her face as she practically spat her response. "...Oh, you're the worst."

She'd hoped the rain would cover the signs that she had backtracked. The fact that anyone could tell the difference in this darkness was nothing short of insane anyway.

There was no point to hiding anymore. Infuriated and dirty, Momo jumped from the tree and cast a hateful glare at the one who'd caught her.

At a glance, it was obvious this woman was a heroine.

She was unusually tall, with intimidating good looks and an overpowering aura that made her loom all the larger. As a young woman in the latter half of her teens, she possessed a youthful vigor that made a strong impression upon any who saw her. This was amplified by her revealing dress that covered only the most critical areas of her body, yet somehow, she wore it so well that it didn't come across as indecent.

Ashuna Grisarika.

Momo had first met her in the great Grisarika Kingdom to the east, and the princess had tailed her all the way to the holy land in the distant west. The rain had done little to mute her fierce golden hair, and her sky-blue eyes glinted as

they fixed themselves upon Momo.

The assistant Executioner jabbed a white-gloved finger at Ashuna.

“What are you going to do about this, hmm? I got all muddy thanks to you, Princess-poo...”

“Sorry about that. I’ll make it up to you at some point. You’ll just have to stick with me for a long time to make sure I can.”

“...No thank yooou. I’ll overlook it if you promise not to bother me, okaaay?”

“Come now, there’s no need to be shy, Momo.”

The last thing Momo wanted was to have Ashuna indebted to her, providing an excuse for them to be bound to each other. Unfortunately, Ashuna was persistent. She obviously knew that Momo wanted nothing to do with her, but she deliberately misconstrued the other girl’s words, steering the conversation to best suit her—all very typical Ashuna.

“Why are you following me in the first place, Princess-poo?”

“Following you? I’m hurt, Momo. Where are you going, hmm?”

“...The holy land.”

“Right? As it happens, so am I.”

Ashuna put a hand to her heart, declaring this nothing more than a coincidence.

“Any traveler who comes to the western part of the continent is bound to visit the holy land. In fact, that’s what brings most people to this region in the first place. There’s nothing unusual about the fact that we share a common, and quite famous, destination. So why act as though one of us is pursuing the other?”

Her eyes glittered mischievously as she rattled off some hard-to-denry logic.

“But incidentally, if I *were* following you, it would likely be because you’re just so damn fun to chase.”

“Well, how grand that you’ve caught up to me now, then. I’m going to wait out the rain here for a while, so please do feel free to go on ahead without me.”

“Oh, don’t be like that. Everyone needs a travel buddy, right?”

Momo’s coldness had no visible effect on Ashuna’s easygoing attitude. Her smile shone as if bathed in sunlight, despite the pouring rain.

“Anyway, all joking aside. Did you really think you could do something this interesting without the great Ashuna Grisarika getting involved?”

The princess’s incredible charisma was enough to bend most to her will, yet Momo’s dull expression remained unmoved.

There was nothing even remotely high-class or noble about Ashuna’s statement; it was an unbelievably bald-faced declaration of intention to keep annoying her. Momo told herself it was her own fault for failing to shake the princess off, resigning herself to the predicament as best she could.

“I don’t even care anymore... I’m sure even a super-princess pain in the butt like yourself can at least serve as a decoy if it comes to that. I’ll allow you to stay by my side, if only as a meat shield.”

“Great, you can count on me as your rearguard.”

Tossing back her red-tinged blond hair, Ashuna puffed up her chest in a show of dependability.

“I’ll break through fleeing enemy lines and cut off their general’s head, just for you.”

Momo could only sigh at Ashuna’s unflinching response.

The holy land was at the westernmost edge of human-inhabited land.

It did not rest on the coast, but all that lay beyond was a barren stretch of the Wild Frontier. The biggest reason was that the earthen vein, so essential to maintaining civilization, both began and ended here, its first and last stop.

Earthen vein was a term for the Guiding Force that flowed freely all through the ground of the continent.

Its power was too strong for a single individual to handle, but the energy it provided was essential to running a highly populated city. The earthen vein was the source that maintained the utilities that provided light at night, the Guiding trains that traveled to and fro, and countless other necessities. In the civilized

nations, settlements were always built in places blessed by the earthen vein, and there were constant experiments to utilize the abundant Guiding Force in new and effective ways.

The holy land was situated where the earthen vein ended, in the westernmost corner of civilization on the continent.

After leaving the nearest countries, it took a three-day march through the Wild Frontier to reach the holy land. This was the most basic route for any pilgrim.

The path of bare earth was just wide enough for two people to walk side by side, surrounded by grassy meadows. Despite being the final leg of the pilgrimage, it wasn't maintained.

Normally, local governments managed the roads linking one town to another to keep commerce running smoothly, but this was not so in the holy land.

Here, the route only existed because people walked it.

Just as wild animals in the mountains could form game trails, the pilgrimage path was formed by the passage of countless believers moving in the same direction.

Ten years, a hundred, a thousand...

The footprints of the unknown faithful who flocked to the holy land on foot overlapped each other, wore down the earth, pushed aside the plants, and eventually formed a road.

No one had spread gravel across the ground to make it easier to walk, nor did anyone deliberately develop the trail. The way was so primitive and naturally formed that if people were to stop walking it, it would surely vanish after a few seasons.

The last section of the pilgrimage was nothing more special than a walk shared by many.

"I heard what happened from Menou. Your 'Master Flare' took a train to the holy land, right? Wouldn't it be easier to follow the tracks to get there?"

"The traain?"

A pious believer was meant to walk this route on their own two feet, every step filled with faith and emotion. Meanwhile, the pair who seemed to have abandoned their faith were having a heretical conversation over whether there might be an easier way.

"It's an awfully strange train, that one. It's impossible to find the tracks, no matter where you look."

The holy land was encircled by the Wild Frontier, land that didn't belong to any nation. It was named precisely because it could not be tamed. Were there a railroad cutting through it, villages might form along the way after some time.

"Back in the monastery, when we first heard the rumor that there was a train track that went to the holy land, my darling and I searched all over yet turned up nothing. So how can there still be a train that goes directly to the holy land? It doesn't make sense."

"Maybe it's in an underground tunnel. The holy land is famous as the place where the biggest earthen vein in the continent connects, right? It stands to reason that this region would also have more advanced marvels, right?"

It was easy to walk along a railroad, if not quite as easy as a paved road. Typically, there was a path running parallel to the track anyway. A Guiding train track always followed the earthen vein from above. Since the holy land was the central point of the earthen vein that ran all throughout the continent, it stood to reason that there would be a Guiding train system constructed there. However, Ashuna's suggestion questioned whether the train Menou claimed she saw was even real.

Momo shrugged. "Who knows? The official stance is that they haven't developed the land because it's sacred, but there might be more to the story. We didn't exactly have time to go around digging holes in the holy land at random, so I have no idea."

The pair continued walking. Their stamina was far higher than an average person's because of their exceptional amounts of natural Guiding Force. The early morning rain died down, and the afternoon sun began to peek through gaps in the clouds. Eventually, there was a change in the endless stretches of undeveloped wasteland around them.

Fields that had clearly been tilled by human hands came into view, a common sight outside many cities.

If there was any difference from normal plots, it was that the workers were not members of the third caste, the Commons, but women in nuns' habits. When they saw Momo's white priestess robes, they stopped their work to greet her with a nod.

This land had been cultivated so that the people of the monastery could earn their daily bread. Ashuna observed with fascination, the scene unusual precisely because it was so much like any regular populated area.

"Now, there's a surprisingly ordinary sight. It's moving to think you once dirtied your hands with fieldwork, too, Momo."

"What kind of remark is that...? Our abbey was near a cemetery, so I certainly spent plenty of time polishing gravestones. It was a nice little break from the horrid training they were always putting us through."

"Master Flare was the director of the monastery that looked after the Faust cemetery, at least in theory. It was really just an empty title, but it still suited our Master far more than a life-giving place like a farm."

"Hmm, is that right? Wait, so is the place where you and Menou grew up nearby?"

"Not at all. Our old home is all the way on the other side of the holy land."

The pair had been raised at a secret Executioner training site. In an effort to keep away prying eyes, it was built in a location where one had to pass through the holy land in order to get in or out.

Momo and Ashuna stopped walking after making it halfway through the farmland.

A beautiful town that looked very out of place in this remote region had come into sight.

It was the ultimate destination of every road on the continent. The beginning of all paths, as well as the end. The source point of the abundant Guiding Force that flowed in the earthen vein.

The holy land.

There were no walls around this unnamed settlement. They were not required, for though it was in the Wild Frontier, none dared attack it. Or perhaps those who lived here simply devoutly trusted that there was no need to fear an incursion.

Thus, the entrance to the village was a plaza for welcoming in pilgrims.

Surrounded by columns, the open court was a beautiful circle that turned none away. The main road that ran through the front half of the town led to a massive cathedral that was obviously the community's heart. The entrance to the cathedral was in the center of the circular plaza, with towers on either side allowing pilgrims to enter.

Multiple churches lined the streets. There wasn't a single building that appeared to be a private home. Every structure was a church facility for priestesses of the Faust, and each was a brilliant white.

The little settlement, only about five hundred meters around, was made up entirely of beautiful and perfectly calculated religious architecture.

"That's it, huh?"

"It is indeed."

Momo nodded to Ashuna.

It was a stunning alabaster village, worthy of being the destination of believers all over the world. Its holiness was palpable at a glance, its purity more evident with every passing moment of admiration.

But what was most impressive of all, what truly left all observers at a loss for words, was that all the buildings...were made of Guiding Force.

"..."

Ashuna squinted at the glow of Guiding Light.

Everyone who came to the holy land inevitably stopped here when they first arrived. They were moved by the beauty, struck by a sense of accomplishment, awed by the sacred streets. That was why the road was slightly wider here. Momo and Ashuna were no exception, joining the lines of pilgrims marveling at

the holy land.

From the cobblestones that formed the foundation of the town to the row of church facilities and the symbolic circular plaza at the center, everything was composed of conjurings glowing in phosphorescent light.

Such was the glory of what was said to be the only surviving village from the ancient civilization that fell to ruin a thousand years ago, and the beginning of all modern Guiding Force culture.

Its population totaled roughly one thousand.

All officially registered residents were priestesses of the Faust.

Aside from the believers who visited on their pilgrimages, there weren't even any members of the Noblesse, let alone the Commons.

This was the holy land, which had no other name, for there was no other hallowed ground like it.

It was clearly a sacred place: small enough to be charming, clean enough to be utterly pure. Any devout believer would easily be moved to tears and fall to their knees at the sight, but Ashuna stood there coolly with her arms crossed and grunted.

"Looks kinda familiar."

"Pardon? You realize it's the 'holy land' because there's no other place like it, right?"

This was presumably Ashuna's first time visiting. And surely there was nowhere else in the world that resembled a settlement formed of Guiding Force.

Momo looked at Ashuna doubtfully, but the princess continued with confidence. "No, I'm sure of it. That area there looks a lot like the conjuring Menou made in Libelle."

Menou had invoked a church-style conjured barrier in order to seal Pandæmonium again.

The scale was different, but a part of the town did indeed bear a strong resemblance to the scripture conjuring Menou had used.

“Ahh.” Momo, who was being treated for poison at the time of that battle, nodded. “That’s right, my darling can produce church barriers on her own if she uses Guiding Force from the earthen vein. Though it’s a bit too flashy to employ very often... You got to see it, Princess-poo?”

“Indeed I did. That fight truly set my heart aflame.”

Ashuna closed her eyes, reminiscing. Her warm, satisfied sigh came out strangely sensual.

“Throw in Pandæmonium’s unique abilities, and it was one of the most memorable mortal struggles I’ve ever experienced. I even helped pull up the earthen vein to take down an enemy who could revive herself. It was a conjuring for the ages.”

“You’ll have to tell me more about my darling’s heroic escapades later... I suppose you’re right about there being a similarity. The holy land is a sort of barrier conjuring as well, even if its construction is quite different from what you saw Menou do.”

Menou’s construct was more minuscule than the one in the holy land.

The cathedral at the town’s center served as a starting point for the conjuring that was the foundation of the entire glowing white village.

Now that she had seen the real thing for the first time, Ashuna hummed. “So basically, the holy land maintains itself with power from the biggest earthen vein in the continent, making a huge, high-quality barrier city. Am I right?”

“Yes, something along those lines.”

The buildings in the holy land were far sturdier than any ordinary stone edifices. Momo was unmoved despite being a low-ranking priestess, while Ashuna’s general lack of faith meant she was more curious than awestruck.

Ashuna put a hand on the hilt of her broadsword in response to Momo’s dismissive assessment.

“A barrier that sturdy is just begging to be broken. I’d love to try cutting it down someday.”

“...Even a Fourth terrorist wouldn’t say something like that, you know. And I

am still a member of the Faust, so I'd prefer that you not declare criminal intent. Frankly, it's off-putting."

Only a princess who once cleaved through a castle could declare something so bold. Momo swiftly put some distance between her and Ashuna, lest she be mistaken for a coconspirator.

"Besides, aren't you a knight, Princess-poo? I thought you were supposed to guard the peace, not smash it."

"Ha-ha-ha. Think about it, Momo. How could I possibly look at such a bizarre phenomenon and *not* want to investigate it? I still take pride in my excellence as a knight, you know. It's in my nature to desire to inspect suspicious buildings."

What had the princess sensed with a mere glance at the holy land? Ashuna gleefully pointed toward the small town and voiced her new pet theory.

"You said the holy land is a barrier, yes? But you realize, Momo, that shields exist to protect something. What could such an enormous barrier be safeguarding? You're not really going to tell me it's just there to 'secure the holy land,' are you?"

Ashuna preemptively threw aside the Faust's self-declared cause with a smirk.

Momo hesitated. The holy land was where modern civilization began. It had survived the chaos a thousand years ago that brought the ancient civilization to ruin. And the current societal structure—the holy first caste, the Faust; the royal second caste, the Noblesse; and the plebeian third caste, the Commons—began in the holy land as well.

"That sequence of events is backward. The holy land came before the Faust. It's only natural to assume this barrier is here to protect something, and the group that became the leaders of the Faust declared it hallowed ground to hide whatever that is," Momo explained.

So then why had the giant barrier called the holy land been created?

Ashuna, who was known as the world-reforming Princess Knight in her homeland, spoke quickly as her curiosity got the better of her. "Look, its whole existence is suspicious. Nothing sparks my inquisitive spirit like an enigma

rooted deep in history. Just what is the Faust hiding?"

"How should I know? I'm at the bottom of the ranks. And I'm not looking to stir up trouble."

The cathedral at the center was the source of the holy land. It was a highly important area, with less than a hundred priestesses permitted entry. Being transferred into the holy land was proof of being a top-level member of the Faust, but a position inside the cathedral placed you even higher.

No matter how suspicious Ashuna might be, a white-robed assistant Executioner like Momo would never be granted access.

"Well, I'll be... Sounds like you do have a cowardly side, Momo. How adorable. Want me to hold your hand?"

"Want me to beat you to death?"

Momo shot the princess a murderous glare, and Ashuna breezily dismissed it with a chuckle.

"Well, this so-called holy land sure is an incredible construct."

"Religion itself is a construct, so what's the problem?"

Both Ashuna and Momo made remarks that would never come from the mouth of a believer, never mind a priestess. If any devotees had heard this conversation, they might have fainted or gone into a mouth-frothing lecture.

Since the cathedral was itself a conjured barrier, it required no upkeep or maintenance workers. The main gate at the entrance was always closed, leaving no physical way to enter or exit. Since a ceremonial conjuring circle was used to get in and out, it was impossible for anyone to break in.

"It's intriguing how the architecture of the city is so erratic, too. I don't know who made the foundation of the barrier, but...there's no consistent markers of age, so it's impossible to guess at its history at all."

"That's quite an eye for detail you have. The town has been the same since the ancient civilization of a thousand years ago, so it's honestly stranger to consider it from the perspective of our modern architectural style... Although there is a tall tale that the power of the Lord is what preserves the holy land."

"I'm sure that story is great for believers and all. However...thinking about it realistically, wouldn't it make more sense to assume it's a remnant from the ancient civilization?"

"An ancient relic, you mean? It's too large for that."

The term *ancient relic* referred to anything inherited from the fallen civilization that was said to be the peak of human development. Supposedly, this highly advanced culture had reached all the way to the stars and built a structure on the moon. The society had collapsed a millennium ago, so it was rare to find ancient relics in perfect condition.

"It's common for ancient relics to produce effects we can't replicate by modern means, correct? With their hyper-advanced technology, it's not impossible that they gave Guiding Force physical form and used it as a building material, don't you think?"

"I suppose so. The method has been lost, though. If they used an ancient relic to construct a city and something unexpected happened, there would be no way to save the whole place. Powerful ancient relic or not, I doubt they'd rely on something they couldn't maintain," said Momo.

"You have a point. Seems there's nothing else for it but to tear the thing open and find out how it ticks, then."

"If you try it, I swear I'll arrest you, Princess-poo."

"That sounds like fun, too... I guess this isn't the kind of mystery we can solve in a day, though. It'd be helpful if there was some way to make the whole holy land disappear..."

"Really, do you *want* me to arrest you?"

Their conversation was all hypothetical, with no right answer to be found. After a moment of gazing at the cathedral with lingering regret, Ashuna reluctantly put her scheming aside.

"So what now? I want to know what we're doing. Menou wouldn't tell me, but I'm sure you've got all kinds of tricks up your sleeve, right?"

"Tricks? How rude. This is just a homecoming, nothing more." Why would

anyone reveal her plans to someone who wasn't part of the team or even a friend? Momo coolly ignored the request. "Anyway, Princess-poo, what do you plan to do now that we're in the holy land? There's no place to stay, you know."

"...There's not?"

Ashuna's eyes widened in surprise. Although this was the Wild Frontier, people were constantly visiting on pilgrimages. Ashuna couldn't have anticipated that there were no accommodations.

"No. In fact, there's nothing much in the holy land at all. The only real activity is staring at it from here."

"Oh? So if there are no inns or anything, do you intend to camp outside?"

"Of course not. What do you take me for?"

Momo tugged at her outfit pointedly. Even if it was modified to be more fashionable, it was a real white robe, given to assistant priestesses of the Faust. It was a bit dirty all over thanks to the mud bath Ashuna had given her along the way, but it still served perfectly well as proof she was part of the Faust.

"I'll just stay at some random monastery. None of them would ever refuse lodging to a priestess on a pilgrimage."

Most monasteries were willing to give wayfarers a place to rest, priestess or not. This was especially true of the monasteries positioned closest to the holy land. Regular people had to give donations, but it was free for Faust members.

"I see. So the fields and such nearby aren't considered part of the holy land. It's just the immediate area of the barrier city, eh? ...You're not going to stay at the monastery you come from, Momo?"

"It's not very convenient, being rather far from the holy land."

Momo and Menou's childhood monastery was a training ground for Executioners. Since it kept many secrets, it was positioned far away from the holy land to avoid prying eyes. Momo certainly couldn't take Ashuna there, so she offered a vague reason to avoid it.

"At any rate, we're not entering the holy land until tomorrow."

Momo turned her gaze back toward the shining town.

She was on Menou's side. No matter what her beloved did, Momo would support her. That was the sole principle behind Momo's actions.

Menou's method for infiltrating the holy land without Master Flare noticing left no room for Momo to tag along. Thus, yet again, the assistant Executioner was traveling separately, bound for the same destination.

Momo closed her eyes.

During their strategy meeting, Menou had been in a state that Momo had never seen before. She'd been tense, much more so than she regularly was while they prepared for missions.

It was understandable, considering who they were about to face.

"I just hope she doesn't do anything too reckless..."

In the back of her mind, Momo pictured the face of the girl who had been walking by Menou's side lately.

Akari Tokitou. Truth be told, Momo had intended to get rid of that airheaded Otherworlder before Menou wound up poised to betray the Faust.

Unfortunately, Momo was unable to kill Akari or stop Menou.

"...I don't looove that this winds up being for that idiot's sake, too."

"Mm? What was that, Momo?"

"Nothing." Momo hadn't intended to vocalize her complaint, and she snapped curtly at Ashuna. Then she began formulating plans in her mind, all for her beloved darling...and one tiny segment for Akari, who had traveled with her.

The heart of the holy land.

From the outside, the cathedral that stood as a symbol of faith wasn't so different from other churches found throughout the world, aside from the fact that it was much larger and made of conjurings.

The central hall of the nave was long and straight, intersecting with a transept to form the shape of a cross. Past the place of worship that lay beyond the intersection was a steeple, continuing to the semicircular inner sanctum. The front entrance was the sturdiest and most magnificent; the door was easily

three stories high, flanked by towers on either side.

In the northern one of the two spires, in a room at the very top, a lone girl stood by a window.

Akari Tokitou, a lost one who had come to this world from Japan.

She was a young woman with a round, childish face and big bright eyes that gave her an endearing expression. Her messy black hair was roughly shoulder-length. In weather such as this, it tended to absorb the humidity and puff up, but a white hairband with a flower decoration held it in place.

Her forlorn air as she gazed out the window made her seem a bit more mature.

“You’d never see a city like this back there. This really is a fantasy world.” Her voice was much lower than usual and bereft of its typical energy.

The words *back there* referred to the world Akari came from.

Even at night, the buildings and streets themselves gave off a glow, far different from the light of the “nightless city” back in Japan. This was a warm, reassuring luminance.

Everything that made up this city emitted Guiding Light, which was wholly dissimilar from any electric, neon glow. The north tower where Akari was being kept was the highest point in the holy land. She could see all the way to the ends of the town.

Down below, the vast majority of people walking the streets wore indigo priestess robes. The alabaster construction of the city made the blue fabric stand out.

Of the rest, most wore the attire of aides or the minister garments of higher-ranked priestesses. Since both were white, they blended into the background.

Fewest by far were those in nuns’ habits or the ordinary garb of pilgrims.

“Still, though...”

Turning her gaze back to the room, Akari raised her index finger.

The light of Guiding Force gathered around the digit’s tip. This power, drawn

from a living soul, created a glow called Guiding Light when it amassed, the precursor to any conjuring.

The glimmer convened as Akari focused her mind, but then it scattered without causing any kind of phenomenon.

“Hrmm.”

Akari pursed her lips. She’d run into this result many times.

Akari was a lost one summoned from another world. She could control a power called a Pure Concept, the most potent kind of conjuring in this world. The concept of *Time*, which had adhered to her soul when she was summoned here, had always come to her as naturally as breathing.

Yet since she’d arrived at the cathedral, she couldn’t invoke conjurings properly.

They weren’t completely impossible, but they were challenging to invoke, and their effects were drastically reduced. Before the conjuring activated, she could feel something interfering. The parts she would normally construct subconsciously were interrupted and dispersed.

In short, this made things very difficult.

“What’s going on here?”

Giving up, Akari folded her arms again. This emphasized her already very notable bust, but since she was alone, she paid it no mind as she racked her brain over what stifled her conjurings.

The Pure Concept of *Time*.

Its powers were unique to Akari, as they had dwelled within her soul from the moment she appeared in this world.

Each time she used them, she lost more memories. If it reached the worst-case scenario, there was a danger that she would sacrifice her entire personality and become a wildly destructive Human Error. Although the power of Akari’s conjurings was nothing short of tremendous, they came at a price. The Pure Concept had been her single greatest weapon since she’d been summoned.

So a malfunction in the method that could normally get her out of almost any

crisis was immensely worrying to Akari.

“I really wanna find a way to use it...”

“I’d abandon that pointless effort if I were you.”

As Akari flung herself onto the sofa and complained aloud, a voice suddenly responded to her.

There hadn’t been anyone else in the room, however. Akari’s eyes swiveled to the source of the sound.

Near the wall of the simple yet elegantly furnished room, there was a woman. Akari hadn’t heard the door open at all and had no way of determining how long this guest had been present.

The woman had short dark-red hair and stood about a head taller than Akari. Even when she was just standing there motionless, her presence was enough to send a chill down one’s spine.

Master Flare.

A living legend. The Executioner who had killed the most taboos in history. Noticing the unexpected intruder, Akari quickly unfolded her arms and narrowed her eyes.

“Wh-where’d you come from all of a sudden? I don’t know what you want, but could you at least knock before you come into my room?”

“Ah, you’re in puberty, are you? This is why I hate kids.”

“Puber—?! That’s just common courtesy!”



“Common courtesy...” Naturally, the Master was unmoved by Akari’s protests, only repeating the phrase in a mocking tone. “Don’t go spouting off about manners, kid. An Otherworlder like you wouldn’t know the first thing about what’s common here.”

“Well, I don’t want to hear about manners from a kidnapper, so there.”

Master Flare did not seem bothered by Akari’s anger. “I don’t see why I should have to be considerate of someone I kidnapped. More importantly, you tried to use a conjuring just now, didn’t you?”

“So what if I did?”

Akari quickly covered her finger.

A few days ago, Akari was captured by Master Flare and brought here to the holy land. The memory of trying to use a conjuring only to have her index finger broken by the woman in front of her was still fresh in her mind.

That painful experience was somewhat traumatic for her. No matter how many times she had turned back time, Akari was still just a girl from Japan who was far from immune to agony or fear. She never felt anything when Menou killed her, so she hadn’t had many chances to get accustomed to the sensation.

“Wait, were you spying on me? Yikes, creepy. So that’s where Momo gets it from.”

“Don’t blame me—Momo’s bad habits are all her own. In fact, if anyone’s the root of her behavior, it’s Menou. For a useless apprentice, she does have a remarkable knack for charming other people. Personally, I don’t get it.”

Evidently, even Master Flare was offended by baseless slander, judging by the scowl on her face. Maybe she carried some bad memories of trying to keep Momo under control.

“At any rate, you can’t use conjurings here, so don’t waste your energy trying. The holy land is made up of conjured barriers. Normal conjurings are one thing, but Pure Concept ones are severely reduced. This cathedral’s especially good at keeping everything inside it shut away, too. That window there might look like glass, but it’s actually part of the barrier. You can see through to the outside,

but no one outside can view you.”

“Wait, really? Hang on, Pure Concept conjurings are weakened...?”

“Damn right. Especially Concepts of Original Sin and Primary Colors. Any monsters or conjured soldiers that depend on conjurings to keep them alive can’t enter the holy land. They’d die as soon as they did.”

“I dunno about monsters and conjured soldiers and all that, but...aren’t Pure Concepts super-strong conjurings? I remember Menou telling me it’s impossible to seal them.”

“She’s never been in the cathedral, so she doesn’t know about this, simple as that. Besides, think about it. This isn’t the first time your conjurings haven’t worked properly, is it?”

“Um...”

Searching her memories, Akari did find a few hints.

Pure Concepts were powerful conjurings. They possessed greater potency than any other conjuring, but there had been a few times when Akari’s didn’t function correctly.

Namely, during the battle in the old capital Garm and the fight against Pandæmonium—any time her strength was set against another Pure Concept.

“You mean when Pure Concepts clash, right? But that’s not like this at all.”

Hearing this, Master Flare threw back her head and laughed.

“Yep, you got it. This time’s no different.”

She confirmed and denied Akari’s statement at the same time.

Unable to understand her meaning, Akari blurted out something in anger. “If you can nullify Pure Concepts, I wouldn’t be able to revive myself, would I? That doesn’t make any sense. Why not kill me right now, without using that stupid Sword of Salt?”

“The power is limited, not completely unusable. That automatic *Regression* would likely still trigger. Although it may not be as effective as usual. Care to test it?”

Master Flare drew her dagger. Looking at the blade, Akari drew back and covered herself defensively.

Apparently, the threatening gesture had been a joke, for the Master stowed the dagger as quickly as she had drawn it.

“Honestly, I think it would even be better for you if you perished here and now...but I’m under no obligation to do anything for your sake. The whole point is to have you turn into a Human Error and run wild.”

“...But why would you want that?”

If the Pure Concept of an Otherworlder like Akari went berserk, it could easily cause destruction on a continental scale. Pandæmonium, who they’d encountered in the southern port town, was proof enough of that.

So why would they choose such a risky method? Akari didn’t understand. “And why do you have memories of other time loops anyway?” she pressed.

Master Flare didn’t answer. Instead, she threw out an unrelated question. “Akari Tokitou. Do you want to go back to your own world?”

“Back to Japan? No, not really.”

“Why not?”

“Because Menou wouldn’t be there, of course.”

Confused by the sudden line of questioning, Akari nevertheless answered honestly.

She may have come from Japan, but she had no desire to go back at this point. After all, Akari had used her Pure Concept conjurings too much and had lost most of her memories of Japan. Her attachment to her homeland was all but gone.

All that drove Akari now was her recollection of the journey with Menou she’d repeated since they first met.

On top of that, Akari had recently learned of the sacrifices needed to send her back to Japan. The ritual demanded countless lives, enough Guiding Force to exhaust a civilization, and the creation of a conjuring circle that would carve out a portion of the continent. A large-scale world conjuring. That was the nature of

the ceremony to send someone back to the other world.

Akari had no desire to produce so much destruction that it would essentially ruin the world. Besides, Menou was here, not in Japan. There would be no point in such a tremendous cost.

“Then what would you do if you were unintentionally separated from an irreplaceable friend, kept apart in different worlds?”

“From Menou, you mean?”

“...It could be anyone. I’m just asking what you would do if you were just living your life when suddenly you got torn apart from your friend.”

“Hmm...”

Akari folded her arms again as she considered the inquiry.

If she was separated from Menou for no good reason...

“I guess...I’d search for a way for us to be in the same world.”

...she would probably risk her life to find a way to be reunited. It wasn’t a question of whether that method existed or not. The possibility that it didn’t wasn’t nearly a good enough reason to give up on trying to see Menou.

On hearing Akari’s answer, Master Flare’s lips curled in genuine displeasure.

“...You people are so damn persistent.”

“What are you talking about...?”

“Just a bit of insurance. You wouldn’t understand right now, even if I told you. And should you figure it out later... Well, it’ll be no skin off my back. That’s the kind of thing I’m talking about.”

“I don’t get it.”

“That’s because you’re an idiot. You never consider the why or attempt to change your way of thinking. That’s how you end up repeating the same things over and over.”

Flare wasn’t Akari’s parent or teacher. Her prickly words only came off as an unwelcome lecture.

Why should Akari have to suffer this chiding from the very person who'd kidnapped her? The girl puffed up her cheeks and looked away.

Her averted gaze landed on a balcony, and her expression softened.

A setting sun. A room where she was being held captive. A hopeless situation, even if the conditions weren't bad.

By pure chance, it happened to bear some resemblance to the predicament Akari had found herself in when she had first been summoned.

"You think she's coming for you?"

The sharp-eyed Master Flare had evidently picked up on the Otherworlder's change in expression. She didn't specify a name, but it was obvious who she meant.

It was a jab aimed straight at Akari's weak point, and she hesitated to respond.

"I... Well..." Unable to answer, she trailed off into silence.

What did Akari want Menou to do? What did she want her own fate to be? Akari had lost all sense of direction.

If Menou came, she would inevitably have to fight Master Flare.

And what would follow?

Akari knew the answer all too well. How many times had she seen Menou perish before her eyes? Menou couldn't defeat her Master. It was a truth Akari had witnessed countless times, an ending she couldn't avert.

Then should she give up on this loop and use *Regression* now that Menou was going to oppose Master Flare?

It was certainly an option, but a part of her hesitated.

Akari had already expended most of her memories of Japan. The fearsomely powerful World Regression that turned back time to the moment she was summoned consumed a great deal of her recollections in exchange. If she turned back time again, she would lose memories from after she came to this world—experiences with Menou.

Akari was very much opposed to that.

And there was something else, too.

"You spoke to Menou before we came here, didn't you?" said Master Flare.

Akari's shoulders trembled.

At the end of their conversation, Menou had promised to retrieve Akari. She was going to come to kill Akari. When Akari had seen the look in Menou's eyes, she understood there was no stopping her.

That gaze, gentle and calm yet full of unshakable determination. Beautiful enough to make one fall in love, yet fragile enough to shatter at the slightest touch.

Right before Master Flare took Akari away, Menou had said to her, "*Be a good girl and wait for me this time, understood?*"

And Akari had replied, "*I'll be waiting for you, Menou.*"

Her reply should have been *Don't come for me*. If she truly wanted Menou to live, Akari should have allowed Flare to slay her. Once Akari perished, there would be no reason for Menou to get herself killed.

Akari dying to Master Flare was the way to save Menou. Then why had she wished for Menou to chase after her?

Master Flare hadn't been present for that conversation, yet she must have deduced it to some extent, for she went on. "Lucky you, getting your precious friend to recognize what you've been doing. Must feel good for someone to finally acknowledge what you've struggled with alone all this time, hmm? Someone recognizing all that time you've repeated must have been far better than suffering in solitude."

She put a hand on Akari's shoulder in a seemingly kind gesture.

Goose bumps formed on Akari's skin. Master Flare had done nothing, yet this was far more terrifying than being menaced with a blade.

The red-haired woman was right.

Akari had truly been happy when Menou finally saw what the girl from Japan

was doing after so many loops.

“I don’t really care if you want to turn back time again. Although I imagine that’ll erase the one version of your friend who actually gets you.”

If she used *Regression* now, Akari would never be able to meet this Menou, the one who truly understood her, again.

“It’s a miracle that you even got her to comprehend this one time,” remarked Master Flare. She was digging at a fear Akari hadn’t even been aware of. The woman’s lilting words flowed in through Akari’s ears and tangled around her brain.

“Are you really going to erase the Menou who recognized your efforts?”

Akari’s eyes widened.

It finally made sense.

This woman had only allowed her time to say good-bye to Menou so that she could use it against Akari now.

“...You devil.”

“Ha!” Master Flare threw back her head and laughed. The darkness visible within that wide-open mouth was as the bottomless pit of hell.

“Me, a devil? Don’t be absurd. Every time you repeat this sequence of events, you put Menou to death yourself. You let her die to me, or Orwell, or something else, consuming a little more of the world every time. Your selfish ways have twisted not only Menou’s fate but the fates of everyone who lives on this continent.”

Master Flare released Akari’s shoulder. A faint warmth remained for a long time, not unlike a burn. It slowly spread through the young woman like blood seeping into a cloth.

“You’re something else, Akari Tokitou. The lives you’ve thrown off course far outnumber the people I’ve killed. As a villain, I’ve got nothing but respect for you.”

With that, Master Flare walked out of the room, leaving Akari dumbfounded.

Having leveraged her insurance against Akari, Master Flare walked through the hall of the cathedral.

“After all that, I doubt she’ll use World Regression at the last minute.”

Akari’s Pure Concept posed a problem for Master Flare, too. Naturally, the girl’s ability to turn back time and revive rendered any physical attempts at killing her useless, but her *Time* conjurings could also affect space, with potentially disastrous results. Akari would continue to wield that power to restart everything until she finally became a Human Error.

Since physical restraints were meaningless on Akari, the best way to hold her was by using an emotional trump card like Menou.

“This is why kids with nothing but a special ability are so easy to handle.”

It was clear who Akari cared about most, thus manipulating her was simple.

The size of Akari’s attachment wasn’t just due to an excess of love. All the effort, time, and pain she’d built up for Menou’s sake... Tangible or not, the more she invested in this cause, the stronger her sentiments became. At this point, she would stick with it no matter what, even if it grew big enough to crush her.

In order to weigh Akari down and stop her from making progress, the best thing to do was keep her torn between saving Menou and being killed by her, never allowing the girl to choose both.

“Sure would be easier for her if she just broke loose.”

But they’d prepared these choices for Akari to prevent her from doing just that.

Flare descended the stairs, her shoes *clacking*. One’s footsteps tended to echo in this quiet building.

There were very few people inside the cathedral of the holy land, a structure which could be dubbed the center of religion on the continent. Since it was formed from conjurings, there was no need for physical maintenance or repair. Only the most tight-lipped priestesses and those directly connected to the Elders were permitted inside, considering the many secrets the place housed.

The cathedral's perpetually barren state was reminiscent of a ruin. Although it was beautiful, without the slightest trace of decay, the artificial edifice lacked human warmth, giving a cold impression.

It was impossible to tell from the outside what anyone was doing within. Those forbidden from entering via the barrier perpetuated all manner of rumors about it.

Some believed the cathedral had a ceremonial hall for maintaining the holy land.

Others claimed you could meet the Lord described in scripture in a deep section of the building.

More asserted that the powerful decision-making body known as the Elders gathered in the cathedral.

These were all likely founded on made-up stories, yet they sometimes struck surprisingly close to the truth.

Was this proof that not everyone could be trusted to keep a secret, or that even far-fetched conspiracy theories hit the mark once in a while?

Regardless, only a select few were privy to the whole story.

If a normal person glimpsed the interior of the cathedral, they'd undoubtedly be astonished.

Coming down the stairs, Flare left the north tower where Akari was being held and entered the nave, the main hallway that ran through the heart of the structure.

A high ceiling and a long, straight hall. Despite being shaped like a place of worship, what was contained within was decidedly different.

The interior was a train station.

The pure-white platform, the kind you might see in any little town, occupied the entire span from the south transept to the north one. The windows of the steeple at the intersection bathed the seemingly impossible terminal in light.

From where Master Flare was standing, she couldn't see the area beyond the transept intersection, where the chapel and pulpit ought to be. She knew

something even more absurd than this ridiculous train station lay there, but she had no intention of investigating.

Master Flare stepped onto the train station within the cathedral. The priestess in the station building at the center of the platform noticed her and gave a little nod.

Made of white brick, the platform was about ten meters wide and a hundred meters long. There were wooden benches at regular intervals and even a two-story station hotel in the middle. The presence of a yellow line before the edge of the platform was so utterly ordinary that it drove home the surrealism of the structure's presence within the cathedral.

There were no trains in sight at the unusual, single-line, one-way station. The railway inside the cathedral didn't connect to the outside. Instead, the exit of the transept seemed to vanish into a glowing disc-shaped door of golden Guiding Light.

This was one of the three hidden features of the cathedral that had existed since the time of the ancient civilization—the Dragon Gate.

An ancient relic, it possessed the ability to convert anything that passed through the glowing gold door into a being of Guiding Force, send them along the channels of power, then reconstruct them in physical form at a chosen destination. To put it simply, it was a hidden feature of the cathedral that could *Teleport* people and things to any destination connected to the earthen vein.

Master Flare knocked lightly on the station building window. A timid-looking priestess in glasses poked her head out.

"Hooseyard. I'm leaving the cathedral for now. Give me a path to my monastery, would you?"

"Y-yes, ma'am. Just a moment, please."

The girl looked not much older than twenty, yet she was the sole person in charge of travel into and out of the cathedral.

The grand building had no physical door. Instead, this young woman worked in the station building under the approval of the archbishop, controlling the Dragon Gate to transport people in and out. Without her, entering and exiting

the cathedral was virtually impossible.

Flare sat down on a bench as she watched Hooseyard establish the conjuring to prepare an entrance to the Dragon Gate. Someone was approaching from the inner sanctum, the opposite end from the nave that Master Flare had entered from.

She raised an eyebrow at the appearance of one of the few people permitted within the cathedral. The woman was hunched and wrinkled with age, her hair turned so white that it was impossible to guess its original color. By all appearances, she was a powerless crone, yet the rage burning in her eyes betrayed no weakness. As soon as she arrived in her resplendent archbishop robes, Hooseyard straightened up with a squeak.

Archbishop Elcami. Unlike most of the Elders, the Magician held a very prominent position in the Faust.

She played her role as protector of the cathedral well.

“Stand.”

The very first word out of her mouth was an order.

Seemingly unbothered, Master Flare rose to her feet.

Society was divided into three castes, but the Elders were a special group outside of all that. It was no exaggeration to say that those people who could not be put into any category were known as the Elders.

Their true nature lay not in differences of strength but of essence. Because of the unique characteristics they all shared, they couldn’t stand forefront on the stage. Some were secluded, others operated in secret, and a few wandered as vagrants.

Elcami was unique, as she held the position of archbishop of the Faust.

There were precious few Elders capable of operating in the public eye. Her position, age, and power were all higher than the others. She had every right to give orders, and Master Flare had no particular reason to waste time defying her.

“I received a report from my subordinate. The assistant priestess known as

Momo has requested lodging in a nearby monastery.”

“Oh-ho.”

Flare felt nothing upon learning of Momo’s returning. If anything, she was more impressed that an archbishop like Elcami would have any awareness of such a low-ranking member of the Faust.

“What of it?”

“She has a traveling companion, but it isn’t the priestess called Menou... It’s Ashuna Grisarika.”

“I see.”

Since priestesses could send messages through their scriptures, sharing information was fundamental to them. There were fewer overall members of the Faust than the other castes, but they made up for it in many other ways to establish their superiority.

This seemed appropriate timing for Momo to come to the holy land. If she was accompanied by Ashuna Grisarika, Menou must have chosen to travel alone. Flare had a good guess of what her former pupils were plotting.

Undoubtedly, Momo thought only of helping Menou.

It wasn’t Momo who concerned Elcami, however.

“Flare. Tell me what you’re thinking. There must be some reason the youngest princess of Grisarika has arrived at a time like this.”

Her caution wasn’t exactly unfounded. Flare understood why Elcami was asking about Ashuna instead of Momo.

Grisarika Kingdom, the major kingdom farthest from the holy land, was difficult to control for numerous reasons, both geographical and historical. In particular, the Elder in Grisarika Kingdom, Guardian, had an acutely repulsive quality about her.

The Elders were all deviants in one way or another, but Guardian of Grisarika was indispensable in keeping the erosion of the eastern Wild Frontier in check. This simple fact complicated the power structure among the other Elders.

However, Master Flare had no interest in the disputes between Elders.

“She probably timed it to meet the runaway princess. The Guardian of Grisarika has a certain attachment to the Princess Knight.”

“Is that really all?”

“Grisarika isn’t going to act. Not yet, at the very least.”

Flare’s answer didn’t erase the suspicion from Elcami’s voice. The Elder had to be very anxious about this. As Elcami rose further to the top, she grew less capable of trust. Since becoming an Elder, she was constantly haunted by worries that her subordinates might know her true identity. The old woman was ever on the alert, fearful one of the other Elders might stab her in the back.

“Is it possible that your successor, Flarette, has disguised herself as Ashuna Grisarika? As I recall, you were the one to alert me that this Menou girl might attempt to take back Akari Tokitou. Of all the repeated loops of World Regression, she betrayed the Faust no small number of times, correct?”

“I would certainly hope my apprentice wouldn’t be stupid enough to waltz right up to the holy land looking like that.”

Master Flare’s voice was devoid of interest as she made a statement that happened to be dead wrong.

“Well, pinch her face or something to be absolutely sure. That’ll prove whether it’s Guiding Camouflage. I’m almost positive it’s the real Ashuna Grisarika, though.”

Elcami was an exceptional conjurer, but she understood her skill as a strategist was lacking. It was why she peppered Flare with inquiries.

“...The return of the Lord is at stake here. I want to do our absolute best to remove any uncertainties. That means the Grisarika problem as well as any other rabble.”

“That’s...fair enough.”

The return of the Lord. It was the cause of the complications around dealing with the Pure Concept of *Time*. Were it not for the connection to the Lord, Master Flare would have killed Akari Tokitou and Menou that very first time.

“Coincidentally, I’m rather invested in the success of this so-called return of the Lord, myself.”

“This is a once-in-a-millennium chance to change the entire continent. Minor interferences cannot be permitted.”

“Miraculously enough, I feel the same way.”

How long had it been since Archbishop Elcami and Master Flare agreed on anything? This could very well be the first time such a thing had occurred. Elcami didn’t look too pleased about it, however.

“If you were going to infiltrate this place, how would you do it?” she asked.

“You mean how would I neutralize the barrier around the cathedral, get inside, and somehow secure Akari Tokitou from the north tower and escape alive?”

“Exactly.”

“Impossible. I wouldn’t attempt that alone.”

The archbishop’s eyebrow twitched.

“...So you’re capable of admitting something is impossible, hmm? Even knowing the layout of the cathedral and the workings of the entrance?”

“Knowing how it works is why I’m so confident it’s impossible.” Flare rapped lightly on a nearby wall. “Besides, the holy land technically isn’t a town. It’s a gigantic conjured barrier. And getting into the cathedral itself is especially difficult.”

Flare nodded toward the timid priestess holed up in the station building. There was no physical door into the cathedral. The only way to get in or out, even from a short distance, was by using the Dragon Gate. There were a few places where one could peer through the windows from the outside, but the panes were barriers—impossible to open or shut. It truly was impregnable to all.

“Why make the attempt when entry is genuinely impossible?” Flare remarked.

“I thought it was your creed that there are always any number of methods?

Would you not at least try to get someone to collude with you?"

"If I needed a coconspirator to get into this place, let's see..." Master Flare met Elcami's gaze as she pondered. "I suppose if I could ensnare someone with your level of power, then a break-in might finally be worth considering."

Perhaps taking it as an accusation, Elcami glared at Master Flare, the wrinkles around her eyes deepening.

Coercing an archbishop like Elcami to your side was a highly unrealistic scheme. Aiding an intruder offered nothing to one of her position.

"Is there nothing else? I certainly hope you're not trying to protect your successor."

"Me, help her?" Flare's eyes widened in mock amazement. "That hadn't even occurred to me. I guess you really do need to be open-minded to become the archbishop, eh? I'm envious that you can conceive such ideas. Is having a wild imagination the secret to a long life?"

"Enough!" The archbishop's sharp rebuke made the air crackle with her rage. "Don't get smart with me, child. There are plenty of replacements for someone like you! By my reckoning, you're still not proficient enough with conjurings to be permitted into the cathedral, yet you weaseled your way in here with your impudent ways...!"

"I'm fully aware of my standing, don't worry."

"Then act accordingly!"

Master Flare wasn't a special conjurer. She was far from the status of an Elder. If she fought the old woman before her head-on, she would surely lose in no time.

"Need I remind you the Akari Tokitou situation is your responsibility? Do not fail me. I must focus on protecting this place of worship."

Ending the conversation there, the archbishop walked away.

She hadn't changed one bit. Why couldn't she ever relax in the slightest when she was undoubtedly one of the strongest conjurers on the continent? Flare watched the old woman walk away radiating anger and distrust.

"...I guess she's stressed from negotiating with the 'Lord' and the Elders."

Although Elcami was an Elder herself, she still maintained some degree of common sense, which definitely made things challenging for her.

Hmm. Master Flare went over their conversation in her mind.

Infiltrating the cathedral. That would certainly be impossible for Master Flare. For better or worse, the Elders were far too aware of her existence. She couldn't possibly make a move when they were all so leery of her, especially Elcami.

But if Menou were to try...

Since she had yet to build up enough accomplishments to earn wariness from the Elders...

"Eh, she could probably do it."

Every individual's position was unique. There were some things that might be impossible for Master Flare but not for Flarette.

But she had no intention of reporting that fact or doing anything about it.

Flare wouldn't stop someone from committing a taboo. Prevention was not her duty.

She only needed to eliminate anyone who became taboo.

It was adhering to that rule that had made Flare into a legend.

If Menou betrayed the Faust and infiltrated the cathedral, Flare would cut her down. In the unlikely event that she didn't come, Menou's life would continue.

There was no need to think any more deeply about it than that.

Perhaps noticing the conversation had ended, Hooseyard peered out from the station building.

"Um, the exit is ready, if you wouldn't mind proceeding through."

"Great, thanks."

Confident in the inevitable way of things, Master Flare kept moving forward.

High-class and haughty, born as a princess but raised as a strong-minded

knight, Ashuna was quite unaccustomed to having her cheeks pulled.

The perpetrator was the adorably petite Momo, who had to reach up to grab the unusually tall Ashuna's face. For some reason, when they sought lodging in the monastery, Momo was instructed to "pull on the cheek of your traveling companion." Naturally, she put on a show of reluctance before gleefully acquiescing, wearing the biggest smile she had in days.

"Theeere, how's thaatat?"

She was clearly pleased. In that moment, nothing seemed more entertaining to her than pinching Ashuna's smooth cheeks and stretching them out.

Meanwhile, Ashuna seemed less than satisfied with the situation. Evidently, even someone as magnanimous as her was bothered by having her face pinched for no readily apparent reason. She crossed her arms and scowled with a certain threatening air.

"A-all right, thank you. Follow me..."

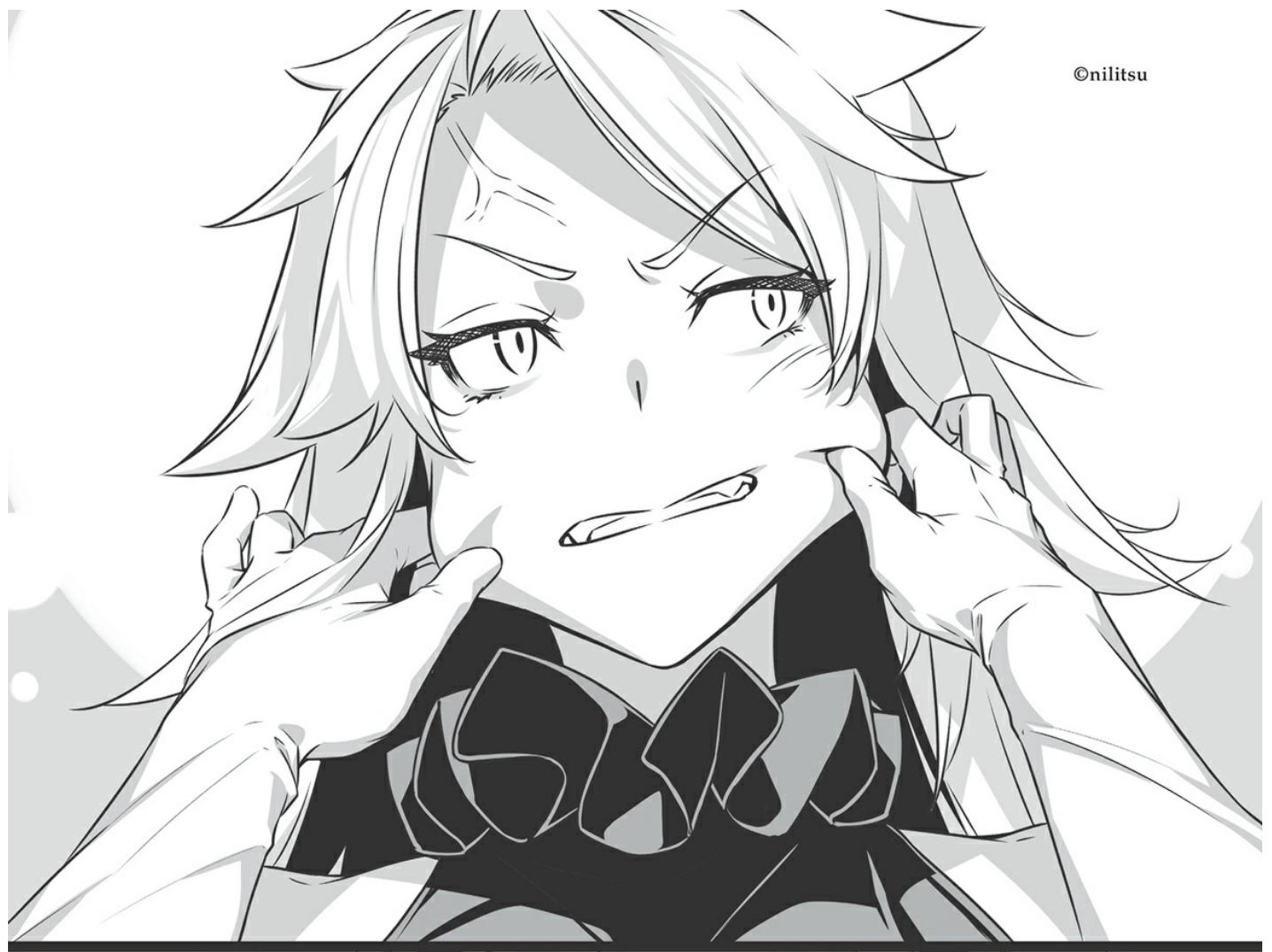
The director of the monastery looked terribly uncomfortable as she communicated with someone via scripture conjuring. She led the two arrivals inside, indigo robes swaying, and she appeared quite conscious of Ashuna's silent show of irritation.

There was a dining hall, a shower room, and a private room for them on the second floor.

Following the tour of the available facilities, Momo glanced down at herself.

After the game of chase with Ashuna, her white priestess robes had been muddied almost beyond recognition. On top of that, her body was still shivering from the rain.

"I'd like to wash my clothes once I've had a shower. Could I trouble you for soap and a bucket of water?"



"Oh, good thinking, Momo. Would you mind cleaning mine, too?"

"And one more thing..." Momo continued, still beaming. "I absolutely must have a separate room from *her*, please."

Self-sufficiency was the core tenet of a monastery. Momo's attitude clearly said *Do it yourself* to Ashuna, even if she didn't speak the words.

Smoothing out the wrinkles with a snap, Momo hung her laundry on the rope to dry.

Her one-piece priestess robe, tights, gloves, and underwear were all generally white, which made it exceptionally difficult to get stains out of them completely, but she managed somehow. Cleanliness was a fundamental requirement of fashion. She nodded with approval at her own work.

"That's a bit better, at least."

Having rinsed off the filth from her journey with a shower, Momo changed into her spare priestess robes.

Her hair was still damp, which was likely why she felt a slight chill with every shift in the air. She sat down on the bed. After a moment's hesitation, she decided to retrieve the tights from her luggage, since the sun hadn't yet set.

She pulled the tights on one leg at a time, carefully stretching them to avoid wrinkles. Her clothes rustled as she drew the tights up to her knees, then she stood and used both hands to firmly pull them on up to her waist without any hitches.

The tights snapped into place against her skin. Momo stretched out her legs to ensure everything was evenly distributed, completing her fashion check. She had to be certain she wouldn't be embarrassed to show herself before Menou at any moment.

Momo normally wore her white gloves for protection in battle. For the moment, she decided not to bother donning them.

The holy land was right before their eyes. Just by arriving here, Momo had already accomplished the bare minimum of the role Menou had assigned her.

Menou had said she would prepare to take care of Akari. As an Executioner,

that could only mean one thing.

According to Menou's prediction, Master Flare's reason for taking Akari away was to let the Otherworlder become a Human Error before killing her.

If that was correct, their Master was trying to bring the Pure Concept of *Time* into the world as a universal time conjuring. Thus, Menou's goal was to put an end to things by her own hand before Akari stopped being Akari.

And if that was Menou's choice, Momo would follow her.

"Now, my darling wanted me to..." Momo began to mutter to herself before stopping when she heard creaking floorboards and leisurely footsteps that had not been disguised at all. That alone was enough to reveal who was approaching.

Still, she observed common courtesy by knocking three times at the door.

"Are you done getting dressed, Momo?"

"...Fine, come in."

It was Ashuna. Momo promptly retrieved her gloves from her luggage, since the odds that she might use her coping saw were now drastically increased.

The door scraped open, and the princess entered. Momo put on her best death glare to make her dissatisfaction with the situation perfectly clear.

"What do you want?"

"Oh, come on now. I just thought we could chat a little."

Easily brushing off the question as Momo donned her gloves, Ashuna shamelessly plopped down on the bed beside the assistant Executioner.

"So some of the girls raised in monasteries like this become priestesses and get deployed throughout the continent, is that the idea?"

"As usual, you're reading too much into things. The majority are educated out in the world."

Young priestesses in training were only brought to a monastery near the holy land if they displayed a high aptitude for conjuring or some other special reason.

“I see... Momo, you were born to the Noblesse, correct?”

“...Yes, although I don’t recall ever mentioning that to you.”

“It’s easy to tell. You were clearly reared to be well-mannered. I’d wager you were brought up by Noblesse parents until around five years old.”

“Well, aren’t you sharp?”

Momo’s brow furrowed. She didn’t like being analyzed. And it felt all the more insulting because the guess was correct.

Ashuna’s guess was perfectly on the mark. Momo was born into a Noblesse family, then eventually taken in by the Faust for various reasons. She possessed naturally high levels of Guiding Force and an aptitude for conjuring, yet she was quite mentally unstable, which was why the young Momo ended up at Master Flare’s monastery.

“Not that it particularly matters that I came from the Noblesse, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Really? I’d say the circumstances of your birth are just as important a factor as how you were brought up. After all, no one else but yourself can take interest in your background and draw meaning from it.”

Born of the Noblesse. Ashuna, who was a true princess, crossed her arms and grinned dazzlingly.

“In that way, I think Menou is especially interesting. Where was she born anyway?”

“My darling was of the Commons, as I recall.”

“Is that right?”

Ashuna sounded surprised, as if she had surmised differently.

Menou was indeed born to a third-caste family.

Momo had once investigated Menou’s background. As a young girl, she was the sole survivor of a village eradicated by a Human Error.

“Where did your animal instincts tell you my darling was born, Princess-poo?”

“Well, for whatever reason, I always felt like she was a child of the Faust.”

“Pardon?”

Ashuna scratched her head as if she, too, knew her statement was nonsensical.

The Faust was a caste composed entirely of women. Only young girls were chosen to be raised in monasteries, the precursor to becoming priestesses and joining the Faust. None of them were related, either. Occasionally, a priestess got married, but registering a family member meant immediate disqualification from the Faust.

This was different for the Noblesse, who were linked through bloodlines, or the Commons, who were connected by the economy. The Faust were considered holy precisely because they did not have anyone else’s interests at heart.

Thus, suggesting someone could be born into the Faust was absurd, but Momo stopped herself from mocking Ashuna for the remark.

Momo had been selected for her natural aptitude, but Menou had been raised by their Master because of her unique circumstances.

Menou had her soul and spirit bleached white as a child because of a Human Error that Archbishop Orwell unleashed in Grisarika Kingdom.

Since Menou was given to Master Flare with her memories erased and personality hazy, it wasn’t entirely wrong to state she’d been part of the Faust from birth.

“...My darling is unlike anyone else, that much is certain.”

What was Menou doing right now?

Momo thought of her beloved, who had chosen to rebel against Master Flare for Akari Tokitou’s sake.

Menou had always been clever and dependable, but this time, she was willing to put her life on the line.

“I don’t know what she’s trying to do, but...in my experience, people who get too intense about something tend to get crushed for it.”

“...I don’t need you to tell me that.”

Menou was pushing herself too hard, but that wasn't necessarily the wrong move.

In the holy land, she would have to face Master Flare. An opponent who knew everything about her. There was no being too cautious in such a case. If Menou didn't push herself, she would die meaninglessly.

So there was only one thing for Momo to do.

"It's my job to support my darling no matter what."

Ashuna suddenly smiled. "Menou sure is loved, huh?"

"Unlike a certain Princess-poo."

What could any of them do for that Otherworlder?

As the sun set, Momo's thoughts and feelings wandered.

The dim light of dusk poured through the windows onto the station platform. The Dragon Gate connected to the end of the mysterious train station within the cathedral of the holy land began to ripple.

From the almost two-dimensional portal shining with golden Guiding Light emerged a five-car locomotive. It smoothly came to a stop at the platform, then the passenger doors opened.

There were very few people permitted to use the highly unusual transport. This time, the one who emerged was a formally dressed man in his mid-fifties. His cane, bowler hat, and impeccably clean and high-class suit actually made him seem rather shady.

The Director, Kagarma Dartaros.

His name was known worldwide as an instigator of protests against the three-caste system. Despite being among the most wanted criminals on the continent, Kagarma stepped into the cathedral and was greeted by the glasses-wearing priestess who was permanently based at the station building.

"Welcome. You must be Mr. Kagarma."

"It has been quite some time since I last visited. Truthfully, I had never planned to come again... I see the station manager has changed."

“Yes, my name is Hooseyard. My predecessor left me in charge of the Dragon Gate. I’m honored to make your acquaintance. Now, I believe we were told you would have a guest today...”

“I do indeed. My beloved daughter. She begged me to bring her here, you see.”

At that moment, a girl in a kimono gracefully alighted from the train. Hooseyard gave her a smile.

“Welcome to the cathedral. Might I ask your name, please?”

Anyone who entered had to identify themselves. The girl smiled placidly, unbothered by the question.

“My name is Manon Libelle.”

“Mr. Kagarma and Miss Manon, then. Very well. Please come in. I’m afraid the north tower is currently in use, though I’m not apprised of the details. You’ll be staying in the south tower, if you please.”

“Wonderful, thank you. That being said...”

Manon glanced back curiously at the locomotive that had brought her here.

Normal Guiding trains ran on rails placed along the earthen vein, drawing Guiding Force from the earth to power the Guiding engines and move the wheels.

This one did not follow any track, however. Partway through, the train itself turned into Guiding Force and sank into the earth, navigating through the astral vein. Even a seasoned traveler like Manon had never known such an experience.

“...I’ve never ridden anything like this before. It’s quite strange.”

“Oh?” Hooseyard’s glasses gleamed when she detected Manon’s interest. “Although the car’s interior design is modern, it was in fact created by lost technology from the days of the ancient civilization. When it travels, the locomotive becomes Guiding Force and enters the astral vein, enabling it to move at extraordinarily high speeds, thanks to none other than an ancient relic! This is undoubtedly the only one in the world with surviving and functional train

cars!"

"An ancient relic... No wonder it's so unusual."

Ancient relics had been created at the height of human development. Small ones were still discovered on very rare occasions, but a functional one capable of transportation was unheard-of.

Manon nodded along as Hooseyard explained her area of expertise at great length.

"So it turns into Guiding Force and travels at high speeds along the astral vein..." Manon remarked. "I assume that wall of light there is what transforms it, but how is it reconstructed, and what part of the device protects the passengers inside, I wonder?"

Kagarma smiled wanly. "I imagine it would be difficult to analyze the structure with modern conjuring technology."

Hooseyard was all too thrilled to elaborate.

"It's all marvelously impressive, isn't it? That includes the Dragon Gate. We call the vast channel of Guiding Force we use today the earthen vein, but there are some who believe it was actually a route created by the ancient civilization for trains like this. It really speaks to the imagination, don't you agree?"

"Why, I had never heard of such an idea... I suppose I still have much to learn."

The three mused about the advanced developments of the ancient civilization until they arrived at a chamber in the south tower of the cathedral.

"Well then, please come see me whenever you must leave the cathedral or return home."

With her duties completed, Hooseyard returned to her post.

Manon and Kagarma watched her depart and sank into the leather seats.

"The Elders have the right to stay here anytime. Please make use of this facility however you wish."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Kagarma. You've been a great help."

Manon bowed her head politely. Kagarma looked strangely put out by her uncharacteristically cordial treatment.

“No one is watching us now. That’s quite enough. Drop that look, would you?”

Manon tilted her head at this.

“Oh...is that so?”

Her tone changed abruptly.

The air trembled, and Manon’s face transformed. Her kimono remained the same, but her placid complexion became wholly different, though still beautiful. The deep-blue braid became a pale chestnut. Her mature-looking eyes shifted to a shape that conveyed a strong will and determination.

It was the Executioner known as Flarette.

Having arrived in the cathedral of the holy land before Momo, Menou crossed her legs.

“Again, I do appreciate your assistance, Director.”

“Come now, you are my old friend’s pupil. Please feel free to call me Uncle Kagarma.”

“...I’ll pass, thank you.”

The way this man tried to get closer with her was curiously off-putting.

Menou suddenly felt like she understood why Manon always disparaged Kagarma, if only a little.



Unrest in the Holy Land

A few days before Momo reached the holy land with Ashuna...

After exchanging temporary farewells with Akari and watching the train leave with her and Master Flare aboard, Menou searched for a man who she suspected was still nearby.

She knew he had been in the station not long ago. There was no doubt about it, since she'd spotted him while chasing Akari. She'd ignored him at the time to prioritize finding Akari, but now she required his help.

While Menou was cautiously peering around, a man spoke from behind her.

"Hello, young lady. Judging by the way you're wandering around the station, I can't help but assume you've missed your train. Are you perhaps searching for the next ride to your destination?" It was as if he had calculated the perfect time to appear. "If you are in a bind, perhaps I can be of some assistance?"

The man who appeared right when someone needed him was none other than Director Kagarma Dartaros.

"That looks wonderful on you. A young lady getting dressed up is truly a sight for sore eyes," Director Kagarma praised.

It was the morning after he and Menou had entered the cathedral as an Elder and his alleged daughter.

Menou was wearing a kimono borrowed from Manon's effects. Her slender proportions and delicate facial features meant she looked good in just about anything, and a kimono was no exception, even if it was from a different culture.

"You truly have learned Flare's Guiding Camouflage. Is there a reason you used genuine clothes instead of disguising them?"

Menou was a bit uncomfortable with Kagarma's enthusiastic inquiry.

"I'm not trying to play dress-up or anything; it's a matter of being practical. It isn't easy to disguise your appearance with Guiding Camouflage, you know."

She had trained extensively in the Guiding Camouflage technique to manipulate her appearance with Guiding Light, even while moving, but it was still a challenging skill to maintain.

Minimizing the risk of breaking the illusion because of a momentary distraction was worth the cost of procuring the necessary garments. It helped that Momo always made clothes for Menou when she was on an undercover mission.

"Manon and I are similar in stature, so it's easier to disguise myself. And the less I have to alter, the better. That's why I had Manon lend me a kimono."

It occurred to Menou that Kagarma may have only posed his question because he was a fan of Japanese-style clothing. However, she decided it would be rude to comment on another's preferences.

Menou moved her arm, and the kimono's sleeve fluttered in the air.

She hadn't yet mastered employing Guiding Camouflage while in motion. If it was necessary, she'd use it, of course, but the Executioner preferred to explore other options first.

"By the way, why did you agree to bring me here so readily?" Menou asked.

"To earn your trust, of course!" Kagarma answered.

After her encounter with Master Flare, Menou immediately searched for the Director. For better or worse, he had a long history with Flare and was sure to have something up his sleeve. Even if he didn't, he was still worth contacting for information.

Still, that didn't mean Menou had faith in him. She gave the hopeful Kagarma a cold stare.

"Oh? I seem to recall a certain person sneaking up and threatening me from behind. What am I to make of that, exactly?"

"That's precisely why I'm laboring to aid you and win your confidence. I did

say that I wished to have a nice long chat with you, did I not, Flarette?"

The smiling gentleman's explanation made sense, but it still felt sketchy.

Fundamentally speaking, Menou had no trust in the Director. To her, he was still an enemy. That was why she remained blatantly standoffish... Menou couldn't deny that she'd gained far more than she'd hoped by working with him, though.

"So was offering me all that critical information on the way here also part of your attempt to gain my confidence?"

"But of course. I revealed the secrets of Flare's past to you. I should think you could spare me a small amount of credit for that."

Menou had heard rumors of Master Flare's golden age, but only in hearsay, never from the woman herself. However, Kagarma, who was a comrade of Flare's during that time, had recounted many stories to Menou. Whether they were true or not, they had all been fascinating.

"Remember, you are my old friend's successor. You're welcome to call me Uncle Kagarma, all right?"

Menou shuddered. Noticing that her hand had automatically moved toward the dagger hidden at her thigh, she cleared her throat and carefully returned it to her knee.

"What I really want to know is what my Master is up to now, not her history. Her actions have been far too roundabout if she only wished to kill Akari." She pressed on, trying not to let Kagarma steer the conversation. "Am I correct in thinking she aims to turn Akari into a Human Error?"

"Oh-ho... I might have known you'd be clever enough to figure it out without me. You must already have a hypothesis about how conjurings come to be, yes? The roots of civilization in this world? Let me hear it."

Because Kagarma had insisted on prattling on about the past earlier, this was the first chance Menou had to discuss the matter with him.

As the man looked at her expectantly with the gaze of one who already knew the truth, Menou took a deep breath.

“When an Otherworlder’s Pure Concept goes out of control, a Human Error is born. The concept that resided in their soul becomes omnipresent. Only then can people like us, those who live in this world, use them as conjurings. Is that correct?”

“It is indeed.”

A Human Error was the rampaging final form of an Otherworlder. It was a calamity and, at the same time, a blessing in disguise.

“A conjuring is nothing more than a lesser imitation of a Pure Concept. Guiding Force is the energy that makes a phenomenon real, but the foundation of that phenomenon must exist as a Pure Concept. The Elders have spent the past thousand years accumulating conjurings in exactly this manner.”

When a Pure Concept attached to a soul, it brought conjurings into existence. Thus, an Otherworlder’s soul being taken over by a Pure Concept created new conjurings.

“The Elders even selected which Otherworlders to kill and which should be allowed to run wild.”

“I suppose the Elders are involved in controlling the road to the Sword of Salt from within the cathedral.”

“Indeed, for it is a rare weapon anyone could wield to kill immortals. Despite its danger, it is far too valuable to destroy. A wise choice, then, to keep it intact but far away from anyone who might use it.”

Unlike the ancient civilization, modern society was not capable of flight. Finding the small island of salt floating in the ocean would be virtually impossible.

Kagarma Dartaros, the founder of the Fourth, went on with a spark in his eyes. “It was decided that the governing of this world was best left divided among a small group. Lack of information would isolate the public. And so we crafted a system with which we few could accumulate knowledge. In spite of the damage done by Human Errors, that is. The Otherworlders who are summoned are sacrifices themselves, too.”

“But that’s...”

"The scriptures all priestesses carry are part of this intelligence-gathering system. The information they collect is closely examined by the Faust in this cathedral, then made known to the Elders at a yearly meeting. It's all part of how they control the world."

"Are you saying that even the Wild Frontier is man-made?"

"Here and there, yes. Very few regions are unmanageable in the truest sense of the word. Territories that were too large have been reduced or divided. Thus, the nations of this continent have been broken down into small enough pieces to prevent a mass insurrection by the Commons."

The stream of knowledge could be cut off by disrupting the flow of humans.

It was the Fourth that attempted to overthrow this system and unify it all.

"Everything I've said so far is known to anyone at the archbishop rank. They are each in charge of a nation's parishes, after all. Their duty is to collect the intelligence that comes to the holy land, too."

The majority of churches contained an altar that allowed long-distance communication. It was possible to relay information across borders by sending specialized messages like the ones created with scripture conjurings.

"All people have the right to happy lives. They should all be free. The lost ones, too, are fragile and should be protected. And yet the damned Elders fancy themselves the world's rulers!"

"Did you create the Fourth because you object to that?"

"How could I not?" Kagarma put his head in his hands, his voice hoarse and powerless. "But ultimately, I became one of those Elders myself without even realizing. I can never forgive myself..."

"I see."

"Yes, through an unlucky coincidence. I had no idea it would lead to that. That's all there is to it."

"What are the conditions to become an Elder?" Menou pressed.

"You'll have to find out for yourself."

Despite Kagarma's forthcomingness about many aspects of the Elders, he flatly refused to answer that inquiry.

"Long ago, I gathered people without care for their placement in the castes and collected information. You will have to find out in your way." He didn't volunteer anything more on the matter. Menou nodded silently. "Now, you've come to the holy land for young Akari, right?"

"Yes."

"To find Akari Tokitou, whose Pure Concept of *Time* has been regressing the world repeatedly...and kill her."

"That's right."

Menou nodded.

She had to kill Akari with her own hands before the other girl became a Human Error and ceased being Akari.

As an Executioner, that was the only thing Menou could do for her.

"I find that rather strange. You've come to the point where you can reach her. Do you not instead wish to save her? She is your friend, is she not?"

"Forgive me for answering a question with another question, but how exactly would I save her?"

There was a chance that saving Akari wasn't entirely impossible. For Menou to kill her without permission, she would have to slip past Master Flare's watchful eye. Rescuing Akari would be more difficult, but the basic approach wouldn't be too different.

Menou didn't intend to kill Akari just to make things easier for herself, though.

"There is no way to save an Otherworlder, is there?" she said.

Freeing Akari would be pointless and temporary. Once the Otherworlder became a Human Error, many would perish. So long as that girl lived, she would lose her memories and identity as Akari Tokitou.

More than any of that, however, Menou couldn't allow herself to do it.

Rescuing Akari for personal feelings was worthless.

“You might be surprised at the possibilities.” The Director smiled gently. “As I told you on the way here, your Master Flare once did everything in her power to help an Otherworlder, too.”

“Yes, and I’ve had no choice but to question whether I can trust anything you say ever since.”

“Ha-ha, I understand. Flare never was honest about her feelings.”

It wasn’t a question of whether the woman was honest or not. Menou looked warily at the Director as he laughed lightheartedly.

Undoubtedly, he and Flare shared some old connection. Yet Menou couldn’t believe that it had been a friendly one.

“She was such a charming young woman that even Flare cared for her. Why, her soul shone so brightly that even I couldn’t help but try to court her, in spite of my age.”

“...Poor thing.”

It wasn’t the Director for whom Menou was expressing pity. Menou’s sympathies were for this unknown Otherworlder whom this creepy older man had tried to woo.

“But Flare still killed her in the end. It was a terrible shame. At the time, I couldn’t understand what she was thinking... Perhaps it was similar to what’s going through your mind at this very moment.”

“...Maybe.”

“Even during the time I knew Flare, she constantly killed people who were precious to her. Each time made her stronger, a more perfect Executioner.” The way he spoke almost suggested he knew what was to follow. “This will be no exception to the pattern. Will you defeat Flare and become the same kind of Executioner she is, or will Flare defeat you and polish her skills as an Executioner? Personally, I suspect you will almost certainly be the one to die. Do you know why that is?”

“Because I can’t defeat my Master,” Menou stated plainly.

“That’s correct.” Kagarma nodded, looking satisfied. He picked up his cane and pointed it at Menou. “As far as I can tell, you are by no means weaker than Flare. Your skills in close combat are comparable, and given that you are younger, you should have some advantages over her as a woman past her prime.”

“You flatter me.”

“But you will probably fail nonetheless.”

He was right.

Menou was going to lose.

He didn’t even need to explain why. Plenty outranked Master Flare in sheer strength. Menou herself had defeated many an opponent stronger than her teacher on paper. Differences in strength might confer advantages or disadvantages, but they were never the deciding factor in a battle.

“You are exceptionally skilled, young Menou. You’ve emerged victorious against Archbishop Orwell and Pandæmonium’s pinky finger. You survived all manner of conflicts that would’ve easily crushed any ordinary priestess. But your old Master has a fatal advantage over you.”

“...”

“She knows your quick judgment all too well. What would normally be a boon for you will, in this case, be a weakness. I doubt you are fool enough not to realize how deadly that can be.”

Menou’s greatest virtue was her ability to adapt to any situation swiftly. Whether she chose to fight or run away, she could always formulate a clever plan to achieve her goals.

The main reason she could not defeat her Master, then, was internal. Menou simply did not believe she could win. Battling Master Flare meant Menou’s choices would be limited.

The Executioner understood this and still chose to infiltrate the holy land.

“What are you suggesting I should do, then?”

“Run away.”

How could Kagarma make such a statement after bringing Menou all this way?

Ridiculous. Hearing him out had been a waste of time. Menou stood.

“Hrmm? And where might you be headed?”

“For a walk and some reconnaissance.”

Menou had already made preparations before arriving in the holy land. As long as the strategy she’d set in motion went as intended, chaos would break out here before much longer. She would have to be familiar with the layout of the cathedral by then to make her move.

“Oh-ho.” There was an undisguisable note of curiosity in Kagarma’s voice. “You mean Akari Tokitou’s location? Quite an adorable girl, that one. Would you perhaps introduce me to her sometime? She is in an exceptionally fascinating position, even for a lost one.”

“No.”

Menou shook her head.

She already knew where Akari was without needing to look. The bespectacled priestess Hooseyard, who greeted them when they first arrived at the cathedral, had all but spelled it out. The north tower was in use because Akari was being held there under close watch.

Surely Master Flare already expected Menou was coming to kill Akari. At worst, she was sticking to Akari like glue because of it. While Menou had successfully penetrated the cathedral, her prospects of escape were slim.

She couldn’t afford to make a careless move now.

Since Akari’s Pure Concept of *Time* conjuring, *Regression*, could return her to before she died, the girl was effectively immortal. How would Master Flare kill Akari, then? That much was clear from the moment she brought Akari to the holy land.

Master Flare intended to use the Sword of Salt to slay Akari.

When Menou was young, Master Flare once took her to the land of salt. So she knew how to get to the Sword of Salt’s location.

The Dragon Gate.

The luminous door the Guiding train had passed through to bring her here was also known as a teleport conjuring circle. It used an ancient relic that could *Teleport* someone to any place with Guiding Force, bridging the distance between the holy land and the land of salt.

The best way to get there was to investigate how the glasses-wearing priestess Hooseyard prepared and controlled that process.

Clothes rustled from being folded.

It was around the time that Menou entered the holy land with Kagarma's help. Far away, at a hot spring in the mountains, two girls were in the changing room of an inn.

Not long ago, the very same inn had dealt with all manner of minor scandals because the runaways Momo and Akari were staying there. This had reduced the number of guests so drastically that these girls had the place almost entirely to themselves.

One was wearing a nun's habit, the other a kimono, giving them nothing visibly in common except for their approximate ages. The one in the kimono carried herself with the mannerisms of a well-bred young lady.

Manon Libelle.

This terrifying girl was working with Pandæmonium, the biggest taboo on the continent. She had just folded her obi and unraveled her flawless braid, and she was about to slip her kimono off her shoulders when she hesitated.

The girl with Manon in the changing room was, to her, a precious opportunity to make a friend her own age. They had been staying at the inn together for several days, so she decided this was the perfect time to get closer and worked up the courage to invite her to bathe together.

However, this was Manon's first time bathing with anyone outside her immediate family.

"Er, how shall I phrase this...?" Manon's cheeks turned pink, her kimono still only partway removed. "This sort of thing is rather embarrassing, I must admit."

With her high-class upbringing, Manon had never been to anything like a public bathhouse. Her rearing as a proper young lady of the Noblesse left the girl with reservations about showing skin in front of others, even someone of the same sex. Although her sense of morals was unhinged by any standard, she was a maiden like any other in this respect.

“Is it?”

In stark contrast to Manon’s tinted cheeks, the other girl didn’t show the slightest shame in removing her nun’s habit.

She had wavy silver hair and sleepy-looking eyes. There was no questioning the beauty of the young woman disrobing with an air of relaxed elegance. Her most eye-catching element was attached to her right shoulder—a glimmering silver Guiding prosthetic.

The artificial limb moved in perfect harmony with her body because its Guiding Force was attached to her spirit. The girl’s false arm was not human-made, but given to her by one of the Four Major Human Errors, the Mechanical Society.

This other girl’s name was Sahara, a former nun who fell into taboo because of the Mechanical Society of the eastern Wild Frontier.

Her prosthetic moved as nimbly as a natural arm as she removed her underwear and tossed it into the basket.

“The monastery was all communal living, so this is normal for me.”

Manon and Sahara. Both girls had stained their hands with taboo and had a history with Menou. Shamelessly enough, after their battle against Menou and company, the pair of them had blithely extended their stay in the mountain hot spring town.

“Hurry up. I wanna get in the bath.”

As Manon wavered, Sahara reached out with her artificial arm and yanked on the other girl’s sleeve to hasten the disrobing process. It was more a show of poor manners than intimacy, and Manon hurriedly brought her hands over her chest.

“I-I’ll take it off myself, thank you very much! I don’t need any help.”

“Oh yeah? See you in there, then.”

Sahara pulled away from the flustered Manon rather than forcing the issue in spite of her protests. Manon sighed with relief; little did she know that behind Sahara’s unchanged expression, the girl was pleased with Manon’s reaction and had resolved to tease her further once they were in the bath.

As Sahara headed out to the open-air bath, the cool air greeted her skin. She nodded in satisfaction at the freeing feeling of the scenery and the heat of the bubbling hot spring.

“Fancy inns are the best.”

She would never have experienced this luxury as a nun. Washing herself off with the speed of one used to shared bathing, Sahara quickly sank into the hot water up to her shoulders.

The warmth spread delightfully through her body. As she let out a long sigh and relaxed for a while, Manon eventually entered after her. She had a bath towel wrapped around herself and a stiff expression on her face.

When her eyes fell on Sahara soaking in the open-air bath, her expression shifted to one of concern.

“Ms. Sahara...won’t your arm rust?”

“Nope.” Sahara flexed her silver Guiding prosthetic in the water. “Technically speaking, it’s not metal. So it can’t tarnish.”

“Is that so?”

Drawing closer to the bath, Manon prodded Sahara’s artificial arm curiously.

Sahara’s limb had been replaced with a prosthetic adhered to her soul with Guiding Force when the Mechanical Society, a Human Error on par with Pandæmonium, made up for the missing part and attached to her like a parasite. The Concept of Primary Colors could simplify the world, dismantle it, and recreate it with the three Primary Colors. The Primary Color Stones, the root of this phenomenon, were said to be living ore.

On the subject of Human Errors, Sahara thought of something else.

“...Hey, where’d Pandæmonium go?”

“She does tend to disappear from time to time. I never paid her absences much mind, since she always shows up when I call for her. Shall I call her now?”

“Ah, no thanks. I don’t really wanna talk to her.”

Pandæmonium.

The shadow of what was once an Otherworlder, she was one of the Four Major Human Errors, which had consumed the once-inhabited southern archipelago and left a permanent scar on the world.

She was also the source of the monsters that infested this world, a terrifying evil in the form of a little girl.

Manon was likely correct that there was no need to fret about her whereabouts. As the Pure Concept of *Evil*, distance meant nothing to her summoning abilities. She didn’t need to travel on foot. Sahara found the monstrous little girl disturbing, so she was grateful for her absence.

“What about the Director, then? I haven’t seen him in a while,” Sahara commented.

“Hmm? Ah, I suppose he is gone, too, isn’t he?” It had been several days since either last saw him, but evidently, Manon hadn’t noticed. She began washing herself with a bucket of hot water.

“I wasn’t too worried about it, because I prefer not to have him around. You should avoid getting involved with him, too, Ms. Sahara. He can be rather inappropriate.”

That seemed harsh, although not untrue.

Just talking to Kagarma for a short time left Sahara creeped out, so she understood what Manon meant. Why did they break him out of jail if that was the case?

It was odd, but Sahara wasn’t interested in the man enough to press the matter further.

“Ah, but now that you mention it...,” Manon began.

“Mm, what’s up?”

“No... I’m sure it’s nothing important.” Manon tapped a finger against her lips, as she often did when thinking. Her gentle features creased with her slight frown as she voiced a sneaking suspicion. “It’s just...one of my spare kimonos has been missing for the past few days.”

“...”

Sahara closed her eyes.

A pretty young girl’s clothes were missing, and the strange old Director along with them.

There was only one possible conclusion. Sahara opened her eyes and spoke firmly.

“Manon. When it comes time to kill the Director, let me know. I’ll help out for sure.”

“Certainly. I’ll be counting on your support!”

The two young maidens clasped hands. Sometimes, discovering a common enemy could strengthen the bonds between friends.

“Truthfully...” Manon laughed softly. “I don’t *really* believe the Director stole my kimono.”

“Really? I wouldn’t put it past him.”

“True, nor would I, but given the timing, it must have been Ms. Menou.”

Menou.

As soon as Manon spoke the name out loud, Sahara unconsciously touched her prosthetic arm with her left hand.

“...Shouldn’t we go after her? She’s gonna chase down Akari, isn’t she?”

“Well, as it happens, I was already planning on going to the holy land regardless of Ms. Menou. Although the information I gave her when we met here was admittedly meant to push her to that action... At any rate, once my little friend returns, I think we should set out, too.”

“Oh yeah?”

Her “little friend” probably referred to Pandæmonium. Apparently, Manon had some scheme of her own. Sahara, on the other hand, was much more impulsive. She didn’t know what Manon was plotting, but she didn’t get a bad feeling about it and decided to let it slide.

“How do you stand to pal around with Pandæmonium anyway?” she asked instead.

“I’m not sure what you mean... It’s fun,” Manon responded.

“...Uh-huh...”

Sahara carefully kept her feelings from seeping into her voice.

Manon was reluctant to show skin in front of a fellow female bather, yet she had no issue declaring that traveling with Pandæmonium and her ever-increasing body count was enjoyable. It was clear to Sahara that Manon’s emotions were twisted, no matter how serene her voice might be. She doubted anyone else in the world could genuinely enjoy being with Pandæmonium.

Thus, Sahara elected to try a different approach.

“I heard what happened in Libelle, but I don’t really understand what you were thinking.”

“Ah, my old hometown? I must admit, I’m ashamed of how haphazard my methods were at the time.”

Manon had spread monstrine, a drug that turned people into monsters, in the settlement where she was born and raised. In the end, she even sacrificed her blood relatives and turned herself into a Concept of Original Sin, becoming a demon. But when questioned about these horrific deeds, she only covered her face in a genuine show of sheepishness.

“I’m not inquiring about your methods... I mean your motives.”

Bring chaos to this world.

Bring carnage to this planet.

Such was the creed of the Human Error known as Pandæmonium, the child of Original Sin. Manon did not share that ideology, however.

“Why do you want to go to the other world so badly?”

“Ah, is that what you meant? Strictly speaking, it’s not that I wish to travel there... It’s just that I’m quite certain that what I want to reclaim must be there.”

Manon, who was born in this world, smiled so faintly that it was almost invisible in the steam.

“I can’t count how many times I heard the stories. My mother was constantly talking about her. You see, I have a younger older sister.”

“A younger...older sister?”

“That’s right.”

Manon grinned, not elaborating further.

That was why she was traveling with Pandæmonium and working for the little monster.

“The foundation of my very self can be nowhere else but there. I’m sure of it.”

Manon Libelle was here precisely because she knew stories of the past that everyone else, even Pandæmonium herself, had long since forgotten.

Naturally, Sahara possessed no knowledge of the mysterious Manon’s circumstances.

Manon didn’t explain any more than she felt necessary.

“What about yourself, Ms. Sahara? Why did you go to the Mechanical Society? I’ve heard you volunteered to venture into the eastern Wild Frontier. And it was there that you met Genom Cthulha and became taboo.”

“I did it ’cause I was pissed off. I don’t regret it one bit.”

“I understand. These things do happen from time to time.”

The two girls who had impulsively tarnished themselves with taboo now bonded over their questionable principles.

Manon finished washing herself off and gingerly sank into the bath. Noticing that the other young woman was uncertain of how to handle the distance between them, Sahara experimentally prodded her side with one toe. Manon

giggled as if ticklish but didn't protest.

"I would like to see the eastern Wild Frontier for myself one day. There's a certain part of the Mechanical Society that's friendly toward humans in a way, right?"

"If you avoid zones one and three, I guess. Out of the thirteen zones, I'd say the machine-tree area in zone eight isn't too corrupted in spirit, and most of the Guiding guns come from there, too..."

As Manon and Sahara deepened their friendship and exchanged information while nude, there was a sudden splash of water.

The pair turned toward the source of the ripples.

"Phwaaah!"

A little girl in a white dress was gasping for breath. She couldn't have been more than ten years old.

She had strangely elegant features for her age, and her dress sported three gaps in the front of it. The girl shook out her soaked black hair and beamed.

"Mmm, this water's not bad. How are you, Manon?"

Pandæmonium.

Sahara stiffened at the sudden arrival. How had she gotten here? She'd clearly emerged from the water out of nowhere.

Manon seemed unsurprised and simply tapped Pandæmonium on the nose scoldingly.

"Now, now. It's bad manners to wear clothes in the bath."

"Mm, is it?"

"You wouldn't want the water to get dirty. One must always wash off properly before entering."

"Mm, but whenever I'm reborn, I become brand-new, so this dress is spotless. Doesn't that mean it's fine?"

"...I suppose I can't argue with that."

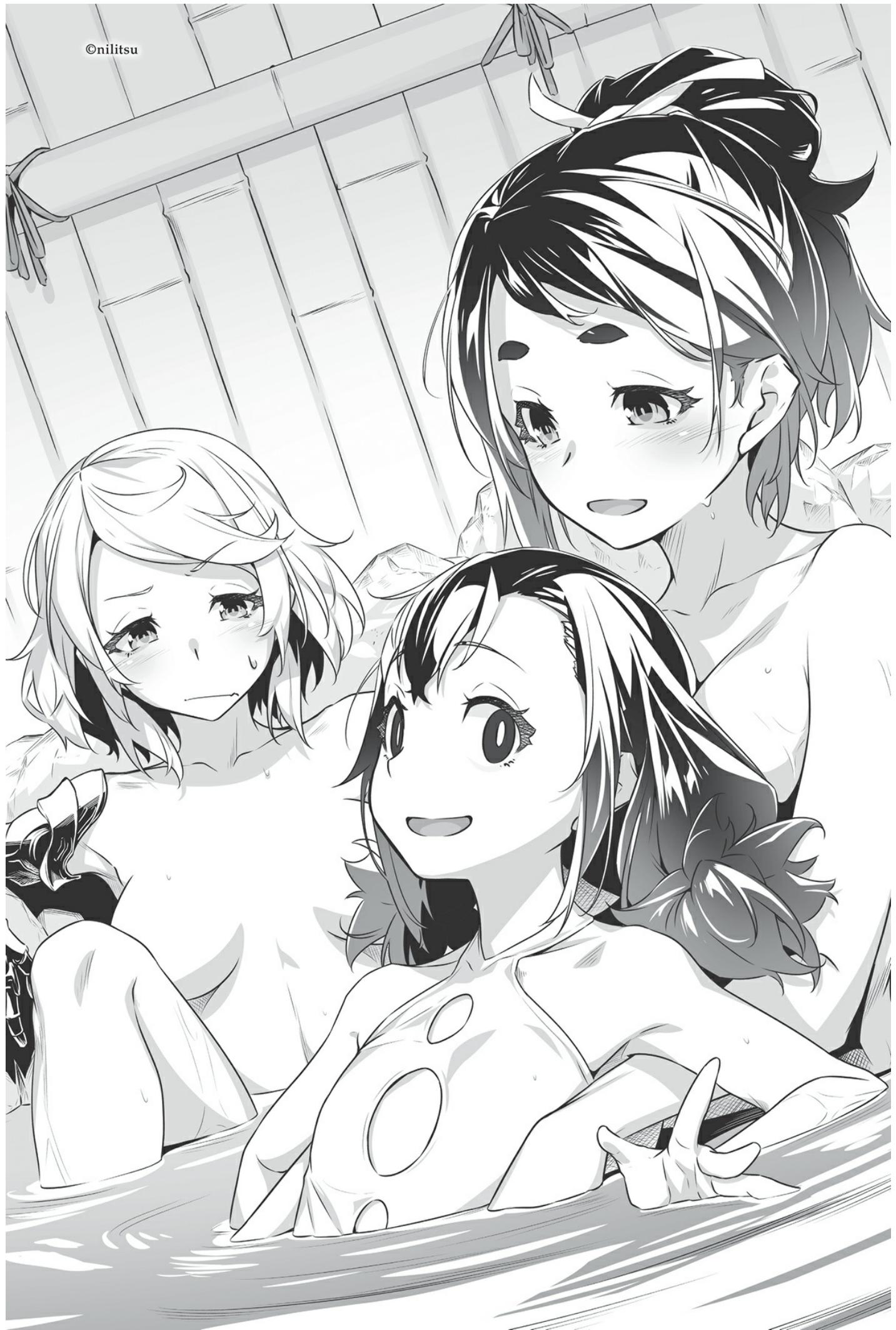
There were some cultures where one bathed while still dressed, so Manon couldn't declare that it was never acceptable to wear clothes in the bath. She frowned thoughtfully.

Sahara watched the scene in disbelief.

Human Errors were universally feared. Pandæmonium, in particular, was the very source of the monsters that devoured humans. Manon was the only person who treated this tiny horror like an ordinary little girl.

Where did that fondness come from?

Sahara didn't understand the urge to be kind to another in the first place. She saw others only as targets to be defeated and dragged down.



"You haven't told me what we're doing next yet. What's the plan?" Sahara said.

"Ah, I'm sorry, I forgot to fill you in. As it happens, we'll need your help," Manon answered.

I'll have to hear the whole plan before I decide whether to assist. Sahara was perfectly willing to shirk her responsibilities if the time came. Manon smiled at her serenely while holding the little monster in her arms.

"We're going to carry out an attack on the holy land with this one here."

"I see."

No sane person would suggest that idea. It was best to flee at the first opportunity.

I might not be able to go along with this girl after all, Sahara thought, already working out a plan of escape.

The morning after their overnight stay in the monastery, Momo went to the holy land and visited one of the church facilities to file a report.

It was the department that managed the abbeys in the area. She was planning to contact the Master who was in charge of the one where she was raised, but evidently, they couldn't get in touch with her.

Momo was told that Master Flare hadn't been in contact since she'd departed the monastery she managed a few months ago. In fact, the priestess in charge ended up asking Momo to let *her* know if she figured out where Flare was.

"...Wellll, I suppose that's no surprise."

Obviously, Master Flare wouldn't follow the rules. Momo left with a mixture of annoyance and resignation.

She wanted to gather as much information about Master Flare and Akari Tokitou as possible while she was working separately from Menou, but both women were proving difficult to catch even a whiff of. It would be easier to state that there were no such individuals in the holy land.

"Don't tell me they're inside the cathedral or something, hmmm?"

There were many locations Momo was denied because of her low rank, but the cathedral was the furthest from reach of them all. As the symbol of the holy land, very few were permitted to enter, even among the Faust. Given her official post, Master Flare technically didn't have permission, either, but this was Flare. She could have finagled her way in.

As Momo finished her paperwork and left, still lost in thought, she found Ashuna casually waiting for her outside.

She was acting visibly bored, in spite of the fact that she'd tailed Momo from the monastery where they'd slept into the holy land.

"This place sure is nothing but a pretty facade." Ashuna grunted as Momo approached. "There's not much to say about it."

"What exactly did you expect the holy land to be like, Princess-poo?"

Ashuna was annoyed, but it was her own fault for expecting amusement from somewhere the Faust gathered.

It was unquestionably beautiful, but there was absolutely nothing else engaging about it for a visitor.

No souvenir shops proffered local specialties, no restaurants for drinking and making merry. There were certainly no tour guides to explain the history and structure of the holy land. The town was less than five hundred meters long, and many of the buildings were off-limits. A half day of wandering was all it took to run out of things to look at.

The lack of Commons inhabitants meant there was virtually no economy or distribution, either. The Faust, who made up the entirety of the holy land, had little use for entertainment. There were no activities, nor locals to spend money.

"Really, I don't know how the Faust can live in a place like this."

Ashuna was born and raised in a Noblesse royal family. For someone who was accustomed to a luxurious lifestyle and naturally inclined to be a thrill seeker, the holy land had to be unbearable. It had been less than a full day since they arrived, and Ashuna was already whining.

Truth be told, all but the most stolid members of the Faust tended to avoid the holy land because there was so little to do there.

At first, Ashuna was enthusiastic about touring to look for further evidence to support her theory that the holy land was a barrier hiding something, but the place was stunningly empty. Evidently, even the overwhelmingly confident Princess Knight couldn't sense anything in the face of a settlement made of conjurings with nowhere to hide secrets.

All that inquisitive energy left with nowhere to go made for one very peevish princess.

"Ugh... I'm so damn bored. Maybe if I stand around in an alley, some thugs will try to mug me?"

"Of course nooot. Seriously, Princess-poo, what do you expect from the holy land?"

It was apparent even at a glance that the holy land was very safe. Everyone who lived here was a member of the Faust. Even the visiting pilgrims were pious enough believers to brave the Wild Frontier to see the holy land. Ashuna wasn't going to find the fight she was looking for.

"Seriously, Momo..." Ashuna could handle an arduous journey with a smile, but boredom was her weakness. "This is supposed to be the headquarters of the Faust. I wasn't expecting it to be this empty! They ought to have at least a little bit of intrigue at the ready! When I saw it from afar, it seemed so obviously suspicious, but now that I'm inside, there's not a damn thing! It's a disgrace to the name of Ashuna Grisarika that I don't even know where to look to find the corruption here..."

"Enough complaining already, Princess-poo. For your information, my hunt isn't going so well, either."

"Hunt?"

"...It's nothing."

That was a careless mistake. Momo hurried to cover up her slip, already regretting catching the attention of someone whining about having nothing to do.

Momo hadn't simply come back to the holy land on a whim. She was trying to track down Master Flare to help Menou, who was infiltrating the holy land by other means, but there was nothing that suggested Master Flare was here. Momo had hoped to give some excuse to stick by Flare, perhaps even deduce where she kept Akari, but she'd been left without a clue.

As of now, Master Flare's whereabouts were completely unknown, meaning Akari could be anywhere.

Still, Momo refused to sit around twiddling her thumbs. "The cathedral is suspicious, but I have no idea how one goes about getting inside," she offered.

"I know what you mean, Momo. If anything is going on, it'd be in there. Shall we start by pitting my blade against the front door to test its strength?"

"Absolutely not. Try it, and I'll arrest you with the help of every priestess in the area."

Ashuna's boredom seemed to be leading her mind down a dangerous path. She furrowed her brow at Momo's reasonable rejection.

"Oh, come now. Whatever the holy land is concealing has to be inside. In general, any place that's closed to the public definitely harbors a secret."

"I didn't come here to expose the holy land's secrets, you knoooow...!"

Perhaps if I cause a scene and punch Princess-poo in the face, they'll bring out Master Flare to take responsibility for me... Just as Momo's thoughts strayed in a direction as absurd as Ashuna's, a man approached the two young women.

In a city where all the residents were members of the Faust, his presence was already unusual.

He had to be a visiting pilgrim. The sword at his waist indicated that he was a knight. His listless face and average build were forgettable enough, but his unusually designed weapon certainly attracted the eye.

There were few people who would use such an armament. Sophisticated manufacturing methods made it difficult to engrave crests for conjurings, so even knights who were permitted to use swords tended to avoid overly complicated ones.

Momo nonchalantly kept an eye on the knight as they passed each other, only to realize that Ashuna was no longer at her side.

Ashuna had frozen in place.

She was acting very oddly. There was a dumbfounded expression on her face as she stood stock-still.

“Princess-poo?” Momo called, but Ashuna didn’t respond. Her eyes stared into space, and the rest of her body stayed stiffly unmoving. This was a wholly different person from the one a few moments ago.

“...Impossible. Why would he be here?” Ashuna’s voice was tinged with dread and despair as she muttered to herself. There was even an undisguisable note of longing.

The princess’s gaze wavered. It was as if all the events in front of her had been scattered from her mind. Her blue eyes turned to follow the man who had just strolled past.

“You’ve got some nerve to ignore me like that.”

“...Guh?!”

A sharp pain on Ashuna’s face returned her to her senses. Just like when they first arrived at the monastery, Momo was pinching and pulling on Ashuna’s cheek.

“Ah... Momo.”

“That’s right. Now, what in the world is going on with you?”

Ashuna’s thoughts stirred to life again, and she remembered where she was standing. She opened her mouth to speak, then swallowed her words with a conflicted expression.

Momo blinked in surprise. It was Ashuna’s nature to be bold and decisive at all times. The princess rarely paused before any action or notion. At the very least, this was Momo’s first time seeing her hesitate.

After a few seconds, Ashuna concluded that she couldn’t get Momo involved.

“Momo... Sorry, but I have to go off on my own for now.”

“Sorry? Nothing could make me happier, Princess-poo.”

Momo had no reason to stop the other girl. They were only together because Ashuna insisted upon following her around. She had pinched the princess's cheek out of annoyance at being ignored; there was no deeper reason for her concern.

Without another word, Ashuna turned on her heel and left Momo behind, hurrying off in the knight's direction.

“That must have been an acquaintance of hers.”

Momo could think of no other reason, nor was the assistant Executioner interested enough to investigate further. Once Ashuna disappeared around a corner, Momo returned to plotting her next course of action.

Without knowing where her target was, there was little she could do unless they made the first move. As she debated over what to do, someone spoke to her.

“Ah, there you are.”

A nun was approaching. Momo recognized her from the monastery where she and Ashuna were staying. She was out of breath, presumably from searching for Momo.

“What is it?”

Momo would have returned to the monastery in the evening. Why was this nun in such a rush to speak with her? The answer was quite astonishing.

“The archbishop requests your presence, Miss Momo.”

“...Pardon?”

The archbishop.

She was essentially the chief executive of the holy land. Momo froze in surprise at being summoned by someone so important.

The only official in the holy land with any connection to Momo was Master Flare.

She could think of no logical reason how that would lead to the archbishop

asking for her. It was no exaggeration to say that the archbishop of the holy land was the head of the Faust, one of the most important people on the continent.

“The archbishop? Why...? The archbishop of the holy land is Lady Elcami, correct? I’ve never even met her before... I’m just a white-robe, you know.”

“I was not informed about the reason. Nonetheless, you are undoubtedly the person she asked to see.”

Technically speaking, Momo had come to the holy land on her time off. Officially, she was under orders from her superior, Menou.

That left absolutely no reason for her to be called upon, but the nun who’d been sent for her urgently tugged at her hand.

“Please just come with me to the cathedral.”

Ashuna set off at a light jog after the man who’d walked past her and Momo.

In this pure-white city, a male knight stood out. He was walking in the open, too, without any need to search for him. Ashuna quickly caught up to him and grabbed his shoulder, pulling him back.

He spun around, his eyes vacant. His appearance suggested he was in his mid-thirties, and he was of average build, not particularly muscular.

Although he appeared unthreatening enough, Ashuna was fully on guard as she addressed him.

“What are you doing here, Experion?”

Experion Riverse was a knight said to be unmatched in strength by any on the continent, even amid the many priestesses, rampant taboos, and wandering lost ones.

Ashuna was well aware of him, as he was a knight of Grisarika. In fact, seeing his swordsmanship was the reason she’d first picked up a blade.

At the same time, he was a pawn of Ashuna’s elder sister, much to Ashuna’s frustration.

His combat prowess was his only redeeming quality, and Ashuna had no idea

why he would be in the holy land.

The man was not faithful in the slightest. He was strong and nothing else—there was nothing else to him.

“I was told to bring someone back.”

“...And you think I’d just come with you?”

Ashuna put a hand on the hilt of her weapon.

The cross-shaped, crested royal sword had been passed down in the Grisarika family for generations; it was the height of Noblesse engineering.

If she wielded it with her full strength, maybe, just maybe...

Ashuna prepared herself for a fight.

Experion wouldn’t kill her. She was in a superior position.

Sensing her bloodlust, Experion only tilted his head in bemusement.

“I wasn’t instructed to get you, Princess.”

“What?”

Then who...?

Ashuna doubted Experion was lying. He’d long since cast aside his own will and did only as commanded. His strength had forged him into a sword at the expense of his free will. The man was quite literally a secret weapon.

“...Who is it, then?”

“I was told not to say.”

There was no point pressing for why. He didn’t know the intentions behind his orders.

He was ordered to do it, so he would. That was the full extent of his reasoning. Then he was indeed here to reclaim someone.

Since he was only a weapon, he kept moving nonstop. Were he not bid otherwise, he would likely forget to eat and sleep and would eventually starve to death. The man called Experion was definitively lacking in humanity.

Ashuna drew her broadsword.

Even as she stood before him with her blade at the ready, the man's eyes didn't show a shred of tension.

Lifeless, listless, empty. But his body still had all its skills.

"I've been told not to harm you."

"I know."

Her sister's hand had reached all the way to the western end of the content. That was nothing short of infuriating to Ashuna.

"But I was told to tell you this."

Experion drew his blade.

Ashuna couldn't help admiring his fluid movement.

Even lacking humanity...Experion Riverse was a thing of paralyzing beauty to Ashuna and her ongoing pursuit of strength.

"If you believe in power so much, then obey the mighty."

The strongest man on the continent relayed difficult-to-denry words from Ashuna's sister.

The cathedral at the heart of the holy land was not open to the public. Even among the Faust, few members were permitted inside.

At the front entrance of that very cathedral, Momo met with the person who had called for her.

"So you're Momo, assistant Executioner?"

"...Yessss, that's mee." "

Archbishop Elcami.

She was known across the continent as a conjurer worthy of her place at the top of the Faust.

As far as Momo knew, she was at least as capable as Orwell, who had been stationed in the old capital of Garm to rule over all the churches in Grisarika Kingdom. Given her standing, however, she might have outclassed Orwell.

Meeting her for the first time, Momo found that she was an elderly woman

with a rigidly straight spine. Her aged and wrinkled hands clutched a scripture to her chest. Though her body was aged as it ought to be, her voice was still vigorous, and she exuded a bold and broad-minded air.

Elcami's eye twitched slightly at Momo's casual, exaggeratedly drawled response.

Momo made a mental note that this woman was the sort of person who didn't disguise her expressions.

"Where is your superior, Menou, also known as Flarette?"

"My darling went to assist with the restoration of a town damaged by taboooo. Master Flare gave her the order, I'm tooold. The mission is unrelated to her job as an Executioner, so as her aide, I was sent back to the holy land alone for noooow."

Momo showed no signs of being intimidated by the questioning, keeping her tone decidedly light and disrespectful.

"Who raised you to be so...? Ah. At your age, if you're of Executioner pedigree, it must have been Flare."

"That's riiight. So if there's an issue with my attituuude, you can blame it allllll on the Master who raised mee. Maybe you ought to fire her for failing to rear me properly, hmm?"

"Priestess's Aide Momo."

"Yeeeess?"

As Momo carried on with a fearless attitude in the face of the leader of the Faust, she was abruptly given her next orders.

"I'm placing you under my direct supervision."

"Pardon?"

It was not the first time today that Momo blinked in confusion. The direct supervision of the archbishop. For a moment, she couldn't quite grasp the meaning of the words.

"Between Flare, her successor, and Ashuna Grisarika, I haven't the slightest

idea what any of you are plotting. But right now, there's a massive event in the works that could affect the entire continent. I cannot permit interference."

"Whaaat?"

Momo was naturally on Menou's side, but she didn't appreciate being lumped in with the likes of Master Flare and Ashuna. She grumbled discontentedly.

The archbishop turned a glare on her, apparently not appreciating that.

"This is an order you cannot refuse."

"I can't...?"

"Until your superior, Flurette, comes to retrieve you, I will be assigning you various odd jobs myself."

"...Oh, all riiight. I understaaand."

"Then come with me. We're going into the cathedral."

With that, Elcami turned on her heel. She was clearly accustomed to issuing commands and having them obeyed.

"Into...the cathedral?"

"Yes, and you'd best assume you won't be leaving for some time. I'll be keeping an eye on you until this is all over."

Momo hurried after Elcami while trying to put her thoughts in order.

The archbishop had gone out of her way to summon Momo and interrogate her. At the very least, it was safe to assume Elcami had no idea what Menou was up to.

However, this also meant she was suspicious of Menou.

Master Flare was one thing, but why would the archbishop take action to stop Menou from following Akari? Momo racked her brain.

Yes, the obnoxious girl was an Otherworlder, but at least two or three were summoned yearly. Some were man-made events, and others were natural occurrences. Still, it was strange for someone as important as an archbishop to take direct action over a single Otherworlder.

If there was a reason behind it, that might be worth investigating.

By entering the cathedral, Momo could study its layout in a way that had never been accessible before, and she might even deduce where Akari was located.

Most of all, if the time came, Momo could do something to help her darling. Since she hadn't been able to locate Master Flare, working directly under the person in charge of the entire holy land wouldn't be too bad.

Still, it was hard to ignore Elcami's interest in Menou and Momo's affairs. Surely, Master Flare didn't believe Menou had truly obeyed her orders and gone to help with restoration efforts in some nowhere town.

"By the way, where is Master Flare right now? I wanted to say hello when I arrived, but I can't seem to find her. You gotta know, right, Archbishop?" Momo asked.

"Ha! Why should I care what that piece of garbage does? She couldn't work with others if her life depended on it."

If even Elcami didn't know, then Master Flare had to be on severe alert.

Momo wondered what her elusive former teacher was doing as she followed behind Elcami into the cathedral.

Give it all you have, and do everything you can.

From the moment she decided to chase Akari when she was taken away by Master Flare, Menou had etched that resolution firmly into her heart.

She was perfectly aware of the difficulty of her task.

Master Flare was taking care not to kill Akari. She deliberately let the girl turn back time over and over, using up her memories. The aim was to turn Akari into a Human Error.

After her conversation with Kagarma, Menou was certain of that.

By nature, Pure Concepts were contained within an Otherworlder's soul. When her spirit was chipped away and her soul lost, Akari would rampage as a Human Error, and the *Time* concept that was attached to her soul would become omnipresent in the world in the form of time conjurings. Such was the

motivation behind Master Flare's actions.

Thus, Menou had to kill Akari with her own hands while the young woman was still herself.

The biggest obstacle would be Master Flare. She was Menou's parental figure, teacher, and the most skilled Executioner alive. She had clearly abducted Akari for a specific purpose.

"If she was going to kill Akari, I'm sure Master would use the Sword of Salt, too..."

That was the same way Menou intended to slay Akari. No matter how she tried, she wouldn't be able to avoid a fight with her Master.

That meant staking everything she had.

Surpassing Master Flare in any ordinary sense was impossible. According to Akari, who had relived their journey countless times, Menou had never once successfully outsmarted her teacher.

It was sheer foolishness to fight Flare despite this. Since she was aware of her own idiocy in this venture, Menou couldn't afford to spare any effort. She would put all her strength, her body, soul, and spirit, into her actions.

Menou slowly walked down the steps of the south tower. She was on the highest alert possible, such that she wouldn't overlook a single speck of dust or fail to hear a mouse's footsteps.

Beneath the mask of Guiding Camouflage that placed Manon's face over her own, Menou was smiling. It was a clear and beautiful expression, yet if anyone were there to see it, they would shiver at its transience.

"..."

The cathedral was shockingly empty on the inside.

It must be true, then, that those with the title of Elder formed the continent's decision-making body.

Officially, the Faust had three political powers: the right to judge good and evil, the right to produce the common currency of the continent, and the right to teach ideology through the church.

The amount of power gained was immense if one could earn a place at the top of the Faust. It was beyond a matter of one's conjuring power. Making an enemy of the Elders essentially meant making an enemy of the very workings of the continent.

Kagarma Dartaros had once tried to challenge the machinations of the Elders.

"But...in the end, he failed."

The Fourth ideology, which tried to create a land without social castes or manipulative leaders, ultimately collapsed. Without its head, the rest of the Fourth scattered, its remains degenerating into petty criminal groups.

Menou had no interest in the powers of the continent or the management of the nations, however.

She sought to alter the fate of something far smaller, yet with an enormous effect—a single life.

"If I can just do that much..."

Menou wanted to reach out her hand to Akari, in spite of herself.

She had no time to waste making excuses for the feelings of friendship she had accidentally developed toward an Otherworlder, a taboo she was supposed to kill. For Menou, her fondness for Akari was nothing short of a sin.

She once made a vow that she would become a villain.

So she had to kill Akari. There could be no reward for Menou, so Akari would be the last victim to complete her mission as an Executioner. Because she had killed so many people already, she would settle things by claiming one final life, even if it meant there was no saving her own.

Menou had already abandoned the notion of escape. Whether her murder of Akari ended in success or failure, Menou was going to die here.

That was why she had steeled herself, come all the way to the cathedral fully prepared to meet an honorable death.

Can I really beat Master like this, though?

The doubt arose unbidden, wrapping around Menou's heart and threatening

to crush it with severe pressure.

“.....!”

Menou’s Guiding Camouflage nearly wavered. She hurriedly focused on controlling herself and managed to maintain Manon’s appearance.

It’ll be fine.

The girl steadied her breathing while reassuring herself.

She knew it was reckless and that she was out of her depth.

Yet she still had to do it.

There was no turning back now. Menou resumed walking.

She had figured out her destination when she and Kagarma first arrived at the cathedral and had since learned the floor plan. There were very few people inside. Thus far, the only individual she’d seen was Hooseyard, who was in charge of the Dragon Gate. Because entry into the cathedral was so severely restricted, the security on the inside was full of holes.

Of course, the biggest problem was Master Flare. There was no telling where she lurked.

The internal construction of the cathedral was very unusual.

Menou had seen many church facilities in her lifetime. She knew that any sizable building was bound to have a hidden room or two. Some others might have unusual layouts due to mistakes made during construction.

But this cathedral had other kinds of problems.

The train platform that immediately caught the eye when one entered was bizarre enough, but there was no path to where the place of worship ought to lie beyond it. A large altar formed a wall that completely blocked the rest of the hall.

“You can’t go that way, I’m afraid.”

As Menou stood there flummoxed, Hooseyard called out to her from the station, not sounding particularly remonstrative.

“Only Archbishop Elcami is allowed past there. It’s not within my jurisdiction,

so a tour is out of the question.”

“Oh, I had no idea. I suppose I’ll have to give up, then.”

Maintaining her Guiding Camouflage, Menou used Manon’s tone and manner of speaking in her response before turning away. Evidently, there was something beyond that altar. Given that the cathedral was a barrier, it was likely protecting something more than the strange *Teleportation* site where Menou and Hooseyard stood.

Oddly enough, Menou had just reached the same theory Ashuna had voiced when she first saw the holy land.

Whatever the cathedral was hiding, Menou assumed it had nothing to do with her present goals. She was here on a mission, with no time to consider anything else.

For now, she decided to take a closer look in the dead of night. She turned around to return to her room when something caught her eye.

Her entire body froze when she realized who was walking by.

It was a person of unparalleled importance even in the holy land—Archbishop Elcami.

Menou was well aware of her existence.

Every member of the Faust near the holy land knew her name. She was that famous and had the power to match her renown.

When the archbishop’s eyes fell on Menou disguised as Manon, the wrinkles around her eyes deepened in displeasure.

But she couldn’t have seen through the disguise. Reminding herself that she was Manon right now, Menou gave a serene smile and ignored her. Just as they calmly passed each other by, Menou realized something.

Momo was next to Archbishop Elcami.

Menou’s aide, her pink hair pulled up into pigtails by two scrunchies, looked at the disguised Menou, and her eyes went wide.

How did she realize who it actually was? Whatever the answer, Momo

pinched the sleeve of Menou's borrowed kimono, then released it as she walked past.

Menou couldn't help smiling a little at the Momo-like gesture.

She had a dependable ally here in the cathedral.

Self-serving though it might be, that fact was enough to make her footsteps a little lighter.

Menou was here.

She appeared to be disguised as Manon Libelle, but Momo saw right through that. Besides, now that Manon was a demon in human form, she couldn't possibly enter the holy land. It was definitely Menou.

Knowing that her darling Menou had successfully infiltrated the cathedral, Momo mentally pumped her fists in the air.

Elcami, on the other hand, looked annoyed.

"Manon Libelle... Tch, she must be here with Kagarma Dartaros. The scum who caused chaos on our continent, entering the holy land? And that damned Kagarma has the nerve to bring Manon Libelle into the cathedral? How very impudent...!"

The reason for her bad mood was simple. Elcami didn't appreciate any visitors. In particular, she must be frustrated that she couldn't do anything about the presence of known criminals.

Momo recognized the name of Director Kagarma, though she was surprised that even Elcami couldn't do much about him.

"Archbishop?"

"Yes?"

"Pardon me... I just thought that your job seems quite stressful."

Elcami narrowed her aged eyes. "Shut your mouth. I'll be assigning you a mentor shortly. Prepare yourself."

Momo only shrugged at the reasonable response.

It looked like currying favor with Elcami was out of the question. Momo

obediently quieted, hoping this so-called mentor would be a better source of information.

Hooseyard, the supervisor who made her home in the highly unusual train station within the cathedral, thought of herself as an ordinary priestess.

She was twenty-three years old. Her features were fairly pretty, and her figure equally decent. At age ten, her eyesight had begun declining, and she'd worn glasses since. However, Hooseyard happened to think of them as part of her charm. Recently, she'd even added a conjuration of her own devising, making them into a modest conjuring tool in their own right, so she was even more attached to them than the average glasses enthusiast.

At eighteen, she'd been granted her very own indigo priestess robes. This was only slightly faster than the average priestess took to achieve formal recognition. Neither she nor anyone else thought she was an exceptionally gifted member of the Faust.

Hooseyard's capacity for using Guiding Force was high, but she had no instincts for battle. Though she excelled academically, she wasn't quite suited to fighting, a standard for any member of the Faust. Thus, she wasn't especially desirable to be positioned anywhere and instead began her professional priestess career traveling the continent as a pilgrim.

The woman thought of herself as a priestess of middling competency and personality. Generally, her image of herself was reasonably accurate, but there was one thing that set her apart.

To put it lightly, Hooseyard was obsessively fond of the Dragon Gate.

The underground earthen vein and the sky's heavenly vein combined to form the most important route on the planet.

Hooseyard's eccentric attachment led to a knack for observing things through delicate manipulation of Guiding Force connections with the astral vein and evolved into an ability to interfere with things using a combination of materials and crests.

She'd traveled to every nation before being summoned back to the holy land. On her journey, she'd created a detailed map of the earthen vein, including

hitherto unknown sections; charted the changes in the current of the heavenly vein; and made city-planning maps based around her observations of the veins, selling these to earn money so that she could go and observe another vein in a satisfying cycle.

Hooseyard lacked ambition and a sense of duty, instead devoting herself to the flow of the veins as she traveled on her pilgrimage. However, when she was twenty, she was brought into the cathedral with (from her perspective) no warning whatsoever.

In reality, the unprecedeted accuracy of her astral vein predictions had caught the attention of multiple nations. Some of the Noblesse had even issued knights to try to bring her in. The written report that caused all this chaos, which included an inquisitor being dispatched, led Archbishop Elcami to pull Hooseyard under her personal supervision.

Of course, the absentminded Hooseyard was ignorant of all that.

All she knew was that the archbishop abruptly pulled her out of the field and assigned her to manage the gate of the cathedral in the holy land.

The cathedral required *Teleportation* to enter and exit. The conjuring circle that used the Dragon Gate constructed a path out of Guiding Force and sent humans through it. Functionally, the conjuring formed a small, artificial astral vein.

For Hooseyard, this job was like a divine calling. She'd first worked alongside the previous pastor, but the old woman retired after less than half a year, citing her age. This left the young Hooseyard alone in the mystery-filled cathedral, and all manner of small tasks ended up falling to her.

Because of the timing, Hooseyard was moved to tears of joy when she learned she would get an assistant.

“I’ll finally have an aide of my own...!” When she received word from Elcami, she held her scripture up in the air and trembled with joy. “I was just starting to reach my limit. Your assignments are always so urgent, Archbishop Elcami. And I have so much extra work besides managing the Dragon Gate!”

Behind her glasses, Hooseyard’s eyes were full of emotion.

Just a few days ago, Elcami had assigned her the absurdly difficult task of making a teleport conjuring circle. When she was suddenly told to prepare a route to the land of salt in a single week, she nearly wept.

It was practically impossible. Yet despite what she thought of herself, Hooseyard was far from ordinary. She'd been working hard to prepare as best she could, but her job was so complex that she'd begun to desire an assistant once this was all over.

Hooseyard's time in the cathedral was valuable experience. In particular, she enjoyed complex conjuring theory, like that of teleportation and other efforts related to the astral veins. The Dragon Gate enabled high-level connection to the earthen vein, and Hooseyard was more than willing to devote her life to its management and the development of related hypotheses.

It was the young woman's truest wish to accomplish more with an aide's help.

And it was as she considered the idea that the archbishop informed her that she would be granted an assistant. Overflowing with gratitude toward Elcami, Hooseyard hurried to meet her new subordinate.

"Pardon me!"

When Hooseyard entered the room where her new aide was waiting, she found an adorable girl.

"I'm Momo."

She was youthful and had to be close to ten years Hooseyard's junior. Cute pink pigtails adorned the sides of her head. Hooseyard found it impressive that Momo was a priestess and not still a nun at her age, even if she was only in white robes.

At any rate, she certainly looked like a sweet and adorable mentee. Hooseyard was thrilled.

"My name is Hooseyard. It's nice to meet you, Miss...can I just call you Momo?"

"Do whatever you want, why don't you?"

Momo's response was shockingly curt.

The sheer coldness of her words and expression nearly stunned Hooseyard into silence, but she wouldn't give up on the conversation. Right now, Hooseyard wanted to focus on constructing the long-distance teleportation conjuring circle. This girl was her assistant. Perhaps the girl was being shy, Hooseyard reasoned, and she brushed past the rocky introduction to assign her aide some work to lighten her own load.

"My job is primarily to manage the teleport conjuring circle, the Dragon Gate. Are you proficient with ceremonial conjurings, Momo? It'd be a great help if you told me what you do best. Working with the heavenly vein might be difficult, but perhaps you could combine the materials and crests needed to construct the conjuration for the ceremonial conjuring to manipulate the earthen vein..."

"Huh?" The girl looked at Hooseyard like she might an alien attempting human speech. "How am I supposed to control a ceremonial conjuring with the earthen vein? Be realistic, please. That's a job for an expert who's devoted their whole life to the subject."

"Hmm?"

Hooseyard tilted her head in confusion.

This wasn't right. Wasn't an aide supposed to make her job easier?

To be honest, precise control of the earthen vein was a necessary prerequisite to doing Hooseyard's job. Elcami understood Hooseyard's role perfectly well—there was no way she didn't. Surely, the archbishop wasn't so uninterested in the one who managed traffic in and out of the cathedral every day that she would arbitrarily appoint a random person to her. She wouldn't do that. Definitely not. Probably not. Maybe not. She wouldn't...right?!

I refuse to believe the archbishop is capable of that...! Hooseyard rallied herself internally.

Taking a deep breath, she steadied herself. Perhaps she had expected too much too soon. By all appearances, Momo was a teenager. Although she couldn't handle ceremonial conjurings, she had to possess a natural affinity.

"W-well, are you good at scripture conjurings? If so, then you might have a

knack for ceremonial ones, too—”

“I hardly ever use those. Why bother when it’s faster to use Guiding Enhancement to punch someone’s lights out?”

“Wh... Why the violence...?”

Hooseyard fell to her knees in despair. Clearly, Momo was particularly battle-oriented, even for a member of the Faust. She was definitely not the type well-suited to desk work, much less helping with Hooseyard’s duties.

As Hooseyard silently mourned, Momo looked down at her coldly.

“Could you hurry up and teach me the ropes, please? You can start with everything you know about the cathedral’s interior, Ms. Four-Eyes.”

“F-Four-Eyes...? O-okay, fine. I get it. I’m sure we’ll find a job you can handle in no time, Momo! Ah, if you’d like, feel free to call me ma’am or...”

“Excuse me?”

Momo shot her a threatening glare.

“Nothing at all, Miss Momo!”

More terrifying yet, Momo started using Guiding Enhancement as she scowled. Hooseyard’s goose bumps informed her that this girl possessed immense amounts of Guiding Force. The timid woman immediately caved beneath the pressure of her much younger aide.

People who produced a lot of Guiding Force from their souls tended to be somewhat mentally unstable. This girl wasn’t just combat-minded, she had a total berserker personality. Mentally, Hooseyard offered complaints to Elcami. (Unsurprisingly, she wasn’t brave enough to voice those gripes in reality.)

This wasn’t what I imagined at all.

Nearly sobbing over the contrast between her ideal subordinate and her present reality, Hooseyard began picking out jobs for Momo to do, starting with simple material gathering.

Chaos in the Holy Land

A calm, hilly area lay on the other side of the holy land from the Wild Frontier.

Upon climbing the gentle slopes covered in short-stemmed flowers, one would arrive at a dreary-looking monastery. The people belonging to this particular cloister were very unusual, but they didn't attract attention since the oddness wasn't in a way that was apparent to the average observer.

If one continued past the monastery at the apex of the hill and started to head back down, they'd discover a curious scene.

There were rows upon rows of thin, stake-like stone monuments.

The one-meter-tall rocks had no inscriptions, decorations, or anything to distinguish them from one another. They were all alike, driven into the ground so uniformly that there was little point in attempting to differentiate them.

It was a graveyard.

Every one of the markers that covered the downward slope and beyond was a headstone for a member of the Faust who had died someplace in the world. This western hinterland where pilgrims never tread was a memorial to all the martyrs.

As the Master returned to her monastery after a long time away, she leaned on an unmarked gravestone and looked around at the familiar sight.

Though privately, its role was to train future Executioners—essentially Faust assassins—the official duty of Master Flare's abbey was to maintain the graves of the clergy.

The majority of the Faust left no mark on history nor record of their names when they died.

There were virtually no bodies or keepsakes buried beneath the gravestones for anyone to mourn. Churches across the continent merely tallied the Faust

members who passed away, and more rocks were added here in this plot.

Their arrangement was devoid even of artistry. Each new grave was added plainly as a matter of procedure. Yet the sheer number of them somehow still added up to a grand sight.

The nuns of the monastery were polishing the stones. These were the very same girls being trained to become Executioners. While Master Flare was theoretically their supervisor, she paid no attention to their work as she gazed out over the tombstones, a cigarette held between her fingers.

“Light.”

“Yes, Master.”

The scripture held under Master Flare’s arm began constructing a conjuring to comply with her one-syllable request.

Guiding Force: Connect—Imitation Circuit: Pseudo-Concept [Light]—Invoke [Lesser: Light Heat]

Once invoked, the conjuring turned the Guiding Force into a physical phenomenon, light converging and creating heat.

As the tobacco began to crackle, Master Flare took a long drag. The end of the cigarette was smoldering.

The Pseudo-Concept of *Light*.

What a useful conjuring. Concentrated light and heat made for an effective attack conjuring, and it could also disrupt the enemy’s vision, making it an excellent ability all around. This was a concept from the planet’s source that had once been attached to an Otherworlder’s soul. When the girl who could control the Pure Concept of *Light* became a Human Error, it was added to the ubiquitous conjurings of the world.

Summoning Otherworlders with Pure Concepts was not done out of desire for their individual strengths.

When an Otherworlder was brought here, a concept was dragged out from the planet and attached to their soul as a Pure Concept, where it could later fall into the hands of humanity as a conjuring. That was the true purpose.

Master Flare watched the thin plume of smoke rise as she toyed with the fumes in her mouth.

Tobacco was an indulgence, but she rarely smoked. She didn't particularly enjoy the taste and wasn't weak enough to be reliant on something of the sort. Worst of all, the scent of smoke would cling to her and could even become part of her body odor if she made a habit of it.

Although she had retired from active duty, there was no telling when she might have to kill someone from the shadows. It was her nature as an assassin to dislike anything that could inhibit her stealth, tobacco included.

Bad for her health. Inconvenient for battle. If she wasn't careful, it could even lead directly to her death.

It was because of all these negatives that Master Flare had decided to smoke a single cigarette whenever she felt the urge to do something stupid and pointless.

It was a perfect tool for self-torture. She opened her mouth wide and belched out smoke.

The white fumes swam through the air with her loud exhale.

Was she secretly hoping this would eat away at her lungs and eventually kill her? Scoffing at her own drawn-out suicide, Master Flare lowered her hand, gripping the cigarette between her index and ring fingers.

The smoke wreathed around her chest and rose upward.

Even without her taking another inhale, the lit cigarette slowly grew shorter. Since she had no real desire to taste the smoke, she felt the calmest in the moments when the thing was burning up pointlessly far from her lips.

If only her own life could burn away as easily. Yet despite that feeling, Master Flare's misfortune was that no fire was strong enough to incinerate her.

She had taken many lives. By killing people, she devoured their life spans to extend her own. The first person Flare ever slew was a member of the Faust. The victim of that incident, who'd had a huge effect on her own life and personality, was undoubtedly resting here as well.

One of the many stones that lined this peaceful hillside existed as proof that she had lived and that Flare had ended her.

Unexpectedly, Flare remembered one of the deceased who wasn't memorialized here.

Around the time people first started calling her Flare, she had befriended an Otherworlder.

"The way you smoke those things is so uncool."

Flare suddenly recalled the voice of the girl who pointed and laughed at her, even though that same girl was the one who taught her how to smoke cigarettes.

In retrospect, she'd probably refrained from snapping back at her because she knew that was exactly what the girl wanted.

Flare threw back her head and laughed, coughing out smoke simultaneously. Coarse laughter issued from her wide-open mouth.

"Master. I've been thinking this for a while, but the way you smoke those things is a bit... Ah?! M-Master, stop, you'll burn me! I am not an ashtray!"

Ignoring the cries, Master Flare mercilessly tapped her ashes out on the chatty scripture.

She wasn't cutting off the scripture's comment just because the unwanted advice was annoying.

The consciousness that dwelled inside this scripture wasn't her. But once in a while, it said things that were startlingly similar to her, which irritated Master Flare to no end.

When a living human's spirit and soul were poured into a scripture used as a base, it gained consciousness, creating a pseudo life-form. It was essentially a failed attempt at a Guiding Force life-form, manufactured by Flare's own weakness.

Once, her killing intent was the reason for her existence.

She was born to slay people and raised doing the same.

Only when she wished for something else did her fate reach a dead end.

All she had to do in life was kill, yet she'd found herself hoping for another life. At the time, she'd really believed the world might change. And then, of course, all her dreams were dashed.

Now she knew there was no point in longing.

"Shut up. You're nothing but a tool. Got it?"

"...Yes, Master."

Good.

"I imagine Menou is waiting for me...but the last thing I want is Experion getting involved in all this."

"Is he here?"

"No doubt about it."

Experion was the only fighter powerful enough to cow Ashuna Grisarika. Out of all the members of the current generation of the Grisarika royal family, the cowardly princess of Grisarika who favored exceptional people loved solely her youngest sister.

"He's an Elder, too, after all."

Although she was powerful, Master Flare wasn't invincible, and there were a few specific individuals she would prefer not to be targeted by if she could help it. One was Genom Cthulha, who had transcended death. Among the Elders, Archbishop Elcami was another. And Grisarika's secret weapon, Experion Riverse, was a third.

Naturally, Flare's foolish pupil was nowhere on that list.

"What do you want to do about your successor, Master?"

"Kill her."

"This seems a rather roundabout approach if that's the case."

"Is it? Well, I admit to harboring a little hope that she'll surprise me."

Master Flare wasn't blessed with high levels of Guiding Force or physical

prowess. It could be argued that her only redeeming feature was her highly advanced Guiding Force manipulation. However, there was one technique beyond her.

Connecting her Guiding Force with that of another living person.

This technique, which Menou and Akari accomplished with ease, was so rare that no one else in the world could achieve it.

Not even Flare.

Even when she attempted it with a friend, certain it would work, it resulted in unbearable agony and damage to both their souls. No matter how much Flare had felt that she'd accepted the other person, no matter how confident she was that they would accept her, the two had been far from reaching the ideal level.

Cross-connecting Guiding Force was an act of offering up one's soul to another and vice versa.

Menou, who could control any Guiding Force that touched her soul, had no idea of her own true worth.

"If she manages to surpass my expectations, someone like me won't pose a threat."

"...I don't know, Master. I think that may be selling yourself short."

"Yeah?"

At the very least, if she were Menou, she wouldn't be threatened by Flare in her current state. That was how powerful Menou's unique peculiarity was, even if she herself didn't know it.

"If she lets me kill her, then that's all there is to it. I don't see any value in a successor who can't surpass me."

The heat from her shrinking cigarette had reached her fingers. She flicked it away.

Guiding Force: Connect—Imitation Circuit: Pseudo-Concept [Light]—Invoke [Lesser: Light Ray]

The beam of light from her scripture burned the cigarette butt to nothing in

midair.

She had to admit that it was convenient for disposing of garbage. As Master Flare chuckled, her scripture flashed in disapproval.

“You’re very hard to understand, Master.”

“I just hate sharing my emotions with someone else.”

Master Flare turned her gaze toward the shining white holy land.

It was about an hour away on foot.

Unhurried, she turned toward it and began walking.

The morning after they both infiltrated the cathedral, Menou and Momo had a secret meeting.

“So, Momo, you were assigned to work under that priestess with the glasses?”

“Yes, and I couldn’t have asked for a better assignment, toooo! She’s very nice, so I bet I can squeeze all kinds of information out of herrrr.”

To Menou, Hooseyard was the priestess who greeted her when she first stepped off the train; to Momo, she was a convenient source of intelligence.

The two girls were talking in the south tower room where Menou was staying. Momo had been assigned to sleep in the strange station building within the cathedral like Hooseyard, but she had slipped away to see Menou.

Elcami probably thought to lock Momo away in the cathedral so she couldn’t get out and reveal anything. However, Menou was already here, so remaining inside made conspiring easier for Momo.

“I thought the cathedral would be more impressive, but it’s full of holes on the inside, hmm?”

“They must be that confident in their external defenses. It would certainly have been impossible to get in through ordinary means.”

“But you and I managed, darliiing. According to that four-eyes, Master Flare is at the monastery right now, not heeere. You should be able to make contact with that boob-lady noooow!”

“Yes...but there would be no point.”

Although they'd successfully entered the cathedral, they had no way out. It wasn't the right time to make contact with Akari yet.

“We'll just have to wait until the teleport gate to the land of salt is ready. It's an enormous help that you're working directly with the manager of the Dragon Gate, Momo.”

“Hee-hee!”

The knowledge Momo had gathered was invaluable.

Hooseyard was their key to conquering the holy land. She was working on making a long-distance tunnel from the cathedral to the land of salt. All the information Menou required to act would come straight from that priestess.

“By the way, darliiing...” Momo pointed at the smiling man in the corner without sparing him a glance. Momo's expression turned cold, and her pupils widened and filled with bloodlust. “What in the world is thaaat? I can kill it, riiight?”

“No, it's best to just ignore it.”

Menou had gotten used to handling Kagarma at this point. He was harmless enough. Calmly, she shifted her position to hide Momo from his sight.

As far as Momo was concerned, Kagarma was already on thin ice for sharing a room with Menou. And she was all the more likely to despise him since he was also a sketchy old man.

“All right, then I'll keep wringing more information out of the four-eeeyes.”

“Excellent.”

With their plan decided, they ended the meeting.

The ceremonial conjuring circle for teleportation.

At its heart, the principle behind the long-distance instant teleportation conjuring using the Dragon Gate and the earthen vein was no different than the unusual Guiding train Menou rode to the holy land.

It created a route with Guiding Force, temporarily converted a target into a

Guiding Force body, and reconstructed the target at the chosen location. Individual *Teleportation* was impossible without the proper Pure Concept, but the cathedral had the ancient relic known as the Dragon Gate. It was the only tool that could mimic that power.

It did have some limitations, though.

The biggest problem was that no earthen vein channel went to the land of salt, which lay beyond the ocean. Without a Guiding Force route to follow, the conjuring wouldn't connect properly. Worse yet, it was much too large a distance for humans to bridge the gap with Guiding Force. Hooseyard's coordinates for the land of salt were so far from the nearest port on the continent that it would take weeks to get there by boat.

It wasn't entirely impossible, however. In fact, Hooseyard's predecessor had connected a route to the land of salt several times before.

There was another vein as good or better than the earthen vein.

The heavenly vein.

It was an astral vein that flowed through the sky, with a comparable amount of Guiding Force moving through it. Despite being a massive power source, it wasn't tapped for cities like the earthen vein because it didn't follow a fixed course through the air. The constantly moving current made it highly difficult to grasp, such that the average conjurer wouldn't bother trying.

But when it came to conjurings related to the astral veins, Hooseyard was far above average.

“...”

As she knelt in front of the glowing golden Dragon Gate and prayed, Hooseyard gave off a mystical aura.

It was the ultimate devotion of a ceremony that touched on the abyss. Like a sage, she hovered on the border between dreams and reality, wholly enraptured. In this moment, Hooseyard was truly a holy woman begging for a miracle beyond human comprehension.

Anyone who saw Hooseyard in this state would be captivated by her

concentration level.

She was holding a golden key in her hands. It was a Guiding vessel made of three kinds of ore, inlaid with twenty gemstones. Hooseyard herself had carved thirty-three crests into the carefully selected materials, forming a conjuration that connected her spirit to the Dragon Gate by way of Guiding Force and led her toward the heavens. She carefully, finely, delicately sent her own Guiding Force to link with a point in the sky.

This Guiding Force connection was unlike any ordinary invocation.

Hooseyard's soul was following the flow of the heavens. From her perspective, Guiding Force wasn't something to be manipulated. Instead of subjugating it with her spirit, she simply gave in to its movements, and in return, it answered her prayers.

Conjuring was essentially a conversation with power.

Hooseyard was connected to a part of the planet itself. The difficulty of constructing a teleportation conjuring circle lay in joining a Guiding Force route. Movement to the chosen destination required the creation of a path that didn't exist before, no matter how narrow it might be. The longer the distance to be bridged, the more challenging the labor.

Of the thousand priestesses in the holy land, the number who could invoke this technique could be counted on one hand.

The construction of the long-distance teleport conjuring circle by way of the Dragon Gate...was complete.

"I made a connection."

Leaving the pure, trancelike state, Hooseyard returned to herself and reality.

The woman had successfully finished her daunting task. She'd connected from the holy land in the west to the floating land of salt far across the ocean. Even the finest sailor wouldn't dream of crossing that route by sea, yet she'd forged a teleportation route.

Even Hooseyard had never traversed such a long distance before. Something stirred in her chest.

Realizing she was damp with sweat, she wiped her brow and sighed in satisfaction.

“I’ve made another adorable child. Hee-hee-hee...”

She gazed at the Guiding Force route she’d formed as if it were her own offspring. This was undeniably degenerate behavior, but fortunately, no one was around to witness it.

She’d successfully met the impossible deadline. That was enough work for today, at any rate. Hooseyard left the teleport gate for the cathedral. When she returned to her room, Momo was waiting for her there, looking dubious about her superior’s springy gait.

“What’s the matter with you? You seem to be in an alarmingly good mood.”

“Is it that obvious? Well, I just finished a reeeeally hard job!”

“Uh-huh...”

Momo’s eyes glittered at Hooseyard’s lighthearted response. The priestess failed to notice this, likely because she was such a research-oriented conjurer.

Hooseyard’s carefree personality made her ill-suited to the battlefield, where the situation was constantly shifting. She much preferred ceremonial conjurings, for which she could take her time and build up materials and conjurations before the invocation. As long as she was in a place where she could feel the flow of the earthen vein, she could spend a whole day without ever getting bored. And if it was to investigate the heavenly vein, Hooseyard would happily climb any sacred mountain.

When it came to her passion for the astral veins, this priestess was second to none. Her interpersonal skills, however, left much to be desired.

“Miss Momo, you really ought to study conjurings seriously. You’ve got a real talent...and it’s fuuun...!”

“That’s none of your concern, thank you. I don’t see myself doing well, so I’d prefer not to try.”

“Awww...” Hooseyard’s shoulders slumped.

Ultimately, she could only trust Momo with odd jobs like paperwork. She

didn't assign her to anything related to conjurings. Momo's Guiding Force manipulation abilities weren't yet on the level required for that.

It was helpful for saving time Hooseyard might have otherwise spent on such chores, but she still wanted to teach her precious new aide the wonders of ceremonial conjuring in connection with the astral veins.

Momo's overall talent was generally high. She had likely just forced her way through life without much of a problem thus far.

Undoubtedly, she held great latent potential, and she was blessed with a substantial deal of Guiding Force, meaning the world itself essentially loved her. Since Hooseyard had spent her life alongside the immense flow of Guiding Force known as the astral veins, she knew that very well, and thus was terribly envious of Momo's significant stores of Guiding Force.

A gifted girl like Momo could probably interfere with the earthen vein using only her scripture, even without materials or conjurations. Hooseyard needed to assemble the components and crests to form the conjuration and produce a ceremonial vessel on top of that—around a month of effort for only a day of working with the earthen vein.

"If I could manage that so easily, my goodness, the things I would do... Hee-hee-hee. I'd spend my whole life making my map of the astral veins even more wonderful. How niiice... Miss Momo, you're sooo lucky... Ah! But if you would only assist me, then I could still...!"

"Why do you think I'd help you with that?"

"Huh?! Are you reading my mind?!"

"You were talking out loud, you four-eyed freak."

Her nickname had already devolved from Miss Four-Eyes to four-eyed freak. Hooseyard clutched her head, bemoaning the loss of her dignity as the girl's superior.

"Forget all that. What sort of person is the archbishop?"

"What? Are you more interested in the archbishop than the astral veins? You're so strange, Miss Momo."

“Most people would be more curious about the archbishop, a real nearby person, than the astral veins that trail all over the place.”

Archbishop Elcami...

Hooseyard thoughtfully pictured her superior.

She was the greatest conjurer of her time. Hooseyard was confident that her own proficiency placed her among the best when it came to large-scale conjurings using the astral veins, but she also knew her confidence would crumble if she had to face Elcami.

“Archbishop Elcami is...a scary person, I suppose.”

“Scary?”

“Mm-hmm. She yells all the time, is constantly in a bad mood, complains as soon as you start talking to her, then hits you with impossible deadlines... Honestly, I don’t like talking to her...”

Hooseyard’s eyes grew more and more distant. The woman really was like an angel of death to her.

“But the thing is...I also think she’s a surprisingly normal person.”

“Normal?” Momo repeated.

“That’s right.”

Elcami hadn’t climbed the ranks of the Faust on virtue of her piety, nor through diabolical schemes. She’d advanced purely based on her high conjuring capabilities. That made her personality fairly easy to understand.

The archbishop was the kind of person who depended purely on strength and accomplishments.

“And her Guiding Force is nothing short of miraculous.”

Hooseyard put Guiding Force into her glasses as she spoke.

Guiding Force: Connect—Glasses, Crest—Invoke [Guiding Force Vision]

Guiding Light glowed around the frames. She had engraved them with a crest to let her observe the movement of Guiding Force more precisely. Using the invoked crest conjuring, she inspected the course of power in Momo’s body.

Once, Hooseyard had looked at Elcami with this tool and had been left speechless.

“Hmm... You’re on the right track, too, Miss Momo, but not quite as good as the archbishop.”

“...What in the world are those glasses?”

“Hmm? They’re a crest tool to view Guiding Force before it becomes a phenomenon. Viewing you through these, I would say you’re a liiittle lacking in spirit.”

Body, spirit, and soul. Elcami had exceptional quality, volume, and balance in all three. Hooseyard so adored the astral veins that she was even enamored with that sight.

After inspecting Momo’s Guiding Force, Hooseyard deactivated the conjuring and returned to her regular vision.

“You have a lot of promise, though, Miss Momo. What did you do before you came here?”

“I’m guessing this won’t be a surprise, but I specialized in combat.”

“Yes, I thought so...”

Hooseyard couldn’t have guessed that Momo was an Executioner’s aide, but she knew the girl was well-acquainted with combat.

“Maybe that’s why... Miss Momo, I don’t think you realize what it means to be blessed with ample Guiding Force. You probably believe it’s powerful and convenient, right?”

“And?”

“Listen, Miss Momo. Guiding Force is the basis of all phenomena in the world. A human is merely a conjured phenomenon using the materials known as the body and the personality called the spirit. The essence of humanity lies in Guiding Force. Have you ever thought about how incredible it is that you can link with that and manipulate it?”

It sounded like eccentric logic, but Hooseyard’s voice had the tone of a sage trying to enlighten someone.

This was the one truth she had come to realize in her twenty-odd years of following the veins of the very planet.

“...What are you getting at?”

“You should devote yourself to ceremonial conjurings, too, Miss Momo. You can discover the joy of yielding your body to the flow of Guiding Force far greater than yourself and—”

“No, thank you.”

Now Momo saw where this was going, and she promptly shut Hooseyard down. The woman slumped in disappointment.

Just then, Hooseyard’s scripture glowed with Guiding Light. It was the communication conjuring used exclusively by the Faust. The only person with a link to Hooseyard’s scripture was Archbishop Elcami, so it was undoubtedly a message from her boss.

She put her palm on her scripture and read the message.

“Say, Miss Momo...”

“Now what? If you start ranting about the earthen vein next, I’ll shove this paperwork down your throat.”

“Why would you say something so awful?! No, it’s just that our boss seems to have finally lost her mind.”

“Hmm? What’s the message say?”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. I’m sure it’s just a mistake.”

Hooseyard tried to brush off the question, but Momo turned a sharp glare on her. The woman wilted under the pressure, and she pointed at her scripture.

“Ah-ha-ha, she says there are a bunch of—”

No sooner had she begun to elaborate than the door opened.

It was none other than Elcami. “Too slow, you fool! I told you to send Momo to me! What exactly is the holdup?!” she barked.

“Yes, ma’aaam! I’m so sorry!”

Elcami was clearly only acting impatient, but Hooseyard still cowered and ducked her head apologetically, tears filling her eyes at the scolding. Elcami ignored her, turning her scowl on Momo.

“Forget it. I’ll take it from here. Momo.”

“Yees? How can I help yooou?”

“Is *that* what you people were plotting?”

“Pardon?”

She obviously doesn’t know what you’re talking about, Hooseyard thought sympathetically.

Elcami’s furious eyes narrowed at the pink-haired girl’s response. “As if I even need to ask. Things like this don’t just happen out of nowhere. Come with me.”

Elcami stormed out of the station building without waiting for an answer. Momo and Hooseyard followed, soon arriving before a window in the second-floor hallway. The barrier wasn’t transparent from the outside, but it was from the interior.

Elcami tapped on the window, commanding Momo and Hooseyard to look outside.

When Hooseyard obeyed, she was met with a very startling sight.

“No way...”

A swarm of monsters was approaching from the pilgrimage route. The creatures were clearly too large to be ordinary wild animals, and they were closing in fast. All told, there were at least several dozen.

“A force of monsters this large can only be Pandæmonium’s doing, right? How did you get a Human Error to do your dirty work?”

“Wait, Archbishop. Why do you think this is Miss Momo’s fault? Please don’t make false accusations!”

“Quiet, you! I don’t need opinions from someone who’s only good for working the Dragon Gate!”

“Yeek!”

Hooseyard made a valiant effort to defend her new aide, but it was all in vain. Elcami shouted her down into a quivering ball of regret.

The target of the allegations appeared completely unbothered, however.

“Now, this is a surprise. What’s going on there, hmmmm?”

“Feigning ignorance to the last, eh?”

“Your lack of trust is truly heartbreaking. I’ve been in the cathedral this whole time, haven’t I?”

“You could’ve easily set this up beforehand. Those monsters couldn’t break through the holy land’s barrier even if Pandæmonium showed up personally. We could ignore them, but... Momo.”

“Yes?”

Elcami’s wizened finger pointed out the window. “Go intercept them.”

“Intercept them...” Momo pointed at herself. “Me? Alone?” Then she directed her finger at the scene beyond the window to confirm. “Are you telling me to die?”

“If you must,” the archbishop responded airily. “The only proof of your innocence I’ll accept is if you wipe out all those monsters.”

Momo folded her arms.

“A-Archbishop Elcami! You can’t possibly expect—”

“Silence. Prepare a Dragon Gate route to the outer edge of the holy land.”

“Wehhh...”

Hooseyard didn’t so much as get to finish her sentence. While she sank into depression over her inability to protect her precious subordinate, Momo quietly and seriously judged the difficulty of destroying the swarm of monsters against killing Elcami on the spot and running away.

“Ohhhh, all right. I’ll do it...ma’am.”

“M-Miss Momo? Are you quite sure...?”

“It’s fine.”

Momo was a priestess, if only barely. No matter how shriveled Elcami appeared, Momo could discern there was a hopelessly massive difference in strength between them.

It wasn't anything as eerily threatening as Master Flare. Rather, it was plain at a glance that Momo could never defeat the archbishop.

Such was the sheer level of power Elcami held.

There wasn't any good reason for Momo to risk her life in a fight with the old woman. She was confident that she wouldn't die from charging into the horde of monsters anyhow, so she unenthusiastically agreed.

Fortunately, Elcami wasn't as unreasonable as Master Flare.

"Fear not. I'll be joining you," the archbishop said.

"Huh? Archbishop, you're going to fight?"

Hooseyard blinked in surprise.

Elcami promptly turned on her. "What, would you like to fight, too? You're still a priestess, astral vein-obsessed as you might be. Surely you could handle yourself."

"Absolutely out of the question! I'll stay here like the scum I am, thank you very much...!"

The cowardly Hooseyard looked ready to break down into sobs again, but she refused as firmly as she could manage.

At the back of the swarm of monsters flooding the pilgrimage path to the holy land was a girl in a nun's habit riding atop one of the creatures.

Her mount resembled an ancient herbivore with a long, tall neck. With each step of its four massive feet, her wavy silver hair bounced on her shoulders.

From this ideal vantage point, Sahara used binoculars to peer ahead at the holy land as it was quickly becoming surrounded by monsters.

Over one hundred of them were marching along now. The pilgrimage path forged by humans wasn't nearly large enough to contain them, so they trampled the nuns' diligently tended fields as they continued forward.

“Beautiful.”

How many had dared to assail the holy land in recorded history? Sahara had once been a member of the Faust, at least in theory. She’d never expected to be in this position.

As far as Sahara could tell, the nuns of the monasteries had already evacuated. They were well-trained, even if they weren’t yet full-fledged members of the Faust. Instead of panicking, they simply retreated into the holy land, fighting back as needed.

The monsters couldn’t enter the holy land, simply because they were monsters. The conjuring that encased the holy land was the strongest barrier in the world. There was no better place to take shelter.

Even the nuns who spent their lives in the area surrounding the holy land were able to react to danger in an orderly manner.

What would happen if the official priestesses who worked in the holy land came out to fight?

“Yeah, I doubt we’d win.”

Sahara was fully aware of the difference in strength.

Monsters needed time to become genuinely strong. Since they were beings born of Concepts of Original Sin, they grew stronger the more sins they committed. As they inflicted pain and wrought destruction, they acquired power.

Naturally, since Pandæmonium had brought down an entire ancient civilization, she wielded power befitting the source of all chaos.

However, monsters that had just been summoned wouldn’t be very strong unless they were made with a massive amount of sacrifices.

Sahara was still a nun from the holy land, even if she had fallen far from grace. Whether there were a hundred monsters or a thousand, she knew perfectly well that they stood no chance.

Their only hope was a starvation tactic. Since the holy land’s food sources were primarily grown on-site, it would cause serious difficulties if they burned

all the monastery fields. And because the monsters were already overturning the fields, they'd already caused some trouble for those living here.

Still, that strategy would only prevail if Sahara's side was capable enough to besiege the holy land for a long period. It would take the priestesses less than a day to eradicate the monsters if they fought seriously, though.

While the monsters had the advantage in quantity, they fell far too short in quality. At worst, a single highly skilled priestess would be enough to wipe out this entire incursion. That was the intensity of the Faust's strength.

Even if Pandæmonium's little finger was mixed in among the monsters...

"Why did you come along, then?"

Sahara jumped at the unexpected question.

Slowly, she looked down to find a little girl in a white dress crouching in front of her.

Her facial features were clever and refined, yet her eyes looked strangely empty. The dress she wore had three holes in it, as if to emphasize what Pandæmonium lacked inside.

She hadn't been anywhere in sight just moments ago. But the timing of her appearance nearly suggested she'd read Sahara's mind. Perhaps she had—Sahara wouldn't have been surprised.

This creature was the same one who had created a new body for Sahara, after all.

"...I dunno. Because Manon is my friend?"

"Mm, is that right?"

Sahara accidentally phrased her lie like a question, unable to commit wholly. She broke out in a cold sweat, but Pandæmonium seemed unbothered.

"That makes sense, then. Friends are really important, right?"

With a big smile, the girl melted away and vanished.

Sahara held her breath for a while. However, nothing else happened. Finally, she let out a sigh of relief.

“This is why Human Errors are so scary...”

Their every action was far too removed from humanity. Pandæmonium even destroyed and resummoned herself elsewhere just to move around. That alone was proof enough that she no longer thought like a person.

The Mechanical Society of the eastern Wild Frontier was the same way. Despite being so far from human that it had rewritten its entire worldview, it still got involved with people. The fact that these Human Errors positioned themselves so close to others regardless of their strangeness made them all the more frightening.

If Sahara had been honest about her motivation, she was too afraid of what might happen if she refused to attack the holy land to actually flee.

Frankly, Sahara was only working with Manon and Pandæmonium because the cards happened to fall that way. She had no reason to be proactive about assisting them, yet she was a little too scared of Pandæmonium to flee. She didn't hate Manon, either, so she was helping her out a bit, nothing more.

Sahara had no intention of risking her life. This march on the holy land was nothing more than a bit of harassment. She fully intended to run at the first opportunity.

How was the holy land going to fight back? With the mild curiosity of someone unconcerned about whether she won or lost, Sahara peered at the entrance to the town and let out a surprised exclamation.

“Oh!”

One of the two priestesses was an old lady she didn't recognize. But her pristine bishop's robes revealed her identity.

Archbishop Elcami. She was renowned as the strongest conjurer of all the Faust. Given that Sahara herself was now a taboo, she was definitely not interested in meeting that bigwig personally.

What interested Sahara more than the major player she couldn't beat was the other figure.

She was only a girl wearing the white priestess robes of an inconsequential

aide. However, the cutesy modifications to her outfit were all too familiar.

“Well, what do you know...?” Sahara muttered to herself, and she tossed the binoculars aside, not bothering to follow them with her eyes as they hit the ground and shattered.

It was Menou’s assistant, Momo.

Sahara was well acquainted with her. Initially, she hadn’t cared who emerged to combat the monsters, but this was an unexpected stroke of luck.

Sahara had planned to leave the serious fighting to the monsters, but now she stretched out her right arm in front of her.

Genom Cthulha had torn off her original limb. Her new artificial one had been infected by a Concept of Primary Colors in the eastern Wild Frontier, ultimately consuming her entirely.

It was a piece of the Mechanical Society that broke down the way of the world into Primary Colors, swallowed it, and painted over it with its own system.

Though it could create Guiding Force just like a human soul, it no longer had the level of remarkable strength that had bested Menou and Ashuna.

Still, there was more than enough power left.

Sahara aimed her prosthetic arm at the distant Momo and focused.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Prosthetic Arm, Inner Seal Conjuration—Activate [Skill: Long-Range Sniping Form]

There was a metallic *clanking* sound, and her false limb changed shape.

It transformed from an arm to a gun-like weapon. Sahara’s shoulder swelled into a shock-absorbing mechanism, while the area from her elbow to her fingertips became long, straight, and slim.

The limb had now become a sniper rifle.

She sat with one knee raised and steadied the barrel. Then she sent Guiding Force into her altered appendage. The gun arm, a perfect replica of a Guiding gun, automatically solidified Sahara’s Guiding Force and molded it into the

shape of a bullet.

Turning up the scope magnification, she peered down the barrel.

Archbishop Elcami appeared to be in a nonaggressive defense posture. She wasn't likely to attack anyone who didn't strike at her first.

The pink-haired girl, on the other hand, was charging right into the swarm of monsters and thrashing around with her coping saw, using crest conjurings to enhance its speed. There was no mistaking that violent behavior. It had to be Momo.

Sahara turned the magnification up higher and began lining up the shot. As she did so, she saw that Momo's hair was held in pigtails not by red ribbons but scrunchies. Sahara scowled.

"She lost the damn ribbons?"

Back at the monastery for training Executioners, where nobody was allowed any luxury items or accessories, Momo had worn those slim red ribbons as a point of pride. Had she lost them during battle or on a mission? Maybe she'd replaced them for some other reason? Sahara had no way of knowing. All she could see was that Momo wasn't wearing the ribbons anymore, even though Menou still sported a black scarf ribbon.

And a certain someone had made those accessories by tearing up Sahara's uniform.

Sahara put her left hand on the trigger.

"There are some grudges even a laid-back gal like me can't forget."

The self-proclaimed "laid-back gal" fired a bullet of power.

Momo only noticed a moment before it happened.

If she had to provide a reason, it was likely the fact that Elcami, who was keeping watch on Momo from behind, suddenly turned her attention from the girl to something far in the distance. Following the archbishop's gaze, Momo suddenly detected a murderous glare fixed upon her. It felt far more intense than the monsters, to the point where it might have been more surprising if she hadn't noticed.

Momo followed her instincts and ducked.

A moment later, a monster's head went flying off behind her, a huge hole bored into it.

It was only afterward that Momo heard the dry *crack* of a gun.

"A sniper...?!"

Startled by the unusual attack, Momo immediately shielded herself behind a monster.

Where was it coming from? She guessed the direction based on where the monster's head had flown.

Just as Momo concluded that the attack must have come from the back of the attacking horde, there was a second shot.

Again, the sound reached Momo's ears after the bullet sped past.



Guiding guns were outlawed weapons.

Those illegally distributed without the Faust's knowledge rarely included sniper rifles, and few people were proficient enough with the scarce weapons to truly call themselves snipers.

In fact, this was the first time Momo had even been shot at by one.

She had learned how to deal with them as part of her battle training, though—which was why something seemed off to her about the interval between the first shot and the second.

“They’re not...moving?”

When one attacked from far away, it was a common tactic to change positions between each shot, yet there was no change in the direction or sound.

Either this person was a terrible sniper, or they were underestimating Momo. Maybe they had a guard nearby and were confident no one could reach them? Momo tapped her foot on the ground, thinking hard.

Judging by the amount of time between firing and the sounds, the shooter was probably about four hundred meters away. With Guiding Enhancement, Momo could try to move in closer to them.

She closed her eyes for a moment, tracing the route in her mind.

“Let’s do this, shall we?”

Momo was swift to act when her resolve was steadied, and she dashed forward.

The second shot.

Just as the echo faded, Momo rose to the challenge and came charging straight toward Sahara.

She was sitting atop the head of a tall monster with her knee raised in order to keep watch on her opponent’s movements.

After the first shot, she’d elected not to move. Momo had sensed that Sahara didn’t intend to hide and came after her.

Exactly as she'd planned. Sahara had remained where she was to give herself away intentionally.

"Simpleminded moron."

Momo was a heavily impulsive person. When faced with a contest of perseverance, she naturally grew impatient and ran straight for the source.

And Sahara would be waiting to take her down.

She aimed for the pink-haired head as it sped toward her. Her right arm—now a sniper rifle-style Guiding gun—absorbed her Guiding Force and produced a bullet of pure power. Feeling it snap into place, Sahara squeezed the trigger.

The third shot.

For a second, the friction of the Guiding Force bullet lancing through the barrel shook the air. The heat warped Sahara's view through the scope, but she saw Momo bend backward.

Got her—wait.

Momo hadn't stopped moving. She was unharmed despite taking a direct hit, and Sahara knew why.

"Barrier."

She'd used the barrier crest in her priestess robes to block the projectile, just as Sahara knew she would.

Guiding guns were dangerous weapons because anyone could use them. Still, they were also easy enough for members of the Faust to deal with for one simple reason: They weren't powerful enough to pierce the barrier crest conjuring inside every priestess's robe.

However, crest conjurings took two or three seconds after each invocation before they could be used again. A few ultra-skilled users could produce a second crest conjuring in less than a second, but that was exceedingly rare. The only examples Sahara knew of were Menou, Master Flare, and perhaps a few priestesses of the bishop rank or higher.

Momo didn't have anywhere near Menou's Guiding Force finesse. Her barrier was down. If another shot came now, her only choice was to evade. The next

few moments hinged on whether she could dodge that next shot. At least, that was undoubtedly what Momo believed.

Sahara lowered the still-warm barrel and stood. Though her approach didn't slow, Momo looked puzzled by this un-sniper-like move.

The distance was too short for sniping now, and that was perfect.

Sahara wasn't much of a sharpshooter anyhow.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Prosthetic Arm, Inner Seal Conjuration—Activate [Skill: Medium-Range Strafing Form]

Sahara's gun arm reconstructed itself again.

The slender silhouette was replaced with a thick, crude, round shape. The barrel became a combination of several cylinders.

Sahara was beginning to understand exactly what her right arm was.

The Primary Color conjuring materials that made up her prosthetic limb... They were basically an aggregation of minuscule conjured soldiers.

Although inorganic, they could transform into something organic. The materials of the three Primary Colors were capable of combining into anything at will. Depending on how they were ordered, it was even possible to form a consciousness. The conjured puppets of Primary Colors were the ultimate realization of that: a man-made, intelligent, nonhuman life-form.

Now it went from a long-distance sniper rifle to a machine gun for dominating at close range.

Momo had reached the bottom of the monster Sahara was sitting on. She was well within range of the naked eye.

This also happened to be the perfect distance for the machine gun. Just as Momo started attacking the monster to knock Sahara off, she abruptly froze.

“This is for my younger self, who hated you for beating me up...”

With the words of one who clearly still held a grudge, Sahara activated Guiding Enhancement. Her body glowed with Guiding Light to brace against the recoil of using her weapon.

“Now it’s your turn.”

She opened fire.

The barrel of her machine gun arm rotated rapidly.

Guiding Force bullets rained down with an endless barrage of sound. Sahara was sweeping the entire area without bothering to aim. The volley felled several nearby monsters in the process and would certainly be impossible to dodge.

Menou could have blocked it with a scripture conjuring, but Momo’s crest conjuring wasn’t ready, so the bullets cut right across her body.

Sahara’s victory was set in stone from the moment Momo carelessly ran toward her.

Her Guiding Force drained away with the bullets that sprayed all around. The friction was causing her right arm to heat up faster than the vents could counteract.

If Sahara kept it up much longer, the barrel might bend, so she slowed her attack to a stop.

Lowering the barrel as inertia kept it turning, she beheld the results. The ground had been battered by the spray of bullets, sending up clouds of smoke.

There was no way Momo had escaped unharmed. Sahara thought she would have to search for the body once the dust settled, but she was quickly proven wrong.

A coping saw flicked out of the smoke like a whip and wrapped around the neck of Sahara’s mount.

“Huh?”

Sahara gaped, frozen in shock. Momo was alive.

Her priestess robes and tights were in tatters, and blood was trickling from several places, but she was far from mortally wounded. And based on the way she was dragging the struggling monster down by the neck, she was fighting fit.

Perhaps Sahara hadn’t used enough Guiding Force. The higher number of

bullets meant that each one was considerably weaker than the sniping shots. But the barrage had been powerful enough to shred the surrounding monsters.

How had Momo endured?

The answer was simple.

Phosphorescent Guiding Light glowed around Momo's body.

She'd used Guiding Enhancement, manipulating Guiding Force without a conjuring to strengthen her body enough to withstand the hits.

"Now, *that* huuurt...!" Momo snarled in annoyance.

Using a barrier conjuring from a crest or scripture was one thing, but it was hard to believe someone could deflect bullets with pure Guiding Enhancement. An attack that was strong enough to turn monsters into mincemeat, even weak ones, had to be agony.

"Momo...! I see you're still a Guiding Force fiend."

"Excuse me?"

Momo looked up.

It had been around ten years since Sahara left the monastery. When their eyes met, Momo looked Sahara right in the face.

"Who are you supposed to be?" A vein throbbed on Sahara's forehead. Momo lowered her voice, shaking out her pink pigtails. "It's bad enough when someone I know casually uses my name. What gives a total stranger the right to talk like that to meee? How do you know my name, hmm? Are you a stalker? I'm going to kill you right now, before you creep me out any more."

A second vein rose on Sahara's temple.

This girl had attacked her in the monastery again and again, even resorting to stealing her clothes, and now she'd *forgotten* her?

Momo wasn't mocking or provoking Sahara—she truly didn't remember.

"Well, whatever. If I don't remember you, that means you didn't matter in the first place."

Momo filled her coping saw with Guiding Force, still using it to restrain the

monster.

Guiding Force: Connect—Coping Saw, Crest—Invoke [Oscillation]

The coping saw whirred and quickly sliced right through the creature's neck.

Its head fell to the ground, and the rest of the monster followed suit. As Sahara dropped with it, she turned her prosthetic arm back to its original form and landed on her feet. Now the two girls were looking at each other on level ground.

Seeing Sahara's clothes, Momo snorted.

"A nun? Wow. How embarrassing to still be wearing a habit at your age."

Incidentally, Momo and Menou just happened to be exceptional; it was perfectly normal to remain a nun until the age of twenty or so.

Knowing this perfectly well, Momo smirked provokingly.

"Did you join up with the taboos out of despair for your own talentless, empty future? What a sad little example of an inferiority complex grown out of incompetence and stupidity. But don't you worry. I'll put an end to that sad little life of yours right noooow. Be grateful, okaaaaay?"

"...Hey, Momo."

"I told you not to use my name. Didn't you hear me? I'll say it again. Don't. Say. My. Naaame."

She put nasty emphasis on every syllable, but Sahara ignored her and expressionlessly gave a thumbs-down with her prosthetic arm to declare her intentions.

"You're the one who's about to die."

"I refuse."

The second round began.

Momo closed in. Hand-to-hand combat was her specialty. With her innately high Guiding Force, she could give herself ridiculously intense strength. Her Guiding Enhancement increased her physical prowess to the point where she didn't even feel a need for scripture conjurings, a typical priestess's main

weapon.

Most living things perished if you beat them to a pulp.

As she always did, Momo followed that rule of thumb, raising her fists.

Sahara, on the other hand, stood bolt upright.

Having experienced death, she had placed her faith in her right arm, which was far more powerful than the rest of her. Sahara knew she didn't have any talent. She hadn't even been able to become a proper priestess.

Still, she had the false limb.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Prosthetic Arm, Inner Seal Conjunction—Activate [Skill: Silver Gauntlet]

The two girls' fists crashed into each other.

The collision of their blows reverberated all the way to Elcami's skin.

It happened a second time, then a third. The far-reaching shock waves and sounds were more than enough to indicate the ferocity of the battle.

Unconcerned, Elcami sent more Guiding Force into her scripture and activated another scripture conjuring.

Elcami's fighting style was nothing like Momo's. She used frequent scripture conjurings, extending them so that the effects never paused.

Her scripture conjurings were delicately detailed and sublime.

The Guiding Force bell rang on, church walls surrounded the monsters, stakes spread into a fence and impaled enemies. The continuous scripture conjurings spread her territory and claimed total control of the battlefield. Elcami could no longer be seen amid the scripture conjurings she'd erected around her.

This was the true path of a priestess of the Faust.

Stepping into the darkness unafraid and lighting up the area as a symbol of hope. Such pure strength as a priestess was beyond those like Momo and Menou, who had been raised as Executioners.

The monsters couldn't so much as draw near the archbishop in the face of her multiple scripture conjurings. Unable to physically overcome the conjured walls,

the monsters that once numbered at least a hundred rapidly declined. The only ones that survived were those that had managed to flee from the area around Elcami.

However, the archbishop had never been interested in the horde.

“Well... It certainly doesn’t look like she’s only pretending to fight.”

Momo’s intense attacks betrayed no sign that she was holding back. Her savage bloodlust, strong enough for Elcami to sense it as she observed from a distance, was undoubtedly the real thing. The girl wasn’t aiding the monsters in the slightest.

“Was I overthinking it...? So few monsters couldn’t possibly threaten us.”

Elcami turned her attention to the one who could be called the leader of the monsters—a cherubic little girl in a white dress. She looked utterly harmless but was, in truth, the most dangerous of them all.

“Little finger. What did you come here to do?”

“Oh, so I guess the heavy hitters *do* show up every now and then.”

The girl beamed, evidently content not to answer Elcami’s question.

Pandæmonium’s entire body had been run through with Guiding Force stakes, pinning her in the air.

“People who are almost unbelievably strong. People who are loved by Guiding Force. People who were blessed with strength from birth... They’re the envy of someone as weak as me, I must say.”

Even as her blood dripped to the ground, Pandæmonium seemed carefree as she spoke. She couldn’t even die in this state, preventing her from sacrificing and resummoning herself as she so often did.

Yet fettered as she was, Pandæmonium reached out her hand. She pressed it against the pristine church wall that surrounded her, leaving a bloody handprint.

“But you know...”

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

cute, cries the child.]

The red handprints on the white edifice suddenly multiplied. It was as if a group of invisible children was throwing a tantrum, trying to break the barrier. With each blow, one of the nearby monsters offered as a sacrifice melted away.

Eventually, the barrier shattered before the monster sacrifices ran out completely.

The Elcami visible past the broken wall was not an old woman in the latter part of her life.

She looked to be somewhere in her twenties, so youthful that her pristine bishop robes appeared strange on her. However, her irritable facial features and fierce, fiery eyes definitely belonged to Elcami.

Seeing this young Elcami, Pandæmonium exclaimed with glee, “Mm, I knew it! I figured that was why you’re so strong. You’re an Elder, aren’t you? And a recent one, at that. Am I wrong?”

“.....!”

The youthful face of Elcami, also known as the Magician, twisted at the remark.

It was Guiding Enhancement on a cellular level, something possible only to those with innate high-output Guiding Force and incredible Guiding Force manipulation skills. Elcami, archbishop and Elder, was beloved by Guiding Force and had reached the heights of Guiding Enhancement. As a result, she had unintentionally unlocked the ability to make herself younger.

“Immortality is a requirement to be an Elder and has been for a thousand years. But why do you act like an old lady when you could be young all the time? Don’t tell me you want to age like a normal person or something?”

“Silence, you...!” Elcami shouted with youthful-sounding rage at the all-too-accurate guess.

Of course she wanted to age.

Elcami didn’t want to leave someone else behind. She didn’t want to be the one abandoned, either. The look on her friend’s face when she found out was

burned into her memory.

They had climbed the ranks of the Faust side by side, fellow priestesses from the same generation. Elcami had always admired her.

She was a true holy woman, unlike the lowly unbelieving Elcami. More pious than anyone, more devoted to the path of righteousness...Orwell.

Orwell's face when she saw Elcami in all her restored youth would live in the archbishop's mind forever.

Ever since, Elcami had raged against her own power and her title as Magician.

"Don't worry. You've got plenty of time. All your friends will die, people will avoid you, and you'll get to totally immerse yourself in despair. Why not live life to the fullest?"

Although Pandæmonium was in no position to fight back, she taunted Elcami. The little girl who had lived for over a thousand years beckoned to the newly baptized immortal.

It was nonsense. Elcami dismissed the Human Error's words.

"I don't want to hear that from you Otherworlders. Not when you get the right to trample over everyone else's gifts, efforts, and passions just by being brought here."

Even when facing the opponent who had given Menou and Ashuna so much trouble, Elcami's bishop robes were spotless.

"Oh my. Do you hate us that much?"

"Who could possibly feel anything but enmity for you? And now we finally have the chance to get rid of you all with the return of the Lord."

"Lord?"

Pandæmonium's eyes widened.

The Lord written of in the scriptures was a great being said to have established modern civilization here in the holy land after it was destroyed a millennium ago.

"The return... Hmm. I see! I can't believe that silly Billy is still doing such

things!"

The girl who had brought about the end of society giggled.

As a Human Error, Pandæmonium had lost her original personality, but she wasn't incapable of thought. It was difficult for others to understand, but Pandæmonium made decisions based on what best suited the Concept of Original Sin, and she acted accordingly.

"Who gave you the idea to come here, and why? This is far too arbitrary for a random whim. What is the point of offering up your little finger here?"

Pandæmonium was now nothing more than a child who couldn't die.

Unsurprisingly, it was impossible to reach an understanding with such a being.

"The point? Hmm... Does there need to be one? Do I need a reason to try to kill you or to let you kill me?"

Indeed, there may not have been a purpose for the attack on the holy land at all.

"You certainly are strong. I can't even beat you myself. But did you know? If I use myself as a guidepost, I can connect for just a moment." A childish smile flashed across Pandæmonium's face.

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Chaos Collusion, Pure Concept [Evil]—Summon [Tall and skinny old thorn]

The gate to hell opened up.

A huge shadow spread across the ground.

The massive monster that had appeared a few months ago destroyed an entire small island just by coming into existence.

Pandæmonium wasn't creating it anew. It was just a summoning conjuring that brought a monster that already existed in some far-off place to where she was now.

Elcami had heard the reports about the massive losses in Libelle.

"How unpleasant."

The Guiding Force that sprang up from her soul filled her body. It seeped into

every cell, rejuvenating them, bringing her back to the prime of her life. The scripture clutched in Elcami's arms was aglow with sacred light. In the form of a twenty-something young woman, Elcami connected to the earthen vein with a scripture conjuring, taking complete control over it.

She brought all that Guiding Force into her scripture and crafted an attack conjuring.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 14:3—Invoke [Reach higher than the heavens, stretching all the way to the moon.]

A shining sword pierced through the creature's gigantic body.

The outflow of the earthen vein that took the shape of a luminous blade eclipsed even Pandæmonium's monster.

In moments, the creature was cleaved in two by enough Guiding Force to power an entire city.

Pandæmonium's monster was enormous and mighty, but not so much that there weren't individuals who could combat it.

The Commons had the monster, Genom Cthulha. The Noblesse had the strongest, Experion Riverse.

And the Faust title of archbishop was no less a marker of strength than the other two.

"Did you really think I, the archbishop, couldn't handle a single giant monster?"

"I never thought that for a second. Like you said, it's only one."

Pandæmonium, who could summon countless monsters, didn't look surprised. She hadn't called that creature for an attack. What she was truly calling was far vaster. It was beyond even the infamous Pandæmonium's control.

"See? Here we go."

White fog billowed from her body. It appeared out of nowhere and wrapped around Pandæmonium's small frame, clinging to her tightly, surging ceaselessly.

The white mist pouring out around Pandæmonium seemed to go on forever. Indeed, it would never run out nor clear up.

Elcami scowled at the sight.

"I see. So that's what you were after."

The holy land was a powerful barrier city. Yet in the south, the misty barrier dubbed Pandæmonium, which kept Pandæmonium's true form trapped within, was just as potent.

Two mighty barriers would cancel each other out. Ironically enough, this vapor that was meant to contain monsters within also allowed the dangerous creatures to roam free wherever the fog pervaded.

As the pale mist flooded, monsters began crowding into the holy land. Even Elcami's mastery of scripture conjurings wasn't enough to repel them as they swarmed from every direction, including overhead. Destroying Pandæmonium would bring an end to this, yet even as a little finger, it was the child's ability to overcome death that made her one of the Four Major Human Errors.

"The holy land isn't just any old city," Elcami spat.

The monsters that invaded the holy land were eradicated in the blink of an eye.

This was a place inhabited entirely by Faust members. They were highly trained elite priestesses. A few monsters wouldn't get the best of them.

Elcami deliberately allowed her body to age. She needed to grow old normally in order to exist as the archbishop. A person who could restore their own youth couldn't mingle among ordinary humans.

Eventually, she would have to fade into the shadows like the other Elders.

But that time had not yet come. Before she was the Elder Magician, she was the archbishop who stood at the front and center of the stage.

"There's not a coward among those who live here."

Not one of the members of the Faust would lose to the monsters that Pandæmonium's little finger had beckoned.

Just as things in the holy land were suddenly heating up, the one priestess who did consider herself a coward was singing a little tune.

“The best thing about glassees...is even if you look down and cry...no one will see your teears...”

Though her improvised song had a cheerful melody, the lyrics were distressingly morbid.

Hooseyard was full of self-loathing at her own timidity. She was holing up in the cathedral while her subordinate was sent out onto the battlefield.

“It’s just too scary...”

Monsters were flooding into the holy land. Even Hooseyard was a competent enough priestess to take on one or two, but she didn’t dare venture out to meet the creatures. Deep down, she knew she wasn’t made for fighting.

Even if the monsters had gotten into the holy land, there was no physical entrance for them to get into the cathedral.

“If I just keep holding down the fort...”

“You.”

“Bwah?!”

As Hooseyard was about to voice her resolve to remain hidden, she was abruptly interrupted by Elcami. The appearance of the elderly archbishop made Hooseyard automatically straighten up.

“A-Archbishop Elcami...? I thought you were out fighting off the monsters with Miss Momo?”

“Since when do I need to explain myself to you?”

“Never, ma’am!”

Hooseyard could never stand up to that withering glare.

“This monster business is the least of our problems. More importantly, how is the teleport conjuring circle to the land of salt coming along?”

“Very good, ma’am. I’ve connected the Guiding Force route! The path to the land of salt is complete. Just say the word whenever you’d like!”

“I see. Just as the report said. So how long will the teleport conjuring circle remain stable once it’s been invoked?”

“Hmm?”

Keeping the portal stable for an extended period of time... Was that mentioned in the assignment? Of course, she had included enough time for travel both ways in her estimates, but if there were going to be additional demands, that would be a problem. To put it simply, Hooseyard would no longer have time to sleep.

“S-since the heavenly vein will eventually shift its course, the Guiding Force route will evaporate within about thirty-six hours after the appointed time and date... Is that a problem?”

“No, not at all. Good work, Hooseyard. Let me see it for myself, just to be safe. Lead the way.”

“Y-yes, ma’am!”

A compliment. Hooseyard’s expression brightened immediately.

This had to be a fairly serious matter for the archbishop to check her work personally. Hooseyard led her boss to the Dragon Gate to show off her accomplishment.

“I see... So you did use the Dragon Gate for this.”

“Pardon? You already knew that, didn’t you, Archbishop Elcami?”

“Yes, it was just such a long time ago. Once the Guiding Force is connected, invoking *Teleport* will be simple enough. Activate the path and solidify it at once.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Hooseyard promptly set to her task. Before long, a new path appeared at the Dragon Gate.

“It’s ready! All that’s left is to set the route in the station building, so anyone can...”

Hooseyard trailed off. Elcami’s appearance had crumbled before her eyes.

What remained in her place was a young girl wearing indigo priestess robes. A strange gasp of confusion left Hooseyard's lips. She took pride in the fact that nobody entered the cathedral without her knowledge, which plunged her further into confusion.

No longer in disguise, Menou dealt the stunned priestess a barehanded chop to the back of the neck.

"I do feel sorry about this, just so you know."

Hooseyard's consciousness plunged into darkness.

A little earlier, while monsters assailed the holy land, Menou noticed the chaos outside from within the cathedral.

She overheard the conversations and saw the battle from her room in the south tower. If Pandæmonium was here, Manon undoubtedly had put her up to it.

However, Manon's attack was all part of Menou's plan.

It was worth the extra effort of stealing a kimono when she left the hot springs town in the mountains. It hadn't only been for her disguise—the theft also informed Manon of Menou's intentions. That girl was too clever not to figure it out. Combined with the fact that Kagarma had disappeared at the same time, Menou guessed that Manon would deduce what was happening and follow her to the holy land.

And if Manon intended to enter the holy land, she would have to do something about the barrier.

That definitely required some kind of monster attack.

Menou could easily predict what the priestesses in the holy land would do if monsters struck.

First, they would need to get a grasp of the full situation and determine what was happening. The information that would be sent to Hooseyard, who was in charge of all travel into and out of the cathedral, would no doubt include what Menou needed to know: the state of Akari Tokitou and the teleport gate to the land of salt.

It was dangerous, of course. Menou's infiltration of the cathedral in the first place was extremely risky. It required her to team up with the Director, a man whom she didn't trust in the slightest.

Still, she now possessed the facts she'd required.

"I'll have to thank Momo again."

By getting information from Hooseyard through Momo, Menou was able to move much more freely. She'd taken Elcami's form to deceive Hooseyard and get access to the path leading to the Sword of Salt.

All she had to do now was to teleport to the land of salt. As she left, Manon would come in her place. Once Manon was there, it would be as if Menou had never been.

The real challenge was what came next.

Killing Akari was Menou's duty.

Akari, who had become Menou's friend.

All Menou could do for Akari was kill her while she was still herself. If she let Master Flare handle it, Akari would lose her personality. She would forget about Menou and end her life as nothing but a Human Error.

So Menou would slay the girl her way.

"This is more than I expected, though."

Once Menou teleported to the land of salt, she intended to hide and stand by. Since Master Flare was also planning to kill Akari with the Sword of Salt, she would have to bring Akari there, even if Menou was lying in wait. Menou intended to secure the Sword of Salt in advance and gain the advantage over Master Flare.

Just as Menou stepped into the station building on the platform in accordance with the information from Hooseyard, she heard footsteps behind her.

They were light, frantic, and strangely familiar.

"Menou!"

Turning around, she saw Akari running up to the station. Menou was naturally

surprised at the sudden arrival of a girl who should've been locked up.

“Akari...? What are you doing here?”

“What do you mean?! The racket from all those monsters reached all the way to where I was being kept! Something crazy must be happening, right? That red-haired priestess who was watching me ran off, and I escaped on my own!”

“Really...?”

“Yup!”

If what Akari said was true, it would be very convenient for Menou. All she would have to do now was take Akari through the Dragon Gate.

“But I wasn’t expecting to find you here, Menou. You really did come for me, huh?”

She was about three steps away, close enough to reach out and touch. As Akari giggled, Menou noticed the scent of smoke tickling her nostrils.

It was a familiar smell. Menou froze in place. Her outstretched hand became a warning, keeping the other girl from taking another step closer.

The difference was clear.

A slight pain formed in Menou’s chest.

It was a sharp sting, as if the prick of a thorn. Menou didn’t look down, keeping her eyes fixed on the person before her.

Akari looked at Menou curiously. There wasn’t anything in her hands, and yet...

Menou slowly raised a hand to her ribs.

There was something there that had just barely failed to pierce through.

She looked at Akari again.

“Master?”

At that, Akari blinked in confusion. Her face said that she had no idea what Menou was talking about, that it didn’t make sense.

Still, Menou didn’t lower her guard. Appearances meant nothing. She was

well aware of the foolhardiness of being deceived by looks.

Akari's face twisted as she barked out a laugh.

"You got it."

The light around them warped. The ability to manipulate the glow of Guiding Light created when one used Guiding Enhancement and use it to deceive the eyes—Guiding Camouflage. When the ripples in the air settled, the person in front of Menou was no longer a young girl.

It was Master Flare.

Free of her disguise, the woman shook out her dark-red hair.

Menou stood stiffly in front of her, her expression hard. Master Flare, on the other hand, was behaving no differently than usual.

"Nice work getting here, Menou."

"...Thanks."

Menou offered only a word in response to what sounded like a sarcastic welcome. The Executioner knew going in that if she was going to secure Akari, she would have to fight her Master.

She'd been prepared for this outcome, or so she'd believed. Menou had been risking her life since the moment she'd set foot in the holy land.

However, now that she was actually standing in front of Master Flare, all the words Menou had intended to say vanished.

Menou unconsciously tried to swallow and found that her mouth had gone dry. She couldn't even begin a conversation. Her feelings in that moment were not unlike those of a child caught shoplifting and brought before their parents.

What was Master Flare going to say?

Would she be disappointed? Mocking? Furious?

As Menou stood in silence, Flare spoke.

"Akari Tokitou seems lost."

From the very first word, she caught Menou off guard.

"She can't run away, yet she can't accept you, either. Funny, isn't it? She's torturing herself by overthinking things, unable to find anywhere she belongs. Truly befitting of a lost one."

Menou hadn't expected her to start talking about Akari.

The words pierced Menou to the core nonetheless.

"You're not going to ask me anything?"

It was a strangely desperate question.

Master Flare was acting as if it was entirely natural for Menou to be here, but the young woman had stolen into the cathedral in direct violation of her orders. Her Master seemed content not to comment on that, though.

This felt oddly frustrating to Menou. Perhaps she wanted Master Flare to ask her reasons for coming.

"You found your own answer, right? I didn't think you'd need any input from your Master after having left my monastery so long ago. Still, if I had to say something about it...I'd tell you that you're making a mistake, Menou."

"I know that much already."

Menou's objective was simple.

She was here to kill Akari, against her Master's instruction. She wanted to slay Akari while the girl still retained her personality instead of letting Master Flare have her way.

"No, I don't think you do."

Her tone was downright scolding.

It was unsurprising that Master Flare didn't accept her pupil's reason, but this was a different angle than Menou expected. Her Master's words shook Menou's soul to an unbelievable degree.

"You're here to kill Akari Tokitou, correct?"

"...Yes."

"You want to put an end to this girl who's become your friend before she turns into a Human Error. You must've thought of that after witnessing the

state of Pandæmonium, right? So sentimental.”

“Is there a problem with that?”

What was Menou saying? She was getting carried away by the conversation, and even her own blurted-out question surprised her. Her thoughts were clearly disordered.

“Idiot.” Master Flare promptly dismissed Menou’s feelings. Her voice rang hollow as she spoke. “You want to find meaning in killing someone.” She took a slow step forward, looming over Menou with her superior height. “But you don’t need a meaning, a method, a motive, faith, or anything else. We execute people even if we don’t know why, no matter what happens, and we never let it slow us down. That’s what makes us the villains. I thought I taught you that much.”

Menou shifted her weight to her heel, carefully stepping backward.

Akari wasn’t here. There was little point in Menou fighting Master Flare now. It was unfortunate that Flare knew Menou had gotten into the cathedral, but all was not yet lost.

The reason Master Flare didn’t take Menou into custody last time they met was because it wasn’t her job.

Menou hadn’t turned against Master Flare in that moment. She’d accepted the mission given to her, though only in lip service, and let her teacher take Akari away. Menou had promised to come take her back, but Master Flare deliberately didn’t listen to that bit.

Master Flare would never prevent taboo.

No matter how obvious it was that someone was about to commit a crime, she wouldn’t attempt to stop them or dispose of them. The woman would only smirk at people’s confusion without offering a word of advice, keeping a close watch for the moment their desire to commit taboo got the better of their conscience.

Master Flare would only draw her blade as an Executioner *after* someone had committed taboo.

“There’s no saving people like us.”

Menou was now breaking and entering without permission, in violation of her orders. No matter the reason, she had perpetrated the grave crime of infiltrating the cathedral for an Otherworlder’s sake.

“Let’s see the measure of your mettle now that you’ve strayed from my teachings.”

Somehow, Menou would have to overcome her Master.

Fear crept up her spine, but she was quick to force it down. This was no time for dwelling on trivialities. She was already face-to-face with the strongest enemy she’d ever come up against in her life.

Menou drew the dagger from the strap around her thigh and filled the crests engraved in it with Guiding Force. At almost the exact same time, Master Flare activated the crest conjuring in her own dagger.

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

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

The crest conjurings of Master and student collided.

Despair in the Holy Land

Most of the monsters surrounding the holy land had stopped moving.

They'd either been caught up in the battle between Momo and Sahara or ignored the pair and pressed on ahead only to fall. On top of that, many more monsters had been used as sacrifices in Pandæmonium's battle against Elcami, although Momo and Sahara were ignorant of that.

At any rate, few living monsters remained around the two girls.

They were locked in single combat with no one to interfere. While Momo tried to close the distance between them, Sahara continued to keep her at bay.

She'd chosen close combat when she fought Menou, but up against Momo, it was better to keep her distance. Unlike Menou, who would use a potent scripture conjuring if given the chance, Momo's most terrifying strike was a simple punch packed with Guiding Enhancement power.

However, if she escaped punching range, Momo's attacks were drastically limited.

Sahara had raised the strength of her shots to break through Momo's Guiding Enhancement defenses, too. If one of the bullets she loosed from her prosthetic arm-turned-Guiding gun found purchase, it would do more than merely hurt. The higher intensity meant she expended more Guiding Force, but Sahara still had strength to spare.

Just as the tree Momo was shielding herself behind started to give way, the coping saw wrapped around the trunk.

Not just one, but two. Sahara assumed Momo was going to hold the enormous tree up with her coping saw to continue using it as a shield, but she was soon proven wrong.

Momo glared back at Sahara as she sent Guiding Force into her coping saw.

Guiding Force: Connect—Coping Saw, Crest—Invoke [Anchor]

The effect of the crest conjuring solidified the flexible coping saw around the tree.

Without a word, Momo raised her arm. The tree, its trunk brittle from the bullets, snapped in two, and the coping saw became a handle that bent heavily under the weight.

It wasn't a shield. Momo had created a blunt weapon.

Lifting the improvised giant hammer made of a trunk wrapped in a coping saw, the petite Momo spun it overhead with both hands.

"I'm going to crush yooou!"

With a bellow, she used centrifugal force to give the mallet a wide swing.

Sahara managed to jump out of the way in time, but the corpses of several unlucky monsters went flying in all directions.

It was like a giant's sledgehammer. Sahara grimaced at the ridiculous power of the attack.

As she stepped back to measure the range of the unwieldy blunt instrument, Sahara muttered an insult. "Using brute force with a blunt weapon is the perfect fit for a puny gorilla like you. Maybe you should give up using the coping saw?"

"Hmmm?" Momo's sharp ears caught Sahara's jab, and she dropped the hammer to the ground and smirked impishly.

"Insulting me because I switched weapons? You must not have much confidence in your adaptability. If you're scared, why don't you say sooo?"

"Of course not. It was just a bit of friendly advice."

With Momo's natural Guiding Force levels, she excelled when employing Guiding Enhancement and brute force to overwhelm enemies. So why did she use a light weapon like a coping saw? Guessing at the reason, Sahara sneered.

"A violent girl like you, whose only saving grace is her massive amount of Guiding Force, shouldn't try to imitate Menou's delicate Guiding Thread. It

doesn't suit you."

"Ohhh?" Momo's grin turned more savage at the mention of Menou. "I don't know who you think you are, but I hate people who pretend to know about my darling more than anything in the world. Your very existence annoys me, so I'm going to turn your whole body into scrap right now!"

"If you can't do it, why don't you just say so?"

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Prosthetic Arm, Inner Seal Conjuration—Activate [Skill: Pile Driver]

A stake shot out of Sahara's right arm, piercing the hammer racing toward her and shattering it.

"You'll only embarrass you—ah."

Sahara's smirk faltered.

Now that the tree portion of Momo's impromptu mallet had broken, what remained of her attack?

The answer was the coping saw, still in the shape it had taken to twine around the tree. Momo knew Sahara would destroy the core and kept swinging the hammer down at her anyway. With the bough gone, the coping saw was now in the perfect shape to form a cage around Sahara.

"Idiot."

This time it was Momo's turn to sneer mockingly.

She'd expected this development. As she deactivated the *Anchor* conjuring, she also added Guiding Force to invoke the other crest conjuring carved into her coping saw.

Guiding Force: Connect—Coping Saw, Crest—

If Sahara didn't get out before the conjuring was complete, she would die. Jerking back into action, she reached out to fling the coping saw off her, but it was too late.

Invoke [Oscillation]

"Nngh!"

Her prosthetic arm was violently knocked back by the rapidly vibrating saw.

Had Sahara been touching it with her bare left hand, it would have been torn clean from her body. Even her metal limb wasn't immune to the damage. Shock waves ran up to Sahara's shoulder, sending her staggering.

Since Momo had banished all her memories of Sahara into oblivion, she had no reason to hold back.

"Now do me a favor and die."

The coping saw cage tightened mercilessly.

It may as well have been a massive boa constrictor for all its strength. There was nowhere to run. Unlike priestess robes, a nun's habit didn't have the barrier crest, leaving Sahara with no way to defend herself. The vibrating coping saw closed in on her, threatening to tear the girl to pieces.

With little alternative, Sahara went on the offensive.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Prosthetic Arm, Inner Seal Conjuration—Activate [Skill: Short-Range Shooting Form]

Her prosthetic limb warped and expanded, and she steadied it and pulled the trigger.

This gun arm was now a shotgun for close-range suppressing fire. Momo's Guiding Enhancement was so absurdly powerful that a direct hit from a Guiding gun wouldn't kill her, but Sahara wasn't aiming for her this time.

She fired a Guiding Force bullet.

The coping saw cage bent outward. It was powerful, but its lightness made it easy to repel. Although direct contact with the rapidly oscillating saw would be highly destructive, a Guiding gun could knock it away without the need to touch it.

Momo scowled, begrudgingly giving up her plan to turn Sahara into mincemeat. She changed her strategy to harassment instead, wrapping the coping saw around her opponent's right arm with a flick of her wrist.

Guiding Force: Connect—Coping Saw, Crest—Invoke [Anchor, Oscillation]

“You little! Agh!”

She couldn’t slice through the sturdy transforming metal arm, but by wrapping the oscillating saw around it, the vibrations reverberated through Sahara’s entire body. With her teeth chattering and body shaking, Sahara couldn’t even curse Momo out properly.

Since the saw was also in the *Anchor* state wrapped around her arm, it couldn’t be removed easily.

This was a nasty maneuver meant to torment Sahara. Focusing on her artificial limb, she transformed it again, returning it to a normal arm. In theory, it should’ve been easy to withdraw now that the limb was smaller, but Sahara had fallen for Momo’s ploy.

“It’s so nice and easy to tell what an idiot is thinking.”

A metallic rasping sounded.

Uncomfortable pressure closed around her throat. The cold sensation was proof that Momo’s coping saw had coiled around Sahara’s neck.

Momo had moved behind the other girl, completely reading her movements. She must have known Sahara would have to concentrate on her arm to alter its shape and baited her into doing so. During that brief distraction, Momo had swiftly moved in and stepped behind Sahara while wrapping her spare coping saw around Sahara’s neck as she passed by.

In a desperate bid, Sahara’s left hand clawed at the terribly thin blade strangling her. She knew it to be a futile effort, but she couldn’t stop her fingers from scrambling after freedom. Before the fallen priestess could even begin to pull herself free...

“I guess you’re the one who’ll be dying today.”

Guiding Force: Connect—Coping Saw, Crest—Invoke [Oscillation]

A metallic *whir* filled the air, accompanied by a spray of blood.

The coping saw spiraled around Sahara’s neck shrank viciously. She couldn’t even scream with the pressure on her vocal cords. What began as a wet gush swiftly began a grind against bone. After a few seconds, there came the dull

thud of a severed head striking the ground.

“Well, that wasn’t so hard.”

Without lingering on the sensation of cutting off the girl’s head, Momo shook the blood from her coping saw with a *snap*.

It was a bit more trouble than she’d bargained for, but a win was a win. That ought to be more than enough to prove to Elcami that she wasn’t connected to the monster attack. Just as Momo leaned down to pick up the head as proof of her victory, she sensed a conjuring being formed behind her.

Immediately, she whipped around.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Prosthetic Arm, Inner Seal Conjuration—Activate [Skill: Eject]

“Ohhh?”

The prosthetic arm shot off of Sahara’s corpse.

Momo was mildly surprised, but she’d sensed it far enough in advance that she could easily dodge the limb flying toward her. It slammed uselessly into a monster behind her and stuck there.

Just to be safe, Momo jumped away to get some extra distance.

On rare occasions, conjuring tools sometimes activated after their owner was killed. It was possible to set them to react to your death.

Nine times out of ten, these automatic responses were explosions meant to take whoever killed the owner down with them. Since Sahara’s right arm was a conjuring tool, Momo was fully prepared for it to blow up, but nothing else appeared to be happening after the half-hearted rocket punch.

“...?”

It felt anticlimactic. Momo looked back at Sahara’s body.

The girl was unquestionably dead. Her decapitated body lay motionless, and the bloody head stared blankly.

Momo started letting her guard down out of sheer confusion when something happened.

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Original Sin, Envy: Body—Summon [Meat Puppet]

All at once, the right arm swallowed up a nearby monster corpse.

Momo gasped at the unexpected sight.

If anything, it reminded her of the formation of a Primary Color conjured soldier. The monster flesh wriggled with the prosthetic arm at its heart, creating a human shape. This horrific process took less than ten seconds, ultimately creating a beautiful, stark-naked girl.

She had fairly well-trained abs and a modest bust befitting her age.

Shaking out her wavy silver hair, she clicked her tongue with irritation.

“You should really double-check your enemy’s remaining lives next time, dimwit.”

Once her form was complete, the girl glared at Momo for only a moment before disappearing into the fog.

Momo shouldn’t have moved away out of fear of an explosion. Now that her enemy had fled into the mist, which was growing thicker by the second, she wasn’t sure whether to give chase.

After a moment’s hesitation, Momo decided that her uncertainty meant she shouldn’t pursue. There was no telling her enemy’s true nature or abilities, especially after that last conjuring.

Once confident that Sahara was truly gone, Momo relaxed out of battle mode.

“...Ew, creepy. What is she, a jack-in-the-box?” Momo glowered into the fog, muttering bitterly to herself.

Creepiest of all was the attack that had taken over that monster’s flesh.

If that arm had touched Momo, it might have stolen her body instead. The notion was repulsive enough for her to shiver.

“What did she mean by ‘remaining lives’ anyway...?”

“Ha. That thing got away from you? I guess Flare’s training doesn’t amount to much,” called a voice in the fog. It belonged to an elderly woman, making it

obvious who was approaching without even a glance.

“Um...”

Momo scratched her cheek awkwardly. Even she couldn’t disguise her sheepishness.

She’d permitted a weaker opponent to escape. If she were scolded for letting her guard down, she wouldn’t have a leg to stand on.

“Now, that was unusual. The soul lies in the prosthetic arm made of a Concept of Primary Colors and uses a Concept of Original Sin to create a human body. It’s incomplete, but...if it keeps growing, it’s sure to be dangerous. You shouldn’t have let it get away.”

Momo sighed. “I know. I’m sorry. What did she mean by ‘remaining lives,’ though?”

“When you defeat a conjured soldier, pay attention to the number of Primary Color Stone cores it has. If you don’t crush them all, it won’t die.”

“Ahh... That makes sense.”

When Momo considered it that way, it fell into place. Conjured soldiers with multiple cores weren’t unusual. The Sahara whom Momo had fought was essentially not a human, but a kind of conjured soldier.

“Hmph. Well, I suppose it’s fine.”

Momo had expected more of a lecture, but the archbishop let her off the hook with surprising ease. She took the opportunity to change the subject.

“So was that a kind of immortality? It was a taboo using a conjured soldier, right?”

“You should know this as an Executioner, even if you’re just an aide. The very concept of transferring from an aging body into a new vessel is plenty taboo on its own. No matter the method, the receptacle, or how many devoted researchers there might be. That effort is the doomed folly of worthless scum. It’s not even where the essence of immortality lies anyway.”

Conjuring was connected to a human’s soul and spirit. The body was an important component as well, but it was considered little more than a house for

preserving the soul.

The soul and spirit were viewed as far more important.

Ultimately, the body was just a terminal that maintained the other two.

“That thing’s real form lies in the artificial arm, not the human body. If you fight it again, focus on destroying that instead,” instructed the archbishop.

“Yes, ma’am.”

That explained why Sahara could still use conjurings after Momo removed her head. The pink-haired girl nodded absently.

“By the way, have your suspicions about me settled?” she inquired.

“Half of them, yes. For the other half, you’ve proven you could never dream of taking on the likes of me. That’s good enough.”

“...Glad to hear it.”

“So long as that’s clear.”

Momo was contemplating whether to push the matter further when she turned around and was stunned into silence.

A monster too massive to fully comprehend was lying there, sliced in half by a sword of light.

Momo stood frozen. The sheer size of this ancient creature made it an overwhelming sight. Even as a corpse, the incredible scale was enough for an onlooker to question reality.

The luminous blade that had cleaved the monster that could crush an entire city was the stuff of myth.

As Momo gaped, Elcami dismissed the conjuring. The afterglow of the Guiding Force that made up the sword fell to the ground like rain.

“Don’t just stand there, fool. We’ve got to expunge the monsters that got into the holy land.”

“...Yes, ma’aaam.”

This was the power of an archbishop.

Momo knew now how lucky they'd been when fighting Orwell.

At times, the true essence of a scripture conjuring could surpass a common taboo.

There was no refusing the orders of someone who could create something straight from myth. Thus, Momo's response had been meek, at least by her standards.

"Judging by that battle, it looks like you haven't polished your Guiding Force manipulation skills in the slightest," Elcami remarked.

"...No, not really."

Blessed with a large amount of Guiding Force from birth, Momo had been told on many occasions that it was prudent to improve her Guiding Force control.

She wrinkled her nose, braced for another lecture of that sort, but the archbishop's response was quite different.

"It's better that way." Strangely enough, Elcami gave Momo a look of approval, even envy.

"When one is blessed with as much Guiding Force as you have been, you're better off like that. Humans have no need for excessive Guiding Force. Human Errors are the most extreme proof of that. After a certain point, one can only possess so much power before they cease to be truly human at all."

Momo wasn't sure what the archbishop was getting at. It was doubtful that she was expressing support for Momo's "it's easier just to punch everything" theory.

"If you go too far beyond that point, you'll end up leaving it all behind." The archbishop was hardly even speaking to Momo anymore.

As she followed behind Elcami without listening too closely, Momo looked down at herself, then cast a glance at an unharmed monastery.

"Excuse meee, is it all right if I take a shower?"

Once they got back to the cathedral, she might run into Menou. Momo couldn't bear to let her beloved darling see her in this filthy state.

“...Do as you wish.”

“Thanks. I willllll.”

Elcami returned to the holy land alone, leaving Momo to her own devices.

The priestesses in the holy land didn’t fly into a panic when the monsters invaded.

Members of the Faust were trained to handle any kind of situation, no matter how unusual. It was only by surviving the rigorous discipline that they were able to call themselves Faust priestesses. Weaklings like Hooseyard were rare outliers.

Pandæmonium produced the monsters, but the number of sacrifices used to form each one wasn’t nearly enough. Monsters grew stronger based on the number of humans they slew. Fresh monsters hadn’t committed many sins and were therefore bound to be weak.

Only the youngest nun in her earliest days of training would fall to creatures of that rank.

However, the same could not be said of people who weren’t in the Faust.

Due to the sheer total of monsters, there were a few casualties among the pilgrims visiting the holy land, although not many. Most of them were ordinary people without any combat training, even if their faith was strong. Someone who couldn’t defend themselves was helpless against even a single monster.

“Huff... Aah...!”

Even now, a young girl was running through an alley away from one of the terrifying beasts. She was fleeing for dear life and short of breath. All her strength was focused on getting away from the threat at her back.

She was only a few steps away from emerging onto the main street, where priestesses were stationed.

But then she tripped and fell.

“Ah...!”

The monster bore down on her, heedless of her adorable cry.

No bloody tragedy followed, though.

A nearby priestess caught wind of her small shriek and came to the rescue, destroying the monster.

“Are you all right?” the priestess called out as she hurried into the otherwise deserted alley, approaching the girl she’d rescued in the nick of time.

Unusually enough, the young woman who’d been chased by the monster was wearing a kimono. Her braided hair was a deep blue, not unlike a priestess’s robe. She was well-mannered, too. When the priestess approached, she bowed her head politely despite still being collapsed on the ground.

“Th-thank you very much. You saved me.”

“No need for gratitude. I only did my duty as a priestess.”

This girl was clearly not a member of the Faust. She must have come on a pilgrimage and gotten caught up in the chaos.

“We’ll exterminate the rest of the monsters out there in no time. Please take shelter inside. You’ll be safe anywhere there are priestesses. Be sure not to enter any more alleys like this one, for your own safety.”

“Yes, I understand. Again, thank you so much. It’s just, er... I’m embarrassed to admit it, but I’m afraid I’m still weak in the knees...”

“Ah, I see.”

Realizing the girl couldn’t stand on her own, the priestess generously offered a helping hand.

“I’m so fortunate to have run into one as kind as yourself.”

The girl’s hand reached past that of the priestess and gently cupped her cheek.

She must have been confused, poor thing. The priestess put a hand on the girl’s shoulder to calm her. What she failed to notice was that as she did so, the girl’s shadow at her feet was moving unnaturally, stretching out behind her.

“I’ll help you up so we can get you to safety, all right?”

As the priestess kindly comforted the girl, the shadow soundlessly rose

behind her. She went on kindly encouraging the rescued girl without realizing that a gaping maw was closing in from her blind spot.

“Thank you for your generosity.”

“...Hmm?”

With a sickening *crunch*, the priestess’s body was devoured.

All that remained was her head, held aloft in Manon’s hand. Her face was frozen in a bewildered expression, oblivious to the end. Manon politely placed the head at her feet, and her shadow swallowed it up.

“Thanks for the meal,” she said, giggling.

Standing without a hint of the frailty she’d displayed earlier, Manon looked back. Since there were no walls around the city, it was easy to see what was going on outside.

Most noticeable of all was the corpse of a giant monster that had been split in two.

The priestess who’d destroyed it had to be a terribly strong conjurer, enough so that Manon shuddered.

“As I suspected, there’s no way I’d stand a chance. Those priestesses certainly are powerful.”

Manon was aware that she had committed enough sins to become rather strong, but that sight was in a different league entirely.

A conjurer had easily destroyed that giant beast and all the other monsters Pandæmonium summoned.

Besides that, the priestesses in the holy land were likely all stronger than Manon, including the one she’d just preyed upon. Since Manon had no exceptional strength, there were few opponents here whom she could defeat in a head-on confrontation.

Yet while she shivered at the thought of the priestesses’ might, she wasn’t afraid.

They were mighty, but that was all.

These noble holy women weren't cowardly or crafty enough.

"That's why they're a poor match for me."

Under normal circumstances, Manon wouldn't have been able to tread into the holy land. The structure maintaining her life now was essentially a monster, and the holy land barrier prohibited monsters from entering.

Manon knew this.

Originally, this place had been created to keep out the Four Major Human Errors. It was only natural that it was also designed to repel monsters.

Thus, Manon made arrangements to ensure she could enter.

The giant, ancient monster Pandæmonium's pinky finger had summoned from Pandemonium in the far south to fight outside. By using herself as a guidepost to connect to the inside of the fog barrier, she was able to create an extension of its area of effect.

The mist would expand anywhere necessary to contain Pandæmonium, whose real body was sealed away. It was a powerful conjuring meant to restrict the Human Error above all else, but it wasn't intended to keep out monsters.

It was a barrier that kept monsters trapped within, never letting them out.

The nature of its construction meant that monsters and Pandæmonium were permitted to reside within it. So when the fog entered the holy land, any areas the vapor touched were now accessible to monsters.

The flashy act of attacking the holy land with monsters was just a means of entry. No monster attack on the holy land would ever deal a significant blow against the Faust. It was all an effort to lay the groundwork for Manon to get in.

"It was quite unkind of Mr. Director and Ms. Menou to leave me out of their little trip, I must say."

The sinful girl in the kimono walked off in the direction of the cathedral, arriving in only a matter of moments, owing to the holy land's small size.

Undoubtedly, Menou and the Director were in the doorless building.

"For now, I suppose I'll give Ms. Menou a little surprise and Mr. Director a

piece of my mind.”

Manon circled the cathedral, contemplating how to get inside, when she came upon a sleeping woman.

It was a priestess in glasses. Seeing her, a thought occurred to Manon.

“Excuse me, please wake up.”

Manon gently shook the woman, who quickly regained consciousness. Though she had never actually met her before, she seemed to recognize Manon, just as the girl had suspected.

“Ah, the guest from the train. Miss Manon, wasn’t it? What are you doing outside? I don’t recall transporting you out here...”

“I was just a bit intrigued by all the fuss. We decided to come out together, didn’t we? Then we were attacked by monsters and barely escaped with our lives.”

“Hmm? I-is that what happened...?”

Hooseyard fell for the made-up story. In reality, she’d been sent outside after Menou knocked her out, leaving her jumbled memories in an easily manipulated state.

“Whaaa—? Archbishop Elcami turned into someone who...? No, that can’t be true. I must have been having a strange dream... Yes, of course. That makes sense. Just a moment. I’ll open things up from out here.”

“Yes, please do.”

Without realizing she hadn’t gotten a proper answer, Hooseyard activated the Dragon Gate teleport circle. It was a very short *Teleportation*, only across one wall.

“Please go on through.”

“Thank you.”

Manon slipped through the newly formed door of light.

The fog followed her into the cathedral as she entered with no idea what was happening inside.

The battle between Menou and her Master began with a clash of crest conjurings.

There was very little space to fight inside the station building. An experienced fighter would most likely choose to strike with a knife instead of a crest conjuring for the sake of speed, but these two combatants were able to fire off crest conjurings in a matter of seconds. Both were exceptional in that regard, and the rates of their conjuring constructions were equally matched.

As two crest conjurings canceled each other out, it was Menou who got the upper hand before the resulting reverberations had faded.

She drew the dagger concealed at her thigh and struck. The transition between the crest conjuring and the blade thrust took less than a blink of an eye.

Master Flare immediately used her scripture as a shield.

The metal-reinforced cover was more than thick enough to hold up to a strong thrust from a dagger. Sparks flew as metal collided with metal, producing an unpleasant *screech*.

Still, the grating noise did nothing to dull the pair's movements. After blocking Menou's thrust with the scripture in her left hand, she stabbed at the girl's flank with the dagger in her right.

Menou raised a leg to meet the attack.

The high-laced leather boots that rose to her shins weren't conjuring tools, but they had been made by a skilled craftsman. Their material was sturdy enough to act as a shield and was difficult to cut without striking at the perfect angle. A kick from one boot batted the incoming blade away.

As she deflected the stab, Menou shifted her weight forward, bringing down her raised leg with intense momentum. Her attempt to stomp and break Master Flare's foot was thwarted by a swift dodge backward, however.

The floor shook on the impact of Menou's heel, and the girl followed up with a swift jab of her knife. Master Flare dodged Menou's thrust for her torso by jumping away again.

The red-haired woman had evaded Menou's every strike, but she'd never expected to best her Master with a simple direct assault anyway.

All Menou had wanted was for Master Flare to back off and create some distance.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 2:5—

Menou's mind was already focused on the scripture under her left arm.

She'd been constructing the scripture conjuring even as her foot landed. The scripture, a high-level conjuring tool, shone with Guiding Light.

Invoke [Rejoice, for the wall that surrounds a pious flock of sheep shall never crumble.]

The white wall that formed separated the room, creating a barrier between herself and her Master.

Made of the same kind of conjuring as the holy land itself, the wall fit right into the chamber, looking as if it had always been there.

As a general rule, defense conjurings were typically more dominant than attack ones. A barricade formed of a scripture conjuring was very difficult to break. Master Flare wasn't gifted with a tremendous amount of Guiding Force like Momo or Ashuna, leaving her as weak as Menou when it came to brute force.

The barrier wall would only last for about ten seconds.

Menou was focusing on building up scripture conjurings to hurl attacks at Master Flare in the meantime, when she suddenly detected the flow of air on her skin change.

A naked blade was lancing toward her face.

“?!”

Menou was so shocked that her heart nearly stopped. She had no idea what was happening. Before her thoughts could catch up, her body moved to avoid the danger. The edge grazed Menou's cheek on its way by.

Her eyes automatically moved from the dark-gray tip of the blade to its

handle to its owner, settling on the person holding it.

Master Flare returned Menou's gaze, dagger gripped tight.

"...You got lucky."

She sounded unimpressed that Menou had avoided her strike out of sheer coincidence. Her knife stabbed at Menou once more.

This time, the woman was aiming for her pupil's throat. Pushing aside her confusion about how Master Flare had gotten onto this side of the barrier, Menou twisted out of the way. The movement threw off her balance, but not beyond repair. She dismissed the conjured wall that was dividing the room. This time, it was Menou's turn to jump to the back wall, successfully putting space between the two of them.

Now Master Flare had secured the only exit. Her stance was flawless as she readied her dagger.

Menou felt like a lump of ice had fallen into her stomach.

Had she been a second slower in recognizing that attack, the knife would have gouged through her eye and into her brain. Her whole body felt heavy. One moment, she'd felt hopeful that her attack was working; the next, she'd been plunged into fearing for her life. The sudden shift had wounded her spirit.

Menou cast her eyes around the inside of the station building.

She was confident she'd trapped Master Flare on the other side of the wall. How had she been able to reach Menou?

Master Flare couldn't have slipped past the sturdy barrier. Guiding Camouflage wasn't a reasonable answer, either. The Master Flare Menou had been fighting definitely felt solid, and there wasn't enough time for her to switch out.

Then Menou spotted something that seemed out of place.

"Ah..."

Master Flare's scripture was still lying on the side that Menou had separated. That could've been how she'd made the swap, and Menou groaned aloud when she realized.

“Guiding Branch...!”

“Exactly.”

The Master Flare who had been disguised as Akari was a Guiding Branch.

Guiding Branch was one of the two crest conjurings engraved in Master Flare’s dagger. She had manipulated the branch of Guiding Force to project her own appearance with Guiding Camouflage. It took some extra effort, but unlike the hollow illusions that were the extent of Menou’s capabilities, Master Flare could make fakes with actual bodies.

When Akari transformed into Master Flare, Menou assumed the person she was looking at was the real thing. It was a trick that took advantage of her preconceptions.

Terrifyingly enough, Master Flare had even given the Guiding Branch fake vocal cords so it could speak. And since it had exchanged blows with Menou, it was no exaggeration to call it a clone.

So was the Master Flare now blocking the Dragon Gate real?

Menou had no idea.

“...”

She took a quiet breath.

Panicking certainly wouldn’t get her anywhere. Menou had learned one of her teacher’s tricks. She would just have to count that as a win.

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

There was a fierce burst of wind, and the Guiding Thread coming from Menou’s dagger fluttered all over the room.

She watched to see if it would catch on anything, but it didn’t.

If no others were hidden in the room, the Master Flare by the Dragon Gate had to be genuine. Menou stopped her crest conjuring and charged forward at the same time.

She aimed her blade for the carotid artery, but Flare blocked it with her own dagger.

In stark contrast to the start of the fight, they had shifted from conjurings to a clash of weapons. There were no big movements. Their daggers clashed at a close distance, neither giving an inch. Both women struck the other's arms with their hands to deflect attack trajectories and sent sparks flying as their weapons met once again.

Master Flare was strong. There were several frightening close calls. A tiny falter, and Menou would be done for.

Yet she also detected something unusual.

It nearly felt like she might just stand a chance.

The opponent she was fighting was on the same level as her. This was Master Flare she was facing, so why wasn't it a tougher battle?

Did the woman have no more tricks, deadly traps, or overwhelming conjurings? Master Flare had created Menou's very foundation. It stood to reason that she had a plan Menou couldn't predict.

Yet this person's strength—was well within Menou's understanding.

Flare.

A living legend. The ultimate Executioner.

She was supposed to be the most difficult opponent Menou would ever face, yet the young Executioner found she could envision a path to victory.

"Menou. What did you come here to do?"

"...To kill Akari."

She answered the question amid their clash. It was strange that she could afford to do so.

"You intend to kill Akari Tokitou? How worthless. That's the most disappointing answer you could've given. If you've resolved to betray the Faust, then why stop there? Why not aspire to something more than mere death? Killing people... Is that all you can do? You're going to stop short there, too, just like I did?"

"What else am I supposed to do?!"

How long had it been since Menou shouted like that in the middle of a battle? She couldn't help raging at her Master's harsh comments. That Menou possessed enough attention to spare for yelling in the middle of their fight left her even more uneasy.

Was Master Flare telling her to save Akari? Was that it?

She was an Executioner who had lived her life by killing others. Why would Master Flare, who had chosen the same path, scold Menou for it now?

Menou had killed people. She had no right to try to rescue someone.

She had cut down many in positions similar to Akari. The only difference between Akari and the others was that she was more difficult to put in the ground.

And that was only a result of chance.

They'd traveled together for three months because of that, and nothing more. If Akari hadn't possessed a Pure Concept that kept her from perishing, it would've ended right there in the castle of Grisarika Kingdom, and they would never have formed a bond. Menou would have continued without any doubts about her methods.

"I have no right...to save anyone, do I?!" Menou cried.

"You don't need it." Master Flare was dismissive. "What's the point of being exactly like me? I thought you understood by now that an existence like mine is worthless."

Those words were so very unlike Master Flare that Menou gasped.

"What in the world are you saying...?"

Menou was a killer, so she kept on killing. If that was the extent of it, then she really was like her Master.

There was nothing left on the path of murder. The red trail continued behind and far ahead.

It was all Menou knew. Yet Master Flare, who had ever walked the same road ahead of her, cut right to Menou's core, upending it all.

“If you can’t be a pure and noble priestess or a merciless, murderous villain, then what are you going to become?”

“I thought we killed people because there was nothing else we could do?!”

“That’s right. There’s nothing we can do. A summoned Otherworlder will become a Human Error. We push them to transform so that we can steal their Pure Concepts from the planet. Truly, this world is utterly hopeless.”

“Then saving only Akari wouldn’t make any sense.”

“Of course not, idiot. But that’s only if you are strictly logical. Consider how you *feel*, Menou.”

Suddenly, Master Flare disappeared. It was Guiding Camouflage. Menou knew this, but there was still a sense of confusion when her eyes were fooled at such close range.

“Saving a friend is well worth destroying the world.”

If Menou took Master Flare’s words at face value, something was bound to break within her.

Master Flare, of all people—more of an Executioner than anyone else—was telling Menou to save Akari. Hearing this sent a wave of paralysis through Menou’s mind. Her thoughts were going numb.

Her hearing was becoming distracting, so she forced herself to ignore sound.

Since Master Flare could no longer be seen, Menou immediately concentrated on her nose. She could smell the smoke.

The only reason Menou had recognized the Guiding Camouflage imitation of Akari as a fake was because of the familiar ashy scent.

People were unaware of their own body odor. Relying on her sense of smell, Menou lashed out with her dagger at the presence she detected behind her. It was only meant as a feint, but for some reason, it knocked Master Flare’s dagger away, sending it into the air with a *clang*.

This was her chance for victory.

Menou thrust desperately with her weapon.

Master Flare was unarmed, and her balance had been thrown off from the impact of Menou's strike. She wasn't defending herself. It was like she wasn't even trying. As long as Menou kept moving her blade forward, it would pierce her Master's neck, inflicting a fatal wound. An image of the future flashed in the young woman's mind. She could see her dagger breaking through the carotid artery and Master Flare falling to the floor with blood gushing from her neck.

She could kill her.

Menou was going to fell Master Flare.

Her own Master. The person who laughed with her mouth open wide and her head flung back. The person who'd taken Menou in when she was young. The person she'd traveled with. The person who'd put her hand on Menou's head and ruffled her hair coarsely. The person she'd once wanted to become.

Kill...her?

".....Ah?"

A questioning sound flew from Menou's lips.

Something unbelievable had happened.

Menou's dagger had suddenly changed course just before it stole her Master's life.

Instead of Flare's carotid artery, the blade sliced only empty air. She could see her outstretched arm and the tip of her dagger, still mid-slash. The world had gone still with Menou's thoughts.

What was she doing?

Her doubts became a void that took hold of her heart.

Menou didn't understand why this was happening. Right as she'd pictured her Master's demise, she'd avoided it. In a fight to the death, Menou had kept herself from killing her enemy. Not on purpose, not because of any decision she made.

Her body had moved on its own.

And avoided striking her opponent down.

Despite having felled many good people already.

Even though she had come here to kill Akari, a person who'd become her friend on their three-month journey.

Menou's mind was fuzzy and blank.

"Ha!"

Although time had slowed for Menou, the same could not be said for the rest of the world. Master Flare opened her mouth wide and laughed.

The dagger Menou had knocked away spun in the air and fell right back into her hand. Flare caught it easily and filled it with Guiding Force.

The choice to avert her attack had left Menou wholly exposed. She could do nothing but watch blankly as Master Flare invoked the conjuring.

"Hey, thanks for not killing me."

Guiding Force: Connect—Dagger, Crest—Invoke [Guiding Branch: Parasite-Eagle Seed]

A small *pop* sounded.

It was similar to the sound of a Guiding gun firing, but it came from Master Flare's dagger.

Pain bloomed in Menou's shoulder. Before she could look, she felt a bud of Guiding Force wriggling and blooming inside her. It spread out its roots to drink up Menou's flesh, blood, and Guiding Force.

"Ah!"

Her mind finally functioned again. More than her brain, though, it was mainly her well-trained body reacting to the danger.

Menou clenched her teeth, but not out of regret, for there was no time to dwell on that. She was tightening her jaw against the pain she knew was coming.

The roots were already budding inside her body. Steadying her resolve, Menou drove her dagger into her own shoulder. She grabbed the core and yanked it out, ignoring the agony ripping through her flesh.

It hadn't been a trap. Had Menou gone through with her attack, she would have won, and Master Flare would be dead.

Menou's breath was ragged as she glared at Master Flare with difficulty.



She'd hesitated to kill. Was it because their conversation had made her realize her own feelings? Or perhaps it was something else?

Master Flare had survived because Menou couldn't kill her.

Menou felt sick. Her self-loathing for having spared a life grew into a throbbing headache that pounded her skull. It weighed so heavily on her spirit that the pain in her shoulder was light by comparison.

"So what are you really?"

The Executioner you raised.

Menou couldn't give that reply.

She had no right to save anyone. She intended to kill Akari, too.

Yet after saying all that, she had faltered when the time came to end a life.

It wasn't a matter of lacking the strength. Her heart had merely refused to kill Master Flare.

This was a critical failure.

Menou had spent her life killing people, but something had broken inside her and fallen apart. She no longer possessed the will to fight back.

She could have slain Master Flare, but didn't. She'd failed to execute an enemy.

And now she would pay a high price for failing to stick to her own rules.

Master Flare, who had smashed Menou's heart to bits, narrowed her eyes as if disappointed by her lack of will. Still, the woman was nothing like Menou. She raised her dagger, still prepared to murder.

Menou didn't dodge. She had no drive to.

She was going to die.

Her brain was still frozen, her sense of reality lost as death closed in.

Then an unexpectedly languid voice rang out.

"I'm not sure what's going on here, but..."

Both Menou and Master Flare spun to face this new speaker.

Inexplicably, Manon's face was peering through the door of the station building. When her eyes met Menou's, her expression brightened, and she waved.

As usual, she was wearing a kimono and holding an iron folding fan. It was a weapon of self-defense, the same one she'd used when they fought in Libelle. There was only one crest engraved in that fan.

Guiding Force: Connect—Iron Fan, Crest—

Compared to Menou or Master Flare, it was a fairly slow crest conjuring. Either of them could have outmatched her construction speed. But because they were engaged with each other, neither could stop Manon's attack.

With a graceful smile, Manon swept her fan, which glowed with Guiding Light, toward where the two women were fighting.

Invoke [Wind Blade]

There was a soft breeze as the fan finished its arc.

Then a sharp whirlwind swept through the room to lay everything to ruin.

The sound died down.

Having endured Manon's attack, Master Flare scowled at the state of the room.

The crest conjuring *Wind Blade* had created a broad attack, filling the chamber with spiraling blades of wind. Someone with as much Guiding Force as Momo could endure with Guiding Enhancement, but a normal person would be torn to shreds. Even Master Flare had needed to stop attacking and invoke the barrier crest.

This went for Menou, too. She'd used the barrier crest in her priestess robes to survive Manon's *Wind Blade*.

The difference was that unlike Master Flare, who had dropped to the floor when she triggered her defense, Menou had deliberately stayed upright and let Manon's blow knock her back.

“That’s a surprisingly cheap move.”

Menou had used the impact of Manon’s attack to help make a quick escape.

Flare thought she’d broken the girl’s will, but some fire yet burned in Menou’s heart. Although the entrance to the cathedral was normally closed, it was still open since Manon had just used it. And in a stroke of fortune, it remained active just long enough for Menou to slip through.

It was clear from the drops of blood left behind that Menou was wounded. Now that she’d fled, she was bound to disguise herself, even if she had little energy to spare.

Flare had failed to finish her off when she had the chance. She turned a glare on the interloper who’d made a mess of things.

“Manon Libelle, eh? I’m amazed you tried to break into the cathedral in that body of yours.”

“Break in? Why, whatever do you mean?”

Manon was calm in spite of Master Flare’s accusation. Drawing her fan back out of her sleeve, she held it to her mouth as she spoke in her usual lilting, eloquent manner.

“It almost sounds as if you’re making an accusation, but I can’t begin to imagine your reasoning. From the beginning, I entered the cathedral through perfectly legitimate means, as Mr. Director’s retinue.”

“Oh-ho?”

Master Flare looked past the girl. Sure enough, Kagarma was standing by her side. He must have sensed Manon’s arrival and come to greet her.

Flare knew perfectly well that he was the one who’d brought Menou inside the cathedral. Yet her bitter enemy simply gave a bold, cool smile.

“Indeed, it is just as she says!”

The way they matched their stories up so quickly might have been impressive if it weren’t for the fact that Manon was clearly pinching Kagarma’s back while she grinned.

Flare decided to ignore him. It wasn't as if he could be killed anyway.

"Even if I humor you on that front, are you really going to claim you had nothing to do with this monster nonsense?"

"But of course I didn't. If anything, I must say I am rather impressed those wild monsters had the mettle to brave an attack on the holy land."

"I heard Pandæmonium's pinky finger was outside, and you're her favorite little plaything. Since she went and connected to the full Pandemonium in the south, now there's fog in the cathedral. It's rendering the whole barrier of the holy land useless."

"Oh, dear me! So rambunctious, that little one." The true intention of the monster attack was solely to nullify the barrier so Manon could enter the holy land. It had more or less all gone according to Manon's aims, but she only offered a pleasant grin without acknowledging that fact in the slightest. "But there was some other commander for this whole tumultuous affair, wasn't there? I imagine the little rascal goaded a certain someone into spearheading the assault. Yes, it seems I've been left out of the fun this time around. It pains the heart, truly."

This was the real reason Sahara had been deployed with the monsters. She was a scapegoat. Manon covered her face with her sleeve and made a show of weeping dramatically.

Master Flare glared at her suspiciously.

"So you insist you had nothing to do with it."

"That's right."

"And your excuse for interfering with our fight just now?"

Manon ceased her crocodile tears, lowered her sleeve, and beamed.

"Well, when I saw the person who killed my mother, I couldn't help but mess things up for her a little."

It was amazing that she could make a declaration like that with a smile.

The fog created by Pandæmonium's summon conjuring continued to surround the area of the holy land.

“...”

Sahara cautiously peered out from behind a monster corpse.

After vanishing into the fog for a while, she'd sneaked back to the site of her battle with Momo.

The problem with recreating her body was that it left her naked. She needed clothes. After confirming that both the terrifying conjurer Elcami and that blasted Momo were gone, she crept toward her own corpse, grateful for the fog that concealed her bare skin. There, she set about the sanity-ruining task of stripping her clothes off her own headless cadaver.

“I can’t deal with this anymore... I should just run away from Pandæmonium now. Yeah.”

She definitely wasn’t running away from Momo. The only person she was trying to escape was that terrifying little monster, Pandæmonium. Sahara hadn’t decided what to do once she escaped, but after what she’d endured during this disaster, she was fully prepared to flee without any plan.

Sahara was reassuring herself and putting her habit back on when she suddenly detected a presence behind her.

She peered warily into the fog. The footsteps were too light to be those of a monster. She could see the faint outline of a human figure, too. Considering that it was coming from the direction of the holy land, it was entirely possible a priestess had been sent to track her down.

As she braced herself for the possibility of another battle, Sahara noticed something peculiar about the person approaching through the mist.

Those unsteady footsteps. The left hand clutching the right shoulder. This person was wounded. It looked more like a soldier escaping the war zone than one searching for a fight.

If it’s some random injured priestess, I guess I’ll just ignore her, Sahara thought. But as the outline became clearer, she found there would be no looking away.

The person wasn’t all that tall, but something about her perfectly

proportioned limbs and body gave her a strong aura. Her fluttering priestess robes had a slit that went up to the thigh, but instead of looking overly flashy, the modification had a combination of practicality and style that suited the wearer well. Most of all, she was ridiculously good-looking.

She had smooth skin and long eyelashes that framed bright, beautiful eyes. Her chestnut hair, tied up in a black scarf ribbon, was fine and sleek.

For a moment, Sahara believed her vision of the ideal person she'd like to be had come to life. She stared for a few seconds, then came back to her senses.

Sahara knew exactly who this was.

"M-Menou...?"

This wasn't just any jaw-dropping beauty—it was Menou. Sahara blurted out her name without thinking, and the Executioner looked up.

"...Sahara?"

Whether because of the fog or the severity of her injury, it seemed Menou hadn't noticed her, either.

The two girls faced each other.

Menou had run away in a daze. Her mind was as foggy as her surroundings.

The shoulder she herself had stabbed was throbbing. This certainly wasn't the first time she'd lost a fight. Indeed, she'd made tactical retreats on countless occasions.

However, she'd never fled with her heart and mind in such a disorderly state. It might even be the first time in her life that her feelings had been so conflicted.

Menou had no memory of ever crying. Not when Master Flare marched her away, nor in all the difficult training at the monastery. She didn't remember shedding a tear when she lost things precious to her. Perhaps she'd screamed and sobbed in her childhood, but those memories were gone. As far as she knew, Menou had never cried out of sadness.

The reason was simple—the young woman had never desired to protect anything before.

Her friendship with Akari was the first time she'd ever felt this way. Menou imagined she might cry after killing Akari.

But she was wrong.

Menou already had something dear before Akari.

Her memories with Master Flare were what ended up dulling her ability to kill.

"Heh... Ha-ha-ha!"

A laugh bubbled up from her throat. She was so pathetic that it was actually funny.

After all that bravado about knowing there was no turning back. Menou had been willing to throw her life away. She'd fully intended to expend her spirit, work her body to the bone, and grind herself into powder to do what she set out to achieve.

And yet she couldn't follow through.

The Executioner fought her Master. The outcome wasn't even a matter of victory or defeat. In a way, she wouldn't have had any regrets if she'd lost and died.

But the moment Menou turned her blade away from Master Flare's throat kept replaying endlessly in her mind.

"Hey, thanks for not killing me."

Those few words, still echoing in her ears, were enough to fracture Menou's heart.

She could have killed Master Flare, and she didn't. Nothing would have barred the way to her goal if she'd won. The path to the land of salt was open, and the powerful archbishop was outside the holy land. Menou could have easily brought Akari from the north tower and ended things.

Instead, she threw away her chance at success.

And yet...and yet.

Menou didn't regret not killing Master Flare.

Logically, she understood that she should have stabbed the woman. Menou

knew that well enough. The correct decision was apparent, painfully so. There were no two ways about it.

But when the time came to prove she could act on that reasoning, Menou's heart proved lacking.

If she could use Akari's Pure Concept of *Time* to rewind to the moment when she was about to stab Master Flare, if she was given a chance to erase the failure tormenting her—Menou still couldn't say for sure if she would have done it any differently.

The route was there, but she turned from it.

Menou had killed people, executed innocent Otherworlders simply because their existences were taboo, and had even resolved to do the same to Akari. For some absurd reason, it was her old Master who caused Menou to hesitate.

It was a reality she had never imagined.

Menou couldn't kill Master Flare.

That was the truth.

She started to laugh at her own absurdity and suddenly felt nauseous instead.

“Ugh...”

She pressed a hand to her throat and gagged a few times, but nothing came out. Her stomach was twisted in knots, but there wasn't anything for her to throw up. Since Menou had planned to lie in wait for Master Flare after arriving in the land of salt, she'd avoided eating anything.

But to Menou in that moment, the fact that she couldn't even vomit felt like more proof of her own emptiness.

There was a hollow red void inside her. The crimson path she had walked all this time. Now it was evaporating, threatening to claim Menou wholly. She couldn't fight it, kill it, or reason with it. The terrifying blankness was Menou's own life.

What was the point of an Executioner who couldn't kill someone?

The moment she averted her dagger, Menou had denied and betrayed

herself.

And in the worst way possible, too. There'd been no step forward, nor had Menou acknowledged the long red path behind her. Instead, she'd cast her blade down. The conversation with Master Flare had drawn out her raw emotions and rendered her incapable of taking a life.

She wanted to die.

No, that wasn't true. If she'd wished for death, she could have remained in the cathedral.

Why did she run?

Menou was caught in a spiral of despair, unable to trust anything about herself.

Then...she heard a voice.

"M-Menou...?"

The despondent Executioner looked up. Sahara was standing in the mist.

"...Sahara?"

Ahh, so this is how it ends.

More than resignation, Menou felt gratitude. This chance encounter was her salvation.

After losing to Master Flare and barely escaping, Menou would be felled by Sahara. This utterly meaningless end made perfect sense to her in that moment.

Things couldn't have been more perfect for Sahara.

With Menou as she was, just about anyone could kill her.

If they fought, Sahara would undoubtedly win. Menou was that grievously weakened. Her body and soul were at their breaking point.

And yet Sahara fired a question, not a bullet.

"...What the hell are you doing?"

Her voice trembled in the face of Menou's broken state. She gripped her

prosthetic right arm so tightly that it elicited a sound.

“I lost to Master Flare. Pathetic, if I do say so myself,” Menou explained with a wan smile. “She didn’t even outmatch me in strength. I just couldn’t go through with it. I came so far, claiming I was going to kill my friend—I’m an Executioner who can’t do anything else. Yet, of all people, I couldn’t tell my own Master when she was clearly my enemy. It was such a stunningly stupid way to lose.”

Sahara didn’t care how Menou had failed.

“Didn’t you come to save Akari?”

“...I suppose you could say that.”

“And there’s not much time left, right?”

“Not really, no.” Still clutching the injury on her shoulder, Menou answered in a voice devoid of emotion. “But I lost.”

She lost.

So what?

Sahara grabbed Menou by the collar, and the girl didn’t resist. Blood loss had leeched her of strength, and she’d expended her Guiding Force battling Master Flare. She was basically helpless.

Blood rose to Sahara’s face. She swung back her metal arm and punched Menou as hard as she could.

Menou slowly reached up to touch her jaw. It was a half-hearted reaction, as if she barely felt the pain.

“...Is that it?”

Menou’s expression seemed to question why Sahara hadn’t struck harder.

She’d attempted to rescue Akari and lost to Master Flare. In a way, that was a logical outcome. Menou had failed in a bout with her Master, as she knew she might, and barely managed to escape.

If Sahara finished her off now, it would all be over. She held the power to end things.

This was a once-in-a-lifetime chance, yet for some reason, Sahara slung

Menou's arm over her shoulder.

Menou, who was so injured that she might very well drop dead soon, croaked out a question.

"What are you doing...?"

"Ugh! I don't know!" she snapped back. Sahara gained nothing by aiding Menou. Killing the Executioner was her best option.

And yet...

"I'm not nice enough to end you when you obviously want to die, okay?!" A single emotion occupied Sahara's thoughts. "I hate this, I hate this, I hate this!" she muttered to herself angrily. Even she didn't know why she was helping Menou. A string of curses flowed from Sahara's mouth as she dragged Menou toward the nearest monastery.

She despised all of this. In fact, Sahara had loathed just about everything that happened in her life.

"But I hate the idea of you losing to someone other than me even more...!"

"You say that, but...all I ever do is lose, you know."



Menou had failed against Sahara when they were young children, and she'd known far more defeats than Sahara overall. Both of the young women remembered that well enough.

"Oh, shut up!" Sahara bellowed angrily. She didn't want to hear another word of this loser's logic. "You give up way too easily, Menou!"

"Do I?"

If Menou were swift to quit, she wouldn't be here in the first place. She'd ventured all this way because she refused to give up on Akari. Still, Sahara wasn't having any of the protest in Menou's eyes.

"Quitters don't have such pretty eyes."

"...What does that mean?"

"I'm sure you're telling yourself you did all you could and you shouldn't want for anything more or whatever, right?"

"...Is that so wrong?"

"Of course it's wrong."

Menou fell into a sulky silence at that. Clearly, she felt that her quick decision-making was one of her precious few strong points.

"This is why you're the worst, Menou...!"

In the fog, Sahara crossed the field and reached the entrance of the monastery.

"I hate you so much."

She put on a good show for others, but the truth was, she didn't feel anything. Menou was moved only by a sense of duty and obligation.

She didn't cry. She didn't yell. She constantly wore a vague, amiable smile. She was always calm and collected.

Menou was ever beautiful.

And that drove Sahara crazy.

Even now, when she was gravely injured, her beauty still won out.

“This is why people with pretty faces piss me off so much.”

“Um, what...?”

Menou blinked at the illogical statement.

Sahara didn’t care.

So what if she wanted to see the person she hated look ugly once in a while? If you were going to cry, then your face should be red and snotty. Should you wish to yell, there was no need to hold anything back. That was how Sahara felt.

“If you always act on logic alone, you’ll lose touch with your feelings.”

Breathless with anger, Sahara reached for the monastery door when it suddenly opened.

“Ah...”

“Huh?”

She was utterly defenseless, supporting someone with her shoulder. And while she’d assumed the monastery was deserted, who should appear at the entrance but Momo, who’d just finished showering there.

All three of them froze at the unexpected encounter.

Momo’s gaze went from the stiffened Sahara to the injured Menou.

In a flash, flames of rage filled Momo’s eyes.

“Wait, this isn’t what—”

“Diiie!”

Before she could say another word, Momo punched Sahara in the face.

The chaos in the cathedral reached the room where Akari was being held captive.

However, she no longer had any energy to spare for paying attention to what was happening beyond that chamber. She couldn’t open the door from the inside, and even if she weren’t being watched, Akari would’ve stayed put.

Master Flare’s words stabbed into her like thorns.

The more she turned back time, the worse things got. With every conjuring,

her memories faded. The price for all of Akari's fruitless actions was eating away at her.

She was starting to lose herself.

Her conjurings claimed bits of her past. It was rare for a Pure Concept holder to overcome that fear. In Akari's case, she had overcome the terror of herself because she possessed both an unshakable hope and a negative resignation.

The girl had long since given up on herself.

She gave no thought to herself as she turned back time repeatedly. It didn't matter as long as she could save Menou.

If Menou killed her, that would be enough. And if Akari was going to die anyway, she didn't care whether she lost her memories.

So she was fine with the notion of losing herself.

She would die to keep Menou safe. Menou would remember her, so Akari didn't mind losing all else.

Things had changed, however. Akari was freshly aware of all the holes in her memories of Japan. She'd long forgotten her parents' names, which frightened her.

She recalled the questions Menou had asked her the first time they met.

"What school do you go to? What year are you and which class are you in?!"

It was a way of testing whether she was an Otherworlder. Would Akari still be able to answer now?

"I'm... I..."

She'd been wearing a sailor uniform when she arrived, so she must have attended a school. At sixteen, she would've been a first-year in high school. Akari was pretty sure she wasn't a second-year, at least.

It was difficult to provide specifics, though.

Akari clutched her shoulders and trembled.

Who am I really?

She couldn't remember her friends, her family, or even herself. There was no continuity in her memories, as if her life had begun abruptly from a long-lost past.

What happened back then? What sort of person was she in Japan? She still knew her name, at least. Akari Tokitou. That much was correct, surely.

"...Am I, though?"

If she couldn't be certain of anything else about her history, was she genuinely Akari Tokitou?

"It's fine... I'm still okay," she reassured herself out loud.

Akari's recollection started with her appearing in this world, a loop she'd repeated many times. The journeys she'd taken with Menou. All that supported Akari Tokitou's personality now were her memories with Menou.

Nothing else remained.

There was still time before she forgot Japan, the fact that she was an Otherworlder, and then all else to turn into a Human Error.

However, because her memories with Menou were everything to her, she didn't want to lose them.

Should she relinquish her purpose for rewinding time, there'd truly be no point in coming all this way.

Menou had said that she refused to let anyone save her. She would definitely come.

To kill Akari, who was trying to save her.

Opposing feelings clashed within Akari.

She wanted Menou to come so that this would finally end.

She didn't want Menou to come so that Menou would live.

Her thoughts contradicted each other. And now that she had been captured by Master Flare and could do nothing but wait, Akari's wishes didn't matter. At this point, what Menou did depended entirely on Menou herself.

Menou had already refused Akari's plea to stay away.

Surely, that meant she was hurrying here.

There was nothing Akari could do. Should she start over again? At present, she was denied even that much. Her Pure Concept conjurings were limited in the cathedral. It was doubtful that she would find a chance to escape under Master Flare's watchful eye.

No matter how twisted it seemed, Akari carried absolute faith in Menou. She knew the Executioner would arrive to kill the hopeless Akari.

And yet...that didn't matter if Menou died.

She would still want to start over, just like the first time.

Menou dead, Momo dead, and Akari killed by the red-haired priestess. It was because Akari hated that conclusion that she insisted on rewriting it all.

She still remembered feeling like it was fate the first time she encountered Menou.

"Help me..."

The appeal wasn't for herself.

Akari covered her face weakly, still searching for a way for Menou to live.

The monastery had been evacuated due to the monster attack, but there were three girls in one of the abandoned rooms.

Menou, injured from her battle with her Master; Sahara, unconscious from being punched in the face; and Momo, the only one who was perfectly fine.

In a way, it was a balanced group: a priestess, a priestess's aide, and a nun. Menou had been laid down in a bed. Momo was using medical supplies from the monastery to tend to her wounds.

As for Sahara, who had carried Menou all this way, she had yet to wake up from the blow Momo delivered to her face when they bumped into each other at the entrance. Momo had dragged her inside and carelessly left her lying on the floor. She wanted to finish the job, but Menou had managed to stop her.

"Darliiing, I really think we should kill her right nooow. She's obviously some kind of taboo, not to mention one of the criminals who attacked the holy land,

too! I'm told she'll die if that Guiding prosthetic is destroyed. Now's our chaaance!"

"No, just leave her alone."

Menou patted Momo's head, quieting her insistence on executing Sahara. Seeing Momo's usual antics had somehow calmed Menou's mind.

It was true that Sahara had committed a taboo, and it made perfect sense to end her while she was unconscious. Yet Menou was putting it off because Sahara had aided her.

No, that's not it, Menou admitted to herself.

Sahara saving her was just an excuse. The fact was that Menou didn't even know if she could kill right now.

From the moment she hesitated against Master Flare, she'd been overwhelmed by a feeling that she had no right to claim any other lives, either.

As Menou waited for Sahara to wake, the unconscious girl's eyes fluttered open with perfect timing.

She sat up slowly, shaking her head.

"That's weird. I had a dream that we tried to take shelter in a monastery, only to run into a wild pink gorilla..."

"Excuse me? Do you have something to say?"

"...Sorry. It wasn't a dream. Being in the same room as this pint-sized ape is worse than any nightmare."

No sooner had Sahara woken than she and Momo were raring for round two. They could hardly be expected to act friendly when they'd been trying to kill each other just a few hours ago.

Momo stopped glaring at Sahara long enough to look over at Menou.

"So. What were you doing out here with *her* of all people, darling?"

It was a very valid question.

Menou gave a brief explanation, going over her infiltration of the cathedral as Kagarma Dartaros's guest. Then she recounted her defeat against Master Flare

and how Sahara had inexplicably saved her.

It wasn't an ordinary failure. Menou had deliberately chosen not to slay Master Flare. She'd stupidly done something an ordinary person would do—act reluctant to take another's life. Menou confessed it all openly.

"And now I have no idea what to do."

Maybe she wasn't an Executioner anymore.

Menou had strayed from Master Flare's teachings.

If she'd truly become a villain, she could have reclaimed Akari without a second thought. That was the right thing to do, and she had no need to want for anything else. A truly committed Executioner would have felled her Master without question.

The uncertainty that clouded Menou's actions was a change brought on by Akari.

Akari's smile had irreversibly altered Menou. Their conversations had softened her heart. She'd fought Master Flare on the foolish premise of doing it for the sake of the individual called Akari, and now Menou's beliefs were so shaken that she couldn't kill.

"I was unable to completely give up what it means to be an Executioner, yet I went against Master Flare, who's more of an Executioner than anyone."

Akari had staked her existence for Menou, yet Menou was stuck being half-hearted.

She didn't care about her own life, for she'd prepared to throw it away. However, she wasn't willing to give up her identity as an Executioner to save Akari. Instead, she'd hoped to resolve things by killing the Otherworlder, clinging to the same methods she'd always followed.

That had fallen apart after she'd lost to Master Flare, though.

The contradiction between the principles Menou believed she carried and the reality she'd been confronted with weighed heavily on her heart.

"You know, Momo..."

“What is it?”

“I never wanted you to have to slay a good person.”

“Pardon?”

Momo tilted her head in confusion. Heedless, Menou continued to lay out her feelings.

“I know there’s no choice when you’re fighting someone. Priestesses, knights, those adventurers who showed up in the Wild Frontier, or other scoundrels who attack you first. I would never ask you not to kill in situations like that, of course.”

Refusing to take a life could endanger Momo in such predicaments.

As long as she was in the world of Executioners, Menou had to approve of violence and murder. She had to be willing to resort to bloodshed on the job to prevent greater death.

At the very least, Menou cared about Momo more than most others. So she wouldn’t object to Momo doing what was necessary for her own survival.

But...

“Innocent people who did nothing wrong... I didn’t want you to have to harm anyone like that, Momo.”

Perhaps the way of life she was unconsciously trying to entrust to Momo was an ideal Menou had seen in a dream.

Menou herself had already done too many things that couldn’t be taken back. She’d killed enough dreamers that she saw them in her own dreams, taken enough life that she sought meaning in it. Ultimately, she found a version of herself who couldn’t do it anymore and lost her way.

“All it took was a single step off the path Master taught me, and my way vanished.”

Akari had called their meeting fate. She had memories with other versions of Menou. Those recollections were so powerful that she was willing to risk herself.

It left Menou wishing she could have that much time, too.

The memories that led Akari to care so much for Menou. A connection without any lies.

Unfortunately, she had no way of knowing all those lost experiences.

“...What an idiot.”

It was Sahara who spoke up to ridicule Menou’s complaint. Menou and Momo both turned to stare at her, and Sahara went on irritably. “Do you enjoy getting all wishy-washy, saying things like you’ve had some great revelation, getting all worked up about a basic concept that anyone could’ve hit upon? Plenty of people get lost and confused about their way of life all the time. You have no idea? Pff! Why don’t you just ask someone, then?”

Sahara didn’t mean for her sarcastic statement to be anything but an insult. Momo’s eyes narrowed in rage, and her small body glowed with Guiding Light.

Menou, on the other hand...

“Ah.”

Looking at Sahara, who was clutching her knees to her chest, Menou suddenly had a flash of insight. The girl’s throwaway mockery had given her a revolutionary notion of how to seek the answer she wanted.

Menou had directly received another’s feelings before, even the ones that couldn’t be vocalized. She had experienced that person’s past through their eyes. It was none other than Sahara whose life had once been projected into Menou’s mind.

A Guiding Force connection.

That was how Menou could access the many things Akari had experienced with her.

“...What? Quit staring.”

Sahara shifted uncomfortably under Menou’s gaze.

After learning of this answer she’d been lacking, Menou was shocked into silence for a moment.

Then laughter welled up from the pit of her stomach.

“Ah-ha...ah-ha-ha-ha!”

Momo’s eyes widened, and Sahara appeared even more disturbed.

Their reactions couldn’t stop Menou from laughing until tears came to her eyes, however.

This time, it wasn’t self-derisive.

In all their years together, even Momo had never seen her like this: laughing uncontrollably, exuberantly, the way a young girl her age ought to.

The heaviness in her chest began to melt away. Her goals rearranged themselves. The path that had been so unclear was suddenly wide open.

“Ah-ha-ha, I really am an idiot. It’s been right in front of me all along. I can’t believe I was too stupid to notice it.”

“D-darling?”

“Hmm? Oh, sorry. I’m fine.”

Menou wiped away a joyful tear with her finger.

Her eyes were opened.

First, she felt Momo’s presence. Then she thought of her own memories with Akari.

The solution had been within her the whole time. It was something only she could do, something she had already proven was possible with Akari.

Menou felt the blood rushing in her veins. For the first time in a long while, she was aware of the sound of her own heartbeat.

“Thank you, Momo.”

“Awww, no need to thank meee!”

“...Yeah, seriously, don’t,” Sahara added quietly.

Without breaking her smile, Momo grabbed the nearest chair and flung it at Sahara, who flinched but managed to block it with her prosthetic arm.

The flimsy wooden thing broke on impact. Ignoring both her destruction of

monastery property and Sahara's hostile glare, Momo went on as if nothing had happened.

"So what are we going to do nooow?"

"Let me think..."

Menou looked outside.

The sun had set, and stars dotted the sky.

It had been several hours since the clash with Master Flare. Nothing about the situation had changed for the better.

But now she knew what was necessary. A smile surfaced on Menou's face. At last, she felt the energy to move forward.

Long had she walked a red path. From where the young woman stood on it now, she couldn't discern what to do next. But she'd caught sight of a way to gain the courage to step forward onto the road that surely lay beyond.

"I'm going to go see Akari again. Momo...will you help me?"

"Of course I will, you silly," the pink-haired girl replied immediately.

Why was she so willing to follow someone like Menou? The assistant's devotion felt unearned yet heartening.

"What about you, Sahara?"

"I'm going home."

Home to where?

Menou raised her eyebrows at the absurd declaration. Sahara concealed her face behind her knees, possibly to hide from Menou's stare. Evidently, she belatedly regretted the choice to aid Menou.

"Sahara. What do you think of Akari?"

"...She's a good girl, that Akari. Unlike a certain violence machine."

"You help, too, then."

"What?!"

Sahara whipped her head up, but Menou ignored her astonishment. She was

going to drag Sahara into this whether she liked it or not.

Next, Menou cast a glance at Momo.

“So I didn’t get to ask this before...”

“Yeees?”

“Did you make friends with Akari?”

“Absolutely not. Not even in the slightest.”

“Really? Even though you ditched me to travel with her?”

“Not. At. All!”

Momo’s response was just as prompt as her previous one. Menou couldn’t help chuckling at the unnecessarily strong denial. Somehow, this convinced her that the pair had indeed become friends.

That was just Akari’s nature.

She was very friendly, and quick to sympathize with others. One couldn’t help getting drawn in by Akari’s personality.

“Then wouldn’t it be lovely if we could spend more time with her?”

“...Whaaat? No, she’d just get in the waaay.”

“Akari’s a thousand times better than this weirdo. I’m Team Akari all the way.”

“No one asked you! In fact, who *are* you, anywaaay?!”

“Huh? Momo, you don’t remember Sahara?”

The three girls who had been raised in Master Flare’s monastery talked over one another. In a way, it was like a tiny class reunion.

But something was missing.

Thus, Menou had to reclaim it.

Something Akari knew that Menou didn’t.

Menou could see now what she required to press forward.

“All right... Let’s go destroy the holy land, shall we?”

“Menou’s brain is broken.”

Sahara stared at Menou in disbelief, and Momo’s eyes widened, too.

“Well, what else are we supposed to do? It’s absolutely necessary.”

The strongest barrier city in the world.

First of all, they needed to reveal everything that barrier was hiding.

“I’ll decide whether to fight Master Flare after that.”

Menou still couldn’t imagine the crimson-haired woman dying. Her teacher was strong and clever enough that it was impossible to conceive of killing her.

Was that really all it was?

Or had Menou just been making excuses in her mind by conceiving of it that way? Did some part of her believe she couldn’t kill her because she couldn’t win?

“If you fight Master...can you kill her?” Momo asked anxiously.

“Why do you think I wouldn’t be able to?”

“Because, darling, Master is...” Momo hesitated but found her resolve and continued. “...even more special to you than that boob-lady.”

It was so obvious that a faint smile flitted across Menou’s face.

Momo understood better than Menou herself. Because Master Flare was important to Menou, she’d faltered when the time came to end her. Menou had those feelings just like anyone else, and Momo knew it, even if her darling didn’t.

It wasn’t a matter of strength, or Flare’s unreadability, or the possibility of a trap. Menou had faltered because her Master was precious, like a parent.

Momo had ever been aware of Menou’s weakness.

Menou didn’t even know her own heart.

“I really am stupid, aren’t I?”

“Of course you’re not stupid, my darliiing!”

“No, I most certainly am.”

Truly, Momo was such a good assistant that she was wasted on the likes of Menou. She grasped Menou better than Menou did.

The Executioner had never truly understood herself.

“It’s all right,” Menou declared firmly.

She could still move forward. Once she knew what she lacked deep down, she could seek it.

“I’m not pure, or strong, or noble.”

If she wanted to be like her Master, she would have to be able to kill absolutely anyone.

However, Menou ultimately couldn’t become Flare.

“That’s what makes me the villain.”

Menou grinned.

Regardless of her failures or how many occasions she’d disappointed herself, she would stand again. Menou would break from her Master’s instruction to move further on the path.

Master Flare’s act of raising Menou would be repaid with vengeance. Menou would speak of love, yet employ every dirty, cowardly, unfair, nasty trick in the book. Not for justice, a creed, nor even peace—only for herself.

The first person she had to kill was her old self—the one fettered by the notion of existing as an Executioner and trying to navigate relationships within that rigid structure.

If Menou could destroy the part that clung to that way of life she had pursued for so long, she could find her next step.

Thus would begin an inconsolable killing, one that would make Menou the villain.

She’d commit the worst murder possible and be haunted by it until her death.

By perpetrating this selfish act, Menou would take the first step toward her unique existence.

The Land of Salt

The night was over.

Peace was slowly returning to the holy land after the attack. The monsters had been utterly defeated, and most of the priestesses in the holy land were disposing of the monsters' corpses. Lower-ranking members were assigned to clean up the giant one outside. Though they were impressed that the archbishop had taken down such a beast, getting rid of a body that was debatably larger than the holy land itself was a struggle.

The fog that had settled over the area was a problem, too. It wasn't just morning mist. The Pandemonium barrier from the south was drastically reducing the effect of the holy land's barrier. All the priestesses could do was wait for the vapor to fade, but it showed no signs of letting up.

Amid the white fog, a priestess in glasses was wandering the holy land.

It was Hooseyard.

She was typically inside the station building in the cathedral, but at present, she was searching for Momo.

When Elcami had returned from fighting off the monsters yesterday, Hooseyard asked why Momo wasn't with her, and she was given the bizarre reply, "She said she's taking a shower first."

Since Hooseyard hadn't yet synced her scripture with Momo's, she couldn't contact the girl with a communication conjuring. Which meant Hooseyard had to wait outside the cathedral for her, or Momo wouldn't be able to get back in.

So even after she'd teleported the girl in the kimono into the cathedral, she herself waited outside.

Before long, day approached.

Hooseyard knew as soon as the sun had set that it wasn't just a matter of

taking a shower, but she still told herself Momo would return quickly. Yet the girl had been missing for nearly half a day now.

This can't be right, Hooseyard had told herself, and she'd forced her sleep-deprived body to start looking for her subordinate.

Had something happened during the battle, or was she merely slacking off somewhere? Knowing Momo, the latter seemed more likely, but it was dangerous to jump to conclusions without proof.

There were a few pilgrim and priestess casualties from the incident, and a couple of people were missing. Hooseyard worried that Momo was among the victims, so she wandered the holy land half in tears for a while until someone finally called to her.

“Miss Hooseyard!”

It was Momo’s voice.

Although she wore white priestess robes, the modified frilly skirt and heart-patterned tights stood out anywhere. Hooseyard was so thrilled to see the pink-haired girl that she forgot to scold her for disappearing without permission.

“Miss Momo!”

“Yes, it’s mee.”

Her response was a full octave higher than the tone Hooseyard knew.

The unexpected pitch made Hooseyard’s glasses slide down her nose in surprise.

“Wh-what happened? You seem to be in a very good mood.”

“Huh?” Momo’s eyes went round, as if she had no idea what Hooseyard was talking about. “What do you meeean? I’m always like this, sillyyy!”

“R-really? I mean, I guess now that you mention it, but...really...?”

“But of cooourse. Whatever do you meeean?”

Hooseyard stared at Momo, who insisted she was acting perfectly normal.

Momo didn’t seem to be aware of it, but she was definitely being strange. Specifically, her tone was much peppier than usual, and her mannerisms were

far cutesier than necessary. There was no sign of the arrogance and disinterest she'd openly displayed before. Momo was acting like an assistant who truly wanted to please her beloved superior.

The change was so stark that Hooseyard was more disturbed than concerned.

“So...nothing’s wrong?”

“Of cooourse not!”

Momo beamed back at her with her most adorable smile. It was such a pure expression that it pierced right through the exhausted Hooseyard’s distrust and into her heart.

This friendly, eager-to-please, adorably honest Momo was much closer to the ideal assistant Hooseyard had once envisioned.

“Of course! This is totally normal!”

This was far preferable to the rebellious girl from the other day. Faced with the advent of her dream assistant, Hooseyard could only accept this transformed Momo unquestioningly.

“Let’s go back to the cathedral, shall we?” she said dreamily. “There’s still a lot of cleanup, so we’ve got our work cut out for us! Let’s do our best together...!”

“Okaaay, you can count on meeee!”

Wearing the biggest smile she had in recent memory, Hooseyard headed back to the cathedral with Momo in tow.

“All right, I’ll be right baaack.”

Momo excused herself from the station building in the cathedral to go about her work.

She only ventured a few steps, paperwork from Hooseyard in her hands, before checking that no one was around. Then she let herself relax.

The air around Momo warped. Her hair color, clothing, and height shifted until she turned into Menou.

“Well, that was a success, at least.”

Menou shook out her ponytail and started walking.

She'd successfully disguised herself as Momo and followed Hooseyard into the cathedral.

As usual, she and Momo were working separately. She'd already entrusted her assistant with another important job.

Despite successfully infiltrating the cathedral for the second time, something didn't sit right with her.

"Why did she doubt me at first...?"

When Menou first approached Hooseyard as Momo and was met with hesitation, she feared her disguise had failed.

Menou was Momo's direct superior, not to mention that they'd grown up in the same monastery. She was confident she had a perfect grasp of Momo's speech and actions. As far as Menou knew, her performance today had been a flawless reproduction of Momo, from her tone to her smallest gestures, on a higher level than ever before.

And yet Hooseyard had been cautious of her energy and attitude.

It made no sense. Menou had definitely pulled off a perfect imitation of how Momo behaved. The Executioner was confident she had acted out her assistant's adorableness down to the last detail.

"Perhaps I was careless... No, maybe that woman's just guarded as the priestess in charge of entrance to the cathedral."

Menou was certainly closer with Momo and had been her senior for much longer. She didn't think she'd underestimated Hooseyard, but evidently, those glasses were for more than show. Impressed by the priestess's sharpness, Menou headed toward Kagarma's room.

She followed the hallway straight to the entrance to the south tower, climbing the stairs.

This room was specifically for the Elders who occasionally visited. It was where Menou had been staying until recently. She walked confidently toward her destination. There were few people in the cathedral, and she encountered

none of them.

Once at the top of the steps, Menou entered the room without so much as a knock.

“Why, hello, Ms. Menou.”

A girl wearing a kimono greeted the Executioner. She didn’t seem surprised in the slightest by the abrupt entry. Manon stood and greeted Menou. She had entered this place just as Menou escaped, filling her role as Kagarma’s attendant. As she moved closer to Menou, Manon spread her arms in a gesture of welcome.

“Please come in. I’m ever so glad to see you! I was just about sick to death of being alone with Mr. Director here! I’ve done what I came to do, so I was about to have him prepare a train for us.”

“Oh? That works out perfectly.”

“Does it?”

One of the reasons Menou had returned to the cathedral was for the Guiding train.

It was a necessary component for her goal of destroying the conjured barrier known as the holy land. Menou could have threatened Hooseyard into doing it if necessary, but if she had the aid of someone who was able to use it freely, so much the better.

“Say, Manon. I’d like to make a deal with you. Could we talk a moment?”

“A deal...?” Manon’s smile stiffened. She took a graceful step back, drew out her iron fan, and covered her mouth. “Is there anything I could possibly offer you, I wonder?”

“Yes, there is,” the Executioner replied.

The Director wouldn’t refuse a request from Manon. That was an alluring power.

“In that case, whatever do you intend to offer *me*, Ms. Menou?”

“What’s hidden in the inner sanctum of the cathedral.”

Manon's eyebrow twitched.

She had alluded to that secret several times, leaving Menou to suspect she was interested in it. That hunch had proven correct.

"That's what you came to the holy land to look for in the first place, right?"

"...Indeed. I suppose there is no point in denying it. You're correct, Ms. Menou."

Just as Menou thought, Manon seemed to have an idea that whatever was kept in the inner sanctum was connected to her goals. She'd only planned to depart the holy land because she'd deemed it impossible to acquire at present.

The heart of the holy land, the place hidden at the center of the cathedral, was strictly protected. It was even more carefully monitored than the Dragon Gate, which could teleport people anywhere on the continent. The secure area possessed no physical or conjuring-based means of entry.

"A device that collects memories, stores them like a vault, and supplies them," Manon stated. "What the holy land truly guards is an ancient relic known as the Star Memory."

That was Manon's prize. Menou hadn't known its title, but Manon had once told her of a device that could restore Otherworlders' memories.

Since Manon didn't have any memory loss, she was likely hoping to acquire it for Pandæmonium's sake. Perhaps she wanted to expand the Human Error's power even further, or...maybe there was a more personal reason.

"It's odd that you would try to bargain using the Star Memory, Ms. Menou. How can you offer something you don't have access to?"

"You're right, but listen..."

The Star Memory was in a completely secret location. It was even deeper within the cathedral than the station building Hooseyard called home. The archbishop spared no effort to keep the inner sanctum protected. Manon was correct that Menou couldn't reach it—no one could.

Unless...

"What if I told you there was a way to destroy the barrier known as the holy

land, cathedral and all?"

"...Well, wouldn't *that* be interesting?"

Manon's eyes glittered.

Destroying the holy land was something she'd deemed impossible, even with the help of Pandæmonium's pinky. The barrier city was powered by the immense Guiding Force of the biggest earthen vein on the continent. Unable to come up with a way to bring it down, Manon had settled for using the fog barrier to neutralize its effects by letting monsters in.

As the two girls stood talking by the entrance, Manon gestured to the sofa with her fan.

"Please come in, Ms. Menou. Have a seat. I imagine this conversation might take a while."

Managing the Guiding train connected directly to the holy land was one of Hooseyard's duties.

She didn't have to do anything to adjust the Guiding Force route or the Dragon Gate that connected to the station. They were an invention of a culture from a thousand years ago. As much as Hooseyard adored the Guiding Force route known as the earthen vein, the system of the Guiding train that delved into it was already perfect without any intervention.

Once there was a set destination, the advanced conjuring tool handled all else automatically. It was best not to mess around with it needlessly. However, Hooseyard was still there as a ceremonial conjurer to keep an eye on things just in case anything went wrong.

"Thank you again, Hooseyard."

"Not at all, sir. The train will be departing soon, so please go ahead and board."

Like any other time she saw a passenger off, there was nothing for her to do but watch as Kagarma departed for home. She'd already ensured the girl who'd come with him, Manon, was on board, too.

The train set out, exuding Guiding Light as it chugged along the rails for ten

meters before vanishing into the Dragon Gate.

Another job done. Hooseyard was stretching when suddenly, she felt a quake.
“Bwaaah?!”

The floor beneath the woman’s feet shook violently, and she nearly lost her balance, but she managed to catch herself.

An earthquake? Hooseyard thought, although she quickly realized that couldn’t be it. She had noticed the strangeness immediately because she was so sensitive to changes in the astral veins.

The earthen vein was going wild—more than she had ever experienced before.

“I-it can’t be...! Is it because of the Guiding train?!”

Hooseyard’s face went pale as she realized the gravity of the situation.

“The Guiding train exploded in the earthen vein?!” Archbishop Elcami exclaimed in disbelief upon hearing Hooseyard’s report.

The earthen vein that connected to the holy land was the foundation of the network of veins that spread all over the continent. The strength of the Guiding Force flowing through it was far beyond a human’s control. Even a dozen talented priestesses working in concert could only draw up a small fraction of the energy.

Yet now, the vein was wildly shooting off power like a volcanic eruption.

After a moment of stunned silence upon hearing the cause of this phenomenon, Elcami began quaking with rage.

“You fool! How could you let something like that happen?!”

“W-well...”

Hooseyard stammered in the face of her boss’s fury, forcing an explanation out through pale lips.

Kagarma had requested to use the Guiding train that navigated the earthen vein to return home. Somehow, it had gone off course. It was difficult to interfere with the earthen vein from the outside, but if something had ruptured

within it, there was nothing to be done. It was the most effective way Hooseyard could imagine to inflict direct damage upon the earthen vein.

“I—I didn’t...do anything wrong. So whyyy...?”

“Idiot! I don’t need your excuses. What happens now?”

“Yeek! I-I’m not sure, but I suspect a dragonblight will occur. And it will be... very detrimental for the continued existence of the holy land...I think...”

Hooseyard glanced nervously at Elcami and immediately regretted it when she saw the archbishop’s face had gone bright red.

She was boiling with anger. The loss of a valuable Guiding train, an out-of-control earthen vein that threatened the holy land, and the possibility of a dragonblight. Each problem was sufficient cause for outrage on its own.

Elcami couldn’t ignore this situation. The holy land sustained itself thanks in no small part to the grace of the earthen vein. If something disrupted that flow, the holy land would undoubtedly suffer. Repairing the damage was paramount. Elcami’s face was twisted with grim indignation, but her mind was hard at work devising a solution.

“...We must fix the earthen vein at once. This is an emergency.”

“H-how many people can you assign to this task...?”

“We’re going to evacuate everyone in the holy land, pilgrim and priestess alike. For now, they’ll be sent to the graveyard monastery that Master Flare manages.”

“Huh?!” Hooseyard exclaimed in abject disbelief, but Elcami was serious. She contacted the necessary priestesses through a communication conjuring.

“Hrm... I can’t reach Flare. What the hell could she be doing at a time like this...?!”

The holy land was going to disappear. There was no stopping it now. A massive amount of Guiding Force was required at all times to keep the barrier city running. If even one strand of the earthen vein was separated, it was only a matter of time until the entire thing fell apart.

Thus, Elcami had to ensure nobody saw what remained once the town

vanished.

For one, there was the train station where Elcami and Hooseyard now stood and the teleportation tool known as the Dragon Gate. And then there was the facility within the inner sanctum, the Star Memory. Elcami doubted it would ever happen, but if what resided beyond that was revealed, the Faust would never recover.

The archbishop ground her teeth. To think that this would happen right as they were preparing for the return of the Lord...

She needed to get everyone far from the holy land to keep them from seeing the truth. An evacuation was the best excuse.

“B-but what about dealing with the earthen vein? As I said before...it could easily become a dragonblight, so—”

“You and I will just have to do it ourselves,” Elcami interjected, cutting Hooseyard off.

“With only two people?!”

“Enough! What are you dawdling for? Get moving. I thought astral veins were the one thing you were good for, you dunce!”

“Yes, ma’aaam...”

With tears in her eyes from the latest of many unreasonable demands, Hooseyard hurried off to investigate the earthen vein’s condition.

The two women had forgotten something important, however: the scripture conjuring. While it reached many in the area, one person in particular didn’t hear the evacuation instructions.

As the foundation of the holy land weakened and chaos took hold, Akari Tokitou sat alone in the cathedral’s northern tower.

“Menou must be a real CWF to come up with an idea like this.”

“And what is ‘CWF’ supposed to mean?”

“It’s short for ‘crazy weirdo freak.’”

In a rural area that was a safe distance from the holy land, a pair of girls

watched Guiding Force surge from the ground like water from a geyser. Their discussion was oddly relaxed for such a tense situation.

Menou's method for disrupting the earthen vein had been incredibly simple. Momo had interfered with the vein to form a small-scale fountain of Guiding Force. They'd employed the same conjuring to wrench up the earthen vein in the battle in Grisarika.

On its own, this tactic didn't have much effect. The earthen vein Momo was messing with this time was considerably larger. Even with Momo's immense Guiding Force, the most she could do was create a tiny bend in the flow.

But what would happen when the Guiding train, which turned into Guiding Force and followed the flow of the earthen vein, hit that curve?

The result was clear to see. It was the same thing that would occur to any train if its rail was twisted out of shape. The Guiding Force went off the track of the earthen vein, causing immense damage and exploding from the ground. The remains of the invaluable, irreplaceable ancient relic were scattered around the holy land.

“Wasn’t the Director on that thing? Is he dead or what?”

“I certainly hope so. He was staying in the same room as my darling all this time, that dirty old man.”

“Seriously? Yikes. That’s a death warrant if I ever heard one.”

“Precisely.”

“But Manon was riding with him, right? If she got hurt, I’d hate to think how Pandæmonium will react.”

“Why should we care? She’s a criminal, after all. The world is better off if she’s dead.”

“One more thing, Momo.”

“Now what?”

“Isn’t this gonna turn into a dragon?”

“.....”

Momo silently looked up at the sky.

Air surged from the hole in the ground like a roar, whirling into a maelstrom. The shock waves of Guiding Force made everything underfoot tremble, as if the world were screaming in protest. The scattered energy slowly, powerfully, came together.

The Guiding Light blazing up from below had connected to the sky.

The heavenly vein and the earthen vein—together, they were called astral veins. What transpired when they linked without a conjurer to control the union?

KABOOM. A ripple ran through the world. That was just an optical illusion, of course. The wave of Guiding Force was so enormous that it looked like all of creation was undulating.

The chaotic outburst of Guiding Force had found direction. This convergence of incredible power was enough to alter the weather. It swallowed the clouds and pulled up dirt and sand. All this otherwise lifeless matter began to take a shape of its own, clinging to the Guiding Force that had tied the land and the sky.

Such a massive amount of Guiding Force in one spot gave the world the illusion that a new existence with a unique will had been born there.

This artificial life phenomenon spread slowly but surely, soon sucking in the corpse of the giant monster Elcami had sliced in half and absorbing it. Then, as if that wasn't even remotely satisfactory, it began ripping up the ground itself.

The phenomenon of Guiding Force storming wildly, absorbing all the matter around it to get bigger and bigger, was known in this world as dragonblight.

Momo squinted up at the natural phenomenon beyond human understanding.

“Yes, it’s turning into a dragon, all right.”

“Okay, then I’m going home for real this time.”

Faced with a massive disaster on the same level as a Human Error, Sahara turned and ran as fast as she could.

At the center of the overflowing fog...

One cherubic little girl had created a connection between two places that would normally be impossible to link—the holy land and Pandæmonium. The child was still trapped in place after the battle with Elcami, and Manon was by her side. After boarding the train with Kagarma, Manon had Pandæmonium summon her, allowing her to escape without getting caught in the explosion.

As Manon destroyed the stakes pinning Pandæmonium in the air one at a time, she beheld the phenomenon that was blowing away the encroaching fog.

A dragon that greedily devoured everything in sight, trying to become a living thing with the power of the earthen vein.

“Well, it looks like Ms. Menou kept her end of the bargain.”

While Manon watched with satisfaction as the dragonblight began, the child next to her looked cross.

“Mmm...”

Pandæmonium wore a rare look of sorrow as she observed the massive phenomenon that could destroy an entire nation.

“That’s supposed to be a dragon? For a vestige of the *Dragon* I knew, it’s so much smaller. Really, talk about disappointing.”

“It’s...smaller?”

“Mm-hmm. Much, muuuch smaller. It doesn’t even compare.”

Manon took another look at the distant dragon. It ran from the heavens to the ground, absorbing all in its path. The giant tornado would likely grow into an unbelievably massive hurricane and swallow up everything in sight.

“You’re saying *that* is small?”

“Mm, it’s tiny.”

It was a phenomenon big enough to alter the weather, yet Pandæmonium called it “tiny.” The little girl in Manon’s arms let her legs dangle, and she pursed her lips.

“It’s hard to believe this is what became of *Dragon*, the greatest Pure Concept

ever. Seriously, it's positively tiny."

"My goodness... How large was the original *Dragon*, then?"

"Hmmm. I'd say the person who had the fastest and best Pure Concept ever..." She reached up with a slender arm and pointed at the sky. "...was about as big as that at their apex."

As one of the Four Major Human Errors, Pandæmonium looked proud as she pointed to the moon visible in the daytime sky.

The holy land was fading.

The Guiding Force that had always supplied the conjured barrier city was being devoured by the newly born dragon. In its efforts to convert into a living thing, it was consuming everything it could to expand and gain life.

The dragon thrashed against the flow of the earthen and heavenly veins, desperate for freedom.

As all the priestesses evacuated, Menou walked calmly through where the holy land had been.

Now that the barrier city had vanished, all kinds of objects were flying around. Though the buildings themselves had been made of barrier conjurings, the items and furniture contained within were ordinary matter. With nothing to support them, all those odds and ends were tumbling down like an avalanche. The resplendent holy land had become a chaotic garbage dump.

One of the only structures that was still intact was a train station with a track that went nowhere.

And farther beyond it, a small cylindrical building.

That was the location of the Star Memory that could collect, store, and supply memories.

The holy land that was the object of so much worship, including the cathedral at its center, existed solely to conceal two things that were now plainly visible.

It obviously suggested the pair of structures were important. Menou looked up at the exposed buildings. She didn't know why they went to such lengths to protect them, nor could she imagine what members of the Faust would think

upon seeing them. Perhaps they'd be shocked that such things had been kept in the cathedral, or maybe they'd accept it.

Regardless, Menou's goal wasn't in either of the structures.

After a moment of observation, Menou climbed up to the train station platform. It was the same one she'd stepped onto upon arriving in the cathedral. It appeared abandoned amid the clutter of scattered furniture, but there was someone waiting there.

She must have fled here in a panic when the holy land began to disappear. This would have been the closest safe place to the north tower where she'd been imprisoned.

Akari stood aimlessly on the strangely exposed platform. The railroad track to nowhere seemed appropriate for someone so lost.

When she noticed Menou walking over, Akari's face stiffened. Menou smiled anyway.

"I came to get you like I promised, Akari."

"M... Menou..."

Akari looked up. Her expression was conflicted. Unlike Menou, she must not have gotten her thoughts and feelings in order yet. In this state, it would be easy to outwit her in a battle of words. Menou snickered internally, but she didn't let it show on her face.

"E-everything kinda disappeared... Did you do this, Menou?"

"I certainly did. I erased the entire holy land just to see you."

Menou clasped her hands behind her back, lifting her chin. She was putting on a similarly mischievous air to the way she'd behaved when she and Akari first met.

"Well? Aren't you happy?"

"Of course not!"

Akari's response came out as a strangled yell. Her face was red and furious over what Menou had done. There were even tears in her eyes.

"The holy land is super important, isn't it?! What were you thinking?!"

Akari was less worried about the damage than she was what would befall Menou now that she'd committed this atrocity.

Faced with Akari's heated concern, Menou only shrugged.

"Who knows? I'm sure it'll work out."

The archbishop and Hooseyard would stop the dragonblight. Once the earthen vein settled, the holy land would likely be reconstructed. There wasn't much to be done about the furniture and other objects that littered the area, but it wasn't anything fatal.

Besides, it meant Menou could see Akari again now. Menou had achieved her goal.

"Listen, Akari." Menou reached out a hand. "I came here to find my way."

"Find your way...?"

"Exactly. I'm about to say something utterly pathetic, but..." The Executioner took a deep breath and dramatically threw her arms out wide. "Right now, I have no idea what I want to do."

Akari's eyes betrayed her astonishment. She had never imagined Menou would say such a thing.

"Menou, you...you didn't come here to kill me?"

"That was my intention at first." Noting Akari's surprise, Menou nodded. That was supposed to be the plan. "But the problem is, I can't kill anyone. At least for now. My path forward feels unclear."

On her way to kill Akari, Menou had been defeated by Master Flare. When she'd failed to kill her teacher, Menou shattered her self-identity and lost her way of life, and she still hadn't recovered.

Akari frowned in confusion. She peered around at the empty holy land, at the piles of objects, then back at Menou.

"Even though you did all this?"

"Yes, even though I did all this," Menou replied, looking satisfied. "Should I kill

you or not? Do I want to live or die? I can't say. I lost everything when I battled Master Flare, and now it's in shards. There's no clear answer to what path I should take... What do you think, Akari?"

"M-my decision hasn't changed! If my being alive puts you in danger, I'd rather you just kill me! Either way, I want you to live, Menou." Akari's choice was the same as ever. "If you say you can't choose, I'll do it for you! Run away, right now. Take Momo and leave, so you can survive..."

"Hmm." Menou hummed thoughtfully. Then she looked at Akari so frankly that it gave the other girl a start. "Don't get the wrong idea, Akari. What you're trying to do has reached a dead end. You know that, right? Just look at the results... You've been turning back time, repeating the same loop over and over on your own, but has anything gotten *better*?"

Akari's face paled.

She knew Menou was correct. For some reason, Master Flare had memories of the looped timelines. The fog barrier had weakened enough to let out Pandæmonium's pinky finger. Akari kept losing her memories, to the point where she wasn't even entirely sure who she was anymore.

No matter how many times she went back to the beginning, it never improved. Each repetition only made things worse.

"Do you plan to keep deluding yourself? To just keep doing the same thing over and over because that's how it goes, never actually looking around you?"

Just blindly running forward, like I always have?

"You'll never be able to save me by being so complacent."

Akari's anger flared to life in her eyes. "Then what am I supposed to do?!"

Her spirit let loose, Guiding Force flowing freely from her soul through her body. The power laid bare by her emotions was just as deep as the dragon raging in the distance.

"I'm too stupid to figure it out!" Akari cried. "That's why I've been doing things the way I want! It's fine if I die and you live, Menou! I don't want to survive so badly that I'd be willing to kill you!"

She shouted out her desires like a child throwing a tantrum, and Menou accepted them.

“If I could go on living with you, then of course I would! I mean, what could possibly be better than that? I’d be so happy... But I can’t! No matter what I do, you always die, Menou. Why don’t you get that my survival only messes everything up!?”

Menou’s repeated demise had permanently scarred Akari.

The person she cared for most, dying because of her. How deeply had such trauma damaged her heart?

“Please, I’m begging you to understand!”

Menou let every ounce of Akari’s storm of grief sink into her. She recognized that she really was hung up on Akari. Menou hadn’t known her for nearly as long as Momo. Their relationship wasn’t as special as that with Master Flare. However, there was something that drew her to Akari nonetheless.

So Menou offered up her hand.

“If you want me to understand, then go ahead and make me.”

It was worth wiping out the holy land and driving away any intruders to be alone with her.

Menou had a method of comprehending Akari that went deeper than words.

“Akari. I’m going to connect my Guiding Force to yours now.”

“Huh?”

Ignoring her confusion, Menou took Akari’s hand.

“I told you earlier, didn’t I? I’m here to find my way.”

A mutual Guiding Force connection. They had done it several times before, typically so that Menou could use Akari’s massive Guiding Force to enhance a conjuring. But at its core, a Guiding Force connection was a means of touching each other’s souls through body and spirit.

One’s true feelings, memories, and personality lay directly in the soul.

“What have you seen during all the repeated cycles? What did you think and

feel? Let me experience all of that through a Guiding Force connection, Akari. I'll live your past through your eyes. I'll accept all your emotions. And if, after all that, you and I decide on the same way forward, I'll run away just like you told me to."

"...All right."

Akari's eyes stilled.

She'd relived everything so many times. Once Menou saw exactly how hopeless the accumulating timelines were, she would give up, too. Akari was confident that Menou would realize what a pointless effort it would be to attempt to save her.

"All right, let's begin."

"Okay."

Menou let Guiding Force flow through their linked hands.

Guiding Force: Connect—

Cautiously, tenderly, and with the ease of two people becoming one, they connected. Absent was the resistance that normally occurred. Akari trusted Menou with her own soul and spirit, even now.

Menou had only gone deep into Akari's soul once, when she used the conjuring that ended the fight with Archbishop Orwell. Other than that, she'd remained on the surface of the spirit, skimming power from it.

This time, she was ready to step deeper into Akari's soul than ever before.

Akari Tokitou—Body, Spirit, Soul—

Menou wasn't after the Guiding Force that Akari produced. Menou moved further into Akari to touch her soul through their Guiding Force connection.

As before, Akari's soul contained immense amounts of power. It was meant to exist as a planetary concept, not reside within a single person. The limitless energy had once frightened Menou, like the void of space.

Now, she drew closer calmly, and it wasn't just her spirit. Her entire self was entering Akari in a Guiding Force connection deep enough to transfer her soul

into Akari's body.

Curiously, the Pure Concept of *Time* accepted Menou.

She came into contact with its essence. It didn't try to control or absorb her; it was merely there. There was no good or evil intent. Like the ocean with its wild waves or the surge of a thunderstorm through clouds, the Pure Concept existed heedless of any human affairs.

Now that she had tread into *Time*, Menou soon arrived at Akari's own soul. Menou reached out and gently touched the girl sitting curled up in a ball. Akari's current thoughts and feelings rippled through her.

There was Akari's kind heart and the fear she'd experienced. Her intense hopelessness mingled with feelings so overwhelming that she wanted to scream.

Menou smiled gently and pressed even deeper. She would accept all that made up Akari—from the knowledge of what happened to how she felt in those moments.

Menou began to vicariously experience Akari's travels through the repeated time loops.

The confusion and caution upon first encountering Menou, and how she'd slowly opened her heart over the course of their journey. Starting to smile more often, growing more reluctant to part, and then the despair when Master Flare killed Menou. The conflict when she learned the truth and her joy at meeting Menou again when she turned back time, followed by the pain and loneliness of being distrusted and disbelieved, and her resolution to change fate on her own.

Akari's feelings through all the cycles filled Menou's soul.

Menou supplied more Guiding Force from her soul as if to match. The connection was so strong that their personalities felt ready to meld.

Menou lost all awareness of herself as a person and viewed herself from Akari's point of view.

Through her eyes, Menou was reliable, never made a wrong move, and came to decisions without hesitation. She constantly leaped into danger resolutely

and always showed up to save Akari when she was in peril. To Akari, Menou was her hero.

And yet even that champion couldn't overcome Master Flare.

Menou died over and over. The joy of reunion was invariably followed by the grief of loss in a circle of despair and solitude. It was an endless loop of emotions that was beyond description. Menou understood Akari's feelings from the bottom of her heart. She felt sympathy for her earnest desire for Menou to live.

It truly was hopeless.

Akari's repeating journey was a cage of time that trapped her in misery.

Menou's spirit separated from Akari. Now that their hearts had perfectly synced, she thoroughly understood Akari's feelings since coming to this world.

Akari had given an answer for Menou's route forward.

She wanted her to live.

As her friend, her best friend, the person more important to her than anyone else, she wanted Menou to continue on.

It was such a heartbreakingly pure wish that she wanted to cry. A simple prayer, a fleeting hope. Such was the shining ideal that Akari was trying to achieve by sacrificing herself. The way of life Akari wanted for Menou was crystal clear.

Was this Menou's response, too?

She could see the path before her. It was hopeless to try to defeat Master Flare. Menou's best option was to flee. She'd already lost once, and her convictions as an Executioner were shattered in the process. Perhaps a life on the run, forever trying to shake off the pursuit of the Faust, suited her.

Maybe that would be for the best, Menou thought, and started to draw her hand away from Akari's. But Akari wouldn't be there.

Menou stayed put.

Not yet. This wasn't enough to find her real answer yet. Menou wasn't

satisfied with Akari's choice alone.

Because the real Menou wasn't as strong as the one Akari saw.

Menou clasped Akari's hands between both of hers as if in prayer. Akari blinked in bewilderment at the sudden action. Undeterred, Menou drew her face close to Akari's...

"Men—owww?!"

...and struck her forehead against the other girl's with the force of a headbutt.

Akari's murmur of confusion turned into a shriek of pain. Menou reopened the Guiding Force connection, touching Akari's soul.

Menou had just taken in Akari's entire life.

This time, it was her turn to let herself pour into Akari's soul.

From the point where their foreheads met, she connected their Guiding Force and let it flow. It wasn't enough for Menou to understand Akari. She had accepted Akari's feelings. Now Menou would have Akari understand her as well. Just as seeing Akari's repeated time loops put Menou on the verge of an answer, surely Menou's recollections would lead Akari to a new one as well.

So Menou laid her whole self bare to Akari. Her own life, which Akari didn't know. The journey that began when Master Flare took her in. The training in the monastery to become an Executioner. Her first meeting with Momo. The days of killing once she became an Executioner. It was the stark reality of Menou's origins as a person.

Then there was the journey over the past three months since she met Akari.

It was brief, quiet, and undoubtedly the most Menou had ever smiled in her life.

The trip Menou and Akari had each experienced unfolded from their own perspectives, then reorganized into one. Their separate lives blended together. Two different paths unified.

Menou was there, inside Akari.

And Akari was inside Menou, too.

They understood each other's hearts and minds. Akari's gentle emotions melted Menou's heart, scarred and self-punishing from having claimed so many lives. Menou's logic offered an answer to Akari's endlessly cycling despair.

There might have only been one route, but it didn't need to be walked alone.

It could be shared with another at her side. Loneliness was not a constant. She need only reach out to the one there instead of remaining isolated. For the first time, their two answers were in agreement.

Menou opened her eyes. Akari's face was closer than she'd expected with their foreheads still pressed together.

They were linked.

The Guiding Force connection had ended, yet a path was still bridging their souls. It was fragile and invisible, but there was definitely a Guiding Force route between them. Their emotions resonated in harmony. They felt so unified that it seemed strange to be separate entities.

This was likely a temporary state. However, Menou understood Akari better than ever before, and the same was true of Akari. They had fully witnessed and accepted each other.

"You're still not sure?"

"I mean..."

"You only have one life, Akari. If you spend it worrying, you'll regret it."

Menou had seen the many things Akari had experienced repeatedly, but she said this nonetheless.

"I'm going to live." Akari wanted her to continue, even though she had killed people. It was Akari's strong wish that spurred Menou to overcome the logic that told her she shouldn't be permitted that happiness. "So your answer should be the same, Akari."

Akari looked sullen. Her intent to die to ensure Menou's survival had been usurped by Menou's logic, overriding that feeling.

"That's not playing fair, Menou..."



“Of course not,” Menou answered with a straight face. “I’m a bad guy, after all.”

Right here and now, they’d compared decisions and found they were in agreement. And with that knowledge, they understood their immediate task.

“We’d better go destroy the only means of killing you.”

The Sword of Salt.

It was a blade that had turned an entire continent into salt. An immortal-killer that anyone could use.

Without it, there would be no way to destroy Akari.

There were many things the pair had to do, but that was at the top of the list. The two girls turned in unison to look in the same direction.

The glowing Dragon Gate stood at the end of the rails that extended from the train platform.

Hooseyard had prepared a Guiding Force path to the land of salt, and the teleport conjuring circle still waited at the ready, independent of the vanished holy land.

“Time to go, Akari.”

“Okay, Menou.”

With the same feeling in their hearts, they walked along the tracks and ventured down the road that led far beyond.

At first, it seemed they’d been cast into the sky.

The scene on the other side of the Dragon Gate threw Menou’s sense of equilibrium into chaos.

They’d been teleported into the heavens.

The illusion that there was no surface beneath their feet nearly made Menou lose balance, but she focused on the fact that she could feel her heels planted on the ground.

All there was to see was empty sky, but that wasn’t where they were

standing.

They stood in a beautiful mirrored world.

It wasn't like the white world Menou had seen before. When she'd visited this place with Master Flare long ago, the sky was overcast with white clouds, combining with the endless landscape of salt to create a world of white that seemed to go on forever.

It was quite different this time, however.

Perhaps it had rained.

The utterly flat surface of salt was covered by a shallow layer of water. It stretched across the land of salt without so much as a ripple, reflecting the light to become an enormous natural mirror.

As far as the eye could see, the ground matched the sky.

The border of the horizon became invisible, creating a connected world of heaven and earth. Clouds trailed across the blue overhead, and the land responded in kind. In the evening, it would undoubtedly turn red, and at night the stars would speckle the world above and below.

"...It's very pretty." Menou's quiet remark sounded like a child's observation.

As soon as she said it, she smiled, realizing it was the kind of thing Akari would say. Wondering what Akari herself thought, she looked over and found the other girl in astonished silence.

"So..."

"So?"

"Soooo cool!" Akari shouted.

She ran forward, the water splashing beneath her feet. It was an even more immature reaction. The Otherworlder spread her arms wide and spun around excitedly.

"Look at this, Menou! It's sooo pretty!"

Akari's joy traveled through the route the Guiding Force connection had created between their souls, flowing into Menou's heart.

She grinned as she looked around again.

This place without sky or sea was truly picturesque. If the Faust had controlled this land purely to protect the view, no one would have doubted them. The tranquil scene was worth any amount of effort to preserve it.

Menou took a step forward.

Ripples spread across the mirrored surface. The peaceful expanse of water that reflected the sky was so incredibly beautiful. It didn't seem possible that a battle to the death was about to unfold in this very spot.

Still, they couldn't play around forever.

"Come on, this way."

Menou took Akari's sleeve and pulled her along the path she recalled from her youth until they reached a familiar spot.

There, just as Menou remembered, was a shabby-looking sword.

It threatened to crumble from the slightest touch. Inspection suggested it was more fragile than any rusted blade, making it utterly useless.

The Sword of Salt.

It was a pure incarnation created by *Ivory*, who'd destroyed or sealed away the other Four Major Human Errors. Anything cut with its blade would become salt. This nastiest of conjured weapons was responsible for an entire continent melting into the sea.

The girls stood before a tool that could eradicate a planet.

Akari steeled herself and stepped forward.

"Wait, Akari."

Menou felt Akari's confusion at her command. She silently sent her reasoning through their connection, and Akari nodded.

Menou would have to go the rest of the way on her own.

"All right. I'll be waiting."

Smiling at Akari's response, Menou approached alone.

She left Akari and kept walking until she was only a few steps away from the Sword of Salt. There, she paused and kicked up some water with her toe. The liquid was barely deep enough to cover the soles of her shoes, but she didn't require much. The droplets appeared to strike empty air as though it were solid.

In response, the scene before Menou wavered, and a woman emerged like paint peeling away to reveal a hidden picture.

Master Flare.

Menou had seen through the Guiding Camouflage she was using to blend into the background.

"Did you come alone?" Menou questioned.

"Sure did," Flare responded evenly. "If I stayed in the cathedral much longer, Elcami would've ordered me to deal with that dragonblight. So I decided to wait for you."

Master Flare looked at Menou, standing in front, and Akari, holding her breath some distance away. She threw back her head and laughed with her mouth open wide.

"And you came with her, eh?"

"Yes."

Menou nodded calmly.

"Bet you came here to break the Sword of Salt... But do you really think you're able? A little whelp who stopped short of taking my life?"

"I can do it. I've recovered my memories with Akari."

Menou wouldn't let the recollections of those cycles that she hadn't experienced herself go to waste. And the same went for the connection between her soul and Akari's. She wouldn't let Akari lose this time, either.

"I see. A Guiding Force connection, eh? That's one answer, to be sure."

Master Flare chuckled, as though deeply amused. Menou had finally realized the value of her ability to create Guiding Force connections with others, even if that was only the tip of the iceberg.

Reliving Akari's memories had taught Menou more than that, however.

"You don't intend to kill Akari, do you, Master?"

"Oh? You figured it out."

It was obvious with enough consideration.

If anything, throughout all the time loops, Master Flare had made an effort to avoid killing Akari. She even slew Menou if she ever attempted to destroy Akari.

As far as Master Flare was concerned, the real value lay in letting Akari go out of control to create new conjurings... But was that truly the whole story? Menou still wasn't certain of Master Flare's motives.

"You're dead-on. I don't plan to kill Akari Tokitou, no. This time, it won't end until she becomes a Human Error."

"...And what do you plan to do with her once that happens?"

"Nothing, really. Whatever happens after isn't my job."

With that, Master Flare's arm shot out abruptly.

It was a sweep to one side. At the end of the swing, her hand grasped the Sword of Salt stuck into the ground.

The purest, most powerful weapon in the world snapped in her grip. True to its flimsy appearance, the Sword of Salt that had been there for a thousand years broke into pieces with almost absurd ease.

Menou gasped. Ignoring her reaction, Master Flare thoroughly stomped on every fragment.

The blade that had once wiped out an entire continent crumbled beneath her heel. It was nothing but salt now, with no possible way to recover it.

"Looks like you couldn't break it after all."

There was no particularly deep reason why Master Flare had broken the Sword of Salt.

Menou said she came to destroy it, so Master Flare destroyed it instead. It was nothing but a useless old relic to her anyway, and it seemed like a good way to deny Menou's wishes and dampen her spirit. The fact that she'd

destroyed an irreplaceable object for the sake of little more than a show of spite was enough to stun Menou into silence.

“So, Menou. What will you do next?”

Was her only concern ensuring that the Sword of Salt, the only means of killing Akari, was destroyed? Would she turn her back on Master Flare and run? By smashing the Sword of Salt, Master Flare hoped to draw out the true motivation that Menou hadn’t yet spoken aloud.

She knew Menou had already hesitated to strike her down once. No matter how valuable it was, how much power it contained, or how many legends there were of it, a tool was only a tool to Master Flare.

Menou took a deep breath. Before she and Akari came here, she’d vowed to destroy the Sword of Salt, yet Master Flare had crushed that plan. The young woman wanted to groan and say *Thanks a lot*. Her heart and words were being drawn out onto a stage where she could no longer hide them.

Thus, Menou decided to speak the truth.

“I’m going to stop you from turning Akari into a Human Error.”

“How?”

“By killing you.”

There was no hesitation in Menou’s answer. She was determined to see this battle through, to protect Akari and find her way forward.

Recognizing that Menou had decided to murder someone of her own free will, Master Flare threw back her head and laughed. “Ha! Now that I’d like to see.”

Master Flare reached behind herself. She wore a belt wrapped around her lower chest, which had the symbol of the church on its buckle. From it, she retrieved a dagger.

Her guard was wide open as she pulled out the blade, but Menou couldn’t bring herself to jump in.

The action felt so deliberate that Menou had to wonder if it was a trap. If she brushed that off as overthinking it and went for the opening, she was sure to be

killed. The feint was the move of one who knew that being both too cautious and too reckless could be fatal.

Only Master Flare, the ultimate Executioner, could wield Menou's mental image of herself to her own advantage.

The red-haired woman aimed her dagger down and let go.

The tip of the weapon dropped easily into the soft salt that made up the ground and remained stuck there. Master Flare stepped on the hilt, driving the dagger down to the root of its blade. Then she sent Guiding Force through her feet into it.

There were two crests engraved upon Master Flare's dagger: guiding branch and thunderclap. This time, she activated the former.

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

Short, repeated vibrations shook the water on the ground's surface, twisting the sky's reflection. The visible change drew Menou's attention to what was below.

Then the ground burst.

Guiding Branches spread upward, splitting the surface and scattering salt everywhere. Roots of Guiding Force spread from the dagger and stuck into the ground, growing into a tree in the blink of an eye.

It wasn't just one, either. Countless Guiding Force boughs sprouted around Menou, surrounding her.

Before long, she was in the midst of a luminous forest.

Each of the trees around Menou moved at Master Flare's will.

"Don't let this kill you."

The woman's voice echoed from nowhere like a signal, and the sharp branches sped toward Menou from every angle.

A Guiding Force branch grazed Menou's hair as she dodged to the side. She'd survived the first attack with the loss of only a few strands. Before she could catch her breath, more branches swept at her legs in irregular intervals.

Far from the battlefield, Akari could detect Menou's movements.

Although Akari couldn't see beyond the dense forest of Guiding Force trees, she felt Menou's emotions and senses as clearly as if they were her own.

She understood Menou's rapid movements, the calm in her spirit even in the face of danger, and the determination in her soul. Everything Menou saw, heard, smelled, and felt was shared with Akari.

Menou knocked away a branch aimed at her face with her dagger and activated a crest conjuring.

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

The conjuring spun a strand of Guiding Force from her dagger. This alone wasn't enough to guard. In that way, the barrier crest in her priestess robes was better suited to the situation. However, there were many more creative uses for Guiding Thread.

As she dodged the attacks, Menou wrapped Guiding Thread around the writhing trees of Guiding Force.

Guiding Thread, one of the two crests in Menou's dagger, was thin but strong. The more they moved, the more the branches became tangled, hindering their movements.

There was a loud, grating *creak*.

The Guiding Force trees had all gotten snared in one another, or the string wound around them, stopping them from moving almost completely.

Menou's first priority was getting out of the forest Master Flare had created. She leaped onto the Guiding Thread that was now pulled taut, using it as a foothold and taking advantage of its flexibility to jump higher into the air. It functioned almost like a trampoline beneath her feet, launching the young woman. The vicarious experience of something she could never do herself made Akari's heart dance.

Sharing a separate person's senses was strange in a way she'd never anticipated. Menou's drive and actions were beyond anything Akari could feel alone. As Menou's thoughts and feelings showed Akari a new world, Akari felt

strangely comfortable, even excited.

Guiding Force: Connect (via Guiding Branch)—Dagger, Crest—Invoke [Thunderclap]

The conjuring crest unfolded in under a second. A Guiding Branch next to Menou suddenly became a surge of lightning. It burned through the Guiding Thread binding it, aiming straight for Menou.

Akari gasped. “Look out!” she whispered instinctively.

Fortunately, Menou had been expecting the attack.

Unlike Akari, Menou was confident that Master Flare could react to her on the spot, and she immediately put her hand on a different Guiding Branch and changed directions in midair. Feeling the heat of the lightning race past her head, she took another leap.

Master Flare’s speed at crest conjurings was on par with Menou’s, if not even faster. There was no time to react after the fact as there was with an ordinary opponent. As soon as she sensed the beginnings of a conjuring, Menou predicted the *Thunderclap*, used the thread beneath her feet to launch herself in a different direction, and kept advancing.

Amazing...! Akari’s eyes sparkled. She’d always known Menou was incredible, but by witnessing it via the other girl’s eyes, it struck her anew. The speed and boldness of her decision-making, the elegance of her Guiding Force manipulation... She made up for everything Akari lacked.

The forest Master Flare had constructed was no more than fifty meters in circumference. As the branches occasionally transformed into lightning, Menou used the Guiding Thread strung around them to cross the area. The wind on her face and the weightless sensation of springing through the air set Akari’s heart aflutter.

Menou escaped the forest unscathed by any of the scorching bolts. Free of the trees, the expansive mirrored sky came into sight again. There was nowhere to hide, yet Master Flare was absent.

Without a moment’s hesitation, Menou charged toward one spot.

How does she know when she can't see her? Akari wondered, but Menou's logic cleared up her doubts by way of their connection. Just as Akari was able to watch the scene from Menou's eyes, Menou could observe through Akari's eyes as well. Since Akari was farther from the fight, she had a wider view of the area.

Menou had access to a third-person perspective of her own battlefield.

It would be silly not to seize upon that advantage. Menou had deduced Master Flare's location by using Akari's vision and focusing on the water's surface, which Akari wasn't paying attention to at all.

The ripples created by the skirmish moved oddly in one particular spot. That was proof someone was there, even if they were invisible. Perhaps realizing she'd been found out, the red-haired woman reappeared, dismissing her Guiding Camouflage.

Master Flare had always been a symbol of terror for Akari—the source of her trauma. Yet when she saw Master Flare now, there was no fear in Akari's heart. If anything, she felt strangely overstimulated, as if she was drunk. This was a completely different kind of battle from Akari's Pure Concept-based combat experience. By tracing over Menou's emotions, Akari felt an exhilaration from combat that was entirely unlike her.

Menou kicked off the watery surface, straight toward Master Flare. She activated the crest conjuring *Gale*, speeding up even further.

Akari's heart was ablaze. The sensation of her fingers coiled around the dagger's hilt, the breathtaking speed. By unifying with Menou, Akari felt so much a part of the fight that she called out when Menou thrust her blade forward.

"Don't lose, Menooouuu!"

Of course I won't lose...!

Menou heard Akari's voice despite the distance, stoking her fighting spirit.

With Akari's feverish shout pushing her forward, her own heart opened up as well. She cast aside her usual calmness, letting her will to fight blaze intensely. Heedless of whether it might befit an Executioner, she struck with all her passion.

Her blade met her opponent's with a *clang*.

Their daggers only locked for an instant. Before the echoes of the collision faded, they struck each other a second time, then a third. The phosphorescent glow of Guiding Enhancement surrounded the two in their flurry of blows, lighting up the world of sky.

The battle of flashing knives kicked up the water beneath them. Menou was the first to find an opening. She thrust with the full force of her body at Master Flare, ready to pierce the woman's heart.

But while Akari was excited at the apparent victory, Menou felt something under her hands that wasn't flesh. This sensation was much too firm to be mistaken for having stabbed a human being. Master Flare had used one of her Guiding Branches as a shield and hid with Guiding Camouflage.

This was quickly followed by back-to-back conjurings.

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

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

The simultaneously invoked *Thunderclap* and *Barrier* canceled each other out, and Menou jumped back. Something besides Master Flare had caught her attention in Akari's vision.

A cluster of the Guiding Force trees behind Menou were reaching out their branches and tangling together.

Were they going to attack her as a group? Was it a feint to distract from an underground attack? Maybe the tactic was to trick Menou into turning so Master Flare could stab from behind.

It was none of those options.

Menou's eyes widened with recognition at the almost pointlessly beautiful cradle of tree limbs in front of her.

It was a ceremonial conjuring.

Guiding Force: Connect—Guiding Branch, Ceremonial Crest Conjuring—Invoke [Laurel Crown]

Laurel buds opened on the branches.

As the many flowers blossomed, they fired beams of light from their centers.

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

Menou was right to choose a scripture conjuring instead of the defensive crest in her priestess robes. Simple yet gorgeous flowers of Guiding Force continued to germinate, each loosing a luminous ray at one of Menou's vital points.

Even Menou had never seen this conjuring. Terrifyingly enough, it was probably Master Flare's original creation. Each beam carried heat and lethal force, yet the conjuring persisted for a long time. It was such an impressive work that it was difficult to believe someone had invented it.

What an incredible command of Guiding Force manipulation and technique. During the fight in the cathedral, Master Flare must have been holding back. That clearly wasn't the case now.

For some reason, this made Menou happy.

Making no attempt to disguise her exhilaration, Menou readied her dagger. She felt unusually excited despite being in the middle of a battle. Perhaps it was her link to the emotional Akari.

“First up...!”

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

Menou hurled her dagger as she invoked a crest conjuring. Pushed by the summoned wind, the blade pierced one of the Guiding Force trees.

Now she had a path. Menou bridged her Guiding Force to Akari, still observing from a distance.

Guiding Force: Connect—Akari Tokitou—Extract [Power]—

Without even touching, Menou was able to tap into Akari's Guiding Force through their link.

Having one's Guiding Force drawn out felt like a light stroke across the skin.

Since she was also sharing Akari's senses, Menou unexpectedly felt the ticklish sensation, too.

"Nn... Mmph!"

Menou's shoulders shivered, but she wasn't using Akari's Guiding Force to construct a conjuring. Instead, she took more power than she could ever produce alone and sent it through the Guiding Thread into the Guiding Branches she had punctured.

Afflux [Guiding Branch]

Unable to contain the enormous amount of Guiding Force fed into them, the tree limbs broke one after another. It was an inelegant approach of sheer strength.

A path was required to control Guiding Force. Just as Menou's Guiding Thread always created a string of Guiding Force connected to the hilt of her dagger, the roots of Master Flare's Guiding Branch traced back to her knife.

This destroyed everything sprouting from the ground.

Master Flare stood in the middle of her summoned trees as they ruptured and scattered.

"Not bad."

She met Menou's murderous glare with a smile. Menou was grinning, too, although she didn't realize it. For some reason, she was still enjoying this.

"Menou, can you really accept living and keeping a lost one alive?"

Just like their previous fight, Master Flare was striking at Menou's core with her words, hoping to shake the younger woman's resolve.

Menou had lived as an Executioner all this time.

Master Flare was asking whether she felt guilty for all those she'd felled.

"I do feel remorseful, and I believe I'm in the wrong, too," Menou replied unflinchingly.

She should have betrayed the Faust much sooner if her intent was to save Akari. Her sense of reason whispered that she had no right to preserve life after

all that death. How would she explain this to the innocents she had murdered? The anguish of it was enough to tempt Menou into stabbing her own throat.

For a long time, some part of Menou had wished to die.

However, Akari's intense wish for Menou to live had overpowered the Executioner's sense of guilt. When Menou was at an impasse, Akari's feelings pushed her forward via their linked souls.

So she could answer honestly.

"But there's someone who wants me to continue."

"Hmph... And what do you plan to do about Akari Tokitou's inevitable transformation into a Human Error?"

"I'll stay with her to ensure she never uses her Pure Concept. I can even supplement her memories through a Guiding Force connection."

By reaching into Akari's soul through Guiding Force, Menou could maintain Akari's memories. She couldn't recover the ones already lost, yet those still at risk of vanishing now lived within Menou as well.

"So you can prevent *Time* from becoming a Human Error because she trusts you, eh? Then what will you do about any new Otherworlders who come to our world? Maybe you just form deep bonds of friendship with all of them and make up a whole happy little class, just like in their world. Ha! Talk about a pipe dream."

Menou understood that Master Flare was right, of course. It would be difficult enough to keep Akari alone from transforming into a Human Error.

That didn't mean she hadn't considered how to deal with future Otherworlders, though.

"You said it yourself, didn't you, Master? That I've chosen the wrong path in life."

"And you truly believe it's not too late to start over now?"

"...Long ago, I decided that since I don't have the power to change the world, I would dirty my hands in the place of others."

That was her vow when she was young. When she was taken to Master Flare's monastery and saw how the training to murder people was slowly eating away at the girls, Menou resolved to kill so the rest wouldn't have to.

She thought that would reduce the amount of times someone had to take a good person's life.

Menou possessed a sense of duty as an Executioner. And she understood that disposing of taboos protected innocents. It wasn't always wrong to take a life to help a person.

However, there had to be a superior method for dealing with Otherworlders, whose only crime was being summoned here against their will.

So Menou decided to alter her methods. Undoubtedly, she would still have to cut people down. She would still be an Executioner who murdered for others. But she would not be fettered by the Faust's rules.

There was only one path she was striving for now.

She wouldn't slay Otherworlders, nor would she try to send them back to their own world at the cost of massive casualties.

"I'm going to kill the very concept of Otherworlder summoning."

She would prevent Otherworlders from being brought to this world in the first place, thereby erasing the very existence of the taboo Pure Concepts. And Menou didn't intend to stop at the summonings performed by humans. She would find the causes of the naturally occurring ones and destroy those, too. Elders sought to gather new conjurings, making it entirely possible they knew the reason behind natural Otherworlder appearances.

If Menou was going to dirty her hands, then she would become an Executioner who killed to rewrite the rules for the sake of innocent Otherworlders.

"So you see, Master...I'm going to gain the power to change the world and save all the lost ones together with Akari."

".....What?"

Master Flare was stunned into silence. She stared wide-eyed at Menou's

confident expression for a long moment.

Then her shoulders started trembling, and she burst into laughter.

“Heh... Heh-heh... Bah-ha-ha-ha-ha! The power to change the world? You and that *Time* girl there? Save the lost ones? Bwah-ha-ha-ha! ...You really are a total idiot, aren’t you?”

True to her words, Master Flare regarded Menou like she’d said something unbelievably stupid. As the woman continued snickering, Menou countered with a question of her own.

“Why do you kill people, then, Master?”

“Me?”

If she won, Menou would never get another chance to ask that question.

If she lost, Master Flare would kill her. Akari would lose control and become a Human Error trying to save her, and Momo would be killed as well. So to ensure that she carried no regrets, Menou posed a simple inquiry to get to the core of the person she was about to kill.

“It’s simple. Because someone told me to.”

Master Flare’s answer was far too plain.

She ended lives on account of her orders. Any priestess who became an Executioner would’ve given the same response.

“Believe it or not, I’ve never once killed of my own choice.”

Not once had Master Flare slain a person out of hatred or a desire for justice. She did it simply because that was her duty—to be a cog in the machine of society.

“I’ve always killed people as I was instructed. I act in accordance with my instructions. There is no honor, purpose, or reason. Whether I’m hated or praised, rewarded or vilified. It was no different when I killed my friend. I ended her because she was a taboo. That’s all I’ve ever done.”

She was an Executioner through and through, committed to her duty.

It wasn’t Master Flare’s unshakable will that made her an Executioner, but

that she murdered in accordance with that role.

Each time she ended a life, Master Flare became a more perfect Executioner, until finally, she reached the pinnacle of slaughter and was left with nowhere else to go.

"I don't feel any guilt. Nor am I in despair. I don't change in the least, regardless of how many fall before me. It's been this way since the first time I slew someone. Do you get it now, Menou? My survival is proof there is no justice in this world."

All at once, Menou understood.

She remembered her Master's teachings. The legendary Executioner Flare, who had killed the hated taboos without salvation, righteousness, reward, recompense, resentment, or anger. If nothing else, she had never been discarded.

Even as she taught Menou, there were things Master Flare herself hadn't put into practice. That was where her true desire lay hidden.

"That's the kind of villain I am."

Master Flare knew she was wicked. It was the reason she'd raised Menou.

She desired punishment. It wasn't that she wanted to die, for she would resist that to the bitter end. However, there was a hope that justice would be leveled against her when she could no longer escape.

Master Flare, who had never been cast aside as an Executioner, wanted to perish at the hand of one who was her reflection.

Menou's hesitation melted away when she realized this.

"Master. How many sacrifices will be necessary to ensure that a lost one never finds their way here again?"

"Rebel against the Lord and kill the Elders," she replied succinctly.

Long, long ago, Master Flare must have found the method to change the present order, yet she'd never enacted it. How could she? The woman was merely an Executioner.

Nothing in her soul, spirit, or body could save the world.

“If you do that, the world will shift of its own accord. Although I could never manage to kill a single Elder myself.”

Menou would make her way further down that path. Undoubtedly, that resolution was clear to Master Flare without putting it into words.

“Menou. You were a full-fledged Executioner.”

“Yes.”

“When you gained your time with Akari Tokitou, that happiness destroyed everything and remade you.”

“Yes.”

“Prepare yourself, then.”

The scripture in Master Flare’s left hand glowed with Guiding Light. The weapon she hadn’t yet drawn in battle was about to display its worth.

“If you don’t kill me right now, you’re going to die.”

Menou silently readied the dagger gripped in her right hand.

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

The Guiding Force thread created by the crest conjuring fluttered in the wind, spiraling into a helix.

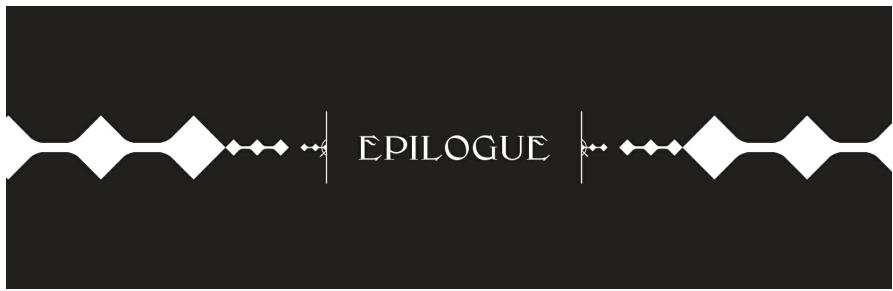
Menou resolved never again to hesitate on the journey she was meant for.

“Here I come.”

“Bring it.”

On the same ground where she had once vowed to become her Master, her battle to overturn those words from her youth began.





EPILOGUE

Around the time that the battle between Master Flare and Menou began while the lost one Akari Tokitou looked on...

...a figure slipped into the cylindrical building left behind when the holy land dissipated. The lone intruder was Manon Libelle.

When the door refused to budge, Manon's body sank into darkness.

Her shadow remained even when her physical body was gone, allowing her to move through the thin gap beneath the door.

Once she was inside, she regained her physical form. With the holy land gone, no conjured barriers were left to stand in her way.

It was surprisingly bright within the cylindrical structure.

No windows adorned the walls. Instead, the illumination came from many Guiding lamps. Although the holy land was in ruins, the lights of this place still seemed to function.

Manon turned her gaze downward. A large hole sat in the center of the floor.

From the outside, this building looked to only possess one floor. It was clear from the interior that the true heart of this facility lay underground. The center of the structure was hollow, and it continued down so deep that the bottom was impossible to see.

Bookshelves reminiscent of a grandiose bookstore or lavish personal library covered the walls. Each and every one of the tomes contained someone's memories.

The Star Memory.

Guiding Force, which was connected to all bodies, spirits, and souls, retained the memories of intelligent life. This place bound those collected recollections into books and preserved them. They were given visible form and occasionally

consumed.

This was the storehouse for all the world's experiences.

In the ancient civilization of a thousand years ago, there existed technology to collect people's thoughts as information and store them.

It eliminated the risk of anyone becoming a Human Error—at least in theory.

Why, then, had the calamity known as the Four Major Human Errors occurred?

Why had the Star Memories gone all but extinct?

It was because the Four Major Human Errors and one other individual had used those facilities to wreak havoc in an attempt to return to their world.

During their battle against the four, the Star Memories were shut down to cut them off from their supply of recollections. And the results were beyond disastrous.

Only one facility remained after the Four Major Human Errors were born.

A thousand years ago, a barrier was created to prevent those known as the Four Major Human Errors from using the apparatus that could supplement their memories. The barrier city became a bastion against the raging group.

The massive conjured barrier known as the holy land existed solely to safeguard this place and keep it isolated.

It gathered thoughts from the entire continent. By retaining people's memories, one could manage the course of the future.

“...So this is the place?”

Descending the seemingly endless spiral staircase, Manon finally arrived at the bottom of the structure. The storage facility extended further in four directions out from the central cylinder, but there was no need to explore more.

A lone young woman stood waiting.

She raised her head upon sensing Manon's arrival. Her bangs had grown out so long that they covered her face. Her unusually long hair was pitch-black, and

her clothes were of a style Manon didn't recognize.

"Hmm?" The girl looked mystified by Manon. "Who are you? Why would someone who isn't Akari come here, I wonder? What happened to Flare? Or Elcami?"

Manon ignored the question. She felt no need to respond and understood this girl's identity without needing to ask.

"Are you the one who manages this place?"

"Who, me? The manager...? Well, yes, I suppose you could say that."

She giggled, as if Manon's inquiry had been very silly indeed.

"And your name... Oh yes. It's Manon Libelle, isn't it?"

"That's correct. So you know of me?"

"Mm-hmm. Everything my eyes see is recorded in my brain, so of course I know. It's unusual that you survived, though. Congratulations."

"....."

Manon smiled at the tone of the young woman's voice as well as the meaning of her words. Now she was certain her hunch was right.

"Well, if you're the manager of the Star Memory, then I imagine you know where to find what I'm looking for?"

"Of course. It's this, yes?"

The manager extended her hand, and a book flew off the shelves. It floated through the air with no regard for gravity, gently landing in the girl's palm.

For a physical form of a person's memories, the tome looked remarkably similar to Menou's scripture. Perhaps the device they were based on was the same.

Manon's eyes sparkled at the ease with which she'd found what she sought.

"Why, thank you very much... Surely it's not fake or anything, I presume?"

"How rude. Of course it's not. What are you going to do with it?"

"I'll take it back with me."

The manager had only posed the question out of curiosity, evidently harboring no desire to stop Manon.

“While I’m here, would you happen to possess the memories of Ms. Menou’s childhood?”

“Nope, I sure don’t.”

Manon blinked. “I thought the recollections of all the people of this continent were stored here.”

“Yep. Those ones don’t exist.”

The memories of the entire continent.

The manager confirmed that this building did catalog all those thoughts, then explained why Menou’s childhood was absent.

“When she was completed, she was set at around five years old, so no memories from before that exist anywhere.”

Upon hearing this, satisfied acceptance rose in Manon’s chest. This was why she’d advised Menou, to the point of pestering her, to investigate her roots.

“That thing is a piece of my eyes and brain. Since I can’t leave this place, I created that version of me to travel with Akari, who I knew would come someday. In Japanese, *me* means ‘eyes’ and *nou* means ‘brain,’ so I’m guessing she calls herself *Menou* because some part of her spirit still remembers her role. I admit, that gave me a chuckle.”

Something about that remark sent a shiver down Manon’s spine. She was going to press further about what the girl meant by *Menou* being a role instead of a name, but then stopped.

The long-haired young woman was clutching the shadow that had sustained Manon’s life since her first death.

“This is the Pseudo-Concept of *Null*, isn’t it? Since the body that once held the Pure Concept was used as materials for the Original Sin Conjuring to recreate you, it pays the price for maintaining your existence.”

Manon’s life was in the girl’s hands.

How absurd Manon was to have assumed the manager wouldn't stop her. In truth, the girl had only been so forthcoming because she never intended to let Manon escape.

But that didn't matter at all. Manon silently approached the girl and lifted her bangs. The face hidden beneath was one she knew well.

Seeing the girl's visage finally confirmed the suspicions Manon had been harboring.

"Ah, just as I suspected."

At last, she'd discovered what she wanted to know most.

It was just as Manon had said to Menou.

Menou's true identity was hidden in the mystery of the cathedral, and she needed to learn what she didn't understand about herself.

"So you really are...the founder of the Faust as described in the scripture—the Lord."

"That's right. Although since you travel with Pandæmonium, perhaps it would make more sense for you to call me the Pure Concept of *Ivory*," she confessed in a casual tone.

The person in front of Manon was the Otherworlder who had annihilated the other Four Major Human Errors—the Pure Concept of *Ivory*. And she was the Lord, the restorer of civilization revered in the scripture.

Manon's shadow, which the girl had peeled off the floor, was slowly being crushed in her grip.

It was resisting, but to little avail. The difference between them was far too large.

Manon's life was being worn away, and the sins and deaths she'd accumulated were being cleansed. She didn't possess the strength to resist. Realizing that she couldn't escape this time, she gave a small sigh.

She did have regrets, but there was no helping that. Manon had never expected to be able to achieve all her goals anyway.

Even when she perished, she would still leave something behind. She couldn't ask for more.

"Ms. *Ivory*, then. So Ms. Menou is your—"

Manon's shadow was destroyed before she completed her final words.

Manon's body crumpled to the ground like a puppet with cut strings.

The girl who had ended Manon's life walked forward, still wearing a faint smile.

"Honestly, I don't really care about being the Lord, the Pure Concept of *Ivory*, or any of that. And I care even less about that thing that calls itself Menou."

She went on in soliloquy, her audience gone. The person she was waiting for hadn't come. Thus, she walked toward the exit, intending to go to her instead. She swept Manon's remains aside with her hand as she climbed the stairs and stepped outside.

"Ahh, I can't wait to return to good old Nishibori High School."

The return of the Lord. Elcami had stated that they couldn't let anything stop it, and Master Flare agreed. Now this girl alluded to the true meaning of those words.

Return didn't mean the secluded Lord would retake the center stage.

It was an elaborate plan meant to send the Otherworlder who had somehow come to be known as the Lord back to her original world.

"Back to year one, class three, where I can be with Akari."

She wanted to go home to Japan.

The girl clad in a sailor uniform, whose face was identical to Menou's, muttered happily to herself as she took another step.



Akari had lost most of her memories, but there was one thing she still recalled.

When she was in Japan, her friend had suddenly disappeared.

Akari had been very close with that girl. That was all she remembered now. One day, the girl abruptly went missing without a trace. Had she run away? Been in an accident? Kidnapped? People had speculated with enthusiasm.

A week passed, then a month.

Akari had begged for the girl's seat to remain in the classroom.

Occasionally, someone placed flowers on the desk. It wasn't usually meant as an insult, although periodically, someone did it to harass Akari for being so hung up on keeping the seat in the classroom.

Akari couldn't stand it.

She grew isolated, for she was the only person in school who clung to the memory of her friend. Forgetting that friendship was unacceptable, even if it meant being left with no other friends at all.

When Akari was summoned to the other world and used her Pure Concept repeatedly, she consumed most of her memories in the process.

By now, Akari could no longer envision her friend's face or name.

When she first came to this world and saw Menou's face, a name surfaced in her mind, convincing her that it was fate that had brought her and Menou together.

Akari had long since forgotten that name, though. Her Pure Concept had melted it away.



AFTERWORD



Good to see you again, everyone. *The Executioner and Her Way of Life* series has reached Volume 5. If you read all the way to the end, you probably couldn't believe your eyes at the final scene, and I'm certain you've realized that the story is far from over.

No amount of thanks would be sufficient for all the trouble I've caused for nilitsu, who once again created an incredible cover, color insert, and interior illustrations. The same goes for Null, my endlessly hardworking editor, and everyone involved in making this book.

Most importantly of all, I have an exciting announcement for you readers who have followed this journey so faithfully.

The Executioner and Her Way of Life is being adapted into a TV anime!

Now that my work is being animated, I'm working alongside more people than I have in my entire creative career. Everyone's hard at work to ensure that the anime is as great and entertaining as it can possibly be.

The realm of multimedia is one that a single creator could never venture into alone. Now that it's spreading out before me, my heart is full of gratitude and excitement.

A manga adaptation by Ryo Mitsuya came out on February 9. Every panel is overflowing with life, from the adorable everyday expressions and actions of Menou and the others to the intensely cool battle scenes. It should already be in bookstores, so please take a look!

In Volume 5, Menou is finally standing on the cover and has reached the land of salt. The following book will settle the battle once and for all.

Please look forward to it.

**The girl made a
grave mistake.**



The Executioner 6

and Her Way of Life

COMING SOON

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