







Prologue

Chapter 1: Underground Hub

Chapter 2: City of Ruins

Chapter 3: Star's Shell

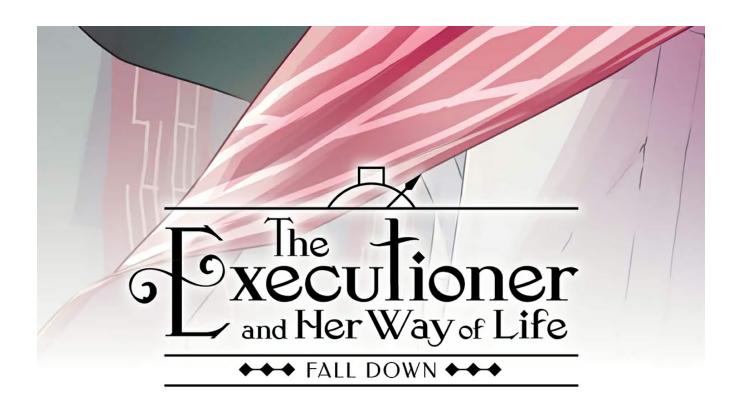
Chapter 4: Time's Nap

Chapter 5: Genom Cthulha

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Epilogue





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ILLUSTRATION BY

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The Executioner and Her Way of Life 8

Mato Sato

TRANSLATION BY IENNY MCKEON & COVER ART BY NILITSU

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SHOKEI SHOUJO NO IKIRU MICHI (VIRGIN ROAD) Vol. 8

-FALL DOWN—

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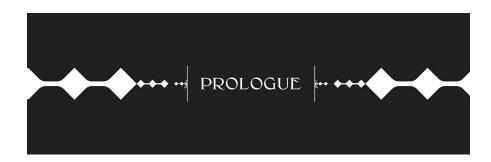
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Guiding Force: Merge Materials (Conditions Met)—Paint Over: Pure Concept [Vessel]—Activate [Astrologer]

"Mm..."

When the conditions were met, a conjured soldier's eyes fluttered open.

"Mgh, it's so dark. Let me turn a light on... Hmm. I'm guessing this is the environment control tower?"

As she stood and began walking around the dark room, her body released Guiding Light, and her form shifted. Her tan skin turned pale, her green hair became black, and her eyes turned to the white sclera and black pupils of a normal human's.

"Let's see... It's now a thousand and sixteen years, three months, and four days later, eh? Come on, now. That means it's only been about half a year since last time! What a hectic time period this is..."

After she used her body's functions to determine the date, a crease formed in her brow.

"Oh-ho. I shouldn't stay here much longer. I'll wind up in checkmate before I know it, eh?"

Muttering to herself, the girl put on an aqua-colored sailor uniform that had automatically formed when she was activated. She pulled a white lab coat over the uniform and donned a pair of red glasses.

"But what else am I to do? After all, this just proves that the world still has need of my words. Goodness, it's hard being so popular."

With her preparations complete, she spoke of what she considered most important of all.

"For the sake of the future, I'll give it my all, even if this is the future!"

On the northern continent, the Astrologer, an Elder, stepped out of the room

"Listen, d'you know what bein' an adventurer means? It's where people wind up when they've got nowhere else to go."

The man, who was himself an adventurer, spoke firmly to the girl in front of him.

Adventurers were known as scoundrels who lived in the Wild Frontier, a mass of territories outside the nations bound by the three-caste system. While this man was near the prime of his life, the two girls in front of him were quite the opposite.

The silver-haired one was around sixteen or seventeen, in a nun's habit. And the other one was practically an infant, so young that she couldn't have been more than ten years old.

"Folks who should never been born. Folks who ran into nothin' but walls wherever they turned. Failure after failure, till it all fell to pieces, and that's when we went to the Wild Frontier. Not that it matters to you kids, but each of us ruined our lives before we fell this far down."

The vast majority of people who became adventurers were from the Commons or the Noblesse. It was incredibly unusual for someone from the Faust to stoop this low, though it happened on rare occasions. No matter how much they were trained, educated, and carefully selected, some people were born to lose everything in life. Strength was all that mattered in a place beyond the protection of any laws. And this group of men had distinguished themselves as especially strong, even among such hardened adventurers.

At least, until a few months ago.

So how did the man wind up talking about this to two girls young enough to be his own kids?

He snorted at himself to shake off the brief existential crisis, then continued

his speech.

"You reap what you sow. I'm man enough to admit that. But for those of us who fell through the cracks of society's three castes... Well, this here is our last bastion."

The man looked out the window, where there was no sky to be seen.

He saw only the roof of an underground hub, lit by a smattering of Guiding lamps.

The dimly visible passage was lined with bars, general stores, restaurants, and so on. The reason for its irregular illumination was that the town had no Guiding Force lines, and thus the lamps were only powered by the Guiding Force of present individuals.

The land's Guiding Force was completely dried up in the center of the continent. In a world where civilization flourished with Guiding Force as the foundational source of energy, places without any flow of that power to provide basic functions were generally considered uninhabitable. Few people traveled through such regions. The underground hub was shockingly quiet.

This place was even farther below the large caved-in area created by the Starhusk.

It was a base two hundred meters underground in the northern region of the Wild Frontier. It had long been conjectured that there was an ancient city in this place where no normal person could live. This rumor, recorded in writing and traded in whispers, attracted adventurers like moths to a flame, until they gathered and formed this underground settlement. It was the final destination for people who could no longer live in the towns or villages above.

"Mm-hmm. I see."

It was the adorable and clearly precocious child who nodded after the man's speech. While her elegant features gave a smart and sophisticated first impression, her tone was downright cheeky. This bold and haughty attitude also helped her look fashionable even in the unusual outfit she wore: a loose kimono over a white dress with three holes down the chest.

"In other words, introducing us to a guide to take us to the City of Ruins was a

bald-faced lie. You tricked us to take us here and hold us captive."

The man nodded. "That's right."

He'd acquired information in advance that the girls who came underground three days ago were aiming to infiltrate the City of Ruins. He and his group were under orders.

The adventurers who made this place their stronghold had fallen under the control of a certain man just a few short weeks ago.

His orders were absolute. They were not to let the two girls proceed any farther, no matter what.

Thus, the men spread information to bait the pair hiding in the subterranean hub.

And just like that, they'd been caught.

"We want to remain down here...and we can't let you two jeopardize that."

The men glowed with phosphorescent light as they pulled out their weapons. Guiding Enhancement was a fundamental battle technique. Users drew upon Guiding Force produced from their souls and cycled it through their bodies to enhance their physical prowess. Each of them gripped a weapon engraved with a battle crest. Some even carried Guiding guns, contraband weapons.

The little girl narrowed her eyes, displeased at the obvious show of hostility.

"Do you know what you're dealing with, exactly? We're rather famous, you know."

"So I hear." The leader of the adventurer group nodded at the girl's rather arrogant words.

The destruction of the holy land. The suppression of the Mechanical Society's front lines in the eastern regions of the Wild Frontier. The abolishment of the class system in Grisarika.

All three were drastic upheavals of the sort that one might expect once in a hundred years. What these girls had accomplished was known across the continent. If anyone aware of their identities was still foolish enough to underestimate them just because of their young age, they'd surely be called a

fool.

And yet the man antagonized them.

"When pushed to pick a side, we'll always pick whoever's stronger." His voice had a distinct tinge of fear. "And I seriously doubt that you two could beat the likes of him... Of Genom Cthulha."

That was all that mattered.

The men were bound by the power of fear. Their opinions would not change; there was no room for negotiation.

They were vastly outnumbered. The two girls who'd been lured here under the pretense of a negotiation were sitting ducks in the middle of a hunting ground. But the pair had survived odds like this several times over. The blackhaired girl's fearless smile never faltered.

"Hmm. Well, I hope you don't live to regret that."

Despite the fact that they were at an overwhelming disadvantage, the little girl in the white dress and kimono looked completely confident as she accepted the declaration of war head-on.

"Okay, Sahara, you're up! Take them out!"

The girl's bold proclamation put the men around her even more on their guard.

Her companion was dressed in a nun's habit and had a Guiding prosthetic right arm. It was clear from her complete lack of tension despite being surrounded that she was no ordinary young woman. A few of the men even intuited that she might be Governor Sahara, who was said to have taken over for the Director of the Fourth.

Even if they didn't know this little girl's identity, Governor Sahara was famous as an authority in the east. She had dominated the front lines of the Mechanical Society and was hailed as a modern-day hero.

A sliver of terror ran through the men. What if they couldn't take her down even with their superior numbers?

However, the one called Sahara only regarded her companion blankly. "Hang

on a sec, Maya. What do you mean? I can't fight all these guys."

Maya, the little girl who'd been talking such a big game, closed her mouth abruptly at this deadpan declaration.

Unbothered by the girl's reaction, Sahara went on in a casual drawl. "Yeah, this is a little too much for me. I mean, these guys look pretty tough. They're not just your average thugs, you know. I'm guessing most of 'em were Noblesse before they became adventurers. And it's a whole squad of 'em, too. You guys were in the military together and took the fall after some political battle or something, right?"

The leader of the adventurers was impressed by her deduction, despite himself.

Once, he'd been a commanding officer, but his group was banished after losing a political conflict. Unable to remain in the nation where they'd been born Noblesse or to flee to other countries, they'd survived by dirtying their hands in the Wild Frontier.

Maya didn't care about their struggles, though. All she wanted to know at the moment was the difference in strength between her side and theirs. To put it even more simply, she only cared if she and Maya would be able to make a quick escape.

"What...? Then how are we going to get out of this?"

"You seemed so confident that I assumed you had a plan, Maya. You don't?"

"Not at all."

There came another long, heavy silence.

"Grab 'em."

"Wait, wait, time out! Stop! Cut! Let's start over from the top, please!"

The men decided they must have been wrong about the girl in the nun's habit being the Governor. She was obviously just some idiot who happened to have the same name, clothes, and appearance as the infamous figure, traveling with a small child.

Still, they kept on guard as they closed in intimidatingly, their expressions

hard. Maya waved her hands frantically.

"I'm sorry, okay? I suppose I got a liiiittle too carried away there. Yes, I'll admit that much."

Even surrounded, she tried to talk her way out with undeniably impressive bravery. For a girl who appeared to be ten years old, at best, this level of courage was nothing short of an incredible natural gift.

"We might not look it, but we're actually rather important in the east, you know? If you gentlemen want to walk freely under the sun again, I'm sure we can help you out. You must be sick to death of living in this hole in the ground, right?"

"You can get us off scot-free even after all the crimes we done, can ye?"

"…"

Cold sweat ran down Maya's face. She pressed her adorable little mouth into a straight line and looked away in a show of irritation.

"I dunno. I'm just a kid."

It was a very honest reaction. For a child her age, it was tempting to praise her for her honesty, but such candidness could sometimes be a disadvantage in negotiation.

"Make sure you take these brats alive, boys. Even clueless kids like this could be useful hostages for dealin' with our real target...Flarette."

"Sahara? Are we really done for? You don't have any tricks up your sleeve to turn things around?"

As Maya looked to Sahara for some salvation, the nun simply shrugged, her eyes as lazy as ever.

"Nope. Just give up already. I did ages ago."

"What?! Nooo!"

While their little two-person comedy skit put a damper on the tension, it wasn't reason enough for the men to show mercy.

The adventurer group who lived in the Wild Frontier, where power was

everything, circled around the intruders to get rid of them for good.

As a different young woman was eating at a sketchy food stall in the underground hub, she heard the kind of clamor that could only mean trouble.

Although the underground settlement that had formed naturally near the City of Ruins was small, it possessed its own ecosystem. There was no shortage of people who couldn't live in their homelands for one reason or another yet weren't strong enough to do battle. Left with few options, they sold to adventurers.

She heard metal clashing against metal and sensed the invocation of a crest conjuring. On top of that, there came the *pop* of Guiding guns and the out-of-place shrieks of a little girl. In this enclosed underground space, sound echoed persistently and refused to fade. The last shriek in particular was so loud and piercing that she suspected it might have been audible from everywhere in the subterranean settlement.

"What in the world did those two get into now...?" she grumbled quietly as she slurped up the last of her noodles.

The young woman was so beautiful that her silhouette stood out even in the dimly lit underground hub. As she placed her chopsticks on the emptied bowl, her light tawny hair swayed, held in a ponytail with a large black ribbon.

She was none other than Menou, also known as Flarette, Flare's successor.

Once an Executioner who hunted taboos, she'd betrayed the Faust and had done enormous damage to the holy land, which made her a wanted criminal. Her blue-based attire only betrayed a trace of her former life as a member of the church.

"Now, now, don't be so mean, li'l Menou," the voluptuous beauty next to Menou chided her lightly.

She wore vertical-striped slacks and a short jacket, showing plenty of her smooth, brown skin. Despite sitting at the food stall, she didn't eat anything, only beaming at the other girl cheerfully with an attitude that cut a stark contrast to her glamorous appearance.

"It's nice that they have so much energy, don't you think? As a big sister, I

think that kind of liveliness is much better than sitting around being gloomy in this dark cave!"

"There is such a thing as *too* much energy. Really, that pair gets into trouble the second I take my eyes off them. Especially Sahara."

"Don't you think you're being too hard on my poor little sister? If you ask me, it's that other pip-squeak who's to blame."

"You're just too soft on Sahara, Abbie. She can do things if she puts her mind to it, but at this rate, she'll be lazy forever."

"Aww, I think it's better to be plenty soft and sweet on her! She's the sort of girl who tends to go where life takes her, after all. And I want to make it so that she can't live without me at all! That's love, I tell you."

"Please stop. For her sake and mine."

Sahara seemed to have bonded with Maya recently. They were a good influence on each other.

While Menou conversed with Abbie, she paid the bill for her meal and stood. Finally, she strode toward the source of the increasingly loud battle, her long legs moving elegantly in small black shorts.

"How much longer will it take to survey the terrain down here?"

"Almost done, I think. This place is bigger than I expected." Abbie held up a fingertip, on which perched an ant the size of a pinky finger. On very close inspection, it was clearly an inorganic insect made of mechanical parts like gears and springs—an insect-style conjured soldier.

Menou had never seen conjured soldiers as small as the ones Abbie produced.

After reaching the northern region of the continent and overcoming all manner of obstacles to make their way underground, Menou and company had hit a snag just outside the City of Ruins.

The reason was simple—they didn't know the way.

"It looks like they've just been digging in random directions. There's no clear route, and some of the passageways have caved in partway through. Some are

full of poison gas or flooded with water... Really, this is no place for human beings to live."

"They're only here because they have no other choice, I suppose."

"It's such a mess that I still don't have a handle on the whole place, but I did find an entrance to the City of Ruins!"

The underground hub had formed when adventurers gathered and settled there. Its nature was not unlike the Balar Desert, where Menou had first reunited with Sahara, but since it was an underground area that didn't see much traffic, it was all the gloomier. On top of that, a wanted criminal like Menou couldn't risk making contact with such an exclusionary community, so she relied on Abbie's specialty of miniature conjured soldiers to thoroughly search the place for the route to the City of Ruins.

"It worries me that Michele hasn't followed us here," Menou said.

"Ughh, Michele..." Even the normally carefree Abbie grimaced at the mention of that name.

Michele was an Inquisitor who'd chased Menou and the others around the moment they reached the north side of the continent. She was a high-ranking priestess of the Faust who received direct orders from Hakua, and she was powerful enough to wipe out Menou's group on her own.

They'd assumed that Michele would continue to pursue them in the underground hub, but surprisingly, she'd yet to make an appearance.

"Is it really such a problem that she hasn't shown up yet?" Abbie asked. "Sounds like a good thing to me."

"Do you realize it's been three days already? She was right on our tails aboveground. It's weird that she's suddenly abandoned her pursuit," Menou replied.

"Maybe she's just focusing on blocking the exit." Abbie offered her opinion based on the underground map she was making. "From what I can tell, the way we entered is really the only way in or out of this place. Maybe she figures it's more effective to just lie in wait for us up there than to go to all the trouble of chasing us down here."

"That certainly would be worse for us."

Truth be told, it would have been preferable for Menou and company if Michele had pursued them.

Michele was strong. Her amount and output of Guiding Force, the basis of strength in battle, was exceptionally high to the point of being downright superhuman. More likely than not, Michele could power an entire city on her own.

But while Michele was far too overpowered to engage in one-on-one combat, she would be at a disadvantage in a subterranean region. There was a very real risk that she might destroy the entire underground hub just with one swing of her sword and a crest conjuring.

Fortunately for Menou and the others, Michele had the good sense not to lay waste to everything around her. Even when she had a goal, she was still careful about her methods.

Had she only followed Menou and the others below the earth, where she'd have to limit herself, they might have been able to trap and bury her alive. Even then, it was debatable whether they'd actually be able to defeat her, owing to the woman's absurd life force, but Menou figured it would be enough to stall her for a while, if nothing else.

However, Michele herself was surely aware of her weaknesses in tight quarters.

"She did blockade the entrance," Abbie mused. "It's been hard on a lot of people down here, like the person who ran that food stall."

"Right, I'm sure their supplies have been drying up without anything coming in. You don't think Michele intends to keep us in here until we starve to death, do you?"

"I get the feeling she's not that patient..."

Adventurers and other rough types in the north used this underground hub as a base. Given the relative size of the population, there was some trade with the nearby towns to secure food and other necessities.

Evidently, Michele had cut that trade off, using the Faust's authority. She was only able to do such a thing because Inquisitors possessed a great deal of individual power. This had brought a lot of negative attention to Menou, Abbie, Sahara, and Maya, who'd slipped belowground while evading the blockade.

While she probably wasn't actually planning on starving them to death, turning the adventurers against them by blaming them for the blockade was most likely a part of her strategy.

"I suppose she wouldn't make it easy for us." Menou sighed. "So what are we going to do when we have to leave?"

"I really don't want to fight her... Should we dig our way out?" Abbie suggested.

"Excavating a new exit? I don't know..." Menou looked up at the tunnel ceiling. It might have been impossible to dig through for humans, but with Abbie's ability to produce all kinds of insect-like conjured soldiers, surely she could find a way through.

But of course there was a problem.

"If we opened up a new hole, wouldn't it cause a cave-in?"

"Maybe, maybe not. That kind of calculation is way outside my wheelhouse. I'm an intuition-based conjured soldier, you know. Even these little ones are made from the feelings that overflow from my soul."

"Let's not risk it, then."

Menou tried not to dwell on the fact that Abbie apparently made precise Guiding vessels based purely on feelings and intuition, and put aside this route for the time being.

The weblike underground hub was home to roughly a thousand people. It consisted of simple, clustered settlements on stable areas of the foundation, as well as wider mine-like passages like the one Menou and Abbie were walking in now.

If they messed up the balance while trying to dig their way out and crushed innocent citizens in the process, the guilt would be terrible.

As for Michele, the Inquisitor chasing them around, Menou still couldn't devise a way to fight her and win. For now, it was all she and the others could do to avoid her. She put this process off for now as they arrived at the source of the commotion, where things were quickly heating up.

Menou drew her dagger from the belt on her thigh. It was an unusual weapon, with the hilt in the shape of a gun's grip.

In this especially complex network of subterranean passages, Menou sent Guiding Force into her dagger gun.

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

The crest conjuring produced branches made of Guiding Force, which formed the shape of a barrel.

In moments, there was a gun glowing with Guiding Light in Menou's hand.

She put the muzzle to the wall and closed her eyes. The battle raged just beyond the wall. She couldn't depend on her sight. Instead, she assessed the relative positions of the people inside the room based on sound. While accounting for the wall's thickness, she carefully adjusted the position of the muzzle, then pulled the trigger.

"...Guh?!"

A hoarse voice echoed from somewhere. The bullet had pierced the wall and hit the leader of the men.

Chaos erupted in response, which Menou observed, if only barely, through the hole in the wall. Undeterred, Menou fired again and again. Now she only sought to stir up more confusion, not to hit anything in particular.

Any leadership and order inside the chamber crumbled quickly, thanks to the random shots. A girl in the fight seized upon the discord to break through a window and escape.

The silver-haired young woman in the nun's habit, Sahara, waved calmly as she carried Maya on her back.

"Thanks. You saved us."

"Don't mention it. I know Maya is adorable, but try not to indulge her reckless

whims, all right?"

"Why do you assume this was all my fault?"

Though Maya protested from Sahara's back, she was indeed the one who'd caused this, after growing bored of three days without excitement underground. She'd dragged Sahara on an independent search for information. It didn't help that Abbie had fanned that rebellious streak with constant arguments.

During this exchange, the enraged men emerged from the building Sahara and Maya had just escaped from.

"Flarette..." The man who seemed to be the leader glared at Menou, invoking her alias with contempt. "We were hoping to use that brat as a hostage to make you come along quietly, but I guess no such luck."

"I'll thank you not to underestimate our secret weapon. She's not so easy to capture, you know."

The sense of tension that had been lost for some time now abruptly returned. More adventurers had emerged from nearby buildings to capture Sahara and Maya before Menou's intervention.

Apparently, they'd organized two groups to surround their targets. Menou's brow creased at the unexpected increase in opponents.

"...What in the world did you two do?"

The situation was worse than she thought. This could easily be the majority of combat-capable adventurers in the underground hub.

"Oh, nothiiing...," Maya replied in her usual cheeky tone. Since she only looked like a child of barely ten, no one was wary of her, no matter what she did. The only exceptions were those who knew she was an Otherworlder with the Pure Concept of *Evil* and a rogue piece of Pandæmonium who'd gained independence.

Sahara was the real problem. She should have stopped Maya from causing too much trouble.

"I hate to say it, Menou, but this is an emergency. We don't have time to

point fingers right n—"

"Sahara. You thought if these men took you hostage, you'd be able to leave relatively peacefully, didn't you?" Menou interjected.

Maya whipped around to stare at the girl who'd been carrying her. "Is that really what you were thinking?!"

Sahara's expression didn't falter. "Of course not. It's so mean of you to falsely accuse me. And Maya, you should really trust me. Mwuhhh, mmph!"

"That's the face you make when you're lying...! Some servant you are, darn it!"

Maya grabbed Sahara's cheeks before she could finish giving excuses. It was great that they were getting along and all, but this was hardly the time. They were surrounded.

"I take it the rumor was true, then?" Menou asked Sahara, who only trembled in response.

"I thought so. Then he really is in the City of Ruins... Genom Cthulha."

She'd been right to assume Michele wouldn't stop at sealing them belowground. Genom's presence here changed everything.

Whispers had posited for a while that Michele and Genom were working together, although nothing had been confirmed. Sahara had probably agreed to look for information in the underground hub with Maya, in the hope she might verify the rumor. Upon learning it was true, she'd undoubtedly jumped at the first chance to give herself up as a hostage so that she wouldn't have to go to the City of Ruins.

Maya looked increasingly confused by their conversation. "Gennum? Who's that?"

"He's infamous in our line of work," Menou answered.

A monster among monsters, born into the Commons caste. For better or worse, he was the individual who'd brought about the most change on the continent in the past several decades.

Slave trader. Arms dealer. Priestess killer.

He dominated an organization that dealt in the illegal sale of anything considered taboo and eliminated anyone who got in the way of his business, whether they were knights or even priestesses. As someone who'd once been a part of the Faust, Menou found it hard to believe that any priestess would ally with Genom.

As strange as it was to admit, a priestess working with Menou was more believable. Genom had simply killed far too many priestesses.

"That one's a monster in every sense of the word. It's not even a matter of how scary or strong he is. I never want to see him again."

Sahara, who'd battled Genom in the Wild Frontier, touched her right arm.

Before she reunited with Menou, Sahara had encountered Genom in the Mechanical Society. At the time, she'd attacked him mostly out of desperation and despair, which resulted in her losing her original right arm and very nearly her life as well. She only survived that encounter because Genom spared her on a whim.

It wasn't his strength that shook Sahara to her core. Rather, it was that she still didn't understand the first thing about him, even after fighting.

"Let's think positive, shall we?" Menou patted Sahara on the shoulder. "It's still better than Michele."

"Is it, though ...?"

Truthfully, since Menou had never encountered Genom herself, she couldn't say for certain. Instead, she sidestepped the question and readied her Guiding gun.

She had to get her best friend Akari back.

If achieving that goal meant adding more casualties, she wouldn't falter.

The adventurers surrounding her and her companions were no exception. They'd come all the way to the depths of the northern continent to acquire a Guiding weapon that would help them fight Hakua Shirakami.

With all the men's attention focused upon her, Menou spoke softly in defiance of the tense atmosphere.

"Let's force our way through this all the way to the City of Ruins."

A girl nearby knew that the Starhusk wasn't a weapon of mass destruction.

She watched as Menou and her companions let loose on the adventurers. They'd left their base in Grisarika Kingdom and come to the northern reaches of the continent, traveling for weeks on end to find this place, all under the misapprehension that the Starhusk could damage Hakua.

Hakua Shirakami was strong. In fact, such a word was insufficient for how drastically she outmatched all others.

"...What a fool."

The girl spoke too quietly for anyone else to hear. The sound of her voice was drowned out by the noise of battle.

It was bad enough that they were chasing after something that wasn't what they thought, but they labored under the misunderstanding it would give them a chance against their enemy. Should things continue and the group enter the City of Ruins to seek control of the Starhusk, it would lead to trouble.

What would happen if she left them to their own devices?

The girl had heard tell of that future.

The adventurers fought Menou and the others frantically. Using Genom Cthulha's name to stoke fear in them had been wise. The girl carefully evaded Menou's notice as she sent Guiding Force into her cloth-wrapped scripture to record the battle.

The speed of Menou's conjurings. The extent of her Guiding Enhancement. The conjurings she used most. The power of her Guiding gun. All of these factors were recorded in the girl's scripture as moving images.

This projection was the girl's strongest scripture conjuring. She could invoke it incredibly quickly and construct the conjuring with great stealth. Since the scripture was wrapped in fabric, there was very little visible leakage of Guiding Light.

However, in the midst of battle, Menou suddenly looked her way.

The girl flinched and withdrew her face behind the dirty cloth. She squeezed a

younger girl close to her, pretending to tremble in fear while still valiantly protecting her—all an act, of course. Still, she was confident that she wouldn't be discovered, not in Menou's current condition.

Sure enough, she remained undetected.

Nearly a thousand people lived in the underground hub. Roughly 30 percent of them were capable of fighting. Out of those, even fewer were actually useful, and most of them were in the group currently chasing Menou and company. Since adventurers and the merchants who catered to them had forged a living community here, however small it might be, there were a few noncombatant women and children around.

The girl who'd infiltrated the town under the guise of one such helpless child continued recording Menou and her three companions as they fought. Eventually, they broke through the adventurers' defenses and headed deeper into the area.

They were forging down the path that led to the City of Ruins, the functional core of this place.

"Here's your reward."

She handed payment to the orphaned children who'd helped provide her cover, stood, and cast the cloth aside. While walking away from the kids who shrieked in delight over the money, the girl opened her scripture.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 1:4—Invoke [The Lord's will is relayed through all of heaven and earth, reigning far and wide.]

She invoked a communication conjuring to contact her superior aboveground. The response didn't take long to arrive.

Continue pursuit. That was all it said.

"That's my darling Michele for you."

Once she reached the temporary base she'd made in the underground hub, the girl turned the valve of the water pipe. There was no need to disguise herself as a dirty street urchin anymore.

All that came out was cold water. Was the water heater broken, or did it just

not exist? She couldn't very well expect to be provided with reliable utilities in a place like this anyway. Counting herself lucky that there was water at all, she took a shower to wash off the dirt, then changed into her usual attire.

Specifically, the girl donned indigo priestess robes. She put on white gloves, then tied up her pink hair into pigtails with two red scrunchies. Then, finally, she pulled her mantle around her shoulders.

An Inquisitor's uniform, as befit Momo's current position.

Menou and the others had found the City of Ruins.

The space below the northern Wild Frontier changed in nature, depending on the depth.

First, there was the spiral staircase that led down from the surface. The stairs alone went almost a hundred meters down, but they were ultimately still just an entrance.

Past the staircase was the passageway-like underground hub. There was no map of this place, for it was populated mostly by scoundrels and criminals. The labyrinthine subterranean passage spread in all directions, like an ant colony. Without a guide, it was all too easy to lose one's way.

While these two spaces were unusual, they were still ordinary, in a way. The passages had once been somewhat more efficient, but the humans who lived down here had expanded them purely to cause trouble, resulting in this chaotic mess.

The place in the northern continent's Wild Frontier truly known as the City of Ruins was beyond the underground hub.

Documents claimed the place existed, yet no one had ever reportedly found it. There was an entrance from the underground hub, and adventurers had discovered a door that seemed to fit the description, but none had managed to get past the gigantic thing.

An urban legend claimed the door opened occasionally, inviting a chosen individual inside. It was an incredibly suspect-sounding rumor, but Momo happened to know for a fact that it was true.

It happened about half a year ago. Momo had been charged with looking after Akari and had brought her here, beneath the lands of the northern reaches of the continent, as a possible place to hide her. Once she passed through the underground city where people came and went, she was invited into the City of Ruins by the one who dwelled inside.

""

Momo closed her eyes and recalled what she'd seen.

The heart of the city rested deep—a cavern that was a miracle merely by nature of existing. Such was the place called the City of Ruins.

And the facility that controlled one of the Four Major Human Errors, the Starhusk, loomed at the center of this hollow.

The prophecy that the Astrologer had told Momo there still echoed in her head even now.

"...Tch!"

She kicked her heel into the white box she used as a chair. There were several loud *thunks* as Momo repeatedly exacted her frustration before finally opening her scripture.

The images she'd recorded in secret earlier were reproduced inside.

Momo had wanted to capture the battle, no matter what. There was no telling who she might have to fight. She had to raise her odds of winning in any way possible.

"Not that this'll help much..."

Watching the group dispatch some common ruffians would hardly reveal the depths of their abilities. Each of them undoubtedly kept aces up their sleeves. It was too much to hope that ordinary adventurers were strong enough to draw those out.

Abbie, a Primary Triad conjured soldier; Maya, the child of a Concept of Original Sin; Sahara, the Governor of the Fourth, even if she hadn't earned the title; and of course, Menou, Flare's successor.

Momo analyzed each of the four girls' movements with rapt concentration.

Once, Master Flare had said that Momo became a priestess relying entirely on natural talent, yet now she studied like any true Executioner, to win at any cost.

Brute strength wouldn't be enough this time. None of her techniques were sufficient.

The element of surprise and sheer dumb luck would probably be on her opponents' side. Those four girls were blessed, almost as if chosen by fate.

Momo would cheat, lie, and wheedle her way into their hearts—whatever it took to achieve her goal. She wasn't strong enough to be picky about her methods, not in a world like this one.

She needed to focus so she wouldn't lose to any of them.

Menou's group had reached the end of the underground hub, which was unfortunately where the adventurers had formed their last line of defense. The sounds of battle echoed off the walls.

"Dammit. How'd we let them get this far ...?!"

"There's only four of them!"

Men traded dismayed frustrations. They were just outside the City of Ruins. For the adventurers who made their living in the underground hub, this was a line they had to defend at all costs. The person beyond this point needed to be protected, no matter what.

"Keep fighting! If we let these brats through, there's no telling what that man will do to us!"

Half a year ago, the adventurers learned that the door to the City of Ruins, the very one they presently defended, had opened. It was three months since the Faust had sealed the entrance to the underground hub, perhaps knowing the way to the city had unlocked. Just before the settlement was blockaded, Genom Cthulha had led a group to infiltrate the place.

Cold, unfeeling, and unbelievably powerful, discerning his thoughts was an exercise in futility. Making an enemy of these girls was nothing compared to having to face him.

Still, the adventurers' hope that their numbers would be enough had been misplaced. They weren't even fighting the four girls anymore, just an endless swarm of conjured soldiers.

"This thing can't beat me...!"

One of the adventurers managed to destroy the core of a conjured soldier. The constructs were each powered by a Primary Color crystal. Destroy the crystal, and the conjured soldier would become inert.

However, the man's celebration for a hard-fought victory was short-lived.

"Ooh, nicely done. What a good kid."

The woman who praised his efforts was beautiful enough to remain captivating even in the middle of a battle.

Her outfit showed off a generous amount of her tan skin and glamorous curves. As she beamed at the adventurer in a way that suggested his fierce struggle was adorable, the gear-shaped mark on her stomach glowed with Guiding Light.

"Here's some more for you."

Her tone was bright, even as a giant conjured soldier emerged from her skin, then another. They were a pair of the same type the man had defeated moments earlier. The ground shook as they stepped forward.

He'd barely managed to best one, and now there were two more.

In the face of this seemingly limitless, unending onslaught, not to mention the reminder of how poorly matched they were, the adventurers' fighting spirit dropped like a stone.

The woman's tan skin, her jet-black sclera, and her beautiful pure-blue irises were all telltale signs that she was a Primary Triad conjured soldier.

Such creatures could produce and command conjured soldiers. They were the only intelligent life-forms besides humans. These special conjured soldiers were normally only seen in the Mechanical Society to the east. However, their superhuman intelligence and abilities were known all over the continent.

And of course, she wasn't the only powerful enemy the adventurers faced.

"Dammit...!"

Another man tried to slip past while his comrade dealt with the conjured soldier, only to be blocked by Guiding Force Branches that formed in the blink of an eye. A gun waited, ready to shoot him as soon as he dared to stand still.

The offender in this case was especially pretty, even among the four girls. She was Menou, the one known as Flarette.

She employed quick crest conjurings to slow her opponents, then knocked them out cold with a single blast from her gun. It was painfully obvious from the fact that she used attacks even the adventurers understood, and not any unusual conjurings, that she was trained and skilled far beyond their wildest imagination.

"Ahhh, this is nice and easy."

Then there was Governor Sahara, the silver-haired girl in the nun's habit. She stood in the back yawning, showing a clear lack of concern. Supposedly, she'd conquered battles in the eastern Wild Frontier. From her lofty attitude, it was easy to imagine that Flarette, who'd brought the holy land to destruction, and the Primary Triad conjured soldier might be her subordinates. Her disinterest, a demonstration that she was clearly on another level, only plunged the men further into despair.

Pure, simple fear kept them fighting, though.

Namely, that of Genom Cthulha.

Although born into the Commons like many of the adventurers fighting, he was in a league all his own. None of the men dared defy him, even though it meant fighting these powerful young women. The fear of Genom had rooted itself in the very marrow of their bones.

For all the apparent hopelessness of their fight, the men did see an obvious weakness.

"Forget the other three—the little one's just some kid! Go after her. If we can take her as a hostage—"

"Oh, really?"

As the shouts of panic and desperation bounced across the battlefield, a little girl spoke from behind the adventurers.

"Don't you know that little kids pull the biggest pranks?"

The men froze in horror. They'd been so focused on dealing with the conjured soldiers, they hadn't watched their rear. They whirled to face her, but it was too late.

A black-haired girl peered out from within their shadows. Her eyes glittered with red Guiding Light.

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Chaos Collusion, Pure Concept [Evil]—Summon [Little pitfall prank]

"Wh-wha?!"

A hole formed in the shadows at the men's feet. They sank into the dark pit up to their ankles, losing their balance.

The little girl stuck out her tongue at her trapped victims. Their faces contorted with rage at the mischievous conjuring, but they never had a chance to retaliate.

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

Menou's crest conjuring brought lightning down on the adventurers. They fainted without so much as screaming.

With that, all obstructions to the City of Ruins had been dealt with, although in a louder and more conspicuous way than Menou would've liked.

She stepped between the heaps of unconscious men and patted Maya on the head. "Thanks."

Abbie had done most of the heavy lifting, of course, but Maya's interference provided the opening for the final blow. The little girl scrunched up her face but didn't push Menou's hand away.

"Are you sure it's safe to use your Pure Concept like that?" Menou asked.

"You used yours, too, didn't you? There's no harm in just a tiny bit."

"Really? I use mine with reduced potency. You aren't, though, are you?" Menou couldn't help but caution Maya over the danger of Pure Concept conjurings.

Their immense power came at the cost of the user's memories. If a Pure Concept holder used up enough memories and lost their sense of self, they'd become a walking disaster, acting on the impulses of the Pure Concept fused to their soul—a Human Error.

But Maya knew the terror of becoming a Human Error more than anyone else, which is why she could answer with confidence.

"Since the Pure Concept of *Evil* also sacrifices the flesh, it consumes fewer memories in exchange. In fact, I think I might get the best bang for my buck of any Pure Concept user out there."

This was a unique feature of the Pure Concept of *Evil*, which adhered not just to the soul and spirit but to the physical body. By offering up parts of her form as a sacrifice to invoke a conjuring, she could significantly reduce the amount of memories consumed.

"I've been saving up stuff like hair and fingernails to use as sacrifices little by little, so a tiny conjuring like that is no big deal. You don't need to worry about me so much, 'kay?"

Maya's traumatic past had kept her from telling Menou and the others about this strength of hers until now.

Because of this feature of her Pure Concept, she'd yet to forget her body slowly being carved away in the name of research, even after a thousand years. She was afraid that if anyone knew that she could use her Pure Concept a fair amount without becoming a Human Error, they would force her to do more conjurings.

But now, Maya was willing to share the secrets of her Pure Concept freely with her companions. Over the course of their journey, she'd come to trust that Menou and Sahara would never do something so cruel to her.

Sensing the girl's faith from her tone, Menou smiled at Maya. "You're such a good kid."

"What makes you say that all of a sudden? Of course I am."

When they first arrived in the north, Maya wouldn't have agreed so readily without a show of stubbornness.

The group pressed forward, stopping before the door that clearly marked the end of the road.

It was huge and metallic, looking like little more than a featureless wall.

Menou knocked on it experimentally, producing only a dull noise that gave no indication of how thick it might be.

"I take it the City of Ruins is beyond this," she remarked.

"Yup, that's right." This casual confirmation came from Abbie, who was busily stripping the men's equipment away. Her insect-type conjured soldiers, each no larger than the size of a pinky finger, were dismantling and neutralizing the adventurers' weapons. Once they woke up, they probably wouldn't chase after Menou and company when they realized they were unarmed.

Based on the results of Abbie's survey and of how the adventurers had defended this door so desperately, it was safe to assume that the City of Ruins lay just on the other side.

Maya approached the giant door.

"Ooh, this door's been here for ages! It's supposed to be an emergency escape route, so it's normally kept closed, but important people like yours truly are registered to it, so..."

"Oh. It's open," Sahara said.

"...So it is. I wonder why," Menou replied.

This door had been sealed to everyone for a thousand years, forever keeping the existence of the City of Ruins a mystery. Menou had come this far relying on Maya's information of the place.

So why was the way open now? Confused, Menou nonetheless stepped through the passageway. The bulkhead was so thick that she and the others had to pass through a small tunnel before reaching the edge of a giant city.

"Whoa!" The exclamation that sounded equal parts alarmed and impressed came from Sahara.

A true city had waited just beyond the metallic door. At first, it seemed the passage had led the group to an overlook of the entire City of Ruins, but it was actually impossible to see the entire thing from where they stood.

It was simply too enormous.

"Are we really still underground...?" The City of Ruins was so spacious that

Menou couldn't help but look back in disbelief at the narrow passage they had just come through.

From her point of view, even a five-story building was considered very tall. The orderly lines of these structures dwarfed that easily. Uniformly paved rows of high-rise buildings made of materials Menou had never seen before climbed high into the air.

At the heart of the city loomed a tower so enormous that it was hard to believe at first glance that it could possibly be man-made.

Given its size, it was undoubtedly visible from just about anywhere in the city. In fact, there were actually two separate towers of equal enormity: one that rose from the ground, and one that stretched downward from the ceiling. Each was probably thousands of meters long, and in the space between them, a swirl of Guiding Light formed a shining sphere. The phosphorescent radiance spilling from this mass was enough to illuminate the entire underground city evenly.

Although these were the ruins of an ancient civilization, it was obvious at a glance they were far more advanced than any modern city.

Most stunning of all was the cavern ceiling.

Menou and company were currently underground. Naturally, they couldn't see the sky. Yet the ceiling wasn't dug out from the exposed earth, nor had it been smoothed over with inorganic materials.

Instead, a cityscape just as impressive as the one below covered the ceiling.

"Wow, whoever made this place had great taste."

Menou and Sahara were too shocked to voice anything like the casual compliment Abbie made.

Structures spread out before them, both above and below. Buildings of all shapes and sizes extended downward from the ceiling like icicles. Such construction was only possible belowground.

Standing at the edge, Menou still couldn't see the whole picture, but assuming that the massive tower was at the center of the city, there was easily enough space to fit the entire capital of Grisarika within this cavern, with room

to spare.

"Heh-heh! What do you think? Pretty amazing, right? I kept the view a secret to surprise you!"

"I mean, it's amazing and all, but..." Sahara, overwhelmed by what was possibly the most stunning spectacle of its kind in all the world, pointed cautiously at the ceiling. "What's with the upside-down buildings? Do they have a purpose...?"

"You mean the ceiling district? People lived there, of course."

"Whaaat? It's not just some stupidly large art project?"

"Ha-ha. You have the funniest ideas, li'l sis. I think it's an excellent use of the space, don't you?" said Abbie.



"I think I have to agree with Sahara." Menou understood why Sahara would make such an off-base guess in the face of the bizarre sight before them.

The buildings above were so high up that it was hard to even imagine how one might reach them. And it was even harder to comprehend how people could stand to live in a reversed city that might fall at any moment. Believing them to be an artistic display with zero practicality made more sense.

"There were lots of fun places to play up in the ceiling district. Although... Hmm." Maya squinted. "There used to be a sort of balloon-like transport that constantly moved up and down, but I suppose that doesn't run anymore. What a shame."

"Well, it *has* been a thousand years... It's more surprising that the city is still so perfectly intact," Menou replied.

The city had been sealed away for nearly a millennium. Yet it displayed no evidence of aging.

"The size of this place..." Sahara shielded her eyes with her hand and squinted up at the ceiling.

"They didn't just dig a cave, they used Pure Concepts to make the foundation. What a crazy idea."

Menou nodded. "True... This couldn't have been easy to pull off."

The sheer height of this place stood in stark opposition to the laws of physics, more so than the city itself.

Menou and the others had descended a long staircase and through the gradual downward slope of the underground hub. Based on that, they couldn't possibly be more than two hundred meters down, yet the cavern ceiling was likely over a thousand meters above. It was proof that the space containing the City of Ruins had been expanded.

"It must be Primary Color Storage Space, right?" Menou said.

Of all the conjuring systems, the Concepts of Primary Colors was likely the most all-around useful.

The Concepts of Primary Colors clustered in an enclosed space would begin to

construct a space of their own, which led to the belief that it could be used to create worlds.

By increasing the density of the Concept of Primary Colors in the enclosed space, the area contained within would expand, becoming a new subspace distinct from the topology that originally existed there.

"So basically, it's like an item box. That's not so different from my shadow." Maya had a point, since she'd lived a thousand years ago, when the Concepts of Primary Colors were used on an everyday basis. This city functionally existed within a ridiculously large item box. "A thousand years ago, it was so useful that miniaturization had to be regulated, but it was used quite often on large, fixed objects like buildings. Space expansion is very convenient—it makes rooms much bigger."

"And expanding the city space while building is a natural extension of the item box idea. When you can control Pure Concepts down to the smallest units, the subspace stays stable, and it's *so* much easier than digging things out. Although there is a side effect if you overdo it, of course," Abbie added.

Unlike Menou and Sahara, who lived in a world where the Concepts of Primary Colors had been strictly regulated, Maya and Abbie were unsurprised, the latter in particular. Abbie was born in the Mechanical Society, a territory and world all its own constructed by the Concepts of Primary Colors within a barrier that was therefore larger than an entire country. Even now, it was still growing and expanding.

Grisarika Kingdom, which had become Menou's base of operations, was in the midst of gradually lifting the regulations on the Concepts of Primary Colors.

"There are micromachines scattered throughout the city that maintain its basic settings," Abbie remarked.

Menou raised an eyebrow. "Micromachines?"

"Conjured soldiers made up of the smallest units of the Concepts of Primary Colors. To put it simply, they're the tiniest conjured soldiers possible."

"Whoa, I didn't know that was a thing..." Sahara sounded impressed.

The Concepts of Primary Colors were a conjuring system that used materials

made from the three Primary Colors as their foundation. Micromachines gathered and formed Primary Color crystals, which in turn were used as a core to collect more crystals of the same color, creating conjured soldiers.

By Menou's understanding, the only way to use Primary Color conjurings was by employing Primary Color crystals that were visualized as materials, but that wasn't the case for Abbie. Analyzing and meddling with a Primary Color space was her domain, where she could use her powers to the fullest. She was essentially an expert.

"And you can tell where they're going and what they're doing?" Menou asked.

"Sure I can. Back in the Mechanical Society, we have micromachines dispersed in each zone that we use to modify the space. If you leave 'em to their own devices, micromachines will naturally gather with other ones of the same color and form Primary Color crystals, so this level of concentration in the atmosphere has got to be artificially managed. Watch this... Hyah!"

Suddenly, Abbie smashed her fist into the nearest wall. Her punch was so powerful that cracks ran through its surface.

Menou's eyes widened in confusion, but what happened next was the real surprise.

Guiding Light appeared in midair, filled in the cracks in the damaged wall, and began to repair it. At the same time, the rubble that had fallen to the ground from the hit was dismantled and disappeared.

"This whole city is built with micromachines. As long as the layout has power, the micromachines will create shapes accordingly, which is probably why it's remained pristine after so long. It looks like the glass and interiors were made with ordinary substances, so it's really just an empty husk of a city."

Automatic restoration and cleaning. That was how the place had survived for a thousand years.

All of this was very unexpected. Menou gave a sigh of admiration, marveling at the ancient civilization's technology.

Perhaps because the City of Ruins far surpassed Menou's expectations, she

found her eye drawn to a decoration that looked out of place. Many structures above and below were decorated with what looked like brand-new flags.

"Maya. Those flags weren't there a thousand years ago, were they?"

"Nope. I wonder what they could be."

Maya confirmed Menou's suspicions. These flags were new.

Each was emblazoned with the letter *G* in straight white lines, a symbol known across the world.

"Genom's red flag..."

Sahara breathed the name of the recognizable symbol in this unfamiliar city.

The City of Ruins had been closed for a very long time, yet he'd heard of its unsealing and made it his base.

"Gennum's... Sorry, what now?" Maya cocked her head to one side.

"It's a flag that the infamous villain Genom Cthulha displays in his occupied territories," Menou explained.

The red pennants were the antithesis of the indigo blue robes that Faust priestesses wore. It was said that Genom adopted the symbol after killing members of the Faust and hanging their bloodstained robes. Even the most confident fighters would hesitate to approach a land marked by those crimson flags. Genom had been known to attack the bases of Noblesse knights and those of Faust priestesses, raising the white *G* on the roofs of claimed churches.

That flag had become a symbol of the strength of Genom's armed forces, a declaration of strength even the mightiest nations were reluctant to challenge.

And now, dozens of them decorated the City of Ruins. The sight of what was essentially an emblem of evil hanging everywhere made even Sahara turn pale.

"You don't look so good, li'l sis. You all right?" Abbie asked.

"No, I'm not." Sahara shook her head immediately. She didn't look well in the slightest. Sahara brought a hand to her mouth, as though to keep from vomiting. "How awful. There were no flags at the Iron Chain base..."

"Well, those people were in the middle of a smuggling trade. And Genom

himself wasn't there," Menou said. Nearly a year ago, she'd fought against an organization working for Genom in the Balar Desert. The armed organization Iron Chain must have taken care deciding when to display proof that it answered to him.

That meant it had been deemed safe to openly display the red flags in the City of Ruins. It looked like the place was under occupation.

Menou sighed. "Well, this is an even bigger problem than I thought." Judging by the many symbols of Genom, it was clear that his primary intent wasn't to intercept her group. "Genom's just been setting up encampments because he wants to use the City of Ruins as his base."

Why he chose such a restricted location was unclear.

Whatever the reason, Genom had left the Mechanical Society and gathered subordinates to turn the City of Ruins into his personal stronghold. The need to constantly flee from Michele had kept Menou from gathering information and learning as much until now.

Hostility and fighting spirit radiated openly from the buildings with the red flags.

Clearly, Genom's forces infested the center of the city. They had to be armed and far more dangerous than the adventurers in the underground hub. Genom's followers had stained their hands with all manner of taboos, yet they'd escaped the Faust and knights of various nations. In short, they were true villains.

The adventurers had been mere scarecrows intended to frighten off anyone who'd try to enter the real mastermind's base.

Genom's true army lurked ahead, ready and armed to the teeth. And it was even more powerful and motivated to keep watch outside than the adventurers they were threatening.

Sahara grumbled wearily. "These guys have to be strong enough to beat the priestesses stationed outside the Mechanical Society..."

There was no warning at all.

The moment Menou, Abbie, Sahara, and Maya stepped out onto the city streets, they were attacked.

Men concealing themselves inside the nearby buildings closed in without a sound. From around the corners of the alleys on either side, from the second floors of buildings, even from hiding places under the ground... They emerged from all directions, skirting Menou's detection until a moment before they struck.

They might have even stopped their heartbeats to lie in wait soundlessly. To maintain the element of surprise, they didn't use crest conjurings or Guiding Enhancement, so as not to risk exposing themselves before their assault. As a former Executioner, Menou had to admit she was impressed with their skills.

At first, the assailants looked empty-handed. However, each of the attackers had at least one artificial limb. They used the metal prosthetics as lethal weapons, striking with jabs and toe-kicks aimed at vital organs.

Menou and Abbie still managed to react. Despite their surprise, they parried and dodged the deadly blows.

But the surprise attack was so perfectly executed that even the two seasoned fighters had their hands full merely protecting themselves.

Maya, who had no understanding of battle, stood in place rigidly.

"Huh...?"

Her failure to react meant there was only one person able to move in time to protect her, the girl nearest to her—Sahara.

Which explained why she quickly became a casualty.

"Mm-gah..."

A sound that was part scream and part groan clawed from Sahara's mouth.

She had thrown herself in front of Maya to shield her, abandoning any hope of defending herself, yet her attackers showed no mercy. Guiding prosthetic hands pierced through her heart and sliced the back of her neck.

A spray of blood splattered across Maya's face.

"…"

Unable to make a sound, Maya looked wide-eyed from Sahara, who was falling to the ground after shielding her, to the attacker's deadly Guiding prosthetic arm.

Menou and Abbie hadn't finished dealing with their own opponents yet. For all their combat skills, their enemies were still able to stall them.

Neither would be able to save her.

As a prosthetic arm came for her life, Maya's eyes glowed with red Guiding Light.

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Chaos Collusion, Pure Concept [Evil]—Summon [What's yours is mine.]

The Original Sin conjuring took less than a second to activate. The bits of Sahara's blood splattered on the attackers' prosthetic limbs shifted eerily and oozed into the metallic parts.

"Tch?!"

The attackers let out a hiss. The Guiding prosthetics that served as their limbs and as powerful weapons suddenly twisted into impossible directions. Alarmed by the sudden change, the men tried to back away from the cause, Maya.

However, the child of Original Sin wouldn't allow them to retreat.

"Are you stupid?" Maya's eyes glinted with the vestiges of the Original Sin conjuring as she laid bare their grave error. "You really think you can use Primary Color-made prosthetics as weapons against *me*? Do you have a death wish?"

As she spoke, the attackers' prosthetic limbs became monsters and attacked with fangs and claws. Even Genom's skilled warriors couldn't fight with their own weapons after they'd transformed into bizarre creatures.

And Menou wasn't about to waste that opening.

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

She touched the dagger strapped to her thigh and activated a crest conjuring.

Her Guiding Force threads wrapped around the pair of assailants that had threatened Maya, binding them.

Guiding prosthetics, built in the Mechanical Society to replace missing limbs, were made up of the Concepts of Primary Colors. They were powerless to resist a transformation invoked by an Original Sin conjuring. Perhaps the men didn't know this, or maybe they'd intended to finish her off in the initial surprise attack.

One of the monsters separated itself from its owner's limb and slithered over to Maya's feet. It coiled around Sahara's body, which appeared utterly lifeless, and touched the Guiding prosthetic attached to her shoulder.

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Original Sin, Envy: Flesh—Summon [Meat Puppet: Heart, Blood]

The monster was absorbed into Sahara's flesh, filling in what she'd lost. Her heart began to beat once more, restored by the Original Sin conjuring.

With her wounds healed, Sahara sat up and blinked.

"...Whoa, that's crazy. I thought I was dead for sure."

Seeing that Sahara was restored, Maya went weak in the knees. She dropped to the ground next to Sahara and let out a deep exhale.

"Whew... Let me make one thing clear, Sahara. You do know you can't live very long as just an arm, right?"

"Wait, I can't?!" Sahara looked horrified at this revelation. "Why not?! I thought I was basically unkillable, since this arm is my main body?!"

She stuck out the Guiding prosthetic that was her right arm, but Maya shook her head. Abbie did the same in agreement as she helped mend the hole in Sahara's clothes.

"Sahara, your soul is stuck between the body I made and your Guiding prosthetic. If either of them gets destroyed, you won't be long for this world," Maya explained.

"Mm-hmm. Your soul is special, li'l sis," Abbie said. "It has to be connected to both an Oirginal Sin body and a Primary Color vessel, or... I'd say it would

evaporate within an hour or so."

"You've got to be kidding..."

While Sahara hung her head, crestfallen, Menou approached one of the men she'd captured with Guiding Thread.

"Now, I'd like you to answer a few questions."

These attackers were a valuable source of potential information, and there was plenty Menou wished to know about Genom and his base in the City of Ruins.

""

The man cast his gaze briefly at Menou, then slowly and silently closed his eyes. Menou furrowed her brow at this odd behavior.

It was a strangely quiet and calm gesture, too much so to be a declaration of intent to resist and remain silent.

Any questions she might have asked were answered immediately.

There came an almost unsatisfyingly soft sound.

It was a light bursting noise, like a single kernel of corn being popped. All the attackers, not just the man Menou had captured, suddenly had blood on their shirts. Life abruptly drained from their faces, making it clear what they had done.

They'd committed suicide.

"Yikes..." Sahara grimaced and covered Maya's eyes. Menou's expression remained calm as she touched the bound man's wound.

Their hearts had exploded, perhaps from a conditionally activated conjuring. It was likely a near-instant death.

"They've been very well-trained. I didn't even have time to stop it," Menou said.

Sahara shivered. "Not even Executioners would go this far..."

As soon as they were captured, they had all taken their own lives without hesitation. Menou laid the body down to rest and raised her head.

Genom's red flags were displayed all over the city.

"With his banners everywhere, there's really no way of knowing where his minions are hiding," Menou remarked with a sigh.

Surprise attacks were bound to continue. There were still enemies swarming all over the city.

"But the Astrologer is in the tower at the heart of the... Huh?" Maya abruptly stopped talking. She stood still, looking dumbfounded. Her gaze was fixed on the giant tower that connected the upper and lower halves of the City of Ruins.

"What's wrong?" Menou asked.

"I just got a really bad feeling from over there...in the environment control tower." Although Maya answered, her eyes never left the spire.

Even the red flags couldn't pull her attention away.

"Pandæmonium is in there." There was no uncertainty in Maya's tone. Her confidence made Sahara's and Menou's expressions turn grave.

"Oh, really." Abbie, on the other hand, sounded casually murderous. "You sure about that, twerp?"

"I'm almost positive. I can sense her."

Maya was a part of the Human Error Pandæmonium. She'd gained independence by recovering her memories. That she possessed a conjuring-like connection that allowed her to detect the main body was no surprise.

Between the surprise attacks and this revelation, the mood was growing increasingly heavy. This wasn't good. Menou clapped her hands to clear the air of the oppressive tension.

"All right. Let's have a strategy meeting."

Menou and the others found a small empty building at the end of a back alley.

There was no telling where Genom's forces were hiding or when they might attack, so even after confirming their hiding spot was empty, Menou, Sahara, Maya, and Abbie remained on alert.

"Our goal is to gain control of the Starhusk. We came here to enter that giant

spire—the environment control tower—and to make contact with the Astrologer to ask for aid. That was our original purpose," Menou began. Maya and Abbie nodded.

They'd intended to search for the Astrologer here, but upon entering the City of Ruins, they found fresh trouble they'd have to deal with first. The plan needed to adapt to compensate.

"Our new obstacle is Genom Cthulha and his armed forces."

The men who attacked them earlier were strong fighters, but not beyond anything Menou and her companions couldn't handle.

"If Pandæmonium is here, too, then there's no telling what might happen."

That being's mere presence was enough to turn the entire situation on its head.

Maya's intuition remained the only evidence they had of Pandæmonium's presence, but they couldn't afford to take that lightly.

"It wouldn't be that surprising if she was here, I suppose. If the World Suspension half a year ago weakened the Mechanical Society's barrier, the same could've happened to Pandemonium," Menou posited.

Pandemonium was a fog barrier that existed to entrap the Human Error Pandæmonium, a place full of chaos and horrors beyond imagining, due to the monsters that had festered and cannibalized each other within it for a thousand years.

Akari, the holder of the Pure Concept of *Time*, had used the World Regression conjuring repeatedly, altering the timeline. The many rewinds put a strain on the barrier and eventually led to a portion of the Human Error within escaping into the larger world.

Pandæmonium's pinky finger drifted ashore to the nearest town, where she took hold of a Noblesse girl and caused a great deal of damage and loss in pursuit of granting the girl's wish.

Such was the incident in the port city of Libelle.

"Yikes, what a pest!" Abbie declared after hearing Pandæmonium's history

from Menou. "Concepts of Original Sin are nothing but trouble. Exterminate 'em all, I say!"

"I wasn't self-aware at the time!" Maya protested.

What Menou found most terrifying during the trouble with Pandæmonium, when she was still an Executioner of the Faust, wasn't that the Human Error sacrificed hundreds of lives or that she summoned a giant monster to destroy an entire island.

It was that Pandæmonium displayed no ill will.

She sought nothing, followed no logic, and harbored no concern for herself.

Her sole purpose, the driving force behind all her actions, was simply to spread the chaos known as *Evil* throughout the world.

After a series of coincidences and Manon's efforts, Pandæmonium's pinky was able to recover her personality as Maya.

The idea that Pandæmonium might be here working with Genom in the City of Ruins, just as she had worked with Manon previously, was disturbingly plausible. Genom's villainous disposition and power to foster *Evil* in the world would make him a perfect match for the Human Error.

"Do you think something like what happened in Libelle might be happening here?" Menou questioned.

"Well, I mean..." Maya nodded reluctantly.

Pandæmonium was here, and so was the most infamous man in the world. This couldn't be a coincidence.

Although her attitude was unusual, Manon's powers had been no different from those of an ordinary Noblesse girl.

Genom, however, was feared as the worst of all criminals for nearly a decade. Not only was he a strong individual, but he had supporters and wealth at his command, far more than Manon ever did.

Should Pandæmonium lend her power to someone like that, what horrors would be unleashed?

Sahara looked nervous. "Is it just me, or is this really bad?"

"It certainly warrants greater caution," Menou replied.

At the very least, it was unlikely that they'd be able to push their way through with brute force.

Menou had access to the Pure Concept of *Time*, thanks to her soul-level connection with Akari's Guiding Force, and Abbie was naturally powerful as a Primary Triad conjured soldier. Together, they could take on just about any opponent, save for Michele or Hakua. They'd remained convinced of that even after learning Genom had claimed the City of Ruins.

Pandæmonium's involvement changed things. She was one of the most dangerous beings in the world.

"We're lucky we have you, Maya," Menou said.

Learning of the Human Error's presence in advance was tremendously fortunate. Had the group pressed on in ignorance, it might've been caught in a hopeless situation before realizing what was happening.

"In a way, you could say this is actually pretty convenient." Sahara offered this from a distance. Rather than participate in the meeting, which seemed like too much trouble, she was keeping watch. "Your goal is to destroy Pandæmonium, right, Maya?"

Maya couldn't stand to let that twisted version of herself exist.

That's why she'd joined Menou and the others on this journey. Given that she'd recovered her identity, her very existence could possibly be considered a counter of sorts against Pandæmonium.

"If Pandæmonium shows up in the environment control tower, we can use Maya against her, but we'll need to get past Genom's lackeys first," Menou said.

Repeat fights like the earlier one would quickly exhaust the group. Sahara had already been killed once. Avoiding combat until they reached the tower where Genom and Pandæmonium likely waited was for the best.

"Hmm... If the ambushes in the city down here are a problem, then..." Abbie

pointed through the empty window frame at the underground ceiling.

There was a cityscape up there just as magnificent as the one below. Truthfully, it was hard to look at it without worrying that it might fall. Anyone who'd ever worried the sky might fall knew exactly what Menou and company felt in this bizarre place.

Abbie was the only one without fear, cheerfully proposing, "From this distance, we could just fly right up there!"

Wind rushed by.

The buildings overhead were all linked by enormous passages. It was like a modern labyrinth constructed with full use of all three dimensions.

Menou and the others rode on a conjured soldier Abbie produced.

The squat, cylindrical mechanical creature oscillated its single pair of wings rapidly as it carried the girls higher into the air.

"I didn't know you could make flying conjured soldiers," Menou remarked, wondering if Abbie had been holding out on her.

"Sure you did. I make tiny ones all the time," Abbie answered quite matter-of-factly.

"The insects, you mean? Yes, I suppose I have seen those..."

Abbie used lots of flying conjured soldiers that specialized in searching and surveying, due to their tiny size. Menou had no idea that she could produce the same design at a size large enough to carry four people. This construct seemed to be based on a bee. Its thorax was fluffy and pleasantly warm. Its flight posture was quite stable, making for a rather comfortable ride. Were Menou tasked with picking a negative, the best she could come up with was the annoyingly loud noise of the wings.

Abbie's conjured soldier climbed high enough to nearly skim the bottoms of the buildings hanging from the ceiling.

"This City of Ruins certainly is strange," Sahara mused.

Maya cocked her head. "How so? It's not that different from when I was here a thousand years ago."

"That's exactly what's odd about it."

Despite its moniker, the City of Ruins was a far cry from crumbled remnants.

Menou had known little about the place, beyond that it was practically the stuff of legends. It had been blocked off by a giant metal door underground for nearly a thousand years, and stories claimed it sometimes opened to invite a "chosen one" inside. Menou only accepted that the city truly existed when Maya told her about it in Grisarika.

"The earthen vein in the north dried up long ago. Where is the Guiding Force maintaining the city's functions coming from?" Menou wondered.

"I mean, isn't it obvious?" Abbie answered cheerfully. "This place is connected to the Mechanical Society. I bet colonies of micromachines flow in from there."

Menou, Maya, and Sahara were left speechless.

"Sorry...what?" Menou said. "I think I must have misheard you. Could you repeat that for me?" Perhaps she'd misheard Abbie's explanation because of the conjured soldier's buzzing wings. She certainly hoped that was the case. "You said this place is...what, exactly?"

"Connected to the Mechanical Society. It's why I came out of here half a year ago." Abbie pointed at the giant sphere of swirling Guiding Light suspended between the two parts of the environment control tower at the center of the city.

Menou frowned. "What? Isn't that just the light source for the city?"

"No, no. It's a hole in the White Night barrier that connects to the Mechanical Society. Didn't you know that?"

"..."

Despite herself, Menou fell into silence.

Genom Cthulha, Pandæmonium, and now the Mechanical Society. The gravity of the situation and the importance of this information were almost beyond comprehension.

Menou let out a long, slow exhale. Then she inhaled deeply to fill her chest, then blew it back out.

Okay, she thought, after gathering her thoughts. Truthfully, her mind was still in utter disarray, but at least she'd calmed on the surface.

"I thought the only spaces connected to the Mechanical Society were in the east, starting with the remote regions of Grisarika. Isn't this too far away?"

"The Mechanical Society is already just about the size of a continent in its subspace. Building a large enough Primary Color Storage Space...makes it a window into the Mechanical Society. That's the side effect I mentioned earlier," Abbie said.

"I see..."

Primary Color Storage Space was a conjuring that created a pocket space on a slightly different level from this world.

The Mechanical Society existed on that same, slightly alternate plane, continually expanding until it was large enough to cover the entire continent.

In other words, if one made a Primary Color Storage Space anywhere on this continent, it would become a portal linking to a part of the Mechanical Society.

Now Menou understood why the unbelievably convenient Concepts of Primary Colors were banned, although she would've preferred to remain ignorant.

"As soon as the Mechanical Society expanded from the east to the north, it connected to the City of Ruins," Abbie explained.

"...In that case, couldn't this place easily become another battlefront like the one in the eastern Wild Frontier?" Menou suggested.

"Whaaat? Why would we do that?"

A tremendous number of conjured soldiers had emerged and attacked humanity in the eastern regions of the Wild Frontier.

Abbie was glad to elucidate why the same thing hadn't transpired in the north. "This boundary line is connected to zone thirteen, where I'm in charge! I wouldn't send conjured soldiers out like that!"

Menou grabbed the other girl's shoulders firmly. Although given a reasonable explanation, she had plenty of questions—one in particular that stood above all

the others.

"Listen, Abbie..." Menou smiled, though something about the grin would've made anyone's blood run cold. "Why didn't you tell me that half a year ago? Or at the very least, why didn't you mention this before we left Grisarika?"

"Well, you didn't ask. Besides, I'd rather travel on this side than cut across the Mechanical Society anywaAAAARGH!"

A swift chop to the forehead interrupted Abbie. She clutched her head while Menou looked down at her coldly.

"See, keeping things like that from me is why I can't trust you."

"I'm sorryyyy...but is it really that important? The Mechanical Society and the City of Ruins have overlapped for at least five years."

"If that's not a major development, I don't know what is!"

When Menou really thought about it, the timing and location of her encounter with Abbie half a year ago had been strange.

Abbie had left the east and arrived in the north awfully quickly. It wasn't impossible, but a conjured soldier unaccustomed to human society wouldn't have access to the quickest route.

Abbie found Menou and the others when she did because she'd emerged in the north, sensed Sahara, and made a beeline for her.

"Oh well. At least this clears up the Michele problem."

"Huh? Wait, li'l Menou, are you saying you want to come to my place on the way home? Gosh, your big sis is a liiittle embarrassed..."

"Do you have a problem with that?" Menou donned her domineering smile from earlier.

Abbie folded immediately. "No, not at all..."

"There's no need to get that angry, is there, Menou? Depending on how you look at it, this means we have one less thing to worry about," Sahara chimed in from the back.

"I suppose so...," Menou admitted. "But the fact that it's not all bad news just

makes it even more annoying somehow."

Michele lying in wait outside the City of Ruins had been a major issue, but not if this place was linked with Abbie's territory. The group could pass through the Mechanical Society and return to Grisarika to the east.

"If we really are allies, you should tell me these things in advance," Menou chided Abbie. "The same goes for this thing we're riding right now. Knowing you could make this while we were fleeing Michele would've been a big help."

Menou patted the conjured soldier they rode on. It was much faster than a train, since it wasn't hindered by the terrain. In fact, it was still a good deal speedier than the spider soldiers the group had used for transportation on the surface.

"I don't think that'd be such a good idea. I don't like to fly with these things much outside. Especially for long periods of time."

"Hmm? Why not?"

"Because it's dangerous, duh." Abbie's tone was nonchalant. "My tiny insect conjured soldiers are great in the air. So I figured I could just make one bigger to use as a flying machine, but the result doesn't work well, for some reason. When they're big enough to carry people, the wings lose efficiency."

"What...? But we're flying on one right now, aren't we?"

"Yup. Pretty amazing, right? Especially this kind. My li'l bros said they couldn't figure out how it was able to stay up at all, never mind with passengers."

Menou, Maya, and Sahara exchanged glances. Abbie had apparently put them on a flying death trap without a word of warning. Was it truly safe to have four passengers riding on a conjured soldier that shouldn't be able to keep airborne?

Abbie smiled brightly, hoping to reassure her increasingly anxious companions. "Come on, don't look so nervous. Your big sis has full confidence that this li'l carpenter bee buddy of mine will fly for us! See? We're almost the RRGUH?!"

A piece of wing came off with a pop and struck Abbie in the face.

Evidently, the fragile wing base wasn't strong enough to withstand the high-

speed oscillation required to create the necessary lift to ferry four people into the air. It was lucky that Abbie took the hit. The fast-moving wing had enough physical energy to cause serious injury had it struck anyone else.

"Oof..."

While Abbie reeled from the surprise, Menou, Maya, and Sahara went into stunned silence. With its pilot distracted, the conjured soldier lost its balance. A crash seemed inevitable. Menou stood up before they went into a complete tailspin.

She saw two options: an attempt at a soft landing from over a thousand meters in the air or finding a way to hang from the ceiling district buildings a few dozen meters above.

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

Menou tossed the dagger with the concentrated Guiding Force thread to Sahara and signaled to the other girl with her eyes. The nun understood immediately and held out her Guiding prosthetic right arm.

Menou placed one foot on Sahara's prosthetic limb.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Prosthetic Arm, Inner Seal Conjuration—Activate [Skill: Guiding Shot]

Sahara used the recoil from firing the Guiding gun to launch her arm up with all her might.

She and Menou had chosen to land on one of the buildings hanging overhead.

Sahara's strength helped launch Menou high. Their combination of abilities made for an impressive jump, but it still wasn't enough to reach the nearest structure. At this rate, Menou would fall with Maya and Sahara, to whom she was connected by her Guiding Thread.

Menou pointed the barrel of her dagger gun downward.

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

The force of firing at her feet catapulted her even higher. Menou was almost within reach of the building.

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

Branches of Guiding Force spread from the gun. Menou's Guiding Force manipulation sent them twining around a red flag planted nearby, which supported her weight right as gravity reasserted itself upon her.

Menou swung up after dangling from the flagpole. Sahara and Maya held fast to the Guiding Thread from the dagger to avoid falling.

"I should've just summoned a flying monster to make sure this never happened," Maya grumbled.

"Agreed." Menou couldn't argue with that. Her shoulders drooped from strain and relief as she pulled Sahara and Maya up to join her.

"Almost...there... Ah."

Menou had nearly forgotten the fourth member of her party in the brief crisis.

"Don't worry, your big sis will be fine! See you at the control tower! Byeeeeeeeee!"

Abbie tumbled toward the ground in a spectacular fashion.

In no time at all, she was only a speck in Menou's vision; then she vanished entirely. After Menou worked to pull up Maya, the little girl tugged on her sleeve.

"Hey, why didn't you save Abbie? Do you actually hate her just as much as I do?"

"No... I just assumed she could take care of herself."

There was no ulterior motive. Menou hadn't sought petty retaliation for their earlier exchange. Apparently, Abbie just wasn't able to fly on her own. It didn't worry Menou too much, though.

"A fall like that shouldn't kill her...probably."

A violent crash echoed from somewhere far below.

Abbie's impact kicked up clouds of dust.

Even the sturdy structures of the City of Ruins had their limits. The impact

from Abbie's fall smashed the surface of the main road, creating a decent-sized crater.

Abbie sat herself up in the center of the impact zone.

"Nnngh... Being ignored really hurts my feelings. I guess I'm not a high priority to li'l Menou. Not at all."

She dusted herself off lightly. Even after a fall of nearly a thousand meters, there wasn't a scratch on her brown skin.

"It's been a while, Ability." Someone greeted her as they emerged from the dust. It was a pink-haired girl wearing indigo-blue priestess robes.

Abbie's eyes sparkled with excitement. She'd known Momo since before meeting Menou, Maya, and Sahara.

"Well?" said Momo. "You've come this far. What do you think?"

Abbie shook her head and regarded the other girl with evident sadness. "I would've preferred that you held us back some more."

"I don't care. You know that's not what I was asking."

Momo seized Abbie's hand and roughly pulled the girl to her feet. Abbie gave a salute of gratitude, which earned a scowl.

"I dunno. It should be fine..." Abbie narrowed her eyes in displeasure. "You're the one who brought that *thing* to the environment control tower, right? Why?"

"Me? Of course not." Momo flatly denied Abbie's intense accusation while taking a seat on her white suitcase and crossing her legs. "I don't appreciate being accused by someone who can't even carry out a plan to destroy the world. So what are you going to do? What do you think, now that you've traveled around the continent for the past six months? Did the deal we made when we met serve you well?"



"Mm... And I'm grateful for it, but..."

Abbie had struck an agreement with Momo six months ago. It had been very useful to her, and even became her guiding principle since leaving the Mechanical Society.

Momo offered a proposal upon sensing Abbie's hesitation.

"Well, if you haven't come up with an answer yet, you'll just have to stick it out. You should see something interesting soon. What do you think about working with me until then, Ability?"



The girls were walking through the sky, looking down at the city that spread out far below their feet.

Menou, Sahara, and Maya had reached the network of buildings on the ceiling of the City of Ruins.

They moved down a tube-shaped passage that connected the structures. This tunnel, like the others, was empty and completely transparent, offering a view of the city below. There were no signs of enemies lying in wait, so they didn't feel the need to stay overly cautious.

Viewing things from up here elicited a different feeling from when they'd looked up from the ground. The three felt as though they were truly walking on air. Undoubtedly, these buildings were designed to invoke that feeling, and Sahara had just one thing to say about it.

"Yeesh, this is awful. Feels like I'm gonna fall."

Menou smiled dryly at her honest comment. "It certainly is anxiety-inducing having no visible floor beneath our feet."

"Oh, come on, it's fine. I'd expect such caveman-like comments from Sahara, but not from you, Menou," Maya said.

"I suppose I can't argue with that, after all the marvels we've seen," Menou replied.

Buildings of all sizes hung from the top of the enormous cavern like stalactites. Some were sized like private dwellings, while a few enormous structures boasted a hundred floors easily.

Although the ruins had been uninhabited for a thousand years, they remained a dreamlike place that called to mind images of the distant future. How much more would the modern technology Menou knew have to develop before it achieved something like this? She couldn't begin to guess.

It hardly mattered. She wasn't here for sightseeing.

"I'm exhausted..."

How many hours had they walked since reaching the ceiling district? Naturally, Sahara was the first to start complaining. But even Menou couldn't blame her this time.

"Agreed. It's certainly a very long way." She lightly rubbed her exhausted thigh muscles as she spoke.

The City of Ruins was simply much too large. In terms of surface area, the inverted buildings covered as much space as the ones below. However, the transparent tubes linking them made the place into a three-dimensional maze. Since the upside-down city's construction made full use of its verticality, navigation was more complex than on the section on the ground. Perhaps it was convenient to the initiated, but it proved exceptionally challenging for newcomers.

This complexity was the main reason Menou, Sahara, and Maya hadn't encountered any of Genom's men since the near crash.

For all of the ground section's advancements, it still followed the same principles as any modern city. Genom's armed forces needed only to keep watch on all important routes to the environment control tower to find Menou and her allies.

However, the complex structure of the ceiling district was still unexplored territory.

Which buildings led to the tower? Genom's men had claimed this place only three months ago and still lacked a firm grasp on the ceiling district's layout.

Fortunately, Menou's team had someone familiar with the city's basic structure.

Menou glanced at the passenger on Sahara's shoulders.

"We've walked quite a while already. Do you have any idea how much longer it might be?" She was speaking, of course, to Maya.

The young girl had been alive a thousand years ago and had used this city as

one of her bases of operation back when it was thriving. She'd guided Menou and the others through a city structure that would boggle the minds of any modern humans. Presently, they were making their way across buildings to reach a so-called station building that functioned as a central connector to other structures and as a stopping point.

"Come to think of it, I have no idea," Maya confessed.

This was not a reassuring statement to hear from the guide. Menou and Sahara blinked at the girl.

"What does that mean?" Sahara asked.

"Well, when I was here, there were Guiding trains and sightseeing sky vessels and such," Maya explained.

"Trains...! Where?! I wanna reach our destination just by sitting...!"

"Calm down, Sahara," Menou said. "There's no way they'd still be running."

"Yeah. When they still worked, you could get from the entrance to anywhere else in the city within less than an hour. I've never walked for so long to get someplace here; that's why I don't know how long it'll take."

The ancient civilization was far more developed than modern society. It stood to reason a city this large had transport besides walking. Abbie had demonstrated and explained how the buildings were still maintained, but a complicated structure of Guiding vessels like a Guiding train likely didn't fall under that purview.

"In fact, we're walking on what used to be a railway track," Maya added.

"Really?" The idea that a train could have passed through this smooth, railless space was a little too strange for Menou to imagine.

They'd walked for half a day and were still only halfway there. Without Maya's guidance, it might have taken weeks just to find the correct path, possibly even longer.

Eventually, the three reached a floor near the top of a particularly large station building and decided to take a rest.

"Now that we've made it this far, tomorrow should be easier," Maya stated

confidently.

Menou perked up a bit. "Really?"

"Yup. All the main lines in the ceiling district pass through the City of Ruins station buildings."

Maya explained that the large station building they were in had a main line that ran even higher than the cavern's ceiling. Since the station buildings also served as hubs of each area, it was intentionally simple to get from one to another via a main line passage. Smaller lines branched out from those to form a complex map, leading to the basic design of the ceiling district.

"So if we just follow the train line from this station building, we should reach the environment control tower."

"Thank goodness... It would've been awful if we had to explore and map the whole place by hand." Sahara breathed a deep sigh of relief, her shoulders sagging.

That had been their only option in the underground settlement that led to the City of Ruins, and it took considerable time and effort.

Even just the cluster of buildings around the station building connected by a spiderweb of passages was big enough that it might fit an entire town inside. Searching the place top to bottom could easily take years.

"At any rate, once the lights go down at night, it'll be difficult to get around. This seems like a perfect place to stop."

Although they were underground, it was never difficult to know the time. Menou peered out a glassless window frame toward the city center. "The entrance to the Mechanical Society serves as a light source, I see."

The giant sphere of light floating between the two parts of the environment control tower had changed to the color of a setting sun. It shone bright white when the group first entered the City of Ruins, and its glow had gradually faded over time.

Maya gazed at the Guiding Light, fascinated. "I can't believe that's connected to the Mechanical Society."

"So it would seem. I imagine Abbie came out when Akari used World Suspension... You didn't notice anything strange about it when we first got here, Maya?"

"Well, there was always an artificial sun made from Guiding Force. The shape was more or less the same. Anything different I chalked up to me misremembering."

"Ah, I see..." Menou nodded. She had a feeling she knew what conjuring Maya meant.

"The Primary Color Sun is a massive Concept of Primary Colors conjuring. It's possible it was the reason this place overlapped with the Mechanical Society," Maya remarked.

"Abbie mentioned that passing through it would lead to her region," Menou said. "What sort of place do you think it is?"

"I'm not sure... I never went to Abbie's zone when I was there."

"Come to think of it, I get the impression that most zones don't really want intruders. I wonder why that is?" Menou had a decent understanding of how conjurings functioned, unlike Guiding vessels, so this topic was more fruitful than discussing the structure of the City of Ruins.

As the group prepared to rest, Maya reached into her shadow and pulled out some canned food.

Maya's shadow was connected to a subspace. More precisely, when her body was constructed by her Concept of Original Sin, the shadow became a part of her, a pocket that she manipulated at will. It could be solidified into a weapon, fixed to a surface, used to create depth, or used for storage.

At most, it could fit two Mayas. Menou had once entered the space as a means of emergency escape, and she definitely wouldn't have described it as comfortable.

Since Menou and Sahara sometimes carried Maya on their shoulders when she got tired on the journey, the two of them were even more exhausted. Sahara, in particular, since she'd carried Maya on her back for a very long time, at the girl's insistence. "Maya... Why don't you just go into Sahara's shadow while we're walking?" Menou suggested.

"No way. There's hardly any space in there because Sahara packed it full of stuff. More importantly, what are we going to do tomorrow?"

While they were getting the food ready, Maya made it very clear that she intended to continue using Sahara as her personal transport before she asked Menou about their plans.

"Tomorrow..." Menou thought about it as she used her dagger to open a can. If all went well, they'd reach the environment control tower sometime tomorrow. Presumably, that would mean a fight, too. "I suppose it depends on what the situation in the environment control tower is like. I suppose it won't be as easy as waltzing right in and finding the Astrologer."

"Yeah, I bet they've got a base in there," Sahara grumbled as she ate food from a can with her fingers.

They'd managed to avoid encountering any enemies thus far, thanks to the ceiling district's complexity, but things would be different at the environment control tower.

Genom was undoubtedly using it as a base of operations. Thus, it stood to reason he maintained firm control over the entrance to the Mechanical Society, since that was where he originally did business.

"I'm still not sure what Genom's goal is, though." Famous villain though Genom was, Menou could think of little reason why he'd concern himself with her.

If anything, the Faust was his enemy. Given Menou's current position, it seemed more likely he'd join with her against their common enemy. However, the intensity of that surprise attack suggested something more than simply retaliation against intruders.

"Maybe it's got something to do with Master?" Sahara suggested casually as she started in on her second can.

Genom Cthulha and Master Flare had been famously adversarial. Flare was an Executioner who ruined many of his deals. And Genom was one of the few

targets she'd failed to eliminate during her long career hunting more taboos than anyone ever had.

"It's well known that Genom Cthulha hated Master, and that you were her protégé. I could see him taking the opportunity to kill Flare's successor. In other words, it's your fault that Genom is our enemy now, Menou."

"I suppose I can't argue with that, but..." Sahara's explanation didn't quite satisfy Menou. She racked her mind for a better one.

If anything, the existence of a window into the Mechanical Society here in the City of Ruins stuck out most. Genom had spent a long time in the Mechanical Society. He'd stayed there for so long that some took to joking he'd been taken prisoner.

Had Genom come out through that hole, just like Abbie did?

Before Menou could work out what that meant, Sahara changed the subject.

"Hey, what are we gonna do about Abbie? She's gotta still be down below."

"Are we going to go in, just the three of us?" Maya asked. "We all know that the tower's our goal, so I'm sure we'll find her if we keep heading for it."

"Right. And if we're lucky, we might even be able to strike from above while she attacks from below."

As far as Menou could tell, the environment control tower was the only structure that physically connected the top and bottom halves of the City of Ruins. Menou, Sahara, and Maya could invade it from above while Abbie went in from below.

"I wonder if there's any way we can contact her," Menou mused.

It would've been easy if they had scriptures. A simple communication conjuring would allow them to communicate. Since that wasn't an option, perhaps Abbie could send up an insect conjured soldier...but it might be difficult for something that little to fly up more than a thousand meters.

While Menou reflected on this, Sahara whispered in her ear, "Hey, Menou. I gotta tell you something while Abbie's not here."

As Sahara went on, she seemed to make an effort to keep Maya from overhearing. "Right before we found this place, Abbie made some weird comments. Something about being glad that you were 'forced to use *Time* a lot more,' and, uh...'Soon we can destroy this whole stupid world."

"...What does that mean?"

"No idea." Sahara shrugged.

Maya looked at the two older girls suspiciously. "What are you two whispering about? I don't like it one bit."

"Just trash-talking Abbie. She kinda scares me," Sahara fibbed.

"Well, yeah. Why do you guys rely on that old piece of junk anyway?"

"We count on you, too, Maya," Menou replied. "If Pandæmonium really is in the environment control tower, we won't get anywhere without your help."

"Hmph... I didn't ask for your praise, you know."

Despite her protesting, Maya clearly still felt competitive with Abbie. A tiny smirk of satisfaction tugged up the corners of her mouth.

Sahara's eyes widened dramatically. "Wow, Menou, you've really grown up... You used to be such an emotionless kid, but now you actually know when to comfort other people."

"Don't be silly. I've always had emotions."

"Gimme a break. You definitely didn't when we were kids. You were just a machine that did whatever Master said."

Maya leaned forward. "Ooh, really?"

"Yup. As a kid, Menou always had this blank-ass look on her face. And she was always disturbingly unguarded."

Menou frowned. "What do you mean, 'blank-ass'...?"

"I kinda wish I could've seen Menou when she was younger than me."

"Well, you could always ask Menou's personal paparazzi monster to show you her... Wait. Haven't we had this conversation before?"

"Have we?" Menou furrowed her brow. Sahara's strange joke about paparazzi monsters aside, she was aware that her emotions back in her days at the monastery were few and far between. She only learned how to express feelings after Sahara left the monastery, so it was understandable that Sahara thought she'd been an emotionless child.

Pursing her lips with displeasure at the mockery nonetheless, Menou touched her black hair ribbon.

Receiving it had taught her of happiness, perhaps because she hadn't expected such a gift. Why *did* it make her so happy?

"...?"

Troublingly, she couldn't remember who gave her the ribbon. The gaps and contradictions in Menou's memory filled her mind with white noise. Frustration roiled in her chest.

She gripped her chest.

This sensation had become common since Menou realized she was losing memories. Perhaps she'd forgotten details about the ribbon after using her Pure Concept to blow Hakua away before she went underground. She could always check in her diary later. Shaking her head, Menou dismissed the distracting worries that had nothing to do with the present.

"Maya. Could you tell me more about the Astrologer, please?" she asked.

"Of course." Maya looked rather pleased to be needed. "The Astrologer is a conjured soldier that Gadou made to manage the environment control tower. She's great but has no mind of her own."

Menou's expression betrayed her surprise. "No mind of her own...? Even though she's a conjured soldier?"

"Yeah." Maya nodded, her expression conflicted. "Humanoid conjured soldiers from before Gadou became a Human Error are very different from those that came after."

Ran Gadou possessed the Pure Concept of *Vessel*. She developed many Guiding vessels, but none that could be called intelligent life-forms.

As far as Maya was concerned, the Astrologer was a machine in human form. Though it could move like a person and hold a conversation, it could only give preprogrammed responses. Its sole function was ultimately to control the Starhusk.

Once Maya explained all this, Menou understood.

"So it doesn't have a soul."

"Right, exactly."

A body, spirit, and soul were the three requirements for life, and the Astrologer was missing one of those.

That meant it was a Guiding vessel, not a living being capable of individual thought.

"So what sort of functions does the Astrologer have?" Menou questioned.

"All of them." Maya's answer was short and simple.

So simple, in fact, that Menou didn't quite grasp her meaning.

"What do you mean, 'all of them'?"

"I mean all of them. It controls all functions of the north-central region of the continent during its golden age."

For a few seconds, Menou's and Sahara's minds went blank.

They shuddered when they began to understand the extent of that scope.

"The underground city, the one that was on the surface, and the Starhusk in the sky. The Astrologer managed all the important functions."

Menou swallowed nervously. "That's...a lot..."

Even though she hadn't experienced the ancient civilization for herself, she could still imagine how extraordinary that was. Or at the very least, she understood that it was beyond conception.

And the Pure Concept of *Vessel* had created that entirely by herself. The achievement went beyond power. In a way, it was more incredible than a Human Error's strength wiping out a city.

"And all that fits in one humanoid form?" Menou asked.

"Of course not!" Maya shot back.

Guiding vessels had a high output. The more functions, the larger the scale.

So of course, it was impossible to cram all the abilities Maya described into a human-sized body. Maya pointed at the environment control tower as she spoke. "That's why the Astrologer is connected to the environment control tower. Really, the tower itself is the Astrologer, and the human part is... I don't know. Gadou's hobby, I guess?"

"Hobby...?"

"Yeah, so what?" Maya puffed up her cheeks at Menou's doubtful reaction. "The conjured soldiers Gadou made after becoming a Human Error... Well, you know from dealing with *her* that they're definitely living things." She looked reluctant to admit it.

For better or worse, Abbie definitely made her own decisions and acted accordingly. She had independent thought and a will of her own.

"Anyway, what should we do now?" Maya asked. "I've been to this station building many times before, so I can show you around. There were plenty of fun places to play! Although they're all abandoned now." Maya was probably just joking. However, it didn't seem to land with her audience.

"Fun...?"

The two older girls shared a look.

Menou spoke hesitantly. "What's fun about playing, exactly?"

"Sorry...I don't think I get it, either," Sahara replied.

"Oh, wow..." Maya gazed pityingly at the pair from a generation with no concept of entertainment culture.

"You poor things... You really don't even know what it means to play, do you? What do you do for fun in life, then? People can't live on bread alone. Do you guys really believe that carrying out your duties is the whole point of existing?"

Now a ten-year-old girl was lecturing them about life. Maya's impressive

eloquence aside, Menou and Sahara couldn't just take this lying down. They eyed each other seriously.

"What is playing, even, when you really think about it? I don't know if I've ever done something just so I could enjoy it to the fullest." Sahara's admission only made Maya regard her with more disappointment.

Menou had been trained rigorously from a young age to fight as an Executioner. Even Sahara, who often slacked off once she became a nun, didn't have any memories of playing.

"You could call that a form of playing, I think. Like bathing in the Balar Desert and stuff; maybe that was playing, too!"

"I certainly didn't consider it playing at the time. I had fun just talking with her. Come to think of it, I don't think I've ever properly played with toys or equipment or anything like that."

"Yikes, breaking out the 'I have friends' card?" Sahara shook her head. "That's dirty, Menou. You don't fight fair. Are you mocking me because I have no friends?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Akari is my precious friend. That's all."

"Oh, right. I nearly forgot that you're an expert at toying with women's hearts, Menou!"

"Don't go dragging my name through the mud!"

While Menou and Sahara's whispered conference escalated into an argument, Maya pushed her way between them.

"This is *not* good," she announced gravely. "No, this won't do at all. Anyone who doesn't know the meaning of entertainment is wasting their life!"

Sahara boggled at the younger girl for a moment. "That's what you're upset about?"

Maya had completely lost sight of her goal at this point. Suddenly, she looked up and gasped, like she'd realized something vital.

"Oh, of course! Sahara, Menou! Movies! I think there's a movie theater

around here! Let's go!"

"Huh? It's after dark," Menou protested.

"We're going! No matter what! Even if it kills us, even if the world ends! Movies are forever!"

"Um... Whaaat...?" Sahara groaned

The City of Ruins was a thousand years old. Anything not maintained by the micromachines had crumbled away. Even if the exterior of this "movie theater" place had survived, the interior would surely be a wreck.

"These 'movies' are moving images projected by Guiding vessels, correct? I don't see how they could possibly still work...," Menou said.

"There might be a chance! This is for the sake of improving a culture full of people like you who don't appreciate the value of entertainment! It's your sacred duty to do as I say!" While her tone was lofty as a princess's, Maya had a point. There was hardly any recreation in this world. Girls who joined the Faust grew accustomed to such rigid training that the very idea of playing would never occur to them. "Now, come on! This way!"

Maya's enthusiasm betrayed no signs of slowing down. She picked one of the many sky hallways branching from the station building and charged straight ahead.

Menou thought to grab her by the collar and stop her forcibly, but if she did, it would mean dealing with Maya's sulking.

Which was the greater annoyance? Menou looked to Sahara to confirm what consequences she was willing to suffer. The silver-haired nun shook her head, indicating that the situation was hopeless.

"Movies, is it...?"

Menou reluctantly trudged after Maya, still unsure of what she was so enthused about showing them.

Menou and Sahara understood movies in theory. Essentially, they were conjurings that produced sound and moving images as a form of entertainment. Menou imagined they were like stage plays shown in moving pictures.

Where was the enjoyment in that? It remained a mystery to Menou.

To a member of the Faust, it seemed no different from using the image recording conjuring in a scripture as a means of amusement. A part of Menou felt that such technology should only be used to capture critical proof during an infiltration mission.

Are movies...interesting?" Menou inquired.

"That you even have to ask is like saying, 'Hello, I'm a foolish human who doesn't understand fun!'" Maya, who was technically a part of Pandæmonium, declared. "You ought to be grateful! Out of the goodness of my heart and my obligations as an entertainment evangelist from Japan, I will teach you poor ignorant masses about the true value of the spiritual world of the silver screen!"

Frowning a bit, Menou replied, "It's really that big of a deal?"

Maya's words seemed harsh for a world guilty of nothing other than having a slightly different culture.

At this point, Menou was growing defiant over whether these so-called movies were as impressive as Maya claimed.

Ultimately relinquishing themselves to Maya's leadership, Menou and Sahara followed the girl down a passage from the station toward a building that held this alleged movie theater.

Maya led Menou and Sahara to a building about three stories high.

It was roughly a ten minute walk down the passage connected to the station. Unsurprisingly, nothing remained in the movie theater.

Just as Abbie had posited before she fell and was left behind, the micromachine colonies had been automatically cleaning and repairing structural degradation throughout the entire city. Anything within the buildings had crumbled and been cleared away long ago. Although the place was barren and devoid of design, the basic framework still remained.

Maya breathed in deeply as tears gathered in her eyes.

"It's been a thousand years since I breathed the air of a movie theater...!"

As she watched sweet little Maya tremble with nostalgia and emotion, Sahara

had only one quiet comment. "...You're creeping me out."

"What did you just say?" Even in her reverie, the sharp-eared Maya still shot Sahara an angry look, prompting the girl to avert her eyes. Meanwhile, Menou scanned the room slowly.

"Movie theater or not, there's not much of anything in here, is there?"

"Well, sure, this is just the lobby. Here, this way."

Maya marched onward, bidding Menou and Sahara to follow. Evidently, there was more ahead.

Thanks to the micromachines, the building wasn't at risk of falling apart, but all decor was gone. Sadness flickered across Maya's face at the state of the stairs and hallways.

"The elevators and escalators aren't working... I guess that makes sense. The posters and pamphlets are gone, too... Nothing's left at all. That's a bit of a shame."

"Well, it has been a thousand years," Menou replied.

That the building still stood was the strange part. Without the maintenance system, all of the structures in the ceiling district would have fallen and collapsed into rubble along with the other half of the city below.

"You're right... Yeah. It's fine!" Maya rallied, insisting that they could at least enjoy the atmosphere. "Here it is, the moment you've all been waiting for! Beyond this door is the theater...room..."

Maya's cheerful announcement trailed off partway through.

The door in front of them was very bulky, seemingly for soundproofing. Yet noise leaked from the chamber past it.

The sounds of multiple voices mixed with music and audio effects streamed from the gaps in the door. Maya wore a confused look as she whispered, "It looks like...a movie's playing inside..."

Clearly, even she hadn't expected the machinery to still be in operation. She stood rooted to the spot, perplexed.

There was only one explanation why a movie, a long-lost piece of culture, could be playing.

Someone had to be inside.

Tension ran through the group.

Pandæmonium seemed the likely culprit. She was a Human Error of *Evil* born of Maya's personality, and had thus carried some attachment to the concept of movies. It would be perfectly in character for her to have recreated one in the theater somehow.

In which case, whatever show waited beyond the door wouldn't be a film for mass amusement but something more befitting *Evil* itself.

""

Menou and Sahara shared a glance. Menou stepped in front while Sahara took the rear, putting Maya between them. They were on the highest alert possible. Menou carefully cracked the door open, drew her dagger, and used its metal blade as a mirror to spy inside the room.

The image reflected on the weapon's surface only served to confuse her, however.

Rows of chairs were neatly arranged inside, each fixed to the floor. Images were being projected onto a screen that took up the entire front wall.

Maya leaned forward to peek at the image on Menou's dagger and nodded to herself.

"That's a movie, all right. It's too small to see exactly what's going on, but...it's not Pandæmonium. It's really just a normal movie."

"Oh-ho..."

Once she learned that the movie itself wasn't anything dangerous, Sahara dared to look directly inside through the cracked-open door. Curiosity about the nature of these films Maya had talked up so much was written all over her face.

Pictures danced across the giant screen.

Menou and Sahara had never seen an image moving on a screen more than

twenty meters across. The footage was of a shark launching out of the ocean, flying through the air, and speeding into the atmosphere at escape velocity.

Such an oddity was surely because this movie was a thousand years old. Or perhaps it was because of a cultural difference or a generational gap. Attack satellites fired lasers at the shark as it broke through the stratosphere. The creature dodged the beams and chomped through the satellites in geostationary orbit one by one. The nonsensical scene of a shark swimming in the zero-gravity ocean of space made no sense to Menou and Sahara whatsoever. Yet the impact of seeing it on the screen alone was still more than enough to leave them slack-jawed.

"So this is a movie...?"

"Huh? Wait..."

The awe-inspiringly huge screen. The sound loud enough to vibrate through their skin. The story's utter disregard for human knowledge and common sense, and the strange, indescribable something that was gained for that sacrifice. All this and more kept Menou's and Sahara's eyes glued to the screen.

Maya wanted to protest, Movies are a composite art that combines the story, imagery, music, and most of all the performances of the actors, among many other elements, to elevate them into something complex and beautiful. This isn't quite the same thing... Yet someone stood from a seat in the middle of the theater before she had the chance.

"I've been waiting for you" came the confident voice of a girl, her words nearly lost beneath the sounds of the movie.

On the screen behind the girl who had the theater all to herself, the shark finally swam all the way to the moon and crashed into its surface, drilling a giant crater into it.

"In fact, I had so much time that I was even able to use the micromachines to reconstruct this theater room. Projecting images from memory isn't so hard when you're a genius like me. Heh-heh. I could just picture the delight on Maya's face."

She looked petite, illuminated by the light of the projection. With her

shoulder-length black hair and the light blue sailor uniform she wore beneath her white lab coat, she reminded Menou of a lost one.

This wasn't Pandæmonium.

She knew Maya's name. And since she was in the City of Ruins and was someone Menou had never encountered, that left little doubt as to her identity.

"Are you...the Astrologer?"

"Excellent deduction, Menou." The girl nodded, confirming the guess. "But it's not quite so simple. You could say that I am the Astrologer, and you could say that I am someone else entirely. After all, the Astrologer who manages the Starhusk in the sealed City of Ruins is but a temporary disguise that hides itself and plays at being Hakua. When I'm activated to invite a chosen one inside, the Astrologer automatically takes my form instead."

The girl who knew Menou's name despite meeting her for the first time did not have tan skin or black sclera. She clearly wasn't a conjured soldier like Abbie. There was nothing about her appearance to indicate that she was anything but human.

"I am prophet and savior in one. I am holder of the Pure Concept desired most in this world, yet undoubtedly known as an Otherworlder."

The girl's introduction contained more self-awarded titles than a middle schooler in the throes of edgy adolescent delusions. She even struck a dramatic pose and flashed a peace sign next to her right eye in a way that suggested a great deal of practice.

In the dim light of the theater room, the girl's signature trait glittered brightly
—a shining star-shaped Guiding Light in her pupils.

"For I am the one and only holder of the Pure Concept of *Star*! The eradefying magical girl genius, Nono! ☆"

The room went still.

While all four people kept silent, the giant shark on the screen ate through the surface of the moon and devoured its core, glowing brightly as it fused with the moon itself and became a heavenly body—sized gigantic shark. The only noises in the room were the accompanying explosion sound effects and the background music.

"I... You... How...?"

Maya trembled at her old friend's ridiculous behavior. The girl who called herself Nono seemed to interpret the reaction as joy, and she spread her arms in a welcoming posture.

"Heh! You're so moved, you can't even speak, eh, Maya? You always did hate to be left alone! C'mere, you adorable little so-and-so!"

On the screen, the shark that had fused with the moon now set its sights on the Earth. It thrashed its fins and swam through space, intent on biting into the blue planet and taking its revenge on humanity for driving it away.



"C'mon, don't be shy. Show me how much you've missed me after a thousand years by jumping into my arms and—"

"Why would you show this awful movie, of all things, you idiot?!"

"That's all you have to saAAAARGH?!"

As the moon-shark crashed into the Earth and destroyed humanity, Maya's furious dropkick struck Nono Hoshizaki square in the abdomen.

The girl called Nono Hoshizaki crouched on the floor, clutching her stomach in pain from Maya's flawlessly executed attack. Even a kick from a powerless child was bound to hurt if it caught someone in the stomach while their guard was down.

"Wh-why would you do that in the middle of our emotional reunion?!"

After recovering, the girl stared indignantly at Maya, her star-pupiled eyes filled with tears.

"I don't remember you being such a violent girl, Maya! What about a hug for your old friend, huh? I was the motherly figure, you know! Household violence is a crime!"

"Could you not just say whatever pops into your head, please?! I have a mother, thank you very much!" Maya roared like a tiny monster at the baseless declaration. "My only family was my wonderful mother and my slightly weird little sister!! There were no freaks like you, Nono!"

"Huh? You were raised by a single mother?"

"What about it?! Besides, I told you not to say stuff without thinking! Don't you remember?!"

"W-well, you told me that a lot, so of course I remember..."

Nono shifted her gaze awkwardly. Evidently, she was aware of her habit of getting carried away when she spoke.

"A-anyway, what's wrong with a shark movie, Maya?! This is one of the highest-budget shark flicks in history, you know?! I thought you loved masterpieces like this!"

"Everything's wrong with it! A bad movie is bad, no matter how high the budget! Change it to some big blockbuster for these movie beginners. Right now!"

"Not a chance! I love shark movies! The creators were human, yet there's virtually no human characteristics to be found throughout the entire franchise! That sacrilegious contradiction is what makes it fantastic! The script that completely looks down on the audience, the way you can sometimes see the actors wondering what the hell they're doing! When the production costs are high, you can tell they were just throwing money away for fun, and when they're low, you can see where the filmmakers got creative and where they hit their limits! You catch glimpses of the behind-the-scenes circumstances through the cracks, so it's like you're getting two stories for the price of one. That's what makes shark films so fun!"

"Just shut up and enjoy movies normally!"

Maya, who'd dabbled in show business as a child actor, firmly entrenched herself in the reasonable camp.

To Maya, movies were entertainment and an art form. Her devotion to the medium turned into rage when people found strange, ironic ways to enjoy movies. Meanwhile, Menou and Sahara were left in utter confusion as the pair ranted at each other.

"And by the way, we could've avoided what happened a thousand years ago if you had your act together, Nono! And now it turns out you were alive this whole time?! I'm actually more disappointed than anything! How are you going to make this right?!"

"Whoa, whoa. Calm down, Maya," Sahara said.

"Agreed," Menou added. "We haven't the slightest idea what's going on here."

Before the little girl could follow up her kick with a flurry of punches, Sahara pinned her in a nelson hold, hoping to get her to calm down.

As far as Menou and Sahara were concerned, Nono was a total stranger. They'd gathered from the conversation that Maya knew her from a thousand

years ago, like Hakua and Michele, but the reason for Maya's indignation remained a mystery.

"That's her! She's the Pure Concept of Star! Nono Hoshizaki!"

"Oh yeah?" Sahara cocked her head while Maya pointed furiously at Nono. The information didn't seem to mean much to her.

Menou, who knew the backgrounds of the Four Major Human Errors from Maya's previous explanations, held back her surprise as she tried to reason with Maya. "We still don't know if it's really her. It could be an imposter acting as your old friend, right?"

"Oh... Yeah, you're right." Maya took a deep breath, then glared at the self-proclaimed Nono. "Can you prove that you're the real Nono? I thought she died, and in a pretty emotional way, after Hakua betrayed us. How do I know you're not just a conjured soldier pretending to be Nono? If that's true, then there's still hope that the Nono I knew wasn't a ridiculous weirdo. I'd actually prefer it if you were an imposter..."

"O, mistrustful Maya. These eyes are the proof, are they not?! But I suppose your point is fair. I'll tell you something only you and I would know."

The girl in the lab coat staggered to her feet, apparently still injured by the dropkick. She put a hand over her heart as she began describing her memories.

"I do believe it was the very night that Hakua rescued you and introduced you to us. You were an adorable little cherub, still terrified of this world. Now, even though you were given your own room, you started crying that you were too scared to sleep alone and clung to Hakua until she let you sleep in her—"

"How do you even know about that?!"

"Sahara, can you hold Maya down, please?"

"Yeah, sure."

As Nono described a story that didn't even include her presence as proof, Maya started thrashing around again in Sahara's arms. Menou had Sahara keep her restrained, since they wouldn't get anywhere if she kept interrupting.

"Heh-heh-heh. Do you truly think you can hide anything from the magical girl

genius Nono? I know *lots* of other stories, too. You see, Maya...it just so happens that I enjoy knowing other people's embarrassing secrets so I can bask in a sense of superiority!"

"Let me go, Saharaaa! I'm going to use an Original Sin conjuring to turn her into a blob of flesh who can't say another word!"

"Calm down. It's not that embarrassing. I'll let you sleep with me sometime, okay?"

Sahara attempted to pacify Maya, who looked so violently furious that she threatened to use her Pure Concept of *Evil*. Given the level of Maya's rage, it was likely that the story Nono told was true.

Meanwhile, Menou's mind raced at top speed.

Nono Hoshizaki. The Pure Concept of *Star*. One of the Four Major Human Errors, the Starhusk. The Elder Astrologer, who was supposed to serve Hakua. How were they all connected? Before Menou could piece it together, Nono shook her head wanly.

"Please, don't even joke about using Concepts of Original Sin. Wouldn't you agree, Menou?"

"...So you really are her."

Menou gazed sharply at this newly discovered surviving witness from a thousand years ago.

Sahara regarded Nono like she was an unusual animal. Perhaps seeing Maya's dropkick had deflated some of the surprise for her. Menou, however, was more mistrustful of Nono than she had been before.

She still lacked key pieces to this puzzle.

Why had Nono waited for them in this theater?

"Does that mean you know about our current situation as well, Miss Pure Concept of *Star*?"

"But of course. I, the magical girl genius Nono, can foresee any situation."

Nono grinned broadly in the face of the pointed question.

What was she saying? Menou tried to order the confused feelings in her head.

Despite Nono's jocular attitude, she held the Pure Concept of *Star*. This was the Pure Concept connected to the Star Memory, the heart of the holy land that Hakua used as her base, and was linked to the Major Human Error the Starhusk as well. On top of that, she'd also acknowledged that she was the Astrologer. That meant that she'd somehow survived for a thousand years, putting her in the same category as Hakua.

Whether she recognized Menou's tension or not, Nono pointed at the ceiling with a satisfied smirk.

"You must be exhausted from walking all this way, no? As it happens, I've prepared a soft, fluffy bed and a working shower upstairs, just for you all, so get some rest and relaxation, thanks to yours truly! It'd be best to prepare yourselves for tomorrow."

"R-right..."

Nono's response was unexpected, but certainly welcome. Menou, Sahara, and Maya had planned to curl up in their cloaks and sleep on the floor somewhere. Resting on the floor offered a very different quality of rest than did resting in a soft bed. The magnanimous Nono led the way out of the theater room, and the others followed her to the floor above.

As they climbed the stairs, Nono cast occasional glances at Menou's face.

"You really do look exactly like Hakua."

"That doesn't make me happy in the least. Besides, I'm essentially a clone of hers, so it's only natural that there would be a resemblance."

"Is that right?"

For some reason, Menou's grimace only made Nono smile more broadly as she leaned her face closer. Between this and her earlier exchange with Maya, her personality obviously had some unpleasant inclinations.

"More importantly, why were you waiting for us in there?" Menou questioned at last.

"Why?" Nono repeated. "Surely you know about my future sight?"

Before too long, they arrived at the room Nono had prepared. There really was a king-size bed waiting for them, one large enough for all of them to sleep in with room to spare.

Nono sat on the mattress and crossed her legs.

"I've been waiting to lend you my aid, of course. With my knowledge of the future on your side, your victory is all but guaranteed! A bright future is waiting for you all!"

"Just so you know, Nono lies as easily as she breathes, so take everything she says with a grain of salt," Maya cut in.

Menou nodded, tapping her chin. Taking Maya's warning into account, she began to formulate a hypothesis that was rather different from Nono's claims. "You...predicted that Genom would take over the environment control tower, but you weren't strong enough to fight him off alone, so you evacuated in advance. And since you knew we were coming, you decided to wait here and try to get us to help you take back the tower, which is your home. Am I right?"

"Ah-ha-ha!" Nono laughed at Menou's guess, then quickly averted her eyes. "Whatever do you mean? State the basis for your theory, Menou! Formulating a conclusion without evidence is a recipe for disaster, you know!"

"See what I mean?" Maya said. "And her future sight has a narrow range, so don't take that too seriously, either. She always overlooks really important stuff."

"Nwha! How could you say such a thing?!" Nono's eyebrows shot up, and her voice quaked indignantly. "How dare you doubt me, the magical girl genius Nono? You're threatening my very identity! Allow me to prove my intellect by deducing your current predicament, then! Firstly, there's the Primary Triad conjured soldier who could very well be described as the child of Kaa and me, dear little Abbie... Hmm? Wait, where is she? I thought she was with you?"

"Trust me, you're better off this way." Maya rolled her eyes. "She hates anyone older than her. If she were here, you'd be dead by now, Nono... I never thought I'd regret her not being around."

"Huh? How do you figure? Did I do something wrong?"

For a supposed genius who knew the future, Nono sounded pathetically bewildered. Noticing that Menou and Sahara were eyeing her with suspicion equal to Maya's, she rallied quickly, puffing out her chest.

"W-well, no matter. I'm only here to prevent the worst possible outcomes, so you must forgive me if I happen to miss a few minor details. Now, get a good night's rest to restore your strength. I'll need you to work so hard tomorrow that you'll put packhorses to shame."

That sounded ominous. Nono went on before Menou and the others could interject.

"Besides, it seems like you've misunderstood the Starhusk to be some weapon of mass destruction, though I suppose I can't blame you if Maya told you what she saw when it activated before."

"Misunderstood...?" Menou had assumed that the Starhusk was a powerful weapon, based on its history of carving a huge hole in the northern continent. She believed it to be a weapon from the ancient civilization, one more powerful than the satellite cannon Master Flare used in the land of salt.

"What is the Starhusk doing up there, then?" she asked.

"It's an otherworld repatriation circle." The answer was unbelievably direct. Nono stated it so casually that the gravity of it didn't sink in immediately.

Menou slowly tilted her head. "Come again?"

"I said, it's a repatriation circle. A massive conjuring circle to send Japanese people who've come to this world back to Earth. Since it's connected to the heavenly vein, a channel of enormous power that runs through the sky, it's able to float in the air with its seven transit points orbiting in circles. See, it's called the Starhusk because it was built on recollections of a planet that doesn't exist in this world—the husk of a heavenly body. What do you think? Cool, righ—bwuh?!"

Menou grabbed the Otherworlder by the collar midsentence. She stared into her eyes evenly, too intense to mask her expression. "You're not lying, are you?"

"Whoa. A super close-up with a mega hottie..."

"Answer the question." Menou had no time to be distracted by Nono's joking around.

The otherworld repatriation circle.

Menou had heard of it before. Pandæmonium and Master Flare had hinted at it in the past. While she'd heard it was somewhere in the north, Menou had never learned more and pessimistically assumed it was long lost. This sudden revelation was of immense importance to her.

"Is it true that the Starhusk is the otherworld repatriation circle?" she pressed.

"Why would I lie? We ran all over this world trying to get back to our own, remember? It'd be silly if it didn't exist."

The Four Major Human Errors.

Although known as terrible disasters today, they were originally just Otherworlders who wanted to go home.

It had never occurred to Menou that one of them, the Starhusk, might be the otherworld repatriation circle. Since they were known as Human Errors, she assumed they were each the result of a Pure Concept going out of control.

However, the Sword of Salt in the west hadn't formed from a raging Pure Concept, either. It was one of Hakua's abilities. This unexpected new information lifted Menou's hopes. She pressed her face closer to Nono's.

"How do we activate the Starhusk? There's got to be a condition, right?"

"No. It's already been activated."

Another unbelievable bit of information fell from Nono's lips.

"It's...activated? The otherworld repatriation circle is...active?"

"Why do you think it made a huge hole in ground? It carved out and consumed the materials needed to function."

After a moment of shock, Menou returned to her senses.

"Wait... I can't imagine that was enough to trigger it. The otherworld repatriation circle is supposed to require massive sacrifices."

Guiding Force, materials, and sacrifices. Master Flare had stated that the cost of sending someone back to Japan was so high that to fulfill it would mean wiping out this world's population. A piece of the continent couldn't have been enough.

"The current population is roughly equivalent to that of the north during the time of the ancient civilization. Back then, this was the site of the greatest metropolis ever seen. You can't compare that to a culture that's barely on par with the early modern civilization of Earth. Besides, in your current era, aren't the southern islands and the western continent completely gone? You have to realize that the current aggregate amounts can't even compare to a thousand years ago."

"I...see..."

Menou released her hold on Nono's lab coat. The girl brushed out the creases.

"Our intention was to send the Starhusk over to the Alliance of Southern Islands and consume all the assets those bastards were hoarding there. Alas, we weren't able to do that. One of my many strengths is that I don't dwell on my failures."

As Nono ranted spiritedly, Maya stared at her, eyes half-lidded with distrust. "Nono. I didn't know any of that."

"Well, you're just a kid, Maya. I planned to tell you after it succeeded so I wouldn't get your hopes up beforehand."

Maya only narrowed her eyes further in response to being treated like a child. Her expression conveyed deep dissatisfaction.

"...Then why did you activate the Starhusk here, of all places?"

"I figured I'd at least use my death to knock Hakua back into our old world. It seemed too dangerous to leave her alive in this one."

Instead of defeating Hakua, Nono had tried to send her back to her original world. Given Hakua's immense strength, it was one of very few valid tactics.

Maya shook her head slowly. "So you mean Hakua could've gone back if she

wanted to?"

She could've returned to her world. All those dragged to this land without any warning wished to go home, and Hakua had been given the opportunity.

"But she didn't," Nono responded.

Because of Akari Tokitou. Hakua had been warned that even if she returned to Japan, her best friend would be spirited away here without any way to prevent it.

"That was the most unnecessary prediction I've ever made."

So Hakua waited for a thousand years. She survived, and went on waiting.

"...Is that really the only reason Hakua betrayed us?" Maya asked weakly.

"I'm not sure. I'm not Hakua, so all I know is what happened, not why." Nono smiled dimly. It was a very different expression from the excited grin she'd worn for most of their discussion.

"At any rate, Hakua still can't risk getting near the Starhusk, as far as I know. She's still its target. She's sealed the thing, but if she gets close enough, it'll activate."

"I see...," Menou replied.

That was surely one reason why Hakua remained in the holy land. While she based herself there for the Star Memory, she also needed to keep out of the north to prevent herself from being forcibly sent back to Japan.

Hitting upon an idea, Menou asked, "Can't you move the Starhusk somehow? You said you intended to send it to the south before, didn't you?"

"I'm afraid not. When Hakua locked it with her power, it lost several of its functions. I've already investigated and considered all the easiest options, so don't bother. As soon as this city was made, I devised a plan to prevent Otherworlder summonings. It's the entire reason I first made the Starhusk."

Something clicked in Menou's mind. There was no getting around it. They absolutely couldn't afford to lose Nono.

"Sahara. Maya. We're going to do whatever it takes to help this girl.

Understand?"

The two nodded in answer.

If nothing else, it was worth leaving Grisarika and coming here just to learn the truth about the Starhusk. This meeting was almost too convenient.

"I'm glad to hear you'll help me. Now we've got all the pieces to avert the worst possible future. You see, we're currently headed toward an outcome so bad that even Hakua doesn't want it." Nono's voice turned grave. "We stand on the precipice of seeing two Major Human Errors combine... The Starhusk and Pandæmonium." Stars glittered in her eyes, but she was unquestionably serious. "I need all of your help to prevent that from happening. I hope you'll cooperate."

The self-proclaimed genius's proclamation meant that Menou, Sahara, and Maya would be unable to sleep despite the comfortable bed prepared for them.



The most prosperous city in the world, located in the heart of the north, was a stronghold to Hakua and company as they traveled across the continents.

At its height, much of the population was concentrated in that metropolis. It was so overcrowded on the surface that there was no room for new structures, and yet the population continued to grow, leading to an interest in underground development. The success of this experimental subterranean expansion of the most developed city in the world was a great boon as the total populace continued to climb.

The construction was completed in the alarmingly short time of one year, thanks to heavy use of Pure Concepts. This led to the technological prowess of Hakua and her friends being known the world over.

This city, erected with cutting-edge advancements beyond what Maya had known in Japan, looked like something out of a sci-fi movie.

The most important structure in the crowded underground chamber was the environment control tower. The space had to be airtight to increase the density of the Concepts of Primary Colors, but humans couldn't live for long in a sealed place. Managing the countless elements needed to maintain a livable space underground was impossible for humans. So Gadou, the holder of the Pure Concept of *Vessel*, created a conjured soldier for the task.

The result was the humanoid conjured soldier dubbed "the Astrologer."

There was no real need for it to be a humanoid. The Astrologer was equipped with artificial intelligence made using Guiding Force circuits. However, Guiding Force AI technology was still in the early stages of development. It couldn't respond to anything outside the realm of its programmed expectations.

"She's a good girl. She's just shy, that's all."

Nono's oft-repeated line was more appropriate for a favorite doll, or perhaps

for a frequently used tool, than for a real person.

Still, Maya liked the Astrologer, partly because she enjoyed its ability to hold simple conversations. Since she still had a tendency to freeze up when confronted by anyone larger than herself, Maya needed someone she wasn't afraid of.

There were times when Nono would hole up alone with the conjured soldier.

That was always strange.

It was very different from when she linked with the Astrologer for a prediction. She would maintain a Guiding Force connection with it for hours, even days.

When Maya asked her why, Nono only winked with one of her starry eyes.

"For the sake of the future."

Maya still remembered how much that smug declaration annoyed her.

At dawn, the City of Ruins began to take on color.

Menou watched the underground sunrise through an empty window frame in the movie theater lobby.

The light source at the heart of the environment control tower shed gradually intensifying light on the city above and below.

"…"

After gazing at the city for a while, Menou flipped through the pages of her diary.

Each line was a record of her memories, which were fading with each day. The Pure Concept of *Time* ate away at her spirit even if she didn't use any conjurings, and when she did, she lost her recollections even faster.

How much did it affect her personality?

She put a check mark next to each passage that described things she no longer remembered.

By doing so, Menou itemized which memories she'd lost. This helped her gain an objective idea of how much she'd forgotten.

Each day, the tally increased. Presently, they covered a third of the diary.

"... Using a Pure Concept certainly makes them decrease faster."

Menou had employed Decay Acceleration since arriving in the City of Ruins, a conjuring that consumed more of the spirit based on the target's volume. It's why Menou used the Acceleration conjuring on a small Guiding bullet instead of on herself.

Yet although this strategy minimized the loss, she kept forgetting things.

It wasn't in chronological order, either. Sometimes it was from her youth in the monastery, other times from the last six months. And it didn't seem to be based on which memories were most critical to her personality. Her exchanges with Akari and Master Flare hadn't faded much at all.

Only one person seemed to be disappearing from her memory very rapidly.

Namely, the girl in white who used to be her assistant.

Try as she might, Menou couldn't recall her feelings for that girl. Reading the diary entries about her was like learning of a total stranger. How should she act upon meeting that girl again?

"I'm still fine for now...I think..."

Time was running out. Losing more than half of her memories was bound to affect her personality. Perhaps she'd already changed in undetectable ways.

What would happen if her history kept disappearing? Menou closed the diary, her thoughts churning.

By all rights, she would become a Human Error. That was the inevitable outcome of using a Pure Concept. And the Star Memory, the storehouse of people's memories, was Hakua's domain. Menou doubted that her nemesis was kind enough to preserve her memories there in case she needed to restore them.

Surely it was one reason why Hakua didn't bother pursuing Menou personally.

She knew that Menou would self-destruct if left to her own devices. Sending Michele hastened that process.

However, Menou wasn't without hope, if only a faint one.

She wasn't an Otherworlder. Looking at the diary and objectively assessing what she'd lost made something clear.

Menou had other memories besides her own—Akari's. They shared their lives through a mutual Guiding Force connection. Menou had recorded all of Akari's memories in the diary as well, but not one of those pages had a single check mark.

Only those recollections that originally belonged to Menou were consumed.

It was safe to assume that it was because those were directly linked to Menou's soul.

Should her past continue to erode until all that remained within Menou were memories from Akari's point of view...

"Good morning."

Sensing someone behind her, Menou cut her thoughts short and gave a greeting.

"Hey. You wake up early, eh?" It was Nono. She walked over to stand by Menou's side with unhurried footsteps. "Maya and Madam Sahara are still off in dreamland."

"I'll scold Sahara for being so careless later."

"No, you should let her sleep. Rest is very important, you know. Even I don't like staying up constantly."

"Oh?" Menou narrowed her eyes.

She was under the impression that Nono had survived these past thousand years by infusing her soul and spirit into the conjured soldier called the Astrologer. She'd escaped Hakua's notice by becoming a being that already existed to manage the environment control tower.

Since she controlled the Starhusk, an otherworld repatriation circle, and sealed away the City of Ruins, the Astrologer had to be more important to Hakua than Menou realized. And yet Hakua couldn't come near her, due to the influence of the Starhusk.

Menou reexamined Nono seriously.

Pale skin. Dark eyes. Even her conjuring qualities were those of an ordinary human.

"You're quite strange, you know that? You don't have any of the characteristics of a conjured soldier, even though you are one."

"Well, yeah. I don't find any pride or embarrassment in being one. Unlike the kids these days, I have no need to show off those characteristics that separate me from humans. Nor do I have any special idiosyncrasies like Kaa, so I simply mimicked my beautiful, pale-skinned self when I activated. That's all there is to it."

"And who is 'Kaa'?"

"The person who held the Pure Concept of Vessel."

"Ah." Menou nodded. By "the kids these days," Nono probably meant the Primary Triad conjured soldiers with natural intelligence that were born of the Mechanical Society.

"So your mind is reawakened on a conditional activation."

"Not exactly, but there's no harm in you thinking of it that way, so I'll let you carry on with that level of comprehension."

"How generous. On that note, what are the conditions that trigger your awakening?"

"I come out whenever the world is in serious danger."

Could Menou really trust her on that? Nono wasn't there when Akari became a Human Error.

"You know, I'd prefer small talk with you over something serious," Nono said.

"Should we chat about the weather?"

"Heh-heh. That is a fascinating topic, but no, not this time."

The weather never changed underground, of course. Nono grinned at Menou's sarcastic remark. Then she abruptly removed her glasses and put them on Menou's face.

"...What are you doing?"

"Oh, I just thought they'd look good on you. I always wanted to make Hakua a member of the glasses gang."

"What 'glasses gang'? And are these fake?"

There was no prescription, nor was there any kind of conjuring effect on them. Apparently, Nono's glasses really were purely a fashion accessory.

"The fact that I wear glasses even though my eyes work fine is further proof of how much I love their design!" Nono proclaimed cheerfully. She peered at Menou casually. "When I mentioned yesterday that the Starhusk is an otherworld repatriation circle, your eyes really lit up."

"…"

Menou didn't trust her ability to conceal her reactions at such close proximity. She silently removed the glasses and handed them back to Nono. The girl must have jokingly put them on Menou's face as an excuse to get close enough to gauge her responses.

Nono's smile dimmed a bit. She'd shown a similar expression yesterday. This was different from mild enjoyment of a conversation. Her smile was fixed, like on a poker face.

"Were you disappointed? The Starhusk is a masterpiece that Kaa and I made, not unlike this underground city. But you came here hoping it was a weapon that could defeat Hakua, didn't you? She certainly is strong, after all. Seeking a weapon to beat her is far more sensible than opposing her directly."



"Why would I be disappointed?" Menou replied, noting that Nono's question was only a setup. She didn't mean a word of it. "If anything, that makes it more important. It's far more useful than if it were simply a powerful weapon. This place must be important to Hakua, too."

So much so that it was strange that she'd allow Genom to take it over.

Or perhaps Genom taking over the environment control tower was a means of forestalling Michele.

"Ah, yes. It's just as you're thinking."

"As I'm 'thinking'?"

Nono used the phrase "just as you're thinking," not "just as you say."

This choice of words made Menou all the more certain that Nono was not to be underestimated.

Future vision that never erred. An Otherworlder who didn't become a Human Error. Based on what Maya had said of Nono earlier, Menou had tried to steer the conversation to learn what she wanted to know.

Unsurprisingly, those starry eyes saw right through that plan.

"We just met yesterday, and you can already tell what I'm thinking?"

"But of course. Have you forgotten who I am?"

"I know, I know. The magical girl genius Nono, right?"

"Yes, exactly!"

Nono flashed a peace sign, pointing at her eyes with both fingers.

"Let me make one thing clear, and I'll swear it on these eyes of mine. There's no way to undo the effects of the Sword of Salt. Not in the past, the present, or even the future."

This information was of utmost importance for Menou.

The Sword of Salt.

It was purity incarnate, having turned an entire continent to salt a thousand years ago and melted it into the sea. It was a fragment of the Pure Concept of

Ivory, and it was currently embedded in Akari's chest.

Menou had thrust it in herself half a year ago.

She'd had no other choice. It was the only way to save Akari after she'd been consumed by the Pure Concept of *Time* and begun transforming into a Human Error. Similarly, it was also the single method Menou had to kill Akari. She'd succeeded in focusing the effects of the massive World Suspension conjuring, which Akari unleashed when she became a Human Error, into one point to resist the effects of the Sword of Salt. However, that solution quickly became Menou's greatest obstacle.

Even now, that little shard continued to kill Akari.

"You mean, no matter what?"

"No matter what. Not even Hakua can undo it. Pulling it out won't stop the effect. That thing is a literal fragment of the Pure Concept of *Ivory* made into a sword, without any of the limitations of conjurings."

Menou thought of a few solutions.

She might negate it with another conjuring of the same kind. Excising the transformed part to keep the damage to a minimum could work as well. And there was the possibility that killing Hakua might undo the effects.

"Nope. None of those will work."

Nono rejected all the strategies Menou vaguely considered before she could even voice them.

"Are you trying to say that there's no way to save Akari?"

"Yup. You should just give up on Akari's body."

Nono mercilessly verbalized what Menou had already somewhat suspected.

Everything she'd done for the past six months had been to save Akari. She worked with Ashuna to withdraw Grisarika Kingdom from the Faust to resist Hakua and gain enough influence to stand against her.

Yet while Menou had worked to gather ways to combat her enemy, she hadn't found a single solution to rescuing Akari. And now she'd been hit with

the reality that such a cure never existed in the first place.

"You..." Menou trailed off, then glared at Nono. "Why would you tell me that?"

"Because Akari is your biggest goal. If you really want to save her, you need to accept what I've told you and find a way forward."

That made everything painfully clear.

Nono's powers were indisputable. Menou required a fundamentally different approach to restore her dearest friend. That's what Nono meant to convey.

Rather than Menou steering the conversation, Nono had controlled it from start to finish. However, she'd revealed something else to Menou by doing so.

"Nono. I certainly can't question your ability to see the future. Your powers of perception are impressive, too."

"I know, right? You should praise me as 'Nono the magical girl genius'!"

"But even if you can see the future, that means you're guiding us toward an outcome you've seen, right?" Menou gazed into the stars in Nono's eyes.

Nono must have given her the information about the Sword of Salt to limit the actions she would take going forward. Why else would she have brought it up?

"Yup." Sure enough, Nono readily confirmed Menou's suspicion. "This situation is partially my responsibility, after all. I just want to steer things toward the best possible conclusion out of the available handful. It's all I can do to atone."

"The best outcome as far as you're concerned, you mean." Evidently, there were several different ways that the future could turn out. Menou worked through this idea while pressing the other girl further.

"What do you want to do about Hakua, exactly?"

There was no guarantee that what Nono considered the best ending was at all agreeable.

Menou wanted to get rid of Hakua. She and Hakua were fundamentally in

conflict. Hakua's existence was an obstacle preventing Menou from reuniting with Akari. No doubt Hakua felt the same way about Menou.

But what about Nono?

The bonds those girls had formed a thousand years ago were not so easily broken.

Menou had seen proof of this with Maya.

"Hmmm..." Nono crossed her arms and tilted her head. "I hate to say it, but there's nothing I can do about her. All I can do is try to guide the emergency situation in the City of Ruins toward a soft landing."

"That's awfully careless for someone who claims to feel responsible. Couldn't you tell me in specific detail what's going to happen?"

"It's a secret. Nothing good would come of revealing all that now."

Nono had said something similar last night. As frustrating as her dramatic hints were, trying to drag the truth out of her was likely pointless.

The pair smiled at each other.

"Okay. We can cooperate until we reach the environment control tower," Menou said.

"Please, let's do just that. I'm just a delicate beauty, after all. You'd better protect me!"

If nothing else, coming to the City of Ruins hadn't been for nothing.

They would bring Nono to the environment control tower. Since she was the Astrologer, it was in their best interest to help her regain management authority over the Starhusk.

"Heh-heh. This reminds me of when I met your Master." Nono chuckled. Menou's eyes widened at the unexpected new subject.

"You've met Master Flare?"

"When she obtained activation authority for the attack satellite, I went to warn her of the dangers. I'm amazed she was able to find such a thing, even with the Pure Concept of Light."

"Oh, right..."

Menou had seen it during her battle with Hakua, the attack from the sky that brought down a massive amount of Guiding Light in a concentrated beam. It had been powerful enough to destroy the land of salt. Menou wouldn't soon forget the sheer strength that vaporized the remains of a continent, even one that had shrunk to the size of an island over the years.

"Couldn't we use that? That seems like an effective means of attacking Hakua."

"Nope, not a chance. It's outside my domain. I don't have a communication vessel to connect with the satellite."

"I take it you didn't make that thing, then."

"Quite the opposite. It's a product of the enemy, really. I think they intended to use it as a weapon against us. I'd applaud the *Light* holder for taking it over, if I could."

Master Flare's ace in the hole originated from the Pure Concept of Light.

While they spoke, Menou and Nono returned to the room where Maya and Sahara slept.

Maya lay upside down on the king-size bed, her bare foot pressed into Sahara's cheek. While Sahara looked a little uncomfortable from the unconscious kicking, she showed no signs of waking up, either.

"They're really passed out, aren't they?"

"That's a good thing. Sleep helps a child grow up strong."

After a long journey filled with battle, a taste of normal life wasn't unwelcome.

Perhaps Menou's memories of traveling with Akari, or her recollections with the aide from her forgotten Executioner days, could be a comforting glimpse of a better life as well.

Although it pained her to know that history had vanished, Menou put such thoughts aside and gave Sahara and Maya a rude awakening.

"All right, let's get things back on track. This is our destination!" Nono had brought Menou, Maya, and Sahara to the theater room for a lecture. "The environment control tower. And what we want is in the top half."

A map of the City of Ruins was displayed on the giant screen. Nono was operating the conjured soldier mechanism somehow. The projection was so large, it was a bit difficult to read the map.

"Why just the top?"

"Excellent question, Sahara!" Nono looked pleased. "Management authority of the Starhusk is kept up there. When the terminal, also known as yours truly, reaches the control room, authority can officially be transferred."

"And the bottom half?" Menou asked.

"That's the system that maintains the City of Ruins. It's not relevant to your mission, so don't worry about it."

Just as Menou started to ask a question in the impromptu lecture, there was a loud crash.

The door in the back of the theater room was suddenly blown off.

"Yo."

Maya froze in shock from the violent noise, while Menou and Sahara leaped into battle-ready stances. Their eyes focused on the brazen intruder—a man with no face.

There was a fist-sized hole in his head that left most of it empty. The aperture was centered on where his right eye should have been. A continuous flow of Guiding Light gushed from the opening.

Menou's and Sahara's hair stood on end. Both recognized this threat immediately.

"Sahara!"

One word was all she needed.

Sahara grabbed Maya by the scruff of the neck and rushed to make an escape. Fortunately, there were multiple exits to the theater room. Nono

hurriedly followed after Sahara, leaving Menou to face this intruder alone.

The faceless man's head turned in Sahara's direction briefly. Believing this to be a moment of distraction, Menou seized the opportunity to rush at him.

However, she only got a few steps before needing to jump aside. Many small holes had appeared where she'd stood a second earlier.

Despite entering unarmed, the man now held a Guiding gun—a shotgun, based on the bullet holes.

Even standard single-shot Guiding guns were very strictly prohibited, so it was unusual to see anyone with this style of firearm. Yet the man tossed this valuable weapon aside carelessly and thrust his hand into the hole in his face.

He withdrew another Guiding gun.

"I must say, I wasn't expecting you to come out and attack us personally."

Menou was already certain of the man's identity; his appearance and powers were exactly as the rumors claimed.

"You must be Genom Cthulha."

"Damn right. Glad to hear Flare's successor knows my name."

Genom pointed the gun at Menou.

Bullets came spewing in rapid succession. Gunshots overlapped and echoed. The weapon was automatic. Each round was much more powerful than that of an average Guiding gun. Since the weapon drew Guiding Force from the wielder, an ordinary human wouldn't have been able to maintain fire like this for more than ten seconds without their soul starting to dry up.

First a shotgun, now a machine gun. Menou zigzagged to evade the endless onslaught. The bullets followed close behind, firing into the trail of light left by her Guiding Enhancement, blowing the seats of the theater room to pieces.

Unlike the scattered grain of a shotgun, the bullets from a machine gun were limited to a straight line directly from the muzzle. As long as Menou watched Genom's arm, she would avoid being hit.

Yet before she could get close enough, the man's gun jerked in a different

direction entirely.

He was aiming for Sahara's back as she escaped through the door.

"Well, now what?" Genom sneered. Menou was too far away to stop him.

"Double Speed."

The Guiding bullet inside the barrel made of Guiding Branches rotated rapidly.

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

Menou didn't level the barrel at Genom. There wasn't time to get her aim just right.

Instead, she fired the accelerated bullet at the floor.

The shot pierced through the ground. Its impact was so great from the Acceleration effect that the floor collapsed, and Menou and Genom tumbled to the level below—the movie theater lobby. Menou used the resulting cloud of dust as cover, blending into her surroundings with Guiding Camouflage and slipping behind Genom.

Her attack came from his blind spot. It should have been flawless, and yet he dodged.

He couldn't possibly have followed her with vision, and any sound of movement had been obscured by the crashing collapse. Normally, he couldn't have evaded.

Menou didn't have time to think about how he managed it. She dismissed her doubts and surprise while readying her dagger gun again.

"Oh-ho?"

Genom's attention went to her weapon.

"Wasn't that Flare's weapon? Did you kill her and take it off her corpse? Nice taste you got there, kid."

"...!"

Menou's hands trembled.

Her crest conjuring faltered, and the Guiding Branches that composed the barrel of the gun vanished.

Invoking a conjuring required intense concentration. It was unlike Menou to allow her mind to be disturbed. She hadn't failed a crest conjuring once in the past several years.

"Oh, come on." Genom sounded disappointed. Taking advantage of Menou's momentary distraction, he pointed the muzzle of his machine gun at her chest. "That was a sincere compliment."

He squeezed the trigger.

The Guiding gun fired close to ten bullets in a matter of seconds, the sweeping fire rapidly reducing the counter behind Menou to rubble. Such a storm would've torn through an average priestess's Guiding Enhancement and destroyed her, but not a single projectile found purchase in Menou.

"Oh?"

The girl had ducked and fled before Genom finished pulling the trigger.

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

"I doubt this will matter, but..." Something hard clunked against Genom's lower jaw: the Guiding Branch gun. "Don't hold a grudge against me if you die."

Invoke [Decay Acceleration → Guiding Bullet]

Menou pulled the trigger, denying Genom any opportunity for last words.

There was a massive boom, louder than all the previous gunshots combined.

The bullet pierced through the top of Genom's skull, blowing his head to pieces. Even after his destruction, the energy shot through to the top of the three-story building, blowing a fresh hole in its foundation.

Since it was upside down from a normal construction, the top floor was the base of the building. The damage rocked the structure, sending fatal cracks through the walls. Aftershocks gripped the ground, scattering more destruction. In little time, the building reached its limit.

The movie theater began to collapse.

As Menou tumbled down with the crumbling pieces of the place, she sent Guiding Force into her other dagger.

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

Using the gust of wind from the weapon to glide into the air, she tumbled through a window into the adjacent building.

Menou stood slowly and checked herself for injuries. Although that battle had clearly ended in her victory, she only felt unease. The fight had gone unexpectedly smoothly.

While it might have looked like she'd won easily, someone could've died had she made a single misstep. Yet after the mortal conflicts with Hakua and Michele, Genom didn't feel nearly so challenging.

The Monster of the Commons. Should a man with that title have gone down so quickly?

Still doubtful, Menou looked up just in time to catch a glimpse of Guiding Light out of the corner of her eye. It was too brief a look to know precisely what its purpose was. She charged her clothing with Guiding Force and activated a crest conjuring purely on instinct.

The Guiding Light flashed as her conjuring activated.

Guiding Force: Connect—Battle Clothing, Crest—Invoke [Multi-Barrier]

Unidentified Guiding Light was best treated with extreme caution. Menou owed her life to that fundamental teaching.

"...!"

The *Barrier* failed to absorb it completely. While the multiple layers of thin Guiding Force walls broke in rapid succession, she was lucky that they'd formed at an angle. By the time it broke through the last *Barrier*, the bullet's trajectory had been altered, preventing a direct hit.

Yet while the projectile didn't touch her directly, the force of it was still intense.

Menou was sent flying. She pulled herself in and rolled over twice across the floor. And she was up in time to see a new opponent, a man holding an

enormous pistol aimed right where she stood.

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

Air burst from her dagger into the floor, sending her up in a near-perfect line.

The enormous bullet missed Menou and bored through the floor. Its destruction more closely resembled a bomb's than anything else. Menou landed and faced this new opponent with disbelief.

The enemy who'd fired twice... He, too, was Genom.

"Your moves aren't bad. I suppose that's because you're a former Executioner." The man with the hole in his face tossed aside the enormous gun.

Menou was sure she'd killed him, yet here he was, complimenting her abilities quite leisurely.

"Wouldn't say they're all that great, either, though. Did you really kill Flare?"

That was a harsh assessment. He seemed to recall the earlier fight before his death, too. It made it hard to believe this Genom was an imposter.

The Accelerated bullet had eradicated him, yet here he stood, perfectly unharmed.

Menou maintained a straight face, suppressing her shock as she leveled her gaze at him.

"Well, your attacks are awfully monotonous. Nothing but Guiding guns. Don't you use any crest conjurings?"

"Nah, I'm no good at conjuring. I can't even get Guiding Enhancement right."

The man who'd held the top spot on the Commons blacklist for nearly ten years, the person considered the pinnacle of individual strength, casually highlighted his shortcomings as he reached into the hole in his face.

A new Guiding gun emerged, surging with Guiding Light.

"Oh, and by the way. The way you guys manage to use Guiding Enhancement while you're fighting is like a miracle to us nobodies, ya know. Wish you'd show some more awareness of your freakishness."

His latest weapon was a machine gun, much like the one he'd used in the

theater. Presumably, it was of an identical make, not the same object. Menou had heard that Genom possessed weapons in abundance, an accomplishment that had earned him the nickname "Arms Dealer."

The hole in Genom Cthulha's face was an armory.

That was a well-known fact.

Still, seeing it up close was startling, nonetheless.

"When you're average like me, the most you can do is toughen yourself to withstand the recoil of these babies while you're standing still. Get it?"

Genom pulled out three different kinds of Guiding guns and tossed them to the floor.

Shotguns, which scattered multiple bullets across a wide range, making it nearly impossible to dodge. Machine guns, capable of fully automatic rapid fire. And the high-powered firearm that blew a hole into a barrier conjuring in just one shot.

All three were Guiding gun varieties not in widespread use, particularly the last one. Even Menou, a former Executioner, had never seen anything like that third one before. She didn't think any Guiding gun was capable of shattering a *Barrier* so easily. And it was even more dangerous because it was pistol-sized, making it easy to conceal on one's person.

Were something like that to hit the market, any ordinary person could easily kill a knight or priestess.

"See, I know I'm just average. That's exactly why I like Guiding weapons so much." Genom smirked and picked up a machine gun.

A second Genom stepped into view from Menou's flank. They both spoke at once.

"Cause even a talentless nobody like me can kill a priestess with the pull of a trigger."

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Prosthetic Arm, Inner Seal Conjuration— Activate [Skill: Pile Driver]

Sahara's metal arm shot out a stake that gouged a huge hole in the passage

linking the movie theater and the station building.

"Wait, what are you doing?!"

Despite Maya's protests, Sahara didn't hesitate. The sounds of gunshots behind her were far more frightening.

Since she was carrying Maya and Nono now, her top priority was making sure that their attacker couldn't follow them. Sahara shot off another conjuring from her prosthetic arm to block the way they'd come.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Prosthetic Arm, Inner Seal Conjuration— Activate [Skill: Guiding Shot]

With holes on either side, the tube broke apart quicker than the micromachines could repair it and collapsed.

The danger hadn't passed yet, however. If Genom was here, he'd surely come with lackeys. Menou's flashy fight would make it difficult to move undetected. Fortunately, she had some unexpected help.

"All right. Take a right at the next corner. They're going to pass over us, so stay still under the roof for a few seconds... Okay, run!"

From under Sahara's arm, Nono offered startlingly useful guidance.

They slipped past the armed forces by jogging sometimes and remaining concealed during others. Sahara would never have navigated all this security on her own.

"Now enter that room through the window and... Great! Take a ten-minute break!"

Thanks to some melodramatic pointing and calling, they made it to a private residence-sized building. Nono's order to rest helped ease the tense atmosphere.

"Maya. You may wish to use the restroom now. We won't have a better time to rest for a while, and holding it in is bad for your health!"

"Either shut up or die!"

Huffing at Nono for her lack of discretion, Maya nonetheless hurried to the

bathroom.

Sahara sat on the floor and slumped against the wall. When she focused, she could still make out the sounds of battle coming from the movie theater. "Your future sight is pretty impressive," she said.

"Heh-heh, keep the praise coming. May I recommend repeating 'magical girl genius Nono is the best!' a few times? Go ahead, Sahara! One, two..."

"Are there limits on your ability to know what's going to happen? You don't seem to use a conjuring. How exactly does it work?"

"Hmmm?"

Nono's power was strong. Sahara had only evaded Genom's forces thanks to her instructions. She leaned forward, hoping to learn more, mostly for the sake of her own safety.

Nono pouted at Sahara's practiced ability to deal with weirdos by ignoring their oddities, but she answered her questions anyway.

"Here's the thing, Sahara. I've never managed to invoke the Pure Concept of Star. Not even once. In a way, I'm a total failure as a Pure Concept holder."

"You haven't?"

"Nope. The best I can do is make a Guiding Force connection." Nono pointed at her eyes with her index fingers. This made for a very silly pose, which was probably on purpose. "All I need to do is link Guiding Force to these eyes, and I can see the near future of anything in my field of vision. Actual predictions are different. I need Kaa's help for those."

If Sahara remembered right, "Kaa" was the Otherworlder who'd become the Mechanical Society.

"Uh-huh. Those eyes still seem pretty useful, though."

"They sure are. But there's a limit. I can only view things that meet the proper conditions. Right now, I'm focusing on Maya to look into the future. If you get too far away from her, you won't be in my field of vision anymore. Be careful, because I can only guarantee Maya's future."

That explanation seemed reasonable enough.

With her hands now empty, Sahara reached out and pinched Nono's cheek.

"Hrm. Very soft."

"Whaffat?"

"Your body. You're possessing a conjured soldier, right?"

"No, not quite."

Sahara assumed that Nono had transferred her soul into the conjured soldier called "the Astrologer," and that was how she'd survived for a thousand years. However, the other girl rejected the idea quite smoothly.

"This body doesn't have any functions for storing a soul, and I refuse to use the Possession conjuring. I wouldn't let Kaa use it, either. No matter what."

Nono was more forceful about this than Sahara thought necessary.

Clearly, she harbored a hangup about it. Sahara wondered privately if Nono was insulting her, since she'd used Possession before. Rather than ask, she moved to her next inquiry.

"Then why are you inside a conjured soldier?"

"I'm not. Not really. I'm just linking information to this body, that's all."

"I see." Sahara nodded, despite not understanding the difference. The details didn't seem like they'd affect her well-being, so she elected not to worry about it.

Just as the conversation petered out, Maya returned.

"Welcome back, Maya," Nono greeted her. "Now, it's unfortunate that we got separated from Menou, but we should continue without her."

Maya frowned slightly. "...We're not going to meet up with Menou?"

"Think about it, would you?" Nono acted like a commanding officer. "You said that you sense Pandæmonium in there, Maya. This Genom fellow left the tower to come find us. In other words, the environment control tower is less protected now."

"That reminds me." Maya's frown deepened. "Why is Pandæmonium here? I sense her nearby, but that's all."

"Apparently, her arm escaped Pandemonium and tried to meddle with Michele, only to get the tables turned on her. She's always been strong, that one!" Nono sounded proud of Michele's strength. While Michele was a dreaded enemy to Sahara, to Nono she was an old friend from a thousand years ago.

"We'd be in big trouble if Pandæmonium took over the environment control tower. The spire maintains the micromachines, so if it stops functioning, this expanded pocket space will overlap with the original one."

Sahara was well aware of what happened when expanded space vanished. "The parts that overlap will fuse together, right?"

"Precisely. And it will produce a shock wave in accordance with the volume of matter fused. The effect is strong enough to be wielded as a weapon in its own right."

A Primary Color Storage Space was a pocket dimension created with Guiding Force. It used the ordinary world as a base to create a realm on a slightly different wavelength. If this other space vanished for any reason, whatever was stored within would return to the area it overlapped.

If the Primary Color Storage Space containing the City of Ruins disappeared, the massive amount of structures in the city would collide with the ground.

"So this chamber would collapse?" Sahara asked.

Nono shook her head. "It'd be far worse than that."

People lived in the underground hub outside the City of Ruins. If the artificial cavern collapsed, it would mean tremendous casualties. While Sahara thought about it distantly, thinking it wouldn't affect her, Nono disagreed.

"The problem is, between the top and bottom halves, that environment control tower is one thousand six hundred and sixty-six meters tall. Amazing, right? It's the tallest building in history, even during the ancient civilization days. And it was much easier to build down here than aboveground, since we were able to expand the space and—"

"That's great and all, but what's the problem, exactly?"

Sahara interrupted what seemed like it might become a lengthy explanation.

So far, she didn't see the connection between what was happening underground and the fusion with the Starhusk.

Sahara knew that Pandæmonium was nothing but trouble. She'd even worked with her, albeit temporarily. The damage of her unpredictable behavior was beyond normal comprehension. However, she couldn't take over something unless she touched it, even with a Concept of Original Sin. No matter how big the environment control tower was, it was deep underground. How could what happened down here possibly have any effect on something high up in the sky?

Besides, the computing unit that managed the spire, the conjured soldier known as the Astrologer, was here as Nono. That left the environment control tower like a human without its brain. Without the operator to access its functions, it was really just a giant building.

"Okay, question. Excluding the expanded space, how deep underground is the City of Ruins?" Nono said.

Sahara pursed her lips. "About two hundred meters?"

"Correct! This is a deep underground cavern that we worked hard to build using Pure Concepts! We had big plans for a subterranean transportation network, and we planned on putting in large-scale Guiding Force supply facilities and a waste disposal center and so on, so we made sure it would never collapse. Now, think about where the Starhusk is located." Nono grinned, acting like a schoolteacher as she prompted Sahara for another response. Sahara and Maya pictured the Starhusk, floating above the northern continent.

"As I'm sure you know, the Starhusk hovers in the sky above the north. However, it's actually not at a very high altitude. It's meant to ride on the heavenly vein, so it's safe to say that it maintains a height of roughly a thousand meters, although it can shift up and down a little."

Now Sahara understood what Nono was trying to say. A shiver ran down her spine.

It was simple math. Round the numbers up, and subtract two hundred from one thousand seven hundred. Even a child Maya's age could handle that arithmetic.

"Guess what would happen if the environment control tower stopped working and the expanded space collapsed?!"

Sahara and Maya pictured a giant tree bearing fruit. It was only a mental image of a palm tree, but they understood, whether they wanted to or not.

"The environment control tower and the Starhusk would intersect and merge into something like an art installation," Nono explained.

"Huh...?" Maya was speechless.

It certainly was a problem if an expanded space collapsing meant that whatever was inside would stick out into the real world. Sahara posed her next question cautiously.

"So, uh, what happens if those things fuse...?"

"When their forms intersect, the environment control tower will pierce the core of the Starhusk and break it. The white liquid covering it will fly off and rain *Blanch* down on the north. The stars, excluding the nucleus, will fall, one after the other."

Just one drop of the white *Blanch* liquid was a conjuring material strong enough to overcome an Otherworlder's conjuring like Akari's *Suspension*. If it poured down, the result would be catastrophic.

"That would be nothing compared to Pandæmonium taking over the Starhusk, though," Nono added.

The color drained from Maya's face. It wasn't long ago that she'd been a part of Pandæmonium. She never wished to return to that.

"Maya. You're separate from Pandæmonium. It's why I activated when you arrived," Nono said.

"What? Where'd that come from?"

"What do you do when a movie ends?"

Maya tilted her head at the seemingly unrelated question. "I watch the credits before I leave. Isn't that obvious?" As a child actress, that was a point of pride for her.

"Good. Just make sure you remember that."

Nono beamed. Both Sahara and Maya looked unconvinced, questioning the meaning behind that question.

"Well, I've told you what you need to know. Shall we keep moving? I really don't like it when people act like the current state of the world is all our fault. It was an accident. Anyway, we'll have to proceed along the route that I've predicted."

"Question."

"Yes, Sahara!"

"Why couldn't you tell us that when Menou was with us?"

When Menou was around, everything was Menou's fault. She had the final say in the group's decisions.

But now that Sahara had been given vital information without Menou to make the choices, she was forced to take responsibility. She didn't like the idea that it might be her fault if something terrible happened to the continent.

"Oh, come on. Some strange man showed up before I could get to that, remember? Who was that anyway? He had a very peculiar face."

"You should be careful about believing what Nono says, Sahara. She tricks people all the time without batting an eye." Maya clearly didn't trust Nono, even though they were close.

Sahara understood where she was coming from. Nono had a habit of dodging subjects she didn't want to discuss. Perhaps it was due to the disparate information acquired from her future sight.

"Yep, she's right. You shouldn't trust me too much. I'll do whatever it takes to guide people into doing what I want."

"Got it. I won't trust you, then."

When Nono chimed in to agree with Maya, Sahara groaned and lost interest in keeping up the conversation entirely.

However, Maya didn't drop it so easily.

"Nono, if you betray Sahara and Menou or try to use them, I really will sacrifice you to an Original Sin conjuring this time. You have to promise you won't."

Nono's smile broadened at Maya's response. "You've really grown up, Maya. You're not the same girl who used to hide behind Ryuunosuke all the time."

"Mm-hmm. And?" Maya gazed steadily at Nono, refusing to be brushed off so easily.

Nono looked away, unable to handle the smaller girl's stare. She straightened her lab coat, adjusted her red-framed glasses, and turned from Maya to Sahara.

"Okay, gang! Prepare for departure! Our goal is to prevent the birth of a giant monster that could destroy the world. Our obstacle—a security detail of armed and dangerous villains. It won't be easy, but hey, with these eyes of mine, we can get past anything! Let's go on a grand adventure to save the world!"

"Hello?!" Maya exclaimed. "Come on, promise me!"

"I've chosen a route that will prevent the armed criminal group from finding us, so we should be safe on the way to the tower. And my eyes can see a few seconds into the future wherever I look! We won't be found, at least not by criminals with artificial limbs!"

"You keep saying 'at least.'" A bad feeling was brewing in Sahara's gut. "What about the rest of them...?"

"Huh? The rest? The rest of who?"

This answer only made Sahara even more anxious. "Like other humans, or a different means of searching, or Pandæmonium's monsters, or even Genom himself... There are plenty of other enemies out there, right?"

"W-well, yes, I suppose."

Genom had already shown himself, bursting into the theater earlier. It was possible that he'd found them because Nono chose that place because it wouldn't be discovered by the armed criminal group.

"Well, what happens if one of them shows up?" Sahara pressed.

"I mean... I guess they'd find us?" Nono answered awkwardly.

The conversation stopped dead. A painful silence fell over the three. What trust Sahara and Maya had in Nono's future sight rapidly crumbled.

"Uh-oh..." Suddenly, Nono gave an alarmed squeak. Something had happened in the future she glimpsed.

A sense of foreboding told Sahara they couldn't stay here. She stood to leave, but it was too late.

"There she is! The Governor!"

The voices belonged to the adventurers from yesterday. Menou, Sahara, Maya, and Abbie had knocked them out and disarmed them, yet they'd pursued the girls all the way to the City of Ruins.

"What do we do?" Nono asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" Sahara tugged on Nono's sleeve. Meanwhile, Maya fused her shadow to Sahara's and jumped inside. There was only one thing they *could* do in this situation. "Run for it!"

A Guiding bullet lanced for Menou, leaving a trail of light.

The powerful gunshot only managed to pierce her afterimage, as she'd already leaped away before it left the weapon's muzzle.

Menou's Guiding Enhancement bolstered her kinetic vision such that she saw the movement of Genom's finger as he started to pull the trigger. Evading his attacks wouldn't be an issue.

However, she couldn't manage to close the distance between them.

"..."

After avoiding the latest volley, she set her sights on the man again.

While the machine gun's power and continuous spray were dangerous, its aim couldn't keep up with Menou's enhanced movements, and a *Barrier* made up for any shortcoming on her part. The large-caliber gun would pierce a barrier conjuring in a single shot, forcing her to evade that, no matter what. However, since Genom had tossed each of those high-powered pistols after a round or two, it was safe to assume they couldn't hold up to their own force. As long as she was careful, she didn't have to fear them too much.

Dealing with one type of firearm at a time would've been simple. Unfortunately, Genom constantly switched between the three, which was much more threatening.

"What d'you say, Flarette?"

She couldn't get close enough to attack, nor would she win in a shootout. But the situation wasn't quite desperate enough to warrant firing a bullet with the Pure Concept Decay Acceleration conjuring attached. While Menou was locked in a stalemate that was perfectly balanced in a way, Genom raised his weapon proudly.

"Those damn priestesses treat them as toys, but my Guiding guns have gotten real powerful, don'cha think?"

"You're certainly as zealous about them as everyone says."

"It just so happens, I'm in the process of having one of the Primary Triad soldiers develop these for sale."

That statement was the true reason why Genom Cthulha was so deeply despised.

Terrorists in cities, adventurers, and other scoundrels were all equipped with Guiding guns because of Genom's rise to power.

He was the source of the Guiding guns sold and distributed all over the continent.

"What do you think? Grisarika's gone independent and started calling off taboos, right? You wanna get a bite of this market, too?"

"Unfortunately, we'll be maintaining the ban on Guiding guns. And you've just given me proof that we made the right decision about that."

"Damn. Your loss."

Conjured soldiers wouldn't normally develop weapons that others could use. They had no need for tools to kill humans.

However, the man called Genom Cthulha had managed to win the support of conjured soldiers in the Mechanical Society, hence his "Arms Dealer" title.

He'd established trade with a conjured soldier, securing mass production of Guiding guns for humans. By selling Mechanical Society mass-produced firearms in steady, large quantities, he'd risen to become an infamous villain known all over.

Conjured soldiers were born as ultimate weapons. They'd never decided to manufacture weapons to kill humans on their own. Typically, any arms they created suited their forms, giving no consideration for how a person would wield them.

Just thirty years ago, Guiding guns were exceedingly rare, only found in ancient ruins and later restored or reproduced with less power by a handful of skilled engineers. Production on any large scale had been unthinkable.

"You've been working with that Ability chick, right? Could you get me in good with her, by any chance? She's valued as a real good creator, even among the zone admins."

"I doubt Abbie would be willing to work for you, even if she is soft on anyone younger than her."

"Don't be so sure. All you gotta do is figure out what they want and pitch 'em a sincere request, and they'll get on board. Those things have real reasoning and intelligence, ya know. See, this is the problem with the Faust. It doesn't even realize that discussions on economy don't care about differences in values. Money talks."

Despite Genom's assertion, conjured soldiers who lived among Concepts of Primary Colors would find no meaning in currency.

Genom had offered the beings sealed away by White Night a different resource—people.

Human bodies were the ideal material to produce Primary Red.

By selling humans as materials, he gained weapons from the Mechanical Society. Genom held sole control over the place of manufacturing, and his operations distributed firearms in vast numbers.

The man abducted innocents, turned them into weapons, and sold them off. And his network was far-reaching, with plenty of sub-organizations, including the armed criminal group Iron Chain that Menou crushed in the Balar Desert.

"You get what I mean, right?" Genom asked. "Even that Michele gal can't touch us now that we've got control of the City of Ruins. Knowing what people care about is important."

"I'm pretty sure she just doesn't want to trouble herself with you for the time being. Once your usefulness dries up, she'll get rid of you," Menou said.

"Maybe." The man who trusted no one and knew the ways of the world sneered. "But big business demands a little risk."

For all the strength of Genom's weapons, none were likely to break through Michele's Guiding Enhancement. Her immortality was much too strong for that.

They were certainly enough to kill Menou, though.

"But I guess the finer points are lost on a kid."

Genom cracked his neck. He had no injuries, aside from the hole, of course. He narrowed his left eye, which stood at the edge of the aperture in his face.

Menou let out a long, thin exhale, steadying her heart and readying her weapon. A quick assessment of the battle left her with only one clear choice. She turned and ran, not showing any concern for exposing her back.

If what Genom said was true, and he couldn't use Guiding Enhancement well, then he wouldn't be able to catch up to Menou, who was a master of the technique. It meant Sahara and the others would outpace him easily as well.

Menou hadn't come here to eliminate Genom. She hadn't even known he was here. She was under no obligation to indulge a face-to-face battle of attrition.

Of all the conjurings in existence, there was only one that came close to a true method of recovering from death—the Concept of Primary Colors, which could transfer a soul and spirit into another vessel.

"That can't be his true body!"

Genom was similar to Sahara and Abbie. His soul and spirit were safely stored elsewhere while he controlled a form other than his own to interact with the world. Destroying what was functionally a puppet seemed pointless.

"You catch on quick." The words came from up ahead, not from behind.

Despite leaving Genom in the dust, he now stood in Menou's path. She jumped backward, startled.

Her body protested the abrupt halt. A massive bullet flew past her face, missing by a hair. Suppressing the urge to move even farther back, Menou dared to glance behind.

Surely not.

A terrible suspicion arose in Menou's mind. If Genom's claim that he couldn't use Guiding Enhancement was a bluff, then so be it. That would explain well enough how he'd intercepted her.

But if the reason was different...

Menou didn't have to wait long for the answer.

"You're dead wrong if you think you can get away from me."

The Genom she had fled from stood behind her.

One in front, one in back. There were two Genom Cthulhas, with Menou trapped in the middle.

Both looked identical in face and stature. The same person had seemingly been multiplied, and both aimed machine guns at Menou.

The cross fire intersected where she'd stood a blink ago, flashing brightly. The bullets were made of solidified Guiding Force. They left a beautiful trail, but anything in their path knew only death.

Both Genoms took aim at Menou again. She'd evaded by leaping into the air. The two men moved in perfect sync. One had ditched his automatic weapon for a shotgun, while the other had opted for a high-powered pistol. Presumably, their intention was to force her to use a barrier conjuring against the scattered shot only for the large bullet to pierce it through.

Menou's options were limited to defending with *Barrier* or avoiding with *Gale*. Either way, her chances of emerging unscathed were slim.

If only she had a scripture.

Menou dismissed the fleeting thought. Certainly, scripture conjurings excelled when facing multiple opponents. However, to hold any attachment to the idea of using a scripture now was absurd. She had let hers go partly to keep Hakua, its creator, from tracking her, but also as a show of her determination to leave the Faust.

She'd relinquished the tool of her own free will.

"...!"

Menou opened her eyes wide. Her thoughts raced. In a fraction of a second, she found her solution.

Guiding Force: Connect—Battle Clothing, Crest—Invoke [Multi-Barrier]

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

She invoked multiple conjurings simultaneously from two different mediums. With her *Barrier* still active, Menou called upon *Gale* to propel her dagger forward, piercing the heart of the Genom ahead of her, who stood nearer.

The one at her back loosed a barrage, but the small clouds of projectiles weren't enough to pierce her *Barrier*.

"Don't underestimate me..." Menou leveled the muzzle of her dagger gun at Genom.

There was no need to use *Acceleration* this time. As he'd revealed in their conversation in the theater room, Genom's greatest weakness was his lack of defense. If he couldn't invoke a simple crest conjuring, a barrier one was definitely beyond him. And if he could only manage Guiding Enhancement while standing still, that meant he was a sitting duck against enemy attacks.

He lacked a way to guard against an attack that surpassed the limits of a human body.

"I am the woman who killed Flare."

Menou pulled the trigger.

The Guiding bullet pierced the forehead of the Genom holding the shotgun. Despite the unusual construction of his face, his vital points seemed no

different from an ordinary human's. The light went out in his eyes as he collapsed to the floor.

"Hahhh..."

Menou spared a moment to catch her breath.

Despite dispatching both opponents, she scanned the area, refusing to let her guard down.

Any hope that the battle would end here had vanished the moment she saw a second Genom.

The trick behind his power was almost certainly an unusual conjuring that employed the Concept of Primary Colors. But it was very different from Sahara's ability to swap her body for a new one.

He wasn't moving the core part of himself to a new body. Genom didn't operate with his true body. He'd abandoned that, preferring to control other forms like pawns.

What incredible mental power it must have taken to manipulate two selves at once. Menou couldn't begin to imagine the weight of the task. Worse yet, two wasn't likely his limit.

Sure enough, Menou caught four sets of footsteps approaching from different directions.

"Ah..."

Although she'd prepared herself for this possibility, Menou would've been lying had she claimed to feel no despair when the latest round of enemies came into view. She let out a hollow laugh.

"No wonder Master couldn't kill you... Tell me, do you even need subordinates?"

"Don't be stupid. I only made it to the top because my lackeys protected me. Why would I give up such loyal assistants?"

All four Genoms smirked. Each had the same hole in his face and moved identically to retrieve a Guiding gun and point it at Menou.

Fighting had to be a lot more fun when one's life wasn't on the line. Menou wouldn't be surprised if she defeated these four only for eight to show up next, and perhaps ten after that.

This unbelievable reality made it agonizingly clear why Genom was considered the peak of individual power.

He wasn't strong as a single person. His strength came from his ability to become a mob all by himself, and on top of that, he could arm every one of his additional selves with powerful weapons.

That was why a man who described himself as average could boast the most individual power, more than any influential figure's or talented fighter's.

"None of those Executioners know a damn thing about the subtleties of how people work. You, Flare, and the rest of 'em—do you all think you can change the world just by killing your enemies?"

Where was it?

Menou's gaze flicked around, searching.

There was nothing more pointless than fighting the pawns of someone who'd abandoned his own body to use the Concepts of Primary Colors. No matter how many terminals she destroyed, he would bring back more as long as he had lives remaining.

Guiding Force could only work with a channel. The one Genom used to control his bodies was the hole in his face. However, it wasn't large enough to try and barge inside.

The real Genom had to be somewhere, controlling all of these bodies. Just like Sahara's real body was her Guiding prosthetic arm, there had to be a control hub containing the soul, the source of Guiding Force, and the spirit, the essence of one's personality, to move the body. Since there were limits on the range of such remote control, the most likely location was the environment control tower at the center of the City of Ruins.

It was a massive spire that stretched from floor to ceiling, constructed in a way that would be impossible with the current level of technology. And with the entrance to the Mechanical Society at its heart, it was a better place to hole

up in than any fortress. On top of that, it was the only passage connecting the top and bottom parts of the city.

There was no better place in the underground chamber to protect oneself.

Menou's attention turned toward the tower for only an instant. Naturally, she kept vigilant against the four opponents surrounding her. She was confident that she could react instantly if any of the Genoms tried to move.

But that moment still led to her downfall.

Without any warning, Menou felt a sudden impact strike her back like a full-body blow, piercing through her chest.

"…"

For a moment, she didn't understand what just happened.

The sound of the wound only reached her ears after the fact.

A single distant gunshot echoed. There were so few humans with the ability to attack this way effectively that Menou had unconsciously excluded it from her consideration.

"A...sniper...?"

Her lungs were more than half-crushed and rapidly filled with blood. She coughed crimson from her throat as she struggled to breathe.

Her vision slowly sank down to her chest.

The metal clasp of her mantle had broken, and the garment slid off her shoulders. The wound it revealed gushed blood. This was a fatal wound, piercing from her back through her chest. Her upper half lost all stability. She tried to remain standing, yet her body wouldn't listen.

Menou's body crumpled to the floor with a quiet thud.

The blood continued to flow, pooling around her. There were to be no death throes, no last words. The wound was so deep that it was a miracle she hadn't died instantly. Her consciousness faded away rapidly. She couldn't even close her eyelids before her vision swam and the world went white.

Her life didn't even flash before her eyes.

"Guess that's it, huh?"

The men's voices were flat as they watched the girl go down in a spray of blood.

Genom Cthulha's fields of vision fixed on the girl known as Flarette as her pale tawny hair was slowly soaked with the red liquid on the floor. As the color spread, all signs of life left the young woman's body.

Gradually increasing his numbers, fighting with three different kinds of guns—all of it had been laying the groundwork for the final sniper shot. Anything less risked someone with such sharp instincts sensing the sniper shot and evading. Some people possessed intuition that warned them when they were being watched or were about to be attacked, although none of that made sense to a self-proclaimed average man like Genom.

That's why he carefully adopted an act to keep her focus on the Genoms in her immediate vicinity.

He pointed a gun at her head to finish the job. Victory brought him no satisfaction.

One-sided wins had long since become boring to him. Now most battles were nothing but work, an uninteresting task.

Genom Cthulha's history had been impeccably clean and normal until he was twelve.

Originally, he was just a young boy of the Commons, the third and lowest caste.

His parents raised him peacefully, and he was blessed with good health and a cheerful personality that earned him plenty of friends.

It was nothing but coincidence and bad luck that led to Genom being kidnapped. He'd played outside with his friends until evening and decided to head home a little later than usual. So he elected to take a shortcut through an empty back alley.

He wasn't careless. He did nothing wrong. He was simply an unlucky victim.

The kidnappers sold him to a taboo researcher.

This man was obsessed with Primary Color materials and crest engravings, testing them until he eventually sank to the forbidden act of fusing crests with the human body. He kidnapped countless people, each experiment ending in transplant rejection and failure, still advancing his techniques at a slow but steady pace. In a way, the man was probably a genius.

Genom became one of his test subjects and had a Primary Color crystal implanted in his body.

Namely, a Primary Color crystal was carved into his body.

The materials proved fundamentally incompatible. Genom suffered a spectrum of agony, ranging from simple pain to unbearable madness, yet he managed to survive.

The experiment, however, was a failure.

Genom didn't gain any powers or special abilities. He lived, and that was it. In fact, he lost whatever talent he'd possessed for Guiding Force manipulation.

Yet while the result was imperfect, Genom was the researcher's first surviving specimen, perhaps the first to survive any such procedure since the ancient civilization fell. What made the boy different? The researcher was determined to find out, and he kept Genom confined.

Then, one day, a lone priestess destroyed the research facility.

Her skills were impressive. Poison, whistle-blowing, assassination. She used all of these to erase every last researcher from this world, potential genius, research data, and all.

At first, Genom thought she was his salvation. He'd no longer be a lab rat. He could return to his family. The red-haired young woman in the pure-white priestess robes seemed to him like an actual angel, or a saint.

Which is why Genom ran up to the priestess in training who'd destroyed the facility all on her own, crying and thanking her repeatedly. "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you for saving me." He was grateful from the bottom of his heart.

"Huh. I didn't think any of the experiments from this place survived."

She sounded impressed. Then, without hesitation, she thrust her blade into

the boy's chest.

"You're a product of the taboo. Better off dead."

She was the girl who'd become the Executioner known as Flare. Killing people was her life's work, and she carried no shred of emotions like compassion.

Genom had never done anything wrong from the time of his birth to the moment Flare's dagger pierced his heart.

He was a poor, innocent victim, kidnapped and subjected to experiments.

Yet she was going to kill him as thoughtlessly as stepping on an insect.

It was nothing but a stroke of good luck that Genom successfully escaped. All those experiments had granted him an unusually strong life force as a byproduct. The collapsing burning building kept the girl from pursuing him. Destroying the entire structure had been a mistake of inexperience by the white-robed priestess. All of these lucky factors allowed Genom to slip from the Faust's grasp.

Unable to return to his family, Genom found his way to a group of adventurers who operated out of the Wild Frontier.

That's where people who had nowhere else to turn wound up in the end. And it was there that Genom sharpened his fangs.

What an unfair world, for him to be killed simply because he was made into a taboo. What a twisted system of oppression that maintained peace in society.

Those priestesses surely believed that they were in the right.

Which is why he hated the Faust, the top caste.

After surviving, Genom sought power to change the world. He was marked as a wanted man with a growing group of enemies, so he gathered adventurers and created a criminal organization. The Director of the Fourth, who spoke of destroying the current caste system, seemed promising to Genom but proved a failure in the end. The Director wasn't qualified to start a revolution, since he'd forgotten that he was an Elder.

Genom was willing to do whatever it took to fight against the unfairness, and to kill Flare.

But he lost to her over and over.

He never managed to hold his own against Flare. She always took down his subordinates and cornered him. He only saw openings when Flare was with the girl who had the Pure Concept of *Light*. But even when he took her as a hostage, he still knew merciless defeat by way of a dagger driven into his face. Ultimately, Genom escaped into the eastern Wild Frontier.

And when he stepped into the inhuman world of the Mechanical Society, Genom learned for the first time how to use the Concept of Primary Colors that had been carved into him.

He refined his abilities and built up more power. When Flare finally caught up to him in the Mechanical Society, he was able to drive her off. His strength grew so much that he was sure he'd be able to kill her next time.

Which is why he couldn't accept Flare's ultimate fate.

"She wasn't supposed to die on her own, dammit..."

Either she would kill him, or he would kill her.

Yet neither outcome came to pass, and Genom was left to grind his teeth in frustration.

Worse yet, Flare's successor proved to be nothing special.

She could have at least conducted herself like a proper Executioner. Instead, she'd brought up the rear to stall for time so her friends could escape. What a joke. She'd only succeeded in dying a pathetic death.

"Bet you never learned how to fight proper, anyway."

Flare would never have let this kill her.

She would've hidden, sneaked, and deceived her target to destroy taboos stronger than her.

That was how Executioners ought to operate. But Flare's apprentice quit wearing a priestess robe. What the hell was she thinking?

That terrible disappointment was why the sound that escaped his mouth held a hint of joy when he sensed something unexpected.

Guiding Force: Connect—

"Oh-ho?"

With the signs of a conjuring construction came Guiding Light that surrounded Menou's body. The luminous motes danced in the air, slowly assembling into a more organized pattern.

Improper Attachment, Pure Concept [Time]—

The Guiding Light formed the shape of a pendulum clock, a device that symbolized time. With a *tick*, the hands of the clock began moving backward.

Invoke [Regression]

A Pure Concept conjuring was invoked.

Tick. Tock. As the clock's hands wound back, the hole in Menou's chest closed up. This wasn't regeneration; it was actually turning back time to before she was killed.

However, the truly strange part was yet to come.

Slowly, unsteadily, the girl stood.

The girl who'd conquered death showed no signs of injury. Even the blood on her clothes was gone. This proved that she hadn't been healed—her time had regressed to before she'd perished.

More than her restoration, the most noticeable difference was her hair.

"...Gotta say, that looks pretty damn cool."

The ends of her pale, tawny locks were dyed black, as though they'd been dipped in ink.

No one in this world would dismiss a change in hair color. Such a thing was more than hereditary. It was perfectly normal for it to change, based on the strength of the power in one's soul or personality.

If a person's hair color suddenly changed, that typically meant that something had happened inside them, an extreme shift in the nature of their soul.

Sure enough, the girl in front of Genom now gave off a completely different air than the one he'd fought before.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Me...nou..."

With that, the girl vanished from sight.

He hadn't blinked or looked away. All the Genoms had been completely focused on her, and now none could see her. The only one that got the slightest indication of her movement was the sniper, who observed the battlefield from a distance.

Something appeared at his back.

He was in a building more than a hundred meters away from the battle. But when he sensed a presence looming behind him and turned, he felt something wrong in his chest.

Upon touching the spot reflexively, he realized a dagger had pierced his heart.

"Huh?"

As blood surged from the wound, the sniper Genom let out an impressed grunt and dropped dead. He tried to get a last look at the girl who'd killed him, but she was already gone.

Then the thing that was shaped like Menou reappeared in the middle of the four remaining Genoms.

Black spread up her hair.

"I'll be damned..." Genom breathed in amazement.

She was fast. No, this wasn't a matter of speed. Her movements completely disregarded time and distance.

She'd vanished, stabbed the sniper, and returned to her original location.

The results of these three actions existed, but the time it should have taken between them didn't. None of the Genoms saw her move.

This was far beyond any speed granted by Guiding Enhancement.

"Don't...you dare..."

The girl in front of him spoke slowly. Her movements were sluggish, her gaze

vacant. Her mind seemed like it wasn't entirely active yet, like she'd only just woken up.

Vacant eyes suddenly snapped to attention.

"Don't you dare...hurt...Menou."

This time, Genom didn't lose sight of the girl.

She was still there, standing still.

The only difference was the blood dripping from her dagger gun.

"...!"

One of the Genoms let out a soundless scream and collapsed.

His carotid artery had been slashed open, his life force draining away with the torrent of blood. There was no questioning that it was the work of the girl's blade.



"Hah...!"

Such unbelievable power. There was no doubt about it. This was on a completely different level from the conjurings Flarette half-heartedly used with her dagger gun functioning as an intermediary. It wasn't even a Pure Concept being invoked by way of a person's soul. This was a Pure Concept in the truest sense. The idea itself given human form. The worst kind of disaster in this world —proof that Otherworlders were only fledglings meant to achieve this ultimate form.

A Human Error.

"You're the Human Error of *Time*, aren't ya?!"

With that, all the Genoms fired their machine guns.

Over a hundred bullets shot out in a single second, only to freeze in front of the girl. All of the Guiding bullets the multiple Genoms had sprayed at the girl simultaneously halted before the Human Error of *Time*'s eyes and froze in midair, utterly defying the laws of physics. The men kept firing, and the fingertip-sized bullets piled up on top of each other, forming a wall in the blink of an eye. Instead of attacking her, it was almost as if they were building a dense barrier to help protect her.

So this was the Human Error of *Time*. No, it was a little different from the Human Errors Genom knew. Perhaps this was the terrible result of humans in this world using Human Errors.

The firing continued for nearly a minute before it stopped.

All the Genoms had run out of Guiding Force. Reinforcements had joined the four, making a total of ten shooting at the girl continuously, at ten rounds per second for a full minute. A total of roughly sixty thousand Guiding bullets, their immense number forming a sphere around their unharmed target.

"Well, that's a problem."

Not one of the bullets had reached her.

Genom snickered despite himself, but the smile faded when he saw the shots reverse direction.

"Oh, shit..."

Genom flinched. It wasn't hard to imagine what would happen next.

The *Time* conjuring *Suspension* didn't erase kinetic energy. Objects that were suspended in time still retained their original momentum. When *Suspension* was released, they would regain all that energy.

The Genoms tossed their weapons aside and dived for cover, hiding behind anything they could. If they were lucky, it would be enough.

However, the snap judgments and evasive actions of an ordinary person were useless in the face of a Human Error.

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

The amassed ball of bullets exploded outward.

Sixty thousand Guiding bullets imbued with *Acceleration* sped out in all directions. With their speed and rotation multiplied to an excessive degree, each one was more than powerful enough to kill. Their movements created no sound, even as they pierced through all the Genoms without exception. The men could do nothing, for they were obliterated without a trace. Their blood vanished into the cloud of dust.

And the destruction didn't stop at the Genoms.

The building around them met the same fate. It couldn't even be called a collapse. The structure was blown apart so completely that no rubble survived. Everything around the girl disintegrated.

Afterward, there was nothing left.

With the floor beneath her gone, the girl fell slowly. She descended gradually and gracefully from the ceiling district to the city below, landing lightly on her feet and looking up.

There was a spherical hole carved out of a portion of the city on the ceiling.

It was like the hypocenter after an explosion. The girl peered up, her expression devoid of emotion. She looked inhumanly beautiful.

Footsteps echoed, coming toward her.

She turned her head and saw two people approaching.

"Wow, you really went for it. I guess you're a Human Error, just like my amazing parents. I certainly wouldn't want to fight you, li'l sis."

The first was Abbie. The girl knew her. She was a Primary Triad soldier. Seeing her as a threat, the girl started to point her finger at her...but paused, confused.

She knew the person with Abbie, too.

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"Momo...?"
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"Akari." Momo spoke the girl's name. She laid the white suitcase she carried on the ground and dropped herself down on top of it.

"Go back in for now. You're not needed yet."

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"Not...yet?"
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"That's right. It isn't your time yet."

"But...I..."

Momo beat her heel against the white case. The girl she called Akari winced a little.

"Just do it."

It wasn't a command or an attempt at persuasion.

It was a plea.

"..."

The two stared at each other for a while.

Ultimately, the girl in Menou's form closed her eyes. The strength left her body, and she stood motionless. The black in her hair drained away.

"Phew..." Momo let out a long sigh.

Abbie applauded her. "Way to calm her down, li'l Momo. So, is this what you wanted to show me?"

"Yes. And I wanted to see it, too. We'll be working separately from here on

out." Momo spoke brusquely and turned on her heels to leave.

"Really? Are you sure? Wasn't the deal we made half a year ago for li'l Menou and Akari?"

"I told you. I've seen what I needed to." Momo's tone was clear and cruel. "That person...is my enemy."

Dull pain radiated through her.

"Nngh..."

She pressed a hand to her forehead to ease the headache. It was with that movement that Menou realized she'd returned to consciousness.

"Hmm...?"

Menou looked around. She had no idea where she was. She'd been fighting in the ceiling district moments ago, but now she was in a sunken, empty crater, with nothing around her.

"What...did I...?"

She didn't remember anything after that fatal wound.

Menou touched her chest, only to find no sign of injury. In fact, there wasn't even a hole in her clothes. Had someone told her it was a bad dream, she might have believed them.

Looking up, she saw the city on the ceiling.

"Did I...fall?"

Had she dropped normally, there was no way she could have survived.

Given the disaster around her and the fact that Genom was gone, she must have used a Pure Concept to get out of her predicament somehow. The logical conclusion was that she'd lost her memories of the incident as the price.

"At any rate, all that matters is the Starhusk."

If she'd driven Genom off, even temporarily, that was good enough.

Because if the Starhusk was an otherworld repatriation circle, then Menou would be able to send Akari back to her original world when she finally regained

consciousness.

Menou wanted to live at Akari's side, but she also suspected that she wouldn't be alive for much longer.

She needed to secure a safe path for Akari to follow once she was gone.

"I have to get to the environment control tower."

Her headache had mostly abated. Thinking she was ready to keep moving, she raised her head and—

"Menooooou!"

"Urgh?!"

The weight of the person who barreled into her with alarming force was a little more than she could take.

The impact knocked her down flat. At first she braced herself, assuming it was a new opponent, but no further attacks came. The female assailant pressed her face into Menou.

There was only one person who would—actually, no.

Menou didn't know anyone who would do such a thing. Not even Akari would tackle her in an embrace the moment they met.

For just a moment, Menou's chest tightened with the frustration of forgotten memories, like something was caught in her throat. Then she shook off lost feelings and shouted furiously.

"Abbie! What are you doing?!"

"Aw, come on! I'm happy to see you!"

Menou had survived her battle with Genom, if only barely, and reunited with Abbie in the City of Ruins.

One of the men running down the main street of the City of Ruins stopped abruptly.

He was among the adventurers who'd chased Menou and the others from the underground hub. They had come rushing to the scene after hearing the extremely loud sounds of a battle.

Since they worked for Genom, they weren't allowed to slack off. All knew what came of insubordination.

A man with a rare Guiding prosthetic stopped running. For all the trouble Genom's arrival had brought, it had produced some benefits.

Namely, he gave out Guiding prosthetics to the people of the underground hub for free.

It was a well-known fact that Genom the Arms Dealer sold Guiding prosthetics as one of his unique products. Since some of the adventurers had lost limbs in the course of their dangerous lives, they were sincerely grateful, and they happily attached the new limbs that moved as naturally as their own.

The man who stopped rubbed his metal arm as he looked around nervously.

"What's wrong?"

"Didn't you hear that voice?"

"Huh?"

His fellow hadn't heard a thing. He strained his ears, but even the earlier sounds of battle had gone silent.

Still, the man looked anxious, casting his gaze around wildly.

"No, I definitely heard... Ah..."

His voice trailed off unnaturally. His body began to tremble.

Something was definitely strange here. The man's companion took his shoulders, shaking him lightly.

"H-hey, c'mon. What's going on?"

"Ah... Aaah... Aaaaah... Ngh."

Blurp. A hole opened in the man's face with an unsettling noise.

The other man's mind went blank at the incomprehensible sight. Had the man dropped dead from the transformation, that would've been acceptable, if nothing else. The cause would've remained unknown, but in a world full of conjuring phenomena, there were plenty of incomprehensible things.

However, the changes in his partner didn't stop there.

His flesh bubbled and writhed. His body changed form. On top of that, he was still alive. When the strange transfigurations finally stopped, he'd reformed into the shape of the human feared as the worst villain on the continent.

The man who bore witness trembled in fear.

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"B...Boss..."
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Genom glanced at the man.

"Whoops... You're an adventurer, not one of my guys, eh?"

"Y... Y-yes, siiiir!"

"Bad luck for you."

"Huh?"

While the adventurer stood bewildered, Genom pulled out a large-caliber gun and blew the man's head off.

"Yeah, sorry. Can't have some random guy from who knows where seeing what I just did."

Genom left behind the man he'd murdered to keep his ability a secret and thought back to the battle.

"That must've been the Human Error of Time..."

It was certainly impressive. He'd been destroyed without even being able to put up a fight. It was a little too much for someone of self-proclaimed incompetence like Genom.

"Ain't half bad, though."

A half-hearted battle had dragged out the Human Error. What would happen if he pulled her into something much more intense?

The fragile girl called Flarette would vanish, and the Pure Concept of *Time* that could freeze the entire world would be brought forth.

And if that happened...Genom's wish, the one he'd held since Flare drove him into the Mechanical Society, would finally come true.

Genom gazed at the environment control tower. A swirling sphere of Guiding Light was suspended between the two halves of the spire.

It was one of only two entrances to the Mechanical Society on the continent. Not long ago, Genom had ordered his subordinates to try creating one in the Balar Desert, and now one had naturally manifested here. He had to laugh.

It was such a wonderful thing, it seemed a terrible shame that there were only two.

"Ain't that right? The Mechanical Society's the only place I call home."

Even if Menou did reach the environment control tower, she wouldn't be able to do anything. It was the Astrologer that Genom had to eliminate first and foremost. She had the processing power to control all the functions of the City of Ruins at once.

This was one of the few places where Genom was able to live.

"We'll finally destroy this whole stupid world."

Genom grinned fearlessly and raised his gun.

Half a year earlier...

The World Suspension opened a hole in the White Night barrier. Previously, only a one-color or the occasional two-color conjured soldier was able to exit, but the new aperture meant that soldiers made with all three Primary Colors could leave.

Abbie had her reasons for leaving the Mechanical Society as soon as she was given the chance.

First, if she got out, the other three-color conjured soldiers wouldn't be able to follow. The hole in the barrier could only be used by a certain number of people; there was a limit on the volume it would allow through.

Second, her younger brothers and sisters tended to be very exclusionary. If any of them had gone to investigate first, they would probably declare that humanity was unnecessary within three days. They'd even declared that they felt no one else should be allowed on the ark but themselves.

Abbie was glad her younger siblings had grown up so protective of their kind, but not that they wanted to exclude humanity.

Abbie dumped all her work on her younger brother, the eldest boy Ginoum, to get ahead of all the other conjured soldiers and escaped through the new hole in the Mechanical Society to the outside world.

Her first goal was to find her new little sister, who'd just been created in the outside world. Abbie wanted to take the girl into her care, since the helpless thing was wandering around with no idea how her real body worked, leaving all of her consciousness in her terminal.

However, the first person Abbie encountered in that city that covered the ground above and below was a girl sitting on a white box. When she'd stopped, the girl addressed her.

"This is the underground City of Ruins. It's usually sealed, but a certain someone decided to invite me in on a whim. According to that person, the entrance will be left open from now on."

The girl kindly told Abbie where she was.

"My name is Momo. Hey, Ability Control... Let's make a trade."

How did the girl know her name? While Abbie pondered this, the girl who called herself Momo opened the white suitcase she'd been sitting on.

Inside was a girl frozen in a curled-up position. Although she was adorable, with black hair and a youthful face, her chest demanded Abbie's attention.

A white shard had been thrust into it. The power hidden in that piece of a blade was more than enough to catch Abbie's interest.

"I need to keep her hidden and safe, no matter what it takes. I want you to put her inside your zone through that entrance and protect her."

Abbie didn't know how to answer. Allowing foreign matter into one's zone was far from pleasant. To put Momo's proposal in human terms, it would be as uncomfortable as swallowing something whole to hide it in one's stomach.

Whether she knew this or not, Momo held up two fingers and went on matter-of-factly. "There are two ways this can benefit you. One. The information you'd gain from her. She's an Otherworlder, and comes with the Sword of Salt. That's gotta be worth researching, whether it's for your ark or not. Maybe you'll get something from analyzing her on a micromachine level."

She knew about the ark. That made Abbie even more cautious.

"Two. I'll tell you the location of the person you're looking for. It's funny, really. She's a sham of a human who's been possessed by Concepts of Primary Colors. If you work with her and her companions, you should get the info you're after."

Abbie relayed her consent with gestures. Nothing was more important to her than her family. Those younger than she was were to be protected, and those who'd lived longer needed to be destroyed. She wouldn't hesitate to swallow a little discomfort if it meant obtaining information about her little sister.

"Also, this is just a piece of sincere advice..." Momo's expression turned perplexed while Abbie rested her wings and listened. "As much as I do think that form is pretty...I believe you'd be better off taking a human form while you're on this side."

With that, Momo handed over the black-haired girl, and Abbie took on a camouflaged form resembling an older version of the girl.

A tremor shook Sahara from behind.

It felt as if the entire City of Ruins was being rattled around. Looking over her shoulder, Sahara spied several of the buildings from the ceiling district collapsing.

She judged it to be where Menou and Genom were fighting. Nothing remained in the center of the destruction.

Even the especially large station building had been blasted away by the shock waves. Sahara shuddered and quickened her pace.

Did that mean Menou's battle was over? And if so, who won? Sahara couldn't be sure that Menou emerged victorious. She knew very well that Genom wasn't so easily beaten.

But Sahara didn't have time to worry about anyone else right now.

"Over there."

She was being pursued.

The men must have come along when Genom stormed the theater room. Had they split off from a contingent surrounding the movie theater, then their comrades must have been caught in the blast a moment ago, yet they didn't seem particularly concerned.

"Go, go! Right there, Sahara! No, not like that...! If you used your Guiding Shot, you could've taken them all out at once...! Come on, now! Aah, you missed your chance..."

If it wasn't for Deadweight #2 here, Sahara could've been long gone by now.

Nono, who Sahara carried under one arm, kept issuing instructions, even though she clearly wasn't going to participate in the battle. The confidence in

her commands probably came from her Star eyes that saw the near future.

Quite frankly, it was very annoying.

"Honestly, Nono..." Maya poked her head out of Sahara's shadow, which had become her go-to emergency shelter by now. "Do you need to keep heckling even though you can't fight?"

"Oh, come onnn. Don't take away my only source of amusement. Where's the fun if you can't keep yelling and yammering?"

"What a pain in the neck."

Maya stared at Nono coldly.

"...So she really can't fight?"

Sahara had started to suspect as much, considering that Nono never made moves on her own, despite all her directions. But surely a conjured soldier should be able to fight. She looked at Nono skeptically.

"At the very least, I've certainly never seen her do it, not once," Maya said. "Well? Am I wrong?"

"Don't be absurd. I'm a genius, remember? Not once in my seventeen years of life have I done something as boorish as fighting."

For some reason, even though she was declaring that she would be of absolutely no help in this situation, she puffed up her chest with pride. Since Sahara was carrying her under one arm, however, it just made her look like a curled-back shrimp.

"In fact, this body is only for calculations, so it's less powerful than the average human's! I'm a delicate magical girl genius, just as my appearance suggests, so I'll thank you to handle me with the utmost care!"

"So you really are just a deadweight who's good for nothing but slowing us down...!"

"Agreed. Why do you seem so proud to admit something like that?"

"Like you're any better, Maya."

"Excuse me?! I'm allowed to do this, because Sahara is my servant! Right,

Sahara?"

Deadweight #1 protested at being lumped in with Deadweight #2, but as far as being useless in a fight, they were peas in a pod. Were these two really half of the Four Major Human Errors who destroyed the ancient civilization? It was enough to make Sahara want to cry.

"Ngh. Seriously, why am I stuck doing this...?"

Evil and Star. Sahara lugged two of history's most famous Pure Concept holders as she fled. She longed for the days when she got to lie around doing nothing in Grisarika. How was the kingdom handling her sudden disappearance anyway?

I hope Ashuna is looking for me... I hope the Director isn't, though. Sahara's mind wandered back to those peaceful times.

While small tears welled up in her eyes, she continued charging through the city streets, never stopping. She turned a corner to the right and cursed under her breath.

A group of men with Guiding prosthetics blocked the way—Genom's subordinates. Sahara had fled from the adventurers only to run into a worse group.

If she stopped to fight here, the adventurers would catch her in a pincer attack.

"See? This is what happens when you don't listen to me. Now we've got even more enemies on our hands," Nono chided.

A vein throbbed in Sahara's temple, betraying her irritation.

Technically, Nono was correct, but it was just too aggravating to have someone who couldn't even fight boss her around while looking so smug. Besides, if things truly became hopeless, Maya's Pure Concept could make quick work of enemies with Guiding prosthetics.

Sahara considered tossing Nono and making a break for it. However, something happened before she came to a decision. The men abruptly went still.

All at once, they went from shouting and dashing at Sahara to silently trembling. It was such peculiar behavior that Sahara slowed to a stop despite herself.

She watched as the men's prosthetic limbs began to take over their bodies. It was a similar phenomenon to when Sahara was sucked into her own arm in the Balar Desert.

When the process reached their heads, a hole appeared in each of their faces.

Their flesh bubbled and transformed under their clothes, reshaping their figures and facial features to match a single mold.

While Sahara was shocked into silence, the sight of a group of different people all transforming into the same person made Maya's eyes sparkle, for some strange reason.

"Wow, I've seen a sci-fi movie like this before! I never thought I'd get to see it happen in real life."

"Huh. I've never seen it. What was the movie?" Nono asked.

"It was a big blockbuster hit, unlike your ridiculous shark movies."

Faced with this anomaly, the pair of inexplicably calm Otherworlders began a film discussion that Sahara couldn't follow in the slightest.

Once the men finished their transformations, they silently pulled Guiding guns from the holes in their faces.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Prosthetic Arm, Inner Seal Conjuration—Activate [Skill: Medium-Range Sweeping Form]

Acting out of sheer instinctual terror, Sahara transformed her arm into a Gatling gun and mowed them all down before they could finish taking the guns out. Strangely, they made no effort to dodge or defend themselves, simply going down as they were hit.

"Huff... Huff! Wh-what just happened?!"

The men made no attempt to evade or to use defensive conjurings.

Sahara wished it was a nightmare. She cautiously checked the faces of the

corpses. Sure enough, they were all the same.

She'd never forget that face, not since first seeing it in the Wild Frontier. It belonged to Genom Cthulha.

Why had other people suddenly turned into Genom? He'd never displayed this power when they clashed in the Mechanical Society. While Sahara stared in confusion, someone poked her on the cheek from behind.

"Sahara, oh, Sahara..."

"What now?!"

Just as Sahara whirled in aggravation, a bullet grazed her cheek.

Blood dripped from the light wound. When Sahara froze, Nono grinned and gave her a thumbs-up.

"I was trying to tell you that standing around is dangerous. Nicely dodged!"

The tightly drawn string of tension in her snapped. Color drained from her face, and any emotions in her expression dropped away. The situation had surpassed Sahara's comprehension.

She peered in the direction of the shot. The sniper was within visible range. He watched her through a scope, from the window of a building that wasn't connected to theirs.

Normally, this would've been a safe range to fire from without fear of a counterattack. But Sahara had a means of retaliating from this distance.

"...Well, damn. That ain't a good match for me."

Genom looked annoyed when he saw his target's abilities.

He'd attacked with five of himself at once, only for them to be mowed down in less than ten seconds. The same formation that had cornered Flarette was nothing to this new opponent.

That metal arm was the problem.

The gun it transformed into wasn't especially powerful, weaker than Genom's mass-produced machine guns. A normal priestess or knight could probably dodge or block it easily enough. It might even be survivable with some

especially good Guiding Enhancement.

Genom couldn't block it, though. He couldn't use crest conjurings or move quickly with Guiding Enhancement. It was all he could do to stand around like a target practice dummy.

Ironically, Genom's greatest weakness was the Guiding guns that he himself distributed.

"Taking control of the fight with random fire is supposed to be my specialty..."

Most of his opponents, be they priestesses or knights, tended to focus on close combat. Their typical move was to block Guiding guns with barrier conjurings and move in close for the finish. However, that nun's strategies were essentially the same as Genom's.

She used the high-power Pile Driver in close quarters. Her Guiding gun form was flexible and lethal. Her command of Guiding Shot seemed extremely polished. All in all, it was as though her techniques deliberately specialized in taking down a large number of weaklings.

Plus, there was that blasted future sight. As long as she had that, sniper attacks were pointless. Even if he'd fired with multiple shooters from different angles, she'd know where each would land and move accordingly. The only remaining option was to overwhelm her with numbers, but Genom didn't have enough subordinates around to feel confident that it would work.

"Hey, wait a minute. Why doesn't my Possession work on her?"

That was the biggest question of all.

Genom was the one who put the Guiding prosthetic on that girl.

"Mine is from the Guardian, dammit. It oughtta be better than hers, unless there's something weird mixed in there, or... Ah, shit. This chick can snipe, too?"

In fact, it seemed like she was even better at it than he was.

Genom grimaced irritably right before a Guiding bullet blew his head off.

"See? That's enough to kill most people, aside from a certain pink gorilla," Sahara grumbled to herself once she confirmed that her shot had eliminated the target.

People who were exceptionally good at Guiding Enhancement could repel Guiding bullets with their body alone, but that was an exception, not the rule. People who sometimes sensed a sniper attack and dodged it on some animal instinct were freaks of nature, arguably not even human. Sahara could only conclude that the pink-haired girl had to be some variant of a gorilla.

Generally speaking, Guiding guns pierced and destroyed human bodies just fine.

With this brief tangent helping to keep her sanity intact in the face of the chaos, Sahara changed her Guiding arm from a sniper rifle back to normal.

Her actions these past few days had been deeply out of character. Sahara turned around, wearing a serious expression.

"I wanna leave the City of Ruins now. What do you think?"

"Now, now, Madam Sahara." Nono nervously raised her hand. "Like I said before, the fate of the world is at stake here, remember? Things will get really bad if we don't do something."

"Shut up, useless."

Sahara's face remained deadpan as she insulted Nono. She had no intention of relying on the girl's future sight. Depending on Nono meant being used by her.

"I trust that Menou will fix it somehow. So I'm out of here."

Sahara's question had really been a declaration of intent.

She turned to go, but as she broke into a run to leave Nono behind, something grabbed her ankle, sending her crashing face-first into the ground.

"Sahara."

Maya had prevented Sahara's escape.

The girl emerged from Sahara's shadow and crouched next to her while she rolled on the ground in silent agony.

"I want to stop Pandæmonium."

"...That really hurt, you know."

"She's a twisted version of me. If a part of myself is causing problems, then I think I need to be the one to stop it." Maya ignored Sahara, who clutched her painfully injured nose. "That's what I want to do. That's the reason I'm needed in this world. You can't take that away from me."

"Maya...! You've really grown up! I'm so happy!"

"Quiet, Nono. Your compliments mean nothing to me."

"Oof. Now I'm sad because you've grown up too much."

Nono withered under Maya's cool gaze.

Sahara interrupted as the two bickered, casting an accusing look at Maya.

"First of all, I want you to apologize. That was seriously painful."

"Okay. I'm sorry, Sahara." Maya patted her gently. "But you said you'd work hard for me, didn't you?"

Sahara didn't want to do this. Who would? But at this point, she had a hard time refusing, when this little girl needed her. Sahara heaved a long sigh and stood up.

The three of them resumed their journey toward the environment control tower looming in the distance.

"From what I've heard, I'm guessing he can take over humans who he's equipped with a Guiding prosthetic," Abbie replied after hearing Menou explain her encounter with Genom.

Having regrouped in the lower half of the city, the pair moved for the environment control tower while exchanging information.

"The kids who attacked us when we first got here all had artificial limbs, too, didn't they? He can probably possess people with them."

Genom was famous for dealing in three main products.

Humans, Guiding guns, and Guiding prosthetics.

The prosthetic limbs, which operated as naturally as organic body parts, were highly advanced technology that couldn't be replicated by modern means. In

the Mechanical Society, when a piece of a humanoid body was lost, it was formed into a prosthetic. Just as this city had self-repairing functions, the Mechanical Society presumably employed micromachines to aid in the function of humanoid bodies.

But of course, not everyone could enter the Mechanical Society. Grisarika Kingdom had forged a peace treaty with the Mechanical Society, but that border had been the site of battle between many humans and conjured soldiers. There was no guaranteeing someone would come back safely if they ventured into that place.

And yet Genom had acquired prosthetic arms for sale that could attach to anyone.

"He equips other people with prosthetics that contain a part of his own soul. Then he gradually uses the connection to the body to corrode their spirit and turn their soul into his own, turning them into faithful pawns he can order at will. Ultimately, they seem to become terminals that he can possess and use as his own whenever he wants," Abbie continued.

The people who worked for Genom directly all had Guiding prosthetic parts. Besides arms and legs, there were some whose eyes, parts of their torsos, or occasionally even their hearts had been replaced. Since the Guiding prosthetics compensated for what was lost, many joined Genom, thinking him to be a benevolent benefactor.

Perhaps it was true for some, but certainly not for the majority.

When something was directly linked to one's body, it was difficult to resist soul contamination. Genom had won his subordinates' loyalty using something resembling brainwashing.

"So he uses the prosthetics he provides to turn other people into parts of himself that he can control. That explains why there are multiple Genoms," Menou said.

"Mm-hmm." Abbie nodded. "The hole that appears in their faces when they've been completely taken over is a Guiding Force channel he uses to control them remotely. I'm guessing that it's connected to the real Genom so he can operate his terminals."

"In that case..."

Sahara's situation immediately came to mind. She'd mentioned that her Guiding prosthetic right arm had somehow formed in the Mechanical Society after she fought Genom and lost.

"Will Sahara be all right?" Menou asked.

"She'll be fine. I hate to say it, but she has Concepts of Original Sin mixed with her soul. Which means Concepts of Primary Colors won't be able to meddle with her, not a chance."

That was a relief, at least.

Although Menou and Abbie were separated from Sahara, they could take comfort in knowing she likely wouldn't get into a life-threatening situation.

Genom presumably chose his controllable subordinates carefully.

Menou's impression from their fight was that Genom's specs as an individual weren't especially exceptional. What made him such a threat was the ability to cooperate between multiple selves that shared a hive mind. These selves all shared information with no apparent time lag. That instant transmission of information was the most frightening part.

By that logic, he would probably want to leave any subordinates that were stronger than he was on an individual level to fight on their own, instead of taking them over as terminals. And he would definitely send those personnel after Menou and Abbie.

After all, if he sent his carefully preserved elite to fight Sahara and company in the ceiling district, Maya's Concepts of Original Sin could nullify them in a single hit. Surely Genom was also aware that the elites he first sent to attack the group were easily neutralized.

As Menou was thinking about this, Abbie suddenly stopped.

"That's right, I almost forgot."

Abbie reached into the gear design on her stomach and pulled out a book.

"Here, Menou, I have a present for you."

"Is this...a scripture?"

Menou's eyes widened at the unexpected offering. At first, she thought Abbie had reproduced a scripture with her abilities, but as soon as she took it into her hands, she knew it was no fake. This was the genuine article.

"Where'd this come from? We haven't seen a single priestess since we came underground, have we?"

"It's a gift from a very cute girl."

"A very cute girl? Come on, now..."

Was she really calling herself cute? Menou glowered at Abbie. However, the conjured soldier seemed completely unbothered by her judgmental gaze.

Menou had admittedly wished she'd had more tricks up her sleeve during the fight with Genom. So she slipped the scripture onto a belt that fixed around her stomach beneath her hooded mantle that was meant to hold up her high socks. This way, she could employ scripture conjurings without occupying her hands.

A scripture was a convenient conjuring book that could invoke multiple conjurings. Since entering the City of Ruins, Menou had found herself missing her old one several times. She accepted it, figuring there was no reason not to use it. Yet she still felt a twinge of hesitation.

There was no reason not to, right?

However, she felt there was one when she recalled how she'd given hers up—a very important reason indeed.

Unfortunately, Menou was getting used to not being able to remember things.

"Well, I guess it's always good to have more weapons at my disposal..."

"Don't worry, it's only got the conjuring invocation functions activated. Carrying it won't leak our information to Hakua or anything... Oh, hey, there's my li'l sis. She's really doing her best up there!"

Abbie stared up at the city on the ceiling, as if she had no interest in the scripture she'd handed over. Squinting, Menou just barely made out black dots in the distance. It was amazing that Abbie had spotted them so far below.

"Do you really think this is the time to be playing around?" Menou asked.

"You're right, I'm sorry. It really isn't the time. I need to come up with a conclusion soon." Abbie's agreement was so unexpectedly serious that Menou was actually confused.

Come to think of it, Menou hadn't seen any enemies for a while. It was almost unnaturally quiet. And yet Sahara and company were being chased around overhead.

"Hey, li'l Menou. Do you remember why I left the Mechanical Society?"

"You came to find Sahara, right?"

"Well, yes, of course."

Evidently, Menou wasn't wrong, and Abbie nodded enthusiastically. Such mysterious positivity from the conjured soldier probably would've disturbed Sahara.

"The truth is, I really just wanted to bring my new li'l sis back to the Mechanical Society right away. But since you were there, too, and it was convenient for me to pretend to be human and travel around, I decided to do some observation."

"Observation?" Menou echoed.

"Mm-hmm. I am the eldest sister, you know. So when a hole opened in the barrier that allowed three-colors to leave, I took it."

Just as a hole in the Pandemonium fog barrier only permitted Pandæmonium to release a single pinky finger, there must have been a limit on what class of conjured soldiers could cross the opening in the White Night. Only one-or two-color soldiers were permitted before. The Mechanical Society remained the entire accessible world for three-colors, those intelligent conjured life-forms made of the Primary Triad.

"Are there humans who can coexist with us? Is there anything that we have to preserve? Any valuable materials? Cultures? Ideas and societies? There were so many choices to be made."

Abbie folded her fingers down one by one as she counted.

Menou frowned. "Why are you telling me all this now?"

"Do you know why it'd be really bad if the space containing the City of Ruins shatters?"

Menou furrowed her brow. No one had told her, but she caught on immediately.

If the environment control tower and the nucleus of the Starhusk fused, the disturbance would cause the white liquid to fly off and fall like rain. And if the tower pierced the core and destroyed it, the other "stars" would crash down, causing unprecedented destruction in the north.

"Then we have to stop th—"

"Okay, then." Abbie interrupted Menou midsentence. "So what do you think will occur if the White Night barrier enclosing the Mechanical Society is destroyed?"

"Ah..."

Menou breathed a small gasp.

The Mechanical Society in the Wild Frontier was undoubtedly the largest subspace in the world. The pocket constructed of Primary Colors was continuously expanding, fed by the micromachines constantly coughed up by the Human Error of *Vessel*. Its expansion was only possible because it was sealed off like the City of Ruins.

So if the White Night barrier that kept the Mechanical Society in an enclosed space broke...what would happen?

The answer came to Menou right away. The phenomenon itself wasn't far off from what was occurring in the City of Ruins, so the logical conclusion was simple.

"The spaces would...intersect...?"

"Mm-hmm." Abbie bobbed her head, then added the part Menou was too terrified to voice aloud.

"On a continental scale." There was a trace of a smile on Abbie's lips as she spoke.

A disquieting chill settled into Menou's chest.

If a subspace that had been expanded using Concepts of Primary Colors was removed for some reason, the matter that existed within would overlap with that outside, causing them to collide. When the two spaces combined, a certain phenomenon would occur.

"An intersection means overlapping matter will fuse. Did you know that it also produces a shock wave relative to the total mass involved?"

"Yes...I know."

Menou felt the chill spread.

The scale of the Mechanical Society, which existed within the White Night barrier, far eclipsed the City of Ruins. It had grown to cover all available land after expanding for a thousand years. By now it surely rivaled the continent.

"If the White Night barrier shattered, the enclosed environment where we conjured soldiers live will be released. The Mechanical Society will cover with the entire surface of this continent... I bet the resulting shock wave could destroy the continent itself."

Menou failed to find words.

She wanted to laugh it off as ridiculous, but she couldn't. This threat, utterly different from the ones she'd been focused on since they came underground, came as such a shock that she couldn't wrap her head around it.

"Wait. That's only if the barrier of the Mechanical Society was broken, right?"

"Mm-hmm. That's right."

"But it won't break, will it?"

As Menou sought salvation, Abbie's only response was a smile.

The barrier that enclosed the Mechanical Society had been intact for a thousand years. But in the last year, just like Pandemonium, it had begun to creak and strain.

And while the future Abbie described was the worst imaginable outcome for humanity, to the conjured soldiers that lived in the Mechanical Society, it was far from a terrible prospect.

"This is probably the only way. If we conjured soldiers want to completely wipe out all the monsters that started with Pandæmonium, that is."

The fusion of the two would annihilate the continent. Abbie and her people would destroy their sworn enemies at the cost of the world itself.

That's why Abbie had come out first when the hole appeared in the barrier.

When it first began to bend, Abbie and the others foresaw the future disaster and rushed to construct an ark to carry them to the sky, where the spatial intersection would be minimal. The impact at the moment of fusion was born when solid matter overlapped. The air lacked large solids and was relatively safe.

Fortunately, the conjured soldiers were able to complete their ark while time looped over and over in the outside world.

All that remained was deciding what to put on it.

"By the way, li'l Menou..." Abbie twined her hands behind her back. "Which Pure Concept was it that damaged the barrier, again?" Despite her asking, they both knew the answer.

"..."

Almost involuntarily, Menou took a step back. Sahara's warning replayed in her mind a moment too late.

Time had damaged the barriers enclosing the Human Errors, the same concept that Menou used through Akari.

If Abbie wanted to destroy the White Night barrier, what would she do?

While Menou considered an escape, she sensed someone behind her.

"Get it? Ability's got her answer now. You humans ain't worth saving."

Genom stepped into view.

Wait a minute... Menou's mind whirred frantically.

Genom had been in the Mechanical Society for a long time, and he hadn't attacked Menou since she reunited with Abbie. Had the two been

communicating in secret somehow?

"The era of conjured soldiers is upon us. Nah, they won't even be called that anymore! They'll be the only intelligent life in the world, with an iron grip on the hegemony! Won't that be great? Bet they'll make a better world than any stupid human civilization ever did."

The man who'd lost all faith in humanity declared his intent to Abbie, who held the future of the world in her hands.

"Let's hurry up and get rid of this stupid world already. The World Regression and World Suspension have already messed up the White Night barrier plenty. So much so that it'll only take one last push to break it."

Genom pointed at Menou.

"If we beat you down until the Human Error of *Time* comes back, it'll all be over. The world will be ruled by Primary Color space, which works just fine by me. Michele? Hakua Shirakami? Who cares about them? We're gonna blow 'em all to smithereens! Right, Ability Control?!"

It was anyone's guess if the two barriers that trapped the Major Human Errors could hold up to another World Suspension.

"C'mon, make a pact with me, right here. If we corner Flare's successor, she'll turn into a Human Error. That'll be it for this whole stupid world."

"You're right, Genom."

What he said was true. If Abbie thought only of her little brothers and sisters, then destroying the White Night barrier was clearly best.

Human civilization would be wiped away, along with its entire burdensome legacy. All that remained would be Concepts of Primary Colors in the form of conjured life-forms. It would change the entire structure of the world. There would be no more Human Errors, and no more Concepts of Original Sin.

While Abbie pictured that ideal world, she punched Genom with all her might.

"...Huh?"

Menou stood frozen by the unexpected act.

An astonished Genom went flying at an unbelievable speed, disappearing from view in the blink of an eye. Abbie twirled around to meet Menou's gaze.

"You know, I realized something when I traveled with all of you..." The conjured soldier who'd never killed a single person during their entire journey smiled helplessly. "It turns out I really love this world. So much that I don't want to destroy a single thing in it."

This was so unexpected that Menou just stood there blinking for a moment.

"Abbie... I guess you really were our ally all along, then."

"Whaaat?! You still doubted me?! I demand an apology and compensation!"

Menou slumped, relieved that Abbie had returned to her usual behavior.

She'd never been able to discern Abbie's real thoughts, the ones lurking behind her light attitude. That unfounded degree of friendliness didn't make sense to her.

However, there was nothing behind it at all. Abbie simply cared for humanity, and she aided Menou and the others purely out of good intentions.

"Okay... How should I make it up to you, exactly?"

"Ohhh! How about a passionate hu— Wha?!"

For some reason, when Menou embraced her as requested, Abbie reacted with shock. Menou grinned, then released the other girl.

"All right, then, let's get to the environment control tower."

"Mm-hmm! That hug gave me all the energy I need!"

Menou and Abbie set off running, trailing light from Guiding Enhancement.

After being knocked some distance away, Genom stood up.

Apparently, Abbie's policy of not killing people even applied to someone using a subordinate as a puppet.

He took a deep, long breath.

"Got it."

He sighed with heavy disappointment.

He felt no despair, though. Although a tremendous setback, this wasn't enough to deny him his chance to destroy the world.

"It's a damn shame. After the Mechanical Society saved me, who woulda thought I'd have to destroy one of its admins?"

Genom pulled out a shotgun from his face. Then he pointed it at the sky and fired.

It was a signal.

This marked the beginning of the end. Playtime was over. It meant they were now permitted to use the attack methods that Genom kept to himself instead of selling them to others.

"Destroying this stupid world will be child's play. Once I get rid of you, all I gotta do is send a message to the other zone admins."

He didn't need a next time.

He could still bring down the curtain here and now.

"I'll tell 'em that Ability Control, who preached about peace with humanity, was taken down by the foolish humans who refused to trust her."

Light flashed near the center of the City of Ruins—a signal.

Menou hadn't done it. She and the others were supposed to be moving undetected, plus she could communicate using a scripture now. Still, the obvious beacon was an efficient means of sending information to everyone nearby.

Genom must have issued an order to his subordinates still hiding in the city. Based on the current situation, Menou could guess what it meant.

Doubtless, it was an order for all hands to charge in and kill her and her allies.

Menou launched herself forward.

Her body accelerated quickly, thanks to her full-strength Guiding Enhancement. She took three more steps, then abandoned her path. An enormous leap carried her through the air to land hard on the wall of a nearby building. The recoil was enough to crack the structure.

Menou bounced from the wall of one building to the next, moving like the wind.

Abbie kept pace close beside her.

There was a smile on Menou's lips. She felt strangely liberated. It was almost as if a missing piece had fallen perfectly into place. However, there were many enemies yet lurking in the City of Ruins. She spotted figures on the roof of the building ahead. Two men. Each had Guiding prosthetics for both arms.

They would clash in mere seconds.

The men waited until the last moment, then closed in with sharp movements. Both aimed for the moment Menou landed and brought down their Guiding prosthetic arms at her.

Landing on the roof, Menou twisted her body and dived sideways. Her foes grasped only empty air behind her. When they were each close enough to touch, Menou lashed out with her right hand.

Blood sprayed through the air.

She hadn't killed them. But the men wouldn't be fighting again for a while, let alone catching Menou and Abbie, who were already making their escape.

Menou didn't spare a glance at the aftermath, preferring to continue running. There were few humans who could keep up with her, even among Genom's direct subordinates. She heard sporadic gunshots as she ran, but the Guiding bullets never came close to hitting her, leaving holes in her wake.

"Hey, you! Don't get distracted by my li'l sis when I'm right here!" Abbie sounded extremely cheerful. Her loud taunt won Genom's attention, although it was likely because he simply couldn't deal with both women simultaneously.

An explosion rang out in the ceiling district.

A second followed shortly after, then a third. Buildings began plummeting down in Menou and Abbie's path. The Genoms in the ceiling district had destroyed the buildings to drop them like weapons. He probably set explosives to set off this defensive trap when he claimed the City of Ruins. Structures fell like icicles in the winter.

The pair dodged the shower of rubble and continued their sprint. Behind them, a whole single-story house crashed into the ground. The vibrations spurred them forward.

"...Abbie?" Menou called.

"I didn't think he'd go this far..."

Even as the pair wove their way through the chaos that made it seem like the sky was falling, Menou shot a dry, accusing look at Abbie, who answered apologetically.

Suddenly, a huge shadow appeared above them.

One of the largest structures in the ceiling district, a station building, was dropping toward them.

Genom likely had subordinates nearby, yet he clearly didn't care. Menou pointed her dagger gun up to intercept, but Abbie stopped her gently.

As the building plummeted, Abbie reached out with both arms.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Primary Red Stone, Pseudo-Primary Color Concept—Invoke [Primary Color Type: Mantis Might]

Abbie's arms transformed into sickles, like those of a praying mantis, and she waved them in a broad slash.

The single stroke must have exceeded the speed of sound. The building, which was hundreds of meters tall, was cut cleanly in two, and shock waves down the middle scattered pieces, sending them flying to either side, leaving a perfect route forward for Menou and Abbie.

Sound caught up not long after.

It was so loud that it might have caused hearing loss. The quake struck with such intensity that standing proved challenging. Menou and Abbie didn't let either slow them down, however, pressing onward.

Soon, they would reach the environment control tower.

The enemy knew their destination, though, and Genom was wise enough to keep men lying in wait.

Roughly a dozen people were gathered near the environment control tower, likely Genom's elite. At the very least, none of them were weaker than those who'd first attacked Menou and her friends when they arrived.

Menou didn't hesitate.



She charged right into the enemy encampment. One of them, a man with an artificial eye, started to invoke a conjuring.

Menou sent Guiding Force into her dagger to charge it, then aimed above the group of ambushers and threw it in an arc.

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

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Prosthetic Eye, Inner Seal Conjuration— Activate [Skill: Basilisk Eye]

The enemy's counterattack was a matter conversion conjuring using a Concept of Primary Colors. Before the green Guiding Light struck its target, Menou used her Guiding Thread to transfer power.

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

Her dagger spun in midair directly above the man with the artificial eye, then changed direction and plunged downward with the momentum from the Gust.

Sensing it just in time, the man ducked his head aside so that it stabbed into his shoulder instead. While it wasn't enough to defeat him, it did interrupt the concentration needed for his conjuring.

Menou arced through the air after her dagger, landing in the middle of Genom's forces.

Gunshots rang out. The men used the same kind of Guiding guns Genom employed. They were smart enough to avoid any foolish friendly fire, carefully calculating their timing and aiming for the moment when Menou stopped moving. The barrage of bullets was too intense to be completely blocked with her Multi-Barrier.

But now Menou had a scripture hidden under her yellow hooded mantle.

The book, tucked into a belt on her back, glowed with Guiding Light.

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

Not even the large-caliber guns could scratch the barrier wall that formed.

Menou sent more Guiding Force into the scripture, using her most familiar conjuring.

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

The Guiding Light that rose from the scripture took the form of a church bell.

But her enemies were experienced, too. They saw through the conjuring construction right away and scattered to evade the attack.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Primary Red Stone, Pseudo-Primary Color Concept—Invoke [Primary Color Type: Blue Spider]

Before they could escape, Abbie called upon a Pseudo-Concept. A large conjured soldier formed to startle the men into stopping. It was a stalling tactic to compensate for the slow construction of the scripture conjuring.

Genom's forces stopped for only an instant, and that proved a deadly mistake.

The Guiding Force bell tolled.

One ring. The men fell, clutching their heads, unable to resist. Two rings. The resounding shock waves of Guiding Force burst the blood vessels in their limbs. Three rings. Not one of their number was able to stay conscious any longer.

A single conjuring had knocked out more than a dozen men.

"That ought to do it."

"Whoo-hoo!"

Having easily incapacitated the group of enemies, Menou accepted Abbie's offer for a high five.

The battle lasted less than thirty seconds from start to finish.

Menou checked the way they'd come and sensed no enemy reinforcements approaching. This had been the last of them. Anyone behind must have been buried by falling buildings or else slowed by climbing over or around the rubble.

Menou and Abbie gazed up at the environment control tower. It seemed even larger up close.

They were headed for the top, where they would regroup with Sahara, Maya, and Nono, defeat the real Genom, and drive off Pandæmonium. However, Menou and Abbie paused before entering the spire.

"What in the world?" Menou breathed.

Something was happening up in the ceiling district that was too strange to ignore.

A little while earlier, before Abbie rejected Genom and his proposal...

...several figures crept around the ceiling district—Sahara, Maya, and Nono.

Guided by Nono's directions, they made their way through the upside down city. While their path was extremely roundabout, it skirted all enemies.

"Tell me something, Nono..." Once the tension eased a little, Maya addressed Nono accusingly.

"Whenever you come up with a plan, you always keep parts secret. Why? Do you just like deceiving people for fun?"

"Do you understand what you're really asking me, I wonder?"

Maya's eyes narrowed at the evasive response.

Nono, who could see the future, regularly kept details to herself and even lied about certain things. She did whatever it took to trick people into helping her.

"Well... You knew all this would happen, right?"

"Oh-ho-ho? My dear Maya, are you suggesting that I predicted a strange person would attack us in the movie theater, that we'd be separated from Menou, and that something interesting would happen to Sahara? Hmm?"

Sahara perked up slightly at the mention of her name. "Huh? What do you mean, 'something interesting'?"

"Well, you did know, didn't you? That's how you've always been, Nono," Maya said.

"Hellooo? Is something weird gonna happen to me?" Despite Sahara's insistence, she was thoroughly ignored.

"Well, yes, I did. You're quite right, Maya!" Nono was quick to admit that

Maya was correct.

"You knew that weirdo was going to attack us, and that we would get split up from Menou?"

"Yep."

"Then why didn't you warn us right away?"

"Ah-ha-ha, you've always been such a child, Maya." Nono cheerfully laughed off Maya's complaints. No guilt over deceiving people with her future sight tainted her smile. The star-shaped Guiding Light in her eyes glittered.

"Why, if I solved all those issues before they went wrong, then there'd be no chance for this magical girl genius to steal the spotlight and save the day. Kidding, kidding! Come on, can't you tell I was joking?!"

When Maya silently adopted a conjuring posture, her eyes shining with red Guiding Light, Nono hurriedly took her statement back.

"I've said it before, and I'm sure I'll end up having to say it again. But the truth is, I had no other choice. I can't see anything more."

"...I don't get it. You never explain anything clearly, Nono."

"That's because I don't expect you to understand. This is just to make myself feel better, really, and it might end up being a groundless worry anyway."

"What do you ...?"

Maya was about to press for more information. What did Nono mean by that? Was she going to try to sacrifice them or something?

Any questions dissolved when the three arrived at a strange section of the ceiling city. The flat surface had been smoothed over artificially, and there were no surrounding buildings in the immediate vicinity.

Ahead stood the largest structure in the entire City of Ruins, the environment control tower.

It was the most important structure as well, serving the vital function of keeping the underground space inhabitable by humans. Menou had made it their destination in the hope of gaining access to the Starhusk. After so much trouble, Sahara's group had finally reached it.

The grounds surrounding the tower were clear, no obstructions. Anyone approaching the great spire was bound to stand out immediately.

"The regulations at the time forbade any construction near the environment control tower. There were plenty of measures to prevent terrorist attacks, too. But don't worry, none of those security systems work anymore. All of them stopped a long time ago," Nono said.

Sahara cocked her head to one side. "The buildings are still the same, but they didn't preserve the related systems?"

"It's a resource problem. There aren't enough micromachines. Plus, they don't work as well when you give them complex orders. They've got their drawbacks, like anything else."

"Oh?" Maya tilted her head, not really following.

Meanwhile, Sahara grew increasingly nervous. "Okay, so the old security isn't around anymore, sure..."

No protection systems from the ancient civilization era were likely to have survived a thousand years. Honestly, that much was a relief. The security devices designed to safeguard a highly important structure must have been loaded with cutting-edge technology. Sahara wasn't battle-crazed or overconfident enough to test herself against such things.

However, the environment control tower had recently become a terrorist stronghold. The area leading to the entrance was perfectly flat in all directions. Any lookouts inside undoubtedly had an excellent view. Not even a mouse would escape their notice.

It would make sniping very easy indeed.

Sahara smiled brightly and placed a hand on Nono's back.

"Say, Nono. How would you like to lead the way?"

"What's this, now? Of course the honor of taking the lead should belong to me... Actually, on second thought, no thank you."

She turned back abruptly, presumably after seeing something unfortunate in

the immediate future if she continued any farther.

Sahara's suspicions were correct. "Great. So where did you see the sniper shot coming from in the future? Give me all the details."

"Ah, wait a minute! You were trying to use me as bait?! What a horrible thing to do!"

"She's right, Nono, you should walk in front. That's all you're good for anyway."

"That's so cold, Maya! I'm in shock! Ah, hey, don't... Ngaaah?! I just saw my head go kablooey... No, that way's no good! Please stop pushing meeee!"

Sahara and Maya moved forward with Nono as their shield, calmly disregarding her screams.

By putting Nono in front, the three made it to the entrance of the environment control tower after about a hundred steps.

"Never in my life have I been treated so horribly. I'm amazing, you know..."

After witnessing countless futures that all ended with her shot in the head, Nono was understandably exhausted. That her sniffling and defeated posture didn't seem to be an act made her pain all the more obvious.

However, her companions showed no sympathy.

"Oh yeah? I guess people were much nicer a thousand years ago," Sahara quipped.

"I wish I could tell my past self from the old days to push you around more," Maya added.

"Oh, come onnn..." While Nono bemoaned their cruelty, she pulled herself to her feet nonetheless. "Oh, whatever. At least we made it!"

"Are we really going in? Just us three? We're going to challenge Genom and Pandæmonium?"

"Yup." Maya nodded firmly. Sahara's pessimism expanded by the moment. "Pandæmonium is a part of me, after all. I have to do something about it so Menou can get the Starhusk."

"And what's in it for me?" Sahara asked, her eyes half-lidded.

"You're my servant, remember?" Maya said simply.

Once she was certain that Sahara was sufficiently resigned to her fate, Nono knocked on a nearby wall. "Sahara, destroy this wall for me, would you?" she requested.

"Yeah, yeah." Sahara readied her Guiding prosthetic arm with resignation. Evidently, she'd quit any hope of arguing.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Prosthetic Arm, Inner Seal Conjuration— Activate [Skill: Guiding Shot]

The Guiding Light from her arm broke through the wall.

When the dust cleared, it revealed a mass of flesh.

The inorganic structure was becoming living matter. Tissue throbbed and pulsed, exhibiting signs of life.

Tendrils grew out of the fleshy wall and tried to coil around Maya. Sahara stepped in immediately to cover her, and the pseudopods twined around her right arm—the Guiding prosthetic.

"Tch!"

Sahara cursed and yanked her limb back, forcing it free.

Luckily, there was no sign of any damage or adverse effects. She'd expected the tendrils to erode her body or soul, but they were merely the instruments of a basic physical attack.

"S-Sahara... Are you all right?" Maya asked, her voice trembling.

"I'm fine. It wasn't that strong."

Sahara looked around more carefully.

It was like they were inside the body of a giant living thing. In fact, that might have truly been the case. The entrance to the environment control tower must have been turned into a giant monster as a trap to ensnare and devour intruders. As further proof of this, the slug-like surface of flesh had already halfway pulled a flailing Nono inside.

This was a dangerous place.

Sahara and Maya looked at each other and nodded.

"Couldn't you at least save me before you go exchanging meaningful looks?!"

Nono struggled, squirmed, and managed to pull herself free. Given that Sahara was also able to pull her arm out easily enough, the wall of flesh didn't seem to be particularly strong.

Maya clicked her tongue, looking annoyed. While she was always precocious, it was rare to see her so overtly upset. Nono's words and actions must still have been seriously bothering her. "You're so useless... How can you be even weaker than me?"

"I told you, didn't I?! This body isn't meant for battle. It's for calculation!"

Nono dusted herself off briskly, seeming to be unaffected by Maya's sharp remarks.

"Anyway, we're inside now. So what do you want to do? Isn't it about time you told us already?"

There was only one reason Maya asked Nono for advice despite resenting her manipulation. Nono Hoshizaki was never wrong.

"Indeed. Excellent question, Maya. I'm so proud to see how strong you've become."

Nono stuck out her chest. Her emotional fortitude was truly something to behold.

"Well, we're going to invade from the inside until we reach Mister Genom! Then we'll overthrow his unjust occupation of the tower and defeat him once and for all!"

"Uh-huuuh..."

Sahara couldn't help but give a slow, dubious response to Nono's all-too-simple strategy.

"Just the three of us, you mean?"

Their party consisted solely of Sahara, who boasted fairly average strength,

and Deadweight #1 and #2, two Major Human Errors who managed to be almost totally powerless.

"Yep, we can do it!"

"Okay, I'm leaving now. Bye."

"Wait just a moment!"

As Sahara politely turned to leave, Nono grabbed her shoulder. Sahara shook her off immediately.

It went without saying that the enemies' inner sanctum would be heavily guarded.

"It'll be fine! Really! There's hardly anyone in there right now! Menou and my dear Abbie have drawn them away for us!"

"But isn't Genom himself still inside?!"

"You can beat him, Madam Sahara! No, seriously!"

After arguing in the entrance for a while, Sahara reluctantly followed Nono's directions and entered the tower.

They went down flights of stairs, walked through doors, and occasionally broke through walls to move forward. They didn't run into a single enemy on their way. There didn't seem to be anyone around at all.

"I don't know... It's almost creepy."

Sahara privately agreed with Maya's quiet assessment. Objectively speaking, the absence of any guards inside felt strange.

"It's because Menou and Abbie are down below, keeping everyone busy. Did you hear that explosion just now? Genom's guys are knocking down ceiling district buildings to attack them."

"Is that really what they're doing? Yikes..."

Sahara shuddered at the thought of the epic battle occurring outside. She pressed onward until she and her party reached the control room of the environment control tower.

"We actually made it." Maya seemed a little disappointed at how easily they'd

accomplished the mission.

Sahara tried the door handle. It wasn't locked.

They entered the room and found a massive number of Guiding guns...and artificial human parts.

Among the many terrible tales of Genom's deeds, there was just one positive thing people said about him.

He was the only human in the world with the ability to acquire Guiding prosthetics.

For those who couldn't venture into the Mechanical Society, the Guiding prosthetics Genom sold were alluring products that could make up for what they lacked physically. His methods of producing those prosthetics were shrouded in mystery.

Guiding guns and Guiding prosthetics were piled high in the chamber. And in the center of this stockpile of Genom's most famous commodities sat a lone man in a wheelchair.

"Yo."

The man was alarmingly thin. All kinds of tubes were connected to his body, possibly serving to keep him alive. He was covered in scars and was missing his right arm and both legs. Most painful-looking of all was the enormous scar carved into his face.

So deep was the old injury on the right side of his face that it was clear at a glance it had damaged his brain.

It was a wonder he'd survived the injury at all. If even one of the tubes attached to his body was removed, he'd surely be dead within a few minutes.

"Genom...Cthulha?" Sahara asked with disbelief.

"Yep... That's me..."

Somehow, his confirmation shocked Sahara.

This was the real Genom.

The mere act of snickering shook his body so badly that it looked like it might

kill him. Continually speaking threatened to break him to pieces.

"Hilarious, ain't it? This...is all...Flare's work, you know."

Genom had gone up against Master Flare more than a few times.

With each encounter, he'd managed to evade her killing blow, escaping by the skin of his teeth with near-fatal wounds that left deep scars.

Yet he'd survived.

"That's how...I...wound up...like this..."

He used his left hand to point at the place where his right arm should have been. Close inspection revealed micromachines gathered there, trying to repair Genom's flesh. They were attempting to create a prosthetic arm.

However, the prosthetic only fell to the ground with a heavy *clunk*, seemingly incompatible.

Thus, another prosthetic was added to the pile.

"See...I'm the only one...these...prosthetics won't attach to. Even though...if... you adjust 'em...they'll attach to...other humans..."

Sahara instinctively clutched her Guiding prosthetic. She looked away, unable to bear the painful sight any longer. Countless monitors formed of Guiding light were arranged before Genom. Each displayed the viewpoint of one of the Genom terminals. They were the perspectives of the people he'd been parasitically attaching himself to via Guiding prosthetics for the past ten years.

"Is that the secret to your multiple selves?"

"Yep...but it only works...in spaces...that're full of micromachines..." His words were halting; perhaps even speaking was painful for him.

Now Sahara realized the true reason why Genom didn't leave the Mechanical Society. Just like they did with his ability, the devices that kept him alive were run by micromachines. The prosthetics that were meant to become a part of his body were incompatible with him because of some Guiding Force bug, so he reused them as materials to keep himself alive.

Genom had never been trapped inside the barrier.

He'd hidden within the Mechanical Society for the past decade because he couldn't survive outside an environment formed of Concepts of Primary Colors.

In his last battle with Flare, while she was traveling with the Pure Concept of Light, Genom was sure he'd been fatally wounded. He'd tumbled into the Mechanical Society fully expecting to die. Instead, he'd gained a sort of simulated *Possession* that let him create more selves.

There must have been some glitch when the micromachines were trying to mend his brain after Flare damaged it. Perhaps the experiments done to him in the past were partly responsible.

At any rate, Genom gained the ability to use *Possession* to split his soul.

"You...people...got some...nerve. I'm...talkin' to you...you with the arm... there."

"What did I do, again?" Sahara asked cautiously.

"Don't...play dumb. You...got in my way...in the Balar Desert...too..."

Finally, Sahara remembered.

It had happened when she still thought of Menou as an enemy. Iron Chain, one of Genom's criminal groups, had been laboring to open a hole to link to the Mechanical Society. The theory behind it was the same as the theory behind the connection that formed in the City of Ruins space. Iron Chain aimed to use a ceremonial conjuring to form a Primary Color space, thereby increasing the number of places where Genom could survive.

"Don't blame me. That was all Menou's fault."

"Shut...up... It all...shakes out...the same."

Sahara had betrayed Iron Chain partway through, and Menou and Ashuna had invaded the base and ruined the plan to create a connection to the Mechanical Society in the central desert region.

However, it all would've fallen apart whether Sahara was there or not, so she truly believed that she wasn't responsible in the least.

"But fine... It...don't matter now... Not really..."

Genom waved his remaining hand, and the screens showing his clones' viewpoints vanished.

"A hole...opened up...here. So it's...fine. I...let you guys...come this far...so I could...kill you all...myself."

For some reason, a chill ran down Sahara's spine.

This was a man who couldn't even stand unassisted.

Still, something about Genom's fearlessness despite his lack of strength set Sahara on edge.

<Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Prosthetic Arm, Inner Seal Conjuration—
Activate [Skill: Pile Driver]</pre>

It was pure, visceral fear that made Sahara play her strongest card. Using her most powerful attack right away to catch her opponent off guard was the right move, but a meaningless one.

"Don't get...so excited... I bet when you...saw...this...you thought...you could beat me..."

Sahara's attack was blocked by the prosthetics scattered on the floor. They linked together and moved as one, forming a giant hand that caught Sahara's attack before it reached its target.

"Die...you bitches."

Genom's prosthetic limbs swelled and came crashing down like an avalanche.

There was nowhere to run. The room was full to bursting with prosthetics that had been built to supplement Genom's body. Even though they weren't attached to his flesh, each of them still moved as he willed, surrounding Sahara, Nono, and Maya.

Among the plethora of prosthetics, the artificial eyes clustered, swiveling to follow the girls' movements.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Prosthetic Eye, Inner Seal Conjuration— Activate [Skill: Burning Evil Eye]

A blazing ball of fire formed above and dropped.

Did Nono see this future, too...? The question flashed through the back of Sahara's mind as she frantically avoided the flames. Before she could reach an answer, a shove from behind sent her flying.

It was Nono. She'd pushed her out of the way.

Nono landed where Sahara had been moments earlier, and the upper and lower halves of her body were torn apart. The fire from the artificial eyes had formed a smoke screen for the prosthetic arms to attack from behind.

Sahara grabbed Nono's upper half and held it to her chest, throwing herself toward the exit with all her might. The abandoned bottom half was blown to pieces as though tossed in a blender.

A blast sounded behind Sahara. A backhand chop whistled through the air and struck the side of Sahara's head, sending her flying and crashing into a wall.

Their only hope now was Maya.

Her Concept of Original Sin boasted an overwhelming advantage because it could corrode something with a single touch. It's why most of the prosthetics were avoiding Maya.

"Nono, Sahara! I'm - Mpgh?!"

"Damn brat," Genom rasped, cutting off Maya's cry "Did you think...I wouldn't...be prepared...for you?"

The monster that had infested the environment control tower lurked in the floor of this room. It had reached out its tendrils and swallowed Maya whole. When Maya used a conjuring, she tended to watch her target to take aim. Genom had deduced this from information his subordinates had passed on. If he blocked Maya's view, she wouldn't be able to aim. Should he kill her, however, there was no telling where she might revive. That's why he used a monster disguised as the floor to capture her instead.

Conjurings that turned things into monsters would have no effect on something that was a monster already. Given Maya's limited judgment, she wouldn't be able to decide what conjuring to employ when she couldn't see or hear anything.

It was over.

Sahara's mind was fading, barely able to register the pain of the impact.

Genom had a counter for everything, even Maya's Concept of Original Sin. There was no way they could win. The absolute certainty that she was really done for this time filled Sahara's chest with despair.

I should've known. I was never good for anything. She felt herself giving up.

Except.

"…"

She couldn't lose.

Sahara didn't care if she lost or died, but she couldn't give up on Maya. As long as she still drew breath, she absolutely refused to abandon Maya—the young, freewheeling, selfish girl who gave her a reason to change for the better.

Was there any way out of this?

As she considered the question desperately, her eyes fell on Nono's severed upper half, her hand specifically.

She was clearly pointing at something. Sahara followed the finger and spied a single doll.

It was a model for a humanoid conjured soldier. Somehow, Sahara recognized it right away.

The inconspicuous thing was the same Primary Triad conjured soldier that was sent back to the Mechanical Society in the Balar Desert. Its face was flat, its body devoid of distinguishing features, yet there was no mistaking it.

Because Sahara's soul had been removed after entering that body, it became an empty shell and was sent back to the Mechanical Society, where Genom must have secured it.

As a three-color conjured soldier that once contained the Human Error of *Vessel*, however briefly, it was valuable enough that Genom kept it close.

And it was sitting right next to where Sahara had landed, as though in wait.

"Hey, bug."

A familiar voice echoed in her soul.

"What happened to that self-hatred that made you who you are? Did you cast aside yourself only to pick it up again?"

Sahara had to be hearing things, but she answered, regardless.

Her old habits had vanished somewhere along the way. She couldn't waste time on self-hatred anymore. Menou, who she'd envied so much, carried a surprising number of unattractive qualities. Master Flare, whom Sahara had so admired, was dead, yet she didn't feel very sad about it. And then there were girls like Manon, who'd known far more tragic lives yet showed no indication of giving in to despair.

And most of all...

...there was Maya.

"Damned bug. Damned bug. You wanted to become something else, didn't you? You wanted to be someone strong, someone beautiful—anyone but yourself. You cast off your bugs. You can still do it. You can become whoever you want to be."

In this moment, if Sahara thought hard about someone else, she was confident she would turn into them, just like she'd once transformed into Menou. She still envied the strength of people like Ashuna Grisarika. Should she will it, Sahara might become Master Flare, or perhaps...even Hakua Shirakami.

All she had to do was discard herself.

"If you wish it, you can become someone else," the desire whispered to her.

However, Sahara couldn't give up on herself any longer. Her feelings were stronger now than they'd ever been, even though they embarrassed her.

A question surfaced so naturally that it surprised her.

"What...do you want to be?"

The voice in her head stopped.

Now it all made sense. Sahara understood what the disembodied speaker really meant. It knew as well as she did that it wasn't a vessel that existed to

grant its own wish. So it clung to another's desire, trying to grant theirs instead.

That left only one thing to say.

"If you don't know...then you should become my Vessel instead."

The voice's answer came a beat later.

"Request approved. Successfully processed. Initiating connection."

Sahara's right arm absorbed the material in front of her. That was the only way to describe what happened.

The matter her arm took in was broken down into smaller components: particles of red, blue, and green. Sahara intuitively understood what was transpiring now. These were micromachines, the smallest possible units of Concepts of Primary Colors. They swirled around with a sound softer than grains of sand as they were sucked into Sahara's Guiding prosthetic right arm.

"Stop... What ...?"

For the first time, Genom looked openly alarmed. A mass of prosthetics formed into a fist that barreled for Sahara, an expression of Genom's anger over this incomprehensible phenomenon.

The combination of limbs was as strong as a Primary Triad conjured soldier. It was a simple yet effective attack, with enough strength to kill.

Sahara gazed dumbfounded at her Guiding prosthetic. She held out her right hand slowly. The Guiding Force accelerated and kept accelerating endlessly inside her artificial arm. The surplus energy overflowed, crashing against Genom's attack.

The fist shattered to pieces.

"What...the hell...did...you...do...?!"

Despite Genom's rage, Sahara herself didn't understand what was happening to her well enough to explain. As if to intervene on her behalf, Nono's remaining half grinned with satisfaction.

"Ahh... It's finally complete."

There was a theory that posited the creation of a perpetual motion machine

through Guiding Force.

Three spaces for circulation were required to use Guiding Force circuits to construct such a device. If three spaces that existed in different phases of reality were linked, and if energy was circulated between them, it would fall eternally, continuing to accelerate in an endless cycle. Quickening energy would be created faster than it could decrease, repeating a Guiding Force loop and forming a total perpetual motion machine.

However, researchers had never been able to find materials that could combine Concepts of Primary Colors and Original Sin. They'd researched methods to connect three spaces for many years, but even the advanced technology of the ancient civilization never provided a solution. Ultimately, the theory was declared a fantasy.

While that was likely true for humans, if the two concepts themselves wished to link...

If the Human Errors of *Vessel* and *Evil*, even if only small pieces of them, were willing to coexist through an individual...

To that end, the girl who knew the future had remained in this place as the Astrologer. Even then, this eventuality had never been likely.

"Take that, Grisarika."

Nono uttered the name of her mortal enemy, inwardly giving the person now known as the Guardian the middle finger.

Sahara's arm glowed. Before long, the light grew to a powerful radiance, an excess of Guiding Light. The power that kept accelerating overflowed, until her limb became pure Guiding Force energy itself. Genom grimaced, gathering all the prosthetics in the room in front of him to form a shield.

But Sahara didn't care.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Perpetual Guiding Force Machine, Inner Seal Conjuration—Activate [Skill: Guiding Shot]

The blinding streak from Sahara's prosthetic arm destroyed everything in sight.

Sahara woke to find a girl slapping her face repeatedly.

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"Ma...ya?"
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"Thank goodness! You're awake...!"

How long had she been out? Sahara felt so exhausted that she didn't want to lift a finger. Her body felt leaden. Undoubtedly, it was the recoil from whatever weird phenomenon had occurred earlier. I can't even wipe the tears from Maya's eyes, she thought, noting that the very idea was out of character for her.

More importantly, this wasn't over yet.

Genom still remained.

Sahara could've only passed out for less than a minute. Nearly nothing about the situation had changed.

After a moment, she realized there was nothing to fear, though. Genom had blocked Sahara's attack, but in so doing, he'd spent all the Guiding prosthetics. He had nothing left to use as a weapon. A few Guiding guns were scattered about, but the real Genom lacked the strength to lift one on his own.

He was truly weak and defenseless.

"Damn it all...," Genom cursed. Sahara dragged herself along, crawling toward him. She was almost entirely out of Guiding Force. She doubted she could even invoke the crest conjuring on a one-in coin right now.

So instead, she picked up a Guiding gun off the floor.

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"S-Sahara...?"
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"Close your eyes, Maya."

She had enough to fire one final shot. Sahara didn't think this was something a little girl ought to see, but Maya helped support Sahara's weight and keep her standing. Her vision blurring, Sahara managed to sit upright nonetheless.



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"Are you...gonna...kill me?"
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"Yeah."

Sahara heard a weak wheezing noise, Genom's labored breathing. She hadn't noticed it before.

He had nothing left to protect him. No fear of death shone in his eyes as he stared down the barrel of Sahara's gun, however.

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"Why...would you...kill me...?"
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"Here's the thing, Genom." When Sahara thought about it, this entire day had been horribly unlucky. "This morning, I didn't get to eat breakfast."

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"Oh...yeah?"
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"This humidity has messed up my hair so bad, it's not even funny, and come to think of it, I didn't eat lunch, either. I'm getting *really* hungry. And on top of all that, what the hell just happened to me? What was that about?"

Sahara listed arbitrary grievances, slowly growing genuinely annoyed.

There was no reason for her to be burdened with the weight of the world. She wasn't going to let other people's deaths weigh on her and drag her down like Menou did. In this moment, Sahara could confidently state that being an Executioner seemed stupid beyond belief.

Thus, she didn't need a better reason to kill this man.

"So anyway, I'd like to kill you to vent all of my pent-up frustration."

Genom broke into a broad grin. He met Sahara's eyes with an expression of acceptance.

"Well... Guess I can't blame ya."

Those were Genom's last words.

Sahara pulled the trigger without hesitation.

The Guiding bullet fired, and the recoil from the high-powered handgun knocked Sahara's arm upward.

For all the names and infamy Genom had acquired, for all his wicked deeds,

death claimed him, as it did everyone. The end didn't care how tumultuous a life had been.

Sometimes, the curtain fell quite abruptly indeed.

So did it close on the life of Genom Cthulha. A powerful Guiding bullet blew his head clean off.

"See ya, source of my trauma."

Now it was truly over. The Guiding gun slipped out of Sahara's hand.

As the extreme exhaustion from using up her Guiding Force became too much to bear, Sahara let herself fall unconscious.

They'd won, if nothing else.

Maya knew that much. They'd eked out a victory, thanks to Sahara's efforts. But the victory hadn't come without a cost.

"Nono..."

She took Nono's hand to comfort what remained of her, while still supporting Sahara's weight.

There was no blood. The cross-section of her severed torso resembled a doll's. But even a conjured soldier's body couldn't function for long in this condition.

As harsh as Maya had been with her, Nono was still an ally she hadn't seen for a thousand years. She naturally still felt an attachment to her.

"I'm sorry, Nono... The truth is, I was happy to see you again. I wish... I should have—"

"Oh, don't worry about it. I'm really just a recording anyway."

"...Huh?"

Just like that, the emotional mood shattered.

As Maya sat there dumbfounded, Nono used what little time she had left to reveal her secrets.

"From your point of view, I'm actually here in the environment control tower

a thousand years ago, connected to the Astrologer. Kaa's helping me do my prediction calculations, you see. I'm running a simulation of what will happen in a thousand years, recording my voice in the Astrologer and installing it with my behavioral patterns to make it move. Basically, I'm predicting the critical situations that might arise in the future and programming the Astrologer with countermeasures to deal with them."

Nono seemed strangely proud as she explained the workings behind her future sight, and she seemed utterly content to ignore her audience's confusion.

"So you see, this is the true nature of my 'prophecies.'"

"Umm...and what does all that mean, exactly?"

"Basically, since I'm living a thousand years in the past, from my point of view, you're just one of many simulations of the future! Frankly, I'm ninety percent sure that this behavioral pattern recording will never be useful anyway! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Bye."

"GYAAAAAAH?!"

Since they happened to be sitting near the edge of a huge hole the battle had blown in the wall, Maya kicked Nono right out of the environment control tower. This would probably be their final farewell, which was perfectly fine with Maya. She smiled and waved cheerfully to the falling Nono.

"Great! We've solved everything once and for all! Now we just need Menou to get here and figure out how to use this control room, and it'll all be over! Uh... Wait a minute."

No sooner had she declared the end of their troubles than she realized something was amiss.

Pandæmonium was missing.

Maya and the others had assumed that Pandæmonium was inside the control tower. She'd sensed Pandæmonium's unmistakable presence.

Yet the Human Error was nowhere to be seen in the environment control

tower. A portion of the wall and floor had been turned into a monster, but there was no indication Pandæmonium herself was present.

What if Pandæmonium had been enacting her own schemes somewhere completely separate from Genom?

Had the situation progressed without Maya, Sahara, or Menou noticing, and was it too late to stop now?"

"...Ah!"

When Maya looked out through the hole in the wall at the ceiling district, her suspicion turned to certainty.

Genom Cthulha was dead.

As she traveled through the ceiling district in the opposite direction from Sahara and the others, Momo realized this when she saw that Genom's terminals, which were demolishing buildings to drop from the ceiling district, had stopped moving.

"Genom. You did an excellent job."

When Maya first realized that there was a part of Pandæmonium here in the City of Ruins, no one doubted for a second that she was colluding with Genom. Between the red flags flying throughout the city and Pandæmonium's presence emanating from the environment control tower, it was only natural to draw that conclusion.

Momo had deliberately set things up to suggest as much. She'd offered Genom a fingernail from just a tiny part of Pandæmonium to gain permission to temporarily enter the City of Ruins and to deceive Maya. Abbie, who knew the situation, had been separated from Menou and the others, and Momo made certain she couldn't share any more information than necessary before rejoining the group. There was still something Abbie wanted to do in the Mechanical Society.

Abbie would undoubtedly side with humanity, but that didn't mean she'd remain Menou's ally.

In the midst of all this chaos, Momo continued quietly making preparations,

neither working with Genom nor assisting Menou and company. She opened the white suitcase.

Inside was an arm that had been wrapped tightly in a white cloth bandage.

Since it was thoroughly sealed with bandages knit using an *Ivory* conjuring and sealed inside a case that isolated Guiding Force, even Maya couldn't sense its presence.

The slender little arm belonged to *Evil* itself.

A mouth appeared in a gap between the bandages around the palm.

"Hey, lady! If you set me free, I'll grant you one wish as a thank-you!"

This too-good-to-be-true offer wasn't given out of goodwill. It wasn't even sincere. The words were merely an act performed on a whim to suit the situation. Were Momo to give a wish that bored the arm, its mood would sour and it would attack instantly.

So Momo said nothing. She knew the only right answer was to not say anything. She simply unraveled the bandages to set Pandæmonium free, then turned and ran away.



"Mmm... Too bad."

The little girl's smiling arm expanded. The upper arm became a lower body, while the lower arm became a torso. Finally, the palm and fingers twisted and turned until she had assumed the form of an adorable little girl.

The shadow at her feet began to spread. This was one of Pandæmonium's arms. The part of the underworld that was allotted to her began to swallow the ceiling district.

It didn't matter where Pandæmonium's arm went.

This pocket space was formed entirely upon Concepts of Primary Colors. Her Concept of Original Sin began to consume the micromachines that drifted in the air, its corruption unstoppable.

Bring Menou down in the City of Ruins. Such were the orders Michele gave Momo and Pandæmonium's right arm.

The shadows continued to expand outward.

These were no normal shadows formed by the obstruction of light. They were darkness itself, their very existence swallowing light into blackness.

Such was the entrance to an endless underworld swirling with the negative thoughts of humans. As Momo made her escape from the City of Ruins, having finished ascertaining what she needed to know, she whispered to herself "No matter what..."

An image of Menou flashed through her mind, and rage kindled in her eyes.

"She won't get away with this."

The ceiling of the City of Ruins was covered in black shadows.

Menou and Abbie could do nothing but watch as the corruption spread. The roof of the underground cavern was dyed black, giving it the appearance of a night sky.

The space wouldn't collapse, even if the shadow kept spreading. Although they were both subspaces of a sort, Concepts of Primary Colors were far more stable than Concepts of Original Sin. The Concept Dimension of Original Sin was crawling with monsters and didn't need to be created by human conjurings. It had existed since before the most ancient of times, an infinite whirlpool of thoughts, and would go on existing for as long as the world did, if not longer.

Just as Menou's world and the one with Japan would never combine, this one and that one ruled by monsters wouldn't fuse.

So if the shadows that served as an entrance to that subspace simply consumed the ceiling district, there wouldn't be any major issues.

The problem was what came next. Menou stared up in panic when she heard a scream growing in volume.

"AaaAAAAAAAAAH!"

Nono's upper body came tumbling from the environment control tower.

"What in the ...?"

"Got it."

Before the bewildered Menou could move, Abbie managed to catch Nono and cancel out her downward momentum.

"Th-thank you, Abbie. You really are my and Kaa's darling daughter! I'm glad you grew up to be so carin—"

"What's up with this doll recording?"

"...You figured it out, huh?"

This brief exchange revealed to Menou why Nono had felt so strange to her. Abbie had called Nono a recording without any particular disdain. It was proof that while Nono's body was a conjured soldier, it didn't contain a soul. This version of her had to be acting on behavioral patterns that Nono Hoshizaki had programmed into the Astrologer based on information she'd predicted a thousand years ago.

She'd entered patterns and reactions into this terminal based on her foreknowledge of what was, at the time, the distant future. That explained why Nono never seemed too worried about danger, which annoyed Menou a bit, so she pinched the girl's cheeks.

"Do you enjoy meddling with us while you're watching safe and sound in the past? Hmm, Nono?"

"I shure dooh!"

"Nothing fazes you, does it?"

Menou released Nono's cheek. With only her upper half remaining, it didn't seem like she would function much longer.

"Abbie. How much time does this piece of junk have left?"

"This thing? I'd say less than a minute. The impact when I caught her really put the last nail in the coffin."

"Okay, Nono. Tell us everything that's about to happen in one minute or less."

"kaaay. Although, I think you can tell by looking that the last thing you need to do is deal with Pandæmonium up there. Don't worry about Genom. Sahara finished him off, thanks to my flawless instructions!"

Nono pointed upward, unbothered by her harsh tone. Menou was privately impressed that Sahara had defeated Genom.

"As I'm sure you've realized, that is Pandæmonium's shadow. She's using it to consume the micromachines in the ceiling district, turning them into her own flesh. As far as she's concerned, she couldn't ask for better fodder."

Pandæmonium always made her choices based on what would cause the most harm to the world. Knowing that made it easy to predict what she'd do next.

"In a few minutes, that little monster will summon the ceiling district space she's devoured in the real world. This subspace will overlap with the real one, and the city up there will disappear and show up in the sky above the north as a giant monster."

If this city overlapped with the matter in its real-world location, the nucleus of the Starhusk and the environment control tower would intersect and fuse. The white liquid would rain down on the northern continent, and the fusion between the Starhusk and Pandæmonium that Nono warned them about would come to pass.

"You'd better make sure you stop it. In my simulations of this route, this is where I break, so I have no idea what happens after this. I'll give the Astrologer's body to you, my dear Abbie. Be sure to thoroughly analyze it later! That's how you'll gain management authority of the Starhusk!"

"Oh, really? I don't know who's sending me this message, but thank you."

"No need to thank me! I'll keep working on plans for a future where I can return to my original world. You should do everything you can for your future, too!"

It had been a minute exactly. Nono gave one last wink.

"Bye then, Menou. I'm glad I got to meet you here in the future, not Hakua."

Just as she finished speaking, the star-shaped Guiding Light faded from her eyes. The mechanisms reproducing Nono's mind and personality broke down completely, never to function again.

The Elder Astrologer, who Nono Hoshizaki had programmed with behavioral patterns a thousand years ago to activate whenever the world was in danger, had expired.

"I'm not sure how to react to this...," Menou muttered.

Although they were unlikely to ever meet again, Nono had been so cheerful

about it that it was hard to feel sad or sentimental. Besides, it wasn't as though Nono had died. In fact, Menou had never met Nono at all.

However, she'd still managed to say good-bye in a way that drove a wedge into Menou's heart. Perhaps it was a sign of her deeply twisted personality.

For just a few seconds, Menou thought about Nono Hoshizaki, who lived a thousand years ago.

There was no time to wallow in such sentimental feelings, though. She ended her moment of silence for Nono and looked up to see that the ceiling district was quickly being consumed by Pandæmonium. But there was still something Menou could do to stop it.

"..."

She silently touched the outer wall of the environment control tower.

What was the biggest problem here?

Clearly, the answer was the fusion between the environment control tower and the Starhusk. That would cause the most damage. Were the nucleus of the Starhusk destroyed, the other miniature planets orbiting above the north would fall. Between the sheer mass and the rain of white liquid, the entire region would be destroyed.

All this was purely because the environment control tower was directly below the nucleus of the Starhusk.

If there was no matter in the same physical coordinates as those of the Starhusk, the spatial intersection wouldn't be an issue. The ceiling district would probably still fall onto the north, but no one would suffer if an uninhabited city was dropped in unoccupied land.

"Abbie. Let's break this thing."

If Menou and Abbie broke the environment control tower's base, the whole structure would fall. When the spaces intersected, the environment control tower would no longer stand in the same place as the Starhusk, and the two wouldn't fuse.

What's more, there was a hole leading into the Mechanical Society in the

center of the environment control tower. If they brought down the top half, it would hopefully get sucked into that hole. Better yet, it connected to the zone that belonged to Abbie.

In one fell swoop, Menou and Abbie would acquire all the necessary pieces to gain control over the Starhusk, including the Astrologer's body.

"No problem, li'l Menou. I got this!"

Abbie caught on to Menou's idea immediately and enthusiastically stretched out her arm. She was aiming for the base on the ceiling that supported the environment control tower's top half.

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

Her tan skin glowed, and her spirit reached into the internal storage space that her physical body contained. She drew out micromachines, the smallest Concepts of Primary Colors units that formed this place, and shaped them into a new form.

Most of them were materials kept for extra lives, but one portion stored Abbie's latent abilities as a weapon.

Invoke [Imitation [Vessel] Armament: Ability Control]

The world around Abbie began to repaint itself.

An air defense weapon developed to shoot down the artificial satellite armaments previously thought to be indestructible from orbit came into being. This Guiding Force energy weapon, composed from the rearranged knowledge of the ancient civilization, fired.

The air shook violently, and far above, the base of the upper half of the environment control tower broke straight off. Without its foundation, the top portion of the tower fell and was pulled into the enormous ball of Guiding Light.

"Awesome!" Abbie cheered. The plan had been a success.

Tremors thundered through the chamber. At this rate, they'd be separated from Sahara and Maya and get left behind underground.

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

Menou left the branches that formed from her blade on the ground and stood on her toes while standing on the handle of her dagger gun. While channeling Guiding Force through her feet to maintain the crest conjuring, Menou reached for Abbie.

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"Here, Abbie. Take my hand."
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"Sure!"

With Abbie on board, Menou put even more power into the dagger gun. The Guiding Branches stretched out, carrying them upward. It took a considerable amount of power to maintain the conjuring's strength, but Menou could easily provide it, since she was connected to the Guiding Force of Akari, an Otherworlder.

As the two rode upward on the branches, Sahara and Maya popped out of the environment control tower, which was more than halfway inside the Mechanical Society.

Something must have happened inside, because Sahara appeared to be unconscious. Maya was frantically hanging on to Sahara with all of her small body's might as they dropped down into Menou's arms.

"Wh...why did it break all of a sudden?!" Maya cried.

"Sorry. We broke it," Menou replied.

"WHAT?!"

While Menou and Abbie had judged it to be a necessary, if desperate, action, they couldn't blame Maya for being angry. The sudden destruction of the upper foundation while she was still inside was a perfectly reasonable reason to be terrified.

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"So, er..." Menou hesitated. "About Nono..."
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"Yeah, she died."

"Oh. Yes. She did."

Before Menou could say any more, Maya cut her off with a straight face and a flat voice. Menou agreed with awkward politeness, in part because of Maya's reaction, but also because she understood why the girl felt so strongly about it.

"Really, what an awful personality she had. We're all better off now that she's completely gone from this world," Maya declared.

"Huh? Wait, who's Nono?" Abbie had only met Nono briefly a few minutes ago and recognized her body as the Astrologer, a soulless recording device. Her question only served to confuse the discussion.

By the time the Guiding Branches carrying the four of them reached the top portion of the spire, the ceiling district had been almost entirely consumed. Only the tallest buildings still retained some of their original materials.

More than half of the City of Ruins was engulfed in the heavy web of a conjuring circle.

Menou had felt something like this once in Libelle. It was the beginning of a large-scale summoning conjuring.

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Chaos Collusion, Pure Concept [Evil]—Summon [Ashes, ashes, we all fall down.]

The conjuring summoned the ceiling district, now completely consumed by the Concept of Original Sin, back to its original spatial axis.

An instant later, it all came crashing down.

From Menou's perspective, the massive cavern containing the City of Ruins suddenly opened up.

The top section of the city was absorbed and summoned, appearing aboveground and causing a spatial intersection collision.

Everything was plummeting down with terrible force. Below, Menou and the others saw the enormous crater that rested in the center of the north. The mass that had previously been the ceiling district of the City of Ruins was raining down upon it, as though to plug the hole.

Menou felt the wind pressure buffet her as she tried to look overhead.

She managed to make out the shape of a gigantic sphere covered in white—the Starhusk. Just as Menou hoped, they'd prevented the environment control tower from fusing with it when the subspace collapsed.

The worst-case scenario had been avoided. Even if they took no further

action, there would be no human casualties.

Of course, that assumed Menou's group escaped the impending crash. Abbie was the only one who stood a chance of surviving.

Menou drew out her Guiding Force.

She led the overflowing power from the depths of her soul into her dagger, carefully selected using materialogy.

Then the power she'd extracted obeyed the seal etched into the dagger with crestology to bring about a conjuring phenomenon.

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

A long bough made of Guiding Force stretched from the dagger. Menou took Sahara from Maya, then passed her to Abbie. "Take care of Sahara, please," she said.

"With pleasure!"

Since Abbie was unlikely to break, even after a fall from this height, she'd be able to handle the unconscious Sahara just fine. Menou smiled brightly at her.

"Also, I'm going to stab this into you, so bear with me for a moment. I can't maintain this while fighting Pandæmonium, you know."

"Bwuh?"

Menou didn't wait for her reply.

She stuck the Mistle Sword into Abbie, then drew out Abbie's Guiding Force through that connection. The blade branched and spread through the air. Soon, the crest conjuring developed a larger range than the average ceremonial conjuring.

Menou would never be able to spread the Guiding Branches on the strength of her Guiding Force alone. She'd only managed to pull off the feat the first time by drawing power from her link with Akari.

"Maintain this conjuring on the ground with Sahara, please."

"Wait, wait, wait. That seems like a big favor to ask after stabbing someone,

even for a big sister like m—eeEE?!"

Menou couldn't afford to listen to the rest, due to the urgency of the situation.

The rubble falling around them had transformed into pieces of Pandæmonium. Unsurprisingly, Abbie didn't even want to touch them. The battle to come would be challenging for her. It was better to entrust her with caring for the unconscious Sahara.

Menou unfolded the meaning of the completed conjuring circle into this world.

Guiding Force: Connect—Guiding Branch, Ceremonial Conjuring Circle—Invoke [Mistle Sword: World Tree]

By drawing out stolen Guiding Force from Abbie, the Guiding Force branches spread out from the dome-like shape.

Menou didn't know this, but her improvised solution was an advanced version of the method that Master Flare once employed to drive off Manon and Pandæmonium. As Abbie fell, Menou wrung out her Guiding Force, growing it into a single, enormous tree.

"Nn... Ghhhhh!"

Evidently, having this much Guiding Force pulled out was too much, even for Abbie. She let out a pained cry.

The giant tree stretched across the sky at an impossible speed. Its branches increased its stability by twining together, while also multiplying and expanding the base section outward to better distribute the weight. The roots touched the ground far faster than anything merely falling and spread to form a sturdy foundation.

Immediately, the Guiding Branches blossomed into a tree large enough to blot out the sky over the Wild Frontier.

Falling buildings rained down on the branches Menou had created.

Loud crashes echoed, yet the tree didn't buckle. It caught the structures midfall, despite their size and velocity. "Perfect. Now I have footing to work with."

Menou hadn't expanded such an enormous web of Guiding Branches just to catch the falling buildings. In fact, that was only a bonus.

Her main goal was to create a suitable battlefield.

Only Menou and Maya remained above the massive Guiding Force creation, quickly joined by another girl, who alighted before them.

"Mm..."

Amid the turmoil of a city falling from the sky, her small body cut through it with strange clarity.

"You just had to go and make this less exciting."

While the force of the plummet broke structures into pieces, the girl sitting atop a monster rested her chin in her hands and pouted.

"Why did you have to ruin it, hmm? I was so close to bringing down the 'stars.' It would've been a wonderful meteor shower."

"It's not wonderful at all!" Maya shouted back. "I never wanted anything like that! Don't use my body to bend this world to your weird whims!"

"Oh, don't be silly. On the contrary, I wish you wouldn't wear my face while saying such nonsense."

The corners of Pandæmonium's lips curled into a smirk at Maya's outburst. She saw through the girl's show of bravery and exposed her weakness.

"Mm-mm. Besides, you can't lie to me. You've thought about it before, that's for sure."

Pandæmonium's voice was barely above a whisper, yet it reached their ears clearly.

"You wished the world would end, that everyone would die, that humanity would go extinct. So why shouldn't we make that come true? Lots of people carried that wish before, deep down, not just you. That's why I want to grant it for everyone!"

Her words carried a note of truth. Everyone had a moment of weakness when

their life became too much, when they wished the whole world would cease to exist. Pandæmonium was putting on an act of being the voice of the people.

"I heard everything. If the barrier around that shut-in's world in the east breaks, everything will be destroyed, right?"

"So will you," Maya spat.

"That's true. So I've been thinking about it." After spreading her arms with a dramatic flourish, Pandæmonium pointed at the ground.

Abbie was down there, supporting their tree, along with Sahara, but that wasn't what the Human Error meant.

There was a sphere of Guiding Light hovering just above the ground. It was several dozen meters around—the entrance to the Mechanical Society.

"I'll just overwrite the place where that homebody's been hiding with my own space and summon it into this world for everyone!"

Pandæmonium announced this as if it were a brilliant idea and not the worst plan anyone could have possibly created. Her plan was functionally a method for changing the entire world into the Concept Dimension of Original Sin.

"Isn't that great? I don't suppose you'd let me just hop into that hole there, please?"

"Absolutely not."

Summoning life from another dimension, then using that life to corrupt and alter this world.

Maya hadn't tried much to be useful a thousand years ago. She'd been too traumatized after being captured and subjected to Pure Concept experiments. The girl was terrified of what her abilities might do if she became a Human Error. She didn't want to face her past or use the Pure Concept and erase her memories.

However, Maya stood against the monster she'd become, nonetheless.

"I can change." She wasn't the same as Pandæmonium, but she wasn't quite Maya Ooshima, the pitiable victim, either. After so many experiences, Maya was here, living in the world as a whole new person.

"Hmm... Well, it doesn't matter."

Pandæmonium looked up at the sky, unaffected by the words of her pre-Human Error self. The nucleus of the Starhusk floated above, so close that it seemed like she might reach up and grab it.

"It's still not too late to turn this whole sky into chaos, after all."

The Guiding Branches that climbed through the clouds pierced a swarm of monsters high in the air.

Abbie was down on the ground, supporting the Guiding Branches that had formed this enormous tree. She deployed her small conjured soldiers to get a broader view, and she inexpertly controlled the Guiding Branches.

Muddled shrieks filled the air. More than half of the many monsters had been run through. Menou took care not to let the movement of the branches knock her off-balance as she stood atop the enormous tree and threw her dagger.

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

Pandæmonium didn't even attempt to dodge the attack.

Sped along by a burst of wind, the blade drove straight into Pandæmonium's forehead. As the girl died and fell, a winged monster caught the corpse in its beak. It swallowed Pandæmonium, then turned sharply in midair, diving to attack Menou.

Without missing a beat, Menou dodged the birdlike monster's maw, grabbed a nearby Guiding Branch, and transformed it with Guiding Force manipulation. It became a longsword she used to slice off the creature's head.

"Hah!"

A blood-soaked little girl emerged from the stump of the monster's neck.

Now that Pandæmonium had gotten close to Menou by using an unthinkable strategy, her eyes flashed with crimson Guiding Light.

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Chaos Collusion, Pure Concept [Evil]—Summon [Yummy in my tummy.]

Her small arms split down the middle, and jagged teeth formed along the new edges.

The little girl's limbs transformed into monsters big enough to swallow a person whole, and they lunged at Menou.

Menou pulled Maya close with one arm and jumped out of the way, all the while sending Guiding Force into her dagger.

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

Since a single jump wouldn't be enough to get away, she used the blast of air from her dagger to go farther. Pandæmonium's monsters passed through the empty space to take huge bites out of the Guiding Branch where Menou had stood. These were no light nibbles. Had Menou been there, she would have been crushed beyond recognition.

Such was the Pure Concept of Evil.

Menou glared at the inhuman being disguised as a child. The little girl was surrounded by monsters, and she evoked an indescribable feeling of revulsion and fear. She was truly the worst monster in the world, one that even Hakua had only managed to seal away, never defeat.

But Menou had a trump card on her side.

"You can do this, right, Maya?"

"Of course I can."

The brave young girl was their key to victory.

"What a boring plan you're scheming." The Human Error who'd consumed all of Maya's memories yawned exaggeratedly to show her boredom.

"I'm Pandæmonium's arm, and you're just a pinky. Surely even you can figure out which of us is stronger." Pandæmonium's eyes glittered with crimson Guiding Light.

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Chaos Collusion, Pure Concept [Evil]—Summon [Four and twenty blackbirds.]

A swarm of dark birds flew from Pandæmonium's body.

Tens, hundreds, thousands, even more. They billowed out endlessly, pouring as if from a broken faucet.

The girl's body was filled with tens of millions of sacrifices from when she devoured the entire Alliance of Southern Islands. While the majority were still packed into Pandæmonium's real body, still trapped in the fog, the number in the arm still outweighed those in a finger.

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

Guiding Light shone from the scripture, evaporating every monster it touched. But that was only a drop in the bucket. The bird monsters circled, plunged, and attacked in droves. Meanwhile, Abbie controlled the Guiding Branches from below to counterattack them.

It was a far cry from the pinky finger Menou faced in Libelle, which only started from a single sacrifice. This Pandæmonium was so full of Original Sin that she had no need to collect any new sacrifices.

Menou couldn't hope for her to run out of sacrifices like in Libelle. The monsters she summoned were still weak, but if she couldn't defeat Pandæmonium quickly, she'd find herself overrun.

Fortunately, Menou had acquired a new weapon since her last encounter with this Human Error.

Abbie currently had her dagger gun. So Menou formed the shape of a gun with her fingers. She'd never used it in this form before, but it came to her easily enough.

Purple Guiding Light formed at Menou's fingertip.

"Mm, how lovely. Are you going to use that gun on me?"

Seeing that Menou was about to invoke a Pure Concept, Pandæmonium squealed in delight.

"I think it'd be just wonderful if you became like me. We could dance together! Go ahead and keep using it, please and thank you."

"Are you sure about that? Bluffs don't work on me, unlike Akari." Menou

pointed at Pandæmonium with her glowing finger.

"Back in Libelle, you went out of your way to interfere with Akari. I found it a little strange at the time, but now that I can use *Time*, I understand."

Menou was imitating the motion Akari used to do when she was aiming at a target to use her Pure Concept of *Time*.

"You were afraid of Akari's power because it can seal you, right?"

In Libelle, Pandæmonium had deliberately followed Akari around. She'd made a point of declaring that Akari's conjurings were meaningless, insisting that they wouldn't work on her, that there was no point in trying.

But that wasn't true.

Her bluffing had been enough to convince Akari, who didn't have much battle experience. However, Pandæmonium couldn't fool Menou. It was clear that she didn't want to be hit directly by one of Akari's conjurings.

The Pure Concept of *Time* worked more on objects than on places. Since Pandæmonium rendered herself virtually immortal by resummoning herself when she died, the *Suspension* conjuring that stopped time for objects or people was far more effective against her than was the white fog sealing an entire place.

Menou couldn't say how much of her memory would be lost if she tried to continually use *Suspension* on a being as powerful as Pandæmonium.

Still, Menou could lock Pandæmonium away if she was willing to risk her life.

"...Afraid?" Pandæmonium gazed at the purple Guiding Light leveled at her as though it were utterly mystifying. She tilted her head expressionlessly, resembling a doll with cut strings. "Afraid, afeared, afrightened, afraid... Who, me?" Her eyes filled with Guiding Light that was darker than red. "MEEEEEEEEEE?"

Her shriek was stranger than the roar of any monster.

Pandæmonium opened her little mouth. She opened it wide, gapingly so. Her slim white neck bent back, and her small round chin tipped upward, fixing her deep crimson gaze on the sky.

Her mouth stretched so wide that her skin looked ready to split open at the seam of her lips and molt away. So wide that her normally pretty young face looked twisted and wrong. So wide that it made her body seem like a costume, and her mouth was the point at which it unzipped. So wide that she was surely preparing to strip off her human disguise.

The stretched maw contained endless nothingness, darkness not even the light from her eyes could illuminate.

Everyone stopped moving at once.

Not just because it was disgusting. They were long past the point of putting the utter revulsion she evoked into words.

Fear seized them, bound them.

The nothingness, the shapeless void, began to move somehow.

It was deepest shadow, if such a word could apply to something one could not see.

The dark void was taking form. A power that wasn't meant to exist in this world forced its way out of the little girl's mouth, overflowing from another dimension.

It had been attached to the soul of an Otherworlder summoned here, had consumed her spirit as the price of using its Pure Concept, finally had controlled the flesh, and had gone on a rampage, crushing the meaning of life itself over a thousand years. This was an Otherworlder's ultimate fate.

The being came into existence when chaos reached its peak.

Its age far outstripped that of the ancient civilization.

The people born into this world called it a Pure Concept and lived in fear of the incarnation of a higher dimension.

Evil.

This embodiment of a Pure Concept, an entire world in itself, pulled itself free from its human shell.

As the souls of all who witnessed it shriveled in horror, the voiceless Pure

Concept invoked a conjuring.

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Chaos Collusion, Pure Concept [Evil]—Summon [Red shoes of children, taken away by the gods.]

Everything turned red.

The monsters flying nearby, the remains of the buildings that had been sucked into the shadow and corroded by Concepts of Original Sin—all were offered as sacrifices and became red particles, whirling into the air.

Cracking in the sky signaled the formation of a fissure above. It peeled open to create a link to the other dimension. The ominous fissure was large enough to eclipse the environment control tower. From the depths of this rift emerged an enormous foot wearing a bright red shoe.

The sparkling leather shoe was densely lined with little teeth on the bottom. The creature on the other side of the sky was so massive that it could only stick out a single leg.

Pandæmonium shut her mouth with a snap.

The being that had crawled out of the girl was hidden once more. It put its skin back on and wore the face of a human again.

As everyone stood stunned by the horrific sight they shouldn't have witnessed, Pandæmonium beamed at them brightly.

"Don't compare me to that weakling from Libelle or the holy land, okay?"

Pandæmonium's little warning gave Menou the brief moment she needed to return to her senses.

This was no time to stand in awe. She tried to shake the numbness from her soul. She could worry about what she'd seen later. The most pressing danger was the giant foot wearing a red shoe that had emerged from the rift in the sky.

The strength of a monster was proportionate to the length of its life. It grew the more the creature consumed. It adapted to all environments, repeatedly evolving, ignoring the normal cycle of genealogy.

Unlike the monsters Menou had fought in the past, this one wasn't freshly made when summoned.

It was a complete malediction that had thrashed and thrived in the dark for a millennium.

"This one's very strong, you know."

The leg with the red shoe kicked the Starhusk.

Atmospheric vibration from the impact made the world tremble. A momentary frequency too low for human hearing became a shock wave and sent everyone trembling.

With that single strike, the Starhusk was blown away, white liquid and all.

Menou was stunned. As long as Pandæmonium had sacrifices, she could have brought down the Starhusk on her own all along, with no need for any complex plans.

"Ngh!"

The white liquid that was scattered by the impact came raining down. Touching a single drop would kill Menou instantly. She immediately manipulated the Guiding Branches to form a protective umbrella above her head.

But that was all she could do.

The branches she stood on were immediately dyed white. Knocked from its orbit, the Starhusk began to fall. The one silver lining was that the summoned red shoe had been damaged by the attack as well. More than half of it had already turned white.

Pandæmonium's eyes sparkled with pleasure as she excitedly watched the results of her meteor shower.

Cracks ran through the white-stained foothold.

It wouldn't be long before the Guiding Branches lost their effect, eroded by the white liquid. Menou opened her scripture to destroy Pandæmonium's hopes before time ran out.

She filled the scripture with Guiding Force.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 1:4, Full Passage—Invoke ["What are you

doing?" asked the king. The woman answered, "I am digging a well." The earth was dry. The ground was cracked. Sand was all around. The Lord thought this strange. There was no water in this ground. Why here, at the end of the world? The king said, "No water will appear. This vein has run dry. The oil too has dried up. There is no peace. There is no order. What could flourish, in this world? What could be planted? What could be found? What is left to be dug up...?" The woman answered, "It is not dead. This land is full of power."]

Menou connected herself to a vast amount of power through the scripture. She no longer had the same purity as a material that she did before. She'd lost the ability to use Guiding Force connections that passed the power through her body and integrated with her control.

However, she retained the foundations of Guiding Force manipulation that Master Flare had taught her.

["If I dig deeper and deeper, I will strike upon the light of great power. The truth of this world. The source. Salvation will spring from the ground's lifeblood and into the heavens, connecting all across the sky, and with the light of this planet create a wall that shall surely bring peace to all." The king believed her. He had not been forsaken. He gathered the people, dug through the earth, saw the light, and knew. Of hope. Of that which connects. Yes—]

This scripture conjuring was originally meant to interfere with the earthen vein, but in this case, Menou targeted the heavenly vein's flow, which had been damaged by the impact from Pandæmonium's tear. While the heavenly vein was vast, it had much less directionality than the earthen vein. The power threatened to scatter through the sky if it broke. Instead, Menou gathered it up, like she was tying thread, forming a clear line.

[—the Lord's will is relayed through all of heaven and earth, reigning far and wide.]

The Starhusk landed in the pure pre-conjuring phenomenon power, which had almost no physical presence.

"Ngh?!" Pandæmonium exclaimed in displeasure. She seemed exceedingly annoyed that the Starhusk's crash had been stopped.

It was in this brief moment of distraction that Maya made her move. She left

Menou's side and ran for the Human Error.

Even Menou was caught off guard by this. This was certainly the best opportunity, for Pandæmonium had exhausted nearly all of the sacrifices she had nearby to summon the giant leg in the sky. However, Menou couldn't help but recall the image of Pandæmonium's true form.

Should she really let Maya get any closer to that thing?

In defiant contrast to Menou's hesitation, Maya boldly rushed forward, straight for Pandæmonium.

"Hmm... No matter how weak I might be, that's just insulting."

Pandæmonium's shadow spread, becoming an array of black spears that shot for Maya from all directions.

This was bad. Panic filled Menou's mind. Each second she wasted wondering what to do put more distance between her and Maya. A single *Suspension* wouldn't be enough to block all of Pandæmonium's attacks. In just a few seconds, Maya would be pierced by countless shadow spears.

Instead, Menou pointed her finger against her own temple.

Guiding Force: Connect—Improper Communion, Pure Concept [Time]—Invoke [Acceleration]

Menou's world sped up. It felt like light was bursting inside her brain. She ran at an unbelievable speed, cutting down every one of the dagger spears with her dagger.

"Hm...mm...?"

Menou heard Pandæmonium's slowed-down voice as she scooped up Maya and ran. Shadows rose, snakelike, all around her, forcing her to whirl with Maya to evade the blades stabbing from every angle and cut them down. The slashed shadows vanished into thin air.

She moved forward, not willing to waste the brief opening she'd created.

It took only a moment to reach the source of the shadows, thanks to *Acceleration*.

But that instant was all Pandæmonium needed to complete her summoning conjuring.

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Chaos Collusion, Pure Concept [Evil]—Summon [Wiggly wormy friends.]

A tidal wave of fleshy tubes tried to swallow Menou and Maya. They were only five steps from Pandæmonium. However, the span of those five steps was now covered in wriggling tentacles. It was an attack that relied on sheer numbers, something speed alone couldn't beat.

As the wormlike feelers flooded toward Menou, she sent as much Guiding Force as she could muster into the scripture in her left hand.

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

The scripture conjuring formed nails of Guiding Force that pierced the fleshy feelers.

A path was cleared.

But it was already starting to close.

"Maya." Menou grabbed Maya's collar and shoved her through the gap. "You take it from here!"

She sent the girl straight to Pandæmonium, trusting her to handle the rest.

The area within five steps around the Human Error was very quiet.

Maya tread into that space with Menou's help, noticing something for the first time.

Pandæmonium's surroundings had become a poor facsimile of a movie theater, more like a life-sized diorama than the real thing. She must have collected the pieces of the theater from the rubble of the City of Ruins and arranged them around herself.

Maya took three steps, coming to stand directly before the girl whose face was identical to hers.

Above, the giant red shoe was slowly coming down toward them. If it reached

where they stood, it would all be over. Nothing would stop it. Even the parts that had been bleached by the white liquid were slowly turning red again.

Time was unquestionably running out, yet now that Maya had reached her goal, she wasn't certain what to do.

She knew she couldn't beat Pandæmonium in a fight. The difference between them was positively absurd.

So instead, Maya spoke frankly.

"Could you please just go away?"

"Mm?" Pandæmonium's voice sounded truly mocking. "I can't believe what I just heard. Tell me, do you have pudding for brains?"

"Well, what else am I supposed to do?" Maya pouted. "I'm pretty sure I could erase you if I put my life on the line to do it, you know."

"Mm. That may very well be true."

Pandæmonium confirmed this with surprising reasonableness.

Maya's memory was the key difference between them. Their bodies were identical. Such was to be expected, since they were offshoots of the same person.

In other words, Maya could make a Guiding Force connection with Pandæmonium.

If Maya sent her memories into Pandæmonium, specifically into the arm in front of her, she might become Maya, just as Maya had regained her memories and emerged independent from the pinky finger. The wildcard that was their potential Guiding Force mutual connection kept Pandæmonium from touching Maya, now that the girl had gotten this close.



"Mm, if you do that to me, I'll let the red shoe crush you. Eeeveryone here will get good and squished."

"Yeah. I'm sure we would. I don't want to die, you know. I don't want Menou and Sahara to die, either."

Pandæmonium held her friends' lives hostage, while Maya held the ability to make Pandæmonium like herself.

In this moment, they were an equal match.

"That's why I asked you to go away. I'll let you live for now if you just leave us and go home, okay?"

"You're very cheeky for a pinky finger. Just who do you think you are?"

Maya and Pandæmonium gazed at each other silently.

Normally, they wouldn't both be able to exist at the same time.

One was a Human Error, the other the lost one who'd come before.

Neither had a good reason to back down, yet they weren't sure they could force their victory. As the staring contest continued, Maya suddenly looked away, her gaze turning to one of the theater seats. She'd noticed something written there.

You should always sit and watch till the very end, even if it's a B-movie. Good luck, Maya!

It was Nono's final message. Out of context, it seemed like a bizarre note to leave behind. But reading it and knowing it had been left by someone who'd foreseen all of this, Maya knew what she had to see. It struck her like divine revelation.

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"Tell me..."
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"What?"

"Do you watch the credits before you leave?" Pandæmonium didn't answer at first. Maya went on anyway, talking about herself. "I always stay until the very end, and I only start getting ready to go once the lights come on. It's the polite thing to do."

"Right..."

After that short response, Pandæmonium's eyes glowed with red Guiding Light.

"I suppose that's just how it is, in the end. You and I are nothing alike."

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Chaos Collusion, Pure Concept [Evil]—Summon [Fly through the sky.]

Maya braced herself for an attack. Instead, Pandæmonium's arms transformed into a monster's wings.

"I never want to turn into the likes of *you*, either, you know." Pandæmonium beat her wings. Maya wasn't sure what resonated with her, but apparently, she'd chosen to withdraw. "I'm sure both you and that lady will meet a much more exciting end than me swallowing you up."

She flew into the air to land on the top of the giant red shoe. Once she was aboard, the foot slowly rose, returning to the tear in the sky.

"As long as you live with a Pure Concept, you'll never escape the fate of a Human Error."

With those foreboding final words, Pandæmonium disappeared through the rift in the sky.

"I'm well aware of that already," Maya whispered.

She and Menou were forced to grapple with that constantly.

How would they pay the price for using their Pure Concepts?

As Maya's mind spun with thoughts that had no satisfying conclusion, a hand rested on her head.

"Good job, Maya."

It ruffled her hair as it petted her.

Maya looked up at Menou. "Were you listening?"

"I was." Menou nodded. She'd thought on the subject constantly since gaining the ability to use Akari's Pure Concept. "But we've come this far to fix things, that problem included." They'd sent the upper half of the environment control tower into the Mechanical Society, and Abbie had collected the top half of the Astrologer's body. Once she analyzed those materials, they'd gain access to the Starhusk.

If the Starhusk really was an otherworld repatriation circle, it would allow them to reverse engineer the conjuring construction of the otherworld summoning. Were they to connect with the core of the planet, the source of all the world's power, then they'd be able to tear a Pure Concept away from a soul.

Maya would surely make it. She'd said that her *Evil* conjurings didn't consume too many memories. She wasn't a lost cause like Menou.

"Look. We should get moving." Menou smiled and pointed down.

Abbie and Sahara were on the ground. They'd sensed that the battle was over and were waving up at Menou and Maya.

"For now, let's go down there and brag that you sent Pandæmonium packing."

"Right... Yes! Good idea! You're absolutely right, Menou!"

There was still a lot to think about, but for the moment, Maya shook off her dark thoughts and descended to where her friends waited.





"Welcome back, Miss Momo!"

When Momo emerged from the half-day trip through the underground hub to return to the surface, she was greeted immediately by a green-haired priestess who clearly had too much time on her hands.

The young woman with glasses that resembled interlinked cogwheels had an abnormal fixation on Guiding Force. Momo ignored her and directed a beaming smile at the other priestess with her.

"Your dear Inquisitor Momo is baaack!"

"Indeed. And I already know what happened in the City of Ruins."

Momo had used a spare scripture to send a report while on her way. Her other scripture was now with Menou.

She looked up at the sky and saw that the Starhusk was still floating safely. A huge amount of rubble had fallen around the entrance to the Mechanical Society that lay directly below, enough that it would be very difficult to reach.

No sooner had that thought crossed Momo's mind than a large quantity of densely compressed Guiding Force was unleashed.

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

The crest conjuring surged forth. In a single swing, it cleaved through the debris filling the crater and cut open a path.

"Ohhh... You really are amazing, Michele," Hooseyard praised.

"Shut up. Your praise annoys me, for some reason," Michele replied.

"I know, riiight?" Momo agreed. "That was great, my darling Micheeeele!"

"Don't compliment me so much. It's embarrassing."

"Why does she get a different reaction when we basically said the same thing?"

The three of them walked down the path Michele had created.

"I saw your report. Just to confirm, Flarette didn't die in the City of Ruins?"

"Yes, ma'am. Well, technically, she did die once. But she came baaack."

"I see. These things do tend to happen when Lady Nono's predictions are involved."

Michele clicked her tongue irritably. Half a year ago, Momo had met the Astrologer, Nono, and received a prophecy from her.

Momo had told Michele about the encounter, of the conjured soldier that activated when the world was in danger. Michele knew, too, that the Astrologer was a recording of Nono's predictions. Just as she blindly believed Hakua's every word, Michele never doubted Nono's message.

"But Lady Maya did enter the Mechanical Society, just as Lady Nono predicted," Michele added.

Maya was still unquestionably a child of Concepts of Original Sin, even if she wasn't as fearsome as Pandæmonium. She would still be enough to destroy the Mechanical Society.

Michele looked at Hooseyard, the subordinate she'd kept on standby throughout their time in the north. "We'll reclaim control of the Starhusk and annihilate the Mechanical Society's subspace. We'll need ceremonial conjurings to deal with a pocket dimension of such a large scale. Be aware that I'll need to rely on you for once."

"Yes, ma'am! I've never been to the Mechanical Society, Michele, so I'm really, really excited!" Hooseyard's eyes sparkled with curiosity from behind her lenses. Put mildly, the young woman's battle proficiency was virtually zero. However, Hooseyard possessed a talent for which there was no substitute. When the situation called for her area of expertise, she became an unbelievably formidable enemy.

"Right. I suppose I'm looking forward to it a little bit myself." Michele couldn't

use her full strength on a continent inhabited by humans. But there was nothing in the Mechanical Society that she had to worry about destroying. "It's been a very long time since I was able to really put my *Dragon* side into action."

"I can't wait to see you go all out, darlijing...!" Even as she fawned on her superior, Momo inwardly snarled to herself.

These people were all monsters, every last one of them. That was true of more than just Michele and Hooseyard. Menou and her friends were rising to rival them.

Momo had to make enemies of all of them if she wanted her wish to come true. Her time in the City of Ruins erased all doubt in her mind. When Menou's beautiful hair turned black and Akari showed her face, Momo knew she was right. She knew the prediction Nono gave her when she invited her into the City of Ruins was correct.

"Your 'darling' will choose to sacrifice herself in the end."

Nono's eyes had shone with star-shaped Guiding Light when she spoke those words. The Astrologer only woke when the world was in danger, and she had gone out of her way to deliver that prophecy to Momo.

Momo didn't know how her actions would affect the world, now that she was armed with that knowledge. But what Menou was doing was unforgivable—unacceptable. Momo would never allow it.

Menou intended to erase all of her own memories and give her body to Akari.

"Your dear Momo will fight those people for all I'm worth, toooo! After all they've done..."

The idea of Menou's body housing Akari's spirit.

"...I'll never let them get away with it!"

Momo set out for the Mechanical Society to crush Menou's plans once and for all, with no real allies to help her.



"You mustn't cause trouble for other people."

I think every Japanese person has heard something to this effect before. Whether it's from your parents, other relatives, teachers, or anyone else in your life...

Every time a deadline draws near, I remember those words.

I know no good will come of discussing how the author called Mato Sato deals with deadlines in too much detail and alienating my dear readers forever, but it's true.

With each deadline, I think, I really shouldn't cause trouble for others. I could just die from the guilt... K*zing, Kaz*ng!! I don't have time to be dead right now!! I have to keep writing as much as I can for the sake of my readers!

Anyway, on to the acknowledgments.

My deepest gratitude to my illustrator nilitsu and my editor Null. I don't have much time to write this afterword, so I'll keep it brief. I owe you a mountain of thanks.

And to all related parties, especially you readers who kindly picked up this new volume even though it came out nearly a year after the anime adaptation...

...thank you so much. It's support from the readers that casts "Kaz*ng" on writers like me. And please don't misunderstand and think that means it only has a 50 percent success rate. That only applies to "Z*ng." I'm always searching my own name online and quietly delighting in your comments. And nilitsu's illustrations? That's a F*Ilheal!

And so, thanks to the buffs from all your spells, Menou's journey continues onward. Please look forward to the next part of the story in the ninth volume.

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