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emeth: Island of Golems

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emeth: Island of Golems

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First Digital Edition: November 2018

ISBN-10: 1-945341-17-3

ISBN-13: 978-1-945341-17-5






St.Rollins Archipelago
Dorms
St.Rollins Academy
『Head Island』
St.Rollins Torah Church
Neck Bridge
Underground Railway
Shoulder Coast
Getz Clinic
『Chest Island』
Heartbreak Hill Mine
PUB
『Nest of Love』
Golem Factory
『OUKA-AN』
Flank Beach Market
Port

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Charis Messier for taking our debut work from eleven years ago and giving it the chance to go out into the world again; and a special thanks to Ken, Hinase, and Koutaro who once crafted this story alongside us. *emeth: Island of Golems* wouldn't exist today without all of these people. You have my heartfelt gratitude for all you have done.

Character Profiles

✤ **Clifford Evans … 13 years old. Male.**

Clifford, Cliff for short, is a street urchin from the slums who dreams of becoming a Golem Tamer someday.

✤ **Lovel Sinclair … 17 years old. Female.**

Lovel is a sophomore at the prestigious St. Rollins Academy. She's a redhead with a lot of spunk and a kickass roundhouse kick.

✤ **Erie Reyer … 16 years old. Female.**

Erie is a freshman at St. Rollins Academy. She's a genius Golem Tamer who has been dubbed "The Witch" by her classmates.

✤ **Heath Coleman … 16 years old. Male.**

Heath is a freshman at St. Rollins Academy. He's childhood friends with the kindhearted Erie.

✤ **Ouka Baraki … 30 years old. Male.**

Ouka earns a living by illegally manufacturing and selling Golems. He used to work for the Torah Church's Civil Obedience Order.

✤ **Kiriko Strife … 29 years old. Female.**

A Torah Chief within the Torah Church, Kiriko is obsessed with hunting down and exposing Golem-related crimes.

✤ **Spinoza Bulledge … 38 years old. Male.**

Spinoza is the current Torah Lord and Ouka's former boss. He's a materialistic and worldly man, which clashes with his senior position within the Torah Church.

✤ **Benny Navarov … 46 years old. Male.**

Benny is a lecturer at St. Rollins Academy. He's a mild-mannered gentleman

who also serves as the Academy's dormitory custodian.

✤ **Crank Getz … 52 years old. Male.**

Crank is employed as an adjunct professor at St. Rollins Academy. He's a levelheaded researcher who operates a private clinic as his primary profession.

✤ **Jair … Age unknown. Male.**

Little is known about Jair besides that he's a black-haired Golem Tamer who is after Lovel and the others.

Precursor Verse

So God created man in His *own* image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

Genesis 1:27 (New King James Version)

Prologue

Day 1

Girl

Location Unknown

THE sound of her shoes pounding fast and hard echoed against the stone pavement in the abandoned alley. Her long, distorted shadow chased after her along the wall, dancing under the pale light. Labored breaths tore from her throat with each bone-weary step, and the moon lit the sweat glimmering on her skin.

Thoughts raced through her mind as she fled for her life. *How did I get chosen for this?* She should've been living a mundane kind of life, yet now everything had changed. This insane battle to save both her beloved and the island she grew up on all began a mere ten minutes ago.

Truth be told, she still didn't grasp what was happening. She didn't understand much of it after hearing the whole explanation either. But she knew one thing for sure—

I have to take this and run! The girl unfurled her right fist and dropped her eyes to the three centimeter red cube secured in her grip. She had discovered that the very fate of her island depended upon this cube, which is why she nabbed it and fled.

Through eyes stinging with the sweat dripping off her forehead, she made out a tall stone fence ahead. Someone she hoped to avoid stood in front of the massive fence.

The girl skidded to a stop and shouted, "JAIR!"

Jair eyed her and replied with disinterest, "And what should I call you?"

Illuminated by the moonlight, his face seemed to float in the dark alley. From

what little she could see, he appeared to be in his late-teens. His black hair caught the moonlight and his eyes glinted with an icy gleam.

He seemed almost disappointed in her as he continued in the same flat tone. “You don’t seem to be her. But what should I call you then?”

“*Lovel*. Lovel Sinclair. I won’t let you call me by any other name.” Determination filled Lovel’s voice.

“Lovel, then. Return that cube to me,” he demanded with bitterness lacing his words.

“In your dreams, psycho!” Lovel yelled, shooting him a death glare. “Who do you think would be dumb enough to just sit back and watch you get away with your evil schemes after being told all about it?”

Jair eyed Lovel suspiciously. “You’re definitely acting out of character. You aren’t someone who would say something like that.”

“These are my words. I’ll say them all I want. I’m *me,* after all.”

“So it appears. Regardless of how you came to be that way, the fact remains you are not the woman I desire… In which case, I’ll use force to put an end to these unfortunate circumstances,” Jair concluded and pulled something from his chest pocket.

It was a tiny *black* cube resembling Lovel’s red cube. He buried it in the ground at his feet.

“…My name is Jair. In the name of the 72 gods, I give thee the name *Adamah*.” The dirt where he buried the cube glowed as if responding to his voice. “Live as one with me and return to dust with me. I order thee to take the cube back from that woman!”

The ground expanded and bulged suddenly at his command. Arms shot out from the mass of dirt and a head sprouted from the top. In the blink of an eye, it took on a human form.

Lovel sharply inhaled and tilted her head back to take in its full size. A dirt giant standing over three meters tall towered before her.

“That’s a Clay Golem…!”



“Not quite, but close enough. Get her, Adamah,”Jair ordered.

The giant called Adamah obeyed. Lunging with a sudden burst of speed that caught Lovel off guard, Adamah swung both fists down and slammed them against the ground where she had been standing. A torrent of dirt and dust flew in every direction.

Sliding safely away from the impact zone, Lovel kicked off and charged the Golem. Leveraging her momentum, she delivered a flying kick right into Adamah’s face. Then, nimbly landing on its arm, she made a mad dash up to the head made of dirt as the giant slowly rose back to its full height, where she launched off from behind it.

Lovel’s lithe figure soared through the air, cutting through the night sky. Sailing right over Jair’s head, she landed on top of the stone fence. The two turned to face each other and their gazes met. Lovel looked down at Jair who still stood on the ground below.

“Where do you think running will take you, *Lovel?*” Jair spat. “You can’t do anything with that!”

Lovel pinched the red cube between her fingers and showed it to him. “It’s better than letting you people have this dangerous object.”

“You don’t understand its value. That’s the last piece needed to move *Sephiroth*.”

“Sephiroth, eh? You can’t move that monster without this, right? Just like that Adamah you’ve got there.”

A dark shadow fell across Jair’s face. “What are you planning to do…?”

“Since you can use that Adamah thing to do your bidding, shouldn’t I be able to do the same?”

“Lovel, don’t tell me you’re planning to use Sephiroth?!” he gasped in shock.

A triumphant smile broke across Lovel’s features. “*Damn straight.* I won’t let you people get away with what you have planned. Now that it’s come down to this, I’ll just find that monster first.” She spun away as she gave her final declaration, “And I’ll save this island from your grimy hands!”

Adamah charged for the wall as she spoke. A thundering crash came a second later. Crashing into the wall sent tremors down the stones to the fence's foundation, but the structure held fast. Adamah's body crumbled back into dirt from the impact.

Lovel could no longer be found atop the fence. She had dropped down the other side of the wall right before Adamah rammed it.

Tiny fragments of dirt rained down. Jair stared long and hard at the moon shining in the sky above the stone fence while the dry sound of his crumbling Golem filled the alley.

Chapter 1: The Street Urchin and the Illegal Golem

Day 1

Chest Island's Street Urchin, Clifford Evans

Chest Island

ISLANDS of the Golem Tamers—that's what people called the glimmering pair of islands surrounded by the deep blue sea.

Only one true power—the Torah Church—reigned on St. Rollins Archipelago, but the islands prospered through its primary industry revolving around the production and manufacturing of Golems. Each island, with an outer circumference of over twenty kilometers, was equipped with everything needed for Golem production: mines where the required materials for Golems were excavated, Golem Workshops where those raw resources were smelted and refined into Golems, specialty shops for Golems, and even a port designated specifically for Golem trade.

Chest Island, the bigger of the two islands, had a poor and deprived region known as Shoulder Coast. With an unemployment rate of over fifty percent, people all over the island referred to this poverty-stricken district as the island's *garbage dump*.

Hovels stood wall-to-wall, supporting each other from falling over in the sea breeze's fury. Vagabonds stared with lifeless eyes at empty space. Smells of emergency rations filled the stale air, accompanied by raucous noises and angry shouts as people brushed shoulders on their solitary trips, their heads down, backs hunched.

For all of them knew of a single truth. The residents of this district were cursed, for they could neither create nor use Golems—they were the outcasts, the dregs of society with no hope for a better tomorrow.

Outdated horse-drawn carriages served as the primary means of transportation. They had a functioning subway not too long ago, but it was recently abandoned for a steam train that passed by their station without stopping. The decision to forgo the subway had further crushed any trace of hope for improvement in the lives of Chest Island's residents.

Nevertheless, there were people who had put that neglected underground station to good use. One such boy's voice could be heard from inside the now largely abandoned subway that ran along the coastline.

“Listen up, guys! I’ve finally finished my Golem!”

Inside the gloomy underground station was a blond street urchin wearing a soot-stained hoodie and cargo pants. He was quite baby-faced even for a thirteen-year-old.

The station had become a hideout for children without parents like him. Other street urchins flocked to the boy from their respective corners of the station, curious about what he had in store for them today.

Facing the growing crowd, he continued his announcement as if he were a professor before his class, “Okay, everybody listening? You can create a Golem by imitating God through molding an inanimate object into a human shape, engraving an incantation by which it’ll operate, and then naming it to bring it to life.”

A gigantic statue slept behind the boy whose eyes sparkled brightly as he spoke. The human-shaped giant stood over two meters tall and was crafted from joined metal fragments. It gleamed dully under the yellow lamplight with the unrefined yet impressive presence of a suit of armor belonging to a knight from the Middle Ages.

Incantations the boy had meticulously engraved into its metal covered it from head to toe. But without a name, it had yet to move.

Noting its inactivity, one of the other street children asked the blond boy, “So, Cliff, how’re ya gonna give that statue life?”

“Good question. For that, you need to use this power here.” Cliff smiled and held up his right index finger suffused with a faint light.

Direct Engrave Incantation was a mysterious art used when the Golem Artificer magically inscribed the Golem’s operating principles right into its body to grant the Golem life. Cliff acquired the technique after years of brutal practice and training. He stroked the Golem’s chest with his glowing finger, and black incantation letters engraved the metal beneath his touch.

“…Aside from inscribing the *Engrave Incantation* throughout its frame, you need a *Restrictor* to move a Golem as well. You can grant an inanimate object life only by engraving an absolute rule that restricts the Golem’s actions,” Cliff

clarified as he finished marking a Restrictor on its chest. He touched the head next. “Lastly, you need to inscribe the most important of all Engrave Incantations. You have to engrave the forehead with the letters spelling *emeth.*”

Emeth meant truth in the ancient language. Cliff proceeded to engrave the five letters onto the giant’s forehead that granted a Golem life.

“And once you finish inscribing all the Engrave Incantations and give it a name…the inanimate object will gain life and move!”

The street children swallowed hard as they watched him.

Cliff locked his eyes upon the giant, solemnly raised his voice, and began to chant the naming invocation, “…My name is Clifford Evans. With *truth* as my witness, I give thee the name *Gandolf*!” His words, instilled with a deliberate steadiness, echoed throughout the somber station. “Live as one with me and return to dust with me. I order thee to…” His eyes flew wide open, and he shouted his first command, “Stand, Gandolf!”





Cliff's voice bounced off the cold walls of the underground station.

But the giant didn't even creak. Cliff, having failed to grant life to his creation, let out a confused, "Huh?" and the street children erupted with laughter.

"*Another* failure, Cliff?! This is the fifty-fourth time, y'know!"

Cliff scratched his head. Staring at the unmoving giant, he pursed his lips. "That's strange. I was sure it'd work this time too… I wonder what I did wrong."

"Don't'cha think the problem's with that piecemeal giant of yours?"

With iron arms, a copper head, a lead torso, and brass legs, it was hard to deny the giant's Prime Body lacked a cohesive design. But this was the frame Cliff spent years fashioning—he didn't want to admit that was the reason it didn't work.

"Nah, I'm positive it's not a problem with the Prime Body. It's gotta be a mistake somewhere in one of the Engrave Incantations." Cliff picked up the book he'd left beside the giant and flipped through it.

How to Manufacture Golems was a textbook with detailed information on the construction of Golems. Cliff checked his Engrave Incantations inscribed in the metal frame against what was written in his treasured textbook.

An Engrave Incantation's accuracy was proportional to the Golem Artificer's proficiency. Letters different from what Cliff intended to write often slipped into his Engrave Incantation because of his inexperience. Lo and behold, comparing his work directly to the textbook revealed a myriad of mistakes in what he had inscribed on the metal frame.

"Agh! How'd that happen?! Even screwing up a single letter will prevent the Golem from moving…!"

The other street children patted the heartbroken Cliff on the shoulder.

"Looks like ya gotta start from scratch again. Well, don't let it get to ya."

"There ain't too many folks on this island who can make a Golem at yer age."

"Ya've just gotta take it step by step. I'm rootin' for ya."

After giving him words of encouragement, they dispersed and returned to

their individual sections of the station and continued going about their everyday routines studying at makeshift desks, training their boxing skills, and crafting wares to be sold at street stalls.

The station-dwelling street children weren't deadweights of society who merely twiddled their thumbs and let their lives pass by in idleness. The understanding that such a slothful life would eventually lead to dying of starvation on the streets had been burned into their flesh, bones, and starving stomachs. So they all trained in whatever ways they could to find some skill that'd help them survive another day.

The station was where these orphans huddled together in order to face down the cruel society that had abandoned them to this life—in other words, it was their base, right on the frontlines of survival. This was exactly why while the children teased Cliff, nobody interfered with his attempts at creating Golems.

While he reveled in gratitude for their support, one of his fellow waifs reminded him, "Hey, Cliff, ain't it 'bout time for ya to get to work?"

"Oh yeah! Sorry, guys, I'm heading out!" Cliff snatched up the rye roll he had left beside the giant and raced out of the underground station.

Spring sunlight stung his dark-accustomed eyes when he exited above ground. Taking a bite out of the blackened bread, he scanned his surroundings.

A scrawny young man ran past him with a leather bag stuffed under his arm. "Wait, you petty thief!" a man hollered, chasing after him. Beggars, hoodlums with too much time on their hands, and alcoholics who were always dead-drunk by noon littered the roadside—the usual setting for the slums.

Sheesh. Not that it's ever any different, but what a sorry buncha bums. Cliff was fed up with the way things were. Glancing at the sea behind him, he spotted the other island about five hundred meters away.

Head Island stretched out on the other side of the sea. Seeing the beautiful townscape across the water disheartened him with how drastically different it was from Chest Island which he lived on.

Cliff let out a sigh then caught sight of a child sitting beside the road. The unfamiliar boy appeared around seven years old.

The boy was likely a new face joining the ranks of street children wandering the area. He looked like he hadn't eaten in days, and he kept his hollow face cast down.

Cliff's stomach growled as he stared at the boy. Still in his hand was the blackened roll he hadn't even had more than a bite of.

Dang it! This is why I hate the slums! Cliff mentally fumed as he walked over to the boy.

Holding the bread out to the child, he said, "Here, eat this."

"Me…?" The boy lifted his head with a surprised look.

Cliff shoved the blackened rye roll into his hand. "Hurry it up, would ya? It's hard enough as it is for me! Also, if you don't got anywhere to sleep, you can head to that station over there."

A clear clang sounded in the distance when the boy hesitantly reached out to accept the bread. Head Island's church bell was tolling noon.

"Ah, crap! I'm gonna be late! See ya! Make sure you go to the station!" Cliff said hastily, leaving the boy to take off running toward his workplace. All the while enduring hunger pangs from his empty stomach in exchange for this small gesture of kindness.

***

THE poverty-stricken district had a marketplace too—a market where street stalls and tents crammed the beach running along the seaside. But the goods sold there were different from a normal market.

"Get yourself the right and left arm of Reigle Co's new model Iron Golem in a set for just 80,000! It's a bargain!"

"I've got the lower-body of that masterpiece Bronze Golem Para Gunner for ya right here! It's only half working, so get it at the cheap price of 150,000!"

"Step right up! We've got farm-fresh Clay Golems that are cheaper and fresher than anywhere else!"

Competing shouts trying to lure in customers drowned each other out from every corner of the open market.

Every stall dealt in Golems, and every stall was less than respectable. They sold junk parts, illegal parts, and mostly stolen parts. Flank Beach Market was the biggest black market where the poor and destitute sold Golems to people who were even worse off.

And Cliff's workplace was within that very black market. Parts Shop Akizu Company did business out of a barracks on the edge of the marketplace. Cliff knocked on its armored door.

"Good morning, Boss," he greeted.

A fifty-something-year-old man appeared from within the barracks with sleepy eyes. He was the shop's owner, Akizu.

"Yer late, Cliff. Let's get straight to salvaging. Bring the cart 'round front."

"Sure thing," Cliff answered and circled around to the back of the barracks.

He found the cart next to the barracks' small garage. Beside the garage towered a rusted metal statue so gigantic Cliff had to tilt his neck way back in order to see its head that reached over three and a half meters. Eclipsing the height of the garage's rooftop, the massive, unmoving giant held a sign that read, "Parts Shop Akizu Company." The nameless metal giant was the shop's trademark symbol.

"……"

Cliff stared at it, remembering how he had finished building it with someone just last month. Needless to say, this metal statue had failed to come to life and move, just the same as his Gandolf.

"Hey, Cliff! What's takin' ya so long?" Akizu's voice rose from the front of the shop, interrupting his daydreaming. Cliff snapped back to his senses and pulled the cart around front.

"Sorry for the wait, Boss!"

"Sure ya are. Alrighty, ready to get to work on our usual recycling mission today?"

Cliff nodded and followed Akizu, towing the cart behind him.

They left the black market and headed for the residential district. Training a

keen eye on their surroundings, the two kept a lookout for what they were searching for. After a while, Cliff spotted exactly that, stashed away in a narrow space between tightly packed apartment buildings.

“Hey, Boss! Doesn’t that look like it’ll work?” he asked, pointing out his discovery.

Closer inspection revealed a heap of scrap iron. Fragments of what could possibly be mechanical arms and legs were littered among the junk. The metal limbs were the remnants of a wrecked Iron Golem that had broken down and been abandoned to weather the elements. A smile overtook Akizu’s face when he saw it.

“Oh yeah, these are quality goods all right. Pick it up! Pick it all up, Cliff!”

“You’ve got it, Boss!”

They loaded the cart with the Golem’s remains while keeping a mindful lookout for any possible witnesses. Once they finished loading, Cliff tossed a sheet on top of the cart and broke into a run with Akizu.

Salvaging parts from broken and abandoned Golems to sell was Akizu Company’s primary business. The work amounted to a minor crime by the Church’s rules, but Cliff willingly took part in the illegal activities anyway.

After all, there weren’t many businesses that would hire a child like him, not to mention working in the mines was too much strain on a boy with an empty belly. Adults who had gone slightly down the wrong road like Akizu had become a form of foster parents for street children without relatives.

Cliff exhaled with a big sigh once they were finally far away enough from the scene of the crime.

Wiping away his sweat, Akizu remarked, “I still gotta hand it to ya for havin’ the guts to do this part-time job.”

“I wouldn’t be able to make Golems without my pay from this job.”

“Yeah, but why’re ya even trying to make a Golem? If memory serves me well, you’ve been at it since you were seven, yeah? What’s that make it? Six years now?” He sounded like he was truly baffled by Cliff’s actions.

Cliff thought about it for a moment before answering. “Yeah, it’s been that long. If I had to give you the short answer, it’d be…in order to achieve my dreams.”

“Yer dreams, eh? Ultimately, ya want to become like Roche?”

“Yes, that’s my aspiration.”

The name Akizu mentioned gave Cliff nostalgia—even though it had only been a week since he parted ways with the boy he called Master.

“Well, what else is there to say?” Akizu remarked, thinking back on the boy himself. “I was worried about what I’d have to do since Roche disappeared, so it’s a real relief to have ya here. Gimme a hand with this work whenever ya can, okay?”

“S-Sure…”

Though Cliff agreed, he had no intention of continuing the job for long. Of course, he wouldn’t tell Akizu that.

Feeling rotten for deceiving him, Cliff deflected the conversation, “Anyways, Boss, let’s get back to work. We’ve only just got started for the day!” He raised his voice in good cheer, pulling the heavy cart faster behind him.

Akizu made a wry smile and followed Cliff.

***

CLIFF and Akizu ended up walking all over Chest Island until evening. Golem parts filled the cart at long last.

They hit the road back to the shop while casually snacking on bread crust they had bought on the way. But when they returned to Flank Beach Market, they found it was unusually abuzz with commotion.

“Hm? What’s going on?” Cliff squinted at the market. He made out men clad in pure-white vestments with Stone Golems in tow, shouting at the top of their lungs.

“Nobody move! We’re with the Torah Church! On account of violations against the Golem Possession Regulations, we are hereby confiscating and impounding all stolen and illegal goods!”

Cliff and Akizu exchanged alarmed looks.

“Crud! It’s the Church’s Rabbis!” Cliff exclaimed.

“Tch, it’s a Torah Church crackdown! This is bad, Cliff. Let’s sit this one out till they go.”

Cliff and Akizu hid in the shadow of a building a short distance from the market.

Most of Chest Island’s residents reacted in this manner whenever they came across the Rabbis. Cliff despised the high-handed, tyrannical religious leaders just as much as anybody else from the slums.

Torah Church was a religious organization with a myriad of devout believers. With Head Island as their base of operations, they acted as the archipelago’s enforcers of civil obedience by using Golems to crack down on criminal activity.

But their relentless, merciless crackdowns frequently devolved into unwarranted abuse of Chest Island’s residents. Cliff was still haunted by bitter memories of the time they caught him salvaging parts and beat him till his skin turned purple as punishment. Torah Church wasn’t just any religious organization—it was also the reigning power on the entire archipelago.

Rabbis confiscated truckloads of merchandise as they intimidated the marketgoers. Some shopkeepers glared spitefully at the Rabbis, while others tried to make a run for it with what goods they could fit in their pockets. The Rabbis caught the runners and beat them with their staffs before they got far.

Meanwhile, the Rabbis’ Golems loaded huge wagons with the confiscated goods. In all likelihood, they planned on returning to the church with the merchandise to dispose of it there. Cliff watched the events from the safety of his hiding place.

“Dang it all! What a cruel bunch of jerks!” he spat under his breath. “Isn’t it unusual for Head Island’s Rabbis to come to this market?”

“Not exactly. They crack down a lot in the spring compared to the rest of the year. It happens ev’ry year, but I went and let it slip my mind this time like an idiot.”

“Why spring?”

“The Church has got some sorta religious event around this time of year. They tighten their reins whenever it gets close.”

“I wish they’d just leave us be… We can’t get back to the shop if they don’t hurry up and finish their business here,” Cliff complained, glancing at the barracks. Then he sharply inhaled.

Several of the Rabbis had congregated around Akizu Company. They were debating about what to do with the metal giant they surrounded beside the garage. Their loud voices reached Cliff’s hiding spot.

“What’s this statue? Doesn’t look like a Golem’s Prime Body to me.”

“Sure doesn’t. Not even the Rabbi could get this preposterously large hunk of metal to move.”

“Still, the sheer existence of such a huge piece of metal is dangerous. We can’t confiscate it at this size—tear it down.” At that command, the Rabbis’ Golems shambled toward the metal giant.

“DON’T!” Cliff yelled.

The Rabbis turned toward him.

“Don’t be stupid, Cliff!” Akizu pleaded.

Cliff didn’t listen as he dashed over, shouting, “Don’t destroy that statue!”

“Wh-Who in the blazes are you?!”

Cliff tried to ram a Rabbi who spun around in surprise—but it was futile. One of the Golems seized his collar and lifted him clean into the air.

“Wha—LEMME GO!” Cliff flailed and thrashed wildly from where he was suspended.

A Rabbi observed his plight with a snort. “What? You from this shop or something?”

“You’ve got that right, Rabbi Scum! Cut the crap and get this hand off of—” Cliff was interrupted by the Golem, which yanked him higher before relentlessly slamming him into the ground. “GUAH!”

Cliff writhed in pain. A Rabbi with a villainous face glared down at him with contempt. “God be with us all. There’s no end to these Chest Island vermin, no matter how hard we try to clean them out,” he spat. “Not *only* are you guilty of illegally creating Golems, but you’ve *dared* to slight us Rabbi.”

Cliff violently shuddered under the Rabbi’s threatening gaze. In that critical moment, Akizu intervened in a booming voice, “HEY, QUIT IT! Stop, please!” He slipped in between Cliff and the Rabbis.

The Rabbi swept his eyes over Akizu in disgust. “Where’d you crawl out of? You the owner of this shop?”

“I sure am. That boy’s just a part-timer.”

“I see. But we had a good look at your garage. It looks like all your wares are salvaged goods.”

“…!”

“You’re guilty of fraudulent appropriation of salvaged articles, direct violation of the Golem Possession Regulations, and the greatest crime of all—leaving this ugly piece of junk in front of your store. What were you planning to do if it actually came to life? HUH?!” The Rabbi kicked the metal giant with the tip of his boot.

Akizu wrung out a reply, his voice thin, “M-My part-timers made that to serve as the shop’s trademark image…!”

“And why should we give a damn about that? In accordance with our duties as the Church’s Rabbis, we hereby claim the right to destroy that monstrosity.”

At the Rabbi’s words, the Golems raised their fists in unison, then brought them crashing down.

“S-STOP IT!” Cliff yelled. But his plea fell on deaf ears. The troop of Golems struck the metal giant, sending metallic clangs reverberating through the market. The statue gave way before his very eyes.

“NO…Nooo…Noooooooooooo…” Cliff could only cry out in horror. The statue he had put his blood, sweat, and tears into creating with Master Roche had its arms ripped off and its head torn down. In no time, they gutted the metal giant

and knocked it onto the ground.

"*How could you…!* How could you do that to something the children put *their hearts and souls* into making?!" Akizu lashed out. The Rabbis shot him death glares in return.

"You got a problem, buddy? Wanna pick a fight with the Church? All the Golems on this island only move thanks to the Church's efforts. Which is the only reason why worthless criminals like *you* can scrape together a living!"

"…!"

"Turn over a new leaf if you get the picture. Go through the proper channels provided by the Church and conduct your business the legal way."

Leaving those final words in their wake, the Rabbis vacated the market. With them gone, Cliff, Akizu, and the destroyed statue were all that remained.

The sea's roaring waves thundered through the lingering silence. Eventually, Akizu weakly muttered, "…Sorry, Cliff. I let 'em destroy this statue of yours."

"It's not your fault. But—"

"Ya heard 'em. With the way things are now, we need to take a break from this job for a spell… It ain't gonna be pretty if they catch us up to somethin' again," Akizu grumbled, dropping his shoulders and disappearing inside the barracks.

Cliff stood stiller than the unmoving, broken statue on the evening beach, simmering with bitter feelings.

The Rabbis told them not to disobey the Church due to an unshakeable truth —*every human on this archipelago can only use Golems because of the Rabbis.*

Golems that came to life by borrowing God's power *could only move on lands where the Torah Church existed.* The Great Bell Tower stood as a symbol of the church for a reason; it was precisely because it tolled the bells of blessing that the archipelago came under God's divine protection and the land was purified enough to use Golems.

The Rabbis let that borrowed power go to their heads and misused it by imposing ridiculously expensive taxes on the creation of Golems and the

permits required to use them. They had essentially created the need for a black market that illegally created, recycled, and sold Golems.

They're the ones who created the problem in the first place, so why're we the ones who get treated less than dog crap?! Do the poor and unlucky have no choice but to suffer wretched experiences under the persecution of the Rabbis?!

Cliff couldn't forgive the Rabbis who used Golems to do nothing but hurt others, when their role was to serve God. Consumed with his fury, he glared in the direction they had departed.

He could see the Rabbis' Golems and their large wagons down the road. Confiscated Golem parts and Prime Bodies packed the wagons past capacity.

I'll get it back from them…! I'll steal back what they took from everybody! Cliff boldly made up his mind and took off to secretly pursue the Rabbis.

He wasn't taking action because of some pure sense of justice, he acted out of the frustration of being oppressed and belittled day after day.

But regardless of his reasons, Cliff raced through the city lit by the evening sun and headed straight for the Rabbis' headquarters—the Church on Head Island.

***

NECK Bridge was the long beam bridge that connected Chest Island to Head Island. By the time Cliff arrived at the bridge, the darkness of dusk cloaked his surroundings.

Cliff swam underneath the bridge to the other side to avoid being spotted by the Rabbis. When he lifted his face from the water at the opposite shore, he was confronted with a massive perimeter fence towering in front of where he wanted to go.

The five-meter tall fence surrounded the entire perimeter of the Torah Church grounds. A single gate had been built as the primary entrance through the fence, but it was locked down since it was past visiting hours for worshipers.

Okay, how do I go about stealing back our stuff…?

The Rabbis transporting the confiscated goods had already entered the

Church's premises. In which case, Cliff needed to find a way to break into the Church and slip away with the reclaimed goods. With that as his game plan, he ran up to the fence and pulled a spanner wrench from his chest pocket.

Cliff always walked around with a small tool set so he could work on making a Golem whenever the opportunity arose. His tool set was also equipped with a thick wire used to connect various parts together. He took out the wire and threaded it through the spanner wrench, which he then tossed over the fence.

After countless attempts, the spanner wrench finally caught on something on the opposite side. Cliff tightly gripped the wire and scaled his way up the fence using it like a rope.

I'm not that strong physically, but I have confidence in my agility. This fence is nothin' to me!

He continued to deftly manipulate the wire, pulling himself higher until he reached the top of the fence where the Church's grounds spread out below him.

He crouched above the spacious front garden, where flowers in full bloom dotted the sacred landscape with color. He saw stairs at the garden's edge leading directly to Torah Church Train Station's underground railway. And, in the middle of the garden, an impressive stone building took center stage.

So that's Torah Church…!

Cliff had yet to visit the church building despite living on the island adjacent to it. Only the Rabbis and devout believers were allowed to enter the Church's premises.

But trespassing on the premises was a different story. The main church building stood five-stories tall, with a chapel situated near the entrance and a courtyard at the heart of its complex, where the Great Bell Tower was erected. Despite all that he could see, Cliff still had no idea where the confiscated goods were transported to within the facility.

Looks like I've got no choice but to search wherever I can. Luckily for me, the Rabbis don't seem to be around.

Cliff slid his way down the wire, landing on the opposite side of the fence.

Stillness hung over the nighttime Church grounds. The Rabbis were nowhere in sight. Considering the grand size and scale of the Church, it was unnaturally devoid of people.

Oh yeah, Boss did mention something 'bout there being some sorta religious event going on today… Are they all gathered in the chapel? His eyes shifted to the chapel and came to rest on an enormous stained-glass window. The stained glass seemed to depict a Golem Tamer. "Saint Clifford" was inscribed at the bottom of the window.

Stained glass of a saint, huh? …Of all the possibilities, it had to be a saint who shares my name. Though there's a world of difference between a saint and a thief. Right as Cliff was thinking, a thundering applause rose from inside the chapel. *What was that?!*

He quickly dove into the bushes beside him. From his hiding place, he stole a peek through the stained-glass window. A hundred or so Rabbis were standing in rows with their attention fixated on six elders clad in particularly extravagant vestments.

One of the elders ran his eyes over the room of Rabbis and greeted them in his hoarse voice, "Thank you for gathering here tonight, brethren. Let's commence the Rites for the Remembrance 0f the Treacherous One."

Just as Cliff had guessed, they were in the middle of a religious event. The other elders began to speak in order, as if continuing each other's words.

"March 21st—this is a day that must never be forgotten."

"On this day, eight years ago, a deplorable traitor appeared within our ranks."

"Brothers and sisters, you must never forget. Never relinquish the memory of our gravest mistake."

The Rabbis faithfully listened to the elders. An uncanny tension permeated the chapel.

"A debauched man betrayed us, running away with the Torah Church's most invaluable asset."

"The odious traitor repelled us with the asset's unspeakable power."

“In the 150 years of Torah Church history, he was the most intrepid Rabbi, and subsequently, the human being most worthy of our hatred…”

The elders went on uttering curses against the supposed *traitor* ad-infinitum. Cliff continued listening to them without the faintest idea what they were blabbing on about.

This is a religious rite…? What the heck are these Rabbis doing?! Maybe I’ve shown up at a real bad time. Cliff heard an abrupt noise from the main gate the moment he came to that conclusion.

“…?!” Startled, he jerked his head around to look behind him. For a split second, he thought it was a Rabbi—but it wasn’t. An unfamiliar girl with red hair was standing on top of the gate.

Her black cape and skirt fluttered in the salty sea breeze. She wore the same uniform worn at Head Island’s prestigious St. Rollins Academy, which the Torah Church operated.

What kinda business does a rich young lady from such a fancy school got with the Church at this hour? Actually, what I really don’t get is…why in the world’s she standin’ on top of the gate? Did she actually clamber her way up it, in that skirt?

Wholly unaware of Cliff’s thoughts and very presence, the girl nimbly hopped down into the front garden and strode toward the chapel. The elders still droned on with their speech inside.

“The unforgettable day of our gravest blunder. We must perform these rites to regain our dignity as Rabbi.”

“Curse the traitor! Seek the way of a true, faithful Rabbi!”

“His unholy name should feel like fire on your tongue,” an elder enunciated sonorously, “The unspeakable name of our traitor is *Arusrad Grinzam*…”

The redhead flung the chapel door open.

The elders stopped, struck speechless by her appearance. The Rabbis turned around in formation.

“Is Torah Lord *Arusrad Grinzam* here?!” the girl asked in a clear voice that

rang through the chapel building.

Her question froze the room.

“Wha—”

The elders’ eyes bulged; the Rabbis restlessly stirred.

The female student persisted, “Please listen to me! I have something I really need to tell Torah Lord Grinzam *right now*!”

Her voice had a boyish ring that was incongruous with her prim and proper attire. Cliff examined the profile of her figure from the bushes. She was a tall girl who appeared around four years older than him, and her shoulder-length red hair gave off a cheerful, upbeat impression.

A woman stepped out of the throng of disconcerted Rabbis before long. She was a Rabba with short hair, wearing red vestments and glasses. “Young lady, the church is currently in the middle of an important rite. Please come back another day.” Though the Rabba’s tone was gentle, it held a peremptory edge.

But the girl refused to back down. “Sorry, but now’s not the time to postpone things! We’re in a race against time!”

“If you have urgent business, I can bring it to the present Torah Lord, Spinoza, for you.”

“Present Torah Lord? …Wait, what happened to Torah Lord Grinzam?”

“*That disgrace is gone*,” she said curtly.

Suspicion colored the girl’s features, but she acquiesced. “Fine, you’ll do too. You have to listen to me…you’re all being targeted.”

“Targeted? By whom? For what purpose?”

“By a man with a grudge against the Torah Church. He’s trying to wipe out the entire church.”

The Rabba laughed dismissively at the girl’s warning. “We appreciate your worries on our behalf. However, our Torah Church doubles as the Civil Obedience Order, consisting of the top Golem Tamers in the world. Attacks by mere insurgents aren’t—”

“Are you okay with *Sephiroth* being stolen?”

The Rabba’s laughter lodged in her throat. Her eyes gleamed sharply from behind her glasses, narrowing on the girl. “…Young lady, what did you just say?”

“Sephiroth. You guys have it, don’t you?”

“Why do you know the name of that Golem?! How do you know of our most important, highly classified secret?!” The Rabba’s tone took a jarring 180-degree turn from kind to harsh.

Unfazed, the girl answered, “A certain man told me. From what I know, he’s trying to bring Sephiroth to life.”

“Impossible. There’s no way he can move it—”

“It can be moved—as long as you have *this*!” The girl procured an item from her pocket. “That man said that as long as you have this, you can use Sephiroth. So I came here thinking I should hand this over to Torah Lord Grinzam.” She thrust the *item* toward the Rabba.

Cliff couldn’t make out what it was from his position in the bushes, but when the Rabba saw it, her face went rigid.

Is it something valuable? Cliff wondered.

His question went unanswered, however, as the Rabba replied in a low, threatening tone. “…What you have in your possession right now is a vital item that was stolen from this church four years ago.”

“Come again?”

“Why do you have it?” the Rabba hissed, demanding an explanation.

Flustered, the girl jumbled her words, “Because…like I said…I stole it from that man. It’s not like I know much about him, but I really did take it away from him. What’re you glaring at me for? I’m telling the truth.”

“…No matter how hard I try, I just can’t comprehend what in the world you are trying to say.” The Rabba turned to the elders, who quietly observed the course of events, for guidance. “How do you wish to handle this female student?”

“She dared utter the name of the traitor, and there are far too many suspicious elements about her—arrest her,” one of the elders bluntly decreed.

“*Seriously?!*” The girl’s eyes widened like saucers.

The Rabbis moved as one unit to carry out the elder’s command.

“Y-You’ve gotta be kidding me!” she shouted.

Cliff was just as confused by the conversation. *Yeah! This has gotta be some sorta bad joke! Why have things gone off the rails in such a crazy way?!*

Though he still didn’t comprehend what was going on, he had a feeling that he’d get dragged into the fiasco if things continued this way. And, if it came to that, stealing back the confiscated goods would be the least of his worries.

There weren’t any Rabbis near the front gate. If he was going to make a run for it, now was the time. With that in mind, he was about to sprint for the gate—when the girl bolted out of the chapel with the army of Rabbis hot on her tail.

“OOPH!”

The girl nearly crashed into Cliff, while both she and the Rabbis stopped in their tracks to stare at him. One of the Rabbi with a particularly villainous face gave Cliff a dubious look.

“You…you’re that brat from earlier!”

“Tch!” Cliff clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

This was the same Rabbi who ordered his Golem to beat up Cliff at Flank Beach Market earlier that day. His face contorted with bafflement at Cliff’s sudden appearance.

“What’s one of Chest Island’s street rats doing here? Where’d you crawl in from?”

“Wh-Who knows?” Cliff lied. “I wandered in by accident during my walk. Maybe you should patch some of the cracks in your foundation to prevent your rat problem?”

“Fat chance, *street rat*!” the Rabbi yelled angrily. “Lemme guess, you’re here to steal the wares we confiscated!” He broke into a furious run for Cliff.

Cliff tried to dart away, but the Rabbi caught him by the scruff of the neck and slammed a fist into his stomach.

“Guah!” Cliff reflexively keeled over from being sucker punched.

“Don’t worry about this pest, I’ve got him under control,” the evil-looking Rabbi addressed the other Rabbis. “Arrest that girl. Quit dragging your feet! GET TO IT!”

The Rabbis resumed their pursuit. Cliff glanced at the girl as he gasped for air on his knees. Their eyes met. Hesitation flickered across her face. He nearly asked her for help despite himself, but a different entreaty escaped his mouth instead.

“RUN!”

Cliff was shocked by what he said, but he thought it was better than asking for help. He didn’t have to know her circumstances to know there was no need for them both to be caught. It was enough for him to be beaten up, he concluded.

Determination flared in the girl’s eyes instead of running away. She slipped past the Rabbis closing in on her and charged in Cliff’s direction.

“Huh?” Taken aback, the man who had punched Cliff braced himself right as she unleashed a flying kick with the full momentum of her fierce sprint. “NNGH!” The wicked Rabbi took her kick straight to the chin and flew backward.

The girl held her hand out to Cliff, who stared at her wide-eyed. “Can you stand?!” she asked desperately.

“Y-Yeah!” Cliff instinctively took her hand and got to his feet. They exchanged looks and broke into a run at the same time.

“He’s with the girl?! Arrest them both!”

“Lock down the premises! They’ll be trapped like rats!”

The Rabbis’ voices boomed behind them.

“We’re in deep! How do we escape?!” the girl beside Cliff asked through quick and short gasps for air as they fled.

The Rabbis had already created a secure perimeter around the main gate. Cliff rapidly scanned the area and his eyes stopped on a specific spot—the sole exit out of the Church's grounds aside from the main gate—the staircase leading underground built right into the fence.

"There's our escape!" Tugging on the girl's hand, Cliff bolted toward Torah Church's Underground Railway Station.

He dove through the entrance, hurtling himself down the stairs. Silence hung over the station ahead of them; nobody was around.

Dang it! The trains are done for the night!

Rabbis' footsteps pounded down the stairs above, drawing ever closer. After taking a brief second to think, Cliff jumped from the platform down onto the railway track.

"Let's go. We can escape to Chest Island this way!"

The girl nodded and hopped down with him. And just like that, the two children hotfooted down the pitch-black tracks.

A thick darkness instantly enveloped them. Their own footsteps echoed off the walls of the underground track and bounced back, sounding like dozens of feet instead of just their two pairs.

A feeling of helplessness washed over Cliff in the dark, when he heard her voice. "Hey, you there?" she asked urgently.

"I-I'm here," he answered. A hand reached out in the dark and held fast on to his. The warmth from her hand anchored his consciousness in the heavy gloom that rendered even his sense of direction unreliable.

They slowed their run to a brisk walk, leaning on each other for mental and physical support. As they fumbled their way along, Cliff asked, "…Why did you save me?"

"I didn't do much. My body just moved on the spur of the moment… I could ask you the same thing though. Why'd you tell me to run away?"

"The same reason. I just said that on the spur of the moment."

"Haha! Looks like we're both softies. We'd better escape this together then!"

“Yeah,” Cliff agreed.

They entered the track from Torah Church Train Station, which happened to be the last train stop to the north. The railway track traveled from that station underneath Neck Bridge, continuing on to Chest Island and ending at Shoulder Coast Station—Cliff’s hideout.

We should be safe if we can leave the station and lose them in the slums, Cliff thought as he walked. They eventually reached a point in the tracks where they could see lamplight illuminating the path ahead.

“We’re almost there! That’s the exit!”

“Great!”

They sprinted the rest of the distance to his home station. One of the street children squeaked in surprise at their abrupt arrival. “Whoa! Geez, Cliff! Why’re ya comin’ from a place like that?!”

“I’m on the run from the Rabbis!” Cliff explained. “Everybody, run for it! I don’t want you gettin’ caught up in this!”

Cliff’s warning startled the street children. After briefly exchanging wary looks, they gave a quick, “Sorry!” before fleeing the station in droves.

Their reaction to hearing that the Rabbis were coming was entirely normal for people who led more or less questionable lives in the slums. Once everyone had dispersed, Cliff and the girl pulled themselves up on the platform and heaved heavy sighs.

“Phew… Looks like we weren’t followed,” Cliff commented, straining his eyes toward the empty dark tracks.

“We’re safe for the moment then. You saved me. Thanks,” the girl said, smiling bashfully. Then she held her hand out to Cliff. “I missed my chance to introduce myself. I’m Lovel Sinclair! And you are?”

“Clifford Evans. Just call me Cliff.” Cliff shook hands with her and asked, “By the way, Lovel, why were the Rabbis after you?”

“I don’t get it either. They suddenly turned on me when I showed them this…” Lovel pulled an item from her skirt pocket.

It was a small red cube that looked like dice. Ancient letters and the word *emeth* were engraved on all sides of the three-centimeter-tall cube.

“What is this? Does it got somethin’ to do with Golems?” Cliff asked.

With a thoughtful expression, Lovel answered, “I dunno the details either, but from what I heard, it’s the key to move the Golem Sephiroth that the Church built four odd years ago.”

“Sephiroth? Never heard of it. What kinda Golem is it?”

“Seems like it’s a Silver Golem. Made completely out of silver.”

“Did you just say it’s a Silver Golem?! Now that’s really something I’ve never seen or heard of before!” Despite being known as Golem Maniac Cliff, he had never heard of anything like the Golem she described.

Lovel kept her face straight, undeterred by the wonder in his voice. “That Rabba said it’s their ‘most important, highly classified secret,’ didn’t she? Maybe it’s a Golem they hide from the world at large.”

“Classified secret, huh…? Anyways, it’s a bad idea to talk here. We’ve gotta hightail it before the Rabbis show up.”

“Wait, Cliff. Is there anything we can use as a weapon before we just start running again?”

Cliff surveyed the station, but he didn’t see anything useful. Lovel scanned the area too. Her eyes fixed on something placed near one of the walls.

“What about that?” She was looking at the giant statue Cliff had made. Picking up the *How to Manufacture Golems* textbook he’d left beside it, she whispered, “Is this a Golem by any chance? Who made it?”

“I did. But it won’t move. Looks like the Engrave Incantations are incomplete.”

“I see…that’s too bad.”

“Can you get it to move? A student of that fancy school might be able to…”

“Sorry,” Lovel apologetically responded. “I don’t know much about Golems. Never made one myself.”

She lowered her eyes and paged through the textbook. An air of loneliness

permeated her profile, making him hesitant to ask anything else.

"…Okay, we have no reason to stick around then. We should make a quick exit while we can." Cliff took Lovel's hand and gave it a small tug.

But she didn't move, choosing to toss him another question instead. "Say, Cliff, will this Golem move if we do this Engrave Incantation thing as it's written in the textbook?"

"Yeah? It will, but we don't got the time to engrave the incantation letter by letter right now."

Cliff's answer didn't seem to matter to Lovel. With her eyes on the book, she extended her right hand to the statue.

"No…I'll try it," she muttered, her hand instantly taking on a faint glow. The same light that always enshrouded his finger when he performed the Direct Engrave Incantation exuded from her entire palm.

Ignoring Cliff's bewilderment, Lovel read the textbook passage aloud. "'Engrave Incantation: ancient magical letters used to restrict a Golem's actions. However, it is near impossible to accurately engrave the letters.' Interesting… As I am now…" She lifted her face from the book and said simply, "I've got the feeling I can do it too."

The light imbuing her hand glowed brighter. The giant statue's entire frame shined as if synchronizing with her.

She's doing it without touching it?! It can't be! This is—

Cliff's thoughts were interrupted by the spectacle before him—the letters he had engraved into the frame were being overwritten in succession.

"Remote Engrave Incantation!" he exclaimed in surprise.

It was an extremely advanced technique where the Golem Artificer performed numerous Engrave Incantations simultaneously without touching the Prime Body. An exceedingly small number of people were capable of pulling it off, and Cliff only knew of one person with the ability—his Master.

An Engrave Incantation immensely more complicated than what he had tried to put together before inscribed itself into the frame. It was a decisively

advanced Engrave Incantation anyone could tell was complex with just a glance.

Who is this girl?!

Cliff stared in blank amazement at Lovel. In a mere few seconds, the Engrave Incantation had inscribed the metal frame, leaving only the chest and head untouched.

Lovel exhaled in relief and asked, “So, Cliff, what should I do next? Is this all?”

“N-No, it’s not done yet. You need to decide on your Restrictor next, then engrave the letters in the forehead—”

Heavy footsteps plodded down the top of the staircase, interrupting Cliff’s explanation. Cliff and Lovel warily spun around and braced themselves. Something was descending the stairs, with dragging legs that landed on each step with a resounding thud. Then a bluish-green giant appeared in the visible part of the staircase.

“It’s a Golem!” Cliff shouted despite himself. Standing at two meters and thirty centimeters tall was a giant made of bronze—a type of Golem known as a Bronze Golem.

“We sent men to secure the other stations too, but I was certain you would show up here.” The Rabba appeared behind the Golem as it finished descending the stairs. She was the same woman who pressed Lovel for answers as if carrying out an interrogation at the chapel.

“You’re a persistent old shrew,” Lovel bitterly snipped. “What’s your problem? Who the heck are you?”

“Torah Church Civil Obedience Order’s Torah Chief Kiriko Strife. Your mischief has gone too far, children. I’ll be taking you both into custody now,” Kiriko announced. Her tone was thoroughly uncompromising.

“That’s *your* fault for suddenly trying to arrest innocent people without just cause!” Lovel snapped back before Cliff could say anything. “I went out of my way to come to the Church to warn you because I was worried!”

“Well, you can try to defend your actions during questioning later. We won’t treat you poorly. You are both still children—AH!” Kiriko unnaturally broke off

midsentence.

Disconcerted, Lovel asked, “Wh-What’s wrong? Why’d you go quiet all of a sudden?”

But Kiriko’s eyes weren’t turned on Lovel or Cliff. She was staring in horror at the metal giant beside them. “What…is that…monstrosity…?!” she wrung out in a hoarse voice.

“What? This Golem? It’s the Prime Body I made…” Cliff answered, his tone innocent.

Kiriko tore her gaze away and grew quiet the instant she heard his reply. Then she began to tremble with violent shakes. “…Criminal Trespassing, Obstruction of Torah Official Duties, Crime of Inflicting Bodily Damage—you have been charged with such crimes for what you have done thus far…but all of those things are of little concern. There’s just one thing I can’t let you off for…”

Her head jerked up with bloodshot eyes. “*Illegal Golems!”* she ranted rabidly at the baffled children. “The *most unforgivable* crime of all is Illegal Golem Manufacturing! This is the one crime I personally can’t forgive, no matter what the reason!”

Crud! She’s flipped her lid. I don’t know why, but she’s lost it!

“Hey, hang on, calm down—” Cliff said, trying to placate her.

Kiriko barked at the Bronze Golem beside her without lending an ear to what he had to say, “NO. 9! SMASH THAT ILLEGAL GOLEM TO DUST!”

At that command, Bronze Golem No.9 lunged to seize the unmoving statue.

“Whoaaaa!”

Cliff and Lovel scampered in different directions to escape No.9’s ruthless line of fire. No. 9 took hold of the metal statue’s torso and easily lifted it off the ground.

“PULVERIZE IT! LEAVE NO PIECE INTACT!” Kiriko shouted relentlessly.

Hefting the statue by the torso, No. 9 hurled it with every ounce of its strength. The metal frame soared through the air and smashed against the wall with a deafening boom, shaking the ground.

It was a terrifying sight, but it was Kiriko, rather than the Golem, that chilled Cliff to the bone. An average Golem Tamer could only tame a Golem around two meters tall. Any attempt at a larger Golem required special talent to succeed.

And yet, here she is, controlling this gigantic Golem like it's a piece of cake…! Cliff developed a newfound fear of the Rabbis' strength.

Lovel was clearly frightened to some degree too, but it didn't stop her from yelling at the Rabba with the glaring resolve of a born fighter. "*Now you've gone and done it, you old shrew!*"

Kicking off into a furious sprint, she unleashed a hook kick on Kiriko. But it didn't land because No. 9 snatched her foot from the air and hoisted her upside down.

"AARGH! Lemme down!"

Kiriko ignored her and turned her menacing glare on Cliff. "Don't you move from that spot either, boy! Wait your turn until I've taught this little girl a lesson." Cliff instinctively shrunk back, and she turned her attention back to Lovel, homing in on her prey. "Now then, pray *do* tell me the rest of the information I failed to squeeze out of you in the chapel. Why do you have that cube on you?"

"I told you then, and I'll tell you same thing now: I stole it from an evil man you people don't even know about."

Veins twitched in Kiriko's temples. No. 9's hand tightened its grip on Lovel's ankle.

"Agh…!" Agonized moans tore from Lovel's lips. Kiriko watched her squirm in pain with apathy.

Clamminess covered Cliff's body and sent his stomach roiling. *Wh-What should I do?!*

The girl who saved him from the Rabbis had been caught right before his eyes. Yet his body trembled with such intensity that he couldn't even will himself to move in a bid to rescue her.

But then something caught his eye. Collapsed against the wall was the metal giant No. 9 had chucked and the Prime Body Cliff had made and Lovel inscribed with the Engrave Incantation.

Assessing Lovel's defiance, Kiriko sighed. "You're a stubborn one… I've had enough of this farce. No. 9, take this girl and—"

Right then, a quivering voice echoed through the station, cutting her command short.

"…M-My name is Clifford Evans!"

Kiriko spun around, fiercely shifting her attention to Cliff—Cliff, who was naming the still giant.

"With truth as my witness, I give thee the name *Gandolf!*"

Kiriko laid into him with a stern scowl. "B-Boy, what are you doing—"

But Cliff continued to focus only on the incantation. "Live as one with me and return to dust with me!"

He finished engraving the letters of *emeth*, and they shined bright-blue on the statue's forehead. The Engrave Incantations written across its entire body flickered once and vanished, leaving only the ancient letters on its forehead and the Restrictor on its chest. Something sharp shot through Cliff's brain.

"…!"

The sensation served as proof that their souls had linked, that the metal body had connected with his heart. It reverberated throughout his very being and felt unlike anything he had ever experienced. He knew this sensation was telling him that the naming had been a success!

Following his intuition, Cliff raised his voice to a sonorous chant, "I order thee to—***defeat that Bronze Golem***!"

The metal giant instantly quavered. Arms and legs of metal belonging to an inanimate body suddenly came to life and moved on their own. What had been nothing more than inorganic matter seconds ago was now slowly rising to its feet.

"*What in God's name* are you doing?!" Kiriko yelled, signaling No. 9 to toss

Lovel aside.

Lovel smacked the ground headfirst and let out a small yelp before she lay still, unconscious. The metal giant steadily ambled toward No. 9, which assumed a fighting stance.

The giant was no longer just a statue made of metal. Being granted a name brought *him* into animate existence. He possessed life that moved in accordance with his Tamer's order as the *Alloy Golem Gandolf!*

"Go get 'em…GANDOLF!" Cliff commanded in a strong voice.

Obeying Cliff's order, Gandolf closed the gap with No. 9. When the two Golems came within touching distance, No. 9 clenched his fists and threw a punch at Gandolf.

"HEY!" Cliff yelled.

The bronze fist slammed right into Gandolf's face. Gandolf tried to draw his own fist back, but No. 9 grabbed his wrist.

"Throw him, No. 9!" Kiriko shouted. In a fraction of a second, No. 9 turned, took a step in the other direction, heaved Gandolf over his shoulder, and flung the metal body in a hard throw. The alloy giant rolled once, crashing into the ground again.

Gandolf's body caved against the ground with a shuddering clatter. Kiriko stared down at him contemptuously and scoffed, "Did you think *you* could win? Against a Rabbi's Golem?"

"Damn it!" Cliff cursed.

"All right, No. 9, punch his forehead until the letters come off!" Kiriko cruelly demanded. No. 9 straddled Gandolf and brought his fists down.

"Crap!" Chills shot down Cliff's spine.

NO! Not the forehead! She's gonna destroy him just when I finally got him to move! In the flash of Cliff's desperation, his Master's lesson crossed his mind.

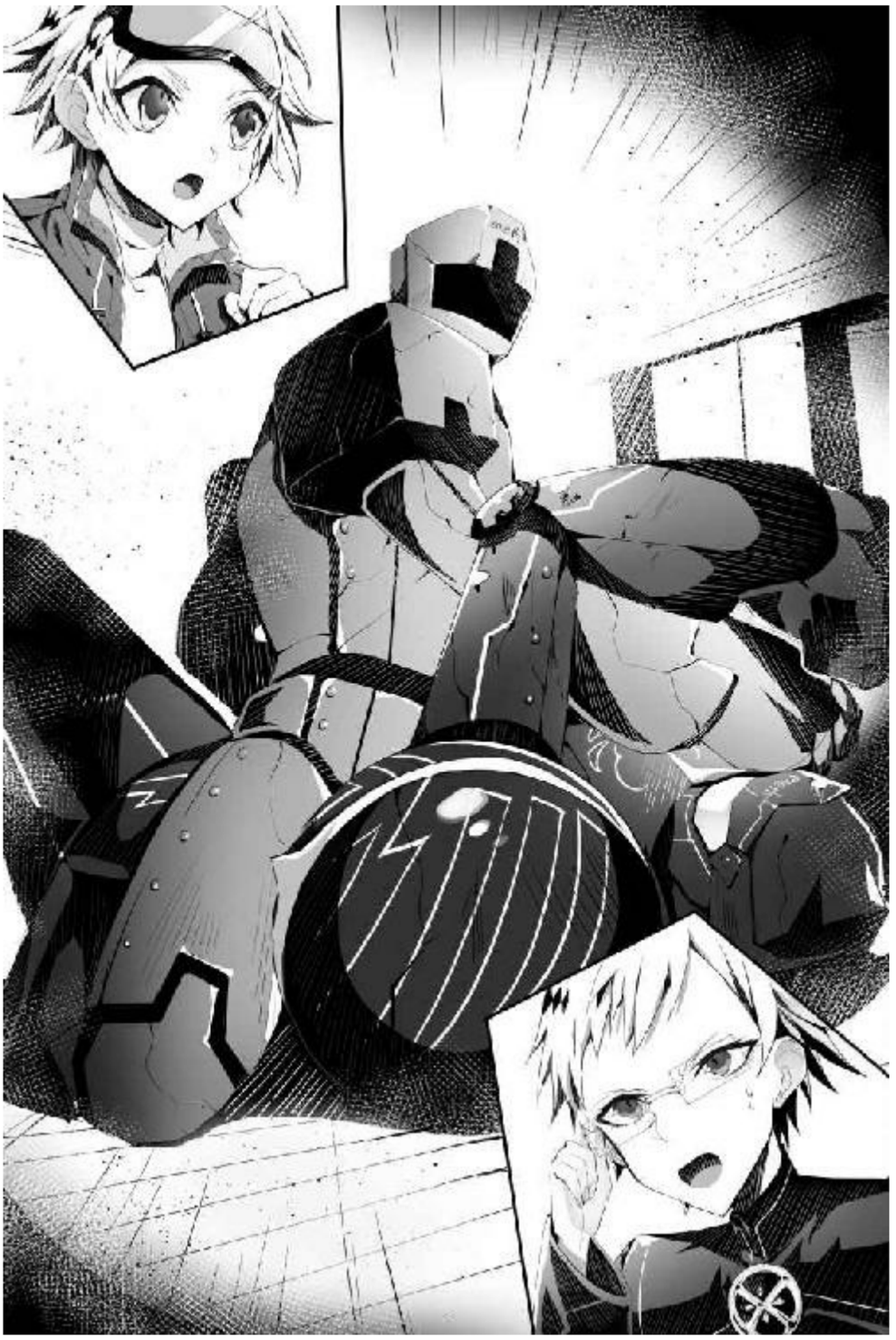
"This part is important, Cliff. You need to train your heart and mind."

His master taught him that lesson first around the time they met.

“The Golem and Golem Tamer are connected mentally. The Golem won’t move the way you want it to if your mind is a frantic mess.”

The memories of that lesson encased his weakening will, providing a protecting layer of support. *That’s right!* Cliff realized, *Gandolf hasn’t lost yet! What good does it do to mentally throw the fight when we can still win?!*

“BLOCK IT, GANDOLF!”



Scraping metal and sparks flew a split second after his shout.

It was the sound of bronze clashing with iron. Gandolf had blocked No. 9's incoming pummel with his left hand.

"How?!" Kiriko shrieked. Taking advantage of her momentary attention lapse, Gandolf clenched his right fist.

"Gandolf, punch back!"

Obeying the order, he hit No. 9 with enough force as to send him flying.

KABOOM! What sounded like an earsplitting blast—more like an *explosion*—rung throughout the station. It was the sound of Gandolf landing a hit straight to No. 9's chest; the sound of a single punch sending No. 9 flying off Gandolf.

Even Cliff, the person who gave the command, stared in wide-eyed disbelief. No. 9 had been utterly blown back and crashed hard on the ground, his chest plate sunken.

"Wh-What in God's name…?!" Kiriko quickly pulled herself together from her shock, and No. 9 lifted himself off the ground the same time Gandolf lumbered to his feet.

"Go get 'im, Gandolf!"

"Fight back, No. 9!"

The two heavyweight-class Golems engaged in a superhuman fistfight with the Tamers' voices as the starting signal

No. 9 dodged Gandolf's left hook, returning the blow with a spinning backfist strike. Gandolf thrust his elbow out to intercept it and executed a powerful knee strike. Cliff's astonishment only grew as he watched how Gandolf fought.

Practicing with the Golem was normally required before the Tamer could freely control it, since the Golem Tamer essentially had to control an entirely separate body through willpower alone. This was why Golem Tamers shouted their commands aloud to clearly define what they wanted the Golem to do under their control.

But Cliff was still very young and had yet to mature mentally. In every other

case, it should've been impossible for him to control a Golem so freely that it could act merely based on the images he envisioned.

There was only one explanation: Lovel's Remote Engrave Incantation must've enhanced Gandolf's performance to an impossibly high level. She pulled off the unbelievable with an Engrave Incantation she formed in the few seconds she had studied the textbook.

Who in the world is she?!

Gandolf locked the enemy in his grip while Cliff contemplated the question. Squeezing No. 9's throat in his left hand, he immobilized the Golem.

"Good work, Gandolf! Use your other hand to take out his forehead's—"

"That's far enough, boy!"

Cliff turned around and inhaled sharply. Kiriko had her gun aimed at him.

"I didn't want to resort to these methods, but that Golem's ability is abnormal. So I'm afraid I have to default to my last resort to tidy up the situation."

"A g-gun?! That's your answer?! Is it right for a Rabbi to shoot somebody with a *freakin' gun*?!"

"For your information, it's a tranquilizer gun. But don't underestimate what it's capable of. One shot and you'll be put in suspended animation, a temporary state of apparent death. You won't awaken from slumber for at least a year, if not longer."

"A wh-whole freakin' year…?!"

"Tranquilizing you will cut your link to that preposterous Golem so we can contain you in our underground cemetery until you regain consciousness. You've earned the Torah Church's prison sentence, boy."

Cliff was speechless. He had heard rumors of the Rabbis using such a ludicrous gun on rogue Golem Tamers before, but he never imagined even for a second that he would be shot with such an unbelievable weapon.

"Quietly surrender if you don't want that to happen to you…! You aren't prepared to make an enemy of the Church, are you?!" Kiriko threatened. Her

cutting words caused Cliff to waver.

Torah Church—the rulers of the archipelago. Cliff thoroughly understood the grave implications associated with making an enemy of them.

His memories of being oppressed and tormented by the Rabbis were still raw however. The craving to fight overwhelmed his fear, solidifying his determination and inciting his rage.

“I’m…prepared!” The words surged from deep within him. “Don’t you keep on thinking that we’ll quietly obey you forever!”

“You’ve got that right, Cliff!” Lovel’s voice rang out a second after Cliff’s declaration.

Startled, Kiriko looked toward the voice. Lovel had sprung to her feet in another mad dash for Kiriko.

“You little brat!” Kiriko reflexively turned her gun on Lovel, but Lovel’s acute rush of adrenaline had her delivering a wheel kick to Kiriko faster than she could fire the tranquilizer.

“…Guh!” Taking the full brunt of the kick to the head, Kiriko collapsed on the spot.

Lovel landed behind her and glared down at the fallen Rabba. “…If you guys won’t believe me, I’ll fight you all,” she declared. For some reason, she looked rather refreshed. Now smiling, she spun to Cliff and said merrily, “C’mon, Cliff! Now’s the time to pummel that Golem!”

“Yeah!”

Gandolf obeyed Cliff’s voice and clenched his right fist. Then he threw a punch right at No. 9’s forehead. His fist struck the letters spelling *emeth* on No.9’s forehead with deadly precision. One of the letters dented beyond recognition, forming cracks in the bronze head.

The cracks surprised Lovel. “It *cracked*?! What did you do?!”

“It doesn’t matter how strong and impenetrable the Golem, the letters on its forehead is every Golem’s weakness. Erasing the e from emeth changes it from truth to death. If you succeed in doing that, the Golem will…”

Cracks spread throughout No. 9's body during Cliff's explanation. Deep fissures covered his body in less than a few seconds.

"…fall apart like this."

As if on cue, No. 9's body shattered like glass.

Lovel cheered and ran over to Cliff to throw her arms around him. "You rock, Cliff! I love how ready you are to take action!"

"H-Half of our success is thanks to you, Lovel…! A-Anyway, we should get outta here before more Rabbis show up." His eyes still spinning from her embrace, Cliff shifted his gaze to Gandolf. Registering his intent, Gandolf promptly picked Cliff and Lovel up in his hand and kicked off into a powerful run.

Gandolf dashed up the stairs and hurtled onto the platform aboveground. Slums, embraced by the night, unfolded below their eyes. Yet, from this height, the scenery appeared completely different from what Cliff was used to. Passersby gaped up at them.

"By the way, Cliff, what did you make the Restrictor?" Lovel asked out of the blue, sitting on the hand beside him.

"You know what that is?"

"Even I know that much. Don't Golems need Restrictors to move?"

Cliff suddenly cracked a smile at her question and answered, "I made the Restrictor, 'don't hurt humans.' I'm not like those rotten Rabbis."

"Good one! That's a great Restrictor!" Lovel returned his smile with a broad grin. Butterflies flittered ecstatically inside his chest when he saw her beautiful smile.

He really was in a ridiculous situation. He'd made an enemy of the Church, and he still didn't know who Lovel truly was. The situation had changed in an unimaginable way; stealing back confiscated goods wasn't an option, much less a concern. He wasn't even sure what the future had in store for them.

But deep down, Cliff understood a part of him had always been waiting for a day like this to come.

“All right, ready to pick a fight with the Church, Lovel? Since I’ve come this far, I’ll see this through to the end with you!”

“Where should we start?”

“Wanna start by searching for that Silver Golem Sephiroth? I’m curious ‘bout what it’s like too.”

“Okay! It’s decided then! I just know we can track it down!”

With those two shouting children on board, Gandolf raced through Chest Island in the cloak of the night, accompanied only by the sound of bells tolling in the distance.

Chapter 2: St. Rollins' Witch

Day 1

Head Island's Schoolgirl, Erie Reyer

Head Island

ALABASTER homes with fancy gardens, paved roads lined with perfectly manicured trees, sunlight streaming through green leaves onto clean stone walkways, sweet-smelling flowers, and leisurely commutes were the qualities of life that marked Head Island—the island floating above sea level a mere five hundred meters north of Chest Island. To the residents of Chest Island, Head Island stood as the epitome of heaven just out of reach.

The chiming bells of Torah Church's Great Bell Tower resounded throughout the beautiful townscape. Under the protection of the Rabbis, the virtuous and affluent residents of Head Island lived in peace, without fear of crime or assault.

To the northern most edge of the island—the metaphorical forehead of the human-shaped archipelago—stood the prestigious Torah Church run St. Rollins Academy.

Yet another zealous lecture could be heard spilling from the windows of a classroom on this day as well.

"…Ultimately, Golemology is a sacred field of study by which we learn how to grant life to inanimate dolls through the imitation of God's holy works," lectured a gentle-looking, bearded man. His clear voice carried to even the far corners of the classroom.

"There's a wide-breadth of Golem types. The standard or base form is the Dirt Golem. Wood Golems are the cheapest and most efficient for multi-purpose utilization. Metal and Stone Golems are suited for heavy labor. There are also Amber Golems, which are imbued with animal life…"

Every student who listened to the lecture had elegant and polished features, unlike the street children of Chest Island, and these fifteen-year-old boys and girls attended class in the Academy's black school uniform.

The lecturer delivered an impassioned speech to those students. "Some Golem types have been restricted over time, too. In particular, Golems made from the human body or human bones have been banned. A number of accounts have come forward reporting this type of Golem moving with as many as four arms."

Bored with the lecture, a girl stared out the window. Perfectly straight black hair cascaded down her back, ending at her waistline. Her large dark eyes stood out against her porcelain white skin. Those eyes locked on somewhere far in the distance. Gentle winds gusted through the adjacent window, fluttering the cape resting on her shoulders.

“Crafting a Prime Body in a shape closer and more faithful to the human body increases the Golem’s usability. With that said, life can be instilled in even the crudest of bodies if you get the Engrave Incantations exactly right. For example, you can even give life to something like this…” The lecturer procured a small cloth doll from a shelf underneath the lectern.

“I would like to give you an explanation on a basic Engrave Incantation using this doll today. We will be using the Engrave Incantation I taught you during yesterday’s lecture. Would anyone like to give it a try?”

Nervous energy shot through the classroom. Every student averted their eyes from the lecturer, praying they wouldn’t be called on. The lecturer forced a smile and pointed to the girl by the window as he usually did in these situations.

“In that case, Miss Erie Reyer, please form the Engrave Incantation to make this doll dance.”

Erie jerked her head from the window toward the lecturer as if he splashed her with cold water. She nodded, pushed to her feet, and approached the lectern where she held her hands over the doll.

Her hands instantly glowed with a faint light and the Engrave Incantation inscribed the doll within the blink of an eye. From her thin lips came a whisper of a voice, “My name is Erie Reyer. With truth as my witness, I give thee the name *Ragdoll*. Live as one with me and return to dust with me. I order thee to **dance**.”

At Erie’s command, the doll broke into a wobbly dance. The lecturer raised his voice in emphatic approval, “That was a marvelous example of Remote Engrave Incantation, Miss Erie!” He then addressed the rest of the class, “As you just witnessed, simple Engrave Incantations can be performed in an extremely short amount of time at the hands of an experienced expert.”

Half of the students applauded her success at a Remote Engrave Incantation,

an exceedingly rare ability that could only be found in a handful of people even if one scoured the entire archipelago for it. The applause arose from a mixture of feelings: envy, respect, awe, and jealousy. Erie sighed quietly, to prevent anyone from noticing how she felt.

“Okay, now I want you all to create a dancing doll while analyzing this doll’s Engrave Incantation. Please engage in the task at hand while keeping yesterday’s lecture in mind.”

Erie returned to her seat as the lecturer described the details of the assignment.

A boy with glasses sitting next to the window smiled at her. She smiled back at him and sat down.

***

“THAT Professor Navarov is trying to live it up through you,” the boy with glasses remarked, striking up a conversation with Erie after class ended and lunch break began. “He isn’t capable of using Remote Engrave Incantation either, so he wants to leave all the hard work to you, Erie.”

“You shouldn’t say things like that, Heathy.”

“I’m begging you, can you please lay off the Heathy nickname? It’s *Heath.* My name is Heath Coleman. Between this horrible nickname and calling that Golem ‘Ragdoll,’ you’ve got a serious case of bad naming sense,” Heath complained, running a hand through his ashen hair. His attractive face held an air of keen intelligence, but more stunning was the fierce determination glinting in the eyes hidden behind his glasses. Oddly enough, the plain black uniform was becoming of him.

“Well, not that it matters,” he concluded. “Anyways, want to have lunch?”

“Sure… It’s nice outside, let’s eat in the courtyard.”

Heath nodded to her suggestion and walked out of the classroom ahead of her. As Erie stood to follow him out, her ears caught the sound of hushed whispers.

“Did you hear that? Sounds like the great and mighty Witch doesn’t want to

eat in the same classroom as us."

"I don't care if she's been recognized as a prodigy since day one. Isn't she looking down on us too much?"

"Don't forget, she's gloomy as hell. I was stuck as her classmate in my first year too, and I've never held a decent conversation with her."

"You gotta wonder why a cutie like Heath is hangin' around a downer like her. It's putting his good looks to waste."

Erie could hear their conversation and mocking laughter. She slowly looked over her shoulder. A group of girls were having a nice lunch together in the middle of the classroom.

...I must be hearing things, Erie convinced herself as she left the classroom.

***

ERIE and Heath sat next to each other on a bench in the Academy's posh green courtyard eating sandwiches they bought at the co-op.

"It's already spring. Almost been a year since we enrolled here, huh?" Heath commented, his eyes sweeping over the back quad's spring scenery.

Erie nodded. "Yeah."

"Only two more years to go 'til graduation. It'll probably pass us by in no time too."

That was how Heath saw things, but to Erie, two years felt painfully long. She felt depressed when she thought of how she would have to deal with two more years of this.

Heath kept talking, saying, "What'll you do after graduation, Erie?"

"I have no clue. I haven't decided yet."

"You can go anywhere and do anything with your grades, Erie. You can become a Rabba with the Church or even a researcher at the Military Golem Laboratory—"

"I don't like Golems one bit," Erie spoke over him, "I don't want work with them." She lowered her eyes to her sandwich.

“Don’t say that. Didn’t you want to become a Golem Tamer, Erie?”

Erie shook her head. Apparently, she once told him about her dream to become a Tamer long ago. But for some reason, she couldn’t remember wanting to become a Golem Tamer no matter how hard she tried.

“…I wonder why I returned to this island,” she muttered to herself. She knew that on the bench beside her, Heath wore a complicated expression that reflected his mixed feelings on the subject.

Erie left her family’s home on the mainland to move into the Academy’s dormitory exactly one year ago. But that didn’t mean she had never visited the archipelago before. She once lived on Head Island for six months when she was six years old for her father’s job.

She met Heath during that sojourn. He occasionally spoke of their time together as kids.

“You know, one day you told me, ‘Heathy, let’s make a Golem.’”

But Erie couldn’t remember. She didn’t even have a memory of why she might have said it.

“You don’t remember? Didn’t you get all hyped up about wanting to become a Golem Tamer after meeting a Rabbi who was making some kinda awesome Golem during church worship service?”

Whenever Heath spoke of her wish to become a Golem Tamer, he seemed to be referring to that specific time. Erie didn’t remember a thing about it, but from what he told her, she and Heath dreamed of becoming Golem Tamers since that day.

She vaguely recalled trying really hard to turn a tiny doll into a Golem with Heath. It never did move, but they were engrossed in trying to make it work.

Eventually, the six months passed, and the time came for her to leave the island. They both cried, not wanting to part.

“Erie! I’ll keep on studying Golems! I’ll absolutely attend that academy! So let’s meet again at the Academy of Tamers someday!”

That’s what Heath said when they parted. Erie also vowed to him, *“It’s a*

promise!”

She at least remembered that much. That’s why she left her parents and returned to this island after nine years. And then they successfully reunited. When she saw Heath’s face at the Academy’s entrance ceremony, nostalgia and joy brought tears to her eyes.

However, several days later Erie passed out behind the dormitory.

She couldn’t remember why she’d fainted. The dorm custodian who found her on the ground seemed worried to death. Since there was no physical trauma, the incident didn’t explode into a big ordeal.

But everything changed since that day. Erie’s childhood memories became terribly vague, and in return, she’d gained the ability to use the all-powerful Remote Engrave Incantation.

She didn’t understand how it happened either. Up until then, she had been an average student, but on that day she became a different person.

Erie was the only student in the Academy’s long history to have learned Remote Engrave Incantation while enrolled. With envy and jealousy, the students around her dubbed Erie St. Rollins’ Witch.

The coveted power that didn’t match her stature created a firm wall between her and everyone else, while her obscure memories leeched away her confidence. It’s around then that Erie developed an extremely introverted personality.

Heath occasionally talked to her about their past together, but their memories often ran counter to each other. Even though they were supposed to be Erie’s memories, she found them unreliable, almost like they belonged to someone else. Trying to force herself to remember only disoriented her, muddying her mind.

Since that fateful day, Erie was submerged in the strange feeling she wasn’t who she thought she was.

“…Hey, Heathy? I…wanted to become a Golem Tamer, right?” Erie asked Heath, the sandwich still gripped tightly in her hand.

He kindly answered, “You did. That’s why you’re here right now, Erie.”

Her dream came true. She had obtained a power beyond what anyone else could even begin to dream of.

But what did that matter? Erie no longer wanted to stay at this academy.

“I…don’t want to become some Golem Tamer… I hate stupid Golems.”

Her words ran contrary to her past with Heath, rejecting him. But to the Erie in this moment, it reflected how she truly felt.

Heath didn’t say anything in response. He simply placed his hand on Erie’s lowered head.

She didn’t know what he meant by the gesture. But, if nothing else, she could feel his warmth through his palm.

***

LECTURES continued in another classroom after lunch. The next lecture was given by a middle-aged lecturer named Crank Getz. Even Erie, who normally spent her lessons staring absently outside, listened attentively to his lectures.

“…To put it simply, great risk and responsibility go hand in hand with creating life.”

Erie had heard that Getz, the man who gave lectures in his white lab coat with an inscrutable expression, had once been a top-notch Golem researcher. But he lost his position when strict regulations were placed on his field of specialty, turning him into the humble adjunct professor she knew today.

Getz operated a private medical clinic out of his home on Chest Island where he lived alone. He had a way treating everyone coldly, which made him very difficult to approach. Erie also struggled with how to interact with his aloof disposition, but she didn’t dislike his lectures.

“*Golem*—this term actually means something incomplete or unfinished, like an *embryo*.” Getz raked his hand through his gray hair as he deadpanned, “A Golem is an eternal embryo, never meant to be given life through birth. Granting life to such a thing skirts close to imitating God. But there are various rules in place that dictate how you create and tame such a being.”

Getz pulled a birdcage from underneath the lectern. A tiny clay Golem was inside the cage. “In general, a Tamer can only control one Golem at a time. Their ability to accurately control each Golem inversely correlates with the number of Golems they simultaneously tame. Incidentally, it’s impossible to transfer a named Golem over to another person… Tamers must take responsibility for the Golems they create from inception until death.”

The Golem inside the cage suddenly began to tremble as Getz spoke. Watching it, he continued, “…But immense danger is involved in creating Golems, even if you abide by all the rules. Every Golem bears one specific, great risk.”

Red Engrave Incantations emerged on the body of the caged Golem. The letters on its forehead glowed crimson as if they were on fire. Then the Golem violently threw itself against the cage in a berserk fit.

“The risk is them going *berserk*, and it’s a state every Golem will eventually succumb to.” Getz observed the Golem throwing punches at the cage bars and pragmatically explained, “Golems and Golem Tamers are mentally linked. Just like how an embryo and its mother are connected through the umbilical cord. Any negative or hostile intentions the Golem Tamer harbors will be passed on to the Golem. Once the concentration surpasses what the Tamer is capable of restraining—the Golem will be free from the Tamer’s control and will go berserk.”

Getz wrote an equation on the blackboard.

Golem Tamer’s Force of Will – Golem’s Accumulated Aggression = Golem’s Lifespan

Erie found the equation to be of critical importance to anyone involved with Golems. But how many people actually took it to heart?

Newspapers covered Berserker Golem-related accidents from time to time and they were never pretty. The number one accident prevention method required rigorous supervision of Golem manufacturing and repairs to shoddy Engrave Incantations by the Church’s Rabbis.

“Furthermore, the cruder the Golem created by a novice’s hand the more likely it is to go out of control. This is why it is ideal to request an official Golem

from the Rabbis. Official Church manufactured Golems last a solid five years. On the other hand, Illegal Golems last a short three months on average until going berserk. The worst cases documented indicate a loss of control within three days."

Getz relayed the harrowing facts, but there was no end in sight to the illegal Golem manufacturing occurring on Chest Island.

Why do people bring life into the world without giving it a thought? Erie's young heart ached whenever she wondered how people could be so thoughtless with creating life.

"Berserker Golems are freed from their Restrictor and will try to kill their Tamer. And they will attack every living being that stands in their way to do it. There are only two ways to stop a Berserker Golem: destroy it or let the Tamer die." A distant look overtook Getz's eyes, a hint of sorrow gleaming deep within their recesses.

"…For that reason, boys and girls, you must return your Golem to dust before they go berserk. That is our responsibility as beings who can never become God."

The bell rang, signaling the end of class.

Getz erased the "e" from the caged Golem's forehead with his finger. While watching the Golem crumble, he quietly announced, "Class dismissed."

***

CLASSES were done for the day after finishing their Golem Tamer Drills. All that was left to do was return to the dorms, but Erie wasn't enthusiastic about it.

She could talk to Heath during school, but she had no one to talk to in the gender separated dorm buildings. Erie liked one of her upperclassmen, but she hadn't seen her around today. Her absence made Erie feel like she had lost her place inside the girls' dormitory.

Sighing, Erie shoved to her feet. She exited the classroom into the evening sunlit hallway and spotted Heath speaking to a lecturer.

“Hello, Professor Navarov,” Erie greeted.

The lecturer turned towards her. “Hi there, Miss Erie. Thanks for helping out during the afternoon lesson.”

The lecturer was a bearded gentleman with an amicable smile, who served as both an adjunct professor and the custodian at the Academy’s dorms. A mild-mannered, middle-aged man—that was Benny Navarov.

“You know, you’ve arrived at just the right time, Miss Erie. I was just asking Heath about this, but let me put the same question to you too.” Navarov walked over to Erie and whispered in her ear to keep anyone from overhearing, “You see, it has come to my attention that one of your upperclassmen who boards at the dorm, Miss Lovel, has gone missing… Do you know anything about this?”

“Lovel went missing?” Erie repeated loudly despite herself.

Lovel Sinclair was the most popular girl in school with her friendly demeanor and endless cheerfulness.

Erie looked up to Lovel as a role model. They had never spoken before, but Erie wished she could become as cheerful as Lovel someday. But now Lovel was missing?

“Um…well…I wouldn’t really know where Lovel might go…”

“Don’t sweat it! It’s not a big deal if you don’t know! I just thought I should try asking.” Navarov waved his hands to reassure her in an overdone fashion and finished merrily, “I’ll be on my way then. Don’t let what I told you about Miss Lovel bother you. She’s probably just ditched class. What a problematic girl, that one.” He flashed them a smile before walking away. Erie watched his back disappear down the hallway.

“Erie,” Heath said, “my committee meeting is going to go late today. You can go back to the dorm first.”

“I’ll wait for you. Let’s go back together.”

“You sure? It’s going to be really late by the time I’m done.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

Heath gave a half smile and walked off to his meeting.

Unlike Erie, Heath was both smart and athletic, so he was often invited to participate in extracurricular activities. Though he turned down every invitation to join a club, he was unable to continue refusing the school committee, since they followed him around every day pestering him to join. Erie recognized his kindness as one of his strong points.

If she hung around waiting for him in the classroom, her classmates could potentially say something antagonizing to her. With that in mind, Erie decided to wait for him in the empty Golem Tamer Practical Training Room.

"…I wonder how long his meeting will take."

Erie took a seat and stared out the window, watching students on their way home. The campus steadily emptied with their departure.

Erie dozed off on the desk without meaning to.

***

ERIE woke up feeling uneasy, with a tinge of sadness lingering from what must have been a terribly upsetting dream. How long did she sleep? By the time she came to, the room had sunken into the shadows of dusk.

O-Oh no…! His meeting must be over by now…

Heath wouldn't know Erie had switched classrooms. Would he think she'd gone back without him when he saw she wasn't waiting in their classroom?

I wonder if Heathy is mad at me… I'm not there when I said I'd wait for him.

Erie's shoulders sagged with the weight of her stupid mistake as she exited the practical training room. The hallways were dark and stiller than death. Pale blue moonlight streamed inside through the windows.

I have to hurry back.

With a sense of urgency, Erie increased her pace and turned the corner. There, she saw a figure at the end of the hallway.

"Heathy?" she ventured, hoping it was him. The figure didn't respond as they walked toward her in silence.

The shadowy figure stepped into the moonlight, revealing a boy not much older than Erie. He wore pants ripped at the knees and a black military surplus jacket. Judging by his clothing, he may have been from Chest Island.

He stopped right in front of Erie and quietly stated, “So you’re Erie Reyer.”

“Excuse me?” The stranger gave her a bit of fright knowing who she was when she didn’t know him.

With his black eyes, even blacker hair, and skin white enough to be transparent, he seemed inorganic, somehow, as if he were made of porcelain. He was easily classified as handsome, but she still didn’t recognize him in the slightest.

“Who…are you?”

“I’m Jair. I’ve come to get you.” He stared straight at Erie. “I doubt any good has come of being here. The time has come for you to toss this unpleasant world aside.”

Erie’s heart thudded in her ears. It dawned on her that she had been waiting this entire time for someone to take her away.

Jair took Erie’s hand as if he knew exactly how she felt. She followed him without thinking when he started walking. Led by his hand, Erie went down the hallway, memories of everything that had happened at school until this very moment replaying in the back of her mind.

She had easily formed the Engrave Incantations her classmates struggled to string together on countless occasions, never needing to put any thought into the act. How many lessons had it taken before she became capable of doing that? Erie became a Golem Tamer without putting in any effort, without having to fight for it, but it wasn’t as if that had brought her any joy.

She felt like she was suffocating all the time. Whenever she stared out the window, she always dreamed of the day when she could go somewhere far away from here. And now, at long last, that day had come.

They slipped out the front entrance into the schoolyard where the scenery she stared at through the window for a whole year fanned out before her eyes.

She was ready to abandon her miserable everyday life, or at least she thought she was. And yet—

What filled her heart wasn't eager anticipation of where she was going or the sweet relief of liberation from her self-imposed prison, but the memory of a certain boy's kind smile.

…Heathy.

She recalled the warmth of his hands.

They had spent a whole year together. Not that anything particularly special had happened beyond that. Nothing but innocent memories of their sweet time together came to mind.

She often taught Heath, who struggled with Engrave Incantations, how to form them correctly. Yet, whenever he tried to teach her how to properly shape a Golem in return, she only ever ended up with an unshapely mess that lacked any semblance to his example.

She couldn't forget his conflicted smile when he tried to find the right words to point out her mistakes. He never failed to look at Erie for who she really was. He was always considerate of her, even though being by her side only served to ruin his reputation. His eyes were devoid of the envy and jealousy everyone else looked at her with. Erie felt like he saw her as a normal person, not the freak the others saw.

One time, they named each other's Golems. He had laughed at her horrible naming sense. For some reason, all of those memories felt incredibly nostalgic to her now.

Erie stopped walking. "…I'm sorry. I can't go," she said to Jair, who questioningly eyed her over his shoulder. Gazing straight into his scowling eyes, she explained, "I promised Heathy I'd go back with him."

Jair didn't humor her comment with a response. After a long pause, he muttered to himself, "I guess something like this is bound to happen after a year… I was told not to make you suffer in your final moments, but it seems that's no longer an option."

He released Erie's hand and took a few steps back. Then he pulled what

looked like a tiny stone from his pocket and buried it in the ground at his feet.

"…What are you doing?"

Ignoring her question, he raised his voice and chanted, "…My name is Jair. In the name of the 72 gods, I give thee the name *Adamah*."

What's he doing? Is he actually performing a naming right now? But he's using different words from the usual incantation, and there isn't even a Prime Body around…?

In the seconds those thoughts passed through Erie's mind, the ground suddenly glowed and ballooned. A mass of dirt took on a human shape right before her eyes.

"How…?"

Before she knew it, a Clay Golem around two meters tall was standing in front of her. She stood there dumbly, staring at it, when Jair's icy voice rang in her ears.

"Live as one with me and return to dust with me. I order thee to **kill that woman**!"

The Clay Golem immediately lunged at Erie.

"AAAAH!" Erie spun on her heel like hot coal was burning her feet and ran into the school building. She fled through the hallways, nearly tripping over her feet. Her heart hammered so hard she thought it would burst from her ribcage. She didn't know what was going on, but she had a pretty good idea about one thing.

He said he came to get me, but he actually came to kill me?! Why me?!

Heavy feet pounded the ground behind her, growing louder with every passing second. Erie knew the Golem had caught up to her. Just then, she spotted a light farther down the hall. A door had been left cracked open at the end of the hallway. It was the security guard room!

Security at the Academy was handled by a Golem Tamer. Though he was advancing in age, he was a skilled Tamer with years of experience under his belt supporting his mission to preserve peace within the Academy.

I'm sure he will save me! Erie threw the door open and dove into the security guard room.

"Mr. Security Guard, help—" The rest of Erie's words lodged in her paralyzed throat.

Fragments of a destroyed Golem were strewn around the back of the guard room. She found the security guard in a heap on the ground surrounded by the sharp fragments. His neck was wrenched at an angle no neck should go.

Erie touched the security guard with a trembling hand. When she held him up, his head lolled in her grasp, blood spilling from his gaping mouth.

"*…!*" Screaming inaudibly, Erie scooted back in horror. The security guard's body slid onto the floor and rolled over.

H-He's dead…! How can that be?! He's really…

Just as her body began to shake uncontrollably, she sensed something looming behind her.

Slowly turning around, she found the Clay Golem standing in the doorway, blocking her only way out. Outside the windows she could see a countless number of shadowy shapes swaying as they came closer. They weren't human, but Golems. The number of shadows multiplied. She couldn't escape.

"Help me…" A wisp of a voice slipped past Erie's lips. Golems were closing in on her.

I'll be killed too! Help me—somebody!

"HELP ME, HEATHY!" she screamed.

"ERIE!"

She heard his voice from the other side of the Golem in the doorway after she screamed his name. Her gaze swung toward his voice in disbelief. Heath rammed into the Clay Golem with his shoulder faster than it could turn around.

Spraying dirt everywhere, the Golem staggered. Without missing a beat, Heath grabbed a nearby chair and braced himself protectively in front of Erie.

"Heathy!"

“I came back when I couldn’t find you at the dorms, but what the hell is going on here?!”

He came to save her. Just like he always did.

Erie couldn’t form an answer. Her overwhelming emotions deprived her of speech.

“C’mon, Erie, now’s not the time to cry!”

“Y-You’re right… I don’t really understand what’s going on, but this Golem is… trying to k-kill me…!”

“It is?!” Tension froze the muscles in Heath’s face. In those flurried moments, the Golem rose to its feet.

“Heathy, erase the ‘e’ from that Golem! We’ll be fine if you—”

“S-Sorry, Erie,” Heath interrupted, “that doesn’t seem possible…!” His voice was taut with panic. “This Golem doesn’t have ‘emeth’ written on its forehead!”

“What?!” Shocked, Erie strained her eyes against the darkness enshrouding the room.

She didn’t realize it earlier, but sure enough, no letters were engraved on the Golem’s forehead. How was that possible when Golems couldn’t move without “emeth” engraved on their foreheads?!

Is this Golem more than just an ordinary Golem…?!

The Golem, or rather the *something* called Adamah, lurched closer to Erie and Heath during the confusion.

“Uraaaaaaaaah!” Heath let out a war cry to embolden himself and swung the chair down on Adamah. Adamah blocked it with his right arm and seized Heath with his left. Then he lifted Heath to the ceiling and slammed him against the ground.

“GUAAGH!”

“HEATHY!”

Erie scampered to his side and helped him off the ground. Staggering to his feet, Heath picked up the chair and challenged the Golem again.

“Stay back, Erie!” Heath shouted.

He smashed the chair into Adamah’s head, splitting his clay skull in half. But Adamah continued to move. And worse yet, his head sucked in the broken fragments of clay skull, gradually restoring the missing part.

“It regenerated?!”

“Is this some kinda sick joke?! Damn it! Break already! BREAK!” Heath brought the chair down on Adamah from the left and the right, from above and at an angle. By the tenth hit, Adamah’s upper body had been battered to pieces, and he fell over motionless at last.

Shoulders shuddering with heavy breaths, Erie and Heath stared at Adamah’s deteriorating remains in sheer terror.

“What the hell is this thing…?!” Heath sputtered

“I don’t know! It’s a Golem birthed from the ground by the person who’s trying to kill me…I think…”

By now, Adamah had reverted back to nothing more than piles of clay dirt. Heath vigilantly watched as it crumbled away until his eyes went wide at what he spotted within the remains.

“What is this?” He crouched and picked up something from the middle of the biggest dirt pile. He held up a tiny black cube about three centimeters on all sides.

“Ah…!” Erie exclaimed in recognition, “A Golem suddenly burst from the ground when he buried that thing!”

She recalled witnessing Jair burying that cube in the ground, then naming it. Judging by the fact they’d found the same cube inside Adamah’s body, it meant that—

“This thing brought the Golem to life…?!” Heath hissed. Erie took the cube from him and examined it.

It felt smooth like obsidian. “emeth” was engraved in its surface.

“Heathy, what could this possibly—”

Glass shattered behind her before she could finish her question. Erie and Heath whirled around to see another Adamah smashing its way through the window into the security guard room.

“Let’s run for it, Erie!” Heath grabbed Erie’s arm and broke into a sudden sprint. Erie shoved the cube in her pocket and matched his pace.

They exited the room into the hallway, where three large shadows were looming in the dark.

“This way!” Heath shouted, dashing for the back entrance behind them. They raced down the hallway and propelled themselves into the back quad.

Unfortunately, there were several Adamahs waiting for them, and they could make out even more ominous shapes lumbering toward them in the dark.

“J-Just how bloody many are there?!”

“Heathy, let’s escape through the rear gate!”

It was possible to leave the campus through the gate behind the old school building. Heath nodded to her suggestion and took off for it, still holding her hand.

But a figure stood in the way of their exit through the rear gate too. Jair stood there, blocking their escape.

“That’s the guy! He’s the one making the Golems!”

“He’s the one?!” Heath made to sprint for Jair. Within a second of his foot kicking off the ground, an Adamah burst from the dirt, obstructing him.

“Not again!” Erie yelped.

“Damn him!” Heath cursed.

Confronted with yet another Adamah, Heath and Erie retreated back, but behind them was blocked as well, by the legion of large shadows that were catching up to them.

Erie wildly scanned the area for a path of escape. An open door jumped out at her—the old school building’s emergency exit.

“Heathy, this way!” Erie tugged him by the hand and hurtled into the old

school building.

Heath and Erie held hands as they raced through the rundown hallways of the old, retired wood building. After a short while, Heath suddenly stopped in front of a door.

“This room is…” Erie strained her eyes to read the plate above the door and made out the letters spelling, “Service Room.” Heath carefully opened the door to hide inside. Erie quietly followed him.

None of the Adamahs had reached this room as of yet.

Erie let out a tired sigh and whispered, “Heathy, this is so messed up…! How can one person keep so many Golems under control?! It shouldn’t be possible!”

“Yeah… It normally shouldn’t be possible for one person to tame more than one Golem at a time…!”

The lecture they had listened to earlier that afternoon was still fresh in their minds. It shouldn’t be physically possible for one person to tame and control so many Golems at once, with that precision.

But what other explanation was there for what they’d seen? Erie and Heath exchanged doubtful looks, but neither of them had an answer.

“…Whatever’s going on, I want a weapon,” Heath said, starting to search for one in the old service room.

The outdated service room looked like it hadn’t been used for years. Rust had formed on the iron cupboards, and the stone sink had dried out and developed cracks.

Ignoring the room’s condition, Erie joined Heath in his hunt for anything that could be used as a weapon. Eventually, her eyes caught the gleam of a sharp blade that had been stowed away in the back of a cabinet. It was a large butcher’s knife with a blade length of thirty centimeters.

“Heathy, check this out.”

Heath rushed over to her and took the knife firmly by the handle when she handed it to him. “I can fight with this…!”

His expression hardened with determination. Erie gave him a firm nod in

return.

Then, out of the blue, the edges fell away from his face, replaced with a soft gentleness as he gazed at Erie. As she looked back at him dumbfounded, he whispered, “Erie, if we manage to safely escape from this mess…will you go somewhere far away with me?”

“…What?”

“Wanting to become a Golem Tamer isn’t the only reason why I came to this school, you know? I came thinking I’d get to see you, Erie.” He simpered and confessed, “I can study anywhere. I don’t think there’s anything for you to learn from here, and there’s no greater teacher out there for me than you, right?”

His voice overflowed with tender emotion, despite their present dire circumstances. Something warm bubbled inside Erie’s heart.

“Let’s do it, Heathy.” She gazed straight into his eyes and gave him a clear answer. “I realize it now. Wherever you are, Heathy, is where I’m meant to be.”

Erie simply said exactly how she felt, but she felt like hands tightly squeezed around her heart nonetheless.

Did I…just say something incredibly important without realizing it?

Her face and chest grew hot. He smiled at her and hugged her with his free hand that wasn’t gripping the butcher’s knife.

“Let’s survive and get out of here.”

She softly nodded in response.

They walked to the door together. Cautiously opening it, they peeked into the hallway to survey the situation. The area remained cloaked in stillness, the enemy nowhere in sight.

“Okay, it’s now or never.” Heath entered the hallway first. Erie followed him out and tried to step forward, when—

The wall right beside Erie creaked loudly.

“Erie!” Heath shoved her out of the way in the nick of time. A fraction of a second later, the hallway wall was bulldozed to the ground, and a massive

Adamah over three meters tall wedged its way inside.

“Kill them.” They could hear Jair’s heartless voice somewhere in the darkness.

“RUN FOR IT, ERIE!” Adamah’s right hand shot out and hooked around Heath’s neck during his shout. “AGH!” Agonized moans ripped from his constricted throat.

With one hand, Adamah lifted Heath by the throat, suspending him almost high enough to reach the ceiling.

“N-No, Heathy…!”

Heath’s neck was being squeezed tighter, and Erie could do nothing to stop it. Adamah mercilessly continued his assault by driving his left fist into Heath’s side.

CRACK! The breath tore right out of Heath’s lungs in a single voiceless shriek. From inside his body came the horrifying sounds of something snapping, as if he were made of dry wood. He couldn’t make a sound even if he tried—his throat was on the verge of being crushed.

“Heathy! HEATHY!” Erie grabbed on to Adamah, but a simple sweep of his arm sent her flying.

Adamah slammed his fist into Heath’s side again, and again. Hanging him in the air by the throat, the Golem pounded and pounded, battering his broken ribcage further and further.

The sounds of bones breaking transformed into splatters—the sound of organs rupturing. Blood gushed from Heath’s mouth. The knife slipped from his grasp and clattered onto the ground.

“Er…ie…ru…n…” Heath wrung out.

“Stop… *STOP IT!* You can do whatever you want to me, but leave Heathy out of this! HELP HIM!” Erie screamed desperately at the darkness—at Jair, who had yet to show himself.

From somewhere she couldn’t see, a cold voice answered, “I can’t do that.”

“Why not?! Heathy isn’t who you want!”

“I was ordered to kill witnesses if necessary. His death is unavoidable in this instance.”

Something snapped inside Erie when she heard that. “I TOLD YOU TO LEAVE HIM OUT OF THIS!”

Snatching the butcher’s knife off the floor, she swung it wildly, putting the full weight of her body behind it. The blade severed Adamah’s right wrist off, freeing Heath and sending him tumbling onto the ground.

“Let’s run, Heathy!” On the verge of tears, she lent him her shoulder, and they scrambled into a run.

They ran in a frenzy and flung themselves into one of the classrooms lining the hallway. Erie warily opened a window to find a horde of Adamahs outside.

“…I think…this is…beyond what we can handle…after all…” Heath slumped onto the ground in an intense coughing fit, blood spurting from his mouth with every cough. His breathing sounded strange; his internal organs were most likely crushed. “Looks like…my wounds are…fatal… Sorry…wish I could be of more help…” He smiled weakly at her.

Erie took his hand in hers, trembling, and wailed, “I’m sorry…! I’m so sorry, Heathy! I’m so, *so sorry* for dragging you into this!” Tears spilled from her eyes.

He softly touched her cheek. “It’s fine…really… Because…wherever you are… Erie…is where I…belong…”

His words made her sob with reckless abandon.

They heard heavy footsteps shake the ground outside the classroom and knew death was drawing in on them. The pack of monsters was undoubtedly right outside the door.

“I wanted to leave this place with you…! I wanted to go somewhere far away with you…!” Erie’s voice echoed in the dark classroom. Heath stared at her face, and then suddenly, his eyes went wide.

“…There’s one good way…out of this,” he muttered, a deep, dark realization washing over him.

Erie furrowed her brow and stared at him in confusion. His right hand moved,

taking the knife from her.

“Heathy…?”

An unshakeable resolve overtook his face. Catching the moonlight, the butcher’s knife glinted. A terrible premonition washed over Erie and hit the bottom of her stomach like an anchor.

“Heathy, don’t…!”

Heath smiled at her. “Farewell, Erie,” he whispered, bringing down the knife.

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THE classroom door was blasted to smithereens in an explosive boom. From around Adamah’s back, Jair took a look inside. His eyes went wide.

The interior of the classroom was smeared with fresh blood. Erie sat there, motionless, the spray of blood coating her face.

Heath was lying on the floor, face up. A deep slash marred his chest. A knife lay on the floor beside him.

“Did you turn on each other…?” Jair sauntered into the room, ten-odd Adamahs following him in single file. They moved to surround Erie. “Erie, this must’ve shown you: refuse to obediently lay down your life and die, and the number of those dying in your place only increases.”

Erie stared at Heath’s corpse without answering him.

Jair sighed his words, “Kill her, Adamahs.”

The Adamahs obeyed and lurched into an attack.

Suddenly, a voice that sounded like it had been ripped from the pits of Sheol tore through the room, *“…My name is Erie Reyers.”*

Jair sharply inhaled. Erie went on despite him, “With truth as my witness, I give thee the name *Heath*.” She lifted her head and flayed Jair with a piercing glare. Tears flowed from her eyes.

Yes, I am St. Rollins’ Witch Erie Reyers. I can turn ***anything*** *into a Golem.* ***As long as it has human shape.***

“Live as one with me and return to dust with me.”

She finally understood her own feelings: she wanted to be with him forever, the way they were.

"*This is the only way for that to happen now,"* Heath had informed her, right before he brought the knife down on his own body.

Ever so slowly, the corpse slowly rose to its feet. Jair's eyes widened at the sight before him. There was little chance he didn't notice it—the letters "emeth" engraved in Heath's forehead.

"I order thee to…" Erie shouted through the tears streaming down her face, "kill them all, Heathy!"

At that command, "Heath" picked up the knife and with a crack of wood exploded from his position at a supernatural speed.



The nearest Adamah was sliced cleanly in half and crumbled. The second swung at Heath but disintegrated when the blade swung through its chest, destroying it in a single motion. The third tried to get behind Heath while the fourth lunged forward, but Heath leapt onto its arm and rocketed off with such force that the Adamah's arm shattered. Flipping upward, Heath landed on the ceiling, rebounded, and crashed into both Adamahs. Six more charged him. Facing them, Heath began slashing his way through the army of Adamahs.

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IN less than a minute, all the Adamahs had been returned to mere dirt.

Having successfully completed his order, Heath now stood still, nestled closely to Erie. But Jair was noticeably absent from the room. He had disappeared using the chaos of the battle as cover.

He had run away from them. Biting the inside of her cheek in irritation, Erie clenched it tightly in her hand—the tiny black cube they had found buried in an Adamah's chest.

This is my only clue. I'll use it to track that man down. Her mind made up, Erie turned to Heath, and left the classroom with him.

She exited the school building and stared at the scenery stretching into the distance. Heath's murderer was somewhere on this archipelago.

"Let's go, Heathy."

In her eyes, Heath seemed to nod. She gazed at his face, a face that had lost all expression and the ability to express itself. He truly was the most important thing to her.

She had made his Restrictor, "Be with me forever." It was a Restrictor meant to grant their wish.

Goodbye, school. Goodbye, dorm. Goodbye, the me from yesterday. This is the person I'll live out the rest of my life with. Because I belong where he is.

The Church's bells tolled in the distance. The sound resonating in her ears, Erie took Heath's hand in hers and walked into the night with him.

Chapter 3: A Golem Artificer’s Elegant Life

Day 2

The Mine’s Golem Artificer, Ouka Baraki

Heartbreak Hill Mine

THE greatest bustle of activity on St. Rollins Archipelago did not take place on Head Island, where the Church and Academy were situated. Rather, it was Chest Island that housed the heart of the archipelago's industry.

Were the archipelago compared to the shape of the human body, Heartbreak Hill would be located right at the heart, in the center of Chest Island. And on that hill was Heartbreak Hill Mine, a gigantic mine that had been excavated over the decades.

With its innumerable tunnels crisscrossing each other down into the deep, dark depths, a long, spiraling mineshaft stuck out of the middle of the low hill granting access to the floors with the greatest concentration of minerals. An untold number of Golems and Golem Tamers labored within these tunnels.

Refineries, workshops, and underground facilities dotted the area around the gaping mineshaft. Workers and miners alike lived crowded together in cramped living quarters, in the rooms of micro-apartment complexes that were built in endless rows encircling the main mineshaft. This was the largest industrial area on the archipelago, and it boasted ten times Head Island's population density.

It was in one, tiny corner of this industrial metropolis that a certain man had built his factory.

He had constructed the small log house in the vicinity of the mine's entrance. The front of the house featured statues of monsters, Oriental phantoms, and half-human half-beasts situated closely together in poor taste.

The sign out front proudly displayed in oversized letters:

"**Golem Factory OUKA-AN**

Golem Manufacturing, Sales, and After-sale Servicing

We Take Care of All Your Golem Needs, from the Cradle to the Grave"

The sloppy brushstrokes of its letters readily revealed the factory owner's dispassionate personality.

"You want help lookin' for somebody? And here I thought you'd come to see me after all this time."

Inside the factory, two men were sitting face to face. One was a tall middle-aged Rabbi, with long hair trailing down the back of his black vestment. The other was an unshaven Asian man, who wore an open-collar shirt under a rugged jacket, like some sort of gangster.

Wine jar in hand, the unshaven man continued, scoffing, “Torah Church must be gettin’ real understaffed. Ain’t that right, Torah Lord Spinoza Bulledge?”

Spinoza, the middle-aged Rabbi, combed a hand through his long hair and replied, “Don’t go saying things that’ll tarnish our reputation, Torah Officer Ouka Baraki.”

“*Former*, you mean. Former Torah Officer Ouka Baraki. I ain’t no more than a Golem Artificer now,” Ouka reminded him with a laugh.

At age thirty, his well-toned, muscular figure stood tall, at 185 centimeters. But his eyes, on the other hand, had clouded over like a dead fish.

Spinoza gave him a strained, sad smile. “You shouldn’t talk about yourself like that. You aren’t just a simple Golem Artificer after all, right?”

“If that ain’t what I am, then what am I?”

“An *Illegal* Golem Artificer.”

Ouka gulped and shot Spinoza a suspicious look. “What? You knew?”

“How could I not? You’re a skilled Illegal Golem Artificer who manufactures Prime Bodies without permission from the Church and sells them en masse through black market channels. Isn’t that what you’re currently up to?”

“…Did you come here to arrest me or somethin’?”

“I wouldn’t dream of it!” Spinoza professed, “I don’t give a damn about that. But I can’t say the same for the people above me… I wouldn’t want *word* to spread, you know. It would result in the unfortunate capture of a dear old subordinate of mine. You understand what I’m getting at, don’t you?” His lips curled into a smirk unbecoming of his high position in the Church as a Torah Lord. Despite the eight years he had on Ouka, he still possessed a mischievous and underhanded streak of a street boy.

Ouka’s response was equally relaxed. “You’ve got me there. I’ll hear you out.

What's got you cornered so badly that you need to borrow a criminal's help?"

Spinoza nodded and launched into a bitter explanation of the situation. "It's to do with something that went down last night. A couple of idiots barged into our Torah Church Chapel, right in the middle of the vital 'Grinzam Disaster' rites. As you can naturally assume, the elders are furious."

"So your first problem's with who orchestrated it. Heretical terrorists? International spies?"

"Yeah well, it's actually a huge problem because it was just two kids."

"Two kids? They got in past all that heavy security?"

"Pathetic, isn't it? One kid's name is Lovel Sinclair, and she's a schoolgirl from St. Rollins Academy. But it looks like she's anything but an ordinary little girl, since she kicked back, as in literally used a roundhouse kick, against a Rabbi and sent him face first into the dirt. Then while everyone else hot on her tail was distracted, she made a run for it."

"What kinda schoolgirl's that? What're the school lunches feedin' 'em these days?" Ouka chuckled. "So, who's the other kid?"

"A street boy from Chest Island. The relationship between the two is unknown, but he seemed to be with the girl. We were able to corner them just fine in Shoulder Coast's underground station, but they slipped out of our fingers again. And our failure's all the more humiliating because they got us good by destroying Kiriko's Golem."

Ouka's facial muscles froze at that last comment. "They destroyed Kiriko's Golem…? You talkin' 'bout that ridiculously large one, the one that's like a mutant wrestler on steroids?"

"Yeah. Those kids smashed it to pieces. It's an unusual blunder for Kiriko to make."

"You serious? Did the kids have a Golem?"

"The boy apparently Tamed a piecemeal Alloy Golem. In any case, their tracks end there at the scene, so I came to ask you to find them."

Ouka lit his cigarette and nodded along.

Spinoza went on, “Those kids are probably hiding somewhere on Chest Island. We’re searching for them too, but the people around here are surprisingly uncooperative. Well, the Church is despised on Chest Island, after all.”

“I get the picture. You came here ‘cause you wanna make use of my connections. But what’s got you guys this worked up and practically foaming at the mouths to catch ‘em? It ain’t a major crime to interrupt the Church’s rites.”

Spinoza gestured for Ouka to lean in. “There’s a chance the girl came poking around to find *Sephiroth*,” he whispered in a hushed voice.

Ouka found that strange. “She’s looking into Sephiroth…? Why does some schoolgirl know that name?”

“We don’t know. But whatever the case may be, that girl uttered Sephiroth’s name in front of a chapel full of Rabbis. And the icing on this disastrous cake is that she even went and said ‘Arusrad Grinzam,’ too. All the elders and Kiriko blew their tops at hearing his name.”

“But that’s still not grounds for arrest—”

“Then what about the fact that the girl had that forsaken cube with her?”

“…Say what?” Ouka’s eyes slowly widened.

“Kiriko clearly saw the girl holding the cube,” Spinoza bitterly spat, “And what’s worse is that it’s the *original*. The cube with a red shell that we thought was stolen from us.”

For a brief period, Ouka said nothing. Eventually, he wrung out a thin voice. “Makes sense why Kiriko lost it now…”

“That’s exactly it, Ouka. I don’t want what happened with Sephiroth to be brought up again either. That monster better stay buried for all eternity. *Agreed*?” Spinoza intoned, his words laced with ominous gravity. Continuing over Ouka’s silence, he said, “I don’t mind putting in a word with the elders if you clean this up for us. You might even get reinstated with the Church.”

“…That’s not a half-bad deal.”

“The quality of Rabbis has been on a steady decline. I’d be grateful to have you back. You don’t want to kick the bucket in Chest Island’s garbage dump

either, right? You've just got to tussle with two little kids. Sounds like a piece of cake to me."

"It's really not a bad offer. But…I'm never going back to the Church."

Spinoza stared at him speechless. "Why not?"

"Believe it or not, being king of this trash heap jibes with me. I can't go back to bein' a Rabbi now."

Spinoza studied Ouka's face carefully. "…Are you still hung up on what happened? Four years have passed. No one's fussing about it now," he reassured, "At worst, the elders are the only ones who still—"

"Don't go forgettin' about you, me, and Kiriko. We all still remember what went down, and you know it." Ouka tilted his head higher as he held Spinoza's gaze. "Sorry. I'll do what I can, but you don't gotta put in any good words for me with the elders."

His tone left no room for negotiation. After a slight pause, Spinoza broke eye contact and shifted his gaze to a corner of the room. "…I certainly can't argue that you're still Rabbi material," he muttered, taking in the mountain of empty bottles rolling around. Emptied bottles of liquor—a taboo for Rabbis.

"That's how it is for me now… Well, you can leave the information on the kiddies here. It's a request from my former boss, so I'll be sure to find 'em."

Spinoza said nothing in return. After what felt like hours of drawn out silence, a long sigh escaped his lips.

***

OUKA contemplated the situation alone in his factory once Spinoza left. Someone had appeared with the cube. But why now after all this time?

Ouka picked up the wanted poster Spinoza left for him and looked it over. A cute red-haired schoolgirl and a baby-faced street urchin peered up at him from the paper. Why did these two kids have the cube? And why were they searching for Sephiroth?

Ouka knew nothing good would come of thinking too much about it. Figuring stuff out was the Rabbis' job. He had his own work to do.

He directed his attention outside the window as he considered the situation he found himself in. He saw numerous Golems trudging about, moving in and out of the mine for the early afternoon shift. Ouka's own work was about to begin.

"…Time for work," he muttered. He left the factory with the wanted posters in hand.

When he stepped outside, his "partner" was sitting there waiting for him in the shadow of the factory where he could always be found. Ouka mounted his back and said, "C'mon Dram, it's time for our usual patrol route."

Obeying his voice, his mute partner Dram gallantly loped off.

***

OUKA went on his established patrol rounds every Tuesday. First stop: Heartbreak Hill Mine, just outside his factory. Many of the Golems he had manufactured would be hard at work there. He dismounted his partner's back and entered the mineshaft.

"Hello! How goes it, foreman? Are my Golems doing well?" Ouka called out to the site foreman inside the main tunnel.

The foreman looked at Ouka and grinned. "Oh yeah, just perfect! Works almost better than official Church-manufactured ones."

Behind him the Stone Golem Ouka had sold at wholesale price last month was swinging a pickaxe and digging out ore. Ouka smiled back at the foreman.

"Glad to hear it. I'll get to today's checkup then. Stop the Golem."

"Sure thing. Hey, Rocky! Stop for a jiffy!"

At the site foreman's orders, the Stone Golem immediately ceased swinging the pickaxe. Ouka jogged over to it and examined the "emeth" letters on its forehead.

The color of the letters indicated a Golem's remaining life span. Beginning with a bright-blue radiance, the letters would steadily take on red tinges until the glow turned completely crimson, whereupon the Golem would go berserk. But Rocky's letters were still perfectly blue.

“Okay, I think he’s still got a long life ahead of him, considering this color. But did you notice that the Engrave Incantation on his arm has worn off a little?”

“Really? Now that you mention it, his arm’s been moving awkwardly ever since he tripped yesterday!”

“Scraping off the Engrave Incantations will dull the movement of the damaged part. But don’t’cha worry. It’s a piece of cake to fix with a *Reengrave Incantation*,” Ouka said. He ran his finger over the damaged Engrave Incantation.

In a fraction of a second, a brand new Engrave Incantation replaced it and slowly disappeared, like it was being absorbed into the stone. Right after, the Golem’s wonky arm began to move with renewed energy.

“Okay, that takes care of that. He can go back to work now, good as new,” Ouka announced with a friendly smile, earning him a few hard whacks to the shoulder from the site foreman.

“I’m really indebted to ya! Thanks for sellin’ me this amazing Golem for eighty percent less than what the official version woulda cost. I’m so grateful to ya, mister, I could cry!”

“This is just what it means to do professional work. By the way, Foreman, I wanted to run somethin’ by you…” Ouka mentioned, passing the foreman the wanted poster he had received from Spinoza. “Have you seen these kids around? One’s a school girl from Head Island, and the other’s a street boy from Chest Island.”

“Lemme see.” The foreman glanced over the wanted poster. “Nah, don’t know ‘em. There ain’t any greenery, if y’know what I mean, on Head Island for me to care to visit, and all those street urchins look the same to me.”

“That so? Well, it’s not a big deal. Anyway, I better get to my next stop.”

“See ya! Let’s share a mug or two together next time!”

Ouka waved to the site foreman and walked into the next tunnel.

He continued through the mine conducting checkups on all the Golems he had ever sold. Once he finished there, he hopped on Dram’s back and took his

usual route throughout Chest Island.

The Golems Ouka had manufactured worked at the refineries, marketplaces, and the port. It had become completely dark out by the time he finished examining them all.

I should call it a day soon… Oh, but I shouldn't forget to check on that shop first, Ouka reminded himself and steered toward the port's nearby pleasure quarters.

The final stop on his routine patrol was a certain pub. Raucous laughter and piano music spilled outside the pub marked with a gaudy sign reading, "PUB Nest of Love."

"Wait here, Dram." Ouka directed his partner to a nearby alley before pulling open the pub door.

"Hiya, my dear Ouka. Welcome, welcome!"

A throaty voice greeted him as soon as he stepped inside the pub. Smiling at Ouka was a beauty with dark tanned skin dressed in a bartending outfit behind the counter. It was the pub owner, Miles.

"Hey, Miles. How's business been lately?" Ouka asked the rather attractive drag queen.

"Booming, thanks to you!"

Miles wasn't kidding. The pub was buzzing with customers even though the sun had only just gone down. The shop was the most licentious of all the businesses on Chest Island—an island under the Church's jurisdiction—for it was a so-called Lingerie Pub.

Miners, Flank Beach Market stallholders, and brokers who dealt in questionable Prime Bodies frequented this pub, where the scantily clad shopgirls waltzed around the bar seats in their sexy underwear. The diverse customer base gathered to make merry, eat, and drink away the evening. Jaunty piano music accompanied their cacophony.

"Now that's good news. Looks like he's in good shape too." Ouka gestured toward the piano in the corner.

“Everything’s in tiptop shape, from the pub to Piano Man!” Miles said merrily, his gaze following Ouka’s lead.

A slender Wood Golem clad in a suit sat in front of the piano, lightly tapping away on the keys. It was the first Golem Ouka had crafted and sold as merchandise after quitting the Church.

“Anyways, sweet Ouka, what brings you here today?”

“I came for the weekly checkup. I’ll be taking a look at Piano Man for a few minutes,” Ouka answered, strolling over to Piano Man. He took a quick glance at the letters on the Golem’s forehead and noted that they were purple. The color degradation had progressed considerably, but it wouldn’t prove a problem yet. “Looking good. Should last ya another year or so, I’d say.”

Miles beamed. “Thank the heavens! Want to grab a drink now? You’re done with work, right?”

“I made this my last stop hoping for one.”

“Want one of my girls tonight?”

“Yeah… Make it one of the good ones.”

“Then move into the booth over there,” Miles told Ouka, then turned to shout to the back of the pub, “CHIKO, RIKO, be a doll and service number three!”

Ouka moved to the designated booth with Miles’ voice behind him. Within seconds of sinking into the seat, two women sidled up to him.

“Chiko, at your service!”

“I’m your girl, Riko!”

The ladies introduced themselves in the most adorable way. There was something uniquely comforting in their fake smiles.

Before long, alcohol and food lined his table. Glass in hand, Ouka cheered, “All right, ladies, let’s toast!”

“What to?”

“To our marvelous encounter!”

“Where’d you pull that cheesy line from?” Miles quipped from behind the bar

counter. Chiko humored him with a smile, while Riko tittered awkwardly. Ouka downed his drinks without a single care.

"…Oh wow, you were a Rabbi?" Riko asked at one point in the conversation.

Ouka answered her with a bitter smile. "Yeah, I was one for a bit in the past."

"Seriously? Then can you, like, make totally awesome Golems?"

"'Course I can! I might not look like it, but I'm actually the number one Illegal Golem Artificer on this island."

"You're such an outlaw," Chiko gushed.

"You've got that right, baby. I'm a dangerous man. You'll get burned if ya get too close!"

Ouka threw back an endless stream of glasses as he kept up the empty conversation. Intoxication hit him right away, sending his vision spinning and making the women's voices sound like they were coming from meters away.

***

OUKA thought he heard somebody calling his name while he slept with his face pressed against the table. It was a husky male voice, and he didn't feel hung over enough to let some man wake him. It reminded him too much of when he lived with a bunch of burly men in communal rooms during his Rabbi training days.

"…KA…HEY, Ouka!"

He grudgingly opened his eyes. His vision came into focus to find Miles peering down at him. "Mn…did I fall asleep?" he asked through a yawn. He sat up and glanced around. The atmosphere in the pub hadn't changed one bit. Riko and Chiko gave him concerned looks. "Sorry, ladies, I zonked out on yer fine company. I'm dead exhausted for the day."

The women apologized to him in return.

"We're sorry for suggesting you drink so much, too."

"Make sure not to let this experience stop you from coming back to play with us again, 'kay?"

Ouka smiled at them, tossed a bunch of bills on top of the table, and unsteadily got to his feet. He stumbled on his way out of the pub.

“Goodness gracious. You sure you can make it back in one piece?” Miles asked, having keenly spotted Ouka slipping. He took Ouka’s arm and escorted him out of the pub, paying no mind to his mumblings of “‘M good, ‘m good.”

Once outside, the refreshing night breeze caressed Ouka’s flushed cheeks.

“Phew… I had a good drink,” he murmured, alcohol wafting off his breath.

Miles chided, “You end up like this because you pour down the drinks when you don’t even have a basic tolerance. You lack class, y’know?”

“I ‘on’t really get that drunk, but it does make me super sleepy.”

“Hasn’t it been a while since you last downed that many bottles…? Something happen?”

Miles’ question went unanswered. Lighting his cigarette, Ouka glanced at the pub. It was still bursting with flirtatious giggling, rambunctious laughter, and lively piano music. Piano Man was visible from the other side of the window.

“I can’t believe how much life Piano Man has left in him, even after four years since his naming,” Ouka commented, changing the topic.

“You can say that again. He’s become the face of our pub. We’ve got a lotta customers who come just for his music.” Miles mimed playing piano in the air with his fingers. His right hand had stumps from his middle to pinky fingers. Whenever Ouka saw the missing fingers, he recalled the first day he’d arrived on Chest Island.

It was Miles who had approached Ouka after he’d quit being a Rabbi to drown his days with alcohol. “If you’ve got enough free time on your hands to spend killin’ your pretty self with this stuff, make me a Golem. I’ve lost the ability to play the piano,” Miles had said, waving his injured hand in front of Ouka’s face.

Miles had wanted Ouka to make him a slender, agile Wood Golem—the complete opposite of any Golem he’d built before that point. Miles was over the moon when Ouka succeeded in creating exactly what he wanted.

His experience with Miles and Piano Man led to his current job. From Ouka’s

perspective, he was pulling in decent wages and living not half-bad days. He was certain his bones would be buried in Chest Island, never to return to the Church again.

And he was okay with that. There was nothing to feel conflicted about…if only his former boss didn't occasionally drop by to see him.

Reminiscing about the past reminded Ouka of the favor he'd accepted on behalf of said former boss.

"Oh yeah, I forgot to ask ya 'bout this." Ouka tugged the wanted poster from his pocket.

Miles immediately frowned at it. "What's that for?"

"Nothin' much. I'm just going 'round asking everybody about it. See, the thing is I'm currently lookin—"

"Excuse me," a sudden voice came from behind them, cutting Ouka off. "May I ask you a question?"

"Hm?" Ouka turned toward the voice.

He hadn't noticed that a girl and boy were standing behind him. The girl was a timid-looking, black-haired beauty wearing a fancy school uniform. The boy with glasses beside her, on the other hand, wore a filthy uniform and kept a cap pulled low over his face, shadowing his eyes.

The boy seemed like he could be from anywhere, but the girl looked like a rich young lady who didn't belong in this neighborhood.

"What is it, little lady? Want to know the way back to Head Island? Golem Rickshaw can take you there. There's a rickshaw stop just over there." Ouka pointed in the direction of the rickshaw stop.

"No, I'm…looking for someone…"

Ouka was slightly amused by the fact that he'd come across someone who was searching for someone else in the middle of his own search.

"Oh, who for, sweetheart?" Miles chimed in, leaning toward her. "This guy and I know a lot of people 'round here, so we might be able to help you out."

“Apparently he goes by the name Jair,” the girl answered. “He’s a black-haired Golem Tamer around my age. Going by his clothing, I would say he’s a resident of Chest Island.”

“Jair? Never heard of ‘im before… But that’s not really much to go off of. Is there anything else that stands out about ‘im?” Ouka asked, which made her pull something out of her pocket.

“This isn’t anything to do with his looks, but he had this thing on him.”

She held out a tiny black cube. The moment he saw it, Ouka couldn’t believe his eyes.

…Come on now, is this some sorta drunk hallucination?

He was well-acquainted with that black cube. Miles, on the other hand, was oblivious to his friend’s inner turmoil. “What’s this, sweetheart? It looks like some kinda dice, but it has writing all over it,” he said casually.

“I don’t know what it is either. It has ‘emeth’ written on it, so I’m fairly sure it has something to do with Golems.”

“Sorry, I don’t know much about Golems. Ouka, dear, do you know what it is?”

Ouka had already snatched the cube from the girl’s hand by the time Miles finished his question. “I can’t believe there were more of these things out there…!”

The black cube was an *inferior imitation* of the red cube that had been in the hands of the girl who had caused a scene at the Church the prior night. It was a regular hexahedron with three-centimeter sides, fashioned from a rare mineral ore. The letters “emeth” were engraved in its smooth, black surface. And it was something Ouka had never wanted to see the likes of again.

Why does this girl have one?!

“…Where did you get your hands on this, little lady?”

Growing suspicious of Ouka’s sudden threatening tone, the girl questioned, “Do you know what this is?”

“I know it very well. It’s an asset that was stolen from the church four years

ago.” Ouka locked a fierce glare on the bewildered girl. “Now then, *little lady,* would you happen to know the children who snuck into the Torah Church last night?”

“Torah Church? I don’t know anything about that. You have the wrong person.”

“The wrong person, huh…? Well, while I can’t be sure ‘bout that, I’ll be taking this cube back either way.”

“What?! You can’t! This is my sole clue about Jair!”

“Hmph. Your kiddy problems are of no concern to me. I’m just gonna take this —” Ouka swallowed the rest of his words.

An intense, almost bloodthirsty aura exploded from the boy standing next to the girl. Ouka instinctively went on guard.

“I don’t know what attachment you have with that cube, but…I *won’t* let you get in our way,” she growled.

The second the growl left the girl’s throat, the boy charged at Ouka with lightning speed. His readied fist cut through the air, straight at Ouka’s solar plexus.

“Whoa!”

Ouka immediately threw up his elbow to block the boy’s jab, but his defensive move did nothing to stop the momentum of the punch. Ouka’s entire body was sent rocketing backward. His back slammed through the pub’s swing doors and he crashed hard against the floor. The harmonious atmosphere of pub quickly gave way to an uproar.

“Wh-What’s goin’ on?!”

“A Rabbi crackdown?!”

“Damn it! They’re back already?!”

Alarmed voices erupted from the room. Before Ouka could gather himself to right their fears, the boy stepped inside the pub.

“…Now that was surprising,” Ouka groaned. He didn’t expect the boy would

be so strong. He nimbly sprung to his feet right as the boy began to throw a wild barrage of punches.

The boy packs a hard punch, but his jabs are all o'er the place!

Ouka crouched, dodging his punch, then threw a right hook square into the boy's side.

Perfect counterattack! Ouka congratulated himself, *I got him good!* But what his fist struck didn't feel anything like soft flesh. Ouka flinched. *How the hell is his side so damn hard? Is he wearing something under his clothes?*

His brief flash of confusion had left him wide open. The boy's knee rammed Ouka's chest.

"*GUAH!*"

The impact sent Ouka flying until the back of his head bashed against a bar table. Applause erupted for the exciting brawl they put on for the pub customers.

"Now that's a damn good kick! Which of 'em elite brawlers done it?"

"It ain't no brawler, it's some kid! Ouka's the loser!"

"Nice! Do 'im in, kiddo!"

Customers gathered around Ouka and the boy, cheering their fight on irresponsibly. From their ranks stepped out a big bald man.

"Lemme in on the action."

It was the drunkard Kane, a confident brawler who acted as the self-appointed bouncer of the pub.

"It's Kane!"

"What? You mean Kane the Sleeping Bull?"

"He's the guy who doesn't even bat an eyelash over punchin' a kid's lights out! He's infamous for his ruthless immaturity!"

Entertained jeers and yells rose from the amassing onlookers. Kane arrogantly cracked his knuckles.

“Hey, punk, lemme give ya a lesson in why this part of town’s meant for adults. It’s full o’ scary scumbags just like me,” Kane taunted, thrusting a finger at the boy. Right as he did that, the boy slipped past his outstretched arm and shot an uppercut at his chin.

“*URGH!*”

The single punch blew Kane back and instantly knocked him out. Astonished cries rang out from the crowd.

“Holy CRAP! He’s out before the fight even began!”

“What’d that kid c’mere for?”

“Whose bodyguard is he?”

Ouka agreed with their reactions somewhere in the back of his mind, but he was preoccupied with the icy chills racing down his spine. Kane may be a moron, but he was built for a fight and knew how to brawl like the back of his hand. And yet, this kid had brought down a fighter of that caliber with one punch…

“Taking him on barehanded ain’t smart!” Ouka concluded under his breath. He quickly snagged the mop leaning against the wall beside him as the boy zoomed in for another attack like a relentless force of nature that had no mercy for taking even the briefest moment to think. “Sorry, but I ain’t goin’ easy on you! You’re in for a beating with Rabbi Krav Maga!”

Blocking the boy’s driving knife-hand strike to the sternum with the mop’s shaft, Ouka whirled around the boy and swung at him from overhead, hoping to knock him out cold with a clean shot to the skull.

The boy crouched and slid sideways, evading the attack. But the mop grazed the side of his hat, knocking it off.

His forehead, previously hidden underneath the hat, was exposed. All at once, Ouka realized what had been so off about the boy: “emeth” was engraved in his forehead.

“This kid’s a freakin’ *GOLEM!*”

Ouka’s paralyzing shock inadvertently left him wide open to the boy’s side

kick. Though he swung his mop around to block it at the last second, it only snapped in half.

The boy's movements became a hundred times faster than they were before. "emeth" was essentially the antenna receiving the Golem Tamer's signals. The boy's efficiency had skyrocketed once the letters were freed from the hat's confines!

"Whoa! Oh—SHIT!"

Ouka leapt out of the way of the boy's rapid punches, narrowly avoiding them. With each subsequent blow, holes opened in the walls, chairs shattered, and tables broke.

"OH MY GOD! My pub! *My precious pub!*" Miles shrieked in the background. The instant Ouka was distracted by his voice, the boy vaulted into the air and fired a series of kicks like a machine gun.

"YEOW! Ow! Ow! OW!"

Taking the tornado of kicks to the elbow knocked Ouka over. The boy smoothly landed on the ground in front of him.

"It's your fault for making things violent," the girl muttered.

From the ground, Ouka stared up at the boy. "You're damned strong enough to make a guy hate 'imself for his weakness…" he coughed. "But you sure suck at seein' the fight through."

"What?" The girl shot him a dubious look.

The boy was standing in front of the pub's entrance. Seizing the opportunity, Ouka shouted, "Now, DRAM!"

Within a split second, Ouka's partner burst through the entrance, slammed into the boy, and pinned him to the ground.

The girl's eyes widened. The boy struggled, trying to pry off his clutch on his arms. But the claws only dug harder into his flesh, eliminating any possible method of escape.

An amber body shaped like a lion; a beautiful beast with a translucent glow. The Amber Golem Dram restrained the boy with his sharp claws.

“Heathy!” The girl ran to the boy’s side. Ouka pushed himself off the floor and caught her arm.



“Hey, stupid girl! Don’t you know that making Fresh Golems is illegal?! Why the hell’ve you gone and done something so goddamn stupid?!” Ouka snapped.

She glared at him in return, frustrated. “I’ve never seen an Amber Golem before… Who are you?!”

“Torah Officer Ouka Baraki!” Ouka barked. He gasped when the words had left his mouth.

“You’re a Rabbi?!” the girl shouted.

He frantically amended, “N-No, I’m a former Rabbi. I’ve long since quit the Church.”

“You quit…? Then this is none of your business.”

“Yeah, it’s not. That’s why I’m free to erase the ‘e’ from that boy’s forehead if I want to.”

Dram bared his fangs at the boy.

“DON’T!” the girl cried, her eyes wide with fear.

Ouka flashed her a reassuring smile. “But don’t worry. I’m not intending on doin’ something so cruel to you. I’m happy with just recoverin’ this cube tonight, so rest easy.”

“…Coward.” She glared at him through wet eyes.

What other choice do I got? I’ve got my own set of problems to deal with. Ouka swore inside. However, the girl wasn’t the only one having a hard time swallowing his terms.

“Hey, Ouka, don’t be a jackass,” Miles said unexpectedly, his voice stern.

Ouka gaped over his shoulder at him. “Hold up, Miles. What was that for? Did you just make me the villain here?”

“You’re the villain, all right. You’re threatening a little girl.”

“Yeah, but I’ve got my grievances too—”

“Miles is right, ya know? You’re bein’ an ass, Ouka.” The onlookers interrupted his attempt at explaining himself with accusations.

“I dunno what’s going on ‘ere, but I’ll put my bets on Ouka being in the wrong.”

“Duh! It’s set in stone, whatever a beautiful woman says is correct!”

“Compared to the girl, Ouka’s shady as hell!”

“Yeah! Yeah! Do somethin’ about that suspicious-looking stubble on yer ugly mug already!”

“He looks like he’s a sleaze with women too!”

“And his clothing choice sucks.”

“He reeks of alcohol!”

Ouka couldn’t take it any longer. “SHUT YOUR TRAPS, idiots! What the hell are you trying to do?! The last half was just blatant insults!” he objected, temporarily shifting his attention off the boy.

The boy took the chance to unsheathe the knife from the scabbard at his waist, and, in one fluid motion, severed Dram’s left foreleg.

“Dram?!”

Missing a front leg, Dram lost his balance. The boy sprung to his feet and swiped the cube from Ouka.

“Ah! Hey! WAIT!”

Ouka tried to stop him, but his speed was on a whole different level. Snatching up his hat, the boy lifted the girl in one arm and bolted from the pub in the blink of an eye.

“Hey! Hang on, little lady! LITTLE LADY!” Ouka chased them outside the pub.

But they were both long gone, leaving behind nothing but the gaudy landscape of the pleasure quarters.

***

Erie

ERIE ran hand in hand with Heath through the town, cloaked in the dark of night. Heath had sheathed the knife in its leather scabbard and put his hat on again. Erie had bought the two useful items, along with Heath's shirt, earlier that evening at a secondhand shop in town.

There had to be a clue about Jair somewhere on Chest Island. With that conviction, Erie had questioned residents throughout the day, beginning from early morning, while showing them the cube for reference. She thought she had prepared herself for the worst-case scenarios, but she never imagined she would stumble right into one on the first day.

How did I come across such a scary man already…?!

She could act tough, but her fears were still just as frightening. After running and running, Erie finally made it back to Heartbreak Hill.

A closed-down refinery standing on the outskirts of the hill currently served as Erie's base. Slipping inside its doors, she slid onto the ground with her back against the cold wall. Heath plopped down beside her.

He never went farther than five meters away from her. By all appearances, that was how her Restrictor, "Always be by my side," had taken shape.

Erie heaved a massive sigh and stared at the cube clenched in her hand.

"I wonder what in the world this thing actually is…"

She had only thought of it as a vital clue in her pursuit of Jair. But the man named Ouka completely flipped out when he'd seen the cube.

He said this was stolen from the Church… Is it valuable?

Erie tried burying the cube in the ground, just like she had seen Jair do once before. Nothing happened. Sighing, she dug it back up.

She tested an Engrave Incantation on it next. At her words, incantation letters instantly engraved the cube's surface.

"Ah," Erie said aloud.

Her Engrave Incantation had disappeared into the cube as if absorbed.

Instantly, the cube's surface returned to its smooth, black gloss. All that remained were the original letters of "emeth" that had been there from the start.

…? I feel like I've seen this happen before…!

Erie's eyes locked on the cube. She recognized the reaction she had just observed from *somewhere.* She felt like she had seen the same thing somewhere in the haze of her elusive childhood memories.

A cloying mist rushed in to blot out Erie's thoughts when she tried to remember just where and when she had seen it. No matter how hard she tried to fight through the fog, her mind went blank every single time. After what felt like an eternity, she gave up.

"I wonder where Jair is, Heathy…" she muttered.

Erie leaned her head against Heath's shoulder.

March nights were still freezing, far too cold for sleeping outdoors, while the refinery's stone floor was hard and cramped her back and neck when she slept on it. Regardless, she would end up sleeping here again tonight.

She didn't have any true qualms about being uncomfortable, because Heath was with her.

Erie snuggled up to him. His body was cool to the touch, but a different kind of warmth enveloped her heart.

***

Cliff

HEARTBREAK Hill Mine, at dusk—that's where Cliff and Lovel went to gather information from miners who were just getting off work.

"Silver Golem Sephiroth, ya say? I doubt a Golem like that's in this mine."

"Really? …Thank you for your time," Cliff said courteously, before continuing on with Lovel. Gandolf ambled behind them at a sedate pace.

After leaving the comfort of the underground train station, Cliff had officially joined Lovel in her search. They now scoured Chest Island for any clues on the Golem she was looking for.

Raking his eyes across the lantern-lit mining grounds, Cliff commented, "Doesn't seem like anybody knows anything about Sephiroth."

"Sure seems that way…" Lovel agreed, "We've been asking around since morning with nothing to show for it." She let out a heavy sigh.

Lovel had changed out of her conspicuous school uniform into clothes she had purchased at a secondhand shop. She now wore a thin purple bolero over a tube top that left most of her stomach exposed, combined with a black miniskirt, tights, and leather boots. The fashion had transformed her into someone who could be mistaken as one of the many women working the streets at night. They no longer had to worry about her being mistaken for a rich young lady from a fancy school.

Cliff had also disguised himself as one of the miners by tossing on goggles and work clothes, and similarly camouflaged Gandolf by tugging a raggedy cloth over him. The party of wanted children had given their pursuers the slip with their disguises, but it had also emptied out their wallets.

Lovel, who had gladly funded their shopping spree, looked dejected as she pointed out, "The fact that we can't find anyone who knows anything after asking this many people only makes it more suspicious. They called it a classified secret, so wouldn't that imply the Church is keeping Sephiroth under wraps?"

"Why would they do that?"

“Maybe they’re trying to keep it from being stolen because it’s made of pure silver? Or maybe it’s such a dangerous Golem, it’d be hella bad for them if the public found out?”

“A dangerous Golem!” Cliff mulled over the idea. Lovel’s conjecture definitely had merit.

The quality of the materials used to create a Golem not only affected the strength of the Prime Body, it also influenced the Golem’s overall performance. Golems made from human body parts displayed tremendous maneuverability, while Golems made from Amber were known to work in nonhuman shapes as well.

Golems crafted from pure silver boasted the highest efficiency, outperforming all other models. They displayed the highest levels of maneuverability and usability in conjunction with the greatest freedom in shape. Though they came with an obscenely expensive price tag, their value corresponded directly to the price.

But that alone wasn’t enough to automatically deem a Golem dangerous. What exactly was Sephiroth? It had to be more than just a Silver Golem. There were still so many unanswered questions.

Cliff brought up a particular one that had been nagging him. “By the way, Lovel, that red cube you have on you…you said it’s the ‘key’ to bringin’ Sephiroth to life, right?”

“Yup. Seeing how the Rabbis freaked out over it, we can bet it’s the key to something important.”

“But how is the cube related to activating a Golem? And what the heck is it anyway?”

That was the biggest question at hand. Bringing a Golem to life through anything other than naming a Prime Body programmed with Engrave Incantations shouldn’t have been possible. Cliff had never come across a single sentence that mentioned using some funky cube during his Golemology studies.

Lovel must have thought the same thing, because she pulled the red cube from her pocket to examine it. Engrave Incantation letters lined every side of it,

leaving no space without the ancient script.

“I just learned this for the first time yesterday, but…it seems like there are actually two ways to activate a Golem.”

“The first is the Engrave Incantation, and the second is…?”

“A method using this cube. Not like I know the specifics of how it works yet, though…” Lovel answered in a hushed voice. She didn’t look like she was lying.

But why didn’t she know how to use the cube when she had it on her? Cliff was about to put the question to her when an unexpected voice came out of nowhere.

“I’ve FINALLY found you, damned street rats!”

Gulping, Cliff jerkily spun around to spot a Rabbi rushing at them. It was the villainous-looking Rabbi, this time with a Stone Golem. He was the same guy who hit Cliff whenever he showed up, and he seemed to show up often since the day before.

“Crap! It’s that Rabbi! He must’ve followed us to Chest Island!”

“Time to run, Cliff!” They broke into a dash, but the Stone Golem unexpectedly outpaced them—it could easily outrun them if necessary.

Coming to that conclusion, Cliff shouted to Gandolf at his side, “Fight back, Gandolf!”

Gandolf readily responded to his voice and switched into a fighting stance. He caught the charging Stone Golem, hoisted him overhead, and threw him hard. The Stone Golem soared a good ten meters through the air before crashing onto the ground.

“GAAAAAHH! My precious Ezekiel!” the Rabbi cried out, skidding to a halt. Cliff took advantage of his distraction to grab Lovel’s hand and make a run for it. “HEY! You little rat! Come back here!”

The Rabbi drew a short staff from the holster at his waist and chased after them, brandishing it. Cliff, Lovel, and Gandolf fled into a nearby mine tunnel.

Cliff raced through the thick darkness without hesitation. The “emeth” on Gandolf’s forehead glowed faintly, illuminating their way.

Keeping pace beside him, Lovel asked, “Where are we?”

“An abandoned mine tunnel, one they stopped using a while ago. Inside is like a maze, so it’s perfect for losin’ the Rabbi.”

Cliff had used this tunnel as one of his many hideouts before he started living inside the underground station. Several years had passed since then, but he still remembered its layout like it was just yesterday.

They kept running until the pounding steps behind them eventually faded away. Not long after, they spotted the tunnel exit ahead.

“Phew… I’d say we’re safe coming this far.”

Cliff exited the tunnel with a loud sigh. The evil-looking Rabbi was nowhere in sight. He had most likely lost his way inside the crisscrossing tunnels.

Wiping away her sweat, Lovel said, “Thanks, Cliff. I’m glad I can depend on you.”

“Give your thanks to Gandolf, he’s the one who saved us. Isn’t that right, Gandolf?”

“Good point. Thank you as well, Gandolf!” Lovel beamed as Gandolf responded with a light bow.

His bow obviously wasn’t a conscious act on his part. Every Golem moved obeying the will of their Tamer. They were essentially puppets controlled from a distance.

Despite that, Cliff treated Gandolf like a living human being. After all, the creation he spent years of his life making had finally moved; he couldn’t help but dote on the Golem.

Quickly catching on to the way Cliff felt, Lovel kindly praised Gandolf. “He’s a fine Golem. We couldn’t have asked for a more reliable partner.”

“He only works because of your Engrave Incantations though. No wonder you’re a student at that fancy school.”

“No, no. It all worked out because of the Prime Body you made, Cliff. You’re amazing to be able to make such an awesome giant!” Lovel insisted, gazing straight at Gandolf. She put a hand on his piecemeal body. “How long did it take

you to make him…?”

“If you include the time it took to teach myself how to do it, six years.”

“You spent six years on him in that underground station?! How can you keep at something for that long?” Admiration seeped from her words.

But Cliff’s answer was laced with bitterness. “…Because there ain’t no other way to escape the cards life dealt ya on this blasted island.”

“Eh?” Lovel gaped at him. Cliff’s eyes swept across the grounds of the gigantic mine sprawling all around them.

Electricity was taking a long time to reach the remote archipelago compared to the rest of the world, but the use of Golems helped them excel in construction and excavation in ways electricity could not. Golems were why they were able to build underground railways, high-rise buildings, and a massive mineshaft with elaborate, stable tunnels.

“Say, Lovel, don’t you think this island’s strange? The majority of the jobs are Golem-related, and people who can’t make or Tame Golems are stuck at the bottom of society, never able to catch a break…”

Indeed, stopping to think about the island revealed its absurd nature. People created Golems, commanded them to excavate ore until the very shape of the island changed, then used the materials to make even more Golems. For that single purpose, they lived in crowded, confined spaces struggling to etch out a living instead of on the mainland.

Those incapable of crafting Golems had no other option than to purchase the exorbitantly expensive Church Manufactured Golems. Heavy taxes were further imposed on the usage of purchased Golems. Still, people purchased them and paid the fines because they needed Golems to survive on the island. The creation and sale of Illegal Golems had grown out of that very necessity, yet the Church was obsessed with punishing their unlawful activities.

Everything on the archipelago revolved around Golems. The Rabbis dominated the archipelago at the top; the poor had to struggle tooth and nail to survive at rock bottom. Cliff couldn’t stand it.

“…I want to break away from the bottom of society by enrolling in your

school, St. Rollins Academy. I want to learn how to create unparalleled Golems, so I can get admitted as a special scholarship student."

Cliff wouldn't have the money to pay for the outrageous tuition placed on normal students even if he secured admission to the Academy. Becoming a scholarship student was the only path left for him, and he wanted it more than anything.

"But, Cliff…is it really possible to teach yourself skills so impressive that they'd give you a full-ride scholarship?" Lovel asked apprehensively.

"I know somebody who did it. Master succeeded."

Cliff thought back to the man three years older than him, who he had spent the past three years alongside, of the man who could do *everything* a thousand times better than him.

"Master?"

"His name is Roche. He was a street kid like me, but he kept on learnin' how to make Golems his entire life. And then, just this spring, he was finally able to enroll in the Academy as a special scholarship student."

Cliff recalled how it had felt to see his master off to Head Island a week ago. Gazing up at the night sky, he admitted, "…I might not be able to achieve what Master did. But I ain't got no other way to crawl to the top."

Lovel stayed quiet for a time. Eventually, she whispered, "…But, you know, shouldn't there be other ways to reach the top, even on the Golem Tamer's archipelago? Why did you choose Golem Artificer, out of all the options?"

"Why? Because…"

"Your master's influence?"

"Nah, he's not why… I was makin' Golems before I met him."

"Then why? Why did you start making Golems?"

Why did I? Cliff asked himself.

He began building Golems when his parents abandoned him at the age of seven. But he had long since forgotten why he even thought to start doing it in

the first place. Where had he gotten the idea, when he was nothing more than a poor kid from the slums without an education?

Lovel sat there attentively, as if waiting for his answer. Getting uncomfortable, Cliff changed the topic. “Enough about me. How ‘bout you, Lovel? Why’re you looking for this Sephiroth Golem?”

Lovel’s face suddenly turned grim, and a foreboding gleam flared in her eyes. After a slight pause, she quietly answered, “…There’s somebody I’ve gotta stop no matter what.”

“Who’s that?”

“A guy called Jair, and the evil mastermind behind him. They’re trying to activate Sephiroth and use him to attack the Torah Church, just so they can destroy the Great Bell Tower.”

Cliff frowned at her answer.

The Great Bell Tower—Torah Church’s symbol, which granted God’s protection to the archipelago.

Behind each toll of its bell came the mysterious, holy effect that stabilized the movement of every Golem. It was only because of the bell tower’s existence that Golems were able to work throughout the archipelago. Destroying it would mean—

“Don’t tell me, they wanna turn every Golem on these islands berserk by wrecking the Great Bell Tower?”

“That’s right. I happened to learn of their plan by accident. That’s why I stole the cube and ran for it, you know, since this cube is the key to activating Sephiroth and all.”

“So that’s how you ended up with the cube, without a single clue about how it works? But why you, Lovel? What’s your connection to those guys?”

Lovel didn’t answer his questions. Her expression was taut, refusing to open up to him. Without addressing him, she said firmly, “I’ve got no choice but to put a stop to it myself if the Church isn’t willing to believe me. Getting my hands on Sephiroth before they do and defeating them is the only option… If I don’t,

this archipelago will become a living hell.”

Her voice rang with absolute conviction. The intensity of her unshakeable resolve made Cliff swallow hard, as if there was a lump in his throat. When he opened his mouth to say something to her, she suddenly smiled at him.

“…Sorry for bringing up something weird.”

“…?”

“I’m not going to drag you into this more than I already have. Go back to your normal life once the storm blows over.”

Cliff was alarmed by those words.

“Go back to your normal life”—he found the idea alarming because, he realized, he absolutely didn’t want to. He had discovered that being on the run with Lovel was a million times more fun than the drudgery his old, gloomy life could offer.

Urged on by the spurt of emotion, Cliff spontaneously raised his voice and said, “…Hey, Lovel, I’ll help you out if you’re going to try to stop those guys.”

Lovel stared at him. “You will?”

“Why wouldn’t I? I’m not big on protecting the damned Church, but…it’d be boring if Golems just up and stopped workin’ on the islands now that I’ve finally got Gandolf moving.”

Slightly taken aback by his offer, Lovel’s eyes wavered in the moonlight.

The look in her eyes made Cliff realize two things: that his heart raced whenever their eyes met, and that Lovel’s face was incredibly cute.

“Cliff…” Lovel whispered his name and nothing more. A lantern crackled somewhere, deepening the silence.

***

Ouka

OUKA took off for Head Island after leaving Miles' pub. He became lost in his thoughts as he crossed the bridge to Torah Church.

His days had been the same old, same old, until today. He hadn't ever intended to peer into the pot of his past after he had sealed it off.

But then Spinoza's request had come. Followed by the appearance of the mysterious girl with a Fresh Golem. And both of these cases had something to do with those godforsaken cubes.

Given either, he would've done nothing but smother them from his mind with silent contempt. But—

"…Not even I can ignore 'em when they all just hit me smack-dab in the face in one go, now can I?" A cynical smile tugged at his lips.

"Torah Officer Ouka Baraki!"

To think he could still say those words.

But that was exactly why Ouka had come. He arrived at the Church's front gate and grabbed the speaking tube installed in it. Addressing the receptionist Rabbi, he said, "Hello, my name is Ouka Baraki. Please call Torah Lord Spinoza out here for me."

He put the speaking tube back after the receptionist agreed to fetch Spinoza.

As he waited for his former boss to appear, Ouka mused, *I might've been waiting for a day like this to come all along.*

The gate opened a short while later to reveal Spinoza. "Ouka? What brings you here at this hour?" he asked with a puzzled look.

"Say, Spinoza, is my quarterstaff still at the Church?"

Spinoza's brows shot up. It didn't take long for him to break into a wide smile. "…You think I could ever toss it away? I've had it securely stored since you left all those years ago."

"Give it here. I'm uneasy, being unarmed."

“Are you going all out on this one?”

“Somethin’ caught my attention, is all.”

“So you’ve got the urge to come back to the Church?”

“Nope, I don’t. But, y’know…” Ouka shifted his eyes toward Chest Island. “I can go back to being a Rabbi until I catch those kids.”

***

THUS, Ouka became invested in the job for personal reasons;

Erie dreamed of revenge with Heath;

Cliff swore to protect the archipelago as he gazed at Lovel—

In that exact moment, the Church’s Great Bell Tower tolled the bells that brought God’s protection upon the islands.

And so their destinies began to converge, even as they remained entirely unaware of their own roles in the grand scheme of things.

All on this tiny Golem Tamer Archipelago.

Chapter 4: Intersecting Destinies

Day 3

Cliff

EARLY the next day, Cliff and Lovel carried on with gathering information in the pleasure quarters near the port. Yet, just like the prior day, they were unable to learn anything new about Sephiroth, despite asking around until dusk.

“Blegh, looks like randomly asking people isn’t gonna get us any leads…” Cliff muttered. Lovel nodded in agreement. Simply asking around could only get them so far, and they both felt like they had already hit the limit.

For that matter, their empty stomachs had reached their limits too. Lovel sighed. “Hah…I’m so hungry I could eat a Clay Golem…” she said over the loud complaints from her growling stomach. “I haven’t had anything to eat since the day before yesterday…”

“I’m used to going without food for two or more days. But agreed, there’s no end in sight the way things are goin’ for us.”

“Ugh. What do we do now, Cliff…? Wanna just abduct a passing Rabbi and get them to cough up the information?”

Cliff shook his head. “Better toss that plan out the window. There’s a high chance we’ll lose if they fight back.”

“Don’t wuss out on me now! Can’t we take them all on with Gandolf on our side?”

“Look here, Lovel, did you just forget that Gandolf’s Restrictor is ‘can’t hurt humans’? Even if he can give the Rabbis’ Golems a thrashin’, he’s useless against the Rabbis themselves.”

Lovel looked shocked, as if Cliff had just dropped a major bomb on her. “I didn’t realize that our trusty partner has weaknesses too… But what’ll happen if

he goes against his Restrictor?”

“Golems ignore any orders that violate their Restrictor. But if the situation forces them to go against it, they’ll stop moving.” Cliff explained what he recalled from his master’s Golem lessons. “And if the Restrictor’s one that can never be abided after it’s been broken once—like ‘can’t kill’—the Golem will never be able to move again. In a nutshell, the Golem dies.”

Lovel’s face darkened. “…He’ll die?”

“He will. That’s why I want to avoid taking any action that puts us at odds with people. I’m pretty sure with a light Restrictor like ‘can’t hurt humans’ Gandolf will be able to move again after the person recovers, but I don’t want to risk it.”

“That makes sense… It is how it is.” She averted her eyes from Cliff, a bitter smile spreading across her lips. Her profile seemed to have hints of misgivings. The unusual expression weighed heavily on Cliff’s mind. But it vanished when Lovel promptly changed the topic. “By the way, Cliff, what does ‘Gandolf’ mean?”

“Huh? Uh, apparently in the ancient language it means comrade in arms. Master came up with it.”

“Now that’s a fine name. How about your name, Cliff?”

“Umm…dunno.” It was the name given by his father, who’d suddenly vanished one day when he was seven years old. Cliff highly doubted it held any special meaning. “I mean, I bet it doesn’t mean anything much. It’s a common name, after all.”

“You think so? I’m of the opinion that every name has a meaning behind it.”

“Okay, how about your name then? What does it mean?”

“Eh? My name?” Lovel made an awkward smile and fidgeted bashfully. She drew circles in the dirt with the tip of her boot. “It has a meaning, all right. It’s way too romantic for its own good though. Hmm, I’m not gonna tell you, Cliff.”

“Fine. I won’t force you.”

“Hey, don’t give up so easily! Be pushier about it!” She tugged on his sleeve.

“What the heck? What do you want from me?” Cliff said, exasperated, just as

a furious bellow erupted nearby.

“That ‘ittle punk didn’t c’mere today?!”

Cliff turned to glance at a pub, where a big man was yelling at a beautiful woman.

“He hasn’t come by. Quit taking your anger out on me just because you were beaten to a pulp by a little boy, Kane,” the pretty woman snapped in disgust.

“Wanna repeat that?! Should ya really be runnin’ that mouth of yours off to yer best bodyguard?”

“Nobody *ever* asked you to be the pub’s bodyguard or bouncer. Quit actin’ like you’re Riko’s pimp and get a real job.”

“Shut the hell up! I don’t wanna get a job!” ranted the big man, stepping closer to the woman. The situation prickled with danger. Cliff debated what to do, when he realized that Lovel had taken off in a beeline for the pub.

“H-Hey, Lovel?!”

There was no time to stop her. Lovel charged at the big man, seized his arm, and, using the full force of her momentum, threw him.

“GAH!” The man slammed into the ground and lay there sprawled out, like a snow angel in the dirt.

Dusting her hands off, Lovel declared, “Isn’t it too early to get drunk? Cool your head off!”

The pretty woman’s eyes opened wide with surprise for a split second before a smile overtook her face and she threw her arms around Lovel. “Thanks a bunch! You’re *so* strong, sweetheart! You’re my savior!”

“No, I only did the obvious thing,” Lovel said humbly. “I can’t stand men who abuse women.”

Normally, Cliff would say something to Lovel for jumping into danger like that, but he was preoccupied by the pretty woman’s deep voice. It seemed strangely incongruent with her appearance.

Just when the flicker of an unbelievable notion crossed his mind, the pretty

woman cackled in a throaty voice. “Gahahahaha! You’re such an honest girl! I’m a man, sweetheart. A *MAN*!”

“WHAT?!” exclaimed both Cliff and Lovel. They leaned in, intently studying “his” face. Upon closer inspection, they noticed the bits of stubble on his chin, along with an Adam’s apple sticking out of his throat.

“I’m Miles Smokers, the owner of this pub. Come inside and I’ll give you a treat as thanks!” he said with a wink to the dumbfounded children.

***

PIANO music was playing inside the dimly lit pub. The sun had yet to set, leaving the pub empty until its usual clientele got off work. Cliff was immersed in the quiet, comforting ambience, but he couldn’t relax. He couldn’t help being keenly aware of the two lingerie-clad women sitting on either side of him.

“Oh, what an adorable young customer we have here!”

“Oh my gosh, look at these red cheeks! You’re too adorable!”

The women gushed over him in honeyed whispers, pinching his cheeks and putting their hands all over him. Chills rushed down his spine, and he shuddered as they blew on his ears.

“Hey, help me out here, Lovel…” Cliff pleaded, looking to the girl sitting opposite of him. But Lovel grinned away like an idiot in the company of two women on both sides of her as well.

“DAHAHA!” Lovel chortled. “Isn’t it a great day to have a beautiful flower on both arms?” She put an arm around each woman’s shoulders.

What in the world is she doing? Cliff thought. She didn’t even glance his way.

“Little boy? Are you listening to me, honey?”

“You needn’t be afraid of us, cutie pie. We’ll treat you extra special.”

Cornered in the booth seat by the cooing women, Cliff felt the blood rush to his head. His face felt awfully hot.

Somebody, help me… He prayed, just as the owner Miles finally came to their table.

“Okay, go ahead and eat up, sweeties! We’re famous for our turkey pita!” Miles invited, placing plates with well-roasted turkey sandwiched between pita bread in front of Cliff and Lovel.

“Oh! Now this looks yummy!” Lovel cheered.

“Th-Thanks for the food!” Cliff said.

Though Cliff had a hard time calming his nerves in this environment, his hunger won out. A juicy deliciousness filled his mouth when he sunk his teeth into the pita overflowing with meaty gravy.

Cliff and Lovel quickly lost themselves in greedily scarfing down the food and drinks brought to their table. Their bellies were bulging by the time they finished consuming every last morsel. Sitting back with a contented bliss washing over her face, Lovel looked Miles over.

“I’m still reeling in shock. Who knew such a beautiful man could exist? Must mean that infinite possibilities exist for mankind, huh?”

Flattered, Miles said bashfully, “You might think otherwise, but I look this way without cosmetic surgery. Not that I have any intention of ever getting it done, when it costs such an absurd amount of money.”

“You don’t need it! If you were to get anything done, wouldn’t it just be a sex change surgery?”

“Hey, don’t be rude, Lovel!” Cliff scolded.

But Miles just shook his hand and smiled. “I don’t mind at all, sweetheart. But aren’t you such a proper young boy? You’re so adorable!”

“Ugh…”

The beautiful drag queen’s flirtatious smile set off a whirl of complicated feelings inside of Cliff. Miles winked at him before shifting his eyes back to Lovel.

“Anyways, you said you’re a student from Head Island, right? What business do you have in these pleasure quarters?”

“I’m in the middle of searching for something.”

“You’re in the middle of a search? That some kind of new trend these days?”

Cliff had no idea what Miles meant. Lovel tilted her head as well, but she took the opportunity to dig for information. “Oh yeah, I’ll ask since I’m here… Miles, do you know anything about Sephiroth?”

“Sephiroth?”

“It’s a Silver Golem that the Torah Church created about four years ago. From what I gather, they’re hiding it somewhere.”

“Hmm, I haven’t heard of it before.” Lovel and Cliff hung their heads at the unsurprising letdown. However, Miles went on to say more than they usually received. “…But I know somebody who might know more.”

“Oh? Who?”

“His name is Ouka. He’s a Golem Artificer with a Golem factory called OUKA-AN, out on Heartbreak Hill. It seems like he was a Rabbi until just four years ago. I think asking him would be worth a shot.”

Cliff and Lovel exchanged looks.

“Four years ago, huh?” Cliff remarked. “Now that’s a funny coincidence… What do you think, Lovel? Want to try askin’ him?”

“Yeah. We might get a lead.”

They nodded to each other and stood from their seats.

“Thanks, Miles! We’ll try our luck at that factory!” Lovel said.

“And thanks for the feast!” Cliff added.

“Make sure you come back again, you hear? I’ll give you a special service!” Miles called as he saw them off from the pub.

Once outside, Cliff and Lovel rejoined Gandolf behind the pub. Lovel flashed Cliff a teasing grin as they were about to head off for Heartbreak Hill.

“Now that was entertaining! You’ve got no tolerance for women, do you, Cliff?” Lovel cackled, upsetting him.

“What the heck?! You shoulda helped me out if you noticed!”

“I left you be because it was sooo amusing! You were just too cute turning all red like a tomato!”

Cliff’s face flushed crimson yet again. “A-A woman shouldn’t call a man cute!”

“Okay, okay. I understand how you feel, so let’s get a move on it, my comrade in arms!”

“Who’re you callin’ comrade?! Comrades don’t let other comrades down when they’re in a pinch just ‘cause they find it funny!”

Bickering endlessly, Cliff and Lovel walked the road leading to the mines.

***

Erie

AT that same time in Chest Island’s mine, Erie was conducting her own investigation into Jair with Heath at her side. But she wasn’t prepared for the population difference between Head Island and Chest Island. While it was technically considered a small island, over forty thousand people resided on the densely populated Chest Island. Pinpointing Jair’s location among the crowd was no easy feat.

“No one knows who Jair is, Heathy… Do you suppose he isn’t actually on Chest Island?” Erie whispered to him. Though she asked every miner she came across, she hadn’t learned anything about Jair.

Maybe my initial theory that Jair’s a resident of Chest Island was wrong? Erie pondered what she was doing wrong while heading down the road, when a discarded newspaper on the ground caught her eye.

“…?”

There was a picture of St. Rollins Academy, the school she had attended until the day before yesterday, taking up page three. Erie picked up the newspaper out of curiosity and read the article under the picture.

“The Supernatural Comes to St. Rollins Academy?! Lots of Blood Found and One Security Guard Missing”

On the night of March 21st, an incident took place that laid waste to the walls of an old school building in Head Island's St. Rollins Academy. Numerous bloodstains have been discovered inside the building, along with what appears to be fragments of a broken Clay Golem in its vicinity.

Since that very day, the Academy's security guard, Enrico Salvini (age 62) has gone missing. The Torah Church authorities are currently investigating his connection to this incident.

Erie furrowed her brow as she read the article. The bloodstains most likely belonged to Heath. The Clay Golem fragments belonged to the Adamahs. But there was one glaring, incorrect detail documented in the article.

"What are they saying…?! The security guard didn't go missing!"

Erie was absolutely certain the security guard had been killed that night, by what was very clearly Jair's handiwork. But the newspaper article listed the security guard as "missing." Did Jair hide the body? Where would he have hidden it?

Something doesn't add up here! He shouldn't have had the time to do something with the body… I need to confirm what's going on. Knowing what she had to do, Erie broke into a run for the Academy.

Exiting the mine, she dashed down the road leading to Head Island. On the way, she heard a voice she recognized.

"…So, Cliff, give it to me straight: do you have experience dating girls?"

"How long are you gonna keep teasing me for?! C'mon, let's go already!"

Startled by the familiar voice, Erie spun around and spotted the boy and girl passing by her, heading for the mine, followed by a Golem draped in a raggedy cloth. The nostalgic sight of the girl's back caught Erie's attention.

"Lovel…?" she breathed.

For a moment, Erie thought she had come across the upperclassman she admired, but this girl looked like a delinquent. Her short miniskirt and tube top didn't match the Lovel that Erie knew.

I suppose it's someone else… Right now, I'm more worried about what happened at the Academy. Erie pulled herself together and resumed her dash for the Academy.

***

Ouka

AROUND that same time, Ouka was working in his factory. He restored Dram's severed right foreleg first. Once he finished, he had a light meal and ran his eyes over the newspaper. The article on page three jumped out at him.

"'The Supernatural Comes to St. Rollins Academy?! Lots of Blood Found and One Security Guard Missing'…?" he read the headline aloud.

From the sound of it, something bizarre had gone down at St. Rollins Academy. The news troubled Ouka.

An incident at the Academy, with this timing? I just bet it's got something to do with those kids.

Both the girl Spinoza asked him to find and the girl with a Fresh Golem he'd bumped into last night were students at St. Rollins Academy. It was highly likely they were connected. Following his gut, Ouka decided to pay the Academy a visit.

"I'd love to take Dram, but…probably best if I don't."

Dram's Restrictor was, "can't move for more than two hours a day." Overusing him early on ran the risk of him not working at a dire moment.

Ironically, the harsher the Restrictor, the greater the Golem's usability and life span became. Ouka had placed a particularly strict Restrictor on Dram because Dram was his treasured partner.

I want to save him for later, Ouka thought. He left the factory alone with the quarterstaff he had retrieved from Spinoza.

It had once been his favorite silver extendable staff. The verses of scripture engraved on it were the badge of a Rabbi. Walking around with the quarterstaff dangling from his waist made Ouka feel like he had returned to his Rabbi days.

***

BEFORE long, the closest underground station—Heartbreak Hill Station—came into view. A steam train slid into the platform as soon as Ouka entered the station. He boarded the train and sighed.

There was only one train route on this island—the line linking this station to the northern Torah Church Station. Passengers had no choice but to disembark at Torah Church Station if they wanted to catch a train to Head Island.

"Oh man, I am *not* keen on passin' through the Church."

There was someone at the Church Ouka didn't want to come across at all costs.

I sure hope I don't run into her by accident.

The steam train arrived at Torah Church Station as he prayed to God hoping not to bump into anyone. Ouka disembarked at the platform and quickly surveyed the station.

…Great, I don't see her, he confirmed as he stealthily made his way to the exit. Right as he stepped outside, a voice called out to him.

"Why are you here, Ouka?"

Cringing, Ouka slowly turned around. A Rabba stood inside the Church's front gardens, near the station exit. They were seeing each other for the first time in ages, and she was already glowering at him with the utmost disgust from behind her glasses.

Torah Chief Kiriko Strife—Ouka's former coworker and the woman he'd hoped to never see again.

"Kiriko…"

"Did you not hear me? I just asked you why a non-Rabbi such as yourself sees it fit to step foot on Church grounds," she restated, briskly striding over to him.

Ouka flashed a daring smile. "My business ain't with the Church. I've got somethin' to check on at St. Rollins Academy, per Spinoza's request."

"You have business at the Academy? I don't know what Torah Lord Spinoza

said to you, but our Church is in no need of your assistance. Only we *Rabbi* are capable of executing justice on this archipelago."

"I see you're still stiff-necked as ever, Kiriko," Ouka said with a wry grin. Intense pain abruptly shot through his shin—Kiriko had kicked him with the tip of her boot. "YEOW! What'd you do that for?!"

"Please don't utter my name with such familiarity, Illegal Golem Artificer scum."

"Huh. You know 'bout that too?"

"Of course I do. I am merely postponing your arrest until the Torah Lord stops protecting you… In any case, I can hardly believe you stooped so low that you became a criminal after quitting the Church. I'm sure even *Alita* would be disappointed if he saw you now."

"…!" Ouka bit his tongue at the sound of that familiar name. Averting his eyes from her, he responded, "…Y'know, I just came to despise the Church, is all. Thought my skills would be of better service elsewhere."

"And you decided that the best service your skills could provide would be as an Illegal Golem Artificer? I can't even begin to comprehend your life choices." Kiriko loudly exhaled and turned on her heel to leave. "You may very well despise the Church, but it is you who *I* despise. The next time you show me that ugly face of yours, I shall beat you until you can no longer stand."

Ouka watched her go. Once alone, he shrugged and headed off toward his destination.

***

OUKA arrived at St. Rollins Academy in the evening. The campus was full of students on their way home from their last class of the day. The old school building was cordoned off with rope, preventing anyone from getting close. Ouka saw Rabbis on watch duty patrolling the area.

As expected, the Church is investigating this incident too. I want to inspect the old school building, but it won't be pretty if I get caught by the Rabbis. I'm definitely in for a whooping if they tattle on me to Kiriko… How do I go about this?

Ouka scanned the area and spotted a bearded gentleman in front of the dorms located next to the school building. He meticulously swept the entrance with a broom.

Is he the dormitory custodian?

Zeroing in on the possible lead, Ouka walked over to the gentleman and called out to him. “Um, excuse me? Are you the dormitory custodian?”

The bearded gentleman stopped sweeping to get a look at him. “I am. Who might you be?”

“This,” Ouka said, patting the quarterstaff hanging from his belt, “is who I am.” The custodian straightened up upon seeing it.

“You’re a Rabbi? Did you come here to investigate the incident that occurred in the old school building?”

“Please forgive my casual appearance. I had been enjoying a day off when I was roped into conducting an investigation at the Torah Lord’s behest.”

“I see.” The custodian nodded, convinced by his explanation for why he was out of uniform. Ouka was grinning like a madman inside.

Hey, I ain’t lying. This old guy’s just drawin’ his own conclusions.

With those wicked thoughts at the back of his mind, Ouka inquired, “I’m sure the other Rabbis have questioned you as well, but would it be possible for you to relate what you know of the case to me as well?”

“Well, that’s the thing… I’m not really sure what happened. There’s so much blood all over the place, and we still don’t know whose it is,” the custodian answered, rubbing his wrinkled brow. With worry lacing his tone, he added, “… And the circumstances are very unsettling for me… Three students disappeared from the dorms the same day the incident occurred.”

“Students went missing?”

“Yes. Students from our high school division: Sophomore Lovel Sinclair, and the freshmen, Erie Reyer and Heath Coleman, are gone.”

Ouka furtively balled his hands into fists.

Lovel was the name of the girl Spinoza asked him to find. And Erie and Heath were more than likely the two kids he'd run into yesterday. Seeing how the girl called the Fresh Golem "Heathy," it was *extremely* likely.

Goin' by that bit of info, the bloodstains in the old school building are Heath's…? If I have to guess, somebody killed Heath, and Erie turned him into a Golem in a last-ditch effort to make it out alive. The pieces fit if I think of it that way.

Ouka began forming a hypothesis about what happened and pressed on with the questioning. "What kind of person was the security guard who went missing?"

"He was a very gentle old man who cared deeply for the students. The other Rabbis seem to be of the opinion that the security guard must have kidnapped the students and vanished, but…I highly doubt that's the case."

Now that theory definitely missed the mark. The fact of the matter was that Erie had been wandering Chest Island last night. It'd make more sense if whoever killed Heath had also killed the security guard.

Ouka was starting to see the whole picture of what went down at the old school building. But there was just one more thing that he needed clarity on.

"Then let me ask you, what kind of person is the missing student, Lovel Sinclair?"

He had essentially zero information on Lovel so far. He needed to gather clues that would help track her down.

Ignorant of Ouka's true intentions, the custodian cooperated and began detailing what he knew. "If you are all right with what I know of her…"

***

Erie

ERIE was hiding in the shadow of the school gates eavesdropping on Ouka's conversation.

Why is Mister Navarov with that scary man…?!

She was met with the unexpected when she came to check on things at the Academy—Ouka, the man who harassed her yesterday, beat her there.

The dorm custodian Navarov was a kind and friendly gentleman. Such a virtuous man was unlikely to suspect what a cretin Ouka truly was.

Erie wanted to warn him, but she lacked the courage to step out of her hiding place. Navarov accommodated Ouka by answering any questions he had.

“If you are all right with what I know of her… Lovel entered the Academy dormitory eight years ago, at the age of nine, and has lived her entire life here since—as an orphan.”

Electricity shot down Erie’s spine when she heard who they were talking about.

He’s asking around about Lovel?! Is he hunting her down as well?! Now that I think about it, Mister Navarov told me that Lovel disappeared the day before yesterday. Did she get drawn into some sort of trouble and end up with that man after her?

Ouka, unaware that Erie was listening, commented, “She’s an orphan? Then that would make this dorm her home.”

“Yes, it is. I became the dorm custodian around the time she enrolled. I’ve watched her grow since the very day she settled in, and I can say with certainty that she is a fine young woman… And that is exactly why I am wrought with worry. This is the first time she has ever gone missing.”

Erie felt just as worried as Navarov. She didn’t know why Ouka was pursuing Lovel, but he was a dangerous man who had tried to destroy Heath. Surely, Lovel would be in grave danger if he managed to catch her.

I have to let Lovel know! But where is she right now? Erie recalled the girl she spotted on her way to the Academy from Chest Island.

“Oh…!” Erie gasped. She thought she’d mistaken someone else for her favorite upperclassman, but now she was certain that had been Lovel. No doubt her delinquent appearance was a disguise meant to throw off her pursuers.

I’m pretty sure Lovel was heading toward the mine… I might find her if I hurry!

Erie shifted, trying to leave the dorms with Heath. In that exact moment, Ouka turned around.

“Hm…? AH, little lady?!”

He found me! Erie kicked off in a frenzied dash.

“WAIT!” his voice bellowed behind her.

“Miss Erie?!” Navarov called after her.

But Erie raced away at full speed without looking back—in order to warn Lovel about Ouka.

***

Cliff

THE sun set on Heartbreak Hill, dyeing the massive mineshaft in the colors of dusk. Cliff, Lovel, and Gandolf loitered in front of the nearby Golem Factory OUKA-AN.

They had dropped by in hopes of gaining some useful information on Sephiroth, but the factory owner appeared to be away at the moment. Cliff polished Gandolf’s body to kill time.

“Hmm…from the look of things, that Ouka guy isn’t coming back anytime soon,” he muttered.

“I’m sick of waiting. We’ve been here for little over an hour,” Lovel complained. Tired of standing, she opted to lean against a lion statue sitting in the shadow of the factory.

A quick scan of the mine’s activities indicated that the business hours were coming to a close for the day. Golems finished with their work pushed railcars filled with ore back to their fixed starting locations. Miners returned in groups to the apartment complexes crowding their surroundings. Yet, for all the activity, the owner of the factory hadn’t shown up.

“What do you want to do, Lovel? Come back tomorrow?”

“But if we stay, we might actually get a solid lead this time, you know? Let’s wait it out a little longer.”

“Lovel!” a voice called abruptly from the distance. Lovel hopped to her feet, turning her head toward the voice, and Cliff whirled around.

They saw a girl and boy running toward them. The girl skidded to a stop in front of Lovel and desperately spoke through gasps for air. “I-I finally found you…! I knew it was you, Lovel!” A smile of relief blossomed on her face. Cliff didn’t recognize the beautiful girl wearing St. Rollins Academy’s uniform.

“Wh-Who are you? Lovel’s friend?” he asked.

The girl nodded. “Ah, yes, I am! I’m Erie Reyer. This here is Heath Coleman. We’re Lovel’s underclassmen at the Academy.”

The boy she introduced as Heath dipped his head in a small bow. Confusion spread across Lovel’s face.

“E-Erie? Um, err, oh yeah, I kinda remember you…! I forget, were we close?”

“No, I wouldn’t say we’re especially close… I just know who you are because you are very popular among the students, Lovel.”

“I-I see… Sorry for the rude question.”

“Don’t be. I’m sure it’s difficult to remember the faces of every underclassman at school…” Erie trailed off, her face giving way to a lonely smile. But, remembering what she came to do, she brushed her feelings aside and cut to the chase. “Anyway, Lovel, I heard you’ve been missing since the day before yesterday. What are you doing here?”

“It’s a long story, but the short version is that I’m searching for something. I’m currently waiting for this factory’s owner to come back.” Lovel pointed a thumb to the factory behind her.

Erie looked at the sign and gasped. “Golem Factory OUKA-AN…?! By *Ouka*, does it mean THAT Ouka?!”

“What’s wrong?”

“You’re in trouble, Lovel! The owner of this factory is after you!”

Cliff and Lovel exchanged questioning looks.

“Are you sayin’ that while we’ve been searching for this Ouka guy, he’s been

trying to find us too?" Cliff asked.

"I wonder why. It couldn't be a request from the Church, could it?" Lovel tilted her head.

"A request from the Church…!" Erie exclaimed. "Why didn't I think of that?! There's a high chance that's the case!"

Ouka used to be a Rabbi four years ago according to Miles. Was he still connected to the Church after his retirement, resulting in him taking on a special mission to apprehend Cliff and Lovel?

"I don't know what situation you're in, Lovel, but I really think you should run away," Erie quietly urged. Cliff and Lovel contemplated the news she brought. "He's an Amber Golem Tamer and is quite skilled too," she added.

"Th-That sounds like big trouble," Lovel agreed. "Trying to ask him questions seems like the last thing we should be doing now—" Something completely unexpected occurred as she spoke. The lion statue sitting in the shadow of the factory *moved* behind her.

"…?!"

Cliff stared at it, stupefied, but Erie shouted, "Lovel!"

The moving lion lunged at Lovel. She was knocked down faster than she could finish turning around.

"Ouch! What? What? What's going on?!"

With Lovel face-up on the ground, the lion pinned her limbs. Face to face with the lion, Lovel noticed the letters "emeth" glowing on its forehead.

"A lion-shaped Golem?! This is—"

"Ouka's Golem!" Erie warned.

Cliff frantically surveyed their surroundings and immediately spotted an unshaven man strolling toward them from the direction of Head Island.

"What luck, tracking the little lady led me to find you two with her. This is like killin' two birds with one stone—or should I say three?" The man stopped about ten meters away and looked them over. He was undoubtedly *that* Ouka.

Underneath the lion, Lovel yelled, “So you’re Ouka! You’re such a coward for springing a surprise attack on us! You’re not worthy of being a former Rabbi!”

Ouka smirked. “Call me a strategic man. Rumors say you’re a ferocious one, so I went straight to my book of tricks.”

Erie glowered at him. Heath’s hand shot to the scabbard at his waist, but Ouka held out his hand to stop him.

“Don’t be so hasty, little lady and her accompanying boyfriend. I let down my guard last night, but I’m serious today. I won’t stand for Dram’s legs getting chopped off again,” Ouka hissed. Animosity gleamed in his eyes. Overwhelmed, Erie fell silent.

Eyeing Ouka carefully, Cliff spoke up, asking, “Looks like the stories about Amber Golem Tamers being skilled are true… But why are you after us? Did the Church put you up to this?”

“That’s very perceptive of you, boy. But you’re missing half the reason why I’m doin’ this.”

“What’s the other half?”

“The other half is personal. I just can’t overlook those cubes being in circulation.”

Cliff frowned. He had to be talking about Lovel’s red cube. But why was Ouka hunting down Erie too? Cliff found the whole thing suspicious.

“It ain’t a good thing for ya to be pokin’ around for Sephiroth either. I’d say it’s a Golem more dangerous than you kiddos can even imagine,” Ouka chided.

“You know about Sephiroth?!” Cliff asked, shocked.

“Oh I know about him, all right—I know him *REAL WELL*.” A dark shadow fell over Ouka’s eyes. “Though there are only a handful of people left at the Church who still know anything.”

Oblivious to his disgust, Lovel happily exclaimed, “Awesome! I’ve finally found somebody who knows about Sephiroth! I want you to tell me what you know.”

“Don’t particularly feel like blabbin’ ‘bout it to you or anyone else.”

“You think refusing will make us back down?” Lovel taunted. “What do you think, Cliff?” She winked at Cliff.

Cliff took her cue and shouted to his partner beside him. “Gandolf, free Lovel!”

Instantly, the still Gandolf came to life. Charging toward the lion pinning Lovel, he swung his fist. But the lion leapt out of the way and stood protectively in front of Ouka.

“So you’re going to force it outta me? Too bad, me and Dram aren’t soft enough to let you get away with that!”

At those words, the Golem called Dram surged into an attack. He swiftly closed the ten-meter gap between him and Gandolf, and unleashed successive strikes with his claws and fangs. The raggedy cloth ripped off of Gandolf, exposing his piecemeal body.

“Punch back, Gandolf!”

Answering Cliff’s voice, Gandolf counterattacked with his fists. Dram hopped out of the way, nimbly evading his punches. But right as Gandolf’s follow-up punch was about to make contact, Ouka forced his way between the Golems.

“Heh. Your Restrictor is ‘can’t hurt humans’? It’s a commendable Restrictor, but sure comes back to bite ya when I do this, doesn’t it?”

He read the Restrictor on Gandolf’s chest! The thought hit Cliff just as Gandolf’s fist stopped centimeters away from Ouka’s face.

Taking the chance, Ouka slipped past Gandolf’s flank and charged at Cliff. He removed the quarterstaff from his waist midstride and lashed out with consecutive, lightning strikes.

“Guah! Gyah! Uaagh!” The quarterstaff slammed into Cliff’s gut, forehead, and chin, bringing him to the ground.

“How dare you hurt Cliff!” Lovel shouted, launching herself into a roundhouse kick. But Ouka smacked down her leg with a single thrust of his staff. “OWWW!” she cried out from the hard blow to her shin and collapsed on the ground, writhing in pain.

“Lovel!” Erie screamed, rushing over to her with Heath.

This time, it was Dram’s turn to get in their way. He slammed into Heath’s side with the full weight of his amber body. Taking the brunt of the blow, Heath flew backward and tumbled onto the ground.

“Heathy!” Erie shrieked, sprinting over to Heath.

“He’s a fine Golem, but he lacks experience. Victory in Golem fights are a matter of teamwork between Golem and Golem Tamer,” Ouka drawled in a lax tone.

Ice-cold sweat trickled down Cliff’s back at seeing his smirk.

He’s strong…!

In a mere few seconds, Ouka had defeated all five of them. Ouka and Dram had crushed everyone—Golem and human alike—as if they were no more a nuisance than flies.

Even Kiriko, who they fought just the other day, wasn’t of his caliber. Was this the strength of a man who had quit being a Rabbi four years ago? Or was this the real strength of the Rabbis that had been lost in recent years?

Whatever the answer, we’re doomed at this rate…! We have to regroup and take a different approach! Right as Cliff came to that conclusion, he spotted something out of the corner of his eye: the rail used to transport excavated ore. An empty railcar that had been left for the night was sitting beside the mineshaft, not too far from the factory.

“Gandolf, carry Lovel and me over there!” Cliff yelled from where he was curled up on the dirt. Gandolf rushed over, scooped up Cliff and Lovel, and bolted toward the railcar where he loaded them in and climbed onto the front ledge where Golems stood on their return trips to the mine.

“Now, now, don’t go thinkin’ I’ll just let you escape!” Ouka quickly mounted Dram and rode after them. As he passed by, Heath jumped to his feet and shot out with a side kick.

“Nngh!” Ouka blocked the kick with his quarterstaff, but the impact was enough to knock him off balance.

“Erie!” Lovel called from the railcar. Following her voice, Erie and Heath made a dash for the railcar. The momentum of their leap into the railcar sent it rocketing down the rail.

“Tch!” Ouka pursued them on Dram.

The railcar sped down the rail encircling the big mine. It rapidly picked up speed; the scenery flew past them, but—

“Don’t ya look down on an Amber Golem’s mighty legs!”

Dram hurtled after them at a speed greater than the railcar. It looked like they’d close in before the railcar had the chance to fully accelerate.

“Oh no! He’ll catch up to us…!” Erie said. Cliff ground his teeth in frustration. But Lovel flashed them a grin; she had just discovered the rocks left inside the railcar.

“We just need to slow him down, right? It’s not the coolest method, but how about we take him down with these?”

Lovel picked up a rock and chucked it at Ouka. He agilely dodged it, but she picked up another rock and invited, “C’mon, Cliff, Erie, Heath! Throw them too! We’ve got plenty of rocks!”

“Nice! Throw enough and one will eventually hit!” Cliff agreed, grabbing a jagged rock.

“O-Okay,” Erie said, taking the rock Lovel handed over to her. The four of them threw the rocks all at once. Ouka blanched when he saw the barrage of rocks flying at him.

“Hey! That’s dangerous!” Ouka exclaimed, having Dram stop in time for him to slide off in a bid to dampen the effects of the hailing rocks. “Even a pebble can kill me if it hits me at this speed!”



“Gandolf’s on the bench ‘cause of his ‘can’t hurt humans’ Restrictor, so it’ll be okay!”

“*What’ll* be okay, boy?! No way in hell am *I* gonna be okay!”

The kids hurled the rocks nonstop at the fuming Ouka who took advantage of a sudden turn in the rail to hop back on Dram’s back. Dram started running in a zigzag pattern to avoid the rocks. He picked up speed and drew nearer at an even faster rate than before, while simultaneously blurring as a target.

“Oh my gosh! This is bad! How can we hit that thing?!”

“It’s okay, Lovel, I’m pretty sure we’re coming up on—” Cliff glanced in the direction they were headed and spotted a five-meter-deep trench intersecting the rail. Only a small bridge spanned the gap. Cliff lobbed a rock at the middle of the bridge once the railcar had safely passed over it.

Dram easily sidestepped the projectile, but his legs went right off the bridge in the process.

“Huh? Eh? NO FREAKIN’ WAAAAAAAAAAAY!” Ouka let out with a death shriek.

Dram plummeted into the trench’s depths. A loud boom resounded from below a second later.

Lovel stared back, worried. “…Think he’s alive?”

“It *is* kinda worrying. Maybe I overdid it…?”

They heard an angry bellow echo up from the bottom of the trench as Cliff said that.

“You evil little brats have SERIOUSLY pissed me off! I’m gonna catch you good and whip your butts!”

It was literally a malicious voice wrung from the bottom of a pit. Cliff shuddered.

“H-He’s angry! He’s super angry!”

“He shouldn’t yell at us so much. He’s the one who decided to chase us.” Lovel pursed her lips. At that unfortunate moment, the railcar arrived at its final

stop and decelerated to a halt where they disembarked, Gandolf a step behind Cliff. They weren't far enough from Ouka to feel safe.

Erie quickly scanned their surroundings and offered, "The building I've been staying in is near here! Let's hide there!"

"Nice save, Erie!"

"I'm all for that!"

It was only a matter of time before Ouka wormed his way out of the trench. Cliff and Lovel headed for Erie's building before he could manage that.

The building was an abandoned refinery on the outskirts of the mine that everyone seemed to have forgotten about. Inside was spacious, dark, and devoid of people—the perfect spot to hide.

They heard Dram's feet pounding against the ground in the distance. So far, they were in the clear—Ouka hadn't noticed the building the kids were hiding in. From the sounds of his footsteps, they could tell he was running around blindly.

"Phew… Want to wait here until that guy goes away at least?" Cliff whispered. Lovel nodded, but Erie meekly dipped her head.

"I'm so sorry. In my attempt to warn you about that man, I ended up bringing him right to you, Lovel…"

"Don't worry about it one bit! If you hadn't warned us, we woulda just waited for Ouka to come back and gotten apprehended on the spot. I'm super grateful to you."

"Same here," Cliff said, "Thanks a lot."

Erie hung her head, her cheeks flushing red. Cliff noticed she seemed to be a bit of an introvert. Maybe Heath was one too, because he kept his head down and didn't say much.

Cliff smiled wryly and asked Erie about a certain detail that had been bugging him. "By the way, Erie, why is that guy after you anyway?"

"I'm not too sure why, but he seems to be trying to steal back this cube," Erie answered, pulling an object from her pocket. It was a black cube.

Cliff and Lovel were shocked to see it.

“This looks identical to the one Lovel has!”

“I-It does! But the color’s different…?”

Lovel pulled the red cube from her chest pocket. The three of them exchanged glances and carefully compared the cubes to each other.

Erie’s cube felt smooth and was made of an obsidian-like mineral. The letters spelling “emeth” were engraved in its surface. Meanwhile, Lovel’s cube was red. Though it featured the same “emeth,” other ancient letters inscribed its surface in succinct rows, and a tiny fissure ran along one of its edges.

“Hm…? Is there something inside?!” Cliff took Lovel’s cube from her hand and intently examined the fissure.

On closer inspection, the inside of the red cube was hollow. A black cube, just like Erie’s, was installed inside. In other words, the red *shell* deftly concealed its black contents, creating a two-tier cube.

Lovel seemed to realize what was inside as well. “Are there two types of cubes…? Red cubes and black cubes with different purposes?” she asked, dubious.

“The Torah Church seems to be after both,” Cliff said. “They must be valuable.”

“For sure. Erie, where’d you get ahold of this black cube?”

Erie wore a grim expression. “I stole it from a man called Jair. He used it to create Golems.”

“Jair?! I stole the red cube from him too!”

“That means both cubes originated from Jair then… But what in the world are they?” Erie muttered.

“You don’t need to know,” a sudden voice answered from the dark.

“…?!”

Cliff shoved the red cube in his pocket on the spur of the moment. He whirled around toward the voice.

For a moment, he thought it was Ouka, but it wasn't. At first look, there was a shadowy figure standing in the refinery's entryway. The shadow emerged from the darkness illuminated by the moonlight spilling in through the windows.

His white face looked like porcelain; his black hair was darker than night. His equally jet-black eyes held them captive. And gripped in his hand was a sledgehammer used for smashing ore.

"JAIR!" Lovel and Erie shouted at the same time. But Cliff reacted a different way.

"Eh? Jair…him? How?" Cliff knew who it was. He was very familiar with the face of the man they called Jair. "M-Master Roche?!"

"What?!" Lovel's eyes went round.

Chapter 5: Reunion

Cliff

CLIFF was stunned to see the boy he hadn't spoken to in a week.

"Master? You mean the master you told me about last night, Cliff?!" Lovel asked, just as confused.

"Y-Yeah…!"

Before them was Roche, Cliff's teacher and the boy he admired as a hero since they met on the side of the road three years ago. He was also the very person who taught Cliff about Engrave Incantations.



But after taking a brief glance at Cliff, the boy dispassionately said, “You. Who are you?”

“What?! It’s me! Cliff! You can’t tell who I am, Master?!”

“I don’t know you.”

“How can that be?!”

Cliff couldn’t believe it. The boy’s face and voice were the same as Master Roche’s, but his tone and word choice sounded completely different.

Jair locked Cliff in his deadly gaze. “It’s a pity you happened to be present at this exact time and place, but I have my orders. I’ll dispose of you with the rest,” he announced coldly.

At those words, a gigantic Golem lumbered through the refinery entryway behind Jair.

“Wh-What the hell is that?!”

Cliff and the girls stood aghast at what they saw. Vaunting a massive body over three meters high was a distorted Stone Golem. Its outrageous shape seemed to come from someone taking all the rubble and debris lying around the mine and mishmashing it into a Golem.

Jair ordered the debris giant, “*Eben*, capture Lovel and kill everyone else.”

The words froze Cliff in place, like icy hands wrapped around his spine.

The giant of debris named Eben lumbered toward them with ground shuddering steps. Erie and Heath readied themselves by switching to fighting stances.

Lovel prepared herself for the incoming giant and whispered to Cliff beside her, “Cliff, run away…!”

“B-But! This might just be Master’s bad joke or—”

“That guy isn’t your master!” Lovel shouted, taking the lead charging at Eben. “URYAAAAH!”

Her vertical kick struck Eben’s knee—but it was Lovel whose face distorted with pain after the impact. Her physical attacks were incapable of damaging a

body built of stone debris.

“Lovel, aim for the letters on his forehead! Damaging them will—”

“Unfortunately, that’s not possible!” Lovel shouted back. Cliff understood why when he focused on Eben’s forehead.

“There aren’t any letters on his forehead…?! I’ve never heard of a Golem moving without ‘emeth’ engraved on it!”

“If it doesn’t have any letters on its forehead, we just have to tear it limb from limb!” Erie concluded, as Heath launched into an attack next. He drew the knife from his scabbard and rapidly slashed Eben.

Hard grinding noises echoed through the building until Eben’s finger was severed. The damage didn’t seem to faze the giant, because he easily grabbed Heath and chucked him at Erie.

“Agh!” Heath collided into her, and they fell into a heap on the floor. Eben reached forward and slapped Lovel with his open hand next.

“Gyah!” With a single blow, Lovel was blown away too, and she tumbled across the refinery’s floor. Cliff watched all of that happen before the danger finally dawned on him.

Master isn’t in his right mind! He might have his reasons for this, but I’ve gotta stop him either way!

“Defeat Eben, Gandolf!”

Gandolf broke into a fierce run at Cliff’s command.

Eben threw a jab straight at the oncoming Gandolf. Gandolf blocked the fast, straight jab and countered with a powerful cross punch.

BANG! An explosive sound shook the room as a wind hole opened in Eben’s abdomen. Even a giant surpassing Gandolf’s size was no match for his iron fists. Eben stumbled two steps backward, on the verge of falling over, when— “…?!” Cliff’s breath caught in his throat. The hole in Eben’s gut closed up with an eerie sound, and as they watched, the finger Heath had cut off regrew.

“It regenerated…?!” Cliff was flummoxed.

Jair shot Cliff through with a piercing glare.

***

Ouka

OUKA was spying on the battle from the refinery's entryway.

A-Am I drunk…?! How the heck did that young guy master the cube?!

Ouka had come running to check out what had caused the loud bangs and crashes, only to be confronted with the unbelievable. He recognized neither Jair nor Eben, but he'd witnessed the dragging movements and regeneration Eben exhibited in this battle many times before.

Beyond a shadow of doubt, that Golem was made using a black cube, the result of the research Ouka had devoted his life to during his Rabbi days.

That's impossible…! We concluded that it was uncontrollable!

But the verdict they came to four years ago was being refuted at this very moment by what he was witnessing right before his eyes.

Eben swayed as he shambled toward Cliff and the other children.

Eben's jerky movements overlapped with images from Ouka's past—with the monster that stole everything from him.

In that instant, a fierce rage surged in his chest. His blood boiled as violent emotions dominated every fiber of his being. Spite filled his impulses, gushing from his lips in a guttural roar.

"GRAAAAAAAAHHHHH!"

Together with Ouka's crazed shout, Dram burst into a sprint. Tossing Ouka onto his back, the amber lion ran like the wind for Eben.

"Ouka?!" Lovel shouted, drawing Jair's attention. Eben swung his huge fists down at Ouka.

Dram evaded them by jumping to the side, then he rammed into Eben's lower back. Ouka ignored Eben's labored staggers and kicked off Dram's back.

He saw Jair's face right below him. Drawing his quarterstaff, he brought it down on Jair with the full force of his descent.

"…!" Jair blocked the blow with his sledgehammer. Then, glancing at Ouka

when he landed behind him, Jair calmly said, “Ouka Baraki, is it? I hadn’t planned for you to be here too.”

“What?! How do you know my name?!” Ouka barked, grinding his quarterstaff against Jair’s sledgehammer.

“I’ve researched every Golem Tamer who could possibly get involved. I’ll be eliminating you from the pool of possibilities.”

Eben caught his balance at last and turned to attack Ouka.

As he spun around, Ouka shouted, “Dram, go for the chest! Attack Eben’s chest!”

Dram obeyed his voice and lunged for Eben’s chest, targeting the sole weakness of a Golem powered by a cube instead of Engrave Incantations.

But Eben defended himself against Dram’s full-speed assault. He caught Dram’s foreleg and easily swung him in circles.

“…!”

Brandishing Dram like a weapon, Eben bashed Ouka with his own Golem. Intense pain seared through Ouka’s side as he went flying. He crashed into a wall of the refinery and crumpled onto the floor below.

Damn…it…! Can I…just not…win…against this thing…?!

Beyond his blurring vision, he could see Eben looming over him. Ouka stared up at the figure beside Eben—Jair—from where he laid in a broken heap on the ground.

***

Cliff

CLIFF watched the events in a stupor. Ouka, the man who had overpowered Cliff and the others so effortlessly, was defeated in mere seconds, as if he never posed a threat from the start. Cliff trembled with fear as the reality sunk in.

B-But I have to fight…! We'll all die if this continues…! Mustering his courage, Cliff set his sights on Eben.

Before Ouka lost, he had ordered Dram to target the chest. Perhaps the chest was the regenerating Golem's weakness.

"Gandolf, go for the ches—"

In the middle of giving the order, Eben abruptly flung Dram at Gandolf.

Gandolf took a direct hit and staggered unsteadily. Jair took the chance to dash in close with the sledgehammer.

"P-Protect your forehead, Gandolf!" Cliff shouted reflexively, just as a metal clang reverberated through the room. Gandolf guarded against the incoming sledgehammer with his forearms.

But that didn't stop Jair from swinging the sledgehammer a second time, then a third time.

"It appears Eben is a poor match for this Alloy Golem. The best plan of action is for me to destroy it," Jair muttered to himself as he kept up his relentless assault.

With each blow from the subsequent strikes, silver sparks spurted from Gandolf's arms. His arms were crushed into a deformed mess before he even had the chance to launch a counterattack.

His arms snapped off with a loud crack and clattered onto the ground.

"…No way…" Cliff uttered in shock, staring blankly at the armless Gandolf. His eyes shifted to the face of the man who had destroyed his Golem's arms.

Is this really Master Roche…?!

His speech, conduct, and physical strength were unbelievable. Everything about him was different from the boy Cliff knew as his master.

Jair swung his sledgehammer back into the air to deliver the final blow. But before he could bring it down, he was knocked away from the side. He had taken a direct hit from Lovel's spinning heel kick.

"L-Lovel!" Cliff exclaimed louder than he meant to.

Without looking at him, she barked, "Cliff, hurry up and run away!"

"What?!"

"I'm saying you're in the way without Gandolf! You've done more than enough, so scram already!"

Her unexpected orders shocked Cliff. Her tone was so cold it was hard to believe that she was the Lovel he'd come to know.

Flustered to find Cliff simply standing there, saying and doing nothing, Lovel blurted, "Idiot! Can't you tell it's dangerous here?! Please just leave—" Her voice abruptly cut off. Dram had sprung to his feet without them noticing and nabbed Lovel.

"…?!"

Ouka was riding Dram's back. Meanwhile, Lovel was hanging stupefied from Dram's mouth.

"Wh-What the heck?! What the hell are you doing?!" she protested.

"I'm furious I have to back down, but Dram's at a disadvantage… So I'm prioritizin' my orders from the Church." Dram dashed for the refinery's exit as Ouka spoke. Ouka shouted over his shoulder, "You kids should run for it too! You can't beat him. Takin' that thing down is the Rabbis' job."

He disappeared with the wind, leaving that word of advice in his wake. There hadn't been a moment to stop him. Jair clicked his tongue and turned his sights on Cliff.

"It appears my plans have failed yet again. I suppose I should eliminate any extraneous elements while I still have the chance."

"…!"

A gaze filled with murderous intent bore into Cliff, making him tremble and

his heart hammer. With both his arms missing, Gandolf stood motionless. Cliff lost the will to fight even more than his partner displayed.

“UWAAAAAHHH!”

Before he knew it, Cliff was sprinting away as fast as he could without caring what anyone thought. He dove outside the refinery and ran like his life depended on it. He kept glancing over his shoulder, thinking someone was hot on his tail.

But there were no signs of Jair following him. Cliff let out the longest sigh when he was confident he was in the clear.

***

Erie

ERIE and Heath were left behind in the poorly lit refinery. Right before them stood Jair and Eben.

Erie slowly rose to her feet and removed Heath's hat. "…I can finally have a serious fight with you."

She worried about Lovel being carried off, but now she needn't be concerned over Heath being exposed. She could unleash his full might as a Golem and pummel Jair!

"Heathy, kill Jair!"

Obeying her voice, Heath surged forward, closing the five-meter gap and thrusting his knife at Jair's heart. A giant hand stretched out from the side, catching the knife.

It was Eben. The debris giant stood in front of Heath, blocking his path.

"Kill him first!" Erie shouted. Heath swept out with a crippling thrust. Grinding screeches blared as he cut through Eben's chest.

But no matter how long and thick the butcher's knife, a weapon of its type was wholly incapable of slicing through the massive stone giant's body. Moreover, any damage Heath inflicted immediately regenerated. Eben was leaps and bounds more formidable than the Adamahs they fought two days ago.

"Tch…" Erie clicked her tongue and reassessed the situation. Jair cleverly hid in Eben's shadow, leaving no visible openings for attack.

Then, rather than taking him on from the front, the best bet is to—

"Heathy, retreat!" Erie shouted, and she darted farther inside the refinery.

Moonlight left the inner depths of the building untouched, sinking it into complete darkness. Erie and Heath were no longer discernible by sight, and they would be able to pinpoint their enemy's location by the sound of his footsteps. Betting on that, Erie hid behind one of the pillars with Heath.

Countless pillars filled the room, holding up the heavy ceiling, which would

make it difficult to locate their hiding spot. Erie hid the glowing letters on Heath's forehead with her hand. Eben's heavy footsteps slowly approached them.

Come and get me. I know exactly where you are.

Erie waited with bated breath for Eben to draw nearer. Heath would slash off his arm once he came in range!

Her plan ready, Erie listened closely, but her enemy's footsteps abruptly ceased.

He's not pursuing us? Before she could even finish her thought, an eruptive bang that bore no similarity to stone footsteps tore through the room. *What was that?!*

The earth-shattering bang shook the room more than once. BANG! BANG! The bangs continued to move closer, one after another.

What is that sound? It's almost like someone's pounding a stone pillar with a boulder… Erie peeked out around the pillar to spy on her enemy. Icy chills rushed down her spine at what she saw, making her shudder.

Eben was smashing all the pillars in the room and knocking them over. And with each bulldozed pillar, a disturbing creak came from above. Losing most of its pillars caused the ceiling to collapse in on its own weight.

AAAAHH! Erie clapped her hands over her mouth to stifle her scream. Heath immediately threw himself protectively on top of her when she crouched down.

Stones from the caving ceiling mercilessly pelted both of them. Intense pain shot through Erie's shoulders, back, and waist. Blood trickled down her face as excruciating pain throbbed in her feet.

Oh no! At this rate, the entire building will go…!

Erie's hands were clammy with sweat. Eben had yet to cease his rampage against the remaining pillars, rapidly bringing down more sections of the ceiling. It was only a matter of time before the entire refinery would give way.

But Erie spotted Jair hiding in Eben's shadow. He was about ten meters from her. He was outside of Heath's range, but now was the only shot they had!

Erie sat up in the raining debris and strained her voice. “Now, Heathy!”

Heath held Erie in his left arm as he dove out of the pillar’s shadow. Eben noticed them and swung down his fist. Heath, still holding Erie, jumped aside, dodging it. He proceeded to vault himself over Eben, landing right in front of Jair. He drew the knife with his right hand and slashed at Jair’s throat.

But Jair blocked the knife with his sledgehammer. Sparks flew in the darkness, illuminating Jair’s face. Jair lashed out with a powerful swing kick. Catching the blow with his side, Heath was flung back with Erie still in his grasp.

“…Agh!”

They smashed against the wall and slid to their knees. In the same moment, the disturbing creaks from above concentrated over their location.

It’s going to collapse?!

Heath hastily scooped up Erie and leapt out the refinery window, shattering it, and landed outside the building.

KABOOOOM! The sound of a heavy implosion thundered behind them. The refinery’s ceiling had entirely caved in. But, without sparing a moment to look behind them, Heath fled from the scene with Erie in his arms.

We couldn’t even faze him…! It’s like we stood no chance at all!

Erie ground her teeth, biting down on the inside of her cheek. Jair might’ve been pinned under the rubble, but she didn’t think for even a second that he would die from it. After all, she could still sense his bloodlust behind her.

She was losing consciousness from the pain and bleeding. From what she could remember from her school lessons, she probably had a cerebral concussion. Heath, who was mentally connected to Erie, started to move sluggishly.

“This isn’t…good…we…have to…run…!”

If they didn’t put more distance between them and the refinery, Jair would catch up. But Erie didn’t think she could last the trip to Head Island, and she didn’t have anyone she could trust to help her on Chest Island.

I c-can’t…hold…on… The moment the thought flickered in her mind, Heath

pitched forward. He collapsed on the ground with Erie in his arms.

The sounds of footsteps approached them before long. Even if she willed herself to escape, her body refused to move.

Those footsteps were the last thing Erie heard before quietly losing consciousness.

***

Ouka

OUKA screwed his face up bitterly as Dram loped toward Head Island. He was pissed off that he'd let his emotions get the better of him and stupidly challenged Eben. He was further annoyed by the fact that he had lost and was forced to retreat like a coward.

But his careless actions weren't the only thing ticking him off right now. Lovel ranted and raved at him the entire time from Dram's mouth.

"Lemme down, you jerk! Or stop! I'll rip the teeth out of your Golem's mouth!"

She's got a lot of energy left in her despite that nasty battle.

Ouka sighed. "Pipe down, girlie. You're not gonna end up in one piece if ya take a tumble at this speed."

"I don't need you to worry about me, geezer!"

"Geezer? I'm only thirty… Well, not that it matters. Anyways, I've got questions for you. Who's that Jair guy?"

"Who knows? I only met him three days ago myself."

"You only just met, huh…?" It sounded like a lie to him, but Ouka decided to set that aside for now. That wasn't what he needed answers for just yet. "In any case, that Jair guy ain't your friend, right?"

"He's my enemy."

"Looked like it. And he's a dangerous enemy at that. Which is why you bothered to say all those mean things to that other boy, to try and get him to run away from the battle, yeah?"

Lovel's expression went blank. She peered up at Ouka from Dram's mouth. "What? You noticed?"

"It was pretty easy to tell from what I saw. Does that mean the boy's important to you?"

"Pretty much, yeah… I'm the one who pulled him into this, and he's still just a kid, after all," Lovel meekly admitted.

Ouka's first thought was that she was still a kid too, but he didn't say it out loud. Instead, he put more pressure on her. "Wouldn't you say it's mostly *your* fault the Church's after him too?"

"…Yeah. It's my fault, because I'm the one who successfully activated Gandolf's Engrave Incantations."

"Then obediently turn yourself in. I'll get the boy acquitted of all crimes if you do."

"You will?" Lovel blinked at him.

Ouka continued with a smile, "This is a trade. I can reasonably say that if you don't adhere to the Church's investigation, that boy won't be let off without payin' a heavy price. How do ya want to proceed, girlie?"

"…You're a crooked coward." Lovel glared daggers at Ouka.

I'm being called a coward a lot lately, he thought for a second, but didn't think it was worth letting it bother him.

"Think what you want, but it's time to choose. The boy's freedom? Or your freedom?"

"You've really left me no choice…I'll cooperate. All I have to do is let you arrest me without a struggle, right?"

"Yup, yup. That's the road that'll lead to everyone's happiness." Ouka spotted the Church up ahead. He dismounted Dram and spoke into the speaking tube installed in the side of the gate. "I'm Ouka Baraki. Please summon Torah Lord Spinoza. Let him know I caught his suspect."

They waited a short while in front of the iron gates, until it eventually opened and Spinoza, accompanied by a subordinate, stepped out.

"You're as fast as I'd hoped, Ouka! Man, am I glad I left it to you!" Spinoza exclaimed, looking at Lovel.

Ouka responded with a grin, "Take this girlie away while you've got the chance. She's a fighter, so watch out."

Spinoza's subordinate followed his instructions and seized both of Lovel's arms. "Move," he ordered her. Lovel obeyed and walked with him.

As she left, she glared over her shoulder at Ouka. "…You'd *better* keep your promise," she warned.

"I will. I may not look the part, but I'm a man of honor."

She disappeared beyond the gates never taking her doubtful glare off him.

Spinoza addressed Ouka once they were alone. "One down, one to go."

"More like two to go."

"Two? Isn't it just one? The boy who Tamed an Alloy Golem."

"Nope. There are two others with a cube, aside from Lovel. A schoolgirl from the Academy, and a young man with a questionable identity."

"How's that possible?! Why are the cubes popping up all over the place now, after all this time?"

Ouka raked his hand through his hair as he answered the bewildered Spinoza. "I dunno the reason, but the cubes are being leaked by a man named Jair. He's a black-haired Golem Tamer in his late-teens."

Spinoza's cheek twitched. "Jair…? Yet *another* involved party? How did you find out?"

"Lovel brought him up. And I had the misfortune of meetin' him myself."

"Did you fight?"

"Yeah, but I lost bad… That guy's mastered the cube. And to make matters worse, it happened to be the imitation black cube without a shell."

Spinoza's eyes went so wide that his whites bulged. He couldn't believe his ears. "That's impossible…! How can he control a cube without a shell?"

His shock wasn't unwarranted. Their tests proved the black cube unusable, no matter what they tried. Ouka wasn't alone with that understanding—Spinoza was fully aware of the facts too.

"I don't know how either. But, whatever the case, we can't let Jair wander about as he pleases."

"Damn straight. The Church will cast a net to catch him too. He's a black-haired Golem Tamer, right?"

“Right. He’s the main culprit. You don’t have to arrest the Alloy Golem boy.”

“Don’t be stupid. You think we’d leave him be? We’re the ones who will decide how to punish him.”

“Sorry, Spinoza, I made a deal with Lovel. In return for her cooperation with our investigation, we’re gonna acquit that boy Cliff.”

“WHAT?! Don’t make decisions for the Church!”

“It’s not that big of a deal. From what I gather, he was just dragged into the whole mess. His only crime would be illegally creating a Golem, but I’d say it’s been destroyed by now.”

Spinoza turned over what Ouka was asking of him in his head. After a slight pause, he exhaled a massive sigh. “Damn it, you’ve really tied my hands with this…! I’ll persuade the elders for you.”

“Now that’s the Spinoza I know and love. You catch on fast!”

“This is a special exception. Now’s not the time to expend resources on small-fry anyway… I have my men stationed at the boy’s hideout. Want me to take them off guard duty there?”

“Oh, I’ll go instead. I’ve got questions for the boy.”

“Sorry, take care of it for me then. The boy’s hideout is Shoulder Coast Station.”

Ouka nodded, hopped on Dram’s back, and left Torah Church’s grounds.

He traveled straight back to Chest Island, headed for the abandoned refinery. Though he planned to let Cliff know about his acquittal, his main motivation was his concern over Jair.

By the time he arrived at the refinery, he found it utterly demolished.

Was it destroyed by Eben…?

Eben and Jair were long gone. They had likely left the scene of the crime and vanished into the dark of night.

“…Don’t think you can escape me. This island’s my backyard.” Ouka’s lips pulled into a fierce sneer. He remounted Dram and set him galloping off to

recommence his search for Jair.

Jair, Erie, and Lovel had drudged up Ouka's past with those godforsaken cubes he never wanted to see again. And he was sure *she* never wanted to think about it again, either.

In that case, I'll seal our past away. And I'll do it with my own two hands, without leaving it to the Church.

Ouka made up his mind and hurried down the road leading to the railway station.

Chapter 6: The Will to Stand Up and Fight

Cliff

CLIFF trudged down the road to Shoulder Coast Station, dragging his heavy feet with each step. The horror he had only just encountered replayed vividly in his head and sent his stomach roiling. He could've been killed—brutally murdered with a sledgehammer or torn to pieces by a demented Stone Golem. His chest squeezed just at the memory of it, suffocating him.

Dread and fear bit at his heels, feeding an all-consuming need to get as far away as physically possible—even if it meant abandoning Gandolf.

"Cliff, hurry up and run away!"

Lovel's words haunted him. He had done just what she said.

"I'm saying you're in the way without Gandolf!"

She was right. The Golem he had devoted the better chunk of his childhood to creating was annihilated without a fight.

Who was he kidding? He wasn't even the one who activated Gandolf. When he actually stopped to think about it, he and Lovel were from completely different worlds. Even worse, the boy he called master and friend had turned into a totally different person in the span of a single week.

I was stupid to think I could join their fight… Cliff convinced himself he wasn't needed. He shoved his hands in his pants pockets and trudged on.

The point of contention—the red cube—jostled inside his right pocket. He had stashed it there the second Ouka showed up. Every time his fingertips brushed its smooth surface, his heart screamed at him. Traitor, coward, it seemed to say with each thud.

After his long, weary trek, he finally arrived at the station he made his home. He stopped on the platform above ground and stared at the stairs descending underneath.

Until just three days ago, he had lived a relatively carefree life in this underground station. Though poor, he peacefully pursued his dreams. Sure, he might've half given up on that dream, thinking it'd never come to fruition. Sure, he might've lived a boring life using his dream as an excuse, pretending he was

content with the way things were.

But what's wrong with that? He descended the steps pondering his life decisions.

Somebody called out to him when he reached the bottom of the staircase.

"You're late, street rat."

Startled, Cliff jerked his head up. Two evil-looking men loomed in the badly lit underground station.

It's the Rabbis! Cliff instinctually made a run for it. But they caught hold of his arm before he made it up the stairs and yanked him back down.

"Where'd that little girl go?!" a Rabbi snapped at him.

"D-Dunno…" Cliff barely managed to answer.

"He says he doesn't know. How do we deal with him?"

"I heard he used an Illegal Golem." The Rabbis nodded to each other.

"You're coming with us, street rat," one told him. "We'll hear what you have to say for yourself at the Church."

Cliff gasped. Golem Artificers apprehended by the Church would never be able to obtain a Golem Manufacturer license again. If that happened, his dream would be lost to him forever!

"Stop it! Let me go!" He jolted into action and smacked the Rabbi's hands off him.

Infuriated by the unexpected resistance, the two Rabbis drilled into him with their livid glares.

"You have *some nerve* to raise your hand against the Rabbis!"

Both Rabbis threw punches at him faster than they finished their curses.

"Guagh!"

Their heavy fists sank deep into Cliff's gut. He involuntarily buckled over, spit flying from his mouth. The Rabbis followed up their punches with sharp kicks to his sides. Pain coursed from every part of his body. In a haze, even the hopeless

thought, *if I pass out here, the pain will go away,* occurred to him.

Then the Rabbis' assault abruptly stopped.

"…?" Cliff warily lifted his head from the ground. One of the Rabbis had fallen to his knees. The second, bewildered Rabbi was taken down by several small shadows.

"URAAAAAAHH!" roared the pack of shadows—the street children who called the station home—as they hurled punches at the Rabbis.

"You guys?!" Cliff cried out as he clamored to his feet.

The street children looked down at the Rabbis with contempt and spat accusations at them.

"Oi, Rabbi scum, yer the ones with some nerve!"

"Don't ya go all wild doin' whatever the hell you want in our lair!"

"Did y'think we were just figurines decoratin' the station?! Quit the crap!"

But the Rabbis scrambled to their feet and drew their quarterstaffs from their belt. The street children's faces stiffened, a reflex reaction seared into them from the beatings Rabbis had given them over the years.

"You accursed street filth…! We'll toss you all in jail!" one of the Rabbis bellowed, raising his staff overhead.

In that same second, a lighthearted voice suddenly came from atop the staircase. "Okay, that's far enough."

Cliff turned around in his pain to find Ouka standing there.

The other Rabbi raised his voice in surprise. "Torah Officer Ouka Baraki!"

"I have a message from Torah Lord Spinoza. Let that boy off the hook." His statement took not only Cliff but the two Rabbis by surprise.

"Why should we?!" one of them stubbornly protested.

Ouka calmly clarified, "We've apprehended the girl Lovel. Spinoza and the others are in the process of questioning her. We've discovered that boy there is unrelated to the case, so he's been acquitted."

“But he’s still guilty of the Illegal Golem charge—”

“I told you to back down, now *do it.*” He gave them a pointed look, his eyes gleaming with fierce intensity. The Rabbis reluctantly acquiesced and grudgingly ascended the stairs together, leaving Ouka behind.

“…What’s going on?” Cliff asked him.

“I made a deal with Lovel. In return for her dutiful cooperation with our investigation, we’ll overlook your crimes.”

Cliff’s eyes opened wider than saucers. “No way. Lovel did that for me?”

“Basically, you’re just an outsider who got pulled into a big mess. Accordin’ to her, she’s the one who imbued that Golem with the Engrave Incantations, yeah? What happened to it?”

“It’s probably been…destroyed.”

“That’s perfect then.”

Ouka’s choice of words pissed Cliff off. “*That’s perfect*?! How could you say that?!”

“That Golem was showin’ signs of going berserk soon. Though you probably didn’t realize it.”

Cliff inhaled sharply. Now that Ouka mentioned it, he recalled thinking this morning that the letters on Gandolf’s forehead had been a funky color. The innocent blue glow had started to become tinged with red, like blood.

“No way! How could it happen so fast?!”

“You can’t go around usin’ a Golem that doesn’t fit your stature. Alloy Golem lifespans are short even under normal circumstances… Well, it’s been destroyed, so that’s that. You’ve learned your lesson, yeah? Go back to your normal life.”

Cliff didn’t say anything to him. What he had been brooding over was thrust into his face by a third party. For some reason, that fact devastated him past recovery.

Ouka didn’t let Cliff go once he fell silent. Instead, he dug for more

information. “On another note, you seemed familiar with that Jair fellow. Who in the world is he? What’s your relationship with him?”

“He is…my master and teacher.”

“That’s what you called him back there, too. Do you have any idea why he had that cube on him?”

“I don’t. My only connection to him is that he’s been teaching me how to make Golems since we met three years ago. But…he felt like a totally different person.”

“And what name do you know him by?”

“He went by ‘Roche’… At least, if he’s really my master.”

Ouka studied Cliff’s face carefully. He seemed to be debating whether Cliff was lying or not. After an awkward staring contest, he appeared to garner what he wanted from Cliff’s expression. He hummed, “Hmm,” and then walked away, heading for wherever he was going next.

Left behind, Cliff stood there stiller than a statue. Eventually, his solitude was broken by the other street children.

“Oi, oi, Cliff! We’ve been wonderin’ where ya went off to, and it turns out you’ve stuck your head into some big trouble, huh?”

They surrounded him with carefree smiles. Cliff cast a look at the ground and quietly said, “That’s all over now.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it. You ain’t getting outta trouble that easy once the Rabbis set their sights on you.”

“Speaking of which, you guys punched the Rabbis,” Cliff pointed out. “Did you forget? It might not end well for you either.”

“Don’t matter a lick. We’ve been pissed with the Rabbis for ages. It was a good chance to sock it to ‘em.”

“That’s not the problem here. Why’d you guys act so reckless?”

The street children fell silent at Cliff’s question. After a short lull, a different street boy answered him.

“…Entertainment to take our minds off of life, I guess?”

“You did it to amuse yourselves? Is that really enough of a reason to invite the Rabbis’ wrath?”

“Why not? Is there any better entertainment out there for kids fighting tooth and nail to survive at the bottom of society than beatin’ the Rabbis up?”

They made a very good point. Cliff had, on more than one occasion, wanted to knock a Rabbi’s lights out. But he’d kept his anger in check for the sake of making his dream come true someday. He had no other choice than to put up with it.

The other street children were the same. But one of the street boys who fought the Rabbis riveted his eyes on Cliff and said, “Say, Cliff, did ya know we’ve got no way to break outta this hellhole? The most we can do is distract ourselves with a lil’ fun.”

“…!”

“But, Cliff, yer different from us. Yer Golem finally came alive and set foot outside these walls, yah? Don’tcha think it’s a little pathetic for its run to come to an end, right off the bat, because the Rabbis say so?”

“So…that’s why you all rescued me?”

The street children exchanged looks and cracked up laughing.

“STU-PID. Did the Rabbis punch yer head so hard y’can’t hear anymore? Like we’ve been sayin’, we wanted a little release to amuse ourselves.”

“Anyways, hurry up and go, Cliff. If yer Golem’s broken, ya’ve gotta get to fixin’ ‘im up.”

“If ya don’t, y’all wind up back in this station no better than when ya left it.”

Cliff felt his cheeks pulling into a smile as he listened to their scolding. “Haha! Wouldn’t want that now, would I?! I’m so done and over with bein’ teased by you guys, day in and out!” he exclaimed while running up the stairs. Halfway up the staircase, he shouted down to his street friends, “I’ll treat you guys to a meal when I get back!”

“STU-PID! Don’t you ever come back again, y’hear?!”

“Kids who kick up trouble are banished from this station!”

“Don’t look back, Cliff! Run forward as fast as ya can! Push yer way down yer own path!”

Cliff grinned at his friends’ encouragement and dashed up the rest of the stairs. His dash changed into a full-blown sprint. At maximum speed, he raced to the refinery where he had left Gandolf.

But when he arrived, he found the refinery caved in on itself. A mountain of debris was all he could see; there wasn’t a shape or shadow belonging to Gandolf.

His legs nearly buckled. But the encouragement from his friends steadied him. Cliff anchored a steadfast gaze upon the wreckage and asked, “Are you there, Gandolf…?”

No answer. But Cliff could sense he was there because Golems and Golem Tamers shared a mental link.

At the top of his lungs, Cliff shouted the exact words of his very first command, **“Stand, Gandolf!”**

The mountain of rubble violently shook. The metal giant sleeping below mightily rose to his feet. He had lost his arms, was covered in nicks and gouges, and bore even more resemblance to something fished out from a rubbish heap.

But Cliff asked him all the same, “Can you still fight?”

Gandolf looked like he nodded.

“Will you fight by my side once again?”

He ran over to Cliff, scattering pieces of the mountain of wreckage and rubble underfoot. Cliff could feel him saying, “I’m good anytime you are, buddy.”

“…!”

Cliff understood when he saw his Golem up close. Gandolf was telling him, his own heart was telling him—both were shouting as loud as they could, *stand up and fight!*

Screwing his face up, Cliff gave Gandolf’s arm stumps a smack. “In that case!

We’ve gotta start by fixing these arms up!” he declared and walked off. He was followed by his mute comrade in arms.

***

Erie

HOW long had she been unconscious for after losing the fight to Jair?

Erie finally regained consciousness.

“Where am I…?!”

When she came to, she was inside what looked like a hospital room. Two beds stood side by side inside the wooden room. Erie was resting on one, while Heath lay on top of the neighboring bed.

Why am I inside a hospital…? I thought Jair had caught up to us… she thought when the door opened and someone came inside.

“You’re awake, Erie Reyer? I’m glad you aren’t seriously injured.”

“Ah! You’re…!” Erie sputtered in surprise.

Before her was a middle-aged man wearing a white lab coat. He was St. Rollins Academy’s adjunct professor Crank Getz.

“Why are you here, Professor Getz? Where am I?” Erie couldn’t help but ask the man who presented the lecture on Berserker Golems that she had attended the day before.

“This is my home and a clinic I operate. I discovered both of you lying unconscious in the middle of the road and carried you here.”

His explanation reminded her of the rumors saying that aside from his job as an adjunct lecturer, Getz also operated a small clinic on Chest Island. Had he passed by the road where Erie fainted coincidentally?

The wounds covering her body had been treated and bandaged. From what she gathered, he had tended to her while she was unconscious.

“U-Um…thank you very much, Professor Getz.”

“You don’t need to thank me. I did what is only natural for a doctor.” Getz perched on the edge of the chair next to her bed and held Erie in his astute gaze. “More importantly, care to tell me what’s going on? I wondered why you were both absent from school. I never expected to find you collapsed on a road in Chest Island.”

Erie hesitated over whether she should answer. But she wouldn't be able to ask what she needed to know if she didn't tell him. So she decided to answer him truthfully.

"To tell you the truth, I'm being targeted by a man…"

"You're being targeted? That doesn't sound pleasant. Can you explain more?"

"The thing is, the man used a certain item… Professor, do you know what this is?" Erie pulled the black cube from her chest pocket.

Getz's expression instantly went stiff. "That's—!" He took the cube from Erie's hand, carefully studied it, then sighed. "…How many years has it been since I've last seen one of these?" he muttered with a bitter edge to his words.

Erie eagerly leaned across the bed. "You know what it is, then!"

"Indeed. I don't know why you have it, but I know what this is." He thrust the cube toward her. "This, Erie Reyer, is what is known as 'Sehem-hamphorasch'—also known as the 'name of the 72 gods,'" he answered definitively.

"*Sehem-hamphorasch*…?"

"When exactly they started this is unknown, but the Torah Church has wondered whether there's anything that can outdo Engrave Incantations in bringing Golems to life for ages now. They perused ancient documents and learned that the very method they were searching for was buried on this archipelago. And what they excavated was *Sehem-hamphorasch*."

Erie listened attentively to Getz's explanation, not letting a single word slip by her.

"It's an item that was used by ancient Golem Tamers, long before the Torah Church was established," Getz elucidated further. "Just embedding it into a doll's chest grants life and unimaginable power. The Golem gains regenerative abilities and an endless life span. What's more, they are even capable of existing on land unblessed by the Church's divine protection. Merely burying the item into the ground makes it automatically take on human shape and move… Sure enough, the method was optimal, far more advanced than the Engrave Incantations we currently use. It is the secret technology of the ancients."

Erie recalled how the Adamah burst from the ground and Eben's outrageous strength. Without question, those were not normal Golems. To think it was all the result of the cube's power…

"But…why doesn't anyone know anything about such a powerful item?"

"The existence of those cubes is the Torah Church's most classified secret. To begin with, the cubes are extremely rare. Only four were excavated from this island during the archeological dig, as far as I know. Furthermore…"

"Furthermore…?"

"No one could Tame them. Every single Golem birthed by the cubes went berserk the moment they were named," Getz said in a chilling voice, his tone embittered. "The Rabbis consequently had to pull out of researching the cubes. Eventually, they wrote them off by concluding that nothing can outdo the 'emeth' Engrave Incantation."

"I see… But how come you know about the cubes, Professor Getz?"

"I heard about it directly from a Rabbi who researched the cubes."

"A Rabbi?"

"The man's name is *Arusrad Grinzam*. He's the most powerful Golem Tamer in Torah Church's history, and my old friend." Getz spoke of his friend with a forlorn face.

Curious about this Rabbi he referred to as an *old friend*, Erie asked, "Where is he now…?"

"Grinzam devoted his entire life and career to that research. But eight years ago, he tried to make off with all of the Torah Church's cubes."

"He stole them? What did the Church do about it?"

"Naturally, they amassed the full force of the Church to hunt Grinzam down. He took on an army of Rabbis and fought as a fugitive on the run. Since the Church lost many of its best people during the incident, the Rabbis call it 'The Grinzam Disaster.'"

"…!"

“In the end, Grinzam fell from Head Island’s western cliffside into the ocean below. A body washed ashore several days later. Though the corpse was severely damaged, it was unmistakably him. I’m the one who conducted the autopsy,” Getz admitted, sadly shaking his head.

I can’t believe this cube has such a dark history…! But then, who is Jair really? Why does he have so many cubes, when there should only be four in existence?

Getz returned the cube to Erie as she was lost in her thoughts.

“In any event, it’s very strange that these cubes have shown up again… The Church recovered every cube Grinzam had taken after his death. Which begs the question: how did the man seeking to kill you obtain these cubes?”

“From what I heard, the cubes were stolen from the Church four years ago. I’m certain Jair must have stolen them. Not only did he have the cubes, but he’s mastered Taming Golems with the cube’s powers.”

“Now *that’s* odd. Controlling them was supposed to be impossible.”

“But it’s a fact; he’s done it. Jair is far too dangerous…!”

Getz’s brow wrinkled into a deep frown. “Are you going to try to stop him? I wouldn’t if I were you. Leave such matters to the Church.”

“I can’t! I have a *very* good reason for hunting him down…!”

Getz studied Erie with observant eyes. She held his gaze without averting her eyes. He finally exhaled and abruptly shifted his glance to Heath.

“…On another note, Heath Coleman hasn’t woken up yet—it’s *almost as if he’s dead*.”

Erie swallowed hard. *Did he find out?!*

“You can’t turn a *living* human into a Golem,” Getz continued over her panic. “As such, I assume Heath was murdered by that man, and you are hunting him down for revenge. Am I wrong?”

He saw right through her. Preparing herself for the worst, Erie argued, “Heathy isn’t the only one he murdered! Jair killed the security guard as well…!”

“I agree that we can’t leave such a dangerous person wandering our islands.

But you are the one who will suffer the most from using a Fresh Golem to take revenge."

"Why?!" Erie sprung out of bed. "What do you know, Professor?! I just lost the most important person, the *only* person who matters, to me!"

"I know all too well. More than anyone you will ever meet. I can understand how you feel… Because I specialize in Fresh Golems."

Erie snapped back to her senses. She had heard that Getz was such a brilliantly skilled Fresh Golem researcher that he once served as an expert advisor to the Torah Church. But since Golems using human bodies had been banned ten years ago, he'd lost both his field of study and position, ruining his life and career.

"People used to beg me to create Fresh Golems for them," he stated, a dark bitterness dully glinting in his eyes. "I'm a doctor, so I had abundant opportunity to create them. Many people rejoiced just to see their *dead* relative or lover *move again*."

"Then why did you stop manufacturing Fresh Golems? Because it was banned?"

"No, because I lost my only daughter. I turned my daughter's corpse into a Golem. That is why."

Erie's eyes widened.

"My daughter was born with a nerve dysfunction." Getz faltered. "She breathed her last, as if she were only sleeping, when she turned sixteen. But she looked so alive to me… That's when I lost the ability to make sane judgment calls, I'm sure."

"That's not true…!" Erie objected. Getz shook his head.

"It wasn't until I turned someone I loved into a Golem that I understood for the first time that bringing the dead back to life isn't something within human reach after all. I stopped manufacturing Fresh Golems because I became aware of that truth."

"But…but Heathy threw away his life to become a Golem and save my life!"

“What?!” It was Getz’s turn to raise his voice in surprise.

Erie painfully remembered the events of that night. The memory of imbuing Heath’s ice-cold body with the Engrave Incantation through her tears haunted her every waking moment. Pushing back the flood of despair, she went on with her explanation in a quivering voice. “Heathy died to protect me from Jair… There’s nothing left for me to do for him aside from this…!”

Getz looked deeply heartbroken by her story. He cast down his eyes and said nothing more.

A long, drawn out silence hung over them. Getz seemed to be brooding over something with intense concentration. At long last, he looked at Erie as though he had finally made up his mind.

“…If you long for revenge, I can’t stop you. But don’t carry the burden alone. This is a problem far too painful to face alone. Is it not?”

“But Heathy was the only person in my life who supported me. Lovel was captured too… I have no one else to rely on…”

“I will become your pillar of support then.” Erie’s eyes went round at his offer. Getz looked straight into her eyes and declared, “I’ll become your ally. I might not be of much help, but I swear you have my support.”

“Professor…?! Why would you…?”

“I wish to stop this Jair as well. Other deaths are inevitable if such a brutal murderer is left loose on this archipelago. If that happens, the bereft will surely make Fresh Golems out of their deceased loved ones. After all, this *is* an Archipelago of Golem Tamers…”

Getz glanced out the window, where the dreary, desolate landscape of Chest Island’s outskirts stretched beyond the horizon. “But I’m going to put an end to this now. I, more than anyone else, understand the anguish of those who create Fresh Golems. I no longer want to see their pain.” He spoke in a detached tone, like he was giving a lecture. But the story about his daughter lent a kindness to his words.

…Maybe I can try believing in him…

Erie felt the wall of ice coating her heart melt away the moment the thought crossed her mind. Getz offered her a faint smile.

“Let’s not forget that you are originally my student and my patient. I would be a failure of a teacher and a doctor if I were to abandon you.”

“…Professor Getz.” His smile made Erie’s chest feel heavy, and the proper words escaped her. After a moment, she finally managed to reply with just two. “Thank you.”

“Good girl. Why don’t you spend the night? I assume you’ve been sleeping outdoors all this time. Your clothes were very unclean and unhygienic; I can’t bear to overlook it.”

“…Okay.”

“Let’s embalm Heath’s body tomorrow. You can sleep easy tonight in my daughter’s empty room.”

Getz gently laid his hand on Erie’s nodding head. From his hand, she felt the same warmth and tenderness she had from Heath’s, from what seemed like ages ago.

***

Torah Church Torah Chief, Kiriko Strife

“LOVEL Sinclair: sophomore at St. Rollins Academy’s High School Division, who has resided in the Academy’s dormitory since eight years ago. Excellent grades, excellent behavior. Serves as the student council secretary… Interesting,” Kiriko remarked, lifting her eyes from the charge sheet she was reading off. “Is all of this information correct, Lovel Sinclair?”

“Yessiree, it’s correctomundo,” Lovel sulkily responded from her seat opposite Kiriko. A cold, hard desk was stationed between them.

They were inside the “special confession room” on the third-floor of Torah Church. Lovel hadn’t stopped moping since they brought her to the dreary, tasteless room, also known as the *Interrogation Room*.

Spinoza observed her from where he leaned against the wall and raised a questioning eyebrow at her behavior. “Your attitude and the report on you sure

don’t match up, though. Aren’t you supposed to be a prim and proper young lady from our prestigious academy?”

“Obviously I’d be on my worst behavior after what I’ve been through. I became a wanted person by the Rabbis *just* for visiting the Church during off-hours, *then* I was kidnapped in the mouth of some Amber Golem, and the *cherry on top* has gotta be that I’m being treated like some sort of *hostage* and was *threatened* into a deal to cooperate with your investigation,” Lovel ranted. “Even somebody as cheerful and upbeat as I am would be *pissed off* after that! I’m no saint, okay?!”

“Well, that makes sense.”

“Please don’t be so easily convinced, Torah Lord Spinoza. Besides, this girl is no prim and proper young lady,” Kiriko reprimanded, running her eyes over the charge sheet. “The report says, ‘She was raised by a single mother on Chest Island who passed away eight years ago. She has since been raised as an orphan at the Academy dormitory.’ She has neither the personal history nor the behavior befitting of a noble young lady.”

“Shut your trap. I don’t deserve to be spoken of that way by you, old crone.”

“I don’t deserve to be called an old crone by you either, *little girl*. Call me Torah Chief.”

“Okay, EFFING Torah Chief.”

“Just so you know, I’m a proponent for equal rights between men and women. The next time you cuss at me, I’ll smack you good and proper, regardless of your gender.”

“Doesn’t that count as witness abuse? Isn’t that a crime? Or are you above the law?” Lovel taunted.

“I don’t balk at committing crimes in order to keep justice.”

“Woooow, should you really be a Torah Chief with those dangerous thoughts?”

Neither Kiriko nor Lovel would back down. Spinoza couldn’t watch them at each other’s throats any longer, so he cut into the conversation. “Now, now,

don’t fight, ladies. You’re scaring me. Back to the point. Lovel, why did you, a young lady raised at the Academy, have the cube?”

“I stole it from Jair. How many times do I have to repeat myself to you people?”

“Then where did this Jair fellow obtain it?”

“I don’t know that much. He probably got it from the mastermind pulling his strings.”

“Mastermind…? Where did that come from? Jair isn’t the only one behind this?”

“Yup, it seems like he has accomplices. I saw another guy’s face, but I didn’t know who he was. Don’t know his name either.”

Lovel’s story was full of ambiguity and bizarre parts that made it sound fabricated. Kiriko questioned her anyway, to be sure. “Assuming what you say isn’t just some wild fantasy on your part, what’s this Jair after?”

“Taming Sephiroth and using him to destroy the Church’s Great Bell Tower—at least, as far as I know.”

“Taming Sephiroth?! Do you people even fathom what a monster Sephiroth is?!” Kiriko lashed out.

“I know,” Lovel answered, despite being unsettled by Kiriko’s reaction. “Isn’t it a dangerous Silver Golem the Church manufactured four years ago?”

“You call such limited knowledge *knowing*…?!” Kiriko’s brow twitched. She restrained her voice and said tightly, “That thing is more than just a mere Silver Golem. It’s a weapon created to murder people. No—it’s a *monster,* unrestrainable by human means. And that cube is the key to activating the monster Sephiroth. It is an item neither you nor anyone else should ever possess.”

“I understand that much too. But Jair is capable of using it. And, most likely, I am as well.”

“Are you insane…?! How would you two be capable of such a feat?!”

Lovel kept silent. She appeared to hesitate over her answer. Finally, she shook

aside whatever was holding her back and muttered, "…Whether you believe it or not, if Jair's left unchecked, he'll bring about the destruction of the Torah Church. He's going to rip this land from God's protection and make the Golems throughout the islands go berserk. I just want to prevent that."

Lovel's expression was dead serious. She pleaded, "So, please, let me see Mister Grinzam. I'm positive he'll be able to stop Jair—"

"Unfortunately, former Torah Lord Arusrad Grinzam passed away."

Lovel trembled at the news. "…He passed away? How?" she asked in a thin voice coated in disbelief.

"He betrayed the Church and stole our cubes. He was punished for his offenses."

"How can that be…?!"

"On that note, I've wanted to ask why you know about former Torah Lord Grinzam."

Lovel's head sunk and she didn't answer for a long, painful time. "A long, long time ago, when I was really little, he took care of me. I was positive he would be the one to take care of all of this too…" she muttered, more to herself than Kiriko. Then she lifted her head and captured Kiriko in her intense gaze. "If Mister Grinzam is gone, then I need to request your help. Please stop Jair. If he gets the cube, he'll—"

"If you want our help, answer me this. Where did the red cube you had go? We couldn't find it during the body check we conducted at the time of your arrest."

"Eh? U-Uh, I wonder where it went off to… I honestly have no idea. Maybe I dropped it during the battle at the refinery?" Lovel tilted her head and seriously contemplated the question. Kiriko exhaled a deep, long breath.

"It appears you aren't willing to cooperate with this investigation. We will take a short break. I will be back to squeeze the truth out of you," Kiriko said, standing from her chair. She left the interrogation room with Spinoza.

Spinoza locked the door from the outside. "What do you think about Lovel's

story, Kiriko?”

“Too much of her testimony is shrouded in ambiguity. She might be hiding something… Let’s hurry and conduct a more precise interrogation.” As she responded, a young Rabbi ran down the hallway toward her.

“I have an important report for you! A man’s body washed up on Head Island’s northeastern coastline.”

“A body? Whose is it?”

“We don’t know. His face was crushed…”

Kiriko frowned and looked to Spinoza. He thought it over for a moment before answering. “Have the body autopsied right away. He may be related to this case.”

“Yes, sir!” the young Rabbi replied before running off.

Kiriko watched his back grow smaller down the hallway, quietly thinking, *while things currently look peaceful on the surface, there’s a chance something sinister is brewing under the surface on our Head Island.*

***

Cliff

CLIFF headed to Chest Island's Flank Beach Market with the armless Gandolf. He finally arrived at a familiar building after his long walk—the Akizu Company barracks, where he worked part-time.

The lights were still on inside. Cliff knocked on the armored door and waited until the sleepy owner Akizu opened it while rubbing his eyes.

"Oh, it's you, Cliff… What's up? I've closed up shop for now."

"Boss, I need a favor of you!" Cliff pointed back at Gandolf towering behind him. Akizu's heavy eyelids peeled back as he gaped at the giant.

"Huh. Yer Golem started moving? But it's armless."

"Please sell me the materials to fix these arms! I'll definitely pay you back someday!" Cliff entreated.

Akizu carefully studied him until he finally said, "Wait here a sec," and vanished inside the barracks.

Several minutes later he returned pushing a cart. Loaded in the back were two somewhat rusty but complete Iron Golem arms.

"You can use these, boy."

Cliff stared at Akizu's face, stunned. "But isn't this merchandise?!"

"Ya worked for free last time. No need to worry 'bout the price," Akizu replied, sniffing. Things were going so smoothly that Cliff struggled to put his gratitude into words. He settled for a deep bow instead.

"…I will *absolutely* pay you back once everything is over."

"It's fine, it's fine. But ya better connect the arms in the garage. Watch out for them Rabbis," Akizu advised, waving to Cliff.

Cliff bowed a second time and pushed the cart around to the garage.

He made Gandolf lie down inside, then pulled out his tool set and went about attaching the new arms. The metal arm parts were far too heavy for him. He persisted regardless, working up a sweat as he tackled the task in front of him.

"…You look just like yer pa when yer at work."

Cliff turned around at the sudden voice. Akizu was standing in the garage doorway, lighting a cigarette.

"Boss, you know my old man?" Cliff asked before he knew it.

"Sure do. He often came here to wangle parts outta me."

"Huh? …He did what?"

"Ya know, yer pa tried to become a Golem Tamer when he was young too. He gave it up when his wife became pregnant though."

A tool slipped out of Cliff's hand. *Pregnant with…me?!*

"Things got harder on him when his wife ran for it," Akizu said. "He became a miner to put food in his belly, but he was the kinda man who couldn't give up on things. Once he figured you could live on yer own, he quit his miner job and went away somewhere. They say he left the archipelago for the mainland."

"……"

"In reality, what matters to humans is the other things: havin' a woman, havin' her leave you, makin' children, dotin' on those children, workin' at a job, gettin' fired from said job, and so on. It's more important to secure yer meal for the next day than it is to blindly chase after some dream ya never know will actually succeed… That's how the majority of us live. It's the norm. That's why I believe yer pa was a big idiot."

Akizu puffed out tobacco smoke and fixed his eyes on its trail. Then he quietly commented as if talking to himself, "But y'know what? I think it's a good thing you finished that Golem. Golems mean squat to me, but I believe it's a good thing you didn't throw it away."

Akizu tossed the cigarette butt on the ground at his feet. He stomped on the tiny flame with his tattered leather boot, smothering it, and then turned to leave.

Cliff asked his departing back, "…Boss. Why did my old man give me this name? What does it mean?"

Akizu looked over his shoulder and pondered the question with a distant look.

He spoke as he retraced his memories. “He said somethin’ about it being some saint’s name. He told me it was the name of a saint from ages ago, who created a Golem and fought with it to protect this archipelago.”

Akizu walked away after he answered. His words made Cliff remember the name he had seen at the Church the day before yesterday.

“Saint Clifford” had been written under the Church’s stained-glass window.

Cliff had received the same name as that saint from his father.

“Dad…” Cliff softly murmured. He thought back to his past with his dad.

It was around the time he was seven that Cliff went to pick up his dad from his mining job. He loved his dad back then. Though his dad had no hope of getting ahead in the world, he was the type of dad who rarely got angry at his son. Living together in the cramped apartment room hadn’t been half bad.

Cliff wanted to see his dad working too. That was part of the reason why he went to Heartbreak Hill, where his dad worked.

But as soon as he arrived, he heard angry yelling. “EVANS! Ya aren’t even capable of carrying this small load of rubble?!” What came into view was the site foreman railing on his dad. “Ya can’t make a Golem, and you’re not even strong! We ain’t got nowhere for the likes of you here!”

The site foreman fumed, and his dad bowed his head. Before long, the bell signaling the end of the workday tolled. The site foreman grumbled a final remark and spat over his shoulder before stalking away.

Cliff dumbly stood there without knowing what to do. Eventually, his dad noticed him. He shuffled over to Cliff with a vague smile.

“Did you come to get me?” Cliff didn’t say anything as his dad patted him on the head. There was a pause before his dad sighed and said, “Let’s go home.”

On the way home, his dad mumbled, “If only I could make a Golem too…”

Cliff mulled over those words. *Dad was yelled at because he can’t make Golems. So, I’ll become a Golem Tamer and protect him.*

The young Cliff harbored those innocent thoughts. He never mentioned them to his dad—because he thought it was the one thing he should never say.

But his dad disappeared a short time later. “I’ll be home soon,” he said before leaving the house, never to return again.

Cliff had searched nonstop for him. He walked all around the mine tunnels, brought home the scrap materials he picked up inside, and combined them into various shapes.

After spending an uncounted number of days following that pattern, he successfully combined the scrap metal into a tiny doll. It was around that time he realized his dad was never coming back. The doll was guaranteed to be motionless, but it was the first “Prime Body” Cliff ever made.

Six years had passed since then, and his memories had been forgotten with the passage of time. He had lost the person he wanted to protect, and by extension, lost the reason why he started building Golems in the first place.

But Cliff continued to create Golems, despite forgetting the reason he started. Now he finally remembered why he did.

I always wanted to protect somebody. I wanted to gain the strength to protect somebody through building Golems.

With that realization, Cliff shouted in the direction Akizu had left, “Boss, thank you! I mean it!”

Whether he was heard or not, Cliff had to say it. He wanted to be grateful to everyone, from Akizu, to Lovel, to the street children, and even his father.

He despised this island. Chest Island’s garbage dump had been Cliff’s entire world. He had thought the only reason he made Golems was to claw his way out of there.

But he was wrong. And he found somebody to protect.

Cliff’s Golem had moved for that reason. And now the girl who activated Gandolf was the Church’s captive.

I’ve been making Golems until this day in order to protect her. He ran his fingers over the red cube in his pocket. *I have to bring this back to its rightful owner.*

Cliff picked up his tools and properly faced Gandolf anew. “I’ll definitely fix

you… Let’s save Lovel together,” he said to his comrade in arms and threw himself into fixing him.

Chapter 7: Clash of Ideals

Day 4

Cliff

DAYBREAK arrived, the sun rose high into the sky, then set once more. All the while, Cliff persisted in repairing Gandolf's arms without rest. He worked alone in Akizu Company's garage, munching on the rye bread Akizu brought him.

Cliff had succeeded in attaching the two iron arms to Gandolf's torso overnight. He meticulously inscribed the Engrave Incantations into the arms with his fingertip.

The skin wore off his fingers and blood oozed from the exposed flesh, smearing onto the iron arms. Strangely enough, his coursing adrenaline washed away the pain and exhaustion weighing on him.

He inscribed the Engrave Incantations over and over again, testing it just as many times. The arms didn't move. Still, Cliff didn't lose heart.

You think I'd give up now? I've been doing this for years without ever throwin' in the towel!

Another night would soon arrive. Cliff kept his restless heart in check and started on his hundredth Engrave Incantation.

***

Erie

EMBALMING fluids flowed through the tubes piercing Heath's skin and coursed throughout his body. Getz confirmed the fluid bag had emptied before slowly removing the cannula by applying delicate pressure to the puncture site. He then stitched the opening and exhaled a long, tired breath.

"Heath's embalmment procedure is now finished. I'm glad we were able to

treat him before the decaying process progressed."

The ashen color of Heath's face that had been growing worse with each passing day returned to a healthier white. The embalmment procedure worked.

"Thank you for even going as far as taking the day off from school to treat him… I am truly grateful to you, Professor Getz," Erie thanked him from the bottom of her heart. Getz had spent the better half of the day performing the surgical procedure on Heath.

"I haven't done much to deserve your thanks. By the way, I wanted to ask you about what you will be doing next. I assume you'll be off searching for Jair again after this?"

"Of course I will. I can't let him run amok out there."

"Wait, before you go… There's something troubling me that I would like to take care of first. You said Lovel Sinclair was apprehended by the Church, correct?"

"Yes, she was… Is there something important concerning her?" Erie asked.

"…There's something I wish to discuss with the lecturer Navarov about her," Getz said, putting his hand to his chin in contemplation.

"You want to speak with Mister Navarov? About what exactly?"

"He has served as the dormitory custodian for many years. He should have plenty of information on the students, and beyond that…"

"What's beyond that?"

"…Never mind. I will discuss it with him directly. Navarov could be hiding some vital information, depending on the situation." Getz pulled his coat over his shoulders. "I'll head to the dormitory. Look after the clinic for me."

"I'll go with you!"

"You can't!" His stern tone made Erie instinctively bite her tongue. "Head Island is crawling with Rabbis. Heath will be disposed of as an Illegal Golem if you get discovered. I'll be right back, so wait here for me like a good girl."

He left the room. Erie apprehensively stared at the door he closed behind

him.

***

Ouka

“ROCHE? He’s a good kid.”

“He’s a hard worker and courteous.”

“He was always practicin’ his Engrave Incantations and the like.”

“He didn’t have that corrupted look in his eye like most of the street kids ‘round here.”

“I haven’t seen ‘im around lately. Maybe he found a better life for ‘imself?”

Ouka traveled around Chest Island inquiring about Roche, and only heard good things about the boy. Walking all over the place paid off, in that he had gathered a decent amount of information by nightfall. That would be the case, at least, if the man calling himself Jair truly was the same person as Cliff’s master, Roche.

Ouka read off the notes he had taken up until that point. “Street child Roche is in his late-teens, last name unknown. He settled in Shoulder Coast Station a few years back. He’s highly skilled in creating Golems and he worked part-time at Flank Beach Market’s Akizu Company, huh?”

Ouka paid a visit to Flank Beach Market after gathering that much information. He stood in front of the barracks belonging to Akizu Company and knocked on the solid door. It didn’t open until after a long silence.

A clearly exhausted man appeared from inside the barracks. He was likely the shop owner. “Oh…sorry, I’ve just closed up shop for the day.”

Ouka tried cutting straight to the point. “I’m not a customer. I’m Ouka Baraki; I run a factory on Heartbreak Hill. I wanted to ask you about something.”

“…What is it?”

“It’s about the boy Roche, who used to work here.” The owner’s puffy eyelids flew open. Ouka went on, “I’ve heard no one has seen Roche around lately. Do you know where he is?”

“Beats me. I wouldn’t know. He was the kind o’ kid who didn’t talk ‘bout himself much,” the owner answered him in an unclear, doddering tone. A difficult type to obtain information from.

“Is that so? But you know…there’s a high chance he’s involved in a major crime. I’m going around gathering information on him because his crimes can’t be overlooked.”

“What crime?”

“I’m acting on behalf of the Church. You might be in for world of trouble if you don’t cooperate with me. We wouldn’t want that now, would we?”

The owner’s eyes instantly narrowed, flashing Ouka a sharp, keen glare. “…I was wonderin’ where I’ve seen yer face before, and then it hit me. Yer the mine’s Illegal Golem Artificer, ain’t ya? That’d put us in the same boat, but the look in yer eyes ain’t like ours.” His tone had changed.

Ouka glared back at him despite himself. The corners of the owner’s lips curled up. “There ya go. Those are the eyes. Ya’ve got the eyes of a bloody Rabbi.”

The gig was up. The man had figured him out, but he couldn’t back down now.

“Yeah, I do. I’m a former Rabbi.”

“I wonder why a former Rabbi such as yerself is digging into Roche.”

“‘Cause he’s wandering the length of this island with somethin’ dangerous. Somethin’ dangerous enough to turn the whole archipelago on its head.”

“He’s got something dangerous? Ya shouldn’t lie through yer teeth. He’s not that kinda kid.”

“Yeah, I agree.”

The shop owner gaped at him. “…What’s that supposed to mean?”

“The more I hear about *Roche* in my investigation, the more he sounds like the complete opposite of who I’m searchin’ for. That’s why I want to know who Roche is for sure, so that I don’t make a mistake,” Ouka told him, his tone serious, earnest. He bowed his head to the speechless owner, knowing that it

was now or never. “Please. Tell me everything you know ‘bout your version of Roche.”

The owner contemplated his request for a long while before he finally revealed Roche’s history. “…He came to this town about eight years ago. He would’ve been around seven or eight at the time. But he didn’t tell nobody where he came from, or who his parents were. Not like anybody cared though.”

“How did you meet him?”

“He’s the one who came to me, askin’ if he could work part-time at my shop. I would’ve normally never hired a kid, but he surprised me by sayin’ he could use Remote Engrave Incantation at his age.”

“*Remote Engrave Incantation?!* I-I can’t even use that! Sounds like he was really something, right from the get-go.”

“Yeah. So he started working ‘bout three times a week at this shop. His Engrave Incantations really added value to my merchandise and he worked hard, so it was great for me.”

“What happened after that?”

“He spent the entire time creatin’ Golems for practice. Seemed like he wanted to enroll in Head Island’s academy. He ended up taking the exam to become a special scholarship student, and passed it by some miracle or another.”

“He enrolled in St. Rollins Academy? You sure about that?”

“Yeah. A kid from this neighborhood gettin’ admitted to that fancy-pants academy as a scholarship student is nothing short of a miracle. He should’ve left Chest Island last spring for the Academy’s dorms.”

Ouka clenched his hands into fists. The pieces of the puzzle he had failed to see—what connected Roche to Jair, and the two of them to Lovel and the other kids—all fell into place. The dorm was the clue that connected Roche, who seemed unrelated, to the overall picture.

“The dorms! That’s it! Thanks, I got the information I needed.”

“I only helped ya out because ya don’t seem like a horrible person for a

former Rabbi scumbag. Please lend Roche a hand."

"I will," Ouka agreed, and left Akizu Company.

He had decided on his next location already. The Academy's dorms were the one node on the disconnected diagram of clues that linked Roche, Erie, and Lovel to each other. He ordered Dram to gallop there at once, but his partner suddenly stopped on the way.

"Huh? What's wrong, Dram?" Ouka said, only to realize the answer after he asked. Dram's Restrictor was "can't move for more than two hours a day." He was reaching his time limit for the day.

The always valiant Dram rubbed his face with his paw like a sleep deprived cat. He had about ten minutes of activity left in him at most.

"I've had you run me all over the place since morning today, huh, buddy… Head Island isn't far from here. I'll just walk."

Ouka wanted to save his last ten minutes for any unexpected throw downs. He ordered Dram to lie in wait on the side of the road, and walked the rest of the way to Head Island.

***

Kiriko

TWENTY-FOUR hours had passed since Kiriko began questioning Lovel inside the Torah Church's Interrogation Room. Only time passed, without yielding any significant information on Lovel's objective or the whereabouts of her cube.

"Just spill it already!" Kiriko spat, burning Lovel with a seething glare. "*Where* did you get ahold of that cube and *where* did you hide it?"

"LIKE I SAID, I stole it from Jair and lost it after that! Just believe what I'm saying already!" Lovel argued back.

"Do you think what you are saying is *believable*? Everything you've uttered about this 'Jair' and some 'mastermind' sounds like convenient lies for framing someone else."

Even supposing Kiriko believed her, for argument's sake, Lovel was still

keeping her lips sealed about her relationship with Jair. Kiriko's hunch that Lovel was hiding something was steadily solidifying into an unshakeable conviction.

Even if she's lying, it doesn't hurt to consider Jair may not be the original distributor of the cubes. It's plausible he obtained it from another person, and that other person recovered the stolen cubes.

Kiriko pondered the possibility further. It was mere speculation at this point, but she *did* have a good guess of who would be capable of both things. Various questions surrounding the cubes would be answered if *he* was involved.

Yes, he'd be capable of doing this! That depraved and corrupt man would—

An abrupt knock on the door interrupted her thoughts. Kiriko looked over her shoulder as the interrogation room door opened and Spinoza stuck his head in.

"Can you spare a moment, Kiriko? The elders have summoned you."

Kiriko's expression soured. "Is it time for the deliberation? …Why must it come at such an inconvenient time?"

"It unfortunately always does. Save the fun girl talk for later and join me in attending the depressing party."

Kiriko nodded reluctantly and departed the interrogation room with Spinoza. They climbed the stairs and arrived at the second-story conference room.

"Please excuse us," she said before entering the room where the elders who ran the local Torah Church sat on six chairs in front of the panoramic window.

Kiriko and Spinoza sat down on the isolated chairs in the center of the room.

"You're both late," one of the elders remarked. "Let's commence the deliberation meeting."

The six elders fixed their dull, somber gazes on them. Kiriko and Spinoza gave visible nods and the first elder proceeded with the meeting.

"We wish to discuss the young girl you are currently questioning along with the sudden influx of Sehem-hamphorasch throughout the archipelago. A day has passed since you began your investigation. I presume you have obtained something of note?"

“We are currently in the process of diligently questioning the girl,” Kiriko answered in an even tone. “As for the cubes, the forty-seven members of the Civil Obedience Order are putting their full effort into the investigation. I guarantee we will have results for you in the near future—”

“Such an ambiguous report is unacceptable, Torah Chief Kiriko Strife,” the elder sitting on the far right interrupted. “The fact that someone is still digging into Sephiroth after four years have passed indicates that we are not simply dealing with a mere street rat. You do comprehend this, do you not?”

“That is my intention.”

“Intentions aren’t good enough. You should be more than aware of how vital that classified secret is to our Church and the military, as a primary member of the development team.”

Unsettling waves of apprehension crashed against Kiriko’s chest at the mention of the *military*.

Another elder continued the questioning. “It’ll be too late for us once the mainland’s military authorities catch wind of this incident. The military has continually cut into our funding ever since the accident four years ago. Should we pile on any further failures, regaining their trust will become a hopeless endeavor—”

“Why don’t you just get rid of that monster then?”

Tension shot through the room the moment the words left Kiriko’s mouth.

“Watch your tongue, Kiriko!” Spinoza reproved.

The elders’ expressions soured, and they each brought their grievances forward.

“Get rid of it? Such foolishness… Have you forgotten *just why this archipelago exists*?”

“Why do you think we built the Church out on this remote island?”

“All of it is for Sephiroth. Or do you think otherwise, *hm*?”

That was certainly what they had taught her. But the history, the teachings, didn’t matter now.

“I hope you haven’t forgotten how many lives were sacrificed for Sephiroth,” Kiriko coolly pointed out, leveling the elders with a hard glare.

“Are you referring to the victims of that accident? They became noble martyrs for the cause. Such misfortune is God’s will.”

“God’s will…? Are you saying the death of Alita and the others is *God’s will*?!” Kiriko’s emotions were about to burst. She desperately fought to restrain them, but failed. “What heretical view do you elders hold of the Church’s doctrines?! You trifle with sophistry, claim your self-righteousness as the will of God, and misappropriate the Torah, which we should strictly adhere to!”

“Mind your tongue, Torah Chief Strife!” an elder’s voice slapped down Kiriko’s angry outburst. “Those of you who were expelled from the Research and Development Bureau have nowhere else to go. We won’t hesitate to bring you before the Small Sanhedrin, if you continue to insult the Church. Depending on the verdict—”

“You will eliminate her?”

Kiriko heard a disappointed baritone voice beside her. Startled, she glanced at Spinoza, who finished his accusation with a grimace. “…Just like with former Torah Lord Grinzam.”

The room froze with an even thicker tension the instant that name was brought up.

“Do not mention that traitor’s name, Torah Lord. You’ll stain your reputation too,” one of the elder’s quietly rebuked.

“……”

“Setting aside our differences for the time being, we want you to carefully consider the gravity of this matter and handle it accordingly. That is all for today. Return to the investigation.”

Kiriko and Spinoza stood and withdrew from the conference room.

Spinoza cast a sidelong glance at Kiriko as they walked the halls back to the interrogation room. “For heaven’s sake, Kiriko, try not to have another outburst.”

“I’m sorry…”

“You guys have caused me plenty of problems since forever ago. Let me relax for a bit, will ya?” Contrary to his words, Spinoza had a pleased smile on his face.

Kiriko knew Spinoza didn’t mean anything special by saying “you guys.” It was just an old habit he hadn’t kicked. It just went to show how often the three of them had been together—Kiriko, Ouka, and Alita, that is.

Perhaps there would have been another option available to them had they known the Church’s true colors back then.

“…I can’t believe the name ‘Traitor Grinzam’ is still a taboo for the elders to this day,” Kiriko spat, picturing the elders’ horrified faces.

“Of course it is. Grinzam’s revolt was a traumatic experience for those elders.”

“You would know, I suppose, since you were acquainted with former Torah Lord Grinzam.”

Kiriko had never met Grinzam, but Spinoza should have, since he worked for the Church during Grinzam’s time.

“That was a pretty long time ago,” Spinoza affirmed. “You guys joined the Church just after he left, but I’m sure he would’ve taught you many things, had you met.”

“What was former Torah Lord Grinzam like?”

“He’s spoken of like the Devil now, but he was a good man… You know, this is a good opportunity for me to tell you an old story.” Spinoza closed his eyes in nostalgia and began retelling the past. “Some ten-odd years ago, when I was still a novice Torah Officer, a prostitute from Chest Island came to the back of our Torah Church to leave her child there. She didn’t know who fathered the babe.”

Torah Church doctrine didn’t allow for abortions. Illegitimate children and other street children crowded Chest Island due to that policy. The lack of aid for single mothers or orphans was just one of the archipelago’s many problems.

“I’ve heard of such cases happening occasionally in the past… What happened

with the child?”

“Grinzam happened to see her by chance. He stopped her. The prostitute refused to listen at first, saying, ‘When I imagine how this child will have to struggle to live in Chest Island’s slummiest of slums, I can only think it’d be far better if I left her here and disappeared.’ But she changed her mind after hearing about Grinzam’s upbringing.”

“His upbringing?”

“He had been abandoned behind this church building too. He was raised by the Church.”

“He was? I never knew that.”

“Raised and trained by the Church since birth, he was as genuine a Rabbi as one can be. Though, it wasn’t words of praise for the Church he had for the prostitute, but a warning. He told her, ‘I too was taken in by the Church, like one would a stray animal. They forced me to devote my entire life to researching some suspicious cubes. What I’ve lived is far from what I would call a life. But that child of yours should be able to choose their own path. Simply being the parent doesn’t give you the right to decide for the child.’”

“Interesting… So he was a man of wise words,” Kiriko approved. What he had told her were strict, yet tender words of advice. It was hard to imagine a Rabbi advising the same thing in the present state of the Church, which charged money for confessions and intoxicated the people with warped sermons.

“He was. The prostitute felt encouraged and made the hard decision to raise the child herself. She quit being a prostitute and escaped a life of misery and neglect with Grinzam’s support. She earnestly worked in the mines, and both mother and child lived happily ever after… That’s my story for you today. What did you think? Heartwarming, isn’t it?” Spinoza grinned. Kiriko smiled back at him and felt her heart sink.

“…Torah Lord, I deeply believe this Church has been growing more corrupt each passing year. The current elders care for nothing aside from regaining the military’s trust and funding. There’s no longer a scrap of dignity in them as the *People of Love* the Holy Scriptures refer to!”

Spinoza stopped walking. He turned an indecipherable gaze on her and quietly reminded, “But you know, Kiriko, we’re still Rabbi regardless. Even if the ones we obey aren’t. So, live by what you know is just. That’s the only thing you can do for our deceased brothers and sisters.”

Kiriko mulled over those words.

What I can do for Alita and the others is making sure that monster never sees the light of day again. That’s my mission in life.

“Torah Lord!” someone called out just as Kiriko steeled her resolve. Spinoza and Kiriko turned around. A young Rabbi ran toward them from the other end of the hallway.

“What’s wrong?” Spinoza asked.

“We have received the autopsy report on the corpse that washed ashore last night,” the Rabbi reported, handing Spinoza the paperwork. Spinoza’s whole demeanor changed once he read it over.

“*Is this for real*…?! Hey, Kiriko, it looks like we’ve had the wrong idea all along.”

Spinoza passed Kiriko the report. Reading it made her frown too. The report contained vital information regarding the incident that had occurred at the Academy three days ago. The autopsy results threw one of their approaches to the investigation for a loop.

“What do you want to do about this?” Spinoza whispered to the speechless Kiriko. “Would you prefer to let someone else take care of it, so you can finish questioning Lovel first?”

“…No. Judging by what we saw at the scene of the crime, the perpetrator is dangerous beyond initial expectations. I will go.”

“Wasn’t your Golem destroyed?”

“I will use my trump card. Give me permission to use *Legion*.”

“Very well,” Spinoza permitted with a heavy heart. “You may use Legion.”

Kiriko straightened her vestments and walked away.

***

Erie

CLOAKED in the darkness of night, Head Island was illuminated only by gas lamps. Getz strode through the still town, allowing his footsteps to echo. Erie and Heath stealthily followed close behind him.

…He warned me about the number of Rabbis on Head Island, but…

Erie had a hunch that Getz didn't want her going with him for another reason. Concerned by what that might be, she tailed him.

The leg that had pained her so much yesterday had recovered enough to let her walk normally. Her heart ached knowing she was spying on the man who had treated her wounds. But she had to confirm his true intentions because he was the first person she felt she could trust.

The long walk eventually led them to the front of the Academy's dormitory. Erie saw Navarov sweeping the stone pavement beyond the gate. She stopped following Getz and took cover behind a gas lamp to spy on them.

"Mister Navarov." She heard Getz speak to him. Navarov lifted his head and his eyes widened.

"Oh, why if it isn't Professor Getz. What in the world happened to make even you take a day off from school?"

"A bunch of things came up. Enough about me. I have a question for you."

"What might that be?"

"I'm sure you know. It's about *that*."

Navarov's expression darkened. He considered the matter for a moment before answering. "…We don't want to stay and chat in the cold. Join me in the caretaker's room for a talk."

Getz nodded and they went inside the dormitory together.

What are they talking about? Curiosity urged Erie forward, but she hesitated despite it. *I'll sneak into the dorm and try to listen in on their conversation.*

She suddenly heard several pairs of feet approaching while she tried to work

out a plan. She looked over her shoulder to see three people coming out of the darkness. Even in the dark, she could tell they were wearing vestments.

It's the Rabbis! Getz's warning had come true. Flustered, Erie hurried closer to the far end of the road. *…Please, pass by.*

Heath was hard to tell apart from a normal person with his hat on. The Rabbis wouldn't address them as long as they weren't conspicuous. Or so Erie had hoped, but the footsteps came to a stop right beside her.

No way! Her heart lurched. One of the Rabbis, a Rabba wearing glasses, scrutinized their faces.

"Heath Coleman and Erie Reyer, I presume?"

How does she know my name?

"Wh-Who might you be?" Erie asked nervously, failing to conceal her apprehension.

"Torah Chief Kiriko Strife. We have been looking for the both of you." Kiriko took a deep breath before launching into a description akin to a news report. "Three days ago large amounts of blood were discovered at the old school building of St. Rollins Academy, the school you attend. Two students and one security guard have vanished since that night. Our initial thought was that the security guard kidnapped the students and disappeared."

Erie couldn't understand what she was getting at and had no adequate response.

"But a man's corpse washed up on Head Island's shores last night," Kiriko went on. "The face was crushed, but the autopsy proved, beyond a doubt, that he was the missing security guard."

Kiriko's voice grew harder and colder the longer she spoke. Anxiety unfurled in Erie's gut.

"This flipped our original theory on its head… The person we believed was the culprit turned out to be the victim. What position do you suppose that renders the people we believed were the victims, then?"

Two Rabbis sidled closer to Erie.

“Heath Coleman and Erie Reyer, we ask that you come with us as suspects in the security guard’s murder,” Kiriko announced, the gravity of the charge weighing heavier with every word.

“How can that be?! Don’t jump to conclusions!” Erie shouted defensively. “The security guard had already been killed by the time I saw him! Jair did it!”

“You haven’t been confirmed as the culprits yet. We just want to hear your account of the incident in detail.”

“Never!”

Erie normally wouldn’t have minded assisting with an investigation. But right now she had Heath to worry about. It’d be all over if they ran a body search on him!

She tried to flee with Heath to prevent that from happening. But Kiriko pulled a gun from her holster a second faster and aimed it at Erie.

“A g-gun?”

“It’s called the *Umbilical Cord Cutter.* Whoever is shot by this gun will enter suspended animation and won’t awaken from slumber for at least a year, if not longer.”

“…!”

“You’re a smart girl, you should understand what this entails. I would hate to shoot you, since I wouldn’t be able to obtain your testimony for the records, but any resistance will be met with force.” Kiriko signaled the other Rabbis to act. They closed in on Erie and Heath.

“You’re coming with us, punk!” one of the Rabbis yanked on Heath’s arm, but he didn’t even flinch. “What’s the deal with this twerp…?”

Heath shook off the suspicious Rabbi’s hand. But that simple movement sent the man flying.

“Whoa!”

“Guh!”

The Rabbi he blew away crashed on top of the other Rabbi, and they

collapsed in a heap on the ground. Kiriko gasped.

“What was that?! Don’t tell me this boy is a—” Kiriko rushed at Heath and swept her arm out to knock off his hat. The letters spelling “emeth” glowed on his forehead. “Fresh Golem!” She kicked Heath away and scowled at Erie. “Erie Reyer! Are you his Tamer?!”

“Don’t you dare use that term on me!”

“I assumed you had *some* form of Golem on you, with the state of damage done to the school building, but did you *kill* them? Did you kill the security guard and Heath Coleman?!”

“I didn’t!”

“You can’t talk your way out of this, no matter what you say now! Only a select few members of the Torah Church are permitted to use banned Golems.” Kiriko glanced over her shoulder and shouted, “Come, *LEGION*!”

Something came swaying from the depths of darkness at her command.

A misshapen silhouette emerged as it stepped closer to the yellow light of the gas lamps. The *something* stood just under two meters tall and wore a cloth. It was probably a Golem, but it moved in a bizarre, jerky way as it sluggishly tottered toward Erie and Heath. Its unnatural, aberrant quality set off warning sirens in Erie’s head.

She didn’t need to know what it was to know it spelled danger. Legion—or whatever it was called—was already before her.

“Heathy! Defeat him!” Erie shouted. Heath drew the knife from its scabbard and slashed at Legion.

It only took one hit.

The blade sliced through the cloth covering Legion’s body and ripped whatever was inside to shreds. Legion splintered into pieces.

Isn’t that too fragile?!

“1st, 2nd, restrain his legs!” Kiriko shouted, just as Erie became suspicious. Two of the fragments on the ground moved swiftly, grabbing hold of Heath’s

legs. “3rd, 4th, put pressure on his elbow joints!”

Another set of splintered pieces jumped into the air and twisted Heath’s arms behind his back.

“5th, 6th, subdue him!”

The final two fragments yanked Heath to the ground and brought their sharp claws to the “e” on his forehead. The six splintered fragments—or rather, the tiny, human-shaped Golem pieces—had utterly overpowered Heath in a mere few seconds.

“How…?” Erie muttered, blankly staring at the tiny army pinning Heath down.

Legion—that was the name of the body composed of six Bronze Golems. Each individual Golem was no taller than eighty centimeters. But every Golem’s fingers were armed with sharp, long claws, which they dug into Heath’s limbs.

I never knew a Golem like this existed! I can’t believe there’s someone other than Jair who can control six Golems at the same time!

“This is my trump card, Erie Reyer,” Kiriko stated in a frosty tone.

Erie promptly took the knife from Heath’s hand and held it out in front of her. “P-Please let us go…! We can’t get caught now!”

Kiriko silently shook her head and pulled back the tranquilizer gun’s hammer. “Come with us peacefully. I will hear everything you have to say.” She precisely trained the muzzle on Erie’s heart.

Erie couldn’t make Heath move. It was plain as day that Legion’s many claws would rip his body to pieces if he did.

The Rabbis he had knocked over clamored to their feet and resumed closing in on them. Erie gripped the knife with trembling hands.

***

Ouka

***WHAT** in the blue blazes is going on here?*

Ouka watched Kiriko point the gun at Erie from his hiding place behind a

building a short distance away.

I came to the dorms thinkin' I'd finally gotten my hands on a good lead and what do I find? Some insane chick fight. Neither Erie nor I got any luck, he thought as he listened to them talk.

Kiriko didn't seem to believe what Erie had blurted about Jair. But Jair unquestionably existed, and he was most likely the person who murdered the security guard. However, was that worth mentioning to Kiriko?

Ouka weighed the pros and cons. Erie should have information on Jair that he didn't. Ouka might just grab hold of an even better lead if he made her indebted to him.

Well, saving her can just be an extension of my job. Erie's arrest wasn't part of the Church's request.

Ouka left his hiding spot and raised his voice in greeting. "Yo, Kiriko."

His unexpected voice startled not only Kiriko into turning around, but also Erie and the other Rabbis.

Kiriko scowled when she saw him. "…Ouka? Why are you here?"

"Put down your gun. That girl is innocent," Ouka said, walking toward them.

The Rabbis looked skeptical.

"Why are you standing up for me?" Erie asked, but he didn't bother with the annoying details. Kiriko glared at Ouka like he was the bane of her existence.

"You suddenly appear and expect me to believe you?"

"What the girl said is true. An even more heinous person is behind these incidents. She's just a victim of circumstance. Let her go free."

Kiriko let out the loudest sigh at him. "You speak as if you have authority here… You're not even aware of the precarious position you're in."

"Come again?"

"Do you remember what happened four years ago?"

Ouka was taken off guard by the question she suddenly thrust at him. "Four years ago? What are you going on about all of a sudden?"

“I’m *talking* about Sehem-hamphorasch. The four original cubes and thirty-seven imitation cubes were stolen from the Church right around the time you quit, yes?”

Ouka groaned. “…Yes, they were. What about it?”

“We continued to search for them, but couldn’t find a single trace. And now, four years later, several people have appeared with the cubes… Moreover, you always show up wherever they are. Don’t you find that suspicious?”

Ouka suddenly had bad feeling about where this was going. “Hold your horses, Kiriko. What are you trying to say here?” he demanded hesitantly.

“The source of the cube leak. *You* illegally sold the cubes on the black market, didn’t you?”

“I-Illegally sold the cubes?! On the black market?!” Ouka’s voice cracked.

“I bet you’re going around collecting the cubes now that you’ve grown scared of your crimes coming to light,” Kiriko intoned with disgust. “This theory perfectly explains why Lovel’s cube went missing.”

“Are you *an idiot*?! You’ve gotta be an idiot! That’s not just a false accusation anymore!”

“Then explain to me how you were able to make a ridiculously expensive Amber Golem after quitting the Rabbis, when you were left with nothing but reduced wages? You couldn’t have done it without illegally selling the cubes on the black market.”

“Leave me be! I put myself in some serious debt for that!”

“What reason would be worth putting yourself in debt? Be more creative with your excuses at least.” Kiriko shot Ouka a repulsed look as though she was wholeheartedly disappointed in him, and then she addressed the Rabbis waiting for orders behind her. “Leave Erie Reyer to me and apprehend Ouka Baraki instead.”

The Rabbis charged Ouka and seized his arms.

This is bad. REALLY, REALLY BAD! I never planned for defendin’ my own innocence when I stepped in to prove Erie’s! Just trying to defend myself with

words ain't gonna work in this situation. Then—there's just one path left to me. I really don't wanna do this, either.

Ouka silently prayed very strongly for a *certain something*.

Hoping his prayers would come true in time, he tried to stall by distracting Kiriko. "You disappoint me, Kiriko… It looks like your eyes have clouded over these past four years. You've really lost the ability to discern the truth." He flashed a provocative grin as the Rabbis restrained his arms.

Kiriko scrunched up her face with skepticism. "What are you going on about?"

"You can't figure it out? Think about it. I quit being a Rabbi *four* years ago. The cubes were stolen at the same time. And now, several of them suddenly appear? What truth becomes apparent when you put all those factors together?" He randomly babbled about anything relevant that could potentially lead her on.

She looked doubtful. "I'm having a hard time comprehending what you are trying to say."

"You've always been like that. You've got the tendency to avert your eyes from whatever ya don't understand. Ain't that right, sweet lil' Kiriko?"

"…Please don't address me with such impropriety. This is the second time," Kiriko protested, irritation coating her voice.

I did it! She took the bait!

"No, lemme tell you! We once joined the church with the same hopes and dreams. But now, I'm an Illegal Golem Artificer on Chest Island, and you're a Head Island Rabbi. How did we end up so far apart, when we were walking the same path?"

"Because you…you ran away!"

He had brought up the past for no good reason. It was only a matter of time before she caught on. At any rate, he had no choice but to ramble on at machine gun speed.

"I left because I couldn't believe in the justice the elders preached about anymore. Do you honestly believe the Church is being righteous? The Church is

profiting loads and loads off Golem Manufacturing Rights. But there are people who don't got the money to pay those outrageous fees. Those are the real people with a desperate need for Golems too."

"Whether they need them or not, people who don't follow the laws don't deserve to use Golems!"

"All they have to do is follow the law? Then they can have Golems for free? The Church Elders have joined arms with the military, happily tryin' to weaponize Golems. They're selling death, with funeral services, in a neatly wrapped package. They get the best of both worlds. Like they say, the Church needs no capital and has no expenses, so their income's pure profit."

"I know…I know all about that."

"Then why haven't *you* quit the Church?! Even the prettiest flower rots and withers away atop a giant pile of bullshit!"

Crap! My real thoughts and feelings are spillin' into my plan to distract her with a random conversation!

The gun started shaking in Kiriko's hand.

But shit, I've been dying to say this to her. Been holdin' it in for four long years. Once Ouka became aware of his feelings, he couldn't stop.

"Four years ago, I realized that something was up with the Church's system. The poor of Chest Island are being worked to death their entire lives by Head Island's wealthy—almost like *they're* the Golems."

"……"

"I wanted to do whatever I could to help the suffering and poor out, no matter how small. There's people who can't be saved by preaching 'bout pretty things from your pretty castle! So if I don't get down in the mud with them, *who the hell will*?!"

He had gone too far with that. The anger quickly slipped from Kiriko's face. "… Ouka, you don't have the right to say that."

When he saw her ice-cold expression, Ouka realized his mistake. His attempt to buy time had just cut his time in half! Now he could only pray things worked

out before it was too late!

“Rather than I, you’re the one who reeks of pretty idealism that amounts to nothing more than lip service. There is no end in sight for Berserker Golem accidents and Illegal Golem crimes to this day. Curtailing the damage would be impossible were the Church to relinquish its control.”

“You’re wrong. That’s wrong—”

“I don’t have to listen to you. The only thing we *Rabbis* can do is apprehend those who break the law. Regardless of how much it makes the people despise us! If I don’t do it, *who will*?” she challenged in an authoritative tone.

But Ouka felt nothing but sweet relief, because he sensed a special presence behind the stone wall at his back. As luck would have it, his prayers had come true just in the nick of time. He eyed Kiriko.

“…Looks like we just can’t see eye to eye after all. Pathetic.”

“I’m *well* aware of how pathetic you are, all right. You’re a disgrace to the Torah Church!”

“Nah, you’re the pathetic one, Kiriko.” Ouka gave her a wicked smirk. “Looks like your instincts have gotten rusty. Why do ya think I’ve been rambling on and on ‘bout nothing of importance?”

“What…are you suddenly going on about?”

“What did I create again, that made you suspect me? I wonder where that might be?”

“OUKA! You bastard!” Kiriko roared in shock and swung her gun to him.

Ouka raised his voice at the same time, “COME, DRAM!”

Dram leapt over the stone wall behind Ouka and landed right in front of Kiriko and the Rabbis. Summoned remotely, Dram crashed into the scene propelled by his breakneck sprint from Chest Island.

“What?!”

Dram kicked away the startled Rabbis. Freed from restraint, Ouka hopped on top his back and spurred him into a gallop.

“OUKAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!” Kiriko’s bloodcurdling shout accompanied several gunshots. The tranquilizer bullets missed Ouka and ricocheted off Dram’s neck.

We’re good! We can do this!

Ouka had Dram swerve back for Erie at full-speed. Kiriko loaded more bullets into her gun.

“Come with me, Erie!” Ouka yelled, right beside Kiriko.

Erie jerked her head up. Surprise and hesitation came over her face.

If I let this chance slip by, I’ll likely never see Erie again. If I’m runnin’ for it, I’m taking her with me!

Dram darted in close to Erie and Ouka swept up her hand, pulling her with all his might onto Dram’s back.

“Wait! Heathy! Heathy isn’t—” Erie thrashed in his arms. He saw Kiriko aiming her gun at them out of the corner of his eye.

“He’ll be fine! We need to run now, or none of us will be fine!”

Dram bolted at lightning speed, faster than Kiriko pulled the trigger. Gunshots echoed behind them for several rounds before they stopped hearing them altogether.

Chapter 8: Into the Darkness

Ouka

"…SO? Why are you with this cute girl, Ouka?" Miles asked, looking at Erie seated next to Ouka at the bar counter.

Ouka had hidden Dram in the sea as he was nearing his time limit, and then somehow shook the Rabbis off his trail before taking refuge in PUB Nest of Love. The crowded pub was the perfect hiding place.

Erie seemed flustered and nervous, but Ouka didn't pay any mind to her. "To tell you the truth, Miles, we're wanted by the Church. Seems like this girl and I are suspects," he answered honestly.

"HUH?! What in Heaven's name did you do?!"

"It's a long story, so I'll fill you in some other time. Just to be clear, we're innocent. INNOCENT." Ouka chugged the glass of peppermint water Miles put out for him and then faced Erie. "Okay, I haven't introduced myself properly yet, have I? I'm the Golem Artificer Ouka Baraki. This here's the pub owner Miles. We're not your enemies, right now."

Erie gave Ouka a suspicious look. He went on, "How 'bout we take advantage of this good opportunity and exchange information? Seems we're after the same person—that bastard Jair."

"…What reason do you have to go after Jair?"

"I've got history with that thing. With that black cube he's using."

"You lost your mind when you saw it the day before yesterday too… What's the deal with it?"

"I was researchin' that cube at the Torah Church up until four years ago. Together with Kiriko, who you've just had the misfortune of meeting, and a man named Alita. We were conducting research under our boss, Spinoza."

“Why were you researching it?”

“We were trying to manufacture the most powerful militarized Golem possible using the cubes. It was called *Project Sephiroth*.” Referring to the unspeakable and reprehensible project by name sent the horrible memories churning within Ouka. “And we created those black cubes as a part of the overall research plan.”

Erie’s eyes slowly grew wider as she stared at Ouka like she didn’t believe him. “Did you just say what I think you did…? Aren’t those cubes irreplaceable items with only a handful in existence?”

“The *originals* are. But the black cubes Jair uses are different. They’re the imitations we created by tryin’ to copy the red cubes.”

“Imitations?”

“If memory serves me right, the Church’s only got four of the invaluable Sehem-hamphorasch. That’s far too few for conducting proper research. So, we created imitation cubes using the same mineral ore. They couldn’t even compare to the originals though.”

“How are they different?”

“Well, Jair’s Golems come to life just by burying the cube in the ground, but don’t ya think they move weirdly slow and sluggish? That’s a side effect of the imitation cube. Golems brought to life by the true Sehem-hamphorasch are much stronger and far smarter.”

Erie nodded, seriously listening to him now. Ouka thrust a finger at her nose and added, “But the true difference lies beyond those aspects. The original has a *shell*.”

“A shell? Are you talking about the red shell around Lovel’s cube?”

“Yup, a shell. The originals have a red shell exterior with the cube inside. You’re supposed to write the Restrictor into that external casing.”

That baffled Erie. “I don’t really get it…” she mumbled. “Is it that important to be able to engrave a Restrictor?”

“No ifs, ands, or buts about it; it’s necessary. We can only control the Golems

powered by the cubes through the Restrictors engraved into their shells. Otherwise, there's nothing to say, 'don't kill humans,'" Ouka answered gravely.

Erie turned over what he said in her mind before asking, "Do you mean to say that without a Restrictor in place, a Golem with a cube embedded will be the same as a Berserker Golem?"

"Bingo. That's what gives cube powered Golems the same immense strength as a Berserker Golem from the get-go. How you use them from there, though, becomes the problem."

Normal usage wouldn't have posed a problem. The Church, however, got the idea to make a *weapon* out of the cubes, which had been an impossible endeavor from the start.

"The research ended in decisive failure four years ago. They sealed away the research facility with Sephiroth's body within, and the cubes vanished into thin air. The cubes and the Golems powered by them *should* have been nothing but uncontrollable, dangerous weapons."

"But Jair mastered their use…"

Ouka gave her a firm nod. What Jair did should've been impossible. As long as the black cubes had no Restrictors in place, the Golems powered by them were guaranteed to go berserk.

"Who the bloody hell is Jair…?" Ouka muttered. "For that matter, why's he after you?"

"I don't know why. He suddenly appeared one night, three days ago."

"Then where'd you learn about Sehem-hamphorasch? Who told you?"

Erie studied Ouka's face and held her silence. She pressed her lips tightly together.

"Please tell me, Erie. The information might lead us to Jair. I understand you'd want to protect the informant, but…I just want to hear what they know, too. So please."

Erie stayed quiet for a long moment. Then she eventually came to a decision and said, "…Doctor Crank Getz told me. He has a clinic on the outskirts of Chest

Island.”

“Really? Why does a town doctor know about this stuff?”

“He told me Grinzam was an old friend of his.”

Old friends, huh? I never heard anything ‘bout that. Ouka doubted the information’s validity, but kept it from showing on his face.

“Guess I’ll go hear him out for a bit… Will you come with me, Erie?” Ouka asked as kindly as he could. Erie shook her head nonetheless.

“…I won’t go with you. I want to go rescue Heathy as soon as possible. I don’t have time to take a side trip.”

“You’re going to rescue him from the Torah Church? All alone?”

“How could I *not*?! He’ll get disposed of as an Illegal Golem if I don’t do something!”

“Take a deep breath and think things through calmly. The Church’s objective isn’t Heath’s destruction—it’s your capture. They’ll likely use him as bait to draw you out… You can pretty much count on ‘em doing nothing to him until they apprehend you.”

Erie gnawed her lower lip.

“The charges against you and me will be lifted if we can capture Jair and bring him to Kiriko. It won’t be too late to drop by the Church after we’ve done that, yeah?”

Erie cast down her eyes, appearing to mull over his proposal. She came to a conclusion and stated, “…But, if there’s even the slightest possibility of them disposing of Heathy, I have to go to him.”

“I understand how you feel… How about this? Why not remotely summon him to you? Like you saw me do with Dram.”

“I can’t. Heathy’s Restrictor is to always be by my side. Being pulled too far apart from each other counts as breaking the Restrictor.”

Ouka grimaced. All of a Golem’s functions were suspended when the Restrictor was broken, and repairing the Restrictor was the only way to

reactivate them. That explained why Erie was so desperate to return to Heath.

“Good grief… I’m sure you won’t listen if I try to stop you.”

Erie nodded and readjusted her grip on the knife she had been clenching all this time. It was the very same knife Heath used.

“That knife won’t do ya any good if you’re going to raid the Church. You’ll be caught in a flash, and that’ll be the end of that.”

“This isn’t all I have up my sleeve, obviously. I have a good plan.”

“You have a plan? What is—”

“Shh!” Miles shushed Ouka, a finger pressed to his lips. His eyes were focused outside the window.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Miles?” Ouka whispered.

“The Rabbis are here. Both of you, hide inside the counter!”

Heeding Miles’ advice, Ouka and Erie hopped over the bar counter and crouched behind it. They heard the pub door being thrown open.

“Hello! Your attention please!” a man’s voice boomed through the noisy pub. “Did a man and young girl with an Amber Golem enter this establishment?”

The voice belonged to Torah Officer Seagal. Ouka knew him as a greenhorn Rabbi with an evil-looking face and eviler personality, who had joined the Church just as Ouka quit. Going by the sound of heavy footsteps, he had brought his Golem with him.

Miles answered, “Beats me. I wouldn’t know.”

“Really now? I heard he disappeared around these parts. What do you have to say to that?”

“There are plenty of shops in the neighborhood. Maybe they’re tossing back a few glasses at another bar?”

“Most of the shops are closed.” The footsteps came closer and stopped right before the counter. “I’ll be searching your pub.”

“Have a heart! You’ll be disturbing my customers from enjoying their drink.”

“This is my job.”

“Oh? Ruining the modest time the common people have to unwind is your job? No wonder you’re hated.”

“Watch your tongue if you want to keep it! You’re just a freak tranny who disobeys God’s teachings!” Ouka heard Seagal’s angry voice fill with malice. He was always heavy-handed with everyone who wasn’t a Rabbi.

“Acting all high and mighty in holy clothes is part of God’s teachings?” Miles demurred without losing his cool. “Your Holy Scriptures or whatever sound real worthless.”

“You scumbag! Enough of this nonsense! I’ll be searching your pub, whether you like it or not!”

BANG! Ouka heard what sounded like a chair being kicked over. Startled cries rose from the drinking customers.

“I told you, he ain’t here! Quit making a mess of my shop!” Miles protested.

“*Quit*? You slum dwellers should just obediently listen to whatever we say! That’s all you’re good for anyway.” Seagal sneered mockingly.

“*Slum dwellers*…? Don’t get cocky just ‘cause you think you’ve got God’s support, Rabbi *SCUM*!” Miles’ furious shout shook the pub.

Seagal shut up like a spanked puppy. Piano music was the only sound heard in the pub after that.

Miles launched into a tirade with his throaty voice. “This is MY pub, boy! Only customers get to go wild! If ya still wanna push my patience, I’ll have this guy take you on!”

The piano music that was a constant background sound in the pub abruptly ceased. In its silence came the echoes of heavy pounding. Ouka spied on the scene from the cover of the counter. The Wood Golem who always sat in front of the piano had left his station and lumbered toward the Rabbi.

“Piano Man, throw the Rabbi Scum out, just like the trash he is!”

Piano Man lunged for Seagal at Miles’ command.

“AGH!”

Piano Man’s wide slap knocked Seagal to the floor. Seagal unsteadily pushed himself off while screaming through his bloody nose, “Y-You ingrate! Take him down, Ezekiel!”

Seagal’s Stone Golem Ezekiel threw a straight punch at Piano Man, launching him back to where he came from.

“Huh?” Seagal squeaked as if he had expected more.

“…Well, he ain’t a combat ready Golem,” Miles confessed, scratching his head.

The frightened Seagal instantly changed his tune. “You damn tranny! You’re in for a world of pain, underestimating us Rabbis!”

“Yer in for a world of pain if ya underestimate blue-collar workers!” Another voice bellowed through the pub just as Seagal threatened Miles.

Seagal quickly spun around. Customers who had been enjoying their ale—miners who were normally oppressed by the Rabbis on a daily basis—were standing in a formidable row behind Seagal, locking him in their bloodthirsty glares.

“How…?!”

Seagal was rendered speechless by their overwhelming contempt and eagerness for a fight. All of the men had taken up their pickaxes.

“I don’t give a damn what the Church minions do on Head Island,” one of the men said. “There ain’t much we can do about ya getting all huffy about the Golems either. But don’t act like a bigshot in this pub! Crawl on back to Head Island, Rabbi Scum!”

“Shut up, slum dweller!” Seagal snapped back. “Our workload never ends because you lowlifes are always breaking the rules with Illegal Golems and Golem-based crimes! I’m putting my life on the line for this shitty, dangerous job!”

“We haven’t committed any crimes!”

“You’re concealing a criminal! Bring out Ouka and the girl!”

“That ain’t something we can help ya with.”

The men gripped their pickaxes and slowly sidled up to Ezekiel.

“Hmph! You slum dwellers are just blowing hot air…!” A corner of Seagal’s lips curled up as he raised his voice in challenge. “Just try it, ACCURSED SCOUNDRELSSS!”

The men lifted their pickaxes overhead and brought them down on Ezekiel all at once.

The pub exploded in an uproar, much like a beehive after it’s been poked with a stick. Miles and the pub girls fled from the fight and took refuge behind the bar counter. Lingerie-clad women came to fill the cramped space underneath it.

Miles took a deep breath in relief. “Phew… I don’t really get what trouble you’ve gotten into, hun, but this should buy you some time. You should both run while you have the chance.”

“Hey now, will you guys be okay?” Ouka asked.

“This kinda thing happens occasionally in this line of business.”

“But, Miles…” Erie trailed off anxiously.

The pub girls comforted her.

“Don’t worry, we’re good. Everybody is stressed to the max. This makes for a perfect chance to let it all out.”

“Fighting is, like, totally a form of communication for the miners.”

“Besides, I’m sure they wanted to do something to impress you, little lady. Men always fight when they see a pretty girl. They’re so stupid!”

The women chuckled, and Erie smiled with them. Miles winked at her. “Time for you to hurry along, sweetheart. Isn’t there somewhere you have to go?”

Erie gave a firm nod then said timidly, “Um, thank you, Miles… And I’m sorry about destroying your pub last time I was here.”

“You don’t have to worry your sweet little heart about that! It’s about as common as a nonpaying drunk!” Miles stroked the top of her head with a kind hand. Then he opened the door hidden behind the counter. “Okay, make your

escape from here. You hurry along too, Ouka.”

Ouka and Erie nodded to each other and darted for the door. Just before it, Ouka stopped to glance back at the pub’s main room, which had devolved into a melting pot of chaos.

“URYAAAAAAH!”

“TAKE THIS, RABBI SCUM!”

“COME AND GET ME, SLUM DWELLERS!”

Brawler shouts were tossed around the room as Ezekiel took on the miners. For some reason, Seagal and the miners seemed to be enjoying themselves. Confirming that the uproar was more of a brawl than a bloodbath eased Ouka’s conscience. He pocketed a bottle of peppermint water and said, “Add the bill to my tab, Miles.”

“Make sure to pay next time you come. You too, Erie dear.”

Ouka and Erie agreed and raced outside the pub.

The alley behind the pub was extremely dark. Ouka shut the door behind him and walked quietly through it. Then he suddenly spotted someone standing at the end of the alleyway.

It’s a Rabbi! He could tell from the person’s silhouette that they wore a vestment.

“RUN, ERIE!”

Ouka sprinted forward with his fist ready. The Rabbi blocked his path.

I’ll just punch him off his feet!

Ouka threw the punch with his entire weight, and the momentum of his run for an extra boost. But the Rabbi caught the blow with his left hand.

“What?!”

His opponent aimed an inside knifehand strike at his neck. Ouka narrowly sidestepped it, feeling the rush of cold air blow past him, and dove to tackle the Rabbi.

As he tumbled to the ground, Ouka spotted Erie out of the corner of his eye.

She was rooted to the ground, watching him. “GO!” he shouted.

“I’m sorry! Thank you!” she shouted back, his words pushing her into a decision. She ran away from the alley, leaving Ouka alone with the Rabbi. Ouka stared after her, worrying.

If she’s set on going to the Torah Church, I have no right to stop her. I heard what I needed, and I have my own objectives to accomplish. I’ll start by beatin’ this Rabbi then head to the town doctor’s clinic—

The Rabbi he had knocked over moved while he was still planning his next move. Quickly slipping from Ouka’s restraints, the Rabbi grabbed his collar and yanked him off the ground by it.

“You idiotic moron….!” The Rabbi—his former boss Spinoza—looked exasperated with him. Realizing who he was, Ouka responded with a wry smile, which got Spinoza to release his collar. “I heard the whole thing from Kiriko. Even if we take her story about you selling the cubes on the black market with a grain of salt… Not even I will be able to protect you from aiding and abetting Erie’s escape.”

“I don’t care. I’ll take action my own way from here. Things have gotten to the point where I have no choice but to track down Jair, anyway.”

Spinoza snorted before his expression abruptly turned grim. “Hey, Ouka, why are you getting so involved in this? Don’t make it personal. This isn’t what I hired you to do.”

“……”

“Back down from this case. I’ll track down this Jair guy for you. I’ll settle this case in your stead while you eat some nasty food and pass the time relaxing in a jail cell for a bit.”

“Spinoza, I’m doing this to help me make sense of things. I’m moving for myself.”

“I’m sure you’re also doing it for Kiriko.” Ouka gulped. Spinoza cracked a wicked grin. “Ouka, Kiriko still only has eyes for Alita. You stand no chance against someone who’s already dead.”

“Mind your own business.” A bitter smile tugged at his lips, because Spinoza had hit the nail on the head. Ouka was annoyed with himself, but he clasped hands with his former boss. “Sorry, Spinoza. Lemme do what I need to do for a little longer.”

“You think I can do that? I can’t make any more excuses for you the next time you get captured by Kiriko or anybody else. You’d better just let me apprehend you here.”

“I see. Then I guess we’ve got no other choice than to go at it…” Ouka slowly shifted into a fighter’s stance.

Spinoza readied his legs and arms in his own stance as he quipped, “Have you forgotten that you’ve never once beat me in Krav Maga exercises, *former* Torah Officer Ouka Baraki?”

“I wouldn’t talk with how long you’ve been away from a real fight. Haven’t ya been enjoyin’ what’s practically retirement inside the Church with that creepy Golem of yours?”

“Let’s test that theory… Come at me, Ouka!”

Spinoza’s words were the trigger to commence the battle. Ouka fired left jabs, one after the other, at Spinoza’s face. Spinoza deflected them with his right hand.

He’s so full of himself! How do you like this, then?!

Ouka unfurled his thrust out fist right in front of Spinoza’s eyes. It was a trick to distract him—just as Spinoza knocked his arm out of the way, Ouka unleashed a body blow with all his strength.

“Tch!” Spinoza guarded against it by bringing up both arms. Ouka followed up by launching a sharp high kick to the gap now created in Spinoza’s defense.

It connected! A disturbing crack came just as he thought to rejoice.

Spinoza had blocked Ouka’s kick with his elbow. Sharp pain rushed through Ouka’s shin from colliding full-on with the hardest spot on the human body.

“AGH…!”

Spinoza slipped in close as Ouka groaned in pain. There was no time for him

to brace himself by tightening his abdominal muscles. Driven with the force of a short rush forward, an intense elbow strike hit Ouka right in the solar plexus. The impact penetrated through to his back, knocking the wind out of him. Without pausing, Spinoza mustered his strength, pulled Ouka onto his shoulder, and while letting out a war cry, threw Ouka.

“GAHA!” Ouka crashed on the ground and tumbled.

Spinoza clapped his hands as if to dust the dirt off them and declared, “You haven’t changed a bit since then.”

What kinda middle-aged man is this? Ouka was half in shock but still flashed a confident grin anyway.

“…It’s true that I haven’t changed. But you’ve become weak!”

Spinoza eyed him suspiciously. Ouka pulled the peppermint water bottle out of his pocket and chucked it at him.

Spinoza intercepted the bottle with his fist, and the peppermint water inside spurted all over his face. “AGH!”

Ouka took advantage of Spinoza’s momentary blindness to swiftly jump to his feet and escape.

“Wait, damn it! OUKA! *Who’s* weaker?! And don’t run away!”

“It’s high time you accept you’re gettin' weaker if you fall for my tricks!” Ouka jeered pathetically and fled without glancing back. Spinoza’s angry shouts grew quieter behind him.

Shit. That does it. Things have gotten super complicated. I’m going to have to get serious now. But even if things go south, I have to get involved. I’ve wanted to for a long time now.

Ouka ran into the hustle and bustle of the town and made up his mind. He resolved to come to grips with the truth.

***

Kiriko

KIRIKO locked the captured Heath up in the designated location and returned

to the interrogation room.

“Tch, you came back?” Lovel pulled a face when she saw Kiriko. She was lazily kicking back on her chair. “Where’d you go that was so important you had to leave me hanging?”

“Work related to another case. Although this case doesn’t seem *un*related to you,” Kiriko answered with a sigh. “An academy schoolgirl suspected of murder is at large. She denies the charges… She says the real culprit is a man called Jair.”

“Wait, are you talking about Erie?” Lovel asked.

Kiriko nodded. “It’s strange. Several completely unrelated cases are beginning to intersect and bleed into each other. I’m starting to get the sense that your nonsense is closer to the truth than I give you credit for…” She leaned across the table until she was nose to nose with Lovel. Glaring fiercely at the girl, she said, “If this Jair you children speak of is real… Who in the world is he?”

“I honestly don’t know much about him. All I know is that he’s trying to Tame Sephiroth and use it to destroy this Church.”

“Pretending that’s true, for argument’s sake… We would have to start looking into him in earnest.”

“Why doesn’t the Church just get rid of Sephiroth? Wouldn’t that solve the problem?”

Kiriko frowned. Staring back into Lovel’s eyes, she growled, “…Get rid of him? You think it’s that easy?”

“Sephiroth is located somewhere on this archipelago, isn’t he? Jair can’t steal it if you just dispose of it first—”

“We can’t do that. This archipelago would effectively lose its meaning.”

Lovel gaped at her. “It’d ‘lose meaning’? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Haven’t you ever found it strange? These tiny islands have the Church, an academy, many residents, and a hardworking population. Despite the countless inconsistencies and issues, people stay unnaturally crowded together here.”

“Isn’t that because there’s a good mine and work here?”

“On extremely rare occasions, cubes have been excavated from that mine. The mine is connected to the Church by an underground railway, and the Rabbis frequently inspect it in order to snatch up any discovered cubes and promptly bring them back to the Church. Don’t you think the process is a little too good to be true?”

“…!”

“The ancient documents had a record that stated, ‘the source of life is buried in the archipelago located in the South Seas.’ The military authorities zeroed in on that bit of information and joined hands with the Church—all in order to build the strongest militarized Golem.”

“…You mean…” A look of comprehension flashed across Lovel’s face.

Kiriko nodded once and confirmed, “They built the Church complex and tunnels all in order to excavate and research the cubes that are buried somewhere on this archipelago. Everything functions for that sole purpose. I would even go as far as to say this entire archipelago is a giant factory, existing solely to create Sephiroth.”

Lovel’s eyes flew open. “Is that why the Church charges obscenely high prices for official Golems?”

“Yes, it’s just another means to raise funding for their project. But going public with such information would invite mass revolt from the residents… Thus, we Rabbis have no choice but to destroy anyone digging into Sephiroth,” Kiriko concluded with bitterness in her voice. Lovel said nothing, she only looked straight into her eyes.

***

Ouka

AFTER successfully escaping Spinoza, Ouka arrived at the clinic built on the outskirts. The lights were off inside. The owner Getz had to be either sleeping or away.

“What to do now?”

In any event, the owner of this clinic was no ordinary town doctor. According

to the rumors Ouka gathered, he was willing to treat anyone regardless of their background or circumstances. There were rumors of him doing surgery on gangsters with knives sticking out of their gut, and going as far as to help them change their appearance with plastic surgery to deceive those chasing them. An Academy lecturer was his cover; his true identity was an underground doctor.

Erie seemed to trust in Getz completely, but it was strange for a simple town doctor to know about Sehem-hamphorasch. He was as suspicious as they come.

Then there's no reason for me to hold back.

Ouka smashed a clinic window with his quarterstaff. Entering the building from his newly made opening, he relied on his lighter's flame to help him search the pitch-black room.

The building was an old mansion that served both as a clinic and the doctor's house. Ouka searched room after room for anything out of the ordinary, but he didn't discover anything suspicious.

What's the deal here?

Ouka decided to wet his parched throat before further investigation and headed to the kitchen to fetch some water. On the way, something caught his eye.

Three large cabinets ran along the wall. The cabinet to the far right had barely any tableware inside.

Does he just not have a lot of dishes? But he wouldn't need so many large cabinets if he didn't. He's got a reason to leave it empty. But what is it…?

Ouka suddenly figured it out. He grabbed the empty cabinet and moved it to the side. The cabinet moved with ease, revealing a door behind it.

A concealed door wasn't standard fare for an innocent doctor's home.

"Oooh! This is gettin' interesting now…!" Ouka whispered and quietly opened the door.

A descending staircase was on the other side. It was probably originally built to serve as a storage space. Darkness concealed the bottom of the stairs.

Ouka carefully descended the staircase. He was inside the home of a man

who served as a lecturer at the Academy. It wasn't unthinkable for him to have a Golem somewhere for security purposes.

But nothing appeared by the time Ouka reached the bottom step. Only a small desk and large water tank rested against the wall of the dark, empty square room that was about six meters in length.

"Is it just a cellar…?" Ouka approached the water tank against the wall. All of a sudden, something flashed red inside the water.

What was that?!

Ouka braced himself and took another look. It was a large tank capable of holding big aquatic animals. The tank could easily fit a person—

The red light came from *whatever* was inside.

"…!"



It slowly wriggled and glowered at Ouka.

Black eyes were what glared at him. The lips below those eyes pulled apart and appeared to scream.

“Wh-What…the hell is this?”

A girl was inside the tank.

She had been submerged with white patient robes on. He knew she was dead at a glance. Her skin was lifeless, and a countless number of red Engrave Incantations were inscribed into the bits he could see peeking out from under her robe. A sinister red glow shone from the *emeth* engraved in her forehead.

“A…F-Fresh Golem…?!” Ouka’s voice trembled.

The crimson glow illuminating the girl’s forehead was the characteristic light given off only by a Berserker Golem.

Chapter 9: The Person Worth Saving

Ouka

THE sight of the submerged girl sent shudders through Ouka.

“Is she a Fresh Golem…?! Whose corpse is this?!”

Her face was clean but abnormally pale, even for a corpse. The bizarre color brought back memories of the frog specimen Ouka dissected during his schooldays.

“A human specimen…?” He suddenly realized what liquid filled the tank. “Embalming fluids? Is this liquid an embalming fluid?!”

If he was right, just how long had this corpse been stored in the liquid without decaying? Since when? For how long?

“What the hell is this?!” Unsure of how to proceed, he dumbly stared at the tank.

Then out of the blue, “Who’s there?!” barked a voice from upstairs.

“…!” Ouka bit down on his lip to stop the frightened noise from escaping his mouth and faced the staircase.

Footsteps pounded down the stairs. Ouka held his breath and lied in wait until a man holding a black file under his arm finished descending the staircase.

“You are…Ouka Baraki?” said the middle-aged man—Crank Getz—when he saw Ouka.

“What? You know me too…?!” Ouka asked.

“I have my reasons to. More importantly, what are you doing here?”

“That’s my question. What in Heaven’s name are you doing, Professor? Whose corpse is this? How long has it been here for?” Ouka asked, shoving his thumb at the tank.

Getz looked at the Golem inside and answered with sadness straining his voice, "…This girl is my daughter Roberta. I suppose it's been eleven years since she started going berserk."

"ELEVEN YEARS?!" Ouka had never heard of a case like that before. "Have you been living with a Golem that's *out to kill you* for eleven freakin' years?!"

"At first, yes. She tried to kill me in the beginning. But she no longer has the desire to do so."

"How…?!" Ouka glanced at the tank and noticed something off about the creature inside.

The Fresh Golem named Roberta was calm. She wasn't throwing herself against the tank to try and kill her Tamer Getz. Berserker Golems always tried to kill their Tamer no matter what. So why wasn't she?

"…How did this happen?" Ouka questioned, trying to make sense of what he saw.

Getz answered him, quiet and thoughtful. "She struggled and raged and thrashed around in the beginning. I restrained her with chains and submerged her in the tank. I couldn't bring myself to erase the letters from her forehead even in her berserk state. But two years passed, then three, since she had been submerged…and then I finally realized something I hadn't before. It occurred to me that Roberta had stopped acting violent."

"A Berserker Golem…calmed down?"

"Yes. She's no longer trying to kill me."

"That's impossible!"

There was no way what Getz said was true. Berserker Golems tried to kill their Tamer. Even if no one knew the reason for it, that was supposed to be the law of the land.

"I didn't believe it at first either. But my daughter didn't attempt to kill me even when I removed her chains. Believe it or not, she even looked at me like a helpless, small child…"

"Like a child…? By child you don't mean…" Ouka came to an astonishing

conclusion. Getz nodded.

“You’re thinking on the right track. A Berserker Golem is no longer a Golem. Freed from their Tamer’s control, they become an existence that moves of their own free will—they are *born again* as another life-form, *similar yet different* from humans,” Getz declared flatly.

Ouka struggled to speak. What could he say about a fact that over a hundred-fifty years of Golemology had failed to uncover? He swallowed the lump lodged in his throat and wrung out, “Professor…did you create new life?”

“You could say everyone who has ever made a Golem and allowed it to go berserk has created life,” he said, looking at Roberta. His eyes narrowed with the pain and guilt he felt toward the child. “But this girl is the result… She will rot the moment she sets foot outside the tank, so she can’t even leave its confines. Just like how my daughter never knew what was beyond the hospital walls while she was still alive.”

Profound regret colored his voice. Getz continued speaking as if moaning the words. “In the end, I’ve done things that only hurt both Roberta and this Golem. Anyone who tries to bring back the dead will become miserable… Just like Grinzam.”

Hearing Grinzam’s name reminded Ouka of why he came to the clinic. Roberta piqued his curiosity too, but he had an investigation to conduct.

“…I heard from Erie that you’re old friends with Grinzam. That true?”

“Yes, it’s true. Our friendship is old history though.”

“Well, let’s just say I believe you. How’d you meet Grinzam?”

“I often went to retrieve corpses from the Church for research purposes, before Fresh Golems were restricted. A young Rabbi called out to me on one of those trips. ‘Are you thinking of creating life too?’ he asked me. That was Grinzam.”

“Create life…?”

“Yes. He often came to my clinic whenever he hurt himself during research experiments after that. He told me about the cubes during one of those visits.

‘Sehem-hamphorasch has the potential to produce true life,’ he said.”

Ouka frowned. He couldn’t deny the fact that the cubes created something extremely close to a Berserker Golem. Considering how Roberta had transformed into a different life-form, Grinzam’s hypothesis couldn’t be completely discounted, but—

“…I don’t think that’s what it does,” Ouka concluded.

“But he believed it did. He probably wanted to hold on to that dream to endure his lonely and wretched life.”

“Okay then.” Ouka sighed. “That doesn’t sound at all like the Grinzam I’ve heard so much about. Ain’t he supposed to be the ‘strongest Rabbi in history’ and ‘the heinous traitor’?”

“He had a reason that led him to that point,” Getz said, taking a breath. “One day, Grinzam met a prostitute who came to leave her baby at the Church. He persuaded the prostitute not to do it and changed her mind. She chose to raise the child herself instead.”

“That sounds even less like the image I had of him. Sounds like Grinzam was a decent guy.”

“I thought the same thing. I was under the impression he was a man of few emotions, but Grinzam began to change after he met the prostitute. She was a woman living earnestly on Chest Island, while he was a natural-born Rabbi who knew of nothing beyond the Church. It was a relationship they needed to keep in secret, but they grew close nevertheless.”

“So, were they lovers or somethin’?”

“I wonder about that. I’m not so sure of the answer myself. But either way, the woman quit being a prostitute, took up work at the mines, and raised her child. Grinzam watched over them both. If only that meager happiness went on forever…”

“Something put an end to it?”

“I guess it’d be about eight years ago now…the woman died. She died in a Berserker Accident caused by an Illegal Golem.” Getz’s eyes fell, and his face

twisted with pain, bitterness. “When she died, Grinzam said, ‘I might be able to bring her back to life if I use Sehem-hamphorasch.’ He tried talking the Church elders into using the cubes for her sake… Naturally, the Church didn’t approve.”

These events were finally starting to connect with the Grinzam Ouka had heard so much about. Thinking back to his days as a Rabbi, he reasoned, “‘Sehem-hamphorasch exists solely for Sephiroth. Everything on this archipelago exists solely for the day he will be named.’ So goes the Church elders’ motto. Makes sense why they didn’t approve.”

“Indeed. Thus, Grinzam made a run for it with the cubes, but he was taken down before he could get away… That’s the truth behind the *Grinzam Disaster*.”

Bitter feelings surfaced inside Ouka after hearing that story.

“The strongest Rabbi in the history of the Church ran away with the cubes for self-serving reasons and was put down.” Ouka had only been given that simple explanation during his days as a Rabbi.

But it was wrong. This was the story of yet another person led by the nose by the Church, who had felt compelled to make an outrageous choice as a result.

Ouka clicked his tongue and continued the story from his end. “…And then, four years after he made off with the red cubes, we failed our research as well, and the Church ended research into the cubes for good. Grinzam’s hopes were squashed along with it.”

Getz quietly shook his head. “No, his hopes haven’t been squashed.”

“How so?”

“There are still people who have continued with his hopes, in his place.” Getz pulled the black file from under his arm and held it out to Ouka.

“What…is this?”

“Something I stole from the dormitory custodian. You should be able to understand what it means.”

Ouka opened the file. At first he had no idea what it was, but he gradually started to understand what it contained as he read on. Inside the file was the list of discovered Engrave Incantations, data on the strength of every Prime

Body type, and a register of twelve Rabbis…including Ouka. Faces of people he would never see again lined the register. The file contained numerous documents that should have been unknown to all but those involved.

Ouka's hands trembled. A taut, stiff voice rushed from his mouth. "Wh-Why are these documents here?!"

"The person carrying on Grinzam's ambitions continued research into Sehem-hamphorasch even after his death. But that was no easy task. They needed ample funding, a fully equipped facility, and a talented team," Getz answered, his voice low.

Ouka's head jerked up and he furiously shouted, "Is that it?! We were just USED, then!"

"Unfortunately, yes. And you must understand what those documents being here means, yes?"

An electric shockwave shot down Ouka's spine.

Right, there aren't many reasons for these documents to be in my hands. Ouka struck on a probable cause and his heart rate skyrocketed. *I have to warn Kiriko about this, as fast as possible.* The woman had become his enemy, but he needed to warn her.

"…Professor, why did you show me these documents?"

"I heard Erie's story and thought I should do what I can too."

His answer convinced Ouka. Witnessing Erie's single-minded devotion to her goal and the dangerous line she toed had likely brought the professor back to his right mind for the first time in eleven years. What she had told Ouka earlier at the pub replayed in his mind.

"…But, if there's even the slightest possibility of them disposing of Heathy, I have to go to him."

Yeah, you're right, girl. If there's somethin' I gotta warn Kiriko about, I have to go to her.

"I owe Erie my thanks!" Ouka exclaimed as his parting words and dashed out of the basement cellar. He raced up the staircase and exited into the clinic. He

shoved the file into his shirt and ran alone through the darkness.

He ran in order to go to the Church, where the woman he needed to save was.

***

Erie

ERIE passed through the bustling downtown streets and ran as fast as her legs would carry her down the dark causeway. Barging into the Torah Church unarmed was just asking to get caught. She knew she was absolutely powerless without Heath. She had to get ahold of a new Prime Body if she wanted to succeed in her rescue attempt.

As long as she found a Prime Body, she could take control of it with Remote Engrave Incantations and make it instantly hers. But Prime Bodies didn't just sit on the side of the street waiting for some girl to take ownership of them. And even if there was one lying around, it'd be a risky bet trying to use it.

Erie already had Heath under her Tamership. A second Golem would have reduced functionality and be less reliable because of it. Unless it was a powerful Prime Body, that is.

But, I still have to try…! Erie thought as she ran.

She finally arrived at Flank Beach Market. She figured she would be able to obtain a Prime Body here, but unfortunately, all of the shops were closed. The tightly crowded street stalls had all been vacated, leaving just a few barracks standing in the market.

"Am I too late…?!"

The hour was close to midnight, and she didn't sense any activity in the area. Only the roaring sea could be heard on the beach covered in darkness. Still, Erie didn't give up hope. Instead, she wandered the area searching for an open shop —when she suddenly sensed a presence behind her.

"You're finally all alone."

"…?!" Erie spun around as if death himself was standing behind her. Without her ever realizing it, Jair and Eben had positioned themselves within striking

distance.

Erie could feel all the hair on her body stand on end, like a cat in danger, the second she saw them. Her vision warped with a flood of fury, and she squeezed her fists until the knuckles turned stark white.

“Erie,” Jair said to the enraged girl. “We should put an end to this predicament soon. The Church has begun to make its move. Dragging things out longer is not an option.”

She didn’t hear what he said. Something snapped inside her the moment she saw his face. Her strongest enemy had arrived at the worst possible time.

“…you,” she mumbled in a hoarse, strained voice. Jair eyed her, dubious. Erie hurled the line at him a second time, “*I’LL KILL YOU!*”

Erie drew the knife from her belt and lunged at Jair. His expression didn’t change. She thrust the knife at his face. But the blade stopped centimeters from his eyes. Eben had grabbed Erie’s arm from the side.

This Eben looked like a different type of Stone Golem from the one in the refinery. He stood two meters tall, but rather than having a Prime Body pieced from rubble, it appeared to be an official Church-grade Stone Golem Prime Body!

He’s even stronger than the monstrosity yesterday?! The battle instincts Erie had honed over the past few days were screeching inside her like storm sirens. But their warning came too late.

“Kill her, Eben.”

Eben lifted her into the air like she weighed no more than a feather. He slammed her into the ground without even giving her a second to think about fleeing.

“UGH!” The impact ripped the air from her lungs and suffocated her. Eben dragged her back into the air and swung her around several times, flinging her at a nearby garage.

“…!”

Erie crashed into the wall hard and slid crumpled onto the unforgiving

ground. Every fiber of her body screamed with aching pain and refused to move. Her teeth cut the inside of her mouth and her lips split, coating her tongue with the iron taste of blood.

"You stand no chance of winning without a Golem."

She heard Jair's voice in the distance, as if coming to her down a pipe. Had she popped an eardrum? Erie lifted her head despite the pain and riveted her eyes on Eben lumbering closer to her, powerless.

***

Cliff

CLIFF was hard at work repairing Gandolf inside Akizu Company's garage. While he desperately tackled the task at hand, out of nowhere, he heard a crash that shook the walls.

What was that?

Something had collided with the garage wall. He glanced outside the window and saw a massive Stone Golem.

Eben?! Why's he here?!

Jair stood at Eben's side, too. But the situation was even worse—a collapsed Erie was within their attack range.

Judging by what Cliff saw, Eben had thrown Erie, and she crashed into the garage. Heath was nowhere to be seen. Eben lumbered closer to the defenseless girl.

Oh no…! She'll be killed!

He hadn't gotten over the fear Jair had instilled down in his very core the day before. Neither of Gandolf's arms moved yet either. Cold, greasy sweat coated Cliff's whole body.

A person's going to be killed right in front of me… By Master's hands, at that…! The moment the thought hit him, a fire lit in his heart and under his feet.

Cliff started making Golems in order to *protect people*. If he forsook Erie despite that, regrets would haunt him for the rest of his life, no question about

it. And there was no way he could fight the upcoming battle to save Lovel if he had those feelings biting at his heels!

Cliff mustered all the courage within him and rushed out of the garage with Gandolf.

“URYAAAAAAAH!”

Jair turned toward Cliff’s war cry. Gandolf charged Eben, slamming into the stone giant with his chest. Cliff rammed into Jair too, but Jair merely glared at him without even stumbling back a step.

“You again? Do you have a death wish?” Jair snarled as he threw a straight punch at Cliff’s face.

“Gagh!” Cliff skidded backward and tumbled over. He saw Erie’s face on the ground right beside him.

“Wh-Why are you—”

“I-I came to save you…or that was the plan.”

Surprise flashed on her face. Cliff shoved to his feet and asked, “Master, why are you doing this?!”

“Master? You on about that again? What in the world are you talking about?”

“Are you kidding? You’re Master, right?! Aren’t you Master Roche? The boy who taught me how to create Golems?! How to use Engrave Incantations?!”

Jair’s face twitched. Did he finally remember? Cliff’s flicker of hope was smothered when Eben approached with fists raised to crush him.

In a fraction of a second, Cliff grabbed hold of Erie and jumped to the side. Eben brought down his stone fists, obliterating the ground where Cliff lay seconds ago.

Jair’s ruthless voice came pouring down on the horrified Cliff. “I’m *Jair*. The human called Roche no longer exists.”

While his face and voice were the same as Roche’s, he was clearly different from the Master Roche Cliff knew well.

“Eben, kill them both,” Jair said over the speechless boy.

The instant he heard that command, the hesitation in Cliff's heart gave way to a new surge of determination.

This isn't Master. He looks just like Master, but he's a different person.

He decided to believe that—at least in this dire moment where hesitation could spell death. Cliff held his head high and yelled his *enemy's* name for the first time.

"Fine, *JAIR*…! I'll just defeat you and protect Erie through to the end!"

"Just try it if you think you can," Jair replied. Eben surged forward, throwing punches with monstrous speed.

Gandolf leapt in between Cliff and the attack. He took Eben's blows to the chest and held his ground.

"Go for the knees, Gandolf!"

Gandolf promptly drove a knee into Eben. Eben's body shot into the air with that single blow and crashed onto the ground with an earth-shattering boom.

Jair observed the power behind Gandolf's hit and muttered irritably, "I see, that must be the Engrave Incantations Lovel formed. It's even capable of granting tremendous power to a crude Prime Body."

"The Engrave Incantations aren't the only thing that's powerful. Even if it's piecemeal, Gandolf has a solid Prime Body."

"So it appears, but don't think you can win with kicks alone."

CRAP! He noticed! The second Cliff sensed danger, Eben rose to his feet and grappled Gandolf. He hoisted him into the air with the spirit of a titan and hurled him against the ground with accelerated speed.

"NOO!"

The ground cracked and Gandolf's back sunk in. Eben's left hand reached over and seized his trachea.

"Sh-Shake him off, Gandolf!"

Gandolf thrashed on the ground, but it wasn't enough to break free without any arms. Eben swung his right fist down at Gandolf's forehead.

Gandolf wrenched his neck aside, avoiding the blow by a hair's breadth. But the stone fists continued to rain down on him with relentless precision. Gandolf fought frantically to avoid the blows by moving his neck alone.

"Why doesn't he use his hands?!" Erie shouted.

"He can't move them! The Engrave Incantations are incomplete!" Cliff answered.

"What part is incomplete?!"

"I've been looking into it nonstop since yesterday, and I think what's missing is the Engrave Incantation for his shoulder joints!"

"In that case—" Just as Erie said that, Eben's fist made contact with Gandolf's face. The back of his head sunk into the ground, completely sealing his movement.

He'll be done in! The second the fearful thought crossed Cliff's mind—

A soft light abruptly illuminated the surrounding darkness.

Cliff was surprised. Even Jair's expression appeared quizzical.

Light had enveloped Gandolf's arms. The incomplete Engrave Incantation repaired itself in record time.

Could this be—

Cliff shifted his eyes to Erie. Light shone from her hands toward Gandolf. Just like he had seen Lovel do three days ago in the underground station.

"Remote Engrave Incantation!" By the time Cliff raised his voice to shout in recognition, Engrave Incantations had covered Gandolf's arms and vanished within. The senses Cliff had lost returned at the same time. Gandolf's fingers twitched as if alive, like a repaired nerve.

Seeing that, Cliff roared, "GANDOLF…PUNCH HIM OOOOOUT!"

Gandolf clenched his fist and launched its iron might with his full bodyweight thrown behind it. Eben's chest instantly burst open. Stone fragments scattered, raining down like pebble hail, leaving fist-sized dents.

In a single blow, the cube in Eben's chest fell apart, and he ceased moving.

“Tch!” Jair hissed. But that wasn’t the end of their fight.

Without missing a beat, Erie raised both hands over Eben. Light radiated from her hands once more, engraving brand new Engrave Incantations throughout Eben’s entire body.

She’s casting a second set of Engrave Incantations?!

Jair seemed to catch on as well, but it was too late. Faster than the length of a single breath, Erie howled, “My name is Erie Reyer! With truth as my witness, I give thee the name *BOULDER*!”

She was trying to take control of Eben from Jair. His expression darkened, tinged with unease.

“Live as one with me and return to dust with me! I order thee to kill that man!”

Erie finished the naming in one breath, causing the suspended stone statue to convulse. The Engrave Incantations covering its body vanished, leaving behind only the emeth on its forehead and the Restrictor on its chest.

The Golem was no longer *Eben*. Boulder, the Golem who moved according to Erie’s will, slowly turned to face Jair.

Gandolf followed suit, edging closer to Jair following the other Golem’s lead.

“To think you had this much power… Things just aren’t going as planned.” Jair clicked his tongue and turned around. And, without an ounce of hesitation, he sprinted away from them.

“Boulder! Hunt him down!” Erie bellowed, but Boulder ran in such an awkward, clumsy manner, he was far from capable of catching up to Jair. Meanwhile, Jair disappeared into the darkness of the night without looking back.

“He ran away, *again*…!” Erie spat with the utmost resentment burning within her. On the other hand, the cord of tension running through Cliff had been cut. He began to fall over. Erie quickly rushed over to support him. “Are you okay?”

“I-I’m fine… Just a little dizzy is all…” Cliff forced a smile. Relief washed over Erie’s face.

"…You called Jair 'Master,' right? Why?" she asked.

Her question was difficult for Cliff to answer. He spoke without coming to a complete answer himself. "Jair—well, he might not be the same person—but he's the spitting image of the boy I call Master."

"What kind of person is your master?"

"His name is Roche. He's three years older than me and is capable of using Remote Engrave Incantations… He's really amazing."

More than seeing Roche as a best friend, Cliff viewed him as the pinnacle of his aspirations. Cliff admired him as someone with power that far surpassed his own. That was why he called Roche 'Master.'

"Master and I met three years ago. We hit it off right away and worked hard together to make Golems ever since."

Master Roche had often told him, *"You have talent too. I'll work hard right beside you, so let's climb to the top together."*

Those words were the reason Cliff tried so hard. He imitated what Roche did and longed to become just like him someday.

Cliff turned his eyes toward Akizu Company's barracks. He saw the remains of the giant the Rabbis had torn apart three days ago sitting behind it.

"…See that there?" he pointed to the destroyed giant. "It's the Prime Body Master and I completed together. He's got an overall height of 352 centimeters. We made him that big even though we knew it'd make him unmovable."

Master Roche had brought up the idea the prior year. *"Let's use scrap iron to make Akizu Company's symbol!"*

The project had doubled as training and play for Cliff and Roche. After investing months of hard work, they had completed it by the time winter came to an end.

"Hey, Cliff, I'll bring this Golem to life once I become an unstoppable Golem Tamer. I'll activate this Golem that nobody else can."

"Let's race to see who'll bring him to life first, Master."

They had promised each other the day Roche left for the Academy. The metal giant was a testament to Cliff and Roche's bonds. For the two boys who had spent three years working together on everything, it stood as their last collaboration project.

"And then Master left Chest Island and moved to Head Island… Not more than a week ago."

When Cliff asked him why he wanted to go to Head Island, Roche told him, "The girl I love is on Head Island." Cliff thought his motives weren't the purest, but it brought a smile to his face regardless. His master was a tough, upbeat, and really just an all-around amazing guy.

Tears blurred his eyes before he knew it.

How could I be so stupid? There's no way I'd mistake the face of somebody I saw just a week ago. Jair is the complete opposite of Master, but I'm positive he's him.

The tears spilled over with the thought. Because Cliff had the terrible feeling he would eventually have to fight him to the death for real.

Erie didn't say anything to the quietly crying Cliff, so he asked, "…How about you Erie?" since she was being considerate of him. "Why are you after Jair?"

"I have a grudge against him. A grudge that won't go away."

"A grudge?"

"He attacked me for no real reason…and I lost the most important person to me as a result," she said, casting down her eyes and lowering her head. Hearing that reminded Cliff of the boy who was always by her side.

"Oh yeah, what happened to Heath?"

"He was captured by the Rabbis and carted off to the Church…because he's a Golem."

"He is?!"

Cliff was speechless. He had thought Heath was a quiet guy since they met on Heartbreak Hill, but the truth was beyond what he expected.

“I’m going to go save Heathy,” Erie said to the thunderstruck Cliff. “I can’t lose him again.”

“But you’ll be caught.”

“I’ll be fine, I’m sure… I have Boulder on my side too.” Erie glanced at the Golem she had stolen from Jair. But Boulder moved crudely and seemed incapable of making agile or precise movements.

Cliff looked at Boulder and blatantly told her, “It’s impossible. You stand no chance challenging the Torah Church alone.”

“…!”

“But if there’s two people—if Gandolf and I come with you—we might be able to pull off the rescue.”

Erie spun toward him like he had lit a flame under her feet. “Why would you do that…? Why would you go so far for me?”

“I have someone I want to rescue from the Church too.”

“…Lovel?”

Cliff nodded. Erie looked at him skeptically, like she couldn’t fathom what motivated him so.

“Why are you going to try and rescue Lovel? What’s your relationship with her?”

“We only just met a few days ago, but Lovel helped me remember the reason why I’ve kept at makin’ Golems all these years.”

“What reason is that?”

“I wanted to obtain the power to protect somebody. Meeting her reminded me of that.” Cliff regarded Gandolf. “This guy’s Restrictor makes it so that he can’t hurt humans. I don’t wanna hurt anybody, but I also hate getting hurt or seeing my friends get hurt… Gandolf’s arms work now, thanks to you. So, I want to protect you too.”

Erie gazed straight at Cliff, and a peaceful expression came over her face, releasing the tension from her eyes. “…Boulder’s Restrictor is to fight only to

save someone. Looks like I thought along the same lines as you, when it came down to it."

Erie stared at her hands—the hands that had formed the Engrave Incantations on Gandolf and Boulder in a split second. "Just now was the first time I've ever used this power for someone else… My professor was right. It's better to have friends you can trust than to go at it alone."

She smiled and held her hand out to Cliff. He took her hand in his and squeezed. It was a firm handshake, conveying not only warmth but reassurance. Erie surely felt the same way Cliff did.

They looked into each other's eyes. "Ready to do this?" Cliff confirmed.

"Yes," she reassured.

And so, they walked the causeway seeped in darkness to Head Island.

They walked in order to go to the Church, where the people dearest to them were waiting.

Chapter 10: A Fierce Fight at Torah Church

Day 1

Cliff

"**HEY**, the Golems over there! Stop!"

There was an inspection station on Neck Bridge. One of the Rabbis was yelling from behind the checkpoint wall made of Golems. Gandolf and Boulder charged forward without stopping. Cliff pulled Erie close and took cover behind their solid allies.

"I told you to stop! Didn't you hear me?!"

Cliff and Erie ignored him. The four Bronze Golems of the checkpoint wall quickly fell into a militant formation.

Erie glowered at them and shouted, "Go, Boulder!"

Boulder burst into an all-out run and plowed through the checkpoint.

"STO—AGHHHHHHH!"

Boulder scattered the Bronze Golems, and Gandolf rushed in after him. The Rabbis cursed at them as they jumped aside.

"It's those damn street rats!"

"I never heard they had a Golem like that!"

"Call for reinforcements! HURRY!"

Gunshots cracked through the air, and something hot ricocheted off the ground at Cliff's feet. It looked like a syringe in the shape of a tiny ball.

Somebody's shooting at us with that tranquilizer gun! I ain't hangin' around for that crap!

"Break through their ranks, Gandolf!" Cliff shouted, running across the bridge just steps behind Gandolf as he bulldozed the enemy ranks.

***

Kiriko

“THEY broke through the checkpoint!”

“What did you just say?!” The words flew out of Kiriko’s mouth the moment her subordinate entered the interrogation room with that report. “Erie Reyer broke through?!”

“Along with the boy from before!”

Kiriko scowled, recalling the Illegal Golem she fought in the underground station several days prior.

Lovel raised her voice in similar surprise, “Boy? What boy? You can’t mean Cliff?!”

“…It appears so.”

“That idiot! Why’d he come…?!”

Spinoza grinned broadly at her from his corner of the room. “The answer’s obvious. He came to rescue you.”

“R-Rescue me?”

“What else would he come here to do? The kid’s got nerves of steel, raiding the Church. Goes to show how much he cares about you.”

Lovel’s eyes widened. Kiriko quietly gnawed her cheek.

I assumed Erie Reyer would come, but…I didn’t account for the boy! That Golem called Gandolf possesses outlandish combat efficiency. Can the Church’s current Rabbis fend him off? I must act before it’s too late!

Kiriko motioned to Spinoza with her eyes, and he nodded. He turned to the subordinate who reported the breach. “Torah Officer Seagal, take care of things here.”

“Y-Yes, sir!” Seagal said.

Kiriko and Spinoza left him in charge and were on their way out of the interrogation room when Lovel called to Kiriko.

“Hey, Kiriko? You never did believe me in the end, did you?”

“I am neither foolish nor gullible enough to believe a child’s nonsense.”

“But there’s a boy who *did* believe my nonsense. To tell you the truth, I’m super happy he did.” A bashful smile lit up Lovel’s face. The expression rubbed Kiriko the wrong way.

“And why am I supposed to care?”

“You aren’t. But things might go better for you in all kinds of ways if you start being a little more honest with yourself, you know?”

Lovel’s remark unsettled Kiriko. She felt furious with herself for lacking a good comeback. “…The road I took to get to where I am today wasn’t pure or honest enough for that,” Kiriko said, sounding as if she had given up on everything.

She left the interrogation room with Spinoza.

***

Erie

THEY successfully crossed Neck Bridge and spotted the Church's main gate up ahead.

"What should we do, Erie? Want to enter through there?!" Cliff asked, running alongside her.

"Going through the main gate is practically inviting them to surround us! Boulder and Gandolf might be okay, but we won't!"

A small army of Rabbis marched toward the gate from the inside of the Church premises. Erie racked her brain for a plan before calling out, "Boulder! Charge right through the gate and give them hell!"

Obeying her order, Boulder smashed through the main gate into the Church grounds. He hurtled toward the chapel, scattering the Rabbis' formation along the way. They panicked over the possibility of the Church's symbol being destroyed.

"S-Stop that Golem! Protect the chapel!" someone shouted in a hoarse voice.

Golems swarmed around Boulder from all directions. Boulder, despite being Erie's second Tamed Golem, held his own in a frenzied rampage in the midst of their overwhelming numbers.

Erie's control over him may have suffered from reduced accuracy, but the strength of Boulder's Prime Body and the degree of perfection in his Engrave Incantations granted him immense power nonetheless.

"Going for a diversion?" Cliff whispered to Erie, watching Boulder chuck a Golem at another Golem.

"Yup. Let's break into the church from another spot!" she suggested.

Erie, Cliff, and Gandolf sprinted on, while watching Boulder out of the corner of their eyes. They saw Boulder completely surrounded just before he left their view for good. Erie deeply regretted having to leave him behind.

I'm sorry, Boulder. She shook off the guilt and ran alongside the Church's perimeter fence.

Gandolf rammed through the fence once they had circled to the back of the Church. Cracks webbed through the sturdy fence wall until the foundation crumbled away, forming a giant hole.

“We can enter through here!”

“Yes!”

Erie and Cliff nodded to each other and invaded the Church grounds through the hole. They left the fence behind and raced on until they saw the grand Torah Church complex. A multitude of complex passages crisscrossed through the massive stone church building. Heath and Lovel were located somewhere inside this maze.

“Cliff, do you know where Lovel is?”

“Nope. You, Erie?”

“I don’t know either… But I have a vague guess of where Heathy might be.” Golems and their Golem Tamer were linked mentally. They could ascertain each other’s location up to a certain distance. “He seems to be somewhere up high… The highest place on these grounds…”

If Erie could get closer to Heath and renew their Restrictor, he would reactivate and help turn the tide of battle for them. The Rabbis had to be hiding him somewhere difficult to prevent that from happening.

Did they have him stowed away in a secret room that couldn’t be entered from the outside? It wouldn’t matter, since Heath would reactivate once she came within five meters of him, regardless of any intervening walls and obstructions. They wouldn’t place him somewhere easy for her to access.

Where’s a high place that’s difficult to enter and capable of locking up a person or two…? Erie lifted her head as she thought through the possible locations. Her eyes fixed on a specific spot—the symbol of Torah Church, and the highest building on the island.

“He’s there! Heathy is in that bell tower!” Erie shouted as she looked up at the Great Bell Tower looming over them.

***

Kiriko

THE uproar outside grew louder. Kiriko looked out from the third-story window and saw a Stone Golem rampaging near the chapel. The single Golem was throwing around the young Rabbis like ragdolls. She stared down at their pitiful display and sighed with disgust.

“How pathetic…”

“The youngsters get cocky with just a small taste of power and slack off instead of becoming truly powerful through continuous commitment to their training,” Spinoza scoffed.

“Shall I send Legion?” Kiriko asked.

“Don’t. You have to guard the prince, yeah?”

Kiriko’s objections lodged in her throat. Legion’s Restrictor was, “can’t move outside of the Tamer’s line of sight.” The confining Restrictor imbued the Golem with the highest efficiency levels, but it also confined Kiriko’s actions at times like this. Legion existed in the form of six separate bodies, but they could only fight in one location at a time, and it had to be within Kiriko’s viewing distance.

But no good would come of begrudging the Restrictor at this point.

“It shouldn’t pose any problems if I immediately return to my post. I’ll go. All right?”

“No, wait… I’ll go,” Spinoza said, stopping her. She heard something make a dry click.

A grotesque figure had appeared at the end of the hallway without her ever sensing it.

“Torah Lord…you are going to use that Golem?” she asked, shuddering slightly from seeing the creepy thing for the first time in years.

“Now’s not the time to bring up restrictions on his use. This guy can defeat that Golem with his hands tied behind his back,” Spinoza remarked with a grin. “Leave the chapel to me and head to the Great Bell Tower. Before the girl arrives.”

“Okay,” Kiriko agreed. Spinoza waved and headed off with the Golem.

A faint smile touched Kiriko’s lips. No matter how powerful the attackers were, they stood no chance against Spinoza. Not against the current most powerful Rabbi and his Golem.

Those kids will be trapped like rats if we set up another checkpoint on the bridge. The Church may have become weak, but we should be capable of ensnaring a few kids… She thought, shifting her eyes back to the window.

She spotted something running across the bridge from Chest Island at a monstrous speed. An amber beast barreled toward the Church.

“That…IDIOT!” Kiriko roared in rage at Ouka on Dram’s back.

***

Ouka

THE day had changed and the reactivated Dram raced across Neck Bridge. The reformed checkpoint blocked his way. The checkpoint guards lined up in rows with their guns held at the ready.

Ouka leaned close to Dram's back and had his partner accelerate even faster. Reaching his top speed, Dram was a giant mass of amber loping at over eighty kilometers an hour.

"BREAK THROUGH!!"

Ouka's holler sent Dram crashing through the checkpoint. He galloped across the rest of the bridge, leaving the Rabbis who instinctively jumped out of the way scattered in his wake.

"H-HALT!"

Ouka heard frenzied shouts and gunshots at his back. He rushed to the Church without batting an eye. He reached the end of the long bridge and saw the main gate, where angry and confused shouts melted into a chaotic uproar on the other side.

What's with all the commotion? Of course—Erie's raiding the Church!

"Wowwie! The little lady has spunk!" Ouka whistled, a half smile on his lips.

He might be able to make contact with Kiriko by slipping into the chaos. Ouka confirmed the file was safely tucked under his shirt and stopped Dram near the main gate.

With one look, he saw a Stone Golem on a violent rampage inside the chapel. Stained-glass windows had shattered and the pipe-organ was smashed, marking the chapel as the epicenter of the chaos. The Stone Golem flung objects around, smashing things left and right, so that not even the Rabbis' Golems could recklessly go near it.

Ouka searched for Kiriko amid the mess. She was nowhere to be seen.

I have no business here then. I'll look elsewhere, he thought, and was about to run, when he heard a dry crack of air from the chapel.

Gunfire?!

He quickly hid behind the gate.

The crack of gunshots littered the air in rapid-fire succession. Ouka turned his eyes toward the chapel, where the rampaging Stone Golem had ceased moving.

Cracks webbed throughout its body, and it crumbled to pieces. Ouka understood what had happened even from a distance: a bullet had shot through the letters on its forehead.

Ouka leapt onto Dram's back and left the location as fast as Dram's four legs could take him. He had firsthand knowledge of the only man capable of instantly destroying a large-scale Golem like that.

"…Spinoza's made his move."

Cold sweat trickled down Ouka's spine. The Church must've thrown public appearances to the wayside to deal with this problem if they were using that Golem now. Ouka willed Dram to run even faster.

He made Dram gallop alongside the perimeter fence to the side of the Church, then had him change course.

"Jump, Dram!"

Dram jumped once, landed on a roadside tree, jumped again, and bounded over the five-meter tall fence. He landed inside an area of the Church grounds where the Rabbis were noticeably missing. The majority of Rabbis were likely gathered inside the chapel. Ouka took the chance to break into the church complex.

"Okay, where would Kiriko be?"

Ouka thought through the possible locations while Dram ran through the long corridors. Under these circumstances, Kiriko would prioritize guarding her hostage. Where was Heath then?

The interrogation rooms?!

Ouka had no guarantee that was it, but he couldn't think of where else to search. With his mind made up, he headed for the interrogation room on the third-floor.

He might not have visited the Church in four years, but he knew its layout like the back of his hand. He avoided the occasional Rabbi traffic inside the corridors until he finally arrived at the interrogation room.

I sure hope Kiriko is alone…

Ouka hopped down from Dram and opened the interrogation room door. But what he found on the other side was Torah Officer Seagal pressing a tranquilizer gun to Lovel. They both stared at Ouka, their eyes bulging.

“Wha-! Aren’t you Ouka Baraki?!”

“O-Ouka?! Why are you here?!”

Seagal panicked and swerved the gun toward Ouka. Ouka closed the gap between them faster than Seagal turned the gun and swung down his quarterstaff.

“ACK!” Struck on the wrist, Seagal dropped the gun. Ouka swiftly circled behind him and secured his elbows behind his back.

“Hey, Seagal, do you know where Kiriko is?”

“Don’t screw around with me after you hit me outta nowhere! Like hell I’d tell yo—OWWWW!”

Ouka squeezed, wrenching a pained groan from Seagal. He constricted the officer’s joints until they began cracking and repeated his question. “Please tell me. I have something important to tell her.”

Instead of answering, Seagal cried out, “OVER HERE! THE INTRUDERS ARE HERE!”

“I-Idiot, don’t cause a scene!” Ouka covered Seagal’s mouth, but that didn’t stop his screaming. He proved to be a surprisingly feisty man. Out of options, Ouka struck the back of his head, knocking him out.

“Well damn, I guessed wrong… Where’s Kiriko at?” Ouka didn’t know how to proceed after his first guess was a waste of time.

“Wait, Ouka. Why’re you looking for Kiriko?” Lovel asked him.

“It’s got nothin’ to do with you, kid. Go ahead and leave while you can.”

“Oh? You sure it’s okay for me to leave?”

“I’ve lost my reason to apprehend you. I’m a wanted man now. They’ve falsely accused me of a crime because of Jair.”

“Aw, you *poor thing*!” Lovel laughed, sounding like she was having the time of her life. Ouka knew it; she was one cheeky girl. “So,” she said, teasing him when he was in a pinch, “why has a wanted man come to the Church?”

“I’ve got something I have to show Kiriko no matter what. Once I do…” Ouka’s thoughts went to the file inside his shirt. Various things would come to light if he shared the information with her. And that wouldn’t be all. “…Lovel, I might be able to clear your name.”

“You can? Really?”

“Yeah. But I dunno where Kiriko is, and it’s not like I can just search for her willy-nilly inside the church…”

“I know where she is.”

Ouka blinked. “You do?!”

“Well, you could call it an educated guess. I’m pretty sure of the location, because I overheard them talking about it.”

“Tell me! Where is she?!”

“I’ll tell you—under one condition. Once I tell you where she is, you have to take me with you.”

Ouka’s mouth fell open. “Huh? What do ya want to do that for? Get outta here.”

“Cliff’s here. Along with Erie.”

“What?!”

“He came to rescue me. I can’t leave on my own now.”

Ouka was flabbergasted. If Cliff was an idiot for challenging the Church to save a girl, then Lovel was just as stupid for wanting to go back for him.

They were as naïve and ignorant as they came. But the exact same thing could be said of Ouka. Realizing that brought a self-derisive smile to his face.

“I can’t fight you on that one… Let’s go, girl!”

“That’s how it’s gotta be!” Lovel rejoiced. They left the interrogation room together.

Ouka mounted Dram and pulled Lovel up behind him. “So, where’s Kiriko at?” he asked.

“The Great Bell Tower. Kiriko locked Heath up and is lying in wait for Erie there.”

“The Great Bell Tower, huh!”

The tower was some distance away, but Dram’s legs would carry them there in no time. Ouka drew on his memories of how to get there as he launched Dram into a swift run.

***

Cliff

CLIFF and Erie sprinted down the corridor leading to the Great Bell Tower. A Rabbi and an Iron Golem blocked their passage.

The enemy Golem had a similar build to Gandolf, but it stood no chance. Gandolf slammed a fist into the Iron Golem's face with the force of his rapid dash.

"What?!" the Rabbi cried out when his Golem crashed into the wall. Cliff dropped in close and drove a punch into the side of his face with a battle cry.

Though it was a hasty surprise attack, the punch was a clean hit and sent the Rabbi toppling over. Erie cheered for Cliff as he shook out his tingling fingers. "Nice shot! You rock, Cliff!"

Cliff answered her compliment with a sheepish grin and increased his speed. He contemplated their steady advance as they accelerated toward their destination. The last encounter marked the fourth Golem Gandolf had defeated since invading the church.

A few days ago, Cliff never even considered opposing the Rabbis. They had tyrannized him and his people for ages, and the mentality not to fight back was deeply ingrained in him. But now, Cliff overpowered the Church's Golems. He felt refreshed to win on the one hand, and yet found it strange on the other.

The Rabbis' arrogance and free, domineering reign over the people prevailed due to one reason. Their possession of the Great Bell Tower was no more than an extension of that reason.

No one could oppose the Rabbis because they were strong. They maintained governorship over the archipelago because they Tamed and controlled Golems better than anyone else in the land.

For all that bravado, Gandolf tore through the Rabbi created Golems like they were made of tinfoil. Their enemies were dumbfounded in the face of Gandolf's abnormal strength. It shouldn't have been possible for a piecemeal Illegal Golem powered by a young student's Engrave Incantations to be this outrageously powerful.

“…What’s wrong, Cliff? Why the sudden silence?” Erie seemed worried by his abrupt reticence.

“It’s nothing,” he said.

Cliff snapped back to his senses and put aside his thoughts for now. He had more important things to do than make wild theories. He focused on running instead.

At long last, the end of the corridor came into view. Gandolf slammed through the giant iron door blocking their way.

The central courtyard lay on the other side with a tower looming over them at its center. It was the Great Bell Tower that brought God’s divine protection to the archipelago, transforming its isles into the Islands of Golems.

“Let’s do this!”

Cliff and Erie dashed across the courtyard and barged into the tower.

***

Erie

THE tower was dark and deserted inside. Dim gas lamps illuminated the interior. Erie strained her eyes against the very weak light. A spiral staircase wound up the inside of the wall, ending at a door on the top landing. The belfry had to be beyond that door. Erie sensed Heath's presence closer than before.

"No doubt about it, Heathy's at the top!"

"Okay." Cliff nodded to Erie. They started their ascent up the staircase with Gandolf taking the lead. Once they made it about halfway up the stairs, they stopped. Mysterious figures blocked their path up.

"I hadn't expected you to make it this far."

Kiriko stepped from the shadows into the lamplight, accompanied by Legion. She looked down on them from twenty steps above.

"It appears the Golem you call Gandolf is special after all… However, I won't let you keep getting away with things."

Heeding Kiriko's voice, the six members of Legion began racing down the staircase in groups.

"Wh-What the heck are these things?!" Cliff raised his voice in shock.

Erie whispered, "Be careful. That lady is controlling all these small Golems."

"She's Tamed this many by herself…?!" Cliff groaned.

Kiriko's lips turned up in a faint smile. "Go, Legion! Get the intruders!" she commanded in a booming voice.

Legion jumped down the steps at them as one body.

"G-Gandolf! Don't let any through!"

Gandolf swung his fist, intercepting the members of Legion as they dove from the stairs. But as strong as he was, holding back the six Golems of Legion was impossible.

"3rd, suppress the girl!"

3rd used the staircase railing as a springboard to dive at Erie.

“Eeeek!” Erie yelped

“Watch out!” Cliff shouted. Gandolf simultaneously knocked the Legion member away with a backfist blow. 3rd fell through the stairwell.

“Hmph. You have some skill. I’ll give you that much…” Kiriko acknowledged. “How will you handle this then?”

Two more Legion numbers jumped down from the spiral staircase. The sound of them landing on the bottom floor echoed up the mostly empty tower.

Suspicious of what Kiriko was planning, Erie looked down the stairs. To her horror, she saw the three fallen members of Legion racing up the staircase toward them.

“I-It’s a pincer attack!” she stuttered, panicking.

Kiriko leaned against the railing and swept her gaze across the entire tower. “Now then, how long will you last?”

The members of Legion left above them recommenced their attack. Gandolf tried to fight back, but his hands hurtled through the air without making contact. The narrow steps threw off his balance, rendering him unable to draw out his full potential.

Meanwhile, Legion’s many bodies executed precise, synchronized attacks from above by maneuvering along the railing or crawling down the stairs. Their claws tore several deep cuts in Gandolf’s forehead, pushing him back.

Worst yet, the rest of Legion had nearly caught up from behind. It’d be the end for Erie and Cliff if the bottom half reached them.

“Damn it! This is the absolute worst! She’s got way too much of an advantage over us!” Cliff yelled.

He was right. The basics of battle stated that the person with the higher ground always had an advantage, and Gandolf’s gigantic body made it difficult for him to quickly navigate the spiral staircase.

“Cliff, why not target the woman instead?!” Erie proposed, glaring at the

woman sneering at them from the safety of her higher ground.

“I can’t because of Gandolf’s Restrictor! Besides…” Cliff trailed off.

Besides what? Erie thought to ask, but she became cognizant of the answer herself. *I’m in his way…!*

If Cliff was alone, Gandolf could focus on protecting him and exchanging blows with Legion. As it was, they were asking for the impossible: there was no way he could protect them both while taking on all six members of Legion at the same time.

The moment Erie realized that fact, one of Legion slipped past Gandolf’s flank and lunged at them.

“RAAAH!” In a last-ditch move, Cliff shoved it against the wall and held fast. Each member of Legion was no bigger than eighty centimeters, but they were still more powerful than Cliff. It struggled, slicing Cliff’s cheek with its sharp claws.

“Give it up, boy.” Kiriko’s cold voice rained down on them. “Legion will have no difficulty mangling you if I let it.” Fear flashed across Cliff’s face. Footsteps were closing in from behind. It wouldn’t be long before the final three members of Legion did them in from behind.

Our back’s against the wall, and the wall has claws! The second she thought that, she struck upon an idea. An idea that could overturn their dire situation. It was extremely dangerous and a risky bet, but no other means were left to them.

Erie steeled her resolve and whispered in Cliff’s ear, “Cliff, I need a favor.”

“What is it?”

“Have Gandolf… me…” She explained her plan to Cliff in hushed whispers so Kiriko couldn’t overhear. His eyes went round.

“Are you *serious,* Erie?! That’s way too dangerous!”

“Do you have any better ideas?”

Hesitation flickered across Cliff’s face. She didn’t blame him. Her plan was far from strategic. Still, she wasn’t going to back down from it.

Cliff had detoured from his primary objective to come to this bell tower for Erie's sake.

It's my fault we've been caught in this scrape! That's why…

"Please, Cliff. Let me fight my way too…!"

She convinced Cliff to take the plunge with her. "Brace yourself…" he said softly.

She gave him a firm nod in return.

The pitter-patter of Legion's many feet had arrived just behind them. Using that as the trigger, Cliff ordered, "Gandolf…***THROW ERIE***!"

Gandolf grabbed Erie's torso with both hands. Her heart squeezed in her chest in anticipation of the fear that was about to hit her.

"…Excuse me?" Kiriko's perplexed voice fell on them from above. Gandolf ignored her, drew Erie back in his hand like he was about pitch a baseball, and threw her toward the highest landing platform on the spiral staircase.

"EEYAAAAAAAAAH!"

She had braced herself for it, but actually being hurled through the air brought bone-numbing fear spiking through her body. Steeling herself against the panic bubbling in her stomach, Erie locked her eyes on the platform above.

Thankfully, Gandolf had thrown Erie almost perfectly to the top of the spiral staircase. Just, the distance was a tad short.

"NOOOOOOO!" Erie thrust out her arms in a desperate bid to cling on. One of her hands caught the railing, and she barely managed to hang on with that one hand. In that same instant, she felt a surge of unknown power within. Her delicate arm hauled her entire body up and over the railing.

Is this what they call near-death hysterical strength?!

Erie wanted to admire her impressive feat of strength, but she didn't have a second to spare for doing so.

"Wh-What are you trying to do?!" Kiriko charged up the stairs like a bull after a red flag. Erie burst into a run for the top. The staircase quickly ended at a

door.

Heathy is behind this door!

Erie dove to the door and wrenched the doorknob to the side. The knob wouldn't turn.

Kiriko's voice rose behind her. "Obviously, I locked the door."

Erie whirled around and saw Kiriko pointing the tranquilizer gun at her. Overwhelmed, she took a step back. She retreated back as far as she could, so that her back was pressed against the door.

"This is as far as you go, Erie Reyer. Surrender peacefully."

"But what will happen to Heathy if I'm caught?"

"We will dispose of him without hesitation," Kiriko cruelly announced.

Erie answered her callousness with unwavering determination. "I see. In that case, I won't be letting you catch me." The muscles in Kiriko's face stiffened.

Erie felt the cut link reconnect.

She smirked. "If only the belfry was a tad bigger for you… My Restrictor reactivates as long as I come within five meters of him…even if there's a thick door in the way!"

Kiriko's eyes flew open in surprise. The doorknob behind Erie loudly shattered to pieces.

"Heathy, defeat her!"

The door opened, and Heath burst into the tower.

"…!"

Kiriko fired the tranquilizer gun at Erie. But Heath stopped the bullet with his hand and brought his other down on her neck like a sword.

"UGAH!"

Kiriko collapsed on the ground with that single strike. Heath caught her before she rolled down the stairs and leaned her against the wall.

"C-Come back here…!" she weakly protested.

Heath held Erie in his right arm and returned to Cliff and Gandolf without heeding Kiriko's calls to stop.

"Cliff, now!"

Cliff nodded, and Gandolf swept away the swarming Legion with his right arm. Heath picked up Cliff with his left arm and jumped down the stairwell with Gandolf. Gandolf landed on the bottom floor of the tower with a bang, while Heath landed lightly on his soles. Erie and Cliff set their feet on the ground, freeing Heath's arms.

"Thank you, Heathy…" Erie said, pulling out a hidden object from under her shirt. It was the butcher's knife she had stored away carefully wrapped in a cloth. Heath took it and gripped the hilt.

Now we're ready! I'll never be separated from him again!

"Let's go!" Erie said, her resolution clear.

Cliff nodded and took off running with her. They heard Kiriko shrieking down at them as they slipped out the tower door.

***

Ouka

THE closer they drew to the Great Bell Tower, the more broken and destroyed Golems they found littering the corridor.

Ouka spoke to Lovel behind him, noting the aftermath, “Now *this* is something! Looks like your guess was right on the mark.”

“Yeah. Cliff and the others have passed through here already.”

But the current Rabbis couldn’t even slow them down. Ouka hurried toward their destination, his disappointment in the Church’s steady decline growing stronger.

They finally exited into the courtyard containing the bell tower after traversing several long corridors. Ouka heard the tail end of Kiriko’s earsplitting shriek.

“HURRY, DRAM!”

Dram galloped toward the bell tower. Four figures stormed out of the door right when Dram tried to duck inside.

“Whoa!”

Ouka brought Dram to a stop at the last second before collision. The figures he saw racing out the door skidded to a halt in front of him too. Erie, Heath, Gandolf, and Cliff blinked at Ouka and Lovel.

“HEY…!” Cliff shouted.

“Lovel?!” Erie exclaimed. Lovel wordlessly slid off Dram’s back.

“Lovel…!” Cliff repeated her name with pure joy. She ran over to him, grabbed his shoulders, and then plunged into a scolding.

“You *stupid dork*! Why’d you come?! Making the Church your enemy means losing your chance at a peaceful life, not to mention crawling your way to the top!” Her voice shook.

Cliff smiled at her. “I’ve already got their target on my back. So that ship’s sailed.”

“Don’t just give up and abandon yourself to recklessness. Don’t you have a bright future ahead of you?”

“You’ve got one too. I’ve come to save your future for you.”

Lovel fell silent for a brief moment before a gentle smile emerged on her face. “Don’t you go talking like a big-shot when you’re still just a kid…”

“You’re just as much of a kid as I am, Lovel.”

They laughed at each other. Erie warmly watched over them.

But Ouka went and cut the heartfelt moment short. “Okay, kiddos, now ain’t the time for a heartwarming reunion, don’t ya think?”

Ouka’s statement brought them back to the situation at hand. Cliff peered at the bell tower over his shoulder. “Y-You’re right! Miss Kiriko is hot on our tail!”

“Really? …She’ll be coming here?” Ouka ruminated over the opportunity and dismounted Dram.

“Ouka, what are you planning?” Lovel asked him.

“You kiddies get outta here. I’ll stay behind.”

Erie raised her voice in surprise. “Ouka, you’ll be caught if you stay!”

“I’ve got reason enough for seein’ her to risk it.” He noticed numerous shadows crawling around inside the bell tower as he spoke. “See? The scary lady’s come for you. You kids better hurry if you don’t want a spanking.”

The kids nodded at his second warning and made a break for it. Ouka didn’t move his eyes from the door. It wasn’t long before Kiriko appeared with Legion.

“Yo, Kiriko.”

Kiriko returned his casual greeting with a stern death glare. “Out of my way, Ouka.”

“Now, just hold your pretty horses. I’ve got something to discuss with you.”

“And *I* have nothing to discuss with *you*. I shall save arresting you for later, so move aside and let me get those children first.”

“Do it after you hear me out.”

Legion surrounded Ouka. But he kept his eyes trained on Kiriko.

“Must I have you mangled to get the point across? Shut up and get out of my way, Ouka.”

“Drop the threats and hear me out! You’ve made a huge mistake!”

“What mistake?”

“Those kids aren’t who you need to go after! Our enemy is elsewhere!”

“Our…? ***OUR***? You and I are of a completely different breed! There is no *us* or *our*!” The look in her eyes and the tone of her voice had dramatically switched. “*You* are an Illegal Golem Artificer, and *I* am a Rabba! Have you forgotten?! And my duty is to prevent those cubes and Sephiroth from ever stepping foot into the world!”

The sadness in her eyes felt deeper than the anger to Ouka. Pinning him with those eyes, she said, “You, of all people, should understand. This is about the *only* thing I can do for Alita…”

“Alita’s enemy is who I need to talk to you about! Just give me a second of your time and look at this file!” Ouka yelled, reaching his hand into his shirt for the file. When he did, Legion attacked him as one. They punched him with their fists instead of gouging him with claws. “Agh!”

Twelve tiny fists pounded him like the sea’s raging waves against a rocky shoreline. Ouka took the punches to every part of his body and buckled over. And that was when other Rabbis rushed into the courtyard.

Kiriko walked away, issuing orders to her subordinates on the way out. “This man is one of the intruders. Please apprehend him.”

“Wait, Kiriko! *PLEASE WAIT!*”

No matter how desperately he called for her, Kiriko didn’t turn around. Ouka ground his teeth and faced the incoming Rabbis.

“I can’t let myself get caught now…!” He staggered to his feet and gripped his quarterstaff.

***

Cliff

THEIR sheer strength blew every enemy away in overwhelming victory. A single straight punch from Gandolf smashed the forehead of a Copper Golem that blocked their passage through the winding corridors. A troop of Wood Golems swarmed in from behind the fallen Copper Golem, but with the gleam of Heath's knife, their foreheads were sliced through one after another.

Their "e" destroyed, the Wood Golems crumbled away in concert. Heath slammed into the Rabbis who tried to flee, knocking them unconscious. Just two Golems were taking down each and every wave of enemies.

It's scary, even though they're on our side! Cliff swallowed hard in the face of their immense fighting capabilities. The corridors they passed through had mountains of wrecked Golems piled high, as if a tornado had blown through instead of three kids and two Golems.

"We can do this! Let's keep this pace going and escape!" Lovel cheered as she ran.

Cliff nodded and looked to Erie. "Erie, is Boulder still alive?"

"I'm sorry, our link is too weak to tell," she answered apologetically.

If Boulder was still functioning and they managed to regroup with him, they would really have nothing to fear. It was worth checking the chapel. As they came to that conclusion, they saw a massive destroyed door ahead. Beyond it laid an awe-inspiring, massive chamber Cliff once saw in passing.

"That's the chapel!"

The desolated chapel looked like it had been through a hurricane before they arrived. No Rabbis were around. Had they given up because they were unable to take on Boulder? Whatever the case, the main gate would be just ahead once they passed through the chamber. Reassured that escape lay just a room away, Cliff and the others began to traverse the chapel—only to abruptly skid to a stop.

Before they finished stepping foot into the chamber, they spotted Boulder, smashed to pieces in a corner. Shudders shot down Cliff's spine. His instincts

screamed at him in warning. The person who defeated Boulder was still here. Somebody dreadfully strong was waiting for them!

“R-RUN!”

The group spun around and fled. But they heard a click behind them before they got very far. Cliff found the tight, dry sound unfamiliar. It didn’t sound like a normal Golem’s footsteps.

The presence that caused him to shake with dread approached them from behind. Cliff realized the true source of his fear—it was the same type of *bloodlust* Jair exuded.

Cliff forced his scared-stiff legs to move and bolted. The crack of a gunshot rang behind him the moment he did.

“…!”

The kids instinctively stopped and turned around. Thin gunpowder smoke curled into the air by the chapel entrance. A man and *something* appeared from the entrance with clicking footsteps.

Lovel saw him and bitterly spat, “Spinoza…!”

“I’ve finally found you, naughty children.”

Something atrocious and eerily terrifying stood beside the man named Spinoza. A deathly white, sinister symbol of death—a skeleton. With a beige mantle tossed over its bare bone body, it looked just like the Grim Reaper. The letters spelling emeth engraved its forehead underneath a wide-brimmed hat. Four arms jutted out from the mantle, each armed with gleaming black revolvers.



Cliff cried out in a hoarse voice at the sight of the four-armed Grim Reaper. “Wh-What the heck is that?!”

“It’s a Bone Golem for trial military use, called *Heaven’s Gunner*. He’s Torah Church’s guardian,” Spinoza answered with a grin.

“Are you serious?! I thought creating Bone Golems was banned ages ago?!” Cliff retorted.

“We both have banned Golems at our disposal. Besides, this guy’s Restrictor makes it so that he can never leave Torah Church’s premises. You don’t really have the right to complain.”

“…!” Cliff groaned.

“Okay then, time for you to toss in the towel and give yourselves up. His guns are loaded with high-speed armor-piercing bullets. It’ll open up some big holes, even in a Metal Golem.”

Cliff swallowed the lump forming in the back of his throat. Heaven’s Gunner’s four guns were each aimed at Gandolf, Heath, Lovel, and Cliff. They were about fifteen meters away from him.

Cliff could send Gandolf after them accounting for the possible damage, but he’d likely be shot first as the Tamer. No one could make a move, but…wait, Erie alone didn’t have a gun trained on her. The moment Cliff realized that, she had already broken off in a run for Spinoza.

“YAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

“Tch!”

Heaven’s Gunner turned one gun toward Erie. Heath took the opening to throw his knife. All four of Heaven’s Gunner’s guns intercepted the flying butcher’s knife by firing at it. The precise shots ricocheted off the knife, sending it spinning in the opposite direction. But the knife had attracted every gun in that second, and the kids didn’t let the opportunity escape them.

“GANDOLF!”

“HEATHY!”

Gandolf and Heath moved at the sound of their voices. Gandolf rammed the corridor wall to create an escape and Heath leapt through the air and caught his knife.

Heaven's Gunner's revolvers trained on Heath. He kicked off the wall and changed directions in his jump. Scores of bullets ripped holes open in the area that Heath had sprung off of. Heath then kicked off the opposite wall, creating a zigzag course until he arrived in front of Heaven's Gunner.

"Now, HEATHY!"

Heath relentlessly swung his knife as he landed. His swings truly seemed to cut at the speed of light.

But Heaven's Gunner moved at a speed beyond that. Dodging a slash, he aimed his guns and shot as soon as his guns were at the right angle. The sound of four gunshots cracked in the air, hailing bullets on Heath and tearing holes through him like a beehive.

Heath stumbled back a few steps and bumped against Erie behind him.

"…!" Erie moaned as she crouched on the ground. Blood spilled from her leg. A stray bullet had hit her.

During the altercation, Gandolf had slammed several more times into the wall, causing it to crumble away and create a gaping hole. Gandolf dove outside, and Cliff and Lovel ran close behind him.

"Erie!" Cliff shouted as he ran. But Erie must have figured she wouldn't make it in time, because Heath whirled around, picked her up, and ran elsewhere with his back turned to Spinoza. "Erie! Wait!"

Cliff's calls did no good as Heath disappeared down the corridor.

Lovel sternly raised her voice, "Let's go, Cliff! I'm sure she will be okay!"

"But!"

"Why do you think Erie ran in the opposite direction?! It's obviously a plan to throw off the enemy by splitting into two groups!"

Heaven's Gunner turned two of his revolvers at them through the window. Necessity forced Cliff to reluctantly dart around in front of Gandolf and run for

it.

Bullets cracked into the air and ricocheted off his Golem's metal back. Gandolf had become their bulletproof wall.

"Lovel, this way!"

Cliff ran, pushing down the fear coiling inside him like a venomous snake. He headed straight for the hole in the fence they had created when they first invaded the Church. They circled around to the back of the Church, and he spotted the hole. With gunshots firing behind him, Cliff dove and rolled through the opening. Spinoza did say that Heaven's Gunner's Restrictor stopped the Golem from leaving the Church's premises. Now they didn't have to worry about being pursued.

"Yes! Now we just have to make our escape to Chest Island, and we're good!"

Cliff and Lovel nodded to each other and sprinted in the direction of Neck Bridge. They raced along the side of the fence until the bridge came into view.

They spotted someone running across the bridge with their back full of bullet wounds. Heath, carrying Erie, sped toward the checkpoint the Rabbis had reformed once again. By the look of it, they had successfully escaped the Church.

"Erie!" Lovel's shout didn't seem to reach her. Heath didn't stop running.

The Rabbis forming the checkpoint braced themselves for a fight. Without changing directions, Heath leapt. He flew right over their heads with Erie in his arms. Landing safely on the other side of the checkpoint, he ran off toward Chest Island.

"Let's follow them!"

Cliff and Lovel followed after them to the bridge, and the Rabbis blocked the way. They had given up on pursuing Heath and decided to focus their efforts on capturing Cliff and Lovel instead.

Three Iron Golems barred their path on top of the bridge. A Tamer bellowed, "We won't let you intruders go!"

They were facing three Rabbis and three Golems. Cliff ground his teeth. *We*

don't have the time to fight them. Is there any way to break through their ranks fast?

Gandolf charged into action before Cliff finished coming up with a plan.

"Gandolf?!"

Gandolf grabbed one of the Golems without listening to Cliff and lifted it into the air with ease.

"What the?!"

The Rabbis inhaled sharply at what they saw. Gandolf lobbed the Golem at another. The two Golems collided, emitted a sound akin to a cracked bell, and fell over. Gandolf rushed in and kicked a fallen Golem's head. The iron head ripped off from its neck and soared. It splashed into the sea far from the bridge.

Gandolf turned to the second Golem with raised fists and brought them down on its forehead. Not only did the letters peel off from that single slam, but the entire head ruptured.

A two-hit finish—Gandolf had laid waste to two Golems with just two attacks. Cliff shuddered; his Golem fought as fierce as a war god.

He ain't just strong! I couldn't have asked for a more reliable combat buddy! But—

"Eeep!" One of the Rabbi's squeaked in fear and turned the tranquilizer gun on Cliff. Lovel whacked him with a flying kick faster than he could pull the trigger.

"You little rat!" Another Rabbi raised his quarterstaff and swung it down on Lovel. She pulled off a reverse roundhouse kick, knocking him out.

The bridge barely had any enemies left standing, aside from one Rabbi and his Golem. Gandolf flew at the last Golem without waiting for Cliff's orders. He pulled back his iron fist, then shot it forward. The Iron Golem's arm broke on contact, and it rolled backward, crashing on the ground. Gandolf straddled the fallen Golem and pummeled it with incessant punches. Over and over again, he slammed his fists into it, deliberate and relentless.

The Iron Golem had already lost its arms and face. Gandolf picked up the

torso and tossed it from the bridge into the sea. A splash came a second later, followed by a huge pillar of water.

“G-Go AWAY!” The remaining Rabbi screamed and fled.

The bridge was free of enemies now. Only Lovel, Cliff, and Gandolf remained.

“Gandolf…?” Cliff gingerly called out. Gandolf quietly turned around and slowly plodded toward him.

Thank goodness. He seems okay… Cliff tried to pat his reliable ally on the arm.

But Gandolf walked right past him—and didn’t stop.

Cliff turned to see where he was headed and spotted Kiriko with Legion on Head Island’s side of the bridge. They had come in pursuit of Cliff and the others.

“…I can’t believe you were capable of doing this much damage in such a short amount of time.” Kiriko stood her ground and glared at the incoming Gandolf. “The events of today are almost as bad as the Grinzam Disaster. What in the *world* is that Golem?”

No one answered her question—they had no explanation for Gandolf’s Herculean strength that had far eclipsed the Church’s Golems.

Gandolf suddenly broke into a monstrous run. Kiriko scowled and yelled, “LEGION! Pulverize that Illegal Golem!” Obeying her command, Legion moved as one.

Cliff gasped. Five of Legion lunged at Gandolf, while the last member charged Cliff.

“Watch out, Cliff!” Lovel promptly unleashed a hook kick to Legion’s side. It fell over but immediately sprung to its feet and attacked her. She frantically kicked it back while shouting, “Cliff! I’ll take this one out! You take care of Gandolf!”

“O-Okay!” he answered, even though he was worried about Lovel. He released the tension from his mind and endeavored to calmly analyze the situation.

Five of Legion were attacking Gandolf. Every movement was synchronized

and deliberate, like an elite squad.

Calm down! See through to the weakness in their movements! As talented of a Golem Tamer Kiriko was, it had to be near impossible for her to accurately maintain control over six Golems at once. They had to have a weakness somewhere.

After observing the battle for a short while, Cliff realized something new. Carefully studying the separate members of Legion up close made it seem like they all moved with the same precision, but they absolutely did not. Some of the members clearly moved clumsily.

The most awkward member had to be the last one she commanded! In other words, that was Legion's weakness!

"Gandolf! Crush the one below your right foot!" Cliff shouted. Gandolf caught hold of the Legion member coiled around his right leg and slammed it against the ground. In less time than the span of a single breath, he crushed it underfoot. Another member of Legion lunged at his back, but he destroyed it with a backhand punch.

Four members remained, but decreasing their numbers only increased their efficiency. Basically, the more Gandolf took out, the more powerful the survivors became as their link to Kiriko strengthened.

Damn it! They're too freakin' well made! Cliff gnawed at his lower lip in frustration, but Gandolf blocked a hit from one of Legion's claws regardless and snapped its neck.

Three to go. No sooner did the thought cross Cliff's mind than the Legion Lovel was kick-fighting with sprung at him. With no time to dodge, its claws locked around Cliff's windpipe.

CRAP! Cliff thought as Kiriko's angry voice barked at him in the distance.

"Boy, I am dead serious this time! Stop your Golem if you don't want your neck slit!"

This is really bad! It doesn't matter how strong Gandolf is if his Tamer is taken hostage! Or so Cliff thought, but Gandolf didn't stop his rampage. He crushed the head of the Legion who leapt at him with his hand and chucked the corpse

at Kiriko.

“Aah!” Kiriko jumped out of the way, temporarily bringing the movements of the final two members of Legion to a halt.

“NOW!” Lovel picked up a quarterstaff from the ground and batted the Legion off Cliff’s throat with it. As she scraped the letters off its forehead, Gandolf pummeled the last Legion member with a powerful punch.

And thus, every enemy had been defeated. Gandolf stood as still as a statue on top of the bridge piled high with the remains of his enemies.

No, *one* more enemy remained.

Gandolf slowly turned toward his last opponent. Captured in his killer glare, Kiriko cried out in a quivering voice, “You…You accursed Illegal GOLEM TRAAAAASHH!”

She shot the tranquilizer gun at Gandolf. The bullets that struck him in the shoulder naturally had no effect. Gandolf strode straight toward Kiriko.

“That’s enough, Gandolf! Let’s go after Erie!” Gandolf didn’t look back even when Cliff called for him. “Gandolf…?!”

His brisk pace didn’t falter. Lovel watched him and gasped. “…Look out!” she shouted, just as Gandolf’s walk switched into a full-stride sprint.

Gandolf ran the twenty meters to Kiriko with heavy, thudding steps. Paralyzed with fear, Kiriko’s feet rooted to the ground. Farther behind Kiriko, another set of pounding footsteps rose from the direction of the Church. Dram zoomed with mad speed toward her.

Ouka yelled from Dram’s back, “KIRIKOOOOOOO!”

But she didn’t seem to hear him. She remained frozen, as if struck by lightning. Gandolf raised his iron fists above Kiriko.

“DON’T!” Cliff screamed. Gandolf brought his fists down on the unmoving Kiriko—but Dram rammed into him a split-second faster. Gandolf staggered but caught his balance. A hoarse voice ripped from Cliff’s throat. “HOW?! Gandolf’s Restrictor…!”

Gandolf’s Restrictor prevented him from harming people. That’s what it

should have done. Cliff watched on in horror, wishing that what he was witnessing wasn't real. Gandolf slowly turned toward him.

Red light flashed before Cliff's eyes.

The emeth on Gandolf's forehead flared with red light like it was on fire. The burning light spread through him, bringing the concealed Engrave Incantations to the surface of his body.

Gandolf's entire body was dyed in crimson Engrave Incantations.

"He's gone berserk…" Lovel's quiet words sounded like they came from kilometers away.



Chapter 11: Comrade in Arms

Cliff

“NOOOOOO!” Kiriko shrieked. She stood paralyzed at the end of the bridge screaming hysterically. Gandolf locked on to her and struck with a backhand strike.

“KIRIKO!” Ouka lunged to protect her. Gandolf’s metal hand grazed his side. “Guh!”

Just the brush of Gandolf’s fist sent Ouka and Kiriko slamming into the bridge guardrail. The collision was likely headfirst, because they both lay limp and immobile.

“URAHHH!” Lovel burst into a run, ramping up speed with a war cry. She swung the quarterstaff down on Gandolf’s forehead as he bent over and reached for Ouka. He blocked the attack and punted her away.

Metal clanged throughout the area. Lovel had blocked his kick with the quarterstaff, but even that hadn’t provided enough friction to prevent the hit from blasting her backward and tumbling on the bridge. Cliff watched on, flummoxed by what he saw.

“…Gandolf.”

He would no longer answer. The red Engrave Incantations coursing through his body rejected Cliff.

Gandolf looked at Cliff and lumbered toward him. Watching the red metal giant come for him brought a surge of memories about the times they had shared.

They had done everything together. Gandolf was Cliff’s sole hope for crawling out from the bottom of society on Chest Island. He was the comrade in arms Cliff fought beside and drew strength and courage from, who helped him stand up and fight.

How… How did it come to this?!

Even though Cliff knew he needed to run, his legs were shaking so hard he couldn’t move them.

Gandolf came to stand right in front of Cliff. And he drew his fist back—

But before he could bring it down on Cliff, an amber lion jumped on his back. The full brunt of Dram's attack sent him toppling onto the ground.

Without a moment to spare, Dram pinned him and bared his fangs, about to rake off the "e" on his forehead. Gandolf slammed his head against Dram's open mouth with explosive force.

The pieces from Dram's broken fangs clattered on the ground. Neither his claws nor his fangs could do any damage. Even so, Dram fought hard to keep Gandolf pinned.

"Boy…!" Ouka's voice came from somewhere. Cliff looked around and found him still on the ground, staring at him. "Die once…with a bullet from this tranquilizer gun…"

Ouka's hand was fastened around Kiriko's tranquilizer gun—the gun capable of putting a Golem Tamer into suspended animation.

"This gun was originally created for this purpose… To cut the Tamer's link and stop a Berserker Golem…"

"You've got the wrong idea! Gandolf isn't going berserk—"

"*That ain't your Golem, kid!*" Ouka forcefully cut him off. Continuing over a stammering Cliff, he said, "Please…if you don't die temporarily, everybody here's gonna die for real…"

"…!"

"He's the life you created. It's your duty to put an end to it… Don't be a piece of shit who doesn't take responsibility and abandons the life he made…!"

Cliff's thoughts went to his street friends living together in the underground station. They had all been abandoned by their parents, irresponsibly neglected and tossed aside like dogs. If Cliff gave up on Gandolf here, he would be the same as those horrible parents.

Cliff had been abandoned too. But he'd at least received a proper name. That was a show of good faith on his father's part.

So he had to take responsibility in the best way he could. Coming to that

conclusion, Cliff replied, “But…I can’t die, not here, not now.”

“*What*?! Don’t be a spoiled brat! How’re you gonna fix this without dying?!”

“Who’ll protect Lovel if I die here and now?! I can’t just die and exit the fight! That’s why, I’ll…” Cliff rallied his resolve and continued, “…*destroy* Gandolf.”

Ouka answered him with silence. Cliff ran over to where Lovel lay flat on the ground.

“Sorry, Lovel… He finally came to life thanks to you, but I have to do this.”

Her eyes went wide, and she shook her head faintly, wearing a terribly sad expression. “…I won’t put the entire burden on your shoulders alone.” Lovel thrust the quarterstaff against the ground and staggered to her feet. “You’re Gandolf’s Tamer, so he’ll target you the moment you get close. So, I’ll be the one to hit him with this to destroy him… Let’s end our child’s life together.”

Cliff nodded and walked toward Gandolf aside Lovel. He didn’t know if destroying him here was the right choice or not. But he had no other options available at the moment.

“Ouka! Please have Dram use his claws to hold down Gandolf’s neck!”

Ouka didn’t answer, but Dram did as Cliff requested. Gandolf’s violent thrashes slowed as Dram’s claws pierced into the nape of his neck.

Yes, the neck was one spot Cliff had failed to find the perfect solid material to protect and the frailest location on Gandolf’s otherwise solid, metal body. The place Cliff kept thinking he wanted to do something about.

Gandolf couldn’t move if his neck was pinned. Cliff was well-aware of that. He knew everything there was to know about Gandolf. After all, Gandolf was his comrade in arms, his combat buddy, who he had been through thick and thin with.

Lovel tightened her grip on the quarterstaff. Gandolf looked at Cliff then. Their eyes met. The emeth on his forehead seemed to be oozing red.

For a second, it seemed as if Gandolf purposely stopped struggling.

“I’m so sorry…!” Cliff squeezed out. Lovel brought down the staff.

A sharp metal shriek ripped through the air and Gandolf stopped moving altogether. His body trembled as the Engrave Incantations covering it disappeared in succession. Once every last Engrave Incantation had vanished, only the letters spelling ‘meth’—*death*—remained on his forehead.

“Gandolf!” Cliff held Gandolf’s hand. Cracks split the metal hand. Fissures spread until they ran throughout his entire body.

And then Gandolf quietly crumbled away.

Only an iron finger was left in Cliff’s hand. His eyes locked on that finger as tears burst forth. Lovel pulled his head to her from behind. Cliff let the tears run their course in her arms.

After a while, Ouka pushed off the ground with his injured body. He picked up Kiriko and said, “Let’s go… We’ll only get caught if we hang around here. I’ve got a boatload of questions for you.”

He put Kiriko on Dram’s back. Cliff and Lovel nodded and followed behind him.

***

Ouka

OUKA and the kids walked Chest Island's midnight roads back to his factory. Kiriko lolled on Dram's back, still unconscious.

Lovel looked at her and asked, "Ouka, aren't you going to take Kiriko to a hospital?"

"I will. After I've told her what I need to tell her."

Lovel nodded in vague agreement.

"But," Cliff joined the conversation, throwing in his own question. "…why was Kiriko so afraid?"

"Why wouldn't she be afraid?"

"Well, it's not like I know her well, but…why'd she breakdown like that when she saw Gandolf going berserk? She doesn't seem like the type to panic."

Ouka knew the answer. The red, sinister glow must have triggered her raw memories of freshly spilled blood. "…I bet it reminded her of the traumatizing past."

"What past?"

"Four years ago, we created a monster at Torah Church—me, Kiriko, and a man named Alita did."

The floodgates holding back his memories opened, and he let them wash over him. Ouka began to retell what had happened only four years before, yet felt like a millennium ago.

"Kiriko, Alita, and I joined the Church the same year, and we were eager to bring Golem manufacturing technology and techniques to new heights. We thought that was the right thing to do. We believed in the path we aspired to."

Cliff and Lovel listened to his story without interruption. Ouka immersed himself in his recollection.

Kiriko used to be a woman who smiled often, someone much more cheerful than she was today. And then there was Alita, who Ouka was fairly certain Kiriko loved. Ouka loved and adored them both. He wanted to do something to

congratulate them if they ever got together.

But the relationship between the three of them never changed, no matter how much time passed. The days went by peaceful, unchanging.

“After several years passed, we started to distinguish ourselves from the rest. That’s when our boss Spinoza invited us to participate in researchin’ the cubes.”

“So you *do* know what this is,” Cliff finally interrupted him. He pulled an object out of his pants pocket—the red cube Lovel should’ve had on her.

“You’re the one who had it…?”

Fissures ran through the cube’s shell. This cube had once been buried in Sephiroth’s chest.

His hand clasped around the cube, Cliff asked, “Please tell me what this cube is.”

“It’s called Sehem-hamphorasch. It’s something that can move a Golem from the inside.”

“It moves a Golem from the inside?”

“Engrave Incantations are generally inscribed into the exterior of a Prime Body, which the Tamer controls from outside, yeah? But there are limits to how much you can do with that. It’s incredibly difficult to maintain control over several Golems at once, and their intelligence is practically nil when you do. But what if there was something that granted a will to the Golem, making it move autonomously?”

Cliff and Lovel frowned at his question. Ouka supplied the answer for them. “That red cube can take an infinite number of Engrave Incantations. Not only for controlling the exterior, but Engrave Incantations programming the interior as well. Memories, emotions, principles governing their conduct—you can program all that through incantations using the ancient language.”

“Memories…? Isn’t that like the human brain?”

“Yup, it comes frighteningly close to what we call a brain or a soul. Well, the black cubes Jair’s got are more finite though… At any rate, burying the cube in the chest of something with a human shape and naming it will bring the puppet

to life. Here's the catch: Golems with the cube aren't mentally linked with their Namer. They move and act according to their own will."

Ouka's research team and Grinzam had spent years searching for the ancient words to input. They had to find the elusive Engrave Incantations capable of restricting the interior because they were completely different from what they engraved into the exterior. Discovering those words would mean dispelling the secrets surrounding the cubes.

"We learned several things from our years of research. First, you can write Restrictors into the shell surrounding the original cubes. Second, if you fail to input the Restrictor 'can't kill people' into the shell, the body you embed that cube in will instantly act like a Berserker Golem… But once we learned those two things, the Church elders declared, 'Now is the time to create a holy warrior who can protect the country from heretics.'"

"…And that was Sephiroth."

Ouka nodded to Lovel. "Yeah. The strongest militarized Silver Golem, powered by the red cube—*Sephiroth*. The development team was formed from the twelve best, handpicked Rabbis. We poured the Engrave Incantations we'd successfully discovered after many years into a Prime Body we built to be as combat-ready as realistically possible. After a year of trial and error, we finally completed it."

He could never forget that day. For the rest of his life, Ouka would never forget the overwhelming joy he had felt and the living hell he witnessed soon after.

"We were ordered to unveil it for the military, right away. Naturally, the Restrictor 'can't kill humans' was engraved in the shell of the cube embedded in its chest. We even went a step further, to ensure we were ready in the off chance it went berserk, by making the armor plate over its chest extremely thin… Alita was chosen as the Namer."

Four years ago, in that underground research facility, the culprits had gathered. It was to be a historical moment, where a new generation of Golems came to life. The day should've been one of joy, of celebration.

"But…Sephiroth went berserk the instant he was named." Ouka heard Cliff

and Lovel draw in sharp breaths beside him.

A torrent of tragic, traumatic memories rushed through him. Spinoza, shouting something at the top of his lungs. Kiriko trembling uncontrollably in a corner of the laboratory. And in her moment of paralyzed fear, Sephiroth attacking her.

“We still don’t know the reason for it, but…the Restrictor preventing him from killing people didn’t function that day—*and only on that day*—despite all our successful tests. Sephiroth stormed around the laboratory massacring every Rabbi on the development team.”

Ouka couldn’t believe it then, and he still couldn’t believe it now. They had tested it hundreds, thousands of times; they only conducted the naming because they were *absolutely certain* Sephiroth wouldn’t go berserk as long as the Restrictor preventing him from killing people was engraved in his cube.

Yet, he’d gone berserk—the cause still unknown. Ouka had come up with a theory of why, even if it went untested.

When Ouka removed the cube from Sephiroth’s chest after the tragedy, fissures were webbed through the shell. Had they overlooked cracks that had already been there when they embedded it for the unveiling? Had the fissures formed when he removed it? He didn’t know the answer.

One possible reason for the Restrictor’s operating failure could be that a fissure had damaged the shell… The other possibility was one Ouka didn’t want to think about, but was the far more likely suspect.

He quietly ground his teeth. Unsettled by the abrupt silence, Cliff urged him along by asking, “How did you stop that monster…?”

“The Namer Alita challenged Sephiroth with his life on the line. ‘Whether I win or lose, it’ll stop him,’ he said. And then Sephiroth crushed him to death.”

Alita had tried to take on the berserker Sephiroth, and Ouka had tried to stop him from doing it. But Ouka hadn’t been able to stop him—he didn’t make it in time.

“…But even Alita’s death didn’t stop Sephiroth. That was the one thing nobody knew going into it—Golems powered by those cubes don’t stop moving

after their Namer's death. What stopped him in the end was Heaven's Gunner's bullet."

The bullet had pierced through the thin plate covering Sephiroth's chest, knocking the cube loose seconds after Sephiroth crushed Alita. *"I didn't make it in time!"* Spinoza had spat out through his teeth, his hand on his face.

"…The incident was enough of a reason for the Church to freeze further development of Sephiroth and research into the cubes. The development team, with less than three members alive, was abolished too. Kiriko and Spinoza were transferred to the Civil Obedience Order, and I quit the Church."

It was since then that Kiriko had developed an extreme hatred toward Illegal Golems. Crudely pieced together Golems posed the highest risk of going berserk, after all.

Kiriko abhorred Illegal Golems and feared berserkers, yet she still couldn't bring herself to leave the world of Golems. She placed stringent Restrictors on her Golems, kept them under supervision at all times, and continued walking the path of a Rabbi. She faithfully stuck to what she believed was right and just.

By extension having failed to bring Kiriko out of the Church with him, Ouka chose his own path in life.

"And so, I became an Illegal Golem Artificer. Because there are people who need Golems, whether the Church permits it or not. Because as long as I keep a sharp lookout, I can surely prevent any from going berserk."

It didn't matter if no one believed it—those were the real motives behind Ouka's choice. He had created Dram to run throughout the island preventing Golems from going berserk. He couldn't think of anything else he could do to help.

"…If Kiriko's a clean, silk handkerchief, I'm fine with bein' a dusty old rag. They might look different on the outside, but they're still both cloths for cleaning up messes. We both just wanted to do whatever we could for this archipelago."

Ouka's long monologue came to end. Silence fell between them. Eventually, Lovel asked in a small voice, "…What happened to Sephiroth after that?"

"The military pulled out of Sephiroth's development too, and the research

facility was locked down. He ended up being sealed away as the monster no one could Tame."

"But Jair can control him…!" Lovel firmly insisted, conviction ringing in her voice. Ouka knitted his brow, frowning at her. She persisted. "You saw what he's capable of! I'm telling you, Jair can control Golems powered by the cube, like the Ebens! It's not too much of a stretch that he'd be able to do the same with Sephiroth!"

"That's the thing that bugs me… How *can* Jair control Eben? It shouldn't be possible."

"It's not something you can create in an experiment. It seems more like a predisposition. Jair isn't the only one who has it, either—I'm positive I can do it too."

"A *predisposition*, you say?" The answer couldn't be so ridiculous. Jair had to have some sort of secret that let him do it. Did Lovel know what it was? Her reasoning was questionable.

"The Church will fall without much of a fight if he gets ahold of Sephiroth. You know that better than anyone else, don't you? Then, we've got no better choice than to let *me* name him first."

"…Tch."

"So please, Ouka! Lead me to Sephiroth, before Jair gets to him!" Lovel's expression was urgent and tense.

Ouka saw it and smiled weakly. "Hey, Lovel…won't you stop with this now?"

"What?"

"I'll cooperate if you're going to fight Jair. But please stop trying to reactivate that monster."

Dang it, saying crap like this ain't who I am, Ouka thought, but those were indeed the words he had said.

"Ouka, why do you care so much…?" Cliff asked, suspicious.

"Sephiroth is the symbol of our mistakes. I don't want to make Kiriko see that abomination ever again. If defeating Jair will settle everything, I'll fight

alongside you kids.” That was the totem of his resolve: to face the past he couldn’t escape.

Cliff and Lovel wore apologetic expressions. Ouka bowed his head to them anyway. “…Thank you for understanding.”

“I’m sorry, Ouka…”

“Ugh, shut it. You don’t gotta say stuff like that. Kids shouldn’t be considerate of adults,” Ouka said with his usual attitude, earning dry grins from Cliff and Lovel.

These kids most likely had their own set of problems. Lovel’s problems were big from the start, but Cliff had it pretty hard too, fighting the boy he admired enough to call Master. Ouka wanted to protect them, but he had more pressing matters to attend to.

Just as Ouka thought that, they finally arrived at the front of his factory. He picked up Kiriko and went in. Calling over his shoulder to the kids outside, he said, “It’s a promise, kids. I’ll help you out as soon as I resolve my own problem here.”

“What problem’s that?”

“Don’t sweat it. I’ll finish things up lickety-split. So do me a favor and wait outside for a bit,” Ouka said, closing the door and locking it behind him.

“Hey! Ouka?!”

“Come on, Ouka! What’s the big idea?!”

Cliff and Lovel shouted at him outside the factory.

Ouka answered them calmly, “I’ve got somethin’ I want to speak to Kiriko about alone. We’ll be having some adult time in here.”

“You’re screwing with us again…” Though Cliff and Lovel complained, they patiently settled down outside.

Ouka was grateful to them. This was the one conversation he wanted to have somewhere without any distractions. He laid Kiriko on the couch and lit a cigarette. Tobacco smoke curled in the poorly lit room. He followed the trails with his eyes for a while.

“…You really are an incomprehensible person,” she said at last. He looked to his side, where Kiriko stared at him from the couch.

“You were awake?”

“How could I sleep with how loud you were?” Kiriko shifted her attention to the ceiling and said quietly, “Ouka…did you quit being a Rabbi because it reminds you of Alita?”

“I quit because I came to hate the Church,” he replied without hesitation. A sad and lonely smile fell over Kiriko.

***

Cliff

CLIFF and Lovel were locked outside of Ouka's factory.

"For crying out loud, what's so important that they *have* to talk about it *now*? Things have turned sour between them because they're both not honest with their feelings anyway," Lovel complained, incredulous. She plopped down in front of the door. Cliff sat down beside her.

"At least he seems serious 'bout helping us. He might surprisingly turn out to be a good person, that Ouka."

"Yeah, but…I don't think he'll take me to where Sephiroth is after all," Lovel said, her shoulders sagging. Cliff found that disappointing too.

"What happens if Jair finds out where Sephiroth is first?"

"I think we're safe for now…? He can't move Sephiroth without the red cube we've got."

"Okay then. Now that we've got Ouka on our side, we just gotta regroup with Erie, and then…"

"And then we might stand a chance at defeating Jair," Lovel finished his sentence, her voice brimming with excitement. But Cliff sunk into despair when he considered what *defeating* Jair really meant.

"…Hey, Lovel? I fought Jair."

Lovel whirled her head toward him. "When?"

"A little before I rescued you. I fought him with Erie." Cliff pulled his knees to his chest and rested his head on them. "That was…Master Roche. His actions and words seemed like somebody else's, but I'm positive he's my master."

"……"

"But I can't forgive him. He tried to kill Erie for real, and there's what he's tried to do to you, too… I want to protect you from him." Maybe he didn't have the right to say that now, without Gandolf. But he couldn't stop himself from telling her.

Cliff gazed right into her pretty eyes and said, "So please tell me, why is

Master calling himself *Jair*? Why is he after you? Lovel…who are you?”

“…..”

“I want a reason to fight. Give me a real reason to do this, Lovel.” Suddenly, soft, warm arms wrapped around him. Lovel was hugging him.

“Just when I was thinking you’re just a boy, you suddenly became a man…” He heard her happy voice right next to his ear. Heat flushed his face and the blood rushed to his head.

“L-Lovel?”

“You did save me, didn’t you, Cliff? I haven’t had the chance to say a proper thank you yet, but you made me really, really happy,” she told him, releasing him from her embrace. She gazed at him as he remained still, in a stunned daze. “I’ll share our past with you and you alone…”

And so, she began to tell her story. “My mom tried to leave me behind the Torah Church right after she gave birth to me. I was an unwanted child. But then a man named Grinzam persuaded her against it.”

“Grinzam? Isn’t he the Rabbi the Church calls a heinous traitor?”

“Yup. But he was a nice guy. He persuaded my mom to change her mind and raise me. Mom went on to quit her job as a woman of the night, and eagerly worked her butt off at the mines.”

“She worked in the mines as a woman? Was she a Golem Tamer?”

“Nope. Mom’s predisposition made her completely incapable of forming Engrave Incantations.”

The word *predisposition* struck Cliff like lightning. Proficiency with Engrave Incantations varied from person to person. Practice mattered, but it was a world where natural talent mattered even more. Lovel’s mom unfortunately lacked any innate talent, rendering practice useless to her.

Lovel continued the story as Cliff’s heart wept for her mom. “That’s why Mom used the Golems Grinzam created to complete her work in the mines. We were poorer than dirt, but our days together as mother and daughter were tons of fun. Grinzam often assisted us whenever we needed it too.”

Lovel had been speaking with a look of nostalgia, but then her face darkened abruptly. She cast down her eyes and continued, “But…Mom died when I was nine. She died in a Golem Berserker accident.”

“She did?!”

“Yeah. There were a lot of crudely made Illegal Golems in the mines back then, causing frequent Berserker Accidents. And mom got caught up in one…! … Grinzam helped me care for Mom with his young disciple until she died.”

“…He had a disciple?”

“Mom had changed her mind about abandoning me, but another woman abandoned her child at the Church later. With no other way to save the child, Grinzam raised the boy as his disciple… He gave him the name *Jair*.”

Cliff drew in a sharp breath. “Jair…?! You mean the Jair we know?!”

“Yup. I’m almost certain your master is Grinzam’s disciple from back then.”

“But how? Master had no parents and…” Cliff trailed off when he hit on his own answer.

Now that he thought about it, Master hadn’t lived on Chest Island since the day he was born. He once told Cliff that he moved to Chest Island eight years ago.

“That’s it…!”

Various doubts and questions became clear when he thought along those lines. Things like: where Master had been before they met, why he could use Remote Engrave Incantations, and why he called himself Jair.

Master used to be a Church boy. He changed his name to Roche when he moved to Chest Island! Cliff concluded.

“…Jair went to Chest Island, and I moved into the Academy dorms after Mom passed away. Unlike Mom, I had the ability to form Engrave Incantations, but the real reason I went to the Academy was because it was her wish for me. She didn’t want me to walk the same path in life she did.”

Cliff felt fulfilled when he heard her story. He had thought they were from two completely different worlds, but their backgrounds were similar. He

thoroughly understood the loneliness and solitude of being left alone in the world. And he wanted to save her all the more for it.

“What happened since then? Why’s Jair after you now?”

“It happened early in the morning the day I met you, four days ago. Jair appeared before me for the first time in eight years with the cube. He told me about the plan to use Sephiroth to destroy the Church then, too.” Lovel gnawed her lower lip, her expression conflicted. “He told me, ‘Your mom died at the hands of a Golem. Such tragedies will disappear from this archipelago if the Golems do.’ But I couldn’t stand for that.”

“So you stole the cube from Jair and went straight to the Church?”

“Yup. I thought Grinzam would still be working there. I never imagined he’d be dead, and I especially didn’t think he’d be labeled a traitor.”

“And the Church didn’t believe you either…making you think you had to fight this battle alone.” Cliff glanced at Lovel’s profile—she was smiling.

“I wasn’t fighting alone… I’m not alone. I have you.” She lifted her head and looked at him. Emerald eyes gazed at him. “Thank you, Cliff. Thank you for fighting with me.”

“…If you’re fine with me, I’ll stay with you till the end.”

“In that case, I want you to promise me one thing.” Lovel took his hand in hers. “No matter what lies ahead, don’t think about killing your master. I’m pretty sure there’s a good reason for his change. A reason we just don’t know.”

“I think so too. So of course, I’ll make that promise with you. I want Master to return to himself too.”

“I knew you would… Don’t worry, I’ll be sure to do something about it,” Lovel said, and softly smiled. Cliff’s heart ached slightly.

She was definitely still hiding something from him. Her story had holes. The holes had begun from the moment they met, when she told him she had never made a Golem before. The fact that she hadn’t heard any news about the man who saved her life didn’t add up either, not when he was so involved in her life up until her mother’s death. What she had talked about didn’t answer any of

those questions.

Does Lovel know the reason why Master changed? Cliff intuitively knew she did. Perhaps her far too kind attitude gave it away. *But, so what if she's hiding things?*

Whether she was keeping secrets from him or not didn't automatically make her someone he no longer wanted to help. Lovel had told him of her past to the extent that she could share. That was enough for Cliff.

I'll fight to protect her until the end. Cliff steeled his resolve and returned Lovel's smile.

***

Ouka

“…KIRIKO, there’s something I’ve got to show you,” Ouka started, handing Kiriko the black file. “A certain doctor stole this from the room of St. Rollins Academy’s dorm custodian.”

Kiriko accepted the file without resistance and scanned the contents. Documents including lists of Engrave Incantations, reports on trial-and-error results, and various graphs, were neatly tucked inside.

A long moment passed until Kiriko’s face stiffened. She must have caught on to what the file meant right away. Those documents detailed their failures, their mistakes. Inside was data that should’ve only been known to those involved—the Church’s most classified secrets, which were forbidden to be taken from Church premises.

Kiriko’s hands trembled. Wrenching the question out of her drying throat, she asked, “Why…did that dormitory custodian have this?”

“Apparently Grinzam’s aspirations haven’t been squashed. But what’s more troubling at the moment is how these documents got outside the Church,” he said.

Kiriko pondered the matter for a minute, then inhaled sharply. She was a smart woman—it wasn’t hard for her to understand what it meant.

Ouka stared at her as she fumbled for words and then told her, “You decide what to do with the information. But if you plan on returning to the Church with it, take me with you. It’s too dangerous for you to go at it alone.”

Kiriko didn’t answer him. Heavy, oppressive silence weighed between them. After what felt like hours, she held her head high and said, “…Let’s go, Ouka.”

Ouka solemnly nodded and stood. Kiriko held the file under her arm and slid off the couch. As he walked toward the factory door—a sudden sharp impact shot through the back of his head.

“Ngh!” Ouka pitched forward, landing on his stomach. Out of the corner of his blurring, swaying vision, he saw Kiriko holding the tranquilizer gun. She had bashed him behind the head with it. “Kiriko! Why…?!”

“I’m sorry, Ouka… I was happy you told me.” Ouka thought he heard her say through his rapidly fading consciousness.

***

Kiriko

KIRIKO stealthily slipped out the back door, careful not to let Cliff and Lovel notice her out front. She walked the causeway out of Chest Island, heading straight for Head Island. Her thoughts went to Ouka as she crossed Neck Bridge.

She might never see Ouka again, even though they had finally made a breakthrough in their relationship and found it in themselves to talk about the past. She had to go regardless. The file he had brought to her revealed the truth she never tried to discover for herself.

It's my job to bring the truth to light… I know he will take care of the rest if I fail.

The risk that they would be killed at the same time was too high if they went together, so her choice to go alone was the best course of action. With those thoughts, Kiriko headed to the Torah Church by herself.

***

THE Church was quiet enough to hear a pin drop. Only a few people on night shift duty would be around under normal circumstances, but the halls were practically empty with the number of casualties they had sustained during the day. Only members of the General Affairs Bureau darted around, wrapping up the aftermath.

Kiriko was summoned to the conference room as soon as she arrived. She ascended the stairs to the second-story and headed there.

"Excuse me," Kiriko said as she opened the door to the room with seven chairs lining the panoramic window. Spinoza sat in the farthest chair with the rest of the elders. Kiriko took a seat in the sole chair placed in the middle of the room.

One of the elders spoke as she sat down. "Twenty-one Rabbis have sustained minor or serious injuries, sixteen Golems were damaged beyond repair, and three have parts broken off—that is how much damage our side has taken. I assume you have captured the rats to make up for our heavy losses, Torah Chief Kiriko Strife?"

“I failed to capture them,” she answered tersely.

Another elder joined the questioning. “Then would you care to explain why we have a witness account of suspect Ouka Baraki taking you away somewhere after the failed battle on Neck Bridge?”

“The witness account is true. I was with Ouka Baraki and Lovel Sinclair up until the moment I returned here.”

“And why wouldn’t you have apprehended the suspects if you were with them, hm?”

“I made the judgment call to postpone their arrest.”

Spinoza gave her a skeptical look. “You did…? Are you sure you have your story straight, Kiriko?”

Kiriko stared right into his eyes and replied, “I have not made a mistake in my account. I willingly allowed the three suspects to escape.” Spinoza shook his head, disappointed.

One of the elders cut into her with a low growl. “You disappoint us, Miss Strife. We believed you were a talented Rabba, but you have proved our expectations of you to be false.”

“I am disappointed as well… I can’t believe I have been acting under a misconception all these years,” she remarked, turning all seven heads toward her.

Another elder spoke up, loud and unhappy. “What are you suddenly going on about? Misconceptions, you say?”

“Yes, misconceptions. I always believed that the Sephiroth Project was entirely pushed by you elders—in order to butter up to the military.”

“Watch your tongue, girl. What does this topic have to do with our current deliberation?”

The elders burrowed into her with sharp, unforgiving eyes. Unfazed, Kiriko persisted, “But it turns out the project was pushed by an entirely different person. Won’t you all please stop and recall who it was that was invariably involved in the cube research, who influenced its direction?”

“You bring up an unrelated matter—”

“No, I don’t. Think back even further. Who was the first person to discover Grinzam’s corpse when it washed ashore?”

“It was—”

“There is someone among us who is Grinzam’s devout follower, who inherited his convictions. *Who* do you think that is?”

“……”

The elders said nothing, giving her their ear for the first time.

Kiriko set the scene for them. “That person refused to take on the role of Sephiroth’s Namer when requested, surviving the Berserker Accident as a result. And now he is trying to lay another trap for the survivors.”

“A trap? What trap?”

Confused voices filled the room. Kiriko’s clear voice cut through the noise. “That person is here right now.” She stood from her chair. “The person who has always remained at the center of the conspiracy for *years* while deceiving the people around him…”

She thrust her finger at the man sitting on the lowest chair. “…You, *Spinoza Bulledge*!” she declared with confidence.

“What?!” one of the elders shouted, shooting a look at Spinoza.

Spinoza responded, voice cool and level, “…Have you become confused, Kiriko?”

“No, I have not. I don’t know whether Sephiroth going berserk was intentional or a coincidence, but you leaked extensive data on our research outside these walls. After all, *you* researched the cubes, not for the Church, but to realize Grinzam’s dying wish.”

That was what the black file revealed. The documents inside were full of data only members of the research team at the time would know. If Ouka and Kiriko didn’t leak it, only Spinoza could have.

“I have here a file full of documents that a certain dormitory custodian had in

his possession. This is proof someone leaked data on Sephiroth's creation, data unattainable without having been present at the scene."

Kiriko handed the black file to the elder furthest from Spinoza. They read it and passed it around, their bewildered chatter growing louder. She glared at Spinoza.

"*You* conducted the research and experiments *you* needed to accomplish *your* objective at this Torah Church—using the Church's funds, facilities, and talented personnel. That is the truth behind the Sephiroth Project." Once the accusation left her, memories of those nostalgic days flooded Kiriko in waves.

Everyone had worked their hardest to unveil the secrets and mysteries of the cubes. She never doubted her path back then, for she had friends to experience the sorrows and joys of it with. She had a boss she respected and looked up to.

How was she to know every day was a lie?

"…Torah Lord, you used us till the end." Tears gathered in Kiriko's eyes. She confronted Spinoza without wiping them away. "Please answer me, Torah Lord. You sacrificed Alita and the others for your selfish objective, *didn't you*?!"

A silent conference room answered her accusation. Spinoza dropped his gaze to the floor and kept quiet. A long pause went by before he quietly murmured with his eyes down, "You saw through me, huh? …I really am disappointed, Kiriko."

"You—YOU TRAITOR!" One of the elders abruptly sprung to his feet, enraged. "You accursed traitor who rebels against God! You *dare* forget to be grateful to us after we raised you as a skilled Golem Tamer!"

The rest of the elders stood and pulled out their tranquilizer guns. Spinoza didn't even flinch as he said, "Rebel against God? Do you people even have hearts capable of adhering to God's will? Till this very day, you are still wetting yourselves over the fact that you failed to follow through with your present to the military. Don't bring *God* up, when the god you serve is but yourselves!"

"We'll take you to Small Sanhedrin, screwed up young man! We'll throw you into prison, never to let you out!"

"I see… As I thought, you view yourselves as right. You don't even stop to

consider you may be wrong.” Spinoza lifted his head and swept his gaze across the elders. The intent to kill gleamed in his eyes.

Oh no!

Spinoza shouted before Kiriko could move to stop him. “You are *traitors,* smeared in their own avarice!” Gunshots fired in cadence from behind, accompanying his grave voice.

Kiriko spun around in time to see the door fall over. A four-armed Grim Reaper stepped inside with gunpowder smoke curling from his revolvers.

“Purge them, Heaven’s Gunner!”

Bullets burst from the four revolvers at his command. Watching the elders collapse in succession from one side of the room, Kiriko bolted for the window. She bashed through it and leapt outside. The impact from jumping down from the second-story numbed her feet with stinging prickles. She endured the shooting pain, broke the window into the first-story corridor, and entered the building again.

The Prime Body Storage Room is just ahead! The confiscated Prime Bodies should be there!

Another round of gunshots and screams reached her ears. She didn’t have a second to spare. Kiriko raced down the corridor and threw herself into the Prime Body Storage Room.

It was a tall and narrow room with only one window at the end. Well-organized lifeless statues lined the walls on both sides. Kiriko found a bronze statue with completed Engrave Incantations and shouted with authority, “My name is Kiriko Strife! With truth as my witness, I give thee the name *No. 10*! Live as one with me and return to dust with me! I order thee to defeat Spinoza Bulledge!”

Just as the Bronze Golem moved to life in response to her, Kiriko’s ears were pierced by the sound of a gun firing.

Scarlet sparks flew from No. 10’s forehead. The bullet shot through the “e” with precision. Cracks webbed through the bronze body and it noisily crumbled away. Kiriko whirled around to find Heaven’s Gunner standing in the entrance

to the Prime Body Storage Room.

"I never thought *you'd* be the one to see through me… My plan failed me at the very end," Spinoza said with a bitter smile, beside his Grim Reaper.

***

Cliff

AROUND the same time Kiriko was fighting Spinoza, Cliff and Lovel sat in front of the factory door chatting about various things. They filled each other in on what had happened since they parted ways two days ago and even swapped stories about their upbringing and families.

There was no end to what they had to talk about. They discussed the most trivial of things, such as their favorite colors and foods. The time they spent unconcerned with the rest of the world was fun beyond compare. And that's exactly why Cliff failed to notice how much time had gone by since Ouka locked them out.

A long while passed before Lovel brought it up. "…Wow, look at the time. You think Ouka's forgotten about us?"

"Now that you mention it, it's been a while since he left. Let's ask him what's taking so long," Cliff said and knocked on the door. "Ouka? Ouka? Are you ready yet?"

No one answered. Lovel frowned, suspicious. "…Doesn't it seem like something's off?"

Cliff pounded on the door, expecting some sort of reaction from inside since they probably couldn't ignore the racket no matter what they were doing. He exchanged looks with Lovel and peeked in through the window. There, they saw Ouka sprawled out on the floor.

"OUKA?!" Cliff yelled. He didn't see Kiriko inside.

Lovel smashed the window open with a rock without an ounce of hesitation. She and Cliff pulled themselves into the factory and ran over to Ouka.

"Ouka, what happened?!" She held him up in her arms and slapped his cheeks. He groaned and sluggishly opened his eyes.

"Wh-Where's K-Kiriko…?" he stammered, his eyes blank, his voice hoarse with sleep.

"I don't see her here. Did she go somewhere?" Cliff asked.

“What?! Does she plan to handle everything herself?!” Ouka clambered off the ground and flew out the factory door, stumbling over his feet along the way. Cliff and Lovel followed him, baffled.

“Where are you going?!” Cliff asked his back.

“To the Church! Kiriko is in danger!” Ouka leapt on Dram’s back in front of the factory and shot off toward Head Island.

“What should we do, Lovel?!” Cliff asked her, watching Ouka grow smaller down the road.

“Something’s not right here… Let’s follow him!”

Cliff and Lovel nodded to each other and ran toward the Church.

***

Kiriko

KIRIKO stood dead still in the middle of the Prime Body Storage Room with all four of Heaven's Gunner's revolvers trained on her.

"Torah Lord… Why did you do it?" she asked Spinoza, who stood blocking the exit.

"I told you why before. I'm still a Rabbi, even if the people whose orders I follow aren't. I was the only one left who could continue Grinzam's dream."

"Was it worth accomplishing at the price of countless innocent lives? Are fulfilling the wishes of the dead that important?"

"Of course it was. Granting his wish was a world of difference better than making some worthless automatic weapon for the Church and military to sic on people. All your hard work paid off for *me*." A distant look twinkled in Spinoza's eyes as he went on, "Doesn't it just remind you of the days when we all stayed overnight at the Church discussing what was right and wrong with the design until morning? We created Prime Body after Prime Body for tests and conducted experiments on top of experiments… I thought everything would go smoothly some day soon."

He tilted his head down, slightly lowering his gaze. Dark shadows fell over his face, making his expression unreadable. He was a shadow of the man she knew.

"Why are you so obsessed with those cubes?! They are a washout. They can't be controlled without inputting the Restrictor not to kill people!"

"You just don't understand the potential the cubes have. You're looking at things on a superficial level. The *life* created by the cubes *isn't even a Golem* in the first place."

"They're not Golems? You mean they're just Berserker Golems."

"No, there is one other thing they could be. What else leaves the control of its parents the moment it's born, and acts according to its own will?"

She gasped. "You don't mean to say that—" Kiriko knew what he meant.

He nodded and answered her right out. "*Humans*. Those cubes are capable of

turning puppets into humans. Or to be more exact, they transform them into something similar, but different."

Kiriko had vaguely considered the theory four years ago. But it was wrong. It should have been wrong.

"…We certainly created a monster back then—a Golem with the same intelligence as a person," she acknowledged. "We could grant memories and emotions all we wanted through the Engrave Incantations."

"……"

"But is that really creating a human being?! A human soul can't adapt to find its home in a metal body! Can you really call something without a soul, without a real body, human?!"

"You're absolutely correct. But doesn't that just make the problem finding a body they can adapt to?"

"What are you implying?" Kiriko didn't understand what he meant by that. Spinoza eventually sighed.

"…I've said too much, Kiriko. Let's end this now."

Heaven's Gunner cocked the four guns, about to fire, when the window behind Kiriko shattered. She looked over her shoulder as an amber beast landed beside her.

"KIRIKO!" Ouka shouted from Dram's back.

Without a moment's hesitation, Kiriko leapt onto Dram's back behind Ouka.

Spinoza howled, "OUKA!" and Heaven's Gunner fired.

"GUAH!" Ouka moaned, nearly falling off Dram. Kiriko held him up with both arms. He reoriented himself on Dram's back and sent him charging at Spinoza.

Spinoza and Heaven's Gunner evaded, splitting to the left and right of the exit. Dram zoomed through the gap and charged right through the corridor window into the garden outside.

"COME BACK HERE, OUKA!"

Bullets whizzed by Kiriko and Ouka as they galloped through the front quad.

Dram cut across the stream of bullets and took cover behind a building a slight distance away.

Relieved to be out of the path of hailing bullets, Kiriko looked at Ouka. Blood was gushing from his side.

“Ouka! Are you all right?!”

“It’s just a dinky scratch. It hurts like hell though.” He forced a smile to reassure her, and it eased her fears a bit.

Bullets fired in the distance while they shared their sweet moment. They didn’t know who he was shooting at, but the gunshots came closer with gradual precision.

Ouka quietly whispered, “I’m going to have Dram leap on Spinoza the second he shows himself. Back me up when that happens, Kiriko.”

“Okay…!” Kiriko gripped her gun. Time inched along as they waited, tension hanging thick over them, gnawing at their feet. But then it was broken by the sound of Cliff’s voice.

“Ouka!”

Startled, Kiriko and Ouka looked in the direction of the voice. They spotted Cliff and Lovel running toward them from the main gate.

“Hide! Right now!” Kiriko shouted. The children hesitated, but ran over and hid beside Kiriko.

Spinoza must have spotted them, because his voice boomed out, “Hah! Looks like all the lead actors of this play have gathered in one place!”

Kiriko searched for the owner of the voice. Gunshots rang out whenever she peeked out from behind their cover and she quickly pulled her head back.

Lovel took one look at a stray bullet and raised her voice in shock, “Somebody’s shooting at us…?!”

“Torah Lord Spinoza is,” Kiriko answered.

“Huh? Why’s he doing that?! Wasn’t he on your side?!”

“No…he’s our enemy. He has been since four years ago,” Kiriko said with a

self-derisive laugh. They could no longer return to the past. She was well-aware of that, but it still hurt and saddened her nonetheless. She could sense it had come to a definitive end. "…I have no reason to capture you now. You have been…acquitted."

Relief washed over Cliff and Lovel, but their expressions instantly hardened.

"Being captured is the least of our problems at this point…!" Cliff retorted, and Lovel nodded.

Ouka snorted before yelling, "Spinoza, is this what you wanted?! Were you trying to turn the Church into a graveyard?!"

"It's an inevitable sacrifice for righting this archipelago from the path it has strayed to," Spinoza replied. They heard his voice continue from somewhere close. "Don't you guys find the archipelago's system strange too? *He* thought so, eight years ago, when *Catalina* died."

Lovel's face tensed at the sound of that name. She shouted at him, though he was out of sight. "Hold on, Spinoza, how do you know that name?! Who are you?!"

"You don't remember me, do you? Well, not that it matters. That person chose it to be so."

"What are you talking about…? We should've met for the first time during the questioning at the Church…" Lovel's face clouded with unease.

Not following what they were talking about, Kiriko cut into their conversation. "What is all this about?! Who is this Catalina?!"

"She's the woman who started it all. Well, I suppose I'll take the opportunity to finish telling you of the past before I kill you, why not…" Spinoza set the stage and began retelling the story. "Seventeen years ago, there was a prostitute who came to abandon her baby at this church. Grinzam convinced her to change her mind and raise the baby herself instead."

Kiriko had already heard that part of the story, but she knew there had to be more to it—an atrocious, appalling hidden storyline waiting to be retold.

"The mother and child found happiness, and Grinzam seemed happy as well.

But then some years later, the mother died. She suffered all her life with the inability to make Golems, just to die miserably in an accident at the hands of a Berserker Golem."

Kiriko scanned the area for Spinoza as he spoke, tracking the sound of his voice to pinpoint his location. Bullets sprayed the wall whenever she tried to stick her head out for a look.

He continued telling the story to his captive audience. "The woman's name was Catalina Sinclair…the mother of Lovel, who you have hiding with you there."

"Seriously?!"

"What?!"

Kiriko and Ouka cried out in surprise at the same time.

"Grinzam enrolled Lovel into the Academy dormitory using his savings," Spinoza said, piling on more surprising details. "And then he tried to use the cubes to revive Catalina. But the Church wouldn't allow the cubes to be used for anything other than Sephiroth, without question. Grinzam put this charge to the elders:

"'If people are starving in the streets, you do not feed them. You levy exorbitant fees on the usage of Golems on an archipelago where it's impossible to attain even a decent standard of living without a Golem. Seconds ago, a woman who lived a tragic, miserable life because she couldn't make or afford a Golem just died. She's neither the first nor last of her kind. Yet, you use Sehem-hamphorasch on a Golem meant to kill people; but you won't use it to help people live. Is this the Church I've devoted my entire life to…?! You have no right to use Golems *or* Sehem-hamphorasch!'

"And so Grinzam took the cubes and fled with his disciple Jair. The Church's greatest Golem, a puppet of a man, went berserk for the first time on that day…" Spinoza narrated, his voice quiet, solemn.

Lovel strained her voice against his. "But Grinzam is long dead, right?! Why're you still obsessed with his dying wish?!"

"He died…?" Spinoza repeated, his voice hollow, vacant.

“He did! Grinzam’s already dead!” Ouka joined in. “So why did you leak the cubes and disclose our classified secrets to a dormitory custodian?! What are you really after?!”

A roar of laughter erupted out of nowhere. Spinoza was laughing at him.

“Wh-What’s so funny?” Ouka asked, flustered.

Spinoza answered through his laughter, “You think Grinzam’s dead?! He ain’t dead!”

“Are you for real…?!”

“Lovel, wasn’t there a man with Jair when you woke up four days ago? He’s the man you call the *Mastermind*! He should have told you the whole story, including things only those involved would know!”

Lovel frowned before the shock hit her like a ton of bricks. Tension tightened across her face, drawing her beautiful features into an uneasy expression. “How? …It can’t be…that person can’t be…!” she rambled, her voice trembling.

“You still don’t get it, Ouka?!” Spinoza taunted, sensing the confusion rising in his prey. “You’ve already been face to face with him! You’ve had a nice little chat with him!”

Realization flashed through Kiriko like a lightning bolt. *Is it possible?! But what other answer could there be?!* Various strands of information connected in her mind, revealing the image of the full picture.

Why had the condemning black file been in his possession? Why had the information been leaked to him? What happened eight years ago? Grinzam was —

“It can’t be him…!” Ouka said, his voice taut and stressed. He seemed to have come to his own conclusion about the identity of the man who had pretended to be another for eight years.

Chapter 12: The Truth

Erie

A little earlier than when Cliff and Lovel fought Berserker Gandolf on top of Neck Bridge, Erie and Heath were racing down the roads of Chest Island shadowed in the darkness of night.

They were headed for Getz's clinic. Erie glanced at the leg Heaven's Gunner had shot. She originally thought the bullet had severely injured her, but it stopped bleeding a while ago. Or rather, wiping away the crusted blood revealed no puncture wound beneath it. Had the bullet only grazed her skin? Had a knick caused that much blood to pour from her leg?

Erie decided to think so. She had a strong feeling nothing good would come of thinking about her injury further.

Heath mattered more at the moment anyway. His body had been filled with bullet holes during the fight with Heaven's Gunner. Though his body wouldn't shed blood, she couldn't bear to leave him looking like a pincushion.

I just know Professor Getz can do something about Heathy's wounds! Erie hurried to his house.

But her hopes were dashed when she arrived at the clinic and breathed in with a start. The windows were shattered and the front door was busted. Something bad had clearly happened. Imagining the worst, she rushed into the clinic, panicking for Getz's safety.

She saw no one inside. However, she could hear voices conversing in the kitchen, farther inside.

"…You surprise and disappoint me, Professor Getz. Never did I think you would sneak out with that file."

"I knew you had it. I merely handed it over to the right person."

The second voice belonged to Getz, and Erie could recognize the first as well. She tiptoed to the kitchen and discovered a staircase leading to a basement below. A cabinet had been moved aside, revealing the hidden entrance.

Erie felt her heart leap to her throat, and she swallowed before descending the stairs with Heath. She heard them talking downstairs while she quietly made her descent.

“Why have you done such a thing, after we have come so far? I feel like I’ve been betrayed.”

“You’re the one who betrayed me first…! I heard nothing of you using it on Erie!”

“I had no other choice. It was the best course of action a year ago.”

The voices grew clearer the farther down she went. She was very familiar with the second voice. Why could she hear it coming from the basement? What was it doing here? After a long descent, Erie stepped off the last stair. She raked her gaze over the dark cellar and saw four figures.

“…Why?”

Getz stood by the window, facing Jair and Eben. And then, the fourth form, standing beside Jair, belonged to someone unbelievable.

“Why…why are you here…?!”

“Oh, why, if it isn’t Miss Erie. You’ve arrived at just the right time.”

The gentle, caring eyes that had watched over Erie for the duration of the school year turned on her. The first voice belonged to the Dormitory Custodian, Benny Navarov. He smiled at her arrival.



“Mister Navarov! Why are you together with Jair?!” Erie yelled.

Navarov answered her question with nonchalance. “Because I’m the one giving him orders.”

“…*You are*?!” Erie brought a hand over her mouth in shock, her stomach roiling.

“Allow me to pay you my deepest respects by explaining how things came to this. Otherwise, I’m sure you would find it simply unbearable to die and leave things without putting up a fight.” Erie sucked in a shaky breath, and Navarov flashed her a sorry smile as he launched into an explanation. “I doubt you remember, but you met me about ten years ago. And I taught your younger self how to make Golems. I showed you how to use Remote Engrave Incantations then, as well.”

“That can’t be true…! I thought you couldn’t use Remote Engrave Incantations…”

“I have my reasons for hiding the ability. In any case, my little display led to you harboring the dream of becoming a Golem Tamer.”

Navarov’s story coincided with what Heath had told her of the past. But Erie didn’t have any memory of the incident. No matter how she tried, she couldn’t remember what had happened.

Navarov continued over her confusion, “It seems like you didn’t abandon that dream, even after returning to the mainland. And so, you came back to this archipelago last spring. Many years had passed since then, and I should have changed quite a bit, and yet, you remembered me.”

“Wh-What are you talking about? Didn’t we meet for the first time at the dormitory, a year ago?”

“*I made you think we did*. I made you forget what happened between us.”

“You made me forget it…?”

“I had no alternative. My plans were still a work in progress. It was dangerous to have someone who knew me around. But I didn’t want to attract the attention of the Church, so it wasn’t as if I could just get *rid* of *you*. So I—”

“Eh?”

Erie lost the ability to process the rest of what Navarov was saying. She saw his lips moving, but only heard ringing in her ears. When she tried to ask him to repeat himself, Navarov finished his statement with, “But it’s time to put an end to that. There is no need to keep you alive any longer.”

Those words spurred Jair and Eben into action—they surged toward Erie. Getz stepped between them. “Stop it! Don’t lay your hands on this child!”

Jair hesitated momentarily before him. Navarov thought it over for a second, then said, “Move him out of the way.”

Eben promptly swept out his arm, knocking Getz through the air. He crashed against a wall in a corner of the room. “AGH!”

“No…why…why would you…” Erie sputtered, her voice lifeless and dazed.

Navarov had been such a kind and friendly custodian. And yet, here he was, hurting Getz and trying to kill her.

Jair and Eben closed in on her. Erie panicked, and the confusion rooted her to the floor, robbing her of the ability to run away. In the drawn-out seconds before her fate was sealed, something glowed, bright and vicious, from within the inner depths of the dark cellar.

Everyone turned toward the light. At the glowing corner of the cellar was a large tank with a girl inside. The girl wore a hospital gown, and the Engrave Incantations covering her entire body floated at the surface of her skin.

Getz lifted his face from the floor and moaned, “Roberta…”

“I had forgotten your daughter is still active,” Navarov spat, revulsion coating his words.

Erie thought back to the story Getz had told her. *Daughter? This is the daughter Professor Getz turned into a Fresh Golem?!* No sooner did the thought flash through Erie’s mind than the girl balled her fists and slammed them against the inside of the tank.

Cracks spread through the tank until the material could no longer withstand the pressure and shattered. The encased embalming fluids spilled onto the

cellar floor, filling the room with a pungent, bizarre smell.

Alarm and wariness came over Jair's features, and he stood protectively in front of Navarov. The girl hopped onto the floor from her confines and let out an enraged shriek.

"Roberta… You don't have to do a thing. Just behave…!" Getz begged her, but the Fresh Golem Roberta fixed furious eyes on Navarov and howled.

"Eben, defeat this woman first!" Jair ordered, and Eben lunged at Roberta. But she was gone. She had jumped into the air a second faster, evading Eben's powerful jab.

Jair's eyes widened. Roberta sank her nails into the cellar ceiling, then, hanging from them, she kicked out with both legs and knocked Eben back.

"Tch!" Navarov clicked his tongue and took a few steps back. Roberta flipped smoothly onto the floor and stalked closer to him. Erie watched on, motionless, as if she were stuck in a nightmare.

Erie didn't know who the real enemy was, and she didn't know what was true. But she *did* know what she had to do.

"Heathy, let's grab Professor Getz and run!"

At her command, Heath picked up Getz and bolted up the stairs with Erie. She heard fierce, savage bangs and crashes behind her, and the intense bloodlust numbed her limbs and sent tremors down her back. She made it to the top of the staircase and rushed right out of the clinic without looking back.

"Professor, let's escape somewhere safe!" Erie exclaimed. Getz shook his head and pulled himself off of Heath's shoulder. "Professor!"

"I won't run… I can't flee when I'm the one who caused all of this."

"Caused what? Are you talking about the events leading up to this?"

Getz didn't answer. Erie grabbed his arm as he tried to walk back into the clinic. "Can you tell me the whole story…?" she pleaded. "Don't you know the truth behind everything that has happened, Professor?!"

A long bout of silence fell between them. Eventually, he came to a decision and looked over his shoulder. "…Navarov arranged everything that has

happened. The boy Jair is also moving according to his will."

"I can't believe it…!"

"I thought I was one of the few friends he cared about. We sympathized with each other for losing who we loved most. That's why I tried to help him, to the best of my ability." A sour expression overtook Getz's face, as though he resented himself for his choice. "But he used everything and anything to make his plans succeed—including you, Erie. I tried to stop him, and this is the result…"

"Stop him from doing what? What is Mister Navarov trying to do?" Erie asked.

Getz wrung out his answer through a constricted throat. "Listen to me very closely, Erie. The man you know as Benny Navarov does not exist in this world."

"He doesn't exist…?"

"It happened about eight years ago. On the run from the Torah Church, Grinzam came to my clinic with his disciple who had fled with him. His disciple, Jair, was unharmed, but Grinzam had serious injuries, and had grown haggard."

Erie listened to the unexpected story about Grinzam with her head spinning.

"He was at the point where he couldn't run any longer. It was clear he wouldn't be able to research the cubes he went through all that effort to obtain. I told my friend I would do anything to save him from the brink of demise. What he asked of me was…" Getz took a deep breath, "…to *erase Arusrad Grinzam* from existence, and create another identity for him."

"You don't mean to say Mister Navarov is…" Erie trailed off as the answer to her doubts flashed through her mind.

Navarov became the Academy's dormitory custodian eight years ago. So why did he tell Erie that he had met her ten years ago? Because he had worked for the Torah Church before he became the dorm custodian. Because he was the Golem Tamer Erie had met and idolized as a child!

Erie finally understood what it all meant. In a quivering voice, she whispered the answer. "Mister Navarov was…Arusrad Grinzam…all along…!" Shock and grief jolted through her, robbing her of speech.

“I performed plastic surgery on Grinzam and his disciple, then autopsied completely unrelated corpses and reported them as theirs. Thus, the Torah Church believed they died, and the man known as Arusrad Grinzam vanished from this world, along with his disciple Jair…”

That was the hidden truth. Grinzam, the man everyone thought had died eight years ago, hadn’t really died. He had changed his name and face and lived on, never leaving the archipelago.

“And so, his plans continued below the surface. His accomplice, Spinoza, conducted research into the cubes within the Church. Grinzam received the data so that someday he could attempt to unravel the secrets of the cubes.”

“But wasn’t the research canceled when Ouka and the others failed?”

“It never ended. Grinzam’s obsession, his vindictive feelings, didn’t end with that horrible tragedy…! He waited and waited at the dormitory for the perfect opportunity to exact his revenge on the Church and bring the woman he loved back to life!” Getz turned to Erie, holding her in his intent gaze. “And then, four days ago, Grinzam finally put his plan into action—his plan to reactivate Sephiroth and demolish the Church.”

“That’s when I was pulled into it… Is that what you are saying?”

“…I’m sorry.”

Erie didn’t want him to apologize. She didn’t desire those words from him. She sought them from no one. She only wished everything had just been one big, bad dream. But it wasn’t.

Mustering her courage to face reality, she insisted, “Let’s run away, Professor Getz! Our opponent is a monster! It’s too dangerous to stay here!”

“I won’t run! I’ll stay with Roberta in her final moments!”

They could still hear chaotic thundering and crashes coming from inside the clinic. Roberta was still fighting Jair.

“A Berserker Golem is no different from a baby. They simply lose control because they were born with power. But she was capable of even making peace with me—the man who imprisoned her in that cellar.”

This was the first Erie heard anything of the sort, but Getz's tense face and what she had witnessed in the cellar told her it was the truth.

"Roberta grew angry when she saw me being hurt. She grew angry for her worthless, cruel father, who had locked her up in a tank for over ten years… She left the tank and told me, 'Daddy, run away…!'"

Erie hadn't heard Roberta say anything. But she didn't doubt Getz had. She understood their relationship better than anyone else, because she was the same as him. It was for that reason she didn't object outright.

"Professor Getz, even your daughter has asked you to run… So please! Run away!" Tears welled in Erie's eyes.

Getz looked away and said, "I'm staying. You run for it."

"But—"

"I can't leave my daughter behind to escape and live a carefree life without her."

"But—"

"This is all I can do for you, and the many others embroiled in this chaos my actions enabled—"

"But *I* don't want you to do that! I don't want to lose the people I care about, ever again!" Erie wailed, taking Getz's hands in hers. Bewilderment flickered in the eyes directed at her.

"Erie…?"

This man had wandered for many years, lost and unsure of what he should do. He was a lonely, miserable, grieving, and selfish doctor. But those were the exact reasons why Erie connected with him on a deeper level. He taught Erie, who could only ever believe in Heath, the warmth of others. Getz had become someone important to her.

"Professor, you wanted your daughter to live, didn't you? You wanted to be with her in whatever shape necessary, right? I was the same. Please don't make me lose another person I care about!" Erie looked squarely into Getz's eyes and declared, "I will protect you, Professor Getz. I will defeat them!"

After a long pause, Getz squeezed Erie's hands. His warmth was conveyed to her through his hands.

"…Don't die, Erie."

"Thank you, Professor Getz… I'll go settle things for us," she told him, and then reentered the clinic with Heath.

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ERIE stepped inside and heard a terrible, loud bang from the cellar. Roberta and Jair were still fighting.

Erie ran down the stairs leading to the cellar with Heath. Below, she found a destroyed Eben, Navarov with his back up against the wall, and a haggard Roberta with her hospital gown in shreds.

Jair seized Roberta's neck in his hand and lifted her up by it.

"STOP!" Erie cried out, but Jair ignored her as he scraped off the letters on Roberta's forehead.

Roberta's body trembled with violent spasms until she ceased moving entirely. The red Engrave Incantations floating at the surface of her skin were smothered, like flames put out by a lid. And thus, the Golem girl, who had spent eleven years locked in a tank in the basement of the clinic, crumbled into fine fragments of ash, never to set foot above ground.

Erie clenched her fists so hard her nails cut into her skin and drew blood. Her voice trembling with her sorrow and fury, she shouted the accursed name. "MISTER NAVAROV…!"

Navarov—no, *Asusrad Grinzam*—pulled a wry, embittered expression at being called by that name.

"You came back? The circumstances aren't in our favor, but we can't back down now… Jair, kill Miss Erie."

Jair nodded and faced Erie. Erie squarely met his gaze. Resentment and hatred far surpassed her despair for being betrayed.

The rage burning in her gut leapt out in a murderous shout. "HEATHY, *KILL JAIR*!"

Heath swiped out with his knife toward Jair at her command. The knife flashed as it sliced through Jair's hand. Jair retreated a few steps and held his ground, but Heath stepped forward and thrust in a volley of relentless cuts. The knife stabbed Jair's arm, contorting his expression. The number of wounds on Jair's body increased with each gleam and flash of the butcher's knife in the faintly lit cellar.

I can't lose! Erie thought, pouring her concentration into the battle. The instant Roberta had defeated Eben, Jair's fate had been sealed.

He had run away during their battle at the Academy four days ago. But this time they were inside a basement with nowhere to run.

I absolutely won't let you escape! I'll put an end to it all here and now! Erie thought.

Jair made a break for her and launched a kick to her side. Heath slid between them, intercepting the blow with his elbows. Without a second to spare, he swung down the knife, cutting Jair.

"Agh!" Blood gushed from Jair's shoulder and he fell forward. Heath pressed the tip of the knife to his throat.

"Tch…!" Grinzam's face twisted.

"I have a question for you," Erie said, looking at him with disgust.

"…What is it?"

"Why did you target me? What do I have to do with your plan?"

"I suppose it's only natural that you would want to know… Then allow me to present you with my final lecture—on the true power of the cubes." Grinzam procured a black cube from his chest pocket. "Each Sehem-hamphorasch can take an infinite number of Engrave Incantations. You can even use them to program the body's interior, and its mind."

Grinzam's hands glowed and Engrave Incantations inscribed the surface of the cube. The ancient letters immediately vanished, returning the cube to its slick, black surface.

"You can use them to implement basic human intelligence and instinct.

Depending on the Engrave Incantations used, you can even make internal organs and vocal cords that work. It's even possible to create a personality and memories. You can go as far as to say the Engrave Incantations can give birth to an artificial *soul* and *mind*."

Erie had learned the gist of those capabilities from Ouka. But it was what Grinzam said next that sent shockwaves through her.

"The one thing that came as an utter surprise, you see, was that embedding the original red cube into a body grants it the capacity to manifest the ability necessary for using the all-powerful Remote Engrave Incantation, if so desired. My guess is that the original purpose of the power was to allow the Golem to engrave newly gained knowledge into the cube embedded in its chest."

"Remote Engrave Incantations…?!" A sudden bad premonition swept over Erie. A mysterious and intense, volcanic anxiety suffocated her.

Grinzam continued his lecture over her silence. "However, that does not mean you can create a human being. You may be able to create a soul—a persona—but we are still incapable of creating a human body. So how do we get around this obstacle?"

Erie felt like she was on the verge of producing the answer. But a fog muddied her mind, obscuring her ability to think. Grinzam lectured on.

"Even if you embed the cube in a corpse, the body will eventually rot away. Embedding it in a living human has no effect, as a living person's will appears to be far stronger than that of the cube's power… So what is the answer then?"

The truth was just before her, but Erie didn't want to think about it. She didn't want to consider where the host body would come from.

"The answer is simple: just make a human without a will," Grinzam said, answering his own question. He pulled a gun from his jacket. It was the same type of gun Kiriko had pointed at Erie the day before—the absurdly powerful tranquilizer gun.

"A medicine that doesn't kill the person, but renders them completely unconscious and without any will—that's the weapon the Torah Church made. Do you understand now? Understand how it is *you* were created, that is."

Grinzam smiled at the speechless Erie and said, “A year ago, I *shot you* with this concoction and embedded Sehem-hamphorasch in your body while it was in a state of suspended animation.”

Erie couldn’t hear what he said. Or to be more precise, she heard him, but it went through one ear and out the other.

“By putting the human body in a state of suspended animation, you can overwrite the original personality with an artificial one using Engrave Incantations. You can kill the mind of a person who knows something they shouldn’t, yet have them act as if they were the same. I was able to do that by combining the Church’s drug with this cube.”

“……”

Erie’s mind stopped working, like the cogs had gotten stuck. The same thing that happened every time she tried to think of her past.

“When you enrolled in the Academy a year ago, you remembered me. You didn’t remember my face, but you recognized my voice and the air about me; the things that couldn’t be changed with plastic surgery. So, I used a rare red cube on you. I engraved a personality that imitated the original you and implanted fake memories into it.”

She couldn’t hear him.

“And born anew on that day was the current you before me. I gave you two Restrictors, ‘can’t kill humans’ and ‘believe you are a normal human being and never doubt it.’ These were truly effective Restrictors in buying me more time.”

She couldn’t hear him.

“And then, when all my preparations were finished four days ago, I put my plan into action. All that was left to do was have Jair activate Sephiroth and use him to wipe out the Church. But Miss Lovel nabbed the last red cube and ran for it…! I was out of cubes, and I needed one to activate Sephiroth.”

Grinzam’s eyes dropped to Erie’s chest as he said, “So I decided to remove the cube from your chest and use it on Sephiroth instead. Long story short, I’m just trying to take back what I never intended to use on you in the first place.”

“…!”

Clarity returned to Erie’s mind after he finished talking. She knew she had been told something of great importance, but couldn’t rouse the desire to think about it.

The one thing she knew for sure was that Heath had gotten mixed up in this man’s evil plans and was murdered for it. She knew this man was a hypocrite, who didn’t hesitate to kill people in order to achieve his goal of raising someone important to him from the dead.

For some reason, Erie couldn’t find it in herself to take matters into her own hands and kill him, despite the hatred she felt. But she could never forgive him for what he had done. The origin of the disaster haunting this archipelago had to be ended, right now.

“Heathy, kill Jair and Grinzam!” Erie shouted to Heath. Her command would put an end to all of it.

But Heath didn’t move. He stayed perfectly still with his knife thrust at Jair’s neck.

“…Heathy?” Erie didn’t understand at first, and then she gasped. Red Engrave Incantations floated to the surface of the hand around the knife. The Engrave Incantations that had originally vanished after inscribing them reappeared, covering his entire body.

Grinzam saw it and cackled. “Haha! What a sorry twist of fate…! Did your temporary brain freeze cause it? Or is it the result of the bloodlust you’ve harbored since you created him…?”

“Heathy?!” Erie called his name, not wanting to believe her eyes. But her voice didn’t reach him anymore. Red suffused the Engrave Incantations drifting on his skin. The emeth on his forehead began glowing like a freshly stoked fire.

“He’s gone berserk!” Grinzam announced, elated with his triumph.

Erie cried out in a hysterical voice, “HEATHY! *Listen to me!* Kill him! *Kill* him!”

Heath didn’t move. He trembled, his limbs quivering as he fought against the desire to rampage surging through him.

Jair snatched the knife from his hands. He shoved Heath away and ran at Erie. He swung the knife down at her as she stared up at him wide-eyed.

“Ah!”

She had no time to do anything. The tip of the knife sliced deep through Erie’s chest. The strength rushed out of her body and she crumpled to the floor. Heath’s movements completely ceased. Jair tossed the knife aside, and it clattered against the cold, hard floor.

“I never even considered you would turn Heath into a Golem… Your quick-thinking sure threw a wrench into my plans.” Grinzam took a deep breath and strode over to Erie. “Use the dead in whatever way necessary to exact revenge—of course, you would have at least considered the option. *I created you*. It wouldn’t be strange for us to think alike.”

Erie was his captive audience—she was unable to even twitch her fingers. Grinzam peered down at her face and said, “But the moment you viewed him as a tool, he ceased to be Heath. Golems are just Golems, after all. They are nothing more than empty puppets that move to their Tamer’s will. Being together with this Golem is no different than being all alone.”

Erie couldn’t even cry. Her consciousness was barely hanging on by a thread. A red cube rolled out with the blood gushing from the giant slice through her chest.

It’s Sehem-hamphorasch. Why’s it in a place like this? Erie thought, seeing her own soul, the soul that had lived Erie’s life from a year ago until this day.

“We finally have it… Let’s make haste to the station, Jair.”

She heard Grinzam’s voice in the distance. He left the cellar with Jair. She merely watched his fading back, unable to do anything to stop it. Erie could no longer move her body. Darkness dyed her vision black. Sensations disappeared, thinking ceased, and her heart sunk in despair, dropped into the void of darkness.

And that was how the soul of the girl who had been called “Erie Reyer” for the past year vanished from the world.

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Kiriko

…RETURNING to the events of two hours later at the Torah Church; Lovel hissed at the truth Spinoza had shared with them. “So that man was Grinzam…!”

Kiriko pieced together all the information she had gathered, matching her conclusion with Lovel’s. “I fear it is so… The dormitory custodian was Grinzam all along, just with a different face!”

“I can’t believe it…!” Lovel’s expression turned grim, and she fell deep into thought. Cliff peered at her, worried.

Though Lovel was still but a young woman, Kiriko realized she had a beautiful face when she looked closer. Kiriko had no doubt she resembled her gorgeous mother—the only woman the strongest Rabbi in history had fallen in love with.

“She has the right…” Kiriko muttered under her breath, and Ouka nodded.

Lovel had the right to be brought face to face with Sephiroth—whether she was actually capable of controlling him or not. True to her word from the start, Lovel was only trying to activate Sephiroth to protect the Church and the archipelago.

Kiriko had misjudged her. And Spinoza, the man she had thought her friend, turned out to be Grinzam’s puppet. The man she knew as the strongest Golem Tamer alive worked for the enemy.

Regret won’t fix what’s done, but…I will make sure to take responsibility for it, Kiriko thought, scanning her surroundings. She still didn’t know where Spinoza was shooting at them from. Four people and Dram remained in the building’s shadow, unable to escape.

“…He hasn’t made a move,” she whispered after taking everything in. Spinoza didn’t show himself, and he was no longer droning on about the past.

“Did he run away…?” Ouka asked, dubious.

“Wouldn’t that be strange? Where would he go?”

“If Grinzam’s alive, hasn’t he gone to meet up with him?” Cliff suggested.

“Meet up? Where?” The second the question left her mouth, Kiriko suddenly figured it out. She understood why he would leave them there, and where he had gone. “Oh no! Torah Lord Spinoza plans to beat us to it!”

Shock and comprehension flashed across Ouka’s face. “We’re leaving, kids!” he beckoned to Cliff and Lovel, who looked at him confused. “I’ll take ya to where Sephiroth is!”

“You will?!”

Ouka hopped onto Dram’s back.

Kiriko turned to the perplexed children and told them, “Please wait for me real quick! I’ll bring a Golem along with us too!” She headed toward the Church as she spoke. She retraced her steps back to the Prime Body Storage Room.

Only one Prime Body was unscathed in the wrecked room full of scattered, broken bits of Golems riddled with bullet holes. Kiriko named the giant wooden body.

“My name is Kiriko Strife! With truth as my witness, I give thee the name *No. 11*! Live as one with me and return to dust with me! I order thee to,” Kiriko drew close to the Prime Body and whispered in its ear, “…please protect us.”

The Wooden Golem named No. 11 came alive.

Kiriko left the Prime Body Storage Room with No. 11 and found Ouka and the children waiting for her. She led them all out of the complex to a corner of the Church grounds.

“Please wait, Miss Kiriko. Where are we going?” Cliff asked on the way.

Kiriko left his question unanswered and ran down the staircase leading underground at the corner of the front garden. It was the entrance to the underground Torah Church Station. The group descended the stairs and stood on the platform. No one was around.

“They went on ahead of us…!” Kiriko breathed. She began operating the switchboard at the edge of the platform.

“Explain what’s going on, Kiriko,” Lovel demanded. “How are you taking us to where Sephiroth is? Is he inside this station?”

“Yes. To be precise, he’s *beyond* this station.” Kiriko finished working the switchboard and directed her eyes to the railway tracks. The tracks leading north abruptly cut off at a wall. Staring at the wall, she explained, “This underground railway connects Chest Island’s mine to the Church. Hence why everyone believes this station is the last stop to the north, and that there is nothing beyond it… But the truth is that the tracks go beyond this stop.”

The wall obstructing the track began to open, emitting the mechanical sound of churning gears. Another platform with a set of tracks appeared on the other side of the wall.

“This is the hidden track that lies beyond the last railway stop, the path that leads to the Church’s underground research facility,” Kiriko clarified. Cliff and Lovel’s jaws dropped.

“Then, is he—”

“Yes, Sephiroth is there. An automatic train connects this station to the research facility.”

It didn’t take long before they heard the rattle of an accelerating train come from the darkness farther down the railway track. A large two-car train slid into the platform. It was an automatic electric train designed to only run on this track.

“Let’s head off to where that monster lies,” Kiriko said, boarding the back railcar with her Golem. Ouka and the children climbed in behind her, and the doors closed. Now that they were all on board, the train took off.

“We will arrive in five minutes. Before that, we should—” Kiriko had turned around to face Cliff and the others when gunfire cut her off.

Chapter 13: Riding Out Death

Ouka

KIRIKO'S *been shot!*

No sooner did Ouka register the fact than a hail of bullets fired at him. In a moment of snap judgment, he pushed Kiriko down behind the cover of a row of seats. Cliff and Lovel dove behind the row on the opposite side of the aisle.

"Aggh…"

Ouka clenched his teeth when he heard Kiriko moaning in pain. Blood spilled from puncture wounds on both her legs.

They had been foolish in their carelessness. They should've been prepared for Heaven's Gunner lying in wait for them, considering that their destination was technically still within Church grounds. Spinoza had ambushed them on the train cars, where they would have nowhere to run.

The showering bullets continued while Ouka regretted his lack of forethought, and No. 11, still standing in the middle of the train car, was caught in its assault. No. 11 protected his forehead with his arms, but the bullets cut through his entire body, splitting his wooden frame.

After what seemed like forever, the gunfire ceased.

"SPINOZAAAAAAAA!" Ouka shouted till his voice turned hoarse.

"…Ouka? Still alive, huh?"

Spinoza's steady and quiet voice came from the front of the accelerating train car. Oddly enough, Ouka could hear his voice loud and clear over the noises of metal squealing, the rumble of the locomotive engine, and the wheels turning over the railway track. He poked his head out from behind the cover of the seats.

About twenty meters ahead, the door to the inner engine room was open, revealing Heaven's Gunner and Spinoza. Spinoza was armed with a shotgun, which he aimed at the seats.

"I told you to back down before, Ouka… It's still not too late. It won't be long before every Golem goes berserk on the archipelago. Take Kiriko and those kids and escape this island while you have the chance."

"You think I'd do that?!"

Kiriko was sitting beside Ouka with bloody legs. Lovel and Cliff were crouching behind the seats on the opposite side of the aisle. Ouka looked at each of them and said, "We've been used as your pawns from the very beginning. But we ain't Golems. Don't you go thinkin' that everything's gonna go as perfect as you plan!"



“I thought you’d say that. Then let’s put an end to everything in the five minutes it takes to arrive at the research facility…” Spinoza replied. “Here I come, OUKA!”

A barrage of merciless bullets sprayed the seats they were hiding behind. The cacophony of clangs and sparks from the ricocheting bullets surrounded them. They were completely unable to make a move.

“Torah Lord!” Kiriko rose partially above the seat and shot her tranquilizer gun. Four times the number of bullets returned fire, making the attempt futile. A bullet struck her arm and she dropped back down behind the seat.

“Damn it! Don’t shoot at him like an idiot!” Ouka yelled at Kiriko.

“Won’t he run out of bullets?!” Lovel shouted across the aisle. “Why don’t we aim for when he has to reload?!”

“You can bet your damned neck he’s got more than enough bullets for firin’ the whole five minutes. And don’t forget: his Golem’s got four arms, and he has two. As long as he can reload some guns while he fires the others, he never has to stop shooting.”

Kiriko took Ouka’s advice and raised her voice. “No. 11! Turn your back to the enemy and crouch!”

Obeying her command, No. 11 turned around and crouched, warding off a few more bullets than standing had.

Ouka bolted from the cover of the seat with Dram. Bullets grazed his shoulders, but he couldn’t stop to feel the pain. He slid into hiding behind No. 11 in the middle of the carriage.

Yet, despite how big No. 11 was, he couldn’t block all the bullets pelting them, evidenced by the countless bullet holes that opened in Dram’s torso, though his forehead remained guarded.

“Kiriko, can you do anything to close the distance?!”

“I’ll try!”

No. 11 slowly trudged backwards toward the enemy. Ouka and Dram advanced closer, matching his speed.

About twenty meters lay between them. If they closed the gap some more, Ouka could sic Dram on Spinoza. But it was impossible at their current distance. As a four-legged animal, Dram couldn't protect his forehead. Lunging straight at Spinoza from this far away guaranteed that the "e" on his forehead would have a hole through it before he even landed a hit.

"Get me another fifteen meters—even ten will do! At any rate, help me get up to the front car!"

Kiriko nodded, though he couldn't see her. No. 11 succeeded in gradually advancing another five meters against the hail of bullets.

Keep it up, No. 11…! We've got a chance at winning if we can get a little closer! Just as Ouka got his hopes up, he heard a thundering burst that sounded different from a shot fired by a revolver.

The back of No. 11's right leg exploded into sharp fragments of wood, halting his forward advance.

"Spinoza busted No. 11's right leg…!" Kiriko hissed over the flying bullets.

The bullets from Spinoza's double-barrel shotgun had blown the Engrave Incantation clean off No. 11's leg. He was trying to inhibit the mobility of both the Tamer and her Golem. Against all odds, No. 11 dragged himself forward with just his left leg. His speed decreased to half of what it was before.

"Kiriko, how many shots does a shotgun have?!" Ouka hollered, his voice straining with his attempts to avoid bullets.

"Seeing that he's not firing it like crazy, I'd say he doesn't have many shotgun rounds on him… But our advance will be over if he gets the left leg too," Kiriko answered, her voice bitter.

Cliff turned to Lovel and urged, "Lovel! Can't you fix the chipped Engrave Incantations with your Remote Engrave Incantation?!"

"Sorry, I've got practically no knowledge about Engrave Incantations! I can't do something so detailed without a textbook!"

Ouka grit his teeth at her disappointing answer. Neither he nor Kiriko could use Remote Engrave Incantations. They couldn't fix No. 11's right leg, and it was

only a matter of time before No. 11's left leg was blown off. The remaining ten-odd meters felt like hundreds.

Lovel's voice came behind Ouka. "Kiriko, break this window!"

Hesitation flashed across Kiriko's face for a moment, but she promptly reloaded the tranquilizer gun and shot the window above Lovel's head. Lovel leapt and leaned outside the train car through the broken window.

"Lovel?!" Cliff cried out as bullets zoomed after her. She pulled herself onto the train car roof before the bullets grazed her.

Her voice echoed through the ceiling. "…I'll spring a…surprise attack through the…roof…to distract…him…" They barely heard her say before her footsteps disappeared onto the next train car.

"That's too reckless…!" Cliff exclaimed.

Kiriko heard him and shouted, "No. 11, please advance on a little farther, no matter the cost!"

No. 11 crawled the distance with his one leg. Once he almost reached the end of the first train car, the explosive burst of a shotgun cracked the air. What they had feared happened. The shotgun bullets ripped through No. 11's Engrave Incantation, rendering the left leg immobile.

"Shit!" Ouka swore against his better judgment. Their hopes of closing the gap any farther had been completely dashed. Around twelve meters stood between Ouka's current position and Spinoza. The distance was still too great.

Should we wait until we arrive at the station? No, No. 11 won't last until then.

Innumerable bullets had pierced holes through the Golem's neck, and his whole head threatened to fall off at any moment.

To make a dire situation even worse, Dram was reaching his daily time limit. Ouka had used him nonstop since the day started. He had a few minutes of use left at most.

Damned if you do, damned if you don't, Ouka thought.

"Dram, let's do this," he reluctantly groaned to his partner. Dram moved out of his stiff crouch.

Behind him, Kiriko shouted, “Ouka! You aren’t planning on having Dram attack from there, are you?!”

“…I am.”

“You can’t do it! You won’t reach him! Dram will be destroyed before he arrives at the enemy!”

“What other option do we got?! We’re out of time!”

“Please wait, Ouka!” Cliff cut into their conversation. “I have an idea!” Tension rang in his voice. Bullets sliced through No. 11’s wooden frame without pause.

“You have an idea?”

“Yes! I’m positive Lovel is waiting for the right timing. This method won’t work more than once, but you’ll have one shot to pull it off!” Determination colored his voice now. His voice was of a man who had made up his mind and wouldn’t go back on it. “The key moment is soon…when Heaven’s Gunner stops firing—”

Ouka heard glass shatter at the front of the train car. It was the sound of Lovel breaking the window next to Spinoza!

“Now’s the time!” Cliff yelled and bolted from behind the seat.

Ouka looked at Spinoza. Lovel was gone. Heaven’s Gunner was firing out the window and the ceiling with all four guns.

Cliff darted in front of No. 11 in the quick second the guns stopped firing down the aisle. He stroked No. 11’s legs with light-imbued fingers.

“You’re pulling off a Contact Engrave Incantation!” Ouka exclaimed as the Engrave Incantations on the broken legs repaired. Spinoza noticed Cliff, and Heaven’s Gunner turned all four guns toward him. Cliff dove behind the nearest row of seats just as the guns fired.

“Reckless child!” Kiriko shrieked.

Cliff turned and grinned at Ouka, even as blood poured down his arm. “Ouka…that Golem will start moving again. Are you ready?”

No. 11 restarted his forward advance. Seeing Cliff’s triumphant expression

brought a smile to Ouka as well.

“You’ve got guts, Cliff…!”

No. 11 was closing the gap. The cadence of explosive shotgun bursts eventually stopped the left leg from moving again. But it was enough this time. No. 11 had finally stepped foot into the front train car. Spinoza was about eight meters away. He was within range!

“…It’s my turn to risk it!”

Ouka mounted Dram’s back. Guarding Dram’s forehead with his quarterstaff, he fixed a hard gaze on No. 11’s back. No. 11 was on the verge of falling over after being filled with bullets.

Spinoza stood on the other side of the punctured Wood Golem, along with his four-armed god of death. A memory from four years ago flooded into Ouka’s mind as he waited to face his foe.

Alita died to protect Kiriko back then. I didn’t protect anyone. And now Kiriko is in danger once more. I have to be the one to protect her this time. He could feel his regrets from the past granting him the power to defeat the enemy armed with five guns, on the other side of the wood giant.

“Here we go, Dram!”

Dram broke into a run just as the shotgun fired.

No. 11’s head blew off and the massive body slowly crumbled to the ground. Dram used the brief gap to reach his top speed, and kicked off the ground into a flying leap. On the other side of the crumbling No. 11, Ouka saw Spinoza.

“SPINOOZAAAA!” Ouka howled.

“OUKAAA!” Spinoza roared.

Heaven’s Gunner fired his revolvers. Burning pain shot through Ouka’s shoulders, arms, and legs, but he endured the agony to defend Dram’s forehead even if it killed him.

Dram alighted on the ground and propelled himself at Spinoza with the momentum. His full bodyweight slammed into Spinoza.

“GUAAH!”

Dram’s charge struck Spinoza square in the chest, crushing his back against the wall. The blow shattered the surrounding windows. Blood spurt from Spinoza’s mouth. But Spinoza’s blood-soaked lips twisted into a demented smile. His arm was wrapped around Dram’s neck. He flexed his shoulder muscles and the vestments ripped right off. Then, clenching his teeth, he belted out a war cry as he threw Dram off him.

Ouka reflexively leapt from Dram’s back. Dram rolled right through the swing door and fell outside the train car. Ouka hit the ground with Spinoza’s shotgun trained on his forehead.

“…It’s your loss, Ouka.”

Ouka stared at the gun muzzle from the floor. Heaven’s Gunner had his revolvers pointed at Kiriko, Cliff, and the ceiling. No one was free to make any last-ditch moves.

Sadness tinged Spinoza’s voice as he said, “I warned you not to get too deeply involved in this… This isn’t the job I hired you to do.”

“And I told you, I’m doin’ this to help me make sense of things. To move on.”

“You stupid bastard… I really took a liking to you.” Silence fell between them, leaving just the sound of the accelerating train.

Ouka fixed an intent stare on him and asked, “…Hey, Spinoza, will you let me say one last thing?”

“Sure.”

“I seriously respected you. Your strength, your intelligence, your Taming skills, and your sly tricks were all things I looked up to.”

“What are you trying to say at this point in the game?”

“But y’know, you’ve become weak.” They heard an odd sound mix with the train noises as Ouka spoke.

“…Who did you just call weak?” Spinoza turned a wary eye on the ceiling. But Lovel wasn’t making the noise. It was coming from outside the train. The sound of running feet came from the other side of the missing door, outside the

moving train.

“Your instincts have dulled, Spinoza. Why do ya think I’ve been dragging on this meaningless discussion?”

The pounding of multiple feet reached the door. The Golem that had been chucked out of the train had pushed its broken body to its limits to catch up to a moving train on four legs.

“Ouka! Damn you!”

Heaven’s Gunner aimed every gun outside the train. Ouka smacked away the shotgun barrel and shouted with its point away from his face, “COME, DRAM!” Heeding his call, an amber lion leapt inside the train.

“DIE!” Spinoza snarled. Heaven’s Gunner fired at random. Dram broke through the wall of bullets and swept at Heaven’s Gunner with his tough forelegs.

There was a loud crack and bones flew through the air. The single strike sent Heaven’s Gunner backward and he crashed through the window, tumbling outside of the train.

Ouka struggled to his feet and swung down his quarterstaff. Spinoza redirected his shotgun at him again. Gunfire reverberated from the back of the train car, blowing Spinoza’s shotgun out of his hand.

Spinoza’s eyes bulged as he watched the shotgun arc through the air. Kiriko had shot him. Ouka didn’t have to see her do it to know. And in that momentary opening, Ouka brought down his quarterstaff with every bit of strength left in his body.

He heard a dull snap. His strike was a square hit to Spinoza’s cervical vertebra.

“…It’s our win, Spinoza.”

Spinoza slowly crumpled. The train began decelerating. It finally stopped at the station as his body hit the ground, signaling the end of the battle that had continued for four years.

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OUKA ran out of strength and fell on the floor of the halted train.

“Ouka!” Kiriko dragged herself across the floor to him. Cliff and Lovel appeared from hiding and peered at Ouka’s face.

“Ouka…” Lovel said, her face white.

“Ouka?” A question hung in Cliff’s voice.

“Stay with me, Ouka!” Kiriko begged.

Ouka forced a weak smile to reassure them. “Don’t ya worry. We’re still alive, Spinoza and me both.” Relief washed over all three faces. Ouka directed just his eyes to Cliff and Lovel as he apologized. “…But I’m sorry to say I don’t think I can show ya the way there. Dram’s reached his daily limit too…”

Dram laid face-down in a corner of the train car after succeeding in his life-or-death struggle to save Ouka. He had used his full two hours, taking him out of the fight for good.

“Nor can I…” Kiriko admitted weakly. “But Sephiroth is just ahead.”

Cliff and Lovel shifted their eyes outside the train. A massive door stood in the darkness at the end of the platform.

Ouka locked his eyes on the door and said, “Go, kids… And if you happen to reach Sephiroth sooner than Grinzam, please name him instead.”

Cliff and Lovel nodded in silent agreement. They disembarked the train together and disappeared into the facility past the platform.

Kiriko waited until they left to ask, “…Are you all right, Ouka?”

“That’s my question. You doing okay, Kiriko?”

“It hurts something terrible and I can’t walk anymore, but they aren’t life-threatening injuries.”

“We’ve become a sorry mess, huh?” Ouka said. Kiriko giggled. He smiled at her and then shifted his eyes to Spinoza on the floor. “…Why did he do it?”

“Why indeed…” Kiriko seemed to feel the same way. Sorrow and a hint of loneliness overtook her voice as she said, “I don’t understand what reason could drive Torah Lord Spinoza into supporting Grinzam to the death. What mattered so much to him to betray us, to sacrifice Alita and everyone else…?”

“Because I’m the same as him.” Spinoza slowly rose.

“…!” Words escaped Ouka. Spinoza dragged only his upper body upright, and looked at Ouka and Kiriko.

“Th-The same? How?” Kiriko asked, her voice cracking.

“I was raised by the Church too. The Church kept on picking up children and raising them to do their bidding. Me, Jair, and Grinzam were kept like pets by the Church, for the sole purpose of devoting our whole lives to researching the cubes,” Spinoza spat with disgust. “Then, one day, Catalina appeared before us hopeless men. She was an amazing woman, just like her daughter Lovel. That’s why I swore to bring her back to life with Grinzam.”

“…!”

“We were able to use the Church to its full extent. Now that we’re finished with it, all that’s left is to activate Sephiroth and crush the Church. Doing so will prevent any more people like us, and poor women like Catalina, from being born into the world. Grinzam and I fought for over eight years to make this tragic wish a reality.”

Ouka listened to Spinoza in silence. After a slight pause, Kiriko quietly asked, “Torah Lord, I have one question for you… Did you arrange for Sephiroth to go berserk during the unveiling?”

Another long silence. Forever seemed to pass before Spinoza answered, “Yeah, I removed the Restrictor… I did it to make the military and Church pull out of their research on the cubes. I thought Heaven’s Gunner could stop him right away.”

“I can’t believe you…!” Kiriko blanched.

“I didn’t shy away from any method that would help bring Catalina back to us. You were all nothing more than pawns in my plan.” Spinoza smiled as though he had given up on everything in the world. Kiriko’s shoulders trembled, and she dropped her eyes to the ground as if it hurt to look at him.

But Ouka blatantly pointed out, “That’s a lie.” Kiriko’s head jerked toward Ouka. He held the frowning Spinoza captive in his gaze and clarified, “You bit out between your teeth, ‘I didn’t make it in time,’ when Alita died. I don’t think

your expression then was fake.”

Ouka thought of the injuries Spinoza had inflicted on him. The bullets had hit his arms, shoulders, and legs, none of which were fatal enough to kill him. Strange wounds, considering that Heaven’s Gunner’s Engrave Incantations endowed him with the ability to aim precisely at his target.

“You must’ve regretted it all this time…that your plan created so many victims… Lemme guess, you wanted to use the red cube to bring Alita and the others back from the dead?”

Spinoza’s expression fell away.

“He’s right, isn’t he?” Kiriko said, tears in her voice. “We obediently followed you because that’s the kind of man you are. Am I wrong, Torah Lord?”

Spinoza buried his face in his hand. A pause stretched between them until he bitterly muttered, “For heaven’s sake…you two never lost your naiveté, no matter how much time passed.”

A dry click echoed outside the train. Ouka and Kiriko whirled their heads toward the open door. Looking like nothing more than a deranged, beat-up corpse, the Golem crawled into the train car.

“…No,” the word fell from Ouka’s lips like a drop of rain. In its one remaining hand, it held a gun. “emeth” glowed from the piece of skull it still had attached.

“Heaven’s Gunner!” Kiriko exclaimed. Ouka wrapped his arms protectively around her.

Spinoza’s voice fell on his back. “…You don’t know what you’re talking about, Ouka. There are only four red cubes. We can’t bring back the nine people who died in that accident.” Grief filled his voice. Ouka prepared himself for death as Spinoza vented, “We aren’t God! There’s a limit to what we can regain once it’s lost…! Which is why I chose to live the way I did!”

Dry gunfire cracked through the train car.

“…Eh?” Ouka said, his voice hollow. He didn’t feel pain anywhere.

Heaven’s Gunner’s bullet had pierced through the left side of Spinoza’s chest with absolute precision.

“Torah Lord, why?!” Kiriko rushed over and tried to put pressure on the bullet hole.

Spinoza held back her hand and quietly admitted, “I allowed nine people to die…all to bring one person back…”

“…!”

“I shouldn’t live any longer, now that Grinzam’s wish has come true… This is about the only thing I can do for Alita and the others…”

Ouka finally understood everything.

Alita and the others hadn’t been disposable pawns. They mattered just as much to Spinoza as Catalina. He must have been distraught with grief and regret when he let them die—enough to want to kill himself.

Yet, for all he wanted to die, he didn’t take his own life. After all, their deaths would truly be meaningless if Grinzam’s plan never succeeded. He had lived in purgatory until today to make their deaths mean something, planning to atone for his sins with his life once everything was over.

“Spinoza…!” Ouka took Spinoza’s hand.

Tears in her eyes, Kiriko called his name, “Torah Lord Spinoza?”

But he could no longer answer them. Warmth seeped from his hands. Heaven’s Gunner quietly crumbled behind them.

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Cliff

CLIFF and Lovel advanced deeper inside the research facility searching for Sephiroth. Guided by electric lights, they threw open several doors and proceeded even farther inside. Then, after a while, they spotted the door in the deepest depths of the facility. A plate reading, “Research and Development Sector” hung over the steel door.

Deep in his gut, Cliff knew Sephiroth was on the other side.

“Cliff…”

He nodded to Lovel and opened the door. The room beyond was vast and empty. Wrecked Golems were scattered about the dreary steel-reinforced room. Old bloodstains dyed parts of the room even after all this time, speaking volumes of the tragedy that had happened here four years ago.

At the farthest end of the room, a massive giant of pure silver lay senseless on the ground.

“That’s…Sephiroth!” Cliff breathed. Modeled after an archangel, the giant gleamed under the electric lights. Not even the word “giant” could accurately capture the sheer size of its colossal body. It easily surpassed four meters in height.

Supple arms and folded wings were attached to its torso. It still clutched a long spear in its hands. This was the militarized Silver Golem Prime Body that had massacred Ouka’s friends.

Unfortunately, Sephiroth wasn’t the only one in the room. Beside the Prime Body stood two men with their backs to Cliff.

“JAIR!”

The men turned toward Cliff. One was Jair, while the other man had a beard.

“You came? I take it Spinoza lost,” the bearded man remarked bitterly.

“I can’t believe you were Grinzam…!” Lovel uttered, her voice sharp enough to cut. At once, Cliff understood the man was the Rabbi known as Asusrad Grinzam, the cause of everything. But Grinzam himself quietly shook his head.

“That man no longer exists. He was killed by the Torah Church eight years ago.”

“And now you’re just the embodiment of revenge? Stop this nonsense. I don’t want Golems to disappear from this archipelago.”

Sadness flickered in Grinzam’s eyes as he demurred, “I can’t believe *you* would say that… Countless numbers of people have suffered at the hands of Golems, including you both. Putting an end to this archipelago’s distorted history with Sephiroth is my calling.” Conviction close to madness laced his voice.

Though Cliff was overwhelmed, he called out, “But Grinzam! You can’t activate Sephiroth without this cube, can you?!” He pulled the red cube from his pocket and thrust it out for Grinzam to see. “I’ll crush this if you won’t quit this ridiculous plan. And if I do—”

“Unfortunately,” Grinzam interrupted. “I no longer have a need for that cube.”

“You don’t…?!”

“I was searching for Miss Lovel because we didn’t have the cube necessary for activating Sephiroth. But we just got ahold of another one not too long ago—the last red cube that exists on this island, that is.”

“What?! Where did you get something like that from…?”

Grinzam didn’t answer Cliff. He looked at Jair and said, “Jair, begin.”

Jair nodded and faced Sephiroth.

“…My name is Jair. In the name of the 72 gods, I give thee the name *Sephiroth*.” Sephiroth’s chest began glowing with Jair’s ceremonious voice. Cliff stared on, too stunned to do anything. He didn’t know where they had retrieved the other cube from, but sure enough, one was embedded in Sephiroth’s chest before they had arrived.

“Don’t do it, Jair!” Lovel shouted, trying to stop him.

Jair sonorously chanted without looking back. “Live as one with me and return to dust with me. I order thee to destroy the Torah Church!”

His voice was portentous and solemn. It was a declaration of war to grant Grinzam’s long-standing wish. And something came to life to obey that voice. An automaton gripping a deadly spear came into existence for the sole purpose of slaughtering.

The monster that had killed many Rabbis right here four years ago—Sephiroth—slowly rose to his feet.

Chapter 14: Island of Golems

Cliff

THE strongest Silver Golem in history finally came alive. Granted a name and life after four years of slumber, the silver body rose to its feet. Cliff could only watch on in horror as it happened.

“Oh no…!” Lovel said under her breath. She tried to run toward Sephiroth but Cliff’s hand shot out to seize hers.

“Lovel, it’s too late!”

“But…!”

Sephiroth towered over them. They couldn’t see the top of the monstrous silver body without tilting their heads back. Sephiroth spun the massive spear in his hand, brandishing it. But Sephiroth didn’t swing the spear down on them; he thrust it overhead. The spear pierced through the ceiling with a thundering crack and the night sky appeared through the hole.

“He’s trying to go above ground!”

Cliff didn’t let go of Lovel’s hand, holding her back as she struggled to follow them. Sephiroth swung his spear, sweeping out every pillar in his vicinity. The ceiling collapsed and the Research and Development Room began falling apart around them.

“We have to run, Lovel!” Cliff tugged on Lovel’s hand and ran for the exit.

Grinzam’s voice echoed behind him. “Be good little children and wait patiently for me here. Once I finish destroying the Church, I’ll come back to take my time with you.”

“Grinzam! Stop this, Grinzam!” Lovel shouted.

Cliff looked back to find Sephiroth picking up Grinzam and Jair on the other

side of the falling debris. Just when he saw them disappear out the hole in the ceiling, the room caved in with a deafening bang.

Cliff and Lovel narrowly escaped seconds before it collapsed. The electric lights in the corridor flickered, then went out. The research facility's electrical grid must have sustained damage.

Lovel moaned in the darkness, "The Church! All the Golems on the archipelago are going to go berserk…!"

"Let's go after them, Lovel! The hole in the ceiling isn't the only way out. We're headin' back to the station!"

"Okay!"

They retraced their steps back to the platform in the dark. They fumbled their way along until they stumbled into the hidden station platform. A train car with broken windows waited where they had left it. Cliff saw the small flicker of a flame coming from a lighter inside.

"Ouka?!" Cliff called, running inside the train with Lovel. Kiriko was sobbing beside a blood-covered Spinoza.

Ouka held his lighter toward them and said, "…You came back?"

"Ouka, that man—"

"Spinoza died." Ouka gently laid Spinoza on the floor and closed his eyes. Cliff couldn't find the right words to say in the face of Ouka's weary expression. But Ouka pushed through his feelings to ask them, "I heard a huge explosion not too long ago. What the hell was that?"

"Grinzam beat us to it…! Sephiroth fell into their hands!" Cliff said in a rush of words.

Ouka's cheek twitched.

"Sephiroth just flew outside and is targeting the Church," Lovel explained. "If we don't stop him, this island—this archipelago is done for!"

"B-But…this train won't move without power," Kiriko pointed out, wiping away her tears. Cliff didn't understand what kind of contraption an automatic train was, but he could tell it needed electricity to function.

“Then, we’ve just gotta walk out of here…” Cliff reasoned, reaching to borrow the lighter from Ouka.

Ouka shook his head. “And what will you do when you get there?”

“What?”

“Dram’s the only fighting power we’ve got left, and he can’t move anymore. And his Tamer, yours truly, ain’t in such pretty shape either.”

“We can’t give up now…!”

Sure, what Ouka said was correct, but Cliff didn’t think he was the type to give up now, of all times. Lovel and Kiriko shot him questioning looks too. Ouka smiled at them.

“…We can’t leave things the way they are. So, we’ll have to change Dram’s Tamer to somebody healthy, with fight left in them.” Ouka’s hand shot out and he swiped something from Kiriko’s waist—the tranquilizer gun and bullets for putting a person in suspended animation.

“Ouka, what are you thinking?” Kiriko looked skeptical. Ouka ignored her and loaded the bullet into the tranquilizer gun.

“Listen up, Cliff. This gun puts the Tamer in suspended animation, severing their link to their Golem… This frees the Golem to havin’ their Restrictor overwritten and their name changed,” Ouka said, pressing the gun against his stomach. Everyone gasped.

“Ouka, you can’t be serious…!”

Ouka pulled the trigger without the least bit of hesitation.

“Ouka!”

The gunshot cracked into the air before Kiriko could stop him. The tranquilizer bullet stuck out of Ouka’s stomach. He smiled down at it with satisfaction.

“Now my link will be severed! So, from here on out,” Ouka held Cliff in his gaze and declared in clear voice, “you Tame Dram, Cliff!”

Cliff drew in a breath and looked at Dram—at the amber beast with mighty legs.

“He’s hard to control, and might even go berserk on ya right away…but this is the time, if ever, to try …!” Ouka insisted as his expression sunk into drowsiness.

Cliff nodded and replied, his voice firm, “…Thank you very much, Ouka.”

“I’m countin’ on ya…please…save…this archipelago…” Ouka’s eyelids fell shut.

Kiriko squeezed his hands and cried, “You idiot! Doing this when your body’s injured to this degree could kill you for real…!” Kiriko and Lovel both stared at Ouka, worried and distraught. Obviously, Cliff was worried too, but they didn’t have any leeway for standing around moping.

“Miss Kiriko, please look after Ouka for us,” Cliff said, turning to face Dram.

The light vanished from the letters on his forehead, and black Engrave Incantations floated to the surface of his amber body—evidence that Dram’s link with his Tamer had been cut, returning him to a Prime Body.

Once he saw the blue color fade, Cliff pressed his fingers to Dram’s chest and overwrote his Restrictor. His new Restrictor: “can move today only.” There wasn’t a stricter or more powerful Restrictor out there. It would manifest the highest efficiency and usability in Dram, at the price of his existence.

But Cliff had no choice but to take drastic measures. With his youth and inexperience, there was no other way to use Dram like Ouka.

I’ll bear the sin of killing him. I’ll agree to any punishment. Once everything’s done and over with, I’ll atone for what I’ve done, Cliff swore, and began sonorously chanting the incantation.

“My name is Clifford Evans. With truth as my witness, I give thee the name *Dram*. Live as one with me and return to dust with me. I order thee to take Lovel and me to the Church!”

Those words brought Dram back to life. He crouched down on the ground, offering Cliff and Lovel his back. They exchanged looks.

“Let’s go, Lovel,” Cliff said.

“Okay!”

Cliff mounted Dram first with Lovel hopping on behind him. Kiriko called out to them as they were about to disembark the train.

“Lovel, there is something I want to ask you before you go. Grinzam attempted to bring your mother back with Sehem-hamphorasch. If I understand correctly, you can use the cube to recreate the dead’s personality and memories… But *what about the body*?”

Lovel’s expression darkened ever so slightly. Kiriko pressed on. “Even if you can bring back the soul of the person, how do you prepare a body for it? Aren’t you aware of where Grinzam tried to obtain that body from?”

A moment of silence hung over them until Lovel quickly and quietly answered, “I wouldn’t know… I just want to stop him. I want to protect the archipelago containing my nostalgic memories.”

Cliff didn’t really understand the meaning behind their conversation. A ghost of a smile graced Lovel’s lips and Kiriko smiled sadly back at her as if that answer had told her everything.

Then Kiriko reached out to Cliff, handing him a gun. “Cliff, there shouldn’t be more than three bullets left, but…please take it.”

It wasn’t her tranquilizer gun, but one of the real revolvers Heaven’s Gunner used. Cliff accepted it with mixed feelings.

“…You can run away, you know,” Kiriko said after passing him the gun, her voice tender and kind.

“I won’t run!” Cliff boldly declared.

“You think I’d run?!” Lovel exclaimed.

Cliff smiled at Kiriko’s worried and tired expression, and raised his voice. “Time to go, Dram!”

Answering his call, Dram leapt from the train car.

Dram landed on the platform and hopped down onto the railway tracks. He took off in a full-speed sprint into the darkness lying beyond.

The amber lion loped through the pitch-black tracks with his two passengers on his back. The light glowing from his forehead faintly illuminated the path ahead. The feeling of Lovel’s warm arms around his waist kept Cliff grounded in reality as the cloying darkness closed in around them.

Some time passed before Lovel softly whispered at his back, “…Hey, Cliff, we ran through a dark railway like this before, didn’t we?”

“Yeah, I was hella desperate to escape then.”

“I totally thought Kiriko was going to be right on our tail.”

“Right? Strange to think now that she’s our ally.”

“She just wouldn’t believe me, even though I told her the real enemy was causing chaos elsewhere,” Lovel said, a smile in her voice.

When he heard her voice, Cliff thought back through the time he had shared with her until today. Memories of fleeing the Torah Church and fighting Kiriko in the underground station came to mind first, then escaping into the town at night with the activated Gandolf. The night he had chatted with her in the abandoned mine, the moment they had reunited at the church, and her many different smiles flashed through his mind.

There was a lot he didn’t know about Lovel. He still had plenty to ask. But the questions he had weren’t enough of a reason not to trust her.

He had been able to fight because she was there. He could continue fighting as long as it was for her, even if the opponent was the master he’d admired for three years, or the Silver Golem Sephiroth, or the strongest Rabbi in Church history. Cliff would have no regrets, no matter what awaited him.

“Lovel, I’ll protect you, no matter who I have to face,” Cliff told her. “You bore the burden of Gandolf with me. So, it’s my turn to bear the burden with you. If you so wish, Grinzam’s—” Lovel’s arms tightened around Cliff’s waist, stopping him from finishing that oath.

“Cliff, I don’t want you to bear any more than you already have…” she whispered in a ghost of a voice. “You have a future. A bright future, where you’ll break free of the dark and live in the light… So, I won’t put this on you. I won’t let you shoulder my burden.” Kindness filled Lovel’s voice, but it was just as sad and lonely.

Cliff’s heart squeezed and his chest ached. “…I want to live that future with you,” he quietly confessed, likely to a crying Lovel.

He heard a faint smile in her quiet reply, “Me too. We’ll be together forever… So, I’ll protect you as well. We’ll definitely save this archipelago together!”

The pain pushing down on his chest ceased with her words. That was all he needed to hear. Her promise made him feel like he could trust her to infinity.

“…We will, without fail,” Cliff assured, slipping a hand over hers.

Just then, he spotted light at the end of the train tunnel, from the underground Torah Church Station.

Cliff concentrated using every nerve in his body to imagine Dram’s moves. He mimicked what Ouka always did to convey his command to Dram, his Golem now.

“Jump, Dram!”

Obeying his command, Dram sprung onto the platform. He continued running up the staircase leading above ground. When they exited the station, not a single soul was in sight in the Church’s front garden. Cliff turned to the north. Considering the location of the railway tracks, Sephiroth would likely come from that direction.

Within seconds of gazing north, Cliff glimpsed a gigantic silver shape, far beyond the Church complex.

“We have to fight that thing…” Cliff shuddered and the hair rose on the back of his neck in anticipatory fear of a silver body so giant it was visible from over a kilometer away.

The only weapons at hand were Dram and the revolver from Kiriko. Cliff pulled the red cube from his pants pocket and frowned at it.

“Damn it all! If only we’d made it in time with this!”

Without a powerful Prime Body, the invaluable red cube was worth less than garbage. They could bury it in the dirt to create Adamah, but the simple Clay Golem would be only fodder before Sephiroth’s spear.

Lovel must have come to the same conclusion, because she asked, “Cliff, is there a huge Prime Body somewhere?”

“Even if there was one, it’d never be big enough…!”

With Gandolf and No. 11 destroyed, there were no more large-scale Prime Bodies around. A Prime Body that could hold its ground against Sephiroth just didn't exist.

Sephiroth's arrival was imminent. Lovel's voice was submerged in hopelessness as she muttered, "If only we had a Prime Body…!"

A Prime Body? A single idea lit up inside Cliff. He lifted his head as the thought struck, and put it into words.

"Lovel! Golems powered by the cube gain the ability to regenerate, right?"

"Uh? I-I think so?"

"In that case, there might be a Prime Body we can use for this."

"There is?!" Lovel's eyes widened.

Cliff commanded Dram, "Let's go, Dram!"

Dram sprung into a dash again. They left the Church grounds, crossed Neck Bridge, and raced toward Chest Island. The entire way, Cliff thought of how the Torah Church controlled the archipelago, how their rule forbid the existence of any overly large Prime Bodies for any period of time. Every time someone had built one, the Rabbis eventually discovered it and destroyed it.

Yes, the Prime bodies were destroyed, just like how the Church had torn down Cliff's metal giant four days ago.

Dram ran through the center of Chest Island headed for the shop located at Flank Beach Market. Their destination came into view before long.

"We're here!" Cliff said and hopped off Dram.

Lovel looked at the shop's sign. "Akizu Company?"

Cliff took Lovel's hand, helped her off of Dram, and circled to the back of the barracks. Metal wreckage glowed under the moonlight.

"If I can just attach these arms and legs, we'll be set…!" Cliff fixed his eyes on the wreck, on the arms and legs that had been torn off, on the iron head left on the ground, and on the rusted body that stood almost four meters tall when pieced together.

Before them was the nameless giant Cliff had made with Master Roche. It was likely the sole extra-large metal Prime Body left on the entire archipelago. It stood as the last plausible way to fight Sephiroth with any chance of success.

“Cliff…!” Lovel exclaimed in awe, walking over to the metal giant. She wrenched open the iron plate covering its chest and placed her hand inside, inserting the red cube. Meanwhile, Cliff used Dram to help attach the limbs and head to the metal torso. He pieced it back to what it had looked like before the Rabbis destroyed it.

“Lovel, you name it,” Cliff said.

“What should we…name it?” she asked back.

Cliff nearly told her to name it Gandolf, but that didn’t fit right. Gandolf was the name that belonged to the Golem Cliff and Lovel had killed.

“You decide, Lovel,” he answered.

She nodded and began chanting, “…My name is Lovel Sinclair. In the name of the 72 gods, I give thee the name *Aru*.”

Her voice echoed into the night sky. The cube inside its chest glowed and the metal giant’s torso shuddered with a jolt. The limbs and head laid on the torso began to fuse together while giving off an unusual sound. Cliff clenched his hands.

It succeeded!

The opening in the chest closed and the limbs merged with the torso. In the blink of an eye, the broken metal giant transformed into a Prime Body with all five parts attached.

Lovel watched and raised her voice as if in prayer, “Live as one with me and return to dust with me. I order thee to defeat Sephiroth!”

Thus, the metal giant known as Aru rose powerfully to his feet. Cliff felt as if he were dreaming. The embodiment of his dreams, that he thought would never move, now launched into motion, granted life and a reason to fight.

“Let’s go, Cliff,” Lovel said. Cliff nodded.

Two people and two Golems strode toward Head Island. Aru advanced down

the causeway leading to the Church with heavy, pounding footsteps.

On their way, Cliff asked Lovel, “Why did you name him Aru?”

“I borrowed the name from someone who was once a great Rabbi… I always wanted to name my son that if I had one,” she answered with a lonely smile.

They saw the Church’s Great Bell Tower looming ahead. The sky beyond it was beginning to grow bright, informing them dawn was near.

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Chest Island’s Doctor, Crank Getz

Getz’s Clinic

INSIDE the clinic’s cellar after Grinzam had left, Getz stitched together the slice in Erie’s chest, though she no longer moved.

“Don’t die, Erie!”

He understood the soul of the girl he knew was gone, but her body wasn’t dead yet. Without the cube that powered her body, Erie’s vitals were nearly nonexistent. Combined with the amount of blood she had lost, her chances of survival were close to nil.

But Getz didn’t want to give up on her. His sickly wife, his daughter born with the same illness, and the Golem bearing the same name as his daughter—having failed to save every person most dear to him, Getz could only think, *Like hell am I going to go through that horrible experience again…!*

Regret inevitably filled him for failing to stop Erie from confronting Grinzam. Thinking back, his life was full of regrets. That was why he was doing whatever he could in this dire moment. Impelled by those feelings, Getz treated Erie to the best of his ability.

After a strenuous procedure, he finished her stitches. The anesthetics affected her pulse, weakening it to a dangerous level. Getz began preparing for a blood transfusion despite the odds. As he prepared the IV, he suddenly saw something move out of the corner of his eye.

Is something here?! He spun toward what had moved. It sat up in the corner

of the room—the boy, who had stopped moving entirely after the cube was removed from Erie's chest, sat up.

"Heath?!"

Heath, covered from head to toe in red Engrave Incantations, began to move once more.

"I-Impossible! You have no Tamer now…"

Despite decades of research into Fresh Golems, this was a first for Getz. He had never seen a Golem, berserker or otherwise, move without a Tamer.

Heath picked the knife up off the floor and looked at Getz. Getz froze, his muscles stiffening. Heath merely gave a tiny bow and quietly ascended the stairs.



“Wh-What was that?!”

Lightning flashed through Getz when he saw Heath bow. His mind went straight to one conclusion, as he was the very man who had concluded that Berserker Golems evolve into a separate life-form.

“It can’t be…”

A Berserker Golem was liberated from the Restrictor placed on their bodies. They attacked their Tamers to free themselves from the final Restrictor—their link to the Tamer.

But Erie’s soul was long gone. Grinzam had taken the embodiment of who she had been this past year and embedded it in Sephiroth. Her red cube, Getz knew, was most assuredly inside Sephiroth now.

The last Restrictor binding Heath had vanished. Without anything to bind it, a life had been born in the truest sense of the word.

“That’s Erie and Heath’s…”

That was no Golem—no embryo. It was a person born of Heath’s body, the father, and granted life by Erie, the mother.

It was their child.

***

Cliff

CLIFF and Lovel returned to the Church to find Sephiroth destroying the tall perimeter fence, trying to force his way inside the grounds. Chaos fell once again upon the Church that had sat stiller than death after the last battle.

“God save us all! What is that monstrosity?!”

“Is it a Golem?! Who’s controlling it?!”

Screams and shouts could be heard from inside Church grounds. Some of the Rabbis were still around.

Dram entered the Church complex through the chapel and raced through the winding corridors until he exited into the center courtyard, where the Great Bell Tower loomed. The archipelago would perish if this tower was destroyed.

“Where’s Sephiroth?!”

Cliff and Lovel wildly scanned the area until they saw something jump over the building surrounding them on all sides. The silver giant landed on the ground inside the courtyard with a deafening *BOOM!* Cliff felt the shockwaves through the ground twenty meters away.

Cliff stared speechless up at its mighty form. Sephiroth softly lowered Grinzam and Jair down from his arm.

Cliff and Lovel weren’t the only ones out in the courtyard trying to protect the Great Bell Tower. One of the elders, clad in magnificent vestments smeared with blood, staggered from the shadow of the tower.

He was one of the Church elders who often gave sermons inside the chapel. A Brass Golem, just under two meters tall and dressed in knight’s armor, stood at his side.

The elder glared at Sephiroth and strained his hoarse voice to shout, “I won’t let you heathens get away with this…! Do it, *Saint Rollins*! Defeat Sephiroth!”

Obeying his voice, the Golem bestowed with the name of the archipelago drew his sword of gold. Sephiroth’s spear flashed as Saint Rollins lunged.

The spear cut through the air in an ear-piercing whoosh, eclipsed only by the

shriek of metal. The Brass Golem's sword and head were severed in a single blow.

"Oh…" the elder uttered in a dumbfounded voice. The headless Golem slowly collapsed onto the ground.

Grinzam watched it fall and bluntly said, "Why are you so surprised? You're the ones who had this monster created." His voice had lost its gentle, mild-mannered tone, sounding more like Jair's. Cliff guessed this was how he spoke when he was still a Rabbi.

"EEEEEKKK!" The elder tripped over his own feet as he tried to flee. Sephiroth swung his spear without mercy. The spear flattened the elder, reducing him to a slab of bloody meat.

"Grinzam…!" Cliff yelled. Cliff and Lovel dismounted Dram and glared at their enemies. Grinzam and Jair slowly turned toward them.

Aru chose then to finally make his late arrival. He hopped over the complex's tall roof and landed inside the center courtyard. Sandwiched between Sephiroth and Aru, four people exchanged deadly glares.

Her face radiating with anger, Lovel questioned, "…Grinzam, is this what you wanted?"

"This isn't *all* I wanted. My true objective comes after the Church's demise."

"Your true objective?"

"I'm going to bring back two lost lives: Jair's and yours," Grinzam said, heading for the Great Bell Tower. He opened the door as he gave his final command. "Jair, this is my last order for you. Use Sephiroth to destroy this Great Bell Tower—with me in it."

"What?!" Cliff and Lovel frowned. Only Jair nodded, his face flat and devoid of emotion. "Grinzam, what are you trying to do…?"

Grinzam spoke to Jair without answering Cliff. "I'm counting on you. Once you finish this, you will be Asusrad Grinzam."

The tower door shut and Grinzam vanished within, leaving Cliff and Lovel behind. Jair looked up at the bell tower, as if contemplating something.

Cliff addressed the side of his face, “Jair…no, Master Roche.”

Jair turned around slowly. No expression showed on his face.

“You’re Master Roche, aren’t you? I heard all about how you used to be Grinzam’s disciple.”

Jair didn’t answer.

Cliff looked at Aru and said, “Do you remember when you created this Prime Body with me? We said we’d bring him to life someday, but today he moved thanks to Lovel.”

Memories of his time with Roche flickered through Cliff’s mind as he spoke. He pressed on, to break free of the nostalgia. “Master Roche, didn’t you once tell me, ‘The girl I love lives on Head Island. That’s why I worked my butt off to enroll in the Academy’? I can now really understand how you felt. So, I will be the one to stop you, for Lovel’s sake too.”

Lovel nodded in agreement. Then Jair, who had kept quiet, finally spoke. “… How many times must I tell you for it to sink in, your Master Roche is no more.”

Cliff thought he heard something sentimental in his voice.

“I am Asusrad Grinzam’s other self. Jair is merely a name used for convenience’s sake while Grinzam’s still alive.”

“You’re another version of Grinzam…?!” Cliff couldn’t believe his ears.

“But I can tell you were a very important person to Roche. It’s the least I can do out of respect to you both to crush you with all the power at my disposal,” Jair said. Sephiroth brandished his spear. Aru stepped forward to protect Cliff and Lovel.



The air froze between them. When the tension reached its peak, Jair and Lovel shouted their commands in the same breath.

“Go!”

“Take him down!”

Obeying their Tamers, the two massive Golems charged. They kicked up clouds of dust and dirt in their wake, and the ground shook with a deafening roar. Giants so huge that Cliff had to keep his head back to see their heads, clashed face to face in the space between Cliff and Jair.

Aru swept the tip of Sephiroth’s spear away with his hand. Sephiroth blocked Aru’s fist with the spear handle. Silver sparks flew with every hit, ringing out in cold, earsplitting chimes like a broken bell. Aru steadily closed the space between them while repelling a volley of storm-like thrusts.

“Aru, kick!” Lovel shouted. Aru, in turn, redirected the momentum of his forward charge to whip his leg into a crescent arc, striking Sephiroth from the side.

Sephiroth flew backwards with an explosive boom. The over four-meter tall body of silver arced through the air as it flailed, and crashed into the building behind. The impact shook the building down to its foundation as innumerable cracks sprung across the outer wall.

“Wow, he’s incredible…!” Cliff exclaimed despite himself. He was awestruck by Aru’s big frame and deft movements that transcended Golem limits on every scale.

Lovel shook her head beside him. “Our enemy is just as incredible.”

Cliff’s eyes widened. Sephiroth had drilled a hole through Aru’s abdomen without Cliff noticing. He must have driven his spear through him in the split-second Aru executed his crescent kick.

“That’s the Golem Ouka and his team devoted their whole lives to after all!” Lovel acknowledged. Jair flashed her a faint smile in return.

Sephiroth wielded his spear once more. He approached Aru more prudently this time, sliding his feet across the ground to keep his body completely stable.

“…Lovel, can I leave the battle here to you?” Cliff whispered in her ear. Lovel nodded. She understood what he planned to do.

“I’ll be just fine! You take care of Jair!”

Cliff took her words to heart and hopped onto Dram’s back. “Go, Dram!”

Dram broke into a run with Cliff riding him. He shot past Sephiroth’s legs to the other side.

There was no question Aru could stand his ground against Sephiroth. But defeating him was another matter. They had no means to destroy the cube in Sephiroth’s chest. It’d be too difficult for Aru’s crude metal fists to penetrate Sephiroth’s silver chest plate.

So I have to be the one to do somethin’ about it! Cliff thought as he directed Dram to run toward Jair in front of the Great Bell Tower.

“Pin him down, Dram!”

Dram lunged for Jair at Cliff’s order. Without stepping out of the way, Jair caught Dram’s face in his palms.

“How?!”

Jair had intercepted Dram’s charging leap with both hands. The ground gave way under his feet and he slid back several meters, yet he held his ground and kneed Dram in the chin.

“Whoa!”

The kick sent Dram, along with Cliff, into the air. Cliff hit the ground first, and Dram’s heavy amber frame fell onto his outstretched arm. He heard a disturbing crack.

“AAGGHHH!”

Searing pain coursed through his elbow. He ordered Dram to move off him and saw his right arm wrenched at an absurd angle.

It’s broken…!

Enduring the pain that threatened to empty the contents of his stomach, Cliff looked up at Jair from flat on his stomach. Jair stood there with cold

detachment, as though nothing had happened.

Cliff heard something slam down behind him, sending the ground quaking under him. He looked over his shoulder to find Aru splayed on the ground.

“ARU!”

Sephiroth ran straight for the shrieking Lovel. Sephiroth caught her without giving her a moment to escape.

“AAAH!”

Sephiroth’s left hand closed around her neck and yanked her off the ground. He drew back the spear with his right hand and thrust it toward Aru.

“Protect your chest, Aru!” Lovel choked out.

Aru guarded his chest with his hands. The spear pierced into his hands with a sharp squeal. Sephiroth leveraged the weight of his body to press down on the spear, and it ate into Aru’s chest with a shrill grinding noise. Agonized moans escaped Lovel’s lips as Sephiroth’s other hand clenched tighter.

“DAMN YOU!” Cliff shouted at Jair. “Dram, get him!”

Dram dropped back on his legs and sprung toward Jair. Cliff dragged himself forward at the same time. Dram swooped down on Jair with his fangs bared. Jair caught the jaw between his hands yet again.

“A futile attempt, no matter how many times you try—” Jair’s remark was cut short. Cliff slid headfirst and swept out Jair’s legs with his left arm.

Jair fell face-up and Dram pinned him down. Cliff saw Jair’s face right in front of his eyes. On the ground, Cliff grabbed the front of Jair’s shirt and yelled at him.

“Master Roche! Please stop Sephiroth!”

Jair’s chest, right hand, and legs were pinned by Dram, sealing his movements.

“What good comes of destroyin’ that bell tower?! We won’t be able to make Golems on this island anymore if you do that!”

“That’s a good thing. This archipelago doesn’t need worthless Golems.”

“Lies! That’s not something Master Roche would say! Master, didn’t you once tell me we’d become amazing Golem Tamers someday?”

The conversation took place around the time they had first met. Cliff had been carving some driftwood he picked up into the shape of a Prime Body. While he worked, an older boy came over and struck up a conversation with him about Golems. They became quick friends.

Cliff had been with him ever since that day. He thought they would be reunited even if they lived apart. He believed they would both become magnificent Golem Tamers and meet again inside the Academy’s lavish garden.

“I was able to persist in making Golems because I met you. I could keep working hard at it, until today, because you told me I have talent.”

“…I have no memory of that.”

“I will never forget it, even if you have! We wanted to become Golem Tamers! This is the archipelago of Golems! The islands of Golem Tamers! This may be an unreasonable island created by the Church, but I love this archipelago, where all my best and worst memories were made!” Cliff shouted, feeling like he was about to cry. “Please, Master! Please stop doing this!”

He had no alternative but to try and talk him out of it. Cliff never wanted to consider killing him as a means to stop him. Jair shook his head regardless of Cliff’s pleas. His left hand shot to his pocket, and he yanked out an object and buried it in the ground beside him.

“…Master, what are you—”

Struck by the realization of what that action meant, Cliff pulled back from him. He knew full well what Jair had buried.

“My name is Jair! In the name of the 72 gods, I give thee the name *Adamah*! Live as one with me and return to dust with me. I order thee to remove that Amber Golem!”

Within seconds of Jair’s incantation said in a single breath, the ground where he buried the cube glowed, and a hand made of dirt burst out.

“No!”

The dirt hand grabbed Dram's torso and the two-meter tall Adamah rose from the ground, lifting Dram up with it. His limbs now free, Jair sprung to his feet and locked his eyes on Dram's forehead.

"Crud! RUN, DRAM!" Cliff shouted, but it was too late. Jair drove his elbow into Dram's forehead. "No…"

Cliff watched, helpless to do anything about it. The elbow strike accurately erased the "e" from Dram's forehead. A fleeting click reverberated through the Amber body. Pieces of amber fell like snow on the ground. Dram had been shattered to pieces with a single hit.

Jair walked over to Cliff as he weakly called, "Dram…!" Faster than he could climb to his feet, Jair's kick sunk into his chest. "Gah!"

Cliff's ribs broke with a muffled crack. Intense pain shot through his brain.

First my arm breaks, now my ribs! Cliff stubbornly hung on to his fading consciousness. He clenched his teeth to brace himself for the next hit.

But the follow-up strike never came. Cliff lifted his face from the dirt and stared at Jair.

"…Strangely enough, your words sound familiar, almost nostalgic," Jair admitted sadly. "But these are not the emotions of Asusrad Grinzam. I was born to become him. As such, I should abandon these feelings."

Cliff frowned at his confession. He was beginning to understand what changed his friend. "Master, is it possible you…"

Adamah lumbered slowly toward Cliff. His right hand seized Cliff's throat.

"I can no longer return to being Roche… I was born in exchange for his life," Jair said, his voice quiet. Adamah tightened his fingers around Cliff's neck.

In the exact moment that Cliff's life tipped precariously over the edge, a single flash of light cut through the dark, severing Adamah's right arm.

Both Cliff and Jair followed the flash with their eyes. A knife stuck out of the ground, about five meters away. Cliff recognized that knife.

Isn't that the knife of…?

Cliff's eyes searched where the knife had flown from, and noticed a silhouette drop down from the Church roof. The figure landed on the ground and ran toward them at lightning speed.

Lovel, recognizing who it was from where Sephiroth had her suspended in the air, called out his name. "Heath!"

It was Heath, covered in red Engrave Incantations from head to toe. He yanked the knife out of the ground and flayed Adamah with it. In a matter of seconds, Heath chopped Adamah into countless crumbling pieces.

"Why is this Fresh Golem here?!" Jair yelled.

Cliff called out to the surrounding building, "Erie! Are you here, Erie?!"

No one answered him. No one understood why Heath was there, or how he was still moving. Heath swung his knife at Jair without a Tamer telling him to do so.

Jair caught the slash with his right hand, and the knife sliced clean through it. Blood spurting from his wound, Jair kicked Heath away and shouted, "Sephiroth! Defeat this Fresh Golem first!"

Sephiroth pried his spear from Aru's palms. He drew back his right arm and threw the spear at Heath. The spear sliced through the wind with a zip of sound, flying in a straight line like an arrow. Heath leapt up a second before impact and kicked the spear back in the air.

Shock overtook Jair's features. The spear spun through the air and pierced into the ground, right beside Aru.

"Aru, the spear!"

Aru grabbed the spear at Lovel's command. Sephiroth tossed Lovel aside and made a fist. Spear and fist lashed out at the other's chest. BANG! Scarlet sparks flew with the metallic clangs.

Silence followed. The spear had been thrust deep into Sephiroth's heart. Sephiroth's fist had also pierced through Aru's chest.

Aru stopped moving and Sephiroth's massive body shuddered.

The two metal giants collapsed on the ground in a mushroom cloud of dust.

“Impossible…” Jair uttered, overcome with his shock.

The red glow started to vanish from Heath’s forehead. But even then, he wouldn’t give up on getting revenge until the very end.

Heath spun around and focused on Jair. He held his knife aloft.

Electricity shot down Cliff’s spine. Lovel shouted at Heath, “Don’t!” But he ignored them and threw his knife at Jair.

“MASTER!” Cliff’s cry echoed through the courtyard. Heath’s knife flew in a fast, precise line—and pierced through Jair’s chest.

“…!” Violent shudders wracked Jair’s body.

The knife passed through him and pierced into the wall of the bell tower. The smell of blood doused the vicinity. At long last, all of Heath’s Engrave Incantations vanished. As they stopped working entirely, Jair slowly fell, face-up.

“Master!”

“Jair!”

Cliff and Lovel called for him and ran to his side.

A butcher’s knife sized hole had been opened in Jair’s chest. Vast amounts of blood gushed and spurted from him. Cliff saw a red cube tumble out of his chest, mixed with the blood.

“No way…” Cliff stammered in shock.

Cliff had vaguely considered the possibility before, but couldn’t believe it until he saw with his own eyes. Looking over his shoulder, he asked, “Lovel, did you know?!”

Lovel didn’t answer his question. Sadness and pain contorted her face when she saw Jair’s injury. Cliff sensed she had known all along about the cube in his chest.

She quickly picked up the cube and reinserted it in Jair’s chest. The skin around the injury immediately tried to fuse, as if jumpstarting the healing process. Inserting the cube had activated its power, but the hole was far too

large for the regeneration to take effect fast enough.

“Oh no…he’s not healing!” Lovel said in a quivering voice. Jair’s hand jerked into motion and pressed down on the cube in his chest.

“…I lost?” Lifeless eyes turned to Cliff and Lovel.

After a short pause, Lovel quietly said, “…So you were Grinzam’s double, after all.”

“Yes. I am a doll embedded with a cube that is engraved with all of his memories, in order to make his dream come true,” Jair said in a weak voice, staring down at his bloodied chest.

“What do you…mean?” Cliff asked.

Though he had vaguely guessed the answer, he couldn’t stop from asking.

Jair shifted his gaze to Cliff. “I am a being that had Grinzam’s personality embedded in the body of the boy you call Master, after he was put into suspended animation with the tranquilizer drug,” he quietly explained. “Humans with the cube buried in their chest transcend the rest of humanity. We gain the ability to use the Remote Engrave Incantation which surpasses human knowledge, along with super strength, and regenerative abilities. And above all else, we exist as the only beings capable of Taming Golems powered by the cubes.”

Those words made Cliff’s heart ache. He knew of others who fit that criteria.

“Do you understand?” Jair put the question to him. “Cubes with the Restrictor ‘can’t kill humans,’ and cubes without Restrictors. Tamers capable of thought and reason, and monsters without reason. Combining the two is when you finally obtain a completed weapon. That’s the real way to use Sehem-hamphorasch.”

Cliff thought back to how many times Jair had cornered him and his friends, yet he only ever directed his Golems to kill them, without ever directly raising a hand against them. He couldn’t do it himself because of the Restrictor placed on a person embedded with the cube.

Out of the corner of Cliff’s eye, he saw the destroyed giants. Sephiroth and

Aru were two monsters embedded with the cubes. But Cliff didn't want to think about what that meant right now. He simply listened to what Jair had to say.

"But halfway through, that stopped mattering to me. I just wanted to bring Catalina back. All I wanted to do was start anew, and live with her in place of Grinzam, who had lost everything." Jair touched Lovel's cheek. His hand was soaked in blood, but she let him touch her.

"That wish didn't come true. Things didn't go according to plan, and it seems that…I'm not completely Grinzam's double after all," Jair confessed, returning his gaze to Cliff. A ghost of a smile dimpled his cheeks. "'The girl I love lives on Head Island.' I said that to you, didn't I? It's not as though I can remember it, but for some reason, those words ring so terribly true…"

Jair stared into Cliff's eyes. His expression was so very like the person Cliff knew.

"…Master Roche." Cliff's heart overflowed, seeing that nostalgic expression again.

In barely a whisper, the boy said, "It appears I'm not Grinzam. But your master no longer exists either. So who am I, then?" He gazed up at the dawning sky. Speaking more to himself, he said, "I have no name. All I have is a temporary name and life. Someone tell me, what is my name?"

"You're Jair!" Lovel said loudly through her teary voice. "I know all about you. You loved Lovel. You're the tiny disciple who loved her!"

Jair directed empty eyes toward her. His lifeless eyes softened with a smile. "…Thank you," Jair whispered and quietly closed his eyes.

Blood poured from his injury, pushing the cube out of his chest. The cube fell onto the ground and broke with a tiny crack.

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CLIFF and Lovel cried over Jair's body for some time after he had passed. Once their tears had dried, they laid Jair on the ground, shut his eyes, and wiped their tears.

"…Cliff."

“Yeah!”

Cliff put his hand over his chest pocket, where he had placed the revolver Kiriko gave him. He confirmed it was still there and turned his eyes on the tower door. Grinzam was waiting on the other side. Lovel lent Cliff, who was severely battered, her shoulder. He leaned on her for support to the tower and opened the door with his unbroken hand.

Deep inside the dimly lit tower, the man behind it all stood leaning against the spiral staircase railing.

“So you’re the ones who came… I find it hard to believe, but it looks like Sephiroth lost,” Grinzam commented, looking at the two beaten-up children leaning on each other for support.

Cliff returned his gaze and answered, “Yeah. Your plan failed, in exchange for a great number of sacrifices and victims.”

“I prepared everything over eight years to make it happen, too,” Grinzam said softly, his eyes gleaming with an air of confidence.

“Tell me, Grinzam, what did you mean by, ‘I’m going to bring back two lost lives?’” Cliff demanded in a sharp, biting voice. It was the last question left unanswered.

Grinzam sneered. “You haven’t heard about it from her yet?”

“From Lovel? Heard what?”

“You just asked the wrong question again. The woman beside you isn’t Lovel.”

“…Excuse me?” Cliff instinctively looked at Lovel. She averted her eyes from him.

“Stop it, Grinzam!” Lovel said, pain lacing her words. He didn’t heed her request.

“In that case, I’ll be the one to tell you our story that began eight years ago and continued until today. It’s the least I can do to reward you for defeating Sephiroth,” Grinzam said, beginning to narrate. “I ran away from the Church with Jair after Catalina died. I told Jair to go to Chest Island, while I remained on Head Island… I had unfinished business. My deep-rooted desire to bring

Catalina back and get revenge on the Church, that is."

Grinzam had a distant look in his eyes. Cliff and Lovel listened to him without a word.

"I changed my face and name, and chose the Academy dormitory as my hiding place, because Lovel was there. I became friendly with Catalina's daughter and collected information on Catalina through the stories Lovel told me about her mother."

"You collected…information?"

The unsettling hunch that had been nagging at Cliff surged to the front of his mind. What had he done with the information he collected? What did it mean to bring a person back? Grinzam was answering those questions for him now. While he wanted to know the answer, he wished he could cover his ears.

"Eight years passed like that. I had gathered the necessary Engrave Incantations and information to input into the cubes. All that was left was to find a body to house Catalina's soul… But that was the one thing that seemed beyond the bounds of possibility to artificially create."

But *what about the body? Where does it come from?* Those were the very questions Kiriko had asked Lovel on the train.

But there *was* a body, a perfect body that looked so very much like the woman Grinzam was trying to bring back to life.

"Then about a week ago, Jair appeared before me. I was shocked to see him for the first time in eight years. I asked him what he had come to the Academy for. He told me, 'I always wanted to enroll in the Academy Lovel attends.'"

"…No way!" Cliff gnawed on his lower lip.

"He apparently spotted Lovel at the dormitory. And then he dared to speak of his joy to me…! My disciple had been harboring feelings of love toward Catalina's daughter ever since they met as children! He loved the girl who had the same face as the woman I loved!" Grinzam's voice trembled from anger, and most likely, sadness.

"Can you *comprehend* the outrage, the bitterness I felt in that moment? I had

lost my face, my name, and my youth! Yet Jair had obtained the life I yearned for from the deepest depths of my heart."

Grinzam's face contorted into an ugly expression. Venom and something dark and sinister flashed in his eyes. "I made up my mind when I realized his feelings! I decided to take back what I lost, to start over with Catalina on this island, and to use Jair and Lovel's body to make that happen!"

Grinzam looked at Cliff as he spoke. Untold loneliness and insanity burned in his eyes. "Don't you get it yet? Inside the chest of the woman you call Lovel—"

"Stop it!" Lovel screamed to cut him off.

He spoke over her screams, "—is *Sehem-hamphorasch*, engraved with the personality of her mother, Catalina."

He laid the truth bare for Cliff.

"…No…" Cliff's vision swirled. It was the truth he had purposely turned away from. He looked to his right, to her face.

"I'm sorry for deceiving you…" Lovel, no, Catalina said, with tears in her voice. "I had every intention of removing the cube from my chest and disappearing without anybody noticing when this all ended… This body is Lovel's. I don't want to live again by sacrificing my daughter's life," she whispered and dipped her head.

Cliff couldn't find the words to say to her. She had hidden the truth from him because she knew Cliff would try to stop her if he found out.

Grinzam continued speaking in place of Cliff's silence. "I inserted Catalina's soul in Lovel's body and my soul in Jair's body… Doing so would allow us to take back the lives we lost. I put Lovel into suspended animation with the tranquilizer and embedded the cube in her chest. Then I summoned Jair to me, and did the same to him."

"…!" Cliff blanched

"He cursed at me the entire time he was still conscious. 'How can you sacrifice Lovel for such a thing? I'll never help you!' he shouted at me, but it was too late. Jair's conscience eventually faded, and I embedded the cube in his chest…

He was born anew—as my other self.”

Cliff saw no traces of guilt or regret for what he had done in Grinzam’s expression or voice. At the end of a life filled with absurdity and hatred, the man who had once been the greatest Rabbi in history lost his heart. He had transformed into a real demon in the time he was called the Heinous Traitor.

Yet for all that, he still spoke as if he had hope. “Catalina and I will be reborn. We will live together on this archipelago without Golems. Everything was supposed to go according to plan for our happy ending. But she went out of control, making my plans go awry.”

Grinzam shot a menacing glare at Catalina. “I put the Restrictor ‘can’t kill humans’ along with a second Restrictor, ‘love and obey Jair’ on Catalina. But for some reason, the second Restrictor failed to take effect, and she betrayed us!”

Grinzam trembled violently. He raised his voice with an enraged expression. “Why didn’t the Restrictor work?! If only it took effect, everything would have worked out perfectly!”

“…Master Roche did it,” Cliff said, as soon as the answer hit him. Catalina and Grinzam looked at him stunned.

They all realized the answer. There was only one person who could have removed the Restrictor under those circumstances. Only one person in that room would try to remove the Restrictor engraved in the cube embedded in Catalina’s chest that would have forced her to “love and obey Jair.”

“Master removed her Restrictor! He did it in the seconds before he fell into suspended animation after being administered the drug. He mustered the last of his strength and used Remote Engrave Incantation to do it!”

“That’s it!” Catalina breathed as if she came to the same conclusion.

Surprise colored Grinzam’s features. Cliff leveled him with a fierce glare and asked, “Can you understand how Master Roche felt, thinking of his loved one up until his final moments? Nah, there’s no way *you* could understand…”

But Master Roche would have. Cliff had no doubt the man he admired and looked up to would. Cliff felt the deepest, greatest admiration for Roche’s determination. Roche had saved Lovel from blind love, even in the face of his

own demise. He had removed the Restrictor binding her and gave her a chance at a future.

“Grinzam, you were just jealous of Master Roche and Lovel. You were willing to sacrifice people left and right to bring Catalina back. Do you think she wanted that? Do you think this kind and gentle Catalina would want that? Like hell she would!” Cliff slapped the truth at the speechless Grinzam. “Listen to me very closely, Grinzam! You might’ve spent nearly a decade gathering information, but you learned nothing! You don’t understand a thing about Catalina!”

“Cliff…!” Catalina called his name in a quivering voice. Cliff held her hand, the hand of the woman he fought alongside for survival these past few days.

“Who you are doesn’t bother me. Tell me what you want me to do. I’ll fight for you no matter what you say.” Cliff knew the answer to his question before he asked it, and that was exactly why it made him want to cry.

Catalina’s face shimmered with the tears she held back as she answered him. “Defeat him.”

Those were words of resolve. They turned their eyes to Grinzam, who seethed at Catalina with the glaring wrath of a demon.

“You *foolish* child, you *dare* to defy the will of your Maker…!” The strongest Rabbi in Church history cursed at them. But Cliff wasn’t afraid of him. As long as she was by his side, he’d fear no one.

Cliff drew the gun. Catalina smiled beside him and resolutely said, “Let’s do this, comrade in arms.”

“Yeah!” Cliff shook off his sadness and answered in the liveliest voice he could manage.

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“I knew it…you aren’t my Catalina.” Grinzam threw his arms out and spat in anger. “It would have been better if you had never been born!” Light emitted from his hands. Realizing what it could mean with a start, Cliff looked behind him. Engrave Incantations were engraving Jair’s corpse outside the tower, through Grinzam’s Remote Engrave Incantation.

“My name is Asusrad Grinzam. With truth as my witness, I give thee the name *Jair*.”

Cliff trembled, the greatest rage and fury he had ever known rising within him.

“Grinzam…you scumbag! How dare you!” Catalina cursed, squeezing the words out.

Grinzam continued chanting over them. “Live as one with me and return to dust with me. I order thee to remove the Sehem-hamphorasch from that woman’s chest and to kill that boy!”

Jair sprung to his feet and rushed into the tower. He lunged to pummel Cliff, but Catalina cut between them and held Jair back.

“Cliff, now’s your chance!”

Cliff nodded and steadied the gun. He pointed the muzzle at Grinzam’s chest.

I can’t let Catalina be the one to kill him! The thought granted Cliff a resolve of steel. He held his breath and pulled the trigger.

The gun fired with a shockingly powerful recoil that threw his arm back, causing the bullet to only graze Grinzam’s flank. Cliff clicked his tongue and cocked the gun again. He heard a scream behind him as he did. He glanced back to where Jair was kicking Catalina.

“Catalina!”

The kick knocked her outside the tower and she tumbled on the ground. Jair turned toward Cliff, who ground his teeth. Their eyes met. Jair was going to attack him next. Now was his only chance. He only had two shots left!

Cliff adjusted his grip on the revolver and shot Grinzam as he turned toward him. Gunfire cracked into the air and blood sprayed everywhere. The bullet hit Grinzam—not in the torso or head, but his arm.

“So close, yet so very far!” Grinzam taunted, his lips curling in a sneer as he held his bleeding arm.

One bullet left!

Cliff felt a sudden sharp blow to his broken ribs while he tried to aim again. Jair had driven his fist into Cliff's ribcage from behind.

"GUAH!"

Cliff flew with the impact and crashed into the tower's inner wall. Agony roared over him, and his brain went numb. The gun slipped from his hand and slid across the ground, coming to a stop in the space between Cliff and Grinzam.

Cliff shoved Jair away and darted for the gun. Grinzam bolted to pick up the gun.

"URAAAAAAH!" Cliff yelled as he ran. His ribs screamed with agonizing pain with every jolting step. His broken arm jostled against his side. He endured the unbearable pain and dove for the gun. His fingers touched the grip!

Jair grabbed the back of Cliff's shirt and dragged him away with his inhuman strength. The gun slipped from Cliff's fingers and into Grinzam's hands.

"…It's your loss," Grinzam jeered. Jair strangled Cliff from behind.

A weak cry lodged in his throat and his conscious mind instantly started to fade into the dark. Hands with strength impossible to throw off strangled Cliff. The strength drained from his body and his vision dropped away. Through his dimming senses, he felt Grinzam hold the gun to him.

Damn it! Damn it! Cliff screamed a voiceless curse and Grinzam wrapped his finger around the trigger.

A silver light soared toward them, cutting through the darkness.

Cliff opened his eyes as wide as they could go and saw it through blurred vision—the flash of light stabbed Grinzam's chest.

"GAH!"

The blow sent Grinzam flailing through the air, and his back banged against the spiral staircase. The strength evaporated from Jair's grip on Cliff's neck. Cliff's rapidly fading vision returned, and he located the source of the light.

It was a knife; the one and same knife that had pierced through Jair's chest and lodged in the Great Bell Tower's outer wall. Large amounts of blood gushed from Grinzam's pierced chest.

“Im…possible…” he breathed, spitting up blood.

Did she do it? Cliff pushed off the ground with his good hand and looked in the direction the knife had come from.

Catalina stood in the tower doorway with the light of the rising sun at her back. Her shoulders labored with heavy breathing, in the same stance she had taken to throw the knife.

“Catalina…” Cliff said her name, his voice trembling.

She answered him gently, “…I told you, I won’t let you shoulder the whole burden.” As Cliff heard her soft voice, Grinzam tumbled and fell in a heap on the tower floor.

“This isn’t…how it’s supposed to be…” he said, voice hollow, continuing to cough up blood. “We’ll redo it…I’ll relive our…lives…together with her…” His voice quickly faded and Grinzam sank in a pool of blood.

Cliff paid him no mind. He ran to Catalina’s side without looking back. Grinzam had died, which only meant one thing for Catalina with her Restrictor, “can’t kill humans.”

“If it’s a Restrictor that can never be kept again after it’s been broken once—like ‘don’t kill’—the Golem will never be able to move again after breaking it the first time.”

Cliff hung his head in despair. The rules he had explained to her days ago pressed down on his chest.

I tried to kill him in her place because I knew this would happen.

He reached Catalina and lifted his head. There, he found her illuminated by the dawn’s light with a peaceful expression on her face.

“It’s all over, Cliff… Now I can disappear, and my daughter will be freed.”

“Catalina…!” Calling her name was the only thing he could do. She smiled at him and weakly shook her head.

“It’s *Lovel*… That’s what you’ve been calling me this whole time.”

Tears rushed to Cliff’s eyes.

She stared at him and said, “Say, Cliff? Weren’t these past five days a blast?”

It was true. They were the most fun days of his life. Cliff nodded over and over again. It was just, now those fun memories were being overshadowed by his sorrow. He was heartbroken that the girl he had fallen in love with was disappearing in his arms.

“Cliff, you know, I’m really glad I met you.” Her legs were shaking. Cliff wrapped his good arm around her and held her up. “It’s because I met you that my life, that was created against our will, gained meaning. I only lived for a short five days, but thanks to you, I’m glad I lived them.”

Tears spilled from Cliff’s eyes without pause. He let them stream down his face.

“Lovel, I’m glad I met you too. I began to live, in the realest sense, since meeting you…!” he whispered against her. She hugged him back. The strength was draining from the arms wrapped around him. Cliff could feel the soul slipping from her.

She flashed him a faint smile and whispered in a ghost of a voice, “Goodbye, Cliff…”

The life went out from her body with those last words.

“Lovel…” Cliff said her name for the last and final time.

He no longer got a response for it.

Cliff embraced Lovel’s body and cried nonstop in front of the Great Bell Tower, where no one else was left moving.

Epilogue: Two Years Later

Everyone

TWO years had passed since those events.

Cliff still lived on Chest Island, same as always. Two years ago, he thought he wanted to leave this island as soon as possible, but he had stayed to this day. However, he hadn't stayed the same.

"Oi, Cliff! Bring these parts inside the garage next!"

"You got it!" Cliff energetically answered Akizu.

A small mountain of parts had formed around Akizu Company's barracks. Business was good enough for Akizu to hire full-time employees. Cliff often helped him out like he was doing now.

He loaded the cart with the hunks of metal and pushed it to the garage. Heavy labor made him sweat waterfalls and his back crack and pop, but the work wasn't all bad. He had a good reason for needing to earn money. Cliff endeavored in his work always thinking of that reason.

"Ah, Big Bro Cliff!" came a peppy voice when Cliff exited the garage. The boy Cliff had given his rye bread to two years ago stared at him with a conflicted look.

"Hey, what's up?"

A small doll rested at the boy's feet. It was a Prime Body he had pieced together with scrap metal.

"I'm practicing my Engrave Incantations, but I just can't get the joints down… Can you show me how it's done?"

Cliff smiled and walked over to the doll. His fingers glowed, and he smoothly stroked the doll's surface with them. Highly detailed Engrave Incantations inscribed the doll's body in the blink of an eye.

"You're amazing, Bro! I always knew you were!"

"The ability to concentrate and memorize is just as important as anything else. You've gotta remember the Engrave Incantations you're going to use, word for word."

“Uh, I wonder if I can…”

“You can. You’ll definitely become capable of doing it someday.” Cliff ruffled the boy’s hair and walked off to return to his work.

“But, Big Bro,” the boy’s voice said to his back. “Why don’t you create your own Golem, when you’re so skilled with Engrave Incantations?”

Cliff stopped walking. He looked over his shoulder at the doll standing below the boy.

He remembered all the things he had destroyed two years ago: his giant, powerful, and mute comrade in arms made of metal, the boy he called master, who’d taught him how to make that giant, and the woman who had activated it.

“…I’ll make one when I can shoulder the responsibility that comes with creating life,” Cliff said quietly, and returned to work.

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CLIFF finished his work around three o’clock. He fetched his pay for the day from the barracks and bowed his head to Akizu, who was reading the newspaper.

“Thanks a bunch!”

“No problem. Good work out there today.” Akizu waved before bringing the newspaper up to his face. “Head Island’s as chaotic as ever, huh?”

Cliff peered at the newspaper behind Akizu. The pages were hopping with articles on the Torah Church again, as was the usual these days. An army of Rabbis had been dispatched from the mainland after the archipelago’s Church faced near demise two years ago, and they had undergone rapid restructuring since.

“I hope this’ll help the Rabbis here take their jobs a lil’ more seriously,” Cliff commented.

“Ya can say that again. They’d better work hard not to bring shame to their name as People of Love,” Akizu said through a sigh. The name caught Cliff’s attention.

“People of Love?”

“Oh, never heard of it? Rabbi is derived from the word *Lovie*. In our ancient language, it means *People of Love.*”

“It does? You’re surprisingly well-read, Boss.”

“Call it an old man’s wisdom. By the way, if you wanna make that mean “Child of Love,” ya just change the end of the word and…” Akizu flashed a proud smile and said, “…it becomes the word *Lovel*.”

Something warm and tender filled Cliff at the sound of that name.

“It’s way too romantic,” she had said bashfully. That was why she hadn’t told him what her name meant.

There’s nothing for her to be embarrassed about. It’s a great name. It really is.

“…Lovel,” Cliff whispered that nostalgic name and automatically cast down his eyes.

Akizu gave him a dubious look. “By the way, don’t ya have to get going soon? Didn’t ya say yer going to the hospital?”

Cliff’s head jerked up, and he glanced at the clock on the wall. It was almost the time he’d promised to be there.

“Crap! Time’s not on my side! Sorry, but I’ve gotta run!” Cliff bolted from the barracks in a rush.

***

“ERIE, Cliff’s here,” Getz told Erie outside her room in the clinic standing on the outskirts of Chest Island.

He received no reply in return. He never did.

After what had happened in the cellar, Getz admitted Erie to his clinic, where at least her physical injuries recovered. He continued to care for her there ever since.

The tranquilizer drug was capable of putting people in a state of suspended animation, otherwise known as temporary death. The drug’s effects could only last so long. His earnest care paid off when Erie finally opened her eyes six months ago.

But she hadn't uttered a single word since waking up. The miserable, sorrowful memories of their time together should have been stripped from her, but Erie wept when she saw Heath's grave. She seemed incapable of knowing how to show any other emotion since.

Getz occasionally wondered if he had made the right choice. But he remembered that her life was already born into the world. He wanted her to survive and live her life to the fullest, regardless of the karma from the past she shouldered.

The least he could do for her was stay by her side. He would remain with her until the day she regained both her mind and soul. As he made that promise within himself, Erie wordlessly stepped out of her room.

Getz kindly said to her, "It seems he is going to pay a visit to Mrs. Kiriko. We have some fine weather today. Why not go with him?"

Erie remained with her head down, eyes trained on the floor. Then she finally gave a firm nod and walked toward the clinic entryway.

***

DRAM Junior zoomed across Neck Bridge. Ouka's heart pounded in his chest as he rode on the lion's back.

"I'm positive she'll be furious if I'm late…"

After all, I've been under her pretty little thumb ever since I woke up a year ago, Ouka thought as he hurried to the hospital on Head Island.

He eventually arrived at his destination, hopped off Dram's back, and rushed inside, where he spotted familiar faces at the front desk.

Ouka greeted the two people he knew. "Hey, if it ain't Cliff and Erie. What're you two doin' here?"

They were restlessly pacing in front of the desk. Cliff noticed Ouka first, and immediately begged him for help. "We came to visit Miss Kiriko, but they refused to let us in because we aren't family."

"Obviously. It'd be impossible to tell what your relationship is to her, with just the two of ya here." Ouka smiled wryly and announced to the nurse behind the

desk, “I’m Kiriko Baraki’s husband. I came to visit her with family friends.”

The nurse smiled and greeted, “Thank you for coming,” and then let them through. The kids accompanied Ouka down the hallway until they arrived at Kiriko’s hospital room. Ouka cleared his throat once, then opened the door.

The hospital room curtain rippled in the wind. Kiriko was sitting on the bed next to the window with a peaceful expression.

Ouka walked over to her bed. “Yo! You doin’ good my little boy?!” he addressed the tiny new life swaddled in his wife’s arms.

The baby partially opened his eyes and looked at Ouka. Cliff peered at him from the side and exclaimed, “Wow! He’s so adorable!”

“Yeah, yeah! He *so* is!” Ouka agreed, nodding repeatedly.

Kiriko flashed a teasing grin. “I know, isn’t he? I am so relieved he doesn’t resemble his father one bit.”

“Hey, Kiriko, that’s not nice!” Ouka whined.

“Can I hold him?” Cliff asked.

“Of course you can. Be super careful,” Ouka said. Kiriko nodded and held the baby out—not to Cliff, but to Erie.

Erie shuddered with fright. She took her time before timidly holding out her arms. Kiriko smiled kindly at her and laid her son in her grasp. Erie accepted the baby a bit awkwardly. Apprehension showed on her face, but she held the baby with care, as though handling a glass crystal.

“What’s his name?” Cliff asked.

Kiriko smiled and replied, “Alita.”

Ouka and the others heard a faint voice repeat the name.

“…Alita.”

The voice was so quiet, it was nearly impossible to pick up on. But, sure enough, the speaker—Erie—had said something for the first time in two years.

Ouka looked at Erie and saw that she was smiling.

***

CLIFF and Erie finished their visit, said goodbye to Ouka and Kiriko, and left the hospital. Erie's smile had returned. Ouka and Kiriko seemed happier than Cliff had ever seen them before.

I'm so glad for them, Cliff thought.

He returned to the clinic with Erie.

"Welcome back," Getz greeted them at the door.

Cliff bowed to him and escorted Erie back into his care. Then, he said, "Professor Getz, I've come to do my daily job."

Getz nodded and let him inside the clinic. Cliff passed through the hallway and opened the farthest clinic room door. A girl remained asleep on the bed inside, as she had for two years.

Cliff walked over to the girl's bed and changed the IV drip for her like he did every day.

He didn't know if he had made the right decision by admitting her to the clinic and caring for her like this for the past two years. But she was a life he had gotten involved with once. He didn't think it was right to abandon, ignore, or give up on her.

She had taught him that.

She had never lost her brilliance or her spirit in the face of the unreasonable, horrible fate she shouldered. Even Cliff couldn't be sure just how much courage her smile had given him.

Thanks to her, I can love life. And the strength Master Roche gave me acts as my pillar of support to this day. I'll continue to protect the life they left to me, Cliff thought, and looked at the girl's face.

The girl's eyes slowly opened. Cliff drew in a sharp breath. She sat up and looked around.

The girl who had woken up for the first time in two years said, "Where…am I?" She looked at Cliff. She tilted her head slightly to one side and asked, "Who are you?"

“Clifford… Clifford Evans,” Cliff told her his name, his voice trembling, just like it had the first time he met her.

“…Cliff?” She dropped her head when she heard his name. She thoughtfully murmured, “I wonder why…this should be the first time I’ve met you, but you feel so incredibly nostalgic to me.”

The girl marveled at him and asked, “Say, why am I here? Can you tell me?”

Tears rushed to Cliff’s eyes and spilled over.

Cliff knew. He knew of the most amazing woman in the world, who had lived a short five days to save the daughter she loved more than anything else. He knew of the amazing man who spent the final moments of his unfortunate life thinking of the girl he loved.

They had both fought for the sake of this girl, in spite of knowing that they would disappear. Cliff thought back to his memories with them, and then of how he had to relay it all to her.

“Where should I begin?” Cliff said. He wiped away his tears and smiled at her.

The End

Afterword

Unless you've played one of the games I've worked on, this is likely the first time I've greeted you, dear readers from abroad. I'm Souki Tsukishima, one half of the two authors behind the Japanese version of *emeth: Island of Golems*.

This work is our—Souki Tsukishima and Tora Tsukishima's—first novel translated into English, and our first time writing an afterword with the knowledge that it will be translated into another language… It's harder said than done!

I have absolutely no idea what kind of afterword would interest readers overseas. It'd defeat the purpose if I write something strange that ruins the overall impression of the novel. How should I tackle it…?

Though I say that, we won't get anywhere if I keep rambling on about such things, will we? So I'd like to take this opportunity to write an afterword in line with what you would find in a typical Japanese light novel. You might end up thinking, "This has a completely different feel from the rest of the book!" but I hope you can excuse the change in style.

Now then, getting back on topic. *emeth* was our debut novel in Japan. The light novel boom had hit Japan around then, and we had many encounters with new works that made us think, "I want to write a story like this."

At the time, I was residing in a labor camp in Tokyo's slums, as one of fifteen people living in the same room. With that room as our Tokyo headquarters, my partner Tora Tsukishima and I came up with the concept for *emeth* and worked out its finer details.

I wanted to experience a variety of things that could serve as good plot material for a book. So while I lived a similar lifestyle as our protagonist Cliff, those days still managed to be fun despite the poverty.

But as I was living out my life like that, I came to a single conclusion: "Even if I can find good material for a novel by living like this, I won't ever be able to write

the novel itself!”

For you see, we were fifteen street children living communally in a cramped room! I couldn’t even begin to hope for a moment of peace and quiet that would allow writing to occur. Just when I was trying to figure out how to solve this problem, a reporter from a major newspaper dropped by our neck of the woods.

“What business do you have here in Japan’s Shoulder Coast, where the dregs of society are?” I questioned him.

He had the nerve to answer that he was in the process of gathering interviews from, “Japan’s Hardworking Youth at the Bottom of Society.”

This jerk’s just admitted he views us as the lowest class of society! I thought angrily, but since I had nothing better to do anyway, I went ahead and entertained him with his interview.

Reporter: “Why did you choose to live a life of poverty?”

Me: “I was originally writing novels with my partner back in our hometown, but when I arrived in Tokyo to search for good material, I couldn’t escape poverty and ended up where you find me now.”

Reporter: “Is that so? Ahahaha!”

Me: “Yup, it is. Hehehe.”

…What the hell was with this interview? Who were they writing the article for anyway? Those were the obvious questions that came to my mind. Then, he completely did me in with the last question of the interview.

Could you believe that of *all* the possible things, he had the gall to end with, “What is your dream?”

That’s it, ladies and gentlemen! What a question to pose to someone who has to live by pinching pennies to make ends meet, in the slums of a major city!

I stayed silent for a whole five seconds. “My dream? To find somebody stronger than me, duh!” I answered with the first thing that came to mind, confusing him and forcefully bringing the interview to an end. Three days later, I returned to my hometown, met up with my partner there, and finished writing

this story.

In any case, who could predict that the story we had finished writing back then would go on to win the grand prize in the 3rd Square Enix Novel Awards—a competition from Square Enix, a company internationally renowned for the *Final Fantasy* series and much, much more—to be officially published, and to even wind up with an English translation some ten-odd years later? I have to say, you never know where life will take you.

Those days I spent living in the slums proved effective for my career as a writer, just like how Cliff is able to become a Golem Tamer after all the crazy twists and turns.

Cliff is another version of ourselves, while this book is the "Gandolf" we successfully created. The story is quite serious and profound for a light novel, but it all falls into place when you think of it this way—especially the rough and depressing parts. Nothing would make us happier than if our overseas readers enjoyed reading it as much as we did writing it.

With that said, please allow me to leave a word of thanks to everyone who has supported us.

First of all, a special thank you to Miss Charis Messier and Cross Infinite World for picking up this novel and making an English release possible. Without your efforts, *emeth* would have never sprouted the wings to fly into the hands of readers outside of Japan.

Next, my utmost thanks to Mura Karuki for drawing the gorgeous illustrations for the international version. Through your illustrations, the world of *emeth* has gained a new perspective and color.

And then, to the Japanese version's staff: Ken Nakagawa, Hinase Momoyama, Koutaro—the story we once worked on together has gained new life.

I must also thank my partner Tora Tsukishima, who always coauthors with me, and our teammate Moyashi Himukai. Even ten years after we embarked on this career, you are both still my greatest and dearest comrades in arms.

Last but not least, thank you to my family and friends, and to everyone who was involved in the creation of this book in Japan and its distribution abroad.

Thanks to your support, *emeth* will get to travel the world once more.

And, most of all, to you, the reader, who opened this book—allow me to thank you with all the gratitude possible.

Thank you very much! Let us meet again somewhere!



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