
9
Mato Sato
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The Executioner and Her Way of Life
WISH UPON A STAR, PRAY TO A FLOWER

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YEN ON
NEW YORK

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The Executioner and Her Way of Life 9
Mato Sato

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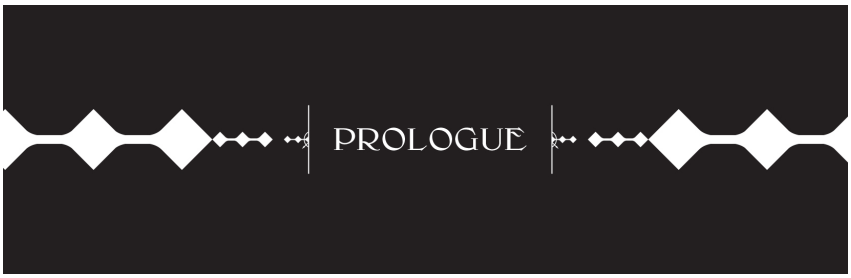
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Help me.

Answering that call was the whole reason Hakua Shirakami came to be known as a "Hero."

I have someone to protect. A home to return to. A wish I want to make come true, no matter what it takes.

So help me.

She sympathized with those feelings, accepted their requests, and went on running through the ages.

Until her body sank deeper and deeper.

Even when she realized she was too far gone, she kept helping them.

And thus, when she was so far beyond saving herself that it was much too late…

She became Hakua Shirakami, the "Lord" of the Faust.

"……"

Hakua Shirakami gazed silently at the scenery as it whipped past.

She was riding a private train that only the highest-ranking priestesses in the Faust could utilize. It was primarily used when the archbishop needed to travel. Normally, it would connect to an ancient relic called the "Dragon Gate" and instantly teleport through space, but that connection was broken. Now it was just an ordinary Guiding train.

Hakua was wearing a school uniform. She knew it was remarkably out of place, yet she could no longer bring herself to take it off.

Nishibori High School. That was the home of the precious few memories that Hakua still held.

She hadn't touched the food or drinks that were prepared for her.

In fact, she hadn't even slept a wink.

How long ago was it when she realized that her mind was losing its humanity just as her body had?

Was it when she'd lived half a century, or when she passed the hundred-year mark? She certainly must have caught on by the time she reached five hundred years.

Yet even now that a thousand years had passed, she still clung stubbornly to the last traces of her humanity.

"…What a joke."

Her face reflected in the window was twisted with self-mockery.

Unbeknownst to anyone, Hakua had left the holy land behind, supplied with only the memories she would need for the tasks ahead.

For good measure, she destroyed the "Star Memory," the structure that stored the memories of everyone on the continent, on her way out. Even if someone were to approach the place now, there was nothing left to find. Virtually no one knew about the structure in the first place. More likely than not, no one had even noticed it had been destroyed.

She never intended to return.

An image arose in her mind: a person who wasn't her, yet wore her face.

She had created this duplicate of herself to meet Akari when she was summoned in this era, to grow close to Akari so that Hakua could use the duplicate as her own vessel. The girl was currently acting under the name of Menou.

Once Menou's body achieved a Guiding Force connection with Akari, rendering them the same person by conjuring standards, she would have the perfect workaround for the otherworld repatriation circle's limitation that it could only be used by one person—at least, that was the plan.

Hakua *Blanched* Akari's memories when she reached the holy land and nearly got her hands on Menou's body—only for Flare's betrayal to allow Menou to escape her grasp. Now Menou had entered the "Mechanical Society" in order to escape Michele, the pursuer Hakua had sent after her.

Shortly beforehand, Hakua exchanged words with Menou, her duplicate, and left the holy land immediately thereafter.

Because she knew that preparations for the "Starhusk," which connected this world to the world where Japan was located, were nearly complete.

"I'm so close…"

Soon, the wish she'd held for a thousand years would finally be fulfilled.

She tried to picture the bright future that awaited her, only for her heart to falter a little.

"I *must* be, right, Nono?"

Why had Nono predicted Akari's summoning back then?

Nono Hoshizaki was a girl who had worked with Hakua a thousand years prior.

She had the Pure Concept of *Star*, which could see the future. Hakua tried to recall the face of her former friend, whose eyes each glowed with a star-shaped Guiding Light, and came up empty.

By this point, Hakua's memories of a thousand years ago were nothing more than information. She remembered names. She knew the sequence of events. But she couldn't remember anyone's voices. Their faces, too, were shrouded in mist. She couldn't even remember the countless conversations they'd exchanged.

It had been hundreds of years. She had avoided conversing with anyone else as much as possible, and yet her memories still faded.

Hakua scowled.

She had accepted every cry of "help me," every "save me," every last "I beg of you."

Even when the line between herself and the people whose pleas she accepted began to blur, she went on accepting all of them.

Heedless of how it muddled her mind until she could no longer remember who she used to be.

"It's fine… I'll leave the 'me' of this world behind here. All of it."

And then she would finally go home.

Back to Japan, along with Akari.

She would forget everything about this world and go back to the very day when they'd both disappeared.

That was the sole reason she'd survived all this time.

"It has to work…"

Just as she started muttering to herself to try to quell her churning thoughts, the train stopped.

She'd arrived at her destination.

Grisarika Kingdom. The royal capital.

One of the continent's most successful cities.

Hakua quietly stepped out into the crowded train station, then furrowed her brow when she saw the person who came to greet her.

"Nice to…meet you?"

"Not quite, Hakua. But it has been a while since we last met in person."

The woman with red-tinged blond hair smiled majestically at Hakua.

CHAPTER 1

Scheme

On the other side of the hole in space was a wasteland littered with the three Primary Colors.

As Menou looked around, she saw nothing but sand and stone, with no signs of life anywhere. Crystals of color were scattered about randomly; in some places they were modified to imitate the form of living things, with colored clouds of smoke rising from them.

It was a world where even places that should be achromatic swirled with color. In this place that lay beyond the hole in space at the center of the northern continent, it was obvious at a glance that this was a far cry from the human world.

When Menou took a single step forward, colors broke beneath her feet with a hard cracking sound.

These fragile but beautiful fragments were known as Primary Color crystals.

Such materials were declared taboo by the Faust and forbidden across the continent, yet here they were just a normal part of the scenery. After all, these fundamental building blocks of the Concept of Primary Colors, which was said to create worlds, were naturally produced here.

The Mechanical Society.

Primary Color crystals formed as a single color, sometimes turning into gas and mingling with a second. On very rare occasions, the third color was mixed in as well, and the world expanded anew. In this world created by the Human Error of *Vessel*—which continuously produced conjured soldiers like a natural disaster—even the farthest reaches were filled with color.

And amidst all this breathtaking color, one person took a long, loud breath.

"Aaaah!"

It was a woman with tan skin and stunning proportions. She wore vertically striped slacks and a short jacket, perfectly accenting her glamorous figure.

Her name was Ability Control, though she went by her nickname, "Abbie."

While Menou and the others were looking much worse for the wear after the battle in the City of Ruins, Abbie was breathing deeply, her eyes sparkling.

"Oh, I haven't been able to breathe in aaages!"

She stretched her arms wide and reached toward the sky, expressing her glee with her whole body. Her childish action, in such stark contrast with her mature appearance, elicited a small snicker from Menou.

"Don't be ridiculous. Surely it wasn't *that* bad."

"Yes, exactly."

As Menou tossed her tawny ponytail over her shoulder, a little girl —wearing a white kimono over a dress with three holes in the front —chimed in agreement.

"If you went that long without breathing, you'd die. And since you're unfortunately still with us, that means it wasn't really that terrible. You're always so dramatic. It's like you're begging for attention."

"You just don't get it, do you?" Abbie shook her head at the sharp-tongued Maya. "I was just trying to emphasize what a big difference there is. From our point of view, it's like the world we were in till just now had a whole other food culture, you know? This right here is the taste of home! The air is totally different, I tell you!"

Abbie clenched a fist to emphasize her explanation, though Menou and the others still couldn't tell the difference. It must have been a sense unique to conjured soldiers.

"Ah, there's a little bit of color in the air, but it isn't harmful to your health, so don't worry. That means you, li'l sis!"

"Yeah, right." Sahara, the silver-haired girl who'd been covering

her mouth and barely breathing since they entered the Mechanical Society, glowered at Abbie. "I inhaled too much color in a place like this once, and it made me go crazy. It's definitely harmful. You can't fool me."

As indicated by the habit she wore, Sahara had been a nun, soon to be a proper priestess, just a year ago. She'd joined the front lines of the fight against the Mechanical Society to earn her place in the Faust, but a corruption of her spirit caused her to betray them, attacking Menou and getting the tables turned on her.

"Ah-ha-ha. It's fine, really. The conjured soldier that contaminated the spirits of any human who came in here is gone now. As a general rule, Primary Color conjurings are harmless to the human body. Unlike Original Sin conjurings, which eat away at you nonstop!"

Maya's lips thinned at the unfavorable mention.

"I mean, sure. If I wanted to, I could mess with the Primary Colors that accumulate in your body as you breathe and corrupt your spirit, but I'm not going to do *that.* Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Abbie laughed loudly, in higher spirits than usual. Unfortunately, even Menou could tell she'd done nothing to assuage Sahara's fears.

The Primary Triad soldiers who had continuously attacked humanity on the border of the Mechanical Society through the entrance in the eastern part of the continent were gone now. This was one of the nuisances Menou had solved with Abbie's help a few months earlier, when they were still staying in Grisarika Kingdom.

Abbie, who was friendly toward humanity, stretched her arms out under the midnight sun.

"Welcome to the Mechanical Society, homeland of my brethren! This is the outer edge of zone thirteen. In other words, we're at the tip of my domain!"

"Mm-hmm."

Maya gave a disinterested hum as she picked one of the Primary Color crystals from the ground. Cupped in her small hand, the pure blue stone transformed under her touch and became a strange little lump of flesh.

"Aaagh! What do you think you're doing?!"

"Who, meee? I was just picking up a pretty stone, that's all."

The unsightly mass writhed in Maya's hand and transformed into a small monster. Once it was done, Maya promptly picked up another stone.

"It would *never* cross my mind that I can conveniently produce more monsters without having to use any conjurings. …When I think of it that way, maybe this place isn't so bad."

"Cut it out! Monsters are to us what cancer cells are to humans. Don't make more weird stuff in heeere!"

Abbie's shriek was no exaggeration this time.

Just touching Primary Color materials with a Concept of Original Sin would transform them into monsters. If it went on like this, the monsters would keep multiplying until she couldn't even maintain the space. It was a rather fatal flaw.

"All right, all right. That's enough of that."

As Maya went on picking up Primary Color crystals despite Abbie's protests, Sahara hoisted her up to stop her.

"Aww, but it's a perfect chance to secure more sacrifices…"

Maya grumbled as her legs were lifted off the ground. The swarm of tiny monsters she'd produced tottered into Maya's shadow and vanished. Even though Primary Color crystals were materials that could create worlds, they were nothing but easy targets to corrupt—this scene was proof enough of the conjuring compatibility between Colors and Concepts of Original Sin.

"You little brat…! Honestly, we're in no position to waste time fooling around like this, if you ask me. Isn't that right, li'l Menou?"

"Very true…"

Abbie was correct.

Menou and company had acquired what they needed to get management authority over the "Starhusk," which was their goal in the northern continent.

But at the same time, they'd been chased down and forced to flee to the Mechanical Society.

Maya was the one who murmured the name of the person who would no doubt be hot on their heels any moment now.

"…Michele."

Just hearing it was enough to send tension through the group.

She was Hakua's direct subordinate, and a deadly threat. They'd gotten into a few skirmishes with her, yet they still couldn't grasp the full extent of her power.

"Yeah, exactly. So let's hurry up and hit the road!"

Sahara raised a fist, insisting that they should flee. Though she was always in a hurry to get as far away from danger as possible, it was a fact that they couldn't fight Michele head-on. They'd managed to avoid fighting on a level playing field thus far, planning their escape routes where Michele wouldn't be able to use her full strength.

This time, however, the choice to run was more complicated.

"Wouldn't it be better to try to ambush her…?"

Maya's suggestion, the opposite of Sahara's, made sense, too.

In the Mechanical Society, Abbie had the home field advantage. She and her fellow conjured soldiers, products of the Human Error of *Vessel*, might even be a match for Michele, who was an imitation of *Dragon* produced by the ancient civilization.

Settling things with Michele here and now, rather than dragging out their game of cat and mouse, was certainly an appealing prospect.

"An ambush, huh… Yes, the Mechanical Society certainly is your big sister's turf, and we might even stand a chance of winning if Menou uses her Pure Concept…but we can't fight and protect this thing at the same time."

Abbie rapped her knuckles on an enormous structure.

It was a piece of the environment control tower, a relic of the advanced civilization that existed a thousand years earlier.

The tower happened to be their hard-won spoils from the fight in the northern continent to gain control over the Starhusk—one of the Four Major Human Errors. The tower was so large that it was impossible to see the whole thing from this close.

Michele was sure to try to destroy the environment control tower. If given half the chance, she would probably prioritize the tower's destruction over defeating Menou and company.

On top of that, they had only just battled with the likes of Genom

and Pandæmonium. Given that Michele was likely to be in prime fighting condition, they were at a clear disadvantage.

"But how are we supposed to run away if we're lugging this huge thing around?"

"Should we drop it, then? It'd buy us some time if we leave it here, at least."

"What do you think we fought so hard in the City of Ruins for, exactly…?"

"Not to worry. Or don't you remember who controls this space?"

While the group went back and forth over Maya's concerns, Abbie puffed up her chest smugly.

"I've got this. Now that we're rid of those old bastards, the entire Mechanical Society is basically my playground! As long as we're within this space, I can do almost anything!"

"Sorry. I guess I don't really get what it means for a 'space' to belong to someone…"

"Oh, right. I guess that doesn't mean anything to normal humans, huh?"

Since Maya could control her Concepts of Original Sin on pure instinct, she didn't know much about how conjurings worked. Abbie clapped her hands briskly and made no further move to clear up Maya's confusion.

Menou continued the explanation in her stead. "A Primary Triad conjured soldier is essentially a conjured space with a mind of its own, constructed from Primary Color conjurings. So it's not like this space 'belongs' to her—her consciousness dwells within the space itself."

"Wait, does that mean…" Maya wrinkled her nose and pointed at Abbie. "We're *inside* of Abbie right now?"

"Yes, exactly."

"What? Then who's this standing in front of us?"

"A communicator, or a remote-control terminal of sorts. This Abbie isn't the real one."

"You got it! I can't communicate with humans without a body, now can I? So we conjured soldiers use the Primary Color stones in our space to create terminals that connect to our spirits."

Since she was just a vessel, it didn't matter how many times this Abbie was broken, as she could provide a new body right away. The different "zones" that divided the Mechanical Society really indicated the spaces that were the true bodies of Primary Triad conjured soldiers.

"Ahh… So that's why you're always a bit cold toward her."

The real Abbie wasn't actually there, even if you were looking at and talking to her. Maya thought she understood now why Menou might want to keep some distance.

The truth was, Menou hadn't actually trusted Abbie right away.

"That's not true at all. I finally earned li'l Menou's trust just recently."

"Yes, I suppose you could put it that way…although it's rather irritating to hear you say it out loud."

"Hey, I'm not irritating! Besides, my li'l sis here isn't cold to me at all, right? Riiight?"

"……"

"Li'l sis?!"

"Just hurry up and transport us, Abbie. Sahara is just, you know, a little shy. It's her nature, that's all."

"Hrmm… All riiight. I'll move us to the central area, then."

"……"

Looking away from Sahara, Abbie reluctantly carried out a conjuring at Menou's request.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Primary Triad, Primary Color Pseudo-Concept—

Guiding Light appeared from the space surrounding them and carved out a three-dimensional geometric pattern. The very space they inhabited, not the physical form of Abbie in front of them, was constructing a conjuring.

Invoke [Zone Thirteen: Connect: Central Zone]

The scenery around Menou and the others shifted abruptly.

Momo emerged from the Guiding Force tunnel through space just in time to hear Michele, who'd gone ahead of her, clicking her

tongue in annoyance.

"They got away."

Michele had been Momo's superior for half a year. Now she cursed the empty view before them.

Momo and Michele had pursued Menou through the spatial hole in the northern continent to the Mechanical Society.

Looking behind them, Momo could see a circular hole in the middle of the air. As it shone with Guiding Light, a green-haired bespectacled priestess emerged after her: Hooseyard.

"Ooh, so this is the Mechanical Society? It's incredible. What a wonderfully incomplete world!"

"How could they have gotten away from us so quicklyyy?"

As Hooseyard immediately stooped to pick up a Primary Color crystal and gaze at it, eyes sparkling with curiosity, Momo ignored her and addressed Michele.

"Flarette fought Genom Cthulha in the City of Ruins for the sake of getting the environment control tower, which connects to management authority over the Starhusk, I'm suuure of it. They didn't have nearly enough time to get away from here with that huuuge thing. You don't want to investigate the possibility that they're hiding nearbyyy?"

"I'm not going to waste time on something that doesn't merit investigation." Michele curtly dismissed Momo's misgivings. "The Mechanical Society is a unique conjured space made of Guiding Force. The laws of physics are much more flexible here than in any ordinary place."

Michele crushed a Primary Color crystal under the toe of her boot and went on. "Don't try to apply normal logic to a place crafted by the Concepts of Primary Colors. The essence of the Primary Color conjurings born of the Pure Concept of *Vessel* is to create and control an alternate dimension. In fact, the 'Chamber' of the individual who held the Pure Concept of *Vessel* was an entirely separate world. From a conjuring perspective, it was practically a work of art."

"Chamber…?"

"Your own personal conjured space… Wouldn't that be so

wonderful…”

While Momo seemed puzzled, the ever-scholarly Hooseyard sounded downright dreamy at the notion.

“Since you can determine the laws of physics within a conjured space using Guiding Force, it would theoretically be possible to make a world that operates under whatever principles its creator prefers.”

With humanity’s level of conjuring technology, conjured spaces were little more than an armchair theory, unobtainable as of yet. Virtually all that was known about them was that they were used in the era of the ancient civilization. And since Momo was primarily interested in battle, this was all a foreign concept to her.

Hooseyard took that as her cue to start speaking so quickly that Momo couldn’t get a word in edgewise if she wanted to.

“I do have a working theory on how to make a small-scale space, but since the Concept of Primary Colors is considered taboo, we can’t experiment… A long time ago, I tried to submit a thesis about it, and Elcami got ever so angry with me.”

“Whoever that is, they were right to be angry,” Michele snapped. “An individual shouldn’t be researching such things. When a conjuring deals in subspaces, there’s no telling what might happen if it goes wrong.”

“You think so…? I still reached a point where I was quite sure it would work…”

“No wonder she was angry, if you reached a point you weren’t supposed to aim for in the first place.”

Priestesses of the Faust were supposed to crack down on taboo, not research it. As Momo wondered drily about the scholarly priestess’s sense of ethics, Hooseyard sent Guiding Force into her glasses-shaped Guiding Vessel.

Guiding Force: Connect—Glasses, Crest—Invoke [Guiding Force Vision]

The conjuring allowed her to see Guiding Force on levels that were normally invisible to the naked eye.

Still wearing the glasses as they glowed with Guiding Light, Hooseyard looked around the area, then abruptly fixed her gaze on one spot.

"Right there."

Hooseyard pointed at an area of swirling color indistinguishable from the rest.

"There's a sign that space has been split apart there. They must have cut this area off. Now it's just a subspace unattached to any conjured soldier's space."

"I see. I've no doubt you're correct."

Michele nodded coolly. She trusted Hooseyard's expertise in Guiding Force. If it had to do with the field of conjuring, she was willing to take Hooseyard's word at face value, no questions asked.

Momo squinted in the direction Hooseyard indicated, but still didn't see anything. It was just a mess of colors, like the rest of this place.

"I don't know how you spotted that. Those glasses are downright freaky."

"Tee-hee, Ms. Momo, you're so… Hmmm? 'Freaky' doesn't seem like the right word, does it? Here, try putting these on, Ms. Momo. Then you'll be able to see it, too! Go on, try it!"

"…No, I still don't see a damn thing."

Even when Momo put on the glasses at Hooseyard's behest, she still couldn't tell where space had supposedly been split.

It was hard enough to make out the flow of Guiding Force in a space full of Primary Color materials floating around in evaporated form. Unlike the normal world, where "Power" only flowed naturally in the astral veins, the Mechanical Society had Guiding Force throughout the atmosphere. All "Guiding Force Vision" accomplished was filling Momo's vision with bright, twinkling lights.

"Really…? Later, I'll teach you all about the differences in the nature and flow of Guiding Force in this place. You have a real knack for it, so I'm sure you'll be able to recognize the basics within three days or so!"

"I can't think of anything I'd rather do less, thank you. Why would I ever need to hone such a uselessly specific ability? It's wasting all your time on things like this that makes you such a weirdo."

"What? No, no. I'm still perfectly normal compared to you or

Michele, you know…"

"Be quiet and put that knowledge and intuition of yours to work. So you're saying the conjured soldier that goes by 'Abbie' altered space in that area and moved them somewhere else, correct?"

"Altering space… Can conjured soldiers really do that?"

Momo returned the glasses to Hooseyard as she reacted to Michele's words in surprise.

"As long as they have a solid grasp of the functions of Primary Color-based spaces, they can do so within that space. See, those Primary Triad conjured soldiers are spaces here in the Mechanical Society themselves—they just take on other forms outside it. I hear they were fighting over control of those spaces for a long time, but they must've settled it by now."

During her explanation, Michele turned her gaze upward. She analyzed the situation and the best path forward, quickly reaching a conclusion.

"…For now, we're going back."

"Back to the northern continent, you meeean? We're not going to chase after them?"

"Chasing a conjured soldier around in the Mechanical Society is an exercise in futility. Maybe if we'd caught them while they were still carrying the environment control tower, but we've missed that chance."

Even though they'd nearly caught Menou and company by the tail, she didn't hesitate to declare it a lost cause to chase them further.

Since their targets had something to protect, they were bound to stop sooner or later.

But they'd already holed themselves up somewhere. No doubt they had fled all the way to the central area, the source of the Mechanical Society where the *Vessel* still remained.

"I see… Well, if that's what my darling Michele wants, then that's what we'll dooo!"

"Obviously. Besides, do you have any idea how pointless it is to keep crushing terminals of a conjured soldier that exists as an entirely separate space?" Michele spat with obvious displeasure.

She knew from experience that battling an opponent who controlled a conjured space was essentially like fighting an entire "world," albeit a small one.

"So if we return from the Mechanical Society to the heart of the northern continent, what's our next step, hmmm?"

"What would you do?" Michele countered.

It was a test. Sensing this, Momo thought about her plan carefully.

"The simplest approach would be Concepts of Original Sin. We summon simple demons and monsters, send them in, and destroy allll the materials here."

"There are three problems with that." Michele immediately listed the flaws in Momo's plan. "One—if we use Primary Colors as fodder to make too many monsters, we won't be able to handle them. Two—even with a natural advantage, it would still require considerable sacrifices for an Original Sin conjuring large enough to deal with this scale of Primary Colors. And the biggest issue…" Michele raised a third finger. "Lady Maya is with them. It would be foolish to oppose her with Concepts of Original Sin."

Maya.

While the girl might look like the weakest of Menou's party, she was actually the most dangerous, being a former part of one of the Four Major Human Errors: Pandæmonium. And although she wasn't much of a fighter in this state, there was a very real danger that she could turn back into Pandæmonium if handled improperly.

The Pure Concept of *Evil* had already consumed the southern islands and swelled in size. If it devoured the Mechanical Society on top of that, the number of monsters in this world could grow large enough to overwhelm what was left of civilization on the continent.

Which would spell destruction for all of humanity.

"So what about an approach that's not so simple?"

"Well, it would take a lot of time and effort…but we could build a railroad track up to the entrance of the Mechanical Society and transport enough materials in to build a ceremonial hall, nooo?"

"Correct. Brute force is ineffective when your opponent is space itself. It requires considerable preparation."

Michele turned on her heel, apparently satisfied with Momo's response. She strode briskly toward the Guiding Force hole that led back to the northern continent.

"You'll take the lead on the preparations, Momo."

"Yes, ma'aaam. You can count on meee."

They would prepare for a massive conjuring ceremony.

Both of them turned to look at Hooseyard.

"This is your time to shine, then. Give it all you've got, Hooseyard."

"Who…?" Hooseyard pointed at herself, blinking. "Me?"

Their opponents would probably use a large-scale conjuring to attack them.

That was Menou's prediction for what would happen when Michele and company came to the Mechanical Society and failed to find them.

It was certainly what Menou would do in their shoes.

Michele knew that Menou was in league with the Primary Triad conjured soldiers who controlled the Mechanical Society. And, having fought against Abbie before, Michele wouldn't waste time crushing the conjured soldiers who only served as remote-control terminals.

A conjured soldier's true nature was that of a living dimension, a spatial life-form with a mind of its own. This wasn't the kind of thing you could fight by swinging a sword around. Yes, Michele's power was so terrifying that she might be able to cause real damage with strength alone, but she was also smart and sensible. If there was a correct path to take, she would take it, not attempt to find a way around it.


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So if this was to be a battle of large-scale ceremonial conjurings, Menou and company would have to find a whole new way to fight, too.

As she contemplated how to deal with Michele, Menou gazed at the changed scenery before them.

In the central zone of the Mechanical Society lay an oddly nostalgic white school building.

There were few buildings like it. But in the other world, at least in Japan, it was the most common architectural style for a standard school.

"Why is it a school, I wonder?"

"Beats me. As far as I know, it's been like this ever since the creation of the Mechanical Society."

Abbie didn't know the answer to Menou's vague musing. Evidently, its appearance hadn't changed since well before she came into existence.

"Well, if it isn't my big sis."

The first to react to Menou and company's appearance in the schoolyard was a wolf with bright blue fur. Abbie broke into a huge smile and jumped at the blue wolf immediately, ruffling his fur.

"Heya, Gi! You been hard at work, I hope?"

"Ha-ha-ha. Bet you clean forgot that you dumped all your responsibilities on me and ran off without askin', didn't ya? Hrmm? Gimme a break, dammit. You got any idea how tough it's been for me, big sis?"

"Aww, come on. It's an elder sibling's responsibility to work hard for the younger ones, right? Well, I'm gonna go see my beloved little brothers and sisters! You show li'l Menou and friends around, Gi! Thanks!"

"Hey, don't run off on me! Get back heeere!"

The blue wolf's howling didn't slow Abbie down in the slightest. She bounded cheerfully into the school building and vanished from sight.

Menou sidled over to him, smiling dryly. "Good to see you again, Ginoum."

"Hrmm, Menou, eh? Thanks again for your help back then."

“That’s my line.” Menou smiled at Ginoum.

He was the conjured soldier who had helped Menou the most in the battle at Grisarika’s borders. It was largely thanks to him that they managed to get that area under control while it was a battlefield hostile toward humanity.

Ginoum approached Sahara. “Hrmm… So you’re the youngest sister she was talking about—our last sibling, eh?”

“Nope. Not me. I’ve got nothing to do with any of this.”

As Ginoum pressed closer, Sahara denied everything for no particular reason. She probably didn’t want to draw any more attention to herself—and this, like most things she’d gotten caught up in recently, sounded like a huge pain.

Ginoum was unconvinced. “Big sis *can* get things done when she puts her mind to it,” he muttered. “She really did finish it…”

Sahara didn’t know what he meant, but she knew it sounded suspicious. She quickly backed away from him.

Maya, on the other hand, was staring firmly at Ginoum. Her gaze had been fixed on his blue fur since the wolf first appeared, and now she steeled herself and spoke up.

“C-can I pet you?”

“Ha-ha-ha. Of course not, dammit. The hell d’you think my terminal is made of, you blasted child of Original Sin?”

“Aww…” Maya hung her head in obvious disappointment.

Ginoum was a conjured soldier, after all. If Maya touched him, his body would corrode and fall apart. Despite this, she kept casting tragic glances at him, clearly wishing she could touch his fur.

“Eh, whatever. You can use that school as yer base. If big sis brought you in here, we’ll accept ya. The only Triad soldiers left after that last scuffle are on her side.”

Ginoum laughed, his wolf’s teeth flashing.

“Welcome to the central zone of the Mechanical Society. This space ain’t any of us Primary Triad conjured soldiers. Yer the first humans to come all the way here since Genom.”

CHAPTER 2

Strife

"Damn you!"

Cornered after a long, fierce fight, the conjured soldier spat a curse at Menou.

It was a humanoid Primary Triad conjured soldier with tan skin and crimson hair. The conjured space that made up her true form was already gone. This single terminal was the only material that remained of her.

Among the conjured soldiers made of all three Primary Colors, she had killed the most humans of all.

She'd continually crafted a battlefield, waging war against humanity in order to survive. The battlefront known as the eastern Wild Frontier was the space she controlled.

She needed more *Red* materials, always more.

And the best source for that was human beings.

"You don't know when to give up, do you? Your territory was unbalanced since you kept dismantling humans and filling it up with *Red*."

"Don't compare me to those lucky bastards who're connected to the center. You people just have to open your mouths and materials come pouring in. I'm nothing like you…!"

"So what?"

Abbie's voice was cool as ice. Her usual cheerfulness was nowhere to be found.

"You lost the fight for a spot adjacent to the central zone, got chased out, waged war against humans, and made all of us into enemies of humanity in the process. That's your own fault."

It was because this eastern borderland was turned into a battlefield that the Mechanical Society was feared as a hostile foe of humanity.

If the Mechanical Society was left alone, conjured soldiers would abduct humans. The risk of corruption to the spirit was too great to invade, so all the humans could do was keep up a line of defense. They couldn't even construct a large-scale ceremonial conjuring there, so the battle dragged on for hundreds of years.

"You waged war against humanity, made a deal with Genom, and even accepted aid from Guardian, didn't you? I'm amazed you managed to expand your territory so far."

Most of her space had now been consumed by Abbie.

"Thanks for the meal."

With a mirthless smile, she stomped the conjured soldier's head into bits.

"There, that's another one down."

"Yup! All thanks to you, li'l Menou. I could never have managed it without your handy Pure Concept of *Time*!"

Having allied with Abbie, Menou used conjurings that could affect space to connect two different areas of the Mechanical Society. Spatial conjurings were a derivative of *Time* that Menou couldn't manage under normal circumstances, but altering space was easy in the Mechanical Society. She could connect Abbie's space to that of the conjured soldier in question. After that, it was just a matter of which Primary Triad conjured soldier could first consume the other's space and materials.

"So, Abbie. How many more did you want, again?"

"Three to go." Abbie's remote-controlled body held up three fingers.

As a spatial lifeform, Abbie's real body couldn't move. It could absorb materials and expand, but couldn't take action and transport itself around, hence the need to create a terminal to send out.

Then the terminal encountered Menou.

By using her Pure Concept of *Time* to connect spaces, Abbie could launch assaults on other conjured soldiers' spaces—their real bodies.

“Then I can make your wish come true, li’l Menou.”

That was the first round in the battle defending the Mechanical Society, which took place a few months before.

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The Starhusk.

This was the name given to the giant orbs that floated above the center of the northern continent.

Those floating spheres were an immense conjuring device that had activated a thousand years prior and carved out the enormous hole in the northern continent.

It was a masterwork crafted collaboratively by the Pure Concepts of *Star* and *Vessel*. Completed by combining immense amounts of materials and lives, the Starhusk had only one purpose:

Otherworld repatriation.

The device now known as the Starhusk was intended to activate a conjuring that would send a human from this world back to Japan by inverting the process used to summon people from that world.

They wanted to go home.

This was a thousand-year-old relic of a wish held so dearly by humans who were summoned to this world from the peaceful country of Japan.

“…I wonder what that place is like.”

It had been a few days since the group traveled from the heart of the northern continent to the central zone of the Mechanical Society. Menou stood in the building modeled after a Japanese school, thinking of the other world.

Japan.

Though she had theoretical knowledge of the place, Menou couldn’t begin to imagine what it was actually like. Any human born in this world would never set foot in the country called Japan, which was in another world entirely.

Here, on the school grounds modeled after the architecture of such an unreachable land, sat an enormous structure. It was much

larger than the school building itself, though it was cracked and crumbling in places. In its original form, it had been more than a kilometer tall. Now, as it took up what would normally be a spacious schoolyard, Menou squinted up at it.

It was the environment control tower: the structure that controlled the Starhusk, one of the Four Major Human Errors.

In the underground City of Ruins, Menou and company had encountered Nono Hoshizaki—the holder of the Pure Concept of *Star*—and learned the Starhusk's true nature.

A conjuring circle reverse-engineered from Otherworld summoning, designed to send someone back, was the one and only way an Otherworlder could return to their world. While it could only be activated once, they were very fortunate to have secured the only device with management authority over the Starhusk.

Now Menou had the environment control tower, which could command the Starhusk, and a Primary Triad conjured soldier, a native resident of the Mechanical Society. That meant she currently held two of the Four Major Human Errors, who were said to be able to destroy the entire world.

"…Ah, wait a minute. I suppose with Maya, that makes three."

Even with her memories restored, Maya was undeniably a part of Pandæmonium. In the seas far south of the continent was a barrier of fog, in which Pandæmonium was bound. She had managed to slip a pinky finger out through a tiny gap in the barrier, and now that pinky finger was Maya. It was only by happenstance that Menou wound up with Maya in her care, but she was now a trusted and reliable friend.

That left only the Sword of Salt. If she could get her hands on it, Menou would have collected powers related to all four Human Errors that had destroyed the ancient civilization. In that respect, Menou was currently in quite an impressive position.

The deadly blade turned anything it cut into salt, without exception. Depending on how it was used, it could even transform the entire planet into salt. A thousand years ago, it had turned a continent into salt, which then melted away into the ocean.

Half a year earlier, the Sword of Salt had been broken and most

of its blade lost. Now the remaining fragment of its tip was lodged in Akari's chest.

Menou had thrust it in there herself to stop Akari from transforming into a Human Error when her Pure Concept of *Time* went wild. By focusing *Suspension* on a single spot to prevent the salt from consuming her, Akari had lost the ability to move at all.

Restoring Akari's memories, bringing her back from the brink of turning into a Human Error, and undoing the salt transformation that threatened to erode Akari's body. These were Menou's goals, along with defeating Hakua.

Still, Menou didn't know where Akari's body was. The diary where she'd written her memories only said that she'd entrusted it to her faithful assistant.

But the girl who must have hidden Akari hadn't contacted Menou over the past six months, nor did Menou have any idea where she was or what she might be doing.

What she did know was the reason her past self must have entrusted Akari to this Momo person.

Menou was trying to keep Momo far away.

The Sword of Salt and the Pure Concept of *Time*. Both elements afflicting Akari were much too powerful. It would likely be impossible to save her through direct means.

That was exactly why Menou sent Momo away—so her assistant wouldn't find out about the plan Menou had come up with to rescue Akari.

It wasn't strictly necessary to save Akari's body in order to save her life.

The three components that comprised life were a body, a spirit, and a soul. Out of the three, a physical body could theoretically be replaced. As long as there was a vessel to contain Akari's memories and soul, she could be transferred out of her current body, which was being consumed by the Sword of Salt.

"……"

As Menou thought about the many events of the past six months, she silently pressed a hand to her chest.

There were, in fact, several possible vessels that could hold

Akari's soul and spirit. Though a soul couldn't be replaced, and the memories of a spirit could only be supplied in specific ways, preparing a body to hold the two was relatively simple.

Menou was deliberately using a Pure Concept to consume her own memories. Of course, this was partly because they'd run into powerful enemies one after another since leaving the holy land.

But erasing Menou's memories was also necessary to save Akari.

If her assistant, Momo, learned what Menou was trying to do to save Akari, there was a high possibility that she would try to stop it. That was why Menou sent her away.

What was her assistant doing now? Menou had no way of knowing. There was no use wondering about it, either.

Menou shook her head to clear her mind.

Right now, she just needed to talk to Abbie, who was assessing and rebuilding the broken environment control tower.

When Menou entered, four blue butterflies were flying around inside.

They glowed with Guiding Light as they landed on broken areas and spurred on repairs. The scales that fell from the butterflies' wings were micromachines that gave off tiny Guiding Lights of their own. The walls, ceilings, and floors already fixed by the fluttering of the blue butterflies were glowing faintly.

Micromachines were the smallest possible form of a Concept of Primary Color. They were minuscule conjured soldiers that multiplied on their own; when enough of these molecules collected together in all three varieties, they could become a lifeform. Abbie was repairing the environment control tower by manipulating these micromachines.

Menou addressed the source of the micromachines as she entered. "Is the transfer of management authority going well?"

The person commanding the blue butterflies filling in all the broken areas of the tower and producing the micromachines was Abbie.

Abbie slowly opened her eyes when Menou spoke to her.

"Yep, going great."

She smiled, her eyes a marine blue, and held up two fingers in a

V for victory.

Since arriving in the Mechanical Society a few days ago, Abbie had been holed up inside the environment control tower.

Originally, the one who commanded the Starhusk was a special conjured soldier known as the Elder Astrologer, who dwelt in the environment control tower in the City of Ruins. After they followed her predictions and fought Genom, Abbie absorbed the broken and no-longer-functioning Astrologer, and by repairing the tower half, she could transfer the Astrologer's management authority.

Abbie was serving as a relay for the combined efforts of all of the Primary Triad soldiers remaining in the Mechanical Society to analyze the environment control tower. To send and receive information, she evidently couldn't move.

"It does look like most of the repairs are done now. What about reverse-engineering the Otherworld summoning circle?"

"That's going well, too." This time, Abbie put her index finger and thumb together to form a circle.

This world was constantly summoning Otherworlders from Japan. It was sometimes caused by a naturally occurring conjuring phenomenon, and sometimes by someone with clear intentions. Either way, it continued to give birth to the immense powers known as Pure Concepts.

But it might be possible to stop the Otherworlder summoning—the sin that this world had committed countless times—from ever happening again.

The conjuring to send someone in this world back to Japan in the other world correlated directly to the Otherworlder summoning circle, which was built into the planet's core system. If they could analyze that conjuring, they might be able to interfere with the natural conjuring phenomenon caused by Guiding Force and make sure no Otherworlder would ever come to this world again.

"…It has to be done. Right?"

This part of the plan had nothing to do with Akari. It was simply one of the only ways Menou could atone for having killed so many innocent people for the sake of the world.

Abbie said that the analysis was going well, which meant that her

hopes of being able to interfere with the reparation circle might soon be true.

Their plans were proceeding smoothly. There was just one problem.

"It's Michele…"

"Yeah, for sure."

Abbie's expression darkened as she agreed with Menou's worries.

Just as they'd expected, Michele had entered the Mechanical Society in pursuit of Menou and the others.

As soon as they arrived in the Mechanical Society, Abbie had used her ability to alter space and move them to the central zone, escaping Michele and her minions. Michele appeared to have left the Mechanical Society for now, but Menou and Abbie were both painfully aware she wasn't the type to give up on a chase so easily.

"Since we got into the Mechanical Society from the northern continent, I figured I might as well send conjured soldiers to Grisarika so we can communicate…except none of them have come back. I don't think we should get our hopes up for reinforcements."

"I'm worried about that, too. It's been about a month since we left Grisarika Kingdom—something might have happened to Princess Ashuna…and we brought Sahara along without asking her, too."

Grisarika Kingdom was the group's base of operations. It was one of the most powerful nations on the continent, and Ashuna Grisarika was a strong supporter of Menou and company.

It was worrying that they couldn't get in touch with Ashuna, who should still be in Grisarika Kingdom, but Menou and Abbie couldn't very well leave to investigate.

"…Perhaps we could send Sahara to Grisarika. She's certainly looked bored these past few days, so we ought to put her to work. With a little preparation, Sahara can also summon Maya, so she's perfect as a go-between for communicating—"

"Nooo!! My littlest sister is the source of all my motivation! I don't wanna send her awaaay!"

Abbie found anyone younger than her to be adorable, without exception.

Menou found herself at a loss for words in the face of such a

ridiculous excuse, but she didn't dare object to Abbie's demands. She couldn't afford to put her in a bad mood right now.

"Well, putting the issue of Grisarika aside…if Michele makes it all the way here, can you beat her?"

"I don't know."

"…Even with my help?"

Of course, she meant using the Pure Concept of *Time* to support Abbie and the other conjured soldiers in battle.

It was safe to say that Menou and company were in the most advantageous position they'd had since making an enemy of Michele. The fact that Michele wasn't just barging in after them was proof enough of that.

And yet Abbie only shrugged. "Seriously, I have no idea."

A troubled expression crossed her lovely face, shadowing her blue eyes and tan skin.

They'd taken actions against Michele in the past few days. They sent Primary Color weapons in the form of conjured soldiers to ambush her, and attacked her with the spirit corruption unique to the Mechanical Society. Abbie summed up the results simply:

"How in the world are we supposed to beat something like that?"

She was too strong.

That was the unvarnished truth about Michele.

"I guess it's no surprise since she's a humanoid weapon built by the ancient civilization. Her strength just defies all logic, you know? …Oh, Menou, one sec. The functional repairs are almost done, so I'll try connecting to the environment control tower."

"…All right. Please do."

With no new ideas on how to combat Michele, they went back to the subject of the tower.

Since Abbie had swallowed up the terminal of Astrologer—the calculation unit of the environment control tower—she was equipped with the features to connect to the giant conjuring construction and control it.

Guiding Force: Connect—Environment Control Tower, Management Authority—

Abbie connected herself to the environment control tower.

Guiding Light formed patterns all over her body, spreading from the floor to the walls and the ceiling to create a giant conjuring circle. The Guiding Force flowed into the rest of the tower as well, extending through the entire building.

"I still think it's better to run away from Michele than try to…fight hERRR—"

As Abbie tried to talk while making a Guiding Force connection to the environment control tower, her voice cut off abruptly. She stopped moving, too, becoming unnaturally still.

"What's the matter, Abbie?" Menou approached her cautiously.

Abbie slowly raised her head.

"Guiding Force connection, confirmed. Route: conjured puppet with management authority of the environment control tower and the Starhusk. Reference goal: Otherworld repatriation circle."

She listed off functions mechanically, looking at Menou with all emotion gone from her eyes.

"Please input Guiding Force activation key required for management authority transfer."

Menou's mind went into overdrive as she tried to keep up with the unexpected development.

Abbie was clearly not her normal self. Then again, based on what she was saying, this had to be connected to the Starhusk management authority that Abbie had been trying to take control of.

"…Are you the system *Vessel* created?"

"Unauthorized intrusion detected. Eliminating threat."

"Huh…?!"

Guiding Force: Connect—Battle Clothing, Crest—Invoke [Multi-Barrier]

A tan fist swung straight toward Menou.

Menou invoked a layered barrier on the spot, only for the punch to break through all of them in one fell swoop. Even that wasn't enough to stop the fist's momentum, and it struck Menou and sent her flying despite her Guiding Enhancement.

Her back slammed heavily into the wall, knocking the wind out of her. She adjusted her posture before she hit the ground and landed on all fours.

"What in the…?"

Grimacing at the pain in her back, Menou looked closer at her attacker.

There was no trace of free will in those marine-blue eyes. Her body was silently taking a stance to strike again.

Abbie's spirit must have been corrupted. More specifically, her terminal was being taken over.

No human technology could hack into a Primary Triad conjured soldier with Guiding Force. Menou had once hacked a Primary *Red* conjured soldier with a Guiding Force connection, but even encroaching on that single-color soldier with a relatively simple construction came with a fair share of pain and difficulty.

Surely it must be impossible to use Guiding Force to successfully take over a conjured soldier made of all three Primary Colors, who had a strong sense of self firmly established.

So what could make the impossible possible? She could think of only one answer.

"This really must be the Pure Concept of *Vessel*, then."

Menou pulled out her dagger gun.

The original creator of the environment control tower was the Pure Concept of *Vessel*, also the maker of all conjured soldiers. As the original source of Concepts of Primary Color, it made sense that *Vessel* could set a trap that even Abbie couldn't escape.

Abbie attacked Menou again.

Menou dodged the powerful punch, which smashed a hole in the wall behind her. As a Primary Triad conjured soldier, Abbie's combat abilities were terrifying. Her physical force was more than a match for Menou's Guiding Enhancement, even with her Guiding Force connection to Akari, which allowed her to access a Pure Concept.

Abbie's true self might have been affected, not just this terminal. The one saving grace was that she was only attacking Menou with simple physical combat. If she started using Primary Color conjurings, there would truly be no stopping her.

"This isn't the time or place to be fighting amongst ourselves, you know…!"

Of course, they weren't actually having a falling-out, but it would

seem that way to any onlookers. The corner of Menou's mouth twisted upward sardonically. Like it or not, she still had to fight back.

Menou threw her dagger at Abbie, who was lunging toward her again.

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

The blasts of wind from its hilt sent the dagger sailing swiftly toward Abbie.

Abbie didn't show any sign of even attempting to dodge it. The dagger hit her squarely in the chest, the blade driving in deep, but Abbie didn't seem to be in pain as she closed in on Menou.

"…!"

Abbie's powerful kick landed a direct hit. Menou was sent flying out of the environment control tower, crashing into the second floor of the school building.

The midnight sun was rolling across the bright night sky. It wasn't moving quickly enough to be perceived. The pure white sun ambled more slowly than a turtle, gradually moving little by little.

A priestess with pink hair held in pigtails by two scrunchies gazed up at the scene.

This was a world made of Guiding Force.

The Mechanical Society: an entire world created by a single human.

An Otherworlder with a Pure Concept had fled into this dimension, which was only slightly separated on the spatial axis from the world Momo lived in. The power of *Vessel* had overflowed, giving form to unique Primary Color materials and creating an entire world.

This small world that existed within a subspace expanded larger and larger, and came to be inhabited by intelligent lifeforms different from humans.

In a way, the Mechanical Society could be said to exist in the gap between the world of Japan and the world that Momo and the others came from.

When the artificial white sun set, it would signal that the barrier

keeping this world locked away had been broken. Here in the Mechanical Society, which had been sealed away for a thousand years and loathed humanity all the while, a town was being built.

There were the sounds of ongoing construction, the hustle and bustle of people carrying materials, and lively chatter as passersby went to and fro. Here in the dominion of Primary Triad conjured soldiers, whose intelligence developed independently from humanity, droves of human beings were hard at work.

Michele had returned to the Mechanical Society, set up an encampment, blocked off the entrance, and gone deeper inside. Then, with the authority of the Faust, she oversaw the making of a railroad track leading from a town in the northern continent to the entrance to the Mechanical Society, then conscripted people to put to work.

They were after Menou—a major criminal who'd laid waste to the holy land—and her allies.

Inside the Mechanical Society, even the laws of physics were twisted out of shape. The priestess who had the biggest role to play in conquering this space wasn't Momo. It wasn't even Michele, though she was powerful enough to fend off Primary Triad conjured soldiers on her own.

"Ms. Momooo!"

Momo's lips pursed at the cheerful voice calling her name.

While it was unbelievably annoying to be addressed like they were good friends, she couldn't ignore the voice, either.

Momo turned around to see a bespectacled priestess.

"…Is everything going smoothly?"

"Oh, yes, quite. I've already completed Michele's requested ceremonial theory on a smaller scale."

Hooseyard appeared to be in remarkably high spirits. Since they'd arrived, Momo was occasionally awestruck by her relentless cheer.

"Just as I thought. If you get the flow of power right for the Concepts of Primary Color when they're in a physical form, you can dismantle them and turn them back into Guiding Force. Ohhh, there's nothing like that moment when a theory you had in your mind succeeds in practice! You know?"

Hooseyard's statement had huge implications.

The Mechanical Society, at the border of the eastern Wild Frontier, had tormented humanity for a thousand years. She was saying it was possible to erase it from the world.

"…How is my darling Michele?"

"She seems to be handling it just fine so far. She's going to be the cornerstone to the whole ceremonial hall, so I'll need her to sit still for a while yet!"

"My goodness… It sounds like we really might succeed at dismantling the Mechanical Society, then."

"Since Guiding Force is the base of all conjuring phenomena, it's always theoretically possible to solve them. Listen, Ms. Momo. All conjuring phenomena can be resolved using conjuring."

"In theory, you mean. It's not really that simple."

"*Theories* are how we analyze reality. Since we're only human, of course there are bound to be mistakes and failures once in a while. But you won't get anywhere if you're afraid of a little trial and error."

Hooseyard seemed pleased with the ongoing construction of the conjuring hall. She gave zero indication that she understood how much work Momo had to do, being in charge of directing the work that put Hooseyard's theories into practice.

"You're only ever proactive at times like these. How convenient," Momo muttered. "But I'm sure they won't just wait for us to make a move. We're dealing with Primary Triad conjured soldiers who can alter space. This might even be the first time in human history that anyone has tried to fight a conjured soldier's actual self, not just their terminal."

"Hmm, I'm not so sure. Didn't Grisarika Kingdom bring the eastern battlefront under control? That would make this the second time."

A few months earlier, the constant influx of conjured soldiers that had caused problems for years was brought to a halt. It was a huge topic all over the continent.

Thanks to this feat, Sahara's fame spread as the governor of the Fourth. The story went that she had spearheaded the whole affair, but as someone who knew Sahara's personality and abilities

firsthand, Momo didn't believe these exaggerated rumors one bit.

"That was really just internal strife between conjured soldiers."

"Really?"

"Yes."

Momo knew the truth. What really happened was that the conjured soldier called Ability Control consumed other fellow conjured soldiers.

Abbie had swallowed up all the Primary Triad conjured soldiers who were hostile toward humanity. As a result, the Mechanical Society stopped actively attacking humans.

"Interesting. So even advanced spatial lifeforms like conjured soldiers fight amongst themselves," Hooseyard murmured thoughtfully, contemplating Momo's words. "Why must everyone always fight, I wonder…"

"What kind of question is that, all of a sudden? You say the strangest things."

"Is it that strange? It's strange for a girl as young as you to advance from a nun to a priestess at your age, isn't it, Ms. Momo?"

Hooseyard had zero tact, as usual. Momo grimaced.

It was poor form for priestesses to discuss what their lives were like before joining the Faust, even when speaking amongst themselves.

All priestesses were orphans, without exception. Children who lost their parents and had nowhere to go were brought to orphanages run by the church; those who showed particular promise were sent to monasteries to be raised as nuns in hopes of one day wearing the indigo robes of a priestess.

Those individuals who had risen from anonymous nuns to become priestesses had confidence in their skills and hard work.

They also never wanted to talk about the times before they became priestesses.

It was an inner weakness, after all.

"Isn't it funny? I was raised by a single mother, but she died of an illness. I think I was around five years old when I lost my last living relative. I went to the orphanage, then joined the church as a nun, randomly became a priestess, and wandered around for a few years,

doing fieldwork in conjuring research. Then, for some reason, the archbishop at the time recruited me into her service."

Without a hint of sadness, Hooseyard casually babbled about her humble origins.

An exceptional gift for Guiding Force was a prerequisite for joining the Faust. If anyone who spent their whole life as a nun and failed to advance heard Hooseyard say she "randomly became a priestess" with no apparent awareness of her natural talent, they might very well go mad with envy. To say nothing of being chosen personally by the archbishop, the top rank in the Faust. It was nothing short of an exceptional history.

"And then I got put to work in the holy land. As I believe you know, Ms. Momo, I was in charge of running the Dragon Gate."

"Uh-huh…"

Momo truly couldn't care less about any of this, so she tried to let the subject drop there. Hooseyard, however, was still staring pointedly at Momo, almost as if to say that since Hooseyard had shared her past, now it was Momo's turn.

"…You're not expecting me to talk about *my* backstory now, are you?"

"Aww, tell meee. I want to know more about you, Ms. Momo. Pretty please?"

Even as she wheedled, she kept staring at Momo through the lenses of her glasses.

Hooseyard had a way of looking at people like this sometimes. It was a look of blatant curiosity and undisguised fascination, like she was looking at a research subject, heedless of their personality or reaction.

Wanting to escape that gaze, Momo reluctantly began talking.

"My parents…are probably still alive somewhere, I think."

As she spoke, memories she thought were long buried began to resurface.

In Momo's earliest memories, she remembered being the child of a family that belonged to the Noblesse, the second caste, in some other nation. However, they weren't so aristocratic that they had a mansion, servants, and other such luxuries. And, of course, they

certainly weren't royalty like Ashuna's family.

If she remembered right, her parents were modestly wealthy at best, doing court service and living in a small single house.

"So how did you wind up at an orphanage if you had both parents? Were they destitute?"

"Because I creeped them out, I'm sure."

"Hmm?"

The death of both parents wasn't the only way children became orphans. But Hooseyard tilted her head, apparently not understanding Momo's scornful words.

"Creeped them out? What do you mean?"

"I've had a lot of Guiding Force since I was born."

Momo had more Guiding Force than most people, enough that it could be considered very unusual.

"Yes, I know… What of it?"

Even this wasn't enough for Hooseyard to guess what Momo was getting at. Momo let out an exaggerated sigh.

People with high levels of Guiding Force often had unbalanced emotions. Their spirit could be overpowered by the Guiding Force that flowed from their souls.

When Guiding Force escaped with someone's emotions, that person almost unconsciously entered a state of Guiding Enhancement. Therefore, a child could have a tantrum with physical strength greater than that of an adult.

How exhausting must it be for a parent who cannot stop their child from screaming, crying, and causing destruction?

"I was first brought to a monastery when I was four, so it must have been around that time. One day, they took me on a train to a festival in another town."

Momo still had memories of that day. She remembered gleefully clinging to her parents' sleeves. They were going to a big festival in a place she'd never been. Of course she would be excited.

Thinking back on it, she realized that her parents didn't try to hold her hand.

They were probably afraid of their own child.

Momo was an emotionally unstable child. Her excessive Guiding

Force held sway over her spirit. She sometimes clutched a toy too tightly and crushed it, no matter how sturdy; on other occasions, she'd broken furniture in a temper tantrum.

Her parents were frightened that she might hold their hands too tightly and crush them, too.

When they got off the train, Momo's mother gave her some pocket money. She told her to do whatever she pleased.

Momo was delighted to run around the festival. She eagerly visited the stalls, eating whatever she wanted and playing whatever games she liked. For the four-year-old Momo, it was probably the most fun she'd ever had.

And when she was done enjoying the festival in this unfamiliar town, little Momo was all alone.

"You can imagine what happened from there, I'm sure."

Momo never saw her parents again. There was a search, but they never showed up, and the monastery that boarded her wound up taking her in for good. Of course, Momo caused trouble there as well. Eventually, someone recognized her natural gift for Guiding Force and selected her to be a nun, a candidate for the Faust, and sent her to a monastery in the far west.

Young Momo made no effort to get used to being alone.

She didn't want to admit to herself that she'd been abandoned. Instead, she clung to the illusion that she was perfectly normal, at least when she was first sent to the monastery that trained future Executioners.

These days, she couldn't remember her parents' faces. She vaguely remembered that her father was a man and her mother was a woman, and that was the full extent of her feelings on the matter.

Until she met Menou, she never considered that she didn't need to expend any more emotional energy on the people who abandoned her. Really, she'd wasted so much time.

"That's not the reason I fight, though."

"It isn't?"

The real start of Momo's story was when she first brushed Menou's hair.

That day, in that moment, when she saw that smile, she decided.

She would live for Menou, and only Menou.

Momo would do anything to save Menou, even if it meant making an enemy of Menou herself. She would join forces with anyone, and sacrifice anything.

That was why Momo had come so far with Michele and Hooseyard.

"I'm sure your disturbing obsession with conjuring theory has nothing to do with your early life, either, right?"

"True. They're not related." Hooseyard smiled bashfully and touched her cogwheel-lined glasses. "It was pretty, that's all."

That was genuinely the entire root of Hooseyard's personality.

She saw Guiding Force, and she thought it was pretty.

The reason for her devotion to conjuring was as simple as that, just as some people were dazzled by the stars in the night sky and aspired to be astronomers.

Momo didn't understand it in the slightest, but it must have been a spectacle worthy of pinning your life on.

Just like the smile Momo saw that day.

"So then, Ms. Momo…"

"Now what?"

"What's Michele's reason for fighting, I wonder?"

Michele.

She was currently Momo's boss, and Momo knew that she was a human weapon born a thousand years ago.

However, Hooseyard probably wasn't aware of that. To her, Michele was probably just a new superior who was suddenly assigned to her half a year ago.

Michele was more powerful than any other human. So why did she fight?

"If I had to guess…"

Momo let out a long breath that vanished into the air.

"…she's probably fighting because she has no reason to fight."

"Oh, really…"

Hooseyard let out a sigh, too. She had been found by Archbishop Elcami and now worked under a superior by the name of Michele instead. She smiled rather sadly.

"I don't understand that at all."

"Good for you."

Momo didn't really care.

Just as Momo didn't expect Hooseyard to understand her, she doubted that Michele wanted understanding or sympathy from anyone else, either.

After all, the person now known as Michele was too powerful for anyone else to keep up.

Sahara was walking through a quiet corridor.

The appearance of this building, the heart of the Mechanical Society, was largely unfamiliar to Sahara.

From what she'd been told, it was the standard design for an educational institution in Japan, in the other world. The actual structure of the place wasn't so dissimilar from educational buildings here, like the monasteries where Sahara and Menou grew up, so maybe it was just the natural result of designing a building to accommodate many people.

As Sahara wandered around aimlessly, one of the classrooms she passed suddenly vanished.

"…Whoa. What's up with that?"

The surrounding walls soon moved to supplement the abruptly emptied space.

During the past few days, while they were lodging in the building, they occasionally saw such inexplicable occurrences, not to mention that there was more space inside than the outside would suggest. The interior must be rendered strange by Concepts of Primary Color.

"I guess that shouldn't be surprising, since we're in the Mechanical Society…"

As Sahara turned away so she wouldn't think about it too deeply, her gaze met a pair of blue eyes.

"Yo, Sahara."

The wolf talked to her lightly in a man's voice.

Ginoum.

He was a wolf with beautiful blue fur. Evidently, he could turn into

a humanoid form if he wished, but unlike the other conjured soldiers, he kept the appearance of a wolf unless it was necessary to do otherwise.

"You guys having a tough time or what? A classroom just disappeared over there."

"Eh, that's no big deal. Thanks to you lot, we can alter the central zone however we want now."

He was referring to the battle on the front of the Mechanical Society a few months before, which Ashuna also assisted in. The various other factions of conjured soldiers were all eliminated by Abbie's side.

"…Is this school really that important?"

As far as Sahara could tell, it was nothing more than a weird building.

She knew it was positioned at the center of the Mechanical Society, but she couldn't imagine it served any function beyond that.

"Yeah, 'course it is." The wolf laughed. "'Cause our progenitor *Vessel* is here. Basically, this is the only place that produces Primary Color crystals, which means that, from here, you can mess with any part of the Mechanical Society to an extent."

The "progenitor" that conjured soldiers like Ginoum and Abbie was the root of the Mechanical Society, one of the Four Major Human Errors. It was the Human Error of the Pure Concept of *Vessel*.

"Up 'til half a year ago, we were always at each other's throats, ya know? Most everyone who's directly connected to the center here are all older Primary Triad conjured soldiers. Every time a new one got born, the elders would eat the youngsters and get even bigger. For us conjured soldiers, that's just what the Mechanical Society was, a dog-eat-dog world."

"So Menou and Abbie put an end to all that."

"Exactly."

It hadn't been settled peacefully. They'd united the Mechanical Society by defeating and destroying those elders.

"Thanks to them, we can finally move on to the next stage."

"Cool. See you later."

As Ginoum grinned meaningfully, Sahara promptly excused herself and returned to the room where they were staying.

While it was originally an unfurnished room, furnishings had been brought in for Sahara and the other visitors. Whatever Sahara requested, Ginoum made for her.

The few days since they entered the Mechanical Society had been, to Sahara, surprisingly peaceful.

"It's so nice having nothing to do, isn't it? I finally get to relax again."

Sahara was very satisfied with being utterly spoiled here. But the other person in the room felt precisely the opposite.

"Well, I couldn't be *less* comfortable here."

It was Maya. The reason for her displeasure was simple. In fact, it was quite obvious from a single glance at her getup.

Almost every inch of her skin was covered, far beyond the level of gloves and a mask. She looked like an entirely new method of disease control gear had just been invented.

Anyone would be in a bad mood if they were forced to wear all that.

"I mean, can you blame them? You know how your power is, Maya. Just think about what happened when we first came here. Right?"

"Well, what about *you*, Sahara?!"

When Sahara attempted to tactfully remind Maya that her Concepts of Original Sin were fundamentally incompatible with the Mechanical Society, she only succeeded in annoying the girl even more.

Maya stripped off the layers of protective clothing and grabbed Sahara's arm.

"Your body…! My power is mixed into it, so don't you have Concepts of Original Sin, too?! It's no fair that you can touch them without anything bad happening!"

"I mean, come on. I awakened to some weird power in the City of Ruins, remember? So I'm probably an exception or something, right? Not that I know how it works."

When Sahara fought Genom in the City of Ruin, Guiding Force

had welled up in her arm. She used that as a justification.

The fact of the matter was that Sahara couldn't produce monsters just by touching something, even if she wanted to.

"It makes no sense! I don't like it one bit! I can't stand my servant getting fawned over while I get the cold shoulder!"

The pair were in the midst of this friendly argument when Sahara saw a shadow outside the window.

Immediately, she tackled Maya to the floor.

"Bwah?!"

Maya let out a little shriek of protest—drowned out by a loud crash as something smashed through the window and flew into the room.

Sahara held her breath, assuming it was an attack from Michele, but she soon realized she'd leapt to the wrong conclusion.

"Menou?!"

Menou had been knocked into the building from outside with alarming force.

If Menou was in the middle of a fight, then something serious was afoot.

"Stay down!"

Sahara stiffened at Menou's sharp command.

The assailant who came leaping in through the broken window after Menou was none other than Abbie.

Was she here to help? But no, something seemed off.

"Wait, what happened?! Why are you fighting?!" Maya cried out in confusion, unable to grasp the situation. Her direct combat abilities weren't that different from those of an ordinary child.

Sahara held onto Maya tightly, lest she get caught in the crossfire between such powerful opponents.

"Abbie's mind is corrupted!" Menou's explanation was short and to the point. She didn't have time to explain in any more detail than that.

Abbie launched herself off the broken window frame. Menou dropped low with her dagger tucked into its sheath, bracing herself to counter the attack.

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

As Menou drew the dagger and struck, she activated a crest conjuring. The slash was akin to an *iai* sword-draw technique, and with the added propulsive power of the *Gale*, it took Abbie's right arm clean off from her shoulder.

Abbie held her ground, steady even after losing an arm. As Menou stayed on guard, Abbie swung her remaining hand toward Menou's neck in a swift chopping motion.

But Sahara stepped in.

"Phew!"

With a sharp exhale, Sahara swept her metal right arm up from below, blocking Abbie's attack.

Menou was startled for a moment, then took advantage of the opening to press her dagger gun against the conjured soldier's head.

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

The Guiding Force branches that sprung forth from her blade destroyed Abbie's terminal from within.

There was a heavy cracking sound, and the gorgeous woman's body shattered into pieces.

But it wasn't over yet. As Menou and Sahara held their breath and looked on, the same woman reappeared where her body had broken just moments ago.

This was Abbie's terminal. If she was fatally wounded, her body would break and vanish, and a new body would be provided in its place.

If the spiritual control extended all the way to her true self, they would have to battle her over and over. With that in mind, Menou and Sahara stared grimly at the conjured soldier.

"Nngaaaaahh! I got hacked! This suuucks!!"

No, this scream clearly came from Abbie's own free will.

"I'm sorry, li'l Menou… Oh no! Don't tell me I hurt you too, li'l sis?!"

Abbie ran over to Sahara, undoubtedly back to her usual self. The other three girls' shoulders slumped in relief, seeing that the danger was past for now.

"You talked such a big game only to be a nuisance to all of us?

That's sooo embarrassing for you!"

"I don't want to hear that from a little brat who didn't do a single thing to help! Aaargh, I can't believe my terminal was taken over so easily!"

Menou, who was accustomed to their arguing, smoothly interrupted. "I'm glad you've come back to your senses, but what just happened was caused by trying to connect to the Starhusk, wasn't it?"

"For sure. Hardware-wise, the environment control tower is just about completely repaired. I'd say its functions are fully restored, too. But that's why the software side, the conjuring construction, was such a pain when I connected to it… I can't get management authority without the 'activation key' or whatever it is."

"…I see."

Evidently, Abbie remembered what she'd said when she was being controlled. Menou crossed her arms, thinking.

They'd hit a wall. If they could get management authority of the Starhusk, Menou could solve a lot of problems at once, including Hakua and the otherworld repatriation circle. That was why they devoted so much time to repairing the environment control tower… But if Abbie, who had far more processing power for conjurings than any human, couldn't get the management authority, it was utterly impossible for humanity to gain control over the Starhusk.

"An activation key, is it…? And Nono is gone now, so we can hardly ask her about it… Maya?"

"Of course I don't know," Maya answered before Menou could even ask the question. "I only learned recently that the Starhusk was a repatriation circle in the first place. I've never even heard of this activation key thing."

"Right, of course…"

It was no use, then. Surely no record remained of an activation key from a thousand years ago. Perhaps if they had any leads, at the very least… Then Menou thought of something else entirely.

The defense function.

It was a conjuring powerful enough to take Abbie over. Where must it have come from?

A conjuring designed to protect something a thousand years old… Surely the conjuring must have been made at the same time. Which meant something, somewhere, was continuing to control the conjuring, even now.

"Hellooo? Hate to interrupt your fun, but if I could have a minute…"

Just as Menou was losing herself in thought, a blue-furred wolf walked into the room. Ginoum padded up to them, holding something in his mouth.

"You'll have to tell me all about how my big sis got taken over or whatnot later—"

"No way! I'm taking that to my grave. You better not tell the others about it either, Gi! Got it?"

"…Just look at this, will ya?"

Ignoring Abbie's plea, Ginoum put his front paws on a desk and dropped the item from his mouth onto its surface. It was a small Guiding vessel made for projecting images. The Guiding Light it produced weaved together to display a three-dimensional overhead view of something.

"Just as we expected, our enemy's up to no good in a very big way."

"How dare someone try to disrupt my precious peace… Oh, yikes."

Sahara leaned closer to look at the image and frowned.

It showed the area outside the hole in space where Menou and company had entered the Mechanical Society, but the view was different than it had been just a few days ago.

Many people were bustling about, laying railroad tracks and carrying materials, making new buildings and streets with a church at the center. It was as if they were developing an entire town.

Maya tilted her head in confusion. "Why are they making so many buildings? Sure, it must be more convenient than when there was nothing there, but this doesn't seem like the time to be pioneering a new town."

"Those are no ordinary buildings. It's a ceremonial hall."

"Yep. Menou's right."

Ginoum changed the image to a view from farther away.

"A space just disappeared nearby. They're using a ceremonial conjuring to try chipping away at the Primary Color materials that make up the Mechanical Society."

"Oh yeah… So that's what that weird thing was earlier."

Sahara remembered the incident in the hallway moments ago. The disappearance of that classroom must have meant that a piece of the Mechanical Society itself had vanished.

"Building a ceremonial hall behind enemy lines…" Sahara mused. "They've got a lot of nerve, all right."

"Agreed." Menou nodded. "I expected them to build a ceremonial hall, but not on such an enormous scale… We'll have to try to delay them, at least, even if we can't destroy the whole thing."

"Yeah. Good luck. You gotta keep things peaceful for me around here."

"Why are you saying that like it doesn't involve you?"

As Sahara flapped her hand breezily, Menou took hold of it with both of hers.

Figuring she'd been a little too flippant, Sahara tried to pull away but discovered Menou was holding on much more firmly than she'd thought.

"Huh? I mean, you're the one going out there, aren't you? Or else we'll have the conjured soldiers handle it or something. I wouldn't be of any help anyway, right?"

"The conjured soldiers are busy analyzing the Starhusk. Whoever's free to help ought to do so, I say."

"B-but you're so talented, Menou. I think you should do it."

As usual, Sahara was scrambling to find a way to push any difficult work onto someone else.

Still smiling brightly, Menou shook her head. "You've got nothing better to do. So take care of it."

It was intoned like a death sentence.

"N-no way! What do you think will happen if you send *me* to the place where Michele and her lackeys are hanging around plotting our deaths?!"

"You'll be fine. Besides, I have something to take care of with

Maya."

"Who, me?" Maya pointed at herself.

Menou nodded. "That's right. I thought of something a moment ago, and you're the only person who can do it."

The thing that took over Abbie was a product of *Vessel*, set up a thousand years ago.

All they had to do to get the activation key for the Starhusk was ask its creator, the holder of the Pure Concept of *Vessel*, for information.

"I'd like to ask you to come with me to meet *Vessel*. So Sahara is going, and that's final. Good luck."

Maya stuck out her tongue at Sahara as she flounced over to Menou's side. She clearly had pent-up anger from the indignities of the past few days.

A wolf poked his head out at Menou's feet: Ginoum. "It's settled, then?"

"Absolutely. You can take that slacker with you."

"Wait, it's not settled. I didn't…agree to this…!"

Sahara tried to protest in fragments, but to no avail. Ginoum stretched upward, grabbed Sahara's collar in his mouth, and yanked her down.

"All right, then I'm borrowing our youngest sister here."

"Go for it. She can do anything if she puts her mind to it, that one."

Ginoum dragged Sahara out of the room, heedless of her resistance.

"Say, Michele, why do you fight?"

The question came out of nowhere.

Michele—the priestess who served Hakua directly and held the title of Elder Magician—couldn't help but stare at the person who had suddenly asked her this so seriously. It might have even been the first time in Michele's short life that someone had asked her such a tactless question.

It wasn't the question itself that was rude so much as the attitude

with which it was asked, as if the asker was saying "You and I are close, so you'll tell me things you wouldn't want to say to anyone else, won't you?" And Michele found that she disliked this immensely.

Should she punch the young woman, shout at her, or perhaps just ignore it and leave? Unable to decide, Michele settled on silently disregarding the question. As much as she respected Hooseyard's unique abilities, that didn't mean she actually liked her as a person.

"Ah! Why are you ignoring me?"

When Michele turned away from Hooseyard, a complaint followed. For such a meek-looking girl, Hooseyard could be incredibly pushy. The only way to sum it up in a word was "irritating."

"Okay, I'll start. When I was about five—"

To better ignore Hooseyard, who was now launching into her life story for some reason, Michele thought back to her oldest memories.

Michele's life had been a series of battles, one after another. She had never even thought to question why she was fighting. A thousand years ago, she fought under a different name. In fact, she had always wandered from one battlefield to the next as a mercenary, going by many different names. It was a way of ensuring that she was never identified.

"Bishop Michele, I have a report."

Mercifully, Hooseyard was interrupted by one of the priestesses who had been called in to help construct the ceremonial hall.

Most of the laborers were from the Commons, the third and lowest caste. Given the circumstances, however, plenty of Faust priestesses were stationed there as well.

"What is it?" Michele waited to hear if something unexpected had occurred, but the priestess just stood there, motionless.

"A report… A re…p-p-p-pooorr…"

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

Michele's vision was suddenly filled with Guiding Light.

It was a scripture conjuring. Looking up at the church bell forming overhead, Michele grabbed Hooseyard by the collar.

"Wh-what? Why is she attacking… Eep!"

“Stay back.”

For a priestess, Hooseyard was unbelievably slow to react. Once Michele tossed her out of harm’s way, the bell swung side to side.

A sound rang out that brought destruction to the entire area. It rained down on Michele, who was directly underneath it.

She didn’t attempt to dodge, nor to activate a defensive conjuring. Being hit by this conjuring at point-blank range would cause any normal person to bleed from every orifice and be rent asunder.

But Michele was completely unharmed.

“…?!”

The priestess who had launched the attack recoiled.

Michele hadn’t done anything special. Her body was simply glowing all over with Guiding Light.

She had blocked a powerful scripture conjuring using nothing but Guiding Enhancement.

There were hardly any human beings alive who could survive a scripture conjuring unscathed, no matter how naturally skilled with Guiding Force they might be. Besides, anyone with the ability to use a scripture conjuring must have excellent Guiding Force skills.

“Mental corruption… This space got to you, eh?” Michele scowled at the priestess who’d just used the scripture conjuring.

She hadn’t reacted quickly because there was no need to dodge it. Scripture conjuring or not, the strength and accuracy varied greatly depending on the invoker. Since the attack couldn’t possibly harm Michele, she briefly forgot that she had to get Hooseyard out of its range and wound up doing so a bit more violently than necessary.

The priestess who had lost her mind drew her sword. She activated her own Guiding Enhancement and lunged at Michele with it. Since her spirit had been corrupted by this unusual space, she could no longer even decide to run from an opponent she couldn’t defeat.

Michele didn’t even spare her a glance as she caught the sword barehanded and crushed it in her grip.

As the priestess panicked at the loss of her weapon, Michele

placed a finger on her forehead.

Guiding Force: Connect—Body, Priestess—External Infiltration—

She wasn't invoking a conjuring, she was simply sending Guiding Force into the priestess's body.

As Michele's Guiding Force flooded the priestess's form, she spasmed like she'd been electrocuted, then fell unconscious.

People's Guiding Forces were in natural opposition to one another. The human body would naturally reject the Guiding Force of a different person. When someone's spirit was corrupted, flushing it out with someone else's Guiding Force was one possible solution.

"…What an annoying way to interfere with us."

Michele released the unconscious priestess, letting her tumble to the ground.

A hundred priestesses with such weak mental defenses still wouldn't pose a threat to Michele, but that wasn't the problem. They wouldn't be able to progress efficiently if they kept losing their workforce, especially if it caused commotions like that and caused friendly fire.

There were only a few ways to deal with a conjuring that could affect people's spirits and minds through the very space they occupied.

Sighing at the lack of options, Michele walked over to Hooseyard, whom she'd thrown some distance away.

"Ouch… Oh, are you done already?"

"Activate the ceremonial hall."

"Huh?"

Hooseyard's eyes went round in surprise at Michele's order.

It was a natural reaction. The construction of the ceremonial hall was less than halfway done. It wasn't even ready to be tested, let alone activated.

But then those incorrigible eyes behind cog-lined glasses started to shine with anticipation.

"Are you sure? It's still very much incomplete."

"Just partially is fine, if need be. We need to show the enemy that we can hit them right back, or they'll start pushing their luck."

"Eh-heh-heh…" Hooseyard's expression turned blissful. "I'll go

ahead and do that, then."

There's nothing worse than a freak who thinks they're normal.

Michele felt that fact keenly when she saw Hooseyard's face.

There were two intelligent species on the planet.

The first was humanity. This included Otherworlders, too. Human beings were the rulers of the continent, convinced they were the lords of all creation.

The second was Primary Triad conjured soldiers.

They were spatial lifeforms constructed of Primary Color crystals, minerals that generated Guiding Force. These beings were intelligent, and independent, and possessed a world of their own. While their numbers were few, they boasted skills and intellect that surpassed humanity's.

One such being, Ginoum, took the form of a blue wolf. He opened his mouth to try and bring the crowd under control.

"All right, you lot, ready to listen to me now?"

They were in one of the classrooms of the school building in the central zone of the Mechanical Society. Even when Ginoum put his front paws on the lectern to pull himself up taller, the hubbub in the classroom showed no signs of stopping.

"No way."

"Creepy. Who d'you think you are?"

"Bring out our big sis, dammit! We don't need you, big bro!"

"Hey, where did my pet go? Heeey, has anyone seen it? The pet I made. Hey, listen. It's a little red dragon. I made it with only Primary Red Stones. It's the cutest one I've made in ages…"

Out of all the rebellious siblings, the one who was derailing things most was a little girl with crimson hair, wandering around asking after her pet. Ginoum ignored his younger siblings' reactions. The conjured soldiers who were born after him had all grown up selfish thanks to Abbie's excessive doting.

"As I'm sure you know, our goal is to make an ark to part ways with the humans. And now the Guiding vessel for that purpose is complete."

"Oh, I know the one. You mean that poor, pathetic little thing?" The crimson-haired conjured soldier who'd been acting on her own agenda suddenly looked up. "If I'd made it, it would've been sooo much cuter. It's so half-baked, I can hardly stand to look at it."

"The foundation was completed in time to get snatched up by Pandæmonium, right? Now it's totally a collab with Concepts of Original Sin. Sooo funny."

"Really goes to show the potential of living organic components, though. That's the one thing we can't make on our own."

"Since it's got Original Sin flesh stuck on, the soul's pathways are disconnected. It probably doesn't even know it's being self-destructive. Poor thing."

"Right. Its core is on display even though it'll die if the core breaks. I feel sorry for it."

"Dammit… You aren't gonna listen to me, are you?"

Ginoum couldn't get a word in without the group getting off topic. Just as things were truly getting out of hand, the door rattled open.

"Your big sis is heeere! Have you all been gooood?"

"Of course, big sis!"

A cheer rose up at Abbie's arrival. The conjured soldier girl with crimson hair immediately jumped into her arms.

Ginoum growled at how differently they were treated, but a part of him understood how his younger siblings felt. In the Mechanical Society, Abbie's popularity was unmatched. It made sense that they would lionize her for what she'd done.

After all, if it weren't for Abbie, the conjured soldiers here would undoubtedly have been consumed by their elder siblings.

"Now then, everyone. I'm sure Gi explained things already, but let me say a few words, too."

Abbie looked around the classroom, gazing into each face in turn. She had protected all of them, kept them safe.

"We've completed a perpetual motion machine of the third kind using Guiding Force. Now, at long last, we'll finally be able to reach our homeland."

CHAPTER 3

Sedition

"I want a homeland."

That was what Abbie said after they defeated all the conjured soldiers she wanted to eliminate.

"A homeland?"

"That's right. A homeland for us conjured soldiers."

"Isn't that what the Mechanical Society is?"

"This place?"

The Mechanical Society was indeed where conjured soldiers were born. But Abbie snorted at Menou's question.

"I thought you knew that the Mechanical Society *is* us. Didn't you?"

Spatial life-forms.

Primary Triad conjured soldiers were spaces made of Guiding Force with high intelligence. Even the place Menou stood now was only a part of Abbie's own form. It was probably akin to asking a human if their stomach was their homeland.

"We can't move from the place where we were born. The best we can do is send out terminals like this one. And on top of that, if the materials inside us mix together and form another new spatial life-form…we basically have to consume them."

That unique feature was part of the natural way of life for a Primary Triad conjured soldier.

"That's why I want a homeland, a place where we conjured soldiers can be in contact without stealing from or fighting one another."

"Even though you're fighting right now?"

It seemed contradictory to Menou. Abbie just smiled.

"My older siblings were a lost cause. They'd gotten too used to stealing."

Abbie was probably including herself as one such lost cause.

For Primary Triad conjured soldiers, their fellows were nothing more than top-quality materials. They consumed one another, and Abbie had taken part in that, too. It was a true dog-eat-dog world.

"So we have to make it ourselves. A place where more of us can be born without anyone rejecting or attacking us… A safe haven."

"Is that your real motive, then?"

"Yep. That's it."

Having revealed her aspirations, Abbie smiled bashfully in a way that didn't suit her mature appearance.

"Why? Is that weird?"

"I don't think it's weird at all."

Menou didn't know what it was like to have a homeland, nor could she sympathize with the insistence on having one. Perhaps the monastery could be called her homeland, but she had no real attachment to the place when neither Momo nor Master Flare were there anymore.

"Even if I don't quite understand it myself, I think it's a lovely idea."

Abbie's dream still made Menou smile, if only because it was something she lacked.

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"Your wish won't come true."

The woman with stars in her eyes spoke to Momo.

After parting ways with Menou in the holy land, Momo visited the City of Ruins. She was looking for a good place to hide Akari. She couldn't go on rolling the girl's body around in a suitcase forever. She intended to find a hiding spot for Akari that no one would find and use that as her base as she strived to help Menou.

The City of Ruins was one potential hiding place. It was a place

where rejects lurked deep underground, and if she went deep enough, the Faust would never find her there.

It was there that she met a conjured soldier.

"My wish…won't come true?"

Momo watched her warily.

The individual who'd been lying in wait for Momo's arrival deep underground was clearly something special. She introduced herself as Nono Hoshizaki, and she seemed unbothered by Momo's distrust. She smiled brightly.

"Momo, my friend. You want to protect someone precious to you, correct? But achieving that goal will be extremely difficult."

Nono clapped her hands together sharply and, once she had Momo's full attention, slowly opened both hands.

"Because in the end, she's going to choose to sacrifice herself."

Although they had never met before, the girl's declaration was strangely convincing.

"So join forces with me."

Momo glared at the other girl with open hostility.

They had only met each other by chance about ten minutes prior. They certainly didn't know each other well enough to work together.

Most of all, Momo had no reason to believe anything this shady-looking stranger said.

"It sounds like you're just trying to use us to accomplish your own goals."

"So what if I am?"

The Pure Concept of *Star*, the woman who could see the future, readily confirmed Momo's suspicions.

"Of course I'm trying to use you. After all, my eyes can see the future! It's only natural that I, the beautiful genius Nono Hoshizaki, would try to make the future better and more convenient for myself. All you have to do is use my prophesies for your goals, too."

Nono Hoshizaki smiled cheerfully.

"When two parties try to use each other, that's called 'joining forces,' you know?"

Momo opened her eyes.

The combination of unpleasant dreams and uncomfortable waking put a frown on her face as soon as she arose.

"…It makes me mad to remember that, even now."

Nono Hoshizaki.

She was the holder of the Pure Concept of *Star*, with star-shaped Guiding Light in her dark eyes. With her special ability to predict the future, she tended to see through everything and steer conversations exactly where she wanted, which was incredibly annoying. Momo learned for the first time how discomfiting it was to have someone act like they understood you when you'd never met before.

The bad mood she'd woken up with stayed with Momo even as she took a shower and donned her priestess robes. Once she had put her pink hair up in two pigtails using the scrunchies that were her most treasured possession, her preparations were complete.

Momo glanced out the window.

There was no concept of "morning" in this world. The sun that kept the Mechanical Society sealed was always at the same height. Without a clock, she would probably lose all sense of the passage of time very quickly.

In this world where colors mingled in the air, a great many humans were hard at work.

The construction of the ceremonial hall was going well. They'd laid down emergency tracks from the nearest station on the northern continent route to the Mechanical Society and used a Guiding train to carry the necessary materials in, building the place according to Hooseyard's theory.

Since they'd exercised the full power of the Faust to move things along at a fever pitch, the project was getting closer to completion at remarkable speed.

They were going to use a ceremonial conjuring to fight back against the Mechanical Society, which was itself a conjured space. The idea, at least, had existed for a long time. Since the space was created through conjuring, it stood to reason that it could be dismantled with conjuring as well.


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The reason no one had acted on this theory, despite it being deemed very plausible, was simple.

There were no astral veins inside the Mechanical Society.

No Guiding Force source existed that could provide enough power for a ceremonial conjuring strong enough to combat the Mechanical Society, which had grown large enough to be considered a world of its own.

In most cases, the energy needed for a large-scale ceremonial conjuring was sourced from the Guiding Force that flowed beneath the ground: the earthen vein.

When one human being's Guiding Force collided with that of another, there was always a strong negative reaction. Because of this, individuals couldn't combine their Guiding Force for a large-scale conjuring. The only people who could form Guiding Force connections with one another were pairs with incredibly strong bonds of trust, or a special human with a sense of self so weak that there was barely a border between them and other people.

Of course, Momo and company chose to construct a ceremonial hall for a reason, even though the lack of an energy source had always been an issue for this approach.

Momo entered the church, still under construction at the heart of the rapidly building town.

"Helloooo!"

"…Momo."

Michele was there in the inner sanctum.

She had been spending most of her time there since the construction of the ceremonial hall began. Momo gave her a friendly smile as she approached.

"Sooo how does it feel?"

"A bit boring, really." Michele closed the book she'd been reading, looking up. "I know it's necessary to ensure that the Guiding Force pathways are connected, but being cooped up in here is still a downer."

Despite her complaints, her voice was as strong as ever. The ceremonial hall, being built to erase the Mechanical Society, had Michele herself as its core.

Michele could supply enough Guiding Force to power an entire town. As long as she was on their side, they no longer needed to worry about having an energy source for the ceremonial hall, even without the astral veins. The ceremonial hall was being constructed assuming that Michele would provide the Guiding Force.

"If this ceremonial conjuring succeeds, we could eliminate every last trace of the Mechanical Society. They'll have nowhere left to run."

Momo and company had come into the Mechanical Society pursuing Menou's party. With the conjured soldiers on her side, Menou had the advantage, which was why Michele decided to blast the entire space out of existence.

"But you knooow, the Mechanical Society *does* have another exit on the Grisarika side…"

Momo's concern was a rational one.

In fact, the Mechanical Society had only recently been connected to the northern continent through the White Night barrier that separated it from normal space. For years, the hole in space from which conjured soldiers assaulted humanity had existed in the eastern part of the continent. That was where Menou and her accomplices had their base of operations.

If they erased the Mechanical Society and sent the fugitives running back to Grisarika Kingdom, they'd be returning to the stalemate that had only broken a few months earlier.

Michele's lips curled at Momo's question.

"If they run to Grisarika, that's even better for us. I've already come to an agreement with that side."

"I see…"

Momo didn't ask what the agreement was, or with whom. She could already tell from Michele's tone that she wasn't going to get any more information out of her superior.

"But I'm sure they won't just sit back and watch us do this, either," Michele added.

"Nooo, of course not. If they were that stupid, they wouldn't have managed to escape from my daaarling Michele for this long."

The biggest drawback of the ceremonial hall was that, since

Michele was providing the Guiding Force, she could no longer move from that spot. If the enemy saw that they were building a ceremonial hall where no Guiding Force power source was available, they were likely to guess what was being used as the core.

Since this plan put their strongest player out of action, it was the perfect opening for their enemies to attack.

As if to underline Momo's prediction, a loud rumble came from nearby.

Next came the sounds of a gun firing and the sensation of conjurings being constructed to counter those gunshots. The chaos outside was clear even from within the church.

"They're here." Michele looked utterly unshaken by the sudden attack. She leveled her gaze at Momo. "Take care of it."

What intentions were hidden in that piercing gaze, which seemed to see through to Momo's innermost thoughts?

Whatever it was, it didn't change Momo's goals one bit.

She beamed back with her brightest smile.

"Yes, ma'am! I won't let them trouble you at all, darliiing!"

As annoying as it was, she had to agree with just one of Nono Hoshizaki's statements.

"Joining forces" really did mean both sides were trying to use one another.

Even on a battlefield, there are positions where one can avoid being exposed to danger.

While the soldiers fight in the dirt and grime of the front lines, someone else can stay behind, perhaps even enjoy a cup of tea.

That is the unique position and privilege of a commander on the battlefield.

Sahara, too, was staying far away as she sent the conjured soldiers into action.

Her job was simple: to direct the conjured soldiers while remaining in a safe place. Usually, being a commander would come with its own burdens, like the pressure to win or the guilt of letting lives be lost. However, since the only ones at risk in this battle were

mindless conjured soldiers, she felt zero guilt no matter how many were destroyed.

"I was trying to figure out how to get out of it when they told me to fight Michele, but this isn't so bad."

She used a palm-sized communication soldier to display the far-off enemy grounds—the ceremonial hall—and to choose positions to set up the attack. The conjured soldiers moved on her commands; all she had to do was sic them on the buildings.

The ceremonial hall Michele and her lackeys were building was remarkably large. An entire village was being built by the railroad tracks, with Michele inside the church at its center. While Faust priestesses were stationed at its most important points, they couldn't possibly cover everything at once. There were plenty of gaps in their defenses.

Not bad. Really, this position wasn't bad at all.

"Excellent. This is how all battles should be."

Sahara was pleased to have evolved from close combat to sniping and finally to giving commands from nowhere near the battlefield.

She used the map information from the communicator conjured soldiers as a guide to position the weapon conjured soldiers like chess pieces. They came in categories of *Red, Blue,* and *Green*, making it easy to distinguish their special traits. She set up a main force to destroy the ceremonial hall while deploying a smaller force to target the railroad track, the source of their supplies.

Ginoum had given Sahara permission to use the single-color conjured soldiers, who had no minds of their own, however she pleased.

"I could've used a few more of these Blue Spiders. They're easier to use than the Red soldiers. The Green ones are only useful in certain situations, since their abilities are sort of weirdly specific…"

As Sahara attacked the railroad tracks, muttering to herself all the while, she managed to bait a few of the priestesses away from the town. She'd already sent in scouts to make sure there weren't any powerful priestesses of note there. If she focused the conjured soldiers on the railway, she should be able to beat them.

She figured it would be good enough to knock the priestesses out

and was just starting to yawn when she felt it—murderous rage directed right at her.

Immediately, she tumbled forward. A large white box went flying through the air that Sahara's head had occupied seconds before.

The white box hit the ground with a boom, sending up a cloud of Primary Color dust.

"…Tch."

On the other side of the billowing cloud, someone clicked their tongue irritably.

That sound alone was enough to tell Sahara who had attacked her.

"…I guess they have wild super pink gorillas out here, too."

"You really do have a death wish, don't you?"

The dust cloud cleared as the voice rang out, dripping with annoyance. It revealed a girl who looked very displeased. It seemed she wasn't a fan of the nickname Sahara had given her.

There was only one priestess with pink hair held in pigtails by two scrunchies. It was Momo.

Sahara saw that Momo's priestess robes had evolved from white to indigo, and clicked her tongue as well.

"Wow, you've moved up the ladder. Congrats. If you keep it up until you get a management position in an office somewhere, we might achieve world peace."

"Why, thank you. In fact, I intend to work toward world peace by exterminating vermin like you."

Sahara scrabbled backward as Momo's death glare grew even more intense. It wasn't because she was intimidated by Momo's attitude and sudden attack but because she'd noticed the armband Momo wore that indicated she was an Inquisitor. She had the same position as Michele, who was chasing Sahara and company.

"Okay, well… How did you even find me anyway?"

"That conjured soldier." Momo pointed at the small communicator displaying the area around the ceremonial hall. "It uses Guiding Force to relay far-off images. All I had to do was find the conjured soldier broadcasting those images, then follow the direction of the Guiding Force it was sending until I reached this place."

"Follow it…? Since when is it possible to trace the source of a conjured soldier's broadcast?"

"Wow, you're behind the times. Is your brain stuck ten years in the past?"

As far as Sahara knew, the Guiding Force used by communication conjured soldiers to broadcast information wasn't strong enough to be detectable to humans.

But Momo only sneered at Sahara, then removed her glasses and flaunted them. She'd been wearing cog-lined glasses all along, though Sahara was too disinterested in such changes to Momo's appearance to notice.

"You can see it if you know how to look. And if you have a crest conjuring developed by some nerd, I suppose."

They were Hooseyard's glasses, of course. Momo had pilfered her extra pair.

"I guess all those boring lectures about distinguishing between the types of Guiding Force you see with these were worth the trouble after all."

Guiding Force: Connect—Coping Saw, Crest—Invoke [Anchor]

Using the solidified form of her coping saw as a handle, Momo transformed her suitcase into an enormous hammer. If she undid the *Anchor*, it would probably work as a flexible flail. It was a powerful transforming weapon made by combining her crest-carved coping saw and her pure white suitcase.

Seeing Momo so much more heavily armed than she had been six months ago, Sahara let out an impressed whistle.

"Wow, that really suits you. It's the perfect brute-force weapon for a gorilla."

"And I see that cute little arm of yours hasn't changed one bit…!"

As she spoke, Momo stepped toward Sahara. She swung her suitcase with its coping saw handle, lashing it through the air.

Momo could produce incredible force by swinging a heavy weapon while using her Guiding Enhancement. Now that she was no longer in the secretive position of an Executioner, she'd no doubt decided to wield her superhuman strength to its fullest potential.

If Sahara had ducked a second later, her head would've been

blown clean off. She dropped and rolled back, getting some distance from Momo, before standing up and assuming a battle stance.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Prosthetic Arm, Inner Seal Conjuration—

Sahara sent Guiding Force flowing into her right arm, itself a Guiding prosthetic, to transform it into battle mode.

Invoke [Silver gggg—

The Guiding prosthetic utterly failed to activate.

"Wha…?"

Sahara was caught off guard, unable to believe her own blunder. It was unthinkable that she would fail at activating her Guiding prosthetic's battle mode.

But, of course, Momo wasn't going to wait around for her to get it right. She swung the suitcase sideways with the coping saw handle toward Sahara.

"Whoa!"

Sahara jumped back, far out of the way.

Six months ago, Momo fought with a coping saw alone, using the crest conjurings *Anchor* and *Oscillation*. The way she used her weapon had certainly changed, but when it came down to it, she'd just stuck a white box onto the end of her saw.

That was nothing Sahara couldn't handle.

While the additional weight gave it more power and range, it was less accurate. It had its shortcomings, and there were bound to be openings left by Momo's inexperience with it. Sahara watched eagerly for her chance to escape.

But then Momo undid the *Anchor* and put the suitcase down, opened the lid, reached inside—and pulled out a scripture.

"…What? You put a scripture in there? In your suitcase?"

"That's right. I'm allowed to put whatever I like in here, last time I checked."

Still, a scripture was normally carried in a priestess's left hand at all times. It was considered a symbol of their faith, so it was rarely hidden out of sight.

Undeterred by Sahara's surprise, Momo charged her scripture with Guiding Force.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 13:13—

Momo was comparatively slow at constructing conjurings. She certainly couldn't compete with Menou, who could invoke complex scripture conjurings as quickly as a crest conjuring. Momo was probably still faster at it than Sahara, though that wasn't saying much.

The problem was the particular scripture conjuring Momo was trying to invoke.

Invoke [The spirit of a martyr is so precious, it is almost foolish.]

As she invoked it, Momo chucked the scripture right at Sahara.

"What th—?"

Sahara scrambled and dived forward just as the scripture exploded behind her. The heat and impact of the explosion washed over her back.

Looking teary-eyed over her shoulder, Sahara saw a small crater carved out in the spot where she'd been standing just moments before.

The conjuring Momo had just used was one of the least useful of all the many scripture conjurings: a self-destruct conjuring. It was intended as a last-ditch method of destroying the scripture to maintain confidentiality, since it was expected that the owner would blow herself up along with it. It was also quite powerful.

And since it would destroy a priestess's highly essential scripture, it was never used for an attack. In theory, that would only happen in an emergency, like if the scripture was about to be destroyed anyway.

Yet Momo had just used such an unlikely conjuring purely to turn her scripture into a moderately powerful bomb.

"Th-that's blasphemy! You just threw away your scripture like that?! I thought you were supposed to be a proper priestess!"

"So? The scripture is boring to read. I've never once felt inclined to take good care of it. Isn't this a perfectly reasonable way to treat a bundle of old papers praising a 'Lord' who's just some human that lived a thousand years ago? …Besides, all the images of my darling got erased already."

"Y-you pink-headed maniac! I guess your common sense got

turned into muscles, too…!”

Though it certainly had the element of surprise, it wouldn’t happen again. Momo had just blown her own invocation medium to smithereens, so she wouldn’t be attacking Sahara with any more scripture conjurings.

Sahara was already flustered enough by her Guiding prosthetic not working. This was a small relief—and an unfounded one.

“Here comes the next one.”

“……Next?”

As Sahara frowned in confusion, Momo opened her suitcase again with a brisk snap, and pulled out her next scripture. Two of them, in fact.

She didn’t throw them at Sahara this time. Instead, she stuck them on the outside of the suitcase attached to the coping saw, swinging the whole thing around like a flail to build up momentum.

Sahara stiffened at the weighty whooshing sound of the suitcase.

“Um… How many scriptures do you have in there, exactly?”

For once, Momo smiled brightly at Sahara. “It’s crammed full. Why do you ask?”

She had stuffed the whole suitcase, which might have fit a whole person inside, with scriptures, each big enough to explode and leave a crater. In other words, the contents of Momo’s suitcase were essentially mega-bombs.


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"Come on! You're not supposed to use those like that, are you?!"

"Well, there's no rule saying you can't, and my current boss didn't try to stop me. It's important to innovate, you know?"

"No one would ever try to do that, even if they did come up with the idea! Someone's gotta stop you! Why did they give you so many scriptures anyway?! I thought those were a one-per-person deal!"

"It's a perk of being an Inquisitor, so *there!*"

Momo swung the makeshift flail at Sahara, sending the suitcase flying toward her face at an alarming speed.

"Urgh!"

Sahara quickly bent backward to avoid the scripture-laden suitcase, but Momo's attack didn't stop at the physical.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 13:13—Invoke [The spirit of a martyr is so precious, it is almost foolish.]

"Gweh?!"

The scriptures attached to the outside blew up behind her. Momo had used the coping saw to channel Guiding Force and remotely invoke the conjuring. Just barely dodging a scripture conjuring like that wasn't enough to get Sahara completely out of harm's way. The blast swept her off her feet, and Momo took that opportunity to close in on her, turning her weapon back into a hammer and raising it high.

Sahara immediately raised her right arm.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Prosthetic Arm.

The Guiding prosthetic still didn't activate. It had actually gotten worse: This time, Sahara's Guiding Force didn't flow into the arm at all.

"Whyyyy?!"

The hammer collided with Sahara's Guiding prosthetic arm.

Immediately, the white suitcase went flying.

Sahara froze, confused that she had won the clash so easily. However, the reason the impact was so much lighter than she expected was simple: Momo had deactivated the *Anchor* on the saw handle at the moment of impact.

While Sahara was distracted by the collision, the unleashed coping saw wrapped around her.

The outcome of their battle six months ago flashed across Sahara's mind.

Momo tightened her grip.

"Nngh!"

Just before the coping saw could constrict around her neck, Sahara thrust her Guiding prosthetic into the gap. She just barely made it. At least she'd managed to avoid losing her head like last time.

"Why…you…!"

Sahara focused all her attention on her prosthetic arm.

"Don't underestimate me! I beat Genom and got some crazy new power—"

"Then why do your conjurings keep failing?"

Sahara winced at the pointed observation.

She kept trying to put Guiding Force into her prosthetic, but she couldn't produce the kind of energy that had manifested when she defeated Genom.

After the second failure, it dawned on Sahara.

The Guiding prosthetic didn't produce Guiding Force. She had to absorb it from the outside, like she had in the fight against Genom. Perhaps when her arm transformed back then, it was a one-time-only ability.

"Maybe your Guiding prosthetic can't use the same conjurings as before because it's been altered somehow? Not that I know the details."

It was a very plausible theory.

As Sahara fell silent, Momo glared at her coolly.

"You really haven't made any progress at all, have you…? Aren't you embarrassed to be so weak?"

"Oh, shut up!"

She'd given up on improving her battle skills after she'd lost to Menou.

"Now, whatever shall I do with you?"

"Hmph, threats aren't going to work on me!" Sahara was defiant, even with her life in Momo's hands. "I bet you haven't actually betrayed Menou at all, have you?!"

“Do you really need to ask such an obvious question?”

Momo, supposedly Michele’s subordinate now, calmly confirmed Sahara’s suspicions.

Anyone who knew Momo would have the same thought. Momo was on the church’s side to help Menou in secret.

And yet…a cold sweat ran down Sahara’s back.

Even after six months of working undercover in the church for Menou’s sake, there was no sign that Momo had ever leaked information to Menou.

Sahara had been working with Menou directly all along. If she was regularly in contact with Momo, Sahara would have noticed.

In other words, Momo was acting completely independently of Menou’s wishes.

After constantly fawning over her precious “darling” for so many years, Momo had chosen to work apart from Menou. It wasn’t hard to imagine, then, that she was acting on goals she didn’t want Menou to know.

Given Momo’s personality, taking actions for Menou’s sake didn’t necessarily mean assisting Menou, especially not now. If Momo intended to stop Menou, that would explain why she would work with Michele to destroy the Mechanical Society.

Most importantly, if it was “for Menou’s sake,” Momo wouldn’t hesitate to kill Sahara. The fact that she was Menou’s ally wouldn’t guarantee Sahara’s safety.

Sure enough, Momo’s next words validated Sahara’s fears.

“It wouldn’t be too bad for my darling if you died anyway, right?”

“Well… No, I guess maybe not…?”

The worst part was that she couldn’t deny it. If anything, Sahara might have preferred to die than to declare herself important to Menou.

“You even picked on her at the monastery. My darling is so kindhearted, letting scum like you work with her…”

Sahara snorted. “You’re still dragging up that ancient history? Makes sense, since you’re such a drag…”

“I’ll talk about it forever, thank you. Why, I’ll even go on talking about it when you’re finally in the grave.”

“You’re going to visit my grave? That’s so creepy. I’d rather you didn’t…”

“Ah, of course, my apologies. I forgot no one in the world would bother making a grave for someone like you!”

The two girls glared at each other.

Even with her life on the line, Sahara couldn’t let go of her deep-seated grudge against Momo.

“It would be worth killing you right here and now just to get Michele to trust me more, I suppose.”

“Hey, the conjured soldiers love me, you know! If you kill me now, you’ll incur the wrath of everyone who controls the Mechanical Society!”

As Sahara started making arbitrary threats to save her own hide, Momo’s eyes narrowed.

“…Listen. I’m telling you not to interfere for now.”

“…For now?”

“That’s right.”

As Sahara fell silent, Momo beamed at her. Of course, the smile was purely intended to intimidate her.

“We’ll make a deal. You can only attack the way I tell you to until I say it’s okay to do otherwise.”

“So I have to do what you say…?”

“Exactly. I’ll accept a certain amount of interference, and naturally, I’ll have to counterattack so I don’t look suspicious.”

Sahara was on the offensive, and Momo had been put in charge of defense. If they worked together, they could delay the construction of the ceremonial hall.

“Right… I suppose there are no downsides except that it makes me mad.”

In other words, it was purely a matter of Sahara’s feelings.

“It’s just a charade until Michele can move again. Let’s be smart about our strategies.”

Then Momo asked the question that mattered to her most.

“What is my darling doing right now?”

There was a school building in the central zone of the Mechanical Society.

At a glance, it looked like an ordinary white three-story building, but it was linked to the entirety of the Mechanical Society. If the interior was modified by conjurings, the Mechanical Society itself would change accordingly. The opposite held true as well: If there were changes in the Mechanical Society, the school interior would transform.

The classroom Sahara had seen vanish not long ago was one such instance.

Abbie was leading Menou and Maya through the mazelike halls.

"This suuuucks," she groaned dramatically. "It's sooo embarrassing that my terminal got taken over like that. I'm seriously super sorry, li'l Menou. That must have been a hassle for you."

"It's fine. Don't worry about it."

While it had resulted in a battle, destroying Abbie's hacked terminal had resolved the issue.

"I still can't believe we need an activation key for the otherworld repatriation circle. I suppose that was a miscalculation on my part."

"Nono should've just told us, darn it!"

Maya puffed up her cheeks indignantly at her old friend's discourtesy. Nono was the one who told them about the Starhusk and the environment control tower in the first place. But, knowing Nono, it was possible she'd planned for them to need to search for the activation key.

She might have left that information out deliberately so Menou and company would have to meet the Pure Concept of *Vessel*: Ran Gadou.

That was exactly the sort of thing Nono Hoshizaki would do.

"What in the world was she plotting, I wonder…?"

"Your guess is as good as mine…"

While Nono acted friendly, bright, and easy to read, she was actually mistrustful, dark, and difficult to understand. Unfortunately, Maya hadn't realized that until after Nono was already gone.

"Well, going to ask for the activation key directly certainly sounds straightforward, but I'm guessing it's not going to be that easy."

“Hee-hee-hee. Don’t worry, you’ve got me on your side!”

Maya put a hand to her chest proudly, and with good reason. Since her powers had a natural advantage, conjuring-wise, over the Pure Concept of *Vessel*, she was a reassuring ally to have on this quest.

The corridor they were traversing was impossibly long, at least from the outside. It was like a bridge with no handrails. Maya clung to the hem of Menou’s clothes as she shuffled along nervously.

“Although… Abbie. The conjured soldiers think Ran Gadou is still alive as a human, don’t they?”

“Huh?” It was Maya who reacted in surprise to Menou’s question. Her dark eyes went wide.

“Yeah, we do. It’s never been confirmed, but I’m pretty sure of it.”

“Whaaat?!” Maya exclaimed even louder this time.

Under normal circumstances, it would be impossible for a human from a thousand years ago to be alive, especially for Otherworlders, who turned into Human Errors when they lost all their memories. And it was well known that *Vessel* had become a Human Error long ago.

“You mean Gadou isn’t a Human Error? But how could anyone still be alive after so long?!”

This was quite a fuss for someone born a thousand years ago herself.

Menou and Abbie exchanged glances, then shrugged almost in unison.

“Well, I suppose I understand your surprise, since you only just came back as a person quite recently…”

Maya was living proof that a Human Error could turn back into a human if their memories were restored, no matter how many years had passed.

“But one way or another, all Pure Concepts can achieve physical immortality with relative ease if they’re used the right way.”

“I mean, I guess so…”

“So if they can find a way to preserve their memories, they can easily survive for a thousand years.”

As they were discussing this, they finally reached the end of the long hallway. The view opened up before them. In the center of the rooftop loomed a pure black monolith.

Abbie stopped in front of the dark structure. "This is as far as I can take you."

Menou, too, drew closer to the mysterious towering object. It wasn't just jet-black. It looked murky, as if all the colors had merged into a deep blackness.

"So this is it…"

"Yep. That's our progenitor, where all our materials are born. Or to be precise, that's the entrance to our progenitor's 'Chamber.'"

The monolith looked so familiar that Maya instinctively reached out to it.

It reminded her of the floating object she had known so long ago. Though it was much larger than it had been a thousand years ago, it felt exactly the same to the touch.

Menou gazed at it, too, murmuring to herself. "A person who's continually turning into a Human Error…"

Most people considered the Mechanical Society itself a Human Error, but Abbie and the other conjured soldiers had a deeper understanding of the Human Error of *Vessel* than any human did. Ran Gadou, holder of the Pure Concept of *Vessel*, continuously produced tiny Human Errors by splitting her soul into ever-smaller pieces. The Primary Color crystals were fragments of Ran Gadou's emotions that had splintered from their source. It was theorized, more or less correctly, that they were minuscule Human Errors in themselves.

So Ran Gadou was keeping her personality and mind intact by sacrificing pieces of her fragmented spirit.

These fragments that had once been part of a human's heart formed a complex mix and eventually created conjured soldiers with minds of their own.

At their core, Abbie and the other conjured soldiers were all members of the Human Error of *Vessel*.

"Are you really going in there?" Abbie lowered her voice, sounding worried. "The space inside is so dense that even we can't

get in, let alone human beings, you know?"

"That's why I brought Maya to help out."

"…Right. I've got this."

The construction of the Starhusk, the otherworld repatriation circle; the building of the Star Memory, a library containing the memories of all the humans in this world; the establishment of the Dragon Gate, which allowed teleportation all over the continent.

Ran Gadou, who had the Pure Concept of *Vessel*, was a key figure in creating all of these and most other technologies of the ancient civilization.

"Help Sahara deal with Michele until we get back, please."

"Sure, just leave it to your big sis! …It's okay if we happen to win, right?"

"Of course."

Maya's shadow encroached on the surface of the monolith, creating an entrance.

Menou and Maya stepped into the true heart of the Mechanical Society.

Drawn deep inside the monolith, they quickly vanished.

"Hmm… I guess Nono Hoshizaki's prediction was right, huh?" Abbie muttered as she watched them disappear. "But now all the conditions have been met."

It was no exaggeration to say that, from where Menou and Maya had just entered, it would be impossible to meddle with the space Abbie and the others occupied. The depth of the space was so different that it warped time itself. In fact, only the holder of the Pure Concept of *Vessel* could move freely within, and the pair had just entered of their own free will.

This meant that Maya—and the Pure Concept of *Evil*—could no longer interfere with Abbie and the rest of the conjured soldiers.

A blue wolf ventured onto the rooftop.

It was Ginoum, Abbie's beloved younger brother.

"Big sis…are we really doing this?"

"Yes, really. I feel bad for li'l Menou, but…it's about time for us to destroy this world."

And for that, they needed a sacrifice.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Ability Control—Invoke [Imitation 'Mechanical Society']

Abbie's terminal began to break, starting from the fingertips. The fine fragments of her body turned into tricolored thread, slowly weaving a cocoon with a gentle swishing noise.

It would take several days for this conjuring to take effect. In the meantime, Abbie wouldn't be able to move. Most of all, it came at a heavy cost, but she still didn't hesitate.

"We need to let these poor humans forget about the Mechanical Society."

CHAPTER 4

Stirring

Sahara couldn't take much more of this stress.

"Ugh…"

She heaved a heavy sigh inside the tent she'd set up away from the central zone, where she'd be camping indefinitely.

It had been three days since she made the pact with Momo. Today, as usual, she was disrupting the construction of the ceremonial hall.

The site that Michele and her team were building was huge. Starting at the entrance that linked the Mechanical Society to the northern continent, they'd used railroad tracks as conductors to send Guiding Force channels out in all directions like a spiderweb. They built stations at important areas, brought in the materials needed for the conjuring circle, and kept expanding the structure's scale.

Sahara was working with Momo to hinder the construction of this increasingly enormous conjuring circle. The targets of her attacks, the timing, the kinds and amounts of conjured soldiers she sent in—almost all of these were according to Momo's instructions.

She didn't particularly mind that, though.

Sahara had given up on finding fulfillment in anything long ago, so she was grateful to have a job that didn't require any thought on her part. Sahara hadn't been attacked since her encounter with Momo, either. Everything was going smoothly.

No, the source of her stress lay elsewhere.

"…Tch."

The scripture flashed.

It was a signal of an incoming communication conjuring. Momo

had given her this scripture so they could contact one another. Sahara glowered at it for a while, until, with great reluctance, she opened the scripture to receive the message.

"These attacks are pathetic, you piece of trash. If they catch on, everything will be ruined. Besides, why are you sending in less than half of the number I instructed? When we were enemies, it worked out to my advantage that you're so weak, but now that we're working together, your incompetence is even more apparent. You can't even follow instructions properly. Do you have a brain at all? Oh, I'm sorry. It'd be even worse if you tried to squeeze a thought out of that nonexistent brain of yours, so I'll let it slide for now. Just do as I told you, please."

From start to finish, the entire thing was just a string of insults.

"Go to hell!"

Sahara cursed vehemently. She gave orders through her communicator to send more conjured soldiers to attack Momo, only for them to be quickly defeated.

"That's better. They won't suspect that we're working together if you attack me more like that. Maybe you do have half a brain after all."

After that short message, Momo cut communications. She hadn't given any concrete instructions to Sahara, just taunts and more insults.

"…I'm gonna get the better of her sooner or later, dammit," said Sahara.

Sahara's intense dislike of Momo finally gave her some motivation.

Momo closed her scripture, cutting off communication with Sahara.

"That poor, unlucky idiot."

Overall, she couldn't care less whether Sahara lived or died. Still, she felt an ounce of pity for Sahara.

It was that Guiding prosthetic arm of hers.

When she fought Genom Cthulha in the City of Ruins, it was

finally completed: the conjured soldiers' greatest wish and achievement.

In the end, Sahara was nothing but parts.

She was a valuable component that Abbie and her kin needed for the home they so dearly desired.

A perpetual motion machine of the third kind.

That was what the conjured soldiers, born of the Pure Concept of *Vessel*, wanted above all else.

Momo pulled out a certain part from one of the conjured soldiers she'd just destroyed. It was a package from Abbie, secretly sent in along with the attack. She held up the part, which was mostly made with the Primary Color *Red*, and squinted at it.

"…This is well-made."

It had been worth leaving Akari's body in Abbie's care. The part she received should suit her purposes perfectly.

"I've got to do my job properly, unlike some people."

Momo couldn't just half-heartedly follow orders like Sahara.

She carefully put the item from Abbie away in her suitcase. With this, Momo finally had everything she needed.

She'd been preparing for this moment since she left Menou's side six months ago, heard the prophecy from the Pure Concept of *Star* while hiding Akari's body, and secretly started working with Abbie.

Now she just had to put it all into action at exactly the right time.

"I imagine Ability is just about ready, too…"

Abbie had heard a different prophecy that prompted her to agree to work with Momo. She wanted to secure the place that was most important to her, after all.

Abbie and Momo were both working to protect what meant the most to them.

The only thing Momo cared about in all the world was Menou.

That would never change, even if she couldn't be by her side.

"Momo."

Someone spoke up behind her.

It was Michele. She was supposed to be in the heart of the ceremonial hall, yet she had left and come all the way here.

But why? The question filled Momo with fear and suspicion. Still,

she couldn’t let the swirling anxiety in her chest show on her face. She put on a smile, carefully but naturally.

“Michele, my darliiing! You should be in the ceremonial hall, nooo?”

“The structure they’re building won’t collapse if I leave it, though the work of checking all the Guiding Force channels will stop.”

“That’s not good at aaaall. Let’s go back, darliiing.”

Momo deliberately kept her voice in a sugary-sweet drawl as she reproached her superior.

The ceremonial hall Hooseyard had planned wasn’t concentrated all in one place. Even the railroad tracks that carried in materials were designed as part of the conjuring circle, connecting several village-sized ceremonial halls to create an impressively large ceremonial conjuring.

Since the key points were dispersed across several separate areas, it was important to make sure the Guiding Force pathways were all connected. If the connection failed at any point, the ceremonial hall on that line would go to waste.

Momo was working with Sahara to delay the construction of the ceremonial hall, but it was only a temporary delay. She still needed it to be completed eventually.

“I just came to check on you, Momo. Out of all the priestesses I’ve met, you’re the one who shows the most promise.”

“What? Whyyy? There are plenty of priestesses with more experience than little old meee.”

“They’ve got no gumption.”

Michele’s assessment of the other priestesses she had met was curt and dismissive.

They were all very talented, it was true. When it came to carrying out the missions given to them, they far outstripped the younger Momo.

But in the end, that was all they did.

They had no doubts about their role, their position, their way of life. After all, they’d been given an unshakeable place to belong.

The Faust.

In this world, anyone in the first caste could earn plenty of glory

and prestige. They went through rigorous training to be chosen and held powerful pride in themselves as priestesses. Sometimes to the point that they thought of nothing else.

"But you…you would throw away your position as a priestess if it brought you closer to your goals, wouldn't you? And vice versa. I'm sure you would work hard to climb the ladder as a priestess if it aligned with your goals."

"…I suppose sooo."

Was Michele warning her? Was she onto her? Momo peered at her but could read nothing in the other woman's face.

Momo couldn't quite figure out Michele's true feelings or motives, and not just in that moment. It had been the same throughout the past six months.

All along, Momo was deceiving Michele. She'd needed to lead Michele into the Mechanical Society as one of the conditions for her secret, mutually beneficial agreement with Abbie.

It was all to build this enormous ceremonial hall.

Neither Momo nor Abbie could produce such a thing alone—the construction would require a great deal of manpower and materials—so Momo joined Michele's pursuit of Menou to arrange the construction of the large-scale ceremonial hall. She needed a position that wielded power, one that could give orders to plenty of people. Working directly under Hakua, Michele had plenty of authority and even satisfied another requirement.

So Momo strove to play the part of the skilled subordinate to get Michele to like her. She'd gotten Hooseyard to introduce them, joined the hunt for Menou, and finally reached the point where this massive ceremonial hall would be needed.

But what did Michele really think of Momo?

After six months of secrets and deception, it was only now that this question began to bubble up in Momo's chest.

"Weeell, as far as priestesses with gumption…what about the one in charge of this ceremonial hall, hmmm?"

"…Don't be ridiculous." Michele grimaced. She clearly didn't even want to explain.

Momo smiled with wry understanding.

Hooseyard didn’t have a strong sense of purpose. Although she was frighteningly talented when it came to the unusual field of ceremonial conjurings, she had no attachment to her position as a priestess. She wasn’t even determined to stick to the conjuring research she was so obsessed with.

The fact that she would immediately suspend her research if told to was proof enough of that. Despite having no ethical scruples, she gave up immediately if someone else ordered her to. Her curiosity was strong, but her tenacity was not, so she never made a permanent place for herself. She might even give up her place in the Faust without a fight. It was only natural, then, that she could never achieve much as a priestess.

“Momo. You’re gifted with a great deal of Guiding Force. In the past six months since you became my subordinate, I’ve been training you to perfect your Guiding Force manipulation, so much so that you might even be able to surpass the amount of power people can have while remaining human.”

“Yes, I knooow. Thank you veeery much.”

It was similar to something Archbishop Elcami had said to her in the holy land, yet with the opposite implication. The woman, nearing her eighties, had suggested that Momo would be better off without that power. Just like Master Flare, she said Momo would be better off leaving her natural talent as nothing more than that.

But Michele, in her twenties, affirmed Momo’s power.

After Hooseyard had let it slip, Momo knew that Michele and Elcami were one and the same. Based on Michele’s behavior, she clearly had no memories of her time as Elcami.

If they were the same person, why did they have such opposite stances?

“I’m not interested in prying into your past from before you came to work for me. It doesn’t seem necessary.”

Momo could never truly understand Michele. There was no way she could figure out her feelings now, when she’d never even tried to think about them before.

Besides, no matter what Michele might think or feel, Momo’s decision would remain the same.

"That's truuue. The present is way more important than the past anyway, you knooow."

"…I suppose."

So there was no deeper meaning to this conversation.

"All right, my daaarling Michele…"

Momo smiled brightly at her superior.

She had looked up to Michele as her boss for the past six months. Even while they were pursuing Menou, they still resolved other incidents along the way. They'd spent plenty of time cleaning up the messes that Hooseyard made, too. Those six months certainly weren't wasted idling away.

And if Momo was honest with herself, she realized that she didn't dislike Michele, not at all.

"…I'm going back to my mission now."

Momo chose to turn around, leaving her back undefended.

Was Michele going to kill her? She was prepared for that possibility. Clearly Michele suspected something was amiss. If she swung her broadsword to slice off Momo's head, Momo wouldn't be able to protect herself.

Just this once, she put her life entirely in Michele's hands.

If Momo died now, it all would have been for nothing.

That moment of vulnerability might have been the first time Momo chose to prioritize Michele over herself.

But Michele didn't make a move. Was she sparing Momo's life out of compassion, or letting her go as part of a calculated strategy? Or had it just been Momo's imagination that Michele suspected her in the first place?

Whatever the case, in that moment, Momo abandoned the relationship she'd built up for the past six months and betrayed Michele.

She had no regrets. Of course she didn't. This had always been the plan.

Even after Momo's back was out of sight, Michele stood there.

There were a few reasons she'd decided to let Momo go, even

though she was clearly harboring intentions of deserting.

For one, it was true that Michele held Momo in high esteem. She was so bold as to seem out of place in the organization, yet she upheld a delicate code of conduct and a careful sense of balance. Her battle instincts were impressive, and she overflowed with talent yet to reach its full potential.

There were few personnel with so much promise. It would be a waste to dispose of her now.

But she would also be of no use to Michele in her current state. The "obsession" that motivated all of Momo's actions was critically at odds with a priestess's way of life.

The best choice, then, was to let Momo go and allow things to unfold—then to crush whatever plan she was putting into motion. Once she tasted that failure, Momo would yield to her fate as a member of the Faust. Though Momo would no doubt be surprised to hear it, Michele considered Momo better suited to the Faust than Michele herself.

And while Michele didn't remember this, when she was still called "Elcami," she had once thought the same thing about Orwell.

Michele closed her eyes.

Fighting was her entire life. The era of the ancient civilization had been the height of conjuring technology…and the time of the most war-torn era between humans in all of history.

The Grisarika Conglomerate.

It was a company that led the global market at the time and faced multiple nations in battle at once. Most of the population was pulled into the fray. The more the war grew in scale and extremity, the more human rights were cast aside.

The experiments to create an imitation *Dragon* were one such instance.

Michele became a subject of that experiment because of a job she took on as a mercenary. Fortunately, she proved compatible with the experiment and gained a great deal of power.

As a result, she was thrust onto the battlefield and gained comrades there, only for them to fall one after another.

Michele was the only one who kept surviving.

Where do you think we belong? There must be a place for us somewhere, right?

Who was it that had asked her that? Whoever it was, they certainly weren't alive anymore.

So many people were driven out of their homes. They had just wanted a place where they could be safe.

Naturally, Michele felt the same way.

She wanted a home.

The thought slowly consumed her, though it seemed the only place she belonged was on the battlefield.

That was when Hakua Shirakami appeared.

They were enemies at first. Then, after clashing a few times, they became allies. The group now known as the Faust was originally a band of weaklings who clung to Hakua Shirakami at the time. They were her followers.

And yet, how things changed in a thousand years. The times had now left Michele behind. She was an ancient relic herself, still hanging on to Hakua, her only remaining salvation.

"Maybe this is where I belong."

Though she tried saying it aloud, she still didn't know if the place where she now stood was the home she had longed for all those years.

Primary Color conjurings could create a space for the conjurer.

For some reason, Michele suddenly felt terribly jealous of the conjured soldiers' unique power.

As soon as Maya and Menou entered, they knew.

Humans could not survive in the space inside the monolith.

Unlike when they first entered the Mechanical Society, there wasn't a Primary Color stone in sight, nor any colors swirling and mixing in the air. There were just plants, no different than in the normal world.

But the wide-open space was utterly solidified. It was as if the scenery and even the air were made of solid matter. The space was so dense that Menou, with her connection to the Pure Concept of

Time, could sense that even the flow of time was different there. If they were inside for too long, there was no telling how many days might pass outside.

Menou experimentally reached out toward the scene in front of her.

"Eek!"

Maya gave a startled squeak at the hard *clunk* that echoed around them.

Menou's hand was blocked by what seemed like empty space. It felt so firm and heavy that it produced a dull sound.

"This certainly is remarkable."

Menou's tone was one of honest amazement.

The word "remarkable" hardly began to describe the space. Everything in front of them was made of crystallized power so pure that it could no longer be categorized as solid, liquid, or air.

Everything had been thoroughly, uniformly coated in color.

It was the true heart of the Mechanical Society. It wasn't like the incomplete world on the outer edges: This was a world that had been completely painted by Concepts of Primary Color.

"It looks like I really will need to depend on you here, Maya."

"Hee-hee. You're so lucky I'm here."

Maya reached out, brimming with gleeful self-confidence, but her brow furrowed at the strange sensation, like trying to push through clay.

"Hmmgh, it's so heavy…"

When they initially entered the Mechanical Society, Maya could change the Primary Color stones into monsters just by touching them. Since she had a Pure Concept attached to her body, she could encroach on the world with Concepts of Original Sin without a conjuring.

Here, she repeated that process.

The world that had been solidified with Concepts of Primary Color crumbled where it was corrupted by the Pure Concept of *Evil*.

Primary Color materials weren't physically stable, which was exactly why a skilled conjurer could reshape those materials however they pleased. The Primary Colors of a newly born world

made ideal fodder for Concepts of Primary Color.

But the world inside the monolith was far denser, which was why it felt heavy to Maya. Even as the child of Original Sin, she couldn't consume the space without careful concentration.

And this entire Primary Color world was full of that density and level of completion. There was no way anyone could penetrate such a space.

"Darn it, Gadou… I can't believe she's alive. I mean, that's not the problem, you know? It's not like I wanted her to be dead, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't happy to hear she survived. She's saved my life before, too."

Countless monsters crawled out of Maya's shadow as she grumbled to herself.

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Chaos Collusion, Pure Concept [Evil]—Summon [Creepy-Crawly]

Used as sacrifices for an Original Sin conjuring, the monsters began to melt and ooze together, merging into a giant amoeba. The liquid life-form began to permeate the space around them.

The places it touched were stained dark, and the scenery began to fall apart. The broken pieces were absorbed into Maya's shadow until, finally, an empty path formed, big enough for Menou to proceed.

For them to enter at all, Maya had to use her Concepts of Original Sin to destroy the space around them. Evidently, Abbie had meant it literally when she said even conjured soldiers "couldn't get in there."

The space was made of Concepts of Primary Color that had been compressed to the extreme. There was nowhere for other concepts to squeeze in. Maya, leading the way for Menou, had the only ability in the world that could encroach on that space.

"But she never even tried to contact me?! I think that's horribly rude!"

As Maya forged steadily ahead in a place no one should have been able to enter, she puffed up her cheeks and whirled around angrily.

"Wouldn't you agree, Menou?!"

"Yes, yes. I understand." Menou patted Maya's head.

Maya smacked her hand away crossly, even though Menou wasn't trying to be dismissive.

"Hakua's been alive this whole time, Nono was in that weird underground city, and now even Gadou's alive? At this point, maybe Ryuunosuke's alive, too!"

"No, I doubt it. It wasn't the real Nono who was alive down there anyway."

The person they met in the City of Ruins was just an information terminal that Nono had left behind for the future. It was called the "Astrologer," and was basically just running a program.

Besides, the Pure Concept of *Dragon* had been cut by the Sword of Salt. There was no chance that he could still be alive; his body must have been reduced to nothing but salt.

"…Got it." Maya's shoulders slumped.

Deep down, she must have sincerely hoped he might be alive, even as she hid her feelings in a litany of complaints.

But while Pure Concepts could transcend even death, they still had limitations.

The holder of the Pure Concept of *Dragon* had fought Hakua and turned into salt. That meant he died a thousand years ago and could never be revived.

"No, you're right. That's just how it goes."

Quietly reminding herself, Maya resumed destroying the world that spread out inside the monolith.

As Maya moved, her surroundings warped and rippled around her. She was breaking the space itself. Since the conjured space had physical mass, breaking through it one piece at a time was the only way to get anywhere.

So Maya kept transforming the space around her and stashing it away in her shadow. It was akin to a miner digging out ore to proceed deeper into a mountain. Without Maya, Menou wouldn't have had any way of breaking through the space.

But while it seemed to be going smoothly, Maya was still using Pure Concept of *Evil* conjurings.

"I want to ask you something, just to be safe… Maya, how much of your memory do you have left?"

"…I'm fine for now, don't worry," Maya replied, keeping her voice level. "I've forgotten about Japan, but I remember everything that's happened since I came to this world. I haven't used actual Original Sin conjurings all that much, you know, because I don't want to turn back into Pandæmonium."

Silence fell between them.

Just as Maya would go back to being part of Pandæmonium if she overused her Pure Concept and spent all her memories, Menou would turn into a Human Error if she used up all of hers.

No, no, she reminded herself silently. A person from this world had never held a Pure Concept before, unlike a summoned Otherworlder. If Menou was consumed by the Pure Concept of *Time*, there was no guarantee that she would turn into a Human Error. There was even the possibility that something else would happen, perhaps something far worse.

"Maya…do you want to go back to your old world?"

"……"

Maya was quiet for a moment, then shook her head.

"You're sure?"

"Mm-hmm." Maya nodded. "There's no one waiting for me there anymore."

She wanted to go back to her mother.

That was Maya's dearest wish.

But that dream could no longer come true, even if she did go back to her old world.

"So you can use the otherworld repatriation circle however you want, Menou. I'll grant you my permission."

"…Thank you."

Menou smiled at Maya's kind words and patted the girl's black hair again. While Maya looked a little embarrassed, she didn't push Menou away this time.

"Are your memories in bad shape, Menou?"

"Well…"

Menou gazed into the distance, caught off guard at having the question turned back on her by someone else who was also losing her memories.

She put her hand to her breast pocket, where her fingers brushed against the diary that recorded all her life's memories.

Even now that more than half of the contents were nothing but words on a page to her, Menou kept using Pure Concept conjurings.

"I think I can stay human at least a little longer."

Maya fell silent.

That answer was far more concerning than she'd expected.

"So what do you think Ran Gadou's goals are?"

"Why ask me? You probably have a better idea than I do, Menou."

"Well, you know Gadou as a human far better than any of us, don't you?"

"Hmm, I'm not so sure. Gadou was always very…unusual, to say the least."

"…Even more than Nono?"

"To the point where Nono interpreted for her."

"Oh dear…" Menou tilted her head back and groaned.

The version of Nono Hoshizaki they'd met in the City of Ruins beneath the northern continent seemed approachable at a glance, but was self-centered beyond belief. Dealing with someone even stranger was bound to make for a difficult conversation.

"It might be hard to negotiate with her, then."

"I don't think it'll be so bad. Unlike Nono, Gadou never lies. I'm sure she'll just tell us the activation key for the otherworld repatriation circle without a fuss. Which is why I want to ask…" Maya turned around and stared straight into Menou's eyes. "What *do* you plan to do when you get your hands on the repatriation circle?"

She couldn't answer right away.

"Erm… World peace?"

"Come on. I'm not looking for a silly joke answer."

Maya glared at Menou, who just shrugged.

One of the main reasons she was so focused on the otherworld repatriation circle was to rid the world entirely of summoning conjurings. If she could destroy the path to the other world, no human would ever be brought from Japan again, whether by accident or intentionally.

If she could achieve that goal, no new Pure Concepts or Human Errors—both of which had caused such suffering for so many—would ever be created again. Answering "world peace" wasn't a lie.

"Right. Yes. Hmm. What *should* I do…?"

Menou's memories were being consumed by overuse of a Pure Concept.

Sending Hakua back to her world wouldn't solve that.

Menou had already given up on saving herself. Perhaps Maya had caught onto that somehow.

The small girl spoke in an overly cheerful tone. "Why don't we ask Gadou how to preserve memories? Wouldn't that be great? Then you'd be saved, and so would your friend. And me, too, of course. It's a happy ending all around!"

"I'm not so sure about that."

While it might sound like a great idea, the way Ran Gadou maintained her memories wasn't practical. From the sound of things, she was splitting and multiplying her spirit, dividing her memories and continually creating tiny Human Errors to keep her original personality in place.

Could someone who kept splitting their own spirit for a thousand years stay sane after all that?

"Losing your memories is a problem, of course, but I suspect having too many memories can be just as bad in other ways."

"Right…" Maya slumped dejectedly.

Menou hadn't wanted to upset her, of course. She patted the girl's head again.

"What sort of space is this anyway?" she asked.

It didn't look like the world Menou knew, though she didn't think it was modeled after Japan. Surely it wasn't how things had looked a thousand years ago.

"If I remember right…she said she was re-creating a fantasy RPG."

"Are-pee-gee?"

"Mm-hmm."

Menou's brow furrowed at the unfamiliar term.

Maya pointed at the scene surrounding them. "She said it was her

dream to create the world she pictured in her mind."

A thousand years ago, five people were summoned to another world against their will and gained powers they never asked for. But there was one thing that separated Ran Gadou from the other four.

"Gadou actually *liked* her power."

The space Menou and Maya occupied was built to be a game world. It was constructed to follow rules different from reality.

"Is the level system part of that?"

"Yup."

The level system applied to anyone who entered the monolith. The more they defeated others, the easier it was for them to win further fights. This distinct feature of the Mechanical Society was part of Gadou's dream.

Normally, the only way to get inside was to turn one's body into Concepts of Primary Color. By maxing one's level and replacing a limb with a Concept of Primary Color, like a Guiding prosthetic, a person could become part of the game world and finally gain access.

The outer edge of the Mechanical Society where Abbie and the other conjured soldiers dwelt was the bridgehead to this, the densely solidified interior of the monolith. It was like a free trial area, meant to remake people into characters that could play inside this game world. That was how humans like Genom Cthulha had entered the monolith.

"But you don't need to bother with all that because you've got me!"

Maya kept pressing onward with her unique ability to erode that world.

Normally, there must be some elaborate method of proceeding that adhered to strict rules. Maya and Menou just ignored the buildings, monsters, and any people who approached to talk to them as they went along.

"Hee-hee. I'm not going to lose to stupid old Gadou after she went and abandoned me—eek!"

Maya's triumphant speech turned into a shriek.

The scenery had suddenly started falling apart in front of her.

All the colors that painted their surroundings broke down into

particles of light and swirled in the three Primary Colors.

Micromachines, the smallest unit of Concepts of Primary Color, gathered in front of Maya and Menou.

"Damned bugs."

It resembled the vortex of Guiding Light Menou had seen when she fought Sahara long ago. The thing that swallowed Sahara up back then must have been the same as what was now in front of them. The function that had analyzed and reproduced Sahara was now doing the same to the environment, growing even bigger and blocking their way.

"Bugs in my world." "No matter how many times I crush them, the maggots keep popping up." "They've made it all the way to this place?" "You dare bring emotions into this world?"

"Wh-what is this?!"

Evidently, Maya didn't know either. As she froze in panic, Menou drew her dagger and prepared herself.

"I've seen something like it once before… This thing isn't Ran Gadou, is it?"

"Of course not!" Maya practically screamed. "She's not some weird ball of light!"

Even when the holder of a Pure Concept consumed all their memories and turned into a Human Error, they almost always retained a humanoid form. Besides, the Pure Concept of *Vessel* supposedly still had her memories, which was all the more reason she would still look human.

"Then this must be some anti-cheating system, I'd assume."

"Damned bugs."

They couldn't very well expect to enter the world of *Vessel* and not encounter any obstacles at all.

"Crush the bugs." "Keep our world safe." "Must erase all annoying bugs."

The swirling light swarmed toward Menou and Maya.

It was almost done.

Hooseyard couldn't stop smiling as she looked at the ongoing

construction of the ceremonial hall.

A normal priestess might never witness the construction of such a large-scale ceremonial conjuring hall.

The ceremonial hall of Hooseyard's dreams was being built before her eyes. For a conjurer, there was no greater joy.

"Still going smoothly?"

"Oh, yes, very much so!"

Hooseyard beamed brightly at Michele.

Her theory was designed to dismantle the Guiding Force of the Mechanical Society and circulate it.

Since it was possible, they'd built the ceremonial hall and carried out a smaller-scale test, which succeeded. Now that they'd erased one small piece of the Mechanical Society, proving that it worked, the workers at the construction site were more motivated.

But of course, there was no telling what might happen when it was done on such a large scale. Risk was inevitable when attempting something that had never been done before. There might be a result even Hooseyard wouldn't expect.

Which was all part of the fun. Hooseyard's eyes sparkled with excitement.

Although she could never understand how anyone put their lives on the line in battle, Hooseyard had no problem with the dangers involved in conjuring experiments.

"Good. You were born to make this ceremonial hall, if you ask me. As long as it goes well, I don't care if you die in the process. Use your very last breath to accomplish the mission if you have to."

"Well, I care very much! I don't want to use my last breath. I still have lots of theories I want to investigate, so don't look at me like… Why did you just click your tongue at me?!"

Michele didn't seem bothered by Hooseyard's protests.

"Well, I was worried about all this Mechanical Society business, but luckily Ms. Momo is handling our defenses. She's such a big help."

"…Hmph. Obviously."

"You're right, of course. That Ms. Momo really is talented, even though she's still sooo young!"

"You are such a moron."

"Wh…why are you insulting me all of a sudden…?"

Hooseyard had praised Michele's assistant only to get insulted for it. Her shoulders slumped at the unfairness of it all.

Michele just snorted at her. "It's easy to control the battlefield if you're colluding with the enemy."

"Pardon?" Hooseyard blinked, utterly confused by Michele's statement. "What do you…"

"Wait." Michele stopped Hooseyard mid-sentence, her expression darkening. "What the hell is that?"

Hooseyard followed Michele's gaze. When she saw what the other priestess was looking at, she was shocked as well.

It was a blue chrysalis.

An enormous one at that. It was so large that it was difficult to tell how far away it might be.

The chrysalis was cracked, and something was beginning to emerge.

Slowly, a blue butterfly crawled out. The newborn butterfly, too, was huge. If it spread its wings, perhaps its wingspan would become the sky itself—at least, it was enormous enough that such a thing was easy to imagine. As if responding to the thoughts of those witnessing its birth, the butterfly did begin to spread its wings.

Blue butterfly scales rained over the Mechanical Society.

And a moment later…

A bombing from the sky filled Michele's vision with flames.

The fire spread into a rapidly growing blaze. The explosions caused the ground to rumble like the surface of a drum, the bursts of the bombs resounding.

"It can't be…"

Even Michele couldn't hide a shudder at the sudden transformation of the landscape before her eyes. All she could do was stand, frozen, and look up at the sky.

It all started with the enormous blue butterfly that had appeared so unexpectedly. After Momo left, Michele had returned to the

ceremonial hall site and was talking to Hooseyard when the butterfly emerged from a chrysalis and sent scales raining down with a flap of its wings. That was when the battlefield appeared.

It had to be some kind of spatial conjuring. The butterfly scales must have overwritten and altered the Mechanical Society, changing the rules of the space.

Which begged the question: What were the laws of physics now?

Michele looked around with a grim expression. There were fires everywhere, with priestesses fleeing in panic.

Michele raised her head and glared into the sky. The blue butterfly was nowhere to be seen. An entirely different enemy had taken its place.

A squadron of aircraft was carpet-bombing the entire area.

Michele's view of the battlefield was so familiar as to be nostalgic, harkening back to her mercenary days in the era of the ancient civilization. One of the aircraft swept low and scattered shockwaves as it skimmed over the site. There was an even louder explosion, and the ground shook.

Such destructive capability was unthinkable in this era, thanks to the Faust deeming most conventional weapons taboo, even keeping a tight control on Guiding guns.

"Have the conjured soldiers been mass-producing weapons…?"

If so, that would mean the priestesses were hugely outmatched in military strength.

Flames were swirling all over, yet the bombing didn't stop, as if the enemy wouldn't be satisfied with just reducing the place to a wasteland.

Amid this onslaught, Michele spotted Hooseyard. She was standing stock-still. Not a surprising reaction, given the circumstances. Michele grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her.

"Snap out of it!"

"…Michele?"

The look in Hooseyard's eyes was so startling that Michele drew back.

Her eyes were completely unfocused, seeming to gaze lifelessly at nothing. It appeared to be the look of someone who couldn't accept

the reality they were seeing.

But in fact, it was quite the opposite.

Hooseyard was the *only* one who was looking at reality.

"What's the matter? This is a psychic attack."

At that, Michele immediately looked around again, straining her eyes, but she still couldn't see what was actually happening.

Realizing this, Hooseyard looked disappointed. "Ahh… That's too bad. Are they making this from Michele's memories? But it doesn't look like the conjuring touched Michele's spirit…so the source must be elsewhere… I'm sure those scales must have made a conjuring circle…"

Hooseyard went on muttering to herself.

Michele shook Hooseyard's shoulders again to keep her from getting completely lost in thought. "Hey. Cut it out!"

"…Huh? What?! Oh, Michele! When did you get here?!"

Apparently, she hadn't even paying attention to their previous conversation. Thinking to herself that Hooseyard was in a world of her own in a different way from Otherworlders, Michele questioned her carefully.

"So this is an attack on the spirit. It's in our minds?"

"Y-yes, that's right." Hooseyard finally focused on Michele. "It's…a re-creation of an artificial world—a simulation. They dismantled part of the Mechanical Society and rebuilt it as a mental world. I'm guessing this is a combination of spatial conjuring and mind control."

"There's no danger to the lives of people affected by this conjuring?"

"I'm not so sure… They'll only faint, but if it goes on for too long… Can you say someone is still okay if their spirit dies?"

Of course not.

Michele forced herself to resist the rising urge to yell at Hooseyard for her disregard of the human mind and continued with a more important question.

"Can you make this conjuring stop?"

"Well… I think it's using your memories, Michele. Memories that you aren't aware of."

"What?"

"I mean, it doesn't feel like anything's messing with your mind, does it?"

Michele fell silent.

Hooseyard was right. Michele didn't have any sense that she might be the source of the problem.

"In other words, they're attacking part of your spirit that isn't the current Michele. The spirit is made up of memories, after all… I guess having holes in your mind really does make for a huge vulnerability. But then again, most people probably wouldn't have to deal with spirit corruption in their lifetimes…"

She got the gist of what Hooseyard was trying to say, though it was hard to understand. Michele could guess what might have caused this vulnerability in her spirit that made her susceptible to such conjurings.

Michele's memories were regularly reset.

After all, she had no memories of the past thousand years. She remembered the first twenty-odd years of her life a thousand years ago, and the version of herself that had come to be known as "Michele" starting in the holy land about six months ago. That was it.

This conjuring targeted the massive thousand-year gap in Michele's mind as a weakness in her mental and spiritual defenses.

"Damn it all…!" she spat. "If this is a psychic attack, we just need to destroy the source, right?"

"Hmm… Yes, over there. The power source is the spot where that blue butterfly was. If you destroy the conjured soldier terminal there, I think this conjuring would end."

Michele took off running, determined to reap what her incomplete nature had sown. It was a considerable distance to where she'd seen the butterfly before the battlefield appeared, but with her Guiding Enhancement, she could get there in no time.

But when she reached the outskirts of the construction site, there was a flare of heat and the clamor of whirling rotors. She looked up at the aircraft that had appeared seemingly out of nowhere and grimaced.

"…An attack heli?"

Hovering above Michele at a very low height for an aircraft was a black machine with a sleek, aerodynamic form: an attack helicopter. It had two Guiding Gatling guns that could reduce a human to a smear of blood and anti-tank rockets that could blow through most defenses.

This wasn't like the other aircraft that were indiscriminately attacking the town. It was specifically designed to counter ground weapons of the ancient civilization.

Fully autonomous, with no pilot nor passengers, this military weapon was said to be the predecessor to today's conjured soldiers. And, of course, it wasn't something any human could fight alone.

"Just like the good old days."

Michele clicked her tongue in irritation just as the triple-barreled autocannon opened fire. She used the agility granted by her Guiding Enhancement to move at supernatural speeds, fleeing the line of fire. This level of firepower made modern Guiding guns seem like toys. The bullets carved holes in the ground with heavy thudding sounds.

These Guiding bullets were designed to break through the armor of a tank. If they hit Michele, they would blow her body to pieces.

Michele raised her broadsword in her right hand.

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

With a flash like lightning, the compressed water formed into a blade and slashed the attack helicopter.

The conjured weapon from a thousand years ago was unscathed by Michele's crest conjuring. It only lurched a little as it kept pursuing her.

Modern crest conjurings were no match for the armor of a weapon developed at the height of conjuring technology.

The launcher under the helicopter's wing fired several shots in rapid succession. They were anti-tank rockets. When Michele dodged them, they crashed into the ground behind her with enough force to pierce heavy alloy armor. There was an earth-shaking explosion, followed by a pillar of sand and dirt.

Such destructive force suggested that it was useless for any mere

human to try to fight back, but the only emotion that arose in Michele's chest was annoyance.

"…What a pain."

She decided to stop dodging. Perhaps assuming Michele had given up, the helicopter hovered in the air and aimed its Gatling gun directly at her.

The barrels of the gun roared to life.

A torrent of massive Guiding warheads rained down on Michele, pummeling her Guiding Enhancement-strengthened body. They pierced her skin, rent her flesh, and sent up sprays of blood, yet the shape of the person called Michele didn't crumble.

In the face of this inhuman toughness, electronic noise coursed through the battle-ready intelligence of the autonomous attack helicopter. Guiding Enhancement or not, a human body that could hold up against machine-gun fire that could lay waste to a steel plate—this was outside its range of calculations.

The helicopter hurriedly started to target her with the anti-tank rocket.

But whether it fired or not, the result would be the same.

Michele's arm shot out. She'd thrown her broadsword directly at the autocannon.

With Guiding Enhancement that outstripped any other human's, Michele's thrown sword broke the sound barrier and ripped through the atmosphere, hitting the helicopter's armor head-on and destroying it.

Guiding Force: Connect (Conditions Met)—Sword of Judgment, Crest—Invoke [Compression]

Pierced by the broadsword, the attack helicopter crumpled inward, crushed like a tin can. There was an explosion in midair—presumably the remaining rockets had caught fire.

"…That was excessive."

Having brought down the helicopter, Michele only narrowed her eyes dispassionately. She went to the crash site and retrieved her Sword of Judgment. Despite the rough treatment, there wasn't a scratch on it. It was built to withstand her immense strength, after all.

Michele stomped past the ancient machine that had been reproduced from her own memories and forged onward.

She had absolute confidence that she could defeat any opponent. Whether it was a Primary Triad conjured soldier, a Pure Concept holder, or a high-tech weapon from the ancient civilization, Michele knew that victory was hers for the taking.

But she stopped in her tracks when she came face-to-face with someone unexpected.

"…Well, don't you look happy. Did something good happen?"

Camouflage pants. Protective combat boots. Covered in mud. Michele knew this woman better than anyone.

"What the hell…"

"Come on, tell me. How did I end up like that?"

This battlefield was constructed from Michele's memories.

And standing in front of her was her past self—the mercenary from the ancient civilization, Michele.

Sahara was speechless at what she saw in the distance.

An attack from the sky.

No military in this world could ever use such a tactic. The Faust had banned the development of aircraft for a very long time. As she watched the attack unfold in the distance, Sahara could understand why.

It was nothing like any battle she'd ever seen before.

"That's a kind of spirit corruption, see."

Ginoum was suddenly by her side.

"Is it?" Sahara asked blankly.

It certainly didn't look like a conjuring that was working on someone's mind. The battlefield appeared to be very real.

"Sure is. That's a world being reproduced from someone's memories. It uses things the target wants to forget: trauma, terrible events. The spirit attack slams all that in their face, and it looks like this person had some real doozies."

Another explosion echoed. Despite being so far away, they could still feel the ground rumble and the air blast in their faces.

"If we had an attack this strong, why didn't we use it right away?"

"It's not that easy," Ginoum responded. "Big sis must have poured most of herself into this conjuring as materials. All to reproduce that battlefield."

Primary Color conjurings needed to consume materials to be invoked. Even creating one single-color conjured soldier required many Primary Color crystals. Sahara couldn't even begin to guess how much material was required for a conjuring on a scale this large.

Abbie had made a huge sacrifice in the hopes of bringing down Michele.

"Gotcha…"

"And also, if big sis is using this conjuring now, that's my signal."

"Signal?"

Ginoum's tail swelled. The end split into two, opening like an enormous mouth.

And the tail-mouth's target was none other than Sahara.

"Bwah?!"

"It's nothing personal."

Sahara's body was swallowed by Ginoum's tail and crushed inside, her consciousness quickly fading.

"Now that we have this arm, we're almost there."

A perpetual motion machine of the third kind. This utterly unique Guiding vessel had enormous significance to the conjured soldiers.

Having captured Sahara for the future of his kind, Ginoum took off running toward the ceremonial hall.

The dense vortex of Concepts of Primary Color vanished at last.

"Ugh, finally! That darn thing wouldn't shut up about bugs…!"

"Well, we showed up in this world without being summoned. From its perspective, I suppose we do seem like bugs."

While Maya spat out complaints, Menou responded in an equally exhausted tone. Menou and Maya had even been forced to use their Pure Concepts against their opponent, which could turn their

surroundings into micromachines and manipulate them. Maya used her Concepts of Original Sin to surround and cut them off from the rest of the area, and Menou used *Weathering* to finish them off.

"What a total waste of time."

"It wasn't a waste," Menou pointed out. "If we follow that thing's Guiding Force channels, we'll find the source. Don't you want to know where the debugging function is based, and who's powering it?"

"Good thinking, Menou!"

Maya's face lit up. There was only one person Menou could be alluding to: the creator of this world, the user of the Pure Concept of *Vessel*.

"Does this mean you figured out where we need to go?"

"Of course." Menou nodded and pointed straight down at the ground.

Maya summoned monsters to start digging. Partway through, the bottom fell away. Evidently, all the space beneath a certain point was an empty expanse.

"…Well, that's not built very well. It's all surface-level, isn't it?" Maya sounded somewhat disappointed.

"I'm sure the settings don't normally allow people to dig underground," Menou replied, "so there would be no point building anything down there."

In the world of the monolith, there were clear distinctions between what could and couldn't be interacted with. Without Maya, they probably wouldn't have had any way to destroy the ground at all.

In the enormous space belowground, there was a single door.

It wasn't attached to a wall—there was simply a door sitting in the middle of nowhere. It could be a trap, but there was nothing else of note.

Menou gingerly touched the door. There was no sign of a conditional conjuring. If it was a trap, it would be Menou's own fault for failing to notice it. She turned the doorknob.

On the other side of the door was a small, cramped room. A young woman sat facing an LCD screen, intently clacking away at a

keyboard. She didn't appear to notice that the door had opened.

Peering in from behind Menou, Maya gave an excited "aha!" a reaction that confirmed the girl's identity.

"Erm, excuse me… Are you Ran Gadou, by chance?"

"…Ueh?"

The girl looked at Menou with obvious alarm. Primary Color fragments clinked and clattered off her body, reacting to her emotions.

"Ah… Um…mm…maya. Maya…!"

She raised her arms as if to protect herself from Menou's gaze. Then, noticing Maya, she dragged the little girl over and hid behind her like a shield.

"Oh, is it because I look like Hakua? Don't worry. I'm a completely different person."

"…Ah. Um."

Despite Menou's gentle reassurance, the girl didn't appear any less nervous.

Maya spoke on her behalf. "It's not that, Menou… Gadou's just got really intense social anxiety." Maya turned around and looked Gadou in the eyes. "It's been a long time, Gadou. I'm so happy you remember me."

"…I'm sorry." Gadou clutched her head and crouched. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm…"

As she went on apologizing repeatedly, Maya sighed. "Come on, I'm not that angry about it. About how you left me behind on the southern islands, I mean."

"I'm really sorry…" The tone of Gadou's apology changed slightly.

Seeing that she had calmed down a little, Menou ventured to speak again. "You are Ran Gadou, aren't you? The Japanese person who holds the Pure Concept of *Vessel*?"

"Who…? Me…?"

Gadou peered out timidly from behind Maya, only showing half her face.

So she was willing to talk, at least in theory. Relieved, Menou went on to explain the mission that had brought them.

"If you don't mind, could you tell us the activation key for the

otherworld repatriation circle?"

"Wait… Did you come here…to talk to the Ran Gadou who has the Pure Concept of *Vessel*?"

Menou looked to Maya for clarification on the strange, somewhat belated response.

But Maya was furrowing her brow, too. "What do you mean? You *are* Gadou, aren't you?"

"Maya… You…didn't know?" The girl with tousled hair muttered barely above a whisper, not making eye contact with anyone.

"Huh? Didn't know what? You're Gadou, I'm sure of it. You're the one who saved me when the Starhusk activated a thousand years ago, remember?"

"…I am Gadou, that much is true…but I can't use the Pure Concept of *Vessel*."

Menou's eyes widened, and Maya's confusion spun out of control.

"Wh-what does that even mean? You're the one who made this monolith, too, aren't you? If this isn't the Pure Concept of *Vessel*, then what the heck is it?!"

"…Ran Gadou had dissociative identity disorder… She was a single person with multiple personalities. Three, to be exact…"

The mumbled response revealed a shocking truth.

Menou was equally surprised by this revelation. If an Otherworlder's spirit had multiple personalities when they went through the summoning process and a Pure Concept attached to their soul, what would happen? The thought had never even occurred to her.


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"So if Gadou had multiple personalities, and you can't use the Pure Concept of *Vessel*…are you saying that you're one of those other personalities?"

"…Right. When the original Gadou was summoned to this world and learned about her Pure Concept, she wanted a way to use those abilities without limits because she really liked her power."

This last line was similar to what Maya had told Menou, about how Gadou had been subject to experiments in multiplying and splitting the self.

It was a simple exercise in reverse-engineering. If using her powers came at the cost of losing memories until the spirit wore away and the user turned into a Human Error, they decided she would have to replicate herself faster than she was consumed.

"…And the first thing she cut away…was me. I'm Ran Gadou's body… Nothing more."

"Her body?"

"That's right… When Gadou underwent those experiments in splitting the self…she abandoned her own body right away and left me, one of her other personalities, inside."

The body, spirit, and soul were the three components of life.

Out of the three, only the body could be replaced. It was only a vessel to store the soul and create the spirit, nothing more.

"…She knew her spirit and soul wouldn't be able to handle all the multiplying personalities, so she held on to the spirit and soul that made her *her* and cut off everything else to use as storage for the memories that are spent when she uses the Pure Concept." Gadou's body smiled weakly. "And I'm…the personality that was left in her body. Then they conducted experiments on me, multiplying the spirit. When Gadou uses her Pure Concept, the memories that have been split off inside me are erased. Ran Gadou uses conjurings to mess with the outside world through my personality and body. The real Gadou, the soul that has the Pure Concept, is totally unharmed. I, the body, am just a relay. Thanks to my spirit being multiplied, my memories keep multiplying and dividing, and on and on forever, heh-heh… It's the ultimate way to use a Pure Concept… Heh-heh-heh…"

"W-wait a second."

Frozen with surprise, Maya finally spoke up.

After all, the only Ran Gadou she knew was the one in front of her eyes.

"How long has that been going on?!"

"How long, you ask…?"

"Was it like this when I first met you? Or when you saved me?!"

"Maya… You've never met the real Ran Gadou. Not once."

Maya was thunderstruck. "I don't believe it…"

"I mean…no one in this world has ever truly met Ran Gadou, except Nono. Gadou has always had multiple personalities. Even back in Japan, she already had three personalities, including me. The original Gadou, me, and one other. I'm just the one who got left in the body."

"Even more of a shut-in than I thought, then. If that's the case, why did Nono get to meet the real one…?"

"Because…Gadou needed the Pure Concept of *Star*…to make her wish come true."

Menou and Maya looked at each other. It was clear that the "Gadou" in front of them didn't have the information about the Starhusk activation key that they needed.

"So where is the real Gadou… The original personality, I mean?"

"…Even deeper."

Gadou pointed down at the floor.

"…In a world beyond this dimension of Primary Colors. She's in a place you can't reach from the monolith interior unless you go through a subspace… In the space where the source of the Guiding Force lies."

So Ran Gadou was in a space two steps beyond normal reality, even deeper inside.

In other words, if Menou and Maya wanted the Starhusk activation key, they would have to make their way to Gadou's soul.

"What do we have to do to get there?"

"…You really want to go?"

Menou shook her head at the girl who was Gadou's body. "I have no choice."

"…That really sucks."

Gadou gave Menou a look of sympathy. When Menou met her gaze steadily, she started and hurriedly hid behind Maya again.

"…I—I really wouldn't recommend it. It's a world of the soul that rejects all matter. Ran Gadou doesn't want anyone else entering her world."

"I'll force my way in if I have to. Besides, if you're Gadou's body, you must have a Guiding Force connection to the soul, right? You can't use a conjuring to communicate with her?"

"I-if I could…I would have done it by now." Gadou looked bitter. "That place is…a model of a world, not yet defined. People from the material world can't get through to it. They get blocked by a concept wall. If you had a huge amount of Guiding Force—like Ryuunosuke, who had the Pure Concept of *Dragon*—you could connect to that Gadou by force. But I'm just the body… I don't even have the Pure Concept of *Vessel*."

"So if I leave my body behind, I can get inside."

Menou calmly overcame the protests of the left-behind Gadou, who smiled ruefully.

"If you're that determined…then I won't bother trying to talk you out of it. Sit there."

A conjuring formed with Gadou at the center. Maya looked on worriedly but didn't speak up to stop it.

"I'm surprised you're so willing to help. If what you said is true, doesn't this go against the original's wishes?"

"…I can't do anything anyway. And I'm not like the other personality, who ran away from here ages ago. I'm the substitute personality… It's my job to take on all the pain and suffering in Ran Gadou's place."

The room broke down, its parts encircling Menou. Gadou's body must have been using some components of this small room as materials to activate a Primary Color conjuring.

"But the truth is, I…I hate the original Ran Gadou. So if you consent, I won't stop you, even if it means defying her will."

Those were her true feelings after having been subjected to a splitting of her spirit over and over for a thousand years in the original's place.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Primary Triad, Primary Color Pseudo-Concept—Invoke [Astral Projection]

Menou collapsed on the spot.

Maya ran over to her and found her unconscious. "What did you do to Menou?!"

"…Exactly what she asked me to do," Gadou answered quietly. "I left her body here and drove her spirit and soul into the source of this planet…the origin of Guiding Force. That's…where Ran Gadou is."

"O-oh, is that all…" Maya breathed a sigh of relief. "So Menou's fine, then."

"N-no… Of course she's not."

Maya stiffened. "What do you mean?"

"That place is…an undefined world," Gadou explained. "If a single human goes there…they'd just fuse with the endless expanse of Guiding Force and melt away into the world. Besides…the body she left is empty. My split memories might get inside and stick there."

Maya's breath caught. "Then…why didn't you tell that to Menou before she left?!"

"…You'll just have to save her, Maya."

"Me?"

"All of this world's conjurings use Guiding Force as their power source. Only Primary Color and Original Sin conjurings…can create their own world."

These weren't like other conjurings, which used things that already existed to cause various phenomena.

Only those two kinds of conjurings could bring forth something that didn't yet exist anywhere in the world.

"Those conjurings can maintain your world…even in an undefined one. With your command of *Evil*, you can protect her spirit by way of her body here."

Maya clenched her small hand, making a fist. "You've got some nerve making demands like that after you abandoned me in the south all those years ago, Gadou."

"…Nngh. I mean, if the Human Error of *Evil* happened in here, then I wouldn't be able to do anything…and the original would get

caught up in it, too… Besides, those were the original's orders…"

"…But fine, I'll do it."

"What?"

"I said I'll do it! Just watch me."

"…Okay."

Maya's shadow spread. A hole opened up in the world. It crept into Menou's body and used it as a stepping stone into the subspace beyond.

"I'll open up a path for Menou until she finds Gadou in there!"

Hooseyard slowly looked around the area.

The Commons laborers with no conjuring capacity, who were hired to construct the ceremonial hall, had all fainted without exception. She could hardly blame them. Even the Faust priestesses had fallen into a state of panic under the conjuring they were being exposed to.

In Hooseyard's vision, the world was divided into two layers.

There was the blazing battlefield being projected onto her mind and spirit by Guiding Force, and the reality where nothing had changed at all. Hooseyard was sharp enough to see the truth, and more importantly, her conjuring senses were so uniquely honed that she could understand the situation perhaps better than anyone. Thus, she could be aware of both versions of the world at once.

"…*Ulp*. I feel sick."

She covered her mouth, nauseous from what could only be described as conjuring sickness.

Hooseyard was the only person there who could escape the effects of the spirit corruption. Yet, as she made her way carefully forward, she was envious of those who had all passed out from the imaginary battlefield that tormented their minds.

"The conjured soldiers are behind this, that much is clear. It's not a physical attack. But if you succeed at a psychic attack like this, there's no reason not to attack physically at the same time. Why aren't they raiding us? If they want to destroy the ceremonial hall, this is the perfect chance…"

Muttering to herself, Hooseyard walked straight toward her destination.

Michele had gone for the source of the conjuring. No doubt the attack on mind and spirit would get worse the closer one came to its source, but Hooseyard never doubted that Michele would emerge victorious.

Someone who had such beautifully perfected Guiding Force could never lose.

The problem lay with Hooseyard herself. It was this whole situation. She didn't even have to think about it to know what the enemy was trying to accomplish with such a large-scale spirit corruption.

"Oh dear. This just won't do…"

Hooseyard grumbled to herself as she entered the church—the completed heart of the ceremonial hall.

It lay at the very center of the ceremonial hall they'd been expanding over the past week. The entrance to the church led immediately to the inner sanctum.

Inside stood a single blue wolf.

Hooseyard could see through its identity at a single glance. A Primary Triad conjured soldier, a terminal created so a spatial life-form could interact with the physical realm. Hooseyard wouldn't stand a chance against such an opponent in a fight.

And there was one other person inside, too.

"This is *my* ceremonial hall, you know." Hooseyard glared through her glasses at the person who'd led them straight into a trap. "What in the world do you intend to use it for…Ms. Momo?"

Her eyes were fixed on her fellow priestess, her junior who had worked alongside them for so long and was now trying to take over the ceremonial hall that could interfere with the Mechanical Society.

Hooseyard's arrival was completely unexpected.

Behind the cogwheel frames of her glasses, her eyes glittered as she gazed at Momo.

"What the hell is your freakish spirit made out of to resist a

psychic attack like this?" Momo spat out an insult that was nothing more than a bluff. Her face was stiff.

The mind control attack was built using a portion of the Mechanical Society: a Human Error born of the smallest and most numerous Pure Concept. Indeed, Abbie's extraordinary efforts had knocked out both the laborers working on the ceremonial hall and the priestesses guarding it. Even the powerful Michele had been cut off from reality. Momo had planned to drag Hooseyard away while she was out of commission by the spirit attack.

And yet here she was, approaching, a dangerous glint in her eye.

"Hey."

Ginoum expanded his tail. It split open into a mouth, and out tumbled the unconscious Sahara.

"I can't move. I gotta give the ceremonial hall the Guiding Force it needs, and big sis is focused on the spirit corruption conjuring."

He handed Sahara off to Momo.

"You deal with it."

Momo's loss in the holy land flashed through her mind. She had fought Hooseyard's ceremonial conjurings once before and been soundly defeated.

Her odds of winning were even worse with Hooseyard in control of the ceremonial hall. Hooseyard's skills with such conjurings were unparalleled.

"Damn it all. I was going to wait for the right moment to grab you and make you do my bidding…!"

Now Momo had no choice but to confront Hooseyard head-on.

Momo steeled herself and pulled out her coping saw.

"You want to fight?" Hooseyard didn't seem particularly shaken by the sight of Momo preparing for battle. "I have to say, though, I wish you wouldn't do this… The conjuring hall was built for Michele, so if you use someone else to provide the power, there's no telling what might go wrong."

Hooseyard's eyes lost their focus.

"Although…I suppose even I can activate it if it's just the church part here."

Guiding Force: Connect—Ceremonial Hall, Ceremony Construction

Conjuring Circle—Invoke [Guiding Force Circulation]

It was a ceremonial conjuring.

Guiding Force flowed from Hooseyard's body and quickly circulated through the entire church, activating the intricately interwoven conjuring circles. The church glowed with faint Guiding Light, took in part of the space of the Mechanical Society, and supplied it to the conjurer.

Guiding Light in the Primary Triad gathered in Hooseyard's palm.

This was the worst-case scenario. Momo cursed herself inwardly for assuming she'd be safe because there was no astral vein.

Hooseyard spread her spirit into the Concepts of Primary Color around them. This was far more dangerous than using ordinary Guiding Force. In the hands of an exceptionally skilled conjurer, Concepts of Primary Color could be given any attributes imaginable.

Hooseyard locked her eyes on Momo. The colored light in her palm obeyed her will, forming delicate beams of light that crisscrossed the room to capture Momo.

The beams were fast, and powerful. A red light easily burned through the coping saw in Momo's hand.

"Oh, enough already. Take a look at this, will you!"

Momo was left with no choice but to bet on Hooseyard's inquisitive nature.

She hurled the unconscious Sahara at Hooseyard, who caught the girl using her Primary Color beams of light. Her brow furrowed.

"What are you trying to do? A Guiding prosthetic isn't going to distract me, even if I am a researcher who— Hmm?"

She couldn't even finish her denial.

"What *is* this girl? She doesn't have a Guiding Force flow at all…? But in theory, if such a thing was possible…" Hooseyard gasped. "A perpetual motion machine of the third kind…? No, that's impossible… It couldn't be—could it?"

"You could tell just by looking?" Momo took the halted attacks to mean her bait was working, and pressed on. "Yes, it's a perpetual motion machine with Guiding Force. The Guiding Force put into it will circulate in the internal space. I'm sure you know what all that means, don't you?"

Hooseyard gulped audibly.

For a researcher, this was quite literally a dream come true.

"A completed conjuring space—an entirely new kind of world—exists inside of this thing."

"O-oh, really? However did you make it…?"

"Using the soul of a human compatible with both the Primary Color Concepts of *Vessel* and the Original Sin Concepts of *Evil* to link the two together. Implementing a perpetual motion machine requires two stable subspaces to exist on top of each other and join as one."

Concepts of Primary Colors and Original Sin both created unique spaces.

Linking the two together made it possible to observe a new, empty world.

Completely blank, in the truest sense of the word.

It was a void where not even Guiding Force existed. By creating zero, infinity would be contained within. That was the nature of a perpetual motion machine.

"I'm not the one who made it, by the way. It's the culmination of nearly a thousand years of obsessive searching by the conjured soldiers. I suppose they wanted a home that badly."

They most likely hadn't stuck to the straight and narrow in their search for materials, either. It was safe to assume they'd done many human experiments and even crossbreeding, too. No doubt it was Genom Cthulha, the human said to have conquered the Mechanical Society, who came closest to a successful case.

And Sahara had proven compatible with the Guiding prosthetic Genom gave her.

Abruptly, Hooseyard's eyes snapped into focus again. Or it might be more accurate to say that she had suddenly stopped caring about anything but the perpetual motion machine. Her gaze burned into Sahara. If left to her own devices, Hooseyard might start trying to dissect her.

"O-oh, *really?* Is that so? Hmm, hmm. So what is it you want me to do, exactly, Ms. Momo?"

"Transfer the entirety of the Mechanical Society into that thing, please. That way, Concepts of Primary Color will vanish from this

world entirely."

Hooseyard fell silent for a moment.

"And what makes you think I would do that?"

"Oh, please. There's no way you *wouldn't* do it."

Momo knew without even needing to hear Hooseyard answer.

"Because you're an utterly insufferable researcher."

Hooseyard pouted, looking displeased with the insult.

It made it sound like she didn't have any common sense at all.

All the same, a gleeful smile was lighting up her face beyond all hope of hiding it.

Wouldn't any human with a curious mind be willing to cooperate for a shot at something like this?

"By the way, this girl is the one with the combination of Original Sin and Primary Color, right? If we put the whole Mechanical Society inside, there's no telling what harm it might cause to her soul and spirit, much less her body. Are you all right with that?"

"Oh, it's fine. She's going to become the cornerstone of a new world. I'm sure she'd be delighted to be so special for once in her life."

Momo cast the careless response over her shoulder. She wasn't especially interested in the still-unconscious Sahara's safety anyway.

When she came to, Menou stood alone, surrounded by Guiding Light.

She had a scripture in her left hand and held two daggers.

It was a matter of the imagination. Since Menou was currently without a body, she was only putting herself into the shape of a person because that was how she saw herself when she did have a physical form. Truth be told, her five senses were very faint. Or perhaps there was nothing for them to sense at all.

The only way to perceive this world was to connect to the Guiding Force and analyze it.

Disoriented by the floaty feeling, Menou tried to look from side to side.

In stark contrast with the Mechanical Society, which was full of

Concepts of Primary Color from the outer brink to the innermost heart, this space was completely empty. If anything, it seemed strange that Menou had a shadow at her feet when there was nowhere for a shadow to be cast.

Describing it as a sea of Guiding Light felt the most accurate. There was no matter, no rules, no definition. There was only the slow yet ceaseless flow of the omnipresent power. The flow had no beginning nor end; particles of Guiding Light drifted endlessly in every direction.

This must be what happened if Guiding Light was poured into an empty space. Nothing existed but Guiding Light, and there was no way of knowing how large the mysterious space might be. Everything was constructed out of pure power, including Menou's current form.

"That way, perhaps?"

With no idea where she was, Menou followed the faint flow of the Guiding Light and pressed onward. It felt like she might melt away into this world if she let her guard down for even a moment. Without the boundary line of a body holding her together, the only things that made Menou herself were her name and her consciousness.

Although there didn't appear to be any ground, she still felt as if there was a solid surface beneath her feet.

The Guiding Force that filled the area had a current, similar to that of the earthen or heavenly vein. However, it was far larger—an infinite flow. Occasionally, it would form whirlpools, make waves, or even stop still. Nothing had any form, nor any mind. None of the logic Menou knew applied in this undefined world.

But somewhere in the midst of this flowing and endless sea of Guiding Force was the person Menou needed to see.

And so she kept walking. She relied on the faint sensation of the Guiding Force's flow to give her direction. As she walked on and on, following a path that might not even have any concept of distance, Guiding Light suddenly swirled at her back.

She sensed a dense conjuring being constructed behind her.

"…!"

Menou whirled around and plunged her dagger into the person's

head.

It was a fatal wound, without a doubt. The kind that would kill instantly.

And yet the person kept moving.

Guiding Force: Connect—Infinite Particles, Pure Concept [Null]—Invoke [Empty-Handed]

Menou jumped back.

The conjuring directed at her erased a swath of Guiding Light where she had stood.

The source of the wicked conjuring was a black-haired boy in a school uniform. Menou's dagger was sticking out of his head.

"Why did you come here now, after all this time?" The fatally injured young man's voice was resentful. "So you killed me just fine, but you'd save your friend."

The boy whom Menou didn't recognize dissolved and disappeared.

Who was he? What was this phenomenon? As Menou stood there, bewildered, a voice rang out from a different direction.

"Oh my, did you forget that poor boy?"

The wooden clack of geta sandals echoed.

Menou threw a dagger at what she assumed was her enemy, who blocked it with an iron fan.

The dagger bounced away, and Menou drew it back to her hand with her Guiding Force thread.

"Or perhaps you never knew his name in the first place? Tell me, do you still remember my name in your current state?"

The person who appeared this time was a girl in a white kimono.

Who in the world was she? Menou searched her memories but came up empty. All that was familiar to her was the kimono, which looked exactly like the one Maya always wore.

This unknown girl covered her mouth with her fan and sighed.

"What a shame."

Then she spread the fan and flicked her wrist.

Guiding Force: Connect—Fan, Crest—Invoke [Wind Blade]

The Guiding Force around them turned into sharp blades of air and sliced toward Menou.

With a short breath, Menou lunged forward, dodging past the blades of wind and slitting the girl's throat.

"I know I'm hardly one to talk…but you really ought to value your own life a little more, Ms. Menou."

The girl's human form fell apart and she vanished in the blink of an eye.

Menou was starting to catch on.

Comprehension dawned as she watched the girl disappear, just like the boy had.

The Guiding Force around her was reproducing Menou's past. It was taking the form of memories that Menou didn't even have anymore, trying to interfere with her progress.

"This space is utterly mystifying."

Menou kept moving, muttering quietly. Perhaps this space could be used as a reference to develop a conjuring that re-created someone's past. But Menou immediately put that pointless thought aside.

Gadou was somewhere in this space. Following the slight sensation of the Guiding Force's current, Menou resumed her walking.

"Do you get it now?"

How many selves had she cut down?

As Michele fought against the re-creations of her past, she realized the true nature of this conjuring.

This was a conjuring that analyzed the target's spirit.

It analyzed the world inside the mind and spirit of the person it possessed and reproduced that spirit world. It extracted and reconstructed everything that made up that person, even things they didn't remember.

The main purpose wasn't to attack her. No, this conjuring was intended to make Michele remember everything she had experienced over the past thousand years.

Michele kept cutting down her own past.

Since the battle began, she had experienced so much that she

was essentially a different person. The versions of her that had lost faith in Hakua, that had despaired at her own life, that had placed their hopes on others. She'd encountered countless versions of herself and fought them all.

And now, the version that came directly before her, an old and withered version of herself, was addressing Michele.

"Hakua Shirakami is never going to save anyone ever again."

"…Yeah."

Each time she cut down another one of her selves, she remembered a little more.

Despite failing over and over for the past thousand years, she was never able to reflect on those failures. She only carried the hopeful memories of brighter days as she went on living.

Long ago, Shirakami had told Michele:

"Someday, I'm going to erase Pure Concepts from this world forever."

Michele never believed that future would come. Otherworld summoning was a natural phenomenon caused by the planet and had been established as a conjuring driven by greed. It was human nature to desire power. Michele had seen so much evidence against the idealistic hope that people would no longer be sacrificed that it was impossible for her to believe in it.

Yet Hakua went on believing that such a world was possible.

And that was good enough for Michele.

"You're right. We should settle this once and for all."

When she cut down her aged self and regained the last of her memories, the spirit world composed of Concepts of Primary Color broke apart.

The battlefield vanished, and the world with the white midnight sun came back into view. There, standing before Michele, was a tan, glamorous conjured soldier.

"…Ah-ha-ha, you got through it already, huh?"

Abbie had been interfering with Michele's spirit to turn herself into Michele's past made manifest and attack her. A true master of Concepts of Primary Color could create entire worlds with enough materials, and this conjuring was her crowning achievement. She'd

thrust Michele into the world of her past and forced her to fight her former selves.

But that must have come at a high cost.

"So? How much of you is left now?"

"……"

Abbie only smiled in response.

She was bluffing, of course. In order to re-create the world of Michele's past, Abbie had used almost all of the materials she'd been saving up since she was born, pouring it all into this single conjuring. She'd barely even had enough material left to make a proper humanoid terminal. If this Abbie died, she wouldn't have the strength to make another one.

Seeing through to Abbie's limits, Michele narrowed her eyes.

"Why would you go that far? You could've just fought me normally and run away."

"…For the kids' future." Abbie's answer was sincere. "They need a home where they can live freely, without stealing from each other or being stolen from. No matter what it takes."

"I see…"

Michele turned away.

While fighting the spirit attack, she'd gotten far away from the ceremonial hall. Part of Abbie's aim must have been to keep Michele away from there.

Which meant that she was trying to do something there, right now, to make the dream she'd just spoken about come true.

"Can't the Mechanical Society be this so-called home?"

"No, it can't," Abbie said firmly. "The Mechanical Society is a subspace built on top of the world that exists right now. If the White Night barrier goes away, we'll end up at war with humans, right? You're even trying to destroy it yourself."

The barrier that kept the conjured soldiers sealed away also doubled as a breakwater to keep humanity from invading. Things might be peaceful for the moment, but in the long run, it was bound to lead to a battle.

"I guess every era has its wars."

Michele sighed heavily and gripped the hilt of her broadsword.

Abby, too, readied her fists. Before the battle, she asked a final question of one of the few beings who had lived even longer than her.

"Look, don't you think we've lived for too long?"

"……"

"We don't die. We have no lifespan. We have no future, yet we still have power. That's just how we are."

Anyone who achieved a state of immortality was strong without exception. Because of that strength, they could go on living by constantly picking off new buds. If they spotted someone who might one day grow stronger than them, they would pluck that new life, harvest it, and make themselves even bigger.

"And so we have to decide for ourselves where we're going to die. That's the duty of those of us without a lifespan. Any long-lived being who can't do that much is just a blight on the world."

"…You're not wrong."

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

Michele's sword swept up. Abbie barely jumped out of the way as it carved through the space at her feet.

"And I understand why you've chosen this as your place to die. But you know, that doesn't have a damn thing to do with me."

Having recovered a thousand years of memories, Michele also remembered what she had to do.

"This isn't where I'm going to die."

Michele took a battle stance, preparing to crush Abbie so she could achieve her goal.

When a ceremonial conjuring activated, Hooseyard's consciousness sank into the world.

Perhaps because this was the Mechanical Society, a subspace, her separated spirit went deeper than ever before. Her soul overcame the barrier of concepts and caught a glimpse of the hidden side of the world.

There, she saw an endless sea of Guiding Force.

A feeling of rapture spread through her.

Behind the surface of the physical realm was a world of Guiding Force. If she let herself drift into that endless expanse, she could become one with the world.

The only things keeping her from that temptation were her lingering attachments to the material world.

She wanted to talk more with the people she considered friends, to eat lots of delicious food, and to get a good night's sleep to carry her through the next day.

These worldly desires dragged her mind back from the depths, bringing her focus back to the material realm.

What mattered most right now was the Guiding prosthetic attached to that Sahara girl. Hidden in that object was a function that could be called an ark.

A perpetual motion machine. By stacking two subspaces together, it created a stable, endless space. This Guiding prosthetic was really just an entrance, and now Hooseyard had to create a path to the completed world inside the mechanical arm.

The ceremonial hall she had created could interfere with the Mechanical Society. But instead of dismantling and destroying its Guiding Force, as was originally the plan, she poured it all into the empty space.

It was essentially the act of creating a new world.

The void took on life.

New existence flowed into the once-empty world. Hooseyard's cheeks flushed with intoxication. Her heart rang out an alarm bell. Her eyes watched the mystery unfold with intense concentration.

Everything around her began to vanish. The Primary Colors that were born in this world fell away into a new one. And thus, a world with entirely new rules came into being.

"Well done."

Momo's voice reached Hooseyard's ears as if from a great distance. The ceremony was a success. The blue wolf who had provided the Guiding power source for the conjuring—the terminal of a Primary Triad conjured soldier—fell apart. No doubt his main body, too, would soon flow into the newly made world.

She'd created a stream for the Mechanical Society to pour into Sahara's Guiding prosthetic. It would take some time yet, but soon every last trace of the space called the Mechanical Society, including the Primary Triad conjured soldiers, would end up inside.

"Phew… What are you going to do now, Ms. Momo?"

"Who, me?"

Momo was already walking out of the church. She'd fulfilled her promise to Abbie to create a home for the conjured soldiers of the Mechanical Society.

"I'm going to do what must be done."

Abbie's driving motive was revenge.

Ability Control, zone thirteen of the Mechanical Society. The spatial life-form known as Abbie was the thirteenth Primary Triad conjured soldier to be born.

When she first came into existence, Abbie wasn't familiar with battle.

She had only just developed a mind of her own. Since her space was adjacent to the central zone of the Mechanical Society, Primary Color materials were provided for her in seemingly endless supply. The monolith in the shape of a "school" endlessly produced materials, and Abbie consumed them, quickly growing.

She had no concept of theft, either. So when lost humans wandered in, she gave them water and provided food they could eat, and eventually her space became a small paradise where many humans and conjured soldiers lived in harmony.

Abbie loved her little world. She never hesitated to give to the other beings that existed inside her space.

A hundred years.

That's how long her paradise stayed in operation.

So she had no idea—that if you prosper, others will take from you.

It was an older conjured soldier who attacked. It sent a terminal to serve as its hands and feet and cut down Abbie's paradise, slaughtering the people who tried to resist. And, of course, it took

the human bodies away as materials, too.

Abbie tried to fight back with a terminal of her own, which she wasn't used to using. The attacker easily brought her down and dismantled the terminal. It was only then that Abbie learned the real reason that there were so few Primary Color conjured soldiers.

They were being destroyed. The other admins killed them all. The moment a new conjured soldier was born, it was broken down, eroded until its consciousness was destroyed, and then consumed.

Abbie kept resisting. By the time she had learned how to fight, there was nothing left in the place that had once been her paradise.

Which was why her real motive was revenge.

She protected the younger Primary Triad conjured soldiers and stored up power. She sent her terminals out to ensure the older conjured soldiers wouldn't get any stronger than they were. It was all so she could one day eliminate the eldest conjured soldiers. That was her one and only goal.

When exactly did that change?

When did she start harboring the wish that her younger siblings wouldn't have to go through what she did?

"…!"

Abbie's body was knocked backward. She'd guarded herself against Michele's powerful attack, but was blown away in the process.

She didn't stand a chance of winning against Michele in close combat, but she didn't have enough materials to make more conjured soldiers to fight on her behalf, either. And now that Michele had a thousand years' worth of memories, there would be no meddling with her mind and spirit.

Worst of all, if this terminal was destroyed, Abbie would be virtually empty. Without any materials left, she might not be able to maintain her conscious self anymore.

Yet even in the face of defeat, Abbie smiled fearlessly.

"Ah-ha-ha, too bad…"

At some point, her hopes for the kids' future had overtaken her thirst for revenge. She wanted better for Ginoum and her other siblings. She didn't want them to start fighting against the humans,

whose lives didn't even last a hundred years.

"I've already…fulfilled *Star*'s prophecy."

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

The flowing water from Michele's broadsword caught Abbie's leg, and she dropped to one knee.

Michele wouldn't miss an opening like that. She kicked through the water she'd produced to send Abbie flying again. As her body bounced almost comically across the ground, Abbie thought of her paradise from days gone by.

She never wanted to know battle.

She didn't want anything stolen from her.

So she didn't want to steal anything from others, either.

That was why Abbie wished for a new world.

A literal new world, where she and the other conjured soldiers could live in peace.

"I see, so it was Lady Nono? I knew this seemed too elaborate for even you and Momo to concoct alone. What kind of prophecy did she give you?"

Michele stood over Abbie, who was lying on the ground. Since she had known the real Nono Hoshizaki long ago, she was naturally interested in what [Star] had predicted.

Momo had been told of a future where Menou gave over her body to Akari.

And Abbie had learned that the perpetual motion machine would be completed.

"An arc."

She stood up unsteadily and smiled.

That was the way to reach a new world where they could live without stealing from one another.

When she left the Mechanical Society, met Momo, and heard Nono Hoshizaki's prophecy, Abbie resolved to use up every last part of herself.

This battle was her destiny, and the end of her lifespan.

Abbie sent her mind back to her real body.

By now, the space that comprised Abbie's actual self was terribly

small.

The only part that she hadn't sacrificed for the spirit conjuring to attack Michele was the place that had once held her paradise.

Now a lone girl floated there.

She was adorable, with a bit of a babyish face. Due to the Sword of Salt that was stuck into her there, the center of her chest had slightly turned into salt.

For the past half a year, this girl had been carefully enshrined in the ruins of the paradise that Abbie had so lovingly preserved.

When she learned that this person was precious to Momo's most precious person, Abbie decided in turn to keep the girl in her most precious place.

When she met Menou, she was truly glad that she had treasured the girl so, even though Abbie had never once spoken with her.

Now a single blue butterfly was resting on the girl's somewhat unruly black hair. Abbie had needed to analyze the girl's body in order to craft a Guiding vessel to give to Momo.

All that was left now was to return the girl.

But at this point, Abbie didn't have enough energy left to transfer this girl from her own space to Momo's suitcase. She was beginning to panic, fearing she wouldn't be able to fulfill her promise to Momo.

Then the world started to change.

"Ah…!"

This world that had been locked behind the curtain of the White Night was flowing into a certain point. It was at the heart of the ceremonial hall that Michele and company created. The subspace of the Mechanical Society was disappearing, turning back into normal space.

What remained was a wasteland.

It was a barren expanse of stone and sand, where nothing had been able to grow due to overlapping with the Mechanical Society for so many years.

Abbie's dream had been realized at last. All of the other conjured soldiers except for her, all of the space that made up the Mechanical Society, had departed for a new world.

A single tear trickled from her eye. With one last burst of

strength, Abbie wiped the droplet from her cheek. She focused all her consciousness on the blue teardrop.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Primary Blue Stone, Primary Color Pseudo-Concept [Blue]—Invoke [Paradise: Connect: Box]

She'd managed to invoke the conjuring she needed to complete her promise to Momo.

"Good for you."

Michele's blade closed in on her.

"You've won."

Abbie smiled at the blessing from her enemy even as she accepted her blade.

Menou was fighting an elderly Archbishop.

She used scripture conjurings with terrifying precision. Menou just barely managed to win by using her Pure Concept. Her breathing was ragged.

"You really should just give up. Isn't it painful? Even if you keep going, your friends will just die, and you'll be left alone."

The old woman, a dagger plunged into her chest, gave her a sympathetic look.

"You poor thing."

With one last pitying glance, the elderly woman disappeared.

She had been a powerful foe, so powerful that Menou could scarcely believe she'd won. Her conjuring abilities far exceeded Menou's. It was painfully clear how many more years of experience she had in battle. Menou had to wonder how she had beaten this enemy before, when she didn't have a Pure Concept.

Many strong enemies had appeared since she first came to this space, but that woman was the strongest yet.


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But even as she kept defeating foes she didn't remember, Menou didn't regain any of the memories she'd spent to use her Pure Concept.

The people Menou did remember never appeared.

Michele, Hakua, Akari, Maya, Sahara, Abbie. She still had memories of the people she'd encountered over the past six months. Or perhaps there were a few she was forgetting. It did seem strange that she could only come up with six people's names.

"…Phew."

She pressed on.

There was no floor, no walls, and probably no air. Menou didn't understand how she was walking, or how she could breathe. She had such little sense of reality that she'd even started to wonder if she had accidentally wandered into a dream.

The origin of Guiding Force, the depths of the planet, or the world of the soul. There were many ways to refer to this place. Even Pure Concepts were only a tiny component of the makeup of it.

The longer she stayed in this endlessly large, incoherent place, the fainter Menou's sense of self became.

The chaotic sea of Guiding Force was changing a little.

It almost felt like the Guiding Force around her was starting to take on a will of its own, as if it had taken an interest in Menou. Sometimes, the particles drifted up to her, or whirled around as if teasing her. They didn't have a physical form, of course. The Guiding Force wasn't trying to help nor hinder her, only to interact with her. Or perhaps Menou was getting closer to being Guiding Force herself, and the effect of the Guiding Force around her was getting stronger.

Menou pushed her way through yet another oncoming swirl of Guiding Force. At this rate, she might lose herself entirely. She had to come up with a strategy, but her thoughts were growing vague, even her sense of danger becoming hazy and tenuous.

Was this the end…?

Nothing had been done to her, nor had she done anything; the swaying of the sea of Guiding Force was simply bearing down on Menou with such intensity that she nearly yielded to the world around her.

But then she heard the hard clack of crisp footsteps.

Menou raised her head and saw a priestess standing before her.

"……?"

Menou opened her mouth to say the priestess's name. Nothing came out.

Who was she, again?

Menou wasn't sure, but she had a feeling she knew her.

The woman's hair was a sinister shade of dark red. She was tall, standing straight in a way that was strangely intimidating.

Menou didn't know her.

Not her sneering lips. Not her scornful eyes. Not her merciless fingertips.

The inability to remember her was so frustrating that Menou wanted to claw at her own throat. The sight of this woman filled her to the brim with bittersweet nostalgia, yet she had no idea what those feelings meant. Could Menou really call herself "Menou" if she couldn't remember this woman?

She felt suddenly conflicted, even miserable.

Without realizing it, Menou was gripping the yellow cape she wore at her neck.

The lack of her own memories was so painful that she nearly wanted to cry.

For some reason, the red-haired woman didn't attack Menou. Unlike the other memories she'd encountered thus far, this one didn't fling accusations at her or try to admonish her at all.

She just raised her arm, looking annoyed, and pointed.

"That way…?"

Was something over there?

Before Menou could ask, the red-haired woman vanished.

For a moment, Menou just stood there in a daze. Her heart was on the verge of breaking. She'd forgotten someone important to her. She couldn't even remember what was important anymore. For the first time, the full weight of losing her memories hit her like a crushing blow.

But she couldn't just stand there doing nothing.

Menou walked on, confident now.

She knew somehow that the direction the woman had pointed in must surely be the right way.

Then Menou's feet touched the ground and made a noise.

Something material had appeared in this empty space.

There was a clear, glass-like floor now, and boxes arranged at irregular intervals. Controlled Guiding Light ran across the transparent surfaces in geometric patterns.

Here, there was finally order.

Now that objects that could be touched had appeared, the power that had surrounded her suddenly disappeared. Menou felt oddly forlorn at the loss of the Guiding Light around her. Even though a space that wasn't full of Guiding Light was what she ought to be more accustomed to, she'd somehow gotten used to being enveloped in it at all times.

Frightened by her own vulnerability, Menou ascended the transparent surface. She proceeded carefully. The Guiding Force in the matter here was all flowing toward a single point. Menou followed that path as she walked.

Finally, she reached the central point, where a girl was standing alone.

It wasn't the kind of place where life occurred naturally. Menou didn't need to ask to know who the girl, who was naked save for a white button-up shirt, was.

This was the real Ran Gadou. The user of the Pure Concept of *Vessel*.

She had tousled black hair and noticeably dark circles under her eyes. Her physical appearance was exactly that of the Ran Gadou Menou had met before.

The girl looked at Menou blankly.

"Who are you?"

Ran Gadou's dark eyes and expression showed little interest as she spoke.

Sweat poured down Maya's cheeks.

She was creating a channel from Menou's physical body,

protecting her soul with an Original Sin conjuring. The shadow Menou had in that world was proof that Maya was supporting the "Menou" who had left her undefended body behind.

But it was no easy task to support someone else's soul and spirit.

Crouching next to her, Gadou wiped Maya's brow.

Without Maya's help, Menou's soul probably would have melted away into the sea of Guiding Force. She probably would have never woken up there in the first place.



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"Why is the Gadou in there doing such awful things?"

Suddenly, Maya spoke to the part of Gadou that was present: her body.

Surprised that Maya had the mental fortitude to hold a conversation while supporting Menou with an Original Sin conjuring, Gadou considered the question. "…What do you mean?"

"Well, it's not fair, is it?" Maya bit her lip. "She's making you deal with all the hard stuff while she just holes up in her own world. It's not right to be so selfish! She seems like a big bully to me…!"

When Gadou realized that Maya was angry on her behalf, her eyes widened.

Gadou had saved Maya when Nono died. Otherwise, when the Starhusk activated, Maya probably would have been sacrificed as a condition to activate the otherworld repatriation circle.

"…I think she just doesn't remember."

"Wha…?" It took Maya a moment to understand what she was hearing. "You mean, she's lost her memories because of her Pure Concept…?"

"…No." Gadou shook her head.

The loss of Ran Gadou's memories caused by her Pure Concept of *Vessel* was a burden for the Gadou there. The Pure Concept conjuring that the Ran Gadou in the world of souls was using consumed her memories. To maintain herself despite multiplying her spirit to stay ahead of the consumption, she turned all unnecessary emotions into Primary Color crystals and ejected them outside.

Thus, because of her Pure Concept, Ran Gadou's memories would never vanish.

"…About me, about Hakua, and even about this whole world."

Menou struggled to reach Gadou, not because Gadou was testing her, nor out of any will to stop her.

"…It's simple. Ran Gadou has just forgotten about what she left behind a thousand years ago."

She stated the obvious with a perfectly calm expression.

Menou didn't seem to be welcome, but she couldn't get what she

needed by letting herself be intimidated and turning back. So Menou gave a challenging look to the real Ran Gadou.

"My name is Menou. I came here to ask about something you made."

Ran Gadou looked quizzical. "Wow, that seems like a lot of work. You came all the way from the physical world just for that? Normally, your soul would've just melted away and vanished… Ahh, it's an Original Sin conjuring, is it?"

Ran Gadou glanced at the shadow at Menou's feet. It was only then that Menou realized her shadow wasn't her own.

This was Maya's power. It was taking Menou's shape to protect her in the world of souls.

"Very smart. That's a different way of preserving a soul. Out of respect for your cleverness in getting all the way here, I guess I can answer your question."

"It's about the Starhusk—the otherworld repatriation circle."

"The what?"

Gadou's response couldn't have been more unexpected.

"Starhusk? Repatriation circle? Did I…make something like that?"

She truly didn't seem to know what Menou was talking about.

There was no way she could have the wrong person after all that, but anxiety gripped Menou's heart nonetheless.

"…The activation key to the repatriation circle. It doesn't ring a bell? Didn't you and Nono make the Starhusk together? …You *are* the holder of the Pure Concept of *Vessel*, aren't you?"

"Yeah, *Vessel* is definitely me… Wait, Nono's involved? Okay, give me a second. I'll remember it right now. Which file would a thousand years ago be again…?"

Muttering to herself, Gadou activated a conjuring.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Paint Over, Pure Concept [Vessel]—Invoke [Restore: Log 111324]

The Guiding Light that ran over the transparent boxes surrounding them grew stronger for a moment. A line of Guiding Force connected one of the rows of boxes to Gadou.

She had used a conjuring to store her memories outside herself, and now she was downloading the memories from a thousand years

ago into her spirit.

"Oh, right. Of course. The Starhusk. I guess we did set that up. The activation key for the otherworld repatriation circle is… Hmm? Wait a minute. You already have it right there, don't you?"

"Huh?"

Gadou was pointing at the scripture in Menou's hand. For a moment, Menou could only gape at it.

"This… The scripture is the activation key?"

"That's right. Stupidly long password, isn't it? It was Nono's idea to turn the books that Shirakami's weirdo worshippers made into Guiding vessels. Really versatile, aren't they? Not bad for something that was made a thousand years ago. Although they're a little on the big side."

"…Nono decided the contents of the scripture?"

"I bet she wanted to see the look on Shirakami's face. Nono always had a mischievous side." Seeing Menou's mixed emotions, Gadou shrugged apathetically. "You just have to stand in the environmental control tower, activate the entire scripture, and read the whole thing. Then the Guiding Force authentication will be complete, and you'll be able to get management authority. If you don't have the conjuring chops to invoke the whole scripture, then too bad for you. I can't be bothered to teach you conjuring techniques."

"…I can do that just fine on my own," Menou responded peevishly.

Menou had confidence in her abilities as a conjurer. She had studied hard to hone her skills to make up for her lack of any innate Guiding Force gift.

Even if she had now forgotten who taught her those skills.

The scriptures distributed to members of the Faust were intended to gather information from all over the continent for Hakua. As it turned out, they were also Guiding vessels for the otherworld repatriation circle.

"I must admit, though, I'm surprised you were willing to tell me that so easily. I thought you would give me a bit more trouble."

"I just don't care about the material world anymore. What's going

on out there anyway? It'd be nice if humanity had just died out already."

"Of course not. Hakua is doing whatever she pleases."

"Hmm. So a thousand years wasn't long enough for humanity to go extinct? Given how things were going a thousand years ago, I figured they'd have blown themselves up by now, to be honest."

This person certainly said disturbing things quite casually.

But the conjuring Gadou used earlier had awoken a desire in Menou. After all, Gadou had downloaded memories that she was storing outside herself.

"…What you just did was replenishing your memories, wasn't it? Does this apparatus work the same way as the Star Memory?"

"Don't be ridiculous. This is a far more advanced version of the Star Memory I built all those years ago." Gadou's tone was sharp. Menou must have struck a nerve. "That old relic from a thousand years ago was barely even a prototype. Going out of the way to make book-shaped Guiding vessels to store memory information, wasting space and making everything too big… It's so embarrassing to think about. So that old thing still exists in the material world? If you don't mind, could you maybe just destroy it for me? A single one of these has higher performance than that big hunk of junk."

As she spoke, Gadou lightly prodded one of the many transparent cubes floating all around them.

"Just one cube is better than the entire Star Memory…?"

Menou's voice shook with surprise despite her efforts to hide it. If what Gadou said was true, then she was currently surrounded by Guiding vessels with even better performance than the Star Memory, which was Hakua's hideout holding the memories of all of humanity.

Storing the memories of humans was already impressive in itself, but this place was on an entirely different level.

"Of course. Even all of these aren't enough to analyze this world."

Gadou's apparatus was collecting, analyzing, and storing everything that was the source of Guiding Force.

"You don't have *my* memories here, do you?"

"Yours? Sure I do. They're somewhere anyway. If you want them, I could give them to you."

Gadou quite casually offered the salvation Menou had scarcely dared hope for.

It was such an impossibly good offer that Menou felt wary to trust it.

"…Just like that?"

"It's not that big a deal. Let me see that scripture of yours for a minute."

The scripture could serve as a vessel for a person's soul or spirit. In fact, the Faust's scriptures were based on the Guiding vessels in the Star Memory, which stored memories. They'd been distributed across the continent as a conjuring tool, all while gathering information. At one point, Sahara's self had been completely stored in Menou's scripture, if only temporarily. It was perfectly capable of storing a person's memory.

Even here in the world of souls, the tool she'd brought with her mind should have had all the same functions. She'd been able to use crest conjurings and such in the battles on the way here.

"…Hmm? Ah, that's not gonna work." Holding Menou's scripture, Gadou furrowed her brow. "This scripture already has someone else's memories in it. Mind if I overwrite them?"

"What?"

At first, Menou didn't understand the question.

Menou had received the scripture from Abbie not long ago. It had its surveillance function, which allowed Hakua to connect to the scripture from the Star Memory, removed. At no point had anything happened where someone's memories would be put inside.

But after thinking about it for a moment, it dawned on her.

Menou had never asked who Abbie got this scripture from.

"……"

Perhaps… A possibility crossed Menou's mind. And if what she'd just realized was true, then the memories inside this scripture had to be preserved no matter what.

"…No. We can't erase those."

"Really? You're gonna give up on your own memories, then? I guess that's fine."

"Isn't there any way to put the memories into me directly, without

using the scripture as a medium?”

“Sure, but if I do that, you’ll totally lose your connection to the material world. Your soul would be directly linked to this world of souls, see. You’d never be able to return to your original body again.”

What should she choose? Her own memories, or the memories in the scripture? Conflict swirled in Menou’s chest.

If she didn’t jump on this opportunity now, it would never come again. This was probably Menou’s last chance to recover her memories.

She thought back on the people she’d met on her way, people she didn’t know. Most of all, the image of the red-haired woman whose name she couldn’t recall squeezed at her heart. If she could only remember that woman, maybe it would be worth abandoning all she’d been pursuing.

For a few minutes, Menou agonized in silence—then decided to give up on herself after all.

“…Tell me something, Ran Gadou.”

“……Hmm? Oh, right, I guess that was my name.”

“What is it you’re doing in here?”

“Me?”

Menou nodded silently. Having given up on herself yet again, she found herself wondering about Gadou’s state.

She was so powerful that she didn’t have to give up a single thing. If she wanted to go back to her own world, she could. Surely, she could build the otherworld repatriation circle from scratch. Why she would stay here, all alone in this world of nothing but Guiding Force, was a mystery to Menou.

“When I was back on Earth, I hated the world. Things never went the way I wanted.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nowhere in Japan felt like home.”

So it was because there was nothing she regretted leaving behind.

Gadou spoke candidly about her past. “I hated other people who just did whatever they wanted. I hated the wars in far-off countries.

I didn't like the family around me, either. And that awful place they call school was nothing but a big box of trauma. I hate everything outside of me that doesn't do exactly what I want."

The heart of the Mechanical Society was shaped like a Japanese school because it was molded by the first piece of trauma that Gadou ejected.

"So when I was summoned to this world and I learned about the power I'd been given, I was happy."

When she came to another world, she received the Pure Concept of *Vessel*. Now Gadou spoke of her feelings at the time and her dearest wish, all kept in the memories she had just downloaded.

"Because I wanted to become a god."

A chill ran down Menou's back upon hearing this vision of the future that not even a child would wish for. It was so dramatic that it sounded like a pipe dream. But once she was summoned to this world and gained a Pure Concept, it was a dream well within Gadou's reach.

She could create spaces. Create objects. Create intelligent life.

With the ability to craft entire worlds, conjurings of the Pure Concept of *Vessel* were as close as a person could get to the power of a god.

"With the help of Nono's abilities, I laid down a path all the way here to the source of this world built of Guiding Force. And then I decided to stay here."

The Pure Concept of *Star* could see the future. By peering into this place, the wellspring of the planet, it could make incredibly accurate predictions. They created a Guiding Force processor with Gadou's abilities that could assess the entire world and its possible outcomes, and they combined the pair's powers to complete their precognition machine.

"If I just could understand how the world works, then I should easily be able to become a god."

Ran Gadou desired influence over the things she could not control.

The Primary Color space she'd made inside the monolith was only a stepping stone to follow a path laid out by Nono Hoshizaki's Pure

Concept of *Star*.

The Star Memory, which bound the world's past in books; the Dragon Gate, which allowed long-distance teleportation using the earthen vein; and even the Starhusk, which opened a path to the other world—all of these were just leftovers created in the pursuit of Gadou's ultimate dream.

All so she could come here, to the ultimate model of how to build a world.

"If you managed to become a god, what would you do?"

"If I become a god, I can finally be free of other people for the first time."

As someone who had hated people all her life, Gadou had no interest in the lives of other humans.

What was Guiding Force, exactly?

That was the only subject Ran Gadou was interested in.

"But…it's not working out. My by-products are much cleverer than I am, so they won't do what I say, and they're always pointing out my failures."

The girl who had used a power akin to creating a world for the past thousand years smiled forlornly.

The Primary Triad conjured soldiers.

They were an unintended by-product of Gadou's subconscious, beings with wills of their own who learned to move freely. And, in the end, they succeeded at Gadou's wish before she did by creating their own world.

"Honestly, it's so annoying."

There was one thing that still bothered Menou. "You know, I heard you originally had three personalities."

"Oh, yeah… I guess maybe I did?"

"I've already met one of them. She's been substituting memories for your Pure Concept all this time."

"Ah, that's right. I didn't really want anyone to come here, so I set things up so the shell of the Mechanical Society would automatically grow around the monolith and left her in charge of that fantasy world. …Right, I guess that means you came here through that prototype fantasy world. How embarrassing. That's a

thousand years old, too, so it's not very well-made."

"Where did the other one go?"

Even as she asked, Menou strongly suspected what had happened to the other third of Gadou's divided spirit.

She had a connection to Nono, she'd fled from the Mechanical Society, and she'd attached herself to a human of this world. There was only one being who met all of those conditions and had been active for the past thousand years.

"I think I remember her, kinda… She didn't get along with Nono at all. I think the way they lived was just too different. Unlike that pathetic other one, this personality has a dirty way of surviving."

"I knew it… So you're the Guardian after all."

The Elder Guardian, a coconspirator of Hakua's for the past thousand years, was the third and final personality of Ran Gadou, drifting without a body or a soul.

"Yeah, exactly. I remember now. Nono hated that thing, but I don't mind it so much. It was originally one of my personalities, after all. Oh, right! She was basically a manifestation of my ideal form. For better or worse, that personality came into being because of my wish to be able to force other people to do my bidding. Wow… So she's still alive, huh? Not bad for a scrappy little spirit. Is she using *Possession* or something? That's the one ability she took from me, you know."

"Why are you using your own body to preserve your memories anyway? Couldn't you use this setup here to handle the memory consumption of your Pure Concept?"

"Huh? Ooh… Yeah, I guess you're right. I just left her connected the whole time, that's all. Force of habit or whatever."

This version of Gadou spoke the terrible truth so casually, without a single thought for the torment her own body had been going through all this time.

"To get into this world of souls, I needed a connection to a body, at least at the beginning. I had to keep her around to make myself a base here in the Guiding Force world…but I don't plan to return to the material world again, so I guess I could cut the cord now. Just tell that girl I said she's free to do as she pleases from now on."

"You know…" Menou's face darkened at Gadou's selfish ways. "You really are a Human Error."

"Who, me? Don't be silly. I've got the memory problem totally under control."

"No. That isn't what I meant."

She wasn't like the other Human Errors, whose Pure Concepts went on a rampage.

In a way, Gadou was the human who'd had the most influence on the world. Out of all the Otherworlders Menou had met, Gadou was the one most suited to the title of Human Error.

"I dunno. I mean, maybe? But the god of this world is very rational and good at crisis management. For one thing, *Vessel* and *Evil* showed up at the same time. Doesn't that seem deliberate to you?"

At that point, Gadou was mostly talking to herself, not even looking Menou in the eyes anymore.

"If it weren't for Maya, this world would've been putty in my hands."

The statement sent shivers up Menou's spine.

"In that respect, Hakua is a problem, too. Her Pure Concept can turn the whole material world into a blank white slate. …Oh, right. That's why I made that promise with Nono, isn't it?" With this unexpected mention of an old friend, Gadou looked at Menou. "I guess I better send you back to the material world safely, then. Once you're back, hurry up and take Hakua away, will you? I don't care if you die in the process, or even if she does. Whatever it takes, Hakua Shirakami simply should not exist in this world."

Once again, Gadou was pushing what was convenient for her on others.

"By the way, if I could get your opinion…"

Menou had only come to get the activation key for the otherworld repatriation circle. Still, since she'd come so far, she thought she might as well ask questions. She decided it was a good chance to pick the brain of someone who knew how to build the repatriation circle in the first place.

"I want to make sure otherworld summoning never happens

again.”

“Oh yeah? Sounds good to me.”

“I’m glad you agree. I think it’s possible to stop the summoning phenomenon from occurring… The problem is, that would mean altering the planet. Do you think that might have an adverse effect on the material world?”

“Now, this is just based on my findings from a thousand years ago, mind you…” Gadou dropped her gaze to the transparent floor. “When the circle first came into existence, there was nothing in the world at all. No matter, no spirits, no souls. It was just a completely empty space. There was power, but with no bodies to wield it and no point in doing so. It was just a void where Guiding Force drifted around. In other words, the whole world was like this place.”

She raised her head abruptly. “Now, pop quiz. How do you make something exist in a place where there’s nothing?”

“…You bring it in from somewhere else.”

“Exactly.”

When Menou responded based on the current state of the world, Gadou nodded.

“It’s cutting corners, don’t you think? But that’s exactly why the otherworld summoning phenomenon exists. They brought concepts in from another world. When someone summoned from Japan passed through here, the Guiding Force began constructing physical matter to realize the concepts they defined. That whole world is a conjuring phenomenon—brought about by what it summoned and pulled in from the other world.”

“Are you saying you think someone *created* this world?”

“I believe so.”

The person who had come closest to creating a world herself nodded.

“I’m a creationist, see. After all, even I made a world, albeit an incomplete one. So of course it’s possible that someone made the imperfect world that’s only built a little bit better than mine. I think my old world and this one were both made by someone.”

It certainly was convincing, even if she had no proof.

“The conjuring we call ‘otherworld summoning’ is a system that

was only necessary in the early days of the world. Now that most concepts have been summoned and successfully realized, the summoning isn't necessary anymore. It's nothing but a remnant of the world creation process that stubbornly keeps on working."

The girl who had lived for a thousand years went back to her analysis of power. She immersed herself in studying the seemingly endless sea of Guiding Force.

Then Menou finally realized.

The faint flow of Guiding Force she had felt since she first arrived wasn't part of the world of souls behind the material world.

It was a conjuring Gadou was producing to analyze the space.

And this conjuring, which was so unbelievably large that Menou had mistaken it for the flow of the planet's wellspring, still wasn't enough.

Not to decipher the origin of the world.

Gadou would probably be here forever. For thousands of years, tens of thousands, a hundred million, and beyond, as if even that were still not enough, until the concept of numbers lost all meaning.

She would keep focusing on her analysis to the point where a thousand years would seem like the blink of an eye.

And someday, she was going to create a world of her own.

"Hey."

Abruptly, Gadou tossed a question at Menou.

"Was Nono smiling?"

The unexpected question caught Menou off guard.

"…Yes. From beginning to end."

"Oh yeah? That's good, then."

Once she heard the answer, the space around Menou began to break apart. She was being dismissed now that her business was finished. Gadou didn't look at Menou again.

Nonetheless, Menou spoke to her one last time.

"Good-bye, god-in-training."

Gadou probably didn't even hear her parting words.

CHAPTER 5

Sentiment

The first thing Menou felt when she returned to her body was a powerful pressure.

As her mind awoke, her spirit was being squeezed and stuffed into the receptacle of her body. She felt as suffocated as if she'd been buried alive, making her spirit tremble in fear.

Slowly, she started breathing again.

Her heart was beating, and her organs were functioning. As a former Executioner, she was accustomed to moving her body, but the complex workings of it still surprised her as she came back into her flesh.

It was a side effect of her spirit and soul being separated from the body. When she thought of it now, the Menou in the Guiding Force world had been a remarkably simple construction. She was only information from her spirit stuck to one simple component, her soul.

Now that she had gone from that pure state back to the bizarre structure of a human body, she was confused at first. Little by little, she regained control of her limbs. As she felt the blood coursing through her veins, she was struck by a surge of love and gratitude for her body.

Ah… I'm alive.

Freshly aware of her living self, Menou slowly opened her eyes and sat up.

The scene around her was blurry, like there was a haze over her eyes. Gradually, it came into focus.

"…Menou?"

A voice reached her ears.

It was Maya. Her young face looked terribly exhausted.

"Wow… She really made it back."

The next to speak was Gadou, in a quiet mumble. This was Gadou's body, the one that was frightened by other people's gazes, not the indifferent Gadou in the world of souls.

"Thank goodness…" Maya slumped to the floor. "Oh, I'm so glad…"

"Did something happen…?"

"Menou…your heart stopped."

"Huh?"

"You weren't breathing, and your skin was getting cold… If Gadou didn't tell me those were symptoms of astral projection, I would've thought you were dead for sure…!"

"I—I had no idea…"

As she comforted the crying Maya, Menou turned a little pale herself, shuddering at the thought that her body had been dead while her spirit and soul were outside of it.

"…You should thank Maya," Gadou whispered timidly in Menou's ear. "This whole time…she was using her Pure Concept of *Evil* here to make sure your spirit and soul kept their form."

"I thought as much. Maya. Thank you, truly."

Menou's survival in the sea of Guiding Force was no coincidence, nor was it because she had a strong will.

It was only thanks to Maya's aid. The shadow Menou had in that world was a connection Maya made to ensure that Menou's form held together. If Maya hadn't maintained Menou's shadow, Menou likely wouldn't have been able to focus on her own form and shape.

"And, um… Thanks to you, I'm free from being Gadou's substitute. Thank you."

Gadou bowed her head.

The original Gadou had already solved the problem of memory consumption. The only reason she kept using her body for it was out of habit, a connection she never bothered closing. Once Menou pointed it out, Gadou's body was finally set free after a thousand years of dividing and multiplying memories.

"It was my pleasure. That other Gadou was awfully selfish."

"…Yeah. I know. And…the situation outside has changed, too." Gadou went on haltingly. "The Mechanical Society…disappeared. Ability Control laid down her life for it."

"Abbie…?"

"…Uh-huh. She…sacrificed herself. To make her wish come true."

Menou and Maya fell silent. Abbie was gone. Even after hearing as much, it didn't seem real to them.

"…I still have control over the monolith, so…do you want to go outside…?"

Menou nodded at Gadou's proposal.

When she left the monolith, Menou was met with unfamiliar scenery.

Just to be safe, she'd left Maya behind and gone out alone to make sure the area was safe. She looked around.

It was a wasteland of nothing but rocks and earth. Only the White Night barrier Hakua created a thousand years ago remained. The inside of the barrier was where the Mechanical Society should have been, but those abundant Primary Colors had vanished completely.

The school Menou and the others had been staying in was gone, too. Only the environment control tower that Abbie had repaired remained, standing alone.

The Mechanical Society that had expanded over the past thousand years was gone forever.

"Now, this is a surprise."

Someone spoke from behind Menou.

"Making a new world and transferring the Mechanical Society into it, instead of destroying the whole thing…"

She must have come to investigate the environment control tower, all that remained in the ruins of the Mechanical Society. Now Michele stood alone, staring Menou down.

"…Was this all part of your plan, too, Flarette?"

"…No. I'd imagine Nono is behind it."

"Ahh, of course. Lady Nono. I suppose she would be able to accomplish a plan a thousand years in the making. She's far wiser than the likes of me, after all."

Michele's lips turned down, her expression strangely sad. Although this was undoubtedly Michele, she seemed to have changed since Menou last saw her. Her hostility toward Menou had faded, and her overall behavior was more pensive somehow.

"What's the matter? You seem a bit…different."

"Hmm? Ah, yes… Well, I just remembered the past a little while ago."

Abbie's conjuring had reproduced her past and filled in the blanks in Michele's memories. And not just those of her most recent past self, Elcami.

All of the lives she had lived over the past thousand years.

Now that she had taken her time back, Michele wore a world-weary smile.

"That conjured soldier used one hell of an annoying attack. I can't believe she helped me remember the past."

The psychic attack Abbie had constructed wasn't meant to harm Michele. Her true aim was to make Michele remember her own life.

Abbie had suspected that if Michele remembered everything, she would have no reason to obey Hakua.

"Living too long is a blight, eh… She's absolutely right. My entire life has been meaningless."

Michele reflected as a being who had lived for a thousand years.

Abbie's plan had succeeded. Michele no longer had any intention of serving Hakua.

But she'd made one miscalculation: Even if she wasn't serving Hakua, Michele still had a reason to fight Menou.

"What about yours? Since you're just a copy of Hakua Shirakami."

"I'm living right now to make my life a meaningful one."

Menou had learned how to activate the otherworld repatriation circle. All she had to do was stand in the environment control tower and activate the full text of the scripture as a conjuring. Just like that, she could knock Hakua back into the other world.

"…I see. That's not a bad way to live."

Michele uncrossed her folded arms. She grabbed her broadsword, which was stuck in the earth, and pulled it free.

"Shall we walk a little?"

"…All right."

Menou had no objections to moving. Maya and Gadou were inside the monolith. She couldn't let them get caught in the crossfire of her battle with Michele. Besides, if they fought there, they could destroy the environment control tower, which she needed to use the Starhusk.

And Michele, who suggested the move, didn't want to cause harm to Maya or the tower, either.

"You remember now that Hakua's been taking advantage of you all this time, right? Couldn't you work with us instead?"

"Ridiculous. You are a part of Hakua's plan yourself, are you not?"

Menou smiled bitterly.

It was true: Menou was only a tool that Hakua had created so she could go back to the other world with Akari. Once Menou and Akari's souls were so in sync that they could form a Guiding Force connection, thus becoming the same person in a conjuring sense, Hakua would take over Menou's body and activate the otherworld repatriation circle so that they could return to Japan together.

That was Hakua's wish, though by now it was nothing but a delusion.

"Don't worry," said Michele. "Even if you lose here, I'll put an end to Hakua myself."

"…You wouldn't be able to beat her, you know."

Menou wasn't saying it to goad her. It was simply her prediction of what would happen if Michele fought Hakua.

"You're too kindhearted," she explained. "When you try to kill someone you once called a friend, you can't do it."

"…Ahh, so that's why."

Michele's memories had been erased by Hakua countless times. Upon learning the reason for her defeat, a smile split across her face.

She knew her combat abilities weren't inferior to Hakua's by any means. And yet every time she could no longer side with Hakua, she

inevitably lost to her and lost her memories. Menou's explanation made perfect sense.

"Well then, let's see you win against me, Flarette."

Michele readied her Sword of Judgment.

"Luckily, you've never been a friend of mine."

So there was no reason for her to lose.

There was no signal to start the battle.

Menou simply charged without any warning. Her dagger flashed through the air, and Michele brought her broadsword up to meet it.

Sparks flew as the blades clashed.

They clanged together three times in the span of a second. These sounds were nearly seamless, resulting in a high keening noise that resounded for several seconds. Both Menou and Michele were glowing with the light of Guiding Enhancement as their killing blades rang out against one another.

It was a breathtaking storm of slashing steel. One single broadsword somehow kept up with the speed of two daggers, deftly knocking them back. In the fifth second, Menou's right arm was sliced off. In theory, she should have had the advantage over Michele's broadsword if she could get close enough with her daggers, but she was met with swordsmanship even fiercer and more precise than she had anticipated. The difference in their close-combat skills exceeded Menou's imagination.

Menou took a half-step back to try and adjust her approach only for Michele to take a full step forward to close in on her.

Michele brought down a blow too fast to evade, killing any attempts at movement. Menou attempted to parry it with her dagger —a deadly mistake.

Michele's broadsword knocked away Menou's dagger, and her defenses with it.

She was much too strong to block. Menou's body was slammed to the ground. Without her right arm, she couldn't even control her fall. Menou's face twisted in pain under the overpowering force of the attack.

To make matters worse, Guiding Force flowed through Michele's broadsword.

Guiding Force: Connect (Conditions Met)—Sword of Judgment, Crest—Invoke [Compression]

The ground surrounding Menou was drawn toward Michele's sword, closing in to crush her.

Menou couldn't move as the rocks bore down on her body. Then Michele's fist drove into her chest.

Her powerful punch smashed through Menou's immobilized body, a fatal wound. In normal circumstances, such a blow would surely decide the outcome of the battle.

Michele and Menou—when they fought head-on, this was the extent of the difference in strength between them.


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"Stand up. You know how this works."

But Michele knew with certainty that it wasn't over yet.

Guiding Light glowed amidst the cloud of dust.

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

The Pure Concept conjuring brought Menou back from the grips of death.

All of the time up to Menou's death—from the fatal wound from Michele's punch to her severed arm and even the dirt on her clothes—was reverted as if it never happened.

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

Branches of Guiding Force bloomed from the dagger and created a gun's barrel.

Menou pointed the shining muzzle at Michele.

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

There was no holding back now.

The bullet's speed was multiplied immeasurably, sending it flying with a resounding roar. Menou's arms were knocked back by the immense recoil.

Breaking the limits of the very concept of acceleration, the bullet tore through time and across space, erasing the distance to its target.

Michele swung her broadsword. Its blade, nearly the length of Michele's body, hacked through the *Acceleration*-enhanced bullet.

Sparks burst in the air. The two halves of the bullet crashed into the ground behind Michele, digging out two deep craters.

The lightning speed of her swing surpassed even that of Menou's accelerated bullet. Such a movement seemed impossible for a human—impossible for anything, by the laws of physics. It was supernatural in its own right.

The aftermath of the slash shook the air. A shockwave sped toward Menou's body, though she was far outside the range of the blade. Menou's lips tightened as she faced down the impossible strike.

Ever since the battle began, Michele's every move had been superhuman.

She was a successful result of human experiments to reproduce *Dragon*, said to be the strongest and fastest Pure Concept. The overwhelming Guiding Force that flowed freely from her soul was enough to far outclass Menou, who used the Pure Concept of *Time*.

But even as she witnessed this powerful being, the pinnacle of Guiding Enhancement, the will to fight never faded from Menou's eyes. She had known all along that Michele would be strong. The amount of Guiding Force Menou could access had jumped up thanks to her connection to Akari, but it still did not compare to the power at Michele's command. But it wasn't as if her only option was to fight fire with fire.

Menou's form vanished into thin air.

Guiding Camouflage.

It was a technique achieved by honing one's Guiding Force manipulation to an almost pathological degree, controlling Guiding Light to fool the eye completely. Such a skill boasted countless uses, whether for stealth missions, battle, or even in everyday life. However, because it was a Guiding Force manipulation technique and not a conjuring, this exceptional technique could be used without any tool.

Menou merged with the scenery and masked her presence. In her training as an Executioner, she had perfected the art of moving without making the slightest sound.

An assassination during a head-to-head battle. Menou's stealth made such a contradictory strategy possible.

In response, Michele gripped her broadsword tightly in her right hand. She made no attempt to track down the vanished Menou.

She simply poured Guiding Force into her broadsword.

This wasn't to activate a crest conjuring.

Her immense Guiding Force simply kept flowing into the single blade. She violently crammed it in with all her might, compressing it, condensing it, and twisting its very nature.

The still-invisible Menou had crept up behind Michele and was about to strike.

Then Michele thrust her broadsword into the earth.

The earth exploded at her feet. As soon as the dull edge of the Blade of Judgment plunged into the ground, the Guiding Force that Michele had flooded into it was unleashed, spreading out into a massive shockwave.

A tidal wave of dirt and sand broke out from the ground.

The earth had been turned up from where Michele thrust her sword into the ground, turning into an attack that surged in all directions.

But even more terrifying to Menou than the earth was the wave of Guiding Force that accompanied it. The violent swell of Guiding Force broke through Menou's body. It hadn't been given any direction in the form of a conjuring—it was pure power rolling off of Michele.

When the Guiding Force of one human enters the body of another, it causes a strong reaction. Menou's soul shook, her spirit was rattled, her body trembled, and her Guiding Force manipulation was thrown off.

Menou's Guiding Camouflage was torn away. Her location was exposed, and Michele immediately locked on.

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

A flash of focused water cleaved Menou in two.

It was a flawless transition from stillness to motion. Michele's miraculous combination of overwhelming destructive power and deft techniques that were no less refined for all her strength made her a superhuman force on the battlefield.

"Tch!"

Michele clicked her tongue in irritation as she saw the result of her seemingly perfect strike.

The Guiding Branches that had taken on Menou's form fell apart. Menou had created a decoy by projecting Guiding Camouflage onto the Guiding Branches that stretched from her dagger gun. On top of being able to fool Michele's senses, what was even more impressive was that Menou managed to maintain her own Guiding Camouflage even through that wave of Guiding Force.

It wasn't only Michele who boasted both abundant Guiding Force and precise techniques. Menou had achieved that combination, too.

Standing in Michele's blind spot with her gun at the ready, Menou silently pulled the trigger.

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

No ordinary attack could harm Michele thanks to her powerful Guiding Enhancement. However, physical strength had no meaning in the face of *Time* conjurings. Michele blocked the conjuring fired from Menou's gun with her right arm, which was instantly exposed to the amplified effects of *Time* and began to fall apart.

Without hesitation, Michele cut off her own arm.

The limb crumbled into dust before it hit the ground.

Though this looked like an obvious opening, Menou didn't take the chance.

It was another blow that would be the end of any normal battle, but just as Menou's fatal wound had been reversed by *Regression*, the loss of a body part was no major setback for Michele, either.

Guiding Light reconstructed the outline of the lost right arm. In moments, the limb was restored, as if the world itself remembered Michele's powerful form.

"You get it, right? When you get too good at Guiding Enhancement, the planet itself learns your shape."

Menou's mind quickly found an explanation for the phenomenon before her eyes.

She thought back to the world of souls she had visited. Michele's much-too-powerful Guiding Enhancement must have expanded its influence from the physical world to the world of souls, bringing about the conjuring phenomenon known as "Michele" and maintaining her physical body.

"You and I both have bodies that refuse to die properly."

The fight so far had just been a prelude to the battle that was about to begin.

Michele, an imitation of *Dragon*, and Menou, who used the Pure Concept of *Time*.

Their battle wasn't one of causing each other physical harm.

It was a race to wear each other down, to determine which would run out first: Menou's memories that were the price of her Pure Concept, or Michele's Guiding Force that granted her immortality.

"I hope you're prepared to fight dirty."

With that, Michele ramped up her Guiding Enhancement output.

The Guiding Light that surrounded her grew even brighter. She had already been dominating Menou in head-to-head combat, and yet she still wasn't even at full power.

Slowly but surely, her Guiding Force grew stronger.

She broke through what Menou assumed was the human body's limit and kept on going.

Her presence became so overwhelming that it scarcely seemed physically possible, and still she kept going.

Even when Menou turned pale with fear, despite her experience with the world of souls, Michele kept going.

Her power grew stronger and stronger.

The being known as Michele was strengthened by Guiding Force. As her physical strength rose, her aura and presence expanded.

"Look."

Michele's voice boomed around the area.

Her vocal cords were so strengthened by Guiding Force that even her speaking voice was transformed into something terrifying.

"This is the next level of Guiding Enhancement."

Menou stared up at her opponent in silent awe.

Michele's physical form hadn't changed at all. She had only increased the output of her Guiding Enhancement, which didn't make her body look any different.

And yet she seemed to loom incredibly large.

Michele's sheer presence seemed to stretch up to the skies with untouchable power.

Intimidated despite herself, Menou unconsciously took half a step backward.

Michele gave a small flick of her wrist.

Just like that, there was a huge hole in Menou's chest.

"What?"

Menou couldn't comprehend what had just happened.

She and Michele were more than ten paces apart. Michele hadn't thrown anything, nor had she used a conjuring for a long-distance attack. All she had done was wave her hand as if warding off an insect, far away from Menou.

The excessive Guiding Light that surrounded Michele had followed her movement and created a physical blow that carved out part of Menou's body.

"But…how…?"

In spite of her strong surprise, Menou's voice came out weak and feeble. The organs needed to keep her alive had been obliterated, and Menou's consciousness quickly faded.

The excessive Guiding Enhancement had resulted in the world misrecognizing Michele's existence, expanding the range with which she could interact. The Guiding Light followed the outline of what the planet had mistaken for the size of Michele's body, causing a powerful physical phenomenon to correspond with her every action, even without using a conjuring.

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

When Menou lost her life, *Regression* activated automatically and brought her back.

"You have *got* to be kidding me…!"

The first words out of her mouth as she regained consciousness were a petty complaint.

She'd always known Michele was strong. She went into their battle with the utmost caution. She fought to the very limits of her abilities, expecting the worst.

Yet Michele easily transcended all of Menou's expectations. She'd underestimated Michele's strength.

Standing up, Menou leapt back as far as she could, trying to put distance between them for now. Michele took a single step toward her in response.

"…!"

The movement sent a mass of Guiding Light plunging to the earth.

A huge crater was gouged in the ground. Almost as an

afterthought, Menou was crushed, her body splattered. As a dirt cloud rose around her, *Regression* revived Menou again.

She'd died twice now without making any progress whatsoever.

This was no longer even a real fight. All Michele did was walk. That alone was enough to kill Menou.

No wonder she never used her full power in cities or underground. Michele's power was such that she could easily crush an entire town like a child stomping on a sandcastle.

This was the true strength of the ultimate human weapon, modeled after the Pure Concept of *Dragon*.

"Is that all you've got, Flarette?"

Michele's voice boomed. Even speaking in a level tone, her voice shook the air, making Menou's skin prickle through her Guiding Enhancement. She felt as if she wasn't even fighting a human anymore. Michele had grown into something monstrous.

Menou's only possible hope of salvation was the Pure Concept of *Time*.

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

Menou closed in on Michele at unbelievable speed. She broke the sound barrier, moving as if the world around her was standing still. If her opponent had been any ordinary priestess, she wouldn't even be able to follow Menou with the naked eye.

But Michele caught up with her easily.

As Menou reached out to strike, Michele caught her wrist and crushed it, then casually threw out a front kick that mercilessly bored a hole in Menou's torso.

An unbelievable amount of blood flooded from Menou's mouth. Michele reached for Menou's skull without even waiting for her to regenerate, but Menou hadn't gone down for nothing this time.

She knew going in that Michele could handle her *Accelerated* speed.

"Kaboom!"

Just as Menou mimicked an explosion out loud, a crest conjuring activated in the dagger she'd slipped into Michele's blind spot.

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

Michele was distracted by Menou's exclamation just long enough for the dagger behind her to plunge toward her with the explosive power of a burst of wind.

At the same time, Menou aimed a finger gun at Michele.

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

One was a physical attack aimed at her vitals, the other a time conjuring that would mean instant death if it struck its target.

Menou had pinned Michele between two different kinds of attacks to finally strike back—but to no avail.

Michele didn't dodge either attack.

As soon as the dagger touched Michele, it bounced away without even piercing the skin. Even with the *Gale* conjuring, what should've been a direct hit didn't have any effect at all. The Guiding Force that overflowed from Michele's body into her surroundings overpowered the Guiding Force that formed the *Time* conjuring and broke it down.

Menou's eyes widened in shock at this unbelievable outcome. Then Michele's fist plunged into her surprised face, splintering it apart.

Her power was overwhelming.

Michele fended off a Pure Concept conjuring with nothing but sheer strength. The *Regression* conjuring activated to erase Menou's death, rewinding her flesh.

"……"

Restored to perfect health, Menou stared down numbly at her own body.

With time turned back, there wasn't a single scratch on her. Even the dirt on her clothes had been purged away, and her stamina was fully restored.

But what good did it do to come back to life?

She didn't see any way she could win this fight.

"Good. Keep using that Pure Concept."

From far away, Michele reached out her hand and closed it into a fist. The mass of Guiding Light bound to her movements crushed Menou's body before she could react.

Regression activated again. It kept consuming her memories to

bring her body back to life, refusing to allow Menou to die even though it seemed pointless by now.

"Lose your memories. Become a Human Error."

None of Menou's attacks could touch Michele, yet Michele's every move killed Menou instantly.

She understood why her physical attacks were being repelled, but she'd never imagined having even her Pure Concept conjurings shut down so thoroughly. At this point, Menou didn't have a single strategy that would work on Michele.

"Then when *Time* appears, I'll break that, too, and ruin Hakua Shirakami's plans once and for all."

Slowly, Menou was ceasing to be herself. The repeated deaths she'd experienced in such a short time dulled her senses and sent her thoughts fading away. Her memories were being whittled down by too many uses of *Regression*. As Menou's sense of self blurred, her cream-colored hair took on a darker tinge.

"…!"

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

It was difficult to explain what happened in the next moment.

First, Michele's fist was stopped in midair before it could strike. The *Suspension* had hardened the air to block her attack. At nearly the exact same time, *Teleportation* sent Michele up into the air, and a spatial fracture sliced her in half.

It was Menou, her hair a mix of black and white.

A triple invocation of Pure Concept conjurings. What's more, one of them was a spatial conjuring, an evolution of the time concept that Menou had never managed to use in regular space.

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

The Guiding Branches formed around Menou's arm, nearly covering it. She raised it, a barrel far larger than the one that had destroyed Hakua's body double.

She aimed it straight at Michele, whose body was already restoring itself even as she was flung into the air.

Guiding Force: Connect—Improper Attachment, Pure Concept

[Time]—Invoke [Acceleration]

The bullet from Menou's arm tore through Michele.

This conjuring made Menou's previous use of *Time* look like an incomplete scrap of the Pure Concept's true capability.

The bullet transcended the limits of the laws of physics, burning the air and spraying off plasma. The recoil caused the ground to tremble and sink beneath their feet.

"…Ha-ha, now that's more like it!"

As the battle became a true battle once more, Michele grinned. Even with half her body blown off by the accelerated bullet, she hadn't lost an ounce of her Guiding Force. The world obeyed the overpowering Guiding Force that defined the *Dragon* imitation known as Michele, reconstructing her lost flesh.

Michele landed and launched herself off the ground. Now that she had truly come into her own, even the ground was too brittle a foothold. Cracks spread beneath her feet. She pushed forward anyway, swinging her fist up as the impact shook the earth.

"Ngh!"

"Hah!"

The pair's fists collided. Both their bodies were blown back by the impact, and the vestiges of the Guiding Force that were already rebuilding Michele's body flashed through the air more vividly than any spray of blood.

Menou watched this happen with all the detachment of someone absentmindedly gazing at a movie screen.

The battle only intensified. As Menou's hair kept getting darker, her gunfire carved holes in the ground. Michele's blade broke the earth's surface and compressed the dirt and sand. If anyone were there to witness their battle, they would never imagine that it was taking place between two humans.

At the height of these attacks that reshaped the land around them, Michele's attack struck Menou in the temple.

Menou was driven into the ground with enough force to bury her, and Michele was upon her instantly.

She punched.

And punched.

Blow after blow, so quickly that Menou couldn't resist, escape, or even regenerate with *Regression* fast enough to keep up.

"Gaaaah!"

Raising a bloodied fist, Michele let loose an animalistic howl. With every punch, the ground buckled as if struck by a bomb.

So this is where it ends, Menou thought to herself dimly.

There was no way to recover from here. Her memories were nearly spent. Her Pure Concept conjurings didn't work anyway. Even if she did become a Human Error, she couldn't imagine herself winning against Michele.

But Menou's body still moved. Something—*someone*—deep down inside her heart refused to break, even under an assault so fierce that Menou herself had given up.

"Cut it out…"

The black-haired girl who dwelt within Menou's body focused Guiding Force on what was left of her fingers.

"Don't bully my Menooooooou!"

The cry opened Menou's eyes wide.

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

The ground around them shriveled into sand under the weight of untold *Time*. Michele was thrown off balance by the unexpected transformation of the terrain.

As she staggered back, the sole of Menou's foot pierced through Michele's chest.

Michele was knocked violently back by this unforeseen attack. As she flew into the air, the black-haired Menou glared at her with seething hostility.

This wasn't possession, nor was it a takeover by *Time*. She was simply trying to protect Menou.

Slowly, Menou's spirit was being restored. The other spirit that was meant to be attached to her body was whittling away its own soul. And the empty space made room for Menou to exist, whether she wanted it or not.

Terror surged suddenly through Menou's mind.

"N…nooooooo!"

Menou screamed. She couldn’t let the other girl control her body for even one more second. At this rate, she was going to fight until her own soul was entirely lost. That much was horrifyingly clear.

Menou hadn’t given up on herself just for the girl she was trying to save to throw away her own soul.

So she grasped the last fragments of her fading memories tightly. She pulled her own consciousness back to the forefront.

What Menou was gripping was the dagger gun. It was a weapon that someone precious to her had once used. Even if she couldn’t remember who that was, the lessons that person had drilled into her remained in Menou’s muscle memory.

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

It was the attack that had ripped Michele apart not long ago. Closer to a Human Error than ever before, Menou conferred the spatial conjuring onto her weapon.

The blade of Menou’s dagger gun pierced Michele’s heart.

Michele stared in astonishment. A person about to turn into a Human Error had recovered control of herself through sheer force of will. In a thousand years of memories, Michele had never heard of such a thing.

But such a minor exception wasn’t enough to put Michele at a disadvantage.

“It’ll take more than that…!”

Michele roared.

The Guiding Force imbued in her echoing voice took on physical power and struck her opponent. Menou was blown back, unable to stand up to the wave of sound rolling directly over her.

Michele thrust her broadsword into the opening it created. Even if Menou recovered her mind, it wouldn’t turn the tides of the battle. Just having one blade stuck into her heart wasn’t enough to slow Michele down.

Michele took pride in her power. Even if it was strength she hadn’t asked for, it still made her the strongest even of the Elders Hakua had chosen. And while her immortality was less complete than the others, her strength was in a league all its own.

For she was a living weapon, the crowning achievement of the ancient civilization's advanced technology.

Michele was the successful result of the experiments to reproduce *Dragon*, the strongest and fastest of the Pure Concepts.

During the peak of conjuring technology, in the midst of constant war, scientists sacrificed countless test subjects in their efforts to create the ultimate human body. Michele was the only one to survive.

Michele's latent Guiding Force was enough to power an entire city, and not just a city in the current era. She had such an enormous capacity that she could have powered a great metropolis during the peak of the ancient civilization.

But what made her massive Guiding Force more than just a power source for a city was that all of it could be used for armed conflict.

Michele had walked the border between life and death more times than Menou could even dream of. She had fought more than anyone else in this world. The sheer violence of her Guiding Force capacity. The excessive amount of battle experience. Equipped with everything she could possibly need to fight, she was even able to crush countless Pure Concepts in her life on the battlefield.

Her body would regenerate anyway. The material part was secondary.

The true essence of this world was Guiding Force.

It was the purest form of energy, existing before any physical matter came into being. The "power" known as Guiding Force made up the world, and eventually the material part of the world latched on and constructed the physical side. The Guiding Force at the wellspring of the planet weaved reality into being, spinning the past and future of the world into material form. In a world that was a grand and enormous conjuring phenomenon, the being who had more Guiding Force than anyone else—Michele—was truly the strongest force imaginable.

So there was no way she could possibly lose.

Guiding Force: Connect—

The beginnings of a crest conjuring formed in Michele's chest.

Her gaze dropped to the dagger gun Menou had thrust deep into her body. That dagger gun was showing signs of invoking a conjuring.

"What?"

A murmur of bewilderment escaped Michele's lips. Menou wasn't touching the dagger gun. No matter how excellent her conjuring skills might be, it was impossible to invoke a conjuring without a direct link to the medium.

(Via Guiding Thread)—

But the dagger gun lodged in Michele's chest was attached to an ultra-fine thread, shimmering with Guiding Light.

Dagger Gun, Crest—

It was *Guiding Thread.*

And on the other end of the thin line of Guiding Force was Menou.

Invoke [Guiding Branch: Mistle Sword]

Michele's eyes flew open with shock.

"What is this…?!"

The crest conjuring was invoked, but it wasn't an attack conjuring. The branches of Guiding Force expanded rapidly, absorbing Michele's Guiding Force to feed their growth. Until just a moment ago, Menou would never have thought of such an approach. They were fighting head-on to drain the other's power source. Menou simply met Michele's Guiding Force with her Pure Concept.

And yet, as if she'd suddenly remembered how she used to fight, she struck a blind spot in Michele's defenses.

Menou intended to use the crest conjuring to consume Michele's Guiding Force.

Immediately, Michele's hand flew to her chest. If her Guiding Force ran out, she would lose her immortality. She had to destroy the dagger gun, the medium of the crest conjuring, to avoid that worst-case scenario. But of course, Menou was expecting such an obvious movement.

Menou moved the hand that held the *Guiding Thread* connected to Michele's chest. A thin strand of Guiding Light twined around

Michele's arm.

It was absurd to think that she wouldn't be able to break such a slim thread with her Guiding Enhancement. Michele didn't even pay attention to it as she tried to destroy the crest conjuring that was absorbing her Guiding Force.

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

Before Michele could move, Menou put *Suspension* on the strand of Guiding Force around Michele's wrist.

Even Pure Concept conjurings had little effect on Michele herself. So she used *Suspension* on a different target to entangle Michele in matter suspended in time.

The Pure Concept of *Time* cut the thread off from the world entirely, rendering it utterly immobile. The *Suspended* Guiding Thread could even stop Michele at her full strength. But even that would only slow her down for a few seconds.

"This won't…stop me…!"

The Guiding Force thread binding her gave an ominous creak.

In her current state, Michele's body could even break through time and space. But the obstacle still bought a few precious seconds.

That was all she needed. Menou raised a finger gun for the finishing blow.

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

She aimed the *Acceleration* at the crest conjuring that was growing in Michele's chest.

All at once, the Guiding Force branches spread out rapidly. The growth was exponentially faster than before. The effects of the crest conjuring accelerated, too, growing taller and taller.

"Urgh?!"

A groan escaped Michele's lips.

She was withering away. The Guiding Force branches were growing into a tree with Michele as its source of nutrients. It spread across the sky and sent roots through the ground, the trunk growing taller and taller. Michele was buried under the enormous Guiding Force tree, barely able to move.

Her desperate struggles were in vain: The Guiding Force that had expanded Michele's presence in the world was flowing out of her at a terrific speed. The power that made her who she was slipped through her fingers.

Soon she lost the strength to fight against the *Suspended* Guiding Thread.

Michele had lost.

"Ah, damn it all…"

As Michele was pressed down by the increasingly enormous tree of Guiding Force feeding on her, Menou receded into the distance. She knew the battle was over, too.

Soon, Michele lost sight of the girl who had taken her down.

She didn't feel bitter that she had lost. Still, she had other regrets.

Deep down, Michele had always known that she hadn't allied with Hakua to make enemies of people like Menou.

She believed that Hakua would eliminate other people like herself.

A thousand years.

It was more than enough time to break a person.

Over a thousand years, Hakua Shirakami had turned into a monster.

Long ago, when people reached out to her for help, she couldn't refuse their pleading hands. Slowly, Hakua was changing. Her Pure Concept of *Ivory* specialized in "accepting." It couldn't be a coincidence that her copy, Menou, worked with the Pure Concept of *Time*.

Hakua could transfer other people's Pure Concepts onto her blank white slate.

She kept accepting other people's burdens, trying to save as many as possible. She kept answering the cries for help.

Until Hakua's pure spirit was altered beyond recognition.

From the moment she saved that first person, the Hakua Michele admired was gone.

And Michele, too, was just one more person who had clung to her and twisted Hakua's way of life.

"I should have stopped her…"

That was Michele's last remaining duty.

But she'd lost to Menou.

As she lamented her first defeat in a very long time, the Guiding Force welling out of her broke into the atmosphere. Guiding Light whirled through the air, the pressure scattering everywhere. The branches sucking up Michele's Guiding Force grew at a tremendous rate, turning into an enormous world tree.

"…That's an amazing amount of Guiding Force."

A familiar voice rang out.

A young girl walked up to the defeated Michele. It was Maya. She was talking to the monolith that floated behind her.

"Will this work? Okay, I thought so. All this Guiding Force ought to be enough, right?"

Michele recognized the monolith, too. If she remembered right, it was Gadou's Chamber. Maya could evidently communicate with the mind within the monolith, as she kept reconfirming with it.

"Mm…aya…and…Ga…do…"

Michele tried to call out their names, but her mouth wouldn't move. Nevertheless, Maya appeared to have heard her halting syllables. Her kimono sleeves fluttered as she crouched down and looked Michele in the eyes.

"…Okay. It's 'Michele' now, right? I know you're not really a bad person…but we're going to take all this Guiding Force."

It was inevitable. Michele no longer had the strength to resist, nor did she have any right to defy Maya. As the Guiding Force flowed out of her in great waves, Michele's consciousness faded away, too.

"Still…Menou's really amazing, too, for being able to beat someone who was the same as Ryuunosuke."

You're damn right she is.

Silently agreeing with Maya's praise, Michele let herself fade away.

As soon as she won, Menou was alone.

The strength drained from her body, and she let out a long

breath. Menou herself had been pushed back by the increasingly massive growth of the Guiding Force tree, moving her away from Michele.

Still, Menou didn't need to check on Michele's state to know she had won.

As the Guiding Force tree reached its full height, Menou tugged on the Guiding Thread to retrieve her dagger gun.

It was a narrow victory. With desperate effort, strategy, and a lot of luck, she'd managed to win a battle that, by all rights, she should have lost. If they were to fight again, Menou would lose. She was sure of that.

But even though she'd snatched victory from the jaws of defeat, Menou felt an emptiness in her heart.

"…I have to go."

She raised her head, like she'd just remembered something.

But where?

Ignoring the question that arose in her mind, Menou tried to drag her feet forward and start walking. Then she noticed something strange.

For some reason, her body wouldn't move. It was like her feet were stuck to the ground. Despite her attempts to step forward, she couldn't move a muscle.

Huh…? A soundless voice escaped her lips.

There was nothing wrong with her body. She should be able to move just fine.

And yet her limbs wouldn't budge. Menou stood there in a stupor.

There was still so much that she had to do.

Nothing would change until she thrust her blade into Hakua's throat.

She had to do it for all the people who had put their faith in her—she couldn't remember their names anymore, but she was certain they existed. Menou had to defeat Hakua and save Akari, no matter what.

And yet her body wouldn't move.

"Why…?"

Why did she have to learn what normal emotions felt like?

Suddenly, a question that seemed completely unrelated to her present condition bubbled up in her chest.

It was when she shared her heart with Akari that she realized the true gravity of the sin of having taken people's lives. Ever since she came to experience emotions with Akari, who knew a normal life in the truest sense of the word, Menou had become weak.

Back then, Akari was by her side.

They shared their whole selves with each other, understood everything about one another. Menou truly believed that she could go on living if Akari was by her side.

She still believed that, even now.

That if only Akari was by her side…

But now there wasn't a single person who would save Menou.

Of course not. She didn't deserve to be saved. Surely, she'd known that since the first time she killed another person. She was beyond redemption.

But for some reason, even though she'd known for a very long time that there was no salvation in her future, she couldn't bear to look at that future now.

"Ah……"

Unexpectedly, a sob escaped from her throat.

The emotions flooding up from her chest overwhelmed her tear ducts. Tears blurred her vision, cries coming up like nausea. As her body rejected reality, Menou's emotions lost balance.

"Ahhh…"

They weren't tears of sadness. She wasn't mourning a loss.

She was scared.

"Ah…aah…nnngh…"

Tears dripped down Menou's cheeks and soaked the soil below.

Menou was crying out of pure fright. She had reverted to being a child who cried for fear of the dark. Normally, there should have been words to help her overcome that fear. There must have once been someone who told her there was nothing to be afraid of, no matter how deep the darkness.

"You'll surpass even me."

But she couldn't even remember who told her that anymore.

Menou dropped to the bare earth with a thud.

"Please…"

She gazed up at the sky, her tears falling to the earth, as she whispered a plea.

"Someone, please…save me…"

For the first time since she became an Executioner, Menou was asking for someone else to help her.

Her feeble words melted away into the empty air. She was surprised at herself for uttering something so stupid.

That's not fair, she thought.

What kind of a pathetic coward am I?

She knew no one else would ever save her, yet she had still voiced the wish that she wanted to be saved.

She was so hurt by her own cowardice that she went on weeping.

There was no one to comfort Menou, who'd chosen to cry alone.

She kept crying without anyone reaching out to help her. For how long, she didn't know.

"…Right."

She nodded once and stood up.

Menou's expression was refreshed and clear.

The tears had finally stopped and dried up. Her heart wasn't healed. Her hopes and salvation had simply dried up, too, temporarily paralyzed so she didn't feel a thing anymore.

And so she was able to walk again.

She wiped her eyes, hiding the evidence from her face. She would use Guiding Camouflage if necessary to keep her tears a secret.

She just wanted to live alongside Akari.

But sure enough, that was probably impossible.

Menou's heart wasn't strong enough to support her wish, so she propped it up and covered it with lies and bluffing. She would keep up her act of being strong for the rest of her life, until she saved Akari and disappeared.

In other words, not for much longer.

Menou began to walk because she knew the end was near. But someone stood in her way.

"…Who are you?"

The person blocking Menou's path was a lovely young girl.

Her wavy pink hair was tied up in pigtails. Judging by her outfit, she must have been a priestess, probably the serious type. The hearts that decorated her indigo sleeves would look strange on an ordinary priestess, but they suited this adorable girl quite well.

Based on her looks, she couldn't have been older than her mid-teens. It would take more than average abilities and accomplishments to don the indigo robes at such a young age.

The girl didn't introduce herself despite Menou's question. She just gazed evenly at Menou, her green eyes glittering.

"I've come to save you."

This unfamiliar figure spoke the very words that Menou had been longing desperately to hear.

A short silence fell after Momo spoke.

"Ah… I'm sorry." The first thing Menou said was an apology, her perfect eyebrows furrowing. "You must be someone I once knew."

Her amber hair had turned almost entirely black by now. She didn't even try to hide the loss of her memories.

Momo's chest twinged painfully. The forced smile on Menou's face was a far cry from the smile Momo had seen that day in their childhood.

Menou pulled out a diary from her breast pocket.

Although she'd just been locked in a tumultuous battle with Michele, the *Regression* had turned back time for her clothes and equipment as well as her body. She was completely unharmed, as was the notebook where she'd written her memories.

Menou flipped through the little book, asking questions.

"Sahara?"

"Certainly not."

"Maya…but you're not quite the right age for that, are you?"

"No."

"And you can't be Abbie, so… I see."

As she eliminated possibilities from the list of people who might

speak to her, she finally reached the right answer.

"You must be Momo."

Even when Menou finally said her name, Momo didn't let the heartbreak of being treated like a stranger by her darling Menou show on her face.

"What did you mean, saying you'll save me?"

"I'm going to stop you. Your current plan."

"…I thought you were supposed to help me?"

"I know all about your goal. Nono Hoshizaki told me."

"…This 'Nono' person must be quite a blabbermouth."

"Agreed."

"She has some nerve to spread people's private information around."

Their faces relaxed a little as they insulted the girl with the star-shaped Guiding Light in her eyes.

Nono's Pure Concept could predict the future.

She used people for her convenience so she could craft the future that suited her best. Though she was always smiling and speaking lightly, she used information about the future to entice people to do exactly what she wanted.

Even now, neither Momo nor Menou knew Nono's true intentions.

With the mood lightened ever so slightly, Menou ventured to speak again.

"I won against Michele, you know."

"Yes, I know. I saw."

One used a Pure Concept, the other was the masterwork of the ancient civilization.

Ultimately, this monstrously destructive battle that reshaped the landscape had ended in Menou's favor.

Michele was the ultimate human weapon who had lived since the days of the ancient civilization. She could cut down the average Human Error with a single stroke. If she had one weakness, it was that she had been earnest to a fault until the very end.

"Do you think you can stop me, even though I beat Michele?"

"I can, and I will," Momo replied bluntly.

Momo had been angry all this time. The fury that raged within

her was always directed at herself.

Ever since the day that the holy land fell and she parted ways with Menou, Momo hadn't been able to forgive herself.

When she was young, Momo was abandoned by her family and wound up at a monastery. Then, one day, Menou's smile saved her. In place of the normal life she had lost, Momo placed her faith in Menou and believed in her blindly. She lived her life by following Menou as her guide.

So that day in the holy land, all she could do was exactly what Menou told her.

She adored and obeyed her, even though she had vowed to protect that smile.

It felt good to be treated kindly by Menou. Momo stayed by Menou's side so she could bask in that kindness.

Now Momo was furious for contenting herself with that naive adoration when it was utterly useless to her darling Menou.

It was because she took the role as Menou's assistant and always stayed a step behind her that Momo couldn't save Menou's heart.

So obeying Menou's wishes half a year ago was also Momo's way of punishing herself.

She thought it would be better to spend some time apart.

"I'm going to defeat you, darling. And then I'll save you."

So she could get stronger.

So she could become the kind of person who could save Menou for real this time.

Momo confronted the person she cared for most in all the world.

Menou's heart wasn't in it.

She was all too aware that her mind wasn't focused on battle as she gazed at her would-be opponent.

A short, adorable girl with pink hair. Menou had just learned her name.

Momo.

She was a priestess with no last name.

Evidently, Momo was her assistant.

So why in the world did Menou have to fight her? What was the point?

This might have been the first time Menou lost her concentration in the face of an obvious threat. Menou's movements were listless as she drew the dagger gun from the strap around her thigh.

What did fighting this girl have to do with taking down Hakua?

Nothing.

It was a pointless battle.

"Must we fight?"

"Yes, we must."

Menou's sorrowful question was met with an immediate answer.

"I have to win against you."

"You're very stubborn. Winning against the likes of me won't do you any good, you know."

"Yes, it will. If I win, a path will open up. The path to saving you."

"Any path that requires defeating someone else…isn't worth following, I'd say."

"A path is a path. Sometimes you just need to use a little brute force."

"…I suppose."

Menou had walked such a path herself.

Her way of life was stained in dark red.

"The thing is…I've done so many terrible things."

"……"

"I did it because I was taught that it was for the good of the world. Because that's what the person I looked up to did."

"You mean Master."

"Yes, perhaps that's who it was. But now I just want to be with my friend."

"Depending on how things go, I might end up killing your friend."

"…I see."

"I came here prepared to do whatever it takes."

Menou looked down quietly.

She wanted to say that there was no point.

No matter how strong one's emotions, they could never shake reality. Even Menou herself had forgotten the strong feelings she

once held.

Her feelings toward this girl, who must have been so important to her.

"You know…I'm planning on giving up this body to Akari."

Akari would go into Menou's body when her last memories vanished. In exchange, Menou would enter Akari's body. Having taken on all of the Pure Concept of *Time*, Menou's soul would enter Akari's body and turn into salt.

Which would leave Akari, alive and set free from her Pure Concept.

Menou didn't think this ending was so bad. But the eyes of the girl in front of her were burning with anger.

"Do you have any idea how I felt when Nono Hoshizaki told me that was what you were planning to do?"

"…Bad?"

"Very bad."

Please just give up on me. I'm not worth it. Menou opened her mouth to say this, then changed her mind.

How pointless would those words be?

Menou herself had certainly never given up just because someone told her to.

Even after Akari became a Human Error, Menou carried on. She kept fighting, determined that there must be some way to save her friend. Even when Nono informed her there was no way to nullify the effects of the Sword of Salt, she kept searching for a way forward.

And now she had finally carved out a path to save Akari.

Menou wasn't going to try to convince someone else to stop with words that never would have persuaded her. It would be nothing short of looking down on her.

Surely, the girl blocking her way had something she believed in every bit as much as Menou did.

"All right."

The pair faced each other down.

Each for the sake of the person they believed in most.

One girl was utterly depleted, and the other still had hope in her

eyes.

"Come at me."

Menou glared with cold intent to kill at the girl whose name she had forgotten.

Guiding Light phosphorescence flashed.

They moved faster than the average person would be able to follow. Launching toward each other at the same time, they closed the distance in the blink of an eye.

"Gah!"

The cry came from Momo. As she charged forward with Guiding Enhancement coursing through her body, Menou met her with a merciless elbow strike.

Momo had been so focused on Menou's daggers that she couldn't dodge or defend herself in time from this unexpected attack. She barely had time to react at all before the elbow hit her jaw, drawing a strange yelp from her throat.

Usually, this one attack would be enough to rattle someone's brain and knock them out. It was so dangerous that it could potentially even kill the target.

But not if that person was strengthening their body with plenty of Guiding Force.

Momo grimaced at the impact, but she didn't lose consciousness for a second. Instead, she used the momentum to swing her leg up high.

Menou's response to the point-blank counterattack was levelheaded. She brought up the tip of her dagger to catch the kick.

"Ngh!"

Momo couldn't stop her forward motion; the blade tore into her ankle. She felt heat before the pain. While a normal person would be screaming and writhing, Momo only narrowed her eyes.

But fighting spirit alone wasn't enough to stop Menou.

"Too slow."

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

It took only a fraction of a second for the Guiding Force to flow

into the dagger and the crest conjuring to activate.

A burst of wind swept Momo upward. Her feet were no longer on the ground. The human body's mobility is drastically decreased without any support.

Menou's hand shot out. Floating in midair, Momo had no way of avoiding her. She tried to shake her off, but Menou grabbed her.

Then she flicked her wrist downward.

Momo's body turned in midair. She could see the sky, her perspective flipped upside down. Menou smashed Momo headfirst into the ground.

"…!!"

This time, she didn't even make a sound.

Even after throwing her down violently, Menou didn't stop moving. The sole of her boot careened toward Momo's face. Momo just barely managed to roll and avoid the kick.

Menou was strong. She was overpowering Momo with her combat techniques, but Momo was only just getting started.

The Guiding Light around Momo grew a shade brighter.

All at once, her movements changed. Her thoughts steadied. Momo's abilities had evolved. Her mind was cold and clear. She suppressed her heightened emotions with the power of reason and grasped her burning feelings with her fist.

During her time with Michele, Momo's Guiding Enhancement had become far more refined.

Her eyes blazed with Guiding Light.

Momo's limbs whirled. A single hit would break bones and crush flesh, but each and every fierce strike in her volley struck nothing but air. Menou expertly read Momo's movements and stayed a step ahead.

Menou's dagger gun pointed at Momo, who was wary of its ability to fire Pure Concepts.

Almost on reflex, Momo kicked Menou's weapon upward.

The dagger gun was knocked out of Menou's hand and sent flying into the air.

But this was just bait Menou had laid to entice Momo into moving.

Menou had let go of her weapon an instant before Momo's foot struck the dagger gun. Now both her palms struck Momo squarely in the chest.

"Urgh!"

Momo's breath caught. The impact to her lungs hindered her breathing. The dagger gun spun through the air and landed right back in Menou's hand.

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

The crest conjuring struck Momo with lightning.

"Ah…nnngh!"

As Momo's consciousness threatened to fade, she bit down hard on her lower lip with a fang-like tooth to force herself to stay awake.

Her mouth tasted of iron. Menou's eyes narrowed when Momo failed to pass out from the *Thunderclap.*

"It'd be easier on you if you fainted."

That was absolutely none of her concern. Momo's eyes flashed. They welled with tears as she glared at Menou and yelled in frustration.

"Why are you always like this?!"

"Like what…?"

"You always try to sacrifice yourself first…! Why don't you ever try to save yourself?! Even when we were in the monastery! You decided to become an Executioner just to spare those random idiots…! You're so strong, you could've become anything you wanted! So why do you always go out of your way to choose the hardest path?!"

"Shut up already!"

A sudden shriek tore out of Menou's lips.

The harsh objection made Momo gasp. The Menou she knew would never have reacted like this. It was utterly unlike Menou to lay her emotions bare over just a few angry words.

"Shut up, shut up, shut up! I don't care about the past! Any of it!"

And yet the Menou in front of her now was letting her feelings fly, spitting venom without any attempt to control it.

"I don't know anything anymore! It's all gone!! I can't remember

a single thing about the past. All I have are these useless flashes of déjà vu! I can't understand my own feelings, either…! You have no idea what that's like—so how can you say I could've become anything?!"

Menou headbutted Momo. While it had the air of a child throwing a tantrum, it was still a powerful move. She broke through Momo's guard at once, then swung a kick, driving her foot into Momo's torso.

"I don't even know why I'm fighting anymore…so what could I possibly become now?"

Menou wasn't fighting to achieve her goal anymore.

She was only fighting for that goal to hold herself together.

"I feel like I'm losing my mind… Ha-ha. No, maybe not."

As Menou mocked herself, she spat out a mixture of blood and saliva.

"Maybe I lost it a long time ago… Can you tell me?" Menou asked Momo with a smile that looked like it would break at the slightest touch. "From your point of view, am I still 'Menou,' or not?"

Momo stood there, stunned.


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An emotion she couldn't name was broiling in her chest. She tried to string a sentence together, to voice even one ten-thousandth of her feelings in that moment.

"Why…did you have to go so far to do it all on your own, darling?"

"I don't have anything else left."

Menou had lost her memories, lost all her options, until all she had left to expend was her own self.

"So I have no choice but to fight. That's all."

Menou's words weren't nearly enough to satisfy Momo's need for answers.

"I can't forgive you for that."

"Well, I don't want to be forgiven."

She had committed so many sins. She had killed people. Surely, she was bound for hell. She didn't want to be punished and forgiven. She kept moving forward so she *wouldn't* be forgiven. All she was doing now was adding the crime of trampling this girl's emotions to the list of her countless wrongdoings.

Momo could tell exactly what Menou was thinking.

Why didn't Menou ever try to share those feelings with Momo? It was so frustrating, so upsetting, so infuriating that Momo could hardly stand it.

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

Branches grew out of the gun and wrapped around Menou's arm. Fusing with her flesh, the Guiding Force branches thrashed as if to unleash Menou's suppressed feelings. They twined all around Momo, trapping her in one spot.

Then Menou aimed a finger gun at Momo.

"But still…thank you, Momo."

Certain of her victory, Menou smiled and spoke the girl's name.

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

Momo couldn't dodge it. The Guiding Force branches had closed any space where she would have moved to avoid it. Exasperation arose in Momo's chest. If she was hit with a Pure Concept conjuring

now, she wouldn't be able to defend herself.

"Thank you for fighting so hard for my sake."

It was only because the battle was about to end that Menou spoke her heartfelt thanks to Momo.

Invoke [Suspension]

What erupted out of the gun was more power than any human born in this world would ever be able to maintain.

Time stopped. The world fell still wherever Menou's Guiding Light touched, freezing over more coldly than ice.

Right before the *Suspension* hit her, Momo's last nerve gave way with an audible snap.

"Screw…thaaaat!"

She lost her temper completely. Guiding Force gushed out of her with abandon. She was even angrier than when she went on a rampage in Grisarika.

"Listen to me…!"

The power welling out of Momo gathered around her fist. With a flash of Guiding Light, her punch collided with Menou's *Suspension*.

"I didn't fight this hard just to get a lousy 'thank you,' you knooow!"

The Pure Concept conjuring broke against Momo's fist.

Menou stared in amazement.

It was the same phenomenon as when Michele had neutralized *Weathering*. Momo expanded her presence in the world through sheer Guiding Force output. Her burning gaze locked onto Menou, meeting her eyes.

"Darling. I'll be the one to forgive you for everything."

Momo swept her hand with all her strength.

Even though they were far enough apart, Menou was sent flying.

She rolled into a landing and stood up, looking at Momo with surprise.

It wasn't the same level as Michele, of course, but no normal person could come this close to Michele's power with sheer natural strength.

Momo had become a small *Dragon* herself as she pulled out her coping saw, attached it to the suitcase, and swung the hammer

down. There was a resounding boom as the ground cracked and caved in. Unable to judge the range of Momo's expanded attack, Menou got caught up in the shockwave.

"Do you think that sacrificing yourself will absolve you? If you save one person, will that make up for all your sins? Did you decide you'd be satisfied with your life as long as you can rescue Akari? … Please don't say such idiotic nonsense ever again."

As Menou bounced off the ground and into the air, Momo grabbed her by the collar.

"You're scared, I know."

Momo spoke to Menou about her feelings.

"You're anxious because you can't tell what's next, sad because you're all alone, and on the verge of despair because you don't know what to do anymore. At times like that…you can just rely on me, darling."

Momo's power kept swelling. Meanwhile, Menou's strength was waning. She tried to pin her opponent's arm, but her right hand only succeeded in ripping off Momo's armband before her wrist was captured instead.

"When you're lost or struggling or suffering, when you feel like everything is hopeless…I'm the one who will always be there for you."

Momo's grip tightened, thwarting Menou's resistance. She took the coping saw off her suitcase and bound it around Menou's arms.

"And to prove that I can forgive you…first, I'm going to win!"

In Momo's blind spot, Menou tossed her dagger with a slight flick of the wrist. Momo saw through this easily, activating *Anchor* in her coping saw to deflect Menou's dagger.

"Even if you give up on living, darling…"

Momo's voice rose. She screamed, to get closer to victory, to show her determination.

"…I refuse to give up on you!!!"

It was the last move. Even while bound by the coping saw, Menou used Guiding Branches around her still-free fingertips to form a gun and fire an accelerated bullet.

Imbued with the speed of a Pure Concept, the bullet broke

through the side of the white case that Momo was swinging down towards Menou.

No matter what was inside, the bullet should have been able to pierce it.

Unless the contents were under the effects of *Suspension*.

"Bweh?"

Akari was inside Momo's suitcase.

Menou made a strange sound out of apparent shock.

So she still remembered Akari, even though she'd forgotten Momo. This extra fuel on the fire of Momo's rage was added to the force with which she swung the Akari Hammer down on her darling.

"Wait—"

Faced with the outrageous strategy of using the *Suspended* Akari as a weapon, Menou froze up.

While it looked ridiculous, it was surprisingly effective. After all, anything under the *Suspension* conjuring rejected all physical phenomena.

In other words, it was extremely solid.

Still frozen in a crouch, Akari was swung down headfirst toward Menou.

The tops of their heads collided with incredible force.



About six months earlier…

After she met Nono Hoshizaki, Momo came up with a plan to save both Akari and Menou.

"Nono Hoshizaki prophesied that my darling is going to hand over her own body to save Akari."

Menou would prioritize saving Akari, that much was clear. If Momo trampled on her wishes to save Menou and sacrifice Akari, Menou would only be hurt. As much as it pained her, Momo was willing to acknowledge the likelihood of that prediction.

"So if I save both of them, I don't think she'd have any objections."

"Oho, I see."

The person Momo was consulting with was the Primary Triad conjured soldier, Ability Control.

When she followed Nono Hoshizaki's prophecy and came to the center of the northern continent, she found a single conjured soldier who had slipped out of a hole in the White Night barrier around the Mechanical Society.

She took the fantastical form of a beautiful blue butterfly.

The butterfly was around the same size as a human, speaking in a mechanical tone.

"So what does that have to do with me?"

Abbie had already explained that she wanted a homeland. She'd sensed the birth of the "little sister" who would be a necessary component to achieve that dream and left the Mechanical Society as fast as possible to jump into the world where humans lived.

"If you help me save Akari, I'll help you. First off, I'd like to use you as a hiding place for this horrid girl."

"I'm not opposed to helping you, but do you know where this 'Menou' person of yours is right now?"

"She left the holy land…so she should be right around here, in fact. But will you be able to find her? It's not easy to track someone down in the middle of a city."

"If I get within a certain range, I'll be able to sense her. Your big sis here has special talents."

Momo produced a map and pointed at a certain town. If she knew Menou, which of course she did, then Abbie should have been able to find her there.

"What do you think of Nono Hoshizaki's predictions?"

"I'd say they're pretty solid. I did sense the seed of the perpetual motion machine, just like she said."

Nono Hoshizaki had given Momo information about what would happen in the near future.

"The only problem is, we'll need a ceremonial hall that can affect the whole Mechanical Society."

From what Momo knew, Abbie's hopes of transferring a whole world using a perpetual motion machine sounded rather ambitious.

"I do have a lead on one ceremonial conjuring user, actually."

"Really…?"

She meant Hooseyard. Momo could tell that she was skilled in ceremonial conjurings to an almost freakish degree.

Last Momo heard, Hooseyard had become an Inquisitor chasing Menou around with Michele. If Momo met up with them and steered them in the right direction, she could match the timing with Abbie and arrange for a ceremonial hall to be made in the Mechanical Society.

"I'll lead them into the Mechanical Society and nudge them into making a ceremonial hall. In exchange, there's something I want you to provide for me."

Momo told Abbie what she needed to free Akari's body from the erosion of the Sword of Salt.

"Hmm, let's see… If you give me enough time to analyze the

person who'll be using it, I could build that, sure."

Abbie took on Momo's request easily enough.

Each of them had a connection that the other needed. Annoying as it was, Nono Hoshizaki had probably arranged things this way on purpose.

"Let's make a deal, Ability Control."

"Sure. I'm counting on you, Momo."

Thus, Momo and Abbie formed an alliance for the sake of what was most important to each of them.

***

Victory.

Momo clenched her fist in satisfaction. *Regression* was automatically activated by Menou's death. Momo's only path to victory had been to wear her down while taking care not to kill her.

But Momo knew this wasn't the end.

"…I lost, didn't I?"

Lying on her back, Menou had apparently regained consciousness already.

"But it's too late anyway."

Black was slowly seeping into the last tuft of hair that was still Menou's natural color. The *Suspension* she fired at Momo must have hit her limit. Menou's body was being consumed by the Pure Concept, with no way to stop it.

"I see you still don't understand that I refuse to let it be 'too late.'"

Momo made her move. First, her eyes fell on Akari Tokitou.

Even though she was frozen in *Time*, her posture had collapsed.

Menou and Akari had connected their souls through a mutual Guiding Force connection. The more Menou's spirit wore away, the more Akari's presence took over Menou and showed itself.

Menou knew this and kept using the Pure Concept anyway.

So she could hand her body over to Akari.

A few words from Nono Hoshizaki had solidified Menou's resolve to go through with this plan:

"There is no way to undo the effects of the Sword of Salt."

When the holder of the Pure Concept of *Star* made this declaration, Menou gave up on saving Akari's body. She decided to go through with the plan she'd prepared as a last resort: giving her own body over to Akari.

But of course, Momo wouldn't just stand by and let that happen.

For Momo to save both Menou and Akari, she needed Menou to use up her memories to the point of becoming a Human Error. That was why she made sure Michele and Menou would fight, and why Momo then fought Menou herself.

Still holding on to Menou's arm, Momo took Akari's hand. She became the connecting point between the two.

Then Momo sent Guiding Force into both of them.

Guiding Force: Connect (via: Momo)—Akari Tokitou—Spirit, Soul—

A Guiding Force connection between people was a painful undertaking, akin to shaving one's nerves down with a hand plane. This held true even between two people who had complete faith in each other, much less a pair like Momo and Akari. They barely trusted each other at all.

"Just so you know, I still hate your guts…!"

Momo gritted her teeth at the intense pain of the reaction.

"But when it comes to the desire to save my darling…I know I can trust you more than anyone else, dammit!!"

The Guiding Force connected.

Momo pulled Akari's spirit, which was in the process of transferring into Menou's body, into her own body instead. The discomfort and distress of letting someone else's spirit into herself was indescribable.

"Wh-whateveeer…! This is nothing—compared to the nausea—of having to talk to *you!!*"

Momo put all of her mental fortitude into surviving and harnessing the pain and chaos, which would drive a normal person mad in a matter of moments, and thrust all of it toward Akari's body.

It worked. The black faded out of Menou's hair. Akari, who'd been

starting to take over Menou, had returned to her own body.

But they weren't done yet.

The *Suspension* that Akari had been under since the Sword of Salt was thrust into her was now broken.

The Concept of *Time* dwelt within Menou, who had become a Human Error. As such, the Pure Concept didn't need to protect Akari's body anymore.

The splintered blade in Akari's chest began to eat into her. The salt transformation, which even the Pure Concept of *Star* holder, Nono, said was impossible to stop, had begun.

Momo didn't hesitate.

She plunged her hand into Akari's chest. If there was no way to stop it, all she had to do was make sure it ended with as little damage as possible.

She broke through the skin with her fingers, dug into the flesh, and swiftly and certainly pulled out a piece of the girl's heart, and the Sword of Salt along with it.

Momo tossed the lump of flesh aside. It turned to salt in midair.

While the salt transformation was absolute, if it was cut off from the rest of the would-be victim, it would only affect the part it was touching.

The fragment of the Sword of Salt fell to the ground. The salt that had been Akari's flesh scattered on the wind.

The salification that was consuming Akari had stopped.

But the wound that Momo dealt to Akari in the process was obviously fatal. She'd gouged out half of her heart. Blood was gushing forth from the gaping hole.

There was no ordinary conjuring that could heal people's wounds. The only exception was Pure Concepts, which Momo couldn't use anyway. At this rate, the only difference was that Akari would die of blood loss instead of turning into salt.

But even if it couldn't heal, there *was* conjuring technology that could replace a lost part of the body.

Momo retrieved a red Guiding vessel from her half-broken suitcase.

It was the package she'd received right before Abbie launched

the spirit conjuring on Michele.

It was a Guiding vessel compatible with the human body—in this case, a heart. Compared to Guiding prosthetic limbs like Sahara's, the functions of an artificial heart were extremely complex, and it was far more difficult to adapt them to a human body. In the case of this particular artificial heart, however, Momo was confident that there would be no problem.

After all, it was created specifically for Akari. Over the course of six months, while Akari's body was in Abbie's care, the conjured soldier had analyzed it and fine-tuned this artificial heart to ensure that it would match her body perfectly.

Now Momo thrust it into the gaping wound in Akari's chest.

The Primary Color heart built just for Akari absorbed the blood that was gushing out of her and conformed itself to the missing area. It fused with the damaged remains of her real heart and began beating just as true, linking up with her blood vessels and circulating the blood to keep Akari alive. Since Momo had originally intended to pull out the entire heart, the surplus began to rebuild Akari's flesh and bones.

Momo breathed a sigh of relief.

Akari would be fine now. It might leave a bit of scarring on her chest, but her life was no longer in danger.

Momo placed the scripture Menou had been carrying onto Akari's newly recovered chest.

The scripture contained Akari's memories, stored as information.

Through their Guiding Force connection, Menou had access to Akari's memories. Half a year ago, she'd transferred those memories into Momo's scripture. It was insurance that whenever Akari eventually awoke, Momo could return her memories right away. Then Momo returned that scripture to Menou by way of Abbie in the City of Ruins. When she ascertained the state of Menou's Pure Concept consumption, she concluded that the scripture would be safer in Menou's hands since *Regression* would automatically activate to protect her and her belongings.

The memories flowed from the scripture into Akari's body. Now the issues of her body and her memories had both been resolved.

She would wake up on her own soon enough.

With her rescue of Akari complete, Momo turned around.

This next move would be a gamble on Momo's part.

She had to bring Menou's memories back.

Otherwise, Menou would turn into a Human Error. No, even if it came to that, it would still be all right. As long as she could restore the memories after, she could still bring Menou back to normal.

As Momo looked on anxiously, Guiding Light overflowed from Menou's body. Her spirit had already worn away. Akari's spirit and soul had returned to their original body through the Guiding Force connection Momo created, but the Pure Concept still dwelt in Menou's body.

Momo gazed at Menou in silent prayer.

The *Time* that had buried all the components that made Menou herself began to form a conjuring to change the world, to align it with the time that its vessel wished for in the depths of her heart.

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

The hands of a giant clock began to tick backwards, toward a certain special moment in the past.

The World Regression was incomplete.

Was it because the medium that invoked it wasn't the body of a summoned Otherworlder? The reason wasn't clear. There were any number of possibilities, but nothing would be more pointless than debating a phenomenon that would likely never happen again.

The result was that the materials that would have turned into a Human Error were used up completely.

Instead of turning into a Human Error, Menou's body began to age rapidly. She lost the youthfulness of a girl in her teens, then soon passed a hundred years, until her body withered and only bones remained.

In a matter of minutes, the burden of trying to turn back *Time* for the entire world used up all that remained of Menou, her body.

But that few minutes' *Regression* changed the world drastically.

It was enough for thousand-year barriers that were cracking and reaching their limit after being exposed to World Regression over and over to finally break.

The World Regression of just a few minutes, brought about by the failed Human Error known as Menou, was the final nail in the coffin for the two enormous barriers. It eradicated the White Night barrier that had isolated the east, dispersed the fog barrier that covered the sea to the far south, and then…

Akari Tokitou opened her eyes.

"Huh?"

The last thing Akari remembered was meeting a girl she didn't know. The girl's face looked just like Menou's, but her eyes were dark and, most of all, incredibly sad.

That girl had erased Akari's memories, she was fairly sure. Although she felt like she'd been dreaming until she woke up, those dreams receded like an outgoing tide.

"Umm… Okay. I'm fine. I'm Akari Tokitou, from Nishibori High School, year one, class three. I remember."

Her memories were still intact.

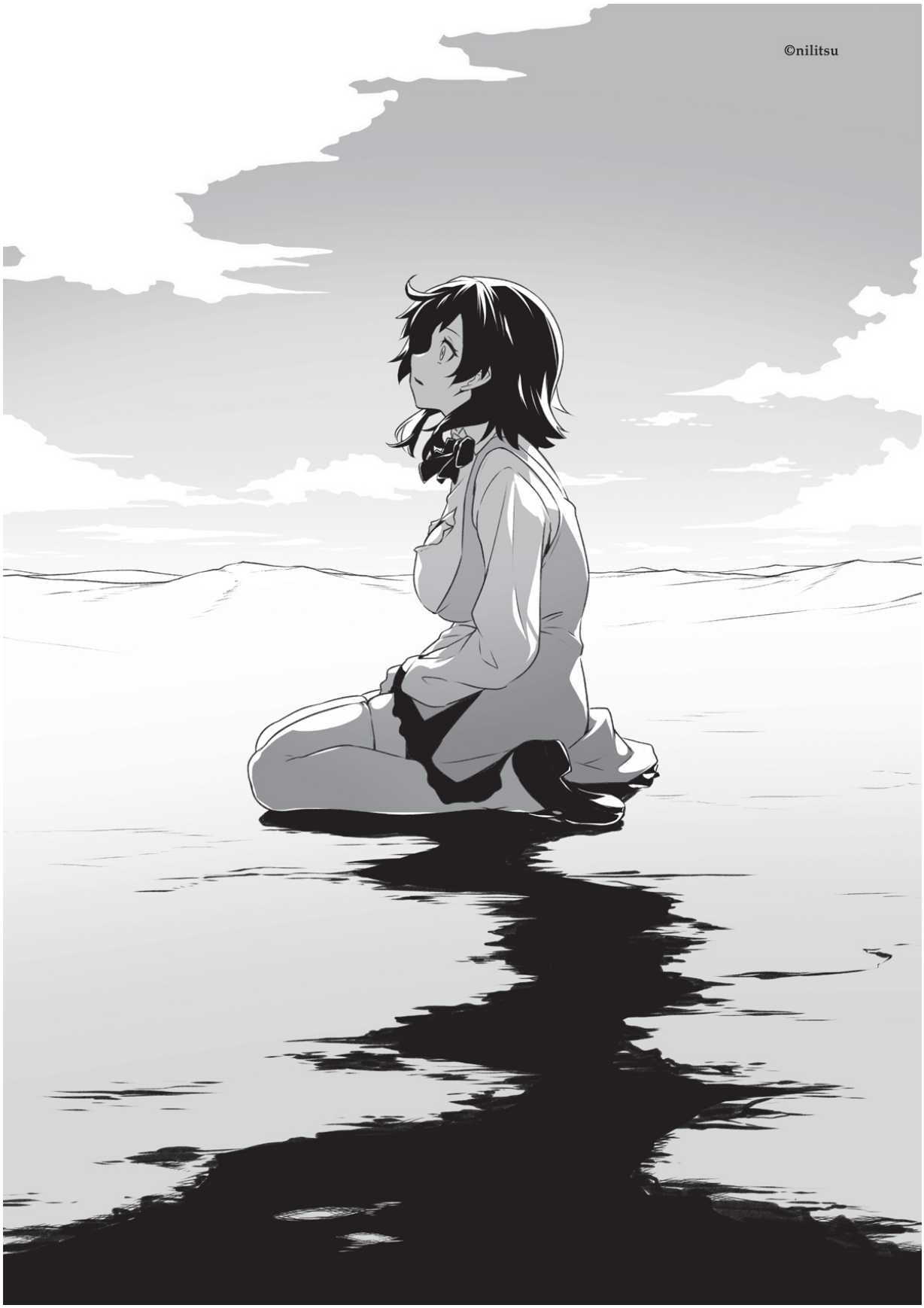
Except…she frowned.

This place didn't match her memories. She was obviously no longer in the land of salt.

Her hand drifted to her chest. Her clothes were torn. Her skin felt a little strange. There was a scar there, as if a large wound had closed up. None of this felt familiar. Her missing memories made her anxious. Akari looked around and realized there was a familiar girl there amidst the unfamiliar landscape.

"Momo?"

She was an awful friend whom Akari had met in this world. Akari's face brightened, reassured by the presence of someone she knew, and she ran over to Momo. Then she realized something was very wrong.


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The girl Akari knew as enviably small and slim, annoyingly adorable, and just a little admirably determined…who was always foul-mouthed and sassy…was crying.

"Huh?! Wh-what's the matter? Are you hurt, Momo?"

"It…failed…"

Momo didn't even look at Akari. She held the hand of a corpse that had been reduced to bones, tears streaming down her face.

"What failed?! Why are you crying…? Wait a minute, I have no idea what's going on right now!"

"But…there was no other way…"

None of this made sense.

Momo clearly wasn't going to explain anything. Akari's gaze shifted.

The clothes on the skeleton Momo was holding looked oddly familiar.

"…What?"

It couldn't be. These clothes didn't quite match her memories. The person Akari remembered was always wearing priestess robes.

But she could think of no other reason that Momo would be crying.

"No… Don't tell me… It can't be…"

She was afraid to even voice her fear.

But she couldn't go on without knowing, either.

"Is that…Menou?"

Momo nodded.

"You're lying!"

A shrill scream wrenched out of her throat.

"That can't be true. That thing…!"

Looking at the skeleton, her breath caught.

"That…person…can't be Menou! There's no way—"

"Shut up!"

Momo's scream of rage cut Akari's words short.

"My darling…ended up like this…to save you when you became a Human Error…!"

"A Human…Error? Me…?"

"Yes, you!!"

Momo didn't stop crying, nor did she wipe her tears away. As she made no effort to hide or hold back her emotions, her words gave Akari a glimpse of what must have happened.

After the girl in the sailor uniform erased her memories, Akari must have become a Human Error.

"B-but why would Menou wind up like this…? As nothing but a skeleton?!"

"Because of her stupid Guiding Force connection with you. You became the same person in a conjuring sense, so she was able to transfer your damned Pure Concept into her own soul…!"

Momo gnashed her teeth with rage and regret.

Akari realized, whether she wanted to know or not, that Menou had taken on her Pure Concept.

"Then she pushed herself to the point of becoming a Human Error. But…it failed… I thought even if she became a Human Error, I could just bring back her memories…but now…!"

There really was no other way.

From the moment Menou decided to take on the Pure Concept of *Time* in Akari's place, there was no saving her. She was careening toward an unavoidable death, just like all the Otherworlders Menou herself had killed before.

So Momo planned for the possibility that Menou would turn into a Human Error.

"But now…now…she's *gone*…!"

Perhaps it was because she wasn't an Otherworlder, or because she was created as a clone. Whatever the reason, Menou's body couldn't handle the Pure Concept's rampage, and she couldn't even become a Human Error at all.

Her body was weathered away by the Pure Concept of *Time*, leaving only her clothes and a bleached-white skeleton on the ground. There was no way to return the memories to her living body, as had worked with Maya.

"No…way…"

Momo would never joke about something like this when it came to Menou.

It was horribly clear from Momo's state. The skeleton in front of

her really was Menou.

"Ah… W-wait, it's okay, Momo!"

"Don't come any closer…"

"I can just use *Regression* on her!"

"Just go away already… Please…"

Ignoring Momo's listless protests, Akari held up a finger and focused.

The Pure Concept of *Time* could transcend death. Akari herself, who had been revived countless times, was proof enough of that.

But now, the conjuring she had always been able to construct as easily as breathing wouldn't come to her at all.

"Huh…?"

Akari could only use *Time* conjurings because the Pure Concept was attached to her soul. Now that it was gone, she was essentially just an ordinary person. In this state, Akari couldn't even dream of bringing Menou back to life, as Momo already knew.

The Pure Concept of *Time* became a Human Error and self-destructed. It didn't even exist as a Pure Concept in this world anymore. When a lost one who became a Human Error died, their Pure Concept would be redistributed into the world as a conjuring phenomenon. Eventually, time-based conjurings would be discovered in this world and a new system would slowly develop. But that could be ten years from now, or a hundred, or even further into the future.

In other words, there was no way in the present to revive Menou.

"Why…"

Crushed by her own powerlessness, Akari staggered over to Menou's remains on trembling legs.

It seemed impossible that those ruined bones could be all that was left of such a beautiful girl.

"Why…?!"

Heat crept into her tear ducts.

It wasn't just sadness. It was regret, helplessness, and anger at Menou for passing on without her.

Menou had ended up like this to save Akari.

Did she really think Akari would be happy to be saved at the cost of Menou's life? No, Akari knew all too well. Menou would have

chosen to save Akari even if it made her angry.

That was just who Menou was: her irreplaceable best friend.

Akari placed both hands on the skull of the girl who had made the terribly selfish choice to sacrifice herself to save her. Tears welled in her eyes, and Momo made no move to stop her when she brought her face closer to all that remained of Menou's.

"Menou…how could you…?"

As tears streamed down her face, Akari placed a kiss on the bleached skull.

"…Ah?"

When her lips touched Menou, Akari sensed something. The remnants of the *Time* Akari had lost still lingered in Menou's bones.

A body that contained a Pure Concept could serve as conjuring materials, even as a corpse. Menou herself had told Akari as much, in fact. And when a Human Error disappeared, that Pure Concept was distributed into the world as conjuring phenomena.

In other words, it became available for general use as a conjuring.

Of course, it would normally take years to incorporate a new concept into preexisting conjuring systems. But Akari was a former Human Error who had more experience with *Time* conjurings than anyone in the world, and Menou's bones were the remains of the Human Error of *Time*.

Conjurer and target: Both were closer to the Pure Concept of *Time* than anyone, and they were the same person from a conjuring point of view thanks to their connection. These two conditions, normally impossible, became the catalyst for the first *Time* conjuring of its kind to exist in the world.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—

Akari closed her eyes. She pressed her forehead to that of the skull. She focused intently, concentrating on the power she had once used so effortlessly.

Skeleton, Pseudo-Concept [Time]—

She put her emotions and theories to work at the same time. It wasn't a Pure Concept. Her brain was nearly boiling with the effort of trying to assemble *Time* into a conjuring phenomenon that

existed naturally in this world. She drew on all the conjuring theory she could think of and desperately strung it together, combining it with the Guiding Force drawn from her soul to build it into completion.

Invoke [Incomplete Regression]

Menou's skeleton, the remains of someone who had nearly become a Human Error, served as the conjuring materials to invoke the first *Time* conjuring ever made in this world without a Pure Concept.

Purple Guiding Light surrounded the pure white bones.

The restoration began. Muscles and veins were rebuilt as the skeleton's time rewound. At the same time, the Guiding Force tree that towered over them and blotted out the sky began to break. The enormous amount of Guiding Force that had belonged to Michele fed into the conjuring phenomenon linked to the scripture resting on Menou's chest and began to restore the information within.

"How…?"

Momo looked up at the sky. It wasn't just Akari reviving Menou's body. Somewhere, someone else had activated another conjuring to save Menou.

"Ability… No, someone else, too…?"

As Momo murmured quietly, Menou's body finished restoring, and her eyelids fluttered. She blinked a few times in evident confusion, then she shook her head as if to rouse herself from sleep and looked up at the girl in front of her.

"Akari?"

The newly awoken Menou first spoke Akari's name. Then she looked around and saw Momo, who was holding her breath in disbelief.

"And Momo, too… Oh?"

Menou opened and closed her hand in wonderment.

She could move. She was alive. And she had her memories, too. She remembered Momo, Akari, her battle with Michele, her travels over the past six months, and all the way back through the rest of her life, all the way to when she first met her Master.

"What? How did this happen?"

As Menou slowly absorbed the reality of her own salvation, something that had never been part of her plans, the other two girls both dove on her at once.

"Menou! You big, dumb jerk…!"

"Darliiing! R-really, you went too far this time… I'm so mad at yooou…!"

As the pair bawled their eyes out and berated her, all Menou could do was watch with her eyes wide open.

The Guiding Force tree was fading away, used up by the ceremonial conjuring.

In the church at the heart of the ceremonial hall Michele and the others had built, Maya murmured thoughtfully.

"I hope Menou got her memories back all right."

After Michele and Menou's battle, Maya and Gadou had gone all the way there.

When she saw the giant tree that sprouted as Menou defeated Michele, made of a massive amount of Guiding Force, Gadou had an idea.

With the Guiding Force equal to that of *Dragon*, they might be able to surpass the material world to reach the world of souls and rebuild memories that way. She asked if Maya wanted to restore the memories she'd lost.

Maya had asked Gadou to use that method to restore all of Menou's memories instead.

Gadou only came up with the plan because she'd had a channel to the original Ran Gadou for so long while serving as her substitute. Originally, Gadou had been working on conjuring theory to connect to the Ran Gadou in the world of souls. She wanted to get the original to cut her loose now that she was no longer needed.

She'd never had access to the vast amount of Guiding Force it would require, until Michele's Guiding Force tree appeared.

That meant she had everything she needed to draw memories out of the world of souls—except that when the Mechanical Society disappeared, it took most of the world inside the monolith with it,

leaving Gadou without an invocation medium.

They needed a ceremonial hall that could hold up to the conjuring needed to interfere with the world of souls. Just as they were about to give up, a tiny blue butterfly appeared. Left without enough materials to maintain a human form, Abbie told Maya and Gadou about the ceremonial hall Michele and company had made.

With Abbie's guidance, they reached the ceremonial hall. There, Gadou used the massive Guiding Force tree to establish a connection to her original personality, draw the memories from the world of souls, and pour them into the scripture Menou had carried.


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"Wait, so what's going on exactly?"

This question came from Sahara, who had just woken up and wasn't following any of what had just happened. She didn't remember anything after being attacked by Ginoum.

Maya gave her confused servant an unimpressed look. "You're always so useless when it matters most, Sahara."

"Hey, Maya, what is this weird floating thing anyway? It's kind of freaking me out."

"That's Gadou, a friend of mine. She's shy, so she doesn't like to show her face."

"This goes further than not showing her face… Oh, the blue butterfly on top is pretty, at least."

"Oh, that would be Abbie. I like her better this way, too."

"Wha…?"

"By the way, Sahara…are you feeling all right in the head?"

"Excuse me? What a rude question to ask out of nowhere."

Completely out of the loop, Sahara looked puzzled by Maya's question.

Hooseyard's ceremonial conjuring had stashed most of the Mechanical Society in the endless space that apparently existed inside Sahara's arm. All that remained outside was the small room inside Gadou's monolith, and Abbie, who had used up too much of herself and could no longer move a terminal any bigger than a butterfly.

There was no telling what side effects those events might cause, but as far as Maya could tell, Sahara seemed perfectly fine.

"For now, we should go find Menou and the others…"

Maya was standing up to leave when a familiar figure entered the church.

"Why, hello there, young Sahara. And young Maya, too."

"…Kagarma?"

Sahara was right. It was none other than the director, Kagarma Dartaros.

He was an important figure who had once led the criminal group known as the Fourth. Through various twists of fate, he wound up staying with Sahara and company while they were living in Grisarika

Kingdom.

"How'd you end up way out here? Is this area near Grisarika, by any chance?"

Kagarma didn't answer Sahara directly.

"I came to say my farewells."

"Farewells?"

"I'm afraid so. You see, I was looking for a place to die a thousand years ago, but at the same time, I was terribly afraid. I didn't want to die and be gone from this world forever."

"What's wrong with that? Dying is scary. Anyway, do you know where Menou is?"

"That's not what I mean. I was simply afraid to die for nothing. I had no children, no one I could trust…nothing to my name at all except for money. That's why I invested in those foolish immortality experiments and aided the Grisarika Conglomerate."

Expertly sidestepping Sahara's question at the end, Kagarma clacked his cane.

"Or perhaps you could say that I would've been happy to die anytime if it meant I could be of some service to the world."

Kagarma turned his gaze from Sahara to Maya.

"Young Maya. The Pandæmonium in the south has been freed."

Maya gasped. That was the name of the ultimate form of the Pure Concept of *Evil*, Maya's former self from when she lost her memories and became a Human Error. The leader of a horde of monsters that could destroy the other world was on the loose.

"If left to her own devices, she'll consume everything and plunge the world into chaos. …Now then, young ladies."

Director Kagarma Dartaros wore a shady-looking smile.

"Can you guess why I've come here when the world is in such grave peril?"

As his untrustworthy grin widened, his shadow shifted with the presence of an imminent Original Sin conjuring.

Menou sensed something horrible nearby.

It was an Original Sin conjuring. What's worse, a presence was

creeping into the world, so enormous and numerous that it was impossible to tell what had been summoned.

"What the… Come on, you two, let go of me already!"

"Nooo!"

"I refuuuse!"

Despite the Original Sin conjuring that loomed so large it could crush one's heart, Momo and Akari were still stubbornly clinging to Menou. They were hanging on so tight, it was as if they suspected she might kill herself if they let go.

"Yes, I know I worried you. I'm sorry, okay! I really do feel bad, but right now—"

"Michele lost, eh?"

A familiar voice rang out behind them. Menou turned around and saw a woman with red-tinted blond hair streaming down her back.

"Princess Ashuna?"

"And Kagarma made up his mind, too. You can tell the times are changing. Those unlucky few who've lasted a thousand years are coming to an end, one after another."

Ashuna ignored Menou, speaking slowly. A single knight stood on guard behind her.

"The Starhusk, Pandæmonium, the Sword of Salt, and the Mechanical Society. They've all come together in one place. So that thousand-year feud will finally end…but is this really the final battlefield you wanted, Nono?"

"Wait…"

Momo finally raised her head from Menou's chest and looked up, her brow furrowed.

"You're not Princess-poo. Who are you?"

Ashuna's distant gaze snapped back, and her lips curled into a grin.

Momo's eyes narrowed. In response to her open animosity, Ashuna spoke the name of the knight behind her.

"Experion."

The man called Experion stepped forward. His hand rested on the hilt of the blade at his waist. Menou immediately pushed the two girls away. Experion drew his sword so quickly that his right hand

blurred in the air. Reading the arc of his strike, Menou readied her dagger at just the right spot to meet his blade with her own.

The blade of Menou's dagger was sliced clean off. She scarcely felt any impact in the hand holding the hilt. Menou watched, shaking, as the blade fell away.

"He *is* still the strongest knight in the continent, you know."

The person who looked like Ashuna spoke mockingly.

This man's blade was completely different from Michele's. Menou had moved in a way that should have been enough to block his attack, and was utterly betrayed.

It was his swordsmanship, not his strength, that surpassed the limits of a normal human.

"Hakua will get here soon enough. I wouldn't mind holding off on interfering if it means all five of you, Hakua included, will take each other out…although I'd hate to lose the perpetual motion machine."

This woman, accompanied by the world's strongest knight, wasn't Ashuna. Her body might be the same, but the spirit within was different.

If she knew about Hakua and what she was doing, her identity was clear.

"Guardian…!"

"Don't glare at me like that. I just thought I'd make a little appearance."

The Guardian sneered through Ashuna's face.

"It's too bad, really. If I just had a hundred more years, I could've taken over Gadou's body from the Mechanical Society and conquered the original personality. But if you go sending someone into the world of souls and cut off the connection between body and soul, even I can't mess with them anymore. Do you get it yet? Nono manipulated you all just to protect Gadou from me. She really cares about her friends, even though she hates me. …See, look at that."

With a little pout, Ashuna—or rather, the Guardian—pointed into the distance. Following her gaze, Menou saw the worst phenomenon imaginable.

It was a gigantic door the size of a mountain, so black that it defied all sense of depth. Monsters were jostling, pushing each

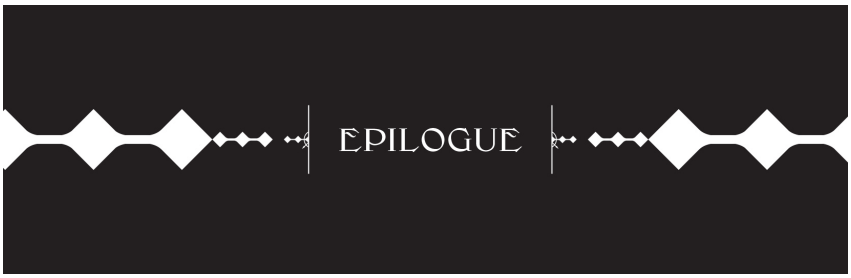
other, piling up and crushing each other to form the enormous black door.

"Well, then. First up is Pandæmonium."

The Original Sin conjuring Menou sensed earlier was designed to summon Pandæmonium's true form.

"Shall we watch together and see what that thing's going to do to this world?"

As the Guardian pointed, the door that hid endless *Evil* was starting to swing open.



Shortly after leaving the holy land and before she met Abbie, Menou reflected on her life.

At first, it was only so she could write down her memories. Now that she had a Pure Concept, she was going to start forgetting things. She would be faced with the same circumstances as all the Otherworlders she had killed in the past.

Perhaps this was punishment for taking all those innocent lives—though if so, it was much too light. At any rate, she was only recording the events of her life now because she knew she would lose them.

But strangely, putting her experiences into writing helped her sort out her feelings, too.

She'd thought the path she walked in life was only stained in red.

But when she looked at all of it together, she found herself thinking something else: "You know, it really hasn't been so bad."

And most recently, when she parted ways with Momo in the holy land, Menou had whispered something in her ear.

"You don't need to risk your *life."*

Menou didn't want Momo to do anything dangerous for her sake, but as she started to write down what she'd said, her pen paused above the paper.

"This might make Momo try even harder."

Her comment might fire Momo up, even though that wasn't her intention. In which case… Menou guessed what Momo would do and started to write it down—then changed her mind.

"Knowing me…it'd be best not to spell it all out."

As Menou looked at her life objectively, she realized something.

Once she started losing her memories, she would probably reject anyone who tried to lend a helping hand and save her. She was

almost certain of it.

She thought for a moment, then tacked on something else instead.

A warning not to let Momo catch on to her memory loss.

She nodded to herself. Much better. That certainly seemed like something she would write. No doubt her memory-less self was going to resist. She would try to sacrifice herself again instead of seeking help from anyone.

So there was no point in warning her future self if she wasn't going to listen to her past self's advice anyway. She was better off deceiving herself. If she wanted to reach a future that couldn't be achieved by sacrificing herself, she couldn't rely on her own future self.

Instead, she entrusted her future to the person she trusted most in the world.

"Knowing Momo, I'm sure she'll find a way to save me."

With absolute faith and a little bit of scheming in her heart, Menou touched the ribbon in her hair and smiled.

AFTERWORD

Hello, I'm Mato Sato.

Thank you very much for picking up this volume.

Executioner has now reached Volume 9. Just as we're approaching double digits, the story has entered its climax.

For every beginning, there is an ending. I always feel a sense of sadness when the time comes to wrap up a story you've been carefully unfolding. Still, I have faith that the conclusion waiting at the end of Menou's path will give me enough satisfaction to blow that sadness out of the water, so I keep writing.

And then there's this afterword! When I first became an author, I was so excited to write afterwords of my very own. But here's the thing! Sometimes I don't have any big announcements or topics to discuss, and if I did, I've already written it all over X (formerly Twitter). So it's hard to write a good afterword!! And so let's move on to the acknowledgments!

To my illustrator, nilitsu.

Thank you for everything: the beautiful illustrations, their wonderful compositions, the fun expressions on the characters' faces. It's always a delight to see my characters take shape in a way I could never produce on my own.

To my editor, Null. I'm so grateful that GA Bunko doesn't change editors on titles as a rule. From the bottom of my heart.

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And please let me express my eternal gratitude that this book has reached its final destination: the hands of my wonderful readers.

Once again, thank you all so very much!

Let's meet again in the next volume's afterword!

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