

Notes.
Kinoko Nasu

This was what I wrote when I was invited to make an anthology comic on the topic of angels. However, the anthology wasn't text based and the other two were artists, so I was in trouble. What is the meaning of a novel when over half of the book was pictures? Especially when it's a short novel. That's how I came up with the irregular "Notes" after my doubtfulness. I remember that I was pretty satisfied with what I came up with, considering that it was completed in a short amount of time. Although, it's unpleasant to the eyes, it brings back memories when I cut and pasted what I typed out from the word processor. ...If I ever get a chance, I would like to make this into a real series of story too. I always think about that when I look at the Black Barrel.

The aircraft rose further up into the troposphere.
The sea of ashen clouds had yet to disappear.

Wings of iron soared through the vast, leaden skies

L i n e r s

embarking on a dangerous mission to eliminate the common enemy of the Human Species.

At the end of the battle, all but one of the aircrafts that had participated in the mission were destroyed.
I guess I was lucky that this old piece of junk's autopilot was flying it.
The AI-controlled plane was the only one that was unaffected by the influence of the enemy's body temperature.

I continued to fly by myself.
The heartbeats resounding throughout the machine were, as one would expect, my own.

I opened the hangar with my gun at the ready.
The air flowing into the aircraft was freezing, burning my lungs.
With the plane's internal air temperature reaching below zero, the coat I wore showed minimal effect against it.
The level of freezing cold was at a critical point, barely maintaining the survival of organic life.

This aircraft, which had only been intended for the transportation of flight-capable species, wasn't equipped with weaponry like sniping equipment.
If I wanted to fight in this war, I had to risk cutting my life short.

Intense cold and rampaging winds,
The corpses of my comrades laid behind me, spinal fluid overflowing from their noses and ears.
As this was an old plane, there was no way of predicting how long it would continue to fly.
The state of affairs was so absolutely bleak that I felt like singing out loud.

With the Black Barrel that I modified for sniping at the ready, I did nothing but wait.
For the moment my enemy would come into the range of my scope.
For the very moment I could pull the trigger and be at ease.
Seven days had been piling up onto the in-flight clock.
Yet only seven days have passed.
My paralyzed brain felt that I could continue staying like this for another month, or maybe another year.
My body was constantly on the brink of death.

I wondered how much time had passed.
My consciousness,
My language,
My very self,
Just when I finished losing all of it – I recollected everything back.
My gun's sight caught the "enemy".
Without a moment's hesitation – I pulled the trigger.

My brain broke through its limits, and was scorched.
Just before I fell into unconsciousness,
Just one brief moment before white was painted over my consciousness.
I caught a glimpse of the enemy's form.
How,
Beautiful.

———Between a rift in the clouds, I saw an angel.

0 / G O D O

angel notes.
the metter of knight arms
...and over count 1999
type:other.

Land of Steel [Over Count 1999.]

A planet that died. A globe that reached its end. A world uninhabitable by living things.

This is the name of the present day's world. It is not an official name, but a common name passed down amongst the humans who live in the ruined land.

Like the name "Land of Steel" makes apparent, the majority of the continent is made up of cracked wastelands, covered by murky gray clouds.

Food cannot be grown, and the earth's atmosphere, previously suitable for animals, has been lost.

It was, to put it in the human species' way of speaking – a drastic end of a century. But even after the mother planet died, the human species was able to live on with its developed civil technology.

Even the planet's end that humanity once imagined couldn't bring an end to the human species.

Hundred A-Ray Subspecies [A-Ray]

Next generation primates created by the humanity that used up all of the planet's resources.

Each possessing motifs from the living things that used to exist on the planet.

They were heavily modified and enhanced in order to survive on the ruined planet.

Their evolutionary tree is diverse and have been broadly classified into a hundred species.

Classifications numbered one through ten consist of only a single species, rather than a colony.

Some carry the genes of humans and have human-like characteristics, but as you would expect, the vast majority have evolved from a fusion of various species and primates.

The Great War [Babel's Tale]

After the death of the planet, there was a war between the surviving remnants of humanity and the hundred A-Rays.

Humanity simply acted in order to survive, and the A-Rays acted in order to rule the world.

The various A-Rays were united into one hundred sub-species by the Six Sisters; in the face of this threat, Humanity was pushed to the brink of defeat. Near the end of the Great War, Humanity created the Human Species and the Knights, and this development only led to the further destruction of the planet that was already dead.

There was no victor in this war. A third party came flying in towards the end of the battle and both sides were almost annihilated.

Human Species [Liner]

Humanity in the Land of Steel.

The former Human Species were able to evolve alongside this world.

To be more precise, they are also included within the Hundred A-Rays.

They were able to adapt and live within the current environment, but despite that they are unable to exceed the limits of an ordinary human's abilities.

They are building a civilization in order to reform the old civilization. They are in a ceasefire with the Hundred A-Ray species.

Knights [Ether liner]

Those among the Human Species who possess biology with an even stronger acceptance of the drastically changed environment's influence. They wield special weapons called Mystic Swords, and are an aggressive species that can fight the A-Rays equally without any support from the weapons of the old era. There are currently seventy-eight knights enlisted.

Mystic Sword [Knight Arms]

The name of the weapon that Knights carry.

Every Liner born of this word receives the influence of Grain. Babies born with a large amount of Grain inside of them at the time of birth shape it as if it's their bones as they mature, and when they reach adulthood, the Mystic Sword is birthed from their body. Because they are created with the unanalyzed entity Grain, Mystic Swords are able to cause various phenomena, and their powers are strong enough to be considered weapons.

Only a few humans are able to form a Mystic Sword, and only those who wield a Mystic Sword capable of being used in a real battle are enlisted as Knights.

Only one Mystic Sword exists for each Knight.

Grain [Grain "Ether"]

Cosmic dust.

It's a name given to all harmful and unmeasurable particles which flooded from the planet after it lost its functions. Although it is hazardous to humans, in rare cases, it can make unique changes to their bodies leading some people to call this substance Ether.

The Hundred A-Ray Subspecies, Human Species, and Knights are all new species brought forth by the effects of Grain. The energy conversion rate of the Grain dispersed into the air is incredible and has resulted in a new level of warfare that was never before possible on this planet.

In this battle between the A-Rays, who can take Grain into their bodies, and those who have crystallized Grain to forge Mystic Swords, all weapons of the old era have become useless.

Notes.

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ii Public Garden

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v How A Star Is Born

vi Glitter Love

Angel Voice

1999 May. K.nasu

After I came home from work – I saw an angel holding a guitar.

...It seems that I had finally gone insane.

Long, blonde, wavy hair and a pure white one-piece dress. A face that left behind hints of girlish youth and a ring of light above her head. If this girl wasn't an angel, what in the world could she be?

"Good evening." The angel bowed with an awkward smile.

After rubbing my eyes, I walked inside. The angel kept standing in the middle of the room holding the guitar, and for some reason was looking at me excitedly.

"What the hell are you?"

"Ah, I'm an angel." She laughed with a sweet smile.

"I can see that. What I meant was, why are you in my room? If you're here to sell yourself, you came to the wrong room. I hate to break it to you but I am not earning enough to buy an angel.

"Um, I'm not here to sell myself. What's the best way of putting it? I'd like to look after you."

"I can do that myself, get out."

"Hey, that's not fair. I'll... I'll do anything you want!"

Well, since she begged me to, I ended up letting her clean my room.

The result: a scene far more gruesome than a tragedy.

"...Um, my cooking is perfect!"

The angel said, raising the tip of her finger up.

"Yeah that's great and all, but my body can't take in factory-produced food. There's way too much nutrition, I bet my blood vessels would burst open. Do you get what I'm saying?"

The angel nodded her head in agreement. She seemed to understand that I'm similar to a Human Species Liner – not an A-Ray.

"So, what else can you do?"

"I can play the guitar!"

The girl said so happily, strumming the guitar in her hands. That blue guitar was one of the types that used electricity to produce sound. It wasn't the kind of thing that could ever suit something like that of an angel. Also she just plain sucked.

"Thanks, but no thanks. Now it's about time you left."

I took the angel by the hand and booted her out the window.

After several days passed, I went to the hospital.

"There is nothing wrong with your brain," answered a fish-faced doctor.

Every day since then, after finishing work I wasted energy chasing away that angel. Eventually I caved and let her in.

"The sky, it's dark." The angel muttered looking out at the sky from the window.

The angel didn't even know that. Figures. She didn't seem to be one of the artificial angels amongst the hundred A-Ray Subspecies.

"Hey. Where'd you come from? I'm guessing you're not an A-Ray from this side of The Rift."

"I'm not an A-Ray!"

"Then what are you?"

"I am the fantasies of this city's people given form. That's why I'm so pretty. I'm glad that everyone has such pure hearts." The angel twirled around happily, the edge of her skirt wavering like a dress.

Now that she mentioned it, she certainly carried the visage of a fantasy. Angels were too beautiful to pass through this Land of Steel. Her golden hair was so dazzling, yet paradoxically reminiscent of poison. So that meant...she was an illusion only I could see?

"So, do you want to explain what the manifestation of everyone's fantasies is doing in my room?"

"Well it's obvious that I'm here because you're the guy who killed me!"

She got more mad at the fact that I didn't realise that more than the fact that I killed her.

"Did you come here to get revenge then?"

She answered back, "What's revenge?"

Eventually, the angel became quite handy compared to before, slowly learning various things over time. She seemed to understand what cleaning actually meant now. The exception being anything related to guitars.

"I'm not improving with the guitar at all. I'm playing it just like what I'm imagining the sound to be, but what I'm thinking and what's coming out are completely different."

I see, so she was interested in playing it? If that was the case then it was clear that it was highly unlikely to go well.

"No shit. That guitar needs tuning, you know."

Yep. Screwed up from the beginning.

The angel tilted her head and asked, "What's tuning?"

1 / Original Sin

"The sky, it's dark." [Cloud Sky]

Cloud-covered sky. Numerous thick layers of clouds have hidden the sky since The Great War. It doesn't mean the sky isn't gray, it appears that the real sky cannot be seen.

Angels [No.20 Guardian Angel]

Artificial angels within the Hundred Subspecies of A-Rays. Ranked #20 of the 100, but in the aspect of destroying matter alone, they come close to the 10th-ranked-species. A colony that protects a single A-Ray species. They possess the characteristics of the angels originating from the Old World's largest religion; a Human Species with a pair of avian wings.

An aggressive species that uses the heavy particles that dispersed into the atmosphere after the world's end as a source of power by absorbing them into their bodies.

Humans [Last-Seed]

A Human Species that did not undergo any selective breeding. Neither did their descendants.

Since they are unable to survive on this planet, it is said that they are on the verge of extinction.

In order for humans to live/survive in the outside world, they need the support of medicines or machines - if the air is inhaled unmedicated or unprocessed, it will result in death. To make matters worse, factory-produced food cannot be eaten, the nutrients raise the physical abilities so much that it becomes poisonous to humans instead.

They are rare, but not valuable.

A pair of feathered wings like that of a bird grow from the backs of humanoid bodied women. Despite their beautiful modeling, those creatures are called angels. My job is to shoot twenty angels dead each day. So it honestly wasn't very surprising that I was seen as an enemy amongst all beings known as angels.

I came to this place a year ago, a rather unique city within The Land of Steel.

No plants can grow on the surface of this dead planet. Yet every manner of gray-colored tree had grown all over the city, and even a withered grass field on top of a hill. On the hill at the center of the city, there were two gigantic trees concealing the sky. These trees even reached the sea of clouds and were named the world trees for their immense size.

I chose my job as an angel hunter. In this city, angels come flying down from the sky and attack people every day. They are unintelligent creatures, resembling angels only in appearance. Although they do attack people, they're only pests akin to wild dogs, doing little actual harm. But if we left them alone, the city would be swarmed by angels, so the city council had to hire hunters. I didn't know if the angels had a set location they came down to, but I saw a lot of them in the forest on the outskirts of the city.

Pulling on the trigger of my rifle, I caught the impact with my shoulder.

The naked angel fell down and hit the floor, having been shot right in the forehead.

The forest floor was littered with falling leaves and countless angel corpses.

Crossing the earth's harsh terrain, I returned into the walls that surrounded the city.

A beastman who was in charge of a different post was waving his hand as he approached me.

"Yo. How's business?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary. Three coppers per kill. If I consider the price of the bullet, I won't even have a single copper for myself."

"That's because you use a gun. If you're a man, use your body."

"I can't do that I'm afraid. Unfortunately, I'm not that well built. I'll be poisoned by the open air unless I take medicine. I'm just doing my best to stay alive."

"Oh is that so? That's inconvenient. So is being human, huh?"

"Yeah, sure is. Just part of being human."

That's right. In this world, being human is definitely inconvenient.

That must have been why the human beings of the old age had to dream up a lot of inventions. The result was the creation of the A-Rays, and that led to the preparations for the Great War.

Just like that, pure humans became the victims of natural selection.

Since I've got another mouth to feed, I increased my workload. Man, that angel sure can eat. The materials produced at the factories are free but there's a limit, so I had to increase my daily quota from twenty to thirty.

...How ironic is it to kill more angels to feed an angel?

"Working hard these days, aren't you?"

"I'm just relieving stress. Those targets actually look very similar to what's stressing me out, makes this job exciting." When I spilt out my complaints in desperation, the beastman tilted his head, lacking any sympathy.

"It's good that you're dedicated to your job. Watch your back though, I've heard there are some Knights inspecting the forest. Apparently a guy with a Mystic Sword was studying up on you."

"—What the hell!? Is an Aristotle coming this way?"

"I dunno. More importantly, they say our pay's getting lowered again this month. That's a more realistic life or death situation, isn't it?"

"Yeah, that's true. This is getting worse and worse, the financial bureau wants us dead too?"

"I've never done anything wrong though."

Yeah right, this guy's a prisoner who murdered over fifty

Human Species

Liners .

The beastman sighed and looked over at the pile of angel corpses scattered across the forest.

"You think we can eat them?"

He mutters a bad idea.

"Forget it. You're probably asking for some divine punishment. "

I shrugged my shoulders as I gave an obvious reply.

/ 2 P u b l i c G a r d e n

Aristotles [ONE]

Eight life forms that appeared at the end of the end of the Great War. Unidentifiable existences.

Each Aristotle has a significantly different appearance and biology.

The origin of their name is unknown, but the name's origin can be traced back to a philosopher from the old age.

Considering both Humanity and the hundred A-Ray Subspecies to be their enemies, they attacked indiscriminately, and often. As a result, humanity's foundation was completely destroyed, and the number of A-Rays was greatly diminished at the hands of the Aristotles.

After the Great War came to an end, their activities were slowed down by the sea of clouds that covered the sky, but they still continue to erase all life forms on this planet.

Since then, the human species and the A-Rays have separated themselves on a grand scale from humanity, and have also become companions under ceasefire until the elimination of their common enemy, the Aristotles.

An angel caught me on my way home from work. Not the freeloader, clearly an angel-type A-Ray.

"Not very social these days, are you? I don't think you're stupid enough to reject a beautiful woman like me."

She said, marching me into a bar and thrusting a beer in front of me.

...It's true, I don't think I've spoken to her for about half a year.

I let the dull conversation blossom before a heckler butted in.

"You should be spending your time with an A-Ray rather than that human-type over there."

I thought so too, but she shut him up with a glare.

"I'm sorry. Were you offended?"

"Yeah, I don't feel good about it but he's got a point. Why are you even spending time with someone like me? Don't the A-Rays prefer strong species? If you think I can father a strong child, I'm sorry but I can't do that."

"Come on, one little exception wouldn't hurt, right? Besides, our outward appearance is much more important. A-Ray species similar to angel-types are few and far between -- and you're also my type. So it's no problem really." She reassured me as she brought a glass of purple fizz to her lips.

She really did have the appearance of an angel – but her wings were not for flying, Angel-type A-Rays could fly without them, and their "wings" were said to be used to collect the heavy particles surrounding them. It was rumored that her subspecies, the former protectors of The Six Sisters could match the Mystic Sword wielding Knights in terms of fighting ability.

In other words, one was capable of destruction on the level of a nuclear bomb by themselves.

We kept drinking and by the time she was completely out of it, she asked me something strange.

"Hey, why do you use a gun?"

"Well uhh.. Unlike A-Rays, humans aren't able to use Grain, you know? Our strength is limited too, so it's only natural that we have to rely on weapons. I mean, what other practical firearms could I use other than a gun?"

"Huh. So that means humans are too weak to fight. So why do you fight despite that?"

"...Yeah, seems to be like that, doesn't it? Well let's see. If I remember correctly, my family were killed when I was just a little brat. I dug up a gun or two and started practicing my aim like crazy. Nothing but revenge on my mind."

"What? I expected more than a typical story like that."

"Uh, yeah. Haha. It's boring, right?"

Yeah, that forced smile wasn't fooling anyone. Neither was that pathetic attempt at a laugh. I've never been able to fake a laugh, not even once.

"But how is that boring? You mentioned a family so they must be the same species right? I've never heard of any humans living around here, except for you of course."

"I must have never told you, huh? I was born and raised in Westland. It's on the other side of The Great Rift."

"Did you say Westland!? The uh, the continent that was erased by The Black Aristotle——?"

She fell silent after that. It makes sense, I must have been around 12 or 13 when Westland was burnt to the ground.

But that's an old story from almost 7 years ago.

"Well anyway, I'm curious. You've given up that awful job, right?"

"Absolutely not. There isn't any other job that a moron like me could do, and I don't feel like being protected as a rare species either. So why are you still complaining about it? Those things aren't the same as you, so don't let it bother you. It's ridiculous."

"It does bother me! I couldn't care less about other guns for hire, but it makes me sick that you of all people are killing angels every day. Well? What's your reason for hunting angels!?"

——That's because I'm twisted.

"——It's just a job, that's all. Like I said before, there's nothing else I can do to put food on the table."

I spat out an excuse without looking her in the eyes, but her cold stare saw straight through my lie.

"Whatever. You've quit thinking. That's why you don't feel any pain. But you can't feel happiness either. Or even have fun thinking about better times. You must be living your everyday life like a machine. That's why you need to rely on logical reasoning to motivate yourself."

The angel talked down to me with a discontent expression on her face.

But what was so wrong with becoming a thoughtless machine? The idea that we were superior creatures just because we had the capacity for emotion was the real fantasy.

"What's with you today? It seems like you're just trying to give me a hard time."

"I *am* giving you a hard time. You're barely talking to me."

"A drunken angel isn't a great look either, you know?"

"What do you mean? I'll have you know that I'm super popular in my hometown, even when I'm as drunk as this!"

Answering "yeah yeah", I looked up at my empty glass. I was planning on holding back tonight but I'd reached the point of passing out before her.

The angel asked one last question.

"Hey, why do you fight?"

That's because... I don't want to die.

"Okay so, why don't you want to die?"

Because... I'm almost certain that I want to live.

"Why do you want to live?"

That's obvious.

I kept on surviving because I'd never experienced anything that made life worth living, not even once.

"...Is that so? Relying on a logical reason to live, you really are an immature creature."

And just like that, she left first.

I guess there was no fixing it. The world's within a post-apocalypse because of humans that lived by their instincts. Having to rely on pessimistic reasoning's the only punishment given to the humans who were left behind.

Six Sisters [No. 1 Saving System of Earth]

Beings who reigned over the Hundred Subspecies of A-Rays at the time of the Great War.

It's said that they possessed the outward appearance of the human species itself, and that all six looked like witches straight out of a fairy tale, wearing black hats and riding on broomsticks. Each one of them carried an ability that surpassed all Hundred A-Ray Subspecies. At the end of the Great War, the youngest sister "Judgment" was defeated by a Knight, but her death cry created a great rift in the center of the continent. The whereabouts of the remaining five are unknown.

Black Aristotle [Type:Jupiter]

An Aristotle that appeared in Westland.

A black giant several dozens of kilometers in length. Its form was extremely close to that of a human being.

In truth, it was a gathering of black photon gas which could theoretically expand infinitely in size.

The mountain of gas contained an unidentifiable nucleus at its core that was impossible to explain other than being a pseudo-sun. The body of photon gas seems to have been emitted from that object.

Of the eight Aristotles, Type-Jupiter has erased the most life.

It sent the western continent into an all out war and wiped them out without a scar. ...Although there are probably no such concepts like scars to this Aristotle.

Later, after a battle with the Knights who were dispatched to the west, it was bisected by Knight Edem's Mystic Sword - Slash Emperor. The bisected Aristotle's pseudo-sun rampaged, and the entire surface of the western continent was scorched.

The Crucifix [Type:Saturn]

Crucifix-like Aristotle. Total length reaching three-thousand meters.

Its outer shell is composed of luminous minerals, and has no pattern whatsoever.

The flying object sends down a deadly rain of light, with the visage of the Holy Cross.

Each "raindrop" is a one-meter-long electromagnetic shock with the shape of a cross, which explodes and scatters upon contact, annihilating all surrounding life forms.

There are other variations of these crosses of light, which can perforate the earth's surface, causing earthquakes that destroy the very land where people live.

Innumerable as they may be, perhaps these crucifixes stuck into the earth mark the deaths of their victims, not unlike the gravestones spread across the wasteland.

It is fittingly titled "The Flying Fortress", and it is thought to be the leader of the Aristotles within the planetary sphere.

Black Barrel [Longinus]

A black gun belonging to Gun God. Because it is made of a mineral that conflicts with Grain, it is quite possible to say that the Black Barrel is the natural enemy of all life-forms that contain even a minuscule amount of Grain.

However in this world where every remaining life-form has been influenced by Grain, there isn't anyone left that can use, or even touch it.

It is the God-Slaying Gun, if the weapon's target contains a great power, in other words—Grain, the bullet's killing capacity will rise in proportion to the amount of Grain within.

... Now, with this gun, the value of a particular rare species has changed.

Only those life-forms that lacked the ability to evolve in response to Grain, and are completely devoid of it, can touch the Black Barrel without any consequences.

"The sky... it's red." [Blood Sky]

The sky of this world. There is no blue sky above the sea of clouds, a red sky spreads out as far as the eye can see.

It isn't because the air is polluted. During the final years of The Great War, a lone Aristotle came flying into the atmosphere – Type-Pluto, whose blood stained the sky a crimson red.

While Pluto was attempting to invade the atmosphere, it was confronted by the Six Sisters who all attacked at once. Type-Pluto's blood completely enveloped the planet.

The gray clouds that conceal the sky are considered to be a protective barrier that the Six Sisters placed – In this red sky, two other Aristotles swim through the sea of blood like floating fish, unable to access the planet itself.

Heaven's Corpse [Type-Venus]

An Aristotle estimated it to be a thousand meters long. It appeared after the Great War, flying within the sea of clouds. Its shape was unable to be confirmed, nor could anyone report any exact features of its appearance.

It is a lifeform that has grown two wing-like appendages, and compared to other Aristotles, it is closer to the evolutionary tree of this planet.

According to records, during the 83rd year of the new calendar, it was shot down in an extermination operation carried out by the Order of Knights and fell somewhere on the continent.

Originally, it was a life-form that fell onto the surface of the planet, sinking its roots into the land, scattering the corpse's ego, manifested as spores, eating away at the life on this planet.

In short, it can be roughly described as a gigantic carnivorous plant.

...Fortunately, it was put to sleep using the Black Barrel.

Slipping through the crowds in the loud city streets, I made it back to my room. The angel was still here, stubbornly still here.

It wouldn't be long before Winter came. The temperature was gonna shoot way below the freezing point, then it wouldn't be long before the town literally froze over.

But it didn't matter, I'd lost the motivation to spend a second winter in this place.

"Um, don't you think the city has been noisy recently?"

The angel muttered as she overlooked the cityscape from the window.

That large window, larger than the angel, looked just like a church window I once saw in a picture book.

That angel with golden hair and pure white wings hung her head with a sad look on her face.

The background of the window behind her was faintly smoking like a mirage.

...Everything in this world is gray in color. Only this angel was beautiful, like a nightmare.

The Angel kept looking down at the scene far down below.

The city was overloaded with people trying to escape.

"Um, what is everybody doing?"

"It's a citywide evacuation. The neighboring area was destroyed by a three thousand meter Aristotle. Calculating its flight path, it should pass by this city in three days."

"Flying... above me?"

"It's flying above all of our heads.

It might crash into the World Trees. It doesn't matter which direction it's going, everything beneath it is going to be destroyed. It's only natural that everyone's running away."

Gazing vaguely at the ground, the angel mutters,

"Ah, so that's why everyone is so desperate."

I gave the angel a sideways glance as I started getting my stuff together; she was just standing there, a little taken aback. I shoved the warm clothes, winter equipment, my personal air maker, and several guns into my bag. I decided to leave everything else behind.

"You too? You're really going?"

"I don't want to die, you know. But I'm not leaving right away. Once that commotion down there has died down, I'll get out of here by myself."

The angel's eyes were downcast with disappointment. Just because she was always so cheerful for no reason, that was enough to make her look so awfully lonely.

"... This might be the last time, so please answer me. What in the world are you?"

The angel let out a carefree sigh.

All I knew was that she wasn't a real angel, but I still didn't get it.

That's why— I wanted to know the truth, at least in the end.

The Angel replied, so simply.

"I'm... what everyone calls an Aristotle."

She stared at me with those eyes, as if to say, "You didn't know?"

Aristotles. Beings that suddenly appeared on our planet and became the enemy of every last lifeform, without exception. Immeasurable monsters whose biological structures, not to mention their methods of communication were enigmatic in nature.

One of those things was in a little city like this, in this deserted tower's cheap apartment, shaped like an angel, playing a guitar? That's not even funny. ... Why did this thing think that no living creature on this planet had the right to live? I guess this must be some kind of punishment from God.

"Are you serious!? You're a—?"

"Oh not at all, that would actually be the ground of this city! The entity containing my former self was shot down and it crash-landed here. It died instantly. Trees grew from its body and humans started to live around it."

The Angel goes on and on. This planet no longer had the power to raise life. That's why greenery could not grow, but she was telling me we could grow it as long as the ground on which it was planted was the top of a corpse instead of the planet!?

"In the beginning, I wasn't this type of existence. I ended up this way by accident. What everyone calls the World Trees are actually the wings of my former self. The leaves of the World Trees are uhh... well in other words, the feathers of the wings, right? The feathers that fluttered down took the shape of my former self. Type-Venus was that kind of invasive lifeform—not the angels spread throughout this planet."

"But you're still shaped like an angel!"

"That's because... I'm everyone's fantasy. My former self's body has died, but what seems to be something along the lines of an ego is still alive. But my former self never had the concept of an ego. The species of this planet possesses an extraordinary ability to give form to intelligence.

My former self also had intelligence, but couldn't use it; so I took shape using everyone as a model.

I took the form of an angel because it was the closest image to my former self. Aristotles don't have the ability to come to mutual understanding, but becoming an angel granted me the same thought patterns as everybody else. By becoming an angel from a fantasy, I could become myself!"

By becoming a fantasy, the angel managed to distance herself from the beings known as Aristotles. By becoming something other than herself, the strange girl was able to understand herself for the first time.

The girl was already nobody at all, just a realization of an angel dreamt up by the people here.

"Are you happy with that?"

"Yes", The angel very happily nodded her head.

The girl was nowhere to be found.

There was only an illusion.

"—I see. I guess angels can only exist in my dreams."

I recall the definition of the angel all of a sudden.

That she had wings, and a halo, and she was beautiful, and finally, she was nothing more than a dream—

After all, the things in my life that give me any small scrap of happiness turned out to be nothing but delusions in the end.

When I thought that, the angel disappointingly replied, "You're right."

◆

"I wish I was a real angel."

She looked so much more angelic than a real angel, but complained about something like that.

4 / A f t e r I m a g e s

The gigantic crucifix disappeared deep into the sea of clouds that had been stained with gray sunlight. Its course had only been shifted slightly, but it began to vanish far away into the distance while continuing to send its rain of judgment down to the surface.

—— It seemed that the battle was finally over.

The plane carrying me kept on rising above the troposphere. Rising slowly. On the side of the smoking plane was a large hole.

The wounded iron bird couldn't listen to orders anymore. Just like the dreams of all who had wings, it would keep flying until its body rotted away.

Sooner or later, it should pierce through the gray sea of clouds and into the stratosphere. My body wasn't strong enough to breathe there. But there was no need to worry about that. Because there was no guarantee that I'd be alive by the time I got there.

I lowered my sniper rifle and slumped against the wall.

The door of the hangar remained open. The freezing air flowed in, just as it did back then. The view of the surface could be seen clearly.

A monochrome land, devoid of color. Even the distant sea was colorless. This world was completely dead. But despite that, this steel-colored world was still too precious to me. My vision started to blur.

...

I saw a scene just like this 5 years ago.

The enemy that tore through the clouds that day was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

I shot down an angel-like creature, it had two wing-like appendages and a vaguely humanoid form. After the comparatively tiny bullet pierced into its forehead, the angel fell down from the heavens. Back then. During the moment I pulled the trigger, I locked eyes with it through the scope. There wasn't any mutual understanding. That's just how it was.

But since then, I just couldn't stop dreaming about that thing falling down into the sea of clouds.

...

The angel riding with me woke up. One of her wings had been horribly plucked off. As a high ranking member of the A-Rays, she was sent out on this mission as usual. She jumped in with wounds all over her body.

She only dropped by to rest her wings, but no luck. The moment she opened the hangar door and got in, this plane was pierced with an arrow of light after continuing to fly too close to The Cross.

The light pierced through the girl's wing and the plane's body, snatching away even the plane's AI and the girl's consciousness.

And now, a few minutes later.

The unconscious angel slowly woke up.

"Good morning."

When I spoke to her, she turned to look at the scene outside.

Retreating into the distance, the thing called an Aristotle vanished. The angel was staring in awe. I informed her about the destruction that happened here, and about the mission's success.

She only had the strength to crawl; as she drew closer, her hand – slipped on something wet.

My blood that scattered across the floor made a pool, dying the angel's body red.

"When you——shoved me out of the way?"

I didn't answer her question. I just stared at what was happening outside.

I saw the sky for the first time in my life, but I didn't expect the real sky to be different from the one I read about in books.

"The sky... It's red."

I repeated words that I heard somewhere before as my arm lost its strength.

The Black Barrel fell to the floor.

"A black gun. I knew it, you're the person who shot down The Bird."

"...Well, sort of. That's what people think. But... I must have used up all of my luck back then. That's why I'm in this mess."

"You're an idiot, you know. It's because you were protecting me."

"Couldn't help myself. I wouldn't want a pretty girl like you dying in front of my eyes."

I gave her a pretentious one-liner. It was so silly, I couldn't stop myself from cracking a smile.

"That line's so out-of-character!" The girl laughed with me.

We both laughed without looking at each other.

With small, weak, but gentle voices.

"You've changed. You weren't this honest with your feelings before, were you?"

...I wonder if such a thing really existed. The angel that told me it was okay to be a fake, she must still be in my room waiting for me to come back.

They say angels can heal the mind, but not the body.

"But, that's not true. I didn't change who I am because of somebody else. I've always been like this. I only pretended to be cold, but I'm actually a nice guy deep down. Didn't you notice?"

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah, really. I got used to being a hero back when I was just a kid. I was immature, maybe I still am. That's why you need to go already. Right now, even with one wing, you should be able to land on the ground. You don't need to go out with me."

She stood and gave me a strangely stern look.

"Are you going to be okay with that? Being alone until the end?"

"I told you. I want to look cool. I'm used to being a hero, you know. Besides, I want to be alone in the end. ——Because until now, I've been alone all of this time."

I think my clumsy forced smile went smoothly. Probably the best one of my life.

"Well then, this is goodbye."

Flapping her single wing, she flew away.

She reminded me of the fish-like angels swimming through the red sea.

...

I stood up and sat in the cockpit.

Not knowing what I was doing myself, I tried to fix the broken autopilot.

If I still had some luck left, I was sure things would end differently.

When I closed my eyes and slept, I heard a voice close to my ear.

"Why did you fight?"

"That's because... I don't want to die."

"Why don't you want to die?"

"That's because... I want to live."

"...Then, why did you want to live?"

"That's simple. It's because——"

At the furthest limits of my memory.

Only that answer was different from before.

5 / How A

Star Is Born

On the day I tried to leave the city, I barely avoided getting caught by a military messenger. Someone must have heard the old story from five years ago and enlisted me in the mission.

When I returned to retrieve the Black Barrel that I abandoned, the angel was also still left in that room.

"You're going to fight that thing?"

"Seems like it. The Order of Knights are gathering too, so the military is definitely willing to fight. I've been told that we'll at least be able to alter The Cross's flight path. If that's all there is to it, well, it's not like it's impossible."

It is impossible. Everyone fails to understand the beings known as Aristotles. They are not creatures of this planet. There's no way to win!"

"There's no such thing as impossible."

"Is that so? They are incompatible with this planet's common sense. That's why the very concept of death doesn't exist for them. They won't stop until they've fulfilled their purpose."

"A purpose? Every one of you has such a thing?"

"Yes. We didn't decide that purpose ourselves, but we have one.

...This planet's death was the result of the life that inhabited it.

The planet itself was not pessimistic about its death.

Because the planet only contained a will; it didn't contain any meaning. However, an exception had been made.

The Human Species was able to live on, even on the dead planet's land.

Please, I want you to cause the extinction of every life form that is still alive."

Naturally, the only ones who were able to hear the planet's cry for help were other planets.

I — No. We were chosen as the absolute highest ranking species of each other planet that received this planet's will.

For example, the Aristotle known as Heaven's Corpse... The thing that used to be me... was the most superior individual on Venus."

"W-What did you just say!?"

I lost my breath without realizing. Our enemies once stood at the top of each planet's evolutionary trees with an alien common sense?

So the strongest life form of a planet is in other words the very planet itself. The Human Species, who had been surviving on this planet were essentially dealing with the eight other planets.

"—Yeah. Well, it doesn't look like we can win, huh?"

"Yes." The angel nodded apologetically.

"Besides, they're the ones in the right. ...jeez. If we just accepted the two-thousand year prophecy, we'd have ended up still being the victims."

"You're wrong...! It's the Aristotles who are at fault. They do not have any will. Isn't it a bad thing to erase life without having a will?"

But there was no longer any notion of good or evil on this planet.

The self-contradictory rule was to just live or die, it was as simple as that.

That's why——, because I've lived 'til this point, I'm not going to roll over and die.

"It makes no difference. I don't have any kind of reason to fight either. At this point, I'll never have one.

Isn't this the most simple way of life?"

The angel didn't answer me.

"What are you going to do? While it may be true that you have the same purpose, you and The Cross are different, right? Then your body will be destroyed along with this city, you know.

You said you died instantly, but that's in our way of putting it.

I don't think "death" as we know it on this planet applies to the life forms from other planets.

The truth is, you can already move, can't you?"

The angel looked down and shook her head.

"No, I can't. If I move, the outer shell of the wings will shatter. All of the leaves will fall from what everyone calls the World Trees. If that happens, countless angels will flood the land from the sky.

The angel said, with a gloomy face.

...She's right. The number of leaves on top of the two trees reaching the sea of clouds far exceeded the number of Human Species in existence. The hundreds of millions of angels set free would cover the planet's surface in a blink of an eye.

"But, you'll die if you don't!"

"It's okay. Because I'm everyone, I'm nothing but a creation of their fantasies."

"But that's just the knowledge given to you. You're different from us. We're just simple decorations to you. So it'd be better if you just hurried up and took off already!"

The angel sadly smiled and just shook her head like before.

"Are you an idiot!?"

"I know I am. But I can't help it.

—I love this place."

With teary eyes, the angel said so in satisfaction.

How could I argue with that?

"...I see. Well, I guess it can't be helped."

"Yes", she nodded and stared at me. Her sincere gaze was silently asking me "What about you?"

"I'm... going to die soon, you know. You're not going to be struck with divine punishment. I think you could at least reward me with an answer."

As I carried my belongings on my back, I answered her.

"Yeah. I understand. Listen, I have a confession to make. I also love this place, so much.

It must have been—roughly from all the way back then, I'd been possessed by you."

"Eh?", the angel's eyes widened in astonishment.

"U-Um... What do you mean?"

"Ever since then, I've been in love with you. I just didn't realize until now."

As soon as I desperately threw out those words, the angel's face lit up, but she immediately hung her head.

"But... I'm not human."

Unfortunately, the angel had only just realized that fact.

...Jeez. Are you an idiot? Seriously.

"Well, let me tell you something. There's only one human being in this world and that's me. So why the hell should that matter?"

"Ah... you're right! "

The Angel nodded in admiration.

There was nothing more to talk about.

The time of the military gathering was drawing closer, so I started walking outside.

"I've gotta head out. Go find someone with a better dream next time. You'll become a real angel if you do that."

—Because the fantasies I dreamt up were all twisted in some way.

When I looked back at her one last time, the angel with a gentle expression answered me.

"No. There is no such thing as a real angel. I'd rather stay as a fake one."

The fantasy told me that she'd remain as a fantasy.

Is that so? Convinced, I left the room.

All that was left in the room was my older sister's guitar and the fake angel.

Gun God [GODOT]

... His other name. It was a popular name assigned to him after the mission "Fallen Bird" where he shot down Type-Venus..

Some sarcastically called him a god imitator or pretender. A rare pure human. He excavated the Black Barrel from a sealed area, it's his favorite gun. Passed away during the intercept mission involving Type-Saturn.

Aristotles [Ultimate ONE]

Eight lifeforms that came from other planets.

In truth, they are the strongest lifeforms on their respective planets, and each possess the capability to cause the extinction of all life on this planet on their own.

The name "Aristotle" was given by the people of this planet, since they have no concept of names.

Aristotles do not fight each other, they just fly around freely killing things.

Some Aristotles have learned the concept of "knowledge" from this planet's life forms, or have even appeared before them.

After the annihilation of Type-Saturn, who received the order from this planet and conveyed it to the other planets, they entered their final battle with the human race.