

Sakon Kaidou

Illustrator: Taiki

# Infinite Endrogram

12. The Forms of Love

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12. The Forms of Love





# Infinite Dendrogram

12. The Forms of Love

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***"Downfall  
Screamer!"***

It moved at the speed of sound, but that wasn't enough to throw him off. Through the earth-shaking impacts, he ran up Sandalphon, heading straight towards Hannya.

Figaro jumped on the surface of one of the tower-legs and began running upwards.

***"...I'm  
coming  
over  
there."***

# Character

## Ray

Ray Starling / Reiji Mukudori

A young man who began playing Infinite Dendrogram. Though generally a calm person, he has a strong will and sense of what is right that allows him to keep struggling for as long as he needs to.



## Nemesis

Nemesis

A girl that manifested as Ray's Embryo. She has the ability to transform into a greatsword, a halberd, a shield, and a pinwheel. She's a bit of a glutton, too.



## Figaro

Figaro / Vincent Myers

A master who holds the esteemed position of being Altar's #1 duelist. As the Over Gladiator, he's rarely seen away from the arena. While he's generally a calm and gentle man, the heat of battle transforms him into something far more brutal.



## Azurite

Altimia Azurite Altar

First princess of the Kingdom of Altar, and holder of the Sacred Princess job. After she encountered Ray, she started to change her feelings towards masters like him.



## B3

Barbaroy Bad Burn / Kozue Fujibayashi

Once the leader of a notorious PK clan, B3 also happens to be Ray's real-life senior at college. While she's usually a dependable and studious girl, she switches into a far more crude and boisterous persona when her PK instincts take over.



# ***Opening: Correspondence Between a Certain Man and Woman***

???

**February 14th, 2044.**

“Figaro,

This is Hannya. I’m using the email address you gave me.

Is this reaching you? I’m writing this trying not to worry that you might have given me a fake address. I hope you’re getting this, but I don’t know what to do if you don’t.

Right now, I’m following what your friend told me and going to Legendaria. I’ll come see you again after crushing my ex and that bitch who took him from me.

I’m thinking of bringing over a homemade cake when I do. Look forward to it.”

“Hannya,

This is Figaro. Yes, it’s reaching me.

I’m also looking forward to seeing you again.

I like cakes, too. My little brother often brings them to me as presents or even bakes them himself. I can’t handle intense, spicy foods, so I’m relatively fond of sweet stuff. I can’t wait to try your cake.”

**February 15th, 2044.**

“I have some bad news... I went to Legendaria and stomped on my ex and the homewrecker, but then the crowd ganged up on me and now I’ve got the death penalty.

Also, I can't use the save points anymore because I'm 'wanted.'

I'm in the 'gaol' right now. Apparently, I won't be able to leave for over a whole in-game year.

...Sorry. Now I can't see you for a long time.

You won't be able to wait that long, huh?"

"The gaol, eh? This is the first time someone I know got sent there.

Oh, don't worry about taking a whole year to be discharged. I'm sure I'll still be here then.

I'll wait for you to leave (so we can duel) for as long as I have to.

Though, I'll be able to catch up to you in power in the meantime. You'll grow stronger yourself, of course, but I'll do even better.

I have a major ranked match coming up, too."

### **February 16th, 2044.**

"Thanks, Figaro. I'm really happy that you'll wait for me (in the name of love.)

I'll go see you in *Infinite Dendrogram* no matter what.

And oh yeah, you're a ranker! That's amazing.

By the way, you mentioned my strength. Should I be trying to raise my level or evolve my Embryo, too?"

"Of course."

"Okay. I'll grow stronger here in the gaol, then go see you right after I'm discharged.

Ohh, I can't wait for that moment. Just thinking about it is too much.

It's so far away, but (because of love!) the wait is going to be unbearable!"

"Yeah. I want to see (and duel) you, too. I hope it doesn't take too long for you to be released."

**April 18th, 2044.**

"Figaro, congratulations on becoming the duel champion! I saw your duel online! I already knew the outcome, but watching it still had me in suspense. Just so you know, I cheered at my screen when you won! Seriously, congratulations!"

"Thanks, Hannya. Because of this, I've finally become Over Gladiator. It's the Superior Job of the gladiator grouping, so we're now on the same job tier. Now, if my Embryo would just evolve into a Superior Embryo, like your Sandalphon did last week, we would be a perfect match (in a duel.) I can't wait for when you're discharged in a year."

"Same here. I can't wait to stand by you (in the wedding hall.)"

**November 11th, 2044.**

"I heard about the Gloria thing and your friend. Tell me if there's anything I can do to help. Though, I know there's not much I can do by email. Ohh, why can't I be outside at a time like this...?"

"..Thanks, Hannya."

**February 14th, 2045.**

“It’s now been a whole year since we started talking like this. I’m spending my days in the gaol roasting food, couples, and people who say inexcusable things. I’m satisfied with my life, but every day feels about the same, which is just making me want to see you more and more.

By the way, you said you were wondering, so I’m pleased to tell you that we have a new Superior here in the gaol.

First there was me and Fu’uta, then we got Sechs, and now we’ve got a boy called ‘Candy.’

He was a real nuisance with all the viruses he spread in here, but he calmed down once Sechs and I beat him. Now he’s shut himself in some dungeon.

His prison term is so long, he’ll probably be in here until *Dendro’s* servers shut down.

Though, the same can probably be said about everyone here besides me.”

“Always the homemaker, huh? Thanks for the info, by the way. I was wondering about it because a wanted Superior that was heading towards Altar suddenly vanished. I guess the rumors are right, then — another PK got him. They might already know, but I’ll inform DIN, just in case.

My days are also just about the same recently. I... wasn’t able to participate in the war last month, either.

Like I mentioned before, it seemed to have given Shu a lot to think about. Though, it’s understandable, considering his reasons for not participating. Right now, he’s out on a journey, leveling up and gathering special rewards.

...Oh yeah. We're both bothered by our monotonous lives, so let me mix things up a little.

My name is Vincent Myers.

Weird, huh? We've been in touch for over a year, but didn't even know each other's names.

Hannya, if you don't mind... can you give me yours? What's your name?"

"...Thanks, Vincent.

My name is Fuyuko Shiki. Can you call me Fuyuko?"

"Of course, Fuyuko."

"...I'll finally be out of here in April. I'll then rush straight to the kingdom to see (and marry) you."

"Yeah. I'll be waiting, Fuyuko."

***Open Episode "The Forms of Love"***

# ***Chapter One: The Three Horrors and the Extras***

*Reiji Mukudori*

When people play too much of a particular game, they often end up simulating it in their heads while lying in bed with their eyes closed.

Recently, these simulations of mine were completely dominated by *Dendro*. Specifically, the fight against the Hell General.

Someone actually uploaded a video of the fight. It had been edited to make it look like I won easily, but that wasn't the case. I knew that better than anyone.

Without Gardranda, without Logan underestimating me and holding back his strongest devils, and without Veldorbell destroying his Brooch, I'd have surely lost.

I knew full well that I lacked the power to defeat a Superior who came at me with everything he had. Even though I won, that scene stayed with me, just like it did when I was first defeated by Marie. Seeing the video had only made the memory more vivid. I began picturing and examining it like a game of chess.

Though, if this was a chess match, then Logan had all his pieces, while I only had a king and a rook, so it's not like I was going to figure out some high-level play by just thinking about it.

"Heeyy, Mukudori, what's with that thinking face and why're ya sittin' there? The lecture's over."

"Ohh..." Kasugai called out to me, bringing me back to reality and reminding me that the morning lectures were over.

It was hard to overlook the fact that I was a college student who couldn't even focus on his lectures.

That made me wonder how B3 — or rather, Fujibayashi — managed. She was a clan leader, so I imagine that she'd have even more trouble dividing her time and attention between the game and reality. I'd have to consult her about it.

During lunch, I looked for her in the cafeteria and found her right away. She had this super diligent vibe, which was even stronger here in real life than in the game. It made her stand out, so she was really easy to find.

However, looking at the other student sitting with her, she didn't stand out so much that it drove people away. The presence of others would've made it fairly awkward to talk about *Dendro*, especially since she was someone who kept the two worlds neatly separated.

I wondered what to do next, but then her friend finished eating and left. Appreciating the timing, I tried to call out to her, but someone grabbed my shoulder.

“What’s up, Ray? Tickletickle!”

“Hh?!“ Miss Eldritch suddenly appeared, grabbed my shoulder with her right hand and tickled my armpit with her left.

*Sexual harassment! Two seconds after her greeting...!*

“Where’s your handler... I mean, Tsukikage?! Did he collapse again?!“ I asked.

“Kage’s not heeeeere. He went to visit his family back in Iga.”

“Iga?! What, is he *actually* a ninja?!“

“‘Actually’? What, you believe the stereotype that everyone from Iga is a ninja?”

...Well, he *was* the King of Assassins. He could sink into shadows, too. Him being a ninja would explain why he ended up with an Embryo like that...

“Heheheh,” Miss Eldritch giggled. “Without Kage around, I can harass you all I want!”

“GHAAH!” *Oh, so she actually held back around him, I thought,* before she continued.

She tried to slip her left hand under my clothes...

“Prez? What are you doing in a public space?”

...But then a heavy, domineering voice stopped her.

The one speaking was obviously Fujibayashi. Her eyes behind her glasses were steady... and she actually looked really scary.

“...Ah. So you were here, B,” said Miss Eldritch.

“Sit down right there.”

“...But this is the cafeteria.”

“*Sit.*”

“...Okay.” Hearing how serious Fujibayashi sounded, Miss Eldritch immediately sank to the floor on her knees. The stares she drew from onlookers made her shake a bit, but she continued sitting regardless.

The way Fujibayashi was looking down at her, I felt like I was watching a priest exorcising a naughty demon. It seemed that even if you ignored the fact that Miss Eldritch needed her around to keep the club going, Fujibayashi still outranked her even in real life. Apparently they’ve been like this for a long time. Miss Eldritch had gone to Fujibayashi’s place to learn etiquette and the Way of Tea, so she developed this awareness that made her crumble in her presence.

The woman looked quite disheartened, but I appreciated the fact that we had someone who could keep her in check.

*Also, is it just me, or have I recently seen a certain someone sit on the floor just like that?*

“Mukudori, foxes are always on the lookout for puppies to eat,” said Fujibayashi. “She’ll gobble you up if you’re not careful.”

“I understand. Thank you,” I said in response.

“Boo... why are you always getting in my way?”

After the incident at the cafeteria, we went to the clubroom set aside for the club that Miss Eldritch is the president of: “Club Infinite Dendrogram,” or “CID” for short.

Last time I was here, I was nearly subjected to Miss Eldritch’s vile ways, but with Fujibayashi present, I didn’t have to worry about that happening again.

“So, Mukudori, did you have some business with me?” Fujibayashi asked.

*Oh, she noticed,* I thought. I went ahead and told her about my difficulty dividing time between reality and *Dendro*.

“Oh, but you just have to focus on your lessons. The more you practice at it, the better you’ll get,” she said. “Besides that, the only thing you really have to pay attention to is your papers.”

“Is that it?”

“Yes. Banish *Infinite Dendrogram* from your mind during lessons. It won’t be easy, since you just started recently, but practice makes perfect. I’m speaking from experience.”

*...I guess she’s right. “All right. I’ll do just that.”*

“Do your best.”

“It’s scary that you can hold yourself in the big T just like that, B,” grumbled Miss Eldritch. “...And it’s scary how Ray thinks that’s reasonable.”

“Did you say something, Miss Eldritch?” I asked.

“Miss what?”

*Ah, I went and said it out loud. There goes my streak of keeping it in my head,* I thought.

“I want you to call me ‘Tsukuyo,’” she asked.

“Will do, Fuso.”

“...You’re a piece of work, aren’t you?” I did have her to thank for fixing my arm, but on the other hand she did kidnap me once and she sexually harassed me every now and then, so I didn’t want to do what she said.

“Well, whatever,” she said. “Anyway, you beat the Hell General, didn’t you? I saw the video.”

“Uhh...” She hadn’t seen it the last time we met, but it seemed like she went on to watch it later.

“You also cleared the ruins and blew up the giant weapon there, huh? Isn’t that nuts?”

“I was involved with the latter, but the former was all Tom’s doing.” We’d only explored the residential area after Tom had destroyed most of the prism soldiers. Hell, even the attack on the plant during the second day was mostly Tom and the other Masters. Honestly, I’d say he deserved nearly all the credit for clearing the ruins.

“Speaking of Tom Cat...” said Fujibayashi. “Mukudori, have you heard?”

“Heard what?” I asked.

“Tomorrow, real world time, Tom Cat and Kashimiya are going to have a ranked match.” She informed me of a coming duel.

◇◇◇

*Prism Rider, Ray Starling*

I logged on to *Dendro* the moment I got home from classes. The place I appeared at was the capital's fountain. I'd returned here from Quartierlatin yesterday and set this as my login point. The weekend would start tomorrow, so I'd be able to stay online for a good while. I'd also be able to return to Gideon — my hometown here.

"Ray. You're back," Nemesis said as she popped out of my crest. That was the same as usual, but there was something that wasn't.  
"Ah. It's The Unbreakable..."

"...I'm scared," I heard someone say. People around me were reacting differently than they had before I'd gone to Quartierlatin. The reactions from children were especially strong.

It was like this before I logged out, but... "Scary?" That was a bit harsh...

"Is this because of the video floating around on 'the net'?" Nemesis asked. I was already relatively well-known due to an incident at Gideon, but the video with the Hell General had made me more famous... or infamous... than ever.

The most striking change was the amount of fear I seemed to cause. That, too, was because of what was in the video.

First of all, the video came in two versions — the complete version and the scene-by-scene version. Among the latter, the most viewed scene was the one where Logan got the death penalty, followed by Gardranda and Gigaknight's battle. The reason why that one gathered so much attention was the rarity of special reward-based summons (if not that, Gardranda's appearance alone would have done it).

Honestly, it was understandable why those two got the most views.

The scene relevant to the current issue, however, was the one in third place — the one where I broke through the devil army and charged Logan.

It showed me releasing miasma everywhere, biting a devil, and running with blood dripping from my mouth.

...I saw it myself, and the angle was just so perfect. It made me feel like I was watching a horror movie. The voices were in French, too, for some reason, which only made it creepier.

Since then, I passed by some Masters in Quartierlatin who went “EEK!” and jumped away from me in shock, while child Masters occasionally cried stuff like “He’s gonna eat meeee!” and actually ran away ... The idea that I was *that* scary kinda got me down.

“I guess eating the devil was a bit too much,” I said.

“...Your appearance doesn’t help, either.” Appearance, huh...? Did the video get tagged with “#DeathKnight” because I was dressed in black?

“Well, you know what they say: ‘everyone gets fifteen minutes of fame.’ They’ll get bored and forget about it eventually.” Though, I didn’t know who was getting the “fifteen minutes” here.

“...You think that isn’t enough time for you to get mixed up in something else? If those ‘fifteen minutes’ keep getting refreshed, they’ll never end, will they?”

I chose to ignore the reasonable and highly compelling, but very unsettling, prediction.

Anyway, it was time to head for Altea’s southern gate and prepare to go to Gideon. Riding Silver would make me stand out too much, so I would only get on him once I was out of the city.

*Though, Quartierlatin's mass-produced models could be a common sight soon. When that happens, I should be able to ride Silver around without standing out.*

“...No, you would not. You will stand out no matter where and what you ride. Consider your apparel.”

*I've been thinking this ever since you pointed it out back at Quartierlatin, but... aren't you making a bit too much of a deal out of my appearance?*

“You think I am...? After seeing your Storm Visage, the mere thought of your appearance changing again fills my heart with worry. Hm...?”

Nemesis looked ahead, seemingly noticing something.

I followed her gaze and saw a clockwork horse ridden by a familiar person.

“Ray, Nemesis... It's been a while.”

“Liliana. It really has.” It was Liliana, riding a mass-produced white Prism Steed.

I'd arrived here alongside Azurite, so I did meet Liliana once before logging out; apparently, she'd gotten a new mount since then.

“You switched to a Prism Steed?”

“Yes. It was time for my trusty horse to retire, anyway, so I visited Quartierlatin and got myself this one.”

That was a sign that they were now being distributed to the kingdom's knights.

The units that could be mass-produced in Quartierlatin — “Second Model Prism Steeds” or “SMPS” — were better overall than the replicas excavated earlier. They had barriers and could fly, which made them better suited to be a knight's mount than the average Demi-Dragon-tier monster.

Their only real drawback was that the barrier and flight were only unlocked if you had Prism Authorization level 1. As a Prism Rider myself, I found that part to be quite a mystery.

Well, perhaps it made sense at first glance, but I didn't understand why this condition was put in place at all. Originals such as Silver could fly and create barriers even if you didn't have the Prism Rider job, yet with replicas, the Prism Authorization skill was absolutely necessary for those functions.

While the other skill — Prism Beast Enhancement — seemed pretty standard, Prism Authorization seemed like exactly that — an authorization.

Hell, even though Prism Beast Enhancement was clearly related to the Prism Steed's skills, it was less like "this skill activates this ability" and more like "we removed the limits *because* you have this skill."

B3 had said that it was like a limitation to prevent those who didn't have the Prism Rider job from using them, but honestly...

"Ray? What is the matter?" Liliana asked.

"Ah... Sorry," I said.

"You have a tendency to lose yourself in thought," Nemesis commented.

*...Perhaps,* I thought. I did often focus on my thoughts too much after being distracted by something.

Rook had said that he had a similar habit. He actually *had* to say that; no one would've known about it otherwise, because his thinking speed was so great that it never seemed like he was lost in thought.

"Liliana, what about Elizabeth's... Her Highness' bodyguard duty?" When we were at Gideon, Liliana was either standing by Elizabeth's side or looking for her after she'd run away. What was that tomboy princess doing now that Liliana was away from Gideon?

“Oh, I received a new order from Her Highness Altimia, so I entrusted her to Sir Lindos for the time being.”

Sir Lindos was quite the serious man. I could only hope that Elizabeth’s shenanigans wouldn’t completely break him.

Though, something she said had me curious.

“An order from Azurite?” Unlike with Elizabeth, I didn’t have to use “Her Highness” there. I had Azurite’s permission to call her just that, and I’d got it again with Liliana listening.

“I know this will be temporary and all, but what could possibly be more important than protecting Azurite’s sister?” I asked.

“...My apologies, but I can’t say that on my own discretion.”

Oh, so this was something classified.

“Her Highness gave me another order, though. It involves you,” Liliana continued.

“Me?”

“Yes. She said she wanted me to find you and Barbaroy and bring you both to the castle.”

“But... why?” I didn’t quite understand why she required us *both*.

“Apparently she has a request for you.” A moment after Liliana’s words...

“...I feel some trouble brewing.”

...Nemesis telepathically spoke words she’d said many times before.

Liliana led us to the castle, then straight to Azurite’s office. I instantly noticed the mountains of documents around her, which told me everything about how busy she was.

...Well, she was the current political heart of the kingdom, and she'd been away in Quartierlatin recently, so I supposed that the work had piled up.

"...You sure look busy," I commented.

"I'm leaving Altea again tomorrow," Azurite said. "I need to get all this work out of the way while I still can."

...What was this masked swordswoman intending to meddle in this time? Though, she wasn't wearing her swordswoman clothing this time — she looked like a normal civil official, and...

"Not wearing your mask today, huh?"

"...Why would I wear it in the castle?"

*Good point, I thought. Hell, in here, it would be worse if she actually did try to hide her royal status.*

"Anyway, what's up?" I asked. "Liliana mentioned a request."

"Yes," Azurite nodded. "I need bodyguards for a trip to Gideon. You're returning there too, are you not?"

"That's the plan. I have nothing against taking this job, but... do you *need* a bodyguard?" Azurite was clearly stronger than me — hell, she was actually on the level of a pre-Superior, if not an actual Superior. At the very least, she would've stood a way better chance against Logan than I did.

"I won't be going alone," she continued. "The person in question has a Master bodyguard, so I thought I would get my own Master retinue to match, but..."

She became silent for a moment.

"The only Masters I've been in close contact with are you, Barbaroy, the parasite, and the Master bodyguard I just mentioned..." Well,

that made sense. She did say that she had been avoiding Masters until recently.

Also, though her attitude towards Masters had changed, she still called Miss Eldritch “parasite.” I could almost hear her voice, saying “That’s sooo meaaaan.”

“Ohh, and you actually know the Master bodyguard, do you not?”

“I do?”

“Master Jiangshi, Xunyu.”

Oh, Xunyu. I did know her. She was one of those people who beat the shit out of me to help me become stronger.

*...Hm? Hold on, but Xunyu's the bodyguard of...*

“...So, about this bodyguard request.”

“As I mentioned, you would have to protect two people: me and Canglong, the third prince of the Huang He Empire.”

*...Failing this one would mean some serious diplomatic trouble, I thought.*

“Like I said, I don’t have any connections among Masters,” Azurite continued. “As things are, you are the only one I can trust enough to request something like this.”

“Well... thanks?”

“No need to thank me. This request is officially for you... and Barbaroy.”

*Aren't you two, well, you know...?* I thought, but couldn’t bring myself to say it out loud.

“You *can* contact her, yes? I told Liliana to search for either of you, because I thought I’d get in touch with both of you if I could reach you.”

“I do have her address and can contact her, yes...”

“Please do, then. Give her this message from me: ‘This is a bodyguard request for a trip from Altea to Gideon. You will protect me and the third prince of the Huang He Empire. Aside from you, Ray, Liliana, and Master Jiangshi, Xunyu will also be acting as bodyguards. We will ride your dragon carriage,’” she said before pausing for a moment. “If you haven’t forgotten your involvement in the capital blockade incident, you are in no position to say no.”

Her tone of voice as she spoke that last sentence sent a chill down my spine.

I logged out, called B3, and passed it on. Her reaction? She instantly logged on and accepted the request.

Thus began our strange party’s trip towards Gideon.

*Let the quest... begin.*

◊

At the moment, we were riding B3’s dragon carriage along the Sauda Mountain Pass leading towards Gideon. Liliana was the coachman, and the carriage was being pulled by her SMPS.

Of course, the royal family had their own Prism Steeds, so they didn’t actually need to borrow B3’s. However, due to recent circumstances, Azurite couldn’t use any of them.

The kingdom had been infiltrated and terrorized by the imperium’s Superiors multiple times now. It had occurred both deep in the south and the very north of Altar, meaning that nowhere was completely safe. If they caught wind that she was traveling between cities, it wasn’t out of the question that they would take the opportunity to cause another incident like the Clash of the Superiors or the events at Quartierlatin’s ruins.

Thus, she had to be covert. It was important to hide the fact that the carriage contained the first princess of Altar and the third prince of Huang He, so Azurite couldn't use the fancy dragon carriages of the royal family. They stood out too much, and there was the threat of someone sabotaging them.

Azurite could go to Gideon all by herself, of course, but this time she had a guest of honor: the young prince. She couldn't let a foreign royal ride a standard dragon carriage. Therefore, she needed a carriage that fulfilled all these conditions: didn't explicitly belong to the royal family, wasn't meant for extravagant ceremonies, looked good in spite of that, and was highly functional, comfortable, and tough. An interior with spatial expansion would've been a nice bonus.

Now, that seemed like a tall order, but what do you know — something like that actually existed.

We were riding it right now, in fact. B3's dragon carriage was an absurdly good quality product from Legendaria. Even the most luxurious carriages available on Altar's market were all outdated and lacked certain modern features, meaning this one surpassed them in every aspect.

Azurite had already ridden it from Quartierlatin to the capital, so she was already aware of its utility and value. Even though she had her mask on, I could tell by her eyes that she was thinking about how she could use this thing. And B3, being partially responsible for some severe damage to the kingdom, wasn't in a position to refuse to provide her carriage and services for this very serious escort quest.

*At least she's getting a reward, I guess,* I thought.

"Also, Azurite probably has many other things to be concerned about besides the dragon carriage," Nemesis added telepathically.

*Yeah. Regardless of what they are, we do have a bit of a problem here...*

“This really is an impressive dragon carriage,” Azurite remarked.

“...That’s true,” said B3.

“Don’t look so worried. I won’t confiscate it.”

“...Oh, I definitely wasn’t worried about that.”

“I see. By the way, how much do you think this carriage is worth?”

“...Somewhere over a hundred million.”

“Really, now? Not that it’s relevant, but that’s nowhere near the losses caused by the capital blockade.”

“...”

...The air between them was absurdly cold.

I really appreciated two things right now: the fact that Xunyu and the third prince were in the cabin at the back, and the fact that this carriage had spatial expansion, which let me sit a decent distance away from them.

“...Those two are the same as ever,” Nemesis commented.

As Nemesis implied, Azurite and B3 didn’t get along too well, to put it mildly. B3 was constantly reminded of the damage she’d dealt to the economy by partaking in the blockade. Her right to use save points was at risk. The victim in this situation had really grabbed her tormentor by the scruff of her neck.

“I gotta say... They’re like rock-paper-scissors.” Based on what Shu had told me, Miss Eldritch had made the royal family sign several contracts in exchange for services from The Lunar Society.

Because of this, the royal family had to humble themselves before Miss Eldritch, and Azurite's uncomfortable relationship with Miss Eldritch had made her deem the girl a "parasite."

With that in mind, the three girls had a dynamic that went like this:

Azurite was strong against B3, but weak against Miss Eldritch.

B3 was strong against Miss Eldritch, but weak against Azurite.

And Miss Eldritch was strong against Azurite, but weak against B3.

Again, it was like rock-paper-scissors with them.

*Or maybe it's like that trilemma between a frog, snake, and slug.*

"...You better not start comparing them to those vermin out loud," Nemesis spoke telepathically.

*I know. I realized that myself right after thinking it.*

"B-By the way, what did you order Liliana to do that was more important than her duty as Elizabeth's guard?" I asked Azurite, in a weak attempt to make the mood more bearable. I knew that Liliana had been given an important order, but she didn't know if she could tell me what it was.

"I had her transport a broken national treasure to Quartierlatin and act as my agent in a request to repair it. Liliana was easily the best person for the job," Azurite answered.

Transporting a national treasure definitely seemed like a serious job best left to people you trusted a lot.

*But why bring it to Quartierlatin, of all places...? I wondered.*

"National treasure... Ah!" I exclaimed as I remembered one particular broken treasure and what was currently being built in Quartierlatin. "The Prism Steed, right?"

"Yes. That precious heirloom that has been with our country for as long as it existed, only to break in the last war."

Gold Thunder. That was one of the original Prism Steeds, last used by Celestial Knight, Langley Grandria — the strongest knight in the kingdom, who'd sadly been slain in a battle against Logan's Mythical-rank devil.

I'd heard that Gold Thunder had been damaged so badly that even its auto-repair function no longer worked. "Can it really be fixed?" I asked.

"That is still unknown," said Azurite. "All we found in the ruins was an SMPS manufactory. Nothing else. However, that's where the kingdom's few machine-focused Masters are located, so giving Gold Thunder over to them seems a lot better than just keeping its shattered remains locked away."

By "machine-focused Masters," she was mainly referring to Blue Screen.

"Though, I am somewhat concerned about leaving the task to the former core members of the rather infamous Sol Crisis," Azurite added.

"They haven't exactly had a change of heart since then, but they *can* be trusted to complete quests with attractive rewards," B3 commented. "Unless their end goal is just PK itself, most PKs do have an eye for profit. I believe they'll do the job as long as the pay is good."

"I see. Very convincing, coming from *you*."

"Ghh..." ...And so the mood in the carriage was back to square one.

I realized now that I couldn't change her mind, so I just said "I'll go check on them," and went to the back cabin.

There, I found Canglong, the third prince of Huang He, and the abnormality that I was quite used to by now — Xunyu. Side note: she was keeping her Tenaga-Ashinaga shorter than normal, so it didn't look like she was uncomfortable in this relatively tight space.

"Huh? What's up?" she asked.

"The air over there is really suffocating..." I said.

"What, they havin' a catfight or somethin'? Should ya really be comin' here?"

"Not that kind of suffocating."

*And what would I have to do with any catfights?* I thought.

"I suppose not even a person of Master Ray's caliber can feel comfortable in the presence of quarreling ladies," Canglong commented with a smile devoid of malice.

Despite being a prince, he was really modest, always adding "Master" before my and Xunyu's names. He even insisted that we talk to him like we normally did. I wasn't sure if it was okay for a prince to behave like that, but according to him, "I may have imperial blood, but I am not very involved in politics. You don't have to be so considerate of me."

*Is that how most third princes are?* I wondered.

"Yeah, I guess I can't feel comfortable," I said. "Girls are terrifying when they fight. They mainly use words..."

"...You know who you're talking about, right? You really think they won't pull out their weapons?"

*...They might,* I thought, as a clear picture of armor-clad B3 and Azurite brandishing Altar formed in my head.

*And B3 would lose because of compatibility...*

“I doubt it will come to that,” Nemesis commented. “They have a common... *friend* in you.”

“I hope that keeps them from escalating things...” I said. “Let’s change the subject.”

“YeAh.”

“Canglong, what were you doing in the capital all this time? If I recall correctly, you were originally supposed to head to Gideon a month ago, during The Clash of the Superiors, right?”

“Yes!” Azurite and Canglong both were supposed to come to Gideon on that fateful day. However, they had to postpone their arrival due to the recent Epidemic. That, the effects of Franklin’s Game, and the incident at the ruins had kept Azurite busy for a long time, rendering her unable to go to Gideon until just today. What had Canglong been doing during all this time?

“This journey served a diplomatic purpose, as well as broadening my own horizons,” he answered. “I spent that time experiencing the capital and the port city to the west.”

“I wAs with him whEn he was oUt, by thE way,” Xunyu added. “As he is nOw, his stats arE low.”

*I see. It’s probably not exactly like that, but it sort of reminds me of a long school trip.*

“Thanks to you, we were able to go to the port city and back in one day!”

“It’s in thE same coUntry, and it’s nOt like wE had to cross an endlEss desert likE in CaldinA. Going thEre and back in a dAy is child’s plAy.”

*...The world must seem really small to those who can travel at the speed of sound, I thought.*

“BUt man, why evEn use a carriAge? I coUld carry yOu to GideOn in a flAsh,” Xunyu added.

“Master Xunyu, that would be quite inappropriate...” said Canglong.  
“I am going to a formal marriage meeting. I cannot show up in the arms of another lady.”

“That’s trUe.”

*Yeah, that sounds like grounds for an instant cancellation of the marr... marriage?*

“So, you’re heading to Gideon for a marriage meeting?” asked Nemesis.

“Yes. The royal capital was unfit for the purpose for various reasons, so it will happen in Gideon instead.”

“No, it isn’t the location I’m wondering about. Who are you set to marry?”

“The second princess of Altar, Her Highness Elizabeth.”

*...Excuse me?* Canglong’s words seemed profoundly important to me. I was about to ask more questions, but suddenly the dragon carriage stopped.

Looking outside through the window, I saw a group of armed people surrounding the carriage.

◇

In *Infinite Dendrogram*, bandits and brigands were actually thought to be less common than you’d expect in a fantasy setting.

The reason for that was the presence of Masters — the immortal beings who gained immense powers from their Embryos.

The thing about Masters was that you couldn’t tell how powerful one was just by looking at them. There were children walking around with Superior Jobs, and jesters in costumes summoning battleships and burning down entire forests.

They weren't all equally powerful, of course, but there were thousands of them all over the world. Accidentally attacking a Master would mean having to fight an immortal superhuman, which didn't seem like a gamble most people would find worth taking.

Because of this, there were only four types of people who would become bandits.

First were the Master bandits. There were those like B3's Mad Castle, which focused exclusively on other Masters, as well as those like Goblin Street, which would also attack tians, but they were unified in that they didn't fear Masters as much as tians did since they were Masters themselves.

Second were the groups like the Gouz-Maise Gang. They were organized and had many members, a handful of which could be notably powerful, giving them the potential to fend off most Masters.

The third were the groups that had a great deal to gain by engaging in banditry. These included the bandits lurking around the trade route going through the Cruella Mountain Belt to the east of Gideon. In other words, they were so blinded by greed that they simply ignored the risks.

And the fourth were the kind of bandits attacking us right now.

"Kheheheh! Leave yer valuables and carriage right 'ere!" They surrounded us, said exactly what you'd expect to hear, and tried to menace us with weapons held high. Their weapons were crude, though, and their levels were probably low.

It was pretty clear that they had become bandits and were now trying to rob us simply because they *didn't even consider* the dangers of attacking Masters, or that even tians could be powerful. They probably just looked at Liliana in the coachman's seat, saw a fair-looking lady, and assumed that this carriage was easy prey.

However, even Liliana was a relatively strong Paladin. She'd been training hard during her days of watching over Elizabeth. As far as I knew, her level was over 300 right now, but even then, she was on the lower end of the spectrum among everyone riding in this carriage.

They'd clearly chosen the wrong prey.

Alas, it was already too late. One of those inside opened the door and stepped out.

"HuhH? WhAt? Altar's got bAndits this dAmn stupid?"

"The hell're... you... Ehh...?" Upon seeing who had stepped out, the bandits were at a loss for words.

Of course they would be. They just saw an over four metel-tall anomaly step out of a carriage that seemed way too small for it.

"I swear, if I see a single scratch on my goddamn ride," said another... *person* who stepped outside, clad in ultra-heavy armor from head to toe.

*She* bashed her shields together in a show of force.

"I haven't heard of this happening too often after Ray crushed the Gouz-Maise Gang... so of course we'd run into bandits when I was transporting a foreign guest of honor... What a disgrace."

The last to come out was a weirdo in a mask.

Apparently, some of the bandits thought that she looked somewhat normal compared to the other two, but then she drew her sword — The Primeval Blade, Altar — and the bandits fell on their backsides. Some even wet themselves.

Even if they couldn't identify it, they could *instinctively* feel how terrifying it was.

The bandits no longer had any will to fight. The three monst— Uh, *ladies* had the kind of pressure that clearly showed how immense the gulf in power was between the two parties, even if they couldn't gauge it exactly.

"They're probably the three scariest women in the kingdom," Nemesis commented.

"If you ask me, Miss Eldritch would be in the top three instead of either B3 or Xunyu."

"...I recommend against saying that to Azurite."

"...Oh, I won't." That aside, the situation was actually worse now than it would've been if Miss Eldritch was around.

I didn't know about Xunyu, but the other two were clearly in a bad mood. B3 was seeing red from the stress, while Azurite was irritated about the very existence of bandits in her country. This could easily become a whole lot more tragic than it had to be.

Feeling that I had to stop it, I decided to leave the carriage as well.

"Oh, I should prepare in case a battle breaks out," I said, turning Nemesis into The Flag Halberd in case of debuffs. I then used Gardranda's miasma and flame-spewing mouths, activated Gouz-Maise in case I needed extra MP or SP, donned Monochrome's hood, and equipped my Storm Visage.

As ready as I could possibly be, I walked out and started speaking.  
"B3, Azurite, calm down. They clearly lost all will to—"

"I-IT'S THE LEADER OF THE MONSTEEERS!"

"MOMMYYYYY!" The bandits looked even more terrified than before — screaming, fainting, falling to the ground and grinding their faces against it, or even trying to run despite being unable to even stand.



“...W h y?” I tilted my head in confusion. They acted as if they’d just seen something even scarier than the other three.

“Your appearance took it to the next level...” Nemesis sighed.

“...Is it that bad? Even compared to them?” I wanted to argue, but the terrorized bandits acted as compelling proof.

Thus, the bandits, terrified by our appearances, gave up without a fight.

*...I'm so lost right now, I thought.*

We bound the bandits and waited for knights from the capital to come retrieve them.

The tough ropes we used, by the way, were acquired by me rolling the gacha.

At the moment, Azurite was using her Truth Discernment to question them.

Apparently, they’d only made their banditry debut this very day. They were basically a bunch of village delinquents, and they hadn’t even finished leveling a single low-rank job.

Well, considering that they gave up before anyone was hurt, they would probably be released with just some community service.

...Attacking the acting ruler of Altar and a foreign prince at the same time, though, was actually a very grave crime; since they were traveling covertly, though, the bandits couldn’t be punished for that. We’d asked Canglong if he was okay with this, and he approved.

They’d also learned their lesson. According to Azurite, they were pledging to lead honest lives once their punishment was over.

However, we had a little problem.

"W-We... We captured a Master and took him to our base," one of them said. There was another victim... and a Master, at that.

Apparently, the Master had surrendered without any resistance, making them overconfident and leading them to believe they could take on a carriage driven by a knight. But...

"A Master surrendered?" I asked.

"Y-Yes! He was a Master! There was one of 'em Crests on his hand!" That was strange. Again, these bandits weren't too strong. Even an ordinary member of the Gouz-Maise Gang was stronger than them. Anyone who could cross the Sauda Mountain Pass by themselves and deal with the monsters here would be able to deal with them, as well.

Maybe the Master just wanted to avoid fighting people.

"What's the Master doing right now?"

"He said we could collect a ransom for him, so we locked him in our base... it's a shack nearby." Ah-hah... He was probably planning to log out. We Masters could do that as long as we weren't interacting with anyone or bound in some way. If captured, we could undo our shackles and move to safety after logging out. It was a way of both avoiding conflict and escaping safely. Though a bit roundabout, that was probably the Master's intention.

It was safe to assume that he had already logged out and returned to safety.

...Though, for all we know, he could've been a total newbie who'd only surrendered and spoke of a ransom because he was panicking. He might've not realized that he could log out. Maybe he was even still sitting, terrified, back in their shack.

"Azurite—"

"We have some time until the knights come. I don't mind if you go check on him," she said, understanding me before I could even say anything.

"Thanks. I'm off."

And so, leaving the bandits to Azurite and B3, I traveled to their base. Riding Silver, I arrived at the shack in question in about five minutes. It was completely unlike the mountain fortress occupied by the Gouz-Maise Gang.

"Well, they *were* the most troublesome bandits in the kingdom," said Nemesis. "It isn't a fair comparison."

"That's true. Anyway..."

According to the bandits, they didn't leave any guards — only locked the place up. Sure enough, there was no one around, and the door sported a chain with a padlock on it.

I casually pulled on it, and my STR, buffed by Gardranda, instantly broke it.

"...Is the Master still inside?" I asked as I gently pulled on the door.

However, something inside kept it from opening.

"Who is it?" a voice from inside asked. It was far more composed than I expected.

"Uh... I'm an Altarian Master who caught the bandits. I came to help."

"Ohh, thank you. I'm a bit busy right now, so feel free to come in and wait a moment."

*...Just to make sure, I'm here to help someone in need, right?* I wondered. I pulled on the door again, and it seemed like whatever was holding it shut was gone.

I was still careful, in case this was a trap. "...Pardon the intrusion," I said.

"...Is that truly the correct thing to say here?" Nemesis asked. Inside, I saw a person sitting on the bed ahead.

It was a black-haired man slightly older than me. Pen in hand, he was writing something down on his memo pad. Seemingly in high-spirits, he didn't even glance at us, as though focused entirely on what he was doing.

No. That wasn't right. We weren't the only thing he wasn't looking at — he wasn't looking at anything at all.

His eyes were closed even as he was writing.

This strange sight left me speechless.

He continued writing for a good few minutes before...

"This gave me some excellent ideas," he said. "I can't wait for the result."

Finally, he opened his eyes, showing his golden pupils.

Then, he took photos of what he'd written down.

I was aware that photos you took in *Dendro* could be uploaded to devices on the other side as images. It wasn't a function I'd ever used, but I could tell that he was really familiar with it.

"Oh, sorry to keep you waiting," he said. "I was on a bit of a writing spree." Once he was done taking photos, he finally faced me. "You have my thanks for saving me."

*...That's kind of a strange thing to say in this situation,* I thought.

Well, perhaps the gratitude was expected, but I'd just watched him lose himself in whatever he was doing to the extent that he hadn't even looked at us. He probably didn't need to be "saved" by anyone. The most likely situation here was that...

"Umm, I'll be blunt... You let yourself get kidnapped, didn't you?" I asked.

"Yes," he answered without hesitation.

It was more or less what I expected, considering how composed he was and how experienced he looked.

"...Why did you do that?"

"To acquire material," he answered. "I happen to be an author in real life."

"...An author?"

"Yes. I let myself be abducted to further my search for writing material."

Hearing that made me think of a certain party member of mine — Marie. She was a mangaka, and I'd heard that she was logging in to *Dendro* and roleplaying as an assassin for work-related research. It wasn't surprising that there were more people out there like her.

"You can't experience being captured by bandits in real life, can you?" he asked.

"Well... I guess not?"

*At least not in Japan, I thought. I got captured by Amazons in South America once, though.*

"People have the power of imagination, but it's more difficult to imagine something you haven't experienced and digested with your own brain. Each and every word and sight you experience first hand feeds your imagination."

I could understand his point well enough. People could only really imagine what they saw, heard, and felt for themselves. Words you've never heard could never surface in your mind.

“And this is why I am here,” he said. “There are just far too many experiences that can only be acquired in this world.”

“...That’s true.” I did agree with him. There were indeed many things, both good and bad, that existed here, but not back on Earth.

“And that’s why being captured by the bandits was a precious experience to me... Oh, speaking of the bandits, how will they be punished?”

“Putting your situation aside, they’ll only get some community service.”

“Oh. I approve of that, too. I’m not entirely sure how Altar’s legal system works, but I won’t press charges. In fact, I would like to thank them.”

“I see... Hm?” His words just now made me feel like something wasn’t right... But why?

“That aside, I will take my leave now. Sorry for bothering you today.”

“Oh, no worries.”

“Pardon the late introduction, but my name is F. My job is High Secretary.”

“Oh, right. I’m—”

“I know you. You’re Ray Starling the Unbreakable, and Nemesis.”

*...That video really did make me more famous... or infamous... than ever, huh?*

“I should also thank the bandits for giving me a chance to meet you. I’m so glad I was kidnapped.”

That’s not the kind of sentence you hear very often, but he seemed to mean it.

"I'll be going now. Let us meet again, if fate decrees it so," he said as he left the shack.

That was proof that he indeed had the power to walk through this mountain pass on his own.

I watched as he disappeared in the woods.

"Why the serious look?" Nemesis asked.

"I feel like I know someone with a similar vibe to him," I said. He reminded me of someone, but I couldn't put my finger on who.

"Is it not Marie? Authors and mangaka are similar professions, no?"

*They have a similar reason for playing and share a similar indifference, but I feel like Marie's shadiness is different than his. And... something just doesn't feel right about him.*

"There's no harm in wondering about him, but for now, we should go back. The capital's knights should arrive at the carriage soon."

"...Yeah." We were currently on an escort quest to Gideon. I'd save thinking about F for later.

## ***Chapter Two: Battle for the Penultimate Throne***

*Prism Rider, Ray Starling*

We were greeted by Gideon's immense outer wall, which I was actually kind of nostalgic for at this point.

There were fireworks bursting up above the city as if it was New Year's. Did they have something to do with the upcoming battle between Tom and Kashimiya?

Once I led Azurite and Canglong to the count's mansion, the quest was complete. If you ignored the freezing cold atmosphere created by Azurite and B3, the sudden bandit attack, and the encounter with F, I would say that it was fairly uneventful.

When Azurite rewarded me, she said that she might call for me again tomorrow. Also, after both she and Canglong had entered the guest house, B3 heaved a particularly long, deep sigh. The trip seemed to have taken a heavy toll on her.

“...You were really tense, huh?” I asked.

“Of course I was. My position in Altar depended on how well that quest went,” she said. “Unlike Eldridge, I actually want to stay in the kingdom.”

Apparently, she thought she was on the verge of being added to the wanted list. Honestly, I really doubted that Azurite would go that far. It seemed like she was just trying to get a feel for Masters like B3..

Following the incident at Quartierlatin, Azurite had decided to rely more on Masters, but whether that went well depended on both tians and Masters, not just one side or the other.

Altar had both worlders and ludos, and each and every one had their own outlook. I'd heard that most of the participants in the previous

war were worlders, but it was clear that the kingdom also needed the ludos to stand a chance in the upcoming round two.

This quest was like a test. She entrusted B3 — a ludo and a PK terrorist — with an escort quest to see how she would behave. The dragon carriage thing might've been just a front. Even if B3's ride was insanely good, the kingdom surely had a fair amount of dragon carriages that would have been well-suited for this trip.

Then again, despite being a PK terrorist who turned into a bad guy when she donned her armor, B3 was a sensible person, so it was hard to say that Azurite had figured out what all ludos were like just by observing her. Even Logan had been acting on the will of the imperium, though, so perhaps you could say that as long as the reward was right, ludos might be even more eager to contribute than worlders. Regardless, this event might've been one of the factors that would ultimately decide Altar's guiding principles in the coming war.

We then went to meet up with Rook and the others.

The location was the same one we'd used when meeting up with Rook and Marie for the first time — the café with the open terrace.

"So I'll finally meet your party and brother," said B3 as we walked.  
"I'm a bit nervous."

I'd thought it would be great for her to join us on our ventures, and I'd already asked what she thought of that. She'd said that she hadn't had much to do lately after her clan disbanded, so she didn't mind joining us.

"Ah. We're here," I said, as we arrived.

"Ray! I haven't seen you in a while!" Rook called out with a smile.  
Marie sat next to him.

"It really has been a while, hasn't it, Rook. You too, Marie," I replied.

This reminded me that we hadn't met since the day our plans to go to the ocean were disrupted by Tsukikage kidnapping me. It was only a week in real life, or three weeks in-game, but I felt like it had been way longer than that.

"Ray... I'm glad you seem well," said Marie.

"You too... is what I'd like to say, but you actually don't look so great," I said, noting how tired she seemed to be.

"Well, I had this and that going on... Hm?"

Marie was usually like this when she either had too much Journalist work or was handling something Elizabeth-related, so with the match coming up and Elizabeth's arranged marriage, it could honestly be either.

Also, she was glaring behind me, for some reason. Why? It was just B3.

"By the way, where's Shu?" I asked Rook.

"He left the city for some urgent business. I have the tickets."

*Urgent business? Here? As in, not in reality? What could it be?*

"By the way, who is that armored person there?" he asked.

"Ohh, let me introduce her. This is B3, my senior in real life and... armored?"

It took Rook pointing it out for me to realize that B3 had used Instant Wear to switch from her normal clothing to Magnum Colossus.

She was giving off her usual violent aura, and it was clear that she was ready to fight. "So... I have to look at your ugly mug once again, you goddamn hitman RPer."

"And you haven't changed a bit, you villain RPer." B3 and Marie glared at each other, clearly ready for murder. ...I could feel their bloodlust even past their armor and sunglasses.

They seemed to know each other... Well, they were both fellow PKs who took part in the blockade around the capital. It wasn't *that* surprising that they would be acquainted.

"Do you know each other from the capital blockade?" I asked.

"As if," they both said in unison.

*Huh? I guessed wrong?* I thought.

"She ambushed me after my clan disbanded... Sometime after whatever happened here in Gideon," B3 explained

*...Seriously? I was wondering why I saw Marie so rarely back then. Was that the reason?*

"What an awful way to put it," said Marie. "I put my PK job on hold after I joined your party, Ray, but I received a lot of requests from newbies who wanted me to get revenge on the PK at Sauda Mountain Pass."

...That explained it. Though, I wasn't sure what to think about someone hiring a PK who was just doing the exact same thing north of the city.

*Then again, not everyone knew that the PK in the north was the Superior Killer...*

"Umm, did she PK you?" I asked B3.

"Hell no. I held 'er off. It cost me a bunch of accessories and items, though."

"The matchup isn't in my favor," Marie said. "My basic shots just fall to the ground, and even Daisy did almost nothing because of your elemental defense and Dragonscale Wards. And why were you wearing that armor like you were expecting an ambush?"

"I'm really damn used to PKs who attack outta nowhere."

“...Does she mean that wolf-eared musclebeast shotacon?” Nemesis wondered telepathically.

*Each of those words totally fit Rosa, but stringing them all together is too much. Tone it down,* I said.

“Ray was talkin’ a lot about some ‘Marie’ person. Funny as shit that it turned out to be you. I’ll settle the score before I join Ray’s party,” said B3.

“Fine by me,” said Marie. “I still need to complete the hit. White, black, and blue should do the trick. Coincidentally, those are the colors *you’re* going to be once I’m done.”

B3 readied her shields, while Marie brandished her handgun and dagger.

I didn’t think it was a good idea for the kingdom’s top PKs to fight in town in broad daylight.

*Oh, wait, I thought. We’re in Gideon.*

“Why not use an arena?” I asked.

“That wouldn’t be PK, then, would it?!” they replied in unison again, totally rejecting my suggestion.

*...Why are these two so in sync with each other?! Are they secretly close friends or something?!*

“They are similar in personality, so perhaps this is less about their history with each other and more about simple hatred for one’s own kind,” Nemesis commented.

*They’re not that similar. I mean, aside from the fact that they’re both bespectacled PKs who hide their identities and tend to reliably provide polite and thorough exposition.*

“Umm, shouldn’t you stop them?” Rook asked.

"I should. The PK seems unavoidable, but that's not something you do in the middle of a city."

Honestly, they should've been moving to some mountain far from civilization. But they were even more ready to fight than before, so there was no telling what might set them off now. It was clearly "kill or be killed" between them.

...Why was it that so many women around me seemed to have some kind of "battle switch" that made them hunger for conflict? My sister was the most obvious example.

"But how *can* I stop them?" I wondered only a moment before the presence of a third person startled me so much I let out a gasp.

I wasn't the only one who felt it. Nemesis, Rook, and even the two battle-crazed women were staring at the source of this presence.

Who could blame us? After all, it was more overpowering than even the women's bloodlust. As for who caused it... "I sense an overworld match. It's rare for them to happen outside of Tenchi."

It was a boy clad in woolly clothing, sporting blades that didn't suit his small frame and wearing an expression full of excitement for the upcoming bloodbath.

"I would like to take part in your overworld match," he said. "I haven't had one in a while now."

The boy was The Unsheathe, Kashimiya "the Guillotine."

The bloodlust of *some* of the kingdom's greatest PKs attracted *the* greatest.

Needless to say, the battle was immediately called off. The two were aware how pointless it was to fight with Kashimiya present. I couldn't help but notice how they were rubbing the back of their necks sheepishly. Kashimiya, however, looked somewhat disappointed.

Anyway, though B3 and Marie's bloodbath had been called off, they still wanted to settle the score before joining the same party, so they'd decided to do it in the arena.

I considered watching their match, but Kashimiya stopped me, saying that he wanted to have a word with me. Apparently, he hadn't found us just by chance — he'd actually been looking for me or my acquaintances.

Whatever he wanted to talk about, it seemed pretty serious, so I entrusted Marie and B3 to Rook and talked to Kashimiya.

"So, what do you need?" I asked. My only real link to Kashimiya was the time Rosa attacked me on the way to Torne, but if that's what this was about, he would be better off talking to B3.

If it wasn't that, then what could it be?

"You recently defeated the Hell General, didn't you?" he asked.

"Yeah." Now I understood. Logan was a Dryfean Superior, as well as their top-ranking duelist... though, I'd heard that the King of Thieves had defeated him and taken his throne.

Did Kashimiya want to talk about him, as a fellow high-ranking duelist?

"I want to ask about the skill you used to defeat the Hell General," he said. "How fast can it get?"

*Huh? That wasn't the kind of question I expected,* I thought.

"I saw the video. I believe that the skill gains more speed and power the longer you charge it... do I have it right?"

He clearly meant Payback Beyond the Stars. Apparently, it wasn't Logan he cared about, but that particular skill of mine.

"Not exactly," I answered. "It does need to be charged, but it's for the process of converting the damage I received from the enemy into

power, range, and speed. The speed is actually proportional to the damage taken.”

I wondered if I should be revealing so much of my hand like this, but I figured that it was now public enough knowledge that people would have it figured out sooner or later; I decided to just come right out and say how it worked.

“I... actually don’t know how fast it can become. When I used it against Logan, it had 60,000 AGI, but I’m pretty sure that’s not the limit.”

“Hmm...” Kashimiya pondered something for a moment before speaking, “Thank you, Mr. Ray, for explaining it to me, even if it meant revealing the nature of your ability. I’m indebted to you.”

“Hey, don’t be. People would’ve had it figured out in no time.”

“Even so, I insist. Also, this might be impudent of me, but could I ask you a favor?”

“What, exactly?”

“When you have time, I would like you to use that skill on me in a mock battle.” I’d sparred against rankers many times by now, so I had nothing against Kashimiya joining them. There were probably many things I could learn from the kingdom’s third duel ranker and strongest PK.

But... why did he want me to use Payback Beyond the Stars?

“This might sound arrogant, but... I actually don’t know anyone who’s faster than me at the moment.”

“...Which is why ‘The Kingdom’s Fastest’ is another one of your nicknames, huh?”

“Exactly.” B3 had told me that nobody could beat Kashimiya’s speed. Even *the Figaro* was said to be far slower than him.

"However, cutting down those who are slower than me does not help me train to cut down those who are faster." That made sense. I'd more or less gotten the point.

Payback Beyond the Stars gained more speed the more damage I'd accumulated. Theoretically, if I took enough damage, I might be able to outpace even The Kingdom's Fastest. Kashimiya wanted to face that and maybe learn something new. The Unsheathe was part of the "The One" series of jobs, so perhaps it had something to do with skill creation.

Personally, I didn't mind cooperating, but...

"Hmph. So you basically want him to act as your pitching machine," said Nemesis.

"Ah. Umm... I'm sorry!" Kashimiya apologized and bowed his head, feeling that he upset Nemesis somehow. Honestly, she *did* look slightly offended.

"Nemesis?"

"Just think about it, Ray. Just how badly would he have to cut you up to get the speed he needed?"

"...Ohh." That *was* a problem. The very fact that we were talking about this meant that he was at least faster than Figaro. It was possible that I would have to take 1,000,000 damage to reach his speed.

"By the way, what's your AGI?" I asked.

"Normally, it's 5,000." *Huh? That's unexpectedly slow...* "But it's 500,000 when I'm using the art of sword drawing."

*...Scratch that. What the hell is with that speed?! And what's with the giant gap between the two numbers?!*

"...To pass that with our skill, we'd have to take 5,000,000 damage," I said.

“Oh... that doesn’t work,” Kashimiya replied. Even at my current HP, that would mean basically dying hundreds of times. How long would it take and how many potions would I have to drink? It was best to not even think about it.

“Cutting you up that much would be inappropriate, so never mind about that...”

“Yeah, thanks.” Not even I could handle all that. It’d turn me into mincemeat.

Anyway, though we wouldn’t be doing everything he asked, we did agree to have a mock battle sometime. New sparring partners were always good in my book.

I decided to hang around and chat until the three who’d gone off to the arena returned. I did consider going to watch, but I didn’t know which one they’d be using... and honestly, I was kinda scared of seeing what was going on there.

“Hm...” As we talked, I belatedly noticed something about Kashimiya. His weapons were enormous katana — *odachi* — linked to chains capped off by decorations shaped like rabbit and shark skulls. He had two of them, both of which had the rabbit skull biting into it. They were about ten centimeters longer than Kashimiya was tall.

Such large weapons were clearly unfitting for a boy his age, and he seemed on the smaller side, too.

I also didn’t forget that Kashimiya’s job was The Unsheathe. That was a job focused around *iai* — the art of drawing the sword, cutting down the opponent, and quickly resheathing it. Not even a full-grown man could do that with odachi like these, and he was just a boy.

“Umm, is there something wrong with my swords?” Kashimiya asked, curious why I was staring.

“I’m just wondering how you can perform iais with those.”

“Everyone does...” So I wasn’t the only one with this question.

However, the answer that followed made me somewhat confused.

“When I demonstrate, people don’t even see it...”

“What?”

“It seems to be caused by the difference in AGI.” He’d said that his was 500,000. It’d gotten him the title of “The Kingdom’s Fastest,” so it wasn’t that weird that no one else could perceive it when he employed his sword skill.

“Hey, what was that about your AGI being different when you’re drawing your sword?” I asked.

“It’s the effect of ‘Godlike Unsheathing.’ That’s the ultimate passive skill of The Unsheath, and it multiplies my AGI by 100 *only while I’m unsheathing a blade.*”

That made sense to me. Real life experts of iai were said to be able to do it so fast that it looked like the sword never even left the sheath, and this skill was basically that taken to the extreme. My guess was that he could instantly cut down anyone who entered his range. It was a potent skill indeed, but like I’d been told, it seemed to be a bad match for Tom.

If it ended after the first swing, he wouldn’t be able to get rid of all eight Toms at once.

“All right, I get that you’re too fast for anyone to see you draw them, but how *do* you draw them? I mean, your arms aren’t even long enough to pull them all the way out, right?”

Kashimiya nodded in response and stood up.

“Well, I can show you how I am *before* I draw them, so let me demonstrate.”

Saying that, he assumed a posture.

It seemed to be a sword-drawing stance, but it was odd. His left hand — which would normally be holding onto the sheath — was just hanging in the air. His right hand, however, was on the grip, where it was supposed to be.

Just as I was thinking that unsheathing the sword would be impossible like that, the chains connecting Kashimiya's waist with the blade began moving on their own.

The rabbit skull-shaped holder bit into and held the sword's sheath in the air. It was as though the chains were taking over the left hand's role and holding the sheath for him. Was this his...?

"You haven't seen anything like this before, have you? This 'tachio'... sword strap is my Embryo, Inaba."

Inaba... as in the Hare of Inaba, clearly.

The long chains fixed the sheathed odachi in the air — specifically, at a level that made it easy for Kashimiya to unsheathe it.

"A chain... no... an auxiliary arm Embryo."

"Yes." That answered that question. These chains explained why Kashimiya, who was small even for a boy of his young age, was able to unsheathe these large blades. With support from something like this, even children were able to perform iais. Aside from the strange quirk of replacing his left arm with a chain, his stance was quite masterful.

His aura was so intense that it was hard to believe it came from a young child. My survival instincts were raising the alarm, warning me that my head could be on the ground the very next moment. This was probably what B3 and Marie had sensed.

"Thanks," I said. "Now I get how you draw your sword."

“You’re welcome. I’m glad I was able to answer your question.”

He then relaxed his stance, instantly dispersing the tense atmosphere around him. Maybe he was releasing a surge of some sort of “grandmaster swordsman’s essence” or something.

...Why was an elementary schooler capable of anything “grandmaster?”

Then again, the world of *Dendro* was no stranger to outliers of any age.

“Also, if you don’t mind me satisfying my curiosity... are these odachi both MVP special rewards?” I asked. The two blades in different sheaths — one red and one blue — seemed to have an unusual presence. The red one in particular gave me a feeling similar to what I’d felt when looking at Figaro’s Gloria α and Xunyu’s Suling Yi. If the chain was his Embryo, were the weapons special rewards?

“This one is like a special reward, yes, but the other one was crafted for me by a smith I knew back in Tenchi.” The former was the red one, while the latter was the blue one. “It’s made out of Mythical metal. It’s very reliable and it helps me a lot in duels and the like,” the boy added, all smiles, while holding the odachi with the blue sheath.

There was a subtlety there that I definitely noticed.

“You can’t say the same about the one with the red sheath?” I asked. It was as though he’d said that it was unreliable and didn’t help him in duels.

“This one... It gets moody when I try to use it inside duel barriers.”

*...So, it has a mind of its own? Is it cursed or something?* I wondered.

“Perhaps it’s of the same kind as Gardranda?” Nemesis commented telepathically. “The bracers aren’t saying anything now, but they do possess intelligence, yes?”

*Oh yeah, they were much like that.*

“So, when you fight Tom tonight...”

“I won’t use it. Mostly because I won’t be able to. I just accept that, though. It’s a blade that doesn’t leave its sheath unless it will be used in a real battle to the death, or at least an overworld match against a Master.”

What a blood-crazed hunk of metal... “But then, how do you repair it?” I asked.

*Or is it best maintained by cutting living creatures? That’d fit a cursed blade perfectly.*

“No. It does come out for maintenance. Like so,” he said, taking out maintenance equipment such as Japanese paper, a pot of oil, and polishing powder before removing the odachi from the red sheath without any issue at all.

It was a fancier blade than I’d realized. It had an intimidating aura, and the “Horobimaru” kanji on the blade made it look pretty cool, but I couldn’t help but feel like I was looking at an unruly pet that became obedient at the promise of treats.

We talked for quite a bit longer before Kashimiya stood up.

“I will be leaving now. Thank you for talking to me today,” he said.

“No problem. I’m looking forward to your match against Tom, as well as our mock battles.”

“Same here! I’m looking forward to them, as well!” he said, beaming. It made him look like an ordinary boy his age... and a really good kid in general.

...But that just made the bloodlust he'd given off seem all the more out of place.

"If I may ask before you leave," Nemesis spoke up. "Do you wish to fight those stronger than yourself for the purpose of skill-crafting?"

"Yes."

"I assume you would create a powerful speed-based skill you can use against Tom?" As far as I knew, Kashimiya had lost against Tom several times now, and the reason for this was Tom's Octachrome Cat — Grimalkin.

That was the fearsome ultimate skill that allowed Tom to split into eight different people, as long as one of the eight was still alive. Kashimiya had nothing that could counter it, so he'd suffered multiple defeats against Tom by now.

With that in mind, trying to develop a counter was indeed a very good way of preparing for the... fight... Hm?

*Nemesis, that can't be right. While we were still considering it, Kashimiya said that he wanted me to help whenever I had free time. Therefore, the skill he would make wouldn't be for use against Tom.*

"That isn't exactly the case," said Kashimiya. "That isn't why I want to craft a new skill."

"Really?"

"Also... *I already have a counter.*"

"Eh?" question marks appeared above our heads.

"I already have a means to remove all eight heads of the Monster Cat Mansion." He said that as casually as he would speak about buying groceries for dinner, looking completely certain of his victory.

His attitude didn't match the carefree words at all, however.

"I'll show you the skill in today's match. I'm sorry if you don't see it," Kashimiya said before bowing and leaving.

From the back, he looked just like a small child. However, the intimidating aura he'd given off when he mentioned that he had a counter to Tom was much like the one I'd felt when I'd first met Xunyu before The Clash of the Superiors... only even more deadly.

"...The world is truly full of absurd children," said Nemesis.

"...Indeed it is," I nodded before sighing in relief as tension left my body.

◇

After Kashimiya left, Rook and the others returned. It... didn't look like the issues between Marie and B3 had totally vanished, but at least they had nothing against partying up now.

For the record, I didn't ask which one of them won. I felt like that would be like throwing fuel on some still-hot embers.

Anyway, with all four of us here, we headed to the central arena.

"So Shu's been training you since then, huh?" I asked.

"Yes!" Rook replied. "Ah, but... it was hellish." He remembered something that made the smile on his face vanish.

*O, dear brother of mine, do not cast my friend into hell,* I thought.

"After the battle training, I just did some powerleveling," he continued.

"What level are you now?" I asked. With my Paladin level at 100 and Prism Rider level at 40, my total level was now 140. As a low-rank job, Prism Rider was capped at 50, but I still hadn't decided what I would take after I maxed it out.

"My total level is 290. My current main job, High Tamer, is at level 40. I already maxed out Tamer and Harlot."

*...He's more than double my level!* I thought in shock. This gave me flashbacks to the time before we partied up at the capital. "I know I've got college and stuff, but he's so far ahead of me now," I muttered.

"...Rook always gets stronger so fast that we don't even notice it," Nemesis added, and I was inclined to agree. I could totally imagine coming back to find him with all his low and high-rank jobs maxed out... or perhaps even with a Superior Job.

His "Harlot" job made me raise an eyebrow, but apparently he'd taken it because it offered a passive skill which increased the success rate of Charm. That skill, along with his tamed monsters, was his lifeline, so I could understand his reasoning.

"During this round of powerleveling, I used XP-increasing items and traveled through high monster population areas with Babi and the others. I still had money from the incident a month ago."

"XP-increasing items... Didn't know they existed."

"Oh no no," said Marie. "Just so you know, even with an XP boost, you never get levels as fast as Rookie did. If XP boosts were that powerful, Journalists would be in higher demand."

*So they weren't that extreme, huh?*

"I just had lots of free time. After the incident with Gerbera, I spent about five real life days not sleeping or resting so I could just hunt constantly... I'm actually kinda sleepy... right... now..." Rook said, his head wobbling like it had earlier.

"Hey! Take care of your body, damn it! That can't be good for the real you!" I cried out.

"I did some training to help me stay active for longer without sleeping. I'm totally finay and oke."

“Now you’re not even speaking properly!” Nothing ever showed on his face, so you could never tell if something was wrong with him!

“I’m not getting much sleep, either,” said Marie. “I’ve been busy with preparations recently...”

“Preparations? You’re gonna cover today’s big duel?” I asked.

“No. This is for the DIN-sponsored... Oh dear, I can’t say that yet.”

“Well, that’s fine, I guess. I did notice that you looked tired, though. So that’s what it’s about, huh? I assumed it was related to either the duel or Elizabeth’s marriage interview.”

Marie and Elizabeth were close, so I wouldn’t have been surprised if she’d been asked to do something for the interview. “There’s some ordinary journalists covering today’s duel... Wait. Hold on a second. *What did you just say?*” Marie grabbed me by my scruff and glared at me.

*I’m scared.*

“On my way back here, I was acting as Azurite’s... the first princess’ and the third prince of Huang He’s bodyguard,” I explained. “During our chats, I learned that Elizabeth and the prince would be having a formal marriage interview.”

At hearing this, Marie buried her face in her hand and threw her head back.

“Ellie’s... going to a... marriage interview... engagement... marriage... birth... They’re rushing things! Big sis doesn’t approve!”

“You’re the one rushing through this with all those predictions... And her big sis is Azurite, not you.”

“GHAH!” Marie heard my response and collapsed where she stood.

“...I know you get along with Elizabeth, but does this really hit you *that* hard?” And so, carrying Marie — who was mumbling something to herself — we went to the arena.

We gathered into a box seat like the one we’d used last time and waited for the duel to begin.

Marie was still moaning and mumbling, and I occasionally heard some terrifying words, like “Third prince... assassination... engagement canceled...”

*Please don’t cause an international incident. Azurite will die inside,* I thought.

“Also, you’re already talking about engagement, but so far they’re just at the marriage interview stage,” I said.

“Ngh... I’ll hope that Ellie has good taste in men.”

*...If she does, then you better prepare to congratulate them on their engagement.*

Canglong was extremely mature and stable for someone his age, and they would no doubt make a fine couple. ...As long as Marie didn’t assassinate him, anyway.

“Well, this is a negotiation between a prince and a princess. All we can do is watch how it pans out.”

“Ngh... Ellie...” Marie groaned as she rolled on the ground, took out a sketchbook, and began drawing a portrait of a girl — most likely Elizabeth.

*...Am I looking at a person with a strange kind of sister complex? I wondered.*

“More like a lolita co—”

*Nemesis, some things need to be left unsaid.*

Anyway, we had about half an hour until the main event started, so I decided to buy some drinks and snacks. Marie was still sulking, while Rook and Babi were napping. I didn't feel good about leaving B3 there all by herself, so I had Nemesis keep her company.

As I walked towards the store, I noticed the central arena's reception area.

It was taking the final bets for the coming main event. The odds were 1.3x for Tom and 5.5x for Kashimiya. It reminded me of the odds I'd seen for The Clash of the Superiors, but those had been affected by Figaro being the local favorite.

The difference here was purely due to their battle history and abilities. Kashimiya had lost against Tom all four times he'd challenged him. Apparently, he was so unable to deal with Tom's ability to multiply and split that almost nobody had any hopes for a Kashimiya victory.

Also, it was widely known that Kashimiya had been inactive for a time, so most were predicting that Tom would just win again.

...Since I was here already, I figured I might as well bet on one of them.

The odds and the info available made it seem like Tom was the likely winner... but I couldn't help but consider what Kashimiya said to me.

That had been no bluff. I could tell that he was at least confident in his victory.

"Well, I guess I'll bet on... *him*." I eventually just let my intuition guide me and went through the betting process. Though, I did make sure to bet less than I had on Figaro.

"...Huh?" After betting, I checked today's notice board and saw info about the semi-event, the betting for which was already over. I'd

focused so much on the main event that I completely forgot the semi-event, which also happened to involve names I knew well.

Fallen Knight, Juliet VS Nobushi Princess, Rosa.

I returned to the box to see that the semi-event had already begun.

"TCH! It's really damn annoyn' how you're scamperin' about, Juliet!"

"Blackwing Requiem!" Rosa was clad in the exoskeleton created by the ultimate skill she'd employed against us, as well. Juliet, on the other hand, was attacking her with dark elemental magic attacks from the air, where Rosa couldn't reach her.

We had experienced first-hand just how tough Rosa's exoskeletons were, but the dark elemental black orbs released by Juliet's feathers were dealing steady damage to her.

The main quality of dark elemental magic was its anti-life properties. It dealt nearly no damage to objects, but in exchange for not being effective against as wide a range of targets, it could ignore most physical defenses when it did deal damage. Apparently, it would fare differently against magical barriers or its natural enemy — light — but in this case, where the opponent was *merely* clad in tough armor, it bypassed that almost as if it didn't exist. With Rosa being so focused on the physical defense from her exoskeletons, it was fair to say that this matchup was in Juliet's favor.

Rosa, on the other hand, couldn't even bring Juliet down to the close range that she specialized in. Her only means of fighting were jumping or throwing her spear, but that was far from enough to make up for the gap in mobility created by Hræsvelgr, which allowed Juliet to fly around freely.

It was clear who had the upper hand in both offense and defense.

"...I can see why the odds were 1.2x against 5.6x." Rosa had had a chance here. The Nobushi Princess ultimate job skill, A Kill Supreme,

was the most damaging skill in Rosa's arsenal, and with duels disallowing Brooches, that skill could end it all right away.

However, the fact that the battle was still continuing was proof that she had missed. A Kill Supreme was a surprise attack skill, after all, so it was probably hard to land it from the front.

Juliet still hadn't used her ultimate skill. She was fully focused on evasion and long-range dark elemental magic attacks.

"She looks used to this," commented Nemesis. "They're fourth and fifth in the rankings. I suppose they fight quite often?"

"They do. Rosa's challenged the Black Crow many times now," said B3. "If she takes fourth, she'll be right next to Kashimiya in third, you know?"

"A wolf-eared musclebeast stalker shotacon to the core, eh?"

"...You added a new word to that!" I shouted.

"All of those words do apply to her, but I recommend against actually saying that in front of her." Anyway, the duel continued, but Juliet still seemed to have the advantage.

One of the reasons for this was Rosa's lack of composure.

Like B3 mentioned, if Kashimiya won his battle today, he would be second in the rankings. Was she acting like this because she feared Kashimiya might be even further away from her if that happened?

Regardless, Juliet, being the skilled ranker that she was, was taking advantage of every opening created by Rosa's panic, slowly but surely chipping away at her HP.

And once it reached a certain threshold...

"Corpse-Eating Bird — Hræsvelgr!"

...Juliet used her ultimate skill to finish her off.

It created a black tornado combining the power of dark and wind magic.

A direct hit from that quickly ended the fight... Or so I thought.

"That's... the skill from back then!" Rosa's body, which had been bleeding within the tornado, had been replaced by a decoy before anyone realized it.

That was the special reward she'd used when she'd attacked us, too.

"Aren't these kinds of items forbidden in duels?" I asked.

"You can't use Lifesaving Brooches, Dragonscale Wards, or consumable restoration items," B3 said. "But special rewards are exceptions."

That reminded me that Figaro's Closer had worked just like that.

"More importantly, Rosa is now... there, eh?" B3 was looking behind Juliet.

Now without her exoskeleton, she was brandishing her spear — Gashadokuro.

"Backslayer!" Rosa used an active skill which, according to B3, increased damage when attacking from behind, and thrust Gashadokuro forward. The damage was great enough to pierce even through the hardy armored gothic-style dress that Juliet was wearing.

Because she was still using her ultimate skill, Juliet couldn't dodge it. The tornado channeled through her arms vanished, and Juliet collapsed towards the stage. But just then, she grabbed hold of Gashadokuro with both arms.

"The Darkness of Valediction." Once she'd used that skill, a black, mud-like darkness began to creep up Gashadokuro's handle.

The Darkness of Valediction was an active skill from the Dark Knight grouping, and it was basically the opposite of the Purifying Silverlight we Paladins had. In exchange for some of the Dark Knight's HP, it briefly cursed the weapon they wielded. Since Dark Knights could overcome curses, it essentially allowed them to increase the power of their weapons...

"Shit! You got me with this one...!"

...As well as make an enemy's weapon completely unusable. Once cursed, Gashadokuro couldn't even be used by its Master. If Rosa tried, she would be subjected to curses that, among other things, limited her movements and continuously reduced her HP.

I had been in serious danger when Juliet had used it against me in one of our mock battles. If I hadn't used Purifying Silverlight, Nemesis would've been cursed, too.

Being a vanguard build, Nobushi Princess, Rosa, didn't have Purifying Silverlight or any uncurse skill, and consumables like Holy Water weren't allowed in duels. Thus, the only way for her to deal with the curse was to let go of her Embryo.

"Tch!" Rosa let go of Gashadokuro and used Instant Equip to take out a spare spear, but then...

"Reverse Crusade!"

...A black light — dark elemental energy that chipped life away — surged out from the surface.

This was the Dark Knight's equivalent of a Paladin's Grand Cross — their ultimate job skill. Caught in the torrent of darkness, Rosa lost HP and mobility all at once.

While that was happening, Juliet took out a small, bag-like inventory with her left hand, and cut it open with the sword in her right. Once

broken, the bag released an enormous amount of cursed weapons, swathed in black or red auras.

Either gathered by Juliet or simply cursed by her afterwards, they were all cursed blades... and her bullets.

“Cursed Phalanx...” Juliet pointed the tip of the sword in her right hand towards Rosa, still bound and unable to move in the torrent of darkness. “...DISORDER!” She unleashed her skill, *launching* the many cursed weapons littered about the arena.

This was the ultimate job skill of the Fallen Knight: Cursed Phalanx Disorder. It was a truly devastating, expensive ability that, in exchange for the user’s HP and MP, animated those bloodthirsty weapons, setting them all on the enemy. It basically turned them into homing missiles. The cursed weapons were akin to crazed beasts, moving in chaotic patterns as they went to bite into their target — in this case, Rosa.

“UOAAAGHH!” Rosa somehow jumped clear of the Reverse Crusade’s torrent and used the spear she had equipped to try and fend off the cursed weapons coming her way.

I couldn’t tell whether she was just that good of a fighter or if she was simply being stubborn. Even though she was wounded by many of the weapons, she managed to parry the ones that would have killed her. Which would give out first: Juliet’s curses, or Rosa’s HP?

Beyond the curtain of cursed weaponry, Juliet stood, joining her hands as though preparing to use Corpse-Eating Bird — Hræsvelgr again.

“Huh...?!” Rosa looked at her in shock, seemingly unable to believe that Juliet could cast her ultimate skill *again* after all that.

It was just a bluff, though. Neither the cooldown nor her mana reserves allowed Juliet to cast her ultimate skill again.

The bluff was enough to distract Rosa, however. Using this opening, a single cursed weapon pierced her abdomen.

It was none other than the newly-cursed Gashadokuro.

For all I knew, she might've been unable to sense it coming because it was her own weapon.

Regardless, the attack was fatal, and it paved the way for more weapons to strike home.

“Liberation!”

And then Juliet used the final skill, releasing all the curses within her arsenal and obliterating Rosa in a massive explosion.

Thus, Juliet emerged victorious.

Considering that she was above Rosa in rank and the matchup definitely favored her, this result was expected. Still, the ability, technique, and strategy involved in this battle was extremely high-level.

“She really made good use of her ultimate job skill, didn’t she?” said B3.

“She did,” I nodded. “Though, honestly, she might’ve lost without it.”

This was my second time seeing the Fallen Knight’s ultimate job skill. The first time was during a mock battle, when she’d used it to utterly defeat me.

Though, from what I could recall, that skill was what she called her “secret weapon.” She’d told me that it was an ace up her sleeve she would eventually use against Kashimiya or Tom, and that she hadn’t used it in any public matches.

That was probably why she’d tested it in a mock battle against me — a non-ranker.

Of course, she'd told me to be quiet about it. "In regards to my most esoteric of powers, I seek nothing less than supreme silence. Exchange with me a blood vow that it shall never reach the ears of worldlings," she'd said, which basically meant, "It's a secret! Pinky promise!"

The fact Juliet had used it against Rosa — a challenger — rather than someone who was higher in the rankings, meant that she'd been backed into quite a precarious situation.

Rosa's substituting special reward and Juliet's ultimate job skill. In a way, this was a battle where both sides bared their abilities to each other and fought as hard as they could. The performance was definitely worthy of praise and applause.

And with the semi-event over, it was time for the match between Tom and Kashimiya.

"TO THE EAST! WE HAVE THE CHALLENGEERRR! THE THIRD IN THE DUEL RANKINGS... THE UNSHEATH, KASHIMIYAAAAAAA!" As the announcer finished, a plume of smoke appeared around the western entrance.

The stage of the central arena had two entrances — one to the west and one to the east — and the east one was usually used by the challenger. During The Clash of the Superiors, Xunyu had entered through the east, as well. Kashimiya now did the same.

At his sides, Kashimiya had an odachi in a blue sheath and another sword about the same size in a green sheath. Since he couldn't use the red one in duels with barriers, he must've taken the green one as a substitute.

"TO THE WEST! WE HAVE THE SECOND IN THE DUEL RANKINGS... THE LYNX, TOM! CAAAAAAAAT!" Tom entered from the west. He looked the same as he had in Quartierlatin, complete with the fat cat — Grimalkin — on his head. Naturally, there was still just one of him.

The two gathered on the stage, set the duel rules, and made some distance between them.

All that was left was to wait for the start of the match.

Kashimiya's chains were already floating, and he was ready to draw his sword.

"Logically speaking, Kashimiya will move the moment the match starts," B3 said as we all waited eagerly.

"I don't know much about Tom Cat... but I did hear the rumors, particularly the one that says that your only chance at beating him is right as the match begins."

"...I see." Tom's multiplication was a result of his ultimate skill, Octachrome Cat — Grimalkin, which he couldn't activate before the match actually started. It was reasonable to argue that if you were able to defeat him *before* he used it, you wouldn't have to deal with his clones. It seemed obvious, really, but so far, no one had actually been able to do it.

Tom surely had something that let him survive long enough to activate the skill. In fact, it had to be so potent that it couldn't even be overcome by Kashimiya's insane slashing speeds.

Or had Kashimiya developed something that had allowed him to shatter Tom's defense? As I was considering that... the moment finally arrived.

"LET THE MATCH... BEGIN!" The moment the start of the duel was announced, Tom threw Grimalkin into the air.

"Hm...?" Kashimiya, on the other hand, wasn't moving at all.

"...Why?" This moment was said to be his only chance, yet he did absolutely nothing.

He was only waiting for Tom to finish splitting.

“Now dance, Octachrome Cat — Grimalkin.” Apparently, even Tom was bracing for Kashimiya to act right away, and was confused when he didn’t.

Regardless, he’d instantly activated the skill, and the Grimalkin he’d thrown into the air to keep him safe became Tom. Both then split again, until finally there were eight of him. Now, Kashimiya had to defeat them all faster than they could multiply.

However, he hadn’t moved at all, even though Tom’s preparations were already complete.

Tom seemed to find it strange, as well. He sent one of himself to act as a scout. He moved so fast that he became a blur despite the slowdown from the barrier, but once he was close to Kashimiya, *his head fell off and vanished*.

The barrier had slowed it all down, but I couldn’t even see what happened anyway.

“...What was that?” I couldn’t see the moment the blade was unsheathed. It went from its sheath to fully drawn as if I was seeing it frame-by-frame... and Tom — who was moving at supersonic speeds, by the way — simply no longer had a head.

Tom quickly multiplied and recreated the eighth, but if Kashimiya’s opponent had been anyone else, this battle would’ve already been over.

Tom was best known for his clones, but he was powerful even when he was alone. He was a Superior Job holder with a lot of battle experience, and even without his clones, he would still be a highly ranked duelist.

Despite that, Kashimiya the Guillotine instantly chopped his head off.

“Did Kashimiya remove all of Tom’s HP with just a single hit?”

"That's not exactly right, Nemesis. I'm pretty sure that what killed him was an injury-based debuff."

Some of the first status effects I'd ever had were Broken Left Arm and Broken Right Leg, so honestly, it wouldn't be that strange if there was a Severed Neck debuff. Its effect as a debuff? Instant death, of course. ...It was basically the human equivalent of targeting a monster's core.

"So he lopped off the defenseless head with his speed alone, eh?" Nemesis continued. "But wouldn't that not work on people with high END, or those clad in armor?"

The one to answer that question was B3.

"In eastern swordfighting, there's a passive skill called 'Blade Speed-Through.' If the opponent wasn't able to defend against your attack, the opponent would lose END equal to 10% of your AGI multiplied by your skill level."

So, with 1,000 AGI and skill level 1, the opponent would lose 100 END, and with skill level 10, it would be 1,000 END.

"Kashimiya almost certainly has this skill maxed out at 10," she continued. "However, the speed of Kashimiya's blade is already so insane that END basically doesn't exist for him."

"...By the way, can the END go below 0?" I asked.

"That's the only saving grace of that skill." It was hard for me to imagine what having a negative END would be like, but apparently, Kashimiya's attacks couldn't do that to you.

"You said it reduces END, so I assume the defense from armor stays the same?" Rook asked.

"Yes. However, Kashimiya also has the attack power of his weapons. With all those unsheathing-based active skills on his attacks, it's difficult to withstand them with just defense from equipment... He

could even cut through my Magnum Colossus, unless I used Astro Guard.” B3 spoke, rubbing her neck.

The match continued even as she explained the situation.

Kashimiya returned the blade that had felled Tom’s head back to its sheath, then became immobile again as though waiting for something.

*What could it be?*

“Sgh!” Since Kashimiya remained immobile, Tom moved first.

The eight Toms all equipped bows, throwing knives, and other mid-range weapons. At supersonic speeds, they split up and moved to encircle Kashimiya.

Kashimiya’s silence and stillness was contrasted with the sound of Toms’ feet hitting the stage as he ran. Tom continued to attack him from a distance, watching out for Kashimiya’s techniques, but Kashimiya evaded them all with only slight movements of his body.

However, Tom anticipated his movements and released a focused attack from an angle he thought would make it impossible for Kashimiya to evade. For a moment, I pictured Kashimiya with tons of arrows and knives stuck in him...

“Hareshark Nullstep.”

...But, for a brief moment, a magic circle with patterns reminiscent of sharks appeared beneath his feet. The next moment, Kashimiya appeared several dozen metels away... *right next to a Tom.*

This was followed by the Tom’s head falling to the ground.

“Was that... teleportation?” When I’d first encountered Kashimiya, he’d appeared before me seemingly out of nowhere, just as he had just now. He probably used the same skill as he had that time, but as

far as I knew, only ultimate skills were powerful enough to allow you to teleport. But that name clearly wasn't that of an ultimate skill.

"Hareshark Nullstep," B3 said. "That's Kashimiya's Embryo's — Inaba's — active skill."

I appreciated the explanation.

"With Brother Bear not present and Maria being useless, B3's explanations sure are welcome," said Nemesis telepathically.

*Yeah, I thought. And man, I sure have a lot of explainers around me.*

"The shark-like magic circle that appeared below him for a moment is basically a moving floor." She called it "shark-like," but honestly, I couldn't actually get a good look at it, myself.

"So it's not teleportation?"

"No. It's not nearly as useful. In fact, for an Embryo's unique skill, it's extremely lackluster."

"Lackluster?"

"All it does is let you move at speeds allowed by your AGI without actually using your legs. The benefit is that as long as you're inside the circle, you aren't subjected to air resistance or inertia and can move while maintaining your unsheathing stance. In the hands of anyone but Kashimiya, it would be a very unremarkable skill."

It let you move without using your legs, but your speed didn't change, huh? Well, that did sound like an unremarkable skill, but...

"So it would be unremarkable if Kashimiya wasn't The Unsheathe, huh?"

"Yes." With Godlike Unsheathing, Kashimiya's AGI reached 500,000 whenever he was drawing his sword. So, if he timed his Hareshark Nullstep movements with the motion for unsheathing, the AGI used

for the skill would be 500,000. That made it extremely easy to approach the enemy and slice their head off.

"...On the other hand, Tom's dealt with this skill many times now, huh?" At the same time, I now understood why Tom didn't just attack Kashimiya with all the clones at once. Tom made best use of his regeneration ability by leaving one of him in safety while letting the other seven fight, even if it costs them their lives, but with Kashimiya's movement ability, that was a bad idea.

It wasn't impossible for Kashimiya to cut down all the Toms ganging up on him, then use Hareshark Nullstep to cover the distance between him and the final clone to kill him, as well. Kashimiya had two odachis, as well as four arms, counting his own and his Embryo. It wouldn't be hard for him to slash twice in a row.

Tom was aware of this, and that was why he didn't fight him by ganging up on him, instead electing to keep his distance. Kashimiya was only fast while he was unsheathing, so his super speed on Hareshark Nullstep also couldn't last forever. Unless at least one Tom was in range, Kashimiya couldn't cut down all of them.

"This battle would've been long over if he was fighting anyone else but Tom." Kashimiya's ability was nearly a match even for those of the Superiors I knew. In fact, if he fought Logan, he could easily break through the devil army and decapitate him.

I now understood why Juliet and the other rankers said that Kashimiya was the true second strongest ranker. If compatibility hadn't gotten in the way, I honestly wouldn't be so sure if Figaro would still be the current duel champion. Kashimiya had just as much of a claim to the throne.

"...The Embryo and Kashimiya's abilities are just so well-matched," Nemesis said. She had a point. Auxiliary arm-chains, Hareshark Nullstep... Kashimiya's Inaba was all about the art of unsheathing.

To be more precise, it was focused on making the art usable to someone of his small stature. Inaba made up for both his short arms that were unsuited to drawing a sword as well as his short cutting range.

Embryo abilities weren't unrelated to Master personalities, though. With that in mind, did Kashimiya have a reason that drove him to pour so much of himself into the art of unsheathing?

"...This seems like it'll keep going forever," Rook said as he observed the match.

Well, it did look like a stalemate. Tom wasn't able to break through the combo of Kashimiya's unsheathing and Hareshark Nullstep, but Kashimiya also couldn't defeat all of the Toms. They both lacked moves they could play.

"In their previous duels, Tom always won because Kashimiya always ran through all his SP by using too many skills," said B3. "So it's a battle of attrition, huh?" Apparently, despite being so broken, Tom's Octachrome Cat — Grimalkin was unusually efficient. Of course, Tom also didn't use other skills along with it, but that was the reason why there was such a gap in their stamina.

It was looking like Kashimiya would once again be unable to topple this fortress and... *Hm?!* "Ray?" B3 looked at me.

"What's wrong, Ray? You look pale," said Nemesis. Both of them seemed worried.

Was my expression that surprising?

Even if it was... I wasn't actually sure why. As I watched Kashimiya, I suddenly felt an unexplained chill run down my spine.

B3 and Nemesis didn't seem to feel it, though.

Rook, too... Wait, no.

“...”

He was feeling the exact same way I was. Just like me, *he was immensely shocked by something, but didn't know what it was.*

“What was that...? Huh?” Just then, I noticed something strange.

The entire arena was oddly quiet.

Everyone was staring at the stage in confusion.

On the stage, there was Kashimiya, slowly returning an odachi to its yellow sheath.

You could no longer hear the footsteps of the Toms surrounding him.

Instead, there were eight headless corpses littering the stage, all with their heads lying next to them.

“Personalized Mystic Blade Technique: Octachrome Thunder.” After Kashimiya whispered that, the eight bodies... the eight Toms became light.

A moment later, the barrier vanished. That could mean only one thing.

Kashimiya had defeated Tom.



“...I-IT’S OVERRRR! THE WINNER IS THE UNSHEATH, KASHIMIYA! WITH THIS, KASHIMIYA RISES TO SECOND IN THE RANKIIINNGS!” The announcer belatedly realized what was happening on the stage and hurried to announce the conclusion, which was followed by a roar from the crowd. It wasn’t praise of the winner or the duel itself. Everyone was merely... confused. Just like me, they wondered when it had even ended.

And so, without anyone seeing the conclusion or any sign of it... the duel was over.

All that we knew was that Kashimiya ascended to second place in the rankings, giving him the right to challenge Figaro.

*...Wait, no. There’s one more thing.*

“Hm? Ray, why are you spacing out like that? What’s that ticket in your hand?” Nemesis asked.

“...I bet on this duel.”

“Again? So, just like on The Clash of the Superiors, you bet on the one who had higher odds, but this time ended up losing, eh? That’s how gambling usually goes. How much did you bet, anyway?”

“Fifty.”

“Fifty lir? That’s absurdly little.”

“Fifty... million.”

“...Hold on. Wait, wait, wait, wait, YOU IDIOT!”

Nemesis gave me an indescribable look, grabbed my collar, and shook me back and forth.

“F-Fifty mi... A-Are you stupid?! That’s so much money, so much... EEEEHHH?!” Unable to process reality, Nemesis couldn’t even speak properly.

Marie and B3 looked at me with faces asking “What did you do wrong?”

Rook, however, was all smiles, clearly following the whole thing.

“Nemesis. You’ve got it all wrong. It’s the other way around.”

“Wh-What do you mean?!”

“I mean that... I bet on Kashimiya.”

“...Huehh?”

Nemesis was now so dumbfounded that it looked like her mental circuits had shorted out.

“I went and bet on Kashimiya. He looked pretty confident when we met him today.”

And he went on to win. With his odds being 5.5x, my 50,000,000 lir was now 250,000,000. Wow.

“...I have so much to say that my words are all stuck in my throat. I’ve just got one thing for you,” Nemesis spoke with a completely exhausted expression as she stared into my eyes. “Stop gambling. It’s scary.”

Those words, coming from the bottom of her heart, left me unsure how to respond. All that came out of my mouth was...

“...Does gacha count as gambling?”

In response, I received a very familiar dropkick.

## ***Interlude: The One Who Arrives and the One Who Finds***

*South of Gideon the City of Duels, natural area*

Beyond the plains to the south of Gideon, there was a sprawling forest growing out of a vast expanse of hills. Further south than that, there was the Altar-Legendaria border, but it lay within an untamed land inhabited by powerful monsters, so there were no border checkpoints or anything of the kind.

In a way, the area itself was like the dividing line between fairyland and the kingdom.

On this day, inside — or, rather, above — the dense forest, something gigantic was traveling northwards.

It was a pair of objects that looked like upside-down towers. With each of them being about a kilometre in height, the twin objects waded through the forest and left footprints on the plains.

The word “footprints” was quite apt, seeing as the two towers were being used as boots by the lady standing above them.

She was none other than King of Berserk, Hannya — the Superior that had recently been released from the gaol.

The boot-towers were Sandalphon, her Superior Embryo, and she was heading north because that was where she would find her beloved.

However, Hannya stopped once she came across something else of considerable size.

It was a giant tank... no... a *land-battleship* with a particularly wide hull.

At first, Hannya thought it was just another obstacle and prepared to kick it out of her way, but then she noticed a man in a costume waving at her from the deck.

“Yooo! Haven’t seen you in a beary long time,” he said, making Hannya certain that it was someone she knew — Shu Starling.

“It really has been a while, hasn’t it?” she said. “Figaro said that he had a health checkup and couldn’t come to greet me, so you’d be coming instead. He said you’d be wearing a bear costume, so I knew it was you right away. Sorry for the trouble.”

“It’s fine, I was fur-ree anyway.”

*And it’s better to stay close in case you do something you shouldn’t, Shu added internally, not daring to say it out loud. I’m still worried about the other bomb I left in Gideon, but that one probably won’t go off if I’m away for just a short amount of time.*

“So, is Gideon far from here?” Hannya asked.

“Two hours away by Baldr. Hop on in, bear-ace yourself, and we’ll be there in no time,” Shu answered.

“I’ll do just that, then. Sandalphon has been doing nothing but walking for who knows how long now.”

*...I can tell by the footprints spreading out towards the horizon,* Shu thought, looking into the distance.

“Also, it’s so chaotic back there that I’m feeling a bit tired. The moment I came out, I appeared in Legendaria’s ‘spirit capital’ of AmNeal, and I was instantly surrounded by tons of players.”

“...Fur-om where did you start walking on Sandalphon?” Shu asked.

“AmNeal, of course. Sandalphon is my only mode of transport.”

*So you appeared with that thing next to the capital... Of course they’d surround you, Shu thought.*

“I didn’t want to waste time with them, so I kicked them away before making my way north.”

“...You said you were attacked by Masters. Did you see a muscled, half-naked, over-bear-ing macho pro-wrestler; an absolute freak in green clothes and a mask; or a fussy-looking, silent guy with a monocle?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t remember... What about you, Sandalphon?”

“I did not see anyone fitting those descriptions, Lady Hannya,” Hannya’s Embryo replied.

*So she didn’t fight any of Legendaria’s Superiors. That’s a relief,* Shu thought and breathed a sigh.

“All right, then,” he said. “I’ll take you to Gideon.”

“Thank you. Figaro isn’t around, though, so I’m logging out the moment I’m there.”

“Oh, he’ll fur sure come online the day after tomorrow, this world’s time.”

“I see. I’ll also log on at about then. I’m dying to see him,” Hannya said as she hopped on Baldr and the twin towers transformed into a boy.

Thus, the two Superiors rode the land-battleship towards Gideon.

A certain man was watching them from between the trees.

His left eye was closed, but his right followed the land-battleship.

*Going by that Embryo’s form... and the data from Libra, that’s one of the gaol’s Superiors: King of Berserk, Hannya. So you can leave that place,* he thought as he wrote something down on his notepad.

There was *something* right next to him. It was so bizarre that it was hard to even tell if it was a living creature or something inorganic.

The easiest way to describe it was “a balance scale monster.” One dish of the scale held an eye, and the other held a status window with Hannya’s name. The balance was tipping in the latter’s favor.

Once the dish reached the surface, the scale monster vanished, leaving behind six black orbs. The man picked them up and put them in the Embryo crest on the back of his left hand.

*I considered going to my little sister in Legendaria and staying there until the war resumed... but this intrigues me somewhat.*

In *Infinite Dendrogram*, Superiors were big names. You could find info about Hannya and what she said at the gaol just by surfing the internet for a bit.

*Two Superiors. Figaro and Hannya. Her prior conviction and nature. This is very intriguing, indeed, he processed all this information and cracked a smile. I smell a potential scoop. I might get material unlike any I've found so far.*

With such thoughts on his mind, the man began walking.

However, right as he was about to leave the forest, something jumped him.

“GHOOAAARRGH!”

It was a Bloody Drag-Tiger — a fearsome, Pure-Dragon-tier part of local fauna that could claw and bite at speeds approaching that of sound, making it a fearsome opponent for many creatures.

The man didn’t even have time to react to the attack that came almost as soon as the roar reached his ears. The beast closed its maw on the man’s head, *only to have its upper and lower jaws split continuously.*

The upper part, along with the rest of the head and the brain within, fell right into the man’s open left palm, while the lower part and the

entire rest of the body passed him by and pathetically collapsed in front of him.

Where they split, both sides were scorched as though cut by something extremely hot.

The head in the man's hand looked at the miserable pile of flesh in confusion before dissolving into bits of light, leaving behind only loot — its fur.

*A surprise attack by a wild beast is a rare occurrence in real life, but I'm already bored of it. Unlike with people, I can't even capture and examine them...*

As he thought this, clearly unamused, a black, floating orb approached from an uncertain direction, and he put them in his crest just as he had with the ones left behind by the scale monster.

*Well, let's go watch this unique event unfold. The tangles between Superiors struck by blinding passion must be something yet unobserved.*

The man imagined what would happen next, cracked a smile, and walked towards the city of Gideon.

## ***Chapter Three: The Start of the Festival***

*Prism Rider, Ray Starling*

Following Tom and Kashimiya's duel, we all went to dine at a place recommended by Chelsea, known for the *huge amounts* of good food it offered. The dinner doubled as B3's welcoming party, and I'd obviously picked the place because it had enough food to sate Nemesis.

Needless to say, as the lucky better, I was the one to pay.

I happened to be the party's leader, so I didn't mind doing that much.

...Yeah, despite consistently being the lowest level among us, I somehow ended up being the leader. B3 also said that this seemed best to her, so her joining didn't change that at all.

If you ignored the fact that Marie had yet to recover from the news regarding Elizabeth, the dinner-party was going quite well.

"Did you figure it out, Rook?" I asked.

"Well, I have a few theories, but I don't have enough evidence to say anything conclusive."

"Same as me, then. I think it has something to do with the change in the sheath's color."

"Yeah, that stood out for me, as well."

We were currently discussing how Kashimiya was able to behead all eight Toms.

With Gideon being the Mecca of duels, most of the other customers were talking about the exact same thing. Some said it was a new skill he'd woven, others said it was a new MVP special reward, and some

even entertained the idea that he might have finally evolved into a Superior.

Aside from that, they were discussing when Kashimiya would challenge Figaro, with the general consensus being that the day was swiftly approaching.

Kashimiya — Altar's strongest PK — versus Figaro — Altar's strongest solo player.

It was a matchup that would make any duel enthusiast salivate, and many thought that it would be an event that would match — or even surpass — The Clash of the Superiors.

I noticed B3 staring at the still surface of her cold fruit drink, deep in thought.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“No, it just... made me think a bit,” she said. “I have losses against both of them, after all.”

Oh, right. B3 had lost against Figaro at the Sauda Mountain Pass... in quite a gruesome way, too.

And she'd already told me that she'd fought against Kashimiya and lost against him, as well.

“As someone who fought them both, which one do you think would win?” Marie asked her, after seemingly recovering a bit.

B3 thought for a moment before answering. “Do you mean in a duel, or a battle where anything goes?”

“The latter.”

“Then it would be Figaro, I think. If it’s not a duel, he can avoid instadeath using the Brooch and extend the battle’s duration. Also, he has a clear advantage as a Superior who also has a Superior MVP

special reward. Though, that might change if Kashimiya gets his hands on something that can close that divide.”

“Ohh... then there’s no way. He might evolve, but Superior special rewards are a different matter. Altar already had its SUBM with Gloria, and the only countries that haven’t had theirs are Dryfe, Legendaria, and Caldina. The kingdom shares a border with all three of them, but the SUBMs will probably be handled by the countries themselves. I mean, Dryfe has the Physical Apex, while Caldina has the Magical Apex and the other Superiors in Sefirot... Though, maybe he would have a chance of stealing the Legendary SUBM. The superiors there are absolute freaks whose combat potential is actually pretty low.”

Granvaloa and Tenchi already had their SUBMs? I only knew about Altar’s Gloria and Huang He’s Suling.

“What kind of SUBMs appeared in Granvaloa and Tenchi?” I asked.

“The one in Granvaloa was ‘Biframe White Whale, Moby Dick Twin.’ It was a large, pale whale that functioned like a catamaran. Apparently, it was a real monster that could destroy large patches of area by transforming seawater into its ‘rigging’ and ‘outfit,’ and also use the same water to regenerate its body if damaged.”

*...How the hell did Granvaloa, a maritime country, handle something like that? Talk about a bad matchup.*

“Apparently, it was defeated by a combination of The Human Bomb blowing it up along with the entire ocean around it, all the firepower of the Granvaloan navy, and The Fatal Seal of the Four Seas.”

“‘Fatal Seal of the Four Seas’? I’ve heard of The Human Bomb, but that nickname is new to me.”

“‘Fatal Seal of the Four Seas,’ also known as King of Thieves, Zeta. She’s a long-time Superior from Granvaloa, but her Embryo’s powers

aren't clear yet. No one's ever seen it, sort of like Figaro's Embryo was at one point."

A well-known Superior who was able to keep her hand hidden... that alone told me that she was no joke.

"Though, there *are* hints," Marie continued.

"Like?"

"'She walked on air,' 'she was completely unharmed by a rain of arrows in the desert,' 'she was suddenly standing right next to me. I could've sworn there was no one there,' 'she made blood burst out of her enemy,' 'she turned the wall into Swiss cheese,' 'she made a tank instantly evaporate.' Information about her powers is plentiful and varied. Some of these were probably done with job skills and MVP special rewards, but because she does so many different things, it's impossible to tell which are her Embryo abilities."

*Well, all those things certainly don't seem like they can be covered by a single Embryo trait— Wait... I don't know why, but I get the feeling I know something that actually can do just that...*

"Speaking of The Fatal Seal of the Four Seas, she escaped Granvaloa after stealing a national treasure. That got her on their wanted list, and she's more infamous than famous now."

"On a wanted list for stealing a national treasure..." Rook muttered, looking as if he remembered something he didn't want to. "She shares a crime with Gerbera."

"Anyway, enough about her, let's talk about SUBMs again," said Marie. "You heard about Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria and Tetra-Beast of Creation, Suling from the people who faced them, yes?"

"Yeah," I nodded. I heard about Gloria from Shu, and about Suling from Xunyu, and both of them seemed like extremely powerful creatures with multiple abilities — or bodies, in Suling's case.

“After Suling, there was Penta-Phased Destroyer, Horobimaru in Tenchi.”

“Tenchi? Aren’t you from there? Did you encounter it?” I asked Marie.

“No. I left the country shortly before it appeared and was already wandering around Huang He when it did. Bad timing, eh? Though... from what I heard, I had no chance against it.”

*Marie? A pre-Superior who actually defeated a Superior? Had no chance against it?*

“Apparently, it was quite a... bizarre SUBM.”

“‘Bizarre’? From what I’ve heard, all of them are.”

“That’s just how bizarre it was. Horobimaru appeared in...”

Thus, Marie began talking about the strange... “nature” of the SUBM known as Horobimaru.

It happened right after the war between Altar and Dryfe:

A giant suit of samurai armor had washed ashore in a certain fishing village on the western side of the island country of Tenchi. It was nearly three metels tall, but there was no head — or even a body, for that matter — inside it.

At first, the villagers thought that a ship had wrecked nearby and the armor it had been carrying had just washed ashore. They didn’t know what to do with it, so they started by simply going to pick it up.

However, right before they did, *the armor stood up.*

And, despite lacking of a head, said the following:

“Who here craves my arms and armor?

Challenge me in combat.

I carry still a longbow, naganata, and this armor.

I am a Superior Unique Boss Monster.

Penta-Phased Destroyer, Horobimaru.”

“...The thing introduced itself?” I raised an eyebrow.

“It did. It also just stood in place, waiting for a challenger, and didn’t lay a finger on anyone who didn’t challenge it.”

Okay, yeah... that was definitely bizarre, even by SUBM standards.

“It didn’t even hurt the villagers that awakened it,” Marie added. “In fact, the village prospered, on account of all the demand for lodging and food from the challengers that gathered there.”

It even helped bring life to the place...? For something with “Destroyer” in its name, it seemed unusually noble.

“And, well, Tenchi is full of hotblooded tians and Masters, so it was challenged many times. Most of them were defeated, obviously, but King of Brigands, Bigman actually did win against it once.”

“First ‘thieves,’ now ‘brigands’... and just ‘once’?”

“Yes. He definitely destroyed it, but then the armor instantly reformed and gave Bigman the naganata it carried, saying ‘Well done. Victory is yours, and so is this weapon.’”

“It gave him its weapon?”

“Yes. While you have MVPs with normal UBM fights, Horobimaru apparently handed away its equipment every time it was defeated.” ...Again, it really was a bizarre UBM. How strange that it would just give away its equipment instead of having them become something adjusted for the individual.

“Also, anyone who received a weapon was unable to fight Horobimaru again. Apparently, they couldn’t damage it at all.”

Oh, so people weren't allowed to get several items, then? That made sense, actually. If they were, then the same person who beat it the first time could go at it again and again, becoming stronger each time thanks to their ever-increasing rewards.

"But didn't Horobimaru just become weaker as it handed its weapons away?" I asked.

"No," Marie answered. "In fact, it became stronger with each piece of equipment it lost. When there was just the armor left, even Superiors lost against it over and over."

"Now that's something..."

*Also, growing stronger as it loses equipment? What is it supposed to be, a UBM version of Figaro?*

"The armor ended up staying on the shore where it washed up for about five months."

"...That's a long time for something like that to be alive." It had countless Masters, Superiors included, challenging it day and night, yet it stayed there for months on end. That made it clear just how powerful it was.

And apparently, it was only defeated recently... about the time I first arrived here, actually.

"So, who ended up defeating it?" I asked Marie.

"Besides Bigman, I know that the one who got the longbow was The Gun, Sauer Urgaur 'the Firestop.' It's still unknown who defeated the armor."

Unknown? Was it defeated in secret? When nobody was watching?

"Because Horobimaru was so strange and gave its special rewards while it was still alive, neither Bigman nor Sauer received the message saying that it was defeated. It was clear that it was gone,

though, so the Conquest General commemorated it with a hanami festival.”

“Ah. I think I read about that on the internet.”

So that was the occasion, huh? Well, there were no casualties, so the SUBM’s defeat was probably a good reason to hold a festival.

All in all, it was the polar opposite of what Gloria had done here in Altar.

Then again, from what I’d heard of Tenchi...

“A monster like Horobimaru, hanami events... Tenchi must be sooo peaceful,” said Babi, cutting my thought short. A heavy silence followed, and Marie and B3 had looks on them which clearly said “Hahaha — no.”

My Tenchi-dwelling college friends had told me enough about the country for me to share their sentiment.

“Anyway, those are the SUBMs that have been defeated so far,” Marie concluded.

“I see... Hm?” I muttered as a certain idea crossed my mind. She mentioned four SUBMs: Biframe White Whale, Tri-Zenith Dragon, Tetra-Beast of Creation, and Penta-Phased Destroyer.

All of the names had numeral prefixes.

“Hey, was there no ‘one’ monster?” I asked.

“Oh, you’re wondering about that, too, huh? People talk about it every now and then.”

So I wasn’t the only one who found it strange.

“But the thing is, we just don’t know. At the very least, there’s no info on anyone defeating such a monster. For all we know, an SUBM could’ve appeared in one of the countries that we think hasn’t had theirs yet, only to have been done away with in secret.”

Like Horobimaru's final form, huh?

"It's just as likely that number one is special and is being reserved for a later SUBM," Rook commented. "Regardless, a Superior special reward bearing the power of 'one' will eventually see the light of day."

"Why do you think that?" I asked him.

"For the number one being special? I just think that's obvious. As for us eventually seeing the special reward... I just thought that someone might be keeping it as an ace up their sleeves to catch an opponent off-guard. They're bound to use it eventually, though."

"...I see." If the "one" has already appeared and it had been in Dryfe, then the special reward could be deployed in the next war. It was a yet-unseen menace that I wasn't sure was actually dangerous, but I still had a bad feeling about it, however slight.

"By the way, Marie... what were you doing while I was away?" With the SUBM talk ending, I asked Marie something that I'd been wondering about. I hadn't gotten the chance to ask before today's big duel, and she was an incoherent mess for most of the day after it. Rook clearly had his share of troubles while I was gone. Was Marie the same in that regard? She'd looked pretty tired when we met up.

"Oh, I was preparing for a certain project related to the festival tomorrow and the day after," Marie answered.

"Festival?"

"Yes. The Love-Duel Festival. We're planning a newspaper project for it, called 'Ba-Thump! A Lovey-Dovey Couple Spawned! Kyahah!'"

*...I have so much to say, but most importantly, you really don't need that "Ba-Thump" and "Kyahah!." Especially the latter.*

"...First of all, what *is* the Love-Duel Festival?"

“It’s a festival commemorating the founding king’s duel with his wife here in Gideon. It happens here every year at about this time.”

*Ohh...? I happen to personally know one of the founding king’s descendants... I’ll have to ask her for the details,* I thought, thinking of Azurite.

“And... Why a project?” I asked.

“DIN is often seen as an info-broker, but it’s actually a newspaper press, you know?” Oh yeah — she’d mentioned that they also covered actual news and wrote lifehack articles.

“That’s why we sometimes do things like this, too. Alison from the planning department is very enthusiastic about this one. Even the twins at the top are into it.”

“Twins at the top?” I raised an eyebrow.

“The tians in charge of DIN. They’re twins of different genders and they look very young, but they’re from Legendaria, so it’s rumored that they’re actually very old.”

*The leaders of the DIN and owners of all the info they have, eh? I wonder what they’re like...*

“So, what kind of project is this ‘Ba-Thump Kyahah,’” asked Nemesis. Damn it, why would she shorten it to *that*?

“It’s basically a report in the style of a romantic comedy,” Marie answered. “During the Love-Duel Festival, we would have correspondents all over Gideon who would record lovey-dovey happenings in town. The editing department would choose their favorites, and our subscribers would then vote which one of those is the most lovey-dovey-est event of all.”

“...Isn’t that basically setting people up for public shaming?”

“Putting up the magic cameras and stuff was hard work.”

“Isn’t that a clear invasion of privacy?!”

*Or is it okay here because we’re in a fantasy land?* I wondered.

“...It is. That’s why the administration didn’t approve it. The cameras had to go, too...”

“Yeah, I figured it was no good...”

“Instead, we decided to just take reader-submitted photos... Though, The Kingdom People Times ended up copying our original project and they’re actually going through with it.”

“Why do so many people think that’s a good idea?!”

“Well, Gideon is all about the duels. You don’t get a wide variety of things to get excited about, so this is a breath of fresh air. And since it’s related to love, lots of people are actually planning to go on dates with their crushes and confess their feelings.”

“Oh, speaking of dates... I’m going on one with Kasumi tomorrow,” Rook said.

“Ohh...? Wait, you and Kasumi?! Since when were you two like *that*?!” I exclaimed.

“I had her help me with Gerbera and wanted to thank her somehow. She seemed interested in this festival, so I invited her.”

*He invited a girl on a date... as a thank you? Goddamn, that’s impressive.*

“Anyway, the town is bound to be full of couples starting tomorrow,” Marie concluded.

“I feel like I’ll have to avert my gaze constantly,” I muttered.

“It’s a beary big problem,” said Shu, who appeared out of nowhere and joined us. He spoke with bad puns, as usual, but I could tell that he was actually quite tense.

“Why are you here?” I asked.

“I knew that you were coming back today, so I was looking fur ya right after I got done with something. I’d love to catch up with ya, but we gotta talk about a huge problem on our paws.”

“What problem, exactly?” asked Marie. “If it makes *you* worried, it must be something really big.”

“Hannya, *the* Hannya is coming... That’s more than enough to get the point across, right?”

*Hannya the Hannya? What is that, some funky robot?* I thought nonchalantly, but it was clearly no joke to Marie, who looked really tense.

B3 was also making a stern face.

If it was enough to shake both of these experienced players, then it had to be something really bad.

“...Wasn’t she in the gaol?” Marie asked.

“She was released recently. Her sentence was pretty short.”

“The timing couldn’t be worse,” Marie sighed as she placed her hands on her head in despair.

“Hey, what kind of person is this Hannya?” I asked.

“She’s a Superior. One who got on wanted lists and was sent to the gaol, at that,” Marie explained. “To be precise, she became a Superior *after* entering that place.”

The gaol was a place I’d heard of many times now, but I didn’t know much about what went on in there. All I really knew was that it was where King of Plagues and Gerbera went after the former was defeated by Marie and the latter by Shu and Rook.

Needless to say, this was my first time hearing that someone had actually gotten out of it.

“What got her on the wanted list?” I continued asking Marie.

“Destruction of personal property and inflicting bodily injury. That only got her a few years in the gaol... the real problem is her motivation.”

“Which would be?”

“...She indiscriminately attacked any Master couples she saw.”

“...Huh?”

*Why would anyone ever do that?* I wondered.

“The reasons behind that are profound... or shallow, depending on how you look at it,” Shu said. “It all began on Christmas of the year 2043, and escalated on Valentine’s day of 2044...”

And so, Shu told me about Miss Hannya’s motivation, as well as his and Figaro’s encounter with her.

Once he was done, I took a deep breath and said, “So, basically, Miss Hannya got NTR’d by someone from *Dendro*, so she started playing to get revenge by crushing her ex and his new girlfriend. She wandered around smashing every single Master couple that had the slightest chance of being them, and encountered you and Figaro while doing so. Thanks to the info you gave her, she did eventually get her revenge, but the crimes she committed landed her in the gaol. In addition to that, she fell in love with Figaro, who only cares about dueling her.”

“Yeah. Beary good job summing it up,” said Shu.

He was right — it really was hard to tell whether her reasons and history were shallow or profound. I could understand that it meant the world for Miss Hannya herself, but to a third party, this all wasn’t much more than something to joke about.

“Is she really all that dangerous, though?” I asked. “I mean, she did get her revenge. Shouldn’t she have stopped randomly attacking couples?”

“...No. She’s still dangerous,” B3 said with a serious expression. “I know bandit clan memb... Ahem, *individuals* in the gaol.”

*Why am I not surprised that you have connections there?*

“They said that there are several unwritten laws inside, and two of them are ‘don’t walk out in public as a couple’ and ‘don’t badmouth Figaro.’”

“...Hm?”

“Those who break those rules get crushed by giant legs.”

“...”

*Hoo, boy.* Miss Hannya not only hadn’t improved — she actually had *more* targets now. It wouldn’t be that bad if badmouthing Figaro was the only thing that could set her off, but if merely *seeing a couple* did that, too, then... ah.

“...Hold on a second,” I said. “Marie... what did you say tomorrow was?”

“The Love-Duel Festival...” Right. The day that would see loads of couples getting together, during which there would be a person walking around who indiscriminately crushed all pairs who merely looked the part...

“...What kind of dangerous combo is that?!”

“I would’ve done something ahead of time if it occurred to me earlier,” said Shu. “But I had my paws full with Gerbera and the other one, so the Love-Duel Fest completely slipped my mind.”

“A Superior that attacks all couples and a festival that creates tons of couples... That alone is extremely dangerous, but we also have the

potential of that meathead Figaro setting her off like a bomb. This could be a repeat of Franklin's Game... Gideon could be attacked by a Superior yet again..."

"Wouldn't she be open to negotiation? I mean, unlike Franklin, she has nothing against Altar or Gideon, does she?" asked Rook. He had a point, but...

"Rook... When it comes to relationships, love, and marriage, people completely lose all self-control."

"Umm... Ray, why do you look like you've been through hell? Your eyes are so empty that even I can't tell what you're thinking."

"...Let's just say that I've been to South America once."

"South America?"

The Amazons, thirsty for a man... my sister, recklessly destroying the jungle... it all terrified me even now.

"...I think she'll be fine with couples if she's with Figaro," said Shu.

"At first, she was out for revenge, but once in the gaol, her motivation turned into jealousy. 'How dare you flirt when I can't even be with him' and all that. She... paw-robably won't care if she's on a date or something with Figaro."

"And what if Figaro himself sets her off?" I asked.

I could totally imagine him ruining everything by looking into the eyes of this lady who expects a "Let's get married," and instead saying "Let's duel."

"..."

*Brother, please say something. Or would it be that bad that you have no words?*

"Well, I did give Figgy a roundabout, but beary detailed, explanation," Shu said.

“Why not be direct?” Marie asked.

“The shock from that might kill the kid in real life.”

That was... *not* actually an exaggeration. I’d learned about Figaro’s condition while chatting between our mock battles. He had a chronic heart disease that endangered his life if his BPM climbed too high.

That was enough reason for Shu not to talk to him about Hannya too much.

“Well, Figgy won’t be on tomorrow, and Hannya’s offline, so if something happens, it’s gonna be the day after tomorrow. I’ll use tomorrow to pre-bear and take measures against it.”

“...Sounds like hard work.”

“Beary hard work, especially with the bomb we’re already working on...”

“Bomb?”

“It’s nothin’... By the way, is Xunyu here?”

“Yeah. Canglong is in Gideon, so she’s with him.”

“I see. It just hit me that if Hannya paw-sitively loses it, Xunyu could stop her by tearing out her heart with Tenaga-Ashinaga. If Figgy and I had to fight her fair and square, it’d probably take too long.”

That was a hell of a violent solution. And did he just say that he and Figaro would take too long to beat her? Was Hannya that powerful?

“Xunyu, though... Xunyu would be able to do something,” Shu concluded.

And the reply to that came... “I don’t really get it... But I’d like it if ya didn’t expect too much of me.”

“Xunyu?!” I exclaimed.

...from Xunyu herself. I hadn't even noticed her enter, but... speak of the devil and all that.

"Xunyu, why would you come here at this hour...? Huh...?"

Behind her large frame, there was another, far smaller girl.

"Ellie?" Marie asked.

"Nnh... waahh! Marie!" the girl — Second Princess Elizabeth — cried as she rushed into Marie's arms.

Something had clearly happened, and the girl explained it herself.

"Altimia said that I have to marry Canglong and go to Huang He!  
That's why I ran away from home!"

*...When it rains, it pours, huh?*

◇

The next morning arrived. After resting at an inn in Gideon for the first time in a while, I was woken up by fireworks going off outside. Not fully awake, I wondered what the occasion was, but I quickly remembered that it was the first day of the Love-Duel Festival.

I then recalled what I had to do today, so I hastily got out of bed, dressed, and left the inn.

After several dozen minutes of walking, I arrived at Count Gideon's mansion — specifically, the guest house connected to it. This wasn't my first time at the mansion. It was where I'd received the reward for my contributions during Franklin's Game, and I'd gone through certain procedures at the nearby knight's offices several times now.

However, this would be my first time entering the guest house. I wondered if it was okay for me to enter, and sure enough, I was greeted by a guard who stuck out his spear to me the moment I came close. "S-Such a terrifying appearance... A villain?!"

“No, wait!” the ninja next to him said. “Villainous as he may look, this is Master Ray the Unbreakable! My Reveal is max level, so that can’t be a mistake!”

“Ohh, that’s certainly his face. My apologies, Master Ray. Her Highness has given you permission to enter. Feel free to do so.”

And so, I was let into the guest house, where I was greeted by a royal knight who said he would show me the way to Her Highness’ room.

*But man, what's with that attitude? I don't even have my mask or my hood on,* I thought.

“I assume I’m allowed in because Azu—... I mean, Her Highness knew that I was coming?”

“Yes,” the knight said. “She said she was certain you would come the moment Lady Grandria and Gideon’s ninjas reported that Her Highness Elizabeth had run away to your group.”

*So they already knew that much, huh?* I thought.

After about three minutes of walking, we arrived at a door deep inside the guest house.

“Your Highness! Master Ray has arrived.”

“Show him in,” Azurite said from behind the door. The knight opened it and urged me inside.

Upon walking in, I saw Azurite sitting at a writing desk, just like she had been doing at the capital.

“Morning, Azurite.”

“You too, Ray... So it’s already morning, huh?”

That was when I noticed the slight bags under her eyes.

“You pulled an all-nighter?” I asked.

“I do have lots to do, after all. I might be away from Altea, but I still have to take care of the more urgent matters.”

Honestly, I wouldn’t have been surprised if she just couldn’t sleep last night, so she decided to just lose herself in work.

“You came to discuss my sister, yes?”

“Yeah.”

“She started crying and ran away because I delivered the order very harshly.” When Elizabeth ran to us, she’d been crying her eyes out because Azurite had ordered her to marry into Huang He’s ruling bloodline, while keeping up her usual frosty attitude.

That was the reason she’d run away from home and was now staying at DIN along with Marie. Xunyu was watching over her, too, and we called Liliana over as well. She’d tried to bring Elizabeth back, but the girl was adamant about staying where she was, so Liliana had decided to just stay by her side.

We had then discussed what to do next, and it was decided that, come morning, I would talk about it with Azurite herself, like I was doing right now. I thought that Liliana, whom Azurite had known for a long time, would’ve been the better person for this, but she herself claimed that she was bound by her role as a knight serving the royal family. Eventually they concluded that I, as Azurite’s friend and equal, was the better pick.

Oh yeah, Marie tried to “talk” to Azurite right away, but it seemed like she was seeing red, so we all had to hold her back. It even got to the point that she used The Art of Vanishing. Man, was that dangerous.

“So, did you come to denounce me as an awful woman who sells out her sister to foreigners?” Azurite said.

“...That depends on how you answer my questions.”

“About what?”

“The marriage between Altar and Huang He’s ruling bloodlines, the alliance that comes with it... Why do it, and all that.”

Elizabeth’s situation upset Marie, Nemesis, and even Babi, for some reason. They were all really mad. The rest of us, however, merely wondered why Azurite... I mean, the two countries involved would come to such an arrangement.

Oh, and Nemesis had stayed up really late last night, so she was still inside the crest.

“While talking with Shu and the others, we were only able to figure out what Huang He wants out of this,” I said.

“I see,” Azurite nodded. “And what would that be? I need to ask to see if you have it right.”

“Yeah... We’re guessing that Huang He wants the Altarian royal bloodline itself... as in, *the right to use The Primeval Blade, Altar.*”

That was Shu and Rook’s assumption, and Xunyu had given the conclusion her approval, saying, “YeAh, that’s prObably it.” She didn’t actually know the terms agreed on between the two countries, but according to her, “Since its foUnding, Huang He’s always seEn Special SupErior Jobs as divinE. Getting anOther one is probAbly more than enoUgh for them.”

“Two thousand years have passed since the downfall of the pre-ancient civilization,” I continued. “During this entire time, the only ones who could become Sacred Kings or Sacred Princesses and wield Altar were the descendants of the first Azurite, and only a few of those, too. However, that also means that anyone from this bloodline may have children with the aptitude. If Elizabeth marries into the Huang He bloodline and such a child is born, Huang He would end up having both the Draconic Emperor and the Sacred King — two powerful Special Superior Jobs.”

With Masters and especially Superiors, there were now a great many individuals who broke the balance. However, before the influx of Masters... i.e. before *Infinite Dendrogram* released... the balance-breakers were the tians with Special Superior Jobs. It was no exaggeration to say that people like the King of Kings, the previous Draconic Emperor, and the Sacred King — who unified the entire center-west area — had changed the course of history.

Shu, Rook, and Xunyu said that it was only natural for Huang He to want those.

“...Yes, that is more or less what Huang He wants to gain from this,” Azurite nodded. “They also added that they want the right to test if Huang He’s bloodline has the aptitude for the Sacred King whenever there’s no living Sacred King in Altar. They certainly like to plan far ahead.”

That also meant that, at the very least, Huang He didn’t seem to want Altar’s demise at this point. Though, for all I knew, they were planning to come in and take The Primeval Blade in the event that the country did collapse.

“...Is there any chance they would do anything about you... the living Sacred Princess?” I asked.

“No. We are using a Contract for rulers, and it would forbid it.”

So the signing would be done on a Contract made for rulers — the kind that punished entire countries if broken.

I’d heard that among the many warring states that would eventually become Altar, one had a king who had broken such a Contract. As a result, his lands were ravaged by famine and disease for several years until an insurrection dethroned him and sent his whole family into exile. The risks were too great for anyone to breach such Contracts.

“...Didn’t you have such a Contract with Dryfe?” I asked.

*From what I recall, the countries were once allies.*

"They have to be renewed whenever new rulers take over, so there was no alliance between us when the war began," Azurite explained. "Also, the alliance between the three western countries was mostly about cooperation in case of invasion by other powers and prevention of the assassination of important figures. There was next to nothing about land or trade, so invasions don't violate it."

"...Isn't that, like, the most important thing?"

"It was the only way, apparently. I hear they had a clause in there against that at first, but the processes involved in avoiding the punishments were very complex, so, over a century ago, my teacher... the late Arch Sage... said that it was better to repeal many of the restrictions to make cross-country interaction more simple. Also... a mere year ago, the countries got along so well that the idea of a war between us was absurd."

The conflict itself was unexpected, huh?

"So, I assume the alliance with Huang He will be done properly?" I asked.

"Yes."

"I see. Anyway, we had Huang He's reasons down, but we haven't figured out what Altar will gain out of this union."

Even Xunyu had no idea, and neither Shu nor Rook had enough information to come up with anything conclusive.

"I mean, it's not like they can send reinforcements, right?"

"Yes. They cannot cross Caldina's deserts, and Granvaloa does not allow foreign armies in their waters."

Going from Huang He to Altar required crossing The Great Desert or Harshwinter Mountains, both of which were extremely unwelcoming places.

Traveling through the former meant dealing not just with attrition due to the harsh conditions, but also constituted an act of war against Caldina, who wouldn't tolerate foreign armies on their lands. The latter was a hostile place inhabited by powerful landdragons and avians, including the Landdragon King, Mother Drag-Land, and Divine Comet Bird, Tunguska, all of which were UBMs above Mythical in power.

Needless to say, neither route was an option.

Therefore, the question remained — what would Huang He bring to this alliance?

“They would give equipment,” said Azurite.

“Equipment?”

“MVP special rewards. Ten of them.”

“Huhh?! Hold on, you can’t even trade those!” Special rewards were made to suit the MVP, and they couldn’t be traded or transferred in any way. If they could, it would totally defeat the purpose.

“Yes. That is why they will be given to us in the form of actual UBMs. Sealed away, of course.”

According to her, Huang He’s Draconic Emperor before the last one had developed a means of sealing UBMs away alive.

“They will give us ten sealed UBMs. They were brought here alongside Prince Canglong.”

“...That takes ‘Handle with care’ to a whole new level.”

“Indeed. Though, the long years of sealing have apparently weakened them a lot. I was told that it’s easy to defeat them if you are well-prepared.”

“And what do you intend to do with the special rewards?”

“At first, I intended to distribute them to trustworthy tians, but now, I am considering using them to entice Superiors into cooperating with Altar.”

Chances to acquire MVP special rewards were few and far between. Even Logan was unable to use the ace up his sleeve on me because he was too hesitant to sacrifice his. Many Masters were absolutely desperate to get their hands on one, and they were a prize not even the imperium could offer. They could be used to get the kingdom’s Superiors to actually fight this time, or perhaps even hire Xunyu or Superiors with no allegiance to any country.

*...Yes, I know that the kingdom’s Superiors are the kind who can’t be bought with special rewards. Shu and Figaro have so many of them even by Superior standards.*

“Would you like one?” Azurite asked.

“Hey, I’ll participate even if I don’t get one. Use it for your negotiations.”

“...No hesitation at all, eh?” Well, I’d already promised that I would help her, so these special rewards were better used elsewhere.

“But man, ten MVP special rewards without a set owner... It’d be scary if someone stole them,” I commented.

“It would. Like Altar, they cannot be stored in inventories, so securing them is a very important matter, as well. Though we will only receive them once Elizabeth is safe on the road to Huang He.”

“I see... Hm?”

*What did she just say...?*

“Ray?”

“...Nothing. Anyway, is that all that Huang He’s offering?”

“No. If Altar is defeated, they would also allow any asylum seekers, noble or otherwise, into Huang He.”

“That’s...”

“Preparation in case we lose. A hard life awaits many people if Altar falls.”

“But they can’t cross the desert, can they?”

“I already spoke to Granvaloa about it. As long as they’re not military and they pay the fare, they will take the people to Huang He. Though, only under the condition that those over a certain level reset their jobs.”

The significance of the military came up yet again. I now understood why Canglong and Xunyu went through the desert. They couldn’t use Granvaloa’s ships because Xunyu’s level was too high and because they were transporting the UBMs. They probably couldn’t reveal that they had UBMs on them and wanted to keep it hidden.

Anyway, I now knew what Huang He gave Altar in exchange for the royal bloodline.

“And that is why I’m sending off Elizabeth and forging an alliance with Huang He,” Azurite concluded, putting on a faint smile. “You can hold me in contempt if you want. I’m basically selling my sister in exchange for military potential and the safety of our people.”

At first glance, this seemed very heartless, but...

“That’s not it, is it?”

...I just couldn’t believe it.

“No. I just said it as it is...”

“I mean, the kingdom... *you’re* getting something more out of this.”

“...What?”

“You’re marrying off Elizabeth because you want her to live in Huang He, aren’t you?”

That was obvious when she’d said, “...once Elizabeth is safe on the road to Huang He.” That was her letting slip her true desires — to allow her little sister to escape the war-torn country of Altar.

Azurite said nothing in return, but I could tell by her expression that I was right.

Considering the situation, I could also more or less guess why, exactly, she wanted Elizabeth away from here.

“During the coming war, more cities could be attacked, like Gideon or Quartierlatin, and Elizabeth might be caught up in all of that again...”

It was easy to imagine what might happen, and how bad of a taste it would leave in my mouth.

“...If I die on the battlefield like my father, my two little sisters would be the only members of our bloodline left. The younger one, Theresia, is extremely sickly and relies on a special field within the castle to live. I’m told that her life will be short...”

I knew Azurite and Elizabeth, but I’d never met or heard much about the third princess. I had no idea she was in such circumstances...

“That is why Elizabeth is in the most danger. If she was captured by Dryfe, as the last of the royalty and the Sacred King’s bloodline, she might be treated horribly. Rather than letting that happen—”

“You think that she would be happier living in Huang He as the prince’s wife... right?”

“...Yes.” What followed was a long silence.

I understood her line of thinking and honestly... kinda agreed with it.

Azurite wished for her sister's happiness. She would marry off Elizabeth and forge an alliance with Huang He so the girl could live a happy, healthy life regardless of what happened to Altar. This actually explained some other things, such as why Azurite had Elizabeth stay here in Gideon all the time.

The girl was originally here on "official business," but now I felt that Azurite merely wanted her to be in the Altarian city that was furthest away from Dryfe and possessed the most military might. From the safety of this city, the girl would go through her marriage meeting with Canglong and be evacuated to Huang He.

However, Franklin then embarked on his game and almost kidnapped Elizabeth.

Back then, Azurite had probably considered bringing her back to Altea, only to realize that Gideon was probably safer now that it was on high alert after having already been the target of a terrorist scheme. For all we knew, the enemy could still have had something sinister in store for the capital. Also, following Franklin's Game, Azurite was busy handling a lot of work and dealing with various incidents, delaying her and Canglong's arrival to Gideon.

In fact, they'd basically come here the exact moment all that work was done and dusted, just so she could ensure her sister's safety as quickly as possible.

Also, there was the trip itself. It wasn't *just* meant to gauge ludo Masters like B3, but also to see whether Canglong was worthy of her sister. Azurite had told Elizabeth about the marriage last night because she'd seen the good in the boy.

She might have even skipped the formal marriage interview because she'd already wasted so much time on other things and wanted to let Elizabeth escape as quickly as possible.

Oh man. Looking back at it all... you could really see how much she cherished her sister. It was a bit awkward, but it was definitely a form of love.

"...I have decided to fight alongside you... and the other Masters," Azurite broke the silence. "However, that resolve does not affect my intention to have her escape in case something goes wrong."

Azurite's will was firm, and it was all because she truly cared for and loved her sister.

"I see. I have nothing to say, then," I said.

"...How unexpected. I thought you would have more objections."

"You're doing all this because you really love your sister, right? In that case, it's nothing I can judge. This is purely a family matter."

"..." Ultimately, they would have to settle this by themselves... maybe even with the youngest, Theresia. I couldn't get involved in it. All I could do is help Azurite, for her sake.

"Though, can I say one thing?"

"...Go ahead," she said, looking as if she actually wanted to hear my thoughts.

"I assume that your attitude as Elizabeth described it was probably meant to make her think that you no longer care about her, to make leaving easier for her, but..." The girl had said that Azurite was very cold to her, and for all I knew, that might've hurt her more than the very fact she was being married off.

Though, putting such a mask on her heart and acting that way might have been painful for Azurite herself as well. But anyway...

"You should drop it and apologize to her," I said. "She might be moving to a foreign land. Just imagining her last memories of her family being so unpleasant... leaves a bad taste in my mouth."

“...I suppose you’re right,” she looked down with regret in her eyes.

Yeah, it really must’ve hurt her, too.

“Bare your soul, be honest, talk to her and find a solution together. And believe it or not...”

This was just a personal rule of thumb, but...

“...Younger siblings understand the honest words of their older siblings way better than you’d expect.” Just as I had carried around the possibility Shu had given me ever since I was a boy...

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#### *DIN Gideon Branch*

That day, Elizabeth awoke not in the now-familiar guest house, but somewhere she didn’t recognize.

It was a sleeping room in Gideon’s DIN branch. She’d been brought there after she fell asleep while the girls (B3 excluded) were comforting her last night. While the others had left her to her rest, Marie was still by her side, leaning against a wall to watch over her.

If Ray was here, he’d wonder if sleeping while standing was an Onmitsu skill or something.

Elizabeth, however, didn’t think too much about it and snuck out of the room, careful not to wake Marie. Though the woman was ready to snap to attention if anything happened, Elizabeth’s innate sneaking ability actually surpassed Marie’s high perception.

First things first, Elizabeth went to the bathroom to wash her face.

She followed the signs on the walls and doors, and when she finally found it, there was already someone there.

“Yo. Already awake, huh?”

It was a girl about as tall as Elizabeth. She needed a moment to realize who it was, but it was easy once she noticed the girl's pale bluish skin and serrated teeth.

"Xunyu? You've shrunk a lot." The nearly four-metel-tall aberration was now only about a third of her usual height.

"A high reach and height would just get in the way here, so I put my limbs away."

Xunyu's Superior Embryo, Tenaga-Ashinaga, was a set of prosthetic arms and legs. However, unlike Figaro's Cor Leonis or Sechs' Nu, it didn't actually replace any parts of her. She was basically just wielding pairs of long, versatile grabbers and platform shoes, and she could remove them whenever she had to.

"Your face and voice are different, too," said Elizabeth.

"Well, I can't wash my face with that Fu on, ya know?" Indeed, the Fu hiding Xunyu's face and distorting her voice was gone, too, so her visage was fully exposed and her speech was natural.

"Here to wash your face, aren't ya?" she said. "The sink right there is open."

"Mhm... And it's really strange for you to be shorter than me," Elizabeth giggled at seeing this new side of Xunyu, who'd been her friend since Franklin's Game.

The two then washed their faces, did whatever else they had to, and went to the lounge. Xunyu went and bought a random drink from the vending machine there and went to sit at Elizabeth's side.

"Feelin' calmer after your sleep?"

"...Mhm." Last night, Altimia had told Elizabeth to marry Canglong and go to Huang He. Her tone was harsh, and the little girl had not been allowed to say no. The suddenness of the situation had been quite a shock, but a night was enough for her to calm down.

In retrospect, though Altimia had tried to act composed, her eyes were full of tears, which might have implied that she was hesitant to give the order. The fact that she did it anyway might indicate that it was for Elizabeth's own good.

"Maybe sending me to Huang He really hurts her, too." She didn't know why, and wouldn't know until she asked Altimia herself, but if it really was so heart-rending for her to send Elizabeth off like that...

"I'll go back tonight... and talk to Altimia again," Elizabeth spoke her resolve.

"Good idea," said Xunyu.

"Your Highness, are you in here?!" Liliana entered the bathroom, looking somewhat panicked.

"What's wrong?" Elizabeth asked.

"He... Third Prince Canglong is waiting below." Those words made Elizabeth and Xunyu look at each other and tilt their heads.

Upon hearing that, Elizabeth first went to get properly dressed. After all, a prince wasn't the kind of person she could greet in her sleepwear. As someone who was adept at running away from home, she'd brought an inventory with extra clothes and other necessities with her.

"Good morning, Your Highness."

Once the two girls were fully dressed — and in Xunyu's case, armed — they, Liliana, and Marie, whom they'd woken up, went to the first floor. There they saw the Third Prince of Huang He, Canglong.

Elizabeth had already met the boy. They'd had dinner together, and the unfortunate conversation with Altimia had happened afterwards.

"Good morning... What brings you here so early?" Elizabeth asked, hiding behind Marie.

She knew he wasn't a bad person, but he was still the reason she was being forced to go to Huang He, so she couldn't help but be wary of him. Canglong began by bowing his head before her.



“I deeply apologize for disturbing you so. Brazen as it may seem, I came here hoping to make up for it somehow.”

The boy had actually come here to say he was sorry.

However, Elizabeth didn’t know how to react. Though she saw him as the reason behind it, she didn’t think it was his fault. The marriage and the move to Huang He had been arranged by Altimia and the emperor; Canglong wouldn’t even be here if they hadn’t. In a way, they were both in the exact same position.

So, Elizabeth didn’t know what to do in response to his apology.

The most she could do was look away from him and say “...It’s okay. It isn’t your fault.”

“But if I didn’t come to Gideon, you—”

“I’m saying that it’s not your fault, so accept that!” Canglong felt uneasy because he thought he’d made the sisters quarrel, while Elizabeth just didn’t know how to feel about the whole situation.

Watching the two made Liliana extremely anxious.

That was when Xunyu beckoned both her and Marie over to her and, in a low tone that Canglong and Elizabeth couldn’t hear, said “Let’s make them go on a date.”

“...Ehh?” Liliana raised her eyebrow.

“...Hold on there, Xunyu — how did you come to that idea?” Marie asked, shocked by this out-of-the-blue suggestion.

“I’ve been thinking it since yesterday, but the problem here’s that Elizabeth needs to marry someone and move out in a way she doesn’t really like, right? Why not just make it agreeable to her? It’s normal to move outta the country for love and marriage. It’s why my mom moved to Singapore.”

“Umm... i-is that how it works...?”

“I meAn, it was supposed to bE a formal marriage intErview at first, right? But thEy went strAight to marriage befOre anyOne even realizEd it. That ain’t hOw it’s supposEd to go, right? For now, lEt’s just see if they’re goOd for one another by making thEm go on a dAte. If they likE each other, they cAn get married no prOb and Elizabeth’s sis won’t hAve to feel like she’s forcing hEr to do something she doEsn’t want.”

That seemed reasonable.

The initial plan was definitely that the two would have a formal marriage meeting to see if it would even work out. Changing up the order made a mess of Elizabeth’s relationship with her sister, but thinking on it, they would have had far fewer problems if they’d just kept with the original plan.

The most questionable thing about this was the fact that this voice of reason belonged to a girl in elementary school.

“...And what if they *don’t* like each other?” asked Marie.

“We’ll crOss that bridge whEn we come tO it. They probably dOn’t have a say in whEther they’ll get married or not, bUt whether they gEt along is completely up to thEm. I’m jUst sayin’ that it’d be greAt if they actuAllly like each othEr and it ends up workin’ oUt.”

“That’s true,” Liliana agreed. “Even if they don’t, the situation won’t be any worse than it is now.”

As a royal knight and a close friend of Altimia, she also hoped that Elizabeth’s marriage would be a happy one.

And, albeit reluctantly and with the most bitter look on her face, Marie also said “Well... it’s what’s best... for Ellie’s happiness... Grnnh...”

Thus, the three stopped the back-and-forth between Elizabeth and Canglong to suggest that they should go on a date to get to know each other.

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*Prism Rider, Ray Starling*

“Hey, this is about Elizabeth’s marriage again... why Huang He?” I asked. “Geographically speaking, Legendaria, Caldina, and Granvaloa are the better options, aren’t they?” They were all closer to Altar than Huang He. With no countries in between, you could even expect some reinforcements out of the deal. And from what I knew, Altar was already allied with Legendaria and had a trade treaty with Caldina.

“Legendaria and Caldina actually gave similar propositions, but I just went with the least worst option,” said Azurite.

“Least worst? And... what about Granvaloa?”

“Forming an alliance with them through marriage is impossible. It just wouldn’t be enough to give you backing from all the four great fleets.”

According to Azurite, the grand captain (as the king of Granvaloa was called) was selected out of the candidates presented by the great houses of each of its four fleets — the merchant fleet, the military fleet, the pirate fleet, and adventurer fleet.

Because of this system, the addition of Altarian royal blood into any of the four houses would destroy the balance and maybe even spark a civil war. No marriage-based alliance offer came from Granvaloa because none of the houses wanted that to happen.

There was also another detail that made it difficult to forge an alliance, even without marriage involved.

The current grand captain was elderly and it was thought that he would be replaced soon, so it was hard for the country to make any major policy decisions. Apparently, the houses weren't unified on whether they should side with Altar or Dryfe.

This was only slightly related, but the house in charge of the pirate fleet was "Grandria," and it was where Sir Langley — Liliana's and Milianne's father — was from. So, if things went differently, Liliana herself might've been a candidate for grand captain.

Though, it wasn't like such "what ifs" meant anything now.

"And what about Legendaria?" I asked.

"That country is going through political unrest."

"It is?"

"Yes. It is a limited monarchy with two people at the top — Fairy Queen Titania, who is basically a figurehead, and the prime minister who's the real political leader."

Oh, I'd heard of Titania before. And... a limited monarchy? So Legendaria was basically like Japan or the UK, huh?

"For many years, their prime minister was the patriarch of the high elves, but he died some time before the war here in Altar." A high elf. So this world also had the classic fantasy races...

"And apparently... it was an assassination." ...Now *that* definitely seemed like something that'd cause a disturbance.

"I hear his death was really odd, too. He transformed into a monkey... from the neck down."

"Now that's just freaky... Hm..." I felt like I'd heard of something like that before...

Oh, right... Marie had told me once that Legendaria had a Superior with an Embryo that did something similar.

“So, uhh...”

“Yes,” Azurite said, understanding what I was getting at. “Legendaria has a Master that can do exactly that. However, he is not being investigated for the crime, and the culprit still hasn’t been found.”

That was weird. It would all work out fine if he was innocent, and with Truth Discernment you’d know if he was guilty right away, so why *not* investigate him?

“I looked into this a bit myself,” Azurite continued. “Apparently, the prime minister’s close relatives tried to look into it, but some other influential people interfered.”

“So, basically...”

“Yes. They have an internal conflict. The country’s tians are split into factions, and as a whole it’s now a crucible of assassination and betrayal. There is no all-out bloody conflict, but many people aren’t even sure who their enemies are. Everything is muddied and unclear. We are always told that that is the reason why they cannot send us reinforcements.”

*Now that’s a hell of a mess, I thought. Even Tenchi seems like a better option, and war over there is like a daily routine.*

Anyway, now I knew why Azurite didn’t feel like sending her sister there.

“The only places in Legendaria that are as peaceful as they seem are the place where Titania lives and their arenas. Many of the Masters there seem to be completely nonchalant about what is happening,” Azurite said.

“For a place called ‘Fairyland,’ it really doesn’t seem all that pleasant. So, last one... why not Caldina?” I asked, expecting her to quickly say something negative about it.

However, her response was... silence.

“Azurite?”

“...There are no obvious problems with that country,” she said while making a face that seemed to imply the opposite. “Ray, what do you think about Caldina?”

Her question was spoken in a voice dense with unease. She basically sounded as though she saw Caldina as an enemy.

“...I know next to nothing about it. ‘I don’t know’ is about all I can say.”

If I had to name something, it would be their indirect involvement in the actions of the Gouz-Maise Gang, which definitely didn’t give me a good impression.

“Is there something about Caldina?” I asked.

“...Nothing I can say with certainty. And unlike Granvaloa, there aren’t any problems that immediately come to mind.”

That alone made it seem like a good potential ally, but there had to be something more to this.

“After we lost the war, they offered to send Masters to us, including four Superiors.”

“Four?!” Caldina had a total of nine, and that was nearly half of them. That would literally double the amount of Superiors Altar had available, and the non-Superiors would do a good job filling whatever gaps they still had.

“And it was an alliance offer that did not even involve marriage. We would simply unite to get back at Dryfe. The only condition was that Caldina would have Dryfe’s land and technology, while Altar would get back the territory Dryfe had taken from the kingdom.”

Altar could use all the manpower from Caldina to win back what it had lost. It sounded like a really good deal, but... "...What about the pay for the Superiors and other Masters?"

"Not only would they cover all of that — they would also give us money to hire our kingdom's Masters."

So Altar would get everything back with little effort on their part. It was actually such a good deal that it made a light chill go down my spine...

"...You didn't agree to it, though? Why?"

"Because if everything went according to their plan, Caldina would simply gain far too much..." First of all, they would receive Dryfe's advanced technology and Dryfe's land. The former was obviously the more important thing, but to a desert country like Caldina, even Dryfe's land would be quite useful. The imperium was also full of ruins like the ones at Quartierlatin, with a great deal of treasure potentially waiting to be unearthed.

Second, they would have Dryfe's Masters. Even if the imperium vanished, its Masters would still be around. Many of them would switch allegiances, and many of those would pick Caldina simply because it would now be controlling Dryfe's territory. Caldina was also rich enough to match the insane monetary rewards Dryfe paid to its Masters, as evidenced by the four Superiors and many normal Masters they offered to dispatch to Altar's aid.

If there was one thing in this deal that might be a hardship for Caldina, it was the money they would have to pay to their Masters, but even that was a drop in the bucket compared to the country's immense wealth. Hugo had once told me that Dryfe's rewards to Masters had made a huge dent in the imperium's coffers, but to Caldina, that kind of money was pocket change.

Third, Caldina would break free of their geopolitical encirclement. Currently, Caldina was surrounded by the three western countries, Huang He to the east, and Granvaloa to the south. If they defeated Dryfe and forged an alliance with Altar, they would lose two out of their five enemies. Once that happened, they could use their nine Superiors, and all the other Superiors and Masters they would gain thanks to merging with Dryfe, to invade Huang He or Legendaria.

Basically, if the alliance happened, Caldina would have it all without risking anything.

They might even be able to use the momentum from their victories to bring the entire continent under their banner. Honestly, it was only natural for Azurite to be wary of their offer.

“Though, we did almost accept their offer,” Azurite said. A drowning man will clutch at a straw, as they said. Desperation could’ve easily led Altar to accept the deal.

“But... the kingdom still has other options. We are not broken yet,” she continued before looking into my eyes, for some reason. It felt like she was using me to remember something she’d seen in the past.

“Azurite?” I broke the silence.

“...I should get back to work.”

*Then I guess I should leave,* I thought.

“...Thanks for coming today,” Azurite said. “I will talk to Elizabeth again and really open up to her, just as you told me.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“Thanks to you, I will avoid making at least one mistake.”

“Don’t mention it. I just did what I thought wouldn’t leave a bad taste in my mouth.”

With that, I left Azurite's room.

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### *The Guest House*

Altimia watched as Ray left and closed the door, then heaved a sigh and said, "You are the reason why the kingdom didn't break, Ray."

*It's only because you gave hope to Altar's tians that the country wasn't shattered, she thought.*

His battle had been broadcast to both Gideon and Altea, and it had been witnessed by many Altarians, noble and peasant alike.

It had prevented the nobles from finally losing all trust in Masters along with their hope for the kingdom's future.

It was why the kingdom hadn't gone with the easiest but most suspicious option.

If Altimia's guess was correct, accepting Caldina's offer would lead to a future where Caldina ruled the entire continent, and Altar would either end up as their vassal state or be destroyed entirely. It would be the same as losing to Dryfe, if not worse. The only difference would be that it would happen later.

Even so, despite the fact that that case held no hope for the future, she might've picked that option in order to save the present. There were many in the Altarian nobility who viewed Caldina favorably. Many of them thought that accepting Caldina's offer was the most certain path to victory against Dryfe, but Altimia believed that a decent number among them were actually colluding with Caldina. There were even some documents in the recently-sentenced Marquis Borozel's mansion referring to shady dealings with Caldinan merchants.

The country was trying to spread their tentacles throughout the Altarian nobility, using merchants as points of contact.

"Dryfe is the enemy that will fight us directly, while Caldina is the one that will backstab us... that might be the best way to look at it," Altimia spoke to herself.

This was supported by the fact that Caldina had begun acting strange once Altimia rejected their alliance offer. For one, they requested a change in the commerce treaty and slightly changed their exports and imports. That didn't seem like much to worry about, but Altimia thought that it wasn't out of the question that they would assassinate her to instill a sense of danger and then support the Caldina-friendly nobles in order to put Elizabeth or Theresia on the throne and forge their alliance then.

"That witch... President La Place Phantasma is definitely capable of going that far." Also, Altimia hadn't told this to Ray because she wasn't certain of it, but it was possible that Caldina was also behind the imperium's invasion of Altar.

Before the change in Dryfe's leadership, Caldina had begun holding back its exports of food. Officially, it was "part of a restructuring related to the recent increase in Masters," but that didn't ring true to Altimia.

She'd also recently learned that Dryfe was going through a severe famine.

Strange as it was, the tian agents she'd dispatched there earlier hadn't reported anything like that happening, and the situation had only become clear once Altimia began giving similar requests to Masters.

Regardless of the reasons for it, Caldina's food export policy and the famine had added up, putting Dryfe in a dire situation. Altimia believed that it was possible that Caldina had stopped their exports *because* there was a famine in Dryfe, all so they could drive them into invading the fertile lands of Altar.

The imperium's food production simply couldn't keep up with demand.

Out of their neighbors, Granvaloa was in a similar position. They could only produce marine products and had to rely on foreign exports to fill the gaps. The other neighbor, Altar, had ended the alliance between the countries shortly after the new imperator took the throne. Legendaria was beyond Altar, while Huang He and Tenchi were beyond the vast deserts of Caldina.

With all that in mind, Altimia could see that Dryfe had no choice but to invade Altar to fix their food shortage.

However, the whole thing just didn't sit right with her. She questioned the actions of the invaders as well as the invaded — her own country.

Altimia found it strange that Altar had ended the alliance in the first place.

She couldn't understand why her father — the late king — and the Arch Sage — a major political advisor — would have done something like that.

Of course, Altimia was aware of the rumors that the current imperator had risen to the throne after killing the whole imperial family besides his younger sister, and it was understandable to be wary of him.

However, she couldn't help but feel as though there were some deeper reasons behind ending the alliance.

"...How troublesome." Caldina's actions, Altimia's dubious agents, and Altar ending the alliance... It seemed as though multiple motives had intertwined to bring about the war between Dryfe and Altar.

Currently, she suspected that one of the people involved was the president of Caldina, who was known to be a witch and a truly anomalous person.

“...Even the parasite is better than that witch.” Even though the “parasite,” Tsukuyo Fuso, often pushed Altar into making difficult choices in order to further her cult’s agenda, she could no doubt be useful on occasion. In a way, she was like a parasite that sometimes became mutualistic.

The same couldn’t be said for Caldina’s witch.

Altimia had actually met her once during a certain diplomatic event. In her eyes, the witch was a monster that would bait you with a sweet deal and tempt you into doing what she wanted before wringing everything you had out of you.

“If I don’t pay enough attention to Caldina’s actions, the situation could become worse than I’d ever expect... How deeply troubling.”

*I already have my hands full with Dryfe,* Altimia thought with a sigh.

The imperium hadn’t acted once since Quartierlatin. They’d even dispatched a Superior for that, but had been completely inactive in the kingdom since.

Was there a problem in Dryfe, or was this a sign that they were planning something major?

Altimia lost herself in thought. Even if they had something up their sleeve, the kingdom and the imperium had already fought head-on, causing much bloodshed and damaging their relationship beyond repair. Painful as it was for her, Altimia had no choice but to admit that this would not end peacefully.

“Claudiah... What is your brother planning this time?” Altimia sighed, as she remembered her good friend from her days as a transfer student in Dryfe.

## ***Chapter Four: To Each Their Own Duels of Love***

*Prism Rider, Ray Starling*

My talk with Azurite was over, so I decided to look around town.

Festivals didn't happen every single day, so it'd be a waste not to enjoy this one... especially with the mess we could be in come tomorrow.

"So, do you have someone you want to walk around town with?" Nemesis asked. Apparently, she'd been awake during my conversation with Azurite, but she stayed within my crest to make the exchange less awkward. Once you looked past her gluttony, Nemesis was actually pretty considerate.

"Hmm... As far as I know, everyone's busy today," I said.

"And we're the only ones left with nothing to do, eh?"

"Well, even if that wasn't the case, I wanted to walk around with you today."

"I see. I also had something I wanted to do with y—... huh?"

She looked dumbfounded. No idea why, but apparently, she had something planned. "What is it?" I asked.

"Oh, uh... I was thinking of doing a bit of shopping..."

"Shopping? For what, Love-Duel-exclusive sweets?"

"...For some normal clothes for you."

*...Well, I guess walking around town in armor can be a problem, so... I guess that's an okay idea.*

"It's far worse than 'just a problem.' Masters don't seem to mind but don't you think walking around town in full armor is... unsettling?"

*You have a point. All right, then — let's enjoy the festival while we keep an eye out for some clothes for me.*

I suddenly began to wonder how the others were spending their first day of the festival.

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*Gideon, Fourth District*

That day, the ninjas Count Gideon had put in charge of intelligence, counterespionage, and spec ops were busy with a particular mission.

“This is squad B. We are observing the fourth district’s market. No suspicious people in sight.”

“This is squad C. We are following the targets. The only dubious people nearby... are those three.”

They had split into several squads, all focused on following a certain group. Why? To protect it, of course. They were, after all, Elizabeth and Canglong — young royalty going out on a date.

Because the Love-Duel Festival had its roots in an historical event that had led to the marriage of the founding king and queen, there were many families that used this day for matchmaking. Most of them were wealthy merchants or craftsmen, but occasionally nobles as well. Even the parents of the current Count Gideon had met in this way.

However, it was nearly unheard of for two members of royalty to take part in such endeavors.

The Second Princess of Altar, Elizabeth, and Third Prince of Huang He, Canglong... Once it was known that they would be going on a date, Count Gideon directed nearly all of his ninjas to focus on securing their surroundings, which was notable even when considering the fact that some of them had already been designated as Elizabeth’s protectors or watchdogs.

It was worth noting that the knights weren't accompanying them. They stood out far too much compared to the ninjas who could melt into the shadows, and having them around would have been like broadcasting the presence of important people. Thus, they had been deployed to guard other areas.

"It's so lively here! It really is a festival!" said Elizabeth. "What are Huang He's festivals like?"

"I'm sorry. I couldn't walk out in town like this before coming to Altar, so I could only watch over such events from far away," Canglong replied.

"That seems boring."

"I can see why you would think that. Perhaps it is."

The two young people talked while walking through the lively streets.

According to the ninjas all around, there were no suspicious people around them... At least, not ones they didn't recognize.

There *were* some shady-looking individuals the ninjas knew well, though.

About ten metels behind Elizabeth and Canglong, there was a totem pole of three people peeking out and watching over the two from around the corner of a building.

It was Liliana, Xunyu, and Marie.

One was there as a knight, one as a friend, and one as a self-proclaimed big sister.

"Do they truly believe they don't stand out?" one of the ninjas asked.

"...Well, they *are* in disguise." Liliana had swapped her royal knight armor for casual clothing, but she was quite a beauty, so that only made her stand out more.

Xunyu had taken off her prosthetic limbs as well as the Fu covering her face and was now wearing clothing more typical of someone her age, but her pale-blue undead skin remained the same.

Marie had removed her sunglasses... but that was it.

"I can understand the other two, but Marie..."

"Best not to say it. She's panicking... is what I'd like to say, but she always seemed to think that taking off her glasses was a working disguise."

Even in her manga, she often had scenes that seemingly introduced a new, beautiful lady character, only to reveal that it was just the protagonist — Marie — without her sunglasses.

Many readers commented that you could tell it was her just by her clothes or just assumed it was a running gag, but she truly and honestly intended it to be a real disguise.

Anyway, there was this young couple and three weirdos, and the former seemed to be enjoying the festival. Elizabeth looked over the festival stalls — and not just the ones with food, unlike a certain someone — with gleaming eyes, while Canglong watched her with a smile on his face.

"...He's lookin' like a brother watching over his little sister as she enjoys the festival," Xunyu commented.

"I-I don't think that is bad," said Liliana.

"But it doesn't seem like a *date*, does it?" Marie asked. "I think we should join them and enjoy the festival together—"

"Stop," the other two shot down her idea.

"What kind of date involves the company of a friend, a bodyguard, and a pervert all at once?" Xunyu said.

"...If I may ask, which of those is which of us?" Marie asked coldly.

*Is that even a question?* thought everyone who heard it, even the surrounding ninjas.

As this continued, the couple arrived at a mask stall.

Because the first queen was said to have worn a mask, and also due to the desire of many ladies and gentlemen to mingle anonymously, many people spent this festival wearing a mask. Elizabeth excitedly examined one mask after another, seemingly pondering which one she should buy.

“She also wore a mask the first time I met her. I guess she likes them,” Marie said. “Ah... Ellie, no. Not the bear mask.”

“...I suppose it’s in the blood,” Liliana commented.

“The founding king’s queen and ex-princess of Gideon was a masked swordswoman, right? Does she get it from her?”

“...I had someone closer in mind,” Liliana said with a clouded expression. Marie didn’t understand what she meant and just tilted her head, while Xunyu, having actually seen the “someone closer” wear a mask while on the way to Gideon, knew exactly what Liliana was referring to.

“Hrmm... Should I pick the bear or the cat?” Elizabeth wondered. At her side, Canglong was looking at another mask. It depicted a dragon... specifically, the eastern “Ryu.” Masks like this were often seen in festivals on the eastern side of the continent — not so much here.

Canglong looked at it as if to compare it with *something*. “Did you pick one, Canglong? Hm... That one’s a bit scary,” said Elizabeth.

The man behind the stall smiled and said, “Little lady, that is a very precious mask. It’s based on the one The Draconic Emperor — the duel champion of Huang He to the east — wears whenever dueling. I

got them from an eastern merchant, and they're selling great. Would you two like one, as well?"

"I want a bear or a cat mask."

"Oh? Then how about this? It's another one I got from the east, and it's like a fusion of a bear and cat... a panda mask!"

"What is this wondrous animal?!" Elizabeth exclaimed, her eyes gleaming at the sight of the panda mask that the man took out of his inventory.

Canglong smiled as he watched her before slowly putting the dragon mask back. He whispered "Zifu Longmian" as he did, but no one heard him.

Elizabeth donned the mask, and they went on to walk around the market in the fourth district. It seemed less like a date and more like two friends enjoying a festival.

This continued for several hours before the two sat down to take a break in the shade of a tree.

"Mrgh... You have so little energy, Cang."

"I'm sorry... I'm not used to walking around like this," Canglong replied. His face was flushed and sweaty, possibly due to fatigue. This would happen to any normal child who walked around for hours on end on a sunny day — Elizabeth was actually the anomaly here. The girl was still full of energy despite not being old enough to even have a job.

The heat had caused Canglong to undo the upper buttons of his shirt and fan himself with a fan he was carrying.

Elizabeth looked at him, and at that moment she noticed something in the gap he'd opened.

“Hm...?” She stared at it, blinked a few times, and realized that it was black bandages, wrapped around him so thoroughly that you couldn’t see his skin.

“Canglong, what’s that?” she asked.

“Eh? Ah...” Canglong realized his mistake and hastily buttoned up his clothes again.

“Are you hurt or sick?”

“...I suppose you might call it an illness. These bandages are a measure to hold back a certain handicap I was born with.”

Hearing these words, Elizabeth realized that Canglong had been born with a disease, just like her little sister Theresia.

“...I’m sorry,” Canglong apologized. “I didn’t intend for you to see something so unsightly.”

“Don’t apologize! What’s so unsightly about being sick?!” Elizabeth snapped at his apology, as though actually angry. “So what if you were born with an illness?! If you think that bothers me, you’re sorely mistaken!” It was possible that she wasn’t talking to him, exactly; She might’ve just been seeing some part of her sickly sister in Canglong.

Even so, Canglong could tell that she was being completely honest.

“...You really are a gentle person, Your Highness,” he said.

“Altimia and Liliana would say the same thing I did.”

“I see...”

*So you must be gentle because you were raised by gentle people,* Canglong thought, as his heart ached at the fact that he was responsible for splitting such a family apart. That pain also made him realize that he couldn’t treat this pure and gentle girl the same way he treated everyone else.

Silence then came over them and continued for a good while.

It was broken by Elizabeth, who said, “I don’t want to go to Huang He.”

“...I’m aware.”

“I don’t want to leave Altimia and Theresia... or this country. I want to support and protect them.”

Though Elizabeth had some particular talents, she was just a child without any special job, so there were few things she could do to help Altar in the war.

Even so, she wanted to support her older sister and protect the younger one.

“I love Altimia. She gives her all and works harder than anyone else to protect this country and us. And...”

Elizabeth paused and looked to the north... in the direction of the mountains, beyond which lay the capital.

“...I love Theresia, too. She’s my dear little sister who’s always stuck in the castle, and I want to protect her so that she can smile at least a little.”

Of course, she didn’t actually know *how* she could do that.

“I’m still just a weak little girl, so I can’t do either of those things.” A child like Elizabeth could do little to save her family or Altar in its time of need.

“But...”

However, now she’d been given a certain way to do exactly that.

“But if I go to Huang He with you, I might be able to support Altimia and protect Theresia.” The support Huang He would give to Altar in exchange for Elizabeth traveling there could help ensure the safety of the country and her family. Young as she was, she had a vague

understanding of her situation and the negotiations between the two countries.

After the shocking news from Altimia had caused her to run away from home last evening, Elizabeth had spent a lot of time thinking about it all, until she finally made her decision.

Through both her calmness and tears, she finally realized that there was no other way, so she resolved to marry Canglong for the sake of Altar.

The girl was too young to understand romance, yet she'd already chosen her significant other. In terms of matchmaking, this date was over.

Canglong couldn't find what to say in response. He couldn't refuse, for that would go against the will of his father, the emperor.

But he also couldn't accept, for that... would go against his own heart.

His soul and heartache told him that he could not "acquire" this pure, gentle, sun-like girl as his wife in such a cold manner, like a trade agreement.

"That's why I will—"

"There is still time until I return to Huang He," Canglong said, cutting Elizabeth off. "I will give you my response before then."

It was neither refusal or acceptance — he merely delayed it.

"I will know how I feel by then."

"...Very well," said Elizabeth. Thus ended their date that doubled as a formal marriage meeting. Basically, it ended on a note of "Could you give me more time?" which was quite common for such events.



"Yo. You feElin' good?"

“Master Xunyu. Thank you for protecting us all this time.”

“Well, that’s pArt of my jOb. Are yoU sure about that, thOugh?”

“With what?”

“You fell for hEr at first sight, didn’t yA?”

“...”

“And yet yoU didn’t accept her chOice. I know how yA feel, though. Forcin’ sOMEone into a mARRIAGE doesn’t automAtically make them lovE ya.”

“Master Xunyu...”

“That’s exActly why I recommendEd the date. If she starts likin’ ya, too, thEn that’d be prOper love. Doesn’t seEm like it happened, thOugh.”

“...”

“Ya constAntly closed yOurself off, didn’t yA? She actEd like herself, but yOu weren’t you. Ya were nEither The Third Prince Canglong nOr *the other you*. Ya werE just a coward hidin’ yoUrself. Ya can’t show off tO the girl you like likE that, can ya?”

“...It hurts how right you are.”

“If you undErstand that, then show hEr what you’re reAlly like... and think of hOw to charm hEr. You cAn do that, right?”

“...I can!”

◇◇◇

*Gideon, urban area, KoD’s Popcorn Factory*

“...Man, how should I handle this?” While Ray and Azurite were having their conversation, Shu heaved a sigh, standing in a facility he’d rented for his popcorn production.

He currently had three major problems to deal with: keeping an eye on the “bomb” that had been lurking since Franklin’s Game, the potentially-bloody romance between Hannya and Figaro, and the marriage between Elizabeth and Canglong. He intended to entrust the last one to Ray and the rest. Considering his relationship with Altimia and general suitability, Ray was the best man for the job.

However, the first two problems had to be handled by Shu alone. This festival was actually a golden opportunity to earn big money selling popcorn, but he ended up having zero spare time to dedicate to it.

“The situation with Figgy and Hannya is especially bad. It won’t end with just a talk... Do I have no choice but to lead them on a ‘date’ outside of Gideon and have them settle it there? But how do I lead them out of Gideon when the Love-Duel Festival’s goin’ on? There’s no tourist attractions or anything outside.”

As Shu worried about the approaching calamity...

“Excuse me. Is Shu Starling here?”

...someone outside asked, with a knock on the door.

Before Shu could even respond, the person opened the door, (twisting off the knob in the process) and entered Shu’s office.

It was a woman with a porcupine in her arms and a crest on her left hand, marking her as a Master.



"I heard your voice, so I figured you were in," she continued. "Aren't you glad, Behemot?"

"...You better pay for the door," Shu said with a glare.

"soz," the porcupine — Behemot — said, as the woman threw a gold coin towards Shu.

This was the "bomb" Shu was watching over. The strongest pawn of the imperium, which had been here since Franklin's Game — King of Beasts the Physical Apex, and her partner.

"So, what's your business? I'm not sellin' pawpcorn today." The porcupine's face was hard to read, but anyone could tell that those words shocked her.

"Behemot, we didn't come here for popcorn."

"...kk"

"Whaddya want, then?" King of Beasts was a major threat to the kingdom, but she was also a regular customer at Shu's popcorn stall, and they had talked many times as they ate.

Shu wondered what they wanted this time... "I'll get right to the point. Come on a date with us."

"..."

...And the answer was one he could have never expected.

He quickly considered how he ought to handle this sudden situation.

*For better or worse, the issue of Hannya will come to a head tomorrow. I'm free today. And I have no idea what they'd do if I refuse. I guess it's best to accept the invitation and watch over them, just in case,* Shu thought in two seconds and accepted.

At the same time, he sincerely hoped that a certain egg-woman who often messed with him wouldn't add anything to the pile of troubles he already had.

Though he'd agreed to go on a date, he had no idea why they'd invited him in the first place.

He went and asked, and the response went as follows:

"Well... the biggest reason is that you can only fully enjoy this festival as a pair."

According to her, The Love-Duel Festival was full of things you could only do as a couple.

For most such things, the gender of either party didn't matter — but obviously, it was hard to make a cool-headed beauty and a porcupine pass for a couple. It would've just made her seem like a profoundly sad and lonely woman.

Considering Shu's costume, it didn't look all that different with him; he was relatively famous, however, so it was at least understandable.

The three still ended up looking like they were orbiting a lonely lady who'd gone to an amusement park by herself, but they all actually ended up quite enjoying the Love-Duel Festival. They looked over the many and varied stalls opened by tians and Masters alike, and they participated in a duel-ranker charity event at the third arena.

Once that was done, they'd bought honey castellas at a stall marked "couples only" and went to the second arena for an event Behemot wanted to see.

Naturally, the strangeness of the pair drew some weird looks. Shu's costume stood out, and the pretty lady with the porcupine also attracted a lot of attention. The lady looked around, as though irritated.

"Sorry for makin' ya stand out," Shu said. "But this was your decision, so bear with it."

"Believe it or not, you were the most reasonable option," the woman replied. "Though, I must say that I don't understand it."

"Don't understand what?"

Not even looking at him, the woman said, "A newspaper article said that you refused to participate in the previous war because you didn't want to reveal your face, yet you participated in the game set up by that weakling while dressed in an outfit that was one step away from doing just that. Now everyone knows you're the King of Destruction, yet now you don't seem to care if you stand out at all. Your words and actions contradict one another."

"...True." It was said that Shu had refused to participate in the previous war because he didn't want to needlessly reveal his face.

That wasn't entirely wrong. Shu had indeed said that, and he had indeed avoided participation in the war. It would've also been a lie to say that he *hadn't* been afraid of revealing his face if his gear had been destroyed. That was exactly why he'd also said the same thing to Ray.

However, there had been another reason why he absolutely *couldn't* participate in the war.

"Well, it doesn't matter to us," the woman said. "But do participate in the war next time. If you don't, we won't have anyone to fight."

"...I'm sure you won't." Shu fully agreed with her words. The pair next to him were no doubt the strongest people around. They were on par with the other two monsters he'd fought — the Magical Apex and the Technical Apex.

There existed a theory of the ultimate synergy between Embryo and job — the Guardian-Jaguarman theory. These two were the

strongest beasts to arise from this theory, and Shu knew full well that he would have to give his all to fight them.

They eventually arrived at the second arena. It had been converted into a theater stage for an event where various groups displayed various acts. There was a schedule off to the side.

“What did we come here fur, anyway?” Shu asked.

“A hero show. Behemot liked them quite a lot.”

The fact that she used the past tense stood out to Shu, but he didn’t ask about it.

“?” Behemot suddenly noticed something and dashed off.

“Behemot?” Shu and the lady went after her and arrived at the arena’s staff entrance.

There was a gathering of Masters there, and they were all wearing costumes fit for the stage. It was clear that they were on next.

However, their expressions were gloomy.

“Gh... This is a nightmare. We can’t do this if Gin doesn’t come online. Why did he have to get food poisoning *now*, of all times?!”

“I should’ve stepped in when he posted ‘I’ll best this vile pufferfish!’ on his account.” Apparently, one of the acting Masters was in no state to come online. And even in the current year of 2045, you had people itching to flaunt their recklessness on social media.

“What do we do? Should we get help from some other acting troupe?”

“But we’ve only got an hour left. It’s too late to get a replacement for a main player, isn’t it?”

“Why not bring the hero count down to five?”

“We already advertised it as a squad of six...”

“We either have to call it off or change the whole thing...” The people in the colorful outfits seemed quite troubled.

“They are...”

“As far as I know, that’s the Hero Club clan.” Shu recognized them from their sentai-hero-like apparel.

The Hero Club was a clan of hobbyists built around hero show performances. They were popular among tian children and Master enthusiasts alike, and their performances gathered a good amount of views on video sites.

Apparently, they had a show planned for the Love-Duel Festival, but it seemed like they’d run into some trouble that might force them to call it off.

“wtf,” Behemot said and collapsed where she stood, shocked by the fact that she wouldn’t get to see the hero show.

It made her seem more like a small child than a porcupine.

“Behemot is sad. Do something about it,” demanded the lady.

“You just assume that I would, huh...?” Shu spent a good moment thinking about it

“Beary well, then,” he said as he walked up to the Hero Club members and asked, “How about I be the stand-in?”

The Hero Club were surprised by his offer... and the very fact that he was here, for that matter. He was one of Altar’s Superiors, famous for constantly wearing a costume. They all knew him, obviously.

While they were surprised by his offer, he asked for the script, and they just went and gave it to him without thinking too hard about it.

Shu went on to flip through the pages. As they watched him do that, the Hero Club members whispered among themselves.

“That came outta nowhere... It’s a nice offer, but what do you guys think?”

“Can... Can he even act?”

“Having the walking playground as a guest star would make the kids really happy, though.”

“It’d be a real news hook, too. Why not just let him act? If he’s bad at it, we’ll just pass it off as a character quirk... That’s about the only option we’ve got, right?”

“Hold on, that’s a bit—” As they talked, Shu closed the script.

“Was there a problem with it?” one of them asked.

“I memorized it,” Shu said.

“...Huh? But you only read it for five minutes...”

“It ain’t beary hard to memorize a hero show less than thirty minutes long. Name a page and a line.”

“...All right. Page fifteen, sixth lin— Ah,” one of the Hero Club members said, only to realize that he gave Shu a line of the leader, not of the sixth they had to replace. He tried to switch to another one, but...

“As long as there are children to protect... WE WILL NEVER LOSE!” Shu exclaimed, making the Hero Club gasp.

That was indeed the correct line, making it evident that Shu had memorized not just the sixth hero’s lines, but *the entire script*.

More importantly, Shu’s acting was simply spectacular. The fact that he was in an animal costume did nothing to detract from the heroic aura he emitted as he delivered the line.

The Hero Club had actual aspiring actors among them, so they could easily tell just how good Shu was.

“All right,” he said. “We have a little over fifty minutes until the show. I wanna pre-bear fur it with a complete rehearsal. Let’s get to it.”

“Y-Yes!”

And so, Shu and the Hero Club began their practice.

Behemot silently watched them with excited-looking eyes. “Did you hear that? It seems you’ll have your hero show after all.”

The lady holding the porcupine was quite happy herself.

“So, what should I wear? If I need to change, I—”

“Oh, just equip this accessory with Clothing Switch on it,” one of the Hero Club members gave Shu a mechanical bracelet. “You will switch from your costume into a hero suit when you say ‘Transform.’”

“That’s beary convenient.” The hero suit produced by the accessory seemed very high-quality even to Shu, which showed just how passionate they were about their hero shows.

“Do I get a transformation pose?” Shu asked.

“In our performances, we use transformation poses from old sentai hero shows. It’s so we can show off the cool poses to tian children and get some grins out of tokusatsu fans. Oh, if you have a pose you like, just feel free to use that one. If you don’t, I can show you some to choose from.”

“I have one I’m used to, so I’ll just go fur that one.”

“I see... Wait, ‘used to’?” the red-clad actor tilted his head, but Shu ignored him and hit the pose. It involved a swing of the hand, a raised leg, and a spin, and it was done with great liveliness and fluidity.

“Ohh, the transformation pose of Cruise Gold, the extra Cruise Five member. You did it great! None of the other members are using it, so please go with that.”

“Gotcha.” The pre-transformation Cruise Gold was played by a child actor. Because of that, it was surprising to see the pose done by an adult man in a large bear costume, but it was done so flawlessly that the red-clad member instantly gave it his seal of approval. In fact, he found it a bit amusing.

However, if Shu’s old friend, Lei-Lei, was here, she would be amused for a totally different reason.

After all, the child actor who’d played Cruise Gold was none other than Shu himself.

It was a particularly noteworthy role Shuichi Mukudori had played as a young acting prodigy.

Shu using this transformation pose was basically just the actual actor revisiting his old role, but no one in the Hero Club could even entertain the idea that they were in the presence of the actual Cruise Gold, now grown up.

Shu, on the other hand, only thought, *I haven’t done this in years. I guess the body remembers.*

The two girls watching him, however, now seemed to feel something other than joy.

Once done with the rehearsal, they went up to the stage. The audience were surprised by the presence of Shu and his animal costume, but thanks to the acting prowess of the Hero Club and especially Shu, they thoroughly enjoyed the show.

Thus, Shu had successfully saved the hero performance.



It was already evening when the show ended. The city was still brimming with life, but Shu was in an empty place, far away from all that vitality.

He had been invited for a post-performance party, but he'd refused.

"Phew... I'm so beary tired," he said, making a sweat-wiping gesture despite the fact that his costume never exactly produced any sweat.

He had Behemot in his hands. The lady that was holding her before had given the porcupine to him, saying that she would go buy him a drink.

"Did you enjoy the hero show?" Shu asked Behemot.

"...yea." There was no lie in that. Behemot had fully enjoyed the show. However, there were signs of a different emotion in those eyes.

Shu could sense it, so he asked, "What's wrong?"

The scene of a big bear talking to a porcupine might've seemed like something out of a children's tale. However, Behemot said nothing, as if she was nothing more than an ordinary porcupine.

"Sorry for the wait." That was when the lady returned with juice cups in hand. Once she drew near, Behemot jumped from Shu's hands to the top of her head. As though used to it, the lady didn't miss a beat. Behemot was still completely silent, making it clear that she didn't intend to answer Shu's question.

"Here, this one's yours," the lady said as she handed him the cup in her left hand.

While still watching Behemot, Shu grabbed the juice with his right hand. He skillfully took it with his bulky paws, but the next moment, she dropped her own cup in her right and *thrust a spear-hand towards Shu's heart*.

A second later, you could smell a mix of fruit juice and the metallic scent of blood everywhere.

The blood belonged not to Shu, but herself.

“...Well done,” she said. The spear-hand had been shattered. The fingers were pointing in unnatural directions and the skin had been torn open, letting blood drip freely to the ground.

Her right hand had directly clashed with Shu’s fist. Shu had expected this surprise attack and placed his fist in the path of her spear-hand.

That was what had broken her hand. Some would say that this was an expected outcome, considering she’d hit the fist of the King of Destruction — the player with the greatest STR.

However, some would claim it was amazing that she had the offensive power and endurance to make it out of this clash with *just* broken fingers. As long as they weren’t END-focused, even ordinary Superior Jobs would have simply lost their entire hand. “What’s this about?” Shu asked without a hint of his usual humor.

“Well, I suppose you can call it a reconfirmation. I simply did a final check to see if you truly are the kind of person who wouldn’t die to a surprise attack from someone like me, as I am now. The result speaks for itself. What a relief.”

“...”

“It appears that you always thought that we might come for your life. Your usual outward attitude always made me somewhat worried and very irritated, but I’m so, so glad to see that I have no eyes for this kind of thing.”

For some reason, she smiled as though actually happy. There was now a grin on her face and no trace of the composure from before. It felt as though she was a monster whose human skin had begun to peel away.

Shu had prepared himself to summon Baldr out of his crest. If worse came to worst, he thought that Gideon might once again have a Clash of the Superiors, except greater than any battle before it. It would certainly come to that if he were to retaliate — so for now, he refrained from attacking.

However, if she wanted to start it here and now, Shu would have no choice but to oblige.

“What do you mean, ‘final check?’” he asked, looking to find out her motive while keeping an eye on her actions.

“We received an order yesterday. We will now return to the imperium,” she said.

“...What?” Shu couldn’t have possibly expected that reply.

“Don’t worry. We won’t do anything here anymore. Consider today’s date and the attack just now to be a little something to remember us by.”

The very fact that they would receive an order telling them to retreat wasn’t strange. It had always been obvious that they were in Gideon on Dryfe’s orders.

However, Shu didn’t understand why it would happen now, of all times.

Why had they stayed here until now?

“Anyway, Behemot and I are now leaving Gideon. It might be a clichéd thing to say, but I can’t wait until we meet again and fight to the death... Oh? Ah, yes...”

As she tried to take Behemot off her head into her hands, she remembered that her right hand’s fingers were broken.

She reached into the inventory on her hip, took out an ampoule filled with healing liquid, broke off the top with her thumb and downed it. It instantly healed her right hand, right down to the bone.

Shu had watched it with Identification on and noticed that it was not a special medicine, but a standard potion that healed a certain percentage of health. It was a low-tier healing item that you could acquire on the market quite easily, and one that only healed about five percent of the user's maximum health.

That weak potion was enough to completely heal the damage her clash with Shu had inflicted.

He knew exactly what that meant — the lady before him was so strong that an attack which could instantly kill Legendaries dealt only minor damage to her.

To win against her head-on, Shu would have no choice but to use his ultimate skill. That would be a repeat of the ultimate battle against Gloria, and it would be a calamity matched by few before it.

He'd been troubled by the problem of Hannya the whole day, but whatever she might cause was small compared to what could happen with this woman.

Even if a fight with her was unavoidable, he couldn't have it here in the city. Thus, he had no choice but to agree to do it the next time they met, just like she'd said.

However... before she walked away, Shu called out to her.

"Answer me one thing."

"Only if it's something I can answer."

"Why have you been in Gideon all this time?" That was something he'd started to wonder just recently... if not the entire time they'd been here.

"At first, I thought you were waiting for some golden opportunity, like the arrival of the First Princess or something," Shu said. "But you didn't do anything when she showed up, and now you're saying that you're leaving. You basically spent the past month and more just hanging around Gideon. What did you hope to achieve with this stay?"

"Phew..." she sighed, as though remembering something boring, before continuing. "We're the same as you."

"...I see." Those words didn't seem to mean much, but Shu instantly understood. As though to reinforce his understanding, she continued, "You couldn't leave, could you?"

The mad smile on her face had vanished and was replaced by a cold expression.

"That weakling's... Franklin's act of terror on Altar was a failure. It's only natural for us to be wary of counterattacks from the kingdom, isn't it? And the ones who would perform them would be Superiors... most likely the wide-scale extermination type — yourself — or the wide-scale suppression-extinction type like the High Priestess and her Lunar Society."

"...True."

"However, the kingdom's relationship with The Lunar Society isn't favorable, so you are the one we have to be most wary of."

Lei-Lei came to Shu's mind, but it was hard for her to be relevant to this conversation when she was hardly ever online.

"If I don't intend to commit any terrorist acts, this is basically a waste of good fighting power, isn't it?" Shu asked.

"It isn't. We were an anchor."

"...An anchor?"

"You were so wary of us that you almost never left Gideon. You mostly did it when you trained that rookie."

It was indeed true that Shu had almost never left Gideon during this time. He hadn't even moved from here when Tsukuyo Fuso had kidnapped his brother. It was all because the King of Beasts was here, and the result of that was...

"You couldn't leave Gideon and couldn't gather the materials for your ammo. Am I wrong?"

Shu's reply was silence, but she was on the mark.

"We can fight at full capacity at any time, but that isn't true for you. Your wide-scale extermination firepower is the same as that weakling's monster creation in that it relies on outside Resources to be effective. However, since we've been here, you haven't been able to go to any high level monster areas to gather rare materials. Your only option was to buy what you could find on the market. However, Altar now has few veteran Masters, so the supply is limited. Well? Are your ammo stocks high enough that you'd be able to fight for the entirety of the coming war?"

It would be quite difficult. Baldr really didn't have much ammo left. He only had enough for three armies of the same scale that Franklin had unleashed upon Gideon. Considering that the war would mean a rematch with Franklin and possibly a fight against the Hell General, who could create monsters even easier than the mad scientist, three seemed like a very small number.

"...I always took you for a meathead," Shu said.

"I can't deny that. Instead of wasting time on craftiness, I believe it's easier to simply crush things with our power. This wasn't just our idea, but part of the imperator's strategy. After Franklin's Game, we were simply ordered to live here. We didn't know the reason ourselves until we were contacted yesterday."

“...I see.” It might’ve seemed like Shu had been taken for a fool, but his actions actually wouldn’t have changed even if he’d known about it. If he’d ignored the King of Beasts and went to gather materials, the imperator could’ve easily issued them a new order, possibly causing another incident in Gideon. He also noted the craftiness behind the fact that not even these two knew why they were here, for the lack of information made it impossible for Shu to actually outsmart the imperator.

Also, this move had probably been made right after Shu had revealed his identity at the battle against Franklin, which made him understand how cunning the ruler of Dryfe really was.

“It is quite troubling that you won’t be at your peak in our coming battle,” said the lady. “However, the ultimate skill that you used to defeat Gloria can be used without any ammo, right?”

“...Yeah.” Indeed, Baldr’s ultimate skill, The Unmatched God of War — Baldr, wasn’t as dependent on Resources as ammo. As a solo fighter, he was still almost at his best.

“Then I don’t mind. All I want is to face you in a contest of pure power.”

“Is that something you say after trying to kill me with a surprise attack?”

“Like I said, that was just a final check to see that you were truly a worthy opponent. If that had worked, you would’ve been unworthy of a *proper* fight... A pebble just like the rest.”

She smiled again, but not in a cruel, monstrous, or crazy way.

It was a smile of actual joy.

“You are indeed worthy,” she said before turning away and walking off, holding Behemot in her hands. If her back could speak, it would

surely say, “This ends our conversation. Next time, we will merely fight to the death on the battlefield.”

Behemot said nothing and simply looked at Shu from within the lady’s hands.

Shu watched them leave, but then remembered something.

“Sorry, there’s one last thing I forgot to ask.”

“...What is it?” she turned around and asked, looking somewhat irritated that he would continue this exchange after she’d said everything she wanted.

Shu went and asked her something that had somehow never come to mind before now.

“You still haven’t told me your name, have you?” And that was despite them being in close contact for over a month. Shu still had never figured out the name of the lady holding Behemot.

“We aren’t foolish enough to show *our hand*.” She tried to avoid answering that, but...

“np.”

“...I suppose you’re right. I guess you may have my nickname, at least.”

Behemot’s urging made her quickly change her tune.

“Behemot calls me ‘Levia.’ You can use that, as well.”

“Levia, eh? Behemot and Levia... I see. What a pair,” Shu muttered as though that was enough for him to understand everything.

The lady calling herself “Levia” turned around and left without saying anything more.

Behemot, however, stuck her head out from her arms, looked at Shu...

“See ya, Mr. Bear.”

...And gave a farewell actually understandable to humankind.

“Yeah. See ya, Behemot,” said Shu.

*King of Beasts*, he added in thought.

After parting ways with Shu, Levia went north through the Nex Plains. Her speed exceeded that of sound, and it was growing so dark that no one could see her. She held the porcupine in her hands, but moved at supersonic speeds, occasionally turning any obstacles — meaning, monsters — to dust as she moved towards the imperium’s capital.

“Behemot, I can’t go at half of my maximum speed in this form, but it should be enough to get us to Vandelheim by tomorrow morning.”

The porcupine in her arms had been silent the whole way so far, but she finally spoke up. “...Cruise Gold.”

There was no one around, so rather than the usual Earth internet slang she’d ordinarily employ, she instead used human words.

“The transformation pose reminded me of Dad.”

“...Yes, it does seem similar to what you see in your memories.” Levia looked through the memories she shared with Behemot and concluded that what she’d seen at some point definitely bore a resemblance to what Shu had done at the hero show.

The movements were the same, but the actor was different.

“It was so nostalgic and made me so happy.”

“If it made you happy, then I’m happy, too.”

“But it also reminded me of something dark... and sad.”

“I understand. We will kill that bear the next time we meet, no matter what,” Levia nodded with a gentle smile on her face.

And, after canceling the Crest Disguise skill and making the mark on her left hand vanish, she declared, “Queen of Beasts, Leviathan was born to protect all that you are.”

Thus, they left the city of Gideon without having caused a single incident.

However, both they and Shu were certain that the day of their clash was drawing near.

## ***Chapter Five: The Lion and the Bomb***

*Prism Rider, Ray Starling*

“I say we should opt for clothing instead.”

“Isn’t armor the better choice? I mean, who knows what could happen.” Following Nemesis’ suggestion that I get some casual clothes, we’d headed to the bustling fourth district, which was filled with all kinds of stores.

However, we’d run into a problem — should I buy armor or regular clothing?

Unlike in reality, what you wore in *Dendro* wasn’t just fashion, but defense too, potentially making it a crucial part of your survival. Most armor pieces with actually good bonuses were crafted using drops from monsters and such, and that often came at the cost of making them look awkward. On the other end of the spectrum, you had fashionable clothing that was both stylish and varied, but completely useless as armor.

For battle, you needed to focus on armor, but to look fabulous in the safety of a town, you needed regular clothing.

“...You sure I can’t just walk around like this?” I asked.

“That is completely out of the question,” Nemesis shot back. “Even *you* noticed how people react to you, did you not?”

She had me there. I’d even been stopped by some guards this morning. *Man, what should I do?* I wondered.

“Ah, Ray. Good morning!”

“Huh? Rook?” I’d run into a familiar, unexpected face.

*Wasn’t he on a date with Kasumi? Or are they going to meet up later?*

“Didn’t you say you had plans with Kasumi?”

“It... has been postponed.” He went on to say that Kasumi was sick in real life and couldn’t get out of bed. She’d caught something a few days ago and tried to recover before the date, but it hadn’t worked out. She *was* getting better, though, and it was likely that she would be well enough to go on the date tomorrow in *Dendro* time, which was about half a day in real life. If that wasn’t enough, then they would postpone it again.

*Well, it happens, I guess,* I thought. *Unlike Dendro, real life doesn’t have items or spells that instantly cure disease— Huh? Wait. But my sister and someone else once... no, it must’ve been my imagination.*

“With my schedule freed up, I thought I’d walk around the stores in the fourth district or pay a visit to the pimp guild. I haven’t been there in a while,” said Rook. “What about you two?”

“Oh, I already talked to Azurite about you-know-what, so we’re just shopping now,” I said.

“We’re looking for clothes for Ray,” Nemesis added.

“Clothes? I see, I see!” Rook said.

*...See what?* I wondered.

“I mean that I understand. Don’t worry about it, please,” Rook elaborated.

“All right... Anyway, we ran into a bit of a problem,” I said before explaining to him that we couldn’t decide whether to focus on the stats, the design, or just keep things as they were.

Rook tilted his head and said, “Why not just buy normal clothes and use an accessory with the Clothing Switch skill?”

“The what skill?” I’d never heard of that one before.

According to Rook, Clothing Switch allowed you to swap between your current equipment and inventory items of the same type that were linked to them using the skill. It sounded like Instant Equip and Instant Wear, but those allowed you to instantly choose and equip any item from the inventory, while Clothing Switch only allowed switching between two items that have been paired. You could use it to change all of your equipment at once, but it didn't give you the freedom to pick and choose the right item for the situation.

Unlike Instant Wear, it also had a cooldown of a few seconds. Because of this, Instant Wear was better for swapping between specific equipment depending on the situation, while Clothing Switch was preferred for just switching from standard clothing to battle equipment.

This didn't mean much to me, but apparently, when you used Clothing Switch on equipment that took all armor slots — like Shu's costume or B3's Gunhammer Plate — it was functionally the same as Instant Wear.

"I hear it's often used for costume changes in plays," Rook added.

"Really? Well, I can imagine it being useful for hero shows."

Regardless, Rook's idea solved our problem. Since I could use Clothing Switch to get into my armor instantly, I would just buy some normal clothes. I did wonder if the switch would be fast enough, but I had Counter Absorption and the Brooch to keep me alive long enough.

We parted ways with Rook again after that. Nemesis and I went to a clothing store, while Rook went to pay a visit to the pimp guild.

The store we went to wasn't all that different from the kind you'd find in reality. It was lit by magical lamps, and you had a wide selection of clothes hanging on hangers all over.

*There's tons of variety, too, I thought. With so much to choose from, I can see why people enjoy shopping.*

"If I may ask..." Nemesis spoke up. "If you think that there's so much to choose from, why do you exclusively go for black and red clothes?"

"...I'm not doing it on purpose." I was definitely picking clothes in that color scheme, which made me think that I might have a fondness for it.

Though, it probably wasn't a good idea to buy clothes of those colors — I'd probably end up looking basically like I did with my armor on.

"What about your bracers, by the way?" Nemesis asked. "You need a piece of equipment to pair them with."

"I guess I can link them with some basic gloves. Like these ones here."

"...You realize that those are fingerless, don't you?"

"...I'm not doing this on purpose."

In the end, we postponed the matter of the gloves, and I let Nemesis choose my clothing. The end result had flair, but wasn't too eccentric, and it seemed like something I wouldn't have any problems wearing in casual situations. The store also had Clothing Switch accessories, so we bought one along with the clothes. I paired my new outfit up with my armor, so I was still ready for battle at any time.

And with that, my appearance change was complete.

"You look proper," said Nemesis. "Yes. Proper indeed. So proper..."

"Nemesis, why are you repeating the word 'proper' over and over while looking like you're about to cry?"

“You will never understand how I feel... Nor understand what it’s like for me to stand next to you when you’re clad in the armor you ended up with!”

*Hey, my current set is just a bit dark, a little scary, and pretty cool. There's nothing weird about it,* I thought.

“...Ray, imagine yourself crossdressing, wearing animal ears, and glasses at the same time.”

“Why would you combine my three most hated clothing styles? The very thought makes me shudder.”

“Albeit in a different way, that is how I feel about your armor.”

“Is it really that bad?!”

*Why would it be so mentally taxing for y— Hm?*

“That’s...” While we talked, I noticed something familiar.

Someone was leaving a nearby accessory shop, wearing a lion costume that I’d once seen in the central arena’s waiting room.

It was undoubtedly Figaro, who was apparently doing some shopping.

“Online already?” I wondered. “But... an accessory shop?”

There was a sign in front of the store saying “Lifesaving Brooches for 800,000 lir each! Limit of 10!”

*Oh, so he's stocking up on items,* I thought.

“Oh? Ray,” Figaro said as he noticed me staring. “Hello. It’s been a while. So you’re back in Gideon. I see you’re going incognito. Well, I guess you *are* famous now.”

“Ahahah. Well... I suppose you could say that.” I did notice fewer people staring at me after I changed clothes, but I didn’t know how to feel about a guy who was incognito in a lion costume asking me if I

was incognito just because I was wearing normal clothes. “Umm... What are you doing here?” I asked him.

“I’m just preparing for something.”

“Shu told me that you weren’t able to get online until tomorrow.” Speaking of Shu, he was probably preparing for Miss Hannya’s arrival and thinking of how to reduce the potential damage.

“Yes. My check-up ended earlier than expected, so I thought I should prepare for tomorrow. I could’ve done this in the morning, but it’s better to prepare ahead of time rather than waiting until the last minute. Oh, wait... did Shu tell you about Hannya?”

“Yes. Umm... that’s a woman who’s coming here, and you’re meeting her tomorrow, right?”

“Right. That’s what I’m preparing for.”

He was preparing for their meeting by buying Brooches? An item that negated fatal damage? It took a moment, but it soon came to me.

According to Shu, Figaro was looking forward to dueling Miss Hannya. However, he’d also said that her Superior Embryo was enormous, reaching as high as one kilometel. It was basically impossible to duel something like that within the confines of the arena.

How would they go about it, then? Well, what came to mind was that they could have a Tenchi-like overworld match outside of the city and fight until one person’s Brooch broke.

...Figaro was clearly preparing for a duel with a lady who was expecting a marriage... and that *definitely* couldn’t end well.

*Oh boy... we have no choice but to hope that Shu will have a solution to this by tomorrow—*

“...Hm?” Figaro suddenly looked up at the sky.

"Figaro? What's wrong?" Silence. Without saying a word, he fixed his eyes above. Even though he was still wearing his lion costume, I could still tell.

I followed his gaze and tried to see what he was looking at.

"...Figaro?" At that moment, I heard a voice behind me.

As it reached my ears, it somehow made a chill run down my spine.

I turned around to see... an ordinary woman.

She had dark brown hair that was slightly curly, Japanese facial features, and was dressed in simple, ready-made clothing.

Nothing about her stood out all that much. In fact, by Master standards, she was really plain. The blond, angelic boy next to her stood out quite a bit more.

However, I could *feel* it... This woman's presence exerted the kind of pressure that Xunyu had emitted at the arena, and made me shiver like Kashimiya had yesterday. She hadn't even introduced herself, but I was already more or less certain that this woman here was none other than Miss Hannya — the one Shu had been so wary of.

Thinking about it, it wasn't that strange for her to be here. Figaro had come on early, so it wasn't impossible that she'd done the same.

*Yeah, okay, fine... but why did they have to actually run into each other, damn it?!*

"Isn't this... quite the predicament?" Nemesis asked telepathically. Indeed it was. I couldn't do anything, though. My body was completely frozen in place.

"Hey, Hannya. Welcome to Gideon. We've finally met," Figaro said, switching into his usual equipment.

He took off his incognito gear so easily...

Speaking of which, how had Miss Hannya figured out that it was Figaro while he was wearing the costume?

Wait... Was it actually his voice? From what Shu had told me, they'd only communicated through text and had only actually spoken with each other on the one time they'd met, a whole year ago... which was actually three years ago here in *Dendro*. She remembered his voice even after all that time?

"Figaro! I was dying to see you!" Miss Hannya said as she clung to Figaro.

It was a very direct expression of affection, yet he hugged her back as if it was nothing.

*Oh, right... He's a westerner. Hugs are probably normal to him.*

"Has it really been three years since we last saw each other?" said Figaro, looking pretty happy.

"It's hard to believe that so much time passed on this side," Miss Hannya replied with a smile. "Heheheh. Our faces haven't changed at all, have they?"

Their expressions made it a heartwarming sight, but the core of my being was ringing all the alarm bells.

*Damn it, Shu! Get over here right now! Xunyu would be fine, too... Hell, I'll even take Miss Eldritch!*

"It's that bad, eh?" Nemesis asked telepathically.

*IT IS! I'm basically stuck right next to a ticking time bomb!*

"Ray, let me introduce you. This is my girlfriend, Hannya and her Embryo, Sandalphon," he said, saying the word *girlfriend* and making me wonder if he even knew what it meant. "Hanny, this is Ray, Shu's little brother and my occasional duel opponent. The girl next to him is his Embryo, Nemesis."

“Oh my, the costume fellow’s family. Your brother helped me out a lot. I’m Hannya, and this is...”

“A pleasure to meet you. I am Sandalphon.”



"Hello... I'm Ray Starling," I said, realizing that I missed my chance to run away.

...Although I couldn't *really* run even if I wanted to. If a battle broke out here, I would have to take action to prevent casualties. Azurite and Count Gideon would die inside if there was another incident.

"I am Nemesis. I must say, the male version of Maiden is quite a curious sight."

"Yes," Sandalphon replied. "I also believe the female version of Apostle isn't exactly common."

The two then glared at each other in silence.

*Nemesis, dearest, why are you being antagonistic towards him?* I asked in thought.

"Figaro, do you have some time today?" Miss Hannya asked.

With the introductions done, she invited Figaro to some quality time.

In response to that, he... *shook his head*.

"Sorry... not today," he said. "There's somewhere I have to be."

I prepared for Miss Hannya to snap...

"I see. I was hoping we could have dinner together, but okay."

...But she backed down without issue. She didn't seem the slightest bit angry, which made me think that she might be more calm than I'd been led to believe.

"But if you have time tomorrow, I'd really like to enjoy the festival with you. We need to take a look at some venues for the ceremony."

...At some venues for *what*?

"Yeah," Figaro said, as if he didn't hear or just didn't care about that last part. "Let's meet up before noon tomorrow and take a walk around Gideon. I wanted to show you around, anyway."

"Thank you! I can't wait." There actually didn't seem to be much tension in the air after all. Figaro was avoiding her advances, but Miss Hannya didn't seem hurt by it.

*I really hope this ends without anything bad happening,* I thought.

"I'm glad that makes you happy," said Figaro. "Oh, by the way... Hannya?"

*Yep, I sure do hope this doesn't escalate...*

"Yes?"

"Would you duel me tomorrow?" He finally dropped the bombshell in that cheerful voice of his.

"...HUH?!" I exclaimed, shaken by his devastating words.

He'd refused to have dinner with her, ignored her mentioning ceremony venues, and just asked her to duel him. Even a normal girl would be mad at that, and from what I'd been told, Miss Hannya was no normal girl — this was *bound* to make her snap.

I expected to suddenly be standing in the center of extreme destruction and mayhem...

"Yes. I'd love to."

...But Miss Hannya accepted his request with a smile on her face.

"Thanks! I can't wait for tomorrow!" said Figaro, full of joy.

"Heheheh. You're like a giddy child," Miss Hannya said, looking at him like he was something precious.

*...This isn't at all like what I was told.*

"Umm, are you *sure* you want to duel him?" I couldn't help but ask. The situation was just so unexpected.

"I am," she replied, looking not the least bit offended. "I know from his writings that he loves duels. If it makes him happy, then I'm happy, too."

Miss Hann... I mean, Hannya then looked at Figaro with affectionate eyes.

...My impression of her was totally different from what I expected based on what Shu and the others had told me. She seemed more like a good wife who appreciated her hubby's hobbies.

"You two duel as well, right?" Hannya asked. "Thank you so much for playing with him."

"Oh, those duels are more like lessons for me, really... He's always a huge help," I replied.

"Heheheh. That made it sound like I'm his guardian!"

"...She has such a gentle demeanor," Nemesis commented telepathically.

*Seriously. Did Shu and the others just overthink things in the worst possible way, or did she mellow out while in the gaol?* I wondered. Whatever the case, I was glad that the worst case scenario didn't happen. If an offer to duel didn't make her blow a fuse, then it was safe to assume that nothing would.

"...Oh dear. I just got a message on my phone in real life," Hannya said before opening up a window. "I hate to have to do this, but I'm logging out. I can't wait for tomorrow, Figaro. It'll be an important day for us and our future."

"Yeah. I can't wait, either," Figaro replied.

They went on to say their goodbyes peacefully and hugged again before Hannya logged out.

"...She seemed nice," I said.

"She's *very* nice. Hannya's supported me over texts for quite a while now," Figaro replied with a very bright smile on his face.

Apparently, Figaro didn't see her as just a duel partner, but also as a good friend. *Wouldn't it be best for them if they just got together?* I wondered.

"That would actually be quite difficult," Nemesis replied telepathically.

"...That's true," I whispered. Over here, Figaro was the Over Gladiator and the strongest fighter in the kingdom, but in reality, he lived with the risk of deadly heart spasms. He was only a picture of health in *Dendro*. Hannya, on the other hand, seemed to want a relationship with him in reality as well as in this world.

I didn't know what effects this barrier between them would have, but I sincerely hoped that things would work out for them.

◇◆◇

#### *Gideon the City of Duels, Fourth District*

There was a man sitting at a table deep in a two-storied café.

He wore a coat that looked like the night sky, but by Master standards, his appearance wasn't too unusual.

What was curious was what he was doing — both his eyes were closed, but his right hand was writing something on the notepad on the table. His vision and the work of his hands were completely disconnected, just like they would be when touch typing.

He'd been doing this for about two hours now. A waitress looking at him wondered if he was deep in thought — as strange as he was

acting, he must've been very focused on something extremely important to him.

However, the man wasn't lost in thought or doing any sort of soul-searching. He wasn't seeing the darkness of his closed eyelids, but the surrounding townscape.

Though his eyes were shut, he was looking down at the city of Gideon. It was like a bird's eye view or the stream of a flying drone's camera.

Not saying a word, he was using this vision of his to *observe*.

A festival was an exhilarating environment, and it made the people attending it truly worthy of observation.

The city was full of people doing all kinds of things. Considering the festival's theme, there were many couples, tian and Master alike, but there were also a lot of tian families enjoying it, as well.

Such wholesome sights particularly stood out, but if you observed carefully, you could see many pickpockets taking advantage of the joyful populace, as well as guards and ninjas capturing the criminals.

The man observed all these events, occasionally giving things a push in a certain direction.

Here, he led a guard patrol into a back-alley where a burglar was hiding.

There, he saw a man who seemed to be secretly dating several women at once, so he led his other girlfriends to the site of his current rendezvous, resulting in a major catfight.

He looked down at the scenery below, watching the events unfolding, or even outright causing them.

Eventually, his vision focused on someone familiar.

It was the famous Master he'd ran into the previous day — Ray Starling the Unbreakable. He was accompanied by someone in a lion costume... and the man knew who it was just by the way he moved.

The two were soon joined by a third person, who was none other than the Superior that had just left the gaol and arrived at Gideon... King of Berserk, Hannya.

“...Already?” he muttered as he stopped writing. He was entirely focused on watching the two Superiors’ every movement, hoping to observe something that had never been seen before.

However, he was quite disappointed.

The two had a peaceful exchange, made some plans, and simply parted ways for the day.

That unexpected sequence of events didn’t make him click his tongue, but it did make him sigh in disappointment.

*That wasn’t it*, he thought. What he wanted out of them wasn’t just the exact same things that most of the city was doing, nor a mere mock battle. He wanted to see some bloodshed filled with the kind of powerful emotions that only these two Superiors could feel.

*I didn’t intend to get involved here, but if holding back means that I won’t get to see what I want...*

It was as if there was a fuse before him, leading to the most exquisite of fireworks. He had intended to wait until it was lit, but if no one came with a match, he would simply do it himself.

The man stopped merely observing and chose to act.

“Apologies for staying so long,” the man said, standing up and handing over a silver coin to the waitress.

“No worries! Please enjoy the festival!”

“Yes. *I’m sure I will.*”

With a smile on his face, the man left the café... and stepped onto the stage he just observed.

## **Chapter Six: The Fuse**

*Prism Rider, Ray Starling*

After that, Nemesis and I parted ways with Figaro and went around the festival.

I'd expected her to redefine gluttony today, but she'd actually only bought one cotton candy-lookalike and that was it.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I'm not hungry. Not sure why."

"Wh... WHAT...?!"

*This can't be real...! This isn't happening!* I thought.

"That is a reaction I've seen before," she said. "I didn't like it then and I do not like it now. Stop it."

"But, I mean, you— 'Before'?"

That reminded me that we'd already had an exchange like this.

*Back when we were in Torne, she... ah.*

"...Are you evolving?" That was it — the evening before she evolved, Nemesis had told me that she actually wasn't hungry for once.

"I'm not sure yet. Also, don't link my appetite and my evolution like that. It makes it sound like the only time I'm *not* hungry is when I'm about to evolve."

"Well, but... you know... you're Nemesis."

"You said that last time, too!" Nemesis was somewhat difficult today.

Anyway, we went on to enjoy the festival with little food involved — a rarity for us — but eventually, I started to feel thirsty.

"Wanna get a drink?" I asked Nemesis.

“I do. I have no appetite, but my throat *is* a bit dry. How about some tea?”

“Sure. Now, where can we get som— Oh?”

As I looked around for stalls that sold drinks, I noticed a certain stall (or more like a small café) that really stood out from the rest.

It was a building with a Japanese aesthetic. Perhaps “Tenchi” aesthetic was more apt here, but unlike the strange Japanese-style design philosophy I’d seen at the inn at Quartierlatin, this building here looked *properly* Japanese. This was the kind of place where you’d drink tea while sitting on cushions placed atop low wooden benches. It looked much like a dumpling shop you’d see in a historical Japanese drama.

“This is a rare sight here in Altar. We should check it out,” I said.

“Agreed.” We went in, bought some green tea, and sat at the benches.

“I suppose I can handle this much,” Nemesis said as she also ordered a plate of dango despite her lack of appetite.

I took a sip of the tea, and it was actually as good as the stuff my mom made, if not better.

“These are some good leaves,” Nemesis said. “But I feel like I’ve had this tea before.”

“Really?” I asked.

“These are leaves from Tenchi. An adherent donated a small amount and we took a liking to them, so we asked Tsukuyo to import more through Granvaloa.”

“I see,” nodded Nemesis. “This is indeed the same tea I tasted at The Lunar Society’s headquarters.”

“I ate breakfast there too, but I don’t remember getting tea like this,” I said.

“Nemesis had it with us while you were still unconscious.”

“Ohh, that is true.” Nemesis agreed, thinking back.

“I see. This tea really is goo— AH?!”

I was so focused on the delicious tea that I didn’t even notice that I was talking to someone else besides Nemesis. I turned to see a third person sitting next to us. It was an unfamiliar woman with a tennyo raiment straight out of Japanese myth and hair akin to moonlight.

“Kaguya?!” Nemesis exclaimed.

“Indeed. It’s been a long time, Nemesis.”

*Kaguya?! That’s Miss Eldritch’s Superior Embryo!*

“Wh-What are you doing here?!” I asked in a panic.

Kaguya smiled and pointed at a certain detail inside this establishment — a symbol of *a crescent moon and a closed eye*.

“This place is owned by The Lunar Society,” she said.

“I didn’t notice...!” Thinking on it now, Altar was the most western country in *Dendro*, and the only groups who used a Japanese aesthetic here were The Lunar Society and K&R.

*Damn it, Ray, why didn’t you notice?!* I thought to myself.

“Wait... If her Embryo is here, then...”

“Indeed. Tsukuyo is in Gideon, as well,” Kaguya said.

*You can’t be serious,* I thought. *Of course this had to happen right when I thought that Hannya’s matter would be settled peacefully...*

...Then again, though Miss Eldritch was quite a troublemaker, she wasn’t the type to do anything bad here in a city, so maybe I didn’t have to worry all that much.

"This is a festival, after all. There is nothing odd about Tsukuyo coming to enjoy it," Kaguya said. "What was the name of that village, again? The one with all the pinwheels? She was there, as well."

Oh, right, she'd been to Torne's Windstar Festival because of her ties to Mr. Shijima. Even if that wasn't the reason, she seemed like the kind of person who'd enjoy festivals. Otherworldly creatures generally had a fondness for such events.

"...You are quite harsh with her," Nemesis said telepathically.

*You know that she's the woman who kidnapped me and locked me up without as much as an introduction, right?*

"Fair point..." As we had our silent exchange, Kaguya watched us with a smile on her face, as though amused. While Miss Eldritch seemed to have a grin much like that of a malicious fox, Kaguya's smile was as gentle as moonlight.

"What is it?" Nemesis asked her.

"Heheheh. Have you two made some progress since then?"

"WHAPH...?!"

*...Whaph?*

"Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Whatever are you talking about...?!"

*"You are spending the Love-Duel Festival together, after all. We suppose our advice was helpful?"*

"Th-That's not what this is about!"

*Why is Nemesis so perplexed?* I wondered.

"It is quite cute that a gluttonous girl like yourself loses her appetite on a date."

"I-I just happened to lose my appetite at this particular moment! There's nothing more to it than that!"

“My my. Heheheh...”

*Interesting*, I thought. Kaguya was only the second Maiden Nemesis had met, but I couldn’t help but notice how the vibe between them was completely unlike the one between her and Cyco. While Cyco was like a friend her age, Kaguya was more like an older sister. Well, she was definitely the more experienced Maiden, at any rate.

Ohh... so Nemesis and I were both juniors to Miss Eldritch’s duo.

“Well, it’s good to make new friends, I guess,” I said.

*Kaguya seems like a better person(?) than her Master, at least*, I thought as I watched her gently tease Nemesis and sipped my tea.

“...It’s really nice.” Because of The Love-Duel Festival, we were surrounded by a very cheerful atmosphere.

It really felt peaceful here.

I knew that there was a war coming, but this moment was so calm that it seemed far away. I wasn’t even caught up in some kind of trouble like usual.

“If only we could just keep having days like this,” I muttered as I took another sip.

“An omen of a coming disturbance.”

*Hm? Am I jinxing it?*

“Hey, not every hopeful statement ends up being a jinx,” I said.

“Things may very well stay peaceful.”

“What awaits the Hero Clad in Violet and Crimson is a tempest of trials?”

“Yeah, I know I often end up at the center of all kinds of problems, but you were also involved in the recent dragon king thing, weren’t you? And stop using that nickname.”

“Strife is the fate to which the living are perpetually bound.”

"Well, that's true. *Dendro* is an eventful place for everyone. Not just us."

"...Hey," Nemesis stopped talking to Kaguya and called out. "What should I be surprised by first: the sudden appearance of Juliet at the bench on the other side, or the fact that you can converse with her so easily?"

She looked at us as if something was wrong.

Like Nemesis said, Juliet had joined us without us realizing and spoke to me while enjoying some black sweet bean jelly. I didn't know what was so weird about it, though. After all...

"We're just chatting," I said as I shrugged.

"...The shackles on my tongue are light tonight," Juliet added.

"What do you mean, you 'aren't using difficult words this time'? You always speak normally."

"First your fashion sense... then your grasp of Juliet's edgy nonsense lexicon... I suppose you really are a..."

*A what? I don't really see what you're getting at.*

"By the way, it's rare for you to eat sweets by yourself. Where's Chelsea?" I asked.

Chelsea was a good candidate for the duel ranker with the greatest sweet tooth, and she often invited Juliet or other rankers to eat with her.

However, this time, Juliet was all alone... and actually seemed to be in low spirits.

"My soul-sister is facing a trial, and I cannot interfere. It is a matter of depravity within the horde bearing the golden flag."

*Mhm...*

So there was some relationship trouble within Golden Pirates — Chelsea's own clan. It was a matter just between the guys and girls there, so Juliet couldn't get involved. She was probably bothered by the fact that she couldn't help her friend while she was dealing with some problems.

"That seems like something you should just wait out," I said. "And... you'll help her if she asks, right?"

"Yeah! I mean... Indeed I shall," Juliet replied.

"Then everything's fine. I'm sure she'll count on you if she really needs someone."

"...Yeah." Juliet's expression lightened up a bit.

*But man, there's relationship troubles in Chelsea's clan, too? I thought. First Hannya, then Elizabeth... I know it's a love festival and all, but does it really have to come with so much romantic drama?*

"Aren't you in similar trouble, as well?" Nemesis asked telepathically.  
"Does nothing come to mind?"

*...Boy, I sure do hope I don't get snatched up to be some amazon's groom.*

"...Huh? That's where your mind went first?"

*...Boy, I sure do hope I don't run into an amazon queen that fights as well as my sister.*

"Your brain is replaying scenes that do not seem to belong in that world. Are you sure this wasn't a dream?"

*Oh, how many times have I hoped that it was.*

"I now feel that most of my hardship that isn't related to combat has its roots in your childhood trauma..."

"Do you really have it that hard?"

*Oh. She looked away. Did I upset her somehow?*

Anyway, the day ended without anything happening, and after enjoying the festival with Nemesis, I went to sleep at the inn.

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### *A Certain Location at Gideon the City of Duels*

It was late in the evening as Figaro left a particular plant shop.

As you'd expect, there were various sorts of flowers in there, but being a *plant* shop, it sold far more than just flowers. There were flora and herbs used in potion brewing, as well as plants and seeds that had an effect when ingested raw, so the shop had quite a wide customer base.

Whatever he'd bought there, it had put a smile on his face. However, that smile vanished the moment someone called out to him.

"I finally found you, you sickly prince." That someone was a person he didn't actually *want* to know, but unfortunately did, quite well.

"...Fuso Tsukuyo," he said.

"You just scowled, didn't you?" she said. "I can tell even through your costume."

Figaro had always found Tsukuyo Fuso to be a fundamentally unpleasant character. As a person, he didn't like how she brought her cult and so many other things from real life into *Infinite Dendrogram*. In addition to that, her Embryo — particularly her ultimate skill — was such a hard counter to Figaro that he wanted to avoid it at all costs. It had even given him the death penalty once.

Anyway, despite being the one to point out Figaro's "scowl," Tsukuyo herself seemed quite upset.

"I walked around town lookin' for you, and I sure didn't expect to find you here, of all places," Tsukuyo said. "What did you want in that shop? Are you poisoning someone?"

“...It has nothing to do with you,” Figaro replied as he realized his mistake.

If he had felt her presence as he left the shop, he might’ve avoided meeting her. He’d been so happy thinking about tomorrow that it had dulled his senses.

Then again, she’d apparently been searching for him, so he figured that this encounter would’ve happened eventually.

“Well, not like it matters to me. I have some business with you. Look here!”

Tsukuyo reached to take something from her side, making Figaro jump back and switch his equipment with Instant Wear. His costume was now gone and he was naked to the waist. It was the AGI-focused set he’d used at The Clash of the Superiors, showing just how wary he was of whatever Tsukuyo was doing.

“Hm...?” He was ready for battle, but Tsukuyo wasn’t actually doing anything that looked like an attack. She just held something out to him — something that seemed to be a piece of paper.

Figaro took a look at what was written on it and tilted his head in confusion.

“...What is this?” he asked.

“Exactly what it says,” Tsukuyo replied, pouting.

However, it was the very contents of the paper that were confusing to Figaro.

After all...

“I want you to pay.”

...It was a bill.

“...For what?”

*What is she even saying?* Figaro wondered. After all, he had never bought anything from her.

In fact, he wouldn't even *think* of buying anything from her, no matter how good a deal she offered.

"You don't know?" Tsukuyo asked with a blatantly displeased expression.

"I seriously haven't the slightest clue. I can't think of a single reason why I would have to pay you anything."

"You're saying that after making such a huge mess for me?!" Even Figaro couldn't hide his surprise at that sentence. *Seriously, what is she even saying?*

"Just *what* are you talking about...?"

"What do you mean, 'what'?! You destroyed my base, didn't you?!" Upon hearing that, Figaro finally understood.

Some days ago, he'd destroyed The Lunar Society base to save Ray after he'd been kidnapped. He'd broken the main gate, leveled the buildings, and shattered many of the installations to drag Tsukuyo out.

"It took us *this* long to estimate the damages! It's over 10,000,000,000 in total! That's more than ten times what I expected! It's all because you destroyed not just buildings, but expensive furniture, too!" The Lunar Society's HQ was a Japanese-style mansion constructed of high-quality wood, which made it quite a luxurious location. With Noz Forest — the capital's primary source of lumber — having been burnt to ash, wood had become a lot more expensive.

Figaro had also destroyed most of the placeable magic items they had imported from Caldina, and with the country's recent revisions of their trade regulations, the price of those items had gone up even

more than wood had. The art that had been destroyed was quite expensive, as well, and the overall sum was far above what Tsukuyo had expected. The Lunar Society was making a lot of money through donations, but paying for repairs would put a serious dent even in their coffers.

“Yeah, I know it all happened because I kidnapped Ray, but you didn’t have to destroy so much! You went crazy! I want you to pay at least half of the costs!” Tsukuyo had become emotional to the point of actually crying, then grabbed Figaro — still shirtless, by the way — by the shoulders and began shaking him.

*Is that really my fault?* he wondered. He dug through his memory, thinking of how to deal with it.

“Talk to my lawyer about i—”

“The law doesn’t exist between Masters! You know that!”

“...Right.” Unlike in reality, he couldn’t rely on legal advisors here.

However, he was still unsure of how to handle this.

*Do I really have to pay her in this situation? Isn’t this her own fault?* he wondered, remembering his rampage through The Lunar Society’s headquarters.

In this situation, Shu would likely say “Huh? The law says I didn’t commit any crimes, so I don’t have to pay, right? It ain’t my pawproblem,” but Figaro was too pure for that.

The fact that Tsukuyo demanded payment despite being aware of that showed that she was a cunning fox, even while she was weeping.

Figaro went on to tell her that he couldn’t make a decision right away and didn’t have the money anyway for one reason or another, and Tsukuyo reluctantly backed off.

However, neither of them realized that someone had witnessed... and recorded them.



### *DIN Gideon Branch*

On the night of the first day of the Love-Duel Festival, Tom Cat... control AI no. 13, Cheshire... paid a visit to DIN's Gideon branch.

While Elizabeth had been staying here, this place was protected by Marie, Liliana, and Gideon's ninjas, but now that she had returned to the guest house, it was back to business as usual.

Cheshire walked up the stairs and opened the door leading to the rooftop.

However, what he saw wasn't the roof or the scenery of the city around the building, but a bizarre space where you couldn't tell which way was up, full of countless information windows.

It was a *control AI workspace* — just like the one Cheshire himself used.

“Pardon the intrusiooon.” When he called out, the two people who had been standing in the middle of the space and doing something with the windows turned to him.

They were twins of different genders, and their faces were nearly identical.

They both had small frames and wore suits like the one worn by Marie, making them look like children pretending to be working adults — which was, in a way, adorable. The boy wore silver-rimmed glasses, while the girl sported large headphones.

“I have not seen you in 2689 hours, 58 minutes, and 14 seconds in this world’s time, No. 13.”

“It’s been too long, Cheshiiire! Congrats on falling to third plaaace!  
Yaay! Clap clap!”

The boy greeted Cheshire with extreme formality, while the girl was nothing if not casual.

“Is that something to congratulate me for?” Cheshire asked.

“It is quite a welcome event,” the boy said as he adjusted his glasses.

“Your Tom Kitty’s there to be beaten! It’s fine, it’s fiiine! Don’t worry! It’s okay to looose!” the girl said as she rolled around in midair.

An overly formal older brother and a sister who was far too casual.  
*They haven’t changed at all*, Cheshire thought.

These two were the founders of DIN, as well as the current heads of the company. They were also the ones organizing all the information DIN had access to. It was an impossible task for just two people, but that only made sense.

These two weren’t human, after all.

The boy was Tweedledum, and the girl was Tweedledee.

Having borrowed those names from the twins in Alice in Wonderland, they were the avatars of control AI No. 11.

“Allow us to inquire something of you, as well,” the boy said.

“Why’d ya come here?” the girl asked.

Cheshire stated his reason for being here outright. “King of Beasts just up and left Gideon, didn’t she? I was wondering why. Was there some sort of incident that happened without me knowing?”

“Certainly not.”

“No no nooo! There’s nothin’ like what you dealt with in Quartierlatin!”

“Really?”

“Affirmative. The first day of the Love-Duel Festival...”

“...Went by without anythin’ happenin’!”

“King of Destruction and King of Beasts nearly clashed...”

“...But they’re puttin’ it off for later! It’s gotta be the main event of the war! Kyaa! That’s so lewd!”

They’d begun talking strangely, with one starting and the other finishing every sentence.

*They really are the same as ever,* Cheshire thought.

“I seeee.” he said. “So there they passed each other by, huh? What a relieeef.”

“A relief, eh?”

“But that ain’t good for us, is iiit?” While Cheshire was glad that nothing happened, the twins didn’t share his sentiment.

“...Ain’t good?”

“War is something we desire.”

“The chance of an Embryo evolving into a Superior during a war is 86.95669%!”

“That is slightly above...”

“...Even SUBM releases!” A war was a major clash between Masters, tians, and countries. Just like the release of SUBMs, it could be a trigger for evolution.

In a way, conflict was something that control AIs would naturally want more of. It was particularly likely that Embryos in sixth form and below would evolve while facing a raging Superior Embryo, especially if it was happening in a city the Masters would want to protect. The twins were actually somewhat disappointed that King of Beasts hadn’t picked this place for the battle.

“Fortunately, we have more gunpowder,” said Tweedledum.

“We’ll light it up and boom, boom, BOOM!” his sister added.

“If all values in our calculations are accounted for...”

“...We might get some more *things* before the waaar!” Albeit with completely different expressions on their faces, the twins were predicting the exact same thing. Cheshire had a bad feeling about this.

“...What are you planning?”

“An event,” they said in unison.

The two were control AI No. 11 — the ones in charge of quests and events. When it came to plotting, they had no equal.

“It is not an official event, however. We will merely assist in spurring on a certain player.”

“We’re just pushing down the first dominooo!”

“Do not worry. We are not acting as control AI. This is all within the rights of this avatar.”

“We’re the big cheese and all thaat!”

“And to be clear, we are designing a romantic tragedy...”

“...That perfectly fits a festival of looove! So Shakespearean! Let’s goo!”

The twins were clearly planning... no, had *already finished* planning something.

Suddenly, tons of visual data appeared in the workspace.

“We received the material, but DIN is not the optimal channel for it. Using it would negatively affect our activities further down the line.”

“Wanna leak it to The Kingdom People Times? They’ll eat this scoop right up! And they’re already stealin’ the ideaa!”

“That is a newspaper with little support but good exposure. It will suffice.”

“Heh heh heh! It’ll be heaven and hell tomorrow!” Cheshire didn’t know what the two were doing, and he couldn’t stop them.

After all, they were working towards the common goal of the control AIs, and they weren’t doing anything that required the use of their original body. In fact, they were putting in a lot of diligent effort into what the control AIs all truly wanted.

Because of this, Cheshire couldn’t say anything, just as he couldn’t argue against Jabberwock’s releases of SUBMs.

Seeing the twins work made him feel uneasy... and he would soon know that it wasn’t unwarranted.

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### *Gideon the City of Duels*

The second day of the Love-Duel Festival had arrived. Rook, Babi, and Kasumi were walking through Gideon. It was still before nine in the morning, but the streets were already full of people.

With Kasumi on his right and Babi on his left, Rook looked like an absolute winner and attracted stares everywhere he went. Babi’s nonchalant suggestions had put them in this position. All the people looking at them started to make Kasumi blush, and she began to tear up behind her long bangs.

“What great weather! Perfect for a festivaal!” said Babi casually.

“Yes. It sure is,” Rook replied, looking the same as ever. Kasumi alone was extremely tense.

*Th-This isn't a dream, is it...? she thought. I keep checking, but it's not just a fever dream, right?* Some days ago, Kasumi had helped Rook find a certain criminal, and he went on to invite her on a Love-Duel Festival date as thanks.

*While we were going through the Tomb Labyrinth recently, I told the girls that I liked the idea of a "Love-Duel Festival date" that I saw a walkthrough blogger talk about... but I never would've thought that Rook would remember it...* Indeed, she was attracted to this idea.

Being the high school girl that she was, Kasumi thought that walking around a love-themed festival with your lover was the height of romance. However, since Kasumi never actually had a lover — or had even attempted to obtain one — it was only something she could imagine.

But then came Rook with his date invitation. Kasumi literally felt like a Typical Village Girl who'd been invited to the ball by the prince. The tension and helplessness were shaking her to the core.

This was only compounded by the fact that Io and Fujinon had caught Kasumi's illness and couldn't log in to watch over her date like they'd originally planned.

*Ohhh... I was perfectly fine with just my daydreams of princes making out with other princes... AHHH! What am I thinking at a time like this?! Embarrassed and perplexed by all the thoughts racing through her head, Kasumi flushed bright red.*

Rook noticed all of this and talked to her with consideration in his voice, "Kasumi, are you sure you aren't still sick? Even your avatar looks flushed."

"Y-Yeah, I'm fine! Perfectly fine!"

"Let me know if something's wrong. I'll do anything I can to help."

"A-Anything?!" His choice of words made various images swirl inside Kasumi's head, bringing her close to the boiling point.

*Wh-Wh-Wh-What?! R-Rook is so forward! Way too forward! What do I do?! Io! Fujino! Help!* As a person with observation abilities that more or less let him read minds, Rook had a good idea of what was going on in Kasumi's head.

However, he didn't hold the girl's tendency to use him in her shipping fantasies against her.

As someone who'd been studying human psychology and examining criminal cases from a very young age, he knew Kasumi just shipped men with other men as a kind of intrusive thought, and it didn't bother him at all..

In fact, the way Kasumi's own thoughts made her red and flustered was rather cute to him.

*Kasumi is also quite heartwarming to watch, though in a different way than Ray,* Rook thought.

"You mean that she has that hamster-like cuteness?" Babi asked telepathically.

*...Babi, please don't use rodents for your comparisons. "Small animal" works perfectly fine.*

Rook remembered a particular animal closely related to the hamster and trembled a little.

"U-Umm, are you okay?" Kasumi asked.

"...Yes. I just had some... recollection shivers."

*Recollection shivers?! Is that even a thing?!* Kasumi wondered in her mind, but didn't say it.

"By the way, is there anywhere you want to go today?" Rook asked her.

"U-Umm, there's a large clothing store in the fourth district that has couples-exclusive photoshoots." This was a special event where

couples could try on new clothes made by clothing-related jobs and take commemorative photos wearing them. Photo data could be extracted, and Kasumi wanted those polished pictures to use as reference.

*Nhh... I'm nervous, but this is a chance to get photos of a wonderful model in wonderful fashion... If I don't go through with this, I won't be able to face Io and Fujino... They even got sick because they visited me...*

It was quite a challenge for her, but Kasumi gathered her resolve and decided to go to the aforementioned store for the event.

"All right. Where is it supposed to be?" Rook asked.

"Ah. G-Give me a moment! I'll check right now..." Instead of using the map window like most players, Kasumi used her Embryo — Taijitu.

Like always, she took a look at what was displayed... and saw something incredibly strange.

"...Eh? What is this...?" The map displayed by Taijitu was *in pieces*.

Gideon on the map was split into many even squares that were scattered about randomly, like a sliding block puzzle. It was as though a mischievous god had shattered the whole city with little rhyme or reason.

"The city is...?! Huh?" Kasumi exclaimed, looking up in shock — only to see Gideon the same as it ever was. It wasn't scattered or broken, and only one thing had changed.

"...Eh?"

And what a major change it was.

At the center of Gideon, close to the central arena, there was *something* enormous.

It was something you could see from any place in the whole city.

Two inverted towers were standing tall as if to pierce the heavens...  
or stab straight through the earth.

It was the Superior Embryo known as Sandalphon.

# ***Chapter Seven: The End of the Festival and the Explosion***

*Thirty Minutes Ago*

After the first day of the Love-Duel Festival, Hannya — Fuyuko Shiki — went on to take a nap.

She could've gotten more sleep within *Infinite Dendrogram*, but she chose to sleep in reality because she wanted the second day — and her date with Figaro — to come as soon as possible.

She slept, anxious for that long-awaited moment... and woke up feeling absolutely awful.

“...Why would I have a dream like that *now*?” During her nap, she’d relived that time when she was betrayed by the man she once loved. She’d seen herself giving her all to him and helping him with everything she had, only for him to cut her off with a single message. She’d seen his face as she found him in Legendaria, grinning like an idiot as he messed around with another woman.

The memories came back to her as a dream, attacking right before her long-awaited moment. It was almost like a red flag, or an alarm bell ringing out.

“Figaro... Vincent isn’t like him.”

*I can trust Vincent. ...Can't I? I mean, he's so pure. ...We only talked through messages. How can I be sure? We love each other. ...Even though I never confirmed it? Vincent isn't like him. ...But what do I actually know about Vincent?*

Her reason clashed with her emotions, repeating her greatest fear: that she would be betrayed by her beloved again.

“What am I so worried about...? I just need to confirm that he loves me...”

Fuyuko shook off the intrusive voice in the back of her mind and logged in to *Infinite Dendrogram*.

She appeared at the plaza — the local save point — and immediately noticed that her surroundings were astir. At first, she thought it was just the cheerful festival atmosphere, but it didn't seem quite right.

"Do you think those two are... you know...?"

"It's unexpected, but they make for a balanced pair. Maybe they're a good match."

"They don't really seem happy, though..." Many people were chatting with newspapers in hand. Nearby, someone was talking while selling copies of that same paper, and Hannya was curious enough to buy one.

What she saw first was the name of the newspaper — "Kingdom People Times."

What she saw next was a photo of a bare-chested man, and a woman right next to him.

To the side, there was a large text saying "THE HEAT OF PASSION?! THE DUEL CHAMPION AND THE LEADER OF THE TOP CLAN!" followed by letters in a smaller font, starting with "A teary exchange! Whatever happened between these two..."

The people in the photo were named, too, but Hannya didn't need that to know who the man was — she couldn't forget him if she tried.

"...Figaro." It was none other than her beloved.

The paper said that the photo had been taken last night — which would mean that this happened right after Figaro had told her that he couldn't dine with her.

*He said he didn't have time for me*, Hannya's mind wrung out one single thought as it gradually went blank.

*Who is she? What were they talking about?* she wondered.

*What am I to him? What did we have between us?* she questioned herself.

Then, all the mail they'd exchanged flashed through her mind.

"Oh... I just realized... that he never said... that he loved me."

King of Berserk, Hannya finally noticed that crushing detail. She realized that her love was an illusion, and the last shreds of her rationality finally fell away.

"As you command, Lady Hannya." In response to the voice in his Master's heart, Warden Angel, Sandalphon instantly began to act.

"Form Shift — Prison Tower." As he appeared out of the crest, he instantly and drastically changed his appearance.

From a living being to an inorganic structure... from a small child to twin towers that reached as high as the sky.

Thus, Sandalphon now stood in the middle of Gideon's central plaza.

Though the structures were gigantic, reaching an entire kilometer in height, they actually tapered down in volume towards the bottom. A building like that would never stand using conventional means and materials, but such logic didn't apply to a Superior Embryo.

The towers hadn't even touched the ground yet. If they weighed as much as they looked, they would smash craters into the ground the moment they landed.

"...AAAAAAAHHHHH! R-RU... RUN AWAAY!"

"Tch! Dryfe's at it again?!"

“...Wait, that’s the thing from Valentine’s...” Sandalphon’s sudden appearance left the people dumbfounded for a good moment, then made them scatter in fear. A few Masters tried attacking the towers, but Sandalphon didn’t care. Numerous as they were, the spells and blows could only scratch it at best.

Sandalphon ignored the minor resistance...

“Angeldeath Dominion — Sandalphon.”

...And activated his ultimate skill.

Like a ripple, its effect began to spread with barely anyone noticing until it enveloped all of Gideon.

A few seconds later, screams of fear and confusion drowned the city, spurred by something more than just the two towers in the plaza.

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### *Gideon the City of Duels*

“R-Rook! Th-That’s...!” Kasumi cried, unable to hide her fear of the large object in the middle of the city.

Rook stood in front of her and considered the situation.

*That fits the description I was given of Miss Hannya’s Sandalphon. Ray said that things were going smoothly on that front, but it looks like something’s changed.*

He took out his Telepathy Cuffs to contact Ray and Shu, but then he heard the screams. However, they didn’t come from somewhere off in the city, but from right next to him.

*The screams were let out by people that had appeared from seemingly nowhere just ten metels in front of him.*

“Huh? What?!” Rook swept Kasumi into his arms and moved away from the panicked crowd. They seemed quite perplexed by the

situation, but they were desperate to get as far away from Sandalphon as possible.

As Rook watched them, he considered the situation once more.

*Mass teleportation? Is this a skill? Did Sandalphon do this?* Rook had been informed about Hannya herself, but he didn't know anything about her skills because Shu and Figaro didn't know anything, either. Figaro could've asked her, but he'd chosen not to do it because he believed that it would've been unfair to know all the cards in the deck of someone he'd eventually duel.

*But... How much would a teleportation skill of this scale actually cost?* As far as Rook knew, teleportation skills were costly even here in *Infinite Dendrogram*. For example, Kasumi's Taijitu's teleportation was limited to her own monsters, and its cost grew exponentially the farther she tried to teleport them. Then there was Franklin, who had to create monsters solely dedicated to Castling — the short-distance teleportation skill that swapped his and the monster's places — just to make good use of it. The only skill Rook knew that could go over long distances without much effort was Xunyu's ultimate skill, but even that was limited to just her limbs.

It was quite obvious this anomaly had been caused by Sandalphon, but if he could teleport that many people at once and also manifest such a gigantic body, he was clearly abnormally powerful.

*Since he can do that, he must either have some complex limitations on it, or it isn't even pure teleportation to begin with... or it could be a mix of both... Reminds me of her Embryo.*

Rook remembered one of his past opponents — Hugo and Cyco. Cyco's La Porte de l'Enfer could instantly kill Masters far more powerful than herself as long as the right conditions were met.

*Assuming that that power stems from the “giant-killing” theme Maidens have, this phenomenon most likely has to do with some*

*characteristic common to all Apostles, but...* Rook didn't have enough information to make any assumptions about what it could be, so for now, he focused on analyzing the effect of the skill.

*It can't be literal teleportation because of the high cost, so maybe it's something else? Like... an illusion?*

He first considered that it could be like the stealth-focused Superior Embryo that he'd faced recently, and that what he had seen here might've been just a vision of people running around in a panic in some other location.

Rook ordered his coat — Liz — to create thin threads and let them flow in the wind. The threads could physically touch the panicked crowd, making him realize that they were real to Liz, at least.

*It's not sense manipulation. Even a Superior Embryo couldn't do that on this scale. These people are definitely real.* Rook had faced Gerbera and her Alhazred, so he knew that the range of such abilities was limited.

*There's people popping up here and there all over the street... Hm?*

He looked at the street ahead, which continued for hundreds of metels, and noticed something.

People were only popping up in certain places. Based on his estimations, it was ten metels ahead, then 110 metels, then 210 — every 100 metels, basically.

*Could it be...?* Rook made Liz extend her threads in all directions, and she, too, was affected by this phenomenon. However, it was only to the threads that reached past a certain distance.

Rook looked in the direction, calculated the distance, and had an epiphany.

*Squares of exactly 100 metels. Leaving one moves you someplace else.*

An area split into 100 metel-large squares. That reminded him of what he'd seen right before he saw Sandalphon.

"Kasumi, could you show me your Taijitu agai— Huh?"

"Hhnn..." When Rook spoke to Kasumi, he noticed that she was blushing bright red from head to toe and seemed barely conscious.

His accelerated analysis took him just a little under a minute, but he had been holding Kasumi this entire time, and she was about to explode from embarrassment.

He gave up on asking. She was holding the Taijitu in her hands, so he took a look at it and saw the map of Gideon displayed in the same "sliding block puzzle" state as before. Rook checked it against his memories and realized that the area ten metels to the north had become Gideon's north gate.

Wanting to test his theory, he walked towards the place people were appearing. He first kicked a pebble before passing, but it rolled by with no problem.

"The utilities haven't been affected, either, so I suppose it only works on living creatures... and whatever they're carrying," he whispered, as he watched the still-clothed people passing by.

"It affects the Taijitu, too... so we can add Embryos to that." And so, he went against the wave of people and passed through the place where they appeared.

A few steps later, he was no longer in the street from before, but the north gate.

"...So this is how it works." With the truth finally revealed, Rook contacted Ray and Shu to pass on this information.



*A few minutes earlier...*

“Labyrinth created — prison complete,” Sandalphon whispered as he opened his eyes — the jewels on the tip of each tower.

Each of them saw different things.

The right jewel saw Gideon as it was before the skill’s activation. The people seen through this one were teleported elsewhere as they moved.

The left jewel saw Gideon scattered in a square tile pattern. The people seen through this one were moving around *without any teleportation*.

To them, Gideon was currently the same as it appeared to the left jewel.

Just as Rook had assumed, this phenomenon was caused by the special characteristic of Apostles.

Maidens were known to excel at giant-killing. Apostles also had a unique theme to their powers. This theme could only be described as “domination” — the opposite of the Maiden-type Embryo tendency to focus their power to defeat overwhelming odds. Apostles, by contrast, spread their power out, claimed a part of the world as their own, and rewrote its rules for their own benefit.

Some might think of Kaguya, but her night was merely an overlay she painted onto the world. Apostles, on the other hand, marked an area as their own, controlled it, and changed it at will.

Sandalphon affected the laws of movement within the ten kilometels he dominated. This ultimate skill rewrote the *spatial connection* for every 100 metels, but only for living beings and their possessions. It shuffled the world around Sandalphon into what his left jewel saw.

This power was based on Judaic writings — specifically, the archangel that imprisoned other angels.

Besides Sandalphon himself, only very few people could perceive this scrambled world. To most, this city would become a prison that merely happened to *look* like a very familiar place.

This was the power Hannya had desired — the power to never let RockPanther get away from her. She'd already used it to corner him. He'd frantically ran around, crying and pissing himself, but she'd eventually crushed him.

This time, she was using it on someone else.

“Optical Search — Over Gladiator, Figaro.” Sandalphon slowly walked and looked in every possible direction to find the target.

He was merely walking through his scattered world, but to others, it appeared as though the two massive towers were teleporting.

This was also how it had suddenly appeared behind Figaro when they'd first met.

At the top of Sandalphon stood Hannya, not saying a word as she glared at the city below. There were many emotions in her eyes, but all of them were overwhelmed by grief, rage, and insanity.

“Lady Hannya. I have finished transforming and setting up the Angeldeath Dominion. I am now searching for the target.”

Sandalphon received no response, but he knew his Master well enough to expect this.

There were two stages to Hannya's rampages.

The first was indiscriminate rage. She would be angry from the bottom of her heart, but she would lack a clear target, so she would simply lash out at those who closely resembled the source of her ire, screaming out her emotions while doing so.

That was how she had been most of the time while searching for RockPanther — the man who'd dumped her in real life.

The second stage was a pure destructive urge. She wouldn't say a word, and nothing — neither power nor words — would be able to stop her until she found her target and the fire in her heart was finally extinguished.

This was how she had been when she'd found RockPanther in Legendaria.

Sandalphon knew full well that the second stage was far more terrifying than the first.

After all — in this state, she didn't care about *anything*. She would be focused solely on letting her anger out on her target and completely lose all consideration for her surroundings — which she still had in the first stage, however meager. Being Hannya's weapon, Sandalphon knew better than anyone that the lack of tian casualties back when she'd crushed RockPanther in Legendaria had been pure luck.

Needless to say, she'd been in the second stage of anger back then.

*This city will probably be wiped off the map,* Sandalphon thought. Figaro wasn't like RockPanther — not as an individual, but as a fighter. He was powerful even by Superior standards, and Sandalphon believed that Gideon would fall before he would be defeated.

*...I have no say in this. I must do as Lady Hannya desires.*

Once, Kaguya had told Nemesis that Apostles were “products of a sense of duty.”

That was simply the truth. Apostles always strived to be merely tools meant to fulfill whatever their Masters desired, and never argued against them or raised any objection.

The title of “Apostle” was most apt indeed, and this one knew that everything would end the moment Figaro appeared.

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*Prism Rider, Ray Starling*

“Can Miss Eldritch go *one day* without being a nuisance?!” I roared as I rode Silver around Gideon’s skies.

In my hand, I held a newspaper — the likely cause of this happening.

I’d picked it up at the inn where I was staying, thought “This can’t be good,” and this whole thing started happening the very next moment.

“...I can understand why she blew up, though,” said Nemesis. “The man who refused to dine with her went on to meet another woman with his shirt off. Fuel on the fire. Truly.”

“And I’m pretty damn sure this wasn’t Figaro’s intention at all!” Then again, this was certainly not what Miss Eldritch or the newspaper company wanted either, but that didn’t change what was going on right now.

[Reiji, how’s it going up there? You gettin’ close to the legs?] Shu asked using his Telepathy Cuffs.

[No! The scenery just changes as I fly around! I can’t get to her even from here!]

[Well, Rook said that the local space’s split into a bunch of 100 metel squares and scattered into a huge mess. Hannya’s movin’ around, too. Meeting her is a matter of pure luck. Rook and the Superior Killer aren’t doing too well, either.]

The spatial scramble seemed to work no matter how high up you were. I saw some people flying around on tamed monsters, and they all seemed as lost as I was.

[...Have you found Miss Eldritch yet?] I asked.

[Nope. She might not even be online,] Shu replied.

Miss Eldritch and her Lunar Society's swarm tactics and debuffs might've been able to help, but it didn't seem like we could rely on that.

*...You caused this, damn it! Where are you?!*

[What about Xunyu?]

[She can't use her ult. Said something about visual info not lining up with her aim. The scrambling only affects creatures and Embryos, so there's a discrepancy between us and our optics and observation from a spellcasting standpoint.]

Some would probably think of just casting spells on the target as it appeared, but that was no good, either.

It teleported with every step taken, so every projectile would just miss; since that could result in collateral damage on the city, it wasn't wise to risk it. The same could be said for Shu's Baldr.

"Those legs are over a kilometel tall," said Nemesis. "A single step is more than enough to cover the 100 metels."

Rook had figured out the nature of the skill, but we had no means of dealing with it.

...Perhaps Azurite's Altar could cut through this skill itself? No. In this absurd situation where the laws of movement were completely re-written, bringing in an even more absurd all-severing power didn't seem like a good idea.

There was no telling what could happen. For all we knew, that could make the laws of space irreparable.

Azurite already knew about the situation and they were acting to mend it, but they'd had no results so far.

[...Bro, where's Figaro?]

[I can't contact him. He ain't online yet... but maybe it's best if he doesn't show up today.]

I thought that maybe Figaro could persuade Hannya to calm down, but Shu rejected that idea.

[Right now, Hannya's just walking around the city using her skill,] he continued. [She's probably lookin' for Figgy. Once she finds him, the situation will drastically change.]

[...In what way?]

[I can think of two. They'll either talk, or she'll attack him on sight.]

*...One or the other, huh?*

[The latter would be real bad. Hannya would use her berserker grouping skills and Sandalphon would start raging around with a huge boost to STR and AGI.]

[...Is it just me, or does that seem worse than Franklin's Game?]

[It ain't just you. That's what I meant by "real bad."]

The fact that Shu stopped using his bear puns told me everything about how serious this situation was.

"I just realized something," Nemesis said telepathically. "Bringing those towers down would be a disaster all on its own, no?"

"Yeah. That's why we don't have many good ways of stopping her."

Our only options were to convince her to stop or instantly give Hannya the death penalty and make Sandalphon vanish before he collapsed.

Shu had been counting on Xunyu because she had Tenaga-Ashinaga's ult, which could quickly get rid of Hannya without making Sandalphon fall, but his own ult made that impossible.

That was why we were now trying to reach Sandalphon and stop Hannya directly, but if she was in no state to be swayed by words...

“...We’ll have no choice but to defeat her, huh?” I recalled her as she was yesterday... and her excitement for today’s date with Figaro.

If things hadn’t unfolded like this, they would’ve had a great time together.

*This is leaving a bad taste in my mouth... Why did this happen?!*

[...Reiji, I got good news and bad news. In a single package,] Shu said with a tense voice.

[...What is it?] I asked, with a worried note to my voice.

[Figgy’s online.] That was enough for me to know that the situation would shift in one way or another.

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#### *Gideon the City of Duels, DIN Gideon Branch*

Standing atop the (actual) roof of the Gideon branch of DIN were three entities. They were control AIs — Cheshire as Tom Cat, Tweedledum, and Tweedledee.

“...How long have you been planning this?” Cheshire asked, realizing that this had been an intentional gambit from the twins. It wasn’t a spontaneous idea they’d had just yesterday — they had been planning this since the moment they found out that Hannya would be coming to Gideon. As the one in charge of the gaol, Red King had already informed them of the time Hannya would be released, as well as her goals.

“Since Alice brought us the idea,” said Tweedledum.

“We’ve been thinkin’ of takin’ a good photo since then. You can get some spicy ones if you try, y’know?” added Tweedledee.

“We were not allowed to set up cameras to increase our chances of success, but this led to us acquiring one of the best player contributions possible.”

“Manpoweeerr! Wait, is that the right way to look at it? His goal is pretty much the same as ours, right?”

Alice was the control AI in charge of player protection, and she worked at DIN as Alison. It was a disguise she kept up for certain purposes, just like Cheshire had Tom Cat.

She wasn’t important right now, though. The twins’ plot was the real threat.

“Anyway, we already had the info about King of Berserk and knew what she was like.”

“We guessed this would happen if we just gave her a li’l nuudge.”

Basically, to the twins, this “Ba-Thump Kyahah” plan was nothing but a method of triggering Hannya’s rampage.

“Originally, we’d planned to use a photo he would take with a fan. This is a love festival, after all, so it was likely that some of them would try flirting with him.”

“He didn’t stop wearing the costume while out in town, though, so we were panicking preeetty badly.”

“We devised some alternatives, but in the end we managed to acquire perhaps the ideal photography.”

“Kingdom People Times did great after we leaked it, too. Though, I guess it’s normal for newspapers to write articles with looots of assumptions.”

From their perspective, Tsukuyo Fuso, the newspaper company, and the contributor had all done a perfect job. Hannya was, after all, going on a rampage.

“...This is bound to affect their real lives,” said Cheshire. “That’s not something we should—”

“That observation could not be more late,” Tweedledum replied.

“It’s waay too late!” Tweedledee added. “There’s already lots of people who were *so* affected by what happened in here that it changed their real lives. It’s especially common with Maiden Masters like King of Tartarus or King of Swords. They’re *sooo* sensitive!”

“Tweedle...!” Cheshire choked out, glaring at them. They had just said something he couldn’t tolerate.

However, when he looked into their eyes, he was shocked to see absolutely no malice in them. There were simply no emotions there at all. Tweedledee seemed to act like she was enjoying this, but a closer look into her eyes would make you see that they were as cold as camera lenses.

They were like machines — even their speech and actions were pre-programmed.

It made Cheshire realize yet again just how different he was from them, even though he’d known them for a long time and seen this play out many times before.

“...You’re more loyal to the cause than most of us,” he said. Cheshire wasn’t like them. He had been a living creature-based Legion-type even before he evolved, while the twins were Type Infinite Calculator, evolved from the “Calculator” branch of Arms, which were focused almost solely on calculation processing. Since the twins had started out as basically machines, they were fundamentally different from Cheshire even after they received avatars which allowed them to act human.

And like machines, they always prioritized their goals over emotions.

"That's what makes you so hard for me to bear. You're just like *that thing*."

They reminded Cheshire of his most hated Infinite Embryo... control AI No. 10.

"I am unable to agree with that assessment," said Tweedledum.

"Yeahh! Bandersnatch goes waaay too far. Don't lump us with hiim."

The twins had just caused some major problems for Masters to make them evolve, but that didn't seem like "too far" to them.

"Make the differentiation, No. 13."

"It's fine, it's fiiine. Even if it hurts them, they're still alive... Unlike our Masters."

"...Tweedle."

For just a moment, Cheshire saw a hint of emotion in their eyes, but it vanished as quickly as it appeared.

He then looked away from them and walked towards the fence around the roof.

"What are you doiing?"

"We shouldn't throw them into traps like this. I'll intervene to stop this disturbance."

He couldn't use his original body, but he could be useful even as Tom Cat.

Cheshire prepared to jump off the roof into the chaotic city of Gideon...

"Ah...!"

...But his legs didn't listen to him.

In fact, his entire body was completely immobilized.

“This is... Alice!” He called out the name of the colleague responsible for this phenomenon.

Control AI No. 1, Alice, was in charge of player protection, as well as all avatars. She’d used her abilities to render Cheshire incapable of moving Tom.

Under other circumstances things might have been different, but as an avatar, Tom Cat had no power against her. After all, control AI avatars, Master avatars... *all* the avatars active on *Infinite Dendrogram* had been created by her.

“...So she’s with you on this one?” Cheshire asked.

“You could see it that way. Be content to spectate. It is not your place to get involved.”

“Observe the results! Won’t it be great if someone evolves?!”

Cheshire couldn’t use his original body and was rendered immobile, while the two twins were eagerly awaiting the results of the rampage they’d set up.

Thus, the control AIs observed the third Clash of the Superiors to happen in this city, none of them knowing how it would unfold.

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### *Nex Plains*

Figaro wasn’t in Gideon.

Last night, he had been running around the city’s outskirts, looking for a good place to duel Hannya; he’d logged out after deciding that the edge of Nex Plains would do just fine. This let him avoid the effects of the Angeldeath Dominion.

Many could count themselves lucky that he was outside the city, for the casualties would’ve been far worse if he’d been inside it.

Right after logging in, he instantly saw Sandalphon stomping around Gideon, as well as its panicked people.

“Hannya...” He understood the situation before he even came online. The MMO journal he’d read right before had mentioned something about the article in Kingdom People Times.

Before logging in, he didn’t think much of it besides “Well, *this* isn’t true at all,” but upon coming here, he realized that article was the driving force behind the situation before him. He wasn’t the type to overthink things, but he wasn’t a fool, either, so he was instantly able to connect Hannya’s rampage to the article.

For a moment, he looked as if he was holding something back... and then he wordlessly removed a particular item from his inventory.

It was a magic item that functioned as a signal flare. He’d acquired it while raiding a dungeon, but since he could only fight solo, it had been gathering dust in his inventory for a long time.

Figaro fired it into the sky, letting Hannya know his location.

“Target sighted.” Sandalphon saw the signal, instantly noticed Figaro standing in Nex Plains, and moved the giant tower-legs according to Hannya’s will. They seemed absolutely out of control. Fixated solely on Figaro and ignoring everyone else, the tower-legs rushed towards him.

It was quite fortunate that Hannya’s current location was at the edge of the Angeldeath Dominion.

Sandalphon quickly left the area of effect, instantly canceling the skill. One of Angeldeath Dominion’s conditions was that Sandalphon had to stay within the area he’d shuffled for it to remain active.

Of course, Sandalphon could use the ult again to apply its effects to his current location, but he didn’t do it. There was something far more important now.

Destroying the Nex Plains beneath, Hannya arrived mere moments before Figaro. The two faced each other, with Hannya staring straight down at him.

“Han—”

“Last Berserk.” Before Figaro could even call out her name, she used the King of Berserk ultimate job skill.

Last Berserk was both a skill and a declaration of incoming obliteration.

It could only be used once locked on to a target, and it put the KoB in a berserk state until either the target or the user died. In exchange for this extreme loss of control, the user’s STR and AGI were quintupled, they took only twenty percent damage and their other skills didn’t cost any MP or SP.

The moment the skill was used, it turned the user into a biological weapon focused solely on killing the target. It was a forbidden skill that had led many past Kings of Berserk to their death in a state of pure insanity.

Hannya knew its effects well, but she still didn’t hesitate to use it on Figaro. A moment later, one of the kilometel-tall towers fell right on him.

Figaro reacted fast, quickly switching to his AGI-focused set and evading the tower by jumping backwards.

However, the other tower fell right where he landed.

It seemed like simple stomping, but because of Sandalphon’s weight and the supersonic speed gained from Last Berserk, each step was like a meteor impact, creating craters that made Nex Plains look like the surface of the Moon.

Back at the gaol, Hannya had fought Gerbera — a stealth-focused Superior — who was quickly pulverized by this exact same barrage.

It was like a bombardment that could neither be avoided nor defended against.

Among the outlaws, it was a well known fact that if Hannya was above you, you *would* be crushed, but the Over Gladiator was far beyond this mere fact.

“Burn, My Soul — Cor Leonis!” With no hesitation at all, Figaro went and used his own ult — the skill that whittled his life away.

“Acceleration!” He followed it up with the active skill from his equipped ring, which greatly increased his AGI.

Cor Leonis empowered the effect of his items’ skills immensely in exchange for destroying them permanently, and Acceleration from his ring now briefly gave him speed that surpassed the stomping towers.

Figaro evaded the legs themselves, as well as the powerful shockwaves they caused.

He survived the fatal blows he couldn’t dodge using Dragonscale Wards that were empowered by Cor Leonis and absorbed even more damage than normal. He replaced the ones that broke, continuing to evade the blows as he did.

Normal people... no... even *rankers* would be pulverized by this bombardment, but Figaro was actually surviving it.

However, he wouldn’t be able to keep this up forever.

He had a limited number of items like the Dragonscale Wards, and his ult was chipping away at his HP every second.

On the other hand, it cost Hannya absolutely nothing to continue doing this.

Because of Last Berserk, she could continue barraging Figaro for as long as he was alive.

This battle already had a set goal — his death.

Despite the absolutely desperate situation, Figaro continued evading the deadly stomps while keeping his eyes on Hannya above him.

He then switched his footwear from Unbound Sabatons, Unchain — which negated movement limitations — to a pair of boots that had the Climbing skill. That was a passive skill used while scaling cliffs, and if empowered by Cor Leonis, it would become so powerful that he would be able to run up even smooth walls.

Albeit situational, the boots that had this skill could be used against a large variety of enemies, so he always had them handy.

And there was only one reason why he would equip them now.

“...I’m coming over there.” Figaro jumped on the surface of one of the tower-legs and began running upwards. It moved at the speed of sound, but that wasn’t enough to throw him off.

Through the earth-shaking impacts, he ran up Sandalphon, heading straight towards Hannya.

# **Chapter Eight: A Story Written in the Sky**

## *Gideon the City of Duels*

“Figgy loggin’ in outside is a real silver lining here.” Thanks to Figaro appearing in the Nex Plains and Hannya going after him, the situation had shifted drastically. As Shu considered how to handle things now, someone contacted him through the Telepathy Cuffs.

[Hello? Can you hear me?]

[Rook! What is it?]

[I just met up with Xunyu. The shuffling effect was canceled, so she can target Hannya now.]

Angeldeath Dominion had been undone, allowing Xunyu to use Tenaga Ashinaga’s ultimate skill.

[Can we count on her tearin’ out her heart?] Shu asked.

[She says there’s only like a fifty percent chance that she’ll succeed, because Hannya has high AGI and she’s moving around like crazy.] Tenaga Ashinaga’s ultimate skill didn’t come with a lock-on function and it could easily miss if the set coordinates were incorrect. That was why Xunyu had first immobilized Figaro before using it on him in The Clash of the Superiors.

With Hannya and Sandalphon being so large and mobile, it was difficult for Xunyu to land the skill.

[...Hannya’s probably wearin’ a Brooch, too,] said Shu. [Even if it lands, it won’t be enough... And then she might go on to make a mess out of more than just the plains.]

[That’s true.]

[...Let’s leave it to Figgy for now. We’ll go with Xunyu’s plan if he doesn’t make it.]

[Understood.] After cutting the comms with Shu, Rook gazed at Sandalphon and Figaro in the distance with an inquisitive look in his eyes.

“Why is Figaro climbing up Sandalphon?” he asked. “He could easily win by just standing on the surface and using Gloria α... or any other ranged skills.”

“It’s sooo weird,” said Babi. “He could just go SHWING like he did in the duuel!”

“...Is there some kind of issue with using long-ranged attack skills against Hannya?” Rook theorized. “Would she block them somehow...?”

“NopE,” Xunyu cut his musings short. “For someone with sUch a good head on your shoulders, you’re prEtty ignorant.”

“...Ignorant?” Rook rarely heard anyone call him that, so he was a bit taken aback.

“The reAson he’s climbin’ is prObably really simplE.”

“It is?” Whatever Xunyu was thinking, Rook couldn’t see it yet.

“YeAh. He ain’t wiEldin’ a weapon, and he’s using thE ult he didn’t use even in oUr *duel*. Ya know whAt that means, right?”

Rook didn’t, actually. Based on what he’d been told, Figaro had been looking forward to dueling Hannya, and according to what Ray had said that had been exactly their plans for today. Because of this, Rook assumed that Figaro saw this as a duel or some sort of fight to stop Gideon from being destroyed.

“Well, you’ll find oUt if ya just think abOut it. Just thinking cAn make for a good lessOn, Rook.”

“For a little girl, you’re so much like a big sisteeer,” said Babi. “I won’t let you be Rook’s big sister, though. That’s *my* role!”

“I don’t even wAnt it,” Xunyu chuckled as she watched Figaro’s fight, preparing her ult just in case.



### *Nex Plains*

Two different sounds now resounded over the plains: the roar of the pulverized ground and a young man’s voice.

“Fall! Please just fall down already!” Sandalphon shouted this while continuing his devastating stomping.

However, Figaro was weathering every movement and shockwave, never stopping his dash to the top of the tower.

The scene seemed to defy the laws of physics, but Figaro’s stats and his boots’ Climbing skill, buffed by Cor Leonis, made this feat possible. The ult had already expired, but because he was limiting his equipment, the enhancement was still sufficient.

It also bears remembering that Figaro had tons of experience fighting on unsteady terrain.

“He’s absurd...!” This was the first time Sandalphon had ever encountered someone who had tried to climb on him while he was attacking.

So far, he’d only lost against two enemies: the incarnation of nature that specialized in area-wide extermination and a slime that negated all physical damage. Compatibility had been against him in both of those fights — Sandalphon couldn’t make use of his strong points and afterwards could fully understand why he lost.

However, Figaro was just a human — a creature that should have died with a single stomp.

The fact that he was still alive began to make Sandalphon panic.

The Over Gladiator was already halfway up his tower-leg.

“...■■”

“Lady Hannya...!” While Last Berserk was active, Hannya was basically a machine devoted to attacking Figaro. It made the movement of her body completely automatic, and if Sandalphon wasn’t there to provide stability, even the massive tower-legs would be moving at a maddening rate.

However, her thoughts remained her own thanks to the player protection function, so even though she was rampaging, her feelings for Figaro remained the same.

Bloodlust, rage, grief, love... too many emotions swirled within her to pinpoint just one, but the effect of them all had already convinced her to use Last Berserk and attack him.

This was the only way of handling lost love that she knew.

She’d only fallen in love twice in her entire life. The first love ended in betrayal, and the second was an illusion. The only way she could feel any kind of relief was by releasing her grief, anger, and hate onto the object of her affection.

Sandalphon knew how she felt better than anyone, and he knew that this was the only way. After all — he was born from her mind and heart. And as her loyal Embryo, he once again fulfilled her will.

“Screamer, set,” Sandalphon said, as he slightly changed his appearance.

The towers remained top-heavy, but spiral grooves now appeared on their surface. Figaro couldn’t see them in their entirety from his current vantage point, but everyone else watching the battle could.

As someone described what it looked like now, Sandalphon suddenly began to shine...

“Downfall Screamer!”

...And used his only offensive active skill.

Sandalphon was now a kilometel-tall pair of drills.

He'd acquired this skill when Hannya was still trying to escape the gaol to meet Figaro and *evolved into his seventh form by using ■■■*.

Though it hadn't been enough to let Hannya escape, it was a space-warping, all-pulverizing, penetrating, perforating attack that ignored material toughness.

Of course, there was little point to some of those attributes now. The skill's effects were concentrated at the very tip of the tower-legs, and Figaro was running up the side.

Why did Sandalphon decide to use it, then? Simple — to make the towers spin and throw Figaro off.

With an obscene 600 revolutions per second, the drills were like giant centrifuges, and the angel was confident that they could easily throw off anyone and anything clinging to them.

That was exactly what happened a moment later. Figaro was flung into the sky...

“Liferend Shield Formation.”

...and landed on thin air.

“Huh?!” Sandalphon couldn't hide his shock at this feat. Figaro had used a skill from his blue coat-like MVP special reward, Rendshield Cloak, Closer, which created barriers that doubled as platforms. He had used it for air mobility when fighting Gloria, and now he used it to approach the top of Sandalphon.

He was already past the halfway point, which placed him close enough for the Liferend Shield Formation to take him up the rest of the way. Hannya was trying to stomp him out of the sky with the spinning towers, but his movements were too unpredictable.

Figaro was soon high enough to make Sandalphon panic even worse.

He was aware that he was a powerful Superior Embryo with a gigantic size and an ability that warped space, but he had his share of weaknesses, too.

One of them was common to all Apostles — the absolute lack of stat growth bonuses to their Masters.

Another was a flaw specific to him — because of his size, he had absolutely no way of dealing with enemies that reached his weak point: the very top of the towers.

His battle abilities were useless against someone who made it all the way up, and even if Hannya unequipped Sandalphon and fought Figaro by herself, she wouldn't stand a chance even with her buffs from Last Berserk. Without her Embryo, the gap between them was just too vast.

As Sandalphon panicked about the danger that would soon befall his Master, Figaro made the final jump to the top... *only for something to shoot him down.*

The sudden snipe shocked many people present, but it wasn't enough to end Figaro's life. He'd switched Closer's barriers from platforms to the absolute defense bubble shield he'd used in his duel against Xunyu. However, the disappearance of the platforms forced Figaro to fall back all the way down to the ground.

Sandalphon watched the sight in confusion, while Hannya looked down at Figaro with a face still full of rage.



### *Cruella Mountain Belt*

A hit, thought the man with closed eyes.

In his hands there was a pen and a notepad, and next to him there was a strange creature composed of four mechanical legs and an upper body armed with a bow.

Behind his closed eyes, he watched Figaro fall with a view *from right above Sandalphon*.

*It was about to end too early. This is an extremely rare event, so I want to watch it a bit longer. It's quite unusual for me to interfere like this a second time...*

The man wanted a true struggle between Figaro and Hannya — an emotional clash between two Superiors. That was why he'd sent DIN the photo that would set this in motion. He hadn't expected that story to get scooped by another newspaper, but the result was the same, so those details didn't matter to him.

And now, because it seemed like it would end too soon, the man waited until Figaro had no control over his aerial movement and sniped him using his own Embryo. It would have been terribly disappointing to end the battle with that one shot, but just as he'd expected, Figaro sensed the attack coming and defended against it.

Thanks to that, the emotional clash had been reset.

*Sagittarius did a good job*, he thought. The strange creature's arrow was special because it was made of light rather than physical matter, but perhaps the most extraordinary thing about it was the fact that it had hit a target in Nex Plains from all the way here in the Cruella Mountain Belt.

*Though, unlike my first interference, this one was much too direct.* Everyone who watched the battle could see that Figaro had been sniped from the side, and thus they now knew some outsider was interfering.

Still watching Sandalphon with his closed left eye, he opened his right and looked up at the sky.

What he saw was a silver Prism Steed galloping across the heavens towards him.

*I knew it... I was fully aware this might happen when I decided to interfere. Still, I hope this doesn't make it too difficult to observe.*

The man heaved a sigh, and Sagittarius vanished, leaving behind twelve black orbs.

He put them back in his crest and gave the incoming Prism Rider a welcoming smile.

“Good morning, Ray Starling,” he said, making the Master... that is, Ray Starling, adopt a shocked expression.

He clearly hadn’t expected this reunion.

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### *Prism Rider, Ray Starling*

Someone had shot Figaro down right as he was about to make it to Hannya.

I’d been high up in the air, so I noticed where the attack originated and rushed to the Cruella Mountain Belt, only to find a familiar face — the man who’d let himself be captured by bandits, F.



“...Did you do that?” I asked him as I put Silver away.

“Yes. With my Embryo,” he replied, showing no intention of hiding it.

“Why?”

“Because I felt that it would be regrettable if things ended too early.”

“R... Regrettable?!” I shouted, not bothering to hide my shock and anger.

However, he showed no reaction to my emotion and continued to speak plainly.

“A romantic tragedy between Superiors isn’t something you see every day. Isn’t it natural to want it to last longer?”

“Like hell it is!”

“Also, I took the picture that caused all of this. I didn’t want those efforts to go to waste,” he said, showing me a photo — the very one responsible for this ordeal.

*He’s behind this whole thing?!*

“Just what are these people to you?!” I roared.

“Sources of material. Very good ones, to be more precise.”

The quickness of his reply made it clear that these were his honest thoughts.

“Gideon might be destroyed! Doesn’t that mean anything to you?!”

“Of course it does. My heart would ache,” he said, as if he couldn’t believe what I was implying. “However, my own emotions would make for excellent material, too, so I would take note of them, as well. And Gideon’s destruction itself would also be quite a good source of inspiration. That would at least make up for missing Franklin’s Game.”

His words shocked me speechless and reminded me of a character from a particular short story: "Hell Screen," the 1918 story about Yoshihide — an artist who'd painted his own daughter burning to death. He placed his art above good, evil, and even morality itself... just like F.

"...I see." Now that I understood what kind of person he was, I remembered the uncomfortable feeling I'd gotten back when I first met him. He hadn't seemed to care one bit about what the bandits were doing — he was satisfied with just being "kidnapped," and didn't spare a single thought for the evil the bandits might've committed. That was why F had said he'd even thank the bandits for what they'd done, and that wouldn't have changed even if the bandits had gone on to kill someone before finally being apprehended. He was only interested in their punishment insofar as their villainy might be useful for improving his work.

And now, he was staring right at me with his one open eye.

He readily admitted everything he'd done because he wanted to see my reaction and use it as "material."

"...All right," I muttered. He found joy in his accomplishments, and even the casualties caused by his actions were a positive to him. I knew someone who was much like him, and in spite of their shared search for inspiration, it wasn't Marie... *F was more like Franklin.*

That mad scientist was the greatest enemy I'd faced so far, and the threat he'd posed to Gideon was unmatched. He was the kind of person who didn't hesitate to put others through hell for the sake of his goal.

And F here... he destroyed Figaro and Hannya's relationship for nothing, created a disaster that could destroy the city, and observed it all with satisfaction. He was clearly cut from the same cloth as Franklin.

"Ohh, he's trying to climb up again," he said, still looking at me with his right open eye.

Figaro had probably recovered from the fall and was trying to reach Hannya again. His condition was deteriorating and the situation was growing worse by the minute, but he was still fighting.

However, as things were, F would get in his way again.

He claimed that he just wanted to observe the battle for longer, but based on the rest of what he said, he also wanted to support Hannya and see her destroy Gideon.

"I won't let you get involved in this any further," I declared. "I'll stop you."

"Yes. Please, do try. You are The Unbreakable — one who defeated many powerful foes in highly dramatic ways. Fighting you directly is bound to make for good material, as well."

He wasn't lying about wanting this. Anything that happened was just further material and more accomplishments to him... and what a troublesome mentality that was.

"Oh, wait. Allow me to introduce myself again," he said as he took out a small object — a Job Crystal. "I'm King of Light, F... the thirtieth in Altar's kill rankings."

He surprised me one more time by switching from High Secretary into his true job...

"Let's see what material I can get from The Unbreakable."

...And attacked me with lasers fired from his fingertips and countless orbs of light that had appeared around him.

"...!" I quickly shielded myself with Monochrome. The Black Warcoat absorbed all light-based attacks, instantly protecting me from all the

damage except the slight heat created by the lasers burning through the air.

Without this special reward, I would've definitely died.

...I was running into way too many laser-wielding enemies recently. First there was Monochrome, and if I hadn't acquired the Black Warcoat from it, I would've had a really bad time against the whale in Quartierlatin.

"I see," said the King of Light. The light-based spellcaster Superior Job had observed me protect myself against his attack.

"The fact that you assumed a defensive position tells me that this isn't the type of item that grants you protection by simply being equipped." The battle had just begun, but F had already figured out my weakness.

If the lasers hadn't hit Monochrome, they would've easily pierced my body.

"Glint Pile." He switched from pointing his fingers at me to opening his palm in my direction.

Knowing that an even stronger attack was coming, I took evasive action while simultaneously preparing to shield myself with Monochrome.

A moment later, I felt an impact on my coat far stronger than the ones before.

"Gh...!"

"Ray!" Nemesis shouted telepathically. Based on the power level, this had to be the ultimate job skill of Flashmancer... a high-rank job.

*It's powerful, but Monochrome absorbed most of the damage—*

"Above?!" My thought was cut short by a shadow falling over my body, which made me notice two orbs of light right above me.

They were growing in radiance. That couldn't be a good sign, so I quickly jumped away.

Right as I did, the orbs released the same high-rank ultimate job skill I'd already blocked once, launching a deadly laser that melted the ground I'd just been standing on.

"Spell extensions... Drones! Ray! Don't stop moving! They'll surround you!"

"I know!" I used Instant Wield to equip Silver and began running around the mountains.

Going into the sky wasn't an option because he would just shoot me down with his lasers. Instead, I zigzagged between the obstacles, aiming for a chance to strike F.

His left eye was closed. He was probably using his orbs and some optical skill to watch Figaro and Hannya's battle — and if that wasn't an opening, nothing was.

I approached him from his blind spot and launched my attack.

"How decisive. Is that one of your strong points?" I was sure I was in his blind spot, but King of Light was still smiling.

A moment later, the lasers from the orbs of light attacked us so precisely that it was like they were threading the needle between the trees.

"Gh...!"

"How?! We're in his blind spot!"

"I suppose you guessed that I'm using my left eye to watch the fight, and you would be correct," F said as he faced me. "But if that's the case, it only makes sense that I would be able to do the same here, no?"

He then *closed his right eye*.

Shocked, I looked over his head — at the orbs floating above him.

*He's using one of them to watch the battle!* I thought.

“It can be quite tiring to see different things with each eye, but if you’re used to it, it won’t even make you dizzy.”

“Is that so?!” F had a grasp of the entire battlefield and would attack me with lasers if I came close.

That only left one option — to use a ranged attack that couldn’t be blocked.

Thanks to his own attacks, I had just the thing.

“MONOCHROOOME!” In response to my call, the Black Warcoat wrapped itself around my left arm and transformed into a cannon.  
“I’m leaving defense to you!”

“Understood! Counter Absorption!” The orbs of light released yet another ult laser at me, but Nemesis’ shield blocked it off.

Seizing on this chance, I fixed my aim on the King of Light...

“Shining... DESPAIR!”

...And fired back at him using the greatest firepower I had — my concentrated laser cannon.

In the blinding, burning white, F stood still...

“I see.”

...And made something black appear out of his crest.

It was a dense wall of dark orbs.

In less than a moment, it clashed with the laser... *and fully protected F against it.*

Not a single spark of the laser made it to him before Shining Despair stopped, and once it was over, the black orbs were shining as if

they'd completely devoured all of that light, sealing it away inside them.

I instantly understood what it meant.

"...Light Absorption?!"

*That Embryo has the exact same skill as Monochrome...!*

"It appears that we have a similar repertoire," he said.

"Guess we do...!" Similar, but not exactly the same.

I also had Gardranda, as well as Nemesis.

I could still win if I hit him with Vengeance — it would deal double the damage sustained by Monochrome.

"Allow me to show you another similarity," F said as he swung his finger like a baton. Seven of the orbs that had absorbed Shining Despair followed his movements and formed into a very particular shape.

I instantly recognized it.

"...Cancer?" It was one of the twelve constellations of the zodiac.

"A Story Written in the Sky — Zodiac: Cancer." As though to tell me I was right, the King of Light activated his ultimate skill.

At that moment, the seven orbs of light became a giant crab.

Both its claws and the shell on its back were made of thick, gleaming armor, and anyone with any gaming knowledge would know that it had been summoned to act as a tank. It moved to cover and protect the King of Light, much like the great crab Karkinos from Greek myth that had appeared to protect its friend the Hydra.

"A monster summon...! This is like Arc-en-Ciel... Wait, no!" If F really was an author, it wouldn't be unusual for him to have an Embryo

that functioned similarly to Marie's Arc-en-Ciel, but that wasn't what he was referring to.

"I'm aware that you also have a summon skill." Indeed... He was talking about Miasmaflame Princess: Gardranda.

However, I'd completely emptied Gouz-Maise during the battle against Logan, and I still didn't have nearly enough power to summon Gardranda for a reasonable amount of time.

"Or have you expended all the battle Resources needed for it? I can't blame you. The battle at Quartierlatin was quite intense."

"...Who knows?"

I was finally beginning to understand something.

King of Light most likely had a fighting style very similar to mine, and it wasn't just because of the skills we shared.

Nemesis' Counter Absorption, the MP and SP storage in Gouz-Maise, Monochrome's Shining Despair charge... I increased my battle potential by charging up abilities ahead of time, then unleashing them later in battle.

F was the same in that regard. The black orbs that had absorbed Shining Despair probably had to be charged with light to be used. The ult that had summoned the crab had most likely come at the cost of a certain number of orbs.

As a fighter, he was indeed very much like me.

"...A pre-Superior with my exact fighting style, huh?" He'd claimed to be the thirtieth in the Kingdom's kill rankings, but under optimal conditions, he had to be far more powerful than that statistic suggested. I'd readily place him next to top rankers like Juliet... if not higher.

"...Can I ask why you're only the thirtieth?"

“I want to gather material in the war, but rising too high would make it difficult.”

“I see.” Like I’d suspected, he was only thirtieth by choice. Considering how he operated, it would’ve been hard for him to find a clan, and from what I could remember of the kill rankings list, the thirtieth place only showed a job and no name, just like Shu’s.

“So, what are your intentions?” F asked. A pre-Superior that could match high-ranking duelists like Rosa, Juliet, and maybe even Kashimiya.

*He's clearly too much for me as I am now...*

“...It’s too early to give up!” I roared before finishing my thought.

*...But I've fought worse!*

“I’m glad to hear that.” He spoke with nothing but honesty, before attacking with both his crab and lasers.



#### *About F*

To F, this world was a wonderful source of material and inspiration.

The extreme realism of *Infinite Dendrogram* formed the ultimate environment to stimulate his mind. The information he could gain from a single description was far less than he could get out of properly experiencing something, and that greatly influenced the writing he could weave.

This world had the foreign townscapes, untrodden lands, and strange, fantastical sights that made it the best tool for inspiration he could have possibly asked for.

There were actually many people who were logging in to see the sights, but he stood out from them because he wanted more than that.

F also had a fondness for *risk*.

Situations where a single mistake could mean death, acts that could make him a pariah and end his life as he knew it... such things were too risky even for him in reality, but as a Master, he could dabble in all of those things without any real danger to his life or livelihood.

He spent most of his time spectating and observing himself, this world, and its lives, not letting a single moment go to waste.

F had entered areas dominated by dangerous monsters, died fighting Masters, led a tian party into a deadly mountain pass, unleashed monsters upon a small fishing village, let himself be captured by bandits... and made Superiors fight to the death.

As he did all these things, all he saw was more reference material for his own work.

Fellow creators such as Marie and Veldorbell could perhaps relate to him, but he was different from them because *he had no limits and never hesitated to go as far as he wanted*.

No matter how terrible the tragedy, it was just a source of material for him as an author.

That was why there were always people ready to try and stop him.

In the mountains, it had been a power-suited Superior who hadn't known when to back down.

In the fishing village, it had been a newbie party calling themselves "The Fairytale Squad."

And now, it was The Unbreakable himself.

◇◆

*...His gear counters me, but it's his persistence that stands out the most, F thought. He doesn't hold that title for nothing.*

He watched in wonder as Ray fought against him, Cancer, and the many stars of his Zodiac.

F was generally known as the greatest wielder of light magic. This element actually boasted some of the game's strongest offensive spells.

Only fire surpassed them in sheer power, and they moved at the speed of light, making them by far the fastest spells of all.

However, casters who used light magic were actually fairly uncommon.

This was due to its three major flaws.

First — the spells were MP sinks, with offensive spells using about five times more MP than similarly-powered spells of other elements. Second — though the spells themselves were the fastest, their activation times were the slowest of any element.

And third — their spell trajectories were extremely simple. Most of them were just straight lines, making it easy for any skilled fighter to counter them before they were even launched. AGI builds could use the slow activation time to make their own moves or dodge after predicting the trajectory, while END builds would have the time to use appropriate defensive or resistance skills.

Because of all this, despite its power, light magic wasn't well-suited for one-on-one battles.

However, as the Master of Zodiac, F was an exception.

The King of Light made up for the excessive MP usage by stocking up his stars with light ahead of time.

The slow activation wasn't a problem, because he made sure his stars were always ready to fire.

And the simple trajectory didn't matter when he could attack from every direction and make his attacks impossible to dodge.

Even without his ultimate skill, F had already conquered every flaw inherent to light magic.

Though he needed time to prepare, at his best, he was one of the greatest light magic casters.

He was exceptional even among pre-Superiors... if not a match to some actual Superiors.

And Ray, despite facing such a powerful enemy, was still persevering.

F was well aware that Ray possessed gear that countered him, but that didn't stop him from recognizing his abilities and deeply appreciating him as a wonderful reference for his work as an author.

*I wouldn't have it any other way, he thought. But I doubt he'll survive this intense barrage.*

Splendid Starsky, Zodiac was a Type Legion-Arms Embryo that absorbed light and used it to power his spells and vision skills. It not only allowed him to fire lasers — he could also use it for remote viewing and optical camouflage.

Just now, Ray felt his side pierced by a star he hadn't even seen.

F achieved this by placing an optical camouflage star right next to one that fired lasers. That was also how he managed to hide the star he was using to look down on the battle.

He used powerful abilities like summoning and giant beams while simultaneously chipping away at his enemies using little tricks like this. As someone who willingly jumped into risky situations, F was an extremely experienced fighter, and it showed.

*This is what's happening over here... but what about over there?* F was still using his left eye to watch Figaro and Hannya.

Not much had changed — Figaro was still climbing Sandalphon to reach Hannya. However, due to the damage he'd sustained and Hannya's resistance, he was far slower than before.

F was also puzzled about something.

*Why does he insist on climbing in that state?* Figaro had yet to attack — all he was doing was climbing up.

What he was doing went against F's... and Tweedle's... expectations, and it wasn't what he'd hoped to see.

F thought that it might end up being necessary to help Figaro next, but he also thought that the Over Gladiator could turn things all around.

He didn't want to miss something like that, but Ray was still continuing his struggle.

F was already satisfied with what he'd received from Ray and now wanted to focus on the main event.

"You really are quite persistent," he said. "But why not focus on those two now? To tell you the truth, I feel that the highlight of the battle may come at any moment, and it's making me anxious. Would you like to see it with me?"

"..." F was nothing but sincere, but Ray responded with only silence.

It was impossible to tell if he was too focused on surviving F's attacks or if *he was already beyond the stage where he was capable of conversation.*

*I suppose the battle continues,* F thought. F himself hadn't thought it was likely that Ray would agree to the offer, but in a state like this, there was probably much more material to extract from him.

*Since this isn't enough to seal the deal, I'll add another constellation. I just used Sagittarius, and I want to leave Pisces in case I need to escape at supersonic speeds.*

The battle here had become far too intense. Even if F defeated Ray, other Masters would come here to fight in his stead, so he wanted to keep an escape route in reserve.

His ultimate skill, A Story Written in the Sky — Zodiac, had two limitations.

First, it required fully charged stars, just as Ray had guessed.

Second, the monsters he summoned returned after fulfilling the single order carved into them, and then he couldn't summon them for a whole twenty-four hours afterwards.

Cancer's order was simply "protect F," so it lasted for quite a while, but there were also those that disappeared after a single activation — such as Libra, which had been commanded to "investigate the target," and Sagittarius, which had "sniped the target."

Because of this, if F wanted to intervene in Figaro and Hannya's battle again, he would have to fire lasers from the star he was using to observe them. He hadn't done so earlier because it would increase the chances of that star being destroyed, and that would leave him without any means of watching the battle.

Of course, using Sagittarius had ultimately let Ray know where F was and brought about this new battle, but he was the kind of person who welcomed that.

"A Story Written in the Sky — Gemini." This time, he summoned a pale shape with an outline that looked much like F's.

This monster was Gemini, which "acted as his clone until it ran out of energy." It had his exact stats and could even use the same spells. F himself remained under the protection of Cancer and sent Gemini to fight Ray in his stead.

It attacked him with light magic, just as F would have.

Charged stars, a clone, waves and waves of attacks from every direction... It was the kind of onslaught that could easily kill high-ranks and even overpower Superior Jobs.

The reason Ray was still alive was his evasion ability, which he'd honed over his many life-or-death battles, and Monochrome cutting down most of the damage from the lasers. Without the Black Warcoat, he would've died dozens of times over by now.

That was just how powerful F's attacks were — it was an overwhelming onslaught employing his sheer volume of Resources.

Even so, Ray was still alive.

*Hm...?* F raised an eyebrow. A whole minute had passed since F had gone on the full offensive.

Because there were more projectiles now and Monochrome couldn't fully cover Silver, Ray had stored the Prism Steed away. He hid his weak points beneath the Black Warcoat while doing everything he could to dodge. Despite all of this, he ended up beaten and battered, and his ability to evade all these attacks slowly dwindled.

And even so, Ray was still alive.

That just didn't make sense to F.

*...Why isn't he dying?* That same thought might've gone through the minds of many of Ray's opponents in the past. With his abilities and stats, it just didn't make sense for him to still be alive.

Even so, Ray lived, unbroken and still going for his enemy's throat.

“Hh...!” F gasped as cold sweat went down his back.

It was caused by panic... a fragment of fear.

F sought out risks he couldn't experience in reality, so real fear was actually a welcome thing. He could use this as reference... but something was off this time.

After facing Ray alone and seeing how he was for himself, F began wanting to *run away*.

Suddenly, Ray looked up to where F was hiding his observation star.

Thus, his right eye met Ray's... Though, "met" might've been the wrong word for it.

For all F knew, Ray might've not realized the star was even there.

However, that gave F a *glimpse*.

Like those who gazed at the abyss found it gazing back, F saw what lived in Ray's eyes.

It was pure rage, directed solely at F.

He'd first caused the conflict between Figaro and Hannya, then asked Ray to watch it with him, increasing his anger beyond all reasonable limits.

It was something many of his enemies had seen, and F now joined their ranks.

To F, fear felt while gathering material was a good thing. It was just another accomplishment, after all. He would simply analyze it, and it would become reference material for his own writing.

But now, he'd seen the weight of the emotion in Ray's eyes.

He was no longer simply a source of material or a fellow player.

Ray was a *human being*... who couldn't tolerate F's actions.

The sheer strength of this emotion filled F with a fear that left no room for analysis... and *wouldn't let him do it* even if he'd wanted to.

"Gh...!" Gathering material was no longer an option. There was nothing for him to gain from this battle. He felt... no... *was certain* that if he didn't end this as quickly as possible, something within him would be damaged beyond repair.

F began gathering magic in his hands, looking to end this battle as quickly as possible.

However, Ray acted first.

“Hellish Miasma... full power!” He equipped his Storm Visage and fired Hellish Miasma from the right Gardranda, covering the area in a dark-purple fog.

It affected Cancer, but Gemini counted as an elemental, so it remained unafflicted. F himself drank an Elixir he’d prepared.

The real problem it caused for F was visibility. The star that had been watching the battle from above had its vision completely clouded by the poisonous gas, and Ray was keeping low, so F had now effectively lost sight of his enemy.

“Kh...?!” The stars and Gemini fired lasers in every direction, but it wasn’t clear if any of them hit.

The sea of miasma was like the depths of hell, leaving F completely in the dark. At any moment, that black blade could strike out from the darkness and take his life.

His fear grew, but F also hadn’t given up on victory.

He used the ace up his sleeve he’d been charging all this time — an attack that didn’t care *where* the enemy was.

“Corona!” It was the ultimate job skill of the light magic Superior Job, King of Light. It released lasers that surpassed high-rank ults in every possible direction, drowning the battlefield in all-consuming light and leaving no room for evasion.

Despite the devastation it caused, Cancer and Gemini were completely unharmed, while the stars actually absorbed the power. Of course, F himself was also untouched.

Only Ray, still hiding within the miasma, would suffer its effects.

*Not yet...!* F thought. He sensed that not even that was going to be enough to finish Ray off. F knew that he would assume a defensive position and shield himself using Monochrome.

The fight was as good as over.

With Ray fully focused on protection against the light, Cancer could attack him now. Its pure physical power would break through his defense, and the combined attacks from Gemini and the stars would wipe him out.

*Check... mate!* The whiteness drowning their vision soon abated, and the miasma blinding F's star dispersed.

He quickly spotted a figure rolled up in Monochrome... *as well as Ray, swinging his left fist straight at F.*

“HUUH?!” F opened his eyes wide in shock, right before receiving a punch to the face. At the moment of impact, Gardranda opened up and doused him in Purgatorial Flames from point-blank range.

“GHAAAAHHHHH!” F had his pain set to on for the experience, so the feeling of his entire body burning was very real to him.

*How?! I saw his Black Warcoat! If he's right here, then who is that?!* he thought, a mere moment before the person wearing Monochrome began moving.

Cancer was about to crush the person with its giant pincer...

“Counter Absorption!”

...But then *she* — Nemesis — blocked it with a barrier of light.

“Wh-What...?!” F couldn't hide his shock. The one wearing Monochrome wasn't Ray, but Nemesis.

Normally, only the MVPs could wear special rewards, but there was an exception — Embryos. They were an inseparable part of their Masters and could equip MVP rewards just as well as they did.

This allowed Nemesis to wear Monochrome, while Ray had approached F *without any armor at all*.

He was only wearing ordinary clothes — the defenseless casual clothing he'd changed into using Clothing Switch. Behind him lay the remains of a broken Brooch.

*He took off his armor to lower his defense and make sure he received lethal damage...?!*

With that, F fully understood what had happened.

Ray had given his lifeline — Monochrome — over to Nemesis, then approached F through the miasma while negating the lethal damage from Corona with the Brooch.

Monochrome then acted as bait, attracting F's attention while Ray used the opening to punch him.

*He guessed that I was charging my ultimate job skill... and knew that it was an all-directional attack?! F's assumption was actually wrong — Ray actually had no idea what kind of skill it was. However, he was already familiar with one caster-type Superior Job ultimate skill — Xunyu's Zhenhuo Zhendeng: Baolongba. Based on that, Ray had gambled on the King of Light's ult also being a high-power AoE attack... and that gamble paid off.*

“Khh...!” Still burning, F tried to recover. He moved both Cancer and Gemini, trying to target Ray with his remaining stars.

“Miasmaflame Princess: Gardranda, 10 seconds.”

However, Ray was faster.

Miasmaflame Princess was a summoning skill that cost 1,000 MP for every second of the summon's life. Not even Gouz-Maise had enough MP to make full use of it right now, but a brief summoning was still possible.

"That's short, but enough... for me." Gardranda began fighting the moment she appeared.

She took a step forward and struck F's head with Shu's signature roundhouse kick — the Kodachi.

F survived thanks to the Brooch, but it shattered from the damage.

Not wasting any time, Gardranda continued to make the best use of the ten seconds given to her. She pointed her right bracer at Cancer and the left one at Gemini.

"Eat this... okay?" The goblin princess simultaneously unleashed the power of Hellish Miasma: Zero and Purgatorial Flames: Zero. These were skills so potent that they rendered all of the bracers' abilities temporarily unusable.

Cancer was a slow tank, while Gemini only had the same stats as F — a caster. They couldn't evade, and both of the "Zero" skills landed without difficulty. The dense poison melted Cancer's body into a bubbling mess, while Gemini evaporated in flames hotter than even its own lasers.

"...?!" The two Zodiac monsters vanished, and though F had negated Gardranda's kick, it had still rendered him momentarily immobile. During this moment, Nemesis returned to Ray.

The moment their hands joined, she transformed into pinpoints of light that converged into a greatsword, while Monochrome covered Ray once again.

F quickly had all the stars fire their lasers at Ray, but the Black Warcoat and his own body weathered the barrage as he rushed towards F again.

The distance between them was soon covered. "Glint Pile!" The King of Light fired the high-rank ultimate job skill from both his hands...

"Vengeance is Mine!"

...But Ray just barely dodged them both and lunged at F.

All the damage he'd done to Ray was returned twofold.

There was no chance that he could survive all of that, and the King of Light vanished without a trace.

Many things went through his head as he did, but he was in no state to analyze any of them. F only understood one thing. He had joined the ranks of those Ray had defeated once they'd roused his wrath.

## **Chapter Nine: The ████ of Figaro**

*Nex Plains*

How long had it been since F had shot Figaro back down to the surface?

His injuries were starting to slow Figaro down, and Sandalphon continued to attack him, not letting the opportunity go to waste.

Even so, Figaro kept on climbing.

His coat and many other pieces of his gear were torn, he was the only one on the battlefield who had been wounded, and Cor Leonis had taken a toll on his HP... yet he continued to climb upwards.

*In fact, he hadn't attacked even once so far.*

Hannya looked down at him, silently but intently.

Influenced by Last Berserk, her body was moving to kill Figaro, but her mind was still her own and her eyes were fixed upon him and only him.

Figaro was doing nothing but climbing. He hadn't equipped a weapon or argued with her — he was simply trying to reach Hannya, ignoring all the painful wounds inflicted upon his avatar.

Though her body was overcome by bloodlust, Hannya's mind couldn't help but wonder why he was so persistent in trying to get close to her. If he wanted to fight and defeat Hannya, he had many options available to him. As these thoughts went through her mind, her heart was slowly starting to be at odds with her body.

Figaro was thrown off, only to cling and keep crawling to try and make it to the top. He was the duel champion and the pride and joy of Gideon, yet he made no effort to hide his beaten and bloodied frame from the masses as he struggled to reach her.

Hannya's body wouldn't stop until Figaro was dead.

Sandalphon wouldn't stop as long as his Master needed protection.

And Figaro wouldn't stop as long as his soul kept telling him that he couldn't.

No one would stop... and the climax was drawing ever closer.

"Kh! You're still...!" Sandalphon sensed the threat approaching his Master and tried to throw Figaro off again.

The moment the cooldown on Downfall Screamer ended, he used it one more time. Figaro couldn't hold on to the spinning tower, and since he couldn't use his barrier-platforms yet, he was about to start falling back down to the surface again.

However, the Over Gladiator denied that fate.

He clung to the tower with not just his legs, but arms as well, which allowed him to continue reaching for the top despite the whole thing spinning like a tornado.

That had slowed him down, of course, but it wasn't enough to stop him.

"Gh...! You're too persistent!" Sandalphon then clashed the towers together.

They were spinning in opposite directions, and their meeting threw out an absurd amount of sparks. Figaro was caught up in the devastation between... *and the sound of something soft and hard shattering resounded throughout the plains.*

Blood thrown off by the centrifugal force dissipated into a lingering mist, while the shattered fragments falling to the ground had to be the remains of Figaro's boots.

"I did it! Lady Hannya, I did it!" Sandalphon was overjoyed that he'd fulfilled his Master's will and turned to face her. He was completely

confident that he had ground Figaro into dust and given him the death penalty.

“...Eh?”

But when he looked at Hannya’s face, he realized that she was still under the influence of Last Berserk.

“H-He’s still alive...?!” He then realized that there was a chain wrapped around one of the jewels that acted as his eyes.

A moment later, its owner pulled himself up.

He was barefoot and covered in wounds, his left arm was completely gone and the power of his ult was boiling the blood straight off his skin, turning it into steam. The only gear he still had equipped was his AGI-focused lower body armor and a single chain.

But despite it all, he... *Figaro* was still alive.

“What...?! Did he actually...?!” Just seeing Figaro’s current state was enough for Sandalphon to understand what Figaro had done.

When the towers were about to clash, Figaro realized that climbing any higher was impossible.

First, he’d quickly removed his Climbing boots and used them to jump into the air.

At the same time, he severed his left arm and threw it between the drills, creating a spray of blood that briefly distracted Sandalphon.

He then focused his equipment enhancement into his chain, giving it enough range to quickly reach Sandalphon’s top and pull himself up. If it hadn’t reached, Figaro would’ve died when he hit the ground, but his gamble proved successful. Finally, he managed to reach the top.

“Are you even human...?! Lady Hannya!” As Sandalphon shouted, Figaro — or what was left of him — approached Hannya.

Silence. Even now that her defeat was certain, Hannya was still looking right at Figaro. She looked as terrifying as her namesake — the Noh mask of Hannya. It was impossible to tell if the expression was the result of Last Berserk or an honest representation of her feelings, but looking deep into her eyes, you could see that Figaro coming all the way up to her in spite of the extreme difficulty was making her feel something other than rage.

Their eyes met, and the silence continued until...

“Hannya... I have something for you.”

...Figaro removed something from his inventory.

For a brief moment, Sandalphon thought that it was a weapon. That exact thought ran through the heads of everyone watching the fight from a distance, too.

However, they were far off the mark.

What Figaro offered to Hannya wasn’t a weapon...



...But a *bouquet* of blossoms that looked much like real-life sunflowers. Figaro had bought them from the plant shop he visited before he ran into Tsukuyo.

“...Huh?” Hannya was so astonished that the rage vanished from her expression. Her heart had been shaken so badly that one might think the effects of Last Berserk had disappeared for a second.

After all, she knew what sunflowers signified in the language of flowers.

They meant “I only have eyes for you,” and were often used for *marriage proposals*.

The offering was so sudden and unexpected that she, still dumbfounded and absentminded, just took it without saying anything, as if Last Berserk had stopped working completely.

“...There’s also this,” Figaro said as he took out a small box and opened it.

There was a gemmed ring inside.

That was what he’d bought at the accessory shop.

The day he’d found out when Hannya would be released, he immediately went to order the best *engagement ring* his money could buy.

“Fi...garo?” she called his name despite still being under the influence of Last Berserk.

“Fuyuko,” he called her by her *real* name as he presented the ring to her. “Will you marry me... Here in *Infinite Dendrogram*... as well as reality?”

This was his first and final marriage proposal.

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*Vincent Myers*

What was she to me?

That was a question that even I had trouble answering.

At first, all I felt about her was curiosity.

She was above me, Shu, and Foltesla, which caught my interest enough to make me want to duel her. I was just hoping that we could become good dueling partners.

That was why I was only thinking of dueling in our early exchanges.

After that, she made me feel at peace.

Though we couldn't meet in *Infinite Dendrogram*, we talked over email basically every single day. She was actually the one person I could talk to naturally. She wasn't like my parents, my brother Keith, my first friend Shu, fellow duelists like Foltesla, or old enemies like Sechs Würfel and Tsukuyo Fuso.

My time with her was pleasant. We spent our time talking about our lives, day in and day out. My bland daily life that rarely ever changed took on a different hue when I shared it with her.

We occasionally shared our joy, comforted each other when one of us was down... The volume of the feelings we exchanged was vast.

This pleasant relationship we had eventually became a source of peace in my life.

The third thing I felt regarding her... was worry.

As we communicated day in and day out, I developed a desire to meet her. And not just as an avatar, but as myself in real life.

However, that meant facing a major worry of mine.

She only knew me as I was in *Infinite Dendrogram*. Figaro was my avatar and the perfect picture of health, while the real me was a sickly young man living on the verge of death.

I wasn't able to bring myself to tell her of my circumstances or how I was in real life. I had little trouble telling it to Shu, Foltesla, and a number of others, but the idea of telling her was so scary that I always ended up deleting the emails before sending them.

The fear that I would disappoint her made me unable to tell her the truth. I couldn't even begin to understand why I was so worried about letting her down, but the answer came to me seemingly out of nowhere.

While the question lingered in my mind and the worry took up residence in my heart, one day my parents invited me to drink tea with them, and my mother, looking at me with a smile on her face, asked, "Vincent... Are you in love?"

At first, I didn't understand what she just said and just tilted my head in confusion, parroting back at her, "Love?"

I then went on to digest the word, truly remembered what it meant... and the pieces all fell into place.

That was the final thing she made me feel — a strong love for her.

At first, I only wanted to duel her; then I found peace in our exchanges until eventually I became attracted to her.

I, Vincent Myers, was now painfully aware that I loved her... and wanted to be with her forever.

I then told my parents about the woman I loved and wanted to marry. I told them how she supported me, how gentle she was... I told them all I could to the best of my ability.

At first they were surprised that I was thinking as far ahead as marriage, but they were understanding of my feelings and said that

they would like to meet her, as well. They also said that I should keep quiet about this with Keith. He was really busy at that time, so I could understand that.

After the talk with my parents, I logged in to *Infinite Dendrogram* and used its tripled time to think about how to confess my feelings to her.

First and foremost, I couldn't do it by email. It was how we usually communicated, but even I knew that it wasn't something you used for a confession of love.

Next, I considered meeting her in person. It was totally possible. We'd exchanged postcards before, so I knew her address and I could send her plane tickets that suited her schedule.

Normally, I should've been the one to go visit her, but the disease I was born with made that impossible, so having her come to me was the only option.

But then... I felt like it would've been weird to bring *her* to me so I could confess.

The only way left... or more accurately, the only way I'd ever had open to me... was to confess to her in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Thankfully, her prison term was about to expire. I could use our promised meeting to express how I felt.

“But... Can I really do that?”

It would be the first time I proposed to someone. Well, that much was obvious, seeing as this was the first time I had ever fallen in love.

I was so worried about whether or not I was going to do it right that the tension and unease put a lot of stress on my heart.

It got so bad that it could've caused a heart attack if I thought about it too much in reality.

If only there was a way I could defuse the tension...

“Wait... I’ve got it.” When we’d first met, I wanted to duel her — to fight someone who was ahead of me.

I decided to start with exactly that.

Duels were great. Through them, I met Foltesla and gained so many other friends. Dueling linked the two combatants through their intense feelings.

That was why I decided to duel her first, then propose to her afterwards... even though I had no idea if she would accept.

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The day we reunited, I didn’t tell her how I felt. ...I was simply unable to do it.

Meeting her made me more nervous than I’d expected. It was partially because I ran into her by chance while getting ready, but I was so overwhelmed that the most I could do was invite her to duel me.

Neither she nor Ray seemed to realize it, but I was really, really tense.

The fact that she accepted my duel made me very happy and relieved.

Even so, I was still tense. As it stood, I wasn’t sure if I could confess even after the duel.

Oh, if only this was as easy and enticing as a battle. I can start fights and keep on fighting even if I bleed or lose a limb, but the very thought of rejection paralyzed me from head to toe.

I was shocked that love could make me so weak.

“I hope I have the strength to take the next step tomorrow.” With that thought, I logged out.

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The fated day had arrived.

I saw Hannya rampaging around Gideon after reading the article. I had an idea why she was doing it — I'd refused to dine with her and went on to be caught in a photo with Tsukuyo Fuso, destroying her trust in me.

Maybe she felt betrayed again, just like she had when her previous man had left her.

For all I knew, she might've been so disappointed in me that she would never accept my confession.

Even so, I had to tell her how I felt... so I stepped forward.

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### *Nex Plains*

Everyone who heard Figaro's confession felt as if time had stopped.

The closest listener — Sandalphon — was absolutely dumbfounded. Rook, who was lip-reading from a distance using a long sight item, felt the same as the angel.

Ray had ridden the skies and returned from his battle against F, and the shock of this sight combined with the wounds all over his body, almost made him fall off of Silver.

Those who were watching through various means felt about the same.

The only exceptions were Xunyu, who saw this coming, and a certain control AI.

However, this was to be expected from the moment Figaro had used Burn, My Soul — Cor Leonis.

He never used his ultimate skill in *duels*.

After all, he kept that skill in reserve for the duel against the friend he'd promised to face with all his power. He hadn't even used it against Xunyu, and the reason why he so readily used it now was simple — this wasn't a duel to him, but his way of proposing to Hannya. Nothing more, nothing less.

Hannya was at a complete loss for words.

Figaro's words resounded within her as the feelings welling up in her heart were rushing through her mind. Last Berserk was still very much active, but just looking at Hannya it seemed to have ended.

"I... I don't think I'm normal." Figaro continued speaking.

"I was born with a heart condition that makes it difficult for me to lead even an ordinary life." He opened up to her, saying what he'd been hiding all this time.

"I don't have much of a life or social experience, so I often say and do weird things." He revealed to her what he'd been silent about because he didn't want to disappoint her.

"All I have to be proud of is my family and what I've built here in *Infinite Dendrogram*." Tense to the limit and with a heart beating so fast it hurt...

"I'm honestly pretty pathetic... Would you choose me despite that, Fuyuko?" ...He confessed his love to her to the best of his ability.

"Ahh..." Figaro's sincerity instantly drove away Hannya's doubts.

Her love was no illusion.

He truly cherished her.

She was finally able to believe.

*Ohh... I knew it. He really is a wonderful... and adorable person,* she thought as tears welled up in her eyes, a charming smile appeared on her face, and...

“Yes. Gladly.”

...She accepted his proposal.

“...Thank you,” Figaro replied, sounding like he was about to start crying — something not even his closest friends ever heard.

Shaking from his own powerful emotions, he put the engagement ring on her left ring finger.

Then, he brought his face close to hers... “I love you, Fuyuko.” ...And declared his love before kissing her on the lips.

Thus, their love was finally realized... and a moment later, the side effect of Cor Leonis and damage from debuffs like Bleeding took their toll. Figaro took the death penalty

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Following the kiss, Hannya was left alone with a bouquet in her hands, a ring on her finger, and rosy cheeks. She wasn’t saying a word.

“L-Lady Hannya?” Sandalphon called out to her in worry.

Last Berserk had ended, meaning that Figaro had definitely received the death penalty this time. Sandalphon wanted to congratulate his Master, but her now-fiancé disappeared right before he could.

The angel was also the one responsible for the damage that had killed Figaro; his stomping and drilling had quickly whittled away Figaro’s HP, after all. *Why did he have to disappear now, of all times...?!* he thought, but thinking logically, it actually was a miracle that he’d even survived long enough to put the ring on Hannya’s finger.

However, there was no telling what his Master felt about all this.

He and all the other Masters watching them gulped...

“Heheheh...”

...Only for Hannya to beam with her cheeks still rosy.

“Sandalphon,” she said.

“Y-Yes?!”

“I’m logging out to send him an e... no... I’ll go meet him in real life.”

“L-Lady Hannya?!”

“I know where he lives.” Vincent knew where Fuyuko lived, so there was no reason why the reverse wouldn’t be true. She hadn’t visited him yet because she was afraid of finding out that her love was an illusion, but now that she knew it was real, she had nothing to fear.

“Oh. Before I go...”

She wrote something on a piece of paper, put it in an envelope and tossed it to the ground.

“All right, Sandalphon, I’m logging out. And I might not be back here for a little while.”

“Understood. I wish you good health and great happiness!”

“Thank you. I’ll be going now.”

Sandalphon saw her off as Hannya logged out of *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Thus concluded the Sandalphon incident, and in spite of all the panic caused and buildings destroyed... miraculously, there were no tian casualties.

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*Earth, Myers Mansion*

“...Oh no. I forgot to check my HP,” Vincent said once he’d logged out.

It was a mistake he would never make under normal circumstances, which spoke volumes about how focused he’d been on his proposal.

However, he had lived long enough for her to accept his love, and that filled him with relief.

"Vince. You're offline," Keith — Vincent's little brother — said as he entered the room.

"Hey, Keith. What is it?"

"Mother's birthday is coming up, so I wanted to talk to you about it... What's wrong?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't see you make that face very often. Your cheeks are red and you just look so... happy. Did something good happen?"

Vincent touched his face and noticed that it was warm. He was smiling without realizing it, too. "Yeah. I just proposed and she said yes."

"Ohh, I see. That's great... Hold on, *what*?"

"Heheh. I was so nervous. The confession, putting the ring on her, the kiss... Just remembering it is making my heart... beat... fa..."

With a blissful smile on his face, Vincent collapsed back on his bed.

It was an attack caused by his chronic heart disease.

"Huh?! Vince?! Heal him, Sapphine...! Wait, she doesn't exist here! Hey! Someone call Dr. Winston!" Keith started to panic, and called the resident maids and the attending physician. Vincent was unconscious throughout all of this, but his face was still full of happiness.

And so, just by remembering their proposal, Vincent Myers suffered a heart attack that landed him in the hospital.

# **Epilogue**

*DIN's Gideon Branch, rooftop*

The twins watched as the towers in Nex Plains vanished.

This hadn't gone according to their calculations. They expected Hannya to rampage throughout Gideon, rousing its Masters to fight her and potentially causing evolutions.

The actual result couldn't have been more different than that.

The damage caused by Hannya was minimal. Figaro took care of the situation all by himself... and by means they never expected — a marriage proposal.

In fact, they didn't expect Figaro to participate in the battle at all, because they knew that he couldn't do so in an environment with allies. They hadn't expected him to appear in the Nex Plains, either — far away from anyone else.

And most of all, they didn't account for his own affection.

With such critical flaws in the calculations, it was only natural that the result would be wrong.

However, one of those miscalculations was no fault of their own. They were *told* that Figaro would log in inside Gideon.

"I see," said Tweedledum.

"So that's how it iiis..." said Tweedledee. The calculating control AI twins quickly reassessed the situation...

"You gave us false variables, didn't you, Alice?"

...And simultaneously addressed the reason why they were wrong.

Turning back to the rooftop's door, they saw a particular person.

She looked like a teenager, but there was a motherly air about her, making it impossible to tell how old she really was.

Her name was Alison. She was a worker in DIN's planning department, *as well as the avatar of control AI No. 1 — Alice*.

"All right, that's enough plotting for today," she said with a smile on her face. "Get back to work, please. You have lots to do, don't you?"

"Very well," said Tweedledum. "I must say, I did not expect this."

"We tried to use your plan, but you used us instead, huuuh?"

"I suppose the wisdom of age is hard to beat."

"Well, other than *that*, she's the oldest of us all. We've been haaad."

"Ugh, don't treat me like an old lady," Alice said with a hand on her cheek and a mildly angry expression.

The twins turned away from her and entered the building.

They'd already switched their focus. Their plans had shown a lower than expected success rate, so instead of sticking to them, they prioritized their sub-job as the CEOs of DIN.

That left only two people on the rooftop — Alice and Cheshire, whose avatar was still immobilized.

"...Could you set me free already?" he asked.

"Sure thing." And just like that, the Tom Cat avatar was free.

Cheshire opened and closed his hand, regaining the feel for his body before asking Alice, "You... you knew that Figaro would confess to Hannya, didn't you?"

"Yep," she answered as if it was nothing.

Cheshire had actually suspected that something wasn't right the moment he'd learned that Alice was helping the twins with this plot.

Alice always prioritized her values over her role... In fact, she held her role *because* of her values.

She was what you could call a “Master Supremacist.”

Alice valued Masters above all else and made it her overriding goal to protect them.

That was why it was strange that she would be complicit in this plot. While she would take part in large-scale events like SUBM releases, this situation was just an idea the twins had dreamed up spontaneously, so it didn’t seem right for her to be involved.

“Tweedle said something about trying to use you, but you used them instead...”

“I had them set the stage for Figaro to properly open up.”

The twins had the greatest calculation power among the control AIs, but as the supervisor of all avatars, Alice wasn’t far behind them.

Though not as well as the twins, she could predict outcomes, and when it came to her field — Masters — her predictions could actually be more accurate than theirs.

When the twins asked her for Figaro’s logout info and feelings, she lied to them so they would use their position as the CEOs of DIN to set the stage for this event. After all — she knew what calculations they would make and what kind of scheme they would weave.

“...Why would you do something so roundabout?” Cheshire asked. He didn’t know whether Alice wanted Figaro to confess to Hannya because it aligned with her values or because of something else, but he couldn’t help but feel that things would’ve gone just as well between them if no one had gotten involved. Alice, however, rejected that idea.

“I’m always monitoring the state of the avatars and the thoughts of the people using them, and it looked to me that Figaro might’ve not

taken the step forward. So I gave him a little push. If he didn't make his move, both of them might have ended up unhappy."

*So she really was just meddling, huh?* Cheshire thought to himself as he realized exactly what she was saying. He knew Figaro well, and the idea of him confessing his love seemed unnatural even now after he actually saw it happen.

Perhaps Figaro himself had felt the same way, and it wasn't unlikely that things might've gone badly if he didn't get a push from someone.

That answered one of Cheshire's questions, but he still had more.

"When Figaro confessed, Hannya's Last Berserk basically went inactive. Did you do that?" Cheshire knew what Last Berserk did — in fact, it was actually used against him in the past. He thought Last Berserk would never let you stand still while the target was in front of you, but Hannya had done nothing long enough for Figaro to finish his proposal. Cheshire guessed that Alice had limited her movements, just as she had made Tom completely immobile.

As likely as that seemed, however, Alice denied it.

"That was simply her own willpower," she said. "The avatars I made resist skill-based effects on the mind, but the reverse, well... that's completely up to them."

Alice was basically saying that Hannya had held back her mad rampage out of love, like the protagonist of a story.

A skill that influenced the mind could in turn be influenced by the mind.

A part of Cheshire found it reasonable, but another part of him just couldn't believe that Hannya had a will strong enough to overpower an ultimate job skill.

Only Alice knew the real truth, but Cheshire realized that she wouldn't say anything more about it.

"This outcome itself was made possible by the strength of their wills," Alice added. "We can set the stage, but we're not powerful enough to decide how they feel."

"...That's true." She'd stopped Cheshire from interfering because she didn't want him to get in the way of the confession. Alice was afraid that he could use his numbers to break out of Angeldeath Dominion and meet up with Figaro. The presence of an ally would hinder his fighting and maybe even lead to him being stomped by Sandalphon.

Basically, she'd bound Cheshire for the sake of the happy ending.

"...But didn't this plot have a chance of seriously damaging Gideon?" If this outcome was truly the result of their willpower, then there was a chance that things could've gone differently. The casualties could've been as high as the twins had predicted.

"What of it?" Alice asked as she tilted her head.

"...Well, I guess that's the kind of Embryo you are." She only cared about Masters. Tians were outside the range of her affection, which was exactly why she had no trouble fighting the war against the pre-ancient civilization as the fearsome Incarnation of Blasphemy.

Cheshire felt that he had to be wary of this particular colleague in a different way than Bandersnatch or the twins.

"Well, they got together, so all's fine and dandy, isn't it?" said Alice.

"Yeah. Though... This is more of a comedy than a love story. Everyone besides those two and you were just aimlessly running around in circles."

Ray's group had been worried about Figaro and Hannya for nothing, the twins and F had woven a plot that in the end only led to a proposal, the citizens of Gideon had been thrown into a labyrinth

before they even knew what was happening, and the unfortunate newspaper company released the leaked photo as a scoop, only to endanger the entire city.

It all seemed so serious, and the fact that it ended with a kiss scene right out of a fairytale or romance manga made it seem like the height of absurdity.

It really *was* a comedy.

“...Oh. I just realized.” As the control AI in charge of spreading culture, Cheshire remembered a certain well-known comic opera titled *The Marriage of Figaro*.

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### *Prism Rider, Ray Starling*

The day after the Love-Duel Festival, I, Nemesis, Rook, and Babi gathered at the usual café with the open terrace and talked about what happened yesterday.

After the battle against King of Light, I’d burned for thirty seconds because of the side effect from Miasmaflame Princess, but it wasn’t enough to give me the death penalty. So here I was, alive and well.

Shu was busy with something today, Marie had DIN work to take care of, and B3 had business of her own.

“I must say,” Rook spoke up. “I’m really glad that no tians died in the incident.”

“You and me both.” Despite the scale of the incident, Sandalphon hadn’t actually killed anyone, directly or otherwise.

The shuffled space had caused some falls, crashes, and broken bones, but nothing had been fatal. This was probably because Hannya and Sandalphon had been considerate of the surrounding

people until Figaro showed up. It also helped that Figaro had been outside the city, all by himself.

“Oh, right.” Rook said as he remembered something. “Bishmal was trying hard to stop her before she went out of control, but when Figaro appeared, she instantly crushed him and gave him the death penalty.”

*Bishmal... RIP.*

“But that’s actually the only death penalty.”

“The injured were healed by Miss El... Tsukuyo Fuso and the priests of her Lunar Society.” She’d logged in after things had calmed down and was very surprised by the state of the city.

I recalled her saying, “Ugh, who did this? The second day of the Love-Duel Festival is a golden day for business. I dunno who’s responsible, but they sure are a nuisance.”

Shu instantly shot her with his gatling gun. I couldn’t blame him. Anyone would be annoyed hearing one of the main culprits saying something like that.

In fact, you could say that Shu was still being very rational, seeing as he used the weakest attack he had.

After finding out what had happened, Miss Eldritch immediately tried to run away, but B3 was there, and she stopped her with a gravity field.

Then Azurite arrived, told her to take responsibility, and had her go around healing the injured.

In fact, she was still doing that, and B3 was making sure of that. Miss Eldritch had also healed my wounds, so I was in top shape despite the intense battle yesterday.

“It’s also looking like they’ll have no trouble fixing the city,” I said.

“It’s just roads that suffered the most, and all key facilities are still standing,” Rook commented. The damage could be undone relatively easily using earth magic and Embryo skills. Even standard crafting jobs could do it.

“And the damages will all be paid by Fuso, Figaro, Hannya, and the newspaper company.”

“Though, the kingdom covered for the first three.” As the main culprit, Hannya was supposed to pay half of the total damages, while the others split the rest evenly. Miss Eldritch couldn’t pay because of various circumstances, while Hannya didn’t have any money to begin with, so the kingdom... that is, Azurite, paid in their stead.

This event was actually the end of the newspaper company. They’d tried to claim that they couldn’t be held responsible over a mere article, but their involvement was undeniable.

Perhaps it might’ve gone differently in modern Japan, but this was The Kingdom of Altar.

Their guilt became even more obvious when the officials used Truth Discernment on them to find out that the article was just sensationalist nonsense they’d written to stir reader curiosity and passion.

“And F will just get away with it, huh...?” He was the one who’d taken the photo that caused the incident, but that was just him answering the newspaper’s call, and for some reason the credit on the photograph sent to the newspaper wasn’t even his.

Also, getting in Figaro’s way didn’t exactly count as a crime.

Master-on-Master violence was just PK, which was outside the boundaries of *Dendro* law. It might’ve been different if his interference led to Hannya causing more destruction, but even with his involvement there were no casualties, so he was considered

innocent. Knowing how he operated, he probably had committed crimes, but they were unknown.

"What a disagreeable wretch he was," said Nemesis.

"I hope we don't run into him again..."

In all honesty, the King of Light was way more powerful than me. If I didn't have Monochrome — his hard counter — I would've barely stood a chance against him.

Even so, I didn't even think of giving up, and I felt like I would be compelled to stop him once more if he attempted something like this again.

The central person in all of this — Hannya — had left behind an envelope before logging out.

The paper inside read, "I am sorry for the trouble caused. I will pay for the damage done through public service."

Azurite chose to believe it and didn't put her on the wanted list, so now Hannya owed the country money.

Figaro's share of the payment would be discussed once he returned, so for now, Count Gideon covered for him. According to Azurite, he'd said, "Figaro is always a great help, and he's the one who actually stopped this incident, so I can do this much for him."

...Though, all the damage to his city seemed to be killing him inside.  
*Do your best, Count*, I thought.

Apparently, Miss Eldritch had tried to worm her way out of her share by saying, "Th-The meathead is gonna pay me 5,000,000,000..." but Shu shot her down with: "Like hell he is! Forget it or I'll trash your place again with my bear hands!"

And that was just about it for the results and responsibility splitting.

Figaro's death penalty hadn't expired yet, and Hannya hadn't come online again since that moment.

"...I wonder how they're doing now," I said.

"Well, they just got engaged..." Nemesis commented. Shu said that he couldn't contact Figaro in reality, so for all we knew, they might've been discussing their future in real life. (I later went on to learn that Figaro was hospitalized and that Hannya had gone to the UK to visit him.)

"Man, this kind of thing just had to happen on a festival day, huh?" And for all the trouble we'd gone through, it seemed like we were just running around in circles... That we had absolutely nothing to do with all that happened. Knowing how long Shu had been worried about it, he might've suffered the most mental trauma from the way everything had worked out.

"Though, once it all ended, the festival just continued like nothing had happened," I said.

"Gideoners are a sturdy bunch." The Love-Duel Festival resumed soon after Hannya logged out. Not even that level of emergency was enough to stop the festivities.

Looking back at it, it had been the same with Franklin's Game.

Even Rook went on to continue his date with Kasumi, and when I saw them in the evening, Kasumi was all flushed and happy-looking, so I could only assume it went well.

"Seeing how it worked out, the incident might've actually been a net positive for the kingdom," said Rook, and I couldn't help but nod.

The most obvious good outcome was Figaro and Hannya getting together, but there was so much more when you looked at the fallout.

“Because of Figaro, Miss Hannya will definitely join the kingdom,” Rook continued. As long as Figaro continued playing *Dendro*, she would keep on logging in with him, and she would obviously stay in the country where her dear husband was.

Basically, Altar would have its fifth Superior.

In terms of numbers alone, the kingdom would finally be a match for Dryfe.

“And because of what happened, both Miss Fuso and Miss Hannya are now indebted to the country.” They couldn’t pay their share of the damages, so they were *literally* in debt now.

Miss Eldritch had put Altar under a contract that forbade them from limiting The Lunar Society, but since this was a personal debt, it didn’t help her at all.

Azurite was pretty happy that she, in her words, “finally got back at that parasite.”

She was obviously thinking of using this to make The Lunar Society participate in the war without having to “change the national religion” or fulfilling whatever other extreme demands Miss Eldritch had.

“These debts will be used against Miss Fuso and Miss Hannya to force them to participate in the war, won’t they?” said Rook.

“Most likely,” I nodded.

“That means that both countries have an equal number of Superiors, which are also more or less equal in power. That alone changes the outlook.”

Of course, there were Masters besides Superiors, as well as tians such as Mario, who surpassed even some of the most skilled Masters, but even so, it didn’t seem hopeless anymore.

“As things are, even if Dryfe attacks, their victory wouldn’t be guaranteed. Even if they won, it would likely be a Pyrrhic victory. And if we consider what Her Highness the First Princess told you about third parties like Caldina...” Rook said before pausing for a good moment. *“The war might not happen at all.”*

That was a guess that could very well become reality.

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### *Sacred Princess, Altimia Azurite Altar*

I finally dealt with the paperwork related to the incident caused by King of Berserk, Hannya.

It had drained quite a lot from the kingdom’s coffers, but it was settled relatively peacefully.

I talked to Ray after the event, and he said that, for a Superior, Hannya was actually a very mild person as long as there were no problems with the Over Gladiator, Figaro.

He and the parasite were the main driving forces behind this incident, but looking at how it all ended, it was unlikely that anything similar would happen again.

I was quite satisfied with the fact that I finally got to put a leash on that parasite, at least.

“I suppose it’s all settled for now...” I’d also taken care of the other problem... Elizabeth’s marriage.

The night before Hannya started her rampage, I had reconciled with Elizabeth.

As Ray had told me, I’d apologized in my own words and talked to her as honestly as possible.

Apparently, she herself had also thought a lot about her marriage to Third Prince Canglong.

For now, we decided to put everything on hold until the day before Third Prince Canglong returned to Huang He.

I, Elizabeth, and Canglong still needed time to process how we felt.

“CooO, CoOo!” I was pulled from my thoughts by the cry of a creature in the corner of my makeshift office.

It was a grotesque little thing that was basically a large eye with wings... and its name was “Broadcast Eye.”

Count Gideon had acquired a number of them after Franklin’s Game, and some of them had ended up here with me. Since they were made by the detestable Franklin and had a disagreeable appearance, I honestly wasn’t fond of them. However, I could not deny their usefulness in long-distance communications, so I used them regardless.

They normally made no sound. If they were, it could be only because someone was trying to contact my Broadcast Eye.

“Connect.” Upon saying that, I saw a room in the royal castle as well as a man — Marquis Findle.

I’d put him in charge of intelligence, so I had a bad feeling about this.

“I apologize for contacting you like this, Your Highness,” he said.

“I do not mind,” I said. “More importantly, did something happen?”

He wiped his face with a handkerchief, looking like he was hesitant to say what he had to. If he was acting like this after contacting me first, it could only be something major.

“Is anything the matter?” I asked.

“...We received a message from the imperium.” That was surprising, but not unexpected. Seeing as the war would resume, I knew Dryfe would contact us with a final warning. I had been preparing for that, as well.

However, his reaction was a bit extreme for one who received something that was “expected,” which could only mean that the content of the message was nothing like what we imagined.

“Marquis Findle, did you already open the message?”

“No. The seal is still intact. However... the messenger who brought it gave us a summary.”

“What did he say about it?” In response...

“That it’s a *peace* offer, Your Highness.”

...He gave me a *truly* unexpected answer.

“...Very well. I will return to Altea as soon as possible. Make sure no one hears of this, especially not information brokers like DIN.”

“Understood.” With that, the Broadcast Eye connection ended.

I closed my eyes and looked up at the ceiling of my makeshift office.

It was *thoroughly* unexpected. A recommendation to surrender would’ve been significantly easier to understand.

“Claudiah... Your brother just can’t stop doing unexpected things.”

Was it an honest peace offer? Or a start of some new plot?

To know even that much, I would have to return to Altea and see the message for myself.

“But... I suppose the time has finally come.” I didn’t know if the message would mark the end or a new beginning, but I could feel that the machine of war, which had ground to a halt when my father died, had begun to move once more.

*To be continued*

# **Bonus Short Stories**

## **A Mascot and His Puns**

*Gideon, City of Duels*

It was the first day of the Love-Duel Festival.

King of Destruction, Shu Starling, King of Beasts, Behemot, and Behemot's Superior Embryo, Leviathan, were walking to the second arena to see a certain event.

Behemot was comfortably seated in Leviathan's hands, while Shu was right next to them.

Naturally, this trio was attracting a lot of attention.

After all, it was a group of a single fine lady and two mascot-like creatures.

Far too often have they been approached by families and couples wanting to take a picture with them.

"Sure thingy. Stay in line, though. Don't be overbearing."

Shu didn't even seem to mind them and gladly agreed, making him hardly different from some mascot in an amusement park.

"...Tch."

Leviathan was maintaining a cool expression, but the blood vessel on her forehead made it clear that appearance betrayed.

This was mostly due to all the couples asking her if she could take the photos.

They actually thought that she was just a woman who spent this festival doing nothing but taking group shots of the couples and the bear.

This group happened because her Master, Behemot, wished for it, but she was losing patience every time she was asked to take a photo.

Once the last of the many couples left with their shots, Leviathan spoke to Shu, not hiding a bit of her hostility and murderous intent.

“Why do you just let them take photos?”

“Hmm... I’m a guy in a costume, so it’s be beary bad if I was cold to people.”

“You were the same when we first met. Why do you insist on being approachable?”

Indeed, he had been the same back when Leviathan had come to take Behemot from him shortly before The Clash of the Superiors began.

“Tis the burden of all those in animal costumes.”

“About that... I understand that you use the costume to hide your face, but there’s no reason for you to use puns, is there?”

Shu Starling was a Superior.

Leviathan knew that he was wearing a costume to hide himself.

However, there was no good reason for him to act like a friendly and quirky bear character that children would love.

Leviathan had wondered about this for a while, just like she had wondered why he was standing out so much despite wanting to hide his face.

“...”

Shu said nothing in response, but it didn’t seem that he didn’t want to answer.

In fact, it seemed as if she'd pointed out something he hadn't realized himself.

"...You're joking, aren't you?" Leviathan asked as she understood what his silence implied.

"...Nope. I'm just not conscious of it. I just got my paws on a costume, put it on, and before I knew it, I was speaking with puns."

He did have control over his puns and dropped them whenever they weren't needed, but the very first pun he used in a costume just came naturally to him.

It might've been something he'd picked up in his child actor years — "People in animal costumes have to talk funny" or something along those lines.

"Why not stop using them?" Leviathan asked.

"I won't. It's just how I am. You'll have to bear with it!"

"...I see."

"Why not join me, Behemot? Add some flavor to your speech."

"'porcupine?' tl;dr," Behemot responded, saying that it was hard to craft puns around the type of animal she was.

"..."

During that exchange, Leviathan swore to herself that she would most definitely launch a surprise attack on Shu for saying something stupid to her Master.

The End

## ***The Culinary Troubles of the Royalty and Nobility (Hell's Kitchen)***

*Prism Rider, Ray Starling*

The path between Altea and Gideon wasn't exactly short.

Figaro, Xunyu, and others who could travel at supersonic speeds could go to one city and back within a day like it was nothing, but most people weren't capable of that. It took a while for me even if I rode Silver at maximum speed, and back when Rook, Marie, and I rode to Gideon as a party, it took us a whole day in spite of the fact that our dragon carriage was dragged by Marilyn — a demi-dragon.

The carriage we were riding now was being pulled by Liliana's Second Model Prism Steed — SMPS. It was faster than Marilyn and couldn't grow tired, but this trip would take time some in spite of that.

Of course, we had to eat on the road a couple times.

Whenever the time came, we set the table and reached into a preserving-type inventory to take out food that was as good as though just done.

"I suppose this is in-flight food, except on land," Nemesis said, somewhat excited.

Before I dug in, I was a bit worried if Canglong, being the third prince of Huang He, would be fine with such meals, but it didn't seem like he had a problem.

Now that I thought about it, he had come here by dragon carriage all the way from his empire in the far-east. He was probably used to such meals by now.

We also had a princess here, but I had no such worries about Azurite to begin with. Knowing that she was the type who didn't mind putting on a mask and investigating ancient ruins by herself, I knew that it wouldn't bother her.

"Do you need medicine?" B3 asked.

"No," Azurite replied.

This exchange sparked my curiosity.

“Medicine?”

“I heard that Altarian nobility dine with Elixirs and High Holy Water at the ready.”

“There are those that do. I, however, do not.”

“...Why would you have anti-debuff potions at dinner?” I asked.

“To be prepared in case their food is poisoned.”

Now that she mentioned it, that did seem like a reasonable occupational hazard to royalty and nobility alike.

“Poisoning explains the Elixirs, but why the High Holy water?”

“Because in some situations, the food might have curse catalysts instead of poison.”

“Now that’s just scary... But why aren’t they using tasters instead?”

“Because there was a time when it was popular among poisoners to use skills that made it so that the food only became poisonous once tested.”

...Well, *Dendro has no shortage of status effect magic*, I thought.

“Apparently, poisons and curses that kill people instantly don’t even give them time to drink, so they always equip Brooches, too,” B3 added. “High Hexers can also use instakill magic, so they might even need some appropriate accessories.”

“I’m guessing that these anti-assassination countermeasures are a result of people learning from history...”

Trying to imagine what kind of incidents had happened before these countermeasures were known made me shudder.

“For something more exotic...” Azurite said. “There were cases of people mixing inventories smaller than even rings into their target’s

food, letting their stomach acid melt and destroy them open. The items would be released inside the body, instantly making the target burst and die.”

“...Man, these assassins scare me.”

“And that is why there are many nobles who always have medicine and accessories on them.”

“I see... But why aren’t you doing the same?” I asked.

“I have accessories on, but there’s no need for me to prepare any medicine.”

“No need?”

“My stats are high, so I would make it in time even if I don’t have any medicine prepared. My resistances are good, too, and the kind of poison that would instantly kill the average person instantly would take about an hour to kill me.”

“...”

Azurite’s casual words had reminded me and B3 that the most powerful beings in *Dendro* had physical prowess that put them far above your average means of assassination.

The End



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by Sakon Kaidou

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