

Sakon Kaidou

Illustrator: Taiki

Infinite End Program

19. The Overlord of Dreams

Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	2
Prologue: The Sword and the Axe	8
Chapter One: The First Battle.....	18
Chapter Two: Remembering and Overlooking	42
Chapter Three: The Next Stage	64
Chapter Four: Encounters	100
Interlude: An Overlord's Domain	116
Chapter Five: The Dream-Quest of Unknown Meetings	124
Chapter Six: Dreamscape Assailant	146
Interlude: The Village of the Overlord.....	164
Chapter Seven: A Battle He Can Lose	170
Chapter Eight: Finest in the Right, Strongest in the Left	187
Chapter Nine: The Dream's End	208
Epilogue: Alone in the Dark.....	231
Afterword	255
Bonus Short Stories.....	259
Bags Under the Eyes	259
Getting Content	263
The Oddballs	266

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19. The Overlord of Dreams



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**"We are...
in a dream."**

**Gerbera looked
at me like I was
talking nonsense,
but that was
the truth.**

**"...Where
am I?"**

**Looking
around, I saw
lots of long roads
stretching out in
every direction.
There were no
platforms or
pillars in sight—
just these thin
roads twisting
and turning all
over the place.**

Character

Ray

Ray Starling / Reiji Mukudori

A college freshman who gets caught up in various incidents within Infinite Dendrogram. Though he is generally mild-mannered, he has a strong will that causes him to fight for his goals and never give up on them.



Nemesis

Nemesis

Ray's Embryo manifested as this girl. Nemesis acts as Ray's weapon by taking up the form of armaments such as a greatsword, halberd, shield, pinwheel, mirror, and twin swords. She is also a notable glutton.



Sechs

Sechs Würfel

Bearer of the King of Crime job, Sechs is a man who commits sins for the sole purpose of being "evil." Though currently imprisoned in the gaol, he is also the leader of Illegal Frontier—IF—a clan made up entirely of Superiors on wanted lists.



Gerbera

Gerbera

A Superior from IF and owner of a Sentinel-type Embryo specialized in stealth. Once overly confident in her powers, she challenged Shu and was defeated, sending her to the gaol. Since then, Sechs has put her through hellish training that left her spirit broken.



Prologue: The Sword and the Axe

Ray Starling

The sound of hammering reached my ears. Next thing I knew, I was in a place I didn't recognize.

I got the feeling that I couldn't trust my own senses, and that made me realize that this must be a dream. The vagueness of every sensation definitely reminded me of the time Gardranda had pulled me into a dream with her, but somehow it was also crystal clear that this wasn't her doing.

The space I was in was completely unfamiliar to me.

It wasn't just a deep darkness, nor was it some place from my own memories—it was simply a place I didn't recognize. At the same time, I couldn't even be certain about what I was seeing all around me. It kinda felt like I'd been thrown into outer space with no suit on.

Nothing here seemed definite. It felt hazy even by dream standards.

However, the purpose of the space was one of the few things about it that was extremely apparent.

In the center there was a single furnace. It was only slightly larger than a person, but it had a presence so overwhelming it almost made me forget this was only a dream. Even the heat coming out of it felt like it was radiating from the heart of the Sun.

The fact that there was a furnace here was what revealed the nature of this place—it was a smithy.

In front of the furnace there was an anvil, and someone was wordlessly hammering away at it.

This person was extremely nondescript: I couldn't tell if they were a man or a woman, old or young, or even if they were human. Their image was so vague that I could barely even perceive them directly.

Despite this, the person also had an extremely powerful presence.

Even though I didn't know anything about smithing, I could really feel the heat and weight behind the power and technique they were putting into every swing of the hammer. If someone told me that this person was forging the world itself, I would've readily believed them.

However, that wasn't the case, for the thing on the anvil wasn't the world, but a single-edged axe. It had no grip, so the person was only hammering on the blade portion of it. The shine of the hot metal was completely unlike that of heated iron or steel. I would bet that even *Infinite Dendrogram* metals like mithril or the Mythical hihi'irokane didn't even look like this.

After all...the metal was slightly transparent.

It reminded me of the blue blade wielded by Azurite—Altar.

Though it was now glowing red with heat, the true color of the axe-head must be quite different. Even at this point in its creation, I could tell that the completed work would be truly beautiful.

The process continued. I had no idea how much time was passing. For all I knew, I might've been watching this in fast-forward.

As the person worked, the shape of the axe became more and more clear, and after it had its grip attached, the weapon assumed the form of a large one-handed battle-axe.

The weapon's final color was a white that was even more beautiful than I'd expected. I had never even seen such a color before. Combined with its slight transparency, it looked like it was not only a weapon, but some kind of ceremonial instrument.

Despite this being my first time laying my eyes upon this *white axe*, though, I felt as though I'd actually seen it somewhere before.

At some point in the process, the person making the axe stopped working on it.

It didn't look complete yet. It appeared perfect on the outside, but I couldn't help but feel like something was still missing. It was like it hadn't received the finishing touch.

"...Two and one." That was when the person first spoke.

I could understand the words, but the voice somehow gave no hints as to the figure's age or gender.

After falling silent again, the person raised their hand, making the axe rise up and stop in midair.

They then raised their hand again, making another weapon appear.

It was a *blue sword* that I knew well by now—the Primeval Blade, Altar.

However, this Altar looked different than the one I knew. It seemed also incomplete, as though it was missing something. Again, it seemed to have not received the finishing touch.

"I am the Blacksmith." That sounded like a job name, but the way the person said it made me feel like it had a different meaning.

The Blacksmith went on.

"I am conflicted."

"Only one weapon is to bear the role."

"I am conflicted."

"Only one weapon can be treated with all of my being."

This wasn't an explanation—they were simply talking to themselves.

Faced with the white axe and the blue sword, the Blacksmith continued to speak. It almost seemed as if they were directly addressing the weapons they created.

“But before me are two masterpieces.” The Blacksmith eyed the axe and the sword, looking conflicted, just as they had described. I could tell that much even though I couldn’t clearly make out their face.

“One will become the crowning work.”

“While the other will find its place among the refuse.”

Even as an onlooker, I could tell that this was a painful choice for an artist to make.

“Which of these weapons should be core to the ■?# that my brethren and I will soon create?”

Thus, the Blacksmith continued to think out loud.

Just like with the creation process itself, in this dream I couldn’t tell exactly how much time was passing by, but this must have gone on for a long time before the Blacksmith ultimately...

“I have decided.”

...took the blue sword in hand.

That was when the dream ended.

◇◇◇

Paladin, Ray Starling

“Ah...!” Next thing I knew, I was surrounded by familiar things.

Looking up, I saw the sky, framed by audience seating in every direction. This made it clear that I was in the eighth arena, which now served as Death Period’s base. Specifically, I was on the stage.

“Ray—you’re awake.”

“...Nemesis?” Her voice was coming from my crest.

“I must say, it was rather surprising that you fell asleep on the stage with no warning. Are you certain you are not more tired than you think?”

“...Well, I did wake up kinda early to spar.” Rook and I had fought a few matches this morning. Since he had a diverse set of combat styles, he made for good practice for The Tournaments. Rook had beaten me more times than I’d beaten him, so after he left I’d stayed behind to think about what I had to work on. Apparently I actually fell asleep in the process.

“I planned to wake you up in time for The Tournaments, but you woke up faster than I expected,” said Nemesis.

I checked, and it looked like almost no time had passed. The dream I’d seen felt really long, but it actually hadn’t even lasted five minutes.

“That dream...” What was that all about, anyway? I’d heard that dreams were supposed to be things your brain reconstructed from your memory, but this one was completely alien to me.

I recognized Altar, sure, but the rest...?

“Hm...?” Suddenly, I felt my hand touch something. Looking down, I saw a large one-handed axe with its blade covered in a black cloth.

“...What’s this doing here?” The thing I’d touched was the nameless axe that had blown my arm away the moment I even tried to use it in my first match against Rook. It really hadn’t seemed like I could put it to good use, so I’d put it away in my inventory. “Nemesis, did you take this out?”

“I certainly did not... Speaking of which, when *did* it leave your inventory, I wonder?”

So, what—was I supposed to believe that it had escaped by itself?

Actually, now that I thought about it, that was pretty believable. I already knew of gear that moved on its own—Gardranda being the most obvious example.

I looked intently at the nameless axe. Since it was covered in a cloth I couldn't remove, the blade's actual shape was hard to make out, but I felt like it resembled the axe I'd seen in the dream.

I'd experienced something like this before, so I had a guess about what had happened.

"Did you show me a dream? Like Gardranda did?" Obviously, the axe did not answer my question.

"What is this about, Ray?"

"Nothing. Don't worry about it."

Nemesis's worried question made me realize something, though—the memory of my dream must not have been shared with her, just like with Gardranda.

This meant that this axe was indeed the one from my dream, and that it showed events from its creation. I spent a few moments pondering this.

"...Nemesis, I'm kinda hungry," I said. "Would you mind bringing me something to snack on from the preservation inventories at the cafeteria? I wanna stay here and think a little longer."



“Very well. Wait here.” Nemesis, now out of the crest, dashed off the stage and into the building.

I looked at the axe again.

“It’s just you and me now,” I said, addressing the axe. “Can you talk?” I posed another question, but once again received no answer. It wasn’t even moving like Gardranda did.

It seemed like the axe was nothing but a mere weapon, and I was starting to feel that maybe the dream was completely unrelated—that I was overthinking things.

But if that dream *was* shown to me by this axe, and if it had shown something that had actually happened, the implications could be huge.

If the dream was meant to show me the axe’s origin, that meant this weapon was another work by the creator of Altar itself. If that was true, then it must have been on the same level as that revered blade.

“...Or, at least, it *could’ve* been.”

I recalled what the Blacksmith said.

“One will become the crowning work.”

“While the other will find its place among the refuse.”

And then, the Blacksmith had picked up Altar.

That had been his answer. The Blacksmith had chosen Altar, and Altar was the weapon that had become their crowning work. In the creator’s eyes, at least, this axe had been rejected and was now nothing but refuse.

That was why they’d abandoned it without even giving it a name.

That’s kinda irresponsible, isn’t it? I thought.

Even if they couldn't make it into their life's masterwork, I felt like this axe at least deserved to have a name. If the dream wasn't just some random fantasy or delusion, that meant this axe had enough of a mind to show others its own past.

In that case, it might actually resent the fact that its creator hadn't even graced it with a name.

Also, my axe had a different color than it did in the dream. The Blacksmith was working on a pure white axe that was slightly transparent. This axe as I had it now, however...was drenched in the color of blood.

What could have caused this change? Did its lack of a name have something to do with it?

Even now, my Grudge-Soaked Greaves were absorbing the grudge stored within this weapon. Did that mean it would be white again once the grudge was gone?

I had no way of knowing if that was true. Gouz-Maise had already sucked up a whole lot of grudge from it, though, and I didn't see even the slightest change in its color.

I sighed. I didn't even know if it made sense for me to start feeling bad for this axe—this cursed weapon.

But looking at it as it was now after seeing that dream...it did leave a little bit of a bad taste in my mouth.

"Well, I guess I can consider it a quest." I tapped the axe's grip with my finger. "I'll eventually figure out how to give you back your color. And I know I'm not your creator, but I'll think of a name to call you by, at least for now."

Let the quest...begin!

It seemed kinda weird to give *myself* a quest, but whatever.

The axe didn't react to my words—not with speech or any other kind of noticeable change.

Maybe the dream I'd seen really was completely unrelated, but I didn't really care. I'd give it back its color and grant it a name because I *wanted to*, and that was it.

I'd probably end up thinking of a name over the next few days or something, though. There was no time limit, so I figured I might as well take my time.

"Ray, I brought some sandwiches and tea," said Nemesis as she returned with the breakfast, snacking on it as she spoke.

"Thanks, but...don't walk while eating. We'll have to clean it up, you know?"

"Hrmm...I suppose being in an arena makes me feel as though I'm going on a culinary tour of some event or other..."

Always about the food, huh? Well, I couldn't say it wasn't like her.

"Anyway, once we finish breakfast, we're going straight to the central arena. The first four matches are before noon."

"That is true. Heh heh heh...I cannot wait. Tonight, I thirst for blood!"

"It's still morning." Following this familiar exchange, the two of us—plus Smol Gar—had our breakfast.

This was the start of the opening day of The Tournaments. The full event would take ten days in *Dendro* time, and this was the first part.

It was a huge occasion in Altar, and it was bound to result in many chance encounters and a whole lot of drama.

At that point, however, I had no idea that my greatest battle would be one I *never* could've seen coming.

Chapter One: The First Battle

Paladin, Ray Starling

The Tournaments would be held on every day of a ten-day period.

One Tournament could have a maximum of 256 participants, all of whom would have registered themselves and signed their Contracts ahead of time. Since Masters might have real-life circumstances or other factors that would prevent them from participating, those who didn't make it to their fight by the designated time would be removed from their slot in The Tournaments. A lottery would then be held to determine their replacement, with anyone who still held a slot in the rest of the competition being ineligible.

The first four fights of The Tournaments—the preliminaries—would be staged using the barrier function that accelerated the flow of time within it. Then, from the fifth battle onward—when all but sixteen of the day's participants had been eliminated—The Tournaments would switch back to a proper show with an actual audience. This was meant to save time, as showing every single fight would be so time-consuming that the whole thing would take much more than a single day. Even with this arrangement, though, the finals wouldn't happen until evening—but that might have been the best time for them anyway.

The preliminaries also had one rule that the actual Tournaments did not—specifically, we weren't allowed to know whom we would be fighting.

The brackets were randomized, and they would already be set up by the time we'd have our first battles. However, they would only be made public when we would have our top sixteen.

There were multiple reasons for this, but one of them was controlling information.

In addition to accelerating time, the barriers that would be used for the preliminaries would also prevent anyone outside from looking in. That would make it impossible to see any of the battles or find out what the other contestants were capable of. That was a big reason why we weren't allowed to know whom we'd be fighting until we actually stepped out to face them—if the bracket was revealed any earlier, we'd be able to investigate our upcoming opponents and find out what they could do. If they were famous enough, we could even prepare for the fights by changing our gear to hard counter them. For example, if our opponent specialized in fire magic, we could give ourselves an advantage by equipping armor or accessories that gave fire resistance.

I'd known about the importance of metagaming since my time in high school. The president of the EGRS had made sure of that.

Anyway, needless to say, I was no exception, and I had no idea whom I'd be fighting first.

The final brackets would be revealed when only sixteen of us were left. This was because if the remaining contestants weren't already famous, the probabilities of any one person winning would be affected by whoever they'd defeated in the preliminaries. It was the kind of consideration you'd expect from the City of Duels.

Well, none of this actually changed what we contestants had to do. No matter whom we were up against, we'd just have to win the four preliminary battles and try to achieve victory in the actual Tournament afterward.

The other contestants and I were now in the waiting rooms, waiting on our turns. Since there were a bunch of these, we were placed among those we *wouldn't* fight in the preliminaries.

"Hm..." I wasn't going to be fighting anyone here, at least for now, but for some reason...I could sense them staring at me.

“I see nothing surprising about that,” said Nemesis. “You have become quite famous.”

“KSHAA!”

Smol Gar was chomping on my hair again with a loud munching sound. I couldn’t tell if she was agreeing with Nemesis or not.

“Yeah...even I’m pretty aware of that by now,” I said. My battles against Dryfe’s Superiors—with the added exaggerations—had become well-known, and the others here were reasonably wary of me. Everybody must’ve been wondering what they’d do if they ended up fighting me outside of the preliminaries.

To be honest, though, I wasn’t sure if I’d even make it that far.

In this tournament, being famous was a huge disadvantage. Anyone I had to fight would know my abilities the moment I stepped into the arena. Even if they weren’t able to prepare gear that countered mine, they would still have an advantage. This was exactly what I’d experienced during The Anniversary.

I did have a few things going for me, though—namely, the fights would all take place inside an arena. I was bad at long-range combat, so the fact that we would always be close enough for me to play most of my cards was a real advantage. I even had the option of equipping my Storm Visage and filling the arena with Hellish Miasma. Now *that* would really give me the upper hand.

“...A truly vile thought,” said Nemesis.

Yeah, if I did it in the actual Tournament, the audience would probably boo me real hard, I thought. Especially since the miasma would probably make it impossible to see anything.

“A Paladin who forces his opponents to duel in a cloud of poison gas...quite the concept.”

Honestly, my fellow freshmen in college already think I'm some kind of devil-eating berserker. I doubt too many people would be surprised if I did do something like that.

“...Anyway, it’s almost our turn,” Nemesis said.

The contestants were being called up pretty quickly—probably because of the barrier’s effect that sped up time. Some new numbers were called just a minute after the previous ones had stepped inside, and even the longest waits weren’t longer than five minutes. Considering that this wasn’t even the only waiting room, it was all going pretty fast.

At this point, it looked like everyone’s first four battles would be over before noon.

“Ray Starling, it’s your turn next.”

“Okay.” Called by the arena’s staff, I stood up from my chair.

“How exciting,” said Nemesis as she switched to her sword form.

“KSHAA!” Smol Gar hissed regrettably as she undid the summoning effect and became my Miasmaflame Bracers once again.

I equipped my Storm Visage and put up the hood of my Black Warcoat. Now fully prepared, I left the waiting room. I heard words like “Dark Lord” and “Devil-Eater” behind me, but I pretended that I didn’t.

“Please step into the arena,” said the staff member, pointing at the black barrier enveloping the stage. “Your opponent is already inside.”

“All right.”

I supposed that having us both enter at different times was another way to prevent us from knowing our opponents.

“All right...let’s see what kind of demons lie in wait for us.”

"I am quite satisfied with *one* demon, thank you very much," Nemesis said.

Oh yeah. We've already got Gardranda, I thought. Though, in this tournament we're fighting for the Orb containing Stern Face-Tender Heart, Sasage—a demon-type UBM. So if we make it to the end, we'll be getting a new demon regardless.

With that useless thought in mind, I passed the dark barrier.

While it just looked like a wall of pure darkness from the outside, it was pretty clear when looked at from the inside, like a canopy of transparent glass. The light passing through made it easy to see the entire arena, including the opponent who was about to walk in.

"Oh, there's my enemy this ti...wait, huh?"

"Huh?"

The person who'd walked to the stage was as surprised as I was.

The reason for that was obvious—we were already acquainted.

"Now that's some dangerous-lookin' gear you're wearing. You're Ray Starling, aren't you?"

"And you're...Lang, right?" It was one of the Masters who'd taken to the skies with me during the battle against Monochrome. He was also a member of Riser's Babylonian Battlegroup and had fought alongside Kasumi's trio during King of Thieves' terrorist attack on Altea.

What were the odds of getting *him* as my first opponent?

"That's me. Hey, you mind if I call you just 'Ray'?"

"Not at all."

"Thanks. Heh heh...but *man*, I sure got the short end of the stick this time, huh?"

"Short end of the...?" What did he think I was, anyway?

"I didn't join the tournament for nothin', though. I won't give up without a fight," he said, using Instant Equip to take out a lance.

"I'm not planning to lose either," I replied as I brandished Nemesis and hopped onto Silver's back. Silver counted as equipment, so I could "equip" him here with no problem.

I used Reveal on Lang, but didn't get much out of it. I could see his job, but his stats were hidden. That meant he was using something to hide them, and my skill level was too low to counter it. I'd done a similar thing to hide the accessory I'd put on as a replacement for the usual Brooch.

That wouldn't help much in this case, though. Just as I'd feared, I ended up facing an enemy who recognized me right off the bat. It was best to assume he knew about my combat style, Counter Absorption use limit and all. The exact same thing had happened during The Anniversary.

I, on the other hand, didn't know the first thing about Lang's combat style. I could recall him riding a hippogryph back in Torne, but Monochrome had taken him by surprise and given him the death penalty before he could actually do any fighting. Practically speaking, I had almost zero information on him.

Since he'd died from a single hit from the laser—albeit to a critical body part—I could assume he wasn't an END build, at least. This was supported by his Gale Rider job, so it was pretty obvious that he was focused on AGI.

"Ten seconds."

"Hm...?" As I heard the staff start the countdown to the beginning of the match, a particular question came to mind.

Lang was a Gale Rider who had a hippogryph as a mount. Tamed monsters could be used in arenas as long as they didn't exceed the minion capacity.

Why wasn't he mounted like I was, then?

"Five...four...three..." Before I could come up with an answer to that, the countdown continued. "Two...one...zero!"

And with that, the match began.

"Heaven's Circuit—Halley, activate!" Lang immediately used a skill named after a comet, drowning the arena in a blue light...

◇◇◇

Central Arena

Large crowds were gathered outside the Central Arena.

Many held tickets to The Tournaments without assigned seats. They had arrived early so they could get the best seats available.

Besides them, many people were simply out enjoying the events and food stalls that had opened up for the occasion, making the area pretty lively even by Gideon standards.

"Ah! Riser!"

"Hm? Oh! It's been a while, Io."

Within the crowd, Masked Riser the Kamen Rider had run into a girl he was acquainted with—Io, a member of Death Period. Both of them had been among those who had acted to protect Altea during the recent act of terrorism.

"The other two aren't with you?"

"We split up to buy some food at the stalls. We're getting ready to cheer for our leader!" There were quality inventories that preserved food freshness and warmth, so buying food ahead of time presented no issue.

"I see. So he's in today's Tournament."

“Yeah! What about you?! The name of today’s UBM makes it sound like it’d become a mask, doesn’t it?!” Stern Face-Tender Heart, Sasage did indeed sound like it could become a demon—or more specifically oni—mask, but Riser chuckled and rejected the idea.

“I am fairly attached to my current mask, so I’m actually avoiding UBMs that could replace it. Also, while the UBM’s abilities are pretty versatile, they don’t really synergize with my build.”

“I see! It’s like how our bear wouldn’t know what to do with more costumes!”

“I guess it’s kind of similar.” In actuality, all of Shu’s MVP rewards besides one had ended up being costumes anyway, so he never had much choice to begin with—not that these two had any idea about that.

“So I suppose you’re just here to watch the fights, then!”

“Well, that’s part of it, but some members of our clan are participating too. Remember Lang? The hippogriff rider who fought with us in Altea? He’s in this one.”

“Oh, him! You don’t say... Wait...huh? I’m trying to remember—did he use his Embryo then?” Thinking back on the battle against Regina Apis Idea, Io found she did recall a Master who was riding a hippogriff. However, she couldn’t remember seeing him use his Embryo. His weapon, skills, and mount were all standard. She thought that maybe he just had an Embryo that was hard to see, but...

“He didn’t.”

...Riser immediately confirmed that wasn’t the case.

“It’s not like he was holding back, though,” he added. “It’s because his Embryo is...well, he just couldn’t use it back then.”

“Hm?” Io looked at him, puzzled, but Riser, who felt like he couldn’t reveal his own clanmate’s abilities, could do nothing but smile awkwardly.

The words “he just couldn’t use it back then,” though, said everything that needed to be said about it.

Lang’s Embryo—Speeding Comet, Halley—could only be used in a limited number of situations.

Therefore, its category had to be...

◇◇◇

Paladin, Ray Starling

“What...?”

Once the bright light subsided, my surroundings had completely changed.

There was now another boundary within the barrier—a gigantic, spherical cage made of metal the color of the night sky. Between the bars of this cage there was a metallic mesh of the same color, making it impossible for even mice to escape.

Silver and I were now trapped inside here.

Well, maybe “trapped” wasn’t the right word for it. The cage was *large*—about the same size as the stage itself. It didn’t limit my movements any more than the barrier did. Since this cage was spherical, the surface we were standing on was now slightly inclined, but that was the biggest change.

I tried attacking the cage with Nemesis, but it reflected her without issue. She didn’t even leave a scratch. It looked like destroying it using normal methods would be difficult.

“This is...” If this cage was an Embryo, its category must’ve been...

“Type Castle.” Nemesis finished my thought. This had to be a building Embryo. I hadn’t fought one of these since Franklin’s.

I’d heard that Castle types were rarely suited for direct combat. Many of them acted as a base or had abilities focused on crafting, and they couldn’t be moved by any means except by returning them to the crest and placing them elsewhere.

Franklin’s Pandemonium was a Castle Embryo that produced and stored monsters, and since it had legs, it could be used like a fleet carrier.

But this one...

“I see. A cage-like Castle *would* be useful in combat,” said Nemesis.

Obviously, a Castle that trapped your opponent would be an asset in battle. But...this one seemed a bit too big to feel like it “trapped” me, exactly. It covered the entire stage, so if it was supposed to limit my movement, that completely defeated the purpose.

And actually...where was Lang himself, anyway?

“Ha ha ha! This ain’t a cage, and it ain’t *just* a Castle.”

I heard a voice above me. At the very top of the spherical cage, haloed by the sun’s light, I saw a unique-looking silhouette.

“This one’s Type is...Chariot/Castle.” The figure was Lang, sitting on a large motorbike decorated with a ram on the front.

A motorbike sticking to the upper part of a sphere, and a rider sitting on it. Lang’s face was concealed, but rather than a tokusatsu hero’s mask, Lang was wearing a helmet like the ones used by racers.

“...A hybrid,” I said. His Embryo was both a Chariot—the motorbike—as well as a Castle—the cage.

This mix of spherical cage and motorbike reminded me of something I’d heard of before.

“This is a Globe of Death...!”

“You know about them? Guess I won’t have much explaining to do, then!”

A Globe of Death was a type of stunt where performers rode motorbikes inside a huge sphere made of metal mesh. Since it involved driving at high speeds without even knowing which way was up or down, it was extremely difficult and dangerous.

If this was Lang’s ult, this “Halley” Embryo must’ve been based on this exact stunt.

“...Weren’t you a hippogryph rider?” I asked.

“Unfortunately, this baby only works inside its cage,” Lang said. “I need Pete—that’s my hippogryph—so I can move around outside.”

So the hippogryph was just his spare mount, and Lang was at his strongest when he was in this cage and on that motorbike. That explained why he hadn’t used it during the battle with Monochrome—this cage sure didn’t look like it could fly.

“I heard you were like a junior Riser, and I guess that includes riding a motorcycle, huh?” I said.

“Hell yeah!” he replied with a laugh.

It really stuck out to me that he’d actually told me about his Embryo. After he’d used his ult, I’d lost sight of him for a moment, and that would have been a good opportunity for him to attack me by surprise. Had he felt that it would be unfair if I didn’t know his abilities like he knew mine?

This focus on fighting fair and square was just like Riser too.

“Anyway, I guess we should get this started, huh?” Lang said as he grasped the handle and revved up his Halley. As the engine let out a roar, the mufflers released a black smoke.

“...Yeah,” I replied. I made Silver use Wind Hoof to create a compressed air barrier. Instead of completely surrounding us, I made it holed like the metal sphere.

Then, I had my right Miasmaflame Bracer let out its Hellish Miasma. The spray of gas flowed out through the gaps in my barrier.

I instantly noticed that none of it was escaping through the metallic mesh, which made me suspect that it not only bound us physically with the visible cage, but also had some of the properties of a non-physical barrier.

“I said I got the short end of the stick, but I’m not gonna lie—the idea of fighting Ray Starling the Unbreakable has got me pretty excited.” Lang was giving me the same kind of vibe that I’d felt from the many duel rankers I’d sparred against. I could sense him smiling under that mask.

“Word of advice: try not to blink,” he said as he revved up his ride again. “My Halley...is *pretty fast*.”

The moment he revved a bit harder, he *disappeared from sight*.

My eyes widened. The trail I could see at the edge of my vision made it clear that it wasn’t teleportation, but actual extreme speed.

And I wasn’t using “extreme” lightly. I hadn’t even blinked, yet I’d already lost sight of him.

“Ah! Behind you!” Nemesis warned me, but I felt an impact before I could even turn around.

“Gh...!” The attack was so heavy it blew me *and* Silver away. Despite the compressed air barrier sheltering us, we both took a considerable amount of damage.

And that wasn’t all. We were sent flying all the way to the opposite part of the cage.

However, before we could actually hit the wall, a silhouette approached us.

It was Lang on his bike. I couldn't see it before because the sunlight was drowning it out, but the bike was a blueish-white color, making it look like an actual comet speeding toward us.

The distance between us was quickly diminishing. "Nemesis!"

"Of course!" She activated Counter Absorption, and Lang drove right into it.

The damage that was supposed to reach us, as well as his kinetic energy, was taken by the barrier, briefly stopping him in his tracks.

"Purgatorial Flames!" I held up my left hand toward Lang and doused him in fire.

He quickly tried to turn away and evade it, but the fire reached him first.

"Damn it!" With his bike and rider suit singed, Lang accelerated and drove away from us. He was driving straight toward the inner wall of the spherical cage. He quickly reached a speed where I could barely see him anymore and instead of crashing into it, he began driving straight *up* the incline instead.

"Ah! SILVER!" Silver quickly used Wind Hoof to take refuge in the middle of the sphere, and a moment later a blue-white silhouette roared through the spot where we'd just been at a speed that not even sound could keep up with.

"...I see," said Nemesis. "This sphere is a space where he never has to slow down."

A Globe of Death was a stunt where the riders reached extreme speeds and spun around the inside surface of the mesh sphere until they were unable to differentiate up from down. Because of this,

Lang could accelerate and crash into his opponents from anywhere as long as they were standing on the sphere.

The open space in the middle of the sphere seemed safe, but I didn't feel like I could rely on it too much. Since this was Lang's Embryo and this was his home turf, it was best to assume that he had some sort of counter to anyone who took refuge in the interior space.

He was still racing around the edge right now, but he would probably do something else soon.

"But man..." I said, trailing off. Lang's speed really was insane. From what I could tell, it was considerably greater than even Marie's, who easily broke the sound barrier.

And not only was he fast; he easily turned this speed into offensive power. If I weren't an END build and hadn't increased my HP with my new VDA, I might've gotten some bad injury-based debuffs, and my situation would've been pretty dire. Silver was slightly damaged too and couldn't move as fast as usual.

"A high-rank job with a high-rank Embryo who reaches a speed like this..." said Nemesis. "I reckon there must be more to it."

"Yeah..." There were multiple ways that enhancements to an Embryo's abilities could be implemented, and the ones I was familiar with were "extra costs," "conditions," "uncontrollability," and "limitations."

"Extra costs" were obviously anything that enhanced skills or gave buffs using something other than MP or SP. Nemesis's damage counter could be considered one of these.

"Conditions" were the—well, special conditions that had to be fulfilled in order for the enhancement to have an effect. In Nemesis's case, Like a Flag Flying the Reversal was a good example.

“Uncontrollability” was trading control for raw output—in other words, discarding control over something, perhaps even making it dangerous to yourself, in exchange for increasing its power. Nemesis had nothing like this, but Miasmaflame Princess: Gardranda could be considered as such.

And finally, “limitations” were just that—anything that limited the scope or use of an ability. These included an ability having a set amount of uses or only being usable in certain environments. Needless to say, this included the use limits on my Counter Absorption.

I was pretty sure that Lang’s Halley also had to be operating under some limitations. He’d said that the bike could only be used within the metal sphere. So, by limiting where it could be used, Halley greatly enhanced its speed and charging ability as a Chariot.

The flaw with this arrangement was that it couldn’t do anything against anyone outside the cage, making Lang completely vulnerable to people with wide-range firepower, and they didn’t have to be as powerful as Shu to threaten him.

This weakness was what gave him all this speed and charging potential—but in a duel, this weakness barely meant anything.

The spherical cage was about as big as the stage itself. His opponents couldn’t get far enough away to avoid being enclosed, nor was there any space to attack him from the outside.

I would even say that it was *optimized* for duels.

“Lang...are you a duel ranker too?” I asked. Even as he replied, he kept up his insane speed that made him hard to see. The Doppler effect made some of it difficult to hear, but I could still make out what he said.

“I was! But right before we met, I lost to Max and got knocked outta 30th place! I hadn’t even gotten a nickname yet!” So he was an ex-

ranker. The speed and attack power he had here suddenly made sense.

He was no different from all those rankers who'd outclassed me before. Were my MVP rewards enough to close the gap or even surpass him?

"...Ray, the Hellish Miasma seems to have no effect," Nemesis notified me.

Since I'd released the poison miasma, it had filled the entire sphere. The triple debuffs it gave should've made it difficult for Lang to keep going as fast as he was, but he didn't seem affected.

And then I began to notice a reason for that.

"The miasma...is being mixed with a gas." The dark purple of the miasma was blended with something black—the gas released by the muffler as Lang revved up the bike.

I'd thought it was just the exhaust, but now it didn't seem like it was quite that simple.

"Halley...Halley's Comet... Oh, I get it now." While thinking about what Lang's Embryo was based on, I came across an explanation for the gas. "Halley's tail..." Halley's Comet was the first widely known example of a periodic comet, and over 130 years ago it was incorrectly theorized that its tail or "coma"—the gaseous bit—contained poison that would kill all life on earth, or that it would blow away the atmosphere and cause mass suffocation.

Of course, it had neither poisoned the earth nor rid it of oxygen, and ultimately, it turned out to be nothing worth worrying about. However, in this Embryo that was named after the comet, the dangers of its tail were very real.

The exhaust itself was a poisonous gas that filled the metal sphere. The reason why my miasma hadn't leaked out of the cage was because it was designed to keep this gas *in*.

This made me realize something else.

"...So he's wearing a gas mask too, huh?" That full-face helm must be gas-proof. He wouldn't have used this skill if it weren't.

Strangely enough, we'd had similar thoughts. And thanks to that, my Storm Visage protected me from his poison, but my Hellish Miasma couldn't hurt him either.

Because of this, we both had to find another way to come out on top. However, I was having a hard time thinking of anything that would work on him.

Lang moved around at incredible speeds. I couldn't catch up to him, and even landing a counterattack was a challenge.

Payback had to be charged, while Shining Despair was even harder to land than a regular counterattack. The same could be said about Grand Cross, which took a moment to activate. Using Chaser to copy his stats probably wouldn't do much good either. It wasn't Lang himself who was fast, but his mount. Taking his AGI wouldn't let me catch up.

"He said he lost to Max, though..." Nemesis noted. I knew about Max—she was one of Juliet's friends and one of the duel rankers. We'd recently teamed up for a quest, and she'd participated in The Anniversary too.

I vaguely knew her combat style and could imagine how she'd beaten Lang...but that didn't help me much. Her Ipetam had the ability to create lots of swords that she could use like drones. She must've filled the cage with them, making it impossible for Lang to ride properly.

That was something I couldn't do.

What else was there, then? Could I fill the area with Purgatorial Flames and cook him slowly? "No, I need something else..." I muttered. I got goosebumps just trying to search for some card I had to play.

This was a warning sign—my instincts were reacting to a danger my mind hadn't consciously recognized yet.

I pulled Silver's reins and dodged slightly to the side. The next moment, a blue-white silhouette passed by me at supersonic speeds.

Taking Silver's left plating and my left leg with it, the speeding figure pierced through to the other side of the cage.

"...Wh-What?!" I did my best to stabilize myself so I could stay mounted on Silver. I was so stunned it took my mind a moment to catch up and realize that the silhouette was just my opponent speeding around on his bike.

Spinning like a bullet, he'd flown through the air straight toward me. My guess was that he'd somehow jumped his bike off the cage's wall the moment his speed reached the maximum.

The move was like a racer flying uncontrollably off the course, but it had enough power to pulverize both me and Silver.

"Gh...!" I looked at the wall he'd flown toward, but there was nothing there now. I didn't see the destroyed remains of Lang or his bike, and I could only hear the engine sounds ahead as I tried and failed to catch up with him.

It seemed like he'd landed without a problem and was accelerating once more.

"...How does that technique work?" Nemesis, who'd finally caught up with the situation, said with mixed terror and amazement.

I was wondering the same thing—except I thought this technique seemed familiar somehow.

Back when I was in high school, our clubroom had volumes of a hobbyist manga about four-wheel drive car races lying around. I'd read them, and I was pretty sure I'd seen a technique like this in there. Doing it with a bike you were still riding seemed extremely reckless, but Lang was the Master of Halley—an Embryo focused on bike stunts. For all I knew, he was the perfect candidate for pulling off such a dangerous move.

"So he can even run us down if we're in the air. How shall we approach this, then?" Nemesis asked, slightly distressed.

Lang had already begun accelerating again, and he would probably pull that stunt on us one more time.

I felt like we barely had thirty seconds until the next attack, if that. If he kept up this hit and run strategy, we'd eventually mess up on our defense and be defeated. We could use Counter Absorption to cancel both his damage and kinetic energy, but he was so fast that we couldn't tell which direction he'd attack from. We'd most likely put up the barrier on the wrong side.

"...That leaves just one thing." The situation wasn't great for us, but we still had one card we could play.

"Our MP stores...are good." After the battle at the peace talks, I'd uncursed a whole lot of items. The nameless axe was an especially good source, and my Grudge-Soaked Greaves now had enough grudge to use *that*. Even though I'd lost the left one along with my leg, I probably didn't need more than the right for this.

The rest depended on how Halley worked—but in the worst-case scenario, I'd cover for it with Hellish Miasma.

"Ray...are you actually planning to use *that*?"

Yes, I am, I thought in response.

“Are you *certain* it’s a good idea?”

We have Halley and the duel barrier. That’s two layers of protection. Also, we don’t have an audience this time, and I don’t think it’ll be enough power to break out. And honestly...I doubt we’ll need to make it that powerful anyway.

“I suppose we can give it a try, then,” Nemesis said.

“Yeah,” I said as I lightly tapped Silver’s neck. “You know what to do, Silver.”

My steed let out a noise that was almost like a neigh.

And I...

“Wind Hoof...Activate.”

...prepared to use a certain tactic.

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Central Arena, Stage

“He’s tough,” said Lang to himself. “Just what I’d expect from Ray Starling the Unbreakable!”

He was speeding along Halley’s walls, half excited and half tense. The poison gas skill his Embryo had—Halley’s Tail—was still active, since it would give him the upper hand if the suffocating poison gave his opponent a debuff. The person he was fighting right now, however, seemed to have nullified this effect in the same way Lang himself did.

But that wasn’t a problem, since Lang had one more way of fighting—in this case, his max-speed flying charge attack.

Halley the bike could only work within Halley the metal sphere. It could only travel within this dark metal cage like a comet speeding through the night sky.

But because of this, within the cage, Halley's speed was unmatched.

Combined with Lang's job as Gale Rider, Halley could currently go over five times faster than the speed of sound. It needed some time to accelerate, but once it topped out, it had a level of speed and power that was completely unexpected from a fifth-form Embryo.

That held true even if it was in the air, and unless they had some special means of defense or incredibly high stats, anyone would die instantly when hit by four hundred kilos of raging metal moving at those unreal speeds.

Most of his defeats in duels—including the one against Max—had been because he was defeated before he could reach his maximum speed.

Because of this, people like Ray—who stayed in the air and observed—were only setting him up for victory. As long as Lang attacked at the right time and from an angle where Ray couldn't defend with Counter Absorption, he could end this battle in a single hit.

That was what he'd planned to do with his first flight, but Ray's own instincts prevented that. The deadly attack had only taken away a part of Ray's body, and Lang was forced to accelerate once again.

Even so, it was effective enough to make him certain he could win if he only landed a direct hit.

Twenty seconds until I top out! I'm moving at a speed he can't even track! I'll win as long as I don't let him guess the timing of my next jump, and I make him miss with Counter Absorption... Lang thought. It didn't even matter to him if Ray dodged the attack, since he could just repeat it over and over.

All he had to worry about was a scenario in which Ray used Counter Absorption *with* the correct timing and direction, but that was pretty unlikely.

Lang truly believed he could win this.

And that was when something happened to Ray.

That's... Lang began to realize what was going on.

Ray...or to be more precise, *Silver* underwent a change.

He was gathering the surrounding air and building the compressed air barrier once again. The barrier was all black, likely due to the miasma and poison gas that flooded Halley's cage.

I guess he wants to defend against my jump! It's my most powerful attack, though—it's gonna take a real good wall to protect against it! Lang was confident that his momentum could break through even Mithril and Ancient Legendary metal, so a wall of air barely fazed him.

He also realized that Ray may have also been using this omnidirectional barrier to determine where Lang's attack was coming from and *then* use Counter Absorption, instead of trying to block it.

"Now *that's* an idea! Let's see if you're fast enough!" Lang cried.

Thus passed a window of time that felt both short and long.

By the time Lang reached his maximum speed, Silver...was still gathering the air.

Despite that, he wasn't creating a vacuum. Halley had a function that prevented air from flowing out so that the poison gas from Halley's Tail could stay within its confines, but there was nothing keeping air from flowing *in*. The arena barrier also worked in a similar way in order to prevent vacuums caused by fires and the like.

The presence of air or the lack of it, though, didn't affect Lang and Halley's speed at all.

"A balloon's not gonna protect you—doesn't matter how thick it is!" Lang shouted as he prepared to jump with his bike for the finishing move.

Wait, no... In a moment, Lang's instincts told him something his mind didn't, just as Ray's had earlier.

Or more accurately, they'd *remembered something*.

It was a scene he'd witnessed—a color he was familiar with.

The reason Silver's barrier was black wasn't because of how much poison gas it was absorbing.

The blackness was due to the air in the barrier being so dense that not even light could pass through it.

This is... Lang knew about this strategy. In fact, most people with ties to Gideon knew about it.

It was the tactic that had led to Ray becoming known as the "Unbreakable."

It was a trick well outside Ray's usual combat repertoire, used only in that specific battle.

"Wind Hoof, cancel."

It was the Wind Hoof Bomb—a compressed air explosion.

The immense volume of air that had been compressed was released with Ray's words. The blast of air delivered destruction in every direction, and this time it was far worse than it had been when used against RSK—and that was because of Halley itself, which didn't let any air escape outside.

This was like dynamite going off inside a safe. In this airtight space, the blast was extremely fearsome.

Even so, it wasn't enough to shatter Halley's bars. The sturdy Castle designed to not let anyone out was able to withstand an explosion like this.

However, there was something that couldn't.

It was neither the safe nor the dynamite in this case—it was the safe's *contents*, lacking the endurance of the exterior—Lang himself.

As the interior of Halley was engulfed in violent destruction, his HP quickly began to drop...

...and it reached 0 before Ray's did.

Chapter Two: Remembering and Overlooking

Paladin, Ray Starling

My first battle in The Tournaments was done, and—however barely—I’d emerged victorious.

It was all thanks to the Wind Hoof Bomb. Against the God Hunter, I’d used it for just its knockback, but this time I had employed it more offensively. Not even the fastest enemies could avoid a huge explosion centered on you—essentially an omnidirectional attack.

Honestly, I felt like the cage being airtight made my explosion kind of overpowered, but both Halley and the duel barrier handled the force just fine, so it didn’t really matter—especially since the fight ended before the blast waves bounced off the walls and obliterated me as well.

Also, if Lang had charged at me while I was still compressing the air, I’d planned to cancel the charging right then. Doing that right as he touched my barrier would’ve basically guaranteed a hit. It would’ve been a bit of a gamble, though—Lang might’ve been incapacitated by the blow, or he might’ve kept charging through and ended up defeating me instead.

Regardless, the battle was over, and everything had worked out about as I’d expected.

Lang and I also got the opportunity to have a little chat after the match. Though we were both surprised by the cards we’d each played, we agreed that it was a pretty good and clean battle.

“...A ‘clean’ battle choked with miasma and poison gas,” said Nemesis. “I doubt it was good for the environment.”

“Kshoo. (Not...ecological.)”

Hey, don't say that, I thought.

Anyway, looking back at the fight, the reason I'd won was that I had a lot of cards I could play. Lang was slightly stronger than me in terms of baseline power and he'd completely negated my miasma and counterattacks, but I could still beat him using Silver's Wind Hoof Bomb.

This battle really drove home the fact that this *versatility* was my biggest strength.

I had Nemesis with her various counters, three MVP rewards, and Silver. My arsenal was so big that even if I was up against someone stronger than me, I had options that could give me the upper hand. This was even better in duels because even if I played every card I had in one match, they'd all be restored once it was over.

Winning my first fight had also given me more confidence. If I could keep this up in the second fight onward, I'd...

[Reiji, ya got a minute?]

"Hm?" Unexpectedly, I got a call over the Telepathy Cuffs from Shu.

[Yeah, sure. I just got out of my first match.]

[That so? Well, ya should know that uh...]

Shu seemed kinda panicked...or maybe troubled? Either way, he didn't sound like he usually did. I figured he wanted to tell me something but was also hesitant about it.

[...Ya know what, forget it. I'll tell ya after the preliminaries.]

[Huh? Uhh...okay?]

[Three more matches. Bear it, brother.] And with that, he ended the call, and I was left wondering what he wanted to tell me.

"What was that all about?" Nemesis wondered, just as confused as I was.

“...Beats me.” We looked at each other and tilted our heads in confusion.

When I came back to the waiting room, I instantly became the center of attention again. “He won. No surprises there,” I heard someone say, but honestly, I definitely didn’t feel like it was no surprise. The battle hadn’t been easy. I’d almost lost a bunch of times—hell, I could’ve lost the moment Lang created Halley. I hadn’t known what it did, so if he’d just charged at me instead of explaining it, I would’ve died easily.

“Indeed,” said Nemesis. She was out of the crest, but since there were people around, she spoke to me using telepathy. “I have always known this, but in Master-to-Master combat, one must always be wary of unknown abilities. Such ignorance might kill you in an instant.”

Yeah, I thought in response. With how varied Embryos can be, it’s scary to fight Masters who have powers you know nothing about.

“And that is why you need some means of avoiding such instant kills,” Nemesis continued via telepathy. “Duels do not allow Brooches or the Death Soldier’s skill, and my skills may lack the precision to fully protect you.”

I guess I should start every match by spreading Hellish Miasma.

That hadn’t done much against Lang because he was doing something similar, but it was pretty clear that it was an effective move in general. Whenever it actually worked, it would make my enemies slower. And if they lacked a means of attacking airborne opponents, I could use Silver to retreat to the sky. Then, I could spread the miasma throughout the area, switch to the flames if necessary, or even use Shining Despair—all while keeping a safe distance.

Though, that sounds kinda...

“If you do not mind me pointing it out... Would that not be...exceedingly villainous?”

...It would, I thought.

“What’s the point of looking good if it just ends up making you lose, though?” I asked out loud.

“Coming from a man who took a bite out of an undead and a devil, that is a truly convincing point...”

“I guess it is...whoa.”

I suddenly felt myself starting to doze off—the battle against Lang must’ve been more mentally demanding than I’d thought.

“We still have time until the second match. I will watch over you, so please do take a nap,” said Nemesis.

“You know what, I think I will. Thanks... Oh, and tell Smol Gar not to chew on me.”

“Very well.”

“Kshasha?”

I went ahead and closed my eyes. Soon enough, my mind drifted into sleep—not caused by a status effect, but simply from my own exhaustion.

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As I slept, I saw a dream—not like the one I’d had that morning, but a completely normal one.

“Mukudori, do you know the word ‘metagaming’?”

This dream was based around a memory I had from back when I was in a high school club. Still in my first year, I’d been sitting in front of a table and facing the person on the other side, who was the

president. The club was called the Electronic Game Research Society, or EGRS for short.

“I...can’t say I’ve heard the word, no.”

“It’s a gaming term that refers to the battle over the information on the game’s current climate.” Prez had trading cards spread out on the table. She was organizing them based on their levels or types and putting them together into a single pile...building a deck, so to speak.

“The ‘climate’ or ‘meta’ of card games changes all the time. New expansions get released, different cards get banned, new limits are set, different decks become popular, and new combos get discovered. It’s very important to gather this information before you build your deck and go to tourneys. Do you know why?”

“Uh, I don’t play card games that much...”

“I see. Don’t worry—I’ll teach you.”

EGRS was a video game club, but the shelves here were full of hobby mags and manga. This was because the prez—Koyomi Hoshizora—was a fan of tabletop games, especially TCGs. Since I was a new club member, she invited me to join her on this path and gave me a starter deck, a playmat, and other few things for it, so I felt like I had to play along.

“Gathering information about the meta is important because it increases your chances of winning against more opponents. For example, if the current meta is centered around lots of effects that let you pick cards from your deck, you can turn the cards with those effects into so much scrap paper by using cards that prevent that. It’s things like that.”

“...I’m not sure about some of the terms you used, but I think I get the principle.”

“But if you use that deck against someone with a deck that *doesn’t* use those cards, it’s your cards that’ll end up being total scrap. Every tourney starts before the first match even begins, with contestants competing against each other by guessing what decks will be the most popular and how to counter them. You can sometimes use a side deck for changes and corrections, but that’s just more reason to really focus on building your deck.”

Despite saying that deck-building was serious business, she seemed to be having fun doing it.

“If being able to counter your opponent’s moves is so important, why not just have a deck with a whole bunch of different counters?” I asked.

“That’s not a bad idea exactly, but doing that comes at the cost of stability. Also...” she said before squinting. “There are decks that can’t be countered.”

“Huh?”

“I mentioned that new combos can be discovered, didn’t I? People sometimes take these unknown combos straight into the tourneys. Combos that remained beneath the notice of this information-based society are as powerful as they are obscure. Most of them are found by combining old, forgotten cards with brand-new ones. Overcoming the boundaries of time, these forgotten things—*things you overlooked*—return to bare their fangs at you.”

Silence ensued.

“Well, in a more general sense...” she said before pausing for a moment, closing her eyes, and continuing. “In games that involve RNG, you may sometimes encounter deviations in phenomena that thoroughly surpass all your preparations.”

She then opened her eyes and looked right at me. “Mukudori, that’s exactly what’s gonna happen to you in some game three years from now. Be careful,” she said.

Prophetic words that came outta nowhere.

“How do you know that...?” I asked, all tense.

In response, she said, “My deck-building fortune-telling says so.”

“Wait, this was all fortune-telling?! What the hell?!” I said in surprise.

“I’ll have you know it’s pretty accurate. When I did a reading for the vice prez, I got it so right I actually freaked him out. It was written all over his *face*. Get it? ‘Face’? Like a card face?”

“...I don’t know if you should be that proud of that one.”

“Well, anyway...be careful three years from now.”

As the prez said those words, my dream came to an end.

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I woke up to a feeling of someone shaking me.

“Ray, wake up. You were called.”

“All right...” I looked to the side and saw Nemesis placing her hand on my shoulder. She must’ve shaken me awake.

I checked the time and realized that only about half an hour had passed. Well, the barriers were accelerated and there were fewer contestants for this battle than the first one, so maybe it wasn’t that surprising.

“Hm...” I took a moment to think about the dream I’d just seen. Was it a sign? It couldn’t be, right? Man, what was up with the dreams I was having today?

“She said it would be in three years, huh...” Three years from the spring when I was a first-year in high school. Wouldn’t that be...now?

“Ray?”

“...Don’t worry about it.” I switched my focus and once again followed the worker to the stage.

No matter how hard I tried, though, I couldn’t stop thinking about the dream.

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When I came out to the stage, I once again passed the black barrier. It looked like I’d gotten here first, since I couldn’t see the other person yet.

Just like last time, I hopped on Silver and prepared myself. I was still kinda tense, but now I at least had an idea of what I had to do to give myself the best chance of winning. I had to establish dominance using my debuffs and flying, use that time to get a grasp of my opponent, then choose the most effective card I could play. *And that’s how I...should win.*

“Ray.”

“Yeah?”

“Your expression does not match your thoughts. And even your thoughts feel as though you are trying to convince yourself.”

Nemesis’s words made me realize that, yeah, my face *was* all stiff. My heart was uneasy too.

“I just...have a bad feeling about this,” I said. The dream of the past—the fortune that prez had given me—was coiling around me like some hint or a curse.

I felt like something bad was about to happen and I wouldn’t be able to do anything to stop it.

“We are strong now,” said Nemesis. “No matter what sort of monster we face, we will not be powerless against it.”

Her words were encouraging and empowering, and they helped me relax at least a little bit.

“...Thanks.”

Soon after that, I saw my opponent on the other side.

“...Huh?”

The shock I received from seeing this person was incomparable to the one I’d gotten when I’d laid eyes on Lang. I could see her through the clear barrier, and that alone was enough for me to understand that the bad feeling I had was completely justified. The prez’s prediction was actually so right it was freaky.

Astonishment overtook both me and Nemesis as our opponent finally entered the stage.

We were now faced with *a Scandinavian beauty in a Chinese dress.*



“Wow! I haven’t seen you in so long!”

It was the fourth Superior of the kingdom—Lei-Lei the Prodigal of Feasts.

She was also known as a member of Death Period—our clan.

“...It’s been a while,” I said, still confused as to why she was here.

“Umm...did you register ahead of time?”

“Nope! I just joined today! I got some unexpected time off work, logged in, got into the lottery to take someone’s slot and won! It’s pretty exciting, huh?! We may get to fight a UBM! I’m pretty excited that I get to fight you too!”

Lei-Lei answered my question with a smile on her face.

...Yeah, that was how it worked, wasn’t it? If a Tournament slot opened up, they’d hold a lottery to let someone take their place. A slot happened to open up, Lei-Lei happened to have some time off, and then she happened to win the resulting lottery.

It was all by chance—*a deviation in phenomena*.

I had no words. I’d completely *overlooked* the fact that this could happen.

Lei-Lei couldn’t log in regularly, rarely showed herself, and was generally hard to get ahold of. Shu had even told me that she was busy with work recently.

But even taking all that into consideration, the chance of her being in the Tournament *was never zero*.

This had to be what Shu’d wanted to tell me and then decided not to—that Lei-Lei got a spot in the Tournament.

He'd probably thought that there was no point in telling me because the ladder would be revealed anyway and it would only make me more tense.

But now we had this situation. It was just the second battle of the preliminaries, and I was up against Lei-Lei.

The randomized Tournament ladder led to us—members of the same clan—fighting each other.

This was the deviation in phenomena that thoroughly surpassed all my preparations.

Of all the people I could've fought, it had to be Lei-Lei, huh?

“...Ray,” said Nemesis. I could tell by her voice that she was shaken too.

Since both me and Lei-Lei were from the same clan, you could say that it was good for us no matter which one of us won...but on a personal level, she was no doubt my greatest obstacle in this Tournament.

“...We got the third one,” I said.

“...Indeed.”

This would be our third time fighting an Altarian Superior.

The first time was when we'd accidentally ran into Figaro in the Tomb Labyrinth.

The second time was when we'd faced Miss Eldritch after she'd kidnapped me.

And now this would be the third time—where we would fight Lei-Lei in an arena. It wasn't an accident or a crime—it was a struggle to the end atop a duel stage.

This was only my second fight, but I felt like I'd already met The Tournaments' final boss.

If something like this was enough to break us, though, we'd have already been broken long before this.

"I said that we would not be powerless no matter what sort of monster we faced, did I not?" said Nemesis.

"You did."

"We now stand against something far more than a monster, but I have no intention of taking my words back."

"I don't plan on losing either. Let's win this, Nemesis!"

"Certainly!"

Thus began yet another one of our fights against a Superior.

"Twenty seconds." A referee began to count down the time.

Lei-Lei the Prodigal of Feasts. Though I'd met her on my very first day in *Dendro*, I still didn't know much about her. The only time I'd seen her fight was the recording Marie'd shown me, where Lei-Lei had exterminated Goblin Street.

I couldn't really tell what she was doing, though. She was somehow making Goblin Street's Masters melt and explode by just touching them, but I had no idea about the mechanics behind that—neither Shu nor Figaro had ever told me.

"I suppose we can assume that we cannot let her draw close," said Nemesis.

"Yeah..." It was pretty clear that even a single touch from her exposed hands could kill me.

I tried checking her stats using Reveal, but just like in the first battle, basically everything was hidden. I wasn't allowed to know how much AGI or what job she had.

I couldn't help but tense up and gulp.

“This is gonna be our first battle! I can’t wait!” Lei-Lei, on the other hand, looked completely relaxed. She was practically *beaming*.

“Ten seconds.” We were in completely different states of mind, but we both had the same amount of time until the duel began—and that moment was rapidly approaching.

“Five...four...three...two...one...zero!”

The moment the fight began, I spurred Silver into the sky. I didn’t know if Lei-Lei had any aerial combat abilities, but I knew that if I stayed on the surface, she’d get close and kill me instantly. It was best to go with my original plan and take to the air.

“Where is she now...?!” Would Lei-Lei follow after us now that we were in the air? That was the first thing I had to find out, and the result was...

“Wow! Your horse is flying! It’s one of those things that are all the rage these days, huh?” she said as she...*began singing*.

She wasn’t following after us. Hell, she wasn’t moving at all.

She was just looking up at us from the ground and, for some reason, singing a cheerful song.

An extremely pleasant voice began to fill the stage.

“...What the hell?” Was she that confident she’d win or was she just an airhead? I thought the song would give me some debuff, but when I checked my stats, I didn’t see any status effects on me.

Well, whatever it was, there was only one thing I had to do here. I had to fill the stage with miasma to create a better situation for myself and close the gap between Lei-Lei and me.

With that thought, I pointed my right hand down at her and activated my skill. “Hellish Miasma!”

“Fire!” Lei-Lei called out.

That was when *my right hand disappeared*.

“...What?” My right arm that was supposed to release the Hellish Miasma, as well as the right Miasmaflame Bracer equipped on it, *had melted away*.

Shock overcame me, and one particular memory rose up in my mind—my battle against Logan. After I’d summoned Gardranda, she’d used Hellish Miasma: Zero to completely melt an armored devil, bones and all.

What had just happened to me looked really similar to that, only I wasn’t the one using it.

The fact that even my Miasmaflame Bracer was destroyed made it clear that something was very wrong here.

“Is this...a power that buffs the enemy’s attack and sends it back to them before it happens?” I wondered. Powers centered around retribution might’ve been able to do something like that, but it didn’t feel right. After all, Lei-Lei *wasn’t doing anything*. She was just singing and looking up at me.

Or was this some kind of preemptive retribution power that only needed her to sing?

That also seemed wrong, simply because it was too absurd and unfair.

“What did she do to—” Before I could finish my sentence, I let out a cough.

“Ray...?!” Nemesis cried. I put my hand to my mouth, and it was instantly painted red.

That wasn’t all. While I was preoccupied with my right arm melting off, a disturbing amount of blood had pooled on the saddle.

It had all come from my own stomach. I had pain sensations turned off, so I’d failed to realize that *my stomach had melted open*.

“...What...the hell?” She wasn’t near me. She hadn’t touched me. I had no idea what she was doing to me.

Despite that, she’d already given me a fatal injury.

Lei-Lei was still doing nothing but singing—but at least I finally realized something.

Even though there were no debuffs on my status window, and even though I had no idea how this all worked, it was clear by now that *this song was her attack*.

I didn’t know how, but she was attacking me using sound as the intermediary.

And if I didn’t stop the song soon, I’d die.

“MONOCHROME!” As I raised my voice, my Black Warcoat began to move, taking the place of my right arm and forming into a jet-black cannon.

If I had to settle this as quickly as possible while keeping a distance from her, this was the only thing I could use. Shining Despair—one of my most powerful attacks, capable of delivering extreme heat at the speed of light. We were in an arena, but if I fired it downward I didn’t have to worry about it breaking through the barrier and damaging the city. It was just like the battle between Figaro and Miss Eldritch.

“Shining...” As I began to call out the skill, heat and light gathered in the dark cannon...and the *Black Warcoat* evaporated under the heat.

I had no words.

This was outrageous. Monochrome was not just the source of the Shining Despair attack—it also had Light Absorption that should’ve made it immune to lasers. How could its own laser have made it evaporate?

At the very least, this told me a lot more about exactly how this attack worked.

She wasn't sending my attacks back to me before they even happened. If that were the case, Monochrome wouldn't have vanished.

Instead, the phenomenon at play was...

"Resistance...negation!" I gasped.

She was dealing not with status effects, but something *before the status effect had even been applied*.

Resistance to status effects was a kind of hidden stat that was influenced by END and other things—and that was exactly what Lei-Lei's Embryo affected. She completely erased resistances to status effects, as well as to the elements.

No, that wasn't quite right—looking at what had happened, she didn't just erase them. *She brought resistances into the negatives*.

She debuffed the resistances themselves, making it far easier for the target to receive status effects or be affected by changes in temperature. That was why my right Miasmaflame Bracer was melted by its own miasma, and why my Black Warcoat was evaporated by its own burning light despite being designed to absorb it.

It was like they were animals dying to their own poison.

"Such a fearsome power...!" said Nemesis. It was like Miss Eldritch's Kaguya, except focused exclusively on debuffing resistances.

That meant that basically all attacks built around status effects and energy releases would just destroy me before they did anything to Lei-Lei. If I used my left Miasmaflame Bracer to fire Purgatorial Flames, they'd just burn along with my arm and become Charred.

I looked down at the hole in my stomach and realized that it had actually gotten bigger. And that wasn't all—when I touched the

wound with my left hand, the Miasmaflame Bracer released white smoke and began to melt.

“So that’s...how you’re doing this...”

Negative resistance explained the hole in my stomach too. You could call the wound a kind of ulcer—except in this case, it wasn’t just the gastric walls that were failing. My entire body had lost so much resistance to acid that even my own digestive fluids were harmful.

“Basically...she can kill any living creature without doing anything...” I said.

A wielder of a destructive song that made all nearby living beings die on their own—that was Lei-Lei, the Prodigal of Feasts.

To her, living beings were just pieces of *meat* that melted away and became like *drink*, completing the feast.

I had no idea who’d given her the name, but now that I knew its meaning, it just chilled me to the core.

“Ray... Well...? What should we do?” Nemesis asked.

This series of gruesome disasters seemed to have greatly disturbed her too.

That made me realize what I had to do, though.

“...Nemesis. The Halberd.”

“...Right away!” She transformed into a halberd with a black flag flying behind it and activated Like a Flag Flying the Reversal. I instantly felt the spread of the hole in my stomach begin to slow down.

“It’s not enough to cancel out the effect...but enough to make it less dire.” Reversal was also a resistance skill. Though it couldn’t flip my resistances back into the positives, it looked like it could make this more bearable, at least.

...It did the same with Miss Eldritch, so I guess it's no surprise it kinda works here too, I thought.

“Nemesis...we’re gonna fight from up close.”

“...It does not seem that we have any other choice.” We’d lost all means of attacking from a distance, so we had to settle this in melee combat. “Why not use Silver to block out the sound?” Nemesis asked.

A dense enough compressed air barrier may have been able to block the flow of sound, but...

“We don’t know if it’ll stop the debuff that’s already on us...and we have no time to make it.” I was still losing HP to the hole in my stomach. Time wasn’t on my side anymore, so I couldn’t waste it by just waiting and seeing—or by making the Wind Hoof Bomb. “Also, we were watching out for her touch at first, but that probably doesn’t actually mean much.”

Lei-Lei’s hands must’ve had some sort of debuff on them.

Certain jobs in the boxer grouping had this skill called “Poison Hand.” By itself, it was just a debuff attack, but when delivered to a body with negative resistance, it became a skill that killed instantly.

Also, it could’ve been that her Embryo was activated by the sound the attack made when it touched the body. If Poison Hand actually had that kind of synergy with Lei-Lei’s Embryo, it really was a fearsome combo.

However, none of that meant anything if it didn’t touch me.

“I’ll flank her and try to attack her then.” Assuming that she was going all out in that recording I’d seen, I might be able to counter her—and I still had my Counter Absorption uses.

It was a shame my Reveal couldn’t see her stats, but I had no choice but to do this anyway.

“Though...I don’t think I have the attack power.”

“Indeed...the damage counter might as well be empty.”

My biggest problem now was that I had no means of finishing her off. The negative resistances made my Miasmaflame Bracers and Black Warcoat completely unusable, and all the damage I’d received so far technically came from me. Lei-Lei hadn’t actually *damaged* me—she’d only lowered my resistances—which meant that I couldn’t use Vengeance, Payback, or Chaser. And I doubted that I had enough power to defeat her with basic Flag Halberd attacks.

I thought that maybe Grand Cross would do the trick, but to use it, I had to descend to the surface and stand in place for a moment. She might have been able to take advantage of that, and if her level was high enough, it might’ve not been enough to kill her anyway.

I had few cards I could play, and my odds of winning were slim.

As things were, it looked like the only thing I had that could finish her off was...our new friend.

“You intend to gamble on that?” asked Nemesis. Well, we were already screwed. If we wanted to turn this around, this was our only chance.

“Yeah...let’s do it!”

“Very well!”

We rode Silver straight toward Lei-Lei.

Accelerated by gravity, we slightly shifted our trajectory as we approached. She was still singing, but she was paying close attention to our movements too.

“GRAAAHHH!” When I was close enough, I let out a roar and swung my Flag Halberd at her. However, she dodged it by merely throwing her upper body back.

The moment my blade passed her, she went back to her previous stance, then charged right at me. Silver was trying to get us away from her, but she was able to instantly close the distance anyway.

I had no idea if this was the result of some skill or if it was just her own stats. Regardless, I was now in range of her deadly hands.

Still singing her heart out, she thrust her poisonous claw toward me.

“Counter Absorption!”

But that was when Nemesis switched to her human form and created a barrier of light. It deflected the lethal hand and stopped Lei-Lei in place for a moment.

“NOW...!” I seized the opportunity, raised my left hand above my head, and used Instant Equip.

And thus, I took out the nameless axe covered in the black cloth.

I had a feeling that this weapon was powerful enough to defeat her. Even if merely swinging it once blew away my arm, it didn’t change the fact that I *could* still swing it.

Lei-Lei didn’t stop singing, but I could see her eyes slightly widen.

“HIYAAA...!” I began swinging the axe, and after it had only moved a few centimeters through the air, I felt something off.

It was as though something was flowing through me, with my left hand as its source.

After that, a change overcame my body so fast that I couldn’t even react to it.

It was just like what had happened to my right arm when I’d sparred against Rook, but with *a far greater reach*.

My entire body was turned to dust.

And as I felt myself shattering, my consciousness faded away.

◇

Next thing I knew, the stage's barrier was undone.

In actual time, the battle had ended before even half a minute had passed.

I'd participated on the first day of The Tournaments...

...and was knocked out after my second battle.

Chapter Three: The Next Stage

Paladin, Ray Starling

After the second match, I went back home to the eighth arena.

Just like I had this morning, I was now lying on the stage and watching the clouds pass. I heaved a heavy sigh.

“Kshoo? (Are you...feeling down?)” Smol Gar asked as she sat on my forehead and lightly slapped my face.

“Honestly...yeah, I am.”

“Kshaa. (I see...)”

After the match, Lei-Lei’d told me she had fun fighting me. I didn’t know if she was just being nice or if she’d actually enjoyed it.

She’d also said that if she won and got the right to challenge the UBM, she’d invite me and some other clan members into the battle, though, and added that she’d try her best to come out on top—not that I could really imagine her losing. So, as far as the clan was concerned, this was kind of a good outcome. I’d even told everyone who was going to come to cheer for me to go cheer for her instead.

But on a personal level...yeah, I wasn’t taking this too well.

“Hrm...” I knew Lei-Lei was a Superior, but I’d lost to her with almost no effort on her part.

Honestly, this left me pretty shocked. Sure, this wasn’t the first time I’d lost like this. I couldn’t even count how many times someone had made quick work of me during sparring, but despite that, my defeat had hit me way harder than the time Marie had first killed me, or the time Miss Eldritch had overpowered me in her base.

That had to be because until I’d lost to Lei-Lei I’d actually believed I’d grown stronger since those incidents. Nemesis was now a high-rank Embryo, plus I had Silver and three MVP rewards, along with a

general increase in my stats. And then there was all the experience I'd built up during my many battles here in *Dendro*. I'd thought I was way better than I'd used to be, and that was why it had stung extra hard that Lei-Lei had beaten me so easily.

Considering that she'd shut herself up inside the crest, Nemesis must've felt the same way.

Still...

“...Ksha? (...Are you broken now?)”

I didn't need Smol Gar asking me questions like that to realize it—I could see my feelings clearly with just a little introspection. However, the pain and shock I was feeling now...none of it was anything I couldn't recover from.

“...No,” I said. “I'm just a little bent.”

I could see this feeling for what it was: a pain meant to make me stronger.

The shock was something else, but I hadn't been *broken*. Lei-Lei had crushed me in the battle, but I'd still gained something from the whole experience. I was really an idiot, thinking I'd already gained enough power and that I had enough tricks up my sleeve.

It was exactly *because* I'd been defeated that I could once again clearly see what I had to focus on in order to grow stronger. And now that I'd realized that, it gave me the drive to stand up again.

“If you are bent, then we must simply hammer you back into shape,” Nemesis said as she appeared from the crest. She'd had the exact same thoughts as me.

“Yeah. There's still time until night falls and the final match ends. We should do some training before then,” I said.

“Indeed!”

It was pretty clear that Lei-Lei would win this Tournament, and the winners had the right to pick the day on which they'd fight their UBMs.

Since Lei-Lei had schedule issues, though, she'd almost certainly want to fight her UBM right after the winning match. I didn't think I could become the MVP with her fighting alongside me, but UBMs were powerful, so fighting it was a good way to get some combat experience nevertheless.

"I guess we should do some leveling to prepare for that... I'd like to do some tests on this thing here too, but that will probably take some time, so I'll save that for later."

As I said that, I reached into my inventory and took out a weapon—the nameless axe.

Nemesis jumped in shock at the sight of the weapon.

"*What?!* Ray! You still intend to use it?! But it turned you into dust!" For some reason, she was full of indignation at this. "It scattered you into pieces at the worst possible time—right before you could deliver the decisive strike!" Apparently, she was really upset by the way the battle had ended. Nemesis was a weapon herself, so she must've not appreciated the results.

"But, Nemesis...it's not like it was the axe's fault."

She was right that I'd basically lost to myself rather than Lei-Lei, and...yeah, it was because of this axe. But that defeat had allowed me to notice something about the weapon and finally understand it.

While sparring against Rook I'd only lost an arm, but in the Tournament I'd lost my entire body. I could kinda see what had caused this difference now, and it was all because my enemy was Lei-Lei.

The effect that had destroyed my arm and body wasn't just simple physical damage. That was why it had become way worse after Lei-Lei had reduced my resistances.

I didn't know what was the power that had flowed through my body, but this was a big hint.

If I had some sort of resistance item that directly countered this effect—similar to Monochrome's Light Absorption—I might have been able to wield this axe without any consequence.

"This axe isn't some crazed monster—it has its own rules. What happened was just the result of that."

"Hrm..." was Nemesis's only response.

I was thinking I could use the barrier at our base to try and find out the nature of the effect this axe inflicted upon me. Getting all the resistance gear would probably be difficult, and the testing would take a lot of time, but I at least had an idea what I had to do now.

"But...what if this had nothing to do with Lei-Lei's skill, and the axe merely made the effect worse because it was in a bad mood?" Nemesis suggested.

That...could be true, I guess... Wait, could it? No. There's no way...right? I'd talked to the axe a bunch of times this morning, but I really doubted that would put it in a bad mood.

"We're cool...right?" I tried asking it, but the axe obviously didn't respond.

"Well...let us put that aside for now," said Nemesis. "More important right now is the leveling. Where do you intend? Gideon's surroundings are too crowded for that."

"Oh yeah, that's true." Thanks to The Tournaments, a whole lot of Masters had come to Gideon. Many wouldn't be participating until the later days, and from what I'd heard, a bunch of them were

currently leveling or adjusting their builds by killing whatever monsters they could find around the city.

I also wanted to avoid any unnecessary attention, so I didn't want to level anywhere with too many other players.

"And I can't use Hellish Miasma wherever there's people," I added, following this line of thought.

"Ksha. (It's really...useful.)"

"...I feel you are becoming too reliant on it," Nemesis said.

Well, regardless, if I was gonna level, I'd have to do it in a zone that didn't have many people, was right for my level range, and was close enough to let me come back by night.

And, well, I actually know of a place like that, I thought.

"You do?" Nemesis answered me, out loud.

"Shu told me about it. It's about an hour from here by Silver, and it's just right for me to level solo. It's actually at the very south edge of the kingdom, and it used to be a buffer zone between Altar and Legendaria." Apparently, it had been dominated by a powerful UBM at some point, but after Shu had teamed up with someone to beat it, the area was annexed by the kingdom. "It's a mountainous area with almost no roads going through it, but Silver can fly, so that's not a problem. It's also on the opposite side of the Border Mountain Belt from all the Skydragons, so we probably won't run into any of them either. And if something happens in the air, we can just flee to the surface. It's perfect, isn't it?"

"I see. It does sound like it."

"Rook said that he leveled there too."

"You began at about the same time, yet your levels have grown so far apart." Rook had always been a fast leveler, but while I had to

reduce my login frequency because of college, he'd started power leveling like crazy and was way ahead of me now.

"His three girls have become stronger too," I added. Apparently, they were close to becoming Pure-Dragon-tier.

It'd depend on who he was matched with, but I was pretty sure he could win his Tournament.

The only difficulty he had in duels was the time he needed to prepare the Union Jack. You could get on mounts and take out your tamed monsters as long as they didn't exceed your minion capacity, but preparing skills before the start of the fight was a no-no.

"Ksha? (Instead of thinking about others, you should focus on improving yourself...right?)"

"Yeah. Let's go."

"Very well." I took out Silver and jumped on him. Nemesis sat behind me like she had earlier, while Smol Gar got on the top of my head.

I hope she doesn't fall off, I thought.

Anyway, I refocused myself and went to level at the Altar-Legendaria border to the south—in the area once occupied by the UBM known as "Divine Disks."



Gao!

This was a place meant to contain Masters who'd broken the law and was currently a realm of death.

Three days ago, the Superior known as King of Plagues, Candy, used his Embryo Resheph to infect it with a deadly virus that killed nearly all the prisoners. That had turned it into an uninhabitable space where merely logging in meant infection and a consequent death penalty that banned you from the game for three days. The few

survivors had also been massacred by another Superior—Gerbera—who'd been excluded as a target of the virus.

This extermination, which had continued for nearly three days now, had left the gaol empty of everyone but the Superiors, and nobody could even log in because of the death penalty.

All this was merely part of Sechs's plan to take the members of Illegal Frontier out of the gaol. The other Masters inside it were uncertain variables that could interfere with the prison break, so they had to be removed as preparation.

And now, the actual prison break was barely an hour away.

"Phew. So this is the last time we'll drink this tasty coffee here," said Candy.

"Yeah...but it's not like we won't ever get to drink the leader's coffee again... Oh, leader—don't forget this dolphin glass."

They were all sitting at the counter in Sechs's café, Dice, and shared their thoughts while enjoying the last coffee they'd have here inside the gaol.

The café had been cleaned up and now looked empty, like a home before a move. April, AKA Diamond Slayer—the café's employee and Sechs's property—had also been stored away into his inventory.

"I feel like a lot of time has passed since I was sent here at the start of April, but the month isn't even over yet...I really can't keep track of the time here."

Gerbera felt as if she'd always been in the gaol, her perception no doubt affected by the tripled time.

Candy seemed to share her sentiment. "I feel like it's been forever ago. I was just *getting some XP* in the great outdoors when suddenly some weird-looking meanie in shades fell from the sky and made me

drop. I figured I'd just level up in the gaol, but Sechsy got in the way and Hanny the big-legged forever-bachelorette crushed me."

Remembering every detail, Candy looked back at his first days here.

Those words reminded Sechs of something. "Figaro actually proposed to her shortly after she was released."

"*What...?!* Uh, I mean...oh, really?" Candy was so shocked he broke character for a moment—that's how big a surprise it was for him.

"Yes. This is info from a reliable source too."

"Wow. Just...wow. Hanny was my tea-drinking bestie, but I always thought that thing she had for him was one-sided..."

"I believe everyone besides Hannya and Figaro themselves thought the same thing."

"Human relationships make my head spin. Not even a *god* like me can understand them!" Candy said, throwing in a random wink and pose.

Sechs showed no reaction to Candy's theatrics and maintained his usual smile. "I'm glad Hanny's happy though. I graciously forgave her for crushing me and forgot all about it, so she can have my blessings!"

The very fact that Candy mentioned it at all meant that he'd neither forgotten it *nor* forgiven her for it, but it did seem like he was genuinely in a celebratory mood.

"Hrmm...that got me thinking though. Hanny's already gone, and our jolly crew's about to leave too, so...be honest with me, what'll happen to the gaol?" Candy went on.

"The prisoners will probably split into small factions and fight for dominance. This will last a while—maybe even a very long time. It may even become a completely lawless area and remain like that forever."

The existence of the Superiors was a pacifying force here. The prisoners sent to the gaol had fewer ways to enjoy *Dendro* to begin with, but the overpowering presence of the Superiors had made them go further and keep a low profile to avoid being marked. The regulars who weren't trying to avoid their notice wanted to act like Illegal Frontrier's underlings, but the overall effect was the same.

Once the Superiors were gone, they would most likely start having fun by fighting for dominance.

"What about that shut-in?" Candy asked.

"Fu'uta?" Sechs replied. "I don't believe he will do anything soon."

"Why does he even log in to *Dendro*, anyway? What's so fun about just staying in that hole at the edge of the gaol? Plus, my viruses don't reach him for some reason, and I just dunno what that's about."

"That's exactly what he's doing there—nothing."

Fu'uta had been in the gaol since before both Sechs and Candy had arrived. He was sitting in a dungeon, but he wasn't even doing any leveling.

In fact, he couldn't level up even if he wanted to—he didn't even have a single job.

He also didn't gather any items or interact with anyone else. He completely refused to have fun with the game and just stayed in that one place.

"Nothing? If you ask me, reality is a better place for that."

"He is waiting for his preparations to be done."

"Preparations?"

"Time is his ally. He will slowly encroach on the Resources comprising the gaol, and then finally eat his way out of it by himself."

Candy furrowed his brow at these words. They made Fu'uta sound like a malignant disease, which Candy felt was supposed to be *his* thing.

"And then? What'll he do when he's outside?"

"I did not speak to him for long, so I am unsure myself. However, I do remember the words I heard him whisper once."

Sechs had tried to invite Fu'uta to Illegal Frontier several times in the past, but Fu'uta had refused every time, and had continued rejecting him even after Sechs had given up on recruiting him and simply wanted to become better acquainted. Despite such limited interactions, however, Sechs was actually the Master who was closer to Fu'uta than anyone else.

That was why he'd been able to hear this whisper.

"Apparently, it's 'For dad.'"

"...Dad?" Candy couldn't make sense of that. "He's being a shut-in and preparing to break out of jail for his papa? I don't get that at all. It's even more confusing than Hanny's relationship!"

"You aren't wrong. I suppose he must be driven by some feelings nobody else can understand," Sechs said, taking a sip of coffee and thinking back to the time he himself acted on nothing but his own inscrutable motives. "Anyway, the situation means that Fu'uta will not influence the state of the gaol after we leave. It will become a place where the more cunning prisoners—or pre-Superiors such as Gakido—play a game of domination."

"That sounds kinda fun too," Candy said—ironically, since his presence was part of the reason such a conflict had been impossible up until now. What meaning was there in a battle for control of the gaol when there was someone who could completely destroy the whole place around?

“That made me wonder...what’s gonna happen to this café?”

“I decided to transfer control of it to a prisoner. More specifically, after we leave, the ownership will go to the first person who visits it.”

“Well, lucky them. Hm...?”

Candy tilted his head in confusion. Normally, this would be the part where Gerbera, being the downer she was, would say something along the lines of “this place is basically cursed and haunted, so I’m not sure if whoever gets it is *lucky*. That person would be our leader’s successor, kinda, so they’d probably be targeted over ownership of the building.”

However, Candy realized that Gerbera was no longer at his side.

Where did Gerby go? How long was she gone? he wondered. Gerbera had been with them, enjoying her last drink in this café—but now, all that was left was the dolphin glass she liked so much.

She’d vanished so naturally it was shocking. Her control over her skills was far above what it had been before. While Gerbera’s self-confidence had dropped, she had become so much more competent that it was beyond comparison. Her behavior had actually changed precisely *because* her self-worth had dropped, and as a result she’d become more careful and cowardly.

On that front, Sechs could only thank Shu for sending her here, and Rook for taking her down a peg despite being less powerful than her.

It seems she is preparing for it, Sechs thought. Gerbera acting like this was part of the reason why their prison break would surely be a success.

“Anyway, we finished our coffee, so...let us begin.” Sechs washed their glasses, put them away, and looked at Candy as well as the

observer of the gaol, who was surely watching them from somewhere.

"And now, we leave," Sechs declared, as if it was already a settled matter.

King of Crime would now escape the cage maintained by an Infinite Embryo.



"...It's about to begin." In a control AI workspace surrounded by countless windows, the observer of the gaol and control AI no. 6—Red King—adjusted his glasses as he spoke.

One of the windows showed Sechs, standing at the edge of the gaol.

Red King had known this day would come soon. Sechs had asked him if he could break out, and Red King had given him permission. The criminal was free to try it.

Red King had also added that he wouldn't go out of his way to bring Sechs back here either.

Masters were sent to the gaol only if they came back from a death penalty without any usable save points. However, after the prisoners returned from their death penalties, they could log in and out normally. If they logged out *after* breaking out of the gaol, they would be able to log in at the same location they'd been when they logged out.

They would be free the moment they took a single step outside the gaol.

Red King wouldn't send anyone to chase them down. If they happened to get the death penalty again after escaping, they'd be sent back to the gaol—but until then, they'd be completely free.

"No one has successfully passed this test of mine. I wonder how he will rise to the occasion."

Despite having given them permission, Red King had no intention of just *letting* them escape. Anyone trying to go from inside the gaol to the outside would be obstructed by Space Fixation.

This was the power mimicked by the pre-ancient superweapon, Acra, and the wall of fixed space it created was so tough that no amount of simple physical force would be enough—not even King of Beasts would be capable of it. The power and scope of this Space Fixation far exceeded its copy.

The wall also could not be influenced from the outside. The gaol was located at a certain set of coordinates within *Infinite Dendrogram*, but it *couldn't be touched*.

You couldn't even see it from the coordinates it occupied. Even if someone outside passed right through the place where the gaol was, unlike those inside, they wouldn't hit any walls and would simply move right through.

The gaol was an isolated area that was almost impossible to escape. The only ways you could do it was by using King of Destruction's Right of Destruction; the Primeval Blade, Altar; or an Embryo that could manipulate space itself, just like Red King could.

And still, not even those methods would be a guarantee.

"Sechs has many cards he can play. I'm not aware of all of them...but it should still be a difficult task for him."

King of Crime had declared that he would break out of the gaol, but Red King did not know the means by which he intended to do it. Red King was the warden here, but not even he had a full grasp of the many and varied abilities Sechs had in stock.

But even if Sechs had some resource or ability that Red King was not aware of, breaking out would still be a challenge no matter what.

"Especially when there's three of them..." To escape as a group, they would have to break the gaol's wall on a large scale.

This had not been impossible for Sechs at an earlier point. If he'd used his ultimate skill to transform into King of Destruction, Shu Starling, then used Split Spirit to divide into six, and *then* used Right of Destruction to attack the wall, he may have forced open a hole that would've taken longer to fix, allowing all three of them to escape.

But he couldn't do that now. He hadn't yet recovered the levels he'd spent on the battle that'd sent him to the gaol in the first place—and King of Destruction had leveled up since then, already making it impossible for Sechs to transform into him.

What about the other two?

If Candy used the MVP reward he'd gotten from the Irregularity, Disaster Bioweapon, he may have been able to break the Red King's cage—but that only applied if Red King was in an area infected by Candy's viruses.

As long as Red King himself didn't contract Candy's diseases, they would have no effect on him. King of Plagues' powers were effective against living beings and matter, but not against space itself.

Because of this, Candy wasn't a threat to Red King. His role in this prison break had begun and ended with the extermination of all other Masters here in the gaol.

The last one of the three, Gerbera, wasn't even worth considering. Even if she could become invisible and imperceptible, she would still be within the gaol. This Space Fixation had no gaps in it, and slipping through it was impossible. Thus, she couldn't do anything. She had absolutely no means of overcoming Red King's spatial control.

Realizing once again that Sechs was the core of this prison break, Red King remained in his workspace, safe from the viruses, and prepared for the attempt.

The Infinite Embryo and warden of the gaol wondered how they would try to outsmart him and—as imprudent as it was—he looked forward to seeing it.



Sechs was standing at the edge of the gaol, right next to the Space Fixation wall separating the inside and outside.

The area around him was covered in marks left by countless assaults. At some places the surface was melted, and large fragments of metal were scattered all around.

These were the traces of the attempts others had made to challenge this wall—the scars left behind by those who'd tried and failed to escape by destroying the indestructible.

Everyone in the gaol knew that there was a wall here, but as of yet, no one had passed through it.

The only one who'd been able to even open a hole in it was Hannya, and it was only after she'd become a Superior. She'd tried to break out many times before her sentence expired, and in the end, she'd been released before she could succeed.

“One could compare this wall to an impregnable fortress. Not that it is a Castle, of course.”

Sechs was among those who knew that the control Als were Embryos.

Based on his observations, he assumed that Red King was originally a Type World mixed with Apostle. And because spatial awareness was a specialty of the Angel type, he guessed that Red King was a Type Apostle-Angel/World.

This meant he had three core traits: space domination, space awareness, and space deployment.

Indeed—the gaol was managed by an Embryo that exceeded all others in his control over space itself. Red King was the uncontested ruler of this realm, and the edge of the gaol was the web that he'd spun.

This was the only exit out of here. Many had approached it hoping to break out.

And unlike regular prisons, there were no punishments for planning or attempting prison breaks. In fact, the control AI actually *recommended* that the prisoners attempt to escape.

After all, it was possible that a strong will to leave the gaol could be the trigger that drove an Embryo to become Superior. That was what had actually happened to Hannya's Sandalphon.

Just like Cheshire—Tom Cat—had once served as the final barrier to the true duel champion, the walls of Red King's gaol were just another trial the control AIs had set up.

Therefore, to break out of the gaol, one had to prepare something more powerful than that wall—not only the barrier itself, but the entire arsenal of the being known as Red King.

Or, alternatively, outwit him using something he couldn't expect.

"Now...considering my current level, I can do this at least once. I may not have enough for a second time." Sechs thought of the person he would now transform into, as well as what he was about to do, and gathered his resolve for what he was sure was his first and final attempt. "Still, the odds are not against us here."

He faced the spatial wall and finally played the ace he had kept up his sleeve.

"I Take Countless Forms—Nu..."

This was the ult that rarely saw use due to its heavy cost of 500 levels. It allowed him to completely transform into anyone who was a low enough level compared to him.

Who he picked was...

“Schwartz Beine.”

...a pair of black, towering legs—Hannya’s Sandalphon.



“It is true that the power to destroy space is a must-have in a situation like this. But Sechs...” Red King said as he watched King of Crime, now transformed into Sandalphon. “*That* will not suffice. You saw with your own eyes it does not suffice.”

Just like Red King, Sandalphon possessed a power that influenced space, so he may have been an obvious choice for Sechs. Upon becoming a Superior Embryo, Sandalphon had even acquired the “Downfall Screamer” skill, which focused his spatial domination ability into the tip of the legs and then used it to drill through space itself.

It was a power designed specifically to overcome Red King’s walls. The evolution had even used ■■■—the emergency mechanism left only in Maidens and Apostles. Because of this, Sandalphon definitely had the power to break the spatial barrier.

However, that didn’t mean it had the power to *break out*.

“Sandalphon is just far too large.” The Embryo’s legs were enormous and, more significantly, they were *long*. Compared to the hole they could bore through the wall, they were simply too big. And as an Embryo that had Gear in its typing, Sandalphon could only be used while mounted. To escape through the hole opened by Sandalphon, the user would be forced to dismount and stop the drilling, which

gave Red King more than enough time to restore the wall. That was the reason Hannya herself had never been able to escape.

“Unlike Hannya, I suppose, Sechs is able to create copies of himself,” Red King mused.

Sechs’s Nu was a Type Body that turned him into a slime. He could split himself into multiple bodies and control the resulting copies freely. Unlike Hannya, he actually *could* attempt to drill and escape at the same time.

“But there’s still the problem of the *main one*.”

Red King was aware that not all of Nu’s splits were equal, with the one that had the most volume becoming the main one. And when the main one disappeared, the one with the second-highest volume would take its place. Also, there was a limit on the distance at which the main and secondary bodies remained linked and able to cooperate. When it was exceeded, the secondary ones would vanish.

That made the power all but useless for a prison break.

“Sechs isn’t a core-based Type Body—its main body switches depending on the volume. That is strong in its own way, of course, but...considering the situation and the transformation he chose, it means nothing.”

Even if Sechs did manage to get his various bodies out of the gaol, the moment Red King fixed the hole in space and isolated it again, it would sever their connection with the main body. That meant there was no point having only his copies escape. Since it was volume that decided which body was Sechs’s main one, transforming into Sandalphon—the gigantic legs—had effectively rendered it impossible for Nu to escape. If he diverted too much volume into the body that he wanted to send outside, he would no longer be able to maintain the transformation into Sandalphon or use his skills.

And even if Sechs somehow broke out of the gaol using his copies, he would be the *only* one to escape, leaving his companions behind.

“What’s he planning, anyway? Hm...?”

The moment Red King muttered that to himself, Sechs—still transformed into Sandalphon—*split himself into three*.

This was Split Spirit—the skill he’d used against Shu.

There were now a whole three Sandalphons towering over the gaol.

All of them were a kilometre tall, and looking up at them would no doubt overwhelm the faint of heart—though, Candy, standing at the side, looked like he was enjoying the view.

“Downfall Screamer.”

After several dozen seconds, the three Sandalphons used their space-drilling skill, thrusting the tips of their legs, now spinning rapidly, against the space above the deteriorated ground. From that seemingly empty space, there was the faint sound of an impact and something tearing.

A moment later, the space around the tips of the three Sandalphons’ legs began to shake.

The shivering space then quickly cracked, creating an opening. Through it, you could see a mountain forest—the scenery that surrounded the gaol.

The tunnel that had just been drilled through space itself was clearly a way outside.

“I see. Hannya was alone, wasn’t she?” *Only Sechs can do this*, Red King thought.

While it was too much for one of them, three Sandalphons were indeed capable of creating a large tunnel. This would allow at least

Candy and Gerbera to break out. In fact, even Sechs himself could leave.

Looking around, Red King saw *another* Sechs standing next to Candy. That meant there were four of him—not just the three Sandalphons. Red King quickly understood the implications of this. “I see you have found your means of escape,” he said.

Split Spirit wasn’t based on Sechs’s self-separation ability as a slime. It was instead caused by his Embryo’s last skill—a fearsome ability that allowed him to multiply his ultimate transformation by up to six. It was also extremely high-risk, though, because it divided his HP evenly among each body, and it wasn’t restored even after the skill expired and all of the copies vanished.

But that was exactly what had made it such a powerful tool in this prison break.

Right now, Sechs took the form of three Sandalphons and one ordinary Sechs. The latter version of Sechs wasn’t a copy made by his skill, but the main one. While the other three would vanish once the skill expired, he would not.

Thus, if he passed through the tunnel and canceled the effect, Sechs would be completely outside the gaol.

“I see—quite an impressive combination. He even considered the costs.”

Sechs had split into four bodies rather than six so that he would have more HP left once he was free.

Since he couldn’t use the save points outside, breaking out of the gaol would mean nothing if he simply received the death penalty again and respawned back in the prison. Keeping his HP loss to a minimum reduced the chances of that happening.

Three Sandalphons were just enough to open a tunnel large enough for people to pass through. Sechs must've watched Hannya as she tried to escape and made his own calculations based on that.

"Sechs, I must say...you've used the cards you've been dealt to make a play that surpassed my expectations...slightly." A single Sandalphon would never be able to break out this way, and Red King felt Sechs's scheme deserved a small amount of praise. "It does not, however, surpass my power."

As he watched Sechs's prison break unfold, Red King had transformed into a new form—humanoid in shape, but appearing more like a wire-frame model. In the dark space within Red King's body, there were countless floating orbs that seemed to represent the universe.

This was his form as an Infinite Embryo. He was Type Infinite Apostle, "Infinite Space, Macrocosmos."

Red King watched as Sechs's two allies tried to enter the opening he'd created...

"Ah...!"

...only to be pushed back.

Looking at the hole again, they realized that although they could see the other side, they couldn't physically pass through it. It still let light through, but there was now some kind of lid over the tunnel.

That tunnel—this dimensional hole through space itself—had been opened by the focused power of three Superior Embryos, and closed by only one.

There was no better display of just how much more powerful an Infinite Embryo was than a Superior.

"Did they think I couldn't close it while they were drilling?" Since the moment the three Sandalphons had begun to open the tunnel, Red

King had been taking action. “Sechs, Candy...and Gerbera. None of you will pass.”

Gerbera had the ability to avoid this fearsome warden’s gaze. Red King had assumed that they may have been expecting him to close the opening and thus had planned to get her out as fast as possible, before the Infinite Embryo could react.

However, that had been a pointless exercise. Red King had closed the tunnel the moment it was only one millimeter wide. It didn’t matter that he couldn’t see Gerbera—she couldn’t pass through regardless.

“They set Sandalphon’s space destruction against my power of space *fixation*. It all comes down to offense against defense, and there is no scenario in which an Infinite like me would lose.”

The three Sandalphons continued their struggle for a while longer, but it produced no results.

This continued all the way until the skill expired—but in the end, they couldn’t pass through the tunnel, and once they vanished, Sechs and Candy logged out as though they’d given up.



Sechs’s attempt at breaking out had failed miserably.

Red King, having returned to his previous appearance as a young man, watched it until it was over.

“He’ll need a few months to regain the levels for another try,” Red King said—and he realized he felt slightly disappointed that they’d failed.

Of course, as the warden of the gaol, he would not benefit from Sechs breaking out. While it was excellent when high-rank Masters evolved while *trying* to escape—just as had happened to Hannya and Sandalphon—Sechs’s trio were already Superiors, so to Red King, there was no point in their efforts right now. Despite that, a part of

him had hoped that Sechs and his allies would greatly surpass his expectations, so this result was somewhat underwhelming.

As such thoughts were running through his head, he was suddenly contacted by a colleague.

“Hm? A call...? From Alice?”

It was the control AI in charge of avatars. Because of their roles, they were in touch fairly often, but Red King found it odd that she would call him now, of all times.

“Indeed. Is anything the matter, Alice?”

“You’re pretty careless, aren’t you?” The first words Alice said made Red King tilt his head in confusion.

“What are you saying?”

“You can do everything by yourself, but despite that *and* being one of us, you work by common sense. You’re not too good at thinking outside the box or cooking up wild ideas. Well, you also struggled to gather enough Resources to become Infinite, so I guess you also don’t like being wasteful...”

“Again—what are you saying...?” Red King couldn’t make sense of her words, so he urged her to get to the point, slightly irritated.

“Their prison break was a big success.”

Those words gave Red King one of the few real shocks he’d felt in his entire life. “Huh...? How? I’ve not missed or overlooked anything. I instantly closed the spatial hole Sechs drilled open. I am certain I did not allow them the opening or the time to escape.”

“You closed the hole?”

“Of cour—”

“*All of it?*”

“Hm...? Ah...?!” Red King was confused about what she meant for a moment—and when he realized what she meant, it made him shudder.

He could not believe what they had done.

“Imagine telling someone to do that. Imagine actually *doing* it. They both have a few screws loose,” Alice commented with a wry smile audible in her voice.

Red King was overwhelmed by the fact that he’d overlooked the truth, as well as impressed by Sechs’s trio for making him overlook it.



A Certain Area on the Continent, Several Minutes Ago

Mountains covered by dense forests stretched as far as the eye could see.

The area linking the gaol’s outer edge to the continent was an undeveloped wilderness. No one knew its coordinates, and it was hidden using Red King’s spatial manipulation.

And then all of a sudden, this scene where nothing was supposed to be unusual underwent a major change.

Three cones—the legs of three Sandalphons—burst out from seemingly nowhere, drilling open the space itself.

From the inside of the gaol, these three large weapons broke through the spatial masking.

However, the holes in space opened around the drill were instantly closed by Red King’s spatial manipulation, leaving not even enough space or time for even a single ant to pass through.

However, the *tips of the drills* were still sticking out of the gaol.

This wasn’t unexpected. All of Sandalphon’s spatial manipulation powers were focused on that point. This was Sandalphon’s greatest

offensive weapon, but the one defending against it, Red King, could still focus his own spatial manipulation to prevent all three of the drills from sticking out like this.

However, that would cost a lot of Resources. Because of that, he figured that the more simple and less wasteful method to deal with this was to simply close off the tunnel they'd created. It would still be enough to keep them from breaking out.

Red King was an Infinite Embryo, but he was also a man of reason, so this decision was completely in character for him. It made sense and was by no means a mistake.

But because of this, he'd overlooked one wild plan that was clearly *a mistake from a human perspective*.

The change in the environment was instant. A number of the trees around the drills broke apart, and there was now a trail on the ground as though something large had slid across it.

However, whatever had actually created the trail was nowhere to be seen. The actual breaking of the trees had not been visible—one moment they were standing, only to be fallen the next. It was as though the world itself took several seconds to notice the destruction inflicted upon it.

At the tip of this destruction of nature, a person's silhouette could be made out.

It was Gerbera—bloodied, bruised, and battered.

“Nngh...I thought I was gonna die. Egh...” Her limbs were twisted in an unnatural way, and a mixture of blood and vomit dripped from her mouth. She looked as though she'd suffered a fearsome attack, and that was no surprise—after all, she was actually right near Sandalphon’s Downfall Screamer—*inside one of the spinning drills*.

While Nu could copy people's appearances and abilities, the copy maintained his nature as a slime. Sechs had shown this during his battle against Shu. Back then, he'd used it to restore himself, as well as move missiles within his body to fire them from a different location. This time, he'd used this quality of slime to put Gerbera—who'd used her ult—into Sandalphon's drill.

And, after drilling through the space, he'd released her outside.

The centrifugal force of the drill had obviously sent her flying—thus the destruction.

"It doesn't hurt...but this feels like crap... I feel like I'm gonna die..." Sechs had turned pain off so he could sense Gerbera touching him. Pain or the lack of it meant nothing against Red King, so turning it off didn't affect their escape plan.

Even if it didn't make them feel pain, a person spun by a drill could not possibly remain unscathed.

"H-He's such a liar... He told me that I'd only have to wait for him to transform into Sandalphon and touch it...ueegh..."

Her inner ear was a mess, the insane centrifugal force had broken most of her bones, and the impact after she had been fired out was enough to kill her instantly. The only reason that hadn't happened was because she'd used her ult to merge with Alhazred. The Embryo had Pure-Dragon-tier toughness, and with it taking most of the damage, Gerbera had managed to get away with *only* horrific injuries.

Alhazred, almost completely destroyed, had returned to the crest. This undid the effects of her ult, so she had appeared again in this state.

"Nnh...I gotta hurry before I die..." Fighting the unpleasant sensations, she reached for the blood-splattered ground and picked up a ring-shaped inventory.

After removing a large number of high-quality Potions, she poured them on herself. That caused her HP to stop falling and eliminated some injury-based debuffs.

The email she'd received from Sechs had said, "Take my inventory, disappear, and touch me after I transform into Sandalphon." She could hardly believe that *that* was all it would take to escape, but she'd agreed regardless.

She certainly hadn't imagined that she'd be used like this, though.

Methods like these were something you'd expect from Sechs's rival, Shu—and in a way, the fact that Sechs had thought of it at all was proof that Shu had had an influence on him.

"...I guess this is one of the reasons I had to go through all that training..." Gerbera remembered the hellish training Sechs had put her through, where he'd made her turn pain back on and damaged her body in many extreme ways. Without that experience, she might've not been able to bear being in the current state, even with the sensation of pain eliminated.

"Ughhh...I hope there aren't any monsters here..." Gerbera kept on pouring the Potions on herself, slowly recovering her HP.

However, her trusted Alhazred was still in no state to protect her, and she herself was a total mess.

"...Oh. Right."

Remembering this, Gerbera reached into Sechs's inventory and took something out.

It was an object much larger than herself—a carriage. Putting this out was one of the orders Sechs had given her in the email.

"There we go... Now the bodyguard..." Then, from the same inventory, she removed April.

“You called, my venerable temporary owner?” she said. Perhaps because they were in a forest rather than the café, she was already in her combat mode and spoke smoothly.

“Keep an eye out for me... I’m a bit groggy, so I’ll take a rest until they come. I can’t use Alhazred yet, so, yeah...”

“Understood.” April looked around for danger while Gerbera leaned on the carriage.

A few minutes later...

“Mmm! The air outside the slammer sure is delici... Well, actually, it smells like puke. I don’t like it...”

...she was joined by Candy, who had most certainly logged out in the gaol.

“...Looks like it worked,” Gerbera said. Candy’s appearance here was proof that Sechs’s plan was a success. This was a relief for Gerbera, since she could now just wait for Sechs to come and heal her.

“Oh. Gerby’s almost dead! That’s hilarious!”

“You are *such* a...”

Candy cut her off by pointing at her battered body and laughing as though it was the funniest thing he’d ever seen.

“Oh, poor girl! You’ve even lost your boobs... Oh wait—there were never any there to begin with!”

“*You got a death wish, shitlord?!*” Gerbera snapped, so incensed she even tried to stand despite her injured state. She had indeed lost her pads sometime during the spin in the drill or the impact after, but her actual chest was more or less unharmed.

Candy’s teasing and Gerbera’s angry squawking continued until they heard another person moving within the carriage.

“I am glad you two are well.” With those words, Sechs stepped out of the vehicle as if the action was of no significance.

“Total success!” said Candy.

“...Do I look ‘well’ to you? Heal me already...” Gerbera pled.

“Of course,” Sechs said, transforming into a long-haired woman. This was the form of the Special Superior Job he’d acquired at one point in the past—The Saint.



“...Gotta say,” said Gerbera during the treatment. “I’m surprised we could actually use this to escape the gaol.”

She was looking up at the carriage as she spoke. Her Identification gave her some information about it, including its name: “Save Point Carriage.”

“A mobile save point...I heard you couldn’t use these to come back from a death penalty.”

“You cannot. But we did not use it for that, did we?”

There were three steps that led to wanted Masters being sent to the gaol. First, by getting on the wanted lists, they became unable to use save points. Then, they had to receive a death penalty. After that, they would return to the only save point they could access—the one inside the gaol—and were imprisoned there from then on. Even if they saved at a carriage with a save point, that save would vanish at the second step, making it impossible to come back that way. It was explained to Gerbera that the carriages were more like suspending the game and resuming it rather than a proper save.

“We, however, have simply logged out and logged back in again.”

They’d saved at the Save Point Carriage while still imprisoned, and by taking it out now, they were able to create a login point that placed them outside the gaol.

“And Red King didn’t notice? He must have seen you save, right?”

Gerbera was the only one who’d actually taken the inventory out of the gaol rather than use the Save Point Carriage, so she was curious about this.

“I observed Red King while I was in the gaol, and through my observations, I found out that he only has one visual point. He may be omniscient in the space he currently occupies, but recently, he has been avoiding the gaol itself because of the epidemic.”

“...Oh, I guess that was the other reason for spreading it.” Even if there were many of the monitor-like observation points inside the gaol, the observer couldn’t look through all of them at once. Things may have been different with Cheshire, who specialized in parallel operations, but Red King wasn’t like him.

Sechs had also confirmed that the other control AIs did not involve themselves with the matters of the gaol. He had learned some of this through chats with Red King himself, in fact.

They had also saved at the carriage while Red King had clearly been focusing on something else—Sechs while Hannya was trying to break out, and Candy while Sechs was talking to Red King.

Clearly, this mobile save point had been part of their escape plan for quite some time now.

“...By the way, did I *have* to go through this? Couldn’t we have just thrown the inventory out...? We have April, and she’s tough.”

Gerbera figured that if they’d just given April the inventory with the Save Point Carriage, she wouldn’t have had to be shot out of a drill into a forest.

Sechs shook his head, though.

“You can make yourself impossible to perceive, but Red King could easily notice April. If he saw her inside the drill, he would have certainly done something about it. This was proved when he closed off the tunnel we used as a distraction. Using your skill was necessary to ensure a more secure prison break.”

“And what about *my* security...? Ugh,” Gerbera sighed as though she’d given up. “What were you planning to do while I wasn’t here, then?”

“I would have hidden myself instead—though I believe that would have been a great deal riskier than having you be the one inside the drill.”

Sechs had actually formulated a plan to break out of the gaol before he'd even added Sandalphon to his stock—and even before he'd been jailed. As King of Crime, Sechs had been going to the internet or DIN to gather info about the gaol's workings, then using his findings to build an escape plan. Back then, he'd been planning to use a space-controlling Embryo he acquired before being jailed, but since it wouldn't have had as much power as Sandalphon, the odds of success would've been lower, and Sechs would've lost far more volume—or rather, HP—than he'd lost now.

And since he now had Sandalphon, he'd removed all the other spatial Embryos from his stock.

The reason why Sechs had spent so much time in the gaol was because he was waiting for those outside to prepare, and because he'd thought he could craft a better escape plan by observing Hannya.

He was later joined by Candy and Gerbera, so one could say that his decision had been the correct one.

"I am very grateful that you came to the gaol," he told Gerbera.

"...I see," she replied.

Because he'd used Split Spirit to split into four, Sechs's maximum HP had been reduced to just a quarter of its the original value, but that was still more than he would have had left in his original escape plans. "We have a long trip ahead of us, so I certainly appreciate having more HP," he explained.

"I haven't been on a big trip since my XP tour!" said Candy. "Where are we now, anyway?"

"This is a buffer zone between Altar and Legendaria... No, wait—it has recently become part of Altar. Still, I have quite a bit of nostalgia for this place," Sechs said, recalling the time he *cooperated* with Shu.

This was the very place once dominated by the UBM known as Divine Disks, Spindle.

Sechs had noticed this when he'd watched Hannya try to break out of the gaol. The location he'd glimpsed through the gaps she opened was one that he would never forget, and he instantly knew exactly where in the world the gaol resided. Before then, he'd entertained the possibility that the gaol was somewhere off the continent—or perhaps even in space. That would have made the prison break more difficult. Discovering that it was in a familiar location made it much easier.

Perhaps the Divine Disks developed spatial manipulation powers precisely because Red King had built his gaol here, Sechs wondered. The creation of the gaol—the hidden realm built by manipulating space itself—may have influenced the evolution of the creature that had once resided here, or so he imagined.

“...Phew.” Eventually, Gerbera was completely healed. She then used Instant Wear to replace her damaged clothes and stood up. “So, what now?” she asked.

“No one passes through here, so we will simply avoid any unwanted attention and head toward Tenchi.”

“Is that so...?” *Isn’t that a bit too far to go on foot?* Gerbera wondered. *Well, we have a carriage, so I guess we just need to get a horse or a landdragon or something.*

Suddenly, April, who was standing next to her, looked up at the sky.

Gerbera, Sechs, and Candy all followed her gaze and did the same.

“‘No one ever passes through here,’ huh...? Are you sure about that?” Gerbera asked.

Their eyes were focused on one point in the sky—a black-clad Master, looking down at them in shock from astride a silver Prism

Steed. Through coincidence or design, it was someone who had ties to the very person who had sent them to the gaol in the first place.

His name was Ray Starling.

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Gaol

“...I am thoroughly beaten,” Red King said as he stood in the gaol, now missing three of its most important prisoners.

Alice had explained to him the process they’d used to escape, and he had understood and come to terms with it. They’d since ended the call, and now, left alone with his thoughts, Red King was looking back on his actions.

“This feeling of defeat is somehow...wistful.” Since he’d lost his Master, Red King had rarely been forced to consider his flaws—the moments he had could be counted on one hand.

He’d gained three things from this entire ordeal—an important lesson, a new countermeasure, and a shapeless nostalgia.

“Sechs...I was unable to see your plan, and your thinking has surpassed mine. You deserve recognition for that.” The warden earnestly praised the prison breaker who’d risen above him. Red King may have failed to fulfill his duties, but he couldn’t help but be honest about this. “However, not even you can see through everything. And because of that...you may very well be back here soon.”

The words that he spoke were not those of a sore loser—he genuinely believed what he was saying.

Red King had enough reason to believe that.

“When you were in the gaol, you could only learn about the outside indirectly.”

Red King, the ruler of space, could see the *multiple* entities approaching the escapees right now.

To the north, flying from the city of Gideon, was a Master known as Ray Starling. He was one who would be placed on the side of good, and thus he would certainly clash with Sechs, who went out of his way to be evil.

However, he was not a major problem. Ray's brother may have been capable of it, but the odds of Ray himself stopping Sechs were unbelievably low.

But *there was someone else*.

The moment Sechs had transformed into Sandalphon and drilled through space, influencing the outside world, an entity far more fearsome had sprung into action.

Red King checked the surroundings of the gaol—and indeed, there he saw them. From the south of the gaol, from the *domain* in Legendaria, a massive group was on the approach.

“There are many stories that only truly begin *after* the escape.”

Thus, the control AI who had stood against the prisoners began monitoring the events outside. The participant became a spectator, and he settled in to watch the second act.

Chapter Four: Encounters

Sorcerer, Ray Starling

We were on the way to the leveling zone at the very south of the kingdom.

Before heading out, I'd changed my job to Sorcerer. The reason for this was, once again, the axe.

The immense grudge permeating the thing had convinced me that the damage it did to me was curse-based. And since Sorcerer was a job that granted skills that inflicted curses as well as skills that increased resistance to them, I'd picked it up to see if it would have an effect on the axe. If it reduced the damage, great. If it didn't, I'd just drop the job whenever I needed a low-rank job slot.

"I feel as though you are on the path to wielding both Paladin and Dark Knight," said Nemesis.

"...That's not totally out of the question." I'd heard that mixing sorcerer and knight groupings was the path that led to the dark knight job. It seemed like a combo Juliet would love.

Oh, and it would make me kinda like the protag of the fourth entry in a certain retro RPG series, so Shu would probably like it too.

"Perhaps it is not such a bad idea. It might lead you to a mixed Superior Job," Nemesis added. I guess it would be like Xunyu's Master Jiangshi—she got that by combining the Jiangshi job with the Daoshi grouping.

"But I feel like there's a lot of people who've gone down this route. I mean, it's a pretty classic concept."

A champion who wielded both dark and light seemed like a tale as old as time. Someone must've tried it already, and since it didn't seem like anybody had found a mixed Superior Job as a result, it

probably didn't exist—or it was a lost job with crazy specific conditions for unlocking it.

"Instead of daydreaming about a still-distant Superior Job, we should focus on the leveling we must do right now."

"Yeah. Let's level until we get the resistance skill."

When we had it, we were going to use our arena to see if the skill had an effect. If it didn't, I'd switch jobs later and level again.

"...Hm?" As I rode Silver through the skies, I heard a strange sound. It was faint and coming from far away, but I could tell that it would be really loud if I were closer to it.

It was a low hum, like something massive destroying something else, though I couldn't tell if it was shattering something tough or tearing apart something soft.

The hum was accompanied by a distant, destructive sound that resembled none I'd ever heard.

I might've been imagining it, but it kind of reminded me of a sound I'd once heard in Gideon—the noise made by Sandalphon.

"Let's check it out," I said. A strange and vague uneasiness was gripping my heart too, so I couldn't help but change course toward the sound.

"I feel as though we are heading toward trouble yet again," said Nemesis.

That's all the more reason to go there, I replied in thought. *This place is pretty close to Gideon, you know?*

And so, we moved toward the sound. We made it there in no time—and sure enough, something had been happening here. I could tell that much even from a distance.

"...That one doesn't look so good," I muttered.

There was a woman lying on the ground, covered in blood. Another woman stood beside her and was working on healing her wounds.

Then, standing right by a carriage with no horse or landdragon attached, there was a woman wearing a maid's uniform. It made her stand out, but I knew a guy who wore a bear costume constantly, so in comparison it didn't seem that weird.

And finally, there was one person I couldn't see fully because there were trees in the way, but glimpsed some girls' clothing at least.

It looked like a party of four women, and something had happened here that had injured one of them. She was being treated now, but even from here, I could see that the unfortunate girl had actually lost some parts of her body. Even a high-rank job would have a hard time treating that. They'd probably need Miss Eldritch to fully heal—

"Huh...?" My thought was cut short as I realized that the bloodied woman was in perfect health now.

Wow...I didn't think there was someone besides Miss Eldritch who could treat something like that so fast, I thought. Maybe it's an Embryo skill?

"Oh..." As I looked at them in shock, the women all looked up at me too.

My eyes met the healer's gaze.

I felt that it would be rude to just turn around here and leave, so I decided to make Silver go down to them. Also, one of them had been badly injured, so they might've gotten into trouble they needed help with.

It sort of felt like Silver was paying extra attention to the woman in the maid uniform, but I had no idea why.

“Hm...?” Suddenly, I heard something. Unlike before, it wasn’t the sound of something giant. It was more like the sound of many small things moving at once. “What is that...?”

It was coming from the south.



The Southernmost Edge of Altar, A Mountain Forest Near the Border

Seeing Ray descend put Gerbera into a panic. *Why is he here...?* she thought.

She already knew who he was. Back when she had been trying to provoke Shu by framing him for a crime, she’d also looked into his brother. Even if she hadn’t done all of that, Ray Starling had become a fairly famous figure after his deeds during Franklin’s Game.

She certainly knew more about him than she would about some random duel ranker, and the fact that he’d happened to be here at this point in time was more than a little unexpected.

What do we even do in this situation? she wondered.

There was no doubt that they’d win if they fought him. The odds of Ray emerging victorious in a battle against three Superiors were beyond low. However, fighting him would still have been a bad decision. If they fought, Ray would find out who they were—and since he was close to their enemies, they would learn about Illegal Frontier’s escape too. Even if Ray got the death penalty, he’d be able to share info about them via online messages or social media in the real world.

If people found out their approximate location, that would be an absolute disaster for them. Anyone could then prepare a kill squad that could give them the death penalty again—

Sechs currently only had a quarter of his HP, while Gerbera's trusted Alhazred was in no state for combat.

If they were sent to the gaol again, it would be difficult for them to escape using the same means. Sechs had lost his levels, while Hannya must've leveled up since leaving the gaol. It was possible that Hannya would be removed from Sechs's stock of transformations while they were preparing for the second try.

And there was the fact that Red King could have already set up a protection against their trick that would make sure it never worked again.

We could run...but that's a gamble too, Gerbera thought.

They could maybe escape the danger if they all logged out at the same time. However, the logout process required thirty seconds of zero contact with anybody. That was enough time for Ray to remember their faces. Sechs was currently transformed into The Saint, so he was safe from being recognized, but Ray might spot Candy. If that happened, it was possible that someone would just camp this area and wait for them to log back in.

And if they fled normally instead of logging out, it would only make Ray more suspicious—he could even chase after them to find out why they'd run away. He was also riding a speedy Prism Steed, so it was questionable if they even *could* run away from him.

Then how about we just kill him really quick...? Wait, no, that won't work...! In the recent peace talks, it was revealed that Ray had the Death Soldier skill. Even if they killed him, he would stay around for almost a minute—more than enough time to get info about them and take it back.

Also, though Gerbera could only see Ray right now, it was possible that he wasn't alone. He could have friends nearby—maybe even Shu and Rook themselves. Ray was actually all by himself, but

Gerbera had just escaped the gaol and had basically no information about the outside, so her fear was hardly unreasonable.

This isn't good... He's the worst person we could've bumped into right now! Ray didn't die right away even if killed, and he had ties to powerful people he could inform about them.

Gerbera had no idea how they had to deal with this, so she decided to leave the thinking to Sechs and Candy.

However...

“...Nhuh?”

...when she looked at them, she saw something that filled her with shock.

Sechs was still assuming the form of The Saint, but in his right hand he held a sword that must've been an Embryo from his stock. Candy was in the process of activating Resheph.

They were obviously getting ready to fight.

“Huh? Are we really doing this?! We’re actually gonna fight?!”
Gerbera was pretty sure that they—or at least Sechs—would’ve come to the same conclusions she had.

Then again, perhaps they had thought this through even more thoroughly than her and *still* decided that simply killing Ray Starling was the way to go.

“B-But my Alhazred is almost out of HP... I guess I’ll bring him out anyway, though... Umm...will my bowgun reach from here...?”

“Gerby,” Candy said as Gerbera hesitantly armed herself. “That guy who looks like more of a baddie than us? He’s not the one we’re fighting.”

“Huh?”

Sechs, Candy, and April had already shifted their gazes away from Ray.

And Ray himself was looking away from them, as well.

All three people and the one machine were facing the south—the Altar-Legendaria border.

“A domain...” said Sechs.

“Leader...?” Shock overcame Gerbera as she looked at him. The usual smile on his face, which almost never flagged, was now twisted up slightly. If slimes like him were capable of doing so, he would most likely be breaking out in a cold sweat right now.

“How careless of me. This used to be a buffer zone between Altar and Legendaria, and the border is nearby... I should have considered this possibility.”

“Wh-What’s going on...? A domain? Whose?” As panic gripped Gerbera, Sechs gave her a reply.

It was a single word, simple enough, and a common staple of fantasy fiction...but also something Gerbera had never faced within *Infinite Dendrogram*.

It was...

“...An Overlord.”

A moment later, the forest grew restless—and a bizarre-looking horde charged toward them.

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Sorcerer, Ray Starling

“What the hell are they...?!” Swarming from the direction of Legendaria was a horde of bizarre-looking creatures shining like mithril.

They resembled clay figures crafted by a child, except even more crude. It was like someone took some clay, made a torso, and just slapped some limbs plus a head on it and left it at that.

There were two kinds of these creatures in the horde: flyers who had wings awkwardly attached to them, and walkers who looked kinda like gorillas. They shared some features, but their shapes were so messed up that it was hard to tell if they were the same type of creature.

Unlike Franklin's mod-monsters, these things didn't seem to have any degree of intentional design behind them.

Despite looking like a toddler's first attempt at sculpture, they all had a very strong presence. If I had to guess, they were high Demi-Dragon-tier in power, if not actually Pure-Dragon-tier.

And there were dozens of them—easily over fifty.

They weren't nearly as numerous as Franklin's Suicide Series, but if they had such a strong presence and could actually fight, they'd be a real danger.

"Are those just some Legendarian monsters?" I wondered. "But they..."

Things would've been easy if that were the case. However, perhaps the strangest thing about these already-strange creatures was that they were all surrounded by an *iridescent* aura.

I felt something powerful behind that—something even more powerful than the creatures themselves.

"Assuming that is not merely a skill that the monsters all happen to have...is it the effect of a Territory Embryo? Or is it one of those so-called Advance types derived from Chariot?" Nemesis asked.

"You might be right..." I said with a nod.

The aura could be the work of an Embryo, but the creatures themselves were clearly monsters of some kind and not just part of a Legion type.

There was one major giveaway that this was the case—there was text above them which said “Thrall.” There were dozens of creatures, all in different shapes, but they all had the same name.

Ten of the winged ones flew toward me, while the rest swooped toward the women below.

I’d gone down far enough to hear the women talk, and they seemed to be far more knowledgeable about this than me.

“They’re pretty freaky... Are they a Legion Embryo?” I overheard one of the women say.

“No. They are the result of a skill granted by a job, most likely Overlord. I have fought Overlord Gula in the past, though, so it cannot be her.”

“Affirmative. They are the servant creatures of Overlord Acedia—the result of the skill ‘Enthrall.’”

“But...‘Overlord?’”

I’d heard Azurite mention an “Overlord Ira,” so I already knew they existed in *Infinite Dendrogram*. Why would someone like that attack us, though?

“I would have guessed you would know about this, April,” said the healer as she stabbed the ground with her sword and used a skill.

“Rumbling Treework.”

A group of trees then sprang out of the ground and charged toward the creatures, running on their roots as though they were feet.

“Is this gonna be enough...?”

“No. It will only buy us some time. This skill uses the Resources...or rather, nutrition in the ground, so it is on the weaker side. Though the fact that it can be cast instantly makes it quite useful in spite of that.”

I looked and sure enough, the creatures were absolutely destroying the newly summoned trees.

They really are tough, huh? I thought as the winged creatures approached me.

“Tch! Purgatorial Flames!” I could tell I’d be done for if they got close, so I used Silver’s mobility to stay at mid-range and sent some flames their way.

I couldn’t put out a forest fire if I started one, though, so I made sure to not fire downward. I couldn’t use Hellish Miasma either, because that might risk hurting the women we’d come across.

I don’t even know if it’d work on those monsters anyway, I thought.

“April, now is a good time for an explanation,” the woman with the sword told the woman in a maid uniform as she spawned more tree monsters.

“Enthrall is one of Overlord Acedia’s core skills. It turns inanimate objects into monsters.”

I could hear their conversation with no issue at all now. I was pretty surprised by that myself, but then I thought that maybe Silver was making it so that their voices reached me. It wasn’t in his description, but if he had some control over the air, it was possible that he could do something like that. After all, he did have that mystery skill, and not even Integra could fully make sense of him.

“The power of the monsters it creates—Thralls—depends on the material and SP used. Their material appears to be mithril, and their power is about medium.”

Mithril? Well, that explained why the silver shine felt so familiar—it was close to the material Rook’s Liz was made of. I doubted these things could transform like Liz could, but I was pretty sure in their current form they were tougher and stronger than she would be anyway.

“Anything else?”

“Thralls obey no one but Overlord Acedia and cannot be transferred to others. In exchange, they take up no party slots or minion capacity.”

“Huh? That sounds kinda unfair.”

“The price for that is steep, however. With the exception of HP and SP, Overlord Acedia has the lowest stats of all Overlords.

Additionally, Overlord Acedia cannot join combat using their own body. All the work necessary for them to secure the Resources to preserve themselves is exported to the Thralls. You could say that these creatures are less like Overlord Acedia’s servants and more like their *limbs*. ”

“...‘Overlord’ is a pretty fancy name, but that just makes them sound like someone who needs to be in a hospital.” I didn’t know what I had to be more surprised by: the details of the Overlord Acedia job or the fact that that woman knew them.

I took a better look at the group and realized that the one they called “April” had ball joints, like a doll. Maybe she wasn’t even human? Silver seemed pretty curious about her too, so perhaps she had some relation to the first Flagman? Was she one of the “Prism Persons” that Integra had mentioned?

“Hm...”

“Leader? What’s on your mind?”

“A *Sacrifice* that cannot fight on their own...transforms inanimate objects into monsters...that is almost like...”

April’s words seemed to have made the woman she called “leader” think about something. As she did, though, the Thralls on the surface broke through the trees and closed the distance between them.

The winged Thralls chasing after me were unrelenting too. They didn’t seem to care one bit about being set on fire—they were inanimate objects to begin with, so they didn’t even try to protect their own lives. Even as the Purgatorial Flames melted their bodies, they tried to ram into me with whatever was left.

They didn’t seem to be using any kind of combat technique either. They were only doing whatever they could to charge and crash their bodies into me. I really doubted that it would be enough to kill me, but I didn’t want to find out. “Inanimate objects made of metal aren’t a good matchup for a *god* like me, buuut...I’ll just spread some little guys that disassemble mithril and see what happens!”

“You made something like that? I can hear every weaponsmith in the world crying right now.”

The woman I hadn’t seen clearly began swinging a large, blunt object—probably her Embryo. I could hear the sound of something spraying. It must’ve been spreading something.

Just to be safe, I made Silver create a Wind Hoof barrier to protect us from whatever it was, but...

“...They’re not melting.”

“Whaaat?” The Thralls on the surface had apparently just been hit by something that “disassembled mithril,” but they didn’t seem to be affected at all.

“Either the material structure is different, or it’s not reaching them. If it’s the second thing, then it’s gotta be that shiny aura’s fault!”

“What is that aura, April?”

“No data found. Overlord Acedia has no skills with such an effect.”

If that wasn’t a job skill, then...it had to be an Embryo, right?

“So it’s a job skill that creates minions and an Embryo that enhances them...? This seems like a standard combo...not what I’d expect from an Overlord,” said the woman with the bowgun as she launched an assault toward one of the Thralls. It didn’t seem to have an effect, though—the creature was just too tough. “Yeah, I don’t have the attack power for this. Mithril and I just don’t get along... Also, is it just me, or are Leader and April the only ones putting up a fight?”

“How about we just leave them to the baddie up there?”

“That’s a great idea.”

They decided to make them my problem like it was no big deal. Also, “baddie”? What the hell? I had no idea why, but hearing that from these women just didn’t feel right to me.

“My friends...and Ray Starling,” said the leader.

“Huh?” I didn’t expect to hear my name here, but...well, the videos had made me pretty famous, so it wasn’t that weird for people to know who I was.

The way this woman talked, though, made me feel like there was some closeness there beyond just having heard of me. Had we met somewhere before...? “Be alert... I believe the main one is coming,” she continued, pointing in the direction the Thralls had come from, where there was now another silhouette.

“What...?” This figure had “Thrall” above its head, just like the others, but it was completely unlike the other Thralls.

First of all, its shape was different. While the others looked like nothing but simple clay figures, this one had a very distinct and proper design. The best way to describe it was “bipedal landdragon.” Its most notable feature was that the tip of its nose, horns, limbs, and tail were all blades.

The shape alone made it obvious that it had care put into its construction that no other Thrall did. But besides that, it also had a different color. It still had the same iridescent aura, but unlike the mithril Thralls, this one shone a brilliant scarlet.

I'd seen this color in Quartierlatin—on the scarlet marionette used by Dr. Mario.

Tom had said that the material was...

“Hihi’irokane!” The Mythical-tier metal...it was pretty much the greatest crafting material in *Infinite Dendrogram*, surpassed only by MVP rewards.

April had said that a Thrall's power depended on the material and SP used. Here, the material was of the highest quality, and I could tell from the shape alone that a lot of SP was used in its creation.

This had to be the Overlord Acedia's heavy hitter. I'd fought Logan's Legendary Gigaknights before, and I felt like this thing was a cut above even them.

Though, this just made me wonder why this Overlord was going this far just to deal with us. Was I the target here? Was that lab coat lunatic involved in this? And if these things were targeting that group of women, was April the reason? Was it all the knowledge she had about this Overlord Acedia? I had no clue. I didn't have enough info to even guess.

While I considered Overlord Acedia's reasons, the scarlet Thrall looked over the others.

And then...

“...G h e.”

...made a strange sound as it used its sword-arm to pierce one of the mithril Thralls.

“Huh?” *Friendly fire? What’s this all about...hm?!*

“Move away.”

“Get back!”

The woman the others called “Leader” and I shouted that at the exact same time. However, the change happened before our voices reached anyone. The scarlet Thrall’s sword-arm became even more red and began shining like molten metal.

A moment later, the mithril Thrall that it had run through *boiled* and *scattered*. The intense heat had made it evaporate from the inside and explode.

“Huh...?!” The mithril clad in the iridescent aura was scattered in every direction like the shrapnel of a frag grenade.

Our warning reached them right as the explosion happened. Everyone jumped back, covering their faces. The heat could burn us, but the actual explosion was far enough away that it wasn’t that much of a threat.

It was an attack that sacrificed one of their own, but it wasn’t enough to be fatal...or so I thought.

“Huh?” Pieces of mithril broke through the Wind Hoof barrier and touched the hand I’d flung over my face.

A moment later, my consciousness began to fade.

“This...is...” I felt dizzy and couldn’t think straight. My vision was hazy too. But despite that, I was able to check my stats and noticed a

status effect—Forced Sleep. “...So...that’s...why.” I didn’t even have to think to know what had caused this.

This must’ve been the plan all along—the Thralls had simply charged at us instead of doing anything resembling combat because their goal was to just *touch* us with the aura. Contact was all they needed. And what that aura did was force us to fall asleep, essentially ending the battle right then and there.

When we were finally asleep, Overlord Acedia would be able to do whatever they wanted with us.

“Neme...sis...”

“Of...course...!” Before my consciousness faded, I drank an Elixir, and Nemesis switched to her second form. She was being put to sleep herself, but she was still able to complete the transformation.

However...none of that did any good.

We were still falling asleep. The Elixir had once negated the UBM Gardranda’s miasma, while Nemesis’s second form flipped its effects into buffs. The fact that neither of these things were working could only mean one thing...

“Supe...rio...” I’d recalled the time I’d fought Miss Eldritch and how she’d given me a debuff so overpowering I couldn’t do anything against it.

The realization that the opponent was a Superior was my last thought before my consciousness disappeared.

Below, I could see that all the girls except the one dressed as a maid had collapsed as well.

And in the moment right before my mind vanished, an unfamiliar voice reached me from somewhere.

“Welcome to Dreamland.”

Interlude: An Overlord's Domain

About the Overlords

The created dungeons built by Red King and other control AIs came in three forms.

First, there was the Tomb Labyrinth—a dungeon built to seal away something left behind by the previous observers and judges of this world.

Second, there was the created dungeon in the gaol. Designed as a means to let the imprisoned Masters still enjoy the game, it didn't have an official name, but it was filled with many of the same features as other dungeons.

Third, there were the created dungeons of the Overlords. The control AI had built them on top of the Overlord job-change dungeons that were already in existence before they assumed control of this world. Since both the previous as well as the current observers had a hand in designing them, they were extremely difficult to complete, but it was said that the reward for doing so was access to a Superior Job from the Overlord series.

While Special Superior Jobs required special bloodlines or talents, the Overlord jobs were the *direct opposite of that*—they did not need any latent abilities or qualities as prerequisites, unlike other Superior Jobs. They did maintain the limit of one holder at a time, but *anyone* could acquire them as long as they cleared a relevant dungeon.

However, the amount of people who'd cleared any of these dungeons and became Overlords was extremely small.

There had once been an Overlord Ira who'd lived before The Era of the Peerless Three and was ultimately defeated by The Hero of that time, but besides a select few such notable examples, they almost

never appeared—or they came and went without anyone ever finding out.

But that had changed when Masters began growing in number—after *Infinite Dendrogram* was released.

It was said that there were seven Overlord dungeons.

Tenchi had the Naraka of Strife, Caldina had the Grave of Unwealth, Dryfe had the Palace of Licentiousness, while the Skycastle of Supremacy had an uncertain location.

The remaining Mountains of Hunger, Depths of Jealousy, and the Exile of Peace were all within Legendaria.

The control AI couldn't have done anything about this unbalanced placement. The dungeons had been in Legendaria to begin with, so they would still be there even if they added on to them. The only way to discover the reason for this placement was to ask the very beings who had originally set up everything related to the Overlord jobs—the previous observers.

In any case, the fact that Legendaria boasted three Overlord dungeons in their territory had never been a big problem. Created dungeons had always been things that were just *there*. They were in remote areas of the country as well, and unlike with natural dungeons, the monsters inside these created ones never left to cause mayhem in their surroundings. Some confident and skilled individuals would sometimes delve into these dungeons in an attempt to become Overlords, but none of them had ever returned.

That was the only significance the dungeons had, and since they were so difficult to conquer, there had been no recorded cases of anyone in Legendaria becoming an Overlord.

And so, their presence in Legendaria would mean nothing as long as everyone there simply let these sleeping dogs lie.

However, that had changed in recent years.

Two things had happened that were catastrophic to Legendaria. First, there was the increase in Masters. The nature of their existence had greatly changed the difficulty of the dungeons. The previous observers had stuffed the dungeons with features that could kill an explorer before they even realized it, making it impossible for all but a few people in history to reach the end of them. However, since Masters only received death penalties instead of permanent death, they were capable of coming back and trying again using the information they'd learned from their previous attempt. Through this, the three created dungeons that had previously been unconquerable by pure power alone had been laid bare.

Second, there were the few who had actually overcome the dungeons. Once information had been gathered, the dungeons could now be conquered by simply being strong enough.

That didn't mean it was necessarily easy. They weren't created dungeons for nothing—their difficulty was so high that simply trying over and over again wouldn't be enough to clear them. Additionally, perhaps due to the dungeons' function in bestowing the Overlord job, their difficulty grew exponentially when multiple humanoids tried to conquer them in parties, basically making it necessary to conquer them solo. This meant that prospective dungeon delvers needed not only information, but also a lot of power as a single unit. Unfortunately, Legendaria didn't have many Masters—Superior or otherwise—who had enough direct combat ability for this task.

That only applied to *those who belonged to the country*, though.

By now all three of Legendaria's Overlord dungeons had been conquered, and it had been done by Masters who were in Legendaria but did not belong to the country—in other words, Legendaria's *wanted*.

The three Overlords were all major criminals as well as Superiors.

They hadn't conspired to make this result. Each of them, completely separately, simply headed out into the dungeons and conquered them. Legendaria was the country with the most first-wave players, and thus also had the greatest number of wanted Masters. It even had more wanted Superiors than Superiors that actually served it—enough that there were still some left after three of their number had become Overlords.

The dungeons that had remained unbeaten for so long had finally been brought down. The monstrous Masters who lived in Legendaria had taken all three of the Overlord thrones in the country.

Having become Overlords, the three went on to live as they wished. They obeyed their desires, consuming, playing, and sleeping—in various different meanings of those words—to their heart's content. They had even found tribes that obeyed them and created domains where they reigned supreme.

Their actions were primal and animalistic, making them seem more like wild monsters than Overlords.

These three also never had any conflicts among them, nor had they ever cooperated. Along with the other wanted Superiors of Legendaria, they had formed a kind of nonaggression pact.

They were not a clan with a united goal, but a cartel with the single rule of mutual nonintervention. As they each expanded their own domains, they were careful not to encroach on the domains of the others. The Overlords were essentially carving up Legendaria from the shadows.

This was the origin of the criminal cartel known as "Desire."

The criminals weren't hostile to each other, while noncriminal Masters were entirely unable to defeat them. Legendaria's nature as a coalition of tribes, as well as the landscape with extremely varied

areas that favored the tribes living in them—including the ones serving the Overlords—made overcoming them difficult.

Legendaria's wanted also had no interest in anything outside Legendaria, so when La Crima had invited them to IF, none of them had even wanted to hear them out.

This isolated fairyland was home to a group of monstrous Masters who were more than a match for IF.

Was it pure chance that the country that was the most fantastical ironically ended up being the one that cast the darkest shadow, or was there some reason that it grew to harbor such evil? Regardless, Legendaria had become a chaotic mix between the main country, led by Titania the Fairy Queen, and several rebellious minor states. It was rumored that the recent assassination of the prime minister was related to these conflicts, as well.

The sole silver lining on this cloud was the fact that despite all the chaos in Legendaria, none of the major cities with save points in them had been conquered by the criminals, Overlord or otherwise.

If that ever happened, the chaos of Legendaria would certainly become the chaos of the entire world—and that remained a distinct threat that loomed over the future.

Despite their lack of involvement with Legendaria's wanted, IF's escape from the gaol did have an effect on the situation there, if only by chance.

The domain of one of the three, Overlord Acedia, was located to the very north of Legendaria—right next to the UBM-dominated area that had once served as a buffer zone.

Sechs and his group had broken out of their prison right on the Overlord's doorstep, and they had achieved the feat through the extended use of Downfall Screamer—the skill of a Superior Embryo.

Overlord Acedia's reaction to this was...



Overlord Acedia

The depression. The melancholy.

It was a nice, sunny day, and I'd been getting some good shut-eye when I heard something on the horizon that sounded like *Dis consuming the sky itself*.

I loved this costume for sleeping, but I hated that it didn't block outside sounds for safety reasons.

That meant that this noise was a danger, which just made me more depressed.

"Ugh...what a paaaiin..." I was now awake anyway, so I went ahead and sent out some recon Thralls.

It turned out that it wasn't Dis this time—it was a group of four that I kinda recognized and kinda didn't, and I could sense what seemed like two Superiors there.

There were probably three, though. The messed-up-looking one must've been a Superior too—and the one in maid clothing wasn't even human. Thanks to Dis, Benetnasch, and all those other pains in the neck, I could now tell things like that whether I liked it or not.

"Such a paaaiin..." Even thinking of how to deal with these bozos was getting on my nerves, and now there was another one. Ugh...he was flying for some reason, but he looked like a real baddie.

Not even G the Bottomless looked like that, and she was the actually Overlord-ish one among us...

Anyway, these four plus the new one were...well, yep. Enemies.

All of them were enemies. Hostiles. They were annoying, they were being a pain, they'd woken me up, and they'd be a danger if they

came here, so I'd just have to beat them before that happened.
Knock 'em down, you know?

"Uhh...oh yeah...I woke up, so..."

I figured I should ask the maids for dinner. I called one of the sheepkin maids by ringing the bell next to my bed.

After a bit...no, a *lot*...of thinking, I asked for omurice.

Then, without doing much more thinking, I picked some forces to send out. It turned out that Leprechaun B had made a whole lotta mithril Thralls, so I'd just send them and Cardinal A. Go go gooo! I'd based Cardinal A on Benetnasch's Aragorn, but this'd be my first time actually using him. Test, test.

Well, the new face wouldn't change anything. I'd just throw them into Dreamland and get rid of their bodies like always. Kill 'em all.

Anyway, thinking about what I wanted for dinner had forced me to use my brain, so I was getting sleepy again...drowsy.

It was high time I was off to Dreamland too.

And the ones who'd woken me up...would die. Death penalty to all.

"Anyway, good night... Zzz..."

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That was the situation.

The interlopers were noisy, dangerous, hard to ignore, annoying, and wouldn't let him sleep in peace. For him, *that* was enough reason to kill them.

He was part of the Desire criminal cartel—Overlord Acedia, ZZZ the Hypersomnia—and he recognized every single person at the site of the escape as enemies.

Ray was in no way involved in the noisy prison break, but that didn't matter to him. It didn't matter whom he was up against, or even if they were all Superiors.

Acedia had set up a domain here instead of the gaol exactly because he had never been defeated.

Thus, Overlord Acedia had decided to kill them all.

Chapter Five: The Dream-Quest of Unknown Meetings

Night Hunter, Gerbera

“Where am I?” After I’d been hit with those fragments of the mithril monster, everything had faded to black, and next thing I knew I was in this weird space.

I was standing on a long and thin road. Looking around, I saw lots of roads just like it going in every direction. There were no platforms or pillars anywhere—just these thin roads twisting and turning everywhere.

They also weren’t black like asphalt or white like a stone pavement. Instead, they were all really colorful and unrealistic. They actually kinda reminded me of the Rainbow Road stages from a long-running series of racing games. I’d played them with dad before, and I’d always hated that track...

“There’s...nothing down there,” I said as I looked over the side of the road. I couldn’t see anything through the dense clouds. What would have happened if I fell? “I...I’m not in the gaol again, right?”

I’d just left that place, so I was really sure it didn’t look this crazy. Had the explosion sent me flying somewhere?

I’ll just check by opening the map window and...huh?

“It’s not coming up,” I muttered to myself. I couldn’t open the map.

But never mind the map—I couldn’t even open the menu or check my stat summary. What the hell was going on?

“Hold on...how am I supposed to log out?”

Am I trapped in the game, like I’m in some 2010-era anime...? No way, right?! Someone tell me I’m wrong!

“What...? I don’t see our leader, April, or even Candy here either...” Hell, I couldn’t even see my own Alhazred.

This was actually the most confusing situation I’d gotten in since I started *Dendro*, which was saying a lot—I hung around our leader, after all.

“Hellooo...? Is anyone heeere?” I raised my voice, but the only response I got was an echo, spreading through the whole who-knows-how-big space.

Well...it doesn’t look like I can do anything but walk...

As I began moving, I thought about the situation.

Before it all faded to black, I’d seen both the leader and Candy get caught in the explosion. If that was the reason I was here now, those two must be here too. I didn’t know about Candy, but our leader could do anything, so I was pretty sure he’d know what to do about this situation.

I wanted to meet up with them again, but I couldn’t find them anywhere.

“What am I supposed to do by myself?” I didn’t even have Alhazred for some reason. What could a non-maxed-out girl like me even *do* here? If I ran into some of those “Thralls,” they’d just beat me up.

“Someone...anyone...show yourseelvess... I need a tank! C’mon, give me a meat shield...!”

Right as I mumbled all of that...

“Hm?”

...the surroundings quickly became more colorful.

A mist with an indescribable color spread around me and covered my eyes. I couldn’t see anything.

“What the heck...? This is scary!” This was like in one of my dad’s horror games! *Will I be okay?! What if there’s some creepy monster somewhere in the mist?! What if it’s all wriggly and gross?!*

“...Hey.”

“EEEEEEEEK!” Someone grabbed my shoulder...!

“Hey, calm down!”

“We are not your enemies.”

“Y-You’re not?” After hearing the voices, I turned around.

This was a weird place where I couldn’t know what I’d run into, but if it wasn’t an enemy, then I didn’t care.

“Yeah. I’ve been dragged in here too. My name’s Ray, and this is my Embryo, Nemesis. Well, your leader knew us...but yeah.”

It did turn out to be enemies!

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Sorcerer, Ray Starling

I’d touched the aura, gotten the Forced Sleep debuff, and next thing I knew I was in this place.

My trusted mount Silver was nowhere in sight, and my body felt so light it made me kinda uncomfortable. But I still had Nemesis with me and could transform her into weapons, so I’d been able to relax for the moment.

After that, I’d gotten caught up in some weird mist, and then ran into a member of the other party that’d been put to sleep. It was the girl who’d been injured and received treatment.

“I know I said ‘anyone,’ but...whyyy...?” For some reason, she took one look at me and then started to panic, grasping her head.

Is something wrong...?

"This must be caused by your apparel," Nemesis said telepathically.

I feel like you always blame my clothes for everything, I replied in thought. *There's no way an outfit can be enough to make a stranger act like this, right?*

"Have you forgotten the dismay you inflicted upon those bandits that one time?"

That must've been because of the other three. Yeah, that's it.

"Nngh...this is the worst time to not have him with me..." said the girl.

"You okay...?" I asked.

"Yeah. I am. I just gotta calm down a bit..."

"That's fine." I didn't know if it was my fault or just because of where we were, but she seemed pretty damn stressed. "What's your name, though?"

"My name? It's Gerbera...uh." After answering Nemesis's question, the girl once again grasped her head.

"What a fidgety young lady," Nemesis commented.

"I get it, though. Just look at what's happening."

Gerbera, huh? I'd definitely heard that name before. That was the name used by the Superior that Shu and Rook had beaten. I knew that Gerbera owned a terrifying Sentinel that couldn't be perceived in any way, but besides that I'd been told that she was an overconfident, extremely self-assertive woman.

"Nnh...I'm such a dummy. I'm a complete mess... I really am useless..."

The Gerbera they'd described was the complete opposite of this self-deprecating girl who was freaking out with her head in her hands.

That other Gerbera was supposed to be in the gaol, anyway, so yeah—she obviously wasn't the same person.

While I thought of what to say to this girl crouching on the ground, she glared at me with tears in her eyes.

"How are you so calm...? You realize you've been put to sleep and sent to this weird place, right...?" Why was I calm, huh?

Well, the answer to that was the simple fact that I'd actually been through something like this before.

"I was once kidnapped by a cult while I was asleep."

"Whaaa...that sounds so scary..."

Yeah...looking back, that was actually pretty terrifying.

"So you're calm because you're used to dangerous situations that make no sense?" she asked.

"I guess you could say that."

"Is that really something you should get used to?"

Silence. It's probably better not to, but I did, so...it is what it is.

There was one other relevant thing I'd experienced before.

"Oh, another reason is that it's not my first time in a space like this."

"Huh...? You know what this mystery zone is?"

I nodded before saying, "We are...in a dream."

Gerbera looked at me like I was talking nonsense, but that was the truth.

"...Weren't we in a *game*? Wait, aren't dive-type VRMMOs already basically like dreams?"

"We're still in *Dendro*, but we're in a dream inside of that—the space you're sent to when your avatar gets Forced Sleep or Faint."

I'd experienced this multiple times before. I'd even gotten to use my avatar in dreams thanks to Gardranda and, more recently, the axe.

"Oh. I see..." said Gerbera.

"Though, normally, there are no other people here but me—even my Embryo isn't here sometimes. This time, though, there's me, Nemesis, and even you. So, this is definitely a dream, but not just *any* dream."

"What do you mean?"

"Someone—probably Overlord Acedia—has connected our dreams."

"What's the point of doing that?" I knew what she actually wanted to say—why couldn't the Overlord just put us to sleep and kill us then? There were still lots of Thralls left. They were more than enough to slaughter us while we were all unconscious.

"I know what you mean. If the Overlord just wanted to defeat us, there's no need to connect our dreams like this. That's why I think there's gotta be more to it..."

Perhaps this space was related to us being put to sleep?

"There's so many things we just don't know... Maybe our leader understands something, but..." Gerbera said.

"Oh yeah, why are you alone? You had a party, didn't you?"

"I'd like to know that myself."

Regardless, all either of us could do right now was keep walking. I had no idea what this dream-road was leading to, but for now, all we could do was follow it. The silver lining here was that Nemesis and I had found someone to accompany us.

"...This took a weird turn." For some reason, though, Gerbera followed after me with a complicated expression on her face.



Inside the Dream

“So you know nothing about this Embryo, huh?”

“I do not. The only Overlord I ever fought was Overlord Gula, Dis Satisfactory.”

Sechs and Candy had already met up in the joint dream that Overlord Acedia had sent them to. They were on a road just like the one on which Ray had met Gerbera.

“All I know is that the skills and Embryos of this one are nothing like hers.”

“They’re both Overlords, but they’re not that similar, huh?”

“Indeed. Overlord Gula is someone who fights head-on instead of using such indirect methods as these. She may be classified as either a solo combatant or a wide-scale exterminator.”

Candy almost asked if Sechs had won, but decided against it. The answer was obvious when you considered that Sechs had not been sent to the gaol at that point, while Overlord Gula was still on this side. *I guess it was a draw?* Candy thought. It wasn’t clear when the fight had happened, but it seemed likely that, at least back then, Overlord Gula was on the same level as, if not above, Sechs himself.

In that case, one could assume that as a fellow member of the cartel and a supposed equal to Gula, Overlord Acedia was also immensely powerful.

“Anyway, back to what we know about this dreamlike place...”

“If our guesses are correct, we are at quite a disadvantage here,” Sechs said.

“My GODly powers are especially useless here.” Candy spun his Resheph and let out a sigh. The sound of something being sprayed out through the Embryo’s holes was audible, but it didn’t seem like it

was spewing disease this time. “It’s all empty now...and when I try to make any more, they all just go poof.”

“I suppose bacteria cannot exist here because they have no ability to think.” This was the inside of a dream—a space in which only creatures that dreamed could exist—so Resheph’s bacteria hadn’t been drawn in. Even if new ones were made, they couldn’t stay here, and anything created in a dream did not appear in reality.

Overlord Acedia had certainly not considered this incompatibility, but his Dreamland had completely neutralized Resheph. This might’ve been the reason why the mithril-dissolving bacteria had produced no effect either.

“And Resheph has first-gen bacteria too... It’s kinda unfair how a slime like you can be here. It’s bacteria discrimination.”

“‘Differentiation’ might be the better word for it, and the only way to know the process behind it is to ask Overlord Acedia himself. Speaking of differentiation, April may not be here.”

April had the ability to think, but she was a Prism Person—not a human. The old question posed by science fiction—*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*—was irrelevant here, as she was most likely not present in the dream. Even if she could exist here, the only way to enter the dreamworld was the Forced Sleep debuff, which had no effect on her whatsoever. She could enter a “sleep mode,” but it was completely separate from all this.

“But that is nothing but good for us,” Sechs continued.

“...Yeaah,” Candy said with a nod. “If April wasn’t outside, we’d be sent back to the gaol while still asleep.”

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The Southernmost Edge of Altar, A Mountain Forest Near the Border

Saying not a word, April swung the wires in her hands and fought off the charging mithril Thralls.

She was facing dozens of creatures all by herself. This was because Sechs—her owner—as well as Gerbera and Candy had suddenly lost consciousness.

Thus, she now fulfilled her role as a combat-focused Prism Person and fought to protect them.

Running away from here wasn't even an option. Unlike her sister unit, Jet Chaser, April wasn't specialized in high-speed combat. She didn't think she could escape while carrying all three of the others.

With strong movements, she used her Material Slider to bring the defense of the mithril as low as possible, then tore them apart with her wires.

However, even after being broken apart, the Thralls were still coming toward her. Kicking them into the distance, she kept them all away from Sechs's group as best she could. The strong defense of the metal meant little to April, but she was having trouble with their unnaturally high life force.

While she was doing all of this, the Prism Steed in the air carried his sleeping owner on its back while evading the attacks of the winged Thralls. It was a unit April did not recognize, but the design alone was enough for her to tell that they shared a creator—the first Flagman.

They were from different series, so April didn't have much sibling-like affinity for him, but the fact that they happened to meet here, two thousand years after their creation, had made some strange feelings flow through her circuitry.

“Support.”

Perhaps that was the reason that she'd expanded her attack radius to include the Thralls in the air and fought the Thralls that were throwing rocks at Silver.

The steed did not respond, but he created a barrier of air to prevent the scattered pieces of a Thrall from hitting Gerbera's unconscious body on the ground.

Their circumstances may have been vastly different, but the ones who gave them orders were currently sharing the same dream.

Thus, April and Silver had decided to assist each other in protecting those they had to protect.

"...G h e."

The large Thrall—Cardinal A—was simply standing back and watching this happen, though.

It was as though it was waiting for something.

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Sorcerer, Ray Starling

How long had we been walking in this dream?

The colorful mist covering everything around the roads here was making it hard to tell how far we'd gone. Also, if Gardranda's and the axe's dreams were anything to go by, the time inside them and the time in reality wasn't the same. It was probably flowing faster in here.

"Hell, if that's not how it is, my body could just die." We couldn't open any windows here, so I couldn't check, but it was possible that my physical body was still being attacked by Thralls. In the worst-case scenario, I could die while I was still walking around in this dream and get the death penalty basically out of nowhere. "But I guess we got no choice but to keep moving." Wishing myself awake and even attacking myself wasn't enough to make me snap out of it.

Well, this sleep was strong enough to overpower both an Elixir and the Reversal, so that made sense.

I had no idea if this road would lead to the root cause of this deep sleep, but if I wanted to change anything, I had to keep moving.

“Well, *someone’s* optimistic...” Gerbera, who was accompanying me in this dream, had a look on her face like she thought she was about to die.

The reason for this gloomy expression wasn’t just the fact that we were trapped in here. In this dream, she didn’t have her Embryo, and apparently she couldn’t even take out any of her weapons.

Why was Nemesis here, but her Embryo wasn’t? That was one of the many questions we had no answer to yet.

“Nnh...I can’t even fight...and if I get the death penalty, I’ll be sent all the way back...”

I guess she saved somewhere far away? I thought.

“Hey, don’t worry,” I said. “I can’t do anything about our bodies, but if we have a battle here in the dream, you can just leave it all to me.” I didn’t know if there were any enemies here, but I had Nemesis, so I was pretty sure I could at least fight. “Help me out by looking for enemies, though.”

“What...?”

“When I asked, you told me you had some jobs from the hunter grouping, right?”

“Ohh. Yeah...well, okay...”

“Thanks.”

This place made no sense, so I couldn’t even guess what could attack us and from where. It didn’t hurt to be extra careful.

As I resumed walking, a question came to mind.

“By the way, when I first saw you, you looked pretty beaten up. What happened there?” That was before Overlord Acedia had attacked us, so it had to have been caused by something else. But what could have damaged her that bad?

Gerbera said nothing at first and instead looked up at the sky, as though deep in thought. I figured she was thinking about how to explain what had happened, but for some reason her legs were shaking.

Still, she was eventually able to give me an answer.

“...I-I got spun by a drill.”

“That’s a thing that happens?!” *What could’ve led to that?!*

“D-Don’t worry, it’s no big deal... It was just an accidental scrape, I guess—with an Embryo.”

“That’s a pretty scary accident...”

And yeah, there were probably drill Embryos out there... Now that I thought about it, Hannya’s Sandalphon was kinda drill-like. Hannya was in Gideon, though, so she obviously had nothing to do with this.

“You have experienced your share of things, but never a drill,” said Nemesis.

“Yeah. Though my whole body did get broken apart multiple times recently.”

“Whaaa...?” Gerbera seemed freaked out by what I’d said.

I wasn’t lying, though. Thanks to the likes of Behemot, Jubei, and the axe, I was getting blasted to pieces fairly often these days. I was kinda worried that it would have some weird effects on Nemesis’s evolution.

“So our leader isn’t the only one who comes apart all the time.”

“Hm?” Leader? Did she mean that woman? She often came apart? Well, she did seem to have healing powers that rivaled Miss Eldritch, so I guess she could make it work. I could recall Miss Eldritch putting her arm back basically the moment after Figaro removed it.

“Ray, Gerbera...what do you think that is?” As we talked, Nemesis pointed to the right—away from the twisting roads.

Before we’d realized it, there was a rectangular cloud in that direction. The shape was clearly unnatural, and we all focused on it.

A moment later, the cloud began to shine, and then displayed something like it was an electronic billboard.



It showed...a tapir.

More specifically, a person wearing a tapir costume.

I didn't recognize that costume in particular, but it had a familiar air to it—probably because of Shu. Well, him or Carl, maybe.

"Oh yeah, I think Shu actually told me about this." He'd mentioned that there was a Superior in Legendaria who also wore a costume all the time. If I recalled correctly, the name was ZZZ. So, this person in a tapir costume must've been—

"Hello. I'm Doraemon."

Whoops, my mistake.

Seriously, though...what the hell was that introduction? Honestly, it didn't even work as a joke.

"You should only say that if you're dressed as a cat. Or a tanuki, at least."

"Are you an idiot...?"

"Even here I have heard the name 'Doraemon' quite often."

We gave various responses, and the self-proclaimed Doraemon nodded.

"Yes, you're right. I'm *not* Doraemon. I'm ZZZ. Overlord Acedia. Good job. Yaaay. I like dorayaki, though. It's great that we have it here too."

The tapir...or rather, ZZZ spoke like he was delirious, or maybe as though he was just barely awake. I felt like I was listening to someone who'd pulled a bunch of all-nighters in a row and was now in a really unstable frame of mind.

But...

“By the way, if anyone here has Truth Discernment, let me ask you: did it work?”

“...Huh?” Gerbera tilted her head, then opened her eyes in surprise.

I’d heard that the hunter grouping’s Trap Hunter was a job focused on setting up traps, but it also had a low-level Truth Discernment meant for trap finding.

Her reaction told me that it didn’t activate when ZZZ had used the obviously fake name.

“Okaaay, I’m now gonna explain that and also the other rules of Dreamland. Explanations are a pain, but it’s a condition for using a skill. If only I could let someone else do it. Too bad it’s gotta be me... What a pain, such a paaain... I’m broadcasting to all of you at once, but it’s still a paaain...”

ZZZ took a pillow out from somewhere and buried his face in it. He clearly wasn’t into this. But then he resumed talking like it was something he was being forced to do.

“First, in Dreamland sense-based skills don’t work right. I mean, it’s a dream, so yeah. Do your best with your own mundane senses. You’re in a dream, so you don’t have a sense of pain, taste, or smell, but you don’t have to eat anymore. It won’t have any taste anyway. But you do have the sense of touch. And sight. And hearing. But this isn’t a lewd dream. Nobuta, you peeerv.”

Where the hell did *that* come from?

Even if I wanted to say that out loud, he was talking too fast to give me a chance. For someone who obviously wasn’t enthusiastic about this explanation, he was talking nonstop.

Or maybe he just wanted this to be over with?

“Next, you can’t bring anything that doesn’t have a mind. Well, Embryos are fine even if they’re just things, but normal gear just

looks like it's there and doesn't actually exist. It's like 'The Emperor's New Clothes,' but reversed. Nobuta, you peeerv—part II: Electric Boogaloo."

I couldn't tell if he liked Doraemon or hated it.

"If Embryos are fine, then why isn't mine here?"

"No idea, Miss Padding. Anyway, nextnextnext."

"Who are you calling 'Padding'?!"

"Oh. Sorry. The pads are gone too, aren't they? It's great that you look the same though, isn't it? That your chest isn't a sheer cliff here."

"You're *dead!*"

"Calm down! That's just a broadcast! You'll fall off the road!" I shouted. Gerbera had no weapons, but that didn't stop her from trying to square up with ZZZ, so I jumped to restrain her by the upper arms and hold her back. Our stats seemed to be about the same, so it wasn't easy. I might've not been able to do it if it wasn't for the STR bonus from my Miasmaflame Bracers.

Hm? Wait...why does grabbing her arms...feel like I'm just grabbing bare skin?

"If all gear in the dream simply *appears* to be there, then I suppose they *are* like holograms over bare skin..." said Nemesis.

Deafening silence. I gently let go of Gerbera's body, and the fist she'd raised against ZZZ went straight to my face instead.

Welp...

ZZZ gave us a "what the hell are you doing" kind of stare that I could feel through the tapir suit. "Heeey, I just warned you. Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you, and I think you probably realized already, but you fell asleep 'cause of my Dreamland. You fall asleep when you touch

“It’s the weird-colored aura. My eeeyes.” ZZZ kept on with his explanation, regardless of what we did. “Dreamland has a limited range. If my creations and I—well, Thralls these days—are gone from the surroundings, you will wake up. You gotta do some search and destroy. But you can’t ‘cause you’re catching Zs.”

So the Thralls were like antennae that spread the Dreamland signal, huh? And as long as they were around, they would channel power and make it impossible for us to wake up.

Wait, doesn’t that mean that we can’t do anything but wait until our sleeping bodies are killed?

“Heh! I got some bad news for you, you sleepy trunk-face! Our April is still awake...probably! She’s a robot! A Prism Person! She’s really strong! She’s making mincemeat out of all your Thralls right now as we speak!”

Despite the situation, Gerbera aggressively pointed at ZZZ. Her depression from before seemed to have been blown away by anger over the whole “padding” thing. Also, she may have been acting confident because she was completely relying on someone else instead of saying she’d do something herself.

“That so?” ZZZ didn’t seem to think much of her words, however. His strategy was falling apart, but it wasn’t shaking him in the slightest.

Is there more to this?

“Finally, dying in the Dreamland gives your avatar the death penalty.”

“HUH?!” Gerbera exclaimed in surprise, but ZZZ ignored her and waved his hand.

“The explanation’s over. Goodbye, everyone. I’m gonna get some shut-eye. Goodnight, don’t let the bedbugs bite.”

The broadcast ended, and the cloud he’d used as a screen dispersed.

Left behind, we didn't know what to say.

"...Even Candy is easier to grasp."

"Candy?"

"Oh...u-umm...well, you know, candy's pretty easy to drop, right?"

As she said that, she couldn't make eye contact with me. "I understand. It is truly saddening when sand sticks to them," said Nemesis.

"You don't eat the candy you drop, do you?"

"...No, I do not." She was looking away from me. Pretty suspicious. Knowing her, she'd probably think the candy was still good to eat if you just washed it off a bit.

"I gotta say, that tapir really runs his mouth... Only dumbasses reveal their...tricks..." After saying that, she crouched and grasped her head again for some reason. I strained my ears and heard a shaky, "I was such an idiooot."

Had she messed up in the past somehow?

"Did he say that the reason he said all of that was that it was the condition for some skill, and because this is a dream?"

"Because this is...why?"

"Look around you. Everything looks clearer, doesn't it?" The clouds surrounding us had dispersed and the bits that had been kinda unfocused were now much sharper.

And though the road was still floating, it had become completely straight.

"I guess that now that our heads have been stuffed with new info, this Dreamland has begun to take shape in our minds."

It was said that dreams were what people saw when the brain was organizing information. I didn't know if the dreams we saw in *Dendro* were the same as they were reality, but it was possible that this power that bore the name of "Dreamland" incorporated some of the principles of real-life dreams.

That would explain why he had to give an explanation to use a skill. And now that we were given info about Dreamland, it would start showing what it was actually capable of.

For now, though, I couldn't see any changes besides the increase in clarity.

"Well, now we know that we'll wake up as long as we just wait," said Gerbera.

"Oh yeah, you said something about April? The Prism Person?"

I'd heard about Prism Persons from Integra. She'd said that they were stand-alone combat dolls equipped with AI and built by Flagman himself. I'd also heard that the Prism Soldiers that had shown up from Quartierlatin's ruins were meant to be mass-produced versions of the Prism Persons—though, I had no idea what had to happen in the mass production process to go from April to those things in the ruins. April looked human at first glance, while the Prism Soldiers definitely didn't. The difference in appearance between them was way bigger than the difference between Prism Steeds and SMPS.

"Yeah. If the tapir wasn't lying, April's gonna take care of the Thralls soon and we'll wake up... I'm really leaving it all to everyone else, huh?"

"But there was a Mythical metal Thrall there." The scarlet Thrall based on a landdragon was obviously way above the rest.

"Mythical or not, if they've got nothing but hardness going for them, they're easy marks for April."

Gerbera didn't seem to worry about the scarlet Thrall whatsoever. There must've been some compatibility at play that I didn't know about. In that case, maybe we really would wake up if we just waited long enough.

"Hm..." But I couldn't shake off my worries. Would waiting really be enough to get out of this situation? We were up against a Superior and an Overlord—someone who stood upon two summits at once. Could he really be beaten by just having someone around who didn't fall asleep and could deal with Mythical metal? "Also..."

ZZZ himself had clearly said that dying in the dream would result in a death penalty. That meant that this dream had something that could kill us somewhere inside it.

"Anyway, I don't think it's a good idea to just wait," I continued. "We should find out if there's anything we can do from—"

"Ray!"

That was when it happened.

With a voice as sharp as an alarm bell, Nemesis transformed into the greatsword and flew into my hand.

I knew full well what this meant.

"We got company?!"

"Aye! Above us!"

I looked up and saw a tiny silhouette far in the distance. Now that the clouds had dispersed and my vision was unobstructed, I could clearly see it falling toward us.

"Gerbera! Stay back!"

"You don't have to tell me that...!"

The thing falling from above grew larger as it did. Soon enough, I was able to see both its shape and its color.

I could see it *very* clearly.

“What...the hell...?!” As that question came over me, the thing finally landed several dozen metels ahead.

The dream’s road remained steady, but the area around the landing site was pulverized and cracked.

“...G h e.”

Through the dust raised by its landing, I saw a giant, scarlet figure. It looked like a dragon with swords growing all over it.

It was undoubtedly the Thrall made of Mythical metal.

“Why is it here...in the dream?”

Something that should’ve been outside had somehow gained an existence within the dream—and now we were its targets.

Chapter Six: Dreamscape Assailant

Sorcerer, Ray Starling

“...G h e g h e g h e.”

The scarlet Thrall had suddenly fallen from above. It looked almost exactly like the one I’d seen before I was pulled into the dream, except it wasn’t surrounded by an iridescent aura—the Dreamland.

There were no eyes on its face, but I could tell that its attention was fixed on us. It rubbed its arm-blades together, throwing up sparks as it walked closer.

“...Wh-What do we do now?” Gerbera said, beginning to panic.

“We’ll just do like we agreed,” I said as I took a step forward. “I’ll fight. You stand back.”

She’d been damaged since before she went to sleep, and she didn’t have her Embryo or even her weapons right now. I had to fight by myself.

“But we are not at our best ourselves right now,” Nemesis said.

“I know!” My arms, legs, and back...I glanced at each of them and took a moment to think.

“I guess we’ll have to figure this out as we go along...”

“Do not rely on your armor! The attacks *will* reach your flesh!”

As we talked, the scarlet Thrall accelerated toward us. Its speed wasn’t supersonic, but I didn’t have Silver here, so it was still way faster than me anyway. I also hadn’t fully adjusted to this Dreamland, so my senses were slightly worse than usual.

“Tch! Purgatorial Flames!” There was still distance between us, so I went and used my left Miasmaflame Bracer.

It released a torrent of fire. No surprises there—Gardranda had a mind, so I could use her inside the Dreamland with no problem.

The flames touched the Thrall as it approached...

“...G h e.”

...but didn’t damage it.

“That’s simply not enough firepower!”

“Man...Mythical metal’s a real pain!”

The Thrall closed the distance and attacked me, but I barely evaded it and tried to remember what I’d heard about this material.

First, if converted to END, its toughness was about equal to that of END-focused Superior Jobs.

Second, making anything from it required special techniques available only to the greatest artisans.

And third, it had an extremely high melting point that made it difficult to change its shape with heat.

It was insanely rare for it to melt in combat, with the only things capable of that being the breath of Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria; the heatwaves created by Shinedragon King, Drag-Flare; and King of Blaze’s ultimate job skill.

Gloria’s case was perhaps the most notable. Upon touching the metal, the breath that made everything evaporate had *only* melted it.

My Gardranda simply didn’t have the firepower for this. Perhaps I could’ve dealt damage to it if I summoned Gardranda herself and had her use Purgatorial Flames: Zero, but it *didn’t look like that was an option*.

“Ray!”

“I know!”

This clash just now had left me more drained than usual. Normally, I made up for the MP and SP I used by tapping into and converting the grudge stored in my Grudge-Soaked Greaves.

But now, it didn’t look like that was working.

“Looks like Gouz-Maise isn’t here.” Even though I appeared to be equipped with the greaves, they weren’t actually here—just as ZZZ had explained. I couldn’t open menus here, so the only way to even know if I had my gear was to try to use it.

And though Gouz-Maise was an MVP reward, I couldn’t have brought it here because it had no mind.

Miasmaflame Princess: Gardranda and a bunch of other skills I had were all predicated on using Gouz-Maise’s grudge. The fact that I couldn’t rely on it now had made me a whole lot weaker.

“Ah...!” Nemesis quickly transformed into The Black Shield and blocked the blade the Thrall swung down. She was able to withstand it, but it left a noticeable crack on her surface.

“I cannot do this too many times!”

“I know...!” Instead of relying on unique quirks I could take advantage of, this Thrall was just another enemy that was simply *strong*. It obviously wasn’t on Behemot’s level or anything, but it was clearly above Logan’s Legendary devils—Gigaknights.

“...Ancient Legendary.”

The words that escaped my mouth had two meanings.

First, it was my evaluation of this Thrall’s power tier.

And second, it referred to a card I had that could maybe defeat it.

But...could I actually use it?

“G h e...” As I considered my options, the Thrall underwent a change.

Its arms, nose, and tail-blade turned an even brighter scarlet and began to heat up. The same heat that had made the mithril Thrall explode now lit up all of its blades, making them insanely hot. This was an absurd move possible only because the Mythical metal possessed an immense heat capacity.

My instincts told me that the blades had more power than the Swordmaster job’s Laser Blade skill. Nemesis’s Black Shield form was the toughest of the ones she had, but I could tell that these heated blades would split her in half regardless.

“G h e g h e...”

The Thrall raised its arm-blades up, then swung them down as if going for a Mongolian chop.

I had to move left or right to evade it, but I could tell that this was only a trap—regardless of which side I chose, the tail-blade would swipe toward whatever direction I’d gone and cut me down.

That was why I chose to go right.

Just as the arm-blades cut into the dream path and opened a deep crack in it, the Thrall threw its tail to skewer me.

“Counter Absorption!”

However, Nemesis’s Black Shield form didn’t preclude her from using Counter Absorption, and she activated it just in time to absorb the damage of the tail-strike. Its arms were left stuck into the ground while its attack was absorbed.

The Thrall was briefly immobilized.

“MONOCHROME!” I didn’t miss my chance and called to the Black Warcoat I was wearing.

I won the first gamble—Monochrome actually responded to me. Just like Gardranda, it was actually here in this dream.

It formed its cannon around my left hand.

And then...

“SHINING DESPAIR!”

...it fired a superheated laser toward the Thrall.

This was the single most powerful attack in my arsenal. Even so, I was seriously gambling on it being able to destroy Mythical metal. The laser was more concentrated than the original's, but would it be enough to match Gloria's breath?

The answer to that turned out to be...

“...G h e...”

...yes and no.

The Shining Despair attack did damage the Thrall—and the Mythical metal it was made of. However, the effect was minimal. The Thrall had twisted its body just in time to make the laser aimed at its chest hit its upper left arm instead.

The blast had created a fist-sized semicircular hole there, but *that was it.*

It hadn't been nearly enough to defeat it. The Thrall could even use the arm still, albeit a little bit awkwardly.

“It's working...! Keep shooting...!” shouted Gerbera.

“Hate to break it to you, but one shot of that takes all the juice.”

“It's over, then.” Gerbera fell to her knees behind me. I could understand where she was coming from, but it was too early to give up.

“Nemesis, status on the damage counter?” Vengeance is Mine ignored enemy defense, so Mythical metal didn’t mean anything to it. I could still win this if I used it on the Thrall’s head, chest, or some other critical part.

“... Zero.”

However, I could never have expected Nemesis’s response.

“...Nemesis?”

“I sense a faint accumulation somewhere awfully far away, but I sense nothing on this creature before us.”

“What?” That didn’t make sense. We’d taken its attacks with the Black Shield as well as Counter Absorption.

Was this because it was a dream, or...?

“Ah...!”

Before I could finish my thought, the Thrall swung its heated blade at me. Nemesis couldn’t defend against it, so she shifted from the Black Shield to the Black Blade. I evaded it as best as I could, but then I started to feel heat in my left shoulder.

“Ray!”

“I know!” This probably hadn’t been intentional payback, but I now had a scorched laceration about where my Shining Despair had hit the Thrall. I couldn’t check my stats, but my senses told me that I’d lost probably about 10% of my HP to that.

“So? Where did the damage go?” I asked.

“It seems to have been added to the accumulation in the distance.”

I see how it is now, I thought. The damage I took here in the dream was almost certainly being credited not to this Thrall, but the tapir himself—Overlord Acedia. I didn’t know whether it was because Thralls were like his limbs or because his Embryo turned the damage

within the dream into actual damage, but this meant that I couldn't use my counter skills on this Thrall.

Silver wasn't here, so I'd lost a lot of my mobility. VDA and my accessories weren't here, so I'd become a whole lot more fragile. Gouz-Maise wasn't here, so I was unable to summon Gardranda. Monochrome was here, but Shining Despair wasn't strong enough to be fatal. And now, to top it all off, I couldn't even use Nemesis's counter skills.

"This reminds me of our battle against that lab coated maniac," said Nemesis.

"I was thinking the same thing." I had no intention of giving up, but this felt like a real dead end. This was worse than fighting RSK, and that thing had been the result of metagaming against me.

I'd known that losing all my non-sentient gear would give anything within the dream the upper hand, but this was worse than I'd expected. This Thrall's defense and offense were basically equal, and I had no way of dealing with any of it right now.

"...No. That's not quite right."

I realized that I *might* have one or two things I could do.

The problem was not only that they'd be a gamble, but also that they were just something...different. Simply trying one of them would have me put my life on the line, while the other—if it was even possible—would have me build up more damage and...

"Buy some more time...!"

Yeah, that, I thought. Wait, huh...?

"Gerbera?" I turned around and saw Gerbera, standing away from the battle and calling out to me with a desperate expression.

"If you keep it busy long enough, April should get rid of the Thrall outside...! You need to buy some time until she does that...!"

Oh yeah, Gerbera had mentioned April. I wasn't so sure about that idea, though. As long as we were fighting this Thrall here in the dream, we couldn't know if destroying all the Thralls in reality would actually make us wake up.

Would this scarlet Thrall here really die if the real one was killed? They were clearly the same thing. Were there two of them—one in reality and one in the dream? Maybe the one from reality had simply slipped into the dream? Or perhaps there was just one of them that existed in both reality and the dream at the same time?

We didn't know any of that. As things were, all of those possibilities seemed as likely as the others.

We gotta get more info, I thought.

"We have no choice but to endure," said Nemesis.

She was right—no matter what the truth was, we still hadn't built up enough damage for the second gamble.

For now, all we could do was draw in the Thrall's attacks and wait for a chance to strike back as we restored our HP.

I feel like it's been a while since I had a battle like this.

"We have been stripped of options. It is best for us to return to the basics."

"Yeah."

I brandished Nemesis in her sword form and focused on the Thrall's attacks.

◆◆◆

The Southernmost Edge of Altar, A Mountain Forest Near the Border

When Ray was first faced with the scarlet Thrall in the dream, the battle between the Prism weapons and the Thralls was changing.

“Remaining hostiles...one.” The mithril Thralls shattered by April had been trying to fight despite being shattered into pieces, but after some time and a few more pulverizing attacks, they had become completely immobile.

The only ones that were left were April, Silver, the four who were sleeping, and...

“...G h e g h e g h e.”

...the Thrall that looked just like the one in the dream—the one ZZZ called “Cardinal A.”

It had done nothing but watch the fight, and it still wasn’t doing anything except rubbing its arm-blades together, releasing sparks as it did so.

Was this some kind of taunt? Or was it preparing for some sort of attack?

“Battle analysis.”

April took a moment to think.

During the battle, she’d used an Elixir on her owner—Sechs—but it did not wake him up. Based on that, she’d assumed that he hadn’t been overcome by a normal sleeping debuff, but the result of a special skill with conditions attached.

This phenomenon was unknown to her. When it came to jobs, April knew everything that was known to the pre-ancient civilization. However, she didn’t have much combat experience against Masters—these newly appeared entities with a multitude of unique powers.

She’d sparred against Sechs and Gerbera, fought Gakido and his Sixth Realm Chaos, and faced the Incarnation of Maelstroms in her last battle during the time of the pre-ancient civilization.

In that final fight, she'd been stripped of all her energy, entered a dormant state, and was then retrieved by the incarnations.

The battle construct believed to be unmatched in physical combat had been easily suppressed and captured.

The mastermind behind this Cardinal A—Overlord Acedia, ZZZ—gave April the same feeling as she'd experienced during that conflict.

“Resuming combat.”

No matter how dangerous it may have been, though, she chose to fight Cardinal A to mitigate the danger to her owner.

In but a breath, she closed the distance between her and Cardinal A, aiming to put it within her Material Slider's range.

“...G h e.” Coming into contact with the iridescent aura surrounding Cardinal A—the fragment of Dreamland—did not cause any changes in April herself. The Embryo had no effect on her.

That was exactly why what happened next was so bizarre—April's wires were deflected without dealing any damage to Cardinal A.

“...?”

This made no sense to her. April was using her Material Slider—a skill that subtracted END and physical toughness. She'd even used a setting far above the -4,000 she'd used against Sixth Realm Chaos. Anything around her would have their END stat reduced by a whole 30,000. Meanwhile, her own toughness, when converted to END, was over 50,000.

Their clash should have been like steel striking styrofoam. Not even Mythical metal could remain unscathed by this, but Cardinal A was under some kind of effect that negated it.

“Conjecture: toughness increased by additional effects.”

April assumed that the Mythical metal's defenses had been enhanced even further, giving it toughness that not even Material Slider could negate.

But there was something she could do against that.

"My silver brother—increase your distance. Incoming hazard," she told Silver, and he carried Ray away from her in response. She then checked where the other three people were and deemed that she could proceed without issue.

If her opponent still possessed toughness that rendered her attacks powerless, there was only one thing she had to do.

"Limiters: off."

She would simply bring the toughness even *further* down.

"Material Slider..."

April was Prism Person No. 2 as well as the first Prism Person designed for combat—Diamond Slayer. Her namesake was an area of total obliteration in which physical defense had no meaning.

The skill's name was...



“Diamond Slaying.”

The next moment, an invisible force field permeated her surroundings. Her output was pushed to the limit to make her modifications operate at a staggering capacity.

Affected by the skill, her surroundings began to crumble. The stones and trees were unable to maintain their integrity as solid objects, let alone hold up their own weight, and were ground into dust as they shattered.

Even the coarse earth beneath her was broken down into smaller and smaller particles, quickly becoming sand. Not even the remains of the mithril Thralls were spared as they all disintegrated into silver-colored ash.

Everything in a 50-metel radius was affected by an extreme toughness debuff of *more than 200,000*.

Not even Mythical metal structures could maintain themselves under this effect. There was nothing in the pre-ancient civilization that could withstand this. Even bullets heading for her at the speed of sound would be reduced to nothing before they even reached her.

And, touched by a skill this immense...

“...G h e g h e g h e.”

...Cardinal A was still completely unharmed.

“Abnormal variable.” Recognizing this opponent as an outlier, April resumed attacking using her wires, but the monster with a body of Hihi’irokane, which must have become as soft as the wall of a sandcastle under her ability’s assault, still deflected April’s attacks.

It was as though it was truly invincible.

April now understood that this entity's form was maintained by some principle other than sheer physical toughness. Thus, she knew it was a power that she could not overcome.

Assuming the worst-case scenario, April considered a disengagement. She compared stats and calculated how many of the three people she could safely take with her when...

"...G h e..."

...with no prior warning, Cardinal A's left arm was destroyed. A semicircular part of the upper arm seemed to have melted away.

It was as though it had been hit by a laser.

The damage obviously wasn't the result of April's Material Slider, but no matter how hard she calculated, she could not find anything in her surroundings that could have caused it.

Cardinal A had received damage from a place that April couldn't observe.

April then reconsidered her decision to disengage and instead chose to buy time to see if she could unravel the secret behind its invincibility.

Thus, everyone facing Cardinal A—within or outside the dream—had chosen to observe.

And as things were, none of them knew which way this would go.



Whimsical Dreality, Dreamland, Interior

Sechs and Candy stood on one of Dreamland's roads, not saying a word.

Everything around them had become clear. They had received the same explanation ZZZ had given Ray and Gerbera—in fact, it had been shown to all of them at once.

Unlike those two, Sechs and Candy hadn't commented, opting to merely listen and absorb the information.

They may have even understood it better than Ray had.

"Now *that* was a waste of time," said Candy with a pout. "We already knew that Dreamland only takes in things that have minds, plus it was pretty obvious that dying here totally equals death penalty, and that we had to do something specific to wake up. The info's useless to us, but he now gets to use a skill." Candy let out a sigh and grumbled. "And he didn't even tell us anything about it."

ZZZ hadn't revealed any of the cards in his hand—he'd merely told them something that anyone could have figured out after enough time. He already had the upper hand, and this gave him an even bigger advantage.

"You agree, don't cha?" Candy asked. "...Sechsy?"

That was when Candy realized that Sechs was deep in thought, one hand over his mouth.

"...That is contradictory." It seemed like he was simply scrutinizing the info they'd been given, but that wasn't precisely the case.

"What is?"

He was questioning something far more fundamental. "The fact that the Embryo requires an explanation...as well as this dreamworld itself. I had information about Overlord Acedia's nature as a person. He was a slothful, laid-back sort who desired nothing else but sleep."

"That's pretty much what I heard about him too."

"If that is truly his nature, this Dreamland makes no sense. It contradicts what he *is*."

"What do you... Oh, I get it."

That was when Candy realized it too.

“A person who merely wants to slack off would never like an Embryo that *forces him to work*.”

Masters generally didn’t end up with Embryos whose powers they actively disliked. Sechs the shape-shifting slime, as well as Candy the bacteria generator, were both fond of how their Embryos were.

With that in mind, would a person who only wanted to laze around enjoy an Embryo that turned his time sleeping—one of the fundamentals of laziness—into *work time*? After all, Dreamland was an Embryo that didn’t stop at merely putting them to sleep—it required its Master’s explanation to unleash its full potential.

“Our interpretation of one factor is flawed.”

Was it ZZZ’s slothful nature? Was it Dreamland’s ability to pull people into the dream?

Or was there something amiss with their assumptions about both?

This deviation in nature had resulted in ZZZ’s Embryo possessing a skill that Sechs and Candy couldn’t have anticipated. It was the very power giving severe trouble to April back in reality, and its name was “Nightmare Kingdom—Dreamland.”

“We lack the information to truly verify anything, but I believe we should be prepared for the unexpected.”

“Okaaay.”

The two were about to resume walking when Candy noticed something.

“Sechsy, what’s with your finger?” Candy was referring to Sechs’s left pinky.

It was *gone*.

Candy hadn’t seen it vanish, but it wasn’t there now.

“Does he have a skill that makes you disappear piece by piece as time goes on?” Suddenly worried he was being consumed by a giant creature, Candy examined himself.

Sechs, however, simply smiled his usual smile and said, “No need to worry. This is not Overlord Acedia’s skill. I have done this myself.”

“Hm?”

“I suppose that is enough.” After saying that, Sechs extended his left hand back to the direction they’d come from.

A few moments later, a small slime came into view.

“That’s...”

“Yes. This was a little test. I separated it the moment we arrived here.”

The tiny slime jumped into Sechs’s left hand and assumed the form of his pinky.

“Wait, your slimes...”

“Indeed. Though it depends on size, they disappear when there is too great a distance between them and the main body—that is, the one with the most volume.”

That was the flaw in Sechs’s powers that even Red King had been aware of. But...

“However, this slime did not disappear even when the distance surpassed ten times the maximum.”

“So, distance works different here?”

“Either that or it does not matter as long as my physical body is still all connected. Regardless, I believe I can make use of this.”

Sechs then transformed his right hand into a sword-like Embryo...and decapitated himself.

A moment later, the rest of his body split into pieces and became tiny slimes. A number of them even had wings.

“I split myself into about fifty parts,” Sechs said. “I will use this for reconnaissance. If we are lucky, I might find Gerbera or Overlord Acedia.”

The pieces then scattered. Normally, this would’ve been suicide for Sechs, as the pieces would vanish one by one—but if they didn’t, this was an optimal way to gather information.

Thus, the slimes crawled off in every direction. Some of them even jumped off the dream road into the abyss below.

“Hrmm, not even a GOD like me could use a trick this extreme.”

“I do consider the safety margins, of course, so I will bring all of them back if at least one vanishes due to distance. Oh, also, I have a request.”

“What is it?”

“Could you carry my head? I am focusing on controlling the other parts, so it is a bit difficult to move.”

“I guess now I know how April feels,” Candy said as he put on a wry grin and picked up Sechs’s severed head.

Interlude: The Village of the Overlord

Northern Legendaria, Sheepkin Settlement AKA Sloth Village

There was a small settlement hidden in the Legendarian woodlands near its border with the Kingdom of Altar.

Mithril Thralls roamed around it, protecting it from monsters and other uninvited guests. They were set to be semi-autonomous, letting them patrol the area even when ZZZ wasn't logged in.

And in the heart of the settlement that was surrounded by these servants of the Overlord, there was a mansion that looked a bit too humble for someone with such a lofty title.

It was the largest building in the village, but it was smaller than the residences of Altean nobility, even the provincial ones.

"Zzz..." ZZZ was sleeping in the bedroom of this mansion's second floor. His bed was fluffy, and his sleep was deep and calm. In reality, he was dressed in the same tapir costume he wore in the dream, and though it made for a good sleeping bag by itself, there was still a blanket over him.

There was a group of people watching him through the door, not saying a word or making noise. They were all sheepkin servants who lived in this mansion, and their eyes as they looked at him were filled with relief and unmistakable reverence.

It felt like they were looking at a *messiah* rather than an Overlord.

That was only natural.

After all, for the sheepkin, Overlord Acedia was nothing short of a savior.



The sheepkin were people who had curved horns on their heads and grew woollike hairs on their limbs and backs.

They had settled in northern Legendaria, but that was not where they had originated—it was merely where they'd arrived after fleeing the heart of the country.

Sheepkin hair—especially the fluff of young women—was treasured as a high-grade material for clothing and bedding. Even though they were a humanoid species, this had led to them being targeted by the other races as if they were monsters that dropped rare items. In fact, unlike monsters, they were actually guaranteed to provide the material, making their situation arguably even worse.

They hated being treated like cattle, so they chose to secretly move to the edge of Legendaria and live there in hiding.

Centuries had passed since then.

They did not participate in the Legendarian parliament and lived their lives as a forgotten minor tribe. The country had countless different peoples in it, but their situation was perhaps among the most pitiable.

However, it wasn't all bad for them.

The location they'd chosen to live couldn't have been more perfect, for it was right outside the area dominated by the Divine Disks. Because their settlement wasn't part of its domain, the UBM never asked them for sacrifices, but at the same time it was close enough that other monsters were scared to approach them. This had allowed the sheepkin to live in peace for the centuries they'd spent here.

However, time had eventually brought change.

The Divine Disks were defeated, and the local habitats changed, allowing monsters in the area to become more bold and start to approach the settlement. The sheepkin had no means to defend themselves against them—the tribe as a whole had a low affinity for combat jobs. They only excelled at crafting roles focused on attire—as well as the Sacrifice job, which was thoroughly useless to tians.

Despite that, the monsters that lived in this area were strong enough for it to be recognized as a leveling zone for Masters level 300 and up.

If they didn't find anyone to protect them, the entire settlement would eventually be consumed by the local fauna.

However, though it was near the buffer zone, it was still part of Legendaria, so it had never been annexed by Altar and did not receive their protection. Since they'd lived in hiding for so long, though, Legendaria itself didn't even know the sheepkin existed, let alone had any understanding of their circumstances.

And if they were to reveal themselves, they would only be hunted and sheared once again.

Their choice was between death and becoming cattle again—and, after a lot of thought, they'd chosen the former.

Or, to be more precise, monsters had come into their settlement before they could truly make a decision. They hadn't even had the chance to consider whether or not a life as livestock would have been preferable.

Just as the sheepkin were about to meet death in the jaws of some wolfish beasts, though...suddenly, a group of odd and misshapen monsters came out of nowhere and began mowing down the wolves. These "Thralls" routed the beasts, despite their numbers.

For some reason, one of them was carrying what first looked like a large stuffed toy shaped like a tapir, but it then turned around, revealing that it was actually a person in a tapir costume.

"...I'm not hungry anymore..." Ignoring the tapir's sleep talking, the Thralls continued to exterminate the wolves.

And when it was done, the strange monsters stopped in place.

The sheepkin focused on the one carrying the person wearing the costume.

The tapir was a strange creature, but the lack of name hovering above it made it clear that it was no monster.

What was it, then?

Most would conclude that it was a Master, but the sheepkin, who'd been living in seclusion for centuries, had no means of knowing about the recent influx. To them, Masters were something that only existed in legend, effectively synonymous with The Lynx, Schrödinger Cat, who'd lived during The Era of the Peerless Three—when they went into seclusion.

"...G h e." Upon noticing the people looking at the tapir, the Thralls spent a moment thinking how to handle them. However, they were unable to come upon an answer and decided to wake him up.

"Mmnghh...we found people yet?" Upon awakening, the tapir looked around, saw that he was in a village and...

"I'm ZZZ. Overlord Acedia. Nice to meetchaaa."

...introduced himself in that manner. The sheepkin were shocked, for the title he'd presented was yet another thing straight from legend. "I'm almost outta food. Gotta stock up. Huuungru. Uhh, that kinda makes me feel like Dis. Oh—I got money if you need it. How muuuch?"

He spoke like he wasn't fully awake, but none of what he said triggered Truth Discernment. None of it was a lie—not even the claim that he was an Overlord.

Overlords were nearly mythological figures who had conquered a created dungeon—entities that enjoyed power and fortune far beyond what the sheepkin had ever known.

It was said that those who had acquired these titles had caused a lot of mayhem in the world. But Overlord or not, this one was the sheepkin's savior.

Not saying a word, the villagers looked at each other. They remembered how they'd regretted their decision when the wolves attacked them.

That was why they resolved to make the right choice this time.

"Please...! Take us as your retainers! We are ready to give you everything we have, save only our very lives!"

"Suuure, why not?"

The response to their desperate plea was quick and casual. It was hard to tell if the Overlord even knew what he was replying to.

At least, he certainly did not know their circumstances.

"Gimme clothes, food, and shelter, please. I'll just get some shut-eye. Sleepy." And with that, ZZZ went to sleep once again.

Thus, the hidden village of the sheepkin became Overlord Acedia's domain.



Because of these circumstances, ZZZ was their savior.

Even after becoming their ruler, he never asked for anything but food and a place to sleep. His Thralls even assisted with security and farming for the villagers, making life there noticeably easier.

The sheepkin could not have asked for a better ruler.

But that also raised a particular question—a question one of the sheepkin maids attending to ZZZ's needs couldn't help but ask. How could someone as unselfish and gentle as him become wanted...and an Overlord?

His response to the former question was “Why am I wanted, huuuh? It’s my bad, really. The skill Dreamland got when it evooolved to seventh form had a bigger range than I thought and it kinda fried a city’s infrastructure for a biiit...and it’s like yeah, I can’t blame them for blaming meee. Wanteed.”

While in response to the latter, he said, “Overlooord? Well, uh...I actually have a few buddies: Benetnasch, Dis, and Omega. Friendooos. They all had Superior Jobs, sooo...well, it’s not like I was jealous or anything, but I got all sad ’cuz I felt like they were leaving me behiiind. I guess it’s like ‘Sorry ZZZ. This SJ stuff is just for three.’ SJs are one each, though. Solooo. Anyway, that’s why I went and took Overlord Acediaaa. It looked like it was gonna be easiest for me since *I’m unbeatable when I sleeEEP*. Star Mariooo. Here we gooo.”

Basically, there was no strong reason or desire behind either of those things.

So the maid then asked, “Why *do* you want to sleep?”

It was a question referring to his usual nature...

“...’Cuz I can’t.”

...and it was met with a casual, but contradictory response.

“I can’t sleep in real life ’cuz *this here* doesn’t work riiight,” he said, tapping his head with his finger. “That’s why I just wanna sleeEEP here. And if I’m dreaming, I don’t even care if I’m lucid or having a nightmaaare. Sweet dreams.”

His tone was indifferent, but a profound sorrow could be sensed behind his words. That was why the sheepkin understood that nothing would give him more joy than many hours of peaceful sleep.

Chapter Seven: A Battle He Can Lose

About ZZZ

Overlord Acedia, ZZZ had no real-life memories of the dreams he'd seen while asleep.

When he was little, he'd gotten into an accident which damaged his brain in a way that prevented him from falling asleep naturally no matter how long he closed his eyes or how unbearably fatigued he was. He could only achieve sleep when his brain was forcefully shut down using medication so strong it didn't even allow for dreams. If he had been born earlier and thus had lacked access to these treatments, he may have even languished and died shortly after the accident.

It was inevitable that a person like him would develop a desire to sleep and dream. This was one of the three core needs as a living being, after all, and it was not satisfied for him.

It was no surprise, then, that he would try out dive-type VRMMOs just so he could sleep in them.

However, many of those games outright denied him entry to their worlds. And it wasn't just those that functioned like a dream—games that sent signals to the five senses also didn't work properly with his damaged brain.

He'd almost given up on VRMMOs entirely, but took a chance one final time on *Infinite Dendrogram*. It could be said that he was drawn to it, just like many other players before and after him.

Ultimately, he was able to log into *Dendro* without any issue, and upon receiving a healthy avatar, he'd become able to sleep whenever he was within this world.

Thus, his greatest desire was fulfilled.

But that was exactly what caused a certain *conflict*.

Before hatching, Embryos analyzed their Masters' personalities and desires before assuming forms that were, to varying degrees, based on those things. In ZZZ's case, there was no doubt that both of these were related to sleep. However, he'd acquired everything he'd wanted the moment he first appeared in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Thus, his Embryo developed powers based on him *in a different way*. Perhaps if he specifically desired *peaceful* sleep, his Embryo wouldn't have turned out the way it did, instead developing abilities that made his sleep more comfortable.

However, ZZZ only wished for *sleep itself*. He was beyond caring whether it was peaceful or not—he'd only wished to fulfill the physiological need he'd always lacked as a living being. This lack of necessity and motivation to develop powers had produced an effect on his Embryo.

This phenomenon was uncommon, but not unheard of.

A particular singer who'd begun *Infinite Dendrogram* was troubled by things such as the gap between languages, her feelings not being understood properly, and her songs not reaching and resonating with the hearts of others.

However, *Infinite Dendrogram* featured flawless language translation.

That alone had solved her problems, and as a result, her Eden, instead of being born as an Embryo that closed the gap between words, became one that just closed gaps in general and let *all things* be conveyed—an Embryo that deleted resistances.

Dreamland was no different.

It wasn't merely an Embryo that put people to sleep. It had the power to protect its owner while he was sleeping. It had the power

to keep people sleeping. It had the power to prevent reality from influencing a sleeping mind. It had the power to pull anyone it put to sleep into dreams separated from reality.

These were the abilities it had developed as the land of dreams.

Just like Eden, it may have diverged from what its Master intended, but he did not care. He was asleep and he was dreaming. That was enough for him, even if the dream was only an extension of this world's reality.

He never held on to any memories of his actual dreams, but the knowledge that he *was* dreaming—that was enough for him to be at peace.

His core desire wasn't to rest or laze about, but to just sleep at all.

It didn't matter if that sleep wasn't restful. And it didn't matter if someone was caught up in the dream and was exposed to a nightmare.

Thus, the name of his ultimate: "Nightmare Kingdom—Dreamland."

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Whimsical Dreality, Dreamland, Interior

How much time had passed since Ray and Cardinal A had begun fighting?

Nightmare Kingdom—Dreamland was a skill that lasted half an hour, so it couldn't have been that long, but this battle certainly wasn't short either.

Despite that, Ray was holding his ground.

Cardinal A completely outclassed him in terms of stats. Ray was standing against something above even the Legendary Gigaknights he'd once fought, stripped of one of his MVP rewards and all of his armor.

Switching to Sorcerer had also made all his Paladin skills except for healing magic unusable, yet he kept on fighting. This was made possible by all his experience in fighting opponents who were clearly above him.

However, he was reaching the limits of that skill as well.

In spite of this being a dream, his breathing had become ragged as he got more and more out of breath. The fatigue was weighing him down, and he'd used up all his Counter Absorptions. He had no healing items here, so he had to cast healing magic—but his limited MP was about to run dry, as well.

Right now, Ray was focusing on evasion as he wielded the twin blades of Nemesis's fourth form to take advantage of their compact size and ease of handling.

Despite that, he was now covered in wounds and his own blood.

"G h e..." Meanwhile, Cardinal A—the Thrall made of Mythical metal—showed no signs of fatigue. Its performance hadn't dropped one bit since the moment Ray's Shining Despair had made a hole in its left arm. The counterattacks Ray launched did nothing but leave a few scratches on its metallic surface.

The gap between them was plain to see. No matter how well Ray could fight against opponents that outclassed him, he had clearly reached the limits of that skill.

Normally, Ray and Nemesis could have turned even a situation as dire as this in their favor. However, the specific circumstances didn't allow that.

This Dreamland was a special place in which Nemesis's counter-skills like Vengeance is Mine had no effect on Cardinal A. Ray was missing the very option that would allow him to win. There was no path that led to victory, yet defeat was unavoidable.

This was a battle that whittled away the heart.

There was something else that Nemesis had noticed, but chose not to mention. It pertained to Ray's movements as he held her.

Ray was doing an amazing job surviving against this powerful foe. He didn't break before the overwhelming difference in power and continued to fight and resist no matter how many gut-wrenching close calls he suffered.

Right now, Ray was standing his ground while giving one hundred percent.

But that was the thing—it was *just* one hundred percent and not *more than that*.

In many of his previous battles against overwhelming foes, Ray had exceeded his limits. If he'd done the same here, he might have taken less damage and inflicted more.

However, it was clear that he was in no state to do that.

One reason for that was that his senses were different because he was currently inside a dream—but there was another, far more important reason.

Nemesis had realized what this was. After all, this factor had been present even in the two Tournament battles they'd participated in that very day.

The thing those duels and this battle had in common was...

This is a battle he can afford to lose, Nemesis thought. Just as his defeat in The Tournaments did nothing but prevent him from proceeding, defeat at the hands of this Thrall *would not mean much*.

As a Master, Ray would simply be given the death penalty. This was not a grand tragedy where mortal tian lives were at stake—not one of the many deadly struggles he'd experienced starting with the battle against that Demi-Dragon Worm.

Thus, Ray wasn't able to channel his true power. He couldn't surpass his limits.

I see. Nemesis looked back at the past.

The majority of his many defeats happened in situations that *weren't* tragedies, just like this one. The battle against Marie, the countless duels, the first encounter with Tsukuyo...and today's Tournament.

He'd only lost battles he *could* lose.

Looking back, the Anniversary was no different. In his first battle against Jubei Kaga, Ray wasn't going all out. As someone who wished to face him in true mortal combat, she'd been disappointed in that and said...

"It did not draw out everything good about Ray Starling. Why? What am I lacking?"

Then, during their second battle, she'd threatened that if Ray lost, she would PK Alto over and over again. The battle thus had his friend's *Dendro* future at stake, allowing Ray to channel his real strength and come out victorious.

Ray was a person who could only exhibit his true power when faced with terrible consequences for losing that could not be undone. Jubei must've understood this as well.

I suppose there's no getting around that central fact, Nemesis thought. Ray was a person who got himself hurt to protect others. That was his nature. He'd surpassed his limits by suffering damage himself so he could keep someone else safe. However, it always came at the cost of saddling him with heartache and physical wounds, and as someone who deeply cared about Ray, Nemesis did not enjoy seeing this in the slightest.

Still, he was fully willing to give so much, and Nemesis knew well that if Ray had let those tragedies come to pass, it would hurt him even more deeply.

That was why, when faced with these dire situations, Nemesis had always supported him and chosen to fight alongside him.

But that was exactly why she now wondered...

Is there any reason to keep fighting a battle he can afford to lose? she thought. This was a situation in which a single direct hit would kill him. Ray himself did barely any damage to his opponent, and there was no telling how long the battle would last. Was there any point in Ray continuing to exert his heart and body here?

Nemesis was even beginning to believe the absurd notion that *losing* may have actually been the best course of action.

That was when...

“Hey...”

...as though someone had read Nemesis’s mind...

“Wouldn’t it be better if you lost?”

Ray heard these words from somewhere behind him.

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A short while ago, Gerbera was watching Ray and Cardinal A’s battle. Other than that single beam attack which had damaged the left arm, it was completely one-sided.

There was no way Ray could win this. Even Gerbera could tell that it was turning into a war of attrition that Ray would ultimately lose.

What should I do? If he loses, I’m gonna be next, right...? she thought.

Gerbera was even more powerless against this monster than Ray. She didn't have any of her weapons or even Alhazred here. All she could do was run, but she could tell that she wouldn't get far.

I guess it dropped from up high thanks to a movement skill... If this whole space is an Embryo, then it's gotta have a skill that lets it move around the stuff inside it. And, well, dreams let you go anywhere, don't they?

Gerbera's concern was not unfounded—Dreamland did indeed have a skill that let ZZZ control the positions of anything within it.

That was why she hadn't tried running away. If she did and ended up too far away from Ray, it was likely that she would be deemed as easier prey. Cardinal A would probably then be moved next to her.

He's trying his best, but it looks like he'll lose at any moment. I don't care if he loses, but if I lose, then it's back to the gaol for me. No, really, what am I supposed to...?

Gerbera was at a loss when...

“Gerbera.”

“EEEEK?!”

...someone spoke from right next to her ear, causing her to jump and let out a strange noise. She turned to the source of the voice and saw a winged slime floating and flapping its wings.

“...Leader?” Upon recognizing his voice—and realizing that there simply weren't any other slimes as strange as this—she spoke to it in a quiet voice so that Ray and Nemesis wouldn't overhear.

“Yes. I finally found you,” responded Sechs—or a part of him anyway.

After getting confirmation it was him, Gerbera let out a sigh of relief.
“I-I'm saved...”

“I see you had a hard time.”

“Oh, you wouldn’t believe it! I don’t have Alhazred, he touched my chest, I’ve got no gear, I could’ve died at any moment, he touched my chest... It was awful!”

Gerbera unrolled everything that’d happened since she came to the dream. Most of it was just complaining, but...

“No Alhazred? Oh, that must be because...”

...Sechs actually gave an explanation for one of the things she’d mentioned.

Dreamland was supposed to take in anything that had a mind—including Embryos. Why, then, was Alhazred not here? Sechs instantly realized the reason why and explained it to Gerbera, who understood it as well.

“Oh, I see... That doesn’t change the fact that I can’t do anything, though.”

“That is true. It will not be a problem, however. I now know where you are, so my main body is making its way to you. It will be here soon.”

Those words filled Gerbera with even more relief than before. Sechs’s entire body was a Superior Embryo that could transform into many other Embryos, no doubt giving him many means of destroying Mythical metal.

It might even be said that allowing Sechs into this dream could ultimately turn out to be the fatal mistake that would lead to Overlord Acedia’s defeat.

“Hurry up and come over here,” Gerbera said to Sechs, glancing over at Ray. He was still fighting Cardinal A. “I dunno how long he’ll hold it off...”

“Actually, it will be bad for us if he keeps fighting for much longer,” Sechs said.

“Huh?”

“I cannot defeat a Mythical metal Thrall without him realizing who I am. I do not know how much Shu told him about me, but it is possible that he will recognize me by my combat style.”

Ray had already seen Sechs use a sword-like Embryo that had possessed the Rumbling Treework skill. That Embryo was useless against Cardinal A, and the moment Sechs used any other, Ray would realize that he was a unique fighter who could wield multiple Embryos—which could only be King of Crime, Sechs Würfel.

Thus, Sechs could not fight Cardinal A before Ray received the death penalty.

“Then just wait until he loses and get over here then,” said Gerbera.

“Waiting is no good either. We cannot be certain how long April can protect our bodies. Your death would be a great loss to us, and if the Contract deems me deserving, Candy’s death could lead to mine.”

That meant that it was best if Ray received the death penalty *before* Sechs made it here and defeated Cardinal A.

“He’s holding out pretty well, though...” Ray was enduring despite the odds being stacked against him. There was no telling how many more minutes he could keep going.

With that thought in Gerbera’s mind ...

“That is why you should stab him in the back.”

...Sechs made a suggestion as though it was nothing.

“Whoa whoa whoa, you know I can’t do that right now. I don’t have a bowgun or even a knife.”

“I did not mean with weapons, but with words,” Sechs said before whispering something into her ear.

Upon hearing what Sechs had to say, Gerbera nodded in understanding before calling out to Ray.

"Hey...wouldn't it be better if you lost?"

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Ray said nothing in response—he didn't even turn around.

He *couldn't* even turn around.

He was dedicating his entire body and soul to evading each and every one of Cardinal A's fatal attacks.

"Wh-What are you talking about...?!" That was why Nemesis replied in his stead. The perplexity in her voice must have been not only due to Gerbera's words, but also because they matched her own thoughts.

"I mean, it's bad for you if this drags on, isn't it?" Gerbera said. "Your gear and the horse are still outside, right? So...the longer you keep this up, the bigger the chances that your gear's gonna get broken."

"That's..." Gerbera was merely repeating what she'd heard from Sechs, but she herself did believe that this was the right idea. No one within the dream knew the situation outside. April had toughness that surpassed Mythical metal, so she was likely unharmed, but there was no telling what state everything else was in. It was entirely possible that Ray could be met with a miserable scenario in which Cardinal A defeated him despite his efforts, only for Ray's needless extension of the fight to have resulted in the destruction of his equipment and trusty steed.

According to Gerbera, Ray had nothing to gain and everything to lose in this fight, and Nemesis was on the verge of siding with her.

If he lost here, he would lose nothing but some random drops. The chances of him sacrificing his equipment or Silver in that scenario

were significantly lower than if he kept on fighting—and the risk of losing something irreplaceable only grew as he persisted.

“That’s why you’d be better off if you just took the death penalty.” There was a hint of worry in Gerbera’s voice as she said that. He may have been her sworn enemy’s friend, as well as someone who’d inflicted lots of mental damage upon her since they’d met in this dream, but at the same time, she wouldn’t be alive right now if it weren’t for Ray valiantly keeping the Thrall busy.

That was why, while a part of her just wanted him to hurry up and get killed, she was also giving him this warning out of kindness.

“Ray...” There was no response from him. Nemesis was unable to find the right words to say, so she’d only called his name.

That was because Gerbera’s words had actually convinced her.

This was a situation in which Ray could lose Silver, who was like another partner to him, and the possibility of him actually winning was absurdly low. Not even Nemesis could help him.

That was why even she began to believe that giving up was the correct course of action here.

That was when Ray...

“Nemesis.”

...evaded an attack and called his partner’s name...

“Why did we come here?”

...before posing a question.

“We...”

“Our last death was against Behemot. Even though we all cooperated, we couldn’t carry the momentum until the end. Without Fuso, everything might’ve been over then and there.”

While Nemesis didn't know what to say, Ray continued talking.

"Since then, we've tried to become stronger—and we did. But today, Lei-Lei completely crushed us. We couldn't do anything against her. And *that's why* we came here—to improve ourselves even a tiny bit."

"That is true." They'd traveled to this zone to gain more power. They'd come to the border because today's defeat had made them realize that they were lacking in strength. Their involvement in the clash between Sechs's group and ZZZ may have been random, but there was an overall motive to their presence here.

"This fight against ZZZ just sorta happened. We may have just gotten caught up in something by accident. Losing here may not mean losing anything of value. And fighting may lead to Silver getting damaged or even destroyed."

Ray agreed with everything Gerbera had said. He himself had already known all that. He was fully aware that losing was better than winning this time.

"Even so...I won't choose defeat."

Despite all that, he continued to fight.

"Ray..."

"I have no idea how we can win this. Our odds of winning are slim. Probably far, far less than one percent."

Ray steadfastly declared that he would continue to struggle in spite of everything.

"This isn't a battle I gotta win at all costs...but we'll soon encounter more like that. They're not even that far away. The fights we'll *have* to win are right around the corner."

Ray was speaking about the impending war against Dryfe—the war to end the conflict with the imperium he'd been involved in since his

first day in *Infinite Dendrogram*. It was inevitable, and he fully grasped the fact that the decisive war was close at hand.

“That’s why I won’t choose defeat.”

With a bloodied face and a strong will in his eyes, he continued to speak.

“If I looked at the pros and cons of each fight and began accepting ‘reasonable’ defeats in fights that I ‘could’ lose, I might start *looking* for reasons to lose the upcoming battles.”

Ray knew that when a spirit broke just once, it would forever be covered in cracks that made it easy to break over and over again.

That was why he never chose to break on his own.

He’d lost many battles he could afford to lose.

However, he had never once *chosen defeat*. He’d merely done all he could and been defeated in spite of that.

“As long as the moment of defeat hasn’t come, I won’t stop trying to seize the possibility of victory.”

And this time too, he exerted his freedom and chose to resist until the very end.

“Ray... Ah...!” That was when Nemesis noticed something.

Even while Ray was talking, Cardinal A had continued attacking him. Like the machine that it was, it continued wielding its full power against its opponent.

Despite that, it didn’t interrupt Ray’s words, and none of its attacks landed.

It was as though death was closing in on him from all sides, yet he was evading it all by a hair’s breadth.

“This is...” Nemesis knew this state of his better than anyone else. She’d seen it in the many deadly struggles he’d endured. It was the strength beyond his limits—the power to forge on through the most dangerous circumstances.

It was on the verge of manifesting even in this battle that he could afford to lose.

“And we won’t just fight...we’ll win.”

Even greater power surged through his eyes and each of his limbs.

“I’ll surpass who I was... We will surpass who *we* were...*and win!*”

He evaded Cardinal A’s right arm-blade and slashed it with his twin swords. It only made a scratch, but Ray was not deterred and continued fighting.

He evaded, attacked, evaded, attacked... The damage he dealt seemed insignificant, but this did not drive him to despair. He simply kept on taking these small steps toward victory. He wouldn’t give up no matter how many millions of steps he had left.

“I don’t care if we’re up against an Overlord or Mythical metal...!” As he slashed at the Thrall, he let out a war cry. “We...*we will grow stronger!*” It was the roar of his heart—Ray’s will at its purest.

Upon hearing his declaration, Gerbera slightly jumped and put her hand on her chest. As someone who’d once wished to be the strongest, she was affected by his words.

She’d wished to be the strongest, but when confronted with reality, she broke, gave in, and had begun to act as though she was the weakest of all just to avoid any more such heartbreak.

The reason she was morose all the time was because she knew that if she let herself be in high spirits once more, it would hurt even more when she was brought down again.

But even someone like her could not fail to be affected by what Ray said.

Upon hearing Ray's declaration, Sechs smiled. What he'd heard through his fragment made the main body—the head—grin in a way different than usual.

Just like Sechs's dear friend Shu, Ray had turned out to be a person who didn't compromise himself. If Ray had given up at Sechs's suggestion, Sechs wouldn't have spared a second thought for him.

But because Ray remained unbroken...he'd caught Sechs's interest as well.

Upon hearing Ray's declaration, Nemesis smiled as tears ran down her face. This wasn't visible in her weapon form, but she was berating herself for her awful misunderstanding.

She regretted that she had failed to understand this fundamental thing without hearing Ray say it himself.

She reflected upon it, reframed herself, and mentally drew herself up. There was no longer any hesitation in her, and there was no time to look back.

Nemesis once again had a grasp of Ray's desire and will.

That meant that there was only one thing left to do.

His words were "We will grow stronger."

Indeed—it hadn't been "I," but "we." If Ray would reach for victory while surpassing limits he didn't even know were there, then Nemesis also had to become stronger.

Thus, she sought more power, a higher evolution—and a new version of herself.

The XP and Resources that had accumulated deep within her, the combined will of her and her Master, were about to initiate ■■L—

the special evolution system left only in Maidens and Apostles—when...

“...Do you seek power?”

...upon hearing Ray's declaration, *an axe* posed that question.

Chapter Eight: Finest in the Right, Strongest in the Left

A long time ago...

In the distant past, before *a certain world* was even born, one of the previous observers—gods, or “Infinite Jobs,” as they could be called—was faced with his creations and overcome by an inner conflict.

This entity called the BLACKSMITH was building the world alongside his colleagues.

Everyone in the group had assumed different roles in assembling this garden—this aggregation of information. One built the world’s foundation. One gathered the monsters—including the “gulong” or “ancient dragons.” One gathered countless physical materials. One wove the system of jobs. One created the young humanoids who would wield those jobs. One prepared the Archetype System—the control substitute. One set up the trial known as the GAME OVER.

Thus, the program known as “the world” was built by many hands, each responsible for a different aspect.

One of them, the BLACKSMITH, created *only a single weapon*.

It was a weapon meant only for a unique entity bearing a Special Superior Job—a weapon for acquiring this job and a weapon meant to be wielded by it.

It was the possibility that could strike down their trial—The DEMISE—and prevent the end of the world—the GAME OVER.

In short, one could call it the world’s strongest weapon.

The BLACKSMITH’s brethren entrusted him with the creation of this weapon, and employing all his creative and imaginative prowess, he began forging a masterpiece.

However, he soon found himself in an abyss of indecision.

He was meant to create only *one* masterpiece, yet in front of him, there were two.

All the skill he channeled into this work had led to him creating one weapon too many.

One was a carver of origins—a two-edged blade that transformed the natural shape of all it cut and sliced even through energy itself.

It was the strongest of swords, one that bore the law of absolute severance.

The other was a determiner of all ends—a killing blade, the antithesis of all and everything that heralded certain ruination.

It was the strongest of axes, one that bore the law of absolute annihilation.

A sword of “one.” An axe of “all.” Faced with these two mighty weapons, nearly finished, the BLACKSMITH found himself lost in thought.

Even with his authority and power, he could only complete one of them, and the weapon that would remain incomplete would not be able to exhibit even a tenth of its projected power. In his eyes, the weapon he did not choose would fall in status from a masterpiece to dross.

Thus, he pondered. He thought long and hard about which of the two he would leave behind.

And in the end, he forged the sword.

Granted the name of “Altar,” the blade had appeared in the completed world many times alongside its Sacred Kings and Sacred Princesses. Even after the downfall of the immense pre-ancient civilization, it still found a wielder and returned to etch its name in history once more.

This weapon was the pride of the world—the strongest sword of legend and the symbol of an entire kingdom. It had become so adored that it was the subject of not just biographies, but children's tales as well.

The incomplete axe, on the other hand, was not even given a name. It found itself submerged beneath the tide of history.

It appeared here and there, but was never wielded by one person for long. Occasionally the axe was held by some of the strongest fighters of an era, but they all eventually succumbed to it.

It was a weapon that hurt whoever wielded it. It could rid them of their body parts and sometimes even strip them of their lives.

This foul association resulted in the axe being reviled as a cursed weapon.

History had seen a few Fallen Knights who had thought they could wield the axe without penalty, but its effects were no curse—merely a feature of the weapon—so they had lost their lives all the same.

Indeed, the damage done to the wielder was by design—and both the sword and the axe had actually been the same in this regard.

When used, the *same power* that flowed through their attacks also flowed through their wielders. That indeed made them *seem* like cursed weapons from RPGs—powerful items that could only be used at a steep cost.

Altar, the chosen blade, simply had this effect removed by the BLACKSMITH's final touch—the application of the mechanisms related to the Sacred King job. If the sword hadn't been chosen, it would've become a terrible blade that inflicted the wielder with wounds that never closed.

And because the BLACKSMITH could only finish one weapon, the unchosen axe became nothing but waste and refuse.

It would never be able to display its full potential, for using even 10% of its output was enough for it to blow away its wielder. It harmed all who swung it, making it impossible for it to show its true power.

The moment the sword was chosen over it, the axe's fate was sealed. It became a weapon that would never see the light of day.

The axe itself didn't think much of that fact. It didn't bear any envy toward or grudge against the blade Altar for being chosen, but it still possessed the instincts of a weapon.

It only wished to be wielded by those who sought power.

Though it may have been incomplete dross, it still endeavored to do what a weapon should do.

Thus, it granted power to all those who took it in hand. In exchange for that power, the axe took their limbs and perhaps even their bodies—and because of that, its entire existence was a series of curses it bestowed. The axe became the subject of its wielders' regret, suffering, and despair—and bathed in its victims' grudge and gore. Even those who initially seemed like they could master the weapon eventually died as they drew out more power than they could handle.

This cycle had been repeated countless times throughout its long history. The grudge of those that touched the axe had accumulated and engulfed it in the same manner as it had covered Tenchi's curseblades, and eventually it lost its original white color and became bloodred.

The axe remained the same even after the Incarnations became the managers of this world. Whether due to its lack of name or some other reason, it had not become a UBM. It was still just a weapon that no one could use in any meaningful way.

However, there was a time when things were different.

King of Kings himself had acquired the axe in the wars and took it in hand.

Fearsome as the weapon may have been, he was actually able to use it. He took the damage it inflicted, endured it, and thus wielded the axe's power.

During that time, the axe saw use as the weapon it was born to be—it had fulfilled the purpose of its being.

However, during one battle, the axe lost a piece of itself. Upon seeing this, King of Kings said, "I will not be using this axe again," and stored it away in a vault beneath his capital.

After King of Kings' "disappearance," the city in which the vault resided had changed hands many times, but the axe was the only thing in it that had remained untouched. Or, to be more precise, anyone who *did* touch it had died.

However, shortly after The Evil took over the city, one of The Evil's dependents took up the axe. The dependent couldn't wield it as well as King of Kings, but it possessed enough regeneration to make up for the damage the axe inflicted. It also covered the axe in a cursed cloth that gave more direction to the weapon's power, making it easier for the dependent to wield. It channeled great amounts of the axe's potential and struck fear into the hearts of many people, increasing the grudge upon the axe even further.

However, this wielder eventually vanished as well. During the final battle between the Sacred King and The Evil, the axe finally faced Altar—now bearing the subtitle of "Primeval Blade"—and was defeated alongside the dependent that wielded it.

That was the last battle the axe had seen.

By the end of it, the grudge accumulated within the axe had surpassed its limit, covering it in layer upon layer of blackish-red rust.

After that, it was moved to the birthplace of the Sacred King's wife—Over Gladiator, Freymel Gideon. Her home had a vault specifically designed for cursed items, and that was where the axe was stored away.

Since then, many clergymen ranging from mere priests to Hierophants and High Priestesses had tried to uncurse it, but all of them had failed. The axe had remained in the vault until modern times.

During the centuries since, certain information regarding The Evil had purposefully been wiped out, stripping the axe even of its history and reducing it to nothing but a cursed object. This axe which had existed since the beginning of the world could very well have remained dormant in that vault's inventory until the end of time, its history forgotten, no different from any other weapon abandoned there.

...But then Ray Starling took it out.

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Sorcerer, Ray Starling

“...Do you seek power?” The voice didn’t come as a sound—it rang out directly in my head.

At the same time, an insane amount of info flowed into my mind.

I was shown the memory of the axe I’d seen this morning, followed by a bunch of stuff that had happened since that point.

I saw the axe spend countless years hurting the many people who tried to wield it.

I saw people take it up as a weapon, then discard it.

I saw it handled by some monstrous creature who wrapped it in the black cloth I now recognized.

And I saw it defeated by someone wielding Altar—Azurite’s ancestor.

And finally, I saw *my own face*, along with the Thrall right in front of me.

“This is...ah! Shit...!” All the info I’d just been bombarded with threw me off and made me stop dead in my tracks for a moment.

I was barely dodging the Thrall’s attacks to begin with. There was no way I could dodge the next one now.

“Hm...?”

But contrary to what I expected, the attack didn’t hit me.

Actually, the Thrall wasn’t moving at all anymore. It had stopped in place while holding up its left blade, ready to swing.

It wasn’t just the Thrall either. Nemesis, Gerbera, my own body...everything besides my thoughts had been rendered immobile. The world itself had also become monochrome, as though stripped of all color.

Only I was different. I looked down and saw my own semitransparent form. It was like I was having an out-of-body experience.

“What...what’s going on here?” Did Overlord Acedia use some skill? He would have no reason to keep my mind free, though.

Then, this has gotta be...

“Indeed. This is a high-speed exchange of information betwixt you and I alone.”

The voice from before...the *axe* explained the situation directly to my mind, like Nemesis with her telepathy.

I couldn’t see it anywhere, though.

“An info exchange...? Was that show from a moment ago part of that too?”

“Indeed. I have conveyed to you the information I possess in a manner you could tolerate.”

It was a high-speed digest that wasn’t even voiced—it was all just some clips and images. I didn’t even know who most of the people were. I only recognized Azurite’s ancestor because I’d seen portraits of him, and I obviously knew it was my face at the end there.

Still, that was enough for me to understand what this axe had gone through—what kind of existence it led simply because it was *incomplete*.

“Now that you understand, I shall repeat the question: do you seek power?” the axe asked me again. “Wielding my power shall bring you harm. It is double-edged in the purest sense—what power is wielded will be returned to its wielder.”

“You...” The axe had told me how it worked pretty clearly. This mechanism had made it hated, yet it remained unbent and unbroken, refusing to change its nature in the slightest.

...This thing’s honest to a fault, huh? I sincerely thought.

“Can I ask something first?”

“I shall permit it.”

“Why did you ask me that *here and now?*” *I mean, you never said anything when I first picked you up or when I fought Lei-Lei,* I added silently.

“There are two reasons. First is the peculiarity of this space.”

“The Dreamland?”

“If your perceptions are correct, then this space welcomes only those that possess a mind of their own. Neither the cloth that binds me nor the mire of grudge that has engulfed me have joined us here. This allows me to act on my own will.”

So this thing was silent in reality because of the cloth and the insane amount of grudge, huh? And it must have really been free to do whatever in dreams, because this actually wasn't the first time it had tried to communicate with me—I realized our first exchange had actually been the dream from this morning.

“The second reason is *you*.”

“Me?” After a pause that made it seem like it had nodded, the axe continued.

“You wielded me once and had your body broken. You saw the dream and came to know my origin. You suffered defeat, and I brought it upon you. In spite of all that, you have not discarded me. I have brought you harm, yet you continue to seek my power. Such wielders are few and far between. In my entire history, I have witnessed only three.”

I figured the axe was talking about the king-like man, the monstrous creature, and me.

“Thus, I give you this question once more: will you seek my power, though it may shatter your body?”

In response...

“And how *much* power can I get if I let it do that?”

...I asked a question that hinged on a certain decision.

The axe fell silent for a moment.

“Within the memories I received from you, there are words which echo my answer,” it said before continuing with “Enough power that we might defeat this Thrall.”

He must have been talking about the words used by Nemesis.

“Perfect.”

That was why I replied to it the same way I'd replied to her.

I sought power and accepted its nature—that was why that single word was enough of an answer. I chose to wield the axe—to shoulder it, risks and all.

I'd actually been considering using it against the Thrall right from the first. It could have literally cost me an arm and a leg, though, and I didn't know if it would be strong enough to break Mythical metal anyway.

But now that I knew for sure that victory was within our grasp, I decided I would just gamble on it.

"I still haven't thought of a name for you, though," I said. "You okay with that?" I'd promised I'd name it just this morning, but I didn't have one yet.

"Wait until the moment my true self is unleashed, and you have become my wielder in truth..."

"All right. I'll think of a good one, then."

"I shall anticipate it."

Then, the monochrome world regained its color, and the moment it began to move again, the Thrall swung its blade down toward me.

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Whimsical Dreality, Dreamland, Interior

Everyone who saw the scarlet blade fall upon Ray was convinced that he'd died.

Ray had stopped moving. He couldn't possibly evade the strike. The death he'd been narrowly avoiding for so long had finally caught up with him. Gerbera, Sechs, Cardinal A, and even Nemesis knew for certain that the attack had struck home. After all—Cardinal A's arm had already been swung down. The searing blade of Mythical metal had sunk deep into the Dreamland's road like it was no more substantial than cake.

Ray was right where it had passed through, and he was certainly split in two now. The bisected pieces of his body were just about to slide apart and collapse pitifully onto the ground.

That was what everyone thought, at least.

“He...EEP!” A moment after that, Gerbera let out a charming yelp and jumped backward. That was because something had flown toward her so fast it had startled her. “Wh-What...huh?” Still shaken, she looked at what it was.

It was a *broken blade*.

The searing-hot Mythical metal had been snapped like a cheap box cutter.

“...G h e?” Cardinal A itself finally noticed that something wasn’t right. It looked at its left blade—this part of itself—and realized that it was half gone.

The lower half had sunk into the road beneath, but the upper half that was *supposed* to have sliced its target in half had been sliced instead.

“*The right* will not withstand beyond one more.”

“Got it.”

And so, the unsevered enemy moved for another *attack*. Though shocked, Cardinal A rushed to protect its head using what remained of its left arm. Its defense power was the same across its whole body, and normally it never had to protect its weak points. In fact, it had never encountered any scenario in which it would have been easily broken.

However, its animalistic instincts, artificial though they may have been, had driven it to shield itself against the enemy’s attack.

A moment later, with an ear-splitting crack, what remained of Cardinal A’s left arm *shattered*.

It was as though the Mythical metal comprising it was little more than a block of ice.

Cardinal A was overcome by confusion, but the same could be said about Nemesis—the weapon in its enemy's left hand.

"R-Ray...! Your right arm...!"

Nemesis noticed that Ray's right arm had shattered from within. Its bones were pulverized, its blood vessels had exploded, its muscles were torn, and its nerves were sending nonstop signals to the rest of his body saying that something was *very* wrong.

Right now, Ray's right arm was little more than a bag of blood in the vague shape of an arm.

Despite that, it was still grasping a weapon he'd taken out using Instant Equip.

It was a *pure-white axe*.

"...This isn't as bad as it was outside. I swung you twice, but my arm's *still there*."

"Indeed," said the axe. "I am currently able to control myself, and thus I am *only* manifesting enough power to destroy Mythical metal. In the waking world, on the other hand, I am optimized for the hand of my previous wielder. My *Blade-Select* is limited to damage that is physical and aligned to the element of dark, and the power I possess is considerably higher. The price you shall pay to wield me there will obviously be far greater."

In this dream, the pale weapon was stripped of both the deep grudge upon it and the curse-cloth it was wrapped in. But although a single swing of the axe as it was here wasn't enough to destroy Ray's arm, it had already pulverized it enough that it barely counted as a functional limb. The damage upon it was too severe to be undone by anything but jobs from the priest grouping and similar individuals.

A tian warrior would have already been incapacitated, and no one would fault him for reviling the weapon that had caused such great harm to him.

Ray, however, continued to hold the axe with a smile on his face.

Though his body was shattered, he kept on looking ahead, just as he had in his battle against an apex.

“R-Ray...is this...the axe?” asked Nemesis.

“Yeah. I’m switching hands. Hold on so you don’t fall.”

“...Very well!” Nemesis replied as Ray took her in his right hand and the axe in the left.

She then slightly changed her form so that she was affixed to the damaged arm.

“Anyway, it’s now possible for us to beat the Thrall, but my left arm can only swing you twice, huh?” Ray didn’t let the axe’s power go to his head, nor was he bothered by the state of his right arm—he was completely focused on how he could win.

In isolation, the self-inflicted damage let him swing the axe twice, but he also had Bleeding and other injury-based debuffs that were gradually draining his HP, so it was within the realm of possibility that he would die before he could use those two swings.

Cardinal A, however, still had its right arm and tail.

If it chose to go on the defensive again, it could force Ray to use up both of his swings. Also, it hadn’t been evading any of Ray’s attacks because it simply didn’t need to—but now that it had seen the axe’s power, it was likely to take more evasive action.

The axe would damage Ray even if he missed. Trying to destroy a critical part with just the two swings he had left to him was a gamble.

“...G h e.” Cardinal A also took a moment to consider its enemy. The Master before him had suddenly found enough power to actually cause it some harm, but it could instantly tell that this power was a double-edged sword—or in this case, an axe.

If Cardinal A chose to run, Ray would likely succumb to the continuous damage from Bleeding and similar debuffs. On the other hand, hitting him just once would end the battle then and there.

The Thrall also remembered the Shining Despair skill that Ray had used at the start of the battle.

The laser and the axe—this enemy had already played two powerful aces up his sleeve.

If Cardinal A focused on running away, it was possible that its opponent would play another one—and for all it knew, it could be something that targeted its creator instead of itself.

It had to prevent that at all costs, so it chose to go on the offensive, flinging out its long tail in a swipe that doubled as a defensive maneuver.

“...By the way, axe.”

“What is it?”

“You mentioned something about optimization and being limited to physical and dark damage, didn’t you? You’re able to...”

Both sides of this battle now possessed a means of destroying one another—and right as they were on the verge of starting the proper fight, Ray posed a third question to the axe.

“...Right?”

“Indeed. Thus my law: ‘absolute annihilation.’”

“Okay. In that case...”

Just as the axe's response caused Ray to think of something, Cardinal A made its move.

It used its extended tail-blade to try and decapitate Ray. If this attack killed him, that would be the best outcome for the Thrall. If it forced him to use his self-damaging axe, that would be second best. And if it made Ray evade and break his stance, that was perfectly fine too.

No matter Ray's response, the attack would make the situation better for Cardinal A.

"That means we can do this," Ray said, using the axe to cut off the tail-blade—the second-best scenario for the Thrall.

"G h e...!" Cardinal A did not miss the opportunity and quickly closed the distance between them. It charged with its right blade forward—if Ray intercepted it with the axe, he would become incapacitated, opening him for a swift death by the Thrall's blade slicing through his head.

But then, Cardinal A suddenly stopped and jumped backward—driven once again by instinct.

The Thrall stopped when it suddenly felt as though it was making a fatal mistake.

The blade of the pale axe had just passed through where Cardinal A's right arm was.

One for the tail, one for this missed attack. That was supposed to deplete the two times Ray could swing the axe with his left arm...*but it hadn't*.

"Yeah. Looks like we *can* do this."

Ray's left arm was still completely unharmed. It wasn't bleeding, and it hadn't shattered.

The only change was that it was entirely covered by *a black cloth*.

“...G h e?” Cardinal A could not understand. Was the self-damage not a feature of the axe?

But then, it noticed something else.

The cross section of its freshly severed tail was *red-hot*.

It was as though it had been hit by the laser from early in the battle. While its left arm had been shattered, this new injury was the result of unbearably high heat.

“Blade-Select: Light,” said the pure-white axe. The weapon responsible for this too. Though it was still pallid, its color was somewhat different than before. Its blade was shining white as though it was under the effect of a Swordmaster’s Laser Blade skill.

“It worked...”

Blade-Select.

This was the power that put the axe on the same level as Altar, giving it the potential to be a true masterpiece.

Altar was a weapon of “absolute severance,” which let it cut through all and any existence and energy.

The axe, on the other hand, possessed the law of “absolute annihilation.”

It *annihilated* anything it hit using energy that was directly opposed to it.

The axe was a counter-weapon against all phenomena, capable of using all elements and attributes—including those unknown to tians and Masters. Even if it didn’t employ an opposing element, it could destroy things with the sheer amount of pure energy it delivered.

The power of burning, scorching, evaporating light was no exception, though using it would deliver the same evaporating light upon the wielder, as well.

The self-damaging power of the axe was inescapable. No wielder of this weapon was capable of avoiding this.

However, they could *withstand* it.

“...Look how it all slots into place,” Ray said, looking down at his left arm.

The dark cloth enveloping it was the Black Warcoat, Monochrome—the MVP reward that *absorbed all light*.

The two swings of the axe had indeed delivered a blast of damaging energy to the arm that held it, but Monochrome had taken and absorbed it all.

Additionally, the Miasmaflame Bracer on the left hand was the one that fired Purgatorial Flames, giving it a naturally high fire resistance. Combined, these two MVP rewards had effectively neutralized both the light as well as the residual heat that followed it.

This meant as long as the axe was light-aspected, Ray could use it with almost no drawback.

“Now I can fight without caring about the backlash.”

And because of this, Ray and Cardinal A had become more or less even.

Both had attacks that could end the other, and victory would go to the one who delivered the killing strike first.

“...The situation has turned so quickly that I am unable to keep up,” said Nemesis, unsure how to feel about the speedy and immense—but certainly positive—change the axe had brought. She had only been able to scratch the Mythical metal, but the axe was destroying it with little effort.

She was starting to feel as though it had taken over her position as Ray’s weapon.

“I did expect to eventually be joined by a weapon that surpasses me in attack power, but this is nonetheless somewhat difficult to take in,” Nemesis said.

“I was designed to be unmatched,” the axe said. “It is an inevitability that the power of a novice weapon would be less than mine.”

“Who are you calling a novice?! You are the pale newcomer here! Are you picking a fight?!”

“You *are* a novice. It is simply true. And only a contest between equals can truly be called a ‘fight.’ That does not apply to us. Please explain to me what you mean, umbral novice.”

“Why, you little...!”

Caught between the two, Ray put on a wry smile and said, “...Could you two cut it out?”

It also reminded him of something and made him think, *Is this how she is with anything white?*

“B-But, Ray! You’re only using that axe now! And I feel that *it* is the reason I failed to evolve!”

“Don’t worry.” As her Master, Ray also felt that a power had been budding within her, only to go dormant again.

However, that was not a problem. They’d already seized the possibilities.

“We already know how to win this, and we see our new possibilities, don’t we?” Ray said. “Isn’t that enough?”

All they had to do here was use the cards they had to approach victory.

“But...well...the axe is so immensely strong that... My role...”

Ray laughed at this.

“Stop that!”

“Laughable,” commented the axe.

“You be silent too!” Ridiculed by both Ray and the axe, Nemesis was starting to get a bit upset, but...

“That’s not really something you’ll ever have to worry about, though.”

“Huh?”

“I mean, even if this axe here is my *strongest* weapon, of all the things I can wield...” Ray said with a grin, “Nemesis is the *best*, right?”

Ray repeated a familiar phrase—from the heart this time.

“...Yes!” she replied joyfully.

The axe said nothing, only watching the exchange between the longtime wielder and weapon.

It found their bond enviable, and it hoped to experience that someday.

“Aaanyway...” Done talking, Ray faced Cardinal A once more.

After the axe had begun to shine and stripped it of its tail, the Thrall had also drawn back to analyze the situation. It was done with that, however. It seemed to have found a means to defeat Ray, and had rushed forward to face him fully prepared.

But Ray was ready for it as well.

“All right...let’s win this!”

“Certainly!”

“Indeed.”

In Ray’s left hand, clad in light-eating black cloth, there was a pure-white axe that brought annihilation by burning light.

In his right, bloodied and bruised, there was a jet-black greatsword he trusted more than anything else.

His hands, covered by demonic bracers, held both the strongest and the best weapons he could wield.

And so, Ray charged at Cardinal A one last time.



Chapter Nine: The Dream's End

Whimsical Dreality, Dreamland, Interior

Whimsical Dreality, Dreamland—the Superior Embryo belonging to ZZZ.

Its ultimate skill, Nightmare Kingdom—Dreamland, was an ability that *switched the dreams and reality* of its Master and any servants he included in the effect.

ZZZ had no knowledge of real dreams. Instead, he thought of them as nothing but an extension of reality. This aspect of him gave rise to an ultimate skill that placed the real body—the player's HP—into the dream.

Anyone harmed in a dream could not be harmed in reality. Conversely—and through the same principles—the real body of anyone under the effect of this skill was immune to damage.

Though there was an SP limit tied to the number of, as well as additional costs for, extending the skill's duration, those affected by this skill were invincible in reality. While they were within the dream, they would remain unharmed no matter what happened to their real bodies.

This was what was happening to Cardinal A—the servant of ZZZ now fighting as though it were nothing but its master's limbs.

Its real body couldn't be harmed even after April reduced its toughness to absurdly low levels. And as long as Cardinal A's real body was in the dream, it would remain its guardian—its existence prevented the Thralls imbued with Dreamland from being exterminated, thus making it impossible for those sleeping to wake up.

On the other hand, even if someone within the dream fought with Cardinal A, that would do nothing to deal with the Thralls in reality,

which would inevitably lead to their real bodies being destroyed by the Thralls. Someone trapped in the dream would have to somehow destroy all the Thralls in reality *except* Cardinal A, and then defeat Cardinal A inside the dream—which was simply impossible if they couldn't somehow fight in both the dream and the real world simultaneously.

This was the primary reason that Overlord Acedia, ZZZ remained undefeated.

But now that April had exterminated the Thralls in reality, all of this would fall apart the moment Cardinal A was destroyed in the dream.

And as it happened, there was now someone in the Dreamland who was capable of doing just that.

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The deadly battle between Ray and Cardinal A had now become extremely taxing to both sides.

Ray's right arm was still bleeding, and even more blood gushed out from countless wounds all over his body every time he swung his blades.

On the other hand, Cardinal A's Mythical metal body was being carved open every time the axe of searing light struck it, molten metal flowing out as though it were the creature's blood.

Silently, Sechs watched them fight.

He knew the background of this battle better than anyone else here. From the designs of the white axe, Sechs realized that it had a connection to the celebrated blade of Altar, while his observations of Overlord Acedia's skill suggested to him that the job was related to The Evil.

He knew this because he had witnessed the powers of The Evil himself—namely, her ability to make monsters out of trees and

stones—and felt that Overlord Acedia's Thralls were far too similar to be a coincidence.

That, combined with his experience with the power of the Overlord Gula, whom he'd fought before—the ability to absorb the Resources of the dead—Sechs guessed that each one of the seven jobs in the Overlord series specialized in one aspect of the skills and traits belonging to The Evil. He figured that they were prototypes for The Evil, or perhaps the other way around.

With that in mind, this fight could be looked at as a clash between lesser versions of Sacred King and The Evil—a strange reflection of the battle that had been waged a few centuries ago.

Ray and ZZZ themselves were completely ignorant of this, but as an onlooker, Sechs saw all of this very clearly. Neither the Sacred King nor The Evil were that important to him, but he thought that there was value in gathering information about them for later.

Even if there wasn't, he was beginning to develop an interest in Ray himself.

Thus, he continued to watch them from the sidelines.

This battle wasn't the only thing Sechs was observing. He also had a full grasp of everything his head saw as Candy carried it, as well as whatever was around all of the tinier slimes he had split into.

He was processing so much visual information it would overwhelm any normal human.

Sechs was a slime and thus did not really have anything that could strictly be called a brain—but on the other hand, it could be said that his entire *body* constituted a brain.

Whether it was the years he'd spent inside *Infinite Dendrogram* or just a natural talent, over time Sechs's mental faculties had diverged more and more from what was strictly "human."

“...There you are.” And at that moment, one of his many visual points discovered something.

It was Overlord Acedia, ZZZ himself—the Master was inside his own Dreamland with them.

“I presumed you must be here somewhere,” Sechs mused. He had guessed that ZZZ would be inside his own dream—this would be the easiest way for him to explain his skill and use it within Dreamland.

And now, with his body dispersed across Dreamland, Sechs had finally found the Overlord that controlled it.

Currently, ZZZ was using the cloud-screens he’d been seen with earlier to watch the battle between Ray and Cardinal A. With all his attention on those screens, Sechs could easily kill him.

ZZZ was wearing a tapir costume, but it wasn’t clear if it offered him any protection, for nothing without a mind actually existed in Dreamland. But even if it did have a mind somehow and functioned as equipment inside the dream, Sechs would certainly be able to deliver a powerful enough attack to break through that. Catching ZZZ off guard and killing him was child’s play for Sechs.

However...I will wait a bit.

Despite that, Sechs chose not to assassinate ZZZ yet. That was because he had developed an interest in Ray and wanted to observe Ray’s battle a bit longer.

Sechs decided to postpone ZZZ’s death until that fight was concluded. Perhaps this was not the most rational choice—but if Sechs was a rational man, he wouldn’t have become King of Crime, nor would he have been sent to the gaol.

Sechs Würfel was someone who *followed his heart*—or searched for its desire—and this decision was simply the result of doing just that.

But...this is... After making his decision to keep watching, Sechs actually noticed that the battle had changed somewhat.

Ray was fighting just as he had been before. He used his instincts to evade his enemy's attacks and fight back with the shining axe.

What had changed was Cardinal A's movements. It was acting more and more meek—less aggressive. Despite being a temporary form of life similar to a golem, Cardinal A had become hesitant to attack—almost as though it was afraid of dying. At first it seemed as though the overpowering axe had somehow struck fear into its heart, but...

I see. This is certainly the most efficient way to fight.

Sechs had noticed what Cardinal A was doing and realized that this was something Ray couldn't counter.

Ray, in Sechs's estimation, would almost certainly lose.

"Hey, leader," Gerbera whispered to the piece of Sechs that was currently observing the battle.

"What is it?"

"I'm just guessing here, but..." Gerbera spoke hesitantly and with little confidence, as if she was afraid that she'd guessed wrong. "Isn't that thing just...*buying time*?"

Sechs said nothing in response at first. He didn't show it, but he was actually impressed by what she'd said. It showed that she'd gotten to the point where she was observant enough to notice such things on her own.

"Buying time for what, do you think?" he asked.

"He's fighting that thing because dying in the dream would give him the death penalty, but..." she said as she looked at Ray, still giving it his all, as she thought about what she'd realized—the reason why Ray was actually powerless against Cardinal A's strategy. "That's not the only way to get the death penalty here, right?"



The Southernmost Edge of Altar, A Mountain Forest Near the Border

April instantly noticed the change in Cardinal A's movements.

This was in addition to the many changes in its shape that had happened already.

Its left arm-blade was first broken, then completely shattered, and then the same happened to the tail-blade.

April's attacks did nothing to it, but it was now breaking apart by itself.

This damage was the result of the destruction it had suffered in the dream, but it was accompanied by a change in its actions—more than the effect that the loss of limbs had on its movement.

Though it was still facing April, its focus seemed to be elsewhere.

Thralls had no need for eyes or anything of the sort to begin with. The poorly made mithril Thralls could sense their enemies despite not having any faces, and Cardinal A was no different in that regard—it could focus on something without even looking at it.

As a battle-hardened, combat-focused Prism Person, April noticed detail and waited to see what it would do next.

Was it targeting Sechs? Gerbera? Candy? April herself? She prepared to counter whatever was coming no matter what the creature attacked.

“G h e...” And so, Cardinal A took to action and *fired its head-blade at the speed of sound to sever Silver's legs*.

The two Prism creations were overcome by surprise. The crimson blade that Cardinal A had fired was a kind of hidden weapon it had, and it truly fulfilled its purpose as a surprise attack.

Both April and Silver had been on guard, but there were no lumps of mithril that the creature could have used for the same kind of explosive ranged attack they already knew how to deal with, and Silver was outside its melee range, so they were both unable to counter this new assault.

On top of that, since Ray had suffered heavy damage in the dream just like Cardinal A, that made it even more difficult for Silver to take any intense evasive action.

And thus, the Mythical metal blade that flew toward Silver severed both of his left legs. Silver couldn't actually fly, strictly speaking—he merely made platforms in the air that he galloped on like an ordinary horse would on land. Losing his legs on one side made it impossible for him to remain in the air, causing him to lose his balance and fall.

Despite that, he used Wind Hoof to create an air barrier to cushion the fall and minimize the damage on Ray. Thanks to that, Ray's HP didn't drop to 0 and his death penalty was prevented.

However, the loss of his legs had rendered Silver unable to move anymore—which of course made Ray an easy target as well.

“G h e g h e g h e...” Cardinal A charged toward them. It was obvious by now that its *target* had already changed. Before, it had been targeting Sechs—the most powerful one here—and April—who was protecting him—but now, it was completely focused on Silver.

Or, to be more precise, Ray's unconscious body which was still clinging to Silver.

That was the realization that both Sechs and Gerbera had come to—the Thrall was now basically treating Ray as he'd been treating Sechs earlier.

Its usual strategy against strong opponents was focused on killing their helpless bodies. Once Ray received an overwhelming power, Cardinal A had given up on defeating him in the dream. The Thrall

was still invincible in reality, so now that it had recognized him as the true threat, it had decided to kill Ray's unconscious body there. For the Thrall, the battle in the dream had now been reduced to nothing but a way to buy time—and it was almost done now. Cardinal A's surprise attack had stripped Silver and Ray of any mobility, making it impossible for them to escape.

April's eyes widened as she considered the situation.

Back in pre-ancient times, her role was the protection of VIPs, so having to choose what to prioritize was an everyday thing for her. Her processors quickly analyzed the situation and came upon two possible actions: assisting her brother and his owner, and protecting her *own* owners.

Cardinal A was currently focused on Ray, but it actually didn't have to do that. There was plenty of distance between Sechs's group and Ray, so if April went to protect Silver and his owner, Cardinal A would no doubt go after Sechs instead.

Either way, the Thrall got what it wanted.

It would gladly kill its dreamscape opponent, and it had nothing against killing the other enemies while Ray was being protected. Regardless of whether April helped Ray or not, Cardinal A would be able to kill one of its owner's enemies.

April ran her calculations, taking into consideration every aspect of the situation, and concluded that someone *would* die here. She had no choice but to protect her owners.

Ray's group was cornered—they already had no chance of winning.

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Whimsical Dreality, Dreamland, Interior

Suddenly, Ray felt something strange on his right shoulder.

He was still evading Cardinal A's attacks, but for some reason, he felt as if he'd just been hit by something blunt.

"Oh...I get it now." Ray instantly realized that he was feeling damage his body had received in reality. He'd already noticed the change in Cardinal A's actions and didn't need much time to figure out that it had begun trying its hardest to kill him outside the dream.

That didn't change what Ray planned to do, though.

He couldn't wake up until Cardinal A was defeated, so his only option was to give his all to the fight that lay before him. He had to set aside the fear of being killed in a world he couldn't see and fight in the world he could.

"RRRAAARRGHHH!" He roared and swung the shining axe as he closed the distance between him and Cardinal A. The creature moved to defend itself as though it were frightened by the attack.

The force of Ray's swing with his left pulled him forward, so Nemesis supported him in his right hand to help him maintain balance. He managed to charge at Cardinal A without losing his footing, keeping Cardinal A close even as it tried to retreat to buy time.

"...G h e." Ray's unyielding, unbreakable charge filled the Thrall with panic.

However, the battle was as good as over. Cardinal A had already stripped Silver of any mobility, and it would kill Ray in less than a minute. That meant all it had to do was hold Ray off for that long.

"G h e...!" In order to do that, Cardinal A employed the same secret weapon that had severed Silver's legs—the fireable head-blade.

The blade flew toward Ray as he tried to charge at it yet again. The surprise attack could surely have been fatal, but Ray's instincts allowed him to evade it, however barely.

Still, it made him lose his footing.

Ray's eyes widened as he raised the axe in his left hand, bracing for Cardinal A's follow-up attack.

However, it never came.

In fact, the Thrall had put even more distance between them—it had actually turned away and was now running *away* from him.

Using all the AGI it had, it was speeding off on the dream-road toward the horizon like a startled rabbit.

In its mind, it would've been great if the surprise attack had actually hit—but even now that it hadn't, it could use the distraction the attack had caused to run away.

That had been the *actual* purpose of the attack.

Even if Ray lost his balance, as long as he had the axe, there was still a chance that he would retaliate. But if it just ran away from him as it was doing now, the speed difference between them would make it impossible for Ray to catch up. Even if he used the same laser attack he had earlier, the Thrall could avoid it by just looking in the direction of the cannon.

Cardinal A had considered what was most likely to result in a victory and had chosen to buy time by running away. It was the kind of utilitarian conclusion that truly arose from a mind that was both living and inorganic—the mind of a Thrall.

Alas, it was a critical mistake.

“Nemesis, stop it *halfway*.”

“Form Shift—Shooting Wheel.” Nemesis responded to Ray's words in an instant. Fixed to Ray's right hand, she changed into her third form β—the Shooting Wheel.

At the same time, she sped up and began to spin.

It seemed like a meaningless action. The Shooting Wheel was a form focused on the ranged, homing counterattack called Payback Beyond the Stars. However, because of some trait of the Thrall or Dreamland itself, Cardinal A couldn't add to Ray's damage counter and thus couldn't become the target of the skill. Because of this, Ray's counterattack skills didn't work against Cardinal A.

However, this Shooting Wheel seemed different.

Normally, the transformation from The Black Shield to the Shooting Wheel made the shield bloom like a flower or a star before taking on a shape similar to a windmill. But now, although its handle had grown, the Black Shield wasn't open.

It looked as if it had failed to transform.

Ray then fixed his eyes on the enemy in the distance and touched the dream-road with the semi-transformed Shooting Wheel.

The next moment, *Ray disappeared*.

“...Huh?”

“Heh heh...” Gerbera lost sight of him, but Sechs had seen everything, so he chuckled.

“G h e?”

Cardinal A suddenly heard something behind it, *and its eyes met Ray's, who was quickly approaching it.*

“G h e...?!”

The Thrall was overcome by shock. It had been certain that this opponent had no means to move that fast.

Its surprise only grew when it looked down at Ray's feet.

He was *riding* the Shooting Wheel.

The tip of the Shooting Wheel—the shield that was supposed to open up—was still closed and *spinning at an immense speed.*

Obviously, it couldn't fire the shooting star in this state. But even though it was closed, it could still do the preparatory action for Payback—the spinning windup.

That turned the sixty second-long spin into a *wheel* and closed the distance between the two of them like an electric unicycle.

Effectively, it was now a vehicle that could deliver Ray right to Cardinal A at an incredible velocity.

"The fact that you can even think of such *acrobatics* is certainly something," Nemesis said.

"I just looked at things from another perspective. There was one other thing that inspired it, though."

The reason Ray could think of something like this on the spot was actually his first battle in that day's Tournament.

Lang had a motorcycle-like Embryo that he'd used for high-speed stunts. That battle had put the idea of "fast, acrobatic movement on wheels" into the back of Ray's mind—and in this battle, right when it counted, that thought came to the forefront and resulted in the ludicrous idea of "high-speed movement using the skill prep-stage Shooting Wheel."

"You are a reckless sort," said the axe.

"Well, this is simply how he is," Nemesis replied. This really was an extremely dangerous thing to do, though. Ray's right arm was already badly damaged, and it was possible that this ride would've torn it right off, and it wouldn't be out of the question for the Shooting Wheel to end up dragging him straight through the dream-road, finally dealing enough damage to kill him.

However, Ray was able to ride it all the way despite this being his first time trying this kind of stunt.

This action truly showed part of what made Ray who he was, for the flair that could make him think of such moves on the spot was yet another one of his strengths.

“We’ll end it with the next one...! Raise your output as high as you can!”

“I shall.”

As time passed, the Shooting Wheel accelerated its spinning. Holding on to it, Ray gave the axe an order, and it instantly responded. “Give rise to power: a tenth for light—ten percent.”

The light on the axe became even brighter. Though it was limited to just the element of light, it now channeled a tenth of its output—the theoretical limit.

The light coming off the part of the axe clutched in Ray’s hand was absorbed by Monochrome, but it was now so intense that it burned Ray’s face and body without even touching him.

He still held on to it, however, and watched as the distance between him and his enemy closed.

Cardinal A began to panic as the beacon of heat powerful enough to utterly destroy it drew inexorably closer—but at the same time, it knew that victory was at hand.

Outside the dream, the *real* Cardinal A had approached Ray’s sleeping body before the Ray inside the dream had caught up. It had just broken through Silver’s final Wind Hoof barrier like it was paper.

Cardinal A now had the upper hand. In the dream, Ray’s axe would reach Cardinal A and defeat him in only about five seconds, but the real Cardinal A would kill Ray in no more than three.

However barely, Cardinal A would win this.



“G h e g h e g h e!”

Silver faced Cardinal A as it swung its right blade toward his owner. The steed was trying to protect Ray, but his efforts were not enough to stop the blade.

It was already clear how this would end. Cardinal A, April, and Silver had taken into account everything they could see and calculated the outcome.

All of them had arrived at the same result—they’d seen no way to turn this around.

Thus...the situation was saved by *something they couldn’t see*.

Right before the final moment, Ray’s body—which was most certainly in the trajectory of the blade—*slightly changed its position*.

“...G h e?” The real Cardinal A’s blade cut through nothing but the air. Ray and Silver had moved out of the blade’s range as though something invisible had pushed them. Because of that, Cardinal A had sliced through nothing.

But despite there being nothing, there were *bits of light* scattering around.

It was as though it cut *something invisible* instead of Ray—as though this unseen thing had come to protect him.

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“G h e...?” The event made so little sense that Cardinal A briefly forgot itself in both the dream and reality.

Two seconds later, the pursuer caught up with the Thrall in the dream.

As Ray passed by the creature, still riding the Shooting Wheel, he swung his left hand and used the shining axe to split Cardinal A’s torso and head in one stroke.

Thus, the scarlet Thrall wrought of Mythical metal shattered without ever understanding or realizing why it failed and what it had overlooked.



Ray and Cardinal A's battle reached a conclusion.

Cardinal A's real body was split by immense heat, then vanished from the world of dreams. Death had stripped it of its mind, making it lose its right to exist here.

Ray—now victorious—dismounted the Shooting Wheel, and fell to his knees. He was breathing raggedly, no doubt because of the fatigue and injuries.

Gerbera looked at him with a somewhat gloomy expression on her face. Then, she dropped her gaze to the back of her left hand.

Her Embryo was focused on stealth, so even her crest was invisible. She herself could see it, however, and for some reason she was staring at it now.

"...I see," Sechs said as he looked at both of them and immediately understood exactly what had happened here.

The real Cardinal A's attack had nearly reached Ray's sleeping body, but Ray hadn't died, and then something unexpected had made the Thrall freeze, giving Ray a chance to finish it.

Ray himself didn't know what had protected him, and Cardinal A hadn't understood what had come between it and its opponent either.

The only ones who *did* know were Gerbera and Sechs.

It wasn't April—she would've prioritized protecting Sechs's group even if Ray was at the risk of dying.

Thus, the thing that had protected Ray must have been Gerbera's Alhazred—the Embryo that *had remained in reality*.

B-But my Alhazred is almost out of HP... I guess I'll pull him out anyway...

It had happened when Ray had found Sechs's group and they had all been attacked by Thralls. While Sechs and Candy had sensed the approaching horde and prepared to fight, Gerbera had also done what she could.

Half-dead though the Embryo may have been, she still had pulled Alhazred out of the crest.

He had been so damaged she hadn't even made him fight the Thralls—but he'd still been there.

Soon after that, Cardinal A had blown up a mithril Thrall and spread Dreamland's aura in every direction. This indiscriminate, wide-scale spread had obviously caught Alhazred as well.

Faint though it might have been, he was an Embryo with a mind of his own, which meant that he, too, should've been drawn into the dream.

However, he was a Superior Embryo specialized in stealth. He couldn't be seen, heard, or felt.

That was why not even Dreamland had realized that it had touched Alhazred, and as a result had been unable to pull him into the dream. It simply hadn't even noticed that he was there.

After that, Alhazred had simply stood by his sleeping Master. The Embryo had been left behind by the dream and remained in reality.

That was the reason why Gerbera was unable to use him in Dreamland.

However, when Sechs had told Gerbera his guess about Alhazred's state—that, having been barred from the Dreamland, he was likely still nearby in reality—the situation had changed.

Knowing that he was out there, Gerbera called out to him from the dream and sent him a thought: "protect me."

Normally, he could share his vision with her, but the barrier between the dream and reality prevented that. She couldn't know what was happening in reality and could only give him the vaguest of orders, but Alhazred still did as he was told and stood ready to protect her if need be.

But then the order changed.

When Gerbera realized that Cardinal A had changed its strategy and was now trying to kill Ray in reality, she ordered Alhazred to "protect him" instead.

She might have done this unconsciously, but something within her had asked for this. Upon receiving the order, Alhazred moved to protect Ray.

The prison break had left Alhazred half-dead, so he didn't have the power to fight Cardinal A—but he still did whatever he could to save Ray and Silver from the Thrall's attack—to fulfill his Master's command.

"Hmm." Sechs was in the dream, so he obviously hadn't actually seen any of this. However, he understood what had happened when he saw Gerbera looking at her crest.

She'd sacrificed her Embryo to protect someone else.

This was something that neither the old Gerbera nor the Gerbera that had received Sechs's guidance would have ever done.

That meant that something had happened during the brief time she'd spent here in the dream that had an effect on her. She'd been

influenced enough that she no longer wished for Ray to be defeated in this way.

The influence he has on other people may be even greater than Shu's, Sechs thought, wondering about the degree to which they themselves may have been influenced in return. *Anyway...*

However, there was something Sechs had to do first.

The battle was over, but they were still in Dreamland. Though the Thralls binding them to the dream were gone, they could now do nothing but wait until they woke up naturally.

After all, you couldn't wake from a *nightmare* by just wishing for it or struggling fruitlessly.

It would be quickest if April woke them up, but it didn't seem like she was doing that yet.

However, they couldn't stay here for much longer—it was possible that a second wave of Thralls could come before they woke up. For all they knew, more Thralls might already be on their way.

Time to kill Overlord Acedia and escape this Dreamland, Sechs thought, moving his focus to the piece of himself that he was hiding near ZZZ.

He would use the element of surprise to deliver a fatal attack, and that would be the end of this. Though a great many unforeseen things had happened since his escape, that would return everything to its expected course.

They would kill Overlord Acedia, wake up, and leave before Ray realized who they were. Then, they would pass by the defeated Overlord's territory and move to the east of the continent while avoiding contact. And if they could meet Rascal's group in Caldina, they'd be in the clear.

“Hm...?” As Sechs pictured what would happen next, he was overcome by a *strange feeling*.

Actually, it wasn’t the feeling itself that was strange. He’d experienced it many times here and even in the gaol.

However, he hadn’t felt it once while in this dream.

It was...

“Wind...?”

...the feeling of air flowing across his skin.

The air in the dream had been completely still the entire time, but it had suddenly begun to move.

The source of this wind was the thing in Ray’s hand—Nemesis. Even now after they’d chased down and defeated Cardinal A, the Shooting Wheel was still spinning.

The windmill that had been closed for his victorious ride against the Thrall was now blooming like a flower.

“Is he actually...?!” Sechs suddenly realized what Ray was about to do.

Ray wasn’t done yet. He might’ve beaten Cardinal A, but in his mind, the fight was still ongoing.

There was still the enemy who’d actually contributed to his damage counter—Overlord Acedia, ZZZ.

They were up against someone who’d sent a horde of Thralls after them. It was naive to think that nothing else was coming just because they’d defeated the one unique monster they’d encountered.

Thus, Ray was now preparing to defeat the Overlord.

He'd come upon the same idea as Sechs, and as damaged as he was, Ray was in no condition for any more prolonged fights. Instead, he decided to use something that would end it right away.

"Payback..."

The acceleration of the spinning blades topped out, and they reached their highest speed. And so, for the first time since the battle against the Hell General, the shooting star prepared to fly once more.

This was the power Ray and Nemesis had created to reach things too distant for them, as well as the strongest attack currently possessed by the Maiden of Vengeance, Nemesis.

The Shooting Wheel wasn't a wheel that blazed on the road...

"...Beyond the Stars."

...but a star speeding through the heavens.

Nemesis became a star moving close to the speed of sound and arced through the clouded dreamscape.

The total damage Ray had suffered at the hands of Cardinal A was easily above 50,000. It was far greater than Ray's current HP—a volume of built-up damage so great it would've killed him if he hadn't used healing magic.

The overwhelming speed it provided was now propelling Nemesis through the world of dreams. She followed her damage counter and went directly toward its source. Her eyes didn't help here, but her unique sense was showing her the way.

The target was, of course, Overlord Acedia, ZZZ.

He was the one who'd sent the Thralls—his limbs—and was thus the true source of the damage inflicted upon Ray.

Just like Sechs, Ray had also realized that using skills in this dream would require ZZZ himself to be here too.

That was why he figured that Payback would be able to reach him.

“There you are!”

Nemesis finally caught sight of the man clad in a tapir suit. However, ZZZ himself also noticed the enemy flying toward him and immediately responded with a skill.

“...Sleepwalking.” This was the ability that allowed him to control his army’s position within the dream. It was what he’d used to send out Cardinal A, and now he used it to place himself far away from Nemesis. Though it had a long cooldown and only worked within the dream, it was a teleportation skill that let him change positions as he wished.

Using it had placed ZZZ at the point in the Dreamland that was farthest away from both the piece of Sechs and Nemesis. Dreamland had a limited size, but it still put him dozens of kilometels away.

“That should do it,” ZZZ muttered. He didn’t know anything about Ray and Nemesis, and she hadn’t gotten the chance to show many of her powers in the battle against Cardinal A. He obviously didn’t know how Payback worked, but its homing range was limited to just a tenth of the total damage counter. The range of this flight was just about 5,000 metels, and now that the distance had increased, Payback couldn’t reach him anymore.

ZZZ had made the right move...

“...Still coming after me, huuuh?”

...or at least, he would have, if this hadn’t been *a dream*.

5,000 metels. 10,000 metels.

Nemesis surpassed her maximum range and continued flying.

The reason for this was simple—this was a dream.

It was the same principle that had allowed Sechs to spread his divided body without limit—in a dream, the concept of distance simply didn’t exist, though it was unclear if this was just a general property of dreams or because none of them had actually moved in reality.

However, ironically enough, this facet of the dream worked against its own Master.

“You will not escape me this time...!” Nemesis continued to chase after ZZZ. She flew without limit, following the source of the damage counter, not slowing down her spin one bit.

Eventually, she had ZZZ in her sight once again.

“Found agaiiinnn...” ZZZ drawled, realizing he couldn’t escape a second time. Sleepwalking could only be used on the same target after a 30 minute cooldown. If it didn’t have such a limitation, he would’ve used it to support Cardinal A when it had tried to run away to buy time.

The cooldown applied to ZZZ himself as well.

Overlord Acedia also had some of the lowest stats in the Overlord series of jobs. All but a few of his stats were below Cardinal A’s, and he had no hope of evading the coming attack.

ZZZ let out a sigh and looked at Nemesis as she flew toward him. Then, he raised up his arms to cover his head and heart.

“Dreamland...” He spoke to his Embryo—this very space itself.

And right when he was about to deliver an order, *the Shooting Wheel pierced into the arm covering his head.*

The very next moment, the tripled damage from Payback was delivered upon him.

The pure damage flowing into ZZZ's right arm was starting to shatter it, when...

"Self-destruct."

...he finally issued his final order.

At that moment, Dreamland lost its color. It lost its sound...and was finally undone.

Epilogue: Alone in the Dark

Northern Legendaria, Sloth Village

ZZZ woke up in his bedroom and, following a brief moment of silence, slowly got up.

The sheepkin maids attending to him were surprised, as it was rare for him to wake up before dinnertime. But then, they realized that blood was seeping through the right arm of his costume, dripping to the ground. There was so much of it that it made a puddle.

“Master Z?!” The maids began to panic, hastily taking out some healing items and rushing to treat him. “We will treat the wound! Please remove your clothes...”

“...’kay.” Urged by the maid, ZZZ took off the tapir costume, revealing his true form and avatar—a youth with a face that would be handsome if not for the bags under his eyes.

ZZZ let out a rather gloomy sigh. It wasn’t the treatment or the need to take off his clothes that was bothering him, but the enemies he’d faced in the dream.

If it had hit a critical part of his body, that final attack would’ve actually killed him. He had no means of preventing fatal damage—nobody could bring Lifesaving Brooches to the dream, and he was no exception.

However, he’d only used Dreamland’s *last skill after he received the tripled damage from Payback—not before*.

The reason he survived was because he’d covered his critical body parts with his arms, and because he just had massive amounts of HP.

As far as Overlords went, Overlord Acedia had staggeringly low stats. Despite being a Superior Job with nearly 1,000 levels, his STR, AGI,

and similar stats weren't much higher than a maxed out high-rank's would be.

However, when it came to HP and SP, he was far above the average Superior Job.

His HP was easily above 6,000,000, and his arm was able to preserve its shape even after Nemesis damaged it for 150,000.

If that damage had been dealt to his head or chest, though, it would've inflicted him with injury-based debuffs that would've surely killed him eventually.

This battle was actually dangerous to ZZZ himself. It had been a while since he'd almost died in the dream.

Or maybe... ZZZ knew that the Shooting Wheel may not have been the only attack he'd had to watch out for. And he was completely correct—Sechs had come extremely close to assassinating him. / hope they all retreat now, at least...

The Dream's End was Dreamland's last skill, usable only at the expense of Dreamland destroying itself.

It had two effects.

First, it canceled the Sleep and Forced Sleep effects on those trapped in Dreamland and everyone around ZZZ in reality.

And second, it reduced the MP and SP of all affected creatures by an amount equal to ZZZ's own SP.

That was the other stat besides HP that Overlord Acedia excelled at, and since most skills relied on MP and SP, The Dream's End made most of them unusable. There were consumable items that restored MP and SP, of course, but the amount they could restore at a time was limited and depended on item quality.

Because of this, The Dream's End guaranteed that those affected wouldn't be fit for much more combat.

This skill that destroyed the land of dreams was like the concept of awakening given real power. It may have been a reflection of the person ZZZ once was—someone who wished for sleep and didn’t seek much else.

“...Man, but it’s sure been a long time since I used it.” The Dream’s End was one of the aces up ZZZ’s sleeve, as well as the reason why he’d become wanted. While testing his skills one day, he’d used it in the city he’d been staying at.

There were two things he’d failed to consider back then.

First, there was the fact that it was a skill that temporarily destroyed Dreamland.

Second, the range of the effect was far greater than ZZZ had expected, engulfing half of the city.

The infrastructure of Legendarian cities depended on magic to function, so the resulting loss of MP was the equivalent of a blackout, if not worse.

Intentional or not, ZZZ had committed an act of terrorism, and though nobody had died, it placed him on the wanted list.

He hadn’t used the skill since, both because he simply hadn’t needed to and because it made his Dreamland self-destruct and become unusable for a few days until it was restored. ZZZ hadn’t even been Overlord Acedia back when he’d first tried the skill, and he had gone against his own wishes and chosen to spend the time until Dreamland refreshed logged out—in the world where he could not sleep.

Brief or not, the destruction of Dreamland was a major loss to him.

Though...I have other ways to fight these days... He’d sent dozens of mithril Thralls to fight today, but he still had several times more than that placed around the settlement. He also still had one party’s

worth of custom golems which he'd used before the Thralls became available to him.

And then there were the special Thralls besides Cardinal A—the ones made using UBM MVP materials.

He wouldn't send them out, as they were part of his defensive forces, but for the most part they would be enough to intercept and defeat any attackers. But if someone did manage to break through to the village, ZZZ would have a problem.

Based on what he'd seen in the dream, he already knew that his current enemies were capable of that.

In the past, ZZZ would have just fled if he encountered a situation where he couldn't use Dreamland.

But now he had a reason *not* to do that.

He looked over at the sheepkin maids earnestly treating his wound. They were all people who could only live here because of ZZZ, and they were the real reason why he'd chosen to intercept the group of Masters that had appeared.

If these enemies of his went on to bring harm to these people, he would...

"Umm, is anything the matter?" One of the maids looked up at him with worry in her eyes.

He quickly assumed his usual relaxed demeanor and said, "All's fine, all's goood. Don't worry, no probs heeere."

ZZZ had been living in this settlement for a while now. He'd stumbled upon it shortly after becoming Overlord Acedia, and over two years had passed in *Dendro* since then.

ZZZ had entered *Infinite Dendrogram* in search of nothing but the sleep he lacked in reality, hoping to finally live a life that included true rest.

There were only two other things besides sleep that he cared about—the few friends he'd made here, and the sheepkin living in this village.

The Overlord who treasured the people around him had already decided that if necessary, he would use *his final power as the Overlord*.



The Southernmost Edge of Altar, A Mountain Forest Near the Border

Sechs's party woke up right after Dreamland collapsed.

They quickly checked their stats and realized that their MP and SP were at 0.

Immediately, each one of them realized that ZZZ must've done something to them when he'd canceled Dreamland. They all tried to recover a bit using the items they had on hand, but it was far from enough healing to make them fully ready for combat.

"Ughhh...well, that's awful," said Gerbera, downing a bitter potion. She was talking both about the taste and the fact that she had now confirmed that Alhazred had vanished in reality. Then, she glanced downward and spotted Ray, lying on the ground bloodied and still unconscious. "...Why isn't *he* waking up, though?" she asked.

"Looks like he just Fainted," said Candy. "Nothing to do with any weird dream stuff. I guess he just took a little too much damage."

"Ohh, I see," said Gerbera.

The damage Ray had received in the battle against Cardinal A had been immense. It couldn't have made him Faint in Dreamland because he was already unconscious, but it was so severe that the moment Dreamland's Forced Sleep was dispelled, he seamlessly shifted to Fainting.

Even Nemesis was nowhere in sight, either in human or weapon form. She must've been so fatigued that she was forced to retreat to the crest to recover.

"This is good for us, though," Candy said. "This way, he won't find out who we are."

All Ray knew about them so far was Gerbera's name and that the woman who'd treated her—Sechs wearing The Saint's skin—was their clan leader. He didn't know Sechs and Candy's names, jobs, or even the name of their clan. He lacked the knowledge to conclude that IF had broken out of the gaol, and since IF didn't exactly want people to know about *that* yet, this was a good outcome for them all.

Gerbera continued looking down at Ray, not saying a word.

He was bleeding and steadily losing health—he would surely die if ignored. Ray's battle with Overlord Acedia would effectively end in a draw, and he would remain clueless about who they were.

That was the most convenient outcome for IF.

However...Gerbera sighed as she took out a potion and poured it over him.



It was low-quality and had no effect on his broken bones and other more serious injuries, but it did stop the Bleeding effect.

Once she confirmed that was the case, Gerbera tossed the empty bottle aside.

“Gerby?” asked Candy, who was starting to feel that Gerbera wasn’t acting quite like herself.

“We should probably leave. Let’s go,” said Gerbera, who was thinking the exact same thing. She began walking off into the woods.

“What? Did you fall for him or something?” Candy asked as he caught up.

“Keep saying stupid stuff like that and I’ll kill you in your sleep,” Gerbera replied with a terrible scowl.

Indeed—it certainly wasn’t love or anything that she was feeling now. Gerbera wasn’t lying about that.

If she had to say how she felt about Ray, she would probably say that she found him “dazzling.”

She was overwhelmed by the radiance of a man who refused to break before an overwhelming foe and never chose defeat. When she compared him to her current self—which was the result of compromise—she couldn’t help but be dazzled by Ray...and admire him a little.

Noticing this change within Gerbera, Sechs followed her and Candy into the forest.

Behind him was April, who seemed to be communicating with Silver. The Prism Person and the Prism Steed may have had something to talk about.

However, when Sechs and his party walked off, April excused herself to Silver and followed after them.

Once they were far enough away from Ray, Sechs said, “It appears we will have to change our plans a little.”

“We got out of Overlord Acedia’s dream, but we won’t go through Legendaria and Caldina like we planned, huh?” asked Candy.

“We cannot take that route because Overlord Acedia is still alive, yes. Though we also did not know about his domain to begin with, so...perhaps he lived in a hidden village of some kind?”

Their original plans had involved going south and heading toward their destination while avoiding well-populated areas and Desire’s domains. La Crima had gathered the relevant information for this back when he’d tried to recruit them.

However, Overlord Acedia’s domain—the hidden settlement of the sheepkin—was in a location they hadn’t accounted for. ZZZ never left the village and thus had never been encountered by La Crima, so they obviously didn’t know its location.

They’d all made a mistake there, but Sechs was concerned that not killing ZZZ in the dream would turn out to be an even bigger error.

“But we won, didn’t we?” asked Gerbera.

“Yes, but we did not *kill* him.” Overlord Acedia was defeated, but not dead. That was the biggest problem for them now. “We do not know if we have seen all of that Embryo’s abilities. Also...April?”

Sechs urged April to reference the records of the pre-ancient civilization—the Overlord data recorded in the history predating even her—and reveal more about the job.

“The Overlord series of jobs all, without exception, have a *final* ultimate skill,” she said.

“A final...ult?”

“The final ultimate of the Overlord Acedia is ‘The End of Sloth.’ It removes the user’s combat restriction and turns them into ‘a terrifying monstrosity bearing the combined stats of all Thralls the user has ever made.’”

It was a skill that would birth an anomalous being that had the stats of Cardinal A *and* all of ZZZ’s other Thralls. This would no doubt raise him past Mythical-tier and perhaps even give him the stats to match the ultimate form of the Physical Apex herself.

“It’s like the second form of some evil overlord from an RPG...” said Gerbera with a scowl before putting on a wry grin and saying, “Wait, that’s *exactly* what it is...”

“He would surely use it if we give him a reason to,” said Sechs. “The battle we just had must have put him on high alert.”

ZZZ’s unbeatable strategy had fallen apart, while he himself had received damage and was functionally forced to retreat. If there was a second round, he would certainly use forces far above the ones he’d deployed this time.

“Even if we decide to use Candy’s diseases to defeat him from a distance, his monstrous transformation would render viruses that attack humans utterly useless, would it not?”

“What a pain in the butt.” Candy’s diseases were terrifying in their capacity for wide-scale extermination and suppression, but they had no effect on targets he knew nothing about. He could do something while Overlord Acedia was still human, but he certainly didn’t have any data on the monstrosity he would become if he used The End of Sloth.

In fact, it was questionable if *anything* Candy had could work on ZZZ if he was clad in Dreamland’s aura either. Overlord Acedia couldn’t deploy Dreamland at that moment, but the group had no way of knowing that.

"Because of all this, we should continue on while avoiding his domain in northern Legendaria. This will make the journey longer than planned, and the meeting with the others as well as our arrival to the destination will be delayed by quite a while. We are left with no choice, however."

Sechs only had a quarter of his maximum HP, Candy had compatibility issues, and Gerbera's Alhazred was completely gone. They weren't at their best, so fighting ZZZ was far too risky. Even one of their deaths would be a major blow to the whole group, so it was better to stay away from him, even if it meant that their arrival would be delayed significantly.

"I must say, it really is something that a wrench was thrown into our plans so soon after we broke out. He certainly did not intend to do this, but...still. Quite impressive."

Thanks to Ray getting caught up in all this, they had defeated ZZZ with little effort on their part. However, they would've likely won even if Ray hadn't been there. They had April protecting their defenseless bodies in reality, and inside the dream they had Sechs on their side.

Sechs would have been able to defeat Cardinal A before his real body was killed, and it was even possible that he could have assassinated ZZZ before the Overlord used his final skill.

But thanks to Ray persevering as he had, the battle ended with ZZZ still alive.

One could say that Illegal Frontier's plan had been so heavily delayed *because* Ray happened to be there.

I could have killed ZZZ instead of watching... No. I wanted to see what happened. I suppose it is what it is, Sechs thought. If his curiosity had negative consequences, Sechs would accept that.

He seems to possess a fate that invites such chance meetings. Does it run in the family...Shu? Sechs thought of his friend and true rival's face and put on a wry grin before turning to Candy and Gerbera and discussing the new route with them.

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Sorcerer, Ray Starling

"This place is..." Before I realized it, I was in a place different from Dreamland—a space that consisted mainly of roads above the clouds.

Right now, I was in complete darkness, but I could stand on my own two feet and see my own body. This was the place I occasionally visited while Fainted or Unconscious.

Well, this wasn't Dreamland, at least.

How had the battle ended, anyway?

"It looks like...you won?" I turned to the source of the voice and saw Gardranda—not the smol version, but the standard one.

"I have confirmed the collapse of the space from moments ago. *This is a space within yourself. No one else is connected to it,*" said the white axe, floating a bit away from us.

I guess that's pretty easy to believe when it's coming from you two. You mess with my dreams on the regular, I thought.

"Where are we, if I may ask?" It seemed that this time, though, Nemesis was here too. This was new—she hadn't been in any of these dreams before.

Was this because of Dreamland, or was it something else? I wondered.

"Until now...I was closing her out..."

"As was I."

Oh, so they were leaving her outside on purpose. *Man, they really did mess with my dreams however they wanted, huh...?*

“Hm...?” I noticed Gardranda looking up at me, and her eyes had a hint of bitterness in them.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I didn’t get to do anything...this time.” Oh yeah, now that she mentioned it, I didn’t use the Miasmaflame Bracers for much the whole time I was in the Dreamland. Purgatorial Flames couldn’t do much against Mythical metal.

As for the powerful Miasmaflame Princess, Gardranda herself...

“I don’t *personally* have enough MP to summon you.” Without the Grudge-Soaked Greaves, I had no way to cover the skill’s exorbitant costs.

That had all added up to the bracers basically being useless this time.

Honestly, I felt like the root cause was really that I’d been fighting way too many enemies who were above me. Both the Miasmaflame Bracers and the Black Warcoat had been adjusted in a way to help me fight stronger opponents, making them poorly balanced and hard to use in a lot of situations.

Most of my gear only really became useful through some sort of synergy between them. The thing with the axe and the Black Warcoat was a good example of that.

“We didn’t even get to use Big *or* Small this time...” said Gardranda.
“Maybe...next time?”

“Speaking of which, if I used it and called you with Maximum...it would obviously increase your stats and the cost of summoning, but what about the drawbacks? Would it make them worse?”

She quickly turned away from me and said, “...Dunno.”

“HEY!” *Look me in the eyes when you say that! Are you trying to scare me?!*

“Ray, if I may ask... Is this a good time for such tomfoolery? What about your wounds?” Nemesis asked, clearly worried.

Oh yeah—the battle with the Thrall had left me pretty battered. I didn’t get the death penalty, but I could still Bleed to death while Fainted.

I became a bit uneasy when...

“The wounds are deep, but not fatal. Your bleeding has ceased as well. You will awake in a while.”

“Really?”

“It is certain.” The axe told me all of that as if to dispel my worries.

Nemesis and I didn’t know what was happening in reality, but the axe somehow did.

I now know its origin, but it’s still full of mysteries, huh? I thought.

“This knowledge is not important enough to be seen as a mystery. I merely happen to possess a function that allows me to sense the state of my wielder. It is meant to enable me to reference your remaining life force and adjust my power output in a way that would not kill you or bring you close to death.”

Well, that made sense. Knowing how it worked, with the whole self-damage thing...yeah, this feature was probably necessary.

“There is more knowledge I must impart upon you before you awaken,” the axe said.

“Yeah?”

“Though you were able to wield me in the dream, you will be unable to wield me in reality for some time.”

“Yeah, I figured...” Dreamland was a space that excluded anything without a mind, so the axe was free of the grudge binding it—but all of that was still there in reality, and it remained too dense for GouzMaise to uncurse it.

“As long as the grudge and the curse-cloth lay upon me, I cannot choose the nature of my power nor control my output. Unlike King of Kings or The Evil’s dependent who came before, you are not yet powerful enough to withstand the price of wielding me. Swing me, and you will find yourself destroyed.”

The reason why I could use the axe in that battle just now was because the axe could control *itself*, and I could use Monochrome to minimize the damage to myself. If I used it in reality, I’d just be repeating what had happened this morning.

“All right. I guess I’ll be using your powers some other time, then.”

“Indeed.”

“Until then, I’ll keep on absorbing the grudge and look for a way to remove the cloth. Oh, and think of a name for you, of course.”

“I shall anticipate it.” The axe said the same thing it had said right before I’d wielded it against the Thrall.

“That aside...it seems that you have become a Sorcerer for naught,” said Nemesis.

“...Ohh.” I’d taken the job thinking that I could use it to let me wield the axe, but now I knew that it wouldn’t help with the self-damage much. Based on what the axe had shown me, even Fallen Knights were helpless against that effect, so when I needed to open up a low-rank job slot, Sorcerer would probably be the first to go.

“Indeed. The sorcerer grouping does not contribute to the act of wielding me. However, you should not purge Sorcerer. Or, to be more precise...you should not close off a future possibility.”

“Huh?” The axe *itself* was suggesting that I keep Sorcerer. But why? It just said that the job was irrelevant to it.

“You have chosen Paladin and Death Soldier, you wield fire, and you know near-death experiences. I did not see this in your memory, exactly, but this degree of alignment did not feel like a mere coincidence...”

“Wait, what are you talking about?”

The axe fell silent for a good moment before saying, “*A mixed Superior Job.*”

My eyes widened. While SJs like King of Destruction were unlocked through focus on a single grouping and the likes of The Unsheathe were available to those with one transcendental technique, mixed Superior Jobs were the result of mixing jobs from multiple completely different groupings. A good example of this was Xunyu’s Master Jiangshi.

“That...exists? There’s an SJ like that?”

“Indeed. It is currently unclaimed, and your memory tells me that the conditions for attaining it appear to be lost. That is understandable, as they are peculiar even by the standards of mixed Superior Jobs.”

“Do you know them, then?”

“I do. However, I cannot reveal them in detail. There is a restriction upon me.”

A restriction...?

“While I was created by the BLACKSMITH, jobs were arranged by the FINDER. Those who satisfy the conditions are granted even greater power—that is the grand principle. The more difficult and peculiar the conditions, the more obvious this becomes. Thus, I cannot reveal them. To be more precise, we are not *allowed* to describe the conditions of unclaimed Superior Jobs.”

Well, looking at it from the perspective of the person who created the jobs, it made sense that you wouldn't want anything going around and giving away the answers.

I listened as the axe continued. "Thus, I am incapable of imparting to you the name or conditions of the Superior Job at the end of the path you walk. I can only reveal what you have already achieved. What you have already heard from me is the limit of what I am permitted to say."

That stuff about Paladin, Death Soldier, and Sorcerer, huh...?

"I have a question," said Nemesis. "Can you reveal the conditions of taken Superior Jobs?"

"Indeed I can. There is no such restriction for occupied Superior Jobs."

...Really?

"Wait, you're able to tell if a job is taken or not?" I asked.

"Indeed. It is one of my functions."

This thing sure has a lot of features.

"To make it brief," the axe added, "it is a derivation of the function meant to create a link with a job, akin to the one between Altar and Sacred King. As there cannot be two Sacred Kings at one time, we are capable of seeing whether Superior Jobs are taken. However, as I am incomplete and was never linked to any specific job, this function of mine will never see proper use."

I guess that makes sense, yeah.

"Then...what is the most difficult condition for a taken Superior Job?" Nemesis asked, clearly out of mere curiosity.

The axe said nothing at first—it seemed like it was thinking. I couldn't tell whether it was checking if the jobs were taken, comparing conditions, or both, but eventually, it gave an answer.

“The most striking is the Superior Job with the following condition: ‘While fighting alone and without having any high-rank jobs or Superior Jobs, kill 10 Superior Jobs whose total level and combined STR, AGI, and END are at least 10x your own.’”

“What the hell kinda condition is that?” That meant you had to kill 10 SJs while still only having low-rank jobs yourself—and since the combined stat thing focused exclusively on physical stats, you couldn't satisfy the condition by using surprise attacks to kill people with more vulnerable magic or crafting jobs.

It was also “at least 10x,” but knowing the difference between people who got Superior Jobs and those who only had low-rank jobs, the odds of the stat gap being *just* 10x were pretty low.

Hell, because it was “at least 10x,” that also meant you could only take like one or two low-rank jobs before you started to risk raising your stats too high to find enough SJs to qualify on top of that.

And back when there were just tians, everyone going for it would have been literally putting their lives on the line, so there would've been no SJs who'd just let themselves get killed. No matter how I looked at it, this condition seemed absurdly difficult.

“The kills are only recognized as such if the Superior Job becomes vacant. Thus, it does not count the use of barrier devices and deaths of your kind, who revive when slain and maintain their Superior Jobs.”

Now I was sure the condition was totally impossible. I felt like FINDER had to have thought up this condition knowing that it would never be fulfilled.

“Hm...?” *Wait, hold on*, I thought. The axe had said that it could only reveal the conditions of *taken* SJs, right? Someone...had actually fulfilled it?

“So, what is the Superior Job that has this deranged condition?” Nemesis asked.

In response, the axe...

“The job belonging to one of my previous wielders—*King of Kings*.”

...brought up a legend from six hundred years ago.

“King of Kings...” I’d seen him in the axe’s memories—he was the wielder who’d mastered the weapon. Even before I’d seen the memories, I’d heard that six centuries ago, during the Era of the Peerless Three, King of Kings had been a dominant, nigh-unstoppable hegemon who had split the world in two before disappearing at the end of that era.

“This is my conjecture, but I believe he is most likely still alive. While I was without an owner, I often looked into it, and King of Kings has never once become vacant.”

I didn’t know what to say. I’d heard there were long-lived humanoids, but was he actually still alive somewhere? After disappearing six hundred years ago?

“What if this is a sign of even more immense trouble in the future?” asked Nemesis.

“Don’t say stuff like that. You’re tempting fate.” This day and age had plenty of problems already. I really didn’t want the guy who split the world in two to come back and make things even worse.

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“...Hm?” I’d been talking to the three when I suddenly found myself looking up at the sky.

Apparently, I'd woken up.

The sky above was being veiled by night. I looked to the side and saw Silver, lying on the ground and staring at me.

Both of his left legs had been severed.

"You didn't have it easy either, huh?"

All silent, Silver brought his nose to my face and returned to my inventory on his own.

"...You did good." I didn't know if Silver's legs were accounted for by his self-repair function. If they weren't, I'd have to consult Integra and her knowledge of the pre-ancient civilization, or Blue Screen at the SMPS factory. Gold Thunder had suffered worse damage than this and had still been successfully repaired, so I wanted to believe Silver would be okay too.

"Hm...?" I felt something hard touch my fingers.

It was an empty potion bottle, lying on the bare ground.

I also realized that my body was a bit wet.

"I guess they gave me first aid."

I couldn't see the women anywhere. I figured they must've walked off after giving me the potion.

I still had no idea who they were—but, for some reason, I felt like we would eventually meet again.

"Anyway. Looking at the time, I'm guessing the Tournament today is about to end." Silver couldn't move, while I was injured all over. The many status effects on me included binding-type debuffs stemming from damage. This prevented me from returning to Gideon by logging out.

It didn't look like I could return to the city before Lei-Lei won the Tournament and it was time to fight the UBM. Lei-Lei was a busy

person, so she probably had to beat the UBM as quickly as possible. I had to use a comms magic item to tell Shu that I wouldn't make it.

Also, it'd be nice if I could get someone to come pick me up.

"...Phew." I had to get in touch with someone in real life, but before I did that, I let out a sigh and looked up.

The sky was completely dark and my surroundings were all quiet. I couldn't hear any flying birds or even insect noises anywhere in the dark forest. Nemesis was still asleep, the axe wasn't speaking to me in reality, Silver was stored away, and I hadn't summoned Gardranda.

I was alone, sitting in a dark and silent forest.

"This whole thing...was hard in a different way than usual."

Through that battle in the dream, I managed to feel like we'd grown somehow. It wasn't growth in terms of levels or numbers, but something more abstract.

And this growth might've been exactly what I needed right now.

In silence, I looked to the north. I pictured what was in that direction: Gideon, Altea...and the land of Dryfe that I'd yet to see.

I remembered the words I'd said in the dream.

"...‘The fight we'll *have* to win,’ huh?"

It was no doubt drawing ever closer.

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The Gaol

The gaol was awfully quiet.

Three Superiors imprisoned there had broken out, while all the other Masters were killed by Candy's viruses, and there had never been any tians here to begin with.

The gaol was now a ghost town where death reigned supreme.

However, somewhere away from the town, there was a single person who was still alive.

It was a boy sitting on the bare ground, not saying a word.

At his side, there was a humanoid Embryo whose stature as well as face were hidden.

One sat and the other stood, but they were both immobile.

However, a keen observer might notice that they weren't exactly doing *nothing*.

Gradually and ever so slowly, the boy's Embryo was consuming the gaol. He eroded the Resources comprising it, adding them onto himself and slowly breaking it apart. It was like digging a tunnel with a spoon—the old-fashioned method of breaking out of prison.

Yet this was what the boy and his Embryo had been doing all this time. He'd been imprisoned before his Embryo was even born, and since the moment it hatched and throughout all the evolutions leading to Superior, they'd been doing nothing but this.

They'd continued this even as other Masters wandered in and became their prey.

And now...the end was in sight.

This would take only about a year more, if not less.

He alone would do what had required the power of three Superiors to achieve.

His name was Fu'uta.

He was the first prisoner of the gaol and the first Master to become a Superior. Unshaking, undoubting—he was a being who existed for one purpose alone.

There was no Master who enjoyed *Infinite Dendrogram* less than he did.

"...It's so quiet today." Fu'uta noticed that he couldn't hear anything outside the dungeon.

At this moment, he was the only person still alive here. Red King was working on removing the viruses inside it, but until then the prisoners would be unable to log in.

The silence of the gaol gave Fu'uta a slight bit of hope. He'd thought that maybe everyone got bored of *Infinite Dendrogram* and quit.

He'd *hoped* that they did.

However, the reality he knew told him that it wouldn't happen.

This entity known as *Infinite Dendrogram*, which presented—*misrepresented*—itself as realistic, was not something that could end that easily. Even if there was no one here in the gaol, there were still many outside of it.

That was why Fu'uta didn't stop.

"Set time passed." Suddenly, Fu'uta's Embryo—Apocalypse—began to speak. "Thirty days have passed since the previous order. If you wish to continue, present the order once again."

With a mouth fully hidden by a plain mask, he spoke to his Master. For a Type Apostle, his words were extremely mechanical.

"...Erode, break, rebuild," Fu'uta answered, annoyed.

"Present target to absorb-destroy."

"I don't need this world." Fu'uta didn't change even now that he was all alone in the gaol. He continued to stay in the prison, eroding it and gathering Resources while waiting for that day to come.

He imagined the day he would escape from the gaol and destroy *Infinite Dendrogram* itself.

He wanted to deny everything—to delete *Infinite Dendrogram* entirely.

With nothing but that in mind, as contradictory as it seemed, he continued to remain inside the game he hated.

“Present target to rebuild into.”

The thing he was reaching for...

“Just NEXT WORLD.”

...was the next world, lost long ago.

“Affirmative.” Apocalypse spoke, then resumed standing in silence.

While the Apostle stood there like a scarecrow, Fu’uta was sitting on the ground...and clenching his fist. The boy who sought the next world sat with his arms around his knees and waited.

Eventually, he knew he would have to fight—and win—against every single person who valued the world as it was *now*.

Afterword



Cat: "Time for the afterwoord. This time it's brought to you by me, Cheshire the Cat, and..."

Bear: "Shu Starling the Beaaar."

Cat: "The standard duo's back, eh? I feel like it's been a while since it was just us two."

Bear: "Yeah. I took a break last time, and befur that the bear wasn't me, but Carl."

Cat: "Speaking of Carl, this volume gave us another character in a costume."

Bear: "ZZZ, huh? Honestly, fur him it's less like a costume and more like a sleeping bag."

Cat: "First Carl, now that guuuuy...this is the second time we've gotten somebody in a costume who's kinda invincible. These costumed types sure like their weird comboos. Tenchi's Bachigo Futae is another one that comes to mind."

Bear: "Really? I'm a costume guy too and I'm pawsitively normal."

Cat: "A guy who uses a giant robot to break space itself isn't normal at aaall."

Bear: "Actually, does *Dendro* even have any tough guys who don't use any combos at all?"

Cat: "Good point. Jobs, Embryos, and MVP rewards—these three systems are all intertwined with each other. I can't deny that things go crazy when they're mixed in just the right (or wrong) waaay."

Bear: “Three systems?”

Cat: “Jobs are the foundation, since they were here from the very beginning. Then there’s the Embryos we brought, and after that we’ve got the MVP rewards, which are the result of us meddling with, modifying, and further processing the non-humanoid inhabitants. That one’s actually the system we did the most work on. We didn’t even touch the other two.”

Bear: “Hrmm. I feel like you just dropped some impawtant info like it was nothin’.”

Cat: “There’s gear that’s stronger than even these MVP rewards we worked so hard on, though. The axe from this volume is a prime example of that. As far as weapon tiers go, that thing is actually above Gloria. And it’s as dangerous as it is powerful. It’s gonna be a long time before Ray can use it without any problems. He only managed it this time because it was a dream. It’s like he got a preview of the gear you get in the endgaaaame.”

Bear: “I’ve thought this for a while, but...you *really* talk more than you should, huh?”

Cat: “I hear that a lot from my colleaaagues too. Then again, I’m the Embryo of a Master who wanted companionship, so you can’t blame me for being talkative, can youuu?”

Bear: “Look at you, em-bear-acing it.”

Cat: “That’s it for the chat, though. It’s time for the author’s commeeents.”

Greetings, dear readers. Thank you for your purchase. I am the author, Sakon Kaidou.

In this volume, you saw Ray grow in some way to win a battle he could afford to lose. With this, he has finally overcome one of the weaknesses he's had since the very beginning.

This story is a long one, and many of its characters change and grow as it moves along. A good example of this is Gerbera, whom you saw accompany Ray in this volume. It would give me much joy if you dear readers continue to watch how the characters change as the story keeps moving forward.

With that in mind, the next volume will be focused on Hugo/Yuri. She is another character who is in the process of changing, so please look forward to seeing what kind of trials await her. Volume 10 of the manga is currently out as well, depicting Hugo's battle against Rook with all the quality you have come to expect from that adaptation. Please do take a look at it.

That said, with the next release of this light novel, it will be twenty volumes long. As the author, I can't help but be overwhelmed by how far we have come.

You all are the reason this series has continued for this long, and it will definitely keep going, so as always I will do my best to make it into something you, dear readers, will enjoy.

And because breaking the twenty volume mark is cause for celebration, we plan to try something different for it. I am personally looking forward to it, so I think you won't go wrong if you get excited for it too.

Nothing would give me more joy than seeing your continued support for *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Cat: “Anyway, time to announce the next voluumee.”

Bear: “The announcements were months off multiple times in a row now. You sure you’re good fur this?”

Cat: "Heh heh heh. Don't worry—I have an idea...VOLUME 20 IS SET TO COME OUT IN WINTER SOMETIME!"

Bear: "He wussed out of actually naming the month!"

Cat: "If you're gonna miss the release date, then just don't say it in the first place! Simple!"

Bear: "But what if it comes out in March? Saying 'winter' doesn't account fur that, does it?"

Cat: "It...probably won't come out that late! And even if it does, if it's cold, it's still winter!"

Bear: "Well, whatever happens with the next volume...please look furward to it."

Bonus Short Stories

Bags Under the Eyes

2044, Legendaria

“Knead knead...knead knead knead...knead knead...”

Colossus Meister, ZZZ—the one who would eventually become Overlord Acedia—was kneading clay in an abandoned Legendarian graveyard.

He was using his own clay instead of what was found at the graveyard, but it was an eerie sight regardless. Combined with his looks—particularly, the pronounced bags under his eyes—his actions made him look like an undead monster or some kind of deranged Necromancer. He’d actually been attacked by a number of Masters who had assumed that was exactly what he was, but he’d used Dreamland to put them to sleep.

“A bit more...just a bit more...”

ZZZ’s strange behavior was just part of the process of making a combat golem. Golem construction depended on the builder’s stats and the natural magic in the environment, but those weren’t the only factors that went into the final product. For example, golems built in places dense with grudge had a chance to come out with the ability to deal damage to ethereal, spirit-like monsters—and that bonus was exactly why ZZZ was building one here in a desolate graveyard.

The reason he needed a golem with this power was simple: peaceful sleep. He’d recently discovered an isolated area that was perfect for sleeping, but for some reason, a powerful spirit monster had begun wandering around the location. It was immune to physical attacks and couldn’t be put to sleep using Dreamland’s effects, so ZZZ was

now playing the golem-building gacha to create something that could fight it. He was a man who spared no effort to sleep soundly.

ZZZ quietly continued his work—albeit with lots of mumbling—when...

“Excuse me. Can we talk for a bit?”

...someone called out to him from behind.

When he turned around, he saw two people. One of them was a girl with purple hair and clothes, but the one who had spoken was a young man with a gaunt frame, a bad complexion, and bags under his eyes. That was a trait he shared with ZZZ, but while ZZZ had added them in order to make his avatar match his real life appearance, this young man’s tired expression was just the result of the life he lived here. In that regard, he was the direct opposite of ZZZ, who could sleep all he wanted here in *Infinite Dendrogram* and thus would not normally look so exhausted.

As for why this person had called out to him...

“So he really *was* alive...” said the young man, sounding slightly surprised.

“As I told you, Master Dearest,” said the girl with a sigh.

Apparently, this newcomer had also thought that ZZZ was undead. Unlike the others, though, he didn’t attack ZZZ on sight, so he seemed more rational, at least.

Hrmm...maybe I should wear a cutesy animal costume or something? Doubt anyone would think I’m undead then, ZZZ thought, perhaps not realizing that someone just standing around in a graveyard wearing an animal costume was terrifying in its own right.

“Oh, I’m sorry...” said the young man. “I just heard that there were dangerous undead in this area. I’m Benetnasch. My job is King of Tartarus.”

"And I am Master Dearest's Embryo. Persephone is my name."

"I'm ZZZ. As you can tell, I'm a Colossus Meister just building a goleeem." The two newcomers tilted their heads, as though unsure if that was really as obvious as ZZZ thought it was, but that was all the introductions they were going to get. "Sooo...why are you in this creepy plaaace?" ZZZ went on, still working on the golem.

"I'm traveling around and extinguishing grudge."

"Whaddya mean?" ZZZ asked.

It didn't seem to be a secret, so Benetnasch went on to explain that the grudge of this world changed the nature of its dead. Under its influence, corpses became zombies or skeletons, and even the souls of the dead could be transformed into wraiths.

Because of this, Benetnasch traveled all over the world to purge all gatherings of grudge before they corrupted the souls of the dead...before it was too late for them. It was a kind of philanthropic work—just one that wasn't focused on helping the living.

"What do you think of my activities?" Benetnasch asked as he wrapped up his explanation.

"They seem fine to me," ZZZ answered.

He didn't know if Benetnasch's efforts would bear fruit or if there was even any point in them to begin with, but he was honestly amazed that the young man could continue to do something so unrewarding and torturous. ZZZ himself would never want to do anything like that, and he felt as if he was looking at a person—an actual living being—who was fundamentally different from him. Nevertheless, he found it admirable.

Everyone's got their own values, so...yeaaah, ZZZ thought. As one whose dream, so to speak, was restful sleep—something most people took for granted—he was extremely aware of that.

But if he had to say one thing...

“I guess I don’t really like that you’re losing sleep because of it.”

...he had a problem with the bags under Benetnasch’s eyes, clearly caused by fatigue and lack of sleep.

“Do tell him that. He must hear it,” said Persephone with a strong nod.

“Ha ha...” Benetnasch chuckled with a bitter smile.

The truth was that Benetnasch didn’t actually like sleep. To be more precise, he was afraid of being too late to do something because he had wasted too much time idling. The day he’d first entered this world, he’d found himself too late to save a girl from starving, and that had left him traumatized. That was another reason he might have begun avoiding sleep—he was likely to remember such things in his dreams.

Regardless, ZZZ and Benetnasch had a completely different outlook on sleep. The former sought it endlessly, while the latter avoided it out of fear.

One could say that they were diametrically opposed to each other, but since neither of them was the type of person to force their values on others, this didn’t result in a clash of any kind.

They would both become Superiors in time—but mellow ones, as far as Superiors went.

“Oh. I’m dooone.”

As they were talking, ZZZ completed his golem. Being constructed in a graveyard had given it a dark purple hue reminiscent of grudge as well as the ability to attack spirits, just as ZZZ wanted.

“Yaaay. I got it. I’m gonna call you ‘Violet GB.’”

“And what does the GB stand for?” Persephone asked.

“Ghostbusteeer.”

That made a particular tune play in Benetnasch’s head for a moment, but then he said, “Speaking of which, why were you making a golem in a place like this? And why does it have to be able to attack spirits?”

“A strong undead started popping up around my sleeping spoooot. I needed a guaaard.”

Benetnasch’s expression darkened. “Can you tell me more about this monster?”

“It’s got three arms, two heads...it’s all floaty and has no lower body...and it’s also very aggressive and it even eats other spirits.”

Upon hearing that, Benetnasch and Persephone looked at each other and nodded.

“Could you show me to this place? That monster may be my target.”

“Sure thiiing. If we’re gonna go beat it and get my peaceful sleep back, I’m ready to let it all hang out toooo. Wow, how lewwwd.”

“Lewd...?”

The extended hours of work had left ZZZ sleepy and in a strange state of mind. Carried by the newly created Violet GB, he began leading Benetnasch to his sleeping spot—the place where they would fight the undead monster.



Thus ZZZ met Benetnasch, cooperated with him against a powerful foe, and became his friend. This relationship endured and they had many similar experiences together—all stories for another time.

Getting Content

Self-Proclaimed “Small-time Baddie of the Gaol,” Tasteman

Good day or evening, ladies and gentlemen—this is Tasteman, coming to you with another tasteful video.

Recently, I've been doing nothing but streaming everyone's favorite monster-hunting game, so it's been a while since I touched *Dendro*. It's a shame you can't really stream that one.

Anyway, since most of you can't go here yourselves, this is gonna be another video where I show you around the gaol and tell you stuff about it.

Last time, I told you about the created dungeon set up by the devs, and this time, I'll tell you about the Masters here. First, you should know that they can be split into two groups: small-time baddies and big-time villains.

This is because of how save points work.

As you all know, the gaol is the place where Masters are imprisoned when they get on wanted lists and run out of save points they can use. You can also have a “backlog” of save points, so even if you're wanted in the most recent country you visited and can't use their save points anymore as a result, you can still log back in using your save points in countries you visited previously where you aren't wanted. This works even if you're coming back from a death penalty.

That's why there are two kinds of people who run out of usable save points: small-time baddies who never even left their starting country, and big-time villains who've been all over the world.

The former are done the moment they get on their country's wanted list. They get sent here not because they're such notorious criminals that every country's out to get them, but because they don't even have what it takes to travel out from where they started.

The latter, on the other hand, are these terrifying bad guys who've got save points in multiple countries, but *still* did enough to get on all

their wanted lists. They're much less common than the former, though.

This means that the mid-level criminals who are only wanted in *some* of the countries they've been to are still at large—but personally, I feel like that's a problem with *Dendro*'s international laws rather than anything to do with the game mechanics.

Anyway, that's why the gaol's Masters are either local small-time baddies or global big-time villains. I myself am a small-time baddie who never left Legendaria and got on its wanted list for theft.

I swear I didn't kill anyone, but what I stole was valuable enough to send me here. I should've known that a cup used by Her Majesty Titania was, like, some kind of national treasure.

Please promise to learn from my mistake and don't commit crimes as casually as you would in a conventional game. If you want to experience the gaol, though, just keep watching my videos.

That aside, have you noticed?

I've been recording throughout the entire explanation, but nothing has happened yet.

Normally, someone would've called out to me or dragged me into some trouble by now...

Actually, I don't see anyone anywhere. It's a total ghost town. Usually, this place is packed with thieves—or worse.

I feel like I'm making an abandoned village exploration video.

I don't want to restart the recording, so I'll go look for villager—I mean, *prisoner* number one. There's a popular café in here, so I'll start there. Its hours are all over the place, so hopefully it's open right now...

Oh. And there it is. That's the café...and there's a piece of paper on the door.

If it's closed, they normally just put up a sign. What's this about...?

"The first one to visit will receive the rights to the store."

...What?



A few days had passed since King of Crime, Sechs Würfel and his clan IF had escaped from the gaol.

The rights to his café, Dice, went to the prisoner by the name of Tasteman, who'd just happened to miss everything that had happened here.

After this, he started the "Gaol Café Series," covering the various incidents surrounding the establishment left behind by the King of Crime, but that was another story.

The Oddballs

April, 2042, Reiji Mukudori

"Hey prez, you gathered all the EGRS members personally, right? Like you did with me?"

"Yes. I made the club, and Vice Prez Sauda was the first member. We didn't have enough people at first, though, so it was just an association back then...but the name was the same as it is now. 'Electronic Game Research Society' sounds better than 'Electronic Game Research Club.'"

N High School of N City in the N Prefecture—the school I went to respected its students' independence and made it really easy to start new groups and the like. That meant there were all kinds of clubs, and EGRS was one of them.

"...What standards did you use while scouting us out?"

Our club was a place you could call "a den of oddballs."

First we had President Koyomi Hoshizora—a girl from a wealthy family who was crazy about card games and had a gacha addiction. She told people's fortunes by building decks, drawing cards, and doing other things that didn't seem like they'd actually work. The only problem was that she got things right so often it was scary.

Next there was Vice-President Elmo Sauda—the tall and silent hit man. His pseudo-VR (that is, VR with only video and audio) FPS skills were so insane he could completely hide his presence and shoot his enemies from point-blank range before they even realized he was there.

Then there was Yubu Munegami—the biggest and scariest-looking guy in school, but who was actually a gentle giant who did volunteer work at least three times a week. When it came to gaming, he was an all-rounder who placed high in tournaments for anything ranging from fighting games to puzzle games.

Then we had Molly Forester—the virtual madwoman who thought messing with people in games was the best thing in the world. She enjoyed tricking people in Mafia-like and trap battle games more than she enjoyed getting her three daily meals.

And finally, we had Hitsuji Kata—my perverted classmate who freaked out the entire class when he, as part of his introduction, said that he was more aroused by lips than by an actual naked body. He was also a fairly popular content creator.

With me included, that made six of us—two from each school year. That was the current EGRS member composition.

"I feel like everyone besides me is very...colorful," I said.

"The fact that you're excluding yourself makes it clear that you're not looking at this objectively...wait, no. It's more likely that your standards are just ridiculous. Please don't use those around you as a baseline. Especially your sister."

Good point. Compared to my sister, the EGRS people were pretty normal.

Not Kata, though.

“Anyway, to answer your question...I invited you based on my gut instinct.”

“Oh, so it wasn’t fortune-telling?”

“No. I just picked people I sensed had a common fate and thought would be fun to have around.”

“And you invited me at the most perfect time...”

She’d invited me right when I was looking for a club that wouldn’t mind if I quit after the first year.

My dad had given me a condition I had to meet if I wanted to move to Tokyo—I had to pass UTokyo entrance exams in my last year of high school. After all that had happened with my older siblings, he was really apprehensive about letting me move out, so he gave me this insane condition hoping I wouldn’t manage it. Not like that would stop me. If the possibility was there, I’d do everything to seize it.

I’d thought it would’ve been difficult to do it if I didn’t go all-in on studying once I was in year two, though, so I’d been looking for a club that would have been fine with me quitting after the first year. That was when prez invited me, literally saying, “Would you like to join us for just one year?”

Thanks to Shu’s influence, I played retro games and the like pretty often, and when I found out she was talking about a club where we’d play games, chat, and attend tourneys for genres we were good at, I felt like it was fun and had direction too, so I didn’t hesitate to join.

“Besides profit, the only reasons people ever get together are gut instinct and a common fate,” she said.

“You think so?”

“Yes. If that is your fate, you might eventually create a group like this yourself.”

“...A group of oddballs, you mean?”

“Odd or not, if the group is fun, that means it’s a good one.”

◇◇◇

I hadn’t thought much of that back then, but now that I had Death Period, looking back at the president’s words filled me with a kind of awe.

Could she actually see the future?



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