



Sakon Kaidou
Illustrator: Taiki

Infinite Dendrogram

8. The Hope They Left Behind

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Infinite Dendrogram

8. The Hope They
Left Behind

Sakon Kaidou
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"But he's Ray Starling the Unbreakable, is he not?
He's been involved in many things that cannot be
laughed off, no? Like the incident at Gideon..."

"I cannot deny that."

After all, he'd been involved in a number of
major incidents ever since I'd hatched.
In fact, he'd been caught up in such events
before he first came here.

"This nature of his worries me sometimes."
"I see..."

I was Ray's Embryo — his partner.
As such, I was confident that I was his
closest ally in battle, but I didn't know if I
properly supported his heart and mind.
I should find more ways to care for him, but...

Character

Ray

Ray Starling / Reiji Mukudori

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



Nemesis

Nemesis

A girl that manifested as Ray's Embryo. She has the ability to transform into a greatsword or a halberd, and is equipped with skills such as Vengeance is Mine, which damages enemies for twice as much as they damage Ray.



Rook

Rook Holmes/Lucius Holmes

An astonishingly beautiful boy in Ray's party. His job is "Pimp" and he fights using his tamed monsters. His Embryo is the Type Guardian "Depraved Devil, Babylon."



Marie

Marie Adler/Nagisa Ichimiya

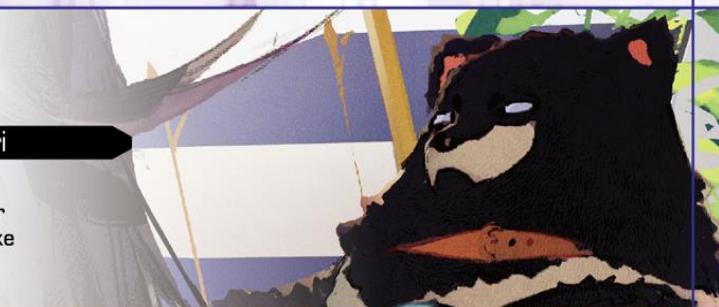
A Journalist player working for the information organization called "DIN," giving her access to lots of various info. Having gained an interest in him, she now accompanies Ray, who has a tendency to be at the center of large incidents.



Shu

Shu Starling / Shuichi Mukudori

Ray's brother and the one who invited him to the game. He wears a suit because, during character creation, he accidentally made himself look just like he does in real life.



Prologue One: A Glimpse Into Days Long Gone

Those who know true hope are the ones who stand on the brink of the abyss of despair.

Those who have already fallen into it can never hope again, and those on the precipice are more hopeful than anyone else.



An amber dragon was speeding through the heavens.

It was a majestic entity, clad in armor that shone like precious gems.

Its eyes, however, had no trace of life in them. They were window-like, and you could see the silhouettes of men inside.

The dragon's head was a cockpit, and those within it were managing various control columns and gauges.

This was the Zweier Imperium's First Special Machine Force.

Its name was Amber Abyss, and it shared the name with the dragon-like weapon they were operating.

There were four people inside, each with their own role in managing the artificial skydragon.

"Captain. With our current speed, we will arrive at the battle area in 20 minutes," said the one in charge of the radar to his commanding officer. He was a man in his thirties.

"I see," said the captain, nodding. His voice was heavy. "So it's about to begin."

"Dr. Flagman finished this Prism Dragon just recently. This is its first battle, isn't it?!" asked the youth holding the control column. In contrast to the captain's voice, his voice was cheerful.

"Indeed," the captain replied. "This Amber Abyss isn't the only one of its kind, though. We've shared Mr. Flagman's technology with other countries, and they're making their Prism Dragons, as well. I also hear that Mr. Flagman's very own Prism Steeds and Prism Persons shall soon be used in battle, too."

"That's great!"

The youth's glee made the captain crack a wry grin and think, *It means that the situation is so bad that the countries have to ignore all their differences and cooperate in order to win.*

Exactly. Everything on the continent — be it the Zweier Imperium or any other nation — was on the verge of collapse.

And it was all because of a certain enemy.

"That aside, what of our advance unit? Have the Skydragon Knights responded yet?" asked the captain.

"No." The subordinate shook his head. "Apparently, there's a powerful magical force obstructing all communication magic."

"...I see," the captain muttered. "Keep trying to contact them."

The lack of response made a cold sweat run down his back.

Overcome with worry, he looked over his subordinates.

That was how he noticed that the one on the control column was smiling while looking at a photo.

The captain looked and saw that it displayed a young woman with a baby in her arms. She looked about as young as the youth holding the photo.

"Sublieutenant, what's that?" the man asked.

“Ah, Captain!” The youth jumped a bit, then spoke with joy in his tone. “Heh heh heh. Well, this is a photo they sent me from the evacuation center! I’m a father now! It’s a boy!”

“What...? Then why didn’t you refuse this mission?! Right now, we’re heading fo—!”

“I know!” The sublieutenant cut the captain’s words short. “I know what all of this is! I know this weapon was sent out without any trials, and that we’re facing those abominations!”

“Sublieutenant...”

There was none of the man’s cheer from before. The happiness he’d expressed talking about his child hadn’t been fully genuine — he’d forced it to try and dispel the fear.

Right now, his expression was one of absolute desperation, but at the same time, it was also the face of a man who had looked ahead and knew what he needed to do.

“But I can’t just escape,” the man said. “If we don’t defeat them, the Imperium... Amelia and the son we haven’t even named yet... will die...!”

“Sublieutenant...”

“That’s why I... we have to defeat them! With this Amber Abyss! We have to show everyone that there’s hope!”

“...You’re right.”

The youth’s words made the captain subdue his fears and face ahead.

“My friends,” he muttered. “Let us win, and attain this hope.”

“Yes, Captain!” they shouted in unison.

Their wills were now united. They were determined to head into the battlefield and become a beacon of hope for all humankind.

They prepared to face the enemy approaching the man-made dragon as they confirmed what information they had.

“Prism Dragon Unit 1, *Amber Abyss*, has arrived at the airspace of the battlefield!”

“There’s still no response from the Skydragon Knights!”

“We’re picking up an immense energy signal! It’s a servant of the Extra-Continental Vessel... the Incarnation of Armaments!”

It was far beyond the distant horizon, but their radars were already capturing absolutely obscene amounts of energy.

“The Incarnation of Armaments will be visible on the horizon after 25 seconds!”

“Get its attention!” shouted the captain. “We’ll take care of it with the first attack!”

“Understood! Abyss Cannon... prepare to fire!”

As ordered, everyone readied the man-made dragon for its greatest attack.

The Amber Abyss opened its maw and started charging the weapon inside — the compressed magical baryon acceleration cannon. The artificial dragon’s power reactor created energy greatly exceeding 1,000,000 MP, then began gathering and compressing it all.

The magic became an ultra-hot ball of fire. If its mouth hadn’t been protected by a special barrier, the dragon would most likely have evaporated on the spot. In spite of that, the energy only continued to increase.

“The energy is at 80... 90... 100%!”

“Blow it away!” roared the captain. “Wipe it out with the horizon itself!”

The moment it reached the limit, the sublieutenant pulled the trigger on the column.

“Abyss Cannon... FIRE!”

And so, the artificial dragon released the fireball from its jaws.

Distorting the very space around it, it flew towards the ground and shattered the earth, directly hitting the enemy in the distant horizon.

The ground around it instantly evaporated, and the enemy's approach was halted.

Then, with a searing blast, all the magic compressed within the core was released. Half of the unleashed power was used for a long-distance gravity spell, while the rest became an even greater heat.

This was the true nature of the Abyss Cannon — it was a fatal weapon that sank and settled the target with an immense gravitational field, then burned it until not even ash remained.

A few seconds later, the distant abyss it created spat out an enormous pillar of fire. And, as one would expect, nothing inside it was moving.

“The Incarnation of Armaments has fallen silent!”

“Yes!” shouted the captain, completely overwhelmed. “We did it! The Prism Dragon’s Abyss Cannon worked!”

“We finally defeated one of them...”

“Indeed,” nodded the captain. “And this won’t be the final victory we claim. If we can beat one, we can beat the rest of them.”

“Though I imagine that the Incarnation of Beasts will be quite troublesome.”

“But I’m sure it’s possible. There’s still hope.”

They all cheered. They had every reason to. After all, the man-made dragon they operated had become a sign of hope in this desperate war. It would still be an uphill battle, but just having a means of fighting back was more than enough for them to feel hopeful.

However... needless to say, that only applied if this means was *actually successful*.

“...Eh?” the one in charge of the radar exclaimed.

“What is it?” asked the captain.

With a face warped in shock, he replied, “The Incarnation of Armaments is active again!”

You didn’t even need a radar for this — you could see it clearly through the optical sensors in the dragon’s eyes.

Something was rising from the abyss they’d created.

It was a humanoid figure surrounded by thousands of Legendary-tier shields, which it had just used to protect itself from the greatest attack mankind had at their disposal.

It was the inimical entity that freely commanded a seemingly inexhaustible arsenal — the Incarnation of Armaments.

“Charge it again!” the captain howled.

Alas, they hadn’t the time to prepare another Abyss Cannon.

The Incarnation of Armaments instantly unequipped the thousands of shields and instead took out a single blade.

Like All the Stars in the Sky — Kaleidoscope.

In a blink of an eye, the single blade became several thousand, and the incarnation launched them all, creating a barrage of Legendary-tier blades that easily exceeded the speed of sound.

They all went towards the *Amber Abyss*, piercing its heavy armor with next to no effort.

The outer shell, designed to shield it against its own devastating Abyss Cannon, was no match for the bladestorm.

The captain wailed and instantly died as one of the blades pierced into the cockpit and fatally wounded him.

“AMELIAAAAAAAA...!”

The sublieutenant and the other members faced a similar end.

They and their hope, the *Amber Abyss*, became atomic dust in but a blink of an eye.



The battle between the Amber Abyss and the Incarnation of Armaments was just one of the many encounters between this continent's humanity and the Extra-Continental Vessel.

The war certainly wasn't limited to just the sky.

“Th-This is the Seventh Magical Infantry Division! We need reinforcements— No! Tell the rear area to evacuate! We can't hold much longer!”

“We're fighting the Incarnation of Beasts! We don't know their total number, but there are so many, we can't see a single patch of ground!”

Infantries were being annihilated by a force of beasts so great that they drowned out the land.

“This is the Zweier Imperial Fleet! The final line of defense was consumed!”

“It... The Incarnation of Maelstroms is about to reach land!” A fleet all but vanished, consumed by a black, vortex-like space in the sea.

None of what they had seemed to stand a chance.

Faced with an overwhelming power they couldn't hope to match, mankind — the prosperous society that would eventually be known as the “pre-ancient civilization” — was facing its demise.

All-dominating weapons blotting out the sky.

Countless beasts covering the ground.

A bottomless maelstrom consuming even the ocean itself.

With forces so staggering all united to annihilate them, humanity had no choice but to despair.



Having heard the news that all the front lines were lost and that the three incarnations were closing in, the capital was in a state of absolute panic.

The people of the Zweier Imperium were desperately trying to escape to either the edge of the world or the underground.

There was a man observing them.

He was the Imperator of the Zweier Imperium, which was once the most advanced nation on the continent... now on the verge of collapse.

“God does not exist,” he muttered as he watched his proud country wither.

He couldn't believe that there was any meaning in praying to God in a world so cruel that it would allow everything that men had created to collapse so easily, especially when the incarnations responsible were so God-like themselves.

“I am certain that, after this, no one will pray to gods ever again,” he continued. “That is, assuming humanity somehow survives...”

As the Imperator looked upon his dying Imperium, a youth called out to him, saying, “Your Majesty, we have finished evacuating the people to the underground and sealed the various underground factories.”

“I see...”

“Four of the five Prism Dragons have been confirmed to be thoroughly destroyed. The last one sank into the ocean and isn’t coming back up. Three Prism People have been thoroughly destroyed. Two are missing. All of the Prism Steeds are lost, as well.”

“I see...”

“As confirmed before, the throne isn’t working. The natural magic channels leading to the construction zone have been cut, so activating it will take 100 times longer than originally planned... which will probably be over a 1,000 years. However, we have successfully constructed an automatic mass-production system for the Prism Person and Prism Rider series. We have set it to sleep mode underneath the Eldim Mountain Range. Acra-Vesta — our ultimate weapon no. 3 — is also being constructed there.”

“I see...”

“Acra-Vesta will be automatically designed and constructed based on the data gathered from the incarnations. The operation will be executed in a way they won’t discover. Considering the overwhelming power of what they’re based on and how difficult it will be to counter them, I believe that constructing it will take between 3,000-4,000 years.”

“Heh heh,” the Imperator chuckled. “That will certainly require some patience.”

“Indeed,” the youth replied. “However, I will eventually get back at the Extra-Continental Vessel. I shall not die until I witness that happening.”

“I see... Then, please, do it for the both of us. My friend... Flagman.”

“As you will. Then I will go make preparations in countries that still exist.”

“Very well. Do your best.”

“I will... Thank you, Your Majesty... for everything,” said the youth, Flagman, as he left the Imperator’s presence. He was fully aware that the man would want to accept his demise like any ruler should.

“Now... which one of them shall give me my end...?” the old man murmured.

Too many of his people had lost their lives against the Extra-Continental Vessel’s incarnations, and thus, he thought he would go out the same way they did.

This would be his end.

However, their will wouldn’t die with them.

Though faced with complete and utter annihilation, they still had a desire within their hearts.

“I will be waiting for you to join me on the other side, Flagman,” the Imperator said as he saw a score of beasts break through the walls.
“The Incarnation of Beasts, eh? Perhaps I should be glad that it’s a foe I’m not helpless against — I can die fighting.”

He then stood up and covered his body in a set of mechanical armor.

“I am Imperator Machina, Wolfgang Magna Zweier. Face me in my final battle as the ruler of this land... Incarnation of Beasts!”

“■■■■■—!”



This was a slice of history etched onto the stage of *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Going by the world's time, it had happened 2,000 years before the first players arrived. That was the end of the period now known as the "pre-ancient civilization."

The ruler of one of the countries from that era faced his demise at his very own throne.

His was not the only country, and he was not the only ruler to die in such a way.

However, they did not vanish without leaving anything behind.

The seas and the underground were comparably safe from the onslaught, so many facilities were left there. The later generations eventually started calling those places simply "ruins."

Within them were powers left over from the people of that era, which could become a source of hope for what remained of mankind — artifacts and technologies carrying the will to revive the dying civilization.

Even after two millennia passed, they were still waiting for the arrival of the later generations.

However, those who left the hope behind had made two major mistakes.

One was not of their own fault. It was the complete and sudden disappearance of their enemies, the incarnations, and their mothership — the Extra-Continental Vessel.

And the other was the fact that they failed to consider how the hope they left behind would actually manifest. Many of the technologies they entrusted to the later generations started acting completely unlike how they intended.

One underground facility held environment-fixing bacteria, which went out of control and started consuming other living creatures.

An underground town had a defensive golem weapon, Magnum Colossus, which went haywire and began annihilating all who came close.

Some were due to glitches in the technology, others due to the effects of time, but the things the pre-ancient civilization left behind began acting in ways their creators hadn't intended.

The hope they'd entrusted to the future was warping into despair for those living in the current era.

It was a nightmare scenario for both the ones who'd left it behind and the ones who were given it, making it very clear that something had gone very wrong in the process.

Thus, certain people started calling these occurrences "errors."

One such error could be found in the ruin in the Eldim Mountains — though the place now had a different name.

Millennia after the era of the Zweier Imperium, the land now belonged to another country.

It was now the territory of The Kingdom of Altar — specifically, the Quartierlatin County — and it was right next to the border to the Dryfe Imperium.

Prologue Two: The Unearthed Ruins

Her dream

She saw a dream.

“Father! Do you really intend to go to battle?” she cried.

It was a dream showing a past event. Not even a year old, it was still painfully fresh in her mind.

After all, a mere three days before, the first princess of Altar, Altimia A. Altar, had lost much of what she held dear.

“Why are you not doing what the imperium’s doing, offering rewards to the Masters who join the war?!” she desperately asked her father and king, Eldor Zeo Altar.

He was a gentle-looking man, who looked younger than he really was.

“Altimia,” he began. His tone was gentle, but it had a certain power behind it. “I did not do that because this is a revolutionary era. The once-few Masters started growing in number a few years ago, and the kingdom alone already has thousands of them.”

“But that is exactly why you should make an ally out of them!”

Masters were immortal entities bearing the supernatural powers of Embryos.

The Contract of War prohibited all except certain rankers to participate, but even so, few could match those Masters in battle. They were significantly stronger than the tian majority, and they would never be at risk of losing their lives.

Even so, Eldor had rejected the idea that Masters should be hired for this battle.

“Altimia,” he said. “If you speak of them that way, you are basically saying that they have been increasing for that sole purpose.”

“Eh?”

“There are more Masters now, and there will likely be even more in the future. They are bound to change the world. I believe them to be the current era’s agents of revolution, sent by the world itself, and believe that their special powers exist for that purpose. However, I don’t believe that using them for war is a good thing. A world where we tians see them as nothing but tools of war, and a world where Masters acknowledge that... is far too bleak,” he said as he looked outside the window — into the world beyond. “That is why I cannot allow myself to be like Dryfe and warp their wills with the promise of rewards.”

After saying so with absolute certainty, Eldor smiled.

“Still, I cannot begin to express my thanks to the Masters who have chosen to stand with this country regardless.”

On this day, Eldor had recruited Masters to stand and defend against the imperium. Because of the aforementioned reasons, he hadn’t promised any rewards, but some had stood up to protect the country, regardless.

“But...!” Altimia protested. Both she and her father knew full well that the quality of those Masters was significantly lower than that of those fighting for the imperium. “But the kingdom will surely lose! If you can’t win, try making peace with—”

“We cannot.” Eldor rejected the idea in an even stronger tone.

“Altimia. The current imperator... Leinhart is dangerous. If we do not stop him, he will become a threat to the world itself.”

“Father...?”

Back when the kingdom and the imperium had been on good terms, Altimia had lived in the country as a foreign transfer student.

Thanks to a certain connection, she'd met and talked to Leinhart for a bit, and he hadn't seemed particularly dangerous.

However, Eldor's expression as he mentioned that man was intense beyond words, making it quite likely that Leinhart was the reason why the two countries were now going from allies to enemies in such a short amount of time.

"Father..." she said worriedly.

"Don't worry, Altimia. I used to fight at Langley's side as a Paladin. And our teacher... the Arch Sage... is with us, as well."

"Father... Then..."

Altimia was about to suggest something to him, but Eldor cut his daughter's words short, saying, "One more thing, Altimia. This doesn't just apply to Masters. I do not want to push people to fight just because they have the power to."

"But..."

"And that's why, Altimia..."



Altimia woke up right as her father was about to say something.

The dream just now had shown her last conversation with him. She'd seen it countless times after he'd passed away.

"Your Highness! Marquis Findle is here!" The voice coming from beyond the door was the reason why she had awoken. It was her attendant. "He has urgent news! Please hurry to your office!"

"Coming," Altimia said, as she wiped the tears that gathered in the corners of her eyes as she slept, got up, changed, and went out to

her office.

"Is that information reliable?" she asked one of her retainers.

Marquis Findle was the one in charge of intelligence, and right now, he was bearing a valuable piece of information.

"It most certainly is," he replied. "Ruins have been discovered to the north of Altea... in the Quartierlatin County, bordering the imperium."

"I see," Altimia said, and began to ponder.

Ruins were best described as "dungeons left behind by the pre-ancient civilization." Both tians and Masters would understand that.

The pre-ancient civilization had held magic and science far more advanced than the people of the current day, and the ruins left over from their demise contained many relics of that era.

Considering that those ruins had once been fortresses, research facilities, or castles, it was fair to consider them a kind of natural dungeon.

The ruins discovered so far included Dryfe's foundation, The Underground City of Granbell, as well as the seven Seafloor Excavation Fortresses Granvaloa had found at the bottom of the sea, and the countless, nameless ruins in Caldina.

Ruins oftentimes contained technology that couldn't be made today. Much of Dryfe's magic machine tech and Granvaloa's shipbuilding knowledge came from analyzing and applying the information found in such ruins.

Though that was a definite perk to such facilities, there were downsides, as well. Particularly, when the technology inside somehow went out of control. It wasn't rare for them to house dangerous UBMs, as well.

For better or for worse, ruins had the potential to drastically change a country's power.

The fact that such a place had been found in the kingdom was critically important, but there was a problem in that it was in Quartierlatin — a county bordering Dryfe.

Dryfe had invaded through another area last time, so it hadn't ended up becoming a battlefield, but there was no guarantee that it would escape that fate the next time — it could easily become the front line.

It was an area of such importance that both armies had fortresses full of soldiers around it, and now there was a ruin there... something that could change the fate of a country.

"Does the imperium know about this?" she asked.

"I would like to hope not... but they have Masters helping their intelligence operations."

Embryo unique skills could easily include powers of interception or clairvoyance. It was best to assume that Dryfe knew about this, as well.

That fact made Altimia anxious. After all, the technology in the ruins had the possibility of restarting the war earlier than expected.

"Your Highness?" Findle prompted.

"No, I'm fine," she replied. "Now, what of the imperium? Have they done anything?"

"We haven't seen any movement from the army garrisoned at the border. It's hard to think that they would use the appearance of these ruins as an opportunity to invade again."

"Then they might be considering an ambush, or stealing the technology in the ruins."

"Yes. I believe the imperium's Masters will make a move, like they did back during the incident at Gideon."

He was referring to the major act of terrorism by Franklin, one of Dryfe's superiors, in the kingdom's strongest city. He'd kidnapped the second princess, brought destruction upon the city, and even planned to completely annihilate it with a horde of monsters exceeding even the number he'd used in the war.

Thankfully, the kingdom's Masters — including one Superior, the King of Destruction — had stemmed the flow of Franklin's abominations at the source and defeated the mad scientist himself.

Remembering the incident, something she'd only heard about while suffering the Epidemic, Altimia clenched her fists in determination.

She couldn't stand the fact that Dryfe's Masters had sparked the act of terror, and that Masters had been the ones to subdue it.

Only she would understand who this frustration was directed at, however.

Why did...? she thought, but then shook her head and came back to the matter at hand.

"Let us do something about it, too," she said. "We will send someone to investigate the ruins and counter the forces sent by the imperium."

"Very well," nodded Findle. "Then I shall contact the guild and ask them to prepare quests for powerful Masters, so that—"

"Do not do that."

"Huh?"

Following the appearance of Masters in the world, requesting Masters to deal with difficult problems had become the optimal course of action.

However, Altimia rejected the idea.

“I will send someone of my choosing. And I do not deem it necessary to contact the Masters or the adventurers’ guild about it. Prohibit it and the job guilds from making any quests related to the ruins.”

“But if the imperium is sending Masters, only other Masters would be able to counter th—”

“That is my decision as acting ruler.”

“As you command.” Marquis Findle made a pose of acknowledgment.

“You may leave. Also, keep in mind that I might not respond for a few days as I deal with this situation. I will tell this to the other departments.”

“Very well.” Findle bowed lightly and excused himself from the office.

Altimia stood up from her chair and walked to the front of the full body mirror.

“Tians have little chance against Masters... I know that much,” she muttered to herself.

She looked into her own eyes and remembered those defeated and dead at the hands of Dryfe’s Masters. A number of them had been especially dear to her. Even her own father had been beaten by a Master and eaten by his monsters.

“Even so, I cannot rely on Masters to accomplish something that could have such a powerful effect on the war,” she whispered as she touched the mirror. “I cannot use them as tools of war.”

Those were the words she’d heard many times in the dream of talking to her father for the last time.

Masters were the current era's agents of revolution. They should not be used in tian... "human" battles.

That was how she understood those words.

Though her interpretation was slightly different from her father's will, she was determined to abide by it.

Then she considered another thing.

During the war, many Masters had sided with Dryfe for the rewards. Her father had offered no rewards to the Masters of his kingdom, leaving Dryfe with far more of them.

Just like her father, she was thankful for the Altarian Masters who'd participated.

However, she couldn't help but feel hatred for the many Dryfean Masters who'd fought the kingdom, grudge for the many Altarian Masters who'd done nothing, and rage at the Altarian Superior who had made absurd demands in exchange for her participation.

She even felt like things would never have turned out like this if Masters had never existed in the first place.

Altimia knew full well that this was naught but the result of war. Dryfe's Masters had only acted as they were requested to, and the kingdom hadn't made the request because her own father willed it.

Even so, Masters... Superiors... have taken far too much from her, and thus, her mistrust for them ran deep.

"But..."

There were some things that shook her mistrust.

During the capital blockade incident, Masters had formed vigilante groups to take care of the ones responsible.

During the Epidemic, some Masters had walked around nursing people without asking for any reward.

And then there was Gideon...

“But now...”

The matter of the ruins was related to war. Regardless of her likes or dislikes, she wouldn't rely on Masters, for she wished to respect her father's will.

Thus, she would do something else.

“This is a job for Azurite.”



After leaving the first princess's room and walking a short distance away from it, Marquis Findle took something out of his pocket.

It was a magic item used for magical communication, and he used it to connect to one of his subordinates in the intelligence department.

“It's me,” he said. “Send a request to DIN to leak the information about Quartierlatin's ruins to the kingdom... Yes, that would be enough... Prohibit all ruin-related guild quests, just as she ordered. They... The Masters will act on their own.”

With that, he cut the communication.

“I understand what Her Highness is saying, but Masters are best left to other Masters,” he murmured.

Even if there was no official request, the Masters investigating the ruins on their own volition would deal with any attacking Dryfean Masters.

Also, if the kingdom's Masters sold any of the technology they found there, it would improve Altar's economy.

If it turned out to be something particularly important, the country itself could send its agents to buy it off of them.

The people they called “Masters” rarely considered life-related risks, and acted mostly on curiosity and potential returns. That was why Marquis Findle thought that this was the best way to deal with this.

“But... No, there is no use in thinking about that.”

With those words as his last, he returned to his office.

There were still many things he had to do in regards to the matter of the ruins. That order to his subordinate was just the first step.

Marquis Findle dealt with the next step while thinking of both the current situation and Altimia’s consideration for her father’s will.

One believed that Masters shouldn’t be used for war, while the other thought otherwise, but both believed themselves to be right, and neither could be proven to be completely wrong.

However, regardless if they were both right or wrong... it would all be pointless if the *Masters sent by Dryfe were significantly stronger than the Altarian Masters investigating the ruins.*



*Dryfe Imperium’s Imperial Palace — Throne of the Imperium,
Dryfe Imperstand*

Dryfe Imperium’s capital, Vandelheim, had two faces.

One face was relatively modern, while the other was a face of clockwork superscience.

There were two prime representatives of the latter.

One was a large research institute right outside of the capital — the headquarters of the Triangle of Wisdom.

And the other... was this imperial palace.

On the outside, the palace looked like little more than an extension of the modern city surrounding it.

However, the same couldn't be said about its core — the heart of the palace.

It was best described as an “enormous clockwork fortress,” a castle of ever-moving gears bearing the name “Throne of the Imperium, Dryfe Imperstand.”

It was an ancient construct that was both Dryfe’s core, its strongest weapon, and an existence some would refer to as an *Irregularity*.



A weapon and the imperial residence at the same time, the Imperstand also had offices for the senior statesmen.

In one such office, two people were having an exchange while enjoying a game of chess — or, at least, a game that looked like it.

“A short while ago, I was informed that one of our Masters had confirmed the appearance of ruins in the kingdom’s Quartierlatin County,” one of them said. The other silently listened. “Could you send the Hell General there?”

“May I ask why, Prime Minister Vigoma?”

One of them was Prime Minister Nobrome Vigoma, the one in charge of the imperium’s internal affairs. As for the other...

“That’s simple,” said Nobrome. “Because there is no method with more certainty, Field Marshal Barbaros.”

“...I see.”

The Zero General, Field Marshal Gifted Barbaros, was the one in charge of the country’s military, and easily the strongest tian in the imperium.

He was both a General and a field marshal at the same time. It wasn’t unusual for tians to have different jobs and official roles. Though there were Superior Jobs, such as “Commander-in-Chief” and

some that included the word “General,” a “Field Marshal” job simply didn’t exist, so there was no helping that.

Despite being the top of the country’s military, Gifted Barbaros was strangely young — somewhere around thirty — and didn’t seem to have the air of command you’d expect from a leader.

To put it frankly, his eyes seemed dead.

“He is in the field marshal faction,” Nobrome continued. “If you convince him, he—”

“We only share a method and approach. He’s not part of any faction,” Gifted argued. “But... very well. I’ll try to persuade him.”

There was next to no vitality in his response, either.

Two of the leaders of the three factions that comprised this country’s forces were sitting at the same table, but he felt nothing about that or the fact that he was one of them. He merely replied emotionlessly and moved the pieces on the board.

But Prime Minister Vigoma didn’t care about the man’s attitude.

After all, he had known him for a long time.

Because of that, he knew better than most that Gifted was akin to a sleeping lion — no, something far scarier than that — and understood that, unless the situation called for it, it was best to let him keep sleeping.

“I must say, this is quite unexpected,” Nobrome added. “I expected you to ask more, or outright reject what I want to ask of Hell General.”

“Masters are free,” Gifted replied. “They aren’t bound by rank or faction — they do what they feel like doing. Even their lives are secondary to them.”

"That is true," Nobrome agreed, but Gifted's words couldn't help but make him think, *Doesn't that apply to you, as well?*

"Also, I understand the situation," Gifted added. "You're giving this request to Logan because the one you're sponsoring, Franklin, is currently unusable... or, rather, you mustn't use him."

"Oh?"

"Franklin's strength is the strength of variety. He lost his forces in the previous incident, and is now being pressed into developing new units and stocking up on the mass-produced ones. The matter of the ruins and the potential technology found inside is important, but mostly in the long-term. It will have little effect on the upcoming war. Therefore, you can't send out a force that's being developed for the sake of the war — you need them to focus on growing. Then there are the recent additions to our Superior forces — the King of Chariots and the King of Thieves — but you have reservations about using them. I'm with you on the latter. Though we've hired that one with a detailed contract, a criminal who's wanted in many places is still a criminal." Vigoma silently listened.

"That leaves only the other two senior Superiors. The King of Beasts is the epitome of solo strength — an absolute powerhouse that needs no price or preparation. However, she's a tad *too* strong, which makes it likely that she will damage the ruins if she goes there. She has a track record of doing just that. By contrast, Logan needs to pay a price, but he can prepare an army instantly and adjust it easily. If you just give him a sacrifice, he will surely agree. And that's what makes Logan the optimal Superior to hire in this situation. That's my assumption, anyway."

"...Goodness."

Looking lifeless the whole time, Gifted had fluently spoken pretty much everything Nobrome was thinking in regards to this.

Though the man was a field marshal at his young age for reasons other than his eye for strategy, there was no denying that he was an excellent army man, as proven by his conjecture.

“Heh heh,” the Prime Minister chuckled. “If you know that much, then I don’t think I have to tell you anything more.”

“Then I will immediately arrange a meeting with Logan.”

“Excellent. Thank you very much, Field Marshal.”

Nobrome extended his hand for a handshake, and Gifted responded, his eyes lifeless still.

“I must say, you evidently have the skill to do it yourself, so why do you leave the army management to your subordinates?” Nobrome asked.

“I still don’t understand why I’m the field marshal. I’m just a soldier. I’m not fit to lead people.”

“Ho ho ho!” Nobrome laughed heartily. “I sometimes question why I am the prime minister, as well. After all, we were simply the most influential of the few military and civil officials who sided with the one who became the imperator.”

Upon hearing those words, Gifted showed emotion for the first time — it came out as a heavy sigh.

“Too many people died during the imperator selection and the chaos that followed.”

“Indeed. But I am truly glad that you, I, and your subordinates remained.”

“As am I.”

People liked to say that the imperium was split into three forces: Prime Minister Vigoma’s, Field Marshal Barbaros’s, and the current imperator’s. That wasn’t false in any way.

Even though the imperator, the highest authority, occasionally participated in politics from the shadows, he spent most of his time messing with machines, training, and other affections. And those left in charge, Vigoma and Barbaros, had different ideas about what was best for the imperium.

That didn't mean they were antagonistic to each other. Though they had different approaches, they shared two common goals: to bring about the best result for the imperium, and to fulfill the will of the imperator. Thus, they had no reservations about cooperating whenever it was best to do so, as in the current matter.

They were no monolith, but they were facing in the same direction.

"Prime Minister," Gifted spoke up. "May I ask something?"

"Yes?"

"You said that the ruins are in the Quartierlatin County?"

"...Yes."

"I see. Then I shall send a special soldier."

"A special soldier? But they are... wait! Do you mean...?"

"There's no better person for the job. Wouldn't you agree?"

And so, their flexibility and coordination birthed a nightmare scenario for the kingdom — the dispatching of a Superior and another powerful force.



Thus, the kingdom's and the imperium's intentions intertwined, setting the stage for a new incident surrounding the ruins at the Quartierlatin County.

However, there was another faction making a move, too. It was a group that no one, tian or Master, could anticipate or understand.



“Pre-ancient civilization ruins were discovered in the kingdom, point A05.”

“Reallyyy?”

“A change in the crust exposed it to the surface. Tians and Masters went on to find it.”

“Well, the Earth recently started lots of earthquakes therre. But it didn’t appear on the ruin search, did iiit?”

“Apparently, this one is a facility from the later period. It used highly advanced anti-discovery technology. It’s somewhat like the Red King’s gaol.”

“Then I guess we should worry about what’s insiide.”

“There won’t be a problem if it’s your average ruin, but there’s no guarantee that it doesn’t hold weaponry that exceeds Prism Dragons or the throne. If either the kingdom or the imperium uses something like that in their war, the already-shaky balance might completely collapse.”

“It’d be much easier if the Masters were the only ones breaking balaaance... I should say that to Jabberwock, too. Anyway... All right, I’ll go investigaaate. Such chores are part of my job, after aaall.”

“We’ll leave it to you.”

“Oh, and I’ll ask for permission to use the original, just in case.”

“I’ll ask, too.”

“Please dooo.”

“Be careful.”

“Sure. All right, I’m offff.”



Chapter One: Change of Clothing — Dark Edition

Paladin, Ray Starling

“Hmm...” Sitting on the coachman’s seat of the carriage, I made an audibly perplexed groan.

The reason for it was the transparent mantle that became black when worn, “Black Warcoat, Monochrome.”

It was the day after the deathly struggle against the Void of the Black Sky, Monochrome, and we were heading back to the capital in B3’s carriage, drawn by my Silver.

On the way, I considered testing the Black Warcoat, just like I’d done with the Miasmaflame Bracers and the Grudge-Soaked Greaves. After all, special rewards were often, well, “special” in how they functioned, so using them without the proper testing was somewhat scary.

They weren’t like Nemesis, whose new skills somehow always provided the desired results shortly after we got them.

Anyway, the reason for my groaning were the specs of my new special reward:

Black Warcoat, Monochrome

Ancient Legendary Item

An ancient legendary item embodying the concepts surrounding the false star that consumed light, shrouded itself in darkness, and devastated its targets with searing light.

It has the power to consume light that touches it, gather it within, then fire it.

*This item cannot be transferred or traded.
No level limit.*

Equipment bonuses: None.

Equipment skills:

Light Absorption

Shining Despair

Yes — the Black Warcoat didn't give any stat bonuses. I'd been told that the higher tier special rewards were generally greater in that regard, so I felt a bit disappointed about that. (I'd also found out that the +100% to STR on Gardranda was actually a jackpot of a bonus.)

Anyway, I didn't know if it was to make up for it, but the Light Absorption skill it had was completely passive — as in, constantly active.

Its effect was "Absorbs 100% of the light damage it takes." That sounded pretty strong. After all, though limited to a single element, it negated all damage.

However, according to B3, "For example, if you were attacked by a sword or anything else covered in light, it would prevent the light damage, yes, but you would still get the damage from the sword itself," which basically meant that Figaro's Fang of Gloria would still make short work of me.

I then asked her how it would work against enemies who used light itself, such as yesterday's Monochrome, and she said, "The coat would prevent that, yes, but until light attacks hit, they often carry heat, so, when dealing with beams like the ones from yesterday, you would negate their light damage, but still end up being burned by the heated air they bring. The coat would need to have something like 'Heat Absorption' as well, to prevent that."

And in case it wasn't obvious, Light Absorption did nothing against fires such as the ones from Purgatorial Flames.

Having heard her explanations, I now realized that enemies who attacked using light were extremely rare to begin with. The only ones I'd ever fought were the RSK and Monochrome.

That was the reason for my groaning — it seemed like a really difficult skill to use. And as for the other, Shining Despair... well, I could only hope that time would make it clear.

"I must say," Nemesis commented, "a coat of darkness that absorbs light is far from 'Paladin-like.' I would even argue that it's quite the opposite."

"Wow, rude," I replied. "I'm a proper Paladin... even if I don't have Grand Cross yet."

Killing Monochrome made me reach the job's max level, though, I thought. Liliana's Paladin level is lower than mine, and she has it... am I missing something?

I raised the question to B3.

"Grand Cross?" She raised an eyebrow. "You can only increase the chance of getting it by helping people through Paladin quests."

I see, so I need to help... eh?

"This isn't bragging or anything, but I'm quite sure I've done a lot of quests where I helped people," I said.

"You always run head-first into the most troublesome matters, after all," Nemesis commented.

Well... you're not wrong.

"I'm aware," B3 said. "I'm saying that the only people who count are the ones you help in Paladin job quests."

"...Paladin job quests?"

“Yes. Grand Cross has a ‘number of people helped in Paladin job quests’ times 0.5% chance to be acquired when leveling up.”

I began, “Is that on the...?”

“No, you won’t find it on the wiki. It’s a conjecture The Lunar Society made, based on their data.”

“Ohh...”

Then that was most likely true. Though I didn’t trust them as an organization one bit, I did trust them to have more reliable info than the wiki.

Anyway... job quests, eh?

I’d almost forgotten that, in addition to random event quests and adventurers’ guild quests, there were also quests exclusive to certain jobs, managed by the relevant guilds.

While we were still at the capital, Rook had leveled himself through Pimp job quests, and ended up getting Marilyn.

I, on the other hand, had become a Paladin after skipping the relevant low-rank jobs, so I’d figured I didn’t have the power most would expect from your usual Paladin, and thus avoided the job quests... only to end up here, with the job maxed-out without me having taken any of them.

“But I can’t get any more levels,” I said.

“No need to worry,” said B3. “You can still learn it as long as you keep Paladin as a sub-job. You won’t be barred from taking job quests, either.”

“What a relief...”

Then I’ll be able to get Grand Cross without any problems. I guess I should thank B3, the Paladins, and even the eldritch abomination for this.

Suddenly, a certain thought came to mind. “Hm?” The fact that The Lunar Society had data on this meant that a significant number of them were Paladins.

Switching to the job required you to fulfill three conditions: to defeat a boss monster (and be responsible for a decent part of the damage dealt), to donate to the church, and to get a recommendation from someone in the knight order. The first two wouldn’t be hard for The Lunar Society, considering they had their own churches, but how did their members get the recommendations?

Curious, I asked B3 about that.

“The Lunar Society gets recommendations for free,” she said.

“Why?!”

“It’s the result of a deal.”

According to her, it all went back to the previous war with Dryfe.

Needless to say, it had been a crushing defeat for Altar. The knight orders had returned completely devastated.

Many of them, including the venerable commander, had lost their lives. Survivors had been heavily wounded, with some of their lives at risk, others facing a future of living with heavy disabilities even if they made it. If that had happened, many of the knight orders would have simply collapsed.

That was when the aberration, as though waiting for this, had offered to help them. “If you promise to write recommendations for any Lunar Society members who want knight-related jobs, I’ll heal alllll of you.”

It was a deal the knights simply couldn’t have refused. Desperate times called for desperate measures.

Thus, the first princess and the knight representative, Liliana, had accepted the deal.

Ever since then, the knights, having had their lives saved by the aberration, had had no choice but to write recommendations for any Lunar Society members who wanted them.

That's probably a small price to pay to keep their lives, but man, Miss Eldritch sure likes employing dirty methods, I thought. Well, she's still saving lives, though, so it's definitely more good than bad.

"Back to the jobs," B3 spoke up again. "What job are you planning to take next?"

"I still haven't decided, actually."

If I took Priest, like Liliana, I'd improve the power of my healing magic. If I wanted to get skills that were useful in the general sense, I'd take jobs from the thief or adventurer groupings.

Simply picking Knight to learn the relevant sword skills was pretty sound, too.

Regardless, it would be my second job, so it was time I started taking my build into consideration.

"Oh, then use this," B3 said as she reached into her inventory and took something out with a curious flourish. "The Suitable Job Diagnostics Catalog."

I'd seen that type of presentation before. It reminded me of Shu taking the same item out.

Is there some sort of rule that makes it necessary to mimic Doraemon whenever taking these Catalogs out?

"Well, that's definitely a useful thing whenever you're not sure what job to take next," I said. "I'll gladly use it."

"Do go ahead."

I still had the Catalog I'd borrowed from Shu, but since she'd taken hers out, I might as well use hers. Just like the first time, I began

answering the questions and diagnosing myself. I was done in about ten minutes, and the job I got suggested was... the low-rank job called “Prism Rider.”

It was definitely a job I hadn’t considered.

Also...

“Did this page even exist before?”

I could’ve sworn it hadn’t been there when I’d been casually checking the Catalog about two weeks ago.

“I don’t know it, either,” admitted B3.

“Not even *you* know it?”

That meant it was a job alien even to her... a person with access to The Lunar Society’s database, significantly more knowledgeable than the average player.

Anyway, I figured I might as well look at the conditions to see what kind of job it was like.

This was what it said:

Conditions:

Possession of a Prism Beast (any kind)

Horse Riding or Riding skill level 5 or above

Just like you’d expect from a “Rider” job, it involved, well, Riding. And then there was the other condition, which implied that it was related to Prism Steeds, like Silver. Though it said Prism “Beasts,” so there were probably more than steeds.

“For a low-rank job, the skill condition is quite harsh,” I said.

"It's not unheard of for low-rank jobs to be difficult to acquire," B3 explained. "Such jobs are quite rare, though. The stats they give aren't that much different from other low-rank jobs, but they often give unique skills."

I see. It's the first time I've ever heard of such jobs.

"Whatever the case, neither of us know enough about it," said B3. "Let's log out and check the wiki... no, we're close to the capital, so let's see if the DIN knows anything."

"All right."

And so, we soon arrived at Altea and made our way to the city's DIN office.

They actually had information about the Prism Rider job.

Or, rather, they'd *just gotten* it.

Apparently, the job had been discovered only two days ago, *Dendro* time — right as I'd been making my way to Torne.

According to the DIN, ruins of the pre-ancient civilization had been discovered to the north of the capital, in an area called the "Quartierlatin County."

When touched by a Master exploring the ruins, a giant crystal there had displayed the conditions to switch to the Prism Rider job.

The discoverer hadn't owned a Prism Beast, but one of the other Masters exploring the ruins had, and he'd been able to become a Prism Rider.

What the job actually did was yet to be verified, but apparently, it had skills that improved the Prism Beasts you were riding.

"So they discovered a lost job," said B3.

The term "lost job" was used for jobs that not a single person had at this point in time, and the conditions for which were lost. Regardless

of whether they were low or high-rank, lost jobs didn't appear on the Catalog.

The concept of version updates didn't exist in *Infinite Dendrogram* — the whole world was already complete as it was. There were probably still many jobs, Superior or otherwise, that had yet to be discovered.

"Just as you would expect from the conditions, it appears that Prism Rider really is a job focused on Prism Beasts," B3 said. "And it seems that both originals and replicas work for it."

"Originals and replicas?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Let's take this outside."

For some reason, she cautiously looked around the DIN office we were in, and then led me out.

She took me to a relatively empty café, where we both ordered something, and she continued.

"Prism Beasts come in two forms: originals and replicas, focused on easy mass production. Replicas are much like the imperium's Magingears, in that they use MP to move, but your Silver doesn't... which means that he's an original."

"Seems like it."

He did consume lots of MP for powerful Wind Hoof barriers, but I couldn't recall him ever taking any of it when simply moving. Also, his description mentioned something about some artisan.

"As far as Prism Beasts go, the Prism Steed series is particularly well-known, as some of them have already been discovered," she said. "There's the kingdom's now-lost national treasure, the lightning-based Gold Thunder. Then there's the earth-based Obsidian Earth-Edge that the Over Gladiator uses for mounted battles. And there's

the fire-based Ruby Ignition that's owned by a Superior from Huang He."

Oh yeah, I almost forgot that Figaro has a Prism Steed, too, I thought. He says he only uses his for the race battles in the eighth arena because it's faster for him to just run, though. Apparently, he'd acquired it deep in the Tomb Labyrinth.

"However, it's still unknown where the ones based on other elements are," B3 said. "And it's highly likely that your Silver is the wind-based Prism Steed."

The X rarity and the power of his Wind Hoof made it clear that he was no ordinary item, and what she was saying confirmed it.

But wait, his official name is "Zephyrus Silver," right? The way the others are named would have you guess it's "Silver Zephyrus," but it isn't. Why? Is there a reason?

"So he's really valuable, huh?" I asked.

"Oh, he is," said B3. "If I were still in Mad Castle and we weren't acquainted, I would have attacked you for him."

"He's that expensive!?"

"He's worth *at least* 500,000,000. You could probably get billions for him in Caldina's auctions."

Silver... I had no idea you were such a treasure, I thought. I'll polish you real good, all right? "Man, am I thankful that no one's stolen him from me."

"While in Gideon, you had the likes of Brother Bear and Marie with you," Nemesis commented. "I would like to believe no one is idiotic enough to steal from you in that environment."

True.

Sol Crisis hadn't exactly been wrong about me being a difficult target while in Gideon.

Wait, doesn't that mean that I'm in danger now that I'm away from there? I'm kinda worried.

"Replicas are often silver, so it's also likely that they simply didn't realize that Silver is an original," said B3. "However, there's no guarantee that people won't, so why not buy an inventory that prevents Steal and similar skills? It will be expensive, but it will completely negate even the highest level Steal."

"Good idea. That'll be reassuri—"

"But Superior Jobs might still steal him with their ultimate job skills."

"Well, you don't normally run into them," I said.

Superiors focused on thievery (like King of Thieves or something) were probably few and far between. Like, in the low single digits in this entire world.

"I'm sure I won't run into them."

Her eyebrow arched. "You say that, but how many Superiors and Superior Jobs have you met already?"

You have a point.

Well, I would probably meet more Superiors sooner or later, so I could only hope that they wouldn't be in the thief or burglar groupings.

Speaking of which, the only one of the four people in charge of the capital blockade incident that I'd yet to meet was the Superior Job of the burglar grouping, King of Burglary, Eldridge.

I'd heard that he was a really crafty PKer who controlled the flow of battle by stealing both his enemies' equipment *and even their body parts.*

There was little doubt that he would be a formidable foe. I could only hope that I wouldn't meet him.

"But... 500,000,000 minimum is really big, isn't it?" I asked.

"It really is, but most of that value is not because of the Prism Steed's abilities, but because they're antique, and often thought to be works of art," she said. "Think about it: it's an OOPArt from 2,000 years ago that's in a perfect state. There's no way it wouldn't be expensive."

"2,000 years... so that's how old the pre-ancient civilization is."

"Yes. The ancient civilization ended around that time, too."

"Hm?" *The "ancient" and the "pre-ancient" both ended 2,000 years ago?* "Shouldn't the pre-ancient civilization have ended before the ancient one?"

"I've only read a little bit on this in the data gathered by The Lunar Society, so I'm not all that knowledgeable, but that seems to be the conclusion historians have come to."

Two civilizations, both of which had died 2,000 years ago...

Silver was a relic from the pre-ancient civilization, so this definitely piqued my curiosity. I wanted to look into this.

"Anyhow, you're picking Prism Rider as your next job, yes?" she asked.

"Yes," I nodded. "Might as well. And if I go right now, I should be able to switch during this weekend."

Right now, in real life, it was Saturday afternoon. We left for Torne on Friday night, and I'd spent two days here since then, but I still had more than half of the weekend left. I had about four days I could use here.

I'd heard that the distance between Altea and the town at Quartierlatin was about the same as the one between Altea and Torne, so I ought to be able to go there, switch jobs, and even go exploring for a bit.

"If you want to switch, you will have to enter the ruins themselves," B3 said. "Since it was just discovered, many experts must have gathered there. Some of them might even have an answer to your question."

"I see..."

Great! So I might get an archeology lesson. I'd been into history since I was a boy, so I was kinda excited.

"This should be exhilarating," said Nemesis, who sounded genuinely curious.

"Yeah," I nodded, sharing her sentiment.

All right, my next course of action was decided. My goal was to switch jobs and investigate the history of the two civilizations!

My destination was the ancient ruins in the Quartierlatin County.

Let the quest... begin!



However, right as we were about to take off for Quartierlatin, something happened.

"Ah, sorry," said B3. "Someone's calling me. I'll log out for a moment."

And she did just that.

Someone seemed to have called her on her phone.

When you set up a link between your *Infinite Dendrogram* hardware and mobile, you could set it to inform you of calls, messages, and social network alerts, the same way it informed you whenever you needed to sleep or go to the bathroom. I'd set up a link, myself. It ignored messages, but it always informed me of any calls.

Usually the only people who called me were my parents and Shu, so it was always best to answer right away.

“Ray,” Nemesis spoke up. “Since you’re heading for another place instead of returning to Gideon, you might want to contact Brother Bear about that.”

“You have a point,” I said. “An update certainly won’t do any harm.”

I’d already told him that I was going to spend the weekend questing with B3, but I had no idea how long I would be switching jobs and investigating the ruins. For all I knew, I might only be able to return to Gideon next weekend or something.

He could be planning something under the assumption that I would be back soon, so it was best to inform him of this.

Just in case B3 returned before I was done, I left a note saying, “I’m also logging out to make a call. — Ray Starling,” and went offline.

I called Shu and told him all I needed to, but I didn’t really understand what *he* was saying.

He kept complaining, telling me something about how he’d been arrested, that he’d destroyed some buildings but was still innocent, and that it was all Gerbera’s fault or whatever, but I wasn’t listening properly.

Who the hell is Gerbera, anyway?

It felt like he wouldn’t shut up, so I just hung up and logged in again.

I looked around. “So B3’s not back yet, huh?”

“Mm-hm,” Nemesis nodded. “It must be a long call.”

We continued to wait for another five minutes or so. Then B3 logged in again, looking somewhat apologetic.

“Sorry for the wait,” she said. “I... My family told me to come to them.”

B3's family are practitioners of the Way of Tea, right?

"I can picture it with B3," Nemesis said telepathically. "But trying to imagine Barbaroy performing a tea ceremony brings up some amusing results."

"Nhh!"

Damn it, you almost made me spit my drink!

"B-By the way," I stammered, doing my best to keep myself from laughing, "where is your family home, anyway?"

"Kyoto."

A refined place, indeed. It was also in Kansai, which would explain why Miss Aberration, who'd studied there when she was a child, now talked in this weird mix of Kyoto and Kansai dialects.

B3 explained, "My parents planned to invite a very special guest and start a Fujibayashi-style tea ceremony, but everyone there became ill."

"Oh, uh, that sounds pretty bad."

"It is. And since we can't have a tea ceremony without a Fujibayashi there, I'm the one who needs to do it. I have to be home by the evening."

In a maglev, the journey from Tokyo to Kyoto took only a bit over an hour, but there were preparations and the like, too. And that meant that...

"Sorry," she said. "I won't be able to join you at the ruins."

"Hey, there's no helping that," I replied. "Family and real life are important."

In fact, I doubted I could've survived the K&R attack and the Monochrome incident without her, so I had no idea why she was apologizing to me.

"I'm grateful you say that, but... will you be all right?" she asked.

"Don't worry. I've got my left arm back, so I'm sure I can handle the monsters on the road to Quartierlatin."

From what I've been told of the current monster distribution, the ones in that area were at about the same level as the monsters in newbie hunting grounds, or just a bit higher. Apparently, monsters escaping the burning of Noz Forest had gone northwards, making the entire distribution shift a bit in that direction.

I was capable of using Purgatorial Flames again, so I shouldn't have any problems there. And if things looked really bad, I could just hop on Silver and ride in the sky.

"That's not what I meant," said B3. "You might be attacked by PKers like Sol Crisis again. Not to mention that someone might try to take your Silver..."

I'd almost forgotten that the wilder Masters were way scarier than the wildest of monsters. "I'll buy an anti-Steal inventory before I go."

With that in mind, it was time to shop.

B3 still had some time until she had to leave, so she would accompany me for that.

"I suppose we're heading to the shop where you messed up and bought a Permit?" she asked.

Yeah, "messed up" is pretty apt. I didn't intend the result of that at all, I thought in chagrin. But that was my own fault for not investigating enough — I won't blame the shop.

Anyway, the shop had lots of rare and curious items, so it was likely it would have the inventory I was looking for.

I ran through my memories to try to remember where it was, and it didn't take me all that long to figure it out. So we headed there right away.

Standing outside the shop, I noticed a detail I hadn't paid attention to before, which was that the sign at the front said, "Monster King's Antique Store, Central Continent Branch."

But there's only one continent, right? Or do they have shops in Granvaloa, too?

The name made me raise an eyebrow, but I quickly shrugged it off and went inside.

Just like last time, the place was completely devoid of customers, which I found strange, considering that it had some pretty good items.

The shopkeeper inside was the same hooded fellow from last time. I wasted no time in calling out to him.

"Excuse me, do you have any inventories that aren't affected by Steal?"

"Yes," he said. "We have quite a selection. Give me a moment to bring them from our stores." Then he went deeper into the shop.

Just so you know, there weren't any other employees around. The rarity of the items here made that seem extremely careless.

Well, I guess I'll wait while looking around, I thought.

B3 looked around at the shields. She'd gotten a number of hers broken by Rosa, so she was probably considering stocking up.

"I should buy some defense, too," I muttered.

Most of my defensive equipment, including the BR Armor, had been burned by Monochrome. I could fill the bracer, boot, and coat slots with my special rewards. However, I had no proper upper and lower body armor, so I was wearing some really weak clothing I'd gotten from the gacha.

"Lose that, and you would be a naked guy in a coat," Nemesis commented.

"Now that would just freak people out."

"Well, what you have been wearing up until now was quite freaky, too, to be honest."

"You need armor?" B3 joined our conversation. "Should I give you what I have?"

"Eh? Your armor?"

The first thing that came to mind was the Gunhammer Plate, Magnum Colossus — her Barbaroy mode armor — but special rewards like that one were bound to the MVP. Not to mention that she wouldn't hand it over even if she could. That meant that she intended to give me something else.

"You mean... lady armor?" I asked hesitantly.

Crossdressing is a big "no" for me, to be honest...

"Heh heh," she giggled before I could voice my thought. "Heh heh heh... sorry. And no, I don't mean my old armor or anything like that. I mean armor that's been left to me by my clan members."

"Clan members... ohh."

Her clan, the great Barbaroy Bad Burn's Mad Castle, had split up because of the results of their battle against Figaro, and also because many of them were simply too busy with real life. At the time, the members quitting had given their items over to the ones continuing.

"My job is Full Armor Giant, you know?" she said. "That's why most of the members, the girls and the guys, gave a lot of their armor to me... heh heh."

Again the giggle. She seemed to be remembering something funny, so I decided to just ask what it was.

She replied with, “Oh, one of the members accidentally handed me a speedo-shaped piece of armor, so everyone else ganked him and it became a real bloodbath... heh heh heh.”

Is that really something you remember fondly and giggle about?

“Back to the matter at hand, that’s the male armor I want to give you.”

“A speedo?!”

“Not that. I mean something normal.”

Man, what a relief... It felt like the conversation was going in that direction.

“I have my Gunhammer Plate, and whenever I wear something else, like right now, it’s always female armor, so I’ve never really used the male armor they’ve given me. They’re like gifts, so selling them wouldn’t sit right with me, and that’s why I’d like you to have a set. Thankfully, the one I’m thinking of is better than any armor here, and you only need a total level of 100, so you can use it right away.”

I hesitated. “Are you sure I should have it?”

“Yes. Tools are meant to be used, so would this armor be better off in your hands.” She reached into her inventory and took out a set of armor that would cover both the upper and lower body. It was a composite work, combining crimson beast leather and black metallic armoring.

“This is Volcanic Darkmetal Armor, otherwise known as just ‘VDA.’”

That name almost made me say, “Wow, that sounds strong,” but that felt too ten-year-old, so I just kept my mouth shut. Even so, there was no denying that it sounded and looked both strong and cool.

“It’s magic armor made in Legendaria,” B3 explained. “It has Fire Resistance and Dark Resistance, both level 4, meaning that it reduces

fire and dark damage by a whole 25%. Even its leather bits are strong and really hard to burn. And, most importantly, the crafter used their crafting skills to keep the level limit low.”

Whoa, that's really great— hold on.

My Black Warcoat — an Ancient Legendary item — cut light damage by 100%. That meant that a combined resistance of 50% was also reasonably powerful.

“How much does it cost, by the way?” I asked.

“I feel like you won’t accept it if I say the price, so I won’t,” she replied.

So it's really expensive.

“I really shouldn’t—”

“It’s pointless to leave it rotting in my inventory. Please take it.”

“Then at least let me pay for—”

“I don’t want money for something I was gifted.”

She's pretty obstinate.

“You, Marie, and Rook weren’t any better after you defeated Gardranda,” Nemesis commented telepathically.

Oh, you mean the time when we were splitting the reward.

It’d happened only a bit over a month ago, but I already felt nostalgic about it.

Back to the matter at hand... how do I get us both to agree— ah.

“Let’s do it like this,” I said. “if I take this armor, I won’t take any of the reparations from Rosa.”

“That is... tolerable.”

Doing it that way, she wouldn’t be making money from this gift, and I wouldn’t feel like I was getting too much.

And so, I accepted the VDA and quickly equipped it.

"You look good," said B3. "It really complements your bracers and coat."

"I feel the same way," I replied.

This is great. I've gotten something that both has good stats and matches the rest of my equipment!

I looked to my side and noticed Nemesis, staring at me in silence.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Oh, it's nothing," she replied. "As long as you are satisfied, then... Yes, don't mind me."

What's with her? I wondered.

With vacant eyes, she murmured, "I completely forgot that B3's equipment was in the same vein as his... Can't expect her to point it out..."

So she's thinking about my and B3's equipment...? Oh! Does she also want something else she could wear in her human form? I guess I should find something for her... but wait, this is an antique store. I should visit something with newer clothes for that...



While Ray was pondering that, this was what went on in Nemesis' head:

I appreciate his sentiment, but the problem is with his clothing — not mine. That set... That armor... No matter how you look at it, it's the attire of a villain. Of course, I'm aware that it came from a clan of villain roleplayers, so that is only to be expected. Still, unlike how he looked with the pirate hook and the spiky armor, there's far more consistency here, making him appear even more sinister than before.

She heaved a heavy sigh before concluding:

I feel like his appearance makes him look far more evil than Sol Crisis.

This somewhat worried her... but she had no idea that her worries would soon come to fruition.

Chapter Two: “I Ran Into Someone Shady”

x2

Paladin, Ray Starling

After B3 gave me the VDA, the shopkeeper brought out four kinds of anti-Steal inventories — bags, wallets, rings, and small side-pouches.

I opted for the last one, because it was easy to take stuff out of it and because it matched the rest of my equipment. It looked somewhat like a deck case worn by characters from card game anime, and it reminded me of the president of EGRS.

One thing about this inventory, though: in exchange for its resistance to Steal and other types of destruction, it had a limited number of item types it could carry.

Though it had about as much space as my other inventory, it could only carry ten types of items. Strange as that seemed, adding resistance to Steal came at the cost of storage variety.

Because of this, I would continue using my previous inventory for general storage, and use this new one for whatever was really precious, like Silver.

By the way, this inventory cost me 10,000,000 lir, which was... kinda expensive, but the fact that I was even able to afford it spoke volumes about how much my situation in *Dendro* had changed over the past month.

As for Nemesis’s clothing... we didn’t find anything that suited her perfectly, so we decided to leave it for another day.

With the shopping done, we saw B3 off as she logged out to prepare for her visit back home, and then we headed out to our destination.

I considered taking a monster-slaying Paladin job quest to make the most out of my trip, but for some reason, there were no job quests relating to the ruins in Quartierlatin County.

I had expected there to be something, considering that new ruins seemed like a big deal but, apparently, that was off the mark.

Giving up on the job quest, I just headed straight to the Quartierlatin County.

Surrounded by a pleasant heat, Nemesis and I rode Silver on the path to our destination. Though he wasn't running at full speed, he was at least twice as fast as he'd been when pulling the carriage. We'd probably be at the town of Quartierlatin by evening.

Silver was clever, so he automatically made his way to the destination and avoided all obstacles and passersby as long as I held his reins. He even knew when to slow down and speed up.

Looking at him again, he really was something special.

I'd never really put much thought into him before, but having heard B3's words made me somewhat curious about him.

The ruins we were heading to right now were a place where you could get a job related to Prism Beasts, so it was likely that we could find info on them there, too, and I was reasonably excited about that.

"Now, Ray," Nemesis spoke up. "Silver is moving automatically, so why not check how it's doing?"

"It'?" I raised an eyebrow, not sure what she meant.

"Shining Despair's charge."

Oh, that.

“Right-o.” I opened up the menu, went to my equipment details, and picked the Black Warcoat’s equipment skill, Shining Despair...

Shining Despair: Releases the light accumulated through Light Absorption to melt all things with a scorching beam of despair.

Active Skill.

Charge: 3%

“It’s only increased by 1% after a whole four hours.” I heaved a sigh.

This skill was no doubt the devastating beam attack used by Monochrome. I knew its power better than anyone else. It’d shattered two of my Counter Absorptions, yet still delivered enough damage to almost kill me.

Being able to use it myself would be... pretty good, to say the least.

However, we had a problem in the “charge” part. It displayed how much of the necessary light the coat had absorbed so far. And despite me wearing it ever since I’d gotten it yesterday, it had only gathered 3% of the amount needed for Shining Despair.

“Basic math tells me that I’ll need a whole month before I can fire it for the first time,” I complained. Considering that I’d be logging out for college and so forth, that was probably quite off the mark, too.

I can’t even try it out like this, I thought.

“If only you could fire it with small amounts of charge,” Nemesis commented. “The fact that it can only be used at 100% makes it quite inflexible.”

And it makes actually using it kinda scary, I added.

Though it would be significantly weaker than Monochrome’s original beam, you couldn’t know what to expect. The original had almost

blasted away all of Torne. Though toned-down, the coat's version was bound to be something fearsome.

"What can we do about this, anyway?" Nemesis asked. "Merely letting it burn in the sun is far too inefficient."

Considering how the Light Absorption skill functioned, Shining Despair was probably based on the premise of gathering light from light-based attacks, rather than charging through exposure to the sun. However, opponents who used light-based attacks weren't exactly common.

"What about Figaro's Fang of Gloria: Overdrive?" Nemesis suggested. "That seems like it could charge it up in an instant. If you take only the beam, you wouldn't suffer the blade damage, so you would only need to do something about the residual heat, no?"

"I'd rather not..." I said.

That sounded like it was one slip-up away from suicide. Not to mention that Figaro was currently soloing the Tomb Labyrinth.

"Perhaps you're right... I wonder if it would work with strong light that is not necessarily of the light element?"

"Strong light, eh?" I muttered. "Ah!"

I actually did have something that fit the bill.

Not wasting any time, I used Purifying Silverlight on the Black Warcoat. Normally, equipment affected by this skill emitted a silver glow, but the coat stayed all black, probably due to Light Absorption.

In other words, Silverlight *was* being absorbed. It was of the holy element, rather than light, so I had my doubts about this working, but if basic sunlight counted, perhaps this result was only obvious.

With this, I could charge the coat with both sunlight and Silverlight, which ought to speed up the process a bit.

"It's pretty smart, if I say so myself," I muttered.

"Agreed," Nemesis nodded.

High and proud, I continued riding Silver while using the skill.

An hour later...

"Man, am I tired..." As Silver's movement shook me, I lazily hung my head.

"You look like you have summer heat fatigue," commented Nemesis.

"It's probably close," I muttered.

I was wearing the Black Warcoat's hood to both hide from the sunlight and absorb more of it, so I couldn't fault Nemesis for thinking that I looked like the heat was doing me in.

"I am unsure if it's because of Light Absorption, but the Black Warcoat's hood makes your face really dark and hard to see," she commented.

"Really?" I couldn't tell by myself. The hood didn't limit my vision or anything.

"Mm-hm," Nemesis nodded. "It's like the darkness is hiding the upper half of your face. You look somewhat like a ghost-like monster, and even though I know it's you, it makes me a tad scared."

"Just wearing a hood makes me look like an undead?" I raise an eyebrow.

"Oh no, I wouldn't say it's *just* the hood..."

"Is that so?"

Well, my appearance aside, what we had to consider now were my summer fatigue-like symptoms. They were caused by my continued use of Purifying Silver.

It had greatly increased the Black Warcoat's charge speed, and it was now at 6%. However, doing this wasn't good for my MP, and I'd already run out of all the MP I'd had at the start.

I still had the MP my Grudge-Soaked Greaves had accumulated during yesterday's Monochrome incident, but I decided to keep it just in case I needed to use Wind Hoof.

Because of this, I had continued using Silverlight by restoring my MP with Potions, but after a while, it was making me feel a weariness much like summer heat fatigue.

Considering I was just riding Silver, this wasn't all that bad, but I couldn't say the same if I somehow got into a battle, so I decided to stop.

But how else can I charge it? I thought.

"Ah!" I lightly exclaimed. "Maybe I should buy lots of light element attack Gems and fire them at the coat?"

The idea sounded like it would eat a lot of my money, but if I was careful with how I used them, I wouldn't be harming myself.

I should've thought of that before leaving the capital, I thought. *I guess I'll have to buy them in Quartierlatin before exploring the ruins... Hm?*

"What is it?" I muttered as I felt that something was wrong.

Unlike B3, I didn't have any skills like Killing Intent Perception, but I still had my natural intuition.

I couldn't guarantee its reliability, but I couldn't help but feel like something disquieting was happening nearby.

"Nemesis," I said.

"Aye." Instantly understanding, she transformed into a greatsword and went into my right hand.

"Over there!" I shouted as I heard a faint sound coming from the dense broadleaf forest at the side of the open road.

The sound was followed by a scream that made me gasp.

Realizing that Silver couldn't go through the forest all that fast, I returned him to my inventory and started running on my own two feet.

Ten-odd seconds later, I found the sources of the sounds.

"Ah... aahh..." One was a girl, scared to the point of being unable to stand.

And the other was a mechanical humanoid approaching her. "Threat le-vel — E. High-ly op-ti-mal. Se-cure tar-get."

It appeared to be a monster, as evidenced by the name above it — *Teal Wolf*.

"In what world is that a...?!"

I knew full well that Teal Wolves inhabited the north of the capital. But this thing before me was metallic, rather than furry; bipedal, rather than quadrupedal; and used some gun-like arm attachments as its weaponry, rather than claws and fangs.

It was nothing like the Teal Wolves I'd fought before.

In fact, this thing was more like a Magingear.

"De-ter-min-ing threat lev-el."

The mechanical Teal Wolf (?) noticed us and made its helmet-covered head turn to me.

The way it talked was blatantly robotic, but upon closer look, I noticed that it had animal fur sticking out through the spaces in the helmet and the mechanical parts.

Is the text actually right, then? Is that really a Teal Wolf? I thought.

“Threat le-vel — B+. Pri-or-i-ti-zing e-lim-i-na-tion o-ver re-triev-al.”

My observation mattered little to the Teal Wolf (?). The gun-like attachment on its arm began spinning.

The sight gave me a sense of déjà vu and made a chill go down my spine. I instantly jumped to the side.

A moment later, countless bullets pierced the space I had been in, turning the trees a distance away into swiss cheese.

“A Gatling gun,” I muttered. “First time I’ve seen someone other than Shu use one.”

Even Hugo’s Magingear had used a single-shot gun.

Though this Teal Wolf’s (?) Gatling gun wasn’t nearly as menacing as Baldr, it still wasn’t something you’d want to face.

“Pur-su-ing.”

Making all its metallic pieces clang, the mechanical beast turned its weapons towards me.

I continued moving, effectively dodging all that came my way.

The bullets flew in a straight line, and they didn’t have a particularly powerful impact. They didn’t chase after me, have needlessly high penetrative force, blow up the surroundings, or become manga characters.

Compared to my mock battles against Shu or Marie, this was actually really tame.

“Hold on... is that the smell of gunpowder?” I asked.

I suddenly realized that the weaponry wasn’t based on magic, but some sort of explosive chemical substance.

“Then I can use *that*!”

The monster had even moved away from the girl to focus on its attacks on me. The situation was perfect.

“Gardranda,” I said as I raised the left arm I’d regained just yesterday and, for the first time in over a month, brandished the left Miasmaflame Bracer. “Purgatorial Flames.”

It had always been my main weapon against monsters, and I didn’t hesitate to use it on the Teal Wolf (?).

A moment later, the construct underwent a dramatic change.

The flames scorching it quickly ignited the chemicals inside its weapons, causing it to swell... and blow up.

“Fire safety’s important, you know?” I grinned.

As I looked at the smoldering mechanical remains, I was relieved that my idea had worked. It had been entirely possible that the weapons were fireproof, just like Baldr. Then again, the fur sticking out had made that very unlikely.

“What *was* that, anyway?” I asked.

The exploded, blackened remains of the Teal Wolf (?) were spread out on the ground.

I walked up to take a better look at the machine’s interior.

There was some open space inside, but there was nothing there — not even the owner of the fur that had been peeking out. During the explosion, I’d seen some light particles, so I could only assume that it was dead. However, the machinery, despite being all burned and broken, was still there.

It didn’t look like it was about to drop something — it was now just scrap metal spread out on the ground.

I picked up a piece of the scrap and opened the menu for a description, but all I got was, “The remains of a mysterious machine.”

Still, the fact that it got an item description and the fact that there was no name above its head meant that the remains didn’t belong to a monster.

“What the hell is this?” I wondered out loud.

Machines and monsters made me think of Dryfe... particularly, Franklin. However, I had a feeling that he wasn’t involved in this.

That lab coat asshole would’ve been way more nasty with his work. At the very least, he’d have made sure that burning it would’ve caused a far bigger explosion, or a release of some poison gas.

“Well, there’s no point in thinking about it now.” Albeit still curious, I put the remains in my inventory.

The fact that I can do this is conclusive proof that it’s not a monster... right?

“All right. Now...”

The girl who’d been attacked by the Teal Wolf (?) was now unconscious because of the shock from the explosion.

However, it didn’t look like she was hurt in any way, so it was safe to say that this little bit of trouble was over. Still, even though that weird Teal Wolf (?) was dealt with, I couldn’t really leave an unconscious girl here in the forest all alone.

I walked towards her to see if she was all right.

But then, as though to stop me, a blue flash ran before me.

“Nh?!”

It was a sword. It separated me from the girl... then changed its course, and *went for my neck*.

In haste, I raised the left Miasmaflame Bracer to block the blade. It was more of an act of instinct, rather than thought, but it worked.

Thankfully, the blade stopped after digging just a little into the bracer. If I hadn't been so lucky, I could've lost my left hand... if not my head.

"Who're you?" I asked, as I assessed the trajectory and threat level of the attack. It had clearly been meant to kill me instantly, which reminded me of Rosa. It shook me so much that my heart began to race.

Wondering what I'd done to deserve this attack, I turned, puzzled, and looked at the attacker... only to be taken completely aback.

The attacker looked *that* shocking.

It was a swordswoman with long, azure hair and a mask on the upper half of her face. Her noble-looking clothes were partially reinforced with metal, and in her hands, there was a blue blade with a strangely pressurizing presence.



There was only one thing I could say about a person who looked like that.

“Shady!” She and I simultaneously spoke the same word.

Excuse me, but why?

“That sinister apparel...” she continued. “A perfect fit for a shady scoundrel rotten enough to assault a helpless girl in broad daylight.”

“Assau— ‘Scoundrel’?!” I exclaimed.

I’m not sure how to feel about a shady masked woman who attacks people out of the blue speaking such baseless slander about me.

“What do you mean, ‘a perfect fit’?” I sputtered. “Do I look like some villain to you?!”

“She is definitely misunderstanding your actions,” commented Nemesis. “But I can’t help but agree with her on the apparel.”

“Nemesis?!”

Why would you say that?! Do you have the Confusion debuff or something?!

“Funny you mention debuffs,” Nemesis said. “Not a day goes by when I do not wonder how many Elixirs it would take to fix your fashion sense.”

A damaged sense would’ve probably been a mental debuff, though. Elixirs didn’t work on those.

Wait, I mean, why are you even saying that? I asked Nemesis telepathically. It’s nothing like an animal suit, being shirtless, a junihitoe, a four-meter-tall jiangshi, or a damn lab coat.

“Don’t use Superiors as your standard! They’re all nuts!”

...You have a point.

“But Nemesis, all I’m wearing is demonic gauntlets, corpse boots, a light-consuming coat, and red and black composite armor. None of these are that bad, right?”

“ALL! OF! THEM! ARE! Spend just a second thinking about the meaning behind all of these things, you fool!”

“Hmm...”

When you put them all together... I guess it's a bit villain-like.

“‘A bit’... You know what, that’s fine. It’s better than not seeing it at all.” Nemesis calmed down.

Anyway, back to the masked woman. She was still brandishing her sword in my direction, not moving a muscle. That, combined with her comments on my appearance, made it pretty clear that she was far more wary of me than she had to be.

But... to be fair...

“I don’t think I want to hear anything about my apparel from someone wearing a mask that shady.”

“I... umm... I must hide my face because I am on a secret mission from someone very important!” the swordswoman argued. “It is nothing like some scoundrel’s heinous clothing!”

“Well, I only ended up looking like this because of what I was given or gifted,” I shot back. “And come on... this isn’t *that* bad, right?”

“I simply cannot trust a person who sees *that* as ‘not that bad’!”

“What a dodgeball game of a conversation,” Nemesis sighed. “Or perhaps it’s just catch where both sides are only hitting the other? Why is this even happening? How did Ray end up talking about fashion with some masked woman he ran into in the middle of the forest?”

Hey, I'd like to know that, too, I thought. Anyway, I should get her to calm down, so—

“Anyhow,” she cut my words short. “I cannot ignore a scoundrel who assaults girls. Forget the details — I shall incapacitate you and hand you to the authorities!”

“The details are important, damn it!”

And did she actually just say “incapacitate”?! Is she another meathead?!

“You seem to be running into more and more of them recently,” commented Nemesis.

Yeah, like Rosa!

However, the masked swordswoman was, in a way, worse than her.

Her left hand was exposed, and there was no crest on it, meaning that she was a tian, rather than a Master, and she was only hostile to me because she genuinely thought I was a dangerous person and was trying to protect the girl from me.

Considering that it was all a misunderstanding, I really didn't want this to get violent.

Still, it didn't seem like she'd be willing to listen to me if I tried to explain.

All of this made her a real trouble to deal with.

“Hey, listen, I just—”

“Enough talk!”

“No, it isn't! Come on!”

I made Nemesis switch into her shield form and protected myself from the masked woman's blue blade.

“Whoa, the speed!”

She didn't move at the speed of sound yet, so she was definitely slower than Figaro, Xunyu, or a number of other duel rankers. However, she was approaching their speeds in spite of the fact that she was a tian.

Additionally, she was clearly a skilled swordfighter, and her attacks were hard to defend against for reasons other than speed.

Shu's skill as a fighter made his fists hard to avoid, and the same logic applied here. I wouldn't have been able to defend against this if I hadn't switched to the Black Shield.

"Gh... Hm?"

Though her swordsmanship was scary, something about it felt off. If I had to explain it, I'd say that I didn't seem to be taking damage I was expecting to take.

Of course, I was using a shield, but there was a great difference between what my senses were telling me and the actual damage I sustained.

The thing my senses were telling me about was that blue blade. It had an absurdly dense air of intimidation around it. In all honesty, it was far more menacing than the masked woman herself.

In fact, the power I felt from it seemed to be on the same level as Figaro's Gloria α... or perhaps even higher.

Despite that, I wasn't taking nearly as much damage as that impression would've had you expect. It was a curious blade that didn't seem to live up to its aura.

But even if her sword was weaker than expected, she handled it beautifully.

The most skilled tian fighter I'd met was Liliana, but this woman was clearly above her. Though she looked weird, she was definitely a first-rate fighter.

The relentless chain of attacks, similar to Liliana's, was pretty hard to defend against, most likely due to stat differences.

"...Hm?" My own thoughts just now made me realize something.

The masked woman's swordsmanship was really similar to Liliana's. Similar enough to make me feel like their style was the same.

However, Liliana's sword-fighting technique wasn't the same that was popular among this country's knights. She herself had once told me that her technique had been invented by her father, the Celestial Knight, Langley Grandria. It was a unique mix of pirate sword-fighting techniques he'd brought from his birthplace of Granvaloa and the knight techniques popular here in Altar.

The only people who could use this technique were the late Langley himself and Liliana, who'd learned directly from him. Otherwise...

"Langley Grandria," I said.

The masked woman gasped.

"Did you learn swordfighting from Liliana's father?"

Indeed, that was the only other possibility.

"You know Lilia... Vice Commander Grandria?" she asked, as she made some distance between us. She was still brandishing her sword, but at least she was willing to listen now.

"I'm Ray Starling," I said. "I happen to be a Paladin, and Liliana's my friend."

"Ray... Starling?" she said, as she made a dubious face.

I proved my identity to her by removing my hood and showing myself.

Her gasp made it clear that she knew my face.

“You are the same one who appeared on the broadcast of the events in Gideon! The one with one arm!”

“Yeah.” Thanks to Miss Aberration, I wasn’t one-armed anymore, but it was clear that this woman knew me.

“Why is one of the main people behind the stemming of that incident assaulting a girl in a place like this?!”

“I’m telling you that I’m not!”

“Eh?” She made a surprised face.

“I beat a monster that was attacking her. She fainted, so I went to see if she was all right.”

“Ehhh?!” the masked woman cried. She looked around at the trees damaged by my battle against the Teal Wolf (?), and then muttered, “Why didn’t you say so?”

“I tried, but you just said, ‘Enough talk!’ and jumped at me!”

“You could have said that instead of making comments about my mask!”

She has a point. I guess we’re both at fault here.

“Hold on! But you attacked me before we even talked!” I cried.

“I thought it was an emergency! My teacher told me that, in emergencies, victory goes to those who make the first move!”

Well, I couldn’t guarantee that I wouldn’t have gone with a preemptive strike in her situation, either, but...

“Hey, I’d understand taking that approach with a monster, but don’t go for a guy’s neck just because he looks a bit bad,” I said.

“Do you have a mirror?!” she exclaimed. “I’ll show you what you’re calling ‘a bit bad’!”

“Oh, yes, we actually have one in our inventory.” Nemesis, turning back to her human form, started to dig through our stuff.

Nemesis dearest, why, might I ask, do you insist on taking her side on this?

“I am happy to have finally found a person who shares my sentiment about your fashion. Everyone else ignores it, after all.”

“Is my gear *that* bad?”

“Why do you think I am looking for a mirror?”

As we had such an exchange, the masked woman looked at Nemesis in surprise.

“An Embryo who can become human...” she said. “So you’re a Maiden, just like that parasite’s... I mean... High Priestess’s Embryo.”

Wow, “parasite” is pretty harsh, I thought. Well, Miss Aberration is pretty infamous.

“Mm-hm,” Nemesis nodded. “I am Nemesis. Ray’s Embryo. Here. Mirror.”

“Thank you,” replied the masked woman. “My name is... Azurite. I am a Swordmaster.”

Swordmaster was a swordsman grouping high-rank job with very difficult conditions.

Anyway... “Azurite,” huh? That name sure suited her azure hair.

“That aside, I’ll say it again,” Azurite continued. “Your equipment is both black and has a sinister design. Even the Fallen Knight pales in comparison.”

“Hey, Juliet’s armor has a different direction,” I say. “Hers is gothic, while I look like... a bit of a bad boy?”

“You look like *at least* the final member of an evil ‘big four,’” said Nemesis.

"You remind me of Lord Ira from a play I saw once," Azurite agreed.
"Except worse."

Do I really look that bad?! I'm genuinely concerned now.

"As you should be," said Nemesis. "Let's forget about fashion for now, though. While you two were having this meaningless dispute, the girl seems to have woken up."

Azurite and I looked at the girl and, sure enough, she was slowly getting up.

The girl introduced herself as "Shirley." Her parents owned an inn in Quartierlatin, and she'd come here to this small forest to forage for edible mushrooms and wild plants.

She was using a monster-repelling item that kept the low-level monsters here at bay. However, it hadn't had an effect on the machine-wearing monster, and we'd come right on time to save her from it.

She also remembered that I'd come to help her, and that completely cleared up Azurite's misunderstanding.

All's well that ends well, I guess.

Anyway, there was no guarantee that another machine-wearing monster wouldn't show up, so we decided to escort her back to Quartierlatin. We were going there to begin with, so that certainly didn't inconvenience us. And apparently, Azurite was heading there, as well.

"Nemesis and I are going to the ruins they found there," I said.
"What about you?"

"I'm going there to investigate the ruins, too."

So we had the same destination, huh?

Well, these were the first ruins ever found here in the kingdom, so they were bound to attract many various people.

“Really!?” exclaimed Shirley. “Then please come stay at our inn! You saved me, so I will ask them to make it cheap!”

She tightly clenched her fists in front of her chest. It was some impressive enthusiasm.

“But I—” Azurite spoke up. She probably wanted to say something about the fact that she hadn’t fought the monster, but Shirley just cut her off.

“I’ll tell Mom and Dad everything that happened, then ask Lefty to prepare a chicken... Ah, the customers really liked the quiche I made recently, so maybe I should...” The girl just didn’t give Azurite a chance to say anything.

“Hey, you were just trying to help her, too, right?” I said to Azurite.

“Don’t sweat it.”

Sure, she’d been trying to protect the girl from *me*, but that wasn’t a big deal. Really.

“Ah...” Azurite opened her mouth to say something, but decided against it.

According to Shirley, Quartierlatin was less than an hour’s walk away.

That was why I chose not to get on Silver and just walk there alongside these three.

Thirty minutes passed. As I talked with Shirley, who was still as energetic as she’d been at the start, something began bothering me.

Azurite was silently walking behind me, and I could feel her gaze on me.

I had no skills that would make this possible, but that was just how intense her stare was.

Why is she looking at me like that? Does she still suspect me?

“Hm?” I exclaimed as something held me back. I turned around to see Azurite, grabbing the edge of my Black Warcoat.

“...” She still didn’t say a word. She was hanging her head, so I couldn’t see her expression.

As I was about to ask what was wrong, she finally opened her mouth.

“Sorry... for attacking you back then...”

“Ohhh.”

So she’d just been looking for the right time to apologize for her sudden attack. Well, all that tit-for-tat we’d gone through had made her miss her opportunity. Still, I had no reason not to accept her apology. It seemed a bit awkward, like she wasn’t used to saying sorry, but I could tell she was trying.

“It’s fine,” I said. “We’re both okay, and you were just trying to help her, too.”

“But...”

“Again, it’s fine. But keep in mind not to judge people based on appearance. I might look like a bit of a bad boy, but there are people in the world who look downright heinous, and are actually pretty nice.”

My words make her giggle for some reason before saying, “All right... Th-Thank you.”

All tense, she gave me gratitude, and I felt like she was even less used to that than apologizing.

Chapter Three: It's Not Against the Rules

Paladin, Ray Starling

Just as Shirley had said, the walk to Quartierlatin took only a little under an hour.

The town was paved with stone, and all in all, it looked significantly more well-maintained than the usual village here in the kingdom. There were trees and flower gardens everywhere, making it feel like a place where humanity and nature thrived in harmony.

Needless to say, it was quite unlike Altea, Gideon, and Torne.

The beautiful townscape made me stop in place and look around.

“This is one flowery town,” I muttered.

“Indeed,” nodded Azurite. “This was done by the will of Countess Quartierlatin. The lady has a taste for gardening. Her mansion’s gardens are particularly splendid. She oftentimes invites orphans and travelers to have tea parties with her.”

“Well, someone’s knowledgeable,” I said.

“The one I serve is close to the lady.”

Uh huh. I guess she works for some noble, then, I thought.

“A-Anyhow, let us hurry!” she urged me. “The Sun will set if you let the flowers divert you like this.”

“Right-o,” I said as I resumed walking, still observing the sights.

Shirley’s parents’ inn was in the outskirts of the town.

It seemed a bit inconvenient for shopping and the like, but from what she’d told us on the way, it was close to the ruins we were after, so that was good.

Suddenly, I noticed white smoke coming from further in the inn. Then I felt a certain scent tickle my nose. It was familiar, and it reminded me of a family trip I'd gone on...

"Why build outside the town?" asked Azurite. "It seemed to me like there was quite a bit of open space in the center."

Shirley pointed at the nearby mountains before answering, "This place is close to the mountains, right? Well, that's probably why my prospector grandpa accidentally dug up a hot spring here!"

"Oh? That sounds nice," I commented. I haven't gone to a real-life hot spring for a while now.

By the way, although she'd said that his role was "prospector," it turned out Shirley's grandpa's actual job was "Adventurer."

She explained, "He was crazy about Tenchi to begin with, and finding the hot spring lit a fire in him. That's why he went ahead and built a hot spring inn!"

"I see," I said.

So the smoke was actually steam from the open-air baths, and the scent was from the hot springs. I couldn't smell much sulfur, though. This spring wasn't particularly odorous.

"I'm baaack!" said Shirley, as she opened the door.

A moment later, a woman — presumably her mother — ran up to us. She looked exactly like you'd expect a hot spring inn hostess to look.

"My," she spoke up. "Why are you so late? You had us all worried."

"I ran into trouble, and these people here saved me!" was how Shirley prefaced her talk. Then she told her mother what had happened.

"Oh my," the mother gasped. "Thank you so much for saving my daughter..."

"Anyway," Shirley continued. "I'd like you to let them stay here for cheap!"

"Forget 'cheap' — they don't have to pay us a single lir. But... oh dear, this is troubling," Shirley's mother said as she placed her hand on her cheek and made a... well... troubled face. "Because of the ruins, we're currently full of customers, so the only place where we have space is the annex."

"Ehhh? But that place is a bit..." Shirley made a troubled face, too.

"What's the annex?" I asked.

"It's a Tenchi-style building Grandpa built just because he wanted to," Shirley explained. "It's so different from Western buildings that our customers find it hard to stay there..."

"Guests don't even have beds," added her mother. "They have to spread the bedding directly on the floor."

Shirley added, "Putting some beds there would make it way easier... but Grandpa's will said that we're supposed to leave it as it is..."

Hearing them talk made me get the gist of it. Basically... the annex was a Japanese-style building. Tenchi was much like Sengoku Era Japan, after all, so that was completely certain.

That's no problem for me, then, I thought.

"I don't mind using the annex," I said. "I'm (probably) used to Tenchi-style buildings."

"Really?" Shirley's mother asked, and I nodded in response.

"I am fine with it, as well," said Azurite. "I have yet to experience staying at a Tenchi-style building, and it certainly won't hurt to try."

Thus, it was decided that we'd stay at the annex.

A short while later, I was standing in front of it, and it was... somewhat different than I'd imagined.

“Tenchi-style,” I muttered in perplexity. “Tenchi-style, eh...?”

While choosing my country during character creation, Tenchi had looked much like Japan during the Azuchi-Momoyama period.

However, the building right before my eyes was quite unlike that.

What's the best way to describe this...? I thought.

“Going by your memory, it looks like a depiction of an old Japan you would see in foreign movies,” said Nemesis.

There. That's perfect.

It got some things right, but it also made some really blatant mistakes. The coloring, for instance, was completely off, and all in all, it wasn't a building I'd expected when I'd heard “Tenchi-style.”

I couldn't help but wonder whether this was actually how Tenchi-style buildings had been in her grandpa's time, or whether the one who'd built it had the wrong image of the country.

Guess that's something I'll have to confirm when I actually go there someday.

“So this is a Tenchi-style building,” said Azurite, as she looked at a shisa-like komainu. Her eyes were gleaming with curiosity. “What an exotic decoration.”

I'm really not sure if that thing's really Tenchi-style, either...

We entered the building, and Shirley led us to our rooms.

As I considered the fact that sliding screens couldn't be locked, I discovered that the rooms here were actually using doors.

That's wrong! Wait... I guess this is right for a hot spring inn.

“Here is your key!” said Shirley. “You can have dinner at the main building between six and eight o'clock!”

“We'll keep that in mind.”

“The annex has an open-air bath, so please use that! We’re really proud of our hot springs!”

“Ooh, that’s good to hear,” I said. I was the only guy here in the annex, so I’d be able to have a really relaxed bath.

“Do you have any other questions?!” asked Shirley excitedly.

“Only one,” said Azurite, as she raised her hand a bit.

“Ask away!”

“Does this annex have any... home warashis?”

“It doesn’t!”

“I see...” Azurite muttered, seemingly disappointed.

“What’s a home warashi?” I asked.

“It’s a creature they speak of in Tenchi. They are ‘yokai’ said to look like young children. They live and play in human households like an odd sort of neighbor, and I hear that having them around is a blessing.”

“But we’re in Altar.”

“That matters not. I was recently bathing in the castle and saw a little girl appear out of seemingly nowhere. That must’ve been a home warashi.”

I stared at her.

Forget the home warashi, how did you end up bathing in the castle? What are you, even?!

“Speaking of that home warashi,” she continued, “I couldn’t see all that well due to all the steam, but she looked much like Liliana’s younger sister.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t actually her... Milianne?”

“The castle’s baths are trapped to prevent assassinations. A child like her could never get in.”

“You have a point...”

That made it likely that they actually did have a home warashi. Unless Milianne was some infiltration expert who could bypass those traps, anyway.

Though, we already had a natural escape artist in the second princess, so that didn’t seem all that unlikely.



Going into the room filled me with relief.

Though the coloring was still far from Japanese, it had a tatami floor, zabutons, zaisu — more than enough to make it feel like an actual Japanese hot spring inn room.

I can chill here just fine.

“The color is discomforting,” said Nemesis. “But the smell of the tatami and the zabuton make me feel... nostalgic, for some reason. This is pleasant.”

She was finding the atmosphere of this room (which, despite it all, felt Japanese) to be soothing, most likely because of her usual peeking into my memories.

Also, about four-fifths of all the tea snacks that had come with the room were already gone.

Oh, well.

“All right, then...”

I removed my equipment so I could relax properly.

I couldn't really wear my special rewards and VDA in a place like this, so I took it all off and stored it in the pouch-shaped inventory I had bought today.

Counting my three special rewards, the VDA, my accessory (I hadn't found anything useful in the shop, so I only had a Lifesaving Brooch right now), my spare weapon, and Silver, I now had seven items inside it.

You could only put ten types of items inside it, but even with everything unequipped and stored, I still had enough space for three.

Though I'd unequipped everything, I didn't want to walk around in just my inner clothing, so I got into the yukata that came along with the room.

Now this really feels like a hot spring inn, I thought, which made me want to go take a dip right then and there.

"Hm?" Nemesis read my thoughts. "The sun is still up. You intend to go this early?"

"Yeah," I said, but then I remembered something I was planning to do today. "Wait, no. I'll go in after cleaning Silver outside. You can go first."

Having found out just how much of a luxury Silver was, I wanted to give him a cleaning. Once I was done with that, I'd go to the hot spring and get all the dirt off of me.

Also, as a girl, Nemesis would probably bathe longer than me, so it was probably best to let her go first.

Hell, there were probably separate baths for guys and girls, so there was no need for us to go at the same time to begin with.

"This'll be your first ever hot spring experience," I said. "Enjoy it for all it's worth."

"Mm-hm," she nodded. "So I shall."

And so, I went to clean Silver, while Nemesis went to the open-air bath that the inn was so proud of.



Maiden of Vengeance, Nemesis

“This is exciting,” I muttered.

As Ray’s Embryo, I’d inherited my general knowledge from him. Thus, of course, I knew of hot springs.

Warmth, pleasantness, health, hot spring eggs, beauty, hot spring manju, the epitome of anything Japanese, hot spring water, drinks under the moonlight... All such information was already in my head.

However, I’d never experienced it for myself.

In fact, most of the time, I relied on Ray logging out to clean me up, so I barely even knew what a normal bath was like.

And now that we’d chanced upon a hot spring, I simply had to try it out for myself.

Excited, I walked past a piece of cloth — called “noren,” according to Ray’s knowledge — that said “women” on it in both old Tenchi language and common, opened the sliding door, and entered the changing room.

“Nh?” I said.

“...Eh?”

Someone — Azurite — was already there. She was placing her clothes away into a box-shaped inventory. Her blue blade was placed against the clothing shelves.

She wasn’t wearing her mask, either. Her face was fully exposed.



“...?!” A second later, she whipped her mask out of her inventory with a haste that made me wonder if she’d reached supersonic speeds and instantly equipped it.

“...”

“...”

I looked at the girl — fully nude, except for the mask — and wondered what had gotten into her.

She looked back at me, clearly shaken by the fact that I’d seen her bare face.

After a brief silence, I opened my mouth. “Keep your mask on if you’d like. Let’s just enter the bath, shall we? Standing naked like that is how you catch illnesses.”

“G-Good idea!” she nodded as she picked up her blue sword and left the changing room.

Eh? You’re taking that thing, too? I raised an eyebrow.

We both followed the instructions on the “Etiquette” sign, cleaned our bodies by dousing ourselves in water, walked into the hot spring, sat next to each other, and heaved a relaxed sigh.

Truly, this was really something wonderful.

It was as though pure, undiluted comfort was permeating my body.

How long is Ray planning to stay here in Quartierlatin, I wonder? I hope we’re here for three or four more days.

Suddenly, I noticed that Azurite was acting like she wanted to say something.

The glass on the eye area of her mask was misty, so she probably couldn’t look at me directly. Still, she was facing my direction, and she opened her mouth to say something I more or less expected.

“Keep my face a secre—”

“Just so you are aware,” I cut her words short, “I have no knowledge of what your face implies. Ray doesn’t recognize it, either. That moment back in the changing room was the first time either of us ever saw it. It exists in neither of our memories.”

“Really?” she asked.

“You can confirm it yourself, no? You seem to have Truth Discernment, after all.”

That skill was surely the reason why she’d so readily understood that Ray was telling the truth after the battle at noon.

“Eh? But... is that really so? He’s a Paladin, right?”

“It really is so.”

“I... see...” She seemed relieved, yet troubled about something else now. Though, it was hard to tell, considering I could only see the bottom half of her face.

“If I may ask,” I spoke up again and pointed at something right outside the bath. “For what purpose did you bring that sword here?”

This was my first time in a hot spring, but even I knew that it was rude to bathe while armed.

“This sword cannot be stored in inventories,” she explained. “I’ve no choice but to carry it around.”

“How cumbersome...”

I’d never heard of an item that couldn’t be stored for any other reason than inventory capacity. Not even Gideon’s rankers spoke of items like that. Then again, it didn’t seem like she was lying, so I assumed she wasn’t.

Azurite presumably realized that bathing with a blade handy wasn’t good, so she went ahead and began trying to hide it with the tubs and buckets here.

That changes little, if you ask me...

“Mh?” I looked at Azurite as she stood there, still trying to hide it, and realized something. “You have quite a nice figure.”

“I do?”

I could see her bare body quite well from here. It was well-proportioned and held a good balance between “muscly” and “soft.” Her chest was sizable, but not enough to lose grace, and the curve from her shoulders to her rear was really smooth.

Mhm, it's of a fine mold, indeed.

“But you’re also...” Azurite spoke up before stopping. “Sorry.”

“Should I take that ‘sorry’ as a declaration of war?”

So my body looked seedy even through her misty lenses, eh? Well, it wasn’t like I wasn’t aware that there wasn’t much to my chest. In fact, considering my overall frame, a big chest would only make me look unbalanced.

“No matter,” I continued. “My Master is not the type to care about women’s figures or breast sizes. Being considered ‘flat’ doesn’t bother me all that much.”

“So he doesn’t judge books by their covers?” Azurite asked. “But then, why did he pick on my mask?”

“Oh no, that isn’t the reason,” I replied, before explaining why Ray cared little for the female figure. “He said that he lost all interest in nude women after his sister took him to a jungle where he ended up being chased by a horde of naked amazons.”

“Ehhhh...?”

When I’d first heard it, I’d also thought, *Eh? That happened on Earth? Not here?* Needless to say, his sister had left him with quite a bit of trauma.

Still, even if naked bodies didn't excite him, he had a decent interest in love and affection, and his heart could still race for reasons related to such things, so he wouldn't have any trouble entering a relationship or becoming intimate with someone... probably.

"It certainly looks like he has his share of troubles," Azurite sighed. She was probably imagining young Ray's trauma.

I grinned. "That story is only something to laugh about at this point, though."

"Perhaps. But he's Ray Starling the Unbreakable, is he not? He's been involved in many things that cannot be laughed off, no? Like the incident at Gideon..."

"I cannot deny that."

After all, he'd been involved in a number of major incidents ever since my hatching.

In fact, he'd been caught up in such events even before coming here. Though the other side wasn't nearly as life-threatening as this one, there was, for example, that thing that had happened before Brother Bear's tournament fight when he was little.

For all I knew, Ray might've been born under just that kind of star.

"He seems to be predisposed to never ignore any tragedies before him, which makes him end up carrying some heavy burdens," I said.

The greatest example of that would be the whole matter that had surrounded the Gouz-Maise Gang. It had been nothing but painful to him, and as his Embryo, I knew that far too well.

"That nature of his worries me sometimes," I sighed.

"I see..."

I was Ray's Embryo — his partner. As such, I was confident that I was his closest ally in battle, but I didn't know if I properly supported his heart and mind.

I should find more ways to care for him, but...

“...Hm?” My thoughts were cut short by a changing room’s sliding door opening.

It wasn’t the same one that Azurite and I had gone through, which made a certain question come to mind — *Why are there two doors?*

Before I could figure out the answer, the door opened up... *and Ray came through it.*

He had a towel around his waist and still wore the pouch-inventory, but that was the extent of it.

I, on the other hand, hadn’t gone into the spring wearing a towel, so he could see me clearly through the water.

Azurite was actually standing, so he could see her whole and bare whether he liked it or not.

“...” Ray and I didn’t say a word.

“Umm,” Azurite spoke up. “My lenses are misty, so I can’t see well. Did someone come in?”

An inexplicable air surrounded us, and Ray, for some reason, turned around and walked back into the changing room... only to *come back out again in about ten seconds.*

Then, as though it was nothing, he walked up to the open-air bath, doused himself in water, got inside, and sighed in satisfaction.

Then, he said two things. “It’s mixed bathing time right now. Also, though the dressing rooms are different, the hot spring is the same.”

A moment later, I hit him with a drop kick, and Azurite — who must have realized who it was by his voice — crushed him with the broad

side of her blade. The combined force of our attacks instantly reaped his consciousness.

I know I was only just thinking about how to care for him, but he definitely deserved this.



Paladin, Ray Starling

“I’m in this dream again,” I muttered.

Nemesis and Azurite had given me the Faint debuff, sending me to the dreamsphere I’d been in a few times now.

I was pretty used to Fainting in *Dendro* by now, so even if this place looked different, I could tell it was that by the feel alone.

Last time, this had just been an empty space with a “Coming Soon” sign, but now, it looked much like my room in real life. It had probably been recreated from my memories.

“Honestly, how I ended up Fainting concerns me way more than how this space looks right now,” I muttered as I sat down on a chair — which felt just like the one in real life. “I was properly following the rules of the bath. Isn’t this result a bit unreasonable?”

I’d gone out to the open-air bath, only to find both Nemesis and Azurite. Thinking I’d made a mistake, I’d gone back to the changing room, but I’d seen a sign saying that it was mixed bathing time. Figuring that meant it was all fine, I’d gone back to the spring, only to be abused like that.

Incomprehensible.

“Oh, but you have to comprehend it... don’t you?” said a small girl, sitting formally on my bed.

I shrugged. “Hey, Shu told me, ‘You must never panic when you accidentally walk in on women bathing. If you falter or turn red,

you'll just make them scream. That's why you have to keep your cool and act like it's no big deal, then calmly explain why you came in.””

“I don't know if that's true or not, but if it is, does that mean that Mr. Bear did it... too?” the reddish-brown girl tilted her head.

“I think he also said, ‘You just have to make them think like there's nothing weird about you being there.’”

“But that's clearly strange... isn't it?”

It is. I nodded. *Now that I think about it, Shu might've been joking.*
I'd taken a joke seriously and done something bad...

But, wait, it was mixed bathing time, so it wasn't against the rules to enter, right?

“Even if it's not against the rules, what's embarrassing is still embarrassing, and what makes you angry still makes you angry. That's obvious... isn't it? Manners towards girls are important... right?”

“Right,” I said. “I guess the sudden event made me lose my composure.”

I belatedly realized that I'd been a bit out of it back there. Even if I'd felt no sexual excitement, the very fact that I'd been in a bath with girls who weren't family had made me lose myself.

That was definitely all my bad.

“You have to apologize... right?” said the girl.

“Yeah, I know. I'll do it after I wake up,” I said. “By the way...”

“What?”

I turned around and looked at the horned, reddish-brown girl before asking, “You're Gardranda, right?”

“Yes... I am.”

Chapter Four: The First Night

Great Miasmic Demon, Gardranda.

That was the name of the first UBM I'd ever encountered here in *Infinite Dendrogram*. It was the creature that had gone on to become my first special reward — Miasmaflame Bracers, Gardranda.

Now, I was facing an entity that seemed to represent the will of that item, and this wasn't our first meeting.

My first encounter with her had been back when I'd passed out while fighting my second UBM, Gouz-Maise, in the middle of a dream depicting my memories.

Back then, she had been nothing but a red-black silhouette of few words, none of them spoken fluently. Now, however, she was clearly visible and could hold a proper conversation.

"I saw the 'Coming Soon' sign a few times," I said as I looked around the room. "And it looks like it came."

"Mm-hm," Gardranda nodded. "Everything is prepared... I guess?"

Why does she sound so uncertain about everything she says? I wondered.

"So, let's start with a question... What are you, anyway?" I asked.

Shu and Figaro had told me that they'd never heard of a defeated UBM showing up to someone while they were unconscious. Those two were veterans who had beaten Mythicals and even an SUBM, and yet not even they had ever experienced it.

Why, then, was it happening with Gardranda?

Since I didn't know, I asked her.

"I am what became of the power and mind that the original Gardranda didn't use... I think?"

You “think,” eh?

“You can also say that I’m the child that was inside her... maybe?” she added.

“That was a pregnant lady?” I raised an eyebrow.

Tian lives had been at stake, so I didn’t regret beating the creature, but this revelation did give me a bit of a bad aftertaste.

“That was the kind of creature it was... right?” she said. “It was like an egg shell... I guess?”

“An egg shell?”

So the Gardranda I fought was like a limbed egg, while the Gardranda I’m talking to is like a... true Gardranda?

“We were a mother-and-child two-layered design?” she continued.
“Even I don’t really understand it... I think?”

“So how is it, really?” I asked.

“Okay... I’m manifesting like this because I was defeated before the conditions to unleash my true power were fulfilled and I could break the shell and be born... probably?”

The only reason why I’d beaten Gardranda so easily was because Cheshire had hinted that the core was in the stomach. So, I could only assume that, if I hadn’t known about that, the situation would’ve gotten worse, and it would’ve entered its final form — this girl right here.

Anyway, though she wasn’t the Gardranda I’d fought, she was Gardranda nonetheless, meaning that UBMs could have a mind even after becoming special rewards.

That fact made me concerned about something.

“Could this happen with Gouz-Maise and Monochrome, too?” I asked. Would the man-eating revenant and the black star manifest before me again?

“It won’t happen with Gouz-Maise... surely,” said Gardranda. “It’s nothing but a vessel now. As for Monochrome... I’m not very sure.”

“Why not?”

“It has a longer history and a higher status than me. But its powers are focused on a single thing, so it won’t show... I guess?”

The “single thing” had to be the skill that I couldn’t use yet.

That aside, if she was right, I probably didn’t have to worry about those two coming back to haunt me.

I was ready to send Gouz-Maise back to hell if it ever appeared before me again, but if that never happened, then all the better.

While Gardranda and Monochrome had been creatures acting within non-human frameworks, Gouz-Maise had been a wraith bursting with human malice and evil conviction, and I had no tolerance for that.

Needless to say, hearing Gardranda’s words put me at ease.

“So,” I spoke up. “Why did you bring me here?”

Last time, she’d wanted to get to know me, the one who’d beaten her, and now, whatever had been “Coming Soon” had come, but I still didn’t really know what it was.

I have a good guess, though, I thought.

“Lend me your ear... will you?” she requested.

“Hm? Sure.”

We were the only ones here, so I was curious why she saw the need to whisper, but I went and did as she wanted. I gently brought my ear close to her, and...

“Amph!”

...she bit into me... *Wait, WHAT?!*

“GYAAHHH?!”

There was no pain, but I could feel it clearly!

Did she seriously just bite me?! Are you kidding me?!

“What the hell are you doing?!?” I shouted.

“My mother didn’t get to eat you while she was alive, so I just tasted you a little... I guess?”

“...”

Of course. How could I forget that she was a man-eating demon? Well, technically, that was her mother. I wasn’t about to blame her for her parent’s sin, but she was one step away from making a sin for herself.

“I didn’t bite it off, but I did get a lick. It was good... you know?”

“Shut up,” I snapped. I felt no pleasure in getting praise for the way I tasted.

“Now, for the main matter... okay?” Gardranda said as she fixed her posture and looked directly at me before continuing. “Because you defeated a third UBM, you unlocked the third skill on the Miasmaflame Bracers... you know?”



I woke up shortly after finishing my conversation with Gardranda.

Silently, I reached into my inventory and equipped the Miasmaflame Bracers.

The item description proved that what I'd just seen had been no dream — the third skill was unveiled and explained.

"Hhh..." I sighed.

After telling me that the skill was now available, Gardranda had gone on to explain its effects... and conditions.

I could see them before me right here in the menu, and I could say one thing about this skill — it was on a whole different level than the skills you'd usually find on items, special rewards included.

In fact, many would consider it broken and unfair.

Sure, it was below the likes of Figaro's Gloria α's skill Fang of Gloria: Overdrive, but the very fact that I was thinking of that when trying to come up with comparisons spoke volumes about it.

But there was a problem...

I sighed. "And so, I get yet another unwieldy skill."

Even Shining Despair was easier to use, and that one had obscene charge rates.

The conditions for Gardranda's third skill were so harsh it would actually be better if I never got into a situation that called for it.

Basically, it was as unwieldy as it was powerful.

Still, in the off chance that I found myself in a scenario where using it was my best option, it would definitely be a reliable skill.

"Hm? Ray. You're awake," said Nemesis as she opened the door, ending my train of thought. Her long black hair was damp, and she was clad in a yukata that came with the room.

Her appearance made me stare blankly and my heart skip a beat.

"You were still in the hot spring?" I asked.

“‘Still’? No, I went in there *again*. After you Fainted, I took you to the changing room, dried you up, put a yukata on you, and brought you here. It made me work up a sweat, so I needed to bathe a second time.”

I looked down at myself and, sure enough, despite losing consciousness naked, I was now in a yukata.

“I see,” I said. “Sorry... and thanks.”

She fully deserved an apology for my misdemeanor, as well as gratitude for taking care of me while I was out cold.

“Well, I couldn’t possibly leave you there in the cold,” she said. “That’s how you catch illnesses. I didn’t want something like that hindering whatever we would be doing tomorrow and beyond. Also, I don’t mind what happened all that much, but you should definitely apologize to Azurite. She seemed to be quite shocked that she was seen... and by what she saw.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m not sure if she’ll forgive me, but I’ll apologize when I get the chance.”

“Good. That aside, I have a question for you.”

“What is it?”

Despite us being the only people in the room, she closed in on me for a whisper.

That made me a bit tense, as it reminded me of Gardranda’s bite.

“You looked awfully composed back there,” she whispered. “Did you actually feel nothing about our naked bodies?”

Now, that was a hard question to answer. I felt that she wouldn’t be satisfied with any answer I could give her.

Still, this was all my bad, so I had to be honest, at least.

“I only *looked* composed back then,” I replied. “In hindsight, I was probably panicking pretty badly. And, uh...”

“And...?”

Urged, I went ahead and spoke the words stuck in my mouth.

“The sight didn’t get me excited... but I did find it beautiful.”

Suddenly, silence fell upon the room.

“...”

“...” Neither of us said a word.

It wasn’t a cold sort of silence, but it wasn’t warming, either — I wasn’t sure how to describe it.

I belatedly realized the gravity of what I’d just said. It made it hard to look at Nemesis’s face.

“...Which one of us do you mean?”

“Both,” I answered without as much as a second after the question.

Crap... I don’t like where this is going.

“Which one of us was more beautiful?”

“Let’s leave it at that!” I exclaimed to prevent myself from remembering what I’d seen and comparing them.

“Gngh...” Nemesis voiced her frustration, and I was afraid to look at her.

I said way too much, I thought. But I can’t go without saying another thing...

“Speaking of ‘beautiful,’ you look great in that yukata. It suits you really well.”

Those were my honest thoughts. Her long black hair, pallid skin, and facial features matched the yukata perfectly. In fact, I’d have gone as

far as to say that I'd never seen a person in a yukata look as beautiful as her.

"R-Really?" she said. "I see..."



I expected more words, but she fell silent with just that. I was unsure of what else to say, and she didn't speak, either.

As silence permeated the room again, someone knocked on the door and said, "Mr. Starling, are you awake? Would you like dinner?"

The person sounded like a young man. His voice was unfamiliar to me, but his words made it safe to assume that he was a worker here.

"Oh, right," said Nemesis. "He dropped by about an hour ago, while you were unconscious."

I looked at the clock and saw that it was seven o'clock. It reminded me that Shirley had said that dinner would be between six and eight.

I guess it's a good time to have some food, then.

"Ah, I'll go right away," I said, as I took my inventory.

We both left the room.



The male worker who led us to the cafeteria was... different, to put it lightly.

First of all, there was a wooden mask on his face. Unlike Azurite's, which only hid the upper half, this one covered it whole — it only had holes for the eyes.

Second, his right hand was a prosthetic, just like my left hand had been until yesterday.

He didn't seem all that aged — in fact, he appeared and sounded younger than me — and yet he'd somehow already lost an arm.

I couldn't help but wonder what had happened for him to end up like this.

He noticed my gaze and greeted me. I apologized for my inappropriate staring and asked about him.

Apparently, he had been heavily injured in the war and then saved by the owner of this inn, a soldier himself. However, the injuries had made him lose his memories, and he hadn't had anything on him that could prove his identity, leaving him with no place to go. And so, after the inn's owner had cared for him, he'd gone on to become a worker here.

Apparently, the kingdom had a large number of people in situations similar to his. Many had ended up in their circumstances because of the Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria, rather than the war that had followed, but regardless, the scars on the kingdom ran deep.

Liliana and Milianne, for example, had lost their father in the war.

Things might've gone differently if more Masters had fought for the kingdom.

Alas, the Masters who'd participated were few, and the Superiors, Shu included, hadn't been among them.

I'd heard that this was due to the kingdom choosing not to reward any participants, instead relying only on the Masters' personal choices.

The Superiors had all had their reasons for not participating, such as Figaro's condition (although I wasn't too sure about Miss Eldritch having a good reason).

I felt like the outcome of the war had been the result of circumstance.

Even so, that didn't change the fact that many tians had probably felt abandoned.

That fact left a bad taste in my mouth.

I hadn't been here during that war. But if something like that were to happen again, I... I would surely...



As the masked youth led us towards the main building's cafeteria, we passed by many other people who were staying here. They had probably just finished eating.

Many of them were fellow Masters, who were surely here for the ruins. Some of them were even wearing yukatas, just like me.

As we walked, I ran into someone particularly unique. My gaze met theirs.

“Ah.”

“Oohh?”

The gaze my eyes met weren’t those of the person — those eyes were completely hidden by the front bangs. The eyes I was looking into right now were those of the *chubby cat on the person’s head*.

Indeed, it was a young man with a cat on him. He looked curious even by *Dendro* standards, and I knew who this person was.

“Ohhh?” he said. “Well, if it isn’t Nemesis and Raaay. I didn’t expect to see you heeere.”

“Likewise,” nodded Nemesis.

“Hello, Tom,” I said. “Why are you in this town?”

This person was Tom Cat — the second in the kingdom’s duel rankings and the bearer of the nickname “Monster Cat Mansion.” His job was “The Lynx.”

He had been the reigning duel champion before Figaro took the crown, and he was now keeping Kashimiya — who was in third — from advancing any further.

Needless to say, he was a big deal. Even if the cat on his head and his mild demeanor made that hard to believe.

"I'm here to explore the ruinnns," he said. "Kashimiya seems to have come baaack, so I decided to re-train myself and make some money heeere."

"Ah, I see," I nodded.

The top three rankers could only be challenged to a ranked duel by those one rank below them. Now that Kashimiya, ranked third, was back, he could challenge Tom for the throne of the second. Tom had every reason to prepare for that.

This reminded me that, because no one had been there to challenge him, I'd never actually seen him fight.

He'd never participated in the mock battles, either. Hell, we'd only became acquainted because of a chance meeting during lunch with other rankers.

"Are you after the ruins, toooo?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied. "I'll be changing my job."

"Oh, right, they found a lost job heeere."

Leave it to a seasoned ranker like him to already know about it.

"We might meet in the ruins, thennn," he said. "Let's be friendly if that happens. Goodniiight."

"Goodnight," I replied.

"You too, Grimalkin," said Nemesis as she looked at the cat on Tom's head — his Embryo. "Sweet dreams."

Grimalkin meowed in response, and Tom walked off, casually waving as he left.

"What an unexpected meeting," said Nemesis.

Seriously. He was a particularly rare encounter among Gideon's rankers, so I never would've expected to meet him in a place like this.

Also, why can't I shake the feeling that I met him before our introduction in Gideon?



The cafeteria was really crowded. Which made sense, considering that it was dinnertime.

"Ah! Mr. Ray!" Shirley saw me and ran up. "I'll lead you to your table! Thanks for bringing him, Lefty!"

The masked youth responded with a light nod and walked away to do some other work.

"'Lefty' is his name, I assume?" asked Nemesis.

"Yeah!" said Shirley. "The name's based on a Master word!"

So instead of a name referring his lack of right hand, they'd gone with a name pointing out the fact that he did have a left. *The glass is half-full, huh?*

Anyway, Shirley led us to a round table, which looked somewhat off, given that all the others in the room were rectangular.

I could only guess that the rectangular ones had originally been here, and they'd had enough of them for all the guests in the main building, but not enough for those in the annex, and that was why they'd brought this round one here.

Azurite was already sitting on one of the chairs around it.

"..." She silently stared at me through her mask.

It was awkward, to say the least. It almost made me remember what I'd seen before passing out.

Still, I couldn't really act like it hadn't happened.

"Azurite," I spoke up. "What happened was all my bad. I should've been more careful... Sorry."

Seriously, I could've figured out what was happening the moment I'd realized that someone was inside. Also, no matter how perplexed I'd been, actually joining them should have been an obvious, really big no-no.

"It's all right," she said, as she kept staring at me. "You forgave me for attacking you because of a misunderstanding. I can do the same for you."

And so, it was all water under the bridge.

"Thanks," I said.

"Again, it's all right. Anyhow, it's dinnertime. Let's indulge ourselves."

"Let's!" said Nemesis, clearly ecstatic.

In conclusion, the food was really good.

The delicious, locally-procured ingredients were well-prepared to make a number of excellent dishes. I particularly enjoyed the wild vegetable-chicken quiche.

Once we finished that main course, I started in on the fruits for dessert.

Since we'd each only gotten a single person's portion, I was sure Nemesis still had vast amounts of space in her stomach. She'd probably ask for a midnight snack at this rate, so it would be better to feed her now, but...

"All I have is Shu's popcorn," I told her.

"Delicious, but not exactly filling."

“Some place nearby might still be open. Go get something,” I said as I took 10,000 lir out of my wallet and handed it to her.

“Very well,” she said as she took it and left.

It just hit me that I casually handed her an amount of money equivalent to 100,000 yen, I thought. Thanks to all the windfalls I’m getting and Shu’s influence, I seem to be getting a warped sense of money.

“All righty, then,” I said.

Azurite had already excused herself, apparently having seen something, so I was the only one left at the table. She’d said she’d pass on dessert, and left the cafeteria. Naturally, her dessert was now in Nemesis’s stomach.

Anyway, I’m done with dinner, so what do I do now? I wondered. This is a hot spring inn, so now that the girls are out, maybe I should take a relaxed dip?

Speaking of hot springs, the main building obviously had some, too. This was evidenced by the fact that a lot of the guests here in the cafeteria were wearing yukatas, just like me.

It wasn’t every day that you got to wear this Tenchi-style clothing here in the kingdom, so it was probably popular just because of the novelty value. However, they clearly didn’t know how to put them on properly. The way they were wearing them was messy, and you could see exposed chests and legs everywhere.

Most of those wearing them like that were men, though. The women either wore their normal clothing, or had plain-looking innerwear underneath.

All sexual interest or lack thereof aside, that was actually pretty sad-looking sight. I felt like I was looking at a girl wearing a skirt over sweat pants.

Thinking this and that, I left the cafeteria.

Upon entering the lounge right next to it, I found a strange gathering of people.

“Hm?” I murmured.

Their ages and appearances told me that they weren’t part of a single group.

Curious as to what it was all about, I went over to the crowd, discovering that they were surrounding a single man.

He wasn’t wearing a yukata, but he had no upper clothing on, making him look pretty casual.

He was wearing a thick set of glasses, so it was hard to tell precisely, but he looked around thirty years old.

“Doctor, I’m thinking that this is my biggest catch today. Is it?” said a muscly guest, clearly a tian who had explored the ruins. He handed a fist-sized, diamond-looking object to the man with the thick glasses.

“Ohh, *bello*... *Molto bello*, but this is no real gem, yes?” he said.

Strange how he can sound so foreign when we have universal translation, I reflected.

“It’s-a false diamond for-a the laser lenses,” he continued. “*Bene* and *largo*, but ah, how you say... worth less than a real one.”

“Oh...” The man with the diamond slumped his shoulders.

But then the man with the thick glasses smiled. “But there are *dilettanti* who collect-a many things like this. To them? *Molto...* *Molto prezioso!* 200,000 lir.”

“Seriously?! That’s great! Now I can get something for my mother back home! Thanks, Doctor!” The tian man joyfully put the artificial diamond into his inventory.

“Who is next?” the man with thick glasses asked.

"Me! I wanna ask about this metal plate."

"*Che bello!* It's-a plate used in the pre-ancient civilization's battle units. Even before any processing, it's tougher than the weaker magic shields."

One after the other, guests presented the man with things they'd found in the ruins.

I could tell that this was basically a meeting for appraising antiques, but who was that man with the glasses?

Shirley happened to be passing by, so I took the opportunity to ask, "Who's that person they keep calling 'Doctor'?"

"That is Dr. Mario," she answered. "He's a doctor of archaeology who's been staying with us since yesterday. He said he travels the world investigating the ruins of the pre-ancient civilization!"

"I see."

I guess it's only natural for ruins to attract archaeologists. I've gotta say, though...

"That name makes it sound like he jumps really high and dives through pipes. Maybe kills viruses for fun on the side."

"Wahoo!" the man laughed. "*Cinque...* That would be-a the fifth time a Master has-a told me something like this."

Whoops, he overheard us.

"Ah, sorry," I apologized.

"It's-a no trouble, no trouble at all... It's clear that you're fond of the name, after all."

Despite sounding like a fake foreigner, he didn't seem like a bad guy.

"If I may ask, what makes your appraisal different from the Identification skill?" I asked.

"You-a cannot find out everything about a pre-ancient civilization relic with just-a Identification. *Non posso*," he explained. "If you don't-a have the, how you say... special knowledge and skills, many descriptions would-a say 'Details Unknown.'"

"...Ohhh." Now that he mentioned it, Silver's description was brief, and it ended with exactly that.

"The explorers here let-a me see their finds, and in exchange, I appraise them for them. *Valutare, si?*" This way, Dr. Mario got to examine the items from the ruins, while the finders learned the worth of what they'd discovered — a win-win situation if I ever saw one.

Wait, this is a perfect opportunity. I should get him to take a gander at Silver.

"Um, I also have something from the pre-ancient civilization," I said. "Would you like to look at it? It's not from these ruins, though."

"*Nessun problema!* No problem!"

"It's large, so I can't take it out here. I'll show it to you outside once you're done appraising the others' things."

"*Nessun problema,*" he nodded. "Then please, *trenta minuti...* ah... how you say? Thirty minutes!"

"All right."

Yep. This is good, I thought.

I'd get to find out more about Silver on the very same day I'd become curious about him. What a stroke of luck.

Now, to find a way to kill time while waiting for Dr. Mario.



As I walked around the inn with no real goal in mind, I found Azurite.

She wasn't alone, though. She was talking to the masked inn worker, Lefty.

"So you have no memories of anything before the war?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "Nothing at all..."

They were clearly talking about the same thing we had talked about while he led me to the cafeteria.

However, Azurite looked strangely stern. "Are you familiar with the family name 'Brittis'?"

"Brittis... Sorry, it doesn't ring a bell."

Azurite looked a bit disappointed by the response. "I see... Could you take off the mask?"

"I... Apologies, but my face is nothing I can show."

"...Very well. Sorry. That was unreasonable of me."

"Not at all. Anyhow, I have tasks I must attend to, so I shall excuse myself," said Lefty, before leaving.

Left alone, Azurite dropped her shoulders and walked in my direction.

"Ah!" she exclaimed as she finally realized that I was here.

I was curious about what I'd just seen, so I went ahead and asked, "Is Lefty noteworthy, somehow?"

"Somehow,' as in... how?"

My question had been relatively casual, but...

"Your attitude made it look like you were confirming something, rather than just asking," I said.

"So you *can* be observant... If only you had used some of this ability before entering the hot spring. It would've spared us both the unpleasant experience."

“Again, that was all my bad... But there *is* something about Lefty, right?”

“There is. His voice was much like that of a friend — one who participated and died in the war.”

“Well... damn.”

So this is a day of chance encounters not just for me, but for Azurite and Lefty, too.

“But his face is supposedly injured, and he has no proof of his identity. His stature and voice are so much like that of my friend’s, though. If it’s really him, I’d love to take him to his family...”

“Then why not ask Miss Aberratio— I mean, the High Priestess for help? If she heals his face, then—”

“*Do not mention that parasite in my presence.*”

“...Okay.”

That livid tone had been legitimately scary. Not in the same way as my sister or Miss Aberration, but still...

Just what had that eldritch monstrosity done to make the mere mention of her name incur such anger?

“...”

“...”

Crap, that’d completely soured the mood.

It didn’t look like I could do anything to improve this by myself, but Nemesis wasn’t here, either.

What should I do...?

“Ray! Ragazzo! So this is where-a you were,” said Dr. Mario as he joined the scene.

Salvation!

"Ray. Who is this man?" asked Azurite.

"Dr. Mario," I answered. "He's a guest at this inn. He's an archeologist who heard about the ruins and came here to this town to find out more about the pre-ancient civilization."

"I see... For a scholar, he was certainly quick to find out about this."

"Hm?"

What does she mean by that?

"So, ragazzo, what-a item did you-a want to be showing me?" asked Dr. Mario.

"Oh, this guy right here," I replied as I took Silver out of my inventory and showed him to him.

Azurite had a far stronger reaction than he did.

"A Prism Steed?!" she exclaimed. "And wait... this is an original, isn't it?!"

"Ah, yeah, he is."

"H-How did you get this?! It's one of the five Flagman units! One of those that hasn't been discovered yet! It's on the same level as a national treasure!"

I hesitated. Her intensity made it really hard to say that I'd hit him in a gacha.

Looking at her reaction, I imagined that the very idea that I'd gotten a national treasure that way would probably make her faint.

"Wait," I said. "You saw the broadcast of the battle in Gideon, right? Didn't you notice it back then?"

Considering our talk at noon, I assumed she'd witnessed me use the Wind Hoof bomb.

“How could I?! It’s impossible to tell the difference from a replica unless you see it with your own eyes! Also, in that motion picture, it was never clear what phenomenon was caused by which item or Embryo.”

So that’s how it is, eh?

Oh, yeah... That might’ve been the reason why no one had tried to steal Silver from me — they hadn’t realized that he was the real thing.

Well, I was a newbie, so I couldn’t really blame them for not assuming that he was.

“Just how did you get your hands on an original?” Azurite demanded.

“Well, I guess you could say I know people...”

I’d hit it at the gacha at Alejandro’s shop, after all.

“Oh, I see. So it’s all because of King of Destruction... your brother,” she said, nodding in understanding.

It really helps to have an eccentric older brother in situations like this. Anything goes when he’s involved.

“Hmm...” While I was talking to Azurite, Dr. Mario examined Silver.

He focused on him through his glasses one moment, then switched to look at him with his naked eye the next. It was hard to tell through his thick glasses, but he had clear blue eyes that seemed somewhat weary.

“*Interessante,*” he said. “*Ragazzo, ragazza...* this is most-a definitely an original made by Flagman — not a replica. *Decisamente.* However, it’s not-a one of the five Prism Steeds.”

“Eh?” Azurite and I exclaimed simultaneously.

It’s not one of the five?

“But the description says that he is...” I began.

“Sì è vero. Correct. The descriptions on Gold and Ruby told us-a that there were a total of *cinque*, five. On the surface, this Silver is-a part of them... but that’s actually wrong. *Scorretto.*”

“In what way?” asked Azurite.

“*In primo luogo*, firstly, about the five Prism Steeds that Flagman developed... the five positions are already filled. *Un set completo.*”

“They have?” I asked, astonished.

“Gold Thunder, Ruby Ignition, Obsidian Earth-Edge, and recent explorations of a Dryfean ruin led to the finding of Jade Storm, a wind-based Prism Steed. The discovery-a was accompanied by a text that implied a ‘Sapphire Wave,’ which makes a total of five. *Solo cinque. Capito?*”

“So what’s the deal with my Silver?” I asked, baffled.

Is he a fake...? No, Dr. Mario just said that he was made by Flagman.

“It’s-a not formally in the five, but it’s close. So much so that even the basic description assumes it is. But it’s actually an unofficial prototype unit, or an experimental one — either of the two. *Non ufficiale.*”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s-a most likely a unit developed with similar standards and a similar base frame as one of the five Prism Steeds, most likely Gold Thunder. *Simile, ma non autentico.* That’s-a the reason for the error in the base description. This Zephyrus Silver was also equipped with some experimental systems and functions. But, ah... how you say? *Non sono sicuro.* I’m unable to tell whether it was created before or after the five.”

I see. It makes sense to think that Silver’s either a test or an experiment.

So Silver was either a prototype made before Gold's development, or an experimental unit made using Gold's spare parts post-development. That was probably the reason why his name was different from the others'.

"*In ultima analisi*, it doesn't seem as complete as the other Prism Steeds," said Dr. Mario. "And it doesn't seem as focused on-a offense as they are."

It was hard to argue with that. The third skill was still a mystery, but the two skills I could see were just air-running and a compressed air barrier. The Wind Hoof bomb I'd used against the RSK probably hadn't been intended by the creator. After all, who would design something with the premise that it would use hundreds of thousands of MP?

Though I doubt I'll ever use it again, even if I had that much.

"Speaking of Prism Steeds and their offensive abilities..." I said.

During a duel race against Shu, Figaro's Obsidian Earth-Edge had made countless rocky stakes pop out of the ground and galloped upon them with his eight legs like the divine horse from Norse myth.

Those stakes had been powerful enough to blast Shu's tank out of the course, and the race would've ended right there if he hadn't brought it back through sheer force alone.

Are those the kinds of skills he had in mind? I thought.

"Well..." Azurite spoke up. "Gold Thunder could release lightning matching high-rank ultimate job skills to create an electromagnetic barrier, and use magnetic repulsion to go through the sky at extremely high speeds."

I wasn't sure if it had anything to do with them having the same base frame, but that seemed pretty similar to what Silver did.

However, I doubted that it cost hundreds of thousands of MP to use that, and the barrier probably provided more defense than compressed air... so it was probably much more reliable.

Still, I didn't like the idea of constantly firing lightning everywhere, so I still preferred Silver.

Silver suddenly rubbed his muzzle on me.

What's up with you?

"Regardless, it's *molto prezioso*, a very beautiful thing, so please treasure it," said Dr. Mario.

"Thank you very much," I said, bowing my head.

The words we concluded with felt like they belonged in some appraisal show, but nonetheless, I couldn't be more glad that I had asked him about Silver.

"By the way, are you two-a going into the ruins?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "Apparently, you can get a Prism Steed-related job there."

"I'm going there to investigate," Azurite added.

Our words made Dr. Mario smile. "Ohh, *molto bene!* Please do-a come to me if you find something for me to look at."

"Sure. We'll be counting on you for that."

With that, Dr. Mario went back into the main building.

The moment he was out of sight, I spoke up. "Azurite."

"Yes?"

"Is there something strange about him?"

My words made her look surprised. "You really *are* observant."

"With siblings like mine, you have to be. So, what's bothering you?"

"The very fact that we have an archeologist here," she said as she folded her arms. "The kingdom has banned all the requests and stifled all the information regarding the ruins here. It's hard to believe that an archeologist could find out about them."

All right now, hold on a sec.

"Stifled all the information?" I asked. "But I easily bought it at the DIN."

"Eh?" She opened her eyes wide in surprise. "Eh? Huh? So you're not here because of some shady information source you got through the King of Destruction?"

"Nope, this info's on the market."

Azurite sat down and covered her face. "Just what *is* that news company...?"

I knew exactly what she meant. The DIN was so well-informed, it was freaky.

Then again, they had Marie, the Superior Killer, among their special correspondents, so it was far from normal, really.

"By the way, you mentioned that you'll also be going into the ruins, right?" I asked.

On the road to Quartierlatin, she'd said that she was here to investigate, but I hadn't realized that she would be going in.

"Yes, I will," she nodded. "I need to get a grasp on what kind of place these ruins are."

"What kind of place could they be?"

"Ruins are treasure troves, full of pre-ancient civilization technology, but in some cases, they've contained dangerous weapons that've gone out of control."

"For example?"

"A good one is the Fourth Seafloor Excavation Fortress in Granvaloa. It became a source of countless carnivorous monsters that almost destroyed the ecosystem. In the end, the one called 'Human Bomb' incinerated it along with the entire sea space. Mind you, it happened shortly before his final battle against the Dual White Whale, so it was somewhat overshadowed."

Human Bomb...? Oh yeah, that's Koukin Shoyu, Master of Abura-Sumashi.

I'd heard of him a few times, and I had always been thrown off by how big the stuff he did was, compared to the banality of his name — "antibacterial soy sauce."

"I assumed that ruins could only be full of treasure," I said.

"Of course, many ruins contain useful technology, and it would be great if this one did, too," she replied. "If it doesn't, a factory to create something good would be favorable, as well."

"And you are here by the order of some powerful individual to investigate it, eh?"

Azurite was stronger than even Liliana — the current top of the Royal Guard. It wouldn't be strange for her to receive such a task.

"Yes. I... the person who sent me here has the kingdom's future in mind. As you are aware, this country is on the verge of destruction," she said. "As things are, it will surely be overthrown. That's why we need the technology inside the ruins. Resisting what we haven't been able to resist before now will require something we didn't have before."

She talked while looking at the mountain where the ruins were, then threw a glance down at the sword on her hip.

“What you didn’t have before, eh?” I raised an eyebrow. “If you’re talking about the war, doesn’t that include Superiors and other powerful Masters?”

Suddenly, I felt her attitude change. I didn’t need to see the top half of her face to know that she was against that idea.

“I... no... the one who sent me has no intention to ask for any Masters’ cooperation,” she said.

I was silent. There was no need to ask why.

This reminded me of my first meeting with Sir Lindos back in Gideon. It was perfectly reasonable for the people of the kingdom, especially those who’d gone to war, to not think highly of Masters.

There had been few on their side, many on the enemy side, and our powers were overwhelming.

Masters were the reason why the kingdom had suffered such a staggering defeat at the hands of Dryfe. There was no room for argument about that.

Azurite had clearly been Langley Grandria’s pupil, so she knew the pain of having lost her mentor to a Master. The person who’d sent her here had probably lost someone dear to him, as well.

Therefore, asking why that person was against hiring Masters would be nothing but rude.

But there was something I could confirm here.

“You have no intention to ask for Masters’ cooperation, huh?” I asked. “Does that mean it’s fine if we participate on our own? You know, to intercept the Dryfean Masters or something.”

“Eh?”

“Tian rules don’t apply to confrontations between Masters, right?”

“R-Right. That’s true.”

"Then I'm sure you'll have lots of people who come, even if no one asks them to."

Shu's face came to mind, then Rook's, Marie's, and then the faces of the many rankers and Masters I'd become acquainted with in Gideon.

Then there was B3's face and uh... yeah, actually, even Miss Aberration was there.

I wasn't sure why, but I felt like these people I'd just thought of would definitely come to Altar's aid during its eleventh hour.

Some of them were weirdos or schemers, but I didn't think that any of these people hated this country.

Some had Altarian tian friends.

Some avidly bettered themselves in the Altarian arenas.

Some had Altarian adherents.

...I wasn't too sure about that one, honestly.

Still, none of the people that came to mind actually wanted this country gone.

Okay, sure, Marie and B3 had played a part in the blockade, and Miss Aberration was a schemer, but even so, they wouldn't be able to sit idly by as this country evaporated.

I was pretty sure that we all liked Altar at least *that* much.

"But..." Azurite said, and then fell silent again.

"At the very least, I know I'll be joining the war," I said. "Sure, I know that doesn't mean much from a newbie who's not in any ranking, but I can participate by briefly joining the clan of an acquaintance."

The idea of joining The Lunar Society scared me, so I'd probably go for Chelsea's Golden Pirates.

“So, even if there aren’t any requests for our cooperation,” I said, “I’d appreciate it if you accepted any Masters who volunteered to help.”

“That’s... not something I can decide by myself.”

“I figured. It’ll be a big help if you pass that over to the person you work for, though. Sorry if this seems a bit out of left field.”

“It’s fine. I don’t mind.”

I could see her close her eyes behind her mask’s lenses. It looked like she was thinking about something.

Oh, right. Speaking of cooperation...

“Also, can you let me help you out with your ruin investigation?” I asked.

“Eh?” She opened her eyes wide in surprise.

“Like I said, I’m only here to switch jobs. Other than that, I’m mildly interested in history. I have the time and I’m not preoccupied with anything, so I’d like to help you out with whatever you’ll be doing.”

I planned on joining the war, of course, but if the investigation here would also have a great impact on the future of this country, I wanted to help with that, too.

I really didn’t want to just leave after doing nothing more than the relatively minor thing I’d come here for.

“But this is my duty,” Azurite argued. “Also, something that could impact the fate of the kingdom might happen there. I can’t make a Master like you be responsible for something like that...”

“You’re right. It’s your duty,” I said. “But I don’t think it’s something that you have to bear and do all by yourself.”

“...!”

"I'll help however I can, as long as it doesn't break confidentiality," I said.

If I didn't help and something bad happened to her, that'd leave a bad taste in my mouth.

"Also, you mentioned being responsible for the fate of the kingdom... I'm kinda already there, you know?" I added. "Thanks to the scheming of a certain bastard in a lab coat... Mr. Franklin."

"...Ah."

Naturally, I was referring to the battle against the RSK during Franklin's Game. If it hadn't been taken care of in time, a horde of monsters would've been released into the city. The vile asshole had even broadcast the battle to all of Altea and Gideon.

"So yeah, considering what I went through then, there should be no problems with me helping you ou— Why are you crying?"

Azurite was staring at me while bawling her eyes out for reasons I couldn't fathom.

Hold on, did I say something bad? Wait, she's an Altarian tian. Did the very mention of the lab coat shithead resurrect some unwanted memories? That bastard...!

"Sorry," she said as she wiped her tears. "You're right. You were... back then..."

It was hard to understand what she was trying to say.

Once done wiping her tears, she looked directly at me.

"I understand how you feel," she said at last. "Can I trust you to help, then? With the investigation, I mean."

"Of course."

"Thank you," she said as she extended her right hand to me. "I'll be relying on you tomorrow."

“As you should,” I said as took her hand and shook it.

Thus, it was decided that Azurite and I would be investigating the ruins together.



A record of a certain magical communication

“Where are you now, Logan?”

“Just entered Barbaros territory. I’ll be at Quartierlatin tomorrow night. You?”

“I’m staying at a nice little inn not far from the ruins.”

“Sure they don’t know about you?”

“No one in the kingdom knows my face. And I have a web set up. If someone finds out who I am, I’ll be the first to know.”

“All right. Then we can get this over with the day after tomorrow, just as planned. That works for me. I have things to do on Monday in real life, so... Well, just keep in mind that I can only cooperate until the day after tomorrow. You won’t have me if this takes any longer than that.”

“Understood. I’ll prioritize your circumstances in this arrangement. I doubt this would take long, anyway... Oh, and I have some extra information.”

“What?”

“The younger of the Starling brothers is here.”

“The younger... him?! The guy who messed up Franklin’s plans twice?! The Unbreakable?!”

“Yes, the same one.”

“That is some good news.”

“Why? I told you about him as a heads-up — a warning.”

“I’ve had my eye on him ever since he beat a Demi-Dragon at level 0, and him beating Franklin gave him even more value. It’s a good chance to make those who think they’re better than me shut up. So yeah...” There was a pause for effect.

“The Unbreakable is mine.”

Chapter Five: Countess Quartierlatin

Paladin, Ray Starling

Thus began our second day in Quartierlatin.

The skies were pleasantly clear, and the morning sunlight leaking through the window was gently warming the room. It was the perfect day for an outing, but sadly, we would be heading for the ruins buried deep inside a mountain.

“How regrettable,” said Nemesis. “This day is far better suited for sunbathing, picnics, or barbeques.”

Two of those are food-related, which says a lot about you, I thought.

“Well, I got an unhealthy amount of sunlight just the day before yesterday, so I’m perfectly fine with not getting to sunbathe,” I said.

“I’m not quite sure I can see that as a joke,” she shot back.

Too soon, huh? I guess you’re right. Our battle with Monochrome was just two days ago.

For all I knew, if Miss Aberration hadn’t fixed me up right then and there, I might still be getting essential medical care at right this very moment.

Ah, speaking of Monochrome... I’ll have to get some light magic Gems before I go to the ruins.

“That’s certainly important,” said Nemesis. “But first, we must have breakfast!”

I sighed. “I knew you’d say that.”

All the food she’d eaten last night had done nothing to lower her appetite for today’s breakfast. How very like her.

I sighed at my partner's gluttonous nature, and we both left for the cafeteria in the main building.

Once done with breakfast, we went to the lobby to wait for Azurite.

However, she wasn't showing up, even when it was past the time we'd agreed to meet.

"Did something happen?" I wondered.

"She *is* a girl, after all," said Nemesis. "Perhaps she needs time to work on her appearance?"

"Well, I guess that makes... wait, no, hold on."

She wears a mask. What good would make-up do?

Right as I thought that... speak of the devil... Azurite walked into the lobby.

"Sorry for the wait," she said.

"That's fine," I replied. "What took you so long, though?"

"...I slept in."

Now that was a shocking truth. I hadn't known her for long, but she definitely didn't look like the type to do that.

"Ahem." She cleared her throat. "Now, about our plans for today... would you mind postponing the exploration a bit?"

"I don't mind, but why? You got something going on?"

"I must report my arrival to Countess Quartierlatin and tell her that I will be investigating the ruins. I intended to take care of that yesterday, but things did not go as planned."

She'd just casually said that she would meet the noble in charge of this area.

"It's really easy to meet up with nobility and royalty in Gideon, so I guess the same goes for other counties too, huh?" I commented.

“Of course not,” she shot back. “What nonsense are you saying?”

“Hold on...” I said. “You know how the second princess is in Gideon right now, right? Well, she constantly escapes the place she’s staying at and runs around town.”

And I worked directly for Count Gideon as a de-cursing.

Azurite made an expression I found hard to describe, and it wasn’t because I couldn’t see half of her face.

Having been taught by Mr. Langley Grandria, just like Liliana, she’d probably had to deal with Elizabeth’s escapes, too.

On the way to the count’s residence, I asked her, “Why did you sleep in, anyway?”

“I’m not accustomed to using bedding you spread on the floor, so it took a while for me to fall asleep.”

“Ohh...”

The kingdom almost exclusively used beds, so that had to be a way bigger deal than just switching your type of pillow.

“The hot spring was magnificent, but getting used to Tenchi-style sleeping would take a while,” she went on. “It’s mildly odd, considering that I had no trouble sleeping in Granvaloa-style beds.”

“Granvaloa uses hammocks, right?”

From what I’d heard, they had proper beds, but since the people there constantly used ships, they often had to sleep in hammocks.

The idea makes me kinda giddy.

“Yes,” Azurite nodded. “I’ve learned about them through my mentor. He was from Granvaloa.”

“Basically, bedding can be really different across countries, huh?” I asked.

“Indeed. You would be especially surprised by Legendarian beds.”

Legendaria was the country south of Altar, and it was the most fantastical place in this whole world.

I recalled Marie saying that their Superiors were the weirdest people of all.

...Was it even possible to get weirder than our bear-suited KoD, the mild-mannered meathead Over Gladiator, and the High Priestess, AKA Miss Aberration?

“The beds there are *that* strange?” I asked.

“Oh yes,” said Azurite. “They sleep on large flowers or floating clouds.”

“That’s straight out of a fairy tale!”

So you can’t even sleep there without being immersed in fantasy.

“The country is rich in natural magic, so everyday life there is drastically different from here or in any other country,” she said.

“That’s why they use such magical beds.”

“Why does it feel like anything goes as long as you add ‘magic’ before it...?” I muttered, then noticed something up ahead. “Hm?”

It was a cat. Not just any cat, but a bipedal cat sìth.

“That’s...” Azurite said as she eyed it. “It’s immune to Reveal, so it must be an Embryo.”

Seeing a cat Embryo reminded me of Tom, but his Grimalkin looked like a common, quadrupedal cat. I’d never seen it walk, either. It was always on Tom’s head.

Also, this cat sìth had another special quality — it was carrying a flute.

“Hm?” I murmured. *A cat sìth with an instrument? That seems familiar, but I can’t remember why.*

“Meow... meow,” it meowed as it walked around.

It reminded me of that one children’s song.

“Oh, little kitty, lost on the road. Where, oh, where is your home?”
and all that, I guess.”

Come to think of it, I remembered having thought about this song in *Dendro* before. Nemesis hadn’t liked the fact that it ended without the problem being solved. I’d thought something like, “Well, it asked for directions from a crow and a sparrow. Of course it wouldn’t find its way.”

That had happened at the arena, right before Figaro and Xunyu’s Clash of the Superiors, and...

“Ah,” I exclaimed as it came back to me. This cat sìth had been one of the animals playing music in the plaza outside of the arena.

The one conducting the orchestra had been an elderly Master with a bird-like hat, but he was nowhere in sight here.

The way the Embryo walked helplessly around made it pretty clear that it was actually a lost kitten.

Ignoring that would leave a bad taste in my mouth.

“Hey,” I called out to it. “Where’s your Master?”

“We got se-pa-ra-ted,” it replied, not by voice, but by the music it nimbly played on its flute.

Was that a skill or something?

Some might wonder if it was even possible for a Master and Embryo to get separated, but I could assure them — it was.

Nemesis would sometimes wander off by herself to go on eating sprees in restaurants and the like.

It would help to have a GPS-like way of knowing where your Embryo was, but apparently, that required a separate skill. If all Embryos had come with such abilities, I'd never have walked in on Nemesis and Azurite bathing.

"Do you know where your owner... I mean... Master went?" I asked.

"He said he was called by the count-ess," it replied.

What a coincidence. We had the same destination.

I turned to Azurite. "Then I guess there's no reason not to take it there, right?"

"True," she replied.

"Then it's decided. We're going to the countess, too. We'll take you there."

"Thank you ver-y much."

And so, led by Azurite, we all made our way to the countess's residence.

The Quartierlatin mansion was quite unlike the Gideon mansion, which was the only other count's residence that I knew of.

The Gideon residence was split into a simple, sturdy-looking main building and a luxurious guest house, while the Quartierlatin residence was somewhere in between.

The building was refined, but it didn't put luxury above all else, and it was nowhere near as noteworthy as the gardens.

Even from the outside, I could see a wide assortment of colorful flowers and trees, gardened so harmoniously that it was almost fantastical.

I'd already thought that this town was in harmony with flora, and it seemed like the countess's residence was the prime representative of this unity.

“As I said when we arrived at the town, this is all due to the countess’ tastes,” explained Azurite. “I hear that she’s been working to make this garden and the town the way they are now ever since becoming the ruler of the county thirty years ago.”

“Thirty years...” I murmured. That must’ve required a lot of labor and passion.

Does the countess have a reason for making this town as vibrant as it is?

Azurite talked to the guards at the gate, and, following some verifications, we were all let inside.

White pavement was leading the way from the gate to the building, but everything besides that was the garden I’d seen from the outside.

There were many people here.

Most of them were children. They looked somewhat unkempt, but they were having lots of fun. Some were eating sweets they’d been handed, some were playing around the fountains, while others were just looking at the flowers.

The adults here, however, didn’t have a uniform look. Many were masters, and many looked exactly like you’d expect “travelers” to look.

“Who are they?” I asked.

“The children are from the town’s orphanages, while the adults are guests from outside of town,” Azurite explained. “I hear the countess invites people to such tea parties every now and then.”

Was this all just philanthropic work?

Even if it wasn’t, the garden, town, and the faces of the children here made it hard to imagine that the countess was a bad person.

Suddenly, the mansion's main door opened up, and a gentle-looking, middle-aged, noble lady walked out.

"Oh, my. Thank you so much for coming here all the way from the capital," she said, as she walked up to Azurite and bowed.

Huh? She's enough of a big deal to have a countess bow to her?

"Hey, Azurite, you—"

"No," she cut my words short. "I'm only getting respect because I represent a certain someone. Am I right, Countess Quartierlatin?"

"Eh...? Oh, certainly. Ohohoh..."

It seemed kinda fishy, but if they insisted that was how it was, I had no choice but to leave it at that.

Anyway, Azurite and the countess's talk needed to include confidential matters. Even though I was a cooperator, I was still an outsider, so I was told to wait in the waiting room until they were done. But...

"Can I wait in the garden, instead?" I asked. "It's really magnificent, so I'd like to look around."

"I see," said Azurite, as she turned to the countess. "Would that be all right with you?"

"Certainly," the lady said. "Look at it to your heart's content."

The countess gladly approved, and so it was decided that Nemesis, the lost cat, and I would stay outside.

Right after the two of them entered the building, we went to the garden that was full of playing children.

Oh, I almost forgot! I realized. The lost cat's Master should be somewhere here.

I walked up to a nearby servant and said, "Excuse me, this cat is—"

"Wind!" Someone off to the side cut my words short. "Where were you?"

It was an old man accompanied by a centaur, kobold, and a harpy. They looked like Embryos, and they all had instruments in their hands.

I could remember seeing the two besides the harpy back in Gideon, so there was little doubt that this man was the cat sith's Master. Also, unlike in Gideon, the man wasn't wearing a mask this time.

"Meow!" The cat named Wind meowed and leapt over to the old man.

Well, I'm glad to see the search didn't take long, I thought.

Then the man and his Embryos walked over to me.

"Are you the ones who brought Wind to us?" he asked. "Thank you very much for that. Wind is quite curious, you see. It's not rare for him to get lost."

"No need to thank us. We just happened to have the same destination," I said.

"I'm still grateful, though. We almost started to perform without a wind instrument."

"Perform?"

"Oh, we are a group of traveling musicians. We were performing on the streets of the town this morning, and a servant of the countess invited us over to play for the orphans she'd invited for a tea party."

I see, I thought. From what I've heard back in Gideon, he and his Embryo play music that's first-class. It's sure to make for a great tea party.

"Although my forte is composition, rather than performing, I couldn't refuse the request of someone enchanted by my music..." he said.

“Oh, where are my manners? I am Veldorbell, a wandering composer without a country. And these are my Embryo — Wind, Clavier, Percussion, and Strings.”

He gestured to each in turn, introducing the cat sìth, harpy, kobold, and centaur, in that order.

Names based on music... a group consisting of a cat, bird, dog, and horse... I mean, donkey... I guess the Embryo was based on the Town Musicians of Bremen musical.

“Ah, I’m Ray Starling.” I introduced myself, too. “And this is my Embryo, Nemesis.”

“Indeed!” she said. “I’ll be looking forward to your performance!”

“Heh heh, as you should... Hm?” Mr. Veldorbell seemed to realize something, looking at me curiously. “Ray Starling...? Are you the one they call ‘Unbreakable’?”

“Yes, that would be me.”

Man, I sure am used to that nickname by now...

“I see. I was there during the incident at Gideon, but I was given the death penalty before you entered the stage and shone. Such a shame I didn’t get to see it.”

“Oh, uh... that’s unfortunate,” I said and thought, *Man, yet another victim of the lab coat shithead.*

Oddly, Veldorbell’s reaction to my words was strange. He looked surprised, then made a wry grin.

He muttered something that I couldn’t make out. “She didn’t tell anyone? Well, neither my name nor face was on the wanted list, and I could use the save point without an issue, so I thought that was the case, but...”

“Um, is something wrong?” I asked.

“Oh, not at all. Anyhow, I got the death penalty for a reason. I don’t mind it, and neither should you.”

“Really?”

“Really. Now... the young lady, here, seems excited for our performance, so we will start right away. Are you ready, Wind?”

“Al-ways am!”

“Very well. Let’s begin,” said Veldorbell as he and his Embryo gathered in the open space prepared for them. “We shall now start our performance. I hope the music we play here tugs at your heartstrings as well as all the beautiful flowers here.”

Following a bow, they began playing.

The moment the music reached my ears, I actually gasped.

I was used to absurdly good music because I had the jack-of-all-trades Shu for a brother, but this performance, conducted by Veldorbell and played by his Embryo, was so good that it actually overcame that and gave me goosebumps.

The servants and the travelers were visibly awed, and the children, in all their purity, were completely moved and overjoyed to hear it.

I’d heard their music in the plaza before the central arena in Gideon, but this performance was on a whole different level.

Suddenly, I realized that the harpy with the keyboard hadn’t been with them back then. This time, the whole group was here, and they seemed to be even better than they had been before.

Listening to their music made me lose track of time. The performance was over before I realized it, and everyone — myself and Nemesis included — showered them in applause.

“Play something cool next, mister!” shouted one of the children.

“No! I want a cute song!” exclaimed another.

This was obviously their first exposure to music of this quality. They passionately asked for an encore.

"Heh heh. No need to rush me, children. You will all get a turn," said Veldorbell as he began the next song, clearly enjoying what he was doing.





Residence of Countess Quartierlatin, study

Deep inside the mansion, in the countess's study, Azurite and the lady were having a conversation.

"So you will be exploring those ruins, then?" asked the countess.

"Indeed. I wish to find out what kind of facility it is as soon as possible," replied Azurite as she examined a set of documents handed to her by the countess. They contained all the information on the ruins that had been gathered since the ruins' surfacing three days ago. "It seems like there hasn't been much progress beyond the hall with the job change crystal."

"Yes. They say there are lots of monsters beyond it... the mechanical sort, specifically."

"Golems, I assume? Ruins are often full of them. What are they called?"

Normally, monsters had their names displayed above their heads. That was one of the laws of this world, which was the reason why Azurite was asking that. But...

"Apparently, their names are... varied," said the countess with a hint of awkwardness.

"Hm?" Azurite raised an eyebrow as she turned a few pages on the documents.

She quickly saw that there had been encounters with machines called "Little Goblin" and "Teal Wolf," among other things, and that they didn't vanish when beaten.

"What could that mean?" she wondered. "Perhaps this is linked to the nature of these ruins. I'll investigate that, as well."

"That's great to know," said the countess. "Thank you very much."

"No need to thank me or bow your head," replied Azurite. "I'm only doing what I must. After all, I am the one who hopes that these ruins will have something that can turn the tide in the second war with Dryfe."

Her eyes as she said that were full of either sorrow or resolution — it was unclear which.

"Then, will you involve Maste—?"

"I have no intention of using them in the war, countess," Azurite cut her words short.

"But your companion is—"

"H-He's...!" she roughened her voice for a moment before regaining her composure. "He is merely a cooperator in this investigation. That and the war are entirely different matters."

Then, as though to gloss over the subject, she shifted her gaze back at the documents.

"I see," said the countess as she looked at Azurite with gentle eyes.
"But you trust him, do you not?"

"N-No! This isn't trust!" she denied, as the small part of her cheeks visible below the mask turned red. She didn't intend it, but the words that followed came out as bashful muttering. "It's only that... I owe him a lot, so I had no choice but to accept his offer to cooperate. That's all there is to it."

The countess observed the blushing girl, with a smile on her face.



Paladin, Ray Starling

Veldorbell continued his performance, filling the children's little hearts with endless glee.

But man, there sure are a lot of children. I'm quite sure the number exceeds fifty.

I asked a servant about it, and was told, "These tea parties are a once-a-month event, and we invite all the children living in the town's two orphanages."

"There are a lot of orphans here?"

"Yes... many of them lost their fathers in the war, then lost their mothers some other way."

War again, huh?

According to what Lefty had told me yesterday, Shirley's father, the owner of the inn, had been a soldier in the war, too. So the knights definitely weren't the only ones who'd suffered in the war.

"Oh? We can go indoors, too?" I muttered, as I discovered that the tea party's area was not only restricted to the garden outside, but also contained a spacious room connected to it.

There was a sofa, a table, chairs, and so on. The children, who were tired from being out in the sun for too long, were cooling off here.

Curious about the interior, I walked inside.

There were lots of flowers growing within luxurious-looking vases, making the place feel both calming and gaudy. The walls had a number of portraits on them.

My guess was that the people portrayed in the portraits were the heads of this family, lined up in a chronological order. They had a sense of intimidation unique to such portraits, and some of the children were staring at them with both fear and respect in their eyes.

"Hm?" I murmured.

The portrait at one edge — likely the newest one — was different from the rest.

Instead of displaying only the head of the family, it displayed three people — a man in his twenties or thirties, and a younger-looking lady with a baby in her arms.

After a moment, I realized that the lady was the countess when she was young.

“What’s this portrait?” I asked the servant in the room.

“That is a portrait from thirty years ago, when Lady Zermina was still young. The ones with her are her husband and their son.”

So the countess’s name is “Zermina,” huh? I thought.

That aside, I couldn’t shake the feeling that the servant found it hard to talk about this.

“Did something happen?” I asked.

“Shortly after this portrait was made... her husband and son both passed away.”

“That’s just... How?”

“Apologies,” he said. “I cannot say anything more about their death.”

“It’s fine. Sorry for being presumptuous.”

So now I knew that Countess Quartierlatin’s husband and son were gone, and that she was controlling this region all by herself.

“That might be why she’s so kind to the orphans,” commented Nemesis.

“True...”

Perhaps her fixation on gardening had something to do with that, as well.

A few dozen minutes later, we were joined by Azurite and the countess.

The children instantly ran up to the lady, thanking her and chattering to her, all smiles, making it very clear just how loved she really was.



Later on, Azurite and the countess began a tea party and, as Azurite's cooperators, Nemesis and I were invited to join.

It was held on a second-floor balcony from which we could see the entire garden. Naturally, the balcony was covered in flowers, too.

Veldorbell was still playing, and we could hear the performance from here. He didn't even take breaks between songs. He would finish one child's request and then instantly answer some other child's request, making it obvious that he was enjoying this immensely.

Though, I didn't know how to feel whenever he started playing some anime song, or the BGM of some famous movie.

The tea party with the countess consisted of her thanking us for cooperating with Azurite and explaining the inner structure of the ruins, based on the explorers' accounts.

But when that was all done, we started to have an idle chat, and Nemesis, still curious about what we'd learned in the room, soon asked, "Why do you invite the orphans to these tea parties?"

The countess showed no aversion to giving an honest answer, and said, "I call the little ones here to distract myself from my loneliness. I once had a son — Emilio. While I was ill, my husband took him on a trip, only to be attacked by monsters."

I was silent.

"I lost Emilio before he was old enough to run around... so seeing healthy children always soothes my heart," she went on as she

looked at the orphans in the garden. “It’s also the reason behind this garden. My husband was an Altarian diplomat, but he had gardening as a hobby, so being surrounded by flowers helps me remember him. The large tree at the center of the garden was transplanted there while he was still alive and well.”

The children... the garden... all of it was just a means of dealing with the loneliness from losing her family.

As saddening as it was, that wasn’t something anyone could fault her for.

As she looked at the orphans, I looked into her eyes, which made me realize something.

“Heterochromia...?” I murmured.

Her eyes had slightly different colors — the right was blue, while the left was green.

Hearing my mutter, the countess faintly smiled and spoke, “These eyes are quite common in the Quartierlatin bloodline. My son had them, as well.”

“Really?”

“Yes... They’re actually the reason why I also invite travelers to my tea parties.”

“You invite them because of heterochromia?”

How are those two things linked?

“After my husband and Emilio were attacked by monsters, my husband’s body was brought back to me, but they couldn’t find Emilio’s. He was but a baby, so maybe there was nothing left, but a part of me believes that he might’ve been saved, and that he is still alive and well somewhere...”

I was silent.

"That's why I ask travelers whether they've seen a man with eyes like mine. It's been thirty years since then, though, so I've half-given up on this." She formed a listless smile.

I couldn't help but open my mouth. "The possibility may be low, but as long as it isn't zero, you should continue doing it. I think that, if you give up only half-certain about what became of him, the regret will haunt you far longer than it would otherwise."

I was merely speaking my mind. We'd met each other today, so I probably wasn't in a position to say something like that, but I didn't care if I came off as impertinent. I honestly thought that the regret would be far worse if she gave up.

"That's true," she said, agreeing with me. "You are absolutely right. As his mother, I can't give up on the possibility of him being alive. Thank you, Mr. Starling. You are exactly as the rumors say you are."

"It's nothing, really..." Honestly, I was mildly curious about what the rumors said about me.

I hope I'm not as infamous as Miss Aberration, at least.

"Now that we are on the subject," she spoke up again, "have you seen a man with eyes like mine? He should be over thirty now."

"Well, I'd be happy to tell you if I did, but you are the first tian with heterochromia I've ever met..."

It was a pretty common thing to see among us Masters, though. Some people — like Juliet, for instance — went out of their way to give heterochromia to their avatars during character creation.

Tians are a different matter, though. I've never seen a tian with eyes like hers... hold on a second.

"Now that I think about it, I think I know someone with the same right eye color," I said slowly.

"If you mean me, then that is only obvious," said Azurite. "My mother had Quartierlatin blood in her."

"Ohh, I see what you mean."

Sure enough, Azurite's and the countess's eyes were much alike.

However, the person I had in mind had the *exact same* right eye color as the countess.

"But there's no way, right?" I murmured.

I mean, both of his eyes were blue.

The tea party ended shortly afterwards, and we left the residence grounds to head to the ruins.

"Thanks," said Azurite, right after we left.

"For what?" I raised an eyebrow.

"For what you said to the countess. She has been searching for her son for thirty years, and despite appearances, she seemed quite exhausted. Hearing your sincere words must've been uplifting for her."

Oh, that.

"I just said what I thought. I don't deserve any thanks for that."

"Indeed," said Nemesis. "Ray says exactly what he thinks far too often. Just yesterday, after the bath incide-mghmghmh..."

I shut her mouth before she could tell Azurite about what had happened after my waking up from Fainting. I'd been so straightforward, back then, that even I was embarrassed about it now. I didn't want it dug up.

"Well, anyway," I said. "It's finally ruin time, right?"

"Yes," nodded Azurite, starting to walk. "Let's head to the— Hm?"

She noticed something and stopped.

I followed her gaze to find someone I was acquainted with.

“Dr. Mario?”

It was the archeologist we’d met yesterday.

He seemed to be looking through the fence surrounding the countess’s residence, to watch the magnificent garden beyond.

Many would find the fact that he was looking at a place full of children to be... questionable, to say the least.

However, the way he looked at the garden made it obvious that he was lost in deep thought, and not even his thick glasses detracted from that impression. It seemed as though he was trying hard to... remember something.

“Ah. Oh. If it isn’t-a young Ray and the young lady,” he noticed and greeted us. “Oh, and who is this dark little *ragazza*, hm?”

“Oh, she’s my Embryo, Nemesis.”

“Mm-hm,” Nemesis nodded. “I must say, you have quite a dubious manner of speech.”

“I get-a that a lot! Ha ha ha!” Dr. Mario was speaking the same way as yesterday — like a fake, cheerful foreigner. And yet, for some reason, it felt somewhat different.

“Why were you looking at the garden like that?” Azurite asked him, with a slightly harsh tone.

“*Mi dispiace!* Forgive me!” he bowed his head. “The garden is so beautiful. I couldn’t-a help but stare. Forgive my lack of manners...”

“I see,” she said suspiciously. “Be careful. Stare too much, and you’ll be arrested.”

“Oh... *Molto paurosi!* That would be scary. I’ll-a take my leave!” he said, then turned around and started to hurry away.

While Azurite simply glared at his back, I couldn't help but ask him, "Dr. Mario, are you acquainted with the countess?"

My question made Azurite and Nemesis raise their eyebrows.

Honestly, I wasn't too sure why I'd asked that, either.

If I had to name a reason, I'd point to what the countess had told me during the tea party and what I'd seen yesterday.

A part of me expected my question to hold no meaning to him. However, he stopped walking and, after a moment of silence, said, "No. There's no connection between us. Of that, I am certain," and then resumed walking away.

Oddly enough, he spoke without any of the unusual accent. As he left, I caught a glimpse of what was behind the thick lenses of his glasses.

His eyes, still as exhausted-looking as when I'd seen them yesterday, were of a blue highly similar to the countess's right eye.

Chapter Six: Ruins

Paladin, Ray Starling

As we were leaving the inn, Shirley told me that lots of merchants set up shop near the ruins to sell battle items for the explorers.

And that was no lie — there were lots of simple stalls on the sides of the path leading to the place. They felt somewhat like festival food stands or small jewelry shops.

I bought all the pure light magic attack Gems I saw and walked while using them on my Black Warcoat. Doing that seemed to be clearly way more effective than normal sunlight or Purifying Silverlight.

“What are you doing?” Azurite asked. I couldn’t blame her. It was pretty weird.

“This coat is a special reward,” I answered. “One of its skills can only be used when it absorbs enough light damage.”

“You have a Prism Steed *and* a special reward?”

“Not just one. These bracers and boots are special rewards, too.”

“Normally, only Superior Jobs have that many. In fact, three is rare even for them...”

That reminded me that Marie, who had a Superior Job, had only two. Strange to think that I’d already surpassed her on that front.

Not that that meant I was better than her. It would be a long time before she would be below me as a fighter.

“Anyhow... light damage, you say?” Azurite continued. “I have a light-based attack skill called ‘Laser Blade.’ Should I try feeding it to your coat?”

“I’ll pass,” I replied. “That probably deals physical damage, too.”

For all I knew, it might even be capable of damaging my coat. Not to mention that its name made it sound like a sure-kill attack.

Talking about this and that, we walked on a freshly-made footpath leading up to the mountain, and it didn't take long until we saw the entrance to the ruins, surrounded by lots of armed people, Master and tian alike.

I suddenly realized that I hadn't seen Tom in the inn this morning. He wasn't among these people, either, so I could only assume that he was already inside.

"So... we're finally here," said Azurite.

"Yeah," I nodded.

Her mask did nothing to hide the fact that she was absurdly tense about this. Although a part of me felt like she was overburdened, rather than just tense.

It would make sense, too. Yesterday, she'd told me she felt like the very fate of the kingdom depended on this investigation.

I might have to keep an eye on her to make sure she doesn't do anything rash, like her attack on me yesterday, I thought.

"Let's go inside, you two," she said before walking ahead.

"Yeah," Nemesis and I replied and walked after her.



The entrance to the ruins was entirely dirt at first, but halfway in, it became covered by a strange, glossy metal.

However, some people were using tools and attack skills to remove it, which made me assume that they were responsible for the dirt walls leading to this point. The entrance must've been metallic, too, at first.

Well, I can totally understand taking this metal. It's probably a good material, I thought. But shouldn't places like this be preserved?

“Whatever is most important here has to be deeper in. Let’s move on ahead,” said Azurite, as she threw a glance at the wall-breakers.

The hallway was completely devoid of monsters, but the burns and bullet holes in the walls told me that it hadn’t been like that at the start.

These ruins weren’t a created dungeon, so monsters would never spawn here for no reason. The monsters in this part of the ruins had clearly been beaten over the course of the three days since their discovery.

And so, following an uneventful walk through the hallway, we arrived at a larger space.

It was about the size of a high school gym. The floor and ceiling were metal, too, but the design seemed to be different than the hallway’s. At the very least, the metal didn’t look like it would be as easy to remove.

“Perhaps this is where these ruins *truly* begin,” said Nemesis.

“Perhaps. This place even has *that*,” I replied as I pointed at the large crystal at the center.

A few of the Masters that were already here were looking at it, touching it, or opening their menus around it.

That had to be the crystal I’d heard about — the one that let people switch to Prism Rider. I’d interacted with a similar one back in a church where I’d become a Paladin.

A while had passed since then, so it was best to refresh myself on how these things worked. I took a few minutes to do so.

These large crystals were the reason why certain jobs were limited to certain areas of the world.

You could switch between jobs you'd already acquired at any save point or by using a small, consumable Job Crystal. However, getting a new job required more than just fulfilling the job's conditions — you also had to touch the appropriate large crystal.

That was why Xunyu's Master Jiangshi job could only be acquired in Huang He, while Miss Aberration's High Priestess job could only be acquired here in the kingdom.

Speaking of Miss Aberration and job switching, there was a little something regarding that.

All the crystals for priest grouping jobs were within churches.

Or, rather, churches had been built around those crystals.

Naturally, those priest grouping crystals were limited, and that was the reason why Miss Aberration, instead of building her own churches, had tried to acquire the ones owned by the state religion.

After all, churches built in random places were little more than empty boxes.

Because of her slimy dealings, she now owned quite a large number of such facilities.

...Too many, actually.

At this rate, she would monopolize the priest grouping, and then make it a rule that anyone who wanted to take those jobs would have to join her cult.

Since *Infinite Dendrogram* had healing magic, the church were both a religious and a medical group, meaning that Miss Aberration was doing the equivalent of putting every hospital in Japan under her cult's control.

No country or person who knew how bad cults could be could tolerate something like this.

However, despite Miss Aberration's obvious efforts to drive them out, the state church didn't seem to be all that bothered by this. In fact, they welcomed it.

This was because their doctrine could basically be summarized as "Use priest grouping skills to heal the ill."

Thus, they gladly let The Lunar Society take their churches and crystals, saying things like, "There is no problem as long as we get more Priests," "We lost a few churches, but this allows us to dedicate more workers to other medical facilities and orphanages. A lot of us were lost to Gloria, you see," and "Let us do our best for the sake of the people, together."

Basically, they were good to a fault — too clean to deal with this appropriately. And this despite the fact that they would be the ones most hurt by Miss Aberration's scheming.

I mentioned all that to Azurite. "The higher-ups in the capital must feel really uncomfortable about this."

"Oh, they are..." sighed Azurite with an odd degree of certainty. She seemed to be connected to the country's leadership, so she might've experienced that firsthand. From what I could tell, the person she worked for was really troubled by Miss Aberration's machinations.

"All right, then..." I muttered, as I touched the large crystal.

I got a list of jobs I could switch to, and instantly found Prism Rider. Before choosing it, I looked at the other options.

There were Mechanic, Engineer, Pilot... a bunch of really "Dryfe-like" jobs.

Forget whatever's deeper in — this crystal by itself may have a great impact on the war, I thought.

"But the kingdom doesn't have the foundation to make good use of these jobs, right?" Nemesis commented.

“Oh, that’s true.”

Mechanical knowledge wasn’t something you could gain overnight. The kingdom would need a lot of research to reach the technological level of Dryfe.

“Well, whether they even want to do that is up to the kingdom,” I said as I resumed doing what I’d come here to do.

Touching the large crystal again displayed a menu of jobs I could switch to. Without any hesitation, I picked Prism Rider and initiated the process.

There was no sound or fireworks or anything — the main job in my stat summary just changed to Prism Rider, and that was it.

Becoming a Paladin, a high rank job, I remembered there having been some light, so this felt a bit underwhelming.

Shu and Marie told me that the switch to Superior Jobs is really flashy... I wonder if I'll ever get to see it.

Suddenly, I got a message saying, “Switching your main job has rendered some of your skills unusable.”

Oh, right. Certain jobs couldn’t use skills that were from groupings too distant in nature.

I looked at my skills to figure out which skills I’d lost.

Naturally, Horse Riding was still there.

Paladin’s Aegis and Purifying Silverlight were available, too. They were Paladin skills, and I could only guess they had stayed because Paladin had elements from the rider grouping.

The only skill that was now unusable was the healing spell.

I had been able to learn it as a Paladin because that job was partially in the priest grouping, but switching to Prism Rider had severed that link.

Oh well... I'd been questioning my healing magic's usefulness, anyway. The amount it restored wasn't too great. Instead of moping over that, I would just be thankful that I still had Aegis and Silverlight.

"Though you might need to start keeping a keener eye on your healing item stocks," commented Nemesis.

"True," I nodded.

Losing that skill made me wonder if I'd gained any new ones, but when I checked, I found nothing.

I guess I'll need to level up, just like with Paladin.

"Are you finished?" asked Azurite.

"Yeah," I nodded. "That's my objective done. Now I can focus on helping you."

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it. Anyway, where do we go now? There are four paths we can take here."

Three, if you ignored the one we'd come through.

"According to the information I was given, the path leading deeper underground is beyond that door," Azurite said, as she pointed to one of the paths.

There was an automatic door there, and many people, tian and Master alike, were walking through it.

From what I could tell, the hallway beyond it was at least five meters high, and it was fittingly wide, too.

"You'll fit there just fine, Silver," I said as I took my trusty steed out of my inventory and jumped on him.

This was my first time riding him as a Prism Rider, but nothing seemed different from before.

“It might be related to some Prism Rider skill, so I’ll ride Silver, if you don’t mind,” I said.

“I have nothing against that, but...” Azurite muttered.

Hm? But what?

“If you don’t have anything against it... could you let me ride him later?” she asked. “I’ve always wanted to ride an original, but my mentor only let me ride his during special occasions.”

Well, Langley Grandria’s Gold Thunder was a national treasure, after all. It’s not something they can put up for rent, I thought. There might’ve been other reasons, but still.

“Why not just sit behind me?” I asked. “You’ll have to get off when we run into monsters, but it should all be fine until then.”

“Can I really?”

“Yeah.”

I can’t imagine why you couldn’t, honestly.

“What of me?” asked Nemesis. “Should I sit before you?”

Oh, right, it’s about Nemesis.

“Well, either that or you go into weapon form.”

“Mm-hm. Very well. This is a dungeon, and you can never be sure what will come for you, so I will go for the halberd for now. There might be nasty debuffs waiting for us.”

And so, she became The Flag Halberd.

Figuring she had a good point, I put on the Black Warcoat’s hood to prepare for any ambushes.

“Excuse me,” said Azurite, as she sat behind me.

It suddenly hit me that Silver was carrying two people and a pretty hefty weapon. The combined weight had to be pretty big, but it

didn't seem like much for a Prism Steed. We went deeper in without any trouble at all.

"Just what I expected of a Prism Steed!" exclaimed Azurite. "We will reach the inner parts of these ruins in no time!"

"Yep!"

Careful not to trample over the people surprised by Silver, we made our way deeper in.

In unrelated (?) news, later in the day, a strange rumor was born. People said they saw an unnerving creature holding a dark flag, as well as a shady-looking masked woman, both of whom were riding a silver horse...



Thirty minutes on horseback later, we were in so deep that there was literally no one nearby.

Still, I kept Silver galloping slowly enough to not crash into any people that might jump out at us.

"What are we gonna do when we're there, anyway?" I asked Azurite.

"First and foremost, we will investigate the technology kept in these ruins," she replied.

"You said that you can never tell what these ruins contain, right?"

"Yes. Also, there are two types of ruins — storehouses and factories."

"Oh?"

"Storehouses are full of items left behind by the pre-ancient civilization," she explained. "But there is no equipment to produce more of them, so you never gain much technology from them. You can salvage parts of it from the items, but it's still very little. Factories, on the other hand, are places that actually make the items."

If the equipment isn't broken, you can use it for production right away, and even if it is broken, you can still look into how the items were made."

I see, I thought. Storehouses are like huge treasure piles, but factories are way more useful to countries.

"What do you think about these ruins?" she asked. "Is it a factory or a storehouse? I don't mind if you aren't too certain."

"A factory," I replied with confidence. "Yesterday, Dr. Mario was asked to examine stuff like artificial diamonds and metal plates — things that were more like materials than products. I think it's likely that this is a factory where they were making items using those and other things."

"But that's not quite enough to discard the possibility that this is a storehouse, is it?"

"Yeah. And that's where the large crystal comes in."

She nodded. "Fair point."

It was just like the matter of Miss Aberration and the state religion's shared monopoly over the priest grouping crystals.

Looking at it from that angle, it was safe to assume that the crystal here was secured so that the workers here could have easy access to jobs like Engineer and Mechanic.

Or, rather, this whole factory had been *built around that crystal*.

"I saw no corrosion on any of the walls here," said Nemesis. "If this is a factory, the equipment must be intact, as well."

"True," Azurite nodded. "That is likely."

The idea that a factory could still be running after two millennia spoke volumes about the technological prowess of the pre-ancient civilization.

Thinking about that made me wonder how a culture so advanced had collapsed in the first place.

Hugo had told me that it was destroyed by a god and his thirteen servants, while B3 told me something about another ancient civilization that had collapsed at about the same time.

I couldn't help but wonder about that.

"I'll have to ask Dr. Mario," I muttered.

An archeologist like him is bound to know something about that... hm?

"Ah!" I gasped as I saw a light coming from further ahead in the hallway.

In a haste, I moved my Black Warcoat to hide my face with it, and a second later, I felt it absorb something.

"Ray!" Azurite exclaimed.

"I'm all right! But there's something up ahead!"

Soon enough, the monsters that were out of sight came into vision.

There were two of them, and they were much like the construct that had attacked Shirley yesterday.

That extended to having names that didn't suit them at all — Goblin Warrior and Pashi Rabbit.

One of them was wielding firearms similar to yesterday's Teal Wolf (?)'s, but the other one had a design focused around the energy pipe it had for a head.

"That's the thing that fired the beam!" I exclaimed as I made Silver accelerate towards them, figuring that being too far away from them was a bad idea.

The one with the firearms responded by attacking us with bullets and shells, but I avoided them by making Silver gallop across the wall.

The one with the beam gun aimed at us and fired again, but just like the previous beam, I saw it coming.

“OARGH!” I roared as I made my Black Warcoat dance and block the beam.

Soon enough, I was right next to them. Not wasting any time, I howled, “Vengeance is Mine!” and destroyed the head of the beam model (Goblin Warrior).

As I did that, Azurite used what looked like the skill she’d talked about, Laser Blade, to split the firearm model (Pashi Rabbit) in half.

The two monsters stopped moving, released particles of light, then ceased all function.

“Phew...” I sighed in relief. That battle had been really sudden, and I was glad it’d gone so smoothly.

“The first attack you received here was a laser straight to the face,” commented Nemesis. “How gruesome.”

Yeah. If I hadn’t had Monochrome, I’d have probably lost my head, I thought in response.

It had given me some Shining Despair charge, though. A silver lining.

I asked, “You okay, Azurite? Got hit by any stray bullets?”

“No, I’m unharmed. That aside, these monsters with absurd names... I’ve heard of them from the countess.”

Azurite and I examined the two monsters we’d beaten. The names above their heads had already vanished, and the particles of light were a sure sign that the monsters were dead. However, the machine parts, though broken, were still there.

It was the same as yesterday.

“This one’s the same model as the one I saved Shirley from,” I said.

"Are you implying that the monsters from these ruins escaped outside?"

That would've come as no surprise. Ruins were natural dungeons, meaning that, unlike how it was with created dungeons, the monsters inside weren't bound to them. It was entirely possible that they'd leaked out.

For all we knew, there might be ways out of here other than the main entrance, and the monsters might be capable of leaving through them. Thus, the idea of them leaving the dungeon wasn't strange at all... unlike these things.

"I heard of this, but it's still so odd," muttered Azurite. "These are monsters, so why are they not disappearing?"

Azurite had the exact same question as me.

Normally, monsters became light and disappeared the moment they were defeated, and non-living creatures, such as golems, were no exception. I'd seen this happen many times with the Balloon Golem Kasumi often summoned, so that was pretty much certain.

Despite that, these mechanical monsters actually had physical remains.

And no, these weren't drops... Based on what'd happened yesterday, it was clear that these were their actual parts, left behind despite their destruction.

I picked up a part, examined it, and just like yesterday, the only description I got was: "The remains of a mysterious machine."

Perhaps an archeologist like Dr. Mario would know more about this? I thought.

"Let's take these remains with us, shall we?" Azurite suggested.

I nodded in response, and we gathered the pieces and stored them away.



Ten-odd minutes had passed since our clash with those two monsters.

We were in another part of the hallway, stunned by what we were seeing.

“Looks like those two were left functioning by accident,” I muttered, as I eyed all the mechanical remains lying around.

These remains were of the same types as the two we’d encountered, but there were at least ten of each.

“The destruction on the surroundings is fresh, and the split constructs are still sparking,” said Azurite. “They were destroyed only recently.”

She wasn’t wrong there — the damage on the machines was clearly new. The damage looked pretty varied, too. Some machines had three parallel cuts on them, some had a single cut that split them apart, some had holes that looked like they were caused by arrows in them, et cetera.

It felt like the aftermath of a fight from someone in the gladiator grouping. Someone who’d used many various weapons.

There was another thing of note, here...

“These are... traps,” I noted.

There were machines poking out of the walls and the ceiling.

Most of them were gun-like in appearance, but there were also some lens-like devices that seemed as though they’d been designed to horizontally slide on the walls.

That’s the generic SF laser trap that splits people apart, isn’t it?

“It’s quite clear that these traps were triggered,” said Azurite.

"There's nothing on the ground, though, so whoever triggered them made it through."

A tian's body wouldn't disappear, and a dead Master would leave behind a set of random drops. This meant that whoever had passed this place had been unfazed by the traps and gone on ahead.

The kind of person could do that and... Hm?!

There was a sudden sound that seemed very familiar.

"Ray!" Azurite called out.

"That sounds like battle, all right," I nodded.

"Mm-hm," Nemesis joined. "Those echoes are coming from further in the hallway."

The hallway took a turn about 100 meters ahead, and it sounded like someone was fighting someone up ahead.

"Let's go check it out," I said, as I made Silver gallop towards the source. He arrived at the corner in a flash, and we could now see what was happening beyond it.

There was a bigger space, much like the room with the large crystal. Floor, ceiling, walls... everything was covered in metal.

And there were nearly 50 mechanical, battle-ready monsters.

However, not a single one of them was looking at us.

They were shooting their guns and lasers at *something* moving in seemingly every direction at incredible speeds.

As I watched this dumbfounding battle...

"Grimalkin at the mercy of the waves."

"Grimalkin at the tail of the wind."

...I heard someone recite a poem.

Despite all the gunfire, I could hear it pretty clearly.

“Grimalkin under the leaves.”

“Grimalkin in the shade of fire-sparks.”

The source of this poem was the thing the machines were aiming at, the thing they were firing at, but were unable to shoot down.

It was a man with a cat on his head.

“Grimalkin beyond the stars.”

“Grimalkin within the heart.”

He was The Lynx, Tom Cat — the second in the kingdom’s duel rankings, and the reigning champion before Figaro’s taking the title.



“Now dance, *Octachrome Cat — Grimalkin.*”

The moment he said that, Tom’s trademark cat, Grimalkin, jumped off his head.

The Embryo landed on all fours, then stood up on its back legs.

It didn’t end there. The cat then grew, lost its fur... and became another Tom in a blink of an eye.

That was surprising enough, but there was even more. Both the original Tom and the Tom that had been Grimalkin multiplied, and the two Toms became four.

Then the four Toms became eight.

“Grimalkin says goodbye.”

Suddenly, they all attacked the mechanical monsters.

They were too fast for me to follow with the naked eye.

I’d already seen supersonic movements from Figaro, Xunyu, and other top duel rankers. Thanks to all the mock battles I had with them, I was more or less used to such speeds.

It was pretty obvious that Tom’s job, The Lynx, was an AGI-focused job that allowed supersonic movement, and normally, I’d have been able to follow him with my gaze.

However, I couldn’t do that with eight of him.

Some were running on the floor, some dashed up the walls, others moved through the air.

All eight moved in all three dimensions, and with unparalleled precision. They even left afterimages so solid that they seemed like new clones, making it even more difficult to follow them.

One had claw-like bracers, one had a longsword, one had a bow... their weapons were varied, and it felt like there were even more of them than there actually was.

Eventually, the entire room became completely filled with Toms and their afterimages. It was as if this very space belonged to him alone.

Their ferocious, supersonic attacks quickly dealt away with the mechanical monsters.

“Monster Cat Mansion.” I unwittingly muttered his nickname.

This was the first time I’d seen him fight, and it was abundantly clear how he’d gotten that nickname. It was his immensely powerful self-cloning ability.

Of course, this wasn’t the first such ability I’d seen. Marie’s Death Shadow job gave her something in the same vein. However, that skill divided her stats between the clones. The more clones, the weaker they were.

Considering that made Grimalkin seem even more fearsome.

Creating seven clones as powerful as yourself was stunning, even for an Embryo’s ultimate skill, and combining that with a speed so great that you formed solid afterimages was just insane.

Staring at the eight, I couldn’t follow them at all.

“Right, up... landed,” muttered Azurite, standing at my side.

She was moving her head as though she was looking at something... someone... specific.

“Are you still following the original Tom?” I asked.

“Yes. Only barely, though.”

That wasn’t something I’d expected from a high-rank job. Perhaps there was truth to the idea that tians were the better technical

fighters, and we Masters only surpassed them because of skills and stats.

Well... there were exceptions like Shu and Figaro, but my point still stood.

"That aside, do you perhaps know Monster Cat Mansion?" she asked me.

"We're acquainted, yeah. You too, I assume?"

"I do not know him in person, but I have heard of him, of course. He was the kingdom's duel champion for years, after all."

"Good point."

Tom had been the king of the arena until Figaro had come and taken the crown, so it was only natural for tians to know of him, too.

Hold on, I thought. Figaro became top duelist when he was still in his sixth form. That was over two years ago in Dendro time, so... when, exactly, did Tom become the champion?

"Ah! Ray!" Azurite exclaimed.

"Eh?!" I brought my attention back to Tom's battle with the monsters.

With most of the monsters destroyed, the winner here was as good as decided.

But then, a great number of gun-like objects with lenses at the muzzle protruded out of the walls.

They were the same as the sentry gun traps Tom'd destroyed in the hallway.

I didn't know if it was because they were old, but only about half of them properly worked. However, that was more than enough.

The Toms were suddenly assaulted by a barrage of lasers, more than 100 of them. Not even supersonic speeds allowed the many clones

to avoid that number of high-velocity projectiles. Both the afterimages and the actual clones alike were shot.

“They hit the original!” Azurite exclaimed.

“What?!”

Azurite pointed at one of the countless Toms.

The Tom wielding claw-like bracers was shot in the head and became particles of light... but then transformed into a fat cat, meowed, and vanished.

“Huh... eh?” Azurite was dumbfounded.

“Sure it wasn’t a clone?” I asked.

“N-No! I was certain that was the real one... huh?”

We looked back at Tom. The afterimages had vanished, and only one of them was left now.

He then became two, and a second later, the one that had been there from the start was turned into swiss cheese by a barrage of lasers.

However, despite seemingly being the original, he became a cat, meowed, and vanished.

Then the Tom that was seemingly a clone began multiplying again.

And so, the Toms were eight once more. They started moving at supersonic speeds again, creating afterimages and making short work of the sentry guns.

“What *is* that?” Azurite exclaimed, utterly flabbergasted by what she was seeing.

I, on the other hand, now understood the true nature of Tom’s ultimate skill.

It didn’t create “clones,” oh no.

It created new “originals.”

From what I could tell, they all shared a single consciousness, but when the “original” housing the consciousness was beaten, it would move to another “original.” Thus, the supposed “original” would become a “clone.”

That ultimate skill couldn’t be countered unless you defeated all eight Toms quickly enough to prevent the remaining ones from multiplying.

This was the power of Grimalkin, the Embryo of the previous duel champion.

“You didn’t know about this, either?” I asked Azurite.

“I only knew that he could create clones... I never saw any of his duels.”

I see. I never saw him fight, either, so I’m pretty shaken right now.

“Few Embryos give their Master as much survivability as this one does,” commented Nemesis.

Yeah.

This also gave me a decent idea of how Figaro had won against him.

At first, he’d focused entirely on defense, bearing Tom’s onslaught until his battle length-proportionate enhancement had given him the power he needed to defeat the Toms before they could multiply again.

And then there was Kashimiya — the third in the rankings. Juliet had told me that he couldn’t beat Tom because of compatibility issues, which probably meant that he had no way to stop him from multiplying again.

And that was exactly why I had no chance against him, either.

“Strange to think that he isn’t a Superior,” I muttered.

I felt Nemesis nod in response and continued to watch Tom clear the room.



Once the room was completely emptied, Tom noticed us, waved, and walked over.

“If it isn’t Ray and... a masked lady I don’t know. Hellooo,” he greeted us.

“Meoww,” Grimalkin joined him. Despite having disappeared many times during the fight, he was back on Tom’s head as though nothing had happened.

“Good job handling them,” I said. “That was an amazing battle.”

“Well, there were lots of them. I had to give it all I haaad!” Tom replied before bending forwards a bit and sighing. “I’m reallllly tired...”

I had no doubt that he was telling the truth, but the way he was bending made it look like he was weighed down by the cat.

“I’ll leave today’s exploration at that and go back to the inn,” he said.

“Ah, it’s safe to explore the room now. There should be no more traps.”

“Eh? Thank you,” I said, slightly confused.

“Thank you,” Azurite joined in. “But shouldn’t you be exploring this place, as well?”

I could see why she was asking that. All Tom had done here was take care of the monsters and traps. He hadn’t looked around for any magic items or anything like that. In fact, he wasn’t even retrieving the remains of the monsters he’d beaten.

“I’ll be fine,” he said. “I don’t need any of thaaat stuff. Do what you want with it.”

“Meoww.”

With those words as his last, Tom casually waved his hand and walked away.

The moment he went behind the corner in the hallway, Nemesis muttered, “What was his purpose here, I wonder...?”

I was curious about that, too, but my top priority right now was the investigation.

We got off of Silver and started exploring the room. Nemesis went back to her human form.

All the machine remains here made it a pain to get around, but this place was much like the room with the crystal.

The most notable feature here was the large painting on one of the sides of the room. Although, it looked less like it was painted and more like it was burnt into the wall.

That painting displayed countless people clashing with a horde of beasts, then another horde of beasts howling atop a place that looked like a castle.

There was some writing under it, but unlike the text you’d find on signs and the like, it wasn’t getting auto-translated.

It seems pretty important, though, I thought.

“Can you read this?” I asked Azurite.

“I can’t.”

If a tian like her couldn’t read it, it meant that this wasn’t written in *Infinite Dendrogram*’s common, but some language they’d used in the pre-ancient civilization.

In that case, all we could do was show it to Dr. Mario.

“Do you have a camera?” I asked. “Polaroid or digital cams would be the best for this.”

“I don’t know what ‘Polaroid’ and ‘digital cams’ are, but I have a magic camera that instantly develops the picture,” she said, as she reached into her inventory and took out an object much like a polaroid camera.

Well, she sure came prepared. It’s clear she’s taking this investigation seriously.

Azurite took a number of pictures and gave me one displaying everything on the wall, including a close-up of the unreadable text.

“You’ll be showing this to the archeologist, I assume?” she asked.

“Yeah. Is that bad?”

“It isn’t... but I will want to hear the translation, as well.”

“Of course,” I nodded as I took the photos.

I couldn’t shake the feeling that Dr. Mario was making Azurite uncomfortable. Yesterday, she’d said that it was strange for an archeologist to be in the area this early. However, he was the only archeologist we had access to, so we had to rely on him if we wanted to know about this text.

“You don’t trust Dr. Mario?” I asked her.

“This is not about trust. I’m merely uncomfortable about involving outsiders. If it was possible, I would make this investigation more confidential... but the kingdom currently has next to no people who know archeology.”

“Really?”

“Yes. My teacher, the Arch Sage, was well-versed in many things, archeology included, but he passed away in the war. His apprentices, too, were lost either in the war or during Gloria’s attack.”

“Ohh...”

According to Liliana, the knight orders had suffered severely in the war, and it looked like the other major groups of the kingdom were no different.

“These ruins are far larger than I anticipated, and there’s a lot of specialized language that’s a challenge to analyze,” said Azurite. “We need outside help to find out what this factory produces.”

“What?” I raised an eyebrow. “But we already know what they make here.”

“...Eh?”

Azurite looked surprised, but it seemed plain to me that we already had enough info to make an educated guess about the nature of this place.

Yesterday, someone had brought Dr. Mario a metal plate as tough as a magic item and an artificial diamond used for lasers.

Additionally, despite presumably protecting this place for two millennia, the machine monsters were functioning without any problems to speak of.

About half of the sentry guns here weren’t working, so it was odd that the monsters we’d fought had been running so smoothly.

Which led me to believe that this place was...

“It’s producing mechanical monsters,” I said. “These ruins are basically a weapon factory.”

What we’d defeated weren’t guards from millennia ago, but newly-produced machines.

“A weapon factory,” Azurite muttered as she put her hand on her forehead and began thinking.

If used well, a weapon factory would surely be a powerful asset to the kingdom. Nothing would increase the country's military strength as greatly as that.

However, there was a problem...

"Ray," she spoke up. "Assuming this place is what you say it is and these machines are the products... there's still one major question that remains unanswered."

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

I knew exactly what she was getting at. It was the most notable thing about these mechanical monsters.

"That doesn't explain why they have unrelated names like 'Teal Wolf' and 'Goblin Warrior,' right?" I asked.

"Exactly."

Normally, monsters had their names displayed above their heads. Golems and the like were no exception.

However, these monsters here were different. There were only two models, but the names above their heads were many, varied, seemingly random, and had little to do with machines.

The only explanation I had for this was the idea that producing these machines required using other monsters as material.

The fact that fur had been sticking out of the machine I'd destroyed in the forest made it likely, but...

"Monsters that are produced like that always end up having names different than their material," said Nemesis.

"Yeah, exactly."

Franklin's creations were a good example of that.

The base monsters had different names than the resulting ones. If this really was a factory that made mechanical monsters from other monsters, there was no reason for the names to stay the same. In fact, I would expect the two models to have their own names, which would be uniform across all units.

Not to mention that, unlike these machines, produced monsters would become light and vanish just like any other monster.

What the hell is this?

"I must say," Nemesis spoke up, "these look much like Hugo's Magingear."

"Well, it was made by the lab coat bastard's clan, but the tech was still Dryfe's, and since Dryfe's tech is based around analyzing the pre-ancient civilization's tech, there's a link there, so... ah!"

A sudden realization made me cut my words short.

Magingears.

Pre-ancient civilization tech.

Silver and replicas.

Reactors and a lack of them.

This factory and the mechanical monsters.

Those keywords came to mind, and everything slotted into place.

The conclusion I came to made me cover my mouth.

"Ray? What's wrong?" asked Nemesis.

"You don't look well," commented Azurite.

So it shows on my face, huh? Of course it does. The conclusion I came to is just that bad.

I hadn't felt this way since entering the basement in Gouz-Maise Gang's hideout.

...Disgusting.

“What did you realize?” asked Nemesis.

“These aren’t monsters at all,” I replied.

My words made her and Azurite tilt their heads in confusion.

Ignoring that, I continued speaking the truth of these ruins. “These things... all the scrap here... is special equipment.”

“Eh?” Azurite muttered as she looked at the only functioning piece of special equipment in this room: Silver.

Nemesis closed her eyes. She was probably thinking about Magingears.

“But what about the names above their heads?” Azurite asked.

“They disappeared because the monsters equipping them died. All that’s left here is the equipment. There’s nothing more to it.”

“So, we were attacked by armed monsters?”

“No. If that was the case, completely different species like Goblin Warriors and Pashi Rabbits would never cooperate. Hell, Tom fought fifty-odd machines in this room. Did you see any infighting between them?”

“...No.”

Exactly.

“Their cooperation when fighting Tom was flawless, like they were commanded by a single will.”

That was the keyword here — “command.” The monsters inside meant nothing.

“Ray, you don’t mean that...” Nemesis muttered and looked at the remains with an astonished expression.

And so, I spoke what they really were: “These things are *special equipment that take control of the user.*”

“?!” Azurite gasped in shock.

I was fully confident I was right.

Not every piece of equipment was good for the user.

The Cursed Bloody Regeneration Armor that I’d uncursed and used before Monochrome’s destroying it was a prime example of that.

“This is cursed special equipment... no... they were designed to be like this,” I muttered.

“Wait. Ray, hold on!” Azurite raised her voice, still unable to fully process what I’d just told her. “Why would anyone make special equipment like that?”

“My Silver is an original Prism Steed,” I said. “He has an engine that produces all the MP he needs to gallop around, so he doesn’t have to drain my MP.”

Based on what Hugo had told me, the pre-ancient civilization’s machines made their own MP. Though Silver was an unofficial prototype or an experimental unit, he still had the engine for it. However, the same couldn’t be said for the replica Prism Steeds.

“Replicas, by contrast, function by using the MP of those riding them. This is probably because of cost. They couldn’t fit all the mass-produced units with the MP engines.”

Original Prism Steeds were amazing pieces of equipment, after all. If the creators could have, they surely would’ve made more than just five of them, and we’d have more of them in the world today. However, most of the ones around were replicas.

“So what about these, then?” I asked.

“...!” Azurite gasped again.

"We've seen dozens of them so far, and they are now scrap on the floor. Do you think they're luxury units with engines, or your common mass-produced models?"

She was dead silent.

"It's pretty obvious that it's the latter. And that's why they need fuel... *living creatures*."

They were clearly great war machines. Not every unit had to be as luxurious as an original Prism Steed. Sometimes quantity produced way greater results than quality.

The fact they could function just fine after taking in weak monsters like Pashi Rabbits and Teal Wolves showed they also had good MP efficiency, as well.

The equipment took something that couldn't be used in battle and turned it into something useful, and there was no arguing that it made them into excellent weapons.

I'm gonna be sick.

"Yesterday, when I ran into the first one of these, it was assaulting Shirley," I said. "However, *it didn't try to kill her*."

It'd fired at me the moment it saw me, but it had treated Shirley differently. It'd attacked the Master, but not the tian.

"It was planning to take her back alive."

"Wait... are you saying that...?!" Azurite raised her voice, the panic in her tone all too apparent.

I nodded and spoke the answer that made me so nauseous.

"To these things, even people are just fuel."

Chapter Seven: Power and Will

About a certain weapon

Prism Persons.

That was the name given to humanoid automata with superhuman abilities.

They were one of the pinnacles of technology — so advanced that even the pre-ancient civilization thought they greatly surpassed the norms of their science.

Many considered them to be the perfect fusion of magic engineering and magic biology, the apex of both form and function.

They possessed humanoid frames of great beauty, intelligence to communicate with mankind, and they behaved like the most disciplined of people.

Their battle prowess, too, was simply phenomenal. They matched Superior Jobs, and sometimes even surpassed them. A Prism Person known as “Diamond Slayer” was said to have defeated the Over Gladiator of their era without suffering a hint of damage.

Prism Persons, much like Prism Steeds, were considered to be some of the greatest things the supreme artisan Flagman had created.

Thus, it was only natural for people to consider mass-producing them.

But of course, doing so meant removing a large number of the functions available to the originals. After all, mass-produced Prism Steeds had to drop their special functions and lose their highly-expensive reactors, making them use the riders’ magic instead.

The Prism Persons were no different. Installing reactors in all of them was impractical, so they had to use other sources of magic. However, unlike Prism Steeds, which were designed to be mounts, Prism

Persons were meant to be autonomous weapons. Turning them into mounts powered by the riders' magic would go against their primary design concept.

Besides discarding the reactors, the mass-produced units also didn't inherit the humanoid, superhuman beauty of the originals, nor did they receive their unique powers.

As a result, the blueprints depicted machines that used the people riding them as their source of magic, were humanoid in design — albeit rough and mechanical — and made up for their lack of special abilities with external weaponry.

In a way, they were much like the Magingears that would come to be used in the Dryfe Imperium two millennia later.

This made them completely unlike the original Prism Persons.

Even Flagman himself was dissatisfied with the blueprints he'd drawn, and the Prism Person mass-production project was halted before a single unit was produced.

That was the reason why, in the future, Dryfe's technology salvaging operations would only result in tank and exoskeleton Magingears. Humanoid mechs would only be invented by Masters.

Still, the invasion of the incarnations forced the ancient people to restart the project. Their fight for humanity's survival needed all the firepower they could get.

They had newer, more powerful weaponry, such as the Prism Dragons, but they were severely lacking in numbers.

Their infantry divisions were annihilated by the inexhaustible Incarnation of Beasts, pressing them into developing a force that, unlike the mass-produced Prism Steeds, could fight on its own.

Thus, they resumed the Prism Person mass-production project and began developing the first units.

Flagman rushed back to their blueprints and quickly began building the “Prism Soldier” auto-production plant.

However, he quickly hit a wall.

According to the blueprints, the mass-produced Prism People had to be controlled by trained Pilots.

However, they had already lost too many soldiers to the incarnations, so they didn’t have enough people qualified to become Prism Soldier magic sources.

This lack of personnel was something that not even a genius like Flagman could solve, so his solution came from another angle — a single thought, both simple and reasonable.

It doesn’t have to be people, does it?

The only reason why Prism Soldiers needed people was their lack of a reactor. They needed Pilots to provide them with magic, and that was all there was to it.

In other words, as long as they had magic, even non-humanoids — monsters — were viable sources.

If they were to capture them and give them no means of control, wild beasts and the like could be used as batteries that powered the machines while their programming did all the fighting.

This realization was a light of hope for Flagman.

But then he ran into another problem.

Specifically, it was the matter of how the program would differentiate between sources of magic and the enemy.

He had the option of leaving a few commanding officers or engineers to control it as they deemed appropriate, but it was likely that they would eventually die in the incarnations’ onslaught. For this system to operate smoothly, they had to make it completely automatic.

Ideally, Flagman wanted to make it so that, as long as at least one plant was active, it would automatically mass-produce Prism Soldiers that would continuously fight the incarnations.

However, mass-produced units weren't capable of processing instructions that were too complex.

Thus, Flagman solved this by using two simple settings.

First, he recorded all the humanoid races living on the continent in his era and made it so the machines saw them as neither hostiles nor magic sources.

The other setting made it so the machines would annihilate anything with a threat ranking of C or above, and use anything D or below as energy sources.

"With this, we'll have soldiers who automatically power themselves while fighting the incarnations and dangerous monsters. They will be mankind's hope for all eternity," Flagman muttered to himself as he finished the auto-production plant.

But he also knew that, were he to activate it right away, the incarnations would surely discover it and destroy it. That was why he made it go into sleep mode and set the plant to produce Prism Soldiers slowly and in secrecy. Then, when certain conditions were met, it'd send its soldiers out to capture more sources and fight the incarnations.

Thus, just like the other ruins, the Prism Soldier plant was left behind to become the hope of future mankind.

Now, the reason why this plant eventually became an error was a major flaw in Flagman's genius design.

Specifically, it was all in the machines' targeting setting.

The ruins had been left behind two millennia ago, and the list of humanoid races was as old as they were.

Naturally, that was more than enough time for tians to start to differ from the list, especially with how heavily the incarnations had altered the environment. For one thing, the amount of atmospheric magic had never been the same since.

Just as people in colder climates gradually evolved to have more body hair, so did tians slightly change to better fit their environment. There was nothing strange about this.

Alas, it just so happened that the primitive program of the Prism Soldiers couldn't understand those minute changes — if a species was even slightly off the humanoid list they were provided with, *it was not human*.

A true Prism Person would've had the intelligence to see the nature of these changes, but the mass-produced Prism Soldiers were too lacking in intelligence.

And so, though built to protect humanity, they now saw them as nothing but hostiles or energy sources.



Prism Rider, Ray Starling

The moment I told Azurite that the machines saw people as nothing but fuel, she turned pale and eyed the metallic remains.

She had come to these ruins hoping to find something that could save the kingdom from its dire state, only to find a factory of murder machines that used people as sources of energy. She had every reason to be shocked.

“If that is true, then this place and the Gouz-Maise Gang are much alike,” commented Nemesis, and I could see exactly what she meant.

To these things, all lifeforms — monster and tian alike — were just a source of energy. That was why they wandered about, gathering creatures they could use as fuel for their brethren.

If I hadn't come on time yesterday, Shirley might've suffered the same fate.

Just imagining that made a cold chill go down my spine.

Then again... for all I knew, some people might've already been turned into fuel.

"I'm gonna be sick," I muttered.

To these machines, people were but tools, and their lives were nothing but fuel. Nemesis was right — they were like Maise, the Lich from the Gouz-Maise Gang.

He, too, had only seen children as materials or money. That was the main reason why this realization disgusted me so much. It was all a bit too reminiscent of those memories I loathed so much.

I sighed and unconsciously looked down at my feet.

"Ah!" I gasped as I saw something with a close link to what I had just been thinking of: the Grudge-Soaked Greaves, Gouz-Maise.

The Gouz-Maise Gang had once been an existence that all of Gideon feared, and even after dying, it had continued to be a major threat as the Revenant Ox-Horse.

These things on my feet were what it had become, and, according to Gardranda — a fellow special reward — they had no will of their own now. They, too, reminded me of that awful time back in the basement.

"But..."

But without these Grudge-Soaked Greaves, I couldn't have won Franklin's Game.

As bad as Gouz-Maise originally had been, it had gone on to become an item that, combined with the pre-ancient civilization's Silver,

could defeat the RSK. Its existence had once been nothing but vile, but there had been a future that it alone could open up.

“Just like the Gouz-Maise Gang, huh...?” I murmured.

The power on these greaves was the same as that Revenant Ox-Horse’s, but what it did was the complete opposite.

Perhaps the same could eventually be said about these ruins?

“Azurite,” I spoke up.

“Ray.” She turned to me, looking somewhat meek.

“Can I give an opinion about this place?”

“...Please do.”

“I think we should stop the factory and break all the machines that are still moving.”

“That... seems to be the only thing we can do here...”

These ruins were far too dangerous. As long as the factory here was active, it would only become more of a threat the more time went by. And that, of course, meant that more and more people would be captured to be used as fuel.

Not to mention that this place worked fast, too. The fact that the monsters inside were alive meant that the machines had started going outside only recently — most likely after the landscape change leading to the discovery of these ruins.

The machines were using some paths to the surface to go outside and start collecting more sources. And the factory had produced this many machines in such a short time. If we left it active, their numbers would grow even larger, perhaps resulting in an all-out invasion of the surface.

We had to stop the production as soon as possible. And then...

"And then you can try to find out how you can put the technology here to good use," I said.

"...Eh?" Azurite voiced her surprise. "We'll use this technology here?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, you're investigating this place from that angle, right?"

"Yes... But the power in these ruins is dangerous and fearsome, no?"

"I know that much. That's why I'm saying that we'll destroy all the active machines and stop the factory, even if we have to break it."

That much was set in stone. I couldn't ignore the man-eating machines here. The aftertaste in my mouth would be way too bad.

"But there's nothing stopping you from searching for ways to use this tech for the kingdom... for the good of the people... right?" I asked.

It was doubtful that the whole "monsters wearing them" thing was an option, and getting tians to use them was just plain wrong, so this would definitely call for some rethinking.

Nevertheless, this place was a treasure trove of pre-ancient civilization tech — a thing that the ancestors of the current tians had left as a hope for the people of the future. There was no way that this place didn't have anything that could be used for good.

Or perhaps that's just what I want to believe, I thought.

"But that is far too dangerous," said Azurite. "We don't know if we can use the technology properly."

I knew full well what she was trying to say.

In fact, a large part of me agreed with her.

This place was seriously dangerous, and perhaps it was best to just blow it all up until there was nothing left.

However...

"Yeah, you can never be sure if you can use any power correctly... but no matter what the power is, *trying* to use it correctly is never a mistake."

"...!" Azurite gasped.

The machines these ruins were making were just sickening, but that didn't mean that this sickening technology couldn't become a key to a better future. We had Gouz-Maise as a great example of that.

"By itself, power isn't good or evil," I said. "I've come to realize that those things only apply to the will of those who wield it. That's why we'll destroy the system — the will — that's running this operation fueled by life, and then the kingdom's will can take the power and decide how to use it."

"Power... and will..." She repeated the keywords.

"Basically, it's all about whether those who use the power are wrong... no, wait... it's all about what they want to do."

She silently looked at me and Nemesis. Then she looked at her own sword, just as she had last night. "The same goes for you, I assume?"

I felt like that "you" included more than just me and Nemesis.

She was probably talking about all Masters and their powers, their Embryos. Masters with wills belonging to Dryfe had used these powers to ravage the kingdom, but there were also Masters who'd used powers of a similar nature to stop them.

Yeah, I guess we're the same in that regard.

"I understand," Azurite said at last as she turned around and walked towards the hallway. "Let us return to the surface. I must talk to the countess... while considering your opinion, of course."

"Yeah!"

We left the room, got on Silver the same way we had to come here, and headed back to the surface.

“Ray,” Azurite muttered from behind me. “Thank you for giving me hope. Both this time... and back then.”

I didn’t really know what she meant by “back then,” but her tone was definitely lighter than before.



Once outside, we went straight to the adventurers’ guild.

We did that so that we could tell them about those constructs, and create two quests — one for the destruction of the machines wandering the surrounding area, and one to get someone to keep watch over those ruins.

Apparently, Azurite held the right to start quests in the name of the kingdom, and because of that, those quests could be put up as “urgent.”

She had a private talk with the top of the Quartierlatin guild, and before long, the quests were available to be picked up.

The wandering machine destruction quest was aimed at Masters. It had no people limit and the reward was great, so the Masters in the guild quickly jumped on it.

The guild’s own, experienced tians were tasked with keeping watch over the ruins.

“One by one, those machines aren’t much for a battle-focused Master with a high-rank job,” I muttered. “And when the machines that gather the fuel are gone, the production of new ones should stop, too. This buys us some time.”

Looks like I won’t have to worry about the machines kidnapping people for the time being, I thought.

Azurite also set up a quest to search the ruins for a path leading to the factory.

The room we'd arrived at was a dead-end, and we hadn't run into any more machines on the way back. Therefore, the factory was probably on a route other than the one we'd taken, or it could only be accessed from another entrance.

To stop the factory, we first had to know where it was.

"I guess all we can do is wait for someone to find it, huh?" I said.

"Indeed," nodded Azurite. "If someone finds the factory tonight, we can send people there to stop it tomorrow morning. We must talk with the countess about this, so let us head there after that happens."

"All right."

Azurite looked far better than she had back in the ruins, which was probably thanks to the fact that she'd created a countermeasure to all that was happening in the ruins, and now felt hopeful about the technology there.

After leaving the adventurers' guild, we went back to the countess's mansion.

This time, I could join the conversation right from the start, and we started out by telling her about the machines in the ruins and how dangerous they were.

"I see," the countess said in response. "What a coincidence. Just today, I was told of odd mechanical constructs wandering the surrounding area. I believe they were the same as the ones you saw in the ruins."

"That means that the unit you said you destroyed yesterday was not the only one to leave the ruins," said Azurite as she faced me.

“Or maybe the few units that were already functional secured enough creatures to activate more units,” I said. “If that’s true, their numbers will just keep increasing until... hold on.”

“Ray?”

As I spoke, I was hit with a realization.

Their numbers were growing because they were securing more fuel.

Their fuel was living creatures. They couldn’t move unless they got MP from a life form.

Which meant that...

“Hey,” I spoke up. “At first, they didn’t have a single creature they could use as fuel, right? So... how was the first unit able to function?”

“Wh—!” Azurite gasped.

It shouldn’t have been able to. However, the reality was that it had. The first unit had been functional, their numbers had increased, and their numbers were still growing.

Did they happen to capture some animal that accidentally wandered into the ruins? Or...

“Maybe there’s a unit that can move on its own?” I pondered.

Like... a unit with a reactor, just like Silver.

“A commander unit, of sorts?” asked Azurite. “Would you assume it exists?”

I was silent, thinking about it. *I would.*

It wouldn’t be surprising if that horde of machines was led by a non-mass-produced leader unit. Which would make stopping the factory far more difficult.

That idea made the mood turn sour.

Munch munch! Crunch crunch!

But Nemesis was just chomping on cookies as if it were none of her business.

“Nemesis...” I muttered disapprovingly.

“H-Hey! We were in the ruins for most of the day, so we didn’t have any lunch!” she argued.

Well, that’s true.

“But wait, we had a light meal at the tea party before we went in, right?”

“Exactly! A *light* meal! That’s not enough for me!”

Man, she always found the strangest times to become the embodiment of appetite.

Also, I couldn’t help but feel that it was starting to happen more often.

“Hee hee,” the countess giggled, clearly amused by our exchange.

Azurite was smiling wryly, too.

“Sorry about my glutton,” I said.

“Glutton’ sounds rude! I am a lady! Call me a ‘gourmand’!”

Ladies. Never. Eat. That much. Ever.

“Oh, no need to apologize,” said the countess. “Surely she only wanted to lighten the mood.”

I sincerely doubt that.

“Y-Yes! That’s exactly it!”

Come on, now.

“I baked those myself,” the countess told her. “How did you like them?”

“They were delicious!” Nemesis smiled wide.

The countess's own cookies, eh? Had she perhaps baked them for the orphans she'd invited today?

"I'll try one, then... wait, there are none left."

The plate that had been full of cookies at the start of our conversation was completely empty now. There weren't any crumbs, either. It was as if the cookies had never been there to begin with.

Nemesis...

She looked away and whistled like she had nothing to do with this.

You're the only suspect, you know?

"We still have some left," said the countess. "Would you like to take them with you?"

"Certainly!" Nemesis instantly replied.

...Leave some for me this time.



The visit had come with an unexpected comedy skit, but we'd told the countess all we needed to. Thus, I was told to go rest at the inn, while the countess and Azurite thought about countermeasures in more detail.

Just like Azurite's private talk with the head of the guild, it was probably something that an outsider like me couldn't hear.

Anyway, Nemesis and I went back to the inn. The place was significantly more empty than yesterday, most likely because a lot of people had gone outside to do the urgent quest. Even the dinnertime cafeteria was relatively free of people.

However, in the lobby next to the cafeteria, there were two notable people who *hadn't* left to do the quest.

One of them was Tom.

From what I could tell, after leaving the ruins, he and Grimalkin had gone to wash away their fatigue in the hot springs before going to eat dinner.

Now, he was relaxing in the massage chair, saying, “Ahhh, this massage chair is basic, but it takes away some of the tiredness from all the hard work I dooo...”

The other person was Veldorbell, the musician I’d met at the countess’s mansion. He, too, was relaxing in the lobby alongside his Embryos.

I asked why he was here, to which he replied that the countess had recommended this place to him.

Incidentally, Tom’s Grimalkin and Veldorbell’s Wind were glaring at each other, completely still, which probably had something to do with the fact that they were both cats.

“Hm?” Shirley made a confused sound. She came to the lobby alongside Lefty and the hostess, bringing tea and snacks. “So many guests are refusing dinner. Did something happen?”

“Dangerous monsters are leaking out of the ruins,” I answered.

“There’s an urgent quest to destroy them, so many are too busy with that.”

“You mean... monsters like the one that attacked me?”

“Yeah, the same kind.”

“That’s kinda scary,” she said, no doubt remembering the events of yesterday.

“No need to worry, young lady,” Lefty said calmly. “The Masters are sure to make short work of them.”

“I’ve gotta say, it’s good that there’s a quest for them nooow,” Tom said, still enjoying the massage chair. “I mean, there are so many of theem.”

I had no idea how to feel about hearing that from the one who'd taken care of all those machines and traps in that room and the path leading to it all by himself. He was the reason why we'd been able to reach that place and figure out the true nature of the ruins, so, in a way, Tom was today's MVP.

"So, lots of people took that quest, huh?" said Shirley as she looked around, noting how empty the inn was.

"Yes," I nodded. "The reward is good, and since the machines don't disappear when they die, many Masters think they can make some serious money selling them. The kingdom's started buying them, too, so... Hm?"

My words reminded me of a question I'd considered back at the ruins.

Nemesis and I had wondered about Tom's reason for going to the ruins. After all, he hadn't even collected the machines he'd destroyed.

He'd come here to prepare himself for his duel with Kashimiya and to make some money, according to what he'd said yesterday. Despite that, he'd left behind the machines he destroyed... the fruits of his fighting. Not to mention that he hadn't even explored that room.

I'm still kinda curious about that.

"Hrmm, machine monsters, you say?" asked Veldorbell. "Were they humanoid, perhaps?"

"Yes," I said.

"Then perhaps they are the same as the one I defeated on my way to Quartierlatin," he said as he reached into his inventory and took out the remains of a machine — the head of the firearm model.

"Yes, this is it," I nodded before raising an eyebrow. "You defeated it?"

Isn't he a musician? As in, a non-battle job?

"Oh, I have my ways. After all, if I couldn't fight, traveling would be out of the question."

Good point, I thought.

"That's the King of Orchestras for youuu," said Tom.

King of Orchestras?

"Hrmm, did you use Reveal?" asked Veldorbell. "I certainly didn't feel it."

"Well, I'm The Lynx, after allll."

"Oh, so you are the one they call 'Monster Cat Mansion.' Allow me to introduce myself, I am Veldorbell, and I'm the King of Orchestras, the Superior Job from the conductor grouping."

"I'm Tom Cat, and I'm The Lynx, the cat-specialized Superior Job. I hope we get allooong."

Sorry, but "cat-specialized Superior Job" tells me nothing, I thought. *His battle style wasn't all that cat-like, was it?*

"Mm-hm, so we have two Superior Jobs here," said Nemesis. "How reassuring."

"Reassuring? What do you mean by that?" asked Veldorbell.

I replied, saying, "Those ruins are producing those dangerous machines as we speak. We need to destroy the ones still active and stop the factory inside. Once we find the route towards it, we'll charge to it as early as tomorrow morning."

"I seeee," said Tom. "So you need people for that, huh? Well, I don't mind joining. Don't have anything better to do, anywaaay."

"Hrmm, I am intrigued by this adventure, as well," said Veldorbell.
"But tomorrow is no good for me."

“You have plans?”

“The children from today’s tea party begged me to come to their orphanage to play again. They said there is a girl who couldn’t come because of an illness. I was told that she truly loves music and would be overjoyed to hear my compositions,” he said with a smile. “Since they value my Embryo’s playing so highly, I see no reason not to answer their calls for an encore.”

“That’s true,” I said. “You should do just that.”

Having a Superior Job like him around would’ve been a huge help, but that promise had to come first.

As we talked about this and that, the hostess, who was giving out tea for the guests in the lobby, joined the conversation, saying, “To think that those ruins are creating such monsters... I hope we don’t have another Edelvalsa on our hands.”

“Edelvalsa?” I raised an eyebrow. I didn’t know that word. It sounded like a noun, but for what?

“It was a monster that appeared about thirty years ago. It was one of those U...something monsters that were very strong. I was still a little girl back then, so I don’t remember it well, but it was called, umm... N... Nay...”

“Nameless Army, Edelvalsa,” Tom helped her out as he blew on his tea to cool it down.

“You know about it?” I asked.

“Yeah. It was a UBM that appeared at the kingdom-imperium border about thirty years ago. Its rank was Mythical, which means that it was the worst kind of monster you could run into... Ouch. Hothothot.”

A Mythical UBM that had appeared thirty years ago...

These days, it wasn't rare for Superiors to beat Mythicals. My very own brother had his Kim-un-Kamuy that proved he'd done just that. However, Superiors hadn't existed thirty years ago. In fact, not a single Master had been around back then. Marie had suggested that there might've been some beta testers that long ago, but if so, they had definitely been few.

A Mythical UBM appearing in a world which held only tians was nothing but a calamity.

"Edelvalsa was a colony-type UBM," Tom continued. "It could use plants, ore — pretty much anything — to create humanoid monsters that would fight for iiiit. The UBM would just continue growing in number until you beat the main bodyyy. I imagine it was a pain to deal with."

"You sure know a lot about this," I said.

It was a UBM from thirty years ago, yet he spoke of it like he'd actually seen it himself.

"Mm-hm. I know someone who knows a lot about UBMs."

Well, B3 has access to Miss Aberration's database, so it wouldn't be surprising if Tom also had a friend with obscure knowledge.

"Yes, that sounds about correct," said the hostess. "Edelvalsa appeared right when the countess's husband and child were heading to the imperium..."

"Eh?" I gasped.

"My knowledge of this is limited to the official announcements and what I read in the paper, but..."

The hostess began telling us about the incident.

It had happened about thirty years ago.

The kingdom's Quartierlatin County and the imperium's Barbaros County were at the border between their countries, and their relationship couldn't have been better.

In fact, back then, Altar and Dryfe were allied, just like Altar and Legendaria. The three western countries were at peace.

Because of this, both countries often sent envoys to the other.

The captain of one particular mission was the husband of Countess Quartierlatin, who was an Altarian diplomat.

One of his official duties was to bring his one-year-old son with him. There was an agreement to bring the Quartierlatin and Barbaros families even closer through marriage, so this was done for an early introduction of the groom.

Some would've questioned bringing a baby on such a long trek, but the path connecting the two countries was lacking in powerful monsters, so safety wasn't a big issue.

In addition, they had the best guard an Altarian could ask for.

His name was Aslan Faldreed, and his job was Sacred Blazer.

He was one of the kingdom's four Superior Jobs at the time, with the other three being the Arch Sage, the Celestial Knight, and the Hierophant (aka High Priestess, but owned by a male).

Originally a vagrant, Aslan's ability, nobility, and loyalty had led to him becoming an important retainer of the king. The fact that he was being sent to protect this mission spoke volumes about how greatly the kingdom valued their relationship with the imperium.

Additionally, Aslan himself volunteered to do this, since the next head of the Barbaros family, The Ram, Ronaldo Barbaros, was his close friend and rival. After arriving at the destination, he planned to have a duel against his friend in one of Barbaros's sparring facilities.

Thus, this was a good journey for everyone involved, and all was looking bright... until they arrived at the buffer zone *and were attacked by a Mythical UBM.*

It wasn't known why the UBM appeared there at that particular moment, or whether it was a coincidence or someone's intention.

Regardless, the Nameless Army, Edelvalsa, attacked the kingdom's mission.

Aslan rushed to the front to protect everyone and downed over a thousand of the doll legion. However, Edelvalsa had several thousands more where that came from.

They were desperately outnumbered. The dolls swarmed over them like a crushing wave. They broke through Aslan's line of defense, and the mission suffered greater damage with every passing moment.

Aslan tried to make his way to the main body, but the army was simply too much for him alone. Right when he began to think that it was only a matter of time before they were overwhelmed, a certain someone from the imperium came to their aid.

It was The Ram, Ronaldo Barbaros.

Upon hearing that his friend and the mission he was defending were in danger, he had rushed to their aid, all by himself.

And so, the two Superior Jobs faced the imposing Mythical UBM.

"...And?" I asked. "What happened then?"

"By the time Barbaros County soldiers arrived, everything was over," said the hostess. "Edelvalsa was defeated, but both Aslan and Ronaldo were dead. And, according to Dryfe's investigation reports, everyone in the mission was gone."

So it was a draw, huh?

During the tea party, the countess had told me about her husband dying and her son going missing, but I never would've thought that a Mythical UBM was involved in that.

"Hmm?" Veldorbell tilted his head. "Did you say that Edelvalsa used dolls?"

"Yeeep," said Tom. "It was a UBM that created dolls and used them to fiiight."

"I see. That's almost like... but it's been thirty years... it's impossible."

"What's impossible?" I asked.

He made a wry grin and replied, "In Dryfe, there is a tian who uses a special reward to create dolls and wield them in battle. I found it curious how similar the powers seem. But the man is still quite young, so it's simply impossible that he became the MVP in a Mythical UBM fight a whole thirty years ago. He must've gotten it from another UBM."

"Ohh, well, there are UBMs with similar powers," said Tom. "Special rewards that make monsters and items aren't that rarrre."

And with that as the conclusion, we stopped talking about the subject.

...However, for some reason, I couldn't help but feel that I was overlooking something really important.



After the hostess finished telling us about Edelvalsa, everyone in the lobby retired to their rooms.

Everyone besides *me*, anyway. I stayed behind and examined the lobby's bookcase for more info about the incident, but honestly, I had no luck.

“That is not the sort of reading you keep in a lobby,” said Nemesis.
“You might have better luck in the local library.”

“Good point.”

Libraries were probably closed at this time of day, and I’d be busy with the ruins tomorrow, so I probably couldn’t dedicate any time to look this up. Reluctantly, I returned the book in my hand back into the case.

“Hm?” I raised an eyebrow as another book caught my eye. “*The Legend of the Sacred King?*”

It was clearly a children’s picture book. The reason why it stood out for me was the word “Sacred” in the title — it reminded me of the Sacred Blazer from the hostess’s story.

I took it in hand. The cover displayed a cutesy, distorted character holding a blue sword... which reminded me Azurite’s.

“What’s this?” I muttered.

“Hm?” Nemesis looked at the book. “I’m fairly certain that is the most popular picture book in the country. As far as I know, it’s based on a true story. I saw it in Gideon, once.”

“...Huh? You did?”

“Yes, when I was out eating by myself.”

...Oh yeah, yesterday wasn’t the only time she’s gone on an eating spree, I thought.

Anyway, her words intrigued me.

I could still remember how shocked Liliana had been when I hadn’t recognized Elizabeth. Maybe I could prevent similar incidents from happening by finding out more things that were common knowledge here in Altar.

I opened the picture book and began reading it.

It went as follows...



Hundreds of years ago, the plains in the west of the continent were home to many countries.

They were almost always at war, and it wasn't rare for nations to collapse or for new ones to appear.

One day, a fearsome creature called simply "The Evil" appeared in those lands.

The Evil had thousands of minions it used to ravage the warring countries.

They tried to fight back, but no nation could match it, let alone defeat it.

That was when a certain king rose up to face it.

He was the young ruler of a small, newly-built kingdom.

The Evil had already destroyed many larger, more powerful countries, and normally, the young king wouldn't have stood a chance.

However, the young king wasn't normal.

He was but a mere shepherd until he happened to dig up a certain sword.

The blade was like no other. It was a sacred weapon with the mysterious power to cut through anything.

Upon taking it, the young shepherd gained a special job and supreme power to go with it.

He soon quit the shepherd's life to become an adventurer.

Wandering the land, he helped countless people and sometimes even became a war hero.

Eventually, he was surrounded by a party of comrades. More and more people flocked to him, and he soon became a king.

Indeed, the king of the small, young country was none other than the strongest hero of all — the Sacred King.

And so, he and his comrades challenged The Evil.

They had to face hordes of minions and harsh trials, but he prevailed, and eventually, The Evil was struck down.

Countless people extolled him, and the Sacred King, still worn out and crying, accepted their praise.

The kings of the many warring countries even asked him to become their king, and he didn't hesitate to agree.

He then erected his royal capital over the land where he defeated The Evil, and named his new, powerful country after the blade that has been with him on all of his adventures.

Thus began the history of the Kingdom of "Altar."



The book had a surprisingly hefty number of pages, and going through them took me longer than I would have expected.

The lobby was silent. The only sounds were those of the turning pages and of Nemesis eating the tea snacks.

She was eating silently, most likely to not disturb my reading. I appreciated her consideration, but... couldn't she just *not eat anything*?

Anyway, I more or less understood what the book was about. It read like a fantasy work or a myth, but I felt there was more to it.

Shu had told me that *Infinite Dendrogram* had an actual history.

It had either been set up that way, or it had been woven using time acceleration way above the 3x we had right now. Personally, I felt that the latter was a lot more likely.

Take the hostess's story, for example. Listening to her, I could just *sense* that she had been alive back then.

The history of *Infinite Dendrogram* simply had to have been woven by tians — no two ways about it.

The same surely applied to the story in the picture book.

There had once been a Sacred King — a Superior Job, surely — wandering the land as an adventurer until fighting and defeating The Evil — another SJ. This had directly led to the creation of the country I belonged to, the Kingdom of Altar.

It was the nation's origin story, and it made sense for it to be Altar's most well-known. But... there was one thing I didn't quite understand.

“...Why was he crying?”

After defeating The Evil, Sacred King had begun to shed tears.

Some might interpret that he was crying out of relief or accomplishment, but I felt that wasn't quite right. I wasn't really sure why, though.

Once I was done pondering the story, I left the lobby and began walking around the inn, just like yesterday.

My brain was becoming a huge mess, thanks to all the events and the info I'd gathered these past few days, so I needed a light change of pace.

I was by myself. It was girls' hour at the baths, so Nemesis was off to take a dip in the hot spring.

It felt like I was taking advantage of the fact she wasn't here, but I was walking around while eating my portion of the countess's cookies. They had a gentle taste. I liked them, though in a completely different way than I enjoyed Shu's stuff.

As I walked around, I eventually chanced upon Dr. Mario, sitting on a wooden bench and looking down at Quartierlatin.

"Hm?" I murmured.

It was already pretty dark outside, so I couldn't see his expression well enough to read it.

"Ohh, young Ray," he said, noticing me. "*Buonasera!* How you say, uh... good evening!"

"Good evening, Dr. Mario."

"They, uh... the cookies! They seem *molto delizioso*," he said as he looked at the snacks I was eating.

"Want some?" I asked and extended the bag to him.

"Ooh, *grazie*," he said as he took one and bit into it. "What a gentle taste. Were these made by the hostess or young Shirley?"

"Uh, no, these are the countess's cookies. She gave me some when we stopped by to talk about the ruins."

I was saying nothing but the truth.

However, for some reason, it made Dr. Mario gasp and lose his words.

It didn't seem like mere surprise, either. There were some feelings there that I couldn't quite understand.

He muttered something I didn't hear well. "Th... So *this* is how they taste..."



“Dr. Mario?” I spoke up.

“Ah...! *Che sorpresa!* Oh my, what a surprise! These-a are-a made by the countess herself!? I thought my heart would stop!”

I could understand how he felt, but I did find his reaction a bit... excessive.

“I must say, everyone is really busy tonight,” he went on, changing the subject. “Not many are coming to have their things appraised, so I was just walking around and enjoying the scenery. *Che bella...*”

“Well, there’s been some new info about the ruins,” I said.

“Oh, I’ve heard. It turned out to be a dangerous place, hasn’t it? *Molto pericoloso.*”

I don’t mean to sound like Azurite, but man, he’s really up to date.

“Oh, right,” I said, then reached into my inventory and took out the photos of the painting. “While exploring the ruins today, we found a painting with some writing we couldn’t read. Can you read the text on this?”

“Hmm. *Un minuto.* Give me a moment,” he said as he took out a lantern from his inventory and lit up our surroundings.

Yeah, you can’t really read in this darkness.

“Let’s see here... Hmm...”

Dr. Mario took off his glasses, illuminated the text, and began reading it. Once again, I couldn’t help but feel that his eye color was much like the countess’s.

“You can read without your glasses?” I asked.

“Ah, *si,*” he replied. “In fact, they-a get in the way whenever I try to read something too close.”

So they’re not for nearsightedness, huh?

"I've read it. Here's what it says," he said, then began reading the text aloud. "The day the Incarnation of Beasts devastated our four infantry divisions is still fresh in my mind. It overwhelmed the horizon, and we matched it in neither quantity nor quality. Are we finally lost? Nay — it is not over yet. There is still hope. Here, within this facility, we will complete the... mass-production of the Prism Soldiers, and one day defeat the countless Incarnations of Beasts. With that oath in my heart, I chose to depict our defeat."

His voice was fluent, and there was no sign of his usual speech quirks.

"That is what the painting says," he concluded. "It is a sort of monument."

"One depicting their defeat, huh?" I muttered.

Ieyasu Tokugawa had left a picture of himself to commemorate his defeat against Shingen Takeda in the Battle of Mikatagahara, so this wasn't all that odd.

What *was* odd, however...

"Countless Incarnations of Beasts'...?" I muttered.

"Oh? Anything wrong with that?"

"Well, I just felt that the number has grown a bit since my friend told me about them," I said, as I remembered Hugo's words from the Gouz-Maise Gang's hideout. "He said that the pre-ancient civilization was so scientifically advanced that the people became arrogant and incurred the wrath of some god and his thirteen servants, who then went on to destroy them all."

Then, yesterday, B3 had told me that the *ancient* civilization had disappeared at about the same time, so I was pretty lost about the history of it all.

“Oh, that’s just the mainstream interpretation,” said Dr. Mario. “It involves elements from the religions that came afterwards. That’s what a lot of the post-collapse texts say about these events.”

“Religions?”

“Yes. Uh, *si*. Speaking of which, do you know what the kingdom’s religion is about?”

“About healing people using Priest powers. It’s built around the job, right?”

“Yes. It’s assumed that there were god-worshiping religions prior to the collapse, but now, it’s believed that they either don’t exist or are exclusively gods of retribution. Besides that, there’s also the ‘The One’ series of jobs.”

I could understand the idea that gods didn’t exist and the thing about “The One” jobs, but...

“Gods of retribution?” I asked.

“*Si, si!* Like you mentioned, many believe that the destruction of the pre-ancient civilization was divine punishment — that-a it was a tale of retribution.”

I was silent.

Hugo had mentioned that countries besides Dryfe and Granvaloa purposely avoided technology to avoid incurring the gods’ divine wrath again. Mind you, the kingdom was also dabbling in it to get out of their dire situation.

Anyway, gods of retribution, huh...? I pondered that. Nemesis is based on one, isn't she?

“But again, that-a is the religious take on it,” Dr. Mario continued. “Reading historical documents written during the collapse itself gives you a, how you say... different perspective. Have you heard that both

the pre-ancient and the ancient civilization collapsed at the same time?”

“I did,” I nodded.

“According to the documents from that time, the two civilizations in question developed on different continents.”

Different... continents?

“There’s another continent?” I asked him.

“There *was* another continent, rather. It somehow sunk, leaving only a solo flying ship... and that’s what we call the ‘ancient civilization.’ The texts often mention an ‘Extra-Continental Vessel,’ you see.”

“‘Extra-Continental Vessel’...” I murmured. A continent had vanished, and all that had remained of it was a single ship...

“They arrived at this continent, but the prosperous civilization that was already here didn’t accept them. In fact, the countries at the east of the continent began attacking the vessel for its technology, which sparked a war between it and the entire continent. Countries in the west — the Zweier Imperium and the like — must have been truly bothered by this.”

So it was an unfortunate clash between civilizations from across the sea, huh? That kinda stuff happened all the time back on Earth.

“Of course, the ancient civilization retaliated,” Dr. Mario continued. “Their numbers were low, but they had these powerful creatures called ‘Incarnations.’”

“How powerful, exactly?”

“Absurdly. If the texts are true, they were as strong as — if not stronger than — Gloria. *Si*, I mean *that* Gloria.”

He was obviously talking about the SUBM, Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria. It was the strongest monster the kingdom had ever faced. Beating it

had required the combined powers of Shu, Figaro, Miss Aberration, and her Lunar Society. Shu had been the only one left standing when it was all over, which said everything you needed to know about the thing's fearsomeness.

"The Incarnations are said to have been like UBMs or Embryos in that they wielded various unique powers," he said.

Then he went on to describe those unique powers.

One could blot out the Sun with the weapons it pulled out of empty space.

Another was a beast that could multiply and bury the horizon in itself.

Another could consume countless boats along with the very sea they were in.

Another was an orb-like entity that could use thousands of unknown powers.

The ancient civilization's ship had contained these beings with extraordinary powers. The Incarnation of Beasts depicted in the portrait was one of them. The Incarnations numbered thirteen... fourteen if you included their so-called "god," the Extra-Continental Vessel.

It seemed like a meager number, yet it had been enough to crush the entire continent.

"The pre-ancient civilization stood no chance. It collapsed in no time," Dr. Mario continued. "And that's the reason why we have no details about what happened to the ancient civilization. It seems to have just... disappeared after the clash. Both of them were gone, and that's it."

Thus, he ended his history lesson.

It gave me a lot to think about, answered a few of my questions... and gave me a bunch of new ones, like, "If the ancient civilization was so powerful, why didn't they contact the pre-ancient civilization earlier?"

With all the power of the Extra-Continental Vessel and the Incarnations, crossing the sea should've been child's play.

"A keen observation," Dr. Mario said. "Many scholars argue this, as well. The fact that there was only one vessel leads many to assume they had some obscure, yet powerful, reasons for that — perhaps religious, perhaps geopolitical. We can't know for sure unless we discover some ancient civilization ruins or something, but all their civilization had was a ship, so all we ever find are pre-ancient ones. Still, I do hear that Granvaloa is exploring the sea floor for the continent that sunk."

"Do you think they'll find it?" I asked.

"Who knows? There should be traces of it somewhere, if you ask me. After all, if it didn't exist, where else could they have come from?"

Well, I can't argue with that, I thought. But wait, he said the pre-ancient civilization's ship was flying, right? Then... couldn't it have come from outer space...?

...Nah, there's no way.

Thinking of this reminded me of Franklin's words from the Pandemonium:

"Anyone who thinks this is *just a game* is either retarded or a child who believes everything he's told."

"I have no idea what all of this actually is. I'd assume it's the human experimentation phase for the creation of a nation... no, world-wide virtual reality, but..."

Even if this world was aligned with his words, the devs couldn't have made this world extend all the way out to far space. There was just no point in having done that.

He'd also said something else back then... What was it, again...?

"I have a question for you, as well," Dr. Mario said. "May I?"

"Sure. What do you want to know?"

"Do you know anything about the Prism Soldiers mentioned here?"

"We saw some machine-armor constructs both in and out the ruins. They're set to capture monsters and tians and use them as fuel. Pretty sure it's those things."

"Hmm... Autonomous weapons that use creatures as pseudo MP tanks, eh?" he pondered, looking disturbed.

"Hm?" Is it just me, has he been acting a little different for most of this conversation?

"They-a sound a lot like Dryfe's Magingears," he spoke again, his demeanor back to normal. "Well-a, those-a don't have autopilot systems, but still."

"Yeah. The system is dangerous, though. We'll destroy all the running units and stop the factory as early as tomorrow morning."

"Si, si!" I've heard the guild is working on it. How unfortunate. *Che sfortuna.* At least everyone's gained-a something from this," he beamed.

Dr. Mario still had his glasses off. The lantern was lighting up his face, giving me a good look of the tired look in his blue eyes. Upon closer inspection, I noticed that the color in one eye was slightly different, but not enough to stray from "blue."

My gaze made him curious. "*Qualcosa non va?* What's the matter?"

"Do you have Altarian noble blood?" I went ahead and asked him.

“Why would you assume that?”

“Countess Quartierlatin has eye color that’s much like yours. She said it runs in her family.”

She was also heterochromic — her right eye was blue, while left was green.

Azurite had said she also had Quartierlatin blood. Her eyes were much like the countess’s right, and the same could be said about Dr. Mario.

“I understand,” he nodded. “*Si*, it’s true — I have Altarian noble blood. And I’ve been told-a that some of it is Quartierlatin. Though my generation has already lost the, ah... how you say? Status.”

“So... you have Altarian nobility in your ancestry, but the family split, and your branch isn’t noble anymore?”

“*Si*.”

That explained his visit to the countess’s mansion today. He must’ve been curious about his ancestors’ home. The words he’d said as he left also made more sense now.

...Still, something didn’t feel right.

His reaction to the cookie was still on my mind, too.

“I’m quite sure I’d find being a noble to be uncomfortable, in any case,” he said. “I very much prefer field work like this — it takes away the weariness from desk work.”

“Desk work?”

“Yes. By that, I mean the nonstop glaring at draft budgets, applications... things like that. I’m far better suited to act on my own... I find that being important is tiring.”

“Is that so?”

“It is.”

The way he put it made it likely he was a professor or a director in some academy somewhere. And again, I couldn’t help but notice his speech slip.

That reminded me that he hadn’t told me where he was from.

I had a rough idea, though, so I just went ahead and asked.

“You’re from Dryfe, aren’t you?”

Chapter Eight: Freedom

Prism Rider, Ray Starling

Dr. Mario answered my question with another one. “How do you know that?”

He didn’t pretend I was wrong or try to silence me — he just stared at me with his blue eyes, curious about what had given it away.

“I’ve had a hunch since our talk yesterday,” I said.

“Yesterday?”

“You knew about Jade, didn’t you? They found that Prism Steed in Dryfe. I know someone who knows a lot about stuff like that. Just yesterday, she told me about the Prism Steeds she’d heard of, and Jade wasn’t among them. Someone who knew about it before she did has to have strong ties to the place where it was found.”

“There’s more than that, surely,” he said.

“Yes,” I nodded. “These days, the only countries looking into the pre-ancient civilization are Dryfe and Granvaloa, right? Well, you said your research involves official desk work, so it’s pretty likely that you’re from either of those places.”

That was two reasons out of the way, and I also had a third.

“You also said that you have Altarian noble blood. Altar and Dryfe might be at war right now, but I hear they used to be great allies. Consider that, and it’s not all that weird that a Dryfean has Altarian nobility in his ancestry.”

I also had another reason I didn’t feel like saying out loud. Azurite was extremely wary of him — a mere scholar. And she was an operative working for someone in the kingdom’s upper echelon.

As such, she might be acting with the assumption that Dryfe, too, had sent someone to investigate the ruins.

“A+,” he said. “Your conjecture is correct.”

Can't say I expected to be graded, but okay.

“I certainly am from Dryfe,” he continued. “I came here to investigate the ruins. Whatever is hidden inside could have a great impact on our country.”

“And...? What’s the conclusion?”

“The imperium will surely deem the Prism Soldiers unnecessary.” He showed no intention of trying to hide Dryfe’s plans from me.

“Why?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Because we already have something similar. I know you’re well-acquainted with Mr. Franklin and his Triangle of Wisdom. Surely you’ve heard of their Marshal IIs.”

“Ah.”

“Of course, Prism Soldiers have the autopilot system. That is a great advantage, but in the current climate, it will only provoke us more enemies. Acquiring the system would be time-consuming, not to mention that we would have to modify it, as well. The pre-ancient civilization’s programs are quite unlike ours, you see. We won’t manufacture decent amounts of the machines unless we port it, so it’s best to rely solely on the Marshal IIs we already have.”

So, they wouldn’t see any need for the Prism Soldiers because they were much like Dryfe’s current war machines.

“What if the kingdom gets them?” I asked. “Wouldn’t it be bad for you if we fixed the autopilot system?”

“The kingdom knows nothing of technology. How many years would that take them?”

“...Good point.”

So Dryfe assumed the war would be over and the kingdom would be annexed before it could pull that off. Then, after things settled down, they would take over the project and take their time reprogramming the system themselves.

"To Dryfe, these ruins would only matter if there were technology we didn't know anything about or if they contained a finished weapon we couldn't afford to let fall into the kingdom's hands. Especially not before the war. This place has no significance to us otherwise. Do you understand, *young lady*?" He turned away from me and looked into the darkness some distance ahead.

"Truth Discernment tells me you speak the truth," the shadows replied in a familiar voice.

"Azurite..." I said, surprised. I had no idea she'd even returned from the mansion, let alone that she was right here.

"Truth Discernment makes this really simple, young lady," said Dr. Mario, nodding. "Or should I say 'Miss Altarian Spy'? Or perhaps, 'the kingdom's—'"

"And what of you?" Azurite cut his words short. "You're not a scholar, are you?"

In a split-second, Azurite closed in on him and swung her blade so fast I couldn't follow it.

"Gh..!" I clenched my teeth as I pictured Dr. Mario being cleaved in half.

My imagination was completely off the mark, though — he jumped backwards and evaded it.

Standing at a safe distance, he looked directly at us. His blue eyes contained a powerful glare. It felt as menacing as Shu or Figaro when they were serious.

"That was very violent of you. *Molto violento*," he said.

“Perhaps,” Azurite agreed. “Now, if I may ask... how did a mere scholar dodge my blow?”

Oh, so that was a preemptive attack to test Dr. Mario’s identity and... WAIT, NO, HOLD ON!

“Whoa whoa whoa! Did you think this through?! What if he’d been the real deal?!” I yelled. *He would’ve been split in half!*

“No need to worry,” she said. “This blade of mine cannot cut now. Unless I aimed for his head, he’d have only ended up with a few crushed bones.”

“Goddamn, you’re such a meathead!”

Not as bad as Figaro, though! That guy’d probably just shove a chain into his face and turn his head into mush!

“You’re one of Dryfe’s special soldiers, I assume?” Azurite asked Dr. Mario.

“Special soldiers?” I repeated. I wasn’t sure I understood what she meant.

“Dryfe’s Special Mission Task Force, often called just ‘special soldiers,’” she explained. “It’s a group comprised entirely of fully-trained battle jobs or Superior Jobs, all specialized in single warfare... or infiltration, like what we have here.”

A group of maxed-out high-ranks and Superior Jobs? I guess they’re like Dryfe’s version of the Royal Guard before their post-war decline.

Dr. Mario nodded. “*Si.* That is correct.”

“‘Mario’ isn’t your real name, I assume?” I asked. “Also, if you ask me, that manner of speech stands out far too much for an infiltration. Is there something else you’re hiding that makes it part of your camouflage?”

"You aren't wrong..." Dr. Mario slowly nodded. "Except about one thing — I really am a scholar with a doctorate in archeology. Mario may not be my real name, but it *is* my name as a scholar."

So even if it wasn't his real name, he was still Dr. Mario.

"Anyway, I've been found out, so I guess this is it... Oh, before I forget..."

He took something out and threw it to me.

As I caught it, it made a hard jingling sound.

"What's this?" I asked.

"The payment for my stay here. Could you give it to the hostess? Oh, and please tell her that the food was delicious and the hot spring felt amazing. I could feel my exhaustion just... fade away."

"...Okay."

He was one of Dryfe's special soldiers and he'd infiltrated Altar, but... he really didn't seem like a bad guy.

"What if that'd been a bomb? You'd be one-armed again," commented Azurite.

"Ah." I hadn't even considered that.

"You're easy to fool, aren't you?"

"No I'm not. Sure, I had a secret player killer in my party, didn't know my brother was the KoD until the thing at Gideon, and drank the drug-slime mixture Franklin gave me, but that's it, really."

"...Let me rephrase. You are *absurdly* easy to fool. Such a simple man." She looked at me with an indefinable expression.

Dr. Mario watched our exchange with a friendly smile, then said, "It's a shame, but I must take my leave now."

"You truly believe you can escape?" Azurite pointed her blade at him.

"My dear. I already have," he replied, and a split-second later he vanished, leaving behind only a small bird.

"Wha—?!" Azurite exclaimed.

I gasped. "That's..."

I recognized the creature. The bird was a monster created by Franklin. It was designed for Castling — a skill that switched the position of the user and the target monster. Gideon's Masters often called it "Chimaera Wing."

"Well, he's a Dryfean soldier," I murmured. "No surprise that he has access to Franklin's stuff."

Castling couldn't have taken him too far, but the man had moved fast enough to dodge Azurite's blade. Catching up to him would be a challenge, to put it lightly.

"Might as well assume we lost him," Azurite sighed. "He's a special soldier. He might have prepared something for us in the ruins or its surroundings. We should urgently hire someone to investigate."

"You think he... or Dryfe, rather... will do something there?"

"Yes, I do. In fact, I came here exactly *because* I assumed Dryfe will make a move."

"Huh?"

I didn't really understand that. I figured she'd known Dryfe would make a move, but I hadn't thought she was here *because* of that. What did that mean?

"That aside," she sighed again, "don't you think you showed him a bit too much? He is a Dryfean special soldier. The portrait from the ruins

is one thing, but he could've assaulted you just for your Prism Steed."

"Well, I was told that all original owners were at risk of being attacked for them."

Even B3 would've attacked me if she'd been an active PK and if I hadn't been her friend.

"I'll run into people gunning for Silver sooner or later," I said.

"Besides, he analyzed Silver for me. My gratitude for that outweighs the risks."

"Is that how it works?"

"In my mind, anyway. Also, I know he's from Dryfe and all, but he really doesn't seem like a bad guy."

He hadn't hesitated to teach me, an enemy Master, about the pre-ancient civilization. He could easily have lied, but Azurite had confirmed that he hadn't.

Enemy soldier or not, the man seemed cordial and honest — qualities you rarely found in bad people.

"You really *are* simple," Azurite grinned wryly. "But I have friends in the imperium, as well, so I can't deny those words."

"You have friends in Dryfe?" I asked.

"Yes. Our countries used to be allied, after all. I was a transfer student there, and..." She gained a nostalgic look and fell silent. "Oh, this is no time to talk about the past."

True, we went off on a tangent.

"Back to the matter at hand..." she said. "According to Truth Discernment, he didn't speak a single lie, but we should still be cautious."

“Speaking of which, how long were listening to us?” I asked. “You make it sound like you were there from the start.”

“That’s because I was. I tried to call out to you, but you began speaking to him before I could.”

I had no idea she was there! I thought, somewhat surprised.

“Again, he didn’t lie... but his manner of speech was off in more than just quirkiness. It was technical, designed to conceal the truth without saying a lie. Most army men know how to speak like that. Special soldiers doubly so.”

“Yeah. I also feel that he wasn’t lying, but it did seem like he was hiding something.”

It had to be related to the portrait — something hadn’t felt right about the way he was talking about it.

“As for what it is...” I said, pondering.

He’d claimed, without lying, that Dryfe had no need for Prism Soldiers. However, that was still only Dr. Mario’s own take on it. We couldn’t rule out the possibility that Dryfe would come for them anyway.

Besides, even if that didn’t happen...

“These ruins might contain more than just the Prism Soldiers,” I said.



Quartierlatin, mountain

“So there was no point in trying to fool them, huh?” the man named Dr. Mario muttered. Thanks to Castling and his own two feet, he was now a fair distance away from the youngsters he’d just talked to. He wasn’t using his speech quirks anymore — this was his natural mode of speaking. “Knowing them, they’ve probably figured out what I was hiding.”

He was speaking about what he'd seen in Ray's photos.

There was a part of the text that he hadn't read aloud:

"Here, within this facility, we will complete the *anti-incarnation superweapon*, *Acra-Vesta*, and the mass-production of the Prism Soldiers, and one day defeat the countless Incarnations of Beasts."

The part he'd kept secret spoke of a weapon that would make the Prism Soldiers pale.

It wasn't news to him, though. He'd already concluded that the ruins contained a supreme weapon based solely on the objects the other explorers had brought him.

"A pre-ancient civilization superweapon..." he murmured. "We might be dealing with something as powerful as the Imperstand... or perhaps something greater."

He heaved a heavy sigh, both because he had to deal with something like this and because ignoring it wasn't an option.

"I can't let it end up in the kingdom's hands... the imperium would suffer if I did."

The special soldier looked at the mountain hiding the ruins. His eyes were bright blue, but his glare did nothing to complement the vividness.

Ray might have felt that he looked tired, but that was an understatement — the eyes were downright devoid of the spark of life.

He reached into his inventory, took out a magic comms item, and connected to a certain number. "Logan," he said. "Are you near?"

"Yeah. I'm in the nearby mountains. You?"

It was Hell General, Logan Goddhart. He was his collaborator in this operation. The only one, in fact. But that mattered little, for he was sole, *but many*.

“They found me out,” Dr. Mario said.

“Now, listen here...!”

“Easy there. They only figured out that I’m a special soldier. They still don’t know who I really am.”

“They ought to know that you’re the only special soldier who backed the current imperator and survived the civil war for the throne! Then again, Altar’s idiots don’t know shit about Dryfe’s internal affairs.”

“The operation starts in the morning, just as planned. Our goal is to either capture or destroy the superweapon in the ruins, Acra-Vesta.”

“Understood. But why aren’t we doing a night assault? My devils can see in the dark.”

“Not even the kingdom knows where Acra-Vesta’s stored yet... and I need some time to prepare.”

“...Oh yeah, that.”

“Mm-hm, I need more Edelvalsa marionettes. I brought some with me, but these numbers won’t do. If I use Marionette Platoon Creation right now, I should have a thousand by morning. That’s the maximum I can control at the same time. You go ahead and create your Demi-Dragon-class devils — at least two thousand of them.”

“That’s more than we originally planned...”

“Well, the plans have changed. We didn’t know about the Prism Soldiers in the ruins, or that Altar’s The Lynx and the Unbreakable were here, too. It’s necessary to be a bit excessive.”

The Hell General was silent. *I alone am already a bit excessive, to be honest*, he thought. *The second in Altar's duel rankings? Some promising noob? A bunch of machines? They're nothing to me.*

"Anyway, summon more than planned. Besides that, the plan is the same. I'll go secure the technology while you keep Altar's forces occupied."

"All right." Logan didn't speak his thoughts and simply agreed. "I'll respect your decision and accept this quest, Field Marshal Gifted Barbaros."



Prism Rider, Ray Starling

The Prism Soldiers might not be the only kind of weapon in the ruins. Even if the constructs were of no use to Dryfe, the spies from Dryfe were bound to make a move if they were interested in the other thing.

We rushed to use comms magic and warn the countess and the guild that the imperium might do something. Good thing Azurite had taken a guild comms item the last time we'd gone there.

"There's one good thing about Dryfe's involvement in this," said Azurite. "If they attack, it will confirm that the second weapon truly does exist. We certainly won't overlook the far greater danger these ruins hold."

I shrugged. *That's one way to look at it.*

"But man, this escalated quickly," I muttered.

At first, it had just been the Prism Soldier factory, and now we also had some other weapon and Dryfe. I had a feeling that this whole thing might turn out to be even more trouble than Franklin's Game.

Still... no matter what came, I'd face it head-on.

"Dr. Mario knows that we're stopping the ruins tomorrow," I said.
"Assuming Dryfe attacks, when do you think it'll happen?"

Would they come to take the weapon before or after the Prism
Soldiers were all shut down? Or would they wait for the actual war?
All cases seemed likely.

"I haven't heard of any movements from Dryfe's army," said Azurite.
"If they attack sometime around the deactivation, it's bound to be a
blitzkrieg with a select few."

"A small, handpicked force, huh?"

"Yes. Special soldiers like that 'Mario' person, or Masters who excel
at battle."

That reminded me of what Franklin and Hugo had done in Gideon,
but this wouldn't be anything like it. Back then, they'd used The
Clash of the Superiors and Cyco's compatibility with Gideon's
Masters to declaw the kingdom's forces.

This time, they had no means of doing anything like that, so they'd
likely use pure power.

"The numbers would be low, though, surely," added Azurite. "These
ruins were discovered a mere three days ago. They haven't had the
time to prepare in the way they did in Gideon."

"Even Masters who could pull something like that off are few and far
between, yeah," I said.

Of course, the same could be said for us. The only Masters here were
the few who'd come to explore the ruins and the ones who had
Quartierlatin as their main haunt.

If Dryfe did what they'd done in Gideon and brought a Superior, the
only one who'd stand a chance would be Tom, our previous duel
champion.

Or maybe...

"Regardless, we must be alert," Azurite said.

"Yeah. How many Masters do we have?"

"Well, there are the ones who took the quest to stop the ruins, but..." Azurite fell silent mid-sentence.

I knew exactly what she *didn't* want to say.

Yesterday, she'd said that she was against using Masters in war. She would tolerate our help in exploring the ruins and stopping the factory, but she didn't want to force us into a direct clash with Dryfe.

This was like a pre-war skirmish. She probably thought we had no place in it.

"The other tian fighters and I will stand to defend," she proclaimed.
"You join the other Masters and stop the ruins."

The gravity of the situation clashed with her line of thinking, causing anguish you could almost hear in her tone.

Still, I couldn't agree.

"No," I said. "I'll stay on the surface and fight Dryfe's Masters."

"Ray!" she exclaimed judgmentally.

I didn't give in. "Didn't I tell you that Masters would come to help Altar when it needed them?"

"...You did."

"And I also said I'd be one of them. So yeah, I'm fighting Dryfe's Masters tomorrow, and that's final."

I was choosing to fight, just as I'd said I would.

"But that's *my* role! I thank you for your help with the investigation, but you Masters mustn't take part in—!"

“Speak up.”

“...Eh?”

I knew I had to fight, but I didn’t know why Azurite was so against it. I needed to find out her reasons before the battle began.

“Why are you against us Masters joining the war effort? Give me a reason. Tell me your feelings.”

“M-My feelings?”

“Why don’t you want us in the war?”

I couldn’t make a choice that respected her feelings if I didn’t even know what they were.

Azurite fell silent, but it didn’t seem to be because she didn’t want to talk about it. She was just conflicted... contemplating something.

Soon enough, she opened her mouth, “Very well... I have two reasons, actually. The first is that I simply don’t trust Masters.”

I’d already guessed that one. Thanks to the war, many Altarian tians no longer trusted Masters, and Azurite was among them. Masters had killed her mentor, Langley Grandria, and her teacher, the Arch Sage, and for all I knew, there might’ve been many more. I really couldn’t blame her for not trusting us.

“But the reason I refuse *your* assistance is different,” she went on. “I don’t hold any mistrust towards you.”

That was as good as saying she trusted me. And yet she was still rejecting me.

“My second reason... is my late father’s words.”

“Your dad’s?”

"Yes..." Azurite said. "He was one of the people in the center of Altar's government, and he thought a lot about the stark increase in Masters that started four or five years ago."

That was more or less when *Infinite Dendrogram* had come out. Shu and the other first-wave players had gotten online and started messing things up or solving them.

"He used to think a lot about what would happen if these powerful, immortal beings kept growing in power and number."

"Did he think we're a danger or something?"

"No... the other way around, in fact. Father considered Masters to be inhuman agents of revolution who would lead humanity and the world to a better future. In his eyes, you were akin to divine messengers I've read about in legends."

"Divine messengers?" I raised an eyebrow.

Well, that's an... interesting way to look at us.

It made me think of the Extra-Continental Vessel, the god and the servants, but that was probably unrelated.

"That's why my father refused to hire Masters for war," she said. "He believed that there was no future for a world in which Masters were seen as nothing but sellswords for war. You are so much more than that. You are saviors from another world."

I was silent. *Wow, he sure put us on a pedestal.*

That line of thought didn't even align with the vast majority of Masters. After all — all of us had started out with the intention to play.

Even if there were people like me, growing to value the lives of those who called this world their home, none of us came here to make this world a better place.

I was pretty sure not even Miss Aberration was an exception, and she was a damn cultist.

If Azurite's father really was a big name in Altar's government, this misconception might've been one of the reasons why the country was in such a dire state. After all... we Masters were no saviors or divine messengers.

"You don't agree with him on that, do you?" I asked.

"I don't. Even so, I'll follow his words until the end. They... They were our last..."

She fell silent again.

From what I could tell, her father must've died in the war.

Not even a year had passed since then. The memory had to be fresh enough that merely talking about it opened the wound again, making it hard for her to speak.

I silently pondered. It was easy to say that she was just a slave to her father's memory, but if it was near and dear to her heart, who was I to ruin it for her?

I couldn't take that angle, so...

"Before I came here, someone told me this," I began.

"Eh?"

I began to quote. "You can become a hero or the demon king, a king or a slave, a good person or an evil person. You can do something, or you can do nothing. You can stay in *Infinite Dendrogram*, or leave it. It's all up to you. If it's possible, then you can do anything you want."

I was speaking about myself... or, rather, *us Masters*. That was what Cheshire had told me when I'd asked about the goal of *Infinite Dendrogram*.

"Who said that?" asked Azurite.

"Those were the words I was told before I came to this world as a Master," I answered. "As far as I know, most Masters are told something similar."

According to Figaro, his control AI had seen him off with, "Blessings upon your days and the freedom they bring."

That was most likely the thing the control AIs — the devs — found most important.

Basically... it was all about freedom.

"Masters are free," I said. "Whatever we do is up to us to decide. We're not some single mass going around changing or destroying the world."

She was silent.

"All Masters follow their own wills and choose how they're gonna be," I continued.

Masters were free — we always had a choice. We were free to choose whatever we wanted, even if it came with a lot of responsibility, or it came at the expense of somebody else.

Many Masters, myself included, had made many choices during their time here. And it was time for me to choose yet again.

"As a Master, I choose to protect you and Quartierlatin."

My choice was probably against Azurite and her father's wishes, but I would stick with it until the end.

She gasped softly.

"This isn't some supreme Master consensus," I said. "Your dad's ideals, or your own, have nothing to do with it, either. This is all just me, my freedom, and my selfishness."

I would choose to protect Azurite even if she was against it, which was probably the purest expression of Master-like freedom.

"Why are you so considerate of me?" she demanded.

It was a very valid question.

"I... I'm not really sure either, if I'm honest."

I'd only met her just yesterday. What reason did I have to care about her so much?

"...Because you saw me naked?"

"NO, DAMN IT! The reason I want to protect you is..."

I didn't know why myself, but I was pretty damn sure she was off the mark with that guess. A few seconds later, I finally figured out the real answer.

"...it's because I just couldn't ignore you."

"What do you mean?" Azurite asked.

"You are by far the most tense person I've ever met. It feels like you're completely on-edge, even when we're just talking like this."

This impression had reached its peaks back at the room with the portrait... and right now too, actually. She seemed on the verge of breaking or bursting, yet she was still giving her all to fulfill her duties.

It made me want to support and protect her. Sitting by and just watching her waste away like this would leave a bad taste in my mouth, surely.

"In my heart of hearts, I just want to support and protect you," I said.
"There's nothing more to it."

"...I understand," she said slowly.

"So yeah, I'm going to be with the defense tomorrow. I won't tell you to drop your outlook or go against your dad's will — I'll be by your side just because I'm selfish."

"I can't even tell if your logic is flawed or flawless... I just can't..." Azurite spoke in a teary voice. However, the edges of her lips were bent slightly up. "Still... thank you."

She was both smiling and crying at the same time.



A few minutes later, the two left the scene to get ready for tomorrow.

They needed to shut down the factory, prepare for Dryfe's assault... there was no shortage of things to be done.

However, neither of them realized that they hadn't been the only ones there.

Silently, the third person showed himself.

It was The Lynx, Tom Cat.

"Freedom, eh...?"

Just like Azurite before, he'd hidden himself nearby and eavesdropped on their conversation. He'd heard everything from Ray's calling out to Mario.

"Looks like those words *do* reach people." For reasons unknown, he smiled incredibly broadly. "First Sechs, then Benetnasch, and now Ray... that's three Masters who've taken the words properly. Yup... I knew he was a good kid."

The mentions of the King of Crimes and King of Tartarus would catch the attention of many, if they heard him, but few would be able to understand what his words truly meant.

A few seconds later, he walked away, finally leaving the scene completely empty.

Chapter Nine: The Three Armies

Quartierlatin, mountain

There were ten-odd parties pulling an all-nighter on the mountain containing the ruins.

They were all Masters on a quest to kill and collect the Prism Soldiers near Quartierlatin.

“Aaaand that’s seven. Damn, we makin’ mint here,” said a member of one such party.

“Honestly, that’s pretty freaky,” another replied. “The three of us ran into a whole seven of them. Imagine how many there are on this entire mountain! Gives me chills, man.”

One party member was a Strong Lancer, another was a Strong Bowman, and the third was a Bishop, making it a well-balanced group.

Thanks to the vigorous work of this and other parties, the Prism Soldiers in the mountain were gradually dropping in number.

“You said there’s gonna be a quest to stop the ruins, right?” one of them asked. “We taking it?”

“Damn right we are. Just think what’ll happen if these things keep pouring out. Our town’ll be gone!”

“True. They’re only about as strong as Demi-Dragons, but that’s still a bit much for tians...”

Talking about this and that, they walked around in search of more Prism Soldiers.

Instead, they stumbled upon a strange sight.

It was a space in the forest where the trees had vanished, as though pulled out of the ground by the roots.

"Hold on... What the hell's this?" one of them exclaimed.

"The trees are just... gone?" another said, stunned.

"Did the machines dig them up?" the third asked. "Or was it some other monster?"

"No clue. Though, looking at what's going on, we should be careful."

The Strong Lancer and Strong Archer stood at the opposite sides of the Bishop and watched for any threats. They were now ready for attacks from any visible direction. The Bishop also prepared to use the relevant support skills.

They were cooperating well. Any proper party with a support would've done the same, but *that was exactly what made them so easy to take advantage of.*

"Phase one."

In a split-second, a creature burst out of the softened ground below and grappled the Bishop.

"...Eh?"

The creature looked like a tree, twisted into the shape of a marionette — in fact, that was exactly what it was. It used its arboreal weight to drop the Bishop to the ground and cut his throat with the knife in its hand.

"...!" The Bishop couldn't speak any of his skills now. The puppet took advantage by stabbing his crown, spine, and heart, quickly ending his life.

The immense damage to his body didn't allow for a long resurrection period, so the Bishop quickly turned into particles of light.

The marionette worked absurdly fast.

"HUH?!" yelled one of his party members.

“YOU BASTARD!”

The Strong Lancer and Strong Archer finally reacted to the marionette and quickly destroyed it, but their Bishop had already gotten the death penalty.

Both sides had only a single casualty.

However, the enemy’s loss was only some strange marionette, while the heroes’ loss was the lifeline of their party.

“What the hell’s that thing?!”

“It’s not disappearing, either! Is it from the ruins, too?”

A monster that didn’t vanish upon defeat made the Strong Archer think there was a connection between it and the machines they were hunting, but his assumption was mistaken. Alas, they weren’t even given the time to realize they were wrong.

“*Phase two.*”

As they were wondering about the nature of the dolls, the ground to their east and west began to bulge.

Twenty marionettes burst out through the leaf and mud covers laid around. They were all armed with Assault Rifles, often used by Gunners and Dryfean machines.

As the two Masters tried to understand what was going on, the marionettes drowned them in a full-auto crossfire, turning them into swiss cheese. Unable to put up any fight, the Strong Lancer and Strong Archer both turned into light.

A few seconds later, all that was left of the battle were a few drops and twenty marionettes with guns in hand.

“*Clear.*” A single voice resounded within the marionettes. “*That’s eighteen, now.*”

That was true not only for the twenty here, but for all of the nearly-thousand marionettes swarming the mountain.

"Hm. Been a while since I last controlled a thousand. Must've gotten rusty. It's only been two hours, and I already feel a bit drained."

As that voice resounded within, the marionettes that had just killed the Masters moved through and looked around the mountain in the most optimal ways.

Yes, this was true for *all* the marionettes on the mountain, not just the twenty in that area. It was the result of a single person manually moving all of them at the same time.

He saw a thousand times more than a single person, processed all the marionettes' states in real time, controlled them all simultaneously, and had them all cooperate.

They were also equipped with High-Frequency Knives or Assault Rifles, which he was having them wield the exact same way he would've wielded them himself.

This was a fully-functional, thousand-strong army, commanded by a single will.

Needless to say, this was an astonishing feat. Auto would've been one thing, but controlling such a number *manually* was downright inhuman.

Nevertheless, this man was capable of this. He was the current field marshal of the imperium, Gifted Barbaros.

His Superior Job, Zero General, was specialized in commanding unmanned weaponry... and he was the special soldier who had wielded the Unguided Gaze, Edelvalsa, for the past thirty years.

That Mythical special reward had been with him for as long as he could remember. He'd begun controlling these marionettes *before he could even walk.*

He was the imperium's strongest soldier.

No — he was a one-man army.

"I'll weaken their forces a little more."

He'd been a special soldier for most of his life, and nighttime ambushes were his specialty. To ensure that he would succeed in taking Acra-Vesta, this man continued his hunt for those who'd get in his way.



Prism Rider, Ray Starling

So came the morning. It was so cloudy and dreary, it was hard to believe the skies had been clear yesterday.

"Such an unpleasant weather..." sighed Nemesis.

"Seriously," I agreed. It felt extra bad because I hadn't even gotten a second's worth of sleep last night. I'd been too busy keeping watch in case Dryfe made their move while it was still dark.

The guild had tried to contact the capital to ask for reinforcements, but as it turned out, long-range magic comms were currently jammed.

"How truly irksome," said Nemesis.

"Yep. Man, that guy..."

The culprit was most likely Dr. Mario. While we were exploring the ruins yesterday, he had been outside the whole time. He must've used the chance to set up jammers all over Quartierlatin, then activated them when we caused a stir by telling the guild what we found out.

Fortunately, only long-range comms were jammed. We could still communicate locally. Then again, that might've been the very reason why it had taken us so long to realize that long-range comms were busted.

We had no clue how many jammers there actually were, so going after them wasn't realistic.

A high-rank AGI-focused Master was on a guild quest to send a message to the capital, but I wasn't sure if he'd make it in time. Hell, it was entirely possible that he'd be stopped on the way.

I had a feeling that Dr. Mario was capable of that.

Remembering the way he'd evaded Azurite's attack, I was sure it was because of his *immense* fighting ability, rather than just high AGI.

Azurite had said he was a special soldier — one of Dryfe's best — and I didn't doubt that for a second.

"Ray," Nemesis said, "how powerful is he? What does your intuition tell you?"

"He's a match for some top duel rankers, *at least*," I answered.

To be more specific, I couldn't imagine Chelsea or Bishmal standing a chance against him.

Sure, this wasn't based on actual data. However, back when he'd evaded Azurite's attack, he'd been as menacing as Shu or Figaro... both Superiors. I never would have thought I'd feel something like that from a tian.

"But man, they actually didn't do anything last night," I sighed. "I should've just gone to sleep."

The fact they were jamming the comms made it pretty damn clear they wanted to settle this before word reached the capital and reinforcements came. They hadn't come at night, but they would surely act within the next few hours. We'd have to protect the ruins

and Quartierlatin from Dryfe while stopping the Prism Soldier factory and securing the other weapon at the same time.

Needless to say, that wasn't going to be easy.

It would've been great to have someone from the Gideon gang, like Shu or Figaro, but sadly, I hadn't been able to get in touch with Shu since last night.

Then again, even if I *could* call for someone, they probably wouldn't be able to make it in time. Gideon and Quartierlatin were basically on the opposite sides of the country.

I hadn't been able to call B3, either. She'd probably turned off her phone because she was busy with the tea ceremony and whatnot. Shame, because I could've used her as a proxy to tell Miss Aberration about this.

There was a Master who'd made a thread about this online and asked for help, but it was doubtful that anyone would actually come.

All in all, it was best to assume we wouldn't get any reinforcements.

"Well, you certainly look serious," a voice said.

"Azurite..." I murmured, looking over. I hadn't even noticed her moving next to me.

"I brought something to keep you standing," she said, handing me some warm tea and a sandwich.

"Thanks. These from the inn?"

"Yes. 'Those dealing with the ruins should be well fed,' they said."

Well, then. Much obliged.

As Azurite handed me the food, she seemed to want to tell me something.

"Did the situation change?" I asked.

"How sharp of you... I have good news and bad news. Which do you want to hear first?"

Hey, that's that line you often hear in Western movies, I thought. Well, Altar's clearly Western, so I guess it fits.

"Good news first, please," I said.

"They found a path leading deeper into the ruins. It's through a different hole in the mountain. Many Prism Soldiers were seen leaving through there, so that has to be the factory."

We intended to shut it down in the morning, but that couldn't happen if we had no idea where it was. So figuring out its location was good news, indeed.

"Tom Cat and a few dozen other Masters are already on the way," she added.

"Then there's nothing to worry about," I said. Just like yesterday, Tom would easily break through the security and reach the deeper parts of the ruins. "And the bad news?"

"Nearly thirty Masters who were cleaning up the Prism Soldiers in the mountains were killed."

I paused. "Dryfe's doing, I assume?"

"Yes. According to a tian who was with them, they were attacked by marionettes wielding knives and guns."

That reminded me of Veldorbell's words. He'd mentioned that Dryfe had a tian who used a marionette special reward.

It would make sense for Dr. Mario to be that person. He was a special soldier, after all. And a really intimidating one, at that. I felt there was something more there, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

"So, how many people stayed on the surface?" I asked.

“There are 200 Quartierlatin knights, but our Master count doesn’t even go above 50, even when you include the low-rank jobs. Apart from that, there are about 40-50 tians who’ve come to explore the ruins.”

“So not even 300 in total, huh?”

That number might’ve been decent in some cases, but our enemy was someone who could deal with 30 Masters all by himself. Not to mention that they could always bring someone like Franklin. Things would be pretty bad if they did.

Not that I don’t have anything to counter someone like that, I reflected.

I silently looked at my hands, and the Miasmaflame Bracers, Gardranda. Then I shifted my gaze down to the Grudge-Soaked Greaves, Gouz-Maise.

The townspeople had heard out about the danger of the ruins, flooding the town with negativity for my greaves to absorb, and it was bound to get worse if Dryfe attacked. The stage was being set for me to use the new ace up my sleeve.

“The skill has three conditions... okay?” I recalled what Gardranda had told me while I was out cold. “You’ve already cleared one... but there are two more. The one for after you use it is especially... troubling.”

She hadn’t been joking about that last part.

After using the skill, I’d be given one of three demerits, each with an equal chance of happening, and if I was unlucky, I’d end up with the death penalty... *or worse.*

I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t worried about that.

However, if I found myself in a situation where I had no other option...

"Ray?" Azurite cut short my train of thought.

"What's wrong? What are you brooding over?" asked Nemesis.

...Hm?

"Hold on... you couldn't read my thoughts?" I asked her.

"Mm-hm," she nodded. "I'm unsure why, but I couldn't. Were you thinking something indecent?"

"Nope."

Did Gardranda do something to hide it from her? I wondered. Guess I'd need to faint to find out, but I'm not going to start bashing my head against the wall.

"Anyway, I get that we have a bit under 300 people on defense, but what about the positioning?" I inquired.

Azurite began explaining our defensive set-up. "Well, for now, we..."

Before she could finish, her comms device began to release static.

That thing was from the adventurers' guild, so the person on the other end had to be someone from there.

"I'm listening. What happened?" Azurite asked the item.

"Lady Azurite! We have news from the ruins!" a voice from the item cried. I recognized the voice; it was a guild worker I'd met yesterday. He seemed to be in a panic. "There's an unprecedented number of Prism Soldiers trying to escape the ruins! *There are over a thousand of them!*"

My jaw dropped.

That was shocking news.



Thirty minutes ago, ???

[This is a directive from Zircon Leader]

[High energy mark discovered in the surrounding area]

[Threat level — A++]

[The mark resembles incarnations]

[Determined that it is pre-■■■■■■■■ — Superior class]

[Detected intention to invade this facility]

[Absolute defense initiated]

[All Prism Soldiers, prepare for battle]

[All 2065 Zircon Fire units, run in defense mode]

[All 898 Zircon Laser units, run in defense mode]

[Analyzing the current state of the anti-incarnation weapon]

[Anti-incarnation weapon no. 3, Acra-Vesta — 37% complete]

[Hull alone is 75% complete]

[Main armaments and sub armaments unimplemented]

[One analyzed weapon complete and equipped]

[Deliberating — determined to release to the front lines]

[Initiating sortie preparations]

[Time of release will be determined by Zircon Leader, standby]

[Due to release of anti-incarnation weapon, searching for cooperators]

[Requesting assistance from no. 1's and no. 2's storage bases — communication failed]

[This facility will defend against the threat independently]

[Ignore all casualties and damage to the surroundings until the threat is eliminated]

[The fate of mankind depends on this battle]

[Purge the threat of the Extra-Continental Vessel]



Prism Rider, Ray Starling

“There are that many?!” I exclaimed. *A thousand Prism Soldiers?!*
How?!

The very notion filled us all with terror.

“How do they have the fuel?!” Nemesis howled the most important question here.

Prism Soldiers worked only when they had a living being as a source of energy. Due to this, the machines already deployed on the mountain should’ve been all they were capable of releasing. Even the factory had tons of units in stock, it wouldn’t mean anything if they couldn’t power them. We’d speculated that there might’ve been one or a few units with a reactor, but a thousand? No way!

“They say these Prism Soldiers had pipes going into their backs!” cried the guild worker through the comms device.

“Pipes? Ah!” I gasped as it all suddenly made sense. “Electric cables!” It was probably “magic” rather than “electric” power here, but whatever. Same difference.

These units were powered not by animals, but by the ruins themselves.

Unlike the first unit I’d encountered, these probably couldn’t leave the ruins, but if all they had to do was defend the place, that wouldn’t be a problem.

It also wasn’t a surprise that the ruins had the power to pull this off — the place had been active for two damn millennia.

“Tell them to pull out the cabl— I mean, pipes!” I shouted.

"They say they tried that, but the machine didn't stop right away and quickly reconnected itself."

Great. So they can store some charge, move briefly while unplugged, and prioritize restoring the link, I thought. The designers thought it through, I'll give them that, but damn, that's annoying!

"What of Tom Cat and the others?" asked Azurite.

"Half of them were taken out by the Prism army's surprise attack and the nearby traps," the guild worker replied gravely. "Most of those who survived can't break through the Prism Soldiers' defenses."

Masters were powerful, but a thousand Demi-Dragon-tier machines with a home field advantage would be a bit too much even for them. Even if some Masters there had some devastating skills, using them wouldn't be an option. There wasn't enough space there to use such skills without wiping out their own allies.

However, I knew someone these circumstances wouldn't affect.

"You said 'most.' Does that mean that someone made it past?" I asked.

"They say that Tom Cat carved a path through the Prism Soldiers and went deeper in."

"Tom!" I cried. He was all right, just as I'd expected.

The odds were much worse than yesterday, but he'd still pulled through.

"Understood," said Azurite. "We'll focus on defense now."

"Roger that," replied the guild worker. "We'll contact you again if the situation changes."

With that, the call ended.

“This is unexpected,” Azurite sighed, comms device in hand and a grave look on her face. “It really shouldn’t be, though. We shouldn’t have underestimated the ruins’ defense system.”

“So we can only hope that Tom succeeds in shutting down the factory,” said Nemesis.

“Yeah.”

A part of me thought that might be too much for him alone, but then I remembered the way he’d fought yesterday. He might actually pull it off.

“Either way, all we can do now is destroy all the Prism Soldiers leaking out through the entrance,” I concluded.

“Indeed,” Azurite agreed.

The moment I turned to head towards the ruins, the comms device turned on again.

“What is it?” Azurite answered and asked.

“Lady Azurite, we just received more news from the ruins!” cried the guild worker, panicking even more than before. “The group fighting the Prism Soldiers was ambushed by wooden marionettes!”

“What?!” I exclaimed.

Clearly, those must be the same marionettes that had killed the thirty Masters wandering the mountain — the ones likely being controlled by Dr. Mario.

“An ambush?! Now, of all times?!” I cried.

“In all honesty, there’s no better time than now,” Azurite commented. “They can effectively team up with the Prism Soldiers to crush the kingdom’s forces, then focus on carving their way through the machines.”

So it was a golden opportunity to get rid of Altar's infiltrators, huh? I sighed.

"Lady Azurite, the countess claims that Quartierlatin's knights are—" the guild worker said something, only to be cut off mid-sentence.

"...?" Azurite raised an eyebrow. "Hello? What's wrong?"

All she got in response was static.

Worried that something had happened at the guild, I looked at Quartierlatin, but the town seemed untouched. That could only mean that the comms were cut.

"More jamming, obviously," I said grimly.

We already knew that Dr. Mario had jammed long-range communications. He must've switched to shut out close-range comms, too.

The reason he hadn't jammed the short-range comms until now was probably either because he'd been using them himself, or because he'd wanted us to take longer to notice that the long-range comms were jammed. Whatever the case, he apparently no longer had any reason to keep the short-range comms open.

"Anyway, let's head to the ruins," I said as I took out Silver. "Now that we know Dryfe is there, too, we should... Azurite?"

For some reason, she was staring at Quartierlatin, not moving a muscle.

No — she was staring at something *beyond the town*.

"Ray," she said, her voice in a quiver — not one of fear, but of concealed rage. "What does *that* look like to you?" She pointed at the sky above the mountain beyond Quartierlatin.

Under the clouds there, I saw...



Quartierlatin, mountain

Quartierlatin was situated between two mountains: the one containing the ruins, and another, much less notable one.

On the latter, there was a man around twenty years of age. He was clad in heroic armor of blue and white, and had long, red hair trailing behind him.

He was handsome, no doubt, but many would be inclined to point out that he looked much like the protagonist of a successful RPG from two years ago.

His name was Logan Goddhart. He was a Dryfean Superior, and the owner of the Superior Job Hell General.

There was a certain degree of regularity between Superior Job names and their nature. For example, the King of Destruction and the Nobushi Princess belonged to “King” series of jobs. Their stat growth prioritized the stat most relevant to the job, and they had few skills, but the ones they had were powerful.

The Unsheath and The Earth belonged to the “The One” series. They had skills aplenty and could even customize or develop new ones from scratch.

Jobs like Over Gladiator and Giga Professor were simply direct, all-around upgrades of the high-rank jobs in their groupings. They rarely had special quirks, which made them strangely balanced compared to other SJs.

Of course, there were also Superior jobs which were difficult to classify, such as Death Shadow and Siren, but they weren’t relevant here.

Now, Zero General and Hell General were in a series called, well, “General,” and they had a special feature, as well.

It was the skill simply called “Army.”

It could only be activated when the General's party had only himself and his minions, and what it did was *greatly increase the number of party slots*.

The minimum was a whole 1,000, and it grew with the skill's level to a maximum of 10,000. Of course, the job was considerably hard to level, so Generals who'd maxed it were few and far between. Nevertheless, the numbers were impressive even at level 1.

In a nutshell, Generals were quantity-based Superior Jobs focused on building thousand-strong parties and making the best use of party-wide buffs.

And saying that they were "building parties" was no exaggeration — they had to gather the minions themselves.

Doing this with monsters would mean carrying loads of Jewels and spending obscene amounts of time Calling them. Not to mention the costs involved. The Zero General, Field Marshal Barbaros, also needed to make his marionettes.

However, the Hell General — or, rather, the current owner of the job — was an exception.

"It's time," said Logan. "Let's begin."

Before him, lying on its belly, there was a Demi-Dragon-tier land-dragon. He'd acquired it at the Barbaros County before he headed out to Quartierlatin.

He held out his hand towards it and, in a sonorous voice, began chanting, "'Here and now, I consign this life I have at my disposal.'"

A moment later, the Demi-Dragon roared in pain, breathed its last, and became light. He looked at the job skill window at the edge of his vision. On it, the number "1,250" suddenly appeared and lit up.

These were the points he'd gotten for the sacrifice. They were necessary if he wanted to use Hell General skills.

To Logan, the Hell General's devil summoning was much like shopping. He sacrificed items or creatures to receive points, which he then used on his skills.

The devils he could summon differed depending on the skill, and the descriptions included brief summaries of their stats and traits.

Of course, there was a time limit on all his devils, but he had a set of skills that made him really adaptable. He was particularly fond of the skill "Call Devil Regiment."

Call Devil Regiment: 6,000 points

Summons 100 Soldier Devils that last 30 minutes.

Soldier Devils were low-rank monsters with 100 for each stat except HP and LUC, which were 300 and 10, respectively. Needless to say, they were extremely weak.

Since the skill needed five Demi-Dragon sacrifices to be used, the payoff definitely wasn't worth it. The devil quantity did little to make up for it. The skill's cost-performance was simply awful.

Unless you were Logan.

"Let's make those 2,000," he said as he traced his finger on the number 1,250 on his job skill window, *making it become 12,500.*

Then he did the same for the skill description for Call Devil Regiment.

Call Devil Regiment: 6,000 points

Summons 1,000 Soldier Devils that last 300 minutes.

Then he traced the Soldier Devil description, multiplying all their stats except LUC by ten.

“Remove the lid of hell and gather, my forces,” he intoned. “Call Devil Regiment.”

At once, darkness emerged from the ground beneath. It bubbled as if boiling, and each bubble burst to produce a devil. This continued until there were 1,000 of them.

He then used the skill again, doubling that number.

These devils were not the weak imps originally described, but true, vicious devils boasting Demi-Dragon-tier stats. And there were 2,000 of them. He’d sacrificed a single Demi-Dragon to create 2,000 devils of the same tier.

The input didn’t match the output in the least — the equation was far too absurd.

This was the reason why he was nicknamed “Contradictory Equation.” It was the power of his Superior Embryo, who was a Type: Another Rule “False Finesse, Rumpelstiltskin.”

Its constantly-active ultimate skill, “Straw-into-Gold — Rumpelstiltskin,” let him *multiply up to ten numerical values on his job skill descriptions by ten*.

It was broken even among Superior Embryos, most of which were infamous for being broken. This skill was at odds with the very concept of game balance.

“With the budget they gave me, I could’ve easily created ten times more than this... but that won’t be necessary,” he grinned, as he overlooked his horde of devils.

They looked almost as if they were pledging allegiance to him.

Of course, that wasn’t the case — *Infinite Dendrogram*’s summoned devils lacked sufficient intelligence to have a concept of loyalty. In fact, they weren’t even living beings — they were just lumps of devil flesh, temporarily put together by a skill.

They were somewhat like the monsters used by Summoners, but they had no medium, so they were always throwaways.

Their loyalty, skills, stats — everything was already within them the moment the creator spoke the skill. In a way, they were “instant devils.”

It was part of the reason why preparing a large amount of high-spec devils was difficult, but again, Logan Goddhart was an exception.

His Superior Embryo made his Hell General skills so much more powerful that it was almost maddening.

“Now, let’s begin,” the Dryfean Superior sneered, and made his devils march.



Thus, the three armies were gathered.

Three thousand machines.

A thousand marionettes.

And two thousand devils.

As Ray’s third day in Quartierlatin began to dawn, the town began to be menaced by three immense hordes.

Conjunction: What Was Left Sleeping

It had been there for two millennia, silent and dormant.

Its years had been full of monotonous repetition, comprised of naught but slowly building its body, preparing for its grand mission.

But today was different. The commanding unit, Zircon Leader, had declared the arrival of hostiles.

Its own sensors confirmed it — its ultimate foe, and creatures much like it, were invading the structure it slumbered in.

It was incomplete, but the time had come for it to carry out its mission.

It observed all the hostile forces in the area — the Hell General, his 2,000 devils, and all the Masters in Quartierlatin — and reached a single conclusion:

The current completion level is sufficient to annihilate them all.

There were no faults in that evaluation, but it would remain on standby until the Zircon Leader ordered it to depart.

The hope left behind by the pre-ancient civilization still slept, but it was almost time for it to awaken.

To Be Continued...

Afterword



Xun: "It's afterwOrd time. I'm Xun, AKA Xunyu."

Fox: "And I'm everyone's favorite Sister Fox, Tsukuyo Fuso. Pleased to see youuu. In case you're wondering, the bear's still in jail and the kitty's outsiiide."

Xun: (That's whY we got this crack pAiring.)

Fox: "So, li'l Yu."

Xun: "'Li'l Yu!?' Is that supposed to be me?!"

Fox: "Who eeelse? So, what's the plan for this afterwoorrd?"

Xun: "We'll tAlk about the scene in the frOntispiece."

Fox: "The bathtime?"

Xun: "Yup. BUt we'll leave that to the aUthor. It's time fOr his serious commEnt!"

Dear readers, thank you for your purchase. I am the author, Kaido Sakon.

All right, so... the seeds for the bathing scene were planted in December of the year 2015, when I was uploading the web novel parts that would become the basis for volume 5. That was about when editor K came to me with an offer to novelize my work.

We met up in person and talked about various things, one of which was the color pages. That was when he mentioned how common it is for two-page color spreads to show a bathing scene. Upon hearing that, I decided that I should write a bathing scene of my own.

The rest is history — this very volume has it. It never would've been illustrated if this series had been cancelled, but thankfully, that didn't happen, and you now get to see it in its full, colored glory, just like I first intended.

Taiki's drawing is so splendid that it feels more "beautiful" than "cute" or "erotic," but that's good in its own right.

On another note, with this volume's frontispiece, cover, and text, Azurite is gaining greater amounts of HP (heroine points) than even I, the author, anticipated. How will Nemesis protect the throne of the main heroine against this mighty foe and her relentless heroine-ing?

Little would give me more joy than your excitement for volume 9 and its intense battles (both physical and the one for the aforementioned throne.)

Kaido Sakon

Fox: "...'Serious comment'? Really, now?"

Xun: "I get what yA mean. It wAsn't all that sErious."

Fox: "Is he acting weird 'cause the other two aren't here?"

Xun: "...WhatevEr. Let's just dO the announcemEnt."

Fox: "Okie."

Xun: "Volume 9 of *Infinite Dendrogram!*"

Fox: "Planned for release in February 2019!"

Fox: "So yeah, keep buying, y'all!"

Xun: "The beAr and the cat're coming bAck next time. To be hOnest, I had no idea it'd gO so well with just us twO."

Fox: "Same. We should plan out a downsizing to give ourselves more spotlight, and—"

Xun: “StOp.”

Bonus short story

A Break for the Orchestra

Paladin, Ray Starling

It was the day after we arrived at Quartierlatin.

Azurite was having a private chat with the countess, so I whiled away the time listening to Veldorbell's performance.

To say that the music was pleasant on the ears would've been a gross understatement.

"Man, this is good," I muttered.

"Mm-hm," nodded Nemesis. She even stopped eating just to listen.

The music had tons of variety. You had famous movie theme songs, foreign TV series openings, western game BGM, and even music from anime — both well-known theater classics and late-night shows.

After a few songs, they took a break. The children took the chance to go to the bathroom, grab a snack, drink some tea, or play around with Veldorbell's Embryos. Wind the cat sith and Percussion the kobold were especially popular.

I walked over to Veldorbell. "Sir, that was just amazing."

"Why, thank you," he said. "I seldom play for audiences of mostly little ones. I won't lie, I was a bit tense."

I really doubted that, but it didn't seem like he was lying. "Don't orchestras usually play classical music, though?"

"Symphonies are long. You may split them into movements, yes, but a group of children would prefer a few shorter tracks, don't you think?"

Well, that makes sense. I nodded.

“You covered a wide range of genres, too,” I said.

“You think so? Those tracks have something in common, though.”

“They do?”

How? Movie scores and anime themes are worlds apart. What kind of link can they have?

“Do they all start with a ‘re’ note or something?” I asked.

“That... isn’t what I had in mind, but yes, they actually do. I’m impressed you could tell.”

“Um, I just guessed and got lucky. Don’t think too much of it.” Unlike Shu, I wasn’t a born musician. “And, uh... I’m drawing a blank for any other links. What’s the answer?”

“Oh, it’s nothing special,” he smiled. “They were just composed by the same person — a humble man by the name of ‘Otto Engelberg.’”

“Ah, so I shouldn’t have excluded that.”

I’d actually considered that it could be the composer, but I’d thrown it out the window because of the late-night anime themes.

So there’s actually a guy whose music can be heard in both Western flicks and Japanese anime? That’s something.

“I’ve heard enough to tell that this Otto person is great at his job,” I said. “The children like his work, too.”

“Heheh,” Veldorbell chuckled. “I’m certain he’d be overjoyed to hear that. Speaking of the children, they seem ready for more. I’ll go back to playing, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all. Go ahead.”

All smiles and baton in hand, he walked to the bright-eyed children and resumed the ensemble.

The End

The Gold-Eating Bear

Duel City Gideon, knight offices, prison cells

“Unbearabllllle...”

Odd as it may have seemed, one of the cells in Gideon’s knight offices contained a bear.

At first glance, he looked like a caged zoo animal, but upon closer look, you would realize it was just a costume.

The wearer’s name was Shu Starling, the one and only King of Destruction, and he was one of the few Superiors serving Altar.

He had been locked up after defeating the Superior serial killer known as “Gerbera.” Eccentric that he was, he’d rushed to her while destroying dozens of buildings in the way.

That was obviously a heavy crime, but as the hero who had ended Gerbera’s spree, he wouldn’t serve any time. He’d be let go as soon as he paid for the damage.

Of course, the amount had to be calculated first. The officials worked fast, but it would still take a few days, and he’d have to wait behind bars during this entire time. Although his new cell was better than the one he’d been in while a suspect, a cage was still a cage, so...

“Man, I’m so beary bored...”

He could’ve been killing time offline, but for reasons unknown, he was choosing to stay in the boring cage.

Noticing the hero’s ennui, the jailer sat down next to his cell and took something out of his inventory. “What would you say to a game of chess?” he said as he presented Shu a chessboard.

It was the foundation for one of the many tabletop games popularized centuries ago by the famous game inventor known as “Boardgame Cat” — a name which made quite a few Masters raise

their eyebrows. The jailer saw it as a good way to keep Shu entertained.

Shu thought the same thing. “Chess, huh? Been a while since I’ve played it,” he said as he got comfortable. Playing through the bars might’ve been weird, but it still made for a nice picture. “Ah. How ‘bout we bet a little money on it? It’d make the game a bit more hairy, doncha think?”

Those born and raised in the city of duels had little to no aversion to gambling, so the jailer didn’t hesitate to accept.

However, he would soon come to know that it was a grave mistake...

Come the next day, things had completely changed.

“My turn!”

“Whoa! It’s Anthony! The chess champ of the Gideon Knight Order!”

“Beat him! Avenge us, Anthony!”

A crowd had formed before the cell.

“Bring it on! I’ll bear it all!” Shu said proudly, chess piece in hand and a tall pile of 10,000 lir coins next to him. That was the money he’d won playing chess.

At first, the bets had all been just 100 lir coins, but after Shu’s winning more and more games, more and more challengers had appeared from all over the knight offices, increasing the betting rate a hundredfold.

Also, unlike in Earth, chess matches in *Dendro* were mostly speed rounds.

This meant that mental and movement speed bonuses from AGI were an important factor, making the game double as a way to hone

your battle tactics... which probably wasn't something intended by the inventor.

Because of that speed, Shu had already garnered over 200 victories in just a day.

"GHAAAAAHH!"

"ANTHONYYYYY!"

"Hyahaah! I'll have that, thank you beary much!" Shu cheered, victorious once again.

Thus the Legend of the Gold-Eating Bear was born.

The End

Miss Marie's Lesson for Newbies — Guns

Duel City Gideon, Sixth Arena

Rook and Marie were having their first few mock battles in a while. His trainer, Shu, had been jailed for severe property damage, so Marie acted as a temporary replacement.

As the sparring went on, Rook suddenly became curious about something. “I have a question. May I ask it?”

“Sure thing! Ask away!” she said gleefully.

“I haven’t seen many gun-users besides you. Guns in general don’t seem to be very big in this game. Are they?”

Even if he included Hugo’s Magingear, the number of gun users Rook had encountered wasn’t high.

“To be frank, I’m not sure I really count as a gun-user,” she said. Sure, her Arc-en-Ciel was gun-shaped, but it was actually an Embryo that fired bullet creatures. “But no, guns are actually pretty darn big. Just not in Altar, mostly ‘cause you can’t get ‘em here.”

“Because no one produces them?”

“Yeeep. There are no Gunsmith job crystals here, and you don’t have any ruins with magic-based guns lying around.”

“Magic-based?” Rook echoed.

“Guns come in two forms: gunpowder-based and magic-based. The former are like the ones we have in real life — substance goes boom, bullet flies. The latter, though, use the user’s magic.”

“I imagine they’re really different.”

“They are. The gunpowder guns pack the same punch no matter who uses them, while magic guns rely on the user’s stats. Because of this, most gun-users start out with gunpowder and switch to magic when they’re stronger.”

Gunpowder-based guns fired bullets using chemical reactions. There was no room for stats there, so the power wasn't affected by whether the wielder was a skilled adult or a clueless child. In fact, you didn't even need a job for them. Of course, sense skills like Firing and Sniping increased accuracy, and job skills like Quick Draw helped with speed, but nothing was actually essential to use them.

On the other hand, magic-based guns were dependent on the MP the wielder used, as well as their max MP. While still guns, they had much in common with magic implements.

Also, gun jobs had magic gun-exclusive job skills which increased the projectiles' power or gave them elaborate trajectories, among other things.

"When it comes to power, gunpowder guns are pretty limited," shrugged Marie. "Unless you bring a cannon, you won't even scratch a proper END build, and AGI builds like me can just dodge it all."

Bullets would never be able to catch up to someone moving at supersonic speeds. In fact, even higher subsonic fighters would be nearly impossible to hit.

"I see," Rook nodded. "But gunpowder guns do have their positives."

"Ah. You noticed?"

"Since they're like magic implements, magic guns eat a lot of MP, don't they? In that case, gunpowder guns are better for drawn-out battles. If you have the funds and a good inventory, you can basically have an endless supply of bullets and spare parts."

Rook figured this was why Hugo's Magingear used a gunpowder gun. A mech needed a lot of MP just to move. Adding another power sink would only lower their already-short operating time.

On a related note, tank Magingears could be boarded by several people — a driver, a gunner, an operator, and a commander. This

workload division allowed the gunner to focus entirely on the weapon, so these machines often used powerful magic-based cannons.

“Good observation,” nodded Marie. “Magic-based guns are hard to craft, too.”

“Why? Gunsmiths can’t make them?”

“Hmm... it’s a teeny bit complicated,” she said as she took out a sketchbook and started drawing a simple diagram. “Gunsmith is a low-rank job, and it has a few high-rank jobs above it — Great Gunsmith, Cannonsmith, and the rare Magic Cannonsmith. As I’m sure you can tell, the first two are for gunpowder guns and cannons, while the third is for magic cannons.”

“So... no one’s found a job for magic gun-making?”

The part of the diagram where that job should be was empty.

“Yes. It’s a lost job. Apparently, it was around a long time ago, and they always had fresh magic guns in the market, but now, newly-made ones might as well not exist.”

There were lost jobs like those, ones that currently weren’t owned by a single person. They didn’t appear in the Catalog, and you couldn’t know their conditions until someone chanced upon and took them.

“Some people are trying to make them without the job, but the success rate is so low that it’s silly, even if you have the other jobs from the grouping. The failure rate is over 99%, and you can’t even make recipes.”

“Well, that’s stern...”

“The materials tend to be pretty expensive, too, so the few guns that somehow get made are stupidly expensive. The chances of making

one are so poor that most people just opt for searching for old ones in ruins. And that's a gamble in its own right."

"I see."

"It'd be super if someone found some gun-filled ruins nearby. But as far as I know, Altar doesn't have any ruins at all."

"Now that you mention it... no, we don't."

"It'd be extra great if the guns aren't single-fire... or are just straight-up miniguns like the bearman uses. Those are rare, hard to make, and really expensive. You could make a killing selling them. Ohh, could someone please find me some ruins?"

"The odds of that happening are negligible, if you ask me," Rook smiled wryly.

"True," Marie chuckled, ending the chat.

On a slightly related note, while they were talking, Ray was on his way to Quartierlatin. The first thing he encountered was a minigun-wielding robot that had come from the nearby ruins.

He went on to blow it up.

The End



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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 8

by Sakon Kaidou

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