

Sakon Kaidou
Illustrator: Taiki

Infinite End Program

6. The Lunar Society

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Shu, Lei-Lei,
Figaro, and
now her.
We were
face-to-face
with the last
Superior of
the Kingdom
of Altar.

**"I'm the High
Priestess,
Tsukuyo Fuso,"
she introduced
herself. "I'm the
leader of The
Lunar Society.
Let's get along,
shall we?"**



Infinite
Dendrogram
6. The Lunar Society

Sakon Kaidou
Illustrator: Taiki

Kozue Fujibayashi

Kozue Fujibayashi

An upperclassman at Reiji's college. She ends up joining him on a difficult quest. Kozue is a diligent person and a member of CID, so she often has to deal with Tsukuyo's shenanigans.



Tsukuyo Fuso

Tsukuyo Fuso

An upperclassman at Reiji's college and the president of Club Infinite Dendrogram (CID). She's also the top of

The Lunar Society cult. Tsukuyo takes a liking to Reiji (Ray) and invites him to join.



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.



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PROLOGUE: THE KINGDOM OF ALTAR'S BIG THREE

The story of a few Masters

A little over a year ago in *Infinite Dendrogram* time, a certain monstrosity was ravaging the lands of the kingdom. Its name was the “Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria.”

It was a three-headed, enormous draconic creature, as mystifying as it was terrorizing, and also the third SUBM ever witnessed.

Gloria appeared in one of the kingdom’s mountain ranges and made its way towards the capital, leaving death and destruction unmatched by most natural disasters in its wake.

As things were, the kingdom would’ve certainly fallen to the monster.

Thus, the kingdom tried to stop Gloria... but alas, its armies were powerless against it, with many of the forces being unable to even stand on the battlefield.

The only tians in the kingdom who could fight it were Superior Job owners such as the Arch Sage and the Celestial Knight, Langley Grandria, or high levels such as the Royal Guard’s vice commander.

However, even if they were to combine their powers, victory against a force as immense as Gloria would still be unlikely, if not downright impossible.

Thus, tians all across the world thought that the kingdom would soon be no more.

But as despair at their encroaching doom overwhelmed Altarian hearts, a certain group of people stood up to the monster.

They were the kingdom's most experienced Masters... the ones many would refer to as the "no-lifer players."

A lot of them had been playing since *Infinite Dendrogram*'s release, and all of them had either reached level 500 or acquired a Superior Job.

To the tians, Gloria's charge was a matter of the country's survival or desolation, but to the Masters, it was a mega event typical of MMOs. They scrambled into battle without hesitation, challenged the great dragon... and tasted a crushing defeat.

Gloria's immense power was one reason for this outcome, but there was an even bigger problem: the Masters didn't cooperate with each other.

Though they could work together with their party or clan members, they hadn't been willing to coordinate with Masters outside their circles. And with Gloria being the equivalent of an ultra-powerful world raid boss from classic MMOs, it simply couldn't have been defeated by a number of small groups haphazardly fighting for and by themselves.

The Masters, however, considered wide-scale cooperation to be nothing but plain stupid. After all, Gloria was an SUBM — the apex of all UBMs — meaning that the MVPs of such a fight would receive a Superior MVP special reward, an item of the highest tier.

Thus, coordinating with many people was out of the question for them, as greater numbers would reduce the chances of them becoming MVPs.

Max-level no-lifers that they were, they simply couldn't make this compromise, and that led to their defeat.

So the tians lacked power, while the Masters couldn't work together and failed.

As the kingdom's end once again became all but certain, another set of individuals came to face the dragon.

They were the three Superiors of the kingdom.

The King of Destruction, Shu Starling.

The Over Gladiator, Figaro.

The High Priestess, Tsukuyo Fuso.

Lei-Lei the Prodigal of Feasts had yet to evolve into a Superior, so these three were the only ones the kingdom had.

Due to their status as the tops of the country's three rankings, they were considered to be Altar's strongest, which led many to believe they could succeed. However, the three were Masters as well, and many thought that they, too, would be unable to cooperate.

Such cynics were proven right when one of the Superiors said something outrageous.

"I'll go first. By myself."

And thus, without even a party at his side, Figaro went solo against Gloria.

Despite his status as a Superior, the power difference between him and the monstrosity was so immense that it seemed hopeless.

Even so, Figaro didn't break. He continued fighting for as long as he was alive, and when he inevitably began to vanish, he took one of

the dragon's three heads — the one that breathed a devastating light — with him.

"We're up next, darlings," said Tsukuyo Fuso. "My ultimate skill won't work on this one, so let's take it with our numbers."

And thus, the head of the Lunar Society and her followers began a raid against Gloria.

The religion's 34 strongest Masters at that time overwhelmed the dragon while cooperating and coordinating without flaw.

Despite that, they were all wiped out, but they took another head — the one that upheld a deathly barrier — with them.

With that, only one head remained.

"...Going down to just one head made its stats go up," Shu observed.

By losing two heads... two ways to use its immense power... Gloria had gained stats *even greater* than before.

Not even the firepower of a Superior Embryo like Baldr could defeat it as it was now, which was exactly why Shu didn't take that route.

"Then I guess we'll settle this with fisticuffs," he said.

Standing in a canyon with no one around to see the showdown, he and the monster glared at each other...

"■■■■■■■■ ■■■ ■■■ — Baldr."

...and began the final battle.

The intensity of their vicious clash shook the earth and changed the surrounding landscape beyond recognition, and at the end of it all, as it was with most fights, there was a victor.

With the death of its last head, Gloria met its end and vanished.

Three Superiors had felled the three heads of the awful, terrorizing great dragon. Thus, after those harsh battles, to show respect for the victories they'd achieved, the people gave them a name.

The ones who'd slain the three heads of Gloria...

The ones who'd surpassed the three-headed dragon...

The three absolute strongest of the Kingdom of Altar...

They were now "The Kingdom of Altar's Big Three."



Approximately half a year after Gloria's defeat in *Infinite Dendrogram* time, the glory of the Big Three had started to fade.

This was because, for reasons unique to each, they had all failed to participate in the war against Dryfe. Many looked down upon them for this, seeing them as failures who had been defeated by the imperium's Superiors before even fighting.

Recently, however, things had drastically changed.

It had all begun with the incident in Gideon one month ago *Dendro* time.

First, the Over Gladiator, Figaro, had fought in the Clash of the Superiors and defeated Huang He Empire's Master Jiangshi, Xunyu, proving that his power was not below that of foreign Superiors.

Second, the King of Destruction, Shu Starling, the one bearing the nickname of "Unknown," had entered the spotlight and purged the tens of thousands of monsters produced by the Dryfean Superior

known as Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin, making his power and presence obvious and known.

With the names of the two resounding throughout the world, Altarians and foreigners alike became aware that the Kingdom of Altar once again had its Big Three.

Indeed, the incident at Gideon had resurrected the name, and since the term “the Big Three” wasn’t complete without a third, naturally, the people’s attention shifted to the High Priestess, Tsukuyo Fuso.

Many wondered what the bearer of this venerable title was doing right now, and to answer that...

“I’m sooo boored. There’s noothing to dooo.”

...she was rolling around on the floor of the inner parlor of her Lunar Society’s headquarters.

Though she looked about twenty, the way she rolled on the tatami mats made her seem like a child, but for some reason, it seemed to suit her. Of course, this action made a mess out of her expensive-looking — priceless, in fact, considering it was a Mythical special reward — junihitoe, but she didn’t seem to care.

“Hey, hey, Kage. Heard of any other PKs around the capital?” she asked hopefully. “You know, some people we can blame for something, gang up on, and wipe out like we did the last time.”

A month ago in *Infinite Dendrogram* time, the Lunar Society had annihilated the PK clan known as “K&R” for, *allegedly*, giving the death penalty to one of their members.

Wanting something similar, Tsukuyo turned to her clan’s sub-leader and her secretary in real life, the King of Assassins, Eishiro Tsukikage.

Despite looking about as old as her, he had the air of an aged butler about him.

“Currently, there are no such PK incidents in the capital’s surroundings,” he said. “The most notable matter here is the spread of the Epidemic, but as you’re surely aware, it’s not fatal. Also, the lack of malignant mutations leads us to believe that it’s the type to last a while, but have weak symptoms.”

“Is that so?” asked Tsukuyo. “I healed it right away, though. It’s important to weed out diseases before they take root.”

“We also have some more adherents that have caught this Epidemic, so you should remember to heal the ones who pay,” Eishiro added. “I hear that the first princess and the visitor... the third prince of Huang He... have healed naturally, but there are some new infected among the senior statesmen.”

“Really? But I wasn’t called to the castle this time, either.”

The Epidemic had spread, and it had even gone as far as to afflict the royal family, and yet Tsukuyo — a Superior Job of the healing-adept priest grouping — hadn’t been called to the castle even once.

“I believe the first princess is apprehensive about asking for your help,” Eishiro commented.

“I wonder why,” said Tsukuyo. “My High Priestess skills can easily cure the Epidemic. And just about anything else.”

“The illness is not fatal, so she probably thinks that simply waiting for it to abate is better than owing something to you, Lady Tsukuyo.”

“Oh dear me, I wouldn’t ask for *too* much. That princess is such a worrywart,” she said with a bell-like giggle before forming a wide

smile. "I'd only have her change about ten state churches into Lunar Society establishments."

Depending on one's outlook, that would be a very heavy condition. A while ago, Tsukuyo had proposed to heal the kingdom's royalty and VIPs in exchange for an increase in the Lunar Society's religious institutions, and this offer was still active to this day. This was her modus operandi.

Even if the current Epidemic was fatal, she would still force the country to accept her conditions before she would help.

Tsukuyo always presented outrageous deals and waited until the other parties had no choice but to swallow them. And with her being the High Priestess, she knew there would be no one in this country who could match her in healing ability.

As things were, the Lunar Society was gradually gaining more and more tian adherents.

This was because, just like the standard state churches, the Lunar Society's establishments healed illnesses and wounds. Not only that, Tsukuyo herself could also rid people of afflictions and injuries too heavy for the state clergy, and she could do it with little effort on her part, provided that the payment was right. However, unlike the state church, the Lunar Society limited their healing services only to their adherents.

Thus, through the pain suffered by the ill and the blood spilled by the injured, the clan and religion continued to grow, eroding the current Altarian faith in the process.

Those familiar with the history of Earth would expect the country to crack down on the Lunar Society and begin to suppress it, but that was impossible in this situation. There were a number of reasons for

this, but the most prominent one was the fact that the clan's upper echelon was dominated by Masters, Tsukuyo included, and suppressing a gathering of resurrecting, undying individuals was nothing but a fool's errand.

Additionally, the Lunar Society had had enough no-lifers to challenge Gloria — the greatest foe the kingdom had ever faced — and had grown in power even more since that time.

As no-lifers, they naturally had save points in other countries, so even putting them on Altar's wanted list wouldn't cause a problem for them.

Thus, though the kingdom saw the growth of the Lunar Society as troublesome, it was unable to make an enemy out of them, since doing so would mean waging a religious war against a cult full of battle-focused Masters led by a Superior. Worst case scenario, that could result in the end of the kingdom.

"Anything else?" asked Tsukuyo.

"Well, there's one thing you might find intriguing," said Eishiro.

"I'm allll ears."

"It's related to the incident in Gideon."

"Oh. Maaan, that was sooo unfair. Those two got to show off sooo much. I wanted to go wild, too."

"Lady Tsukuyo, if you went wild, there wouldn't be many survivors, so I would prefer it if you didn't."

Eishiro spoke his warning while looking at the wand fixed at Tsukuyo's side. It was the Superior special reward she'd received for taking one of Gloria's heads, Gloria β.

The effect of the deathly barrier it could create was weaker than that of the Tri-Zenith Dragon's, but it was still enough to instantly kill low-level commoners, and it hardly needed to be said what would happen if she used it in a battle to protect a city.

"Oh, come onnn," groaned Tsukuyo. "I'm borrrred, you knowww?"

"I know quite well," said Eishiro as he reached into his inventory, took out a photo, and handed it over to her. "Which is why I'll show you this."

The photo portrayed a particular scene from the incident at Gideon. Specifically, the instant a blond young man, beaten and burned, raised his right arm up into the air.

It was a photo of the moment when Ray had defeated Franklin's RSK — the Ray Starling Killer.

"Oh, this boy," said Tsukuyo. "I was watching Fran's broadcast, too. He was pretty good."

"Have you heard that he's a Maiden's Master?" asked Eishiro.

"Oh, really?"

"Also, the battle cost him his left arm, and he keeps it like that instead of fixing it with a death penalty."

"...Oohh?" Tsukuyo's smile turned even wider.

To some, it might've seemed like she was merely having a good time, but to others, her expression was that of a carnivorous beast with prey in sight.

"Now *that's* interesting," she said.

"I'm glad you found a way to kill time, Lady Tsukuyo," said Eishiro, feeling nothing but pleased that the one he served seemed satisfied.

"Kage, bring him over to me, will you?" she asked.

"As you command." A moment later, Eishiro sank into his own shadow. From toe to head, he was consumed by his shade and vanished, quite literally, without a trace.

"Well, I guess I should prepare to welcome him," said Tsukuyo. "I wonder what he's like when you talk to him."

She got up from the ground, stretched, and looked towards a certain part of the room.

"Hear that? His Embryo is a Maiden. You're a bit excited, aren't you... Kaguya?"

"Indeed I am. In fact, I am about as excited as you, Tsukuyo."

The one to answer was a kneeling woman clad in curious clothing. She was wearing a raiment characteristic of tennyo from Japanese myth, and had long, silky hair reminiscent of moonlight.

Though she appeared as fantastical as Tsukuyo, the aura about her was quite different. True to the name "Kaguya," she seemed to have come from another world.

"Eheheh. Oh, I am excited indeed. Very much so. It appears they even used ■■■ once. Eheheheheheheh."

Her eyes closed shut, Kaguya — the Type Maiden Superior Embryo — giggled with anticipation for her meeting with a certain Master and a certain Embryo.

"Come hither, new goddess... Nemesis. I will treat you kindly... Eheheheheheheheheh."

Kaguya smiled, and so did her Master, Tsukuyo.

Those expressions were a sure sign that the most wicked of the Superiors in the Big Three would soon bring Ray and Nemesis into the fox's den.

Open Episode: "The Third Power."

CHAPTER ONE: IN THE JAWS OF THE FOX

Journalist, Marie Adler

“Just so you guys know, I’m starting college tomorrow,” Ray revealed out of the blue.

A month of *Dendro* time had passed since Franklin’s annoying little game. We were currently at a diner annexed to Gideon’s sixth arena, celebrating the success of a recent quest.

“Oh, really?” I asked. “Well, it’s that time of the year, after all.”

In real life in Japan, tomorrow was March 31st. As far as I was aware, colleges and the like would normally start on April 1st, but I guessed it had been moved a day back due to it being a Saturday.

I hadn’t gone to any college or university, so I wasn’t too knowledgeable about this. The manga I was drawing was set in a societal underworld dominated by inhuman assassins, so I hadn’t really needed any higher education.

...Honestly, I was probably more knowledgeable about guns and poisons than anything relating to college life.

“I must say, I had no idea you were a college student,” I said, realizing that he was actually younger than me. I’d always assumed that we were as old as each other, or that he was a little bit older. I mean, that bear man was 27.

Then again, it was entirely possible that he’d repeated years or entered college following a gap after high school, which could easily make him older than me.

Digging too much into the real lives of other players was bad manners, but even if it was BM, I couldn't help but be curious.

How old was he? What college was he going to? *Maybe I should just ask him?* I wondered.

"Will that lower your online time?" Rook spoke up before me.

Oh, yeah, that would be a problem.

These past few days, Ray the one-armed wonder and Rook — no longer Pimp, but a Lost Heart — had gone on many various kill quests, and I'd accompanied them to help them level up. We'd even returned to the capital and raided the Tomb Labyrinth. Our party had consisted of us three and Kasumi's trio, and we'd been able to defeat the boss on the tenth floor.

Just so you know, I'd done little to help them in the actual fighting. I'd changed my main job from Death Shadow to Journalist and only used the "The Pen is Mightier than the Sword" skill, increasing their EXP gain. After all, if I'd just powerleveled them while doing all the work, they wouldn't learn anything.

Ray had defeated tons of monsters during the past month, and he was getting close to reaching max level on Paladin. Not only that, but the stat growth bonuses from his job and Nemesis had made his HP enter the quintuple digits.

...In contrast, my HP growth was so bad that, despite being a level 500+ with a Superior Job, I was still in the quadruple digits, meaning that he'd already surpassed me in this regard.

Additionally, Ray had had lots of mock battles against me and the duel rankers such as Figaro, which had greatly improved his fighting technique.

It only went to show that there was much to learn by fighting those stronger than yourself. My feints were working on him less and less frequently.

Ray would often dedicate entire *Dendro* days to quests and mock battles, but that would certainly happen more rarely when he started college.

“On my days off, I’ll be online as much as before, but on weekdays, I’ll only log in for one day,” Ray explained.

One real-life day was equal to three days here, and he was saying that he’d only be able to stay around for one of them. No surprise there; college students seemed like busy creatures. As far as I knew, they spent their after-school hours living out their youth through club activities or part-time jobs.

...Despite that, Ray had implied that he’d be online for eight real-life hours each day. Which, if you asked me, made him into quite a no-lifer.

Looks like the Dendro virus has really corrupted him over the past month, I thought.

Speaking of corruption... his gear made it look like he’d given in to the dark side. To think that he’d looked so decent back when I’d PK’d him a month ago.

...Wait, his dark fashion sense isn’t my fault, is it?

“The turns and twists following the PK are directly linked to the present, so I wouldn’t say the incidents are unrelated,” muttered Rook. “After all, the reason Ray was in Gideon in the first place and got involved in all the incidents here was because the newbie hunt made him go to the Tomb Labyrinth, where he met Figaro, who suggested coming here.”

Rook, I would prefer it if you didn't try to hold casual conversations with my thoughts. Also, you're implying that I'm the one who caused Ray's fashion sense to take a turn for the worse, and I won't accept such slander!

It had all started with the one who'd given me the PK request! I didn't know who had done that, but I was willing to bet it was all Franklin's fault!

...Strange. I could almost hear him shout, "No, it's not!" Was I having auditory hallucinations?

"But wait, if your college starts tomorrow, shouldn't you be preparing for it today?" I asked Ray.

"No, I'm actually pretty free today," he answered. "I've already taken care of the necessary paperwork and gone through the physical examination. Right now, it's about 2PM in real life, so I'll be online for the whole of tomorrow here in *Dendro*, log out, and then go to bed. When it's tomorrow IRL, I'll have to go to another college briefing and the orientation."

Well, he certainly seemed to be more busy than he'd let on.

"No entrance ceremony?" I asked.

"Yeah. That's gonna happen in about two weeks. I was told it's gonna be held in the Budokan, too."

"Wow, I had no idea colleges handled things so strangely." Having never gone into higher education, I was quite surprised by this.

...*Huh?* I thought as a certain word caught my attention. "...The Budokan?"

Wait a second...

He was going to a college that was holding its entrance ceremony two weeks from now, at the Budokan?

“By the way, uh, don’t answer this if you don’t want to, but... what’s the college?” I asked.

“UTokyo,” he answered with no hesitation.

...*Th-That's the best place in the country*, I thought in shock. *The University of Tokyo!*

Oh no. Ray was actually a winner at life. I reluctantly compared him to myself, an unemployed high school graduate manga artist, and it made me feel...

“...Bitter,” I muttered under my breath.

“My parents refused to let me live in Tokyo by myself unless I passed the entrance exams for UTokyo during my last year of high school,” he continued. “Also, a year and a half before the exams... on the summer of my second year... I rejected all entertainment and focused solely on studying.”

“Ohh, well... I see... Hm?” I murmured.

Entering UTokyo after a year and a half of intensive studying was certainly quite impressive, but he’d started it at about the same time as *Infinite Dendrogram* had come out, which made me feel kinda bad for him.

Also, if he’d passed the entrance exams in his last year of high school, then he really *was* younger than me.

“Wait, so you’re living alone now?” I continued my questions.

“Yeah.” He nodded. “I’m from the northern parts of the country, but last month, I moved to a high-rise apartment building in Tokyo.”

“...Hmm?” I said.

A college student, living all by himself, not in a dorm or some cheap condo, but in a high-rise apartment building?

“First mind... now wealth... Curse you!” I grabbed Ray’s collar and rocked him back and forth, not caring about his protests a single bit.

“Whoa?! What the hell?! Stop shaking me!” he cried.

Feel the resentment of a have-not! I thought.

“...I think lots of people would get mad if you called yourself a have-not, Marie,” said Rook under his breath.

Rook, could you please stop reading my mind and replying? Thank you very much. Also, I didn’t actually say it out loud, so don’t judge me.

“Anyway.” Rook looked at Ray. “You can actually afford an apartment in a high-rise and don’t have to live in a dorm or a cheap flat... Are your parents rich, perchance?”

With his collar still in my hands, Ray shook his head.

“No,” he said. “The allowance I get from my parents doesn’t even cover rent. I can live in a high-rise apartment only because it belongs to Shu.”

“Oh, so that’s how it is.” I let go of him and nodded.

So he lives with that reckless furball bear man King of Destruction... Well, his brother.

...Wait.

“Eh? Didn’t you say that you live alone?” I asked.

"Yes, and...? Oh, sorry, the way I put it is confusing. Let me rephrase," he said, correcting himself. "I'm borrowing an apartment in a *building* owned by Shu, so I don't have to pay any rent."

That semi-naked fur man actually has an apartment building — a no-effort source of income — in an urban area?

"Really?" I asked incredulously.

"Yeah, Shu said, 'Just use any of the free rooms in my three apartment buildings, you can pay the rent after you get a job and start making bank,' so I just chose the one closest to college, and—"

"Wait, 'three'?!" I cut his words short and howled.

Three apartment buildings in an urban area?! How?!

"Where did he get the money for them?" I exclaimed.

Ray put on a distant look. "When he was still in college, he often used to accompany his professors to their presentations in other countries, and he casually bought lottery tickets every time."

...You're joking.

"He actually won?" I asked.

Ray slowly nodded. "He called us and said, 'I hit the jackpot with a lottery ticket I bought for no real reason and got some serious money,' and even with all the international taxes and handling charges, he still had an insanely huge fortune. I'm kinda scared of finding out the exact amount, so I never actually asked." There was that distant look again.

Honestly, Ray's brother's IRL luck was so broken, it left me speechless. That arsonist hairball was an enigma both here and on the other side.

“So yeah,” Ray continued, “Shu used the money to buy land and apartment buildings. I still remember how hard our dad snapped when he shouted, ‘Woohoo! No-effort income! Now I don’t need a job!’”

Well, it was only natural to be upset when your college graduate son proudly proclaimed that he would live a life of leisure because he’d won the lottery. *My sympathies to you, Papa Starling.*

“Anyway, that explains why your working-age brother is online around the clock,” I said.

“Indeed it does.” Nemesis nodded. “Hm? Wait a second.”

“What?” Ray raised an eyebrow.

“You said that Brother Bear was a popular child actor when he was young, and the world champion martial artist during his school years, no?”

“Yeah.”

What? That’s just... disturbing, I thought. Then again, I think I’ve actually heard of someone with such a track record.

“So, basically,” Nemesis continued, “Brother Bear is an insanely talented individual with a brilliant track record who now spends his days as a video game no-lifer NEET surviving on money he won in a lottery?”

“...Yep.”

I might not have been in a position to say this, considering I was a manga artist who had shut herself into *Infinite Dendrogram* instead of doing my job, but... he was definitely wasting his talent.

“We went off on a tangent there,” commented Ray.

“Indeed we did,” I agreed.

What we’d just talked about was so astonishing that it could easily have become the main subject of the conversation.

“Anyway, starting tomorrow in real-life time, I’m a college student,” Ray said.

“Real life is important. Don’t neglect it, and do your best,” I said.

It was a shame that he’d only be able to take quests spanning multiple days on weekends and the like. Then again, right now, in real life, it wasn’t even 3PM. Just as Ray had said, even if he planned to go to sleep early, he could easily spend a whole day’s worth of time here in *Dendro*.

“Then let’s go on a big quest tomorrow!” Rook proposed. “We have Audrey, so we can even pick one that takes us far away!”

Ray and I both nodded in response.

Flying monsters were always useful in these situations. With Rook’s Audrey and Ray’s Silver, I had come to know this pretty well.

Maybe I should buy a flying monster myself? I wondered.

Though I was taking a break from it right now, I’d pooled quite a lot of wealth from my professional PKing, so I definitely had the money for one. These days, I even had some nice extra income from the jobs I was doing for Count Gideon.

Wait... “pooled”... “pool”... That gives me an idea, I thought and spoke my mind.

“Then how about we go to the seaside tomorrow?”

As far as I was aware, these two hadn’t seen *Dendro*’s seas yet.

"The seaside? Good idea. We could go fishing," said Ray.

"And I might be able to tame an aquatic monster," Rook put in.

The two were clearly in favor of it.

Personally, I was looking forward to sketching them in their swimwear. It was for research purposes, of course. Couldn't neglect to gather material, after all.

"The sea, you say?" Nemesis asked with interest. "Fresh seafood... Kamameshi... Seconds, please."

"The sea... Maybe I'll get to cover some sashimi in habanero topping..." Babi murmured.

Those two were the same as they always were. Also, in my humble opinion, sashimi covered in habanero topping would be sashimi no longer.

"Then let's meet up tomorrow at the western gate. How does eight o'clock sound?" I asked.

"No objections there," said Ray.

"Same here." Rook nodded.

And so, with the meeting time and place properly set, we went our own ways.



The following day, Ray, for reasons unknown, hadn't showed up at the meeting spot. The friends list said that he was online, so we checked up on him at the inn he was staying at.

When we asked, the proprietress of the establishment said, "He didn't come down when it was time for breakfast, and when I went

to call him, I found this in the gap in the door," and gave us a piece of paper.

Its contents said:

"Due to certain circumstances, I had to summon Mr. Ray Starling to our headquarters.

I greatly apologize for this abrupt interruption of your plans.

Please bring your complaints to the nearest Lunar Society branch.

Yours sincerely,

The Lunar Society's spiritual leader's secretary, King of Assassins, Eishiro Tsukikage."



“...”

“...”

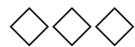
“Hey, is this a kidnapping?” said Babi, breaking the silence.

Oh, uh... Yes, I realized.

I had many things to say about this situation, but the jist of it was this: Ray had yet again found himself in some sort of trouble.

Barely a month had passed since Franklin’s Game, and it looked like he was now at the epicenter of a new major event.

“...The swimsuits will have to wait,” I said as I went to contact the furball.



Paladin, Ray Starling

I woke up to see a ceiling completely unlike the one I had seen as I was drifting off into dreamland.

“I’m quite sure I was sleeping on a bed at an inn,” I said through my drowsiness.

Now, however, I was in a futon in a predominantly wooden, Japanese-looking room.

I momentarily thought that I was back at my parents’ house in real life, but though the room was similar in style, it certainly wasn’t the same.

It had the aesthetic characteristic of Japanese construction, but it looked far more expensive than any place I’d ever lived at.

“This is... *not* real life,” I said as I noticed my avatar’s blond hair drop over my eyes and confirmed that I could open the game’s menus.

Indeed, I was still in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

“You’re awake,” said Nemesis as she popped out of the crest on my left hand and sat on her knees next to my futon. Her posture was surprisingly proper.

“Nemesis... where are we?” I asked.

“I don’t know.” She shrugged. “We seem to have arrived here while I was still sleeping within you.”

I was silent.

From her words, I could deduce one thing.

The one who’d taken me out of my bed at the inn and brought me here had done it so silently that neither I nor Nemesis had woken up. As far as I was aware, not even Marie, with all her Death Shadow skills, was capable of such a feat.

Overcome with worry, I looked into my inventory, but thankfully, it didn’t seem like anything was stolen.

“But Ray, can’t you check where we are by simply looking at the map?” asked Nemesis.

“You have a... point?” I said as I opened the map, and what I saw made me tilt my head in confusion.

The words written there were:

[Royal Capital, Altea, The Lunar Society Headquarters]

“...Calm down, me,” I muttered.

Players were automatically given the maps of the capitals of the countries we belonged to, so the map window showed my exact location. I was in an area outside the walls encircling the capital. That was fine and all, but I couldn’t say the same for the name of the place.

“The Lunar Society Headquarters’...”

I was at the heart of operations of the one and only Lunar Society — the largest clan in the kingdom and an actual real-life cult.

The fact that I’d been taken from my inn and was moved to the headquarters of such a shady bunch could only mean one thing...

“I’M KIDNAPPED!”

Why did they kidnap me?! For what purpose?! I thought frantically.

“Don’t men only come to establishments like this when trying to save girls they’re acquainted with?” asked Nemesis.

“Well, I gue... HEY, NOW’S NOT THE TIME!”

“Calm yourself. A predicament like this is nothing compared to the lab coat lunatic’s shenanigans.”

“This isn’t like anything Franklin did, but being kidnapped by a cult is still freaky as hell!”

“Hm...” she said.

Okay, Ray, think. Work your brain... Oh, yeah!

“Nemesis, I actually have no reason to panic!” I declared.

“Oh?”

“I can just log out and return to the save point in Gideon.”

“That’s a great idea!”

All right, I’ll just open the menu, start the log out process, and...

[Cannot log out: In contact with another entity]

...*Pardon?*

“I... I can’t log out,” I muttered as I fell to my knees.

“You sound like the protagonist of a death game VRMMO story,” Nemesis commented.

“No, really, I can’t. It says that I’m in contact with someone...”

To log out, a player had to go 30 seconds without touching anyone. We were the only ones in the room, and there was no one who could touch me, so why...?

“Oh, so that’s why I’ve been feeling a presence here,” said Nemesis.

A presence? I asked telepathically.

“Ever since I woke up, I’ve felt as though there was another Embryo here,” she answered. “We are probably within the effective range of a Type Territory or Castle. Naturally, that prevents you logging out, as that counts as you being ‘in contact’ with someone.”

“Ah...!” Shock overcame me. They’d actually anticipated me trying to go offline, and had prepared a countermeasure. That meant that...

“It appears the ones who brought you here have no intention of letting you go,” said Nemesis.

“Seems like it...”

Suddenly, the room's sliding door opened up.

"Hm?!" Completely on edge, I turned towards it.

"Ray!" Nemesis shouted as she transformed into the Black Blade. I hastily grabbed her hilt and brandished her.

The one who came through the sliding door...

"Good morning, Mr. Ray, Miss Nemesis."

...was a servant.

Specifically, a nakai — a waitress-like girl working at traditional Japanese inns. The lack of crest on her left hand meant that she was a tian.

Besides those two points, the only notable thing about her was the mark on her kimono, which displayed a crescent moon and a closed eye.

"Your breakfast is ready," she continued. "I will lead you to it once you've changed."

Seemingly having said all she had to, she politely bowed and closed the sliding door.

"Hm..." Nemesis and I were at a loss for words.

Well, that sure softened the tense air in here, I thought.

"What now?" Nemesis asked.

"Guess I'll change," I said.

I was still in my pajamas, after all. I had no idea what I was in store for, but considering where I was, I had to at least be battle-ready.

"Very well," nodded Nemesis. "And then we'll have breakfast."

I'm not too sure about that, I thought. *What if it's spiked?*

"Wouldn't that be a good thing?" Nemesis asked.

"What?"

"If the food is poisoned in some way, we can simply use Reversal."

...Good point. I guess spiking isn't much of a problem for us.

"With that in mind, let's go have breakfast. We're kidnapped, after all. Might as well have a feast at their expense."

"Nemesis..." I muttered.

I couldn't help but feel that recently, this partner of mine had become even more gluttonous. Was she about to go into hibernation or something?

But we did go to breakfast together.

"This is really good," I said after taking a bite.

"It's... amazing," Nemesis agreed.

I mean, sure, it had looked good from first glance, but the circumstances certainly hadn't made me think it would be. Basically, the breakfast we were given was stupidly delicious.

"It just... really emphasizes the taste of each ingredient," I commented between bites.

"The seasoning is light, but so satisfying at the same time," Nemesis added.

I'd never even considered that *Infinite Dendrogram* had Japanese food of this kind. Not having both hands made it a bit hard to eat, though. I couldn't hold the rice bowl.

"I haven't been this satisfied with my meal's taste since our first day here," said Nemesis.

"Same here, actually," I nodded.

"I'm glad you two like it, darlings," said someone behind me.

The food the Star Chef had made for my welcome party had been the greatest cooking I'd ever eaten in *Infinite Dendrogram*, and these dishes here actually rivaled it.

"It has such detailed flavors," said Nemesis as we were finishing up. "Looks like the kingdom's largest clan has no shortage of skilled people. Do they have high-rank and Superior Jobs from the cook grouping or something?"

"Actually, this is my secretary's natural cooking," said the voice behind me. "Even in real life, Kage's food is sooo good that it could be in a manga."

"Oh, yeah," I said. "Cooking is a type of sense skill, so—"

Suddenly, all the cells in my entire body began to shake. It was a reaction to multiple powerful stimuli attacking me all at once.

I belatedly felt surprise at the voice that had been joining our exchanges as though it belonged, then became overcome with shock at the woman embracing me from behind, then felt intoxication from her own scent and the fragrant wood incense smell coming from her clothes, and lastly... *I was overwhelmed by fear as a living creature.*

I felt as though my neck was in the jaws of a tiger, as though my head could fall off with the most casual of bites.

"Hh?!" I gasped as I realized that the woman holding me could easily end me.

I was familiar with this sensation. I had felt it on my first meeting with Figaro in the Tomb Labyrinth, and in my encounter with Xunyu before the Clash of the Superiors. However, this time, I was feeling such danger directly on my skin, which made it countless times more scary.

“Hmm? What’s wrong, sweetie? You’re shaking,” the woman said, as though whispering to me. “Oh, and don’t glare at me like that, li’l Maiden. This is just some light skinship.” She then slowly let me go, running her pale, slender fingers along my neck in the process.

“Rgh!” I grunted as I instantly got up, ran to Nemesis, had her turn into a greatsword, and grabbed her by the hilt.

I had three Counter Absorption uses — my current maximum. And yet, for some reason, it did little to help me feel safe.

This wasn’t like the time when I’d ran out of uses while facing overwhelming odds, not like the time when I hadn’t been able to activate it fast enough against Xunyu, not like the time when Marie had taken advantage of my flaws in our rematch, and not like the time when it had been broken in a mock battle.

Though she would probably handle it in an entirely different way, I had a feeling that this woman would render Counter Absorption meaningless.

“Oh no, sorryyy.” She put her hands together and giggled while apologizing. “I overdid it with the teasing.” In all honesty, that gesture was quite adorable, and an overwhelming majority of men would find it charming. Had I the emotional capacity right now, even I might’ve been captivated.

However, the fear I’d felt when she’d touched me seemed far more reliable than any cutesy gesture.

"So you're Ray Starling and his Maiden, Nemesis," said the woman — or, rather, the woman-shaped aberration.

"You're sooo earnest," she continued. "I like that. I like that *a lot*."

She cracked a smile just like the one I saw on her in the recording on the crystal, and began introducing herself.

"I'm the High Priestess, Tsukuyo Fuso. I'm the leader of The Lunar Society. Let's get along, shall we?"

Shu, Lei-Lei, Figaro, and now her. We were face-to-face with the last Superior of the Kingdom of Altar.

After her introduction, Tsukuyo Fuso called some people to clean up the table.

For the whole time they were doing their job, I was just grasping Nemesis and barely moving a muscle.

Nemesis and I were both silent, unsure of how to react to the prime suspect behind our kidnapping.

However, the one to break the tense silence that had overcome us was none other than the person who'd caused it.

"That left arm of yours..." she said while pointing at the limb I'd lost in my fight against Franklin, which was now replaced by a hook prosthetic. "So you really haven't fixed it yet."

"Sadly, I don't know anyone who can do that for me," I said.

Speaking of which, Marie had said that the High Priestess was capable of it. She held a Superior Job from the priest grouping, after all. Despite that, I had absolutely no intention of asking this aberration to fix me up. I could now understand full well why Marie had recommended against it.

Seriously, who in their right mind would request anything of... *that*? Might as well try the devil. He'd probably give you a better deal.

"For someone who's barely even talked to her, you sure seem to consider her a danger," Nemesis commented telepathically.

Being kidnapped by her is more than enough reason, if you ask me, I replied.

Besides that, merely being touched by her and exchanging several words with her had been enough for me to come to a conclusion.

She's as bad as, if not worse than, Franklin.

"Heh, agreed," Nemesis said. "I also feel the same way about the presence behind her."

I could feel her shift her attention towards somewhere behind Tsukuyo Fuso — an area we couldn't see from our position.

"Hmm..." The aberration showed little concern about Nemesis and me being on high alert. Ignoring that completely, she continued her questions. "You can fix it, but you're not doing it... Why aren't you getting the death penalty? Hm?"

"What?" I raised an eyebrow.

"I mean, if you get the death penalty, you'll be completely healed after just a 24 hour break, no? I don't see the reason to spend more than ten days... a whole month of this world's time... with such a disability."

Oh yeah, Marie said the same thing, I recalled. *Still, I don't think that's an option.*

"What kind of idiot dies just to fix his arm?" I asked.

Even if I had to die in the near future, I didn't want it to be for the sake of just an arm. That would be unreasonable.

"Ha ha!" Tsukuyo Fuso laughed, her eyes open wide. It wasn't a loud, roaring laughter — the sounds escaping her covered mouth were a bell-like giggle.

I didn't know if anything I said was funny or if she was laughing for some other reason, but I felt like taking advantage of this moment was a bad idea, so I just stood stock still.

"This... is so good." Tsukuyo Fuso muttered as she stopped laughing and looked at us again.

Her gaze was completely different from before.

I felt as if there was some sort of fire in her eyes, and it made me freeze in fear.

"You know, sweetie," she said, "I actually had you come here to invite you to join my clan. You're pretty famous, after all."

"Not happening."

If I ever entered a clan, this certainly wouldn't be it.

Cults were freaky in and of themselves, but more than that, I was just really scared of the... *thing* before me, and that feeling only grew stronger the more we talked.

"I'll fix your arm if you join us, though," she offered. "I'm the only one in this country who can do that, you know?"

"Still... not happening."

"Hmmm..." She turned away from me.

The fact that she wasn't facing me anymore soothed me, if only a little bit.

I didn't know whether she was aware of my current emotional state, but Tsukuyo Fuso continued talking.

"I don't want anyone who chooses a 'logical' death penalty."

Wait... What the hell is this ominous feeling? I thought.

"I don't want anyone whose reasons for not choosing a death penalty are boring."

She's looking away from me, and yet...

"And I don't want anyone who's not cute in some way."

Yet the fear binding me just continues to grow.

"So, honestly..." she said before quickly turning around, making her long hair sway. "*I really want you.*"

Those words, combined with her gaze, filled me with fear far greater than before.

"...Gh! HELLISH MIASMA!" I shouted.

Still holding Nemesis in my right hand, I directed Gardranda's right bracer towards Tsukuyo Fuso and launched the triple debuff mist. I didn't care that we were inside or that she was close to me. That aberration was far scarier than any debuff.

"Oh, so this is the Legendary they were talking about," she said.

"Holy Zone Horizon."

In an instant, the miasma was gone. The dark purple mist vanished as if it had never been there.

"What?!" I gaped.

The space around us was bathed in light and filled with a purified air. It felt as if the world itself had been remade anew.

“This is one of my High Priestess skills,” she explained. “It nullifies all disease and curse-based debuffs within the area!”

“Nullifies them... all?!” I yelped.

The High Priestess was a Superior Job from the priest grouping, which was focused on healing and purification. I should have expected her to be able to do this!

“It’s quite a shame. That might’ve worked if you’d been up against anyone else.” She covered her mouth and giggled again.

Ohh no, I’m not giving up yet! I thought.

She was a support-type Superior Job, so she ought to have lower stats than vanguard roles. Of course, I didn’t expect her to be as frail as Franklin, but in 1v1 melee combat, I should have a chance...

“Okay, me neeext!” she said as I kicked the tatami below and sprinted to her side. “Lunar Divider Field.” The world was engulfed in night.

We were inside, and yet above us, I saw a dark sky with a large blue moon. An unnatural space — a world abnormal.

“It’s just like in the crys...tal... Gh?!” I said. Or at least tried to, but something strange began happening.

“Ray?!” Nemesis exclaimed.

As the night I’d once seen in Marie’s crystal overtook the world, my body started malfunctioning. I wasn’t taking in any air... No, I was breathing normally, but my lungs and heart weren’t delivering

oxygen like they were supposed to. Not only that, but my body was quickly turning colder!

“This is my Kaguya’s... my Superior Embryo’s unique skill,” she said as she looked down on me, squirming on the floor and grasping at my chest. “Its name is ‘Lunar Reduction Field.’ It’s pretty famous. You didn’t know about it?”

No, I goddamn didn’t!

“Basically... this skill creates an area where all the numbers I find inconvenient are reduced to a sixth of their original value.”

Inconvenient... numbers?

“It divides enemy stats by six, the damage they deal by six, their heart rate by six, their body temperature by six... among many other things. Oh, and it’s probably six because it’s ‘Lunar.’ The gravity on the Moon is six times weaker, you know?”

“Wh...?!”

What the hell?! No one could stand a chance against that!

The damage she would receive would be divided by 36 — the combination of the stat and damage division. Not to mention that her opponents’ bodily functions would drop way below tolerable levels.

“Well, high-level people can resist it. A bit,” she added.

That basically meant that a sub-level 100 newbie like myself would be feeling its full effect.

“But... I...!” I said through ragged breaths as I remembered one of my skills.

...I have a way to fight this!

“Neme...sis!”

“Very well!” cried Nemesis as she switched from her Black Blade form into the Flag Halberd.

At the same time, I activated Like a Flag Flying the Reversal. It was one of Nemesis’s unique skills, and it reversed the effects of debuffs I was subjected to.

Now, I’ll turn this Superior Embryo’s debuff against its Master, and...

“Khh...” I groaned and realized that something was off.

Reversal was up and active, yet it was still hard to breathe. It had become a bit easier, sure, but that was the extent of it.

“What... is this...?” Nemesis said, her voice thick with shock. “I... I can’t reverse it? Can’t push it back? The output is just too...”

“What’s wrong, Nemesis?!” I shouted, but all I got in response was silence, as if she was completely dumbfounded by something.

“You have the right idea here,” said the aberration. “My Kaguya is focused on debuffs, so this skill Nemesis has is her, well, nemesis.”

I didn’t know whether she’d learned about my Reversal beforehand or if she’d figured it out just now, but she clearly knew what it did.

“But...” She tut-tutted me. “That only applies when you and I... and our Kaguya and Nemesis... are on a similar tier.”

“Wh-What...?” I stammered.

What does that mean?

“Your Nemesis is still just low-rank, while my Kaguya is a Superior Embryo.”

Smirking in the most terrifying manner, she slightly opened her eyes and looked at me with a spine-chilling gleam in her gaze.

“Their base powers are on entirely different digits, sweetie,” she continued with a giggle. “You can’t carry 100 tons just because you can lift 100 kilos, you know? Same thing. Though, from how it feels here, she can probably reverse debuffs from high-rank jobs just fine. Heh heh.”

“Gh!” I shouted.

The description for Reversal *did* say that its effects could be affected by the enemy’s level and skill level. But... the skill had reversed so many debuffs I’d been subjected to. It had even turned around all the nightmarish status effects piled on me by the Lich, so how could it have no effect here?

“Up until now, you’ve won against stronger enemies because you were compatible, no?” she said with an eerily gentle voice as she walked up to me. “Well, here’s something for you to keep in mind, darling. Compatibility... isn’t enough to win against someone with *absolute power*.”

Then she extended her bare foot from out of her junihitoe and kicked me directly in the chin.

“...Hh,” I gasped as my consciousness was forced to shut down.

CHAPTER TWO: THE MAIDENS' TEA PARTY

Death Shadow, Marie Adler

Ray had been kidnapped by The Lunar Society, the clan led by the infamous High Priestess.

“Why does he attract the attention of such troublesome individuals?” I mumbled.

First Franklin, now Tsukuyo Fuso... Just what did the guy do to deserve this? I added silently.

“Excuse me, but weren’t you the first ‘troublesome individual’ he encountered?” asked Rook.

“Oh hush, Rook. You might have a point, but now’s not the time for that.”

This was a serious event that might even go beyond the confines of *Infinite Dendrogram*.

The two of us were clearly not enough to handle this. We needed more manpower, and there was no better opponent for Tsukuyo than another one of the kingdom’s Big Three, Ray’s very own brother bear... the King of Destruction, Shu Starling. I wasn’t sure about in real life, but surely he could counter most of her nonsense here in *Dendro*.

“What about you, Marie?” asked Babi, the curiosity in her tone all too evident. “Can’t you do it?”

“...Well, if we’re talking about *just* killing Tsukuyo Fuso, then I probably can,” I said.

I wasn't called "The Superior Killer" for no reason. If I delivered a good surprise attack while she was off-guard, I might be able to quickly dig through the High Priestess's HP and PK her. However, as things were...

"It's impossible," I sighed.

"But whyyy?" Babi asked.

"Because... she has the King of Assassins with her."

King of Assassins was the Superior Job of the assassin grouping, and it currently belonged to Eishiro Tsukikage — the functional second-in-command at The Lunar Society.

It was much like my Death Shadow in nature. The only real differences were that mine was eastern, while his was western, and that Death Shadow was focused primarily on hiding the user's presence, while the King of Assassins specialized in, as the name might suggest, assassination.

And because of that, just like I was as good at seeing through Conceal as I was at Concealing myself, he was as good at preventing assassinations as he was at assassinating.

As long as she had him at her side, the High Priestess would be an impossible target for me. Any and all of my surprise attacks would be countered.

"In fact, we can't even be sure if giving her the death penalty would be enough," I added. After all, we were faced with a cult that had a solid presence both here and in reality. And if that wasn't troublesome — nothing was.

Still, that furball could, at the very least, save Ray from his predicament here in *Dendro*, and...

"Ah," Rook exclaimed, pointing. "Look, Marie! Ray's brother is right over there!"

I turned to where he was pointing, and saw...

*The bear's popcorn! Gosh, oh boy!
Eating them is so much joy!
Your taste buds these will destroy!*

The bear was standing at a popcorn cart and attracting customers with a song sung in the most needlessly beautiful voice.

What is this manbear-thing even doing? I thought, exasperated.

"Mister Shu!" Rook called as we approached him.

"Oh, hey there, Rook, Babi, Superior Killer," the bear greeted us.
"Something wrong? You look beary out of it. Oh yeah, Superior Killer,
I—"

"Don't call me 'Supe... whatever and so forth' in public!" I shouted.
"And just what are you doing here?"

Why was the top of the kingdom's kill rankings selling popcorn? Had he gotten a part-time job as some business's mascot or something?

"A furmer I know retired and went off to Caldina, so I went and bought all the corn he had left," the furball answered.

Well, Altar *was* politically unstable and kept bleeding people daily...

No, wait, but *why* had he bought them?

"I'm selling popcorn to get money fur Baldr's ammo," he continued.
"The KoD's seal of approval actually makes it beary popular."

"You could go hunting instead," I commented. "Thought about that, Mr. Kill Ranking Number One?" He'd definitely earn more money that way.

"Well," he scratched his cheek as he responded. "I have reasons that keep me from going too far from here. Anyway, what's your deal? You were looking for me, weren't you?"

"Well, Ray was kidnapped by The Lunar Society, and..."

Once Rook explained the situation, the surrounding air instantly shifted.

"Reaaaally, now?" said the bear who was the King of Destruction. He was spitting words so laced with bloodlust that one needed no skills to sense it. Though it wasn't directed at us, it still made a chill go down my spine.

The people around us were shaking, as well, thoroughly unaware as to why.

"That damn cultist fox bitch..." he continued with not a hint of the usual humor in his tone, even swearing in the process. Clearly, he was most displeased about the kidnapping.

...Wait, had he been like this back when I'd given Ray the death penalty?

...*Th-That's just terrifying*, I thought as another chill went down my spine.

"The guy has college tomorrow, damn it..." the angry bear sighed.

"Man, how am I supposed to go about this?"

"You're actually thinking this through?" I raised an eyebrow.

That was thoroughly unexpected. Knowing this bear, I'd expected him to go straight to the capital and raid The Lunar Society's headquarters the moment he'd heard that Ray was in a pinch.

"Strange," I said, speaking my thoughts. "I expected you to rush to them and punch her lights out the moment we told you."

I mean, you scorched the entire Noz Forest when I PK'd Ray, I thought.

"Believe me, I'd love to do that, but I can't really move from here right now," the bear said, once again telling us that he couldn't leave the city.

Was something happening here in Gideon? Surely he didn't mean that he was too busy with his popcorn business to leave, right?

...Then again, I couldn't really put it past this ursine barrel of laughs.

"I see," I sighed, giving up on his help. "But if *you* can't act... saving Ray will become much harder. Well, if worst comes to worst, he can escape by just using suicide." As a precaution against harassment and cyber bullying, *Dendro* had the "suicide" feature. It allowed players to give themselves the death penalty by simply willing it, letting them escape situations where they, for some reason, couldn't log out the normal way.

It came with the risk of dropping precious items, but the most valuable gear in Ray's possession — the two special rewards — couldn't be transferred in any way, including via dropping upon death.

Also, most of the money he'd acquired from Gouz-Maise, Clash of the Superiors, and Franklin's Game had been entrusted to the relevant public institutions.

The only thing to fear was the possibility of his dropping Silver, but considering the number of items he had on him, that was highly unlikely. Ray's daily gacha rolls had given him quite a stuffed inventory.

All in all, a death penalty wouldn't be *too* bad for him. In fact, once he came back from it, he would get his arm back and be fully healed — a huge plus, no doubt.

However...

"Well, sure he can use suicide," said the bear man. "But knowing him, he won't want to."

Yeah, that, I thought.

I mean, the guy had chosen to spend a month of *Dendro* time without an arm instead of fixing it with a death penalty.

"Still, if we don't do anything about this, his college life could be in danger..." I said.

We were dealing with The Lunar Society here. That bunch of literal lunatics would have no qualms about keeping him from logging out for 24 hours and beyond.

...Oh dear, that might even cause Ray's real body to be in danger.

"The timing just couldn't be worse," growled the bear. "Leaving Gideon and letting the nuclear duo do what they want isn't an option, so... damn."

Nuclear duo...?

"Who do you mea—?"

“Should I go, then?” asked someone at my side, cutting my question short.

I turned and saw none other than the most famous person in Gideon.

“Over Gladiator, Figaro...” I muttered his job and name.

It was another one of the Big Three and, without a doubt, one of the strongest Masters in the kingdom.

...For some reason, he was actually eating the popcorn sold by the bear.

“I’m about to... raid the Tomb Labyrinth again, anyway,” he said while munching down the popcorn. “I can also pay a visit... to The Lunar Society.”

He then cracked a smile while looking at us with those slit-like eyes of his.

It was no doubt a pretty expression, but alas, his popcorn-eating completely ruined it.

“You’ll help him?” asked the bear man.

“Of course.” Figaro nodded. “Ray worked really hard while I was unable to move back during Franklin’s Game. I’d like to return the favor.”

“Thanks,” said the bear.

So we now had the one and only Figaro on our side.

...*This will work*, I thought in relief. In fact, the Over Gladiator would be even better than KoD in this situation. With the High Priestess being holed up in her HQ at the capital, the bear would have had to

hold back so that he wouldn't destroy the city, but Figaro had no such limitations. Not to mention that his limitless buffing was a good counter to her debuffs. No matter how heated things got, he could save Ray without much trouble.

"You probably know this, but..." the bear began.

"Yeah," Figaro cut his words short. "If she and I fight, I'll make sure to end it before she uses her ultimate skill. Otherwise, *I'll lose.*"

...*Eh?* I thought in surprise.

"Thankfully, it's still daytime," he added. "If I hurry, I should be able to settle it before sundown."

"...Take care, my dude."

"Yeah. All right, I'm off," he said before running away from us at supersonic speeds. Even I found it hard to follow his shape. He'd probably switched to AGI-focused gear.

With how fast he's going, it won't be long until he's at the capital, I reflected.

"Marie," Rook spoke up. "What do we do now?"

"Well..." I muttered, and began to ponder. At our top speed, it would take us several hours to arrive at Altea. But if all went well, we might be able to meet up with Ray right after he was rescued by Figaro.

"Maybe we should go right now...?" I said.

"I don't think there's a need fur that," the bear commented.

"Why?"

"No matter how quickly Figaro does his thing and saves Ray from the lunatic cultists, Ray would need to log out immediately. Going there now would beary much be a waste of time."

Well, he wasn't wrong, but I didn't feel too good about entrusting it all to Figaro alone.

"Also, Superior K... Marie," he continued as he reached into his inventory and took out a letter. "I have this for you."

The "To Marie" written on the envelope in cutesy handwriting made it easy to tell who was the sender.

"Is this from Ellie?" I asked to confirm.

"Fur sure," the bear nodded. "She and Liliana came to me while I was selling popcorn yesterday and handed this over to me."

Well, our party had been out on a quest for the whole of yesterday, so they'd probably figured that giving the letter to the bear, our party member's brother, was a good way to get it to me.

They'd actually entrusted a letter to this furball... Well, as far as Superiors went, he was definitely a good person, so it wasn't the worst idea. He certainly wasn't *reasonable* by any stretch of the imagination, though.

"They told me it was fur a quest," the bear added.

"A quest for me? From Ellie?"

Now, what could it be? I pondered.

"Yeah, so I'd say you should focus on that. Also, Rook."

"Yes?" Rook replied.

"Lend me your ear fur a sec."

“Hm...? All right.”

The bear walked up to Rook, brought his mouth to his ear, and whispered something. In all honesty, it felt kinda like I was watching a bear about to eat a person.

“I see,” nodded Rook. “Very well, then.”

“All right. Come to me within the next few *Dendro* days. Whenever Ray’s offline and you have nothing going on will do just fine.”

The two seemed to have made some sort of arrangement.

“Just what are you two planning?” I asked.

“Well, in a word... ‘training,’” the bear answered.

Training? The furball is gonna train Rook? I raised an eyebrow.

“That’s the simplest way to put it, anyway,” the bear added. “I mean, Ray’s been in lots of mock battles, but you can’t really say the same for Rook, can you?”

True enough. Rook had been primarily an observer, rather than a participant.

Wait, no, that wasn’t the crux here. What I had to ask was...

“...What does this ‘training’ involve?”

“Death...ly difficulty, but it’s beary much worth doing, yes.”

H-He just straight up said “death” and then added some words that don’t make it the least bit better.

“...Isn’t a Superior like you a bit too much for a newbie like him?” I asked.

“The world is an unbearably harsh place,” the furball sighed. “It even has veteran players who stalk forests and go around massacring newbies on their first day of *Dendro*. ”

...Sincerest apologies, I thought and looked away. I have no say in this matter.

“I don’t mind it,” Rook spoke up. “Also, if he went out of his way to bring it up, then this training is probably very important.”

“It is.” The bear nodded. “I guarantee it.”

Rook seemed to be very accepting of the idea.

Are you sure? You’re training with the bear, you know?

“Anyway, with that pawsitively settled, again, come find me whenever you have free time.”

“Yes, of course,” Rook said.

The bear then left us, dragging his popcorn cart behind him. It kinda felt like he was avoiding us, but instead of investigating it, we just went our own way.

I then opened and read Ellie’s letter, parted ways with Rook, and went to her place.

Sure, I was still concerned about Ray, but I decided to entrust him to Figaro.

I could only hope that the situation would be resolved without Ray having to choose the death penalty.



Duel city Gideon, alley

Once Shu pulled his popcorn cart into an empty alleyway, someone behind him began talking to him.

“Do you plan to train the newbie and make him capable of doing something against us... or him?”

It was a lone woman. She had the appearance of an average adventurer, but the porcupine-like animal in her arms made her more than notable.

As for her expression... it was clearly mocking.

“We heard your exchange back there,” she continued. “So neither Figaro, the prime primate around these parts, nor your lucky, puny Superior-killing little brother is here, eh? Such a shame we don’t have any orders from the imperator. As things are, we wouldn’t have to kick away any annoying trash gathering around us.”

Those words clearly mocked the weak and frail, but they weren’t enough to arouse Shu’s anger.

“‘Kicking away trash’?” he said. “What are you, some sort of slovenly OL?”

“OL’? What does that mean?”

“...Oh, I see. That expression isn’t beary popular in your cultural sphere. Well, can’t say I blame you. I mean, it’s a neologism that was created in a Japanese magazine.”

“But what does it mea—? Well, no matter. I must say, though, you certainly like making assumptions. That little encounter made it clearer than all the days since the incident have.”

“Mh...” the bear muttered.

“You’re here to *keep an eye on us*, aren’t you? That’s why you’re staying in the city instead of going out and hunting. Am I right?”

“Well, if worst comes to worst, I’m just about the only one who can stop you.” Shu’s reply was very casual, definitely not meant to bring out any sort of emotion, but it was enough to make the woman knit her brow.

“You’re *gravely* wrong about one thing,” she said in a menacing tone, and looked at him with a beast-like glint in her eye. “You are not enough to stop the Queen of Beasts... and the King of Beasts.”

The murderous aura about her was enough to instantly kill the faint of heart. Even hardened warriors would shiver when facing it.

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that.”

But the King of Destruction remained firm. Like a boulder standing solid in the wildest storm — or perhaps like a willow letting the mighty winds pass it by — Shu was unfazed by her threats.

“Care to try?” she said, pushing the tension further and creating an air much like the one that formed between Figaro and Xunyu during the Clash of the Superiors.

This one was very different in nature, though. While Figaro and Xunyu’s battle had been one of precision and technique, this one would be a face-off of sheer power.

Indeed, while the Clash had been a duel between two of the greatest warriors, this would be the *collision of two natural disasters* — a sign of a volcanic eruption and a tornado coming at the same time, devastating everything in its wake.

The situation was critical. It felt as though Gideon could be wiped off the face of the world the very next moment.

“I’m beary much against that!”

But all such feelings scattered like mist when Shu spoke in his usual, comical tone, not even neglecting to throw in a pun.

“Going at it now would be bad fur all of us. Your infiltration would become meaningless, while I’m short on money fur ammo. Man, that unbearable lab coat lunatic’s mess was such a hit to my wallet that I can’t make up fur it, no matter how much popcorn I sell.”

“You little...”

Shu’s seemingly-mocking — yet completely true — words made the woman scowl even more. Anger overwhelmed her. She began reforming the menacing aura Shu’d scattered and prepared to charge him.

“lol” The porcupine-like animal in the woman’s arms released a sound that seemed somewhat joyous.

Because of that alone, the woman’s rage vanished like it had never been there, and her expression softened up.

“If you’re having fun, Behemot... then I won’t mind it,” she said.

“Well, fun things are beary good things,” Shu commented.

There were no traces of the tense air from just a moment ago. The alley was now tranquil.

With their exchange seemingly done, Shu grabbed his popcorn cart and started walking away.

As he did so, the woman spoke to him again, as though she just remembered something she was curious about.

“By the way, may I ask you something?”

“Bearly, yes.”

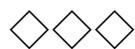
“What about your life on the other side? You’re always online whenever we’re here, aren’t you?”

“You’re in no position to talk.”

“XD”

With those words as their last, the no-lifers that had clocked over 200 hours of play time over the last ten days turned their backs to each other and walked away.

Hidden under the everyday scenery of Gideon, the two’s clash had been postponed to a later date.



The Lunar Society headquarters

“...How pathetic,” Nemesis muttered.

She was at The Lunar Society’s headquarters, in the same room that Ray had awoken in. Having passed out after the staggering loss against Tsukuyo Fuso, he had once again been brought to lie here.

The room had no grates, no guards — nothing in the way of security. And that only served to make Nemesis more conscious of just how powerless the enemy thought them to be.

“Truly... I’m beyond pitiful,” she muttered again as she gently stroked Ray’s hair.

Her evaluation of herself came from her very heart. After all, the defeat at the hands of Tsukuyo had been hers alone. She was simply too weak of an Embryo for Ray to stand a chance. No amount of strategy, willpower, or compatibility could ever make up for the great gap between Nemesis and Tsukuyo's Embryo, and this truth weighed heavily upon her.

"Ray... You've become so strong over the last month..."

Through victories against UBMs or by luck alone, he'd acquired a formidable set of equipment.

Through numerous battles, he'd raised his Paladin level and gained stats befitting the high-rank job.

But most of all, through all the sparring against many veteran players, he'd gained battle experience that would make most newbies like him pale in comparison.

All in all, he was staggeringly more powerful than he had been a month ago.

"And then there's me... Painfully stagnant," Nemesis murmured.

Ever since undergoing her first evolution in the battle against Gardranda, Nemesis hadn't experienced any power progression as an Embryo, and that was the very reason why she was admonishing herself.

The Embryos of the many Masters they'd faced in the mock battles were no doubt strong, and even Babi — who had once been on the same tier as Nemesis — was now two forms ahead of her. Nemesis felt as if she alone wasn't making any progress whatsoever.

She knew that, were she to reveal these worries to Ray, he would instantly deny it and say, without a hint of falsehood, that Nemesis was growing.

However, as she was now, Nemesis sought power that was more tangible... more direct. Power that she could use to never again let Ray suffer the pain of defeat.

"I want to evolve..." she said through the most sincere sobs as tears formed in her eyes.

She cried, wishing for new powers she could use to uplift Ray... the Master she'd dedicated her heart to.

"Evolution is not something you become impatient over," someone suddenly said as they opened the sliding door and let themselves in.

"Ah?!" Nemesis gasped as she transformed both her arms into swords and stood to protect Ray. "Who are you?!"

The person who'd entered the room looked strange, to say the least. She was wearing a raiment characteristic of tennyo from Japanese myth, and had long hair that radiated moonlight. However, Nemesis found the very presence of her being far more curious than any visual details.

"'Who are you,' you ask?" the entity replied. "Should we present you with the name 'Kaguya'? Or maybe we should introduce ourselves as Tsukuyo's Embryo? Or perhaps we should simply say that we are your senior?"

That made it all too clear.

This Maiden is...! Nemesis thought in shock. This was the very same Superior Embryo that she had been so utterly defeated by.

Remembering her loss made her tense. Nemesis mustered her willpower and stood before Kaguya to protect Ray.

“Eheheheh. You look like a mother cat protecting her kitten,” the Superior Maiden giggled with a gentle smile on her face. “Don’t worry, neither we nor Tsukuyo have any intention of touching your Master while he sleeps.”

“As if I can believe that!” Nemesis shouted, thoroughly mad at Kaguya for having the gall to say that. The Lunar Society had kidnapped Ray while he was asleep, after all. “You’re that freakish woman’s Embryo! What do you want?!”

“Eheheh. No need to be so antagonistic. We merely wanted to have a talk with a fellow Maiden.”

“I have nothing to say to you!”

“Now, now, calm down,” Kaguya said as she reached into her inventory, took out two floor cushions, placed them on the floor, and sat down on one of them. “Care to use it?” she said, referring to the other.

Nemesis felt as if she was mocking her and was about to refuse on reflex, but then she thought of Ray, reconsidered, and hesitantly sat down on the cushion.

Kaguya then took out a teapot, some tea leaves, a magic flask full of hot water, and prepared some tea.

“...Again, why are you even here?” Nemesis asked.

“We just said that we want to talk,” Kaguya replied. “Oh, by the way, these are high-quality tea leaves donated to us by an adherent. They’re from Tenchi. Do try it,” she offered the tea to Nemesis.

"It's not poison, is it?" she asked cautiously.

"Heavens, no. Unlike a certain fake chinagirl and the snake, we don't poison drinks."

Fake chinagirl and the snake? Nemesis raised an eyebrow, but instead of inquiring about it, she chose to believe her words and hesitantly sipped the tea.

"...It's good," she said after one taste. Nemesis had no cause to lie about this, so she didn't. To her mind, the tea had a gentle flavor that warmed and relaxed the whole body to the core.

"It truly is." Kaguya nodded as she sipped on her own tea, clearly satisfied. "Oh, would you like some tea cakes with that?"

"...Yes."

What followed was a short silence. The only sounds in the room were those of Nemesis eating the tea cakes and Kaguya sipping her tea.

Eventually, the Superior Embryo spoke up again.

"It has been so long since we enjoyed tea with another Maiden."

"Mh..." Nemesis silently thought of how to respond to that, but Kaguya spoke up before she did.

"Due to its nature, The Lunar Society has more Maidens than other clans. However, not every Master who thinks this is not merely a game gets a Maiden Embryo, so the numbers are still quite low."

"Mhm..." Nemesis nodded as she realized that, indeed, she didn't sense many of her kind in the surroundings.

Masters who hatched Maiden Embryos had a tendency to consider *Infinite Dendrogram* to be more than just a game, but things didn't correlate when it was the other way around. Such a mental state only made it *possible* for Maiden Embryos to be born, rather than making it 100% certain.

"Also, strangely enough, Maidens' Masters oftentimes leave us," Kaguya added.

"They do?"

"We even had some such Masters among those whose Maidens were born at about the same time as yours truly. Officially, they're still part of the clan, but they live their lives away from here. Do you know why?"

"...I haven't the slightest idea."

Neither Nemesis nor Ray could understand the mind of someone who had become a part of a cult and distanced themselves from it, despite not quitting.

However, Kaguya's answer made it somewhat easy to imagine.

"Because they made families with tians," she said. "If a Master truly sees this world and the other side as equal, it's not unlikely for them to fall in love with tians."

"...True," Nemesis said, nodding.

Entities one didn't consider to be mere game characters were, indeed, valid targets for romance. In fact, there could also be Masters who saw tians as romanceable despite still seeing them as NPCs.

“The number of such people is growing, both in and out of this clan, and among both Masters with and without Maiden Embryos. Almost five years have passed since *Infinite Dendrogram* began, after all.”

“Hm?” Nemesis raised an eyebrow, feeling as though the subject of the conversation was changing, or that everything up until now had been nothing but an introduction.

“Our name is ‘Kaguya,’” the Superior Embryo continued. “It’s the name of a heroine from a tale from Tsukuyo’s country.”

“I know *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* from Ray’s memories. It’s common knowledge where he comes from.”

“Oh, so your Master is from the same country as Tsukuyo.” Kaguya formed a smile, which quickly turned faint. “The Kaguya from that story was an entity not of their Earth. She quickly grew to be stunningly beautiful, and eventually returned to the Moon. While she was on Earth, many men fell in love with her and sought reciprocation, but she responded by giving them nigh impossible tasks, and in the end, she went far away from everything she’d ever known there.”

She’s presenting Kaguya as some sort of foreign contamination, Nemesis thought.

“You’re not making your name sound very favorable,” she commented.

“Indeed.” Kaguya smiled for a moment before looking at Nemesis with her most serious expression yet. “‘Kaguya’ might be our name, but we feel that, to Masters, all Maidens, Embryos, and tians alike are akin to Kaguya... or perhaps it’s the Masters who are the Kaguya in this situation?”

Depending on one's perspective, that was either a vague comparison or a solid truth without a hint of dramatization.

"...What are you implying?" asked Nemesis.

"You love your Master, don't you?"

"NHUH?!" Nemesis exclaimed. The question caught her completely off-guard and was shocking enough to make her rise up from her cushion.

"A budding affection. A feeling of attraction. Isn't that the innocent emotion we call 'love'?"

"D-D-Don't be absurd! That's not... I'm not... W-Well, I won't deny I find him likeable, but that's only..." Nemesis tried to deny it, but her inability to do so made her all flustered.

"But no matter how much we love them, we and our Masters will eventually have to part ways," Kaguya said.

Those words made Nemesis's expression completely freeze solid.

"What kind of—"

She tried to say "What kind of nonsense is that?" but Kaguya cut her off and continued enforcing her point.

"Surely you have considered this. Their reality is on the other side. They are nothing but guests here. They don't die in this world because their very lives here are evanescent."

That was nothing but the truth. Masters were called "players" for a reason. To them, the world of *Infinite Dendrogram* was a game. Even if they recognized it as a world inhabited by intelligent beings, they were still merely visitors. And though Maidens' Masters didn't see

this world as a game and could make it a part of their lives, they could never make it the core of their beings.

“And so, when the end comes, they will return to the other side, while we will stay here,” Kaguya said, emphasizing that the Masters’ actual ending was different from the ending of them coming here. “The end might come in the form of their death on the other side. Or perhaps they will merely lose their will to be here. Or maybe the thing that binds them to this world will disappear.”

Indeed, there were many ways in which it could end. It could happen at any time, too. And that was exactly why...

“When that happens, as you are now, you will be left with nothing but despair.”

This was true. With her love for him still in her heart, Nemesis would be rendered incapable of meeting him ever again. And being an Embryo, she wouldn’t be able to interact with the world or anyone else unless her Master was here, meaning that she would be left with nothing but the memories of the days she’d spent with him... and an ending with no continuation.

Nemesis had tried to avoid thinking about this harsh truth, but Kaguya had made her all too painfully aware of it.

“*Why did you tell this to me?*” Nemesis wrung out those words and looked at the Superior Embryo with a hint of grudge in her gaze.

Nemesis knew full well that her anger was misplaced. This harsh truth was something she should’ve faced by herself a long time ago.

Upon seeing the sorry state the young Embryo was in, Kaguya gently caressed her head. “Eheheheh.”

“Nh?! What are you doing!?” Nemesis exclaimed, taken aback by the abrupt move.

Paying no heed to her reaction, Kaguya softened her expression and gave Nemesis a smile. “Forgive us for that. We came here to talk about something more Maiden-like, but your teary plea for power to help your Master made us want to warn you.”

“Well... much obliged.”

“Oh, but leaving you with just a warning is quite sad, so let us give you some advice to help you fight the despair when the end comes,” Kaguya said as she extended her finger and lightly poked Nemesis’s chest. “If possible... you should confess your feelings as soon as you get the chance. The earlier they bloom, the more memories you will make for you to treasure.”

Thus the experienced Maiden bestowed the young Maiden with the most straightforward and sincere love advice.

“...I will keep that in mind,” said Nemesis. “But whether or not I will act on it is another matter.”

Still, Kaguya’s words made her cheeks slightly rosy, and her expression was now soft, housing little of the gloom from just a moment ago.

Upon seeing that, the Superior Embryo formed a satisfied, gentle smile.

“Then we will take our leave now,” she said. “When your Master awakes, Tsukuyo will likely approach him again.”

“I really wish she wouldn’t,” Nemesis sighed.

While Nemesis had absolutely no love for Tsukuyo Fuso, she no longer felt the same about the woman's Embryo. Kaguya's eyes as she looked at her were much like those of a worried senior or an elder sister, which made her feel slightly peaceful.

"Oh, another thing," Kaguya spoke up again. "Here is some Maiden-like advice for you... If you get another chance to use ■■■, you should cancel it until you're at least a high-rank. Otherwise, your evolution to high-rank might be postponed by a whole year or so."

"I'll keep that in mind, too... but what *is* that, anyway?"

Nemesis could tell what Kaguya was referring to, but she couldn't even hear it as spoken word.

It — ■■■ — was the thing that had activated in the middle of the battle against Gardranda, forced Nemesis to evolve, and provided her with Like a Flag Flying the Reversal — the most optimal skill for the situation.

She still didn't know what it actually was, but she could tell that it was the reason why she was evolving so slowly.

"It's what causes Maidens... no... what causes *Embryos* to be what they are," Kaguya said. "It's a meaningless function that has already been lost... but it still exists in Maidens and Apostles."

"Apostles?" Nemesis raised an eyebrow. She had never heard of such a category before.

Kaguya ran her mind through her memories and spoke. "While we are the products of a sense of danger, Apostles are the products of a sense of duty. The function remains solely in Embryos that can only be owned by those whose will isn't vague."

"...I don't understand."

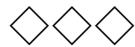
Kaguya had spoken nothing but the simple truth, but Nemesis had been unable to comprehend it. Or, more like, she just didn't have the right foundation to be able to understand it.

"You will come to understand it eventually," said Kaguya. "Perhaps when you are on the same stage as we are... Oh, my." Her gentle, considerate smile vanished. She put on a stern expression and looked at an uncertain direction.

"What is it?" asked Nemesis.

"We have a guest."

A moment later, the roof of the room they were in was torn off by *chains*.



Paladin, Ray Starling

When you fell asleep in *Infinite Dendrogram*, your consciousness fell asleep with your body, just like it did in reality.

However, when you were forcefully made unconscious, things were a bit different. The body would be under the effects of the Fainting debuff, while the consciousness would still be awake in a space away from the body, where only the mind existed.

"*Here again*, huh?" I sighed. The first time I'd entered this state had been during the battle against Gouz-Maise. Back then, I'd been flung into a world that replayed my memories, and I'd encountered its creator — the dark red silhouette.

A month of *Dendro* time had passed since then. During this interval, I'd Fainted a few times while exploring the Tomb Labyrinth or doing

other things, and I'd found myself standing in a pitch black space, just like now.

Unlike the first time, there was neither the memory world, nor the dark red silhouette.

All there was was a sign saying "Coming Soon..."

"...Seriously, just *what* is 'coming soon'?" I demanded.

The sign had probably been placed there by the dark red silhouette, the Miasmaflame Bracers, Gardranda.

Just like how it was with any other mental status effects, Fainting was fully applied to the body, but the player protection function prevented it from actually affecting the Master's mind. Because of that, when we Fainted, instead of actually losing consciousness, we were just forced to wait in this empty space until the effect wore off.

Apparently, Gardranda had learned to take advantage of this. Just like she'd recreated my memories here, she had now placed this sign.

"Well, if I can't meet her this time, either... I guess all I can really do is wait..."

I'd wanted to confirm a few things with her, but alas. Still, at the very least, I could spend this waiting time thinking things through.

I closed my eyes and remembered the battle — if you could call it that — I'd just been in.

Compatibility... isn't enough to win against someone with absolute power.

Those were the last words Tsukuyo Fuso had told me before I Fainted.

This hadn't been my first time facing a Superior. I'd had a few accidental encounters with them, sparred against them, and, of course, fought Franklin.

I compared those experiences with my "fight" against Tsukuyo Fuso. It was completely unlike the time I'd faced Franklin, who'd prepared a weapon specifically against me.

This time, I'd won in terms of compatibility, but I'd been completely overwhelmed by the immense difference in our powers, and totally crushed because of it.

Not only did Tsukuyo Fuso have ill will towards me... she was also insanely strong. And for some reason, she wanted to drag me into her clan.

It was clear that she'd still keep me here when I awoke. To log out, I either had to use the suicide function or fight them while trying to find a way to escape the headquarters.

With that in mind...

"Looks like I have no choice."

...I readied myself to fight that freakish creature.

Even if my chance of victory was minuscule — far below 1% — I would still struggle to seize the possibility. That was how I rolled.

"Still... there are some problems," I muttered. "That aberration... is scary as hell."

Even now, I was still afraid of Tsukuyo Fuso. I was losing to her not just in terms of actual power, but on the mental front, as well. I'd actually found her far more scary than anything else I'd encountered in this world so far.

That might've been strange, considering I'd faced a Demi-Dragon Worm while being a level 0 without an Embryo, and later fought two awe-inspiring monstrosities, Gardranda and Gouz-Maise.

As scary as I found her, though, I couldn't really tell why I felt that way. This fear should've been completely new to me, but for some reason, it felt somewhat familiar.

Whatever the case, acknowledging that something was scary ought to make it a bit less scary than before.

"All right, I have the mindset... Now I just need to find a way to win this."

Tsukuyo Fuso could cast an AOE debuff that would make short work of my basic bodily functions, and neither Hellish Miasma nor Reversal had any effect on her. Thus, I had to use something else. However...

I didn't have enough MP stored to use the Wind Hoof bomb... not to mention that I couldn't really use it in town, either.

I didn't have my left hand, so I couldn't use Purgatorial Flames.

I probably couldn't build up enough damage for a good Vengeance, either.

Besides that, all I really had was Purifying Silverlight... but no matter how much of an aberration she was on the inside, her job was completely sacred, so it wouldn't help at all. I'd heard that the priest grouping had passive skills that lowered all holy damage coming their way.

I could ignore all that and try to take her head-on... but either because of her level, or because of some other jobs she had in her build, she had higher stats than me.

From the kick that'd reaped my consciousness, I could also tell that she was a skilled fighter. In fact, she could probably rival the contestants in the Un-kra tournament that Shu had taken part in. She was probably doing some sort of martial arts in real life.

"But man, the direness of my condition makes me wonder... How the hell did she actually corner me more than Franklin did when he was actually aiming to do it?"

I could almost picture Franklin retorting with "Don't get the wrong idea, noob! I'd have won if I'd set all my forces on you!"

That aside, this encounter made me painfully aware that, even if I was able to surpass Superiors on some highly specific fronts, they were still so much more powerful than me, it was stupid.

With opponents like Tsukuyo Fuso and all the powerful foes waiting for me in the upcoming war, I definitely had to become stronger. Otherwise, I wouldn't be able to seize the possibilities.

"The best way to become stronger would be... an evolution."

Evolutions were the primary feature of all Embryos everywhere, and also their greatest power-ups.

What separated Superiors and standard Masters was that their Embryos were in their seventh forms, so if I wanted to catch up to them, an evolution was my best bet.

However, ever since evolving to her second form in our fight against Gardranda, Nemesis hasn't evolved once during the entire past month here.

To compare, despite him having started at the same time as me, Rook's Babi had already reached the fourth form, making her a high-rank Embryo.

According to Marie, a month should be more than enough time for an Embryo to reach the third form.

...Well, I was fully aware why Nemesis was evolving so slowly.

It had been there in the system window that had popped up when she was evolving to her second form.

I recalled the window saying that it would provide us with the optimal evolution for the situation in exchange for slowing down the next evolution.

I was completely fine with that.

If we hadn't gotten The Flag Halberd and its Reversal back then, we wouldn't have won against Gardranda and Gouz-Maise... and if I hadn't gotten the Grudge-Soaked Greaves, I couldn't have won Franklin's Game, either. Without that evolution, I couldn't have made it against those odds, so I found it perfectly fair that it had come at the cost of slowing the next evolution.

The only problem here was... just how long would this lag continue? Surely we wouldn't be stuck in the second form forever, right?

"I'd say it's high time we see a sign that it's about to happen," I muttered.

It wasn't like I was expecting to get a convenient evolution here and now and completely turn the situation around, but still.

"I want it to happen... for her sake, too."

I was fully aware that Nemesis was troubled by the fact that she wasn't evolving. She was clearly trying to hide it, so I never actually said anything, but for her own sake, I really wanted to help her evolve.

As I considered Nemesis' evolution problem, I began hearing a voice from what felt like far beyond.

“...! ...!”

“Hm?”

“...y! ...e up!”

“Nemesis?”

The voice belonged to my Embryo. It was faint, as if it was coming from beyond a thick glass.

“Ray! Wake up!”

The moment her voice became loud and clear, the space within my mind vanished, and my consciousness returned to my avatar.



“Nngh...” I murmured.

“You’re awake!” Nemesis cried.

Upon waking up, I found myself on the tatami of the same room I’d woken up in last time. Nemesis was right next to me.

That was all perfectly normal, but she seemed really tense, and the room was in a... rough state, to say the least.

Two of the room’s walls were completely gone, as if they’d been blown away by an explosion.

Through the missing walls, I could see other areas of this facility, and honestly, it didn’t look pretty.

Most of the tiles had slipped off the roof, and I could see the evening sky beyond it. The walls and pillars alike were broken, letting me see

even more of the devastation, including the countless furnishings scattered all over.

It looked as though this place had suffered an immense earthquake or a powerful tornado, but that wasn't the case here. This devastation was man-made, and I couldn't be more certain of that.

Why? Because I could see the two responsible in the midst of all the chaos.

"Now, now, don't overdo it, you sickly prince," Tsukuyo Fuso said mockingly.

"How about you just take the death penalty and give Ray back?" Figaro snapped.

The two Superiors were killing one another.



CHAPTER THREE: LION AND FOX, LIGHT AND DARK

The Lunar Society headquarters

Figaro had arrived at The Lunar Society's headquarters approximately ten minutes before Ray was woken up by Nemesis.

It hadn't been long since he'd left Gideon. The Superior knew the quickest way to the capital by heart, and he'd traversed it while wearing his best AGI-enhancing equipment, so while his speed had been impressive, it definitely wasn't surprising.

Standing at the gates of The Lunar Society, Figaro spent a moment to equip the best gear for the situation, such as anti-debuff armor to counter his prime opponent, a stone ax so large it could split mansions in half, and a monocle-like accessory.

That last item wasn't particularly rare or remarkable. It only had a weak Clairvoyance effect, which was often used to search for traps and the like. However, Figaro planned to use it for a completely different purpose — to merely *look at the backs of people's left hands*.

The presence of a crest there would indicate that the person was a Master.

"If I get rid of all the Masters, they'll have no choice but to let Ray go," he murmured.

And the monocle was there to help him differentiate who to kill and who to let live.

Indeed, the very same man that had dismantled the blockade at the south of the capital by annihilating Mad Castle was about to rescue Ray by massacring The Lunar Society. And alas, no one was there to tell him just how absurd and rash he was being.

This Superior's modus operandi was quite unlike what his noble-like features would have you expect.

"Let's go," the fair-faced meathead said as he started it all off by throwing his gigantic ax towards the main gate.

Needless to say, it collapsed in one hit, and Figaro didn't hesitate to bound over the rubble and enter the premises.

Thus began the lion's wild dance of destruction.

Walls crumbled, structures fell, Masters vanished, and tians scrambled for safety.

It didn't take much of this chaotic pandemonium for Tsukuyo herself to stand before Figaro. Kaguya, too, was forced to end her chat with Nemesis and join her Master in battle.

It was at that moment that Ray woke up and saw the two Superiors face one another, murderous as could be.

With The Lunar Society's HQ as their stage, two of the Big Three were now fighting each other to the death — a situation that could certainly be called a Clash of the Superiors.



Paladin, Ray Starling

Nemesis and I stood in the shattered room and observed the battle.

Figaro's arms were entwined in his trademark Crimson Dead Keeper chains, and he held a bow in his hands — a weapon I had rarely seen him use.

From his words, I could assume that he'd come here to help me, but his murderous intention seemed unfittingly immense.

Did something happen between him and the aberration? I pondered.

Speaking of Tsukuyo Fuso, she was holding a wand as menacing as Figaro's Gloria α or Xunyu's Yinglong's Fang, and she, too, looked thoroughly murderous, likely because of the tragic state of her base. Even a third party like me could feel the hostility between them.

Maybe because of the intensity alone, or perhaps because of their immense skill, the battle between the Over Gladiator and the High Priestess was simply sublime.

Figaro wasn't clad in his AGI-focused gear, so even I could follow his movements, and they were nothing short of spectacular. The four chains on his arms attacked automatically, and he coupled it with shots from his bow.

Not only that, but he was doing it while moving all across the space by kicking off of walls or pillars, and the arrows he'd launched all seemed to break the laws of physics, leaving log-sized perfect circles wherever they hit.

Tsukuyo Fuso, on the other hand, was entirely different from the way she had been when she'd faced me.

She was wrapped in a dark blue cloth highly reminiscent of the night she'd subjected me to, only *denser*, and she was launching black waves, much like swallows or crescent moons, with every swing of

her wand. In all honesty, she looked like a final boss straight out of an RPG.

“Is that dark blue cloth just another form of the Lunar Reduction Field?” I asked.

“Yes.” Nemesis nodded. “Kaguya... Tsukuyo’s Maiden... transformed into it a short while ago.”

“Maiden...? Oh, so we share a category.”

The impression they gave me was completely different than the one I’d gotten from Hugo and Cyco, though. Also, that cloth of hers seemed like a solidified version of the night she’d used to defeat me.

This was supported by the fact that Figaro, despite excelling at melee combat, wasn’t fighting her from up close, meaning that the cloth-Embryo might be a more effective — or harder to resist — Lunar Reduction Field.

The swallow/crescent moon-like waves were likely similar in nature.

Another thing to note was that the wide-scale night she’d used to suppress me wasn’t active. Tsukuyo Fuso herself had said that the night wasn’t effective on high level opponents, so when faced with someone like Figaro, she probably had no choice but to “compress” it.

Also, Figaro’s endless buffing was a good counter to her debuffing. He was growing stronger with every passing second. His movements were gradually becoming too quick for me to follow, and his arrows were causing more and more destruction.

The two were more or less on equal footing right now, but that meant that Figaro would eventually gain the upper hand.

"As things are, it seems like the meathead will win," commented Nemesis.

"Yeah." I nodded, but then noticed something. "Hm?"

The flow of the battle itself was shifting in his favor, but there were two things I found odd and concerning.

First was the fact that Figaro wasn't looking at me at all. I was aware of a plausible reason for that, though. He himself had told me about it.

One day, after we'd had a little spar, we'd chatted a bit. I'd taken the opportunity to ask him why he was so adamant about playing solo, both in the Tomb Labyrinth and out.

Figaro definitely wasn't socially impaired. While sparring, dueling, or just having lunch, he had absolutely no trouble making pleasant exchanges with me, Shu, or the kingdom's duel rankers, so that had made me all the more curious about his solo fixation.

A part of me had thought that it might be a sensitive subject, but Figaro hadn't hesitated to answer, "Because I can't cooperate with anyone."

I didn't know the details, but apparently, when he participated in battles involving someone he recognized as an ally, his fighting would become abnormally worse, and that was why he was never a part of any party, and always acted alone.

It wasn't an effect of a *Dendro* skill or debuff or anything the like. It was related to his real life, so I'd chosen not to ask about it any further.

That being the case, right now, Figaro was purposely ignoring me because if I entered his vision, his movements would become more dull.

Even so, his fighting was lacking some of his usual brilliance, making it evident that he was telling the truth and that my very presence here was burdening him.

The other strange thing I'd noticed was that Figaro seemed to be rushing so much that it made it look like he was panicking. Occasionally, he looked away from Tsukuyo Fuso and, for some reason, glanced at the sky.

Since she wasn't using the wide-scale night effect, it was nothing more than a sky you'd see on a typical evening.

Another thing I'd found strange was not something with Figaro, but with Tsukuyo.

"She still looks confident," I muttered.

Though she was clad in the nightly veil, I could occasionally catch a glimpse of her expression — a composed smile.

It didn't seem to suit her current situation at all. Figaro was growing stronger by the moment, and his attacks were beginning to pierce the night shrouding Tsukuyo Fuso.

"Ah..." she gasped as one of Figaro's arrows grazed her and *completely blew her left arm away*. In but a moment, she became as limbless as I.

"Mercy of the Holy," she said, speaking the name of a skill. Light gathered where her arm had once been, and reformed it as if it had never been gone.

An injury so grave, treated in mere seconds.

“So that’s the healing magic of the High Priestess...” I muttered. Though she could probably fix me up just as easily, I still had absolutely no intention of asking for her help. “Even so, it doesn’t look like he can lose this.”

Figaro’s attack, the damage it had done, and the way Tsukuyo Fuso had reacted to it made me more confident than ever.

She’d used her immense healing ability and damage reduction from the Lunar Reduction Field to effectively become an endurance build meant to survive prolonged battles, meaning that Figaro — a fighter that turned stronger with the passage of time — had no way of losing this fight.

However...

“Oh dearrr, a dummy like you is just too much for little old me alone,” she muttered as she wiped her brow with her freshly-healed left arm.

She was absolutely right about that. Figaro was at the top of the kingdom’s duel rankings and was nearly unmatched in solo battles. In contrast, Tsukuyo Fuso was a support job focused on helping her clan as they did the dirty work.

One was the apex of single battle, while the other was the zenith of leadership. The outcome of a one-on-one battle between them was obvious from the start.

“I could realllly use an ally or two...” she murmured.

We were at her clan’s headquarters, so there should’ve been many of her followers here. However, I didn’t see any of them in my immediate vicinity. There was only Figaro, Tsukuyo Fuso, and us.

"She herself made all the adherents, Master and tian alike, distance themselves from the battle," said Nemesis.

The aberration had probably realized that an opponent like Figaro was just too much for them, and that they wouldn't be much help in a battle against him.

Still, she must have known full well that a pure support build such as her would stand little chance in a solo battle against a pure battle build such as Figaro, and... wait.

"Is she really alone?" I thought out loud. We'd only talked for a brief moment, but that was enough for me to be able to tell that she wasn't exactly a nice enough person to make all her underlings stand down and to face a threat all by herself to lower the casualties.

And so, as if to prove me right...

"You can join us now, Kage."

"As you wish."

Indeed. She spoke to something, and the "something" answered.

It seemed to have a man's voice, but I couldn't be certain about that. After all, it came from all the lengthy evening shadows, and it reached my ears like an echo.

"The Shades and Death, They Beckon — Erlkönig." The voices from the shadows spoke what were unmistakably grand words of power — a skill.

Suddenly, all the shades turned from black to crimson and rose up as arms with the most menacing of claws. I felt like I was looking at the nightmare of a child still afraid of the dark. Shades small and large... the darkness of every corner became monsters full of pure malice.

“King of Assassins,” Figaro muttered in surprise as he began evading.

The shadows of the trees in the garden, the shades of the ruined building, the blackness beneath the broken lanterns, and even the darkness following Figaro became crimson, gained an extra dimension, and clawed towards him. However, though the claws were menacing, the shadows themselves were far more scary, for everything they touched simply *crumbled*.

The trees in the garden, the ruined building, the broken lanterns — all were consumed by the shadows they made, crumbled to pieces, and scattered.

It was like watching the deceased invite the living to the afterlife — beckoning straight out of hell.

The shades were encroaching towards Figaro like a raging wave.

“These shadows are an Embryo’s ultimate skill!” I shouted, more certain than ever.

Before they’d appeared, I’d heard the word “Erlkönig.” That was the name of a certain poem by Goethe and a song by Schubert based on it.

It was about the Erlking beckoning a child to his death from the shadows of the night forest, and it was a perfect fit for what I was seeing.

Another thing to note was their menacing presence, as it matched those of the skilled rankers I’d faced in many mock battles over the past month.

Figaro had said they were made by the King of Assassins — a job Marie had once told me about. It was the Western equivalent of her Death Shadow, meaning that he could very well be on the same tier

as the Superior Killer. This ultimate skill alone was enough to tell that the King of Assassins was among The Lunar Society's best.

However...

"Something's off," I murmured.

The shadows were attacking Figaro, but not as intensely as you'd expect. It almost seemed like they were focusing on keeping him in check and preventing him from acting, rather than actually killing him. A portion of them were positioned around Tsukuyo Fuso, too.

I momentarily assumed that they intended to limit Figaro's movements and make it easier for her crescent moons to hit, but for some reason, she created some sort of barrier around herself.

That was probably another one of her High Priestess skills. After she'd put it up, it didn't seem like she had any intention to attack anymore.

The shadows alone weren't enough to defeat Figaro, and Tsukuyo Fuso was focusing entirely on defense, making it seem as though they were stalling.

"What good can come of that?" I thought out loud.

The first thing that came to mind was that they were waiting for reinforcements. However, no matter how great of a clan The Lunar Society was, I couldn't help but doubt that they had that many Masters that could turn the tides of this battle, especially since Figaro only grew stronger with every passing second.

Would something change if they bought enough time?

"Ah...?" I silently gasped as I realized that the shadow beneath my feet had become quite long.

For a moment, I thought that the shadows were about to attack me, too, but then I realized that it was natural — an effect caused by the sun slowly sinking below the horizon.

Well, it's gonna be night soon, I thought. Wait... night?

“Is that what it’s about...?” I murmured.

A while ago, Figaro had been looking at the sky with obvious panic in his expression. Had he, perhaps, not been looking at the sky itself, but at the way it was darkening? The night was Tsukuyo Fuso’s Superior Embryo, after all.

Given that, I could assume that...

“...It gets stronger when it’s night?”

In the PK clan massacre clip Marie had shown me, in Tsukuyo Fuso’s battle against me, and even now, she’d only ever used her night when it wasn’t actually night.

So, would something change if she used it at nighttime? Would it allow her to use something she couldn’t during the day? Like, say, her *Superior ultimate skill*?

“That’s most likely correct,” said Nemesis telepathically. “With the growing darkness, I can feel that Kaguya... her Embryo... is growing stronger, as well.”

Her words supported my conjecture.

If that was really true and they were actually stalling until nighttime, it meant that Tsukuyo Fuso was fully confident that she could defeat Figaro if she got to use her ultimate skill, and this was backed up by Figaro’s panicking.

Because of this, Figaro had to defeat her within the little time we had left until night, but the shadows were preventing that.

I looked and noticed that, sheltered by her barrier, the aberration was casting some sort of magic — most likely support spells to help the King of Assassins and his shadows.

I also realized that the shadows protecting her were not only keeping Figaro at bay, but also preventing him from going above her.

“They’re not letting him use the ace up his sleeve,” I said.

No matter how tough the barrier and how resilient the shadows guarding her, they could all be broken by powers surpassing them.

Figaro had one such thing — the Superior special reward, Gloria α’s item skill, “Fang of Gloria: Overdrive.”

During the Clash of the Superiors, it had delivered heat that’d completely annihilated Xunyu and even blown away the arena barrier’s upper part. That skill could instantly vaporize the shades and make short work of the aberration’s barrier.

The fight had been going on long enough for him to accomplish that feat without much trouble.

But, alas, he couldn’t use it now.

Why? Because *we were at the royal capital.*

Indeed, The Lunar Society’s headquarters was in one of Altea’s residential districts.

If he were to launch Fang of Gloria, it would easily pierce the building and burn the homes outside the complex. To avoid that, Figaro would have to do as he’d done against Xunyu and slash upwards from melee range, or aim it downwards from above.

The enemies were fully aware of that, and they were making sure those scenarios didn't happen.

The shadows had surrounded Tsukuyo Fuso and were preventing him from getting close, hindering his movements so he couldn't go above her. This meant that as long as those shadows were there, Figaro couldn't use the ace up his sleeve... and had no chance of winning. However, he had yet to find the location of the King of Assassins, and there was little he could do against them.

To break this deadlock, we had to...

Nemesis sighed. "I don't even need to read your mind to understand what you're thinking."

Yeah, I thought. We'll have to do this without becoming a hindrance for Figaro, but I've decided on what to do.

There was only one way to turn this situation around — we had to get rid of the King of Assassins and make his shadows vanish.

It might've been bold to state that I could make that happen, but I had to kill him and let Figaro move freely if I wanted him to win against Tsukuyo Fuso.

First, I looked around, but I didn't see the KoA anywhere within my visible range.

Granted, the moving shadows and the darkening skies greatly hampered my visibility. Not to mention that...

"Though I'm free to move, it's clear that they have no intention of letting me escape," I said.

The crimson shadows were surrounding the battle area like a wall. The only shadows that hadn't been made crimson were those around me and the aberration. It was to protect her... and to keep

me alive and bound. Whether by escaping or by death, they had no intention of letting me go.

Not like I wanted to run away, but still.

Honestly, I could probably break through the shadows surrounding us by imbuing Silver with Purifying Silverlight and charging towards them, but the KoA would most likely instantly curb me.

I'd been told that it was a job much like Death Shadow, so I simulated that scenario while picturing Marie in his place. She would attack me from a blind spot the moment I tried to move, and the King of Assassins was surely capable of the same thing. Of course, since they had no intention of letting me escape or die, he'd only make me Faint again.

"Hm?" I murmured.

Wait a second, I thought. Something's not right here.

If they really had no intention of letting me escape, why hadn't they just made me Faint again the moment I'd awoken? In the first place, why hadn't they just...?

"Gh..." My thoughts were cut short by Figaro's grunt, caused by one of the crimson shadows touching a part of his body.

From the point of contact, the shadow began to encroach on Figaro's skin, damaging him in the process.

This affected his speed, causing many shadows to charge and attempt to consume him.

He wasn't able to escape, and the crimson shades overwhelmed him, but then...

"■■■!"

...Figaro released the familiar, inhuman roar as he equipped his Gloria α and made the surrounding shadows evaporate.

He was using the standard version of the Fang of Gloria skill, not Overdrive. Instead of launching the vaporizing breath of light, it merely coated the blade in it. Nevertheless, its damage was immense, and it made short work of any shadows in its way.

I could even picture him charging through all the shades and closing in on Tsukuyo Fuso, but both she and the King of Assassins were aware and well-prepared for that scenario. Were he to get too close, Figaro would be completely surrounded by both the shadows and the Lunar Reduction Field. No matter how powerful he was, he would be able to do little against such a number of shadows while weakened.

“Then perhaps he should refrain from using the sword, and instead opt for the appropriate ranged set-up?” Nemesis commented. “He was using arrows and chains until now, after all.”

That’s reasonable, but I don’t think it will work, I thought in response.

No matter how well-adjusted for the situation, I didn’t think that any ranged weapon he had could deal fatal damage to her while under the effects of the Lunar Reduction Field, and fatal damage was the only thing that could kill the High Priestess.

Again, the only real way to break through it was to use Fang of Gloria: Overdrive, which could instantly kill her even with all the defenses and damage reductions, and...

“...Wait.” I stopped my train of thought.

Nemesis, what did you just say? I asked.

“‘Ranged weapons?’” she said. “Or did you mean the thing about the arrows and chains?”

Chains... That's right, the chains, I realized.

The Crimson Dead Keepers that Figaro so loved had the skills “Range Extend” and “Auto Enemy Detect.”

I'd watched Figaro hold mock battles against Marie before. When enhanced by his Superior Embryo, Auto Enemy Detect was so powerful that it could even find Marie when she was using her maxed-out Conceal skill. The only time the chains didn't track her was when she used the Death Shadow ultimate job skill: the Art of Vanishing.

Because of this, the current situation struck me as odd.

Despite the King of Assassins hiding somewhere in the surrounding space, the chains Figaro had been using were *only* going for Tsukuyo Fuso, which could only mean that the King of Assassins *wasn't* actually in this space. However, even if he'd disappeared with a skill similar to Marie's Art of Vanishing, he was definitely keeping it active for too long. It should've been too taxing in MP or SP to both vanish *and* use his shadow attacks at the same time.

From what I could tell, Erlkönig was most likely a Type Territory Embryo. Many of that kind could only influence their Masters' immediate vicinity, so it was hard to imagine that he was manipulating all these shadows here from a distance at which Figaro's chains, imbued with Range Extend, couldn't reach.

All of that made it clear that the KoA was nearby, but in a place where neither Figaro nor his chains could find him.

“Does such a place even exist?” asked Nemesis.

Normally, it wouldn't, I thought in response. But if you ignore the means he would go about to get there, and assume based on what's happening... you can find one place.

"Ah!" she gasped upon reading my mind, as certain questions flashed through my head.

Why couldn't Figaro's chains find the King of Assassins?

Why hadn't I been assigned a single person to keep me in check?

Why wasn't I able to log out?

Why hadn't they made me Faint to keep me from running away?

Why were they half-ignoring me?

All of that connected, and I came to a conclusion.

"Ray!" Nemesis exclaimed telepathically.

Nemesis! I replied in thought, giving her an order.

"Very well!"

She instantly transformed into The Flag Halberd, and I quickly imbued her spearhead with Purifying Silverlight. Then, silently, yet forcefully, I thrust it *into my own shadow*.

Instead of digging into the floor, the light-clad spear *sunk into my shadow* and made sounds of tearing and clashing metal as it hit something. After a moment of silence, something began pushing the halberd's spear back.

"How insightful of you," said a voice from inside as dual blades emerged from my shadow. They were holding my halberd from going any further.

Then came the arms, head, and the rest of the body. The King of Assassins was now *out of my shadow* and stood before me, in the flesh.

“I must commend you for realizing,” he said as blood flowed out of his shoulder — most likely the injury I’d just caused. “For reference, would you mind sharing how you came to this conclusion?”

I’d expected to catch him completely off-guard, but it seemed that he’d stopped it with his dual swords before my spear had sunk in any further.

It was an impressive feat, considering how much he was focusing on controlling his shadows. Clearly, he was as skilled as the many rankers I’d faced. However...

“Don’t you have something more important to do than checking my answer sheet?” I asked.

Right now, his focus had shifted away from his shadows. The movements of the crimson shades behind him had become *slightly* duller.

It was quite remarkable that my attack and our exchange had only had such a meager effect on his control. However, his opponent wasn’t lenient enough to ignore that mistake, no matter how slight it was.

“■■■■HHHH!” the Over Gladiator roared as he carved his way through the minutely-slower shades.

Figaro rid himself of much of his equipment and adorned his AGI-focused gear, along with the strongest blade in his arsenal.

He dashed through the shadows, cut them down, climbed the roof, and leapt upwards, bringing himself above Tsukuyo Fuso — a place

from which he could use his strongest attack. Then he began summoning all the brilliant light stored within Gloria α.

“Ah...!” Tsukuyo Fuso gasped as she quickly discarded the wand in her right hand and raised both her hands to the sky, as if to praise the *real* moon now lording over the young night. “Return to a Life Most Rightful — Kagu—” She spoke the name of her ultimate skill, but alas, she was too slow. Before she could complete it, Figaro had finished his swing.

They had both started their actions at the same time, so it was only natural for Figaro — the one with far greater AGI — to finish first.

Indeed, this moment of victory...

“Fang of Gloria: OVERDRIVE!”

...belonged to the swiftest and the strongest.

The pillar of light coming from above burned the crimson shades, the active barrier, the night Superior Embryo, and vaporized Tsukuyo Fuso.

Thus, the battle between the Over Gladiator and the High Priestess — two of the Kingdom of Altar’s Big Three — ended with Figaro’s victory.



Following the conclusion to the fight, both Figaro and I faced the King of Assassins.

But instead of doing anything we’d expected...

“Gentlemen, allow me to express my gratitude.”

...he actually thanked us.

“What do you mean?!” Nemesis exclaimed as she returned to her human form, the indignation and confusion in her voice all too palpable.

I was as surprised as her. I’d prepared myself to fight the KoA and other adherents as they tried to avenge their spiritual leader or something. Instead, all I’d gotten was gratitude.

Why?!

“Lady Tsukuyo desperately wanted a way to while away the time,” he courteously explained. “Not being able to participate in the incident at Gideon made her quite frustrated, you see. She often asked me if there was something she could do to divert herself.”

Wasn’t she doing that just by being online on Dendro? I wondered, baffled.

“And now she’s met a Master as intriguing as yourself, then gone on to fight a fellow Superior, and received the death penalty. In my humble opinion, that should be more than enough to disperse the frustration she’s built up over the last month.”

“So... she just wanted to kill time?” I asked.

“Indeed.”

“...She’s pretty dead, though, isn’t she?”

“Indeed. I believe that experiencing death, too, was good time-killing.”

I was speechless. *Wow, uh... This guy’s actually the type who wouldn’t hesitate to sacrifice his master if she so willed it.*

“You’re the same as ever, KoA,” said Figaro.

In response, the King of Assassins courteously bowed and said
“Thank you for the praise.”

“No one’s praising you!” Figaro, Nemesis, and I replied in perfect unison.

I’d honestly had no idea Figaro was the type who could deliver a brusque retort.

“So, right now, Tsukuyo Fuso is...?” I asked.

“Lady Tsukuyo is most likely rolling around in her futon and throwing a tantrum while howling, ‘I loooost!’” he answered. “She should regain her spirits once I prepare dinner for her.”

...Is she twelve or something?

“Oh, with Lady Tsukuyo defeated, we have no reason to keep you here anymore, so you are free to leave. Apologies for the trouble. Here is your cartage fee,” he said as he presented me with a bag of money.

...You’re the ones who brought me here, you know?

“But before you leave, I would like to hear how you discovered me,” he added. “I was right under your nose in the most adequate sense, and I thought it to be quite an excellent hiding spot.” Oh, yeah. He’d asked me about that right after I’d found him out. Well, I didn’t really see the harm in telling him.

“It’s the only conclusion I could come to after considering several factors,” I said.

They hadn’t seemed out of the ordinary when separate, but putting them all together had made me think that that was the answer.

“First of all, Figaro’s chains weren’t able to find you.”

This had made me conclude that he hadn't been using a Conceal-type skill, and had been hiding in a space where not even the chains could reach.

"When thinking of a place where they couldn't find you, I quickly considered your shadows."

Since he was able to control shadows, it hadn't been far-fetched to believe that he also had skills that allowed him to enter them.

"Well, Crimson Dead Keeper's Auto Enemy Detect doesn't reach pocket dimensions and the like," said Figaro. "I know how his skills work, so I also thought that he was in some nearby shadow. The only difference was that I expected him to be somewhere around Fuso, not Ray."

Apparently, because they'd been acquainted for long, Figaro had known how King of Assassins operated and had made his own conjecture about where he was. However, he'd had a reason why he didn't realize — or, rather, *couldn't realize* — where the KoA was hiding.

"Then there was the fact that you left me all by myself," I continued.
"There are two points to this, actually."

First was the time I'd awoken in these headquarters, while the second was Figaro's battle.

"When I awoke here, I first thought that I wasn't being observed until the servant came to call me for food."

However, now I saw just how unlikely that was. Since they'd kidnapped me, they'd probably done their research and surely knew that I had Silver in my possession. If I'd felt like it, I could've attempted to get on him and fly off the moment I'd realized that

something was wrong, and it was downright weird to not have anyone guarding someone who could escape just like that.

“And that was why you were in my shadow,” I continued. “You were ready to jump out and stop me if I tried to escape, and you prevented me from logging out by secretly staying in contact with me.”

Indeed, I hadn’t been able to log out, not because I was in the effective range of a Type Castle or Territory Embryo, but because the King of Assassins had been keeping contact with me from inside my shadow.

“Yes.” The KoA nodded. “Your assumption is most correct.”

“Then there was the battle between Figaro and Tsukuyo Fuso. Instead of making me Faint again, you just let me do what I wanted, even giving me the option to influence the flow of the battle,” I said. “It wasn’t about me... it was about Figaro.”

“Me?” Figaro said, looking startled.

That was the reason why Figaro had failed to realize that the KoA was within my shadow.

“You people know that Figaro becomes a worse fighter when he has allies, right?” I asked. “That’s why you let me move around and tried to suppress him by making him recognize me as an ally.”

If I’d started to move in a way that made it hard for Figaro to ignore me, his movements would’ve become worse, and that might’ve been exactly what they were aiming for.

“However, that’s not the main reason why you let me do as I pleased,” I said. “You had a different main reason.”

“Which would be...?” the KoA asked.

“Figaro purposely ignored me.”

Figaro couldn’t fight as well when he wasn’t solo, and he circumvented this flaw by doing all he could to ignore the existence of the allies on the battlefield. Though his fighting still became slightly duller, he could still hold himself in a proper fight, and it came at the cost of being thoroughly unaware of what was happening to his allies. And that meant that...

“As long as you were within my shadow, Figaro could never find you.”

After all, he’d have no means of noticing the enemy beneath my feet if he didn’t pay any attention to me.

“You said you were ‘right under my nose,’ and that could hardly be more fitting,” I went on.

Figaro hadn’t been able to discover him, and Auto Enemy Detect couldn’t track him. In that particular situation, he would never have gotten attacked by Figaro, and would thus have been able to focus entirely on controlling his shadows, making it the perfect hiding spot.

“Magnificent,” he said and applauded me. “Your words describe my intentions flawlessly. You have excellent situational awareness.”

“...Thanks?”

“This has been a most productive time for not only Lady Tsukuyo, but myself, as well.”

Despite the fact that I’d just told him the reason why his master had lost, he seemed strangely happy. Though not in the same way as the aberration, he was definitely just as much of a weirdo.

"Now, if you will excuse me, I must log out," he continued, clearly satisfied. "I must return and make dinner for Lady Tsukuyo, after all... Oh. Or would you perhaps prefer to give me the death penalty?"

"...No. Just go," I sighed. "I've had enough for today."

This whole incident had made me stupidly tired.

Figaro had been about to pull out his Gloria α, but he stopped upon hearing my words.

Maybe I should just have him cut him down? I pondered.

"Thank you kindly," said the KoA. "I will make sure to express my gratitude properly someday. Take care..."

"Ah, wait a sec," I stopped him as I realized I still had a question I wanted answered.

"Yes?"

"Well, this is about the battle between Figaro and the aberr—Tsukuyo Fuso." There was one point that still didn't make sense to me. "Why wasn't Tsukuyo Fuso wearing a Lifesaving Brooch?"

That accessory negated fatal damage, and it was pretty much a necessity in every battle between the more experienced players.

However, when the aberration had been bathed in light from Fang of Gloria: Overdrive, it didn't look like one had activated, meaning that she hadn't actually been wearing it. Its presence could've changed the outcome of the battle, and I couldn't help but ask about it.

"That's simply because Lady Tsukuyo is Lady Tsukuyo," the King of Assassins answered with a smile on his face and confidence in his tone, as if he honestly believed that that was the only possible response to my question. "All the best. May we meet again."

Then he went through the logging out procedure and vanished.

"Honestly, I'd prefer it if we didn't," said Nemesis, and I shared her sentiment.

After the KoA logged out, we walked out of The Lunar Society's headquarters.

Honestly, I'd expected to be attacked by the adherents here, but they didn't seem to mind us all that much, as if they'd been told to leave us alone. In fact, it looked like they were just too preoccupied with fixing the broken mansion.

Man, was the place in a rough state. Seriously, the destruction there rivaled the one left by the Clash of the Superiors, making it clear just how hard Figaro had been rampaging before the aberration came out to face him.

"All right, I'll go raid the Tomb Labyrinth now," Figaro said the moment we walked out.

I guess he went berserk on The Lunar Society and saved me only as an extra to his raid, I thought.

"Figaro, thanks for helping me," I said.

"It's fine. No need for that," he replied. "You worked really hard when dealing with Franklin and the Gouz-Maise Gang."

"Hm...?" I could understand Franklin, but where did the Gouz-Maise Gang come in all of this?

"Anyway, see you later. I'll be in the Tomb Labyrinth for a while, so if you need anything from me, just tell it to Shu and he'll pass it on."

With those words as his last, Figaro dashed towards the created dungeon. He was really fast, and it only took a moment for me to lose sight of him.

“All right, it’s high time I log off, too,” I said.

In real life, it was past 10PM, so I really wanted to get out, prepare for tomorrow, and go to sleep. Not to mention that I’d been getting alerts for hunger and bladder trouble for quite a while now.

“Very well,” said Nemesis. “Be the best college student you can be.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll enjoy my life for all it’s worth.”

“Do come back here, all right?” she added.

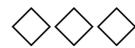
“Eh? Well, I’ll be online tomorrow night.”

For some reason, those words of mine made her seem somewhat... relieved?

“Good night, Ray,” she said.

“Thanks. You too, Nemesis.”

With those words as my last, after being online for a whole complete *Dendro* day, I finally logged out.



???

“Damn that sickly meathead prince... And I was so close to *turning him back* like I did last time,” Tsukuyo grumbled.

“They say that luck is an important factor in victory. Unfortunately, unlike last time, the battle didn’t begin in the middle of the night.”

“And that’s exactly why he came early. And he destroyed the mansion so I couldn’t just hide until it was night... Hmph, oh well. It’s still just one loss, one victory for me.”

“Indeed. What do you wish to do now, Lady Tsukuyo? You cannot go online, so I would strongly recommend you go to sleep.”

“That’s probably best. Spring break is over, and I have lots to do in college tomorrow.”

“Truly. You were intending to gather new members for the club.”

“Oh, yeaah. I hope I meet a freshman that catches my eye...”

CHAPTER FOUR: REAL LIFE ENCOUNTER

Reiji Mukudori

It was the day after I'd been kidnapped by Tsukuyo Fuso and her Lunar Society.

I'd honestly been worried about how that would turn out, but thanks to Figaro, I'd had no trouble going offline, getting a decent night's rest, and making it to college.

The first day wasn't the entrance ceremony or the start of classes or anything like that. It was simply a guidance session about the college.

Things here were going to be different than in high school or anything we'd experienced before, so this was obviously necessary. We looked through the materials they gave us, listened to their explanations, made preparations for next week's lessons, and got a description of our schedule going forward, but there was nothing particularly strange about any of it.

I'd expected there to be a few days of group lodging to help us familiarize ourselves with our fellow students, but apparently, they didn't do those anymore.

Cool, that means I'll have more time for Dendro now, I instantly thought, before realizing that that probably wasn't something a model student would think.

Still, we were given some time to introduce and present ourselves to the fellow students with whom we would be learning until we split into different departments two years later.

Since I came from a distant countryside, I obviously didn't know anyone here, but the introductions were enough for me to memorize the names and faces of about 70% of the freshmen.

Also, I and four others revealed that we had *Infinite Dendrogram* as our hobby, so, come break time, we gathered up and had a talk about it.

As expected of college students my age, the rest either hadn't been able to play much because of exams or, like me, had started after their exams were finished.

I felt that five players was a very small number, but it made sense, considering that we were the unfortunate generation of college students whose exam prep had coincided with *Dendro*'s release.

Anyway, I was excited about the prospect of questing with my new college friends, but alas, all four of them belonged to Tenchi.

There're seven countries to choose from! Can such a coincidence even happen?! I thought, thoroughly surprised. The four seemed to share my sentiment, so it looked like it did, indeed, happen.

Naturally, going on quests with people on the other side of the continent was a difficult task. While most RPGs had teleports to fix such issues, in *Dendro*, teleportation was limited to Embryo unique skills, a way of leaving created dungeons, or just some weird accidents. Because of that, we had to postpone our questing to... whenever we had the chance.

Interesting thing to note: though all four of the other players were from Tenchi, they all served different lords, making them rivals, rather than allies. Their country was much like Sengoku Period Japan, so it would be apt to say they were like subordinates to Oda, Takeda, Chosokabe, and Shimazu.

If given the choice, I'd probably side with Uesugi, I thought.

So, with the guidance and orientations over, we freshmen were next confronted by countless canopy tents built on the college grounds — the club invitation zone.

The participants from all clubs were many, and they were full of zeal to gather as many new freshmen as possible. Many of us newbies were fully into it, while to some, this was just a bit too much.

I was one of the latter.

Struggling through the wave of people trying to invite me to their clubs, I made my way to the cafeteria to take a breather.

“Well, it sure looks like the culture gap between high school and college life is bigger than I expected,” I muttered to myself.

Though not in the same way as the one I’d experienced with the foreign culture in *Dendro*, it was still pretty overwhelming.

Exhausted in both mind and body, I drank some tea while listlessly staring at the bulletin board, which, of course, had posters inviting students to clubs.

“Clubs, eh...?” I murmured.

Many people considered college students improper unless they joined a club and made the most of their youth forming bonds with fellow club members. However, doing so would definitely have a negative impact on my *Dendro* time.

I was fully aware that a college student had no business prioritizing an MMO over communication and bonds made in college, but I really wanted to preserve as much of my online time as possible.

“If only there was a *Dendro* club or something...”

If there was, I would get the collegian social experience and not lose any online time because of it.

However, while a club for all games could probably exist, a college would never, ever have a club focused entirely on one game. Ever. At least, that was what I assumed until I looked at one corner of the board.

“...There is?”

Sure enough, a poster there said “Club *Infinite Dendrogram*” in English, which was as much of a description as it was a title. I questioned why they hadn’t gone with a Japanese name, but I could only assume it had something to do with the abbreviation. “CID” was quite convenient.

Anyway, I wasn’t about to ignore this blessing of a discovery.

A *Dendro* club was a two-for-one deal for me. It would allow me to live the collegian social life *and* come to know new fellow players.

Well, things could get awkward if there were people from Dryfe, but that would be interesting in its own right.

I followed the map provided, and made my way to the CID room. It was my first time at this part of the college, so I felt a bit lost every now and then, but I eventually arrived at my destination.

The door had a somewhat fancy-looking wooden plate on it, saying “Club *Infinite Dendrogram*.”

Slightly tense, I reached out and knocked.

“Come innn,” called someone inside.

“All right, then,” I said as I opened the door.

At that moment, a certain, danger-sensitive part of my brain belatedly reacted to the voice coming from inside and urged me to *stop*. But alas, I'd already opened the door, and now saw what waited beyond it.

"A freshman, I assume? Hey theeere! Welcome to Club *Infinite Dendr*—"

That was the moment I closed the door.

I had every reason to do so.

After all, the face I'd seen there was one I'd involuntarily etched onto my brain. It was a visage I'd seen just yesterday... the one belonging to *Tsukuyo Fuso*.

I might've been mistaken, but I had no intention of opening the door and confirming it. It wasn't far-fetched to believe that the aberration, just like Shu, played as herself. Hell, considering the nature of her cult, it would be the obvious thing for her to keep her real face.

No, screw the reasons why she looked like she did, the person herself was a far bigger problem.

"Damn it! I should've been more cautious!"

I'd completely neglected the possibility of her being in the same college as me! I'd been told that cults often used clubs to gather new members, so why hadn't I connected the dots?! Shit! I'd gone out of the frying pan and into the fire! My college life was in danger of collapsing on the first day!

I hurriedly turned around and got ready to sprint...

"Why are you running?"

...but before I could dash, the door opened, and a slender hand reached out and grabbed me by the nape of my neck. I struggled to move regardless, but I couldn't make an inch of progress.

It seemed mechanically impossible, but once I glanced back, I saw the she-monster holding on to the frame of the door with her other hand.

Well, I... guess that's enough to render me completely immobile with one hand... LIKE HELL! What's up with this upper body strength?! What are you, my sister?!

"Wow, don't know why, but you seem really scared," she said, probably oblivious to the true cause of my panic. "Come on, there's nothing here to be afraid of. Let's go in and have some tea."

The aberration dragged me into the room with unwomanly — borderline inhuman — strength, making me feel like a hamster being swallowed whole by a snake. Then she pushed me onto the bed they most likely used to play *Dendro* on.

"You're here to join the club, aren't you? Why are you running?"

Was that even a question? I was basically encountering an eldritch abomination right after having a nightmare about one. Of course I'd run.

"Oh dear, what a bad expression. Why are you so...?" she said before looking at my student card. "Umm, your name is..."

"Ah?!" I gasped as I realized she'd taken the card case out of my pocket without me even realizing it. She was strong as hell *and* had sticky fingers!

"Okay, so your name is 'Reiji Mukudori'... Oh?" She slightly tilted her head to the side, clearly noticing something.

Oh, crap.

“That look in your eyes, your voice, and... ‘Reiji Mukudori’? Ray Starling?”

Shit! This is what I get for just translating my last name into English! I should've made it less obvious!

“Oh, I see. So that’s what this is about,” she said and cracked a grin.

To me, that expression was the very epitome of horror.

“Well, well... you can’t run away here, can you?”

Oh no. This is really bad.

She was about to force me into joining her cult, and I had no means of escape. *How do I handle this...?!*

“Okay,” she said as she started slowly moving her hands. “Let’s begin with my thanks for yesterday.”

And then...

“Hello.” The clubroom’s door opened, and a third party entered the room.

A part of me thought it was King of Assassins, but it was actually someone I’d never met before.

It was a girl with long hair in a braid, slightly slanted eyes, and glasses, all of which came together to make her look like the diligent type.

“Vice President Tsukikage asked me to bring him the relevant papers to the club invitation tent, and...”

She stopped mid-sentence and noticed the situation in the room. The aberration — all smiles — was holding me down on the bed,

while I — scared beyond words — fruitlessly struggled to escape. The sight made the girl heave a sigh.



“President, could you refrain from pushing boys down on college grounds?” she asked, speaking in such a normal tone that it almost didn’t seem to fit the scenario. That made a flicker of hope light up within me.

This girl might actually be... I thought as I anticipated what she’d say next.

“More importantly, he doesn’t seem to want whatever you’re doing. Sexual misconduct against men is as valid as the reverse. Let him go ASAP.”

She is. My God, she’s actually normal.

She wasn’t an eldritch being, nor was she some weird super secretary.

“Oh, come onnn, I just caught him, you know?” said the aberration.

I’m not some pocket monster for you to catch, damn it!

“I was about to invite him to the club... and make him one of us, of coocourse,” the aberration purred.

“Don’t you think you’re being a little too forceful?” asked the normal girl. “Let him go.”

“Nooo, I wanna make him miiine!”

I’d very much prefer it if you didn’t!

“President, if you don’t listen to me, I will leave the club.”

“Eh?”

“That would leave only you and the vice president, and two people aren’t enough to keep a club active, correct? Do you want that?”

The normal girl's words made the aberration falter. "That... would be a problem..."

"Then please refrain from approaching him improperly and inviting him so forcefully. I'll say it again. Let him go."

At this moment, in my eyes, she seemed somewhat divine.

"But..." muttered the aberration.

"But' what?" demanded the normal girl.

"Okaaay..."

And thus, although reluctantly, the woman finally let me go.

Freedom! I thought as I jumped out of bed and distanced myself from the eldritch creature so much that my back was against the wall.

"He's so scared," said the normal girl. "Did you do more than just make unwanted sexual advances?"

"Nooo, I didn't do much. I just kidnap— invited him over in *Dendro*."

In response, the normal girl just looked at her in silence.

The aberration was clearly far too guilty to plead "I didn't do much."

The normal girl then sighed and said, "President, I have something to say to you. Please sit where you stand. Properly. On your knees."

"Umm... but this is the floor."

"No worries there. I'm sure your legs can handle it just fine."

"That's not the problem here..." The aberration was actually being overpowered.

Just what is this girl...? I wondered, astonished.

“You should run away right now,” the normal girl told me. “You can’t let yourself be caught by a person like... *this...*”

“Like whaaat...?” the aberration complained.

I felt like I’d been pulled into a boat when I was seconds away from drowning.

“Thank you,” I said, expressing my sincere gratitude. Then I left that wicked lair. Once outside, I took a moment to listen to their conversation.

“President,” said the normal girl, “I know that *Infinite Dendrogram* gives us great freedom, but you shouldn’t bring that mentality over to reality. You might’ve been able to kidnap him with no repercussions in the game, but here, unwanted sexual advances are a breach of public order and morals. Do you want to become a criminal?”

“Ehh? But you’ve got it all wronnng. He came here himself this time. And secondly, when you’re online, you also...”

“I separate my game life and real life, thank you very much.” The normal girl was thoroughly scolding her for this.

Anyway, thanks to her intervention, I’d escaped the aberration’s venomous fangs.

Oh, I forgot to ask for her name, I thought as I walked away.



Thanks to the normal girl, I’d been able to escape the eldritch monstrosity. That was the second time the woman had held me in her grasp, and the second time someone had saved me from her.

Still, I couldn't ignore the fact that she was in the same college as me. That could become a huge problem going forward. Though I'd avoided whatever she had planned for me this time, the aberration was now a part of my real life, and I definitely wasn't excited about that.

For some reason, she was obsessed with me, and that made me feel really unsafe.

I sighed, realizing that this might lead me to involve Shu... or perhaps even my sister.

No, that's not an option. Things would only escalate further, I thought as I pictured The Lunar Society's IRL building, completely reduced to rubble. If someone unrelated to the conflict got hurt, it would leave a bad taste in my mouth.

Anyway, after getting out of the lion's den, I made my way to the college library, since one of the fellow students I'd met today had told me something intriguing about it. He'd said he'd been there before, and told me that he'd seen several *Dendro*-related books.

Curious as to what they were like, I came to the library to check them out and read them, and it didn't take long for me to find where they were.

Though the publishers sold them as strategy guides, they had titles you'd expect to see on adventure novels or travel magazines.

Exploration Records of the Maxim Brigade, Twenty Thousand Metels Under the Sea, and Vagrants in Tenchi were good examples.

Basically, *Infinite Dendrogram* was so vast that getting the required information for a proper strategy guide was no small task.

Not even the walkthrough wiki had all the info on all the maps, spawns, or dungeons, and some of it could even become obsolete as time went by. Like everything relating to Noz Forest.

Because of this, most of the so-called “*Dendro* strategy guides” were focused on describing the editors’ personal experiences, rather than presenting data. I found that interesting in its own right, so I didn’t hesitate to pick those three up.

With this, I’d have something I could use to keep myself occupied during breaks between lectures or other times I couldn’t go online. Many of the books were about countries other than Altar, so I was looking forward to reading them.

Now, all I had to do was check them out, and...

“Ah,” I exclaimed as I realized that my student card was still in the aberration’s hands.

What now? I wasn’t too keen on exposing myself to the danger of going there again, so... hm?

Without saying a word, I reached into my pocket and found the very same case I’d thought was still in her hands.

“That’s even scarier than going back there,” I muttered.

The eldritch creature had probably returned it, but just like with the time she’d stolen it, I hadn’t felt it happen at all.

Monstrous strength, inhuman slyness... It wouldn’t surprise me if I learned I’d actually labeled her correctly with the term “eldritch aberration.” Anyway, with my student card on me, there was nothing stopping me from checking out the books.

With the three books in hand, I walked to the borrowing counter, where the nearby “New Releases” corner caught my eye. One of the books there was the *Dendro*-related *A Gourmand’s Tour of Caldina*.

I reached to take it, too, but...

“Ah!”

“I’m sorry.”

...my hand touched the hand of a girl who reached for it at the same time I did.

I apologized, hastily took my hand back and looked at her.

“Oh, you’re the one from before...” she said.

“Ah, thank you for helping me back there!” I replied upon realizing that it was the normal girl from the club room.

My expression of gratitude made her look somewhat troubled. “No need for that... I’m just glad the club didn’t end up having someone with a criminal record. Oh, where are my manners? My name is Kozue Fujibayashi. I’m a second-year in Liberal Arts I.”

“I’m Reiji Mukudori. Starting today, I’m a first-year in Liberal Arts III.”

I’d finally gotten her name and found out that she was an upperclassman.

Following our introductions, Fujibayashi said, “I want to make up for what happened back there,” and invited me to a café on school grounds.

“But there’s nothing for you to feel guilty about,” I replied.

“Well, the president would never apologize for what she did, so, as someone who knows her, I feel I have to do it in her stead.”

She really is diligent, I thought.

“I’m really sorry about what the president did. She doesn’t usually have this many screws loose.”

I wasn’t sure if I could believe that. From what I’d seen of the aberration yesterday and today, it seemed to me that she was always like this. Actually, I wasn’t capable of picturing her without any screws loose. That creature caused trouble wherever she went.

“This is actually the first time something like this has happened since I joined,” Fujibayashi continued.

I was inclined to believe the aberration had just been hiding her true self. Honestly, I’d probably prefer a literal wolf in sheep’s clothing over her.

“Oh, by ‘joined’ I only mean the club,” she added. “I’m not interested in her family’s cult in any way whatsoever.”

“I can tell.” I nodded. A cult adherent would never force their spiritual leader to kneel on the floor.

“How long have you been in that club?” I asked.

“A short while ago, the fourth-years and apprentices graduated or went professional. The club lost some members and they desperately needed more, so the president and vice president went around inviting people. That was when I decided to join... Oh, and in case you’re curious, both of them are third-year medical science students.”

...The eldritch being is a soon-to-be doctor? I thought, baffled.

“Also, I’m sure you’re aware of this by now, but those two are as crazy as their cult, so they didn’t have much luck getting new people. As far as I know, not a single freshman has joined today, either.”

Well, “as crazy as their cult” is pretty damn apt, I thought.

“Their lack of success is only obvious, I’d say,” she added. “In this college, The Lunar Society adherents are staggeringly rare, after all.”

“Really?” I raised an eyebrow.

“The cult is centered around escapism, so there aren’t many people here who would find it attractive.”

That made sense. I was told that The Lunar Society’s first teaching was “Escape the shackles of flesh and betake yourself to the true world of souls,” which basically meant “Escape this cruel reality” with fancy presentation. The cult’s believers picked *Dendro* as the “true world” they so revered, and they now lived on the other side at the expense of their real life.

Naturally, those who made it into this prestigious college wouldn’t be intrigued by a cult that thought this world was fake and tried to escape it.

When I think about it like that, the aberration’s and the KoA’s presence in this school seems really bizarre, I thought.

“And why did you join the club?” I asked Fujibayashi.

“For the info,” she answered.

“Info?” I tilted my head as she pointed at the books I’d borrowed.

“As you know from such books or the wiki, unlike walkthroughs and guides for other games, the ones for *Infinite Dendrogram* lack thoroughness and detail.”

“That’s true.”

“Well, and it just so happens that the president has vast amounts of detailed game info collected by her 1,000 followers.”

Well, I certainly can't doubt the reliability and scope of data gathered by 1,000 no-lifers who see the world as real.

"Members of CID have free access to the info, so I joined because I wanted it," she said.

"I see."

"Of course, I ended up being the only one who joined. Everyone else was too scared off by the strong negative of 'getting involved with The Lunar Society.'"

"I can understand why..."

I imagine people who simply wanted to enjoy a game weren't too excited about the risk of having their real lives jeopardized by a cult.

"What did you think of that negative?" I asked.

"Nothing much. I was already involved with them beforehand," she answered.

"Hm?"

"The president is a student at my family's home."

She then went on to explain what she meant.

According to Fujibayashi, her family were practitioners of the Way of Tea, and the aberration had been learning under them ever since she was young. They'd known each other for a long time, so joining the club hadn't bothered Fujibayashi that much.

The fact that she'd been able to force the aberration to kneel made more sense than ever now.

"By the way, you were kidnapped in *Infinite Dendrogram*, weren't you?" she asked.

“Yes.” I nodded. “They took me when I was sleeping there.”

“...Again, I’m really sorry.”

“Hey, it’s not your fault.”

80% of it had been the aberration’s fault, while the rest had been the King of Assassins’.

“Today is the first day of college, so I assume you escaped by using the suicide function?” she asked.

“No, thankfully, I didn’t have to resort to that. An acquaintance saved me.”

Although, even if Figaro hadn’t been there, instead of using the function, I’d have probably faced the head lunatic and KoA all by myself, completely ready to die.

“‘Saved?’” she repeated, looking startled. “Crazy as they are, the president and vice president are really powerful. Just who in the world could save you from them?”

“Figaro. You might know him. He’s the top of the kingdom’s duel rankings.”

“Figaro...?” The aura about Fujibayashi underwent a slight change as the eyes behind her glasses became a tiny bit sharper. For some reason, I felt a sense of contempt, or fear, behind her gaze. “You had the duel champion come and help you? Just who *are* you?”

“I met him soon after I started. I later found out that he was friends with my brother, too.”

“Brother... Figaro... Superiors... Brothers... Mukudori...” she muttered, placing her hand over her mouth and pondering. “...The Starling brothers.” Then, seemingly having come to some conclusion,

she looked into my eyes. “Sorry if I’m wrong, but... are you Ray Starling of the Starling brothers?”

“Ah, yes. That would be me,” I confessed.

Man, my real and avatar names were a bit too much alike. People were figuring out who I was way too quickly. Thanks to Franklin’s broadcast, quite a number of people knew my avatar’s name, which no doubt made figuring it out even easier.

“KoD’s younger brother and the Over Gladiator’s student? *That* Ray Starling?” Fujibayashi asked to confirm.

“I wouldn’t call myself his student,” I said. “We do spar every now and then, though.”

Also, this probably wasn’t a nice thing to think, but Figaro just wasn’t cut out for teaching. Honestly, even Xunyu was better at that.

...Although I didn’t know how to feel about being taught by a ten-year-old girl.

Oh, and Riser — the sixth in the duel rankings — was pretty good, too.

“I see,” Fujibayashi said before placing her hand over her mouth again and pondering for ten or so seconds. “Mukudori,” she said at last, seemingly having thought of something. “Would you go on a quest with me this weekend?”

It was an invitation to a *Dendro* activity.

“Sure. Gladly.” I accepted without hesitation, feeling that this was a start of a good relationship.



"So yeah, that's how it is," I said.

"Right-o," Shu confirmed. "Got it."

I'd called Shu to tell him that I'd made plans to go on a quest with a new acquaintance, and that I'd take a while to return to Gideon. I'd also told him to pass it on to Rook and Marie, so everything should be settled now.

Mind you, it was a bit of a waste of time and effort to ask someone else to pass on my messages, so it was probably high time our party exchanged contact info.

"By the way, what happened to the fox that took you?" Shu asked.

The word "fox" momentarily confused me, but it didn't take me long to figure out who he was referring to. There was only one person who fit the bill.

"Oh, you mean the aberr... Tsukuyo Fuso?"

While I saw her as an eldritch aberration, apparently Shu saw her as a fox.

"There's a bit of a problem regarding her," I sighed.

"And that would be?"

"She's an upperclassman at college."

"...That's... just... grizzly..."

I don't know if you're surprised or shocked, but please don't bring your bear puns into real life.

"You all right, bro?" he asked, clearly worried.

"That new acquaintance I told you about helped me out, so yeah, I am, if only barely." I couldn't bear to think how things would've turned out if Fujibayashi hadn't been there.

"I see. Should I contact our sis? Just in case?"

"...Don't. I feel like whatever she'd do would leave a bad taste in my mouth."

She was a woman who seemed to be living in a different setting than the rest of us. I'd recently started reading Marie's manga, and I could honestly say that my sister would fit in there just fine.

Did I just think that she'd fit in a battle manga about superpowered professional killers?! I realized. What the hell?

"You still can't handle our sister, huh?" Shu asked.

Well, he certainly wasn't wrong about that. I didn't hate her or anything, but remembering what she'd done when I was young still made me shiver.

Ten years ago, up until that one Un-kra tournament, I'd been really attached to Shu. Looking back at it now, it had probably been a reaction in response to my fear of my sister.

"Hmm..." Shu pondered about something. "By the way, what did you feel when looking at Tsukuyo Fuso?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You found her *really* scary, didn't you?"

The question made my heart skip a beat. "...How do you know that?"

"Yeah, I thought as much... Then let me give you a little trick to make the fear go away."

A trick? Dude, this really doesn't seem like something that can be taken care of by just that.

"The reason why you're so afraid of the fox is very simple," he said before making a pause to emphasize the words that followed. "*She's just like our sister.*"

Ah.

"I don't mean her face, of course. It's the general feel about her. She's weirdly friendly, cheerful, childish, and mischievous, and yet she sometimes has the aura of a murderous animal aiming for her prey. She and our sis are extremely alike."

"Guh..."

H-He's completely right. That's it. I finally know the cause of the vague, unknown fear within me.

It also made me realize why my mind hadn't been able to connect the dots. Going down memory lane to find the reason why I was so afraid of the aberration would have meant digging through my traumatic memories with my sister.

"Just keep in mind that she and our sis aren't the same, and she shouldn't scare you anymore."

"...Yeah."

"That fox didn't jump from building to building while holding little baby you."

"...Yeah."

"She didn't escape a sinking passenger ship by breaking its hull."

"...Yeah."

“She didn’t jump out of an aircraft without a parachute and survive with just a few scratches.”

“...”

Just what the hell is my sister’s body made of?

Although I guess I couldn’t ignore that, with the third incident, she’d fallen on a soft, freshly-tilled grape field, and there’d been other people who’d survived such falls with minor injuries.

“So yeah, there’s no reason for you to be so afraid of the fox,” Shu concluded.

“Thanks,” I said. “That helps a lot.”

I really meant that. That exchange made me feel completely refreshed.

After the call, I went to have dinner and take a bath. Following that, I went on the *Dendro* news site, *MMO Journal Planter*, and checked if anything had happened in the kingdom while I was offline.

I saw headlines such as: “Shindo 3/Mercalli III-IV Earthquakes Happening All Over the Kingdom,” “That Big PK Joined That New PK Clan, Sol Crisis,” and “Gideon’s Next Big Thing! KoD-Approved Popcorn!”

“...”

I didn’t care much about the PK news, and I was too scared to read the one about my very own brother, so I went straight for the one about earthquakes.

According to the article, over the past month or so, weak earthquakes had been happening here and there across the kingdom. The hypocenters were scattered all over the country, and

people still couldn't figure out what was causing it. Also, the places that suffered the earthquakes had a high chance of revealing new dungeons, UBMs, or hordes of strong monsters, making many believe that they were all related somehow.

I scrolled through the discussion board and saw people present theories such as: "Large monsters are wandering around the underground," "The environment control AI is preparing something big," "Someone's just practicing their earth magic," and "It's just Franklin being a terrorist again."

I was leaning towards the last one.

Once done checking the news, I equipped my *Infinite Dendrogram* gear.

I would now go on a quest with Fujibayashi.

Thankfully, tomorrow was Saturday and there was no college, so unless the quest was absurdly long, we shouldn't have any problems. Hell, and if we didn't find a quest that was right for us, we could just raid the Tomb Labyrinth.

"All right, time to go online," I said as I logged in to *Infinite Dendrogram* after a whole day away from it.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE IMPOSSIBLE QUEST

Paladin, Ray Starling

Fujibayashi and I had decided to meet in the capital, rather than Gideon, so I chose to log in at the place where I'd last logged out instead of my save point at the city of duels.

Sure, I had my worries about appearing right next to the aberration's lair, AKA The Lunar Society's headquarters, but thankfully, no one was waiting to ambush me.

Hold on, I thought. The King of Assassins could be hiding in my shadow again.

Just to be sure, I coated one of my Grudge-Soaked Greaves in Purifying Silverlight and kicked the ground beneath.

Nothing happened, which could only mean that my shadow was mine and mine alone, making me sure I was safe.

"It appears you had no trouble making it to college." Nemesis popped out of the crest and spoke to me. "But that seems to have led to even greater trouble."

She could only be referring to the fact that the aberration and I were in the same college.

"Well, I'm glad you were able to escape her clutches, but this makes it two times I couldn't help you in any way."

"Hm?" I raised an eyebrow. Nemesis seemed uncharacteristically down. It was as though she were deriding herself for something.

“While you were on the other side, I was thinking things through,” she said in a slightly dejected tone, probably as a reply to my thoughts. “I was of no help to you during yesterday’s battle. Even when attacking the King of Assassins, you could’ve used any other weapon, and the result would’ve been the same. My powerlessness back then made me consider whether I have really grown since our battle against Gardranda.”

“But you did,” I said.

And don’t think otherwise.

“I knew you would say that,” she sighed. “But you can’t ignore that I haven’t even evolved since then.”

“But there’s still stuff you’ve learned to do, right?”

“...Oh, you mean *that*? But it’s a technique we didn’t even have a chance to use against the High Priestess and King of Assassins.”

“We’ll use it eventually, properly paired with what *I’ve* learned. So yeah, don’t be so down. And don’t mind the skills and stats so much. I know better than anyone else that you’re growing and working hard for it,” I concluded with a light tap of her shoulder.

“I must say, you speak *very* passionately sometimes,” she said and cracked a wry smile. “You sound like an overly-enthusiastic teacher.”

Though probably not in the way I’d intended, my words seemed to have lifted her spirits.

“So,” Nemesis spoke up again. “We’re cooperating with one of your acquaintances from the other side, yes? If you exclude Brother Bear, this is going to be a first.”

“That’s true.”

We arrived at the rendezvous point, the familiar fountain, and I became aware of a problem.

“While Fujibayashi seems to know me, I know neither her avatar’s name nor what she looks like.”

For reasons unknown, she’d insisted on telling me when we were online. I hadn’t pushed it, but it was still going to be a problem when trying to find each other.

Things would be really easy if she, like the aberration, played as herself, but I certainly didn’t expect Fujibayashi to take that route.

So how do we meet up? I wondered. I don’t feel good about just standing here and waiting for her.

My voice was the same as in real life, so maybe I could just wait for the time to come and start shouting “I’m Ray! Right here!” or something?

No, things would be pretty embarrassing for me if she was late. Worst case scenario, I could even attract the aberration.

“Don’t I have *any* good way to help us meet up?” I thought aloud.

Wait... Meet up... Fountain... Shu...

“Ah!” I exclaimed as I was struck with an idea.

“...You’re really going to do it?” asked Nemesis.

“What choice do I have in this situation?”

A few minutes later, I was sitting on the edge of the fountain while holding a sign saying “Welcome, KF.”

“This should be enough for her to realize it’s me,” I said.

The letters “KF,” of course, stood for “Kozue Fujibayashi.” Things had come to this because I hadn’t been given her avatar’s name.

“...Is it just me, or are you attracting more stares than usual?” asked Nemesis.

“Well, of course. People with signs stand out, you know?”

And as many people as possible have to see it, just in case one of them is Fujibayashi.

“Doesn’t it bother you?” she asked.

“I get weird stares all the time these days. I’m more or less used to it by now.”

It was probably because of Franklin’s Game. My battle against the RSK had been streamed to both Gideon and the capital, so I’d become strangely famous.

I swear, nothing good comes from whatever that lab coat bastard does, I thought.

“I’m inclined to believe that most of the stares are because of your current appearance,” commented Nemesis.

“Hm?”

What do you mean?

“Anyway, I must say, you’re becoming more and more like Brother Bear.”

“Prepawsterous.”

“It’s spreading?!” she exclaimed with obvious shock in her tone.

Whoa there, I’m just joking. No need to shiver that much.

“Nh?” I added.

We — or, Nemesis insisted, I — had been attracting stares from many people here, but one person in particular had a relatively strange presence.

Since entering *Dendro*, I'd become quite sensitive to this sort of thing.

The peculiar stare was coming from someone mixed into a crowd. Specifically, from a *huge* person in appropriately large full armor.

None of that was an exaggeration. The person looked at least three meters tall, and his armor was so complete that I couldn't see a hint of his skin.

However, his face was directed towards me, so I could only assume that he was looking at me.

As though realizing that I'd noticed him, the armored giant turned around and walked down the alley.

"What was that about?" I asked.

"A fan, perhaps?" suggested Nemesis.

While it was true that I'd had a few fans approach me since Franklin's Game, somehow, I didn't feel that was the case here. I couldn't see his eyes, but I felt that the armored person was... observing me. Also, I couldn't help but feel as if I'd seen that armor before...

"Well, he might've just been taken aback by the sign," said Nemesis.

That wasn't unlikely. I, too, had been shocked when I'd seen Shu wait for me here while holding his sign and wearing a bear costume.

I look way more normal than he did, though, I thought.

“Eh?!” Nemesis exclaimed, as though questioning if I was being serious.

Of course I do, I thought in response. My gear's history might be dark, but it's all perfectly normal compared to a goddamn bear suit.

Nemesis didn't argue. She just closed her eyes, sighed and muttered, “He's too far gone.” I had no idea what she meant by that.

Twenty minutes had passed since I'd brought the sign.

“Are you Mukudori?” someone asked in a familiar voice, prompting me to turn towards them.

Though the voice was one I'd heard in reality not so long ago, the appearance was completely new to me.

“Yes, I'm Mukudori,” I said. “Are you Fujibayashi?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “Looks like we met up without a problem.”

Her avatar looked decidedly plain and normal. Though there was little of her real-life self in her appearance, her height was about the same. The equipment she had equipped looked high-quality, but none of it really stood out, especially when compared to animal costumes and the like.

If I had to point out anything special about her appearance, it would be her glasses. She wore a pair in real life, too.

While the gear of the eccentric Superiors and duel rankers I'd been sparring against often weirded me out or put me on edge, she had an appearance that gave me peace of mind.



"I'm glad we were able to meet up, but I must ask, what's with the gea— I mean, sign?" she asked.

"My brother did this to me before," I answered. "Is it *that* weird?"

"...It surprised me, but that's the extent of it."

What's with that pause before her answer? I wondered.

"Anyway... You really *are* Ray Starling."

"Well, yeah."

"Being with someone famous makes me a bit tense."

I was silent.

Like Nemesis had mentioned, I'd recently had some people approach me as fans, so this wasn't completely new to me. Still, having a real-life acquaintance call me "famous" made me somewhat bashful.

"So, let's go to the guild," she said. "There are two of us, and we're both battle jobs, so I feel like a kill quest would suit us far better than a gathering quest. I'll leave the choice to you, though."

"All right," I said. "Oh, by the way, what's your job? I'm a Paladin."

"My current main job is Shield Giant."

I didn't know what kind of job that was, and once I asked, she said, "It's a high-rank job that focuses on shield skills, and it allows smooth usage of all shields regardless of size as long as you have the required STR."

It was probably a defensive job, but I couldn't help but note that the term "Giant" didn't fit Fujibayashi's slender frame at all.

Oh, there's something I must ask before we form a party, I thought. “What’s your avatar’s name?”

It couldn’t be just “Kozue Fujibayashi,” after all. She wasn’t like that aberration or her super secretary.

“Well...” she said, before taking a moment to think. “Call me ‘B3.’”

“Okay... Hm?” I complied, but then I realized that she’d said something off. She’d told me to *call her* “B3,” strongly implying that it wasn’t actually her avatar name.

“That’s not my avatar’s name, but ‘B3’ is how my close friends call me,” she explained as she sent me a party invitation. “And my name is a little, uh... long too, so it’s convenient.”

The name I saw next to the invitation was indeed long, and it could easily be abbreviated to just “B3.”

I accepted the invitation, and we became part of the same party.

Interesting note: she was level 485, making it very clear that she was experienced.

“I was maxed out just a while ago, but now I’m experimenting with various job combinations,” she told me.

Oh, yeah. Shu had once told me that jobs could be reset and exchanged for other jobs.

I was still on my first, so that feature didn’t really matter to me.

“Now that we’re in the same party, let us introduce ourselves again,” she said. “I’m B3. Nice to meet you.”

“Ah, all right,” I replied. “I’m Ray Starling. Let’s get along.”

“Greetings!” Nemesis joined in. “I’m Ray’s Embryo, Nemesis. It’s a pleasure, B3.”

“Same here.” With the partying up and introductions done, we headed out to the guild to pick up a quest.



It was my first time at the capital’s guild since Rook, Marie, and I had taken the quest to make a delivery to Gideon. Not even a month had passed since that time, so the interior hadn’t changed a bit.

B3 and I sat down at a table and looked at the quests in the large magical catalog.

Unlike last time, when there had been many escort quests from people heading to Gideon or other countries, there were now lots of escort quests to some village in the north, and I couldn’t imagine why. Ten minutes of quest-searching later, we still hadn’t found the right one.

“...Nh?” I raised an eyebrow as I noticed that there was some trouble going on at the counter. It was caused by a young boy, desperately asking for something from the guild employee.

“Please, get someone to search for my dad! He’s been gone for half a year now!” the boy pleaded.

“I’m sorry, but we cannot accept your request because it breaches one of the adventurers’ guild’s special rules,” the employee replied, looking thoroughly troubled.

The adventurers around them seemed quite perplexed, as well.

Apparently, the boy was making a request, but for some reason, the guild wasn’t taking it.

“A missing persons quest, huh?” I muttered.

“The adventurer’s guild handles those, but they’re not too popular,” said B3. “They often take a long time, and they require a highly particular set of skills.”

I see, I thought. Depending on your perspective, killing monsters or just gathering stuff is way easier and simpler than searching for someone.

Sure, search quests had an advantage in that they weren’t life-threatening, but that wasn’t that big of a deal for us Masters. Then again, the first quest I’d ever taken on had been a life-threatening search quest... though it probably didn’t count as a search quest, since I’d already known where Milianne was.

“But there *are* skills that help search for people, right?” I asked.

“Yes.” B3 nodded. “There are some of them among both job skills and unique Embryo skills. However...” she said before pausing and looking at the boy and the employee at the counter. “The worker mentioned a special rule, and if it’s regarding search quests, that might be...”

Suddenly, one of the nearby tian adventurers, unable to bear it, placed his hand on the boy’s shoulder and spoke to him.

“Kid, the man’s been lost for nearly half a year, right? Sorry to break it to you, but your dad’s probably—”

“He can’t be dead!” the boy shouted defiantly as he escaped the man’s hand.

For reasons unknown, I’d felt as though his shout was more than just wishful thinking... as if he was absolutely certain of what he was saying.

"I mean... my dad is..." he said before following it up with words that left me completely astonished. "He's my stepdad! And he's a Master!"

"Wh...!" I gasped.

A tian boy had just asserted that his dad was a Master.

"He's a Master, so he can never die," he repeated himself. "But he's been gone for half a year now... so I want someone to find him..."

The boy turned teary and spoke the reasons why he was making the request.

"My little brother or sister... Dad and Mom's child should be born soon. I want him to be there to meet him or her, and... and..."

He suddenly stopped speaking. He hung his head and started sobbing.

Seeing him like that made my heart ache, but at the same time, I was curious about several things.

"B3, I have some questions," I said.

"Yes, players and NPCs *can* get married," she answered before I could even ask. "As for children between players and NPCs, they're only possible in theory."

That was exactly what I wanted to know about.

"If they're old enough in real life for it — 18 or above in Japan — players can marry NPCs or other players... and partake in intercourse... *become intimate*, so to speak."

Well, I guess jobs like "Pimp" and "Harlot" are there for a reason, I thought. I guess it's only obvious for Dendro to have that kind of intimacy.

On a tangentially-related note, back when Rook had asked if Pimp was “a monster-taming kind of job,” he had only been referring to the job as it was in *Dendro*. He’d been fully aware of what the word meant in real life.

“I knew about it. It’s common knowledge,” he’d explained to me later.

Are Pimps really common knowledge for people his age? I thought, and then suddenly realized I’d gotten sidetracked pretty badly, so I shifted my attention back to B3.

Probably because I’d appeared really contemplative, she looked like she’d been overthinking some things, too.

“Sorry, I guess you’re too young to talk about this,” she said with her hand over her mouth. Her tone was apologetic.

“Oh. No, no, I’m old enough for this...” I cleared up the misunderstanding, and my own words made me realize that I was already allowed to *become intimate* with people. I didn’t really see myself ever using that feature, though.

“I see. I’ll continue, then. While players can have intercourse, a certain problem makes it nearly impossible for it to ever result in children.”

“And that problem would be...?”

“Take a look at this,” she said as she reached into her inventory and took out a knife and a handkerchief, neither of which seemed special in any way. Then, not saying a word, B3 thrust the tip of the knife into the palm of her free hand.

“Huh?!” I exclaimed as the shock forced me to stand up.

“Hyah! Hyah!” she shouted, doing it again and again.

The knife didn’t pierce her hand. No matter how many times she tried, it just couldn’t break her skin.

Eventually, the speed of her attacks became such that it had me worried, but even then, B3’s hand remained unharmed.

Normally, the palm would’ve been covered in holes all over at this point, but no, there wasn’t even a hint of a scratch on it.

Soon enough, I began feeling like she was just showing me some trick, and that was about the time when she stopped.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I tried to release some blood to make my explanation easier, but my END is so high that this knife just couldn’t do it.”

“Ohh...” I expressed my understanding.

That reminded me that B3’s job was “Shield Giant,” and that she was a long-time player who’d once reached the maximum level available to non-Superior Jobs. It was only natural for her to have a high defense stat, and honestly, it wouldn’t have surprised me if that palm of hers was tougher than my armor.

“We’ll have to continue without an example,” she said. “You *have* seen what happens when players get the death penalty, right?”

“Well... yeah,” I nodded. *I’ve seen it plenty of times in the past month.*

“Have you noticed how their scattered blood and other bodily fluids vanish along with the body?”

“...I have.”

The first thing that came to mind was Lei-Lei's battle that Marie had shown me on her crystal. The melted, liquid flesh and the shreds of skin of the Masters she'd killed had all become particles of light and vanished at the same time.

"This exact same phenomenon happens when you log out," B3 said.

"The exact same?" I raised an eyebrow.

"For example, if I had gotten some of my blood on this handkerchief and logged out, the blood would disappear at the same time as I vanished."

"I see," I said, fully understanding what she was getting at. "So you can't make children because bodily fluids disappear the moment you log out."

"That's exactly it."

It made perfect sense now. After all, we Masters simply *had* to log out every once in a while.

"However, some theorize that it might be possible if the Master stays online long enough for the zygote to properly develop."

Well, that was certainly a reasonable theory. I could totally understand why someone would think that a zygote wouldn't vanish if it was recognized as a separate organism, rather than just an egg with some genes sticking to it.

"But that's..."

...difficult, to say the least, I finished silently.

Yesterday, when I'd been kidnapped by The Lunar Society for just about a third of one real-life day, I'd become quite hungry and really needed to pee.

Being online long enough for a zygote to develop into its own organism — which could be anywhere from several days to a few weeks — seemed downright impossible.

“Then what about that boy’s sibling?” I asked.

“In my opinion, the most likely case is that his mother cheated on the stepfather Master with another tian,” B3 answered. “The second most likely case is that the stepfather is actually a tian merely pretending to be a Master, and the child is really his. The third and least likely scenario is that the aforementioned theory was proven right. Though, note that the second one would mean severe punishment for the stepfather, since the law in every country strictly forbids tians to pretend to be Masters.”

“Then I hope it’s the third one,” I said. The other two would definitely leave a bad taste in my mouth.

“It doesn’t look like there will be a good ending to this regardless, though,” said B3.

“Why not? If it happens to be the third one, someone would only have to find the stepfather Master and... ah.”

“You see the problem?” she said.

Sure, someone would only have to find him. However, it was likely that the search would go beyond *Dendro*.

“I didn’t get to tell you about the special rule regarding search quests,” she added. “The guild refuses to accept them when the one being searched for is a Master who hasn’t been online for a long time. You understand why, don’t you?”

Of course I do.

For tians, searching for offline Masters was downright impossible, and even Masters would find it extremely difficult. They might even have to hire a detective, and even then, the chances of success would be low.

After all, *Dendro* had players all over the world, not to mention that the only info you started out with was regarding them as they'd been *here*, not back on the other side.

"Finding Masters that haven't come online for a while is completely impossible," B3 concluded. "In fact, when they've been away from *Infinite Dendrogram* for so long, it's highly likely that they've quit, so even if you did miraculously find them, convincing them to return would no doubt be difficult."

She was completely right about that.

The tians and Masters around the boy knew that, too, and I could easily tell they were avoiding any involvement.

They were right to do so.

For tians, going to the world where Masters returned to — reality — was downright impossible, and though it wasn't so for Masters, they would still have a low chance of succeeding, not to mention that they had no obligation to dedicate their real-life time to a search because of something in *Dendro*. I could totally understand that, but...

"B3," I spoke up.

"Yes?"

"Sorry, but can we postpone today's quest for a later date?"

"Why?"

"I'm gonna accept that boy's search quest."

Despite it all, I just couldn't turn a blind eye to the downcast, crying little kid.

"I just explained that that quest is impossible," she objected.

"It probably is," I agreed. "But ignoring it would leave a bad taste in my mouth."

"..." B3 fell silent as she placed her hand on her mouth and thought about something.

That reaction was only natural. I was fully aware I was being unreasonable, and I didn't want to involve someone as logical as her into something so unsound.

"You should—"

"Then I'll join you," she cut me off with words I really didn't expect.

"Really...? Are you sure?"

"I said that I would ultimately let you choose the quest we would take, didn't I?"

That she had. However, I'd assumed that had only applied when we were talking about normal quests.

"Also, if you don't mind me borrowing your words..." she said in a gentle tone as she looked directly into my eyes. "Going my own way from here would leave a bad taste in my mouth."

"Thank you," I said gratefully.

Then I stood up, walked up to the dejected boy at the counter, and placed my hand on his shoulder.

"We'll accept your request," I gently said.

“...Eh?” he exclaimed, thoroughly surprised.

There was hope in his eyes. It was as though they were asking
“Really?”

I nodded, and asserted, “We will search for your dad.”

Thus, B3 and I began our first adventure together.

We would brave an impossible quest — the search for a Master.

Our goal... was a happy ending.

Let the quest begin.



We'd accepted the request of the boy named Louie who was searching for his dad. However, it didn't even count as a quest. Not only did the guild not process it because of its special rules, but it also didn't appear in my log as an event quest. I didn't know whether that was some sort of accident, or whether the control AI that calculated quest difficulty just didn't recognize this as a quest.

Still, even without a difficulty rating, I could tell that a quest to find a person in real life would be, in a way, harder than any other quest in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

We were now at a diner adjoined to the adventurers' guild, where we had Louie tell us about his dad.

We asked for his name, job, and anything else that could help lead us to his real-life self. None of what we'd learned was much help, but at the very least, we'd gotten his avatar's name: Ichiro Shijima. If, as the name implied, he was really Japanese, our search would become somewhat easier.

The difficulty would drop again if that was actually a modified version of his real name, since it would limit our search to names such as “Ichiro Ishijima” or “Ichiro Ushijima,” among others.

And, if we were to be greedy...

“It would really help if that’s his real name...” I muttered.

“I don’t think that’s possible,” said B3. “This isn’t the president or the vice president we’re talking about.”

“Yeah, we can’t expect everyone to be like the aberration or the KoA,” I agreed.

“Indeed, the only people who would play with their real names are people such as myself, Lady Tsukuyo, and our Society’s adherents.”

“True...” I said, before realizing who I was talking to and replying with a sarcastic tone. “Ah ha ha... And why might you be here, King of Secretaries... nay, King of Assassins?”

Before we’d realized it, the KoA who was our upperclassman in college, Eishiro Tsukikage, was sitting at one corner of our table with a tea cup in hand, all smiles. He reminded me of Marie.

They’re similar in more than just jobs, I thought. Now that I think about it, the aberration did a similar thing yesterday.

“I’ve been sitting here since halfway through the questioning, but since no one noticed me, I took the liberty of asserting my presence,” he said.

“And why did you sit here?” I demanded.

“Lady Tsukuyo is still prohibited from logging in, so she had me deliver a message to you.”

“Which would be?”

“It’s a proposition. ‘Now, I’ll fix your arm up if you only join CID.’”

“Hm...”

That... was actually worth considering.

You would never see me become a part of The Lunar Society, but I wasn’t too averse to joining the aberration’s college club. I now knew why I was so afraid of her, not to mention that CID had B3, who would keep her in check. The conditions were definitely attractive, but...

“I’ll give my answer after the weekend,” I said at last.

“Very well.”

Yesterday’s memories were just too fresh in my mind to let me accept the offer so nonchalantly.

With his business done, I expected Tsukikage to leave, but he showed no intention to stand up from his chair. I glanced at him and noticed that he was looking at Louie.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Would you like The Lunar Society to help search for this boy’s father?” he proposed.

I didn’t know what kind of whim or plot had caused him to make this offer. Sure, having the cult’s many adherents helping us would greatly increase the scope of our information network and make the search many times easier, but...

“Why?” I asked, not seeing the reason for this proposition.

The aberration wasn’t here, and she probably didn’t know that I’d accepted Louie’s request, so it was highly unlikely that she was

related to this offer. This would mean that it came from Tsukikage himself, but I couldn't see any reason why he would suggest it.

The aberration would obviously do this to make me owe her something, but somehow, I didn't see that being the case with Tsukikage.

Thus, my question.

"That's a secret," he replied.

The cloak and dagger in his words made accepting his proposition seem all the more dangerous.

"We'll ask for your help if we figure there's nothing we can do by ourselves," I said.

"Very well." He nodded. "We will be ready to assist you."

For now, I decided to keep his offer as an alternative.

Tsukikage stood up from his chair. Then, seemingly struck with an idea, he turned to say something more.

"Oh, by the way... Take this as simple advice, rather than a proposition, but I suggest you take your search for real-life information to young Louie's mother — Mr. Shijima's wife. Just as there are things only parents and children talk about, there are also private talks between spouses. Not to mention that you might find clues in their family home. You should only rely on real-life detectives, your brother, or your friends after you've exhausted such sources."

"...Thanks."

"With that settled, I bid you goodbye. May we meet again."

Following his long, oddly specific advice, Tsukikage sunk into his own shadow.

The sight greatly surprised Louie, but Fujibayashi — fully used to it, apparently — didn't even flinch.

Additionally, Tsukikage left behind a pouch with a little paper saying “Payment for my tea.”

...Guy's a damn weirdo, but he sure is principled, I thought.

Anyway, his advice was completely sound. If we wanted to find a person in real life, we couldn't miss a single clue we could find here.

“Where do you live, Louie?” I asked the boy.

“In Torne village. It's in the north, about half a day away from here by carriage.” That was closer than Gideon, but still pretty far.

“Did you come alone?” I asked.

“No.” He shook his head. “I took a stagecoach that was passing through the village. I used the allowance I got from Dad to pay for it. I also thought of using the money to pay for the guild request, but...”

He then showed me the inside of his wallet, and it was doubtful if there was even enough for a carriage back to the village. In fact, it probably wasn't even enough to pay for the guild request, but in my eyes, that was a sign of just how desperate Louie was.

“I hope we find his father,” Nemesis said telepathically.

Yeah, same here, I thought in response.

“All right, let's go to Torne, then,” I said. “As for how we get there...”

Silver could fly us there in no time, but I could only let one other person ride with me, at most, so...

"You have a horse, don't you, Ray?" B3 asked, cutting short my train of thought.

"Ah, yeah, I do."

"Excellent. I don't have a horse, but I do have a carriage. Can we get your horse to pull it?"

"Sure." A carriage would let us all travel there at the same time.

With our destination and means of transportation all set, we began making our way towards Torne.

I'll admit, I'm kinda curious as to why B3 has a carriage, but no horse, I thought.



???

After Ray's group left the diner, a girl sitting at a table some distance away from them, close to the exit, stood up from her chair.

She was just another Master who'd merely happened to be there at that time. However, since she'd seen something that she, as a member of a *certain clan*, just couldn't ignore, she left the diner right after confirming that Ray's group wasn't there anymore.

She quickly made her way for a certain establishment in the capital. These were the headquarters of her clan, and they had a Japanese aesthetic, though not in the same way as The Lunar Society's HQ.

It was obvious from its outward design. The building looked like the house of Japanese martial arts practitioners, and it had a dojo affixed to it. Another thing that stood out was the sign that had the clan's name on it, for it was written very skillfully.

“Big sis! I have something to report! It’s urgent!” the girl from the diner shouted as she ran into the dojo and called for someone inside.

“Damn, you’re loud,” said a woman in a husky tone.

She surpassed 180cm in height, had a body covered in well-trained muscles, eyes that gleamed, and dangerously sharp fangs.

All that, combined with the wolfish ears on her head and the tail behind her, made her appear very much like a carnivorous predator. And because of such appearances, as well as her demeanor, those close to her often referred to her as “big sis” or just “sis” despite no blood relation.

The muscular woman stood in the middle of the dojo, spear in hand. Around her, there were a number of freshly downed Masters, all of whom looked nearly dead. They, too, were Masters belonging to the same clan as the girl who’d just left the diner and arrived here.

From the dire sight before her, the girl assumed that she’d arrived right as they finished training, and she couldn’t be more glad that she was off-duty today.

“And? What is it, Tomika?” asked the muscular woman, making the girl snap out of it. “Weren’t you out to get a quest today?”

“Th-This is serious, sis!” the girl named Tomika shouted.

“Just tell me *what’s* so serious,” the muscular woman said. “Did my darling finally go online or something?”

The “darling” she spoke of was none other than the clan’s owner. Due to certain real-life circumstances, he hadn’t been able to log in for a while now.

Sadly for those in the clan, his absence had caused the muscular woman's training to become more intense with every passing day. After all, it was well-known in and out of the clan that she was absolutely head over heels for the young leader.

"The Lunar Society might be planning something..."

"The lunatic cultists? I'm all ears." Suddenly, the woman began emitting a menacing, pressurizing aura.

It was caused by not only her avatar's stats, but also by the intensity of her emotion. Everyone present — even the downed clan members — felt it clearly.

"Th-The KoA was in the guild's diner and, uh..."

"Oh? That hanger-on? By himself?" the muscular woman cut Tomika off and asked.

"Yeah. And he was happily talking with a certain party, and before disappearing, he left them a pouch with something written on it."

Tsukikage never neglected to have a smile on his face, so it was hard to deny that he'd *looked* happy, and Tomika had been too far away from them to know that the pouch was nothing more than the payment for his tea.

As a result, the impression she'd gotten from their exchange was exactly as she'd described it.

"Hmm... You sure that wasn't just a party of cultists?" asked the muscular woman.

"Well... he was talking to *that* BBB and Ray Starling, the guy who became famous after Franklin's Game."

“Ohh...?” The woman, intrigued, cracked a grin. The expression made her look like an actual predator. “The rumored ‘Unbreakable,’ eh? And B3? I was wondering what she’s been up to after disbanding her clan, but I never expected her to be dealing with the cultists. Guess this means the rumors are fake.”

B3 was, in fact, “dealing with the cultists,” but only as a member of a real-life club led by them, and definitely not in the way that the woman imagined it.

“And? What are they planning to do?” the woman asked.

“I don’t know that much... But before they left the diner, I overheard that they were going to Torne...” Tomika confessed.

“Torne? Well, Windstar Festival should start soon. Maybe that has something to do with it.” The woman repeatedly flicked her spear’s handle with her thumb as she tried to figure out the plot between Ray’s group and The Lunar Society — which didn’t actually exist. Though unable to find an answer, she was finally able to make a certain decision.

“All right,” she said. “I don’t know what they’re planning, but we’ll crush them anyway.”

Words to play by: *I don’t know, therefore I PK.*

“Let this be a little preliminary match before our actual revenge battle. We’ll screw up whatever the lunatics are planning.”

“But sis, our leader still isn’t...”

“Ha! The only reason why we got messed up by The Lunar Society is because we didn’t have my darling with us to take care of them. I don’t wanna involve him in the revenge match when it’s all our own fault.”

The woman then momentarily fell silent and took a deep breath.

“WAKE UP ALREADY, DAMN IT!” she howled so loudly that the whole dojo shook.

Her voice made all the members spread out on the floor jump up and stand straight.

“We... the K&R, are going on a hunt! Go and prepare!” the Nobushi Princess, Rosa, cried.

Hearing the order of their sub-leader, the members of K&R — the third clan in the kingdom’s rankings and the country’s strongest PK clan — began preparing for an attack.

Thus, because of a minor misunderstanding and a major lack of forethought, Ray’s search quest was about to be gatecrashed by the kingdom’s strongest PK clan.

CHAPTER SIX: ALONG THE WAY

Paladin, Ray Starling

Riding our carriage as it left tracks on the dirt path below, we gradually made our way towards Torne Village.

Well, calling it “our carriage” wasn’t exactly appropriate, considering the fact that it belonged B3 alone. Still, it was being drawn by my Silver, so that term wasn’t entirely wrong.

B3 and I were in the coachman’s seat, while Louie sat inside the actual carriage.

The vehicle was very well-designed. Its base was high enough for me to pass under it by simply bending forward, and it had tires akin to those on old off-road cars, letting it easily handle uneven terrain. It was also imbued with various magics, giving it functions such as air conditioning, impact reduction, interior space expansion, and a defensive barrier.

All in all, the carriage was the *Dendro* equivalent of an armored vehicle that VIPs would use. That made me all the more curious as to why B3 had *only* the carriage. After all, what good was a horse-drawn vehicle without a horse to pull it?

“So, why do you have *just* the carriage?” I let my curiosity take over and asked directly.

In response, B3 placed her hand over her mouth again and took a moment to think before matter-of-factly saying, “This carriage was the common property of my clan.”

“You were the leader of a clan?”

“Yes. It’s disbanded now, though,” she said as she cast down her eyes, looking somewhat lonely. “It had many members who had busy real lives, you see. There were people with children or work to attend to, people in middle management, job-hunting students, police officers, college professors... they were all so busy, they made a college student’s life seem easy.”

She spoke with her eyes fixed upon the scenery directly ahead, but I felt as though what she was actually seeing were visions of the good old days.

“Despite their harsh schedules, we were able to get together and kill monsters, clear quests... go on hunts, have parties, and do lots of other fun stuff.” The look on her face bore not a hint of dishonesty. She really *had* enjoyed her time with her clan.

...Wait, why are “kill monsters” and “go on hunts” separate? I wondered.

“Maybe she means scavenger hunts?” Nemesis suggested telepathically. “They would be different here than in your world, after all.”

Well... that makes sense.

“But a short while ago, we were dealt a really hard blow. Many of us, myself included, lost gear and other items,” she said before closing her eyes in a regretful manner and cracking a wry smile. “Because of that and the changes in our lives that came with spring, we decided that we’d had enough fun and decided to disband the clan.”

“I see...”

Apparently, no matter how realistic it was, *Infinite Dendrogram* wasn't safe from normal MMO-like happenings such as the ending of clans.

"With the disbanding, the clan's shared items were distributed among the players that would continue playing," she said. "I can still remember the members offering this carriage to me while saying 'This slick ride should be yours, boss.' I appreciated their sentiment and gladly accepted it, but... eheheh." She giggled as she remembered something—

...Wait, "boss?"

"I accepted the carriage, but didn't have any monsters for it," she continued. "It slipped my mind because I always had clan members with tamed creatures that could pull it. Because of that, I haven't been able to use it once ever since the clan disbanded..."

Suddenly, as I held the reins, she turned to look at me with eyes that looked both slightly lonely and happy.

"It's nice that we got to use it today."

"Yeah." I nodded. "Thanks again, B3."

About three hours had passed since we left the capital. We were currently on a road called the "Fadl Mountain Pass."

Honestly, I felt that "Mountain Pass" was a bit of a misnomer, considering we were passing only hills, rather than mountains.

Anyway, according to Louie, we were about halfway there by now. We'd left before noon, so, at this rate, we ought to reach Torne Village before sundown.

That aside, I couldn't help but notice that this road was unusually active. Just like us, there were quite a lot of people heading northward, on foot and by carriage alike.

Many even had children with them, making it highly unlikely that they were going on hunting or trading trips.

"Is there something I don't know about?" I asked.

"The Windstar Festival is happening soon," said Louie as he stuck his face out through the carriage's window.

"Windstar Festival?" According to him, the Windstar Festival was an event held by a group of villages situated in the north of the capital, with Torne being the focus.

The festival was a long-running tradition by now, and it was renowned for the many pinwheel-like decorations all over the villages and the fireworks lighting up the night sky, attracting many tourists from both the local villages and the capital, who, in turn, attracted merchants aiming to profit from them.

"Well, that definitely sounds like a festival," I commented.

"It is!" Louie said excitedly. "Until last year, we would go there with Dad every year, and it was very fun! But now..."

He suddenly became downcast again. That was only natural, considering that the dad he so adored might not be there for the festival.

"We'll find your dad, so don't you worry," I said.

"Okay. Please find him, mister."

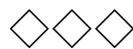
Chatting more about this and that, we continued following the road north. Eventually, we went up a gently-sloping hill.

“Ah...” Louie gasped, apparently realizing something.

“What is it?” I asked.

“This place...” he said as he looked around with nostalgia in his eyes.

“This is where Mom and I met Dad.”



Four years ago, Fadl Mountain Pass

It had happened four years ago, in *Infinite Dendrogram* time.

Louie and his mother, Farica, were at the Fadl Mountain Pass, riding a stagecoach to the village of Torne. The aged Needleworker of the village had passed away, and Farica — bearing the same job herself — had been dispatched there by the Needleworker guild as the replacement.

It wasn’t unusual for job guilds to transfer their members to the surrounding towns and villages, but such agreements were never forced, and Farica had volunteered for this role.

Her primary reasons for this were monetary. A year ago, she’d lost her husband, Louie’s biological father, to an accident, and the money he’d left behind was beginning to run dry.

Though she herself had a career as a Needleworker, it wasn’t quite enough for a single mother with a child as young as Louie, especially with the recent increase of skilled Needleworkers... the Masters.

Because of them, supply had started to outpace demand, and tian-made clothes, which were generally lower quality than those made by Masters, had gotten harder to sell. The drop in available work had made it difficult for Farica to get by, and though her situation wasn’t

dire, it was definitely getting there, so she'd chosen to take the transfer to Torne.

Since it was a guild assignment, she would receive both the payment for her work *and* financial aid from the guild, not to mention that distancing herself from the oversupplied cities would greatly increase the demand for her products. Spurred by the wish to have her son grow up healthy, away from the ailments of poverty, she'd resolved to take him and move to the village of Torne, and that was no mistake.

Their small household would receive the money to get by, her son would grow up properly, and Torne would have a Needleworker. Everyone involved would benefit from this.

Indeed, Farica's decision wasn't a mistake... but alas, Lady Luck, capricious as ever, didn't favor her on the day of the move. The stagecoach she was on was attacked by over a hundred monsters.

From just over several hundred of metels away, they were charging straight towards the stagecoach, leaving a thick cloud of dust behind them.

It was a horde of "Violent Fanged Boars." True to their name, they were a brutal, carnivorous type of monster known to vehemently chase the smell of blood.

Though they were native to the area, it was rare for them to hunt in such great numbers. However, this was a world in which the spontaneous appearance of UBM could greatly alter monster habitats, sometimes forcing them to form large groups. Thus, the boars' attack on the stagecoach was merely an unfortunate turn of events — one that greatly endangered those without the power to stand up to them.

The coachman hastily tried to turn the vehicle around and escape the boars, but the menacing horde scared the horses into rearing up, panicking, and making the carriage fall on its side.

Passengers and baggage alike dropped out of vehicle, and though nobody died from that, it didn't change the fact that the situation was nothing short of hopeless.

"Hurry! Stand up and run!" roared one the tian adventurers tasked with defending the stagecoach.

Faced with this threat, they had completely abandoned their roles.

Some tried to be the rear guard, protecting the passengers as they ran, but the experienced adventurers suggested against it, telling them that it was suicide.

Not many could fault them for that. Even if those adventurers had battle jobs, that number of boars was just too great for only a few sub-level 100 tians.

Escaping along with the passengers while avoiding encounters with monsters was the sound thing to do... the *right* thing to do.

Alas, doing the right thing was never easy, and this time, it came at the cost of sacrificing two lives — a boy and his mother.

After the carriage fell, Farica was still inside, and her leg was caught under the baggage, while Louie was crying at her side. He begged for someone to help her, but everyone else had already ran away.

It was only natural. The situation was dire, and every second counted. Anyone who tried to save them could easily end up as sustenance for the boars, and even if they were successful, Farica's bleeding and all the blood that had gotten on Louie would definitely

attract the monsters. There was no viable escape plan that included the pair.

Their deaths were definitely unavoidable and perhaps even necessary, so the rest of the people ran while closing their ears to the boy's tearful pleas.

The cruel inevitability would soon spell the death of the mother and child, and the two had no means of overturning this harsh fate.

However, *they* did.

"Gringham!" someone roared just as a Boar was about to charge into the carriage's exposed base and break it open.

That word — no, that *call*...

"GROAAAAAHHHHHH!"

...was answered by a giant beast that forced its fangs deep into the Boar's neck and shattered its upper spine, instantly ending its life.

It was a lion, bearing a mane as thick as wool and a size rivaling that of an elephant. It pulverized the carnivorous boars, asserting its position as the true apex predator on the scene.

"Are you all right, boy?" asked one of the two people that jumped off the lion's back.

The one who spoke was a bald warrior. He had the facial features of a person from Tenchi and a well-trained body covered in light armor.

The other was a girl with green hair. She glared at the Boar horde with a somewhat vague expression on her face.

The bald warrior ran over to Louie, who was too scared to stand at this point, and extended his left hand towards him. There was a blue crest on the back of the hand.

"That's my mount, Gringham," he said. "He'll keep the monsters away, so you just run, and..."

"M-My mom! My mom is still in the carriage!" Louie shouted, making the bald warrior turn to the vehicle, where he saw Farica, her leg crushed by the baggage.

He hurried to her aid and said, "I'll help you!"

"Don't mind me! Just save my son, please!" she protested, urging the bald warrior to focus entirely on Louie. That would be the reasonable thing to do. After all, her damaged leg not only rendered her incapable of running, but also made her attract the violent boars.

"Only a miracle can save me now... So please, help my son..."

"I don't think so," the bald warrior retorted. "You will be saved if I kill all the monsters."

"But that's—!"

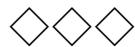
"If that would be a miracle... If a miracle alone can save you, then I shall become a miracle-worker!" He stood up, then looked at the boar horde fighting his trusty lion mount.

"Juno!" he called the green-haired girl's name, prompting her to become green and red particles of light that gathered in the man's hands, taking the shape of a spear in his right and an elliptical shield in his left. "Come, monsters! *This is the shield of miracles!*"

The man tightened his grip on his weaponry, ran up to his mount and jumped on its back.

He faced the numerous boars and roared, “I am a Myth Rider, Ichiro Shijima! Face me now!” before charging the overwhelming odds.

The result of this battle was obvious.



Paladin, Ray Starling

“Dad was... awesome. He and Gringham killed all those monsters and saved me and Mom,” Louie finished.

“And that’s how you met him?” I asked.

“Yeah. He also protected us all the way to Torne and even brought someone who could use healing magic to fix mom’s leg.”

Louie then continued to tell us that Mr. Shijima, concerned with their well-being, had regularly visited them in the village. Eventually, he and Farica had fallen in love, gotten married, and made a child.

I silently processed the story.

One thing that I couldn’t help but note was the fact that Mr. Shijima was a *Maiden’s Master*. If the words Hugo had told me were to be believed, it meant that he, too, didn’t consider *Infinite Dendrogram* to be just a game.

The fact that such a person hadn’t visited his *family* for half a year of this world’s time made me picture scenarios I really didn’t want to consider. When we found him in real life and discovered that he’d simply quit, I would like to, at the very least, convince him to come here and give Louie and his wife a proper goodbye.

However, if the reason why he’d disappeared was *one that rendered him incapable of ever meeting them again*, then—

“...What?” I asked suddenly as my thoughts were cut short by a low, distant sound, much like the howling of the wind.

The noise was repeated again and again, and seemed to come from several locations. Upon hearing one that came from relatively close, I realized that it was the sound of a conch trumpet.

Soon enough, the entire area’s soundscape was dominated by the sound, and I had no idea if it was a warning, a message, or something else.

“B3, what is th—?” I tried to ask, but cut my words short upon noticing the drastic change in her expression.

If I had to summarize her face in just a word, I’d have probably used “fierce.”

However, once I blinked in surprise, B3’s expression was back to normal.

Did I just imagine that? I wondered as she looked into my eyes and began talking.

“Be alert, Ray. This conch is their signal.”

“‘Their’?” I asked, but before she could answer, a voice blared throughout the entire area.

“This is a message to all Masters passing through or hunting in Fadl Mountain Pass,” the voice said loudly. It was obviously passing through a voice-amplifying item, and it reminded me of a female announcer in Japanese baseball stadiums. “In ten minutes, the PK clan K&R will begin hunting in this area. Those who do not wish to fight must leave Fadl Mountain Pass within this time.”

“Huh?!” I exclaimed as the sudden PK announcement left me confused.

I wasn’t the only one. There were other Masters nearby, and they seemed as puzzled as myself.

Meanwhile, B3, despite acting weird at first, seemed completely calm now.

I silently thought things through.

“Mister, what’s going on?” Louie asked in a worried tone.

The announcement had stated that “Those who do not wish to fight must leave Fadl Mountain Pass within this time.”

Since we had Louie to look out for, I really didn’t want to get involved in any battles, so I considered making Silver hurry and using the given time to leave.

“I repeat. In ten minutes, the PK clan K&R will begin hunting in this area. Those who do not wish to fight must leave Fadl Mountain Pass within this time. Circle of Detect Life — Human.”

Following that repeat and the skill activation, I felt something pass through my body, which was enough to make me gasp.

“They’re just like always...” said B3. “Don’t worry, this isn’t dangerous by itself.” Since she was clearly familiar with the magic used, she explained the spell’s nature. “This is just a life search skill that had its range and precision enhanced by the announcement they used as a Chant. It’s what they usually do.”

Oh, so the announcement was a Chant, I thought.

The Chant skill used MP-imbued words to enhance magic effects, and since the user was free to set the words used, with the exception of a

few special spells, even that announcement had been a proper Chant.

That aside... “life search”? I wondered.

“The search they made allows them to know the location and level of all the creatures in the area that fit the designated type,” B3 continued. “They put the skill name in the announcement as a way of saying, ‘There’s no use in hiding. Either run or fight.’ Oh, and just so you know, most K&R members are from Tenchi, and this is an Onmyoji job skill.”

“K&R...” I murmured.

That name was familiar. Marie had mentioned it after the capital blockade incident, and I’d seen it myself on the bulletin board for clan rankings, where it was no. 3.

“They’re third in the kingdom’s clan rankings,” B3 confirmed. “And if you consider just PK clans... With Mad Castle disbanding and Goblin Street moving to another country, they’re the undisputed top.”

The kingdom’s strongest player killers... That certainly seemed like a force to be reckoned with.

“Also, though it pains me to say it, their leader was the top PK even when the other clans were active. In fact, you can even include that hitman, the Superior Killer, and he’d still be the best in the kingdom.”

A PK stronger than Marie... the Superior Killer... the one who killed King of Plagues?

“Is he a Superior?” I asked.

“Not yet, as far as I’m aware, but he’s well-known and very powerful,” she said before making a short pause. “Kashimiya is third in the kingdom’s duel rankings, after all.”



The third in the kingdom's duel rankings was a person I'd heard of before.

Following one of our usual sparrings, Juliet, the fourth in the rankings, and I had gone off together to have some lunch.

Spurred by curiosity, I'd said, "I've yet to see the third and fifth in the duel rankings. What are they like?"

Through Figaro, I'd come to know the eighth, Chelsea the Vagrant Golden Sea, and almost everyone above her. By now, mock battles against these skilled players were a part of my daily life. However, I'd never even met the third and fifth. I'd even talked, though I hadn't sparred, with the second one, Tom Cat, so I was starting to find this quite strange.

Speaking of him, Tom Cat was a weirdo who walked around with a cat on his head. Then again, most of the top rankers were weird in their own ways, so he might've not been all that special.

"So you seek tales of the 'Guillotine' and the 'Bone-Eater'..." said Juliet.

"Guillotine'? 'Bone-Eater'?" I asked.

"Indeed. The latter was conferred the name because of her Embryo's ultimate skill, while the former was crowned as such because he beheaded all the rank-bearers below himself... including yours truly," she said before placing her hand on her neck.

"Even you?" I muttered in disbelief.

Juliet was fourth in the rankings and bore the dark knight grouping's Superior Job, Fallen Knight. In addition, her Embryo, Hræsvelgr, could

become wings that greatly increased her mobility and gave her magic attacks, making her into a character perhaps as versatile as Xunyu. And yet, she'd still lost her head against the third.

"The Guillotine is strong," she continued. "Though compatibility walls him away from the throne of the second, Monster Cat Mansion, he is undoubtedly a match for him. In fact, I expect that even the Endless Chain would find it a challenge to seize victory before the Guillotine's blade reached him."

"He can defeat Figaro in close combat?" I couldn't even picture that. Just what kind of a monster was he?

"You might wish to know that you would never see him spar," Juliet added.

"Why?" I asked.

"He is a crest hunter... a player killer. On days without a ranked battle he must partake in, he indulges in headhunting 'outside.'"

"...Well, that sure sounds unpleasant," I said.



I recalled having thought, *Man, I sure wouldn't like to encounter a ranked PK*, but that had turned out to be a jinx.

"Can't a man catch a break?" I complained. *Tsukuyo Fuso yesterday, the strongest player killers today... What the hell's up with my luck?*

"K&R is unique among PK clans because their hunting is limited by rules put there by their leader," said B3.

"Rules, eh?"

Well, considering they had the decency to announce it and give us time to escape, they were probably a better chance encounter than Marie.

“The rules include the necessity for announcements, giving time for people to escape, warning signs next to the roads leading to the area, and a ban on any attacks against tians.”

“Well, that’s pretty considerate of them... Definitely not praiseworthy, though.” They were basically occupying an entire area, after all. It wasn’t like that counted as a crime, considering they didn’t hurt tians, but still.

“So we just happened to get caught up in their hunt, huh?” I asked.

“No.” B3 shook her head. “I’m inclined to believe this is no coincidence.”

“Hm?”

She opened her map window and pointed at a certain location.

“When the conch signal began, we were right here.”

It was the exact center of the Fadl Mountain Pass.

“Wait, so...”

“Yes, and if it’s no accident, it means they began their hunt exactly when it was hardest for us to escape. Ten minutes aren’t quite enough for us to leave this area from here.”

I’ve been singled out? Again? I thought, confused.

“It’s not guaranteed it’s because of you, is it?” asked Nemesis telepathically.

Well, yeah, but Louie was a tian, so he simply couldn't be a PK's target, while B3 was a normal player, so it was unlikely she had anything to do with this. I told her, *That leaves only me. I stood out because of what happened in Gideon, so I could easily have gotten into their sights. Damn you, Franklin.*

"Whatever the case, escape is unlikely, so it's best we ready ourselves for battle," said B3.

"All right, let's do this," I replied with no hesitation.

"You sure are quick to prepare."

"I'm used to it by now." This certainly wasn't the first time I'd been caught up in some sudden trouble, after all.

"Then let me tell you about the way K&R fights," B3 said.

"You know that?"

"To a certain extent, yes."

First the conch, then life search, now this... B3 seemed to be quite knowledgeable about K&R's methods. Well, she'd said that she'd joined CID because of the info they had, so it was no surprise that she was well-versed.

"Following the search, K&R's members split up into three roles," she said as she raised three fingers. "Group fighters — the ones that target the non-veteran players and wipe them out by overwhelming them; squad fighters — the ones that form single parties and go for the high-rank, max-level veterans; and solo fighters — their two Superior Jobs. One is the leader, Kashimiya, while the other is the sub-leader, Rosa. All the roles act simultaneously."

“Two Superior Jobs, eh?” And one of them was said to be stronger than any of the rankers I’d sparred against. I hadn’t had many victories against any of them, and this was despite them letting me use a Lifesaving Brooch as a handicap. However, if I were to use the technique that got me some of those wins, I could maybe...

“If they’re targeting us, they will attack right after the ten minutes are up,” said B3. “And they will likely use their Superior Jobs, rather than groups or squads.”

“So we’ll have to fight two Superior Jobs?” I asked.

“Probably just one. Search-and-kill is more effective when they split up, and their fighting styles have little compatibility, so they’ll target different Masters and... Hm?”

Well, having to fight just one instead of two definitely gave me hope.

Oh, B3 seems to have realized something, I thought.

“...Odd,” she said with her hand placed over her mouth.

“What’s odd?” I asked.

“Now that I think about it, the very fact that we’re being targeted is strange.”

“They’re player killers, aren’t they?”

“Yes, and that’s exactly why it’s odd. Right now, we’re escorting Louie — an NPC. A *tian*,” she explained before looking inside the carriage. “K&R doesn’t target tians *or* Masters who are escorting them. That’s one of the rules put in place by Kashimiya. So, if they’re really targeting us, they either don’t know about Louie... or Kashimiya isn’t with them this time. I’ve heard rumors that he hasn’t

been seen online for almost two months of game time, which makes it highly plausible.”

“So, if they’re targeting us despite knowing about Louie... they’re doing so because the leader isn’t here to enforce the rules?” I asked slowly.

“I believe that the rule has simply slipped Rosa’s mind. The woman is quite a meathead, you see, though not in the same way as the Over Gladiator... Basically, she’s not the sharpest tool in the shed.”

Coming from B3, that’s quite an evaluation, I thought.

Also, I couldn’t help but feel that her knowledge of K&R amounted to more than just what she’d learned through CID. It seemed kinda personal.

“That aside, if we’re really fighting just the Nobushi Princess, a job from the ambush-focused nobushi grouping, it means our opponent would have a limited set of moves. We could perhaps even counter her, and... Ray.”

“Yes?”

She looked directly into my eyes and asked “Do you want to try and defeat the sub-leader of the kingdom’s strongest PK clan?”



Royal Capital, Altea

K&R’s headquarters, the martial arts building, was currently mostly devoid of people, as most of the members had gone out to hunt. One Master that had stayed behind was currently stressed out of her mind.

“Oh no no nooo... What have I done? Nooo...”

Her name was Tomika, and she was the exact same girl that had witnessed the conversation at the adventurer's guild and reported it to Rosa.

Today, she was free from both training and hunting, so, after seeing off all the members who had gone to Fadl Mountain Pass, she'd stayed and looked after the headquarters. That was when she'd realized that she'd neglected to do something very important.

"I forgot to tell her they had a tian child with them... Oh noooo..."

Tomika had tried to fix this mistake by contacting the hunting party, but she didn't know any communication magic, nor did she have any items that enabled it. She'd also considered using real-life emails, but unfortunately, all the members she could contact like that were off-duty, just like her, and thus weren't participating in today's hunt.

Sadly, there was nothing she could do.

"Oh noo... They'll be maad... The leader will be mad at Sis, who will then be mad at meee..." she whined with both her hands on her head. "Something even worse might happen... Oh noo..."

K&R's leader was a gentle sort. Gentle enough to become upset at PK that was senseless or involved tians. Not to mention that, in his absence, Rosa had become even more irrational and inconsiderate than usual.

That had caused her to participate in the well-funded newbie hunt despite it breaking K&R's rules, and it had inspired her to reduce the time the clan gave to let people evacuate, among other things.

Tomika knew full well what the implications of the current hunt were, and imagining the worst-case scenario made her stressed beyond belief.

“Why would anyone be mad?” someone asked.

“S-Sis was all fired up about this... she might involve the tian in her fight... and if he dies, the leader... Sis... the entire clan would... aaahhhhhh!”

It was hard to tell what kind of future she pictured, but her tears made it clear that it wasn’t pretty.

“Hmm,” hummed the person behind her. “I don’t really understand, but it all seems complicated. Let me just try to contact Rosa, and... Oh dear, she’s not answering. Looks like she’s already hunting. Her communication device must be in her inventory by now.”

The person had tried to talk to Rosa, but hadn’t had any luck. It was only natural. During a hunt, the Nobushi Princess Rosa was a solo “search, ambush, and destroy” operative, so it was imperative for her to put away any magic devices that could give away her position. To avoid the effects of some search spells, she also didn’t wear the likes of Telepathy Cuffs or exchange any info with the other members of the hunt.

This time, Rosa’s meticulous preparation had worked against them, and the person concluded that contacting her — or anyone else — was now impossible.

“This leaves us no choice,” he said. “We’ll go there directly. Tomika, could you prepare the *car*?”

“Uohh... Okaayy... Huh?”

“So, where did they go?”

“Fadl Mountain Pass...” Tomika replied in a stupor as she finally realized who was there with her. “Umm... How long have you been online, *leader*?”

“For only three minutes. Come on, we have to hurry.”

That person was none other than the leader of K&R — Kashimiya the Guillotine. At his side, there was an odachi — a blade so large it didn’t suit his frame. It was connected to him by a chain hook bearing the semblance of a rabbit’s skull.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CROSS HUNTING

Fadl Mountain Pass

“Ten minutes have passed. K&R shall now commence hunting in the Fadl Mountain Pass,” the same voice as before resounded throughout the area, declaring the end of the waiting time.

As the limit was reached, the Masters that had been unable to escape or were simply up to the challenge became on high alert, and justly so, as the first attacks began just as the time ran out.

First came a deluge of arrows.

From what seemed like out of nowhere, hundreds... no, thousands of arrows rained down upon the Masters. They were caused by the Heavy Bow Samurai skill, Early Summer Arrow Rain.

It released 100 arrows for every use, and when used simultaneously by the 30-strong K&R group fighters, it created a storm of 3,000 arrows. Each one of those arrows did less than 100 damage by itself, but those numbers easily made up for that, making this tactic quickly whittle away the life of most targets.

The Masters subjected to this lethal rain were less than a tenth of all those in the Fadl Mountain Pass, but that tenth included Ray and his group, who had yet to escape the area.

As the owner of Nemesis, Ray was capable of using a single Counter Absorption to withstand 200,000 points of damage from a single attack, but he was painfully ineffective against rapid fire from a distance he couldn’t hope to reach. Whenever Marie switched to

such tactics in their mock battles, Ray always ended up completely crushed.

He might've been able to burn the arrows with Purgatorial Flames, but alas, he didn't have the left hand for that.

Silver's Wind Hoof had the potential to block them, as well, but Ray had neither the MP stock for it, nor enough time to activate it, leaving Ray completely powerless to defend against this arrow storm.

"Thousand Shutter!" B3 shouted the name of a skill as she jumped off the carriage, taking it upon herself to protect it.

Out of her inventory, she'd taken out a shield so large it covered her whole body, and once she held it up, a giant, blueish barrier of light appeared and shielded the whole carriage. The countless arrows falling towards them all hit the barrier, and not a single one passed through.

This was a Shield Giant skill, and it blocked any and all attacks that didn't deal more than 1,000 damage, meaning that the arrows — with their focus on quantity at the cost of quality — couldn't hope to pass this wall.

Following this act of defense, B3 took out a shield even larger than before from her inventory, probably one meant to be used by giants, and, right as the arrow storm ended, went on the offensive.

"Anti Gravity! Flying Shield!" she roared as she activated one of her Embryo's unique skills and paired it with another job skill, which involved *throwing the shield*.

She launched it in the direction where the arrows came from, combining her intuition, calculations, and experience to fine-tune her

throw. The result? Pure success. The shield landed in the middle of the gathering of K&R's group fighters.

With that alone, the few that weren't wearing Lifesaving Brooches got the death penalty, and the ensuing confusion prevented the survivors from firing their next wave of arrows.

Ray hurriedly made Silver move, using this opportunity to try and take them out of the area.

Even as his left, prosthetic arm was fixed into holding the reins, he held sword-form Nemesis in his right, ready for whatever might come.

B3 jumped up on the roof of the carriage and held up her shield, making it clear she was on high alert as well.

Both of them were armed and ready, but even so, they failed to notice someone jump out from behind the tree and to the forward-right of the moving carriage. That "someone" was none other than the Nobushi Princess, Rosa.

She didn't miss the minor opening in their alertness.

"A Kill Supreme!"

And she used her Superior Job's unique skill on Ray.



Five Minutes Earlier, Paladin, Ray Starling

"K&R's sub-leader is name Rosa. Rosa's job is Nobushi Princess, and it's the Superior Job from the nobushi grouping," B3 told me.

She'd started giving me info right after asking me whether I'd like to defeat K&R's sub-leader.

"Though Nobushi is a job branching out from Samurai, Nobushi and Samurai focus on very different things," she continued.

"As far as I know, Samurai are close to the Fighters or Gladiators we have here," I said. "So, what do Nobushi focus on?"

"Ambushes and first hits. The damage they deal with *the first attack they use on an opponent on that day* is ludicrous. Nobushi Princess's unique job skill can easily go into the hundreds of thousands."

Ambushes, eh...? I thought. I guess it's a reference to Sengoku Era peasants who preyed upon deserters.

Anyway, six digits of damage was no joke. That amount was matched only by the likes of Shu's punches or stabs from Xunyu's Yinglong's Fang.

Through all my sparring, I'd found that Counter Absorption could only take 200,000 points of damage before breaking, so unless the damage done was closer to 100,000 than it was to 1,000,000, not even we could survive it. Hell, it would come as a surprise attack, so I probably wouldn't even be able to activate it in time.

"There's no need to try and bear or dodge Rosa's first attack," said B3.

"Huh?" I raised an eyebrow.

"It's best to just let it hit you."

...B3, you've completely lost me.

"Nobushi ambushes were greatly feared for quite a while after the game began. And for a reason. The jobs are a great source of single-attack damage, after all. They were especially popular among PKs who liked to ambush, and many players ended up being OHKO'd by Nobushis. But eventually, things started to change."

B3 raised up her upper clothing and showed me the thing she was wearing underneath. It was an accessory that I knew very well. In fact, I was wearing one right now.

“What caused the change were these Lifesaving Brooches. When a certain portion of players began wearing these, Nobushi lost their advantage.”

“I see...”

Since Nobushi were only strongest on their first hit, the existence of an item that negated fatal damage was their bane. Lifesaving Brooches canceled out their sole advantage, effectively turning the immense power of their first hit into no problem.

“It’s not unusual for certain MMO strategies to become obsolete as the environment changes,” B3 added. “I can also name the Guardian-Jaguarman strategy as another example. That one declined when the King of Beasts appeared.”

Basically, the game’s meta shifted. This was common in many multiplayer gaming scenes, and you could even see it in trading card games and the like.

“Mind you, the Nobushi Princess, with her Superior Job stats, still uses this strategy,” B3 said. “‘Breaks the Brooch? Good enough for me,’ and all that.”

B3 spoke as though she’d actually heard her say those words.

“Still, that doesn’t change the fact that our Brooches can negate her first — and strongest — attack. And, as you can imagine, when she does her ambushes, she’s almost completely on the offensive, meaning that...”



Meaning that... for us, it was a great opportunity.

“Gh!” The Nobushi Princess’s attack pierced my chest, and all the damage done was negated by my Lifesaving Brooch. Her attack was many times more powerful than my remaining HP, and it came as no surprise that the Brooch inside my armor instantly shattered. But that was no loss, for the moment I felt the impact on my chest, I was already making my move, fully certain of how I had to retaliate.

I had to *aim for the exact moment her attack hit, and give it back twofold.*

“Vengeance...”

It was the technique I’d pictured when I’d prepared for death while facing Franklin’s DGP.

“...is...”

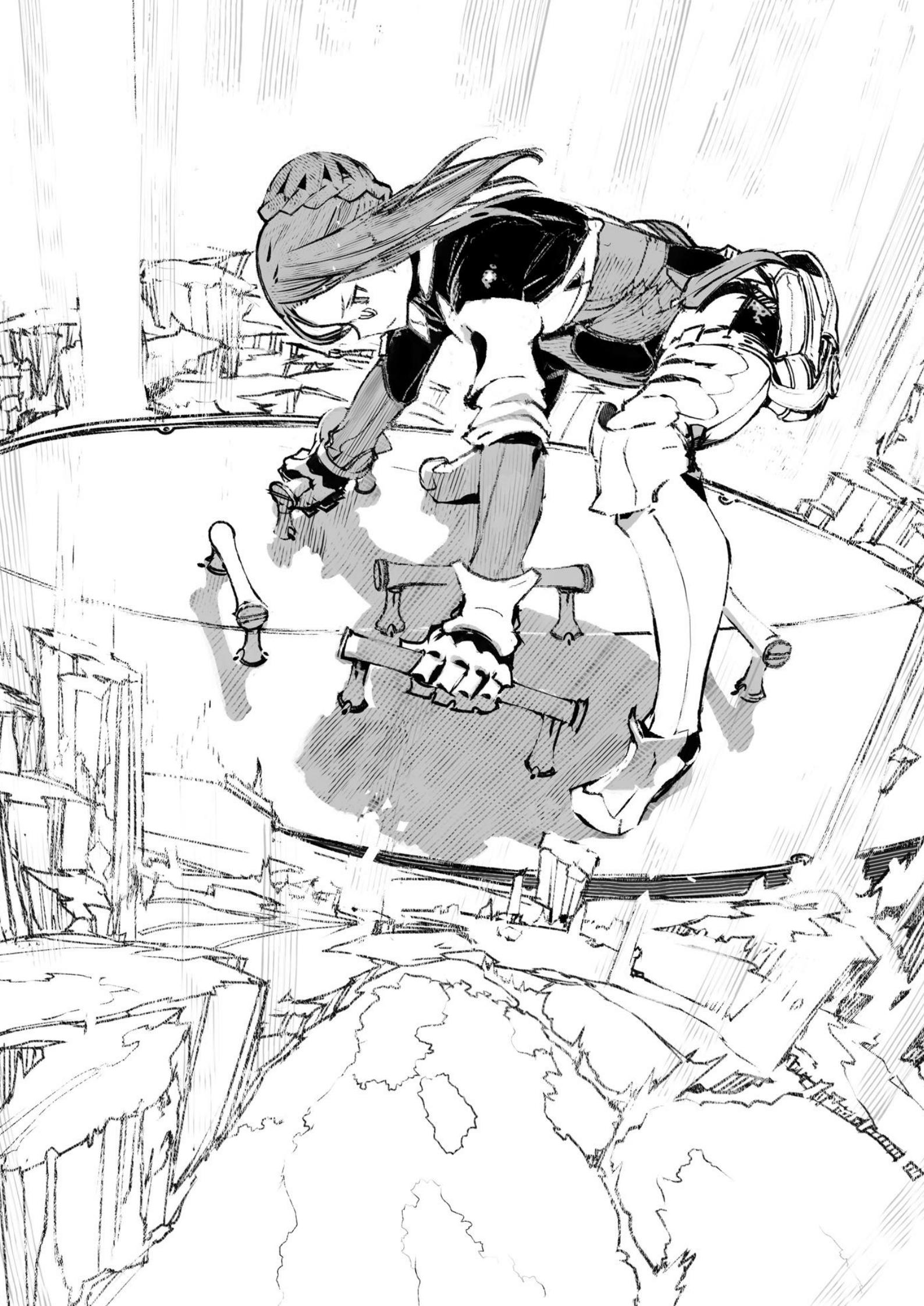
It was the move I’d mastered while sparring against the duel rankers.

“...Mine!”

And now, without a flaw to name, I used it on Rosa.

“Wha?!” she gasped in surprise as my counterattack forced her to drop down from the carriage. Her body skipped on the ground three times before she stopped, leaving her spread out and vulnerable.

“—las! Stronghold Pressure!” B3, not missing the opportunity, jumped off the carriage and crushed Rosa with her second giant shield.



Suddenly, I heard the sound of something wet being crushed.

“...” I had no words.

“Oh, dear,” said Nemesis. “I’m actually scared of seeing what’s going on under the shield.”

B3 had mercilessly pulverized a downed enemy, but I didn’t think it was relentless of her. After all, Rosa had been perfectly fine even after taking my Vengeance, which had dealt double the six-digit damage she’d done to me. That wasn’t an amount that could be taken care of with just a Dragonscale Ward — which reduced incoming damage by 90% — so it was clear she’d also had a Lifesaving Brooch.

Unlike in my mock battles, my opponents could also use Brooches, so the result of my counterattack was pretty obvious. Still, B3’s follow-up ought to be more than enough to finish her off.

As proof, the blood spreading out from beneath the shield was slowly becoming particles of light, making it clear that Rosa had received the death penalty.

“Well done, Ray,” said B3.

“You, too,” I replied. “And hey, you were right. She actually did go for me.”

When we’d talked about how we’d deal with her, B3 had said that Rosa would most likely attack me first. I’d assumed she’d go for B3, considering she was a higher level, but she’d suggested otherwise, saying that, because I held the reins, taking care of me would reduce our mobility. That seemed like a good reason by itself, but I felt like B3 had had another basis for this assumption.

“Yes, I expected as much,” B3 said. “She and I have fought before, and I used the same ultimate skill I used just now as a counter, in a manner similar to yours. I assumed she wouldn’t attack me to avoid repeating the same mistake.”

Oh, so you’ve fought her before, I thought. That explains why you know so much.

“But man, to think we won against an SJ so easily...” I said.

“Player battles aren’t all about differences in levels and stats,” B3 replied. “Preventing your opponent from using their powers, while using your own cards in the best manner possible, is far more important.”

The battle just now had been the perfect example of that. We’d used my Brooch to negate her primary power, and then used the resulting opening to launch a combination of my counterattack and B3’s ultimate skill.

“I must say, your counter was quite a feat,” B3 commented. “Not everyone can land a hit while taking a hit.”

“Well, I’ve had tons of practice. The duel rankers helped me out a lot with that.”

They’d helped me learn to launch a counter *while* receiving my opponent’s attack. That wasn’t a *Dendro* skill, but a technique I’d learned myself. Though I hadn’t gotten to use it against DGP, I’d kept the idea in my mind, polished it in the many mock battles I’d had during the past in-game month, and become good enough at it to use it in a real battle.

All the sparring had given me many chances to test it, and Bishmal, the seventh in the rankings, had been especially passionate about

helping me. After all, he had always, without fail, started every battle by charging towards me with his ultimate skill. He had obviously been taking that simple approach to help me learn.

I mean... that couldn't have been his actual fighting style... right? I pondered.

Anyway, because of that, he was the only ranker against whom I'd won more than I'd lost. The other rankers had been able to counter this technique after the first time I'd used it on them, but still, without it, we wouldn't have won this battle.

I said, "The counter not only had excellent timing, but—"

"A Kill Supreme!" B3's words were cut short by the activation of a skill. For a moment, I was completely lost as to what was happening.

Before I realized it, a spear had pierced B3's chest and launched her into the carriage's door.

Suddenly, it came to me that I'd heard the skill name and had seen the spear before. This attack could only have been done by one person. "Yeah, you're wearing a Brooch, too. No surprise there, B3." It was the Nobushi Princess, Rosa — the one we'd killed just a few moments ago.

"Well, I'm quite sure it's broken now," she continued.

"Why are you alive?" asked B3, still standing despite the impact and the damage from the spear. However, the shattered Brooch falling out of her clothes made it clear that she wasn't as good as she appeared.

"Ray's attack broke your Brooch," B3 continued. "So my ultimate skill should've killed you, right?"

"Well, normally, yeah," Rosa replied. "Your skill is as much of a big deal as ever, and the Unbreakable's counter was something else. Sadly for you, though..."

She cracked a grin and showed us the thing hanging on her wrist. Though it was wrapped around her arm like a bracelet, upon taking a better look at it, I realized it was a small, dried up doll.

"I killed a UBM recently and got this thing here. It's why I survived. You can guess what it does, can't you?"

"Considering there was blood and particles of light, I assume it 'Creates a substitute and replaces you with it right before you experience fatal damage.'"

"Not bad, you data nerd. You more or less got it."

So basically, Rosa had two accessories that let her avoid lethal damage.

...How is that allowed?

"Non-Brooch items that negate fatal damage are rare and precious," said B3. "You sure are lucky."

"Ha ha!" Rosa chuckled. "Good girls get good things, you know?"

"Is that a joke?" B3 snapped. "Because I'm not laughing."

Though they were talking like friends, I could sense an air of bloodlust gathering between them. It was reminiscent of what I felt when watching Figaro and Tsukuyo Fuso.

However, B3, being an endurance-type, showed no intention of attacking just yet. If she made one wrong move, Rosa would quickly take advantage of any openings in her defenses.

“Anyway, now none of us can do anything against fatal damage,” Rosa spoke up again. “I also used my first attacks against you both, and B3’s pretty little ultimate skill can’t be used again until the cooldown’s up. I’m not wrong there, am I? Your ultimate’s cooldown ain’t as long as *mine*’s, but it still takes some time, doesn’t it?”

B3 said nothing.

“Also,” Rosa said before pausing and looking at me. “I now know about the Unbreakable’s counter. You just used a skill that works as long as the sword touches the enemy, didn’t you? The posture or the power you give it doesn’t matter at all, right?”

“Ah!” I gasped. She already knew the workings of the counter I’d just used.

Indeed, Vengeance is Mine worked as long as the blade touched my enemy, delivering double the damage I’d received from them to that particular part of the body. Sure, I’d had to force the sword inside when fighting large monsters with cores in their bodies, but that wasn’t necessary with human-sized opponents.

Regardless of how awkward my posture was or how little power I put into it, Vengeance activated as long as the blade was connected to their body, meaning that I could use it even when I was being hit and couldn’t position myself properly.

That was exactly why the counterattack I’d used against Rosa had worked so well, and apparently, that alone had been enough for her to figure out how it worked.

“Guess you could call it an ‘Impact Counter’ or something,” Rosa commented.

She'd actually given it a name. Well, it wasn't weird or anything, so I was fine with it.

"I've heard you've been sparring against the rankers. I can just imagine Bishmal charging at you, and you using him as a practice dummy for this trick."

"You seem quite knowledgeable about the rankers," said Nemesis.

"Well, that's because I am one." Rosa cracked a grin. "I'm the fifth, you know?"

...So it wasn't just the third. Both the third and the fifth were among K&R's player killers.

"There's not much to it," she added. "My darling plays along with my hobbies, so I play along with his. I kinda like duels, too. Even if I can't use my ambushes." She formed a smile.

"Yeah," I said. "To ambush someone in a duel, you'd have to be like Xun...yu...?"

Hold on, I thought. She just said that she couldn't use her ambush attacks — the nobushi grouping's forte — in a duel. In that case... how did she rise up all the way to fifth?

As if to answer that question...

"All right, then. I can't use my job's ultimate skill, so I'll take you on in a fair fight." Rosa reached into her inventory and took something out.

It was the skull of a dragon, probably a land-based one, and it was even larger than her body. She placed the skull on the tip of her spear and casually spun it before saying a certain set of words.

"Remnants of Warrior Dreams — Gashadokuro!"

The skull she had pulled out instantly became powder, which was then absorbed by her spear.

The sight reminded me that the fifth in the duel rankings was called “the Bone-Eater.” However, it didn’t end with *just* eating.

“Khaaaaghhh!” Rosa roared as her spear unleashed a light and a white aura, which soon engulfed her whole body.

At that moment, when the light and the aura made it impossible for Rosa to see...

“Stronghold Pressure!”

...B3 crushed her with the giant shield.

It was a repeat of the attack from before, but the results were drastically different this time.

“Not gonna work now!” Rosa shouted as she stopped B3’s attack with little effort.

She was now clad in a white exoskeleton. Her form was abnormal, like a forced merging of humanoid and draconic bones, and the presence she emanated was completely unlike before. It felt as though I were looking at a hardened warrior and a mighty beast inhabiting a single body.

“Hh!” B3 gasped as she let go of the giant shield and jumped backwards.

“Hhaagh!” Rosa exclaimed as she pulverized the shield with just her exoskeleton’s right arm. Indeed — the stout, bulwark-like shield crumbled in but a single hit.

“Such beastly strength... It reminds me of Brother Bear,” commented Nemesis, and I was inclined to agree. Of course, Rosa was still

nowhere near Shu, but her power was incomparable to what it had been before. It was, without a doubt, her Embryo's ultimate skill, and it was an enhancement transformation type, just like Riser's — the sixth in the rankings.

We were now faced with a player who had a real ace up her sleeve.

"She's strong," I muttered. The power and presence were enough for me to see that she was indeed a duel ranker.

And yet, despite that, I still believed... "...that winning is possible," Nemesis finished my thought. "Correct?"

"Yeah," I replied as I tightened my grip on my greatsword and resolved to battle the mighty foe before me. "But man, this sure is a bothersome ultimate skill."

I'd spent a lot of the past month sparring against the rankers. Needless to say, they were all significantly stronger than me, and — barring one exception — I had repeatedly lost against all of them. However, I knew full well which one of them gave me the hardest time.

Ignoring Superiors like Figaro and Xunyu, the most difficult opponent for me was the sixth, Masked Riser.

You'd expect it to be the fourth, Juliet, who had a Superior Job, but no, I had more trouble with the high-rank Master in sixth. His Embryo's ultimate skill was the type that transformed him and greatly enhanced his abilities.

Compared to ultimates that launched single, powerful attacks, prolonged status enhancements were far harder to counter for me.

It was made worse by the fact that, with my current stats, even the most basic attack post-transformation was lethal for me, and that alone was enough to make me wary of such opponents.

“Rhhaagh!” Rosa, now clad in her exoskeleton, roared as she attacked, as though flaunting the fact that she was exactly that type of fighter. The power of her attacks and the proficiency behind them made it clear she was on the same tier as the famed rankers.

“Goddamn, she’s trouble,” I grumbled.

However, though Rosa was on the same tier as Riser and had an ultimate skill similar to his, there was one way in which they greatly differed.

From what I could see, the Nobushi Princess was now an *endurance type*.

B3 and I had already taken advantage of several openings in her defenses and landed many hits on her, but it didn’t look like any of them had had an effect. In fact, I wasn’t sure if we’d done even a single point of damage.

“Ha,” Nemesis chuckled. “Most of the rankers were speed-focused, so we’re not used to this.”

Indeed, the duelists I’d sparred against had prioritized speed over toughness, and Rosa’s ambush had made me assume she was the same.

“Wait, maybe she...” *Maybe her battle style changed when she used her ultimate skill?* I wondered.

I was assuming this because she’d activated it by using the skull of a monster, and because, when Marie had shown me the clips on her crystal, Rosa’s fighting style had been different than it was now.

Back then, instead of being completely covered by an exoskeleton, she'd only worn a bony set of arm and leg bracers. This made it safe to assume that the skill could create exoskeletons meant for different styles depending on what skulls she used, which would make it not only powerful, but versatile, as well.

"Aahahahahahah!" Rosa laughed out loud. "Come on, come on, COME ON!"

She charged towards B3 while masterfully using her bone-made, mace-like right arm and the spear — likely her Embryo — fixed in her left arm. Her power was great, and her attacks damaged B3's shield by merely grazing it.

Rosa now excelled at both defense and offense, leaving us overwhelmed despite it being a 2v1 battle.

"However," I said as I noticed something, "she's not fast."

She was nowhere near the speed of the duel rankers I'd fought against. In fact, she was even slower than me, which was crazy, considering she'd been much faster while ambushing us.

Most would assume she'd become slower because of the weight added by her transformation, but that was only half-right. She had certainly slowed down because of an increase in weight, but it certainly wasn't caused by the transformation.

No. The extra weight didn't even come from herself.

"I knew it would be like this, but I'm still surprised you can move while being so close," mumbled B3. "I mean, the weight can be as high as *500 times* greater than normal."

It was one of B3's Embryo skills.

Cracks were appearing around Rosa's feet, and her legs were sinking about ten centimeters into the ground. While the "Anti-Gravity" skill B3 had used had seemed to make things lighter, this one appeared to have the opposite effect.

However, despite being exposed to 500 times greater gravity and reaching the point where she started breaking the ground she treading, the Nobushi Princess could still run towards B3 and attack her.

The skill slowed her down enough for B3 to be able to deflect Rosa's attacks with the curved surface of her shield. Still, it was clear that a proper, direct hit would break it, just like the other one.

I also noticed that B3 was defending against Rosa's attacks in a way that gradually distanced them from the carriage. Louie was still inside, hidden from the battle and protected by the vehicle's defensive barrier. However, it was obvious it wouldn't be much protection against Rosa as she was now, so B3 was making sure to lead her as far away from the carriage as possible.

Before the time limit hit, B3 and I had talked about the likelihood of K&R stopping their attack if we'd told them we had Louie, a tian, with us.

The clan had a set of rules, and no one there wanted to get on the wanted list, so if they knew about Louie, it was possible they would let us go.

However, B3 had said that: "If they don't stop, the situation will shift from bad to worse."

K&R had started the attack exactly when we were in the middle of the area, when it was hardest for us to escape. If they had some sort

of reason they simply *had* to defeat us, telling them about Louie would most likely turn him into a hostage.

And now that we had the Nobushi Princess herself — the strongest among them — coming after us, it was clear they were intent on killing us.

Having to protect Louie made this an uphill battle in more ways than one, and it wouldn't be hard for Rosa to make short work of us if she knew of his existence.

According to B3, “We can’t know how well the clan is protecting Kashimiya’s rules without him there, so it’s best to act while expecting the worst.”

And because of that, we were now fighting while hiding Louie’s existence and trying our best not to let any damage come to him.

Side note: I *had* asked about the life search skill and whether it worked on Louie, and B3 had said that it functioned based on levels, so a tian child would remain undetected. After all, normal tian children didn’t have jobs and thus, levels, making them immune to the search.

This was supported by the fact that Rosa hadn’t mentioned Louie even once, which meant she either didn’t know he was here... or was merely pretending she didn’t.

“Glad to see this skill again, B3!” shouted Rosa. “It’s like I’m in the training arc of some manga! Though, you *do* know it’s not enough, RIGHT?!”

“Gh...!” B3 exclaimed.

Their battle was turning more heated than ever.

The Nobushi Princess was obviously referring to the ultimate skill B3 had already used. If B3 had used it while Rosa's movement was as limited as it was now, she could easily have achieved victory. I recalled one of the PKs from Marie's crystal ball having used a similar combo.

"Tell me this, B3!" Rosa continued. "Why aren't you switching to your main job?! You making light of me or something?!"

"Oh no, this is the best I can do right now," B3 replied.

"Quit your acting and go all out, damn it!" And Rosa continued vehemently attacking B3, who did her best to defend against her.

I was left on the sidelines of all this, since Rosa didn't show any intention of hurting me. In fact, she didn't even give me as much as a glance. This woman was focused solely on B3.

"Hmph, looks like you became too famous," said Nemesis.

"...Yep."

The tricks I had up my sleeve, such as the powerful Counter Absorption-Vengeance combo, were already well-known by many.

This was all because the broadcast of my battle against the RSK had been voiced, and my voice had been heard as clearly as Franklin's. Because of that, it was now common knowledge that I had a skill that absorbed damage, and that I could return it back to my attackers. Anyone who was aware of that wouldn't willingly attack a counter-user like me.

Rosa seemed to know that my and Nemesis's Vengeance was about the only thing here that could break through her endurance and deal damage to her, so she was purposely ignoring me and targeting only B3.

I silently thought things through. With Louie being in the carriage nearby, I couldn't use Hellish Miasma. Sure, I could give him an Elixir, but the miasma could ride the wind and affect more than just us, so in the end, it really wasn't an option.

That left me with only one option: the usual Counter Absorption-Vengeance combo.

However, to make it work, I had to get Rosa to hit me, and the only way I could make that happen was by slipping in between her and B3 while she was attacking.

That wouldn't be easy, considering I had to do it without her noticing me. She wasn't looking at me right now, but she would surely see me if I were to get close to them.

I looked around and examined my options.

"Ray! This is bad!" Nemesis exclaimed, making me hastily look back at the battle.

B3's situation was dire. Not in terms of who had the upper hand, but because of her position.

I didn't see how, but they had switched places, and the carriage was now *right behind B3*.

"HAHAAH! Let's go, B3!" roared Rosa.

Despite being affected by supergravity, she charged towards B3 with immense ferocity, shattering the ground beneath her. The force and vigor she emanated made her seem inhuman, much like the Pure-Dragon whose bones were used as material for the exoskeleton.

"Gh...!" B3 grunted in anger, not doing anything to avoid Rosa's incoming attack.

It wasn't because she couldn't — she simply didn't. After all, the carriage right behind her contained Louie.

This was one of the ways Rosa could make short work of us. If Rosa targeted Louie, we had no choice but to defend him, even if we had to abandon our ability to defend ourselves.

It didn't look like the Nobushi Princess had intended this, but that didn't change the fact that our situation was now more dire than ever.

If B3 averted a single attack in a way that made it go straight to the carriage, it would jeopardize Louie's life. Thus, she had no choice but to take the attack head-on.

"Fatal Defender!" She shouted a skill, making her shield momentarily shine, then break when hit by Rosa's attack.

The impact blew B3 away, making her crash into the carriage.

Rosa didn't miss this opportunity and attacked her again.

"HA! That skill raises your defense in exchange for destroying your shield, doesn't it?! Pretty desperate, aren't you?!"

"Shut up. Fatal Defender!"

B3 was able to take the following attacks by using the same skill again, but if every use of it really cost a shield, her situation was really bad.

I had to find a way to help.

"I have to go... *there*," I said as I made my move, going as fast as I could while avoiding being noticed by Rosa.

I was heading for the side of the carriage opposite to the one they were at.

During that time, B3 lost a total of five shields, and was slowly starting to receive damage, which caused her to slow down while trying to prepare the sixth.

The Nobushi Princess wasn't lenient enough to miss that opening.

"YOU'RE DONE, B3!" she roared as she swung both her arms.

The bone mace on her right and the spear in her left were closing in on B3, carrying enough power to finish her off.

However, right before they landed, I *jumped out from under the carriage*.

"?!" B3 gasped.

When Rosa was focused on her battle with B3 and attacked in the direction of the carriage, I'd slipped under the carriage from its opposite side.

The vehicle had been designed to handle uneven roads, and its base was high enough for me to go under by just bending forward. The area under the carriage was a blind spot for Rosa, since she was already pretty tall and her sizable exoskeleton raised her visual point even higher.

Of course, the carriage was also still taller than her, and that had allowed it to function as a wall that had prevented her from seeing me get to the other side and hide under it. From there, I had been capable of slipping in between B3 and Rosa, which had given me the perfect opportunity.

"Counter Absorption!" Nemesis howled and activated the skill.

“Shi—! Screw it, I’ll break through!” Rosa reacted, hesitating for a moment before attacking with even more ferocity.

She intended to shatter my barrier, me, and B3 all at once.

“RHAAAGH!” she roared as the bone mace on her right arm crashed into the barrier, making it crack. “RUOOAGH!” she roared again as she launched an attack from the spear in her left.

The barrier of light was no longer there to protect us, and the spear was quickly closing in to pulverize B3 and me both.

“Counter Absorption!” Nemesis triggered the skill again, putting up the *second barrier of light*.

A high-speed Counter Absorption activation. It was something she’d had to learn if we wanted to stand a chance against all the high-speed fighters in the duel rankings. The second barrier not only neutralized the attack that would’ve surely killed me, but also gave me a chance to launch a counterattack.

“Vengeance...”

This counter would carry the damage of two powerful attacks. Rosa’s exoskeleton prevented me from unleashing it on her body, and I doubted that it was enough to shatter the tough, large bones covering her now. However, I already knew where I had to aim for my counter to be effective.

“...is Mine!”

My blade was touching the tip of the spear she was extending towards me — *the main body of her Embryo, Gashadokuro*.

The moment I finished activating the skill, Gashadokuro was exposed to double the amount of damage I'd accumulated with my two Counter Absorptions.

It exceeded the Embryo's endurance as a weapon, and a moment later, it shattered into pieces.

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE BAD DOG AND THE OWNER

Paladin, Ray Starling

Our counterattack landed right on Rosa's Gashadokuro, breaking it into too many pieces to count.

With the Embryo's destruction, the exoskeleton forged by its ultimate skill also crumbled away. However, *that was where the damage ended*.

"This woman sure is tenacious," commented Nemesis.

"Can't argue with that," I agreed.

Indeed, the Nobushi Princess herself was completely unharmed.

There had been a small window of time between the moment Vengeance connected and the moment the damage left over from Gashadokuro's destruction reached her. She had used this opening to discard her Embryo, remove the exoskeleton, and distance herself from us, likely to avoid B3's gravity skill.

That escape had been nothing short of spectacular, but it meant little against the fact that the tables had turned.

Sure, I only had one more Counter Absorption use in stock, but B3 already had a new shield at the ready, and she still upheld the gravity skill. Without her exoskeleton, Rosa would be unable to resist its effects.

"Hhaah... Hhaah," she panted. "You're pretty good, Unbreakable."

Not even losing Gashadokuro could wipe that ferocious grin from her face. A broken Embryo wasn't lost forever, but they still took quite a while to regenerate.

"Heh heh heh," Rosa chuckled. "So I used up my ambushes and lost Gashadokuro... So what? The fight's just getting started!"

Despite her dire situation, her fighting spirit was completely unbent, and I found it highly reminiscent of the duel rankers I knew.

She was fixated on continuing this battle, and though we had the upper hand, that was still pretty bad for us.

If this went on for too long, other K&R members might come to her aid and turn the tides against us again. The battle so far had left us drained, meaning that something like that would further endanger not only us, but Louie as well.

If B3 hadn't been there to protect the carriage, the boy could've already been a goner, and prolonging this fight would only up the chances of it happening again.

...Hold on a second, I thought. Rosa's not in a state to immediately hurt him, so maybe it's safe to tell her about him now?

I glanced over at B3, who replied with a light nod.

"Hey, Nobushi Princess!" I called out to her aloud.

"That's 'Rosa' or 'Bone-Eater' to you, Unbreakable!" she roared in response. "I don't like being called a 'princess'!"

"That so?! All right then, Rosa, listen to this! We're in the middle of escorting a tian child to Torne! I hear you at K&R don't hurt tians! What the hell will happen to him if we're gone?!"

I readied myself just in case she tried to take Louie as a hostage.

"Don't you worry!" she replied with a chuckle. "I'll take him to Torne right after I'm done with you two!"

Well, that's... considerate, I thought.

The woman had no intention of harming the tian boy. Cool. Great. It would've been better if she'd also said that she'd back down, but she hadn't, so we had no choice but to fight her, win, and escape the area before the other K&R members got here.

"All right, I lost my ambush *and* my follow-up, but I'm not letting go of this fight yet! I'll turn this around!" Rosa reached into her inventory and took out some spare weaponry: a set of equippable claws and fangs.

I responded by brandishing Nemesis, while B3 readied her new shield for another skill.

It would all be decided by the next exchange of blows.

I prepared to charge...

"Please stop, all three of you. There's no need for this."

A strange person came between us and Rosa.

It appeared as though he'd teleported here, but no, his spontaneous entry had been due to nothing but *pure speed*.

He wasn't using stealth skills such as Marie's Art of Hiding or those on Shu's Kim-un-Kamuy, nor had he activated some Xunyu-like teleportation. My experience from fighting the speedster rankers made me absolutely certain of this. Also, unless my eyes were deceiving me... he was actually faster than both Figaro and Xunyu.



“Please don’t move,” he said. “Just a few more steps and you’ll be in my range.”

The first word that came to mind upon seeing him was “fluffy,” for he was wearing a coat that seemed to be made from pure, unprocessed wool.

“Anyone who enters my range will lose their head.”

The second word was “katana,” because, at his sides, he had two odachi unbefitting his small frame, both of which were linked to him with chain hooks bearing the semblance of rabbit skulls. Eerily enough, all the rings in the chain looked like shark heads, while the rabbit eye sockets had faint red lights burning inside.

“You too, Rosa,” he continued. “Don’t move, please. The hunt is over, so put your weapons away.”

At that point, I finally realized that this small-framed person was *an actual child*. He looked even younger than Xunyu, and he was delivering his warnings with a soprano unique to young boys.

“D-Darling?!” exclaimed Rosa. “You can go online?!”

...Did she just call him “darling”? I asked myself, as if denying reality. Again, did this tall, muscular beast of a woman just call this short, young boy “darling”?

That question weighed heavy upon my mind, and yet, it was still blown away by the words I heard next.

“And so you show yourself,” said B3. “The Guillotine... The Unsheathe, Kashimiya.”

“Eh?” I voiced my shock. Her words made me doubt what I was hearing.

That was the Guillotine? The one and only Kashimiya?

...Well, I already knew Xunyu, so it wasn't too weird that he was a child, but I still had my share of comments and questions.

Why was he wearing wool while bearing the Japanese name for cashmere goats? Where had he appeared from? Could he even unsheathe those odachi? His arms certainly didn't seem long enough for them.

Shu had once told me that weapon-focused Superior Jobs from the “The One” series required great mastery over the relevant techniques, so I also found it odd that The Unsheathe had ended up in the hands of a child.

However, my prolonged exposure to skilled fighters made me certain of one thing: despite appearances, Kashimiya was probably on the same tier as Figaro and Xunyu.

That aside, I had to focus on what he'd just said.

“The hunt is over?” I asked. “Does that mean K&R's withdrawing?”

“Yes.” The boy nodded. “The other groups have already left.”

Honestly, I couldn't be more thankful for that. Being ganked by the members of the kingdom's strongest PK clan wasn't my idea of a good time.

“Darling! Sorry, but I can't have that!” Rosa protested. “This is the start of our revenge!”

Apparently, there was some sort of disagreement between her and Kashimiya, but she'd just said one word I couldn't ignore.

“Revenge?” I raised an eyebrow.

Whatever does she mean? Why is it just the “start,” too? I don’t recall ever getting on K&R’s bad side. Is this about B3? She said she’d fought them before, so... maybe?

“They’re teaming up with the damn cultists from The Lunar Society!” Rosa continued. “We’ll crush them and their plans! It’ll be the signal before we attack the lunatics at their HQ!”

Her words instantly made it all clear, and there was only one way B3 and I could respond to that.

“We’re not teaming up with them,” we said, completely in-sync.

“...What?” Rosa became puzzled.

“Their leaders are acquaintances from college, but we don’t really cooperate in-game,” B3 explained.

“Hell, they kidnapped me just yesterday and I barely escaped,” I added. “Also, Figaro just destroyed their base, so I’m not sure if you even have to do anything to it.”

“...?” Rosa tilted her head in confusion. “Wait, but Tomika said you were having a nice chat with that hanger-on KoA and that you got something from him...”

“We’re college acquaintances. Chats between us are nothing special.”

“Yeah, and all he gave us was the payment for his tea.”

“...” It looked like she finally understood.

Seriously, though... us? Scheming alongside the aberration? What kind of sick joke was that? By whose design would you ever come to that conclusion?

“Rosa,” said Kashimiya, causing the confused woman to freeze solid. “If it’s really as they say, it means you started a self-centered hunt based on nothing but a terrible misunderstanding. You not only inconvenienced them, but also went against the clan’s principles.”

Well, I won’t lie. This was a real bother, I thought.

“In fact, I don’t think I can allow this revenge of yours,” he added.

“Eh? But the cultists started it...” Rosa argued.

“Oh? And who, exactly, accepted a suspicious beginner hunt job for nothing but profit?” His words were razor-sharp and almost murderous in tone.

Over yesterday and today, I’d been exposed to bloodlust from Figaro, Tsukuyo Fuso, B3, and Rosa, but Kashimiya’s was unlike any of them. It was keen. Honed to perfection. And it made me feel like my head could fall at any moment.

Okay, how the hell is an elementary schooler capable of such strong murderous intent? I thought.

“On my way here, I heard *all* about the blockade incident that happened while I was away.”

“I-I had to take it to pay for our HQ expansion...” Rosa argued. “And we still protected the rules of the hunt.”

“That might be fair for bandit clans like Goblin Street, villain role-players like Mad Castle, or hitmen like the Superior Killer, but K&R is a hunting clan. Tell me, did we establish rules so we could hunt beginners that are less than rabbits to us?”

“Ghh...” Rosa groaned and fell silent.

So, Rosa had decided to join the newbie hunt without the leader's permission?

Now that's a bad move, I reflected.

"Do you think that was a good thing to do?" Kashimiya pressed her again.

"N-No! I don't!" Rosa meekly replied.

She was no longer the ferocious wolf she had been in the battle. Now, she was more like a cat outside its territory... or a naughty dog with a strict owner.

Honestly, the difference in physique and apparent age between them made the scene all kinds of confusing. Rosa was significantly larger than the average adult, and she looked at least 20 years older than Kashimiya.

Just what kind of relationship did they have? Was Rosa actually a child, too? Were they siblings or something? Or was it the other way around and Kashimiya was actually an adult?

Overwhelmed by curiosity, I silently asked B3 to tell me more about them.

"Kashimiya started out in Tenchi, as a solo player killer," she said. "But instead of PKing indiscriminately, he simply did it because he wanted serious duels where the loser got the penalty. 'Consensual PK,' so to speak. Players with this stance aren't uncommon in Tenchi, and it's one of the reasons why he also participated in actual duels."

I see, I thought. And he continued dueling even after moving here, eventually becoming third in the rankings.

"Rosa, on the other hand, led a bandit-like PK clan. One day, they all fought against Kashimiya and suffered a staggering defeat. They tried

attacking him many times after that, and, well..." B3 fell silent and heaved a long, tired sigh, as if she just couldn't find the words for this. "Apparently, Rosa eventually fell in love with Kashimiya..."

"B3," I interjected. "Kashimiya is..."

"...about as old as his avatar."

"And Rosa is..."

"...about as old as her avatar."

That's a crime!

"And just so you're aware, most of the clan's members feel the same way as her."

It's a goddamn fan club! An actual hive of little boy enthusiasts!

"Anyway, Kashimiya eventually had to move out of Tenchi, and Rosa and her clan followed and asked him to become their leader."

"...And?"

"Kashimiya accepted in exchange for having the clan adopt a set of rules, which brings us to the present."

Oh, so Kashimiya was mad at Rosa for breaking those rules.

"This is partially my fault for being away for so long," Kashimiya continued. "I went on a short homestay in America, had to visit my grandmother in Hokkaido, and then had to do the homework that had piled up. I'm really sorry that focusing on that made me unable to visit the clan."

Hey, no one can fault you for that, I thought. Real life's important, too.

“But still, PKing beginners for money is a very bad thing to do. If you’re defeated by The Lunar Society because you did it, you’re only getting what you deserve.”

“B-But darling, the offer was just too delicious to pass up...”

“No matter how tasty, there are some things you shouldn’t eat! That’s what it means to be a moral person!”

“I-I’m sorry!”

I was actually watching an elementary school boy scold a woman in her twenties and teach her about morality.

“Rosa is a... simple person who doesn’t think things through and rarely considers the after-effects of her actions,” commented B3.

“Kashimiya, on the other hand, is a bit... no, *a lot* more developed as a person than his age would have you expect, so scenes like this aren’t too uncommon.”

Well, I could definitely see what she’d meant when she’d called Rosa “not the sharpest tool in the shed.”

“Not only that, but...” Kashimiya said as he looked Louie, who was fearfully peeking out of the carriage. “You also involved a tian child in your grudge match.”

He then placed his hand on his head, as if to lighten a headache, and heaved a long sigh.

For someone so young, he sure doesn’t seem to have it easy.

“Th-That’s ‘cause Tomika didn’t say anything about him...” Rosa argued.

“I’M SOOOO SORRYYYYYY!” cried someone hiding a short distance away from us.

I looked and saw a girl Master — likely another K&R member — secretly observing what was happening here.

“Tomika! You little...”

“Please leave it for later,” Kashimiya cut Rosa’s words short. “More importantly, about the moment Mister Unbreakable told you about the tian child...”

“Twitch...” Rosa said.

“I’ll take him to Torne right after I’m done with you two? That’s not how it goes, is it? We have a rule against attacking Masters protecting tians, don’t we?”

“Twitch, twitch!”

...Is she vocalizing that sound effect on purpose?

“Rosa, please apologize.”

“I-I’m sorry, darling!”

“No. Not to me.”

Rosa reluctantly turned towards us...

“S-Sawree.” It was one of the most awkward apologies I’d ever heard.

Her poor delivery aside, no one had died in this encounter, so I was entirely willing to forgive her as long as she didn’t try to attack us again.

However, B3 seemed to have other ideas.

“No, that doesn’t seem sincere,” she said.

“...B3?” I raised an eyebrow and turned to her.

She adjusted her glasses, reached into her inventory, took out some paper, and began writing something. “I am willing to forgive the attack itself with just that sloppy apology, but it doesn’t make up for the actual damage done. We both lost our Lifesaving Brooches, and I had to sacrifice a number of shields.”

“Ah.”

She had a point there. *Somebody* had to pay for all the shields Rosa had broken, and there was no better person for that than Rosa herself.

“With that in mind, this is the Contract for our damages. Please send the set amount of money to my account before the deadline provided.” Contracts were a type of item used for setting and enforcing contracts, and B3 gave it to Rosa to sign.

“Tch, all right, all right,” the woman grumbled. “...Wait, what’s with this amount?! It’s clearly above the market price! Hell, it’s almost double!”

“Oh? Is that too much for you?” asked B3. “Didn’t you make a killing from the newbie hunt?”

“You’re damn right it’s too much! This isn’t just more than my share from the newbie hunt! It’s more than my entire savings!”

“...‘*My share?*?’” Kashimiya overheard, repeated Rosa’s words and emanated another wave of bloodlust.

“Ah!” Rosa gasped, realizing her mistake. She closed her mouth with her hand.

I looked to B3, who was adjusting her glasses as if proud of a job well done.

You made her walk into that one, didn't you? I thought.

"Rosa, you said it was to expand our HQ, didn't you?" Kashimiya asked in a menacing manner. "Did you actually pocket some of the money?"

"Well, I... That's..."

"Please pay for their equipment, okay?"

"...Okay."

And thus, Rosa reluctantly signed the Contract. When she did so, I noticed that B3 lightly, yet triumphantly, pumped the hand she was hiding behind her back.

Then she came close to my ear and whispered, "I'll give you half of the extra money we get."

Well, then, I thought. For someone so gentle, B3 sure bargains hard.

Anyway, the contract was sealed, and we were set to receive both the damages and reparations.

And from what I was hearing, K&R also planned to pay compensation to the victims of their newbie hunt.

Rather than using Rosa's money or the clan's funds, Kashimiya would take managerial responsibility and pay them money from his own savings.

There was a thing or two to be said about having an elementary schooler pay for your failure, but Rosa seemed to be fully aware of this. She was on her knees and palms, looking thoroughly dejected.

"The beginner hunt didn't fit K&R's policy at all," said Kashimiya.
"Hunting beginners before they can grow is definitely not good PK."

“‘Good PK’? What?” I raised an eyebrow.

“That would be PK where you hunt people you told you would PK, and they accepted the challenge.”

Well, that’s certainly “good,” but I’m not even sure if that counts as “PK” anymore.

“But even if you tell them, you only give ten minutes to escape, right?” I asked. “Unless you’re close to the edges, that’s not enough to leave the area.”

“Rosa...” he said with an ice-cold tone thick with murderous intent. Apparently, he’d found some problem with what I said.

The likely culprit, Rosa, was still on her knees and palms, but she was now several meters away from us.

What an impressive backwards crawl. She truly was the Nobushi Princess.

“The time we give depends on the size of the area, but it’s never less than an hour, right?” Kashimiya asked icily.

“W-Well... the hunt doesn’t go as well when we give that much time...” Rosa meekly argued.

“It’s *supposed* to be like that. The rule is there so we don’t hunt just anybody.”

So, while he was away, Rosa had gone and changed the rules he’d set. It seemed like a generic scenario about a malicious substitute leader misusing his power, but in this case, all of it was simply because Rosa wasn’t the smartest individual.

I could only hope she wasn’t so prone to messing up in real life.

"I'll ask more about what happened over the last two months from the other members," said Kashimiya. "While I do that, you'll stand in the hallway with buckets in each hand."

"EEHH?!" Rosa exclaimed.

That was a very... elementary school-like punishment to give, but it was made far worse by the fact that the receiver was a woman in her twenties.

"Why not just, you know... do away with her?" asked B3. I couldn't tell whether she was suggesting he kill her or just kick her out of the clan.

"No, this is partially my own fault, so I won't fire her," he replied.
"And if you mean giving her the death penalty... the problem with that is that she enjoys being cut..."

I see. I see. She enjoys it. All right, then.

"However, if there are many incidents like this one, I'm thinking of abandoning the leader's seat and leaving the cla—"

"I'm sorry! I'm *really* sorry! I'll never do stuff like this again! So please, don't leave, darling!"

"NOOOOO! NOT THE CLAN! ANYTHING BUT THAT!"

Rosa and the hiding K&R Master both went into panic mode and implored him to reconsider.

Yep, this really is an idol fan club, I thought. I wonder if anyone reacted this way when Shu left show biz.

"That thought made me picture Brother Bear say 'I'm going back to being a normal boy!' before taking off his costume and revealing his muscles," Nemesis said telepathically.

“PFFT!”

The comment made me burst out laughing, but thankfully, the K&R clan drama kept everyone from noticing.

Anyway, everything was settled, and we were about to resume heading to Torne. K&R made preparations to return to their HQ in the capital.

“Sorry for all the trouble today,” said Kashimiya. “I’ll make it up to you when I get the chance. Feel free to call me whenever you need me.”

“Oh. Okay,” I replied. “I guess I’ll hold you to that.”

In all honesty, I hadn’t the slightest idea of what I’d have him do.

“Then this is goodbye. Tomika, please ready the car.”

“Okay! Oboroguruma!” The other K&R member on the scene, who was apparently named Tomika, raised her left hand and made an armored vehicle-like object pop out of her crest.

From the name “Oboroguruma,” I could only assume that it was her Embryo, and that Kashimiya had ridden it all the way from the capital to here.

Tomika sat in the driver’s seat, while Kashimiya went to the back. Only Rosa was left.

“Unbreakable and B3... sorry about what I did today,” she said, giving another awkward apology while facing away from us.

“No need for that,” said B3. “I just want the reparations.”

“Gnh, all right, all right! I’ll send the money over to you before next week!”

Rosa spun around and walked towards Oboroguruma. Then, as though remembering something, she looked back and said her goodbyes.

“See ya later, B3! We were enemies today, but if you ever find the time, *let's go PKing again!*”

The words she used were nothing to some, and a real bombshell to others.

As though thoroughly oblivious to what she'd just said, Rosa sat down in Oboroguruma with a carefree expression on her face.

CHAPTER NINE: TO THE WINDY VILLAGE

Paladin, Ray Starling

After the folks from K&R left, we resumed our journey towards Torne.

The sun had already set, and Silver was now pulling the carriage over a dark road lit up by magic lights installed into the vehicle.

There was traffic here and there. Groups of Masters who'd survived the hunt and tians who hadn't been targeted to begin with were heading in the same direction as us.

Apparently, the party behind us had lost two of their people, and I couldn't help but feel a bit guilty about that.

But then again, the only ones at fault here were K&R, or just Rosa, to be specific.

The chaos had left Louie all drained, and he was now fast asleep inside the carriage. Hell, even if this whole thing hadn't happened, Louie was a child who'd woken up early in the morning to travel to the capital and back, so it was only natural for him to be exhausted.

Honestly, I was pretty tired, as well.

Well, I haven't gotten a proper breather on this side ever since the kidnapping, I reminded myself.

"I hope we get to Torne soon," Nemesis said aloud. She was sitting to my right on the coachman's seat. "We might finally get some rest there."

I couldn't help but agree with her.

"Though, I must say," she continued, switching to telepathy, "B3 is strangely silent."

I threw a glance over to B3, who was sitting to my left.

"..."

Continued silence. She hadn't said a single word ever since our exchange with K&R. It was probably because of Rosa's words as she left. Specifically, "Let's go PKing again."

I'd heard Kashimiya tell her off for saying that, but that didn't undo the very fact that she'd said it, effectively revealing two truths about B3.

First was the fact that B3 was acquainted with K&R, and that they weren't necessarily enemies, while the second was that B3, too, was a PKer.

The fact that she'd been hiding this could only mean that she hadn't wanted me to find out. Well, the curtain had fallen and now I knew. And as for what that made me think...

"...It bothers you, doesn't it?" B3 asked, suddenly breaking her long silence. "You're probably aware of this by now, but I'm a PKer. In fact, I'm about as infamous as K&R."

I listened, not saying a word.

"I haven't been active lately, but before I stopped, I gave the death penalty to at least a thousand players."

"That is quite awe-inspiring," Nemesis commented.

As a first-hand witness of B3's battle against K&R, I couldn't help but believe her. She was extremely adept at analyzing her opponents.

"I probably should've told you right at the start, but I chose to hide it because I thought you might avoid me," she admitted. "I didn't want to lose a new junior friend like that... Sorry."

B3 looked into my eyes and bowed her head repently.

It was clear as day that she was earnestly apologizing for keeping secrets from me, but honestly...

"Umm... I really don't think much of it, though," I said. The fact that she was a PKer didn't bother me in the slightest.

"...Eh?" She looked up with a confused look on her face.

"I wouldn't avoid you just because you're a PKer," I repeated myself. "Sure, I'd be pretty annoyed if you came at me like K&R did just now, but that's about it."

As long as someone didn't act like a certain bastard in a lab coat and go around doing acts of terror that endangered tians, I really didn't care if they were a PKer or not. Hell, a certain PKer hitman who was responsible for my only death penalty was now a member of my party. PKer or not — it barely mattered to me at this point.

B3 silently stared at me, as if to assess whether I was telling the truth or not, then sighed in relief before forming a faint smile. "I can't tell whether you're just excessively tolerant, softhearted... or just naïve."

"Ha ha," I chuckled. "Well, I can't really deny any of those. But even so, I feel that you're someone I can trust."

There were Masters who didn't hesitate to commit genocide upon tians. The King of Plagues that Marie had defeated, the King of

Crimes that Shu had told me about, and Franklin — who I'd faced myself — were all among them.

However, I could easily tell that B3 was nothing like those three.

My strongest argument for this was the fact that she'd sacrificed her shields to protect Louie from Rosa, but even if I hadn't seen that, I already knew that she was kind and considerate at heart.

"Hell, I wouldn't have cared about you being a PKer even if you'd revealed it to me right at the start," I continued. "Like when we were talking at the college café."

"...No," B3 said as she looked away from me. "I definitely couldn't have told you then."

"Why not?"

"...If I'd told you that I was the infamous PKer X, you would have researched me on the Internet before going online, right?"

"No, I wouldn't ha— Well, maybe?" I couldn't entirely rule out the possibility.

"That would have been... well... embarrassing."

"Hm? Embarrassing? How?"

"When I'm PKing, I become an entirely different person... and it's definitely *not* someone I'd like my real life acquaintances to see..." Her cheeks turned rosy, and she covered them with her hands.

The gap between her current expression and her usual, calm and collected self made her seem a bit... cute.

"Ah! I just felt a violent, inexplicable surge of danger!" Nemesis exclaimed.

Nemesis? What's wrong? I asked.

"Oh, uh... but B3," she said, ignoring my question. "You didn't seem to change all that much in our battle against K&R. That was PKing, wasn't it?"

"Back then... I wasn't *turned on* in that way."

"Turned on'?" Our voices as one, Nemesis and I repeated the term.

Did she have some sort of switch at the back of her head or something? Did it make her turn into a PKer when on? Was it like a literal "*kill-switch*?" I considered asking more about this...

"Hh... Nnh, hm...?"

...but that was when I heard sounds coming from the carriage. Louie had woken up.

"You're awake?" I asked. "We should be there soon."

"Yeah," he replied. "I can hear it."

"Hear?'" I strained my ears and opened my mind. Upon doing so, I could hear lots of faint sounds coming from the other side of the hill before us.

Before long, Silver went up and brought us high enough to see beyond it.

"It's beautiful," said Nemesis, clearly overwhelmed by the sight.

The road to Torne now had guardrail-like fences on its sides, and both of them had been turned into *an attraction*.

The tops of the fences were decorated by countless pinwheel toys, spinning in the nightly wind. The paint on those toys had to contain something, because they were emitting a faint, yet vivid, shine.

Brightening the dark like guiding lights, they spun and turned as though inviting us over to the village.

The sight was truly wondrous, and it made me understand why this festival attracted so many people.

"It starts tomorrow, but they already put up the windstars," said Louie.

"Windstars'?" I raised an eyebrow. *Not pinwheels, not windmills, but "windstars"?*

Upon closer inspection, I noticed they all had a total of five blades, and when looking from the front, they did indeed have the likeness of a generic star symbol.

"They're based on an old story from here," Louie explained. "Long ago, a star that fell from the sky when the wind was very strong sealed the evil monster 'Blacksky' deep in the earth."

Was that the local belief or something?

Thinking of "beliefs" made my mind trail off towards the aberration, but I couldn't let myself forget that there were faiths other than hers.

"Ah! You can't take the windstars off the fences!" Louie shouted, and I instantly turned to see Nemesis frozen solid while reaching towards the fence on her side.

"...Nemesis," I said.

"I-I just... I watched them spin, and I just couldn't help it..."

What are you, a cat? What kind of reason is that?

"If you want a windstar, you can have this one," said Louie as he reached into his inventory, took out a windstar, and handed it over to Nemesis.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Yeah! I brought it with me for good luck, but we have more back at the village!"

"I see... Thank you." Nemesis held the windstar in hand, looking at it with a gleeful smile on her face.

"This is the first time I've seen you make an expression that fits your appearance," I said. "If I don't count the times when you eat sweets, anyway."

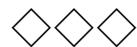
"Mrgh! How rude! I'm a lady, so I have to use my indulgent expressions sparingly!"

Is that really a lady-like thing? I pondered. It sounds warrior-like, to be honest. And hey, you already sound like a warrior sometimes... Oh, well.

Anyway, despite the minor hindrance along the way, we'd made it to the outskirts of Torne.

We'd take Louie home, and then, come tomorrow, we'd start our search for information which could lead us to Shijima's real-life self.

That would be the real start of this quest.



K&R's Headquarters

In the leader's room deep inside K&R's HQ, Kashimiya sat on a floor cushion while examining a pile of documents held together by a string.

It had been created by a member using skills from the shoshi job grouping — a set of scrivener-like jobs from Tenchi. That gave it the format of an old Japanese picture book.

Kashimiya flipped through the pages until one part of it made him furrow his brow.

“What’re you reading, darling?” asked Rosa, standing at his side with water buckets in both her hands and on her head.

True to his word, Kashimiya had given her the punishment he’d said he would. The bucket on her head was an extra, added because Rosa had revealed that B3 was a PKer.

At first, Rosa had been taking her punishment in the hallway, but since she always cheated without him around, Kashimiya had made her do it in his room. Then again, Rosa could’ve intended this.

“This is the report for today’s pseudo-hunt,” Kashimiya answered.

“Ghuh,” she flinched.

Indeed, Kashimiya was reading the report describing Rosa’s hunt, which had been sparked by a misunderstanding and fueled by a personal grudge.

Besides the Masters who participated in the hunts, K&R also had members who recorded the situation and presented reports to Kashimiya and Rosa.

Kashimiya had to pay reparations to the newbies and process two months worth of information, but he first wanted to take care of the most immediate problem.

“Look, I’m sorry, okay?” Rosa said meekly. “Can you let it go?”

"This time, we lost a few group fighters and an entire set of squad fighters," Kashimiya said, completely ignoring her words.

"...What?"

The death penalties among the group fighters had obviously been caused by B3's Flying Shield. The group fighters were full of low-level members, so it wasn't strange for them to have been utterly crushed by someone in B3's tier, but the same couldn't be said about the squad fighters. They were parties of level 500 high-ranks, meaning that they could easily stand their ground against other parties of such caliber and likely defeat them, as well.

Though this had been primarily a personal assault on Ray and B3, it had also been a K&R hunt, so, while the group fighters and Rosa had focused on the two, the four sets of squad fighters had been hunting as normal.

The fact that one of them had been completely annihilated before Kashimiya had told them to withdraw — within only a few minutes after the hunt began — was somewhat strange.

"The search didn't show any Superior Jobs, though," said Rosa.

Circle of Detect Life was a skill that checked levels, so they would've instantly known if there had been anyone above level 500. With the exception of Rosa, the highest level in that hunting ground had been 500.

"Yes, the report says the same thing." Kashimiya nodded.

"Then..."

"Apparently, they were outnumbered. Not every battle's outcome is decided by the power of one, after all."

Rose was speechless. *Are you sure you, of all people, can say that, darling?*

Kashimiya was the very embodiment of the power of one he'd just mentioned. He was literally a match for a thousand. Unleash a regiment on him, and all their heads would fall.

"Anyway, the enemies were acting strange," he said as he examined the document again. The fighters who'd been wiped out had attacked a party with particularly high levels among those caught in the search.

At first, both parties had been equal and it had seemed like either side's game, but then, about a minute after the battle had begun, a few nearby parties had gathered at the location. They had all begun cooperating flawlessly, and the K&R squad fighter set had been quickly destroyed. According to the report, they'd killed two of the enemies before the last of them fell.

"They got there too fast, and they cooperated too well for it to be improvised," said Kashimiya. "This can only mean that..."

"...a single group split into parties and moved separately for some reason, right?" asked Rosa.

"Yes. I think so," he said, approving of her theory.

Though Rosa was a tactless, dumb dog with no forethought to speak of, her extensive experience as a leader of PK groups made her more knowledgeable on some fronts than Kashimiya.

Battle tactics was one of those fronts, and because of this, Kashimiya and Rosa had clean-cut roles in the clan — him as the general manager, and her as the hunt strategist.

In fact, the clan's group fighters had been her idea. She'd figured that the inexperienced members would be most effective when they banded up and unleashed focused waves of long-range attacks. She definitely deserved credit for that strategy.

"Isn't that strange, though?" asked Kashimiya. "If they're heading to Torne at this time, they must be Windstar Festival tourists, right? It would be normal for them to go all together, so why did they split up?"

"I don't think they're tourists," Rosa said. "They're fellow PKers."

"How can you tell?"

"They're using the same plays as I did back in Tenchi and B3 did before her clan split up. A load of people in one group really stands out, and it's easy to tell when they're about to do something, so you split up into parties, surround your prey, and take care of them before they can even realize what happened."

Rosa then laughed, adding, "This move is sometimes used when hunting actual animals."

Her laugh made her lose her balance, causing the bucket on her head to flip and spill its contents all over her.

"Ugh, I'm all wet now..." she complained. "Anyway, they were probably following some target of theirs. We got anything else on them, darling?"

"The party they first attacked had a person with this mark on them," he said, showing it to her.

It was a symbol best described as a red circle and black circle stacked together, and from certain perspectives, it appeared to represent a solar eclipse.

Rosa was familiar with that mark. “It’s Sol Crisis,” she said.

“‘Sol Crisis’?”

“Oh yeah, you don’t know about them. It’s a PK clan that blew up after the newbie hunt we did. They’re basically trying to fill the hole left by Mad Castle and GS, and their playstyle is closer to GS’s.”

Basically, this meant that one of K&R’s squads had lost against a rising PK group. Rosa wanted to go on a revenge match against them, but she wasn’t certain what Kashimiya would say to that. PKers were probably fair game to him, but the recent events might be too fresh in his mind for him to allow it.

“I see,” the boy sighed with a somewhat gloomy expression on his face. “Things sure have changed over the last two months...”

It had been a turbulent time, indeed. Full of various happenings, twists, shifts, and turns. The fact that he hadn’t been able to participate in any of it had made Kashimiya feel a bit lonely, as if everyone had moved on without him while he was offline.

His gloomy expression had a strong effect on Rosa, but she was somehow able to hide it.

“B-By the way,” she said, changing the subject to help her calm down. “There’s a weird rumor about Sol Crisis!”

“Oh?”

“They say there’s one PKer among them that stands out... though it’s more about the gear he wears than the actual person.”

“What gear?”

“It’s a set of armor, used by a certain PKer...” she said before momentarily falling silent and picturing a certain person. “People say

they saw someone in Sol Crisis wear Barbaroy Bad Burn's Legendary full armor MVP reward, Gunhammer Plate, Magnum Colossus."

CONJUNCTION EPISODE: THE NEWS

Torne Village, Paladin, Ray Starling

We passed the windstar-decorated road and arrived at Torne.

Being a village, it was obviously a far smaller place than Altea or Gideon. There were only about 400 or so houses spread out over a wide area, and the few windmills standing tall here and there made me feel like I was inside a painting of the 15-16th century Netherlands.

Torne and its surroundings looked crowded and lively, most likely due to tomorrow's Windstar Festival. I could even see some people setting up tents to sleep in. They probably hadn't been able to get a place at any local inn.

"I don't think we'll be any luckier in that regard," I muttered.

"We can sleep in the carriage," said B3. "Its interior space expansion makes it a bit like a camping car."

Well, then. All that was left for us was to take Louie to his mom and call it a day.

...Alas, that wasn't as simple as it seemed.

"Louie, are you crazy?! You're not supposed to do that!" Farica scolded Louie as he cried, sobbing loudly.

A child, all by himself, had taken a stagecoach to the capital, passing the monster-filled Fadl Mountain Pass in the process.

It was fair to scold him for that. In fact, a scolding simply *had* to happen.

“Just how sad do you think I and your dads would be if something happened to you?” she demanded.

Dads. Plural. She was obviously referring to both the MIA Shijima and Louie’s late biological father.

With both of them gone, Farica was looking after Louie all by her lonesome, and I could barely even imagine the anxiety this incident had given her.

However, I knew enough to conclude that she’d been overdoing it. Apparently, she’d been waiting for Louie in front of their home ever since she’d found out he’d left for the capital.

Farica had spoken to the merchants she was acquainted with and many other people who were heading for the capital, and after figuring there was nothing more she could do, she had carried a chair over to the front of the house and just sat there until we arrived.

An environment with jobs and stats might make tians stronger than the average real-life person, but that still seemed like a bit much to a woman in the later stages of pregnancy. I could understand being worried about her son, but she shouldn’t compromise her health for that.

“B-But I wanted to find Dad...!” Louie cried.

“You know what he’s like,” said Farica. “How many times do I have to tell you that you don’t have to worry about him?”

“But we have to find him! When he found out about the baby, he was so happy he cried! Don’t you remember?”

“Louie...”

“He wants to see the baby! I’m sure of it!” Though his words came through tears — or perhaps because of that — his words were full of certainty.

Farica looked like she wanted to say something, but instead, she just gently wiped his tears and embraced him.

I stood silent. This was a talk between mother and child, and it felt like we didn’t belong here at all.

I considered leaving and letting them have their moment, but since she had been waiting outside, I couldn’t find the right time to do it.

Well, we also had a few things to ask her, so it might be best to wait it out.

“Anyway, Louie... Who are these people?” Farica asked finally.

“These are the Masters who said they would search for Dad!” he replied. “Mister Ray, Miss B, and Nemesis!”

“And why don’t I get a ‘Miss,’ if I may ask?” Nemesis grumbled.

Because you don’t look that much older than him.

“Nemesis... are you a Maiden?” Farica asked.

“Indeed I am.”

“I see. Just like Juno...” Farica suddenly became pensive.

Well, Ichiro Shijima, her missing husband, was a Maiden’s Master, so seeing another Maiden might very well mean something to her.

“They’re here to talk to you about Dad to help them search for him,” Louie added.

“Search for him...? But...” Farica said and momentarily fell silent.
“Very well.”

“Excuse me,” B3 broke her silence and joined the exchange. “May I have a moment?”

“Yes?”

“We’re here to gather information that could help us search for Ichiro Shijima in real li— I mean, ‘on the other side.’ To that end, we wanted to question you about him and examine any items he’s left behind, but...” She paused and adjusted her glasses. “I believe it’s best to leave it for tomorrow. You seem quite tired today, and we wouldn’t like to stress you or your baby any further.”

I couldn’t agree more. It was already late, anyway, so all that business was best postponed to when Farica was in a better state.

“Thank you,” she said. “I appreciate... that... phew...”

While talking, Farica lost her posture and almost collapsed, but I ran up and kept her steady. The wait for Louie must’ve been more burdening than I’d thought. She seemed extremely tired and looked somewhat anemic.

B3 took Farica and, led by Louie, carried her over to her room and had her lie down. I wasn’t involved in this because we decided that a stranger like me had no place in a woman’s room. Instead, I took care of the chair out front and checked my inventory for any items that could help Farica feel better.

Since I had a tendency to get all sorts of debuffs on me, and because I had quite a fat wallet, I was now loaded with debuff-removing items. I even had a dozen Elixirs, which had a market price of 100,000 lir each.

Well, actually, half of them had come from my daily gacha rolls, but hey, they were a better hit than a Permit.

“Can a pregnant woman really drink items meant for combat use?” asked Nemesis.

“...Oh. I don’t really know.”

Though this world’s medicines came with descriptions of their effects, they never had warnings or anything like that. I’d yet to see any potion say things like “Ages X and up” or “Not for use by pregnant women.”

“I guess I’ll just give her some food, instead,” I said. “I’ll go ask if I can use the kitchen.”

I already had some ingredients on me, so that wouldn’t be a problem. Most of those had also come from the gacha, and though they were cheaper than the money I’d thrown in, at least they were useful.

Farica didn’t feel too good about us doing any more for her than we already had, but Louie approved of me using the kitchen, so that was exactly what I did.

The kitchen here had an oven, a gas burner, and lots of other expensive-looking cooking equipment, all of which had probably been provided for them by Shijima. It didn’t seem like I’d have much trouble making food in here.

I concluded that Farica needed something light, and decided to make some minestrone soup.

Might as well make something for Louie and ourselves, while I’m at it, I thought as I heard someone enter the kitchen. Upon turning around, I saw B3.

"I'll help," she said, already wearing an apron. She looked pretty good in that.

From how confident she seemed, I was guessing she knew her way around the kitchen. B3 might be unexpectedly good at homemaking.

"Ngh! I just felt another inexplicable surge of danger..." said Nemesis. "Oh! Ray, let me hel—"

"Not happening. You'll eat most of it all during tasting," I rejected her. "Don't think I've forgotten how you ate half of the cookie dough when we were baking with Riser and Bishmal."

"Nhogh... You don't trust me at all when it comes to food."

I have every reason not to.

"Ray," B3 spoke up. "I'm more curious about how you ended up baking cookies with those two."

"Well, this and that happened and it led to that."

Basically, we had all been helping out at a certain arena charity event. One thing that had really surprised me back then was the fact that Bishmal's cookies had been baked to perfection. In all honesty, as rude as that was, I'd expected him to completely burn his.

"Hmm... Well, I have some store-bought bread on me," I said. "Guess I'll make some minestrone soup and green salad."

"Then I'll make some Hamburg steaks with cheese," said B3. "I'm quite good at those."

We quickly started cooking, and in about an hour, we had a full course of standard Western food. Neither I nor B3 had the jobs for it, but Cooking was a sense skill, meaning that we could cook as well as we did in real life.

But then, I couldn't neglect to mention that there were people like Marie, who couldn't cook even if they had the Cooking skill.

"First you bring my son back, and now you make food for us," said Farica, seemingly humbled. "I don't know what to say..."

"Don't worry about that," replied B3. "We did this because we wanted to."

"It looks so good!" Louie said with a mix of excitement and surprise in his tone.

By the way, since it had me curious, I'd asked about the medicine, and apparently, there was a type of magic medicine which didn't give any side effects to pregnant women, which seemed really convenient.

"Wow! You're Masters, but you can cook!" Louie enthused.

...What does that have to do with anything?

"Could Shijima cook?" I asked.

"Not at all. He said that he'd never done it on the other side, either."

"...Hmm."

Could that work as a hint leading to his true identity?

Well, that and other similar questions were best postponed for tomorrow.

We all said our thanks for the food and began eating.

Likely due to Shijima's influence, this family expressed thanks before their meals in the Japanese way. That, combined with the fact that they were using chopsticks, made it safe to be completely sure that Shijima was Japanese.

Anyway, as for the taste of the results of our labor... the minestrone I'd made wasn't bad at all. Shu could probably make a way better one, but my work right here fully deserved a passing mark.

B3's Hamburg steak, however, was really good. If you just made it two times better, you'd have something that could rival Shu's cooking.

...Man, that brother of mine can do everything except art.

"Nh?" I noticed something.

Nemesis, sitting at my side, wasn't eating all that much. Was she holding back because we didn't have a lot of food today?

"Nemesis, you're not eating. What's wrong?" I asked, not holding it in.

In response, she lightly hung her head and said, "I'm not hungry."



A moment later, my spoon fell out of my hand.

“This can’t be real...”

Nemesis? *This Nemesis?* Not hungry?! In what world could this happen?! Was this the portent of some cataclysm?!

“It vexes me that you’re more surprised by this than by Marie’s or B3’s identities,” she said.

“Well... You know...”

You’re Nemesis.

“I have no idea what you mean by that. And for your information, it’s not just lack of appetite. My body feels heavy, and I’m being attacked by drowsiness...”

“Are you sick? Do you have a fever?” I asked as I pushed my forehead against hers, which didn’t seem all that hot at first. *Hmm, I’d say it’s standard... Perhaps even a bit below the average?*

“Ah! R-Ray...?!”

Oh, wait, it’s a bit hot. You have a cold, don’t you?

“Embryos don’t get colds, you fool!” she shouted. “Anyway, my face feels warm, so I’ll just go to sleep! You take responsibility and eat my food!” Having said that, Nemesis returned to the crest.

Embryos don’t get colds? But I’m quite sure I’ve heard of Guardians catching Epidemics, I thought. We have a pregnant lady here, so we can’t be too careful.

B3 was staring at me, not saying a word.

Was something wrong?

"Have you ever been called a 'natural womanizer'?" she asked.

"No," I replied. "Though, in high school, I've been called an 'all-nizer.'"

And I still had no idea why. By what design could anyone ever call a person an "all-nizer"? What did that even mean?

"Is it because he 'womanizes' all? Indiscriminately?" B3 muttered something I couldn't hear or understand.

Anyway, I began digging through my two portions of dinner.

Once I was done with that, we washed the tableware and excused ourselves from Farica's home.

She'd offered to let us stay, but we didn't want to bother her more than necessary and decided to sleep in the carriage, like we'd originally planned. However, we *did* ask to park it on their grounds, and she gladly agreed.

Speaking of which, for a family with such a modest house, they had a strangely large amount of land. I'd asked why, and apparently, Shijima had prepared it for his Aries Leo mount, Gringham. From what Louie told me, Gringham was a lion as large as an elephant, so having this amount of land made perfect sense.

Anyway, with Farica's permission and more than enough space to park, we settled the carriage and prepared to call it a day.

Of course, we had the option of logging out and taking naps, but that came with the risk of oversleeping. Also, for some reason, sleeping in *Dendro* made me feel as though I'd gotten more sleep. It probably had something to do with the fact that three hours in real life were nine hours here.

Mind you, if you slept here and logged out, you could still be greeted by a feeling of drowsiness, making you aware that all the rest you'd gotten here was just an illusion. Strange how that real-life feeling wasn't there as long as you were online.

All that aside, this carriage we would be staying in *had an actual shower room*.

There was a knob on a door, placed where nothing could possibly be behind it. But when you opened it, there was — oh me, oh my — a fully-functional shower room.

Space expansion was impressive, albeit trippy, stuff. Just what would happen to all this if the carriage broke?

I took a quick shower and prepared to go to bed.

Honestly, instead of showering, I could have simply logged out and logged in again, as that would have made all the dirt on me vanish — or, rather, fall off my disappearing body. However, over this past month, I'd realized that it felt better to sleep after cleansing your body in warm water. I'd bathed in real life before I'd met up with B3, so there was no problem in that regard, either.

As for where we would sleep, well... toppling... no, *flipping the seats upside down* caused beds to appear.

This carriage couldn't surprise me anymore.

Hell, despite having the appearance of a slightly luxurious carriage, it had more space inside than a large camping car. That, too, was the mysterious space expansion.

“How much did this thing cost, anyway?” I asked.

“Who knows?” B3 shrugged.

...Excuse me?

"It was a random drop from our PKing," she continued. "Apparently, it's a prototype of a new magic carriage model created by a Legendarian fairy workshop. I don't even know how it ended up in the hands of the person my clan PK'd."

"..."

"I was curious myself, and after a bit of research, I found out that the market price for models from the previous generation of such carriages is 100,000,000 lir."

"..."

That would destroy my bank account. Were we inside the *Dendro* equivalent of a Benz Roadster? Or was this more like one of those pure gold Lamborghinis bought with Arabian oil money? No, this was probably more expensive.

"One of my clan members said it costs about as much as a tank," B3 added.

"Ohh..." Well, that *did* seem like a better comparison.

Whatever the case, the carriage was a stupidly great luxury, and I had to help make sure it didn't get damaged.

Today's incident was a close call, I thought.

"I'll turn off the lights, then," said B3. "Good night, Ray."

"You too," I replied. "Good night."

Thus we fell asleep.

The hectic day had left me completely drained, and I slept soundly, with no dreams to disturb me.



The next day, I opened my eyes to see Nemesis staring directly at me.

“Morning, Nemesis,” I greeted her.

“You too, Ray,” she replied. “Anyway, I’ll get right to the point.”

She raised both her index fingers.

“I have good news and bad... or more like ‘mildly troubling’ news. Which do you want to hear first?”

“...Well, this is sudden.”

Good news and bad news, eh? Well, the bad news probably had to be dealt with first, but I didn’t want to start the day like that.

“Good news first, please,” I said.

“Very well,” Nemesis replied as she raised two more fingers on her right hand, for a total of three raised fingers.

Then she made the revelation.

“I’ve evolved to my third form.”

“...What?”

To be continued...

AFTERWORD



Cat: "Hello, I'm Cheshire and I didn't get any scenes again."

Bear: "I'm Shu, and I used my old skills to show off my beary beautiful voice. Anyway..."

Cat, Bear: "It didn't come out at the end of the year! Sorry!"

Cat: "As you're surely aware by now, this volume came out on February 1st (in Japan)."

Bear: "And that means that the previous volume's announcement for this volume is now nothing but a lie. Appawling."

Fox: "Seriously. That was my first announcement, and now it's all ruined."

Bear: "...And so the fox appears!"

Fox: "You make it sound like I'm a ghost or some other monster."

Bear: "You might as well be."

Fox: "How harsh. Oh, I'm sure you already know me from this volume, but I'm the Fox, Tsukuyo Fuso. I hope we get along."

Cat: "The Normality-Consuming Nightmare, Tsukuyo Fuso."

Bear: "The Crawling Cultist of Chaos, Tsukuyo Fuso."

Fox: "You're both so hard on me. You treat me like I'm some sort of yokai or eldritch creature."

Bear: "You deserve that beary much."

Fox: "How mean. You shouldn't mistreat me just because I'm a yokai in real life."

Cat, Bear: "You are?!"

Fox: "I'm joking. Why did you believe me?"

Bear: (Because it seems likely.)

Cat: "Anyway, back on track. Here's the usual comment from the author."

Thank you for the purchase, dear readers. I'm the author, Sakon Kaido.

Time flew by, and we are now at the 6th volume of *Dendro*.

After the release of the 5th, we were blessed with the pleasant news that *Infinite Dendrogram* had received 3rd place in Takarajimasha's *Kono Light Novel ga Sugoi!* 2018 Bunko rankings, and 2nd in their new entries rankings.

This couldn't have happened without the support from you — the readers. And you're also the reason why volume 6 could be released and introduce you to the story's second part.

It involves new characters, such as Tsukuyo Fuso, the kingdom's final Superior; B3, the upperclassman Ray can rely on both in-game and out; and many others. Please look forward to the old and new cast's new adventures in *Infinite Dendrogram*, and enjoy them for all they're worth!

With that in mind, volume 7 will cover everything until the end of this quest, revealing things such as the whereabouts of Louie's dad, what happens during Windstar Festival, and the nature of Nemesis's third form.

The wind-clad, star-spangled volume 7. Little will give me more joy than your excitement for its release!

Bear: "Is it just me, or is the aufur a bit more hyped than usual?"

Cat: "He's probably happy that his work reached volume 6."

Fox: "Probably. And while you're distracted by him, I'll just announce another new thing!"

Cat: "?!"

Fox: "If all went well, volume 2 of the manga adaptation of *Infinite Dendrogram* should already be out! According to the author: 'It's so good! It's much like reading Kami Imai's own manga!' More importantly, it's the volume where I make my debut and show off my powers! Oh, and Rosa — who didn't get an illustration in this book — also makes an appearance! And to top it all off, the end of the volume has an extra short story written by the author! It's a real must-buy for any fan! *OH, AND VOLUME 7 OF THE LIGHT NOVEL IS SET TO COME OUT IN JUNE 2018! (In Japan!)*"

Cat: "Aggressive direct marketing! Is this the fabled Kansai entrepreneurship?! ...Wait, you even took the volume 7 announcement!"

Bear: "From the volume's beginning to the end, the unbearable fox was with us all the way through."

Fox: “I might’ve been defeated by Figaro in *Dendro* and by B in real life... BUT I STILL HAVE MY LATENT POTENTIAL!”

Cat: “Potential for what?! You just stole my announcement for the second time in a row! And stop speaking in caps lock!”

Bear: “...Give up, Cheshire. I can’t bear to say this, but you probably won’t be getting a chance to do an announcement until you show up in the main story.”

Cat: “BNYAAGH!”

Fox: “Anyway, darlings, see you in volume 7.”

Xun: “...I’m misSing out on a lOT of stuff, arEn’t I?”



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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 6

by Sakon Kaidou

Translated by Andrew Hodgson

Edited by Emily Sorensen

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Original Japanese edition published in 2018 by Hobby Japan

This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan,
Tokyo

English translation © 2018 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: May 2018

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