

Sakon Kaidou  
Illustrator: Taiki

# Infinite Dendrogram

10. After the Storm, and Before the Storm

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## [The Ace] AR-I-CA

AR-I-CA

*"I made some  
good money  
just now, Yu."*

She was the person who'd forced herself into the role of my mentor. Just like me, she was an ex-member of The Triangle of Wisdom, as well as my sister's close friend, and the one and only "Blue Sky Songstress" — one of the nine Caldinian Superiors.

*"You overdid it,  
teach."*

<Illegal Frontier>  
Leader: Sechs Würfel

Sechs

Sechs Würfel, who was my clan leader, landlord here in the gaol, and the owner of this café, actually sounded worried.

***“Give me some iced coffee, please. Pour it in the usual dolphin glass...”***

***“Mm-hm.  
Very well.”***

<Illegal Frontier>  
Member: Gerbera

Gerbera

# **Prologue**

## *Control AI Workspace*

“Ngh... There’s so much work...” A certain white cat was hard at work in a space populated by countless screens.

It was control AI no. 13, Cheshire.

Once in charge of spreading culture, he was now the odd-job AI, constantly dealing with various tasks piled up on him by the other AIs.

Now, while Cheshire was working in this space, he had clones currently leading new Masters through the tutorial, and an avatar acting as a duelist.

This ability to split himself and thus divide his processing power was what had gotten him the role of the odd-job AI.

“I’m not at my best, either,” he grumbled. “Using my real body took away a whole lot of my processing power...”

Recently, in the ruins near Quartierlatin, he’d unleashed his power as Infinite Multiplication, Grimalkin and crushed an army of pre-ancient weaponry.

Doing something like that wasn’t without its costs, though.

Unlike how it was with controlling normal clones, using the main body to its full potential left a burden on his processing power. In other words, it made him tired.

“Nngh... But I need to clear some of this work to open up processing power for my match as Tom...”

Tired or not, he still had work to do.

All the administrative work was done by just thirteen Als, so breaks were out of the question, especially when there were those who were even more tired than Cheshire. It was a vicious circle, like in a typical employee-exploiting business.

Then again, perhaps you couldn't expect any rest while managing *Infinite Dendrogram* — a world that was active 24/7 and constantly had several hundred thousand people connected to it.

It made sense that they would have to use so much of their processing power.

“Looking back at it, the first two thousand years here before launch were sooo easy... Even if you ignore the hell I went through because of Rockfell and Fanlong.”

Cheshire grinned wryly as he recalled the time when he was The Lynx, Schrödinger Cat. Those were the names of the King of Kings and the Draconic Emperor of that time.

It was now called “The Era of the Peerless Three,” but from Cheshire’s perspective, it was “The Era of the Peerless Two and an Extra.”

Most of his memories of that time consisted of nothing but getting into trouble made by two people who were basically walking glitches.

“Our recent incident reminds me of that time.”

Cheshire had needed to deal with the pre-ancient civilization’s weapons back then, too. Remembering how hard it all was, he felt a bit nostalgic.

“Oh, also...”

He then remembered a certain newbie Master... who probably couldn’t be considered new anymore.

Ray Starling — the man who'd taken Cheshire's words about freedom to heart and then defeated half of Acra-Vesta, against whom Cheshire himself was hopelessly incompatible.

Cheshire wondered what the young man was up to right now.

"He's probably having a hard time..."

The young man had been caught up in all sorts of happenings ever since he'd started.

The event in Quartierlatin had been preceded by the battle against Monochrome in Torne and the trouble with The Lunar Society.

"I can't get a break myself, but I really hope he doesss."

A rest without anything special happening. A silence after a typhoon.

Cheshire thought it wouldn't hurt for Ray to have that.

### **Beginning Episode: Break Time**

# **Episode One: College**

*April 3rd, 2045, Reiji Mukudori*

On the first Monday of April, I woke up earlier than usual.

We'd gone through the enrollment guidance and procedures and introduced ourselves to our fellow freshmen on Friday, so today, we were going to start classes and our college life.

It was just a weekend, but somehow, it felt like a whole year had passed since Friday.

*The weekend was just that impactful, I guess, I thought.*

First I'd picked up a search quest that had culminated in the battle against Monochrome. Then I'd gone to change my job at Quartierlatin's ruins, only to end up fighting Hell General and the whale.

The weekend had been almost as packed with happenings as my first few days in *Dendro*, everything from coming online until the conclusion of Franklin's Game at Gideon. I felt like I'd done nothing but fight the whole time.

Now, though, I had to focus on my college life. My parents had told me that I could only live by myself if I made it into Tokyo University, one of the country's best universities. I'd done just that, but this would be pointless if I didn't keep up with my studies. It'd make for quite a bad joke if I went on to repeat a year because of too much *Dendro*. What would my parents think? Seriously. They already had enough to worry about with my siblings, so I didn't want to add to that.

I'd balance my real and *Dendro* lives to be a proper college student.

Speaking of my siblings, I got a call from my sister. She congratulated me for enrolling into college, which was so normal of her that it actually worried me.

She'd been traveling all over for as long as I'd known her, and she was now busy working in a different time zone, which was the reason why it had taken her so long to contact me.

Being busy with work was a good thing, though. For example, as busy as it would make them, authors who were having their work adapted into anime must surely be happy.

Not like my sister worked in that sphere, though.

We chatted and reminisced (some memories made my legs tremble) for about half an hour before she asked if I wanted anything for my enrollment party, to which I answered that I wanted some foreign sweets, preferably from famous confectioners.

That might seem inconsequential, but when it came to such things, my sister was a person you had to be specific with. If I were to just tell her 'anything's fine,' she would bring something far out of reasonable limits or something incomprehensible.

Shu had done that once, and he'd received a gift that had somehow gotten him into major, life-threatening trouble in Aokigahara. That was only a little while before the Un-kra world tournament, when he'd been shaping up to be a great martial artist, and even then, the gift had almost gotten him killed.

If I got into something like that right now, it'd make a mess of both my school and *Dendro* life, so I went and asked for something harmless.

Despite the slight bit of fear, my chat with my sister was fun, and it ended without a hitch.

Still, for some reason, I heard an explosion right before we ended the call, which made me think, *Man, she never changes, huh?*

It honestly felt like she was living in a world and genre a whole lot more dangerous than even *Dendro*.



I made it to college pretty early.

It wasn't far from my apartment, so I just used my bike.

First I went to the student cafeteria and ate some breakfast while checking the syllabus on my mobile for the details on the various courses.

Unlike in high school, where all but a few classes and timetables were decided for you, in college, you have to choose your curricula and set your timetables yourself. I'd looked at it at home, but this could decide my life, so I had to be careful with it.

"For my required foreign language... I'll just take English II. I'm sure you can't go wrong with the ability to talk with those from the Anglosphere."

Although we had some really accurate translation apps these days. *Dendro*, for instance, translated everything into Japanese for me, no matter where the speaker was from.

Rook and Figaro were from the UK, Chelsea was American, Xunyu was Chinese... no, wait, Singaporean. And going by his name, Hugo was French.

You could probably find a lot more interesting nationalities if you looked hard enough.

"Gotta pick one more, right...? What should I go for?"

I was interested in Greek because of its relation to Nemesis, but I didn't have that option here.

She was based on Greek mythology, right? As far as I knew, “Vengeance is Mine” was a biblical quote from the New Testament.

Oh, well. Nothing could be done if Greek wasn’t an option.

Still, what other language could I go for?

“Heya, Rei! How are ya?” Someone slapped my back and greeted me with a cheerful voice.

I turned around and saw someone familiar. “...Natsume.”

This girl with unruly hair and a bit of face paint was a fellow freshman: Soprano Natsume. She was one of the four other freshman *Dendro* users I had met during the introductions.

Though her first name was read as “Soprano,” it was actually written in Japanese kanji for “high” and “sound.” Such names had once been rare, but it was at least one in five people now. It had been that way since I was in elementary school.

“That’s my name!” she exclaimed. “Anyway, what’re ya up to?! You okay? Wanna do some cat’s cradle?” Natsume presented me a cat’s cradle wrapped around her hands.

“...Why?” I asked.

“Brain exercise?”

*What’s with the questioning tone? You’re the one who offered.*

“Mukudori, Natsume, good morning,” yet another person greeted us.

“Oh. Good morning, Akiyama.”

“Morning, Suba!”

It was Subaru Akiyama, another fellow freshman *Dendro* user.

Unlike Natsume, Akiyama wasn't the kind of person who'd touch you upon greeting or randomly ask to play some cat's cradle. However, she was wearing a long-sleeved maid uniform.

College had no rules for clothing or hair styles, but constant cosplayers like her were few and far between.

Then again, she claimed that it wasn't cosplay. During the introductions last week, Akiyama had said she was juggling her college life and work as a maid in a certain household, and this was her uniform.

I'd asked why she didn't just change, and gotten the un-maidlike response of, "Changing a bunch of times per day is a pain."

The other two *Dendro* users I'd met were guys who were about as... interesting as these two.

I was probably the blandest among us *Dendro* freshmen.

That made me realize that the higher years had people like Miss Eldritch and Tsukikage. Tokyo U sure was full of weirdos.

"I must say, you're early," said Akiyama. "I know we agreed on something for the first period, but it's over an hour away."

"Oh, I just wanted to think about my timetable."

The thing we'd agreed on was related to classes.

We five liberal arts freshmen *Dendro* users would split up and take a look at the available courses. We'd all look at different classes and take notes and stuff to help each other decide what courses to take.

Whether someone wanted something easy, useful, or nothing at all depended on them and them alone, but it wouldn't hurt to have more info. The syllabus didn't contain everything, after all.

I could ask B3, though. Kozue Fujibayashi was a diligent girl who could teach me a lot.

There was also Miss Aberration, but... we were in different departments, and I felt like her help would cost something I could never repay. So a strong “no” from me.

“We haven’t even started looking around. What’re you so troubled by?” asked Natsume.

“The second foreign language. I still don’t know what to pick,” I answered, and both of them looked at me in confusion.

“I thought you’d just go for German.”

“Yes. I think it would suit you well.”

I had only one response to that strange opinion: “...Why?”

The two looked at each other, then back at me, and then said simultaneously: “Because it would fit your *in-Dendro* edgy chuuni fashion.”

“All right, when we meet in *Dendro*, I’m dueling you both.”

What was so chuuni or edgy about my gear? How rude.

Though, yeah, I’d just go for German. That seemed cool.

“Your newest set is just crazy,” said Natsume. “Ah, in a good way, I mean.”

“You even ate a devil...” muttered Akiyama.

I said nothing.

They were talking about the video uploaded shortly after my battle against Logan. I had no idea who, but someone had recorded it in its entirety.

“Hmm... But that vid looks a bit R-rated, so maybe most edgy kids can’t see it?” one of them said.

“Well, it does seem inappropriate for minors.”

“Don’t talk about me like I produce adult content!” I exclaimed.

*What do they think I am?!*

“Ah. I just got mail from Draggy,” Natsume said as she looked at her mobile.

“Draggy” had to be Dragon Kasugai — another fellow freshman.

Just like with Natsume’s “Soprano,” “Dragon” was only the reading, and it actually used Japanese kanji when written.

He had a mohawk and wore sunglasses, so he might’ve stood out even more than Akiyama and her maid uniform.

“He says he’s tired after yesterday’s mixer, so he’ll take the first period off,” said Natsume.

“It’s the first day!” I shouted, wondering if all colleges had this level of freedom. “Is that really okay?! What about our agreement?!”

“Planning tiiime!” said Natsume, instead of responding.

“Let’s ignore the classes with the lowest priority,” said Akiyama.

“Wouldn’t that be a bit mean to the professors?” I asked. It didn’t seem good to remove those from the running without even trying.

“That’s true. Then let’s make it fair and roll for it,” Akiyama said as she took out some dice.

“Why are you carrying those around?” asked Natsume.

*I could ask the same about your cat’s cradle, but I won’t.*

“I like gambling.”

“That’s not something I’d like to hear from a maid,” I muttered.

Those long sleeves made her seem like a capable maid, but this and her refusal to change from her uniform made me believe that she was actually pretty slovenly.

Still, she’d made it into Tokyo U, so maybe she was a diligent student.

...One who was about to pick her classes by rolling dice.

Still, we had to remove some classes to make up for Kasugai's absence, so we had no choice.

"Oh? Lexy mailed me, too," Natsume said as she took out her mobile again.

"Lexy" was her nickname for Alex Fuyuki, the last of the freshmen *Dendro* users. Like the name implied, he was half-Japanese, and he *always* wore an overcoat — even indoors.

It was a chilly spring right now, but what would he do when it was summer?

"Oh, dear," she added.

This gave me a slight sense of *déjà vu*. "...What did he say?"

"He's not coming today."

"He's skipping not just the first period, but all the classes?! It's the first day!"

*Isn't that, like, really dangerous?!*

"Wait, he could be sick," I composed myself. "Warm clothes don't make you immune to colds, so..."

"He says he's busy with *Dendro*."

"He's not sick?!"

While I was here worrying about my life-*Dendro* balance, Fuyuki was going and tossing it aside on the first day.

Then again, maybe I wasn't in a position to say anything to him.

I could totally imagine myself skipping college if, for example, the battles surrounding the ruins were happening now.

It wasn't unlikely that I'd be in such a situation eventually.

That aside, I was kinda worried about Fuyuki's college life right now. The guy was actually skipping the entire first day of college. Would he be all right...?

## ***Side Story: A Certain Arrest***

*April 3rd, 2045, Tenchi*

The island country known as Tenchi was located to the east of the continent.

It was considered "different" even by *Dendro* country standards, but not due to its culture or appearance.

The extra-fantastical Fairyland of Legendaria or the floating country of Granvaloa beat it out in that regard.

Tenchi's culture was a unique reflection of Azuchi-Momoyama or Edo Period Japan, but that wasn't what made it stand out.

It was the fact that it was in a state of constant civil war.

The country had a de facto leader, the person with the job of "Conquest General," but the feudal lords under him... the "daimyos"... constantly waged war on each other. In fact, you could say that even the Conquest General was just the daimyo with the greatest amount of land, as proven by the fact that his status could often be taken from him.

In Tenchi, conflict and death were part of daily life. The reason for the constant civil war wasn't clear. The separate parties had their own reasons, but the conflicts kept continuing in an endless chain, and as of yet, no one had united the entire island under a single flag.

Even if most of the daimyo families were destroyed, the larger ones would split, increasing their number again and continuing the conflicts.

They fought as though it was in their DNA. At this point, that was part of Tenchi's identity as a country. Many of the Masters who learned about it would call it "the country of strife." This aspect of the country was reflected in its people. The median level of Tenchian fighters was over 300. Being a country of conflict had made it a breeding ground for warriors far stronger than those from other countries. One of the reasons for this was surely the fact that tians were a better source of EXP than monsters.

It was often said that history would've gone completely differently if Tenchi had stopped infighting and invaded the continent. But even now, after the explosive increase in Masters, Tenchi continued to be the land of strife.



Three shadows were moving through a mountain forest in the northern reaches of Tenchi. They all had unique appearances.

One was a blooming beauty akin to a squid. She had ten mechanical tentacles growing out of her back. She traveled by using them to reach for the ground and pull herself forward, and her speed was nothing to scoff at. The tight-fitting bodysuit she wore made her look like a sci-fi ninja.

The second was a middle-aged man wearing apparel like that of a Japanese diviner, an onmyoji. He was sitting cross-legged on an ant as large as an elephant, which was moving as fast as the tentacled woman. With a marked Fu in hand, he whispered something under his breath.

The third person was a young man in a coat that was clearly too big for him. There was a clear contrast between his apparel and his small

stature. You'd expect him to have trouble walking, but that didn't matter now, as he was being carried by one of the woman's tentacles. Another thing notable about him was the Fu on his forehead, which made him look like a jiangshi from Huang He, but he was neither a jiangshi nor an undead.

"Well, Winterbaum? Is that Fu doing its job?" the man on the ant asked the youth.

"Yes. I don't feel any motion sickness. Thank you, Mr. Eashtan," replied the young man, Winterbaum.

"Kyah kyah kyah!" the man on the ant laughed. "It's just a Fu to ward against weak poison-type debuffs, but it does the job for motion sickness. You can't ride Probe's chains without it. I could let you ride my ant, but they throw off anyone they're not used to. You don't have to worry about that with her holding you, though. Right, Probe?"

The woman clearly heard him, but didn't respond. Some might think they were on bad terms, but that certainly wasn't the case. This was just how they usually were. That was proven by what happened next...

"BHOAAHHH!"

"BHAAOHHH!"

A pair of large, Demi-Dragon-tier boars jumped out on the path and attacked them. Without saying a word, Probe tore one of them apart with one of her tentacles.

"This doesn't look like pork I'd like to eat," said Eashtan as three ants appeared from out of the ground and instantly reduced the other boar to bone.

Still bound by the tentacle, Winterbaum could do nothing but watch. Unlike the other two, he was a newbie with stats that wouldn't let

him last a minute against those two boars. They were on a whole other level, both literally and figuratively.

*They're amazing... So this is the power of Hokugen'in's top fighters, huh?* he thought, both tense and excited.

"Hokugen'in" was the name of a particularly well-known daimyo family in Tenchi. They owned lots of land in the northern reaches of Tenchi and had a lot of strong fighters at their disposal, many of which were Masters. The best of the best among them were known as "The Hokugen'in Elite Four," and they were feared and respected all across the already-dangerous country.

The two people Winterbaum was accompanying were among those four.

One was The Whip, Probe USA One the "Dismantler," while the other was Onmyou Doctor, Eashtan the "Army Ant." Both were extremely powerful pre-Superiors who'd made a name for themselves in both Tenchi's duel and kill rankings.

*I'm so lucky,* Winterbaum thought. Despite being just a newbie, he'd been invited to go on an official Hokugen'in quest alongside these two.

*It's hard to refuse a request to party up with our top people. The reward is great, too, so it's worth skipping college for this... I'll have to apologize to them, though...*

Winterbaum — otherwise known as Reiji Mukudori's fellow freshman, Alex Fuyuki — slowly nodded to himself. He did feel bad about skipping out on their agreement to scout out their course options together, but it was a sacrifice that had to be made.

*I hope I can make up for it with some lunch...*

"What's wrong? You look like you got something on your mind," said Eashtan, noticing the youth's expression.

Winterbaum didn't want to lie to someone he respected. "Oh, I... I'm just thinking about college. I skipped it today..."

Eashtan looked at him with worry. "Isn't April an important time in Japanese colleges? Can you really do that?"

"It's just the first day, so I'm sure I can get it back..."

Tokyo U was among the country's best, but he didn't want to believe that skipping a single day would be enough to ruin his college life.

*W-Well, this week is all about examining the courses, and lots of people change theirs after the first or second lecture, so I'll be able to make up for this... right?*

His own words had made Winterbaum a bit worried, so he had to try and convince himself that it would be all right.

"Funding education. Parent burden. Idle pleasure. Not good." Probe spoke up for the first time. Her tone was strong, and she coupled it with a few light slaps on Winterbaum's forehead.

However, Winterbaum didn't really understand her. Her words were too simple for him to process.

"...What?"

"Your parents paid for college, so you shouldn't waste it by playing around," said Eashtan. "That's how I interpret that, anyway."

"College life. Prioritize studies," Probe added in a huff.

"Right... I'm sorry," Winterbaum apologized, now feeling down. "But class is about to end, anyway, so please let me keep questing."

Probe said nothing and just gave him a glare.

"Hey, it's fine," Eashtan said. "It's too late for that now. And he will be useful, right?"

“...Reluctant agreement.” Probe still didn’t seem to think it was okay, but she did seem to see that she had to accept it, so she just continued carrying Winterbaum.

“Well, just remember to prioritize your real life next time,” Eashtan said.

“Okay...” Winterbaum felt bad for worrying them, but he was also curious about something.

“Sorry to bring it up so late, but why does Probe speak in sentences of just two words?”

“I don’t know myself,” said Eashtan. “We can still communicate just fine, so I don’t mind it.”

“I see...”

*I guess there really are a lot of weirdos among the top players, he thought. It doesn’t bother me, though.*

“Oh!” Winterbaum exclaimed as he opened a map. “We’re close to the third village, you two!”

“Mhm,” nodded Eashtan. “And what does your Horus show there?”

“I’ll take a look,” he said as he reached into the crest on his left hand and took out a magnifying glass. He then held it over the map. Specifically, the aforementioned village. “Uhh... There’s a fight. Or more like, they’re being attacked.”

Instead of simply magnifying the map, the lens displayed a bird’s eye view of the actual place it represented. Winterbaum’s Horus was an Embryo of farsight, based on the ancient Egyptian god said to have the sun and the moon for eyes. It created livestreams of distant places when simply held over maps.

It had a flaw, it couldn’t see inside buildings, but that didn’t stop it from being extremely useful for reconnaissance. This was the very reason why a newbie like him was going on a quest alongside these

two renowned Masters: the lens of Horus presented a clear scene of brigands attacking a village and its inhabitants struggling against them.

“I expected this,” said Eashtan. “The first two villages were untouched, but this one is closer to the halfway point. Still, we’re on a quest to both bring the news and enforce order, so let’s hurry there.”

“Pressing urgency,” Probe agreed.

The two of them prepared to hurry over to the village, but then...

“Hm...? What?” Eashtan suddenly placed the Fu in his hand against his ear.

“Mr. Eashtan?” asked Winterbaum, but Eashtan just gestured for him to be quiet.

A few seconds later...

“Hmm... We don’t have to hurry anymore, you two,” Eashtan said as he not only slowed down, but changed direction. “Let’s go to the fourth village. We’ll just be late to this one.”

“Demanding explanation,” said Probe.

“We were too slow. *He*’s already there. There’s nothing for us to do there now.”

“Eh?” Winterbaum looked at the village once again. The situation had completely changed, and it left him speechless and wide-eyed.

“Dear me. Didn’t we set out on this quest before him? I can see why he and Saki are considered abnormal,” Eashtan grumbled.

As for Probe...

“Mist...” She whispered her first one-word sentence and looked at the mist at the foot of a nearby mountain.



Tenchi was a land of strife.

Because of this, it had the strongest tians on average, which in turn made it difficult for malicious Masters to commit crime. Even tians could beat them, after all.

But there were exceptions...

“TAKE IT AAAALL!” a man roared. “DON’T KILL THE WOMEN AND CHILDREN! WE’RE SELLIN’ ‘EM OFF!”

A certain mountain village was under attack by bandits. It wasn’t that special of a situation, but there were two strange things about it: all the bandits had crests on their left hands, and there were nearly no young men among the defending villages. The few elders tried fending them off with spears, but the power gap was evident.

Watching his partners in crime round up the villagers, one of the bandit Masters spoke to their leader. “Big catch, huh, boss?” The boss had a large build and a fierce look about him. His apparel was as colorful as a kabuki performer’s, and on his hands, he wore gloves with the letters “B A N” engraved on them.

His name was Gigamaru Gakido. He was the King of Grind — the Superior Job from the Boxer grouping’s Pound Boxer sub-grouping — as well as the leader of the “Sixth Realm’s Chaos” bandit clan, and the tenth in the highly competitive Tenchi duel scene.

“Heh heh. Sure is,” he chuckled. “Looks like they sent all their fighters to Kurowa. Seems like they lost, too, so they ain’t comin’ back, either. Kheheheh. Perfect time to make a killin’.”

A few days ago, the local daimyo family, Kurowa, had battled one of the neighboring daimyos. They’d suffered a decisive defeat, making them lose a lot of influence and land.

This village was one of the places Kurowa had lost, but the victorious daimyo still hadn't established his rule here. As a general rule, all daimyos in Tenchi ruled separately, and each had their own laws.

Since this was no longer Kurowa land, Kurowa laws no longer applied, but since it wasn't officially under the wing of the victorious daimyo yet, their laws didn't apply, either. Basically, this was now an unprotected, lawless land.

Sixth Realm Chaos had purposely attacked them at this exact time.

This wasn't their first time attacking tians. However, since their crimes hadn't come to light yet, they weren't on the wanted list yet. This was a major job, even for criminals like them.

"No proper warriors guarding 'em, no laws or rights to protect 'em... We rarely get prey this good," Gakido said, grinning. "But where're we sellin' 'em? Can't do it in Tenchi, can we...?"

"That's nothin' to worry about. We got in contact with a good slave trader recently, didn't we? Said he'll buy all the slaves we catch and handle all the shit surrounding 'em."

"Ohh? That sounds good. What was his name, again? Slipped my mind. La, Ree... Relacma?"

"La Crima. He's the one who told us about the war and where to find these villages. Also gave us some damn good accessories as a sign of friendship. A good guy, that one." He pointed to his earring-shaped accessory.

Gakido himself had better accessories, but these gifts were more than good enough for his underlings.

"Ha ha ha! That's great. It costs money to grow the clan and to hire smiths to make better gear for the duels, so we can't miss out on tasty deals like this. You know what, I'll give ya a better share for mediating."

"Heh heh. I knew you'd say that. You're a nice guy, boss."

While they were having this conversation, the rest of the clan mostly finished rounding up the villagers. They were all sitting in the center of the village, bound in chains. Five of them, however, were seated separate from the rest.

They were the prettier-looking women, girls, and boys, and they were bound in just shackles, rather than chains.

"Hmm? Does this mean what I think it means?" Gakido asked.

The clan members responded to his question with nothing but vile grins.

"I'll have the redhead. You do whatever you want with the rest," Gakido said.

"That's our boss! You know what it's all about!" Hollering, the bandits surrounded the girls and boys.

Gakido himself reached for the red-haired woman he'd picked... but then realized that something wasn't right.

"...Mist?" he muttered. A dense mist had filled the village.

There was a well here, but the kind of river that could form such a mist was a fair distance away. As they all wondered what was happening... an unfamiliar voice reached their ears.

"Hmm... No good. No good at all," the voice said. "The women and boys of the world have a beauty to them that changes with the passage of time. Violently tearing it while it's still budding is truly a waste. After all... what's a love-making without love?"

The source of the voice was on the roof of one of the buildings.

It was a muscle mountain of a man. Not in the unsightly sense, though. He was over two meters tall, and combined with the muscles, he created a very balanced-looking build.

He had hair that was long, dark, and disorderly, and a beard that grew away from his face. Additionally, he wore skins that looked like they were freshly-torn from a baboon, and had a hatchet-like blade at his side.

Judging by appearance alone, you would have assumed that he was from Gakido's clan.

"Who the hell are you?" Gakido demanded.

The man reached for his side and took out a traditional Japanese smoking pipe before responding.

"Me? I'm Bigman."

He then lit the pipe and began smoking it. It was a calm and casual act — which was in complete contrast to Gakido and his gang. After all, "Bigman" was a major name — a true big deal.

"King of Brigands..." one of them trembled.

"Bigman the Mountain-Splitter!"

"The Superior that's second in the kill rankings!"

The man held the brigand grouping's Superior Job, King of Brigands. "Mountain-Splitter" was a nickname, said to have been born when he'd cut a mountain in half. Obviously, he was a Superior.

"You can't be serious!" one of the brigands yelped.

Tenchi had a number of Superiors. The top three in the duel rankings were among them, so Gakido — a duel ranker himself — knew their power well.

But that wasn't all.

Bigman was...

"So you're all informed, huh? Guess I don't have to introduce myself now. If you know that much, then you probably also know that... I'm

a guest at Hokugen'in's," Bigman exhaled some smoke, mixing it with the mist before continuing. "This recently became Hokugen'in turf."

Indeed. The daimyo family that had fought Kuroha and conquered this land was the Hokugen'in. Thus, there could only be one reason why one of their Elite Four would come here.

He took out a seal case and presented it to Sixth Realm Chaos.

"Hokugen'in's law's in place now. In case it ain't obvious, we can't have our people taken into slavery."

"Gh...!" The words made the bandit clan grind their teeth in frustration, and the villagers cheer. The item Bigman had shown was proof that he represented the Hokugen'in family.

Midorino Hokugen'in, the current head of the family, had taken the potential of such crime into consideration. Thus, he'd given his seals to some of his guest Masters and had them travel around to prevent it. Eashtan, Probe, and Bigman were among those chosen Masters.

This was no longer lawless territory. Thanks to the edict, it was now under the law of Hokugen'in.

"Blood has already been spilled," Bigman continued. "But it's my own fault for not making it in time. It would be wrong to judge you for simply adhering to the law of lawlessness."

Falling silent for a moment, he looked down upon the Sixth Realm Chaos.

"But if you continue to act as criminals even after seeing this seal, you'll all lose your heads and drop straight to the gaol."

His status as a Superior — one of the strongest Masters — made his words feel like a menacing growl.

Looking at his awed gang, Gakido clicked his tongue.

*He's not someone we can handle.*

Gakido didn't believe that numbers gave him any sort of advantage. Battle-focused Superiors weren't the kind of creatures that could be swarmed. Backing down was obviously the right choice here.

But before he could tell his clan to retreat...

"Ohhhh?" Bigman noticed a few of the clan members point their weapons at the bound villagers. The one he'd talked to before Bigman's arrival was among them.

"Wh-What the hell're you doin'?! Put your weapons away!" Gakido shouted. However, the brigands said nothing in response and just swung their weapons at the villagers.

A member with Telepathy Cuffs equipped tried to talk to him telepathically. "B-Boss! Something's wrong! My body's moving on its own and I can't ta—!"

His sentence was cut short by Bigman jumping off the roof and splitting the man in half before he could harm the villagers.

"Looks like you're all victims of possession... no... parasitism," Bigman said. "I did hear that a worldwide criminal who has an Embryo like that had infiltrated Tenchi..."

"Huhh...?" Gakido looked and noticed that most of the members had lost the earrings they'd been wearing.

No... That wasn't right. The earrings had crawled inside their bodies through their ear canals... like parasites.

"Wh-What the hell?" Gakido didn't know what was happening.

However, the battle had already begun. The Sixth Realm Chaos had surrounded Bigman, weapons in hand. Albeit outnumbered, Bigman laughed.

"Fwahahahah! Sorry, but I can't tell which of you've got the things in ya, so I'll just beat ya all. This and all the other stuff they find out

about ya will probably put ya on the wanted list, so you just go and have a good time in the gaol.”

“What?!” Gakido screamed.

“Well, I guess it just goes to show that crime doesn’t pay.” Bigman swung his hatchet at the Sixth Realm Chaos members.

Strange as it was, he easily chopped off the heads of those who were clearly outside of the hatchet’s reach. The sound of the blade rending the air and the spraying of blood resounded in the village.

“FUCK!” At this point, Gakido resolved to fight the Superior.

He had a chance against him. His Embryo, the gloves on his hands, had the power to defeat anyone in a single hit. It was an Embryo focused on that alone, and it would give him victory if he just landed a hit.

“I’ll beat you and escape!”

Taking the peekaboo block position from boxing, Gakido ran towards Bigman.

“Grinding Shockfist!”

As he closed the distance, he used the ultimate job skill of the King of Grind.

“Pound Boxer” was a hybrid job fusing Boxer and Crasher, making it a job specialized in grinding trees and rocks with fists.

Thus, the ultimate job skill of the King of Grind, the culmination of its grouping, was focused on destruction, as well. It created a shockwave in the shape of a fist that treated its targets as if they had 0 starting defense.

It was a crushing, devastating attack that only registered defense from skills. As Gakido approached Bigman, he pulverized trees, rocks, buildings, and even his own clan members. Bigman, however,

dodged it with light movements you'd never expect from someone so burly.

Gakido, surrounded by the debris caused by his ultimate job skill, used that opening to approach Bigman and prepare to use his Embryo — his true ultimate skill. But then, to his shock, there was suddenly a lot of distance between them.

“Ah...?!”

It wasn't that Bigman backed away.

He'd simply moved the tip of his pipe over his shoulder and pointed it towards Gakido.

Gakido was blown away by a smoking pipe as large as a pillar. Once airborne, he was completely at Bigman's mercy.

“Dewblade's Touch — Brocken.”

Following that ultimate skill, the hatchet sliced Gakido in two, giving him the death penalty.



After beating Gakido, Bigman went on to get rid of the rest of his clan.

“That takes care of that,” he said with satisfaction. “Now we've just gotta wait for the officials to arrive.”

He removed the chains from the villagers, helped them bury their dead, and took a break.

“Man, I feel like I'm dancing on someone's palm. The real big bad here's the guy with the parasite Embryo, but it doesn't look like I can trace him from here.”

Since they were no longer equipped, the members of the Sixth Realm Chaos had dropped the parasite earrings. However, the earrings had

quickly blown up and dissolved into light, no doubt to destroy the evidence.

“He was gathering slaves... No... That was just to bring us here so he could gauge us, clearly. It’s looking like we’ll end up fighting eventually. Man, the battles just don’t end here. *Infinite Dendrogram* sure is a restless place... Or is it just Tenchi? Ha ha ha ha ha.”

Bigman laughed and looked at where he’d just fought the Sixth Realm Chaos.

“Now, they’re obviously going to the gaol. It’s hard to cross the sea from Tenchi.” His words reminded him of the last of The Elite Four. “I wonder if Saki did it with that shabby raft.”

There was a hint of worry in his tone.

Unless you had save points in other countries, getting the death penalty in Tenchi while on the wanted list meant going straight to the gaol.

The waters in the strait between Tenchi and the mainland were known to be extremely rough and full of powerful aquatic monsters. Crossing it alone was so extremely difficult that the only ones who succeeded were people like The Unsheathe, Kashimiya.

There was also the option to give up on the strait and take the long way through the ocean, but Tenchi was on bad terms with Granvaloa, who considered all the waters beyond Tenchi’s territorial waters to be their domain. This lack of insurance in case they were put on the wanted list was another reason why Masters in Tenchi were reluctant to commit crimes.

“I hope Saki doesn’t cause too much trouble in Caldina or Huang He. Caldina’s ‘Blue Sky Songstress’ and Huang He’s ‘Fenghuang’ sound like the kind of people she couldn’t get along with...”

Bigman was worried that his fellow Elite Four member would pick a fight with a foreign Superior and end up on a wanted list.

“Even if that does happen, Hokugen’in has her back, so at least she wouldn’t lose all her save points and go to the gaol,” he thought out loud. “Speaking of that place...”

Bigman looked up at the sky and thought of the mysterious place in an unknown location.

“I wonder what kind of Superiors they have there. They must be pretty rough.”

Martial artist that he was, he couldn’t help imagining the place full of powerful potential foes.

*It must be a war-torn hellhole that makes Tenchi pale in comparison...*



*April 3rd, 2045, gaol, Bow Hunter, Gerbera*

On a Monday afternoon, I logged in to the gaol and found a note on the counter.

“Miss Gerbera,

I have business to attend to in real life and won’t be able to return until evening.

During my absence, the establishment will be closed, but feel free to eat whatever you find.”

It said that our clan leader wasn’t here right now.

“That’s rare,” I muttered.

He'd been online almost all the time every day since I'd come here a few days ago. I'd only ever seen him log out to eat or use the bathroom. He even went to bed here.

"Ah. So April's here even when he's gone," I added. He must've set her to stay around, even when he was offline.

You could also do this with tamed monsters, but since they could be killed or stolen while the Master was away, it was rarely used. April was once again just sitting in her chair, eyes closed. That seemed to be her default whenever not working.

"He said 'eat whatever you find,' but..."

There actually wasn't that much food here.

There were some ingredients in the fridge-shaped inventory with time-stopping function, but the only things that could be eaten just like that were the bread, and the ham and veggies for sandwiches.

"Going out to eat... isn't a good idea, either," I murmured.

The food in the gaol honestly wasn't very good, which was only obvious, since there were no tians here, and the Masters were all criminals.

Masters who did nothing more than run a restaurant or something wouldn't end up in a place like this.

There were no proper cooks with the "Cooking" sense skill, so you only had back-alley cooks who tried to do what they could with their real life cooking skill.

So yeah, the gaol lacked good food.

At first, I'd thought that our leader's café was successful because he was the King of Crime, but it turned out that his good coffee and tea-cakes played a big part in that.

He was actually good at cooking. Still, there had been a time when he was making nothing but popcorn.

“He’s not here... so I guess I’ll just have to make something myself,” I muttered.

“Eh?”

*Did I just hear April make a sound I never heard from her before? I’m just imagining it, right?*

Shaking my head to clear it from the distraction, I said, “I can make a berry pie out of this stuff.”

I would have liked to make something more proper, but sweets and pastries were all I could do.

“Thinking of sweets reminds me of my life in Gideon,” I added nostalgically.

They had tons of cafés and restaurants there. I’d always enjoyed lunch time back there. With all the places selling them, I hadn’t had to make any sweets myself.

*I wanna eat doughnuts from White Sugar Peach again,* I thought longingly.

“Anyway, it’s a pain, but I don’t wanna go through hell’s training on an empty stomach,” I decided.

I prepared the cookware and ingredients, and made my first pie in a while.

I remembered how to make it, so I just moved my hands based on my memory. I could feel the “hang of it” coming back to me. It reminded me of my days helping Mother make sweets.



While I was busy, April had opened her eyes.

“What?” I asked her.

“...No-thing.” She was looking at me as though she was seeing something unbelievable.

*She's a maid robot, so... did she notice something strange about my pie? Well, whatever. I'm making this for myself. If it's not good, then it's my own fault.*

Over two hours had passed before I was done.

It had taken longer than expected. It wasn't my lunch anymore, but a mid-afternoon snack.

“Here goes...” I cut the freshly-baked berry pie, placed it on the plate, and began eating.

It would be good both warm or cold, but I was hungry right now, so it was best to eat while it was still hot.

Well... It was pretty good. It would've been better if I'd prepared for this, but it was makeshift, so this was probably the best I could have done.

“I'm back,” our leader said as he suddenly logged in.

*Oh, you're earlier than I expected.*

“Welcome back,” I said.

“Oh...? What's that?”

“I baked a berry pie. Want some?”

“...I might as well.”

I took out a new plate and dished up some of my pie for him.

*Oh, I'll also give him the candy art, I thought. Now that I think about it, I didn't need it or the little peacock if I'm eating by myself.*

“Here I go...” he said as he took a bite.

*Ah. He fell silent, I thought. He didn't like it? Is it because of the slime thing? But he's human now, right?*

“I forgot to breathe,” he finally said.

“Hm?”

*Breathe? You can survive without a head. Don't talk like that matters to you.*

“Miss Gerbera, did you take Cook or Patissier jobs?” he asked.

“No I didn't. They weren't in the training menu, were they?”

“I see. That's true. So this is all you. It's like Shu...”

*What's wrong with him today? He's not the type to get lost in thought and mumble like that.*

“Miss Gerbera, could you please make some desserts for us to sell here?” he asked.

“Sure, but it's amateur work. Will that be fine?”

I didn't even have the Cooking skill. Could we really charge for the stuff I made? Then again, that wasn't rare here in the gaol. Not even our leader had the skill.

“...Yes, please,” he said.

“Okay. I'll make some in my spare time and put them in the fridge.”

And so, I now had confectioning as part of my daily routine. Yup. That was my life now. Just another peaceful day in the gaol.

## ***Episode Two: Seniors***

*April 4th, 2045, Reiji Mukudori*

It was the second day of college. Classes were over, and I was heading to relax in the café. Fuyuki had ended up not coming to college all of yesterday, but he'd come as normal today.

The four of us — including Kasugai, who had come during second period yesterday, as planned — all scolded Fuyuki, telling him we were worried about him, and then sharing the info we'd gotten from sitting in the classes.

Natsume also told him that he owed us lunch in the expensive cafeteria.

Anyway, I parted ways with them, and it was time for me to build my timetable for Monday and Tuesday. I'd have to consider the balance between all the days, but I knew for sure that I wanted Monday's first period open, since I'd probably spend most of my weekends logged in to *Dendro* for long periods. Quartierlatin surely wouldn't be the last clash between Altar and Dryfe, so I had to dedicate as much time for *Dendro* as possible.

...That thought made me feel like *Dendro* had become a really big part of my life, but I was fine with that. I just had to take care of any *Dendro* trouble while being careful that I didn't lose control of my life in reality. Of course, it would be best if there was no trouble at all.

Specifically, I would have liked to avoid any more Superior-related trouble, but that seemed unlikely. Anyway, I'd save the thinking about *Dendro* trouble for when I came online. For now, I was just going to think about my real life, drink this fancy tea, and—

“Heyoo! Hi, Ray! How’re ya?!” a voice came from behind me.

It was akin to the insane ramblings of a cosmic horror, and it was coupled with a slap on my shoulder. It clearly wanted my attention, but I didn't want to turn around, because I knew exactly what it was.

“Ah. Those cream puffs look great. Don’t mind if I doooo!” The creature reached forward and took one of the 300 yen chou à la crèmes I had.

The slender, beautiful fingers made me picture the tentacles of indescribable eldritch horrors lurking inside the deepest, darkest trenches of the ocean.

“So what kinda tea’s that?” the person went on.

...No good. If I continued to ignore her, she’d probably take more of my snacks.

“...Fuso,” I said as I turned around. “You’re not supposed to take people’s food without permission. What are you, Nemesis?”

“Those words make me wonder about li’l Nemesis’s role,” said the cosmic aberration, AKA the Superior and my upperclassman, Tsukuyo Fuso.

Not even real life could save me from encountering *this* Superior...

“Hmm? Why’re ya lookin’ at me like I’m a monster?” she asked.

*You’re not a monster, but a yokai,* I thought, not daring to say it. *The Chou à la Crème Kitsune.*

“Oh dear, you look upset,” she said. “Sorry ‘bout the cream puff. It looked so good that my hand moved on its own. I skipped lunch, so I’m hungry, too. Will you forgive me if I buy you somethin’? I can even get you somethin’ more expensive. A sponge cake? Parfait?”

“Just get me a new chou à la crème,” I said.

“Kaaay... Didn’t take you for the type who’d be picky about food names.”

“I’m just calling it by its name on the menu.”

She went on to order some tea and snacks, and sat down on the chair in front of me.

*Ah! Damn it! We ended up sitting at the same table!*

“Boy, is it hard to meet when we’re in different departments,” she said, flopping back across from me.

“Yeah...”

“We had a good time chattin’ in the club room last time, didn’t we?”

“That’s not how I remember it!”

*You dragged me in and held me down!*

“Details, details... How’re you doing these days?”

“Fine, I guess,” I shrugged. “College is different than high school, so I’m still adjusting to the system. I’m making a timetable right n—”

“I don’t wanna hear that boring stuff,” she cut me off.

*She just called everything I was up to “boring”...*

“I meant in *Dendro*,” the aberration continued. “What kinda deadly fights are ya gettin’ into recently?”

“Why are you making it sound like I’m always on the verge of dying?” I demanded, looking back at the dangers I’d faced in Quartierlatin and being unable to deny her implication. “Well, I did go through some stuff after leaving Torne...”

“Ah. Were you caught up in the trouble at Quartierlatin?” she asked, making it clear that unlike Natsume and Akiyama, she hadn’t seen the video.

“No comment...”

“Ahaha! ‘No comment,’ he says!” I had no idea what was so funny, but she burst out laughing and started poking me in the cheek.

Her nails weren’t sharp — probably because she was a medical student — but it kinda annoyed me.

"Tell me if the trouble ends up hurtin' ya. I'll treat ya for a special price," Miss Aberration said.

"...How much are we talking?" I asked.

"One heal and you join the club."

*I could consider that much...*

"Two heals and you join The Lunar Society."

"Not happening!"

I was against getting a death penalty just to fix a bad injury-type status effect, but I sure as hell wouldn't pick anything worse!

"Oh, that's sooo mean."

"At least I'm not going around a university campus inviting people to my cult," I shot back.

*Isn't that forbidden?* I fumed silently.

"Hey, don't be like that," Miss Eldritch said. "That was just a joke. Look, the snacks are here, so let's just have some tea. I need a break right now."

"Did something happen?" I asked slowly.

"I had to hand in some reports. Today was the deadline, but... stuff happened on Saturday, so I had to get 'em done yesterday."

*Reports?* I thought. *So even she can be a proper student, huh?*

She was a Superior in *Dendro* and the top of a cult both here and there, but now she seemed like a normal university girl. The "stuff on Saturday" must've been related to Mr. Shijima.

...Fine. I have her to thank for fixing my arm, so I could at least have some tea with her.

"This all looks sooo good. Wanna feed me? Here! Ahhhh," she said as she opened her mouth.

*This woman...*

“Nope,” I replied. “Also, isn’t that something you should ask your boyfriend?”

“Boyfriend?”

“Isn’t that what Tsukikage basically is?”

She blinked a few times, then laughed out loud. “No no no no! We’re not like that.”

“You aren’t?”

“We’re childhood friends. Kage’s from the family that’s been serving mine for generations. He’s now my secretary and caretaker.”

“I see.”

*So that kind of thing actually exists...*

“So there,” she added. “He’s not my boyfriend. I left my parents’ place in Kyoto and moved here for college, and he’s been a big help.”

“In what way?”

“He makes my breakfast and dinner. Sometimes even gives me some packed lunch.”

“Mm-hm...”

“He does the cleanin’ and laundry, too. Thanks to him, I don’t need a cleaning robot, no matter how much of a mess I make.”

“...Hm?”

“Whenever I almost sleep in, he takes me to college in his bike’s sidecar, he translates all the foreign papers I need for reports, and he always looks through The Lunar Society’s register and other documents.”

I had no words. Wasn’t the guy working too hard? And why did it seem like Miss Eldritch did absolutely nothing?

“I asked him to get material for yesterday’s report, too, but... for some reason, he’s not getting up from bed.”

“Overwork! That’s your reason!” I shouted.

*Tsukikage! You’re pampering this cosmic horror too much!*

“Seriously, don’t you think you’re working him too hard...?” I added.

“But I’m working, too. I wrote the report myself, and handed it in before the deadline,” she said with a smile, and puffed up her chest.

“So this is where you were, president,” a familiar voice came from behind. It was Kozue Fujibayashi, AKA B3.



“O-Ohh... B? Wh-What’s up...?” asked Miss Aberration. Her smile was looking a bit stiff.

“Your mobile is off, so I went looking for you. Associate Professor Miyano left us a message in the club room.”

“No! I don’t wanna hear it!” the aberration wailed as she closed her ears and shook her head.

B3 ignored this and delivered the death sentence. “You need to fix the report. The deadline is 9PM today.”

The aberration made Tsukikage work so hard, and yet couldn’t even handle the report? I feel for the guy...

“Nooo...! I don’t wanna go through that again! B! Do it for me!”

“Who do you think you’re asking? We’re in different years and departments. Give up and go back to editing the report. And turn your mobile back on.”

*She clearly turned it off because she knew this would happen, I thought.*

“Nooo...! Help me, Kage!”

*You mean the person who collapsed because of you?*

Miss Aberration continued to whine for a few moments before finishing her tea and snacks and returning to the club room to fix the report. She’d always been just this indefinable, morally-grey cosmic horror to me, but now I knew that she could be a normal college student, too.

“So... She has bad grades?” I asked B3.

“Not bad or good. They’re normal. It’s just that she is juggling her studies and being the leader of The Lunar Society, so all the lacking bits really stand out.”

*That makes Tsukikage seem... really amazing.*

"Anyway," said B3 as she took Miss Aberration's seat. "Haven't seen you in four days. In reality, anyway."

Chasing after Miss Eldritch had worn her out, so she was sitting down to take a breather, and I'd be damned if she didn't deserve it.

"That's true. We just met on Friday," I said. But on the other side, she'd been with me all the way through the events at Torne until returning to the capital. "Still, you get a few more days if you add the time in *Infinite Dendrogram*."

"True," she agreed.

The tripled time never ceased to weird me out.

"How was it at your parents' place? Did it all work out?" I asked.

"Yes. The tea ceremony went by without a problem."

Her family back in Kyoto were practitioners of the Way of Tea, and when everyone there had caught a cold, she was called to fill in.

I was glad to hear it had gone well.

"I returned here yesterday, after cleaning up and catching up with my family," she said. "You seemed to have a hard time, though... I saw the video."

"Ohh..." So Fujibayashi was more informed than Miss Aberration.

"You really like going head-first into trouble, don't you?" she commented.

"I'd say that trouble likes coming to *me*," I replied. Then again, I'd gone there to get the Prism Rider job. No one had forced me. So maybe you *could* say I'd jumped into trouble on my own.

"Sorry I couldn't help you," Fujibayashi went on. "Are you still in Quartierlatin?"

“Yes. I still have something to do there.”

Quartierlatin now had many quests related to the town’s restoration and the ruins. I was fine with returning to Gideon next weekend, so I’d decided to hang around Quartierlatin for now. Besides, Azurite had said she’d stay there until Thursday, Earth time.

“Then I will go there tomorrow,” Fujibayashi said. “I can’t come online today because I’m also busy with reports for college.”

“Okay. I’ll be waiting.”

We chatted about recent happenings and enjoyed some tea for awhile.

“By the way, this is unrelated, but...” Fujibayashi seemed to have remembered something. “I have something to tell you about Hell General.”

“What about him?” I asked as I remembered the devil-wielder.

“Tonight... or more like tomorrow... he’s going to have a duel for his throne.”

“Well, he is the first in the imperium’s duel rankings. It seems a bit sudden, though.”

“I’m sure he knows the general opinion about him and wants to fix it as soon as possible. Thus, the duel.”

Basically, he’d found out about the video and wanted to restore his reputation where he had the home field advantage — the duel arena.

Since the arenas returned all the items you used, he was absolutely free to summon the Mythical devil he hadn’t been able to summon against me. It was definitely the best place for him to show his power.

"Though, I can't be sure if he will win this one," Fujibayashi said after a sip of her tea.

"Why?"

Mythicals were two tiers above the Legendary Gigaknights I'd faced. If he was free to summon them, I was guessing he'd have the win in the bag.

Fujibayashi answered briefly, but told me everything I needed to know in a few simple words: "Because he's up against another Superior."

## ***Side Story: Crime and Invitation***

*April 5th, 2045, Imperial Capital, Vandelheim, Noble District.*

The countries on the continent all had capitals with a similar design.

They all had a central building, such as a royal castle. It was surrounded by the noble district, which was surrounded by commoner houses and stores. Vandelheim was basically that, too — it was built around the Imperstand.

The only notable difference was that its outskirts had military bases, and research facilities like The Triangle of Wisdom's headquarters.

The noble district of the city had recently begun housing people other than nobles... specifically, Superiors and Masters important to the imperium.

But those who used them well were few. Franklin had a residence, but it was unused because he always slept at The Triangle of Wisdom's headquarters. The King of Beasts had one, too, but due to

that Master's long absences, the only people living there were some servants who regularly cleaned the place.

Out of the two new Superiors, one had simply refused the residence by saying, "Unneeded."

However, the other newcomer, the King of Chariots, Murdoch Martinez, now made good use of his, going as far as to use the attached garage for his hobby of tank maintenance. He also occasionally went to the outskirts to have some fun with his subordinates and Embryo in some tank battles using mock shells, so he really seemed to enjoy his new life here in the imperium.

Now, Dryfe had one more Superior. It was the Hell General, Logan Goddhart.

As a veteran Dryfian Superior right behind the King of Beasts, he obviously had his own noble residence and generally lived there. He had a large number of servants, and it was safe to say that he was the Master who led the most noble-like life in the noble district.

However, he was now curled up in his own bed. "Nhh! Nngh!" he cried into the pillow he was holding tightly. It didn't suit the beautiful young man represented by his avatar, but it was something you might expect from his real self — a boy in elementary school.

The reason for his crying was simple — *he'd lost again*. First, he'd lost in Quartierlatin, against the newbie, Ray Starling. Then, he'd lost against Franklin, who'd recorded his fight against Ray and uploaded it to the Internet. And now, he'd lost his third fight... along with his throne at the top of the duel rankings.

"Damn it... Damn it...!" he sobbed.

The first loss could be portrayed as an accident, and the second loss could be seen as the result of a trap, but the third loss, which had happened in his own domain on the arena, left him completely devastated.

The person he'd just lost against was someone who'd climbed up to the second place in the duel rankings at an amazing speed.

She was the King of Thieves, Zeta — one of the two new Superiors in the imperium. She was originally from Granvaloa, but something had led to her being put on the seafaring country's wanted list.

After many twists and turns, she'd ended up signing a contract with the imperator and becoming part of the imperium. Then she'd risen up the duel rankings at an incredible speed, and then finally faced Logan.

It had been, for all intents and purposes, a Clash of the Superiors for the champion's throne.

Logan definitely hadn't been holding back in that battle. In fact, he'd felt he had to win it at all costs, so he'd faced the challenger without any conceit. And yet, he'd ended up losing without as much as scratching her.

"What the hell was *that*!?" he screamed, remembering it.

Right after the start of the duel, Logan had started to summon Zero Exceed. However, for some reason, he hadn't been able to say a single word needed for the summoning of the devil.

Then his vision had drowned in red.

Whatever she'd done, blood had started flowing out of his eyes and nostrils, while the blood still inside started to boil.

He'd tried to counter it, but Zeta had closed the distance between them at supersonic speeds, and then, without even scratching his skin or armor, she'd *stolen his heart* in the most literal sense. Logan had watched, utterly baffled, as she'd casually crushed it in her hand.

All he understood was that the final attack was the ultimate job skill of the King of Thieves.

The inability to speak, the bleeding, and the blood boiling were all a complete mystery to him. He'd never experienced such a fight while rising up the imperium's duel rankings.

Surely the only one there who had understood everything, audience included, was Zeta herself. All everyone knew now was that Logan was no longer Dryfe's duel champion.

Once that realization had spread, the arena had drowned in cheering, and Logan had fled back to his residence, as if to escape them.

"Those fricks...!" he cursed.

The passion from the audience made it seem as though they'd wanted him to lose, and that was nothing but the truth.

Logan had only been the duel champion because of his ability to crush all his duel opponents by summoning Mythical devils for literally no expense whatsoever.

His battles were always the same: summon Mythical devil and win. Even if he was up against someone stronger, he'd just summon more and maybe sprinkle some Legendaries here and there. All of his battles had been won the same way.

The only Dryfean Master capable of facing multiple enhanced Mythical devils was the King of Beasts. However, the imperium's strongest didn't participate in duels, so Logan's matches had always ended up becoming nothing but Logan's summoning shows.

Watching something like that was more like a chore than a duel.

The audience hadn't been pleased, and the duel rankers had lost a lot of their motivation.

All of that was more than enough reason to cheer for Logan's defeat.

"Gh..." Logan moaned. He felt completely crushed to have lost at something he'd thought he couldn't lose, and that no one had

wanted him to win. After burying his face in the pillow for a good few hours, Logan whispered, “Maybe I should quit *Dendro...*”

He’d become a Superior, the duel champion, and had held some of the greatest war potential in Dryfe. He’d believed he was at the top of *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Little boy that he was, he had little life experience, and thought he was better than everyone. This game had affirmed his delusion and satisfied his pride.

But now, after three defeats and the loss of his position, the pain and embarrassment made him want to quit, which, again, was very much like the little boy that he was.

Without Logan, the imperium would become a far weaker foe in the war. However, since he was about to quit, Logan didn’t care about what would happen in this game. He activated the logout timer and prepared to leave *Infinite Dendrogram* for good.

“Restraint. I am stopping your escape.” A certain person placed a hand on his shoulder, stopping the logout process.

“Eh...? You...?!” Logan jumped away and brandished the Viledragon’s Prideblade, Woltgyzur.

His weapon was aimed at a strange person fully covered in bandages.

It was none other than the one who’d defeated him and became the new duel champion: the King of Thieves, Zeta.

“No one let you in here!” he yelled. “What do you want?!”

His tone as he said that wasn’t that of the “Logan” avatar he played, but the little boy he was in real life. However, neither he nor Zeta seemed to care.

“Response. I have an offer for you,” she simply answered his question.

Her manner of speech was strange, but Logan could understand it.

“Offer...?”

“Addendum. Before I speak of it, allow me to say that I heard you mumble about retiring. That would be inconvenient, so I am stopping you.”

Logan said nothing. He realized that she hadn’t just appeared out of nowhere; she’d been hiding in this room, watching him.

He wanted to sue her for violation of privacy, but crimes between Masters couldn’t be taken to the court of law, so that wasn’t something he could do.

Of course, since Logan was underage, he had special restrictions and protections put on him. If Zeta had done something inappropriate, she’d have received a penalty, but Logan didn’t realize that.

“I’m not talking to someone who sneaks into people’s rooms! Get out!” he shouted.

“Appeasement,” Zeta replied. “Please do not be upset. I apologize for sneaking in, but the offer I have is one you will like.”

“I will?”

“Affirmative. Specifically, I can provide you with a plan to make you a lot stronger than you are now.”

“Ah...!” That was something that he, defeated three times in a row now, couldn’t ignore.

He really wanted to become stronger and show all those who’d wished for his defeat who was boss.

However, since the person making the offer was the one responsible for the third defeat, Logan wasn’t sure about this.

“Can you even do that...?” he ventured.

“Affirmative. We have a unique compiled database, using which we can give you several sub-job plans that suit you. Additionally...” She fell silent before continuing. “We can provide info about a maximum of eighteen undefeated UBMs.”

Surprise filled Logan’s face.

“I can even give you one right now.” Zeta took out some sort of orb. Logan looked at it. He didn’t know what it was, but he could tell that it was related to UBMs.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Answer. A Treasurebeast orb. It is not an item, though.”

“Hm?”

“Treasure. A national treasure from the eastern empire of Huang He.”

“National treasure?”

Zeta nodded and said, “Beast. It has a UBM sealed inside.”

Those words surprised Logan.

“Statement. You can have this one... and I will give you info about all the UBMs whose locations I know.”

“...!” Logan wanted that so badly, he almost jumped on it.

Logan’s trump card, Call Devil Exceed, required MVP special rewards to work.

He’d originally had three of them, but he’d used one up in his battle against the Celestial Knight, then another against Ray — which he ended up using against Franklin — and now, he only had the Viledragon’s Prideblade.

MVP rewards could be great sacrifices and gear, and Logan desperately needed UBMs that could drop them for him.

“If I had that...” he began.

*...I could play Dendro again,* he finished silently.

However, he was also suspicious. He could understand if she just wanted to give him a job plan to make him stronger, but UBM locations and UBMs themselves were just too great of a treasure. Defeating them gave amazing prizes, so you’d expect any capable Masters to go after them themselves.

And there was no way that Zeta, who’d mysteriously, yet easily, defeated Logan, wasn’t capable.

Why would she just give such valuable information to Logan?

What did she want in return?

His suspicion was about as great as his desire.

“...What do you expect to gain by making me stronger?”

“Sound. I am here to sound you out about something,” Zeta said, then looked at Logan with her eyes peeking through the bandages on her face before continuing. “Invitation. I invite you to join our clan, Illegal Frontier.”

Illegal Frontier, otherwise known as “I.F.” It was the most infamous clan, led by the King of Crime, Sechs Würfel, and made up exclusively of Superiors on wanted lists all over.

Zeta was part of it, and she was inviting Logan.

“I.F...? That I.F?” he asked.

“Affirmative,” Zeta nodded. “With the Quartierlatin incident, you are officially on the kingdom’s wanted list. That gives you the qualifications.”

Logan’s actions in the war hadn’t been considered a crime because they’d happened in wartime. However, the incident at Quartierlatin

had been clearly outside of it, and Logan was now among the kingdom's wanted.

That made him a Superior on a wanted list.

"But what are you guys even planning?" he asked.

That question was only natural. I.F. was infamous for being a clan made up of only wanted Superiors. Other than that, their nature and goals were a mystery.

No matter how great the rewards were for joining, Logan couldn't bring himself to accept without knowing that much.

Zeta understood that, and so... "Explanation. We aim to..."

...she began telling him about their goal.



"That sounds great!" was the first thing Logan said ten minutes later.

And for the first time in a while, he was genuinely excited.

"Question. Do you like our goal?" asked Zeta.

"Yeah. I want in on that, too. And if I'm also getting UBM info, then I have no complaints. Though, hold on a second..."

Zeta tilted her head, wondering what he'd say.

"This country has another Superior who's on a wanted list."

Needless to say, that was Franklin. If the mad scientist would also be invited to Illegal Frontier, Logan couldn't join it.

However, Zeta shook her head. "Denied. We will not invite Mr. Franklin."

"Why? I know I shouldn't say this, but..." Logan couldn't bring himself to finish the sentence with, "He's stronger than me now."

“Unfit. The person in question could not exhibit his true power with I.F. And more importantly, he is not in gear with us.”

“Hm...?” Logan couldn’t understand what Zeta meant, but he did understand that Franklin wouldn’t be invited by I.F.

That left him with no reason to hesitate.

“All right,” he said. “Then I’ll gladly join the clan... and take the payment, of course.”

“Reception. Welcome, new member.” They exchanged a handshake.

“So, when should I leave Dryfe?” Logan asked.

“Hold. Stay with the country for now. I will contact you when the time is right.”

“All right... I can’t wait.”

“Training. Until then, I will provide you with a plan to make you stronger.”

“All right. I’ll play along. Uhh... Don’t disappoint me.”

“Certainly. You will have clear results.”

And so, Logan and Zeta were now on the same side.

This was the moment when a third faction began tangling itself in the intrigue of the Altarian-Dryfean war.

## ***Episode Three: Sister***

*April 4th, 2045, Reiji Mukudori*

I returned home from college to find something in the mail: the foreign sweets I’d asked my sister to send me.

It was pretty fast, considering she'd just called two days ago. It was also delivered by a company I never heard of, but that wasn't that strange — my sister had connections.

Just to be safe, I looked up the confectioner and product online, and sure enough, got a decent number of search results. After confirming it wasn't weird in some way, I threw one in my mouth, and it was a proper, delicious sweet.

Nothing weird happened even after a few minutes post-eating, so I was now completely sure it was safe. A part of me thought I was being too wary of my own sister, but this was necessary. She was the one who'd casually asked me if I wanted to go to the jungle, and then *actually taken me there* when I'd said yes.

I still wondered how she'd taken me to South America when I hadn't even had a passport. Honestly, it felt like I'd just... suddenly found myself flying over a jungle in a small plane, and then...

"Gh... Thinking about it makes my head hurt."

The point was that I'd learned to exercise an appropriate amount of caution when dealing with her. However, I didn't think that she bore any ill will. Whatever she did with me, she did out of kindness.

Even that traumatizing trip had probably been nothing more than her taking advantage of her work trip to South America to show her little brother what jungles were like. She certainly hadn't intended to endanger my life and chastity.

I still didn't really know why I had been chased around by Amazons or why the jungle had ended up on fire.

It was probably a rude thing to think... but my sister was quite abnormal as a living being. That probably affected her standard for me. There was also the fact that her first little brother, Shu, was also quite the superhuman.

Compared to them, I was pretty normal, so I knew I always had to be cautious with her. I felt that it was an inviolable rule necessary to my survival.

Still, I wouldn't forget to send a "thank you" email to her. She scared me like hell, but she was a dear part of my family and not a bad person.

"I've gotta say, these are pretty good," I muttered. Since they looked really safe so far, I began trying out the sweets for real.

I'd just had some chou à la crèmes at the college's café, but these were simple chocolates, so I still had plenty of room for them. College had exhausted my brain more than I'd expected, so my body needed the sugar, too.

I also hadn't rested at all in the café because of Miss Eldritch.

"Speaking of chocolate... there's Valentine's Day in *Dendro*, right?" I murmured.

Special as it was with its full-dive capabilities, *Infinite Dendrogram* had planned events, just like any common MMO. Most were based on real seasonal events, such as Christmas or Valentine's Day. I'd started in the latter half of March, though, so I'd missed both Valentine's and White Day.

I had yet to experience any seasonal event, actually. There had been two Valentine's Day events so far, and I had no idea what they were like.

"Did Shu and the others participate?" I wondered.

Shu, Figaro, and Miss Eldritch had been playing since launch, so they must've seen a whole bunch of events.

"I wonder what Valentine's was like... I'll have to ask them."

Valentine's Day was associated with love, so it must've been a peaceful, sweet time.

# ***Side Story: Valentine's Day of 2044***

*February 14, 2044*

Figaro logged in to *Infinite Dendrogram* and was welcomed by his friend saying:

“Figgy, let’s hop off and hunt for chocolate.”

His friend was none other than Shu Starling, wearing a two meter-tall animal costume.

The clumsy inclusion of “hop” was him making a pun, for he was wearing the “Hyper Costume Series, Cyclone Pocket” — a costume he’d gained from an UBM that looked much like a kangaroo.

He also emphasized his “roo”s and even added them where they didn’t belong.

Figaro silently looked at him, remembering some of Shu’s previous costumes. *He made bear puns when wearing the bear costume, but when wearing the wolf costume, he just threw in the occasional “woof.” How does he decide between puns and animal sounds?* he wondered.

He chose not to ask, though, for there was something more important.

“‘Hunt’ for chocolate? Not receive it?” Even Figaro understood where this talk about chocolate came from.

In the real world, it was Valentine’s Day — a special occasion in both Christian and non-religious places. Figaro had already received chocolates in real life.

Though his inborn heart disease had him bound to his house for medical reasons, he had still received chocolates from his mother, the maids working at his house, and his little brother Keith, for some reason.

Figaro was sickly, and one of the symptoms of his disease was the spasms that happened every time his heart rate rose above a certain point. Because of it, he couldn't exercise to lose calories, and the increase in heart rate from overeating could kill him, so he could only enjoy the chocolate he was gifted in small bites.

Even so, he really appreciated the love they had put into them.

"Yeah. We're v-roo-ming through the Valentine's Event!" Shu shouted.

"Oh... That's a thing...?"

At first, women handing men chocolate on Valentine's Day had been a Japan-only thing. A certain confectioner had created the practice in the twentieth century.

In the West, the go-to gifts were flowers and sweets of any kind, and the gender of the giving party was never a question.

However, by the fourth decade of the twenty-first century, the constant flow of culture had led to the Japanese practice spreading to the West, and being a worldwide VRM MO, *Infinite Dendrogram* reflected this.

There were also events for the more local occasions, such as the Japanese Setsubun.

"This one's like Halloween and Setsubun," Shu explained. "Monsters that drop chocolate spawn on the map. You're supposed to stuff your pouch full of them and exchange them for prizes."

"Ah. So it's not the chocolate that's the prize?"

"Yep. You've gotta exchange it. Though I hear it's so tasty, it makes you d-roo-l."

"Oh? So you have people who try to eat an exchange item, huh?"

The event had begun twelve hours ago in real-life time. The seasonal events generally began when the real-life holiday began in the time zone furthest ahead, and ended when it ended in the time zone furthest behind, making it last a total of 48 real life hours.

That translated to six days in *Dendro*, which was a standard amount of time for an event.

Side note: the number of people online had dropped during the Christmas event.

Those who were online, however, were extremely passionate about it... but it was best to not ask for the reason.

"I get that it's a hunt, but why are you asking me?" asked Figaro.

*You know I can't handle myself properly when I'm not solo,* he added silently, knowing that Shu would understand.

"That's 'cause this event's special."

"It is?"

Shu nodded and said, "Only couples can kill the monsters for this event. I'm roo-seless alone."

"Hm...?"

According to Shu, this was an event where you had to make parties of two and kill the monsters the devs spawned.

Those monsters couldn't be harmed and couldn't harm you if you weren't in a party of two.

This was surely done out of consideration for non-participants, tians, and monster ecosystems. The devs tended to think such things through.

What made this a Valentine's Day event was that a party of two was a couple swearing their love for each other. The devs were fine with homosexuality, so the gender composition of the party didn't matter at all.

They didn't allow pairing up with monsters, though — both party members had to be humanoid creatures.

"I haven't found anyone else to pair with me, so I'm asking roo," said Shu. "I'll do all the fighting, and we can split the rewards evenly."

"I don't mind. I didn't have anything planned besides a trip down the Tomb Labyrinth," Figaro replied. "But I find it odd that you didn't find anyone to pair with yet."

Shu was an eccentric weirdo who constantly wore animal costumes, but he was pretty popular, so Figaro would have guessed he'd have no trouble finding someone to pair with.

"Lei-Lei's busy in real life, Darshan's got the restaurant to take care of, and everyone else already has a pair. And those roo don't, well..."

"Well...?"

"I quote... 'it'd give me pain to be treated as a couple with a guy in an animal costume,' 'I'd feel like a lonely office lady who went to Disneyland,' and, 'Take it off. Please, take it off.'"

"Take it off"? Now that's asking for too much of you."

"Hell, this is all because of... Forget it, I won't go too deep into it."

"Hm?"

The actual reasons why the girls had refused had nothing to do with Shu's costume and everything to do with their relationship situations in real life, but since Figaro had no love experience whatsoever, he wouldn't understand that.

He understood affection between family members, but he knew absolutely nothing about the more passionate kind of love. If he had been just a bit more sensitive to subtleties of that kind, this incident might've gone differently.



Regardless, Figaro agreed to form a party with Shu and participate in the event, even if as just an observer.

“Let’s v-roo-m off northwest!” Shu shouted.

There were event monsters spawning around the capital, too, but Shu didn’t hunt there, since their strength and the value of chocolate dropped was adjusted to fit the local level ranges.

Also, since they’d been part of the first wave of players, they were already in their fifth forms, and it would be immature for veterans like them to steal kills from the newbies.

Thus, they were now riding Shu’s Baldr’s fourth form, the tank, northwest of the capital, where he could find monsters of his level.

“Not using the battleship?” asked Figaro.

“Not for simple traveling. Roo have no idea how much it stands out.”

Baldr’s fifth form was a land battleship only as big as a light cruiser.

“Also, the ammo costs are roodiculous,” he added, sighing at just how expensive his Embryo had become. “I’ll use the fourth and my fists this time.”

Standing on the tank’s cupola, he did a check on his weapons and items. In its tank form, Baldr could be remote-controlled or put on autopilot. He could use it as one of the self-driving vehicles that had become popular in real life and make it drive him to his destination without him lifting a finger.

Baldr would automatically attack the occasional monsters popping up on the way, and all their drops would go to Shu's Cyclone Pocket's "pouch." This was the item's unique skill, High-Speed Auto-Retrieve, which, true to its name, automatically retrieved all items he had a right to.

While a UBM, "Whirlwind Beast of Ill-Omen, Cyclone Pocket" had been a frustrating monster that automatically retrieved the items people held in their hands and even projectiles flying at it, so you could say that the MVP special reward skill was a big downgrade.

As for how Shu had beaten it... he'd simply made Baldr go into fifth form and fire its proximity shells at it. Cyclone Pocket had absorbed them all, and the explosions right before they were stored away had made short work of its HP.

It was probably the easiest UBM kill Shu'd had so far. The proximity shells had cost a lot, though, so getting back the money lost had taken some effort.

"By the way, what kind of monsters do we have this time?" Figaro asked.

Events generally had monsters related to the events.

Setsubun had featured oni and bean bag monsters, while New Year's had featured rat monsters, since that was the Chinese zodiac for the year.

Because of this, Figaro thought Valentine's Day monsters would be chocolate monsters, but...

"Girls," Shu said.

"...Huh?"

"Pretty girl monsters. Crooture type: devil."

Figaro had no words.

Though he was a musclehead battle junkie, he was still Christian, so he wondered why a celebration of love involved devils or why there'd even be an event focused on stealing chocolate from girls.

Then he realized that he was about to watch a kangaroo riding a tank massacre girls for their chocolate.

Instead of questioning any of it, he just said one thing. "What are the devs thinking?"

"I'm pretty sure the control AI in charge of events doesn't actually know what Valentine's Day is," said Shu. "Those devils also throw chocolate and absorb three times the damage they deal."

*That's not what it means to return it three-fold!*

A few hours later, the two arrived at their destination.

With monsters of level 51 and above lurking about, it was the perfect hunting ground for a high-rank like Shu.

He'd intended to start hunting the event monsters right away, but...

"That's not an event monster, is it?" Figaro asked.

"I don't see a name above it," Shu agreed.

In the area, they were facing a strange entity.

It wasn't an event monster, nor a Master hunting them.

It looked like two towering, metal legs that skipped around with lightness you wouldn't expect from their size and earthquake-causing weight.

Additionally, there were Master-like people where it was heading, and you could see them being crushed and turned to light.

The most bizarre thing about this place, however...

“AHAHAHAHHA! CRUSH! I’LL CRUSH YOU ALL! IT’S WHAT ALL BOYFRIENDS AND HOMEWRECKERS DESERVE!”

...was the feminine roar echoing from the top of the legs.

The two watched the scene, not saying a word. They were skilled Masters who’d already faced many foes, so they were able to make a quick, calm analysis of the situation.

The shouting woman was a Master.

The large metal legs were her Embryo.

The fact that she was crushing Masters in this high-level area meant that she was really strong.

Her legs were making them scatter with next to no effort on her part.

However, anything that came from such analysis meant nothing compared to the searing hatred in her voice.

Shu instantly understood that, *She’s the type you shouldn’t get involved with.*

Figaro, on the other hand, thought, *She looks strong. I wanna fight her.*

That might’ve been the reason why there was such a gap in the amount of danger they felt. Figaro knew nothing of love, so he couldn’t understand just how deadly the grudge in that voice really was.

“We’re hoppin’ away from that,” said Shu as he turned Baldr 180 degrees, determined to leave as soon as possible.

“Eh...? Ah. Okay,” Figaro replied, slightly disappointed. But then... the hellish voice rang out above them.

“IS THAAAT A COUPLE I SEEEEEE?!”

They looked up and saw the metallic legs. Not saying a word, the two silently analyzed the situation again. The scariest thing about this was that neither of them had noticed her come close.

They both had exceptional intuition, of course. Therefore, this had to be teleportation or something similar.

She'd also come to them after killing every single Master on the map, making it even clearer that she'd be a tough foe to fight. While Shu thought that they were in for some trouble, Figaro was excited.

Shu started out by trying to communicate, "Uhh... We're just—"

"Eh? What?" She unexpectedly cut him off. "There's a guy in that costume?"

You could tell by her voice that she was surprised by something. A few seconds later, she asked, "Are you a gay couple?"

"No," Shu and Figaro replied in perfect unison.

"Then all's goooood... Hold on a second."

Suddenly, the hellish thundering subsided, the towering metal "legs" vanished, and a woman descended from the sky.

It was worth noting that it was over 100 meters worth of free fall, and she went down with great energy and splendor.

The woman was in her mid-twenties, and looked reasonably beautiful. However, her beauty didn't seem to extend beyond her appearance.

"My name is Hannya," she said. "Sorry if I surprised you."

Her voice was nice to listen to — nothing like the curses she'd spewed while PKing.

*That just makes her even scarier, Shu thought.*

*And why the hell would you name yourself after a Noh mask, of all things?*

"I'm Shu," he greeted her, cautiously, for he was experienced enough to know just how scary and complex women could be.

"And I'm Figaro. Nice to meet you," said Figaro, as casually as ever, for he knew absolutely nothing about such things.

Shu appreciated that he was acting natural, but was also worried that he could step on a landmine.

"Oh, yeah. You say hi, too, Sandalphon," said the woman.

"Yes. Right away." Following the voice from her crest, it began to glow and released her Embryo.

And what a strange Embryo it was.

It looked human. That alone wasn't strange. Both Shu and Figaro had seen human-like Guardians and girl-Embryos — the Maidens.

But this Embryo was different.

Unlike human-like Guardians, it didn't have any inhuman parts, such as a tail or horns, but unlike Maidens, it wasn't a girl... but a boy.

Not an androgynous girl, but very clearly a boy. Shu could tell.

It was their first time seeing an Embryo that looked like a human boy.

"My name is Sandalphon," he said. "My Type is Apostle-Angel Gear."

Neither Figaro or Shu had ever heard of "Apostle" or "Angel Gear" Types. Though they had a guess that the latter was a category unique to him, developed from either Arms or Chariot.

Regardless of what he was, his power was immense.

The ground Sandalphon had tread on looked completely ravaged.

The event monsters were fine, though, since they could only be harmed by couples.

"There weren't any tians here, were there?" muttered Shu. "This'd be a real calamity if there were."

"Don't worry," said the woman with a mild smile. "He has the ability to differentiate NPCs and Masters, so there aren't any dead NPCs here. I don't have any grudge against them, so I don't want to kill them."

*So what you're saying is that you have a grudge against Masters and want to kill them,* Shu thought, sweating inside his costume.

"Why're roo going around cursing and PKing?" he asked Hannya.

"Because couples are the enemy."

"And you didn't attack us because...?"

"You're not a couple."

*Ah. We've got a walking pile of complications here. Best not pry deeper,* Shu thought, setting his mind on changing the subject.

He was so careful with her that he even decided to refrain from using his puns.

However, that went to waste when Figaro asked, "Why are couples the enemy?"

"FIGGYYYYYYY!" Shu groaned.

The peaceful meathead at his side clearly didn't notice the darkness surrounding her love life.

Hannya began answering Figaro's question. "It happened 52 days ago... or about five months ago here."

"...Ah," Shu said as he realized what day that meant. Like Valentine's, that was also a day tightly linked to love.

"Yes, it was Christmas," she continued. "Back then, I had a boyfriend I was dating with the intention to marry him."

Her eyes were calm and her tone was nostalgic, but Shu knew that this was basically like the peace you felt while going up a tall roller coaster.

Her emotional state would soon go downhill. Figaro, of course, was clueless, and just listened to her story.

"I knitted a sweater, scarf, and gloves for him, and made a full course Christmas dinner for both of us. I even baked a three-layered cake. I even had a marriage registration and betrothal money. I was fully prepared for him to propose to me."

*Damn, you're overbearing*, Shu thought, and praised himself for not saying it.

Figaro, on the other hand, simply thought, *That's impressive*.

"But he didn't come to my room at the time we agreed on..." Hannya continued.

"Here it comes..." Shu murmured.

"Huh? What do you mean?" Figaro asked.

*You wouldn't understand...* Shu thought.

"I called and messaged him over and over and got no response until, about an hour later, he just wrote, 'Let's break up.'"

Shu said nothing.

"Why?" Figaro asked her.

Hannya opened her eyes wide, cracked a joyless smile and said, "'I found someone I like more in *Infinite Dendrogram*, and we're now going out in real life. Sorry.' Ahahahah..."

It was definitely a sad thing, in at least one way, if not a few.

Shu dedicated a moment to think about it. Real love born through MMO relationships and online game marriages had existed for almost half a century now.

And this was *Infinite Dendrogram*. A world as real and realistic as this gave plenty of room for love to blossom. Epic fights against powerful monsters could also produce a good suspension bridge effect.

Over half a year had passed since release, and you had more and more Masters marrying other Masters or even tians. There was even a term for it now: *Dendromony*.

However...

“WHY. WAS I LEFT. BECAUSE OF A DAMN GAAAAAAME?!” the woman screamed.

Yes, whether someone who was left for such a reason could accept it was an entirely different matter.

Shu knew that everyone loved differently, and that all loves had different origins. However, he wished that people would at least give their loves a clean conclusion. Otherwise, you could create people like Hannya — desperate and hurt creatures who went around causing trouble for others.

“Ah,” Figaro said, seeming to realize something. “Are you in *Dendro* to...?”

“TO CRUSH MY EX AND THAT THIEVING HOMEWRECKEEEERRR!” she screamed her desire, crying profusely.

Sandalphon went to pat her on the back. He looked used to it, so this must’ve been common.

*I’d like it if you didn’t bring real-life drama here*, Shu thought with a sigh.

"Hoo, hoo... Sorry. This happens whenever I remember it... Sorry." The scream worked as an outlet for her emotions, letting her calm down a bit.

Just a bit, though.

"Can't you settle this in real life?" Shu asked. "Take him to court and make him pay for the emotional damage or something?"

"I've already been filed with a restraining order. That got me a criminal record, and I was fired for it, but I can still get my revenge on him here."

"You got physical with him before trying to solve it lawfully?" Shu mumbled.

She didn't hear him and just began reciting what she'd gone through so far. "Once I got on *Dendro* to get my revenge, I started in Caldina, since it's in the middle of the continent and I thought I'd quickly find him there. No luck, though. I then went to the west, since he likes Europe more than Asia. The time we went on a trip to Italy on my money, he—"

"Yeah, uhh... I get it," said Shu. "And why did you go around crushing all the couples here?"

"Because they all seemed like him and the homewrecker to me. I mean, I don't know what they look like here, and I don't even know the thief's name. That's why I'll treat all couples as them and C R U S H. T H E M. A L L."

*Damn it, woman, you're one big step into insanity,* Shu thought before saying, "You said you don't know their faces or her name. Do you know the guy's name?"

"Yes. He had a blog called 'RockPanther's Dendro Tour,' so it has to be 'RockPanther.' But the blog didn't get a lot of clicks, and he shut it down after I flamed it."

“Flamed... Uh huh, okay. ‘RockPanther,’ right? Gimme a moment.”

“For what?”

“I think I might be able to find the guy...”

“Really?” Hannya asked while looking at Shu with eyes bordering on demonic.

There was no room for lies or jokes here.

Shu refrained from emphasizing the “might” and just said that he’d ask an informant he knew.

Then Shu walked away from Hannya and took something out of his inventory.

It was a luxury item imbued with communication magic, given only to the best customers of a certain information broker: the DIN.

You could only use it to communicate with DIN workers who had the receiver, but unlike most comms magic devices, you could use it just about anywhere.

“Uhh... Hey, it’s me,” Shu began talking to the informant. “I need you to find someone...”

*She’ll probably attack us if they don’t find him,* Shu added silently.

While he was busy with that, Figaro was talking to Hannya.

“By the way, you look pretty strong. What’s your job and Embryo form?” he asked.

She could absolutely crush skilled players who were hunting in this high-level area, so there was no doubt she was powerful.

Figaro, the battle-junkie that he was, also wondered if she would be up for a duel.

“Job... What was mine, again?” Hannya asked a seemingly impossible question. It wasn’t a joke or anything like that, though — she had actually forgotten her job.

Her revenge on her ex occupied such a large part of her that she couldn’t care about anything else.

“You are now the King of Berserk, Lady Hannya,” Sandalphon helped her.

“Oh yeah, that’s it,” Hannya nodded.

“...A Superior Job,” Figaro muttered in amazement.

Indeed — the King of Berserk was the Superior Job from the berserker grouping.

If she was telling the truth, she’d earned it within just fifty days since starting *Dendro*, which was simply staggering, even when you took into account the tripled time.

Even Figaro was still just aiming for the gladiator grouping’s Superior Job.

Granted, the only reason why he didn’t have it yet was simply that one of the conditions was to be first in the duel rankings. He’d already cleared the other two.

Figaro was currently second, and he was preparing to beat the first — Tom Cat.

By the way, while Hannya didn’t remember any of the conditions, and Sandalphon was too ashamed to say it, one of the King of Berserk’s conditions was basically unclearable.

It was: “To kill 444 humans within 10 seconds of seeing them.”

Berserking at its finest.

No sane person would even attempt it, and even if they would, they probably couldn’t do it. Unless you’d preemptively decided to kill

everyone, you could never decide whether to kill someone and then do it within ten seconds.

In the time when there were only tians, you'd be hunted down and punished as a murderer. Those who'd tried it were many, but none had succeeded, making the King of Berserk into a true lost job.

Masters would've probably attempted it with other Masters, but as mentioned above, this condition had been completely buried by the time *Dendro* was released.

There were probably berserker grouping Masters doing this and that, trying to figure out how to get the Superior Job, completely unaware that it had already been taken.

Now, though this condition was something you normally couldn't and wouldn't clear, the fact that she was the King of Berserk was all the proof you needed that she could and had done it.

This was due to Sandalphon's skill that allowed him to differentiate Masters from tians, and due to Hannya being a dangerous person who instantly killed any Master couple she saw.

As a result of her shenanigans, she had inadvertently cleared the long-buried condition for the King of Berserk, and taken the job.

"And my current form is six," Sandalphon continued.

"Six... Amazing," Figaro said.

Neither Shu nor Figaro were there yet. He did feel like his evolution was close, but it was still five.

"He's an 'Apostle,' right? Maybe they evolve quickly," Figaro guessed.

"Maybe," said Hannya. "I only know Sandalphon, though, so I can't be sure..."

"I barely see my own kind," said Sandalphon. "I wonder why?"

There was a time when a thing called “category-based personality analysis” had enjoyed decent popularity. It was simply personality guessing based on people’s Embryo’s base categories, so Figaro wondered what kind of personality the super-rare Apostle represented.

Then, he noticed Hannya looking at him weirdly.

“What?” he asked.

“Well... I just felt like it’s been so long since I’ve had a proper conversation. I don’t think I’ve talked to anyone since my ex left me. Except Sandalphon, I guess.”

“Indeed,” the Apostle said. “As far as I can remember, this is the first time.”

Of course it was.

She was a PKer who went on a rampage the moment she saw a Master couple, and the onlookers would see her as a rabid dog, if not worse. She herself knew that she was weird, but that awareness wasn’t enough to hold back her emotions.

Even Shu couldn’t help but be a bit freaked out by her.

“Umm... are you sure you want to talk to me? I’m weird, aren’t I?” she asked.

“How?” Figaro asked, puzzled.

The only ones who could look at her without any sort of lens... were those who couldn’t even understand what was weird about her.

As a sickly person all his life, Figaro had limited experience in everything, so he assumed that even Hannya’s eccentricity and rampages were nothing special.

There was also the fact that his first friend had been a man in an animal costume. It was like he didn't even have a compass for the very concept of weirdness.

Hannya looked at him in silence. Figaro had just honestly asked her what was so weird about her, and since she didn't know that there was something wrong with him, it had made her heart skip a beat.

"Can we meet again once I'm done with my revenge?" she asked.

"Hm...? Sure," Figaro replied. "I'd like to see you again, too. Want to exchange emails to stay in touch?"

He only wanted to see her again for a duel, and was completely unaware of the romantic potential of his words.

"Yes! Of course!"

And so, the clueless, meatheaded son of a wealthy family exchanged addresses with a yandere King of Berserk.



"All right, thanks... I know where RockPanther is," Shu ended the call and said as the two were talking.

Hannya turned to him so fast you could hear it and said, "Really?"

"There's this large group of info brokers called 'the DIN.' They have a list, and he was on it. He's a Legendarian right now. You'll get the details if you go to a DIN office and tell them the number on this paper."

"Ohh..." Hannya was so moved that her eyes filled with tears and she joined her hands. "I'm so glad I came to this country... to this area... and I met someone... and got a hint to help with my revenge... Oh, dear... Are you an angel?"

Shu wanted to say that her Embryo was the angel here, but didn't.

She looked calm right now, but there was no telling what could set her off. However...

"Ahahah. Your Sandalphon is the angel here, isn't he?" Figaro asked.

His friend didn't seem to care about such dangers.

*He's got the wrong job, Shu thought. He ain't a Gladiator... he's a goddamn Hero!*

Thankfully, it turned out that it wasn't a dangerous thing to say, and Hannya just giggled and said, "You're right."

Shu felt that she was being strangely nice to Figaro, but again, he didn't say anything.

"Then I'll be going to Legendaria," said Hannya. "It's to the south of here, right?"

"Yeah. Just go straight south. You can't miss it," said Shu.

"Thanks again. Let me help *you* out with something after I'm done with my revenge."

"No need. Really."

*Seriously, don't*, he added silently.

"Goodbye, Shu. And... Figaro!" She walked up to the Gladiator and handed him something



“What is this?”

“I just got them. It’s Valentine’s Day, right?”

It was the chocolate dropped by the event monsters.

“I’ll send emails,” he said. “Let’s meet again!”

“Yeah. See you,” she said as she waved, made Sandalphon transform back to the towering, metallic legs, hopped on and ran off into the horizon.

She was heading to Legendaria, and it was guaranteed that she’d make a scene.

*Man, I’m glad her boyfriend isn’t in Altar, Shu thought. I do feel bad for Legendaria, though.*

“Let them handle the rest themselves, I say,” Shu whispered.

If she was to be believed, her ex was at fault, so he believed — or, rather, chose to believe — that this was the right decision.

Shu ended up not hunting any event monsters.

The encounter with Hannya was so emotionally and mentally draining that he lost all motivation.

He and Figaro were now riding Shu’s Baldr back to the capital.

On the way, Figaro decided to ask Shu the question he had about Hannya and Sandalphon.

“Category-based personality analysis?” Shu raised an eyebrow.

“Yes,” Figaro nodded. “What would Apostles represent?”

“Hm...”

“Proactive people?” Figaro asked.

“I’m pretty sure there’d be more if that was the case.”

“Ah. True.”

Shu was genuinely impressed that Figaro could look at *that* woman and see proactiveness, of all things, as the defining feature.

“Well, I can’t make any conclusions with just a single sample, but I have a guess,” he said.

“Which is...?”

Shu’s guess was based on two factors — Hannya’s words and actions, and the extreme rarity of Apostles.

It was...

“They hate *Infinite Dendrogram*.”

...a real contradiction of an answer.

“I see. So that’s why there are almost none of them.”

Most people started *Infinite Dendrogram* because they were interested in it — they liked what it supposedly had to offer.

Sure, there were those who experienced something as they played and began to hate it, but those who hated it right from the start — before their Embryos hatched — were practically nonexistent.

Unless, of course, it was a woman who’d started *Infinite Dendrogram* to get revenge on an ex she’d lost to this game, and the homewrecker who’d taken him from her.

“Now that I think about it, Sandalphon’s quick evolution wasn’t caused by some Apostle quality, but by her obsession,” Figaro added.

“Well... Maybe, maybe not,” Shu answered.

In Shu’s mind, Apostle Masters were contradictions right from the moment they started.

*Masters who hate Infinite Dendrogram, yet still start it, must be a really troublesome bunch, he thought. Imagine the sense of duty they'd need to dive in here...*

"She's also the second person I've seen who's ahead of me, the first being Tom," Figaro said. "I need to work harder."

"Yeah, do your best, Figgy. I'm cheering ya on. You'll hop up to the top in no time."

Though things hadn't gone as planned, seeing his friend become all fired up made Shu satisfied. All that was left now was to ride Baldr back to the capital.

"Hm?" Shu raised an eyebrow as he noticed Figaro eating something.

It was the chocolate Hannya had just given him. He probably didn't want to exchange a gift, so he was deciding to eat it himself.

Shu silently thought about them both. He was perceptive enough to understand that Hannya'd had feelings for Figaro from the moment she'd handed him the chocolate.

Hannya was currently a mix of love and hate.

While her hate was directed at RockPanther, her love had ended up targeting Figaro — the man who was almost completely dense about matters of love.

Shu felt that Hannya would eventually cause even more love-related trouble, but this time related to Figaro.

*Honestly, I think that would be good for Figgy, he thought.*

Even if there was some sort of misunderstanding that led to PvP between them, Figaro would probably welcome it with open arms.

"Hell, you really need a lesson in just how complex and scary women can be," Shu added.

"Hm?"

Figaro tilted his head, not really understanding what his friend meant, as he bit into the chocolate.

“Ah,” he added, suddenly realized something. “If only couples can kill the event monsters, how did Hannya end up having this?”

“Who knows?” Shu shrugged, feigning ignorance.

He knew full well that it had been dropped not by the event monsters, but by one of the couples Hannya had killed.

You could very well call it “murder chocolate.”

Shu knew that Figaro probably wouldn’t care, but he also saw no need to tell his friend that the chocolate he was eating had a bloody history.

And so, with the evening sun on them, they rode the tank back to civilization.



Following this encounter, Hannya changed her country to Legendaria and used the DIN’s info to start searching for her targets more seriously.

Thus, on the final day of the Valentine’s event, she found both RockPanther and his new lover, and got her revenge on them, making a huge mess of the town they were in.

But then, a tian Special Superior Job and a group of ten Legendarian rankers defeated her, and she was sent to the gaol due to the severe property damage and tian injuries she’d caused.

However, by some miracle, no one had died, so it didn’t count as murder, and she would get to leave the gaol in only three or four years, *Dendrotime*.

After getting locked up, Hannya, feeling completely refreshed, began to get her real life in order and fix all the problems that had arisen while she'd been focused on revenge.

She also occasionally logged in to *Dendro*. Whether to get rid of stress or to prepare for when she was released, she trained in the gaol by trampling all over the other Masters locked up in there.

She also promised to meet Figaro again, and they regularly exchanged emails.

Now, to evaluate the Valentine's Day of 2044.

Shu didn't get to hunt.

The Masters in the area were unjustly PKed.

The destructive drama was nothing but a disaster to the Legendarians who were caught up in it.

And finally, RockPanther — who could be considered the root cause of this — had ended up breaking up with his new girlfriend.

Admittedly, she'd had problems with him to begin with, so you could say it was the straw that broke the camel's back.

Most of those involved in this incident had gotten nothing good out of it.

The only exceptions were Hannya and Figaro.

After settling the score, Hannya began a new life and got a new love, while Figaro believed he had found a new duel buddy.

That was all he thought of it.

In his emails to her, he wrote things like, "I want to see you." (*So we can duel.*) "I hope you're released soon," conveniently forgetting to type out the bracketed part, as if it were obvious, and letting Hannya interpret it in a completely different way.

Hannya's love for Figaro grew larger by the day, but Figaro, who'd never loved before, had no means of noticing it. This severe failure in communication continued for over a year in real life and over three years in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

It eventually led to a certain incident, but that was a story for another time.

## ***Episode Four: Consultation***

*April 4th, 2045, Prism Rider, Ray Starling*

I looked through my mail, had a meal, and logged in to *Dendro*.

Even though it was night in real life, the sun was still high up in the sky here.

"You're back." Nemesis popped out of the crest and welcomed me.

"Well, I have college tomorrow, so I can't stay online for more than a day here," I said. "There's no helping it. Life on the other side is important, too."

*Now if that ain't something Fuyuki should hear, I thought, rolling my eyes. Still can't believe that guy skipped the first day of college.*

"Also, it's not like we have any major trouble here right now," Nemesis added.

"True." I nodded.

We'd had problem after problem for the first few days after coming here, but things had calmed down after that.

There was no sign that anything was about to happen now, and the local quests reflected that — there were only tame ones like ruin investigation and town restoration.

“We’ll hang around and do a bunch of those before returning to Gideon,” I said.

“It feels like it’s been so long since you were kidnapped by that fox,” Nemesis commented.

*Well, it’s been an impressive journey,* I thought. *We went all the way from Gideon in the south to Quartierlatin in the north.*

“I actually miss Gideon quite a bit,” said Nemesis. “I’d love to be back soon.”

“Same here,” I said. “It’s pretty far, though. Even getting to the capital takes a while. We’ll go back to Altea on Thursday the 6th, then go to Gideon over Friday and Saturday.”

We’d have to talk it out with Azurite, though. She was still working here in Quartierlatin.

“Wouldn’t we return faster by riding Silver through the sky?” Nemesis asked.

“The skies above the capital have the occasional Pure-Dragon flying around,” I replied.

“Now that... is troubling.”

If there was one thing we’d learned from Gigaknight, it was that we were weak against enemies who didn’t rely on any gimmicks, but were simply *strong*.

We were bound to fare badly against flying dragons who would fight from outside my range and use various breaths.

Sure, I’d beaten a Pure-Dragon-tier worm near Gideon before, but it wasn’t a good comparison to the sky beasts above Altea.

“Riser told me that you could even come across UBMs there,” I added.

“Mm-hm... Let’s avoid needless deadly battles. You’ve had too many of those recently.”

“Seriously.” I wanted some peace and quiet right now.

I’d probably get more than enough of that if I just didn’t log in, but that would leave a bad taste in my mouth.

“Anyway, we’ll think about the way back later,” I said. “For now, let’s just take care of our business for today.”

“You’re planning on going to a craftsman, right?”

“Yeah. They offered, so I might as well.” A local craftsman had offered to make something out of the metal powder I’d acquired from the whale. The place wasn’t far from the local save point, so we went there right away.

It was a mix of workshop and store. It specialized in equipment, and there were two counters: one for buying ready-made equipment, and one for ordering custom-mades.

“Now that I think about it, all the equipment you’ve ever had has been either monster loot, ready-mades, or gifts,” Nemesis commented.

“True.”

All I’d ever gotten in the past was either store-bought gear, MVP special rewards, gacha pulls, or gifts from B3.

“A custom-made certainly won’t hurt,” said Nemesis.

“I *do* have the money and mats for it,” I nodded. “It’ll be my first one.”

Speaking of order-made gear, I knew someone who knew a lot about that: Juliet.

Her gothic dress-armor and many other things she wore were order-mades.

We'd even talked about the subject once...



A few days before Miss Eldritch kidnapped me from Gideon, Juliet and I had a mock battle.

If you ignored Figaro, a Superior, and Marie, who primarily used ranged attacks, Juliet was the sparring partner I had the most trouble with.

This was due to her build being extremely balanced. She could move at the speed of sound, fly, had powerful physical *and* magical attacks, intense debuffs through her curses, and a knight grouping Superior Job, Fallen Knight, which gave her great defense.

Sure, I could turn her debuffs into buffs by using the second form's Reversal, but that barred me from using Vengeance, which overall just made it worse for me.

On top of that, I didn't have my left arm, so I couldn't use Purgatorial Flames. And Nemesis was in her second form, as I wouldn't get Monochrome until I went to Torne later.

I lost the overwhelming majority of my mock battles against the rankers, but Juliet was easily the one who beat me the most times.

This was simply due to the fact that we were often online at the same time, and thus sparred the most.

Apparently, she was a middle-schooler who also lived in Japan. We were in the same time zone, and just as I'd started *Dendro* on my pre-college holiday, she'd started her spring break right after Franklin's Game, so our online times coincided a lot, and we had many mock battles because of it.

Well... my online times coincided even more with Shu's and Marie's, who were not only living in Japan, but were also unemployed, but we didn't spar a lot because Shu was busy with his popcorn stand, while Marie had an important job as a mediator between Count Gideon and the ninjas now working there, among other things.

Well, back to the main matter. While Juliet beat me more than anyone else, I was also learning a lot from her.

Though I still wasn't perfect at it, she was the one I had to thank for teaching me how to counter those moving at supersonic speed, and since my battle style incorporated rare things such as Counter Absorption, Vengeance, Silver, and MVP special rewards, she also ended up learning a thing or two.

That was what she said, anyway. My guess was that she was preparing to fight someone who used unique battle styles and special rewards.

At first I'd assumed it was Figaro, but by now, my guess was that it was Rosa, who was just below Juliet in the rankings. That was probably the reason why she'd shown me her most secret move a whole bunch of times now. It was like she was testing it on me.

Now, since Juliet and I sparred a lot, we tended to have many post-spar chats over lunches or tea. On this particular day, we talked about fashion.

The reason for that was the fact that, just a few days ago, I'd pulled the BR Armor from the gacha. The once-cursed, spiky armor that had melted in the battle against Monochrome had really intrigued her.

"Although no longer bound by the abyssal shell of malediction, it continues to shine an obsidian black," Juliet said.

That roughly translated to: "That spiky armor looks cool even without the curse!"

I liked it myself. It was better than glasses, animal ears, or crossdressing, anyway.

“Is this truly a praisable design?” asked Nemesis, clearly not sharing our sentiment.

Looking back at it, Nemesis had been very critical of my fashion even before we’d met Azurite.

“Goblin bracers, corpse greaves, an iron prosthetic arm, spiky curse armor... where are you even going with this?” she muttered.

“‘Tis naught but the wondrous and mysterious hand of fate,” Juliet said with shining eyes.

Nemesis sighed in response, but I couldn’t tell if it was because she didn’t have anything to say or didn’t understand Juliet’s words, which, by the way, meant: “You got this design set from MVP rewards and the gacha! You didn’t even try for it! It’s gotta be fate! Wow!”

She then added, “If you wish to resist fate and reveal yourself to the world in a new form, you must resolve to sacrifice material wealth in exchange.”

“Hm?” Nemesis raised an eyebrow.

“She’s saying that if you want something with a specific design, get it custom-made,” I translated.

According to Juliet, though it was based on their stats and skill levels, craftsmen could slightly alter the designs of the gear they were making.

From what I’d been told, before people like those in The Triangle of Wisdom — that lab coat lunatic’s clan — had come along and made things like humanoid robots, most items crafted by Masters had been exactly that: just slightly-altered non-originals.

Still, the increase in Masters that could create new things hadn't decreased the demand for design changes, and even now, you had many Masters who came to craftsmen to forge their own unique look.

Juliet was one of them. She regularly used the money she won in duels and materials she got from kills to order various new gear from her favorite craftsmen. She probably liked trying out new clothes. You could even see her walk around the normal clothing shops.

Not too long ago, I'd seen her in front of some shop's show window, talking to Chelsea and some other girl I didn't recognize. They must have been having a hearty chat about fashion, like the girls they were.

"My false eye itself was wrought by the hands of those with art and ability," Juliet said as she reached for her right eye and *removed its surface*.

It was a contact lens.

I'd always thought that both her eyes were red, but the one under the lens was blue.

"You can even have custom-made colored contacts?" I asked.

"Certainly. This one bears the powers of Identification and Reveal."

That reminded me of when I'd met Franklin for the first time. He'd been wearing a penguin costume and mentioned that you could get glasses with skills on them.

*I guess contact lenses are the same, I thought. Do they count as accessories?*

"The truly exceptional false eyes have the power to throw your foe's condition into disharmony," Juliet added.

*Oh? There are contact lenses that give debuffs by just looking? That's pretty strong, I thought. Still, you can probably negate them with the right level and resistances.*

“Why is that one colored?” I asked.

“I began having eyes of a different hue, bewitching in purity, but it came to be known that the foes see such a quality as an ill omen,” she explained.

“...I see.”

So at first, she’d used transparent contact lenses, but since her avatar had heterochromia, her enemies would be wary of something in her eyes despite the transparency, so she’d switched to one colored contact and one transparent one, to make her eyes appear the same color.

Every now and then, you would see manga with characters who hid their heterochromia — and with it, some sort of power — behind contacts, but in Juliet’s case, the contact *was* the power, while her avatar’s heterochromia was just a bit of fashion.

But now, you couldn’t even tell that she had heterochromia, so the fashion factor was gone.

I was guessing that this had caused an inner conflict between her as a fashion-loving middle schooler, and her as a high-ranking duelist.

“Did you just imply that heterochromia is merely a bit of middle schooler-like fashion?” Nemesis asked telepathically.

*What else?* I replied.

“This false eye also demands the remains of a crystalline Pure-Dragon, bestowing upon it an immense value,” Juliet added.

“You need materials for custom-made items?” I asked.

"If you seek apparel that reaches supreme heights in its splendor, you must be willing to part with elements common folk cannot procure, some so precious that not even the weavers of finest cloth have them in store."

She had basically just said, "Craftsmen sometimes don't have the material for high-level gear," which was completely right. Most Pure-Dragon-tier material couldn't be found on the market, and if it somehow got there, it'd be really expensive.

It didn't mean much to me, though. I couldn't equip any of that fancy gear at my level, so there was no point in gunning for it, even if I had the money.

If there was one thing to take from this, it was that it was standard to bring your own material when ordering a custom-made item.

Side note: UBM MVP special rewards were sometimes materials which had to be used by craftsmen to become something useful.

"How troubling it is that you are aesthetically complete," said Juliet.

"Ray," said Nemesis, "what did she just say?"

"Your set is so perfect that there's really no point in ordering any custom-made items..."

"*THIS* is your idea of perfection?!"



Yeah, that was the conversation Juliet and I'd had.

Since then, I'd lost the spiky gear and instead gotten a black coat and armor of fire and darkness, so I was beginning to feel like my personal fashion was converging on the darker side.

"...Really? 'On the darker side'? Is that the extent of what you think of the disaster that is your equipment?" asked Nemesis.

“I see your point. This gear would let me be the star of a dark overlord fashion show,” I said.

Deafening. Silence.

“I’m cracking a joke here. How about a reaction? At least boo me if it’s that bad.”

“You said nothing but the truth. I had no comment whatsoever.”

Anyway, this “dark overlord” gear of mine couldn’t really be replaced.

The three MVP special rewards were closely linked to my fighting style, while the VDA I had as my upper body armor was both really good *and* a gift from B3. Therefore, the only open slots I had were lower body armor, headgear, and accessories.

I noticed that Nemesis looked somewhat pensive.

“What now?” I asked.

“...Nothing,” she replied.

“Hm?”

*Oh well,* I thought as I went back to considering my gear.

In my hand, I held the shining material — the metal particles — I’d gotten from the whale.

I could get some lower body armor, but the result would be plate mail, and thus would probably make it harder to move around.

Besides that, I had headgear and accessories... but then I decided to just ask the craftsman about my options.

In the store, I met the same person who’d recommended I have something crafted using the powder, and he gave me a list of items they could craft from it. Apparently, Countess Quartierlatin had given him some of it, too, and they were in the process of investigating its properties and uses.

The powder turned out to be really easy to work with, and it could be used to make various pieces of high-quality equipment. It must've been one of the reasons why the whale regenerated so quickly.

As I looked through the relatively small list, I saw an "Anti-Poison Oxygen Mask."

"This one's good," I said.

It counted as an accessory, and once equipped, it provided a flow of clean air.

I really needed something like it for whenever I used Hellish Miasma or flew around on Silver.

Besides, its name was "Storm Visage," which sounded crazy cool to me.

I'd clearly found what I was looking for, so I wrote it down on the order form.

There was a section for the design, too, but since the designs I thought were good didn't sit right with Nemesis, I decided to respect her and not think about it myself.

Instead, I just wrote down, "Please make it match my current set."

This was the kind of thing best left to the pros! Nemesis would surely be glad I took this route.

"Hey," Nemesis spoke up. "A chill just went down my spine. Did you write something strange on that form?"

"Hey, it's all good," I said. "It's nothing for you to worry about."

"I certainly hope so..."

Anyway, that ended my first order of a custom-made item.

*I can't wait until it's done!*



After ordering the Storm Visage, I went to the adventurer's guild to pick up a quest.

Quartierlatin's adventurers' guild was away from both the ruins and the town center that Logan targeted, so it hadn't suffered any damage in the attacks, and was functioning as normal.

Scratch that — it wasn't normal, since you had way more Masters and tians looking for quests through the catalogs than usual.

It looked like many people had rushed over to Quartierlatin to help.

Azurite had told me that at first, she'd banned the adventurers' guilds from spreading any info about the ruins, in order to keep the Masters away. Because of this, the only ones who'd come were those who'd gotten the info some other way, like I had through the DIN.

But the ban was now lifted, so you now had people from all across the kingdom coming here on or for quests.

"All right, let's see what quests we have today," I said as we sat down at a table that'd just opened up.

However, there was someone else who sat down at it.

"Hm?"

"Oh?"

*Well, it's crowded, anyway. Might as well share,* I thought as I looked at his face.

"...Hm?" I said.

He looked familiar.

It was a guy with a bandana on his head. Where had I seen it before?

"Y-You're Ray Starling the Unbreakable!" he suddenly raised his voice.

*Oh, so we did meet before, I thought. Wait, no. I'm weirdly famous, so I can't be sure about that. Back in Torne, some PK clan even tried to beat me to make a name for themselves and—*

“AH!”

*It came back to me! This bandana guy is...!*

“The leader of Sol Crisis!” I shouted as I stood up from my chair.

“Shh! Shh! Don’t mention that clan!” he put his finger in front of his mouth and signed for me to be quiet, then looked around in a panic. The guild was so crowded and noisy that no one noticed what was going on here.

“Are you still after Ray?” asked Nemesis menacingly.

Last time, B3 had handled Sol Crisis because they were using her name, but honestly, if there were PKers going after me, it was only fair that I would be the one to take them on.

“No no no no! I’m not plannin’ on messin’ with ya anymore!” He lightly waved his hands in front of him and asked me to calm down.

“Why would a PK clan come here, then?” I asked. “Are you plotting something? Like you did in Torne?”

“I’m not! I’m just here to quest, man! And I’m not in a PK clan anymore. Not Sol Crisis.”

“Hm?”

As I wondered what he meant, he became dispirited and slumped down in his chair. He looked really down, and his shabby gear didn’t help at all.

Even I, an ex-enemy, was kinda worried about him.

“...What happened?” I asked.

He hesitated for a moment, then began talking, saying, “The clan collapsed after the real deal kicked our asses back in Torne.”

I said nothing, but I could see why that had happened.

The clan had gathered members by stealing the authority of a major player killer: B3, AKA Barbaroy Bad Burn.

It was only natural that they'd get many quitters after they learned that their Barbaroy was a fake and the real one had come in to beat them up.

They'd probably also thought that she'd come after them again if they stayed.

"The guys also put us to sleep and used Steal and Plunder to take all of our stuff..." he added.

"Ouch..." Nemesis and I said in unison.

*So that was why his gear is different than it was in Torne,* I thought.

"Vermin... the guy who faked Barbaroy and the other founding member besides us... ran away before that happened to him. Blue and I stayed and tried to get the clan back up, but the aggro of the guys we tricked went all on us..."

I didn't know what to say to that. It was their own fault for faking B3, but I also felt kinda bad for him.

"We couldn't use 'Sol Crisis' anymore, so we changed it to 'Rising Sun,'" he continued. "It's just me and Blue, though, so it's barely even a clan, really."

So that was what he'd meant by, "Not Sol Crisis."

"And 'Blue' is...?" I asked.

"Blue Screen. The guy who shut down your Prism Steed replica back in Torne."

*Oh, him, I thought. Silver's not a replica, though.*

“Sorry ‘bout that, by the way,” he added as he suddenly bowed to me. “I was in a PK clan, so I’m not gonna say sorry for trying to PK ya, but now I think we should’ve picked a better time for that. You beat the UBM, didn’t ya?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. The Black Warcoat I was wearing was all the proof I needed to show that I’d killed the UBM that’d attacked Torne — Void of the Black Sky, Monochrome.

“I didn’t think anyone could do that, and went after ya ’cause it seemed like the perfect chance... but you actually did it. In the end, we just got in your way and got flattened by Barbaroy. So damn stupid.”

Once again, I had no words. Unlike Azurite, I didn’t have the Truth Discernment skill, but the self-derisive, sad-looking smile seemed pretty genuine to me.

*Maybe he’s not a bad guy at heart,* I thought.

“So why did you come here, anyway?” asked Nemesis.

“I’m just looking for jobs. We’ve got no gear, gold, or people besides me and Blue, so we need ways to get money that don’t ask for much.”

*Well, there are tons of quests in Quartierlatin, so you can make some decent money here,* I thought.

“But if you’re here, then we’ll just go somewhere else. You probably couldn’t relax with us here,” he said as he stood up and prepared to leave the guild. “I’m out.”

I stopped him by saying, “You don’t need to be considerate of me.”

“What?”

“You apologized, and honestly, that’s enough for me.”

“...You sure?”

"Yeah. You've already had it pretty rough, and it's not like your getting in my way back in Torne resulted in something that couldn't be undone."

I'd made it in time to save Louie, and we hadn't gotten any major increases in casualties, so with the apology, it was all water under the bridge.

"...Thanks." Dum-Dum, the ex-leader of Sol Crisis and current leader of Rising Sun, bowed to me once again.

"Still, I don't know what B3 will think, so you should talk to her," I added. "I'll say something to her, too."

"Yeah. Thanks again. You tell me if Vermin or someone else starts bothering you again."

"Sure. I hope that doesn't happen, though."

And just like that, the minor conflict between us, born back in Torne, reached a peaceful conclusion.

Shortly after that, Dum-Dum found a quest that suited him and accepted it.

After he left, Nemesis and I looked through the quest list for any good ones, but then one of the guild's workers called us. She said that someone important was calling me and asked me to come to a certain room here in the guild. I could only think of two "important" people that could call me in this town, and sure enough, I came into the room to find one of them — a familiar masked lady.

It was none other than the first princess of Altar, Altimia Azurite Altar.

"Still wearing that mask?" I asked.

"Many outsiders gather in this facility, after all. And why does it feel as though you always talk about my mask before you even greet me?" she replied, slightly annoyed.

“I heard you needed me?”

“Yes. To be specific, I need your connections.”

*Connections?*

“I assume you heard that the kingdom resumed the investigations into the ruins after the chaos surrounding them died down?” she asked.

“Of course.”

The quests in Quartierlatin that had appeared after the incident could be put into three groups: material gathering for rebuilding, monster hunting until the local knight order recovered and could take it over again, and ruin investigation.

They were all backed by Countess Quartierlatin and the kingdom itself, so the rewards were generally higher than usual. However, the ruin investigation quests had ended yesterday, and I hadn’t seen a single one of them today.

“Aren’t you done with ruins investigation?” asked Nemesis.

“We have finished exploring the interior, at least,” Azurite replied.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Simply put, we are done exploring it as a standard dungeon, but the investigations are going nowhere.”

According to her, they’d shifted from mere exploration to trying to figure out what they could do with the technology.

“But as things are now, Altar does not have any people capable of that.”

“I see.”

For that, you needed people with jobs and skills related to machines, but due to the inherent nature of the countries, most of them were in either Dryfe or Granvaloa — certainly not Altar.

Some had taken the machine-related jobs available at the crystal in the ruins here, but their level was still low, so they couldn't be useful for this.

"We could hire outsiders, but that would be careless," added Azurite.

*Of course it would be,* I thought.

The ruins were a classified matter — one serious enough to cause Dryfe to get involved. Altar clearly couldn't just hire anyone who didn't serve the country's interests.

"I can only entrust this matter to someone who is both trustworthy and has knowledge of machines, or someone who is vouched for by someone I trust," she said.

"And so you're asking if I know someone like that?"

"Yes. Does anyone come to mind?"

"Hm..."

There was one person who came to mind before anyone else. However, he wasn't here, couldn't come here, and I couldn't let him take this.

The second person who came to mind was Shu, but while his Embryo, Baldr, was very mechanical, it didn't mean that he was fit for the job. In fact, I could totally imagine him somehow destroying the ruins.

The third person who came to mind was B3. She was well-informed and surely knew more people than me. I felt like she could find the perfect solution to this problem.

"I know someone who's very knowledgeable," I said. "I'll ask her."

“I see. Is she trustworthy?” Azurite asked.

“Of course.”

She’d easily make the top five people I trusted the most.

“She said she’s coming here tomorrow—I mean, in three days. You can talk to her yourself.”

“Good idea. I will still be here in Quartierlatin, so I’ll meet her.”

Thus, I arranged a meeting between B3 and Azurite.

“Is it really a good idea to let them meet?” asked Nemesis telepathically.

*Huh? They’re both the diligent type, so I’m sure they’ll get along,* I replied. *They both have a thing for hiding their faces, too.*

“You are no different, no?”

Having just ordered the Storm Visage, I really couldn’t deny that.

Once Azurite and I were done talking, I picked up a quest, left the guild, and walked through Quartierlatin.

The restoration efforts were going well, but many buildings were still damaged, and the trees and flowers that distinguished this town from the rest were still a huge mess.

Those were the scars of the recent incident, and they reminded me of how Gideon had looked after Franklin’s Game.

“Hm...” I murmured.

Remembering that made me think of a certain someone. He was a friend I’d faced twice — once at the gate, and again atop Franklin’s Embryo.

“Someone trustworthy who knows a lot about machines, huh...?” I added to myself.

It was the first person who’d come to mind when Azurite asked me.

“What’s Hugo up to these days?” I wondered. I hadn’t seen him since our final clash in Gideon. Over a month had passed since, so I couldn’t help but wonder what he was doing now...

## ***Pallid Pages Part One: Spin the Roulette Wheel***

*Late March 2045, City-State Union of Caldina, Hermine the City of Gambling*

It was late March, about a week after the incident in Gideon.

The location was Caldina, the country almost completely covered in desert and dry wasteland.

The dry areas of old had become deserts, while the dry areas that had become deserts just a few centuries ago were now wastelands.

The few areas that were neither were either oases or fertile lands surrounding the rivers flowing from the Harshwinter Mountains to the north, and most Caldinian cities were built around these.

Hermine the City of Gambling was one of them. It was built around an oasis. Like its title implied, it had an entire district focused on the gambling industry.

Masters often compared it to the likes of Las Vegas.

One notable thing about the casinos and other gambling houses here was that they all differed depending on which organization was funding them.

Caldina was a place where merchants and organizations from all the other countries gathered to do business, and the casinos funded by them often had an air similar to their homelands.

The more elegant-looking casinos were often funded by Altarian merchants, while the ones that had a heavy focus on entertainment value were built by Legendarian design.

Then you had the ones that those from Earth would call “Asian-looking.” The serpentine dragons on them clearly showed that they were built with Huang He in mind.

On one of them, there was a sign which translated to something along the lines of “Mirage.”

That was the name of an organization from Huang He, but they were by no means mere merchants — it was a Huang Hean mafia.

It had roots in the underside of the empire’s society and worked with an iron fist to incite people’s greed and gather money. One of its sub-groups ran a casino here in Caldina.

This wasn’t unique. There were also casinos funded by the likes of the Great Pirate Fleet of Granvaloa — the most infamous of the Four Great Fleets — as well as the vampire clans of Legendaria.

Hermine’s casinos weren’t even the only places that had monetary support from foreign underground societies.

In fact, the Caldinian authorities saw them as venerable guests and good sources of money.

As long as they could tax them, Caldina didn’t care who ran the establishments or what they did there — they even appreciated when other countries made certain businesses illegal, for it increased the number of shops moving here and, subsequently, their tax income.

Of course, there were those who refused to pay the taxes, but they were not an issue, since they would just die while wandering the deserts between the cities and perish before bringing their money back to their countries.

They would either die because they couldn't get a guide, walk into monster habitats because they were given false maps, or simply get taken out by certain professionals.

There were some guides who claimed to be non-official and agreed to escort those who refused to pay their taxes through the desert, but they sometimes turned out to be Caldinian assassins who led them into Pure-Dragon worm lairs, or worse.

Regardless of how, the non-paying would regularly lose their lives and money, which would then be picked up by Caldina.

If you wanted to avoid such consequences, you had to abide by the rules, pay the taxes, and get the official guides.

That was the kind of country Caldina was — everything was allowed if you paid money, and everything was lost to you if you didn't.



Back to the topic of Mirage's casino...

The establishment had Huang He-like — or China-like, for those from Earth — decorations, both inside and out. Despite that, the gambling going on within the premises was more on the Western side. You had roulette, poker, baccarat... most of the games Masters knew well.

Servers clad in Huang Hean dresses that emphasized their legs, similar to qipaos from China, walked around the casino, plates in hand, and handed out alcoholic drinks to the gambling customers. Beauty must've been one of the job criteria, for they were all either beautiful girls or boys that looked the part.

Some of the customers were simply enjoying the sight of the servers at work. Many would gather here not to gamble, but to relax after a long day at work while having a meal and drink at the designated eating space. Watching the gamblers and the servers was a strange kind of spice to them.

Among those eating, there was an individual wearing strange clothes. That strangeness made him attract lots of attention. Perhaps his apparel wouldn't appear strange in some places, but they certainly didn't suit this casino. It looked like a mix of a military uniform and pilot suit, and neither Caldina nor Huang He had anything like it.

Another notable thing about him was his face. He was a handsome man, but for some reason, there was sadness in his expression. That well-defined face combined with grief made for a combo that moved the hearts of many women here, young and old. However, more perceptive folk would notice that his mannerisms were sometimes too feminine for a man.

The third notable thing about him was the snow-white girl at his side, who was silently eating almond jelly.

They were Hugo Lesseps and Cyco — ex-member of The Triangle of Wisdom and his Embryo, and together, they really stood out in this casino.



### *High Pilot, Hugo Lesseps*

“Haaah...” I sighed, wondering how I’d ended up in a place like this.

I’d left Dryfe and headed out towards Tenchi, on the other side of the continent, in order to broaden my horizons, so it wasn’t strange for me to be here in Caldina, which was on the way there. But I didn’t know why I was in a casino, of all places.

Why was I being forced to wait here?

“I’m underage,” I muttered.

In reality, I was a girl who’d just turned fifteen, so this shady place was just a bit much for me.

I felt like I was about to cry.

Being here was actually harder on my mind than attacking the Gouz-Maise Gang’s hideout.

But “I”... which was to say, Hugo Lesseps... did my best to not cry, and just look sad instead. Crying in a place like this would just make me stand out more.

“You’re such a crybaby,” Cyco commented. “And FYI, you’re so handsome that even making a sad face makes you stand out.”

*Shut up, Cyco. Just eat your almond jelly,* I shot back.

“Okay, okay. Ah, also, if you don’t wanna stand out, why not just change your clothes?” Cyco asked as she pointed at my Triangle of Wisdom-made pilot suit.

*You know I can’t, I responded silently. I don’t have any other clothes besides a few sets of these.*

I’d only realized that after entering the desert, and I hadn’t had a chance to buy anything new since then.

I’d also spent most of my money on repairs, and ToW-quality parts that’d made it to Caldina were more expensive than I’d thought.

*With the money I have left, I can’t get any pilot suits that don’t stand out and have good stats.*

“You can just stop caring about stats,” said Cyco.

*Shut up and just get more almond jelly.*

"Who do you think I am? Nemesis?" she retorted. "One portion is enough for me."

I said nothing in response. That name made me remember a familiar face — Ray.

We'd been enemies at our last meeting, but I still wondered how he was doing right now.

I'd cut off his right arm, and he'd lost his left against Francesca... Had he gotten them back yet?

*I'd love to meet and talk to him again*, I thought. *Probably not to apologize, though.*

"Oh yeah," said Cyco. "When you're down like this, you should act all smug, like you did when Ray was around."

*To be honest, keeping up that act has become really hard lately.*

One of the reasons was probably the fact that I'd lost all reservations I'd had for Francesca, but anyway, the Hugo Lesseps character wasn't as big of a part of me anymore.

*If I remember correctly, even my thoughts were more "Hugo-like" before*, I thought.

"Oh, I get it," said Cyco. "You turned fifteen on the other side, so that cured your chuuni... your self-conscious fourteen year-old syndrome."

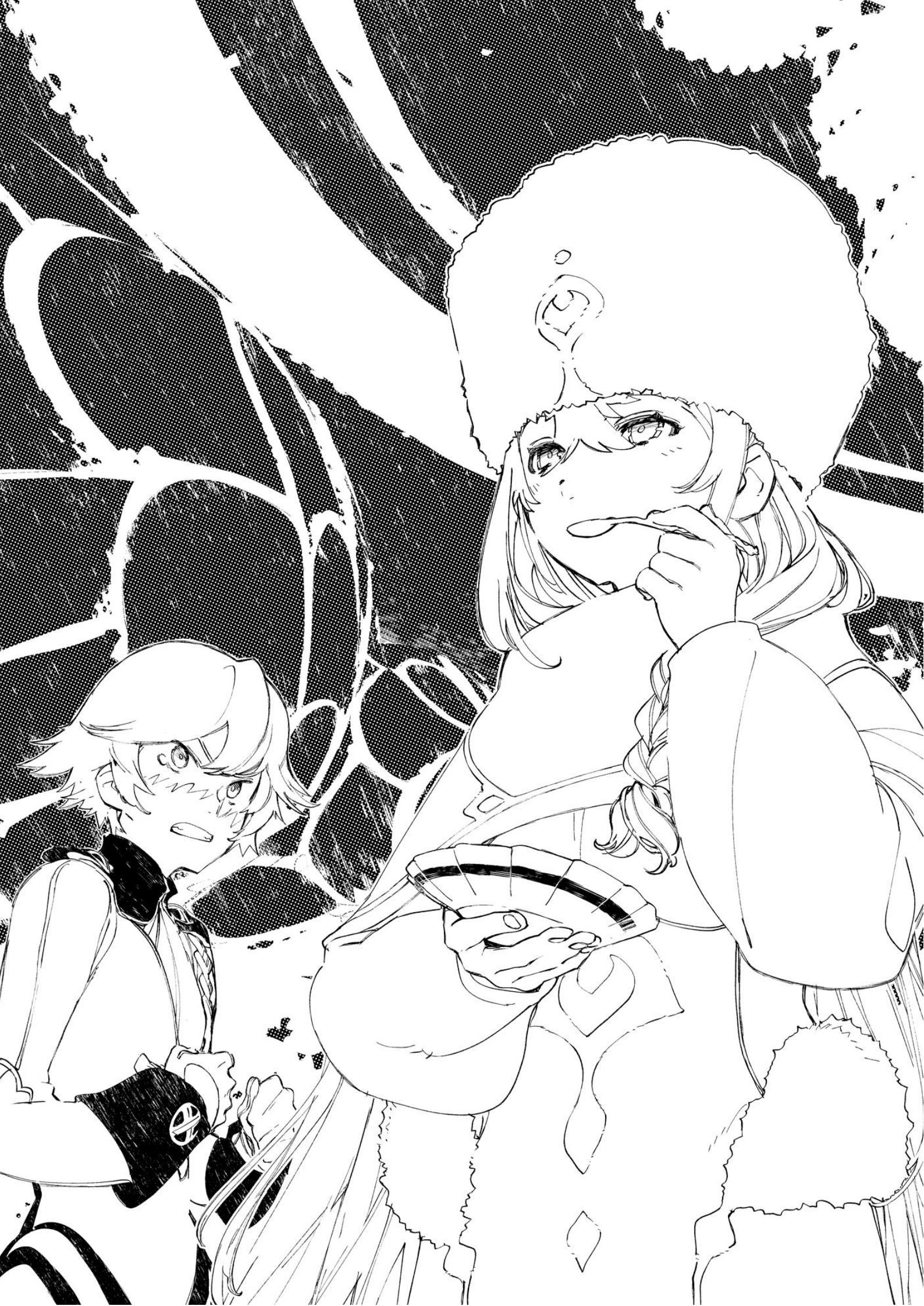
"No. I am not in a phase," I retorted.

"Ehh? You're a handsome, pompous gentleman who likes saying hot one-liners."

"No. Hugo Lesseps is not a product of adolescent self-consciousness."

"Lady, we shall stop your tears. I promise that you will greet tomorrow's morning with a smile on your face," Cyco quoted me.

“You even stopped speaking in monotone to say that! Can you *not*?!”



*And that wasn't a weird thing to say, right?! I know I'm the one who said it, but that's a good line!*

"Ugh... I didn't expect the very basis of who I am to be put into question at this point," I complained.

"Did that help?" Cyco asked with a smile.

"...Eh? Ah..." That made me realize that I was feeling a lot more comfortable than I had been a few minutes ago.

So my verbally abusive, monotone Embryo had said that to take my mind away from the pressure of being in a place like this.

"Thanks, Cyc—"

"Anyway, I'm gonna write a report about what's not right about you and hand it over later."

"You've ruined it in more ways than one," I muttered.

Anyway, though she had hurt me a bit in the process, Cyco really was helping me deal with being in this place.

Feeling a bit better, I continued to wait for the person I was here with.

"What's going on there, anyway?" I said as I looked into one part of the gambling area — the roulette space.

Just like in reality, the roulettes had all the numbers from 0 to 36, red or black colors on them, and green on 0. They were European-style roulettes.

Yes — they were almost no different from the ones in reality.

"That reminds me..." I murmured.

Francesca believed that the developers had made the tians accustomed to these games ahead of time.

She theorized that *Infinite Dendrogram* was the result of someone creating a cutting-edge virtual space from scratch, then using it to simulate an ecosystem of virtual life.

I wondered if creating a civilization this complex was possible without it taking really long. Even on Earth, this would've taken hundreds of years. However, Francesca had said it was possible due to several factors, including the *function they used for the war*.

“Also, doncha think that creating an entire world *this* detailed in no time and from nothing would be way more insane?” she’d added, and I was inclined to agree.

Back to the matter of games...

Roulette, card games, and even the board games popular outside of casinos all had their equivalents here in *Dendro*.

You could say the same about food and drink, too. The almond jelly Cyco was eating, for one thing, was basically the almond jelly you could get on Earth.

Francesca thought that this had all been done by the developers’ design to get this world used to Earthly breakthroughs of this kind ahead of time and keep Masters from being the ones to bring them.

It was to prevent them from using real-world games or food to either make some serious money or impact the cultures here.

Francesca said that if the world of *Infinite Dendrogram* had lacked popular entertainment or good cuisine, you would’ve had many Masters bringing such things from reality and acting as if they were their original ideas.

And if anyone had been successful, it would create many copycats who’d attempt the same thing.

“The devs were probably worried that it’d divert *Infinite Dendrogram* from its main point,” she’d gone on.

I recalled asking, “But isn’t *Infinite Dendrogram* supposed to be all about freedom?”

She’d grinned and said, “Sure. At least, as long as it doesn’t stray from the main point — Embryo development.”

According to her, the devs wanted Masters to evolve their Embryos.

“They’ve gotta have a goal like that. This game’s just too extraordinary for it to be just for profit. Ha ha! I mean, come on, you don’t need something of this level just to make some money.”

Then she’d given me her theory.

“If it’s about something other than profit, it’s gotta be something that distinguishes *Infinite Dendrogram* from the other games. That would be our Embryos. They’re something the devs force upon us, and something no other game has. That made me conclude that *Infinite Dendrogram* was made so we Masters, as a group, could nurture all kinds of Embryos. Eh? You think it’s this realistic world that makes it stand out? I don’t think so. I have a basis for that belief, but it’s long, so I won’t say it now. Anyway, I’m pretty damn sure the devs made the game so they could have us grow some Embryos... specifically, Superior Embryos such as my Pandemonium, or maybe something beyond that... not that it matters right now. Eh? You wonder how this relates to entertainment and all that? Isn’t it obvious? If the meta was all about trying to make money by introducing the real world’s features to *Dendro*, it’d be nothing but a glorified business simulator. You can’t develop a good Embryo under those conditions, right? They set up the entertainment culture to prevent Masters from converging on doing nothing but looking for success through easy breakthroughs.”

Francesca’s rapid-fire theorizing had been just that — theorizing.

However, she probably had good reasons for believing what she did.

Anyway, Francesca's point was that the devs were making sure that Masters couldn't just introduce easy breakthroughs, but it felt weird to hear it from her because *she herself had actually done something like that.*

She'd brought humanoid robots — a fictional thing from the real world — into *Infinite Dendrogram*

The developers probably hadn't anticipated anyone using the technological architecture here to pioneer humanoid mecha, or they simply hadn't thought that anyone could do it.

As a result, Francesca was now living proof that you *could* bring something revolutionary here and turn it into a business.

While remembering that, I looked at the roulette table in the gambling area. It was surrounded by an air of expectation... or perhaps fear.

"I... I shall throw it, then," said the dealer with a tense voice.

Something was strange, though.

Not about the dealer, but the roulette's betting table.

There was only one token on it, specifically, the red 1 to 1. It was the cheapest, too, worth a mere 100 lir.

Despite there being many people around the table, that was the only bet on it.

Rules were rules, though, and since someone had made a bet, the roulette had to be spun.

But after the dealer threw the ball on the roulette...

"Ten million lir on 21."

...someone made an additional bet and placed ten of the most expensive tokens on top of the 21.

“Me too, me too!”

“Same here!”

More additional bets followed as those surrounding the table also bet on the 21.

The dealer became pale, the roulette gradually stopped spinning, and the ball... ended up on the 21.

“T-Twenty-one...” he stammered.

The table was drowned in raging cheering.

The person who'd bet first — and the most — was given 36 times the original bet, which amounted to 360,000,000 lir's worth of tokens.

That was equivalent to 30,000,000 Euros in real life, and it was enough to buy a whole twelve Marshall II's with add-ons... with ToW member prices, at least.

“Isn't that too much?” I muttered.

I didn't know whether I was heard or not, but the person took the tokens and left the table.

The surrounding gamblers looked blatantly disappointed that they could no longer win by simply copying her bets.

“Ah.” The woman realized something and stopped before pointing at the table, looking at the absentminded dealer, and saying, “This is two hundred lir short.”

Those were the winnings from the first token she'd bet on the red 1 on 1.

That was the straw that broke the camel's back and made the dealer cry. Even so, he forced himself to give her the tokens.

Not only had she won an immense amount of money — she had even broken the dealer's spirit.

This person's appearance was best described as "red and white."

Her hair was red with a few streaks of silver.

Wearing only hot pants, a bikini-like top on her chest, and a flight jacket, she was brazenly showing off her nice figure. However, the most notable thing about her were her eyes. Each of them had a different color. The left eye was red, the right one silver.

A closer look into her right eye would reveal that its iris had the pattern of a detailed kaleidoscope, and that it as a whole was artificial.

I knew that that was her Embryo.

She casually walked over to the eating space, approached our table, and said, "I made some good money just now, Yu."

"You overdid it, teach," I said.

She was the person who'd forced herself into the role of my mentor.

Just like me, she was an ex-member of The Triangle of Wisdom, as well as my sister's close friend, and the one and only "Blue Sky Songstress" — one of the nine Caldinian Superiors.

She was The Ace, AR-I-CA.



I'd met her about three weeks ago in *Dendro* time.

After the incident in Gideon, I left The Triangle of Wisdom and tried crossing the Caldinian deserts to go to Tenchi.

Using the sea route was the better option, but ever since Dryfe had created a navy and tried to expand into the ocean, the country's relationship with Granvaloa had become sour. We'd even started stopping Granvaloan merchant fleet ships, so I really couldn't go to Tenchi by sea.

I even considered using Altarian ships, but I wasn't brazen enough to just pass by through the country after causing all that trouble in Gideon.

That left only one route — the desert in the middle of the continent. There were also the Harshwinter Mountains to the north, but that was no place for people, passing or otherwise.

The person who'd passed the place most recently was a Huang Hean Superior and his flying fortress, which said everything about how inhospitable the land was and how much you'd need to pass it. That was why I'd chosen the desert, but since it'd be a long journey and I would have to log out, I wouldn't be able to ride alongside merchant dragon carriages.

Xunyu the Yinglong had arrived at Altar using a dragon carriage that functioned as a mobile save point, but unfortunately, that was among the best magic items you could get, and I didn't have anything that luxurious.

Still, even without anything that fancy, I had ways of traveling long distances.

Caldina had these so-called "sandships," and since ships counted as half-buildings, I could travel by setting the ship's inside coordinates and my logout location. When looking it up on the internet, I'd thought that was the way to go, but then I'd realized that the diplomatic relations between Dryfe and Caldina were so bad that you had no civilian sandships going between the countries.

I decided I had to give up and go by myself using my Magingear, but then I quickly realized that was impossible.

There was no denying it: I was naïve.

Piloting Magingears used MP, even when you weren't fighting, and the desert was such an unwelcoming place that even the simplest movements drained a lot. It didn't help that I was using the unit

Francesca had gifted me. It was a custom-made heavy-type machine focused on output, so it drained a lot more MP for less movement than standard ones.

To avoid being wasteful, I stored the Magingear and tried walking through the desert alongside Cyco... but it almost killed me. My job was High Pilot, and my sub-jobs were Pilot and Mechanic, so I didn't have the stats needed to survive crossing a desert. My END was especially low.

That was when we were attacked by a large number of desert-dwelling worms that saw us as food. I tried fighting back with my Magingear, but while the unit was in good shape, I myself wasn't — traveling through the desert had left me drained — so we'd ended up in a dire situation.

The worms didn't seem to be cannibalistic, so La Porte de l'Enfer didn't have any effect on them, either. But right before things became really bad, I heard a song-like sound coming from the sky. Wondering what it was, I looked up and saw a Magingear. It was my first time seeing one speeding through the skies.

The flying Magingear made a song-like sound as it fired shells at the heads of all the worms leaping from the sand, quickly exterminating them. It was so precise that it felt like the pilot *knew* where they would leap from — none of its movements or ammo were wasted. It fought with a brilliant beauty, and all the worms were dead in less than two minutes.

Once done with the battle — if you could call it that — the Magingear landed in front of me. The pilot left the unit, and looked at me with eyes of different colors: red and white.

"That's Fran's unit, right?" she asked. "Wow, you don't see a lotta human-shaped Magingears here to begin with, but I didn't think that Fran made any other full custom units besides my Opera... Huh? Now

that I think about it, it's rare for her to go that far for someone. She's sociable, sure, but a bit... messed up."

The pilot spoke without even stopping to wait and give me a chance to respond. Her voice was blatantly full of curiosity, wonder... and nostalgia. She clearly knew the person who'd made this unit — Francesca.

That was why I asked, "You know my sister?"

A moment later, I realized my mistake.

In *Infinite Dendrogram*, Francesca was a man named "Mr. Franklin."

Even those who knew "him" wouldn't make the connection between "him" and the word "sister." Some would even use it to assume that Mr. Franklin was actually a woman.

I panicked and was about to say that I'd stuttered, but the pilot then said, "You know Fran's gender and call her sister...? Oh! I get it! You're her little sister, Yu!"

"Eh...?" I was really surprised that Francesca had told this person about her real self.

People she opened up to were rare. Even in the ToW, it didn't go beyond me and the sub-leader.

"Huh? But Yu's a sister, and you're a man... Are you a crossdresser?" she asked.

"N-No. My avatar is a man, but I'm a girl in real life," I answered.

"I see! Just like Fran! You're so alike!" she said as she gave me a thumbs-up, for some reason.

The strange vibe about her was nothing like Francesca's, but it was still a bit overwhelming.

Still, I brought myself to ask, "Umm... who are you?"

She clapped her hands before answering, “I’m The Ace, AR-I-CA! I used to be a part of the ToW, but now I’m with Sefirot! And I’m a close friend of Fran’s!”

That made me gasp.

The Ace, AR-I-CA — Francesca had told me about her.

She’d started out as one of the ToW’s first test pilots, then left to become one of Caldina’s Superiors.

Her nickname was “Blue Sky Songstress,” and I’d heard that she was combat-capable, even for someone from Sefirot.

The fact that such a person was before me surprised me, and as I tried to figure out what to say...

“By the way, what’s with the outdated red and white two-tone color look?” asked Cyco. “It’s excessive and cringy.”

The sudden insult to the Superior’s appearance made me feel like the air had frozen, and I wasn’t even using *La Porte de l’Enfer*.

I was a bit conflicted. I wondered why Cyco always verbally abused anyone we met — she’d even done it to Ray and Nemesis — while at the same time slightly agreeing that the red and white hair and clothing combo was a bit... much.

“Yes! Red and white are the colors of the coolest legendary pilot! The excessiveness makes it good,” The Ace said as she gave a thumbs up with a full smile.

She didn’t look the least bit upset. It was like she didn’t even understand that she was just insulted.

“Hugo. No good. My insults don’t work on her,” Cyco complained.

“Can you just... not insult her?” I asked.

*Insults make things awkward, I added in thought. Let’s just stop badmouthing people’s fashion, okay?*

But now that I thought about it... Francesca was a full mad scientist, the King of Destruction was a half-naked bear, and Figaro and Xunyu were weird in their own ways. Maybe it was a rule for Superiors to have a weird fashion sense.

"By the way," AR-I-CA said. "It looked like you weren't having a good time here. You okay?"

"Yes. Somehow... Ah!" I realized that I hadn't thanked her yet and said, "Thank you for helping me."

"Don't mention it. Anyway, you're not used to the desert, huh?"

"I... Yes."

Those worms had almost gotten me, and going through this desert any further would be difficult. I'd probably need to switch to accompanying a merchant group or something, but then how would I handle logging out?

"All right, leave it all to me," said AR-I-CA.

"Eh?"

"I'll become your mentor."

"Ehhh...?"

"From crossing the desert to the ABCs of Magingears — I'll drill it all into your head! Call me 'teach' from now on."

And so, with a forcefulness I'd never experienced before, I gained a mentor.



That was how The Ace had become my mentor and forced me to call her "teach."

Her constant forcefulness was a bit problematic, but I could tolerate it just fine.

There were two much bigger problems.

First was the fact that her training was actually hellish. She'd started out by making me level up by throwing me into a lair of worms similar to the ones that'd attacked me, putting my unit in danger of destruction.

Then, she made me do "mock battles" (read: one-sided beatings) with her. She'd evaded my La Porte de l'Enfer despite not knowing anything about it, which was completely ridiculous. She'd even made me pay ten million lir to repair my unit, and I was really glad the broken parts weren't custom-made.

Her vibrant appearance was hiding a darkness that came out whenever she was acting as my mentor. It was hard to complain, though, since I actually was getting stronger.

Not only was I gaining more levels, I was actually becoming a better pilot beyond just my Piloting sense skill level. This positive canceled out the negatives of the first problem, so I could accept it.

But then there was the second problem...

She was likely the apex of all Magingear pilots, and had a wealth of knowledge about machines in general and Caldina in particular, which made her a mentor deserving of respect.

However, as a person, she had a disposition that made me uncomfortable.

"You're looking for prey even in a place like this?" I asked.

"Yep," she replied as she looked around the establishment and drank a non-alcoholic cocktail, clearly satisfied with all the tokens she'd won.

She was looking not at objects, but people such as the attractive servers or the young, rich ladies who'd come here to gamble.

"And who do you have in mind?" Cyco asked her.

“Either that Chinese-looking pretty boy with long hair, that lady with a 90cm bust, or that fiery-looking girl!”

“You really don’t have any limits for this, huh? I hope you die,” Cyco put in.

“And you’re as sulky as always, Cy. It’s soooo cute!”

“Don’t hug me. It makes me feel like I’m in danger.”

Yes, that was the problem with my teach’s personality — she hit on anybody she thought looked good.

It also didn’t matter to her whether they were men or women.

In fact, it seemed like she hit on women more often than men.

She’d only have tea with some of them, while taking it far beyond that with others. Still, it was something that a fifteen-year-old like me couldn’t quite grasp.

“If you’re feeling lonely, why not get a lover?” I asked. “You’re in a clan. Don’t you have someone you like in there?”

“Nope. I asked our leader, but he awkwardly refused. I don’t know what Carl’s like on the inside, Albert’s a hardcore, iron-faced terminator, Fatoum is handsome, but married, and the old man and lady are... well... old. There are no good love interests in the clan.”

“Doesn’t Sefirot have three more people?”

“They’re not even worth considering,” she said, strongly implying that she was averse to the very idea of loving them.

*Looks like even the strongest clan in the world has some internal issues,* I thought.

“Also, getting a long-time lover is fine and all, but one-night stands are great, too,” she said. “Both sides fall in love, are drawn to each other, have a tryst of a lifetime, and part ways with only the sweet memories to show for it. You see that kinda thing a lot in movies

from my homeland of Italy. That's why I'm more about hitting on and picking up than keeping."

"But... three days ago, you said something about getting a real beauty to sleep with you for a million lir," I said.

"I did," she replied as if it was nothing.

"Does that really count as 'hitting on' or 'picking up'...?"

"Looks, words, wealth... I'll use everything I can to charm them! I'm The Ace of love!"

"...Eh?"

"Though, my Superior Job has nothing to do with my sexuality."

"Now that's a relief. For a moment, I wondered if that was one of the conditions for The Ace."

"Ahahahah! If one of the conditions was to make a number of people fall for me, I'd have gotten it three months earlier than I did!"

She laughed, but it was hard to see it as a joke, considering how she behaved.

"Annyway," she continued. "I've got a good idea of who I wanna pick up, but when I think about what's about to happen, I probably shouldn't do it here... Ah!" She looked at me and Cyco as if she just had a brilliant idea. "Hey, Yu."

"...What is it?" I asked.

"Let's have some *fun* later, shall we?"

*So she finally bares her fangs at me, I thought.*

"My avatar is a man, but I'm a girl on the inside... an underage one, at that... so I thoroughly refuse."

"Eeehh? But the three of us could have so much fun, right, Cy?"

"Not in a million years."

“Oh my, what a shame.”

I really appreciated that she never actually forced anyone to go with her, so all you had to do was refuse.

She’d also told me that she backed down if she found out that her targets weren’t single.

That made it sound like she had limits, but it had to be emphasized that she went for *every* good-looking person besides those in relationships.

“No chance, huh?” my teach continued. “Fran rejected me, too, so now I’ve been given the cold shoulder by both of you sisters. Oh, woe is mee.”

*She went for Francesca, too?*

“Aren’t you and my sister friends?” I asked.

“Yeah. That’s why I hit on her with the intention of marriage. She rejected me, but she’s still my best friend!”

...She’d wanted to marry her best friend?

I really didn’t understand her outlook on love. It made me want to turn my brain off.

“So what are you into, anyway? Men or women?” asked Cyco.

“Both, obviously,” my teach replied without even thinking. “I specialize in taking the lead with other girls, though.”

“Is your gender different on the other side? Like Hugo?”

“No way. I’m a woman all the way through.”

Her indifference for what she was saying made me heave a long sigh.

“Aren’t you a better fit for Legendaria than Dryfe or Caldina?” I asked.

"Ahahah! Don't be stupid," she laughed before making the most serious face I'd ever seen her make. "*My sexuality has nothing on the perverts there.*"

The words by themselves were like a joke, but it certainly didn't feel like she was fooling around.

Hearing that made me promise myself that I'd never, ever go to Legendaria.

Following the silly exchange about my teach's sexuality, I lowered my voice and began talking about something more serious.

"About the roulette game... are you sure you didn't win too much?"

"It's fine," my teach replied. "It was obvious they were gonna cheat if the bets were too high, so I bet when the hole the ball was going into became obvious and threw a wrench in their plan."

I was silent. Knowing where the ball was going to seemed impossible... for anyone except her, anyway.

"I don't use my eye unless they're cheating," she went on. "It wouldn't be fair if I was the only one doing it."

"But isn't this place owned by Huang Hean mafia? If you bet and win in ways that stand out... you'll catch their attention, right?"

"That's the plan. I'd seriously appreciate it if they picked a fight with me."

"Eh?"

"If you wanna fight tians who aren't criminals, you need them to attack you first. Otherwise you're going to the gaol. Ha ha!" she laughed before adding, "As long as they pay their share, even mafia don't count as criminals here in Caldina."

This was the first time I'd heard that she'd come to this place to fight the Huang Hean mafia backing it.

Shaken by the revelation, but hiding it well, I said, “Before we came here, you said that there was something you were supposed to get here. I thought you just meant some money for the journey.”

“Ah ha ha! Please. I’m not poor enough to need to gamble to get through the day. I’m a Superior, and the money I already have is on a whole different level than what I won today.”

Right... Superiors like her and Francesca were basically people who made astronomical amounts of money with little effort and wasted it just as easily.

I’d heard that there was a broke Superior who was making money selling popcorn, but that had to be an urban legend.

“The thing we’re here for is basically a stolen article,” my teach said.

“Stolen?”

“Yeah, I’m doing this at the request of the good old company leader... Well, the main source of it is someone even bigger. I’ve gotta retrieve or destroy the thing that was stolen.”

Retrieving something stolen seemed like a good enough reason to infiltrate a place owned by the Huang He mafia, but I didn’t understand the rest of it.

“What’s the point of destroying it?” I asked.

“Sorry, I said it wrong. We’re supposed to break what’s inside it, not the thing itself. But that’s only if it comes out.”

That made it sound like the item was some sort of container.

But in that case, shouldn’t she have said that the stolen thing was the content of the container?

“What is it, anyway...?” I asked.

“Something that was stored away in Huang He’s treasury. Not too long ago, when Canglong the third prince was leaving for Altar, they

decided to give a couple of these to him, and when they took them out and got busy deciding which ones to pick, someone came in and stole it.”

“You mean it’s a national treasure?!”

Not a Caldinian one, either — it was from Huang He in the east. Something that important had made it to the hands of a criminal organization here in Caldina.

Though, since it was in the possession of a Huang Hean mafia, it had probably gotten here through Huang He’s criminal channels.

Regardless, this was big enough to become an international problem.

“It’s exactly that,” my teach said. “We’re bound to get a lot from Huang He if we bring it back to them, and if whatever’s inside comes out, we’ll have to break it... and if it comes down to that, it might as well be us. That’s why I was chosen for the job. We don’t have a lot of members who can fight while being careful not to break something. The old lady’s all about one-on-one fights, while Carl’s unbeatable, but a bit dull, if you know what I mean. I’m the least worst choice among us.”

She’d mentioned breaking the contents of the object again.

It was a foreign national treasure, yet she was speaking as if breaking it was inevitable.

“...Teach,” I said.

“What?” she asked.

“Can you describe the stolen object in detail?”

“Ohh, it’s a—”

Before she could finish, the casino became astir.

Suddenly, dozens of people in black suits ran out through the staff doors, and half of them gathered in the eating space — around our table, specifically.

*This is...*

“Hahahah!” my teach exulted. “See, Yu? I knew that talking about something that big was gonna make them pick a fight with us!”

“You could’ve told me about this...”

“Well, you can look at it as just some observation and perception training!”

Those two words almost made me remember the silver-haired boy I hated, but I did see her point.

The black-suited men who weren’t surrounding us were kicking out the customers, who were complaining, but had no choice in the matter.

“Whoa, now, if you mistreat your customers, you’re gonna lose business,” my teach said cheerfully, not bothered by the situation one bit. “Though... *that only matters if this place is still standing by tomorrow.*”

She was ready to fight them.

With her hand in her jacket’s left pocket, she was moving something that made a clicking sound.

*I’d better prepare, too,* I thought.

“Anyway, I’m sure you heard what I said,” my teach said as she looked up at the suited men. “Can you give me the UBM... the Treasurebeast Orb that was stolen from the inner treasury?”

The moment she said that, the air around the suited men changed.

“Do that, and we can forget about the 360,000,000 you lost—”

And we were both assaulted by a barrage of combat magic.



### *The story of certain treasures*

Huang He had a Special Superior Job called “Draconic Emperor.”

It occasionally manifested in the imperial family, which, due to the ancient dragon blood flowing in their veins, were oftentimes called “gulong ren” — ancient dragon kin.

A Draconic Emperor was a living deity closely tied to the very history of Huang He.

While all of them were revered, the manifestation of the Draconic Emperor before the previous one was considered to have been the strongest of them all.

His level had surpassed 2,000, and he'd defeated countless UBMs.

This was due to a mix of his supreme stats, unique skills such as Draconic Inheritance and Gulong Ren Cells, the various techniques he crafted through harsh training, and the many special rewards — Mythical included — he gained from killing many UBMs all by himself.

It was fair to call him a beast among beasts.

His era was one in which Masters almost didn't exist, so he was easily among the strongest the world had to offer. It was believed that if King of Kings and The Lynx hadn't existed at the same time as him, he would've unified the entire continent under the flag of Huang He.

As he fought off UBMs to protect Huang He, this Draconic Emperor realized that expanding his own strength any further would not help Huang He in any way, and that instead he needed to increase the number of people who wielded immense power.

Thus, he began research into a technique that would allow him to seal away powerful monsters. Of course, they already had monster

storage in the form of Jewels, but they could not store UBMs — those weren't even tameable to begin with. However, the Draconic Emperor didn't give up trying to wield their powers, and eventually, he created the so-called "Treasurebeast Orbs."

These weren't items, but a type of barrier that materialized and acted as live storage for treasurebeasts — in other words, UBMs. The orbs made it possible for anyone to draw out and wield the powers of the UBMs inside. Since such powers were usually reserved to those who had contributed the most in the UBM's defeat, this was simply astonishing.

Being the only one capable of using this technique to trap UBMs, that Draconic Emperor had done it many times throughout his long life. He'd sealed away tigers, dragons, and monsters unlike any you'd ever see. The trapped beasts' tiers reached as high as Mythical, and their number amounted to almost a hundred.

When that Draconic Emperor was on his deathbed, he left the young, normal emperor with the words, "I shall die soon. But worry not, for I left you many means to make up for my absence. Use them to protect yourself, bring security to this land, and make the country prosper. This is goodbye, young one. Also... I have been feared my whole life. Everyone besides the King of Kings and The Lynx were afraid of me. You are no exception, but I've always found it endearing how you faced me despite your fears."

And so, the long-lived Draconic Emperor had breathed his last.

Sadly, history hadn't played out as he'd desired.

The young emperor he'd entrusted the future to died to a disease only a few years later.

That sparked a civil war between his brother and his unborn child... or rather, those who supported his unborn child's rights to the imperial throne.

Not only did it cause many deaths, but it ended with the child being born as the next Draconic Emperor, while being a person who had no right to inherit the political throne.

It had been a time of meaningless bloodshed, and perhaps the most embarrassing stain in Huang He's long history.

But if there was one good thing to say about it, it was that neither side had used the Treasurebeast Orbs even once.

That was because both sides had greatly respected the previous Draconic Emperor, not wanting to trample upon his will... and because they simply couldn't even use them.

The inner treasury, where the Treasurebeast Orbs were kept, could only be unlocked by the emperor or the Draconic Emperor.

No one else could open it, and according to the late Draconic Emperor, if someone tried to enter without using the proper means, they would vanish from this world, alongside the treasury.

There was no emperor or Draconic Emperor during the civil war, so no one could open it to use it in the conflict.

Both the younger brother, who went on to become the emperor, as well as the child who became Draconic Emperor, thought that this was good, and greatly appreciated the late Dragon Emperor's work on this front.

The Treasurebeast Orbs went unused even after that.

The only exception happened post-civil war, when the emperor gave a tiger orb to a group of people who'd decided to travel to the west.

This was what the emperor said concerning the use of Treasurebeast Orbs:

“These are powerful indeed. However, we must not wage war or quarrel merely because we have them. Instead, we should let them lie dormant until we truly need them.”

Perhaps that wasn't what the late Draconic Emperor had intended. However, the people of Huang He, weary from the civil war, readily accepted his words, and the nearly one hundred UBMs sealed within the Treasurebeast Orbs were left to lay dormant without even using their power.

That ended once the treasury was opened a few centuries later, when the third prince of Huang He was heading out to the kingdom in the west... and someone used it as an opportunity to steal some of the orbs.



### *Hermine the City of Gambling, Mirage*

"Mr. Zhang, we've disposed of the rats," an employee reported.

"Well done." In the gambling den's manager's office, the man in charge of the place, and all of Mirage's operations in Caldina, sighed in relief and sat down on his chair.

His name was Zhang, and there was a Treasurebeast Orb in his hand.

He was looking at a crystal giving a live video feed of the gambling den's hall, where he saw nothing but smoke caused by several dozen combat magic attacks.

"Phew..."

Needless to say, his relief was due to the death of the Masters he'd ordered to have killed... or at least one of them.

As one who worked here in Caldina, Zhang obviously knew about AR-I-CA.

She'd come here to take the orb in his hand.

She was a Superior operating as part of the strongest clan, Sefirot.

Her nickname was “Blue Sky Songstress,” and she was one of the strongest people in the country. However, that was only when she was riding her Magingear.

That was why he’d given out the order for her death while she was still bare.

In a way, Zhang was lucky. If she’d been replaced by Carl Lourlou the Multifariously Invincible, this attack wouldn’t have done anything to him. He was the ultimate endurance fighter, known for, among other things, his fight against a UBM in boiling magma, and also the destruction of a spellcaster association that’d tried to defeat him with thousands of combat spells at once.

Surprise attacks wouldn’t have scratched him, and they’d have been defeated before the battle even began. However, if the man had demanded the orb, they would’ve still had to fight despite the overwhelming odds.

That was just how important the orb was to them.

They’d received it from Mirage’s headquarters in Huang He about a week ago. All Zhang knew was that it was a bargaining chip in negotiations with a certain clan present here in Caldina. Since Zhang was in charge of Mirage’s operations here, he was in charge of this task.

Once the appointed time came, he would go to a designated spot, present the password, and complete the negotiation. It seemed like a basic trade, but the object in question was extraordinary.

The orb was a national treasure that everyone from Huang He had heard about in stories from their childhood days. He also knew that this would be less of a trade, and more of a creation of a bond with a certain organization. Zhang had been surprised by that and asked the one who’d presented it, “What kind of bond could be worth something like this?”

He hadn't gotten the answer from him, so Zhang had used comms magic to contact Mirage's main branch. They'd responded with nothing but the name of the organization, but that was more than enough.

Zhang understood the gravity of this exchange, and that his head was on the line here, along with those of every Mirage member here in Caldina. Thus, even if the one who'd caught wind of it and come here for it was a Superior, he had no choice but to shoot.

"This orb... that clan... Are the main branch planning a coup d'etat?" Zhang murmured.

He knew what they wanted to do, but he couldn't understand what they were thinking. Even so, he knew he would all be over if he went against the order.

He would be crushed by either the main branch, or that organization. Regardless, his future was so bleak that making an enemy out of the Blue Sky Songstress seemed like the better idea.

"She'll come back in three days, but the exchange will be done in two," he muttered.

Unlike tians, Masters were immortal. Zhang knew full well that he had only bought himself three days worth of time. However, that was all he wanted.

That was enough for him and his group to go through the exchange and leave Hermine.

Having made an enemy out of a Caldinian Superior, he had no choice but to abandon this business. That was why he could act without caring about its reputation among the customers or any damage dealt.

Otherwise, he would've never used explosive magic indoors. Zhang looked inside the crystal again — at the scene where a Superior had just died.

“...Isn’t this smoke lasting a bit too long?”

The smoke rising from the spot where the two Masters had stood showed no sign of going away.

*Is it burning that hard?* Zhang wondered, and a chill went down his spine. Zhang was a battle-focused Mirage operative that’d lived through many fights, and the chill was his experience speaking to him.

“Ventilation magic. Use vent magic to spread the smoke away!” he shouted.

“But if it’s a fire, that might make the flames stronger...”

“Doesn’t matter! Do it!”

The member followed Zhang’s order and used a vent magic, Fu, to disperse the smoke.

It exposed a cylindrical object that was continuously releasing smoke. Those with Identification saw that it had the name “Smoke Discharger.”

But there was something that attracted even more attention.

“Is that... scrap metal?”

At the ground zero of the combat magic attack, there was a large pile of scrap metal... or maybe remains.

The wall was covered in various kinds of mechanical junk, including weapons and armor. They had no idea that before the attack had hit, a certain someone had *released the scrap from her inventory into the magic’s trajectory*.

Needless to say, the person who’d done it was...

“Ohh, you noticed?” a voice rang out from behind the wall. “Too late, though. It’s showtime!”

The wall of scrap suddenly collapsed.

As though its role was over, it fell as if calculated for performance value, and revealed a blue, human-shaped machine.

It was a humanoid Magingear, but those who only knew the Marshall II wouldn’t believe that. This unit was impossibly slender. It almost felt like it was but a chassis without its armor. The design made it look like a slightly bigger, more beautiful version of the power armor Magingears that had once been the norm. The only thing that made it clear that it was bigger than it first appeared was the device equipped on its back.

The unit’s name was MGFX-001 Blue Opera. It was the first unit of the MGFX series. That was the title for custom units that Franklin, the father of all mech-type Magingears, created without paying any heed to the cost.

This particular unit was all blue in color, and so slender and streamlined that it didn’t even feel like a Magingear.

“Sing... Opera!” Blue Opera absorbed the pilot’s MP and activated its engine.

An air-shaking song started to stream through the air. It was merely the sound of the machinery inside Blue Opera, but it was comparable to the voices of proficient soprano singers in its elegant beauty.

The melody wasn’t made by a human voice, but the beauty made it more than worthy of the title “songstress.” The audience here wasn’t moved, however, for they realized that this songstress might be the siren bringing them their doom.

“I’m ready, too, teach,” a new voice rang out as someone behind the blue songstress stood up.

This Magingear was larger than the songstress, and a whole lot bulkier, but it was beautiful nonetheless.

It was a heavy unit with layers upon layers of armor. It was as though they were petals.

While the former was a songstress, this was a blooming flower.

Its name was MGFX-002 White Rose. It was the second MGFX unit, and Franklin's birthday-farewell gift to his little sister. All white in color, it was no doubt the most solid Magingear of all.

"You hopped in yours too, huh?" AR-I-CA asked.

"Yes," Hugo nodded. "But next time, please inform me that we are going to fight before we enter the establishment."

"You've gotta learn to sense that by yourself. It's part of your training!"

"Do you think that *anything* can count as training?"

"N-Nooooo..."

"You're stuttering."

The pilots of the blue and white units were chatting in the same way they had around the table before it was blown up. The Mirage members facing them couldn't feel so carefree, however.

Someone among them gulped.

These machines were enemies they had to defeat, and it seemed like there was no better time to strike than now, while they were chatting.

However, they felt like everything would end the moment they attacked.

All of them thought that this would be where they died.



### *High Pilot, Hugo Lesseps*

“Eh? You actually keep your Magingear in a Garage?” my teach had said three hours before we’d entered the gambling den. “Well, they’re good for their automatic light maintenance and gun loading, but if you need to use it in an emergency, you should keep it in an inventory with Instant Release on it. There’s no point in using Garages when your mech’s a hundred percent battle-ready.”

Then she’d given me a spare inventory, which I’d moved my Rose into.

That should’ve been enough for me to realize that I would be involved in some battle soon.

At least this experience had made me understand just how useful Instant Release inventories were for spontaneous battles.

It was the first time I’d heard of such a technique, but that was probably because we ToW pilots were mostly focused on tests and didn’t use Magingears this way.

This had to be something my teach had thought of in her battles after leaving Dryfe.

“Is it just me, or did that scrap wall almost break?” I asked.

“Don’t worry. It was right in the trajectory, and it... *was* tough enough.”

“Why the pause and why the ‘*was*’?”

“Hmm... Well, this is all scrap from the machine I broke. Maybe it wouldn’t have lasted if I’d used just a little bit less...”

I said nothing and just thought, *So she’s basically saying that if the scrap had been only a little more weathered, we wouldn’t have made it.*

“It’s fine, it’s fine. I can just dodge it,” she said.

“But... then I would be dead, right?”

“...That’s part of traini—”

“Stop that.”

As we continued the nonsensical analysis of the situation, I noticed something at the edge of my monitor.

It was one of the Huang Heian mafia members. He was preparing to fire more combat magic at Blue Opera.

The unit was lightly-armored, so he probably thought that it could be disabled with a well-aimed surprise attack. He launched his spell before I could say anything...

“And just so you know, apparently, Embryos grow-up more powerful if you die a couple times.”

...while my teach just continued her speech.

His spell headed straight for her back, but my teach avoided it by simply tilting her unit. It didn’t even affect the flow of conversation.

“Eh?” the mafia member said.

He probably didn’t understand what had just happened. It was as if my teach had eyes on her back... or some other mysterious sense.

She was capable of that.

I was pretty sure that no one could land a surprise attack on her. Before her Superior Embryo, traps, sneak attacks, gambling cheats... all dangers were rendered powerless.

“Teach...” I began.

“Yeah. I guess we should start the battle. We don’t want the one with the orb to escape.”

As she spoke, she materialized two rifles in midair — probably using Instant Release — then grabbed them with her Blue Opera.

“...! Fire!” a mafia member shouted.

They all began attacking us all at once.

A rain of combat magic fell on both Opera and Rose, but it didn’t have the effect the casters were intending.

My teach’s Opera repeated the previous feat and dodged every single one of the spells.

Her Magingear was on the smaller side, but still much larger than a human, and yet it didn’t even get scratched.

My Rose, on the other hand, couldn’t dodge at all, so every single attack heading my way landed.

Still, the petal-like layers of armor created a white light that blocked off all combat magic.

It seemed like we were demonstrating the difference and viability of AGI and END-focused builds.

If not that, then we were showing them the power of the most expensive and strongest Magingears built by Dryfe’s largest clan.

Of course, it was worth noting that while my teach was dodging using her skill, I was surviving using nothing but the power of my unit’s gear.

“You’re bad at dodging,” said Cyco. “Your sister probably knew that.”

*Probably, I thought.*

If you looked at this and one other feature it had, you would truly understand that Rose really had been made for me.

It seemed like proof that Francesca knew me well.

*I should write to her soon, I thought. I’ll mention that I met my teach, too.*

My thoughts were cut off by my teach saying, “Hmm... What to dooo?”

“Teach?”

“Hey, I’d like to go look for the orb. Can I leave these to you?”

“Hm...” I closed my eyes and thought.

Not so long ago, I’d exterminated almost every member of the Gouz-Maise Gang.

That was enough to believe that I could do it.

But was it something I was okay with doing? I’d absolutely had to get rid of the Gouz-Maise Gang, but what about this mafia...?

“Just so you know, I looked Mirage up, and their Caldinian branch engages in murder, burglary, gang violence, drug trade, kidnapping, and slave trade. Though the latter half is legal if you’ve got the money!”

“...It’s like you read my mind,” I muttered.

*Like a certain silverhead...*

Anyway, I now understood how it was and was ready to do it.

“Let me handle this by myself,” I told her.

“Sure thing,” my teach replied. “I’ll go look for the orb.”

She moved her Opera and activated the ancient legendary MVP special reward on its back: Skycontrol Wings, Aircluster.

A moment later, Opera vanished, leaving behind no trace of it besides the echo of a thunderous, destructive sound.

I looked at the wall and saw a hole large enough for Blue Opera to fly through. I could’ve sworn it hadn’t been there before.

*So the one with the orb is already outside,* I reflected. “Anyway...”

With Opera gone, all the attacks were now focused on Rose.

Even so, they couldn't even scratch its white armor.

The mafia members were looking at my unit with pure fear in their eyes.

They must've thought that it was indestructible.

I, on the other hand, didn't feel the least bit safe or secure.

"It's a real MP hog," I muttered. "I won't last more than five minutes like this."

"Yeah," Cyco agreed.

Rose's multi-layered armor, Fleur d'Hiver, was designed with the Shield Giant's Thousand Shutter skill in mind, and it created a barrier that blocked off a certain amount of damage.

It could deal with combat magic from low-rank tians with no Embryo stat growth bonuses without me having to lift a finger, but keeping it up cost a lot of MP.

And that was only when I wasn't doing anything else. If I started using other skills or engaging in complex maneuvers, my MP would downright melt.

MP Potions couldn't keep up with me, either, so I had to make sure this battle didn't drag on.

"What's the count on them, Cyco?" I asked.

"Twenty on average."

Our main weapon, La Porte de l'Enfer, was based on the number of creatures of their own type the enemies had killed.

Twenty wasn't a good number for it to be effective.

The battle would surely last long if we relied on it, so we wouldn't use it this time.

“What about Deuxième?” I asked.

“That should work, I think.”

*Then let's use it.*

“Okay, time for high-rank Cocytus to make her debut!” Cyco declared.

“Indeed. Let us decorate this sand-covered oasis with the flower of abyssal ice.”

“Oh? I guess your edgy phase didn't go anywhere, huh?”

“...Shut up.”

Blushing due to the words that'd escaped my lips, I prepared to fight.



*Hermine the City of Gambling, outskirts*

The leader of Mirage's Caldina branch, Zhang, was standing on the sand all by himself.

Hermine had been built around an Oasis, but everything outside it was just desert. Once the blue and white units had appeared in the gambling den, he'd left and run all the way here. He wasn't just making off with the orb, however.

“There she is!” He looked up at the sky and saw one of the units, Blue Opera, descending nearby with a high-pitched song. “That hunk of metal sure is loud. Doesn't she know that it's night?”

The Magingear descended, but didn't attack. The pilot seemed to be worried that she would break the Treasurebeast Orb.

AR-I-CA's goal was to retrieve the orb, and killing the UBM inside was merely a relief measure in case it broke.

That was why AR-I-CA tried talking to Zhang first.

“Evening! I'm guessing you're the Mirage member with the orb.”

"Indeed I am," Zhang said. "I'm impressed you found me."

"I've got this radar here. It's a special reward, and I just followed the person with the highest level."

"I see," he sighed as he realized that escape wasn't an option.

"Anyway, you didn't give me the orb or run any farther, and instead you just stopped here in the middle of nowhere. Does that mean what I think it does?"

"Yes," Zhang said as he turned his hands around, revealing dozens of Fu talismans. "I realized that battle with you was inevitable and prepared myself for it. That's why I changed location." Indeed. He hadn't gone to the desert to escape; he'd been waiting for AR-I-CA so that he could face her.

"If I went all out in there, I'd end up killing my subordinates!" he shouted as he spread his arms.

A moment later, five pillars of sand rose behind him, revealing five long silhouettes.

The things that popped out appeared much like the local worms, but there was something different about them.

"I'm the head of Mirage's Caldina branch, Great Soul Daoshi, Zhang Zangqi! My nickname is 'Wuxing Jilong,' and I will use the five great jiangshis that gave me this name to destroy you!"

"Wuxing Jilong" translated to "Penta-Ravenous Dragon," and that was exactly what these creatures were.

Their eyes were completely lifeless, and each of them had a Fu on their face.

They were simultaneously Dragons and Jiangshi, and for some reason, they were covered in lightning.

“Oh? So you have a Superior Job. Great Soul Daoshi is basically Huang He’s King of Tartarus, right?” AR-I-CA asked. “You’re not exactly that similar, though.”

The soul daoshi grouping was the Eastern equivalent of the West’s necromancer grouping. Thus, the Jiangshis they were dealing with counted as undead.

Still, they were creatures controlled by Fu, and despite the similarities, they weren’t much like the Jiangshi job.

“You took some upper-level Pure-Dragons, enhanced them by turning them into Jiangshi, and now you’re enhancing them with the orb, too, huh...? Now, that is strong.”

AR-I-CA already understood the details and extent of his power, and even though she saw him as strong, she remained cheerful.

“But I guess this is better than hunting down each member one by one.”

In fact, she was downright ecstatic.

“I mean, what’s the point of a mech fight if you’re not up against someone strong?!”

Yes, the battle she was about to have was already making her genuinely happy.

“Anyway, thanks for the answer! A thumbs-up to your courage!”

AR-I-CA raised Opera’s right thumb in the same way she always raised her own.

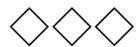
Then she turned the hand, making the thumb face down.

It was a sign of killing intent.

“...And goodbye.”

“Prepare yourself!” Zhang shouted.

With the great desert of Caldina as the stage, the battle between the Blue Sky Songstress and Wuxing Jilong began.



*High Pilot, Hugo Lesseps*

“We’re done,” I said as I confirmed that the members of Mirage here were defeated.

We had done it in less than two minutes. The casters were all partially or completely Frozen.

“Great, huh?” Cyco spoke up. “That was so super easy, huh? Boring, huh?”

“Could you at least not call it ‘boring’?” I couldn’t deny that it had been super easy, though.

I’d taken all of them out with a single skill.

“At least we now know that La Porte de l’Enfer Deuxième works in battle,” I said.

That was the skill Cyco had gained upon advancing to her fourth form.

Like the name implied, it was an upgrade... or more like a sidegrade... to La Porte de l’Enfer.

Its effects were exactly the same as that of the first, but the formula was different.

The original La Porte de l’Enfer gave an X% chance to Freeze X% of the selected target’s body every 13 seconds, where X was the number on the target’s kill counter for the same creature type as the target.

La Porte de l’Enfer Deuxième, on the other hand, simply Froze X% of my targets’ bodies, where X had the formula of “Damage received

from target (includes negated damage) × amount of own creature type killed ÷ HP of the in-range target.”

Basically, it meant that someone who’d dealt 1,000 damage to my Magingear, killed 20 people, and had 1,000 HP would have  $1,000 \times 20 \div 1,000 = 20$  percent of their body frozen.

With 2,000 damage, that would be 40 percent.

It could only work if I received damage from my target, but it was much less picky than the original La Porte de l’Enfer. There was no luck factor, either.

The evolution had happened after Francesca’s gift of the Rose, and that was probably why it was so endurance-focused.

Besides that, this skill...

“It’s so obviously made with Nemesis’ Vengeance in mind,” said Cyco.

“...Yeah,” I nodded.

I couldn’t say whether it was the moment he’d defeated me in Gideon or just the way he acted in general, but Ray had clearly influenced me and the way my Embryo had evolved. Deuxième was an actual counter skill.

“Anyway, my work here is done,” I said.

Considering the noise we’d made, the Caldinian military police would come soon. The mafia members couldn’t move, so I could just leave them here and go to my teach. After making Cyco cancel the merge with Rose, I returned the equipment I’d used.

“I’ve gotta say,” said Cyco.

“What?”

“Battle Mode II didn’t get to do a lot, huh?”

“It eats a lot of MP, so I don’t wanna use it too much.”

I was done with my role for now. The rest was up to my teach, but she probably wouldn’t have any problems.

In fact, I didn’t know anyone who would be a worse opponent to have than her.

I could confidently say that *not even the King of Destruction could beat her.*



*Hermine the City of Gambling, outskirts, sky*

Lightning cracked the darkness above the desert.

Normally, these cloudless, dry, barren lands were no place for such phenomena, but at this moment, the skies above were decorated by five lightning-clad, serpentine Dragons — specifically, High Dragon Jiangshi.

They twisted and twirled in a seemingly random but definitely organized manner, chasing after the shadow of the slender unit, AR-I-CA’s Blue Opera.

The five corpse-dragons spewed fire, ice, wind, petrification, and curse breaths, but the unit dodged them all.

“You’re from a country that has these dragons as a symbol, aren’t ya?” AR-I-CA asked. “Pretty messed to make them into Jiangshi, doncha think?”

“Perhaps that is the reason why I was tasked to work in Caldina,” her opponent replied.

“Good point.”

The one commanding the five lightning-clad dragons was Great Soul Daoshi, Zhang Zangqi.

He was riding one of them, but the lightning wasn't shocking him, nor was it burning the Fu on the High Dragon Jiangshi's forehead.

Despite that, the electricity surrounding them burned and melted all the shells fired by Blue Opera.

This was done by the Treasurebeast Orb in Zhang's hand. It sealed the UBM called "Thundershield Beast, Dangai," which was said to fight using lightning armor. Despite centuries of imprisonment, its power hadn't faded.

"Wow, that's just unfair," said AR-I-CA. "That's some broken loot."

"Be silent. You're in no position to call anyone unfair."

Despite the immense power he wielded, Zhang didn't feel like he had the upper hand. While the lightning rejected all the attacks heading his way, none of his dragons' attacks were landing on Blue Opera.

Even when he calculated its trajectory and fired where it would be a moment later, it kept dodging in a 90 degree angle, seemingly ignoring aerodynamics and the law of inertia.

This was due to the special reward on Blue Opera's back: Skycontrol Wings, Aircluster.

It was the remains of an UBM that had appeared here in Caldina, often described as an "unidentified flying object." The item came with the item skills "Inertia Control" and "Air Canopy." The former did exactly what it said in the name, while the latter allowed manipulation of air resistance. Combined, they let Blue Opera fly in trajectories that ought to be impossible.

"It seems like we're on equal footing," said Zhang.

Both he and AR-I-CA only had one UBM power they could use in this battle. AR-I-CA had her radar, too, but it was useless to her right now.

Though Zhang's UBM power was leaning towards endurance and AR-I-CA's was focused on speed, they were more or less evenly matched. Zhang's attacks couldn't hit Opera, while AR-I-CA's shells couldn't break through the lightning barrier.

*If I hadn't had Dangai, this battle might've been over already,* Zhang thought, impressed by just how accurate AR-I-CA's shells were.

Nevertheless, as things were, he was right that they were on equal footing. It was a stalemate neither of them could easily break.

Thus, Zhang predicted three outcomes to this: it could either become a struggle for who would run out of MP first, AR-I-CA could use some sure-kill attack that could break through the lightning barrier, or Zhang's attacks could somehow hit Opera.

He obviously wanted it to be the third one.

"I'm not losing sight of her, anyway," he muttered to himself.

Blue Opera's dark colors melted into the night sky as it moved quickly and erratically, yet Zhang always knew exactly where it was.

It wasn't his own ability, but a certain feature on the unit — specifically, its engine sound.

The high, song-like roars filled the entire battlefield, making it easy to tell exactly where it was.

It could go to Zhang's side or behind him, but he would track it down like a cat with a bell on its neck.

At first, Zhang believed that the sound would be used for some kind of bluffing tactic, but he now realized that that wasn't the case.

This unit would make this sound whether AR-I-CA wanted it to or not.

The engine sound was a flaw Blue Opera had had since its creation.



Blue Opera was a defective unit.

Specifically, there was an issue with its core magic-exchange engine.

Most Dryfean machines operated by transforming the user's MP into power.

Therefore, one of the most desirable features on them were engines that could transform MP to power with great efficiency and not take too much space on the unit.

Blue Opera's engine was perfect in that regard.

It had efficiency incomparable to other Magingear engines and was small enough to install on a motorbike.

Its creation was accidental, so it was difficult to recreate it, but it was still perfect for its intended purpose.

At least, if you ignored the extremely loud sound it made while active.

It was so loud, in fact, that it couldn't be used in normal battles, let alone covert operations.

Once active, it would give away the unit's location to even the farthest enemies, leaving it open to ranged attacks and skills of all kinds.

Naturally, Franklin, its creator, tried to solve this problem using silencers and many other things, but strangely enough, the more of these he installed, the less effective the engine became.

It was as though it itself *wanted* to be loud — to sing to the world.

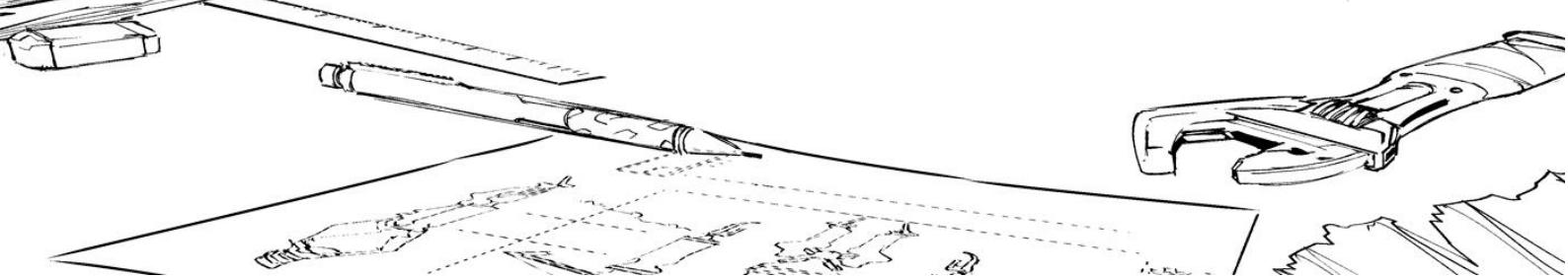
"I'm not dealin' with a Tenchi-esque karakuri or a Legendary spirit doll here..." he muttered. "Why's this engine such a weirdo?"

Eventually, Franklin just gave up on it.

There was no way you could make a decent Magingear with an engine like this. It would stand out so much that it would be shot down immediately.

Thus, Franklin considered sealing it away in the warehouse until he had the technology to properly analyze it, but AR-I-CA, who watched him work, said, "Who cares if it stands out? Just don't get hit!"

His friend's words made Franklin's eyes widen. Then he smiled and thought, *Yeah, you could pull that off.*



Though the focus on speed contradicted its immense presence, Franklin felt that it suited AR-I-CA well, so he took to creating the first MGFX — a unit he spared no expense on.

Thus, MGFX-001 was born. Combined with AR-I-CA's piloting skill, it became the only Magingear that could move on the surface faster than the speed of sound.

And the Aircluster it had now made it even more mobile than ever. Blue Opera was the fastest, loudest unit, entrusted to AR-I-CA by her dear friend.



Blue Opera flew through the night sky, singing all the way through.

The five corpse dragons attacked it over and other, but none of their breaths even touched it.

It danced in the air as if playing with them like a sylph.

*Why can't I hit her?* Zhang wondered.

As far as he knew, no matter how well-equipped, Magingears could never go beyond Pure-Dragon-tier.

Of course, this one was piloted by The Ace, who surely had the maximum level in Piloting, making it twice as powerful as usual, if not even more than that.

However, Zhang's five High Dragon Jiangshi were all upper-Pure-Dragons enhanced even further.

There should've been no difference between each of them and AR-I-CA's Blue Opera, and it was 5v1, at that.

Even so, they were on equal footing.

*It should be equal... wait, no!* Zhang realized.

The Ace and the Great Soul Daoshi.

Air Cluster and Dangai.

Blue Opera and five High Dragon Jiangshi.

Those factors alone made them seem equal, but there was one factor that couldn't be ignored.

While Zhang matched her on those fronts, he couldn't forget that this was a battle between a Superior Master and a tian.

"Gh...!" Zhang used all five of his dragons, enhanced himself with Fu, and launched a perfect surprise attack on AR-I-CA.

Even so, she evaded it.

He couldn't believe that he had failed to even scratch it.

Zhang knew full well that The Ace, AR-I-CA was the greatest pilot in the world, and that her Magingear was the only one that could move faster than the speed of sound.

However, skill and speed alone couldn't explain this result. There had to be something more to AR-I-CA.

"It can't be..." Zhang muttered as a thought came to mind.

He quickly used one of the aces up his sleeve.

Following Opera's sound, he made the High Dragon Jiangshi closest to her prepare to fire its breath, saying, "Death Tornado."

That activated the Fu inside the dragon, making its stomach area release a powerful magic attack. It was a surprise attack that was coming from a place that normally wouldn't be used for attacks.

No one could expect it, and normally, it couldn't miss.

However...

"Whoa!" The Ace evaded it with little effort, and just like the others, it ended up not even scratching her before it faded.

Zhang didn't say a word as the corpse dragon's stomach burst and it fell to the ground, paying the price for its attack.

One of his namesakes had just died a useless death, but Zhang couldn't even care about that.

All that was on his mind was the answer to the phenomenon that'd just happened: the reason behind her ability to dodge a complete surprise attack.

The nature of AR-I-CA's power was...

"She can see the future?"



Some jobs had the skill called "Prophecy," which let the user give vague predictions for the distant future.

There were sense skills that could sharpen people's senses for incoming dangers, such as Killing Intent Perception, which informed the user of nearby hostiles, and Danger Sense, which did the same for danger in general.

However, there were no skills that gave you a detailed understanding of the future, and the same applied to Embryo skills.

In fact, though they gave Masters access to powers far outside the norm, when you looked at it as an MMORPG, *Infinite Dendrogram* had some abilities that were thought to be impossible even for Embryos.

One of them was time stopping. Since the world of *Dendro* hosted so many people at the same time, stopping time for all of them at once was considered too great of a feat for a single person. The closest you could get to time-stopping was raising your AGI so high that it looked like other people weren't even moving.

Besides that, there was Master mind control. While this didn't apply to tians, players' minds were immune to all kinds of control. It was possible to control their bodies, though, and it was thought that the mind immunity was due to the player protection system.

Then there was future-sight. It was also considered impossible for one reason: Masters.

A certain ludo Master once said, "When you look at *Infinite Dendrogram* as an MMORPG, everything can be predicted because everything acts based on programming. However, players aren't programs. You don't know what's on their mind and how they'll act, and that creates a map with countless possible futures. That's why it's impossible to see which one of them is right."

This Master wasn't wrong about how the future could easily be changed by the will of the people. It wasn't something that could be calculated.

But there was an exception to this, and that was an Embryo that saw the future by looking into the hearts of people, Masters included.

Whether it was to protect their privacy, or just a functional limitation, this Embryo wasn't actually able to tell its Master what others were thinking.

However, it calculated everything.

It turned others' thoughts into masked data and calculated every relevant factor, inside or out.

Temperature, wind speed, geothermal heat, gravitational pull, all the artificial physical states... nothing wasn't considered.

Not even the thoughts of those nearby escaped it.

It calculated everything and delivered it to its Master as "danger," letting her see what would imperil her a few seconds ahead and evade it easily.

That was The Ace, AR-I-CA's Superior Embryo: Transcendental Calculator, Cassandra.

It was currently the only Superior Embryo that could see the future.

It took the shape of AR-I-CA's artificial eye, and its unique skill, Calamity Princess's Prophecy, was basically in the same vein as Killing Intent Perception and Danger Sense.

However, it was on a whole 'nother level.

Cassandra not only knew there was danger — it saw what it was.

It saw the trajectories of all the attacks that could touch Opera's frame, the air movements the attacks would make, the scattered rocks that would fly in their path when a stray shot hit the ground... Cassandra saw all the dangers several seconds before they happened.

It could be a skill like La Porte de l'Enfer, which was sure to kill anyone who didn't know about it, or a surprise attack that wasn't telegraphed at all... nothing could escape its gaze.

And Cassandra's Master wielded this power well.

Back when AR-I-CA was riding Geists or slow Marshall IIs, the machines couldn't keep up with Cassandra's predictions. But all of that changed once AR-I-CA got the supersonic unit that was Blue Opera.

She saw all and dodged all — the power of absolute evasion.

That was *half* of the reason why she was a renowned battle-focused Master.



"Prescience..." muttered Zhang. "I guess I should assume that you can read all my moves."

Zhang had lots of battle experience, but someone with such a power was new even to him.

“But that’s it — I simply didn’t know something like this.”

Not having experienced something before wasn’t enough for him to deny it when it was happening before his very eyes. That was the right thing to think.

He also pondered, *How far can she see?*

If AR-I-CA could see everything to the end of this battle, Zhang had no chance.

But he knew that that wasn’t the case.

*If she could see that much, she could’ve handled this a lot better.*

For example, she could’ve captured the person who’d delivered the orb to Zhang before it reached him, or handled herself better at the gambling den.

Because of that, he believed that she could only see a few seconds ahead. If she could see further ahead, this battle would be over already.

He was right about that, too.

*That means I must lead her into a situation where she can’t evade my attack, even if she had a few seconds to do it,* Zhang reflected. He had an ace up his sleeve that could do that.

Not saying a word, Zhang looked at all his dragons — even the one that was lying on the ground.

*This is your final mission... Go.*

Following Zhang’s will, the three airborne corpse dragons created space between them and began flying about as though to surround Blue Opera.

However, the space between them was so great that none of their breaths could reach her.

“Hmm...? Ohh, I get it,” AR-I-CA said, and suddenly, something changed.

First, the corpse dragon that had fallen to the ground exploded, releasing countless Fu.

The three surrounding AR-I-CA did exactly the same, multiplying the amount of Fu several times.

The Fu began whirling, creating a cage around Blue Opera... or a hurricane with it as the eye.

The spaces between the Fu were wide, but still too small for the Magingear to pass.

The Fu gradually closed the distance, creating a giant, orb-shaped cage around Blue Opera.

Each Fu had enough power to keep Blue Opera inside the cage, effectively making that cage into a coffin.

It was the sign that the Great Soul Daoshi, Zhang Zangqi, was about to release his strongest magic.

It was called...

“Zhenwo Zhendao, Xuanlongba!”

The skill translated to “True Vortex True Blade, Whirling Dragon Dominance,” and it punished its targets using all the powerful wind-blades inside.

It cost all the Fu flying around, and it was equal in tier to the Baolongba that the famous Xunyu had used in The Clash of the Superiors.

He had to sacrifice all four of the corpse dragons he had left.

And Blue Opera was definitely within its range...



The battle's outcome was decided the moment Blue Opera was caught in Xuanlongba.

It was an immensely powerful skill which had more than enough power to quickly reduce the unit to scrap.

Even if AR-I-CA currently had a Lifesaving Brooch, her Magingear wouldn't survive the continuous onslaught.

AR-I-CA's defeat would be certain.

The battle would soon end.

The present painted an image of a future where Zhang won...

"The Calamity Princess Closes Her Eyes — Cassandra!"

...only to take it away the very next moment.



Zhang didn't understand.

Experienced as he was, Zhang had been able to expose the nature of many of AR-I-CA's abilities.

However, he couldn't even begin to understand what was happening before him right now.

Blue Opera had left the deadly storm as if it was nothing, then fired off shells that easily broke through the lightning barrier and pierced the forehead and Fu of the corpse dragon Zhang was riding.

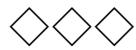
The Fu was the thing supporting its fleeting life, and without it, it ceased all function and began falling to the ground.

The shells then blew off Zhang's right arm, which Blue Opera then reached for to retrieve the orb it was holding.

The unit then showered the falling dragon in countless metal cans — Grenade Bombs.

Flames soon engulfed both the half-dead Zhang and his last dragon.

Unable to understand what had led to his defeat, Zhang fell to the sand below, concluding the battle in the desert.



### *High Pilot, Hugo Lesseps*

It was the day after the incident with Mirage.

After logging out and taking a nap, I returned to *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Normally, I would just sleep in here, but I couldn't have done that after what'd happened yesterday.

There might have been Mirage remnants who'd assassinate me or steal my inventory and unit, and that wouldn't have been funny.

Anyway, as strange as that seemed, Hermine looked exactly the same as it had yesterday.

One of the underground organizations that had made a nest in the city was gone, but things were continuing on, as always.

*Perhaps events like yesterday's aren't uncommon here*, I thought.

As a result of the chaos, all members of Mirage's Caldina branch had been arrested.

Like my teach had said, they'd accumulated many sins to their name, but I wasn't sure if they would really be punished, since I'd heard that Caldina would forgive anything as long as you had the money.

But my teach had said that they couldn't pay their sins off in this case.

"Sure, money can bend the law in Caldina. That's why people trade illegal goods all the time here. But listen here, Yu: the sin of

endangering or taking the life of another person isn't cheap. You can try to pay it off by working your ass off your whole life, but even that wouldn't be enough."

That was her reason for thinking that Mirage would be properly punished.

"Of course, two of the three worst people I know are dumbasses who go against that, too," she'd added.

Anyway, I was glad to find out that even this "money is everything" country had some level of morality.

Also, Zhang, the head of Mirage's Caldinian branch, was considered missing.

My teach had said, "I'm totally sure I beat him, but I don't know what's become of him. I'd say that there's a 70 percent chance that he's alive."

I was guessing that, in my teach's mind, the battle had ended the moment he was defeated and she'd taken the orb from him.

Pushing yesterday's events aside... I was now waiting to meet up with my teach. We'd agreed to rendezvous in the hotel's lobby at nine in the morning.

It was ten now.

"She's a whole hour late," I mumbled.

"She should have more respect for time," Cyco commented.

*She tends to be late, and is generally carefree. Is that due to her being an Italian? I wondered. But now that I think about it, neither Francesca nor I act very... French. I guess stereotypes have nothing against the individual.*

"Ah. She's here," said Cyco.

"Finally... Wait, ehhh?"

My teach was showing up an hour and ten minutes past the time we'd agreed on.

Not only was she awfully late, she was accompanied by a vaguely familiar woman.

My teach had her hand around her waist, and she even kissed her as they parted.

"Last night was amazing..." said the girl.

"It really was. I'll never forget it for as long as I live. Your cuteness will stay with me forever."

With that, the two split apart.

I suddenly remembered that the woman was the lady my teach had been eyeing back in the gambling den. Apparently, she'd gone on to court her and do the you-know-what.

*I'm not sure I know "what,"* I added silently. *I'm only fifteen.*

"Kept ya waitin', huh?" my teach said, coming over. "Nice morning we're having. I'm still a bit sleepy, though."

"I'm not gonna say anything about your way of life, but can you at least come on time?" I asked.

"Sorry 'bout that. I got a little carried away last night. Oh, I just remembered the innocence on her face... She was the best!"

*Really, now?*

"I hope you die," Cyco and I said in unison.

"You're gonna be in sync for *that*?!"

According to my teach, the orb had been given to a transporter before the end of yesterday.

Since it was a barrier-like thing that couldn't be placed in inventories, I'd wondered how they'd handle transportation, so I was glad to hear that.

I also asked about something that had me curious.

"We crushed Mirage's Caldinian branch. Won't that make us a target of the entire organization?"

It was a famous underground entity, after all, and I didn't want to have to worry about them all the time.

Some people could easily handle being their targets, but we were Pilots, which meant that we were fragile without our Magingears.

"I don't think you've gotta worry about them," my teach said.

"Why not?"

"You'll know when you read today's evening newspaper."

"Hm?"

Had something article-worthy happened?

Well, no matter what, we'd finished retrieving the orb here in Hermine. Even though I hadn't even known my teach was doing something like this.

I'd been thrown into an international problem concerning a national treasure without any warning, and that was... draining, to put it lightly.

Honestly, I wouldn't want to take part in something like this even if I was fully-informed.

"I'm glad we were able to get the orb without too much trouble," I said.

"Yep! Time to get back to training as we go for the next one!"

*Training... I wonder what she'll make me do now, I thought. I've almost maxed out High Pilot, so it's almost time to change... jobs... Hm?*

"Next one?" I asked.

"Yeah. Didn't I tell you?" she said as she raised seven fingers.  
"There's a whole seven of these stolen Huang He orbs."

*Seven, huh? I see. I see...*

"We'll have to do this six more times?!" I shouted.

"Yeah! Let's do our best, Yu!"

I could hear my body turn limp.



Hello, Francesca.

I hope you are well.

I went through some things that made me feel like I'm about to die inside.

It looks like I won't be making it to Tenchi for a long time.

I'm broadening my horizons, but maybe not in ways I ever wanted.

Why am I getting involved in Huang He and Caldina's national problems right after leaving Dryfe? Was this how you felt when you were traveling across the Earth?

I feel like I just heard you say, "No way, damn it!"

It must've been my imagination.

I'm pretty tired, so I'm leaving it at that for now.

I'll write again if something happens.

Also, let's talk a lot when I return to Dryfe someday.

I hope my journey is one that gives me more good stories to tell than complaints.

Until next time,

Yuri Gautier



*Huang He, a certain place in the draconic capital, underground*

The space was under a building of a company that was large even by the draconic capital's standards.

It was a place of proper business, too, but its — Mirage's — true nature was in its underground.

In the space, there was a U-shaped table, surrounded by eight men and women of various ages.

"And everything is going as planned, I presume?" one woman asked.

"Yes. Of course, milady."

One was the head of the Huang He branch.

One was the contraband supervisor.

One was the slave trade supervisor.

One was the intelligence supervisor.

And finally, there was The Fang, the SJ working as the assassin supervisor.

They were all part of Mirage, and they all had an extremely important role in the organization.

At the end of the U-shaped table, there was a platform with a chair placed as high as a person.

On it, there was a young girl who was looking down at the rest. She was clad in robes you'd expect to see on Huang He's imperial family.

The girl wasn't there by mistake.

"Excellent. Once the clan in question begins cooperating with us, Huang He will return to me — its rightful ruler," she said.

Her name was Hualong.

She was the current head of Mirage, and had only risen to the role about a month ago.

She was the only gulong ren besides the current imperial family.



Gulong ren — ancient dragon kin — were the descendants of half-breeds born between ancient dragons and mankind.

They ruled Huang He as the imperial family, looking after its people as themselves, emperors, or the famed Draconic Emperors.

However, there was one time when the gulong ren had fought amongst themselves.

It was the civil war that had come after the Draconic Emperor before the previous one and the emperor had both died within a span of just a few years.

The gulong ren had been split in two groups, fighting a battle which would only end when the child of the late emperor — which one side claimed had the right to the imperial throne — was born as the Draconic Emperor, who couldn't simultaneously be both.

However, there was one problem: the gulong ren faction that had supported the child then attempted to assassinate the emperor.

The child they'd pushed had no right to the throne, but they believed their faction could still win if they got rid of the emperor.

With that foolish thought, they tried to kill the new ruler.

But their plot was exposed before it could happen.

The one who revealed it wasn't anyone from the new emperor's faction, but someone who didn't even belong to Huang He: it was The Lynx.

No one knew what the rival of the late Draconic Emperor was thinking when he did this, but the result was clear — the assassination didn't happen, and all those who were planning it were executed.

However, there was one person who'd avoided death.

It was a young girl — the person the assassins had wanted to make the empress.

She was little, so people assumed that she'd known nothing of the plot, and thus she was the only one of the faction who avoided execution.

Or perhaps the emperor simply hadn't wanted to kill a child.

Regardless, someone related to the assassination plot had no place in the imperial court. Because of that, the child was merely banished.

Some worried that she could spread gulong ren blood to the outside and that killing her was the better option, while others believed that the optimal course of action was locking her up until she died, but the emperor rejected those ideas and simply banished her.

Respecting a child's life was obviously the kind choice, but it became a source of woe for Huang He.

Over the years thereafter, the girl became a prominent figure in Huang He's underground society.

She was a gulong ren, after all. You couldn't judge her capabilities by human standards.

Thus, it was clear that she would become a skilled fighter. That might have even been the reason why the emperor had exiled her — he'd

known she could make it on her own. Still, he probably hadn't expected her to join the underground society.

Anyway, by the time she was an adult, she had great wealth, many subordinates, and something you could call an organization.

Its name was "Mirage."

Indeed, at the center of the infamous Huang Heian mafia, there was an exiled gulong ren.

The name of the mafia was actually the name for her hideout, a reference to it being an illusion compared to the palace she rightfully belonged in.

*We won't get there in my generation*, she would think as she watched Mirage's progress.

"There" referred to the imperial throne.

Indeed... she was living on while carrying on the will of the would-be assassins from her younger years.

She planned to exterminate the current imperial family and rise to the top.

It wasn't that she hadn't known anything — people had simply thought she hadn't.

And she was still thinking of killing the emperor and becoming the empress herself.

"It will take us a few generations to grow large enough," she murmured with dissatisfaction.

No matter how quickly Mirage expanded, it would never be able to fight Huang He in her generation.

Thus, she entrusted the plot to her descendants, essentially turning Mirage into a mafia.

Several centuries had passed since then.



“Everyone, the time has come.” Seated in her throne-like chair, the current head of Mirage, Hualong, spoke to her people.

Another thing of note about her was her name. The “long” in it, which meant dragon, was actually only allowed on men born into the imperial family, so her having it was just another show of defiance towards the current rulers. All the heads of Mirage had done this.

“Recently, the inner treasury, which had been sealed for centuries, was opened, and one of the orbs ended up in our hands. With it, we were able to secure the strongest reinforcements. The heavens themselves are telling us that now is the time to act.”

Many would consider that to be a mere coincidence, but the girl was certain that this was their greatest opportunity yet. Her family had been waiting to take the throne for centuries.

“The battle to decide the true emperor draws near!” she declared.  
“That is when the Mirage will become the reality!”

Thus, she was drawing a picture of the future she desired. The moment that her family would have their revenge for the pain they’d experienced... which was arguably well-deserved.

They would start a coup d'état and take the imperial throne for themselves.

It wouldn't be legitimate, of course.

The people had no issues with the current imperial family, and their chances of success were low.

However, Hualong thought she could keep them under control if she simply had the power to do so.

At the moment, half of Huang He's Superiors were outside the country. Thus, if the clan she had in mind, which was said to be one of the best, came here and helped, they should be able to overthrow this country.

At least, that was what Hualong believed.

It was easy to call her idea foolish. In fact, one might even ask her how she'd come to that conclusion. However, she'd ascended to Mirage's throne while she was still young. Her predecessor had died prematurely and left her without the knowledge necessary to lead this organization.

She'd also been taught about her family's history and the power of Mirage for as long as she could remember, so her conclusion was the only one she deemed possible.

"Heh heh heh," she snickered. "I can't wait."

The responses of Mirage's leadership were varied.

"I guess we'll soon be ministers."

"I would be fine with just handling money."

"So, who do I gotta kill?"

Some were thinking the exact same thing as Hualong.

Some were certain of her failure and were thinking about how to survive.

Some were simply trying to do their roles regardless of Hualong's ideals.

With even her most trusted people being this divided, it was natural to expect infighting, too. However, compared to the chaos that would befall the people soon, any infighting was nothing. They were about to repeat the civil war from three centuries ago — the greatest conflict in Huang He.

As they pictured the upcoming battle, a voice that didn't fit the scene reached their ears.

"Hello and good evening to all of you, my dear fooools!"

Hualong and her underlings looked at its source — the only entrance to this place.

A woman was standing there.

She was unbelievably beautiful.

If human beauty was like a work of art, hers would be a treasure that would be talked about for centuries, if not millennia. It was the golden ratio of beauty, pushing the very limits of human attractiveness. Her voice, too, was as pleasant as a feather tickling the earlobes. While beauty was in the eye of the beholder, hers would surely be considered perfect by many.

The people of Mirage were no strangers to beauty and pleasure, but even they were overwhelmed by her beauty.

However, those who kept their sanity felt something completely different.

"Fenghuang... Phoenix!"

"Dancing Princess, Huili!"

The experienced fighters on the scene shouted her name, bringing the ones bewitched by her beauty back to reality.

That was just how big of a deal her identity was.

"That's mee!" the woman called. "I'm Huili, the leader of Huili's Army of Fools!"

Huili Yuminjun or Huili's Army of Fools was the clan at the top of Huang He's clan rankings, anomalous in that every member there was a devotee of Huili, the Superior at the top.

No clan in Huang He matched their numbers or quality.

Hualong raised her voice from atop her false throne. “What do you want, Superior?!”

Huili wasn’t shaken by her demeanor at all. “Oh my. Are you Mirage’s young leader? Aren’t you just the cutest little cutie pie. You’re not as pretty as me, though.”

“You wretch!” Hualong became angry at her behavior.

“Hey, hey, hey, by the way, listen up. You aren’t gonna believe this, but...” Huili said, making Hualong even more angry. “The emperor requested that I come here and destroy Mirage!”

Those words made Hualong’s anger instantly fade as she squeezed out a “Wh-What...?” “So yeah, here’s how it is. Until now, he thought that Mirage was such a big deal that destroying it would be even worse than just leaving it, but with the whole orb thing, them getting outside the country, and that little coup you’re planning, he decided that he couldn’t ignore you anymore. The bad from leaving you is worse than the bad from destroying you.”

She spoke like a little girl with limited intelligence, but her words had endless importance to Mirage, for they implied that Huang He knew about them having an orb, using it in a trade, and their coup.

All of these were top secret matters. The only ones who were supposed to know them were the high-ranking Mirage officials here. Not even the leader of the Caldinian branch had been told about it.

In fact, he hadn’t even been told of the organization’s ultimate goal. He was far too normal — unfit to take part in their ambition.

Regardless, the Mirage leaders present were now suspiciously eyeing each other. They wondered which one of them had leaked the information, but none of them seemed to have a clue.

There was no lie there; none of them had told anyone about this. Even those who'd considered betraying Mirage hadn't made a move yet.

"By the way, we got this info from the DIN," added Huili.

"Those damn paper salesmen!"

The DIN was an information organization with no borders. Mirage certainly hadn't anticipated them having and selling info about the plot of Huang He's most secretive group.

"Aaanywayyy, His Majesty's also giving us a good reward, so it's bye bye to Mirage!" All smiles, Huili eyed Hualong and her people. Her smile bewitched some of them, while terrorizing the rest.

They all understood that that smile meant nothing pleasant. It carried in it the will that could tear them apart.

"Ah. I'm sure you fighting types probably realized it already, but..."

Huili took out one of the two fans on her waist and used it to point at the ceiling.

*"...there's no one alive upstairs."*

Mirage had had a total of over two hundred fighters on the surface and on the path leading here, and Huili was saying that they had all been dealt with.

One of the battle-focused Mirage officials and The Fang, who was in charge of security, already knew they were dead due to no one having come here to deal with Huili.

"Just how many did you bring?" Hualong demanded.

"No one. It's just little darling me. You'd see me coming if I brought an army, and I made my Five Generals go crush all the other Mirage branches in Huang He."

"What?!"

The Five Generals were the strongest members of Huili's Army of Fools, which put them among the country's strongest Masters, as evidenced by them taking ranks three to seven on Huang He's duel rankings.

There were two reasons why the leaders here were shocked.

First was the fact that such powerful people had gone to crush the branches they were supposed to be in charge of, and the second was that Huili was capable of silently killing a whole two hundred of their fighters without her generals at her side.

"And that's why Mirage is over," Huili went on as she equipped two fans.

It was her Superior special reward of "Phoenix Wings, Suling Er."

At that moment, one of the officials made a move. It was The Fang, who had a Superior Job focused on dagger use.

He had an AGI build, so he was able to move behind Huili at a supersonic speed and use the fang-like dagger in his hand to attack her neck...

...only to lose his head and both of his arms.

"Don't touch my hands, okaaay?" the woman sang.

"...Eh?" Hualong voiced her confusion at The Fang's vanished head and arms.

She knew him very well. He was her bodyguard and an assassin who'd sent many of her enemies to their graves.

She trusted him more than anyone else here, and he was now lying in a pool of his own blood, leaking from the places where his head and arms were supposed to start.

"Oh dear, I'm gonna get blood all over me. Maybe the head was enough?" Huili said as she made a troubled face.

In her hands, she held two bloody fans, making it obvious what happened — she'd killed The Fang using those as her weapon.

"I-It can't be..." Hualong panicked. "The Fang... He was our strongest..."

Her subordinates were shocked, too.

"N-No way... wait... but the Dancing Princess wasn't a vanguard..."

"She was *this* powerful? She wasn't at the top just because of her looks...?"

No one could blame them for being surprised.

As famous as Huili was, she wasn't known for her battle prowess.

It was widely believed that she was at the top of her clan only due to her supreme beauty, and that she only had a Superior special reward because her clan had played a big part in the battle against the SUBM.

That was the consensus among Huang He's tians. The fact that Dancing Princess was neither a vanguard nor a rear guard job played a part in that perception, too.

The belief about the Superior special reward was ridiculous, though, for the MVP had to be someone who'd contributed to the UBM battle directly, not through someone else.

But even then, no one could blame them, for it was hard to believe that someone this beautiful could be such a monster.

"The Fang, huh?" Huili muttered as she looked down at The Fang's corpse. "Hmm... do we have anyone who could take that job among my fools? It's a 'The One' job, though, so it'll probably be hard. Will I free up any more Superior Jobs after I take care of you all?"

She looked at the remaining officers as if evaluating them.



On this day, Huili's Army of Fools and Huang He's military focused on completely destroying Mirage.

The info provided by the DIN was very clear, so they were able to eliminate all the Mirage bases in Huang He and the people working there.

They were all either killed or arrested.

The same applied to those in the main branch.

The two hundred fighters were either killed or captured, while out of the eight officials that'd gathered, three died, two committed suicide, and three gave themselves in.

And most importantly, Hualong was arrested.

After losing everything her family had worked for in but a blink of an eye, the girl looked as though all emotion had left her.

Thus, centuries of a grudge that had almost sparked a new civil war was cleaned up like the most insignificant triviality.

Then again, compared to what would eventually happen on this continent, it really *was* a triviality.



#### *A certain clan's info transmission*

Time: March 28th, 6:32AM (Global Standard Time)

Notification: From Zeta to all I.F. members.

Report: Failed to retrieve Treasurebeast Orb containing Thundershield Beast, Dangai.

Reason: Destruction of the other party, Mirage.

Details:

The Caldinian branch was suppressed by The Ace and one other (no details available).

The main branch in Huang He was destroyed by Dancing Princess.

The other branches there were destroyed by Huili's Army of Fools and the military.

Addendum:

Dancing Princess isn't the only one making notable moves in Huang He. The emperor found out that other orbs had leaked to Caldina and ordered the Commander-in-Chief to go retrieve them.

Powerful people from Legendaria and Tenchi are moving towards Caldina, too.

It is unknown whether that is related to the current main subject, but the possibility cannot be ignored.

It appears that Caldina will soon host battles over the orbs.

It is unlikely that any faction will cooperate with any other.

Conclusion:

Just as planned. By giving six of the seven orbs I'd stolen to tian organizations which then took them from Huang He to Caldina, I successfully achieved the intended goal.

The info reached many people, making widespread chaos inevitable.

Next up:

We will focus on analyzing all the forces taking part in the battles for the orbs, starting with Caldina and Huang He.

I will also report this to our leader in the gaol.

Just as scheduled, I will play a role in the upcoming war between two countries on the west side of the continent.

The orb I have with me will be a good bargaining chip when trying to persuade someone to join us.

If possible, I will also try meeting the newbie infiltrating Gideon: Gerbera.

It appears that she is planning to do something we haven't accounted for, so I intend to question her.

Human affairs:

I entrust our Caldina operations to those who aren't wanted there.

Revision:

*All of us are.*

Designation:

I entrust it to Murder Princess, Emily.

Remarks:

I request that The Weapon, Rascal the Bloodonyx support her.

Additionally, I have found someone of value in the desert. Entrusting him to my successor.

Caution:

Emily, keep your kill count for this case within three digits.

## ***Episode Five: Predicament***

*April 5th, 2045, Prism Rider, Ray Starling*

It was Wednesday. I was in a certain room in the Quartierlatin palace.

Two girls were facing each other, surrounded by crushing silence.

One was Azurite. She was staring — or more like glaring — at the other girl.

The other was B3, who was sweating profusely as she meekly sat on the floor.

These acquaintances of mine clearly weren't enjoying each other's presence.

It wasn't a nice comparison, considering the fact that they were girls, but it felt like I was watching a snake ready to swallow a frog.

*Why is this happening?* I wondered.

"You putting them in the same room is one of the reasons, I assume," Nemesis said telepathically.

I couldn't deny that at all.

I was partially responsible for this.

It had all begun an hour... or perhaps over a month... ago.



After coming back from college, I logged in to *Dendro* and, just like yesterday, paid a visit to the adventurers' guild.

It was packed again, but Rising Sun secured a table and invited us over.

It was my first time talking to Blue Screen, and he apologized for shutting down Silver back in Torne.

"Sorry 'bout that," he said. "Gremlin's effects should be temporary, though. Did it work fine after that?"

"Yeah. It didn't change one bit," I told him. Silver had flown around during the Quartierlatin incident without a hitch.

Though he had done something weird when we'd fought the whale.

"Good thing it didn't put you on another wanted list, eh, Blue?"  
Dum-Dum commented. "Dryfe's is more than enough."

"Never again on that crap," Blue Screen replied.

*He's on Dryfe's wanted list...? I thought.*

"Umm... Can you expand on that...?" I asked.

"I don't wanna talk about it," said Blue Screen.

"I do," grinned Dum-Dum. "Blue started out in Dryfe, and it happened sometime before the war, right about when his Gremlin got its ult. You know, the skill that fried your Prism Steed."

*Oh, that.*

"He was in town, and he decided to try it out on one of his magic machines, but he didn't know how to control it, and it had such a large AOE that it caused an electricity... magic(?)... whatever, power outage in the entire area. It even fried a bunch of state-owned machines. No one died, but he still got on the wanted list for terrorism."

"Ohh..." I nodded in understanding.

"That does sound like something that can happen," Nemesis commented.

*Looking back at it, my Miasmaflame Bracer and Wind Hoof tests went pretty badly, too, I reflected. I'll make sure to do my other tests in safe environments.*

As we continued to chat...

"Ray, Nemesis... Sorry for the wait."

"Hm? Well, if it isn't B3," said Nemesis.

"Eh? She's here?" I said as I turned around and saw her.

She had told me that she would be heading to Quartierlatin, but man, was she fast.

“Egh?! Barbaroy...”

“Whoa!”

The two Rising Sun members — especially Blue Screen — seemed to be afraid of her.

“Oh? Well, if it isn’t the leader of Sol Crisis and the High Engineer I crushed first,” B3 said. “Why are you with Ray?”

*Oh, so Blue Screen was the first Sol Crisis guy she killed? I can see why he’s afraid.*

B3 started equipping a shield like it was no big deal. She was fully ready to crush them again.

To avoid standing out too much, she wasn’t wearing her Magnum Colossus right now, but she wouldn’t hesitate to use Instant Wear if it came down to it.

Blue Screen looked at me as if to say, “Dude, you said you’ll back us, right?! C’mon!”

“I ran into them here in Quartierlatin,” I said. “They apologized and we made up.”

“I see,” said B3. “It’s all fine, then. I have nothing against that.”

She quickly accepted the situation and put her shield away, and thus any unnecessary bloodshed was prevented.

B3 then told them she forgave them for using her name. According to her, she didn’t mind that part at all, but as the ex-leader of Mad Castle, she couldn’t stand the fact that the faker hadn’t been at the top of Sol Crisis.

That clan had disbanded, and they were now Rising Sun, so B3 no longer had anything against forgiving them.

The two then went out on quests, leaving just B3, Nemesis, and me.

"You sure got here fast," I said. "I don't remember Altea being *this* close."

"My afternoon lectures for today were canceled," B3 replied. "And I had a good ride."

"You did?"

"Remember the car Embryo that Kashimiya and Rosa rode after Rosa attacked us while we were on our way to Torne? Its Master had nothing better to do, so she drove me here."

*Oh, yeah, there was that armored car Embryo, I remembered. If I recall correctly, its Master was "Tomika," similar to the line of toy cars. How fitting.*

"I had to pay her like she was some sort of taxi service. So I just took some from the money Rosa gave me," B3 added.

"I see."

Apparently, as self-punishment for what Rosa had done while Kashimiya was away, K&R wouldn't be doing any PKing for a while.

"Anyway, who did you want to introduce me to?" B3 asked.

"Oh, yeah." I'd already mentioned that there was someone I wanted her to meet. "Looking at the time... she should be in the Quartierlatin mansion."

"The mansion?" B3 asked. "Is it the countess?"

"You'll know when you see her."

B3 tilted her head in curiosity, but didn't have anything against coming along.

So the three of us went to the countess's mansion, creating the strange kind of hell before me.



The silence continued to be crushing.

Once we'd entered the office Azurite was borrowing, I had introduced them to one another.

A moment after I'd given their names, B3 had sat on the floor, with Azurite glaring at her.

*...Seriously, what's going on here?*

"Ray..." they said as they looked at me in unison.



“Why did you bring this person here?” Azurite demanded.

“What kind of place did you drag me to?” B3 finished.

“Umm... did I do something bad?” I asked hesitantly.

They looked at me with eyes that asked, “He doesn’t know?”

Well, I knew that Azurite didn’t get along with Miss Eldritch, but B3 should’ve been fine... right? They were in the same club, but B3 was nothing compared to the aberration.

As I wondered what was going on here, Nemesis said, “Hey, I just realized something.”

“...What is it?”

“Something you could’ve realized before you even brought B3 here. Unfortunately, you’re only sharp when it matters the most...”

*Come on, don’t stall like that! Just answer, please!*

“Last month. PKers. Newbie hunt. Capital blockade.”

“...Ah.” That was enough for me to connect the dots and understand the situation.

B3 was a PKer.

That wasn’t a problem, since issues between Masters were outside of the law here.

The only crimes that could have you sent to the infamous “gaol” were those that involved tian victims.

However, that was exactly it — one time, B3 *had* indirectly harmed tians.

It had been during the blockade at the capital... the time Marie had given me my first death penalty.

Though it had been primarily a PK incident with the only cases of tian assaults happening in the west of Altea, the act of terrorism had made it hard for tians to travel to and from the city.

Many of them had been merchants, and the blocking of the southern trade route leading to Gideon — Altar's second largest city — had caused great damage to the economy.

The biggest problem here was the fact that the ones in charge of that side had been Mad Castle... Barbaroy Bad Burn's clan.

Thus, to Azurite, the acting ruler of Altar, B3 was someone who had caused great losses for her, while to B3, Azurite was someone she had deeply troubled.

Thus, B3's sitting position and Azurite's glare.

"So you finally figured it out," Azurite snapped.

"Ray," B3 looked back at me.

*Uh huh. Yeah. I know how I messed up now,* I thought.

"Umm... I didn't bring her here as a criminal. And it's not like she caused any loss of life or property," I argued.

"That is true," said Azurite. "All the damage she caused was indirect. Though I can still put her on the wanted list for this."

"Eh?" I asked.

Azurite elaborated that B3 could be judged for forcible obstruction of business and that, as royalty, she had the power to put her on the wanted list.

That was probably the reason for B3's meekness.

An awkward silence filled the room.

Azurite suddenly reached into her inventory and took out a bunch of papers.

“Umm... Azurite? What’s that?” I asked.

“I carry copies of my documents in case I need to work away from the capital. These contain the economic data for the month the blockade took place.”

Those words made B3 twitch.

“The blockade lasted for four days, didn’t it? There was a loss of several hundred million lir’s worth of distribution flow per day... and there’s also been an increase in people leaving... though that might have been due to Noz Forest burning to the ground.”

Now it was my turn to twitch.

That fire had been caused by none other than my own brother.

Looking back at it now, things were really bad for Azurite... no, the whole kingdom.

B3 and Marie had joined the likes of Rosa in creating a blockade around Altea. Shu had gone and burned down Noz Forest, an important source of wood. And Franklin and Hugo had terrorized Gideon.

The kingdom was in such a bad state that I could totally understand why Azurite didn’t trust us Masters.

“And many of those causing trouble are your acquaintances,” added Nemesis telepathically.

*Damn, I feel so bad now!*

“...Ngh.” The next moment, I found myself sitting next to B3.

Gouz-Maise’s spikes were poking my thighs, and that wasn’t pleasant, but...

Azurite spent a few moments looking down on us before heaving a deep sigh and saying, “I’ll ignore it for now.”

“...Really?” I asked hopefully.

“It’s the sage’s pilgrimage... or a ‘twist of fate,’ as you Masters would say it. There might be a better future that can only be reached because the blockade incident took place,” she said as she stared at us. “There is no lawful basis for binding you to any role, but if you feel bad about what happened, I want you to help me. I will be relying on Masters’ powers and knowledge more and more in the future.”

“Okay,” B3 said, still tense.

“No need to worry,” Azurite answered. “I shall not have you work to make up for the economic losses. You will even be rewarded, just like with normal quests.”

Those words made B3 relax a bit, and then she looked like she was pondering whether she should refuse the reward.

“Let us start right away,” Azurite continued. “I have a question for you.”

“Yes?” she asked.

“Are you familiar with any Masters knowledgeable in machines?”

That was the question she’d given me yesterday.

“Could you elaborate?” B3 asked.

“We don’t have anyone who can operate the computers in the plant within the ruins here. I was told they are protected by security that none of the kingdom’s current technicians can break.”

A whole three days had passed here, but it looked like they still hadn’t found or grown a person fit for the job.

*Hm...? Hold on a second,* I thought as a certain someone flashed to mind.

"There could be a decent few Masters who can operate them here in the kingdom, but some could very well be Dryfean spies," Azurite went on. "That is why I was hoping that you would introduce me to someone trustworthy."

B3 pondered. "I would like to consult Ray about this..."

"Very well." Azurite nodded.

So B3 had thought of him, too.

It was the ex-Dryfean Master we'd just met — Rising Sun's Blue Screen.

B3 and I left the room and talked about getting him this job, while Nemesis stayed behind to talk to Azurite about something.

"What do you think?" B3 asked.

"Well..." I said.

He was an ex-PKer, but the fact that he was wanted in Dryfe made him an even safer choice than most.

From the little I'd talked to him, he did seem trustworthy enough to at least give a chance.

"I think he'll do all right," I said at last. "You?"

"I wouldn't have thought so when they were still Sol Crisis, but Rising Sun is just him and the leader. They desperately need sponsors and funds, so if they make it a Contract-bound quest, I'm sure there won't be any problems."

"True." I nodded.

"There's also the fact that Blue Screen might be able to easily take care of any other incidents in the ruins. He was able to stop Silver — an original Prism Steed — so he would surely be able to deactivate any machines causing trouble there. In a way, he might be the best man for the job."

“Good point.”

He was more than qualified on that front.

It made me wonder why a guy from Dryfe had ended up being a machine-killer.

Anyway, with that decided, we returned to Azurite’s office.

“We know someone fit for the job in the ruins,” said B3.

And so, we told her about Rising Sun and Blue Screen.



We then went on to find the two questing out nearby and introduced them to Countess Quartierlatin.

It was her rather than Azurite because the countess would be the one in charge of the operations here once Azurite returned to Altea, and the first princess’s visit here wasn’t official.

The two gladly accepted the high-reward, continuous quest, and thanked us for mediating.

It was a win for everyone: the kingdom, Rising Sun, and B3, who had now somewhat made up for what she’d done a month ago.

“I thought I was about to be sent to the gaol,” B3 sighed as we headed out on our own quest.

Her voice made it clear just how hard the encounter had been on her mind.

“Sorry, B3,” I apologized.

“No need for that. Despite all I said, I’m aware that I brought this upon myself with what I did back then. Also, thanks to you mediating, it’s now less likely that I’ll get put on the wanted list in the future.”

*Oh, that’s one way to look at it,* I thought.

“I’ll also have to be careful to not get on her bad side from now on,” Nemesis put in. “She was in a pretty foul mood during the consultation.”

“Hm...?”

*She was? Why?* I wondered.

“By the way, Nemesis, what did you talk to her about?” I asked.

“Ray, it’s rude to pry into secret chats between women.”

*So that’s the kind of chat it was, huh? You two seem to be on a similar wavelength, so I imagine you have lots to talk about.*

“Well, we mostly chatted about your fashion sense and human relations,” Nemesis went on.

“Hm?”

*You’re saying there’s a lot to talk about there?* I thought, puzzled.

“You ordered something dreadful recently, didn’t you?” Nemesis asked darkly.

“You mean Storm Visage?” I’d picked up the completed accessory before entering the adventurers’ guild today.

The stats and abilities were exactly as advertised, and the design matched my gear perfectly — a pro’s work if I’d ever seen one.

“Why would you make them create something so terrifying?!” Nemesis exclaimed.

“Hey, we needed it for what it does, right?” I argued. “The dark-ish design is pretty damn cool, too, isn’t it?”

“Is that all you think of it?! Seeing you wear it gave me chills! What kind of cursed set have you developed?! I’m supposed to be a part of *that*?!”

“Well... yeah. My gear isn’t complete without you.”

“...Ugh! Why are you so...?!”

*Why are your cheeks all red, and why are you hitting me? Why is B3 looking at me like I’m complicated? Did I do something wrong?*

“You might go to the gaol for illegal levels of all-nizing,” B3 put in.

“That’s not a crime that exists.”

Silence.

“...Is it?”

It’d be pretty damn scary if she wasn’t kidding.

I didn’t doubt that there were crimes that were unknown to me, but getting a criminal record for “all-nizing” would be a whole new level of absurd.

*Wait... Gaol... Unknown... That reminds me of something. But what? Pretty sure it’s something Shu told me about...*

I couldn’t quite seem to remember.

## ***Side Story: Nightmare at the Gaol***

*April 6th, 2045, Bow Hunter, Gerbera*

*Hello, I’m Gerbera! My real name is Kikuko Belmont, and I’m a seventeen-year-old domestic helper so charming, I put flowers to shame!*

*“Gerbera” is a very clever name that comes from my real one — “kiku” is how they call the flower in my dad’s country!*

*Right now, I’m here in Dendro, having a very good time—*

“...Like hell I am. Screw it. It’s not working,” I sighed as I rested my head on the counter of the café on the first floor of my gaol residence.

I’d tried to distract myself from the heavy mood by starting a cheery monologue, but it was just making me feel worse.

“You’ve just logged in, and you’re already so down... What’s wrong?” asked Sechs Würfel, who was my clan leader, landlord here in the gaol, and the owner of this café. He actually sounded worried.

No matter how many times I interacted with him, he seemed like a really good guy. How had *he*, of all people, ended up as the King of Crime?

“Give me some iced coffee, please,” I said. “Pour it in the usual dolphin glass.”

“Mm-hm. Very well,” he replied before preparing my drink like a true professional.

I watched as the black liquid filled every part of the intricate dolphin-shaped glass. It was my favorite among the many interesting glasses we had in this café.

Even the customers knew that by now. Recently I’d overheard a conversation that went:

“That dolphin glass is Lady Gerbera’s favorite.”

“Guess we can’t use it, then.”

“...Isn’t that all the more reason to pick it and lick it?”

The Legendarian-sounding perv had received a taste of my Alhazred’s attacks.

“Here you go,” said the leader as he gave me my coffee, bringing me back to the present.

“Thank you,” I replied as I took a sip. It was as good as ever.

The CLOSED sign was up on the door, so there were no customers inside, which made the place very quiet.

April the Prism Person — the only employee besides our leader — was just sitting on a chair with her eyes closed.

*What's she doing, anyway? Why is a robot sleeping?* I wondered. *Well, whatever. Let her rest while the café's closed.* I relaxed and took another sip. *Ahhh, it's so refreshing.*

Noticing that I was feeling a bit better, the leader asked again, “So, what’s wrong?”

It made me remember the reason why I’d been in a bad mood in the first place.

“My death penalty just ended,” I revealed.

“Ohh, now that you mentioned it, I haven’t seen you recently,” the leader said. “So who got you this time?”

“I... think it was the ‘Fu’uta’ guy. I entered the dungeon that I think was his territory, my vision started to glitch, and I died before I could even make sense of what was going on.”

“Ohh... Well, that certainly sounds like a battle against him,” he said, implying that he knew what the deal was with Fu’uta’s Embryo.

Personally, I still couldn’t make any sense of what he’d done to me.

“So now you’ve fought all the Superiors here in the gaol, haven’t you?” our leader asked.

“Yeah... but it wasn’t even a fight against half of them,” I whined.  
“I’m probably one of the weakest gaol Masters...”

A whole three weeks of *Dendro* time had passed since my arrival here.

It didn’t seem like a lot, but it had dramatically changed my mentality.

The Chinese saying “The frog in the well knows not the sea” seemed to describe me perfectly.

*I was a sheltered little froggy before, but now I’m out in the salty sea, and it’s basically killing me...*

I was training to regain confidence that I was the strongest, but the more I trained, the more distant that goal seemed to become.

I did think that the leader’s guidance had made me stronger, but it felt like I had no chance against the other Superiors.

The leader never died even if he was killed, while Hannya had just completely curbstomped me.

That had already been a heavy blow to my confidence, so I’d decided to check on how strong the other two Superiors were, and now I regretted that immensely.

Jumping into a battle between Candy and one of the gaol’s UBMs, I’d just crumbled to bits, and I still didn’t have the slightest clue what had happened when I’d tried to go against that “Fu’uta” guy.

I’d just walked into the dungeon he was rumored to stay in, and the next thing I knew, my vision and stats had started to glitch and I’d just died.

So now I’d lost a whole four times in a row. Thankfully, I’d only gotten the death penalty the latter two times — when I’d fought Superiors of my own accord — but losing still kinda hurt.

Honestly, it felt like nothing I did by myself ever came out right.

Back in Caldina, when I’d tried to use Alhazred to steal a national treasure, I’d been found out almost instantly, put on the wanted list, and even dropped the item.

Back in Gideon, when I’d tried to win against the King of Destruction, he’d sent me here to the gaol, and that had been in addition to Rook destroying my mentality.

Nothing ever seemed to go my way.

I want to believe that my Alhazred and I were the strongest, but the world, and especially this gaol, was full of weirdos that felt like they existed to deny that.

“Is the gaol just a hive of people with broken Embryos?” I muttered.

“I believe many would call yours broken, as well,” the leader commented. “And you should bear in mind that the three besides me are focused on wide-scale attacks... or conditional indiscriminate attacks... so you have bad compatibility with them.”

“I guess you’re right...”

Hannya was someone you couldn’t let have the high ground.

Candy was someone you shouldn’t — or couldn’t — come close to.

And Fu’uta... I just didn’t know what to think of his powers.

“You’re usually a solo battle-type, aren’t you?” I asked him. “Have they ever killed you?”

“No. So far, Shu is the only one who’s ever given me a death penalty.”

...How many times?

And how the hell had the KoD pulled it off? The leader was basically immortal.

“Ohh... the days when I can once again call myself the strongest feel sooo distant...” I moaned.

“You may start getting to them by maxing-out your new jobs.”

“Mgrr...”

One of the first things the leader had made me do as part of my training was to remove my old jobs — including Dead Hand — and take new ones.

I'd whined about how much time I'd spent leveling them, to which he'd replied, "They have next to no synergy with your Alhazred, so there's no point in keeping them."

*That actually kinda hurt.*

Anyway, back to the present...

"Your Alhazred is a Guardian, so it's not hard for you to level, is it?" he asked. "The created dungeon here in gaol has good XP efficiency."

"Yes, but... straightforward work is so hard. Why can't there just be a way to grab a Superior Job like it's nothing?"

Right now, I was leveling jobs from the hunter grouping.

I had started with Hunter, then the low-rank offshoots of Trap Hunter and Poison Hunter, and now I was working on Bow Hunter.

Once I was done with this, I'd go for the high-rank Great Hunter.

Good thing that the gaol had job crystals from all the countries.

But as far as I knew, all the hunter grouping SJs, offshoots included, were already taken.

The fact that I couldn't get one no matter how hard I worked was a real downer.

"Even a Master with a Superior Job can be a third-rate if he isn't thorough," said our leader. "Even I supplement my build with sub-jobs."

*Oh, yeah. I always thought that you just had to get a Superior Job and just level that, but I guess that's not how it works... !?*

"Speaking of which, what are your most-used sub-jobs?" I asked him.

"Recently, I've been using Glass Meister a lot."

"How does that supplement your build?!"

*There's no way it could be useful in battle! He just has it as a hobby!*

"It's very dear to me," he continued. "The café's glasses are all made by yours truly."

"You made *this*?" I shouted as I looked at the dolphin glass in shock.

It was very impressive, even if you took the effects of the job into consideration.

"Upon coming here, I realized that I like making glasses... or more like, pouring coffee into them."

"That's a weird thing to like," I told him.

"I hear that a lot. But... you know how it fills every edge, no matter how complicated the glass is? I'm fond of watching that happen."

"Hmm..." I half-understood what he meant, half didn't.

But I did know that he had many complicated-looking glasses here, and I'd always wondered if it was hard to clean them.

(It turned out he used The Saint's purification magic.)

"I believe I like it because it feels... familiar," he added.

"...Familiar?" What, exactly, could coffee poured into a glass remind him of?

Also, it hit me that this was the first time he'd said that he liked something.

"Would you like some more coffee?" he asked.

"Yes, please. And be generous with the milk."

As he began pouring the coffee, I asked him something that had been bothering me for a while.

"Why did you become the King of Crime?"

He really wasn't the type of person to act like a criminal.

Honestly, it never even seemed to me like he had any desires that would motivate him to commit crime.

He had a gentle demeanor, and I hadn't heard him say that he liked anything until just a moment ago.

That was why I kept wondering why such a person would become the King of Crimes, much less the leader of Illegal Frontier.

"Well... I can't say I have any reason worth naming," he replied.

"Eeehh? I don't believe you. I mean, King of Crime is a high-risk job that could have you sent to the gaol... and actually did!"

As far as I knew, that was the reason why, despite not being a lost job, it was a job that no one before him had ever managed to take.

If they'd tried, they'd been captured by Masters or killed by tians during the process.

"You misunderstand. Becoming the King of Crime was merely a side effect," he explained. "I committed crimes day in and day out, and one day, I got a message saying that I'd unlocked a job change quest."

"You weren't going for it?" I asked.

"Yes. It happened by chance."

Now I was even more confused about his reasons for committing crimes.

"By the way, which control AI were you handled by when you started out?" he asked.

"Two children," I said. "Twins. You can get different ones?"

"Yes. I got a cat."

*Ohh? That's nice. I like cats. They're as cute as me.*

“During the introduction, I asked him, ‘What should I do?’” he asked.

“Eh?” *You were starting a game so... just game, right?*

“As embarrassing as this might seem, I started this game because I had nothing to do on the other side, but because I was like that, there was nothing I really wanted to do here, either. That was why I asked the cat to help me with that.”

He’d had nothing to do on the other side?

That reminded me that he was online more often than me, and I was a NEE— uhh... a domestic helper.

Did he have no job?

“He answered my question by saying, ‘You can become a hero or the demon king, a king or a slave, a good person or an evil person. You can do something, or you can do nothing. It’s all up to you.’”

“Interesting...” It was kinda fun to imagine a cat saying something like that.

The twins had said something similar to me, actually.

“And that is why I am the King of Crime, Sechs Würfel.”

“Umm... I’m not sure I get it.” Had I blacked out and missed part of the conversation?

“It’s nothing complicated. He gave me six options: hero, demon king, king, slave, good person, evil person,” he said as he took something from the counter.

It was a die, just like the ones decorating this café.

“I assigned the six options on each of the sides and rolled to decide which one I would be.”

“...Eh?”

He rolled the die on the counter. Unlike the one out on front, it had normal values instead of all sixes, but he still rolled a six.

That wasn't important right now, though.

What was important was the fact that...

"...You decided by rolling a die?!"

"The room was a bit disorderly, and there were things such as chess boards and dice, so I borrowed a die, rolled a six, and decided to become an evil person."

So he had... *rolled* to become a criminal?

"Is... Is that it?" I asked.

"Yes. There's nothing more to it. That's why I am Sechs Würfel — I rolled a six on a die," he said as if it was nothing, then picked up the die and rolled it in his hand.

"...Ahaha." I laughed with no energy or glee.

I was pretty sure that if he'd rolled a five, he would've been a really good person who went around helping people.

And if it was a four, he would've willingly become a slave.

He'd be completely faithful to those roles, just as he was faithful to being evil now.

I'd known him for almost a month now, so I knew him well enough to know that that was just how he was.

I'd even known him when he was The Saint, when he'd truly behaved like and had an aura of a perfect holy maiden.

Ohh... I suddenly understood what he found so familiar about coffee being poured into a glass.

*He himself is exactly like that.*

No matter how complex the role — the container — he could change himself accordingly and fit it perfectly.

I'd fought all the Superiors here, and they all had powers that were scary in their own ways, but no one... *no one* had a mind as terrifying as this Master here.

"But I guess you need someone like that to take charge of a criminal clan," I thought out loud.

The two sub-leaders had probably thought the same thing — that no one was more fitting to lead us than this person here, who changed himself in order to fit the mold.

No one could do a better job at being the king of us criminals.

"Is anything the matter?" he asked.

"Nothing at all. By the way, about today's training—"

I was about to ask him what we'd do today—

"KING OF CRIME! I KNOW YOU'RE IN THERE! COME OUT, DAMN IT!"  
A thick voice resounded from the outside.

*What's this about?* I wondered.



*April 4th, 2045, gaol*

"Shit!" Upon logging in and realizing that they were in the gaol, Gakido and his Sixth Realm Chaos couldn't hide their frustration.

Gakido had climbed up to the tenth in Tenchi's duel rankings and fifteenth in their clan rankings, but now that they were here in the gaol, it was completely meaningless.

"It's all *their* fault!" he cursed.

There were two people Gakido blamed and hated for this.

First was, of course, the person who had directly sent them to the gaol: the King of Brigands, Bigman.

And the second was the slave dealer who'd caused them to attack that village: La Crima.

During their death penalty period, they'd gotten online and discovered that La Crima was actually a very infamous character known for pulling such schemes.

He specialized in modifying tians using his parasitic Embryo and selling them on the black market as either battle or pleasure slaves, which led to him developing vast amounts of wealth.

His deeds had earned him lots of enemies, and back in Caldina, he had even been targeted by two Superiors: the King of Termination and the King of Revelry.

The enigmatic man had somehow survived the encounter and soon gone on to Caldina.

"That goddamn parasite fucking used us to test the strength of Hokugen'in forces!" I shouted.

And even if Hokugen'in hadn't interfered with Gakido's work, La Crima would've just gotten some new slaves, meaning that he hadn't stood to lose anything in this debacle.

"That goddamn slaver asshole played us like a fuckin' fiddle!" I screamed.

"Yeah!" another member of his clan agreed vehemently.

They had cooperated with La Crima on their own free will, but they conveniently forgot that part.

As a side note, the member who'd negotiated with La Crima wasn't online. He probably felt he couldn't show his face after what he'd led them into. No doubt he was afraid of being the target of the clan's ire.

“What now, boss?” asked one of the members.

“Looks like there’re dungeons and shops here in the gaol, too,” added another.

They were worried about what would become of their *Dendro* life, now that they were here.

Gakido, however, just grinned like a ravenous beast and said, “We’ll start by settlin’ the score.”

“Eh? But they’re outside...”

“No... we’re puttin’ the blame on La Crima’s boss.”

“Boss...?! Y-You mean, the King of Crimes... Sechs Würfel?!”

From their investigations, they’d found out that La Crima was in a clan called “Illegal Frontier,” which was led by the King of Crimes, who was now in the gaol.

Someone had bought this info from the DIN and spread it everywhere as a way of getting back at the clan.

Despite that, there was only info on four of the members: La Crima, Emily, Rascal — whose activities really stood out — and Sechs, their leader.

There was nothing on Zeta, who always disappeared from her crime scenes before getting spotted, or Gerbera, who was new to the clan and had gone to the gaol before doing anything significant.

“You lost against a Superior, and you’re gonna pick a fight with another?” asked one of Gakido’s boys. “That’s a bit...”

“Think about it — even if he’s a Superior, he’s a loser just by bein’ here in the fuckin’ gaol. There’s no way he’s as much of a beast as Bigman.”

Any Master who'd been here long enough would call Gakido an idiot for thinking that, but unfortunately, the only ones on the scene were the members of Sixth Realm Chaos.

Most Masters from the three western countries would've said the same, but this clan was from the far-east land of Tenchi, and didn't know much about the King of Crime beyond the name of his job.

"We'll kick his ass and take his wealth as reparations," Gakido said confidently. "I mean, he has a clan, sure, but he's all alone here. I heard that even Al Capone was really pathetic after they locked him up."

A cool-headed Master would've pointed out that Al Capone hadn't had an Embryo, but everyone in Sixth Realm chaos was too angry to think that much.

"Let's start by gatherin' info," said Gakido. "We'll find out what he does, where he hangs, and attack him when there's no one to get in the way."

"Hell yeah!"

They went around the gaol and found out lots of things about him.

Strange as it was, all the prisoners talked about Sechs like he was above them, but no one said that he was strong.

They mentioned that he was a model prisoner, had a café, enjoyed reading, made good coffee, that he had a soft demeanor, had nice glasses, and cute employees, making the Sixth Realm Chaos members conclude that he was absolutely harmless.

"Kheheheh. That dumbass," Gakido spat and grinned. "This is gonna be so easy. It hasn't even happened, and I'm already cheering up."

After finding out all they needed, they decided to attack him in two days, when the café would be closed and there would be no customer Masters to get in the way.

Imagining the attack and their victory, they began the preparations for the assault.

However, none of them had noticed the soft, sympathetic gazes the other Masters were giving them.

They were looking at the clan like they were just another in a long line of poor sacrifices, but none of the clan members were in the state of mind to realize it.

And they hadn't noticed that each and every single fellow prisoner hadn't said a single word about how dangerous the KoC really was.

Thus, two real life days passed, and Sixth Realm Chaos attacked the café, Dice.



*April 6th, 2045, Bow Hunter, Gerbera*

"COME OUT OR WE'RE BURNING YOU DOWN WITH YOUR CAFÉ!"

The suicidal idiots barking outside were a bunch of filthy-looking men in clothes that made them look like stereotypical criminals.

The one at the front was extra weird. He wore animal skins and flashy clothing that looked kinda like the "kabuki" style from my dad's country, while at the same time not even close to it.

The cherry on the cake was the cringy gloves, though.

His clothing aside... what was up with that face? He could choose anything he wanted during character creation, and he'd gone with something that brutish?

...Speaking of which, I was beautiful in real life, too.

Yeah, I had spent some time making my character, but the overall beauty rating was the same.

*That reminds me that I forgot to change my breast size, I thought. I hope the leader doesn't realize that I have pads on...*

“Yes, yes, who is it?” the leader asked as he opened the door with a face like he was being visited by children selling cookies.

*Does he ever feel any danger?* I thought one moment before he bent his upper half forward, probably due to a punch in his stomach.

The people passing by instantly ran away, because of course they would.

“YOU TOOK TOO FUCKIN’ LONG!” the boss-looking guy shouted.

“My apologies. So, who might you be?” said our leader, clearly not caring about the stomach blow.

Why would he?

After all... physical attacks did nothing to his HP.

“I’m the King of Grind, Gigamaru Gakido! I’m the man who was tenth on Tenchi’s duel rankings!”

*Gigamaru Gakido... what a weird name.* Also, this was the first time I’d ever seen someone from Tenchi.

Our clan didn’t have a single member from there, come to think of it. I wouldn’t mind if some cool-looking samurai guy joined. I’d talk to the leader about that later.

For now, the main matter was Gakido, and uhhh...

“Tenth? Isn’t that kinda lame?” I asked.

I lived in Gideon, the Mecca of duels, but even I knew only the first eight. Wait, no. I’d forgotten the seventh... what was his name, again? It was the burning, smothering guy, right?

B... B... Bijmal?

“What the hell’d you just say?!” Gakido snapped.

“Oh no no, Miss Gerbera,” said the leader. “That’s certainly not true. Tenchi’s dueling scene is particularly strong. It has about twice as many participants as the others, so the tenth there is about as strong as the kingdom’s fifth.”

I nodded in understanding. *Well, I did hear that Tenchi was “the land of strife” or something.*

“And, uh... the King of Grind?” I asked. That job name seemed to have a familiar aura...

“The King of Grind is more or less the Eastern version of King of Destruction,” the leader explained. “Both jobs excel at object destruction. But while the KoD is focused on STR, the King of Grind is more balanced and thus is easier to use in combat.”

“You really know everything, don’t you?” I commented.

Anyway, if going by job alone, this weirdo here was on the same level as the King of Destruction.

...It really didn’t feel that way, though.

“Ohh, ‘Gakido?’” the leader said casually. “Now I remember. You lead a bandit clan called ‘Sixth Realm Chaos,’ which was destroyed by the King of Brigands, Bigman the Mountain-Splitter, about five days ago. So that sent you here to the gaol. From what I recall, your crimes are burglary, murder, and sexual assault, among many others. Oh yes, that is certainly enough to put you on the wanted list.”

It felt like our dear Sechs Würfel was a bit *too* knowledgeable. At least, for someone stuck in the gaol.

Wait. It suddenly hit me that one of our people, La Crima, was currently operating in Tenchi, so he’d probably gotten that info from him.

“Well, you sure know a damn lot about us,” sneered Gakido. “Then I guess you know why we’re here, don’t ya?”

“I cannot even begin to imagine,” our leader replied. “Coffee, perhaps?”

“NO! YOU’RE LA CRIMA’S BOSS! SO WE’LL KILL YOU AND TAKE YOUR SHIT AS REPARATIONS!”

“Is that it?”

“LIKE HELL! WEAK-ASS OR NOT, KILLING A SUPERIOR WILL MAKE US FAMOUS! IT’LL SEND A MESSAGE TO THE ENTIRE GAOL, AND WE’LL SOON BE THE TOP OF THIS SHITTY PLACE!”

Hearing his words made me choke.

I had no idea why, but it felt like my old wounds were opening up — like I was watching a detailed replay of a very dark, very cringy period in my life.

“But there is no rule that says that defeating me would make you the top of the gaol,” the leader said calmly.

“But tons of prisoners treat you like you’re above them, don’t they? If I beat you, that means I’m above you *and* them!”

I choked again. Oh, how I wished for him to stop talking. He sounded exactly like I had when I was going after the KoD. It was making me cringe.

*Gakido, please. I really don’t want or need this kind of familiarity. Shut up, or I’ll kill you.*

“Oh... very well,” said the leader. “Are we having a duel?”

“Nope. It’s already over. Look at your stomach,” said Gakido.

From where I was, I could only see the leader’s back, so I made Alhazred move in front of him and checked.

On his stomach, there was a circle-stamp with a large “B A N” written on it.

“What would this be?” he asked.

"That's a seal made by my Embryo, Banten'in. Better not touch it, my guy. You'll be torn to shreds."

I looked and noticed that the same stamp was on the knuckle parts of Gakido's gloves.

*That is so lame.*

"I see," said the leader. "So it's an Embryo that inserts a bomb through touch... or more like, changes the parts of the body touched into bombs."

"You got that right! And just so you know, no one who's had it on them has ever come out alive!"

*Oh, so that was the purpose of the stomach blow from before.*

Would our leader actually die from being torn to shreds, though?

*He probably wouldn't...*

"If you admit defeat, I wouldn't mind removi—"

"Excuse me for a moment," the leader said, cutting off Gakido and then walking past him to stand in the middle of the street.

"Where the hell do you think you're goin—"

"Like this?"

Before anyone could stop him, Sechs Würfel touched the seal on his stomach and, like advertised, exploded into little bits.

Dark red pieces of flesh and blood rained down on the surroundings, dirtying the unpaved road and Gakido's clan.

*Ew.*

"Whoa?!" Gakido shouted.

"H-He went and killed himself...!" cried a man behind him.

The leader had probably gone away from the café to avoid making a mess inside.

I really didn't see why he'd bothered. He could easily use The Saint's purification magic to clean up.

"Wh-Whatever," said Gakido. "This still counts as a win against him. It just ended in one hit."

"Oh, yeah. Suuure," I said with all the sarcasm in the world.

They finally noticed my presence, and Gakido asked, "Who the hell are *you*?"

"A freeloader."

"Oh, I get it. You're the KoC's bitch."

"...Huh?"

*I feel like he just said something staggering.*

"You have a good face, but your tits look fake as hell. Man, the guy has shit taste in women."

"Huhhhh?" I yelled. "Who the hell are you calling fake? You better not mess with me!"

*Did this idiot actually just call me flat—I mean, the KoC's bitch? What is he, a porn-crazed brat from a 2000s MMO? This is the first time anyone in Dendro's talked to me with the lower half of their body!*

*Wait, there was also La Crima... but the circumstances and implications there were different.*

I considered just beating them right here and now. Alhazred was outside with them, and none of them had a clue.

That made me think it was possible, but Gakido had a Superior Job, and I didn't have a good track record with them here in the gaol. What to do, what to do...?

"Argh, forget this fake-ass hoe," said Gakido. "Let's just take everything in the café. Get to it, boys!"

“Roger!” his bootlickers replied almost mechanically. You could tell they were used to this and that it was no surprise that they’d gotten on a wanted list.

As they tried to enter the café, something called out to them and stopped them.

“Please-wait-a-mo-ment.”

“Wh-What? Who’s talkin’... Huh?” Gakido’s people looked around and quickly found the source of the voice.

The entity was sitting on a chair, looking at them with inorganic eyes that had been closed until just a moment ago.

It was none other than the Prism Person, April.

She hadn’t moved an inch even when her owner had blown up, but now... she stood up.

“Are-you-en-ter-ing-this-es-tab-lish-ment-with-the-in-ten-tion-to-rob-it?” She hadn’t participated in the conversation at all, but she seemed to have listened.

“What’s this? It’s like a human, but it’s got spherical joints. Is it a Marionetter’s doll?”

“Well, damn,” Gakido grinned. “Score. It looks like it costs a whole lot. Let’s take it, and—”

Gakido entered the café with the intention to take April, but the moment one of them stepped in...

“Rec-og-nized-as-a-threat. Initiating battle mode — eliminating.”

April stopped speaking in monotone. Words just flowed out of her mouth...

“Eh?”

“Eh?”

And the man who tried to touch her was split in half, making him speak through two mouths.

Before either of his halves could even fall to the ground, he was cut into little pieces and became bits of light before a single drop of blood touched the floor.

“Ah?!”

“H-He had a Brooch, right?! How did he die in one hit?!”

A Brooch, eh?

April attacked with both hands, so it had broken with the first, I’d guess.

I mean, they were all really susceptible to damage right now.

“Starting elimination of enemies within the café’s perimeter,” she said smoothly before stepping outside.

I’d thought this back during training, but it was staggering how well-spoken April was in battle compared to how she was usually. Did the café employee work she was assigned to put some sort of load on her AI?

“Tch...! Don’t let her scare you! There’s just one of her!”

“It’s just a robot! We took out dozens of guard robots in ruins back in Tenchi!”

Ruins, huh? I’d never been to one.

Even so, I was pretty sure that there wasn’t a single robot stronger than April.

...Oh?

Some guy who was probably in the nobushi grouping came out of his hiding spot and attacked April from behind. “Got you now...! Huh?”

His aim was true, and his spear was heading straight into her. But...

“I-It’s not piercing?! How?! Why isn’t my surprise attack working?!”

The nobushi grouping was focused on surprise attacks, but this one couldn’t even break through April’s clothes.

“Eliminating,” April said as she responded with a swing of her arms.

Her arms didn’t reach the guy due to the spear’s range, but that didn’t matter.

“GHUAH?!”

The man was decapitated, exposing the flesh and bone of his neck.

*Gross.*

“W-Wires?!” The onlooking bandits finally realized what her weapon was — they were metal wires extending from inside April’s wrists.

They were thicker than the steel threads used by some assassins — enough to be called wires.

It didn’t seem like they were strong enough to cut people apart, but that was exactly what they did.

“Khh...! Protect your weak spots! Those wires won’t do shit if they don’t touch your body!” Gakido screamed.

He wasn’t wrong. There was nothing to those wires besides their toughness.

*But I would really recommend against focusing on defense.*

“GHUAH?!” a man in heavy armor screamed as he was torn into shreds and became bits of light.

“Th-The armor’s in pieces...?!” someone shouted.

“What?! What’s going on?!”

Looking at them reminded me of tofu, a food my dad liked. Tofu could be cut using threads, and these wires broke their bodies apart just as easily.

There was no point in just watching out for them, though.

The reason why they were so easy to tear apart... was the fact that they were simply really fragile right now.

“Huhh?!”

“Wh-What’s wrong?!”

“M-My END’s supposed to be 4,050... b-but it’s 50 now!”

“Just minus 4,000?” I commented. “That’s... pretty tame, April.”

“There are no endurance-type Superior Jobs or Guardians,” she said.  
“This is more than enough.”

*Oh, so she’s just conserving energy, I thought.*

“A... a skill that lowers defense!” one of them screamed.

“Heh! Then I’ll just run circles around it with my speed and—  
GHAAHH?!”

An AGI build did nothing more than stomp on the ground, but that was enough to give him a compound fracture.

Actually, it seemed like the leg was just gone.

It was the expected result, though.

His END was probably so low now that it was actually in the negatives.

So yeah. April the Prism Person had the ability to reduce the toughness of surrounding material.

It was extra lethal on AGI builds, which had low END to begin with. Just like now, it could easily bring that stat to below zero.

Simply running too hard could make an AGI build’s bones shatter and flesh crumble, while an END build’s toughness would do as much good as a sheet of paper.

AGI builds would be driven to self-destruction, END builds would lose their one selling point, and all would be slain.

That was the power of the Diamond Slayer's transformation weapon, Material Slider.

When I'd first heard about it, I had reflected that the one who'd made it didn't care one bit about game balance.

Though, honestly, that kinda applied to *Dendro* as a whole.

"U-Use ranged attacks! Beat it from a distance!"

"I-It's not working! Arrows and bullets don't do anything!"

April's Material Slider not only lowered the toughness of surrounding material — it could also raise her own.

Their attacks were all negated by a defense which, from what I could tell, easily exceeded 100,000.

"April's easily Superior-level," I commented to myself. I hadn't won against her once during training.

*I just made myself sad again...*

"Shit! I beat *the King of Crime*, and now I've gotta deal with this fuckin' monster?! Outta my way, boys! No matter how tough, my Banten'in's gonna turn it into scrap!" Gakido clenched his fists, covered in Banten'in, and struck a boxing pose.

Well, if Banten'in could blow up any material it placed a seal on, then maybe it had a chance against April.

However, to pull it off, Gakido would have to get close to April while being conscious of his severely lowered defense, which didn't even allow him to run as fast as he wanted.

It was a battle that would be over in one hit from either side, but due to her range, April had the upper hand.

However, before such a battle could begin, April tilted her head at Gakido's words. "Did you just say that you defeated my owner?"

"Heh! Hell yeah! My Banten'in made short work of your master, the King of Crime, Sechs Würfel!" Gakido claimed proudly.

"But he is right there." April pointed behind Gakido.

"Huh?!" He turned around so fast you could hear it, but all he saw was three of his clan members. "You little...!"

For a moment, he seemed to think that April was just toying with him, but the robot just continued pointing in the same direction.

Gakido turned around again and saw only two of his clan members.

"...Huh?"

Oh, so he'd realized that one had just gotten the death penalty.

"Hey! You two! What happened to Fapel? He was there just a second ago!"

The other two didn't say a word in response — they just eerily stood in place with faces full of suffering and fear.

They didn't even make a sound, as if their throats... bodies... were full of something.

Their bodies then began to change.

Their eyes popped out, blood poured out of their mouths, and their bodies throbbed like hoses about to release large amounts of water.

But before anything like that could happen, their bodies suddenly vanished and became bits of light.

They must've used the suicide function to save themselves from the extended suffering of suffocation.

When they vanished, they left only their drops... *and a red liquid.*

"...Ah?" Gakido said dumbly.

It was the same liquid as the one that was scattered all over the surroundings.

The same liquid that had gotten on all of Gakido's clan members, all of whom were now dead.

*It was the blood and flesh of Sechs Würfel.*

Gakido could've noticed this earlier, but I was guessing that he'd achieved his goal so easily that he couldn't even think properly.

And so, he hadn't realized that *our leader's flesh and blood hadn't become bits of light.*

"This is as grotesque as it always is..." I sighed.

The flesh and blood scattered all over began to crawl and gather where the two had used the suicide function.

Once a giant pool of blood and bits was formed, larger than the volume of one person, it began to rise up.

The fluid extended, was compressed to the size of a single person, and began to receive form like heated glass being expertly shaped into a human.

Eventually, even the clothes were given shape, and finally came the color.

The result? Sechs Würfel was now standing there as if he'd never exploded.

"Hello, Mr. Gakido," he said. "I haven't seen you in six minutes and twenty-seven seconds."

"Huh? A-Aaahh...?!" Gakido was naturally surprised.

Blood and flesh had suddenly become human again right before his very eyes.

That wasn't strange in our leader's case, though. Being blown up into bits and fluids, only to return to human, meant absolutely nothing to him.

You could cut his head off, pierce his heart, crush him with a giant leg, and he would simply shrug it off.

To him... all of those states were just one of his shapes.

That was the kind of body he had... the kind of *monster* he was.

Sechs Würfel was the only Master who'd replaced every last part of his body with slime.



Body replacement type, otherwise known as Type Body.

It was an ultra rare Embryo category separate from the usual Arms, Guardian, Chariot, Castle, Territory, and even the rarer ones like Maiden and Apostle.

I didn't know the details of it, but I was told that it was completely different from the Type Arms that replaced only certain parts of the body, like hands or eyes.

Type Body Embryos were actually the rarest of all, and examples of them were few.

Even our leader only knew a single one besides himself — Caldina's King of Termination, who'd replaced his whole body with machinery.

There was a reason for their rarity, of course.

Embryos hatched and evolved based on their Master's personalities.

Embryos were always influenced by who or what their Masters were, though it happened to different extents.

That left us with a question: what kind of personality would a person who would replace his entire body with slime have?

Personally, I couldn't begin to understand it.

I couldn't even comprehend why he had this kind of Embryo or how he saw the world.

He could become a slimy monster, be split into little pieces, mimic another person's body, yet accept it all as if it were him.

I didn't want to imagine the mentality of a person like that. I felt like it was off-limits for someone like me.

Today, I'd found out and understood that he was the type to fulfill the role he was given, but even so, I knew that I didn't even come close to truly understanding him.

After all... Type Body could only be given to people who could turn themselves into something entirely different and see absolutely nothing wrong with it.



"K-King of Crime?! Shit!" Gakido looked shocked by the sight of the person he'd just blown up standing before him completely unscathed.

Of course he was shocked.

If Banten'in couldn't kill the man, it meant that Gakido had no means to do it.

"The King of Grind doesn't have the Right of Destruction skill, after all," said our leader. "You can only turn me into little pieces, *nothing more*."

*See what I mean? He was completely blown up and says that, I thought.*

Then again, that mentality of his was surely part of the reason why he was the way he was. To him, there was probably no difference

between taking the shape of a human and taking the shape of a slime.

He acted differently whenever he switched from the King of Crime to The Saint, so maybe becoming a slime and acting the part came naturally to him, too?

Also, he was extremely good at changing shape, even by slime standards. Whenever he was in his default form or the form of The Saint he used very often, all the cells in his body were exactly like those of a normal human. But he went back to being slime whenever his shape was broken.

Also, according to him, the DNA of his The Saint form was exactly the same as that of the original person.

I'd asked him how he knew that when there was, as far as I knew, no way to check DNA in *Dendro*, and he'd said, "I became The Saint by fooling the The Saint's crystal, which judges viability of job inheritance by checking DNA."

I was still curious about how he'd ended up replacing the woman who had been meant to become The Saint.

Also, his Superior Embryo's name was "Primordial Shifting, Nu."

I didn't know what that was based on, so it was probably really minor. Was it an urban legend or something? It'd be pretty embarrassing if it was actually famous, but I was just thinking this, so I was safe.

Anyway, in conclusion...

"Our leader is... unbeatable," I said.

He was a full slime, so even if you cut his head off, pulled his heart out, or reduced him to bits, he'd just come back to normal like it was no big deal.

Blunt, slashing, explosive — all physical attacks were useless against him.

As for magic... I wasn't so sure, either.

He had a bunch of special rewards inside him at all times.

There were skills to consider, too, so I felt that he could even handle fire, even though it was supposed to be a slime's weakness.

He also had the KoC's passive skill, which made him have really high stats.

And finally, he had the ultimate skill which was probably the worst thing you could ever encounter.

*Seriously, how did the KoD send this guy to the gaol...?*

"You seem to be the only one left, Mr. Gakido," the leader said.

"Would you like to fight me now?"

"Ngh... ghh..." He said nothing in response.

Gakido understood that he had no chance against him. He probably wanted to just run away.

Feeling like a mere onlooker, I watched the scene until our leader called out to me.

"Miss Gerbera!"

"What?" I asked, jumping.

"You were worried that you might be among the weaker people here in the gaol, weren't you? Care to test just how much you've changed?"

"...What do you mean?" Unable to understand what he was getting at, I tilted my head and imagined a question mark popping up above my head.

He looked away from me and talked to Gakido. “Mr. Gakido, you may choose to fight Gerbera instead of me.”

“What?”

“Win against either of us, and I will let you off the hook *and* give you this café.”

“...Ehhhh?!” His words shocked me so much that I let out a weird sound.

*Huh?! We'll lose this café if I lose?! But it's my home here!*

“Hah! You're damn right I'm choosin' this woman here,” Gakido said as he looked at me, all smiles.

*Oh man, that relieved look really pisses me off.*

“Very well,” said the leader. “Are you okay with this, as well, miss?”

I wasn’t!

I really wasn’t, but... ah, no dice.

His eyes looked exactly the same as whenever he made me go through his hellish training. He wouldn’t take “no” for an answer.

I had to prepare myself.

And so, I reluctantly agreed to do what he wanted me to. “Fine... I’ll do it.”

I’d be up against a Superior Job in the same vein as the KoD. What if I lost?

*Well... I'll just move in with the leader again and continue living as a freeloader.*



We left the street we were in and arrived at a wasteland outside of the gaol’s town.

This was Gakido's idea. He couldn't go all-out with the constant risk of damaging the prize: the café.

The leader told me, "Though the King of Grind doesn't have Right of Destruction, his ultimate job skill is Grinding Shockfist, which is a wide-scale area attack. He wouldn't be able to fight as he wished if we were near the prize café."

"Tch! Well, you sure know a lot," Gakido clicked his tongue.

"Yes... In a certain place, I found a list of jobs," the leader said as he looked in the café's direction.

"Oh?" I asked.

Was it in the café's safe or something? I'd constantly worry about something that important getting stolen. Though, with April there, we probably didn't have anything to worry about.

"So, are you two ready?" the leader said as he stood right between us like a referee.

We'd already signed a Contract, so if I lost this, Gakido would really get the café. There was also an extra rule preventing the use of Brooches.

*Oh, dear, I sighed. I'll be a little tricky...*

"You're damn right I'm ready!" Gakido roared.

"I guess you can start," I said.

*Just a little bit more...*

"Ah, Miss Gerbera, please don't back away any more," said the leader.

Tch. He'd noticed.

I would've liked for there to be more distance between us when the battle began.

“It seems like you both are ready, so... begin.”

“Ooaagh!” Gakido charged at me like a boxer, just like when he’d faced April.

His body swayed as he rushed at me, quickly closing the distance between us.

I couldn’t read the movements of his upper body.

He was preparing a decent feint — one that I probably couldn’t deal with.

However, feints I saw coming were pointless against me.

“Agh?!” Gakido suddenly fell to the ground.

Why? Because I’d made Alhazred, whom he couldn’t see, trip him up.

Still, due to the shin guards on his legs, it wasn’t enough to cut off his leg.

*Those are pretty tough, I thought. Is this the rumored Tenchi craftsmanship?*

I didn’t really mind that I couldn’t sever his leg. It wasn’t damage I needed right now.

I just needed enough time to activate my ultimate skill.

“I am Unknown... Total Eclipse of the Flesh — Alhazred.”

It was best to activate it before a battle even began, but if that wasn’t an option, it was important to buy enough time to do it.

“She... disappeared?!” Gakido yelled.

Following the activation, I merged with Alhazred and became imperceivable to everyone in the world.

“What’s going on here?!” Gakido exclaimed.

"Well, considering that Miss Gerbera already knows about your Embryo, I think it would only be fair if I told you about hers," the leader said calmly. "She has an Embryo that's imperceptible to everyone but her."

Our leader had just gone and told him about Alhazred.

*You're not helping, damn it!*

"So she's still around, huh?" Gakido asked.

"Yes. Not even I know where, though."

"Then I'll end it with this one." Gakido cracked a grin, raised both his fists to the air, and threw them to the ground, shouting, "Mark of Cataclysm — Banten'in!"

That created a seal that seemed as large as one hundred meters, which then went on to cause an explosion several times larger.



*Gaol, outskirts of the residential area*

"Mark of Cataclysm — Banten'in" was the ultimate skill of Gigamaru Gakido's Embryo: Marked Murderfists, Banten'in.

Banten'in's special characteristic was marking things and making them explode, and this ultimate skill represented it perfectly by creating a mark far bigger than the usual ones and making it cause incomparable destruction.

It allowed him to pulverize people without even marking them directly — the giant mark on the ground did the job most of the time.

It was the pre-Superior Gakido's trump card.

"Kheheheh. Thanks for choosin' this as the battleground, losers!"

Gakido himself came out of the destruction relatively unscathed. He did this by canceling out the explosion near him using a Grinding Shockfist.

Of course Sechs survived, too, but the destruction had sent him flying all over the place.

“That woman’s gotta be gone for real now, heh heh. Just look at all this shit!” Gakido said as he looked around with pride.

It seemed as though everything within a diameter of one kilometel had been turned upside-down.

Gakido was confident that only a slime could survive this unscathed.

He also thought that the robot that had killed his clan, April, would’ve easily made it through this, but she wasn’t on the scene.

“Well, with that done, I’ll just wait for the KoC to fix his body and make him give me my café,” Gakido smirked.

He’d already lost sight of his initial goal of beating the King of Crimes and becoming the top of the gaol.

Or more like, that was just what he was choosing to believe.

A large part of him just really didn’t want to face the undefinable, immortal King of Crime.

In a way, he was much like his ex-opponent, Gerbera.

No... she wasn’t an “ex-opponent.”

*The fight was still going on.*

“Hey! KoC! Where the hell are ya?!” he called out to the broken wasteland, started walking and then just... tripped. “...Huh? Now that’s weird. There’re no rocks here or anything.”

He tried to get up, but his legs didn’t seem to listen.

“Is it a debuff?”

He looked at his status summary, but didn't see any detrimental effects or HP loss.

"Huhhh? Then why am I...?" He lay there, confused, for about ten-odd seconds. And then suddenly...

"...Huh?"

He had no idea when it had happened, but there were ten-odd bowgun arrows in the back of his knees.

It seemed as though the shooter was avoiding the shin guards and going for the unprotected area.

It was barely even a knee at this point — it was just a tendon linking the thigh and the shin.

"Ah. Eh? Aaahh?"

His stats now showed that yes, he'd suffered damage.

In addition, there was the Bleeding debuff, as well as a Knee Joint Destruction injury-based status effect for both of his knees.

"H-Healing! Gotta heal...!"

He tried to take out his inventory and heal himself using the medicine inside.

But for whatever reason, his fingers didn't seem to even touch his inventory.

Ten-odd seconds passed.

"AAAHHH?!"

All he had in his hands was a destroyed inventory. The contents were scattered all around him.

"What the hell... WHAT THE HEEELL?!" Gakido was shaken up by the incomprehensible situation.

There was someone looking down at him.

But he couldn't feel it — couldn't perceive it.

It was none other than Gerbera. Merged with Alhazred, she observed him.

Though merged with her Embryo, she wasn't limited to using Alhazred's scythe-arms. She could use her own, too, and she was holding bowguns with an Auto-Loading Function in each.

She was the one who'd destroyed Gakido's knees and inventory.

Gerbera had survived the cataclysm he'd caused.

The reason for that was simple: she'd been trained to distance herself the moment she saw that the enemy was about to use their ultimate skill.

Anyone would be wary if their opponent vanished before their very eyes, and many who were capable of it would launch a wide-scale attack.

No amount of hiding could help against that, so Gerbera needed to distance herself until the enemy calmed down.

During its ultimate skill, Alhazred's attacks were completely imperceptible, and they had the greatest effect when the enemy was calm.

No matter how wary they were... *they just couldn't see them coming.*

"Poison... Paralysis... and Intoxication?!" Gakido shrieked.

He had no idea when he'd received them, but his status summary was displaying a whole bunch of status effects.

His movements were so sluggish that he couldn't even see to hold and use his medicine.

The status effects were there because ten-odd seconds ago, Gerbera had used her Poison Hunter skills.

“My arm... MY AAAARM!”

He had no idea when it had happened, but his left hand was gone from the wrist down.

Only now did he realize that he'd lost an important part of his body.

This had happened ten-odd seconds ago, when he'd crawled over to his medicine, only to touch a mine placed there by Gerbera's Trap Hunter skill.

He'd missed each and every single attack.

He didn't perceive anything.

He couldn't perceive anything.

Everything that Gerbera did while merged with Alhazred using its ultimate skill could never be noticed the moment she did it.

The very fact that you had been attacked would reach you a whole ten-odd seconds late.

“G-Grinding Shockfist! Grinding Shockfist!”

Using his remaining hand, Gakido frenziedly used his ultimate job skill to attack his surroundings, but alas, Gerbera wasn't close enough for it to reach.

She stood at a distance, bowgun in hand, watching and waiting for her prey to grow weaker.

Once he raised his upper body, she silently shot his left eye.

He lost half of his vision instantly. It scared him, but he had no idea that it was caused by an arrow piercing his head.

He reached for the area and unknowingly touched the arrow, making the wound worse.

Gakido was already as good as dead.

Three of his limbs were gone, his HP was almost non-existent, and the many debuffs were weighing down on him.

Even so, Gerbera didn't come close to him.

She simply waited.

Not saying a word, she waited until the very last moment.

As she was now, she wouldn't make her presence known until the very last moment.

That was her greatest change since entering the gaol.

She would keep a cool head and relentlessly chip away at her opponent's life until they died.

She wouldn't let her guard down or allow anyone to perceive her.

She had become perhaps the most haunting hunter of all.

Once Gakido stopped moving, Gerbera, while keeping her distance, finished him off with a fire magic gem. Flames embraced him, but Gakido didn't even realize it until his death penalty came. However, before he went, he was able to whisper a short sentence.

“It’s a nightmare...”





*Bow Hunter, Gerbera*

After the incident with Gakido and his merry crew, we returned to the café, and I was now having some of our leader's coffee along with a simple cake.

This was nice and all, but I was still in a bad mood.

"Hey," I called out to our leader.

"Yes?"

"You called that a test, but... wasn't he just really weak? I don't feel like it was even a fight."

Gakido had been about as easy as Rook from when I'd fought him back before I was sent to the gaol.

He was nothing compared to the KoD, Hannya, Candy, and Fu'uta.

He must've been one of those third-rates who focused too much on their SJ!

"Perhaps," said the leader.

*Ah. I knew it.*

So basically, I was still one of the weaker people here in the gaol.

"Ugh... This is hopeless... I'm pretty sure I'm the weakest Superior..."  
I lay face-first on the table, as dejected as I had been when I'd first logged in today.

I had no idea why, but the leader was making a slightly different smile.

*What's so funny?*

"By the way, about your nickname..." he began.

“I can’t call myself ‘The Unknown’ yet.”

I had to win against the KoD first.

Hold on. If even our immortal King of Crime had lost against him, what chance did I have? What a downer of a thought...

“Perhaps, but Gakido gave you a very good one, didn’t he?” the leader asked.

“Eh?”

He had? D-Did he mean “Fake-Breasts!?” If that became my nickname, I’d have to quit *Dendro* for good!

“The name he gave you is... Albtraum.”

*“Albtraum”?* Umm... that means “Nightmare” in German, right? Better than what I expected, but... “Nightmare”...?

“Isn’t that common?” I asked. I felt like there’d be at least a few “Nightmares” in every country.

“I would say it’s a good start.”

Hmm... it wasn’t weird or anything, so I didn’t really mind it.

“Then I guess I’ll be Gerbera the Nightmare for now,” I said.

“Excellent. I will tell that to our regular customers.”

“That’s kinda embarrassing. Please don’t.”

“Well, these names only gain meaning when others give them to you and start using them regularly.”

I cringed.

That hurt the side of me that desperately wanted to be called “Unknown.”

*I’ll just change the subject.*

“By the way, do you have a nickname?” I asked him.

"I'm confident I had one... but haven't heard it used for so long that I've forgotten it. If only it was as easy as Miss Hannya's, it would never have left my memory."

Oh yeah, hers was just "Hanny."

Thinking of her reminded me of the time the leader and I had gone shopping and she'd mistaken us for a couple.

She'd just popped out and attacked, screaming, "COUPLES IN THE GAOL?! I CAN'T EVEN SEE MY GUY!"

It had been crazy scary. I'd used my ultimate skill, but even it had done nothing against her trampling. I'd even had pain on because of training, so it had hurt a lot, too...

If the leader hadn't been there to become The Saint and heal me, I would've gotten the death penalty on the spot.

"Speaking of Hannya, I haven't seen her in a while," I went on.

Besides the leader, she was the Superior I met most often. Was she busy in real life or something?

"Ohh, you didn't know?" the leader asked.

"Eh?"

"She was released yesterday. She gave us this cake as a parting gift. She made it herself, apparently."

"Oh, I see."

The cake was good, but I couldn't tell that it was homemade. This reminded me that as long as she didn't snap, Hannya was actually a very feminine lady.

Also, I'd heard of it happening, but I still had a hard time believing that anyone could be released.

Of course, we did plan to escape.

“...Hm?” I murmured.

Hannya... had been released?

Hannya, the woman who went on a murdering spree whenever she as much as saw a couple, had been released?

Hannya, the woman who’d destroyed more buildings here than any other Superior, had been released?

Hannya, the woman who was known for her low boiling point even among all the low-lives here, had been released?

“...She’ll be back in no time, won’t she?” I asked.

In response to my words, the leader broke his usual smile and cracked a wry grin — a rarity for him.

## ***Epilogue: After the Storm, and Before the Storm***

*April 6th, 2045, Quartierlatin Country, ruins*

“Ughh...” Rising Sun’s Blue Screen was moaning in front of the plant’s console.

He was doing official work investigating the ruins.

Thanks to Ray and Barbaroy’s help, he’d received a very lucrative quest. He was very thankful for that.

For a clan as insignificant as theirs, this was a true stroke of luck that he probably hadn’t deserved, what with the bad karma on him from the incident at Torne.

Regardless, it was a very good quest, and he'd feel indebted to Ray and Barbaroy for a while.

The only problem was that he was the only Master who'd received this quest.

There were other people who wanted it. Some had gone through introductions that didn't involve Ray and Barbaroy.

The reward was very good, so of course there were many who would have liked to work alongside him.

However, the quest had the condition of having high-level engineer or mechanic grouping jobs, and those were rare even among Masters who'd moved from Dryfe to Altar.

No one else fit the conditions as well as Blue Screen did.

As a result, he was facing the ruins' computers all on his own.

"Shit... I'm playing *Dendro*, but it feels like I'm working IRL," he grumbled as he typed away on the console.

Despite his complaining, he did excellent work, easily unlocking many systems that had left tian scholars stumped.

"Ohh, another cyclic code security program. Dream of Electric Sheep — Gremlin."

He used his Embryo to dull certain functions of the systems while scanning the data for anything significant.

"Heeey, how's work?! I got ya somethin' to eat!" Dum-Dum entered the plant and called out to Blue Screen. "Makin' any progress?"

"I'd say so. But man, is it just me, or is what we're doing right now *really* far from what a usual PK clan does?"

"Well, we lost Vermin, so now we're a clan of just us two. We don't have a lot of options, so we should be thankful for good jobs like this."

"True," Blue Screen nodded as he ate some of what Dum-Dum had brought. "Any changes in town?"

"Nope, wouldn't say so. You've still got tons of repair and search quests. Lookin' for lost items is basically all I'm doin' right now. Speakin' of which, I found a small engine in one of the hidden rooms in here."

Dum-Dum's Embryo, Mary, was specialized in tracking, and with it, looking for lost items or people.

This side of his Embryo didn't see much use back in Torne, but it was actually the Embryo's main feature.

He led a PK clan, but many would say that he was better suited for something else.

"An engine, eh...? What's the name?" Blue Screen asked.

"Identification wasn't enough for it, so all I got was 'Reactor.' I handed it over to the Altarian research group stationed here in town. We'll see what they find out. Oh! By the way! This old man in the plaza had this fancy-lookin' orchestra. They were playin' Engelberg's music, and they were so goddamn good!"

"Oh, that's the composer you like, right?"

"Hell yeah. He's not releasing anything new at the moment, though. Well, he's old, so maybe he retired?"

Blue Screen continued working even as he chatted with Dum-Dum.

"Hm?" he said suddenly, coming across an interesting set of data.

It was design data that had to be inputted into the plant's production line, and the monitor displayed some sort machine's blueprint along with the corrupted name, "Crystal ████."

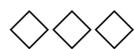
"The data's corrupt?" Blue Screen muttered. "Now that's something not even Gremlin can... Wait, there's something more."

There was more data. The folder had another, completely undamaged machine blueprint.

It displayed what clearly looked like a mechanical horse and had the name “Mass-Production Prism Steed, Second Model.”

It was a gift from the past.

The ruins containing a warped hope were now showing a light of hope untainted.



*April 6th, 2045, Prism Rider, Ray Starling*

Thursday.

My few, yet long, days in Quartierlatin had come to an end, and it was time for us to leave.

Azurite was going back to the capital, and we were accompanying her.

We were planning to go all the way to Altea today, then make our way back to Gideon.

It was basically my *Dendro* hometown, and it felt like I hadn't been there in ages.

The entrance to Quartierlatin was growing ever more distant, and I saw all the people seeing us off.

Azurite was here unofficially, so the only ones there were the people we'd met here.

There was Shirley and all the other people from the inn we stayed in, Countess Quartierlatin, and Veldorbell.

Tom had already returned to Gideon. Veldorbell had stayed behind, but I hadn't gotten to see him much, due to differences in online times.

Still, every now and then, I could hear Veldorbell's music echoing through the town.

He claimed he would stay here a bit longer, saying that, "I have something I wish to do, but the people of this town need the consolation my music provides."

I'd also met the two Rising Sun guys here, but they hadn't been able to see us off because of all the work they had going on in the ruins.

Apparently, they'd found a way to mass-produce Prism Steed replicas and were now extremely busy producing and deploying units to the knights.

For a moment, I worried that I'd accidentally pushed too much work on them, but B3 said, "They're getting something from this, so don't worry about it too much."

Anyway, with that warm goodbye, we left the town, but the inside of our carriage, drawn by Silver, was so cold that I could feel it here on the coachman's seat.

We were in B3's extremely luxurious, comfy carriage, and that seemed to have upset Azurite a bit.

It seemed to bother her that B3 was riding something this fancy after doing significant damage to the kingdom, and B3 seemed to be worried that Azurite would take it away as compensation.

"And I was pretty sure they'd hit it off," I sighed.

"Their personalities may be a match, but human relations aren't so simple," Nemesis commented.

"That's true..."

That also meant that there wasn't any fundamental incompatibilities between them, so I could still hope that they'd eventually get along.

"Phew..."

Anyway, if you ignored the confrontation at the end, my time here after the incident at the ruins had been very peaceful.

I'd felt the same after Franklin's Game. The contrast between the chaos during major incidents and the peace after them was really staggering.

*I really hope we don't get anything that could cost irreversible losses anytime soon,* I thought.

"I'm not certain if you can hope for that," said Nemesis. "The problems between Altar and Dryfe are still unsolved, and let's not forget that this is *Infinite Dendrogram*. Even if nothing happens here, there could be major incidents happening in a distant land right this very moment. This world is vast, after all."

"True..."

In that way, it was just like in real life. Something was always happening in a place you couldn't see or reach.

"And that is why you cannot stop yourself from reaching out and preventing any tragedies you encounter, no?" Nemesis said.

"Maybe," I admitted.

I just disliked things that could leave a bad taste in my mouth, but it felt like I'd been constantly running into such events ever since I'd started *Dendro*.

Perhaps that was what made these peaceful, uneventful days so dear and precious, like the clear sky after a violent storm.

Even if another storm was inevitable, the fact that none of them continued forever was what allowed human hearts and minds to carry on without breaking.

"After the storm, and before the storm" seemed like the best way to describe these past few days.

To be Continued in the Next Episode

# Afterword



**Cat:** "And here we are! The tenth volume! Double digits! I'm the usual afterword cat, Cheshiiire!"

**Six:** "I invaded the afterword last time, but now I'm here from the start. I'm Six, Sechs Würfel."

**Cat:** "Oh... the number?"

**Six:** "I considered using 'Evil,' since I'm a bad slime, but I ultimately decided to go with this."

**Cat:** "If it hadn't been for Xunyu and her 'Xun,' we'd all have a nice animal theme going on here, and now we have another mold-breakeerrr."

**Six:** "I would've used 'Slime,' but I feel like that takes too much space. Shu's 'Bear' is already pushing it."

**Cat:** "What would you pick if you could use an abbreviation?"

**Six:** "BoM. (Blob of Malice.)"

**Cat:** "Wow... That sounds like the nickname of a portly Mafia boss who kills anyone who says it. It suits you well, King of Criiime."

**Six:** "Anyway, I've introduced myself, so let's move on to the comment from the author himself."

Dear readers, thank you for your purchase. I am the author, Kaido Sakon.

After announcing the anime recently, I've received lots of words of encouragement from people hopeful for the production. Director

Tomoki Kobayashi and everyone else on the team are working very diligently, and I believe the end result will answer your expectations.

Also, I can't reveal who they are yet, but the people working on the music are brilliant, as well! I am certain they will be revealed by the time volume 11 is released, so please wait for that, too.

Speaking of releases, the spin-off manga where Juliet is the main character should have begun serialization in *Monthly Comic Alive*. Please enjoy Juliet and company's adventures drawn in La-na's beautiful, cute, and cool art style!

I am the one writing it, by the way, and as I mention in the cover comment, this has increased my workload yet again. It's a happy kind of hardship, but I won't deny that it can be painful sometimes... I'll persevere, though.

My series is making new leaps and bounds this year, but don't forget that Kami Imai's manga adaptation of the original story is still going strong! The climax to the second volume is very fiery!

Now, let's talk about the upcoming volume 11.

It's planned to be the last volume to release before the anime starts airing, and the timing makes me feel like the hand of fate is at work here.

Ray and company will soon start their adventure once again in the anime, and the volume coming out right before the airing begins happens to be a prequel about an event that happened sometime before Ray first set foot in Altar — an attack on the country by an unfathomably dangerous creature.

It involves a face-off between the strongest monster and the kingdom's strongest Masters. It's a story from before the time when Ray and his gang had their humble beginnings.

Please look forward to one of the highest-class battles in the history of *Infinite Dendrogram*.

**Six:** “Volume 11, *The Glory Selector*, is coming out in October 2019. Please look forward to it... Oh? We’re not emphasizing the announcement with spacing this time?”

**Cat:** “The amount of space we can dedicate to the afterword changes sometimes, and we got only three pages for this one. Your proper introduction to this corner and the author’s comment took up most of it.”

**Six:** (I see. I guess that is also why it’s just the two of us this time.)

**Cat:** “Anyway, it’s goodbye for now. Please continue supporting this series.”

**Six:** “May we meet again. I appear in the next volume, as well, by the way.”

# **Bonus Short Stories**

## **Embryo Motifs**

### *A certain place in Tenchi*

On his first day of college, Winterbaum, AKA Alex Fuyuki, stayed home to go on a quest in *Dendro*. He traveled alongside two of Hokugen'in's Elite Four, checking up on a number of villages and talking about various things.

"Tenchi's Embryos are relatively simple in that they often focus on pure power," Eashtan commented.

"Really?" asked Winterbaum.

"You could say it's due to the nature of the people who pick this country. Bigman's Brocken is especially simple — it just enlarges his items. It's literally based on the childish idea that size is equal to power, but childish or not, there is truth in that."

He was describing the fellow member of the Elite Four who had just soloed Gakido and his group.

"I suppose it's based on the Brocken specter phenomenon," said Winterbaum.

"Brocken specter" was a name for the shadows dispersed and enlarged by mists or clouds. Their otherworldly appearance earned them a place in folklore all across the world.

"Speaking of Embryos and their motifs, what are your Embryos called?" Winterbaum asked. They went out on the same quest, yet he still didn't know that much.

"Try guessing," said Eashtan.

"Umm... your Embryo spawns ants, so... Myrmecoleon? Myrmidon, maybe?"

Those were the only two ant-related myths that Winterbaum could think of.

"You were close with the second one," said Eashtan. "My Embryo is 'Zeus.'"

The unexpectedly major name caught Winterbaum off-guard. "Ehhh? Oh, wait... Zeus was the one who made the Myrmidons."

Greek myth had several theories for their origin, and one of them was that they were a warrior tribe created when Zeus transformed some ants into humans.

"That's a very famous name," he added.

"Your Horus is impressive, as well," Eashtan replied. "Hm... you should keep in mind that famous motifs with many legends to their name can be used on multiple Embryos."

"Oh, so the names aren't exclusive?"

"Embryos are unlimited, while motifs aren't. My Zeus is based on a smaller myth, but of course there are Zeuses that are all about just throwing lightning."

"...I wonder if there are Zeuses with no control over their private parts," Winterbaum said wryly.

Zeus was mainly associated with lightning or his strangely vast number of children. Even the Myrmidon myth had a version where he transformed into an ant and had many offspring.

"Perhaps there are," said Eashtan. "Even Horus has many other forms. It's just how it is."

*I wonder if I'll ever meet another Horus user,* Winterbaum thought before continuing the conversation. "By the way, what's Probe's Embryo?"

"I don't know," Eashtan replied without hesitation.

“Eh?” Winterbaum was confused that Eashtan wouldn’t know something so fundamental about his long-time companion.

“Think about it. Do you really believe she would say it in a way we can understand?”

“Corporate secret. Firm refusal. No questioning.” Probe made it very clear that she would not talk. You could see it as a sign that she was a careful woman who wouldn’t reveal her hand, but...

*Well, I think I know what Mr. Eashtan means,* Winterbaum thought.

Probe spoke in sentences of just two words, so if her Embryo’s name was one or more than two words long, she couldn’t say it even if she wasn’t secretive about it. It made him realize just how many Embryo motifs and weirdo Masters *Dendro* had to offer.

The End

## ***The Triangle of Bygone Days***

*A certain day of a certain month*

This happened back when Triangle of Wisdom was just another crafting clan among many others in Dryfe. Franklin, a Master with an Embryo in its fourth form, was sitting in a wooden shack attached to a shabby warehouse incomparable to the headquarters he would eventually have. The leader and originator of this clan, which he had started with the idea to create a humanoid robot, was silently facing the documents on his desk and reading them with a bitter expression.

“Fran, ya heeeeere?” AR-I-CA, the clan member who had been with Franklin since the start, opened the creaking door and went inside... but as she did so, the door came off the hinges and became nothing more than a board with handles on it. “Whoops. Sorry.”

“It’s okay. You can expect that sort of thing from this cheap shack,” Franklin replied. He didn’t sound like the mad scientist most people knew him as — he was actually being “herself.” The reason for this was because “she” was alone with AR-I-CA, one of the few people she could be completely honest with.

“Why not make this place a bit better?” AR-I-CA asked.

This place had been built by the ToW’s clan members, but the material was some of the cheapest possible. There was no security here to speak of; instead, any valuables were in their inventories at all times and the clan barely had anything worth stealing, anyway, so this shack was only used for office work.

“If I had funds I could spare for our living environment, I’d fund our prototypes instead. That’s what Holheim would want, too,” said Franklin.

“Ahahah. Yeah, he really would.” AR-I-CA laughed as she remembered the exhausted face of the clan’s sub-leader who doubled as the accountant. It always made him look like an overworked-yet-skilled secretary.

Franklin cracked a wry grin, too.

“So, what’s that?” AR-I-CA asked as she pointed at the documents Franklin was holding.

“Most of these are logs concerning the prototype we lost yesterday,” Franklin replied with a bitter expression.

“Ohhh...”

“Prototype” could only refer to the humanoid Magingear their clan was trying to create. It didn’t have a proper name yet — it wasn’t even complete.

“That’s a whole fifty we’ve lost...” Franklin sighed.

Thanks to the existence of crafting skills, creating parts and building the robots didn't take a lot of time. Even so, designing and creating fifty robots was time-consuming, and they hadn't had a single success yet.

"It's a nice number, but it looks like there're still lots of problems," said AR-I-CA.

"In the real world, the main problem behind building humanoid robots is power," Franklin explained. "Here, though, that's solved by the mystery voodoo we call 'magic,' which can be converted into all sorts of energy. But using it complicates the way the energy flows, which causes all these self-destructions."

They were using the already-existing powered suit Magingears as a reference to create prototypes that were basically bigger versions of those, but that almost always caused some circuits to overflow or become underpowered, making it impossible for the mech to even move.

"Maybe I should refer to the tanks instead?" Franklin added. "I'd whip up a simple mechanism where you just make the wheels spin and... but that would come at the cost of combat ability..."

"Hey, don't worry about it alone, okay?" AR-I-CA said as she hugged Franklin's head from behind.

"...What are you doing?"

"Breast cushion. Happy?"

"No. How many times do I have to tell you that I'm a woman in real life?"

*In fact, your size kinda irritates me,* Franklin added in thought.

"Oh. Well, it calmed you down, didn't it?"

"Well... I guess."

The warmth of another human being did have a calming effect.

“Aroused?”

“No.”

“Oh, okay. Anyway, this clan’s got lots of smarties, so I’m sure you’ll solve the problem if you just talk to them!”

“That’s not a good idea.”

There was the saying “Two heads are better than one,” and this clan was built with the idea of research and development using the combined knowledge and brainpower of many individuals. However, Franklin was controlling and directing the development to prevent a “Too many cooks spoil the broth” situation. With so many hobbyists here, it was obvious that letting everyone do what they wanted would make the project lose structure and make completion that much more distant.

“There’s the risk of others trying to take charge or having disputes over minor things. I really can’t ask for their opinions,” Franklin explained.

Another problem with being a group of hobbyists was that people were likely to become upset or try to take matters into their own hands when their ideas went unused. Franklin wanted to provide them with an environment where everyone could develop what they wanted, but for that, they had to complete the very first unit, and that problem troubled him to no end.

“I get it now,” said AR-I-CA. “By the way, you said that ‘most of these’ are logs. What else is there?”

Franklin still had a wry grin on his face, but a select few would be able to tell that the question made him a bit depressed. “Letters of resignation...”

“Ohh? Again?”

“Blitz and Waterloo left. That’s another two of our fighters gone. They even called me a parasite here. Not that I can argue. I’ve wasted a lot of our money.”

It was impossible to make something from nothing. You always needed money to create something, and building robots was a costly task even here in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

The ToW raised funds by either selling products crafted by Holheim and the other crafters, or by trading in quest rewards or monster loot gathered by the fighters. Both sides played a part, but there was a big difference in the way they saw things. The fighters could only participate in mech development by being test pilots or mock battle targets, but the development hadn’t even progressed to that point yet. There were even cases of test pilots getting the death penalty due to the robots exploding. From the fighters’ perspective, the crafters were just burning the money they gathered, which was leading many to quit. Some crafters also left due to the lack of prospects.

Franklin silently pondered just how bleak the outlook was. Holheim was doing his best, but despite his efforts, people were leaving, and their funds were dwindling. Whether they would even achieve their goal was an open question, and it worried Franklin to no end.

She hid it with the personality she played, but her thoughts were always on the negative side.

“It’s fine! Don’t worry, Fran!” said AR-I-CA, puffing her chest.

“I can see it! It’ll go great!” she continued as she pointed at her artificial eye, which was her Embryo.

“Your Embryo can’t see that far, can it?” Franklin retorted.

AR-I-CA’s Cassandra could see the future, but it was limited to near-immediate events, and only to dangers directed at her, so there was

no way she could see their clan succeeding in what they were trying to do.

“Yep! That’s why I’m seeing it with my normal eyes! I believe in you and everyone else in the clan! I can see our bright future!”

“I’m... not sure if I appreciate those words.”

Baseless confidence and optimistic observations were an enemy to all tech developers. Still...

“But if you trust me that much... it makes me want to meet your expectations,” Franklin said at last.

She felt like she could keep on trying. AR-I-CA was the only person she could show weakness to, and the only person who brought her back on her feet when she was close to breaking. With AR-I-CA supporting her mental state and Holheim supporting her environment, she was a balanced triangle. Because of this, she felt like could keep on trying — keep moving forward.

“All right. I guess I’ll go, then. Getting it all back on track once this is done is gonna be a pain in the ass, though.” Franklin stood up, log in hand, to go consult the other members about the problems with the prototype and take their ideas for the development direction.

AR-I-CA watched her best friend off with a smile on her face.



A month of such difficult days later, the Triangle of Wisdom completed the first Marshall II.

A while after that, AR-I-CA left the clan.

Her reason for doing that was a mystery to all but Franklin and AR-I-CA herself, but the influence it had on Franklin must’ve been

immense.

The End

## ***The Relationship Between AAA and BBB***

*Prism Rider, Ray Starling*

“I must say, the way you change is quite something,” Azurite commented. “The impression you give off is like night and day.”

“‘Change’?” B3 repeated. “Whatever do you mean?”

We were on the way back to Altea. Sitting in the coachman’s seat, Azurite and B3 were talking about something. Knowing the peculiar relationship between them, I was kinda worried.

“I am impressed that *that* armor could contract this much. Does it use an anthropomorphization spell?” asked Azurite.

“Let me to inform you that *this* is my default apparel. Not the armor,” B3 replied.

“That was a joke. I understand that much.”

So Azurite was just messing with her.

“Also, I can’t say I expected you to know how I appear in my armor,” B3 added.

“Oh, I do. I was investigating you to decide whether I should put you on the wanted list, after all,” Azurite explained. “Honestly, though, my impression of you has changed. You are far more refined than I thought.”

“Well, thank you very much, but... did you think I was brutish or something?” B3 spoke as if to argue against that point.

Azurite looked at her in confusion. “Aren’t you the one who harassed a low-level Master? Does the sentence ‘Kyah ha ha! Come on! Damage me for at least 1 HP and I’ll let ya go!’ ring a bell?”

*Oh, I’m pretty sure I saw that, too, I thought. Marie showed it to me. There was no sound in what she showed me, though. Man, that’s a villain-y phrase.*

“Cough...!” B3 made a sound like she choked on her own blood. “H- How do you know that...?”

“I just said I investigated you. That includes getting testimonies from your victims.”

This was probably like having someone else bring up something cringy you did in high school.

“I guess you could say that hiding my face makes my mind excited,” B3 admitted, looking embarrassed.

B3 had mentioned something about having to be “turned on” in some way to switch. So it was all about hiding her face, huh? Going by how she’d sounded back in Torne, the helmet even had some sort of voice-modifying device to fit the change.

“I see. I wear a mask myself, so I do understand you a bit,” said Azurite.

“Well, but... isn’t it the other way around for you?”

“What do you mean?” Azurite asked.

B3 paused for a second before saying, “Without a mask on, sword in hand, you struck a pose and said, ‘Are you prepared?’”

“Cough...!” Now I heard Azurite choke.

*Oh, that’s from the battle against the crab. I saw a recording of it online, and I guess B3 did, too.*

“How do you know that...? An impressive counterattack, though, I will give you that much,” Azurite admitted.

“I didn’t intend it that way.”

“My Truth Discernment just flared up a bit. But... very well. Let us not have conversations in this vein again.”

“Understood.”

Due to her prior offense, Azurite was treating B3 with a bit of harshness and a lot of sarcasm, while B3, though generally on the receiving end, occasionally went in for counterattacks.

*Why do they insist on repeating these self-destructive exchanges?* I wondered.

“I have a feeling that you are an indirect cause,” said Nemesis telepathically.

*Why?*

“Well, it is nothing I should say. More importantly, you should stop letting them distract you and return to your coachman duties.”

Nemesis had a point, so I focused on Silver’s reins.

The two ladies inside continued their exchanges until we arrived at Altea.

The End

## ***Sisters***

*Bow Hunter, Gerbera*

A depressing rain was falling upon the gaol.

Our clan leader, Sechs, had left to get coffee beans for the café, leaving me alone with April.

To absolutely no one's surprise, you had to get coffee beans even here.

The gaol had no proper restaurants or vendor tians, but there were some vending machine-like shops. Was that where he was going?

The alternative was that he would farm coffee beans in a dungeon, but I found it hard to believe that.

*Oh, speaking of dungeons...*

"Hey, April, can I ask you something?" I called out to the robot.

"What-is-it?" she replied in monotone.

"The leader picked you up in a dungeon, right?" I asked, remembering him saying something about a treasure chest.

"Af-fir-ma-tive. This-u-nit-was-dis-a-bled-du-ring-a-bat-tle-at-the-end-of-the-pre-an-cient-civ-i-li-za-tion. The-ow-ner-ship-in-for-mation-was-re-set, as-well. Af-ter-re-ac-ti-va-ting, I-re-gis-tered-the-current-own-er-as-my-ow-ner."

That sounded like some a baby bird's filial imprinting. But looking at how much she knew, it wasn't like she'd lost her memories, right? I didn't get it at all.

"So... do you remember what you did before you starting serving our leader?" I asked.

"I-used-to-pri-mar-i-ly-pro-tect-V-I-Ps."

"Ohh, that sounds like a perfect job for you."

She was the world's toughest bodyguard, after all. Of course, she'd have to make sure her Material Slider didn't harm those she wanted to protect.

"Af-fir-ma-tive. I-am-the-Prism-Pe-son-fo-cused-on-en-dur-ance. It-is-a-good-ap-pli-ca-tion-of-my-a-bi-li-ties."

"So you're saying there are other Prism People as powerful as you?"

"Af-fir-ma-tive. There-were-a-to-tal-of-five-of-us-made. I-am-u-nit-two. Every-one-be-sides-u-nit-one, who-may-be-called-my-el-der-sister, had-ex-cep-tio-nal-bat-tle-ca-pa-bi-li-ties."

*So she's one of five sisters, huh...? Wait, there are four... no, three robots... as strong as her?*

"Can I ask what the strong sisters were like?" I asked.

"U-nit-three, Jet-Cha-ser, was-fo-cused-on-speed. She-was-e-quipped-with-a-mo-di-fi-ca-tion-wea-pon-that-made-her-the-fastest-in-all-cir-cum-stan-ces."

"That's just broken."

"U-nit-four, Gar-net-De-stro-yer, was-fo-cused-on-fire-pow-er. She-was-e-quipped-with-ma-ny-tac-ti-cal-wea-pons."

"Was she the same size as you? You're sure she wasn't a giant robot?"

Also, the name reminded me of a certain bear, and remembering that bear made me kinda depressed.

"U-nit-five, Pearl-Sa-vior, was-fo-cused-on-hea-ling. She-was-e-quipped-with-me-di-cal-na-no-ma-chines-and-dil-i-gent-ly-served-hea-ling-the-hea-vi-ly-in-jured-and-se-rious-ly-sick."

"That's a bit sci-fi, but really peaceful compared to the others. I think healing magic does the job just fine, though."

Wait, from what I could recall, healing magic was weak against diseases that required surgery...

"But wait, the fifth isn't exactly a battle robot, right?" I asked.

"She-also-ex-celled-in-sen-ding-na-no-ma-chines-in-to-the-bo-dy-and-as-sas-si-na-ting-the-tar-get-from-with-in."

"I take it back..."

What a dangerous bunch of sisters. Whoever'd made them must have been a real mad scientist. The pre-ancient civilization sounded like an era of insane robots.

"Will your sisters pop out of some chest, too?" I asked.

"That-is-im-pos-si-ble." After saying nothing but "af-fir-ma-tive" to all I'd asked, she was finally denied something.

"Why?"

"The-three-are-ei-ther-de-stroyed-or-miss-ing."

"...Sorry."

I knew I was in a game, and that she was a robot, but I still felt like I asked something I shouldn't have.

April, however, didn't change her expression and said without pause, "No-need-to-a-po-lo-gize. It-is-the-past-and-no-thing-but-a-re-cord-of-the-truth."

It was as if she felt nothing about her sisters "dying."

"Don't you feel that it's... a sad memory?" I asked slowly.

"If-there-is-some-thing-I-'feel,'" April said as she looked at the devices in the café, "it-would-be-the-fact-that-I-was-far-more-for-tunate-than-my-sis-ters."

I looked at her in silence. She had basically just said that she was fortunate to still exist, and that that was what separated her from her sisters. It felt less robotic and more like something a philosophical person would think.

"Want some of the cake I made?" I asked at last.

I didn't know whether I wanted to thank her for telling me about her past or make it up to her for being insensitive, but I took out the cake from my inventory and handed it to her. She didn't need to eat, but she could still enjoy the taste.

“Thank-you.”

She accepted my offer, and we both ate cake together.

We were the only ones here, and neither of us said a word. All we could hear was the sound of the rain outside.

“Unit five...” Suddenly, April stopped moving her fork and spoke up with vocal smoothness not present before. “She was good at making sweets. The other battle-focused units, myself included, weren’t fit for such precise work.”

“...I see.”

April then returned to eating the cake.

*Why did she say that, though?*

When I’d asked whether losing her sisters was a sad memory to her, she’d said that all she’d felt was that she was more fortunate than her sisters just by the virtue of still existing, but then, after a strangely long pause, she had indirectly implied having fun memories with her sisters... which implied that she felt something for them, too.

I was dumb, though, so I wasn’t sure if my interpretation was any good.

After we silently finished the cake, I began to wonder if she would ever fondly look back at the days she spent with us.

It wasn’t a very “me” thought. The weather must’ve made me sentimental.

“I wonder when the leader’s coming back,” I pondered. After eating something sweet, I was up for some good coffee to help me change my mood.

I looked at the rain outside and waited for Sechs.

April joined me, and together, we both simply watched the time pass by.

The End



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by Sakon Kaidou

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