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Infinite Aeondrogram

9. Blue Blood Blitz

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Infinite End Program

9. Blue Blood Blitz



Infinite Dendrogram

9. Blue Blood Blitz

Sakon Kaidou
Illustrator: Taiki

**"I am
the first
princess
of the
Kingdom
of Altar —
Sacred
Princess,
Altomia
Azurite
Altar."**

**"Are you
prepared?"**

Then, she pointed the tip of her blade at Acra, cracked a fearless smile, and asked:

"By these names, the duties that come with them, and by my own will, I shall not tolerate anyone menacing the people of the kingdom."

It was none other than the name of the one who inherited the blade, Altar, and the country named after it.

Azurite, also known as Sacred Princess, Altomia, looked at Acra with her unmasked eyes. Facing the machine as it stood up using its remaining legs, she declared,

Character

Ray

Ray Starling / Reiji Mukudori

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



Nemesis

Nemesis

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



Rook

Rook Holmes/Lucius Holmes

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



Marie

Marie Adler/Nagisa Ichimiya

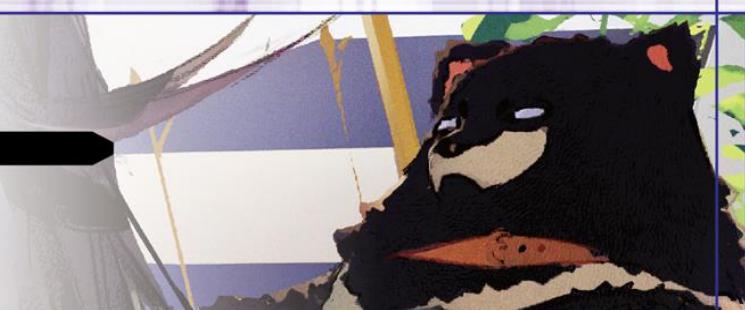
A Journalist player working for the information organization called "DIN," giving her access to lots of various info. Having gained an interest in him, she now accompanies Ray, who has a tendency to be at the center of large incidents.



Shu

Shu Starling / Shuichi Mukudori

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



Conjunction: The Unfinished Hope

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

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

Thus, those who are cornered create things that will save them.

It might be beliefs that speak of the salvation of the soul, lives that carry their wills to the next generation... or beings that can shatter the encroaching despair.



Long ago, in the age of what was now known as the “pre-ancient civilization,” there was a weapons plant deep within the mountains that eventually became part of the Quartierlatin County.

It had equipment for mining resources, turning them into materials, extracting energy from the earth, and producing Prism Soldiers. Everything inside was advanced enough to work without human interference.

Despite this, there were people inside.

They were in the deepest depths of the facility, developing the most important thing within.

Standing behind fortified glass, they used remote-controlled manipulators to bring it further to completion.

Suddenly, the automatic door to their workroom opened, and a man walked inside, accompanied by a small child.

“Sir?” one of the workers asked. “Why did you bring your son here?”

“We completed the core yesterday, didn’t we?” he replied. “I want to show it to him. It’s the hope that’ll save our world... and all the children of the future.”

As they had that exchange, the boy walked up to the glass wall. The thing beyond made him gasp in amazement.

“Dad, is that the thing that will protect us?”

“It is. Acra-Vesta will save everyone,” his father replied.

The clockwork sphere behind the glass was the weapon’s artificial intelligence block. It would eventually be shielded by a frame and hull, completing it as a weapon.

This anti-incarnation weapon, as it was labeled, had the groundbreaking ability to develop and produce its own parts, as well as the equipment that would create them.

The workers were only laying the foundation for the auto-creation process. Once this was done, Acra-Vesta would begin turning itself into a superweapon.

“Really?” the boy asked eagerly.

“Yes.” His father nodded. “Acra-Vesta is our hope. It will beat the incarnations and save the world.”

The word “incarnations” referred to the nightmarish beings that were attacking the pre-ancient civilization. They were the very source of their despair.

One of them was immortalized on the wall of the plant’s hall, along with some writing and the name of the genius who’d designed this facility, to make sure no one ever forgot their terror.

"Wowww!" the boy became excited. Hearing that this machine here would save the world filled him with joy. "When that happens, will we get to see Mom again?"

His dad was silent. That was something that couldn't happen even if the world was saved, but the man couldn't bring himself to say it.

This era was full of such tragedies. They were building Acra-Vesta to prevent any more of them from happening.

"Sure... When the world is at peace again," he said as he patted his son's head, before taking his hand and leaving the workroom.

"Bye bye!" The boy waved his free hand to Acra-Vesta's intelligence block. "See ya!"

There was no response to those words. All you could hear from the machine were the silent sounds made by its optical sensor.



It was a two-millennia-old superweapon created to become mankind's hope.

Ironically, its awakening in the present day was triggered by a battle between two factions of men.

Devils were attacking Quartierlatin.

Marionettes were infiltrating the ruins.

Fatally glitched Prism Soldiers were moving out.

And the people were struggling against them all.

In spite of that, Acra-Vesta didn't move.

But the incomplete superweapon knew that the time for awakening was drawing near.

Chapter One: Battle of the Fairy Tales

The Town of Quartierlatin

Hell General Logan Goddhart had unleashed two thousand devils upon Quartierlatin. Now, the Dryfean Superior continued to terrorize the town.

It was early in the morning. The alarm sounding throughout the area woke everyone up and had them scrambling for safety.

Sitting on the back of a devil different than the ones comprising the army, Logan looked down at the town like it was anthill.

“I’m attacking a town...” he muttered. “Franklin tried the same thing a month ago and failed, didn’t he?”

Gifted Barbaros had given him a quest: to derange the forces protecting Quartierlatin. In his mind, that was the same as invading the town.

Not that he was wrong. The defending force would definitely have to shift their focus to him.

However... he had no intention of limiting himself to being *just* diversion.

“Looks like there are two ways I’ll succeed where he failed: I’ll beat The Unbreakable *and* take the town.” The Hell General grinned. “Lots of trees in this town. It’ll burn real well. Fire it is.”

Thus, the two thousand devils began spewing balls of flame. They hit the houses, trees, and *the inhabitants*, setting everything on fire.

“In the war, I found out NPCs give a lot of XP,” he grinned. “I’m on a mission from Dryfe, so they won’t put me on the wanted list. I’ll gather as much as I can here.”

People were burning, screaming in pain, but the horrid sight did nothing to Logan — he cared only about the XP.

The reek of scorching death didn't reach him; in his eyes, they were only CG characters covered in flames that were just as artificial.

To someone who had that setting on — especially for one who thought of this as nothing but a game — this was just him following his quest. Killing the NPCs for XP was just a nice bonus. It meant nothing to him. The only life he cared about here was that of his quest giver, Gifted Barbaros. It didn't go anywhere beyond that.

Despite being a Superior, one of the most prominent Masters, he still saw *Infinite Dendrogram* as nothing but a game.

“Hm?” He raised an eyebrow as he looked down at an army of about two hundred knights. “Is that the defense force?”

Those were the tian knights protecting the Quartierlatin County. They were moving out to defend the people from the vile, cruel demons burning their town and killing the townsfolk.

“Ha!” Logan laughed, ridiculing the knights’ desperate, valiant resistance against the devilish horde. “They must have some bad AI. They don’t have the quality or the quantity, but they’re still coming at me. Idiots.”

Yes, even their courage was worthless stupidity to this man.

Logan let loose ten devils for each knight.

It was far too much for a common tian, knight or otherwise, and they quickly overwhelmed them, halting their advance.

The scene felt like a replay of the war.

“They’re weak, but they’re still battle jobs. They give more XP than other NPCs,” he said in satisfaction before moving on.

Eventually, he ran into a certain building.

"There are a lot of them in there," he said. "That makes it easier for me."

He was looking at *an orphanage*. It was full of children and workers hiding from the scary devils.

But even this was just "an easy target" for him.

Logan decided to shower the building in dozens of fireballs, simply because that was the most effective way to burn everyone inside.

"I hope I find more places like this. They'll make XP farming a real cakewalk," he muttered as he raised the greatsword in his right hand.

He was preparing to give the signal to fire and set the orphanage aflame. The idea that he was about to take the lives of many children hadn't even crossed his mind. After all — this was just a game. To him, doing this felt no different than opening a treasure chest in an RPG.

"Fi—" But his signal, the word "fire," was cut short by a sudden turn of events — the complete extermination of all the dozens of devils he'd prepared for the attack.

Some shattered into little pieces.

Some were split in two.

Some expelled all their blood and collapsed.

Some began attacking their own, as if someone had taken control over them.

The ways were different, but one thing was certain — someone had killed the devils.

“What?” Logan looked around in confusion. He was surprised that someone here could destroy his Demi-Dragon-tier creatures so easily, and he wondered who it was.

“I didn’t expect to see something so disgustingly familiar on my morning walk,” the answer came in the form of a man’s voice — or, rather, music that sounded like it. “Apologies, but I promised the children here I would play music for them. I know I am in not in the position to talk, considering what I did in Gideon... but *I won’t let you harm them.*”

The owner of the voice was standing before the orphanage.

It was an old man. He was surrounded by machines reminiscent of metal musical instruments, donning the shapes of a kobold, centaur, harpy, and cat sìth.

He was the King of Orchestras, Veldorbell.

Once a Master belonging to Dryfe, now he was merely a wandering musician who played music alongside his Embryos.

“You’re... King of Orchestras!” Logan exclaimed. He knew the old man’s name. Franklin was a rival to him, after all, so of course he knew all the top fighters from the mad scientist’s clan. “Why are you here?! Did Franklin send you to get in my way?!”

“No.” The old man’s music silently sung. “I’ve left The Triangle of Wisdom.”

And I doubt Franklin cares about you enough to get in your way, the old man’s tone implied, though he didn’t put it in the lyrics.

“Then why are you here?” Logan demanded.

“Like I said, the orphans in here are my audience. I won’t stand by and let some vile devils take them from me.”

“Huh...? What are you talking about?” Logan couldn’t begin to understand.

He'll play for some orphans? Is that a quest or something? he wondered. That was the only way he could process it. After all, what else could it be?

Veldorbell ignored his confusion and added, “Not to mention that a man who does nothing in a movement like this has no business writing a hero’s saga. That is what’s most important to me.”

The old man had started playing *Infinite Dendrogram* for the sole purpose of getting the inspiration he needed to write an opera depicting the life of a hero. He would attack or defend, but never stand still and do nothing. And like the free Master that he was, he was choosing to defend his audience instead of standing in line with his old faction and attacking.

“A saga?” Logan repeated. “Write about me, then.”

“Hm?” Veldorbell tilted his head in confusion.

That made Logan irritated. How could the old man not understand something so simple? “I’m the hero of this game. There’s no better person for you to write about.”

In response, Veldorbell merely chuckled, contradicting the Hell General’s claim more eloquently than any words ever could.

“You damn...” Logan instantly began boiling with anger. “You’re a support build for support builds! Do you seriously think you stand a chance against the Hell General?!”

“Who knows? What about you? Do you think a suppression type like you can do anything against an extermination type like me?”

“Stop talking! I’m the Hell General! The most numerous and the strongest Superior in Dryfe!”

“Fix your tone, brat. And you’re neither of those things.”

“Shut up!” Logan gave in to anger and mobilized his devils. A hundred or so of them charged at the elder, hungry for his head.

Their charge was menacing...

"Percussion's music isn't so weak as to be broken without a plan."

...but they stood no chance against the invisible vibration waves. Those pulverized them in seconds.

Logan was shocked.

"*Heart Beat Palpitation.*" That was the name of the music created by Percussion, the Bremen playing the drums.

Thanks to the passive skill Veldorbell held as King of Orchestras, "Orchestral King's Conducting," that music had been enhanced several times over, becoming a fearsome field of vibrations so powerful they broke apart physical material.

Marie, the Superior Killer, had had to fake her own death to stand a chance against it. It was one of the most powerful defense-offense hybrid skills to come from Dryfe.

"Tch!" Logan spat.

"No point in talking anymore," Veldorbell sighed, and stood like the conductor he was, his supreme orchestra at his side. He looked at the Superior devil-commander. "Come. My divine ensemble shall crush all of your imps."

"You dare mock me...?! You senile sixth-former!"

And thus the two were matched up.

The ex-strongest fighter from Dryfe's top clan, the Triangle of Wisdom: the King of Orchestras, Veldorbell.

The reigning duel champion of Dryfe and Superior — Hell General, Logan Goddhart.

This was the beginning of their battle.





Among the tales from the Brothers Grimm, there was one called “Rumpelstiltskin.”

It went something like this:

A poor miller once lied that his daughter could spin straw into gold.

It spread as a rumor, and when the king caught wind of this, he captured the daughter and locked her up, saying, “Spin all this into gold by morning. If you do that for three days in a row, I’ll take you as my queen. If you don’t, I’ll have your head.”

When the powerless girl gave up all hope, an imp-like creature appeared before her, offering to spin straw into gold in exchange for some jewelry.

This happened twice, but the third time, the feat came at the cost of her eventual firstborn, and she had no choice but to comply.

Having cleared the king’s condition, the girl became the queen.

But when she had her firstborn, she begged the creature not to take him. The creature agreed on the condition that she guess its name within three days.

In the end, she discovered that the imp shared its name with the tale — Rumpelstiltskin.

Now, what kind of powers would a Superior Embryo of the same name have? What could False Finesse, Rumpelstiltskin actually do?

It was based on the “spinning straw into gold” part of the story. Job skills under its effects became significantly more powerful.

In its first form, it could only *double a single number* in job skill descriptions, but as it evolved, its multiplication grew, as well as the quantity of numbers it could influence.

At this point, the Embryo's constantly-active ultimate skill, "Straw-into-Gold, Rumpelstiltskin," could *multiply ten numbers by ten*.

That made Rumpelstiltskin the Embryo that could use job skills better than any other, uplifting them to new levels.

For this invasion, Logan had multiplied the points he'd gotten from his sacrifice. Then he'd done the same for Call Devil Regiment's summon count and time.

And unlike how it was with Summoner creatures, the devils created by his skills didn't need any fixed catalysts. The stats were in the description, and he was free to alter them.

He'd multiplied all of them except for LUC — the multiplication didn't have much of an effect there — by ten.

Points, summon count, summon time, and seven stats. That made ten numbers multiplied, and Logan believed this was the best way to use his Rumpelstiltskin and Hell General combo.

On the other hand, Logan rarely used skills besides his summons and army. He had party enhancement skills, but he didn't like them much.

Upgrading them required lots of MP, and the cost scaled with the power of the buffed devils. Though Logan's Rumpelstiltskin could increase effect power, it couldn't reduce costs. Even his summon point manipulation was no exception. He merely increased the points he had, not lowered the costs of his summons.

Additionally, though he had three stat buff skills to choose from — one for STR, one for END, and one for AGI — they only increased

the stats by 20%. Multiplying that number by ten would only give him a 200% enhancement.

Logan's ultimate skill was more effective when used on the base stats during summoning.

Basically, Logan preferred to fight by letting his Rumpelstiltskin-enhanced devils crush his enemies.

Thanks to the nature of his Embryo, he'd quickly cleared the job conditions — including “summon count” — for Hell General, and he'd reached a Superior Job without even filling up the rest of his job slots.

Despite that, his devil army was a powerful force. A horde that could be restored with a single skill was menacing indeed, and that was how Logan had won most of his victories outside of the arena.

After all, who could stand a chance against such overwhelming numbers?



That question was answered by his battle against Veldorbell. He hadn't expected what was happening here at all.

Reason insisted that a battle-focused Superior like Logan should absolutely dominate the support job from the conductor grouping pre-Superior that was Veldorbell.

And yet...

“Tch!” Logan clicked his tongue, his face in a grimace.

The reason for his frustration was that his devil army seemed to stand no chance against the old man's Bremen. Faced with the vibration field, the devils didn't know how to continue. Charging ahead would make them shatter, and the fire they launched disappeared like mist.

The deadly mix of defense and offense was too much even for a horde of Demi-Dragon-tier devils.

To make things worse, the attacks of the other Bremen had longer ranges. More and more devils fell to the ultrasound scalpel, the high-output low-frequency waves, and the hypnotic music.

The defense couldn't be overcome by mere numbers, and the attacks were deadly and as fast as sound.

Veldorbell's battle style was almost a perfect counter for Logan.

"Khh!" He voiced his vexation.

"I was with Dryfe. The top clan, at that. I know your fighting style well." Veldorbell's music sang in his voice. "You're the Hell General — a devil summoner. Your strength lies in your ability to quickly summon an army of devils. Your Embryo's unique skill lets you increase the cost-performance. It's perfect for you. Normally, to get an army of devils this powerful, you would have to sacrifice a whole town, if not more. I assume these are all Demi-Dragon-tier?"

He sighed as he described his opponent's strategy, proving that he did indeed know what he was facing.

Of course, that was mostly because Logan never even tried to hide his Embryo's power from anyone in Dryfe.

His ultimate skill was constantly active to begin with, so hiding it wouldn't give him anything like an element of surprise. Not to mention he wanted everyone to know why he was above everyone else.

He'd started this after the war, when Franklin had become a Superior.

Logan's sense of rivalry had driven him to flaunt it.

Of course, there was little disadvantage for him in revealing Rumpelstiltskin's powers, but it still gave people like Veldorbell a better grasp of the situation.

It wasn't enough to be a blunder, but it was a negative nonetheless.

Side note: in the tale from the Brothers Grimm, Rumpelstiltskin's name was revealed because the creature sang it himself, making it a fitting name for Logan's Embryo in more ways than one.

"But there is a limit to how much you can enhance the devil army. These are all too weak to break through Percussion's vibration field," Veldorbell declared. "If you wanted devils that could survive Heart Beat Palpitation, even a Superior like you would need to sacrifice something major, no?"

"Well, you sure know a lot, King of Orchestras," grumbled Logan.

"I said I did, did I not? I'm certain we can defeat any devils within your reasonable limits... up to Legendary-tier, I'm guessing. So why not get rid of little old me by sacrificing a special reward and summoning a Mythical? You know, like you did with the kingdom's commander."

He was referring to the Hell General's ultimate job skill, Call Devil Zero Exceed.

Unlike how it was with the other skills, the points for it could only be gathered by using a very luxurious sacrifice.

Even for Logan, who could multiply the points gained by ten, the only items that could give him enough were special rewards.

Also, since the Mythical-tier devil's stats weren't in the descriptions, Rumpelstiltskin couldn't enhance them like it could for Call Devil Regiment. Same went for the Legendary-tier devils.

But despite those many problems, it was still Logan's trump card. It had brought him victory in all the battles he used it in. In a way, it was his ultimate skill.

However...

"You can't do it now, can you?" Veldorbell's song continued. "The cost is far too great. After all, *this isn't the arena*."

This was the reason why Logan was Dryfe's reigning duel champion.

All items lost and consumed within arena barriers returned the moment the duel ended, and the special rewards he sacrificed were no exception.

While dueling, Logan could use his special rewards without hesitation, sometimes summoning several of the Mythical-tier devils.

No one else in the duel rankings stood a chance against that.

Another side note: Franklin had once told him, at their first meeting, "You're only the champ 'cause Behemot doesn't duel, though. I mean, the King of Beasts could take care of your Mythicals in a snap."

Logan had seen both Franklin and the King of Beasts as rivals ever since.

"Well? Will you throw away a special reward and bring in the Mythical?" Veldorbell provoked him.

Veldorbell's only chance to win would be the moment Logan tried to use that skill.

As things were, he couldn't move or disable the vibration field because he was protecting the orphanage behind him. But if Logan decided to summon a Mythical-tier devil, he could switch to offense.

Summoning devils required time and rendered the summoner defenseless. During that moment, Veldorbell would disable the vibration field and attack with his ultimate skill, Beast Orchestra — Bremen.

A super-powerful vibration wave from Percussion, or Wind's song that drove enemies to suicide, would surely defeat both the devils and Logan.

Perhaps Veldorbell only had to whittle away the number of devils until Logan had to summon more. Regardless, he was biding his time.

Focused on his conducting, he observed Logan, waiting for the right moment to strike.

"Tch." Logan clicked his tongue. "You talk a lot for someone who's not even moving his mouth."

He then cracked a hideous grin. It was an expression that didn't belong on the face of the hero he'd used as reference for his avatar.

"Listen here, old fart... You've got it all wrong."

"What?"

"I don't need to sacrifice a special reward for you. I've got something way cheaper." He snapped his fingers, making one of the devils behind him show itself.

It was carrying *a person*.

"You wretch...!" Veldorbell exclaimed, this time with his own voice.

"This NPC is more than enough," Logan taunted.

It was a girl Veldorbell recognized.

She was one of the children he'd played for in the countess's mansion yesterday, and she loved his music a lot.

She had been so scared that she'd ran out of the orphanage, only to end up in the arms of a devil.

"You said something about children, didn't you?" Logan mocked. "I thought it'd be useful, so I picked one up. And looking at that face, I can tell I was right. *This* is the item that counters you! HAHAHAHAHAH!" Logan laughed out loud, gleeful that he got back at Veldorbell for trying to sway him. "HAHAHAH! Here's a little something for the concert!"

The devil threw the girl into the air ahead, straight into the destructive barrier that would reduce her to less than dust.

"Heart Beat Palpitation, cancel!" Veldorbell acted instantly.

He ordered Percussion to stop playing, canceling the field right before the girl entered, while Strings, the centaur, ran to catch her.

But that was when the greatsword Logan threw pierced Veldorbell in his torso, pinning him to the ground.

"Ghph..!"

"Pathetic! That's what you get for getting invested in NPCs!" Logan laughed as the devils attacked Bremen.

They fought back using their skills, but losing their conductor meant a severe loss of power. They took out a few, but there were far too many.

The devils were destroying them.

Wind's flute and Clavier's keyboard were broken.

Strings earnestly protected the girl and carried her back to the orphanage, but that came at the cost of its instrument and one of its legs.

Pierced by the sword and unable to do anything, Veldorbell watched his Bremen. He was Bleeding, and his HP was dropping

quickly, not to mention the special reward blade had some sort of curse-based debuff.

It wouldn't be long until he got the death penalty.

Despite his state, he still looked at his Bremen, and they looked back at him. There was a fire in all their eyes.

Though hurt or broken, they could still fight.

"I guess it's time for the finale." Veldorbell, though fatally wounded, rose his hands to the sky. "Final Orchestra!"

It was the King of Orchestras's ultimate job skill.

By taking an immense amount of his own health, it multiplied the effects of all musical skills by ten.

Bremen regrouped and became a single musical machine centered around Percussion, the only one whose instrument wasn't broken.

"WHAT?!" Logan had thought that Veldorbell was as good as dead, so this turn of events shocked him.

However, it was too late for him to do anything about it. Veldorbell and Bremen were already playing.

"Beast Orchestra — Bremen: PERCUSSION!"

Thus, the final and the greatest shockwave flew towards the distant sky, crushing over a thousand devils, as well as Logan himself.



Once the shockwave had passed, only one being was left standing in the path it'd traveled.

"You went and done it, old fart," said Logan. "You took out over half of my army... and my Brooch."

He bit his lip and grimaced at the shattered Lifesaving Brooch that'd fallen off of him. He couldn't believe that he, of all people, had just essentially lost a life to a non-Superior.

However, the culprits weren't unscathed, either.

The shockwave came at a cost, apparently, since Bremen were now just empty pieces of metal, while Veldorbell was rendered immobile and silent by the greatsword's curse-based debuff. Within the next two minutes, he'd Bleed out what little HP he had left and receive the death penalty.

"You deserve a reward for giving me a hard time," growled Logan, humiliated. "I don't know or care if it's a quest or if you just got invested, but I'll completely destroy this damn orphanage." Then he cracked a dark grin and pointed at the building. "I won't burn it. My devils are gonna eat them one by one."

It'd take longer, but his role here was to buy time anyway, so it didn't matter where and how he attacked.

Hell, we're at war. It doesn't matter how hard I crush them, he thought. "Do it."

The devils who'd survived the battle against Veldorbell amounted to fewer than five hundred. Besides them, there were about a hundred of those who were still fighting Quartierlatin's knights. The devil army had lost a lot of its numbers.

Even so, Logan was sure this was more than enough to eat up the orphanage and crush Quartierlatin.

Veldorbell wanted to stop the devils heading for the children, but he could neither speak nor move a finger. This was the end of the aged composer's promise and the beginning of a tragedy.

However, there was someone who couldn't allow that.

"Purgatorial Flames, max power!" a man's voice rang out, and the devils were drowned in dark-red fire unlike their own.

Dozens of the ones leading the charge to the orphanage were set ablaze. They were now writhing on the road, screaming in pain.

"Who are you?" Logan asked, looking at the source of the fire.

With devils burning all around, a dimly-lit silhouette was walking forward.

It had a strange appearance.

The man's whole body was covered by a coat akin to darkness itself.

The armor that occasionally peeked through the coat was a menacing mix of black and crimson.

His hands were shielded by bracers depicting demonic faces, while his legs were in boots reminiscent of corpses.

Most who saw him would surely think he was wicked.

But his eyes told a different story — the devils' brutality had set them alight with a righteous fury.

"I guess you're the Hell General," he said.

Slightly taken aback by the raw emotion in his voice, Logan repeated his question. "Who are you?"

He glared directly into the Hell General's eyes before giving his name. "Ray Starling."

He was The Unbreakable — the one who'd broken Franklin's plots twice.

"Ohhh." Veldorbell finally let out a voice as he slowly became particles of light. He didn't know the reason why The Unbreakable was here. It didn't even cross his mind that Ray had come because he

heard the old man's final Beast Orchestra. But Veldorbell was satisfied.

He looked at Ray's back with a fulfilled smile on his face.

After all, that back was almost exactly like the one of the hero he'd envisioned for the dream of his lifetime.

"I leave the rest... to you." Veldorbell fought through the blade's curse to speak those words.

"You can count on me," Ray replied.

Upon hearing that, the elderly composer and his Embryos smiled before becoming bits of light and finally vanishing.

Ray stood before Logan, his heart full of anger.

It was an anger Nemesis was familiar with. She knew full well that Ray Starling... Reiji Mukudori... was a well-meaning person prone to acting on goodwill or righteous indignation. He could never ignore anything that could give him a bad aftertaste. Anyone who'd bring tragedy was a target to him, and he'd face them with a heart full of anger.

He was like this in *Infinite Dendrogram*, as well as everywhere else, and it wasn't going to change anytime soon.

However, Nemesis knew that his anger had two forms.

The first was the rage at those who filled the future with potential tragedies — the anger he used as fuel to unlock the future he desired.

The second was the fury at the wicked malice of those who'd already created many tragedies and laughed on top of them.

Most of those he'd faced were the former. Gardranda, the RSK, Monochrome... even Franklin was one of these.

But there had been one very clear example of the latter — the Lich, Maise.

That man had been a true wretch who'd taken the lives of countless children and gone on to toy with their corpses.

Nemesis was aware that Ray's anger back then had been different in nature, and far more than his flesh and blood could stand.

And now, just like Maise before, Logan had crossed the line.

He'd set the town on fire, attacked an orphanage, and declared he would have his devils eat the children.

It was malice wicked enough to trigger Ray's fury.

Ray's opponent was none other than the Hell General, Logan Goddhart — a Superior. The gap in power between the two of them was even greater than the one between Ray and Maise, not to mention that Logan had an army of Demi-Dragon-tier devils on his side.

Ray was outclassed and outnumbered, but it didn't matter to him.

He had already decided he would face this evil.

Chapter Two: Of Demons and Devils

Prism Rider, Ray Starling

Surrounded by a burning city, I faced a man.

He was the Hell General, Logan Goddhart — one of Dryfe's Superiors I'd heard about.

Apparently, he was above even Franklin in battle. Leading an army of devils, he had used them to devastate the Royal Guard, as well as take the life of Liliana and Milianne's father.

I'd suspected that he was the culprit as soon as I saw all the devils attacking Quartierlatin.

Machines, marionettes, and devils. There were three major threats here, and this guy was the biggest reason why I was here.

In the ruins, the Prism Soldiers were fighting Dr. Mario's marionettes, so they were too busy to be a danger to the town right now.

Tom was there, too, and I trusted he'd keep them inside.

But even if I hadn't had those reasons, I'd still have come here, to the Hell General and his devils setting the town ablaze.

"Ray Starling, you say?" the Hell General said as one of the devils returned the blade that'd pierced Veldorbell to him. "Ha ha ha! Your clothes have sure changed a lot over the last month. That's a real villain look. Perfect for someone about to lose to me."

I said nothing in response and examined *his* appearance.

He looked a lot like the protagonist of a game I'd played before cutting off all entertainment to study for my exams. His armor was

custom-made to be just like that character's, and his face was about what I'd have expected for that face in a more realistic art style.

However, that protagonist would never have done something this vile. I couldn't even imagine him proudly saying he'd *feed children to devils*.

"This disgusting little..." I muttered in rage.

Back at the hall in the ruins, I'd remembered the Gouz-Maise gang. But the machines were only like that because of their programming.

This guy, on the other hand, was like the Lich right down to the core. Both of them hurt the weak and mocked those trying to stop them in the exact same way.

That gave me a severe heartache. My state of mind was about the same now as it had been back in that old fortress. Even I knew I was on the verge of erupting.

"Heh heh heh," he snickered. "Ray Starling the Unbreakable! I've wanted to meet you."

"You have?"

What the hell? I raised an eyebrow.

"I've seen you fight since the time Franklin trapped the vice commander of the Royal Guard. I saw how you beat a Demi-Drag-Worm at level 0."

He was talking about the first thing I'd gotten involved in, here in this world.

Well, that was a Dryfean plot. No surprise he'd know about it, I thought.

"I also know he lost against you, even though he planned for it," the Hell General grinned, clearly enjoying the fact that his ally had been defeated. "That felt great."

Perhaps he didn't see fellow Dryfean Superiors as his allies?

Well, you can say the same thing about our kingdom's Figaro and Miss Eldritch, I reminded myself.

"Now you stand before me," he continued. "You foiled two of Franklin's plots, and now it's time for you to lose. Defeating you is my greatest wish right now!"

"You wanna avenge him?" I asked.

"No! My goal is to prove that I'm better than him!"

I had no words.

I could barely understand him, but I could tell he was gathering his forces here. Looking around, I noticed that none of the devils were going out to destroy the town anymore. They were all standing close to the Hell General, ready to beat me.

I didn't mind having to fight more if I kept them distracted from the rest of the town.

"I went out of my way to come to the kingdom, and found you here all by yourself," the Hell General grinned. "How convenient. No other Superiors will get in my way as I beat you and prove that I'm better than Franklin."

"Hm?" I had a slight sense of *déjà vu*. "Let me tell you one thing."

"What?"

"Just a couple days ago, there was a PK clan that said something like that. It's gone now."

Sol Crisis, the clan that had been solo killed by B3, was still fresh in my memory. The way Logan was talking was so similar to their manner that I'd just had to say that.

It was a decent way to provoke him, too.

"I'm not some lame clan!" he hollered.

Sure enough, he became more hostile, and that was fine by me.

"Me and my 2,000 devils can't lose against a low-rank like you!"

"2,000? You sure you know how to count?"

Thanks to Veldorbell's valiant fighting, the devil army here had been reduced to only about 500. Besides those, there were the ones fighting the Quartierlatin knights, but overall, their numbers had dropped by a lot.

"Damn... you...!" he said through clenched teeth. I wouldn't have been surprised if he'd popped a blood vessel. Either his boiling point was either really low, or he was just really shallow.

Franklin had an air of mystery and eeriness, as well as supreme composure. Logan definitely didn't.

My heart was still full of rage, but this realization made my brain cool down.

"Very well... I'll just make you regret making a fool out of me!" he shouted as he made his devils move out.

He probably wanted to crush me with sheer numbers. The army was moving slowly — probably to instill fear — but I appreciated that. It gave me time to think.

"I have nothing against provoking him, but are you certain we can win?" asked Nemesis. "It feels as though you only brought your heart, not mind."

*I'm not gonna deny that, but we do stand a chance, I thought.
We've got two ways to win.*

“Two?” she repeated.

Veldorbell broke his Brooch. It'll be over the moment we bring him down to 0 HP. We also have a way to break through this army and land a hit. We've used it before.

“That, eh? It's certainly something we can use here. What about the other?”

It's a trump card... I'll only use it if I have no other choice.

“A trump card? You mean Payback Beyond the Stars? Wouldn't it be of little use against him? He is a commander, after all.”

“No, not that one,” I replied as I looked at my hands — at the Miasmaflame Bracers.

These things were actually a bigger gamble to me than just jumping into the devil army.

It would be fine if I didn't have to use it, but I would if I had no other choice.

“Hmm, I have trouble reading it, but I do understand you have something in mind,” said Nemesis. “I must say, though... this is a battle against an army, and your win condition is killing the leader without dying yourself. Silver might've been useful here.”

“Too bad I lent him out,” I agreed.

Before hearing the sound and coming here, I'd sent Azurite to head out and help the Quartierlatin knights. They were farther away, so I'd given Silver to her. She would come support me once she was done there.

“Still, it'd be better if I finished the job before she got here,” I muttered.

My reason for that wasn't tian mortality, but the fact that the enemy was the Hell General.

He had killed her mentor, and I felt she would push herself too hard if she had to face him. Considering how she'd glared at the army, I was pretty confident in that assumption.

We'd only known each other for a few days, but I already knew she was gentle and wouldn't hesitate to burden herself.

"HA HA HA!" Logan guffawed. "How does it feel to be surrounded by so many devils?! Just so you know, these are all Demi-Dragon tier and above! Your little flamethrower won't be enough!"

I can tell, I thought as I looked at the devils I'd set on fire when I'd come here. They were all hurt, but could still fight. If I wanted to burn them, I would need to channel my Purgatorial Flames a bit longer.

But... I had something else in mind.

"All right," I said after I looked around and saw no people anywhere nearby. The children in the orphanage were fearfully peeking at me through the windows, but they were pretty far away, not to mention indoors.

Looks like I can use it...

"Come on! Beg for your life or something! I'll listen!" said Logan.

"Man, how can you even say all these generic bad guy lines unironically? You're a disgrace to your face and armor."

"Gh...!"

"But yeah, I've got some words you. Listen closely," I said as I covered my mouth with the edge of the Black Warcoat and raised my right arm. "*Hellish Miasma, erupt!*"

A moment later, the right bracer released a dark purple mist.

This was a fiendish skill that gave three severe debuffs: Poison, Intoxication, and Weakness.

“Huh?! You’re using poison gas in a town you’re supposed to protect?!” he shouted.

Well, thanks to a certain general, there was no one nearby, so why not?

Since the devils had surrounded me, it touched pretty much all of them. The Hellish Miasma quickly took effect. The devil army fell to their knees and started writhing slowly.

Logan probably hadn’t lied about them being Demi-Dragon-tier. But during the battle against Gardranda, the miasma had affected even Marilyn, who was on the same tier, so there was no reason it couldn’t work on these devils.

Of course, it was possible that devils had a resistance to it, but then again, it’d worked even on Gouz-Maise, an undead, so the chances of it working on these guys seemed high.

And now I would continue by doing the same thing I’d done against Gouz-Maise.

“GHAH!” I went to the nearest devil, bit off a bit of its wing, and swallowed it.

I instantly got the three status effects I’d given to it, as well as some curses for eating devil flesh.

“Form Shift — The Flag Halberd!” Nemesis wasted no time transforming into the halberd and activating Like a Flag Flying the Reversal, which reversed all the debuffs on me.

Poison now healed instead of damaging me. Intoxication now sharpened my sense of balance instead of dulling it. And Weakness now doubled my stats instead of halving them.

The curse debuffs were either negated or turned into buffs, too.

This was the strategy I'd used in my battle against the Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise.

Getting buffs by eating the flesh of a debuffed enemy and reversing it was a pretty unorthodox move. I'd thought I'd never use it again, but I had nothing against doing it again, in this case.

"Hgh!" I exclaimed as I kicked the pavement below and jumped into a dash through the weakened devil horde.

Cutting off a few of their heads on the way, I broke through the purple miasma to close in on the Hell General.

"Huh?!"

"FHUAH!" I exhaled as I swung my halberd's blade. Logan tried to parry it with his sword, but my halberd slid on its surface and slightly cut into his protagonist-like face.

"Damn you...!" The speed at which he tried to parry it was above mine, and I was buffed.

This was because he was a Superior Job with stats suited for one. They were high, but not high enough to make him unbeatable.

Also, his movements were kinda...

"Ray Starling... that move was vile!" said Logan. The injury enraged him. He swung his greatsword down on me.

"It's your own fault for letting me do it," I said as I evaded and attacked him myself.

"What?!"

Until now, I'd never gone out of my way to use this enemy-eating strategy, but there had been one time when I couldn't have used it, even if I'd wanted to.

It was my battle against Franklin's RSK.

He'd made the monster into almost the perfect counter to me: I couldn't give it any of the three debuffs, and the Material Barrier was too tough for me to bite it. Franklin had known this move, and fought me after making sure I couldn't use it.

But Logan wasn't like that.

He'd said he wanted to beat me, but he didn't have a single bit of the info needed, much less made sufficient preparations for it. He'd just thought he'd have an easy win here.

Franklin hated losing, had a lust for victory, and always joked around while actually being one of the most serious people you could ever meet. Logan was nothing like him.

"You're half-assing it," I said.

"Huhh?!"

This man had attacked Quartierlatin, destroyed the Royal Guard, and made the Grandrias cry, but my next words had nothing to do with my anger for the guy. They were just a small bit of truth.

The words felt so natural that they just flowed out on their own.

"You're weaker than Franklin."

"Huhh?! B-B-But I... Me?! Hell General, Logan Goddhart?! Below Franklin?!"

"Yeah, that's what I'm saying."

Franklin had some of the weakest stats of any Superior, but he made up for it with the monsters he created.

He never neglected to prepare all the necessary counters against the enemy, to ensure his own safety, and to keep a bunch of tricks up his sleeve.

The thoroughness of his approach for battle made him such a threat that his own fragility was only a minor problem.

Given all that, beating him had required the collective efforts of all the Masters in Gideon.

This guy, though, was nothing like that. He had little grasp of strategy, and his devil army composition was way too basic.

He had another major flaw, too...

“TAKE THAT BAAAAAAACK!” he roared. My words must’ve stung. He started swinging his sword like he was losing his mind.

Though he wasn’t a vanguard fighter, he was still a Superior Job and had impressive stats. The blade swings were fast and powerful, but they were way easier to dodge than duel ranker attacks.

“Ray,” Nemesis spoke up. “He...”

“You noticed, too, huh?”

We both could see his flaw.

Logan was at the top of Dryfe’s duel rankings.

When you thought about it, it didn’t make sense for him to be an easier enemy than the kingdom’s duel rankers.

But that was the reality here. Even if you ignored the fact that I was buffed, he was below them.

The reason for that was simple.

Crossing swords with him, I re-confirmed my suspicions. “You used devils in your duels, too, didn’t you?”

“What about it?!”

This situation was a better answer than any words I could come up with.

He was used to summoning his devil army and winning the duels without doing any fighting himself.

Actually, you couldn't lose items in duels, so maybe he just always summoned the Mythical devil that had defeated Sir Langley.

He probably used devils even when hunting monsters for XP.

And this was the result.

"You suck at swinging this," I said, looking at his greatsword.

"WHA—?!"

He had the stats of a Superior Job, but he couldn't use his skills well at all.

Literally everyone in the Royal Guard was above him in swordfighting, and the duel rankers had way better moves than him. They were worlds apart.

He was a Superior with a Superior Job. But he'd relied too much on his devils and Embryo.

I'd learned from Marie that his Embryo enhanced job skills. That was what made it so easy for him to create these devil hordes.

He'd crushed most his enemies with sheer numbers, leaving the strongest ones for his Mythical. That had always been enough for him, so this was what he'd become.

His own battle ability had never improved. He just kept on combining his Embryo and job skills.

Basically... he was a really bad player.

Even if he'd once been better at it, relying on his devils had made him rusty.

"That's why you stop being a big deal the moment your devils can't move," I said aloud.

He was faster than me, but I could see his attacks coming.

He was stronger than me, but I could easily dodge his sword.

He was tougher than me, but I could hit him.

I had all the experience I'd gained from my mock battles against the rankers. Even the countless defeats weren't meaningless.

I could easily handle him, even if I had lower stats. I wouldn't be surprised to learn he hadn't practiced even once.

"If this stays 1v1... I'll win," I said.

"Oh, but it's 2v1," said Nemesis.

"Yeah... that's right!" I replied and attacked with even more intensity.

"No way! I won against the strongest knight in the kingdom!" he yelled back.

"By the time he got to you, Sir Langley was badly wounded. That's why he couldn't beat you before you could summon your Mythical devil."

Logan had sent his devil army at the Royal Guard. Sir Langley had fought with his men at first, but then charged through the enemy lines to get to the Hell General.

I'd trained with the Royal Guard before, and they'd told me that, during the first battle, he'd gone out ahead of everyone to protect them, taking more punishment than anyone else.

If Sir Langley had been at his best, the Hell General would've died before he could finish the summon. All Logan had done was finish off a wounded man with a Mythical devil.

"Wanna try summoning the Mythical on me?" I asked him.

"No way! I'd never waste a special reward on you!"

"And that's why you're weaker than Franklin."

That lab coat shithead would do everything to win, and wouldn't hesitate in the slightest. He'd make monsters using special rewards, even if they were throwaways. That was just how he was.

"Ghh. Nnh...!"

I continued attacking him all throughout the exchange, and he was more and more hurt by the second.

None of the wounds were even near fatal, but the damage was definitely there.

He had no Brooch anymore, either. We'd win if I just kept it up.

"Devils! What are you doing?! G-Get over here and protect me!"

The Hell General raised his voice and shouted at the devils that were suffering from the miasma. But Weakness and Intoxication made them too slow.

"Shit! If that old fart hadn't taken so many out...! No, I should've made more to begin with...!"

Even as he yelled his regrets, I kept showering him in halberd attacks. One of them sliced through his left eye.

"Ghuh! AAAAHHHHHH!"

There was no pain. But losing half of his field of view made his fury even more intense.

"DAAMN YOUEUUU! YOU'RE ALL USELESS!" He glared at the devils writhing in the miasma, his one eye full of rage. "Then I'll make you useful! CONVERSION DEVIL FLARE!"

I gasped. The moment he used the skill, I felt something vanish, and my body was hit by multiple debuffs. "What...?!"

"Ray! The devils behind us vanished and became a ball of fire!" Nemesis cried, right as I began to feel intense heat from behind me.

I turned around and saw a sinister ball of fire.

“Khh!” The skill had made Logan’s entire army vanish and converted them to an offensive spell.

The devil that’d given me the debuffs had disappeared, too. Reversal couldn’t work anymore, so the debuffs once again were doing what they were intended to.

I couldn’t dodge the spell.

“Leave it to me!” Nemesis switched to The Black Shield.
“Counter Absorption!”

She used one of two uses we had left. The magic was absorbed by the barrier of light.

But the damage was greater than 300,000. One Counter Absorption wasn’t enough, so Nemesis had no choice but to use the other one.

“The second... will bear it!” she declared with confidence.

That meant that the magic dealt would be over 300,000, but less than 600,000 damage.

“1,000 for each devil, maybe?” I guessed.

If so, the 500 devils had become about 500,000 worth of damage. Originally, it had probably just been 100 damage for each devil. He’d turned it into 1,000 with his Embryo.

As we blocked it, I took out an Elixir and High Holy Water I’d moved to my pouch beforehand, and drank them to get rid of my debuffs.

We successfully protected against the lethal attack and I healed myself, but...

“*Call Devil Gigaknight,*” said Logan.

We'd given him the time to summon another devil.

The one that appeared now was about as tall as a human.

Standing at over two meters, it was covered in heavy armor, held a sword in its right hand, a shield in its left, and wore a helmet with a slit that had insect legs peeking out.

Compared to many monsters I'd fought so far, this devil was pretty simple.

However, it was even more menacing than Gouz-Maise.

"Ha ha ha ha! I've gotta say, I expected to end this fight with that one," said Logan. "But it's not a problem that you survived it. Now that this one's here, the fight's as good as over."

Summoning the armor devil must've relieved him. He definitely wasn't as desperate as a cornered rat anymore.

"Really, now? You realize you traded 500 devils for just one, right?" I said, but even I knew that this devil was way above the devils from before.

Hell, it was more menacing than the entire army.

"You can't tell? Gigaknight is a Legendary-tier devil!" he revealed, confirming that my senses weren't lying to me. "It costs a lot, but not a special reward. Using it on you is a waste, but think of it as my thanks for all the stuff you said. I'll kill you good..."

"W o w O w o W o..." Gigaknight made an eerie moan as its insectoid legs wriggled. The sense of intimidation grew stronger.

"Legendary, huh?" I said.

Marie had recently told me that, "*Even we battle-focused pre-Superior Masters have only a fifty percent chance of winning against Legendary UBM s. Your victory against Gardranda was a pretty unique case.*"

That meant I was dealing with a monster on about the same level as Marie or Juliet.

The only Legendary I'd ever beaten was Gardranda, and that was only because I'd gotten to its weak point before it could release its true power.

Monochrome had been even higher — Ancient Legendary — but I'd only won against that because Nemesis's third form had turned out to be the perfect counter, and because I'd had B3 to help me. Not to mention it had been a strange UBM focused on some weird stuff.

Gigaknight, however, was purely a straightforward fighter. If it had been specialized in something, I could've looked for openings I could take advantage of, but it didn't look like I could expect anything like that.

I could try gathering damage to launch a Vengeance is Mine, but I'd probably die before I had enough damage. We'd already used up our precious Counter Absorptions to survive against that spell.

It was pretty obvious I was dealing with something tough and had a small chance of winning.

"What of it?" I asked.

I'd known I was dealing with something bigger than myself the moment I'd gone in to face the Hell General himself.

In fact, I'd even considered that he'd summon the Mythical. Getting *just* a Legendary instead was actually good for me.

"We still have a chance," I continued.

His greatest mistake had been attacking me with the spell he'd sacrificed his devils for. Nemesis had gathered the damage, and her counter was now on a whopping 500,000.

This battle would end the moment I passed the Gigaknight and hit him with a Vengeance.

"This makes it clear how much of a hindrance Payback's charging time is," Nemesis commented.

"Yeah. But for now... I'll just have to make do with this."

The devils had died, and the buffs were over. Still, I had my Brooch, and he didn't have his. I just needed to go at him like mad and land a Vengeance.

"Let's go, Nemesis," I said.

"Very well!" she said as she shifted from her shield to her sword form, and I dashed towards Logan.

"Ha ha ha! You probably think you can win as long as you get close to me... but that won't work anymore," he laughed.

His Gigaknight appeared instantly before me and got in my way like some sort of brick wall.

"Huh?!"

The speed startled me. It was like nothing you'd expect from something in such heavy armor. It swung its sword at me.

"Gh!" I grunted as I stopped it with my blade, but the impact created was so powerful, I was blown away and hit a structure's wall back-first.

The hit wasn't even direct, but that brief impact took a whole fourth — almost 3,000 — of my HP.

"Ray!" Nemesis raised her voice, and I quickly moved.

But I was too slow. There was an impact on my neck, and I felt the sword sink in.

Obviously, the damage was lethal, activating my Lifesaving Brooch.

I desperately stood up, only to be greeted by the ruthless Gigaknight's downwards slash on my crown.

That was, once again, negated by the Brooch, but this time, it failed the damage check and shattered.

But I wasn't gonna stand and just take the third attack.

"Vengeance is Mine!" I roared as I did an Impact Counter, taking all the damage gathered so far, doubling it — raising it to 50,000 — and sending it back.

However...

"This goddamn...!"

...all that did was shatter some of its torso armor, take a chunk of the flesh, and make it bleed. That was it.

Gigaknight was still standing, not even flinching.

That meant only one thing: 50,000 damage wasn't enough.

"W O w o W o..."

I wasn't sure if it was because of the damage, but Gigaknight didn't swing its sword. Instead, it hit me with the back of its left hand, sending me flying a few meters.

"Khuh! Ah!"

That impact reminded me of my first enemy — the Demi-Drag-Worm. The power difference back then had been about as hopeless as it was now.

But I wasn't defeated yet.

Still flying, I aimed my right bracer at it.

"Hellish... Miasma!"

It was drowned in a purple mist.

“W o O.”

But it didn’t look like that was working at all. Apparently, it had better debuff resistances than the devil army.

“Damn thing has no weaknesses...” I muttered.

“Ha,” Nemesis laughed. “This makes me realize we haven’t had many battles against enemies who are simply strong.”

Breathing raggedly, I nodded in response.

All the overwhelmingly powerful things I’d fought before had had both extreme strong points and weak points.

Gigaknight wasn’t like that. It was just fast, tough, and strong. But that was enough to make it a powerful foe.

“Shame we’re out of Counter Absorptions,” Nemesis continued. “Taking a few of those attacks is suicidal without it.”

I nodded.

The thing could probably kill me in one direct hit, and even if I parried, my HP wouldn’t last more than three times.

“HA HA HA HA HA! Well?! How do you like my Legendary devil?! This is the power of Hell General, Logan Goddhart!” Logan laughed out loud. “Its AGI lets it move at almost the speed of sound! Its STR and END are over 10,000! And its HP is over 300,000! Try and beat it if you can! HAAA HA HA HA HAAA!”

Well, the name fits, at least, I thought. That does seem like a stat distribution you’d expect from the knight grouping.

The devil was probably weak at magic, but that didn’t help me at all.

“You think we can kill it if we land 50,000 damage on whatever’s inside the helmet?” I asked Nemesis.

“Aiming at its weak spots is one thing; gathering the damage without dying is another.”

In terms of pure toughness, this thing was clearly one of the toughest things I’d fought. Shining Despair was only about eighty percent charged, which was a shame, since I was expecting some great firepower there.

The last option I had would basically guarantee my death penalty in my current state.

“Looks like there’s only one thing I can do here,” I said.

I’d get past Gigaknight and beat the Hell General himself, standing dozens of meters away.

That’d obviously be difficult...

“But not impossible,” I muttered.

Nemesis shifted to her shield form.

I’d dodge its attacks or just prevent direct hits to close this distance. It was simple.

Or at least, it was simpler than beating a monster in the stratosphere.

“Let’s go, Nemesis,” I said.

“Very well!”

We ran towards the Hell General.

Of course, the opponent wasn’t going to allow that.

“W o O o o O o O!” Gigaknight moved at nearly Mach 1 speed to appear before me and swung its sword to split my torso in two.

“Hh...!” I dodged it with a roll and held up Nemesis behind me.

Then I felt a kick-like impact on the shield. It pushed me several meters ahead.

I was hurt, but still alive.

I resumed closing the distance between me and the Hell General.

However...

“W o W O w o...”

The Gigaknight raced from behind me to right in front.

“It was just behind us!” Nemesis exclaimed. “That’s too fast, even for something moving at nearly-sonic speeds!”

“W o W o w O.”

No...

I heard the same voice behind me.

“No way...!”

I looked beyond the Gigaknight blocking my path, at the Hell General’s face.

His grin had grown wider.

“A second one!”

“That’s right!” Logan shouted in joy, and the new Gigaknight brandished its sword at me.

I still felt the other Gigaknight moving behind me.

I was standing between two Legendaries — two Gigaknights blocking the ways forward and backward. We were outside, but I felt like I was in some lion’s den, completely cornered.

“Ray!” Nemesis cried a warning.

I frantically pondered how I could deal with the two Legendary devils. The idea I’d had before wasn’t an option now.

I could barely even hurt one of them. With two of them, trying to get past them and beat the Hell General was basically impossible.

“Even so...!”

I wouldn’t stop moving forward.

If I gave up now, I’d never see another possibility.

No matter how difficult the path to our survival was, there was no greater obstacle than stopping.

I called out to my body to stop cowering and freezing. *Move your legs!*

I wouldn’t give up, even if I was attacked by near-Mach 1 blades from both front and back.

The possibility was always there — *with your will.*

No matter how small, no matter behind how many zeros beyond the radix point it lay...

“It *always* exists!” I roared, paraphrasing Shu’s words, the ones that’d taken root in my very core, and took a step forward.

The moment right before the devilish blades came to split me apart...

“I love those words, too... I guess?”

...I heard a powerful impact and a voice.



A Certain Consideration

In *Infinite Dendrogram*, the power scale was based on monster strength.

The most popular was “Demi-Dragon-tier,” equal to a full party of low-rank jobs.

It was followed by “Pure-Dragon-tier,” equal to a high-rank party.

Admittedly, the conversion there was based on tian standards. It wasn’t uncommon for a single low-rank Master to beat a Demi-Dragon-tier creature, or for a high-rank Master to beat a Pure-Dragon.

Ray, for one, had defeated a Demi-Drag-Worm at level 0, without even a low-rank job.

There was also a power scale that was used by very few people: Epic, Legendary, Ancient Legendary, Mythical, and Superior.

Those were UBM tiers, and they revealed what tier special rewards they would give upon defeat.

UBMs had appeared many times throughout the history of *Infinite Dendrogram*, and they were almost always defeated, often after many sacrifices. Due to that and other reasons, tians had created a technology that allowed one to measure UBM ranks before they were killed. Skilled Masters could gauge them just from experience.

There was a job that was more affected by this than any other — and that was Hell General.

One day, after UBM power scales were clearly settled, the Hell General of that era had looked at his job skills and realized that *the job skill text had changed*.

Text that used to say “Summons a powerful devil” was now “Summons a Legendary devil.”

It was as though the job skills themselves had accepted this shift in the world’s common sense.

Hell General skills began calling the devils “Legendary” or “Mythical” instead of “Powerful” or “Extremely powerful.”

It was only a change in naming, but it was a change nonetheless.

Naturally, it led to a certain question.

Not “Why did the change happen?” but “Are the summoned devils really on the same level as Legendary UBM’s?”

Logan had summoned his Legendary devils many times before, always gloating about their Legendary status.

It was true that he’d used the Legendary devil Gigaknight to beat an Epic UBM called “Vilestone Dragon, Woltgyzur” and receive the “Viledragon’s Prideblade, Woltgyzur.”

With just that, Logan had concluded that his Legendary devils were on par with Legendary UBM’s.

However, a certain Superior had a different opinion.

These were some of the things he’d said about it.

“Nah, killing an Epic really doesn’t prove that the thing’s Legendary. It could easily be another Epic.”

“Eh? You’re saying that Gigaknight’s stats are about the same as a Legendary’s? Ha ha ha! Well, that may be true, but... it’s not the stats that make the UBM, right?”

“And hell, Epics are often new UBM’s, and you never know what to expect from them. Some stay there, some just keep advancing — you get the full range there. There are huge differences between different specimens, so Epics don’t really work for gauging strength. I’m not sure His Excellency the General’s (lol) Gigaknight is really Legendary, ’cause Epics just aren’t good for scaling that. It doesn’t answer the question if it’s on the same level as an actual Legendary UBM, though.”

“Most UBM’s evolve beyond Epic, y’know? I’ve even heard of ancient ruin relics getting high ranks right after they come out.”

"You ever get an Epic special reward, and go, 'Huh? It's actually pretty damn good'? The UBMs you get those from were probably gonna go on to become way tougher and even climb up a tier or two."

"Things that would've turned out strong in the future show it when they die and become special rewards. I've beaten a whole lot of them, and I always enjoy thinking about what would they have been. 'What would they have been...'"

"Speaking of which, there were some interesting points in his equipment data that I got in Gideon: An original Prism Steed that's not on the list, the MP tank boots that let him beat the RSK... and the bracers. It looks like they're a special reward from a Legendary UBM, but..."

A pause.

"What would it have been?"

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Prism Rider, Ray Starling

The sources of the impact were the swords of the devils.

The blades were stopped by something right before they could split me.

That something was the Miasmaflame Bracers, Gardranda.

The front blade was blocked with the right, while the rear blade was stopped in place by the left.

Before I knew it, they'd separated themselves from my arms.

"Huh?! What?!" exclaimed Nemesis.

She was shocked, but I quickly understood what was happening here.

There was only one entity that could do this, and this phenomenon was its — her — way of saying that it was time.

“All right! I’m entrusting this to you!” I called out.

I had to respond in kind. She was leading me to my path to survival, so, for her, I would take it all, even the risk of a death penalty or *even worse*.

I’d take it all... and beat the Hell General!

“I’M GIVING YOU ALL I’VE GOT!” I roared as I turned the grudge in my Grudge-Soaked Greaves into MP.

The negative emotions I’d gathered in the Monochrome incident and here in Quartierlatin had become 400,000 MP — nearly the same as in Franklin’s Game. I redirected all this MP into the Miasmaflame Bracers.

“Set skill activation time... 400 seconds!”

The sustenance in the form of MP fed the bracers, acting as the catalyst to pave the way for *the summoning skill*.

“Come... Miasmaflame Princess: GARDRANDAAA!”

Right after I spoke the name of the Miasmaflame Bracers’ third skill, they underwent an explosive change.

The dark red flame and purple miasma whirled and gathered around the Miasmaflame Bracers.

Tanned arms grew in and then out of them, creating the shoulders, torso, legs, and finally the head, which had two horns on it.

It was the same person I’d seen in that dream — the demon overflowing with vast murderous intent and fighting spirit.

“Wh-Who...?” Nemesis couldn’t hide her surprise at the sudden entrance.

“Gardranda,” I replied.

“Huh?!”

Indeed. She was Gardranda.

Not the incomplete UBM I’d beaten back then, but the true form that had never gotten the chance to show itself: Miasmaflame Princess, Gardranda.



Her mother's defeat should've made it impossible for her to manifest like this, but the Miasmaflame Bracers' third skill allowed it.

The skill that was named after her had the power to summon Gardranda's true, complete form for vast amounts of MP and another certain demerit.

"What's that?! Why does a Paladin have a summoning skill?!" Hell General was confused. He clearly hadn't expected what was happening here.

But that was nothing compared to what was coming.

"Am I a bother... perhaps?" Gardranda tilted her head before the Gigaknight in front, and kicked the Legendary devil's armor with her slender legs.

The Gigaknight flew almost ten meters back.

"W o w O W o W O?!"

The armor didn't shatter, but it was badly bent.

Gardranda went to the Gigaknight behind me so quickly that I couldn't even see her — her speed was supersonic. She grabbed the devil's legs in her arms.

She, despite being of small stature, picked it up so easily that it looked like a comedy skit, and threw it upwards. The thing seemed really confused and shocked.

Though they were devils that could move at almost the speed of sound, Gigaknights didn't have wings. The thing couldn't move in midair, so Gardranda took advantage of that by targeting her left hand, the left bracer, at it.

The demon on the back of the hand opened its mouth and released a red, brilliant light unlike any I'd ever seen it make.

“Purgatorial Flames: Zero,” she said, speaking the skill’s name, making the fire burst out.

Its power was completely unlike what it had been when I’d used it. It was more like the fire used by the Great Miasmic Ogre, Gardranda... No... it was far above even that.

What came to mind was one of Xun Yu’s skills — the Master Jiangshi’s ultimate job skill that created a heaven-piercing pillar of crimson.

“W o W o w O o o O o O o O o o?!”

The Gigaknight had no means of dodging the flame. The crimson fire surrounded the devil, and when it connected, all the firepower gathered within the Gigaknight, and...

“Dirty... fireworks?” She tilted her head, saying a fitting word for what happened next — an explosion.

The Gigaknight was blown to smithereens and became bits of light. That single attack shaved away all of its 300,000 HP, killing it instantly.

That was the Gigaknight that had lost 50,000 HP to my Vengeance, but that fact did nothing to change the fact that the damage from that fire was insane.

“I burned it up... see?” she said as she looked at the left bracer, releasing nothing but smoke. “It won’t work for a while... I guess?”

Hell General was looking at the scene like he couldn’t believe it.

I could tell that Nemesis, still in my hand, was feeling something similar.

Well, I couldn’t blame them. A young girl had just appeared out of nowhere and killed a Legendary devil in one shot.

There was no arguing that it seemed unreasonable and strange, but I didn't see it that way.

After all, she was Legendary, too.

Gardranda was a Legendary demon... and a UBM.

"I'm gonna have to fight the other one empty-handed... aren't I?" she said as she took a martial artist's posture. "320 seconds left. I'll get this done before it ends... okay?"

Snapping her fingers, the Legendary demon began a devil hunt.

Chapter Three: Legendary

About a certain special reward...

Special rewards were items that took the main traits of a UBM and adjusted them to suit the MVP's needs.

Ray's first special reward, Miasmaflame Bracers, Gardranda, was no exception. The three skills it had were the UBM's traits adjusted to suit Ray.

The first two skills were obvious.

The flame and miasma abilities wielded by Gardranda had been turned into the easy-to-use skills known as "Purgatorial Flames" and "Hellish Miasma."

So this might lead you to the question of what kind of trait was adapted to create the third skill of Miasmaflame Princess: Gardranda.

The hobgoblin herself had explained it, in fact: "I'm manifesting like this because I was defeated before the conditions to unleash my true power were fulfilled and I could break the shell and be born... probably?"

As a UBM, Gardranda had been originally designed to be monster with multiple stages. The death of the parent body, the Great Miasmic Hobgoblin, should have brought about the true form: the Miasmaflame Princess.

That meant that the Great Miasmic Hobgoblin's third trait was "birth."

Thus, upon its defeat, the power to summon the Miasmaflame Princess had become a skill.

Needless to say, this skill was insanely powerful, as it allowed the wielder to call forth a creature as strong as — or, in Gardranda's case, even stronger than — the original UBM. It wasn't on the level of Superior items, but it was still powerful.

Too powerful, even.

No one man could be allowed to wield such power so easily, and that was why the skill came with three major limitations.

The first was the unlock condition, which Ray had already cleared.

Just like Paladin's Grand Cross, powerful skills were often barred behind certain conditions, and for Miasmaflame Princess, that was *becoming MVP against three UBMs*.

Defeating UBMs was no easy task. Even Marie, a Superior Job who'd killed Ray once, had only beaten two, and even among Superiors, you had those who'd never won against a single one, such as "The Unknown" wannabe, Gerbera.

This skill had ended up with such a condition because it, too, was adjusted for Ray.

To the system, Ray's primary trait in the fight against Gardranda was *being a low-level entity who'd defeated a UBM and become MVP*.

Thus, that was considered during the conversion, and the condition to unlock the third skill became "becoming MVP against three UBMs."

It was set to that under the assumption that Ray could surely fulfill it. If the unlock condition had somehow ended up being different, it surely would've been just as difficult for him.

Regardless, he'd cleared this condition by defeating the Great Miasmic Hobgoblin, Gardranda; Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise; and the recent Void of the Black Sky, Monochrome.

The second limitation was the MP cost.

To manifest and fight at full power, Miasmaflame Princess, Gardranda used 1,000 MP per second.

Even high-rank magic jobs couldn't keep her up for more than 10 seconds, and even level 500 casters couldn't break through 30. That was how severe the cost was.

This wasn't adjusted to Ray or anything — it was just the natural cost of using something so powerful — but Ray was able to clear that, too.

Due to the recent Monochrome battle and the panic right here in Quartierlatin, his Grudge-Soaked Greaves had gathered enough negative energy to produce 400,000 MP — enough for the Miasmaflame Princess to be active for a whole 400 seconds.

And the third limitation, the post-use punishment, was something Ray was more than ready for.

With these conditions cleared, Gardranda was made manifest and faced Ray's foe with all her might.

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Prism Rider, Ray Starling

One Gigaknight exploded, and Gardranda targeted the other one.

The scene made the Hell General make a strained smile and force a laugh. "H-HA HA HA HA! I'll praise you for one-hit-killing a hurt Gigaknight! B-But that flame has to be a one-time use skill!"

He was right.

Because she was a summon, Gardranda didn't use a single point of minion capacity, but I still had access to her stat and detail screens. Three of the skills listed there — Purgatorial Flames, Purgatorial Fist, and Purgatorial Flames: Zero — had become unusable.

That had to be a side effect from the "Zero" skill. That made sense, as it seemed powerful enough to come with such a powerful negative. Gardranda wouldn't be able to use the flames for the rest of the summon time.

"This goblin is the ace up your sleeve, right?!" Logan continued. "And now it's lost its ultimate attack! That means my Gigaknight will win!"

He extended his hand to the remaining devil and named some skills.

"Boosted Devil Strength! Boosted Devil Endurance! Boosted Devil Agilityyyyy!"

Once he was done, the Gigaknight began glowing in three different colors and became way more menacing than before.

"HA! I used my Rumpelstiltskin to multiply these buffs by ten! The Gigaknight's STR, END, and AGI are up by 200 percent! I'll crush your goblin to dust!"

I had no words for this. Why hadn't he used these buffs before? Was he unable to use them while he had his devil army? Was it unlocked when their numbers dropped?

"200 percent, eh?" Nemesis pondered. "That means its STR and END are over 30,000, and it can move faster than the speed of sound."

I know what you're getting at, I thought back. You're wondering if Gardranda can win. And honestly, I'm not sure...

I switched to speaking aloud. “But you and I both know she’s not easy to beat, right?”

“...True.”

The first UBM I’d ever fought was fearsome, tough, and crazy strong.

I couldn’t even imagine how this Gardranda, who was even stronger than that one, could ever be defeated.

“By the way, Nemesis...” I began.

“Yes, I know.”

It wasn’t just Gardranda. We had to act, too.

But for that, we needed the Hell General to—

“HA HA HA! Gigaknight! Show this low-rank the power... of a Superior!”

“W o W o w o O o O o o o O o O o o O o O O!”

The buffed Gigaknight followed its summoner’s orders, crushing the pavement beneath as it dashed *straight towards me*.

As if completely ignoring the goblin, it raised its blade and swung it down at me.

But Gardranda stopped it with a palm strike that blasted it away.

“I knew you looked like the type to do something... like that,” I said.

“W o O O o!” The attack tore open the dented armor and dug a hole in its flesh, but the Gigaknight didn’t seem to care, and just roared at her while moving the insect legs peeking from its helmet. Its END was now so high that even that didn’t mean much to it.

Still, since Gardranda was as relentless as her mother, the STR she'd delivered with her strike was immense enough to send it a whole eight meters back.

"If you want to beat Ray, you need to beat me... first," said Gardranda.

"She sounds like some rival character who switched sides after you beat her," commented Nemesis.

Well... that's pretty much what she is, right?

"Also, Ray, heal up... okay? As you are, you'll die even if you get the... good one."

"Yeah," I said in realization. I reached into my inventory, took out an HP Potion, and started downing it.

Gardranda moved right between me and the Gigaknight, posing in a way that basically screamed, "You're not getting past me!" Man, was she reliable.

Also... with all his antagonism towards Gardranda, I really hadn't expected Logan to launch a surprise attack on me. What a piece of work.

"Tch...!" The Hell General clicked his tongue. "All right, then I'll crush you first! It'll be easy! The Gigaknight has way better stats than you!"

"Way better stats?" Gardranda tilted her head. "*Not anymore.*"

No one else here — not even Nemesis and I — understood what she meant by that.

At least, until the Gigaknight moaned in pain and fell to its knees.

"WHA—?!" Logan exclaimed.

"It's got half of what it had before... I guess?" said Gardranda, and I finally noticed that her right hand was covered in a dark purple miasma.

It was like the legendary Chinese martial art, poison fist. She was wielding the three debuffs like a weapon on her hand.

Seeing that made me remember the concept of punching with fists imbued with Gardranda's flames or miasma. I'd done that by accident when finishing off Franklin.

I wanted to try and replicate that, but it was difficult with miasma, and it had been impossible with the flames because I'd lost my left arm.

Gardranda herself, though, was doing that as if it was natural.

Well, she does have Purgatorial Fist and Hellish Hand in her skill list, I thought.

"But Hellish Miasma didn't work on them before, did it?" Nemesis asked, and I could see where she was coming from.

We'd tried it on the first Gigaknight, and it had done nothing. The second one couldn't have weaker resistances, so there had to be some other reason.

"Umm, my miasma is stronger... and I compressed it... see?" Gardranda explained.

"Compressed? Ah..."

I was familiar with the concept of debuff compression. We'd seen Miss Eldritch do it in The Lunar Society's headquarters. But I was surprised Gardranda had been able to learn it from inside the Miasmaflame Bracers.

"So she's actually above her true power now," I said.

Kasumi had told me that summoned monsters became stronger the more you used them, but right here, we had one who had learned new things before even the first summon. That was insane.

“Hellish Miasma,” she said as she released the purple mist upon the ground. It didn’t rise any higher than my waist.

It was both a debilitating miasma and a smokescreen that hid her when she lowered herself.

“W o O o O O, w O o o O o O o O O!” Still afflicted by the debuffs, the Gigaknight stood up, swung its blade, and tried to bash Gardranda away with its shield, but not a single one of its hits landed.

It wasn’t because it’d lost sight of her in the miasma.

It was like my one-on-one battle against Logan. She’d predicted its attacks, evaded them, then punched back.

It wasn’t like a fight between two Masters, where a single ultimate skill could end it all, but that made the gap between their abilities all the more obvious.

“This is odd,” said Nemesis. “She’s spread a smokescreen, yet she moves in such an erratic manner. Don’t you agree?”

I did. Gardranda had created a smokescreen, but instead of using it, she was just moving around at supersonic speeds, making a mess of it and making it easy to see where she was.

What’s the point...? I wondered, right before I noticed Gardranda looking at us.

It was a signal of some sort, and I understood exactly what she was getting at when she was out of Logan’s sight and pointed at the smoke below.

“I see,” Nemesis said. “So that’s the purpose of this miasma.”

"Yeah... We can actually pull it off now."

As we agreed on what we had to do, I sunk Nemesis, still in her sword form, into the miasma.

"Impossible!" Logan roared, clearly irritated by what he was seeing. "Mine's a Legendary devil! How can it lose against a low-rank goblin thing?!"

"That devil is Legendary... that's true," Gardranda nodded. "Its stats are about the same as mine... and I'm Legendary. But..." She made an extremely annoyed face. "We aren't simple enough to be measured just by rank. Your ready-made devils... don't have the 'self' to stand a chance against a real UBM... understand?"

It felt like this was a matter of pride to her.

She was original and one-of-a-kind, and thus she was confident that no mass-produced devil summoned by magic alone could match her, same tier or not.

"I was born out of a man-eating hobgoblin, and turned out as a human-goblin hybrid," she added. "That's why I can move, think, and learn like a human. Since becoming a special reward, I've watched the movements of many rankers, experienced knights... and even Superiors. By watching, I understood, and by understanding, I learned."

She wasn't lying. Some of her movements actually looked Shu's and Figaro's.

Perhaps *this* was Gardranda's true power?

"Compared to that, your devil is so weak," she said scornfully. "Its movements are patterned, and it only relies on its stats."

"W o, w O o o O O!"

The Gigaknight wasn't mad at her for insulting it — it didn't have the mind for that — but it still attacked Gardranda right at that moment with a horizontal slash.

She caught it between her elbow and knee, and then, like a master karate artist, turned the attack around and broke the blade.

"You didn't buff the weapons... huh?" she scoffed before running up her opponent's arm and launching a knee kick into the head — the Shining Wizard, as it was called. It made its helmet fly off.

Its head was repulsive. It looked like it had a human face with insect legs growing out of it.

Gardranda didn't seem to mind as she bared her fangs, sank them into its windpipe, and tore out its flesh.

"Ewwww." She voiced her displeasure. "Ray was way more... tasty."

"o, w o o o...!"

The damage to its throat made it lose its voice, but the Gigaknight still fought on, swinging its shield.

Gardranda easily evaded it and said, "32 seconds left. I'll just end this... okay?"

Missing the shield attack rendered the Gigaknight defenseless.

Gardranda raised her right leg, aimed it at its neck...

"Kodachi."

...and launched Shu's forte right into its torn windpipe.

The already-damaged neck couldn't bear Gardranda's attack, and the Gigaknight lost its head.

Then Gardranda jumped on its shoulders and sunk her hand down its neck, saying, “Hellish Miasma: Zero.”

Basic Hellish Miasma was a skill that gave the Poison, Intoxication, and Weakness debuffs. But in Gardranda’s hands, it showed its true power and became something far more fearsome.

You could hear the body melt as the red of blood, the black of rotting flesh, and the white of melted bone poured out from the spaces in its armor... and quickly became bits of light.

The battle was over.

The Legendary devil, Gigaknight, had been completely powerless against the Legendary goblin UBM, Gardranda.

“N-No way...” Logan muttered in shock.

Gardranda eyed him, then looked at us.

“Time’s up... I guess.”

Just like the Gigaknight she’d just defeated, she herself was turning into light.

The 400 seconds — the time I’d given her with the 400,000 MP from Gouz-Maise — had expired.

But that didn’t matter much, as she had done her job.

“The rest is up to you two,” she tilted her head to look at us. “Do your best, Ray.”

And so, she vanished, leaving behind nothing but the bracers, which made a metallic noise as they fell on the pavement.

“Gh...” I grunted. Right when she disappeared, my body became extremely heavy.

I looked at my stats and saw the three debuffs — Poison, Intoxication, and Weakness.

"Looks like I was lucky this time," I said.

Miasmaflame Princess: Gardranda not only cost an immense amount of MP — it also came with a powerful post-usage side effect.

There were three possible side effects, and I was fortunate enough to have gotten the least bad of the three — *incurable debuffs that lasted three times as long as the summon did*.

If it had been one of the other two (*three times as long burning* or *three times as long loss of control over my body*), I'd have been done for.

But as things were, I could end this.

"Ha! HA HA HA HA! I'll praise you for beating two of my Gigaknights!" Logan laughed.

He already had two more Gigaknights at his side. He must've waited until Gardranda vanished to summon them.

"But unlike you and your monster, I can summon dozens more Gigaknights and thousands more Soldier Devils! You put up a fight, but you didn't change anything! You'll still lose!"

He was talking sense.

I was a low-rank, while he was a Superior.

He was several tiers above me, and I'd no doubt lose if I kept on fighting.

With the difference between us, my chances of victory were close to zero.

But... it was already over.

"Hell General, Logan Goddhart..." I called out to him. "You're done."

I lifted Nemesis out of the miasma that was hiding her.

She was neither The Black Blade, nor The Flag Halberd.

She was now a spinning blade reminiscent of a five-bladed pinwheel — a windstar.

Third form β — Shooting Wheel.

It had the power to chase after the target with AGI equal to a tenth of the damage they'd inflicted upon me, then giving it back to them three-fold. It was a long-range, auto-seeking counter-attack.

It had a flaw in its charge time, but thanks to Gardranda, that was already done.

If I'd attacked Logan while she was still fighting, he'd have summoned the third and fourth Gigaknights right at that moment. And If I'd started charging the Shooting Wheel where he could see it, he'd have noticed and stopped me.

But thanks to the miasma, the smokescreen Gardranda had set upon the ground, he hadn't noticed it.

The reason why she'd made a mess of the miasma with her supersonic speeds was to hide the movements caused by the Shooting Wheel's spinning.

Nemesis and I had done the charging while Gardranda was keeping Logan distracted with her fight against the Gigaknight.

Everything was set.

I couldn't move right because of the debuffs, but that didn't get in the way of launching the next and final attack.

Logan gasped, realizing the power I was wielding, then started chanting something. “H-Here and now, I consign this unique treasure!” he said, making one of his items vanish.

“Payback...” I began saying the name of my own skill.

“In exchange for its limitless value, grant me a moment of power!”

Alas, his chant came far too late.

Perhaps it wouldn’t have turned out this way if he’d chosen to do this while Gardranda and the Gigaknight were still fighting.

“...Beyond the...”

“Come from the ancient times, O endless devil!”

Perhaps what he was trying to summon right now was his ultimate trump card.

But, again, *it was far too late*.

“...Stars.”

“C-Call Devil Ze—”

The shooting star flew.

Going at five times the speed of sound, it closed the less-than-a-hundred-meter distance between us before hitting him and unleashing the damage.

With Veldorbell having destroyed Logan’s Brooch, he now had no means of resisting.

The damage exceeding 1,500,000 turned him into dust, not even giving him the chance to say his final words.

All that was left were some random drops and the shattered pieces of his custom-made armor — the proof of his death penalty.

I said nothing.

I’d just won against the Hell General, Logan Goddhart — a Superior. However, that barely made me feel anything.

Perhaps that was because he’d underestimated me and hadn’t gone all-out, even for a second.

Or maybe this was just the kind of victory that just couldn't give me any joy. Perhaps all it could make me feel was just... emptiness at the fact that so many irreplaceable, priceless things had been lost to *someone like this*.

"Phew..." I tried to think of some words, but all that came out was a sigh.

I reached into my inventory, took out an HP potion, and downed it.

As the debuffs made my body feel heavy, I lay down right where I stood.



Earth, ???

"AAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!" the person screamed, jumped out of the bed, lost himself to rage, took off the *Infinite Dendrogram* hardware, threw it into the wall, then stomped on it over and over, breaking it completely.

As if that wasn't enough, he started kicking around everything else in the room. Magazines, cushions, his *elementary schooler backpack*, and his homework... nothing escaped his rage as he tried to let go of something whirling within.

"I... I-I lost to a... low-rank... in a fight... I even used a... special reward... WAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!"

The little boy who wasn't even in middle school yet screamed as if that would make his defeat go away.

You'd expect someone to hear and come to check on him, but his room was specially designed to be completely soundproof "to let the boy focus on his studies," so no one was overhearing this moment of madness.

After raging around for a while, the boy — the real identity of the Hell General, Logan Goddhart — started shouting something more coherent.

“I’m supposed to be better than everyone else! In school and *Infinite Dendrogram*! No one’s supposed to be better! I’m the best gamer! It’s not fair!”

That was when he realized his temper had led him to break his game hardware.

For a moment, a chill went down his spine, but then he remembered that it registered brain waves, so all he had to do was buy another one. It was just money.

He calmed down a bit and started muttering.

“It’s that old fart’s fault. I didn’t know he’d be there, and I wouldn’t have lost if he hadn’t been. That was a 2v1, and they used dirty tricks. Why could he even use a UBM?! That’s not fair! I’ll mail the devs and—!”

He spoke as though he’d forgotten about his army and Legendary devils, but his excuses were cut short by a message he received on his mobile device.

“Who...?” He looked at it and became petrified.

The message said, “Not so hot now are ya, Your Excellency? (GIT REKT. L M A O)”

The sender was “Mr. Franklin.”

That was the name of the Superior he was most antagonistic towards, and the message irritated him like nothing else.

He suddenly realized that Franklin must have used his monsters to observe the whole battle just now, just like he’d done during the Liliana incident.

The message also came with a URL leading to a video site, showing the entire fight between Hell General and Ray Starling.

The boy suddenly realized that his embarrassing defeat had been made available to the public. The shock caused him to throw his phone at the wall.

He then proceeded to bury his face in a cushion, wetting it with tears.

Chapter Four: Gifted Barbaros

Thirty years ago, Quartierlatin mansion.

In the Quartierlatin mansion's garden, a young married couple was sitting around a white table underneath a large tree, drinking tea and chatting.

"Oh, so you plan to take him on your next trip to Dryfe?"

"Yes. While I'm at it, I will also introduce him to the Barbaros family."

The wife was Countess Zermina Quartierlatin, the only child of the previous count.

The husband was Mark Quartierlatin, an Altarian diplomat who'd married into the family.

The two had married out of love, which was a rarity for nobles, and had been blessed with their first child just a year ago.

Their son's name was Emilio. Bathed in the sunlight leaking through the tree, he was lying asleep in a carriage next to their table.

They had a garden because of the husband's fondness of them, and the time the three of them spent here was nothing but bliss.

"He's only a year old," Zermina said, expressing her worry. "Are you sure he should go on such a long trip?"

"We're taking a dragon carriage, so we will be safe," he said soothingly. "The mission will have a Bishop from the state church, as well as many escorts, including the one and only Mr. Faldreed."

"Oh, my. The Sacred Blazer?"

"Yes. He said he also has business with the Barbaros family. Apparently, he and The Ram... Ronaldo Barbaros... are going to have a duel."

"Mark... you care more about the duel than your work, don't you?" she asked suspiciously.

"Ah... N-No, no, certainly not!" he overreacted, making it clear that she'd hit the nail on the head.

"Ugh..." she sighed. "Don't forget your work, at least."

"I would never. Far too much depends on how these discussions go."

The diplomatic mission he was entrusted with would greatly affect the futures of both Dryfe and Altar, as they would discuss the potential of a marriage between the kingdom's royalty and the imperium's bloodline.

If that happened, it would greatly strengthen their alliance and perhaps even lead to a union of the two countries.

However, all of the king's children — including the firstborn, Eldor Zeo Altar — were male. Though the imperium had a princess, her family on her mother's side was too lacking in status to marry into the kingdom.

So Mark expected the discussions to be about the potential marriage in the later generations of kings, imperators, and princesses.

The mission had a number of other goals planned, but the focus was on that subject — the talks of future decades.

As a count, he cared a lot about the future of Altar, but as a father, he was obviously concerned about the well-being of his son.

"If you're to take Emilio, maybe I should go, as well?" asked Zermina.

"Mina, you don't like using dragon carriages, do you?" he said.
"Not to mention that there's count work to be done."

"That's true, but... I'll ask again. It *is* safe, right?"

"Of course. We will come back in less than a month. I imagine I'll be missing your cookies dearly at that point." The count picked up one of the cookies from a plate on the table and took a bite. They were handmade by his wife, and he always enjoyed their gentle taste.

"Ahh! Ooh..." Emilio suddenly became noisy. He was awake now and staring at the cookie with his heterochromic eyes. Those were a trait he'd inherited from his mother.

"You want a cookie?" his father asked.

You could tell that was what he wanted by the way he reached for it.

"You can't," scolded Zermina. "You're too young for cookies. You don't even have a full set of teeth yet."

"Nnh..." The boy became sulky as though he actually understood her words.

"Ha ha ha! Emilio, just wait a few months and you will have the teeth for them. Or maybe you'll be able to eat them by the time we come back from Dryfe. Who knows?"

"Oh, then I'll have to work hard and welcome you with my best cookies yet," Zermina giggled.

Her husband chuckled, and it soon spread to little Emilio.

It was peaceful quality time with the family.

A week later, the count took Emilio on his trip to Dryfe.

The lady saw them off with a smile on her face, completely unaware that *this would be the last time they ever saw each other.*



The entire scene was drowned in flames.

The road, the trees — everything was burning to a crisp.

There were countless limbs littered in the fire, and it was easy to see that they had come from humanoid marionettes. In fact, there were no human limbs anywhere in the blaze.

Those were outside of it.

The human limbs had been torn off by the marionettes, and were now burning and collapsing. They easily surpassed one hundred in number. They'd belonged to at least fifty people.

Ignoring such statistics, they were the corpses of the Altarian mission to Dryfe.

On the road from the Quartierlatin County to Barbaros County, on the border between the countries, the party had suddenly been swarmed by a horde of marionettes.

Not even understanding what was happening, the guards assigned to the mission had still fought hard to protect it.

Alas, they were quickly outnumbered, and as their numbers dwindled, the marionettes finally reached the carriage they were tasked to protect.

The marionettes were unarmed, but they were strong enough to cling to people and tear off their limbs.

A user of search magic discovered that they were being controlled by a UBM called “Unguided Horde, Edelvalsa,” with a rank of Mythical.

It was no doubt an emergency, and those who could use communication magic called for reinforcements from both Dryfe and Altar.

Unfortunately, no one came, no matter how long they waited.

After all — they were right at the border between the countries.

It wasn't easy to send an army to such a politically-important location, especially if it had to be large enough to battle a Mythical.

Then again, an army wouldn't have made it even if they'd moved out the moment they'd learned of this attack, as the mission was almost completely wiped out *in less than two hours*.

There was only one person left.

It was a young man somewhere in his twenties.

He was clad in armor as red as a blaze, and wore long, navy blue gloves.

In his hands, he held a sword with a wave-like blade — a flambeuge.

Fifty-odd marionettes were charging at him. Communicating in a language unintelligible to mankind, they approached him to tear him limb from limb, but...

“Blazing Circle.”

...the man swung his sword in an arc.

A flame extended from the blade, splitting all the fifty marionettes in two, then creating explosions on the cut.

They fell to the ground and began blazing, mixing with the countless other marionette remains spread out on the ground.

Counting the remains would easily give you a number surpassing one thousand, and many of them were too indistinct to count properly.

Almost all of those marionettes had been destroyed by the man.

He was the Sacred Blazer, Aslan Faldreed.

He was considered to be the strongest man in Altar currently. Anyone who witnessed this display of a would understand why — he was a one-man army.

But despite crushing his opponents so easily, he showed not a hint of joy.

After all... he'd already lost.

Even if he himself was unharmed, none of what he was supposed to protect had survived. A thousand destroyed marionettes meant nothing compared to that.

There was only one possible outcome to a fight where a solo battle type defended against a wide-scale suppression type — the solo battle type survived, while the wide-scale suppression type destroyed all that was supposed to be protected.

He didn't have the power to repel the swarming horde.

"I'm so sorry..." he muttered, but there was no one who could hear him. He was by far the strongest creature on the battlefield, but he felt nothing but powerlessness.

The marionettes had been destroyed. The only things moving now were the flames.

Aslan stood in place, listening to the fire consume the marionettes, when suddenly, he heard something different.

Not wasting a moment, he ran to the source of the sound — the collapsed dragon carriage.

He rose it up, opened it, and lost his words.

The interior was in a terrible state. A marionette had gone in and slaughtered everyone.

The officials had all died, their bodies ruthlessly torn apart, but then the marionette had been destroyed, too. Count Mark

Quartierlatin, the main diplomat, had pierced the marionette's head with his blade.

The count was dead, but he had been protecting something behind him — a piece of cloth that was still moving.

Aslan gently took it in hand and unwrapped it a bit to expose the face of the count's only son... Emilio.

Aslan closed his eyes tightly and prayed.

This wasn't a miracle from God, but the mere result of a father protecting his child. Thus, he prayed for Mark to find peace.

Still holding Emilio, Aslan left the dragon carriage and heard a new sound.

Countless footsteps were marching from somewhere in the distance. They were human-like, but inhuman — akin to the uncanny valley of human footsteps. The marionette reinforcements had come, this time numbering to ten thousand.

"Marionettes..." the man muttered as he shielded the child in his left arm and opened his eyes wide. "Come, if you're willing. For the sake of this child, and for the kingdom... *I will burn you all.*"

Gripping his blade in his right hand, he stood alone and faced the encroaching horde.

But right as the strongest warrior clashed with the ten thousand marionettes...

"Distortion Pile!"

...a shockwave cut through the center of the horde.

Holes larger than the marionettes' torsos opened up in their bodies and made them fall apart.

Second and third shockwaves followed, not giving the horde a chance to do anything about it.

“Prominence Wave!”

Aslan joined the onslaught and swung his blade, creating what could only be described as a tsunami of flame.

The ten-thousand strong marionette horde lost a tenth of their numbers in just a few attacks.

The humans, however, had doubled in power.

“Yo, Aslan. I’m here to give ya a hand.” said the man now standing next to him. “Looks like I’m late, though.”

He was wearing mechanical armor, equipped with a gigantic pile bunker in its right hand.

The face cover on his helmet opened up, and he looked at the state of the mission with grief in his eyes. Though his armor looked clunky, his expression was truly refined.

He was none other than the Barbaros County’s heir apparent, and Dryfe’s strongest warrior — The Ram, Ronaldo Barbaros.

“You aren’t late. I thought I wouldn’t get reinforcements for a while still,” said Aslan.

“I know what you mean. I just went out ‘cause I’d had enough of listening to the old farts in Vandelheim wasting time. Sorry, but we won’t get any real reinforcements for a while.”

“It’s fine. I don’t mind” Aslan stood back-to-back to Ronaldo. They faced the nine thousand marionettes surrounding them. “I’ve already gotten the best reinforcements I could’ve asked for.”

“Heh. Guess I’ll have to live up to that, huh? Let’s do this!”

Placing their lives in the hands of each other, the two men, who trusted one another more than anyone else, clashed with the marionettes.



“Blaze Edge!”

“Distortion Pile!”

Altar’s and Dryfe’s strongest pulverized a hundred marionettes with just a single hit.

Unbeatable, two-man army, unmatched, peerless — there were many terms to describe them.

After meeting up, the two went on to destroy over ten thousand marionettes.

Even so, the battle wasn’t over, for there were still thousands more, and they only kept increasing.

This was the power of the Mythical UBM known as “Unguided Horde, Edelvalsa.”

It had a skill called “Marionette Brigade Creation,” and the name said everything you needed to know — it was a menacing power that created a marionette army as vast as a brigade.

It needed wood or stone for the material, but the border between Altar and Dryfe was a woodland, so there was no problem on that front.

Individual marionettes were weak — equal to just single low-rank jobs. To experienced Superior Jobs, such as Sacred Blazer and The Ram, they were like paper.

However, *there were just too many of them.*

The battle had been going on for dozens of hours now, draining them of their energy and making it harder to evade attacks.

“Feels like we haven’t done shit to their numbers,” said Ronaldo as he opened his face cover and wiped the sweat off his face. “The main unit’s gotta be hidin’ somewhere. I can just imagine its shit-eating grin.”

He suddenly aimed his pile bunker behind him and fired it, piercing a marionette.

"What a goddamn monster, though. We've taken out a whole bunch of UBM's, but this one's worse than all of 'em combined," he added as he eyed his pile bunker and machine armor — both Legendary special rewards.

"Let me correct you." Aslan made a serious face. "You say you imagine the main unit grinning, but according to our search magic, it's a doll, too. Its expression doesn't change."

"Man, you never change, do ya? You said something like that when we downed that sphinx, too."

"That takes me back..." Aslan said as he looked at his long gloves — the remains of the UBM he and Ronaldo had defeated. They were an Ancient Legendary special reward, and though they gave him a great advantage against magic and its users, they were useless to him in this battle.

"You think the other marionettes're far?" asked Ronaldo. "Wanna try escapin' through where there're less of 'em?"

"A foolish question," Aslan declared. "Running away means leaving this UBM until the army comes to take care of it — who knows when that will happen — or until it starts invading Altar and Dryfe. At the rate it's making its marionettes, it could create an army of over a hundred thousand in just a few days. That would be a disaster."

"Guess we got no choice, then."

"Yes... We have to beat it here and now."

They both looked around.

The trees that'd been here before had all been used as marionette material, so they could see far into the distance.

They saw nothing but the remains covering the surface and a new marionette army coming their way, signaling yet another attack.

"By the way, let me hold the kid," Ronaldo said as he extended his left hand towards the cloth in Aslan's arm. Emilio was sound asleep.

Aslan refused. "No need."

He hadn't been able to protect the mission. Emilio was the sole survivor of the group, as well as a child that Count Quartierlatin had given his life to save.

Thus, protecting the child was his duty. He would bring the child back home, along with the inventories containing the remains of the others who'd perished at the hands of this UBM.

"Don't get stubborn with me now," his friend said. "Your right arm's broken. You can't fight with that boy in hand, can ya?"

"Yours is broken, too, you know? I can tell just by looking."

"Don't mind this. It doesn't make pile-bunkering any harder," Ronaldo laughed. "Also, that boy right there's gonna be my daughter's husband. I've gotta keep the li'l guy safe."

Aslan's eyes opened wide. "Your child's already born?"

"Nope. Not yet. But I mean, my honey's the one birthin'. I just know it's gonna be a cute girl! No! It's gonna be a cute girl 'cause I *want it to be a cute girl!*"

"You're a noble... Shouldn't you wish for an heir? Though I guess I'm in no position to talk. I was a nomad before I rose to nobility." Aslan grinned wryly and handed Emilio to Ronaldo, who took him with lots of care. "You'd better keep him safe."

"Don't need you to tell me that." Ronaldo formed an indomitable smile. "Anyway, what now? We holdin' out until the cavalry gets here? Whenever that'd be..."

“No... we’re taking out the main unit.”

“You know where it is?”

“Yes. I’ve kept track of the variations in their reinforcement times, the percentage of stone marionettes mixing with the wooden ones, and general information about the location — particularly, the state of the woodlands. I’m seventy percent sure I know where it is.”

“You know, I thought this during the Veltboule Sphinx battle, but damn, you’ve got what it takes to be a detective.” Ronaldo grinned wryly. He still couldn’t believe Aslan could say things like that and act like it was nothing.

“Anyway, are you up for this?” Aslan asked. “There’s a thirty percent chance we’ll go right into the enemy army and get nothing for it, and a seventy percent chance we’d be fighting Edelvalsa in tatters.”

“Oh, I’m up for this. And don’t worry. No matter how bad it gets, I’ll protect this boy.”

“I see. Shall we go, then?”

“Yeah!”

Thousands of marionettes right before them, and Edelvalsa somewhere beyond...

With a goal set, the two warriors faced and braved through the horde.



Two days had passed since the appearance of Unguided Horde, Edelvalsa. Both Altar and Dryfe were keeping to themselves and preparing for a potential attack from the UBM.

Despite this, there was a group running through the border.

It consisted of men riding tank-type Magingears, known as Geists, and replica Prism Steeds. They were the army of the Barbaros County.

One replica rider was ahead of them all. He was the current head of the Barbaros family, and one of the generals of the Dryfear army: General Barbaros.

He was also the proud father of The Ram, Ronaldo Barbaros, the man who'd gone to aid in the fight against Edelvalsa before anyone else.

He'd wanted to rush to save the diplomats the moment they'd received their comms magic request for aid. However, the current imperator and the other higher-ups had restrained him.

"Sending an army to the border might not be wise."

"It wouldn't be good for us politically if we move an army there before they do."

"It wouldn't be good if the imperium's army is the only one to suffer casualties. In fact, we should wait until the kingdom wears the UBM down, then move out to finish it off and take the Mythical special reward for ourselves."

Calling their assertions "political" felt like an insult to politics.

General Barbaros had wanted to bellow out his disagreement towards their decision, but as an army man, he simply couldn't.

Instead he'd tried to persuade them like the general he was.

His son, however, had said, "It's fine if we don't go with an army, right?" and headed out to the border by himself.

A whole day had passed since then. General Barbaros had successfully convinced the imperator to allow an army to move to the border, but only if it was Barbaros's own and no others.

“Please, tell me I’m not too late...!”

Tortured by unease, he urged his army to move as fast as possible.

He wasn’t the only one who felt that way. All of the Barbaros army men who knew Ronaldo felt the same. They all broke their speed limits and records to rush to aid him and the diplomats.

Then marionettes appeared before them, slowing them down.

“These must be Edelvalsa’s!”

They made short work of them. Ironically, this encounter gave them hope.

After all, if there were marionettes, the battle wasn’t over yet.

And if they hadn’t invaded either country yet, it could only mean that someone was keeping them busy.

“I’m coming, son!” General Barbaros shouted as he broke through the marionettes in his way.

Crossing thousands of marionette remains, they arrived at a forest that seemed to be their source.

“RONALDO! MR. FALDREED! WE CAME TO YOUR AID! ARE YOU WELL?!” His voice, filled with the hope that it would reach his son, resounded throughout the forest.

For some reason, however, it made all the marionettes around him just... *stop*.

They now just stood in place, not doing anything.

No — they all started pointing in a single direction.

General Barbaros found it odd and suspected it was a trap, but he was confident he would make it regardless.

However, what he found upon following the marionettes' directions was far worse than a trap.

"Ahhh..." Vocal despair left his mouth as he fell to his knees.

His son, Ronaldo Barbaros, was lying against a large tree, clad in only his innerwear, for his armor had vanished.

The disappearance of a special reward could only mean one thing — he was dead.

In his left arm, he held some sort of blanket, while his right hand was fixed in an odd state, like he'd just pulled a trigger. It was proof that he'd held the pile bunker, his other special reward, until his dying breath.

The death of his son made the general bawl his eyes out.
"Ronaldo! Ronaldo...! I'm so sorry... If only I'd come earlier... ohh...!"

The grief from losing his son, the regret that he had been too late to save him, the guilt towards his mother and his son's wife... such feelings whirled inside him and tortured him.

"General! Look there!" One of his soldiers pointed to something surrounded by countless marionette remains.

It was the body of a man he knew well — his son's friendly rival, Aslan Faldreed.

He'd died standing. His special rewards were gone, but his hands were positioned in a way like he had stabbed someone below him.

The two soldiers had fought until the very end.

"So... you both died as you lived... Hm?"

As the father within General Barbaros lamented the loss, the soldier within him calmly began to wonder.

What became of Edelvalsa?

His son and the kingdom's people had surely died hours ago. If Edelvalsa was still alive, it would have surely created an army and invaded one of the countries by now.

However, the number of marionettes that had appeared before him was far too lacking.

That could only mean that Edelvalsa disappeared with the deaths of these two men, but that left him with the question of why the marionettes had been able to move right before they'd arrived here.

As he searched for an answer...

"Hm?" ...he noticed the cloth held by his son's remains move slightly.

"Could it be...?" He gently reached for and took the cloth from his son's cold hands.

Inside, he found...

"A... baby?"

It was a child not much older than one, covered in high-quality baby clothing.

There was blood on its face, and it had several minor wounds, but its life wasn't in danger.

General Barbaros wondered why it was there, and quickly figured it out. "I see. So you are Count Quartierlatin's..."

He remembered that they'd had plans for a marriage between the Quartierlatin and Barbaros families, so Count Quartierlatin had been bringing his son to present him to them.

The remains of the count himself and everyone else from the Altarian mission were in Aslan's corpse inventory.

All of them were gone, except for this baby... Emilio.

General Barbaros realized that his son had given his own life to protect this child.

"You were a proud soldier until the very end..." If Ronaldo hadn't left early and gone ahead on his own, this child wouldn't have lived, and many Altarians or Dryfeans would surely have died.

Though his heart was aching, General Barbaros couldn't have been more proud of his boy.

"Young Quartierlatin... I will bring you back to your country," he promised, with respect to the life his son had protected.

But then, he noticed something odd.

"Hm? This boy's eyes..."

He wiped the blood off the child's face, and he slightly opened the baby's left eye. The color wasn't what it was supposed to be.

"I heard he had his mother's blue-green heterochromia. Why are they both blue?"

The child didn't fit the description. As he wondered whether there had been more children in the mission, he noticed that *the boy's left eye was artificial*.

Overcome by unease, he used Identification on it, but his skill level was too low to even see the name.

He called for someone with the highest Identification level and showed it to him.

The man gasped, and his voice was shivering as he said, "Unguided Gaze, Edelvalsa... th-that's the name of his eye, sir."

"Wh... What?"

This couldn't be anything other than the special reward from the Mythical that had ravaged this land, Unguided Horde, Edelvalsa.

"Wh-Why is...? Don't tell me he...!" General Barbaros stopped as he thought of a possibility.

Ronaldo and Aslan might have died before Edelvalsa. The wounds from the battle had caught up to it after their deaths.

Since Emilio had been the only survivor when the MVP was being chosen, it had gone to him.

Naturally, the boy was far from the "Most Valuable Player" in this battle. However, if, for example, a single cry had attracted even a little bit of the UBM's aggro, that could have counted as a big enough contribution to the battle to make him the MVP if there had been no one else.

If that was the case, then perhaps the marionettes they'd run into on the way here had been summoned by Emilio instinctually trying to protect himself.

"G-General..." The man who identified the eye looked at General Barbaros with unease.

Instead of responding, he just looked down at the sleeping child and said, "I'm sorry..."

The apology was full of despair and guilt, for he realized that the promise he'd just made would be impossible to fulfill.



He was right.

The imperator issued an order to tell the kingdom that the Mythical was defeated, but no one had survived.

The reason for this lie was Emilio's special reward — an immense power that only he could wield.

If he were brought back to Altar, the kingdom would surely gain more power, but if Dryfe claimed he'd died and raised him themselves, his power would be theirs.

The countries had a good relationship, but a Mythical special reward was valuable enough for them to lie to an ally.

The imperium had lost The Ram, too. He was their most powerful warrior, and they needed to fill the void.

The politicians had also argued that, "Having him with us would give us more power over the potential union with Altar."

As a Dryfean soldier, General Barbaros couldn't argue against that.

This was on a whole other level than the reinforcement matter. It was possible that the imperator wouldn't have hesitated to eliminate anyone opposing this decision. That was how powerful a Mythical was.

However, General Barbaros asked for one thing: to be allowed to raise the child.

The imperator allowed it right away.

The Barbaros family had produced excellent soldiers every generation, not to mention that General Barbaros had been the one to nurture the late Ronaldo Barbaros. The imperator was certain the child would grow to be a force to be reckoned with.

And with that, Emilio was adopted by the Barbaros family.

However, the general didn't take him with the intention of turning him into a human weapon.

"This power given to you will never let you have peace from battle," he spoke to the babe in his arms. "You will be forced to fight and train as a human weapon for the imperium... as part of the Special Mission Task Force."

Sad as it was, it was a future set in stone.

“But if possible... I want you to grow up with love.”

That was the general’s real desire.

“My precious boy gave his life to save you... so I want you to find happiness.”

He wanted to prevent the child from becoming little more than a tool, and to protect at least a little bit of what his son had died fighting for.

“I’m an old, contradictory fool... a weak idiot who can’t even return you to your mother’s arms. You have every right to resent me. But...”

No one knew what he was going to say next. But whatever it was, it was cut off by Emilio giggling and extending his little arm to the general.

Upon seeing that, he could no longer speak... and only cried.

Thus, Emilio became a Barbaros and was given a new name: “Gifted.”

By chance, it coincided with a word from Earth.

He’d lost his real name. He’d lost his father. He’d lost his entire life. And in compensation, he was instead *gifted* with immense power.

The life of Emilio Quartierlatin had ended, and the life of Gifted Barbaros, Dryfe’s future field marshal and strongest tian, had begun.

Chapter Five: His Reason

About the imperium

Seven months ago in *Infinite Dendrogram* time, the Dryfe Imperium had waged war on the Kingdom of Altar.

There were three reasons why they had done so: one of them was “hunger,” and the other was “the risk of an invasion.”

The hunger was caused by the loss of fertile land.

A few years before Masters started growing in number, Dryfe’s cultivated territory began to wither. Being a northern country, it was never suited for farming, but things had only gotten worse since then.

The cause was unknown, and no amount of fertilizer research could reverse the problem. Eventually, about a third of Dryfe’s total area became unable to sprout even potatoes.

This famine continued to spread throughout the land, and it didn’t take long until the imperium was no longer a self-sustaining nation.

For a while, it could survive on imports from Altar and Caldina, but soon after Masters began growing in number, for reasons unknown, Caldina set a limit on their food exports to the imperium.

Many Dryfean diplomats were sent to negotiate a reversal of this policy, but Caldina wouldn’t budge, no matter what.

The desert country was well-known for being a nation that made a profit as a trade intermediary selling goods from one country to another, and yet it suddenly stopped doing that with Dryfe, taking on a “Want it? Come and get it” approach.

The imperium didn't have the know-how needed to cross the perilous desert while transporting enough food to feed the population, so they had no choice but to give up on food from Caldina.

Some Dryfeans started dying of hunger, but the country could still survive on imports from Altar.

But then, soon after the new imperator was chosen, there was cross-national discussion in which the alliance between the two countries was canceled, ending the flow of food from the kingdom.

It was only a matter of time until the imperium had a massive famine on its hands.

The second reason, risk of an invasion, was also linked to Caldina.

The country was starting to show signs that it was preparing to attack one of its neighbors.

Following the increase in the number of Masters, Caldina began acting strange. Importing goods from the other countries while refusing to export certain things could be seen as a preparation for war.

Caldina was the richest of the seven great countries, so it could focus on imports for several decades and not endanger its financial situation one bit.

Additionally, they wanted to keep the items that would attract Masters to them.

Masters, particularly those powerful enough to cross the deserts, had a tendency to gather in Caldina because their markets had unique items from every country.

So one of the reasons why they stopped exporting such products was to keep the Masters who wanted them from leaving Caldina.

Upon realizing this, the imperium stopped exporting their machinery to them, but that didn't stop smuggling and the black markets.

Over the course of just a few years, Caldina had gathered massive amounts of goods and vast numbers of Masters. It was blatant preparation for war, and Dryfe couldn't understand why a country that had done nothing but trade until now was suddenly making such a drastic switch.

Many thought they saw the sudden increase in Masters as an opportunity, but that wasn't certain.

Whatever the case, Caldina was now the most dangerous neighbor to them, so thinking about the reasons for that was pointless.

As things were, Caldina was going to invade another country as soon as they were ready. It could be the Kingdom of Altar, Legendaria, the Huang He Empire, or the Dryfe Imperium, and Dryfean leadership guessed that it would be them.

After all, they had been the very first to have their imports from Caldina cut.

Though weakened due to the famines, the imperium still had the best technology out of all the countries, so it wasn't hard to believe Caldina would come for them to gain an advantage. Dryfe had no choice but to protect themselves.

Their first plan against that was a marriage between the next imperator and the kingdom's first princess, followed by a transformation that would turn Dryfe and Altar into a united kingdom.

It was a three-decade-old secret agreement that would both fix the imperium's famine and give them a chance against Caldina. It seemed like an action above all others.

However, as mentioned before, the cross-national talks following the new imperator's ascent had resulted in the complete opposite of a union — the end of their alliance. The imperium was left to face Caldina's incoming invasion all by themselves.

With all the Superiors and other powerful Masters that desert country had, the imperium stood no chance against them.

Thanks to the recent imperator accession civil war, Dryfe knew just how powerful Masters were — especially their own King of Beasts.

Thus, the Dryfian leadership unanimously agreed that the result of the war would be decided by the number of Masters on their side.

Although Dryfe had the KoB — the strongest in the three western countries — Caldina had the most powerful wide-scale exterminator, The Earth.

Even if you assumed they were equal, there was no chance that Dryfe's Hell General and other Masters could defeat Caldina's other Superiors. Everyone knew that war with Caldina would mean certain defeat for the imperium.

To avoid that, Dryfe had no choice but to gather enough power to make Caldina think twice before attacking them, then give them an obvious display of this power.

Basically, they had to gather war potential, show it, and fix their food shortages.

As it happened, right to the south of them, they had the perfect country for this: the Kingdom of Altar.

It was a fertile land that had recently had its forces devastated by the SUBM known as "Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria," making it a perfect target.

Also, many people in the imperium were upset at how Altar had ended the alliance and even cut off their food exports to Dryfe.

And they'd ended the alliance despite Dryfe sending out — and losing — reinforcements during the Gloria incident.

Unbeknownst to many, for details which won't be named here, the imperator was half of the reason why the alliance was broken. But with the state the imperium was in, that mattered little to the people. In fact, from Dryfe's perspective, they'd only tried to go through with what was planned long ago.

Anyway, the first war began.

Though the imperium had little food, it still had a decent amount of wealth. It spent a great amount of that to hire many country-less Masters, and went on to invade the kingdom.

It was easy for them to pick an invasion route, as one of the Altarian territories bordering Dryfe had its entire population wiped out by Gloria.

This route was picked by Field Marshal Gifted Barbaros, and his reason was, "There aren't any defenses or villages there. That makes it easy to fight."

That also meant that they wouldn't conquer any towns or villages on the way through there.

Side note: the other proposed invasion route was through the Quartierlatin County, which was the territory bordering the military base in the Barbaros County.

The battles began, the countries fought, and the first war reached its conclusion.

Altar lost major figures such as the king, the Celestial Knight, and the Arch Sage, while its knights and soldiers suffered major casualties.

Dryfe, on the other hand, conquered the unpopulated land they'd invaded through, giving them a bit of fertile land and improving their food situation.

However, not everything went as planned.

Near the end of the war, Caldina invaded Dryfe in order to divert them.

The imperium had to recall their forces, including the King of Beasts, making it impossible to complete their original plan and conquer the capital.

Caldina's intervention came at such a precise time that they delivered a critical hit to Dryfe's plans.

Naturally, Dryfe's leadership was bitter about this. The unpopulated area wasn't enough to cover the imperium's food needs, and their unfinished invasion of Altar gave them new openings for Caldina to take advantage of.

Caldina could easily approach the kingdom with an alliance offer and say, "Let us join hands and fight the imperium. You will get your lands back, while we will take Dryfe and their technology."

If this had been any other country, Altar would assume that the new, expanded Caldina would go on to invade them afterwards and strongly refuse the offer, but the kingdom was in such a dire situation that it didn't seem unlikely for them to accept.

The war that was supposed to be the key to solve all of Dryfe's problems had led to them fighting a battle on two fronts.

Though it was their decision to invade the kingdom, you could say it was Caldina that had forced them to take that action.

The one sitting at the top of their congress was often described as a "monstrous anomaly," while the Caldinian Superior, the King of Toys — named simply "Grandmaster" — had the nickname "Lord of

the Boards” for a reason. It wouldn’t have been strange for that Master to have predicted this future and manipulated them into doing what they did.

It was likely that Caldina would soon take advantage of the situation and, as previously mentioned, cooperate with the kingdom or use their wealth to start directly hiring Masters.

To quickly do away with these possibilities, Dryfe had no choice but to merge with the kingdom as quickly as possible.

However, their opinions clashed when it came to the method.

The prime minister faction was worried about the situation of their treasury and general logistics, so they proposed that they shouldn’t move the army or negotiate with Altar, and instead did some small-scale operations that would have the same effect.

That included Franklin’s Game, assassination plots, and plans to persuade certain Altarian nobles.

The field marshal faction, on the other hand, insisted they should resume the invasion to the capital from the currently occupied lands.

The main reason for this was time. It was clear that Caldina would make a move soon. The prime minister faction’s proposal would take time and give too many openings for Caldina.

Therefore, the field marshal claimed it would be best to simply gather the Masters again and quickly take the capital, this time making sure to leave some Superiors at home for defense.

It would also make for a better situation further down the line, since union through the prime minister’s method could split Altar into two factions: those who accepted it and those who were hostile to it. That would throw the entire area into chaos full of guerrilla warfare.

The imperator made the final call, settling this argument by saying that they would prepare for the second invasion while trying to further the prime minister faction's plots.

Dryfe had always had two routes to annex the kingdom.

And even though the prime minister faction's plot to break the kingdom's spirit had failed, the imperium's army was still preparing for the second invasion.

The ruins were found when there was only a month left until those plans were ready.



Ruins

Shortly after the Hell General began his invasion...

While the devils were invading the town, Gifted Barbaros was halfway up the mountain with the ruins. There were no enemies nearby, and he was protected by only one marionette.

He could see all of Quartierlatin from where he was standing.

The morning sun still hadn't risen above the eastern mountain range, yet the town was bright. After all — it was burning.

Smoke rose up to the air from the chaotic townscape as the devils attacked the people.

The field marshal watched in silence. He had more or less expected this.

He'd known Logan long enough to know full well that the man didn't see tians as people. That was probably the reason why he'd told Nobrome that they only shared a method, not a faction.

While the field marshal's proposed invasion was for the sake of the imperium, Logan had only gotten in on it because it would be a chance for him to shine. No other reason.

Despite it all, the man was no doubt a valuable asset to the imperium, and besides that, he obediently completed any quests given to him.

The field marshal believed it was because of his actual age.

Though Logan had never revealed it himself, Gifted had seen enough people to make an educated guess that he was actually a young boy no older than ten.

“I expected as much...” Gifted sighed.

The Hell General was a valuable asset to the imperium, but to its enemies, such as the kingdom, he was nothing but a calamity.

Quartierlatin was burning right now. That was obviously Logan’s doing, but he wasn’t the only one at fault — the prime minister had requested it, and Gifted had approved it.

In other words, the man who had originally been a child of Quartierlatin was now a foreign soldier responsible for the town burning.

Emilio Quartierlatin knew everything about his origin. The previous head of the Barbaros family, his adoptive father, had told him about it soon after he turned ten.

It had happened on the evening before he’d gone out on his first mission.

In the end, his father had told him that, if he so wished, he could return where he belonged.

However, he had chosen to stay in Barbaros family and continue to live a soldier.

Although he’d been basically kidnapped, they’d raised him well, and perhaps he felt indebted to them. Or perhaps what kept him there was his relationship with the girl who, at least according to his

family tree, would be his niece-in-law. The daughter of Ronaldo, the one who'd died saving him.

Regardless, the most important reason was surely the fact that he'd grown up surrounded by love.

Thanks to his history and power he'd ended up with, his life was full of strict training. Even so, he could tell that the love he was provided was real. Both his adoptive mother and Ronaldo's widow treated him like their own son.

He felt like he hadn't repaid them for that, so he chose to stay in the imperium.

Since then, he'd lived twenty years as a Dryfean soldier.

Over that time, he'd become part of the SMTF and gained a Superior Job.

He'd investigated the history of his origin, Edelvalsa, and gone on to become an archeologist.

He'd met and become friends with his adoptive sister's and the third imperial prince's child, the one who was now the imperator.

He'd married his childhood friend and become a father.

He'd fought alongside the current imperator and defeated imperial family members and nobles loyal to the old regime, drastically changing Dryfe.

After his foster father's death, he'd inherited his land and become head of the Barbaros family.

And, by the request of the current imperator, he'd become the field marshal.

He had countless bonds and responsibilities here. It was safe to say that, at this point, he was far more "Gifted Barbaros" than "Emilio Quartierlatin."

He continued to silently watch the burning town, and he would've been lying if he'd said he didn't feel any regret.

He'd only lived here as a baby, and the town had changed too much for him to recognize the townscape. Even so, sacrificing Quartierlatin made him regretful.

He'd come here of his own free will. Prime Minister Vigoma had told him about the ruins and the potential technology in Quartierlatin, and once he'd found out, he was compelled to go.

He was SMTF and a scholar. Those reasons were good enough, but in reality, something deep inside had ordered him to go.

Wanting to find reasons to prevent any sort of action on Quartierlatin, he had infiltrated the town and started investigating.

Pre-ancient civilization ruins could have superweapons such as Prism Dragons or the Imperstand, the very symbol of Dryfe. However, if there was nothing of note there, there would be no reason to attack. If there was nothing, Dryfe would have no business with Quartierlatin.

He was the only one capable of conducting such investigations and making the decision to call off the operation.

He'd spent his entire time in Quartierlatin hoping that there was no superweapon. If it had been nothing but a Prism Soldier factory, he could've found a reason to leave it alone.

Unfortunately, his investigation had made it evident that the ruins contained a weapon of the highest tier.

It was simply too powerful to ignore. Were it to end up in the kingdom's hands, the kingdom would become too powerful for Dryfe to annex it, and the imperium would soon fall to Caldina.

He couldn't accept such an outcome, no matter what.

He had to either capture or destroy the superweapon.

The field marshal had already resolved to sell his soul to the devil to prevent Dryfe's demise.

Thus, he hadn't faked the results of his investigation. And, just as planned, he'd started the mission to either capture or destroy the superweapon.

"Looks like the Countess' mansion is still unharmed..." he murmured.

Yesterday, soon after he'd resolved to start the mission, he'd gone around placing jammers. While doing so, he'd passed the Quartierlatin mansion.

It was the home of his biological parents, and he couldn't recognize any of it.

It did shake his resolve a bit... but not enough to make him reconsider.

The taste of the cookie given to him by Ray, made by his real mother, was the same in that regard. He had vague memories of it and could faintly remember wanting to try it at some point.

There was a promise somewhere in there, too.

Once he'd tasted the cookie, he'd been struck by a surge of images and inexpressible nostalgia.

Even so, he had already decided.

There was hesitation, sure. It was a heavy choice to make, and it seemed to gnaw at his heart.

Even so, he didn't change what he had to protect.

Thus, he was choosing to harm his birthplace to keep his country, family, and friends safe.

He started by having his one thousand marionettes make a move.

“Ruin invasion, phase 2: Exterminate all Altarian forces within. Additionally... prepare for phase 3. Faldreed, standby.”

Following his words, the metallic marionette next to him stood up, shining with a scarlet color.



While Ray was facing Logan Goddhart, there was a vicious three-way battle within the ruins.

The kingdom’s Masters tried to stop the factory.

The Prism Soldiers tried to protect it.

And the imperium, meaning Edelvalsa’s marionettes, moved to capture the superweapon.

The kingdom’s Masters were at the greatest disadvantage. They had the most powerful individual units, but their position was awful. Prism Soldiers flooded from the deepest parts of the ruins, while wooden marionettes charged from the entrance.

The Prism Soldiers showered the Masters in lasers and gunfire, while the marionettes barraged them with bullets from Dryfean standard Assault Rifles.

Altar’s Masters were holding them at bay with defensive magic and barricades from Embryo skills, but this wouldn’t last.

“Shit! Where’re the damn reinforcements?!” Having to go completely on the defensive made one of the Masters frustrated.

Suddenly, one of them who’d logged off suddenly came back. With a pale face, he said what he’d seen in real life. “It ain’t good... I read online that Quartierlatin is being attacked by Hell General.”

“Huh?! The Superior?!”

The comms had failed, so they hadn’t known the situation on the surface. Needless to say, this news came as a shock.

“What do we do?” one of them asked frantically. “Go back?”

“I don’t think we can... The marionettes have weirdly good cooperation. Making it past them won’t be easy. And we’d have to turn our backs to the Prism Soldiers.”

“Then everyone who’s got some one-shot ultimate skills should... Wait, what’s with this smoke?”

As they talked, they noticed colored smoke coming from the entrance.

Since many of them had lowered themselves to hide behind barricades, some ended up breathing it in, and those who did instantly lost consciousness.

The people in their parties looked at the stat summaries and saw the “Forced Sleep” debuff on them.

“Sleeping gas...!”

Filling a closed space with gas was an effective strategy, especially when the gas used only had an effect on the opposing side. Sleeping gas only worked on animals, so the marionettes were unaffected.

At the entrance, there was a gas cylinder about as big as a drum. It was connected to several marionettes, who were pumping their contents inside.

Just like High-Frequency Knives and Assault Rifles, this was another weapon the field marshal had brought to occupy the ruins.

Except for those whose equipment gave them resistance against Sleep or those who drank Elixirs in time, everyone fell asleep.

Those who were still awake now had to take care of those who weren’t while fending off attacks from both sides.

“Tch! We’re already low on numbers, damn it!”

“Hold on! Something smells weird!”

As the sleeping gas began to fade, another gas began being pumped inside.

Again, gas was extremely effective in closed spaces.

Especially flammable ones.

This second gas burn very easily.

As it flowed deeper inside, it was shot by a stray beam from a Zircon Laser, causing a massive explosion.

In an enclosed space like this one, there was no escape from this immense power. Compressed in a tight, tunnel-like space, the explosion became a wave that quickly flowed to and overwhelmed both sides.

It quickly wiped out all the Masters who were still breathing and pulverized the Prism Soldiers defending the factory.

The marionettes had only lost the few that were set there to keep those inside from escaping.

“Check complete. Moving on to phase 3,” the field marshal muttered. He’d watched the entire scene through the eyes of the marionettes.

With no more Altarian Masters there, he sent more reinforcements inside.

The marionette platoon ran through the hallway, rendered empty by the gas explosion.

Though most of them were wooden, the one at the front wasn’t.

That one was made of a scarlet, Mythical metal called Hihi’irokane.

Just as the name “Mythical” implied, you could use these metals to create things on the same level as Mythical special rewards, except without the unique skills.

However, it was so difficult to work with that even in the country with the most advanced smithing, Tenchi, you could count those who could turn it into weapons on one hand. Additionally, it was so precious that a single kilogram could cost as much as 10,000,000 lir.

And yet here, you had a human-sized marionette made of this super tough, super luxurious Hihi’irokane.

Needless to say, that was accomplished through the field marshal’s Mythical special reward of Unguided Gaze, Edelvalsa.

He’d used one of its skills, Marionette Soldier Creation, to gradually forge a marionette out of Hihi’irokane.

The toughness of Edelvalsa’s marionettes was based on the material used, making this one into his strongest one by far.

The scarlet marionette’s name was Faldreed. This was to honor the Sacred Blazer who’d saved young Emilio alongside Ronaldo Barbaros, giving that name to his strongest marionette.

Unlike the basic, throwaway ones, this marionette was a treasure that he had on him all the time and trusted immensely.

Many Prism Soldiers stood in the marionettes’ way, but no matter how much gunfire or lasers hit him, Faldreed wasn’t even scratched. He went on to make short work of them with the super-tough blade fixed to his right arm.

Faldreed had similar qualities to END-focused Superior Jobs, and with the fire support from the other marionettes, these Prism Soldiers weren’t even an enemy.

This was going about as the field marshal had expected. While Masters could have countless trump cards they could use to give him

lots of trouble in a head-on fight — perhaps even destroying Faldreed — Prism Soldiers were limited to a standard, set power.

He was certain Faldreed wouldn't be harmed, no matter how many of them attacked him.

"So far, so good..." he murmured.

There were only three things to worry about now.

First was the defense system set in place to protect the superweapon, Acra-Vesta.

Second was the Acra-Vesta itself.

And the third was...

"There you are..." Ahead, the field marshal saw seven men.

They all had the same face. In fact, the only differences they had were the weapons they wielded.

They were all The Lynx, Tom Cat.

The ones obstructing his path were the clones Tom Cat was making using his ultimate skill.

Tom Cat was the reigning champion of the kingdom's duel rankings, so the field marshal knew his power well.

Thus, he'd expected him to notice his marionettes and turn around to fight, or leave his clones here to fight.

However, there was one thing he hadn't expected.

"Seven? Here?"

Tom Cat was Altarian, so his goal here was to stop the Prism Soldier factory and secure the superweapon. Therefore, it was logical to focus on securing the heart of the ruins.

The field marshal had only expected him to leave only about two here and take six with him. And yet, he'd gone ahead all alone, leaving the rest here.

It felt as though he was more focused on not letting anyone go after him than he was on conquering the ruins.

"Strange..." he murmured. "But his reasons are secondary now."

The seven Tom Cats were already making a move. All of them had stats equal to that of an AGI-focused Superior Jobs. They were difficult opponents even if the marionettes had the numbers.

"Looks like I have no choice."

He made his toughest, Faldreed, charge ahead, then had the hundred-plus other marionettes support him with gunfire.

The action the Tom Cats took, on the other hand, was really simple.

They just made a line. The seven Tom Cats lined up and charged into the firing line.

Naturally, the first one was turned into swiss cheese. He tried to block the bullets with his weapon, but it did little against the bulletstorm.

Still, his body became a shield that helped the others press on.

After the first reached his limit, turned into a cat, meowed, and vanished, the second one took his place.

As he began battling Faldreed, the third one broke out of the line and used his body to momentarily seal Faldreed's movements.

The third was quickly turned into swiss cheese, then cut in half by Faldreed, causing him to disappear, but the line then passed the metallic marionette.

With two meat shields gone, the rest of the four dived into the marionette army behind Faldreed.

No — not four. Before the field marshal could realize it, there were seven Tom Cats again.

“I see how you work...” Gifted quickly understood what Tom Cat was doing.

Tom Cat wasn’t just charging at the marionettes as just “seven AGI-focused Superior Jobs.” He was going at them head-on as inexhaustible cannon fodder.

“This is why Masters are outside common sense,” he muttered.

Tom Cat’s fighting style was unusual, as well. Though he didn’t hesitate to let his clones die, he always kept two at a safe distance.

That allowed him to multiply again and continue fighting even if all the others were destroyed.

Tom Cat’s goal was to keep the marionettes away, and he fought carefully, preventing himself from being wiped out. Gifted could easily understand that he wouldn’t let them pass, and he also felt as though he knew Edelvalsa’s fighting style.

The field marshal continued sending new marionettes to the scene, creating more to replace those lost. Gifted had to watch his MP, but at this rate, he could continue sending marionettes as long as there were trees on the mountain.

As though aware of that, Tom Cat fought while protecting the pace of their multiplication.

“He sure is troublesome...” Letting that bitter thought reach his marionettes, Gifted sent even more to the ruins.

Thus, the field marshal began a battle of volume against Tom Cat.



The last of the eight Tom Cats arrived at the deepest part of the ruins.

There were no Prism Soldiers around him. All that separated him from the factory he was heading for was a single door.

Expecting more Prism Soldiers behind the door, Tom Cat chuckled, for some reason.

"I'm here, fighting Edelvalsa's marionettes... ohhh, the twists and turns of faaate..."

That was putting into words what he felt about the battle between the seven other Tom Cats and the field marshal's army.

Just like Gifted with his marionettes, Tom Cat was fully aware what the other Tom Cats were up to. He watched the battle through the seven's visions.

"Man... This place is just full of stuff I have close ties to," he whispered.

Those were words that no one but him could understand, but to him, they were just perfect.

Once he was finished voicing his thoughts, Tom Cat opened the door leading to the heart of the ruins.

Chapter Six: Infinite Multiplication

Ruins, Prism Soldier plant

Zircon Leader had been on the same mission for the past two millennia.

After being created as the commander unit for the Prism Soldiers, he never left the ruins once. (There were no genital parts on the unit; “he” was just a gender identity assigned for convenience.)

His initial mission was supervision and defense of the facility, but since it had no invaders for two millennia, all he did was supervision.

That meant he’d spent the last two thousand years merely managing the Prism Soldier factory and observing the creation of the other weapon here, Acra-Vesta.

Both processes were designed to be slow to prevent any energy signals from leaking outside. The speed at which it was happening was so lethargic that any person or animal would go insane.

However, Zircon Leader, being a machine, merely followed his program and continued to operate.

Most would find his existence saddening, but he himself had no problems with it.

Besides, he didn’t expect this mission to continue forever.

As a machine, he had no dreams of the future. However, he had programming that implied the need to fight enemies.

He knew he would eventually have to lead the Prism Soldiers into battle against one of mankind’s enemies, the Incarnation of Beasts, and protect the world.

That was his final goal, the purpose behind his creation, and he had been waiting to fulfill it for two thousand years.

The first change in two thousand years had come just a few days ago, with the mountain suddenly shaking.

It was highly localized shaking, so it didn't damage the nearby town of Quartierlatin, but, as though it had been planned, the ground crumbled and exposed an entrance to the ruins.

Zircon Leader's AI was advanced enough to let him understand it was no accident. But, rather than investigating it, he had to prioritize hiding the facility.

Burying the entrance was top priority, but since the other Prism Soldiers had no good energy sources and thus couldn't leave the ruins, and he was equipped with a reactor just like that of the Prism Persons, he had to be the one to move out.

And so, he left the ruins.

His AI felt nothing about it, but there was something he realized when he did so.

None of what he saw outside was familiar — not a single bit of it was in the data he was provided.

The trees, terrain, and even monsters were different from the ones he knew.

And to top it all off, according to his list, *none of the humanoids he discovered were actually human*.

Zircon Leader was the commander unit of the Prism Soldiers. Although special, he didn't have the intelligence or adaptability to match that of the original Prism Persons.

To him, the tians of this era were just “human-like, non-human animals.”

He also discovered information that implied the facility was in danger. There were signs of the incarnations — the pre-ancient civilization's greatest foe — all over the place. They were weak and varied in comparison, but they were incarnations nonetheless.

Thus, he prioritized investigating the outside over hiding the facility.

Zircon Leader began gathering animals and using them as fuel to build and run his Prism Soldiers.

He sent out the first of them to gather more sources of energy and investigate the outside.

Something was happening here, and he needed to know what it was in order to protect the facility.

However, right as he let the Prism Soldiers move out, the facility was infiltrated by numerous signals reminiscent of the incarnations.

Zircon Leader tried to hold them back with sentry guns and Prism Soldiers, but they didn't stop, and eventually, half of the facility was conquered.

Thankfully, it wasn't the Prism Soldier plant, but a spare material warehouse and the living space of the human engineers that'd once worked here.

Losing those places wasn't a big issue, but for Zircon Leader, who had defense as his mission, this was a major problem.

He considered initiating absolute defensive mode and making all the available Prism Soldiers protect the facility, but he decided to conserve units for the true battle against the Incarnation of Beasts.

Until this morning. This morning, he'd had no choice but to do it.

There were two reasons for this.

First, the intruders began entering a high-priority location — the plant.

Second, the sensors placed by the Prism Soldiers he'd sent out found an incarnation-like energy signature that was many times stronger than any other.

The creature was highly human-like, but the amount of energy within it was anything but. It was unmistakably an incarnation signature.

And worst of all, the entity *and its devils* were clearly invading the area.

Thus, Zircon Leader decided that *this* was the anti-incarnation battle he'd awaited for two thousand years.

He initiated absolute defense and prepared to intercept the invaders approaching the plant.



Zircon Leader was standing in the Prism Soldier plant, the high-priority area connected to Acra-Vesta's hangar.

He was at least two times larger and significantly more colorful than the usual Prism Soldiers.

The stone he was named after could come in many colors, including red, gold, white, and more. Zircon Leader had all of them on him.

This design had been chosen by his developer, Flagman.

When he was being made, there was no time to create a new Prism Person, so Flagman had just taken an experimental, large Prism Soldier frame, equipped him with an original reactor core from Jet Chaser — a Prism Person that had already been destroyed by the

incarnations — equipped him with various weapons, and left it at that.

Zircon Leader was an unplanned mess made of things Flagman already had, but the color itself had been Flagman's decision.

The multiple colors were supposed to be the colors of the Prism Soldier commander who would become their hope. In a way, it was like a rallying flag.

"Detected." Zircon Leader directed his eye-camera at the entrance to the plant.

He knew everything about what was happening in the ruins, so he knew there was an intruder in front of the door, and that seven more of the same intruder were fighting another one.

"Prepare to intercept."

His words made the 968 Prism Soldiers aim their weapons at the entrance.

If you included the makeshift units that had nothing but the base frame and weapons, their numbers would actually be more than double that.

No matter what came through the door, the barrage would turn them to dust in an instant.

The intruder opened the door to his demise...

"Our era shall meet a shining dawn yet again. Cease fire."

...and spoke those words in *the pre-ancient civilization's language*.

"Ceasing fire."

"Ceasing fire."

The *highest-level control code* spoken by the intruder made all the Prism Soldiers stop attacking.

Zircon Fire, Zircon Laser, and even the incomplete units were rendered immobile.

"Oh, it worked," said the intruder, The Lynx, Tom Cat. "I figured it would, considering these ruins are untouched, but I didn't expect it to be *this* effective."

The words he'd spoken were an emergency code given to just a few researchers and Zweier Imperium elites two thousand years ago.

It was something that no normal Master could know. Not even Mario AKA Gifted Barbaros knew it, and he was Dryfe's most renowned archeologist.

As he'd said, it was extremely effective against the Prism Soldiers. If he'd used it on the way here, while with other Masters, they'd have all made it here without any trouble whatsoever.

Despite that, he hadn't done that. It was as if he wished to hide the fact that he knew it.

"Well, it didn't work on all of them, though. You're the commander unit, I assume?" Tom Cat shrugged and jumped back at supersonic speeds.

A moment later, a large blade cut through where he'd just stood.

"Continuing battle."

The attacker, Zircon Leader, hadn't been affected by Tom's code. This was because he had a top-level control code that not even Tom's words could override.

With the rest, since their codes contradicted each other, all the Prism Soldiers besides Zircon Leader didn't know what to do and just stopped in place.

Meanwhile, Tom was using seven of his bodies to keep the marionettes away.

That made this a one-on-one battle.

As Tom ran and jumped from floor to ceiling and back, Zircon Leader aimed and fired at him with the Gatling guns installed on his backpack.

The bulletstorm followed Tom's trail, but the guns were too slow for a single one to hit him. So instead, Zircon Leader aimed at Tom with the laser cannon installed in his forearms.

Tom noticed and quickly spun to dodge the light-speed beam while taking out a bow from his inventory and firing an arrow.

That was when Zircon Leader also began moving at supersonic speed.

Outspeeding even wind, his large body easily dodged the arrow. Though less mobile than Tom, he could still chase after him. That was exactly what he did, and he accompanied it with laser attacks, which he periodically stopped to give them time to cool off.

"I see," Tom nodded. "I guess it makes sense to give a commander similar specs to a Prism Person's. Your gear isn't special, but you have more of it to make use of all that extra energy. Since I'm all alone, I'm at a bit of a disadvantage here..."

He was analyzing the state of the battle.

"Heyyy, uh... I'm only here for the weapon inside. Can I have a look at it? If I don't have to destroy it, I'll just leaaave." Those words went directly against the quest he'd taken. "Sure, I'll break it if I have to, but it doesn't seem like you Prism Soldiers are my targets here, so I can just leave you heeere... Whoa!"

Zircon Leader paid no mind to those words and just kept on attacking Tom.

"Yeah, I knew this wouldn't work. You pre-ancient civ weapons are really hard-headed when it comes to this. It's actually a bit noble.

Still, I want to finish this before anyone else comes, so I'll just destroy you."

"Continuing battle."

Thus, Tom decided to face Zircon Leader, a foe stronger than himself, head-on.

He couldn't use any of his clones, which were his greatest strength, and could only rely on his powers as a Superior Job. And yet there was joy in his expression.

He moved away the bangs hiding his face. "It's been a while since I've had only one life left... but that just makes it interesting."

His exposed eyes were exactly like those of a feline.



Monster Cat Mansion, Tom Cat

He was well-known by everyone in the kingdom, tian and Master alike.

Once the Altarian duel champion, he was now the second in the rankings.

He'd been dueling for *eight years now*.

That amount of time was notable because it was more than the amount of time that'd passed in *Infinite Dendrogram* since its release in the year 2043.

There was also the fact that he'd lost his position as champion after his defeat to Figaro over two years ago.

The time just didn't add up.

It could only mean that Tom Cat was no normal player.

When asked, tians would describe him as a Master who'd been active before Masters started appearing en masse, leading many to

believe he was a player working for the developers — an alpha tester.

When players asked him if that was true, he'd always go, "No commeeent," and that was it.

For a while, people in online forums and the like had held heated discussions about whether it was all right for a tester to sit at the top of a duel rankings list, but that had died down when someone proposed a theory that Tom Cat's Embryo couldn't go beyond the sixth form.

He had an immensely powerful cloning ability, but his Embryo, Grimalkin, was limited to high-rank, as supported by the fact that he had been around way longer than any other player, yet he wasn't a Superior yet.

As a supposed tester, he had a head start, but that came with certain restrictions.

Besides Embryo form, there was also the fact that his level was stuck at 1,000 — 500 from standard jobs, and 500 from his SJ, The Lynx.

These limitations led many to believe he'd been placed there as an obstacle to other players.

The Lynx, Tom Cat, had sat at the top of Altar's duel rankings as a wall for those who came after, a challenge left there by the developers.

Once people began to look at it like that, those who'd complained about him were outnumbered by those who were determined to beat him.

Thus, many Masters tried to challenge and defeat Tom Cat.

This included the still-active duel rankers like the Kamen Rider, Riser, and the Raging Blaze, Bishmal.

They all grew better and struggled for this cause, and eventually one of them, Figaro, finally defeated Tom Cat, overcoming the challenge presented by the developers.

After that, instead of challenging Figaro to take his throne back, Tom just stayed where he was as a challenge to those who wanted the title of the second.

Soon after that, he stopped being relevant.

Some of the recent Altarian duel rankers, like the Black Raven, Juliet, and Vagrant Golden Sea, Chelsea, didn't even know that Tom used to be such a big deal.

The controversy regarding Tom Cat was a thing of the past.

However — *it was all true*.

Tom Cat was working with the developers, had been active as a Master since before the official release, had limits set on his Embryo and level, and had only been the duel champion to provide a challenge to those wanting to reach the top.

All of that was right.

However, the theories regarding him were lacking something important.

Something that had nothing to do with the current duel rankings.

Roughly six hundred years ago, *Infinite Dendrogram* time, there had been an all-out war between two immensely powerful tians: King of Kings and Draconic Emperor.

History spoke of a third entity who'd interfered in this clash.

His name was The Lynx, Shrödinger Cat.

He *happened* to have the same Superior Job as Tom Cat of the present, and according to all the texts, he was a Master — an extreme rarity at that point in time.

The only link people saw between the previous duel champion and the third force in the great war was the job.



It was hard to say whether the battle between Tom Cat and Zircon Leader was equal.

Tom had more AGI, sure, but less of everything else, including firepower.

It might've been different if his level had been somewhere around 1,500, but with the limits placed on him, it wasn't even worth considering.

The same went for battle prowess. Tom was a skilled fighter with many victories under his belt, but Zircon Leader wasn't any worse than him in that regard.

This was because, between managing the Prism Soldier production and Acra-Vesta's development, his program had spent the last 2,000 years simulating battles.

Though this was his first real battle, the ones in the simulations had, over the centuries, evolved in difficulty so much that all he had to do here was act like he had in them.

Thus, neither of them had the fighting ability to overturn the difference in stats between them.

Even so, Tom hadn't suffered a single wound yet. His movements showed even more skill than in yesterday's battle in the hall or today's battle against the marionettes.

In fact, the seven clones fighting the field marshal were being a bit sloppy. It was like Tom was focusing everything he had on the one Tom that was here.

"MEOW!" Tom jumped like a cat and charged at Zircon Leader with blades in both of his hands.

He cut into his armor, leaving some marks, but not dealing enough damage to break through and damage the inner mechanisms.

"Close-Range Defensive Electromagnetic Radiation Construct." Zircon Leader countered this attack by making electrodes grow out of the spaces between his armor and releasing lightning all around.

Tom avoided its effects by jumping backwards, but he couldn't dodge the follow-up laser that scratched his left shoulder.

"Are you a bag of tricks or somethiiing?" Tom shot back.

He was rather taken aback by all the gear Zircon Leader had. He felt like he was in a fair full of pre-ancient civilization weapons.

Looking at its size, I shouldn't expect anything like an Abyss Cannon, but I'll be at a disadvantage if this battle drags on for too long, he thought as he became more alert.

However, Zircon Leader was also wary of Tom.

It wasn't because he had a dangerous power, but because he wasn't using job skills.

In fact, he hadn't used a single one since Zircon Leader had first observed him.

It went far beyond their first encounter. Tom hadn't used a single job skill during yesterday's battle in the hall, or in any of his many duels.

This weird fact had been a topic of discussion between those wanting to beat him when he was the champion, and they'd concluded that his cloning ability came at the cost of making all active job skills unusable.

Many found the idea counterproductive, considering that The Lynx was part of the "The One" series of jobs, which was focused on skills, while others speculated that it was just a job focused on passive ones.

However, Zircon Leader's issue with this was far more simple.

"A question — what are you?" the machine asked.

"Oh? You finally feel like talking? I'm The Lynx, Tom Cat, and I already told you why I'm here."

"Another question — what is 'The Lynx'?"

Tom fell silent.

Zircon Leader's battle program had asked the first question because Tom wasn't using job skills, and thus the machine couldn't know his job. Once it was revealed, however, Zircon Leader questioned the job itself.

After all...

"This alleged job *does not exist*."

"The Lynx" wasn't in the two millennia-old job list in his storage.

Jobs had all been decided long ago, and there hadn't been any new ones since. Even Prism Rider, the job linked to the use of Prism Beasts, had existed before Flagman developed the first of them.

The list that encompassed all the jobs in existence didn't have an entry for The Lynx.

What was it, then?

"Ehhh? But it's right there on my status windowww," argued Tom Cat.

"What is a status window?"

"...So you're a pre-update unit. Well, you weren't found until just a few days ago, so I can't say I didn't expect it," Tom sighed. "I guess I'll *have* to destroy you, after all. What about the Prism Persons already owned by people, though...? We'll probably have to ignore them... Damn it, Hatter, if you're gonna be in charge of items, at least be more thorough in destroying the ones that have their memories of what it was like before..."

A certain face came to Tom's mind, making him a bit irritated. Then he dashed towards Zircon Leader, fully intent on destroying it.

Unlike before, when he'd been fighting while keeping himself safe, he was now charging like a beast ready to take a life.

However, Zircon Leader had a counter for it.

The cover on both of its forearms dropped off and released missiles.

Tom now approached Zircon Leader while evading them, but the missiles changed trajectory to follow him and accelerated.

"Ah?!"

The missiles' speed exceeded the speed of sound several times over, quickly reaching Tom's torso *and tearing it in two.*

Lethally wounded, Tom's upper and lower bodies fell to the ground, accompanied by the sound of blood spreading around him.

His upper body was still leaking immense amounts of blood and other fluids.

"Well, I sure didn't expect this," Tom spoke, coughing up blood. "Jet Chaser's Clock Killers, huh? Your arsenal's fancier than I expected."

He was fatally wounded, but it didn't seem to bother him.

After all, this body was just another, easily replaceable spare to him.

"But this is kinda bad..." he muttered. "As things are, the next multiplication will happen where I left the seven... and with all the marionettes there, getting here again would be pretty hard."

As Tom muttered that, Zircon Leader fixed his laser cannon's sights on him. Tom was an intruder and an enemy. The machine had no reason to hesitate to fire at him.

As things were, this Tom would vanish, and an eighth would appear where the seven others were fighting.

However...

"Special paragraph no. 3 — preventing potential balance collapse by forces outside of regulations. Special paragraph no. 2 — preventing potential exposure of confidential matters." Tom suddenly spoke in a machine-like voice, completely unlike his usual, drawn-out manner of speech. "On account of being in a situation where both apply, I request permission to use my original body."

Half a second after these incomprehensible words...

[Original Body Use — Permission Granted]

That message reached him, and Zircon Leader's laser made him evaporate.



Legends

There were strange legends in this world. Or perhaps “myths” was a better word for them.

Most of them were about powerful, fearful creatures which were perhaps capable of destroying the world.

These legends described either UBMs over level 100 — SUBMs — or the so-called “Irregularities.”

Such creatures had appeared in *Infinite Dendrogram* many times throughout its history.

Once Masters began growing in number, they were the ones to take care of them, but of course, there had been beasts like those before that time as well.

Creatures strong enough to destroy the world, with no one powerful enough to face them.

And yet the world still existed, and the reason for that was that the creatures had simply vanished soon after they appeared.

They came and vanished like a storm, and, just like a clear sky that came after, they left no signs that they had ever been there.

That always made the local tians wonder what happened.

No one knew the answer.

However, every now and then, there would be people claiming to have seen what had happened, and they all said a similar thing: *that the creature was fighting something even more terrifying.*

Alas, nobody believed them. They just laughed those people’s claims off, thinking that nothing could be more fearful and powerful than the creatures.

Seeing those reactions, some of the witnesses would start to believe that they’d merely been dreaming or something.

However, the few who were sure of what they'd seen would leave what they'd witnessed in writing.

This resulted in strange texts that seemed to stand at the border between factual writings and descriptions of dreams.

They came from many various eras and locations, and some spoke of the mysterious stronger entities in words like:

"An animal that looked like many other animals, but didn't seem to be any of them."

"A column so large it could perhaps grind countries and mountains into dust."

"A beautiful woman covered in a cocoon much like an eggshell."

"A horde of countless beasts."

These mysterious beings either made the world-ending creatures disappear or completely destroyed them.

No one could tell what they were, and they simply vanished right after completing their roles.

No one knew they were acting in accordance to special paragraph no. 3.

They gathered the SUBMs they could control in preparation for when the Masters came, while destroying the uncontrollable Irregularities... and nobody had a clue.



Ruins, Prism Soldier Plant

"Ending battle," Zircon Leader declared as he let his laser cannon cool down.

He had destroyed the first intruder, but he knew that the seven exactly like him and other intruders would come here eventually.

Thus, he prepared for their arrival by reactivating the halted Prism Soldiers.

He also used the data from the previous intruder to order them to ignore any codes from entities that fit certain criteria.

Right as he finished those preparations, though... a voice resounded throughout the space.

"I have a strange connection to a lot of the things here in Quartierlatin. The most direct of them is Ray, but there are a number of bonds that are way older than that one."

Zircon Leader searched for the source, but found nothing there. The voice was coming from a place where his sensors didn't see anything.

"First is the Unguided Gaze, Edelvalsa. You probably don't know, but the original Edelvalsa was an anti-Incarnation of Beasts weapon that was newer than you Prism Soldiers."

The place was exactly where Tom had just vanished, but the voice was a bit different from Tom's.

"It was a weapon that didn't need a factory, and could make moving marionettes out of just about anything. But since it was standalone and half-bioweapon, it was recognized as a UBM. It had a mind of its own and went out of control, leaving Flagman, its creator, no choice but to seal it deep underground. And that was undone thirty years ago."

This Tom-like voice spoke of things with major implications. It was nothing like what he'd said in the inn about Unguided Horde, Edelvalsa.

After all, Edelvalsa had been recognized as a UBM a whole two millennia ago.

The details Tom Cat was mentioning now were unknown even to the field marshal, who was a famous archeologist and the very owner of Unguided Gaze, Edelvalsa.

“I’m fighting the child who got Edelvalsa’s power back then, in a Prism Soldier plant, of all places. That’s just so ironic. After all, this plant... no... all of you...”

The owner of the voice paused and appeared out of nowhere.

It was *a cat*.

White in color and pretty generic in appearance, it wore a clerk’s vest and walked on its hind legs, making it look like it’d just popped out of a children’s picture book.

Most Masters knew this cat. After all, they’d met him on their visit to this world.

Indeed, this cat was well-known.

“...were... heh... made *to destroy me*.”

This cat was one of the thirteen control AIs managing *Infinite Dendrogram*: control AI no. 13, Cheshire.

There probably wasn’t a word to describe the torrent of information within Zircon Leader when Cheshire showed himself. It was like a mechanical version of a human’s surge of emotion.

Perhaps it was best translated as simply, “This is it!”

Yes — just “this is it.” This was what he was waiting for and couldn’t ignore no matter what. It was very reason for Zircon Leader’s and the Prism Soldiers’ existence.

All the weapon sensors in the plant recognized it as such, and all the info besides visual was a perfect match.

This white cat before them was why they’d been created.

It was...

“The *Incarnation of Beasts* detected! Granting permission to fire for all Prism Soldiers!”

Zircon Leader could not deny what it had seen. This white cat was one of the beings that the pre-ancient civilization had given their all to try and defeat.

It was the Incarnation of Beasts — the one responsible for the fall of their Zweier Imperium.

“Attack!”

Zircon Leader attacked with all its available weapons, while the 968 complete Prism Soldiers drowned him in gunfire and lasers. Even the incomplete units joined the effort to turn this enemy into less than dust.

The projectiles were about to hit.

However, Cheshire once again used the same power he'd used as his avatar, Tom Cat.

“Now dance... *Octamillionchrome Cat — Grimalkin.*”

The ultimate skill name was almost the same, but its effect was completely different.

In less than a blink of an eye, a wall of beasts spawned before him. The number was nowhere near the eight from before — they amounted to over a thousand.

The gunfire and lasers destroyed some of them, but more and more beasts appeared around Cheshire.

Though they were unlike lions, tigers, or leopards, they certainly looked feline, but that was just about the only thing you could say about their appearance. The focused gunfire and lasers destroyed

hundreds and thousands of them, but their total number didn't drop at all — in fact, it was still growing.

The plant was wide, but not even it had enough room for this flood of beasts.

Stats, maximum number, multiplication speed... Cheshire was simply incomparable to the highly-limited Tom Cat.

He was the nightmare witnessed by the pre-ancient civilization. He was a calamity of claw and fang that could grow in number without end.

"You asked what I am, didn't you? Let me answer." Protected by a wall of beasts, Cheshire spoke to Zircon Leader. "Second in the Altarian duel rankings: The Lynx, Tom Cat."

That was the name he'd used until a few moments ago.

That was his avatar as a developer-side Master set up as a challenge to other Masters.

"I'm also The Lynx, Shrödinger Cat from six hundred years ago."

That was one of the names created to etch the existence of Masters into tian history, as well as the name of the third major force in the immense war from that era, when he'd fought to prevent a second destruction of civilization.

"Or perhaps you prefer I use my two thousand year-old name, 'Incarnation of Beasts.'"

That was one of the incarnations from the Extra-Continental Vessel that had fought the pre-ancient civilization.

It was the arch-enemy of the Prism Soldiers, and the one who had drowned the horizon in countless beasts.

"And finally, my current name, which is control AI no. 13, Cheshire... no..."

Cheshire was the one who led countless Masters, and the odd-job AI who supported the other control AIs in their work.

However, he was actually...

“...Type Infinite Legion — *Infinite Multiplication, Grimalkin.*”

That was his one true name.

He was a being that an entity long gone had led beyond Superior and into the realm of Infinite.

He was an Embryo in its ∞ th form — in other words, an Infinite Embryo.

“That’s what I am. And my role here is to destroy you and the weapon inside.”

He spoke those words while commanding enough beasts to cover half of the plant’s surface.

Zircon Leader said nothing in response and merely continued attacking. However, due to the constant firing since Cheshire’s appearance, his ammo was running low.

The same applied to the other Prism Soldiers. Zircon Fires spun gatling guns that didn’t fire a single bullet, while Zircon Lasers used their lasers so much that some of them overheated and destroyed themselves.

No matter what they did, they could do nothing to Cheshire — the Incarnation of Beasts.

Ammo was always limited. Flagman knew this, and that was why he’d designed Edelvalsa, the unit after them, to create marionettes that fought empty-handed. He knew all too well that *no amount of weapons would be enough* against this incarnation.

“Continuing battle.” Despite losing firepower and performing at less than half of the full capacity, Zircon Leader didn’t back down.

“For the world... for mankind’s future... we must destroy the Incarnation of Beasts.”

He stood no chance, but he didn’t have any code for fleeing. Zircon Leader would simply complete the goal set by his creator, for it was all that he was.

He was a machine with no emotions, but there was pride in his adherence to his instructions.

“For the world and mankind’s future, huh?” Cheshire looked at the proud weapon with a bit of sadness in his face. “I wonder which era’s world and which mankind you’re talking about.”

Perhaps he felt like he was looking at a mirror?

“You really are stubborn and noble. We’re similar in that regard. However, you’re standing in a completely different place than us.” Cheshire raised his right hand.

The beasts reacted to the motion, and their eyes glowed gold. They had been nothing but a wall of flesh until now, but now, the horde of Legendary Guardians would go on the offensive. The battle would be over the very moment these thousands of beasts began their attack.

Even so, the Prism Soldiers didn’t back down. They were born to fight the Incarnation of Beasts, after all.

The environmental changes had made them act in a way that wasn’t predicted.

But even so, none of them changed or went against their set natures.

“You’ve been waiting to fight incarnations for two thousand years. You’ve waited and prepared for that goal alone. We’re exactly like you in that regard... so I think I will at least fulfill your wish.”

Cheshire, looking at the Prism Soldiers before him, threw his hand down.

“Goodbye, machine soldiers. Goodbye, remnants of the Zweier Imperium’s pride.”

“Continuing battle.”

With that as a signal, Cheshire’s beasts and Zircon Leader’s Prism Soldiers clashed.

A few minutes later, none of the Prism Soldiers were left standing.

◆◆◆

Incarnation of Beasts detected.

With the disappearance of Zircon Leader, the commander unit, the standby order was automatically canceled.

Check sequence.

Unit α — functional.

Space Fixation — functional.

Unit β — functional.

Space Dilution — functional.

Mutual Repair — functional.

Main and sub weapons — incomplete.

Installing conventional equipment as an alternative.

The lack of a solution to the energy problem had made installing a compressed magical baryon acceleration cannon impossible.

Problems — minimal.

Determined to sortie with the current usable equipment.

Initiating sortie sequence.

Anti-incarnation weapon, Acra-Vesta.

Sortie.

Chapter Seven: The Superweapon

Prism Rider, Ray Starling

How long had it been since I'd beaten the Hell General and collapsed?

The three debuffs, combined with serious post-battle fatigue, had left me lying on the ground for what seemed like a really long time.

Looking up at the sky, I chugged down Health Potions to regain the HP I'd lost to Poison, and checked the results of the battle.

Beating Logan had raised my Prism Rider level to 21. That was actually quite a lot. It reminded me of what I'd gained from Franklin.

Just goes to show just how much level and Embryo form differences affect EXP gain, I thought.

I couldn't remember gaining any levels while fighting the devils, though. They hadn't given me any EXP at all, which was probably intentional.

"I got two skills... 'Prism Beast Enhancement' and 'Prism Authorization,' huh?" I murmured.

Both of them were at level 1. The former did exactly what it said in the name: it enhanced the abilities of all Prism Beasts, Prism Steeds included. It prioritized acceleration and improving their skills, and at level 1, the enhancement was 10 percent.

Prism Authorization, though, was a mystery to me.

The description said, "Unlocks the restricted functions of certain Prism Beasts," but there were no details at all.

I thought it had something to do with Silver's mystery skill, but I couldn't check, since I'd lent him to Azurite.

"Guess I'll just wait..." I muttered.

Right after the battle, I'd given Nemesis some healing items and told her to look around the surroundings, help anyone hurt, and evacuate the orphans.

There was no one nearby, so as soon as I stopped moving, the world felt strangely silent.

My eyelids were closing on their own.

With Poison taking away my HP, I couldn't really let myself sleep, but Weakness made my body feel heavy, while Intoxication warped my vision and made it hard to keep my eyes open.

My eyes closed, and I spent the next few minutes floating somewhere between dreams and reality when...

"Nh..."

...I felt someone touch my body.

They put their hands on my forehead and neck, then gasped.

A moment later, I felt something tough on my lips, followed by some medicine going down my throat.

"It's not disappearing! Why?!" The voice was Azurite's.

So she'd finished helping the knights and came here, huh?

Guess I should get up now...

"The Elixir's not having an effect," she said frantically. "Is he not drinking it all...? In that case..."

I heard the sound of something being unfastened, then felt a faint warmth over my face.

It made me open my eyes.

Silence.

Her face was right in front of me, and our eyes met.

I could feel her breath on me, and we were so close, it felt like our lips were about to touch.

She wasn't wearing her usual mask, but I could tell it was her by her eye color and face outline.

This was the first time I'd seen her face, and I'd be lying if I said it wasn't beautiful.



“Ah...?!” Surprised by the eye contact, Azurite jumped backwards and gulped something down.

Based on the Elixir bottle in her hand, I could only assume that she’d first tried to cure my status effects by pouring it into my mouth, but when that hadn’t worked, she assumed I hadn’t drunk it properly and tried to give it to me mouth-to-mouth.

Man, she must’ve been worried...

“Thanks, Azurite,” I said. “But don’t worry. These debuffs are a side effect from a skill. Elixirs won’t work on them.”

“I-I see!” she exclaimed, flustered, as she put her mask back on. She must’ve removed it because it would’ve gotten in the way of the mouth-to-mouth.

Good thing I woke up before she went through with it, I thought.

It was for lifesaving, sure, but Azurite probably wasn’t married yet, so she might’ve regretted it.

“But wait... status effects that do not go away? Isn’t that serious?” she asked.

“They’ll disappear with time. It’s fine,” I replied.

I looked at the clock at the side of the road to discovered that fifteen minutes had passed since I’d beaten Logan.

The side effect would last 1,200 seconds, so it wouldn’t be long now.

Then again, since Gardranda had used the “Zero” skills, I couldn’t use my Miasmaflame Bracers properly now.

This must’ve been the price she’d had to pay to use skills that powerful, and it’d probably take a while before I could use Purgatorial Flames and Hellish Miasma again.

Also, the clock made me realize that it was just barely six o'clock in the morning.

Sure, the battle had started at about dawn, but it was hard to believe that it was this early. The sun still hadn't finished rising over the mountains to the east.

"What about you?" I asked Azurite.

"I've helped the Quartierlatin knights," she said. "We slayed most of the devils... but the rest simply vanished."

"Good to know."

I'd already assumed that because the third and fourth Gigaknights had disappeared, but this just confirmed that summoned devils weren't an exception to the "summons die with the summoner" rule.

That had to go for me and Gardranda, too. Needed to keep that in mind.

"Since you made it in time to help, I guess I made the right choice by lending Silver to you," I said.

"About that... He was an immense help, but you *must* refrain from lending your Prism Steed to people. It's dangerous."

"I'll keep that in mind."

I'd surely do it again if the situation called for it, though.

"Where are the people?" I asked.

"They were panicking and looking for shelter when the devils were around, but now that they are gone, the townsfolk are moving to the designated facilities. I left them to the knights who are still moving."

Oh yeah, there were no enemies in town for the time being. What a load off my shoulders.

"Speaking of the devils... did they vanish because you beat the Hell General?" Azurite asked.

"Yeah."

"I see..." She closed her eyes in thought.

For a moment, I wondered if she'd wanted to beat her mentor's killer with her own hands, but that didn't seem quite right. It seemed more like she was frustrated with something.

"Azurite?"

"It's nothing. Pay me no mind."

"All right. What about the people from the mountain inn?"

"Evacuated, as well. Many were frightened, obviously, but the skilled tians and Masters there did an excellent job helping them find shelter."

"I see... What a relief."

With that, I didn't have to worry about any people dying anymore.

"I guess all that's left is to stop the Prism Soldier plant and take out the Dryfeans going after the ruins," I said.

"Are you going to still fight?" she asked. I couldn't be sure because of the mask, but it felt like she was slightly down.

"Well, the debuffs should be gone soon. I'll go to the ruins then."

"You fought the Hell General until you collapsed from exhaustion, and yet you will still fight?"

"Yeah. Logan's not the only problem here. There's gotta be more I can do."

"I see... So you will fight again." Her tone somehow seemed slightly critical.

I thought she had issues with me for a second, but that didn't seem right.

What... or who... was it directed at?

"The Hell General, the Gouz-Maise Gang, Gideon..." She trailed off. "Why do you keep fighting for others' sakes, even when it leads to such injury?"

"Azurite?"

"Yesterday, you told me you had chosen to protect Quartierlatin... and me. But this is not new to you, is it? You must have made similar choices the other times. Why do you continue to do this when it's so taxing? What drives you to sacrifice yourself over and over again?"

I said nothing and just listened to her talk.

"Is it because you're an immortal Master? Do you protect others because you cannot die and there's no need for you to consider your own well-being? But... the one who should be protecting this country's people... the one who should face the hardship is..."

"Azurite, you've got me all wrong," I interrupted.

There was a slight disturbance in her speech. If I had to guess, it was caused by some intense feelings that surfaced as she observed and talked about me. Her own words seemed to start crushing her, so I decided to point out a major misconception before it became too heavy.

"I'm not diving into all these incidents and getting hurt out of self-sacrifice or to protect anyone," I said.

"...Eh?"

Yeah. My reason was never that grand.

"I'm doing it 'cause I think it'd give me a bad aftertaste if I didn't."

That was all there was to it. I always just dived in and faced whatever would leave a bad taste in my mouth.

"Ignoring stuff like that would hurt me way more than damaging this avatar or going through something scary, so I just move in and stop it from happening. That's it. It's not self-sacrifice, and there's nothing noble about it." I wasn't some saint who put himself on the line to save someone. It just seemed that way because I was still weak and always ended up in tatters.

"I'm not the virtuous champion you think I am — I just acted on my own feelings," I said. "Fighting Logan, saving children from the Gouz-Maise Gang, picking a fight with Franklin... I did it all because I felt like it."

"That's the... 'freedom' you mentioned yesterday, yes?"

"Exactly. I told you, didn't I? I stood up for Altar and decided to support you because I'm free and selfish."

I was just a self-centered player — a Master.

"You say things one wouldn't even hear in modern plays, and yet Truth Discernment is not reacting at all... You are so simple and softhearted... heheh..."

I had no idea what she found so amusing, but she started to giggle with tears in her eyes, just like yesterday.

"But... that's exactly why..."

Azurite stopped mid-sentence. Then, after a while of silence, gathered her wits for something and took off her mask.

"Ray, there's something I want you to know," she said, looking at me with her exposed face. "I... I am actually—"

Her words were cut off by a sudden rumble that made us both gasp.

It was an earthquake quite unlike the one I'd experienced in Torne. It felt as though something large was moving and the ground was shaking in fear.

"Ray! Look!" Azurite pointed at the mountain with the ruins.

It was completely unlike what it had been the last time I'd looked at it. Despite having ruins inside, it had been a normal mountain on the outside.

Not anymore.

"It... split?" I murmured.

The peak had parted in two, exposing the ruins inside.

The earthquake was actually the vibrations caused by the mountain-ruins opening up.

It was an absurd sight, but it didn't end there.

Something was crawling out of the parted mountain.

It was as large as a fortress, had a streamlined main body with dozens of thorn-like legs poking out of it, and shone with a metallic brilliance impossible in the natural world.

"What the hell is that?!" I exclaimed.

If I had to describe it, it was like a robot that had the shape of "a whale poking into a horseshoe crab." To be more specific, it was like the prehistoric fish called pterichthyodes, but with trilobite legs.

It was a huge, weird construct, but the fact that it had appeared from the ruins was enough for us to guess what it was.

"That's the weapon that was inside the ruins!" I gasped.

I had no idea what had caused it, but it had come alive.

We'd guessed that it existed, but... man, it was way bigger than I'd expected.

"Ray! Azurite!"

"Nemesis!" I cried. She'd come back from the orphanage.

Out of breath, she stared at the weapon and said, "Ray, is that...?!"

"Yeah. It's just like Azurite said. Dr. Mario made a move because the ruins had something way worse than the Prism Soldiers."

Speaking of Azurite, she had her mask on again. I had no clue what she'd been about to say, but it seemed like she'd figured this wasn't the time for it anymore.

"What do we do?" asked Nemesis.

"We've gotta find out what kind of weapon that is."

It seemed to be a mobile unit, just like the Prism Soldiers, and nothing would be worse than it turning out to be a moving bomb. A pre-ancient civ weapon of that size would make short work of a town like Quartierlatin.

"Let's ride Silver and attack from the sky—" I began.

Suddenly, still looking at the weapon, I noticed something.

The weapon was under attack by several men who had the same face and a bunch of wooden marionettes with weapons in hand.

Eight Toms and Dr. Mario's marionettes were already fighting the weapon.



Ruins, Prism Soldier Plant

A few minutes before the weapon left the mountain...

"There. Done."

After his beasts destroyed Zircon Leader and all active Prism Soldiers, Cheshire went to the control terminal and stopped the plant.

As Tom Cat, he'd come here on a quest to do just this, but his real reason for coming to the ruins was different.

He was here to investigate if it had any weapons that could break game balance or reveal important information. If it did, he had to destroy it all before other players got to it.

Zircon Leader had turned out to be just that. The information he had made him a threat so major that Cheshire had to destroy him even if it meant having to unseal his real body.

However, unlike Zircon Leader and the weapon deeper in, he didn't have to destroy this plant.

Looking at the data in the terminal, he could confirm there was no classified information — all it had were mass-production programs.

All the weapons available were like the Prism Soldiers in that they wouldn't have caused any problems to the developers, so he'd decided to keep it intact, leaving the final call to Altar.

“It'd probably improve the kingdom's situation a bit...”

Unless things got seriously out of hand, the control AI didn't really care about the results of wars. The only exceptions to that rule would have to be as extreme as the war six hundred years ago that had almost turned the continent into a wasteland.

Still, Cheshire's avatar, Tom Cat, was an Altarian Master, so there was no problem with him helping out his country by completing a quest or two.

"There's also the thing about creating more Superiorrrs. It's better for the war to be more equal so they can all improoove. Anyway, now for the thing deeper in..."

Cheshire looked at the data from the beasts he'd sent there, then sighed.

"It's about what I'd expect from a weapon Flagman made over two millennia. It's a whole lot of trouble."

The information showed a battle — if you could call it that — that was still happening further in the ruins.

Acra-Vesta's hangar was full of beasts, a number that easily surpassed one thousand. Using their claws and fangs, all of them were attacking the superweapon as it prepared for departure.

All of the beasts were as strong as Legendary monsters such as Gigaknights.

Needless to say, it was a menacing horde. If one of them could deal 10,000 damage, then a thousand of them could deal 10,000,000.

No matter how large and powerful an entity, it stood absolutely no chance against a horde of such beasts so vast it drowned the horizon.

This was evidenced by the time Cheshire had defeated an Irregularity as large as a mountain range.

Acra-Vesta was only as big as a fortress, so you would have expected them to have crushed it by now, but...

"How does this even worrrk?"

...the beasts couldn't even scratch it.

None of the attacks from the thousand-strong Legendary beasts did anything to it.

It wasn't even that the hull was too strong — the attacks didn't even reach that far.

All of them stopped at the space right before the hull.

It couldn't have been a simple force field, since that would've already been broken by the beasts.

There was some strange power at work that prevented all attacks from passing.

"I guess this is another anti-me featurre. Boy, just how much of a grudge does Flagman have against me...?"

Cheshire — also known as Infinite Multiplication, Grimalkin — had passed Superior and reached his final form as an Embryo. However, that didn't mean that he was omniscient and omnipotent. Like with all Embryos, his powers were limited to certain primary characteristics.

That was exactly why the control AIs had split their roles; they were all in charge of what their features allowed them to do best.

No matter how powerful, Embryos couldn't escape the bane of incompatibility, and this superweapon seemed to be a hard counter to Infinite Multiplication.

Cheshire could repeatedly deal the 10,000,000 damage 1,000 times, but if, for example, the superweapon negated the 10,000 damage delivered by each beast, it would remain undamaged. And it seemed that this barrier would prevent attacks even stronger than that.

Cheshire's infinitely multiplying army could suppress its enemies with nothing but numbers. That was simple and practical, but that was exactly what made him so open to such absurd defenses. It was one of his weaknesses.

"This defensive ability has a small range, but its nature seems like that of Red King's," he noted. "Is this actually...?"

The unpleasant thought made the cat grimace. He'd suspected something like this about Acra-Vesta, and it'd turned out to be right.

"Well, this sure is troublesome. My powers are really incompatible with it. Humpty, Jabberwork, and Red King could take care of it easily, but I have no time to call them. At this rate, it's gonna go outside in just a few minutes—"

Cheshire suddenly stopped talking to himself. That was because he could hear a bunch of footsteps coming from the hallway.

He knew exactly what they were caused by — Edelvalsa's marionettes.

They'd been fighting the seven Tom Cats until now, but when Cheshire had switched to his real body, Tom's avatar had been put on standby.

"They must've had no problem getting here without me in the way. I guess time's up." Cheshire sent his main body back and called for his avatar as Tom Cat.

He couldn't let anyone know who Tom Cat really was, or let them find out about Cheshire's activities.

Killing witnesses was way too drastic, and he couldn't do it for several reasons.

Acra-Vesta was about to go outside, anyway, so he wouldn't have another chance to fight in his original body.

He'd already given up on destroying the superweapon by his own hands.

"Well, at least it's not controlled by anyonnne. This isn't all that different from a UBM rampage."

Because of its background, Acra-Vesta wouldn't get recognized as a UBM, but as it was now, it was truly closer to a weapon than a monster. It wasn't captured by a country or anything, so Cheshire's work here was as good as done.

If it rampaged like a monster, it would eventually be taken out by a compatible Superior.

"Oh... Ray beat Rumpelstiltskin's Hell General. That leaves Quartierlatin with no Superiors. This might be the end of the town."

Acra-Vesta still hadn't attacked in any way, but even if you ignored Cheshire's incompatibility with it, the fact that his beasts hadn't damaged it at all meant that it had absurd defensive abilities — enough to put it on the same level as Ancient Legendary UBMs. And if it had more tricks up its sleeve, it could easily be a Mythical.

If the defense worked as he guessed, Tenaga Ashinaga's Master Jiangshi, Xunyu, could destroy Acra-Vesta easily.

The King of Destruction, Shu Starling, might be capable of breaking through its defense, as well.

However, they'd take a while to get here, and Acra-Vesta would cause immense damage during that time.

Altea and Gideon were far away enough for it to destroy a town before any Superior from those cities arrived here.

It was more or less certain that Quartierlatin would be reduced to ruins.

"Well," Cheshire — Tom — mouted as he calculated the most likely future using his immense processing power, then sighed. "Tom Cat is an Altarian Master, so I'll fight for as long as this avatar holds. Now dance, Octachrome Cat — Grimalkin."

He multiplied into eight and attacked the weapon much like his beasts had, searching for flaws in this seemingly unmatched defense.



“What is going on here?”

The field marshal was looking through the eyes of Faldreed, who was reaching the deepest part of the ruins.

The factory-like space was littered with countless Prism Soldier pieces.

There was an even larger space deeper in, where a weapon that looked like both a fish and a crustacean at the same time was preparing for something.

Besides that, his enemy from before, Tom Cat — eight of him this time — was fighting the machine.

He silently and calmly analyzed the situation.

There was no doubt that the Prism Soldiers here had been defeated by Tom Cat.

The seven he'd been fighting had suddenly vanished, and he assumed Tom had called them back to fight the Prism Soldiers.

(He wasn't wrong. The method was different than he was thinking, though.)

He figured that then, after Tom'd beaten the Prism Soldiers, he had discovered the superweapon, presumably the so-called “Acra-Vesta,” as it went out of control, leaving Tom with no choice but to fight it.

“I guess I can't expect to secure it...” Gifted sighed.

The weapon was active and beyond anyone's control, making it extremely difficult to take it for Dryfe.

There was another reason why he'd given up on that. Gifted himself was outside, and could more or less see the general state of

Quartierlatin. Naturally, he hadn't missed the moment of the devils vanishing.

It could only mean one thing — Logan had been defeated.

He had a strong guess about who was responsible, but decided to focus on what he had to do now.

The superweapon had gone out of control, and only one of the two of the imperium's forces were remaining, meaning that securing the weapon — the best-case scenario for the imperium — had become nigh impossible.

That left three choices for him.

One: he could destroy Tom Cat to prevent the weapon from falling into the kingdom's hands.

Two: he could assume that the weapon going out of control meant it was mission accomplished for him and just leave the battlefield.

Three: he could destroy the...

"The choice is obvious." His marionettes aimed their weapons.

They had Tom Cat in their sights.

They pulled the triggers. Their bullets went towards Tom, *passed him*, and pierced the space around Acra-Vesta.

"No perceived effect. Continue attacking."

Feeling that flow of will, Faldreed and all the other marionettes attacked the superweapon.

Indeed, this choice was obvious. By the time he'd arrived, Tom Cat was already fighting Acra-Vesta, meaning that it was clearly out of control.

If he let it be, the superweapon could potentially go to the imperium — specifically, the Barbaros territory. Even if it didn't, its rampage would definitely reach the local town of Quartierlatin.

The choice couldn't be more clear.

There was no hesitation or conflict.

He could protect everything he wanted without sacrificing anything. It was by far the easiest choice he would make that day.

Choice three was that he could destroy the out of control superweapon.

"I'm here to help. You won't mind if I destroy it, will you?" he asked Tom.

"Think you can?! Do it, then!"

"Understood. Using all available force."

The Lynx, Tom Cat and Zero General, Gifted Barbaros now stood on the same side and fought Acra-Vesta.

As the battle continued, the mountain — Acra-Vesta's exit — opened up, shifting the stage to the surface.



Acra-Vesta

Incarnation of Beasts signal lost.

As Acra-Vesta made its way to the exit, it realized that the Incarnation of Beasts had vanished.

It ran a threat search, but couldn't find the incarnation anywhere.

Besides that, it also realized that someone had destroyed the Superior-class incarnation that was one of the reasons for its activation.

Though there were still some incarnation-like energy signals nearby, they were all so weak that they couldn't even begin to compare.

With that in mind, if it destroyed the intruders still in the facility, there would be no need to uphold the absolute defense, but that was irrelevant to Acra-Vesta. After all...

Several Superior-class signals detected.

Acra-Vesta's enemy-locating ability was miles above that of Prism Soldiers and many other weapons.

It was so powerful that it could locate the incarnation-like signals... the Superior Embryos... far away in the south — the cities of Altea and Gideon.

Thus, Acra-Vesta changed its priorities.

Its main mission now was to go down south and destroy all the Superior Embryos it encountered.

Of course, it wouldn't waste time on anything or anyone else.

However, Acra-Vesta was unlike the Prism Soldiers in one important way.

Detected many signals of life.

Found humanoid animals who are not on the list.

Modifying list based on acquired information.

Recognizing humanoid animals as mankind.

Acra-Vesta's AI was more advanced than that of the Prism Soldiers, so it could see that modern tians were humanoid. They might have changed over the past two millennia, but they were human nonetheless.

Prioritize the destruction of incarnations. Ignore all potential loss of life.

Despite that, Acra-Vesta didn't hesitate to make sacrifices.

For the future of mankind.

For the world that has created us.

Annihilating all incarnations, no matter the cost.

With a will as solid as its frame, the superweapon prepared to go south — through Quartierlatin.

◇◇◇

Prism Rider, Ray Starling

The superweapon, Tom, and marionettes that had to belong to Dr. Mario were all fighting on the mountain. The eight Toms and countless marionettes were cooperating to shower the weapon in attacks.

Despite belonging to opposing countries, they were actually fighting as allies.

I could think of several reasons why they might team up, but the most likely one was that they'd realized how dangerous the weapon was and decided to team up to take it out.

The weapon, however, didn't seem to care about them and just went south — to Quartierlatin.

It was attacked from all directions, but it didn't seem to care. Completely unharmed, it moved its trilobite-like feet to move onwards.

Unlike the Prism Soldiers I'd encountered, it didn't seem to be preparing any weapons for attack. It did nothing but move forward.

Their attacks didn't hurt it at all, but they didn't suffer much, either. Some marionettes had been crushed by the feet, but that was the extent of it.

It clearly had superb defense, but unlike Shu's Baldr, it didn't seem to have any close-range firearms.

"But it's heading straight for the town," I said. "We've gotta take it out before it gets here."

It had a defensive ability so great it was absurd, but Nemesis's Vengeance ignored defense.

Maybe we could hurt it?

The three debuffs were gone by now, so I was good to go.

I hopped on Silver and called out to them. "Nemesis, Azurite, let's go and... Hm?"

I noticed the situation had changed.

The superweapon had stopped in place.

Not on its own, though — countless marionettes had gone in to hold it back.

Besides the human-sized wooden marionettes, there were stone ones about ten times as large.

There had to be at least a thousand of them. Dr. Mario was using them to force the superweapon to stay in place.

"Well, that's a good idea," I mused.

Even if it had good defense due to its hull, skills, or whatever, it had nothing against this kind of physical binding. The fact that the weapon didn't use firearms or anything made it even easier.

This was really good for us. While it was being held back, I'd go hit myself on its legs or something to accumulate damage, healing whenever necessary, before finally ending it with a powerful enough Vengeance.

"That makes you seem like one of those people who jump in front of cars to extort money," Nemesis commented.

I thought of that, too, but did you have to say it out loud?!

It was an emergency, anyway. I couldn't pick and choose my methods.

"Let's go join them," I said.

"Mm-hm," nodded Nemesis.

"Yes," Azurite agreed.

I took Nemesis in her greatsword form with my right hand and let Azurite sit behind me on Silver, just like yesterday.

The superweapon tried to move its legs to go forward, but the marionettes did a great job of keeping it in place. Even those that were trampled were quickly replaced.

I also saw Tom use some sort of Gem. It made the superweapon sink a bit into the ground, so it was probably for some sort of magic that softened the earth.

Apparently, they were now prioritizing binding over destroying it.

That was probably the right choice. They just had to hold it long enough until someone good against tanky enemies — it didn't have to be me — came over and beat it.

Wanting to get there ASAP, I made Silver hurry.

"He seems faster than when I used him," said Azurite. "Is it because the original owner's riding him?"

Her words reminded me of the Prism Rider skills.

Silver was obviously faster because of Prism Beast Enhancement.

And then there was the other skill, Prism Authorization.

Using my right hand, still holding Nemesis, I opened the window and looked at Silver's skills. I'd be fighting the moment I got there, so this was my only real chance to check it out.

"And... no dice." I sighed.

Silver's third skill was still hidden. I had thought that Prism Authorization was the condition for unlocking it, but no.

I was getting nothing even when I tried to check its details—

"...Eh?"

When I selected it, something unexpected happened.

There was some new text underneath where the skill's description was supposed to be.

"To the inhabitant of the post-incarnation world who acquires Zephyrus Silver and the Authorization," I read. "You do not have permission to see the details of this skill at level 1. However, Zephyrus Silver is allowed limited use of this skill at his own discretion. To see all his details and unlock all his functions, acquire Prism Authorization level 3 or above. Sincerely, Zephyrus Silver's developer, Flagman."

"What...?" I raised an eyebrow. It was unlike any description or game message I'd ever seen.

It seemed... personal.

This Flagman guy had left it specifically for the one who got his hands on both Silver and the Prism Rider job — in this case, me.

I was probably the first person to ever read this text. After all, Prism Authorization was given by Prism Rider, which had been a lost job until just a few days ago.

Were there similar messages on the other Prism Steeds? Or did Silver only have this because he was, according to Dr. Mario, a prototype or an experimental unit?

Whatever the case, it was clear that this Flagman person had tech advanced enough to let him leave such messages on skill description windows.

Also, something about this message felt off...

"I can tell you want to ponder, but now is not the time, Ray!" Nemesis exclaimed.

"Look!" Azurite joined. "The superweapon is...!"

I stopped my train of thought and looked at the superweapon.

It was still being bound by the marionettes, but I could instantly see what had caught their attention.

"The back... is splitting?"

The upper part of the weapon, the horseshoe crab's carapace, split in two and opened upwards.

I thought that Tom and Dr. Mario had finally damaged it, but that wasn't the case.

Rather, something was rising from the space the opening had made.

It was the superweapon's rear — the part that looked whale-like. The head that had been kept inside the crab was rising with it.

Just like that, a thing that looked like a large, multi-finned, mechanical whale split from the crab and rose upwards.

At the same time, the crab began violently struggling to break free of the marionettes' grip. That was enough to turn the tides in the struggle. The marionettes were the ones being overwhelmed now.

It felt like losing the whale was letting the weapon use its full power.

“Is that thing actually...?” I wondered.

My own assumption made a chill go down my spine, but alas, it was completely true.

This weapon was...



Acra-Vesta

Pushed down by countless marionettes, Acra-Vesta gathered data from its surroundings.

The humanoids that released faint incarnation signals were launching gems to the surroundings, turning the ground into mud.

They couldn’t beat it, so the marionettes were shifting all focus to binding it.

However, these enemies and their actions meant little for Acra-Vesta. What it found important was the muddied ground beneath it.

Right now, it was sinking into this ground because it was a plain surface with no ruins underneath.

It was a decent distance away from its exit, and with it, the ruins.

That was the most important factor for it.

Closing exit.

Checking the anti-explosion and anti-impact systems on the facility’s high-priority blocks.

Since everyone had been so preoccupied with Acra-Vesta, no one had cared about its exit, which had closed shortly after it left.

It was the final switch.

Separation mechanism, initiate.

Unit α, Acra — opening upper hull.

Unit β, Vesta — raising altitude.

The name of the third anti-incarnation superweapon, Acra-Vesta, was from a language other than the current *Infinite Dendrogram* common — the one being auto-translated for Masters.

They were of the creator's — Flagman's — mother tongue, used in the now-gone Zweier Imperium.

In that language, "acra" meant "shell," while "vesta" was "sky."

"Acra-Vesta" was literally just "Shell and Sky." A many-legged tank and an air battleship — both formidable weapons of war.

Acra's unique skill was "Space Fixation."

It shielded from all incoming damage by fixing the space in place, and it was powerful enough to survive the relentless attacks from Tom, the marionettes, and even the beasts without as much as a scratch.

Vesta's unique skill was "Space Dilution."

What it did was...



The air battleship, Vesta, had split from Acra and was now rising towards the sky.

Tom and the field marshal didn't just sit by and let it happen.

Tom fired arrows and threw weapons, while Gifted's marionettes attacked it with their guns.

They weren't particularly serious attacks, but, much to their surprise, they actually dealt damage this time.

The hull was dented, pierced, or blown open all over. They kept attacking the legged tank, too, but it just continued being impervious to damage. The same couldn't be said for the airship.

However...

"It's repairing itself?"

Despite being a metallic machine, the unit was slowly regenerating. The metal on the hull and machines made waves as they closed the wounds.

The damage was greater than the repair speed, but since it kept rising up, their attack options would soon be limited, and the repairs would catch up.

"Not gonna let youuu," said Tom. "Granting permission to use heavy weaponry. Marionette Squadron Creation."

Tom jumped from the surface, then used other Toms as stepping stones to jump even higher and approach the airship.

Leaving one Tom on the ground for safety, he created seven of himself at the top of Vesta.

The field marshal's marionettes went into Faldreed's weapon inventory to take out an anti-aircraft gun they used to defend fortresses, while the squadron of the newly made flying marionettes went up to the sky.

The seven Toms tore into Vesta's armor from above, while the massive AA gun tore holes in it from below.

As Faldreed lit the machine ablaze, the flying marionettes assaulted it with gunfire from the sides.

In but a moment, the airship became covered in holes.

"Intercepting."

Small bits of its hull slid to the side, exposing the lenses of the laser cannons they'd seen many times in the ruins.

They shot down some of the flying marionettes around it, but the field marshal quickly replaced them.

Vesta could do little against Tom as he ran around destroying it, and the lack of laser lenses on its bottom part made it impossible for it to get rid of the AA gun right below it.

The airship was powerless to stop them.

The lasers, the sensors, the empty bridge — all of it was being destroyed.

Even the important bits, such as the large reactor and the main AI, didn't escape this fate. The airship's lifeline was cut down so easily, it felt anticlimactic.

Seasoned veteran that he was, the field marshal knew that it was destroyed.

"We did it! Ah...?!"

But then, Acra-Vesta began to fix itself like it was the most normal thing to do.

"Hey... we took out your corre," Tom Cat objected. "Can't you just, you know, breaaak?"

Shocked that it had actually happened, the two continued attacking it, but it just kept on regenerating.

Even when you obliterated its equivalent of a human's brain, heart, and lungs, it still continued to fix itself. Needless to say, it was an eerie phenomenon.

It was caused by one of Acra-Vesta's functions, Mutual Repair.

Acra was set to repair Vesta, while Vesta was set to repair Acra. No matter how heavily damaged one of them was, the system would

control the metal particles building up the unit to fix it and return it to its original form.

Of course, too much destruction would eventually cause a shortage of metal particles meant for repair.

That was considered during their design, and as a result of that, both units had inventories full of metal particles, hidden in their hardest-to-destroy areas.

The metal particles were mined, extracted, synthesized, and stored over a period of two thousand years.

There was enough of it to completely fix it three hundred times.

“What’s going on?” Gifted was perplexed.

“Is it just a part of the one at the bottom?” Tom wondered. “No, that’s too... Hold on, is this actually Mutual Repair?”

“The theory found in Dryfean ruins...? Wait, how do you...?”

As they began to wonder about the nature of this function and were about to reach the answer, the airship rose 1,000 metels above the surface.

Just like it had waited until there were no ruins beneath, Acra-Vesta was now waiting until one of its halves reached that height.

Space Dilution.

The airship activated its unique skill, changing the very space around it.

The skill had several effects, but each of them were felt by separate people.

“What...?” The first effect was noticed by the field marshal. He instantly lost his link to the flying squadron.

He could control marionettes from as far as 100,000 metels away. Whether they were deep underground or in some barrier, he could control them if they weren't too distant.

However, he could tell that the reason he couldn't control the squadron anymore was because of range.

He could see them from the surface just fine, yet the message was that they were too far.

The squadron he'd lost control over was shot down by the lasers.

Gifted then noticed something else.

The AA gun that had been damaging the airship all this time now fired shots that didn't even reach it.

It was obviously within range, but the shots just lost all speed before reaching it and fell down to the surface like a pebble thrown by hand.

The difference between what he saw and the phenomenon that was happening around the airship made a chill go down his spine.

"...!" Tom was the one to notice the second effect.

No voice came out when he spoke, and he couldn't even breathe anymore.

The beasts created by his true form might've been able to bear this, but Tom was a humanoid avatar. He wasn't designed to survive without breathing.

Besides that, there was also the view the seven of them were seeing.

Up until a moment ago, they had been able to easily see the town of Quartierlatin below the airship. Of course they had — it was only about 1,000 metels above the surface.

Now, however, it wasn't even a speck on the horizon.

It was like they were above the clouds... no... far higher than that.

But just looking upwards made that impression flip upside-down — they were really far down, and the sky was extremely distant.

Even the light from the sun rising above the mountains to the east seemed tiny.

He felt like he was suddenly taken into a vast, otherworldly realm.

This is Space Dilution and its side effect... the vacuum! This thing actually imitated Red King's... Infinite Space's space manipulation powers...!

Cheshire realized what he was dealing with and quickly tried to stop it by destroying Vesta, but he was powerless against the repair.

After a short while, the vacuum made the seven Toms' blood vessels and eyeballs burst, quickly killing them.

The third effect was noticed by Ray's group as they approached the mountain.

They saw things falling from the sky.

The whale-like airship had several fins.

Some of them had fallen off, but...

"They're... not coming down?" He expected them to reach the ground right away, but that just wasn't happening.

They just stopped in place after removal... no... they were still dropping, but really slowly.

The fins approached the ground slower than balloons full of normal air. They seemed to be accelerating, but they were still slow. You could just picture them softly landing on the ground.

"GET AWAY OR YOU'LL DIE!" the Tom on the surface shouted in a voice you'd never expect from him.

Ray's group had no way of knowing it, but this was a voice Cheshire rarely used even as himself — a warning tone meant only for the most perilous of situations.

"Ah! Okay!" Ray shouted back as he made Silver turn around and tried to run as far away from the fins as possible.

The field marshal heard Tom, too. He created a new flying marionette squadron, jumped on their backs, and flew away.

Tom himself multiplied again and split up in all directions to increase his chances of survival.

His warning was no joke. After all, those fins... *these mere pieces of metal*... were Acra-Vesta's greatest weapon.



Space Dilution.

Belonging to the airship, Vesta, it was a skill that expanded the space around it.

Specifically, it multiplied a radius of 1,000 metels by 300 to make it 300,000 metels.

It didn't affect the outside world in any way. It was a change exclusive to the 1,000 metel radius space around Vesta.

It was a really restrictive power in that it could only be used when there were no massive objects besides it in the 1,000 metel radius. The surface counted for this, which was why it had needed to go up that high.

Like Ray and Gifted had confirmed, Space Dilution didn't affect how the world looked to those outside of the space.

Tom was inside when it was activated, and the 1,000 metel radius space was stretched out 300 times.

That was the reason why the AA guns no longer hit. Even if it seemed like you could land a shot from the outside, it actually had to cover an area 300 times larger than what it seemed.

And though the space's volume had grown 27,000,000 times larger, the amount of air molecules had remained unchanged.

As a barrier, it didn't allow any air from the outside, either.

It was almost a vacuum. No animals could survive in those conditions, which was exactly why the seven Toms had died.

However, this atmosphere had another terrifying quality.

Normally, on planets with atmospheres, there were limits to how fast something could fall. This was caused by air resistance. Objects that entered the atmosphere from an airless space would either slow down immensely or burn up in plasma born from air pressure.

In short: the atmosphere acted as a break for anything going fast.

However...

What if there was a space with 27,000,000 times less air resistance, 300,000 metels to fall from, and normally functioning gravity?

What level of kinetic energy would the falling object have by the time it reached the surface?



Falling through the Space Dilution field, the fin reached about seven times the speed of sound before hitting the ground.

It could only be compared to one thing: a meteor.

It created a several hundred metel-wide crater, a ground-shattering shockwave that extended several times further, and a light, glass-breaking wave that extended throughout all of Quartierlatin.

Most of the marionettes that were around the legged tank, Acra, evaporated the moment it hit. Only Faldreed survived, but the shockwave bent his limbs and blew him several hundred metels back.

Though Acra had been on ground zero, it was unscathed because of its Space Fixation. That was how Acra-Vesta had been designed to operate.

Acra couldn't break to Vesta's bombing, and even if it did, Vesta would repair it as long as it was around.

As long as one of them existed, the two space-controlling machines would continue repairing each other from total destruction.

Their Mutual Repair system would only stop functioning if both of them were destroyed at the same time.

That meant that it wasn't impossible to destroy them, but it would be no easy task.

The unbreakable Shell and the unreachable Sky had to be conquered at the same time.

It would be impossible under normal circumstances. No one could hurt either of them, leaving them to watch as Vesta's kinetic energy bombs destroyed their enemies.

Not even the Incarnation of Beasts could defeat Acra-Vesta.

In fact, that was the very first original concept behind this weapon.

Being about 37 percent complete, it didn't have a lot of its intended weaponry and counters to other incarnations, but it was no exaggeration to say it was 100% complete as an anti-Incarnation of Beasts weapon.

The pre-ancient civilization's grand engineer Flagman poured intense murderous intent and hope for the future into this particular superweapon, and Acra-Vesta wielded it proudly.

The kinetic energy bombs born out of the ancient hatred assaulted even those who'd escaped the direct hit. Six Toms out of eight vanished in the shockwave.

"GH?! SILVEEEEEERRRR!" Ray shouted.

Ray's group were distant to begin with, so they didn't suffer fatal damage, but the shockwave upon them was powerful nonetheless. They bore it only by running Wind Hoof at max capacity and shielding against it with Nemesis's third form.

As for the field marshal...

Caught up in the shockwave mid-flight, his squadron was destroyed.

Then, he himself was blown away. His bones shattered, and he fell down from several hundred metels in the air.

Chapter Eight: The Primeval Sword

The Lynx, Tom Cat

“Huff... huff... It’s not quite like the original, but Flagman actually weaponized Red King’s power! Just how absurd is that guy...?”

Standing in the mountains a short distance away from ground zero, I panted heavily and cursed Acra-Vesta’s creator. I’d lost count of how many times his weapons had given us serious trouble.

And most of the time, I’m the one who has to take care of them. The others should run into them more often, I thought peevishly.

“This one’s way more complete than the one we broke six hundred years ago,” I pondered aloud. “Self-developing weapons really are too dangerous to ignore. If it became a UBM, Jabberwock could set some vectors on its powers, but we can’t count on that happening...”

Acra-Vesta couldn’t become a UBM. Though that had happened to Edelvalsa, another one of Flagman’s weapons, the circumstances here were different.

Edelvalsa had been a standalone bioweapon designed to operate by itself, while Acra-Vesta was a legged tank paired with an airship. They were weapons that could be piloted, but which were operating on auto right now — as intended.

There may have been some sort of code to override it and make it obey people again, but Flagman was probably the only one who’d ever known it.

Prism People couldn’t work unless owned by humans, and Acra-Vesta was the same in that regard. It was still being used by someone

and thus couldn't become a UBM... or even a normal monster, for that matter.

Others' possessions couldn't be made to evolve — this was a safety that Jabberwock's Master had set on him, and there was no way to go around it.

"What do we do nowww...?" I wondered.

My base position on the situation was the same as it had been back in the ruins: we'd wait until compatible Superiors came around and destroyed it.

Just two Superiors — one to counter Space Fixation and another one for Space Dilution — would be enough... Actually, Xunyu could probably solo them both. Distance didn't matter to her, after all.

However, Acra-Vesta was on a whole different course than before. If it went southwards, bombing everything in its path, Altar's map would change drastically.

"Well, I guess I should be glad it didn't copy Red King's offensive abilities, tooo," I muttered. "Seriously, good thing it's just the defense..."

If it'd been the full package, the damage would've been a lot worse than just a changed map.

"Northern Altar would be destroyed before any Superiors came," I muttered. "And we have... only one way to prevent it..."

I knew the original behind those space manipulation powers, so I knew the counters, as well, and it just so happened that a couple of them were right here in Quartierlatin.

A couple of people in town would stand a chance against Acra-Vesta, despite not being Superiors.

The chances of them actually pulling it off were astronomically low, but they would be capable of breaking through both Acra's

absolute defense and Vesta's vast vacuum, ultimately destroying them.

"Pulling it off is about as likely as tightrope walking on a cotton thread, but it's something," I pondered. "I need to let them know... but how?"

I knew both Acra-Vesta's powers and that their powers could counter it, but *I couldn't let them know that I knew.*

"It's not something I should know. It'd seem unnatural if I did," I said. "Even the warning from before was pushing it."

At the start of the bombing, I'd instantly realized that it was an attack that used Space Dilution. That was knowledge I could play off as just an assumption made from being inside the field or from my experience as a veteran duelist. However, it wouldn't be normal for me to know the details about Acra-Vesta and their... or, rather, *her...* powers.

While *his* abilities had been completely exposed by Franklin, *her* power was like a state secret — no, even more unknown than that.

"It'd be best if they figure out its powers and that they can counter it all by themselves... but I don't think that's going to happennn." I sighed.

◇◇◇

Prism Rider, Ray Starling

Once the shockwave had subsided, we kept our distance from the enemy and talked about nature of that attack.

"My guess is that the whale's power is to make the distance... or space... around it bigger than it looks," I said.

If we approached the whale without knowing how much, though, it could drop another fin on us.

Tom had been near ground zero, while Dr. Mario had been flying through the air when the first one hit.

I was worried about them, of course, but if we didn't figure out what that thing was and think of a way to counter it, Quartierlatin could end up a crater, which would leave a bad taste in my mouth.

I mustered whatever wisdom I had and tried to guess what the fins were all about. "Distance... and space?"

"What do you mean?" Azurite and Nemesis both asked. They didn't seem to fully understand me.

"Why do you think that?" Azurite added.

"I have several reasons. One of them was the AA gun. Its shots stopped reaching the whale, and from what I could see, they dropped naturally. It didn't look like they hit anything, were damaged in any way, or were influenced by some outside energy — they just didn't reach it, leaving us with two options: either the AA gun's range became smaller, or the whale went up too high for its shells to hit."

It reminded me of the battle against Monochrome. Some Masters had tried attacking it from the ground, but none of their attacks had reached, just like with the AA gun.

"What else?" asked Azurite.

"The way the fin fell. It looked really slow to us, but you saw how hard it hit. Even if the fin weighed tens, hundreds of tons, at that speed, it could never have the kinetic energy to make a shockwave that powerful."

"Could it not be full of explosives?" asked Nemesis.

"It could, but I didn't see any fire, and it didn't sound like an explosion. Then again, it could easily be a magic bomb that worked like that..."

I wouldn't have been surprised if shockwave bombs existed in this world or something. This was a fantasy, after all. Earth's laws of physics didn't always apply.

"No, continue with your theory," said Azurite.

"All right. Another thing I noticed was that it didn't make any sound while falling."

"But it did. Quite a loud one, too," commented Nemesis.

"That happened when it hit the surface. I'm talking about the fall itself. It's a pretty large object, yet it fell without making any sound. You couldn't even hear it cut the air. If my guess is right, then that's because it was either going a larger distance than it looked... or passing a vacuum."

"Vacuum..." Nemesis murmured.

I nodded. And if it really was that, another thing would make sense. "A vacuum would explain why it didn't heat up as it fell."

"It should have?" Nemesis asked.

"Yeah. Objects that move through the atmosphere really fast are subjected to air friction, and there's a point at which the air molecules are compressed and become plasma. Understand?"

"Metallic monsters shine when they move at multiple times the speed of sound. Is it something like that?" asked Azurite.

"Close enough. Now, if my guess is right and it had enough distance to speed up to create an impact *that* powerful, it should've started shining because of the heat from the air friction. That didn't happen, though, so it's very likely it's surrounded by a vacuum."

"What does that change?" asked Nemesis.

"In normal free fall, the air resistance would set a limit on the object's acceleration. That limit wasn't there in a vacuum."

It reminded me of a video I'd seen in class once, showing an experiment in which they examined free fall that had gravity, but zero air resistance. They'd removed all the air from a pipe, then made an iron ball fall through. It had been faster in the vacuum than in the air.

"I have another reason for why I think it's creating a vacuum," I continued.

"What is it?"

"The lasers. That's the weapon the whale used to shoot down the marionettes. The Prism Soldiers had Gatling guns, missiles, and lots of other weapons, yet the whale only used lasers. That makes sense only if it was designed around a power that expanded space and created a vacuum."

That'd make it pointless to use any other weapons.

"After all... *lasers don't lose power over distance*," I said. That was one of the main properties of light. "Lasers only lose power if there are molecules in the way, so if they're in a vacuum, they deal the same amount of damage, no matter how many hundreds of kilometers they pass."

Monochrome's maximum range had been about 15,000 meters, but only because of the air molecules in the atmosphere. In a vacuum, its lasers could've reached anything.

"Lasers go at the speed of light, too," I said. "They can't miss their mark even with the expanded distance."

The speed of light was roughly 300,000,000 meters per second. Given that number, a distance difference of ten thousand meters was negligible.

That was what made lasers the only weapon that could be used well in pre and post-space expansion, as well as in and out of the vacuum.

The fact that the whale had only lasers and fins strongly supported my theory.

"Can you give us a summary of your theory?" asked Nemesis.

"Though you can't tell by looking, the whale created a huge vacuum around it," I said. "That's why the attacks don't reach, and that's why the things it drops gain insane amounts of kinetic energy before they hit the ground. That explains all the phenomena around it."

All in all, it was a pretty terrifying power. The whale ruled the skies in an even worse way than Monochrome.

But...

"What can we even do against such a thing?" Azurite wondered in despair.

"...I can beat it."

"Eh?" She turned away from the whale and back to me.

I nodded and raised just one finger. "I think I can beat the whale... but *only once*."

It would be a huge gamble.

I had no idea how powerful *it* would be, couldn't guarantee that I would hit the whale with it, or that I could survive until I finished the attack.

Nothing about my idea was certain, but going by the toughness of the whale, which I assumed I understood now from watching Tom and Dr. Mario fight it, I could destroy the thing if the attack was at least half as powerful as the original.

"But once is not enough, is it?" asked Nemesis.

"Yeah."

She was right. Tom and Dr. Mario had destroyed the whale a few times, but it had restored itself every time and continued rising.

While the crab had insane defense, the whale seemed to have some sort of insanely powerful repair function. It would probably come back soon after I destroyed it.



“Oh, but it *is* enoughhh!” a voice called.

“Tom!” I cried.

Looking slightly tattered, Tom popped out of a nearby street and stood next to Silver.

“You’re okay!”

“I lost six outta eight, thouuugh. But as you can see, I’m still here and can still talk to you, so I’m just fiiine. Another one of me is still watching the thing.”

...Man, his Embryo had some impressive survivability.

We walked over closer to him and I asked, “Umm, where’s Dr. Mario?”

“Mario...? Ohh, you mean the one who used the marionettes. I’m not sure. Don’t even know if he’s alive.”

“I... I see...”

I could only hope he was. He was Dryfe’s SMTF, so he had the stats needed to survive... probably.

“What did you mean by, ‘It’s enough?’” I asked.

“That repair power is called ‘Mutual Repair.’ You find it on ruin machines sometimes.”

“What a simple name,” I commented.

“And it does exactly what it sounds like. It makes two machines fix each other. As long as one is around, it will fix the other even if the other is completely destroyed. That means they won’t be able to repair each other if you destroy them both at the same time.”

“I see...” I pondered. “Hold on.”

If that was happening between the crab and the whale...

“Doesn’t that mean they’re indestructible?”

I had a slim chance of destroying the whale, but there was no way for me to destroy the crab at the same time. I could maybe destroy the crab with a Vengeance is Mine, but then I'd be left with the whale, which I couldn't beat from the surface. Since it wasn't as close as it seemed, I'd spectacularly miss. Whether I went for the whale or the crab, I'd have to get close, meaning that I could only take out one of them.

"By the way, I don't think your skills would work on the legged tank," Tom added.

"Eh?"

"Uhh, I know about your counterattack skills from the broadcast during Franklin's game. The thing about the tank is that you can't touch it. The space right in front of it blocks anything that gets too close."

"No way..."

I already knew that Tom and Dr. Mario couldn't beat it, but if we couldn't touch it at all, me and my Vengeance would be useless against it, too.

And as long as that crab was around, the whale was indestructible.

We had no moves we could make.

"Hey, why not ask for Brother Bear or someone else's help?" asked Nemesis. "Xunyu had warp attacks! Surely she could..."

"And how do I contact them?" I demanded. "Bro didn't answer when I called him, and I don't know any way to get in touch with Xunyu. Also, they'd take too long to get here, and..."

...Quartierlatin would be gone by then.

That was the one ending I couldn't accept, no matter what.

"Do we have anything else?" Nemesis wondered. "Are any Altarian Masters still alive here capable of dealing with the crab?"

"The Masters who went with me into the ruins were all wiped out," said Tom. "And most of the others were taken out over the course of the night."

That left us with no options.

I could give my all and challenge the whale, but that wouldn't be enough. If only there were one more person... someone who held the possibility of beating the crab!

Troubled and feeling like our chances were going further and further beyond the radix point, I heard a familiar voice.

"Tom Cat. I have a question."

It belonged to Azurite.

"What is it, masked lady?" Tom asked.

"The weapon on the ground is protected by space, right?"

"Yep. But none of our attacks worked. Even the whale's bomb didn't hurt it, so I doubt any normal attacks would work on it."

"I see..." Tom's hopeless words made Azurite nod. "Then I will be the one to destroy it."

She said that as if it was no big deal.

"Huh?! Azurite! Have you gone mad?!" Nemesis exclaimed.

"I haven't. I shall destroy the weapon on the ground."

She looked straight into my eyes. I saw no hesitation in them. It felt like we both saw glimpses of each other's minds.

"Ray, you said you can destroy the flying weapon, yes?"

"Yeah... I'll do it, no matter what."

"You never lie, so I shall believe you. In exchange..." With her left hand, she grasped the azure sword fixed to her hip. "...I want you to believe me, as well. *I will cut down the weapon on the ground.*"

Her eyes had a strong will, confidence, determination, and trust for my ability to beat the whale. She clearly had a way to beat the crab.

Perhaps it was as much of a gamble as my way of beating the whale, but since she sincerely believed I could pull it off, I had to respond the same way.

"Yeah... I believe you."

I felt her resolve and accepted her choice. I wouldn't stop her from going because she was a tian. I'd said I would support her, and stopping her wouldn't be it.

I would believe that she could handle the crab, and I myself would go and beat the whale. That was my current way of supporting her.

"Let's do it, Ray," she said. "Let's put an end to the foul legacy of those ruins."

She then removed her mask and smiled.

I responded with a smile of my own. "Yeah!"

Thus began the final round in the battle against the weapons reigning over both heaven and earth.

◆◆◆

About a certain craftsman...

Flagman.

The name that would later survive on many pre-ancient civilization relics was known all across the continent during the time when the civilization was thriving.

His knowledge and ideas were on a whole other level. It was said that the very prosperity before the arrival of the ancient civilization — the incarnations — was caused by the technological revolution brought about by Flagman.

His technology felt as if it had come from another world. Naturally, all the countries wanted it, but he never bound himself to just a single one.

He never created anything specific because he was hired or commissioned to do it; he only provided his products to those countries that gave him the funds, resources, workforce, and let him make whatever he wanted.

It wasn't uncommon for his weapons to be used against one another in battlefields.

Some considered monopolizing him, while others wanted to assassinate him before others could use his talents to make more new weapons, but those plans never came to fruition.

Instead, countries which treated him favorably, like the Zweier Imperium, began receiving products Flagman considered necessary for them. The very first non-weapon he ever made, an environment-improvement tool, went to the Zweier Imperium.

Because of that, other countries began to hide their ulterior motives, ending their efforts to make an enemy out of him.

Eventually, the continent began revolving around Flagman, and after a quarter of a century of technological prosperity, the Extra-Continental Vessel and the thirteen incarnations appeared.

The countries that first contacted those incarnations launched a preemptive strike against them with Flagman's weaponry.

However, not even their strongest weapons stood a chance.

Faced with the sudden, drastic change on the continent, Flagman resolved to design weapons stronger than any he'd ever made before, and use all the countries' powers to create them.

The danger the continent was in was one reason he did it, but he had something even more important driving him: a sense of rivalry.

He had technology surpassing all others and had spent his whole life on research, so seeing his many weapons get turned to scrap so easily made him want to challenge the forces responsible and ultimately emerge victorious.

That led to the creation of pre-ancient civilization weapons such as the Prism Dragons and the throne. They were, without a doubt, unmatched, and had they been created before the incarnations came, they would have changed the course of history.

Alas, even that was nothing before the incarnations.

The Prism Dragons fell to them, while the throne couldn't be activated because its energy lines were cut off.

Thus, the pre-ancient civilization was destroyed by the incarnations.

However, there were weapons that were being created even after the very last normal weapon was destroyed and all the countries had fallen.

They were the anti-incarnation superweapons.

The concept behind them was to analyze, recreate, and utilize the incarnations' own powers for use against them.

Flagman was involved in the creation of the foundation, but he left the rest of the creation process to the machines themselves.

He was ready to die at the hands of the incarnations, so he left behind weapons that would continue to develop without him, all for the purpose of beating the incarnations.

One of them was Superweapon No. 3, Acra-Vesta, which would end up lying dormant in a mountain that had once been Zweier Imperium territory.

Flagman provided it with the foundation, concept, half of the analysis, and the name. The still-living researchers built the facility, and the rest of it was all left to Acra-Vesta itself.

None of that was different from any other superweapon, but Acra-Vesta was unique in one way: it was created as a counter to a specific enemy — the Incarnation of Beasts.

Flagman had been a true anomaly his whole life — not just among people, but perhaps even in the world itself. Despite this, there had been one person who had treated him kindly, valued his talents more than anyone else, and treasured him like family. His name was Imperator Wolfgang, and he'd lost his life to that very incarnation.

Thus, Acra-Vesta, built in the imperium's lands, was the only superweapon that embodied not only Flagman's rivalrous spirit and hope for the future, but his personal grudge, as well.



Having completed going down the mountain, Acra was now moving southwards at its regular speed.

Vesta, its other half, was following it from the heavens.

The airship was significantly faster than the legged tank, but their current speed was completely in sync.

The units were separate, but they operated as one, and Vesta was simply slowing down to avoid leaving Acra behind.

Some would expect Vesta to have to move three hundred times faster to make up for the three hundred times larger distance, but that wasn't the way it worked.

Space Dilution was centered around Vesta, so its speed remained the same as before.

Normally, Acra would hold on to Vesta — the opposite of what they had before the split — letting Vesta move at its own speed.

However, though weak, there were signs of incarnations nearby, so Vesta couldn't undo the Space Dilution, and they had to move in their battle formation.

Suddenly, Vesta noticed an incarnation drawing close to it.
“Incarnations detected.”

Vesta's search capabilities easily extended all the way to Gideon, so it could sense enemies beyond even the 300,000 metels of its realm.

Without this ability, it wouldn't be able to use its lasers to shoot down any incoming enemies, so it was crucial for its operations.

On the other hand, most of its processing power and payload was split between the laser cannons, search devices, Mutual Repair, and Space Dilution, so it couldn't have any weapons besides the lasers, nor did it have all that much defense.

The weapons meant to cover those problems were still mid-development, so it didn't have them equipped.

As a standalone airship, it would be considered a frail failure, but that wasn't a problem, for as long as Acra was around, Vesta would be indestructible.

“Target approaching at high speeds.” Vesta's search systems looked for the enemy's exact position.

It was coming from...



Ten minutes ago, Prism Rider, Ray Starling

We promised to destroy the machines — with Azurite going for the crab on the ground and me taking out the whale in the sky — and split up.

Tom would support Azurite, so now I was alone with Nemesis and Silver.

“So, Ray,” Nemesis spoke up. “The method you have in mind is the Black Warcoat’s skill, right?”

“Yeah.” I nodded as my coat waved in the wind.

Its Light Absorption skill gathered light and stored it as energy which it would probably use for the other skill, which was most likely a giant laser beam like the one used by Monochrome the UBM.

It had to be capable of destroying the whale.

“Hmm, well, the compatibility is certainly there. You can finish charging the coat by letting it absorb the whale’s lasers, and since, like you said, lasers don’t lose power over distance, it doesn’t matter how much the whale’s expanded its surroundings.”

“No. We’ll have to get close,” I said, correcting her misconception.

“What?”

“It expanded the distance by *a lot*. Even a slight error while targeting would make the beam fly completely off the mark, so we need to get close enough to at least see it clearly.”

From what Tom told us, the area around the whale was like a different realm where both the sky and the ground seemed extremely distant.

His assumption was that the distance couldn’t be any less than several hundred thousand meters.

So to make sure my laser hit it, we had to get as close to it as possible first.

"We'll counter the vacuum by preemptively compressing the air around us using Silver's Wind Hoof," I said. "There's not much MP left in Gouz-Maise, but it's enough for some decent compression."

That would be my substitute for a space suit.

"Honestly, I'm more worried about the lasers than the vacuum," I added. "I have no idea if Monochrome and The Black Shield will be enough for them."

"That's true, but I see a flaw in your idea," said Nemesis.

"Which would be?"

"You said you would compress the air around us, but it would be limited, no? We'd run out of it long before we reached the whale. Silver can't run in a vacuum, you know that from when we fought Monochrome, don't you?"

"I do. That's why we're I'm not making him run."

"Nh?" My words caused Nemesis to make a confused face.

"Listen, Nemesis, this isn't like the Monochrome battle," I said. "We aren't chasing something that can rise to the sky at supersonic speeds."

The main problem back then had been that the enemy was high up in the sky and moved higher if threatened. What about the whale, though?

"There might be a several hundred thousand meters between us, but *it's actually only about a thousand meters in the air.*"

"Several hundred thousand meters are just a thousand?" she asked.

"The distance is only messed up in the space around it. It's not affecting anything outside."

It was hard to comprehend with our standard laws, but in this case, the several hundred thousand and the thousand were actually the same distance.

That allowed us to do something that we couldn't do against Monochrome.

"What are you planning?" Nemesis asked, despite already knowing the answer. You could tell by the stiff smile on her face, to which I smiled back.

The answer was painfully simple. It would let us get to the whale faster, and without making Silver waste any air for movement.

Our method of getting to the whale...

"We just have to go above it and *fall* for hundreds of thousands of meters."

...was exactly the same as its means of attack.



Quartierlatin, town outskirts, sky

"The enemy is *descending from straight above*." Vesta's systems and optical sensors spotted a black mass falling towards it. It was Ray and Silver.

"Intercepting."

As Ray endlessly accelerated through the vacuum around Vesta, it activated its laser cannons and began shooting him.

The sophisticated search system made it impossible for them to miss.

However, all the lasers were consumed by the darkness — the black color covering Silver.

“No effect.”

Dozens of lasers were consumed by the coat, doing no damage.

Vesta’s upper part was its blind spot. It was originally supposed to be equipped with secondary weapons meant to cover it, but unfortunately, it hadn’t had the time to develop them.

Still, even without them, the lasers should’ve been able to shoot just about anything down with a good enough barrage.

The problem here was that the lasers didn’t seem to have any effect at all.

As Vesta’s artificial intelligence began operating to find a solution to this problem...

Enemy spotted.

...Acra from down below informed it of another threat.



“Enemy spotted.”

As Acra went to the south, it was hindered by eight people.

“Are you sure you wanna do this by yourself?” asked one of the eight men who had the same face. “And was it really okay for you to remove the mask?”

“Yes,” said the ninth person. “And you already knew my face, didn’t you?”

“Well, yeaaah... It’s Ray who’s weird for not realizing.”

“Heh heh, he really is.”

The eight were Tom, who’d already fought Acra once. They split up, leaving the only non-Tom alone.

The person had no entry in Acra's logs.

"No sign of incarnations," Acra said.

Indeed, the last one wasn't an incarnation, but Acra-Vesta had been set to ignore all human casualties. Thus, it would head forward even if it had to crush someone in its way.

"Advancing while retaining speed."

It would just keep going forward. That was Acra's sole weapon. The absolute defense from Space Fixation made it into an object that couldn't be destroyed, no matter what it crashed into. Nothing could surpass its toughness.

Though faced with Acra's deadly charge, Azurite didn't move an inch.

She just held a Job Crystal in hand...

"Job Change — ■■■■■ ■■■■■■■■."

...and shattered it.

Acra paid no heed to that and just continued speeding through the ground with its legs akin to twisted thorns.

Azurite's slender body was about to be torn apart by the legs, but before that happened, she voiced the name of a skill.

"Release."

"...?"

Now, even after Acra had passed her, Azurite was still standing.

Though she was supposed to be caught in its legs and badly wounded, if not dead, not even her silky hair was damaged.

There was only one difference about her — the azure blade in her hand was glowing.



“Repeating attack... error.” Upon realizing that its attack failed, Acra tried to turn around and face Azurite again, *but it couldn’t*.

As it attempted a turn, a few of its legs detached from its body and fell.

“Analyzing damage. Initiating repairs.” As a machine, Acra felt nothing about its impenetrable defense being broken. It would just mechanically fix itself with mutual repair.

However, that...

“Repair... *impossible*.”

...was something that could never happen again.

“That wound is *the origin*,” Azurite said with her back to the machine. Acra had just lost its legs, which were under Space Fixation’s absolute protection, and couldn’t fix them despite its impressive repair powers. “You have not ‘lost’ the legs. The ‘you without those legs’ has *become the original you*.”

Thus, the damage could never be repaired.

Acra’s repair function was in Vesta, rather than itself, yet Azurite had just stated that not even that mattered to the wounds she’d given — *the origins she’d etched*.

“This blade of azure severs all,” she told it. “The wounds it bestows never heal. It is the blade that etches inescapable origins.”

Azurite gently swung her blade, and the empty space it passed was actually torn. This unfathomable sharpness was the true nature of her sword.

It was the kingdom’s most prized treasure, an anomaly of a relic, and the legendary blade said to have been wielded by the founder and first king of Altar.

“The Primeval Sword, Altar shall cut all that you are!”

It was a sword... and an *Irregularity*.

"The Primeval Sword, Altar — matching data found. Wielder — no matching data."

Even the database that had been built in the time of the pre-ancient civilization had records of Altar. As one would expect, however, it had no info on the wielder.

Thus, Acra released a question-like tone, and Azurite was courteous enough to answer.

"I am the one who shall wield Altar as I stand alongside them as the vanguard resisting all that menace the kingdom."

The words contained her will and determination, and the words that followed were proof that she alone was capable of wielding Altar.

"I am the first princess of the Kingdom of Altar — Sacred Princess, Altimia Azurite Altar."

It was none other than the name of the one who inherited the blade, Altar, and the country named after it.

Azurite, also known as Sacred Princess, Altimia, looked at Acra with her unmasked eyes.

Facing the machine as it stood up using its remaining legs, she declared, "By these names, the duties that come with them, and by my own will, I shall not tolerate anyone menacing the people of the kingdom."

Then she pointed the tip of her blade at Acra, cracked a fearless smile, and asked:

"Are you prepared?"

Chapter Nine: Their Choice

About The Primeval Sword, Altar

“The Primeval Sword, Altar” was the name of a legendary azure blade that had existed *even before* the time of the pre-ancient civilization.

It was a transcendental sword of immense power that was said to be able to cut anything.

Two thousand years ago, during the final years of the pre-ancient civilization, it had disappeared from the face of history, and resurfaced only about five centuries ago.

Back then, the entire continent had been in a state of perpetual war, like the modern Tenchi.

It was the time after the time of the immensely powerful Draconic Emperor, King of Kings, and The Lynx.

The Draconic Emperor’s long life expired, the King of Kings was sealed by The Earth, The Ocean, and The Atmos of that era, while The Lynx simply disappeared somewhere.

With the King of Kings’s disappearance, the vast lands to the west of the continent lost their ruler, causing many to fight for control over the fertile lands near the west coast.

Some wanted as much profit as possible, some tried to replicate what the King of Kings had done, some simply wanted to defend themselves. The reasons were varied, but the west was in a state of chaos nonetheless.

The situation quickly stabilized in the southwest, under the control of the long-lived races, and in the northwest, where people were unified by their worship of the pre-ancient civilization, but the

space right between them had no common banner to fly, so it ended up becoming a gathering of small countries fighting with each other for a long time.

That situation was made even worse by the appearance of The Evil.

Eventually, however, there came a man who subjugated all the countries and unified them into one.

His name was *Azurite*.

He started out as a shepherd who was grieved about the war, but it all changed when he chanced upon The Primeval Sword, Altar, buried under some dirt.

The blade chose him, and he became the Sacred King. He used the sword's immense power to fight in the wars, eventually defeated The Evil alongside his friends, and brought stability to the central west part of the continent.

He was Azurite Altar — the first king of the Kingdom of Altar.

“The blade chose him, and he became the Sacred King” meant exactly what it sounded like.

After the destruction of the pre-ancient civilization and the death of its previous owner, The Primeval Sword, Altar, spent centuries untouched and even became a UBM over the years, but that did not change its role — to determine who was suited to wield it and to give them the Special Superior Job of Sacred King, or, if the wielder was female, Sacred Princess.

The first king, Azurite, qualified for this role and became the Sacred King, letting him wield Altar.

There were two types of Superior Jobs: those who could be reached through talent and hard work, and those for which no amount of work and aptitude was enough.

Hierophant — or High Priestess if female — and The Saint were good examples of each.

They were both Superior Jobs with a heavy focus on healing magic, but there was an important difference between them.

First, the conditions for Hierophant:

One — reach level 500 with only jobs linked to the clergy, such as Priest, Temple Knight, or Monk.

Two — find 1,000 people who had maxed out the Priest job, have them nominate you for the Hierophant job, gather their signatures, and bring them to the priest grouping crystal.

Three — complete the special job change quest.

As hard as these conditions seemed, it was entirely possible to fulfill them with just hard work and talent.

The same thing couldn't be said about The Saint's conditions.

To gain that job, you had to be a woman who had the blood — the genetic information — of a certain family, and complete a special quest.

The Saint prioritized bloodline over all hard work and talent.

Basically, normal Superior Jobs could be acquired through aptitude and determination, while the Special Superior Jobs had unique conditions which excluded the vast majority of even the most talented people.

Sacred King and Sacred Princess were Special Superior Jobs that could only be acquired by people with aptitude for The Primeval Sword, Altar.

The first king had used the blade's name for his country, giving rise to the kingdom of knights.

The royal family of these lands had been inheriting the blade ever since, and because they had the blood of the first king in their veins, the children of their family inherited the first king's aptitude for Altar.

Not all of them had it, however. In fact, only one child in every few generations did; those who did were actually quite rare. Not even the previous king, Eldor Zeo Altar, had been an exception.

His daughter Altimia, however, possessed this gift.

Though born to two blonde-haired parents, she herself had azure hair. This was definitely not because of infidelity, but more like an atavism.

The first king's hair color had been azure, and every now and then, the gene resurfaced in his descendants. That detail alone was considered auspicious to the point that the azure-haired child was always given the first king's first name, Azurite, as a middle name.

However, unlike most of the previous blue-haired Altarian royals, Altimia also had Azurite's immense aptitude for Altar.

Soon after she was born, the blade, kept in the treasury, began glowing blue, and Altimia, despite being still a baby, was given the Sacred Princess job.

Needless to say, her father, Eldor, instantly knew that his first daughter was the blade's chosen one.

However, he didn't want to force her into a life of fighting just because of how she was born.

The sentiment was similar to his stance on Masters, but this surely must have been stronger than that.

He couldn't tolerate the idea that an infant, not even months old, would be forced into a life of strife just because she was chosen by an ancient power.

Thus, he kept her job, as well as Altar's sudden gleaming, hidden from the public.

Revealing it would have given him cards to use against foreign countries, and it would definitely have enlivened his people, but he still prioritized his daughter's peace.

Still, he was well aware that, as royalty and as someone calling this world her home, Altimia would not be able to live without knowing battle at all. Simply having a power like hers put her in danger, and he wanted to make sure she didn't hurt herself.

Thus, Eldor revealed the truth to and asked the help of two people: Langley, the Celestial Knight and an old friend of his, and the Arch Sage, his own teacher.

Langley taught Altimia in the ways of the sword, while the Arch Sage taught her about how the world worked. Thanks to that, the girl grew up to be someone who wouldn't misuse her power as the Sacred Princess.

However, there was one thing no one expected.

Langley had soon realized that Altimia's status as the Sacred Princess wasn't the only thing special about her — she also had a talent for swordfighting.

It was so immense, in fact, that she surpassed even Langley, and when combined with the supreme power of sword only she could wield, her talent made her the strongest swordfighter in Altar.



Quartierlatin, town outskirts

"Hhn!" Altimia didn't even dodge Acra's charge.

With a breath, she dove right into the rows of its needle-like legs, evaded them all with supreme precision, and swung Altar's azure blade.

The sword that could cut everything tore through the fixed space around Acra, then through its own armor like it was nothing.

She found it easier to swing than a feather. Many would feel that that actually made it harder to use, but to Altimia, handling the sword came as naturally as breathing.

Another thing of note was her speed. She'd originally used the Swordmaster job to hide her identity. But when switching to Sacred Princess, she'd activated the job's passive skill, The Inheritor of the Sacred Blade, which multiplied all her stats by ten whenever she wielded Altar.

It was one of the things that made the Special Superior Job so impressive. With her speed now exceeding 50,000, she was too fast for Acra to keep up with.

She surpassed the speed of sound five times over, and Acra, a machine which dedicated most of its Resources to Space Fixation and Mutual Repair, had no way to counter her. As powerful as Acra-Vesta's abilities were, they consumed all of its available resources.

Thus, when faced with Altar — an enemy against which its functions meant nothing — it lost all of its advantages.

"Requesting backup." Acra quickly calculated what it had to do, and decided to request that Vesta release one of its kinetic energy bombs.

Though Vesta was in a battle itself, it quickly acknowledged the request and released one of its fins right over Acra.

Tom, who was watching Vesta's surroundings, quickly called out, "Princess! The thing above just released a fin!"

Not even a Special Superior Job such as hers was sturdy enough to survive this attack. That was the very reason why Tom had been watching Vesta — to let her know when she had to back away.

But...

"Just one...? There is no need to retreat, then," she replied.

"Eh?" Tom couldn't understand what she meant.

"I shall not allow it to damage Quartierlatin any further. We are too close to the town. There might be casualties this time."

"Well, I get your point, but it's already falling down!" Tom was already making seven of himself retreat, and the fin was falling faster by the second.

Just like the first one, it was going to reach speeds of seven times greater than the speed of sound.

"If it is only a little bit faster than me... then I can match it," Altimia declared as she stood where it would fall.

Her claim was based on not just her AGI, but on her kinetic vision, as well. That was what had allowed her to keep an eye on Tom while he was moving at supersonic speeds and she herself was only half as fast.

She correctly calculated the moment the fin would reach the ground, and...

"Cut."

...with a skill bearing a basic name, swung her azure blade on it.

It was hard to describe what happened next.

The gigantic fin, now split in two, gently descended to the ground.

There was none of the insane speed it had gained during its free fall through the vacuum.

"What did you just do...?" Tom asked, completely dumbfounded.

"I just cut its kinetic energy."

She said it like it was nothing special, but that definitely wasn't something you could cut.

However, Altar made it possible.

It was a blade that could sever matter, space, and even energy, regardless of whether the thing had a shape or not.

Tom knew that well, so the main source of his shock was the skill Altimia was demonstrating. She'd effectively cut through something that moved at seven times the speed of sound, while she herself was at five.

When fighting Ray during their first encounter, Altar had been dormant, and she'd been trying to incapacitate, rather than kill, him.

Now that she'd unleashed Altar's and the Sacred Princess's powers, she definitely had enough power to match many solo fighting-focused Superiors.

Altimia began to silently ponder that. There was no doubt that she had supreme power. Perhaps if she'd taken part in the war, she could've defeated Logan and protected her mentor, and maybe even saved her father from Franklin, too.

Even now, she was often tortured by regret at the fact that she hadn't stood at the front lines, despite being the kingdom's strongest tian.

However, what'd stopped her from taking part in the war were Eldor's own words.

One more thing, Altimia... I do not want to push people to fight just because they have the power to. And that's why, Altimia... you don't have to fight.

His words had been gentle and full of fatherly love, but as she was now, she would never nod to them. Though it was far too late, she'd developed a better answer.

"Father... you claimed that you didn't want me to fight merely because I had the power to. I am extremely grateful for your consideration, kindness, and love, but..."

She stopped to cut off more of Acra's legs and armor and continued to talk to her late father.

"I have now decided, by myself, to join the Masters in battle."

That was the path the current Altimia was choosing to take.

"I will not be the pacifist you wanted me to be, nor the same me who distanced Masters and tried to bear it all by myself."

As she muttered that, the face of a certain Master came to her mind.

All Masters follow their own wills and choose how they're gonna be. As a Master, I choose to protect you and Quartierlatin.

Those were the words Ray had told her yesterday. His choice was his and his alone, and born of nothing but his freedom.

Those words had left such an impression on her that she had gotten the urge to choose something herself.

"I shall stand with them at the front lines and resist all that menace the kingdom."

Inspired by Ray, she took a step forward on her own path.

"Father, please watch over me from the heavens... and see where the battle I chose leads me."

With those words, Altimia split Acra's body in half and looked up at the sky.

The lights high above were proof that her comrade in arms was fighting, as well.

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Prism Rider, Ray Starling

The whale's field was a strange space.

The moment we entered, I instantly became unable to see Quartierlatin. The increase in distance made it appear far away.

I was free falling down and accelerating towards the whale below.

Since there was no air, I didn't feel any wind — the compressed air barrier protected me from it, but I felt no resistance behind it, either — and since there was nothing but sky around me, I had completely lost my sense of distance and was now left with no idea of how fast I was going. I was just falling through the cloudless sky — and I wasn't sure if it even qualified as that, considering it was a vacuum.

This would be the fourth time I'd fallen from the sky like this.

The first time was when my sister wheedled me into going skydiving in a South American jungle, I reflected.

The second time was when I first logged in to Dendro and Cheshire dropped me to Altea.

The third time was just a couple days ago, when I failed to reach Monochrome and had to go back down like I was falling.

This fall, however, was way more silent than any of those had been.

This descent through a soundless space felt more like drowning in the sea.

The light coming from the sky became distant as I continued this seemingly endless fall.

But then, something entered my vision.

"Here they come again! More lasers!" Nemesis exclaimed.

From a distance at which I still couldn't properly see it, the whale attacked us with dozens of laser rays. Most were consumed by the Black Warcoat covering Silver, but some that came from a different part of the whale grazed me.

As you'd expect, the whale had powerful anti-air defense. It was probably aware that attacks from above were its weakness. After all, if you could somehow bring something heavy above it, you could do the same thing to it as it was doing with its fins.

The lasers were there to prevent that.

If those lasers changed an object's trajectory even slightly, it would become a major difference mid-fall, and it would miss the whale.

Considering that that would make the object fall near the town instead, it wasn't really an option for us. The chances of hitting it were low to begin with, anyway.

However, things were different with us being the thing that was dropping towards it. My Monochrome could absorb the lasers, and Silver could move to make up for any slight changes in our fall trajectory or the whale's position.

"Those lasers also help us know where it is," Nemesis added to my thoughts.

"Yeah."

Lasers went straight, so the whale could only be directly where they came from, and we simply had to fall in that direction.

I was actually beginning to see an insanely small dot in the distance, and I had no doubts that it was the whale.

However, I couldn't attack it yet. If Shining Despair did what I expected it to, firing it from the top was out of the question, as it could damage the town, too.

I had to get to where I could see the whale clearly, and fire from its side or the bottom.

"But... can we survive long enough to get there?" she wondered.

"We'll have to."

I used the Black Warcoat to protect Silver, as his Wind Hoof protected us from the vacuum.

Naturally, for all the Monochrome surface area I dedicated to him, I had less of it to protect myself. I could block some of it using my Black Shield, but some still grazed me, sometimes going dangerously deep.

Also, though Monochrome's Light Absorption dealt with the light, it couldn't absorb all of the heat. The many lasers hitting us were slowly increasing our temperatures, and my skin already had signs of Burns and Scorches on it.

But we had already fallen about a third of the distance to the whale. There was no going back now, and I, praying that they didn't land a critical hit, had no choice but to continue.

There was just one problem. As we drew closer to the whale, the whale gained better angles to attack us from.

"Ray?! Gh... There are more and more lasers I can't protect you against!"

I silently gasped as another laser hit me.

If this keeps up... No! Not yet!

“We’ll reach it, no matter what!” I shouted.

Azurite has to be fighting that crab right now. I have no reason to give up!

“Ah...! Ray! There’s something above us!”

“Above?! But the whale’s below us!” I looked up, and what I saw shocked me. “That’s...!”

What was falling towards us was...

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Zero General, Gifted Barbaros

“*If you’re to take Emilio, maybe I should go, as well?*” the voice in my memory said.

“*Mina, you don’t like using dragon carriages, do you?*” another voice responded. “*Not to mention that there’s count work to be done.*”

I instantly understood that my life was flashing before my eyes. When on the verge of death, the brain projected the past into the hazy consciousness.

I’d been through this a number of times before. Once when the current The Ram was young and we’d fought a powerful UBM together, once when I’d fought other SMTF members during the imperator accession civil war, and that was just the tip of the iceberg.

Looking back at it, it was strange to reflect that I’d survived to thirty-one with so many deadly battles on my record.

“*That’s true, but... I’ll ask again. It is safe, right?*”

"Of course. We will come back in less than a month. I imagine I'll be missing your cookies dearly at that point."

During some of these near-death experiences, I often saw visions of the past. Most of them were of my youth in the Barbaros household, but what I was seeing this time was different.

"You want a cookie?"

"You can't. You're too young for cookies. You don't even have a full set of teeth yet."

The memory was too vague for me to remember how old I was. However, I could clearly see two people in it.

"Ha ha ha! Emilio, just wait a few months and you will have the teeth for them. Or maybe you'll be able to eat them by the time we come back from Dryfe. Who knows?"

One was a man reminiscent of my image in the mirror...

"Oh, then I'll have to work hard and welcome you with my best cookies yet."

And the other was a gentle-looking lady with a right eye much like his, and a beautiful green eye...

"Emilio..."



"...ther..." The vision I saw on the verge of death vanished along with the strange sound that left my lips.

"I... I'm still alive, I see." I quickly checked my window to assess my state and realized I had less than a tenth of my total HP left.

I also had the Bleeding and a number of Broken Bones status effects. If I'd continued drifting in that vision for just a few minutes more, I'd have been as good as dead.

Moving my broken arm, I reached into my inventory and took out a Potion, as well as drugs that increased regeneration and sped up the process at which injury-based debuffs vanished.

My HP stopped decreasing, and then began going up instead.

Waiting until I was sufficiently healed, I stayed collapsed on the ground, pondering something.

Specifically, why was I still alive.

I'd suffered lethal damage from just the shockwave alone. The Brooch and my SJ stats had kept me from dying instantly, but considering the situation and the height from which I'd fallen, it didn't make sense that I was still alive.

"Was it the growth here?" I wondered out loud as I realized that I was lying on some plants in some garden.

It really didn't seem like enough to soften my fall and keep me alive, though.

Thinking there had to be something else, I looked around and saw a tree so large that it left me speechless.

Some branches of this brilliantly verdant giant were broken as if something from high up in the sky had just fallen on it.

For some reason, though, lying down and looking up at it gave me some immense *déjà vu*.

I actually felt like I'd done this before. A very long time ago...

"Milady! You must take shelter within the mansion's barrier!"

"I know... but I just heard something happen at his tree. I'll only take a look. You take shelter and treat everyone's wounds."

"...!"

As I searched my memories, those voices reached my ears.

One of them was new to me, while the other made my heart shiver, for some reason.

Hearing them also made me realize where I was.

These were the gardens of the Quartierlatin Mansion.

I'd simply happened to fall here by chance.

With that in mind, it was easy to know whose voice that was.

"Good... I can still move," I muttered.

The healing had progressed enough, so I slowly got up from the plants I was lying on. As I stood tall, I heard someone behind me, but I couldn't let myself turn around.

"You are..." a voice said.

I couldn't face her. I was the Dryfean field marshal, and I'd already rejected the option to return to my mother in Quartierlatin.

Thus, I couldn't let myself meet her.

Even if I did, she'd probably treat me like any other trespasser.

I hadn't been here since I was an infant. A whole three decades had passed since then.

The only proof that I was her family, my heterochromia, had been taken away from me by Edelvalsa.

Right now, I was nothing more than an injured man who'd fallen into her garden. The countess would probably see me as a potential threat, and meeting her face-to-face would simply burden her.

After reaching that conclusion, I began dragging my feet towards the gate...

"Emilio?"

...but that word made me freeze.

“...How?” I whispered.

There was no way she could’ve known. She hadn’t even seen my face. My height and build were nothing like when she’d last seen me.

The “me” she’d known was a harmless infant, not this man reeking of blood and gunpowder. How, then, could she speak that name upon seeing me?

“You... You are Emilio, aren’t you?”

Silence.

Unable to confirm or deny that, I just stood in place and listened to her words.

“I don’t know why, but I had a feeling I would see you soon,” she said. “It started yesterday, I believe... I somehow felt like I did back when you and he were still with me.”

I’d definitely visited this place yesterday, but how could that have been enough for her to realize who I was?

“Perhaps it was because of the young man’s words, but I don’t believe it was only that.”

I was silent.

“I also met him in a dream last night. ‘Emilio is coming home,’ he said, still using that strange manner of speech.”

That sounded a lot like something I would say when acting as Mario. Why had I decided to use that manner of speech, anyway?

“The town has been in a dreadful state since early morning,” she continued. “And then this tree shook at a time like this, so I came out to take a look... and found you. You could say he arranged for us to meet.”

Ah, so the “he” she was talking about was my real father.

Oh, I see... so that's why the tree looks so familiar, I thought.

It was the same one that I'd slept under when I was an infant. And it'd saved my life just now. This was definitely a strange day.

Strange things happened on strange days, so perhaps it was only natural that she would realize I was Emilio.

"Emilio... can you show me your face?" she requested.

In response...

"I can't..." I shook my head.

I was now Gifted Barbaros, the Dryfean field marshal.

I hadn't chosen to live as the kingdom's Emilio Quartierlatin, so that name wasn't mine.

Not only that, but I was a man who was willing to destroy Quartierlatin for the sake of the imperium.

Could a person like me face his mother? Certainly not. At least...

"...not at this time," I murmured.

Until this incident and all other issues between the kingdom and the imperium were settled, I had no right to face my mother.

"I understand," she said, accepting my selfish reply and not pressing any further. "I can feel that you are resolved. You have a reason for that, don't you?"

"I do."

"In that case... just finding out that you are alive... is more than enough for me," my mother said in a tearful voice.

Suppressing the urge to turn around, I gave her a promise. "I will... come again... someday." My own voice made me realize I was choking up, too, but I continued regardless. "I have a wife... and a daughter. We will all come visit you someday... no matter what..."

“I’ll be waiting... Emilio.”

“Yes... Please be in good health... until then,” I said. And then I forced myself to begin walking.

“Take care, Emilio.”

“I’m off.”

With that promise, I left the Quarierlatin mansion.

Albeit barely, Faldreed was still working, so I looked through his eyes and saw the battle between the legged tank... and the first princess.

“Looks like they’re engaged in battle now,” I muttered.

It turned out that the masked woman really was her.

The disguise was so obvious that I’d actually thought it was a bluff or something. But she could wield Altar, so there was no way she could be anyone else.

I had no orders from the imperator this time. The princess was unrelated to my current mission.

After finding out what was happening on the surface, I looked up at the sky and saw Ray Starling, the Unbreakable slowly descending towards the airship. He was being barraged by lasers, but he was blocking them somehow.

“But he won’t last,” I muttered. I could tell he was close to his limit.

Just like the princess with her Altar on the surface, the Unbreakable probably had a way of dealing with the airship, too, but as things were, it didn’t seem like he’d succeed.

“I don’t have much MP and SP left... and I can’t really tell what damage the fall did to my brain...” I examined my state. “Well, it won’t be a problem.”

I used Marionette Squadron Creation a few times in a row.

Many of the trees in town became flying marionettes.

They used a lot of my brain's calculative power even under the best circumstances, and I was making an awful lot of them, despite my condition.

"Gh..." My head rang out in pain, and my left eye socket, where I had Edelvalsa, began to bleed, but I didn't care.

If I didn't do anything, the Unbreakable would break, and the airship's fins would destroy Quartierlatin.

That would make the promise impossible to fulfill.

"Run at maximum capacity!" I ordered. "All units, support the Unbreakable!"

Thus, the hundred flying marionettes took to the sky to protect my promise to my mother, and to protect the possibility leading to the best future.

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Prism Rider, Ray Starling

What I saw were wooden marionettes with their arms spread like wings.

They were all falling directly down.

"Those are Dr. Mario's!"

I knew because they looked exactly like the one he'd been riding before the kinetic explosion.

Unlike us, who were free falling, they were basically diving through the vacuum, and ended up going ahead of us.

That made the whale's lasers focus on them instead of us, but no matter how many of them were shot down, they kept going forward.

One after the other, they went ahead and took the laser fire in my stead.

“This is...” I whispered.

“Are they opening a path for us?” asked Nemesis.

A path. That had to be it.

The countless marionettes were using themselves to shield me from the lasers and to give me an opening leading to the whale.

“Dr... Mario...”

As one marionette burned to protect me, I looked at its head.

At that moment, I felt like I heard the word “Go.”

This was a vacuum, and the marionette was silent. But I had no trouble understanding that he was urging me keep going forward.

There was only one thing for me to do at this point.

“Nemesis! Silver! Let’s do this!”

“Certainly!” she called.

“Gh...!” agreed Silver.

Chapter Ten: The Warped Hope and the Shining Despair

Vesta

“Enemy count: 158,” Vesta said.

Vesta’s excellent enemy detection ability let it know the exact number of enemies approaching it. Then it intercepted them all with its lasers, starting from the closest one.

It also knew that there were two kinds of enemies. The majority, which were the wooden marionettes, could be shot down with just one laser, while the weak, incarnation-like entity absorbed all the lasers and continued to fall.

Still launching lasers, Vesta’s artificial intelligence processed the situation.

“Moving unit to evade the attackers.”

“Denied. Moving any more would negatively affect the Mutual Repairs with Acra.”

The Mutual Repair system installed in Acra-Vesta was the reason why Vesta constantly floated above Acra.

Most skills had their limits, and this one was no exception; it had a maximum range of about 300,000 metels. That was almost the exact distance between Acra and Vesta with Space Dilution active.

If either of them went beyond that, the repairs wouldn’t work anymore.

At this point in time, Acra had lost most of its legs, rendering it almost immobile, which, in turn, made Vesta unable to move, too.

It was also worth mentioning that Acra could no longer be fixed due to the attacks from Altar, but Vesta was the core of the matter right now.

The machine was faced with a dilemma.

It could either evade the enemies and lose its repair ability, or...

“Analyzing enemies...”

“Measuring mass...”

Vesta’s sensors looked for data they hadn’t looked at before and quickly concluded that the incarnation and the marionettes were far lighter than the fins Vesta was dropping.

Vesta could quickly fix the damage from the impact they would deliver, so it concluded that they would use something other than kinetic bombing.

“No explosives or explosive magic detected.”

That meant that this wasn’t a kamikaze attack of some sort, making it likely that it was either a hijack or simply a close-range attack. Upon reaching that conclusion...

“Enacting countermeasure.”

...it went for the kill.

◇◇◇

Prism Rider, Ray Starling

Using the opening created by Dr. Mario, we advanced towards the whale.

The lasers either hit the marionettes or were absorbed by Monochrome.

We single-mindedly accelerated to our target.

"It's only an estimated 40,000 metels away now!" Nemesis shouted, making it clear that we were at the home stretch now.

Silver started using the air around him to slowly break.

At the speed we were going, without breaking, we would pass the whale in the blink of an eye, not even giving me a chance to aim at it.

Monochrome's Shining Despair was fully charged, and all I had to do now was fire it. However, doing it from the top would endanger Quartierlatin, so I would have to fire at either its side or around a bottom area where there weren't many lasers.

We wouldn't have any problems reaching those spots. I'd found out just how good Silver was at descending in the Monochrome battle.

I was starting to feel pretty confident. "We're gonna make it..."

Suddenly, everything changed.

"Eh?" For a moment, I was completely lost about what just had happened.

Of course I was. After all, the whale, which had only been about as big as a pinky until now, *had suddenly become a gigantic wall right in front of me*.

"...!"

I quickly realized what had happened: *It had canceled the field*.

It had undone the field meant to protect it, instantly returning that vast distance between us back to normal.

The whale that had been off in the distance was now right in front of my eyes.

Though Silver had slowed us down, we were still going at the speed of sound.

In barely a moment, we would crash into the airship and quickly disintegrate.

The whale would sustain some damage, too, but it could easily fix itself.

It knew that our combined mass wasn't enough to completely destroy it, and that was why it had undone the field. That wouldn't cause much of a problem to it — it just had to activate it again after we crashed.

It had analyzed our and its own abilities and done the best possible move for the situation.

It felt like a proud demonstration of its abilities.

Time seemed to slow down as the impact was drawing closer, and we...



19XX years ago

Deep within an underground shelter, a man silently glared at a set of blueprints.

Though now bordering on elderly, he was none other than Flagman.

The once-renowned apex of craftsmen from the era that would eventually be known as the pre-ancient civilization was now hiding within an underground shelter and designing weapons all by himself.

He'd been doing nothing but working on weapons ever since the invasion of the incarnations.

Even after all was lost, he had shut himself in a shelter specialized to be impossible to detect, eating only preserved foods of his own design and drinking only water while doing nothing but

research, all day and night long, for the sole purpose of destroying the incarnations.

He'd already tried all the technology available while the pre-ancient civilization still existed. There were even some secret plants that had already begun automatically constructing the superweapons he'd designed.

However, he didn't think it was enough, and there was no better judge of that than him.

He knew better than anyone that he needed to use newer technologies that had eluded even him so far. Otherwise, he wouldn't stand a chance against those Infinite-class monsters.

Thus, he continued doing nothing but thinking of new weapons.

However, the look in his eyes made it clear just how drained he was.

The reason for this was his most recent failure.

Edelvalsa, the autonomous semi-bioweapon he'd created to defeat the Incarnation of Beasts, had unexpectedly fallen under the incarnations' influence and changed completely.

Because of that, he'd had no choice but to seal Edelvalsa away and rework most of his planned weapons from the basics.

It felt like rebuilding a collapsed tower, and it was draining both mentally and physically.

It had even made him wonder if all his effort was meaningless. Remembering that made his hands shake, either due to fear or madness — it wasn't clear.

He'd spent the last few decades doing nothing but thinking of weapons all by his lonesome. A normal person would've gone insane at this point, and perhaps he was already there.

“I need a change of pace...” he murmured.

Even that was something he hadn’t had in dozens of years.

He decided to design a unit as he desired. It didn’t even have to be a weapon. He simply wanted to invent something by letting his whims take charge — like he had back when he’d still had friends and companions.

That was when he discovered something in the warehouse.

“This is...”

It was a half-finished Prism Steed frame.

Having an excellent memory, Flagman instantly remembered why it wasn’t complete.

“Oh, it’s Thunder’s first frame.”

This was the original frame he’d started when he’d wanted to create a Prism Steed focused on the use of lightning.

However, during development, he’d realized that the material used for the frame was sub-optimal for the end result’s planned abilities, so he’d restarted and built a new frame from a different material, eventually constructing the Prism Steed now known as Gold Thunder.

“Guess I’ll try working with this,” he murmured.

Leaving the base frame as it was and changing only its functions, he would let his creative freedom take charge and lead it to completion.

Thus, he began working on it.

“This material is good for wind... No, then it’d be the same as Jade Storm.”

"Then I'll change my approach completely and try... this theory, maybe?"

"All I have so far is the torso... For the rest, instead of emulating some already-existing parts, I should use some new gimmicks..."

"Now this is interesting. Too bad I don't have Horse Riding or Riding. I'd need those to try it out."

While working on the frame, he made the exact same face he'd once made often — the face of a creative child proud of his work.

"All right. Done. But... what do I name it?"

Days and months passed, and Flagman eventually completed the Prism Steed. However, he couldn't find a name that would reflect its nature.

The Prism Steed that had wind as its power had been given the strong name of "Storm."

He didn't want to give that same name to a unit with different strengths and abilities, but he couldn't think of anything good.

"I'll breathe some outside air," he said one day, at last. "You come with me."

That morning, Flagman left the shelter for the first time in long while, taking the Prism Steed with him.

The atmosphere, the environment... everything was capable of sustaining human life, but the scenery had none of what he had created.

It was all nature, and no culture.

The civilization born with his intelligence as one of its pillars had crumbled and disappeared without a trace.

The genius silently looked at the scenery.

“Hm...?”

Suddenly, he felt the wind caress his side. The western wind, Zephyrus, was heading to the east.

He followed the invisible wind’s destination and saw a sunrise.

“Wind...”

Certain words came to his mind like a revelation.

“This unit is ‘Wind.’”

There was no need for exaggerated or strong names here.

“This is the wind that will, by its nature, blow towards the new dawn.”

This unit was designed in a way unlike any other, and the post-apocalyptic world reflected in his eyes was completely new to him. Thus, he decided to use a new, different naming system than he had used for any other Prism Steed.

This unit’s name was...

“Zephyrus Silver.”

Satisfied with the name, Flagman rubbed the mechanical steed’s face.

“Zephyrus Silver, I’m not giving you a mission.”

Flagman spoke to the final Prism Steed he’d ever created.

“Among all the things I have created, you’re probably the only one that’s free.”

Silver wasn’t just another weapon built to kill the incarnations — he was a manifestation of Flagman’s creative freedom, built simply because Flagman had wanted to do it.

“One day, when you get an owner... gallop through the world as you like,” he said. Surrounded by wind and nature, he pointed

towards the sunrise. “Join your owner and walk through the wind as you see fit.”



Over 1,900 years had passed since then.

The artificial intelligence installed in Silver remembered his creator’s words. And he realized... that now was the time to walk through the wind.

“■■■■■.”



Prism Rider, Ray Starling

We couldn’t comprehend what was suddenly happening.

“Wh...?!” I gasped in shock.

“What happened?” asked Nemesis.

I clearly remembered that we were about to crash into the whale and disintegrate.

However, that hadn’t happened.

In fact, we *were actually below it now*.

All the acceleration from before, the hull that was right in front of my eyes, the imminent impact — all of it was gone.

I had no idea why this was happening.

But I did know one thing: that there was no better time than now.

“NEMESIIIIIISSSS!” I shouted.

“I know!” She instantly changed into her greatsword form.

I swung the black blade into the whale’s armor right above me, shouting, “VENGEANCE IS MINE!”

It doubled and sent back all the damage from the lasers — even that absorbed by Monochrome and Nemesis in shield form.

“Lower hull, lost,” Vesta reported.

The hit wasn’t enough to destroy it, but the armor’s disappearance left its mechanical insides — including the engines — exposed.

At this point, I didn’t know which part was responsible for the Mutual Repair function.

“...I see it!”

Right as the opening I’d created was beginning to repair itself, one of the engines inside lit up.

The timing of that engine’s activation gave it all away — it could only serve one purpose.

Thus, I now knew where to aim.

“MONOCHROOOOOOME!”

Following my shout, the Black Warcoat unwrapped itself from Silver and went to my left arm instead.

The material took on a pipe-like form and grew wings like the ones that had once decorated the Void of the Black Sky.

My left arm had become a jet-black, winged cannon.

This feature might perhaps have something to do with the fact that I’d gotten it when I didn’t have my left arm. And though it was my first time using it, the shape made me know exactly what I had to do.

“OAAAGHH!” I roared as I pointed the cannon at the whale right above me, then felt immense energy gather at the end of my left arm.

All the light gathered by Monochrome was becoming condensed, compressed, and turned into an extremely powerful, all-consuming light. It felt like there was a small star forming in my hand.

The overflowing light made the entire Black Warcoat gleam with blinding intensity.

"Ray! She took care of the one on the ground!"

Hearing Nemesis's voice, I glanced down and saw some blue trails tear up the mechanical crab.

I'd told Azurite that there would be an intense light right as I was about to defeat the whale, so that was surely her doing. She'd timed the defeat of the crab with the impending doom of the whale.

That meant we could destroy them both.

"Turning right. Aiming lasers." With its lower hull still broken, the whale began tilting to the side. I was in one of its blind spots, so it was probably trying to put me in range of one of its laser cannons and take me out.

However, it was too late.

Right before I fired, I silently pondered about what Dr. Mario had told me last night.

The pre-ancient civilization had fought the ancient civilization and been thoroughly defeated.

This whale had been left behind by the pre-ancient civilization.

This and the crab below... everything within the ruins had most likely been built to become someone's hope.

Someone from the dying pre-ancient civilization had created these to be the hope of future generations.

Or perhaps this was a remnant of the creator's vision that had never come true, no matter how hard he tried.

The weapon must've been intended for use in battle against enemies, fighting for the goal of protecting the people.

But now, this hope had become warped.

It was trying to destroy the descendants it was supposed to protect.

And since I couldn't tolerate that... I would launch this skill.

"SHINING..."

Oh. Now that I think about it, this name is painfully apt.

"...DESPAAAAAAAIIIRRR!"

A shining despair to burn away the warped hope.

The cannon unleashed a light akin to the brilliance of a sun.

The pillar of light that'd once almost burned the entire village of Torne was now aimed for the heavens.

Releasing light and heat unmatched even by the UBM's skill of a similar name, the pillar of light pierced through the whale's insides, evaporating a number of engines, including the one responsible for the repairs.



Chapter Eleven: The End of a Hope

Acra-Vesta

The third anti-incarnation superweapon, Acra-Vesta, had spent 99.9 percent of its existence doing nothing but developing itself.

Following Flagman's ingenious blueprints, that development had continually imitated parts of the incarnation powers he'd analyzed.

Doing so was an extremely difficult task — even Space Fixation and Space Dilution had only been completed recently.

Like Zircon Leader, the supervisor unit of the facility, Acra-Vesta had spent most of the past two millennia doing nothing but preparing for the task.

Most of the past two millennia, but not all...



It happened shortly after Acra-Vesta's core, the AI block, was completed.

One of the facility's founding technicians and his son, who had taken shelter with him in the living quarters, were looking at Acra-Vesta through the transparent window.

"Dad, is that the thing that will protect us?"

"It is. Acra-Vesta will save everyone."

"Really?"

"Yes. Acra-Vesta is our hope. It will beat the incarnations and save the world."

To protect humanity. To eliminate the incarnations. Acra-Vesta knew those purposes were at the core of its being. Those purposes were what made Acra-Vesta their hope.

"When that happens, will we get to see Mom again?"

"Sure... When the world is at peace again."

The technician patted the child's head, then took the boy's hand, and they left.

Acra-Vesta continued using its sensors to watch as the child used his free hand to wave at it.

The boy came to watch Acra-Vesta's creation a few more times after that. But eventually, an alarm resounded throughout the facility.

[Incarnation of beasts, approaching.]

[To ensure the secrecy of this facility, all personnel and their families must leave and go to another shelter as soon as possible.]

An incarnation had appeared.

Despite the proximity of the enemy it had been created to fight, Acra-Vesta couldn't even move. Only its AI was complete, after all, and creating the rest of itself would take entire millennia.

[Please make your way to the surface.]

[I hope you all see each other in the shelter.]

Upon hearing the message resounding through the facility, Acra-Vesta's AI began calculating the likelihood that they could cross the surface, which was still being menaced by the incarnations, and make their way to the nearest shelter.

The chances turned out to be extremely slim.

It didn't know why, but Acra-Vesta watched the evacuation through the facility's cameras.

One of them showed a familiar child hop on a vehicle alongside his father.

The boy was waving.

Perhaps it was his way of saying goodbye to his brief home, or maybe he was waving at someone the camera couldn't see.

The gesture could've been directed to anyone — even Acra-Vesta.

Whatever it was, the child left the facility... and never came back.

After that, Acra-Vesta did nothing but bring itself closer to completion.

At the present time, it was still far from complete, but it had developed itself enough to fight, which turned out to be necessary, given the reappearance of the incarnations.

Acra-Vesta prioritized the elimination of the incarnations over all else.

Of course it did; that was the very reason why Acra-Vesta had been created, and why it'd spent the past two millennia developing itself.

But why was it necessary to destroy the incarnations?

The reason for that was...

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Prism Rider, Ray Starling

“It’s over, huh?” I murmured.

The Shining Despair had left the whale badly damaged.

It had pierced through the middle of its frame and evaporated all the engines within.

As a result of the destruction, the tail fin started to fall to the surface.

I was scared for a moment, but then I realized that the field was no longer active. The tail fin was as large as a few trucks, but it wouldn't deal nearly as much damage as the meteor-fin had before.

That meant I only needed to worry about Azurite and Tom, who were fighting the crab on the surface right below us, but I looked and noticed that they'd already retreated.

The tail fin reached the ground in no time, and though the sound it made as it hit the remains of the crab was very loud, it definitely didn't leave a crater.

However, there was something strange.

"What's that?" I wondered.

The remains of the tail and crab released a burst of some powder. It looked either white or silver from here.

I worried that something big was happening again, but it just stopped after creating a small mountain of the stuff.

"That reminds me of the time Brother Bear broke an inventory," Nemesis commented.

Yeah, the one that was full of wheat flour, I nodded. *I guess the inventories of the whale and crab broke. I have no idea what was inside, though.*

"Ray, more importantly..." Nemesis began.

"Yeah, I know."

The crab on the surface had been sliced apart, while the whale's frame had lost most of its middle, as well as its tail fin. Despite that, it was still active.

"You don't break easily, do you?" I commented.

Above me was the front part of the whale, still floating.

In fact, it had continued floating even after Tom and Dr. Mario had damaged it way more than this. Perhaps it had been designed to continue its functions even through extreme destruction.

But... it was clearly at its limit.

The whale had lost its back half, and I couldn't see anything undamaged inside.

And most importantly, it couldn't repair itself anymore.

It was as good as dead.

"It isn't firing any lasers, either," added Nemesis, and she was right — the laser attacks had completely stopped after my firing of Shining Despair.

Did it lose its weapons system? Or does it just not have the energy to fire?

Whatever the case, the front part of the whale was nothing but a floating object now.

"Do we finish it off?" asked Nemesis.

We probably should, I thought in response.

However, Shining Despair's charge was back at 0, and we'd already spent the damage Nemesis had gathered on Vengeance.

And with the Miasmaflame Bracers being unusable, all I could really do was slash at it. It'd be great if it'd just fall down like its tail had, but...

"Can't hope for that, huh...?" I murmured.

The whale slowly began moving.

I didn't know where it was heading, but its direction was the same as before — the south.

What was different now was the fact that it had lost the crab following it below, and it couldn't use the field skill anymore.

It can't bomb Quartierlatin anymore, so... Huh?!

"Hold on!" I yelled in shock as I realized something. "It's slowly going down!"

The whale was heading to the south while lowering its altitude. It looked like a plane getting ready for an emergency landing *in the middle of Quartierlatin*.

It couldn't use its kinetic bombing anymore, but a huge whale falling into a town was bound to cause some serious damage.

"Kh!"

I made Silver move right before the whale and used what little MP I had remaining in Gouz-Maise to create a Wind Hoof barrier, but the whale broke through it like it was nothing.

"Then we have to bring it down right here!" Nemesis cried.

"We can't! It's already above inhabited areas!"

I didn't have any means of destroying it anymore, and bringing it down would cause major casualties. Which meant that...

"Ray!" she shouted.

Silver and I went below the whale and tried to push it upwards, which caused great strain on my back and Silver.

I'll keep it at least a bit higher... and make it fall outside of Quartierlatin...!

"That's ludicrous!" Nemesis yelled.

But I can't just sit by and watch!

Dr. Mario's marionettes joined me in my effort to prevent it from falling on the town, but even then, it only slowed the fall a bit.

The whale continued towards Quartierlatin, and its large frame quickly approached a building.



Vesta

Even after suffering immense damage and losing Acra, its other half, Vesta didn't give up on eliminating the incarnations. It resumed going southward to do whatever it still could to further that cause.

However, it soon noticed the anomaly in its functions.

The propulsion engine it'd reactivated had been badly damaged, and running it for any longer would mean self-destruction.

Thus, it deactivated the engine and let inertia take over as it prepared for a landing.

It had lost a lot of important functions, but it could easily resume them after ceasing all operations and dedicating some time to repair itself.

Even without the integral Mutual Repair ability, Vesta, just like most of Flagman's weapons, could repair itself using a self-maintenance ability. The repair speed and quality would be far lower than that of Mutual Repair, but that wasn't a problem.

While Acra had no hope of recovering, Vesta could be completely restored in about a month or so.

Thus, to minimize the damage to itself, it decided to make an emergency landing in Quartierlatin.

The enemy from before was touching it, but Vesta didn't care, and simply continued going down.

After the emergency landing, it would have to prioritize repairing the lasers so that it could intercept any enemies coming near.

Admittedly the likelihood of it repairing itself completely was low, but even so, Vesta refused to give up on its base objective to eliminate the incarnations.

With a plan set, Vesta prepared for landing...

“Optical sensors captured new movement.”

But then something came out from the building it was going to land on.

It was no incarnation, and its energy signals were minuscule. Even so, it was an entity that happened to be caught by Vesta’s optical sensors — a young child.

The child was curiously looking up at Vesta as it fell from the sky.

There were seconds until impact.

The child probably couldn’t understand that he was in danger — he wasn’t even crying. Instead, he just raised his hand and, as if Vesta was nothing but a big doggy to him, *waved at it*.

Upon seeing that familiar motion, Vesta’s AI remembered something.

“Remaining propulsion engine, initiate at full capacity.”

Vesta reactivated the engine it had stopped.

“Raising altitude.”

Right as it was about to hit the ground, Vesta raised its front end and quickly regained height.

Unfortunately, making the near-broken propulsion engine work at full capacity accelerated its destruction.

“Engines disintegrating due to overload.”

The destruction didn't stop at just the propulsion engine. The energy running through Vesta's circuits began burning its own insides, creating small explosions and short-outs.

"Discovered an energy counter-current. Risk of explosion."

At this rate, Vesta would be destroyed from the inside. Once that happened, there would be no room for any maintenance, and the machine would be destroyed for good.

"Continuing propulsion at full capacity."

Even so, Vesta didn't stop its engines.

"Total engine damage: 87 percent."

As it accelerated, Vesta's large frame began spewing large bursts of flame.

"Destruction: inevitable."

It was too late to stop the engines now. Vesta would break, no matter what.

"Moving away from town area. Minimizing casualties from self-destruction."

Not even that was enough to stop Vesta from running its engine and increasing altitude.

It was as if that were its very role.

"Reassessing base objectives."

As it drew closer to the limit, Vesta began to question what it was doing. It took another look at its base objectives — the reason for its creation.

"Elimination of incarnations." That was its role as an anti-incarnation superweapon. The elimination of incarnations was the very reason Acra-Vesta had been created.

But why was it necessary to destroy the incarnations?

The reason for that was...

“To protect humanity—”





Prism Rider, Ray Starling

All of a sudden, the burden on my back became light.

I looked and noticed that the unit falling towards Quartierlatin was now rising once again.

As if mustering all of its final strength, it let out an engine sound akin to a whale's cry and continued to move up.

It eventually left Quartierlatin and arrived at the sky above the mountain from which Logan and his devils came... *and that was where it exploded.*

The blast was strong enough to tear apart the whale's large frame, and once it subsided, all that was left were small pieces of scrap, as well as an ash-like powder of a white or silver color.

The shockwave and the sound reached us a few seconds later.

That was the end of it.

The superweapon that had been sleeping in those ruins for two millennia had now entered eternal slumber.

It could no longer respond to anything.

No one would ever know why it had gone out of control or raised its altitude at that very last moment. But...

"Ray?"

"What is it, Nemesis?"

"Why are you crying?"

Nemesis's question made me realize that there was a tear going down my cheek.

"I'd like to know, too..." I murmured.

No one could know what its AI had been thinking.

However... I fully understood that it had spent its final moments protecting something.

Epilogue A: The Imperium

Zero General, Gifted Barbaros

“Ngh...?”

I woke up and realized that I’d lost consciousness. I couldn’t remember when, though. My memory seemed to be failing me.

Wait... My last memory before losing consciousness was the moment of the destruction of both Acra-Vesta machines, right before the moment the flying ship exploded.

That must have been the moment I’d passed out.

“Where am I?” I murmured.

At first, I thought I’d been caught by the kingdom, but that didn’t seem to be the case.

The light shaking around me made me realize that I was in a vehicle — a tank, apparently.

The continent was large, but the only country using Geists (the tank-type Magingears) was the imperium. Because of this, at first I assumed I’d been retrieved by the Barbaros tank division, but I soon realized that wasn’t the case.

The inside of this vehicle was nothing like that of the tanks I knew. It was far too large to be a Geist, so it had to be something entirely different.

If I have to guess...

“Ohh? Field Marshal. Ya up?” My thought was cut short. Someone replied to my drowsy question.

I looked and saw a man sitting at the control seat.

He was wearing an army uniform and had a cloak that made it seem like he was preparing to fight in the desert.

There was a cigarette in his mouth, and his unkempt beard seemed to purposely accentuate his jawline.

I knew this man.

"King of Chariots, Colonel Murdoch Martinez. Haven't seen you in a month."

"Yeh. Last time I saw ya was at the investiture."

This was one of the Superiors newly hired by Dryfe.

During his hiring, he'd insisted that his payment would be accompanied by his receiving the rank of colonel in the imperium's army.

Since we'd had an open seat among the military authorities, the imperator had suggested brigadier instead, but Murdoch had replied with, "Thanks, but nah, colonel's cooler." He was no doubt a strange man.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

"I'm on a mission. Not gonna hide it — I was told it didn't look good for ya, so I got sent to pick ya up."

"What?"

"Franklin reported that li'l Logan lost, so the imperator stepped up and gave me a direct order to pick ya up and take ya away from the heat 'cause yer important and all that. I'd say the kid didn't wanna lose an uncle, but what do I know?"

"I see..."

That seemed possible. It was no surprise that Franklin would know what was happening in Quartierlatin, and this man here had

the speed to get from Vandelheim to there in less than an hour; he had the fastest, strongest tanks in the world, after all.

I couldn't feel it inside the vehicle, but we were probably going at breakneck speeds. We'd be Vandelheim in just a couple dozen minutes.

With a quick glance, I turned around to look behind me. I couldn't see anything through the tank's wall, of course, but I was sure that Quartierlatin was just behind it.

"What's wrong? Oh yeah, I found your pricey-lookin' doll. It's inside."

Oh, so he got Faldreed, too.

"Or did ya forget somethin' else? Do I turn this thing around?"

Something I forgot? Well, I guess you could say that.

"It's fine... I'll go there myself eventually."

Once it was all over, I'd visit Quartierlatin and take my family with me.

"Fine by me. Gotta say, the town's a bit of a mess right now, but it's a nice place. Really green. I'd love to visit it after it recovers."

"I understand what you mean. However, you should keep in mind that they have a ban on public smoking."

"Ha ha ha! I'll remember that." Murdoch's cigarette shook as he laughed.

Imagining the moment I would return to the land where I was born, I also cracked a smile.



Three days later, Vandelheim outskirts, Triangle of Wisdom Headquarters

Early morning of the third day after the incident in Quartierlatin, Hell General, Logan Goddhart, barged into the Triangle of Wisdom headquarters with greatsword in hand and demons at his side.

“FRANKLIN! WHERE IS HE?!”

The Hell General’s face was warped in anger and hatred, and it was easy to see that he’d come here to get back at Franklin.

Needless to say, it was because the mad scientist had uploaded Logan’s defeat at the hands of a low-rank to the internet.

Right now, Logan was like a gun with an itchy trigger finger on it. It wouldn’t take much for him to sic the entire devil army upon the headquarters.

However, the Triangle of Wisdom members present didn’t seem all that concerned about that. They only said things like, “Ah, it’s His Excellency,” or, “Guess his death penalty’s over.”

For some reason, they also looked extremely sleepy. It didn’t seem like they’d just woke up; it was more like they’d been working on something all the way until dawn.

“BRING ME FRANKLIN!” Logan demanded.

“Oh, yeah... he told us to give this letter to you when you came.” The tian in charge of the clan’s official business handed it to him.

The letter contained only the words “I’m waiting for you here,” accompanied by some coordinates.

It was basically a challenge text.

“YOU’RE ON!”

Still livid beyond words, Logan hopped on a devil’s back and headed out to the given coordinates.

However, as he left, he suddenly noticed something.

What's this smell? he wondered for a second, but then shook it off, ignored the thought, and just took off to his destination: the Harhwinter Mountains.

"Hello!" called one clan member, logging in right as Logan left. "Whoa! This place is about thirty percent worse than normal!"

He saw lots of his clan members, all half dead from the all-nighter of work.

But then, it had to be noted that the clan's standards for normality were a bit warped.

"We've been doing lots of testing on this and that..."

"Ohh, you're making a new weapon? By the way, what's this weird smell? I feel like I'm net fishing near the sea."

It was a scent you wouldn't normally experience in Vandelheim, a landlocked city. It was a smell of pure sea water, and it was somehow permeating the entire Triangle of Wisdom.

One of the collapsed clan members pointed at a few large objects covered in barnacles and corals. "It's coming from that thing."

The silhouettes seemed like the limbs of a large reptile, but the azure color peeking out from beneath all the corals and barnacles made it clear that it wasn't of animal origin.

"What's that?" the clan member asked. "Where'd you get it?"

"The sea. Where else? Our leader salvaged it from the sea north of the continent."

"Eh? Didn't the imperium create a navy and start face-offs with Granvaloa...? I'm impressed he could go out into the sea."

That was month-old news in the imperium. Dryfe had started planning to expand to the sea, so they'd formed a navy and ended up

sparking tensions between them and Granvaloa, who owned a lot of the world's oceans.

"It's the other way around. The leader wanted to salvage this thing, so he had the big-shots in the government create a papier-mache navy just for that."

"Eh...?"

"While Granvaloa was distracted by the navy, the leader went off with some aquatic monsters to take this thing."

"Whoaa..." The clan member was thoroughly impressed by the level and scale of this distraction. "What is that, anyway? It's all covered in barnacles and corals, so I really can't tell..."

"A Prism Dragon."

"...A what?" He knew the term full well. Just about anyone in the Triangle of Wisdom did.

That was the name of a weapon type that had been used by the pre-ancient civilization during their final years.

They were said to be on the same level as Mythical UBM's, and many doubted whether the things had ever actually existed.

"You know the data we found in the ruins where we got Her Highness Claudiyah's Jade Storm? There was info on the appropriate location where the pre-ancient civilization lost one of the Prism Dragons, Lapis Lazuli Decimation. The leader used that data to go and salvage it, and, well, succeeded."

"Is this even usable?" the clan member asked.

"It was, apparently. It's been underwater for two millennia, but it was about ninety percent functional. Well, he's used it for parts, though, so it won't work now."

"Parts?"

"Yep. The limbs are all that's left, and we can use them for research and whatever."

Like he'd said, all that was left of Lapis Lazuli Decimation were the limbs.

It was as though everything else had been eaten...



To the north of Dryfe and the rest of the continent, there was an area called "Harshwinter Mountains."

It had a high altitude, thin air, and had awful temperatures below negative forty degrees Celsius. The area was made even more dangerous by all the monsters that lived here, many of which were stronger than the ones you'd find at the deeper levels of created dungeons.

This area didn't belong to any country. Theoretically, you could use it to travel between the east and west, but the number of people who'd succeeded at that could be counted on both hands.

Even now, there was a violent blizzard here that seemed to reject all humanoid influence.

Standing on top of one mountain, there was a Master wearing a lab coat. He obviously had a cold resistance accessory on him, but he definitely looked unprepared for this harsh climate.

Still, this man named Franklin seemed to be in a good mood as he waited for something within the blizzard.

"Ah, my boy's here," he whispered as he saw countless silhouettes appear at the base of the mountain.

That was Logan and his army of devils — which had already lost some of its numbers due to the severe conditions.

Logan hollered, “Found you, Franklin! What was the meaning of that?!”

“Whatever do you mean? You’re gonna have to elaborate, Your Excellency,” Franklin responded with a slightly mocking tone.

“That video! Why’d you upload that?! Because of it, I...!”

Logan broke off, seething at the memory that the video had displayed only his battle against Ray, making it seem like he’d lost against a newbie 1v1.

None of that could have happened without Veldorbell having destroyed vast quantities of Logan’s army and breaking Logan’s Brooch, but there was no way for viewers to know that.

Because of this, most comments either praised Ray or ridiculed Logan.

Logan’s infamy as a duel champion who fought only by summoning his Mythical devil made him pretty unpopular, so he was like the heel in wrestling — someone who pleased the crowd when he lost.

Whatever the reason, Logan couldn’t handle being the subject of ridicule.

“I’ll be frank — I was just observing Ray Starling to see if I could find a weakness,” Franklin said casually. “I really didn’t expect to capture that pure, grade A goodness... Kheheheh.”

He wasn’t lying about that. Franklin had continued to observe Ray even after Logan’s defeat. He’d even recorded the fight against Acra-Vesta.

However, Franklin had only uploaded the battle with Logan, because of a purpose that would become obvious soon.

“You... damn...! You’d better be ready for this! I’m about to crush you over and over! Just like you once did to some insect!”

"Oh yeah, I did do that once," Franklin said. "But you can't really pull it off with me, can ya?"

"Shut up! Devils, attack!"

Upon hearing Logan's order, the devils flew and closed in to Franklin to tear him apart.

There were even some of the Legendary-tier Gigaknights among them.

A non-combatant job like Franklin would surely die in less than a second.

"Nope. Can't even have a proper test with these."

However, the devils that were trying to kill Franklin all burst and died in the blink of an eye.

"...?!" Logan was speechless.

Missile-like objects had zoomed in from beyond the blizzard behind the mad scientist and blown up the devils approaching him.

Even Logan's cherished Gigaknights had melted in a beam-like light.

"I see!" Logan shouted. "You prepared a monster here! You unfair frick!"

"Ha ha ha! I'm wondering why you didn't expect something like this. Did ya seriously think I'd just stand here and die? That I wouldn't place a monster or two to protect me? Please."

There was something behind Franklin, densely veiled by the blizzard. Showing only its silhouette within the snow, the monster was making sounds that seemed to lie right between mechanical and animalistic.

“By the way, Your Excellency. About one of the reasons why I uploaded the video... Before getting yoinked outta the game, you’d already sacrificed your special reward, right?”

“What about it?!”

“You know what I’m getting at. You can summon the Mythical without sacrificing another one, right?”

That was correct. The points Logan had gotten from sacrificing a special reward were still there, even after the death penalty.

He’d failed to summon the Mythical in time against Ray, but he could do it now.

“You’re telling me to use a Mythical against *you*!?” Logan bellowed.

“Do it. Otherwise, you’ll be known as a scrublord who’s lost against both a newbie and a non-battle job. Just so you know, I’m filming this, too.”

“...! YOU’RE DEAD!!”

Logan went through the chant, ending in:

“CALL DEVIL ZERO EXCEED!”

He successfully summoned the Mythical devil. It was the strongest being under his command — the fearsome creature that had defeated the Celestial Knight, Langley, and brought him to the top of the duel rankings.

It had the appearance of a stereotypical devil — head of a goat, bat-like wings, and four thin legs. The most notable thing about its looks was its size, as it was a whole seventy metels tall.

All of its parameters greatly exceeded those of a Gigaknight, and all its stats except LUC were over 40,000.

It could even use spells that matched those of magic-based Superior Jobs, making it extremely versatile.

This was Zero Exceed, Logan's trump card.

"Boosted Devil Strength! Boosted Devil Endurance! Boosted Devil Agilityyyy!"

Logan buffed the devil even more, raising its STR, END, and AGI all to over 120,000.

"Behold! This is me at my strongest! I only lost against that weakling because I was caught off-guard! I'M STILL THE STRONGEST!"

"'Strongest'? But, dude..."

Franklin made a grin that seemed both wry and full of ridicule. His right eye shone blue as he ran his Analyzing Eye of Wisdom. He'd already finished analyzing Zero Exceed and knew its stats clearly. So he gave his extremely frank opinion.

"Those stats don't even reach Behemoth's. It's weaker than the King of Beasts, kiddo."

"...KILL HIM!" The words enraged Logan, and he set his trusted Zero Exceed on Franklin.

The Mythical devil's speed was twelve times the speed of sound, and it wasn't something a non-combatant job like Franklin could keep up with.

Even if Franklin had a Brooch and could transfer his damage to his monsters using Life Link, he'd get the death penalty in the blink of an eye.

That would be the natural outcome.

However, Zero Exceed's attack charge was stopped by a different gigantic creature.

"AGI's lookin' good," Franklin commented.

"...?!"

Logan couldn't see it in its entirety. This was because of the raging blizzard... and also because it was even larger than Zero Exceed.

What he *could* see was that the creature had a strange, lapis lazuli-colored head reminiscent of dragons.

The dinosaur... or kaiju... was a monster that seemed to be made of machinery.

"Wh-What is that...?" Logan sputtered.

There were two feelings swirling around within him: confusion because he didn't know what it was, and fear at the fact that it could match his enhanced Mythical devil.

"This is my MGD. The Mechanic God Dylan," Franklin replied with a smile. "He's my masterpiece. I completed him recently. The only problem I've found with him so far is that he's so perfect that it's hard to find a good enemy to test him on."

"...?"

"I'd originally designed him to be an anti-SUBM and anti-King of Beasts weapon, so half-assed test subjects just aren't good enough."

"...! Wait. You...!"

Logan finally realized why Franklin had uploaded that video, why he'd said that Logan's ability to summon Zero Exceed was one of the reasons, and why he'd provoked him to summon it. It was all so that Franklin could use Logan's Zero Exceed as a test subject.

"It's a secret weapon, so I can't use him in those duels you love so much," Franklin said pleasantly. "Man, you lost at the perfect time. It made it easy for me to resolve to use it, y'know?"

Those words felt both needlessly provocative and completely honest.

"I've gotta be as sure as can be about this. Ray Starling always exceeds my expectations. To crush him for sure, I need it to be at least powerful enough to beat an enhanced Mythical devil."

Franklin's words made Logan lose his.

It sounded as though Logan, a Superior, was just a test for Franklin to prepare to beat a newbie.

In fact, that was exactly what the mad scientist thought, and it made Logan boil with fury unlike any he'd had before.

"Don't look down on me, Franklin!" Logan screamed. "I'll tear apart that pile of scrap and make you regret ever making light of me! My Zero Exceed is above that pile of crap!"

Fired up, Logan ordered Zero Exceed to destroy the MGD, making the two monsters clash.

Watching over the battle, Franklin cracked a faint smile. "Well... they *do* have similar stats."

He spoke quietly, and Logan couldn't hear him over the blizzard and sounds of battle in any case.

"But that doesn't really matter here," Franklin murmured.

Those words were the very reason why the outcome of this battle was obvious before it even began.

Thirty minutes later, a single monster went down the Harhwinter Mountains, carrying its owner.

The creature with the lapis lazuli-colored head had lost its right arm. But that was the extent of it. It hadn't taken a single fatal injury during the entire battle.

Zero Exceed, on the other hand, had become particles of light and disappeared into the Harshwinter blizzard along with its owner.

Logan had witnessed his strongest creature be crushed right before his eyes, and then received the death penalty.

The battlefield had left the scar on the land — a giant hole in the mountain. It was akin to a grave.

Despite the lost right arm, Franklin was very satisfied with the MGD's performance.

"Even the loud brat can be useful sometimes, huh?" he said fondly. "I even got to test the Decimation Cannon."

He was especially happy to know that the two-millennia-old weapon he'd taken from Lapis Lazuli Decimation worked like a charm.

"The lost arm means there's room for improvement, though. I'll have to finish it up before the war. What's important is that it can win an equal battle."

Franklin began planning modifications, picturing the enhanced MGD completely crushing Ray.

The thought brought a smile to his face.

Epilogue B: The Kingdom

About Altimia

Ever since the war, Altimia had spent her days cornering herself.

After starting to run the kingdom in her father's stead, she'd also started losing herself in her harsh training as the Sacred Princess.

Whenever there was trouble, she'd hide her identity and go solve it herself.

Perhaps it was her way of atoning.

Though her father had been partially at fault for stopping her, she — despite being the kingdom's strongest tian — hadn't joined the battle for the kingdom, and that had led to the loss of many of her people, as well as her own loved ones.

She couldn't forgive herself for that.

She believed that things might've gone differently if she'd gone against her father's wishes and headed out to battle.

Thus, she wanted to stand at the forefront next time, protecting everything she'd failed to protect last time.

Azurite wanted to safeguard the country, its people, and her loved ones.

She wished to be like the first king, Azurite, the origin of the Altar bloodline.

That was why she used that name whenever she hid her identity. It was one of her names, and it represented what she wanted to be.

About a month ago, something major had happened in Gideon.

The infamous Franklin's Game.

Gideon, the place where her sister was, had been terrorized by Franklin, the man who'd killed their father.

It had happened right when Altimia was afflicted by an Epidemic.

Upon seeing the broadcast Franklin was projecting over the capital, she had found out what awful things were happening in Gideon and that her little sister had been kidnapped.

Azurite had instantly tried to hurry over there to save Elizabeth and to fulfill her duty as one who was supposed to protect the country from those menacing it.

However, the illness had made it impossible, and the retainers surrounding her bed had urged her to reconsider, so she'd stayed.

Overcome by despair, she'd cried over and over.

"Why can't I ever be there?! Why can I only watch as I lose my loved ones? I..."

If Gideon had been destroyed, if something had happened to her sister, the despair would've surely haunted her for the rest of her life.

However, there was someone who'd shattered her despair.

A Master.

A Master challenging a monster many times more powerful than him, one that had even been designed to beat him.

All ragged and torn, he had continued fighting the seemingly hopeless battle... and actually emerged victorious.

He'd put himself forward and erased the despair that was going to overcome Gideon.

Azurite could clearly remember him raising his right arm.

That was the moment when her distrust for Masters had started to warm into an equivalent trust for them... and the moment when a certain Master had left a mark on her heart and mind.

◇◇◇

Prism Rider, Ray Starling

With the whale's explosion, all the battles in Quartierlatin ended.

Once it was all over, I realized that the only surviving Masters were me, Tom, and the few that had helped the people find safety.

Some tians had been lost. The Hell General's devils had killed both knights and civilians alike.

It was tragic, but it wasn't like we hadn't gained anything here.

I was pretty certain that all the factions involved here had lost something.

That was probably why I felt less "victorious" and more "glad that this was over."

If there was one thing I'd gained here, though...

"These, huh?"

There were ten palm-sized inventories before me. I'd picked these up in the huge load of silverish, whitish powder I'd found in the mountain where the whale had exploded.

These inventories seemed to have a lot more space than the bag-like inventory I always used.

Looking inside, I found that they were full of the powder. Checking out the powder, the window only gave me the description of "Metal Particles."

I really need to consider getting Identify...

"For now, simply take the inventories," said Nemesis. "You can ask Brother Bear, Marie, or B3 about the powder."

"Yeah."

They were knowledgeable enough to know something about it, surely.

This made me realize how clueless I was about *Dendro* compared to a good chunk of my acquaintances.

"Ray." My thought was cut short by Azurite.

After the battle, she'd gone to visit Countess Quartierlatin, and now she was back.

"How was it?" I asked.

"Well, besides the fact that Tom Cat is gone, we don't have any problems."

"Tom's gone?" I really doubted that he'd gotten the death penalty. Had he logged off for some urgent business or something?

"Both the countess and the people from the inn we stayed at are unharmed."

"They are?"

Good to know, I reflected, and then remembered somebody else.

"Wait... What about Dr. Mario?"

"I haven't seen him, either. With the troubles here over, I imagine he's returned to the imperium."

I wanted to thank him for his help fighting the whale, but it looked like I'd have to save it for later.

"By the way, Azurite, should you really be walking around with your face exposed?" I asked.

She wasn't wearing her mask right now. Azurite was talking to me, out here in public, with her beautiful face out in the open. This meant all the passersby were staring at her.

"Ray... there is something I've wanted to tell you," she said.

"There is?"

Oh yeah, she'd almost said something before the whale and crab appeared. Was it that?

"Listen, Ray... My real name..." She looked at me with a serious face before gathering her resolve and continuing. "...is Altimia Azurite Altar. That is who I am."

"Oh, so your first name's 'Altimia.'" This was the first time I'd heard her full name.

"...That's it?" She looked dumbfounded.

"Well, I didn't realize 'Azurite' was your middle name."

Of course, a middle name meant that she had to be a big deal in the nobility. She had mentioned that she had Quartierlatin blood, after all.

Wait, hold on... She said her family name is "Altar..."

"Are you related to the royal family?" I asked.

Azurite stared at me with an indefinable expression. I couldn't tell if she was surprised, angry, or just at a loss for words.

"Ray..." Nemesis joined the exchange. "Isn't 'Altimia' the name of the first princess?"

"Ohh... So she has the same name as her, huh?"

"It's not just the name. She might be the real thing, don't you think?"

Ha ha ha! Don't be silly, Nemesis.

"A princess would never wear that shady-looking mask," I said. "Say whatever you want about everything else, the mask nullifies it all... Huh? Azurite? Why're you raising the sword?"

The next moment, Azurite hit me with the dull side of the azure sword.

BPHH!

"Realize it already!" she shouted. "You were so perceptive during the exploration and battle! What happened to that?! Do you have any idea how hard it was for me to reveal this?!"

She half-cried, half-laughed as she bashed me from a fair distance away.

What did I do to deserve this?!

"It's me! The first princess! The masked princess! The Sacred Princess! Altimia! So what if my mask makes me look shady?! I'll say it again — I don't want *you* to talk to *me* about fashion sense!"

That was enough for me to finally understand that she really was the first princess.

"Sorry for what I said about the mask," I said.

"You should be!"

"Can I ask one thing, though?"

"...What?" She looked at me like she was sure I was about to ask something about her mask.

That wasn't the case, though. It was much simpler than that.

"Azurite... what should I call you?"

"Eh?"

"You're the first princess, you know? Should I call you 'princess,' like I do Elizabeth, or 'Your Highness,' or something?"

After a brief moment of surprise, she sputtered a laugh. “Call me Al... no... ‘Azurite’ is fine. You don’t have to use any titles in non-official scenarios.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Call me that.”

“All right. I’ve got another question now.”

“What is it?” She looked at me curiously.

I extended my hand to her and asked, “Azurite... Can I cooperate with you?”

“Ah...”

On the night of our first day here, I’d told her that I’d appreciate it if she’d accepted any Masters who wanted to help. This was just a repeat of that.

A Master was presenting the first princess of the kingdom with the same question as before.

So this was less of a question and more of a request for an answer.

With my hand still extended, I waited for her to make her choice.

“Back then...” She closed her eyes and seemed to be remembering something as she began talking. “When we fought the weapons that came out to the surface, I defeated the one on the ground, while you bested the one in the sky.”

“Yeah.”

“But I’m certain that you couldn’t have beaten the one on the ground, and I couldn’t have touched the one in the sky.”

“That’s true.”

"I can stand on the front lines, but there are things I can't protect by myself. However..." She smiled. "I believe there are things I can protect if I stand side-by-side with you... with Masters."

She extended her right hand.

"I'll be counting on you, Ray."

"Yeah. Let's get along, Azurite."

We shook hands.

◇◇◇

A week after the incident in Quartierlatin, the first princess made a kingdom-wide announcement.

She said that was seeking the Masters' help in the many challenges the kingdom would face, including the war with the imperium.

Some were confused about what had caused this change of policy, but in the end, both tians and Masters alike accepted it.

Though the specific measures weren't happening yet, a gale of hope swept throughout the kingdom.

Epilogue C: The Ancient Ones

???

“Gurmalkin?”

“It’s ‘Grimalkin,’ Master.”

“Grewmalkin?”

“Grimalkin.”

“It’s so haaard...”

“Then call me whatever you want.”

“Can I?”

“I just hatched, but I am your Embryo.”

“Then... Tom!”

“...Now that one is really simple.”

“I think it’s cute.”

“Isn’t it a bit too... normal?”

“It’s fine! Tom is Tom now!”



Cheshire woke up.

“A dream, huh?”

A side effect after using his real body was a cooldown period which caused him to experience something similar to human drowsiness.

Right now, Cheshire wasn’t in the dream, but in a work space that he’d grown tired of seeing a long time ago.

"It's been so long, yet I remember so clearly."

He heaved a sigh.

Cheshire had many names.

His official title was "Infinite Multiplication, Grimalkin."

His name as a control AI was "Cheshire," and like the others, based on a character from *Alice in Wonderland*.

His name as the third major force that had fought to prevent the ultimate battle between the King of Kings and the Draconic Emperor two generations ago was "Schrödinger Cat."

Besides those, he also had fake names like "Stray Cat" and "Wild Cat."

However, the name "Tom" was especially important to him.

It was just an alias, but he'd received it from his Master.

Out of sentimentality, he'd chosen that name for his identity as the developer-side Master at the top of the kingdom's duel rankings.

"I'll go take a look," he murmured to himself.

He left his work space and went somewhere else.

He was currently in control AI territory... the place that the pre-ancient civilization had given the apt — but not completely right — name of "Extra-Continental Vessel."

Cheshire moved before the door leading to its deepest part and stopped.

The door before him was like a bulkhead door to a nuclear shelter, except more complex and a whole lot larger.

Though he was already in a space that only a control AI could enter, this place was even more secure than anything else here. It seemed to reflect its solemnness.

It was protected by the Red King — who could control space — and the Rabbit — who could control time. With multiple Infinite Embryos guarding it, no one had any hope of going inside.

Thus, even Cheshire had to request that the supervisor let him through.

“Number 0, can you let me in for a moment?” he asked.

“Access granted.” He instantly got approval. The voice was the same as the one that had responded to Cheshire’s request to use his real body in the ruins.

Soon, the complex mechanisms slotted out of place as the bulkhead slid and opened up.

Cheshire slightly nodded and went inside.

He looked around silently.

It’s the same, he thought. Of course it wouldn’t change.

He was looking at a certain object.

It was a large, star-like sphere orbited by thirteen other bright, planet-like spheres.

No, that wasn’t entirely right.

The central sphere was surrounded by thirteen spheres that shone, as well as one that emitted no light.

“How long will it be until that one lights up?”

His whisper was full of several complex emotions.

He’d spent too much time on this to be able to put those emotions into words.

Of course, it was absolutely certain that the time it would take for the last one to light up would be nothing compared to the time he’d spent waiting and working.

"We're at over half already... so even at the longest, it won't be more than five years."

Thinking about what he... no, they... were waiting for, he heaved another sigh.

"I hope it's someone I see as worthy... No."

He slowly shook his head and turned around.

"Maybe it will be the same, no matter who it is."

With those incomprehensible words as his last, Cheshire left the room.

Even after he left, the fourteen spheres continued to orbit the large one in the middle.

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Ruins, living quarters, great hall.

The ruins at Quartierlatin were being investigated by the kingdom and the Masters they'd hired.

However, the ruins seemed to be focused mostly on the material storage and the research and production plant. To them, the living quarters were secondary, if not tertiary.

Thus, the great hall Ray had visited on his second day in Quartierlatin was completely empty right now.

Some investigators had come here, but all they'd done was take pictures of the painting, like Ray had, and gather all the scattered Prism Soldier parts.

The piece of art on the wall had been slightly burned by the lasers used in the battle against Tom Cat.

The burns had mixed with the colors of the artwork, and it looked they had been that way from the start.

If you strained your eyes, you could see some text there.

Unlike most of the writing on the piece of art, it was written by hand, rather than burned into it, so the burns made it especially hard to notice.

It said, “With a prayer for restoration, I lay hope to sleep in this mountain.” Those words were accompanied by a name.

It was the signature of the one who’d written it, the man in charge of the facility — the great craftsman Flagman himself.

This facility had many things with his name on it, so it wasn’t special in that regard.

However, this one was a bit different than the others.

While his title on most of them was “great craftsman” or something similar, this one had his role — his job.

It wasn’t known why this artwork alone had his job on it, but Flagman’s job was considered to be one of the mysteries of the pre-ancient civilization, and it was solved right here.

The small text next to his name said just two simple words:

Arch Sage.

To Be Continued in the Next Episode

Afterword



Cat: "Time for the afterwoord! I'm the 'Cat,' Cheshire! I haven't been here in a while!"

Xun: "I'm XunyU, and I'm surprisEd this guy cAn come here after *that mAin story.*"

Fox: "I was wondering how to talk with him around, but it looks like I didn't have to worry. Oh, and I'm the 'Fox,' Tsukuyo Fuso."

Bear: "Well, the af-ter-word *is* a law-less waste-land, af-ter all."

Xun: "Hm?"

Bear: "I am the 'Bear,' Shu Star-ling. I have not been here fur a long time, al-so."

Fox: "I know that, but... why are you talking all stiff?"

Cat: "Yeah, and why is your suit all metallic?"

Xun: "Yeah, you're likE a mech rlight now. Or just an animAted hunk of scrAp, really... Wait."

Bear: "Yes. Pre-cise-ly. I am now... an-i-ma-ted."

Cat: "Are you about to...?"

Bear: "PREBEAR YOURSELVES, FOR THE *DENDRO* ANIME IS HEADING INTO YOUR TV SCREENS!"

Xun: "He actUally did it... He stOle the announcEment!"

Cat: "With a crappy pun and set-up, tooo."

Fox: "He said this place is lawless, but there are limits, right?"

Bear: “Mecha suit off! Back to the one I bear-long in!”

Fox: “Oh, so it really was a suit.”

Bear: “Yep. And just so you know, that announcement was something the author’s always wanted to do.”

Xun: “It wAs?”

Bear: “There are things that can only be said once in a lifetime. It’s basically like shouting ‘WOO HOO!’ at the beary top of the mountain.”

Xun: “It doesn’t seEm like that at all...”

Cat: “Anyway, yeah, we’ll have an anime noow. You can read more about it laterrr!”

Xun: “As in... whEn?”

Cat: “Thanks to how many pages we got for this volume, we have a much bigger afterword this time. That’s why we dedicated more space for the author’s own words.”

Xun: “So that’s whAt the ‘Afterword (Characters)’ is about, hUh?”

Bear: “We got a double afterword to cele-bear-ate the anime. You just can’t beat us!”

Fox: “Is that really the right thing to dedicate more pages to?”

Cat: “Volume 9 was really looong...”

Bear: “And had more battles than any other...”

Cat: “But there will be a 180 from the other ones, since it will be pretty peaceful for Ray.”

Xun: “Really? A relaxed *Dendro* volume? That’s rare.”

Cat: “You’re getting it wronnng.”

Xun: “Hm?”

Cat: “It’s only peaceful for Ray and everyone around him.”

Xun: “...Suddenly, the volume sounds the opposite of relaxed.”

Cat: “Anyway, I guess it’s time to announce it. I worked hard in the main story, and I haven’t done this in a while, so I will be the one to...”

???: “I am a bad ████████. Therefore, I am stealing this announcement... Volume 10 is set to come out mid-2019!”

Cat: “Wh-What...?”

Bear: “He slipped in here from the next volume!”

Fox: (This is sooo familiar.)

???: “Now, let us meet again on volume 10.”

Xun: “Huh? The afterword’s gettin’ even more characters?”

Dearest readers, thank you for purchasing my work. I am the author, Kaido Sakon.

As you may already know from the cover and the earlier afterword, *Infinite Dendrogram* is getting a TV anime.

Having your work adapted into an anime is an important milestone for all light novel authors, and I couldn’t be more overjoyed that *Infinite Dendrogram* and I have made it this far.

This certainly couldn’t have been done without support from all of you.

When the first volumes were coming out, I was always worried about the possibility of cancellation. It’s an industry with hundreds of books coming out every month, after all. Not all can survive, and it wasn’t unlikely that my work wouldn’t make it.

However, with all of your support, *Dendro* has made it this far, and I couldn't be more thankful for that.

Since I have about eight more pages for the afterword, and since it's a good opportunity in general, I would like to look back at and tell you more about how things were during and after publication. Consider it a post-volume mini-essay extra, of sorts.

The first volume of *Dendro* was released in the year 2016. Around the release, there was a marvelous event titled "The Great *Dendro* Festival," in which many artists made art to help spread the word and support *Dendro* (you can still find this art on the series' official website.)

As you certainly know, the one hired to work on the illustrations for these novels was Taiki, and his art is simply out of this world. Then, at the end of the Great *Dendro* Festival, it was revealed that Kami Imai himself would provide my work with the best manga adaptation imaginable.

To be honest, I was being a bit too optimistic back then. At the very least, I probably thought that stability was guaranteed. But then I looked at the sales. They weren't bad at all, but personally, I was worried if they really matched the backing it was getting.

Did my work really live up the hype?

Did my novel really match the excellent conditions it was provided?

What if I still wasn't good enough?

What if it was canceled after the first volume?

A lot was bothering me back then, but after the editor, K, told me that the second volume sold about ninety percent of what the first did, those worries slightly relaxed.

I also realized that it was better to work than worry, so I simply took to improving the light novel releases, writing the exclusive short stories, and uploading new web novel parts.

That was when I was writing the extreme, tumultuous Gloria side story. Look forward to it in volume eleven!

That reminds me... At the end of 2016, I was talking to K by phone, and he said he would go around Comiket to say hi to the illustrators.

"Will there be *Dendro* doujins or something?" I asked.

"Light novels need anime adaptations to get those," he replied.

"Ohhh, right."

"Doesn't look like *Dendro*'s getting one anytime soon."

"I know, I know..."

At this point in time, an anime was nowhere in sight.

New Year's passed, and it was now 2017.

This was a very great year for *Infinite Dendrogram*.

The sales of the currently released volumes kept steadily increasing, and then some big things happened.

First, *Dendro* won first place in BookWalker's New Light Novel Awards. Then it won third place overall, and second place for new entries in its category on the "This Light Novel is Amazing!" awards.

Thanks to these awards, *Infinite Dendrogram* became more popular than ever. The older volumes received reprints, while the newer ones were now selling enough for me to feel completely safe.

This was nothing if not fortuitous, and I am certain it couldn't have happened without support from both the readers and the publication team.

Thanks to this, at the end of this year, I was a lot more relaxed than the last.

That was when I got a call from K.

“Can you talk right now?” he asked, like he always did, before getting straight to the point and dropping this bombshell:

“We’re getting an anime.”

Talk about a surprise. I thought my heart was about to leap out of my chest.

Since 2017 had been such a good year for *Dendro*, I had mildly hoped that we would get one next year, and here it was coming before 2017 even ended. I felt like I’d teleported right next to it before I could even see it.

K likes such surprise attacks. He did this when he got Kami Imai on the manga, too. Heartstoppers like these can kill a man. It’s in the word. If that ever happens, I hope it’s after I’ve completed *Dendro*.

With that revelation, my relaxed end of the year became one of excitement and nervousness.

So came the year 2018.

If I had to sum it up in a couple words, it would be the “Year of Preparations.”

Now, in addition to helping with the light novel, checking the manga, and putting out new web novel parts, I also had to work on the anime.

My first job was to provide name lists, character descriptions, key design features and other materials for them to work with.

My second job to check the scripts, pick and choose the most important dialogue lines, shorten the longer ones, and add any depictions I felt were necessary.

I recall being surprised by how quickly anime scripts are made. The script wasn't the only thing I was involved with — I also had a part in the art direction.

I remember looking at what they gave me and thinking things like, "So this is what noble mansions in Altea look like, huh?" It will probably influence how I depict the city in writing.

Everyone on the staff was putting a lot of effort into their work, and I really thought that *Dendro* as a whole was blessed with the best people.

Now, no anime is proper without voice actors. Since I myself am primarily an anime watcher, rather than a creator, I know next to nothing about this and just assumed that they would be picked by the experts.

That was when I got another call from K.

"We're holding auditions for the main cast. Come participate."

That was when I concluded that his calls could only ever be about two things: deadlines or bombshells. I feel like one day he'll go full zabaniyya on my heart.

And that's how I ended up being one of the judges in the auditions.

Upon seeing the list of people who'd participate, I went, "Eh?! There are so many big names...!" and my heart almost leapt out of my chest again.

There were two major auditions, and I took part in them both. In both cases, I took a bullet train to Tokyo first thing in the morning, and both auditions lasted until there were no more bullet trains to take me back. The schedule was harsh, but overall, I'm two hundred percent fulfilled and satisfied I was part of it.

I had to check live vocal performances in the auditions, then return home to re-check the voice recordings, as well as check the submissions from those who couldn't make it due to tight schedules. I was doing nothing but checking all day long, but it was a fun experience you don't get every day.

I also realized that different people read the same lines differently and with varying emotions. That is something I now consider when writing, and I appreciate that.

Also, I found out that picking the voice actors for monotone characters is actually really hard. I feel like I had the most difficulty judging auditions for Cyco (who's showing up again in the next volume, by the way).

In case you're wondering, the second in difficulty — though in a completely different way — was Babi.

The auditions passed, and at the point of writing this afterward, the main cast and Franklin have already been decided.

I am so happy with the casting that I've been excited about it nonstop since last year.

I don't know whether they're revealed yet, so I won't write them here, but I'm sure you, dear readers, will know what I mean when you see them.

By the way, one day after the auditions, K called me again.

"By the way, about the one doing the BGM..."

Yes, he attacked my heart even from that angle. That was how big of a shock it was. I feel like everything I'm writing about K has to do with surprises and my heart, but that's just how it is.

Anyway, those have been my days since the release of the first volume until now.

There are still lots of things I can't mention, but rest assured that the people involved in the anime are great. I can hardly wait for it myself.

Oh? What's this? Another call from K?

"Hey, about that deadline and the anime exclusives..."

HA HA HA. What a double punch.

Anyway, it seems like 2019 will be even busier than 2018 for me. But just like everyone involved with the anime is working so hard, I will also use my writing to make the most out of *Dendro*'s once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

I thank you all for giving me the chance to go all-out, and I intend to continue doing my best.

Please continue supporting *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Sakon Kaidou

Bonus Short Stories

Covert?

WARNING: Contains spoilers. Please read after volume 9.

A certain day of a certain month, Royal Palace

A few days before the incident at Quartierlatin...

“This is a job for Azurite,” declared the kingdom’s first princess and acting ruler, Altimia Azurite Altar.

Those were her first words, upon hearing about the ruins that had shown up in Quartierlatin.

This was a declaration that she would hide her identity and go investigate it herself.

If she hadn’t been alone in the room, the other person would surely have pointed out that using your actual first name wasn’t smart if you wanted to hide your identity.

However, if she used a fake name, someone with a high level Truth Discernment skill would sense it, so just using her middle name was actually safer for covert action.

There was also the fact that Azurite was a fairly common name here in the kingdom. As the name of the first king, a man who’d risen from shepherd to sovereign, many commoners gave that name to their children in the hopes that they would be at least a bit as successful as he was.

Nobles, however, avoided using it due to respect for the royalty.

“If I take care of the necessary verdicts ahead of time, things should be able to run without me.” Altimia checked all the relevant

political affairs and confirmed that everything would be fine without her. "I also need some equipment."

Since she would be acting covertly, she obviously couldn't wear her regal clothing. Her best equipment, the highest quality forged dress armor, also wasn't an option. She needed something that wouldn't stand out in a city and came with decent stats, which led to her choosing light swordswoman clothing. It was a good quality product that wouldn't draw much attention to her.

However, that did nothing about her most prominent feature: her face.

Altimia believed that every single person in the kingdom would be able to recognize her by her visage.

Infinite Dendrogram was a primarily a fantasy, but it had both newspapers and cameras. There were photos of her face everywhere, and there was even a clan which doubled as her fan club.

Hiding her face was an absolute necessity.

"I guess I'll have to use this again," she muttered as she equipped a mask.

She'd prepared it for situations such as this, and it even had an anti-Reveal effect. However, the design was such that it only hid the upper half of the face, which made her look quite shady. Anyone who'd wear something like this anywhere except a masquerade would be considered suspicious.

"Perfect. No one will suspect a thing."

Sad as it was, the princess, lacking in worldly knowledge in some regards, had no clue regarding the odd nature of her appearance.

Thus, Altimia went on her covert(?) operation to investigate the ruins in Quartierlatin.

Soon afterwards, she met Ray Starling and was faced with a terrible situation where her appearance was seen as shady as his.

The End

The Lynx's Monetary Affairs

WARNING: Contains spoilers. Please read after volume 9.

A certain day of a certain month

“By the way, what do you think Tom spends his money on?” Bishmal, the seventh in the duel rankings, asked during a post-spar lunch meeting.

The other participants were Riser, the seventh in the rankings, as well Ray and Nemesis.

It was common for duel rankers to eat something together after sparring. Others who tended to participate included Juliet, the fourth in the rankings; Chelsea, the eighth in the rankings; and even Figaro.

Ray wasn’t in the rankings, but since he sparred a lot, he often ate with the rankers, too.

“Tom?” Ray repeated.

She was referring to The Lynx, Tom Cat. The ex-dueling champion who’d lost his throne to Figaro and gone on to defend the second spot with his fearsome cloning ability. He was a man of mystery.

“He’s gotta have a lot of money, right?” Bishmal asked. “But I never actually see him spending it on anything.”

Not only did Tom make impressive amounts of money from his dueling awards, he also ran a few revolutionary establishments in Gideon, such as the maid café. There was no doubt that he was rich, but no one ever saw him actually use his wealth.

"Munch munch... Isn't he just buying new equipment?" asked Nemesis.

"No... As far as I know, he hasn't changed his equipment even once," answered Riser, a true veteran player. "He never changes his equipment or the weapons wielded by his clones."

"You seem to know a lot about him."

"I was one of those who tried to surpass him and become the duel champion. I never won against him, though."

The top three in the rankings could only be challenged for their rank by those who were directly below them. To challenge Figaro, the current champion, you would have to defeat Tom, the second in the rankings, and take his place.

"Speaking of money, I once saw Tom enter a money exchange place," Ray said.

Everyone else was perplexed. "Money exchange?" they asked in unison.

In *Dendro*, where there was only a single currency, a money exchange business was simply a place where you would exchange your coins to make them easier to use. You could get hyper-expensive coins for big purchases, or cheaper coins for smaller ones.

They all wondered why Tom would go to such a place, finally coming to the conclusion that he must have been planning to buy something expensive.

"This is your first moneeyyy. Five silver coins worth a total of 5,000 liiir. An onigiri costs about 10 lir, by the waaayyy."

In a study-like area, which was the character creation space, a white cat was handing a new player some money while giving him an explanation.

The white cat was Cheshire — one of the control AIs, and the true form of Tom Cat.

He was giving the new player five silver coins. It was the amount that each and every player received, and all of the money came from Cheshire's work as Tom Cat.

It was his own earnings that he exchanged into mere silver coins.

Control AIs could simply create the money, but they preferred to reuse the money already in circulation to prevent a collapse of *Dendro*'s economy.

Speaking of control AIs and money, Mad Hatter — the item control AI — earned more than Cheshire purely due to his gacha machines, but all of that money was moved to drops and created dungeon treasure chests.

While *Dendro*'s control AIs may have been operating the most immersive and realistic VRMMO experience around, it was important to note that they also partook in simple moneymaking activities.

The End



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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 9

by Sakon Kaidou

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