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Infinite
Dendrogram

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16. The Tartarean
Possibilities



*Emily, heedless
of the chaos
around her,
swiftly
began her
slaughter.*

**"Minus,
minus,
minus..."**

**"Gh...!
Target those
with more than
10,000 and
restart!"**

Character

Ray

Ray Starling / Reiji Mukudori

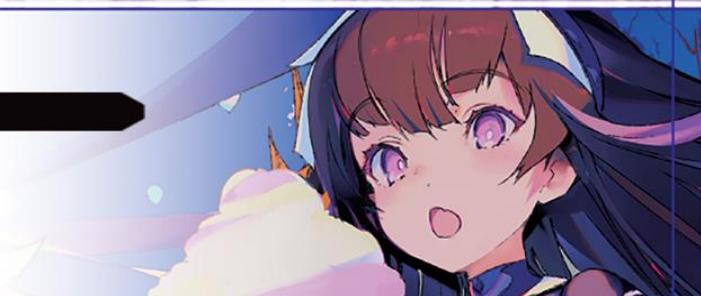
A college freshman who gets caught up in various incidents within Infinite Dendrogram. Though he is generally mild-mannered, he has a strong will that causes him to fight for his goals and never give up on them.



Nemesis

Nemesis

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



Hugo Lesseps

Hugo Lesseps/Yuri Gautier

An ex-Dryfian Master. He left the country and went on a journey, during which he happened to be caught by Ace, ARI-CA and was forced to become her disciple. A girl in real life, she is also Franklin's younger sister.



Cyco

Cyco

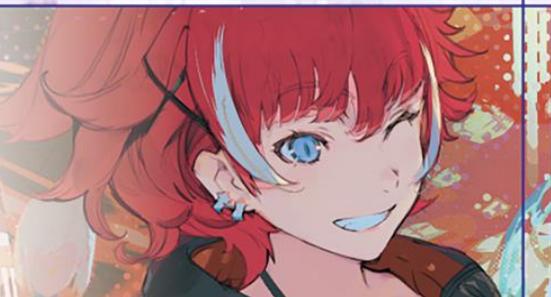
A Superior hailing from the Huang He Empire. Presently assigned to protect Prince Canglong. Their duelist ranking is exceptionally high, and they once contributed to the death of a SUBM.



ARI-CA

ARI-CA

A Caldinan Superior, also known as the "Blue Sky Songstress." She has an artificial eye Embryo that lets her see danger and holds the Superior Job, Ace, which she uses to ride her flying, singing Magingear, Blue Opera. ARI-CA swings both ways and never misses a chance to make a play at anyone she finds attractive.



Prologue: Another Started Game

March, 2044, ???

With my exam season over, I finally got the chance to start playing *Infinite Dendrogram*.

The game came out while I was in my third year of high school. All my friends who really wanted to pass, including me, weren't exactly crazy about the timing.

To make it worse, all of our friends who'd already given up on exams or were set to inherit their family businesses regardless had picked up the game right away — and they had plenty of fun stories of their time in-game to bother us with.

Determined to play only *after* I'd passed, I fought the urge. I focused solely on my studies, finished the exams...and then, I finally got the gear I back-ordered and logged in for the first time today.

"It really *is* realistic... The wind is so hot."

For my starting point, I chose the country called "Caldina."

It was a merchant nation in the desert. The dry winds rolling in from the dunes tickled my skin with such detail that it felt real, even though I'd never been to a desert before.

The city I appeared in was a "City of Commerce" called "Cortana."

The main thoroughfare had many stalls lined up on both sides, all filled with merchants enthusiastically hawking their wares.

As big and populous as this city was, though, it wasn't actually the capital of the country.

The cat that had helped me with character creation told me that new Caldinian players started in Cortana instead of the capital because

the strength of the monsters around the capital tended to fluctuate a lot, for various reasons.

That seemed to make sense. Right now, I was level 0 without a single job. If they dumped me right into an area swarming with powerful monsters, I'd be softlocked.

Speaking of which, I really needed to choose a job and start leveling up already.

The "Embryo" I was told about still hadn't hatched, though, so I decided to leave the job-picking for later and just enjoy the sights for now.

Cortana had a very *Arabian Nights* feel to it, reminiscent of various picture books and animated movies I'd watched when I was little.

The bazaar was as lively as it was colorful, and among the goods on display were many magic items that caught my eye. Unfortunately, the five pieces of silver given to me by the receptionist cat — 5,000 lir, apparently — weren't nearly enough to buy even a single one of those.

All I could afford was the food, so I got myself some skewered meat of unknown origin, along with some fried snacks.

The taste was about as real as it could get, and though I personally would've preferred if it was all a bit sweeter, it was perfectly fine for eating while walking.

Doing this made me feel less like I was playing a game and more like I was actually touring a foreign country.

...Honestly, I still had trouble believing that this really *was* a game — even after being online for a whole hour.

The environment I perceived with all five of my senses and the merchants who sold me that food all seemed like the real thing.

When did technology advance *this* far?

“...Huh?”

I suddenly realized that I’d wandered into an empty part of the city as I was lost in thought.

Desolate and silent, this place was nothing like the lively road I was just strolling down. Looking around, I saw nothing but decrepit buildings crammed together as close as possible.

It was astounding how different two sections of the same city could be.

“Hm...?” As I walked around, I caught something out of the corner of my eye.

In the tight space between two buildings near the entrance, there was a little girl sitting with her back against the wall.

Just at a glance, I could tell that she was abnormally thin. In fact, even the refugee children I saw on the news some time ago looked healthier than she did.

There was no one nearby — no family or anyone else.

She was just sitting with her back against the wall.

Without a word, without any sound at all, she turned her head slightly to look at me.

No — not at me, but at the bag of snacks in my hand.

I’d found those snacks rather bland... But oh, how the mere sight of them seemed to draw her hungry gaze.

She raised her twiglike arm and reached towards me. But she lacked the strength to even get up, and the way her little hand shook made it clear just how empty that movement was.

That tiny gesture, her fragile little action, made my heart want to burst out of my chest. It was a tight, emotional kind of pain.

“I-I’m so sorry! P-Please, take them!” Those words escaped my mouth as I approached her.

That girl was the most tragic thing I’d ever seen in my life. I tried to think about her, this situation, about what I was doing right now or should’ve been doing — but my thoughts were nowhere, letting my words and body take charge.

I was unable to ignore her, to leave her like this, so I approached and presented the bag of snacks.

She reached for it and tried to put her hand inside, but she missed every time she fumbled for it.

“I’ll feed it to you. Here...” I took a snack and gently brought it close to her face.

She slowly opened her mouth. She tried to chew. And then, she fell still.

“...Huh?” The snack fell out from between my fingers and rolled across the ground.

Sensing that something wasn’t right, I hesitantly reached for her cheek.

And that was enough for her malnourished body to slowly collapse to the side...and she made no attempt to get up again.

“...Huh?” She wasn’t moving. Not an inch.

She’d just fallen asleep, I rationalized. Surely that was it.

But her eyes were open.

The light had just gone out of them.

Grains of sand blew along the ground, but not a single grain near her mouth or nose was moving.

I stood there and stared in disbelief...and before long, an ant crawled along her face, to no reaction whatsoever.

“Ah... Ah...?” I touched her withered wrist...and felt no pulse.

This complete stranger. This innocent little girl... She had starved, faded...and died right before my eyes.

Chapter One: The Poisonous Oasis

Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

Early August, 2045.

A month of *Dendro* time had passed since I moved away from my sister and friends in my starting country of Dryfe. Three weeks had passed since Teach — Ace, AR-I-CA — got me involved in her quest to find the Treasurebeast Orbs.

Since then, I'd done some desert crossing and ruin raiding; since I'd maxed out High Pilot, I had switched jobs to Armored Pilot.

And now, having retrieved the first Orb in Hermine, we'd moved to the City of Commerce, Cortana, where we would supposedly find the second one.

The title of this city was well deserved. Full of shops and bazaars, it was quite wealthy even by Caldina's standards. It was as though Gideon's fourth district had been spread out to the size of a city.

"Well, I suppose it wouldn't be weird for strange objects like the Orbs to end up in a city like this...but imagine what kind of trouble it'd bring." I vocalized my worries as I gazed at the street outside the café's terrace.

Then again, there probably aren't many places in this world that are free of trouble, I thought.

"You're not gonna eat that?" asked Cyco.

"Oh, I will. I just had something on my mind."

Having done some shopping in the morning, we were now taking a lunch break while waiting for Teach.

Cyco was eating vanilla ice cream...or what was left of it.

Here in the desert, ice cream melted extremely fast. She'd tried to finish it before it melted completely, but eventually resigned herself to eating its milkshake-like remains as if it were a soup.

She seemed satisfied, though. I could only guess that the state of the food didn't bother her as long as it was white.

"Good thing you found the right parts, huh?" Cyco said with a white stain around her mouth.

She was referring to the Magingear parts I'd bought at a store before coming here.

Custom Magingears like my White Rose or Teach's Blue Opera had two general types of parts.

First were the new, custom parts that my sister had produced specifically for White Rose. They were costly, but they came with an auto-repair function similar to those found on original Prism Steeds.

The other type of parts were the standard, ready-made ones. Those were used in Marshall IIs, and they had to be replaced through maintenance every now and then.

Blue Rose didn't fully auto-repair, which was probably due to a technical flaw.

It just highlighted the fact that even if you built mechs using real-life knowledge like The Triangle of Wisdom, you'd never reach the level of Flagman, the Grand Artificer of the pre-ancient civilization.

Anyway, I had to replace the parts that I'd lost, but being away from Dryfe had made that rather difficult for most people.

Thankfully, among the grand total of *three* good things Teach had taught me, one of those had been the means of finding quality Magingear parts in Caldina, so I had no trouble getting what I needed.

The other two good things, by the way, were some piloting tricks and the location of the ruins with a crystal for the pilot job grouping.

I still had part of the money I got for assisting the fight against GouzMaise, so I could pay for the parts no problem, but...

“...When Caldina’s stores sell wholesale parts made for the Dryfean army, you *know* something isn’t right.” *Just how did they end up here*, I wondered, finding myself a bit awed by Caldina’s distribution channels. That was probably something that bothered every country, not just Dryfe.

“I gotta say, she’s really late,” said Cyco.

“...She is.” Teach was the one who’d told us to wait for her here.

Last evening, she’d said that she was going to search for the Orb and headed straight to the mansion of Cortana’s mayor. And if she didn’t return the same day, we’d agreed to meet up here in the morning or at noon.

Since she was nowhere to be seen in the morning, we’d gone out and bought the parts we needed, but she wasn’t here even now when we returned. It was now noon.

“Is Teach just bad at keeping time or did something happen?”

“Hmm... Both?”

Yeah, knowing her, that’s probably the correct answer, I thought. She was an ace pilot, but you really couldn’t trust her on many things. *It probably isn’t even trouble that’s keeping her. I fully expect her to come back and say that she was busy messing around with some girls.*

“Heyoo! Yu and Cy! Sorry for the wait!”

“Teach! Oh...”

She came in right as I was thinking about all of that and, well...

“The investigation dragged on a bit,” she said. “Yeah, that’s it.”

“Is that so? By the way, Teach...”

“Yeess?”

“Your neck.”

My words made her flash me an awkward smile and rush to cover a spot on her neck.

The spot, by the way, was clearly a hickey.

“I see you had some fun at the mayor’s place,” I said.

“There was this baby-faced maid with a nice body! I flirted with her a bit and we talked straight until dawn!”

Yeah — pillow-talked, I thought.



“I hope you die.”

“Cy! That’s way too harsh! I actually got the info!” So the little chat with the maid hadn’t distracted her from her job after all.

“So, guilty or not?” I asked.

Teach had gone to the mayor’s place to find out where the Orb might be. At first, I’d thought she’d solicit the mayor’s help directly, but while she was away, I’d realized that probably wasn’t the case.

It had been the same way back at the casino. In situations like these, Teach *already knew* where the Orb could be, so she’d likely gone to the mayor’s mansion because that was probably the place.

“Heh heh heh. I see you’re startin’ to catch on. And yeah, he’s obviously hidin’ the Orb somewhere. If he wasn’t, he wouldn’t try to assassinate me or get a maid to spike my drink with poison.”

A slight shock came over me as I asked, “...They tried to poison you?”

“Yeah. I didn’t drink any and came on to that same maid instead. She was sooo cute and lewd!”

“Teach, why are you so...?” How could someone be so carefree when they’d almost gotten poisoned...?

Well, Teach’s Superior Embryo, Cassandra, saw not “the future,” but “danger,” so poison was perhaps the most useless method of assassination to employ against her.

Then again, everyone could counter poison with an Elixir, so maybe this “attempted assassination” was nothing but a warning from the mayor.

“I know that he’s hidin’ the Orb,” Teach continued. “If the info I already have on it is true, everyone with wealth and power would want to have it more than anything else!”

“You already know the Orb’s...um, the UBM’s abilities?”

"Yep. Some of the leaked Orbs also had their powers leaked too, and this is one of them. They say that it 'gives the user a healthy life, and then a new life eternal.'"

A healthy life and a new life eternal.

Well, it was true that those who already had wealth and power might fear death more than other people. They would be afraid of losing their riches to age or illness, so it was no exaggeration to say that they'd want eternal life more than anything else.

"And it seems like it actually works. Hell, the mayor is using it himself!"

"Hm?"

"This is the mayor's photo from the documents I brought." She showed me a picture of an obese, jaundiced man with rough skin and bags under his eyes. If intemperance and bad health was a person, this would be him. "And *this* is a picture I secretly took of him last night. His age, by the way? Seventy years."

"...Huh?!" This photo clearly showed a middle-aged man no older than fifty. He looked vigorous, his skin was smooth, and overall he seemed to be brimming with life.

I could hardly believe that this was the same person as in the first picture. I'd say he was rejuvenated, but that would feel like an understatement.

"You can see why he'd act like he doesn't even know about the Orb," Teach said. "For all we know, he might change back if he loses it."

"...But you're Sefirot, aren't you? Can he really lie to you like that?" Sefirot was a clan that had nine Superiors, making it the strongest clan in all of *Infinite Dendrogram*.

At the same time, it was the greatest force serving Madam President La Place Phantasma herself.

Teach had told me that Sefirot could only do quests that might lead to international problems — such as this very Orb-hunt — after the president had given them her explicit approval.

Although Teach was officially acting on the request made by the head of a certain company, the person behind this quest was the president herself.

The Orb in Hermine was in the hands of a foreign mafia, so I could understand the lack of cooperation there, but the mayor of Cortana was a member of the congress, so I'd really thought that he'd help us in finishing this quest.

"Ah ha haa! You still don't really understand Caldina, do you?" Teach said, showing me a map of the country. "This nation is a union of city-states. Some have elections, some have a hereditary system, but each city is its own country, and the mayor is its king."

The city-state union of Caldina was an assembly of small individual nations, run by a congress where the mayor of every city-state held a seat. This made it the only major country with a "proper" government.

...Yeah, I didn't count Tenchi. A land of constant civil war seemed less than "proper" to me.

"...So, Caldinian laws don't fully apply to the cities themselves?" I asked.

"Not exactly," Teach said. "There are Caldina-wide laws you'd be penalized for breaking, but the mayor of this city thinks he's above them, and he's not exactly wrong."

"Hm?"

"Yu, where did you log in when you started in Dryfe?"

"Well... Vandelheim?" It seemed obvious to me. You picked a country, you appeared in its capital.

"Yeah. Same here. But in Caldina, the starting city is right here in Cortana."

"Huh?"

"Drag-Nomad, Caldina's capital and seat of congress, *moves* from place to place. The level ranges of the monsters around it constantly change, so it's not a good place for newbies."

"The capital...moves?" What did she mean by that?

"We'll visit it someday, so I'll tell you the details then. It'll be a surprise!"

"Okay...?"

"Well, anyway, Cortana is Caldina's second major city, its heart of commerce, and the starting point for its Masters. It's extremely important... So much so, in fact, that it's hard to levy any penalties against it."

"..." The president controlled the actual capital, but the mayor of Cortana held the capital city in every sense but its name. Both cities were actually tiny nations, so if you ignored their stated political roles within the union, they were both essentially kings.

And if anyone tried to do something against this particular king, it could negatively impact the country as a whole.

"So what will you do?" I asked.

"I could just tell the prez that I know he's hidin' the Orb somewhere, but that seems lazy...so I'll obviously go and take it!"

"Huh? But..."

"Listen, Yu. The mayor told me that he 'doesn't know about any Orb' and that 'there's no way it's in this city.' So..." she said as she cracked a smile. "...He won't be able to complain if something he 'doesn't know of' and 'isn't here' just disappears. Will he?"

That was basically a declaration that she would *steal* the Orb.

“Ughh...” a sigh escaped my mouth.

Her face looked just like it had back when we went into the Huang He mafia’s casino in Hermine.

We’d spent enough time together for me to understand that despite having an Embryo that let her sense danger better than anyone else, she definitely had a taste for those exact same dangers.

She was the opposite of my sister, who could never have enough safety nets or secondary plans.

Perhaps those two had become friends exactly because they were so different? They *did* have a similar vibe, though, even if Fran’s was more RP-oriented.

“Hold on. Yu, are you thinking that I’m gonna do something rough just for the thrill and the laughs?”

“...Am I wrong?”

“Nope! But that’s not all of it.”

“Hm?”

“I mean, we’re on a time limit. If we just report it to the boss, someone else’ll come and take it.”

Time limit? Someone else? I wondered.

“Yu. About this Orb-hunt quest...it’s not just some grand little adventure with just the two of us.”

“...You dragged me into this, you know.”

“Yeah yeah, just accept it already. Anyway, what I’m trying to say is that we have rivals on this quest.”

“Rivals?”

“Remember how I told you that some of the orbs’ powers are already known?”

“Yes.”

“Well, there’s also people in the world who’d love to take these powers for themselves.”

“Those people being...?”

“Well, there’s some evidence that Granvaloa’s makin’ moves to grab the Orb that turns water into land, while Legendaria’s degenerates are comin’ after the one that Anthropomorphizes monsters.”

“Ah!” That meant that this Orb-hunt was also a *race*...and that Teach probably wouldn’t be the only Superior that would get involved in it.

And, perhaps most importantly...

“So we’re not the only ones after the Orb in this city?” I asked.

“That’s very likely.” Well, an orb that “gives the user a healthy life, and then a new life eternal” certainly did seem like something a lot of people would want. “Whatever’s comin’, you better hope for the best, but expect the worst. Boy, I suuure wouldn’t like to run into anyone like *that*,” she said, sounding somewhat joyful.

I had a really bad feeling about this.

The chill running down my spine told me that I should prepare for a battle more intense than the one back in Gideon.



City of Commerce, Cortana

Cortana was the second largest city in Caldina, and it was built around a giant oasis somewhere in the middle of The Great Desert.

Defying the searing heat, the waters flowing up to form the oasis lake were almost unnaturally pure, making the land around it more than fertile enough to support such a city.

With the exception of the capital of Drag-Nomad, all the cities of this desert country were built around these welcoming patches of land in an otherwise treacherous desert. Even the Gambling City of Hermine was no exception.

Many wondered why the vast scorching desert, home to ferocious giant worms, even had such oases of safety.

There were various theories about this phenomenon, but the most popular one proposed that it was due to the influence of save points.

Currently, save points were best known as the points through which Masters moved to and from a different world, but people had been aware of their existence for a long time.

In fact, save points had actually existed before there were any cities built around them.

As strange as it was, the environments around save points were very conducive to human survival, as though someone was intentionally adjusting them to be that way.

But no matter what the reasons for it were, people were attracted by the safety that save points provided. Over the many centuries, grand cities had been built around them.

Even places that weren't known to be save points at first eventually came to be called that.

The name of whoever had first used the term "save point," though, had been completely lost to history.

As mentioned earlier, Cortana, the City of Commerce, was Caldina's second most important city — though some would argue it was the

first. This desert jewel of water and coin was notably affluent even for a Caldinian city.

However, that didn't mean that it was free of the nation's ever-present heat. The oasis made the city slightly cooler than the barren dunes, but compared to the climate in other countries, the temperatures were still unbearably high. Even those used to it would find themselves sweating, while visitors from other countries were in serious danger of suffering heatstroke.

This applied to one of the two people walking in this searing heat — the little girl trudging through the sands. Clad in a red dress, wearing childish boots, and sporting a large ribbon in her hair, she walked while sweating waterfalls.

“Nnh... It’s sho hot. I’m gonna melt...”

Though she looked at least ten years old, her manner of speaking made her sound several years younger than that. However, most of those hearing her speech from up close would have the impression that this wasn't an affectation — she simply wasn't very good at talking.

“I wanna go to Dryfe. There’s lots of snow there... Or maybe to Granvaloa on the sea... Ah...”

Suffering the heat, she looked up at the person walking beside her and holding her hand — a man who seemed to be in his thirties.

“Mr. Zhan, can I swim in that oasis?” the girl asked.

The man shook his head and said, “You’re not allowed to swim in most of Caldina’s oases. People get their drinking water from there.”

“I see... I guess I won’t be swimming then...”

Instead of throwing a tantrum, the girl gave up and continued to trudge along.

“...That café over there sells fruit juice. Want to take a break there?”

“Can I?! Do they have ice scream?”

“They might, but it would melt really fast.”

“Then I’ll eat it fast!” the girl said as she hurried to the café.

Watching her from behind, the man — Great Soul Daoshi, Zhang Zangqi — said, “...It really is so hard to believe it. I know it’s true, but still...”

At that moment, he was reminded of something that happened a week ago, when he had taken on his current job.



A Week Before, a Certain Place in Caldina

Zhang, the head of the Caldinian branch of the Huang He mafia called “Mirage,” was having a nightmare.

In it, he saw his battle against a flying blue robot.

He saw how it destroyed the five dragons that were his namesake as well as the crystallization of all his power and technique.

Even after giving it everything he had, he was unable to harm the robot — while the robot’s weaponry blew off his right arm.

“...Ah!”

That was when he woke up.

The nightmare had left him sweating all over. He tried to get up and wipe the sweat from his body, but...

“What is this?”

...he found himself bound to the bed he was lying on.

He then examined the state of his body.

His skin was covered in wounds. Most were marks left by his many days of fighting, but some were completely new to him.

And most importantly, his right arm was missing from the elbow down.

"...I see. So that was no dream." Zhang realized then that he'd somehow survived his staggering defeat against The Blue Sky Songstress.

Most of his newer wounds showed signs of treatment with Potions or healing magic, but it seemed like whoever had taken care of him had no means of restoring his arm.

He then looked around to examine his surroundings.

He was in a small but hygienic room, highly reminiscent of a hospital. If you ignored the fact that he was bound to the bed, it was a fitting place for someone in his current state.

However, he didn't recognize the room at all.

If this is a sickroom...who is it that helped me? he wondered. At first, Zhang thought it must have been one of his subordinates, but that was impossible. If he had been defeated by AR-I-CA, the others must've suffered the same fate.

It also couldn't be another criminal organization. Zhang had often used his combat-capable status to exercise authority over the other criminal leaders in Hermine. If they found him on the verge of death, they would not have helped him — they would gladly finish him off instead.

A kindly citizen, then...? No, that's the least likely thing of all, he thought before chuckling in self-derision.

His life was definitely not one of virtue. There was no way fate would grace him with salvation at the hands of a benevolent stranger.

In the end, he failed to guess who saved him, and eventually...

"Yo. You awake, Zhang Zangqi?"

...someone entered the room, calling his name.

It was a man, and at first glance it was obvious that he was part of the societal underworld.

First of all, he was clad in a fashionable gray suit. There was no country in *Infinite Dendrogram* where such suits were worn by upstanding individuals. This kind of clothing only existed in this world because certain Masters had them custom-made.

Over the suit, he wore a trench coat in a strange style, suggesting to Zhang that it was a UBM MVP reward.

And finally, there was a gangster-like hat on top of his head.

All of this combined would make it obvious that he engaged in illegal acts.

At a glance, he wasn't very tall — about 160 centimeters — and he had a young face that made him look no older than twenty, but that only made his threatening aura more intense by contrast.

The crest on the back of his left hand, showing interlocking gears, was proof that he was a Master.

As he observed him, Zhang also realized something else about the newcomer.

This man...is far stronger than I...and perhaps even The Blue Sky Songstress.

In his current state, he wasn't even able to determine the extent of this Master's power.

“Can ya talk?” he asked.

“...I can,” Zhang answered.

“That so? Let’s start with names, then. I’m Rascal the Bloodonyx. Though, I guess ‘The Weapon’ works better for you.”

“Ah?!” The name filled Zhang with shock.

Everyone in Caldina's criminal underworld knew this name.

The Weapon, Rascal the Bloodonyx — the Superior who made a living exploring ruins and selling the items he discovered. He was especially well-known for his weapons, with some of his finds having made it into the hands of truly infamous criminal organizations.

He was especially well-known for destroying ruins after he was done with them. That was a crime in every country, and he was already on every wanted list for it...but no one had defeated him so far.

Besides that...

"Now, as ya probably know, I'm the sub-leader of the clan known as 'IF.'"

...he was also a core member of the clan whose membership consisted solely of wanted Superiors. With the leader, King of Crime, currently in the gaol, Rascal here was functionally at the top of it.

"IF..."

"Yeah. The clan that was supposed to take the UBM treasure Orb from Huang He off ya hands."

Indeed, that had been the plan. Zhang's role had been to receive the Orb from the main branch in Huang He and give it to IF to create a bond between their groups.

He wasn't told what the groups would do afterwards, but...

"...I am sorry."

"Hm?"

"The Orb was taken from me... I cannot complete the exchange."

Zhang had used the Orb during the battle against The Blue Sky Songstress, but he'd been defeated by her regardless, resulting in the loss of both his arm and the Orb. "But...please! Take my life if you must, but please consider making another deal with Mirage!"

Zhang believed that he couldn't let his failure be the cause of a conflict between IF and the organization to which he'd dedicated his life. Mirage was the greatest criminal organization in Huang He, but having faced a Superior himself, he now knew too well that Mirage stood no chance against an entire group of them.

Thus, he tried to prevent that by offering up his own life.

"I see... I'll just get right to the point and say that we can't make deals with Mirage anymore."

Rascal's words almost sent Zhang into despair, but...

"That's 'cause Mirage doesn't exist anymore."

...he then said something Zhang couldn't even understand.

Rascal then began telling Zhang about what happened over the two weeks he'd spent unconscious.

He told him about how Huang He had gotten serious about dismantling Mirage.

About how Dancing Princess, Huili and her Huili Yuminjun — Huili's Army of Fools — had destroyed every Mirage base in Huang He.

About how even the strongest among them, including The Fang, had been either killed or arrested, and their leader had been captured as well.

And about how, by this point, the prosecutions and executions must've already finished.

Zhang's first reaction was silence. Then, having been freed from the bed, he covered his face with his still-healthy left arm...and wept.

He wept from sadness over the destruction of the organization he had given his life to, his own powerlessness to do anything about it, and his guilt over the possibility that things might have turned out differently if he hadn't lost against The Blue Sky Songstress.

"Zhang Zangqi... I know you're having a moment, but can I keep talking?" Rascal asked.

"...Yes," Zhang said, looking at him with reddened eyes. "You saved my life. It would be more fitting for me to listen to your words than to lament my foolishness."

"Actually, I ain't the one that saved ya. It was the other sub-leader — the one who was gonna make the trade with you. She picked ya up and told me to look after ya."

The sub-leader in question — King of Thieves, Zeta — was no longer in Caldina. She'd left the country to get involved in the conflict between Altar and Dryfe to the west.

"I see... But that doesn't change the fact that I am indebted to you," said Zhang.

"Well, it's fine if ya think that way. Anyhow, to get to the point, we saved ya because we want ya to join us."

"...What?" That was so out of the blue that Zhang couldn't believe his ears.

"Not as an official member, though," Rascal continued. "In IF, we only take Superiors who are on wanted lists. It's part of the 'brand,' so to speak... Even with that limit, we've got dumbasses who misuse their damn powers, though. Haah..." He let out a fatigued sigh as he thought about something.

Zhang didn't have the slightest idea what it was that Rascal found so draining.

"Sorry about that," Rascal said. "Anyway, back to the point — I want ya to be a 'supporting member' for the clan. You won't be an official part of it, but you'll have to assist us with this and that. Most of these supporting members are tians, and we got a pretty good number of them."

“...But right now, I have nothing. I’ve lost my organization and my subordinates.”

“Your technique and level haven’t gone anywhere. There’s exceptions, sure, but Masters are generally below tians when it comes to technique. We want you, yourself.”

Having been defeated by The Blue Sky Songstress and seen his organization destroyed, Zhang had lost all confidence in his abilities — and yet Rascal sincerely solicited his aid.

“...If you just want my Superior Job, I can take my life. You will know exactly when Great Soul Daoshi can be taken again, giving IF the advantage in the ensuing race to find it.”

“No, that wouldn’t be good for us. We’ve got no one who can take the job, so if ya die, it’ll probably go to some other Master. If that happens, we’ll never have it again. That’ll be no good at all.”

Rascal was basically saying that if they had a Master who could fulfill the job’s conditions, they might’ve already let Zhang die, but that didn’t really bother him.

“So, what will become of me? Should I just be locked up until you find someone who can take Great Soul Daoshi?”

“That’d be a waste of human resources. Like I said, our group wants you. We can always use people.”

“Why? Why would a group made up of Superiors insist on hiring a mere tian?”

“...Yeah. I suppose I should’ve opened up about that,” Rascal said, looking Zhang straight in the eye.

Then, he slowly began revealing the very foundation of the Illegal Frontier.

“Our goal as IF is to...”



Ten minutes later, Rascal finished telling Zhang all about their intentions.

“And that’s what we’re planning to do.” Zhang silently processed what he had been told...and it all added up to him.

He also understood why IF had tried to make a deal with Mirage.

I see. It does make sense. This explains the actions of both Mirage and IF, he thought.

Through his line of work, Zhang had maxed out Truth Discernment, so he knew that Rascal wasn’t lying.

In fact, he didn’t even need the skill to know that. The experience gained from dealing with scores of crooks was enough for him to know that Rascal was saying nothing but the truth.

“...I see.” From IF’s perspective, Mirage’s plot was nothing but one of the many options they had for fulfilling their goal, but Zhang could at least understand that they did indeed wish to cooperate with Mirage.

It just so happened that he had been defeated and Mirage had been wiped out by Huang He before the partnership could bear fruit.

“That’s how it is. We’d like to have you with us.”

“...I have a question.”

“Go ahead.”

“Which is the next most likely place?”

“Tenchi,” Rascal replied in an instant.

“I see...” Zhang said as he closed his eyes.

And when he opened them again, they gleamed with determination.

“In that case, when you face Huang He, put me on the front line. If you can promise me this, I will accept your offer.”

“I promise.”

The determination in those eyes was also a blazing urge to fight Huang He.

However, it wasn’t the dark flame of vengeance.

...Heh. I always thought that Mirage’s long-term goal of destroying Huang He was unrealistic... But I suppose that I am a member of Mirage to the core.

He’d dedicated his life to that organization, and now, as its last living member, he was given a chance to do the deed they’d failed to do.

For this, he resolved to live on as a supporting member of IF.

“Don’t think you can go off and die just ‘cause I put you on the front line, though. It’d be a waste of human resources.”

“Yes. I am well aware,” Zhang said as he took the hand of Rascal — his new associate. “I will work for you and IF, Mr. Bloodonyx.”

“That sounds way too stiff. You’re older than me. Just ‘Rascal’ is fine.”

“Well...I suppose I should respect the wishes of my superior. ‘Rascal’ it is.” Zhang considered calling him “Sir” instead, but he thought that might also sound too “stiff” for him.

“Hmph. This ain’t about me. I just wanted ya to use something more comfortable. Anyway, thanks for joining us. Can we do the Contract now?”

“Of course.”

Rascal then took out a Contract.

This was common practice in the societal underworld. Contracts that forbid actions such as betrayal or leaking secret information were, in a way, the very first step towards earning someone's trust.

However, from what Zhang could tell, IF's contract conditions were unusually relaxed.

The only conditions written on it were "until the time comes, Zhang Zangqi must not talk about IF's goals without the permission of an official member of IF," and "unless the situation is such that Zhang Zangqi deems that there is a high chance he will die, he must obey the orders of the official members of IF."

"Is this really good enough?" On a Contract for the entry to Mirage, the second condition would be more like "if a higher-up tells you to die, you die," and that would be just one condition out of far more than just two. IF's conditions seemed almost lax in comparison.

"Yeah. Knowing what may happen in the future, a contract that's too strict might do more harm than good."

"I see," Zhang said, signing the Contract with his left hand.

And so, the ex-member of Mirage became a supporting member of IF.

"I know you just joined and all, but I already have a job for ya. It'll be your role for the time being."

"That is fine by me. What would this job be?"

My first job in service of the Illegal Frontier, he thought. What kind of trial am I about to be put through, I wonder...? Whatever it is, I will overcome it.

His resolve firm, Zhang waited for Rascal to speak.

And after a brief silence, he...

"I need ya to do some babysitting."

...said something so absurd that almost all of Zhang's resolve dissipated immediately.

A deafening silence followed. Babysitting? As his first job for IF? The idea was enough to make Zhang freeze.

"Sorry about that," said Rascal. "I worded it wrong."

"Oh, no need to apologize..." *So he merely misspoke*, Zhang thought as he readied himself for his first mission once again.

The words that followed...

"Babysitting's just part of it. There's more to do besides that."

"Babysitting is *part of it*!?"

...made Zhang raise his voice, completely dispersing the tense atmosphere.

Naturally, he found it hard to simply accept such an unfitting job.

"Are you being serious!?" he asked.

"I'm good at manipulating people, but I don't lie or hide anything. Yeah, we need a babysitter."

Unfortunately, Zhang's Truth Discernment didn't react to anything Rascal was saying.

That meant that, sadly, Rascal was speaking the truth.

"No, wait! What does babysitting have to do with IF!?" Zhang could not see any possible reason that a clan of infamous criminals would need a babysitter.

Do they run a preschool as a subsidiary business? Zhang wondered, when suddenly...

"Is the talking over?"

...the door to the sickroom opened, and a childish voice that sounded quite out of place reached their ears.

Zhang looked at the door and saw a little girl looking in.

She looked no older than ten years old and, likely because of someone else's tastes, was wearing a frilly red dress that wouldn't be out of place in a piano recital.

And on the back of her left hand, there was an Embryo crest showing two crossed axes.

A girl... Is she the one that Rascal wants me to babysit... Hm?! Zhang's thought was cut short by the realization that Rascal's aura had completely changed.

He still looked calm on the surface, but he was clearly extremely tense on the inside, like he was standing right next to a bomb that could explode at the slightest wrong touch.

"Ah. Mister! Are you the new 'support' guy?" the girl asked Zhang, seemingly oblivious to Rascal's state.

"Y-Yes. I just signed the contract."

"I see. Nice to meet you."

"Yes... You too." Still not sure what to make of the situation, Zhang returned the greeting.

He took her extended hand and, careful not to be rough, shook it.

That made the girl happier than one might expect, and she put on a broad, innocent smile.

"You're a good person, mister! A *plus!* Not an enemy!"

"Hm...?" Zhang didn't understand what she was saying, but also couldn't help but wonder why Rascal relaxed and let out a sigh of relief.

"I'm Emi-ee Killingshton! Call me Emi-ee!"

"Zhang Zangqi. Let's get along, Emmie."

“No! Not Emmie! Emi-ee!”

“Hm...?” Zhang tilted his head in confusion. Rascal, growing tense again for some reason, came to his aid.

“...This here’s Emily Killington. She’s still not good at saying her name.”

“Hey! I can say it fine! Don’t bully me, Rashcal!”

“...Can’t imagine how long it’ll take until you can properly say mine.” Listening to them, Zhang understood the problem of the name and spoke again.

“Sorry about that, ‘Emily.’ Is that better?”

“Yeah!” Emily seemed very satisfied that Zhang had said her name correctly.

“Emily, we’re not done talking, so go play elsewhere. My Machina can keep ya company, can’t she?”

“Huh? But Machinya’s a very bad player. I made the whole Oshello board black!”

“...That dumbass can’t even win a game of Othello against a child?” Rascal heaved a fatigued sigh.

Though they’d barely just met, Zhang already felt that Rascal was dealing with a greater share of problems than most others in IF.

Regardless, he soon sent Emily away.

“Later, mister!”

“L-Later.” Right after the door closed with Emily on the other side...

“Phew...”

...Rascal let out a sigh of relief as if all the tension instantly left his body.

Zhang then asked, “Rascal... Do you want me to ‘babysit’ Emily?”

"Yes. Until now, it's been me, the other sub-leader, La Crima...and a certain *dumbass* who got herself jailed who've been taking turns looking after her — but now, I'd like to put her in your hands. For the time being, anyway."

The fact that he mentioned La Crima — a criminal infamous even in Caldina — made Zhang understand that Emily was being cared for by IF's official members, which said all that needed to be said about her importance.

However, there was something he didn't get.

Why was Rascal so tense while Emily was here? There was another thing that had him confused: for some reason, Rascal's tension was directed at Zhang as well.

It was as though Rascal had been worried that he would do something to Emily.

That seems like a sign that he doesn't trust me yet, but...

There was something strange about it all.

Rascal did indeed dedicate a bit of his focus to Zhang, but it felt more like he was preparing to jump in to *protect him*.

That didn't make much sense to him.

"Rascal, what *is* that girl...?"

"...Hmm." He couldn't exactly come to a conclusion just by thinking about it, and since this was related to his job, Zhang elected to just ask.

And Rascal, being the type who didn't lie or hide anything, readily answered.

"Zhang Zangqi... You didn't use Reveal on her?"

"I didn't..."

“Good move... You might've been a *minus* if you did.”

“Hm?” Zhang couldn't help but note the emphasis on “minus.”

It reminded him of how Emily herself called him a “plus.” It didn't take much to connect the two terms.

“But...didn't you realize who she is after just hearing her name? As far as we IF members go, she's better known than me, La Crima...and maybe even the leader in some places.”

“What? I... Hmm... Ah?!” Zhang tried to remember if he had ever heard the name “Emily,” and after a few moments, he did recall something.

He knew the name, but Zhang could hardly connect it to the girl he just met.

Who could blame him? There was no logical way to link *that name* to a little girl who could barely speak.

“Let's keep talking, Zhang Zangqi,” Rascal said as he put a hand on Zhang's shoulder.

“V-Very well...” Zhang replied, still shaken.

“Your first job is to be Emily's babysitter...or ‘a supporter for her job.’ Though, keep in mind that the job isn't unrelated to you.” Rascal, noticing Zhang's state, decided to change the subject. “So, about that UBM Orb that Mirage was supposed to give us... Including that one, there's actually six of them spread out across Caldina. Lots of Superiors the world over, as well as tough guys from the underworld, are coming after them.”

“The Orbs...?” The Orb he'd obtained by the order of Mirage's main branch contained a UBM called “Thundershield Beast, Dangai.”

It was a very potent weapon, and the idea that there were *five more* in this country made Zhang quite nervous.

“So you want me to join the competition for the Orbs and take them?”

“No. I mean, it’s fine if you do get them, but that’s not the top priority.”

“What *is*, then?”

“I want you to observe who’s seeking the Orbs. Find out their abilities, goals, personalities, dispositions...and if they’d be open to having a chat and joining us,” Rascal said before looking Zhang right in the eye. “We’re not after UBM or MVP rewards, but the human resources they attract.”

Those words made Zhang realize something.

Using the Orbs as bait seemed inefficient while they’d been spread across Caldina, but if you looked at it another way...

“...Let me ask something.”

“Sure. Ask away.”

Gathering his determination, Zhang asked, “Is IF behind spreading the Orbs into Caldina?”

“Yes. The other sub-leader stole seven orbs from Huang He’s treasury and spread six of them across this country.”

Zhang had actually expected Rascal to dance around this question. After all, one of those Orbs had been the reason why he’d fought The Blue Sky Songstress and lost his right arm.

However, Rascal answered truthfully, still adhering to his creed of never lying or hiding anything.

“...I see. So you made a deal with Mirage to get back something you let go of just so you could use it as bait for human resources?”

“That’s only half of it.”

“Half?”

“We planned to collaborate with Mirage and execute our plan within Huang He, but with us being as infamous as we are, it’d be hard to trust us if we just approached ya and asked to join forces, wouldn’t it?”

“Hm...” In such a case, Mirage would have no doubt assumed that IF had ulterior motives, leaving no room for trust.

“Now, imagine if ya had something really valuable, like a national treasure of Huang He, and solicited our cooperation with that... What happens then?”

“...At the very least, we would understand your motives better. It would put our minds at ease much more than if we’d gotten your trust for free.”

“Exactly. There’s no such thing as a free lunch, and nobody in the underworld believes in uncompensated kindness. My plan was to gain your trust by first letting ya get your hands on something that could act as a vector for it.”

Zhang completely understood Rascal’s perspective.

“...Though, that’s not to say that I know exactly what she was thinking while going through with the plan,” Rascal said, thinking of Zeta. Zhang noticed that Rascal occasionally described his actual feelings, rather than conveying facts, though he couldn’t tell whether that was because of Rascal’s creed to not lie or hide anything, or if the words merely escaped his mouth on their own.

“I know exactly where some of the Orbs are, and I’ll tell ya. You’ll go to the closest one from here and get cracking.”

Zhang nodded in response before a question from earlier came back to him.

“I understand my job now, but there is one more thing I need to confirm.”

“Emily, right?”

“Yes. Is she...truly *that* Emily?”

“She is.” Truth Discernment didn’t trigger yet again.

Zhang didn’t actually need to ask — he already knew it was the truth.

It was just that he found it so difficult to link the stories he’d heard to the girl he’d seen.

“But as you can tell, she’s still a child. We can’t just throw her into the desert by herself. We need some human resources by her side... This reminds me of when Zeta said that ‘the girl is a whole ten years old, she can travel across the countries and do proper work.’ The hell was that about? There’s no damn way she can do that. She ain’t some prodigy. Child wonders like that probably don’t even exist,” Rascal trailed off again, but he soon had himself back on track.

“Anyway, there’s really only one thing I can say to someone who’s gonna act as Emily’s support.”

“And that...would be?”

“Don’t become her ‘enemy.’”

“‘Enemy?’”

“Act like her guardian. Scold and admonish her when you must. But don’t disparage her without a purpose. Don’t hurt her for no reason. Don’t treat her with disdain. Don’t flip her ‘switch.’ Otherwise...”

“Otherwise...?”

“You’ll end up seeing her true nature for yourself.” Rascal said that with more gravity than he had anything else so far.

That was when Zhang realized that Rascal had been tense because he was worried that Zhang would do something that Emily disliked, letting him see her “true nature” then and there.

“...I will keep this warning in mind.”

“I can understand if it’s hard to understand and believe, but it won’t be long before you do,” Rascal said as he gave Zhang a paper with the job details, opened up a map, and pointed to a location. “You’ll know when you make it to the location of your first job...Cortana, the City of Commerce.”



City of Commerce, Cortana

A week had passed since then, and both Emily and Zhang had made it to Cortana.

It was worth noting that while Emily was struggling with the heat now, it wasn’t a problem for her while traveling on the sands. At that time, they’d been on a small sandboat provided by Rascal.

It was air conditioned, and Emily spent most of her time there, reading picture books and such.

Zhang dealt with the occasional worm, turning them into jiangshi before putting them in Jewels.

During all this time, Emily had not shown even a glimpse of her “true nature,” so he still had trouble believing that she was the same Emily that he’d heard so much about.

...But Rascal wasn’t lying. There must be something more to her. I just have not seen it yet.

As that thought was running through his mind, Emily, standing at the front of the café, called out to him.

“Mr. Zhan! Are you coming?” The way she did it made her look like a normal child, which brought a bit of a smile to Zhang’s face.

Zhang and Emily both were currently wearing accessories that hid their true appearances. This was because Emily, as a member of IF, was a wanted criminal, while Zhang could be targeted due to his ties to Mirage.

The accessories, provided by Rascal, were highly potent. Even the highest levels of Reveal would have trouble with them. First the ship, then these trinkets... Rascal was an absurdly well-prepared man.

In the eyes of passersby, Zhang and Emily likely looked like a normal family or at least close enough to it.

With his right arm being a prosthetic made of Fu, though, he might’ve stood out at just a bit.

“Yes. I will be there in a moment,” Zhang said as he began walking towards Emily...but then something rendered him speechless.

...Why is she...here? The café’s windows were large, so you could easily see inside.

And what Zhang saw was The Blue Sky Songstress, sitting at a table and chatting casually.

Indeed — this café they were about to enter was actually the exact location where Hugo had been waiting for AR-I-CA.

She’s after the Orbs too, so I guess it makes sense to run into her here, but... To Zhang, this woman was first and foremost the person who had destroyed his organization and taken his right arm. It was safe to call her a sworn enemy.

What do I do...? My job here is reconnaissance... Rascal told me to gather info about the people who come after the Orbs. If I get into trouble here, I might be exposed, and that would make my job harder...

Zhang was actually thinking about his role and how he would execute it. Despite being a man of the underworld, he was rather like a diligent, hardworking citizen.

“Emily, why don’t we go to another—?”

“Yay! It says ‘ice cream!’” In Zhang’s mind, the optimal course of action was to go to another café, but that course of action was shut down by Emily, who read the menu and beamed.

And needless to say, he couldn’t just leave her here.

“Ugh... Come what may.” So, Zhang and Emily both entered the café.

“Oh, we are sorry, but there are no open tables,” an employee said.

“Ahh, now that is unfortunate,” Zhang said, regaining the hope that they could go somewhere else.

“We will have to seat you alongside some other customers.”

Zhang was at a loss for words.

Why? Because the six-person table they were led to was the very one occupied by The Blue Sky Songstress and her group...

“Yaay!”

...and Emily had already taken a seat there.

In silence, the Great Soul Daoshi — the peak of Huang Hean necromancy — prayed for his own bliss in the afterlife.

Chapter Two: Minus

A Certain Place in Caldina

While Zhang was in Cortana, suffering through his unexpected encounter with The Blue Sky Songstress, Rascal was sailing on a boat, heading out to do business with someone in the Gambling City of Hermine.

The boat was cutting through the desert dunes as though they were ocean waves. Caldina had access to technologies from all over the world, and sandboats such as this one were a hybrid technology created by mixing Granvaloan shipwrighting, Dryfean magitech, and magic items from Huang He.

In a way, these boats were some of the most advanced creations in the world, but they actually didn't see all that much use.

The reason for this was that the engine sounds could attract the worms that lived underground, making the journey far more treacherous. These worm monsters were often Demi-Dragon-tier or above, so tians, who naturally wanted to avoid them, preferred to use dragon carriages as they had in the old days.

If they *did* end up using sandboats, they would opt for the quieter, smaller kind, like the one used by Zhang and Emily.

However, the one carrying Rascal certainly wasn't that kind of ship.

Instead, it was a massive construct that rode the dunes while exterminating any worms that dared attack it. The creatures, attracted by the engine sounds, were instantly shot to bits by the cannons installed all over the hull, quickly turning them into bits of light. It didn't matter if they were Demi-Dragon-Worms or Pure-Dragon-tier Dragon-Worms — they all broke before this giant battleship.

Boasting an overwhelming power, this giant vessel sliced through the dunes while thoroughly negating the great menace of the desert worms. It was an outlandish scene, but it made sense the moment one learned that this ship was the headquarters of IF.

Its name was “The Tetragrammaton.”

It was constructed using a three-hundred-metel-long prototype battleship from Granvaloa as a base. A vessel with a dark history, it had been sunk by the SUBM, Twin Moby Dick, during its test run.

Having been sent to the depths of the sea, it was considered unsalvageable; but Zeta — a Granvaloan Superior at the time — knew where it was resting. After joining IF, she suggested to Rascal that they retrieve it, and with a bit of cooperation and the help of one of Rascal’s Superior Embryo skills, they went on to do just that.

Since then, Rascal had repaired and improved the ship many times, using pre-ancient civilization technology to turn it into a fearsome battle cruiser capable of dominating both land and sea.

Now, the vessel served as the mobile headquarters of IF.

“...There sure are a lot of them today,” Rascal said, glancing through the thick window.

What he saw beyond it were the dunes of Caldina — as well as the ship’s mechanical arms, retrieving the loot dropped by the worms.

He was currently the only human on this ship, but he wasn’t the one controlling it.

The Tetragrammaton had an autopilot mode, so Rascal, the only actual person on board, could just stay in his room and prepare for the negotiations.

This ship had many rooms, among which was the sickroom where Zhang had awakened two weeks ago. The group’s prisoners and members alike had their own living spaces here.

“...That dumbass is the heavier ordnance. It could give away our position to Caldina. I’m not in the mood to sneak through the desert on foot again.”

Powerful as it was, The Tetragrammaton wouldn’t be enough for Rascal to take on Caldinian Superiors like The Earth by himself. Luckily, his Superior Embryo had a skill that let him store it away, allowing him to hide and log out.

“Master! I brought tea!” someone cried as they entered the room, carrying a tray with a teapot and cup balanced on it.

Dressed in a maid’s uniform and sporting green, fluffy hair, the newcomer looked like a beautiful girl in her late teens at first glance. A closer look, however, would show that she wasn’t even human.

Most of her body was covered with glossy skin, but her left arm was bare of flesh from the shoulder down, showing its metallic interior. Her well-defined face also seemed to be damaged. There was a large black bandage over the right eye, and her forehead showed signs of something having been removed from it.

She was very obviously a female android — a gynoid — straight out of a sci-fi novel.

Her name was Machina, and she was the Superior Embryo of The Weapon, Rascal the Blackonyx.

“...Machina, turn down the sound and power while exterminating the worms.”

“Okaay! More importantly, do you think Emily and Zhang have made it to Cortana yet?!” The way she so casually swept aside her Master’s order made Rascal sigh before answering.

“...Yeah. As long as they didn’t run into a Superior or some Mythical, they should be there by now. If they get into that kinda trouble,

though... Worst-case scenario, Zhang will die and I'll know that through his Contract. They're fine."

He said all of this as though the prospect of little Emily running into Superiors or Mythicals didn't worry him one bit.

"Good to hear! I still need to get back at Emily for beating me at Othello fifty times in a row!"

"Machina... Don't ya think that's way too much?"

"I'm using most of my processing power on other things! If I want to win, I need to rely on *your* strategy! That goes for Othello too! I won't win if you don't stand behind me and tell me what to do!"

"...What's the point of you playing when I'm making all the moves?"

"I might be able to win by myself with some optimization! I would only need about a hundred more games!"

"...That so?" Rascal whispered as though tired, taking a sip of the tea Machina had brought.

Then, not speaking a word, he slowly set the cup back on the tray before saying, "Hey, you dumb hunk of scrap...what did you use as the water for this?"

"Elixir! You're tired, so I poured a whole five bottles!"

"That so...? Drop down and give me five hundred push-ups."

"Why?!" After giving that order, Rascal picked up the cup of tea again. As awful as it tasted, it *was* made using five Elixirs — each one costing 100,000 lir. It would be a waste to throw it out, so he drank it properly, all the while making a bitter face.

Boiling the Elixirs had made them lose their effects, so dealing with this only made him feel more tired than he was before.

As his idiot maid began doing her push-ups, he began looking over a certain set of documents.

“My frame...my frame is creaking... Ah, what’re you looking at, Master?”

“This here has info about recent sightings of independent Superiors and pre-Superiors. I bought it at the DIN in that town we stopped by yesterday. I haven’t gotten the chance to look at it yet.”

“Ohh?”

“It’s way easier to bring in those who aren’t already working for any faction. Zeta was able to take the Hell General away from Dryfe, though. First she stole the Orbs from Huang He, then did this... It’s damn impressive.”

Rascal couldn’t help but respect Zeta’s ability. As a capable Superior, the Hell General must’ve been heavily supported by Dryfe. Rascal honestly had no idea how Zeta had been able to convince him to join IF.

He couldn’t possibly have guessed that she merely broke the Hell General’s underdeveloped mind in a duel, then persuaded him to join by enticing him with various things he needed.

“Wasn’t Gerbera the one you recruited?! And the both of you are sub-leaders! Zeta really *is* capable!”

Being reminded of the now-jailed problem child made Rascal hurt inside — or perhaps that was just all the boiled medicine starting to take its toll.

“...I know I might be responsible for hiring Gerbera, but saying we’re both the same rank makes me look kinda bad, don’t ya think?”

“I’m not putting you down, but you *should* feel guilty! Yep!” Machina said, puffing out her chest.

“That so...? Then, with a guilty heart, I order my Embryo to do five hundred *more* push-ups.”

“Ugh?! Why are you so sadistic to me?! You’re nice to other people!”

“...I wouldn’t be this way if you got your shit together,” Rascal sighed as he resumed reading the documents. Machina was a natural at putting her Master in a foul mood.

Upon reaching a certain page, though, Rascal stopped.

“...I see. So that one’s near Cortana now. They might bump into each other.”

“Who do you mean by ‘that one?’”

“Someone you know. We fought in the desert and the nearby ruins were destroyed before we could completely empty them.”

“Oh yeah! Ace, right?!”

“We had a similar encounter with her, but we’re talking about independents here! It’s the *other* one!”

“Other one...other one...ohh...” With that, Machina recalled who Rascal was talking about and nodded to herself, doing her push-ups all the while. “Huh? Wait, isn’t Cortana the place where Emily went?” she then asked.

“Yeah. I guess I should inform Zhang, just in case... But, man, this is interesting. As a Master, I’d like to see how Zhang and Emily would handle ’em. If at all.”

“Okay! Changing course to Cortana right now!”

Following those words, with a low hum, the room — or, rather, the entirety of The Tetragrammaton itself — began to shake as it turned.

Machina’s mere thought was enough to move this giant battle cruiser.

However, that wasn’t unexpected. The Tetragrammaton’s autopilot functioned because Machina, as Rascal’s Superior Embryo, was controlling it. As foolish as she appeared to be, she served as the ship’s helmsman as well as its central computer.

“Don’t! I told you, I’ve got negotiations in Hermine!”

“I get it! You’re just *pretending* to have negotiations! You *actually* don’t want me to change course at all!”

“I see... Looks like I’ll have to take off your defective ears and clean them real good!”

“Yaay! Master’s gonna clean my ears! What a rewa— OW OW OW! Don’t pull on them! That hurts!”

As they argued, the entire vessel shook, but they were soon back on course towards their business in Hermine.

All of this, however, had rather made them forget to inform Zhang and Emily of the coming storm.



Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

A little while after Teach told me about the location of Cortana’s Orb, we were asked to share the table with a pair of other customers.

“Ice creeeam! Ice creeeam!” Clearly excited to eat some ice cream, one of these customers — a little girl — sat down while singing that song, all smiles.

The other person was a man who looked to be in his thirties, and he sat by the girl’s side wearing a somewhat exhausted expression.

He seemed like her guardian, so at first I assumed they were father and child, but then I noticed the crest on the girl’s hand — and the lack of a similar crest on the man’s. This marked her as a Master and him as a tian.

Personally, I didn’t feel that it was that strange for tians and Masters to associate. Even The Triangle of Wisdom had tian employees like Lufia.

“Hngh... Nh?” Cyco suddenly let out a quiet groan while tilting her head to the side.

I looked at her face and noticed that she didn’t seem too well.

“What’s wrong, Cyco?”

“I feel kinda...*chilly*.” Chilly? In this weather? Was it because of the ice cream? It was so hot that it was more like a milkshake than ice cream right now, though...

“I’m going back in for a bit,” she said before returning to the crest on my left hand.

That made the little girl’s eyes go wide with surprise.

“Wow! She was a ‘Mayden!’” she said, flashing a childish smile brimming with wonder and joy. “Mister, you’re a ‘Mastar’ too!”

“Yeah. I am.”

“Wow! Wow! That’s sooo nice! I never saw a ‘Mayden’ before!”

“Huh? Ohh, right...” I was a Master with a Maiden Embryo and knew other people like me, so I tended to forget that Maidens were actually pretty rare.

This girl surely wasn’t the only one who had never seen a Maiden.

“Umm! The ones I saw were, uh...a slimey, a buggy, a thingy you can’t see...and another thingy you can’t see!” A slime guardian, a bug-like guardian, and two Embryos she couldn’t see... Territory types without any visual effects, maybe?

A part of me noted that she probably couldn’t say that she “saw” those Embryos if she “couldn’t see them,” but this was just how conversations with children went — nuanced in a very strange way.

Also, the girl really wasn’t very good at speaking. She looked about ten, but her actual age might’ve been even lower. Many people on

the younger side created avatars older than themselves. I myself was one of them...

The tian man accompanying her might've seemed anxious exactly *because* this girl was so childish. It seemed likely that, since the girl was so young, her actual guardians had gotten a trustworthy tian to look after her.

"Ah. There's Machinya too!" she said.

"Machinya?"

"Machinya is very very clumsy and very very bad at Oshello! Rashcal always gets mad at her! But we are friends!" Based on the flow of the conversation, this "Machinya" was an Embryo as well as her friend. Since she said she'd never seen a Maiden, it must've been a humanlike Guardian instead, like that one succubus.

"Hm...?" Feeling that something wasn't right, I turned to Teach.

She hadn't said a single word since we'd been joined by the girl and the man. Her expression hadn't changed, but the atmosphere around her was different somehow.

Most notably, the iris of her right eye — her Superior Embryo — was changing intensely, like a kaleidoscope.

Also, for some reason the tian man accompanying the girl was sweating profusely, and it didn't feel like it was because of the heat.

"Mr. Zhan, you're swetting a lot. Are you okay?"

"Yes... No need to worry."

"Really? But talking so much made me very swetty too! It's *sho* hot! Your clothes look very hot too, mister!"

"Ah. Yeah. But I'm used to wearing this in the desert."

I was curious about Teach and the tian man, but I couldn't just ignore the girl.

“I never get this hot over there, so it makes me very tired.”

“Over there?”

“Outside of Dendrogryam!”

“Ohh. Well, it’s hard to feel heat like this if you don’t live somewhere that’s hot.”

“Yeah! And I’m always in a bed inside a white room with air-conditioning, so I only feel hot or cold when I’m here!” A *bed inside a white room...a hospital, I assume?*

I vaguely remembered reading an internet article that talked about hospitalized children who go on trips inside *Infinite Dendrogram*. The monsters, though, made it necessary for them to be accompanied by skilled attendants. It always reminded me of the adventurer guild quests from low-level Masters looking for bodyguards who would escort them to scenic locations.

“Your ice cream, little lady,” a waitress said as she brought the girl’s order in.

“Yay!” the girl cheered.

Just like Cyco’s, the ice cream instantly began to melt, but...

“Wow, it looks so tasty! Thank you very much, it was *delishus!*”

...it all vanished in the blink of an eye, leaving the cup empty.

“...Huh?” The sudden change left me perplexed. The tian employee who brought the ice cream also tilted her head in confusion, whispering, “It was just there, wasn’t it?”

However, Teach and the tian man had different reactions.

The tian man seemed surprised by something, while Teach...was smiling.

“Little lady, did you really have to eat the ice cream at *supersonic speed*?”

“Huh? But it would melt if I didn’t...”

“Ha ha hah! That’s true! It wouldn’t be ice cream if it melted! With the weather like this, I guess it makes sense to eat it before it melts! Well, your experienced time is still the same, so maybe it really *is* better.” While Teach laughed, the girl used her spoon to eat what little remained of the ice cream.

The peaceful scene did nothing to change the meaning of their exchange.

Teach had just said that this little girl moved at supersonic speeds — an impressive feat available only to a select group of individuals, most of them battle-focused.

“...W-Well, you got your ice cream, so let’s go, shall we?” the tian man, still somewhat shocked, said as he laid down the payment and stood up in such a hurry that it seemed awkward. “Okaay! Bye-bye, mister and miss!”

The two then left the café, leaving me and Teach behind.

“Yu, follow those two.”

“Huh?”

“While I go retrieve the Orb, you keep an eye on those two. If something happens, use La Porte de l’Enfer to suppress them. It’s a hard counter to them, I’m sure of it.”

“Teach, what do you...?!”

“If I explain, they’ll get away. Act now. I’ll give you the details through Telepathy Cuffs.”

That was when I realized she was completely serious.

She'd kept her composure even when fighting the Huang He mafia back in Hermine, yet all of that was completely gone now.

I also realized that to her, that exchange with the girl was about more than just the supersonic speed.

"All right..." I'd ask for details later. For now, I stood up and went out to search for the pair.

"'Machina' and 'Rascal'... Haven't heard those names in a while," I heard Teach say behind me, her tone dense with displeasure. "A girl Master who says those names like they're friends... If she's who I think she is, then things might get *really* bad."



City of Commerce, Cortana

Overcome with unease, Zhang rushed through the streets of Cortana with Emily beside him. *That conversation...her eyes and aura... There is no mistaking that she knows*, he thought.

Not even Zhang expected Emily to reveal IF-related information so casually.

The Master that was with The Blue Sky Songstress seemed clueless, but she herself suspected us from the moment we sat down, and those suspicions were confirmed when Emily spoke Rascal's name.

And to top it all off, Emily performed the absurd feat of eating ice cream at supersonic speed.

Zhang hadn't even known that she was capable of that, and he certainly didn't expect her to do it in front of someone who could be one of their enemies.

With that, the disguises given to them by their accessories became completely pointless.

“Emily, why were you so incautious in front of our enemies?” Zhang asked.

“Huh? Enemies? Who?”

“The Blue Sky Songstress and the other Master. We were sitting with them,” Zhang answered, still holding Emily’s hand.

“But the mister and miss weren’t enemies...” The girl tilted her head in confusion. “I mean, they weren’t *minuses*. Also...”

“Also...what?” Zhang already heard the word “minus” before, so he was more curious about what she had to say beyond that.

However, before Emily could answer...

“Whoa, would ya lookit that. Travelers? In a place like this?”

“Heh heh heh heh heh. What brought ya to our alley? Lookin’ for somethin’?”

...a bunch of men — clearly not respectable individuals — stepped out in front of them and blocked their path.

Armed and with malicious grins on their faces, they moved to surround the pair.

...I made a grave mistake. I was so focused on getting away from the café that I chose the wrong turn, Zhang thought.

He was deeply familiar with their type. They targeted those weaker than themselves and took their valuables or even lives. While in charge of the Huang He mafia in Hermine, he used to suppress these kinds of people every time they overstepped their boundaries.

Another thing he knew about them was that *they were often terrible at gauging their targets’ power.*

“Wow, the brat’s a damn Master.”

“Heh! I’m not gonna be scared of a little girl just ’cause of that.”

"Hey, you two — if ya don't wanna get hurt, ya better start layin' down your cash."

The thugs hadn't the slightest clue that Zhang was a Superior Job or that Emily was part of Illegal Frontier. They didn't even entertain the idea that they were the weaklings here — they assumed that these two were no different than their usual victims.

In this particular scenario, Zhang and Emily's disguise accessories were actually a drawback. If they revealed their true powers, those who came to Cortana in search of the Orb would be wary of them, so the accessories were set to make them look non-threatening. Even Reveal would show fake stats that made them look like common folk, so perhaps it was hard to blame the men for thinking they were easy targets.

Though, in a way, the criminals' mistakes weren't quite fatal yet. Perhaps if they felt an instinct or something warning them to run, this encounter wouldn't escalate any further.

After all, *they were still in her gray zone.*

But then, they sealed their own doom.

"You gonna just stand there or what?!" The largest man among them stuck out his weapon...

"Fork over the money! I'll kill ya!"

...and said those words — the greatest mistake of his life.

"...Minus." Two sounds followed, and Zhang needed a moment to figure out their source.

The first sound was a voice as cold as ice, and Zhang just barely realized that it belonged to Emily.

The second sound only lasted for a split second, making it extremely hard to guess what it was.

It took Zhang a long moment to figure out that it was the sound of a blade *splitting the man from the top of his head to his groin*.

The blade in question was a reddish-black axe that shone with a faint luster like dried blood. Its overall shape was similar to a tomahawk, but the blade was styled like the spread wing of a raptor.

That detail made the blade look like decoration, but any doubts about its ability to cut were dispersed by the fact that it had just severed a human in half.

And the one holding this blade...was Emily.

The blade that had just brutalized a man was clutched in her right hand, but she held another one just like it — though still unbloodied — in her left. She was facing away from Zhang, and though the appearance of the axes was the only thing that had changed about her physically, her aura was completely different.

“Emi...ly?” Zhang hesitantly called out, but the girl didn’t turn to him.

This made it impossible for him to see her expression. Somehow, he doubted that it even looked human.

However, from the angle of her neck, he could at least guess what she was looking at.

She was looking at the men who were still alive — and who had just witnessed one of their own be split in half, his entrails spilling onto the ground and starting to reek in the sweltering heat. They could barely process what was happening.

“Huh...ah? Huhh?”

“H-Howard? Huh? B-But he’s a...high-rank...” They stared at the man’s remains in disbelief.

But then they noticed Emily...looking right at them.

“AIEEEEE?!”

“A-AHHHHHHHHH!”

Just what was it that they'd seen in her gaze?

Whatever it was made them flee in abject terror, some tripping over themselves.

However, one remained, practically popping a blood vessel as he glared back at her with his face twisted in rage.

“My bro... YOU FUCKIN' DEMON!” The man raised up his two-handed sword, but the moment he did that, Emily threw the axe in her left hand.

Spinning wildly, it flew into the man's raised arms and severed them at the elbows...

But then it flew back like a boomerang...and decapitated him.

When the axe returned to her, there were now two bodies on the ground — one without a head and one split in half.

Upon seeing this, the remaining men screamed again and fled with even more fervor. However, Emily merely watched them run away, showing no intent to follow.

Throughout it all, Zhang wasn't moving a muscle.

It wasn't fear that had immobilized him — he hesitated to move because for all he knew, that could set her off.

Once the men were completely out of her sight, Emily began to do something else.

She stuck an axe into each of the remains.

At first, it seemed like she was getting rid of the bodies, but that wasn't her aim.

The axes began absorbing the remains as though they were drinking water. The corpses dried up at an immense speed — and soon

enough, the water within them as well as each and every cell they had were completely gone.

Then...*they turned into motes of light.*

Tians were supposed to leave behind corpses, yet here, they had turned into light and vanished like monsters and Masters.

The motes soon mixed with the passing desert wind and were completely gone out of sight.

Once that was done, Emily turned back to Zhang.

“Mr. Zhan? What’s wrong?”

Emily’s curious eyes as she gazed at Zhang were all innocence. They were pure — certainly not the eyes of someone who’d just committed a brutal murder.

This perplexed Zhang, making it hard for him to respond.

But eventually...

“Emily...”

“Yes? What is it?”

“...What were you going to say?”

...he spoke up, but didn’t ask about what happened just now.

Perhaps he simply needed a moment to collect himself before asking about the brutality he’d just witnessed.

Regardless...he certainly didn’t know that he would get his answer immediately.

“When?”

“You said ‘They weren’t minuses. Also...’ You were about to say something, right?”

“Oh! I remember!” Emily said. “I was saying that if they were enemies, *they’d just go away somewhere*. That’s why that mister and miss weren’t enemies!”

Cryptic words, spoken with an innocent smile.

“Go away somewhere?”

“Yep! People who become enemies hate me, so they *get away* from me. I wonder where they go...”

As terrifying as it was, Zhang’s Truth Discernment didn’t go off.

The one flaw the skill had was that it didn’t react to words that the speaker honestly believed were true.

This meant that Emily actually thought that people who became her enemies simply *went away* from her...when the reality was that she killed them. Every last one of them.

So this...is her “true nature,” huh? Zhang now fully understood what Rascal had meant.

When faced with someone she saw as an enemy, Emily was like a machine that instantly sliced them apart. However, she didn’t actually remember any of these murders.

If Zhang somehow became her enemy, she would instantly kill him and not even recall the event.

Just...how? How does a person like her come to be? Zhang had been through a lot and seen all manner of people, yet the true nature of the little girl before him sent chills down his spine.

At the same time, however, he now understood that this Emily was the same Emily that he’d heard rumors about.

She was the holder of the Superior Job “Murder Princess,” which was unlocked by killing at least ten thousand people using melee weapons.

She was the bearer of the Superior Embryo, “Soul-Eating Axes, Youaltepuztli” — a pair of blood-colored hatchets.

She was the most infamous serial killer among all Superiors...Emily Killington, “the Kill Leader.”

Chapter Three: The Gaunt Man

The Tetragrammaton

“Yeah, that’s right. It’s likely that that one’s in Cortana too... Huh? The Blue Sky Songstress? I did consider it, but it looks like Caldina really is plannin’ to gather everything.”

In his own room aboard The Tetragrammaton, Rascal was talking into a magic comms item. On the other end of the line was Zhang; the purpose of this call was to inform him about the Superior that was sighted in Caldina, but Zhang responded by saying that he’d run into AR-I-CA and that she most likely knew who they were.

“First of all, use those accessories to change your appearance again. Yeah. Like I said before, just twist the knob to choose between five different disguises. It’ll buy ya time, at least,” Rascal said, explaining what he thought was the current optimal approach to Zhang. “Your top priority is survival. Data gatherin’ is secondary, and gettin’ the Orb is tertiary. And don’t worry about Emily. If a massacre breaks out, just wait in a safe place before pickin’ her up. Yeah, that’ll be fine... All right, then, keep it up.”

Having said all he needed to, Rascal cut the call. Machina was still doing push-ups at his side, and he set the comms device on her head.

Supporting herself with just her left arm, she used her right to move the bandage over her right eye slightly, prompting the device to smoothly roll into the gap between her eye and the bandage *and be stored within*.

The device was as big as a palm, yet it had no trouble fitting into that seemingly small space.

Rascal was quite familiar with the workings behind this, so he didn’t even comment on it.

“Zhang didn’t ask why it was okay to leave Emily. I guess he finally discovered her true nature.” Based on Zhang’s words and tone, Rascal could tell that the two of them had already been caught up in some trouble that had exposed Emily’s true nature, just as he’d expected.

“Well, Caldina’s cities *are* full of people she’d see as enemies,” he added.

“Up, down, up, down... Master, I always wondered... What do you actually think about Emily’s thing?” Machina asked, still doing her push-ups.

“By ‘thing,’ you mean...?”

“The Emilynation Mode, of course!”

“...Oh, that was the name the dumbass gave it before she headed out to Altar,” Rascal noted, remembering Gerbera’s smug face as she said it to him. “I can’t *believe* how proud she was of that one. ‘It’s like elimination, but it has her name!’ she said, grinnin’ obnoxiously and puffing out her chest...not like she’s got anything to puff out.”

“How lecherous of you to stare at a lady’s pa— I mean, chest-armor! Also, you’re not one to talk! You’re the one who named this ship!”

“What’s wrong with ‘Tetragrammaton?’”

“...Wow! That’s a serious face!”

Rascal was indeed the one who had named this ship. At the time the vehicle was restored, Illegal Frontier had four members, each with an Embryo related to gods. So, he’d chosen “Tetragrammaton,” which referred to “the four letters of God.”

Another reason for the name, though, was the fact that Machina would be the one controlling it.

“...Back to the topic of Emily,” said Rascal. “After she does the switch, her mind and actions are fixed on the sole purpose of killing

anyone she sees as an enemy. And as you know, she forgets it all once it's done. That's how her 'thing' works."

The people she saw as enemies were the ones her brain personally judged as "minuses." Based on Rascal's experience, he believed that Emily remembered absolutely everything other people did to her. She remembered who was a plus or a minus to her — and if they were the latter, she would deem them an enemy and slaughter them.

Because of this, she was most dangerous during her first impression of a person, when they were neither a plus nor a minus.

If someone she just met raised a weapon against her or threatened to kill her, she would see them as enemies immediately and kill them even if the threats were empty ones. There was even a chance that it would develop into a "chain."

That was the reason why Rascal was so tense when Zhang and Emily first met. If Zhang had done something "minus"-like, she might've killed him right there.

It also meant that she would never murder a fellow member of IF.

As long as the plus-minus system inside her head was functional, it was difficult for her to ever view her friends at IF — who had many pluses in her book — as enemies.

That dumbass almost managed it, though, Rascal thought, thinking of Gerbera. Emily had grown very attached to her since then, however, for reasons unknown to Rascal.

When Rascal had asked, Gerbera seemed to be just as ignorant of the reason; Emily on the other hand had only said, "It was very very tasty!"

Back then, the question of what had caused them to become so close had bothered him to no end.

The answer to that question turned out to be a chance encounter where Emily had walked in on Gerbera while she was making sweets. Gerbera had casually offered some to Emily, and they were so delicious that the girl had instantly become attached to her.

Back then, Emily was the only IF member who had any idea that Gerbera's sweet-making skills were extraordinary. Not even Gerbera herself was truly aware of it.

"But Emily is human, isn't she? Why is it that she can basically become a killing machine?" Machina asked.

"...This is just my outlook, but I think it's a kind of mental illness."

"Hmm?"

"It's basically an alternate personality focused on nothin' but murder... Though, I'm not sure if it can even be called a 'personality.' She just kills her enemies, then watches out for any *more* enemies, then goes on to kill those enemies, repeating this loop until they're all gone."

"Hmm... That reminds me of the robots we find in the ruins."

"Yeah. Like you said, it's almost mechanical... It's like she boots up some sort of murder program. Though, knowing her real life, it's not that weird for her to develop these kinds of symptoms. 'Reality is stranger than fiction,' as they say."

Rascal wasn't as uninvested in this as he initially appeared.

For certain reasons, he knew of Emily's situation in real life. He was aware that the Emily here was no different from the Emily on the other side...her true nature included.

Thankfully, her real self was never in any situations that would call for her to switch to murder mode.

Or more accurately, *it was no longer possible for that to happen.*

I guess we can only hope that her condition subsides as she matures, Rascal casually thought. Good thing it's not a big deal if you kill people here. Between that and the tripled time, I'd say this is a pretty good environment for her.

“Master! Why are you so quiet?! Is all the sweat from these push-ups highlighting my curves *that* well?! Feel free to come and *get some*, in that case!”

“Like hell, ya piece of scrap. And you don’t even have the glands. You can’t sweat.”

“Not with that attitude!” Machina said before letting out a war cry and speeding up her push-ups.

Needless to say, not a drop of sweat resulted.

“Oh yeah! I just remembered something!”

“What?”

“I asked Zeta the same thing before! She gave me a different answer! She’s the correct one, right?!”

“...Why are ya so confident I’m below Zeta?” Rascal said with a sigh before shifting to the topic of Zeta’s outlook. “Yeah, Zeta has a different opinion on Emily. She thinks that Emily’s still conscious after she switches, and later uses extreme autosuggestion to make herself believe she didn’t do anythin’. I’m not convinced you can fool Truth Discernment like that, but I guess it’s not impossible.”

Part of Rascal thought that such distinction meant nothing to post-switch Emily.

“Hmm? Which one of you is right, then?” Machina asked.

“To find that out, you’d have ta look directly into Emily’s mind. And with the player protection system in place, that’s not happenin’. Even if ya bring a Superior Embryo.”

Rascal believed that Emily's killing mode was a symptom of mental illness, while Zeta thought it was all acting and autosuggestion. At this point, no one could know which one of them was right, for not even Rascal knew of any Embryos that could interfere with the minds of Masters.

"Regardless, the result will be the same. There's no point thinkin' about it."

"Result of what?"

"With The Blue Sky Songstress, Emily, and that one we talked about, Cortana's Orb has three Superiors gathered around it. It's gonna get ugly."

The city was on the verge of becoming a battlefield. The explosives were set, and now all it needed was a spark to set it off.

However...

"No matter what, Emily'll be the last one standing. That's gonna be the result, and it ever ain't gonna change."

Regardless what kind of battle ensued, The Weapon, Rascal the Bloodonyx, was absolutely certain that Emily would never fall.

"That *is* true!" nodded his Embryo.

Everyone else in IF who knew Emily would have surely agreed with them.

They all knew how extreme Emily's abilities truly were.

"Her job is to observe, though. The other two'll fight before she gets involved... But I don't think she'll stop at just 'observin','" Rascal said as he gazed out the window, in the direction of Cortana.



City of Commerce, Cortana

After leaving the café, AR-I-CA went to a particularly gaudy mansion here in Cortana — the mayor's residence.

With her back against the mansion's walls, she was communicating with Hugo.

"I'm sorry, Teach," he said. "I lost them."

He'd combed through the café's surroundings but failed to find the pair they'd shared a table with. While searching, he'd passed by a bunch of terrified men — but besides that, he'd found nothing of note.

"Yeah, they probably changed their appearances," AR-I-CA said. "There's accessories that give you multiple disguises to choose from." The face Emily "wore" at the café was different than the one in her wanted photo, so AR-I-CA was fairly certain about this. "Her appearance and stats might be fake, but her actions will be all too real. If she's really who I think she is, then she'll definitely do *something*. You just go wherever there's any sign of trouble."

"...All right."

"Anyway, I'll go grab the Orb off the mayor. Byeee!" AR-I-CA said before ending the call.

Okay, I'll leave the girl to Yu for now and just get this over with, she thought. She'd already told Hugo about the Murder Princess. There was still no guarantee that the girl was really her —but you could never be too careful.

The atrocities committed by the Murder Princess were many and well-known. It was said that she'd even slaughtered each and every single member of the Pentagon Caravan — the 469-strong clan that was second in Caldina's rankings.

We know her job, but we don't know much about her Embryo. That's bad. The details of the Murder Princess job were well-known even

among tians, but the details of her Embryo, Youaltepuztli, were a mystery even to Sefirot.

All that they really knew about it was that it was focused not on large-scale destruction, but rather on lengthy battles against many enemies.

Remembering a fellow Sefirot member who was focused on endurance battles, AR-I-CA tried speculating about the Murder Princess. *Is she like our boy Carl? If your defense is broken, you can take out lots of people one by one. But man...I'm glad I had Yu and Cyco with me when she came. Going by Cyco's reaction, it should work real good.*

AR-I-CA had a good guess about what caused Cyco to change.

Embryos with skills based on certain numbers had some sort of sensitivity to those same numbers. Ray Starling's Nemesis, for example, had an innate counter that tracked the amount of damage Ray suffered.

Similarly, Cyco could just *feel* how much of a kinslayer someone was.

Faced with the Murder Princess's obscenely high kill count of her own kind, Cyco, understandably, had found her senses overwhelmed.

However, that also meant that...

They're probably the Murder Princess's greatest enemy.

...she would be extremely susceptible to the effects of Cyco's La Porte de l'Enfer.

The skill Froze targets based on the amount of their own kind they'd killed. If Hugo could just activate it, the Murder Princess — whose kill count far exceeded a hundred — would Freeze without a doubt.

That skill alone should end the battle, and White Rose should be able to hold out until Yu can use it... Fran made that thing really tough.

MGFX 002 White Rose — the unit that Mr. Franklin of The Triangle of Wisdom gifted to his little sibling, Hugo. Its multilayered armor, Fleur d'Hiver, was created with extremely sturdy material as well as having its defense enhanced with skills. If AR-I-CA's assumption was correct, the surface armor was actually made of the Mythical metal — the scarlet Hihi'irokane. It was just a different color, either because adding the self-repair function had changed the metal's properties or because Franklin had just made it white somehow.

Regardless, it was clear that no Magingear in this world was sturdier than White Rose. It could no doubt withstand even the Murder Princess's attacks.

It probably cost several times more than Opera. It has crazy stats too... Looks like Fran intends to keep the promise she made to me. I dunno about the "entrusting to Yu" part, though...

AR-I-CA cracked a smile as she recalled the promise she'd shared with her dear friend before leaving The Triangle of Wisdom.

"I guess that promise will have to wait until Yu's grown some more," she whispered to herself before switching gears.

Now, she would infiltrate the mayor's mansion.

AR-I-CA could sense danger, so it wasn't difficult for her to sneak past the security. If she could acquire the Orb just like that, everything would be fine — and if the mayor had it on his person, she'd set up an ambush and take it using Blue Opera's supersonic speed.

Killing him could destabilize the city, so she was planning to just take the Orb and get out. If that caused any political problems, she'd just leave them to her sponsor — the president.

“Let’s-a go then! Wait, huh?” As she psyched herself up to cross the wall and start the operation, she noticed something happening at the main gates.

“ARE YOU MESSING WITH US?!”

“...”

It was a conversation. One side could be heard easily, but distance made it hard to hear the other.

AR-I-CA considered the situation.

An incident at the front gates would act as a good distraction for her operation. However, her woman’s intuition — a force separate from Cassandra — told her that things could be bad if she didn’t figure out exactly what was happening.

With that in mind, she leaped over the wall and entered the mansion’s garden before making her way closer to the gate, keeping concealed behind trees and greenery all the while.

Of course, she was there in no time.

At the gates, there was a group of ten men. Or more accurately, a group of nine men and one lone man.

The nine were brawny tians who, based on the results of Reveal, were all over level 300 — very impressive for Caldinians. That, combined with their high-grade equipment, led AR-I-CA to assume that they were members of the private army tasked to protect the mayor’s mansion.

Tians were still seen as better full-time guards than Masters. People who had a tendency to suddenly disappear were obviously unfit to provide security for anyone.

The person facing these tians seemed to be the exact opposite of them.

He had a gaunt face and a body so thin a strong wind could blow him away. Not even his loose robe could hide just how lean the man was. If someone said that he'd just recovered from a serious illness, no one would doubt them for a second.

AR-I-CA's Reveal told her that his stats were far below those of the men, but...

...They're fake, she thought. Her instincts told her that the man wasn't weak, but had only made himself seem that way.

"What's yer deal, anyway?! Ya think ya can just waltz in here and see the mayor just like that...?!"

"I'm sorry... I just need to talk to him. But if I told you why...it wouldn't be good for him."

"And ya expect us to understand ya?! Ya got any clue how shady ya look right now?! There's no damn way we can let ya see 'im!"

"I suppose you're right... Ohh, how should I put it...?"

The man hung his head and put his left hand over his forehead, revealing a crest depicting "a woman holding a skull."

The lone man facing the tough private soldiers was a Master.

"Ohh. I see, I see. This much can be said, I think..."

"What?! Say it!"

"Please pass this message on, from me to him: 'Please show me the Orb' and 'I heard about this from Fria'..."

The representative of the soldiers pondered this for a moment.

The gaunt man was no doubt suspicious, but he was also a Master, making it possible that he had good reasons for being here. They'd had a visit from a Superior just yesterday, and perhaps this man was somehow related to that.

"Wait here!" the representative said before returning to the mansion.

A few minutes later, he returned, accompanied by the Mayor of Cortana, Douglas Coin. His complexion was as good as it was when AR-I-CA saw him yesterday, but his expression was laden with profound distress.

"Are you the Master who sent the message?" he asked.

"Yes," the gaunt man replied. "I came here to look at the UBM Orb you have."

"I have no idea what you are talking about!" the mayor insisted. *I knew it! A robber seeking the Orb of De Vermis!* he thought, panicking.

The mayor was secretly keeping the Orb containing an Ancient Legendary UBM called "The Rebirthing Infestation, De Vermis."

Just some time ago, he'd used it to make himself younger.

Some Orbs could only be used if you knew exactly how to use them, but De Vermis was different. Anyone who possessed it and merely desired its power would quickly be granted healthy bodies.

After wishing upon the Orb, the mayor had actually regained his youth *overnight*.

De Vermis was also particularly loyal. The day after the mayor became healthy, the Orb began talking directly to his mind, telling him how to perform a ritual that would grant him "a new life eternal."

He was actually working on that even now.

I only need three more days... Then I will finally be immortal!

Having gained immense wealth and power even for a Caldinian elite, just like many others before him, he now craved immortality.

De Vermis had told him that “a new life eternal” would not only be impervious to death, but also grant him immense amounts of power.

When that happens, I will no longer need to fear the congress or any Superior! That is why I simply cannot let them take De Vermis!

That was why he’d ordered his maid to assassinate AR-I-CA last night. Doing so would buy him the time he needed to finally become immortal and gain the power to resist those who would judge him for it.

Most would see his line of thinking as extremely narrow-minded, but the mayor couldn’t understand that perspective. He was so close to the impossible goal of achieving immortality, after all.

“But...Fria is telling me that you have it...” Though the mayor denied it, the gaunt man weakly, but with certainty, claimed otherwise.

“That is what I came to ask! Why do you know about Fria...?! What is your relationship with her?! Speak!”

For some reason, the man’s words had driven the mayor into a panic. Neither the personal soldiers nor AR-I-CA could understand why.

However, the gaunt man could.

“...‘Speak’? Do you *really* want me to?” the man asked as he looked around. It was hard to tell if he was looking at the mayor’s soldiers, AR-I-CA, both, or neither.

“Yes! Do it! After all, she could not possibly have told you about any Orb! It’s impossible!”

“Impossible because...*she died years before you even had it?*” the man asked, looking straight at the mayor.

No, not *at* him, but...

“But it *was* Fria who told me about the Orb. And she did so just minutes ago, actually. After all...”



"Fria...the same Fria that you tortured and killed...is right over there," he said, pointing *behind* the mayor.

"Wh-What...?" The mayor hesitantly turned around, but there was nothing there.

He wasn't the only one confused. The soldiers and AR-I-CA also didn't see anything.

However, anyone with Truth Discernment saw that it wasn't a lie, and the man's eyes were focused on the space as if there was truly something there.

"She's saying that she's the wife of your political opponent and that you brought them down and killed them."

"W-Wait..."

"And...Fria is far from the only one who's buried underneath this mansion. Ohh... I was wondering why there aren't any dead children in *this city's* streets. You were gathering them up... Wait, some died *after* you got the Orb... A total of a hundred and ninety-eight, it seems. And most died as slaves..."

"Wait! What are you saying?!" the mayor shouted, thoroughly confused.

It wasn't because the man was speaking nonsense. Quite the opposite, in fact — he had a full grasp of the deeds the mayor had committed under his mansion, *right down to the number of people involved*.

To complete the ritual to gain "a new life eternal," he'd secretly gathered corpses and even killed slaves, but the gaunt man knew it all.

He even knew of the sins the mayor had committed long before he even knew of the ritual.

“Ohh... I’m sorry,” the man said. “I happen to have this skill, Soul Sight...which, well, lets me see souls. That includes people who are no longer with us. I can talk to them and even negotiate with them. Fria actually told me about your crimes in exchange for doing her a certain favor.”

Upon hearing those words, the mayor was overcome by shock.

He was well aware of the skill this man had just named.

“Soul Sight...! Th-That... That is the ultimate job skill of the necromancer grouping...!”

“...Huh? Ohh... I’m sorry... I haven’t introduced myself yet.”

The man put his hand to his chest...

“My name is Benetnasch. My job is...King of Tartarus.”

...and declared himself transcendent.

“King of...King of Tartarus?!” the mayor exclaimed in a panic, backing away. The mayor’s soldiers all stepped in front of him, but their expressions were stern, clearly showing their fear of Benetnasch.

Unlike Masters, who had well-rounded avatars crafted by the control Alis, tians were born with sets of talents that prohibited all but a few of them from ever acquiring Superior Jobs. This made them acutely aware of just how powerful the bearers of these jobs were.

“So, let me ask again... May we talk about that Orb you have?” Benetnasch asked.

“Y-You’re planning to take it from me...!” said the mayor, showing no intention of hiding the truth any longer. It was obviously futile by this point — if Benetnasch’s stats as they appeared to Reveal were indeed fake and he was actually the King of Tartarus, then it was fair to assume he had accessories with skills like Truth Discernment.

The mayor also used a magic item to activate a barrier around the mansion that would prevent people from noticing whatever happened inside it.

After all, if someone were to hear the sins Benetnasch had alluded to, not even his position as a mayor would save him from severe punishment.

"For now, I just want to see it," said Benetnasch. "I still don't know if it has the power I seek. If it doesn't, I'll back off..."

"And what if it does?!" the mayor exclaimed.

"If it happens to have the power I want...I would like to have it. Through a trade, of course."

"A trade...?" the mayor asked.

Benetnasch nodded before replying, "The souls here told me about many of your crimes...but I won't report any of them to the Caldinian congress if you have what I want. Oh, but if it *isn't* what I want, I'll report it regardless. It's what I promised to your victims."

"Guh...!" the mayor winced. Burglary was a crime that could get you on a wanted list. Because of this, Benetnasch wanted to get the Orb with a trade instead of just taking it — but to the mayor, this was no better than blackmail.

The courts of *Infinite Dendrogram* used Truth Discernment without restriction, so verbal testimonies had as much gravity as physical evidence. Even if that hadn't been the case, a search of the mayor's mansion would turn up plenty of proof.

This might not have been a problem immediately, since this city was still in the palm of his hand. However, if his memory served him well, the capital of Drag-Nomad was currently about a day away by dragon carriage. It would take only two days for Benetnasch to report his crimes to the congress and return here with government officials in

tow — perhaps even less if Benetnasch had any faster means of travel.

The Mayor of Cortana was powerful even among the Caldinian elite, but the sins he'd committed were so numerous and severe that even he would be made to face judgment.

He would lose his title as mayor as well as the Orb itself before the ritual's completion in three days.

I have not yet accomplished all that is needed to become immortal! It is too early for me to be caught! the mayor thought in distress. For a moment, he considered refusing Benetnasch's offer and just fleeing Cortana the moment his crimes were reported.

After all, the mayor didn't *have* to perform the ritual in his mansion. He could put the necessary corpses in an inventory, find a safe and secret spot outside Cortana, and complete it there. However, before he could resolve to do that...

"T-h-a-t...i-s...n-o-g-o-o-d."

...he heard a voice in his head — the fluent, but not flowing, words of De Vermis, the Orb that served him.

Wh-Why? the Mayor asked.

"L-e-a-v-i-n-g...t-h-e c-i-t-y...m-e-a-n-s...m-u-r-d-e-r," the Orb replied. Its words made the mayor gasp.

The reason Benetnasch wanted to obtain the Orb through a trade instead of by force was because there were many potential witnesses here. The King of Tartarus had yet to be put on the wanted list, but if he tried to steal the Orb from the mansion of the mayor himself, he would certainly be branded a criminal. That was why he was taking the soft approach.

But if I leave Cortana and find a place where no one would find me...

“Y-o-u-w-o-u-l-d-b-e-k-i-l-l-e-d.” De Vermis cut the thought short.

The mayor hadn’t considered that angle. Away from prying eyes, Benetnasch could kill him and take the Orb without anyone noticing.

There was no guarantee that was indeed the King of Tartarus’s plan, but the idea still filled the mayor with fear, urging him to take a step back.

“I see. So he would leave to report me...and then kill... In that case...” the mayor mumbled, covered in sweat and hanging his head.

“Hm...? Is something wrong? Are you talking to someone? Wait... Now that I look at it... Your body... The soul inside is...” Benetnasch said, looking at him with a worried expression.

His gaze was directed not at the mayor’s face, but at something deep below the surface — something only he could see.

This is my only chance...! If I dispose of him now...!

“...T-h-e-n-y-o-u-w-i-l-l-h-a-v-e-a-n-e-w-l-i-f-e-e-t-e-r-n-a-l.” De Vermis finished the mayor’s thought for him. Murdered Masters didn’t come back for three whole days. If killed here, Benetnasch wouldn’t be able to report him before the mayor had finished his ritual and become immortal.

Normally, challenging a Superior Job — as well as a Master with a Superior Embryo — would be sheer recklessness. However, King of Tartarus was a job that commanded the undead.

Undead were monsters without living bodies. This gave them nigh inexhaustible fortitude, but in exchange they were vulnerable to many things — sunlight, fire, and holy attacks, to name a few.

It was noon right now, and a searing hot one, at that. In an environment like this, any undead were bound to wither away in mere moments.

That meant that Benetnasch couldn't employ any of his monsters, leaving only his own frail self.

The mayor knew well that rear guard casters had low physical stats, and this was enough information to convince him that he could win this battle.

His decision firm, the mayor raised his head and held up his right hand, displaying his Jewel.

“*Call! Flame Dragon! Saint Dragon!*” He raised his voice to activate a skill and summon two of the Pure-Dragons he’d acquired using his vast wealth. Both were of the skydragon kind, but one was a red-scaled fire dragon, while the other was a white-scaled dragon of the holy element.

“Mayor?!” the soldiers exclaimed, shocked that he would go on the offensive against a Superior.

“Kill him! He cannot wield his undead now!” the mayor urged them. “And keep in mind that if my crimes are laid bare, you will be judged along with me!”

“Ah!” The soldiers all voiced their shock. They had acted as the mayor’s hand for a long time, assisting him in committing many foul deeds. Even before he’d begun the preparations for the ritual, they’d done many terrible things on his behalf.

For them, the great payment made it worth it, but there was no denying that they were as guilty as the mayor.

With that in mind, they gathered their resolve and faced Benetnasch.

“I...really can’t recommend using force,” Benetnasch said, still apparently trying to be considerate of everyone present. “If you use violence against me, I will be legally permitted to fight back.”

Fights between Masters were completely outside of tian law, but that wasn’t the case for conflicts between tians and Masters.

Masters who killed tians would be placed on wanted lists, while Masters who were attacked by tians would become legally able to retaliate...in self-defense.

Benetnasch knew this well, and that was exactly why he showed concern — or perhaps *pity* — for these people who raised a hand against him.

"I really think you should reconsider," he said. "I'm speaking to you Pure-Dragons, as well. Please refrain. You will surely die if you don't."

He showed extra sympathy to the two dragons summoned by the mayor. However, the great beasts only chuckled in response.

These intelligent creatures could feel the aura of death about Benetnasch, so they knew well that he was a necromancer. In broad daylight, he couldn't even hope to match these wielders of fire and holy power.

Thus, Benetnasch's warnings fell on deaf ears.

"Kill him!" the mayor ordered, prompting the two dragons to ready their breath attacks...

"Awaken Undead — Aragorn."

...only for their heads to be severed a moment later.

Separated from their bodies, the large dragon heads rose into the air before falling to the ground. A drizzle of flame and holy radiance escaped from their opened throats before their entire bodies dissolved into specks of light and vanished.

"Huh... Ah?" The mayor and his soldiers were struck dumb — partially because the two dragons had died in a flash, but even more because of the *giant object* that had appeared before their eyes.

It was an entire massive skeleton, and one that possessed the majesty of a four-legged dinosaur fossil enshrined in a prestigious museum. There was a faint glow in its empty eye sockets, and its tail

was a blade whose edge shone sharper than any sword of legend — no doubt the very weapon that rid the dragons of their heads.

“...Over-tamed and overfed. Too much flesh and fat on those bones. They were more swine than dragon,” the skeleton said in an imposing voice, its disdain for the dragons all too obvious.

Referring to this creature as merely a “skeleton,” though, did not convey the truth. Actually, it was a “High-End King-Edge Skeleton Dragon” and its — or rather, his — true name was Aragorn.

Once an Ancient Legendary UBM called “Bladedragon King, Drag-Edge,” he’d been defeated and as a result had become Benetnasch’s MVP special reward in the form of “Full-Body Skeleton of the Bladedragon.” Now, Benetnasch had revived him using Necromancy.

“...And there it is,” said Benetnasch with a sigh. “Those Pure-Dragons seemed like the type you’d dislike. I knew you wouldn’t hold back against them.”

“It is a grievous sin to debase a strong life. Thus, dragons must never fall as far as they have.”

It was worth noting that Benetnasch had actually summoned Aragorn using an impressive technique that combined the Instant Release function of the inventory where he’d stored Aragorn’s skeleton with a perfectly timed cast of Awaken Undead.

“...I’ll salvage their souls, at least,” Benetnasch said, removing a crystal-like object from his robe.

It looked like a Crystal of Resentment, the kind used to unlock the King of Corpses job — but unlike that stone, it was shining with all sorts of colors.

Once he was done, there was slightly more red and white in it than before.

“H-How...?!” the mayor exclaimed, having somewhat recovered from the shock. “We are in *broad daylight*! Why is this undead unaffected...?!”

“My Embryo has a passive skill that nullifies the sunlight- and fire-related vulnerabilities of all undead in my party. That lets them function just fine even within daylight.”

This was an outright negation of the one thing that had led the mayor to believe he would win.

He’d ignored the existence of Embryos — arguably the thing that defined Masters — and it had led to his staggering defeat. But that didn’t matter anymore.

All that mattered was the result.

“This is now a situation where I wouldn’t be punished if I hurt you, just like I warned it would be,” said Benetnasch, and he was right. The mayor had just attacked him with intent to kill.

This was a world full of violent bandits and other humanoid dangers, so self-defense laws were far more lax than they were in real life. Because of this, Benetnasch could now kill the mayor outright without facing punishment.

“I’ll ask one more time... May I see the Orb?” he said as he extended his right hand.

“Ghhnh...” The mayor let out a moan. Having lost the dragons he’d been counting on, he felt like he could barely move. His soldiers were slowly backing away as well.

All of them could feel the sheer difference in power between them and Aragorn. They were neither stupid nor courageous enough to challenge a creature they couldn’t hope to defeat even if they gave their lives for it.

What do I do...?! What can I do...?! the mayor thought in a panic, but no answer came to him. If Benetnasch willed it, Aragorn could lop off his head just like he'd decapitated those dragons.

That fear made the mayor reach for the Orb in his pocket when suddenly...

“G-o-t-o-t-h-e-u-n-d-e-r-g-r-o-u-n-d.”

...he heard De Vermis's voice again.

“...What?” the mayor asked.

“I-t-i-s-a-b-i-t-e-a-r-l-y-b-u-t-w-e-w-i-l-p-e-r-f-o-r-m-t-h-e-r-i-t-u-a-l.”

“You can do that?!”

“N-o-t-p-e-r-f-e-c-t-l-y. N-o-t-e-n-o-u-g-h. B-u-t-i-t-i-s-p-o-s-s-i-b-l-e,” said De Vermis.

This was nothing but good news for the mayor. Even if it wasn't perfect, gaining some degree of immortality and power would rescue him from his current situation.

Gathering his resolve, he turned back and ran towards his mansion.

“Ah. Wai—”

“I will sever his legs.” Before Benetnasch could tell *someone* to wait, Aragorn made his move and swung his blade-tail.

It easily sliced off the mayor's legs...

“OWWAAAHHHHHHH...! AAAHHHHHHH!”

...but he *continued running in spite of that*.

“...What?” Aragorn muttered as he watched it happen. The spark in his eye sockets shook, like he couldn't believe his nonexistent eyes.

No blood came from the mayor's severed legs. Instead, something deathly white flooded from the wound and quickly assumed the form of replacement legs.

To Benetnasch and Aragorn, the white mass seemed like *a swarm of maggots*, and the mayor used those maggot-legs to run into the mansion.

Benetnasch watched him disappear inside, his expression a bit darker than before.

“...My friend,” Aragorn said. “That does not seem like the item you seek.”

“...Yeah. Chances are that it isn’t.” Benetnasch let out a tired sigh... It wasn’t an expression of despair, but a slight sense of wasted effort and resignation to an arduous future. This particular endeavor had been for naught, but there were others awaiting him.

“But I should still confirm it, just in case,” Benetnasch added. “And even if it turns out it isn’t what I want, I may still be able to trade it for an Orb with the right power.”

“Truly?”

“I mean, I already got the Orb that turns water into land. If I got one more, I’d have two things I could tra— Necro Aura.” Benetnasch cut his words short and gave Aragorn a stat buff.

The next moment, a melodic engine sound rang out, followed by a rain of artillery.

“RRHHOOAAAGHH!” Aragorn roared as he rushed to cover Benetnasch with his blade-tail.

The sturdy skeleton deflected the shells, and the King of Tartarus didn’t suffer any damage at all.

When the rain of artillery paused, Benetnasch and Aragorn looked up at their attacker high in the sky.

There, they saw a singing, azure Magingear — Blue Opera.

It could only belong to Ace, AR-I-CA the “Blue Sky Songstress” of Sefirot, Caldina’s top clan.

And, indeed, that was exactly who had just attacked him.

“...Honestly, I thought of just watching this play out, but if you’ve got an Orb too, then I can’t possibly ignore you!” AR-I-CA spoke through the machine’s speakers.

Those were AR-I-CA’s honest thoughts at the moment. Her best-case scenario was one where the Orb turned out to be something Benetnasch didn’t want, causing him to leave it behind. She planned to settle things with the mayor after that.

But Benetnasch already had an Orb of his own and was planning to take the mayor’s regardless of its use to him. That made him another target and a competitor.

AR-I-CA herself hadn’t been expecting this fight, but she couldn’t miss this opportunity.

...There’s the Murder Princess too, she thought. If she causes trouble, this guy’ll probably get away. That’ll make it hard to get his Orb. I gotta end this here and now.

She’d decided to defeat Benetnasch, take his Orb, then pursue the mayor and take his.

She also believed that this was *her only chance* to fight Benetnasch.

“A blue Magingear... Sefirot’s AR-I-CA, right?” Benetnasch said. “I’ve heard...certain rumors.”

“I’ve heard ‘bout you too,” AR-I-CA replied. “Like the fact that you always have a pretty purple-haired little Maiden at your side. She hates being in the crest, right? Wait a minuuute. I’m not seeing her anywhere.”

Her tone casual, she said this before looking around. Benetnasch kept looking up at her, not responding.

"I know 'bout your skills too," she continued. "You can use your undead-protection skill from any distance, but *you need her at your side to use your absolutely broken ult.*" Those words made the necromancer's eyes widen. "So... Let's dance, shall we? Just the two of us."

The truth in her statement slightly rattled Benetnasch.

A moment later, Blue Opera resumed its attacks, intent on finishing this while Benetnasch's Superior Embryo was elsewhere.

Chapter Four: The Chain

Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

After ending the call with Teach, we continued the search for the Murder Princess and the tian with her.

I had actually been aware of the Murder Princess before that conversation.

She was rather famous among wanted criminals, and I'd heard about her a good number of times while I was still in Dryfe as a member of The Triangle of Wisdom.

Honestly, I had trouble believing that girl and the infamous Murder Princess were one and the same. Though maybe a bit immature for her age, she seemed like a normal kid.

Still, I knew I had to do something. If it turned out that she really *was* the Murder Princess, the situation could get really bad.

"Can you feel something?" I asked Cyco.

"Hmm... She's not nearby." Cyco could sense any kinslayers in her immediate surroundings — specifically, within the effective range of La Porte de l'Enfer.

The girl's appearance and stats were concealed, making Cyco's skill the best way to search for her, but Cortana was quite a large city. Built around a lake, it was doughnut-shaped — but even taking that into account, it covered a massive area.

The range of Cyco's senses would be only a small dot on the map.

"Compared to this city...my power is minuscule."

Oh... She's a bit sad about it, I thought.

"It's like your chest in real life," she continued.

...But not sad enough to be nice, I thought again. And it's not that small... I'm still growing!

“Anyway, we need to keep combing the city,” I said. “If something happens, it’ll be too late.”

“Yeah,” Cyco replied. “You should also consider that they might attack you.”

“...That *is* true,” I nodded. They now knew my face, and Teach’s face too. If they realized that she was part of Sefirot, it was possible that they would launch some assault against us.

I couldn’t just ride White Rose around town, but I could at least prepare to take it out of my Instant Release inventory.

Several dozen minutes of searching later, we arrived at a bazaar full of people doing business while seated on carpets. Some were even selling wares that were on the larger side — I could see caged monsters in the distance. Careful not to be swept up by the crowd, I entered a relatively empty alleyway.

“Ohh? Well if it isn’t a Maiden I have seen before,” someone suddenly said — clearly addressing us.

“Hm?” I looked around, but I couldn’t see anybody. “Who’s there?” I asked.

The “Maiden” mentioned by the voice could only be Cyco, but that didn’t make sense.

To prevent the Murder Princess and the tian with her from gathering too much information about us, I had Cyco use Crest Disguise, just like I had back when we first met Ray.

However, the voice seemed certain that Cyco was indeed a Maiden.

The fact that they had also “seen her before” implied that the voice didn’t belong to a stranger, but there wasn’t a familiar face anywhere in sight.

"To fail to recognize me *this* badly... You should know that even my feelings can be hurt," the voice said.

"Hugo. Down," snapped Cyco.

"Huh?" I said and looked down, where I saw a mop of purple hair that didn't even reach my waist.

Apparently, the person talking to us was so small that I had completely overlooked them.

...My avatar was way taller than my real height, so I had trouble acting my size.

"I called out to an acquaintance only to have that same acquaintance imply that I am tiny... How disappointing..." the person — a girl smaller than even Cyco — said, covering her face.

I couldn't see her expression, but I could see that her small body was covered in an ancient Grecian-style dress that left one of her shoulders exposed. Just like her hair, it was purple, and the predominance of this color helped me remember who she was.



“...Are you Persephone?” I asked.

“Oh? You *do* remember? I was worried, seeing as we barely talked when we met at The Triangle of Wisdom...but you seem to have a good memory!” she said, standing on her toes and slapping my shoulder a couple times.

“Though, Franklin told us a great deal about you. For example, you are the clan’s rising star — and a Maiden’s Master, just like my Master Dearest! ‘Hugo’ and ‘Cuckoo,’ was it?”

“...I’m Cyco.”

“Oh, I got it wrong! My apologies!”

“Well, you look like some kind of colorful baby bird, so it’s not surprising that you’d have the memory of a bird too. It’s fine.”

“This is the first time we have even talked! Why are you so mean?!” the girl exclaimed.

Anyway, I did indeed know who she was.

She was Persephone — a Maiden Embryo, just like Cyco. The one she referred to as “Master Dearest” was...well, her Master — King of Tartarus, Benetnasch. He’d once helped my sis with some particular research projects.

“Now, why is a member of The Triangle of Wisdom here in Caldina? Traveling, I presume?” Persephone asked.

“More or less...and since you’re here, that means that...”

“Indeed. Master Dearest is in the city, as well. Ohh, he is currently at the mayor’s residence, facing a Magingear. A metal giant with a sky blue color,” she casually said with one eye closed.

“Huh...?!” I exclaimed. If she was telling the truth, then Teach was currently fighting Benetnasch.

I spent a moment wondering how it could have come to that and remembered what Teach said at the café.

“Is he here...to get the Orb?” I asked.

“You know about it? Impressive. Wait, are you after it as well? What a coincidence!” Persephone said.

Teach had mentioned that other Superiors were after the Orbs, but I never would’ve guessed that the King of Tartarus was one of them...

“Why is he after it...?”

“Ohh, saying that would infringe on Master Dearest’s privacy. I cannot give you the details, but I can give you the rough outline.”

“Huh?”

“Basically, he is chasing an unreachable dream. He is searching for something that would let him achieve an impossible task. Though, assuming it *is* possible, his best bet is to take me to the next stage,” she explained.

I looked at her in silence. Her description was abstract and I could barely understand the details.

However, one thing was fairly obvious.

Persephone was a Superior Embryo — one in her seventh form — and Benetnasch was after something that required “taking her to the next stage,” as in making her evolve to the eighth form, something that wasn’t even confirmed to exist.

There was a chance that the Orb in Cortana, which was said to “grant a new life eternal,” could help him achieve whatever it was he was after, so he was now fighting Teach for it.

“Personally, I wish he would focus on the main objective instead of getting sidetracked by these futile wastes of time... And how am I supposed to feel if he achieves his goal without me?”

“...Oh. I see,” said Cyco, noticing something. “So that’s why you’re not helping him fight AR-I-CA.”

“More like not helping him hunt the Orbs at all. I am boycotting this meaningless endeavor!” she claimed.

...So Persephone was walking around here instead of helping her Master because she was fundamentally against what he was doing. That must’ve been part of the reason why she revealed some information about her Master’s goal. It wasn’t uncommon for Maidens and humanoid Guardians to act on their own will, but Persephone seemed to take it a little far.

“Wait, if Master Dearest is fighting a Magingear pilot... Is it an acquaintance of yours?” she asked.

“...What if it is?” I countered.

“I pray that they do manage to take away the Orb! It is a nuisance! A revolting one, at that! I do not even *want* him to have it!”

...This is the first time I've seen an Embryo actually wish for her own Master to lose, I thought in surprise. What does she mean by “revolting,” though?

“So there! I will not involve myself in the fight... So don’t even *think* of harming me!”

...*Pardon?* I thought, eyebrow raised.

“Do not attack me thinking it would help your pilot friend!” she explained.

Well, I suppose it wasn’t out of the question that we’d decide to do something like that. Persephone was Benetnasch’s Embryo, and though she wasn’t helping him now, there was no guarantee that wouldn’t change if he was close to getting the death penalty.

We did have the option of beating her just to raise Teach’s chances.

“Wh-What is that look in your eyes supposed to mean?! Just so you know, I am frail and weak! Even a low-rank Guardian would leave me beaten and crying! So don’t attack me! And no looking at me with those eyes! I know what is currently going through your head! You are thinking ‘What nonsense is that? You’re a Superior Embryo,’ are you not?!”

What nonsense is that? You’re a Superior Embryo, I thought.

“The idea that every Superior Embryo is strong is a myth! And I am so specialized on one thing that I am *especially* weak! I cannot even be compared to that Pandemonium your clan leader has! That is a monster factory first and foremost, but it is plenty strong even when used to just trample — plus, it has camouflage! I am not *nearly* as versatile!” The Superior Embryo continued to desperately assert her weakness, leaving me unsure how to react.

Honestly, I felt like it was best to just leave her be, though that didn’t change the fact that Benetnasch and Teach were fighting. That was something that I couldn’t ignore.

But there was still the matter of the Murder Princess. What was I to do in this situation...?

“By the way, Hugo,” Cyco asked telepathically.

What is it? I replied in thought.

“Persephone is a bit like Nemesis, isn’t she? A bit smaller than even her, though.”

...Yeah, I thought that too.

Their appearances and mannerisms weren’t exactly the same, but they were alike in many ways.

I had no idea why, though.

It wasn’t like Embryos had siblings, after all.



City of Commerce, Cortana, The Mayor's Mansion

During Hugo's encounter with Persephone, the two Superiors at the mansion were still fighting.

Blue Opera danced in the air at supersonic speeds, raining down bombs and artillery that quickly turned the mansion's garden into a devastated wasteland.

Despite that, Benetnasch was unharmed.

"Necro Aura, Necro Repair." He cast his skills as he stood.

"This is the third time... Goddamn, you're tough!" AR-I-CA spat out. The necromancer was protected by Aragorn — an ex-Dragon King specialized in STR and END.

The King of Tartarus's combat style could be summarized with the phrase "tank and caster."

He used sturdy undead like Aragorn as vanguards while staying back and buffing them, debuffing the enemies, or casting offensive magic. It was a configuration that was focused on defense first and foremost.

It was hard to break through even for a Superior — especially one like AR-I-CA, whose offensive abilities were lower than the average Superior.

No matter how intensely she attacked, Aragorn only lost an insignificant amount of HP. That was quickly healed by Necro Repair — a regeneration buff — leaving the bone dragon completely unharmed.

On the other hand, Benetnasch and Aragorn had yet to land a single hit on AR-I-CA.

“Such an irritating assault,” Aragorn said with a growl. “Friend, my blade just cannot reach her.”

“And she’s out of the range of my spells...” Benetnasch added.

Aragorn’s attacks were purely physical, limited by the range of his skeletal frame. He could leap extremely high, but even that wouldn’t have helped him harm AR-I-CA, who had far more maneuverability and could use Cassandra to avoid danger.

In fact, trying to attack her in that way would leave Benetnasch vulnerable to her artillery, which would quickly result in a death penalty for him.

Benetnasch himself couldn’t attack her either. At the very least, she was outside the range of his curse-based debuffs.

His main alternative to that was his equivalent of the Lich’s Deadly Mixer — the High Necromancer’s ultimate job skill called “Deadly Explosion.”

This skill made grudge combust to create an explosion. That might reach her, but chances were that she would evade it.

With the amount of grudge that saturated the mayor’s mansion, the whole place was like powder keg. Deadly Explosion would no doubt level everything in the area. That did make the explosion *potentially* powerful enough to reach AR-I-CA.

However, Benetnasch had refrained from using it so far because it would kill so many innocent people. Even ignoring the mayor, who was on the verge of losing his last shreds of humanity, there were still servants and similar individuals who would no doubt die in the explosion.

“Well, with how much grudge there is around here, I’ll have to burn it down anyway,” Benetnasch said.

"Indeed," Aragorn agreed. "The grudge here is abnormally dense. Were I a grudge-based undead, I would have no doubt been affected."

The dragon was undead, but he wasn't powered by grudge.

This was a result of the manner in which he had been created.

The necromancer grouping powered their undead using either grudge or their own magic. Maise, the Lich of the Gouz-Maise Gang that Hugo once fought, had used grudge. Benetnasch, on the other hand, used magic.

Grudge-based undead weren't taxing on the caster, but they were never intelligent and came with the risk of escaping the caster's control.

Magic-based undead were the opposite, eating away at the caster's magic in exchange for creating an undead monster like Aragorn, which retained the soul and mind they had in life.

Another flaw of magic-based undead was that they had enough free will to disobey the one who had resurrected them, but Benetnasch had forged a relationship of mutual trust with his undead — Aragorn included — so that wasn't a problem for him.

The army of the dead he commanded — his company — was no doubt a force to be reckoned with, but he had no allies who could counter Blue Opera.

"It seems like I really should've gotten someone who can fly," Benetnasch said. "But undead skydragons lose a lot of the flying ability they had in life... That's not the case with Dragon Spirits, but you can't ride those."

It was worth noting that undead avians could fly as well in death as they could in life, but Benetnasch did not have command of such a beast. The reason for that was that Aragorn unconditionally hated all

avians, which showed that not even death could cure a landdragon's natural prejudice.

"I could've done something if Persephone was here, though..." he said with a sigh. He recalled how, right as they'd arrived at Cortana, Persephone had said, "I am not helping you look for any Orb, you cheater!" and walked away from him.

At any rate, this battle was a stalemate. AR-I-CA's attacks were all blocked by Aragorn, while Benetnasch's attacks couldn't reach her.

This will never end, huh? AR-I-CA thought and sighed. *I guess this is still better than dealin' with Carl's broken defense.*

Neither of them had any moves that could quickly conclude this battle.

AR-I-CA had her ultimate skill — the one she'd used to break through Dangai's electrical defense.

Benetnasch also had an ace up his sleeve that he could use without Persephone present, and it would likely be enough to defeat AR-I-CA.

However, neither of them intended to use these for two reasons: first, they were extremely costly, and second, they had to consider the possibility of additional enemies.

The mayor's mansion was already being targeted by King of Tartarus and Ace — two powerful Superiors. Neither of them were stupid or optimistic enough to believe that they would be the only ones who might get involved in the struggle for this Orb. This was doubly true for AR-I-CA, who knew that the Murder Princess was in this city.

Man... What to do? What to dooo? AR-I-CA thought. If this continued, Benetnasch would definitely gain the upper hand.

In battle, Magingears quickly drained the pilot's MP. With Blue Opera being more advanced and power-intensive than the usual Magingear, as well as with all the skills AR-I-CA was using, her MP

wouldn't hold forever. Her Superior Job, Ace, provided her with vast MP reserves, but there was still a limit to how long she could fight.

Benetnasch's Aragorn, on the other hand, was undead. That meant that there was no limit to his health, while the amount of MP the necromancer was using on skills was no doubt less than AR-I-CA's.

If this battle continued for an hour or two, Benetnasch would eventually come out on top.

Looks like that's his plan too, she thought. Well, the boney boy has the endurance for it. It looks like it was made using material from...an Ancient Legendary dragon king. It actually looks like something Fran'd make. For a girl, she really likes dragons and reptiles and stuff.

Remembering her friend, AR-I-CA smiled to herself.

Oh well. The situation won't get any better for me, so I guess I'll have to use the quest item, she thought, taking an object out.

It was the Orb containing Thundershield Beast, Dangai — the very same one that she'd taken off of Zhang Zangqi in Hermine.

Taking on the will of its new wielder, the lightning-clad UBM unleashed its power, quickly enveloping Blue Opera's armor in lightning — but not even scratching it.

The lightning then focused on the rifle in the unit's hands...

“BANG!”

...and imbued the shell it fired.

The charged projectile cut the air and landed straight on Aragorn.

“Ah...!”

“This is...!”

Both Benetnasch and Aragorn were overcome by shock at what happened next — the impact shattered one of the dragon's ribs.

Thundershield Beast, Dangai possessed the power of lightning, and he also controlled it to a minute degree.

AR-I-CA had covered her bullet in this lightning in an attempt to enhance its power, and it had been entirely successful.

Unlike her previous attacks, which had all been deflected by Aragorn's sturdy frame, this shell clearly injured him.

There were multiple reasons why it was so effective.

Being undead, Aragorn had high physical defense and nigh inexhaustible fortitude — but in exchange, he'd lost many of the qualities he'd had in life. This included defensive skills like Dragon King Aura as well as all of the elemental resistances dragons tended to have.

Because of this, the storm of lightning shells shaved away his HP at a rate so high that Necro Repair couldn't keep up.

Additionally, since the lightning had come from Dangai from within the Orb, it didn't drain any more of AR-I-CA's MP.

"Albeit weak, I sense the power of a fellow Ancient Legendary," said Aragorn. "My friend, it does not seem that we can wait until our adversary exhausts her magic."

A quick analysis of the situation was enough for him to realize that his HP would run out faster than AR-I-CA would run out of fuel.

In response, Benetnasch spent a moment thinking before giving a nod and saying, "...All right, I'll do something."

With the stalemate broken, he gathered his resolve to use the ace up his sleeve.

"I can't use Persephone's ultimate...so I'll use this," he said, pulling out the pendant hanging over his neck.

It looked like the lower half of a gargoyle, but it was made of a strange metal. At first glance it seemed to be silver, but it had a luster that proved it was anything but.

“...You will awaken it?” Aragorn asked.

“This will no doubt withstand her attacks. And while it protects me, you can go on the offensive.”

“But my blade cannot—”

“I don’t mean attacking *her*. I want you to chase after the mayor and secure the Orb. Once you get back, we’ll leave this place, go pick up Persephone, and then escape the city.”

“I see. Very well.”

“All right... Here I go. Awaken, Standing and Indomi—”

Right as he was about to pull out the ace up his sleeve...

“...Huh? Persephone?”

“Hm...? Yu?”

...both he and AR-I-CA received messages from their companions in some other part of the city. A moment later, screams rang out from somewhere in Cortana.



Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps.

“The Murder Princess might be in this city? Good grief, we’ve got quite the crowd of walking disasters here!” said Persephone.

I’d ended up explaining our goal to her as well. Or more accurately, she asked and I just answered.

“But...Murder Princess, eh? I see...” she said, smiling for some reason. “Heh heh. That makes this city a true crucible of death. One who *transcends* death, one who *mass-produces* death, one who

changes the meaning of death... Certainly this is not the result of deliberate meddling, but it is no doubt interesting.”

“Hm?” I raised an eyebrow, not sure what she was talking about.

“So, I assume you wish to both keep me from going to assist Master Dearest, while also maintaining the search for the Murder Princessss?” she asked.

“...You could say that, yeah,” I said.

“How greedy of you. But...very well. I will help you in your search.”

“Huh?”

“For better or worse, I have nothing better to do, and this will likely be more productive for me and Master Dearest than fooling around with some Orbs.”

“Productive? In what way?”

“I cannot say that, but rest assured that it will not be detrimental to you as you are now,” she said before walking away. “Come. Let us go. You wish to find her quickly, do you not?”

“...Yeah,” I said, and Cyco and I followed after her.

I intended to search for the Murder Princess while keeping an eye on Persephone, but she was the one who took charge.

She was so lively that it was hard to believe she was the same girl who had just recently been reduced to tears, whining about how weak she was.

With her in the lead, we walked deeper into the bazaar.

But suddenly, she turned around.

“Oh! If we will be together for the time being, why don’t we have a conversation?” she said.

“Like...?” I asked.

"Well, I may answer your questions. Is there anything you wish to ask?"

"Your clothes leave your shoulder exposed... How can you handle this heat?" Cyco asked.

...Is that really the thing you're most curious about? I asked her in thought.

"Heh heh heh. Quite easily, actually," Persephone chuckled. "I have a passive skill called 'Kálypsi ton Nekrón.' It gives undead enough sunlight and heat resistance to let them operate at full capacity even in broad daylight! I can use it on myself too, so I will never be sunburned."

"...That sounds so nice," Cyco said with a jealous expression.

I could tell by her expression that this made her wish she had a higher level of control over ice, which she'd use to keep her ice cream from melting.

"What about you? Any questions?" Persephone asked.

"...Yeah," I said before posing a question that had been bothering me for a while. "It's about The Triangle of Wisdom's grudge engine research. Why did your Master help with that?"

At one point in the past, the clan...or rather, my sister had an idea for engines that ran on grudge. Magingears were MP hogs, and she thought she could fix this issue by giving them the ability to convert any surrounding grudge into usable energy.

That was *her* reason for investing into this research. For all I knew, she might've even planned to use the results to overcome the White Rose's greatest flaw.

However, Benetnasch didn't seem to have any obvious motive for helping. I'd thought that he might've cooperated in exchange for

money, items, or some other reward, but he didn't seem like the type of person who'd be convinced by that kind of thing.

That was why I just directly asked Persephone about it.

Her answer...

"Because it would make cleaning up easier."

...was a bit hard to understand.

"...Cleaning up?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Ohh, not the mop and bucket kind of cleanup, of course. Master Dearest takes care of that himself. I mean the cleaning up of grudge."

"Hm?"

"Explaining what I mean requires explaining the nature of grudge and souls... Hmm... Give me one moment," Persephone said before heading off to a nearby bazaar stand.

She came back with a cup full of juice, complete with large chunks of ice.

"Thirsty?" asked Cyco.

"No. This is for the explanation," she said as she used the straw to point to the cup, ice, and then the juice. "So, here are the parallels. Assuming that the cup is the body and the ice floating in it is the soul, then the juice filling it is what you might call the 'mind' or the 'heart.'"

Flesh, soul, mind or heart... I thought.

"Master Dearest and myself can see souls, so we know that there are ghosts who do not count as monsters," she continued.

I was aware of graveyard- and dungeon-dwelling undead like Spirits and Wraiths, but she was obviously talking about something different.

"Imagine if the cup — the body — is lost, leaving the ice — the soul — exposed. Ghosts would then be like the remnants of juice — the mind — that still cling to the ice. If these remnants vanish, the pure soul also vanishes. In fact, it vanishes in the process of any normal bodily death. The remnants are what some might call 'regrets' and without them, the soul merely vanishes in peace."

Hearing this made me wonder if there were any real world religions with a similar outlook on death, but that line of thought was a bit too much for a girl who'd just turned fifteen.

"And grudge is...akin to boiling water," she continued.

"Boiling water?"

"A fraction of mind that has had its nature changed. Minds that die while harboring great resentment or dread boil especially well. Of course, you can feel such things while alive...but they are not much of a problem then. At most, you will generate an apparition or some negative emotional energy," Persephone explained.

...I could understand that. Ray's Grudge-Soaked Greaves turned grudge into MP and SP, but they could feed just fine on the negative emotions of living people.

"But matters are different when death is involved. As a corrupted form of the mind, grudge can greatly affect the bodies and souls of the dead," she continued before downing all the juice in the cup.

"Phew... For example, if you fill an empty cup with boiling water, it will be difficult to touch that cup with your bare hands. In this analogy, that is an undead monster — albeit a kind quite unlike Master Dearest's magic-based undead. Oh, and I suppose it needs to be mentioned that grudge-defiled items may become cursed."

Persephone then paused for a moment, then took a piece of ice in the cup.

"Now, what would happen to the soul of a dead person — this piece of ice — If it were to fall into boiling water?" she asked.

"...It would melt and disappear," I answered.

"Exactly. If the water is lukewarm, a soul may remain in some cases, usually as undead like Spirits, but *boiling* water... Truly deep grudge melts souls completely and turns them into more grudge. After that, nothing is left. At the very least, the soul would not vanish peacefully," she explained.

The idea that grudge literally melted souls made a light chill run down my spine.

"The souls of villains are especially susceptible. Exposed to the grudge of others throughout their lives, they are already partially melted. Prime for the crucible."

Those words reminded me of the Gouz-Maise Gang.

They were fiends in life and became an undead monster in death. That UBM — Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise — seemed to be exactly what she was talking about — a monster born from the molten grudge of many vile souls.

If that was the case, it would explain why the damage Nemesis had accumulated while fighting Maise could be used for a Vengeance on the UBM he became a part of.

"On the journey to achieve his goal, Master Dearest had made a point to disperse any grudge that could melt away pure souls, but since there is so much of it in this world, continually replenished by the vices of man, he cannot disperse it all no matter how hard he may try. It is such a threat to souls, however, he could not simply ignore it either. That is why he cooperated with Franklin."

She'd finally reached the part that I wanted to hear about.

"If they were able to create a mechanism that absorbs grudge and turns it into energy, there would certainly be far less of it in the world, especially if the technology spread across the land. Master Dearest would have less work to do, and the pure souls he wished to save would vanish far less often," Persephone explained before her expression became somewhat saddened. "Though as you are well aware, they only created engines that lost more and more control the more grudge they gathered. They were essentially machines that automatically moved towards creating more grudge — the exact *opposite* of what Master Dearest wanted."

I didn't know what to say here, but my expression seemed to be response enough.

"Do not make such a face. The Triangle of Wisdom is not at fault. This merely proved that there is a limit to how much control technology can have over the realm of souls. Magic or science — the result is the same," she said.

She had a point. Sis tampered with grudge using science, while Maise the Lich took the magical approach, but the result was the same — complete lack of control.

Perhaps this meant this wasn't something people should have been meddling with in the first place.

"Because of that, Master Dearest still continues his 'treatments.' He has a core goal to achieve, yet he still makes certain to disperse any gatherings of grudge. Good grief... He burdened himself with far too much," Persephone sighed.

Her expression seemed far beyond her apparent age.

Also, what she'd said so far made me curious about something else.

"...May I ask two more questions?" I asked.

"You may."

“Everything you said makes it sound like your Master is very busy... How long does he usually stay logged in?”

“Converting to the other side’s time, about *twenty-two hours per day*. He never forgets to eat, relieve himself, and bathe, but any time not doing those things is spent *here*.”

I was at a loss for words. What she just said made me all the more curious about the answer to the third question I had.

It pertained to King of Tartarus’s motivations.

What Persephone said so far was enough for me to understand what he was doing. It might’ve been a slip of the tongue, but she’d said, “the pure souls he wished to save would vanish far less often,” and I felt that that was the heart of it.

He wanted to save souls. He was probably after Cortana’s Orb for the same reason — he thought that its power to grant “a new life eternal” could be used to that end.

He cooperated with The Triangle of Wisdom, purified grudge the land over, and now worked to gather these Orbs, putting in obscene amounts of effort...all to save souls.

But...I didn’t know his *reasons* for doing this.

He certainly wasn’t the kind of person to save the dead just for the sense of accomplishment. I’d seen him a few times while he was at The Triangle of Wisdom, but I’d never once seen him having a good time.

He always looked tired, worn out — and like he was feeling responsible for something.

And now I just found out that he was even sacrificing his real life to keep doing what he was doing here.

Basically...he wasn’t enjoying Infinite Dendrogram at all.

I was a Maiden Master myself, and I didn't think of this world as a mere game. However, I would never be able to sacrifice my real life to save the dead of *Infinite Dendrogram*.

This world and reality — they were both worlds I lived in and belonged to.

For Benetnasch, though, this world had far more weight than the other one.

"Why does he go so far...?" I asked. He'd sacrificed his real life and was now traversing this scorching desert. What was he actually seeking here? Why was he trying to save these souls?

In response, Persephone...

"...I see I said too much. I cannot answer that."

...didn't give me an answer.

"And even if I did say it, you would not fully comprehend it. Your nature is different from his."

"What do you mean...?"

"I believe the only ones who could understand it are Masters who have already pulverized their minds and hearts for the sake of this world, yet still *cannot break*. Though I do doubt there are any besides Master Dearest."

Persephone's words brought the image of a certain friend's face to the forefront of my mind.

Perhaps *he* could understand it?

The moment that thought passed through my mind...

"Ah...! Hugo!"

"Seems like this conversation is over. Hmm... So this is the Murder Princess? What a curious presence she has."

...the two Maidens said all of that, putting me on edge.

At the same time, I heard something shatter, followed by the roar of a beast.



City of Commerce, Cortana, Bazaar, A Short While Ago

Meanwhile, Zhang and Emily were actually in the very same bazaar as Hugo's group. The pair had already used their accessories to change their appearances, this time making both Zhang and Emily look like harmless tians.

Zhang had one of his eyes covered up, overawed by what he was seeing.

So that is the zenith of western necromancy... King of Tartarus the "Indestructible," he thought. "Indestructible" was the least threatening of Benetnasch's multiple nicknames.

Zhang was watching the events at the mayor's mansion using the vision of a bird jiangshi under his command. Having been informed by Rascal that King of Tartarus was in Cortana, he'd sent the creature to do some recon around the mansion.

Although jiangshi were undead that ran on magic rather than grudge, they had no will of their own, instead moving like machines controlled by the Fu that acted as a substitute brain. Additional Fu could be used to do things such as lessen the negative effects of sunlight, making them quite versatile as far as undead went.

The problem with them was that they could only operate based on set patterns imprinted on the Fu, but that usually presented no obstacle with a simple task like observation.

His undead are far superior to mine. A fight against him would be nearly hopeless even when I still had my Wuxing Jilong, he thought, looking at Aragorn.

Even with the five Pure-Dragon jiangshi that had been his namesake, at best Zhang could have hoped for an outcome where both he and Benetnasch were defeated.

To have even the slightest chance of winning the battle alive, he'd have to still possess Dangai's Orb and give it everything he had. That was how wide the gap was between him and Benetnasch.

I see that powerful people have indeed gathered here...just as Rascal expected. This fact made Zhang feel uneasy.

The one Orb here in Cortana had attracted the Indestructible and The Blue Sky Songstress. Since there were several more Orbs spread out across Caldina, what other people of great power would they attract, and how fierce would their battles be?

...Perhaps what happens here will be merely the prologue, he thought, bracing himself.

His job right now was to support Emily and gather data on the major players here, and that was what he would focus on.

At the same time, Emily was looking up at a giant cage in the bazaar. Inside it, there was a horned, lionlike creature of the upper-Pure-Dragon tier — a Taurus Leo.

It was lying on its belly in its own filth, and the reek made many people keep their distance.

However, some were still actually lining up in front of it.

"Mr. Zhan! Why is that in a cage and not a Jewel?" Emily asked, pointing at the cage and tilting her head.

Normally, tamed monsters were sold through Jewels. Even when let out for a proper examination, they would never be put in cages.

Still, some monsters were sold in this state for a reason.

“Because the monster is not tamed yet,” said Zhang — and indeed, the creature inside was still wild.

When the traders didn’t have Tamers capable of taming the monsters they’d captured, the creatures would sometimes be carried around in cages instead. Of course, such trade was highly regulated, obligating the traders to keep their “products” sedated using drugs or other means and to make sure to keep them in cages strong enough to contain them. Naturally, appropriate measures had to be taken if they had fire breathing or other special skills.

Many believed that it would be easier to just put in a request at the appropriate guild to find a Tamer capable of subduing the monsters, but if the beast was particularly valuable, there was always the chance that any Tamer they hired would just take it and run.

There were already several cases of Masters doing something like this. They had save points in other countries and didn’t mind getting the death penalty, so they readily signed Contracts and took their punishment — as well as their place on the wanted list — just so they could keep a precious monster all for themselves.

“The monster is cheaper than normal because the buyers would have to do the taming themselves,” Zhang said. “Or rather, what they’re selling isn’t the monster, exactly, but the right to attempt taming it.”

This was especially evident when considering the fact that instead of a number of chances, the seller gave the buyer ten minutes to complete the taming.

“And if they can’t do it?” Emily asked.

“They do not get their money back,” Zhang answered.

“Hmm... So the seller doesn’t *want* the buyers to tame it,” Emily said with unexpected frankness, at which Zhang gave a slight nod.

According to the sign next to the cage, no one had succeeded at taming this monster for weeks now.

In a way, that was to be expected. Zhang could tell that in addition to sedatives, the monster was also under the influence of mind-impairing items that interfered with the taming process.

However, the Tamer who had just stepped up to subdue it this time seemed to be utterly unaware of this fact. Confident that he would succeed, the man was smiling as he envisioned the moment he would make the Taurus Leo his own.

“He will not succeed,” Zhang noted. The Tamer’s repeated attempts were failures, only making the Taurus Leo squirm. Panic began to creep into his expression.

“It’s moving around a lot,” said Emily.

“Unsuccessful taming attempts can make monsters go berserk,” said Zhang. “Though, thanks to the cage and drugs, that should not be a problem.”

“Ohh. This *is* dangerous, then.”

“Hm...?” Zhang raised an eyebrow, unsure what she was talking about. Emily pointed inside the cage and said, “The drug’s gone. It’s only pretending.”

“What?”

“And it’s moving around ‘cause it’s preparing. It’s gonna crash into the cage,” she explained.

Zhang wondered how she knew that, but was forced to set that thought aside as *the Taurus Leo got up and began throwing itself against the cage*.

But the cage is supposed to be designed to contain it... Wait, no! Zhang panicked as he began to notice the dents in the bars.

Apparently, the lower half of the cage had rusted through, and the stench surrounding it explained why.

...Feces and urine! The monster used them to degrade the cage over time and wait for a chance to break out of it!

Not every monster lacked intelligence.

Caged monsters were valued as products based on thorough examination of their stats and abilities using Reveal or other skills, but none of this could gauge how cunning the monster was.

This one was smart enough to pretend to be affected by the drugs its captors employed and to use its own waste to ruin the cage containing it.

Because the seller had used anti-tame items on the Taurus Leo, preventing any buyers from actually taming it, the monster had had ample time to slowly rust away the cage.

“BRROOAAAAAARRRGHHHHHHHHH!”

And now, with a mighty roar, it shattered its prison and leapt out into the bazaar.

It started by killing and devouring the tamer in front, then attacking the workers at the stand who had been selling the rights to taming attempts.

It was as though the monster was finally venting all the anger that it had built up over its long imprisonment.

...What do I do? I could subdue it using the Drag-Worm Jiangshi I'm keeping outside the city, but if we make ourselves stand out, we might attract the attention of The Blue Sky Songstress and her companions... While that thought ran through Zhang's head, the Taurus Leo finished off the workers.

It had stained the area around it in blood, yet it still wanted more.

Its next targets, however, weren't Zhang and Emily, but a little girl and her parents who were trying to flee the scene.

"BRRGHAAAAAARRH!" With another roar, the Taurus Leo rushed towards its prey, fully intent on consuming them to fuel its own flesh and bone.

The girl began to wail in fear as the beast approached, while the parents wrapped themselves around her, hoping to at least save their daughter.

However, their fragile bodies would not be nearly enough to stop the terrible creature. They would quickly become its sustenance.

But just before that could happen, a small figure appeared in the beast's path.

Shock overcame Zhang. The girl that had just been right next to him had moved at supersonic speed to stand before the Taurus Leo.

"BROOOAAAARRGHHHH!"

Obviously, the beast saw her as just more prey and tried to attack her...

"Minus."

...but Emily switched into her killing mode and swiftly dismembered and decapitated the creature, destroying it instantly.

The beast didn't even have time to realize what happened. The destruction of its body was so intense that it immediately began turning into motes of light and vanishing, leaving behind only its loot...and Emily, covered in its blood.

"...Emily," Zhang whispered in confusion.

Why had Emily rushed out like that?

Before she stood in front of the Taurus Leo, she hadn't been in her killing state, which could only mean that it was the *standard* Emily who was trying to protect the family.

Zhang didn't understand why she would help a group of strangers...and decided to wait until the girl had stopped being a killing machine to ask her.

However, before that could happen...

"Hey! Are you the one who killed my monster?!"

...a portly man — or an obese one, depending upon who you asked — appeared, practically dripping in gold and gems. Behind him stood several burly men.

The fat man seemed to be the merchant who owned the stall that sold attempts to tame the Taurus Leo. However, based on his attitude, it didn't seem like he'd come to thank Emily for stopping the beast's rampage.

"How dare you destroy my merchandise like that! I'll have you pay for it in full!" he shouted.

Zhang and the rest of the onlookers were united in their feeling that the merchant was being absurd. Between the neglect of the cage, the misuse of drugs, and the way he'd interfered with the monster's ability to be tamed at all, the merchant was no doubt the one at fault here. And yet, he wanted Emily to pay for essentially preventing any more casualties.

"Wait," Zhang said. "That is just unreasonable. This was a—"

"Are you her guardian?! You better take responsibility and pay up! It's ninety million lir!" the merchant said, cutting Zhang off and naming an insanely high price.

He wouldn't be nearly as confident if he'd known Zhang's and Emily's true identities, but they were both disguised as normal tians.

“I have the backing of the mayor, Douglas Coin himself! I can have you arrested and condemned to slavery!” the merchant claimed.

Hearing those words filled Zhang with fatigue. He’d lived in Hermine for years, which was long enough for him to know that Caldina was full of people like this.

With money deciding so much of what went on there, most of the wealthy were also exceptionally greedy. Some even tried to get more money using illegal means — like those hooligans back at that alley.

Things weren’t as bad in places that had some degree of “self-regulating” activity, but the current mayor of Cortana was one of the lowest among the low. This merchant who was supposedly backed by him was obviously cut from the same cloth. He had no doubt used his wealth and power against many people.

With corruption here being so obvious, I would have expected the mayor would have been voted out by now, Zhang thought. Wait...if I recall correctly, in the election five years ago, every candidate besides the mayor dropped out of the race.

There was clearly something happening behind the scenes, but if the mayor had extended his power over the entire justice system, no one would be able to do anything about it.

With various countries funding the casino industry of Hermine, we actually struck a balance that made for a fairly clean government in comparison... Though, anyone who stood against casinos had no chance of winning.

The irony made Zhang sigh, and apparently the merchant didn’t like that.

“Tch! You don’t have the money, do you?! Hey! Seize them!” he cried. The bodyguards behind him made ready to capture Zhang and Emily.

“Hey! Hold on!”

“That girl stopped the monster’s rampage!”

“Yeah! People died!” The onlookers could no longer stand idly by and began to protest this obvious injustice.

“Huh? The only ones who died were my workers and the customer who signed a Contract saying that he will not hold us liable for anything that happens. That means that the only *actual* problem here is that my monster died. Or what, do you wanna pay for them too?” the merchant said, making the people fall silent.

Ninety million lir is a lot of money... Much more than the monster is worth, but still, Zhang thought. *Is it best for us to just pay him using the money Rascal gave us? Or should we simply run away?*

The Blue Sky Songstress and the Indestructible were still fighting at the moment, but there was no telling how long it would last.

From what Zhang had seen through the bird jiangshi’s vision, their battle had actually paused. If they’d settled their differences and were intending to come here next, Zhang wanted to get away as soon as possible.

However, this line of thinking was fundamentally flawed.

In Zhang’s estimation, the time limit on their current situation was up the moment either of the two Superiors arrived here, but it was actually *much closer than that*.

“Just grab them!” the merchant said, ordering his bodyguards to take Zhang and Emily.

“Wait. I’ll—”

“Minus.”

“...pay... What?” The girl’s single word cut his sentence in half. Zhang looked to the side and saw nobody.

“Khh...?” A confused gargle reached his ears — one of the bodyguards that tried to take them had had his throat and chest torn open by an axe.

Needless to say, the one wielding the weapon was Emily.

In confusion, the injured man tried to examine his state, only for Emily to swing her other axe and cleave his head in two. By the time Youaltepuztli had drained him and transformed him into bits of light, Emily had already sunk her axe into the other bodyguard’s side and split him in half.

Once the brutality was over, the onlookers finally realized what was happening.

“AAAAHHHHHHH!”

“M-Murder...!” They shrieked and scattered in a panic, creating a chaotic scene that was no better than when Taurus Leo broke out.

“Y-You monstrous brat! Hey! Just kill her already!” the merchant yelled, unaware that these would be his last words.

“Minus,” Emily said as she threw an axe at the man’s saggy cheek, slicing off the upper half of his head and instantly killing him.

The remaining bodyguards also readied their weapons, but they died as easily as the others.

And just like that, the merchant and his bodyguards were all dead.

The disaster left Zhang at a loss for words.

I was too careless. I underestimated how easily Emily could deem someone an enemy. It is not merely a matter of pointing weapons and threatening her, he thought.

Regardless, the situation was taking a bad turn for them. They had to hurry out of here before things got any worse.

However, before they could, three Masters ran up to Emily.

“That’s enough,” a woman said. “Please put those down and relax!”

“We saw what happened,” a man said. “I understand why you resisted, but there’s no need for any more violence.”

“We’ll vouch for you when the guards get here,” another man said. “So let’s settle this peacefully, okay...?” They seemed to have good intentions and were acting to get the situation under control.

Zhang wondered how to get away from them, when suddenly...

“Minus, minus, minus.”

...Emily swung her axes thrice.

Two lost their HP and died instantly, while the third one — the woman — survived thanks to her Lifesaving Brooch.

“Huh?” she said, confused, as Emily began repeatedly maiming her with the twin axes. “Wha—? S-Stop...!” she begged, but Emily ignored her, pulverizing her until she was nothing more than a hunk of flesh, then tiny motes of light.

“...What is happening?” Zhang said in confusion.

He couldn’t believe what Emily was doing.

The Masters had all approached her with good intentions, showing no desire to harm her, yet she had judged them as minuses and instantly killed them.

In fact, it was also strange that she’d murdered the bodyguards who had intended to merely capture her. Unlike the hooligans from that alley or the Taurus Leo, they hadn’t threatened her life at all.

The bar that those bodyguards and the Masters had to pass to be deemed as “enemies” seemed to be significantly lower.

“Is she actually...?” Zhang muttered as an idea came into his head that made his blood run cold.

While that was happening, the situation was only escalating.

“Stop that girl!”

“The stats Reveal gives you are fake! She’s not what she seems!”

Drawn by the commotion, other Masters had gathered here, some of them ready to face Emily.

Upon seeing them...

“Minus, minus, minus...”

...Emily repeated the same word over and over.



Normally, Emily was an innocent little girl who was generally friendly and usually liked the people she met, rather than disliking them. Because of this, there weren’t many things she recognized as enemies, making her switches to killing mode rather uncommon.

However, things were different once she’d already made the switch. While she was in her killing mode, the bar for her to judge someone as an enemy was much, *much* lower.

Those trying to restrain her, those trying to make her put down her weapons, those who simply approached her and happened to be powerful...

As long as they weren’t Zhang or other people from IF — essentially anyone she’d already recognized as a friend — her killing mode would see anyone who came too close as enemies.

Even trying to stop her would make you an enemy, making the number of targets increase endlessly.

Rascal and the other members of IF referred to this as a “chain.”

This was the phenomenon that devastated the massive Pentagon Caravan clan, led to the death of every fighter in a whole city, and drove a species of worms to extinction.

It was the murderous stampede that continued until all possible enemies were gone from her sight.

And it had now begun here in Cortana.



Emily dashed towards a group of Masters that had come to defeat her.

She covered a distance of fifty metels with a single step and swung her axes at the same time, removing the head of one of the Masters.

“Ah! Supersonic speed?!”

“EEYAAHH! STORM STINGEERRR!”

Right after the decapitated Master vanished, the Gale Lancer nearby used his ultimate job skill on Emily. She was wide open, and the supersonic attack was too fast for her to evade. It was a direct hit, *but all of it was nearly negated by the defense of her skin.*

The lance only barely hurt her.

“How...? Ghuh?!” the lancer exclaimed as Emily gave him the death penalty a mere split second later.

While this was happening, a Gunner Master fired his Embryo bullets, only for them to be repelled like it was nothing.

“What’s with her?!” one of the Masters said.

“She’s way too tough...! There’s no way she’s a tian! She’s probably a Master with an Embryo focused on phys-def!” said another, analyzing their enemy.

“Guess it’s a job for me, then!” a robed Master — a Pyromancer — said as he took a step forward.

Emily quickly faced and charged at him...

“Instant Charge! Crimson Sphere!”

...but the Pyromancer, who had an Embryo specialized in high-speed spellcasting, quickly cast his ultimate job skill on her.

Emily’s vision was drowned in crimson, and her whole body was covered in flame.

“I did i— Guhh?” the Master said as, a moment later, Emily’s tiny arm reached out from the ball of fire, grabbed his neck, and snapped it like a dry, withered twig.

The flame soon expired, leaving only Emily, completely unharmed.

However, the same couldn’t be said for her equipment. Her custom-made dress was resistant to fire and had withstood the Crimson Sphere’s flame, but the accessory that maintained her disguise had melted away. Now she stood there not as a harmless tian, but as herself.

Her face was clearly visible, exactly as it appeared on the wanted list.

“...No way,” murmured a Master as they stared at her unmasked stats.

Emily Killington

Job: Murder Princess

Level: 528

(Total Level: 928)

HP: 8,056 (+36,550)

MP: 350 (+36,550)

SP: 1,980 (+36,550)

STR: 3,050 (+36,550)

AGI: 4,356 (+36,550)

END: 1,680 (+36,550)

DEX: 687 (+36,550)

LUC: 100 (+36,550)

Everyone present was perplexed by Emily's stats. They were abnormal — simultaneously too low for an SJ, as well as too *high* with the bonus.

However, this was only to be expected. The bonus was created by the very skill that made the Murder Princess such a fearsome job.

This skill's name was "Kill Leader," and it had actually given Emily her nickname.

It was the Murder Princess's *passive* ultimate job skill that made the job what it was.

Its effect was simply "give a bonus to all stats equal to the amount of *humans killed*."

Indeed, the total number of people she'd killed, tian or human, was 36,550 — and each of them had added a point to her stats.

The more Emily killed, the stronger she became.



Chapter Five: The Machine Knight of Ice and Roses

Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

By the time we arrived at the source of the screams, we found a scene of absolute mayhem.

People were fleeing in all directions while countless Masters engaged in fighting something that turned them into bits of light one after the other.

My low AGI made it hard to see it, but there was definitely something moving around at an incredible speed.

The first time I did manage to see anything properly was when it used an axe to split open a Master's head.

The figure was a girl, wearing a dress so drenched in crimson blood that I couldn't tell the original color.

With her disguise gone, her face was different, but I was certain that this was the very same girl I'd met at that café.

"The Murder Princess," said Persephone. "This is my first time laying eyes on her, but she is truly something. I can see why she is in the same clan as The Weapon... She is clearly on a rampage, but she's killing them one by one."

"What now, Hugo?" Cyco asked.

I knew why she was asking me that question.

She wanted to know what *I, myself*, would do now.

I closed my eyes and pondered. Teach had told me to suppress the Murder Princess using La Porte de l'Enfer. I was reluctant to use it against a little girl, but I couldn't just sit by and let the casualties pile up.

More than that, I felt that I had to stop the girl from doing this for her own sake.

Neither Yuri nor Hugo could tolerate the disaster before them.

“Cyco... Let’s do this!” I shouted.

“Roger that!” she responded. I used Instant Release to take out my White Rose, summoning a pure white Magingear into the bazaar.

The scene attracted many eyes...including Emily’s.

Under the gaze of all present, I rushed to enter White Rose.

It only took me a few seconds, but that was a long time when dealing with someone who moved at supersonic speeds. As I put my hand on the edge of the cockpit, the Murder Princess fixed her eyes directly on me.

I looked right into them and saw...tranquility.

Despite the violence she was committing, her eyes were as still as a calm lake.

She’s gonna kill me, I thought.

She had plenty of time to reap my life while I boarded the cockpit.

I expected her blade to reach for me next...

“...”

...but she did nothing.

She allowed me to enter my Magingear. It was as though she *didn’t see me as an enemy.*

She then looked away from me and resumed moving at supersonic speed, disappearing from my sight.

While that was happening, I finished boarding White Rose.

“Cyco!” I called, ordering Cyco to merge with White Rose and become its frozen armor.

“La Porte de l’Enfer!” she shouted the moment the fusion was complete.

This was a skill that Froze X% of any targeted creatures’ bodies with a probability of X%, where X equaled their kill count of their own kind.

It activated the moment it was used, then ticked every thirteen seconds afterwards.

Because of this, anyone that had killed a hundred or more of their own kind would instantly freeze solid, just like the dozens of Masters I’d faced in Gideon.

“Wh-Whoa...!” a Master voiced his surprise.

“What the hell...? Is this one of her skills?” another one asked. I was in too much of a hurry to set the skill’s target, so I ended up just using it indiscriminately. As a result, many other Masters had their bodies partially or completely frozen.

That wasn’t what truly mattered here, though.

“...What became of *her*?!” I asked. Moving at supersonic speed, she was too fast for me to follow, so I didn’t know where she was or if she had even been affected by my skill.

I knew the extent of La Porte de l’Enfer’s power.

I’d used it against skilled Masters back in Gideon and even tested its viability against Superiors with Fran.

However, I’d never once used it against a combat-focused Superior. If it didn’t work because of, say, the sheer difference in power output of our Embryos, then I would have no means of stopping her.

As such worries flickered through my mind, I looked around as I suddenly heard a voice.

“H-Hey! The Murder Princess... She’s Frozen!”

Looking for the source of the voice, I moved White Rose’s camera-eye.

There, I saw an ice statue of a girl holding two axes.



City of Commerce, Cortana

With Emily neutralized by La Porte de l’Enfer, the situation was brought under control.

One could say that this positive result was pure coincidence.

Normally, Hugo would’ve been instantly killed while he was boarding White Rose. In her killing mode, Emily rushed towards and murdered anyone she deemed an enemy.

However...Hugo had chatted with her *before* she’d entered her killing mode.

Although briefly, they’d had a pleasant exchange back at the café. Emily remembered it, and that was enough for her to recognize him as a friend even in the heat of battle.

While killing mode made it far easier for her to see *strangers* as enemies, those that normal Emily had already deemed to be friends would still be hard-pressed to become her targets.

That was what had made it possible for Hugo to enter his Magingear and activate his skill without interruption.

And the ultimate result of that was his act of giant-slaying — a high-rank Master subduing a Superior one.

The onlookers were filled with shock.

This included the many Masters that had been battling Emily...as well as Zhang Zangqi — Emily’s only real ally in this city.

“Wh-What...?” he stammered as he observed Emily’s Frozen form through the vision of a bird jiangshi.

When La Porte de l’Enfer was activated, Zhang had been nowhere near her. After Emily had begun her “chain,” Zhang had obeyed Rascal’s words to the letter — “If a massacre breaks out, just wait it out in a safe place before pickin’ her up.”

Emily’s rampage was no doubt something that would attract the other Superiors.

It was an unusual situation, but Zhang’s primary objective was to survive, and his secondary objective was to collect information. He was hesitant to leave Emily, but he did so anyway to fulfill these two objectives.

Thankfully, he’d gone far enough to leave the range of La Porte de l’Enfer.

If he had been nearby, he’d have been turned into an ice statue just like Emily.

However, he was in no state of mind to appreciate the danger that he’d narrowly evaded.

Emily...someone so powerful Froze in an instant... he thought, stressed. I must save her. Rascal said that I should not, but with the situation being what it is, I need to retrieve her no matter the cost. I doubt even he’d expected that she’d be neutralized like this.

As things were, Emily’s Frozen body would either be shattered or locked away, and both of those things would lead to her being sent to the gaol.

With that in mind, Zhang rushed to Emily’s aid...

“Ah...!”

...but the *very moment* he stepped into La Porte de l'Enfer's range, the skill had another thirteen-second tick, which instantly Froze his right leg.

If he had been just a couple seconds later, he would've been an ice statue; he was lucky to get away with just a leg.

"I am not sure how this works, exactly...but I see that I cannot enter either," he said. However, his observational jiangshi were untouched by the ice, which told him that jiangshi were unaffected by whatever this was.

Zhang came to the conclusion that he might be able to use his jiangshi to approach and retrieve Emily.

"Drag-Worm Jiangshi, move!" he said. "Will they make it in time, though?" Positioned outside and moving through the ground, Drag-Worm Jiangshi weren't fast monsters. They couldn't even be compared to the High Dragon Jiangshi he'd possessed in Huang He and Hermine.

Zhang was worried that they wouldn't make it to his location before Emily was shattered.

If it had been Rascal in his place, however, he wouldn't have been the least bit anxious. Instead of calling for reinforcements, Rascal would've merely resumed his hunt for information.

"No matter what, Emily'll be the last one standing. That's the result, and it ain't ever gonna change."

Rascal had said those words a mere hour ago.

He hadn't said that for any reason as simple as Emily's Kill Leader skill and the immense stat boosts it gave her.

No. The true value of the Murder Princess lay elsewhere.



Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

“Cancel La Porte de l’Enfer...” I said.

“Okay,” Cyco replied and did as told.

At the same time, she thawed everyone out besides the girl.

“Whoa... I’m back.”

“So this was the Magingear guy’s skill. Damn, he completely stopped the Murder Princess.”

“I feel like I’ve seen this skill before...” I heard such voices around me, but I had something more important to focus on.

Hurriedly, I established a comms line with Teach’s Blue Opera.

“Teach, can you come here right away?” I asked.

“Kay kay,” she replied. “Ya met the Murder Princess, didn’ cha?”

“Yes... I neutralized her with La Porte de l’Enfer.”

“Niiice one!” She gave me an impressed whistle.

“...What do I do now?” I asked.

“Just wait there. Oh, but she had a friend, so watch out for him too, okay?” she said.

That much was true. Back at the café, the girl had been accompanied by a man with the air of a guardian. If he was actually with her, then he certainly wouldn’t ignore a situation like this.

“All right,” I said.

“Okay then. I’ll head there after I’m done talkin’ here. I won’t be long,” Teach said before cutting the call.

She must’ve been talking to King of Tartarus, Benetnasch.

“Persephone, is your Master... Hm?”

I called out to his Embryo using the unit's speaker, but I got no response.

I looked for her using the cockpit's monitors, but she was nowhere in sight.

Well, she had said that she couldn't fight, so it would make sense for her to flee the scene.

Regardless, I had more important matters to attend to.

"Cyco, stay alert," I said. "The man who was with the Murder Princess might come to retrieve her."

"Roger that."

I had to keep an eye on my surroundings until Teach showed up. However, when I started looking around, I noticed that there were a bunch of Masters around White Rose.

One of them — a man with a mohawk — spoke to me.

"Thanks for that. You're the one who Froze her, right?" he asked.

I responded with a nod of White Rose's headpiece and, trying to be Hugo-like, said, "This is one of my Embryo's skills. She will remain Frozen for quite some time."

"Good to know... Should we break her now?"

"...No. My companion will be here soon. She is part of Sefirot. Ace, AR-I-CA."

"The Blue Sky Songstress, huh...? Yeah, it's probably safer to wait, then. For all we know, shatterin' her might just activate her Lifesavin' Brooch and basically just...free her."

...I actually hadn't considered that, I thought. What happened to fully Frozen enemies who had Brooches equipped if their ice was shattered? I hadn't tested that.

“...I will prepare to use the skill again, just in case.”

“Good to know. Thanks. Without you here, we’d be... Wait, I haven’t introduced myself yet. My name’s Mohawk Rock, and I’m part of the local Mohawk League branch.”

...I’d guessed as much based on the mohawk alone. For some reason, that clan had branches in every country. Dryfe was no exception.

“I am Hugo Lesseps,” I replied. “I am currently independent, but I used to be a member of The Triangle of Wisdom.”

“Aha, so you were. Your Magingear’s like none I’ve ever seen, so I guessed you’d have ties there.”

“I see... Oh, there is one thing you should know. The Murder Princess did not come here alone. Her companion might come to retrieve her. Could you help me keep an eye out for him?”

“Sure thing. Leave it to us,” Rock said before calling out to some other Masters and explaining the situation to them. They soon began looking around for anyone suspicious. He then turned back to me and said, “They are all from our clan. Though, they’re hidin’ their mohawks. For reasons.”

...What is the significance of them hiding their mohawks? I wondered.

“By the way, why’s The Blue Sky Songstress here in Cortana? She’s part of Sefirot, right? Is it somethin’ to do with the mayor?” he asked.

“...I am not at liberty to say, but why are you asking?” I returned. It actually *was* related to the mayor, but I couldn’t exactly say that.

However, I couldn’t help but wonder why Rock had posed the question.

"Well, if it's somethin' to do with the stuff the mayor's pullin', I thought that maybe she could help us out. Sefirot is on the president's side, right?"

"Hm?"

"We Mohawk League were asked by Caldina's Administration of Justice to investigate Mayor Douglas Coin. He apparently did lots of really bad stuff, but there was no solid proof for any of it. At least, until some time ago, when someone submitted a letter to the administration describin' a bunch of his crimes in detail. We came here to confirm that... Though, one of our leads — the merchant with ties to the mayor — was just killed by the Murder Princess."

Apparently, the mayor was involved in far worse things than just keeping the Orb for himself.

...And they were hiding their mohawks to be discreet while investigating, huh? I thought.

Well, a bunch of Masters with mohawks would certainly stand out too much. Though Rock, the apparent leader of this group, had kept his mohawk on.

...I really wasn't sure if that was a good idea.

"At the very least, I can tell you that we are *not* with the mayor, so we might be able to assist." I said. "Though, I would have to discuss it with Tea— I mean, AR-I-CA."

"Well, that'd be great if you do."

"By the way, who was it that submitted the letter?" I asked.

"Oh, that would be my Master Dearest." A third voice joined our conversation. It was Persephone, who'd at some point approached my White Rose without me noticing her at all.

"Persephone, Hugo's thinking 'she's so small I didn't even notice her,'" said Cyco.

"Gngh... Am I truly *that* tiny...?!" Persephone groaned in chagrin with her hands on her head.

Well, it was less about her size and more about her being in the camera's blind spot...

"I just didn't see you anywhere. Where were you?" I asked.

"I went to retrieve something."

Retrieve? I wondered.

"So, lady, you said that you know who submitted the letter?" asked Rock.

"Indeed I do. It was my Master, King of Tartarus, Benetnasch," she answered as if it was nothing special.

"King of... Damn, so there's three Superiors here? What's going on in this city? Maybe we should've gotten Sec-Gen Omega to come here too?" Rock muttered, saying something quite worrying.

I'd heard that Secretary-General Omega was the Mohawk League's leader and another Superior... Bringing him here would only make things more chaotic than they already were.

Putting that aside, I faced Persephone and asked, "Why did he make the submission?"

"Well, as I already told you, Master Dearest can see ghosts. He gathered information from the spirits of the mayor's victims in exchange for assisting in the exposure of his crimes."

...So that's the situation, I thought.

"He also used the information he acquired to blackmail the mayor," she added. "'Please give me the Orb or I'll report you to the congress' and all that."

"...Huh? But he'd already submitted the letter..." Cyco noted.

"To the Administration of Justice, yes...but not the congress."

...Not lying, but not telling the truth either. This conversational trick was often used to avoid Truth Discernment. My sister was a fan of it too.

Anyway, this meant that the mayor's misdeeds would be exposed whether or not he gave away the Orb. This Benetnasch seemed to be quite a character...

"Looking at all the grudge in this city, the mayor has gone far beyond all reason," Persephone continued. "He did not have much time left regardless. The rest of his life will be spent behind bars...assuming he even survives," she said as she looked in the direction of the mayor's mansion. "Now, your companion and my Master Dearest should be... Oh dear. This is bad."

She spoke the last line while looking at the still-Frozen Murder Princess.

A moment later, the twin axes *broke out of the ice and flew through the air.*

"What?!" A cry of shock escaped my lips. The deadly weapons decapitated two Masters in their path and began to spin around the area.

"It's an Arms-type Embryo!" a Master exclaimed.

"Tch! They can move around even when she's Frozen?!" said another. I looked and noticed that the ice statue's arms were shattered.

This was the price she'd paid to move those axes.

However, the owner's wounds seemed to matter little to the weapons. They flew around until...

"...Huh?"

...they crashed into the girl's Frozen frame, *shattering it to pieces*.

The shards of ice sparkled within the sunlight.

Among those shards were motes of light that were her mortal remains.

Emily had used her own Embryo to give herself the death penalty.

"Sh-She killed herself...?" one Master wondered.

"I guess it's better than letting us take her out?" said another. "Also, death penalties from losing HP make you drop less stuff than death penalties from using the suicide system."

With the resurrection timer expired, she'd become bits of light and could no longer be brought back.

"...Oh no," I muttered. I hadn't expected this outcome.

It's in Infinite Dendrogram, sure, but I just pushed a little girl into committing suicide... I'm not sure if I'll be able to sleep tonight, I thought.

...At least this whole problem was solved now.

This was the end of my encounter with the Murder Princess...

"Minus."

...or so I thought.

A moment after I heard a voice speak the word, I heard a powerful sound of something breaking.

I looked around for its source and I soon found it. The Master near me — Rock — now had an axe instead of a head.

It was clearly a fatal wound, and with his head and trademark mohawk destroyed, he quickly dissolved into bits of light.

In his place, there was now only a blood-colored axe, which soon spun and flew to return to the hand of a particular person.

After catching the weapon, *she* looked around.

It was her. The very same girl who had just received the death penalty — Murder Princess, Emily.

She wasn't Frozen, and she even had the hands she'd lost when her axes had flown away from her.

She stood, unharmed and ready for battle.

"Wh-What's going on?!" a Master shouted.

"D-Did someone use a rez item on her?!" a second Master asked.

"Like hell! You can't use those after the rez timer runs out and they turn into light! And that's what happened to her! There's no way she should've been able to come back from that!" a third one exclaimed.

Indeed, this was impossible.

Reasonably, there's no way this could've happened.

However, I knew things that others here might've not.

I knew of a Master that merged with a kaiju of immense stats.

I knew of a Master that could rewrite the effects of skills to make them far stronger.

I knew of a Master who could see a future others couldn't.

And I knew a Master who could create armies of tens of thousands all by herself.

They...the Superiors could go beyond what was reasonable and make real what should've been impossible.

Knowing this, I understood what was happening here.

"This is the Murder Princess's...*her* Superior Embryo's power...!"

She could die, only to live again.



About Youaltepuztli

In *Infinite Dendrogram* there was a concept referred to as “Resources.” It could be described as a kind of “energy” possessed by jobs, monsters, items, nature, and Embryos.

Resource exchanges came in many forms.

When a creature defeated another creature, the latter became experience points that raised the former’s level.

Items used the Resources stored within them to activate various skills.

Upon death, monsters had most of their Resources converted into items.

When Masters or monsters died, the Resources that didn’t become EXP or items were quickly retrieved by the control AI, and the Resource-less bodies instantly became bits of light.

The Resources retrieved by the AI were used in various ways.

Control AI No. 1, Alice — the one in charge of avatars — used the Resources of destroyed Master avatars to restore them.

Control AI No. 9, Caterpillar — the one in charge of environments — used Resources to fix this or that biome, or to improve the areas around save points.

One could say that all life in *Infinite Dendrogram* depended on the concentration, distribution, depletion, and growth of Resources.

Naturally, there were also Embryos that used Resources.

King of Destruction’s War God Ship, Baldr, and Giga Professor’s Magic Beast Factory, Pandemonium, used item Resources to produce ammo or monsters.

King of Crimes' Primordial Shifting, Nu, acquired physical resistance and its well-rounded nature by taking most of the Resources meant for its Master's job.

Emily Killington's Soul-Eating Axes, Youaltepuztli, was a Superior Embryo that used Resources far more *directly* than others.

Their power was simply to *reap and store Resources*.

Most of the Resources that would have originally become her EXP had actually gone into the axes instead.

Because of this, Emily's level was lower than it should've been, but considering Youaltepuztli's power, that mattered little.

The axes could turn even tian corpses into light and absorb them. The numbers were estimates, but by fully absorbing a level 100 tian, Youaltepuztli would receive 100 resources. Even a normal murder would give at least half of that.

With Youaltepuztli being a deity as well as a demonic figure in Aztec mythology known to consume souls, one could say that this was a fitting power.

However, that was only the first part of what made it such a fearsome Embryo.

Youaltepuztli could use the stored resources to *resurrect* Emily.

That was the effect of its passive skill, "Survival of the Fittest."

When Emily died, her resurrection timer expired, and her Resource stocks were scattered and drained, they would automatically be refilled to bring her back.

Like the blood of sacrifices made to god, the stored Resources would be used to recreate her avatar the moment she turned into bits of light. Whether it was death by external wounds or the result of some status effect didn't matter at all — Emily would always come back with full health.

One could say that she was doing Control AI No. 1's job for herself, except instantly and without the need to log out.

That alone made her a fearsome foe, but those fighting her would have an even bigger problem...a fatal one, in fact.

Though the process drained the stored Resources...*there was no limit to how many times she could come back.*

If Emily was level 100, she could come back by draining 100 Resources.

With her now being level 928, the Resource cost for resurrection had increased.

In a way, that meant there was functionally a limit — she couldn't come back once her Resources were depleted.

However, including those she'd just killed, Emily had murdered a total of 36,587 people.

That didn't even include monsters such as worms.

This was what made this skill such a fatal problem for her opponents.

Just how vast were her stores of Resources? And how many times could she use them to come back?

Even if someone was able to drain her Resources by repeatedly killing her, Emily could replenish her stocks simply by killing any living creature.

This meant that she would never fall before her enemy did.

This was the true meaning behind Rascal's words.

Murder Princess, Emily Killington was an *immortal* Master.



Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

Death was the end of life — the inevitable fate that loomed large over everything that existed. No matter how good or bad, all things ended the moment death arrived.

Infinite Dendrogram had these so-called “undead,” but those were really just a different form of life — not something that came after a truly final death.

Everything was destined to die, and death was something that could never be reversed.

My unwavering belief in this fact was probably the reason why my Embryo, Cyco, was born with the power to punish those who inflicted death upon others.

However, things seemed to be different for Emily. She'd become bits of light, only to return a moment later.

This girl was clearly above even the temporary death that we Masters had been granted.

Emily...was unstoppable.

“Wh...What...?” said someone nearby. It seemed I wasn’t the only one who was dumbfounded by this.

The Masters who had been surrounding Emily, keeping a close watch out for anyone who might try to help her, seemed to be barely moving even to someone as slow as me.

The absurdity of what was happening had essentially left us frozen in place.

Emily, of course, didn’t care about any of that. Instead, she instantly renewed the slaughter.

A transcendental entity who possessed immense stats and could instantly revive from death... She was easily among the strongest Masters I knew. Even Teach was below her, and on top of that, Emily gave off a threatening aura that rivaled the King of Destruction.

“Ngh...! Target those with more than 10,000 and restart!” I shouted out.

“Roger that,” said Cyco.

It only took me a few seconds to activate La Porte de l’Enfer again, but that was enough for nearly ten Masters to die. She was moving at supersonic speeds, cleaving through them one by one.

I could only see the afterimages left by her attacks, but I could tell that she was committing a massacre.

And, for a split second, I felt a chill go down my spine.

Seeing this made me understand that I was a target as well — that she now saw me as an enemy, just like the others.

“La Porte de l’En...?!” I tried to resume La Porte de l’Enfer when I heard the sound of White Rose’s armor being struck, followed by a shock that reached me here in the cockpit.

All the armor made my unit extremely heavy, yet the attack sent it flying backwards, knocking it completely off balance.

“Ugh...!” I used the momentum from that strike to jump and create some distance.



After a moment of floating through the air, the cockpit was shaken by the shock of landing, powerful enough that White Rose couldn't fully absorb it.

"...Ngh."

"Cyco?!"

"I'm...okay. She only threw an axe... It shattered part of me, but stopped at the armor before returning to her," she said.

Thanks to a damage reduction skill, Cyco's frost armor, and the unit's own armor, White Rose, actually boasted the strongest defense of any Magingear.

However, that single thrown axe carried enough power to penetrate it regardless.

"What's the damage on the armor...?" I asked.

"A small dent; that's it," Cyco answered.

That's still damage, I thought.

Still, the Mythical alloy armor that my sister built hadn't been destroyed.

Fran's creation could still stand for now, but it wouldn't last long if Emily decided to focus on it until she tore it apart.

"Where's Emily...?!"

"...There. Frozen," Cyco said. We'd successfully activated La Porte de l'Enfer, Freezing her once again.

However, the axe flew out once more, shattering and reviving her yet again.

Strange as it seemed, she didn't attack me this time either, instead targeting other Masters.

It seemed that she was in a state similar to the one granted by berserk-type skills. I couldn't see any reason or logic behind her attacks.

There was no clear order for whom she targeted either. I was the one Freezing her, but she ignored me in favor of slaughtering other Masters, seemingly at random.

...Maybe it was all about distance and level?

I was relatively low-level and was further away from her than the others, so that might explain why I wasn't high on her list of priorities.

"Minus... Minus..." She massacred Masters, repeatedly reviving herself after either being Frozen by La Porte de l'Enfer or suffering deadly damage from some other Master's ult.

The scene was downright hellish.

"There's no end to this..." I said.

"Do you have any ideas?" Cyco asked.

"...All that comes to mind is destroying those axes."

Those two instruments of slaughter must've been Emily's Superior Embryo. Without those, she wouldn't be able to revive herself.

"...But destroying those is impossible," I added. Just now, one of the Masters had used an ult on one of her axes, clearly aiming to break it, but the weapon hadn't even been scratched. Moments later, it killed that same Master.

Damaging an Arms-type Superior Embryo was extremely difficult. I knew this quite well after seeing how not even Xunyu managed to destroy Figaro's Embryo; Figaro himself could only harm Xunyu's after enhancing the effects of his own Embryo.

It was obvious that White Rose's firepower wouldn't be nearly enough to destroy those axes. That was probably true for Teach too.

Altar's King of Destruction could probably do it...but we didn't even have a prayer of getting his help right now.

"There's nothing we can do..." I said. Ray and that Rook guy could probably find a way to victory in this situation, but not me.

I'm not good enough to stop the girl's killing spree... I thought, with self-derision.

"...And that's acceptable to you?" Cyco asked.

"Of course not! But I..." *There's nothing I can do anymore... I can't do anything here that would possibly help.*

"Hugo... 'A knight who protects women,'" Cyco silently said.

"...Huh?" I asked, hearing her words clearly. It seemed like her response against my inner whining.

"Cyco? Where did that come from...?"

"That's what you wanted 'Hugo' to be, right?"

"That's..." I said, before trailing off as I pondered her words. That was *definitely* what I wanted out of Hugo.

I wanted him to be a knight who protected women and defeated any threats to their happiness — the thorn for every beautiful flower. The Machine Knight of Ice and Roses.

That was the image I had for Hugo and the role I played — the hope I had entrusted to him.

"She won't stop no matter what," Cyco said. "She will kill many people, including those you wanted to protect." I listened to her intently as she spoke. "I was born from your desires. Because of this, I will protect you and your wishes," she continued.

Her words made me feel like the frozen armor covering White Rose was actually embracing me.

“Trust me to protect everything. Don’t turn your back and give up. Don’t look away from your wish.”

“Cyco...”

She was named after the frozen hell, but what she’d said warmed my heart like few things could. Her words had reached my very heart, and they had helped me remember a different set of words I’d once heard.

“*Stop wallowing in doubt, young lady.*”

I’d heard that said back when I was so full of doubt that I could neither move forward nor turn back.

It had been spoken by one of Ray’s friends — the sharp-tongued boy I hated more than anyone in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

However, I knew full well that his words had hurt me so much because he was exposing the truth I had been trying so hard to avoid.

Those words had come back to me because I was fully aware of that fact. Even as they hurt me so deeply, his words now served to spur me onwards.

This had also reminded me of a particular scene — the memory of a Master facing an enemy far greater than himself, yet without even thinking of backing down.

“...Don’t turn your back, Hugo,” I said to myself. *Choose your path and move forward, no matter how powerful the enemy may be. Those two would’ve never backed down in this situation, and neither should you.*

“...It’s time to choose, Hugo,” I reinforced to myself.

Also, right now the circumstances were completely different from what they had been at that time. Back at Gideon, I had been forced to choose between standing against my sister or letting a tragedy happen.

The thing that had filled my heart with doubt was entirely in the past. This time, I only had to choose between fighting or giving up.

When I thought about it like that, it became very obvious what Hugo Lesseps had to do!

“...All right, Cyco,” I said. “Neither I...nor Hugo...will give up!”

“Yeah. Do your best,” said Cyco.

I decided to keep moving forward and face this threat. Since that was my decision, I had to reexamine my options here.

“Hmm...”

Back when facing Fran, Ray had supposedly told her something like this: *“It means that not even you — a Superior — were able to create a monster that was invincible just because.”*

That was exactly it — not even Superiors were unbeatable.

Even if they *seemed* invincible, they must have a weakness of some kind.

Think, Hugo. Her immortality has to have a flaw, I thought.

“...Wait.” And then, it finally hit me.

Currently, Emily Froze every thirteen seconds, then used her axes to shatter herself and return from the dead.

The important thing to note was that...*she wasn’t actually immune to Freezing.*

Though she could kill herself to come back from it, La Porte de l’Enfer was still effective at neutralizing her.

“Another thing I’ve observed is that the power of the flying axes can vary widely...”

Emily’s axe-throws were significantly stronger than the flying attacks the axes did on their own. I could only guess that her throws were empowered by Emily’s STR, while the axes themselves weren’t.

White Rose’s armor couldn’t withstand the former, but it was strong enough to hold against the latter.

“...Also, her actions after Freezing have already become like a routine.” Once Frozen, Emily herself couldn’t move, so the axes instantly broke off her hands and flew.

If they were in flight the moment she Froze, they would stop attacking and focus on shattering her. It seemed as though they would do this even if they were close to killing their targets.

That meant that the axes would automatically move to kill and revive Emily the moment she was incapacitated. They *had* to do that.

“...And if they didn’t shatter her, she would still be Frozen.”

Her revival needed a trigger — *her death*. She couldn’t come back if she hadn’t actually been turned into bits of light.

Emily was *immortal because of her deaths*.

In that case...!

“Cyco! Use White Rose’s second battle mode.”

“...The anti-artillery defense thing? You know it’s costly, right?”

“My MP wouldn’t last long regardless!”

White Rose was a heavy unit with always-active defense skills, making it a real MP sink. The drain on my reserves was even bigger when La Porte de l’Enfer was active.

This was White Rose's greatest flaw, even mentioned in the manual Fran had given to me — it was built for endurance battles but could only be used for a short while.

It was like a tank that quickly ran out of gas.

This could also be said about its synergy with Cyco.

Anyone who'd killed a hundred or more of their own kind would instantly be defeated by La Porte de l'Enfer, but anyone with a smaller number of kills — like that Rook person — would be drawn into a war of attrition.

White Rose's ideal position was that of a unit that defended against the enemy's attacks while slowly suppressing them with La Porte de l'Enfer.

But with my high-rank MP reserves, it couldn't be used for long; unlike Ray with his Grudge-Soaked Greaves, I had no way to make up for this shortcoming.

This was a design flaw of White Rose that I couldn't address at this point, and the second battle mode that I was about to use was only going to make it worse.

I couldn't even keep that battle mode up for five minutes...but it let me do things I couldn't do otherwise.

"In this situation, it's our only choice...!" I said.

"Okay," Cyco replied. I input something into the console to the side of the piloting gear and waited for the right moment.

Emily was currently slaughtering Masters even as she was Frozen and shattered by her axe every thirteen seconds.

There were at most two seconds between the moment Emily was Frozen and the moment she was revived.

Those two seconds would decide everything.

“Cyco! Count down until the next tick!” I barked out an order.

“Eleven, ten, nine...!” She did as told.

However, the next moment...

“Minus.”

“Ah...!”

...Emily, still barely visible to me, launched an attack against us in earnest.

I looked around and realized that most of the Masters were already dead.

“Looks like we are her targets now... But...!”

Emily had thrown both of her axes.

They spun in the air as they attacked the other Masters still standing. Emily herself was attacking White Rose with her bare hands.

“Ahhh...?!” Her blows were powerful, throwing my unit off balance. They were even more intense than Rook’s Demi-Dragon’s attacks, and White Rose’s frame was starting to creak in agony. This was especially baffling because this unit was far stronger than the one I’d had back then. That meant that Emily’s bare fists were worlds above even Demi-Dragon charges.

“Damage on external armor. A crack has formed,” Cyco said.

Emily was actually *breaking* the Mythical alloy armor with nothing but her hands.

“My body too...” she added.

“Cyco, are you all right?!”

“Don’t worry...!”

Cyco and White Rose were still somehow withstanding this onslaught.

“We’re not...giving up yet!” I declared. We waited out this several-second-long barrage that felt like it lasted minutes, and survived to see the moment come.

“Three, two, one...!”

Cyco finished the countdown to La Porte de l’Enfer’s next tick — and once it came, Emily instantly Froze yet again.

“White Rose, purge all armor! Second battle mode!” I shouted. A moment later, all the armor that Emily had cracked and bent was removed.

This wasn’t due to her attacks, however — I had done this purposefully.

Cyco quickly transformed into armor to replace the pieces that were detached.

“Axes incoming!” she cried. They had instantly switched from attacking the Masters and were now returning to Emily to shatter her.

However, before that happened, I activated White Rose’s final trick.

“Boucliers Planetes!” The axes were on their way to kill and release their Master.

Just like before, they approached Emily — but unlike before, *they were reflected by White Rose’s armor, now floating around her Frozen body.*

The axes couldn’t reach her.

“Hugo!”

“We...did it!”

This was White Rose’s second defense mode — Boucliers Planetes or “shield planets.”

These were floating shields that protected the target from a distance. They were remote-controlled armor-pieces originally designed to protect White Rose from artillery and magic while maintaining distance, preventing the damage from leaking to the main frame.

I had a degree of control over it as well as some automation settings, giving me multiple ways to protect White Rose...or anything else I wanted. *Even the enemy.*

Emily's axes crashed into the armor over and over again, but without her stats empowering them, they couldn't damage the Mythical alloy, which was just as I'd expected.

They seemed to be automatically prioritizing Emily's destruction, showing no intention of actually attacking White Rose itself. The weapons only continued to repeatedly crash into my shields, unable to break through and kill their Master.

"This...is checkmate," I said.

This was the only way I could win this.

I'd protected her from her flying axes, preventing her death — and with it, her revival.

Ironically, protecting her was the only way to defeat her.



"...Cancel La Porte de l'Enfer," I said. "I'll focus my MP into maintaining Boucliers Planetes."

"Roger."

"You get some rest, Cyco."

"...Okay. I'll take a break."

I canceled La Porte de l'Enfer while Cyco, completely drained, transformed from her armor form back into a Maiden.

I didn't intend to move the unit or use any skills from now on. The MP cost of Boucliers Planètes alone could be recovered using MP consumables.

The Freezing debuff of La Porte de l'Enfer continued even if the skill was canceled. The length of the effect actually scaled with the amount of their own kind the target killed, so as long as no one shattered her, the Murder Princess would be Frozen for days.

She would probably have to log off before it expired, but the Frozen debuff prevented people from logging out.

This meant that she would have to use the suicide system in order to actually disconnect from the game.

Or perhaps her family would start to get worried that she'd been logged in so long and try to remove the headgear, forcefully activating the suicide system.

...At least, I was pretty sure that was how it worked.

Regardless, the suicide system would obviously override her resurrection ability. Otherwise, she wouldn't have had to use her axes to kill herself, and she would've already been revived by now anyway.

That made it clear that this battle was over.

I watched the axes continue their futile attempts at breaking through the shields and killing their Master — their other half.

"...Why?" I peeked at her through the Boucliers Planètes and thought, *Why did she massacre all these people?*

Of course, I knew that not everyone was a Maiden's Master like myself.

There were those like Dryfe's Hell General — people who only saw this world as a game and thought that tians were just NPCs whom they were free to break like any other object.

The Murder Princess's fighting style was pretty "game-like" too.

Fighting her made me feel like I wasn't actually facing another human. What I felt was instead the shortsightedness of primitive AI enemies from old games, as well as the calculating coldness of an emotionless machine.

Many had died here, and my surroundings were far more empty than they had been before.

The tians who had populated this bazaar had all run away, while the Masters that had survived didn't even amount to twenty.

Besides them, there were the tian corpses...or what was left of them, anyway.

This horrific sight made me understand why she was wanted in every country, and why she was one of the most infamous Masters in the world.

"...Why?" I muttered. The girl I'd met at the café didn't seem like the type of person who was capable of something like this. She'd spoken of other people's Embryos like they were friends, all smiles.

She had been like a normal, purehearted little girl.

"How did you end up becoming the Murder Princess...?" I asked — but of course, the ice statue didn't answer.

The battle was over, and the only sound left in the bazaar was the metallic clang of the axes striking Boucliers Planetes.

Chapter Six: The Rebirthing Infestation, De Vermis

A Certain Place in the City of Commerce, Cortana

Great Soul Daoshi, Zhang Zangqi was overcome with panic.

Through his jiangshi, he'd witnessed everything that had happened to Emily. Upon seeing her break free of the ice for the first time, he'd thought that his worries were over — but when Hugo completely sealed her away, Zhang's fear grew to even greater heights.

But that wasn't the only reason for his distress.

Zhang had placed Drag-Worm Jiangshi on standby outside the city. He'd already sent them to Emily's aid, and under normal circumstances, they'd have already rescued her.

"...No good," he said. As it turned out, the jiangshi had all been intercepted and destroyed before they could fulfill their objective. Through their vision, Zhang saw exactly what had been responsible for this — a soaring Magingear with blue armor.

Luck was against him this time.

The local Drag-Worms were creatures of the dunes, made to travel beneath the dry sands. Because of this, they couldn't reach their top speeds while burrowing through the rich soil around Cortana's oasis, forcing Zhang to make them move above ground for a swifter rescue.

Unfortunately for him, AR-I-CA was heading towards the bazaar at the same time as the jiangshi were approaching. She spotted them immediately and wiped them all out using charged artillery fire from her Blue Opera.

"That must have been achieved by the Dangai Orb I once possessed," Zhang said. "It is a reliable power to wield, but a frustrating one to face."

At the very least, the Drag-Worm Jiangshi were able to keep AR-I-CA from reaching Emily as quickly, so their deaths might've not been *completely* in vain.

That meant little, however, if she would still make it there first.

Regardless, Zhang had lost the jiangshi he'd planned to fight with, and thus he had next to no chance of saving Emily now.

Despite this, he had no intention of giving up. After all, if Emily was kept locked in stasis as she was, it would be a heavy blow to the organization he now served.

"I must rescue her no matter the cost," Zhang said. He might have lost his jiangshi, but he still had himself.

He'd lost against AR-I-CA even with his Wuxing Jilong and Dangai, so now he didn't even have a hope of defeating her; but he could bring Emily back by merely removing the shields protecting her and letting Youaltepuztli do the rest.

"I will free her even if it costs me my life," he declared before taking a step into the zone where his leg had been Frozen earlier, confirming that the effect had been deactivated. He'd expected as much based on what he'd seen through his jiangshi while watching Hugo's White Rose.

That skill is now inactive, he thought. I suppose it can only be used with that armor.

Knowing that La Porte de l'Enfer wouldn't interfere, Zhang instantly broke into a sprint. He cut a path through the alleyways, rushing towards the bazaar where Emily still stood.

If only something would happen to distract them, he hoped, knowing full well how impossible that was.

Through the eyes of the jiangshi he'd sent to the mayor's mansion, he'd witnessed AR-I-CA and Benetnasch strike some sort of deal, and

the necromancer had handed over the Orb he possessed. Zhang couldn't hear their conversation, but he guessed that Benetnasch gave her his Orb in exchange for AR-I-CA letting him take the mayor's.

The Indestructible is far more powerful than the mayor. He will have no trouble taking the Orb, so there is no chance it would cause any kind of worthwhile distraction.

Since AR-I-CA was in a hurry to aid her companion, she'd accepted the deal, but Zhang could tell that she did intend to ultimately take the mayor's Orb away from Benetnasch.

Perhaps if I wait until then... No, even if The Blue Sky Songstress and the Indestructible resume their battle, more Masters would have arrived here by then, Zhang thought. Being a member of Sefirot, AR-I-CA could use the influence of the congress and the president to send requests to the guilds. This would make it easy to find more Masters who could protect Emily until she finally took the death penalty using the suicide system. Some of these Masters would surely have defensive abilities or items better than Boucliers Planetes.

In the worst case scenario, The Earth — another Sefirot member — could come and bury Emily thousands of metels underground.

Zhang would be out of options then, unable to do anything to save her.

I must do something before that happens... What? As that thought crossed his mind, he suddenly stopped running.

This was because his senses as the Great Soul Daoshi picked up something unusual.

"...Grudge? Souls? No...what *is* this feeling?" Great Soul Daoshi was a job that dealt with death, but Zhang's necromancy was quite different from that of the west.

The jiangshi that he usually used were little more than corpses animated by magic that followed the instructions written onto their Fu. The Fu acted as a kind of replacement soul, so unlike the King of Tartarus or a Lich, he didn't have to deal with souls directly.

But he was a necromancer still, and as such, he could sense souls just like the rest of them.

However, what he sensed now was unlike anything he'd ever felt before.

"...A lamentation?" A souls' lament — a deathly wail that cannot even be classified as an expression of grudge.

It was as though someone was crying out in horror as they watched something happen that could not possibly be undone.

It reached Zhang from the mayor's mansion — the same place where he'd thought nothing more would happen.

◇◇◇

Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

"Heyyy! Good job, Yu!" said Teach, flying in with her Blue Opera. Only a few minutes had passed since I'd trapped Emily. "Whoa. She's locked up gooood. What's with the shields, though? And the axes hammerin' 'em?"

In response to that question, I recalled what had transpired and explained everything to her, along with a description of what Emily's Superior Embryo could do.

"...Endless auto-revives? You gotta be jokin'." she said in shock.
"Man, I knew this already, but there sure are a lotta broken Superior Embryos, huh?"

You can basically see slightly into the future. You're not one to talk, I thought.

"Even our Albert can only do that seven times... Though, I guess the revival is more like a bonus for him," she added.

"Teach?"

"Oh, sorry, got a bit off track there."

"So, how were things on your end?" I asked.

"I let KoT have his turn with the mayor's Orb. He said he'll pass it to me if it turns out he doesn't need it. Though, if he *does* end up needing it, I'll just go and take it from him." Knowing her, none of that was surprising. "Oh, and he gave me a li'l somethin' in exchange," she added.

"That being?"

"The Orb he had. The one that turns water into land. He didn't really seem to need it, so he went and gave it to me, just like that."

Based on what I heard about him from Persephone, I could understand why. The Orb had nothing to do with souls or life, so it made sense that it wouldn't be worth much to him.

Still...an Orb was an Orb. It was Huang He's national treasure and a potent negotiation piece.

"You make it seem like he doesn't gain anything from the exchange," I said.

"Hmm, we agreed that if he passes the mayor's Orb to me, I'll have to do something he wants... Oh no! What if he asks for something lewd?!"

"...You'd probably like that, wouldn't you?" I said. There was no helping this woman.

"So, what're ya gonna do now?" she asked.

"I'll try to keep this girl Frozen until she uses the suicide system to log out," I answered. "With her kill count, she'll probably stay like

this for more than a full real life day... We still have to worry about that person who was with her, though."

My words made Teach fall silent for a moment and think.

"I beat some worms on my way here. They might've been with that guy, and there might be more," she said.

I guess we can't exactly sit here and wait, I thought, before pointing at the axes and asking, "Can you break the Embryo, Teach?"

"Nope. As far as Superiors go, I don't have much firepower. And from what I can tell, those axes put toughness above sharpness. You need somethin' *very* strong to break 'em."

If not even Teach could do it, then there wasn't much we could do here.

For a moment, I considered asking for KoT's help...

"Hm...?"

...but when I looked around, I realized that Persephone was nowhere in sight.

"But...man, this is bad," said Teach. "I don't think the guys who sent her over expected her to get into a situation like this. We might get actual IF members comin' to save her."

"IF'...?"

"A criminal clan Sefirot scraps with every now and again. Little Murder Princess here is one of them," she explained.

This reminded me of the times I'd heard of the clan while I was still in The Triangle of Wisdom. The rumors about Emily were most of what I'd heard, though.

"The problem is that all official members of the clan are Superiors who'd easily break her out of your ice." That certainly *was* a problem. "Sechs the 'Dark Core' is in the slammer, so we won't be

seein' him, but La Crima the 'Error Source' has the army to do it, while Rascal the 'Ruiner of Legacy' can destroy her along with the entire city."

...Teach, might I ask who thought of those nicknames? It's like they were trying to sound like bad news, I thought.

"Just so you know, these nicknames are straight out of DIN articles. They make Emily's 'Kill Leader' look so simple, don't they?"

...You think so?

"Anyway, since keepin' her here is a bad idea, and we can't have anyone break her out..." Teach said before stopping to think for a moment. "All right. Let's just *throw her out* then."

"Huh?" I said. I had just heard her say something I couldn't ignore.

"There's a huge patch of quicksand a little bit to the southwest."

"Huh? Umm... Teach?"

"If I dump her there, anyone comin' to help her won't be much of a threat, and breakin' her out while she's in sand will be kinda hard. It'll keep her in place even after she's revived! It's perfect!"

"Perfect?! Teach, are you listening to yourself?!" I raised my voice. *I know I'm the one who froze her, but throwing a girl into quicksand...?!*

"So yeah, see ya later!"

"Ah, wai—!" I tried to call out, but she picked up Emily and flew away before I could finish.

The two axes followed after them, but their speed was far below Blue Opera's and they quickly fell behind.

I could do nothing but stand behind and watch as they disappeared. I'd spent a good while racking my head about Emily and how to deal with her, but now I felt like Teach had rendered it all meaningless.

“...There there,” Cyco said as she consoled me with a pat on my head — though she was still tired and barely able to move.

“Truly, nothing is beyond her. How terrifying,” said a voice coming from behind us.

I turned around and saw Persephone.

“Persephone?” I asked. “When did—? No, *where* were you?”

“Hmm... In hiding.”

“From Emily?”

“No. From Ace, more like.”

From Teach? I thought.

“From what I could tell, that woman would have murdered me on sight purely to make it easier to take the Orb from Master Dearest,” she explained.

Oh no... After seeing Teach grab Emily and fly away, I could easily see her doing just that.

“So, you finally showed yourself because she left?” I asked. “I’m pretty sure she’ll come back soon.”

“I understand that, but I feel that I must give you a warning.” ...A *warning*? “Well, the matter of the Murder Princess is solved now, but...” she said with a tired shake of the head. “*Something worse* will soon show itself.”

Those words were laden with certainty.

“Huh?” *Something worse than Emily?* “Persephone, what are you talking about?”

“Hm...” She gave no proper response to my question. Instead, she merely looked off into the distance — in the direction of the mayor’s manor.



City of Commerce, Cortana, Mayor's Mansion

"Aieee...hieee...!" Douglas Coin, the mayor of Cortana, was running frantically through his mansion.

"Sir, what is the matt— AAAAHHHHHH?!" The maids that saw him shrieked in terror as their eyes fell on his legs, severed by Aragorn and now replaced by countless writhing maggots.

However, he ignored them and continued running, as though unaware of his own state. His destination was the mansion's dungeon — the place where many homeless people and slaves had met their ends, turned to corpses for the mayor's dark ritual.

"I-I just need...to finish the ritual...!" The fear of incoming death made him lose his mind, as well as gave him the strength to keep running.

He didn't want to die.

That was the mayor's main motive, as well as the reason why he now wanted to carry out the ritual of the Orb of De Vermis. This motive, however, had its roots in a time before he'd acquired the Orb at all.



About a year ago, his body had been overcome by severe illness. His old age and the many years he'd spent living large had begun to take their toll on his vital organs and overall health. Life became difficult for him, and the idea that he might die soon became an obsession.

Perhaps because death felt so close, the Mayor had begun seeing visions of the many people he'd tortured and killed in life.

Dying would have meant losing everything he'd attained, and it wasn't clear what would happen after that. Many stories of old said that those who incurred the grudge of others in life would suffer

immensely after death. This had been all but confirmed by the observations of various necromancers.

The mayor had once laughed these stories off, but that amusement had turned into fear as his death drew closer and closer.

After illness had taken hold of him, the mayor's nights had become filled with teeth-chattering terror. He buried himself deep under his sheets, because otherwise he would see things he didn't want to see: his own disease-stricken, dying visage, *as well as Fria — the wife of one of his political opponents.*

During the mayoral election some years ago, he'd ruined a couple who opposed him by having the man accused of crimes he did not commit. Following that, he took Fria as a slave and eventually murdered her...but now, her face was coming back to haunt him. It was as though she was waiting for him to finally die.

That was far from the only misdeed he'd committed. He'd done many vile things as both a merchant and a politician. He'd even accepted money from the Gouz-Maise Gang that had operated on the border with Altar, keeping the Altarian army at bay and supplying them with magic items in exchange for their payment.

Many children and the people who'd tried to rescue them died as a direct result of his actions, but Douglas didn't care as long as his wealth continued to increase.

He'd been committing such crimes for decades now.

However, as death drew near, he'd begun to selfishly fear the retribution he could face.

These days had seemed endless.

"No... I don't want to die... No... Nooo..." Crying like a child, the mayor had continued to panic over the prospect of his impending death.

He felt that if he strained his ears, he could hear his subordinates and servants talking about what they would do once he was dead.

“I-I... I can’t die yet... I don’t want to die...!” He’d begun life as a merchant, become a politician, and eventually rose to become mayor of the second most important — if not *the* most important — city in Caldina. His word in congress carried more weight than anyone’s save maybe the president. It would have been accurate to call him the “vice-king” of the union.

However, all the wealth, glory, and power he’d gathered would all vanish the moment he died.

And beyond the grave, there would be nothing waiting for him but the vengeful victims he’d murdered for his own ends.

“Aaaahhhh... Huh?” As the idea of such a future paralyzed him with terror, something moved the sheet that he had pulled over him.

It was the wind flowing into the room.

The window was open for some reason, letting in the night breeze.

“...Ugh!” For a moment, he considered calling a servant to close it, but he didn’t want anyone to see him crying, so he decided to do it himself.

His limbs shaking, he took his cane and slowly walked up to the window...and then noticed something odd on the floor.

“...What is this?”

It was a crystalline Orb. Below it, there was a piece of paper saying, “Present. This is what you seek. Place the Orb under the pillow, wish for health and youth, and they shall be yours again.”

He looked at the Orb in suspicion, closed the window...and picked it up.

His suspicion was no match for the temptation presented by the Orb and the mysterious letter.

Someone had clearly left the Orb after breaking into his room, but he felt that doing as the letter said was the correct course of action. So, he placed the Orb under his pillow.

“A healthy body...and youth... Heh heh... What am I hoping for...from this thing...?”

He chuckled in self-derision at his own actions, but he still went to sleep with the Orb beneath his head.

And when he woke up the next day, he was so healthy that it would have been hard to recognize him.

The shadow of death that had hung over the mayor before had all but vanished. His face was full of life, and there wasn’t a hint of pain or trembling in any part of his body.

The mayor felt freer that day than he had in decades.

“Ha...hah hah hah,” he laughed in disbelief. “What...? What is this...?!”

“I-h-a-v-e-m-e-n-d-e-d-y-o-u-r-b-o-d-y-w-h-i-l-e-k-e-e-p-i-n-g-i-t-s-s-h-a-p-e.”

“Ah?!?” The mayor jumped as an unfamiliar voice rang out in his head.

It wasn’t an auditory hallucination. It seemed more like someone nearby was talking to him.

“Wh-Who is there...?! Where are you?!”

“I-a-m-D-e-V-e-r-m-i-s. T-h-e-o-n-e-s-e-a-l-e-d-w-i-t-h-i-n-t-h-e-O-r-b-y-o-u-p-o-s-s-e-s-s.”

“What...?”

De Vermis then began speaking about itself.

It revealed that it was a UBM that had been sealed away in the Orb by the Draconic Emperor over six hundred years ago, and that someone had taken it from Huang He and brought it here.

Perplexed by those words, the mayor looked at the letter.

Who, exactly, had left him a national treasure of the Huang He Empire?

He wondered what their goal could've been, and guessed that by giving it to a powerful Caldinian, they intended to spark a war with Huang He.

The idea made him shiver. He wondered if it was best to return it, but De Vermis told him that if he were to let go of the Orb, his body would not stay mended. Without the Orb in his possession, the mayor would revert to his sickly, aging state once again.

Upon hearing that, the mayor remembered the fear he'd felt every night, and he couldn't bring himself to give the Orb up. Ultimately, he decided to keep it himself and hide it from everyone else.

Afterwards, he had some slight trouble proving who he was to his servants. He ended up telling them that he'd "used a special item" — which wasn't the full explanation, but also not a lie in the eyes of Truth Discernment.

After a day of particularly good health, De Vermis spoke to him once more.

"M-e-n-d-i-n-g-y-o-u-i-s-n-o-t-m-y-o-n-l-y-p-o-w-e-r."

"What...?"

"M-y-p-o-w-e-r-i-s-w-h-a-t-y-o-u-c-a-l-l-i-m-m-o-r-t-a-l-i-t-y."

"*What?!*"

De Vermis then told him of the ritual for immortality.

First, it needed between a hundred and two hundred dead bodies. And second, after they'd been killed, the bodies had to be kept in one place for a certain amount of time.

With that, the preparations for the rite of immortality would be done.

It would come at a cost of many lives, but with the mayor's wealth and power, this was easy to accomplish without anyone being the wiser, especially if he only targeted vagrants and slaves.

"I-b-e-l-i-e-v-e-l-c-a-n-p-e-r-f-o-r-m-t-h-e-r-i-t-u-a-l-w-i-t-h-y-o-u-r-a-i-d. W-i-l-l-y-o-u-a-s-s-i-s-t-m-e?"

"If I do...?"

"Y-o-u-w-i-l-l-a-l-s-o-b-e-c-o-m-e-i-m-m-o-r-t-a-l." Magic and necromancy were real in the world of *Infinite Dendrogram*; this was a wicked and suspicious offer.

However, the mayor accepted it, mostly because De Vermis had already demonstrated its power on the mayor's own body.

"Immortality... If I become immortal..." If he became immune to death itself, he would never again have to feel the fear he'd experienced when facing the prospect of his own demise.

And there was nothing he wanted more than that.

He accepted De Vermis's offer and began doing whatever was necessary to become immortal.



The one who'd given him the Orb was none other than the sub-leader of IF, Zeta.

She believed that a greedy, influential politician who was on the verge of death would use the Orb in a way that would attract many powerful figures to the city.

In some sense, it went exactly as she'd expected.

But whether the ultimate outcome was something she'd accounted for was another matter entirely.



And so, the mayor arrived at the dungeon — the place of the ritual.

"Hee...heeeee... I am here! I lost them, and I made it!" he said out loud. The dungeon was full of bodies — all belonging to the nearly two hundred people he'd killed.

Despite that, the place did not smell badly at all, strangely enough.

All the corpses looked fresh, and even the wounds that had caused their deaths had stayed as clean holes in their flesh.

The mayor took out the Orb of De Vermis and said, "Now! Start the ritual!"

"T-h-a-t-l-w-i-l-l."

A moment later, *the mayor's hand moved against his will and threw the Orb to the floor, shattering it.*

"...Huh?" The mayor had no intention of doing that, but he had thrown the Orb on the ground as though spurred on by some unknown force inside him.

The UBM-sealing Orbs, created by the greatest Draconic Emperor in history, were potent treasures that allowed the holders to wield the powers of the UBMs within, but that didn't mean that the orbs themselves were difficult to break. Just a few years ago, an Orb in a certain land was shattered, releasing the UBM within.

And here, it had just happened once again. The Orb shattered, releasing the sealed UBM — a small fly.

It seemed hard to believe that this pitifully small creature possessed immense power, but it was undoubtedly an Ancient Legendary UBM — The Rebirthing Infestation, De Vermis.

“This is the first time we have faced each other like this, is it not, Douglas?” De Vermis spoke to the mayor with a voice far clearer than it ever had before.

The mayor, however, said nothing in response. He did not even move from where he was standing, for he was too shaken and overcome by terror.

“E-Eek...!”

All their exchanges thus far were based on the premise that De Vermis was sealed in the Orb and could thus be controlled.

But now it had been released.

A tian facing an unbound UBM was a death sentence.

Thinking that he’d been simply manipulated into freeing the UBM, the mayor almost despaired...

“Please do not be afraid. I have no intention of harming you.”

...but De Vermis spoke to him in a gentle tone.

“What...?” the mayor said.

“As I said, I will now perform the rite of immortality. As a friend, you will be part of it. Let us live together, eternally.”

There was no hint of malice or deceit in that voice. De Vermis just saw the mayor as a friend and wished to grant him immortality.

Realizing that the UBM had nothing but good intentions, the mayor relaxed.

“I-I see! Then let us complete it before King of Tartarus comes.”

“That would be for the best. Let us begin.”

A moment after De Vermis said that, the corpses lying in this room began to move.

The remains of the slaves and beggars killed by Douglas's private soldiers began to rise, with bodies so healthy-looking it was impossible to believe they were actually dead.

"The corpses...!" the mayor cried.

"They are not corpses. They are alive," De Vermis insisted.

"...What?"

"Oh, I suppose I should explain. The *fragment* that I created when I mended your body had a limited ability to speak, so I could not convey all of the information to you. I will tell you about it now while I create the immortal body."

De Vermis's words raised some questions in the back of the mayor's mind, but before he could ask them, the UBM began explaining its abilities.

"My power is called 'Reinvigorating Rebirth.' It is a skill that targets flesh, bones, and organs damaged by wounds or illnesses and *replaces them with fragments of myself.*"

"Hm...?"

"The fragments act exactly as the organs they replace, and they also improve anything that passes through them. Blood, for example. Additionally, since they have the power to grant vitality, anything that has part of its body replaced by my fragments becomes even healthier than they were before. This reinvigoration is perpetual and does not degrade with time, making eternal life possible. Even if ninety-nine percent of such a body is destroyed or burned, the damaged cells can be replaced. Oh, and since your entire body was so decayed, a very large amount of you was replaced, which greatly improved the effect and made you look far younger."

“Wait, what are you saying? I...”

“To put it simply, I use the failing parts of others’ bodies to create fragments of myself. Those fragments then make their bodies healthy.” With that simplified explanation, the mayor finally understood how De Vermis’s power worked.

However, he now had another question.

“What do you mean by ‘fragment?’” he asked.

The best answer to that question was no doubt the mayor’s own legs, replaced by countless maggots.

However, De Vermis didn’t point that out. Instead, the mayor looked at the walking dead surrounding him.

The corpses that the UBM had said were alive gathered together in one place and began to collapse there. As they fell, they looked unnaturally limp, as though they had no skeletons or joints.

And from the many holes all over those bodies, innumerable amounts of maggots began to pour out.

“Those are my fragments,” said De Vermis. Upon seeing that, as well as noticing the maggot-legs he now possessed, the mayor was completely unable to speak.

However, De Vermis continued talking, ignoring the mayor’s emotional state.

“The bodies of people dying from heart and lung failure are the optimal bases for the creation of my fragments. First the killing wound, then the dying brain cells, then the decaying body... I can replace them in that order.”

The UBM was speaking as though none of this was remotely out of the ordinary.

"I would have preferred to keep replacing parts for a few more days and increase the number of fragments, but now that there is someone who would take my power away from you, this seems to be the best I will be able to do." The maggots overflowing the pile of bodies were now leaving behind the parts they hadn't replaced — the cells that were still alive — like food they hadn't had time to eat. The writhing mass then began to gather into a single place.

These maggots born from human bodies might've been made of human cells, but they were clearly *not* human.

The maggots abandoned their original form as disparate parts of many corpses and began to gather and assume a different form.

Maggots born from certain corpses became fingers, others became toes, and the majority of the creatures merged together into a most fitting shape — a maggot.

Born from nearly two hundred corpses, the writhing bugs created a freakish form akin to a giant maggot with multiple sets of human limbs — a sight most ordinary humans could scarcely bear to look at.

Perhaps if it were some sort of artificial creation, it wouldn't weigh so heavily on an onlooker's sanity. However...it was alive. It pulsated as a single creature.

The maggots born from the corpses became a new shape...*a new life-form.*

The sight was unbearably repulsive. If the wicked dead were given a choice between this and hell, most would certainly pick the latter.

Perhaps if Ray Starling or Hugo Lesseps had been there, this creature would remind them of the great manifestation of grudge — The Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise.

However, the essence of this creature was nothing like that at all. In fact, it was completely the opposite.

Gouz-Maise was an undead — a mass of corpses animated by grudge — while this was a creature whose living cells had turned into maggots that kept them *alive*.

Sooner rather than later, the tiny fly that was the heart of De Vermis approached the mass of maggots.

It welcomed their father and entrusted the entire body to it. Then, the giant gathering of nearly two hundred corpses-turned-maggots were now De Vermis's body.

“...Ah, ahh...ahhh?” As the mayor stared at this bizarre scene, he felt something tickle the inside of his ear.

He put a trembling finger inside, and when he pulled it out, there was a single maggot on it.

“...Ah? Ah...?! AAAAAAHHHHH?!” Just like that, the mayor realized that the voice of De Vermis had not been actually ringing inside his mind — *this maggot was whispering it directly to his eardrum*.

“I used my fragments to make your body accustomed to me.” De Vermis spoke calmly, ignoring the mayor’s disgusted writhing on the stone floor.

“Unlike other flesh, you will live with me until your final cell vanishes. I have you to thank for being outside again and for helping me create a body so swiftly. You have my endless gratitude.”

And so, with pride, confidence, sincerity, and a gentle tone...

“So...*let us live a life eternal.*”

...De Vermis spoke these words.

“Y-You mean that...you...?” the mayor muttered in disbelief.

What terrified the mayor the most was that De Vermis was no doubt expressing its genuine goodwill and gratitude. It truly wanted to live

a life eternal with the mayor, because it wanted nothing but the best for him.

However, “life” in De Vermis’s mind was a thoroughly inhuman existence.

To this being, “life” was transforming human cells, so they would be reborn and kept alive forever.

Thus, The Rebirthing Infestation, De Vermis’s power, was exactly as it was rumored to be.

It did indeed give the user “a healthy life, and then a new life eternal.”

What the description did not convey was that this “new life eternal”...was a life as a maggot.

“Aaahhh! AAAAAAAAAGH!”

The mayor finally realized that the thing being created here wouldn’t be anything as simple as a flesh golem.

It would be a mass of maggots that would not even be capable of dying.

“Please relax. You will feel no pain. It might be bewildering at first, but I am sure it will please you,” said De Vermis with nothing but honesty in its voice.

However, the mayor shook his head and wailed.

“NO! THIS IS NOT WHAT I...!”

The lives of the living and undead were different. The lives of multicellular and unicellular organisms were different.

The mayor hadn’t thought for a moment that the immortality he would be granted would be as different from human life as that.

Where would the soul go when one became a part of such an undying body?

What if it became forever sealed away, trapped and unable to escape?

The mayor looked at the mass of maggots, hoping to see at least one silver lining, but there wasn't even a hint of humanity in any of the human-born maggots forever crawling within it.

And *that* was the mayor's future.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOO!" Upon realizing this, the mayor lost his mind and began to wail and tried to escape the dungeon. In his mind, even capital punishment was better than this.

However, it was too late. With most of his body replaced by De Vermis's maggots, the UBM was able to force him to turn around and walk towards the wriggling mass.

Starting from his fingers, his body was slowly disassembled. Slowly, he was made part of the whole.

"NO! NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

Overcome by despair, he wailed again and again as De Vermis took him in.

Right before he was consumed...

"I beg...you...please...kill...meee..."

...his final words were truly ironic for a man who had clung to life so fiercely.

With the mayor assimilated, The Rebirthing Infestation, De Vermis was complete. It broke the restricting ceiling above and began rising to the surface. After all, it had been formed earlier than planned. It still needed to find more bodies to bring into the fold.

Chapter Seven: Standing and Indomitable

City of Commerce, Cortana, Mayor's Mansion

Benetnasch noticed the anomaly soon after he finished negotiating with AR-I-CA.

He possessed skills that gave him sight of the surrounding souls and grudge. Walls and similar kinds of barriers meant nothing before those skills, allowing him to clearly see the souls beneath the mansion.

That made it easy for him to understand that the nearly two hundred souls gathered here were now wailing. The sensation froze him in place.

"What troubles you, my friend?" Aragorn asked as he was busy breaking through the mansion's many walls.

"...This is really bad," Benetnasch said with a shake of his head and with frustration that was quite out of character for him.

A moment later, a gigantic pale arm broke through the floor in front of them, soon followed by five more. These limbs then flailed about, grasping at any piece of the mansion they touched. Under the creature's immense weight, the building quickly began to collapse.

"In me, my friend!" Aragorn called.

"...Yeah," Benetnasch said, jumping inside the skeletal dragon's ribcage. Aragorn then rushed back to the garden, pulverizing any walls and pillars on the way. By the time they were out, the mansion had collapsed completely.

Benetnasch gazed at the dust-shrouded remains, saying not a word. One didn't have to see souls to know the fate of the servants who were still inside.

“Below!” Aragorn said right before the six arms that destroyed the building pulled on the rubble, lifting up and revealing the creature’s full form — that of a maggot with human limbs.

The maggot was larger in size than even Pure-Dragons; it possessed six long arms and so many legs that they were hard to count. Every inch of it was made of tiny maggots.

It was so disgusting that the sight alone would break weaker minds.

Still, it wasn’t difficult for Benetnasch to understand what he was looking at.

“My friend, is this...?”

“It looks like the sealed UBM has been released.”

“The Orb held this enormous mass of maggots? How repulsive.”

“No,” Benetnasch said with a shake of his head. “This body is made of living humans.”

“...What?” Aragorn asked in shock. The necromancer hadn’t witnessed the moment De Vermis’s current form was created, but he could see souls, and he saw *the many souls trapped within the maggots that composed the creature*.

While talking to Hugo, Persephone had explained the relationship between souls, minds, and bodies using ice, fluid, and a cup as their respective parallels. She had primarily focused on the effect that boiling grudge had on souls and bodies, but that wasn’t the only way the relationship could go sour — the flesh could affect the soul and mind, as well.

When put in a repulsive vessel far unlike the original, souls and minds would be tainted just as drinks poured into lead cups became poisonous.

In this case, De Vermis was the lead cup.

Though the people used in its creation had had their cells replaced by maggots, *they were still alive*. They had died once, but their souls were trapped inside their bodies. Since they still lived, they couldn't even be melted away by grudge and vanish.

Because of this, to be one with De Vermis was a fate worse than undeath.

"Truly, this is not enough," said De Vermis. "Eternity requires more power and volume."

The human-maggot mass then used one of its six arms to pick up the corpse of a maid who had died in the mansion's collapse *and crushed the body with its hand*, mangling the flesh both inside and out.

Starting with the damaged cells, the destroyed corpse then began transforming into writhing maggots, all of which were absorbed by De Vermis to make it grow in size.

"My friend, this creature..." said Aragorn.

"I thought it was strange when I saw the mayor grow those 'legs,'" Benetnasch replied. "Even if that UBM could use its powers from within the Orb, it couldn't have possibly gotten its egg-laying organs outside to infest the mayor like that. It makes sense now. The maggots weren't born..."

"...but transformed," Aragorn finished the sentence. "So it used a skill to turn the body of that lowlife into maggots."

"...That is probably how it made him healthy too," Benetnasch added. "I guess maggot therapy exists in real life, but this is just..."

Disgusting, he finished in his head.

That judgment wasn't just based on its appearance or nature — it was the fact that it trapped souls.

The transformed cells continued to live as maggots, and as living creatures, they bound the souls they had once possessed as human

beings to them. Forced into such a form, these once-human souls and minds would eventually become those of maggots.

Benetnasch had already noticed such changes begin to take root in the mayor when he'd met him at the entrance. Merging with De Vermis had only accelerated the process, and that was exactly why Benetnasch called it "really bad."

The souls trapped within were wailing, lamenting the fact that they had been made inhuman and could no longer die as people.

"...Deadly Explosion." Benetnasch unleashed a spell. With everyone in the palace now dead, he didn't have to worry about killing anyone, so he decided to use the High Necromancer's ultimate job skill on the immense amounts of grudge accumulated by the mayor's deeds.

The heart of the explosion was the basement, where the grudge was densest, and the fires produced easily consumed all of the mansion's rubble. The blast even tore out the trees in the garden, sending a giant pillar of flame into the sky.

The firepower of this attack matched that of the Baolongba once used by Master Jiangshi, Xunyu.

"My friend..."

"...I'm seeing it myself. No need to say anything."

Even the immense flames of the Deadly Explosion couldn't burn up De Vermis.

The spell would've surely scorched even Pure-Dragons with high fire resistances, but the mass of maggots came out of it unharmed.

Great amounts of its body were left Charred, but the blackened bits quickly became white again as they were replaced by new, healthy maggots.

This was what made De Vermis's Reinvigorating Rebirth so terrifying.

What this power did was replace damaged cells with maggots — its fragments — which made it possible for De Vermis to fully heal itself by simply replacing its *own* damaged cells with writhing new growth.

“UBMs are always such unreasonable foes...” said Benetnasch.

“Truly,” Aragorn agreed.

“...You should know that you weren’t any better.”

Though the Charred bits were quickly healed, the Deadly Explosion had actually *completely blown away* a portion of De Vermis’s total size, cells and all, which manifested as damage dealt to it.

However, that hadn’t accounted for even a tenth of its total HP.

“I do not suppose you can use that again?” Aragorn asked.

“Nope. That blew away all of the grudge around the mansion,” Benetnasch replied. Deadly Explosion was a spell that transformed grudge into firepower, making it a one-time spell that could only be used on large accumulations of grudge.

If he’d carried around Crystals of Resentment like Gouz-Maise the Lich, that would have been a different story, but those items were directly opposed to Benetnasch’s goals. Obviously, he would never carry any.

“The only way to defeat it is to destroy it utterly, with not a trace left,” said Aragorn. “What a menacing creature. It must be near-Mythical.”

“An upper-Ancient-Legendary-tier, then...” said Benetnasch.

“Wouldn’t that make it stronger than you, though?”

“I am confident I was a match for it in sheer status, though compatibility is so heavily against me that I could never defeat it,” Aragorn concluded, after spending a moment analyzing his own powers compared to those of his opponents.

“...Well, slicing probably wouldn’t do much to it,” Benetnasch agreed.

While they were having this exchange, Masters from all over the city were starting to gather, likely to investigate the source of the flame pillar.

Upon seeing the words “The Rebirthing Infestation, De Vermis” over the large maggot’s head, they all recognized it as a UBM and mobilized to destroy it.

Some were shocked by Aragorn’s appearance and prepared to fight him as well, but they quickly realized he was a Master’s undead minion and immediately shifted their attention back to De Vermis.

“Hmm... For a city of such a scale, few enough Masters have gathered here,” Aragorn observed.

“Based on what Persephone told me, the Murder Princess caused some trouble at the bazaar... I imagine that many got the death penalty trying to deal with her.”

“The girl who shares a clan with that tomb raider? Well, I cannot imagine any ordinary Master being a match for her.”

“...I hope she isn’t as fearsome as Rascal, at least.” While their conversation continued, more and more Masters gathered and focused their fire on De Vermis. The UBM had no proper defenses or resistances, so all the spells, slashes, and debuffs hit it with full effect...only for it to recover from them moments later.

Any part burnt by a spell was fixed in the same way as the parts of its body Charred by the Deadly Explosion.

The weapon attacks only briefly parted the wriggling mass, and any individual maggots that were severed were quickly regenerated.

And then, the maggots afflicted by the debuffs were instantly replaced by new, healthy ones.

No matter what was done to it, De Vermis instantly regenerated itself back to a state of perfect health.

Those with Reveal would notice one other thing — the UBM's SP did not decrease no matter how many times it restored itself.

This was the second thing that made Reinvigorating Rebirth so fearsome.

It was a skill that not only didn't cost SP — it continuously *increased* its SP reserves.

De Vermis could heal itself countless times and never feel fatigued because of it.

In fact, the fatigue could actually worsen the "cells," causing Reinvigorating Rebirth to replace them yet again.

The skill kept De Vermis in good health *forever, no matter what.*

Its lack of defenses or resistances was not really a problem for it — any damaged parts would simply be replaced.

"Its HP is measured by volume, like that of a slime. And it can regenerate...no...*rebirth* itself without limit," said Aragorn.

"That reminds me of what Persephone said about the Murder Princess," said Benetnasch. "Apparently, she can revive herself over and over again... She should've been here to fight De Vermis."

"...That would no doubt have been a sight most hellish." As De Vermis healed all and any wounds inflicted upon it, unrest spread among the Masters.

Some had actually used ults that matched or even surpassed Deadly Explosion, but the UBM had recovered even from those.

And once it was done weathering all of the attacks, De Vermis went on the offensive.

It held the palms of its six arms towards its surroundings.

“Initiating parallel offensive magic. Firing,” it said, releasing countless offensive spells.

Lightning, fireballs, ice lances, wind-blades, earth spears, and light rays rained down on the surrounding Masters.

They were all spells known by the owners of the bodies that now composed De Vermis. Since most of them had been slaves and vagrants, this magic was obviously very basic. Their power was minimal individually, and though the UBM could release them as a barrage, they merely scratched the veteran Masters here.

But that wasn’t a problem, *for a scratch was all that it needed.*

“Heh! That barely qualifies as damage!”

“Looks like this UBM’s hard focused on health and regeneration. It doesn’t look any weaker than before, but if we keep going— hm...?”

The Masters fighting De Vermis suddenly realized that something wasn’t right.

Parts of their bodies were itchy, as though something small was crawling on their skin.

They looked at the source of that sensation — the minimal damage done by the creature’s spells — *and saw countless wriggling maggots.*

“A-AHHHHHHHHHHHHH!”

The Masters’ screams resounded throughout the area. Who could blame them? This was an event that defied logic.

The crawling maggots used their tiny mouths to bite into their flesh, which then turned into more maggots.

“You little...! Damn it! I’ll smash you all!”

Some crushed the maggots crawling over them, while others killed them with fire, but the crushed or burned maggots were quickly reborn into healthy ones.

Even worse, the wounds they inflicted upon themselves in the process only became more maggots.

This was the third factor that made Reinvigorating Rebirth so fearsome, and it was no doubt the most terrible thing about it.

It allowed *any wounds* within a radius of three hundred metels to be turned into maggots.

The Masters present screamed in disgust and fear at the sight.

Even the falls and crashes caused by the panic created minor wounds that quickly became sources of even more maggots.

“Fresh maggots out of its own wounds as well as out of the wounds of others. Its volume cannot be reduced by harming it, yet it can turn its opponents into itself,” Aragorn noted.

The Masters were unable to fight it any longer.

Even through the pain they were experiencing, they could still feel the maggots crawling all over them, slowly conquering more and more territory in their bodies. A single wound was enough for Reinvigorating Rebirth to create a swarm that would encroach over the body for as long as De Vermis was within range.

Some Masters almost instantly used the suicide system, but no one could blame them for that.

“It is best for you to avoid any attacks at all, my friend,” said Aragorn.
“Use me as your shield and do not stop channeling your Necro Effect.”

“I understand,” said Benetnasch. Aragorn was tough, but he couldn’t prevent any and all damage from reaching his necromancer. The

wounds Benetnasch received were slowly being replaced by maggots, *all of which died a moment later.*

This was because of a buff available to the necromancer grouping, Necro Effect.

It created a weak contact-based instant kill effect which killed all maggots on Benetnasch as soon as they appeared.

Its flaw was that it only worked on the weakest of creatures — but fortunately, the maggots were exactly that.

“...By the way, are you affected by this? You’re all bones.”
Benetnasch asked.

“I believe it only replaces parts that receive damage or are afflicted by disease. It seems it does nothing to flawless bone. I do not rot, after all.”

“...Then I guess zombies wouldn’t be very useful here. And the parts where you’re damaged *are* actually being replaced... I guess there is the possibility that it can replace any creature even if they have no flesh *or* bones.”

Benetnasch and Aragorn had been calmly conversing and analyzing De Vermis ever since it appeared.

Even when their surroundings were flooded with panicked screams, their minds remained as serene as the surface of a still lake.

This didn’t mean that either of them — or at least just Benetnasch — had superhuman mental fortitude though. *He was merely used to such hellish battles.*

“Anyway, we have enough grudge again, so...there you are,”
Benetnasch said. Still using Soul Sight, he looked at the mass of maggots and found the soul of De Vermis’s main body.

He then used his skill as King of Tartarus to focus the grudge created by the trapped souls and the terrified Masters into a single spot...

“Deadly Explosion.”

...and incinerated the fly that was the original De Vermis.

With it gone, De Vermis froze in place...

“Did it work?”

“...Doesn’t look like it.”

...only to resume moving a moment later.

The fly was the main body, but not the core.

Even with that initial fly-body gone, De Vermis as it was now was *a gathering of maggots*. The only way to win against it was to destroy it completely.

“It doesn’t seem to *have* a physical core. The soul is still there,” said Benetnasch.

“So the only way to defeat it is to annihilate the entire mass outright,” said Aragorn. “I see we shall have to work our fingers to the bone.”

“...Is that a joke?” Benetnasch asked, his face serious. “Anyway, I can see why Huanglong...*that* Draconic Emperor sealed it away. It seems easier to do that than to actually destroy it.”

While saying that, he considered another possibility.

Or maybe he thought that it was better to seal it away in order to later release it in enemy lands as a bioweapon? I mean, if he could seal it, he probably could’ve overcome it a second time.

Ironically, it had been stolen by a third party and had now been released in a major city of a potential enemy country.

“To my knowledge, the only dragons that can conquer this foe are the king of all skydragons and the long-missing Extinction Dragon King...as well as the Gloria whose name I have heard spoken in rumors,” said Aragorn.

All three were Mythical or higher in status and excelled at wide-scale extermination.

No Masters here had such power at their disposal...

“So, my friend...what shall we do?”

“...If burning it all away is what it will take, then I will make it burn.”

...but Benetnasch had a means to deliver what was necessary.

“For better or worse...I know some people who have enough firepower.”

“...Them, eh?”

“Yes. Though I’ll have to meet up with Persephone, make sure the area’s evacuated, and get approval. Doing this won’t be good for Cortana...but I guess that all actually depends on how the negotiations with her will go.”

Benetnasch recalled the sky-blue Magingear he’d fought not too long ago, and it made him a bit uneasy. It was hard to imagine that Caldina would ignore this problem for long, however. They would likely accept Benetnasch’s help simply because he could take care of it faster than anyone else.

“Something needs to keep the UBM occupied during the evacuations and preparations.”

“I will gladly take the role...is what I would *like* to say, but separated from you, Necro Effect would expire, exposing me to the possibility of becoming sustenance for the maggots.”

“Yeah. That’s why whatever’s buying us time...must be *something that cannot be damaged*,” Benetnasch said as he took hold of something under his clothes. “The only one we can count on...is him.”

"Good grief...so you will end up using it regardless." This was the thing he'd almost used while fighting AR-I-CA — a strange pendant that looked like the lower half of a gargoyle.

"Since the last time we used it, I've taken every chance I had to pour MP into it. Now it has 6,000,000...which should be enough to keep it active for at least half an hour."

"...As expensive as ever, that one."

"He's worth the price, though, and there are some things only he can do, so..."

Benetnasch held the pendant and raised it in front of him.

Then, he called out, "Awaken, Standing and Indomitable: Greatest Bottom!"

Light enveloped the accessory and...



As De Vermis attacked the Masters and turned them into maggots using Reinvigorating Rebirth, it thought that things were proceeding smoothly.

Even now, the UBM was swiftly growing in overall volume.

This was done through the same Reinvigorating Rebirth skill. It simply transferred any of its fragments that left its range back to the main mass. Because of this, even if the injured Masters who were being consumed by maggots managed to escape, the fragments created from their bodies would always return to De Vermis.

From a purely animalistic perspective, the right thing to do might've been to let the Masters run with the maggots to spread itself far and wide and expand its territory.

However, that wasn't what De Vermis thought was the best course of action. Its optimal scenario was one where it turned more and

more creatures into fragments, so that they lived forever in De Vermis's collective existence. In this UBM's mind, that was an act of goodwill...even if other creatures saw it as a violation of their very being.

Since fragments that left the effective range of Reinvigorating Rebirth couldn't be replaced and would die if they were further harmed, De Vermis found it only natural to retrieve them.

However, it would be a mistake to think mankind ought to be thankful for its non-expansionist inclinations.

After all, as it grew, *so did the range of Reinvigorating Rebirth.*

The size of the body it originally planned to have was three hundred metels, but if it grew beyond that, the effective range would grow as well. It grew slowly, but if it was able to do so unimpeded, there was no telling how vast De Vermis could become.

Perhaps it could one day cover an entire country.

"Not enough..." De Vermis said as it looked around for more food to turn into maggots.

The fear of the writhing monstrosities and the futility of fighting this foe had caused most of the nearby Masters to flee, and the UBM did not appreciate that.

It did not enjoy having fewer creatures to share its life with.

That was why what it saw next made it immensely happy.

"This is..."

It was a gigantic silhouette.

De Vermis could sense and understand that the thing before it was a powerful being, but at the same time, it was glad that it would be able to corrupt something so large. That would no doubt help it grow, after all.

Following those thoughts, De Vermis attacked it with magic — a focused onslaught of countless offensive spells.

It was hard to withstand the barrage unharmed, and even the slightest scratch would be enough for Reinvigorating Rebirth to start replacing the injury with maggots.

No one could escape it, no matter how strong they were.

“Hm...?”

That was why De Vermis was puzzled. Despite the many attacks it had just unleashed, it couldn’t feel the ability activating on its target.

That could only mean one thing — the target wasn’t even scratched.

“...Who are you?” it asked.

There was no response.

There *couldn’t be* a response, because it had no mouth.

No eyes, no ears, or even a head.

No arms, no torso, and no heart.

It was nothing but two legs and a tail, standing tall before De Vermis.

The silhouette was a lower half, shining in a way similar to, but unlike, silver.

It was the gigantic, fifty-metel-tall bottom half of a gargoyle.

A loud hum resounded throughout the area. It wasn’t caused by a mouth of any kind, but by the massive tail it was swinging.

The tail was vibrating at immense speeds, stirring the air around it.

Despite not having eyes, it flawlessly pulverized the six arms extended towards it with a single swing of its tail.

Those six arms were instantly reduced to bits smaller than grains of sand. This was achieved by the gargoyle's Hyper Vibration offensive-defense skill, which thoroughly destroyed anything it touched.

De Vermis focused and quickly regrew its six arms before resuming its offensive magic barrage. However, once again, none of the spells did any damage to the gargoyle. The countless magic attacks were negated by a skill which made it immune to offensive magic.

Realizing that, De Vermis then tried to attack the legs, which weren't vibrating like the tail.

But no matter how hard it tried, all the damage its arms might've done was negated by the gargoyle's immense defense and damage-decreasing skills.

The creature rendered all of its attacks impotent.

"Just...what is this?" De Vermis asked.

The bottom half of the gargoyle statue had no mouth with which to respond. However, words weren't needed for anyone who witnessed it to know its power.

A body made of a Superior Metal that surpassed even the Mythical Hihi'irokane.

An offensive-defense skill that easily pulverized the attacks of an Ancient Legendary.

And finally, an overwhelming aura that surpassed the one possessed by De Vermis itself.

This was the creature summoned by the Superior MVP reward once acquired by King of Tartarus, Benetnasch.

This was the creature only barely defeated by the combined efforts of the King of Beasts and King of Tartarus.

This was the strongest gargoyle in *Infinite Dendrogram*...and the first SUBM. The “Lone Yet Unmatched, Greatest One.”

Or, at least, one *half* of it.

Prologue: Another First Choice

March, 2044, Benetnasch

A girl had starved to death right before my eyes.

My memory of the events that followed that was hazy.

I remembered screaming at the top of my lungs, then frantically logging off and rushing into my bed, my blanket covering me like the overwhelming regret I felt.

Many questions raged in my mind as I lay there. Why did I pick Caldina? Why did I choose realistic visuals? Why did I walk down that street at all? Why...why did I ever pick up *Infinite Dendrogram*?

It was supposed to be a game, nothing more. A realistic game, but a game nonetheless.

But to me, it was just...*too* real.

I'd been utterly convinced I'd stepped into a desert city, despite never having been to any place like that in my life.

...And it had made me feel that I'd actually witnessed a child starve.

The moment of her death came back to me every time I closed my eyes.

"Why...? Why did that...?" I couldn't wipe away that memory no matter how hard I tried.

It was the first time I had ever seen such a cruel death. The shock and regret I felt stuck to me like tar.

I relived the moment in my mind over and over. I even felt the sensation of that bit of food she'd so desperately wanted before dying as it slipped from my fingers.

"If only I could...at least..." If I had been able to give her that snack, perhaps my regret wouldn't have been so deep.

But that was no longer a possibility.

I couldn't undo the past.

The dead girl couldn't come back to life.

Her untimely, unjust end haunted my memory.

"It's a game...just a game...but..." A character in a video game had died — that was all there was to it.

But my heart just *couldn't let it end at that*.

I continued to cry and wallow in regret for hours.

But then, I thought of one thing more.

"...A funeral...for her."

I couldn't change the fact that the girl was dead, but I found hope in the idea that I could ease my regret if I set some flowers on her grave and said a prayer for her.

"I should...prepare some snacks too..." With my hands still shaking, I picked up *Infinite Dendrogram*'s headset and logged in once again.



The time that had passed in the game was three times what had passed in real time.

It was currently the dead of night, and since there weren't as many lights here as there were in real life, the city was dark. I hadn't logged out far from the alley where I'd found the girl, so I was able to return to it in no time.

"She's not here... Well, of course she isn't."

The girl was nowhere to be seen. I could only guess that she had been taken and buried by her family, or the church if she had no relatives.

In that case, I had to at least put some snacks on her grave and give her a prayer.

To find out where she was buried, I spoke to the nearby patrolman.

“Excuse me,” I said.

“Hm? What is it, Mr. Master?” he asked.

“Umm, I would like to know where to find the grave of the child who was here.”

“Child? Whose child?”

“It was a girl who died in that alley over there...”

“...Oh. Orphans who die in the streets are buried on the outskirts of the city, to the north.”

“Th-Thank you!” I expressed my gratitude before rushing off.

“But it’s best not to go ther—”

I couldn’t fully hear the voice behind me.

I went to the north of the city and, eventually, found the location. It was over ten minutes by foot away from the gate.

There, out in the sands, stood several large areas enclosed with pitiful fences.

They looked like the fences around graveyards, but these areas were anything but.

There were no gravestones, or even graves, for that matter.

There was *nothing but piles of corpses*.

Lying atop the dry sands, there were parched and mummified corpses, skeletal corpses whose flesh had been consumed by insects, and fresher ones that were still being feasted upon — all thrown together to create an imposing mountain of death.

“...Egh...” Before I knew it, I was vomiting.

The fear I felt and my confusion at how such a thing could be allowed to exist overwhelmed my mind like a raging torrent.

“...Huh?”

And then I noticed a sign next to the entrance.

It said “Homeless Body Disposal.” Below that, there was an explanation:

“Because there are no places in Cortana where the homeless who are unable to pay taxes may be buried, and because there are no funds to cover the fuel expenses of cremation, they are to be left here so that the elements and/or the local wildlife may see to them.

—Mayor of Cortana, Douglas Coin”

Because of the nearby save point and oasis, Cortana was a flourishing city in spite of its barren surroundings. However, its area was limited, and unlike large cities in the other countries, it couldn’t expand much beyond its current size.

Because of this, even burial space was in short supply, and with Cortana being the city that exemplified Caldina’s ideal of “money makes the world go around,” money was required to procure a grave plot. Street urchins couldn’t possibly pay the fees, so they were all thrown outside the city, as though the expenses of even burying them in the sand were too great for the authorities.

I spent a good while standing before the “graves”...the *corpse-piles*, saying not a word. I could read the explanation on the sign just fine. The auto-translation feature made it easy.

However, I couldn’t *understand* it, no matter how hard I tried.

My mind grasped the meaning, but my heart could not.

There was reasoning behind these actions, but it still didn't make sense to me that someone would actually act like this. My society in the real world would give a proper burial to even the most unfortunate.

This felt *less* realistic than anything I'd experienced since I came to *Infinite Dendrogram*.

“...Ah.”

I gasped as I finally saw it.

At the top of the pile, on a corpse that was mostly bone, there were remains that still had skin and hair on them — and the body of the girl that had died right before my eyes.

I froze in place. I'd come here to give her a prayer alongside an offering of flowers or snacks.

But now, I couldn't even do that much.

Falling to my knees, I looked away from her.

“Huh...?” And then, my vision stopped on a different sign.

It said, “Anyone is free to take the corpses, but bringing people back to life using Necromancy is forbidden within the city walls.”

The first half of the sentence shocked me. The idea that anyone could just take the corpses, though, felt apt for this inhumane place. Considering it would make space for more corpses, you could even call it “rational.”

That aside, though...

“Necro...mancy? Bringing people back to life?”

Those words implied that it was possible for dead people to live again.

Wait...perhaps it *was* possible? A world with magic may have resurrection spells, after all.

“A-Ahhh...” But bringing dead people back using magic was immoral. At the very least, it would stand against the faith I’d followed until now.

But if...if it was something I could do...

If it was possible...

“And if it...made this regret go away...”

...Then morality be damned. Just let me do it!

The moment that thought crossed my mind, my left hand began glowing purple...

“Very well. Then that shall be my nature.”

...and an unfamiliar girl appeared at my side.

“...Huh?”

The best word to describe her was “purple.” She had purple hair and wore a purple gown in the style of ancient Greece.

Her eyes, though, were a different color — a deep, striking black.

“Who...are you?”

“My name is Persephone. I was born of your flesh, soul, and the lamentation of your heart. I am your Embryo — a Type Maiden-Castle/Territory.”

“Perse...phone?”

“I am pleased to meet you, my Master,” said the girl with a ladylike bow. She shared a name with the queen of the underworld and was, apparently, my Embryo.

“So, will you use my power this very instant?” she asked.

“Power...?”

“Mmhmm. I am able to bring this girl back to life.”

“...REALLY?!?” I exclaimed. I’d grabbed hold of her shoulders before I even realized it.

“Though I am but a hatchling in my first form,” she went on. “To resurrect someone, I need their fresh body, and the time they will be alive is brief.”

“What do you mean...?”

“I can bring her back...for a mere three minutes.”

I needed a while to process those words.

“Three...minutes.” That was barely any time at all. It barely compared to the amount of time the mythological Persephone had offered Orpheus when he descended into the underworld to fetch his wife back to the land of the living.

It was so little time, in fact, that rather than bringing her back only to die again minutes later, it was perhaps better to just leave her as she was now.

But...three minutes...

That was enough to...

“I...” The bag of snacks I’d been holding made a rustling sound as it shifted in my hand.

And then, I made my choice.

Chapter Eight: The Tartarean Possibility

Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

Drawn by the pillar of fire, I'd arrived at the mayor's mansion to witness a battle between two giant beings.

The pale maggot creature used its six arms to cast spells, while the countless maggots composing its body tried to bite into its opponent.

However, the silvery creature that looked like only the bottom half of something...was completely unaffected.

It used its tail to pulverize the maggot monster, and the creature's attacks didn't do any damage to it at all.

However, the same could be said about the writhing mass it was fighting — it instantly recovered from any and all damage done to it.

An amalgamation of maggots that negated all wounds, and a leg-and-tail creature that didn't receive wounds in the first place. They both tried to defeat each other, but neither of them could do anything to hurt the other.

I felt like I was watching a scene from that mythological afterlife where battle never ended.

And, of course, it reminded me of Emily.

“...Cyco, what’s the number on them?” I asked.

“Zero for both. The legs are a summon, while the maggot...doesn’t kill anyone.”

...So La Porte de l’Enfer wouldn’t work on either of them, I thought.

“Hmm... So Master Dearest summoned Greatest. Well, that is no doubt the optimal choice to buy time against the creature,” said Persephone, shifting my attention away from the eternal battle.

“You know them?” I asked.

“Yes. The lower half is...well, to be concise, a monster Master Dearest summoned using an MVP reward. Its name is ‘Greatest Bottom.’”

“So that’s KoT’s...”

An MVP special reward could only have come from a UBM. With the text above the maggot creature saying “The Rebirthing Infestation, De Vermis” in UBM nomenclature, one could say that this was truly a battle between UBMs.

“He seldom uses it, however,” Persephone continued. “It is quite costly, after all. Master Dearest is a caster Superior Job and he charges the MVP reward whenever he finds the time — but even with that, it cannot fight for long. And it is not even as powerful as the original.”

“The original?”

“As you can see, it is nothing but a lower half. Were it whole, it would be able to defeat this De Vermis creature, but with the upper half *taken away*, Greatest Bottom is only legs and a tail with defensive skills. It could never be defeated, but it could never defeat this foe, so this would no doubt continue without end. No... Seeing as it would not last long, we are at a disadvantage.”

I assumed that she was simply saying that it was weaker than it had been as a UBM. But...what did she mean by the upper half being “*taken away*?” It was like she was implying that the upper half was actually owned by someone else now.

But UBMs who split MVP rewards were...

“Persephone...!”

My thought was cut short by the voice reaching my ears. I turned towards its source and saw a skeletal dragon rushing forward with a thin man enclosed inside its ribcage.

The skeletal dragon was unfamiliar, but I knew the man. It was the same person I'd seen several times back at the Triangle of Wisdom's HQ — King of Tartarus, Benetnasch.

"Oh, Master Dearest," said Persephone.

"So this is where you were," said KoT. "And you are...the Triangle of Wisdom's...?"

Apparently, he remembered me as well.

"Hugo Lesseps," I said. "I am with Teach— I mean Ace, AR-I-CA. I know about the Orbs and your negotiations with her."

"I see..."

"What is that maggot creature?" I asked.

"...To be brief, this is the result of the mayor's Orb breaking and the UBM within being released."

"Huh?!"

"By the way, since you're with her, I don't suppose you would have any means of contacting her? There is something I must tell her."

"J-Just a moment," I said before opening up White Rose's cockpit, turning on the comms, and connecting to Teach's Blue Opera.

The King of Tartarus then explained the situation to her.

"...And now it's gradually growing in size. Ordinary attacks are ineffective; the only way to defeat it is to completely incinerate the entire surrounding area."

"...You can't be serious," Teach said from the other side of the comms unit, her voice like a groan. "I just finished disposin' of the

toxic stuff and I'm headin' back and...yep, I see it. Boy, is that gross. And then there's the thing that's just legs and tail... Hey, KoT, is that...?"

"No comment."

"Oh, okay then... Here goes nothin'."

A moment later, a melodic engine sound rang out and a pale blue combat unit sped through the evening sky above.

Blue Opera then fired shells at De Vermis that crackled with lightning, but the monster simply ignored them, repairing the damage just moments later.

"Well, this is hopeless," Teach said. "I can't win against these types."

"...Aren't you a little quick to give up?" I asked.

"Hey, I was chosen for the Orb-gatherin' precisely *because* my firepower isn't too over the top! Big guys who regenerate are a job for Fatoum, Albert, the money-brain, or the bitch!"

...*Who were those latter two?* I wondered.

"Would they make it in time if I called them now...? They're either at the capital or on the borders to other countries...and they're slow as hell... Ugh! Losin' Cortana would be real bad even for Caldina!"

This city was the starting point for Caldina's Masters. If it was destroyed, the country would basically lose its entrance.

Not many Masters would want to start the game in a ruined city, after all.

Even ignoring all of that, Cortana was the heart of Caldina's commerce. Losing it would be a major blow to the country's economy.

"Ace, I have a proposition," said Benetnasch.

“I’m listenin’.”

“If you accept three conditions, I will defeat this UBM.”

“...Hmm?” Teach thought for a moment. “I see. So you *have* someone who can deal with this?”

“...Oh, you were aware of my ultimate, huh?”

“So name the conditions.”

Teach didn’t seem to have any doubts that KoT could do what he said.

“The first condition concerns the UBM’s defeat itself. My method will make it impossible to give you the Orb if I didn’t need it myself, as we agreed previously.”

“Fine by me. Next.”

“Second...we agreed that you would do me a favor when I gave you the Orb. I want it done regardless.”

“I’m gonna need the details.”

“If you find any items or information relating to grudge disposal or ‘healthy revival’ of the dead, I want to know about it.”

“You’re not gonna ask me to actually *give* you the items or the info?”

“No.”

“Hmm...? Well, that’s fine too. What’s the last condition?”

“That would be...” Benetnasch said before pausing for a moment, as though hesitating to actually speak it out loud. “Permission to annihilate anything within a six hundred metel radius of De Vermis, part of Cortana included.”

...I could see why he’d hesitated. That was an outrageous request.

"Of course...I would only do it after an evacuation," he continued.
"My summon is buying the necessary time, so it should be doable. If possible, I would like you to help with it as well."

"I see... 'Annihilate,' though...really? Whatever you're plannin' to use has gotta be somethin'."

"...So, do I have your permission?"

"One moment," Teach said, and then I heard some rustling at the other side of the comms. "Ah. Hello, Madam—I mean, President. Yes, it's me, AR-I-CA. There is a problem with the Orb retrieval and... Huh? You already know everything? Just how much do you see? Are you actually Laplace's demon or something? It's in your name, so..."

I could tell that she was talking over comms with someone else.

"Okay then. Hey, Benny."

...Benny? That seemed like a weird thing to call him, but KoT didn't seem to mind at all.

"Yes?" he said.

"Just to check, is the mayor dead?" Teach asked.

"...He was consumed by De Vermis."

"All right, we'll just treat him as dead, then."

...I felt like I just heard a pretty grim exchange.

"Here's the results. You're good for the third condition. With the mayor dead, Prez used her emergency authority to give you permission. Her exact words were 'I will not hold you liable for any fatalities or property damages. Please thoroughly eliminate the threat of De Vermis from Caldina.'"

"...Understood."

...Fatalities or property damages, huh?

“Teach, I...”

“So, Yu, let’s check the area around that thing for anyone who didn’t get away yet!” Teach began to speak as though she knew what I was gonna say.

“...Yes!”

“So yeah, we’ll be doin’ that, but when are you gonna do your thing, Benny?”

“...I can keep up the summon for at most fifteen minutes and a half more, so... I’ll use it after exactly fifteen minutes have passed.”

“All right! Let’s go, Yu!”

“Okay!” I moved White Rose — with its armor stored away to make it lighter — to go around and search for people in order to aid the evacuation.

...Though, I couldn’t help but wonder what Benetnasch had that could defeat that UBM.



City of Commerce, Cortana

After seeing off the two Magingears, Benetnasch rushed into the six hundred metel radius, deeply lost in thought.

“You seem to be shocked that the ‘new life eternal’ is not what you hoped it would be,” his Embryo spoke to him.

“...Persephone.”

Aragorn was busy watching for anyone who could interfere with the use of the skill, so Benetnasch and his Embryo were the only ones talking.

"That is why I told you not to rely on those accursed Orbs. If mere UBMs can hold the miracle you seek, things would have taken a turn for the better far earlier. Or perhaps a turn *for the worse*."

Benetnasch listened to her admonishment before slowly turning to her and asking, "Did you...know what De Vermis actually was?"

"Of course I did. *I'd heard about it*, after all. I knew full well that UBM was the sort of thing you hate the most — that which changes the meaning of death."

While talking to Hugo, Persephone had said, "That makes this city a true crucible of death. One who *transcends* death, one who *mass-produces* death, one who *changes the meaning* of death... Certainly this is not the result of deliberate meddling, but it is no doubt interesting."

"One who transcends death" referred to Benetnasch and Persephone.

"One who mass-produces death" was obviously The Murder Princess, Emily. Though if Persephone had truly understood her power, she might've said that she transcended death, as well.

And the "one who changes the meaning of death" was De Vermis. It transformed humans into maggots, even claiming their very souls. The way in which it ended people's lives *as humans* while still keeping them alive no doubt fit Persephone's description.

However, it was something she could only say if she had known of De Vermis's power.

But back then, not even the mayor — the owner of the Orb — knew about this.

"Why—?"

“Don’t ask me why I did not tell you, Master Dearest. You would have wanted to confirm it yourself even if I did. You never stop grasping at straws, after all.”

Benetnasch had no response. Her words were a knife sharpened by truth, and they cut deep into his heart.

“I will say the same thing I have said a thousand times — you are drowning, dragged down by countless weights. You could easily swim free if you cut them off, but you cannot, so you suffer without end.”

“Even so, I...”

“I know full well. I was born from you, after all. But as the first weight you must cut off, I must keep saying this over and over,” Persephone said before resting her forehead on Benetnasch’s back. “What you wish to accomplish is a true miracle. Even if I went beyond the seventh form, there is no guarantee what you desire will ever be possible.”

“I know...”

“I wish for you to be happy. I wish for you to forget me, this world...everything that gives you all this pain and suffering...and return to a proper life on the other side.”

Silence.

“But of course, you would not do that...would you?”

“...No,” Benetnasch said before turning around and laying a hand on Persephone’s shoulder. “I won’t deny that I’m hurting and suffering... I know that this way of life restricts me.”

Persephone’s expression became cloudy for a moment.

“But...I freely chose...to be bound in this way.”

“Master Dearest...”

“I can’t forget anything I’ve seen, and there’s no way I can give up now. As long as I am me...I will keep taking the liberty to choose this way of life.”

Those words came out with a certain resolve. It was a resolve forged years ago — a will that had faded and been damaged since then, but had never once broken.

Persephone knew the significance of this better than anyone else. The words made tears well up in her eyes, but she quickly wiped them away.

“I see. In that case, there is only one thing for me to do. As the one who carries your wish, I will give my all,” she said as she grasped the hand over her shoulder.

“...Thank you.”

“For now, we must annihilate De Vermis,” Persephone said as she let go of Benetnasch’s hand and turned to face the UBM. “It is time. Master Dearest, the ultimate skill. Queen of the Afterlife, Persephone, stands by her dearest King of Tartarus, Benetnasch, to give her all to destroy this living hell.”

“...Please do, Persephone.”

Persephone called out to him, and Benetnasch responded with an awkward smile.

He then reached into his inventory and took out an item — a Legendary MVP special reward — before giving it to her.

With the item in her hands, Persephone nodded. “This should suffice. It will not be long...but long enough for the single attack we need.”

At those words, she raised the special reward upwards.

“Now...Master Dearest! I will build the gate!”

“...Yeah. I’m counting on you!” And so, Persephone...

“Here and now, I devote this treasure of a creature so many dread...”

...began to sing.



“This will become the gate to the realm of the dead.” Her voice was her own, but it seemed to echo as though many unseen voices were singing along with her. As they resonated, the MVP reward in her hands transformed into bits of light... It lost its Resources and vanished.

“It will be a door to the chamber of repose within me.”

The moment the reward dissolved into its Resources, a giant gate appeared before Persephone.

“Here these souls will make their triumphant returns.”

“Glory consumed by the past like a parchment burns.”

The form the gate took on was a purple triumphal arch. Though it did not resemble the great arch in real-world Paris, its splendor made it an apt comparison.

“Be that as it may, they shall cross through time,

And once again wield what they had in their prime.”

As Persephone’s song continued, a film of light appeared within the gate. Its colors were innumerable, and it soon covered the entire inner side of the structure.

“...It is prepared,” said Persephone, seemingly exhausted.

“Yeah...” Benetnasch replied as he put his hands on her shoulders to support her. “...Fourteen minutes and a half.” He whispered the time that had passed since he’d told Hugo and AR-I-CA of the time limit.

Thirty seconds left. As far as Benetnasch could see, with the exception of those trapped by De Vermis, there were no living souls in the immediate surroundings.

And so, the time came. Benetnasch canceled the Greatest Bottom summon, making it vanish and become bits of light right before De Vermis’s eyes.

“Hm...?” De Vermis was confused by a powerful enemy just disappearing suddenly, but didn’t think too much of it. The only thing that mattered to it was increasing the number of its fragments. With all living creatures in the area gone, it had to find new bodies it could transform into itself.

However...

“...What is that?” Almost before De Vermis realized it, a strange purple gate appeared far outside of its skill’s range. Busy with Greatest Bottom, it hadn’t noticed the structure being built, but it was sure that it hadn’t been there before.

However, when it saw the film of light appear...

“Ah...”

...De Vermis became afraid of something.

That was a feeling it shouldn’t have possessed.

It felt as thought it was staring into an abyss — a vast nothingness directly opposed to the eternal life it desired.

Instinctually feeling that it had to destroy the gate, De Vermis rushed forward.

However, it was too late, for the preparations were already done.

“Gate to the Afterlife — Persephone...”

Despite still being far away, De Vermis felt like it could hear those words clearly — Benetnasch activating his Embryo’s ultimate skill.

A moment later, the gate’s light intensified. It began to shed a radiance that seemed otherworldly.

King of Tartarus, Benetnasch and Queen of the Afterlife, Persephone.

Those who knew their power might call them either “Indestructible” or “Witching Hour.”

“Indestructible” because he had transcended ultimate destruction — what he had wouldn’t remain even if the flesh decayed away — and “Witching Hour” because it referred to a time when you could encounter *something you should have never been able to encounter*.

Once they had used their ultimate skill, those around them would encounter something truly impossible — something that surpassed the demise of flesh and the ravages of time.

The shining arch of triumph...

“Amber Abyss Squadron!”

...allowed an amber metal dragon to fly once again.



About Persephone

In Greek mythology, Persephone was the wife of Hades, the king of the underworld.

The most famous tale about her concerned her marriage to Hades — said to be the beginning of the four seasons — but the second most famous was that of Orpheus the musician.

Orpheus traveled to the realm of the dead to bring back his deceased wife. He played an indescribably beautiful song on his lyre that charmed all the residents of the underworld and eventually reached Hades and Persephone.

His music made Persephone weep, and she begged Hades to help Orpheus.

The singer was then allowed to take his wife back to the realm of the living, but only if he did not turn back to look at her the entire way out. If he did, she would have to stay in the realm of the dead.

In the tale, Orpheus looked back right as he reached the edge to the realm of the living, sending his wife back to the realm of the dead.

His dead wife returned to life for a single moment, only to be sent back, and that was where the story usually ended.

Having been based on a character from this myth, Persephone had an ultimate skill that worked in a similar way.

Queen of the Afterlife, Persephone was a Type Maiden-Castle/Rule.

Her ultimate, Gate to the Afterlife — Persephone, was a skill that momentarily brought the dead back to life.

It used Resources to create a gate for the dead to pass through, then brought the souls resting within Persephone back as they had been in their prime.

Persephone was able to bring the dead back to life using only their soul — something that normally could only be accomplished by the Skydragon King, Drag-Heaven.

She summoned the dead at the peak of their living power — exactly as they had been during the best times of their life, even including their equipment. It could be the famed heroes of ancient times, entire parties of champions, or even powerful monstrosities of old. The total power of the summoned souls determined the Resources needed, but they would come back no matter what.

However, this wasn't a power that gave full control over the dead.

Anyone Persephone brought back wasn't bound in any way, and they could use their resurrected bodies as they wished. They could be at odds with Benetnasch and perhaps even attack him.

That was why he connected with all the departed souls he summoned — for if they didn't share Benetnasch's will, they would not assist him.

The ones summoned now were no different.

Benetnasch had helped these souls once, and they were now resting within Persephone, ready to share the necromancer's will when they were needed.

And so they were called, here and now.

Neither he nor they wanted to see people be consumed by the living hell of De Vermis, so, having crossed a time of two millennia, they now flew through the skies of today.



City of Commerce, Cortana

The purple gate shone, and a giant silhouette flew out from it — a mechanical dragon, covered in amber armor.

It was a weapon, operated by the four people inside.

The creature was in fact a Prism Dragon, and its name was "Amber Abyss" — the same superweapon of the pre-ancient civilization that had fought against the Incarnation of Armaments and vanished.

And now, Persephone's power had brought it back, along with the soldiers who piloted it.

"Captain, we have exited the gate without issue. Analyzing the environment."

"Keep an eye on the radar and fly towards the sky. Enter the Abyss Cannon firing sequence. You have a grasp of the situation, right? You better not fire it anywhere near the unevacuated areas!"

"Of course I won't! Sure, it's been two thousand years, but I haven't forgotten how to use this!"

"Heh. You never change, sublieutenant."

The revived dead were talking within the cockpit of the Amber Abyss. Since they had been kept within Persephone, they already had a full grasp of the situation here.

“Captain, the sublieutenant here sure seems fired up. I guess this is his chance to thank Mr. Benetnasch for confirming that his wife and kid survived and for looking into his descendants.”

“Th-There’s that, yes... But I’m also happy that I can fight for people again.”

“I understand...” said the captain as he looked down at the city and the disgusting creature that was De Vermis. “Our contract with King of Tartarus, Benetnasch says that we are to lend him our power when he fights monsters that endanger humans, the Incarnations, or the Extra-Continental Vessel. I believe this situation isn’t in conflict with that. Any objections?”

No one said anything in protest — their will was united.

“In that case...Amber Abyss Squadron, commence the mission!”

“Roger!” Amber Abyss suddenly stopped gaining altitude and stopped at one point in the sky.

Its metal head moved, targeting Cortana...specifically, the ruins of the mayor’s mansion.

“Prism Dragon No. 1, Amber Abyss, set the firing point.”

“Prepare to fire the Abyss Cannon. Pinpoint the radius of the attack. Fire at 20% energy.”

“Roger! Entering Abyss Cannon firing mode!”

The Prism Dragon opened its maw towards the surface.

Immense amounts of energy gathered in its mouth, but since it only needed a fraction of its total power, it was quickly ready to release.

“Energy at twenty percent...charging complete!”

“Abyss Cannon... FIRE!”

Thus, the compressed magical baryon acceleration cannon installed in its maw fired for the first time in two millennia.



De Vermis couldn't even begin to understand what the gate or the amber dragon were. However, it felt immense fear that drove it to desperately crawl away.

Alas, its running ended before it could even cover a few dozen metels.

De Vermis looked upwards and saw a giant orb of flame. Released by Amber Abyss, it warped the very air with its immense heat as it flew...and hit the ground close to De Vermis's body.

"Hn...?!" The heat turned the air into plasma, evaporating the ground below and causing the UBM to let out a soundless scream. The maggots all over shrieked in pain, but without any air to carry their silent voices, no one could possibly hear them.

De Vermis had Reinvigorating Rebirth, but it wasn't fast enough to replace the volume it was losing to this heat.

Its maggots were not just being burned, but obliterated without a trace.

Quickly losing parts of itself, De Vermis tried its hardest to survive.

The UBM pushed Reinvigorating Reincarnation to its absolute limit. It managed to endure by using the cell-to-maggot transformation it had used when the mayor lost his legs — continuous reincarnation that ignored the law of conservation of mass.

Using the skill caused immense pain, but it did not care about that. In fact, the pain of the skill was nothing compared to the pain of the fires burning it.

Loss of...whole... Calculate...healing... Must...bear...it... Despite losing immense amounts of volume, De Vermis didn't give up on survival.

However, the next moment, the Abyss Cannon showed its true power.

The magic core within the orb of flame was released in a burst of heat.

Half of the magic released remotely activated a gravity spell. The rest of the magic became more heat, all of which was drawn downwards into the newly spawned epicenter of the gravity spell.

The result was a pit that trapped heat, and a gravity well that would not let the target escape.

Anything caught within would be trapped and thoroughly scorched.

This was the true power of one of the pre-ancient civilization's strongest weapons — the Abyss Cannon.

Even greater shock overcame De Vermis. It beheld a meltdown leading straight into an abyss.

The UBM burned within the pit, sinking deeper into the ground with every passing second. The maggots that the orb of flame had missed *returned to De Vermis* while it sank several hundred metels into the ground.

The heat grew ever greater, burning the UBM with an intensity that soon surpassed the speed of its healing by a wide margin.

As all the maggots composing its body burned, De Vermis began to feel true fear.

I...I... Douglas... We... Eternal... A new life... ETERNAAAAAAALLL!

Then came the final magic installed within the orb of flame — an immense explosion.

A few seconds later, a pillar of fire rose from the pit where the UBM was caught, scorching the last of the maggots.

Buried in a fiery grave, De Vermis's life eternal was burned away to nothing.

Prologue: Another Starting Point

March, 2044, Benetnasch

The girl's corpse lay before me.

But unlike my previous encounter with her, there was peace in her expression.

She'd been brought back. She seemed to have no memory of dying, so she was simply reaching for me just as she had before her first death.

This time, I was able to give her that snack.

She ate it as if it was the most delicious thing in the world.

Persephone noted that this had perhaps satisfied her one and only regret.

Crying, the girl ate up every scrap of food I gave her...only to die again three minutes later.

I...didn't know if I had done the right thing.

I'd brought her back solely to do away with our shared regret, as well as my own fear...only to let her die again.

Her last words were "I never thought I'd ever eat something so delicious. I'm so glad I could be here for this!"

Words that made it seem like she was born just to eat those simple snacks.

Words that made it seem like nothing in life had ever made her happier.

She left behind those words...and died again.

"In what world can you be all right with *a life like that...?!*" This cry escaped my lips as I looked at her tear-smeared, joyous face.

Was this really salvation?

“...Anyway.”

Anyway, I would never forget what happened today.

And I would surely never log in to *Infinite Dendrogram* ever again.

“...Ah.”

As I prepared to log out for good, Persephone opened her mouth to say something.

I turned around and saw her there with her hand meekly extended towards me, saying nothing more.

I didn’t know what was on her mind. I knew barely anything about her. I only knew that she was my Embryo and that she had brought a girl back to life, if only for three minutes.

Perhaps it was because of her that I was able to get rid of these regrets. If so, then I ought to be grateful to her.

With that in mind, I prepared to log out...

“Hm...?”

...but then I remembered something I’d heard.

Embryos were things that evolved.

Right now, Persephone could only bring someone back for three minutes. She had just been born, after all.

But if...

“My Master?”

“...Persephone, I have a question for you,” I said as I looked into her deep black eyes. “Will the time limit on the resurrection disappear if you evolve?”

“Ah...!”

Embryos evolved. Because of that, it seemed that she might be able to evolve past this limit.

“That...is a possibility.”

“I see...” Upon hearing my response, Persephone grimaced.

What expression was I making? Was I laughing? Crying? Or showing regret for having asked such a thing at all?

It didn’t matter to me.

All that mattered...was that there *was* a possibility.

“This world probably has tons of children who died like she did,” I said, calling *Infinite Dendrogram* a “world” as though it was natural. “Probably a great many in this city alone...unfortunate urchins who die without even knowing what a helping hand looks like. Children who die without knowing even the smallest joys, like enjoying a snack.”

I didn’t know anything about this world. I couldn’t have imagined that it would be filled with so much misfortune.

I found this world so unfair I couldn’t stomach it.

“But...the girl looked happy. She felt saved in the end... That’s what I want to believe.”

“Mhm. Now you can proudly return to your world and...”

“A *single child*, out of all the unfortunate children here...” She was the only one who’d been saved.

But that wasn’t enough.

I wanted to turn all of this around.

“...What are you saying?” Persephone asked, her face full of fear.

“For now, it’s just three minutes.” I grabbed her shoulders and spoke of what could be possible for us. “But if you evolve and grow

stronger, if your power grows beyond this...we may be able to save all the children who died just like her and give them a full second life."

"You...!" The salvation of all unfortunate children who met untimely deaths — realistically thinking, it was impossible.

However, she had already done the impossible once.

Perhaps if I saved every child, this profound distress that made me want to bash my head against a wall would disappear? No — it *clearly* would.

"That is a miracle beyond the reach of mankind...! It is *far* too outrageous. There is no guarantee that it would be possible even if I became a Superior Embryo...or even something beyond that!"

"There is no guarantee...but it isn't impossible."

"Merely *trying* to achieve it is ludicrous! You should abandon this world and return to the other side!"

"I...can't do that..." I'd learned too much.

I realized that this world had misfortunes that I couldn't tolerate no matter what.

I would save the souls of dead children until I was satisfied.

Otherwise...the wound in my heart would never heal.

Therefore...this is the path I would walk.

"Let's grow strong — you and me, together. If we keep growing stronger, we will eventually reach what we want. That's what this world is about...right...?"

Silence. Persephone seemed to be thinking about something.

But then, she briefly closed her eyes and...

"...Very well."

...nodded.

That made me very happy. With this...I wouldn't have to give up.

"...Let's keep going," I said. "So that we may fulfill our desire..."

"...Indeed," she said. "Let us pray that our hopes will one day come to fruition."

And so, we made a promise to each other.

"We will bring back all unfortunate children from death...and give them full, happy lives."

Together, we would fulfill this grand desire.

This was our true starting point.



Epilogue: Two Worlds, Two Mes

City of Commerce, Cortana

[The UBM, “The Rebirthing Infestation, De Vermis,” was defeated.]

[Selecting MVP.]

[“Benetnasch” was selected as MVP.]

[“Benetnasch” is presented with an MVP special reward — “Rejuvenating Grubwear, De Vermis.”]

Following that message, white boots dropped in front of Benetnasch.

Benetnasch had no attention to spare for them. He was focused on the scorched hole that De Vermis had vanished into.

The heat it created had reached Benetnasch, but the effect of the flame pit on the surface of the earth was minimal. Abyss Cannon was a weapon that could compress and focus its firepower, so it hadn’t delivered any life-threatening damage to anyone outside the established radius of six hundred metels.

Within the radius, though, some of the buildings had collapsed, while the ones next to the fiery pit were on fire.

The destruction in that particular area was devastating in its own right — and it was a kind of devastation that had already been caused by someone, somewhere, at some time.

Gate to the Afterlife — Persephone was an ultimate that could bring back any tians and creatures that had lived in the past and release them as they were in their prime. This meant that it could bring back long-forgotten devastation that was beyond the power of Masters.

His skill was rightfully feared because of it, but Benetnasch wasn’t one to care about what people thought.

There was only one thing in his sight, after all — his desire and the path leading to it.

“Hm. The skill on the reward is a lesser version of the original,” said Persephone.

She’d picked up and examined the boots before Benetnasch even looked at them.

“It transforms the wounds of the wearer into maggots, which in time become like the original skin, flesh, and organs. It also gives SP cost reduction and automatically restores it when worn. Not bad at all, but...”

Silence.

“...it goes against your tastes, so I will only treat it as a Resource for my ultimate skill.”

The purple gate created by Persephone was already turning into bits of light. The Amber Abyss Squadron had also transformed back into souls and returned to rest within Persephone.

“So, what do we do now? Should we meet up with Hugo’s group?” Persephone asked.

“...No, I’ll log out for a bit,” said Benetnasch. “I’ll come back in about an hour and then we’ll go undercover and travel to Melkava. We can’t keep Vina and Trim waiting too long.”

“Ohh. Well, you did say that you didn’t want them to see this city.”

The names Benetnasch spoke belonged to children he’d saved.

“Saved” was a relative term, though — he’d merely brought them back as undead after they’d died in a particular tragedy.

In a way, it was him grasping at a possibility again.

But as he was now, this was the most he could do, and even that came with many conditions that had to be fulfilled.

Thus, he hoped that would not be the case in the future.

“Yeah. I need to hurry back to them.”

“But what of the information you are meant to receive?”

“...Knowing Sefirot, they can contact me no matter where I am. I don’t think I need to give them an address or anything.”

“That is true.”

Benetnasch then opened the menu and logged out.



Coming back to reality, Benetnasch — or, rather, the person who played him — opened his eyes to see the ceiling of a lightless room.

It was particularly dark because of the rain outside, and with the curtains closed it was hard to tell if it was day or night.

Then, with a hand as brittle as a dry twig, he picked up his mobile device.

There was a missed call and a voice message from his mother; after listening to the latter, he sent a message saying “I’m okay. Don’t worry about me.” Then, a moment later, he added “I’m sorry I can’t come back home for spring break” before sending it off.

Spring break didn’t actually mean much to him.

After all...he almost never actually attended the college he’d enrolled in last year.

With the message sent, he stood up, revealing legs so thin that anyone looking at him would worry about his health.

He went to the bathroom, showered for a moment, then went to his fridge to take out a tube of nutritional food and mineral water before wolfing it down as though it was a chore just to nourish himself.

He then went back to bed, put on *Infinite Dendrogram*'s headset and logged back in.

Once again, he returned to that world as King of Tartarus, Benetnasch...abandoning reality...and abandoning his flesh.



Southwest of the City of Commerce, Cortana, Large Quicksand Patch

Some distance from Cortana, there was a giant patch of quicksand that had existed for over a hundred years now.

It had a diameter of three hundred metels, and it was said that nothing ever escaped from it.

It seemed like an antlion pit, and that was actually a very apt description.

It was the habitat of Sandhole Worms — Pure-Dragon-tier monsters that looked like antlions and possessed a skill that created quicksand.

As a secondary effect of the environment control AI's save point, Sandhole Worms and other wild monsters were instinctively unable to come too close to Cortana.

Because of that, this patch of quicksand was right outside the save point's monster-repelling radius.

Neither skilled Masters nor the Drag-Worms that made the desert their home could come out of this quicksand alive or overcome the many Sandhole Worms here. Being so close to Caldina's starting point, this quicksand served as a newbie trap like Altea's Old Reve Orchard, but even more dangerous.

However...

“GYUAWAAAHHHHH...!”

...the quicksand was now vanishing, accompanied by the death-screams of the Sandhole Worms within.

The antlion-like creatures occasionally stuck their heads out, but the bodies under their armor twisted and shrank as though being dried out before sinking back into the sand.

This continued for hours, and eventually, the screams of the Sandhole Worms stopped.

With the monsters gone, the environmental effect they were maintaining vanished, and the century-old patch of quicksand became normal desert again.

Then, from the depths of the pit, a small girl's hand peeked out. Clutched in that hand was an axe, which used its skill to raise her out of the sand, revealing her entire form.

This figure was none other than Emily. Though her clothes were covered in sand, she was in perfect health. There were no wounds on her, and she wasn't Frozen anymore.

After Hugo had Frozen her with La Porte de l'Enfer, AR-I-CA had thrown her into the quicksand here.

However, the Sandhole Worms within had shattered her Frozen body, activating Survival of the Fittest. She had then proceeded to kill all the Worms attacking her and turn them all into Resources, which was quite a struggle.

Being an immortal Superior, Emily was ultimately able to escape this death-pit.

Silence. Having just come out of the quicksand, Emily looked...very discontent.

In her killing mode, Emily wasn't supposed to show any emotion — but now, as though profoundly angry about being thrown into quicksand, she was displaying extreme hostility.

“Bad.” Still visibly upset, she actually said something that wasn’t “minus.”

She stood in place, holding Youaltepuztli in her hands...

“...”

...then suddenly looked at the sky.

It was already past sunset — well into the night. As though confirming that, Emily looked ahead — to the city of Cortana away in the distance.

She then raised up the axes in her hands...and crossed them.

This was a preparatory motion for a skill that not even IF members were aware of.

It was impossible to communicate with Emily when she was in her killing mode, while the normal Emily never spoke of her powers to anyone — assuming she was even aware of them.

Even her own allies at IF didn’t know the true extent of Emily’s abilities. Perhaps this was only to be expected, considering that nearly all of them had aces up their sleeves that they concealed even from their own clan members. The one exception was Gerbera, who proudly flaunted the effects of her ultimate skill.

Because of this, most IF members assumed that Emily’s immortality was the result of a passive ultimate Embryo skill.

However, Survival of the Fittest was a *standard* passive skill.

Her ultimate was something different.

“Harvest...”

And now, she was preparing to use it — *the wide-scale extermination ultimate that could easily destroy an entire city-state*.

“...Night...”

A calamity unlike any other before was about to hit Cortana...

“...Youaltepuzt—”

“Emily! Are you okay?!”

...when suddenly, the worried voice of Zhang reached Emily's ears.

Silence. The moment she heard the voice, Emily lowered her hands, and both of the axes returned to their crest.

Emily turned around...

“Mr. Zhan? What's wrong?”

...and faced Zhang as normal Emily, speaking to him in a childlike voice.

“Forgive me for taking so long. After The Blue Sky Songstress picked you up, I lost sight of her. I ran all around Cortana's outskirts.”

“Hm...? I...see?” Emily said, tilting her head as though clueless what he was talking about.

She then staggered for a bit before leaning on Zhang.

“Emily?”

“...I'm kinda tired. Emmie wants to sleep...”

And just like that, the girl fell asleep.

Zhang was slightly perplexed for a moment, but he picked her up and left the pit where the quicksand used to be.

After that, he took out the small sand-boat given to him by Rascal from his Garage and left Cortana, taking care not to be seen by AR-ICA or others.

Once they were some distance away from Cortana...Emily logged out for the day.



Emily opened her eyes.

After logging out, she left her bed and walked around her room on bare feet.

With the exception of the hospital gown she was wearing, she looked exactly as she did in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

She did seem to be one or two years older than her avatar.

Suddenly, the automatic door to her room opened up, admitting a nurse wearing a white coat.

“How are you today, Emily?”

“Hmm...good!”

“I see. Anyway, I’ll bring you dinner soon, okay?”

“Okaaay!” After seeing off the nurse, Emily looked around her room — a pure white sickroom. She then dragged a chair close to the window, climbed on it, and looked at the scenery outside.

The cloudless sky showed the moon and its beautiful patterns. The veil of night had fallen over the nearby forest, and she could hear the hoots of the owls there.

All by herself, she looked *through the grated windows* at the night scenery outside.

It was unclear if she was satisfied with what she saw, but she climbed off the chair and returned to bed, sitting atop it and waiting for dinner. She was well used to the meals served at the *psychiatric hospital* by now.

“Today was so fun too...” she said as she recalled walking around with Zhang, eating ice cream at the café, and looking around the bazaar — nothing more than that.

She would pay no attention to the time she’d apparently lost.

It was only the fun times that ever stayed with her.

“What should I do tomorrow?”

Like any innocent child, Emily wondered what the next day would bring.



Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

The amber-colored dragon summoned by KoT instantly ended the battle.

The UBM was purged by the dragon’s flames, concluding all that had happened in Cortana that day.

As a new day dawned, the city began to relax.

Teach had contacted Caldina’s capital and called for aid. They had already arrived and were working to get things under control, assisting the people who were injured or lost their homes in the chaos. They’d also declared that due to the mayor’s death, Cortana would be briefly put under the direct control of the congress, and they prepared to investigate those who had close ties with the late mayor, among other things.

The happenings here had caused quite a stir, but they weren’t anything particularly damaging in the long term, especially compared to what would’ve happened if De Vermis had been allowed to grow — Cortana could’ve been destroyed entirely.

I was also told that if the burning pit created by the amber dragon had connected with Cortana’s oasis, it might’ve caused a steam explosion that would’ve wiped out the entire city.

Benetnasch had probably accounted for that when picking the “six hundred metel” range, but I couldn’t help but notice how desperately the Masters and tians handling the aftermath worked to cool the burning pit.

I would've liked to help, but unfortunately, La Porte de l'Enfer didn't work on objects, so I had to leave it all to them.

"...Benetnasch, huh?" I hadn't seen him, Persephone...or Emily, for that matter, since my last encounters with them.

They might've left the city without anyone noticing. I wasn't completely certain, but I was pretty sure that Emily hadn't been sent to the gaol either.

There was a chance that I would meet them again someday.

With those Superiors gone from Cortana, Teach — the one who was still here — seemed to be extremely busy.

In spite of it all, she was Sefirot — a Master given special privileges by the president herself. It was expected that she would have a lot to do.

A appearances aside, Teach was actually pretty hardworking, so she must've been really busy right now.

...If only she were this dedicated in her personal life. I could respect her without any reservations.

"I see a lot of words like 'in spite of,' 'appearances aside,' and 'if only' in your mind."

"...Well, it *is* about Teach, you know?"

As for me and Cyco...we weren't citizens of this country, so we couldn't actually help that much. At most, we would occasionally dispose of some rubble using White Rose. But with many Masters gathering to help, it was already done.

Now, I was just waiting for Teach in a café, just like I had yesterday.

In silence, I pondered a variety of things.

Back in Hermine, the matter of the Orb had been accomplished with few casualties, but here, many people had died.

Emily was supposedly here because of the Orb, and she'd killed a number of people. Investigations also revealed that the mayor also murdered many for the power of the Orb.

And we obviously couldn't forget those that died after De Vermis was released.

Yesterday might have marked the end of an entire major city...but that wasn't even the last of the events surrounding the Orbs.

Teach now had two of them, while one had been destroyed at the mayor's mansion, leaving a whole four more of these Huang Hean treasures scattered across the continent.

I didn't know if all of them were in Caldina, but Teach had said something terrifying about them: "I did some extra lookin' up and it turns out that one of the seven stolen Orbs has somethin' worse than a Mythical."

A UBM that surpassed Mythical in status.

That could only mean that a creature more than a match for a SUBM was now in someone's hands, lying dormant in its Orb, always on the verge of being released. Seeing the kind of trouble an Ancient Legendary like De Vermis had caused, I didn't even want to imagine what *that* one would do.

However, I wouldn't hesitate to prevent that from happening.

I was basically dragged into this Orb hunt, but if it would prevent incidents like this one, I would see it through to the end.

Abandoning it...would it make it hard for me to sleep at night.

"Yu! Cy! Kept ya waitin', huh?"

As that thought passed through my mind, Teach entered the café.

"Teach, good work with every...thing... Teach?" I tried to express my respect for the hard work she'd been doing, but then I noticed something on her neck.

"What is it?"

"You have more hickeys than before."

"Ah," she said, putting her hand on her neck.

Other side, I thought. Actually, there's some on both.

"...Teach?"

"Ah hah hah. Well, you know the maid I told you about yesterday? The one who was gonna poison me?"

"Yes." *The one she was pillow-talking with straight until dawn.*

"It turns out she was staying at the same inn as me after that. She wasn't there when the mansion went down, so she was perfectly fine."

"That's a...silver lining on a dark cloud, as they say."

"What dark cloud? It's all clear skies for *her!* You should've seen how happy she looked while she was sleeping!"

"Teach...?"

"Well...I met up with her after the whole thing yesterday and she was pretty freaked out. I mean, think about it, her workplace got blown apart and her boss and colleagues all died! Anyone would panic!"

"And...?"

"I spent the whole night comfortin' her."

...Silly me for ever thinking she was hard at work. I want my respect back, I thought.

"I hope you die," said Cyco.

“I’m gettin’ some déjà vu here!”

Thanks to her, the worries I had just moments ago were blown away.
Did she have a natural talent for destroying my inner conflicts?

That aside, there was something I had to ask her now. It had been bothering me since yesterday.

“Teach,” I said.

“What is iiit?”

“Yesterday, you fired lightning shells at De Vermis... Wasn’t that the power of the UBM Orb you retrieved last time?”

“ACK?!”

...She actually said that. With her mouth.

“Didn’t you say that you passed it over to a courier?”

“Uhh...yeah. That’s what I told you, but...”

“...Teach?”

She reached into her flight jacket’s inner pocket and...took out the Orb before putting it on the table.

“I actually had it this whole time... Ah ha ha.”

“...You could’ve just said so.”

“You lied to your disciple. How awful,” said Cyco.

“Ughh...?! I-It wasn’t my idea! It was all old man Grand!”

What did she mean by old man Grand?

“It’s a long story, but...” she began, launching into her explanation.



After retrieving the Orb at Hermine, Teach had apparently contacted the capital with a comms device.

“So yeah, I got the first Orb. Can ya send someone to take it off me?”

“Impossible.”

And just like that, she was denied a courier.

There were multiple reasons for this, apparently.

First of all, Orbs weren’t items that could be placed in inventories. That meant that Masters left them behind when they logged out, making them a bad choice for carrying them. Even if they were put up to the task, there was a chance that greed would get the better of them and they would make a run for it with the Orb in order to have the special reward for themselves.

The only Masters who could be trusted with the Orbs were other Sefirot members, but the only one of them who was both fit for courier work and wasn’t too busy was Teach herself.

Tians weren’t a good option either, though, because Caldina didn’t have many that were powerful enough.

Almost none of them could stand their ground against pre-Superior or greater Masters, and if someone learned that a tian was carrying the Orb, it was likely that powerful Masters would attack them and take it.

By process of elimination, the most powerful and reliable courier was Teach herself.

However, she also couldn’t stay logged in all day and night long, so just about anyone could take the Orb from her by simply picking it up from where she logged out.

If someone found out that she was still holding it, she would certainly be targeted somewhere.

Thus, the first thing she had to do was lie to me — her only companion — by telling me that she didn’t have the Orb.

Neither I nor Cyco had Truth Discernment, and Teach already knew that.

Telling us that the Orb was “with a courier” was also a very deliberate act.

It was possible that someone could attack me while Teach was logged out and interrogate me about the location of the Orb.

If I truly believed that the Orb had been passed to a courier, Truth Discernment would detect that as a true statement.

The same would be true if anyone had asked me if the Orb was in Ace’s possession.

Because of this, anyone who tried to get information from me would end up searching for a fictional courier.

Apparently, this trap that turns the useful Truth Discernment skill against the user was thought up by the person Teach had called “old man Grand” — King of Toys, Grandmaster — and Teach had put it to use right away.

As for how Teach had dealt with having to log out with the Orb in her possession... Well, she simply buried it in the sand of the dunes or the dirt of the cities after attaching a simple transmitter to it.

Trapping it was an option, but that would make it discoverable using the Trap Perception skill.

Since I’d truly believed Teach’s words, this whole “courier” thing had been a good decoy.



“...But now we know that you still have it,” I said.

“Uhh, yeah,” Teach said. “But that’s not a problem anymore.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. In response, Teach put a map window on the table, expanded it, and pointed at it before saying, “Drag-

Nomad is close to Cortana now. With Blue Opera, I can make it there within the day and give Prez both of the Orbs I got.”

I see. With the courier work nearly done, there was no harm in telling me the truth now.

“So yeah, I’ll be flyin’ there soon. There’s a buncha stuff I gotta do there, so you’ll have to wait for me here in Cortana, okay?”

“Okay. I have school anyway, so in a way, this is good timing.”

I can still stay here for about six hours of Dendro time, but if I don’t have anything to do, I might as well log out now, I thought.

“Oh yeah. School,” said Teach. “Man, I’m unemployed myself, so I kinda forget that you’re busy.”

...How am I supposed to respond to that?

“By the way, Teach,” I said.

“What is iiit?”

“You’re not hiding anything else from me, are you?” The first Orb-related incident in Hermine, the secret courier work... I felt like Teach had been hiding things from me ever since we’d met.

So, wondering if there was anything more I didn’t know about, I posed that question to her.

In response...

“I am.”

...she casually responded in the affirmative.

“Of course you are...”

“Yep. But it’s got nothin’ to do with Orbs. You can trust me on that.”

“...What is it about, then?” I asked, slightly exasperated.

“About me, you...and Fran, I guess.”

...I certainly didn't expect to hear my sister's name there.

"Is this—?"

"Uh, nonono," she cut me off. "I can't tell you now, but...you know what?" She folded her arms and seemingly thought about something for a moment before saying, "I'll tell you either when you get a Superior Job, or when Cy becomes a Superior Embryo."

"...What's with those conditions?" The former was only achievable by the first person to make it to each job, while the latter had yet to be accomplished by even a hundred players in the whole world.

"That's way too hard."

"You think so? I'm pretty sure you and Cy will get there eventually," she said with an amused smile. "So do your best, okay? I'll be waitin'."

Her heterochromic eyes were fixed on me, looking as serious as she could get.



After that, I parted ways with Teach and logged out.

After taking off the headset, I heard songbirds singing as dawn broke.

Looking at the time, it was past five in the morning. There were two hours left until breakfast at the dorms, and three until classes began.

I could have taken an hour-long nap, but a good shower to wake me up was probably better than a lackluster sleep.

I took off my clothes and entered the bathroom attached to my room. Using the panel on the wall, I turned on the shower and stood beneath it.

I was glad that we didn't have roommates here in Lorraine's Girls College — I might've woken mine up with my showering.

“Ahh, I needed that.” After cleaning myself, I dried my hair and body before changing into the school’s uniform.

There was an hour left until breakfast, so I used the time to go through the texts that would come up in today’s classes.

Even with that done, I still had some free time, so I looked at some video sites for the first time in a while and...

“...Ah.”

...there was a video called “Hell General, Logan Goddhart gets REKT!” in the rankings for the gaming category.

Uploaded several days ago, it showed how the top player in Dryfe’s duel rankings had lost against an Altarian newbie...*him*.

“...He’s the same as ever.” Watching him fight Hell General in the video reminded me of his battles against Gouz-Maise...and Fran.

Earlier, remembering those things made me feel both longing and guilt. But now, I felt a bit proud... I could look straight at that video without feeling bad in any way.

It might’ve been because I — Hugo — had chosen to stand up to impending doom just like he did.

“It would be great to talk to him about the recent happenings someday.” That day, before we faced each other, we’d met up at a café and had this exchange:

“All right, then. Guess this is goodbye for now. Oh, should we add each other on the friends list?”

“...Not now. Let’s do it next time we meet...or the time after that.”

I’d said that because I knew that we would be enemies “next time” and that if we were to become friends, it would necessarily be “the time after that.”

We hadn’t met again after our meeting as enemies.

I didn't know if he still saw me as an enemy or if he believed we could still be friends — but personally, the next time we met, I wanted to make it up to him and, if possible, be on good terms again.

"I guess it might depend on his relationship with my sister... Ah." As I said that, I noticed the name of the person who had uploaded the Hell General video.

It was easy to guess who it was...

"...I see she's still sour." Apparently, my sister was still stuck to him like slime, gathering info about him using methods that were basically stalking.

She must've gotten the footage through all of that, and it showed me just how obsessed she was.

Thinking of their relationship, I grew slightly exasperated and let out a sigh.

"Yuri! The cafeteria's about to open up! Let's go!"

That was when a friend — Sonya — came to invite me to eat breakfast together.

"Okaaay," I said as I closed the video site.

It was time to put aside the Orbs, KoT, Emily, and Teach, as well as Fran and Ray.

There were many problems in *Infinite Dendrogram*, but they would have to be dealt with later.

The Machine Knight of Ice and Roses, Hugo Lesseps would have to rest for a moment. Until today's classes ended, I would be Yuri Gautier — a third-year middle school student in Lorraine's Girls College.

I was both Hugo and Yuri — and without either, I would be no one.

"Yuri?"

“Comiiing!”

Called by my friend, I left my room and took a step into a life as Yuri.

To Be Continued in the Next Episode

Afterword

Hello dearest readers! I am the author, Sakon Kaidou.

Thank you for reading volume 16 of *Infinite Dendrogram*. This one took a step away from the stage where our protagonist, Ray, resides and instead focused on the story of Hugo, who is currently traveling around Caldina.

An important figure that has appeared in this volume is the Superior he met — King of Tartarus, Benetnasch.

As you may have noticed from the similarities between the wonderful covers Taiki drew for volume 1 and this one, he is a reflection of Ray.

You can see it in their positioning next to their Embryos, but if you look at the backgrounds, you will notice that while Ray is in front of “the kingdom they would now live in,” Benetnasch is in front of “the arch through which the dead may return.”

Their very natures are opposed, as well.

Ray stands in the path of tragedies and gives his all to keep hope alive.

Benetnasch follows after tragedies and fathers hopes that have already died.

Nemesis carves a path through the present using the pain of the past.

Persephone revives the past in its entirety and brings it into the present.

The time when they would face each other is still in the distant future, but it is my hope that the day will come when I will be able to let you dear readers witness it.

Now, enough about volume 16 — it is time to talk about the next one.

We have been on this journey for a whole 16 volumes now, and over a dozen releases of adaptations of the web novel. But with volume 17, the *Infinite Dendrogram* light novel will finally...

...get its first volume of all-new original content!

Did you think I was going to say it was ending? It most certainly will not! It will go on!

Up until now, I have been making edits and additions to the light novel to make it worthwhile for both the light novel readers as well as those who have been following the web novel, and I also wrote an all-new five-hundred-page bonus novel for the anime release, but now, the light novel series itself will get a full release of all-new content — a volume that isn't even partially an adaptation of the web novel.

I must admit that writing it makes me tense in a way I usually am not, but please do look forward to it, as I will do all I can to write the best draft I am capable of.

Additionally, last month marked the release of *Crow Record* volume 4 in Japan — the final one of the spin-off.

Just like the previous one, it comes with a bonus short story, so please do pick it up if you are so inclined.

I must say that working on *Crow Record* has been a very positive experience for me.

I was especially happy with how charming and expressive La-na made the new characters, Max and Shion.

Crow Record may be over, but please do read through it if you can — now is the perfect time to do so.

Please continue supporting *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Sakon Kaidou



Xun: “Hm? Ohh, right. The after-aftErword. I’m ‘Xun,’ shOrt for ‘Xunyu.’”

Fox: “And I’m the ‘Fox,’ Tsukuyo Fusooo!”

Xun: “...Huh? I’m jUst with yOu this time?”

Fox: “Yep. We only got one page left. It’s not enough for more than two, so it’s just you and me, sweetie.”

Xun: “...Well, whatEver.”

Fox: “You seem a little bothered by something. What’s on your mind?”

Xun: “Oh, I just wondEr what the author meant when he sAid that it’s the perfect chance to reAd Crow Record. Why’d he, of all peoplE, emphasize somethin’ like thAt?”

Fox: “Oh, thaaat? I’ll just tell you along with the announcement. VOLUME 17 IS SET TO COME OUT IN NOVEMBER! THE MAIN CHARACTERS IN IT WILL BE RAY AND THE CROW RECORD GANG!”

Xun: “...So that’s whAt that was about! It’s just mOre direct markEting!”

Fox: “If any of you haven’t read it yet, go pick it up! It’s both a good read and good prep for the next voluuume!”

Xun: “I now understand whY you’re the one doin’ this afterwOrd...”

Bonus Short Stories

Pandemonium

2044

This was back when Triangle of Wisdom was just another one of the many crafting clans in Dryfe. In their wooden shack — the workshop where their few members were trying to make humanoid robots a reality — there currently stood just two Masters.

“Hey, Fran, there’s somethin’ I’ve been meaning to ask ya.”

“What is it?”

The two people speaking were the clan’s test pilot, AR-I-CA, and the clan’s leader who also served as their project supervisor, Franklin. Since they were the clan’s top pilot and engineer, they often conversed with each other, sometimes alone and sometimes joined by the clan’s accountant — a lady named “Hohlheim.” When there was no one but the three of them around, Franklin spoke in a manner quite similar to Francesca’s; their conversations covered many topics ranging from work to completely random things, and this was yet another such exchange.

“It’s about the monsters ya make with your Pandemonium. Do they count as undead?”

“Hm...? Ohh, you mean, since I use monster materials? As in...*corpses*? ”

Pandemonium was, of course, Franklin’s Embryo — a factory that produced monsters based on the materials placed into it.

It grew larger with every evolution, and was now so large that he had to go out of his way to find a flat expanse of land with no people around to summon it.

If it was this huge in its fifth form, it was hard to imagine how big it would become as it evolved.

Since Franklin could be attacked outside of Vandelheim, producing monsters was now a stressful affair. At that time, he wondered how much a patch of land near Vandelheim would cost, wishing that Pandemonium could walk or at least be cloaked.

As shown by history, by mid-2044, the clan ended up becoming large enough for them to buy the needed land, and when Pandemonium evolved into its seventh form after the turn of the year, it gained optical camouflage as well as legs.

"I know what you're trying to say, AR-I-CA," said Franklin.

"Pandemonium makes monsters from monster bones and dead flesh, and you want to know how and why is that any different from the creation of undead like skeletons and zombies."

"Yep-yep," said AR-I-CA, visibly happy that Franklin had instantly understood her.

"The difference is in the creature type and creation," said Franklin.

"...Hmm?" AR-I-CA raised an eyebrow. The answer was not quite what she wanted to hear, but from Franklin's perspective, there was no better way to put it.

"Making undead involves this energy called 'grudge,' but I really don't know much about it yet," Franklin continued, admitting that the details were currently beyond him. "And even if I wanted to find out more, we don't have any Necromancers in our clan."

"...Well, they don't seem like the type to care about robots. Hell, I don't think we got a lot of 'em here in Dryfe to begin with."

"Mhm. I'll probably never get involved with them, anyway."

That eventually turned out to not be the case. Franklin would eventually hire King of Tartarus to help in his attempts to develop

grudge engines, and that same grudge would be the reason Ray Starling would eventually shatter his plans. This dark energy would eventually affect Franklin's life much more than he could have ever imagined on that day, conversing casually with AR-I-CA.

"So what *are* your monsters, anyway?" AR-I-CA asked.

"Well... Do you know *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus?*"

"Mhm. I do."

"Without getting into specifics, the monster in that novel was made by gathering parts from other creatures, combining them to create a body resembling the animals the materials were sourced from, and bringing it to life. That's more or less what I do."

"Isn't that like a flesh golem? As in, an undead?"

"My monsters don't have grudge, or even a soul. They just have some directive programming 'burned' into their brain cells... Which sort of makes them more like robots made of flesh. Oh, but..."

"But...?"

"If I use lots of material from undead, I can make undead out of the residual grudge."

"It all depends on the mats, huh? So you can make anythin' the mats let ya make?"

"That's mostly accurate. I definitely can't make angels, though. The creature type has an entry in the info menu, but there has never been even a single sighting. I can't make a creature type without the necessary materials."

Even if creatures of the angel type did have a habitat somewhere, its location was completely unknown.

"Angels, huh...? I wonder if they're winged and naked! You think they're kinda horny too...?!"

“...It’s very obvious what you’re thinking, but if succubi wear clothes, I’m pretty sure angels would too.”

Slightly shocked by his friend’s blasphemous words, Franklin brought up a familiar comparison.

In the country of Dryfe stood the created dungeon called “Lust-Devil Palace.” Home to many succubi-like creatures of the devil type, it was a treacherous place no one had cleared yet in spite of the many Masters who had repeatedly tried to do so — and the reason behind their dedication should have been obvious.

It was also worth noting that, since necessary materials harvested from succubi were reasonably available on the market , Franklin could, if he felt like it, actually make that type of monster himself.

“Lack of materials is the reason I never made yokai, either.” Franklin continued. “I heard there’s plenty of them in Tenchi and Huang He to the east, but you never see them here. I’d have to import the materials to make them, but I need a lot to make a monster, so I can’t even imagine how much that would cost...”

“For somethin’ that looks like it can do anythin’, Pandemonium sure has a lotta limits...” AR-I-CA commented.

The Embryo seemed to have a high degree of freedom, but since it depended on the materials provided to it, Pandemonium ultimately had many restrictions. One could say that it was the pinnacle of Embryos that relied on external Resources.

As they talked about monsters and Pandemonium, AR-I-CA began wondering about something and asked, “By the way, Fran, ya compared yourself to Frankenstein, didn’t you?”

“I did.”

“Frankenstein’s monster learned human words and culture, didn’t he? What would you do if the things you made gained intelligence or self-awareness?”

If that were to happen, they would stop being “biological robots” and become “living beings.”

AR-I-CA wanted to know what Franklin would do if that possibility existed.

“I go out of my way to make sure that *doesn’t* happen,” Franklin said, his eyes slightly colder than before.

“That so?” AR-I-CA said, choosing not to ask for an elaboration.

Embryos were mirrors of their Masters. If Pandemonium was a reflection of Franklin’s true nature, AR-I-CA had no intention of prying any further. She could tell that — just like her own eye — Franklin had some baggage best left untouched.

They both had told each other about certain aspects of their real lives, but neither of them tried to tread on the other’s deepest secrets.

“There’s tons of stuff involved, huh?” AR-I-CA said.

“I would say so,” nodded Franklin.

They enjoyed and found comfort in each other’s presence, but never overstepped each other’s boundaries.

This friendship of theirs continued for a long time...

...Right until the day AR-I-CA ruined it all.

Bar Chatter

February, 2045, The Tetragrammaton

Illegal Frontier, the criminal clan. Being a group that boasted only wanted Superiors as official members, it was no doubt one of the strongest forces in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Their headquarters was the amphibious battle cruiser called “The Tetragrammaton.” Inside it there were rooms for every member, as well as a number of recreational facilities.

“Heh heh! This is the luxurious grown-up life!”

Inside one such facility — a bar, to be exact — there stood Gerbera, holding a cocktail glass and posing in a manner she believed to be mature.

She was underage, however, so the drink inside was non-alcoholic.

Next to her, not saying a word, was one of the clan’s sub-leaders, Rascal.

He’d come here first and had been unwinding with a few drinks, but then he was joined by Gerbera and Emily, both of whom were strangely excited.

Rascal could only assume that they were in the middle of exploring the battle cruiser.

“It’s *shoo* tasty!” Emily said, drinking her orange juice float.

“It really is!” said Gerbera. “This bartender is quite skilled. I feel like this might even actually get me drunk!”

Like hell it will. It’s non-alcoholic, ya dumbass, Rascal thought.

The bartender, as it happened, was an Idea made by La Crima.

“Heh heh... This booze is making me feel like talking about my past... Wanna hear a story?”

“Tell me tell me! I love you, Gerbera!”

I’m glad they’re gettin’ along, but what if this dumbass turns out to be a bad influence on her? Rascal thought, beginning to worry.

“Very well — then I shall tell you the take of how I stole a national treasure from Caldina!” Gerbera said proudly before beginning to eloquently describe her endeavor.

Seriously? You’re gonna boast about your dirty deeds? Rascal thought with a sigh.

None of what Gerbera went on to say was a lie. She’d indeed used Alhazred’s cloaking ability to steal one of Caldina’s national treasures. The problem was that she’d neglected to consider that the item would have a transmitter on it, and she was chased down by the authorities the moment her ult expired.

“They sent skilled pursuers after me, but I was able to escape with my ult. They couldn’t keep on chasing me after I drop— *let go* of the treasure! I came out on top! I was the victor!”

It was obviously a defeat, but in her mind, she was the one who had prevailed.

This was how Gerbera was at that point in time. Rascal had acknowledged her as almost offensively stupid, but still accepted her into the clan because of her Superior Embryo’s abilities. A small part of him was actually starting to regret it.

“Wow, Gerbera! I thought you could only make sweets!” Emily said, clapping and clearly not fully understanding what she had just heard.

“Yes! Praise me more!” Gerbera declared proudly.

Rascal looked at them, not saying a word. Being a guardian-like figure to Emily even in real life, he had actually begun to worry that Gerbera could be a bad influence on Emily in a way unrelated to her illness.

Following this, Gerbera was sent on a certain mission to Altar...

The End

Similarity

Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

While looking around Cortana, I'd chanced upon Persephone — King of Tartarus' Maiden Embryo.

Back when the pair had been collaborating with the Triangle of Wisdom, we'd met several times, but we never properly talked to each other. Now that I finally had a chance to do so, I couldn't help but notice something.

"Hm? What's the matter? Is there something on my face?" she asked as I looked at her.

It wasn't anything on her face, though — it was actually her face itself. Though her apparent age, hairstyle, hair color, and clothing were different, her face was much like that of Ray's Nemesis.

At first, I thought my mind was just playing tricks on me, but the more I talked to her, the more aware I became of the similarities between them.

I hadn't felt this way when I'd first met Nemesis, but having had a good number of conversations with her, I could now clearly see that she and Persephone had much in common — so much, in fact, that they seemed like sisters.

"...Maybe Persephone's Master is actually Ray's brother?" Cyco commented telepathically.

If siblings ended up having similar Embryos, you'd have ended up looking like Pandemonium, I thought in response.

"Huh...? That'd be scary as hell..."

Also, Ray already has a brother — KoD. His Embryo is nothing like Nemesis.

"I see you are busy thinking or possibly conversing by telepathy, but I must say that this silence is quite alienating..." said Persephone.

“Oh... Sorry about that,” I said. “I know of this Embryo that is much like you...and I was wondering why you are so alike.”

“Oh? An Embryo like me?”

“Do you have any idea why Embryos might end up looking similar?”

“Well, there are two hypotheses,” she said as she held up both of her index fingers. “The nature of an Embryo depends on the nature of its Master. Their lives, preferences, their strong yearnings...Embryos pick up various things about their Masters and reflect them, gaining powers accordingly. In the same way, it is possible that the nature of the Master may influence the shape of the weapon, as well.”

“So, you are saying that King of Tartarus and Ra— the Master I know have a similar nature?”

“You are the one who knows both of them. That is up to you to decide.”

I fell silent and thought about KoT and Ray.

They were both Maiden Masters and seemed to have a tendency to burden themselves with the lives of others.

However, when I compared their expressions as I remembered them, I could see nothing in common.

Alike, yet completely opposed — that was the impression they gave me.

“...And the other hypothesis?” I asked.

In response, Persephone lowered the index finger on her right hand and said, “The abilities of an Embryo depend on the nature of its Master. However, there is a possibility that at the very beginning, one particular difference may depend on an external factor.”

“That difference being...?”

"The visage. Or overall appearance, if you prefer," she said, using her left index finger to point at her face. "Offspring resemble their parents. This is natural for animals with genetics. The information comprising us, on the other hand, comes from our Masters, meaning that our powers cannot be determined by anything but their nature. However, the 'vessel' that is to be filled with this information exists *before* it meets its Master."

"The zeroth form..."

"Indeed. There is no difference in power between zeroth forms, but if zeroth forms born from *the same parent* become the same type of Embryo...perhaps they would be alike in appearance or shape."

In that case, Nemesis and Persephone were...

"Heh heh. That's quite enough time spent on mere speculation, especially when it cannot be proven. It's no better than nonsense. Although..." Persephone said, falling silent for a moment and then whispering, "An Embryo that shares my likeness... Perhaps I may one day encounter her?"

Her words were like a premonition of something in a distant future. I couldn't help but notice that instead of "I would like to meet her," she said "Perhaps I may one day encounter her."

The End



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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 16

by Sakon Kaidou

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Original Japanese edition published in 2021 by Hobby Japan

This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo

English translation © 2021 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: December 2021

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