



# Infinite End Program

18. King of Crime

**Sakon Kaidou**  
Illustrator: Taiki

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Infinite  
Dendrogram

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**Death Period:  
RENEWED!**



# 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.



## Shu

Shu Starling / Shuichi Mukudori

Shu is the King of Destruction, the first in Altar's kill rankings, and Reiji's brother in real life. A Dendro veteran since before Ray even began his journey, Shu has seen many adventures, oftentimes through the eye holes of an animal costume.



## Sechs

Sechs Würfel

Bearer of the King of Crime job, Sechs is a man who commits sins for the sole purpose of being "evil." Though currently imprisoned in the gaol, he is also the leader of Illegal Frontier—a clan made up entirely of Superiors on wanted lists.



## Integra Flagman

Integra Sedna Clarisse Flagman

The Arch Sage of Altar and an old friend of two of the kingdom's key individuals—the First Princess, Altimia, and the Vice-Commander of the Royal Guard, Liliana. Integra is a mysterious woman who bears the name of the pre-ancient civilization's Grand Artificer.



# ***Prologue: The Minority's Justice, The Majority's Evil***

*June, 2044*

Thunderous explosions rang throughout a forest on the border between Altar and Legendaria.

Calling it a “forest,” though, wasn’t entirely accurate, because the trees—the old growth that had stood there until just yesterday—were all but gone now.

The land looked as though it had suffered a relentless aerial bombing, and this unbridled destruction continued unabated. There were no longer even any animals running from the overwhelming noise that shook the earth and sky. How could there be? The battle had been going for an hour now. All the local fauna had either escaped or died long ago.

The only moving things left were two large silhouettes.

“UAAAAGH!” One of the figures was a giant humanoid robot that was over a hundred metels in size. With an echoing roar that shook the ground, it ran at near-sonic speeds before leaping forward.

Its target was the other silhouette—a strange object that looked like three large disks stacked together. Seemingly about a hundred metels in size, the object stood on a singular column-like support that pierced the ground. Its appearance might be compared to the stacked prayer wheels used in Tibetan Buddhism.

However, the *living face* each of them possessed might make the comparison to religious instruments a bit bizarre.

“Nejirebana!” The steel giant coupled its leap with a spiraling right-hand palm attack called “twisted flower.” The palm would soon grab

one of its opponent's disks, then use its speed and sheer strength to twist and break it.

"Turning Space."

However, two words from the topmost disk reversed everything. Instead, the steel giant's right arm shattered.

"...Kodachi!" Not faltering, the giant went on to twist its body in midair and throw a roundhouse kick. This had actually been its plan from the start—the giant had expected the palm attack to fail and was ready to deliver this far stronger blow.

But as the kick was right about to connect...

"Turning Land!"

...the land beneath the steel giant flipped upside down.

The ground itself crashed into the giant, sending it flying.

"NGH!" Despite the impact, the giant spun in the air to brace itself.

However, its movements began to grow more sluggish once it landed.

"Warning: Energy cells depleted. Full Offense Mode can no longer be maintained. Recharging cells would require twenty-four hours spent in a noncombat state. Furthermore, there is a severe combat munitions shortage."

With a mechanical voice, the steel giant—or rather, the Embryo—declared that it had run out of everything necessary for its ultimate skill. It said all this while in the process of transforming from its robotic form back to that of a battle cruiser.

"In that case, fire every armament the moment you transform! B-type shells for all!"

"Affirmative." In response to its Master's order, the Embryo loaded all armaments with the specified type of shell.

And when it had finally become a battle cruiser again, it gunned its engines to full power and surged forward. A moment later, however, the land beneath the battle cruiser was flipped exactly as before.

“BALDR! DO IT! FIRE ALL GUNS!”

“Affirmative.” As the battle cruiser moved, crushing what remained of the trees beneath it, the Embryo obeyed its Master and fired every weapon it had equipped. Hundreds—*thousands* of shells and missiles flew towards the disks.

Upon seeing this onslaught...

“Foolish.”

...the faces on the slowly spinning disks cracked a smile and spoke these words in perfect unison, their voices strangely distorted.

“Turning Space,” the topmost disk said. All of the heavy ordnance aimed at it flipped around and flew back towards the battle cruiser instead.

That was one of the three great “Turning” abilities the disks possessed—the ability to turn space itself.

The Master of the battle cruiser clicked his tongue in annoyance and switched its engines to full capacity in order to escape, but...

“Turning Land.”

...the face on the middle disk spoke. At its words, the land around it shifted like a table being flipped over.

This was the second “Turning” ability. It allowed the disks to freely warp the landscape around itself, and its effect reached as far as ten kilometels away. Right now, it was using this power to force the retreating battle cruiser back into the trajectory of its own shells and missiles.

“Ah...!” And thus, the battle cruiser was drowned in flames. There was no sign of its Master escaping the conflagration—he must have been engulfed as well. Even the disks could see that he could not possibly have survived it all.

Eventually, the battle cruiser vanished, presumably having succumbed to the fire.

“He finally died,” the three faces of the disks said as they gazed at the flames, chuckling.

This impudent enemy had spent most of the battle outside the range of Turning Space—but in the end, he’d apparently lost his presence of mind. As a result, he had been destroyed by his own weapons.

“He and the dark man who died first were a true nuisance.”

“We were injured.”

“The humans will have to pay for this.”

The strange entity’s name was “Divine Disks, Spindle.” It was an Ancient Legendary UBM that had lived in this area for a long time and ruled over its people with an iron fist. Despite being inorganic, it was also carnivorous; perhaps the most distressing thing about its dominion was that it demanded human sacrifices to feed on—and even seemed to derive excitement from this.

Many tians had challenged this creature in the past, including combat-focused Superior Jobs from Tenchi. However, not even the likes of them could bring this entity down. That was just how strong the disks were.

If the overseer of UBMs were to look at this creature, he would surely describe it as “an Ancient Legendary that was absurdly close to Mythical.” If it defeated just one more UBM, in fact, it would no doubt ascend to the Mythical tier outright.

Today, a mere two people had attempted what so many before them had failed to do—and they both had met with abject defeat.

The first opponent had died early on when the bottom disk used its “Turning Life” skill, which accelerated his cell division cycle, causing them to multiply so rapidly that he burst into pieces. The other had just vanished within his own artillery barrage.

Once again, the Divine Disks had emerged victorious.

“We are fatigued. Let us feast to heal ourselves.”

“One village should suffice.”

“A g r e-e-e...” However, as they were in the process of planning their victory celebration, the third disk’s words trailed off into nothing. Its spin, normally steady, had also become unstable—almost as though it had suddenly gone rusty.

“What is wrong?” the other two disks asked. However, it returned nothing but silence.

Eventually, the disk stopped spinning completely. The eyes on its face rolled backwards, and it opened and closed its mouth like a fish out of water. Then, suddenly...

“Goodbye.”

...a voice that sounded nothing like its own escaped its mouth before it shattered from within.

Without much flair or fanfare, one third of a near-Mythical creature instantly died.

“W h...W h a t?! B r o t h e r...b r o t h e r... W h a t h a p p e n e d...?!”

“W h a t i s t h i s?! W h o?! W h o...d i d t h i s...?! U n f o r g i v a b l e!” The remaining two disks were shocked by the sudden loss of

someone who had been with them all since their creation. As bewilderment overtook them...

“Ohh, so you were brothers? My condolences. I see I’ve done you some great harm. Committed a crime you can never forgive.”

...they noticed someone standing within the motionless face of their brother.

“I do find that *very* satisfying, though.” The person—an unremarkable young man with black hair and black eyes—said all of this with a smile.

It was the same human who had been killed by the third disk’s “Turning Life” earlier.

“Y o u...y o u a r e a l i v e?!” the other disks cried in shock.

“I happen to have a body that does not die when split apart. Thanks to Shu’s distraction, I was able to enter your brother with little effort.”

The man said all these outrageous things in an incredibly matter-of-fact manner as he looked up at the two remaining disks. His eyes showed no pride in having defeated a third of such a powerful creature, but neither did they betray any disdain or fear. He looked as tranquil as someone gazing out at the sunset over the sea.

“Y o u... C u r s e y o u! Y o u r d e a t h i s n i g h t!” The top disk was overcome with anger and set the man as its target for Turning Space. In several moments, he would be twisted right out of his body along with the space he inhabited.

“Focusing on me right now is dangerous,” the man casually remarked, pointing at the still-burning fire.

“...Strength Cannon.”

As soon as the voice issued from the smoldering wreckage, a shell of light broke through the veil of flame.

“W h...W h a t...?!”

And just like that, it was over. Before the top disk could change Turning Space’s target, and completely ignoring the second disk’s ability to turn the land, the shell of light flew towards the top disk.

“...Just fuckin’ break already.” The shell reached its target at the same time as those words did, and the immense power within utterly obliterated the disk.

“G h... G h a h...”

“B r o t h e r...!” As the top disk died, the second let out a wail of grief.

The man responsible, however, was standing in the fire with an indomitable grin on his face. As he looked up at Spindle’s final remaining disk, he made his Embryo—now in its cannon form—disappear.

“Yeah, I figured it couldn’t do the turning thing fast enough,” he said.  
“An hour is more than enough to figure out how fast you operate.”

The voice that was currently speaking belonged to the man from the battle cruiser.

“W h a t...? H o w? Y o u s h o u l d h a v e b e e n d e a d t o o...”

“Sorry, but the ‘B’ in ‘B-type’ stands for ‘bluff.’ Those special shells sure put on a hell of a show, but they don’t actually *do* much.”

As if to prove his point, the man showed no signs of discomfort as he stood next to the roaring fire.

“...They did burn my costume though,” he added with a sigh. “This show’s on the rougher side, I guess.”

Indeed, his costume’s top half had been completely burned away, leaving his upper body exposed.

“Curse you puny humans...! You will pay for what you did to my brothers...!”

“...And that would be why you lost.”

“What...?”

“Ya spent your days actin’ like god up in these mountains, only dealin’ with weaklings—forcin’ them to pay you tribute in sacrifices. Of course you’d lose your instinct for combat.”

“What...?!”

“And *that’s* why ya don’t even recognize an obvious distraction. Holy shit, how much time can ya waste talkin’ when you’re up against the two men who just killed your brothers?”

That was when the last disk realized that the black-haired man was nowhere in sight.

“Shapeshift: Linker Arm of the Destroyer, Macht Kanone!”

He was standing in one of the creature’s blind spots, his left arm transformed into one armed with a cannon. Both the arm and the weapon looked *exactly* like the one possessed by the man with the battle cruiser.

“Once again...goodbye.”

The cannon fired, and the last of Spindle’s divine disks vanished like mist.

◇

Divine Disks, Spindle. A terrible being that regularly demanded sacrifices from the local villages—a creature that was taboo even to touch—had thus met its end at the hands of two *people*.

However, if anyone was present, they might not recognize them as human.

One had changed into a raccoon-like costume, which just made him look like some new kind of monster; the other had completely shed any semblance of humanoid form and become a black slime shaped roughly like a starch cake.

“...I *raccoon* we won,” said the former, awkwardly replacing “reckon.”

“It seems that way,” said the other. “Oh. It appears the MVP reward went to me.”

“Well, you made the winning move. No surprise there.” They—Destroyer, Shu Starling, and King of Crime, Sechs Würfel—were talking so casually that it was hard to believe they had been in a fierce battle mere minutes ago.

Although the conclusion seemed anticlimactic, Spindle certainly hadn’t been an easy foe.

The Divine Disks were extremely powerful, with their stats and skills alone making its defeat a difficult challenge for either one of them.

They’d ultimately won for two reasons. Shu had pointed out the first—that Spindle had lost its touch for combat. The second was the fact that Shu and Sechs were working together. They had both acted as distractions to create openings the other could take advantage of. Without such cooperation, Spindle would’ve won despite its rusty combat instincts.

Perhaps “cooperation” wasn’t quite the right word, though, since *they weren’t actually coordinating whatsoever*.

They both possessed a degree of confidence—or perhaps it was more like vigilance—that did not plan beyond thinking “this is what he’s gonna do next.”

They knew each other well enough to make such guesses and be correct almost all the time.

They clearly didn't know *everything* about each other, though, as evidenced by the fact that Shu was looking at the starch cake next to him with slight surprise and thinking, *Huh...this guy can't keep up his human form if he's tired?*

Sechs's Embryo was a Type Body called "Nu." Its base form was that of a slime, and his human form was actually a result of a transformation. At this moment, he was so fatigued that he couldn't even assume his regular appearance.

This seemed like a golden opportunity to send this criminal to the gaol, but Shu had no means of doing that now. He'd just used his first form and his ammo stocks were depleted, so he had no way to deal damage to someone immune to physical attacks. Things might be different if he had the King of Destruction Superior Job, but he would only acquire it after about a month of real-life time following this encounter.

As he was now, however, he was powerless against Sechs.

"Apologies for taking the MVP reward," Sechs said as Shu looked down at him. It was hard to tell what he was thinking.

"It's fine," said Shu. "The only reason I signed myself up fur this was because it pissed me off that children were bein' wagoned off as human sacrifices."

"Oh, that is true. I am certain you will not be thanked for this, however."

The local villages had long tolerated the practice of offering sacrifices to the Divine Disks. This was because the land was Spindle's territory, and that deterred most other monsters from entering. Outside of the need for human sacrifices, this place was actually on the safe side compared to the rest of the world.

The villagers believed that instead of worrying about some unknown monsters that could consume all of them, it was better to pay a "tax"

of their own children to ensure the safety of the rest. “The devil you know” and all that.

In a way, it was like a religion that treated Spindle as a god.

This was especially clear when Shu had declared that he would defeat the UBM—only to be showered by loathing gazes and ceaseless verbal abuse.

Destroying this monster that demanded sacrifices was, from their perspective, a grave sin and a heavy crime.

And that was exactly why Sechs *also* wanted to defeat it.

“In the long run, defeating that UBM might actually increase the number of casualties here,” Sechs said. “I am certain that the victims themselves do not believe that you have done the right thing. That may even include the parents of the sacrificed children.”

“Probably,” Shu replied, his voice nonchalant. “I did what I wanted. To me, that was the right decision. It just also happened to be wrong for those villagers. That’s all there is to it.”

“...So you are not afraid of being in the minority.”

“If I changed my opinions just to be part of the majority, I’d stop being myself and lose my sense of what’s right.”

“Your sense of justice, you mean?”

“Nothin’ that grand. I just don’t give up on the possibility I want. That’s the one thing that won’t change no matter who tries to deny it—or how many,” he said, looking back at the place where Spindle had once stood. Nothing of it was left. “This time, I just wanted to break some shitty spinnin’ top that demands child sacrifices, so that’s what I did. I won’t regret it no matter what anyone has to say about it.” Within his suit, he cracked a smile. “Well, I’ll still get in touch with my contacts in Altar and Legendaria to have them build a defense

network here. A freshly opened monster habitat ain't safe, and I can do that much."

Saying nothing in response, Sechs looked up and considered Shu.

He was a man for whom the opinions of others didn't matter at all—they were merely by-products of his actions. To him, all that mattered was that he did what he wanted. He was the only one who needed to see the purpose and value of anything he did. He influenced other people, but was immune to influence from them. It didn't matter if he wore an animal costume, played the comedian, or obliterated those who stood before him—his nature remained unchanged.

He had a well-established, powerful sense of "himself."

He was one who delivered his justice even in the face of terrible adversity.

Sechs thought many things about this person before him, and found himself a little bit ■■■■■■■.

"We are directly opposed," he finally declared.

"Hm?"

"I came to defeat the UBM because I wanted to do exactly what the majority was against. You came to defeat the UBM in order to do what *you* felt was right. Our actions and their results are the same, but we are thoroughly opposed otherwise."

"We've always been like that, haven't we? Like, since the time we met during that whole Theresia thing," said Shu. This wasn't a new concept to him.

"That is true. You keep her status as The Evil a secret to protect her, while I keep it a secret because it's bad for the world. We truly are opposed."

Shu did what *he* wanted and delivered his justice.

Sechs did what the world *didn't* want and spread his corruption.

They were indeed directly opposed, but that was exactly why they occasionally saw eye to eye.

One man's justice could clash with another's, but justice and evil could interlock like gears and begin to turn.

That might have been a good way to describe their relationship.

That might've been why Sechs didn't actually dislike Shu, despite the fact that he'd thwarted many of his crimes.

That wasn't the only reason, though. In spite of being Altar's most wanted criminal, Sechs didn't have many personal desires...but Shu had caused him to develop one.

*When he gets a Superior Job and becomes my equal... he thought as he looked up at Shu. I will have him do that until...*

This desire had stuck its head out of its hiding place, but not far enough for him to say it out loud.

The time for that would come later.

◇

The two then went on to part ways.

They would spend their days encountering one another regularly—chatting, quarreling, and even cooperating like they had done during their encounter with Spindle. Sechs certainly saw Shu as a friend and someone special to him, while Shu didn't actually hate this loathsome criminal all that much.

However, after a year in *Dendro* time, right before the first Knight-Machine War, the two would finally clash. It was a battle that no Master or tian ever knew about—a deadly struggle between the giants of steel and darkness.

Destruction and Crime—the kings of both had fought until they shattered.

Begin Episode: “King of Crime.”

# ***Chapter One: Real-Life Relationships***

*Reiji Mukudori*

A real-life day had passed since the battle royale on the uninhabited island.

It was now a Friday, and my college, UTokyo, was brimming with excitement.

The reason for all the enthusiasm was obvious. The week after next, from Wednesday on May 3rd to Sunday on the 7th, we would have five days off in a row—Golden Week.

I could hear cheerful talks between friends, lovers, and everyone else—making plans to go on trips or other activities for the occasion. Some people were considering not taking any lectures on Monday and Tuesday as well, opening up a full nine days for longer outings. The freshmen, however, seemed particularly keen to visit their homes. College life was still new to us, after all, and I could totally understand those who needed a break from it.

Even I'd gotten a call from my mom this morning, asking me if I wanted to spend Golden Week with my family. I spent a long moment thinking about it, but I wasn't feeling homesick or anything, so I decided to pass this time.

But before I could open my mouth, mom went and said something shocking.

“Your sister’s coming back too. The 5th is her birthday, if you recall.”

And just like that, I knew that I *absolutely had* to return—at least for the 5th of May.

Not being there to celebrate my sister’s birthday would leave me afraid for my future. Knowing her, she wouldn’t be upset by my absence, but there was a chance that she would “kindly make up for

it” by barging into my place and whisking me away to spend some “quality time” somewhere foreign. I’d already had quite enough of that with the South America visit...

My home at the big N was just two hours away by bullet train, and I had no *Dendro* plans for Golden Week yet, so I figured I’d be able to return for the 5th.

Speaking of birthdays, Shu’s was on the 3rd of March.

A brother and a sister, born just about a year apart—the sister on Boys’ Day and the brother on Girls’ Day. It was quite a rare coincidence, and it seemed kinda auspicious. The only way it could be better was if their days were switched.

As for me, I was born on July 7th—Tanabata. The 3rd day of the 3rd month, the 5th day of the 5th month, the 7th day of the 7th month... Our parents probably hadn’t planned for us to have these birthdays, but I’d found it really strange when I was little. Hell, I still thought it was weird.

Anyway, thinking about visiting home, my sister, and some *Dendro* matters had left me feeling fatigued all morning, and I’d spent my lectures just zoning out.

Lunch time rolled around with me having learned absolutely nothing in class, and I was now sitting in the second cafeteria, absentmindedly twirling spaghetti with meat sauce onto my fork without actually bringing it to my mouth.

“What’s up, Rei? Summer heat a bit too much? You okay? Wanna play some cat’s cradle?”

“It ain’t summer yet. It’s obviously just May blues. Lil’ early for that too, though, I guess.”

“No, it’s clearly bloodlust. He hasn’t had his fix of *Dendro* devil meat.”

The friends eating with me—Natsume, Kasugai, and Fuyuki—suddenly started commenting on my current state of mind.

“...You guys really just say whatever pops into your head, huh? Especially you, Fuyuki.” Also, I hadn’t eaten any devils since the battle against Logan. Why are Fuyuki and Natsume so fixated on that?

By the way, the fifth of us *Dendro* freshmen—Akiyama—was currently at her part-time job.

“Then why do ya look so gloomy? Didja get a bad gacha pull with your ticket...? Or wait—did someone break your heart?! Are you *sure* you’re okay? Wanna play some cat’s cradle?!”

“Mukudori...I’m goin’ to a mixer next week. Wanna join?”

“Wait a sec, you two. He’s got a Maiden, so he’s with a girl basically every second in *Dendro*. Plus the internet tells me that he’s constantly surrounded by weird women, so it’s *obviously* not relationship trouble. If anything...he’s probably tired *because* he hangs out with girls all the time.”

“...Could you all quit it? Especially you, Fuyuki.” *Also, I didn’t even use my ticket yet, Alto,* I added silently.

“It’s not the heat or May blues, and it’s *definitely* not a broken heart or too much interaction with women. I’m just dealing with some tiring family matters and looking back at all that happened in *Dendro* this month.”

“Ohh,” Kasugai and Fuyuki said in unison. “I get ya! That was one hell of an event!” Natsume nodded in understanding. Of course she’d get it—she was with me for one of the most notable moments. “And Altar is havin’ a rough time too, huh?” she added.

“...Yeah.”

Way too many things had happened this April. On the first Saturday, there were the incidents at Torne and Quartierlatin. The following Saturday, there was the incident involving Hannya and King of Light, F. The Saturday after *that*, there were the peace talks that went so very wrong. And yesterday, there was The Anniversary.

*Dendro* time went by three times faster so it didn't exactly feel like it, but in real-life terms, something had happened every single week of the month so far.

Then again, it hadn't been much different in March either.

*...We won't get another incident this Saturday, will we?*

"And I was directly involved in all of them..." I muttered. The only exception was the terrorist attack on Altea that had happened at the same time as the peace talks.

"Wanna play some cat's cradle to take your mind off of it?"

"No."

"How 'bout that mixer, then?"

"No."

"Mukudori, relax—the KoB video with you in it is good stuff. It's doing good numbers."

"...Why would that make me relax?" Speaking of which, after hearing Jubei mention it, I'd gone to see the KoB video for myself. The uploader was the same person who'd put up the Logan video, and for some reason it was edited to make Altar's side—and me—look better than we really were. Since there were no other recordings to disprove any of that, the internet now saw the video as the absolute truth regarding what happened.

...By this point, I was pretty sure I knew who was behind this. I sighed as the silhouette of a Superior in a lab coat loomed in my mind.

“What about Tenchi? Anything happening in your country?” I asked.

“Not really. Everybody at Toseiden’s just chillin’,” said Natsume.

“Nothin’ here in Nanshumon either,” added Kasugai.

“Hokugen’in...we won against Kurowa in the north, but besides that, yeah, not much is happening here.” Tenchi was considered a single country on the world stage, but internally it was split into a number of lands ruled by different “Daimyos.” It was worth noting, though, that that title came to us via the auto-translation, so maybe it wasn’t actually a hundred percent accurate. Anyway, the situation there was similar to Sengoku Era Japan’s. Civil wars were a common thing, and Hokugen’in—the Daimyo Fuyuki served—apparently just took part in one.

“Kurowa? Are they the bunch who really don’t know how to pick their battles?” Kasugai asked.

“Yeah. Soon after they got a new Daimyo, they invaded us at Hokugen’in, and we’re one of the Tenchi’s Big Four.”

“Tenchi’s Big Four” were the particularly strong and long-lived Daimyo families of Tenchi—Kasugai’s Nanshumon, Natsume’s Toseiden, Fuyuki’s Hokugen’in, and Seihakuto. They were dominant in the south, east, north, and west, respectively.

Akiyama, who wasn’t with us here, was the only one of them who served a family outside of those four.

Jubei also happened to serve the same family as Natsume, as a matter of fact.

“What’s the power balance between them in terms of Sengoku Daimyos?”

“The Hokugen’in are like the Takeda from the Sengoku Era, while the Kurowa are like the Date from the Azuchi-Momoyama Era, I guess.”

...That actually seemed like a pretty even fight. Fuyuki had cited the eras when both clans were at their height, so from her explanation it didn't really seem like that uneven of a matchup for Kurowa.

"Kurowa was a powerful family that had save points in their fief, and their tian soldiers outnumbered Hokugen'in's 3-to-2," Fuyuki explained. "However, that's not the case with Masters. Hokugen'in had two Superiors: Bigman and Saki Muryo-Taisu."

*...Those are some major names.* I thought.

"So yeah. They struck first, but when we struck back, we just crushed them."

"...I see." This was clearly a case like the First Knight-Machine War on our side of the world, where Masters had made all the difference.

"The very first battle was an overwhelming defeat for them—even their Daimyo got killed. Now we're just taking their land while trying to minimize casualties and dealing with the bandits popping up in the neutral zones. I actually went on a quest to help with that... Though, something weird's been happening recently."

"What kind of weird stuff, exactly?" I asked.

"Well, there seems to be a third party involved," Fuyuki said. "There's been ambushes by some...demi-humans that look like monsters...like people you'd find in Legendaria. They've slowed Hokugen'in's advance down a lot, and they even managed to give me the death penalty."

"Demi-humans that look like monsters...?" I'd heard of something similar appearing during the terrorist attack on Altea—a "Bug General" leading an army of bee-people.

"Hm..." According to Kasumi and the others who were there, the Bug General mentioned someone who, in her own words, "gave me power and this army."

Altar and Tenchi were on opposite sides of the continent. It didn't seem likely that a single person would be able to successfully pull strings that were *that* long, but it still stuck out to me.

"Troubled again, Rei? Wanna exercise your brain with some cat's cradle?" said Natsume.

"No, he's obviously imagining the taste of the demi-humans," said Fuyuki. "You know how he fights. I'm sure he'll eat bugs *and* corpses if he has to!"

"...I think he's just tryin' to fight off the headache you're both givin' him," said Kasugai. Well, nothing would come from thinking about it now, so I figured I'd just leave it for another time.

*And what the hell kind of person do they think I am?* I thought in response to their comments. *I guess I did eat a corpse during the Gouz-Maise thing, but still...*

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The lectures ended before evening, and I wasted no time before making my way back home. Tomorrow was Saturday again, so I could focus solely on *Dendro*.

We at Death Period were planning to look for a place to use as our HQ, and The Tournaments I had a small part in were going to start soon too. My business in *Dendro* seemed like it would be comparatively lighthearted this time.

"Well, I can only hope nothing goes wrong." With that thought, I kept riding my bicycle until the building where I lived came into view.

"Hm?" In addition to the building, I caught sight of a taxi driving off, leaving behind a single familiar person.



Flanked by paper bags that looked way too cumbersome for a woman like her, she seemed to be thinking something along the lines of “What now?” It looked like she’d gone on a shopping spree and ended up with too much to carry up to her apartment.

“Hello,” I called out to her.

“Mr. Mukudori. Hello,” the strikingly blonde woman greeted me in her somewhat awkward Japanese. She was a minor acquaintance of mine.

“Would you like some help carrying that?” I asked.

“Is okay?”

“Of course. We’re neighbors.”

She...or rather, Francesca was a neighbor who lived right next to me. Helping her bring her stuff up was no big deal.

“Thank you.”

“Hey, it helps to help others,” I said as I picked up two-thirds of everything she had.

It was just two bags, but they were way heavier than they looked. Looking in, I saw lots of small glass containers, making clinking sounds as they shifted around.

“That’s a lot of little bottles. What are they?”

“Paints. Clay. College assignment. Deadline next week.”

“Oh, so you go to a fine arts college.”

“Yes. Bought more—just in case. Too much.”

Francesca still wasn’t proficient at Japanese, so her responses were very simplistic. She seemed to understand me just fine, though, so maybe it was just speaking that was giving her trouble.

“Which college do you go to?”

“Togeidai. Freshman.”

Tokyo University of Fine Arts, huh? Just like my school, it wasn’t far from here. I probably could have guessed that just from the fact that she lived in the same apartment complex as me.

“Hm...?” Wait... Freshman? I thought she was older than me... Are we actually the same age?

“...Twenty-one,” she said as she pointed at herself, apparently understanding my confusion.

“Oh, I see.”

It was hard for me to gauge a foreigner’s age, but she was indeed older than me. I guessed that she’d just decided to go to college at a later age.

Her Japanese might’ve been the way it was simply because she hadn’t been here long. We’d been neighbors for over a month now, but this was the first time we’d actually gotten to talk like this.

“You?”

“Me?” As we talked, we arrived at the elevator.

“I’m eighteen. A freshman at UTokyo.”

“...C’est surprenant.”

...Was that French for “I’m surprised” or “I didn’t expect that?” Did I really not seem like a UTokyo student? Even in *Dendro*, I’d had people like Juliet and Bishmal tell me the same thing.

Though, Chelsea was more like “Where *is* that, anyway?” which was probably a very normal reaction for a foreigner unfamiliar with Japan.

As that thought passed through my mind, Francesca said, “I guessed fourteen.”

"Wait, *that's* what you're surprised by?!" Now I was the one left in shock. Did she really think I was four years younger than I actually was?! I did hear that to foreigners, Japanese people often looked younger than they were, but did she seriously just skip straight past high school and assume I was in *middle school*?! "I'm a proper college student. Think about it—a middle schooler couldn't live alone in a place like this."

"I see. Hm..." she said, nodding in understanding.

However, I felt like her lips were moving slightly, murmuring something in French. I couldn't catch exactly what it was, but I felt that she said something like "I lived alone, though."

"We're here," I said as the elevator stopped on our floor. The both of us then exited the elevator.

The floor's number, by the way, was thirteen. I wasn't on this floor by accident, but by choice. The ominous number meant this floor had relatively few residents, and since Shu owned this whole place and I would get to live here for free, I specifically went for a cheap apartment that probably wouldn't have been picked by anybody else anyway.

Francesca looked like a westerner, but she lived on this floor too. That was probably because she simply didn't care about superstitions like that...or maybe she had some kind of religious reason for it.

I went and carried her things over to her door. I then asked if I could come in for a moment, and she gave me a nod. When she opened the door, I detected the faint smell of paint and clay. Looking around, I saw an odorless air freshener. It was probably meant to mask the smell, but it wasn't doing a good enough job to remove it completely.

...This wasn't really my business, but I figured Francesca probably wouldn't be getting her deposit back.

"Where should I put it?" I asked.

"Here is fine," she said.

"All right," I said as I set down the bags, mindful not to break anything.

"Thank you. I'd make tea, but..." she said as she looked ahead of the entryway, where the door to the living-dining-kitchen area would be if this was my apartment.

...I knew what she was trying to say. If the smell was still detectable despite the door and the air freshener, this was obviously no place for someone unaccustomed to it to relax and drink tea.

"It's fine. Feel free to tell me if you need help—we're neighbors, yes?"

"Yes. I will get back at you for this."

Her lack of Japanese proficiency came out yet again, this time in the form of a line you were more likely to see in battle manga than hear in everyday conversation.

◇◆◇

*Francesca Gautier*

After exchanging goodbyes with the kindly neighbor who helped me carry my stuff, I closed the door.

This was the first time we'd talked since he'd moved in and brought me some Japanese noodles for some reason or another, but as far as neighbors went, at least he didn't seem stressful to talk to.

"...So he was actually a college student after all," I said to no one in particular. "It's so hard to guess Japanese people's ages."

Since I wasn't talking to someone who needed to understand me, I spoke using my native language. A little bit of French had slipped out while I was talking to him too, but he probably hadn't heard it.

Regardless, I appreciated his help. Japan was a relatively peaceful country, so it wasn't likely that someone would steal my things if I left them there, but thanks to him I managed to get everything up here in one trip.

"Phew... Though I guess I really *did* buy too much. I guess I just really wanted to get my assignments out of the way before the break."

I'd put everything directly from my cart into the taxi, so I hadn't even realized how much I'd bought until I was dropped off. Pretty stupid of me.

"The break that starts the week after the next... 'Golden Week,' was it? How strange to have a break at this time of the year... Though if I do my assignments before that, I'll be able to focus on the other side. I suppose that's rather convenient for me."

As I muttered to myself, I carried my things out of the entryway, through the living-dining-kitchen area, and into my workspace beyond.

When I opened the door, my nose was assaulted by the now-familiar smell of clay and paint. Here and there, you could see vase-sized statuettes and figurines, all of which I'd made myself. Many of them hadn't dried yet, so the smell was still extremely strong.

My apartment had two rooms and a living-dining-kitchen area; with the exception of the room I used as a bedroom, all of it was in this state. One room was the workspace, while the living-dining area was where I put all my finished pieces. I hadn't even done any cooking recently out of fear that the paint may catch fire.

The disorder here reminded me of my clan on the other side, even though the details were different.

“If this was a normal apartment, I’d have been kicked out by now.” Thankfully, though the rent here was steep, this place had one big advantage—there was basically no risk of that happening.

Based on the neighbor’s reaction, it seemed like the smell wasn’t carried out into the rest of the building anyway.

*...I should still consider calling a cleaner when it’s time to move out,* I thought.

“Hm...” Cleaners weren’t cheap, but my current livelihood simply wouldn’t be affected by that.

I had enough wealth to leave Europe, rent an expensive apartment, enter a Japanese fine arts college, and live comfortably not just until graduation, but for the rest of my life.

“...Maybe a grave visit is in order.” That thought had reminded me of the person who’d suddenly died at the end of last year, leaving all this wealth to me and my sister both. It was making me feel a little bit sentimental.

“Speaking of which...I wonder what she’s up to right now?” I then thought about my sister, who lived apart from me—in this world as well as on the other side. We’d been reunited when it was time to split the wealth, and that was when I’d invited her to come to the other side in the first place.

Based on what I saw in DIN articles, she seemed to be getting caught up in all kinds of incidents that were no less dramatic than the ones we had in the west. My sister was a purehearted girl who was easily troubled by all sorts of problems in life, so I could only hope she didn’t find Caldina too stressful.

Once I was done bringing in my things, I sat down on the sofa in the living area. Instant coffee in hand, I relaxed while watching a French-language news program.

I was used to it by now, but the scent of the coffee mixed with the smell of my supplies always made me feel like I was drinking a cup of pure black paint.

“...I should at least clean up enough to have guests over.” Something like what had happened today could happen again, so I’d decided to at least free up the table in the living-dining space and make sure I was mostly drying the pieces with a weaker smell.

Once I was done with my coffee, I went to work.

I looked over the clay statuettes and figurines on the work table and took one in hand. Some time had passed since I’d made these, so they were already dry. I could store them away without a problem, so I wrapped them in a French newspaper and did just that.

Considering I’d only been living here since February, I’d made quite a lot of pieces. With so much of my time being dedicated to college and the other side, I often wondered how I found the time to do all this.

“...Oh?” While cleaning up, I picked up a statuette that had been sitting on the edge of the table. Made of clay, it depicted an orb-like monster with tentacles.

I could clearly remember when I’d made this.

It was about a month ago, and the whole process of sculpting it was like a tribute to the dead. I was probably the last person who should be pointing this out, but you could tell that the artist of this statuette was full of anger and discontent.

I spent a few moments looking at it in silence—or maybe “glaring” would be a more accurate description—before wrapping it up and storing it away just like the others.

“...I won’t mess up next time. I’ll get back at him, no matter what,” I said, staring down at the clay statuette of the thing I’d named “RSK.”

Once I was done cleaning up for the time being, I went to my bedroom. Next to the bed, on a storage chest as tall as my waist, there lay the hardware for a certain game.

“Okay. Now...” I said, putting it on and lying down.

I’d repeated this sequence so many times I’d lost count. It was what I had to do to live as myself on the other side...in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

“First things first, there’s gonna be the right arm. Final tuning time!” And once again, I, Francesca Gautier, became Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin.

## ***Chapter Two: Invitation***

*Paladin, Ray Starling*

I logged in to *Dendro* right after taking care of business in my apartment.

I appeared in-game at the fountain plaza in Altea. Though by now I was quite familiar with the location, the recent terrorist incident had changed things up a little. The destruction caused had since been repaired using job and Embryo skills, but the repaired areas looked different from the ones that had remained untouched, giving the plaza a patchwork appearance.

I heard that all the different areas blend together given enough time, but it seemed like Altea would just be like this for now.

“Ray.” As I was taking in the new scenery, Nemesis came out of the crest.

“Nemesis.”

“This is the start of another weekend, is it not? What are your plans for it? Taking and leveling your next job?” Yesterday, right after the event, I’d done some hunting and maxed out Scout; that had brought my total level to 250. It took a while, but I was now halfway towards the non-SJ max level.

I still hadn’t decided what job I’d take next, but it was probably between Knight, Priest, and Adventurer. The first two had good synergy with Paladin, while Adventurer had many versatile utility skills that I’d be able to use even when I had Paladin set as my main.

Whichever I picked, though, leveling it would have to wait.

“I think I’ll prioritize other business for now,” I said. “That event in Gideon is coming up the day after tomorrow, remember?”

“Oh, that is true.”

“I contacted everybody by email and they said they’re already on the way to Gideon. I gotta get going too.”

With everything that had been going on, our clan had figured it was a good idea to exchange email addresses. Some used their personal addresses while others had made new ones just for this purpose, but our whole clan now had an easy means of contacting each other in real life.

It was worth noting that unlike in *Dendro*, our communications weren’t auto-translated, and with Rook and Figaro being from the Anglosphere, Io’s group emphasized the need to prepare a free translation tool.

“Since Silver can get us there in no time, though, I’ll take care of business here in Altea first.”

“I see,” said Nemesis. “I must say, traveling to Gideon has certainly become easy for us. I recall when it was a daylong endeavor riding Marilyn’s dragon carriage.”

“True.” In *Dendro* time, that was more than three whole months ago. I could clearly remember traveling through the Sauda Mountain Pass—the same area that B3 had blockaded—then suffering when Marie gave us a dinner that couldn’t even be called “food,” then fighting Gardranda... It was a hell of a time.

*...I feel like I’m looking back at the past a bit too much today,* I thought.

“Is my life flashing before my eyes?” I wondered.

“...What an ominous thing to say. Where did that come from?” Nemesis asked.

“Well, it’s now guaranteed that I’m meeting my sister soon. Maybe my body’s sensing danger and is preparing for death by showing me the past?”

“What do you think of your sister?”

“A raging storm.”

“...Can a person truly be compared to something like that?”

*Let's put the matter of my sister aside for now,* I thought. The encounter was still a week away, after all.

“Let's stop by The Overlord's Antiques, then go to the castle,” I said.

“Mhm. Now that you mention it, you did make an order there.”

“Yep.”

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It had happened back when I returned to Altea following my second death penalty.

After checking up on the city and the castle, I went straight to The Overlord's Antiques with a fairly obvious purpose—to find a replacement for my Volcanic Darkmetal Armor.

B3's gift had served me well in Quartierlatin and the battles after that, but alas, Behemot had left it broken beyond repair.

I obviously had to get something new, so I made my way to the now-familiar store.

However, as much as I looked around, I couldn't find any armor that was just right for me—they were either outside my level range or simply weaker than VDA.

I was left with no choice but to buy something less powerful, but that was when the hooded shopkeep said, “It would take a while, but if you wish, we could procure a certain armor for you from one of the other branches. It would be better than your VDA and, of course, suitable for your level range.”

Apparently, the shopkeeper recognized me from the time I'd come here to buy an inventory. He'd also remembered my equipment from back then and said that he could prepare something even better.

This offer couldn't have been more perfect for me, so I took it immediately.

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"So yeah, it should've arrived by now."

My order hasn't come in time for yesterday's event—but that might've been a good thing, since I could've lost it when Jubei split me in half.

"New armor, again," said Nemesis. "I wonder what this one will be like..."

"The shopkeeper said it's good, so I wouldn't worry about it."

"It is not the *quality* I am concerned about."

"What is it, then?"

"...At this point, I would hope you could infer that from my words alone."

I still had no idea what she meant, but before I could figure it out, we'd arrived at The Overlord's Antiques. Pushing open the door, I saw the hooded shopkeep right behind the counter.

"Hello there. Has the armor I ordered arrived yet?" I asked.

"Yes, it did," the shopkeep said, reaching into an inventory and taking out the armor.

"...Huh?"

I couldn't help voicing my surprise at its appearance

"Hm? This armor is...*the same?*" Nemesis said exactly what I was thinking. Yeah, the armor on the counter was clearly VDA. The design

was identical, and the weight I felt in my hands when I picked it up was the same too.

It did seem to be a bit different on the inside, though.

This version looked like it'd be easier to move around in, and somehow I got the impression it might even be tougher than the one I'd had before.

"This is indeed a Legendarian Volcanic Darkmetal Armor," said the shopkeep. "However, though it may look the same, it is actually quite different. The higher ability of the artisan has made it more powerful, and more importantly, its focus is different."

"Focus?"

"It *is* a crafted item, after all. Like any crafted item, some aspects of it can be changed around somewhat. Consider the VDA you wore previously—it was crafted to have a lower level requirement than usual."

Oh yeah—I recalled B3 saying something like that. VDA originally had a level requirement of 200, but the one she'd given me was designed to be worn by anyone 100 or above.

"This VDA's level requirement was untouched. In exchange, it possesses two additional skills: HP Boost and Destruction Resistance," the shopkeep explained.

"That so?"

"The HP Boost, by the way, is level 5, which means that it increases the wearer's HP by 50%."

"That's a hell of a boost!" A skill like that could bring even *my* HP over 10,000!

"I have never seen a non-MVP reward with such a bonus... But, dear shopkeep, would I be correct in assuming that a crafted item of this quality is quite rare?" Nemesis asked.

“Why, of course,” the shopkeep said with a nod. “Applying skills while crafting is a risky endeavor, and it only becomes riskier the higher level of a skill you are attempting to add. A level 5 HP Boost and Destruction Resistance together would reduce the odds of success for any common craftsman to a paltry 2% or less. Failure would result in worse equipment, and although it depends on the means of production, you might even end up adding *negative* effects.”

...Now *that* was just scary. Crafting seemed like a real high risk, high reward kinda deal.

“With Recipes, enough DEX, and the right skills, crafting items in their standard form is relatively easy, but high-quality custom pieces such as this are exceedingly rare. This one was actually left behind by The Craft from some generations ago.”

Wow, a crafting Superior Job. That explained why this VDA was so different despite looking the same as the one I had.

“Your previous VDA was excellent as well... In fact, the mere ability to craft VDA is proof of great skill, and a VDA with the level requirement cut in half is a truly incredible piece. However, it goes without saying that it still does not measure up to one made by The Craft.”

“...A treasure such as this seems expensive,” said Nemesis. “A success rate of 2% would make its price at least fifty times higher than average, no?”

Oh yeah. The price. I hadn’t asked about it back when I made the order, so it was about time I finally heard it.

“Taking its historical value into consideration as well, the price would be 200,000,000 lir.”

“God DAMN...!” Though, all things considered, that did actually seem like a reasonable price. A 50% boost to HP seemed like something

that'd be on a lot of people's wish lists, even those who were higher level than me. I could totally imagine this armor being used by tanky SJs specced into high HP.

Hell, the fact that something this good could be bought with money at all was kind of amazing on its own.

Nevertheless, the price was still prohibitive for anyone but a few SJs...and certain outliers.

"That is a price *you* can pay, however," said the shopkeep, and that sure was the truth, huh? I was one of those outliers, after all.

The amount of money I currently had was *400,000,000 lir*—nearly double what I'd need to buy the piece.

I'd kept getting more and more money without many chances to spend it, and then multiplied my wealth several times over by gambling it on The Clash of the Superiors as well as the Kashimiya vs Tom duel. Even buying tons of Brooches hadn't put a dent in my funds.

"Wait, how does this shopkeep know the extent of your wealth?" Nemesis asked telepathically. *Dunno, but this one seems like a pro merchant. Maybe it comes naturally?* I thought in response before pondering the situation a little further.

I'd considered using my money to fund a base for our clan, but this armor would help me a whole lot. I felt like I wouldn't get another chance to buy it if I passed on it now, so...I really didn't know what to do.

"I would prefer to make a trade instead," said the shopkeep, stopping my train of thought.

"Huh?" *A trade...worth 200,000,000 lir?*

"You were among those involved in the Quartierlatin incident, were you not?" the shopkeep asked.

“Yes,” I said, slightly surprised that this person even knew that.

“I hear that the pre-ancient civilization weapon created a metallic powder. You took copious amounts of it for yourself, did you not?”

“Metallic powder...? Ohh, that.” Yeah, when the flying whale-like superweapon fell from the sky, there’d been a lot of this strange powder in its remains. The kingdom retrieved most of it, but since I beat the whale, I also received three inventories’ worth of the stuff. However, I hadn’t gotten much use out of it. I’d supplied some of it for my Storm Visage order, but other than that I’d just been sitting on it.

“Would you trade it for this armor? In fact...*please* let me have it.”

“Well, I don’t mi—”

“I will pay 20,000 lir per hundred grams.”

“God DAMN!” *What the hell kind of price is that?! It’s making me feel like I’m dealing with the wrong kind of powder—the white kind! I didn’t know it was illegal, officer, I swear!* I thought. Wait a sec...

I currently had three inventories full of the stuff.

I’d never emptied them, so I didn’t know the total amount, but during the tutorial Cheshire had told me that even the starter inventory could hold a full ton of items.

That meant that I had at least three tons, which was...600,000,000 lir?

“...That amounts to double your wealth even after you pay for the armor,” said Nemesis. *Yeah. Dealing with shady powders sure is something, huh? I can totally see things going very wrong somehow. Am I gonna end up at the bottom of Tokyo Bay? Help!*

“Calm down. Your thoughts are a mess,” Nemesis interjected.

*Ah! Crap. I lost my cool for a bit there over that obscene amount of money...*

“Umm, why is this powder so expensive?” I asked the shopkeep.

“Those metal particles are used in the production of Second-Model Prism Steeds—SMPS. It is known to be excellent for the creation of all kinds of high-quality equipment. However, almost all of the powder is in the possession of the government, and because most of what they have is dedicated to the production of SMPS, there is almost none of it in circulation.”

I did know that Altar was bolstering its forces by making SMPS production into a high-priority task. And since the powder obviously wasn’t unlimited in supply, I could understand them not releasing it to the market.

“The SMPS that do make it to the market can be dismantled, of course, but in the process of building them, the metal powder used is alloyed and becomes impure,” the shopkeep added.

“I see,” said Nemesis. “So Ray is the only person who has a large amount of this powder in its pure state?”

“Indeed he is.”

Well, that explained the obscene price, and why I was being offered this deal.

Now it was time to decide whether to accept it or not.

I could just buy the armor using money, but since we’d be looking for a clan base soon, it’d be better to hold on to some of it. If Death Period had crafting jobs, I would’ve considered giving the powder to them, but sadly we had none. Selling it here seemed like a good idea.

There was a chance that we’d get a crafter eventually, so I would’ve liked to keep some of it just in case.

“Will you trade us the powder?” the shopkeep asked.

“...One inventory’s worth of it,” I said as I took out one of the three powder-filled inventories I had.

The deal was complete, and I got my new armor—a better version of VDA.

Also, when the shopkeep checked the inventory's capacity and the weight of the powder inside, we discovered that it had *triple* the space of the starter inventory and held three tons of powder all by itself. Because of this, the inventory I gave not only covered the price of the armor, but also got me an extra 400,000,000 lir—essentially doubling my wealth.

...And I still had six tons of powder left.



Having gotten my VDA 2.0, I made my way to the castle.

Giving greetings to the guards—who seemed more numerous than before—I passed the gate. It had been melted during the terrorist attack but had been recently rebuilt.

“I’m kinda getting used to visiting the castle,” I said.

“Same here,” Nemesis agreed. “And the guards seem to have gotten used to your appearance. I hope this does not stop them from apprehending anyone suspicious.”

As we walked and talked, I heard construction and other sounds coming from various places within the castle. They were obviously repairing the destruction caused in the terrorist incident, but apparently that also included the maintenance of the castle’s security facilities, which had been deactivated for a good while now. With most of the court wizards dead after the war against Gloria, little could be done with the security system, but Integra’s return had made restoring it possible again. Because of that—and a few other reasons—she and basically everyone else in the castle were extremely busy.

"Needless to say, that includes Azurite," I said. "I doubt Liliana or even Sir Lindos can catch a break either. He's barely had time to recover."

"They do have a shortage of personnel here," said Nemesis. "Since this is the castle, they cannot hire as many Masters here as they did for the restoration of the city."

"Yeah. Security and confidentiality reasons..." They couldn't rely on Embryo skills for this, so repairs on the castle would probably take longer than repairs across the rest of the city. At least they were already done with the gate—the "face" of the castle, so to speak.

It was still badly damaged on the inside, though. Looking at the castle from above, you could see a large hole that had been blasted through the middle of it all the way into the depths below. Liliana and Integra had told me that that hole was the result of King of Blaze using his final skill.

On top of that, the magic distribution network had been severed with noteworthy precision, while another area was so contaminated with poison that no one was allowed to enter it.

*...Just how long will fixing all this take? I wondered.*

"I would not know," said Nemesis. "And it is not just material damage we have to consider. There were many casualties as well."

"...Yeah." Bug General's army had attacked the city, while the Kings of Blaze and Venom had targeted the castle; the combined total of people who'd died because of them was even greater than the overall fatality count during Franklin's Game. I didn't know if it was any consolation to the deceased that all three of them had been dealt with.

However, there was one problem with that line of thought—there were actually two other attackers.

The first was a man with the ability to transform into a bat. Liliana had witnessed him at the gate, but there was nothing to suggest that he'd been defeated. In fact, though it was confirmed he'd engaged in subversive action, there was no sign that he'd ever actually fought anyone.

For some reason, though, he'd broken not only the magic distribution network, but also some paintings and furniture in the castle, which Liliana found really strange. I could remember Integra jokingly saying, "Obviously he was just doing battle with the furniture, floors, and walls. What's so strange about it?" which made Liliana a bit angry.

Apparently, Third Princess Theresia hadn't been far away at the time, but all they could get from her was that she'd been hiding and didn't know anything.

The second attacker, however, was far more dangerous than the bat-man.

It was King of Thieves, Zeta herself—a Superior who had once been affiliated with Dryfe.

She'd left the imperium in order to become the central part of the trap set up for the peace talks. During the attack on Altea, she'd fought and defeated Xunyu, and it seemed pretty clear that Zeta had survived the rest of the incident. That was clear from the fact that there were no reports of her entering the gaol, as well as a lack of confirmed sightings by the DIN branch in Dryfe.

That left us with two possibilities: either she'd received the death penalty and hadn't logged in since, or she was still alive and hiding somewhere in Altar.

With two of the attackers being unaccounted for, possibly hiding in this very castle, I could fully understand why there were more guards than usual.

“Hm...” But even though the incident had all these loose ends, we could at least be thankful that the injured had recovered quickly and that Milianne and the rest were unharmed.

Most of the Royal Guard had suffered severe poisoning or received heavy wounds, but Integra’s first-aid treatment was enough to keep them alive until Miss Eldritch returned and fully healed them, and they had gone back to work as though nothing had happened.

Elizabeth’s fiancé—Canglong—had actually collapsed during the incident, but now he didn’t have a single scratch on him.

Based on what Elizabeth told Marie, he was actually the Draconic Emperor—a Special Superior Job from Huang He—and thus possessed immense regenerative abilities.

Speaking of notable people, Marquis Kindle had also been badly injured, but again thanks to Miss Eldritch, he was fully healed now.

All the healing brought about a different problem, though.

The reason Fuso had been obeying Azurite in the first place was because the Hannya incident had put her in immense monetary debt to the country, forcing her to enter into a Contract.

At first Azurite had planned to reduce Fuso’s debt in exchange for her help with healing the injured—but before she could, Fuso had repaid everything she owed. Apparently, making sure to be as obnoxious as possible, she’d said something like, “Hee hee! I’m finally freeeee! Oh, being used and abused by this foul princess was suuuch a paaain. Oh, I’m still open for business if you need me, so don’t you worry about thaaat. *We can make a deal.*”

Fuso then topped it off with, “So, what’ll you gimme for treating these poor people? I won’t take money, just so you know.”

With the lives of her loyal retainers on the line, Azurite had no choice but to accept some devilish deal, and the last time I’d seen her, she

was in a really bad mood because of it. I could clearly remember the way she'd clasped her head in her hands and said, "I was even tracking the flow of wealth in this country to prevent things like this from happening..."

*Did Fuso have some fortune stored away somewhere? I wondered. Or did she get an exorbitant sum of money in exchange for treating someone?*

Regardless, Azurite no longer had a leash on her. For all I knew, that might've been part of the reason why she was rushing to start The Tournaments in Gideon.

"...Hm?" As all of this was running through my mind, I noticed a familiar shape in the hallway.

The person looking outside the window and blowing bubbles through a pipe was...

"Xunyu?"

"Hm? Oh, RaY. Hey thEre."

Standing shorter than usual to match the window, she used her open hand to wave me hello.

"New rAgs, huh?" she said. "Some goOd stats on thosE."

I would expect no less from Xunyu. All she needed was a glance to know the skills on my VDA 2.0.

"Yeah. I can't walk around in stopgap gear. I wouldn't be ready if something happened. That aside, what are you doing here?"

"I got nOthin' to do and that's whAt I'm doin'—nothin'. Well, actuAlly, I'm usin' skills to hElp with security, but nOthin's happenin', so I'm kindA spacin' out."

“You got nothing to do? Weren’t you about to go back to Huang He with Elizabeth and Canglong? Aren’t you busy preparing for that?” That was what she’d told me last time we’d talked.

There was a chance that she would have been hired to help Altar in the war against Dryfe, but with Elizabeth’s marriage being set in stone, it was decided instead that she’d serve as the princess’s bodyguard on the way to Huang He. With Elizabeth having been the target of terrorist attacks a couple times now, it was obvious that she needed a Superior bodyguard—or maybe even more than one.

I could recall Xunyu saying that the previous time we’d talked might’ve been the last before she left.

“That was thE plan... Hell, I shoUld’ve been on thE way back to Huang He bY now, but...” she said as she reached into an inventory and took out a newspaper.

At a glance, I saw sentences like “Clashes Between Caldina and Granvaloa Intensify!”, “The Magical Apex VS The Human Bomb—the Fight of the Strongest Exterminators！”, and “Vennsayle the Lake City Devastated!”

“This is...”

“This ain’t thE only place at wAr. The neighbOrs’re seein’ some spicY conflict too. It’s too damn dangeroUs to go back by lAnd or by sea. Cang and I’d bE fine, sure, but ElizAbeth and the officiAlS? Not so muCh.”

The Magical Apex and The Human Bomb... Shu himself had told me that their extermination potential was even greater than his.

Going by land would mean going through their battlefield in Caldina, while going by sea would mean going through Granvaloa—which, if the conflict intensified, would also become a danger zone. Transporting VIPs through either was far too risky.

“But Altar is no better, is it?” I asked. “Things have cooled down for now, but there’s no telling when they’ll heat up again.”

“Yeah. And thAt’s why we’re waitin’ for sOmeone from thE motherlAnd to come pick us Up.”

“Who’s that?”

“Guy cAlled ‘Gray.’ One of Us Huang He Si Ling—Gray a CentaUri the ‘Spirit Turtle.’ His Superior Embryo’s called Laputa and it’s a goddAmn flying fortress. It’s the perfEct ride for sitUations like this.”

A flying fortress Superior Embryo, “Laputa...”

...Well, if that didn’t sound like something that could be brought down by a single word: *BaSe*.

“He stands oUt and puts othEr countries on edge, so it’s normAllY hard for him to move aroUnd like this, but it lOoks like Caldina gavE the go-ahead. They strUck a deal for thAt.”

“A deal?”

“It’s relatEd to the Orbs. Like the ones Cang broUght that the princess is gOnna use for the tournAments.”

“Oh those?” I knew about the UBM Orbs. Called “Treasurebeast Orbs” in Huang He, they were items produced as a result of a Draconic Emperor from history sealing away UBMs.

Some of the sealed UBMs’ power could be used with just the Orbs, but you also had the option of breaking the seal and defeating the UBMs inside to take the MVP rewards. I was told that Figaro had fought a UBM that had once been sealed in such an Orb. He’d won, and his reward for that was the blue coat he always wore.

As part of the engagement between Elizabeth and Canglong, Huang He had gifted Altar a whole ten Orbs like this.

Azurite had spent a long time thinking about how to use them or whom to entice with them, but she'd made her final decision right after the peace talks—she would use them for The Tournaments in Gideon.

I would review the details once I got there, but in a nutshell, it would be an event where Masters would fight for the right to challenge one of the ten UBMs. The catch was that they would all have to sign a Contract preventing them from committing hostile actions against Altar for a set amount of time.

She'd come upon this idea upon remembering the turncoat Masters that had popped up during Franklin's Game, as well as realizing how much control she'd had over Miss Eldritch while she was contractually obliged to serve her until she'd repaid her debt.

Besides the right to challenge the UBMs, there were extra rewards in the form of "rare equipment from Altarian history," and I played a part in that...as a cleaner.

"How are the Orbs releva... Oh, wait, it's Caldina."

"YeAh. Damn things'rE givin' the sAndy land a hard timE."

I'd heard rumors of the incidents in Caldina centered around the Orbs. Some people had mentioned a giant maggot creature appearing in some big city, which had been attacked by a metal statue and some kind of dragon.

And according to the newspaper in my hand, even the conflict with Granvaloa had been caused by the Orbs.

"BasicallY, in exchange for Huang He abAndonin' the rights to thE Orbs that leaked into CaldinA, they want 'em to temporarily allOw Huang He's forces to enter the coUntry and provide escOrts as needed."

“...I see,” said Nemesis. “So what they are saying is, ‘Keep the Orbs if you must. Use them as you will. In exchange, we demand you do not interfere with the retrieval of our prince and his bride. In fact, assist us.’”

“Yeah. MorE or less.”

...It was Huang He’s fault for failing to prevent the theft in the first place, but they abandoned both that responsibility and the right to the Orbs and used the situation to their advantage, huh?

“Well, thEre’d be some filthy quarrEllin’ even if they demAnded the Orbs back, and if they weren’t cOmin’ back anyway, it was better tO just act like ya gave them awAy and attach some conditiOns to it. Our head honchO is that kinda fella. The first princE, I mean.”

“Canglong’s older brother, right?”

“YeAh. The current empEror ain’t doin’ too hot, sO he’s workin’ hard in his stEad. He’s even thE one who made Huang He mOre welcomin’ to MastErs.”

“Is he also the one who got the idea for the marriage between Elizabeth and Canglong?”

“Nope. That wAs the emperor himsElf, apparently. I dunno much ‘bout it mYself. Though, it was thE first prince who put me as Cang’s bodYguard.”

It seemed like a complex situation, and it bothered me somehow.

...I had my hands full with the situation here in Altar, though. I couldn’t think too much about whatever was happening with the imperial family on the other side of the continent.

“Will Huang He be all right without you and this ‘Gray’ person?” I asked.

“Well, I heArd they recently got rid of a lOcal mafia, and with Caldina bEin’ in the state it is, and Tenchi bein’ Tenchi, they dOn’t really need

anyonE... And thoUgh the two that're lEft are unhinged, they sure as hEll aren't weak. I can voUch for that."

"Hm?"

"BasicallY, out of us Huang He Si Ling, GrAy and I're on the simplEr side." Xunyu seemed like she stood a chance against literally anyone, while this "Gray" person had a flying fortress for an Embryo...and they were on the "simpler side"?

"What of the other two?" Nemesis asked.

"The battlEs they're specced for are limitEd. Though, if thE conditions are right...one of the twO can be as bad as your bro or KoB."

*...Looks like I certainly didn't see all the cards Huang He could play,* I thought.

"Well, enoUgh 'bout my situatiOn. Why're you herE in the castle? YoU won't find Elizabeth's sister if it's hEr you're after. ThAt LiliAna woman ain't herE either."

Yeah, I'd have figured as much. Considering the date, they must've gone to Gideon for the preparations.

That wasn't the reason I was here, though.

"Oh, it's not either of them this time. I came to see someone else." Before logging out last time, I'd gone to the inn I'd been staying at, where I'd received a letter—an invitation, to be precise.

It had multiple days and times on it, and I could come at whichever time suited me. Thus, I was here today and now.

"Who woUld that be?" The one who'd invited me was...

"Integra."

...Integra Sedna Clarisse Flagman.

I would soon talk with the person who shared a name with the person who'd created my Prism Steed, Silver, and countless other wonders of the pre-ancient civilization.

◇

I didn't actually know all that much about Integra. So far, we'd only had a single conversation, and all I learned was her name and the fact that she was the Arch Sage.

However, since they were Integra's childhood friends, Azurite and Liliana had told me a few other things about her.

Integra had lost her family when she was little and had been completely without relatives since then, but she'd gone on to have her talents noticed by the previous Arch Sage, who'd taken her under his wing. Despite her young age, she was rumored to be the most gifted and strongest out of all of his disciples.

By his order, issued some time before Gloria's attack, Integra had left Altar and gone on a journey—during which she became the new Arch Sage. She'd returned to Altea during the recent terrorist attack and cooperated with Canglong to take out King of Blaze.

Besides that, all I knew about Integra was that she'd only begun calling herself "Flagman" after coming back and that she was currently busy with the castle's repairs.

Liliana and Azurite must've had lots of memories of her, but I hadn't heard most of them yet—nor did I know the reason why Integra began using the "Flagman" name. My upcoming talk with her seemed like a good chance to ask about that, among other things.

With that in mind, I knocked on the door leading to the lab that was supposedly used by the previous Arch Sage and his disciples. After I heard a "come in" from the other side, the door opened without me lifting a finger.

Inside, I saw many bookshelves and desks covered in various implements, papers, and folders. The lab was a crucible of knowledge if I ever saw one, and in its heart there was Integra, seated in a chair clearly too large for her tiny frame. She wasn't wearing her pointy hat today, which only made her look smaller. It really emphasized the fact that she was even shorter than Nemesis.

Integra put down the papers she was reading on a desk and said, "Hey there—I bid you welcome, Ray Starling. Your Embryo too. I couldn't ask for better timing—I was just about to take a break."

"Well, hello to you too," I said. "So, why did you call me?"

Before answering my question, she waved her finger slightly without getting up from her chair. As if prompted by the motion, two other chairs in the room slid towards Nemesis and I.

"First things first—take a seat," she said. "This conversation may be a bit on the longer side."

"...I see," I said, and we did as directed. The chairs then started moving again, bringing us to a better position for a conversation with Integra.

It didn't end there. A small round table and a tea set also moved on their own to set up a little tea party for us.

"...Now *this* is a wizard's room if I ever saw one," I said. I felt like I was in a western animated film I'd seen when I was little.

Integra was also wearing a robe, and if that pointy wizard hat she'd had equipped when we met outside was part of her usual wardrobe, I could honestly say that she was the most "wizard-like" person I'd met in this ostensibly fantasy-themed—but ultimately quite eclectic—world of *Infinite Dendrogram*.

It was oddly *novel* to me. As I watched in surprise, Integra smiled as she used her moving teapot to prepare us some black tea.

"It's just solid object manipulation—nothing but basic geomancy. Oh, and I heated up the water by simply increasing its heat energy. Once you know how it works, it's as easy as lighting a match."

Once she'd finished her explanation, two teacups made their way towards us.



“It’s still strange watching it in action,” I replied.

“If you think *this* is strange, you should visit Legendaria someday,” Integra said. “You may find yourself welcomed not by mere magicwork, but furniture that’s functionally alive.”

Now that *really seems like some* Beauty and the Beast stuff, I thought.

“Speaking of Legendaria, that’s where these tea leaves are from,” she added. “The taste is a bit odd, but personally, I am a fan. I hope you enjoy it too.”

“I will gladly try it,” said Nemesis as she took a sip.

I also took my cup in hand. A strange fragrance unlike any I had encountered in real life reached my nose, but the taste struck a balance between sharpness and sweetness. Overall, I found it pretty good.

“Thank you,” I said. “This tea is really nice.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to begin the conversation I brought you here for. There are two subjects I’d like to discuss, but they’re mutually exclusive and I’m not sure which one to start with,” she said as she pondered something. “Though...I guess I should go with *this one*.”

I took another sip of the tea...

“Are you Altimia’s lover?”

“BPFFT!”

...only to spit it out and start coughing.

*I think I inhaled some of this tea after hearing that...!*

“N-No! Ray and Azurite are not like that!”

“Huh? Is it Liliana, then? She was the one he met first, wasn’t she?”

“That does *not* mean they are in a relationship!” While I was still busy coughing, Nemesis was vehemently arguing with Integra’s assumption for some reason, her face beet red.

That was when I finally became able to breathe and talk again.

“Phew. I’m good friends with them both, but neither of them are my girlfriend or anything like that...!”

“Hmm... So, you are not interested in their bodies *or* their status? They’re both quite the prize—especially Altimia.”

“I don’t care about that!” *And don’t talk about your friends like they’re objects you can own! One of them is even Altar’s acting ruler!*

“...Hearing you so strongly deny that you find my friends attractive actually makes me feel a bit sorry for them. Well...have you ever really *seen* them? It’s been a few years since we bathed together, but they were *really* beautiful, if you ask me.”

“I never saw...! Oh...” *Umm... Yeah. I actually have seen Altimia naked once.* It was a mixed bath, though, and it was kind of an accident.

“Oh? And there’s the first detection... Huh? So you *have* seen them without their clothes on? Knowing that, I’m very curious—and concerned—about your relationships.”

“A-All you need to know is that I don’t have any ulterior motives like that and I haven’t paired up with either of them!”

“Hrm... Well, I suppose I understand. With that, the main topic of discussion is out of the way.”

“Did you *really* call us here just to sexually harass him like that?!” Nemesis exclaimed in shock, and I totally agreed with her. What kind of girl would invite a guy over just to ask if he was attracted to her friends or if he was dating any of them?

“Oh, don’t put it like that. I see nothing unusual about being intrigued by any men who become close to my childhood friends, especially since they used to be so detached from such matters. I’m *immensely* curious.”

“...These ‘matters’ seem way above your age level.” It felt like every second kid I met here in *Dendro* was terrifyingly mature—Xunyu being the most obvious example.

“Hm?” Integra said as she tilted her head in confusion. “Aren’t you Altimia’s age? Maybe a year older at most? Then I am your elder by a substantial amount. Respect is due.”

“Huh?” Seriously? Integra looked like she was twelve, so I just assumed she was actually around that age. I’d even been surprised that she could be childhood friends with Liliana and Azurite despite being so much younger than they were...

“My apologies...”

“Ha ha ha—I’m just kidding. You can speak as casually as you like. I myself only used formal speech with my late teacher, so I don’t mind it at all—not one bit. Though...do understand that you are younger than I am.”

“Of cour—I mean, all right.” So despite looking younger than Nemesis, she was actually older than me... This was especially surprising since she was a tian, and she wasn’t even an elf or some other long-lived race from Legendaria.

“...So, how old *are* you?” I asked.

“That’s not the kind of question you ask a lady.” ...*Yeah, that might’ve been rude*, I thought.

“Anyway, let’s move on to the other matter,” Integra said. “Though this is more of an aside.”

*So the thing about lovers and bodies and all that stuff really was your main deal...*

“I’d like you to show me your Zephyrus Silver.”

“Silver?”

“Yes. The second thing I’d like to discuss concerns the last Prism Steed made by the Grand Artificer Flagman...the first of us.”

The *last* Prism Steed, huh? Back in Quartierlatin, Mario had told me that Silver was either an early prototype separate from the five “official” Prism Steeds or a recent experimental unit made to test a new function. Apparently it was the latter.

Also, Integra just called Flagman “the first of us,” which meant that her carrying the Grand Artificer’s name wasn’t just some accident—she’d actually inherited it from him.

*...How is this an “aside”? It seems way more important than those questions that bordered on sexual harassment.* “All right,” I said. “Though, I wanna ask something as well. It’s about Silver and Flagman.”

“I have his name, so I assume you’re curious about my relationship to him? I’ll explain that too,” she said, placing one palm against her chest. “First of all, I’m not the Grand Artificer’s descendant. My teacher was a Flagman as well, but none of us are connected by blood. It’s merely a name that has been passed from teacher to disciple.”

“A name passed on from teacher to disciple... Is it like the professional names used by artists, martial and otherwise?”

“Ah, you’re thinking of the custom they follow in Tenchi. It’s not exactly the same, but it’s also not entirely different either. My teacher was the Arch Sage, and he’d inherited the Flagman name along with the job. And when he died and I became the new Arch Sage, I began calling myself Flagman just like he did. Just having his

name doesn't mean any of us have even a fraction of the Grand Artificer's technological knowledge, though."

"Is that how it works?"

"Yes. Our technological prowess more or less died with the third Flagman. Do you know the Prism Crawlers? Those were made by the third."

*Oh, so that's the guy who made Shion's spider...*

"Anyway, I've been curious about your Zephyrus Silver for a while now," Integra continued. "Since before you even obtained him, in fact."

"Hm?"

"We've known for a while that the first Flagman created him, but nothing about the steed's functions or abilities was recorded. Even we—Flagman's successors—don't have any of that information, even though we have full specs for the other five."

Now that was just weird. If he'd left behind a record of Silver's creation, you'd think he'd have also left a spec sheet or something like that. It wasn't as though he couldn't do it or the records had been lost, right?

"So, as someone who inherited Flagman's name, I have always wanted to see Zephyrus Silver for myself. Do you mind if I take a look?"

"Not at all. There's things I wanna know about him too."

"Oh, you did mention that, yes."

"Yeah. I can't get any details for the third skill. Maybe you can help me with that?"

By becoming a Prism Rider—the job dedicated to the use of Prism Beasts—I'd unlocked the message the first Flagman had left on

Silver. However, all it said was that I didn't have a high enough level of Authority to see the skill's details.

The skill had been activated only twice so far: once in Quartierlatin and once during my battle against Jubei.

Silver seemed to be using it of his own accord and only in certain situations, but I didn't really know what "it" was. I was hoping Integra could tell me that.

"Very well. I'll look into that too," she said.

"Should we go outside?"

"No, there's enough space here." Given the go-ahead, I reached into my inventory and took Silver out.

The damage done by Jubei had already been repaired. He was tilting his head at me, apparently confused that I'd taken him out indoors. Despite this, he was standing still in place, his hooves firm on the floor.

"I'll start, then," said Integra.

"All right. Be a good boy, Silver." As though acknowledging my words, he let out an engine noise that somewhat resembled a neigh.

*This reminds me of the time I got Mario to check on him, I thought.*

"It might take a while, so you might have to wait a bit. Do help yourself to as much of the tea and snacks as you wish."

"Very well! We will wait as long as necessary!" Nemesis said as she dug into the snacks.

*...And this reminds me how she emptied the cookie plate when we were visiting Countess Quartierlatin. Control yourself this time, Nemesis.*

As I was thinking that, Integra was carefully examining Silver, peering at him here and there while checking something using a lens or an object that looked like a pin.

“So you’re not dismantling him?” I asked.

“All you really need for this is a high-level See-Through Sight and some examination magic. Also, as I said, I don’t even have a fraction of the first Flagman’s technological prowess. I wouldn’t want to dismantle Silver only to be unable to put him back together.”

“I see...” I thought of how, back when I was a little boy, I’d let my curiosity get the better of me and used a screwdriver to take apart a toy clock. I couldn’t put it back together, but Shu had fixed it like it was nothing.

Also, Integra’s words reminded me that despite his animal-like form, Silver was actually a complex machine. The whale and horseshoe crab thing from Quartierlatin were like that too.

It felt like the pre-ancient civilization had a strangely high amount of animal-like machines. *Wait, that reminds me of another question I had,* I thought.

“Hey, can I ask something else?”

“Go ahead.”

“What’s the difference between regular machines and Prism Steeds like Silver...or Prism Beasts in general?” Based on the info acquired from the wrecks, the whale and the horseshoe crab weren’t actually Prism Beasts despite being animal-like, so I’d been wondering where the lines were drawn.

“The differences there, eh...? Well, I could just say that it’s just the series they’re part of, but apparently there *was* a rough definition of ‘Prism Beast’ in place during the time of the pre-ancient civilization.”

“What was the definition, then?”

"Generally speaking, Prism Beasts are anything that fulfills two conditions. One—it's equipped with an artificial intelligence and is capable of autonomous action. And two—it's designed to have human riders."

Machines with AI that allowed autonomy, but were designed to have humans ride them... Those conditions seemed contradictory, but Silver obviously fulfilled them both.

"Because of this, modern Magingears, with their lack of AI, aren't counted among Prism Beasts. Machine golems, which have AI but can't be ridden by humans, don't make the cut either."

"I see..." *The whale and the crab were unmanned, so I guess they're more like the latter example,* I thought.

"The first Flagman also created these 'Prism Persons'—stand-alone automata with functioning AI. They're still 'Prism,' but since they weren't designed to be ridden by humans, they weren't 'Beasts.' The 'Prism Person' name might've been coined for the express purpose of establishing that distinction."

"I see..."

"Though, annoyingly enough, the mass-produced 'Prism Persons' you and Altimia fought at Quartierlatin—Prism Soldiers—were designed to have human...or at least, animal...riders, which by a strict definition would make them Prism Beasts."

...This was starting to feel like animal classification. Parvorder: Odontoceti. Family: Monodontidae. Genus: Delphinapterus. Species: Beluga whale... Something like that.

"So, if someone woke up today and decided to make a machine that had AI and was designed to have human riders, it would be recognized as a Prism Beast?" I asked.

“It would, but that’s unlikely to happen either way. AI technology has been lost, after all. Legendaria and Huang He have AI created by sealing spirits from nature or the realms of the dead within certain objects, but Prism Beasts need intelligence born of pure science, not magic.”

The distinction seemed broad at first, but it turned out that it had some pretty strict limits.

“The first and the third Flagman were geniuses when it came to that, but none of us who followed can match them. Well, it’s more...even though the basics of it were passed down to us, we just can’t understand them.”

“Really...?”

“Apparently, in its early years, Dryfe delved into the process of capturing ancient machine golems, taking out their AIs, and installing them in Magingears. I hear that went nowhere because they couldn’t recalibrate the programming.”

Dryfe had only received its first humanoid robots once Franklin’s Triangle of Wisdom had created the Marshal II. Up until then, the only Magingears they had were tanks or powered suits, and I would guess that AI from the presumably humanoid golems wasn’t suited for those. Hell, there was probably nothing in their programming that accounted for people riding them.

“In that case, the SMPS factory in Quartierlatin...”

“Yes. In a way, it’s a groundbreaking discovery. We may be seeing the revival of the age of Prism Beasts. It looks like more and more people are becoming Prism Riders, after all.”

With SMPS spreading throughout Altar, Masters and tians alike were taking the Prism Rider job so they could make the best use of them. SMPS were decently fast, could gallop in midair, and had the ability to create barriers. Being machines, they never had bad days and

didn't require much in the way of upkeep. Generally easier to handle than many regular mounts, it seemed like SMPS would only get more popular over time.

The more powerful riders already had mounts that they'd gotten attached to, though, so not many of those had made the switch.

"Oh, speaking of," said Integra. "There's something an owner of an original Prism Steed like yourself should know."

"Hm?"

"This is some info discovered by going through what the first Flagman left behind...the conditions for the prism rider grouping's high-rank job."

"Oh, now *that's* something I'd love to know." To my knowledge, no one in the world had it yet. The job wasn't even in the Catalog or in DIN's information network. It was likely that the Authority thing mentioned in the message on Silver involved getting the high-rank job, so I was definitely curious about this.

"The prism rider grouping's high-rank job, Prism Cavalier, has three conditions," Integra said. "First, your Prism Rider skill, Prism Authority, has to be level 1 or above. Second, your total level has to be 400. And third..."

"Third...?"

"The *entire world's* combined Prism Authority skill level has to be over 5,000."

...*What?* "You mean...?"

"I mean that it's only unlocked if Prism Beasts and Prism Riders are popular enough. The level requirement is steep too, so this job's on the rarer side."

...*Well, that explains why nobody has it,* I thought.

Even with Prism Rider maxed out, Prism Authority was stuck at level 1.

"So we need at least 5,000 people to have the Prism Rider job, huh...?"

"Well, it's getting more popular. At the rate it's going, it should get there eventually." It'd be hard with just Masters, but with SMPS being delivered to tians both within Altea and to the many orders of knights and such serving the nobility all across Altar, it really didn't seem impossible that the number would get there soon.

It seemed like a good idea to finish leveling my low-rank jobs to prepare for the occasion. I didn't have any high-rank job I was planning to take, and since I had Silver, Prism Cavalier seemed like a good choice for me. Silver couldn't unlock his full potential right now, and not putting such a treasure to good use felt like a waste.

Though, what I'd just heard made me curious about something else.

"The Prism Beasts were made by the first Flagman, right?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Yet the Prism Rider job existed before that?" The prism rider grouping was based entirely on the premise that Prism Steeds would be in common use. Without that, the job would serve basically no purpose.

Did that mean that jobs from the prism rider grouping only appear once the first Prism Beasts existed or...?

"It's said that the job was actually there before he made the steeds," Integra answered.

"Now *that's* strange. I mean, a job for something that doesn't exist...?" Cause and effect seemed to be a little switched up there.

"Yes. Though, it's not just the prism rider grouping. You can say the same thing about all jobs."

“Hm?”

“This is something my teacher...or rather, my teacher’s teacher...looked into.” Having said that, she made the wheeled blackboard in the room roll over closer to us. Then, the chalk moved by itself to draw something on the board. Integra herself was still focused on Silver throughout all of this. It honestly made her seem less like a wizard and more like a psychic with telekinesis.

“Tenchi has this strange high-rank job called ‘Sumo Wrestler.’ It’s related to a contest called ‘sumo.’”

Oh, so even that existed as a job here. I guess it was just a contest rather than a whole ritual, huh?

That aside, I couldn’t help but wonder if the chibi sumo wrestler she drew on the board actually enhanced her explanation.

“What’s relevant here is that the culture surrounding the contest has only spread within the last millennium. And that’s despite the fact that Sumo Wrestler had already been discovered during the time of the pre-ancient civilization.”

“...Hm?” A job based on sumo had existed since before sumo was even a thing here? Just like with Prism Rider, cause and effect seemed really off. The chicken had come before the egg.

“From what I’ve heard, the world you Masters go to also has a Sumo Wrestler job,” Integra said.

“Uhh, yeah. Though jobs over there aren’t the same as jobs here. Taking it doesn’t mean you’ll get levels or skills or anything.”

“I did hear that as well. Over there, though, the contest came before the job, didn’t it?”

“Yeah...” On that front, reality and this world were the complete opposite.

"And Sumo Wrestler is far from the only example," Integra continued. "Even the 'Mechanic' job existed before people began using technology."

*So the prism rider grouping wasn't the only one with this chicken-and-egg problem, huh?*

"The job names here often match the ones you have over there," she said. "That includes magic jobs like my Arch Sage, doesn't it?"

"Well, ignoring the question of whether or not they actually exist in our world or not...we do have a concept for them, yeah."

"Perhaps that is just a coincidence. Or perhaps those who created this world built the framework of 'jobs' based on jobs that existed in other worlds."

...Now *that* was something to think about. From a game design perspective, you could probably assume that the devs had referenced real occupations and programmed those into the game. Knowing *Infinite Dendrogram*, though, it might not have been quite that straightforward.

"So, Prism Rider and Prism Beasts..."

Those things seemed out of place because they didn't exist in real life. Unlike the other jobs we'd discussed, where at least the concept existed in the real world, Prism Rider could only be found *here*.

Then again, maybe...

"Yes. It may be that there is *a world besides the one you Masters go to*, where Prism Rider is a job and Prism Beasts are a common sight."

A place besides reality and *Infinite Dendrogram*... Maybe it was another game? Or maybe...

"But that would mean that the first Flagman *just happened* to create something that was recognized as a Prism Beast."

A magic machine equipped with AI and designed to be used by humans—it didn't seem impossible to come up with that independently. And the fact that he'd done that was the reason the Prism Rider job had ever seen the light of day.

That made me think of something. "Wait, actually—the existence of the job names 'Prism Rider' and 'Prism Cavalier' were probably the reason why the things he created were called 'Prism Beasts' in the first place," I said.

"That's the obvious assumption."

"It is, isn't it? Otherwise, the only alternative would be that the first Flagman made the Prism Beasts and uncovered the Prism Rider job because *he knew of some place where they already existed.*"

*Man, that was a stupid thing to say,* I thought. It was unthinkable that people of this world would know about concepts that didn't exist here, so yeah... It had to have been a coincidence.

For some reason, though, Integra was just staring at me. It didn't seem that she was flabbergasted by the stupid thing I'd said. It was more like...

"Integra?"

"...Oh, I'm just impressed by the imagination you Masters have. Back when my teacher first taught me all this, that idea never occurred to me."

"I see. Well, it's not like it's actually possible."

"Ha ha ha! Maybe. Anyway, I just finished checking Silver," she said as she took her hands off of him.

"That was fast! And we were talking the whole time too..."

"I'm not the current Flagman for nothing," she said. "Talking and working at the same time comes naturally. Anyway, there are a few things I can say about him now."

Integra sat down and took a sip of tea to get some moisture into her throat.

"First of all, his design is about the same as that of the other Prism Steeds...with the exception of the unknown mechanism in his torso, which is wired to every other part of his body. I'm guessing that's supposed to make Zephyrus Silver original."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked. My question made Integra heave a long sigh, but it didn't seem like she was sighing at me—more like she was sighing about the concept of "originality" that she'd just brought up.

"Sorry about that... Well, basically—though the first Flagman was a genius, he had one problem."

"That being?"

"The fact that he never made the same thing twice."

"Huh? But what about SMPS and the Prism Soldiers in Quartierlatin...?"

"Sorry, I wasn't entirely clear—I was talking about the things he created *personally*. It doesn't apply to factory production."

"Oh, I see. But isn't that normal for artists and the like?"

"...He wasn't an artist, but a scientist. It should have been routine for someone like him to make copies of his best creations. If he could make it once, he could mass-produce it... However, he just didn't do it." She heaved another sigh. "Anything he poured his heart and soul into making would always be different from anything he'd ever made before. That was why he never made multiples of his masterpieces and never cared if he produced garbage."

"Masterpieces and garbage...?"

"One of his masterpieces was one of the Prism Persons. Named 'Agate Designer,' it was basically an automaton with extremely high

DEX. It had creative potential that would make even crafting-focused Superior Jobs flee with their tails between their legs. When it came to processing technology, it surpassed even the first Flagman himself. It actually served as his assistant for many of his creative endeavors that followed.”

“Now that’s something...”

“Oh, it is. Despite that, he never even tried to create multiples of it. It was clear as day that a few more of them would accelerate his work, yet he was satisfied with having just that one. He never even tried to create anything that shared its core concept. The time he spent on END- or AGI-focused creations would’ve been a lot more fruitful if he had just made more Agates. I mean, if we had at least one, then the second and every other Flagman up to me would’ve had a far easier time with our—”

“Whoa, let’s calm down.” This seemed like a touchy subject for her. It felt like she was on the verge of reaching her boiling point. Even Silver looked a bit scared of her. Nemesis, though, just kept eating the tea snacks.

*...It just hit me that Nemesis isn’t involving herself in the conversation at all.*

“...Sorry about that. As Flagman, I’ve inherited many things, but Agate is easily at the top of the list of things I would’ve *liked* to have inherited but didn’t.”

*Well, a Prism Person like that would have certainly been useful for Altar as a whole.*

“Anyway, back to the matter at hand... Since he focused so much on creating things without overlapping concepts, he made even things that were obviously garbage.”

“Like?”

“Obsidian Earth-Edge the Prism Steed.”

*...That's the one owned by Figaro, I thought.*

“The core concept of Prism Steeds was to expand the battlefield of combat-focused Superior Jobs, but Obsidian couldn’t fly or swim, so it couldn’t even do that. And since it was limited to fighting on land, AGI-focused Superior Jobs were better off just running instead of riding it. What use could they get out of it?”

*...Yeah, Figaro also said that he ran faster than Obsidian, so he only used it for mounted competitions.*

“It had more power and heavier armor than the other units, but that didn’t even matter in battles between Superior Jobs where both sides just launched ultimate job skills at each other. It’s a hunk of garbage that came about as a result of ignoring the core concept of the Prism Steed series. In all honesty, it’s hopelessly useless.”

*Man, that's so harsh...*

“Though, I guess it could work as the mount of an END-focused Superior Job, but that comes with a high risk of it being destroyed, just like Gold was.”

“That’s a scary thought,” I said. “So, what’s original about Silver?”  
The answer to this could be related to his third skill.

“It’s...”

“It’s...?” I gulped and waited for her answer...

“...Something I couldn’t figure out.”

...only to fall right out of my chair when it finally came, like something straight out of an old manga.

“I-I see... So you couldn’t figure it out.”

“Well, to be more precise, I couldn’t figure out *everything*. There are things I *did* find out, though, such as the fact that his mechanisms aren’t based on aeromancy...wind magic, I mean.”

Those words surprised me in an entirely different way.

“They aren’t? But I use his Wind Hoof all the time, and even his name references the wind.”

“It’s looking like the reference may have just been something the first Flagman thought of at the moment of Silver’s creation. Silver’s true nature as a Prism Steed lies somewhere else.”

“His nature...” This made me reflect upon the battle in Quartierlatin’s skies. The very moment we were about to crash into the whale and die, we suddenly appeared right under it instead, still riding Silver.

That may have been a glimpse into his third skill and true nature.

“Also, it wouldn’t make sense if it was wind-based,” Integra added.

“Why?”

“In the recent peace talks, Her Majesty used Silver to fight Jade Storm—the aeromancy Prism Steed—and apparently, he was far slower in general and only slightly surpassed Jade in the turning department.”

“Oh yeah. Azurite told me that too.”

“If they’re actually of the same type, then Zephyrus Silver, which was made later, shouldn’t have been weaker than Jade. More importantly, with how much the first hated making the same thing over again, I really can’t imagine him using the same element for two Prism Steeds.”

*Oh yeah, that makes sense.*

“Also, Wind Hoof ‘compresses the air to create platforms and barriers,’ right? From a physics perspective, the process of compression should also condense the heat, creating a plasma. Since that doesn’t happen, that means it’s probably not just simple gas manipulation.”

“I see...” She had a point. This made me realize that Silver was full of mysteries even beyond his unknown third skill.

“So there you have it. Currently, the application of its original concept just happens to *look* like aeromancy. And a good candidate for its original concept is part...”

Integra stopped talking in the middle of her sentence.

“Integra?”

“...No. I won’t give you my uncertain, off-the-cuff guesses. As the current Flagman, I don’t want you—the owner of the first Flagman’s last Prism Steed—to have a false impression of him.”

“I see.” I considered pressing her to continue, but ultimately didn’t. She seemed to have pride in the name she’d inherited, so it didn’t seem like a good idea to argue against that if she brought it up.

“Anyway, that’s it for the matters I called you here for,” she said.

“Sorry for taking your time.”

“Hey, this was fruitful for me too,” I replied. “I can now work towards becoming a Prism Cavalier.”

“Oh, please do. Zephyrus Silver and SMPS were left behind by the first, and I’m sure that’s exactly what he would have wanted.”

I went on to put Silver back in my inventory when...

“Hm? Is the chat over?”

...Nemesis finally stopped eating and looked at me.

“Nemesis...”

“Th-The snacks are simply delicious. I would put them on the same level as Brother Bear’s popcorn, if not higher.”

“For real?! *There’s something even better than THE popcorn?!* “Let me have a tast— Hey, Nemesis...”

“...Y-Yes. There is none left.”

Apparently she hadn’t stopped eating because our conversation was over, but because there was simply nothing left to eat. She’d been notably less gluttonous recently, but then she went and did something like this. It felt like she’d go on an eating spree every time I was busy talking to someone.

“...I made a setup that automatically replaced the empty plate, yet you *still* ate everything?” Integra’s face was in a mix of surprise and exasperation.

“...Sorry about this,” I said.

“Oh, don’t worry. It’s a small price to pay for having you come all the way here. Though, I intended to give you some for the way back, but now it’s all gone.”

*Nemesis...*

“Mhm. It was most delicious,” she said. “Who made them?”

“The snacks were made by an acquaintance in Caldina, so it’ll be a while until I get more.”

“Hrm, that is a shame.”

“Ha ha ha. I’ll make sure you get some when they arrive again,” Integra said before turning to me. “Enough for you to have some too.”

“I’ll be looking forward to that,” I said.

With that, our conversation was over.

I was kinda curious about the piercing gaze she’d given me when we first met, but looking back on it now, it was probably just the gaze of someone wary of a guy who’d gotten close to her childhood friends. The “main topic” of whether I was in some kind of spicy relationship with either of them must’ve also been related to that. She’d just

been looking out for her friends in her own way, and in my opinion that was a pretty good thing to do.

“Oh, one more thing, Ray Starling.”

“Hm?” As I was about to leave, Integra called out to me again.

“I have one last question.”

“Ask away.”

“Why do you give so much for Altar?”

I felt like this wasn’t the first time I’d been asked that.

My answer was the same as back then, though.

“Azurite, Liliana... I just like the people I met here and the kingdom in general. It’d leave a bad taste in my mouth if it were destroyed.”

“I see... Mhm. So that’s how it is. I see... I see. *That’s* the kind of person you are...”

“Hm?”

“Oh, don’t mind me. That was definitely my last question. Thanks for coming today.”

“Don’t mention it. And thank *you* for taking a look at Silver.”

“Thank you for the delicious snacks,” Nemesis added.

With those words, we left Integra’s room.

*All right, time to head back to Gideon, I thought. If I leave now, I should be there before sundown.*

◆◆◆

*Arch Sage, Integra Sedna Clarisse Flagman*

Once Ray and his Embryo left, the door closed and I went to check if the counterintelligence devices had reactivated before examining the action on the magic I’d set up in this room.

That magic, by the way, was basically a lie detection spell. Its power surpassed Truth Discernment, because it considered things like body temperature, heart rate, and even brain waves. It could even detect when someone was lying by omission or if they were speaking with an ulterior motive.

It was seamlessly mixed with the magic imbued into the furniture, so it was impossible to even notice it.

This was functionally an interrogation room, and my main goal for today was to examine Ray Starling.

He'd appeared seemingly out of nowhere and formed connections with Altar's central figures like Altimia, Liliana, and Count Gideon in no time at all. Masters were many in number, but those that had an impact on the kingdom as great as he were few and far between.

He wasn't even a pre-Infinite—a Superior—yet he'd defeated Superiors such as Mr. Franklin and Logan Goddhart.

To add to that, he also owned Zephyrus Silver—the only one of the first Flagman's creations that his successors knew nothing about.

Everything we'd learned about him had been extremely unusual, so I'd established this meeting to find out what kind of person he really was and what drove him. We'd even considered the possibility that he had direct ties to the Incarnations and was working as their pawn.

However, he had shattered all those expectations.

"...And the only thing that triggered the magic was 'I didn't see them naked.' Now, isn't that just hilarious?"

That meant that he was wearing his heart on his sleeve, saying only more or less exactly what he'd been thinking.

The words "I'll do my best for this kingdom because I like it," were hard to believe, yet he wasn't lying in the slightest. He wasn't

motivated to obtain some grand goal or reward, but by a simple desire not to lose what he already had.

One could say he was a very convenient person for the kingdom. Though, with how many *inconvenient* people this place had—us included—I felt like it was only fair for it to have someone like him around.

Anyway, he wasn't hiding anything, nor did he hold any suspicions about me.

"He wasn't the least bit wary of the tea I made, nor did he hesitate to give me info about Zephyrus Silver—one of the aces up his sleeve." Though I did understand why he trusted me as much as he did.

I was Altimia and Liliana's childhood friend, and he trusted the two so deeply that he'd completely dropped his guard around me simply based on that. There was nothing impure about that trust either. I'd confirmed that he wasn't trying to show off to them, nor did he have any grand political ambitions. In fact, back when he'd met Altimia, he hadn't even realized that she was a princess.

This meant that there was no selfishness in any of the help he'd given them... It had all come naturally to him.

"...That's such a difficult way to live." The bodies of Masters restored themselves, and they may have been able to turn off physical pain, but they had nothing to protect them from a broken heart. If he truly cared for Altar's people and wanted to protect the kingdom, he would surely receive such wounds eventually.

Or maybe he already had?

Maybe that had changed him? Or maybe he'd remained unchanged in spite of all that?

Or maybe he would never change at all?

Maybe he would stand against my actions, the doings of The Evil, the plans of the Incarnations, and all other threats simply because *not* doing so would, in his words, “leave a bad taste in his mouth.”

Maybe he would always continue fighting to prevent any tragedies he saw...no matter how much he hurt himself in the process.

“Hm...” The path he walked was different than ours, but it may have been just as thorny.

His unique outlook had convinced me of something else too.

“Masters aren’t a monolith after all. They all have free will.”

Ignoring Incarnation disguises such as The Lynx, it was best to assume that Masters all had minds of their own.

I didn’t know how Embryos worked, but Masters themselves seemed like people who were in some kind of *parasitic* relationship with these “lesser Incarnations.” With that in mind, it was possible that everything they saw and heard could reach the Incarnations themselves.

That wasn’t a problem, however. Nothing I’d told him was a lie.

I hadn’t implied that I’d inherited information which was detrimental to the Incarnations, all while revealing just enough to explain my situation.

If the Incarnations came for me at this stage, I’d certainly die.

But as long as Crystal was all right, she would be able to straighten the course of those who would come after me.

...Though personally, I intended to settle things within my own generation.

“Looking back at the battle between Chrono Crown and Kashimiya, it’s obvious that the Masters have complete dominance over their Embryos. That means that they’re functionally outside the control of

the Incarnations... In that case, it may help if we had Masters with power close to that of the Incarnations on our side. Even if we cut them off in the end, they would be useful in battle."

The first person to come to mind was the individual I'd just been talking to, but I shook my head right after.

"Ray Starling...is no good for this." He was a trustworthy person, but that was exactly why it was clear he'd never take my side.

What I needed was *someone who wanted to kill the Incarnations even if it meant destroying the world.*

Masters with any less of a driving ambition and less power simply wouldn't be enough.

Under the pretext of gathering info about Altar to make up for "the time I'd been away," I'd spent a good while investigating various Masters. The papers here in the lab had lists of Masters registered with the kingdom, and it was possible that I would find the one I was looking for among them.

"...I already have someone in mind," I said to myself as I reached into a bundle and took out a paper with a tag on it.

On this paper, there was a photo of a man from a time when his face was still full of fighting spirit, alongside his powers and achievements.

In bygone days, he was a famed duel ranker and the owner of a major clan.

But now, he was a man who'd lost everything.

This was the kind of person who could share my ambitions.

The kind of people I needed weren't the kind needed by Altimia and the kingdom.

I didn't need someone like Ray Starling, whose driving force was an urge *to not lose anything*.

I needed someone whose driving force was the fact that *they'd already lost everything*.

“...The ‘broken sword,’ eh?”

## **Interlude**

### *Gaol*

Somewhere in this world—at the infamous gaol, to be more specific—something unusual was occurring.

The nameless town that the prisoners inhabited was currently *devoid of any signs of life*.

All the gaol's residents save for a select few had died and vanished from this world.

The townscape, styled straight out of a western movie, was completely barren. The only things of note here now were the automated item-dispensing vending machines, leaking light and sound onto the ghost town's streets. Even those had something strange about them, though, with some of the machines displaying confirmation or selection screens as if people had vanished while using them.

The town's death had been just that sudden and indiscriminate.

“...This is just creepy,” said Gerbera—one of the few Superior prisoners—as she looked out the window of her clan leader’s café, Dice.

Her bored, listless tone and her casual pose, with her chin resting on her hand and her elbow on the counter, hid it well, but there was no exaggeration in her words—she was actually creeped out.

That comment was directed at the person sitting next to her, taking sips from a caramel macchiato.



"Hee hee! A GODlike day for a GOD like me! How wonderful it is to drink such a perfect caramel macchiato here in the gaol! Good job, Sechsy!" spoke the cross-dressing boy—King of Plagues, Candy Carnage. His manner of speaking was about as inelegant as a person could sound.

"I am glad you like it," replied Sechs—the owner of this establishment.

Next to Candy, there was a hammer-like *measuring flask* about as big as himself.

Even though the object resembled a measuring flask, it was hard to tell if that was actually what it was. The transparent spherical section was split into multiple layers, each of which looked like slowly turning petri dishes growing some kind of culture. In several places on the sphere's surface, there were holes apparently spraying *something invisible to the naked eye* into the air around them.

Gerbera knew that this object had caused the deaths of everyone in the gaol except for them.

The strange measuring flask was King of Plagues' Superior Embryo. A rare triple hybrid as well as a "twin" simultaneously belonging to two categories that branched out from the Arms type, it was a Type Legion/Weapon/Calculator, and its name was "Pestilent Divinity, Resheph."

True to its name, which it shared with a deity of plagues that had left a mark on both Egyptian and Abrahamic texts, this Embryo was a potent exterminator even by the high standards of Superiors.

Gerbera knew several of its capabilities.

Its core traits were "malignancy mutation" and "contagion magnification."

Once Resheph was supplied with cells or materials from living organisms, it could automatically research, develop, grow, and release bacteria that exerted certain effects against them.

The most terrifying thing about this Embryo, however, was the fact that the bacteria it released could not be controlled in any way. The most Candy could do was set a limit on their multiplication and lifespan, or take samples from certain creatures and analyze them to exclude them as targets of the contagion. That was exactly what Candy had done with himself, Sechs, Gerbera, and Alhazred in this situation.

But that was the extent of the control he had, and it was uncertain how far the contagion could spread without such limitations. It was possible that without the involvement of the control AI, the bacteria he'd left outside of the gaol would still be spreading even now.

*...That means that this café is crawling with germs, doesn't it?* Gerbera thought. *That's just dirty and depressing... I can't even drink my coffee like this.* Stirring the coffee in her favorite dolphin-themed cup, she heaved a sigh.

Released without any limitations, the modded bacteria demonstrated extraordinary effectiveness.

Resheph was currently releasing three types of pathogens.

First was "Soiled Future," which simultaneously inflicted heavy disease and binding-based debuffs.

Second was "Collapsed Present"—a carnivorous bacteria which ate the infected organism from the inside.

And the third was "Punctured Past," which improved the activity of the other pathogens already infecting the body.

The resulting triple biohazard had exterminated the prisoners without even giving them a chance to resist. Enhanced by the "Past," the "Future" was too strong for all but those with considerable

debuff countermeasures, while the “Present,” since it was nothing but a bacteria that consumed flesh, would continue ravaging the body even if the infected drank an Elixir.

As the Superior Job of the pestimancer grouping, King of Plagues also had the Underground Prosperity skill, which further increased the vitality and infectious capacity of the pathogens. It was possible that the bacteria would continue to spread until they buried the entire gaol.

Candy had no means of controlling them once they were released, so not even he could stop them now.

Even if he were capable of it, though, doing so would require him to *want* to stop the contagion in the first place. The fact that he would never consider doing that, combined with the very fact that his mind birthed an Embryo like Resheph, placed him among the most unhinged Masters even by Superior standards.

It was what had gotten him the nickname of “Legionkiller,” as well what had led to every building in the small country he’d extinguished becoming a ruined gravestone to the people who had once lived there.

*Wait... Gerbera thought. We gave him our hair for his Embryo to analyze. That was so he could exclude us as targets for his bacteria, but...that means he can also create bacteria that only targets us. He's got us by the throat.*

It suddenly occurred to Gerbera that Candy held her life in the palm of his hand, but then...

*...Oh, wait. If he wants me dead, I'll die either way.*

*...she realized that regardless of whether he made his contagion targeted or indiscriminate, she couldn't escape it...*

*Huh. So there's no point in caring about it... Ugh...*

Following that thought, she let her head drop on the counter, fully aware that she'd been making that gesture far too often recently.

*Wait, but what about our leader...? Oh...yeah.* Gerbera considered Sechs, who'd given Candy his hair just like she did, but then realized something else.

*He can just change his cells around if he feels like it. Actually, I don't even know if bacteria can do anything to slimes...*

Gerbera had been told that Sechs and Hannya had once teamed up to defeat Candy. She could only assume that Sechs's slimy nature had rendered the pathogens ineffective.

*But then what about Hannya...? Oh, I think I know...*

She considered the other Superior and soon realized that she, too, stood a chance against Candy.

One of the core traits of Hannya's Sandalphon was the randomization of the local space. Since Candy was the epicenter of the contagion, anyone facing him would likely die before they got close.

However, Sandalphon potentially allowed Hannya an almost instantaneous approach, as well as the safety of being a kilometre up in the air.

*I guess she wins against him in the game of compatibility... I know I can't do that...*

The bacteria targeted any organisms regardless of whether or not Candy acknowledged them, making it impossible for Gerbera's Alhazred to defend against him.

*...I guess I could do something when I'm right next to him...like I am now.* However, the only reason they were this close in the first place was that they were allies.

Facing Candy Carnage properly meant crossing a country-sized biohazard exclusion zone. Many tians and Masters alike had tried to do so and failed in the attempt. Even The Hero's sword couldn't sever the thread of KoP's life.

It was thanks to this that Candy Carnage had become the greatest tian genocider, and how his King of Plagues job had reached the high level of 1,680.

*Well, Alhazred's out for a walk and we're allies now. I can't kill him, and I wouldn't even want to try, Gerbera thought. Imagine the grudge he'd hold if I managed it, though... she sighed.*

Candy had actually killed Gerbera once, but she now had enough perspective to know that it had been her own fault for walking into a battle where he had the advantage.

*...Seriously, though—how did the Superior Killer do it? It was difficult for her to imagine how an Embryo that did nothing but fire living bullets could take out King of Plagues.*

As all these thoughts about Candy were running through Gerbera's mind...

“Okie then! I’m gonna log out for now! My skin needs some beauty sleep.”

...Candy said, standing up.

“Very well,” said Sechs. “Thank you for your work today.”

“The bacteria will spread on its own, so don’t you worry a bit. Starting now, the gaol’s gonna be a GODlike heaven where logging in = death!”

*...Sounds more like hell to me, Gerbera honestly thought.*

“See you two lateer!” Candy said with a wink before finally logging out.

“...He’s finally gone,” Gerbera let out in a tired voice.

This certainly wouldn’t be the last time she would see Candy, though. After all, albeit temporarily, Candy was a member of Illegal Frontier.

“This is so depressing...” *A clan with that thing in it is not the place to be*, she added in thought before laying her head on the counter again.

*Then again, Candy’s not the only one with a few screws loose. Just look at our leader.* The man who’d welcomed her into the clan and talked to her more than anyone else here was plenty unhinged, as well.

*...Does that mean that Rascal, Zeta, and Emily are all comparatively normal? Seriously...? Isn’t it kinda bad if the least crazy people in your group are a mummy and a murder child...? Now that I think about it, even Rascal is a perv who owns a robot maid, but I wonder how normal he is otherwise...?* She’d upset some people if she said those words out loud, but no one could hear or confront her about them as long as they stayed in her head.

*I guess I must be the most normal one after all...* Again, no response.

“Wait, leader...why’d we kill everyone in town anyway?” she asked.

“Oh, did I not tell you?”

“All you told me was to ‘prepare for the move.’”

“And that is the entire reason. We are preparing to move.”

“Hm?” Gerbera tilted her head. If *Infinite Dendrogram* had emotes, a question mark would have been hovering above her head.

“In a few days, we are breaking out of the gaol.”

“...I’ve been wondering about this for a while, but is that really something you should be saying out loud?” Gerbera was worried

that the gaol's warden—the control AI known as Red King—would hear about their plans.

Naturally, she had completely forgotten that she had said the same thing back when she'd first arrived here.

With a smile plastered across his face, Sechs said, "Actually, the control AIs know everything avatars see and hear."

"HUUH?! Are you serious?! But I *bathed* here!" Gerbera exclaimed, covering her (nonexistent) chest.

This café had a sizable bath that she'd occasionally used alongside April. Prism People were fully water-resistant, remaining undamaged even if completely submerged. When bathing with April, though, Gerbera had never once even considered the possibility that it would damage her. If Flagman hadn't made her water-resistant, Gerbera's carelessness might've caused April to be lost forever.

"No need to worry," said Sechs. "I am sure the control AI feels no lust for humans."

"But won't the devs in the studio be able to look over the data the AIs collect?"

"...Devs? Studio?" Sechs said and thoughtfully put his hand on his chin as though he'd just heard a very strange statement, only to remember something and nod before adding, "Ohh. There is no need to worry about that. I am sure of it."

"...Really?"

"Yes. Also, we can talk about breaking out all we like. I already had a talk about it."

"You did? With who?"

"Red King."

Hearing the name of the gaol's ruler absolutely shocked Gerbera.

“Huh?! You mean, he *OK’d* our escape?!” She couldn’t begin to understand why Red King—the warden of this place—would even suggest something like that.

“I suppose you could say that.”

“Hm?”

“These were his words...” Sechs said, turning his black eyes elsewhere. “‘Do it if you think you can.’ Well...let’s do just that, shall we?”

With that, Gerbera understood that breaking out of the gaol wasn’t exactly forbidden—there was merely something that prevented it, and whatever it was, the warden had limitless confidence in its ability to keep them inside.

Despite that, Sechs seemed to have just as much confidence that he could escape.

“Ahhh... I have no idea how we’re gonna do it, but you seem really sure that we will,” said Gerbera.

“I am. I would prefer to give you the details by email, though.”

“Hmm... All right. I’ll set up a throwaway and give it to you.”

“Please do. Oh, and let me answer your question about why I asked Candy to spread the bacteria,” he said as he looked out the window to the now-empty streets of the town. “It is so that no one would interrupt us when the time comes for our escape.”

“Interrupt us?”

“Some would simply get in our way, while others might see it as their own opportunity to escape. There is also a chance that these people would have Embryos that may be a major threat to any of us three.”

That was indeed a possibility.

With how varied Embryos could be, it was fairly likely that someone here in the gaol would have one that could counter even Superiors like them. Even if that wasn't the case, it was possible that new Superiors or pre-Superiors would be sent to the gaol right before their prison break.

"I requested that Candy spread the bacteria to remove such uncertain variables. Since dying makes you unable to log in for three days, that will be how long we have to make our escape. Though, we still have to go around town and kill off the people who did not die from the bacteria."

That was the explanation Gerbera needed.

It was certainly best if there was no one who could get in their way. Candy's ability to continuously exterminate vast amounts of people was highly effective for this task, and it might've been one of the reasons why Sechs took him into the clan.

*Anyway, it looks like I did the right thing,* Gerbera thought.

"With that in mind, the two of us should go and finish off any survivors."

"Uhh... Don't bother," Gerbera said, casually waving her palm.

"Hm?"

"Uhh... I only just now found out why we're doing this, but I knew you were planning to kill everyone the moment Candy started spreading his bacteria, so..." Gerbera said as she pointed at the empty space—no, at the *invisible assassin* who had just returned. "I made Alhazred kill everyone who survived. All of them."

It seemed as though she thought nothing of this deed one way or the other. However, on the inside, she happily puffed her (nonexistent) chest, extremely pleased with the levels she'd gained from this.

"It was fine that I did that, right?"

“Of course. Thank you very much. You saved me the trouble, after all.”

“Hey, I just gave the order to Alhazred. It’s no big deal...”

Countless people had died of a disease while an invisible assassin had picked off all the survivors. At this moment, the gaol was less like a prison and more like a hell.

Or, true to Gerbera’s nickname, it might be described as a nightmare.

“Oh. There is actually one person I didn’t kill,” added Gerbera.

“Though, honestly, that one’s impossible...”

“Ah. I know exactly who you mean. You can ignore him—I doubt he will be leaving his domain soon.”

Someone who hadn’t succumbed to Candy’s bacteria and someone Gerbera couldn’t kill—this was none other than the last Superior of the gaol, staying firm within his domain away from town.

He’d rejected Sechs’s invitation, ignored Candy’s bacteria, caused Gerbera to steer away from him, and stood still right where he was.

“He will eventually escape by his own means,” said Sechs. “We will go on ahead without him.”

“...Fine by me,” said Gerbera. “But are you sure escape is even possible?”

“No need to worry. It was an uncertain prospect when it was just me and Candy, but with you here, I guarantee that we will be able to escape.”

“...Hmm.” *Will I really be much help with that?* Gerbera tilted her head and wondered. *Though, if he’s right, that means my short—well, actually I guess it was kinda long—stay at the gaol is about to end, huh? There’s no place here that sells sweets besides Dice, so I’m kinda looking forward to getting out.*

Albeit still unsure how it would be accomplished, Gerbera started to grow excited for the time when she'd finally leave this place. Soon, it was time for her to log out.



Several hours later, she received the details of the prison break at the throwaway email she'd provided to Sechs. This elicited only yet another confused head tilt. *Huh? That's all it takes?*

## ***Chapter Three: The First Clan Meeting***

*Paladin, Ray Starling*

By the time I arrived in Gideon, it was already dark out.

“...That took longer than expected,” I said.

“Well, you certainly could not have anticipated that encounter,” shrugged Nemesis. We’d jumped on Silver and headed towards Gideon as soon as we left Altea.

The best thing about flight as a means of travel was that it freed you from the need to follow the roads and let you take the direct path towards your destination. It was made even more convenient by the fact that many of this world’s most popular means of flight, such as flying mounts or aeromancy, didn’t require much space for taking off and landing.

Because of this, I’d always wondered why there was nothing like an aerial transport network here.

Today, however, I learned—or more like, had been taught—the reason for that.

“...Yeah, I sure didn’t expect to run into a stray dragon.”

“It was our first aerial battle in a while. We are lucky to have come out of it as well as we did.”

Indeed—while flying towards Gideon, we’d somehow crossed paths with a skydragon. Although I was able to win against it solo, I really couldn’t say that it had been easy.

“Well, the thing was just firing breath attacks at us from outside my range...”

“That was also why Hellish Miasma could not reach it either.” I hadn’t even been able to use my usual tactic of weakening my opponent before coming in close for a counterattack. I’d solo’d a

Pure-Dragon-tier worm shortly after Franklin's Game, but this one was way more trouble.

That battle was enough for me to realize that a world with things like *that* flying around was no place for an aerial transport network. They might not have been much trouble for skilled vanguards, but common folk would be in serious danger of dying on every flight.

"...Oh, I remember."

"Remember what?"

"The talk at the café I had with Hugo shortly before Franklin's Game."

"...Ohh. That."

◇

The day after our encounter with the Gouz-Maise Gang, but before we had ended up fighting on different sides, Hugo and I met up and had a little chat. Some of the conversation was about Magingears and other technology in Dryfe.

"So, the only three types of Magingears are humanoid robots, powered suits, and tanks?"

"Yes. And before the leader of our clan made Marshal II, it was actually just two."

"Hm..."

"What is it?"

"Well, I understand that ships are Granvaloa's thing...but what about planes?"

In response, Hugo put on a troubled expression and said, "...We do not have those. If you're wondering why, well...I suppose you could say that songbirds cannot fly in a sky ruled by birds of prey."

“Ohh, so aeronautics here is so rudimentary that flying monsters are a major threat.”

“Exactly. Flight speed, maneuverability, offensive potential... Current airplanes fall short on every factor needed to survive the skies. When there are creatures out there that fly around at supersonic speeds, ordinary planes are simply not enough.”

“...Yeah, I can easily imagine one of those planes losing a wing and crashing the moment a monster appears.”

At the very least, it was doubtful that any machine like that would stand a chance against Pure-Dragons. A single hit would reduce the plane’s flight ability, and then it’d be easy prey.

“I guess that’s why it’s better to just ride a Pure-Dragon-tier skydragon,” I said.

“Tamed Pure-Dragons are not exactly common, though. Anyway, that is why there are no planes. Well...I suppose there are plane-like Embryos, but not many of them are focused on transportation.”

“I see. And here I thought planes were always a good way to get to distant countries.”

“Currently, your only options here are Granvaloa’s sea routes and the roads of the desert.”

“The desert, eh...? That doesn’t sound like an easy trip.”

“Truly... Regardless, I do hope to visit a distant land someday.”

“Same.”

◊

That conversation now felt like it had happened so long ago.

“I wonder what he’s up to now,” I said.

“Would he not still be in Dryfe?” asked Nemesis.

"If he is, we may run into him if a war breaks out again." Though, I kinda got the impression he wasn't there anymore. "Anyway, on to the meeting place."

"Mhm. Thanks to that encounter, we are in danger of being late."

Our clan had agreed to meet up today in order to talk about tomorrow's base-hunting and the following day's Tournament over some dinner. We had ten minutes left until the appointed time, which was just about enough to make it if we hurried.

After more or less that exact amount of time, we arrived at the location. Since Rook was already here in Gideon, I'd asked him to secure the place, and going by the sign that said "Reserved by Death Period," he'd made a smart move and gotten it set aside exclusively for us.

"...That sign sounds so threatening," said Nemesis.

"That's our clan name. It is what it is."

I opened the door, making the bell above it ring out.

Inside, there was a round table surrounded by familiar faces.

"Sorry for the wait, guys."

"Raaaayyy! You're almost late!" said Marie, her cheeks all red. Apparently, she'd been drinking. "All righty," she continued. "Let's get some of this wine for you too—OW!"

"Control yourself," said B3, having hit Marie on the back of the head. "Most of this clan are below drinking age. Him and myself included."

Now that she mentioned, yeah...the only ones in the clan who could drink were Shu, Lei-Lei, and Marie.

Not content to just take the hit, Marie retaliated against B3, who retaliated back.

They seemed to have the sense to not use their Embryos here, at least, but it was still a scuffle that looked like it belonged in a wrestling ring.

“Our teacher and B3 are the same as ever,” said Fujinon.

“Yeah, they were just like this last time too!” said Io.

“Sh-Shouldn’t we stop them...?” asked Kasumi.

I was curious what they meant by calling Marie “teacher,” but I wasn’t sure if I wanted to ask. I had a feeling that it had nothing to do with combat and everything to do with the kind of things she had in her sketchbook.

“Ray, Nemesis, we have free chairs here.”

“Over heeeeere!” Rook and Babi said as they pulled us closer to them.

“Thanks. But damn, we really were late, huh? Everyone’s already he— Huh?”

I looked over my fellow clan members, all seated around the large round table.

However...

“Where’s Shu?”

...I didn’t see his bulky costume anywhere. Lei-Lei wasn’t here either, but she was really busy in real life, so that was expected.

“He was here at first, but then it looked like someone contacted him and he went to see them,” said Rook.

“See who...?”

“We don’t know. ‘It’s a beary big secret. You’ll be surprised’ was all he said.”

...A *surprise*?

“He also said we can start eating without him.”

“Whoa whoa whoa, let’s be reasonable here. If we start eating, my partner here won’t leave anything.”

*Just like she didn’t leave a single one of Integra’s snacks...  
Integra’s snacks!*

“Do not worry,” said Nemesis. “A dinner like this is rare. I will eat at a slower pace.”

*Well, that’s...not at all reassuring. Eating at a slower pace doesn’t mean you’ll eat less.*

“I may have not forgotten the welcome party on the day I hatched or the fact that Brother Bear ate all of my à la carte while we were logged out...but I have no intention of getting back at him.”

“...The very fact that you even remember something like that at all makes it seem like you’re holding a hell of a grudge.” *Food’s important and all, I get it, but let it go and leave some for the rest of us.*

And so, we went on to dine and talk.

We started by talking about what we wanted in a clan base, and we decided on the following things: private rooms (everyone), large bathing area (the ladies), large room for meetings and stuff (me, B3, and Rook), space for free-range keeping of large monsters (Rook and Kasumi), cafeteria (Nemesis), and a pool (Marie and Babi).

That was a large number of conditions to fulfill, but none of them was outlandish or anything. Wealthy merchants who’d moved due to the recent events might’ve left behind a mansion or other kinds of estates that ticked every box, and we should’ve been able to secure it if we had the budget...which I assumed we did.

It looked like we’d have to spend some time looking around Gideon, though.

I'd had a look around Altea, but since it was the capital, it didn't have much quality real estate still available for purchase. It seemed like a certain religious group and fan club were buying up any available land. Setting up in Altea would mean setting up close to those two, and that smelled like trouble best left avoided.

Even Azurite agreed with me on that, which only made the situation there seem more terrifying.

After nearly an hour passed since we began, the bell on the door rang and I heard a familiar voice.

"Yo. Sorry fur the wait."

"Shu, you're finally...huh?"

As he entered the establishment, clad in his usual bear costume, we were overcome by surprise.

The door wasn't the widest, but his large costume smoothly changed shape to let him fit inside.

What caught us by surprise, however, wasn't the way he entered, but the people who followed him inside.

"Hey. Mind if we join?"

"Heh heh. It's been a while." Shu was accompanied by Figaro and Hannya.

"Figaro! You recovered?!" Following the Hannya incident, Figaro's chronic condition had become worse, leading to his hospitalization. He apparently hadn't logged in once since, but seeing that he was here now...

"Yes. I would say that I'm better now, but that would be a bit of a lie. I do *feel* good, though."

"Hm?" It wasn't like Figaro to give such vague answers and have such a hard-to-read expression.

Hannya, standing next to him, seemed somewhat perplexed too.

*Wait, it's not just that. She also looks...bashful?*

"...I actually kept having new spasms every time I saw her face in real life," Figaro explained. "It kept extending my stay at the hospital."

*...What?*

"I hope you can forgive a man who can't even *touch* his beloved yet," he said as he faced Hannya.

"I can," she replied. "Especially since I know that this is proof of your love... Also, here we can gaze at each other to our hearts' content..."

"Fuyuko..."

"Vincent..."

*...Did they just go and get lost in their own world? I thought. I'm not sure if it's a good idea to call each other by your real names here... Then again, I guess this place is reserved, so it's just us here.*

"...You look away for one moment and they become a pair of lovebirds," commented Nemesis.

"...So this is what Figaro has become," said B3 with a complicated expression.

"...Shu," I said, turning to my brother.

"I was beary surprised too," he said. "They met IRL and...progressed? Apparently? Anyway, this is how they are now."

"I'm not sure what to say... I guess...congratulations?" I said as I started to applaud lightly. Most of the other members weren't sure how to process this either, but they joined me in clapping.

"Thank you!" said Hannya, all smiles.

"Thank you," added Figaro with a nod. "Now, as for the reason why we came here..."

His expression became more serious—he was clearly preparing to say something important.

“Hannya and I would like to join your clan... To be part of Death Period.”

“Oh!” I was told that they might’ve been interested in joining once Figaro recovered, and it seemed that the time had finally come.

“Can we?” Figaro said as he held out his hand.

“Why, of course!” I replied, giving it a good shake.

And just like that, it was officially decided that Figaro and Hannya would join Death Period.

With these two additions to the clan, we now had eleven members, making us into a double-digit family. This was all the more reason to work hard and find the best clan base I could.

Also, it was decided that the people who would be covering most of the base-buying budget would be me, B3, and Marie. Figaro and Hannya still had debts to pay after the incident, while Shu was using his wealth to produce ammo for Baldr in case of another large-scale battle. For now, the costs would be covered by those of us with money to spare, and the rest would have to give their contributions later.

Speaking of the base, Figaro and Hannya had no requests regarding it whatsoever, since apparently their primary home would be Figaro’s place here in Gideon.

As for Shu’s request, I rejected it right away. If we’d focused on finding somewhere that had a *popcorn factory*, we’d never have a base.

With every member besides Lei-Lei present, it was time to shift subject to the matter of The Tournaments.

The Tournaments were an event held in preparation for the coming clash between Altar and Dryfe. Its main purpose was to tie as many Masters as possible to the kingdom, and it would be done through arena duels where the prize was the chance to challenge UBM.

The rules for it—the content of the Contract the participants had to sign—had four points.

“1. The participant must be an Altarian Master.”

“2. The participant will be unable to switch countries for three years after The Tournaments.”

“3. If the participant commits a crime within Altar’s borders that would otherwise be worthy of one or more years of penal servitude, they will be rendered unable to use any save points.”

In a way, these three were about what you’d expect. They were meant to strengthen Altar, slow down any weakening, prevent crime, and entice foreign or free Masters to join the kingdom.

The most important point out of the three, however, was the one discussing criminal acts. It didn’t apply to minor offenses, but anyone who did something really bad would be punished. This was apparently meant to deter potential turncoats like the kind we’d seen at Franklin’s Game.

The fourth and final point had a hard focus on the coming War.

“4. The participant will receive the right to challenge a UBM depending on where they place in The Tournaments. Additionally, those who also sign the Contract declaring intent to participate in any War involving Altar upon the kingdom’s side within the next three years will receive an extra prize in the form of the right to select a rare piece of equipment. The order of selection will also depend on placement in The Tournaments.”

If you also agreed to assist Altar in any War you could join within the next three years, you received an extra prize in addition to the right to challenge the UBM.

The “you could join” part was there to account for the fact that the three factors of location, timing, and quest status may have made that impossible. It wasn’t certain that the Master who signed the Contract would even be online for the War, so the Contract was lenient enough to account for that.

“The winners of The Tournaments may simply win against the UBMs, but there is the possibility that they would lose instead, no?” asked Nemesis.

“Oh yeah, there is.” The winners of The Tournaments were simply given the *first go* against their UBMs. If they and their party lost, the second place winners would challenge the monster instead.

Because of this, there was a degree of uncertainty in who, exactly, would become the MVPs. Even if a first place winner lost against their UBM, the damage they’d dealt and their general contribution to the battle during their attempt could still be enough to get them the reward.

That seemed to hinge on how much of a fight those before you were putting up.

“Anyway, the important thing now is deciding which of the ten days we’ll take,” I said. The Tournaments would start the day after tomorrow and run daily for ten days. This was meant to give time to potential participants to make it here, as well as to just prolong the show.

A participant in one day’s Tournament couldn’t participate in another’s, but three real-life days seemed like enough time for most people to get a chance. Also, since the functions of the Orbs were

open to the public, those with more time on their hands could prioritize The Tournaments for the most optimal or powerful Orbs.

The Tournaments happened to start on Saturday for me, so I had a good range of Orbs to choose from.

On Saturday I could choose between Tournament days one or two, and on Sunday I had days three, four, and five... I could even go for day six, but that'd be early Monday morning.

“Oh. Count Gideon sent us this,” said Marie as she handed me the details of the prizes—the UBMs.

The dates, rules, and the fact that we’d be fighting to challenge UBMs were revealed a good while ago, but these details were only sent out yesterday in *Dendro* time.

The details of The Tournaments’ UBMs were, in order...

Day one: Legendary “Stern Face-Tender Heart, Sasage” (Type: Demon). Core traits: AoE healing proportional to damage dealt (Presumed).

Day two: Legendary “Fortcrushing Mawdragon, No Mercy” (Type: Dragon). Core traits: Object hardness-ignoring attack (Presumed).

Day three: Name and tier unknown (Presumed type: Undead). Core traits: Poltergeist, curse-based debuffs.

Day four: Ancient Legendary “Spiritblade Rider, Gradsoul” (Type: Elemental). Core traits: Grudge absorption and body enhancement.

Day five: Epic “The Uncornered Rat, Balooberry” (Type: Beast (Rat)). Core traits: Fatal damage negation followed by time-limited body enhancement (Presumed).

Day six: Name and tier unknown (Presumed type: Dragon (Serpentine)). Core traits: Tornado, lightning, and explosion generation (Uncontrollable in its Orb form).

Day seven: Name and tier unknown (Type: Unknown). Core traits: Short-distance warping (Presumed).

Day eight: Epic “Twin Orphans, Arma-Karma” (Type: Elemental). Core traits: Clone creation (Summoning?).

Day nine: Legendary “Prospector Centipede, Gold Rush” (Type: Insectoid). Core traits: Vein prospecting, underground scanning.

Day ten: Mythical “Night Sky General, O’oimimaru” (Type: Yokai). Core traits: Unknown (Space alteration?).

*So those are the details of the ten UBMs... I’m seeing a lot of “(Presumed)” and “?” here,* I thought.

“...A Mythical whose power we don’t even know...? Sounds pretty scary, if you ask me,” said Marie, prompting all of us to nod in agreement.

This information had been gained either by reading the descriptions Huang He had provided alongside the Orbs or by simply testing them out. The descriptions given weren’t complete due to much of the information being lost in Huang He’s civil war, while some Orbs had effects that were hard to understand even by using them. That more or less explained why there was so much uncertainty here.

I would’ve liked to meet the person who picked these and tell them off for sending undefined hazardous material to other countries, but it was likely that Huang He had specifically picked Orbs they didn’t mind letting go of or even wanted to get rid of. A lot of the Orbs that did have known details seemed pretty useful, though, which might’ve been their way of making up for that.

“It’d be pretty bad if any UBM escaped,” said Figaro. “Did they account for that?”

I nodded in response and said, “Apparently they won’t use the normal duel barrier of the central arena, but the one Franklin used to seal people inside.”

That barrier could only be broken by the likes of Shu.

The arenas would be unusable until the UBMs were defeated, but with the monsters being weakened by their six hundred year imprisonment, it was unlikely that all the combined participants *wouldn’t* be enough to.

...Though I was a bit concerned about the Mythical.

“Also, they said that if Figaro and Hannya returned—and they did—they wanted Superiors to go on guard duty and remain on high alert, just in case,” explained Marie. “And while The Tournaments’ fights will have spectators like any Gideon event, the UBM battles certainly won’t due to the dangers involved.”

On top of that, the entertainment part of The Tournaments would only begin once the day’s top sixteen were decided. The fights before that would be quickly settled using the barrier function that did the opposite of what had been done to Figaro and Xunyu during Franklin’s Game—they would *accelerate* the flow of time within.

Without something like this, there would be too many participants for a day’s Tournament to actually end within that day.

“I see,” I said. “With different types of Superiors around, it should be possible to deal with most situations.”

Speaking of which, Azurite would also get Miss Eldritch to join this guard duty.

Azurite really didn’t like relying on her, but her debuffs and healing, not to mention the organizational potential of her Lunar Society, made her a must-have if something went wrong.

“By the way, I’m not participating in The Tournaments,” said Shu.  
“I’ll just do security and that’s it.”

“Huh?” That was news to me.

“But...why?”

“...I mean, this whole event’s meant to improve the power of Altar’s Masters, right? If I go for one of the UBMs, I’ll probably just get another costume I won’t use.”

...That seemed pretty likely. For some reason, every one of his MVP rewards besides the one from Gloria was a costume.

“Also, if I participate in it...” he said before falling silent.

“Hm? Bro?”

“Nah, don’t worry about it. All that matters is that I’m not in.”

*Hmm, I wonder what he was about to say...* I thought.

“Perhaps it was something about the fact that he could accidentally break the barrier?” Nemesis said, telepathically.

*Oh yeah. That’s a possibility.* He could endanger The Tournaments spectators and perhaps even give a chance for the UBM to escape.

“In that case...I won’t participate either,” said Hannya.

“You too?”

“Yes. As he is now, Sandalphon can’t be used to his full potential in arenas.” *Oh yeah, that was the reason why her duel with Figaro happened outside the city.*

“I also still have to pay my debt to the country, so I will just focus on security.”

“All right,” I said. “I’ll pass that on to Azurite.”

That meant that if you ignored Lei-Lei, who probably wouldn’t make it, the clan had a total of eight participants.

“So, Ray, what we’re about to discuss is...our distribution, right?” Figaro asked.

“Yes. Exactly.”

I wouldn’t expect any less from the man who knew more about duels and UBMs than anyone else in Altar. He instantly understood the point of this meeting.

I looked over everyone again and repeated what I’d been told by Azurite.

“The UBMs will first be challenged by the day’s winners, then the runner-ups, and so on. While The Tournaments would consist of duels, the UBMs can be challenged with a party, and the party members can be anyone regardless of if they participated in another day’s Tournament or didn’t participate at all.”

“And that is why it is best for the clan members to spread out across the Tournament days and aim to win as many high placements as possible,” Nemesis added.

“Exactly.” Everyone seemed to agree with that.

“Our clan has many people who can take first,” said B3. “Figaro most obviously.”

“That is true,” said Marie. “Me, Figaro, Rookie, and even Ray can do it if the matchups are good. My student trio has potential too, so even if they don’t take first, they might still land some good placements.”

“...I didn’t hear my name in there,” noted B3.

“Huh? You’re too slow and heavy to get from point A to B, let alone place high.”

“You’ve really said it *now*, ya dinky piece o’ paper scrap!” B3 roared as she instantly donned her armor and began scuffling with Marie again.

Their combat styles were very different, but it seemed that when it came to STR they were about equally matched.

*...I'd say they're getting along pretty good, though, considering, I thought.*

Anyway, despite what Marie said, I wasn't that confident that I could place high. My fighting style could be strong, but it was far from reliable, and since those videos had exposed me, a lot of people knew the cards I could play. That had become especially obvious in my recent fights against Jubei. And if people were aware that I would be their enemy in The Tournaments, they could easily prepare countermeasures.

I was also so lacking in pure power that even the dragon we'd fought on the way to Gideon was a real challenge. It had only retreated once we'd been backed into a corner and had started charging Payback.

It had probably gone away because it had realized how dangerous that really was, which was about what I'd expect from a dragon. They were clever creatures. If it had been as unintelligent as, say, a worm, there was the possibility that it could have charged me before I'd fired, giving me the death penalty.

...Also, I'd felt like I'd seen something like a Pomeranian on the dragon's back as it retreated. I had to have been seeing things, though. A dragon-riding dog? That just didn't make sense.

...Anyway, back to The Tournaments.

While B3 and Marie were fighting, the rest were considering which UBM to target.

I also looked at the details to find out which day was best for me.

“Man, this is hard...” I couldn’t skip class, so I could only participate on days up to the sixth. Out of these, there were three that caught my eye: the unnamed undead, Balooberry, and Sasage.

I didn’t want the undead’s powers, but I felt like I’d be effective against it when we had to fight it. Reversal and Grudge-Soaked Greaves would likely give me the upper hand.

Balooberry had a very good power—someone like me could never have enough means of negating fatal damage. However, if the UBM both negated fatal damage and enhanced itself afterwards, I would be at a real disadvantage against it.

Then there was Sasage on day one. As someone whose build was based on taking damage, I felt like I could really use the healing. It would enable me to heal even with Purgatorial Flames, and it might even have been possible to land Vengeance and then instantly recover the HP I’d lost for it. If I could heal by attacking, I also wouldn’t have to add Priest to my build.

“...I probably shouldn’t count my chickens before they hatch. I gotta place high in The Tournaments first.”

“You do lose quite often when very little is on the line,” said Nemesis. “That recent event was especially full of close calls.”

“...Yeah.” The results I got were so inconsistent that even I didn’t really know how strong I actually was at this point. At the event on the uninhabited island, I’d been saved by Juliet, Alto, or the environment more times than I’d like to admit.

I figured this Tournament might’ve been a good chance to properly gauge my power in its purest form.

Anyway, while we Tournament participants had long discussions about who would take which day, the two who wouldn’t participate—Shu and Hannya—were talking about something else.

“So he was still in the gaol?” Shu asked.

“Yes,” Hannya replied. “He was operating a café and seemed to be used to life there.”

Apparently, he was asking her something about the gaol.

Looking back on it, Hannya’s incident had begun soon after she arrived here, and she hadn’t logged back in until today, so they hadn’t had a chance to really talk like this yet.

“Strange that you’d use the word ‘still.’ No one can escape the gaol. Even I couldn’t,” said Hannya.

“...Speaking of, how did you try to do that?”

“I used the skill Sandalphon got when he became a Superior Embryo...what was it again?”

“‘Downfall Screamer,’ Lady Hannya! It focuses my spatial control into the tips of the towers and pushes space itself aside to deliver a powerful drilling effect!” Hannya didn’t seem to remember her own Embryo’s skill name, so Sandalphon answered in her stead.

“Yes, that’s it. I used it to open a small hole leading outside the gaol, but it closed before I could pass through it.”

“I am certain that the observer of the gaol wields spatial manipulation powers that surpass even mine,” said Sandalphon. “I gave my all to drill open the space, yet he restored it like it was nothing. You cannot escape from anyone capable of that!”

Listening to this from the outside made both Hannya and the observer of the gaol seem pretty nuts.

Sandalphon’s words, though, seemed to have made Shu frown. I could tell even through his costume.

“...You actually opened a hole?”

“Yes,” said Hannya. “I could see a bit of the outside, but it closed the moment I stopped the skill to try and pass through it.”

“Hypothetically...do you think he could escape by *cutting off a part of his body* and sending it through the hole while it’s open?”

*Cutting off...a part of his body?*

“I doubt it. I mean, Red King...the observer of the gaol would take that into account. Even if Sechs tried that, he probably has a means of preventing it.”

“...True.”

Sechs...King of Crime, Sechs Würfel? I did know the name, and I knew that Shu was deeply involved with him...but why was Shu so wary of someone who was already in the gaol?

“Raayy! Let’s finish our plans for The Tournameeents.”

“Oh... All right.”

Called by Marie, I shifted my focus back to The Tournaments.

I’d ask Shu about this some other time.

The discussions were soon finished, and this was the resulting Tournament participation split.

Day one, “Stern Face-Tender Heart, Sasage”—me.

Day two, “Fortcrushing Mawdragon, No Mercy”—B3.

Day three, name and tier unknown (Presumed type: Undead)—Rook.

Day four, “Spiritblade Rider, Gradsoul”—lo.

Day five, “The Uncornered Rat, Balooberry”—none.

Day six, name and tier unknown (Presumed type: Dragon (Serpentine))—none.

Day seven, name and tier unknown (Type: Unknown)—Marie.

Day eight, “Twin Orphans, Arma-Karma”—Fujinon.

Day nine, “Prospector Centipede, Gold Rush”—Kasumi.

Day ten, “Night Sky General, O’oimimaru”—Figaro.

We were all more or less matched to UBMs based on our combat styles. I didn’t really know why Rook chose the opponent he did, but knowing him, there had to be a good reason.

Also, we’d avoided not only the dragon on day six, but also day five’s Balooberry, even though it was obvious it would become a powerful MVP reward.

The reason none of us wanted to take it was because we had full details on it and because it was “too good.” It was abundantly clear that it would be sought by many powerful Masters, potentially those high up in the rankings, making it more difficult to place high in that Tournament. I honestly wouldn’t be surprised to even see Kashimiya there. No matter how powerful the potential reward, it meant nothing if we couldn’t even challenge the monster for it.

The person with the highest chances among us there was Figaro, but he instead chose the Mythical of day ten—potentially the most dangerous one, but also the one best left to someone like him. It wasn’t like he needed fatal damage prevention anyway. He could do that by simply enhancing the gear he already had.

It took much deliberation, but I myself chose Sasage. Thus we ended up with no one from Death Period participating in The Tournaments for Balooberry.

Marie had actually tried to convince Rook to take it, but all he said in response was “A *rat* UBM? Never,” all while maintaining a perfect, all-denying smile.

Anyway, just like that, it was decided which day we would participate on.

Mine was the very first, and as the leader of the clan I'd have to do my very best.

Though...why did it feel like I was forgetting something important?

## **Interlude**

*Dryfe Imperium, North, Vara Plains*

Located in the north of the northern country, the Vara Plains were a wasteland of little value.

Some decades ago, it was a wetland overflowing with life, but the worsening climate of Dryfe had destroyed most of its flora and fauna.

There was little of note here besides the occasional monster.

“Z e E z e e E Z e e E e e z Z e E e e.”

And now, in this wasteland, a sound very like hard objects being ground against each other could be heard.

It was a cry of an abominable creature—the self-assertion of a life-form inhabiting this wasteland.

The entity was an insect equipped with long, sharp, and hard mandibles, and its name was “Borer Deathbug, Shellstro.” It was a Legendary UBM specialized in defense and magic that enhanced its piercing ability.

Adapted to this wasteland, it had spent its days burrowing underground and attacking anyone who’d wandered into this place, stabbing them with its imposing mandibles and sucking out their life.

It could have been called the lord of the Vara Plains, but now...

“Z e E z z e E e E e z e e e...”

...it was on the verge of death, skewered like a scientific sample.

“W o w O w o.”

The abhorrent bug was surrounded by a number of other creatures.

Standing far taller than the average human, fully covered in plate and with insect legs peeking out of their head-concealing helmets, they were the Legendary-tier devils, Gigaknights.

A total of *ten* were surrounding Shellstro to finish it off.

Six were holding down the UBM's legs to keep it still, while the other four were stabbing their greatswords into the gaps in its shell, quickly stripping it of its HP.

UBMs fought—and won—their battles through the uniqueness of their abilities, but that meant nothing when they were outnumbered ten-to-one by creatures that were the same stat tier as they were.

“Well, I guess I win...”

Standing some distance away from the Gigaknights' hunt was the one who'd summoned them. A Dryfean Superior and secretly a part of Illegal Frontier, he was Hell General, Logan Goddhart.

Shellstro was among the eighteen UBMs whose locations and details he'd been given upon joining IF. Although it was fairly strong, the creature had little in the way of trickery. This had prompted Zeta to make the assessment that Logan “was perfectly capable of beating it by himself,” as it could neither escape nor repel him.

And just as she'd expected, Logan had rendered Shellstro completely incapable of even resisting.

Logan had once seen Gardranda—a demon on the level of a Legendary UBM—defeat two of his Gigaknights with little effort.

One could say that his success against Shellstro was a result of learning a lesson that day, but it really had more to do with the new build that Zeta had taught him, which let him *overwhelm his targets with devils without regard for the related costs*.

His current job configuration was so effective that even a Legendary UBM—albeit a very straightforward one—was no trouble for him whatsoever.

“Legendary Shellstro...done.” He had just defeated this great creature, and yet contrary to how he might have acted before, Logan showed no pride in it. All he did was matter-of-factly record the UBM’s defeat in the list Zeta had provided him. It was almost eerie how unexcited he was.

The reason for it, however, was clear—it was the peace talks, where he’d been instantly defeated by Tsukuyo.

Equipped with his new build, Logan had entered the scene as if he were the strongest there...only to be erased by the High Priestess’s Gloria β, along with all the other Dryfean Masters besides Behemot.

An intense battle had ensued, and he hadn’t been involved in any capacity. The fact that he’d been taken out like cannon fodder despite being a Superior had been terrible for his mental health; it was weighing down on him even now.

This was only made worse by the fact that it had been his *fourth* major defeat in a row, and defeating a UBM that’d been handed to him on a silver platter wasn’t enough to make the shock go away.

Things might’ve been different if Zeta were here—she was good at directing and teaching Logan. However, she’d yet to return to Dryfe from the terrorist attack on Altea.

“...Altar’s about to have some kind of ‘Tournament,’ right? Guess it doesn’t matter to me anyway. I’m with Dryfe and I have lots of UBMs...and I can’t win against people.”

It was an event that bound you to Altar in exchange for the right to fight for a chance to battle UBMs.

The terms of the Contract were strict, but UBMIs were rare content—enough to make it worth it.

Logan, however, was currently defeating UBMIs one after another, yet none of this helped his state of mind at all. Partially because he was the former duel champion, he felt that this game was primarily about competing with other people. Nothing else had much of a point if you were on a losing streak.

As he was now, Logan was actually far stronger than he had been while he was acting tough in the arenas, but his spirits were at an all-time low. It was as though these two things were inversely proportional to each other.

If Sechs knew about Logan's current state, it might've reminded him of Gerbera. Despite its humble size, IF had two members that had been defeated and then grew stronger, but had found this failed to improve their feelings.

"...I wonder if the Unbreakable's participating." Remembering the newbie who had kicked off his chain of defeats, Logan let out a heavy sigh.

The recording of Ray Starling's battle against King of Beasts had once again put him in the spotlight. This consequently led to more people taking a look at Ray's fight against the Hell General, which caused Logan no end of headaches.

As the view count rose, Ray Starling eventually came to be called a "devil-eater."

Overcome by curiosity, Logan had summoned a devil and tried biting into it. The taste was downright hellish, making him conclude that someone who could fight after eating something like *that* was simply crazy.

He still wanted to get back at Ray Starling, but the last time he'd tried that without ample preparation he'd been instantly erased by

Tsukuyo Fuso. This time he intended to attempt it only after he'd become as strong as possible.

[The UBM, "Borer Deathbug, Shellstro," was defeated.]

[Selecting MVP...]

["Logan Goddhart" was selected as MVP.]

["Logan Goddhart" is presented with an MVP special reward—"Borer Deathspear, Shellstro."]

"Oh." Following that message, an MVP reward appeared in Logan's hand.

Shellstro's focus on penetration had made its reward take the form of a spear. At first glance it might appear very simple, but there were a few elements of the design that deserved a closer look.

It was black like the UBM's shell and generally didn't deviate much from the usual form of a spear, but it was also covered in sharp, insect-like decoration. Some would find it appealing, others cringey...

"It's so cool..."

...and Logan was the former.

To him, Shellstro's design was almost as cool as that of Viledragon's Prideblade, Woltgyzur—his current favorite—a weapon that resembled nothing so much as a generic key chain with a dragon twisted around a sword.

Hell General, Logan Goddhart was an elementary school boy in real life and his tastes reflected this perfectly.

Regardless, Logan was done here. Feeling good about receiving an MVP reward he liked, he made his way back to Vandelheim.

"That was the last one on the list I could do. Now I gotta go back and do the homework Zeta left."

Shellstro was the final of the eighteen UBMs that Logan could defeat on his own. Those remaining were more difficult than this, so it had been decided that he would beat them with Zeta's support.

"I hope she comes back soon... Oh. That reminds me..."

Though Zeta hadn't returned to *Infinite Dendrogram*, they had talked a bit by email. According to her, IF was planning to do something big soon.

Their leader—King of Crime, Sechs Würfel—had been imprisoned in the gaol since the last war, and Logan had been informed that he was about to break out.

The gaol was a game system meant to confine players who'd committed major crimes, so Logan wasn't even sure if it was even *possible* to escape it. However, Zeta and the other long-time members of IF seemed to have no doubt that he'd succeed.

*Sechs Würfel... I wonder what he's like*, Logan thought.

Regardless, he had been told that once Sechs broke out of the gaol, they would all separately head to Tenchi in the distant east, where Illegal Frontier would truly set their plans in motion.

*I'm in the clan, but I haven't met the leader yet... Actually, I haven't met any members at all besides Zeta.* Logan had never been part of any clan before IF, so he was looking forward to seeing his clanmates.

*...I'm probably the weakest of us all though*, he thought. The repeated losses had stripped him of his confidence, and despite the fact that he knew next to nothing about the other members of IF, Logan was already assuming the worst.

At this point, he had no means of knowing that a fellow clanmate in the gaol was thinking the same thing as he was.

## ***Chapter Four: The Ring and the Axe***

*Paladin, Ray Starling*

The day after the clan meeting, I went to the knight offices attached to Count Gideon's mansion.

My business here wasn't with the knights, however. I'd come here to visit the facility deeper inside. It was a place I'd been going to whenever I was in Gideon and had free time—the cursed item vault.

I had a part-time job here as a "cleaner" who uncursed the items within. It was an easy activity, since I just had to equip Gouz-Maise and stay next to the cursed items.

Once uncursed, most of them reverted back to being proper, high-quality equipment. There were some that could only maintain their form thanks to the curses and crumbled once they were broken, but apparently there was nothing that could be done about those. As a result, they never held me accountable for those.

This part-time job provided uncursed equipment to Altar and charged my Gouz-Maise with grudge. Both sides benefited from our arrangement. This was relevant now because these uncursed items would be the extra rewards for The Tournaments.

I was glad to find out that my little part-time job would end up helping Azurite.

Another benefit I got out of this was that for every ten inventories I'd uncursed, I could pick any one of the uncursed items.

Having done about sixty inventories now, I could take away a total of six items. And since The Tournaments started tomorrow, I came to take my share before any of them were given away as extra rewards. First come, first served after all.

I was also accompanied by Rook and the Kasumi-Io-Fujinon trio.

However, I still hadn't picked a single item despite having the right to take six. The ones I'd uncursed and looked over either required a higher level than mine, weren't appropriate for my combat style, or were simply rejected by Nemesis.

It was obviously difficult for me to pick six in one day. I could just randomly take items I didn't need, but I'd probably end up just selling them or leaving them to collect dust, which didn't seem like a fitting way to treat the kind of rare equipment that you probably couldn't even find on the market normally. Also, with my MVP rewards, VDA, Storm Visage, and Lifesaving Brooch—a necessity for my combat style—a good number of my equipment slots were already in use anyway.

I couldn't reasonably pick a whole six of these items and frankly didn't even need them all that much in the first place.

That was why I, as the leader of Death Period, decided to give four of the picks to my clan members. Considering that it might increase the clan's overall strength, this seemed like the best use of this reward.

"Are you sure about this?" Rook asked.

"Yeah. The Tournaments starts tomorrow and there's bound to be other stuff going on in the future. If we all can become stronger now, we should just do it."

"YAY! Our leader's so generous!"

"Thank you."

"Th-Thank you..."

The five of us soon arrived at the vault. One of the workers here dealt with the many layers of security and let us go inside.

The vault was full of container-type inventories stacked high on top of one another. Usually this place was dense with grudge that made

it feel oppressive, but most of it had been absorbed by Gouz-Maise. Now it felt more like an antique storage area.

"There's so many of them," said Rook.

"And they were all cursed, as well... How did this happen...?"

"Yeah, I had the same question as you guys," I said.

A mountain of cursed weapons that needed this many inventories just to store them... I'd been wondering how exactly this collection came to be. When I'd asked Count Gideon, he said all he knew was that the cursed items had been stored here for most of this land's history. However, I got my answer when Azurite was telling me about the extra rewards.

Apparently, it went all the way back to before Altea was Altea, when the Sacred King defeated The Evil. According to information left behind by Azurite's ancestors, the city was at one point the base of the King of Kings, which led to it housing a large number of weapons and other kinds of equipment. Before this land was united under the flag of Altar, those who captured the city had tried to get ahold of those weapons, but the vault was so secure that they couldn't even access it.

However, there was one entity who'd opened the vault, and it was the final ruler of the city—The Evil.

It was said that this was why most of The Evil's dependents had powerful equipment. Some of the items in here didn't even have to be equipped—they themselves became monsters that went on to attack people.

Azurite's ancestor and his party had won regardless, but the equipment remained even after The Evil and the dependents were dealt with. However, whether due to The Evil's influence or the fact that they'd been in the center of a war, most of the equipment had

become cursed. The mechanisms involved might have been the same as the ones behind the Tenchi curseblades Jubei was using.

Figuring that it wasn't a good idea to have so much cursed gear laying around in what would become the new capital, they decided to move all of it to Gideon—the birthplace of the Sacred King's queen as well as the holy land of duelists even in those bygone days. The reason for that decision was that Gideon already had a special vault meant for storing cursed equipment.

Thus, all cursed gear from then and onwards was moved to Gideon, which eventually led to this place accumulating the collection it had now.

"And that's how it is," I said, finishing off my explanation.

"Now *that* is something... Could this be the cause of all the incidents here in Gideon?"

*Yeah, I wondered the same thing, I thought. It's like the place itself is cursed, and maybe this vault is the reason.*

Anyway, it was time to make our picks.

"Oh yeah...the uncursed inventories are over here, so look around those. Tell the worker if you find something. I also borrowed enough of these magnifying glasses for each of us. They've got Identification on them."

"Okaay!" The room was small, and since she was the loudest, I could only hear Io's response. The others gave their replies as well, though, and went to find gear that suited them.

I moved some distance away from them, towards a different pile of inventories, and began uncursing the gear within like I usually did.

"Well, it is true that we found nothing among those you already uncursed," said Nemesis. "I hope we have better luck with what we work on today."

“Nemesis, keep in mind that we *gotta* pick two items today, so be a bit less strict, okay?”

“Hrm... Very well. But I will not be lenient on weapons.”

“Fine, fine.” Nemesis had said things like that many times before. She had extremely high standards for any weapons that would take her place in protecting me.

*Honestly, though, even I can't imagine myself fighting using anything other than Nemesis... Hm?*

“What's wrong, Nemesis? You're all red...”

“...That is for you to guess.” Well, okay. Anyway, it was time to resume uncursing.

Even if I didn't have much luck with weapons or armor, I could maybe find a useful accessory or two.

An hour passed as I kept uncursing the gear, not finding anything that suited me.

Io had quickly chosen an animalistic set of armor, but everyone else was still deliberating on what to pick. She hadn't left yet, though, instead staying to help Kasumi and Fujinon with their choices.

Rook seemed to be considering his pick very carefully. When I asked why, he said that he was specifically looking for gear that was effective against undead. Apparently, he was thinking ahead to The Tournaments, already considering his fight against the UBM.

Rook's current minion capacity was enough to comfortably fit even Liz. As long as he was able to buy the time to merge using Union Jack, he should have been able to stand his ground even against many stronger Masters. Also, his assumption was that the undead UBM he'd fight wouldn't be very popular. Its capabilities were known, but they didn't stand out much. On top of that, its tier was a mystery. Altar currently didn't have many high-ranking Masters that used

debuffs, so Rook believed that he would be able to place fairly high—maybe even reach the top.

Just as I'd thought, Rook had his reasons for picking that specific day.

Speaking of Rook, his partner—Babi—had seemingly grown bored of the search for the right item and was now sleeping in the corner of the vault.

"Hrm. We still are not having any luck," said Nemesis.

"Yeah." Most of the gear we'd uncursed today were weapons.

Nemesis was extra strict with them, but even if she hadn't been, normal weapons just weren't a good fit for my combat style.

If I wasn't wielding Nemesis, I was just a low-stat vanguard with a couple of heavy-hitting skills. Sure, my HP was pretty high right now, but only Nemesis could use that for offense, so there really was nothing that would serve as an appropriate substitute.

"I really can't imagine switching to normal weapons at this point," I said. "Oh. An accessory. It's been a while since we saw one of those."

The next item I took out of the inventory I was cleaning was a bracelet. It wasn't *that* cursed, apparently. The thing was clean after only about a minute.

"Hm...? 'Big or Small'?" I held it in my hand and found that I could read its name, but all I got for its effects was "Unknown."

This seemed like a standard case of something needing a higher Identification level. Not even the magnifying glass I had was enough.

*...Well, whatever. This seems like a caster item anyway, so I probably won't use it,* I thought.

I put Big or Small away in the inventory for uncursed items and took out the next one...

"...Hm?"

*What?* I could've sworn I'd put the bracelet away, but for some reason, I was still holding it in my left hand.

Or, rather, my bracer was grabbing on to it.

"...Gardranda?" In response to my question, the left bracer moved on its own to put Big or Small on my right wrist.

It was rare for her to act like this. Was the bracelet that important to her? "Well...I guess I could try putting it on."

"Indeed," said Nemesis. "With the curse gone, I doubt equipping it will bind it to you or anything of the sort."

Anyway, I went and put Big or Small on my right wrist.

Once an extra accessory slot was taken, the bracer on my left hand moved on its own to force my finger to move over the floor. It seemed that she was writing something. I followed it with my eyes and made out the words "Say 'Minimum'"...and summon me."

"...Seriously? You know what will happen if I summon you, right?" I was referring to the drawbacks that followed her summoning. I could be subjected to three different debuffs, get set on fire, or lose control over my body. None of those seemed all that attractive.

In response to these concerns of mine, she only said, "It's okay... Summon," before adding, "You still owe me from last time."

Silence. Yeah, now that she mentioned it, I'd summoned Gardranda in the fight against KoB, but I got the death penalty before I got hit with any of the drawbacks for it. They weren't on me when I'd returned either, so I just assumed that was how it worked, but Gardranda seemed to be holding a grudge about it.

*...Wait, do you even benefit from me getting the drawbacks?* I wondered.

"...Well, all right," I said. "Oh uh, Rook... If something weird happens to me, do something about it, okay?"

“All right.” Rook was quick on the uptake, as always. He was already preparing Liz in case something happened.

With my preparations complete, I went and answered Gardranda’s request.

“Minimum. Miasmaflame Princess—Gardranda.” Only after saying that did I realize that I hadn’t specified how long I wanted the summon to last or how much MP I wanted to put into it.

However, it seemed like the summoning worked regardless, and the Miasmaflame Bracers flew from my wrists.

A moment later, Big or Small began to shine and the bracers vanished...but Gardranda was nowhere in sight.

“...HUH?!”

I had no idea what was going on at first. Miasmaflame Princess was a skill that used the bracers as a medium to summon Gardranda, and the bracers themselves became Gardranda’s own equipment. However, right now I couldn’t see Gardranda *or* the bracers.

“What happened... No way!” I cried.

*Does Big or Small actually set summoned monsters free?! If that’s the case, then she must’ve gone off somewhere and...*

“Hm...?” And then, just when I was on the verge of panicking, I noticed that everyone else was looking at me in surprise.

No—not at me. They were actually looking at something above my head.

“R-Ray... Your head...” said Nemesis.

“...This isn’t the first time I’ve felt like this.” It reminded me of the time Franklin, dressed as a penguin, had given me a drug with a particular furry side effect.

Remembering that event, I put my hand up to my head...and felt something strange there.

“...Ngh.” The feeling was followed by a tingling sensation on my finger. If my avatar had pain on, it probably would’ve hurt me.

I slowly lowered the hand so I could get a good look at it, only to see a small creature biting into my finger. It looked like a *tiny person with exaggerated proportions*. They had brownish-red skin, a set of horns, and their hands were covered by a familiar pair of bracers.

Either this was an insane coincidence, or the person was...

“...Gardranda?” I asked as I set her down on my palm.

“KSHAA!”

...That response wasn’t in a language I could understand, but it seemed like a “yes” to me.

It was obvious that Big or Small was doing this, but...

“...I’m gonna log out and look this thing up.”

“That is for the best...”

“KSHAA!”

*...I have no clue what you’re saying.*

◇

Conveniently, the details of the ring were on the wiki.

Big or Small was a magic item created a long time ago, and so far about four of them had been found.

Its special effect was the adjustment of summoning output. By saying “Minimum” or “Reduce” while summoning, you could summon creatures at low cost in exchange for making them weaker. Meanwhile, adding “Maximum” or “Increase” made the summon stronger in exchange for making the involved costs steeper.

However, the enhancement function wasn't very useful because it increased the costs so much—up to several *dozen* times—while only strengthening the summon by a one-tenth for the extra MP or whatever else you spent.

"And using the Minimum function makes the summon basically powerless in exchange for reducing the cost to almost nothing. That includes Gardranda's drawbacks, right?"

I'd unsummoned her before logging out and nothing had happened to me yet.

"KSHAA!"

"I'll take that as a 'yes,'" I said. "It's cool that I can summon you so casually, but it's kind of tough that we can't actually talk with each other."

"Then why not buy a non-humanoid translation item?" Rook asked.  
"You should be able to find one in Gideon's markets."

"Oh, they have things like that? I guess I'll look around," I said. "I don't think I ever saw you use it, though."

"That would be because I can understand them without it."

*...Yeah, I wouldn't put that past you.*

"Anyway, it's looking like this will be one of the items I take," I said. Gardranda would probably hold a grudge if I didn't. "Where is she, anyway?"

*"On your head." Again? Does she like being there or somethi...? Hm...?*

"Hey, Nemesis. I'm feeling a bit of a tingle on my head..."

"Of course you would. Little Gardranda is gnawing on your head. In fact, she's eating your hair."



“How about you STOP HER!?” *What a way to remind me that she was a man-eating goblin! She’s after my body—I mean my flesh!*

“KSHAA!”

“Hrm, even I can understand what she just said. It must have been ‘delicious,’ or at least something along those lines,” said Nemesis, slightly salivating. “Ray, if I may ask—”

“HELL NO!” *One man-eater is one too many!*

Anyway, I picked Big or Small as my first reward and another hour had passed since.

I’d already unsummoned Gardranda Minimum—otherwise known as “Smol Gar.” She didn’t seem to like being unsummoned, probably because she wanted to keep gnawing on my head, but I was able to convince her by promising that I’d summon her again after buying a translation item.

She’d actually bit me so hard I was bleeding, but the damage was light enough that even my healing magic could take care of it. Well, the damage obviously wasn’t as bad as a lost arm.

*Next time I summon her, I won’t tell her to not bite me...but I’ll at least try to make her hold back a bit,* I thought.

By this point, Rook and Fujinon had also decided what they’d pick, meaning that the only items left to select were Kasumi’s and my second one.

“Kasumi is a High Summoner, so wouldn’t it be best for her to take a summon-related accessory like the one Ray got?” Rook asked.

“It ain’t summoning skills she needs, but defense! Even I can take her out in one hit!” Io asserted.

"...lo, you're all about offense. Most rear guards in your level range wouldn't survive your attacks," commented Fujinon. They were all hard at work picking the right item for Kasumi.

"What about you?" Rook asked me. "Do you think you'll find your second one soon?"

"Hrm... I've been uncursing and looking at everything, but I've hit a bit of a roadblock here." After uncursing Big or Small, I went on to work on weapons again, but progress had suddenly stagnated.

One weapon shortly after I'd resumed was taking an unusually long time to uncurse. Up until now, even the worst curses hadn't taken much more than five minutes to remove, but I'd been absorbing grudge from this one for a whole hour now.

At first, I thought that Gouz-Maise was just full and couldn't take any more, but when I switched from this weapon to another, that one still took less than a minute to fully uncurse.

This meant that it wasn't about me or my greaves, but this weapon in particular—the large battleaxe wrapped in a jet-black cloth.

I'd considered leaving it aside, but it had sparked my curiosity, so I was still trying to remove the curse.

I was doing all of this with the weapon on the floor, by the way. Unlike some cursed items, it didn't seem to be leaking its aura into the air around it... In fact, it felt like it was the other way around—that the dense curses were tightly *sticking* to it instead, like coagulated blood.

And no matter how much grudge I'd vacuumed out, it didn't seem to be losing any of those curses. Clearly, the amount of grudge on this axe was far beyond that on any other weapon I'd encountered so far.

"I guess the curses are just that strong?" I said.

"Perhaps," said Rook.

“...Maybe I should just take it as a source of grudge, then.” I’d stocked up on a lot of grudge by now, but I could see myself using all of that up in the coming battles.

I might even be forced to use Big or Small to summon Gardranda Maximum.

*Using more MP is fine and all, but since Big or Small influences the length and effect of the demerits too, doing that would mean certain death for me no matter which of the three I got.*

“A one-handed axe, eh?” said Nemesis. “The fact that you cannot know what you will get once you uncurse it makes it rather like the gacha. Well, that *would* suit you. It seems like a fine choice to me.”

“Hm?” Her words made me slightly confused. “But it’s a weapon,” I said. “You’d usually have something against those.” Nemesis had extremely strict standards for weapons—and shields—that I would use instead of her. She hadn’t approved of any weapon I’d uncursed so far or any weapon in the shops we’d visited. Yet this axe...passed?

Apparently, Nemesis hadn’t even realized that she’d approved of a weapon until I pointed that fact out. She looked at the axe, blinking, and said, “That *is* true... How should I put it...? My intuition is telling me that it is a worthy pick.”

“Your intuition?”

“I happen to be half-weapon, so there are things I understand exactly because of that.”

She—Nemesis the Maiden-Arms Embryo—crouched down and looked at the axe on the floor.

“This is an amazing weapon,” she asserted. “And...I believe I have seen something like this before.”

“Oh. Wouldn’t that be your second form? It’s black...and it’s an axe...kind of,” said Kasumi.

“No, I doubt it’s reminding me of myself.”

“Then it’s my Five-Ring!”

“That one is nothing like it in size,” said Nemesis. “And it is not about shape, but...its aura?”

Nemesis seemed to be trying to recall exactly what this weapon reminded her of. I tried thinking with her, but I was also drawing a blank.

Still, Nemesis was okay with it, and it was useful as a source of grudge, so it looked like I’d be taking this one-handed axe.

“...What’s its name, anyway?” I said, bringing the Identification glass close to it.

Cursed items had a tendency to have names that referred to their nature, like how my BR Armor was CBR Armor at first. I thought of just taking a look at this one, but...

“Name: [] An unnamed axe.

The axe that was not ■?# by ■?#.

The axe that ■?# to ■?# in ■?#.

The axe that is ■?#, as well as ■?# to the ■?#.”

That was all that Identification was giving me.

The name field was empty—no, there wasn’t even a blank space in there—while the explanation had holes all over it.

Unlike with Big or Small, it wasn’t just a problem of low Identification level. This felt closer to looking at Shu’s hidden stats right after I’d first started.

“...I guess it’s an old crafted item, and the person who made it just didn’t give it a name?” After all, the only line I could fully read was “an unnamed axe.”

Perhaps the craftsman hadn't been satisfied with it?

Looking at the actual axe, the handle didn't seem to be complete in places. Also, it really did seem like a weapon from a very long time ago. I wouldn't be surprised if it was older than any of the ones I'd managed to purify.

"Excuse me...is Death Period here?"

While I was considering the axe, the door to the vault opened up and I heard someone address us with those words.

The one saying them was a youth with dark circles under his eyes, as well as the manager of this vault—Count Gideon.

He was even younger than me, but he was in charge of the entirety of Gideon County, which was among the most important areas in the kingdom. In that role, he had always been directly and strongly affected by the many disasters inflicted upon the city. You could say that he was among the greatest victims of the Gouz-Maise Gang, that lab-coat bastard, Exadragon King, and Hannya.

That was probably why he had those bags under his eyes.

"Count Gideon. What brings you here?" I asked.

"I have come here because there was something I wanted to talk to your clan about... Have you found anything you like?"

"Yes. Three of us have already made their choices, leaving only her and me," I said as I pointed at Kasumi. With Count Gideon being sort of like my boss for this part-time job, I was naturally speaking in a more respectful manner.

"...Quite curious, that," said Nemesis telepathically.

*What?*

“Well, you speak to Azurite—the first princess and acting ruler—as though she were merely a good friend, yet to Liliana—a knight—as well as the count here, you speak with reverence.”

*Azurite did tell me that I can talk to her casually in private conversations... Hell, now that I think about it, for both Azurite and Liliana, I'm just talking to them the same way I started out talking to them.*

“Is that how it is?”

*That is exactly how it is.*

“Oh, right. Count Gideon, would you happen to know anything about this axe?” I asked.

“An axe...?” he said as he looked down on it and tilted his head. “No, I do not... You there, what are the records for it?”

He was talking to one of the workers outside the vault, the same one who’d recorded our picks. After looking at the many documents, the worker gave a shake of the head.

“There are no records left on it, sire. Though the number on the ledger does imply that it was stored away here around when Altar came to be.”

“...A significant number of the items here were acquired by defeating The Evil. In many cases, their details and origins only became evident once they had been uncursed and their functions were revealed... I suppose all we know is that this is one of them. The documents will have to be rechecked after the Tournaments’ reward distribution...no, before that... Oh, my apologies.”

“No need for that...” Using cursed weapons while they were still cursed was risky, especially when Identification couldn’t give you much information about them, so I could understand where Count Gideon was coming from. The way he was clutching his stomach made him seem like he was overburdened with responsibility,

though... *He was way more lively before and after Franklin's Game*, I thought.

"So, what was your question about the axe, again?" he asked.

"May I have it as my second reward even though I never managed to uncurse it?" My question made the count a bit surprised, but he quickly nodded in approval.

"I certainly would not be against that. I did say that you are free to pick anything within this vault. Though...are you certain?"

"In my case, the curse is a blessing in its own right."

"I see. Very well, then. I will ensure that it is done." The count knew that I converted grudge into magic, so it didn't take much to convince him.

And just like that, it was decided that my second reward would be this nameless one-handed axe.

Careful not to touch it directly, I put it away in my inventory.

"Now, Count Gideon," I said. "You mentioned having some business with us?"

"Yes," he said. "It has come to my attention that your clan is looking for a base here in the city."

*...How did he hear about that? I wondered. Did he get it from his ninja intelligence network?*

"Mr. Figaro told me as much when he came to visit today to greet me after being away for so long."

*Oh...I guess that was it.*

"Well, we are," I said. "We had no luck in Altea for a variety of reasons..."

“I am aware. The city of Gideon would deeply appreciate it if a powerful clan like yours would make your home here. It would certainly be reassuring, at least...”

I’d heard that even during the Gloria incident, a large clan had stood against the dragon to protect their hometown. The count was probably thinking of that.

“Oh, did you come to welcome us?” I asked. “We actually planned to greet you after we were done here, so...”

“No. It is a bit more than that.” More? I wasn’t sure what he meant by that. Frankly, I was confused.

“Since Death Period wishes to secure a base here in Gideon, I would like to introduce you to a property you might find interesting.”

And just like that, the confusion was gone. Count Gideon had come here to offer us some real estate.

◇

After that, we went to take a look at the property the count wanted to offer us.

I wasn’t sure why the count himself was introducing it, but I figured there had to be a reason.

While we rode the carriage, the count was resting his head on the door and, seemingly without realizing it, saying—almost *moaning*—things like “My stomach hurts,” “I hope The Tournaments go well,” “We’ll not be terrorized again, will we?” “I wish I could find a different job...”

The city had been threatened so many times in recent memory that it seemed to have taken a toll on his mental health.

He was younger than me, but the stress was already making his hair turn gray. I really hoped he got some well-deserved rest once The Tournaments were over and the matter with Dryfe was settled.

The count was actually seated in the carriage's frontal compartment, separated from us. It was probably so that he could take a nap or maybe even get some work done.

...He really *didn't* have it easy, huh?

Besides him, the people in the carriage on the way to the property in question were myself, Fujinon, Io, and...

"Hm..."

...Shu, whom I'd called over using my Telepathy Cuffs.

He was the clan's most veteran Master and already had experience with *Dendro* real estate from when he rented a popcorn factory, so I had him come along for advice.

Rook had decided not to come with us. Kasumi had yet to pick her item, so he'd stayed behind to help her. I was wondering why Fujinon and Io also didn't stay for that, but as they'd left the vault and followed after me, I'd notice them give Kasumi a hearty thumbs-up.

*...Well, they're cheering their friend on. Even I could tell that much.*

"Real estate, huh...?" Shu, who was sitting next to me, said as he looked outside.

It seemed that something was on his mind, but I couldn't tell what it was—so I just went and asked. "What's up, bro?"

"Well, we're on the way to check out some pawrperty, but I don't remember there being much good real estate here." His words prompted me to look outside. The carriage was on the main road, but the buildings on every side of it had this gloomy look to them. It wasn't a nice thing to say, but it reminded me of something I'd seen on TV—slums in the big cities of developed nations.

There also seemed to be a degree of social disorder here, and you could see a bunch of establishments with less-than-wholesome signs on them.

Also, the faces of the people here—or rather, the looks in their eyes—were less than welcoming.

“So this is the...”

“The eighth district, yeah,” said Shu. “It’s the place with the thieves’ and pimps’ guilds. There’s no district in Gideon that’s got a worse public order...fur real.”

Well, uh... That sure explained why it was different from the first and fourth districts I always visited. Though with Rook’s group regularly going to the pimps’ guild, he was probably used to it by now.

“WOW! Fujinon, look! Over there! That sign’s kinda lewd—it’s got panties on it! There’s also some signs I can’t read ’cause of the mosaics! That must be the underage visual censorshi— GHUH...?!”

“Io, please have some discretion! You’re a girl!”

The district seemed to have gotten Io excited.

Maybe a little *too* excited, seeing that Fujinon had to interfere.

“...Is it a good idea to go through here in a carriage this fancy?” I asked.

“Well, this pawrt of town ain’t peaceful, but no one’s dumb enough to go after a carriage with the count’s family crest on it. Hell, I’d say we’re perfectly safe.”

*...Makes sense. Forget the count—if they went after it now, they’d be dealing with a goddamn Superior, I thought.*

“Do not forget yourself,” said Nemesis telepathically. “Your mere presence has made bandits shrivel up in terror.” *Hey, that was more about the other three setting an oppressive mood...*

"Hrmm... But just what kind of real estate can there be in an area such as this?" Nemesis wondered.

"I'm as curious as you are. Though, since the count himself is introducing it, I'm sure it'll be good."

"Ah! I know!" Io said as she puffed her chest.

"You do? Let's hear it," I said.

"It's gotta be a place where there was a massacre! Two Mafias or something fought and everyone living inside died! Since then, it's been overrun by ghosts and no one wants to buy it! That's why he'll have you use your MVP reward and anti-undead skills to purify it, then sell it to you for cheap!"

"I see..."

*...Why does that sound so plausible?*

"Io, that would be a literal haunted house," said Fujinon.

"Well, the kingdom as a whole is kinda haunted, so..."

"What was that, Shu?" I said.

"Ah, furegt I said anything."

*...Well, I also told Azurite that it felt like the country was cursed, but still...*

"Anyway, since the count himself is introducing it, I really don't think it'll be a haunted house or anything," said Fujinon.

"Huhh? What's your guess, then?" Io asked.

"I think he'll kick out the squatters from some abandoned building and then build our base over it. Death Period will help with the evictions."

"...That's a scary thought," I said. That seemed like it'd spark some serious trouble with the locals, so I'd honestly be against that.

I could only hope neither Io nor Fujinon were right.

“Seriously, what *is* he gonna offer us...” I wondered out loud.

Once the carriage left the main road, I saw we were heading straight towards a familiar building.

It was one of Gideon’s thirteen arenas. There was one in each district, and this was the eighth’s.

“Huh. This is my first time seeing this one,” I mused. Each of these lesser arenas stood at the end of the main roads connected to the central arena in the heart of the city. With the exception of the central one, the arenas were more or less identical in structure, and this one here was just like the others. Though for some reason, I felt like it was more desolate than the others. “We have arrived,” said Count Gideon as the carriage stopped. That meant that the property was somewhere nearby.

However, upon getting off and looking around, all I saw were stores, taverns...nothing that could be called a mansion.

“Count Gideon, where *is* the property you wish to introduce to us?” I asked.

“This one here,” the count said. He pointed to something, but I couldn’t see what he was pointing at.

*Is it...behind the eighth arena?* I wondered.

“Mr. Ray Starling, leader of Death Period,” he said as he looked straight at me with those tired eyes...

“Would you buy the eighth arena as your base?”

...and made an offer I could have never imagined.

## ***Chapter Five: Homes, Sweet Homes***

*Paladin, Ray Starling*

It went without saying, but arenas were extremely important to Gideon. They were the reason why it was called “the City of Duels,” and it was the only city in this world that boasted a whole thirteen of them. One could say that they were the skeleton that defined Gideon’s shape.

Normally, someone in charge of the city would never even think of letting them go.

However, the count had explained himself a little further. “There are two reasons that made the eighth arena unnecessary for us,” he’d said.

The first reason was fairly obvious: its poor location.

Back when it was a city-state and a few centuries after it had become a part of Altar, Gideon didn’t have any problems of that sort, but over time the eighth district became an unlawful place. By the time the Count Gideon of several generations earlier realized this, it had already felt as though the place had always been in such a state. This had caused commonfolk to start avoiding the eighth district, and as it became a hot spot for outlaws and groups in the legal gray zone—such as pimps and thieves—the eighth arena began seeing less and less activity.

Another reason for the drop in activity was that the eighth arena was still a publicly run, clean establishment that hadn’t become corrupted by the lawless district where it stood, and with the locals preferring to bet on the more intense, unofficial underground events, even the people living right next door almost never visited it. It wasn’t uncommon for there to be duels hosted at the eighth arena without a single spectator.

Despite that, the barrier equipment required regular inspections and maintenance which could only be done by experts, whose services did not come cheap. Combined with the cost of cleaning and maintenance of other facilities, the eighth arena had become unprofitable to run.

The second problem was that as the spectators decreased, so had the number of duelists. Due to Gloria's attack and the previous war, Gideon's arenas had lost a significant number of their fighters, tian and Master alike. Some of those fighters had been rankers.

And with the duelists—the entertainers themselves—leaving, the city's dueling industry suffered an overall decline. This was made worse as more and more wealthy Altarians moved to other countries and the kingdom's economy suffered. These days, the only duels that could attract a full arena of spectators were those between high-rankers as well as special events like The Clash of the Superiors. There were also fewer people renting dueling areas for sparring matches, and the eighth arena almost stopped being used entirely.

And with every arena's revenue dropping, the deficit at which the eighth was being run had become worse than ever.

That was when Count Gideon had begun to consider letting go of the arena.

The Gideon family had stored away immense wealth that would keep the city financially secure for now, but that obviously wasn't unlimited. The treasury was also losing significant amounts to things like rewards to Masters, so the count wanted to reduce his losses somehow.

At first, he'd thought of giving the arena away to the royal family so the knights could use it as a training area, but decided against that because a location situated in a district often known as "The Town of Vices" seemed like an inappropriate donation to a royal lineage.

Instead, he'd gone on to look for someone to sell it to. Even though it was in a bad location, an arena was superb real estate that many powerful clans would desperately want to have.

However, the clan at the top—The Lunar Society—was an awful group on which to bestow that particular benefit. Considering their negotiations with the royal family, it wasn't unlikely that they would use the arena as a base of operations from which they would spread their influence into the eighth district—and then the rest of Gideon.

The count had then considered K&R, which conveniently boasted a number of prominent duelists among their ranks, but he wasn't sure about the morality of selling such a property to a PK clan. In a way, they seemed like an even worse option than the religious group.

The once-great Babylonian Battlegroup was no longer active enough for such a purchase, while AETL Union, which was a combination of the princesses' and Liliana's fanclubs, would never leave their idols' home in Altea.

Holding on to the eighth arena was a net negative, yet the count couldn't find a viable potential buyer.

Just when he was at a loss for what to do with it, a new clan appeared on the scene, and its name was Death Period.

In other words...us.

When he heard that we were looking for a base here in Gideon, the count saw it as an opportunity to finally sell the eighth arena.

We were Altar's top second clan, we were trustworthy, and we had the power to set up in the eighth district without a problem—in fact, there was a chance that the locals would fear us and our presence would act as a deterrent against lawlessness. We even had the duel champion, Figaro, so selling it to us meant giving him easy access to the arena facilities for training and the like.

We were also a clan that had a whole four Superiors, which was unheard of here on the western side of the continent, so the count was sure that we would have the money to purchase it as well as the funds to maintain it.

Basically, we were the best potential buyers the count could ever ask for.

The price, by the way, was 15,000,000,000 lir for a full purchase or 500,000,000 lir for yearly rent.

“...That’s cheaper than I’d have guessed,” Shu and I said in unison.

“HUH?!” Io and Fujinon exclaimed, also in unison.

Their response really highlighted how absurd my words really were.

*My sense of scale here is a real mess, huh?* I thought. *That’s probably because even the armor I’m wearing is worth 200,000,000 lir.*

Shu also was a guy who could spend billions on a single battle. There were few things King of Destruction destroyed better than his own bank account.

Purchasing the arena was a bit too expensive even for us, though. Due to the recent payments they’d had to make, Shu’s and Figaro’s finances weren’t in a good state right now, so we couldn’t buy the place even if we pooled everything we had.

The yearly rent, however, was perfectly payable. I had eight billion on me, so I could cover the first year with just my pocket money.

And apparently these prices actually *were* on the cheaper side. The historical and functional value of an arena was astronomical, but the count had priced this one after considering its location and deterioration from age.

“...It’s a hell of a facility to have, though,” I said.

The arena was all that we wanted out of a base and then some. First of all, there were personal rooms. Just like the other arenas, this one had box seats, all of which were equipped with air conditioning and the like. All they needed was some furniture to become high-class hotel rooms.

Since there were a whole twelve of them and since Figaro and Hannya would live at Figaro's home, there were more than enough for each of us. We might have difficulties if we got a few more members, but in that case we could then just use the waiting rooms or remodel the place to make new ones—the count said that we were allowed to do that. We didn't even have to make a deposit.

The building also had the large baths that the girls wanted so much. An arena was, in a way, a sports facility, so it wasn't surprising that it would have places for people to wash off the sweat. They were properly split into men's and women's baths too.

Io and Fujinon took a look at them and said that though they needed some cleaning, they were up to par.

There was a space the arena's staff used for meetings, which could easily function as a meeting room for our clan. And the building obviously had the space for monsters that Rook and Kasumi wanted. Designed to enable even battle royales, the arena stage itself was more than large enough for that.

Of course, we couldn't ignore the cafeteria that Nemesis insisted we have. Though, since we had no cook, we'd have to hire someone or cook for ourselves.

Somewhat unexpectedly, though, we also had the pool that Marie and Babi wanted.

Just like the Roman Colosseum was used for various kinds of events, so was this arena equipped with functions to support several types

of competitions. Among these were aquatic contests, and thus the stage could be turned into what was essentially a pool.

Of course, filling it up with water would be costly and maybe take some time, but the arena was properly supplied in that regard. Though, considering how little business this place was having recently, the pipes would probably have to be checked first.

Ignoring Shu's "popcorn factory" request, the arena ticked every box our clan had. On top of that, it offered a barrier function that none of us had even considered.

The advantage of having a duel barrier in your base was immense. It would let us freely test new combat tactics and skills, as well as spar without worrying about how much longer our reservation would last. We didn't have to care about any prying eyes either, and that might end up being the most beneficial thing of all.

All of this combined made the arena perhaps the best base we could have here in Gideon. It seemed like a miracle that we even had the opportunity to buy it.

The only real problem with it was the price.

"So buying it is thirty years of rent... What do you think, bro?" I asked Shu.

"Time's thrice as fast here, so that's ten years IRL," he said. "I'm pawsitive we won't be movin' away furom it, so it's cheaper to just buy it. Though, it's hard fur us to get the money fur the purchase right now."

"Yeah. It's a pretty serious deal, so I think we should discuss it with the rest of the clan first."

*Sure, they entrusted the matter of the base to me, but this feels like too important a purchase to make without their approval... I thought.*

“Huhhh? You know you can pay the rent for the first year and then just save up the money to buy it later, riiight?”

*Oh yeah. That's an option.*

Shu was funneling his wealth into ammo and Figaro also wasn't in a good situation financially, but after the thing with Dryfe was over, we'd have plenty of time to gather the billions to own the property permanently.

“Also, it'd be pretty awful if you saved up to buy it only for the kingdom to go bye-bye by next yeeear. It won't hurt as much if you just rent it for a year, will iiit?”

“If that's a joke, I'm not laughing... Hold on.”

That was when I realized that I was hearing a familiar voice that didn't belong here. Turning around...

“Eh he!”

...I saw an eldritch abomination.

Yes—*Miss Eldritch Abomination* herself.

“...And so we're joined by the fox,” said Shu.

“That you are, Mr. Beaaar,” she said in response.

This reminded me of my first encounter with her.

*But how did she...? Oh, I get it now,* I thought as I held up my left Miasmaflame Bracer, ready to fire it into my own shadow.

A moment later, *a silhouette jumped out of it* and, upon landing on the ground, corrected its posture and gave me a bow.

“...Tsukikage.” Another familiar face—Miss Eldritch's right-hand man, Eishiro Tsukikage.

“Greetings,” he said. “You noticed me faster than you did before.”

*Of course I would*, I thought. I had no idea how long they'd been there, but apparently they were both hiding in my shadow.

"So...why are you two here?" I asked.

"We saw you, so we decided to follow you," she said. "Nothin' more to it!"

"Who in their right mind slips into a guy's shadow just because they see him?! Why are you in Gideon in the first place?!"

"Hmm? We're here for The Tournaments, of couurse. We gathered some volunteers from our faithful and brought 'em all with uuus!"

That was a bit of a shock to me. Thinking about it now, The Lunar Society did have the right to participate in that event, but...

"...You know you have to sign a Contract to participate in it, right?" I asked. She obviously wasn't the type to tie herself down, especially after just being freed from one such obligation.

"You don't gotta go to war if you don't want the extra rewards," she said. "And we don't do crime, anyway, so signin' a Contract that prevents that doesn't mean anythin'. The Lunar Society is a clean religious organization."

"...Correct me if I'm wrong, but you did *kidnap me*, right? Also, Azurite said you implied you'd be willing to commit acts of terrorism."

"Huhh? You're a Master, and as you suuurely know, crimes against Masters aren't criimes. And implyin' somethin' isn't the same as doing it, is iiit?"

...Her face as she said that was *so* annoying. It felt like she was in a better mood than usual and wanted to make it as obvious as possible.

"Well, whatever," I said. "At least we won't have to worry about The Lunar Society doing anything stupid in the kingdom."

"Whaddya mean? We only brought less than a third of our fighters. The rest can still do whatever they want. Kage isn't in the tourney either, so that's another negotiating card I can playyy!"

*Yeah, I should've expected something like this,* I thought. I could totally understand why Azurite called her "parasite."

"By the way, you buyin' this arena?" she asked.

"That's the plan... What about it?"

She put in an even wider smile and said, "If you're not takin' it, I thought we should pick it up instead. A little bit o' blackmail and some negotiatin' and the count would—"

"Count Gideon, we'll take one year's worth of rent for now, please. I'm paying out of pocket."

"Oh. Excellent. Thank you very much."

Not wanting Miss Eldritch to have this establishment, I instantly agreed to the rent arrangement.

Thus, it was decided that this arena would be Death Period's base.

Miss Eldritch, by the way, instantly left, shouting, "I'll get back at you in The Tournameeeent!" as she did.

"...What did she come here for, anyway?" I wondered.

"Fur you. To light a fire under ya, to be precise," said Shu. *A fire?* "If she really wanted to take the arena, she'd have gotten it without tellin' us a thing. All she came here to do was act unbearable, annoy you, incite you...and motivate you to rent this place."

"Huhhh...?"

"Also, she said that Tsukikage won't pawrticipate in The Tournaments...but that implies that she herself *will*. That was a roundabout way of sayin' that she won't commit any crimes against the kingdom."

*“...I see.” She’s shady, openly awful at times, and filthy when it comes to money...but I suppose she’s not rotten to the core, at least... Even if she did kidnap me once.*

“Anyway, we got our base now,” said Shu.

“Yeah,” I said. “Hm...?”

As I nodded to his words, I noticed that he was looking at the eighth arena. His real eyes were hidden by his costume, so I mostly had to guess from body language and stuff, but it felt like he was putting on a so-called “distant look.”

It seemed like he was looking at the arena, but it felt like his eyes were fixed at something else entirely.

*We just got a base for our clan... Does he find that significant in some way I don’t quite get right now?*

◊

After signing the contract, we told all the other clan members that we got a base and had everyone—except Lei-Lei, of course—gather at the eighth arena.

The fact that the base was an arena was so unexpected that even Rook looked surprised.

Despite the shock, though, all of them approved of my decision. In fact, the more experienced among us were extremely happy to have an environment where they could test out the aces up their sleeves without worrying about anyone seeing them.

*And I’m glad they like it, I thought.*

“But man... The crazy good armor, the money for the powder, Big or Small, the axe, and now this arena. That’s a lot of things to get in one day...”

I felt like all of this was a little *too* lucky.

Nemesis often noted that my luck was on the bad side, so this made me concerned about what would happen once the pendulum swung back and I had to pay my dues for all the good luck I'd been having today.

"I understand why you would harbor such worries, but I do not believe they are necessary," she said.

"Why?"

"Because nothing that you received today was by mere luck. The material you exchanged for armor and money was your reward for defeating the whale. The bracelet and axe were your rewards for your part-time job uncursing the items in the vault. And it is because of your hard work that this arena has remained here and Count Gideon began to trust you enough to make this offer. All you have received is merely the results of your actions. It just happened to arrive on the same day. There is nothing more to it."

"...Really?"

"Be proud! Your actions deserve to be acknowledged!" she said, poking my chest.

Her words and actions made my anxiety wash away.

"Thanks for that, Nemesis."

"That's the spirit!" she said with a bright smile.

"Yep, she's completely right," added Marie as she barged into the conversation. "As someone who has watched you since your early days here, I fully agree with her!"

Nemesis seemed dissatisfied with Marie's sudden appearance and her words, apparently struggling to keep herself from pointing out that Marie was actually responsible for my first death penalty.

"By the way, Ray," Marie continued. "Wouldn't you say that now is a good time to use it?"

“Use...what?”

“The thing you told us about yesterday! The ticket you won at the event!”

“...Oh!” So much had happened that I’d almost forgotten about the ticket.

I’d recently participated in a battle royale event at an uninhabited island—The Anniversary—and since I was one of the three winners, Cheshire had given me a gacha ticket that guaranteed an S-rank pull.

“You’re also participating in tomorrow’s Tournament, aren’t you? I’d say it’s a great time for you to power up. And let’s not forget you’ve just gotten a perfect environment to train and maybe test out whatever you pull.”

Marie was right—it seemed like there was no better time to use it than now.

Juliet and Alto had both gotten MVP rewards from their tickets, and Rook’s natural S-rank pull had also given him an MVP reward, so if that happened to me too...I’d have my fourth.

Though, since the MVP rewards from gacha were adjusted to suit the late tians who’d once had them, whatever I received might end up difficult for me to use—which was why I would probably need to test it in our arena before tomorrow’s Tournament.

I reached into my inventory and took out the ticket, making everyone gather around.

“...What is it about gacha that makes you want to watch people pull?”

“Let me explain, Fujinon,” said Marie. “It’s because people are attracted to things that have an unknown result. Also, if it’s other people pulling, you don’t suffer at all even if the pulls are trash.”

“...Marie,” I said. “This ticket guarantees an S-rank pull. It literally can’t be trash. Whatever comes out will be worth *at least* the maximum amount you can put into the gacha, which is 10,000,000 lir.”

“But in your case, it can easily be a hundred-in-one set of Tomb Labyrinth Exploration Permits, don’t you think?”

“...Don’t joke like that...please.” I’d pulled even more of those after the second one...

*At least the unsigned ones can be sold...* I thought.

“R-Ray, are you certain about this?” asked Nemesis. She’d been encouraging me just a few minutes ago, but even she looked concerned now.

“D-Don’t worry, Nemesis... I’m not *that* unlucky.”

*My luck really wasn’t good, but yeah...*

“But...when it comes to gacha, you are predisposed towards downright comedic pulls.”

“I’m not gonna accept that assessment!”

“I still believe you should save it,” she insisted. “Considering how the gacha has been until now, you should pull when you are cornered and out of options. Does it not seem like you might receive something very powerful then?”

“I don’t wanna rely on gacha in a situation like that!”

“But think about how it’s been in the past...”

“No! My past self was weak! Here and now, I will surpass it!”

“I would prefer it if you did not waste such impressive words on something as mundane as a gacha pull...”

Shaking away Nemesis’s words, I mustered up my courage and used the ticket! It dissolved into shining bits of light and a rainbow-colored

crystal appeared in my hand as though to replace it. This was an S-rank capsule, just like the one Rook had gotten on his pull.

I'd used the gacha many times since then, but this was the first time I had an S-rank capsule myself. I was overwhelmed, but the S-rank was guaranteed in this case. The real challenge began now.

"...Hm?" Hidden within the crystal's rainbow light, I noticed a bunch of letters written on its surface. It said *Open only in spacious areas.*

"...This isn't the first time I've seen this text." The capsule that had given me Silver had it as well.

"In that case, the prize within the capsule must be at least as large as Silver," said Nemesis. "That rules out most kinds of equipment."

"And it's definitely not a Permit or anything. What a relief..."

"...You were actually worried?"

"...Yeah. I put on a bold face, but I'm well aware of my gacha luck..."

"If only you were aware of your fashion sense, as well..."

Anyway, it was time to open the capsule. We needed a large space, but we now had a whole arena stage for that. There was enough surface area there for even a large ship.

Hell, if we got something that was too big for the arena, you could say that I really hit the jackpot.

And so, with everyone watching from a safe distance, I went and opened the rainbow capsule.

After a bright flash of light, a large object stood before me.

"Stood" didn't seem accurate, though, since it was *floating*.

"This is...?"

For a moment, I didn't understand what I was looking at.

It was large enough that I had to crane my neck to see the top of it, as well as wide enough that I couldn't have wrapped my arms around it.

Roughly cubic in shape, it seemed about three meters in both height and width.

At that moment, I realized that the object was actually a *house* floating a little more than fifty centimeters above the ground, and its name was "Carriage House of Legend."

"Well it's...not an MVP reward," I observed. Ship and building MVP rewards did exist, but based on the naming, this wasn't one of them.

According to the explanation, this thing was a house built by the King of Building from a long time ago. Since it floated, it was immune to earthquakes and the like, and it wouldn't move even in the center of a raging storm. It was also too durable to be affected by regular attacks and even regenerated the damage done by the stronger ones. The owner could easily move it around too, making moving and setting it up really simple.

It even came with an inventory made specifically for it. All in all, this was a house that could be set up anywhere and at any time.

The inside was amazing, as well. Though it seemed small on the outside, looking in, I saw a whole bunch of rooms. It reminded me of B3's dragon carriage, but this was a giant leap ahead of that.

And to top it all off...

"Oh. This house acts as a save point."

It was a simple kind of save point that couldn't be used if you were returning from a death penalty, but it was a save point nonetheless.

I'd heard that Xunyu had received a save point dragon carriage as a reward for her bodyguard duties, and this house here seemed like a similar kind of treasure.

“Ohh? Somebody I know said that items with save points are beary useful,” said Shu.

*I see, I thought.*

As far as houses went, this one here would certainly be counted among the best. I sure as hell didn’t pull trash this time, and it was no doubt worth more than 10,000,000 lir.

However...

“You pulled a house while celebratin’ gettin’ a house! It seems like a bit of a waste!”

“GUH...!” Io’s words made me drop to my knees.

I could sense the others thinking stuff like, *Why would you point that out?*

And so, this became a day on which Death Period received *two* houses.

*I guess I really am predisposed towards joke pulls, huh...?*

## ***Chapter Six: Rummination and Reminiscence***

*Paladin, Ray Starling*

After securing a base and getting our own rooms, we'd gone to the fourth district to buy ourselves some furniture.

And now, we were making ourselves at home.

My room, by the way, was inside the arena itself. It seemed weird to set up the Carriage House of Legend here in the arena and sleep in it when I could just use the arena instead. I would probably just use it instead of tents or inns while I was in other places.

With that in mind, I was in the box seat that would become my room, refurbishing it with a curtain, a table set, and other furniture.

Among them was the placeable time-preserving inventory that Nemesis wanted. It was larger than other inventories I used and thus difficult to carry it around, but it had the ability to keep things as hot or fresh as they were at the moment they had been stored away, which was obviously very good for food.

It was fairly expensive, but it was probably nothing compared to the money I'd be spending on food from here on out. Just thinking about that gave me a headache.

I'd also bought the translation item I needed, so I summoned Smol Gar and put it on her. She instantly demanded to eat my hair, so I cut a little bit off and gave it to her to chew on.

*I'm also using a hair restoration potion I got, but...this won't be bad for me in the long run, right?*

"That seems like that for the furniture," said Nemesis. "Now, to focus on The Tournaments tomorrow."

“I spent most of today picking rewards and moving in here, so I didn’t even level up or anything.” Then again, a day spent leveling a low-rank job might’ve been wasteful in comparison.

“I guess we’re not getting much prep for this,” I said.

“Hrm. Well, The Tournaments are within duel barriers,” said Nemesis. “Since everything is reset after every match, you can use your MVP reward skills as much as you desire. You actually have a chance.”

“I won’t work...for free,” Smol Gar stopped eating my hair and interjected.

“For free?”

“The duel barriers. Once they’re gone, the summoning demerits would disappear too, right?”

“Yeah. I didn’t think you’d know that.”

“Shared memories.” Oh yeah—she was just like Nemesis in that she could check on my memories.

Though apparently the ones I considered more private were more difficult to access.

“It’s like the duel had never happened, so...no.”

“Well, the costs expended and items broken *do* get reverted,” I said. I’d heard that that was how Logan had become the top of Dryfe’s duel rankings.

...Thinking about it now, I still didn’t know why and how duels worked the way they did. It didn’t seem like a big deal from a game design perspective, but the world of *Infinite Dendrogram* was built upon many solid principles. How did the barriers deal with, for example, the law of the conservation of energy? Were the battles within actually just fully sensory 3D simulations? Like...were they to *Dendro* what *Dendro* was to reality?

But that wouldn't explain some other things, like how Xunyu was able to *break* the barrier...

The more I thought about it, the more mysterious it seemed.  
*Well, we now have our own arena, so when I find the time, I might have someone look into this.*

"Anyway, no arena," Smol Gar insisted. "Though, I may think about it if you let me eat your finger after you summon me..."

"...Seriously, how do you benefit from me getting the demerits?" I asked. "Also, I guess I got two gluttons on my hands here."

"What do you mean, 'two'?! Do *not* group me with that man-eater!" Nemesis said.

"...Didn't you try to get a taste of me just like her?" *Why are my weapons such big eaters?* I wondered.

"Oh man... Hm?" As I sighed, I looked through the window—the glass facing the arena itself.

It was already dark out, yet in one of the spectator seats, I saw a familiar—but still rare—sight.

The person was obviously Shu, but he wasn't wearing his costume.

"Hm..." Somewhat curious, I decided to go to him.

As I left, I saw Nemesis trying to take some of the hair I'd given to Smol Gar, who retaliated by biting her.

*What the hell are you two doing?*

◇◇◇

*King of Destruction, Shu Starling*

A clan...a base...I'd never had these things before.

It wasn't like I didn't have good friends, and I'd gotten a bunch of clan invites during my time here, but until Reiji invited me to his, I had just been rejectin' them all.

The reason why I hadn't joined any of them must've been...the bad timing.

It had taken some time after *Infinite Dendrogram* began for the Masters of the world to start bandin' up and formin' clans, and I met *them* before all of that.

"Them" bein' Humpty, Theresia, and...him.

Those encounters had happened not long after I started, and *Infinite Dendrogram* stopped bein' "just a game" for me just as fast.

That was why I'd never joined any clan.

Reiji's was the only exception.

"...It's been so long since then, huh?" Shortly after startin' I'd talked to Humpty after bein' thrown into a certain incident, in fact.

The subject had been "What is *Infinite Dendrogram*?"

Back then, I had three hypotheses about this absurdly realistic world.

The first was that it was an extremely detailed program designed to be like this from the start.

The second was that it was a virtual world, simulated using time acceleration.

And the third...was the least plausible theory of the three.

Upon hearin' those three hypotheses, Humpty had said, "...Ohh, you're on the right track. None of those three quite hit the mark, though."

She'd often led me into trouble and tended to obfuscate the truth—but she never lied either. By that point, it was already clear that this place wasn't normal.

And that became even more obvious after I met The Evil, Theresia, who had a built-in function to *end* this world.

Despite that, I'd stayed here and even invited Reiji to join me.

There was a goal I had—somethin' that I wanted to fulfill. Somethin' that'd been on my mind for a long time.

And I felt like it could only be done here.

That must've been why I'd also been subjected to desires that were similar to mine.

"Hrn..." The air-conditioner in my Hind Bear costume was makin' it hard to focus, so I went and took it off.



This wasn't somethin' I normally did. I guessed that bein' at my clan's base made me relax just enough to do it.

The arena was open at the top, but the barrier could be set to interfere with the vision of those lookin' from the outside in. That was just another reason why this was such a damn good piece of real estate.

Feeling the wind flowin' in from outside, I closed my eyes and recalled the battles I'd had against those who were frankly on another level.

In a desert, I'd fought the man who held the greatest magic—The Magical Apex.

"I am a cup that has lost the contents that were meant for it."

"My father did not let me inherit anything he had."

"He feared me so much that he even turned our country into a republic..."

"All so I would not receive any of it."

"Far Atum—the genesis was excruciatingly distant."

"And that is why the person I am in this world will claim it all for himself."

"I will acquire everything that I was supposed to be given."

"My wife told me that she would guide my way."

"And in exchange, I will destroy every obstacle in her path."

"She also told me that Shu Starling would one day become such an obstacle."

"Through our cooperation just now, I could feel that you are indeed powerful."

“And that is why, I will now measure your power directly...Shu.”

As I was leaving Tenchi after receiving my Godcloth, I’d encountered the man with unmatched technique—The Technical Apex.

“They must see use.”

“These fingers must see use, lest the ancient techniques within them grow dull.”

“Touch the skin. Tear the flesh. Split the bone. Reap the life.”

“That alone is honing your skill.”

“To use what you had under the light of day meant always changing your domicile.”

“How vexing.”

“Here, however, even the living can be freely used for such things.”

“The techniques must not degrade before they are inherited.”

“And that is why we are here.”

“We came here today to test our arts on the godbeast of Kamuy Forest.”

“Yet you defeated the beast and took away our chance.”

“Thus, we will hone our techniques on *you* instead.”

And here in the duel city, I’d met the beast with the strongest body of all, as well as her Master—The Physical Apex.

“Then I don’t mind.

“All I want is to face you in a contest of pure power.”

“Like I said, that was just a final check that you were truly a worthy opponent.”

“If that killed you, you would’ve been unworthy of a proper fight...a mere pebble just like the rest.”

“You are indeed worthy.”

Lookin’ back at the memories I had of the “Apices,” I let out a sigh.

Thinking about them made me realize something once again.

“Man... What the hell do they think I am?” It wasn’t like they hated me or had some kind of grudge or anythin’.

Despite that, way too many people wanted to fight me.

Measurement, honin’, the fight itself... They wanted different things, but they all had in common the fact that they didn’t give a damn what / wanted.

The “Apices” had way too many screws loose.

Just like *him*, they lived in a world where common sense just wasn’t a thing...

Well...Behemot, at least, was probably normal in real life.

As far as I could tell, she was—

“This is rare. You never take off your costume when you’re not fighting.”

My thought was cut short by a voice from the side.

I turned to its source and saw...Reiji. I was so lost in thought that I hadn’t even sensed him approach.

“Well, I’ve been doin’ some thinkin’ and felt like feelin’ the wind,” I said.

“Ohh. Well, you can’t do that with the costume, I guess. But, man...”

“What?”

“This is supposed to be your normal appearance, but it actually feels weirder than the bear suit.”

“Someone I’m beary familiar with told me the same thing.”

That “someone” was Rachel...Lei-Lei.

...Now that I thought about it, she had a few screws loose too. Though, maybe it was better to say that she was just “slightly off.” I’d known about her behavioral principle—her dream—since we were children, and her Embryo, Eden, was the result of *Infinite Dendrogram* adapting it in an unusual manner. The powers it had because of that were just...freaky.

“So, you ready for tomorrow’s Tournament?” I asked.

“Well, as ready as can be, I guess,” he replied. “I’ll use everything I’ve got...except Gardranda. She told me not to summon her in duels.”

“Conscious summons and intelligent tamed monsters can be like that every now and then.”

“...I can’t imagine Rook’s three monsters being that disobedient, though.” Well, they’d all fallen for him, so...

Then again, Gardranda was kinda similar in that regard.

Whether he realized it himself or not, Reiji was always the type of guy people easily liked. The incident with the amazons in South America was one of the more...unfortunate results of that.

...Man, goin’ to pick him up from there sure was a challenge.

Big sis, Sensei... I knew way too many people who seemed like they belonged in different genres of fiction, and they sure didn’t make my life any easier.

When she heard that our sis had taken Reiji to the Amazon, our mom actually collapsed from worry. Seriously, though, how do you end up goin’ all the way to South America “for a part-time job”?

Well, the job she was currently on was an extension of that one, but still...

*That reminds me that she still hasn't given back the money I spent to go there, I thought.*

"You okay, bro?" Reiji asked.

"I'm just rememberin' this and that. By the way, Reiji, I heard you got some beary weird axe?"

"Yeah. This one here," he said as he reached into his inventory and took out a one-handed axe covered in a black cloth.

"Lemme look at it fur a minute."

"Sure." When he gave it to me, I took a look at it, then *threw my fist at it.*

The clash between my fist and the axe resounded throughout the arena.

"NHUH?!" Reiji immediately voiced his shock at the sight.

Though...in all honesty, I wanted to yell in surprise myself.

"...I see." I was surprised, sure, but part of me also wasn't.

Its aura alone told me that this was *that kinda thing*, but I couldn't help but be shocked that *my all-out attack didn't even crack it.*

My fists could shatter even Mythical metal. I could even put cracks in the Ultrahard Regalia that Fatoum made by *compressing* Mythical metal. Even special defenses meant nothing as long as the object's endurance was below my attack power, since that would activate Right of Destruction.

That meant that this axe was made of something even tougher than my attack power.

I felt like I couldn't put a dent in this thing even if I used Baldr's ult.

"The hell are you doing?!" Reiji panicked, taking back the axe and holding it close.

"Hey, it was a joke. I wasn't bein' fur real."

That was a lie. I'd actually punched as hard as I could. From what I could see, this axe that didn't even crack under my fist was already missin' a few pieces here and there. I couldn't help but wonder what had caused that.

"Anyway, it's beary tough, so if nothin' else, you can always use it as a *shield*." In all honesty, I couldn't even imagine what would happen if someone tried to wield it as a *weapon*.

"That so...? Well, it's still cursed, so it's not like I can equip it. Using it could have some major drawbacks."

"Ha ha ha." It'd be weirder if it didn't.

"Phew," Reiji sighed. "I'm used to you doing crazy things when you're in bear form, but when you look like this, that kinda stuff is heart-stopping. It makes me remember that competition you were in."

"...I guess I get ya." For a moment, I almost remembered how I'd felt back then, but decided to put it out of my mind.

"I'll go back to my room, then," he said. "Got my Tournament tomorrow and all."

"That so?"

"The results of The Tournaments will change what I'll be able to do in the fight against Dryfe. Losing to KoB made me realize that I'm still not strong enough...so I'll take my best shot at this."

I said nothing in response. The War would surely follow after The Tournaments. Tians as well as control AIs such as Humpty would surely act to prepare for that.

It was clear that Reiji would soon take part in his first War, and I in my second... No—this War would be a *first* for me too in a lot of ways.

“Shu?” As Reiji looked at me with curious eyes, I wondered if I should tell him about what had happened.

“...Don’t mind me,” I said. “You go on and rest fur tomorrow.”

I ultimately decided against it.

“You don’t have to tell me that... Also, the bear puns really don’t work when you look like that.”

“How unbearable.” This conversation wasn’t much different from ones we always had. It ended, and I just watched Reiji as he walked away.

The thing I was considering telling him was a story of the past—the actual reason why I hadn’t participated in the first War against Dryfe.

I didn’t say anything because it was more or less nothing but an excuse—an explanation of my actions and an expression of my regret.

It was a story of the time Sechs and I had fought *until the very end*.

# **Chapter Seven: Love Letter**

*January, 2045*

The New Year of 2045 was a memorable time for many.

Most were obviously celebrating the holiday, while some, like Reiji Mukudori, were busy preparing for the upcoming college entrance exams.

It was a good time for *Infinite Dendrogram* players too. The game held a New Year's event that had, among other things, increased spawn rates for monsters that were bursting with Resources in the form of XP.

It was not all good, however, as something unpleasant—as well as unavoidable—was on the verge of happening.

This was a major event involving two countries—namely, Dryfe's declaration of War against Altar.

After many consecutive bad harvests, Dryfe had been thrown into a state of famine, and to mend the situation, they would invade Altar, which had abandoned them in their time of need.

Altar's leadership already knew that Dryfe was readying their soldiers for an invasion through the old Lunnings Duchy and that they would attack in about three days. That was information gathered by DIN, the Arch Sage, and Altar's intelligence, so it was unlikely to be wrong.

In preparation for that, the Altarian King, Eldor Zeo Altar, began recruiting volunteers. He didn't discriminate between tians and Masters, calling upon anyone and everyone who lamented this dire situation and wished to fight against it. This was directly opposed to Dryfe's approach—the imperium offered rewards to any Master who helped them out.

Because of this, Altarian Masters—especially the “ludos”—weren’t too receptive to the king’s calls.

Even many worlders prioritized defending their own hometowns instead of the country itself, and as a result, Altar didn’t have many Masters fighting for it.

But perhaps most importantly of all, there were also no War participants from the Altarian Big Three—the ones that had protected Altar from the Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria.

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In the terrace of a café bathed in the late-day sun, a man in a raccoon costume was drinking black tea while reading an evening newspaper.

The paper wasn’t from DIN or the largest printer in Altar, but it was one that was infamous for its articles full of scathing critique.

It didn’t take much reading for the costumed man to realize that today’s paper had focused heavily on attacking Altar’s Big Three.

First of all, the High Priestess, Tsukuyo Fuso, had demanded something far greater than ever before in exchange for her clan’s participation in the upcoming War. Since Altar’s stance was to not reward any Masters, they had refused. And because Tsukuyo Fuso refused to bend, the negotiations were simply canceled.

The article was condemning her for profiteering from the situation.

*That all seems right to me, the person in the costume thought.  
That fox would definitely take advantage of this.*

That was, after all, exactly what she’d done during Gloria’s attack.

It was worth noting that despite Tsukuyo Fuso’s decision, the Masters of the Lunar Society weren’t actually prohibited from participating if they so wished. As far as religious groups went, theirs was quite lenient. This might’ve been expected, however—the core

of their teachings was the phrase “Embrace this free world and celebrate your liberty to your soul’s content.”

The article that followed that one was about the Over Gladiator, Figaro. It claimed that, when asked about whether he would participate in the War, he said that he “wasn’t interested in sloppy fights.” The writer condemned him for being a “picky fighter” who fought exclusively in duels and one-on-ones, calling him a “self-centered battle maniac” for it.

“...That ain’t exactly wrong,” said the man in the costume. However, since he knew the circumstances, he felt like the article was missing some details. He had been there when Figaro was interviewed, and the conversation went as such:

“Mr. Figaro, will you participate in the War?”

“...No.”

“Why?! Is this not the perfect opportunity to show your might to the world...?!”

“I’m not interested in that. Also, it’d be a sloppy, messy fight where I’d have both allies and enemies—and more importantly, tians and Masters... There would be no point.”

The exchange ended with the interviewer in shock.

The words quoted in the article weren’t actually *wrong*. However, it appeared that the journalist writing it interpreted them as “I’m not interested in sloppy fights. There would be no point—in other words, I don’t stand to gain anything from joining in,” which wasn’t exactly accurate.

Figaro could only fight solo, and since the War would involve both allies and enemies, he wouldn’t be half as strong if he participated.

The fact that both tians and Masters would be participating made it even worse for him, because Figaro *had never actually killed a single tian*.

Outside of duels where everyone involved would come back, ending tian lives was something that Figaro simply never did. This didn't make him a rare case—many worder Masters shared his stance on tian murder.

*Infinite Dendrogram* was extremely realistic, and that extended to its people. Some Masters took it a step further and never killed even monsters, instead focusing on crafting. A few had even given up on the world entirely.

A War that involved tians and didn't allow solo combat was an environment that would have made Figaro powerless, both physically and mentally.

What he'd meant with his words was that "there would be no point—in other words, I wouldn't be useful."

You couldn't even blame the journalist for misinterpreting that. Who would ever believe that the duel champion who was also a Superior would even imply that he would be useless in a war? It was unthinkable, especially if you didn't know Figaro's flaws.

The fact of the matter was that if he were to participate, even a lowly grunt could take him out. The only way he could be of use in the War was if there was a situation where he could fight alone and his only enemies were Masters.

However, the first Knight-Machine War wasn't that kind of conflict.

"All righty..."

The last article was about King of Destruction.

It mentioned the message KoD had sent to the various newspaper companies, and it even publicly revealed the text of it.

The message read, “If I participate in a big event, I could accidentally expose my face. I’m not going to the War.”

That was it.

All KoD had sent was a brief message saying that he wouldn’t participate in the War because he wanted to maintain his status as “The Unknown.”

The general reaction to this could be summed up in three sentences: “He’s hiding, yet he sends out a message like this. What a bastard,” “He’s gotta be hiding because he’s actually weak and doesn’t want anyone to find out,” and “He probably only beat Gloria because the other two softened it up.”

It was notably harsher than the reaction to the other two. That was because while Tsukuyo Fuso was the head of a major group and Figaro was the duel champion, everything about King of Destruction was a mystery.

Not saying a word, the man in the costume—Shu Starling himself—read the disparaging remarks as if they didn’t make him think anything at all.

It was as though being condemned didn’t affect him whatsoever.

Or perhaps he...

“I have been searching for you.”

Suddenly, he heard a voice from behind him.

Looking around, he saw a huge hamster. It was none other than the control AI that also served as the third princess’s pet, Dormouse.

It was also one of the few creatures that knew KoD was Shu.

“Yo, Dormouse. I’m pawsitive I haven’t seen you in a hot minute. What did you come to me fur?”

Shu's response was the same as it'd ever be—casual and with costume-related puns.

"Theresia wishes to speak to you," Dormouse said, taking a crystal ball out of his fur.

It was a comms magic item, and out of it came a little girl's voice.

"It's been a while, Shu."

"...Yo." At some point, their conversation had stopped reaching anyone except those at Shu's table—Dormouse's doing, no doubt.

"So, what did you call me fur?" Shu asked.

"It's about the message the newspapers received. Are you really the one who sent it?"

"Yeah. Why ask me that, though? It was obvious it was me since all the newspapers are makin' it public after running it by Truth Discernment. Hell, you could've just asked Dormouse."

"That's true... I just didn't think that you would refuse to participate in the War just because it may expose you."

Theresia had no intention to condemn his decision—she'd simply felt that the text was unlike him and had sent Dormouse to get a confirmation.

"That so?" Shu asked.

"Yes... If that was a reason for you to not get involved in a conflict, you wouldn't have actually been there for very many of them...including the ones where Sechs was involved."

"...He and I just kinda happened to keep clashin' here and there," Shu said with a sigh as he remembered the many incidents they'd been part of. "Anyway, yeah...it's not that I'm afraid to show my face. Well, I guess I am a *little* bit. I'm a shy boy and showing it around gives me pawse."

Shu spoke partly in jest, and Theresia met those words with silence. It was starting to become hard for him to joke around, so he spoke a little more seriously.

"I doubt I'll be makin' it to the War, and if everyone fought clingin' to the hope that I'd come to their aid, it could just make the casualties worse, so I went and used a shitty excuse and said I won't come at all."

"So what is the actual reason you're not going?" Theresia asked. She was now certain that his nonparticipation wasn't by choice.

In response, Shu was quiet for a moment, then said, "...I got a love letter."

It seemed like one of his jokes at first, but the face he was making inside the raccoon costume was completely serious.

"A love letter? From whom?" she asked.

"...Dormouse, read this for me," he said as he reached into his inventory and took out the letter.

It was crumpled, presumably by Shu grasping it tightly, but it was readable nonetheless.

Dormouse skillfully balanced on three legs and took the letter in one of his forelimbs.

""Mr. Starling..." he began reading, but before he could even properly start, he was filled with shock as the entire text sunk in.

The letter went as follows...



Mr. Starling,

By the time this letter reaches you, the War between Altar and Dryfe will be five days away.

I know you will act of your own volition and participate in it to protect the kingdom.

That is why, six hours before the War begins, I will attack either you or what you wish to protect.

If you are alongside Altar's army on the front lines, I will target those present.

If you challenge Dryfe on your own, I will target Altea.

If you have a death penalty or are offline, I will destroy Altarian cities one by one until you come back.

And if you are alone somewhere far from any settlement, I will attack you.

Where you are does not concern me. *This me* will act as described regardless.

This moment and situation makes it possible for us to fight until the end.

You would give me a serious fight under these conditions, would you not? And that is why, here and now, I challenge you.

I will face you no matter where you are at the time.

If possible, I wish the circumstances to be as favorable as they can be.

Regards, King of Crime, Sechs Würfel



It was a letter from the Master Shu was more involved with than any other.

A *letter of challenge* from King of Crime, Sechs Würfel.



*Cruella Mountain Belt*

The Cruella Mountain Belt that acted as the border between Altar and Caldina was a dangerous territory rife with bandits who targeted the passing trade caravans.

One of the mountain villas here was a hideout of such thieves, but now only two people were in it.

These two had slaughtered each and every one of the bandits who originally inhabited it.

They hadn't had a strong reason for doing so—they were merely traveling through the mountains to avoid being seen and had stumbled upon this villa. The bandits attacked them on sight and were in turn annihilated in the blink of an eye. You could say that the thieves were simply unlucky.

"...You really doin' this, Sechs?" One of the two was a relatively short man wearing a gray suit, a matching trench coat, and a gangster-like hat.

He was The Weapon, Rascal the Bloodonyx. With his back to one of the villa's pillars, he was spinning a gear-like object in his hand while talking to the other man—a black-haired, black-eyed, plain-looking youth in clothing just as unremarkable. He was none other than King of Crime, Sechs Würfel.

"Yes," Sechs replied with a smile. "I understand that you came all this way to try and make me reconsider, but I am resolute."

Slightly irritated by the response, Rascal spun the gear again before saying, "Tetragrammaton...our base ain't even done yet. We're still in the process of gettin' the Soul Trader to be our fifth official member, and we don't even have that many supportin' members either. Our alliance with The Death has also just begun. We're just startin' to take off."

They were both part of Illegal Frontier—a clan made up exclusively of criminal Superiors.

In fact, they were the leader and sub-leader.

IF was still new and was currently in a very important time period for its development as a clan—and yet the leader, Sechs, was prioritizing personal matters instead of the good of the group.

“Most of that is true,” he said. “But the base is already complete, no?”

“Only on the outside,” Rascal retorted. “We don’t have the people or the processors to run a ship that huge, and good processors’re hard to come by even in pre-ancient civ ruins. Most o’ them become sentient and turn into goddamn UBMIs.”

“Is your Machina not a valid substitute?” Sechs asked.

Rascal glanced at the gear in his hand, shook his head, and said, “Sure, my Deus Ex Machina can be a *connector*, and I can use it for control, but connectin’s basically all it does then. It’s pointless if there’s nothin’ to connect it *to*. If I want it to act as a good processor, I need the processor itself. That’s why I’m plannin’ to raid some major ruins in Caldina soon. It wouldn’t be easy, though, and I was plannin’ on your assistance...”

“That is unfortunate. However, my decision is final.”

Sechs didn’t waver even though Rascal needed his help.

That said all that was needed to be said about how important this was to him.

“Why do it now?” Rascal asked. “Ya didn’t forget our goal or the benefits of achievin’ it, right? It’s nothin’ but risky now, but eventually, those risks’re gonna be gone.”

“Of course I did not forget it, and I am fully aware of that.” Sechs nodded in response, still unwilling to change his mind. “However, chances for a serious fight against Shu are few and far between.”

“...You tellin’ me he was holdin’ back? Against *you*? ”

"He was always doing his best, but he never once fought *with the goal of defeating me*," Sechs said as he closed his eyes and reflected upon the past. "In every incident he was involved in ever since the time I kidnapped Theresia, I was merely an extra. He always had things he had to prioritize over me."

They had been involved and interacted with each other for a long time now, sometimes as enemies, sometimes as allies. However, they had never had a true clash against one another. This was because although their goals were generally very different, they were never quite directly opposed.

"That is why it must be done now."

"I...I see," said Rascal, finally understanding Sechs.

"I will use the coming War to create a situation in which he must defeat me. He will surely come and fight me with that in mind."

If Sechs merely engaged in more terrorism, Shu would likely take care of the problem while avoiding conflict with him.

However, things were different now that Altar as a whole was being threatened. If Sechs chose to attack the Altarian army before they faced Dryfe or assaulted the towns on the other side of the land, it would severely damage the kingdom's defenses, making their defeat in the War all but certain.

If what he wanted was to keep the casualties to a minimum, Shu would have no choice but to fight Sechs.

"Ya know this comes with the risk of losin' and bein' sent to the gaol, right?"

"Yes."

"And that you'll be leavin' behind the clan...that you created?"

"Yes," Sechs replied, fully aware of what Rascal was saying. "But would you not say that this is typical of us members of Illegal Frontier? To put our desires above the convenience of others?"

"...That is true." Rascal had no grounds to argue against that. Even the goal they shared as a group was ultimately only meant to support the goals they had personally, and Rascal was no exception—he was playing *Infinite Dendrogram* because there was something he felt he had to do.

"My apologies," Sechs said. "I might end up entrusting the management of the clan to you."

"Don't say that like ya haven't been leavin' the business work and infrastructure to me since before IF was even established," Rascal said, then heaved a sigh. "Well, fine. You do you. I still owe ya for Emily and other stuff. I can hold this thing together while you're away." To Rascal, Sechs was both the clan leader and a friend, so he ultimately respected his decision no matter how risky it was. "Leave a letter for Zeta before ya go, though. She'd probably get really annoyin' if ya don't. I can actually imagine her thinkin' I'm plannin' somethin', and we don't need an internal conflict on our hands," Rascal said with a wry grin.

"Very well," Sechs replied with a faint smile.

"Also...this is in case ya lose, but...I dunno what kinda place the gaol is, but get out of it within a year. I'll keep workin' on the prep until then."

"You believe I can escape the gaol?"

"Yeah. You may fail sometimes, *but you can do anythin'*, can't ya?"

Sechs said nothing in response to that, but his face was still in a smile.

"Go get 'im, leader. What you want is right in front of you."

“It certainly is. Farewell.”

With that, Sechs went towards Altea, where Shu was waiting, while Rascal turned away and went on the path back to Caldina.

This had been the last time they’d met, but neither of them believed that it was their last *ever*.



### *Kingdom of Altar, Newest Canyon*

Three days had passed since Shu had shown Sechs’s letter to Dormouse and Theresia. Before dawn, when light was still scarce, Shu stood alone in the Newest Canyon.

This was where Altar’s Big Three had faced and defeated the Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria. The local geography had been devastated, while the ecosystem had all but vanished within Gloria’s Fatal Field, making it an area where neither people nor monsters ever ventured.

That was exactly why Shu had chosen it as the place where he would face Sechs.

Well, that and the fact that it was between Altea and the old Lunnings Duchy, which would make it easy for him to contribute to the war effort.

It was predicted that the War would start at noon. However, Shu felt that defeating Sechs and surviving to assist Altar would be more difficult than anything he’d ever done before.

More time passed as he waited in silence. The sun had begun to rise and the clock hit six in the morning when...

“Apologies for the wait.”

...Sechs arrived, just as he’d said he would.

He was still the black-haired, black-eyed, bespectacled, plain-looking youth that he’d always been. He was even wearing his usual smile.

However, even though this was merely a form he was assuming, Shu felt as if Sechs was...somewhat excited.

Silence followed. Shu had chosen to fight in these mountains, and now Sechs had come here as well.

They had both been certain that this would happen. Sechs knew that Shu would do this, and Shu knew that Sechs wouldn't use the opportunity to commit some other misdeed.

Despite the fact that they would now fight to the death, they knew each other better than some people who were the closest of friends.

"...If you were here, you could've just shown yourself instead of wastin' my time," Shu said as he eyed Sechs for an opening. He was waiting for a moment he could deliver a fatal blow and end this battle before it could even properly begin, but alas, on this particular day, Sechs's guard was impenetrable.

"Wasting your time...? So you intend to defeat me and rush to aid in the War?"

"Yeah."

"Do you think you will have any strength left?"

"Dunno. But it's possible that I'll be able to do *somethin'*, ain't it?"

"That is true. Oh, and if you lose to me, I will attack Altar, so please face me with everything you have."

"...I knew you'd say that." Since Sechs's goal was to force Shu to fight him as hard as he could, that much went without saying.

If this was a battle he could simply lose without consequence, it wouldn't have required such a set-up. Losing to Sechs would obviously influence the War and the fate of Altar.

"...Though, I will say that participating in the War does not seem to suit you," Sechs said with a lower tone than usual, but his face still

smiling. “The proactiveness of people is highly influenced by their views of good and evil. Apparently, if they see something as bad, they will simply not do it or at least be reluctant to, and if they think nothing of it, there will be no such reluctance.”

“*Seems so.*”

They both spoke as if these words had nothing to do with them.

“And if they think that something is right...they will push themselves to do it.” Nothing could stop a person from doing what they thought was righteous. Even if their actions brought harm to others, they would not slow down as long as they believed they were just. “In most cases when people become like that, they are not alone. They are often accompanied by like-minded brethren and act as members of a greater group, losing control for the sake of their justice. Looking around and seeing many people who shared their will reassured them that they were righteous, which only made them more dedicated to the cause.”

The march of an army fueled by a sense of justice was truly a fearsome thing.

“Both armies that will soon face each other in the old Lunnings Duchy believe themselves to be right,” Sechs said as he looked into the distant west, his smile now gone. “The Altarians defending against Dryfean invaders think they are on the side of justice, and the Dryfeans trying to save their country from famine also see their cause as righteous. With these thoughts reinforced by those around them, they march into a war—perhaps even clinging to the comforting pretense that there is no other way.”

Sechs spoke of the nature of this War, but it was clear that these principles applied to wars in general.

"But...there is no *true* righteousness there," he continued as Shu just silently listened. "Not a single person in either army did what they believed was right in the absence of anyone to affirm it."

He then looked away from the western horizon, faced Shu, and put on a smile which seemed different from the one he'd had.

"But there is someone *right here* who never wavers." The smile on his face now was much like the one Sechs had shown when Shu went to defeat the UBM that was treated as a god, paying no heed to the verbal abuse hurled at him by the villagers. "I've thought so since the day I met you. You knew full well that the girl could destroy the world, yet you protected her regardless—and still do. You never hesitated or doubted your decisions, always sticking to your strong sense of justice."

In Sechs's mind, Shu was a strong person who did what he felt was right regardless of what others thought of it, and that was exactly why Sechs had found himself drawn to him.

"This person before you...I have no sense of right or wrong or anything like that, so I find myself dazzled by your strong sense of justice."

"...That so?"

Shu also believed that Sechs was nothing like the people he was talking about. He didn't see himself as just and never felt remorse no matter how many evils he'd committed—he was merely doing what the people had *deemed* was bad.

Good and evil didn't exist in Sechs's mind. There were only the crimes as established by society. His conduct was never hindered by a sense of wrong nor expedited by righteousness.

In his life, Sechs merely moved forward...no—he *descended downward*. He was like a drop of water, falling into a dark abyss and dragging everything down with him with no regard for good or evil.

Never doing anything but committing crime, Sechs was more of a phenomenon than a man—the world's most hollow king of sins.

Shu already knew that, but he was still unaware of the reasons why.

"Do you remember the Divine Disks?" Sechs asked. "That is the UBM that you and I cooperated to defeat."

"...Yeah."

"The people that worshipped it instantly went on to join Altar. Their village is now no different from any other."

Sechs brought this up like it was simple gossip, but those who tried would make out a hint of...*irritation* in his voice.

"The moment they were no longer under the wings of their deity, they fled beneath the wings of Altar. They worshipped their god, sacrificed children to it, and condemned you for its sake. They believed they were righteous, but now they live on completely forgetting their previous faith and allegiance. They are all weaklings who kiss up to the strong and have no justice of their own."

His words were far harsher than anyone could ever expect from him, which made Shu ask a question.

"Are you...angry?"

"Angry? Me?" Sechs put his hand on his mouth. It seemed that he hadn't realized it himself.

After a few moments of thought...

"...Perhaps."

...he acknowledged Shu's words.

"I myself was a sacrifice, after all."

"A sacrifice?" That wasn't a word one would associate with the fearsome King of Crime, yet that was what he called himself.

As for the reason for that...

“The me that is not this me...the person I am in reality...was born as *a clone made for organ transplants*. Biological stock.”



Cloning technology had already existed for decades before the current year of 2045. There had been successful clonings of not only animals, but people, as well. The old technological hurdles related to clone lifespan and body function had already been conquered.

The people of this world—those that dwelled on Earth—already had functioning cloning technology. However, it wasn’t something that would see common use, and the reason for that was obvious—morality.

Though technology had permitted it, cloning people was considered unthinkable from a moral standpoint.

However, there were hushed whispers that human clones were being produced in the less regulated countries as well as in other places, but in secret, away from the eyes of the moral public.

These were clones that elite or wealthy people created in case they were heavily injured or afflicted by internal diseases, when they would call upon them to provide healthy organs.

Nothing but living, breathing storage for “spare parts,” these clones were the very definition of sacrifices.

In countries driven by morality, they were seen as fiction—but they did indeed exist, and Sechs was one of them.



“You’re...a clone?”

“Yes. It has been twenty and...a few more years since I was created.”

Sechs had never revealed this truth about himself to anyone. Even Rascal and Zeta were still in the dark about it, yet he'd gone and told it to Shu.

"I was created when a certain elite family finally had their heir apparent. Not legally, of course."

Some people with incredible wealth chose to go to particular other countries to secretly create organ transplant clones, *just in case*. They would be raised so that their ages matched their originals, and if the originals caught some sort of disease, the clones would have their organs used to save them.

"Though, my original died before I could provide my organs," Sechs said. "Apparently, it was some sort of accident that killed him instantly." Shu was silent. "However, he is not *officially* dead."

It was easy for Shu to understand what Sechs meant by that.

"...'Cause you replaced him?" he asked, to confirm.

Sechs responded with a nod and said, "It was declared that he survived and I was made to take his place. Instead of just my body parts replacing his, I became a replacement for his entire existence... Though, perhaps they had anticipated this. I grew up knowing I was an organ transplant clone, and yet I was still provided with basic education."

Shu merely listened as Sechs continued. "Of course, I could not possibly take over the social life of the original, but that was not a problem if I simply never saw anyone. Officially, 'the heir is currently recovering from the accident.'"

He'd been isolated from the public, taught what he needed to know about the world as well as any relationships relevant to him, all in preparation to make a soft landing into society as a replacement for this dead heir. All but a select few believed that the original was still alive, completely clueless to the existence of Sechs himself.

“My role is to continue the lineage. After all, I have the appearance and DNA of the original. My father—at least genetically—is already too old to have offspring, and despite the fact that he commissioned a clone, he is against creating *actual* offspring via artificial insemination. I will eventually marry a woman of some other elite family, we will have children, they will inherit everything from me, and I will be dismissed.”

“Sechs...” Hearing that made Shu feel something, but it was definitely not pity.

He didn’t look down on Sechs enough to feel something like that for him.

If there was a word for what Shu was feeling, it was most likely “understanding.” Sechs had been born as spare organ storage, but when donating became impossible, he was forced to be a full replacement for his original and carry on the lineage.

That explained why he was so...

“I have no life of my own. I was not even born with the *intent* of being a person... When I came to this world and received Nu—this body—I became fully aware of what I truly am.”

He raised his right hand and turned to slime.

No, not “turned,” but “returned.”

“I am nothing but a droplet of blood and DNA—a substitute that changes shape to suit its vessel.”

As he spoke, he changed himself into a man, then a woman, then Sechs.

“And that is why...*I am Nu.*”

Albeit to varying degrees, Embryos were influenced by their Masters. They represented their natures, actions, and maybe even their ultimate fates.

Looking at it like that, Nu might have been the only thing Sechs could ever be.

“But despite what I am, I was at least able to roll the dice on what I would be in *this* world.”

Sechs had his share of free time in reality. Though he was locked away, he’d been given the freedom to read books or enjoy a game or two.

However, he didn’t know what to actually do with that free time.

And that might have been exactly why, just like the many others who were uncertain what to do with their time, he was attracted to *Infinite Dendrogram*’s offer of infinite possibilities.

To him, it had seemed like a door to a world where he could truly live freely.

And upon seeing the die on the table during the tutorial, he’d made a decision.

He was a hollow person meant only to be a replacement. Any paths he could choose in his daily life were not actually his own.

And that was why he’d decided that *he* would be the one to roll the die and set his future here in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

“*That* is my freedom.”

The fate he’d rolled for himself was one of evil. Directly opposed to the justice of the majority, he would be a methodical committer of sin.

However, he was satisfied with that. He had chosen to be evil and he lived as such.

Everyone looked at him, and through his evil, they were acknowledging *Sechs himself*.

And that was not the only thing that being evil had provided him. It had given him personal principles, human relations, allies, memories, and had led to him meeting a person who was both his opposite as well as his mirror—a person he was more taken with than anyone else.

“Shu.”

“...Sechs.”

Sechs looked directly at Shu and slowly began talking once again. “Please...fight me until the end,” he said. “This is my true form. What I truly am. I am a substitute that changes shape to fit its vessel. A droplet of blood and flesh. This is my undiluted nature.”

Sechs then began converting his body into red-and-black slime.



“And in spite of this nature of mine, living as *this me* in this world made me see something I could not see before. I feel as though I am not far from fully grasping its truth. I simply need to come to understand what I must.”

He looked at Shu with eyes full of longing.

“And so, for me to live as myself...this me—the entity that I am—must face you...my polar opposite.”

Sechs shut his eyes and clenched his hands into fists as though to grasp what he was seeking deep within. He considered Shu—the unwavering man who was no one’s replacement and never compromised who he was. Sechs wished...

“...To understand you.” He opened his eyes again.

“If I do that, I might be able to live as myself. Not just here...but on the other side as well.”

*Infinite Dendrogram* promised to provide its players with their one true possibility unique to them. That manifested as their Embryos, as well as the experiences they had here.

And Sechs sincerely believed that his possibility could only be found if he defeated Shu—his polar opposite.

“Our lives may be transient, but let us fight...until the end.”

This was why he wanted a fight to the death—the moment they both would bare everything to one another.

“...How long have I been involved with ya now?” Shu said as he processed Sechs’s words. “Over four years, right? If that’s the answer you came to after thinkin’ that long, then sure. Let’s do this.”

Thus, he accepted the suggestion.

"Though...I'll tell ya one thing." Shu fell silent for a moment...and removed his apparel. He'd used Clothing Switch to change from the specialized, unwieldy raccoon costume into custom-made pure combat equipment. This set was the most optimal fighting gear he had at this point in time. It didn't hide his face whatsoever and doubled as an expression of a will to destroy his enemies.

And thus, Shu...

"Don't think that a *measly little* fight to the death's gonna be enough to really understand me."

...grinned back at Sechs and took to action.

And so, with the War but a few hours away, known to none, a battle between two of Altar's strongest had begun.

# ***Chapter Eight: Gods of Destruction and Creation***

## *King of Destruction and King of Crime*

Shu and Sechs had fought many times before. Over four years had passed since they met, and they had already clashed more times than could be counted on one hand.

Because of this, both of them had a good understanding of each other's combat styles.

Shu had two different ways of fighting: an “army of two” approach and “machine god rush.”

The former was focused on using his unbelievable STR, resistance nullification, and combat prowess to fight from up close while Baldr provided him with wide-area artillery cover.

The latter was the fighting style he used against large or powerful foes—close combat while inside Baldr’s giant robot form.

Regardless of which he was using, however, he was simply delivering destruction in different ways. One could actually call his fighting style “simple,” especially when compared to that of his opponent.

Sechs’s combat style, after all, was often described as “faceless.”



“RRHAAGH!” Expelling his breath, Shu took a step forwards and threw his right fist at Sechs.

“Shapeshift: Rechter Arm of the King of Destruction!” King of Crime responded with a gleeful smile, followed by a right punch of his own.

The fists clashed, and *their powers canceled each other out*.

As though the punches were equal in might, their bodies didn't even flinch. However, the impact cracked open the ground beneath them, and Sechs's right fist began to shatter shortly after.

"Baldr!" At that moment, Shu used his immense leg strength to jump backwards.

A split second later, a rain of incendiary missiles from Baldr's Stardust Genocider showered Sechs in fiery destruction.

"Shapeshift: Eisschild." Even a slime like Sechs should have not remained unharmed by Baldr's searing blaze—and yet, Sechs was neither burning nor boiling.

The reason for that was his left hand...equipped with a *shield of ice*.

The hand itself was different, as well, with skin of a color far darker than Sechs's own.

Shu instantly understood what that meant.

"An Embryo that's got Heat Absorption! Where'd ya *stock up* that one, huh?!"

"It was a little find in Caldina."

Despite the fire surrounding him, Sechs replied as though he was rather chilly.



Sechs's Superior Embryo was called "Nu," and its core trait was "transformation."

It gave him the power to transform into other people, copying their jobs, skills, and even their Embryos—the entities that were thought of as one with their Masters. That meant that by simply transforming a part of his body into that of another Master, he would essentially be transforming it into their Embryo as well.

He'd nullified Shu's first attack by turning his right arm into Shu's own to meet the strike. And for the incendiary missiles that had followed, he'd used Jötunheimr, a shield-like Embryo focused on Heat Absorption, which he'd acquired from an enemy he'd faced in Caldina.

The more transformations he had stocked up, the more cards Sechs had in his hand.

That was why his combat style was called "faceless."

Of course, it had its own share of weaknesses.

First of all, Nu's Embryo stat growth bonus was negative.

King of Crime was not a combat-oriented SJ and thus didn't have impressive stats to begin with, and since Nu's stat growth bonus further halved them, Sechs's own base stats were astonishingly lackluster.

Additionally, the transformation skill, Shapeshift, had several limitations.

First, it required him to take in actual cells. He couldn't add any Master or tian transformation into his stock without absorbing cells from their body in some way.

Second, it was limited to beings who actually *had* a physical form. He couldn't assume a body that resembled the spiritual kind of undead, nor could he copy Embryos of the Territory type.

Third, stocking up on transformations didn't give him any actual information about them. He didn't know what skills they came with or how they were used. Simply putting these transformations in stock did not mean he would automatically understand how to wield them, and to employ them optimally, he had no choice but to learn it from the sources themselves.

And then there was the fourth and final limitation: the fact that he could only transform into those who were “half of what he was.”

With Embryos, that meant half of his own Embryo’s form, rounded up. This meant that even as a Superior Embryo, Nu could only completely transform into Embryos *up to their third form*.

With people, he could only assume the shape of someone who had *half of his total job level or less*, meaning that to transform into the first-rate Masters who were far above level 1,000—such as Shu—Sechs had to have a total level of over 2,000.

If he didn’t fulfill this requirement—if his level was less than double that of his Shapeshift target—the resulting transformation’s precision, stats, and skill power would greatly suffer for it.

Also, if he were to transform different parts of his body into different people simultaneously, the limit would be calculated from the sum total of all of them. That made more extreme multiple-person transformations all but impossible.

As well, Sechs could only stock a certain amount of transformations at a time. The sum total level of all the available transformations in his stock could not exceed ten times his own total level. Any more and he would be unable to add new ones, making it necessary to get rid of others to make space. If he later wanted a transformation that he’d discarded, he would have to absorb the target’s cells again.

The way Nu’s transformations and storage worked meant that this Shapeshift skill required a great deal of levels.

Because of this, the powerful, chimera-like transformations that were possible in theory were in practice barred behind the impossibly high level limitations.

However, Sechs wouldn’t be the *King of Crime* if he didn’t break such expectations.



“...Look at how much heat it absorbs in just its third form,” said Shu.  
“That’s a good Embryo you picked up.”

“Embryos with a single focus are quite good at what they do even when they are low-rank.”

“Well, my Baldr does a lot, but nothin’ too great—and comin’ from *you*, that almost sounds like you’re makin’ fun of him!” Shu roared as Baldr fired its Twin Quintuple cannons.

Sechs responded by returning to his slime form and slithering into the cracks in the ground created by their first clash.

“Shapeshift: Gebrochen Schwert.”

A moment later, a blade thrust out of the ground. This was a copy of the sword-like Embryo that had a blade-extension skill—Nægling.

“Tch...!” And the right arm holding it...

“Sword Avalanche.”

...belonged to King of Swords, Foltesla.

What followed Sechs’s words was exactly what the skill’s name suggested—a literal avalanche of swords. The cascade tore the ground apart and even managed to slice into Shu’s leg, which was caught at the edge of the skill’s AoE.

“Gh!” The severed tendon almost had an impact on Shu’s movements, but the equipment on his legs acted as enough support to minimize the effect. His current gear was focused on keeping him fighting regardless of the situation. He’d assumed many things about how this battle could go, but he never once assumed that Sechs would never manage to hit him with an unexpected attack.

“When did ya get Foltesla?!”

“I stole a part of him away some time before he vanished.” Sechs’s arm, peeking from the wounded ground, was no longer Foltesla’s. It now looked noticeably aged.

Shu didn’t know who the arm belonged to, but he recognized the blaze burning right above it.

“You...goddamn...!”

After all, even the Arch Sage used this immensely powerful spell.

“Fixed Star.” This was the ultimate job skill of one of the strongest tian casters—King of Blaze, Feuer Lazburn. As a fire spell of the highest tier, few things could match it in pure firepower.

If the ball of flame landed, even Shu would melt away in an instant.

“RRAGH!” With a beastly roar, Shu kicked up the surface beneath him. His vast strength forced the very bedrock upwards, crashing into the incoming ball of flame.

The Fixed Star melted right through the bedrock, but before it could fully break through, Baldr fired a missile barrage at his rocky shield. With the bedrock reduced to pieces and melting away, the Fixed Star had lost a good amount of its power; it vanished within the explosion.

Before it could fully abate, though, Shu and Sechs were already making their next move.

Sechs transformed his body into that of a certain Master called “Juliet,” then grew out Hræsvelgr’s wings and took to the skies.

Shu used one of his equipment skills—Air Skip—to chase after him.

*...He just keeps turnin’ into things I don’t know!* Though Sechs hadn’t used a mix of forms yet, with Shu included he had already turned into three separate Superior Job owners. That number would go up to four if the owner of the ice shield was a Superior Job as well.

Those forms alone should've taken at least 5,000 levels of Sechs's available transformation storage.

That was perhaps the biggest issue here. When it came to Sechs's combat style, the level limitations on simultaneous use of multiple transformations meant little in comparison to the limit on how many forms he could have in his stock.

However, despite having already shown so many of his abilities, it didn't seem like he'd run out of cards to play quite yet.

...*What level is he now?* Shu wondered. It was already obvious that Sechs had to be at least double Shu's level.

He'd asked him about it once, and even back then, Sechs was *over level 2,000*.

This absurdly high level was all thanks to his Superior Job, King of Crime.



King of Crime was a job unlocked, as the name suggested, by committing countless crimes.

While even Murder Princess could theoretically be acquired by honest people, King of Crime was essentially exclusive to sinners.

The job had an ultimate skill that was simultaneously its *only* skill, and it was called "World Record."

This skill had multiple effects, among which was a stat bonus dependent on skill level, but that effect wasn't all that impressive—nor was it the skill's primary focus.

World Record's core feature was *the acquisition of XP—Resources—by committing crimes*.

While most people gathered Resources by defeating other creatures or completing job quests, King of Crime could do that through the

very act of sinning. And the greater the crimes—the worse a criminal the people of this world believed him to be—the more XP flowed towards him.

It was unknown where the Resources came from or what exactly counted as a grave sin, all of which served to make the skill rather mysterious. There was speculation that it relied on the hatred King of Crime received for his transgressions—specifically that the relevant negative emotions were converted into Resources and sent towards him.

Regardless, this was the *only* skill that the job had, and it was a skill that sped up the owner's leveling. Of course, each level-up provided more stats, but the job didn't have the growth of combat-focused Superior Jobs.

It seemed especially weak when compared to Draconic Emperor—another job defined by its high level.

King of Crime could be considered a vain, self-absorbed job that did almost nothing but increase the level's number.

It was as though the creator of the world was talking to the sinner, saying "This is all that you are."

Because of this, most people who became Kings of Crime died shortly after. After all, their stat growth meant they were no match for combat Superior Jobs.

However, things were different for Sechs Würfel.

He was the current King of Crime, and he was perhaps the biggest sinner out of all who had ever claimed the job, meaning that the experience given to him by World Record was simply immense in comparison to his predecessors.

Because of this, Sechs's current total level was 2,890.

This meant that he could freely transform into anyone up to level 1,449—and that his total transformation storage cap was 28,900 levels.

With the exceptions of over-leveled beings such as King of Beasts, The Earth, and Draconic Emperor, Sechs could become a replacement for just about anyone.

That was the true nature of his combat style—the one those who understood it called “faceless.”



*...What's he gonna do next?* Up until now, Sechs had been using partial Shapeshifting to assume forms Shu didn't know about.

However, that had its own flaws.

While such chimera-like transformations allowed Sechs to wield many and varied powers, the stat balance was all off.

Indeed—the transformed parts of his body had different stats than the others.

There would be no issues if he continued to use them for singular attacks like he had been doing until now, but keeping that up for too long ran the risk of making Sechs lose his balance.

Shu knew this, and what's more, Sechs knew that Shu knew this.

*Since he can transform into me even now that I've gotten my SJ and leveled up, his level's gotta be way bigger than I thought. Though...it's not large enough to let him transform into multiple SJs at once. That's why he's constantly changin' his arm.*

As he chased after Sechs, Shu analyzed the situation.

*I dunno how long he's gonna keep usin' the partial transformations, but when he figures out they're not workin', he's gonna use a full body one.*

When Sechs assumed the shape of another person, he matched them in almost everything, including stats—but excluding Embryo form. In addition to that, he would still be a slime, meaning that he would maintain his physical immunity and ability to split apart for multidirectional attacks. He might even be able to use the leftover levels for other transformations and skills.

If, for example, Sechs transformed into Shu, he would receive Shu's stats and resistances, as well as Baldr up to the third form, theoretically giving Sechs the upper hand in this fight.

However, both of them knew that that would've been a bad move.

Shu wasn't afraid of facing an enemy who was a perfect mirror of his own body, because he was confident that he could wield that better than anyone else. The advantages of being a slime also wouldn't mean much before Shu's Right of Destruction.

Additionally, Sechs didn't receive stat bonuses from his transformation target's equipment. His gear post-transformation would be either a mere mimicry of Shu's gear or simply Sechs's own equipment, and the stats and abilities would obviously be different as a result.

Though they'd seemed equal when their fists met on the first clash, Shu had actually won out because of the stat bonuses from his equipment. Sechs's World Record gave him enough of a bonus to prevent Shu from destroying him instantly, but the gap in their powers was evident regardless.

Also, Baldr's first three forms were hard to utilize in battles against powerful foes. Even Shu himself faced all major threats with either the first or the seventh.

The second form was lacking in pure firepower, while the third form was a pillbox that allowed for no mobility. The fourth, fifth, and sixth

had better maneuverability than the seventh, but in terms of firepower, they were certainly a downgrade.

Those were the reasons why even Shu only fought his strongest enemies with either the seventh or, if the situation was good for it, the first forms. And even the first also had the major drawback of being incredibly difficult to hit anything with.

Because of all that, becoming Shu entirely wasn't even an option for Sechs.

Whose form would he assume, then?

Would he combine someone's powers with his abilities as a slime?

Would he take the form of King of Swords, Foltesla?

Would he become King of Blaze, Feuer Lazburn?

Or would he shift into an SJ or Superior Shu had never even heard of?

The answer would now become clear.

"Shapeshift..." A moment later, Sechs's form changed...

*"King of Destruction."*

...and, betraying all expectations, he assumed the shape of his opponent.

Shock overcame Shu. It wasn't a choice he'd been remotely anticipating. After all, Sechs was unlikely to win against him while using the same character, so to speak.

Was he perhaps planning to send Shu flying and hit him with Strength Cannon while he was in midair and unable to dodge?

However, switching between transformations didn't reset the drawbacks each form suffered from. If Sechs fired Strength Cannon and missed, he would be unable to use it again in this battle.

Also, Shu currently had Air Skip active, so he would have some maneuverability in the air even if he was sent flying. It wouldn't be hard for him to avoid a ranged attack from someone whose AGI was the same as his.

That was exactly why he hadn't thought Sechs would even try to take this form. He knew Sechs had to understand all of this as well.

Shu was on edge, wary of where Sechs was planning to go from here.

"Heh heh..." King of Crime, wearing Shu's face, let out a little laugh.  
"I Take Countless Forms—Nu..."

He spoke, calling forth his—*Nu*'s ultimate skill. "...Schwarz Baldr."

And with those words, he transformed himself into a towering, jet black robot.



The greatest of Masters, tians, and even monsters rarely revealed all they were capable of.

The only ones who freely exposed their own cards were those whose craving for the limelight surpassed their caution. Those who were Superior or greater never showed the true aces up their sleeves to anyone, and they went the extra mile to hide them when dealing with Masters, who couldn't be silenced by death.

For example, The Earth—the Magical Apex—had only revealed two of the great spells he'd crafted, and there was always the possibility that there were actually five or more in total that he had access to.

King of Beasts—the Physical Apex—had also never shown anyone the combination of her Superior MVP reward and the ultimate skill that put her in her strongest form.

As those who matched these "Apices," both King of Destruction, Shu Starling, and King of Crime, Sechs Würfel had aces of their own as well.

The two had already fought too many times to count on both hands, but this was the first time Sechs had ever used his ultimate against Shu.



Still in the air, Shu was faced with *his own ace that he'd kept up his own sleeve*.

"...Yeah, it's about what I'd expect from your ult," he said.

At this moment, Sechs looked much like Baldr in his ultimate form. However, this version of the machine god was all black, like the primordial watery abyss from Egyptian mythology—the namesake of Sechs's Embryo.

"'Black Baldr,' huh? 'Schwarz Baldr' *really* doesn't roll off the tongue. What's with you and makin' everythin' German?"

*Then again, Baldr's from Norse mythology, so maybe "Schwartz" is just fine there*, Shu wondered as he dodged backwards. He used Air Skip and his immense STR to make some distance between him and the black machine god, who responded by firing countless missiles from his chest.

"So you took to the air to separate me and Baldr!"

Sechs's goal here was to fight Shu until the very end. That included doing all it took to win.

Shu was currently separated from his Embryo. While Baldr could still provide artillery support for Shu, he couldn't use his ultimate—which was the only thing he could do to stand a chance against the dark copy that no doubt also possessed the immense stats of the original.

Shu couldn't have used his ult until now because that had come with the risk of Sechs literally crawling inside him—that was what he had done to the UBM they'd cooperated against.

Now, however, it was clear that he had to use his ult as quickly as possible.

He would be fine as long as they were still in the air, since the machine god had no means of flying and couldn't use its stats to their fullest in this situation. All Sechs could do right now was fire missiles at Shu.

However, the moment he landed, Sechs could use the dark Baldr's full power to kill Shu in an instant.

"You're always a real hog when it comes to upkeep, but now that the shoe's on the other foot, I can see what a real pain in the ass you truly are," said Shu to Baldr.

"I am afraid I cannot agree," his Embryo replied.

Shu had actually anticipated that Sechs would use something like this, but there was something that even he had failed to anticipate.

Nu was an Embryo focused on transforming into other people, so it was obvious that its ultimate would be something that fit into that theme. And if it was more powerful than Shapeshift, one could easily expect that it would allow Sechs to employ even other people's Superior Embryos.

However, there was one thing that Shu had never seen coming.

"He's dodgin' the ult's goddamn payment!"

Sechs had transformed into Baldr *with* his ultimate active. However, normally, The Unmatched God of War—Baldr was a skill that used up an energy cell created within Baldr. Those energy cells could only be produced if Baldr spent a certain amount of time active *outside* of combat.

Because of this, even though Shu expected Sechs was capable of copying even Superior Embryos, he never thought he could actually use an ult with such strict conditions.

However, there he was, using The Unmatched God of War despite ignoring all of those restrictions.

He'd even used missiles right away, while the original Baldr had to spend time crafting them.

*...Did he cover the payment some other way?* Shu wondered. Since the price obviously wasn't paid with an energy cell, Nu's ultimate skill had to have demanded something else.

Something like this shouldn't be possible for cheap.

*It probably ain't just lots of MP or SP. Was the cost covered by somethin' produced over time, similar to Baldr's energy cells? No...Baldr himself needs both time and materials. Unlike him, Nu shouldn't have the default ability to produce stuff.*

Sechs had to have paid some sort of a steep price. In exchange, he was able to use a skill that either "drew out the full potential of the one he was transformed into" or "made him the strongest that *he knew* the person could be."

Though given their relationship, those two were one and the same when it came to Shu.

*What did he pay? It's powerful, so it's gotta cost a lot...an MVP reward?*

Shu was aware that Dryfe's duel champion, Hell General, Logan Goddhart, sacrificed MVP rewards to summon Mythical devils. Sechs surely had many such MVP rewards he could give away for his ult. However, Shu had seen no sign that he'd sacrificed anything of the sort before activating it.

*Is there a time-related limit, then? Can it only be used once every...I dunno, month?* It wouldn't be the only ultimate that had such a long cooldown. The leader of Caldina's Sefirot as well as Dryfe's Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin both had ults that functioned like that.

Slowly, over long periods of time, they accumulated the Resources necessary.

*Seems closer, but it doesn't quite cover everything. Nu's not the kind of Embryo to stock up on Resources. If anything, it's more likely to use... Ah!*

At that moment, two things came to Shu's mind.

First was the way Nu's Shapeshift functioned. It was a transformation ability entirely dependent on Sechs's total level.

The second thing was the Master he called "fox"—Tsukuyo Fuso.

Specifically, it was her job, High Priestess, and its *final* skill—Ulfaria Eltram.

"...I get it," he said with certainty.

Predicting the trajectories and avoiding the missiles coming his way, Shu glared at the black Baldr.

*"You sacrificed your levels, didn't ya?"*



The Superior Embryo, "Primordial Shifting, Nu," had an ult called "I Take Countless Forms—Nu."

This was a skill that sacrificed *the user* in exchange for giving him a different form. It allowed Sechs to select a transformation target he had stocked up and let him use all of their powers, if only for just thirty minutes.

It didn't matter if that meant using a Superior Embryo or a skill that required specific items to be used.

*However, using it caused Sechs to lose 500 levels.*

That was more levels than many tians could stand to gain even if they dedicated their whole lives to leveling. It was such a steep cost

that this could rightly be called a final skill—in the sense that it would often mean utter self-destruction.

Though Sechs had many levels thanks to World Record, this certainly wasn't cheap for him. His level was now 2,390. Since this ult had the same level conditions as Shapeshift, the next time he used it, he wouldn't even be able to take Shu's form again.

And if he used it too many times, Sechs *would no longer be able to become anyone or anything*.

Nu—and Sechs himself—would lose his purpose.

It was such a double-edged sword that it made perfect sense why he had never once used it against Shu.

And yet, he was using it now.



Shu silently considered his enemy. Sechs had used the War as an opportunity to challenge him, but he must've been preparing for this for a long time. He'd even stocked up on forms he could take and raised his levels so he would have enough. He wanted to fight Shu until the end, and with everything he had. He wanted them both to give their all—and for him to emerge victorious, having gained the understanding he so desired.

"...Fine." Shu had given a lot for this, and this was Shu's response:  
"I'll play the ace up my sleeve too."

Shu had two goals for this fight.

First, he wanted to beat Sechs and put an end to all the crime he'd been committing in Altar.

Second, he wanted to rush to the War between Altar and Dryfe to aid the kingdom's war effort.

He'd sent out a message suggesting that it was better not to expect him, almost certain that he wouldn't be able to participate in the War. Despite that, he hadn't given up on the possibility. After all, it wasn't impossible that he'd still be able to make it in time to assist in the War, and if the possibility wasn't zero—even if it was a tiny fraction of a percent—Shu would simply reach for it.

That was the kind of man Shuichi Mukudori was.

At this moment, however, he abandoned his second goal.

This wasn't him giving up, though. The man who was right now giving all he had was none other than Sechs Würfel—his rival, his foe, his friend, and his reflection—and Shu had simply decided to throw away all considerations outside of this and stop caring whether he'd have enough power left to spare once this battle was over.

He'd recognized that he also had to give his all against this enemy—and resolved to do just that.

"I'll use everythin' I got too. Though, just lemme repeat what I said," Shu said as he pointed at the black machine. "Don't think a little fight to the death's gonna be enough to *really* understand me."

That was another way of saying "you won't fulfill your goal either."

Hovering in the air, the dark god let out a roar. Just like the original Baldr, it must've contained Sechs transformed into Shu.

However, the entire machine was *also* Sechs. The doppelganger within was but a small part of the whole, and the roar of the dark god was not the loud workings of the machine, but Sechs's own voice.

As that sound shook the air itself, the armaments on the dark machine's chest, fingers, legs, *everywhere* opened fire.

It was indiscriminate, unbridled devastation. Like a god of destruction, the black machine ravaged its surroundings, defacing the already blasted land of the canyon even further.

As the storm of shells and fire rained down, Shu rushed towards Baldr, and Baldr rushed towards Shu.

Neither could evade every attack launched by the other. Gear and armor was damaged; blood and energy was spilled.

Eventually, the dark god landed, and Shu reached Baldr at the same time. The dark god kicked off the ground at supersonic speeds while Shu entered his Embryo. The dark god threw his deadly punch while Baldr assumed his robotic form. And ultimately, their fists clashed once more.



Launched from below, the steel god's fist welcomed the dark god's arcing punch.

The shock from the clash dwarfed the one before it. Its power was so immense that the walls of the canyon that had enclosed him until now *were completely blown away*.

The two gods in the center, however, didn't flinch at all.

In silence, these reflections of one another stared at each other.

One was the color of steel, while the other was of the deepest black.

A flawless, shining metal that bent before nothing and remained itself no matter what.

A chaotic darkness that sought itself and took on countless other colors on the way.

It was as though their colors represented their very natures.

Words were no longer needed between them.

The steel god kicked off the ground. The technique he planned to use now was "Nejirebana." The twisting of this right palm-strike was meant to drive the full force of his momentum into his foe.

In response, the dark god also stuck out his right arm.

A moment later, that same arm *began to turn at an extremely high speed*.

"Gh...!" The way the arm rotated was far too visceral compared to the way the steel god moved, based solidly in martial arts. The dark god's hand was instead turning from the wrist down like a drill.

Thus, the two twisting hands clashed. The steel god's right hand pulverized the dark god's, but its rapid spinning took two of the steel god's fingers.

*...Gotta be that thing's MVP reward,* Shu thought, instantly understanding what caused the spinning.

Just like Shu had some unique gear, so there was gear owned only by Sechs.

The MVP reward for the turning UBM they'd cooperated to defeat had gone to King of Crime, and Shu guessed that he'd just experienced a manifestation of its ability.

*Did he force his hand into that spin to mimic my Nejirebana? Is it a skill that lets him spin his body...? That seems a bit weak for a reward from that thing. Best assume this ain't all it can do.*

While Shu was thinking that, the dark god regrew his lost hand.

*...He's still a slime. No surprise he'd be able to do this much.*

The dark god was as strong as the steel god, but he was also a slime, letting him ignore all physical damage. Even though Shu's Right of Destruction enabled him to physically destroy Sechs, it didn't prevent *reconstruction* of those destroyed parts.

However, the damage had still made him lose some volume—or rather, his HP. Shu's attacks were not exactly ineffective here.

*Sechs can keep goin' in good condition for a while, but there's still a limit here—he can't have his actual volume drop below that of his transformation target. Not that that changes my plan.*

He would simply fight the dark god, whittle away at Sechs's HP, and eventually destroy him.

There was no other way than that, but...

*...I'll be at a disadvantage if this drags on,* Shu thought. While the steel god was a machine, the dark god was a slime that had means of healing himself. He was well aware that he couldn't win an endurance match. He had to make it quick.

And for that, he had to use the ace up his sleeve.

He'd already resolved to do just that.

"Ah...?!"

But before Shu could actually do it, the steel god found himself tripped up. As though hit by a sliding kick, the right leg he used to support himself was knocked off the ground, making him lose his balance and fall.

"This is...!" Looking down, he saw the shattered fragments of the dark god—a part of Nu—clinging to his right foot.

It didn't make sense, though, that such a small part could deliver enough power to make the steel god trip.

There had to be some other cause...

"So this is what the reward was for!"

...and Shu knew exactly what it was.

It had to be the Ancient Legendary MVP special reward, "Spinning Belt, Spindle." This item contained the power of the turning UBM, concentrated solely on making Sechs's body revolve quickly.

It wasn't *just* simple turning around, though. Its activation required no physical focal point, letting him turn along any vector even if he was midair.

Additionally, it allowed turning not only on *his own axes*, but also making his *surroundings turn* around a specified point in space.

Sechs not only had the UBM's Turning Space at his fingertips—that power was available even to the parts that had been separated from him.

Because of this, he was able to rotate things that he'd merely attached severed parts of himself to. The effect of the turning was weaker the less of his total volume Sechs used, so the amount

attached to the steel god wasn't enough to actually force Shu to spin—but it was enough to make him lose his footing and trip.

As long as part of Sechs clung to Shu, he simply couldn't move as he intended.

Even though he had Shu's body, Sechs didn't have his technique, and this was one of the ways that he intended to make up for that gap.

With a sound much like the one that had preceded it, the dark god threw another fist towards his destabilized enemy. Shu tried to raise his right hand to protect himself, but the part of Sechs attached to his right arm essentially negated his defensive movement, letting the dark god deliver his punch straight to his chest.

"Kh...!" That alone was enough to send a shock wave that reached even Shu in his cockpit, making the surrounding consoles release sparks and the entire frame audibly and visibly creak.

The punch that followed the first left the chest armor in ruins.

"Baldr!" That one word was enough for the Embryo to understand what his Master wanted.

A moment later, the steel god's chest *exploded*.

Stardust Genocider had been fired within the warped, shattered armor, behind unopened nozzles. The resulting explosion reached his own inner machinery, blew open the chest armor, and caught even the dark god unawares.

Shock overcame Sechs as he realized these were the same incendiary shells as before.

Even though he had equipment to mitigate some of the risk, he still had a slime's characteristic weakness to fire. The high temperatures almost made the dark god's surface melt, forcing him to jump away.

However, the steel god was in an even worse state. The armor over his chest was completely gone, and the damage had spread to the

other parts; the surface of the unit was covered in heat from the incendiary shells.

That was exactly what Shu had intended, however.

The intense heat enveloping him had made the bits of Sechs that were clinging to him melt away.

He'd chosen to harm himself just so he could remove what was hindering his movements.

Though, the price to pay was not exactly small.

"Total damage has exceeded 40%. All armor compromised. Serious damage to inner systems within the chest area. The Stardust Genocider in the chest area, as well as all Bloody Laser Storm slits within all armor, have been rendered unusable."

"Figured." They'd been punched by the god's own power twice, and suffered the self-destructive missile "launch." In fact, it was a miracle that the damage wasn't more than fifty percent.

However, this had completely eliminated his already low chances of winning a drawn-out battle. Even if his opponent had no means of healing, fighting him in his current state would mean utter defeat.

"Well, not like it changes what I'm doin'." Shu had already decided that he wouldn't make this an endurance battle. Sechs had used his pricey ultimate as well as his MVP reward, revealing every card in his hand. "Guess I'll lay it all on the table too." Right now, Sechs had both Shu's job and Embryo powers.

But that didn't mean that he had everything that Shu possessed. Though he could assume the forms of people or their Embryos, he couldn't transform into things—or more specifically, *items*.

It was a limitation on Nu's abilities, likely born out of Sechs's own nature.

Compared to the ability to transform into people and Embryos, it seemed like a trivial limitation. However, that was exactly what made it so important to Shu.

Sechs now exceeded the original in physical form and skills; this was the sole way in which Shu could still surpass him even now.

“Baldr... Rev up the Gamma.”

“Affirmative. Fatal Engine, Gloria γ, ignition.”

It was something just barely visible through the gaps of the destroyed chest armor—the place where a human’s heart would reside.

As though to make its origins clear, this “heart” looked quite different from most of the steel god’s inner workings, with an appearance more organic than mechanical.

It was King of Destruction, Shu Starling’s *final* card in the most literal sense of the word.

It was the *curse* left behind by the terrible dragon.

This thing that had been sealed away within this chest was now receiving energy from the steel god, making it roar in a way that made the very ground tremble.

Now awoken, the curse would seek its tribute, and that was exactly what made this his “final” card.

He had nothing to say about that. He’d already resolved to pay the price.

The War was barely on his mind anymore. He had no power or thought to spare for it.

He would give his *all* to this battle against Sechs.

Thus, he spoke the name of the power within the Fatal Engine, Gloria γ—the Superior reward left to him by the strongest dragon.

“The Dying Breath at World’s End: Gloria.” “Code, acknowledged.”  
Following Baldr’s response, the steel god...

“War God Ship, Baldr. Assuming Ragnarök Form.”  
...was reborn in a red-gold hue reminiscent of twilight.

## ***Chapter Nine: In Skies of Twilight and Dawn***

### *About Baldr*

Baldr was the god of light in Norse mythology, as well as the owner of the world's greatest ship—Hringhorni.

This was reflected in Shu's Baldr, as well. His first form was a weapon that fired a projectile of light, while the fifth, sixth, and seventh forms were all ships.

It was as though the final result of the Embryo's evolution had been fixed from the start. Perhaps Baldr had understood—or was made to understand—his Master's true nature even before Baldr was born.

However, there were a few other aspects that were core to Baldr's myth.

First, he was killed by his brother Höðr, who was tricked into doing it by the evil Loki.

Second, his death meant the disappearance of light and the beginning of Norse mythology's Twilight of the Gods—Ragnarök.

The Baldr of myth was instrumental to the beginning of the end—a sign of a coming calamity.

Baldr the Embryo, however, had never possessed anything like that—but *he did now*.

By defeating the overwhelmingly terrible Tri-Zenith Dragon, Baldr had received the Fatal Engine, Gloria γ. Taking the form of an extra engine within Baldr, it was never active and functioned as nothing but dead weight.

It was never active because activating it would mean the end of everything.

Once it was turned on, it would be covered in the red of heat and *the gold of the dragon*.

And that was when all would end.

That included the enemy, as well as...

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### *Twilight and Chaos*

The god cloaked in red and gold...the twilight god stood up.

Sechs had no idea what had caused his foe to assume this appearance. Was it an Embryo skill? A job ultimate? The effect of an MVP reward?

Regardless, this was a Shu that Sechs was not aware of.

Sechs had given his all and successfully forced Shu to play this new ace up his sleeve. Neither of them was holding back, and their fight was now more true than ever.

However, this still wasn't enough.

“Not yet...” Drawing out Shu’s full power wasn’t enough. He still had to fight him, understand him, and find out what made him *him*.

Sechs thought he could do it—felt he had to do it—and had challenged Shu for that exact purpose.

“Not yet...!”

That was why he couldn’t let it end here. He still had not gained anything.

A sound hard to describe rang out as the twilight god moved forwards once again.

Shu was now faster than the dark god even after Sechs had used an ultimate to match his speed.

It instantly became clear that Shu had used some sort of transformation skill that increased stats. If it was from an MVP reward, Sechs could never copy it, and if it was a job or Embryo skill, he didn't know how to activate it.

And so, he could do nothing to prevent the coming clash.

However, though his stats were lower than Shu's now, Sechs was still a slime and could rebuild his form. An injury or two was a small price to pay if he could learn more about his opponent.

Part of Sechs's fighting style involved understanding others through the violence they inflicted upon him. Because of this, what would happen next was an inevitability.

The twilight god threw his right fist at him, and the dark god welcomed it with his own. The resulting clash *made his right arm vanish without a trace*.

Even Sechs couldn't help but be shocked by this. In fact, it was so unexpected that the dark god trembled with raw emotion, an unusual sight for him. Sechs's counter punch not only wasn't enough to match Shu's—it was so weak by comparison that his entire arm shattered at the atomic level.

This wasn't simply due to Shu's Right of Destruction. It was the result of the unimaginable gap that had widened between their offensive abilities.

The slight increase in speed was only a small part of what made the twilight god what it was. His true value resided in his offensive power, unmatched by anything else.

The dark god, Sechs, had used his ultimate skill to match—no, *surpass*—Baldr in overall power. However, the twilight god's might was oppressive even to him.

“Shu! You...!” To gain Shu’s power, Sechs had sacrificed a whole 500 levels.

What, then, had Shu given away to gain power that surpassed even that?

“Nejirebana.” Instead of an answer, the twilight god followed up his attack with a palm-strike.

The dark god raised his left arm in defense, but upon impact it dispersed all the way to the elbow, and it did nothing to stop the palm from reaching his face, which was also reduced to atoms.

Shock overcame Sechs yet again. Losing his head wouldn’t normally be fatal to him. Nu the Type Body Embryo had no concept of a “weak point.” As long as his volume remained plentiful, attacks to his head or heart were no different from scratches.

However, two attacks from the twilight god had shaved away an extreme amount of Sechs’s body.

“So this is Shu’s trump card...” Sechs murmured. “This is so...”

A god of twilight, wielding immeasurable physical offensive power. Combined with KoD’s Right of Destruction, his limbs became weapons that could blow anything out of this realm. Even the dark god, who had copied the original Baldr and gained his defense, was unable to protect himself against this. Would Mythical metal withstand this? Would the “Invincible” Superior survive this? Sechs didn’t know the answer to either of those questions, but he did know one thing.

*I...Nu does not have anything left that can counter this...* Sechs thought. His slime body already had supreme physical defense, and even though he was weak to energy-based attacks, he could defend against them with Jötunheimr’s Heat Absorption or other abilities he had in stock.

Even so, the twilight god's attacks were far beyond anything he could use.

And since Shu now had the upper hand in skill as well as speed, Sechs couldn't even hope to fully evade his strikes. The most he could do was turn the attacks slightly aside, but even an edge that barely scraped him would reap his volume—his HP.

*Spindle is meaningless, as well,* he thought. Simply touching the twilight god would disperse the dark god at the atomic level, making it impossible for him to attach any pieces to Shu's body like he had been doing.

Through nothing but sheer power, Shu had rendered all of Sechs's resistances and strategies meaningless.

*...It must have been risky, though.* Since the twilight god's own limbs weren't shattering under the force of their own strikes, it must've been a skill that increased not STR, but the final attack power.

Despite that, Baldr's mechanical frame was covered in cracks all over.

The offensive power delivered by the twilight god traveled through the surrounding space, even damaging himself slightly. It wasn't a drawback specific to the skill, but a mere phenomenon caused by its natural function.

Still, it was obvious that it couldn't be used for an extended battle.

*A Superior MVP reward focused on a brief, decisive battle...* Sechs thought. He had a Superior MVP reward of his own, and in terms of compatibility he was actually above Shu.

His ultimate skill that cost 500 levels would only last 30 minutes, and he'd already lost a great amount of his total volume...but that didn't matter one bit. If he used his Superior MVP reward—Organ of

Rebirth, Gloria δ—against someone who could only fight briefly, he would *certainly* come out victorious.

To be more precise, he would *ultimately* come out victorious. That was how the reward worked.

It completely upset the basic idea that “you either defeat your enemies, or they defeat you.” It was pure treason against the very way *Infinite Dendrogram* worked, and it certainly wasn’t any weaker than Shu’s fearsome Gloria γ.

However, that wasn’t something Sechs could use now. Considering the nature of its owner, it was likely the most meaningless Superior MVP reward ever.

*...I suppose this was part of the reason why Rascal tried to stop me.* If they had waited until Gloria β became something he could use and their goal as Illegal Frontier was fulfilled, Sechs would finally be able to win no matter whom he was up against.

*But... However...*

“It does not matter to me whether I win or lose against Shu.”

Sechs wasn’t interested in coming out victorious to begin with.

That was why there was no point in waiting until he could fight against Shu and win. There was something far more important to him.

“He is so different from me. This is about whether I can understand him... That is *all!*”

Sechs was only after the results of an all-out, true battle between them—the clash of their souls. He was certain that these results could only be found at the conclusion of a battle in which both of them fought to the very last.

“And that is why...!”

He still had not gotten his answer, so he simply could not allow this to be over yet.

“I will not let this end here...! I cannot...!”

The dark god’s soul let out a panicked shout...

“SPLIT SPIRIT!”

...and used the last skill in his—Nu’s—repertoire.

The next moment, the dark god split into *six* of himself.

It was as though he had become the embodiment of chaos. This multiplication was caused by the last skill Nu had acquired.

Split Spirit was a skill that built upon Sechs’s ability as a slime to separate himself into parts.

It allowed him to split into a maximum of six iterations of himself while maintaining all the powers he had as one person. The drawback was that none of the resulting splits could transform into anything else, and the original’s HP was equally divided between them. That meant each of them represented only a sixth of the dark god Shu had been fighting until now.

Additionally, it had the demerit of semi-permanently reducing maximum HP.

Once the skill expired and the other splits vanished, Sechs’s max HP would not go back to what it was before. Instead, it would stay divided all the way until he came back from a death penalty.

To Nu, HP was equal to body volume—and for King of Crime, dying would mean being locked up in the gaol for an obscene amount of time. The risks of using this skill were quite extreme.

But Sechs had used it regardless.

Just as he’d sacrificed his levels, so did he sacrifice his life force...all so this fight would continue.

“Shu,” the embodiment of chaos—the six dark gods—all said in unison as they approached the twilight god.

Dashing, jumping, flanking, crawling, they attacked their opponent in a relentless assault that was impossible for him to defend against alone. Their cooperation was flawless in a way that only a group who were all one could achieve.

It wasn’t the drawbacks that had prevented Sechs from using Split Spirit. The skill was just most effective after he had used Nu’s ultimate to become someone overwhelmingly powerful.

Because of this, it was fair to say that the twilight god was currently surrounded by six fully realized steel gods.

“SHHEAH!” The twilight god retaliated by throwing a punch towards the first of them, “Eins,” who was heading directly for him. It sank into his chest and caused his entire upper body to vanish.

With their HP divided by six, a single punch from the twilight god was enough to take them out.

On the other hand, that meant that collectively, they were able to withstand a whole six of his attacks.

“Shu!” Zwei, the one who’d jumped, was approaching the opponent from above while swinging down with both hands for a crushing attack.

In response, the twilight god launched a kick with his right leg.

As he was faster, his kick blew away both of Zwei’s arms down to the elbow before they could reach him. He then accelerated his raised leg downwards, delivering an axe-kick that split Zwei in half.

That was when the attacks of the four remaining ones landed upon the twilight god. His armor shattered, and his left arm was cleaved from his body.

To the four remaining, this was confirmation of a certain fact. It was already obvious that Ragnarok Form didn't increase speed to the same extent that it increased attack power, and this proved that his defense also did not receive any such extreme bonuses. In fact, since the twilight god actually damaged himself with every attack, he might have actually been *more* fragile than before.

He could still be damaged if an attack connected, so...

"Shu."

Drei stood before the twilight god. Like a raging bear or a magnanimous king, he had his hands spread out as if to say, "Let us compare our strength."

The twilight god...Shu accepted this challenge.

He had to punch and obliterate all of them regardless of anything else. Since Ragnarok Form didn't enhance his potential for wide-area extermination, anyone as powerful as the steel god had to be dealt with with his own fists.

The twilight god kicked off the ground and approached Drei. Drei stood no chance against one who surpassed him in speed and technique, and the twilight god could waste no time grappling with him.

He threw a punch from his right, causing Drei's upper body to disintegrate on contact just like Eins.

The next moment, Drei's outstretched arms let out a powerful light.

"Gh...!" This was a light so bright it burned the eyes and caused temporary blindness, and Shu instantly recognized it.

"F Warheads!"

It was one of Baldr's weapons—missiles that released intense light that made it impossible to see. He'd used it himself against Gloria.

“Tch...!” Since the dark god possessed the steel god’s stats and could use everything he could, Shu did know Sechs could fire such special warheads, but it still surprised him to see them delivered from the arms. They were normally fired from the chest, which he had obliterated with his attack.

He only needed a moment to understand how this was done, though.

Although Drei *looked* like Baldr, he was actually Nu. Because of this, it was no surprise that he could move the F Warheads through his liquid body to fire them from elsewhere.

This tactic paid off, and Shu was briefly blinded. Before Baldr could repair his burned-out visual sensors, an impact shook the twilight god.

“SHUUU!”

That was the voice of the fourth—Vier. He’d used the opening created by the flash to cling to the twilight god with both his arms and legs.

It almost made Shu lose his balance, but besides that, it meant little. Vier couldn’t attack from this position. The twilight god, on the other hand, had more than enough power to instantly make another split vanish. All he had to do was throw the punch.

“Ah...!”

However, that was soon made physically impossible.

While the visual sensors were still fried, from inside the twilight god’s cockpit Shu felt as though the world was flipped upside down.

And that was exactly what had happened—up had become down and down became up.

“This is...!” Shu said. The twilight god, as well as Vier still sticking to him, had both begun to spin.

Shu already knew what was making this possible.

“Again with that MVP reward...!” Spinning Belt, Spindle—the MVP reward that let Sechs rotate his body. A small part of Sechs could only make his opponent lose his balance, and it was difficult to attach to the twilight god he was now.

This was different, however. Vier was the same size as the twilight god, and he had stuck his entire body to him. That made it possible to force both of them to spin at extremely high speeds, rendering Shu incapable of doing anything.

His immense stats could only be put to use if he had his feet on the ground.

This was almost a reverse of the situation when the dark god first appeared. However, there were two key differences.

First, the high-speed spinning made it uncertain what the twilight god would actually hit if he swung his fist. He was just as likely to punch himself instead of Vier, which would cause a great deal of damage.

Second, there were still the fifth and sixth—Fünf and Sechs.

As the twilight god spun, his sensors began to recover, and he saw his two other opponents.

The dark gods were both in the *exact same pose*.

“Ah...!” Shu knew what that pose meant. “They’re usin’ the World Breaker!” The *final* ultimate skill of King of Destruction, World Breaker. It was a sure-kill attack that combined the immense attack with Right of Destruction to demolish space itself, ensuring the destruction of both the target and the user.

Fünf and Sechs were both preparing to launch it at the twilight god at the same time. A direct hit would be fatal even for him.

Not saying a word, Shu considered Sechs. He realized that his opponent was planning to end the battle.

This was the climax.

However, Shu had no means of escaping Vier's grip. Stuck in the air, he couldn't make use of his stats, and all of his firearms had been destroyed.

"I can't move or even touch the ground, huh?" Shu mused.

However...

"I can still reach the sky."

Following those words, the twilight god made a fist.

He wouldn't target Vier, nor would he brace for Fünf's and Sechs's attacks.

He would instead shatter the very space in front of him.

That was all that he needed.

"Shu," Fünf and Sechs both said as they rushed towards him.

"World Breaker," Shu replied, before they reached him.

That moment was the end of everything.

The final ultimate was launched with all the attack power of the twilight god behind it.

The resulting destruction of the surrounding space engulfed everything around it.

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Nowest Canyon was a dead land.

The battle between the Superiors and the SUBM had changed its landscape, destroyed its trade routes, and the Fatal Field had wiped out all life it had once had.

However, despite all of this, it could still be called a “canyon.”

That was no longer true, as *everything here had vanished*.

In its place was a gaping crater, as though it had been the site of a mortar strike, making it impossible to imagine that a canyon had ever stood here.

Now, the area was no longer worthy of its name. The Newest Canyon had come to an end.

But despite that...

“...Guess it’s down to this one.”

“It seems so...”

...there were still people standing here.

One was King of Destruction, Shu Starling.

After having lost the left arm to his opponent, he’d now lost his right to his own World Breaker—it had completely vanished. The twilight god’s armor was mostly gone as well, and he was only barely standing on nearly broken legs.

He’d used the strongest World Breaker in history, and it was a mystery how he survived. Was it the slightly increased defense? Or did even this skill, which seemed synonymous with the user’s death, have some degree of consideration for its king?

The second figure was King of Crime, Sechs Würfel.

Only the sixth of the dark gods was left, and even he would’ve vanished if he hadn’t used the fifth as a shield. What had happened to the fourth, who was at the epicenter of this destruction, is hardly worth mentioning...

That wasn’t to say that the one still standing was in a good state, though. There was almost nothing left of him now, and he could only barely maintain his shape.

Split Spirit had an extra effect that helped maintain the shape and size of the splits even if they lost volume. Without it, Sechs would've already crumbled.

A single attack from the other would be enough to fell them both.

"So...do you understand?" Shu asked. Only silence answered him. It was obvious what the question was about. He asked if this battle to the death, soon to end, had helped Sechs understand Shu.

The answer to that was...a complete denial.

"...No. I feel like I am close to grasping it, but I cannot... I do not understand. I thought I would, so why...?" said Sechs, struggling to comprehend what he was still missing.

"Yeah. Thought so. Of course you wouldn't understand," Shu replied.

"Why?"

"The goddamn fact you'd even ask that..." Shu let out a sigh before continuing. "I'm not just about fightin', and we're not just about killin' each other."

Sechs couldn't say anything in response. Shu was a person who was often caught up in all kinds of trouble, and he'd resolved many problems through combat.

However, his life wasn't all about fighting.

He lived in *Infinite Dendrogram* as no one but himself.

He wore an animal costume and handed out candy to children.

He sometimes cooked food and brought it to his friends at the castle.

He was occasionally invited to party with his friends and acquaintances.

He didn't live in this world *just* as a warrior. His peaceful days were as much a part of him as those of strife.

And that included the days he'd spent with Sechs.

"There's no way you can fully understand me by *just* fightin' me to the death."

Sechs was still speechless. Shu seemed completely right.

In fact, one could say that Sechs's very idea that he could understand Shu by "giving his all and making their very souls clash" was logically inconsistent.

"...Why?" said Sechs, completely dumbfounded.

"Ya wonderin' why ya didn't realize it earlier? I think I know," said Shu.

"Why?"

"It's 'cause for you, both here and on Earth, human relationships and exchanges of life are one and the same." Sechs had revealed that he was an organ transplant clone—a life made solely to be given away to the original. And after the original died, his life became solely about passing on his genes—continuing this lineage of life.

And even here, his first act of freedom was to roll the dice that would set his way of life, and it landed on the path of evil.

Because of that, exchanges of life were normal for him.

"You always lived under the assumption that everythin's about taking life or having it taken away from you. Your thinkin's messed up on a fundamental level."

"...Hah hah..."

There were two reasons for the laughter that escaped Sechs's lips.

First, he laughed because he was disappointed in how off-the-mark his methods were.

And the second reason for his laughter was...joy.

*He...Shu understands me so well... His true self was something that even Sechs himself couldn't truly comprehend, yet even he had someone who really understood him...and that realization made him happy.*

So happy, in fact, that he was tearing up.

*I still cannot understand Shu. But even so...I am sure that I will only know myself if I keep involving myself with him. And on top of that...*

Even though he knew his methods were wrong, he wouldn't change the way he was. He had no intention of giving up on his goal of understanding Shu, nor would he stop walking the path of evil that he'd chosen.

If he'd compromised that side of himself, after all, he would never achieve what he wanted—to understand the man who *never* compromised himself.

"So, yeah... You should try somethin' besides crime now," said Shu. "Take up cookin' or whatever."

"You will not tell me to *stop* committing crimes?"

"You won't budge on that no matter what I say or how hard I kick your ass."

"...Heh heh." *He truly knows me well*, Sechs thought, smiling.

"Now..."

"Yeah."

Thus, Shu and Sechs—the gods of twilight and darkness—faced each other.

"Let us settle this."

"Yeah. Time to end this."

Both of them dashed towards each other. There was no strategy and no tactics—nothing like that at all—in their actions...

With bodies on the brink of collapse and life that could be extinguished by a gust of wind, the two charged forward, each intent on delivering the first blow.

The dark god may have had the upper hand simply because he still had all his limbs. With no arms and barely working legs, the twilight god could hardly make use of his speed advantage.

“SHUUUUU!” And so, the dark god swung his fist.

“SEEEECHS!” The twilight god threw up the remains of his shattered leg.

Thus, the final shock wave resounded through the brightening morning sky.

Both of their attacks connected.

The dark god’s fist blew off the twilight god’s head.

And the twilight god’s leg split apart the dark god’s torso.

To a human, both of these attacks would’ve been fatal.

However...

“...Shu.”

“Yeah?”

The dark god’s body was beginning to crack, spreading from the gaping split in his torso.

And then, his body shattered and started to dissolve into tiny sparks of light.

“Let us meet again.”

“...Sure.”

At this point, Shu had left Baldr and stood watching Sechs vanish with his own eyes.

“And...let us fight again.”

“...Haven’t learned your lesson, huh?”

“No.”

“...Well, whatever. Just don’t do any of this blackmail type shit again... I feel like I said that to Humpty once.”

“Heh heh... Very well. I will have my rematch...under different circumstances.”

“Well, it’s not like ya lost here, really. It’s a draw.”

“Hm...?” All that was left of the dark god by now was his head, and it was tilted—intentionally or otherwise—in a questioning manner.

That was when the twilight god lost his light and assumed an ashen color before starting to disperse like dust.

“Time’s up for me too.” Shu’s own body was becoming bits of light as well. That confirmed Sechs’s suspicions about this power being one that came at a heavy cost.

“...For me, this is still defeat,” Sechs insisted.

“Well, aren’t you stubborn?”

“Heh...” Sechs laughed as he was reduced to nothing but droplets...

“I suppose...that is just...*who I am...*”

...and ultimately vanished.

The kingdom’s worst criminal, the leader of the Illegal Frontier—King of Crime, Sechs Würfel, was thus sent to the gaol.

“You don’t need me to be your mirror... I know you’ll find yourself one day, on your own.” Shu’s rival, friend, and reflection was no longer here to hear his words. “Anyway... I wonder what’s gonna

happen now.” As he was also dissolving into light, he looked up at the sky.

“I hope Altar’s still around when I come back. Worst-case scenario, this and that’ll happen with Theresia and it’ll all be over... Though, I guess Dormouse’ll do somethin’ about it then.”

He spoke as though he wouldn’t be around for a while.

“Only god knows what the world’ll be like in a *month*, huh...? What a sick joke.”

And with those final words, Shu and his Embryo vanished just like Sechs and Nu.



### *About Baldr*

There was another story about the Baldr of Norse mythology.

After Loki’s trickery had caused his death, he was given a chance to come back to life—but for that to happen, everyone in the world had to weep for him.

Loki also prevented this resurrection. Thus, countless winters passed by with Baldr still deceased. He only came back to life after Ragnarök had destroyed the world and paved the way for a new one.

It was not exactly based on this story, but the Fatal Engine’s skill—The Dying Breath at World’s End: Gloria—had *two* drawbacks.

First, it guaranteed the user would take a death penalty in five minutes. It not only destroyed the Embryo it was installed into, but also killed its Master.

However, this was the lighter of the two drawbacks.

The second one was far worse, as it *increased the death penalty tenfold*.

Normally, avatars would come back in 24 hours of Earth time, but this drawback made it so he could only come back after *240 hours*.

That was thirty days in *Infinite Dendrogram* time—a whole month.

Shu knew well what it meant to use this during the War, and that was exactly why he'd had to steel himself to disregard everything besides his battle with Sechs.

King of Destruction, Shu Starling's avatar would be rebuilt and returned to this world after a month had passed within it. The First Knight-Machine War would already be over by then, and the king, the commander of the Royal Guard, and many others would be lost forever.



That was how the battle ended.

Shu defeated Sechs, and Sechs was defeated by Shu.

However, Shu was unable to rush to the battlefield and aid in the War effort, while Sechs, despite getting the clash of souls he'd wanted, still could not truly understand Shu.

Sechs had insisted this was his defeat, while Shu saw it as a draw.

It was hard to say that either of them was wrong.

Nevertheless, this was the end of the battle that happened behind the scenes of the First Knight-Machine War.

However, it marked the beginning of a new battle...for the both of them.

# **Epilogue**

*King of Destruction, Shu Starling*

Hearing songbirds from somewhere, I opened my eyes.

My sight was hazy, but I could tell that I'd just woken up.

"...I was sleepin', huh?" It seemed like I'd dozed off while thinkin' 'bout the past. That might've been why I had a dream that was so damn nostalgic—a dream of the last time I met that guy.

"Achoo...!" As my consciousness was roused, so was the rest of my body, and I quickly started to feel cold. Gideon's nights were on the warmer side, but sleepin' without even wearin' my suit really wasn't a good idea.

"Should've saved my deep thinkin' for after I got back to my room..." My END was in the four digits, so I couldn't get sick from a li'l bit of sleepin' outside, but that didn't stop my body from gettin' cold.

I used Instant Wear to switch to my usual costume. As I did, the sky became brighter as the sun began to rise.

"Hm?" Looking down at the arena, I saw Reiji and Rook come out of the entrance. Both of them were fully geared, so it seemed pretty clear they were about to do some final optimizations before today's Tournament.

He got Rook to be his sparrin' partner. Even at this stage, Rook's Union Jack gave him the stats and skills to match first-rate Masters. He even had three options to choose from dependin' on what he wanted—Marilyn for the big muscle and tankiness, Audrey for flight and ranged attacks, and Liz for physical attack negation and high-speed offense. Rook was more than good enough to play the part of a powerful enemy Reiji might meet in the Tournaments.

“Hrm...” I watched as the two started sparring inside the duel barrier. The barrier was set to accelerate what was happenin’ in there, but I could clearly see Rook in his Dragon-Devil-Man form and Reiji fightin’ against him.

I didn’t know whether Rook had chosen this transformation ’cause he was simply tryin’ them in order, or if he felt like Metal-Devil-Man was bad against Reiji ’cause of his fixed damage attacks and fire elemental affinity.

There was a clear gap in their stats, but Reiji was keepin’ up.

He began by goin’ on the defensive, usin’ Reversal to counter the potential debuffs; then, once he had enough damage stored up, he switched to Chaser and targeted Rook’s AGI, lettin’ him go on the offensive.

He used his twin swords to fight against Rook’s lance, but as Dragon-Devil-Man, he had such high stats that Reiji couldn’t damage him much. His only real ways of attackin’ him were the Miasmaflame Bracers and Vengeance.

Instead, though, he used Instant Equip to take out *that* axe.

“Right after he said he wouldn’t use it,” I muttered. “Well, there’s the barrier, so I guess he’s just tryin’ it out.”

It was worth testing it to see if it was usable in the tourney. Equipping it didn’t seem to do much at first. So far, he was only usin’ it like a shield, defendin’ against Rook’s lance attacks.

Though, if my predictions were correct...

“Oh.” Suddenly, a roaring sound.

A sonic shock wave so explosive that it passed the barrier reached my ears, and the axe was spinning in the air, free of Reiji’s grip.

Actually, the right arm that was holdin’ it until a moment ago *had been blown away and reduced to dust*.

Reiji'd probably tried to switch from usin' the axe for defense to attackin' with it, but he couldn't even swing it at Rook—his arm shattered when he just raised it up.

"...Well, that's usually how it goes with cursed weapons." Usin' them was always a huge risk, and when it comes to that, that goddamn axe was the worst one I'd ever seen.

My Gloria γ could also be classified as cursed gear, but I felt like even that wasn't as bad as that axe there.

...Anyway, it seemed pretty clear that he wouldn't figure out how to wield it before today's tourney.

The two were silent, both clearly surprised by what had happened to Reiji's arm, but it didn't stop Rook from loppin' off his head.

*Not holdin' back one bit, huh? I thought. Well, I'm the one who taught him to be like that.*

That was the end of their first match, and the barrier disappeared. Barrier duels ended when one side's HP dropped to 0, and Death Soldier's Last Command didn't mean anythin' in this situation.

Even if it did activate, though, he wouldn't be able to do much with his head separated from the rest of his body.

...Maybe that was the reason Rook decapitated him?

"...I loooost!" Reiji cried.

"Ah hah hah," Rook chuckled. "That was basically an accident."

Reiji's arm had returned, makin' him whole again.

I'd kinda expected the axe's curse to be the kind that persisted even outside barriers, but it seemed like it wasn't.

"...Looks like I'll have to seal it away for now," Reiji said.

"Indeed," Nemesis agreed. "This one will need to have more of its curses dispersed before I would deem it safe in your hands."

Reiji then hesitantly and carefully put the axe away in his inventory...

“...All right! Let’s do it again!”

...and went for a rematch as though it was nothin’.

I knew they were just sparrin’, but you’d expect one to be more shaken by the fact that he had his damn arm blown away.

Then again, he’d sparred with Figgy and other rankers plenty of times now. Was that why he was like this now?

“...Nah.”

How long had it been since he’d first arrived here? It was over a month in real life, and he was just not a newbie anymore.

He’d fought a whole bunch of tough enemies, and either overcame them or hadn’t broken when he failed.

And throughout all of it, he’d gained experience and grown stronger.

His level had grown, and so had his technique.

Despite all that, there was one thing that had stayed the same—he was always a guy with a strong heart, and that hadn’t changed one bit.

Despite his weaknesses and wounds, he’d always remained strong.

Sechs said that I had a strong sense of justice. If you asked me, Reiji was the one with a strong heart, and that was no different even here.

And to match his strong heart, he was given power in the form of his Embryo—Nemesis.

“Still...not now.” It was still *too early*. It wasn’t the time yet.

“...Is this how Sechs felt?” Had King of Crime had similar thoughts while I was hardstuck as a high-rank job?

“Hm...”

And if that fight before the War was the battle he'd wanted, when would *my* desire come true?

With such thoughts in mind, I watched Reiji and Rook continue to spar.



### *Gaol*

That morning, the gaol was a very silent place.

This was thanks to King of Plagues, Candy Carnage's bacteria having exterminated nearly all the Masters in the town, as well as Gerbera getting rid of everyone who'd somehow survived.

The only ones in town who were still alive were members of Illegal Frontier, and the only one currently here—in their café, Dice—was Sechs.

The other two were nowhere in sight, and his Prism Person—April—was in his inventory, leaving him all alone.

Completely silent, he was seated in one of the café's chairs and...sleeping.

He'd spent last night closing up shop.

Now that he'd decided to leave the gaol, he would never return here again, but since he had some memories of the place, he'd decided to clean it up.

All the tables and chairs besides the one he was using were already in his inventory. As though to not leave behind a bad impression, he'd stored away all the tableware and furniture.

The only exception was the clock on the wall.

"...Morning already?" The clock was pointing at six and the light of dawn began to spread as Sechs woke up.

Even the gaol had a day-night cycle, as well as its own weather. Like a colony ship from a sci-fi story, it had a fully functional artificial environment.

Red King was not the only one responsible for that, however—the other control AIs were no doubt lending him their aid.

However, Red King was the only one who would be concerned with what Sechs was about to do.

From their perspective, that was yet another manifestation of freedom. Their stance could be described as “do it if you think it possible.”

“...What a nostalgic dream that was.” Sechs had dreamed about his memories from right before he’d been sent to the gaol again—the last time he’d met and fought Shu. The remnants of the sensations brought about by that dream made Sechs smile without realizing it.

He’d believed that he could find himself through that battle, and that if he and Shu—someone radically different from him—would clash on such a soul-connecting level, then even a nobody like Sechs would perhaps develop a “self.”

However, Shu had clearly told him that it would never work—and indeed, Sechs didn’t feel as if he had anything that he could call “himself.”

If he did possess such a thing, he didn’t even know how to tell. From his point of view, he had remained unchanged.

However, there were some things that were different...or, more specifically, things about *him* that were different.

After that battle, he’d tried focusing on things other than the evil he’d established as his guiding principle. Just like Shu had suggested, he’d begun doing things he hadn’t done before.

This café was the result of that.

He'd learned coffee-making, dabbled in glasswork, and opened up this establishment. Like a model prisoner, he'd also participated in Red King's events. He'd read books and even wrote his thoughts about them.

Ironically, he'd led a far more respectable life in the gaol than anywhere else, including his real life.

He spent his days here—talking to acquaintances, hanging out with allies, and occasionally dealing with all kinds of trouble.

One could say that his life here was much like Shu's.

The thing known as the “self” was something gradually built by going through life like that. Perhaps if he'd stayed here far longer than he had, Sechs may have eventually found that elusive “himself” he was looking for.

However, his days here were about to end.

“Now...” Sechs said as he looked at the clock, which showed that it was slightly past six in the morning. “I will be departing this place in less than six hours.”

He then stood up and walked out of the café.

Once outside, he lightly jumped and sprouted a pair of wings.

They were Juliet's Hræsvelgr, which he'd had in his stock since before he was sent to the gaol. During his time inside he'd changed his “loadout” many times, but this was among his forms that remained, just as Shu's had.

Silently, he flapped the black wings to take to the gaol's sky, a clear firmament that seemed to continue forever.

However, Sechs knew full well there was a wall one thousand metels up.

Despite appearances, the gaol was nothing but a cage and a nest.

It was a cage because you could not leave until you did your sentence, and no one so far had escaped it.

It was a subspace nest, created by the Embryo once known as the “Incarnation of Cages.”

Looking down at this tiny world, Sechs said to himself, “Though small, it still had everything.”

The gaol was a feature meant to quarantine the most sinful of Masters.

It was made to encourage the growth of the innocent Masters who fought against criminal Masters, as well as the growth of criminal Masters trying to avoid imprisonment.

By spurring both sides to struggle, the gaol was something that accelerated Master evolution across the board.

That was also why even if you were defeated and quarantined here, you still had access to most everything you needed.

There was a town. There were dungeons. There were rare items. There were job crystals from all countries.

And though there were no tians, there were still other Masters you could make friends with...or fight.

Because of all that, even here you could experience growth.

Growth for those trying to deliver sinners to the gaol.

Growth for the sinners trying to avoid the gaol.

And growth for the sinners already sent into the gaol.

This, too, was another system through which they tried to create one hundred Superior Embryos.

And it was not without success—there were two Masters who had become Superiors while imprisoned in the gaol.

It was a cage to quarantine the criminals, as well as a nest to help the quarantined grow.

To Red King, the prisoners were like little chicks—Embryos that had not yet become Infinite. And the reason he let them do as they liked was because he was certain they could never escape.

And so, at the top of this cage-nest, Sechs looked down on the empty town—the gaol as a whole—and said, "...Today, I say goodbye to this place."

His sentence would keep him here for many centuries to come. The day when he could leave the ordinary way was obscenely distant.

Thus, the means he would use would be that of a sinner...the path of evil.

"Red King." He looked up at the sky-ceiling, as well as the entity who was surely behind it, looking down at him as well as the rest of the gaol.

"Today, I leave."

It was a declaration of a coming prison break.

The first reason why he'd sprouted wings and flown to this height was to take one last look at this microcosm—which he intended to never see again—and burn the sight into his memory.

The second was to declare that he, a fledgling bird, would seek freedom from this cage and leave it.

He already had his wings.

This bird no longer needed a nest.

As dawn broke on the first day of The Tournaments in Gideon, some of the gaol's inhabitants would soon attempt the impossible.

They would commit the cardinal sin of organizing a prison break.



# **Afterword**



**Cat:** "Hmm... Hrmm..."

**Xun:** "Time fOr the afterword. I'm 'Xun,' shOrt for 'Xunyu.'"

**Fox:** "And I'm the 'Fox,' Tsukuyo Fusooo! Just so y'all know, the Bear and Sechs are on a break this time."

**Xun:** "Guess thEy're tired from what happenEd this volume... Anyway, Chesh, whAt're ya groanin' fOr?"

**Cat:** "Oh. I'm the 'Cat,' Cheshiiire! And I'm a biit troubled right nowww..."

**Xun:** "Why's thAt?"

**Cat:** "There's a problem with this afterword..."

**Xun:** "A problEm?"

**Cat:** "...We got a whole seven pages left, but no real subject to spend them on. We're out of things to talk about."

**Xun:** "It's an aftErword. Do we really nEed 'em?"

**Cat:** "A-Anyway, let's use this to give out a couple tidbits! You two will reveal some info relevant to the volume that the volume itself missed! You first, Xunyu!"

**Xun:** "You're not bEin' reasonablE...but all right, I'll dO it."

**Cat:** (I didn't even have to convince her... She's so nice.)

**Xun:** "Ray's group gOt an arena, so I guess I'll tAlk about how duelin' wOrks in Altar and elsewhEre."

**Fox:** “Is it that different in other places? FYI, I already know that Granvaloa doesn’t have arenas.”

**Xun:** “Yeah, thAt was brought up in VolUme 17. I’ll talk abOut other countriEs. First of all, those who stArted in Altar woUldn’t know this, but the kingdOm’s arena situatiOn ain’t normal.”

**Fox:** “That so?”

**Xun:** “Ya gOt way more of ’em than any othEr country. You can actuAllY add up all the arEnas everywhEre else and yOu’d still have less thAn Gideon by itself. Even oUr Huang He has just threE of ’em, each in a diffErent town.”

**Fox:** “Meanwhile, Gideon alone has thirteen...”

**Xun:** “And sincE Huang He’s arenAs prioritiZe events and rAnked matches over anythin’ elsE, ya get way fEWer chances to spAr or do some secrEt trainin’ than in AltAr. Rentin’ thEm ain’t as easy, so you almOst never get tO test out your skills bEhind a barrier that dOesn’t show what’s gOin’ on inside. That’s whY you gotta do yoUr secret trainin’ deEp in the mountains and away frOm people, even if thAt comes with thE risk of givin’ you the deAth penalty. And there’s obviOusly no barrier, so yoU also don’t get bAck your MP, SP, items, or whAtever else your skills usE.”

**Fox:** “Now that just sounds painful.”

**Xun:** “Huang He’s a lAnd with lots of placEs good for trainin’, thOugh. One of our SuperiOrs, Ming She, bAsically lives in thE mountains. Anyway, ’caUse of all that, I like GideOn a good bit. It’s grEat to always have accEss to an arena. It’s alsO why I’m pretty jealoUs of Ray’s groUp for gettin’ one fOr a base.”

**Cat:** “It’s actuallyyy the first time an arena has become the HQ of a claaan!”

**Xun:** “By the wAy, though things arE about the same in thE rest of the coUntries besides Granvaloa, in Tenchi, yA got people riskin’ thEir lives in duElS outside of barriErS like it’s nOrmal.”

**Fox:** “Well, it *isn’t* normal. There’s gotta be something wrong with them.”

**Xun:** “Why’s Gideon got sO many arenas, anyway? Care to tEll me, devcat?”

**Cat:** “We’re not fit to answer thaaat... Just like the Primeval Blade and jobs, they’ve been around since before we got involved, so we just don’t know.”

**Xun:** “...Y’all arEn’t that good at runnin’ this shOw, huh?”

**Cat:** “I don’t think I can disagreeee... But there is a reason why they’re spread out like this.”

**Xun:** “Hm?”

**Cat:** “The arenas that are around now are the ones that remained intact even after we got involved. And out of the places that had multiple arenas grouped up, Gideon just happened to be the only one that stayed exactly the way it waaaas.”

**Xun:** “...That rAised more questions thAn answers, but I wOn’t ask.”

**Cat:** “Thank youuu. Please dooon’t.”

**Fox:** “Anyway, it’s my turn now. I’ll say a thing or two about bases in general. First of all, a base can be literally whatever—cabins, mansions, anything. A base is a base. There’s even clans that use ships. And the bigger clans tend to have more proper bases.”

**Xun:** “I’m not in a clAn, so lemme ask... WhAt’s the point of a basE, anyway?”

**Fox:** “This is more about buildings in general than just bases, but they can have all kinds of bonuses. For example, they can increase

the rate of MP and SP regeneration, or give production quality or success rate bonuses to crafting jobs. My Lunar Society's base reduces the MP cost and cooldowns of healing spells, so we don't have to worry even if we get a lot of patients at once!"

**Xun:** "That makes yoUr base sound less like a rEligious place and more like a hOsptial."

**Fox:** "*Dendro*'s religious institutions are all about clergymen grouping healing skills to begin with. Most of them function like hospitals."

**Xun:** "Oh, that sO?"

**Fox:** "I wasn't there back then, but our base was actually very busy during Volume 15."

**Xun:** "Your group's a rEal pain in the ass fOr Altar, but it's lOokin' like nOt havin' you around woUldn't be tOo good either..."

**Cat:** (That's exactly what makes them so baaad.)

**Cat:** "Anyway, that filled in the pages. With that done, it's time for the comment from the author!"

**Xun:** (He was being serious about that...?)

Dearest readers, thank you for your purchase. I am the author, Sakon Kaidou.

Volume 18 came later than planned, but I hope you enjoyed it in spite of that.

It was originally set to release in March, but we had to delay it by a month for quality assurance reasons, and I deeply apologize for making you wait.

However, it was because of this delay that I was able to polish the text and, more importantly, Taiki was able to deliver such wonderful illustrations for this volume. My personal favorites are the color

illustration depicting the clan and the one finally showing Baldr in all his glory.

Speaking of Baldr, his design was actually created during the airing of the anime.

Since the anime only covered everything up to Volume 5, it only showed Baldr in his battleship form, but the robot form was actually designed first. This ultimate transformation was what the battleship form was based on.

Baldr wasn't the only thing designed by the anime staff. We also had them create designs for several items and characters, and I deeply appreciate their work.

And now, after two whole years, you were finally able to see Baldr in his robot form.

I was the one who requested that he receive an illustration in this volume, and I can only hope that you were left surprised by how cool he actually looks.

Anyway, this volume was about Ray's everyday life, the results of his actions, as well as the past shared by Shu and Sechs.

I feel that I write many characters that are fundamentally opposed to each other, but these two were perhaps the most extreme example of that.

While Shu always made choices he deemed right, Sechs simply went with the flow to do what the world saw as evil.

While Shu had an unwavering soul, Sechs didn't even have a core sense of self.

I hope the battle between them as well as their story has reached your heart.

Volume 19 will continue from here.

Holding new equipment, Ray will challenge his new opponents in The Tournaments, while Sechs is fully prepared to make his escape from the gaol.

Where will these paths they have taken ultimately lead...?

To learn that and more, please continue supporting *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Sakon Kaidou

**Cat:** “VOLUME 19 WILL probably RELEASE IN AUGUST, 2022!”

**Fox:** “He went and made the announcement right as the author’s comment ended.”

**Xun:** “ThoUgh...did you hEar him say ‘probably’?”

**Cat:** (Feigning ignorance by whistling.)

**Fox:** “Oh, I get it. He’s scared that this volume may be delayed too.”

**Cat:** “ACK!”

**Xun:** “Oh, so thAt’s it, huh?”

**Fox:** “He went and made the announcement right away ’cause he wanted to make the date somewhat fuzzy.”

**Xun:** “And he’s dOin’ an awful job hidin’ it...”

**Cat:** “...Th-The next volume should come out as planned, so please look forward to it!”

## **Bonus Short Stories**

### **Founding IF: The Unknown Story**

*A Certain Place in Caldina.*

“So Sechs is finally gettin’ out, eh?”

That day, Rascal was holed up in his clan base’s office, his eyes fixed upon a certain photo. He generally kept the picture stored in his inventory, away from prying eyes, so it was most unusual for him to hold it out in the open like this.

“What is that?”

Puzzled by her owner looking emotively at the photo, Machina couldn’t help but take a glance at it herself and ask about it.

The image showed four people: Rascal himself, Emily, Zeta, and Sechs.

“It’s us from when we first met,” said Rascal. “According to this side’s time, it’s from a year ago.”

“Hrmm. So this is the first meeting of IF’s founding members. That means it’s from before I was picked up and connected.”

“Yeah.”

“This really puts into perspective how quirky you all are. Even the most normal-looking person here is actually a slime—not to mention being King of Crime. How did you even end up joining forces?”

“Well... Long story short...”

At that time, Illegal Frontier was a force that made both society and its underworld tremble, so many would be surprised to find out that its founding members all met because of nothing more than a string of coincidences—and one man’s ambition.

The man's name was "Zwart Friebel." He was a count of Altar who was plotting a coup d'état against the kingdom.

This was an ambition that required a great deal of power, so he was gathering pre-ancient civilization relics to strengthen his forces.

However, even after he'd exhausted the ruins he was excavating in secret, he still didn't feel like he had enough strength and resources to accomplish his coup. He wasn't aware that the Sacred Princess was among the royalty at the time, but the kingdom's army still had the Arch Sage and Celestial Knight, and Count Friebel knew that winning against them would take more than what he'd found thus far.

And so, to further supplement his forces, he set his eyes on Rascal. As a Master who was already well known as a dealer in pre-ancient weaponry, Rascal seemed like the perfect source.

Thus, the count offered him a deal that bordered on blackmail—which Rascal naturally refused. Count Friebel responded by making good on his threats and sending so many tian thieves and assassins against Rascal that they almost became a daily encounter.

Eventually, Rascal grew sick and tired of dealing with them and decided to go to the city of Friebel to stem the flow of these nuisances at the source. His arrival to the city coincided with Zeta's visit after she had recently escaped Granvaloa, and once a conflict involving the three began, it quickly escalated out of control.

It became even more heated when Emily, whom Rascal had brought with him, had an unpleasant run-in with Count Friebel's soldiers, sending her into killing mode.

And to top it off, with perfect—or awful—timing, Sechs happened to simply *be* in the city while this was taking place. He apparently hadn't been planning to do anything there, but when chaos began to break out, he certainly didn't hesitate to take part in it.

Because of all that, the city of Friebel became a war zone involving a whole four wanted Superiors.

"Honestly, even I can't tell ya why it turned out like that, and I was one of the stars of the show," said Rascal. "Even Emily went off and started doin' her own thing."

"Now that is really quite something... But why did the count even think it was a good idea to pick a fight with a Superior in the first place?" asked Machina.

"He was just that confident in his powers. He himself was King of Magic Gear—a combat SJ that enhances all magic-based equipment. Plus he commanded a bigger army than almost any other noble. And most importantly, it was back when Altarians still didn't think we Masters were all that big a deal."

By current standards, Count Friebel was a suicidal madman, but this encounter happened not only before the war with Dryfe, but also before Gloria's march.

Because of that, the people of Altar were not fully aware of just how powerful Masters were, and it took witnessing the immense strength of Superiors to change that.

"By the end, it was the four of us versus the count, who brought out this massive pre-ancient weapon."

Count Friebel was among the strongest tians that Rascal had ever known. Enhanced by his job, the pre-ancient weapon he wielded was powerful enough to match even weaker Superiors.

This was before Rascal had his mechanical maid, so even he felt like he might've lost if he'd fought the count alone. Thankfully, the count greatly underestimated Masters and didn't know how fearsome they truly were. If he had known better, he certainly wouldn't have engaged in the folly of fighting four combat-focused Superiors all at once.

“Anyway, we destroyed the weapon, killed the count, and that was that.”

“Oh? What kind of weapon was it?”

“I actually took the remains, but last I checked, they were gone... You used my stuff for mats *again* without askin’ permission, didn’t ya?”

“I did? Which ones were they...?” Machina wondered aloud.

“Anyway, though the whole situation started out as just a pain in the ass, we all ended up gainin’ somethin’ from it.”

That was definitely true. Rascal had retrieved the weapon’s remains as compensation for what the count had put him through. Emily had received a lot of Resources from slaughtering the count’s forces. Zeta had stolen copious amounts of valuables and items from the count’s mansion.

As for Sechs...

“Once it was over, Sechs said, ‘If you don’t mind, I’ll be taking full responsibility for this crime,’ and did just that.”

“Huuuh...?”

Sechs, as King of Crime, had also gone out of his way to eliminate all evidence of the coup Count Friebel had been plotting and made it seem as though the count and his forces had been unjustly attacked and exterminated by this mad criminal.

The world now remembered this event as the Friebel Massacre, completely oblivious to the truth behind it.

At first, Sechs’s words made Rascal doubt his sanity, but they made sense now that he knew about King of Crime’s skills, convictions, and modus operandi.

Though, just like Machina, he had found the revelation disturbing.

“Heh heh...”

If that was all there had been to that encounter, though, Rascal would've split away from the others, hoping never to meet them again. They'd teamed up to defeat the count, but until they'd done so, it was highly likely that any one of them besides Emily could die and be sent to the gaol. Rascal initially saw both Sechs and Zeta as major threats.

However, something happened that he never would've expected.

"The reason why we grouped up...is 'cause Emily somehow took a likin' to both Sechs and Zeta."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Even I still don't know what that was about."

Rascal assumed that something happened between Emily and the two while they were separated, but he had never gotten a clear explanation when he'd asked her, and by the time he himself was close enough to Sechs and Zeta to pose the question to either of them, there was simply no need to do so.

"Emily decided they were 'pluses' almost straight away. She made me take this photo to celebrate the first new 'friends' she'd made in a long time. I used one of my drones for that."

At that point, Rascal fought his battles using waves of drones, and even though the drones were intended for combat, they could be used for non-offensive purposes as well.

"Anyway, that's how we all ended up on friendly terms. And once Sechs got his Superior reward from Gloria, we established our current goal and created IF."

"Every person has a past,' don't they? It's a bit trite, but it's what that made me think of."

"...It ain't wrong."

Rascal did find it a bit ironic to hear that from Machina. While whether or not she counted as a person might be up for debate, she had a far more extensive past than any of them.

“Well, as you know, they turned out to be a real couple of weirdos. Zeta may look like she’s got her shit together, but she’s true to her desires and often goes on absurd thieving sprees, while Sechs has convictions that make him do things nobody else ever would. It honestly feels like I just got two more people to babysit.”

“So you’ve had this role since the very beginning...”

“You know it. It’s annoying as hell.”

“But you still look out for them, don’t you? That means you like them, right?”

Rascal was silent.

There was no way he could reasonably deny that. Though Emily had been the first to recognize Sechs and Zeta as friends, Rascal could recall that it hadn’t taken all that long for him to feel something similar.

“...Even bad guys have people they get along with. That’s all there is to it,” Rascal said, turning his face away bashfully—which brought a smile to Machina’s face.

## ***Smol Gar***

*Paladin, Ray Starling*

I heard pleased noises coming from above me.

It was the night after we got a base, and the source of the noises was the small goblin-demon sitting atop my head as I was getting some R&R in my room.

To be more specific, it was Gardranda Minimum—otherwise known as “Smol Gar.” I hadn’t been able to casually summon her before

because of the heavy drawbacks that came with it, but the Big or Small bracelet I had picked up made it possible to have her around at all times, albeit in this weak and tiny form.

I'd actually prepared some miniature furniture for her and set them up on the table, but she seemed to prefer sitting on my head.

She was heavier than you'd expect, so this was making it harder to keep my head's balance.

"KSHAA!"

As if she read my mind, Smol Gar began tearing out my hair. I would have really preferred it if she didn't do that.

Anyway, we could now communicate as much as we wanted, so I went ahead and asked something I've been wondering about.

"Hey, Gardranda."

"What?"

"I want you to tell me more about the drawbacks I can get by summoning you the right way."

Miasmaflame Princess: Gardranda—the skill that pushed my bracers to their absolute limit. It was powerful, but it cost immense amounts of MP and gave one of three negative effects upon expiring. I would either get the three Hellish Miasma debuffs, be set on fire by Purgatorial Flames, or lose control over my body.

about the thing where I can't control my body. How does it work?"

"I control your body instead of you."

"...That's it?"

"That's it."

*here's cursed weapons that take control over you, so I guess it's kinda like that?*

A part of me thought the effect would just completely immobilize me. That would be fatal in combat, but if it just made Gardranda take the wheel, it wasn't much to worry about.

She would dodge enemy attacks and do all the other combat stuff, right...?

"I'll use your body to munch on your body."

"Wait, what?"

Smol Gar had just said something grotesque. Well, not like it was the first time—just this evening she'd asked me to let her eat a finger.

"If I get control over your body, I'll use the time I have to eat as much of you as possible."

"Don't treat my body as an all-you-can-eat buffet!"

"All-you-can-eat?!"

*Nemesis, chill.*

"I could eat other people, but you look more delicious than anyone else..."

"That's a 'man-eater' line if I ever heard one...!"

"I really like you, Ray. You're delicious."

That doesn't make me happy to hear!"

"...I wouldn't be surprised if she ate you whole before the debuff timer ran out," commented Nemesis.

Gardranda and I could now communicate without a problem, but it had only helped me realize all over again that I had to be mindful about summoning her.



Later that night, Ray went to sleep. In the unlit room, Nemesis and Smol Gar, whose summoning had yet to expire, had a little exchange.

“Smol Gar, you claimed you like Ray because he is delicious, yes?”

“Mhm.”

“Is there anything else you think about him?”

“*As a demon*, I think he’s a real treat.”

“...Hrm.”

Nemesis spent a moment pondering Gardranda’s nature and words, then nodded to herself in understanding.

“Regardless, you and I are his main weapons. We should support him as best as we can.”

“Yeah.”

Ray’s primary armament and bracers could now converse, and by their sleeping Master’s side, they pinky swore to seal their promise.

## ***Unintended Terror***

*Paladin, Ray Starling*

“Hey, Fujinon! This is probably the best base in Altar, isn’t it?!”

After we signed the contract to rent the eighth arena, Io looked at Fujinon and posed that question, her eyes sparkling.

“Well, we’re certainly the first clan that lives in one of Gideon’s arenas. Though, as far as novelty goes, I heard there are clans that built floating bases or battleships that can go on land.”

“For real?! Leader! We should upgrade our base too!”

Inspired by Fujinon’s words, Io now turned to me instead.

“Upgrade...how?” I asked.

“We could install cannons on the outer walls! You know, for defense!”

“But we’re in the middle of a city!”

*What would we even fire at?!*

“...That’d make it look like the hideout of a tyrant who terrorizes the slums using force,” said Fujinon.

“It’s too late to make it not look evil, doncha think? I mean, even our leader looks like...you know, how our leader does!”

“What do you even mean by that...?” I asked Io.

“Huh? Obviously I mean that you look like the ruler of a postapocalyptic wasteland!”

“You too, Brutus?”

“Who’s Brutus? I’m Io!”

To be honest, I felt like Shu in his combat mode was a better example of the postapocalyptic aesthetic.

“Anyway, no cannons! If anything, the walls are dirty, so we should clean them up first.”

I’d even seen some indecent graffiti on the outside, as you’d expect of a building set in a bad part of a city.

“We gotta focus on The Tournaments first, though. We should split up and get some cleaning done once they’re over.”

“We should,” agreed Fujinon. “Hm...? There’s someone outside.”

I strained my ears and sure enough, I heard the noises of a crowd outside the arena.

“Did the baddies of the district come over to beat the crap outta the new blood?!”

“What is this, a manga about delinquents...? Anyway, let’s go check what’s up.”

And so, we walked out of the arena, where we found...

“ALL RIGHT, YA SACKS OF DUNG! LET’S MAKE THIS PLACE SPARKLE!”

“YEEEEAAAAHHHHH!”

...a bunch of stern-faced men carrying lots of cleaning equipment.

“Umm... What are you all doing here...?” I asked.

“Hm? EEP! Mr. R-Ray Starling...sir!”

“It looks like you want to clean the arena for us...but why?”

“W-We heard you and your clan are now rentin’ here...”

*Already? Well, the people of Gideon in general are no strangers to hardship, so I guess the residents of this district couldn’t be underestimated either.*

“And uhh...we made a mess on these walls recently...”

“Ohhh...”

So the graffiti was their doing.

“W-W-We felt bad about it, and uh...thought we should clean up and...WE’RE REALLY SORRY! WE DIDN’T MEAN IT...! PLEASE SPARE US...!”

“Whaaa...?”

*Hold on. They’re way too scared about this—and the way they’re scared is weird.*

As I became confused, Fujinon began whispering in my ear.

“Leader, let me remind you that we have: Figaro, who is Gideon’s strongest; your brother, who bombed the land around the city beyond recognition; and Hannya, who threw the city into chaos during the Love-Duel Festival. Don’t you think that tians who made a mess of such a clan’s base would feel like their lives are forfeit?”

“...Oh.”

She had a point. For us, Death Period was just a gathering of friends and acquaintances, but to them, it was the clan composed of Altar's most powerful. I could totally understand being worried if they felt that they wronged us somehow.

Though, it kinda surprised me to find out that people who didn't know them feared our Superiors this much...

**"PLEASE DON'T EAT ME! I DON'T TASTE AS GOOD AS A DEVIL...!"**

*...Huh?*

"...Hey, why does it feel like it's not Shu or Figaro they're scared of but...me? And wait, do even tians know about that?"

My words made Io burst out laughing, while Fujinon covered her mouth and held back a chuckle.

*...This doesn't make any sense.*

Anyway, the stern-faced men went on to clean the arena, giving us a base that shone like new.



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