

Sakon Kaidou
Illustrator: Taiki



Infinite Dendrogram

11. The Glory Selector

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**"Let's just
go all-in
on taking
out the
two-horn."**

Tsukuyo Fuso

**"Mark
my
words...
We're
gonna
destroy
that
shitty
dragon."**

Shu Starling



**"Still...
I'll go
first. By
myself."**

Figaro

**"OK,
captain!"**

[Type Maiden/Elder-Arms]
Nægling

**"Let's go,
Næ."**

**Thus, he mustered
his courage and spoke
his declaration.**

**"This is the
beginning
of the
REAL
battle
between
you and us
humans."**

[King of Swords] **Foltesla**

Opening: The Observer Thought About Days Gone By

2045, April. The Control AI's Workspace — “The Cistern”

The space was akin to a snow dome: a transparent, ever-expanding seabed filled with a slightly blue-tinted fluid. There was not a speck of filth, a flaw, or a sign of life anywhere. Within it, small orbs appeared only to vanish moments later. None of them were any different from each other, *and all of them were Embryos*. Specifically, Embryos in their zeroth form — yet to be implanted, yet to read the host’s heart and mind, and yet to be born.

They held endless possibilities, but right now, they were nothing. All they did was rise from the seabed, only to vanish halfway up. The scene was the very definition of transience. They were like shadows, or bubbles, or anything else that had an impending end, no matter how distant. Perhaps *Infinite Dendrogram*, too, was no different at its core. However, the vanishing Embryos were no dreams or illusions. These zeroth forms were being gathered from The Cistern to be implanted into Masters. The Embryo “eggs” were surfacing into the world, carrying their endless possibilities with them. They would meet their Masters, get to know who and what they were, and descend upon the world as their shadows, reflections, or *other halves*. These were shadows and bubbles carrying possibilities too many to count, and it would be no mistake to say that this was a sight of Infinite Transience.

At the very least, that was what the manager of The Cistern believed, and it also happened to be one of “her” names. She was watching the sight right then, not saying a word. A thin, elliptical membrane surrounded her. Though transparent and seemingly weak, the membrane wasn’t crushed and did not lose its shape under the weight of all the fluid pressing down upon the seabed. She was

within the “egg,” and she looked much like a human girl. Some would compare her to an aristocrat hiding herself behind a facade of fine fabric, while others might see her as a bride beneath a veil. She was control AI no. 2, Humpty Dumpty, and her role among the thirteen AIs was to manage the Embryos.

However, that didn’t mean that she would interfere with them in any way. Unlike Alice, who was in charge of avatars, or Caterpillar, who managed the environment, Humpty didn’t interact with what she “managed.” She had only two roles. First was to oversee The Cistern. She would secure the unborn Embryos in their purest form and send them to control AIs who were welcoming newly-arrived Masters. She would also protect the pure zeroth form Embryos from outside influence until the moment they were to be implanted. Though, considering the importance of this act to Embryos, some might say that there was no role more significant. “...No problems here,” Humpty said after checking the state of the seabed and protective fluid, then left The Cistern as though vanishing into thin air.

She had moved to a space akin to a study. It looked much like the one control AI 13 — Cheshire — used, but there were more bookshelves here. Every shelf was full of records. Humpty’s study contained data on all the Embryos that had existed from the time *Infinite Dendrogram* began up to the current moment. Managing such data was her second role. She took out a particular book with a spine that read “Superiors.” It contained the ordered names of Embryos that had reached their seventh form, such as Apocalypse or Grail. She silently leafed through the pages, only to stop on one of them.

It bore the Embryo name of “War God Ship, Baldr,” as well as the name of its Master. “...Shu,” she muttered his first name.

She had been there to greet Shu Starling when *Infinite Dendrogram* launched — when her job had required little processing power.

Humpty had been observing him ever since. She saw him and Figaro defeat two UBM's when they had just started out. She saw his first meeting with Sechs Würfel, and their many clashes and joint struggles. She saw his encounter with Caldina's Magical Apex, as well as Tenchi's Technical Apex. She saw him become involved with the incident of the Corpse Fortress in Granvaloa's southern seas. She saw his actions during the fall of a flying fortress in the Harshwinter Mountains in the north of the continent. Humpty had been there to see him get caught up in various events — or even lead him to them — ever since he'd started. She remembered them all very well, but there was one among them that truly stood out. "Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria..."

One of her group's goals was to create a hundred Superior Embryos. This drove them to try out various ways to spur Embryo evolution. The most notable of them, no doubt, was the deployment of the calamities known as "SUBMs." After all, even supreme sacrifice and suffering could produce Superiors. "Heheh," she giggled, recalling the third of these calamities — the most destructive of them all so far.

However, she wasn't laughing at the sacrifices. "'You aren't gettin' any new...'" she mouthed the first part of what Shu said as he challenged the golden calamity, but the rest was drowned out by her giggling.

Thus, the observer reminisced about days gone by.

Act One: The Golden Calamity

2044, November, Control AI No. 4's Workspace

[Selecting target from vault no. 4.]

[Initializing the time stopping cancellation process... completed.]

[Ready for activation.]

[Setting deployment area to the border of the Kingdom of Altar.]

[Set to the northern area of the Kingdom of Altar, Lightning Dragon Mountains.]

[Executing deployment.]

[Initializing the third intervention for the purpose of creating more Superiors.]

◇◆◇

An Area Near The Border Between The Kingdom and The Imperium

Altar and Dryfe. There was lots of traffic between these countries, but there were only two reasonable paths a human could take to cross the border. One was in the plains spreading out between Quartierlatin County to the kingdom's northeast and Barbaros County to the imperium's southeast. The other was the mountain pass linking Lunnings Duchy to the kingdom's northwest and Eldona March to the imperium's southwest. Between these countries, there was a steep mountain range called simply the "Border Mountain Belt," and crossing it on foot was no small task, to put it lightly. However, the true problem in crossing it wasn't the steep slopes, but the dragons inhabiting the mountains.

It was said that in the heart of the Border Mountain Belt, at the peak of the highest mountain, Mount Skycrown, lived the strongest of the skydragons — Skydragon King, Drag-Heaven — while the

surrounding mountains were occupied by other kings of the skydragon kind. Mount Skycrown stood alongside Landdragon King's Harhwinter Mountains and the Outer Sea circled by the Seadragon King as a place densely populated by fearsome dragons that no sane tian ever approached. The occasional foolishly-confident martial artist or adventurous Master might actually enter the area, but with the sky dominated by Pure-Dragons, most of them were extinguished before reaching the Skydragon King; even those who made it that far were reduced to dust in a mere moment.

The Border Mountain Belt was a place that no uninvited guests could leave alive. However, if you ignored the skydragons' harshness to intruders, they were actually a very magnanimous kind. They rarely left their territory to hunt other animals, and never attacked the people traveling to the east or west of their mountains. As long as their borders were respected, they were actually a surprisingly safe neighbor to both the kingdom and the imperium. That was what separated them from the landdragons of the Harhwinter Mountains. Due to a shortage of food and an environment so harsh they'd named the whole area after it, the landdragons frequently left their mountains to hunt. That was an underlying cause of the ancient rivalry between landdragons and roc birds. Regardless, thanks to the orderly skydragons, exchanges between the two countries were going swimmingly.

"Hmm... There is more human movement than usual. Is this a sign of another major event in the world of men? Is one of the countries changing rulers? Is it the north or the south?"

Seated at the top of the Lightning Dragon Mountain to the west of the belt, a large dragon was looking down at the people passing by. Overall, he was slender, but his wingspan was vast and his horns imposing. It wasn't just for show, either — there were pale sparks running through both the wings and horns, making it obvious that he

channeled immense amounts of electricity. His name was Lightning Dragon King, Drag-Volt. He was the third child of the Skydragon King, and the head of the Lightning Dragon kind living around this mountain of the same name, which was particularly close to the border between the human countries. “There is also the harvest festival. Perhaps I should use Anthropomorphization and go see the town when the day comes.”

He enjoyed observing the world of men, and it wasn’t unusual for him to transform into a human and go look around their settlements during special occasions.

Drag-Volt even called Duke Lunnings himself a friend. The man knew what he really was, but hid it from everyone else; they even enjoyed festivities together. The majestic dragon truly enjoyed the world of men. “I would have to have one of my younger brothers take my place, so... Hm?” Drag-Volt suddenly felt the presence of an approaching dragon over ten kilometers away. “...This one does not belong here. Does he intend to harm mankind?”

Controlling dragons that would bring harm to the area and mankind was one of his roles. Every dragon that perpetrated malicious attacks on humans increased the chances of sparking war between mankind and dragonkind. The Skydragon King and his family kept control over the local dragons in order to prevent that. And even if it hadn’t been his duty, Drag-Volt himself couldn’t tolerate any kin who would harm the world of man. “I suppose this is just another rebel from some mountain... Hm?”

At first, he guessed that it was just a dragon who had gained power at some mountain or other and let it go to his head. However, the presence he felt as the creature drew closer confirmed that this was not the case. And upon seeing the being’s body, he realized that it was not one of his kind.

"You... You are no skydragon." Though still a dragon, this one looked wrong. Dragons usually had but one head, but this one had three, each of which sported a different number of horns. Things might've been different among seadragons and landdragons, but the orderly skydragons would've culled this creature, for it was known that malformed skydragons would not mature properly and were often malicious.

In the many years of his life, Drag-Volt had never seen a malformed dragon grow as large as this three-head, and that alone was proof that it was not from these mountains.

"Answer me! Where did you come from!?" Drag-Volt spoke in Draconic. However, the response he got...

"ShEaAwOooOooAAAAaaaHHH!" ...was just a roar — a primal scream unleashed with a force that surpassed any ability to describe its insanity. "Mad-dragon! You know not even words!?" At that moment, Drag-Volt realized that this three-headed dragon must be annihilated, and thus released the strongest attack ability he had — a skill unique to him.

The electricity in his back and horns grew in intensity before gathering in his maw... "Lightning Vortex!" ...And released as a giant, whirling lightning storm that reached several kilometels away. That was the fastest, most powerful attack of Lightning Dragon King, Drag-Volt — a Mythical UBM. It was literally lightning-fast and carried the energy of several nuclear warheads, burning anything in its wake. The force of the impact was such that it even melted the mountains surrounding the three-headed dragon. There was little doubt that it would boil every fluid in a living creature's body before vaporizing them entirely, granting them a swift death. "Foolish, maddened dragon," Drag-Volt said. "Why do you think me and my brother were stationed on the east and west of this border? An overconfident whelp is nothing to us."

He was in the west, while the younger of his elder brothers — Winddragon King — was in the east. If you ignored the Skydragon King, seated at The Skycrown, and his firstborn — his most trusted confidant — the strongest of the skydragon kind were placed at the mountains near the border. This was so they could easily take out any dragons as insolent as this one. The Lightning Dragon King had purged many such dragons over the five centuries since he set to this task. Thus, he didn't doubt his victory this time, either. However... *the same could be said about his foe.*

“SHuOoaAahHhH!” With another roar, the dragon emerged from the vaporized mountain... completely unharmed.

“...Impossible.”

This can't be happening. Drag-Volt could not shake the thought.

He could perhaps understand if the creature barely survived his strongest attack, and could even accept it sustaining merely light damage. However, it was *impossible* for it to be completely unharmed. After all, even his father couldn't accomplish that — the Skydragon King himself. That would mean that this dragon here was actually superior to his immensely powerful father. “...No,” Drag-Volt denied the comparison, but not due to any sentiment as his father's son, but because of his experience as a dragon with many battles to his name.

“It must have something that shields it from harm.” A skill unknown to Drag-Volt protected it from his Lightning Vortex, and he believed that there was no point in attacking it again until he knew what it was.

Thus, he gathered his resolve. “...FATHER! BROTHERS! DO YOU SEE ME!?” he roared to the heavens.

Of course, The Skycrown where the firstborn lived was too far away to see. However, Drag-Volt was confident that they heard him and

were watching this battle. “I WILL NOW GIVE MY ALL TO EXPOSE THIS WRETCH!” he roared again, gathering power in his limbs. “AFTER I PERISH, DESTROY IT!”

The Lightning Dragon King was already prepared to die. Drag-Volt didn’t think that the creature before him was superior to the Skydragon King, but he knew for a fact that it was most certainly stronger than himself.

“COME, YOU MADDENED DRAGON! I SHALL GIVE MY LIFE TO EXPOSE THE SECRET... OF YOUR DEFENSE!” Thus, Drag-Volt dove towards the dragon...

“SHAhAHahHAhaH!”

His death was unceremonious, punctuated only by the beast’s cackling roar.



Kingdom of Altar, Lunnings Duchy

Lunnings Duchy, situated in the kingdom’s northwest, was a welcoming land with a temperate climate. It was one of the country’s grain-producing regions, and it was harvest season. Looking over the fields of wheat that spread all the way to the base of the mountains, Duke Lunnings, who was here for an inspection, nodded in satisfaction. “Mhm... I see that this year’s harvest is especially abundant.”

The chief of the local village smiled as he said, “Truly. We had a fair bit of help from Masters this year. Both the amount and food value are greater than last year, and the soil is still fertile enough for more.”

“I see, I see,” nodded the duke. “I must admit, I was quite worried by the sudden growth in Master numbers three years ago, and though I’m aware there are folk as troublesome as Sechs Würfel among their

number, I see that their arrival was a boon to my lands. Most excellent, indeed. Hahahah!” he laughed heartily. “This year’s festival is sure to be grand.”

Lord Drag-Volt will certainly enjoy it, he thought to himself, not saying a word — for that was a secret not even his family could know, let alone the chief.

“Mhm... With such a harvest, it will not pain me too much to not send out the gift,” the duke continued.

“Gift?” the chief asked.

“Mhm. As you know, this duchy shares a border with Dryfe, and we are on very good terms with our foreign neighbors in the Eldona March. Thus, during their auspicious events, we must send a gift separate from the one sent by the kingdom itself.”

“There’s an auspicious event in Dryfe?”

“Mhm. They have stopped mourning the imperator they lost last month, and his successor has been chosen. I’m not certain who it is, but I would guess it’s either the last imperator’s firstborn, Prince Gustav, or Gustav’s son, Hallon. The imperator’s wife and mother of Gustav is from the Eldona family, so it’s likely that it will soon be even more prosperous than before.”

And that was exactly why Duke Lunnings wanted to strengthen the ties between the two lands. He had considered funding the gift by emptying his family’s coffers, but with a harvest so great, the damage to his finances would be minimized. This greatly relieved him. Recently, Altar had been on good terms with both Dryfe to the north and Legendaria to the south. Duke Lunnings felt as though this harvest was a sign of peace and prosperity for all three western countries.

However... fate had other plans.

“...Hm?” The duke looked ahead into the distance. The color of the mountain beyond the wheat fields — the mountain whose pass linked Altar and Dryfe — had changed. It had been covered in green plant life, but now, mysteriously, the peak grew brown with decay. It didn’t stop there, either. Little by little, as though descending from the peak to the plains, the decay encroached on the wheat fields. “What is that? Poison? Is there a poisonous monster there?” The kingdom was no stranger to poisonous monsters, but those that could stain a whole mountain were few and far between.

“Don’t tell me it’s a King Basilisk! They’re some of the worst Pure-Dragons you can encounter!” Duke Lunnings named a creature so dangerous that there was a perpetual bounty on them, even though they weren’t UBM. Even the kingdom recognized them as especially dangerous. If a monster like that reached the fields or the town, the damage would be immense. Naturally, Duke Lunnings decided they were in danger. The chief, on the other hand, was rather calm.

“A King Basilisk, eh?” he said. “Then I’m sure all will be well.”

“Why are you so confident!?” asked the duke.

“We have Masters staying in this village. We’ve been attacked by several Pure-Dragons since the crops became ripe, but they’ve always defeated them. Look.”

The chief pointed at a party of five, speeding towards the decaying mountain. Duke Lunnings’ Reveal skill told him that they were all above level 300, and he saw that one of them was riding a landdragon Pure-Dragon. “Ohh! They should have no trouble at all!” he exclaimed in relief.

“Indeed. They will surely slay the King Basilisk,” nodded the chief. The Masters were probably stronger than even the duchy’s knights. The chief had full confidence that they would be victorious, and Duke Lunnings expected good things as well. Alas, the party of Masters

became orbs of light the moment they approached the rotting greenery.

"...What?" A group of Masters over level 300 and an earth-type Pure-Dragon vanished in but an instant. *This can't be the poison of a mere King Basilisk... there's something even worse in those woods!* the duke thought, now absolutely certain.

"C-Could it be... a Mythical UBM? Like Edelvalsa!?" The first thing that came to the duke's mind was Unguided Army, Edelvalsa — the Mythical UBM that had appeared at the border of the Quartierlatin County in the northeast of the kingdom nearly thirty years ago.

Back then, the disaster had felt like somebody else's problem. Mythicals were astronomically rare, and the Border Mountain Belt was occupied by the orderly skydragons who never harmed humans outside of their territory. "Is it an evil dragon from the mountains?" the duke wondered. "But then Lord Drag-Volt should've put it in its place... Ohh, what is going on?"

He closed his eyes, not certain how to feel about this sudden incident. "Still, we must act right away! First, we evacuate our people! Then I will return to the town — no, I will use the communication magic devices here in this village to contact the capital!" The duke quickly put together a plan. He wanted to contact the capital or the adventurer's guild to call forth high-ranking Masters that could take care of this emergency. The wheat fields might be left in ruins, but the duke believed that as long as the people were alive, they would eventually recover. There were no holes in his plan, except perhaps his lack of awareness of just how menacing this monster was. The strongest monsters that had ever appeared in the kingdom were Mythical UBMs. With such a limited scale, it was impossible to gauge the power of this being.

"D-Duke... DUKE LUNNINGS!" The chief had recovered from the shock of seeing the party of Masters in which he'd placed such

confidence vanish in an instant, and now was staring at something with his eyes wide.

“What!?” the duke exclaimed in frustration, before noticing what the chief was looking at and muttering a meek “...What?”

They were staring in the direction of the decayed woods, but not into them. The cause of the decay and the monster that destroyed the Masters wasn’t something that could hide behind a few trees. *It was still behind the mountain.* Slowly, as though walking, it showed itself from behind the mountain. The thing they saw first was a head. A golden head with three horns slowly crossed the ridge and showed itself. Then, the duke saw a single-horned head show up from the left, and a two-horned head from the right. All three heads had long necks, covered in the same golden scales as the head. Finally, once it placed its front claw on the mountain top, the duke realized what he was looking at. “A golden... three-headed... dragon...” A monster as large as half the mountain — at least two hundred metels in height. Perhaps it was just a hundred, but even so, it was far larger than any monster the duke had ever seen. More importantly, his instincts told him that he could not stand in this thing’s way and that he should abandon all and run for his life.

“Th-That’s...!” Despite being struck by terror, the duke somehow noticed that one head — the two-horned one — was biting into something.

“L-Lord Drag-Volt...!?” Indeed, those were the remains of the Lightning Dragon King. Though, for all the duke knew, he wasn’t dead yet. There were no scratches on the lifeless body. It was in oddly pristine condition, and hadn’t vanished because the resurrection period hadn’t yet expired. Sadly, that didn’t mean that there was hope.

“SHyeAhwOWahwOWHahWoO!” With a feral scream akin to a human cackle, the two-horned head crunched its fangs into Drag-

Volt's neck, transforming his corpse into particles of light. "Th-This is... This can't be happening..." As the count's mind failed to process the sudden trauma of losing his dragon friend, the three-headed nightmare crossed the peak, revealing its full, terrifying glory.

"SHEeEAHHhwOooOoO!" Then, the two-horned head let out a cry akin to a whistle. There was a giant oblong eye buried in the center of its face, and it was shedding a purplish, hazy light.

It filled the duke with immense fear. He didn't know why. He didn't know what made him believe what he did. But he somehow understood that that single eye was the cause of the decay and the thing that killed the Master party... as well as Drag-Volt.

"...EVACUATE! GET AS FAR AWAY FROM THAT DRAGON AS POSSIBLE! IT WILL KILL YOU!" The duke used the voice amplification item he'd brought to address his people to order them to run for their lives. The awestruck, dazed crowd was jolted back to their senses, screamed in panic, and ran as fast as their legs allowed. The duke jumped on his horse and fled along with them. Well-trained as it was, the horse stayed calm and obeyed its owner well despite the situation.

The chief also began running. "Hoo... hoo..." His breathing ragged from the fear and tension overwhelming his heart, the duke spurred his horse into the fastest gallop it could manage. After a minute of this, he turned around to see the three-headed dragon still clinging to the peak. It walked slowly, and though its area of decay now reached the wheat fields, the villagers were only running faster. *It's too large to move any faster...!* the duke thought in relief. It was surely a sentiment shared among all the people fleeing from it. Thus, only a few of them realized that the dragon was *spreading its wings*.

In fact, if they hadn't been panicking, they would've realized the obvious detail they'd all missed: The fact that dragons could *fly*.

The three-headed abomination spread out its wings, which were each as large as its torso, and took its massive body to the sky. It flew at a leisurely pace, ending the lives of all living creatures it drew close to. The duke, the chief, the thousand or so villagers, the non-humanoids, and monsters... Their lives were taken from them in the blink of an eye. They fell to the ground like lifeless dolls.

Thus came the end of the northwest region of the kingdom... The Lightning Dragon Mountain and the Lunnings Duchy.

◆◆◆

“And so, the SUBM, Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria, has been successfully deployed in the northwest of the kingdom. It looks like the Lightning Dragon King died, though. What a shame. He was quite promising.”

“Nooo helping it, is theeere? Aaaanywaaay, if aaall goes accooording to hoow we set it, it should slooowly moooove to the sooutheeeeast, and the Fatal Field’s effects will reeeeeach the capital in a weeek!”

“All that’s left for us is to watch. Let us hope that this will be a good test for the kingdom’s Masters, and that the one to conquer her will be a new Superior.

“...”

“You look like you want to say something, Cheshire. Is it because the kingdom is your homeground?”

“We’re releasing a powerful enemy that can’t be defeated in normal ways... an SUBM. This will spur those slacking Masters into action and maybe even force an evolution. I understand that much, and I know it went well last time, but there’s still something I feel I must say.”

“What is it?”

“Gloria is... too strong. She’s above both Greatest One and Twin Moby Dick. She’s extremely complete as a monster, even when compared to the many other SUBMs we’ve retrieved and contained. Honestly, I think she should’ve been released at a later time.”

“That’s exactly why we’re doing it now.”

“...What?”

“Humpty has high hopes for King of Destruction, Mad Hatter has his eyes set on the Over Gladiator, Alice is fond of the High Priestess, and you give lots of your attention to the King of Crimes. A standard SUBM would not have much of an effect on a country with so many outstanding individuals.”

“...”

“Do not forget, Cheshire. This is all in the hope that the kingdom’s Masters will shatter their limits and emerge victorious. It’s for that reason that we’ve crafted the most perfect monster of all.”

Act Two: Claymill Absolute Defense Line

Days since Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria's Emergence Event: Four.

The Lunnings Duchy had been destroyed, and the head of the Lightning Dragon Mountain — Lightning Dragon King, Drag-Volt — was dead.

News of these events were both sudden and devastating to the kingdom as a whole. Those with far-sight magic confirmed that the one responsible for all of this was a creature known only as “Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria.”

However, the name wasn’t the only thing they’d found out about it.

First, they’d confirmed that it was the first SUBM — a rank of UBM above even Mythical — that had ever appeared in the Kingdom of Altar.

Second, they’d found out that all living beings that entered a radius of one kilometel around it instantly died.

The approach of a creature with such an ability promised a swift, inescapable death to all in its path.

The revelation of its approach struck fear into the hearts of the people, and those who lived in its predicted path had immediately begun to evacuate.

However, there were some who welcomed its appearance.

Most of them were Masters... particularly, the rankers. Their feelings could be summed up by one word — “finally.”

To them, UBMs were nothing more than special monsters that dropped unique items upon defeat.

The stronger they were, the more reason the Masters had to battle them. And with SUBMs being the pinnacle of UBMs, one could only

imagine what incredible loot it would drop. Many of the craftier individuals were already scheming to become MVPs, no matter the cost.

This wouldn't be the first time an SUBM was defeated. The one that'd appeared before Gloria, "Biframe White Whale, Twin Moby Dick," had been conquered by the entire Granvaloan navy, along with the Great Admiral Antimicrobic Soy Sauce, the "Human Bomb", and King of Thieves Zeta, the "Fatal Seal of the Four Seas."

The two Superiors had been picked as the MVPs and received items that were above Mythical tier.

That knowledge was one of the reasons why many were enthusiastic about facing Gloria, but there was something besides the special reward that greatly attracted them — *glory*.

Many ludo Masters thought of SUBM fights as a major facet of *Infinite Dendrogram*'s late-game content. The name of an MVP in an SUBM fight would become well-known across the whole game. The *glory* earned from this was particularly attractive to the stronger kill rankers. They and the high-ranking clans instantly mobilized to defeat Gloria. The first to act focused more on speed than preparation.

There were a few reasons for this.

One was that if they wasted too much time, the kingdom might hatch a countermeasure of their own; if not that, the Skydragon King might leave The Skycrown to avenge his third child.

The kingdom's Masters couldn't have been the only ones attracted by Gloria's promises, either. There might've been Dryfean or Legendarian Masters traveling there right that very moment for the sole purpose of slaying the dragon.

But perhaps the greatest threat to them were the four Superiors of their own country — King of Destruction, Over Gladiator, High

Priestess, and King of Crime. If any of them were to act first, the high-ranking Masters would have no hope of becoming MVPs.

With that in mind, many rankers and clans quickly gathered to face Gloria... *only for most of them to suffer the death penalty on the fourth day of Gloria's appearance.*

The famed rankers and clans were crushed like pebbles on the road, like something out of a bad slapstick routine.

More than half of them died the moment they approached the dragon, while those that somehow made it to Gloria itself were instantly pulverized by its immense stats that surpassed even Mythical tier.

The only valuable result of their hasty actions was two pieces of vague information picked up by DIN agents watching from a distance: “some didn’t die instantly” and “it’s likely that Gloria has some sort of defensive ability.”

Perhaps the rankers that had survived the encounter long enough to actually fight Gloria itself had more information, but they all kept that to themselves. As Masters, they could challenge the dragon again after their death penalty timer expired, so it was only natural to guard and treasure whatever valuable information they had. Though, it was questionable if a rematch would’ve been enough for any of them to best a creature this powerful.

While Masters experienced defeat after defeat, the Kingdom’s tians crafted an anti-Gloria plan of their own.

Specifically, they would shower it with an obscene amount of long-range attacks.

Its insta-death field was fatal, but nothing prevented you from attacking it from outside its range.

They would simultaneously attack it with a coordinated magic attack from Arch Sage's apprentices and a rite of divine punishment from Cardinal Fau Verdin — the current head of the national church — and his many adherents.

They also borrowed some special support from a particular ally.

The kingdom finished its preparations, established a defensive formation at the fortress city of Claymill, and prepared to greet the dragon.

And, as though in perfect sync with the kingdom, a certain group of more cautious Masters also prepared to act.

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Kingdom of Altar, Claymill the Fortress City

The fortress city of Claymill was located right between the capital and the Altar-Dryfe border in the country's northwest. It had started out as a fortress for war between neighboring countries —though, in this case, that referred to neither Dryfe nor Legendaria.

The foundations for this city had been laid several centuries ago, back when the land that would become Altar was split into many smaller, warring countries. The city sported a defensive barrier that entirely covered it and even extended to some land outside of it; at the time, it was perhaps the strongest fortress in the middle-west.

However, Azurite, first of his name — Sacred King who would go on to found the Kingdom of Altar — charged the fortress all by himself, shattered the barrier, and quickly defeated the city's leader. In the world of *Infinite Dendrogram*, it wasn't exactly unusual for a single person of immense ability to bring down a powerful fortress all on their own... and that was exactly what Claymill was.

Since it was far from Altar's current borders, it had little value as a strategic point. Now, it was more of a tourist destination, due to its

involvement in the legend of the Sacred King and the founding of Altar. However, the city's defensive functions were still active. Even now, it could create a defensive barrier around it that provided absolute protection from even high-rank ultimate job skills. And despite it being such a strong defense, the barrier didn't hinder attacks from inside it whatsoever.

It may be obvious why Claymill was chosen as the location for the kingdom's plans to defeat Gloria.

Currently, in the outskirts of the city, there were four different groups preparing to fight Gloria.

The first of them was the smallest in number. Clad in deep blue robes, they were the Arch Sage's apprentices. There were fewer than thirty of them, but not a single one was below level 400, and every one of their number was one of the most distinguished tian Sages.

They were led by the eldest among them — Sage, Frigelt.

"A monster that requires us to all join forces... It speaks volumes to the gravity of the situation."

"If only our Arch Sage was here, too."

"Our teacher stands at the last line of defense, along with Sir Grandria and his Royal Guard. He stands near the capital to stop the creature from entering, in case it takes an alternate route and doesn't pass through here."

The Arch Sage was their teacher and the pride of their country, and he was powerful enough to cast spells as strong as their unison magic all on his own. It would have been encouraging to have him here, but many of the apprentices thought that this was an excellent chance to go all-out with the magic they'd learned from him.

"Like Mr. Frigelt suggested, we will use unison binding magic, aspected to the element of earth."

“Not offensive magic?”

“With Magic Range Extension using so much of our MP, offensive magic would be less effective. There’s also the rite of divine punishment from the church, as well as our other weapon. We are to focus on trapping it in place.”

“I see. So we will be the ‘unsung heroes.’”

“...The what?”

“It’s a term I heard from a Master. It describes someone who is vital to success, but does not stand out.”

“‘Unsung heroes,’ huh? Well, let’s just keep in mind that what we do is important and give it our all.”

“Of course!” Thus, the apprentices prepared, determined to use their magic to carve a path to victory.

The second group was made up of people clad in white. Unlike the Arch Sage’s apprentices, they were numerous — over six hundred strong. They were diverse in jobs, with Priests, Temple Knights, Monks, and others among them, but they had one factor in common — they were all people of the cloth. Their great number served a purpose, too, for the rite of divine punishment’s power increased the more people who performed it.

This was a mobilization of all the volunteers still undergoing their training as holy acolytes. They were willing participants here, but as the hour of battle drew close, some became afraid.

“...We’ll die if it gets too close, right?”

“Yeah. They say that it’s a dragon embodying a curse of death. That sure is scary...”

As the still-young priests talked among themselves... “And that is why it’s our turn to act.” ...A man in the prime of his life called out to them.

“Cardinal Verdin?!”

“Why are you here?!”

Indeed, it was Cardinal Fau Verdin.

With Tsukuyo Fuso taking the High Priestess job, the male version of it — Hierophant — was unavailable, and without a proper Hierophant, he had become the functional leader of Altar’s church. His status was equivalent to that of a cardinal, but his job was actually Bishop, because a “Cardinal” job didn’t exist.

“I can understand why you would be worried. However, those who have no means of fighting the approaching death curse are far more worried than you could ever be,” he said, giving a strong yet peaceful smile and placing his hands on their shoulders. “We have the power to repel this death curse. Thus, you must believe that the powers granted to us by the heavens and the crystals will banish this approaching evil.”

“W-We will!”

“We’ll do our best!” The two regained their morale. Cardinal Verdin smiled and nodded in satisfaction before moving on to other priests who were still nervous.

The third group was stationed some distance away from the other two, and they were clad in dark green army uniforms.

They spread silver sheets over the plain and did something to make them — the Garages — open up, revealing many heavily armored, tracked Magingears known as “Geists.”

They were the imperium’s second armored battalion... reinforcements from Dryfe Imperium to the north.

When Gloria had appeared, they happened to be here for joint military exercises.

Of course, they could've just returned to their country, but by the will of First Prince Gustav — the one rumored to be chosen as the next imperator — they would help the kingdom defeat Gloria.

Like unison magic and the rite of divine punishment, Geists excelled at dealing damage at long range, so they were certainly capable of lending aid to this defense.

And tanks weren't the only things they had up their sleeve. While coming to Altar for joint exercises, they'd brought over a powerful secret weapon as a bargaining chip. This weapon was now being assembled by Mechanics using parts from Garages and their own inventories, and it looked like a cannon with a barrel as large as a smokestack.

However, the strangest group of all was the fourth one.

Unlike the other three, they all wore different clothing. They all dressed as they pleased, but their gear was, on average, far more rare and powerful than the robes or uniforms of the other three groups.

Some of them even had MVP special rewards — a rarity among tians — that they seemed to wear and wield like it was no big deal.

They were Masters, but not just any Masters. They were the Babylonian Battlegroup — the second in the kingdom's clan rankings.

They stood ready on the plain outside of Claymill's defense barrier.

"Leader, 256 of the 287 members were able to log in today," the clan's sub-leader, Over Enchanter, Shulka, reported to the leader. They both stood in a tent erected on the plains.

"I see," the leader said. "It's great that so many could make it."

“It’s a very important quest, after all. You have a lot of people calling in sick and skipping work or school just for this, especially here in our clan.”

“Heh. You’ve got a point.” The leader’s name was King of Swords, Foltesla. He was third in the kingdom’s duel rankings, and many saw him as the current champion’s — Over Gladiator, Figaro’s — friendly rival.

While Figaro was often compared to a lion or a tiger, Foltesla had the air of a snow leopard about him.

“Also, this is not *just* an ordinary fight,” Shulka added. “Our hometown is in danger. There’s no better time to go all-out than right now.”

“...Yeah.” Babylonian Battlegroup was based in Claymill. The city was a major part of their lives, and they’d made many memories here. Thus, they had to protect it at all costs.

“Leader... What about your wife?” Shulka asked worriedly.

“I asked her to evacuate three times now. She said ‘I work with medicine. I have to stay for the sake of those who can’t leave.’”

Foltesla was one of the few Masters who’d married in *Infinite Dendrogram*. His wife was a tian working in a hospital in Claymill. Thus, he wanted to protect this city more than anyone else. It was the reason his expression was even more serious than that of the other Masters.

“...We can’t lose this,” he said. A moment later, the crest on his left hand shone and...

“We’ll win for sure, captain!” ...and a girl appeared. She had red hair and seemed to be in her late teens, but she moved around with so much energy that it made her look younger.



Her name was Nægling. She was Foltesla's Embryo of the Type Maiden/Elder-Arms.

"We'll win no matter what, take its special reward as a souvenir, and return to Erica! I won't accept anything else!"

"Yeah... Of course... Næ," said Foltesla, patting her head with a smile.

"Leader, I just got some info via comms magic," said Shulka. "There are other clans and parties besides us in the surroundings."

"They probably think they can become MVPs by finishing Gloria off after we and the kingdom weaken it," said Foltesla. "Reaping the benefits of our hard work." He also assumed that some of them were those who'd fought Gloria earlier and had just returned from their death penalty.

"...Should we remove them beforehand?"

"Leave them. We won't be cooperating, but they will add to our overall power. Honestly, I have no idea how much of it we need."

The strongest UBM that Foltesla had beaten so far was Ancient Legendary. Gloria was two tiers above that, and he couldn't even imagine how dangerous it was.

"Power, eh...? If only we had The Lunar Society or the likes of Figaro and Tom Cat with us." Shulka named the country's top clan and the two duel rankers who were above Foltesla.

"It is what it is. The cult is negotiating with the kingdom, while Tom Cat is probably a dev plant, so he won't do anything about this. As for Figaro..."

"Leader?"

"Oh, it's nothing..." As his longtime rival, Foltesla knew Figaro's weakness.

Specifically, he knew that Figaro could only really fight alone. Participating in a large-scale cooperative battle such as this one would've been quite the challenge for him.

Despite that, Foltesla clearly recalled him saying “Foltesla... Should I participate, too?”

Figaro'd offered this because he knew that Gloria was approaching Claymill, which Foltesla held dear as his and his wife's home.

Foltesla had replied by saying, “No need, Figaro. You just sit tight on your throne. I'll be coming to take it after I beat Gloria.”

He'd rejected Figaro's offer, because he didn't want to expose his weakness to the many others gathered there and didn't want Figaro to be aware of his own weakness either — and, as his rival, he wanted Figaro to be the best he could be.

“Do you think I did the wrong thing, Næ?” he asked Næ telepathically.

“No. I'm sure this is good! I want the lion to stay strong, too! It's one of the reasons why I wanna beat him!”

“...I know what you mean.” A moment later, a Babylonian Battlegroup member opened the entrance to the tent and said, “Leader! I have a message from the scouts observing Gloria! We have only two hours left until the target arrives!”

“I see,” said Foltesla. “Then we'll follow our plan and attack it outside the barrier.”

“Understood!” said the member before running out and informing the start of the operation.

“It'll go well, yes?” Shulka asked, clearly worried.

“We have to make sure that it does. Right?” Foltesla responded.

Unlike the clans and rankers who'd rushed in, the Babylonian Battlegroup was cooperating with the kingdom, and was integral to their plan.

This was how it would go...

First, the Babylonian Battlegroup's ranged squad would attack Gloria from a distance. While Gloria was distracted by them, the Arch Sage's apprentices and the holy acolytes of the Altarian church would launch the large-scale magic known as the rite of divine punishment. And while the consecutive attacks kept it distracted, the imperium would use that ultimate weapon they'd brought.

If all went well, that would be the end of it.

"If Dryfe's weapon isn't enough..." Shulka mused.

"Then we will have to charge in ourselves." Their info was vague, but according to DIN, there were cases when merely drawing close to Gloria didn't result in instant death.

In the worst case scenario, the King of Swords, Foltesla, and the finest of his Babylonian Battlegroup would have to face Gloria by themselves.

Foltesla thought that that would be all they had left... and had a feeling — a certainty — that it would indeed come to that.

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The fifty-eight Geists of the imperium's second armored battalion were stationed outside the barrier, away from the Arch Sage's apprentices and the followers of the church.

Unlike unison magic and the rite of divine punishment, artillery was limited by firing location and trajectory, so the distance was necessary to make sure none of the other groups were caught in the bombardment. Even if none of the shells did any direct damage to their allies, anyone too close to a tank would be risking their

eardrums. These Geists were loaded with powerful long-range ordnance, so they posed an even greater danger.

After Gloria's approach was announced, the commander of the battalion and his soldiers assumed their positions and waited, but the dragon was nowhere in sight even after nearly two hours had passed.

"...Is it really on its way here?" a Geist driver asked.

"If it doesn't change course, yeah," said the commander, seated in the vehicle cockpit. "But we're dealing with a living being here. There's no telling what kind of urges it'll get... In the worst-case scenario, it might come at us from behind."

By that, he meant the city of Claymill.

"What would we do then?"

"We'll do what we can to ensure the people are safe, then attack. We got permission to use the strong stuff inside the kingdom, but I'd prefer not to harm Claymill or its people."

Though, by the time that thing was there, the death field would've killed every single inhabitant already, the commander added mentally, but not out loud.

"I must say... I really didn't expect to see a real battle here in the kingdom. And against a so-called 'SUBM,' at that... Why must we fight a monster above even Mythical for the sake of...?"

The young driver was frightened and slightly upset by the fact that he would be risking his life outside of the imperium, but the commander offered another perspective.

"Don't think of it like that," he said. "In the long run, defending this country is defending Dryfe, too."

"What do you mean?"

“It’s little more than a rumor, but... there’re plans to unite our next crown prince and the kingdom’s first princess in marriage.”

This was a rumor that sometimes spread among the imperium’s elite. The idea had been considered for decades now, but due to clashes in circumstance, it had been postponed until the next generation.

But now, Prince Gustav, the prime candidate for imperator (merely “candidate” because the previous one hadn’t officially named a successor) had a firstborn named Hallon, who would presumably become crown prince the moment Gustav took the throne. There was also the possibility of Gustav being passed over and Hallon becoming imperator, but that didn’t matter much in this context — a crown prince and an imperator were both worthy of a first princess’ hand in marriage.

“So you are saying that this land would be Dryfe, too, sir?” asked the driver.

“Or Dryfe would become Altar,” nodded the commander. “I don’t mind either way. The kingdom is rich in farmland. If we merge, Dryfe’s food shortages would be a thing of the past.”

“Well, I do hear that there have been more and more people dying of hunger in the colder regions...” Due to poor harvests with unknown causes, the imperium’s self-sufficiency was dropping dramatically. They could still survive with imports from foreign lands, but Dryfe’s future was looking quite bleak.

“Yeah. That’s why we have to protect this country. For the sake of our future.”

“Sir, yes, sir!” Keeping their morale high, they continued to wait.

Fifteen more minutes had passed when...

“WE SEE GLORIA ON THE HORIZON! IT’S APPROACHING!”

...The comms blared a message from the scouts.

“And there it is... all vehicles, prepare to fire.”

“All vehicles, prepare to fire!”

“Understood! All vehicles, prepare to fire!” The commander’s order spread through his battalion, and the fifty-eight Geists moved and fine-tuned the angle of their turrets...

“Begin charging the Supergravity Shell.” ...And prepared to use the ultimate weapon they’d brought all this way.

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Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria, appeared on the distant horizon. It walked upon the surface, its three heads swaying with every step.

The one-horned head on the right had three eyes which moved separately and with no clear pattern, as though it were scanning its surroundings randomly.

The single eye of two-horned head on the left shone brightly as it glared down towards the surface below.

However, the three-horned head in the middle had its two eyes closed, as though it was fast asleep.

Its body, completely covered in golden scales, moved its four limbs along the ground, leaving behind clawprints as it approached Claymill.

The flourishing plants around it withered and died the moment its aura touched them.

If it drew too close to a lake, the aquatic monsters there perished instantly and floated up to the surface, becoming particles of light once the resurrection period expired and leaving behind only the meat they dropped. The aquatic plants died, as well, and in such numbers that the lake changed color.

“SHuEwOoOAAagHh!” The light of the single eye on the two-horned head grew in intensity, as if this creature could not tolerate the existence of any life around it.

Gloria strode through the withered, dead land as though surveying its conquered kingdom.

“...?” Suddenly, the three disorderly eyes of the one-horned head all focused upon a single point.

A moment later, countless arrows and blades of ice rained down on Gloria.

These were the result of skills used by Masters from the Babylonian Battlegroup. These long-ranged attacks were even mixed with ultimate Embryo skills, and they all barraged the dragon.

“Aim for the eyes! Don’t think you can take it down like this! Focus on distracting it!” Listening to their leader, Foltesla, the clan continued their onslaught.

This was such an intense assault that it would make short work of the average Master’s — maybe even a standard UBM’s — HP.

However, the max-level Reveal skill possessed by one of the high-rank jobs present told a different story.

“Leader!” he cried, in a panic. “Gloria’s HP isn’t going down at all!” It was the truth — Gloria hadn’t lost even a fraction of its HP. In fact, direct hits to its eyes — presumed weak spots — didn’t even make it flinch.

“So it really does have some sort of defense skill,” said Foltesla. “But it can’t be all powerful.”

He was certain that no creature could be invincible to all attacks. There had to be something, such as a specific level of power or a certain element, which could break through it.

And if the problem was indeed that their attacks lacked power...

“Leader! The kingdom has contacted us! They’re commencing their attack!”

“All right! Back away, but don’t stop attacking! And make sure you aren’t caught up in the crossfire!”

...The joint attacks from Altar and Dryfe would surely make up the difference.

“Mr. Frigelt! The twenty-six apprentices are ready to cast the spell!”

“Excellent! I will take the lead! Match my chant and casting!” the aged, long-bearded Sage, Frigelt, called to the younger of the Arch Sage’s apprentices.

They were preparing to use unison magic. This was a technique that increased the potency of spells by combining the magic power of casters who possessed the unison magic skill and simultaneously cast a spell using a specific chant. The need for extremely strict timing and precise control of magic power made it poorly suited for Masters, and most believed that only highly trained tians were capable of it.

And when it came to unison magic, the Arch Sage’s apprentices were thought to be among the best.

“Let us join our wills as one,” said Frigelt.

“LET US JOIN OUR WILLS AS ONE,” the others echoed.

“We call to the earth. Spread our magic like you spread the violent rain and morning dew.”

“WE CALL TO THE EARTH! SPREAD OUR MAGIC LIKE YOU SPREAD THE VIOLENT RAIN AND MORNING DEW!”

“We the students of the Arch Sage now weave our rite.”

“WE THE STUDENTS OF THE ARCH SAGE NOW WEAVE OUR RITE!”

The simultaneous chanting enhanced their magic powers and merged them into one... “UNISON MAGIC — GRAND HOLDER!”

...And they spoke the magic words.

A moment later, seven stone arms over a hundred metels in size manifested around Gloria. They grasped the dragon in the blink of an eye, preventing it from moving any further.

The toughness and precise movements of those arms spoke volumes of the unison magic’s perfect execution.

“Hhaah... hhaah... NOW! HOLY MEN OF THE KINGDOM!” Breathing raggedly after such a taxing spell, Frigelt used voice amplification magic to signal that it was now the church’s turn.

By the time the voice reached them, they were already doing what they had to do.

“O, heavens. O, incarnation of divine punishment, judge of all living things.” Cardinal Verdin closed his eyes and joined his hands together. This was no chant for a magic spell, but a prayer for a ritual — one that they had been doing for nearly an hour now.

All for this very moment.

“Before us looms a wicked dragon. If it is indeed truly evil, may it suffer unrelenting retribution.” The prayer reached its peak, and white light — orbs of their HP, MP, and SP — began leaving the bodies of the assembled priests. That was the crystallization of their collective power, and upon losing that light, they Fainted, one after another.

The lights then began to merge into one in midair.

Finally, even Cardinal Verdin’s body released its white light, and the amalgam of all these shining orbs from all these holy men flew above Gloria’s head.

Then, the gathered white light itself spoke the final line of the rite of divine punishment.

“Come, Judgement Pillar!” The rite of divine punishment was a technique that drained all power from the participants and unleashed purifying holy magic upon whoever the majority of them had deemed an enemy.

Gloria was their only enemy here, and thus, a pillar of obscenely hot light engulfed the dragon and the arms binding it.

The golden body was blasted by immense heat and the stone arms around it melted, becoming magma that buried Gloria alive.

You would expect any creature to burn, boil, or suffocate to death when exposed to this, but nothing was certain with Gloria.

Thus, the imperium’s second armored battalion moved in to finish it off with their strongest weapon.

“Commander! Gloria is completely bound!”

“All right... Supergravity Shell... prepare to fire!” At his command, the battery constructed in their formation by their Mechanics began to hum.

The battery — or, to be specific, the shell it would fire — was the strongest weapon in this battle.

It was a “Supergravity Shell” — one of the so-called “Four Forbidden Shells,” a quartet of immensely powerful shell types meant to be fired by the symbol of Dryfe: Throne of the Imperium, Dryfe Imperstand.

What they had here was one single warhead and a replica turret designed to fire it.

Current technology wasn't able to properly replicate the Imperstand's parts. The replica's range was only one hundredth of the original's, and it was guaranteed to break after firing just once.

But even though the cannon was merely a replica, the shell was the real thing — a devastating weapon that compressed and crushed anything within a one kilometel radius, until everything was annihilated.

The unison magic and the rite of divine punishment was only meant to hold Gloria in place. This Supergravity Shell was the two countries' trump card.

"This hasn't been used in an actual battle in about a century, has it?"

"Well, we don't have many of them." The Imperstand's Four Forbidden Shells had been created during the time of the pre-ancient civilization, and no one had been able to replicate the feat since. Even counting all the types together, there were scarcely ten shells in existence.

Because of this, the imperium was extremely apprehensive about using them. They had never been used in a war — in fact, aside from the time they had to get rid of a Mythical UBM raging in their lands, they had never been used at all.

Of course, they saw enough of a reward for using a Supergravity Shell in this battle: the very defeat of Gloria itself.

The kingdom had set the stage, and the imperium would now deal the final blow. It was unknown whether it would be the commander giving the orders or the gunner manning the cannon, but either way, the imperium would receive an SUBM's special reward.

Altar would minimize the damage to their lands, while Dryfe would acquire an immensely powerful item; both sides benefited from this arrangement.

“The turret is at 80% energy!” said the Engineer managing the weapon.

“You only have one shot. Don’t miss,” the commander said.

“Sir, yes, sir! I’ll stake my life on it!” While they talked, there was some kind of change in Gloria.

“...So it seriously didn’t die, huh?” the commander gasped. The hardened magma moved, and three heads broke free of it.

Neither the searing rite of divine punishment nor being buried alive under magma seemed to threaten its life. The dragon’s survivability was so great that the commander now knew for sure that only the Supergravity Shell could stop it.

He looked at Gloria with determination when the Engineer declared that the preparations were complete.

“Energy is at 120%.”

“All right! Fire the Supergravity Shell!”

“Firing the Supergravity Shell!” At those words, the replica turret released a pitch-black orb.

The power of the release shattered the gun, but the black orb flew towards Gloria at full speed for a direct hit.

A moment later, the space around the dragon distorted.

Heaven and earth alike tore apart, converged on a single point, and vanished. Not even light could escape; the onlookers could only see a black, spherical space.

This was absolute destruction at the hands of extreme gravity for everything within a radius of one kilometel. All within was compressed and annihilated. Gloria, too, was caught up in this gravitational hell, unable to let out even a single roar.

Finally, after a time that felt both too short and far too long, the black sphere vanished.

Gloria was nowhere to be seen.

There seemed to be no doubt that the Supergravity Shell had destroyed it.

“We did it...”

“Yes! We won, commander!” The commander was relieved to see that the superweapon that had sat idle for a century was just as powerful as they said, while the young driver couldn’t contain his pure joy.

Similar reactions could be heard from the others in this Geist, as well as those in the other Geists.

The apprentices of the Arch Sage were overjoyed, as well. The holy men of Altar were unconscious, but their expressions were peaceful, as if they had been certain of their victory and were dreaming of it now.

“Heheh... We can relax now.” The more fearsome the creature, the greater the joy and relief of beating it.

Certain of their victory, of good diplomatic relations between the two countries, and the salvation of Dryfe’s future, the commander smiled in satisfaction.

“This means that you should receive a Superior special reward, doesn’t it?!” asked the young driver in excitement. The commander nodded, but then raised an eyebrow. “Hm...? But if you did get a special reward, you would know that right away.”

He figured it would go to the one manning the weapon, and that disappointed him somewhat. Despite that, he didn’t care about it *too* much. To him, successfully finishing this mission was the greatest reward.

...A reward he had yet to earn.

“C-Commander...” the driver, who’d been cheerful moments ago, now spoke with fear.

“What is it?” the commander asked.

“...” The young one was struck speechless, so instead he simply pointed outside the front window. Feeling a sense of foreboding, the commander opened the Geist’s hatch and looked at what was happening outside.

Then, using a pair of binoculars, he scanned the large crater opened up by the extreme compression.

He stared into the hole that was supposed to have been Gloria’s grave... *and found the eyes of its three heads staring back at him.*

“How...?” The binoculars fell from his hands. He couldn’t believe the sight — or didn’t want to believe it.

“Supergravity Shells compress and annihilate everything...! It couldn’t possibly have survived that!” Alas, his words meant little in the face of reality: *Gloria was completely unharmed.*

It lifted itself into the air on its wings, which had not a single scratch on them, and rose out of the kilometel-deep hole left when the ground had vanished.

After all this, Gloria still walked the continent. The disappearance of the space around it had merely dropped it down a kilometel.

And now, it rose out of the crater as if the unbridled annihilation around it was nothing.

“Th-That was the imperium’s strongest weapon! How is it unharmed?!”

“A-Aaah...” The superweapon of legend, said to have felled even a Mythical-tier monster, did absolutely nothing against Gloria, and this fact left the second armored battalion absolutely shaken.

The Supergravity Shell was so powerful that it was hard to even imagine anything that could survive it. It was undoubtedly a formidable weapon.

However, it didn’t work on Gloria whatsoever.

Even ignoring that, the combined power of the unison magic and the rite of divine punishment was also immense — but that, too, did nothing.

This was because they didn’t even clear the first step in fighting Gloria.

“...All vehicles, attack! We’ll destroy it using standard firepower!”
The commander realized that Gloria’s survival had left his battalion completely shocked.

“The Supergravity Shell damaged it internally. Our normal attacks will work now!”

That was why he voiced an optimistic assumption that even he didn’t believe, just to keep his squad from collapsing.

“S-Sir, yes, sir!”

“Understood!” Following the commander’s orders, they began firing at Gloria.

At the same time, the Babylonian Battlegroup resumed their ranged attacks, and the Arch Sage’s apprentices joined in as well, resulting in a barrage about twice as powerful as the first one.

But then... the commander realized something he was better off not realizing.

“Do you hear it?” he asked.

“H-Hear what?!” The driver was shaking, clearly too frightened to know what the commander had in mind.

“The sounds of our shells hitting Gloria...”

“I don’t hear them, sir!” Normally, it was impossible to make out something like that out of the mess of sounds made by the explosions, but the commander had a high level in his hearing sense skill and thus perceived much more.

“Yeah! I don’t hear it, either! It’s like not a single one of our shots are landing!”

The sound of the explosions simply wasn’t there.

He heard the impact of their high-explosive projectiles, as well as bursts of magic, but never the sound of armor-piercing bullets hitting it.

That was actually a major hint towards uncovering the secret of Gloria’s defense.

However, such an observation was unnecessary now.

After all, having received all that punishment... “There’s a change in the target’s head!” ...Gloria was now switching to offensive mode.

“Is it the death field we heard about in rumors?! Check our distance from it!”

“It’s still 3,800 metels away! That’s 3.8 times farther than the range of the field, sir!”

“What...?” It had been proven that the area of the death curse didn’t extend past one kilometel.

Thus, it had no means of attacking anything outside of it.

At the very least, it hadn’t used anything like that so far. However...

“It’s not the two-horned head that’s doing something! It’s the one-horn!”

“What?!” Following the report from a different vehicle, the commander used his binoculars to look at the one-horned head to the left.

It had indeed begun to change.

All of its three eyes were now covered by a mobile shell. The horn on its head was shining bright, and it slowly began to open its maw.

It was clearly about to do something.

“...Fire into the one-horned’s mouth!” The chill that went down his spine spurred the commander to shout that order.

Dozens of shells and offensive spells from the other groups hit the head directly. Some caused immense explosions right inside its mouth.

But even that wasn’t enough to faze Gloria.

“F f r R r R r r r R r R r r R r r R...”

Eventually, the one-horned head began growling...

“R r r R r r S s s S s s H h E E E e E w w W w w W w w!”

...And spewed out a vast light.

“...?!” The light was enough to make the commander prepare himself for an immense amount of casualties, as well as his own death.

“Hm...?”

However, nothing happened.

There was no change in anything showered by the one-horned head’s light. Nothing died, and nothing was burned. It seemed like little more than a flashlight.

“Wh-What? What’s happening?” Confused, the commander pondered what to do, and quickly decided to...

“...Leave the light!”

“Eh?”

He immediately ordered the driver and other vehicles to move away.

“We’re dealing with a creature that kills all living things just by walking past them! There’s no way this is safe!”

“S-Sir, yes, sir!” The driver leaped into action, and the other vehicles followed. They all tried to escape the light as quickly as they could. The light that flooded the area made it hard to tell where it began and ended, but they all relied on each other’s silhouettes to try and find their way out.

Eventually, they were free of the light.

“W-We made it!”

“All right! Keep making distan... Hm?” Upon leaving the light, the commander noticed something.

It was a change in the head of Gloria responsible for the light.

The single horn on its head had begun to change color.

“What? What’s about to happen?” The pale horn on the dragon’s head was turning redder.

And when it became completely red...

“O v E r d R i v E!”

...The thirty-seven Geists that were still within the light *evaporated*.

In the blink of an eye, both the metal vehicles and the people inside became smoke and scattered, leaving nothing behind.

It was an awfully silent extermination.

The scariest thing about it was that those outside didn't feel the heat at all. It released a level of heat that instantly turned metal into gas, while maintaining complete control over the energy involved that kept the heat contained within the light.

"Th-This is just... you monster!" The commander grieved the loss of the majority of his battalion, but that wasn't even the end of it. Something even more terrible was happening.

"S h A a A a a a A l i i n N E e E!" Gloria roared and began slowly moving the torrent of light.

It swung its all-evaporating heat with the ease of someone directing a flashlight.

Pandemonium.

The surviving battalion as well as the Arch Sage's apprentices were now screaming in terror.

Claymill's barrier did nothing.

Wherever the light passed or touched, it left behind nothing but a brief vapor.

Tanks were consumed mid-retreat. Apprentices vanished while hiding at the edge of their posts, in the middle of their prayers.

There were those who were caught halfway in the light, leaving their other half to crawl around in confusion, dying moments later.

All the holy men were consumed by the light before their consciousness even returned.

As this hell continued, the light approached the commander's vehicle.

"Commander! Commander! Where?! Where do we—?!"

"You can't escape light, damn it..." The driver was panicking, looking for a way out, while the commander had already given up.

He would not survive this, and had no motivation to try.

He had no family, and besides those in this vehicle, the subordinates he'd raised had been taken by the light.

He now had nothing.

Not saying a word, his only worry was that their demise would have a negative, lasting effect on the relationship between Altar and Dryfe.

"Please... at least let both countries survi—" Before he could finish his prayer-like words, the commander evaporated and dissipated into the air.

◇◆

Out of the four groups, the only one that had avoided direct contact with the light was the Babylonian Battlegroup. It was fair to say that they were the only Altarians still standing.

"Captain! This is dangerous! We need to retreat!" insisted one of the members.

Foltesla, however, shook his head, "Retreat where?"

"Where the light won't reach, of course! Oh yeah! We should log out...!"

"Well, that's definitely something we can do. But right over there, in Claymill — our home — you have lots of tians who can't."

There were still many people within the city. The light had washed away the three groups in and out of the barrier outside the city walls, but it hadn't yet reached the city itself. However, if things kept going like this, Claymill would surely fall. The fate of all its inhabitants would be sealed the moment they — the last line of defense — vanished.

Foltesla couldn't tolerate that.

“...Everyone max level or above, come with me,” he said. “We’ll defeat it at close range.”

“But... the field...!”

“I have an idea... And I’ll test it by myself.”

“C-Captain!” Vanguard that he was, Foltesla charged towards Gloria at supersonic speeds.

It only took him a few seconds to reach the outside of the death barrier, marked by withered plants.

“Let’s go, Næ.”

“OK, captain!” Nægling instantly became a longsword. Holding her in hand, Foltesla took a step into the deathly field.

If it killed him, too, it would activate the Brooch, and he would instantly leap away.

He clearly pictured how he would have to move to accomplish that, but *stepping inside did nothing to him*.

“Just as I thought.” He took a couple more steps forward, and it didn’t look like he was about to die.

Thus, he raised his voice.

“Listen up! This death field works based on level! If yours is high, you won’t die!” That was a conclusion based on the info he’d gotten from DIN. Those who were level 500, or Superior Jobs such as himself, hadn’t died upon closing in on Gloria.

On the other hand, those who had great stats due to Embryo stat growth bonuses, had died regardless. It had even killed a Mythical UBM.

This insta-death field wasn’t based on pure power or lack of it — it only judged whether you were the right level or not.

"Those whose Brooches activate inside the field, back out! The rest of you, come challenge it!" Watching his clan jump into the barrier, Foltesla rushed right next to Gloria.

And, as he passed it by at supersonic speeds... "Thunder Slash!" ...He cut its hind leg with an offensive skill from the swordsman grouping.

To Foltesla, it was a tense few seconds, but time eventually caught up to him, and he saw a line-like cut in the scales that soon began to bleed.

That was the first injury that Gloria had suffered in this battle.

"...I thought that's what it was." Gloria was unharmed even when exposed to crushing compression via supergravity, which meant that this defensive ability wasn't something that could be overcome by pure damage.

At the same time, all the many and varied attacks rained down on it hadn't scratched it either, which meant that this wasn't a type of defense that was keyed to some element or other.

And if it wasn't pure defensive ability or elemental shielding, Foltesla guessed that there had to be some sort of other rule to it.

This rule had defended against all the overwhelming attacks raining down upon it during this battle, and now Foltesla knew that it could only be... "This thing can only be damaged by attacks from *within* its insta-death field." It rejected the attacks of anyone outside its barrier — the weaklings and cowards who couldn't survive its onslaught. Only those with the power — the level — to survive the insta-death field were granted the chance to enter it and do harm to Gloria.

The role of the barrier was to select those who were worthy of fighting it.

"I know your trick now." More Babylonian Battlegroup members were entering the barrier and attacking Gloria.

As that happened, Foltesla pointed Nægling at Gloria's head — the one-horn that'd evaporated so many people — and declared, "This is the beginning of the *real* battle between you and us humans."

Act Three: The Selection of Despair

Some time ago:

Foltesla the Surpassing Blade. The duel ranker who would earn that nickname had started playing *Infinite Dendrogram* shortly after its release.

He didn't have any special reason for starting the game. He'd only picked it up because it was a hot topic in the media, and he suddenly had a lot of free time after quitting his job recently.

Upon logging in for the first time, all five of his senses were absolutely overwhelmed.

"Realistic" doesn't even begin to describe it, he thought.

Right after arriving at the royal capital of Altea and before his Embryo hatched, he went wherever his legs took him and headed towards the north.

As Foltesla was taking a casual stroll through Noz Forest, he suddenly heard a scream.

By conditioned reflex, he ran straight to the source of the sound, where he found a young lady clutching a basket of herbs and a wolf about to attack her. The "Teal Wolf," as it was called, bared its fangs at the girl and leaped towards her.

"...!" All of a sudden, the only thing between the wolf's fangs and the girl's flesh was Foltesla's sword.

She's in terrible danger, he thought, as his body moved on its own.

The very idea that this was a game — not reality — had completely vanished from his mind. There was only his fear that this girl may die, and his actions were simply a response to that.

After that, Foltesla went on to slay the Teal Wolf, badly injuring himself in the process.

Though these wolves were among the weakest monsters one could encounter, just a single one of them was stronger than level 0, jobless Foltesla. He'd have been lucky just to chase it away.

As Foltesla, tired from the fight, sat down on the ground, the girl asked, worried, "A-Are you okay?"

"Yeah. What about—?"

Mid-sentence, Foltesla finally remembered that he was in *Infinite Dendrogram* — a game.

For a moment, he reminded himself that she was just an NPC...

"A-Are you okay?! I-I'll make some medicine right now!" ...But as he watched the worry in her eyes upon seeing his wounds and the care she put into making his medicine, Foltesla simply couldn't keep thinking of her as nothing but a character in a game.

"This might sting a bit, but it should work right away...!" she said, wrapping the medicine-soaked bandage tightly around Foltesla's wounds.

He'd disabled the pain settings, so it didn't sting at all, but he could feel the smell pierce his nose, and pick up the flowery scent wafting off the girl.

As she covered him in medicine and bandages, the two talked.

"I'm sorry," the girl said. "I'm new to this, so I still can't make medicine that would heal you right away..."

"It's okay. Thank you." Foltesla checked his status summary, then showed it to her.

Relieved that he was healed, she noticed the name on the summary.

"What a relief... Umm... Is your name 'Foltesla'?"

“...? Oh. Yes.” He wasn’t used to his player name yet, so it took him a moment to remember it.

“Umm... Thank you for saving me!”

“Thank you for the medicine, uhh...” He wanted to thank her, but then he realized that he didn’t know her name.

She realized that, too, and quickly corrected the problem. “I-I’m sorry! My name is Erica. Erica Lansley. I’m a Medicine Worker.”

“I see. Thanks, Erica. I’m Sfor—... I mean, Foltesla,” he re-introduced himself, nearly saying his real name.

That was their beginning: the beginning for a Master and tian who would become husband and wife.

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Claymill the Fortress City, outskirts

Gloria had been completely unharmed by the ultimate attack of a Mythical UBM and countless full-power attacks from tians. Foltesla, however, had figured out the secret behind its apparent immortality and quickly rallied his Babylonian Battlegroup against it, sparking a battle that was intense from the moment it began.

“Shulka! Hold it in place!” Foltesla roared.

“Got it!” the Over Enchanter responded. “Come, Lahmu!”

Shulka’s crest glowed before a vast amount of mud spewed out of it. The overflowing mud quickly became a fifty meter tall, human-shaped giant that stood before Gloria.

Its name was “Guardian Mire, Lahmu,” and it was the Embryo of the Over Enchanter, Shulka — the sub-leader of the Babylonian Battlegroup and sixth in the kingdom’s kill rankings.

“BO-BO-BO.” Large as it was, it was still less than half the size of Gloria, but it charged forward regardless.

Gloria couldn't miss the mud behemoth approaching it and quickly swung its tail, bristling with four spikes, to slice Lahmu in half diagonally.

"BO." However, Lahmu was merely a flowing mass of mud, and because of its Physical Attack Negation, the tail had no effect.

Gloria might've been a fearsome monster superior even to Mythicals, but nothing could deal physical damage to a creature that negated it. Its Fatal Field wouldn't work on non-animals, either.

That meant that there was only one thing Gloria had that could make Lahmu vanish.

That thing was the breath of ultimate light... The weapon that had slaughtered all the tians guarding Claymill.

However, Lahmu had been summoned precisely to prevent that.

"BO-BO-BO!" Upon approaching Gloria, Lahmu transformed its body back into mud and crawled up the dragon's head: specifically, the one-horned one that fired the deadly light. Lahmu quickly wrapped itself around the head... "Great Guardian of Firmness — Lahmu!" ...And, with Shulka's ultimate skill declaration, compressed and hardened itself.

Lahmu's ultimate skill turned it into a material harder than even Mythical metal. Normally, it only hardened a part of its mud for use as a weapon, but this time, every last bit of it was instantly petrified.

"...!" Lahmu now acted as something like a dog muzzle or a prisoner's mask. Gloria's one-horned head could neither open its jaws or emit its deadly light. It tried to break the restraint with its immense STR ranking in the tens of thousands, but even that couldn't easily destroy a creature that was as hard as Mythical metal.

It came at the cost of all the power of a sixth-form Embryo, but the light of the zenith was now completely sealed.

“You’ve got it!” Foltesla cried.

“Yes,” nodded Shulka. “But it seems that anything that went inside its mouth evaporated, so I can’t finish it off.”

The closed maw kept the heat inside, preventing Lahmu from going in and killing it from within.

“That’s all right. Focus on keeping it bound.”

“Very well. I’ll focus the single-target buffs on Lahmu, then cast the area buffs in order.”

The Over Enchanter’s passive skill, “One and All Enchanting,” let Shulka simultaneously use single-target and area buffs at the same time. Thus, it was possible for him to put the single-target END buffs on Lahmu to keep the binding strong, while at the same time using area stat buffs to increase the abilities of his clan members.

“All right...” Foltesla said before charging Gloria again, now buffed.

His attacks were powerful now, and not just because of Shulka’s buffs. It was also due to Nægling’s self-enhancement.

The skill that Nægling had possessed from the very beginning was called “Over Chaser,” which increased Foltesla’s stats by (skill level x 10%), provided the corresponding stat was higher on the enemy he was fighting.

In her sixth form, Nægling’s skill level was 6, which meant that all of Foltesla’s stats except AGI — in which he was already above Gloria — were increased by an impressive 60%.

The two enhancements added up, giving him impressive stats even for a Superior Job, and supreme offensive ability against Gloria.

“It has some strong defenses... But it’s nothing an active skill can’t break,” Foltesla muttered as he cut into Gloria’s tough scales.

He wasn't the only one fighting, though. All of the Babylonian Battlegroup's elite, also buffed by Shulka, were attacking Gloria now as well.

"We can do it... We're damaging it!"

"Watch out for the tail! It deals more damage than its legs!"

"We know that, Riser!" There were even rankers among the Masters, and they fought against the dragon without showing the slightest intention to retreat. They were daring and resolute indeed, and little by little their damage began to add up.

However... the dragon's HP was going down too slowly.

"We lack the numbers, don't we?" Still fighting, Foltesla looked over the clan members within the barrier. Even with himself and Shulka included, their number didn't exceed twelve. Two parties — only about 5% — of all the members present were even able to participate.

The players here were all level 500 or above, and Foltesla already knew that was what allowed them to stand in the field.

Attaining level 500 was actually very difficult for Masters. Besides Superior Jobs, the only ones that could reach it were those who'd maxed out all their low and high-rank jobs. However, it was extremely common for people who'd hit max level to be unsatisfied with their builds and reset unneeded jobs to get new ones. It was also a way of experimenting, in the hopes that they would discover the conditions for unlocking Superior Jobs.

This was especially true in the Babylonian Battlegroup, which was the second strongest clan in the kingdom and was fully focused on battle. Most were in the middle of leveling new jobs, and thus only the aforementioned twelve qualified to enter the field.

In addition to that, the party compositions weren't all that good, either. There wasn't a single person who focused on a job in the priest grouping. One might say that the only reason they were able to put up such a good fight was that Shulka — a Superior Job from the support-focused enchanter grouping — was a central figure among them.

To fully prepare to fight Gloria, you needed at least a few dozen max-level Masters. That was the reason why the rushing rankers had been defeated. And if not that, you needed people who were above maxed-out — Superior Jobs.

I see... Foltesla thought. So this is what this thing is all about.

As he fought, he finally figured out the concept behind Gloria.

As a storied fighter and leader of the Babylonian Battlegroup, Foltesla had fought many UBMs, and by now, he knew that the majority of them had some sort of theme behind them.

Some would regenerate endlessly until you dealt with their weak spot.

Some would absorb the life force of nearby animals to grow stronger.

Some would nest in an advantageous spot and simply attack from there.

Design concepts like that applied to most UBMs.

And just now, Foltesla had figured out Gloria's concept.

This thing specializes in "selection," he concluded. You could see it in the many powers it'd used so far.

The Fatal Field selected those who were of high enough level.

The negation of all damage from outside the field prevented people of lower level from joining the battle at all.

The light breath selected those who could escape before it became deadly... Basically, anyone fast and decisive enough.

All of them were powers that selected the powerful and filtered out the weak.

...It does make sense for what it is, though, Foltesla thought. If you looked at Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria, as an endgame raid boss from a traditional MMORPG, it made a lot of sense. You had to fight it over and over so you could figure out its special qualities, weaknesses, and action patterns before you could fully prepare yourself and beat it to receive an immense reward.

In a way, it was a very “complete” boss monster.

“But... there’s no time for repeat runs!” A vast number of tians had already died, and they would never come back.

If they lost to it over and over, the kingdom would fall, even if the Masters themselves didn’t.

And considering the fact that the Babylonian Battlegroup was the last barrier standing between Gloria and their hometown of Claymill, they couldn’t afford to lose even once.

“We’ll finish it, here and now!” Foltesla shouted.

“YEAH!” the others cheered.

“We have a chance.” To Masters that could enter the Fatal Field, the only dangerous things were Gloria’s stats and light breath, but the latter had been sealed by Lahmu.

And though its stats, such as the STR that could kill in one hit, were intimidating... “We can just dodge all the attacks!” Foltesla was third in the duel rankings, and the other Masters had plenty of fights under their belts, as well. With their AGI buffed by Shulka, they used their stats and experience to avoid the storm of claws and tail.

“Gloria’s STR and END are great, but its AGI isn’t even supersonic,” Foltesla said. “As long as we watch out for its tail and claws, it won’t be hard to avoid its attacks.”

A single mistake meant certain doom here, but as the rival of the Over Gladiator, he was familiar with these kinds of situations. It was dangerous, but as of yet, not a single one of the twelve Babylonian Battlegroup members had died. In fact, they were starting to gain the upper hand.

Their MP and SP was limited, of course, but the members outside the barrier could keep them charged using their support skills. They would fight with all their might, run out of MP or SP, rush to the edge of the field to fill up, rinse and repeat.

If things continued like this, victory was in their grasp. The moment they felt certain of that...

“Ah...!”

...Gloria was attacked from an unexpected direction.

It dealt damage, so it was clearly from inside the monster’s field, but the ones responsible weren’t part of the Babylonian Battlegroup.

“Captain! It’s those parties and clans that were watching from a distance! They—”

“Found out how to beat it and decided to take advantage of our fight, huh?” It was actually a number of parties and clans, and all maxed-out, skilled players who jumped in to attack Gloria.

Some attacked Gloria with AoE attacks, not caring if they damaged other Masters. There were also some who targeted Masters specifically.

The Babylonian Battlegroup members outside the field had tried to stop them, but they were caught off-guard and did not manage to succeed.

“Build up your damage! We gotta be the MVP!”

“Crush the others, too! Keep those AoEs coming!” Their actions were, in some ways, reasonable. Everyone gathered here was after a Superior special reward. By default, it was “every team for itself” — or perhaps even “every man for himself.”

“Can’t expect any cooperation here,” Foltesla scowled and rang out as he cut down one of his attackers.

At first glance, it looked like they now had more people on their side, but everyone was trampling over each other in their rush for the merit needed to become MVPs.

To the Babylonian Battlegroup, who fought cooperatively, this clearly made the fight more difficult.

“...Rabe, Hanzaki, tank for Shulka,” said Foltesla. “If he dies, Lahmu will disappear.”

“Got it!” the two responded and went to defend the key individual here.

If Shulka vanished, the one-horn would wipe out all the Masters here with its light breath.

“At least the amount of incoming damage increased,” Foltesla muttered. Gloria was clearly taking more damage than it had been when only his clan were fighting it.

As things were, chances were high that it would lose all its life in this hectic battle.

“Hm...?” However, Foltesla noticed something.

It wasn’t the sealed-off one-horn, or the barrier-holding two-horn.

The central head that had been dormant until now was now beginning to open its eyes.

"Ah...!" At that moment, a strange feeling ran down his spine. It was impossible to tell whether it was due to his vast experience as a fighter or his nature as a Maiden's Master who saw this world as real, but it was most definitely *an ice-cold chill*.

It was a sign that something terrible was about to happen.

"...Næ," he said.

"I know, captain," his blade replied, feeling what he did. "That needs to be dealt with right away."

A prolonged battle certainly wasn't the way to go with this creature.

Gloria was a being that forced its opponents to be strong through selection. There was no way that extended battle and attrition would work on it... *that approach was too focused on quantity, rather than quality*.

There had to be something. This monster had to have something that would render any attempts at prolonged battle useless.

Foltesla believed that they had to beat it before it could activate whatever that was.

"...We'll use the ultimate."

"Okay! I'll go all-out!"

"Yeah. I'm counting on you." Nægling in hand, Foltesla dashed forward. Ignoring the many attacks the Masters were launching at Gloria, he closed in on it once again.

However, he was caught up in the smoke from an explosion spell. Gloria growled and swung its four-spiked tail, aiming it directly at Foltesla.

He avoided it with a quick leap, but Nægling was still within its trajectory. The tail was Gloria's greatest means of attack now that its

breath had been sealed, and it could easily break an Embryo in its sixth form.

Thus, on the moment of contact, Nægling shattered.

“That’s what...!”

“We’ve been waiting for!” Foltesla grinned like a war-demon, and Nægling giggled before...

“The One Who Overcomes — Nægling!” ...They spoke the name of the skill.

The next moment, a dazzling light extended from the broken sword, recreating the shattered blade with pure light.

He aimed the blade at Gloria’s tail and activated a skill, “Over Edge!”

The next moment, the size of Nægling’s light grew, becoming longer than the diameter of the dragon’s giant tail.

Foltesla then matched its movements, set the blade against it... and *sliced through it as easily as a knife through butter.*



“...!?” Gloria’s defense required the use of active skills to break through it.

What made it so easy for Nægling to overcome was her ultimate skill.

The One Who Overcomes — Nægling.

It was an ultimate skill that activated upon her destruction.

First, it would recreate the blade out of light for ten minutes.

At the same time, it added the destroyer’s defense to Foltesla’s attack, offense to his defense, and AGI to his AGI — a retaliatory ultimate skill.

That meant as long as the skill was active, Foltesla had an attack power that could always break through the opponent’s defense, defensive power that they could never overcome, and speed that was always greater than theirs.

The skill’s duration was limited, but in a one-on-one, this would always place Foltesla above his opponent.

“ShoUOooOoOEeeEAaAaaAAAAaaAHHhHh!?” The shock of losing its tail caused Gloria to roar in pain for the first time.

However, Foltesla didn’t stop there.

Gripping the blade that had now returned to its original size, he ran up Gloria’s back and, once at the base of its wings, unleashed the ultimate job skill of the King of Swords.

“Sword Avalanche!” It was a barrier of blades — a sword-storm slashing all around him at twice the speed of sound.

A weaker blade would have definitely shattered from the force of this relentless attack. However, as she was now, Nægling could bear it.

Thus, the sword avalanche cut down the two wings growing out of Gloria's back before tearing open a giant hole in its body, dealing immense damage.

It had destroyed Gloria's heart *through* its back.

“...”

Losing a critical organ made Gloria's balance waver. Neither the Babylonian Battlegroup nor any duel rankers missed this brief flash of weakness. At this moment, they would unleash everything they had.

“Disintegrating Bow of Divine Lightning — INDRAAAAA!”

“Thousand-Arm Earth-Shaking Fist — Avalokiteśvara.”

“Storm-Man Who Blows Away All Evil — Hermod... RISER KIIIIIIIIICK!” An arrow of compressed thunderclouds, continuous blows from fists that seemed to number in the thousands, and a supersonic spinning kick all struck Gloria.

Seeing the opportunity, the surrounding Masters also focused their attacks on the dragon.

In that moment, firepower that surpassed even the rite of divine punishment overwhelmed Gloria's body.

Foltesla leapt off Gloria's back to avoid being caught up in it. And even if he wasn't forced back, using Sword Avalanche had rendered him unable to move his arm for a minute, so he couldn't keep attacking anyway.

“Captain! Are you okay!?” asked a Babylonian Battlegroup member who ran up to him.

“I'm fine,” Foltesla responded. “I'll attack it again the second the side-effect wears off.”

“...So it still isn't over yet?”

"Yeah. I destroyed its heart, but that just slowed it down. It's probably a core-type, and the core is probably in one of the heads, or in all three of them."

Normally, destroying the heart was enough to kill most creatures. But if the creature had a core that ruled over the other organs, the heart was little more than a piece of flesh.

And Foltesla guessed that Gloria had three cores — one for each head.

"...The side-effect's gone now," he said. "I'll go get its head."

"Be careful. Hm...?"

The clan member that was seeing him off was blinking rapidly.

It was because a light was shining into his eyes.

After a moment that was like staring at dawn or directly into a flashlight... *his head vanished*.

"Huh...!?" After seeing that, Foltesla looked up at Gloria. What he saw reminded him of the disco balls from the nightclubs of a few decades ago.

Gloria was releasing light from its entire body.

There was no telling when this began, but it seemed like the wounds the Masters had dealt to Gloria had transformed into toothless mouths, all of which were releasing light. The one-horn was still bound by Lahmu, but the horn peeking out was shining red, *just like when it had evaporated the tians*.

"...! This has gotta be it!" Foltesla became certain that this was the source of his fears.

Gloria, now covered in wounds-turned-mouths, was twisting its body, sweeping up the surrounding Masters. The range of the blasts

from the wounds was shorter than the ones from the main mouth, but that didn't mean much to the Masters it caught.

They survived for a moment thanks to their Brooches before expiring in the light.

It felt like a bad joke — the Masters that were dominating the fight were now being simply swept away.

That included the non-maxed-out Babylonian Battlegroup Masters who were providing support from outside the field.

Foltesla himself was able to avoid the light with his skillful movements, but...

“Ah...! SHULKA!”

“Captain, I’m sor—” The light show evaporated Shulka, the sub-leader of the Babylonian Battlegroup and the Master of Lahmu.

“BO...” A moment later, Lahmu vanished, freeing the one-horn and unleashing the first and strongest source of deadly light.

The source that, unlike the wounds, could fire all the way to Claymill.

Most of the surrounding Masters were gone, so Gloria stopped releasing light from its entire body.

Instead, the one-horned head opened its maw and aimed straight at Claymill.

“Not yet...!” The very next moment, Foltesla charged towards the head at supersonic speeds.

He got on it right before it fired and... “Over Edge! Sword Avalanche!” ...ran in to destroy the one-horned head using his ultimate job skill, right after expanding the size of his blade.

True to its name, the attack was like an unrelenting avalanche. It shattered the face cover on its head, split the right eyelid, cut the

eye, and nearly reached within the skull when *Nægling's blade of light shattered*.

Foltesla gasped. "H-How? This just...!" Neither he nor Nægling could believe it.

After all, there was only one opponent who could withstand Foltesla's blade after he had used his ultimate skill.

Regardless, the reality was that the blade had broken upon reaching the bone.

This couldn't be right. His offense should've been above Gloria's defense.

There was only one reasonable explanation for this...

"Its stats increased...!" Foltesla now knew.

While Nægling's ultimate skill was active, there were only two ways the target opponent could have a defense greater than her offense. Either it was some special defensive ability that had nothing to do with stats, or the target's stats had increased after the ultimate skill was executed and copied the stats onto Foltesla.

Foltesla had fought Figaro many times, and he knew that he could lose even with his ultimate skill active due to the lion's ability to grow stronger as the battle progressed.

He suddenly felt a gaze on him. He turned and wondered how long it had been *like this*.

The third head, the one that had been dormant since the start, now had its eyes completely open.

Seemingly bored, the three-horned head stared at Foltesla, who was still on top of the one-horn.

If Gloria was indeed specialized in selection...

The barrier selected the powerful, while the breath of radiant death selected the quick and decisive...

So wouldn't it make sense for it to have a power that would allow it to select the strongest among the strong?

"Not yet...!" Foltesla stood up and brandished his sword. Even if his Nægling had broken and the opponent had become stronger, Foltesla wouldn't stop fighting.

Maybe he wasn't a man of true strength who could make it past Gloria's third selection. But even so, he had something he wanted to protect with his blade.

Gloria would soon fire its breath of light.

If that happened, Claymill would be done for.

Erica — Foltesla's wife — would die.

As a Maiden's Master, he couldn't tolerate that. This world was real, after all. She was real.

"N-NO! I WON'T LET YOU DO THIS!" Nægling had shattered and vanished, so he used Instant Equip to take out and brandish his spare weapon — a greatsword forged from a Mythical metal.

He struck Gloria again and again, even if it meant breaking his blade. He had to shatter the core at all costs. His grip on the handle was so tight his palms began to bleed. He didn't even stop attacking when the bones in his wrist began to crack.

Gloria didn't stop, either.

The horn soon began to shine, and its mouth began to overflow with light. The all-extinguishing radiance shambled towards Claymill.

"No...! ERI—!" Suddenly, the wound Foltesla had made on the head became another mouth.

And he, too, was engulfed by the torrent of light.

Nothing could withstand that. Even the Mythical greatsword melted to liquid, dripping down on Gloria as Foltesla and all he'd tried to protect vanished within the light.

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After the battle, there was neither a fortress nor a city. The only things left were Gloria's own severed wings.

The city had evaporated, leaving only the foundations. The people had evaporated as well.

Claymill the Fortress City had fallen. There were no survivors.

The battle had simply ended in a bitter flash of light...

Interlude: At the Royal Castle

Royal Capital, Altea

Three days had passed since Claymill's destruction.

News had spread across the continent that the Arch Sage's apprentices, the holy men of Altar's church, the imperium's second armored battalion, and the Babylonian Battlegroup had all suffered a staggering defeat against Gloria.

With Claymill the Fortress City gone, nothing now stood in Gloria's way.

The evacuation of the capital's inhabitants had accelerated, the price of food and clothing skyrocketed, conflict increased, medical facilities suffered a shortage of healers due to the lack of holy men... it was equivalent to a full-scale war. Gloria itself was far from the only thing the capital's knights had to deal with.

All this chaos demanded leadership for the knights, but their commander, Celestial Knight, Langley Grandria, was simply floating above the royal castle.

He was sitting on Gold Thunder — the national treasure loaned to him — and looking not at the town below the castle, but towards the northwest... the direction Gloria was approaching from.

Gloria itself was still nowhere in sight.

Three days after Claymill's destruction meant that it was now a week after Gloria's initial appearance at Lightning Dragon Mountain.

It ought to have arrived at the capital by now.

The only reason it hadn't was all the damage inflicted by the Babylonian Battlegroup, the other Masters on the scene, and King of Swords, Foltesla.

Though Gloria wasn't killed and could still fight just as well, all the damage it sustained, especially the lost heart, forced it to spend a whole day fixing its wounds. It had also lost its wings, which didn't regenerate, so it was now a day behind schedule.

Even so, Gloria would arrive at the capital tomorrow and engulf it in its Fatal Field.

"...I must face it," Langley muttered. It had since been revealed that Fatal Field wasn't fatal to everyone. Those of level 500 and above could survive it and fight the dragon.

It was also known that Gloria couldn't be harmed by anyone outside the field. That was information that the members of the Babylonian Battlegroup fervently spread throughout *Infinite Dendrogram* and even outside of it. The conditions for fighting it were now known, and, for better or worse, Langley met them. He had the power to fight for and protect his kingdom.

"Let us move, Thunder."

He steeled his resolve and prepared himself to ride Gold Thunder towards the northwest, into the Newest Canyon where Gloria could be found, but stopped when someone grabbed his shoulder and said, "Wait, Sir Grandria. There is no need to rush."

This rather surprised him, seeing as he was high up in the air, and he quickly turned to see a man standing in midair using his absurdly precise control of wind magic. There was only one person capable of that: one of Altar's Superior Jobs, which Langley named with his next words. "Mr. Arch Sage..."

He'd served the kingdom for over a century, but no one even knew his name. He only went by "Arch Sage," and that was what people called him. The old man's origins were a mystery, but he had been an Altarian court magician for generations, and always used the wisdom

he'd gathered to advise and tutor its leaders, which had made him a highly trusted figure here.

"There are a few things I would like to say, but first and foremost, you will not solve the problem if you go alone. It would only waste our battle potential too early, and you could not do much besides buy a little time. If I were the one heading out, it would be exactly the same."

"Not even you can best it?"

"Oh yes. And if I summoned a meteor within the field, I would endanger myself, as well."

In an off-hand manner, the Arch Sage brought up his most powerful spell — a meteorite summon. However, he immediately changed his tone.

"It would be different if I still had my apprentices... What a grave loss."

"Mr. Arch Sage..." All of his apprentices had died in the battle at Claymill. The Arch Sage's expression was that of a teacher who had lost all his students, and Langley felt sympathy for him.

However, his feelings were a bit misplaced.

The Arch Sage did feel that their deaths were a loss... *but he didn't regret them for a moment.*

"That Gloria creature, though..." said the old man. "Thanks to the sacrifices that were made, we now know how it functions, and it is indeed a fearsome monster... I wonder how the remaining forces of the kingdom can even fight it."

The kingdom had already deployed and lost nearly as much as it could afford to give.

There were still the knights, but the only ones among them who could survive Gloria's Fatal Field were Langley and the vice-commander of the Royal Guard. Even with the Arch Sage joining them, it wouldn't be enough.

Besides them, the kingdom had another tian who could be an immensely powerful addition to the group, but sadly, that tian was not yet level 500.

"It is futile. At the very least, tians alone cannot win this," said the Arch Sage.

"So not even you know a way to defeat it?" Langley asked. The question made the Arch Sage fall silent.

Finding that strange, Langley called out to him, "Mr. Arch Sage?"

"...Oh, my apologies. I was simply racking this old brain to remember something, but came up with nothing. How embarrassing. And here I am, supposedly this great fountain of wisdom," he said as he returned from his trip through his own thoughts with a wry grin, then took out a pocket watch. "More importantly... Sir Grandria, it's almost time for the negotiations. Knowing who we are dealing with, I humbly believe it is best if you participate as well."

In less than an hour, the king would be negotiating with a certain someone. Langley hadn't planned to attend, but the Arch Sage was right about the other party. *I should be ready to protect Eldor*, he thought, before saying, "Very well. I will go and guard him. What of you?"

"I will stay here in the wind's embrace and lose myself in thought. Perhaps I shall happen upon a solution. Oh, but do not worry. I will be there for the negotiations."

After seeing off Langley, the Arch Sage looked to the northwest again.

His train of thought went as follows...

Would Superweapon No. 3... Would Acra-Vasta be able to handle it? No... it should not be complete yet. However, the base functions should be ready to go. Perhaps Acra would survive it...? No. No it would not. The monster breathes light. The distance created by Space Dilution means nothing against that, and Vasta's Mutual Repair would be quickly exhausted. And since attacks from outside the set range do nothing, their kinetic energy bombs would be useless, as well.

He was thinking about Langley's question — the means of defeating Gloria. However, there was a major problem with that.

It was the name "Acra-Vasta" itself

Acra-Vasta was a superweapon being secretly constructed within some uncovered pre-ancient civilization ruins. Even the Arch Sage shouldn't have been able to discover anything about it.

No. 5... Beldrion would have had a better chance against it, but it was destroyed by the King of Kings and The Lynx over six hundred years ago. Using No. 1 is not an option, while No. 2 and 4... are no longer under my control.

The man calling himself Arch Sage sighed, then looked up at the sky.

No matter. Gloria is just another pawn of the incarnations... Between this and the recent increase in Masters... inferior incarnations... it appears that now, after two millennia, they are approaching their endgame.

That thought made him change his expression.

This new expression was ugly, and seemed to contain both pure hatred towards a sworn enemy and the sheer joy of eventually bringing him down.

Worse comes to worst, this body of mine might wither; I will simply focus on gathering more data. It is of no consequence. We still have a spare... The “we” of the next generation... already exists.

Thinking that, the man who'd hid his name from the world and went by only his job returned to the castle he'd been nesting in for over a century.

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Royal Capital, Altea, Royal Audience Hall

As Gloria's arrival came ever closer, certain negotiations were reaching their end. The parties involved were the king, Eldor Zeo Altar, and... “Okie-dokie. My darlings and I will fight Gloria, too.”

...the leader of The Lunar Society, High Priestess, Fuso Tsukuyo.

“So The Lunar Society will help in the fight against Gloria? How reassuring,” said the king.

“Yes indeed,” Tsukuyo nodded. “We got lots of people who can survive Gloria's field, so you can be sure we'll be useful.”

Her response calmed Eldor's nerves.

Thus far, negotiations with The Lunar Society hadn't gone well, mostly because he couldn't contact Tsukuyo. Now that he finally had, it seemed to be going smoothly.

With Gloria only one day away, they couldn't manage without the help of The Lunar Society — the kingdom's largest and strongest clan.

“Thank you,” said the king. “I am in your de—”

“But only if all the royalty sign this Contract.” However, it would come at a price.

“This is...? Ah...!” Tsukuyo presented him a Contract of the highest quality — the kind that instantly granted death to anyone who

violated it. Knowing that full well, she had still demanded the entire royal family sign it. Eldor went on to read the conditions of the contract and...

“A prohibition on all use of the kingdom’s authority to suppress the actions of the Lunar Society?” he read aloud.

“It’s basically a written guarantee — an agreement to never suppress or harm The Lunar Society no matter how big we get.”

Essentially, she wanted him to grant them complete freedom as a religious group. The Lunar Society was currently growing at staggering rates. It was far above a thousand strong, and that included both believers from reality as well as tians.

The speed of their growth would be menacing to any politician.

Even if everything seemed fine now, there was a chance that it may grow into a terrible cancer upon the kingdom. The chances of the kingdom dismantling the clan were low, but it was entirely possible that they would’ve begun to limit it, and Tsukuyo brought out this Contract to prevent that.

“Oh, it also says that the Contract would be null and void if The Lunar Society committed acts of terror or got involved in criminal activity. Otherwise, we would be able to do whatever we wanted. Though, in exchange for that, we will also be given the freedom to accept or refuse any other requests from the country.”

“But that means that...” ...It would become impossible for the kingdom to bind this dangerously powerful entity in any way. Signing this basically meant trading the elimination of a current threat for a dangerous future.

“You wouldn’t interfere with our religious activities and wouldn’t force us to do something we don’t want as long as we don’t engage in criminal activity. That’s all. Nothing big, right?”

Tsukuyo Fuso, sly fox that she was, demanded this despite knowing all of that full well.

The king wouldn't have to give anything. As long as the contract was unbroken, no one would be harmed. It came at no immediate cost, but it would enable them to deal with the imminent threat.

The conditions seemed truly fair, but it made the king feel as though his head was caught between the jaws of a fox.

"And what if we try to force you to act before signing this contract?" asked the Arch Sage.

"We'll respond with terrorism," Tsukuyo instantly replied.

The words made the audience restless, with some of them beginning to berate her.

"Before the contract is signed, we can go ahead and engage in religious terrorism if we want... *And we are well prepared for that.*"

Those words made everyone fall silent.

"Wh-What are you saying?" asked the king.

"Right now, I have Kage's special forces hiding within every major city in Altar." Special forces led by King of Assassins, Eishiro Tsukikage.

Their specializations and goals were obvious.

"Besides that, I could cover the capital in my night, then have Kage follow it up with Erlkönig... You know what would happen, don't you?" Everyone present knew the powers of Tsukuyo Fuso and her most trusted aide.

Tsukikage was a limited wide-scale extermination specialist, while Tsukuyo was a wide-scale suppression type who greatly expanded those limits. It was easy to see that the capital would fall if they unleashed their combined power upon it.

“Please don’t...!” the king pleaded.

“You don’t have to ask. I’d only have them act if the kingdom tried to force us to cooperate. That’s why you have three options,” Tsukuyo said as she raised up three fingers. “You either sign the Contract and get our cooperation, don’t sign the Contract and try to take care of it some other way, or try to force us to do what you want and face utter destruction.”

After naming the three things, Tsukuyo smiled proudly and waited for an answer.

“...You are a monster,” said one of the nobles in the audience.

“Control yourself!” said another.

However, none of this had fouled Tsukuyo’s mood whatsoever. In fact, her smile actually widened to an inhuman degree; she tilted her head slightly and said “You’re asking for my help exactly *because* I am as dangerous as a monster, no? Anyway, what do you say, Your Majesty? Will you sign it? Or not?”

Eldor hesitated for a good moment before deciding to sign it.

Thus, the *peaceful negotiations* ended, and it was decided that the kingdom’s largest clan would participate in the fight against Gloria.

Act Four: Figaro's Choice

Gideon the Duel City, Central Arena

The Central Arena. A lone man sat on top of the building that looked much like the Roman Colosseum.

Not saying a word, he — the kingdom's duel champion, Over Gladiator, Figaro — was looking towards the northwest. Caressed by the wind, he wore a sorrowful expression — one unlike those he usually displayed.

In his mind, he held the image of the powerful monster beyond the horizon, which would soon attack the capital.

But at the same time, he was looking back at the past — specifically, a certain meeting that had occurred over three years ago.

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The real Figaro... Vincent Myers... was born with a rare, unusual, and painful heart condition. Its most obvious symptoms were the life-threatening spasms that occurred whenever his heart rate climbed too high.

He was born to a wealthy household and received the best treatment possible from infancy onward, but the disease stayed with him all the way to adulthood. Not even a heart transplant could relieve the symptoms of his condition.

But although he was born into an unfortunate body, he was blessed with a wonderful family.

“Live your life to the fullest,” his father said once. “We’ll do whatever we can to help you with that.”

“We’re your parents, after all,” his mother added. “We love you, Vince.”

It had been years since he heard those words, but he could still remember them clearly.

His younger brother, Keith, was supportive as well. "I'll do my best in your stead," he resolutely said once.

Vincent appreciated his wonderful family. But at the same time, he couldn't help but feel that he wasn't truly happy.

He could never feel the rush of running through open fields.

Excessive activity put a strain on his heart, limiting his movement to short walks. The simple act of running was life-threatening to him.

His heart would never race in satisfaction. An accelerated heartbeat could be deadly to him, so he couldn't even allow himself to be moved.

He once couldn't even finish watching an opera he attended with his family, as he was overcome by a sudden spasm.

Despite this, his life was comfortable. He was provided for, but had no real reason to hope for the future, either. For as long as he could remember, he would only read relaxing books, watch the scenery, eat, think, sleep, and just... coast through life.

His life was more like a plant's than a human, and he had never truly felt the vitality within him. He never had the opportunity to go all-out. He never felt the flame of excitement or the lively throbbing of his heart.

Vincent Myers' life was gentle, but extremely isolated.

All that changed when Keith gifted him *Infinite Dendrogram*.

"This is a VRMIMO! The real deal!" he said, handing the hardware to Vincent. Keith explained that it transported the mind to the virtual world, leaving the flesh unaffected, which meant that Vincent wouldn't have to worry about heart spasms due to over-excitement.

At first, Vincent doubted that such a thing could really exist. It seemed like something straight out of science fiction. He also thought that even if the game's promises were true, it was still a game — even if he could move around freely, it would all be fake.

"Hm..." But even if it was all just a game, he believed that it might be better than the reality with his limited body. With that in mind, he began *Infinite Dendrogram* and found a realm that was as close to real as you could get.

It wasn't just an extremely realistic game, but a world where he could actually live his life to the fullest. It was here that he could experience excitement for the first time in his life.

After naming himself "Figaro" — from the opera he couldn't finish watching with his family — he descended upon *Infinite Dendrogram* and quickly discovered how he would spend his life in it.

What enchanted him the most were the duels.

In reality, his disease made him unable to even watch sports; but as an avatar, he had no issue with it.

The first duel he saw was shortly after *Infinite Dendrogram*'s release, so there were no Master participants, but the scene of tian gladiators fighting still moved him greatly. The all-out clash between lives thrilled his virtual heart far beyond the capacity of his real one. He was looking at something that he couldn't even hope to have in the real world. Following the duel, he quickly went through the process to become a Gladiator.

Thus, Figaro the Gladiator was born.

His first month within *Infinite Dendrogram* was certainly an eventful one.

He'd encountered Shu, fought his first UBM, switched his country from Legendaria to Altar, and arrived at Gideon's Central Arena for the first time.

It was there that he was first able to participate in duels.

Maxing out Gladiator — a low-rank job — put him at level 50, giving him the right to become a duelist, and he quickly went to the Central Arena's reception to register.

The fact that he'd finally be able to actually participate in the duels that had so moved him when he'd first entered this world was immensely exciting to him. So much, in fact, that he signed up for a match on the very same day.

His goal was to join the top 30 duel rankers, among all the thousands of combatants. Figaro clenched his fist in anticipation for the many days of dueling to come.

At that moment, he noticed that the person next to him was making a similar motion.

The two looked at each other. The other person was a Swordsman with a red-haired girl at his side.

Figaro looked at the papers the receptionist was handling and realized that he, too, had just signed up. They both just went to their own waiting rooms without saying a word to each other.

But when it was their turn to go to the stage, they both realized that they would be facing the man they had just run into at reception. This wasn't quite as much of a coincidence as it seemed. They both had just registered, they both wanted their first duel, and their level was about the same. In fact, since matchmaking preferred opponents of the same level, this was an obvious outcome.

"Fight!" Following the call, their duel commenced.

Compared to duels between top rankers, theirs was surely unimpressive. Both were low level and their Embryos were still low-rank, so there was no way their duel would ever be one for the history books.

However, they both fought with intense zeal. During the entire duel, it was never once clear which one would win and how. Both of them were giving it their all and using whatever they had to achieve victory over their opponent.

But in the end, they were both scarred all over, and it still wasn't clear which one of them had emerged victorious.

However, they both felt that this had been the most fun duel they ever had.

"I'm Foltesla, and this is Nægling," the opponent introduced himself right after, extending his right hand.

"I'm Figaro... That was a good match, wasn't it?" Figaro said as he took the hand.

"Let's fight again!" they both insisted simultaneously.

It was obvious that this match made them both feel the exact same way.

Thus, the two became the closest of friends... and rivals.

Their first duel against one another was far from the last. They continued rising up the ranks, piling wins and losses against each other, and their rivalry continued after both entered the top 30 rankers.

Eventually, Figaro defeated Tom Cat — the wall to every Altarian duelist — and became the best out of thousands of duel participants... the duel champion.

Even so, he didn't believe that this was the end of his and Foltesla's rivalry.

The top three could only be fought in order, so Foltesla couldn't face Figaro in a ranked match until he defeated Tom.

However, Figaro believed that Foltesla would do it someday, and they would face each other in the arena again.

He was completely certain that the rematch was close.

But now, Figaro could no longer tell just how imminent — or distant — it really was.

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"Yoo. You don't look too good todaay."

The voice he heard cut off Figaro's reminiscence.

"...Tom." It was a fellow duel ranker: specifically, the previous champion and the current second in the rankings — The Lynx, Tom Cat.

"What's wroong...? Wait, don't tell mee. It's obviouus..." Figaro didn't say a word in return.

Not minding it, Tom continued, "Gloria, riight? You're wondering how to fight it, aren't you?"

"...That's not it," said Figaro. "And... I can't fight it even if I wanted to."

"Hm?" Tom tilted his head.

He thought about it for a second, then found an answer by simply remembering Figaro's nature.

It wasn't clear whether Figaro realized this or not, but he continued.

"Gloria is... very strong. I know that better than ever now that I've looked at the data leaked by the Babylonian Battlegroup."

After their defeat at Claymill, the Babylonian Battlegroup revealed all that they'd learned about Gloria on their website. The members who couldn't participate in the battle went online the very same day and gave the info to informants like DIN and other media companies. This, of course, was met with a lot of anger from the rankers who were hiding such information. The Babylonian Battlegroup could have also kept it to themselves and gone for a rematch with a greater chance of emerging victorious and becoming MVPs. However, instead, they spread the info as far as possible with the hopes that someone would defeat Gloria as quickly as possible... that might've been their leader's last wish.

"No offense to you, Tom, but Gloria is immeasurably stronger than anything or anyone I've fought so far."

"Hey, you're not wrong. I know way too well that I have no chance against it as I am now. That monster is probably meant to be fought by several Superiors at once. If you wanna beat it, you need to team up with other Superiors... or people like Foltesla."

"But..."

"Yep. That's impossible for you."

Figaro nodded in response.

This was another face of the disease he had been born with.

Because of his illness, he'd spent his entire life doing nothing, *and with nobody*. This left him without the most basic of social skills.

He had never played with other children when he was young, nor had he ever teamed up with someone for a sport in class. Until he'd entered *Infinite Dendrogram*, he'd never actually done anything significant with someone else.

He knew what cooperation *was*, but that was the extent of it.

When it came to actually cooperating with someone — to fighting as a party — his brain would instantly shut down because he was so unused to the experience. His reactions would become considerably worse, and he even once failed a quest because of it.

Figaro himself knew this too well.

He didn't have the fundamental skills necessary to actually cooperate with anyone. The nearly twenty years of stagnant, solitary life he'd lived had become shackles that bound his movements. Removing them would take a long time. Not even the few years he'd spent in *Infinite Dendrogram* were quite enough yet.

That was the reason why he explored the Tomb Labyrinth solo.

"Fighting alongside others makes you useless. If a Superior like yourself was defeated, the frontline would be likely to collapse, and that's probably why Foltesla refused your help. Is that what's troubling you?"

"It's not about my inability to cooperate..."

"Really? What's bothering you, then?"

Figaro fell silent for a good moment before slowly speaking up, "Foltesla... sent me a message."

"...He did, huh?" As rivals and friends, the two were in contact in real life, as well.

However, they rarely communicated in that world. Anything they wanted to say, they'd say here in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

But he couldn't do that this time, because Foltesla hadn't come back even after his death penalty expired.

The reason was laid out in the message he'd sent to Figaro.

"I'm not coming back," he wrote. "I don't want to see it with my own eyes. I don't want confirmation that Erica is gone... It's all my fault." His wife and everyone else in the city had vanished without a trace.

There wasn't even the faintest hope that they had escaped the calamity.

People with jobs specialized in investigation had tried to find survivors, only to conclude that everyone in the city was dead. They had all been evaporated by the breath of light.

Foltesla learned this during his death penalty. The cruel reality broke him to the point that he wasn't even able to log in and face it.

That was just how important Erica was to him.

In the message he received, Figaro couldn't find even a hint of his rival, the seasoned duel ranker and clan leader.

And one part at the end hit him harder than anything else.

"I can't keep my promise. I'm sorry, Figaro," Figaro quoted it to Tom.

Those words clearly meant that he would never see his rival and friend again.

The man who claimed that he'd defeat Gloria and take Figaro's throne was now forever lost to this world. He just wasn't coming back.

Figaro had the toughest heart in all of Infinite Dendrogram, but this truth was so heavy that even that had begun to ache.

"I... I want to keep our promise," muttered Figaro, voice faltering ever so slightly. Their promised duel could simply never happen now. It was impossible to keep it, but Figaro didn't want to abandon it entirely, even if the other party was no longer in this world.

But there was one way that didn't require Foltesla's presence.
"Maybe I could fulfill this promise by fighting Gloria," said Figaro.

"...A time attack, huh?" Tom nodded. A time attack was a type of duel where the duelists fought the same kind of monster, and victory was decided based on how fast they defeated theirs, or how much damage they dealt to it. Besides their standard duels, Figaro and Foltesla engaged in these, as well.

In a way, fighting Gloria, whom Foltesla couldn't beat, could be considered their last duel.

Whether he won, joined Foltesla in defeat, or even reached a stalemate, this would be Figaro's last duel against Foltesla. The promise between them would be fulfilled, and that was ultimately why Figaro wanted to fight.

"But... I can't." Gloria had to be defeated using all the kingdom's remaining power. If Figaro wanted to have his duel and fulfill the promise, he had to go to the battlefield ahead of anyone else and fight it alone.

However, Gloria had already been revealed to be a creature without compare, and it was likely that it was still hiding something. It was fair to assume that it would cause some sort of unexpected disaster during the next battle.

It had unleashed new powers at Claymill, and it was possible that another battle would uncover yet more calamities hiding within the dragon.

It would be too much for an exclusively solo player like Figaro. While a well-coordinated group could perhaps handle it, a lone player likely had no chance. And then the newly-empowered Gloria could become an immeasurably powerful threat to those who would face it next, potentially making it impossible to avenge those Foltesla and his Babylonian Battlegroup tried to protect.

"And if that would make it impossible to put their suffering to rest, then I should just..." Figaro voiced his worries and explained why he tried to keep his desire hidden.

In response... "Hahahah. I see, I see." ...Tom laughed and slapped Figaro's shoulder before continuing. "Don't be stupid, Altar's strongest. I mean..." He rejected Figaro's words...

"...YOU'RE NOT THE KIND OF GUY WHO FIGHTS WHILE THINKING ABOUT NONSENSE LIKE THAT!" ...Then topped it off with an all-out punch to the face.

"...Tom?" Figaro mouthed, feeling pain on his cheek and looking back at the ex-champion.

There was anger on his face, along with some other intense emotion.

"You're the one who beat me," Tom said. "You're the one who beat Tom Cat, the biggest barrier the kingdom's Masters had to overcome. And you did it before you were a Superior, or called the Over Gladiator! You are one who exceeded our expectations!"

Figaro couldn't tell just how much emotion he was putting into those words, but he could feel the passion behind them.

"And now you're even stronger than you were back then! Why would you even say something so... weak?! Act like yourself! You're a meathead berserker! Don't think, and just go fight the damn thing! Fight it alone and maybe even die, but lop off one of its heads on your way out! Go at it solo and destroy the head that beat your rival! Don't just give up on that duel! On your promise!" He then fell silent for a moment before continuing. "Does that promise mean so little to you that you're gonna give up on it after just a little bit of *thinking*?!" Those were the most important words Tom wanted to say.

Figaro opened his eyes wide, as though he was done hesitating, and found his answer.

“...Thanks, Tom,” he said as he looked up. “I’ll go and fulfill our promise.”

The very next moment, Figaro vanished. Tom Cat shifted his gaze and saw him rush towards the capital at supersonic speeds.

“Go get ‘em, champion.” Tom watched him disappear in satisfaction. And now that he was all alone, he muttered something to himself.

“Jabberwock, Mad Hatter... This will probably undermine your plans, but I choose to respect their freedom... And their feelings. To me, that’s more important than creating more Superior Embryos.”

He cracked a smile... “That’s the kind of person my Master was, after all.” ...And spoke those words with nothing but nostalgia and heart.

Act Five: The Departure of the Two Kings

The Skycrown

In the Border Mountain Belt, there was a mountain where no human was allowed to tread.

The entire belt was a skydragon hive, but there were only two dragons atop the Skycrown itself, for the other skydragons never ventured near the area.

Despite being home to only two dragons, for hundreds of years the western tians had made a point of avoiding the area. The Kingdom of Altar even passed a law that made entry into The Skycrown a capital offense.

The reason for this was clear — the dragons nesting atop this mountain were more frightening than any ordinary monsters.

One of them was the Skydragon King, Drag-Heaven. He was the strongest of the skydragon kind, having existed since before the time of the pre-ancient civilization: living, dying, and being reborn over and over. No records of this remained in the current era, but he had annihilated countless countries in his time before coming face-to-face with the so-called “incarnations,” dying, then coming back to life in this manner.

The Skydragon King was a fearsome entity that had surpassed life and death, making him superior to countless other beings, living or dead.

“...I have recalled something,” he said, perched atop his throne on the mountain, the majesty of his pale, gargantuan frame plain to see.

Besides him stood two humanoid figures.

“What did you recall, father?” one of them asked. Though his form was human, he certainly wasn’t of mankind. He was an

Anthropomorphized skydragon — and one of the greatest among them, at that.

His name was Shinedragon King, Drag-Flare, and he was Drag-Heaven's firstborn, as well as the second strongest after him. He was only in human form because his dragon form would make the throne area a bit crowded.

"Gloria. I have witnessed it before," Drag-Heaven said.

"Are you certain?"

"Indeed I am. It is the offspring of Deathdragon King and Lightdragon King. They were a couple that existed long before you were born. I murdered them when they tried to leave the mountain belt."

"Why...? Oh. I see."

"Indeed. As you saw, their child was an abomination, and it seems they tried to let it escape before it was culled. Heheheh. Three heads, golden scales... there is no mistaking it. Apparently, their struggle allowed their offspring to escape, but I never thought I would lay eyes on it again... Oh, I see..."

Drag-Heaven realized something and paused before continuing.

"This must be the work of the incarnations. I was wondering why it seems to have powers beyond those of its parents, but if they are involved, then it makes sense. It must have been sealed away until now in exchange for this power. And it is approaching the cities of men instead of The Skycrown... Heheheh... This all must be a result of some sort of contract between it and the incarnations."

Drag-Flare silently listened to his father, but didn't understand all of his words.

As a creature that had existed since before the time of the pre-ancient civilization, Drag-Heaven knew far more than any dragon, or

any other living being for that matter, and he hadn't passed on most of his knowledge to his children.

From another point of view, one could say that Drag-Heaven was about the only creature that could still be alive despite his immense knowledge. Most anyone who knew too much was neutralized by the incarnations, but since neither death nor binding had any power over the indestructible Drag-Heaven, he was simply left alone according to a deal they struck.

"Hmm... but this is quite troublesome," Drag-Heaven said. "I am bound by my contract with the incarnations, so I cannot leave The Skycrown unless the conditions are fulfilled. I heard Arcal's dying wish clearly, but unfortunately, I cannot move from my place."

"Arcal" was the Lightning Dragon King's original name. When dragon kings became UBM_s, their names would assume the model of "X Dragon King, Drag-Y," where X and Y referred to their nature, but intelligent dragons would oftentimes call each other by their original names.

"Father, I will go slay the dragon in your stead," said Drag-Flare.

"You will fail," said Drag-Heaven without a moment of hesitation. "Its field will not kill level 100s such as yourself. However, you have not *exceeded* the level 100 barrier. Gloria *has*, and furthermore, it has acquired Arcal's Resources as a UBM, making it a foe beyond your ability."

UBMs were treated differently when they were defeated by other UBM_s. Instead of becoming special rewards, like they did with people, they became pure energy that empowered the victor. In game terms, they basically became enormous amounts of EXP. Defeating UBM_s greater than yourself also came with an added bonus of increasing your level cap, but that didn't matter to an SUBM like Gloria. There were also a number of individuals who

mimicked the MVP special reward function by taking in the powers of those they defeated, but this too was not relevant in this case.

What did matter was that Gloria — an SUBM to begin with — had become even stronger by defeating Drag-Volt, an upper-Mythical UBM.

“Even if I could face it myself, the battle would never end,” added Drag-Heaven. “My offense is incompatible with Gloria’s, and it cannot defeat me, for I am immortal. Even if one of us did eventually best the other, the continent would be a very silent place by then. It would be true foolishness.”

Imagining the outcome, the Skydragon King chuckled.

“Or perhaps the incarnations would come out to settle the matter? That could be entertaining in its own right, but escalating things so far would make the end rather anticlimactic... Heheheh... What a shame. Truly.”

Drag-Flare said nothing in response. To his father, the fate of the continent was nothing more than part of an entertaining board game or a theater performance.

Or, more accurately, he enjoyed watching the rise and fall of all kinds of life, his own included. No one could comprehend the scale of the thoughts of the most transcendental being on the continent — not even his own son.

“But I also cannot merely play the spectator. I still have to fulfill Arcal’s dying wish.”

The Lightning Dragon King had asked his family to defeat Gloria in order to protect the Border Mountain Range they inhabited, as well as the world of men. The Skydragon King loved his third child enough to honor this wish.

“I cannot leave, and my son cannot best it. That means that I must rely on a third party.”

“I see.” The second humanoid creature there finally broke his silence.
“You wish to give me a request to defeat Gloria, yes?”

His name was the King of Crime, Sechs Würfel.

He was a Superior from Altar, and a criminal wanted by not just the Kingdom, but every other country as well. Besides that, he was one of the few who knew The Skydragon King personally.

The reason behind their acquaintance was simple — it was the fact that entering The Skycrown was a crime so grave it was punishable by death. Sechs’ only goal was to sin and become an evil-doer. In Altar, invading The Skycrown was a crime matched by few others, and that alone was a good enough reason for him to do just that.

Thus, he went to The Skycrown all on his own and fought Drag-Flare when he came out to defend it.

The Skydragon King’s firstborn was troubled by the amount of invaders they had these past few years — especially the kind they called “Masters.” He was fed up with the people flooding in hoping to defeat him or his father for their MVP special rewards, and worked hard to defeat them all.

Sechs, however, was greater than any that had come before. He was already a Superior, and his power matched that of Drag-Flare — a Mythical UBM.

Because Sechs excelled at defense and Drag-Flare was focused on offense, they were more or less evenly matched, and it seemed as though their battle would go on forever.

It only ended once Drag-Heaven, who had been simply enjoying their battle, called out, “By the way, why did you come here in the first place?”

Initially, both The Skydragon King and his son thought that he was here for the same reason as the others — to acquire glory and a Mythical MVP special reward. However, Sechs' eyes as he fought Drag-Flare were strangely pure. They held no greed, nor any hunger for glory.

Sechs' reply to the dragon's question was simple: "Because invading The Skycrown is a great offense here in the kingdom."

"I see," Drag-Heaven nodded. "That is indeed a sin, but there is no crime in defeating us."

"Then I will stop," Sechs said, assuming a neutral stance.

The battle ended in a way that left Sechs' opponent, Drag-Flare, completely speechless. Drag-Heaven, however, laughed out loud and immediately took a liking to Sechs.

Ever since then, he had regularly invited the criminal to The Skycrown.

The kingdom didn't know the circumstances surrounding his visits and assumed Sechs was merely committing that grave crime over and over again, piling sin upon sin. Sechs never turned down the invitations and gladly visited Drag-Heaven. "What a nice place. I'm committing a crime just by coming here," he'd once mused.

At first, Drag-Flare wasn't sure if this was acceptable, but he acquiesced to his father's will, and soon, he and Sechs even became friends. He might've been yearning for a conversation partner besides his father.

And now, a week after Gloria's appearance, Drag-Heaven had summoned Sechs again.

"I promise to reward you if you agree to slay Gloria. I have not yet decided what it shall be, but as The Skydragon King, I assure that it will be worth your while."

“It’s been a long time since I received a quest,” said Sechs.

“...You told me once that even criminal organizations want nothing to do with you.”

“Sad as it seems, yes.” Just as there were official adventurer’s guilds, there were also organizations that gave out quests for outlaws. However, as a Superior criminal, Sechs was feared even by the outlaw guilds. After finding out about them, Sechs had excitedly made his way to them, only to find out that they had caught wind of his coming and fled the kingdom practically overnight.

“Also, if the kingdom fell, it would be bad for you as well,” Drag-Heaven continued.

“What do you mean by that?”

“If Altar perished, all the sins you had committed against the country would be null and void. That would be troubling for you, no?”

“...It would,” Sechs said, his expression serious. Most criminals would be glad about that, but to this man, committing crime and being evil *was* the end goal. Thus, being pardoned was a negative to him.

“But father, Sechs is my equal. If I am unable to defeat it, would he not fail against it, as well?”

“Perhaps. However, there is a Gloria that you cannot best, but Sechs can.”

“Hm...?” Drag-Flare made a confused expression.

Drag-Heaven had just implied that there was more than one Gloria.

However, Sechs seemed to understand. “I see,” he said. “So that’s how it is.”

“Heheh. You understand, then?”

“Yes. I also saw the video of the Babylonian Battlegroup’s fight and read the papers that accompanied the photos.”

Drag-Flare didn't know what his father saw and didn't read any newspapers from the world of man, but he could tell that there was something they both knew that he did not. His father and friend were both extremely enigmatic, and he was fully aware that he had to ignore certain things about them to hold a proper conversation.

"Then I will go search for it," said Sechs. "You can't see it, can you?"

"In a way, that tells us exactly where it is," said Drag-Heaven.

"Indeed. Anyway, time is short, so I'll be heading out immediately."

"Very well... But before that, I have some encouraging words for you."

"Hm?"

"Gloria was sent by the entities managing this world for the purpose of creating new Superiors. Therefore..." Drag-Heaven cracked a grin before continuing. "...Defeating it before any new Superiors are born might be considered a truly mortal sin — an offense against the heavens themselves."

"Ohh... that is indeed motivating." The relentless sinner broke into a wide smile before leaving The Skycrown.



"Now, what should I reward him with? A daughter's hand in marriage, perhaps?"

"Father, none of my sisters are fit to marry. The eldest fell at the hand of King of Kings, Rockfell and was sealed alongside him; the older of my younger sisters now serves the Master known as Catherine Kongou. The youngest is still far too young."

"Heheheh. That is true." After Sechs left, Drag-Heaven and his son engaged in idle chatter. At the same time, the skydragon king eagerly awaited the final act of the battle against Gloria.

“I must say, the world of man is certainly exciting these days. Things grew a bit dull after the eras of Rockfell and Azurite ended... Events like this are what make life worth living.”

“Father...”

“Heheheh. You will come to understand as you grow older.” He spoke with a slightly disinterested look in his eyes. “However, I imagine that even a mere few hundred years won’t be enough for you... or for Arcal.”

“...Father?”

Drag-Heaven then got up before saying, “Now, then... I guess I should bring him back.”

He followed this statement with a wave of incomprehensible words.

This was not the humanoid language, non-humanoid language, dragon language, or the ancient civilization’s language. He was speaking words from a past long forgotten, before he finished the chant with the perfectly understandable phrase “Heaven’s Resurrection.”

Suddenly, his body released a massive torrent of energy and a pillar of light.

The energy gathered before him and assumed a form. It had four limbs, a long neck, a tail, and a pair of giant wings — it was a dragon.

Clad in lightning running along its scales, it was none other than the Lightning Dragon King, Drag-Volt... *the very same who had fallen at Gloria’s hands.*

“Huh?! Arcal?! How?! He’s dead...!” The sight of his revived little brother astounded Drag-Flare. This was far outside the limits of the resurrection timer. Drag-Volt had dissolved into specks of light days ago, and a long distance away from here, too — but now, he had been brought back to life right before his brother’s eyes. It was

resurrection from nothing — something that would be impossible even for the greatest Necromancers.

Only two beings in the entire world were capable of this, and one of them was Drag-Heaven.

“Oh. I just realized I’d never showed you this before,” he said.

“Heheheh. Well, I have not used it for at least a millennium... And it still seems to come at a cost.”

The resurrection was impressive, but the Lightning Dragon King wasn’t the same as before. His body had shrunk by about two or three times, and the lightning he released seemed far weaker. The most notable change, however, was the fact that the name above his head was no longer “Lightning Dragon King, Drag-Volt,” but “High-End Lightning Dragon” — a kind of pure-dragon.

“Wh-What? Have I not died...?” The dragon regained consciousness and spoke those words in his confusion.

“You were lucky, Arcal. If you had been defeated by mankind, your soul and concept would have been transformed into a piece of equipment. I was able to bring you back because only your Resources were gone.”

“Father...” Arcal said, realizing that his father was the one who had resurrected him.

“However, you have lost your title of Lightning Dragon King, and the vast Resources supporting you have been taken by Gloria. You are also weakened as a result of your return. You are now merely a skydragon. You will have to train and work diligently to regain your former power.”

“...I will, father. But... what became of the mad-dragon that killed me?!”

“It still lives. It destroyed the duchy, erased the ancient fortress, and will soon arrive at the capital.”

“Gh...!” Arcal’s eyes were full of rage. He couldn’t stomach the idea that Gloria had taken the life of his friend. Power gathered in his newly-revived limbs, but...

“Do not.”

...His father stopped him with those few words and a serious gaze. “As you are now, you cannot even stand upon the same stage.” Arcal clenched his teeth. He knew what his father meant better than anyone. He could feel how meager his power was, compared to what it had once been.

“Father... I...! I curse my weakness...!” Arcal lamented his lack of power. If only he’d been stronger, he might’ve prevented this tragedy.

“Khahahah. Yes. Lament. Your lamentations will fuel your training. I have lost count of how many times I have been defeated, lamented, died, returned, and grew ever stronger.”

“Father...”

“But you will have to entrust the mad-dragon’s... Gloria’s demise to the hands of men.” The Skydragon king looked into the distance... at the three-headed dragon ravaging the kingdom’s lands and the people preparing to fight it.

“Let us watch the battle that will decide the fate of the kingdom... and the world of man.”

His smile grew wider...

“And let us not ignore the skirmish that shall precede the upcoming fight.” ...And he muttered this with excitement.

◇◇◇

Royal Capital, Altea, deep inside the royal castle

While most of the attention in the castle was directed at the negotiations between the kingdom and its begrudgingly welcome guest, a particular girl was sitting on a bed closer to the heart of the castle.

Her name was Theresia C. Altar. She was the third princess of the kingdom of Altar who, owing to her sickly constitution, lived within a room surrounded by a field of sterilization and healing. Unlike her eldest sister, who'd been chosen by The Primeval Blade itself, or the second oldest, who was almost *too* energetic and naïve, Theresia spent most of her time in her room.

Even while the whole castle was buzzing over the deadly Contract Tsukuyo Fuso had presented during the negotiations, she was just sitting in her room. Though, that was also due to the fact that she and the younger of her sisters weren't required to sign the Contract.

Theresia absentmindedly stared at a point in the air before shifting her gaze to the door.

"I haven't seen you in a while, Mr. Costume," she said.

"...Yeah," replied the man in a *raccoon costume*.

"Not a chameleon today?"

"This one has the Presence Block skill. It's not as good as the Optical Camouflage from the chameleon suit, but the security isn't as tight as usual, so I just came wearing this."

The man wearing the Ultimate Costume Series, Orphan Roa was none other than one of Altar's Superiors: King of Destruction, Shu Starling. He stepped closer to her and stopped at a distance where conversation was easy.

Theresia sniffed the air a few times, catching some sort of scent.

“I don’t know this smell,” she said. “Did you go really far away?”

“All the way to Caldina. Fought a magic dumbass who likes playing in the sand too much,” Shu said before putting on a regretful air. “...It took me a whole week to come back here.”

A week was exactly the amount of days that Gloria had spent terrorizing the kingdom. The moment he heard about the dragon, Shu had immediately prepared to return, but the road was long, and even a Superior like him needed some time to cross the Caldinian desert.

“I don’t think you should let it bother you,” said Theresia. She wasn’t even consoling him — she merely stated the truth.

“It’s not like you *have* to beat Gloria. Masters are free. That’s how it is, right?”

“...Yeah. But from what I heard from DIN and on the other side, the situation is about as bad as it could be, right?”

“They say that Altea might be destroyed. The maids were talking about it.”

“But it didn’t look like the staff had decreased any.”

“Everyone working here is loyal to a fault. I think they should all just run away, though.” Theresia was young, and her manner of speech reflected that, but the topics she discussed were disconcertingly mature. She wasn’t even elementary school age by Earth standards, so this would normally be a very strange sight.

However, very few had ever heard her speak this way. Three, to be exact — two people and an animal. The animal was the gigantic hamster she kept as a pet, while the people were Shu and the irredeemable criminal who had once kidnapped her. The kidnapping was actually what had led to Shu’s regular visits, but that was a story for another time.

“...What would you do if everyone ran away?”

“Nothing. My condition... I mean, *it* is stable here inside the barrier around the castle, so I’d just end up waiting for Gloria here.”

She would wait for a creature with a passive field skill that caused death to all those below level 100. That obviously meant certain death for her, but she didn’t seem to care and simply continued speaking.

“I would love to take it out with me... Ohh, but Altea would be completely useless at that point. Though, I guess that’s better than letting the damage spread all over the kingdom.”

“...Where’s your pet? Where’s Dormouse?”

“Dor isn’t here. He’s probably busy with work. He said something about the deployment being too early. Maybe something didn’t go as planned?”

In response to her words, Shu began to think to himself, but then she continued.

“You should probably hurry up and get ready, Mr. Costume. No matter what you choose.”

Theresia meant that he should hurry up and pick an option, regardless of whether it was fighting, running, or something else. However, she didn’t urge him towards any one option.

“...Theresia,” Shu said as he removed the head of the raccoon costume and looked directly into her eyes with his own. “Are you really okay with all of this?”

That wasn’t enough to make her waver, though.

“Altimia bears the burden of the power she was born with and her responsibilities as the first princess. I’m just here resting, bearing only one burden. It would be unfair if I didn’t try to balance that

out.” Theresia then smiled like the child she was. “And I want Elizabeth to live freely, without any responsibility at all. That’s why I’ll use the power laid on my shoulders to protect my dear family.”

These weren’t words of reassurance, and she wasn’t talking childish nonsense — she was merely prioritizing what was important to her. They were the words of a girl who’d chosen her beloved family over her own life.

In response, Shu was silent for a good few moments before putting the costume head on again, turning around, and saying, “...I remembered some business I gotta take care of.”

“Oh? What is it?”

“A walk.” Just like that, the man in the raccoon costume left Theresia’s room.

◊

After sneaking out of the castle using Presence Block, Shu went out to the capital’s noble district and arrived at a back-alley. The main street was full of evacuees, but the back-alleys were surprisingly empty.

As he walked down the alley, he suddenly spoke to himself. “She... didn’t once ask me to fight.”

If Shu fought and emerged victorious, he would prevent Gloria’s arrival at the capital. That would save Altea’s tians, and Theresia wouldn’t have to die.

Despite that, and despite knowing Shu’s identity as the King of Destruction, she never once asked him to fight.

The current situation was one of the worst possible scenarios, but still she thought of nothing but her duty and those she wanted to protect.

It was as though she believed that her entire life's purpose was that single moment.

"That kind of thinking... she's too young for it." Letting his irritation take over, he punched the brick wall of a nearby abandoned building, collapsing it instantly. Since there was no one around to see it, this didn't cause any commotion.

The hand of the special reward costume he was wearing couldn't take the force and shattered into tiny pieces. Paying it no mind, Shu tried to walk away, but...

"You seem quite frustrated, Shu."

...Someone called out to him from behind.

"...I've felt like I was being watched since I was in Caldina," Shu said.
"I knew it had to be you, Humpty."

He turned around and saw a bizarre entity in the middle of the back-alley.

It was a creature wrapped within an oval, egg-like cocoon.



She was the control AI no. 2, tasked with managing Embryos. Her name was Humpty Dumpty.

She had also been in charge of handling Shu's arrival and character creation, and she was an entity he had met many times since then.

"Yeah... 'since I was in Caldina,'" Shu repeated himself. "...You're not about to tell me that you timed that shitty dragon's release with me being outta the country, are ya?"

"I won't deny that," Humpty replied. "I mean, unlike the Over Gladiator, High Priestess, or King of Crime, you would actively try to solve the problem, right? I mean, you're a very good boy at heart."

She didn't seem to feel the least bit guilty about it. In fact, she was smiling.

"Even if you couldn't defeat it alone, with a Master of your caliber fighting against it, all of Gloria's skills would be exposed in no time. That would make it easy for Altar to come up with countermeasures, and impossible for us to gauge the limits of the other Masters... *making it harder to create new Superiors.*"

With a full smile on her face, Humpty revealed their goal. "We had hopes for the King of Swords, but they're gone now. He's broken. Oh, but he might've become a Superior if his Embryo didn't shatter. Maidens' ■■■ is easier to initiate in desperate situ—"

"I'll tell you one thing," Shu cut her off. Humpty was talking about who had the greatest chance of becoming a Superior, but Shu didn't care one bit about all of that. In fact, if that was what this girl before him hoped to gain from this calamity, he was completely against it.

"You aren't gettin' any new Superiors outta any battle against that shitty dragon." He dismissed her goal, determined to prevent it. Thus, all that was left...

“We will *destroy* Gloria.”

...Was to make a final declaration as the King of Destruction.

His words — no, the will behind them — left Humpty speechless.

Shu turned around and resumed walking, heading towards the Newest Canyon in the northwest of the capital, where he would find the dragon terrorizing the country.

With Shu gone, Humpty was left all alone.

There was not a single person or creature in sight. In fact, it was very strange that no guards arrived after the abandoned building collapsed. The back-alley was only empty because Humpty had some sort of ability that made it so.

However, that wasn't important to her now.

“Heheheh, ahahahahahahah!” she burst out. The girl-like control AI shielded by a thin veil — a transparent shell — was actually laughing out loud. She wasn't laughing because the Master she'd favored was turning out exactly like she wanted him to be, but because the will he'd displayed was far stronger than she'd ever imagined.

“Shu, this is why I like you. Back when I was alive, there were no synchronizers... Masters as engaging to watch as you.”

Thus, Humpty, the Infinite Embryo of the Type Infinite Body, imagined what would happen next and laughed with supreme joy.

Act Six: The Lion and the Dragon

???

“The kingdom’s Superiors are approaching Gloria.”

“Weeell, it ceeertainly toook them a whiiiile.”

“I have no intention of stopping her, but if she really does reach the capital, we shall have to rethink our schedules going forward.

Though, I imagine that the disappearance of a whole country would act as a powerful dose of smelling salts.”

“So you don’t care either way, Jabberwock?”

“Indeed I don’t, No. 3... Queen... whichever you prefer. Though, I would be troubled if we don’t produce a single new Superior.”

“‘Troubled,’ huh? Hmph. I’d say that whether or not it happens is up to the Superiors. Let’s observe the true power of the ones they favor.”

“Very well.”

“Though, no matter how strong they are, Gloria... ‘The Glory SelectE.R.’ cannot be stopped.”

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Kingdom of Altar, Newest Canyon

The Newest Canyon to the northwest of the royal capital was a place where few dared to tread. Even those who traveled from the now-destroyed city of Claymill to the capital would detour directly south to reach the Wez Sea Route and follow it eastwards.

The reason for taking this roundabout path was simple: the Newest Canyon was a land of giant fissures as wide as one kilometel, as long as several kilometels, and as deep as several hundred metels.

It was said that this place was unnatural. Many believed that these cracks were the scars of a fierce battle that happened at the sunset of the pre-ancient civilization. Regardless of its origins, though, Newest Canyon was an unwelcoming landscape rife with creatures of a higher level than the surrounding areas, making it difficult to traverse and even more difficult to build on. That made it a roadless, empty land inhabited only by monsters.

Of course, there were beings that had no trouble passing through the scarred terrain.

After destroying Claymill, Gloria headed for the capital directly through the Newest Canyon.

The dragon was moving through a fissure large enough to hide its gargantuan frame. Its steps were confident and full of vigor — it had closed its wounds and restored its heart during the day it had dedicated to healing itself. Its wings and tail were still gone, but that didn't affect its walking speed or the lethality of its Fatal Field, which killed all the creatures around it.

Gloria had surpassed the limits of the animal kingdom, and neither the land itself nor the other monsters could stop it now. Any creature that could stand up to it would have to have similarly transcended those limits.

"...It's here," he — Over Gladiator, Figaro — said, sensing Gloria's oppressively majestic approach. "Yeah... It looks really strong."

As someone who regularly raided the Tomb Labyrinth solo, Figaro had reached its lower levels many times and encountered a decent number of UBMs there. He'd even come across and defeated several Mythicals, including the most powerful foe he had faced so far — the creature that erratically wandered the dragon area: Extinction Dragon King, Drag-Fin.

Figaro was no doubt accustomed to powerful UBM's, but the pressure emitted by the SUBM approaching him was in a class of its own.

Drag-Fin had been a massive creature fully worthy of the title "enemy of all life," but it paled in comparison to this ominous golden dragon. The videos didn't do it justice. Now, seeing it with his own eyes, he understood just how immense it was.

The gap in their power was obvious. Even a berserker like Figaro knew that facing it alone would be sheer stupidity.

Despite that...

"Still... I'll go first. By myself."

...He'd resolved to fight on his own. His fatal flaw was one of the reasons for this, but even without that, he would've made the same decision.

Figaro had also sealed away one of his specialties.

Dance of Anima — one of the skills of his Superior Embryo — improved his equipment the longer the fight dragged on. Because of this, he had the option of engaging in a warm-up battle to power up and close the gap between them before fighting Gloria head-on.

However, he didn't want to do that. So, he chose not to. He would fight alone, without any head start.

After all — to him, this was a duel against Foltesla.

Figaro and Foltesla had begun dueling and rising up through the rankings at the same time. They'd piled on victories and losses, coming out ahead or falling behind each other like the rivals they truly were.

They'd become good friends through their dueling. Theirs was the kind of friendship that could only exist between equal, competing rivals, and it was quite unlike what Figaro had with Shu.

But when Figaro defeated the previous champion, Tom Cat, Foltesla became unable to challenge him in a ranked duel. Only the second-ranked duelist could challenge the duel champion, and Foltesla couldn't get the position due to his incompatibility with Tom Cat.

Despite that, Figaro was sure that Foltesla would eventually take his position.

Many believed that the gap between them had become insurmountable the moment Figaro evolved into a Superior, but Figaro himself didn't believe that to be the case.

He continued to view Foltesla as an equal.

Figaro believed that while he kept his title and improved himself, Foltesla would also experience immense growth.

His rival would eventually surpass Tom Cat and fight Figaro for the title of champion. Figaro believed that with complete confidence, and the two even swore that they would one day face each other in that battle.

However, now it was clear that the day of their showdown would never come, for everything that Foltesla held dear to his heart had vanished along with the fortress city.

Figaro was sure that his rival would never return to this world. Thus, he knew that this would be their final battle.

"Let's do it, Foltesla," he said, as Gloria came into view.

Despite its powerful presence, Figaro actually didn't see Gloria as his true foe. To him, it was just a target... a tool in his duel with Foltesla. The dragon was nothing but a means through which he would battle his rival in a time attack.

“Let’s begin. You were defeated, so you have no time attack record. Your notable acts include taking its wings, tail, heart, and right eye. To win against you, *I will go beyond that.*”

Time attacks tracked how well the duelists did against a monster of the same type, and they received a score even if they were defeated. To surpass Foltesla, who went as far as destroying a heart, Figaro had only one possible target.

“...I’ll take a core,” he declared, deciding that he would aim for the part that gave the most points on monsters that possessed it.

And Figaro already had his eyes set on a single head out of the three. He’d chosen the one-horn. It released the devastating breath of light that had destroyed all those defending Claymill, clearly making it the head with the greatest offensive power. As long as that head existed, Gloria would have the ability to instantly kill anything in the path of its light breath, and every wound dealt to it would potentially be fatal to its attackers.

Logically speaking, if you wanted to defeat this dragon, the one-horn had to go first.

However, Figaro’s reasons for targeting the one-horn weren’t strategic. He was looking directly at the head’s right eye.

There was a deep wound there, along with a scab-like covering of mythical metal — the molten remains of a greatsword. It was all the proof Figaro needed that this was the head Foltesla had fought until the bitter end.

It was the head the King of Swords had tried to conquer, and the head that had finally defeated him.

That was the only reason Figaro needed to target it, and the reason he would give everything he had to tear it off.

“Let’s do this,” the champion said as he brandished a spear in his right hand.

“FfrRrrRrrrRrRrrRr,” Gloria rumbled, acknowledging its enemy and rearing up on its hind legs.

“Fight.” Figaro declared the start of the duel.

“FRHSssSSsSsHeeEAAHhhHH!” The dragon unleashed its breath of light as the champion charged towards it.



Gloria’s breath melted a part of the canyon, causing a cliff to crumble. The sound of it could be heard even outside of the Newest Canyon.

“...It’s started,” said the man standing atop a giant battleship — King of Destruction, Shu Starling.

He had it parked outside the canyon and waited in it, silently.

“Sure ya shouldn’t help the prince?” There were 34 people gathered around Baldr. They were all members of the kingdom’s top clan, The Lunar Society. All the clan-cult’s level 500s and above had gathered to fight and defeat Gloria. Naturally, the leader and sub-leader — Fuso Tsukuyo and Eishiro Tsukikage — were among them.

“I’m pawsitive. In fact, I don’t want you getting anywhere near them until his battle ends,” said Shu.

“But going against it alone is suicide. Solo-only players are so annoying.”

Shu, Tsukuyo, and Figaro. Albeit for different reasons, the three top rankers of the kingdom had all gathered in a single place.

Figaro had been the first to arrive, and he’d immediately jumped into a crack in the canyon to face Gloria alone.

Shu was close behind him. As Figaro's good friend, he had an idea why the champion would challenge and fight the dragon alone, so he knew it was best not get in his way.

Tsukuyo and her clan were the last to arrive, and Shu also took it upon himself to keep them from interfering with Figaro's fight. They had no real reason to listen to him, so at first they had tried to follow Figaro, but Shu struck a deal with them to keep them out.

"So, trash panda, we can go right after that sickly noble takes out the one-horn, right?"

"Fur sure." Indeed — they'd agreed on an order. Thanks to the data gathered by the Babylonian Battlegroup, they had a fairly good grasp of Gloria's nature. The one-horned head released an evaporating breath, the two-horn spread out a deadly field, and the three-horn increased its stats as its HP went down.

The one-horn had to go first, as it made Gloria more dangerous the more wounds it received.

The second one that had to be destroyed was obviously the three-horn, as it increased the dragon's power as it came closer to death. There was no good reason to leave it until the end and allow Gloria to become as powerful as possible.

Finally, with the one-horn and three-horn gone, only the two-horn would be left, and that had no effect on those who were max level or above. Without the one-horn and three-horn, the two-horn would be easy pickings, for without the head that enhanced its power, Gloria could only become weaker.

Also, it was likely that Gloria had a core in each head, and with standard UBMs, the core's destruction was a major factor in MVP selection. After the recent incident with Twin Moby Dick in Granvaloa, it had become widely known that SUBMs gave out several

MVP special rewards. Gloria was presumed to have a core for each head, meaning it may give a special reward for each core.

That meant that you could become MVP multiple times. This was just a theory based on very few examples in the past, but even the chance of it being true convinced Tsukuyo to aim for the destruction of both the two-horned and three-horned heads.

However, the one-horn stood in the way of that goal. Its deadly breath of light made fighting it extremely risky, especially for group fighters like The Lunar Society.

Because of this, Shu and Tsukuyo had agreed that after the one-horn fell, he would let The Lunar Society take both the two-horn and the three-horn.

If Figaro was defeated after taking out the one-horn, Tsukuyo would go next.

If Figaro failed, Shu would give his all to finish off the one-horn, then leave the rest to Tsukuyo.

Thinking that two battle-focused Superiors had a good chance of taking out a single head, she had gladly accepted this deal.

“But what if Prince Meathead attacks one of the other heads?” Tsukuyo asked.

“Ain’t happening. He’ll fight the one-horn,” Shu replied.

As his friend, Shu knew Figaro well; he was fully aware of Figaro’s relationship with Foltesla. Thus, he didn’t doubt his own judgment here one bit.

“Hell, you should be worried about him taking out all three of the heads.”

“There’s no waaay. That’d be inhuman.”

"It would be, fur sure. But..." Shu acknowledged Tsukuyo's words before continuing. "...You know he's the kingdom's strongest, right?"

His words were brimming with confidence in his friend's ability.

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The battle between Figaro and Gloria began with the dragon instantly releasing its breath of light.

The monster's Fatal Field came with the ability to gauge the levels of its targets, which told it that Figaro was the most powerful creature it had encountered thus far. In addition to that, it could feel the immense Resources he carried in the form of MVP special rewards — the remains of other UBM's.

Gloria had no reason to hold back against a foe like that.

"OVERDRIVE!" Its single horn glowed red as the head beneath it released the breath that had extinguished the tian elite and the entire city of Claymill.

The neck danced, and the fatal light moved along with it.

"I know this," Figaro said, narrowly evading the lightshow of certain death as he closed in on Gloria at beyond supersonic speed.

Figaro's thoughts — no, his *battle instinct* — told him that, while the breath moved at the speed of light and was thus undodgeable, the head releasing moved far slower than the speed of sound. As long as he watched the creature's movements and kept running at supersonic speeds, the head would never hit him. He simply had to focus on taking advantage of the slowing of experienced time caused by supersonic movement to avoid the subsonic beam of light moving towards him.

The slightest touch and it would be all over for him. But by putting that thought out of his mind, he was able to approach Gloria without any hesitation.

It was a manifestation of the battle sense and instinct that he was born with, but could never use in his real life.

“I’ll start with this. ■■■■, ■■ ■■■■ — ■■■ ■■■■■■!”

Figaro muttered something and threw the spear in his hand at Gloria.

It was a Legendary item with fantastic stats, but it didn’t scare Gloria in the slightest. No matter what skills it had, the dragon knew that something like that would never kill it.

It wasn’t an incorrect assumption. Dragonhowl Spear, Drag-Song had the ability to destroy matter using shockwaves, but it wasn’t powerful enough to be effective against Gloria.

The one-horn head was so confident that it almost smiled as the spear approached its long neck... and it took a moment for it to realize that the spear had *torn a good half of the flesh away from its neck.*

“Ggha... ah...?” With half of its mass gone, the neck folded forward so far it nearly crashed into the ground.

But when the one-horn’s third eye noticed Figaro’s approach, it quickly recovered, supported its head, and released its breath on him.

Figaro evaded the attack before using Instant Wield to equip a new weapon — an Epic throwing ax called “Whirlwind Ax, Fulgore.”

As he avoided the storms of light, he swung and threw it, just like he’d done with the previous weapon. It spun at immense speeds as it flew towards Gloria’s neck, drawing an elliptical trajectory and gathering wind that soon became a storm.

This also didn’t seem capable of dealing any significant damage to the dragon, but the one-horn had learned the hard way that appearances could be misleading.

“FRHhSshhEeeEAAhHhhhHHhh!” The one-horn showered the ax in light, evaporating it and instantly eliminating it from the world. However, before it vanished, it created a disturbance in the air strong enough to shake even Gloria’s massive body.

It forced the dragon to totter straight towards...

“Gouging Draconic Spinfang: Drag-Spiral.”

...Figaro himself, who’d used Gloria’s momentary focus on his ax to close in on the dragon.

He shoved the lance in his hand into the dragon’s left heel.

The name of this weapon was “Drilldragon Lance, Drag-Spiral,” and it was an MVP special reward he’d gotten from an Ancient Legendary “Drilldragon King” of the same name.

“Gouging Draconic Spinfang: Drag-Spiral” was its only skill, and all it did was penetrate matter. The drill-like tip easily pierced Gloria’s tough scales and spun around rapidly, scattering flesh, shattering bone, and rupturing the entire hindlimb.

“FHRrruuUUuAaaAAaaAArRrgGHHHhhHhH!” The sudden, unexpected loss of an entire limb made Gloria collapse.

If it was capable of words, the only thing that would’ve gone through its mind would be “Impossible!”

Knowledge of UBMs and special rewards had been etched into its instincts. Therefore, considering the ranks of the UBMs that had become the rewards, there was no way they could have done this much damage to it, even when used by someone as powerful as this particular wielder. This could only mean that he had some mysterious other ability that was capable of closing the gap.

Its instincts were exactly correct.

Figaro had already used an ace up his sleeve that brought him closer to Gloria's level — an ability that was a double-edged sword.

As it collapsed, Gloria noticed that the lance that had destroyed its limb had shattered. As an SUBM, Gloria understood what the lance was, and concluded that it was looking at *an empty shell*.

The concept, the soul, the Resources that made up every special reward — none of it was there anymore.

The remains of the lance left no hope for its recovery.

It was as though *the entire special reward had been used up for one single attack*.

“Gh...” Figaro staggered in pain right where he stood.

“It... It really does hurt.” Gloria hadn’t actually hit him once so far. Despite that, his body was criss-crossed with wounds, as though it had been burned all over.

Gloria’s breath of light didn’t allow any heat to escape, making this kind of burning impossible; upon closer inspection, one might notice that he had no external wounds at all.

All these burns had been caused by something within him. It was as though the blood running through his veins had become pure fire.

This was the price he paid for the ace up his sleeve — lost special rewards and countless burns.

“The thirty seconds are up. Judging by my max HP... I have two more uses.”

Figaro had pain set to on, so to him, he really was being burned alive from the inside.

Even so, he showed no fear. Bearing the injuries, fighting the pain, and losing his weapons, Figaro glared at the one-horn with fighting spirit in his eyes.

“This is the second one.” He wielded his double-edged sword once more, speaking the name of his life in this world...

“Burn, My Soul — Cor Leonis!”

...And the name of the Superior Embryo based on the star known as “the heart of the lion.”

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Sometime In the Past

On a particular day a few weeks after defeating Tom Cat and becoming the duel champion, Figaro woke up in *Infinite Dendrogram*, as usual, and noticed he had changed.

The body he woke up with was completely unlike the body he'd gone to sleep with.

He realized that the difference was in the blood running through his veins.

His avatar's heart was his Embryo, Cor Leonis, so any change to his Embryo changed his blood, as well.

Figaro checked the relevant windows and realized that Cor Leonis had reached its seventh form... that it evolved into a Superior Embryo.

He also noticed that it gained a third skill — the ultimate one, to be exact. Upon reading its details, Figaro instantly understood why it was the way it was.

“Considering my personality and what I've been through, it makes sense that it'd come out like this.”

Embryos evolved based on what their Masters were like and their experiences. Thus, even if some of their abilities seemed dangerous to others, the Masters themselves generally found them fitting.

Figaro's "Burn, My Soul — Cor Leonis" was in this vein. It was so powerful that his previous self paled in comparison, and it was extremely compatible with duels. He couldn't ask for a better ace up his sleeve.

"...I know when I'll use it in duels, then," Figaro said, deciding that he would only unleash it when Foltesla became second in the duel rankings and challenged him for the throne.

He hoped that he could release his full potential — his entire soul — against his good friend and rival.

He was certain that Foltesla would eventually challenge him, so he never used it in any of his other duels. Even when fighting monsters, he only used it once — during his battle against Drag-Fin.

Figaro waited for Foltesla, ready to give his all and then some. But the arrival of Gloria meant that their promised duel would never happen.

Thus... he used it now.

This was the moment... the duel that would unlock his full potential.

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Kingdom of Altar, Newest Canyon

"Burn, My Soul — Cor Leonis!" The skill turned his heart searing hot, as though it smouldered like its namesake star in the Leo constellation. It burned his flesh, made his blood boil, and lowered his HP; it scorched his Max HP away as well. Through his torn skin rose a smoke that seemed to be a mix of white steam and blood.

Figaro always had his pain settings turned on, so he felt the full intensity of the agony, but even that wasn't enough to stop his power.

Intent on making every moment of the thirty second effective time count, he swung into action immediately.

“FNGH!” First, Figaro used Instant Wield to equip a shadow-colored Legendary rapier called “Shadowbind Pin, Bolbara.” He thrust it into the shadow of the dragon, still collapsed to the ground. Then, he used Bolbara’s skill, Anchoring Shadowpin, which applied Bind to the target whose shadow it pierced.

For a UBM skill, it wasn’t too special — you could even find some like it among skills of certain jobs.

Standard shadow-based bindings could be easily undone, and even those from special rewards could be overwhelmed and broken by sheer force.

However, this one actually pinned this immense dragon in place.

Gloria was actually held fast by an impossibly powerful shadow-based binding — but in exchange, Bolbara shattered.

This was the ultimate skill of Cor Leonis.

By burning Figaro’s flesh and blood, it lowered his max HP by 1% every second, and this damage could not be restored until he received a death penalty. Additionally, using the active skills of any items during this time destroyed them beyond repair. In exchange for these two heavy drawbacks, it empowered those skills beyond all limits.

“Burn, My Soul — Cor Leonis” burned up the life of Figaro and his equipment, making them shine as bright as possible before they fell dark.

That was the shape of life lived by the sickly youth known as Vincent Myers.

His entire life, the 28 special rewards he’d acquired, and the very soul challenging the foe before him were all focused into a single

instant, going up in flames like a firework. It was a manifestation of the way he lived, and it was so intense that even an SUBM like Gloria couldn't brush it off.

"FhuUuRRrraaAAAaAaaAaAAaHhhHhH" Upon realizing that this foe had the power to defeat it, Gloria focused all its power into the one-horn. It tried to release light from its wounds, but Figaro was expecting this, for it was the ability that devastated the Babylonian Battlegroup and many other Masters.

It was the reason that trying to overwhelm it with numbers or attacking it without careful consideration was a fatal mistake.

Accounting for this, Figaro had picked his targets carefully, focusing on only certain parts to limit the area its light could cover.

The first wound had been dealt to the throat of the one-horn that breathed light. Extra light coming from this area changed little.

The second wound went to one of the hindlegs. Since it had lost its wings, they had become important in supporting its immense weight.

Both of these were places that made it hard for Gloria to effectively utilize its ability to overwhelm the enemy by turning its own wounds into fountains of killing light.

Figaro was able to evade the light coming from there almost instinctively.

Gloria's abilities were already known, so it couldn't outwit the very best of Figaro's instincts.

At the very least, the breath of light as it was now couldn't defeat Figaro on its own.

"■■!"

With Gloria out of moves to make, Figaro moved to put it in check.

He activated Physical Berserk and equipped a gauntlet on his left and a short spear in his right before charging at the still-bound one-horn head.

A Bind that lasted several dozen seconds. One-shot attacks, each one potentially fatal. The 23 special rewards Figaro still had left. Combined, that was more than enough to take out the one-horn. In fact, even the other two were in danger.

At this moment, Gloria acknowledged that the tables had turned — that it was likely that the battle would end in its defeat.

At that moment, certain shackles within the dragon shattered.

Gloria did away with one of the limits put on it by the control AIs *and unleashed a power that it had kept hidden, even from them.*

“RRrrRrruaAaAaaaAaAggGhHhHhhHHhhhHH!” The one-horn let out a roar beyond any that had come before, and suddenly all the golden scales covering its body began to shine.

“Ah...!” Figaro instantly took evasive action.

It wasn’t exactly that he’d sacrificed his perfect moment to land the killing blow in favor of saving himself. It was more that his instincts told him that if he kept going, he was the only one who would die.

The next moment, Gloria’s shining claw cut through the air just behind him at supersonic speeds. The speed was incomparably faster than it had been earlier.

This meant that it had broken the speed limits set on it by the control AIs. And more importantly, the shining scales released the same light as its breath, making it menacing beyond measure.

“So that’s the ace up your sleeve...” Indeed — this was the ultimate weapon of Gloria’s first head.

Its name was “Zenith Dragon’s Shining Field: Fang of Gloria.” It was unbreakable armor that protected it utterly, as well as a blade that extinguished all.

“I knew that its breath didn’t work on itself... but I didn’t think it could use it this way.” During the battle at Claymill, Gloria had showered itself in its light many times, but it had never damaged itself in the slightest.

Most people, Figaro included, assumed that it was because the golden scales covering its body had full resistance to the breath, but that wasn’t entirely correct.

In fact, Gloria’s scales were the best conductor for its breath of light. It channeled light through them like they were optical fiber.

“FruUooOooaAAaaAagHHhhHhhH!” This full-body radiance was Gloria’s ultimate offensive *and* defensive ability. Not even the control AI were aware of it.

Gloria was wielding a power that made its defeat virtually impossible, and it had broken the limitations placed on it, bringing its stats back up to their previous Mythical-tier.

Thanks to it spending a day to heal itself, the wounds left by the loss of its wings and tail were also closed over with scales.

The damage Figaro had inflicted on it was also still releasing its deadly breath. It had even closed all its eyes to reduce the amount of weak points and chased after its enemy using only the senses given to it by the Fatal Field.

Thus, there was no opening.

Gloria as it was now was no doubt the strongest it could possibly be. The result was so powerful that even the control AIs would have hesitated to release it if they’d known of this ability.

Faced with such a creature, Figaro...

"Its body isn't touching the ground. It can float a bit even without its wings?"

...Just calmly analyzed it.

He avoided the supersonic claws, all the while observing the monster and looking for his chance to conquer it. Even though the already-insurmountable gap between them became even wider, Figaro's eyes showed no fear, and his heart was nowhere near broken. A normal person would've given up already, but he continued to calmly ponder how he could still win this.

He was certain that he could still defeat this dragon.

Figaro had seen the reason for his confidence the moment Gloria began to move.

Until its body began gleaming and it attacked Figaro, Gloria had clearly been Bound. The Anchoring Shadowpin had been undone merely because the dragon became a source of light that banished the shadow binding it. It wasn't because it had powered up, or because it ignored some special reward's effect.

It broke out in a way that still conformed to cause and effect, which was proof that Gloria was still bound by the laws of this world.

It was an unreasonably powerful monster, but not an unbeatable one. And that was why Figaro knew he could defeat it.

I... don't have a special reward that can break through the light and damage it. This would be a lot easier if I had something that could warp through space and attack its inside directly, he thought.

He had already removed most of his equipment, even the Lifesaving Brooch. It did little against Gloria and the light radiating from it. He'd focused on improving his evasion by channeling the power of his Arms Selector — the skill that made his equipment more powerful the less he had on — to improve the items that passively enhanced

his AGI. Additionally, a few minutes of actual — not experienced — time had passed, improving the effect of his Dance of Anima.

Even though Gloria now moved at supersonic speeds, Figaro was still faster.

My ultimate skill expired, and I can only use it once more. Looking at how much HP I have left, I'll get the death penalty before it ends... I guess I should be glad that the light doesn't heat up its surroundings.

Gloria's light could only heat up things it shone directly on. If that hadn't been the case, Figaro would have already died due to the damage from the residual heat.

But even if he never once touched the light, the price for his ultimate skill was significant.

In addition to the 60% of his HP he'd lost due to its direct effects, the injury-type status effects caused by the wounds the skill inflicted were eating away at his remaining life. Normally, he'd wear accessories that healed him and gave him resistance to such debuffs, but he had to focus only on his stats now.

It was clear that Figaro's death penalty was only a matter of time, and he didn't have many chances left.

I need to take out the one-horn in the next few moves, he thought. That would have been possible in the absence of the Fang of Gloria, but now, its defense was unbreakable.

There wasn't a single opening on the dragon, it seemed...

“Ah...”

...Until he noticed one.

It was just a single point, but it was still a crack in the impenetrable, deadly armor of light.

“Foltesla...” he spoke his friend’s name before gathering the resolve for one final attack and fixing his eyes on the point.

“FRuuoooOoAAaaAggGhhhHHhhHH!” Gloria roared, as though sensing Figaro’s determination through its fatal field. Both of them already knew that the next supersonic exchange would be the end of the battle between lion and dragon.

As the struggle reached its peak... “Let’s go.” ...Figaro equipped a new item — a blue cloak.

Its name was “Rendshield Cloak, Closer,” and it was the first UBM special reward he’d ever acquired. Its defense was impenetrable, but he hadn’t taken it out to protect himself against the light.

He had no intention of using it to protect himself at all.

What he’d chosen for this battle was...

“Liferend Shield Formation.”

...Another form of the skill that created an impenetrable space.

It was an offensive ability that attacked using countless floating barriers as weapons. But instead of using them for offense, Figaro turned them into stepping stones for him to run on top of.

The next moment, Figaro dashed along the path of blades, speeding straight down it as though that was the only way he would ever reach the head of the monster bathed in light. The speed at which he approached it, defying the laws of gravity, was so great that even Gloria at its most powerful couldn’t follow his movement.

However, it did know that the enemy was getting closer.

“...GHaaaAAaAaAaAAAAggGhHHhhhhhHHH!” Its response was quick — at supersonic speeds, it focused the one-horn’s power to strengthen the light its body emitted to its utmost maximum,

becoming a luminous storm that evaporated the shield-blades it touched.

“FRUuuSsssSsSHeEeEEEAAAAaaaAarRrRgGggGHHHH!” If Gloria’s thoughts were human, they might have looked like this: *He runs, but has no destination. My body has no weak points, and no one can break through my defense, so if I continue destroying his path, he will eventually lose his way down and fall to my breath.*

This conclusion was not a wrong one. Gloria knew its own powers and already had a grasp of what the enemy could do.

From its perspective, there was no flaw in this assessment. There was simply no opening for the enemy to take advantage of.

Figaro had no chance of emerging victorious here.

However, that was only true if Gloria and Figaro were the only ones fighting.

“Now,” Figaro said as he leaped towards Gloria’s shining form like a moth seeking a flame.

His evaporation was unavoidable.

The battle’s end approached... *and Figaro landed on the one-horn’s head.*

“...?” Gloria couldn’t understand.

It simply couldn’t comprehend why this was happening. After all, all three of its heads had their eyes closed, so it couldn’t see or understand that there was in fact a single opening in the Fang of Gloria — a part of the head that wasn’t covered in the conducting scales.

The place where Figaro was standing had no scales to release the light.

It was a place where the one-horn’s right eye used to be.

The part that Foltesla had given his all to attack, and the part where his melted Hihi'irokane greatsword had landed.

Even Gloria's breath wasn't enough to evaporate the Mythical metal — it had only melted it. The metal had already cooled, hardened, and closed the wound, forming a scab that made it impossible for the scales to regenerate.

Hot as it was, Gloria's light didn't let heat leak out. Because of this, it couldn't melt the scab, for its light couldn't touch it.

Indeed — the proof that Foltesla had been fighting to protect what was dear to him until the bitter end was the one opening in this armor of deadly light.

If it was truly one against one, Gloria would have won the day — but it was never like that from the start. This was a duel between Figaro and Foltesla.

“Burn, My Soul — Cor Leonis!” For the third and final time, Figaro activated his ultimate skill.

He followed it with Instant Wield, which he used to equip the Ancient Legendary gauntlet called “Seismic Fist, Bull-Lament” on his left hand, and the Mythical short spear as dark as the void called “Extinction Dragon Spear, Drag-Fin” in his right.

Figaro had equipped the strongest weapons he had.

“FHR—” Gloria tried to throw him off, but it was already too late.

“Lament Crash!” Figaro let out a cry as he pulverized the Mythical metal below him and the head along with it using the hyper-vibrating fist.

The Mythical metal shattered, and the head and most of the upper jaw were blown away.

Despite that, the one-horn was still alive, and its entire body was still clad in light.

“Tears of the End: Drag-Fin.”

Figaro wasted no time, didn’t hold back, and didn’t hesitate to sacrifice his Mythical weapon.



The Extinction Dragon Spear went straight into the one-horn's forcefully-opened throat, *infecting all of the one-horn's cells*.

The concept of Drag-Fin's power was forcefully initiating apoptosis — the self-destruction of cells. In exchange for the spear's obliteration, the power of this skill was amplified such that it spread faster than you could blink.

“GHH.” The three-horn was quick to act.

It went and tore off the one-horned head before the infection spread any further.

All things considered, it was too late to save that head, anyway.

It crumbled, turned into light, and vanished, not leaving a single word or sound behind.

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This was the conclusion to the battle with the one-horned head. Gloria had lost one of its heads, as well as its greatest weapons — Overdrive and Fang of Gloria.

However, Figaro was fading fast because of his own ability, too.

The one-horn and Figaro had effectively defeated each other.

“Foltesla...” he muttered. This was also the conclusion to their duel. However...

“...Which one of us won?”

Figaro was the one who'd defeated the one-horn. However, Foltesla had given him the necessary data, as well as his final chance at victory. That meant that this time attack was invalid.

“I can't say that I won this on my own...”

And...

“Let’s... Let’s have another duel.” ...Figaro was certain that this wasn’t their promised fight, after all.

“One day... when you return to this world... let’s have a *real* duel.” As he hoped for the day to come sooner than later, Figaro’s body dissolved into particles of light.

The ultimate skill had burned off all of his HP. All that was left was for him to vanish, and as he did, he looked out of the canyon — at the person who was watching over his duel.

“This is it for me. I leave the rest to you, Shu.”

Entrusting the battle to his other good friend, the Over Gladiator, Figaro, took his leave from the battle against the Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria.

Act Seven: The Gaze of the Moon and the Evil Eye

Kingdom of Altar, Newest Canyon

“Looks like it’s over,” said Tsukuyo. The roar of the battle between Figaro and Gloria faded, and there had been nothing but silence for a whole three minutes now.

“Kage, check things out for me,” she continued.

“I have,” Eishiro replied. “The battle is indeed over. Figaro received the death penalty, and Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria is missing the one-horned head.”

“Wow, he works fast. And it went about as we thought it would.”

The most troublesome head had vanished, and Figaro — a man they couldn’t hope to compete with for the MVP title — had gotten the death penalty.

They’d also signed a contract with Shu, so there was no chance that he would interfere.

Tsukuyo concluded that now was the time to charge.

“We’re up next, darlings. My ultimate skill won’t work on this one, so let’s take it down with our numbers. Are we ready?”

That wasn’t even a question to them. The group who bore the mark of the crescent moon and closed eye had been waiting for this.

All told, the Lunar Society had gathered thirty-four max level Masters here.

One might expect them to be in five parties of six and one party of four; they were actually in seventeen parties of two, which was slightly unorthodox.

Fifteen of the parties were pairs of casters and speed-based vanguards. One of the two remaining parties consisted of the High Priestess, Tsukuyo Fuso and King of Assassins, Eishiro Tsukikage.

The last one was made up of a member who would buff everyone alongside Tsukuyo, and...

"It's been a while, Shijima. Think you're good to go?" Tsukuyo asked.

"Of course," replied the other half of the final party — Myth Rider, Ichiro Shijima.

He was the ex-captain of the battle corps and effectively The Lunar Society's third in command. In his hands he held a spear and an elliptical shield: both of them were halves of his Embryo, Juno of the Type Maiden/Elder-Arms.

He was also mounted, but not on his trusted Aries Leo. Instead he was riding a replica Prism Steed.

"Where's your sheep-lion?" asked Tsukuyo. "You work best with him, no?"

"I gave Gringham to my wife," Ichiro replied. "This foe is unlike any other. I'm afraid it would harm him even beyond the Jewel's auto-retrieve safety mechanism. Also, Gringham simply cannot enter the dreaded field."

Monsters below level 100 were instantly killed by the Fatal Field. No one who knew that would consider bringing their tamed monsters to this fight.

"Most importantly, my son would be upset if Gringham died. It's best to let him protect my family."

"Hmm. You're such a dad," Tsukuyo said, noting that he seemed to be enjoying his life in this world.

She then faced her group and said, “We’re all level 500s or Superior Jobs. Gloria’s field won’t affect us, and that meathead took out the annoying head that spat light everywhere.”

All it had left was the ability to enhance its stats. This meant that its lethal abilities were now completely nullified.

“All we have left to beat is a big lizard with nothing left but sheer strength. We should take it easy,” Tsukuyo said, as she headed towards the Lowest Canyon followed by her thirty-three adherents. As she did, she looked at the nearby battleship — Shu’s Embryo, Baldr.

“Just like we agreed, don’t step in until we’re done with it,” Tsukuyo said.

“Yeah, yeah. Are you sure, though?” Shu asked.

“You won’t even get a turn. Just sit there and wait until we get both special rewards,” she asserted with the look of a smug, crafty fox before her expression changed. “Also... I don’t think that bag of trouble is out of tricks. If we both go and get wiped out by some new, ridiculous power, it’d all be over.”

Shu listened silently as Tsukuyo continued.

“I do wanna get something for myself out of this, but... if we don’t beat it, everything we’ve built here in this kingdom would come to nothing.”

“Should I go first?”

“I don’t need your consideration. But yeah, I’m counting on you if something happens.”

“...I’ll clean up your mess.”

“We won’t leave one.” Grinning like a malicious spirit, Tsukuyo leaped into the fray.



Following its battle against Figaro and the loss of its one-horned head, Gloria was lying at the bottom of the canyon.

One of its most important body parts was now gone. The loss of its head presented a far greater problem than the recent loss of its heart. That organ regenerated in a day, but the head showed absolutely no sign of returning; it seemed like it had lost the title of “three-headed dragon” forever.

However, all of its other injuries had already started regenerating, and its skeletal frame was reshaping itself to maintain a balanced structure.

The three-horn silently examined the place where the one-horn used to be.

The wound was now completely shut.

After the restructuring of its skeleton, Gloria looked like it had always been a two-headed dragon.

It had lost a part of itself — both a function and a sibling that had been with it for over a millennium — but the three-horn’s eyes held not even a hint of sadness.

“Ghroah...” Gloria let out a growl which, if translated into a human tongue, may have been something like “Go and wait for us.”

Gloria then stood up. Its left hindleg had regenerated enough to support its immense weight once again.

Despite all the regeneration and the reshaping of its skeleton, its HP hadn’t returned — both because it was simply how Gloria functioned, and because this was advantageous for it.

The name of the three-horn’s skill was “Resurgence,” and it empowered the dragon as its HP went down. Losing a third of itself

had damaged it immensely, making the skill significantly more powerful than it had been when it fought Figaro.

Suddenly, Gloria felt the presence of someone entering its Fatal Field, announcing that the next enemy had arrived.

A moment later, countless offensive spells rained down on it from every direction.

All of them were of the lightning element, which was notable for its ability to ignore physical defenses.

This was a choice based on Gloria's high END, and the ones responsible for it were none other than The Lunar Society.

“SHHeEEeeEAAAaaaArRghhhHh!” the two-horn — the one responsible for the Fatal Field — roared as it sensed all thirty-four of its enemies surrounding it.

When Gloria's one-horned head was alive, the most difficult thing to do was fight it with a large group. Now that it was gone, all that had been reversed. — the dragon could be easily overwhelmed.

It no longer possessed the breath that could evaporate countless people at once. Its wounds no longer released light and the Fatal Field had no effect on levels 500 and above, meaning that the dragon had to lower the numbers using its claws.

As it was now, Gloria had incredible stats, but no special means of attack. Its stats still grew as its HP decreased, but its offense remained lacking in variety. UBMs were often defined by their unique abilities, so it could be said that Gloria as it was now — with nothing but pure power — was at its weakest point.

Still, its stats were no laughing matter. Though they outnumbered it, Gloria's attackers right now were far weaker than the dragon. Its current attack power was more than enough to tear through even metal armor like paper and kill the wearer easily.

Thanks to its Fatal Field, Gloria already knew where its enemies were and what they were doing, as well.

With the sole exception of the King of Assassins, they all moved at subsonic speeds — so Gloria, which could now break the sound barrier, could easily catch up to them and kill them.

As it prepared to do just that...

“Lunar Divider Field: Faint Light.”

...The day transformed into a night with a cloudy sky, and a single ray of moonlight peeking through those clouds shone down on Gloria.

Suddenly, the dragon felt its body become as heavy as lead.

“SHhEWhrRoAahh...!” Its supersonic speed had dropped to subsonic level.

“Well, what a relief. It actually works,” Tsukuyo said.

This was a variation of Kaguya’s Lunar Divider Field. It focused the moonlight through a hole in the clouds, narrowing its targets and effect.

Normally, Lunar Divider Field divided any numerical statistics hostile to Tsukuyo by six, but Faint Light focused the effect on just one. In exchange, the effect became extremely hard to resist the effect with levels, stats, or skills. The result was so difficult that not even an SUBM like Gloria could resist it.

The number Tsukuyo focused on this time was the enemy’s AGI.

During the battle with Figaro, Gloria had broken its shackles and reached supersonic speeds, but Faint Light reduced it back to subsonic. Gloria’s stats were still powerful, and a single one of its attacks was equal to a high-rank Embryo’s ultimate skill, but that meant little if it couldn’t land a single hit.

"Keep those spells coming, casters. Vanguards, do as we planned and carry the casters while attacking it with Gems."

The group of thirty followed Tsukuyo's orders. They were still in the same caster and speed-focused vanguard pairs as before, with the latter carrying the former at subsonic speeds. Gloria now was no faster than them, and the casters attacked it with lightning magic, which was relatively unaffected by defense. The vanguards assisted them with magic Gems containing spells which dealt fixed damage — 800, to be exact.

That may have seemed like an absurdly small amount in a high-level battle such as this, but with Gloria's high defense and The Lunar Society's immense numbers, it had quite a noticeable effect.

They were rather expensive, however. During their preparation, Tsukuyo had gathered every Gem she could find and made non-max level adherents who could create them produce as many as they could. As a result, each of the vanguard fighters in the battle had 1,000 Gems each.

However, little strokes fell great oaks. The combined lightning attacks from the casters and vanguards' Gem spells slowly but surely whittled away Gloria's HP.

It was approximately 70,000,000 at the start, but now Figaro and The Lunar Society had dropped it below 50,000,000. It would take over 60,000 Gems or spells dealing 800 damage each to defeat it now — but to achieve that, each of the thirty members would have to have 2,000 Gems.

The number might be lowered by the additional power of lightning spells, but the casters were limited by their MP, and there was always the risk that some of them would fail to dodge and suffer the death penalty.

However, all that mattered right now was bringing down Gloria's HP below half.

The Lunar Society already knew that Gloria was only as strong as it was because of the three-horn's skill, so if they were to get rid of that head, its defense should return to its original state, when even the Babylonian Battlegroup could hurt it with no trouble.

At that point, Gloria would be completely out of special abilities, making it a relatively easy kill.

"ShOoooOaArRghh..." Gloria let out a roar that seemed full of irritation. It was under attack by near-constant flashes of magic, unable to catch up to any of the insects swarming it. This was surely the most humiliating thing it had ever experienced. It was made even worse by the single human that, instead of using any magic, was just lunging in close and poking it with the butt end of his spear. The bald man switched between doing that and bashing the canyon or the ground with the shield in his other hand.

That served to make Gloria even more irritated.

Tsukuyo, their leader, was being carried by Tsukikage, grinning as she said, "We've got the pattern down." If Gloria could see her, its anger would reach even greater heights.

"It sure got a lot faster, though," she added. Kaguya's Faint Light was still actively dividing Gloria's speed, but as its HP decreased, its stats increased. It wasn't out of the question that it would break the sound barrier once it reached 60% HP.

"Bind it for me, will you?" Tsukuyo said.

"As you command," Eishiro replied. As before, the crux of the offensive here was the spells and fixed damage Gems from the thirty casters and vanguards. This strategy relied on Gloria being unable to hit them, and that was why Tsukuyo had reduced Gloria's AGI to a sixth of its maximum.

However, she wasn't the only one meant to keep the dragon from reaching supersonic speeds again.

"The Shades and Death, They Beckon — Erlkönig." The shadows created by the Lunar Divider Field's night became countless hands that wrapped around Gloria. They both hampered its movements and sunk through its scales, damaging it from underneath them. If the one-horned head was still present, shadows that wounded the dragon's entire body would have been completely off the table, but the power of the light was lost to Gloria forever.

It didn't end at just the shadows, however.

The same bald man that had been poking Gloria's scales from the back of a replica Prism Steed — Myth Rider, Ichiro Shijima — unleashed his ultimate skill.

"Binding Vows, Sought and Linked — Juno!" A moment later, seals manifested all over Gloria — specifically, the parts Ichiro had poked with the butt-end of his spear.

Simultaneously, similar seals appeared on the various points of the canyon that he'd touched with his shield.

Suddenly, Gloria completely stopped in place, as though it was being dragged by something from every direction.

These were attracting seals — the power of Ichiro's Embryo, Juno.

The seals created by the butt-end of the spear were "male," while the ones made by the shield were "female." Upon activating the skill, a powerful attractive force would be created between them.

Though a single pair of seals could be shaken off with just 2,000 STR, Ichiro could produce many pairs, limited only by his SP, and by binding the target from many directions he could significantly increase the bind's power. Eventually, it would become so strong that the target would become unable to move an inch. Applying seals

was particularly easy against larger enemies, and with enough of them, even UBMs would be rendered completely immobile.

He rode around and planted seals to bind the enemy in place, making it an easy target for the rest of the group.

This was the fighting style of the ex-captain of The Lunar Society's battle corps, Ichiro Shijima.

"Sh-ShrRooOaaArghHhhHh!" The two-horn roared as Gloria tried to move, but it couldn't shake off the force of the attraction. The number of seals set on the dragon easily exceeded a hundred, and even this super-Mythical creature had trouble escaping the binding.

Due to the SP cost, Ichiro could never place this many seals by himself, but the group buffer riding the Prism Steed with him was also using items to restore his SP, and this allowed him to create far more seals than he usually could.

Once Gloria stopped, the remaining members became even more aggressive.

Eishiro's shadow hands burned and strangled the three-horn as Ichiro placed more and more seals. Gloria's STR grew as its HP decreased, so the extra seals were necessary to keep it bound. Additionally, Tsukuyo had switched the target of her division from AGI to STR.

The dragon couldn't move an inch, and The Lunar Society had taken complete control of the situation.

This could never have happened if the one-horn was still alive, but... there was no point in imagining such a scenario now.

Gloria was completely cornered.

A few minutes passed after this battle had become completely one-sided.

“Its HP is about to fall below 50%,” said Eishiro, using his Reveal skill.

“Really? Wow, we’re fast,” replied Tsukuyo.

So far, Gloria had been unable to fight back directly, and even most of the rocks it was somehow able to shatter and scatter were blocked by Eishiro’s shadows. Any injured party members were quickly healed by Tsukuyo.

Gloria’s stats continued to grow, but the situation didn’t change. If this continued, Gloria would surely fall.

The moment Eishiro thought that, Gloria’s HP finally fell below 50%... *and all the members besides Tsukuyo and Tsukikage instantly died.*

The level 500 elites suddenly and unexpectedly became bits of light.

“Hm...? Faint Light,” said Tsukuyo, as she recovered from her moment of shock and instantly switched the target of her division skill from STR back to AGI.

That was exactly the right move, as proven by the slowed, but still-subsonic claw that cut the air right where Eishiro had just been.

“...Is this a joke?” Tsukuyo said, as she was carried around by Eishiro to re-evaluate the situation.

The fifteen offensive pairs were all dead.

The one extra support-buffer was dead.

Ichiro had also died, undoing all his attraction seals.

The situation they had constructed had been completely undone.

“We lost thirty-two, and the only survivors are Kage and I... the Superior Jobs.” She re-examined the situation. “A barrier that kills everyone based on level... and enhancement based on lost HP...” Then she re-examined Gloria’s powers. “...That’s just not faaiir.” This information was enough for Tsukuyo to fully understand what the dragon had done.

Basically...

“Enhancing the stats is fine and all, but you just can’t do that with the death field...” Tsukuyo now knew that Gloria had an ace up its sleeve far worse than she could ever imagine.



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The dragon that went on to become the Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria was a true rarity, in that it was a child of two UBM^s and inherited powers from both.

However, neither of its parents possessed powers even close to Gloria’s.

Its father, Lightdragon King, Drag-Shine could only breathe light from his mouth, while its mother, Deathdragon King, Drag-Death could only instakill people up to level 250 and monsters up to level 50, and there was a limit to how well she could negate damage coming from outside the field.

There were two reasons why Gloria had become a true monstrosity with similar, but far more fearsome, powers.

The first was bodily modification by an external agent.

The enhancement of its Overdrive and Fatal Field, as well as Resurgence and ■■■■■■■■■■■■ didn’t come from within — they were all part of the UBM control AI’s, Jabberwock’s, design.

Jabberwock designed UBM^s and used ■■■■■ to transform standard monsters into them... but on rare occasions, he used ■■■■■ on a single monster several times.

Theoretically, each use of ■■■■■ could empower an UBM more and more, but this came with disadvantages.

For example, too many uses could cause a data collapse and subsequent destruction, even in monsters with great potential.

In fact, a monster could only become a designer UBM after it was of an appropriate level to survive a single one, and the ones that followed were harder and harder to survive.

Jabberwock generally avoided doing this, since he didn't want to risk losing a perfectly good UBM.

He had attempted this less than a hundred times during the past two millennia, and his successes didn't even add up to ten, even if you included the irregular future case where he would give one for both a mother and her fetus.

However, Gloria was a special case.

It had survived not one, not two, but several uses of ████. It had the makings of a creature that could prevail against fatal odds and defeat countless monsters and UBMs to finally become an SUBM.

That was all according to Jabberwock's predictions. However, there was one factor that he hadn't accounted for.

The second reason why Gloria had ended up this way was its ability to create skills.

Such an ability wasn't unique in this world. Certain high-rank and Superior Jobs — most notably the "The One" series — could create their own skills, as well. Even standard UBMs could develop new abilities as their powers grew.

Gloria had simply done the same thing.

The skill it'd used against Figaro — Zenith Dragon's Shining Field: Fang of Gloria — was one of them. Ever since creating it, the dragon had kept this ability a secret from even Jabberwock, the one who'd given it power.

However, there was another skill it had woven, and it was one it simply couldn't hide.

This was a skill that applied its stat enhancement to the Fatal Field, raising the level bar that had to be surpassed. Its name was simply "True Fatal Field."

It was a truly fearsome ability, born from mixing the powers inherited from its parents and the ones given to it by Jabberwock.

Over a thousand years ago, before Jabberwock retrieved Gloria, it had fought an Irregularity, was badly hurt, and used it.

The True Fatal Field instantly killed the Irregularity, and the Resources it had received let it break past level 100.

Jabberwock had been observing this battle and learned of this ability, but as fearsome as it was, he found it appropriate. This was one of the reasons why he'd considered Gloria to be the most complete boss monster, and he'd thought that it was a fitting power for a creature with that title to have.

Allowed to retain this ability, Gloria waited for over a millennium for its deployment, and had now once more used the fearsome True Fatal Field that had extinguished even an Irregularity.

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Kingdom of Altar, Newest Canyon

The single eye of the two-horn released a sinister shine as it spread the True Fatal Field. Looking up at the evil eye, Tsukuyo muttered, "Ohh, it's so over..."

Still carried by Eishiro at supersonic speeds, she let out a sigh.

Gloria now had stats that surpassed Mythical-level, nearly all of her group was dead, her plan had collapsed, and there was an overwhelming gap between the dragon and the two survivors.

Though Eishiro was a battle-focused Superior Job, he didn't have much offensive ability, and his job skills were focused on fights against other players, while his Embryo was anti-group, making it inefficient against powerful single enemies such as Gloria.

With Tsukuyo, the reasons were even more obvious. Her job was focused on healing and support, while her Embryo was all about debuffs. Also, Kaguya's ultimate skill could only be used against Masters, which rendered it completely useless against the dragon.

To make matters worse, even if they somehow fought and damaged Gloria, they would only increase the limit of the Fatal Field, and it would eventually catch up even to Superior Jobs such as them.

"I dunno the max level limit on it, but I guess we can't leave the two-horn be..." If it was left alive, in the worst case scenario it could develop a Fatal Field that killed all those below level 1,000 or even 2,000, and negated all damage coming to it from anywhere outside the field, becoming effectively immortal.

A Gloria like that would become a deadly calamity in its purest sense.

The two-horn had to die. Like with the one-horn, letting it live could potentially erase all chances of ever killing it. However, doing so would leave the three-horn, and it was easy to imagine how high its stats would grow.

Needless to say, it would be too much for just the two of them.

"Yep. This is all we've got. We can't beat the three-head, and the plan we had is in shambles now" Tsukuyo shook her head, as though giving up. "*So let's just go all-in on taking out the two-horn.*"

With a wicked smile, she declared that she would end the head with the most fearsome skill.

She'd only given up on getting both of the remaining special rewards — but not on victory.

"We'll retreat once the two-horn's gone. Then, we'll just leave the rest to the trash panda. I've got no clue how a STR idiot like him will even fight it once it moves several times faster than the speed of sound, though."

Tsukuyo had handed the conclusion of the battle over to Shu, but that also meant that she'd decided that taking out the two-horn was her role in all of this.

"Kage, I'm using *that*. Be a dear and buy me about three minutes. Oh, and get ready to help me with rehab after we're back."

"As you command, Lady Tsukuyo," Eishiro nodded before activating a skill. "Shadow Cradle."

He then sank her into his own shadow.

Eishiro's shadow was a separate realm that he often used for movement or covert operations. However, the shadow he'd sunk Tsukuyo into was different from his usual shadows, in that it was meant chiefly to protect the one inside. It was a shadow shelter he couldn't use on himself, or on any unwilling target.

No external forces could affect it as long as Eishiro was alive and the one inside it didn't wish to leave. This made the shadow the safest place against Gloria — the menace before them.

Alas, it would only last until Gloria killed him.

"Three minutes," he said to himself. "Heheh, Lady Tsukuyo's requests are as absurd as ever."

With Tsukuyo in hiding, Kaguya's Lunar Divider Field: Faint Light was undone, and Gloria could now move at several times the speed of sound.

It was now even faster than Eishiro — a speed-focused Superior Job.

In fact, one of Gloria's claws was approaching him at immense speeds right this very moment.

"But fulfilling her absurd requests is my duty," he sighed, as he took control of his shadows to create a brief wall, then took evasive action.

This let him avoid a direct hit from the claw, but *the shockwave alone blew away his left arm.*

Paying it no mind, he used his legs and shadows to evade the attacks that followed.

In a supersonic battle, one's experienced time was drawn-out, so three minutes was actually a long time for Eishiro. Regardless, he would fulfill his mistress' request.

"If I am unable to buy a mere three minutes... I am unworthy of standing at her side."

His leg was blown away, and he simply replaced it with a leg of shadow.

His arteries were torn, and he wrapped them up in shadows to stop the bleeding.

Replacing more and more of his body with shadow, he kept moving, buying the time he needed.

"If the lady ordered it, even seven days and nights would be nothing to me." The King of Assassins who served the High Priestess continued to buy time with his unyielding will.

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Within the world of shadow, a poem-like voice rang out.

The holy one walks the endless path. The path of the seeker and the path of the savior. The path on which she seeks her conviction. And at the end of the path, she will grant salvation.

Tsukuyo was reciting something in a language completely unlike her native tongue. It was a chant, but it was fundamentally different from the common magic skill.

The users were free to pick the words used in standard Chants. All that mattered was that they said something out loud and expended MP.

This moment is the end of life. This moment is the end of the path. The conclusion of the holy one's journey. The point from which the holy one shall return.

However, the chant Tsukuyo now spoke was quite different.

It was one of the world's few Ancient Spells — a kind of magic that had their own specific chants.

As she spoke it, light appeared from within her and gathered into an orb in her palm.

It was the same kind of light as the one created by the church's holy men at Claymill — same as the rite of divine punishment, Judgement Pillar.

The holy one now lays down her burden. She puts away that which she had sought. And, she embraces instead a new desire.

But as the chant continued, the ball's light changed in nature.

While Judgement Pillar's light was Sun-like, this one was dimmer... like the light of a full moon in the night sky.

All that she gained in her life. All that she gained on her path. All this shall be sacrificed for this single light she so desires. This light carries her wish for the salvation of others. Otherwise, it cannot be released.

She finally concluded the chant...

“The Return of the Holy One: Ulfaria Eltram.”

...And spoke the name of a miracle older than even the pre-ancient civilization — the name of the ultimate job skill of the entire priest grouping.

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Three minutes. The short time that felt far too long was finally over, and a particular part of the shadow rose up to reveal Tsukuyo, carrying an orb of what seemed like pure moonlight.

She solemnly glanced at it once before looking up to see a shadow standing before her.

“...” It was a man who’d lost all his limbs, replaced them with shadow, and whose torso bore several fatal wounds.

For a hefty price, Eishiro Tsukikage had bought the three minutes.

“Good work, Kage,” said Tsukuyo. Not saying a word back — he couldn’t, due to the hole in his throat — he gave her a faint smile... and dissolved into bits of light.

Tsukuyo saw her confidant off with a smile of her own.

“Anyway, two-horn, our turn is almost done.” A moment later, the orb of light in her hands pulsated as though it had found its target.

Gloria didn’t just sit and watch, however.

The dragon moved *and split Tsukuyo in half with a horizontal claw strike.*

Indeed, it was more like it obliterated her entire lower half.

The wound was obviously fatal. As the High Priestess, Tsukuyo had the potential to quickly patch herself up using Mercy of the Holy, but Gloria would crush her head before she could.

Though... Tsukuyo herself would soon be unable to use that skill.

“SHUuuOoOeEeeeAaaAAaRrGhhHhh! Nh...?” Before Gloria finished Tsukuyo off, the two-horn’s single eye noticed the orb of light approaching it.

Slowly but surely, it floated towards the two-horn.

Gloria’s instincts took over, urging it to avoid the tiny orb. It could feel it was dangerous and distanced itself from it at the speed of sound.

However, the orb of light *moved along with it*, catching up to the dragon and continuing its steady approach.

Never letting Gloria gain any distance on it, the orb of light came closer and closer to it.

“This is my first time using it... so that’s what it’s like.” Tsukuyo grinned, lying on the ground as nothing but a severed top half.



That light was Ulfaria Eltram — the double-edged sword wielded by Hierophants and High Priestesses that poured everything they'd built and, indeed, their entire lives into a single attack.

An ultimate spell that came at the cost of all the user's job levels.

Even to the immortal Masters, this was the equivalent of sacrificing a huge part of your own life and time. The reward for this was an inescapable spell that dealt a fixed amount of damage.

It would land no matter how fast the target was, and though the idea of fixed damage might recall the Gems employed earlier, this was quite different in that it dealt quite a bit more damage — 3,000 for every level sacrificed.

With Tsukuyo's total level being 1,026... it would deal an astounding 3,000,000 damage.

“SHheEeeEEAaAaaAAaaaRrgGhhHHhhH!” Gloria also realized how potent and abnormal the orb was, but it was unable to do anything about it.

Even killing Tsukuyo herself couldn't stop it now, for it had already been released.

However, Tsukuyo's death penalty was already set in stone.

The moment Ulfaria Eltram reached its target, Tsukuyo's level would drop to 0.

She'd become susceptible to the Fatal Field again, and even if that didn't kill her, the resulting HP drop and her fatal injury would.

Tsukuyo's death was certain, but the fate of Gloria's two-horned head still hung in the balance.

“...It won't be enough, will it?” she mused. Though Ulfaria Eltram dealt immense damage, Gloria's HP was simply on a different level.

Fighting Figaro and The Lunar Society took it below half, but it was still about 35,000,000.

This meant that this spell would be far from fatal. “Well, then, you know what to do.”

“Indeed we do. Lunar Divider Field: Faint Light.”

Of course, neither Tsukuyo nor her Embryo, Kaguya, would allow her spell to fail.

The Maiden cast Faint Light one last time, *switching from AGI to HP*.

Indeed — not even HP was immune to Faint Light.

Tsukuyo avoided using this while the entire group was still around to prevent Gloria becoming too powerful; she didn’t use it after they died because dividing AGI was the only way she could stay alive, and because enhancing the Fatal Field too much could kill her.

However, speed didn’t matter to Ulfaria Eltram, and there was no point in worrying about the limits of the Fatal Field after she’d cast a spell that already made her as good as dead.

Gloria’s HP had been reduced from 35,000,000 to a little under 6,000,000.

“You measured human life by level, killed thousands by level...”

Ulfaria Eltram landed, dealing 3,000,000 damage — half of Gloria’s remaining HP.

“...So it’s only right that you die by level.”

Needless to say, the two-horned head vanished without a trace.

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The two-horn vanished, and the True Fatal Field was undone.

At the same time, Tsukuyo, who was now level 0, was fading due to her now-meager HP. Her body was quickly turning into bits of light, but she displayed no concern as she checked her status windows.

“Ah. I’m level 0, but I’ve still got my jobs,” she said. “I thought I’d have to get them all again. This means that the only rehab I’ll need will be powerleveling.”

Tsukuyo grinned, highly satisfied with the outcome.

She’d expected to have to get the High Priestess job again. Though, that wouldn’t have been difficult, considering that most of the country’s holy men died at Claymill and she was the only viable candidate in the entire kingdom.

“My work here is done. I’m leaving the rest to the trash panda!” Entrusting the fight against the three-horn at its most troublesome to Shu, she vanished in satisfaction.

But right before she did...

“...You better protect the capital. I’ll be really mad if you don’t clean up my mess.”

Saying that with a hint of prayer in her voice, Tsukuyo Fuso returned to reality.

Act Eight: Unmatched God of War — Baldr

???

“Twin Quintuple Cannons linked to ammo storage. Loading all gunports with DD Shells. Equipping Stardust Genocider with F Warheads. Firing preparations complete.”

“Fire while it’s still recovering.”

“Roger. War God Ship, Baldr is engaging the enemy.”

◇◆◇

Kingdom of Altar, Newest Canyon

After Tsukuyo took out the two-horn head, Gloria collapsed and fell motionless.

It was taking time to restore the part of its body that Ulfaria Eltram had blown away along with its head, as well as to process what had just happened. In silence, Gloria pondered the fact that it had lost both the one-horned and the two-horned heads, leaving only the three-horn.

This was the first time in its long life that it had felt true solitude.

Its senses had been greatly affected, as well. With the loss of the two-horn came the loss of its passive Fatal Field, along with its abilities to sense things within that field and to block attacks coming from outside it.

The millennia-old SUBM had never felt like this, and it was greatly perplexed.

That was why he saw this moment as his opportunity.

Cutting the air, countless missiles flew towards Gloria — but alas, they were too slow.

The dragon had about 17,000,000 HP left, which was less than a fourth of its maximum, but in exchange its stats had grown over four-fold. Its STR, for example, was over 160,000, and its other stats were just as ludicrously high. Its AGI let it move at four times the speed of sound, so the incoming missiles were far too slow to be a threat. And even if they did hit it, its END, which exceeded 120,000, would not let any damage pass.

Knowing that, Gloria casually brushed the missiles aside, *only for them to burst and release a light that blinded it.*

The missiles weren't standard high-explosives, but F Warheads — flash bombs which exploded in a light so intense it could permanently destroy a human being's eyesight. As a creature that breathed light, Gloria had high resistance to the element; it was caught off-guard, however, so its eyes were still burned. It shut its eyelids as quickly as it could, but the flash bombs continued to rain down with only brief pauses in between volleys. Every time Gloria tried to open its eyes, all it could see was white.

This was a clear opening in its defenses, and it wasn't missed — a rain of shells fell on Gloria, actually breaking through its 120,000 END and damaging its HP.

The DD Shells, as they were called, had all been created by a single skill, and their effect was the same as that of the magic Gems used by The Lunar Society — they inflicted *direct damage*.

Its HP, already low after two taxing battles, was now falling even lower.

“GrrRoOoOaaAaARrRgHHhhH!” Fast as it now was, Gloria could've easily avoided all the shells... but it was now blinded. If it opened its eyes, it saw nothing but the white of the F Warheads. Up until recently, attacks from outside a certain range were useless against it,

but with the loss of the two-horn, Gloria had lost its Fatal Field — its deadly ability that doubled as an impenetrable defense.

It had no choice but to bear the rain of shells.

Losing its field had also made it woefully incapable of assessing its surroundings and sensing the presence of enemies, and Gloria fully understood that its opponent was attacking now precisely because he was aware of that exact fact.

“Ghoarrh...” It could easily escape the shells. Gloria could cover a whole kilometel in a single second. It had the potential to escape the enemy’s effective range, but it just *couldn’t do it*.

Though Gloria could evade attacks, it wasn’t allowed to flee from battle. It had to obey the orders of “Head straight for the royal capital” and “Fight every enemy you encounter.”

These commands were etched into Gloria’s existence as part of a contract with Jabberwock — the being that had saved it from the Skydragon King’s servants and had given it power as a UBM.

The dragon was fundamentally incapable of running away merely for survival, but even without its orders, Gloria would have never chosen to do so. It prided itself on being the most powerful creature in existence — more powerful than either of its parents and even the Skydragon King who’d murdered them. It was convinced that it could defeat and surpass any creature that stood before it, and disregarded any other options.

Though, perhaps it would’ve been different if the other heads were still alive. The one-horn wanted to eradicate everyone with its light, while the two-horn was a coward who killed other creatures to protect itself.

The three-horn, however, wanted nothing but to increase its own power, exercise that power, and prove that nothing could stand in its way.

Thus, Gloria would never choose to retreat with only its three-horn head left. Without a sound, the dragon chose to just let the shells hit it.

The DD Shells raining down on it were powerful — a hundred of them were enough to reduce its HP to 15,000,000.

“...GHhHAaaAAaaAArRrrrGhhH!” In exchange for taking damage, Gloria was able to determine the direction the shells were coming from.

Still blinded, it sped towards the attacker, ignoring all the shells still falling on it.

Having lost two heads and most of its HP, Gloria had become an incarnation of pure power. Now, it charged towards its enemy.

Each step made the earth quake, and the walls of the canyon didn’t even slow it down. No matter what stood in its way, it would arrive at its target in a mere handful of seconds, extinguish the annoyance, and continue on its path towards the capital.

With its stats grown so high, even Superior Jobs paled in comparison. As it was, nothing could stop Gloria.

At least... *Not yet.*

◇

Meanwhile, the attacker — King of Destruction, Shu Starling — sensed Gloria’s approach. “Guess it’s on its way, huh?”

“Hostile target, Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria, is approaching this location. Calculating time until arrival based on speed and obstacles... Roughly 32 seconds until contact.”

“That’s faster than expected... I guess its stats went up by that much, huh?”

Re-evaluating his opponent, Shu removed his raccoon costume, leaving him in only his innerwear; now clearly visible was a handsome man with long hair and a well-proportioned body of toned, tough muscle.

"We got any more DD Shells?" Shu asked.

"Fifteen DD Shells remaining," Baldr replied.

"I'm pretty sure those are the only shells that'll do anything to it at this point. Damn thing is probably tougher than Fatoum's Mountain Puppet and Ultrahard Regalia."

Baldr could produce its own ammo, and though the materials required could be costly, the destructive potential was immense. Despite that, the only ones that were of any use against Gloria's current form were the blinding F Warheads and the fixed damage DD Shells. Incendiary? Armor-piercing? Those weren't even worth bothering with.

And if shells weren't an option...

"I guess we'll have to *duke it out*."

...He had to rely on his other weapon — the greatest STR of any master.

Though, at the moment his base STR was 80,000, and even with the 100,000 he could achieve with equipment bonuses, it wouldn't be enough to even harm the dragon. He also had no means of actually damaging a being that was several times faster than the speed of sound.

Gloria, on the other hand, could turn him to dust with a single attack.

And this was why Shu removed his costume — he would now equip his *ultimate gear*, which would solve all three of those problems.

"Baldr, we're using *that*."

“Full Offense Mode can currently be activated for 60 continuous minutes.”

“That’s more than enough.” A grin spread across his face...

“Unmatched God of War — Baldr!”

...As he spoke the name of his Embryo.

◇◆

As Gloria ran, through its closed eyes it realized that the blinding light had ceased.

It then opened its eyes to see that its vision was recovering — and that it was already facing its enemy.

The silhouette before Gloria was immense. It was a battleship — or a giant tank — that had quintuple cannons lining both sides, as well as countless missile launchers on its deck.

This vessel that could rule over both land and sea was already launching an attack upon Gloria, but there was no longer even the slightest chance that any of the shells would hit.

With its vision returned, Gloria could use its supersonic movement to easily evade them all.

Then, it charged at the battleship.

“GHRrrROoooOAAaaaAaRRGggHHHH!” It swung its right claw towards the bridge, fully intent on ending it with a single hit.

As it came closer, Gloria pictured the pulverized bridge in its mind’s eye...

“...?”

...But that was a far cry from what actually happened.

Gloria’s claw fell, but the bridge was still very much intact.

In fact, the claw that was meant to destroy it *had been caught*. Gloria couldn't comprehend this.

The fact that its arm had been caught — something that had never happened before — left it bewildered; the fact that there was a being even capable of that left it shocked.

It wondered what this being could possibly be.

Looking at its claw, it saw five steel-blue fingers.

The Quintuple Cannon barrels bent like a hand and grabbed Gloria's arm.

"...!?" As the dragon was overcome with surprise, the metal battleship *stood up*.

The front part of the hull became legs... The Quintuple Cannon turrets on both sides became arms... A face appeared from inside the bridge... And ultimately, a humanoid figure was created.

It was like a man... or perhaps a god.

The latter comparison was not unwarranted.

In Norse mythology, some stories of Baldr told that he owned Hringhorni — the greatest of all ships — and possessed the strongest body of all, unsurpassed and undying.

"War God Ship, Full Offense Mode transformation complete," coldly spoke Baldr — the Type Guardian/Fortress/Gear/Weapon Embryo. It was a quadruple hybrid — an utter rarity — and this was its true form.

There were many words one might use to describe this mighty entity.

A walking idol. Deus ex machina. The ultimate weapon of fantasy.

Every person would have their own term for Baldr as it was now.

“Ghrr, OoOagh...” Gloria, however, couldn’t even begin to describe it. Thus, the thought it had given to Baldr, when translated to human tongue, was simply “Unknown.”

Amusingly, it fit perfectly, for that was his — Shu Starling’s — nickname.

“That was a close call. A moment slower, and my head would’ve been crushed.”

“Denying that notion,” said Baldr. “With the *current toughness*, a single hit wouldn’t have been a problem.”

“Really? Well, I’m not gonna run any endurance tests,” Shu replied.
“...I *am* gonna test the speed, though.”

The moment Gloria snapped out of it, it instantly attacked with its left claw... only for Baldr to dodge it at *supersonic speeds*.

Once again the dragon was left stupefied. It watched as the hundred metel-tall machine-god moved at speeds equal to its own, if not greater...

“Kodachi.”

...Before it spun around and launched a roundhouse kick — its Master’s specialty — towards the head of the strongest dragon in existence.

“...Ghrh?!” The hit made Gloria stagger, which was all the proof needed to know that Baldr’s — Shu’s — attack worked.

This was the Unmatched God of War — Baldr. It was an ultimate skill that turned Baldr into *armor* that greatly increased HP, STR, END, and AGI based on Shu’s already immense STR.

And like any armor, this machine god was worn by and moved with none other than Shu himself.

“Hoo...!” From within Baldr — from the bridge that had become a cockpit — you could hear Shu stabilize his breathing.

As he fixed his posture, Baldr moved along with him at essentially the same speed. The hundred metel-tall machine god perfectly replicated its Master’s martial movements.

This was all exactly as expected. Baldr was Shu’s Embryo, and there were few greater unions of man and machine than this.

Gloria silently watched its opponent and soon became certain that this one was unlike any it had ever faced. He wasn’t like the weaklings it had crushed earlier, those who’d tried to swarm it, the UBMs that had challenged it with their unique powers, or the man who’d taken its heart, wings, and the right eye of the one-horn.

Even those who’d actually removed its two other heads were far below it, overall — they’d only achieved what they had because they excelled in a few very specific things. However, this one was unlike them — *for he was its equal*.

This was an entity that could fight it head-on, now that it had lost its offensive and defensive skills and had nothing but pure physical ability.

Gloria had never encountered an opponent or a battle quite like this.

“GhAhhHAhAhHAH...!” The thought actually made the dragon laugh. Feeling the joy of true conflict, it laughed as though to express that *it had never had this much fun*.

“Hahah...!” Shu laughed along with it. He was fully aware that this was a battle he couldn’t lose, and that his defeat would mean the end of the kingdom.

But even so, he found it a bit... exciting.

It reminded him of his school days as a martial artist.

“GHhAHhaHhAhaAhhaaHHaAHHahaHAHAhAh!”

“HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAH!” Laughing uproariously, the two rivals rushed to face each other.

The King of Destruction, Shu Starling, Full Offense Mode.

The Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria, Max Battle Mode.

The greatest STR among mankind versus the greatest STR among monsterkind.

They laughed for a good while before going for each other's heads, fully intending to pulverize them.

Overwhelming their surroundings with crushing shockwaves, the machine god and the strongest dragon clashed, sounding the gong for the true start of the final battle between Superior and SUBM... power against power.

Interlude: The Worst and the Worst

???

This space existed in a place unreachable from the Newest Canyon where that fierce battle was raging... or any other place on the continent.

Several people were gathered in this separate dimension-like place, in an area that looked much like a spaceship.

Though, perhaps “people” wasn’t an apt term, for some among them looked truly inhuman. However, their appearance mattered little compared to features they *did* share.

They were all control AIs, otherwise known as Infinite Embryos.

They were the observers of the world of *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Not all of them were here, but those who were gazed at a screen hanging in the air, showing the clash between the machine god and the most powerful dragon.

“Strangely enough, it turned out exactly like you expected, Jabberwock,” said the entity that looked like a carnivorous beastwoman. She was control AI no. 3 — otherwise known as simply “Queen.” Her voice made it clear that she was truly enjoying the battle.

“What do you mean, No. 3?” Jabberwock asked, with curiosity in his expression.

“Ha! Isn’t it obvious? You said that nothing would happen if we released a standard SUBM into a country with so many outstanding individuals. And it looks like not even unleashing Gloria changed that. They sure are something,” Queen said before pausing for a moment. “We didn’t get any new Superiors or Superior Embryos, but hey, it happens. Also, a country with this much potential is bound to

produce a few more Superiors with or without SUBMs. Don't let this failure get to you."

She spoke as if to cheer up her colleague.

"Indeed. I failed *this time*," Jabberwock nodded in response...

"*The next Gloria* will do better."

...before saying something that would make any man despair, or at least tilt their head in confusion.

"...The next Gloria?" Queen asked, clearly puzzled. "You say that like you actually managed to mass-produce this monster that's almost as powerful as us."

"Oh, nothing of the sort. Gloria is a once-in-a-millennium miracle. Even creating new Superiors is easier than mass-producing this dragon," he shook his head in denial before clearing up the misunderstanding. "I'm simply saying that Gloria will *fully regenerate* from its backup."

The words made Queen gasp. "...Fully regenerate? With the cores and all?"

"Of course," said Jabberwock. "As long as the backup is safe, it will begin regenerating once any of the cores are destroyed, eventually becoming whole again. It isn't exactly flawless, though. I thought that this function could be used to create more Glorias, but it turned out that the cores couldn't be duplicated as long as the original still existed. Apparently, none of the cores can be multiplied as long as any of the three cores of the original are still active. Since the abilities themselves can only be restored to the backup the moment the corresponding cores are destroyed, there's a bit of a lag until full regene—"

"Wait... Wait just a second!" Queen cut off Jabberwock's excessively long explanation of Gloria's functions.

From her perspective, there was a fundamental issue more important than any detail he could discuss.

"You mean to tell me that the head the Over Gladiator sacrificed a Mythical special reward to beat and the head the High Priestess gave all her levels to destroy... will just keep coming back?"

"Indeed."

"Jabberwock... I didn't hear anything about this."

"Because I didn't tell you. Well, don't worry. Gloria will come back and test the Masters over and over... *until we have all the Superiors.*"

Jabberwock's plainly-spoken words made a chill go down Queen's spine.

She realized that his stance regarding Gloria's deployment was unlike any other control AI's. While they approved the release of such a powerful SUBM because the kingdom was full of outstanding individuals, Jabberwock intended to continue using Gloria to test the Masters in perpetuity.

"...Is there a way to stop it?" she asked.

"Of course," Jabberwock replied. "I have the exclusive right to stop the backup's functions at any time. The backup can be destroyed by standard means, too."

"What is this 'backup' you're talking about, anyway?"

"This." Jabberwock changed what the screen displayed.

It now showed a dark cave.

It was clearly created naturally. You couldn't tell it from just looking at it, but the data displayed on the screen said that it was at an extreme depth of 3,000 metels. The cave was over a hundred metels tall and extended for several kilometels in each direction. Needless to say, it was gigantic.

In the center of it, there was a giant object.

“Is that... its tail?” It was a long tail with four protrusions and golden scales — the same one that Foltesla had cut off during the battle at Claymill.

“To be more precise, it’s Gloria’s fourth head... If we go by the naming scheme Altar’s Masters gave it, it’s the ‘*four-horn*.’”

Gloria’s tail... the four-horn... had seemed to vanish after the battle at Claymill. Some had wondered why the tail disappeared while the wings stayed behind, but they simply concluded that it had merely been lost during the chaotic battle.

However, it had actually moved on its own and hid within a nearby lake, and from there it had dug down to hide in this cave.

“Hm. We’re just in time. The four-horn’s *Revitalization* is about to begin.”

The moment Jabberwock said that, the severed end of the tail began to grow into two heads.

There were short horns on them — one had one, while the other had two — and they were obviously the heads Gloria had lost.

The tail now looked something like a two-headed snake, slithering on the surface of the cave.

“They regenerated already...?” Queen asked.

“Not yet,” said Jabberwock. “It might look like they have, but there’s no core inside them. Like I said before, the cores will come back once the main Gloria is defeated. For now, it will just reconstruct the body alone. Assuming the main Gloria fell right at this moment, it would completely regenerate by... tomorrow, I’d say.”

Queen was speechless. That was far too fast. Even if Shu defeated the three-horn, the kingdom wouldn't even have time to celebrate their victory and its survival.

As long as the backup was alive, Gloria's march wouldn't stop.

"The Glory SelectE.R... Endless Routine." Jabberwock spoke the codename he'd given to Gloria.

"Gloria is a creature that will *sort and select Masters without end*, spurring Superior Embryo evolution. If it can be stopped, that will only happen once there are enough Superiors to actually accomplish it."

"...Won't the kingdom fall?"

"If it falls, it falls. Perhaps the destruction of a country is what we need to speed up the process. I'm even thinking of having Gloria attack the whole continent until we have the hundred Superiors we need."

That would be a true calamity — a catastrophe that wouldn't end until all the Superiors had gathered. It would obviously throw the balance they had set up completely out of order.

The other control AIs listening in on this exchange were already wondering if they should go destroy the four-horn before it regenerated. However, they knew that Jabberwock would stop them if they tried. That meant having to fight one of the strongest control AIs — a match even for no. 10, Bandersnatch, who was in charge of security.

In fact, in the worst case scenario, Bandersnatch would also try to prevent Gloria's defeat. It was a simple machine that didn't even have the thought patterns necessary to limit itself when trying to achieve objectives, so it was likely to side with Jabberwock.

As they racked their brains about what to do next...

“Jabberwock...”

...Cheshire, control AI no. 13 and the one in charge of miscellaneous jobs, called out to him.

Upon hearing his voice, the other control AIs thought that he was about to try to bargain with Jabberwock and try to get him to use his exclusive right to stop the backup.

However, they were all wrong.

“Let me give you a warning.”

He only wanted to impart a small piece of advice.

“I interact with Masters a lot more than you. With that in mind, let me tell you something I know from experience.”

“What is it?”

In response, Cheshire put on a feline grin and said, “They’re completely free, so very few of them act exactly as we want them too.”

A moment later...

“A Master is approaching Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria’s backup.”

...A voice informed of a change in the situation.

“A Master? All the way down there? Who?” asked Jabberwock.

In response, the voice...

“King of Crime, Sechs Würfel.”

...Spoke the name of *the offender*.

◆◆◆

Kingdom of Altar, underground cavern

Several minutes ago...

There was a gigantic tail.

It was the same one that Foltesla had severed during the battle at Claymill.

It had four protrusions — horns — and it was fair to call it Gloria's four-horned head. Some would argue against that, though, for it didn't even have a face, let alone a mouth.

But that soon changed as a pair of vocal entities peeked out from its wound.

“FFfrrRRsSsHhhh...”

“ShhoOoAarrghh...” They were the one-horn and the two-horn — the heads destroyed by Figaro and Tsukuyo Fuso.

The tail now looked like a two-headed snake, or the letter Y. Though, compared to the original one-horn and two-horn, these were more like the heads of lizard hatchlings, and their powers matched their relatively pitiful appearance.

However, they kept growing larger and tougher, and it wasn't hard to imagine that they would eventually become what they once were.

This was the power of the four-horn — Revitalization.

It had the ability to, if necessary, separate itself from Gloria. Even if Foltesla hadn't cut it off, it would've detached itself if the dragon encountered a powerful foe. It would then hide, ready to regenerate in case the original was destroyed.

Gloria would never die as long as the four-horn wasn't found and defeated. It would be reborn again and again, and wage an endless battle.

That was the final trick Gloria — the most perfect monster — had up its sleeve.

It was an SUBM that would never stop executing the unworthy and selecting the few who exceeded its exacting standards, making it perhaps the most dangerous creature imaginable.

As it was now, the four-horn was far from active. Currently the original, having become immensely powerful, was fighting a battle which could be its last. The four-horn didn't know how the battle would end, but if the original managed to survive, it would simply continue sleeping until it died, in which case it would finish its regeneration. That was all there was to it.

However, the regenerated Gloria would be weaker than the Gloria currently fighting on the surface, because tail-Gloria had stopped gaining battle experience the moment it had been severed. This regenerative ability it had actually gave it the option of shedding its tail and hiding before it even entered battle, but it had decided not to so that the four-horn could gain experience as well.

In simple terms, this was like saving game progress on an external memory drive. The Gloria that would revive here would have the experience of killing Drag-Volt and the kingdom's tians, but it wouldn't know about anything after it had been severed — specifically, the battles against the Masters. In both level and battle technique, it would be far weaker than the original Gloria fighting on the surface.

But that was no problem for Gloria. It could easily gather the experience again. Regardless, it would regenerate, and the second Gloria that would come after the first would destroy the kingd—

“Would you look at that! It really is here.” Mixing with the echoes of water droplets trickling down, a man’s voice resounded throughout the cave.

The darkness was complete, but thanks to the regenerated two-horn and its Fatal Field, the four-horn could sense the presence and

realized that the source of the voice was the liquid dripping down from a crack above.

It soon gathered in a single place and formed a humanoid figure — a plain-looking man with black-rimmed glasses as his only notable feature.

Despite appearances, the four-horn instantly understood that this being was as fearsome as those who'd felled the original's heads... if not more.

"I see that the one-horn and two-horn are on the verge of coming back," he — King of Crime, Sechs Würfel — said in understanding, adjusting the glasses made out of his own flesh. "So you truly *do* have regenerative powers."

Sechs had known of this function the moment Drag-Heaven had given him the request. There were three reasons for this.

First was the discrepancy in the battle logs and results. In the battle at Claymill, Foltesla had cut off Gloria's wings and tail, yet only the wings remained.

Secondly, he compared it to himself. Being a slime, Sechs had the ability to fully regenerate himself from any remains of sufficient size, and if a slime was capable of that, there was no reason to believe that an SUBM couldn't do the same with the tail it had lost.

The third reason was Drag-Heaven's implications to that effect. The Skydragon King released undead parts of himself — spiritual dragons — all over the continent and used their eyes as his own. A creature with so much information at his disposal had implied that there were multiple Glorias, which was as good as outright stating that as fact.

Having become certain of the tail-Gloria's existence, Sechs went on to look for it in places where Drag-Heaven's eyes couldn't reach — the caverns, rivers, and lakes around Claymill.

And now, he'd found it.

"Here it is," he muttered to no one in sight.

"Heheheh... Just as I thought," Drag-Heaven replied.

Of course, the Skydragon King himself was nowhere near, but Sechs had one of his scales in hand.

This, too, was an undead created by Drag-Heaven's unique ability to split his soul. It was what he usually used to invite Sechs to The Skycrown, and as an undead, the scale was immune to the effects of Fatal Field.

"As expected, it was underground. Flare definitely couldn't fight here," said Sechs.

"Indeed," replied Drag-Heaven. "In the worst case scenario, he would melt the very crust beneath the kingdom. And even that might not be enough to kill it. This is certainly no laughing matter. Kheheheheheh."

"But you *are* laughing." Shinedragon King, Drag-Flare wielded heat that reached tens of thousands of degrees and was even nicknamed "Stardragon." If he were to fight in a place like this, it would no doubt change the very ground beneath Altar.

Sechs, on the other hand, was capable of *adjusting his power* with great precision, and that was exactly why Drag-Heaven had given him this request.

"It seems it only has the one-horned and the two-horned heads. Only the ones that were defeated, yes?"

"It appears so." Through Drag-Heaven, Sechs was already aware that Gloria's one-horned and two-horned heads were gone.

"It would be very troubling if I didn't defeat it before Shu was done," said Sechs as he cracked a smile. "So let's begin our deadly battle in the dark, shall we?"

A moment later, he approached the four-horn at supersonic speeds.

"Shapeshift: Schwert." Sechs turned his right hand into a sword as hard as Mythical metal before transforming his upper arm back into slime and swinging it like a bladed whip.

There was no hesitation in his attack. He moved as though the pitch-black darkness didn't impede his sight at all.

Sechs' attack easily broke through the 30,000 or so END's worth of defense on the four-horn's scales and damaged it.

"...!" The fact that it was injured naturally made it panic. With the three-horn still with the original, the four-horn didn't have Resurgence or its boon of increasing stats with the decrease of HP. Additionally, the lack of a core in either of the two heads it had made it incapable of transforming its wounds into weapons or using the True Fatal Field.

What it could do, however...

"OoOoVveEeRrrDdrrRriiiililiVeeEEeE!"

...Was release an Overdrive as powerful as the original's through its regenerated one-horn.

Sechs instantly evaded it, and the light shining where he'd just stood brought daylight to the cave and melted the very bedrock.

"Now *this* is terrifying," he said with a composed expression before attacking again.

The four-horn continued using the one-horn's breath, but it simply couldn't hit him.

Though the light's power was the same, it covered a far smaller area than the original, making it harder to damage its enemy.

And although Sechs couldn't have known this, the Fatal Field had become weaker, as well — it could only instakill people below level 250, and only within a range of 100 metels. Since their UBM cores had yet to be restored, both the one-horn and the two-horn were now only as powerful as their parents.

Despite that, the four-horn was still a Mythical-tier creature that had the powers of two Ancient Legendaries. And yet, it couldn't hurt Sechs at all. In fact, he was actually thinking that he must be having the easiest time out of all of them.

He had it easier than Figaro, who'd faced Gloria's supreme battle potential; Tsukuyo, who'd fought Gloria's perfected power of certain death; and Shu, who was currently fighting the Gloria that had become an incarnation of pure power.

Thus, he knew that he couldn't lose.

“Shapeshift: Maschinen Kanone.” Sechs transformed his left hand into a gatling gun.

Though there were limiting conditions, Sechs could transform himself even into complex objects such as machines.

The bullets he fired didn't have as much power as the sword and were repelled by the scales. They couldn't break through the four-horn's defenses, but that didn't matter.

“...!?” The four-horn noticed that something strange was happening on its body.

The bullets it was supposed to have repelled had clung to it instead, slowly damaging the scales.

They had transformed into a black liquid — a slime.

Sechs' gatling gun was made out of his own flesh, and the same applied to the bullets.

They turned back to slime mid-flight and clung to the four-horn, continually damaging it.

"...!" The mouthless four-horn writhed as the two regenerated heads screeched in pain.

Sechs used this as an opening to approach Gloria, coming close enough to use something other than the whip-sword.

"Shapeshift: Richtig Arm of the King of Destruction." With the third Shapeshift, Sechs right arm became someone else's.

It was far more muscly than his own, and he used it to punch Gloria's body.

A moment later, Gloria bent as it received the greatest damage yet... while Sechs' right arm simply burst.

"Shu has so much STR that even my weak copy is enough to take out my arm when I use it," he said calmly, retrieving his splattered arm and restoring it to its full state.

Sword, gatling gun, and Shu Starling's right arm.

These were all created by a single skill — Shapeshift.

It was an active skill of his Superior Embryo, Nu.

With Shapeshift, the passive skill of "Liquid Lifeform," the ultimate skill, and one other, Nu only had four skills.

As its name suggested, Shapeshift let him transform his body. He mostly used it to alter his appearance, like he usually did with his human form, but its true power was far beyond that. It allowed him to gain the powers of people and even Embryos he'd transformed into.

Currently, Sechs' left arm was assuming the shape of Shu Starling's Embryo in its second form. Actual equipment and skills that came with them were off-limits for Shapeshift, but he could copy equipment-like Embryos.

"...!" Gloria attacked Sechs with a sideways sweep. Sechs countered it using the King of Destruction's right arm again, only for the dragon's attack to hit and shatter him whole.

However, he instantly reformed and became whole again.

This was the effect of the Liquid Lifeform passive skill, which granted him unparalleled powers of regeneration and almost totally negated physical attacks.

Shapeshift allowed him to freely transform and gain new abilities, Liquid Lifeform gave him supreme regeneration and physical attack negation, and then there was the King of Crime's ultimate — and only — job skill, World Record.

These three abilities combined gave him supreme defense as well as offense.

This was his basic fighting style.

As well-rounded as it was, however, Nu didn't come without disadvantages. It had a total of three.

The first was that Shapeshift's precision was connected to the level of whatever he was transforming into. He could only mimic something of the same level at about half the original's power; to make a perfect copy, he had to have at least double the target's level. The same was true with Embryos. He could only create perfect copies of Embryos in forms half as great as seven — forms three and below.

The second was that he couldn't use skills he didn't know the details of, even if he transformed. He simply could not incorporate those functions without the corresponding knowledge.

The third was *the lack of Resources*.

Both the well-rounded Shapeshift as well as the potent defensive ability that was Liquid Lifeform were powerful enough to be the sole abilities of an Embryo.

Thus, as an Embryo that had both, Nu was far weaker than other Embryos in a different way — the stat growth bonus it gave to its Master.

Nu was a true rarity in that it was an Embryo that actually gave *a negative growth bonus*, halving all of Sechs' stats.

Since Shapeshift cost SP, this also effectively limited how long he could transform.

In exchange for being able to become anyone, Sechs Würfel had received a great handicap in the form of a limit on his basic stats.

Though one of the reasons why the King of Crime was so feared was that *he'd already solved those three problems*.

"Kheheheh," Drag-Heaven chuckled.

"Oh? I heard laughter just now. What's so amusing?" Sechs asked.

"Oh, I am merely delighted by your friend's battle. I have not seen a fight like this since the time of the King of Kings and that era's Draconic Emperor."

"That makes me want to see it as well. Hm...?"

The battle against the reviving Gloria was still easy enough for Sechs to have a conversation with The Skydragon King, but then his expression changed.

Suddenly, he split his body into little pieces, and a moment later, countless threads of light filled the cave.

The limited-area Overdrive that had been released by the one-horn here was now split into hundreds of thin rays of light that danced throughout the cave.

The power and killing potential hadn't dropped one bit, but the number became greater than ever as it now melted everything in sight.

"This is..." Gloria was a monster capable of creating new skills, and that applied to the reviving four-horn, as well.

Faced with the powerful opponent that was Sechs, it created a skill that split its already smaller breath of light into smaller rays, greatly increasing its coverage.

It would be fitting to call it an "Area Overdrive," and it lapped at every corner of the cave, evaporating one-fifth of the scattered pieces of Sechs.

He lost HP and body mass, but once the Area Overdrive stopped, he gathered himself up into one place and restored himself before turning his arm into a gatling gun again and firing bits of himself at Gloria.

However, none of them reached it this time.

The pieces became particles of light that vanished before they could touch it.

This was due to the field around it, which was so dense you could actually *see* it.

It was the very same Fatal Field it had since the start, but it had been *compressed to a radius of merely 50 centimetres*.

Unlike its earlier form, this wasn't a power that could exterminate all life in a vast area, but a power that protected it by killing all creatures that came close.

This "Compressed Fatal Field" could easily kill even people above level 1,000, which was proven true by the fact that Sechs' bullets — parts of himself — could no longer reach it.

Additionally, the compression had made its defensive ability impenetrable. The standard Fatal Field couldn't have been compressed like this. Gloria's weakness during its revival process had made it possible.

Area Overdrive and Compressed Fatal Field.

It was safe to say that this Gloria had, in an amazingly brief time, developed skills that matched the ultimate abilities of the original one-horn and two-horn.

Normally, this would've been impossible, but there was a reason why it had happened.

The situation *was just that dire for Gloria*.

The cores of the three heads had yet to reform, and compared to what it could be, it was in a truly pitiful state. Additionally, it was facing the enigmatic and immeasurable King of Crime, with full understanding that it was merely backup and its destruction would be its ultimate end.

It had never experienced adversity like this, and in response to the threat against its life, Gloria's survival instincts had woven these two skills.

This version of Gloria had the weakest power output of all, but it excelled in innovation and had created a new fighting style.

"I can only assume you spread out the already-thin light into even thinner rays and expanded the range of creatures the field kills by

lowering its area of effect.” Sechs adjusted his glasses as instantly figured out and described Gloria’s abilities.

This was an exceedingly bad situation for Sechs.

He had no means of fighting that didn’t involve his own body, so the Compressed Fatal Field was his natural enemy, while the Area Overdrive would eventually evaporate his entire volume.

“I see. You certainly thought this through. Creativity and imagination truly are wonderful things. I’m particularly impressed with the change in the field — it’s akin to an imposing fortress that few can bring down.”

Sechs spoke as though impressed, seemingly not bothered that the tides had turned.

A smile then crossed his face...

“I can only assume that you want me to *destroy* you along with the field itself.”

...And asked that out loud, as if to get a confirmation.

“If that is the case, I’m happy to oblige. A friend of mine specializes in that style of fighting, you see.”

“...!?” The four-horn writhed, sensing an air of intimidation it couldn’t fully understand.

Sechs was certainly impressed and surprised by its new abilities, but he didn’t see them as any kind of a threat. It was as if he already had a way to counter it.

“Do you hear me, Sechs?” asked Drag-Heaven through the scale.

“Oh? Yes. What is it?” he asked in response.

“The conclusion to the battle is near.”

"I see. That is a problem," said Sechs, fully confident that Shu was the one who would emerge victorious.

That was how much he trusted Shu's power.

And once the original Gloria fell, this Gloria would grow the three-horn head, completing it and granting it the ability to grow stronger as its HP fell.

Thus, Sechs couldn't let this battle drag on any longer.

"Well, I have a means of dealing with the field, so I will end this with *that* me. Let me borrow a couple things from you, Shu."

Sechs' presence underwent another drastic change.

The four-horn felt as though the incomprehensible being before it was being replaced by something entirely different, without shedding its fearsome aura.

It was a presence of overwhelming power... comparable to an inland sea becoming as vast as an ocean.

"Heheheh..." Sechs lost his human form and returned to liquid.



Then, he grew in volume to the point that even this cave, which was over a hundred metels tall, seemed cramped.

Gloria continued to attack him with its Area Overdrive, but the speed at which he grew exceeded the speed at which it evaporated him, like he was transforming into something with immense amounts of HP.

Growing larger, Sechs changed not only his appearance, but also what he was on the inside...

"I Take Countless Forms — Nu: ■■■■■■■■■■■■■■."

...And the dark liquid took on a very particular shape.

Act Nine: Power and Power

Kingdom of Altar, Newest Canyon

Everything, eventually, must end.

The battle between Gloria and the people of the kingdom was no exception.

Whether that end would come in the far future or in mere moments depended upon two particular kings.

While Sechs was beneath the kingdom, fighting to stop Gloria's revival loop before it even began, Shu was giving his all battling the original Gloria here in this very canyon.

The battle had begun at the edge of the canyon, but it had now migrated closer to the center. This was because Shu, who was currently controlling machine god Baldr, wanted to hinder Gloria's supersonic approach towards the capital. Thus, just as with Figaro and Tsukuyo, the battle between the kingdom's Superiors and Gloria was still confined to that canyon.

But if anyone was watching this battle, they would all certainly think that by the time it ended, Newest Canyon would be no more.

◇◆

"Hyper Blow, set," Baldr's inhuman voice announced as the machine god prepared to swing his right arm.

In response to this blatant preparation for an attack, Gloria went on the offensive with both of its front limbs.

However, Shu controlled Baldr as if it was his own body, turning the dragon's strikes aside and directing the attack harmlessly away.

Gloria's forelimbs slammed directly into the canyon's cliff face, leaving a crater with a radius of over a hundred metels and collapsing the canyon's wall.

The miss left Gloria wide open, so Baldr...

"Battering Ram!"

...Launched an active skill from the Crasher grouping straight into the monster's side.

Battering Ram required a charge time, but in return it multiplied blunt damage by six. The immense amount of damage dealt knocked the giant dragon to the opposite cliff face.

The impact caused even more damage to their surroundings.

Despite receiving nearly one million HP's worth of damage, however, Gloria recovered immediately, broke out of the rubble, and sped towards Baldr.

"Tch!" The machine god sidestepped the charge and as Gloria passed him, the fingers of his left hand — all gunports — fired his few remaining DD Shells into the dragon.

At the same time, he began charging a skill attack with his right leg.

Most of the active skills from the Crasher grouping, like Battering Ram, had to be charged, and this one was no exception. This made them impossible to use consecutively, and often left the user wide open in battle. That was one of the reasons why the Crasher grouping was thought to be an anti-object job series, unsuitable for fighting.

However, Shu — and thus Baldr — was capable of controlling the flow of battle in a way that let him avoid enemy attacks and buy himself the necessary time for these skills.

“Crag Scraper... SHINEN!” Using a skill that increased both standard and penetrative power, the machine god launched his left ankle into Gloria’s neck.

His strike broke through scales, tore through flesh, and shattered bone. Gloria staggered so much it seemed like it might collapse, and — in a show of relentlessness — Shu then began charging yet another skill.

“GHOoOoAaaAAaRrghHH!” But before Shu could do that, Gloria jumped using one hind limb to launch into a charge that combined its weight and physical power. It was so fast that the machine god wasn’t able to react in time, and the force even he couldn’t withstand opened a large crack in his armor.

“I knew it... Its highest stat is its attack,” Shu said. “It’s sped up, too... But it looks like the thing’s stats are too much even for it to deal with.”

Despite the desperate situation, he calmly analyzed his opponent. He had been making optimal moves thus far, but that would soon stop being an option.

Under normal circumstances, he would’ve prioritized the faster, weaker normal attacks over the slow but powerful skill attacks. For this battle, however, he abandoned that strategy shortly after the battle began and now focused solely on avoiding Gloria’s attacks, retaliating only with skills.

The reason for this was simple — Gloria’s END had already surpassed the machine god’s STR by a whole 30,000.

Only his skills could deal any kind of damage to it.

This outcome was inevitable. While Baldr’s stats were at their maximum the moment the battle began, Gloria was still growing stronger. As its HP dropped, its Resurgence skill increased its stats, meaning that its limit wasn’t in the past or present, but in the future.

Thus, it was only a matter of time until Baldr's attacks would no longer work on it at all.

Even Gloria's speed, which was equal to the machine god's at first, had now increased to the point that it was nearly twice as fast. Considering that, the actual outstanding thing here was Shu's battle prowess, which let him fight it as an equal despite the widening gap.

That, however, would not last.

This latest exchange of blows had already exposed Baldr's... the *machine's* weakness.

Machines couldn't recover HP via magic or items. That was the common flaw of Dryfe's Magingears, and it applied to this weapon-like Embryo as well. Thus, Shu had no means of fixing Baldr's armor or preventing the deterioration of the engines mid-battle.

Gloria's HP didn't return, either, of course, but its wounds had all been closed. Even its destroyed neck had completely regrown.

"Hah. Man, this regeneration is broken," said Shu. "Though, I guess it's allowed because the HP itself doesn't come back. It's basically just for structural integrity."

The ultimate dragon was always at its best and only became better, while the machine god had nowhere to go but down.

The gap would only grow wider as the battle went on.

Despite that, Shu's eyes held not a hint of despair as he took up a stance within Baldr's head.

"...Grrh," Gloria growled, glaring at Baldr with eyes that said, "You've still got an ace up your sleeve, don't you?"

In a canyon that hardly deserved the name anymore, the machine god and the greatest of dragons faced one another. They both

understood that their next exchange of blows would decide the course of this battle.

“Baldr, how many shells we got in the cannons?”

“Three in the right, zero in the left.”

“Connect the left one to the ammo storage.”

“Roger.” As he gave the order to Baldr, Shu took up his stance.

It was strange — he was pulling both his arms back in such a way that both his elbows ended up at his sides.

With both him and Baldr in that position, he wouldn’t be able to reliably block any enemy attacks, nor put enough torque into his own. It was a highly unreasonable stance for a martial artist to take.

However, Gloria knew nothing of martial arts, so it was only able to sense that *it was a sign of something terrifying*.

It knew that its enemy’s most powerful attack yet would be launched from that stance.

At the same time, it could see exactly how the attack would go. Even if it was in the path of that assault, it could easily avoid it.

Shu himself was aware of that, as well.

And for that exact reason...

“Stardust Genocider... Fire!”

“Roger.” The armor on the machine god’s shoulders slid open and launched countless missiles.

Gloria was so close that even Baldr was affected by them. However, these weren’t damaging missiles, but the F Warheads employed earlier — the blinding flash bombs.

A moment later, their surroundings were drowned in light, and Gloria couldn't see anything — including the machine god that was ready to launch his final attack.

It was clear that he was intending to finish Gloria off while it was blinded.

“Ghrrhh...” the dragon growled in disappointment, as if saying, “How foolish.”

After all, Gloria had already closed its eyes and dashed behind the machine god.

The dragon had expected this from the moment the missiles were launched. Thus, Shu's final attack would miss, and Gloria would finish him off.

Certain of that outcome, it swung its front claws at the machine.

“...GHHR!?” But then, although unable to see, Gloria nonetheless sensed that the machine god had turned around and was now facing it.

Shu had expected that the dragon would move behind him if it was blinded.

“Final Blow...” He undid the seal on this skill.

The King of Destruction had no equal when it came to sheer destructive force, and this was the ultimate attack that could only be used by a few of those who'd acquired the job.

It was a supreme power that could only be achieved by KoDs that had 70,000 or more STR.

Bear witness to the strike that shatters realms.

“World Breaker.”

He punched with both arms simultaneously, aiming straight for Gloria's abdomen, and when the pure carnage of both punches met, a calamity was born.

The machine god's fists *broke space itself*.

The Right of Destruction skill, which allowed him to destroy indestructible targets with endurance lower than his attack power, wasn't limited to solid targets with resistances and damage negation — it also worked on liquids, gasses, and even barrier abilities.

Combined with World Breaker, it allowed the King of Destruction to destroy even the very *space* supporting this world.

However, it didn't stop there. To fill the void created when the very universe was broken along with Gloria's body, the surrounding space began to contort.

The distortions caused by the world trying to patch up the hole in itself tore any object to shreds, regardless of how tough they were.

Gloria — the living being with the greatest END of all — was no exception.

Even the machine god that had initiated this distortion was being broken apart by it.

It was a "final" blow, after all — it was only natural that it would destroy the user, as well.

The other Kings of Destruction who had used it in the past had all died from it, after all.

Space bent as it healed itself, tearing up the strongest dragon and the machine god alike.

And by the time space had completely restored itself, only one of the two was left standing...

"Ghr, oargh..."

...And it was Gloria.

There was a large hole in its torso, cracks all over its body, and its HP had fallen below a measly 100,000.

Even so, it was alive, while the machine god was gone.

The machine god had seemingly shattered and vanished without a trace in the wake of its spatial destruction. But even though it came at the cost of its own annihilation, the machine god's final attack wasn't enough to defeat Gloria.

"..." Even if it was able to speak, Gloria wouldn't know what to say. It had realized that a single mistake, or just one more attack, would now be enough to banish it from the earth.

This was a pyrrhic victory, and the end of a battle it would never be able to forget.

Even this memory would eventually vanish once it died. Gloria's backup would not possess the memories of the battles this Gloria had experienced today.

The dragon also realized that it wouldn't last long as it was.

It had taken too much damage. Even a large group using fixed damage attacks would be able to overwhelm it now.

"Ghraahh..." But... there was still something it had to do.

It had to obey the two missions carved into its very being and destroy the royal capital.

Now that it was so close to death, Gloria's stats had grown so much that it was foolish to even measure them.

In less than a minute, it could reach the capital and level it to the ground with a single blow.

Once that was done, it would be free.

The first thing it would do then was go to The Skycrown and destroy The Skydragon King.

Letting its wounds close, Gloria imagined that future, when suddenly...

"Bit too early to start fantasizing about retirement, ya overgrown lizard."

...It heard a voice that shook it to the core.

It could recognize that voice anywhere by now. This was the same voice it had heard from the machine god — the voice of King of Destruction, Shu Starling.

However, the machine god was nowhere in sight, so where could it be coming fr—?

"...!" Gloria suddenly made a profound realization. It began to come to a realization that it would have rather not ever contemplated.

The enemy was...

"No matter how damn fast you are... There's no way in hell I can miss you from *here*."

...Inside the wound that had just closed.

Gloria didn't know when, exactly, he had been able to get there.

It couldn't know that it had been right after he'd used World Breaker.

It couldn't know that right after using it, he'd left the cockpit, used the ammo storage to enter an empty cannon barrel — or rather, finger — on the left arm, and gotten inside the dragon using that.

And it couldn't possibly know that he'd acted as he did because he'd anticipated that everything would play out exactly like this before he had even activated World Breaker.

“Cough...” Of course, Shu wasn’t exactly unscathed. Passing through the shattering space left him covered in heavy wounds.

Despite that, he had arrived at his destination — the inside of the dragon. And though the machine god had vanished, his Embryo hadn’t — it had become a cannon fixed on his left arm.

That was the first form of the War God Ship, Baldr, and the only weapon that could defeat Gloria as it was now.

Baldr was an Embryo that had “power” and “weapons” as its core characteristics, and the power of its first form was simply called “Strength Cannon.”

It was a deadly, once-a-day ability that released a destructive ball of light which dealt multiples of Shu’s STR’s worth in damage.

Specifically, it multiplied his STR by 5... back when it had first hatched, anyway.

Now that it was a Superior Embryo, it actually did *35 times* Shu’s STR’s worth of damage, and his STR was currently over 100,000.

An attack that dealt an obscene 3,500,000 damage was too much even for Gloria’s current END.

There was a reason why Shu hadn’t used a skill this powerful right away — *it was simply far too slow*.

So slow, in fact, that even someone moving at subsonic speeds could easily avoid it. It could never hit a being that had surpassed the speed of sound several times over.

However, the current circumstances made that impossible, for nothing could evade an attack from within.

Baldr was covered in cracks — the effects of the damage it had sustained as the machine god — but it was still able to launch this one final attack.

It would end this once and for all.

“GyYyYYGhHhhhHAAaAAAaaARrgghHHhh!” Feeling the waves of power gathering within its body, Gloria swung its claw towards itself to crush Shu... *only to stop midway*.

The reason why should be obvious.

Gloria’s HP was so low it was truly on the verge of death, so *attacking Shu within itself would be fatal*.

Shu had anticipated what would happen if World Breaker wasn’t enough to defeat Gloria. He knew how high its stats would climb and just how much the gap between his offense and Gloria’s defense would widen.

Gloria could recover from any injury, but that only applied to its physical form. Its lifeforce — its HP — stayed low, and it was still technically on the verge of death. Gloria was now so fragile that its own power, having grown as it had, could easily kill it. And if it wanted to kill Shu, Gloria had to attack with enough force to break through its own defense. It had to somehow shatter its own defense and kill Shu without accidentally killing itself, and Shu knew that it had grown far too powerful in far too short a time to have the precision necessary.

Basically... Gloria had become *too strong, too quickly*. That was why Shu chose to end their battle like this — by either his Strength Cannon, or Gloria’s own hand.

Regardless of which it would be, Gloria was done for.

If you were to identify the one factor that had most influenced this outcome, it would have to have been Gloria’s awareness of this turn of events — or lack of it.

The dragon had only realized its predicament moments before ending itself.

Knowing that its fate was sealed, it wanted to at least take Shu with it, but its brief pause had already made that impossible.

“Let’s... end this.” A split-second before the claw crushed Shu, he fired the ball of light.



The deadly orb hit its target the moment it was fired, and instantly wiped out Gloria's remaining HP.

The three-horned head, the upper body it was connected to... its entire structure vanished as if it was never there.

The claw that was about to crush Shu was gone, as well.

A moment after the dragon vanished, the particles of light left behind almost seemed to be a giant pillar reaching towards the sky.

Thus concluded the sequence of battles against a living calamity... and the demise of the SUBM known as "Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria."

Interlude: The Past Becomes the Present Becomes the Future

Remnants of Newest Canyon

[SUBM, Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria, has been defeated.]

[Selecting MVPs...]

[Figaro, Tsukuyo Fuso, Shu Starling...]

The message rang out immediately when Shu defeated Gloria, but those who actually heard it were few, for it was exclusive to those MVP candidates and their party members.

Figaro and Tsukuyo were already gone. Shu, meanwhile...

“...” He had Fainted and was now falling from the sky.

There was nothing surprising about him being unconscious. In fact, it was incredible that he had stayed awake for as long as he had. Fighting against a dragon with such absurd stats was draining both physically and mentally. Furthermore, he'd been badly damaged while running through the space-destruction near the end of the battle.

He might have had the will to stay awake, but his body was inflicted with Unconscious due to Blood Loss and other injuries.

The moment Gloria vanished, Shu's body began to fall through the air.

Injured as he was and unable to make a proper landing, he was in danger of actually dying upon hitting the ground.

However, that did not occur.

A moment before impact, Shu's body began to slow and landed softly on the ground, as if it was a bed.

The person — no, *being* — responsible for this silently looked down on Shu. This entity had the appearance of a woman covered by a thin, egg-like shell.

It was none other than control AI no. 2, Humpty Dumpty.

She examined Shu's face with an expression that was impossible to read.

"This makes us even after purposely leaving you out earlier."

She was referring to the fact that they'd specifically chosen to deploy Gloria while Shu was away from the kingdom. Shu himself had pointed this out, and Humpty did feel that it was a little unfair. Thus, she had chosen to make things even by saving Shu from a death penalty. She knew that she would be the only one aware of this gesture, but that didn't bother her much.

"...Oh?" she said, noticing something nearby. "You came, too, Dormouse?"

A giant hamster was lumbering towards her with its eyes closed. This was Dor, the third princess' — Theresia's — pet. Though, his status as Theresia's pet was more like a disguise than anything else.

He was actually control AI no. 8.

"Theresia ordered me to," Dor replied to Humpty in a deep voice you'd never expect from a creature who looked like he did. "If Shu is alive and unable to move, I'm to bring him to the castle before anyone else finds him."

"That has nothing to do with what you're in charge of, does it?"

"Hey now — as avatars, Alice and just about everyone else more or less does whatever they want. I'm merely enjoying the simple life of a pet, myself. It's a kind of freedom. Though, I don't think I like what Rabbit does."

"What can you do? He has an awful personality. You might as well think of him as no different than that ill-natured Jabberwock or that unsociable Bandersnatch."

"Hahahah. You're one to talk, you big meanie. I've always thought that you were like a little girl who bullies the boy she lik—"

"I will *crush* you," Humpty cut Dor off, glaring at him.

"Sorry, sorry. Please spare me," the hamster apologized with a wry grin on his face.

"...All right," Humpty calmed down. "So I can leave him to you?"

"Mhm. You can. I'm actually used to carrying people around."

"It really does look like you're enjoying your life as a pet." Humpty appreciated this. The kingdom and its Masters should've realized that the battle was over, so they would soon be heading here to investigate. Humpty had been wondering what to do with Shu when that happened, so this was actually a great help to her.

"Do what you have to, then," she said.

"Mhm," Dor nodded before putting Shu on his back and running off.

After watching him disappear in the distance, Humpty vanished.

With that, the shattered canyon was left absolutely vacant — to the immense confusion of those who came to investigate.

◇

For a brief while, the question of who, exactly, had defeated Gloria dominated people's minds, but all that ended once Figaro and Tsukuyo returned from their death penalties with special rewards bearing the dragon's name.

They testified that the King of Destruction had been on the battlefield, as well, making it well known that Gloria had been slain by Altar's three Superiors.

Since then, as the three top ranking players and the ones who'd conquered the three heads of Gloria, they became known as "Altar's Big Three."

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Kingdom of Altar, underground cave

[SUBM, Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria, has been defeated.]

[Selecting MVPs...]

[Figaro, Tsukuyo Fuso, Shu Starling, Sechs Würfel have been selected as MVPs.]

[Sechs Würfel is presented with "Organ of Rebirth, Gloria δ."]

"...Oh, it looks like Shu also won," Sechs spoke, his voice echoing throughout the cave. He had just finished his fight against the four-horn, which was now completely gone from this place.

However, Sechs wasn't anywhere in sight, either.

He could be heard, but his preferred shape was nowhere to be seen, nor was any of his slime.

"Even I was in extreme danger of dying, yet Shu was able to defeat the third head with all its amazing stats. I would expect no less of you, Shu."

A gigantic, black humanoid figure stood in the underground cavern.

The entity seemed entirely made of some dark metal and, as though just now realizing that the battle was over, it began to shrink until it once again took on the appearance of a plain young man — Sechs.

"So, Skydragon King... I completed the task," he said.

"Kheheheh. Well done, Sechs," said Drag-Heaven. "I will prepare your reward. Is there anything you want? If it is the head of a dragon king that you wish, I can find one for you among those serving me."

“No. I’ll leave the decision up to you. There’s nothing I really want right now.”

“I see. Then I shall think of something myself.”

“Oh, and this has nothing to do with the reward, but may I ask you something?”

“What is it?”

“Did Shu get the death penalty after defeating Gloria?”

“No. He survived. However, he seems to have Fainted.”

“I see. Thank you.”

“Oh, I should be the one thanking you. It was quite a spectacle to behold.”

“I can imagine.”

“Looking forward to your reward.” Thus, The Skydragon King cut off their conversation through the undead scale.

Left alone, Sechs considered what he just learned.

“Perhaps Shu doesn’t know that I helped defeat Gloria. And if he stays Unconscious long enough for the message log to vanish... Oh, speaking of which, what kind of reward did I get?”

Sechs finally decided to take a look at his Gloria δ. It was an egg-shaped accessory, and its effect...

“Hm? But... What am I supposed to do with this?”

...Was something that left Sechs perplexed, which was quite a rare occurrence.

“What it does is wonderful, yes, but it doesn’t mean much to me... I’ll have to discuss it with Rascal.”

Puzzled by the treasure's effect, Sechs decided he ought to talk it over with a fellow wanted Superior: The Weapon, Rascal the Bloodonyx. Known as the "Ruin-Killer," Rascal had a wealth of knowledge about many kinds of items and could likely think of a way to use this special reward.

"Time to flee the scene," Sechs said, returning Gloria δ to his inventory and transforming back into a slime. He then entered a crack in the cave and made his way to the surface.

Nothing was left in this cavern underneath the Kingdom of Altar. Few would ever know that Gloria had a backup, or that the new menace had been consigned to the darkness by an even greater menace.

It would take more than a year for the world to learn that this battle even happened. Around that time, the world would also finally learn just how terrible Sechs Würfel's reward truly was.

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Gideon the City of Duels, Central Arena

The location was on the Central Arena — a building that looked much like the Colosseum in Rome.

Few people could even access this place. Figaro, having returned from his death penalty, was lying there and looking up at the sky. There were a few clouds above, and he followed them with his eyes as though searching for something.

"Yo, Figaro. You're here agaiin?"

Just like he did on that day some time ago, Tom Cat called out to him. With his Embryo, Grimalkin, sitting on his head, Tom crouched down and looked into Figaro's eyes.

"What's wrong?" Tom asked. "It looks like something's troubling you again."

“Shulka came by,” Figaro replied.

“Shulka... Oh, the guy from the Babylonian Battlegroup.”

“He said he’s giving up being the sub-leader and going on a journey.”

Shulka, the sub-leader of the Babylonian Battlegroup, had come to Gideon to thank Figaro for defeating Gloria and say his goodbyes.

According to him, the Babylonian Battlegroup would cease their activities. With the leader — Foltesla — having retired, and Claymill — their hometown — in ruins, the clan was having a hard time carrying on as normal.

“He said he wouldn’t be a good leader, and that it was hard for him to even stay in the Babylonian Battlegroup. That’s why he left the sub-leader’s seat up to the other members, so they could at least keep the clan alive.”

Shulka himself had decided to leave the kingdom and go visit the other countries. He’d told Figaro that he simply had too many memories here. It was up to the other members to make sure the clan continued to exist, and the main man behind that was Masked Riser — a fellow ranker.

Riser insisted that he would only be holding down the fort and waiting for Foltesla and Shulka’s return, all the while protecting Gideon the way he couldn’t protect Claymill.

Upon hearing all that, Figaro asked Shulka, “If Foltesla returns someday, will you come back, too?”

To which Figaro had replied, “I hope that happens.”

“Oh, so that’s the reason...” Tom said. “I was wondering why a bunch of other rankers from the Babylonian Battlegroup were gone... It’s gonna be lonely.”

“Yeah.” They looked at the ranking board in front of the arena and thought about the ones who were now gone. Because he hadn’t

officially withdrawn, Foltesla's name was still there, but it would soon disappear from the rankings as he kept failing to appear and forfeited all his duels.

"But I'll stay. Always," Figaro spoke what he'd decided. "I'll remain champion until the day Foltesla returns."

"Yeah. I think that's what you should do, too."

The champion and the second in the ranks didn't say anything more. Under the flowing, amorphous clouds, Figaro looked at the names on the ranking and resolved to wait.

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Tomb Labyrinth

"I thought leveling would be easier, but it's unexpectedly haaaard."

High Priestess... no... the mere Priest, Tsukuyo Fuso was leveling alongside her secretary, Eishiro.

They'd chosen the Tomb Labyrinth because regaining the sheer number of levels — over a thousand — that Tsukuyo had lost required killing so many monsters that it would affect the ecosystem. Tsukuyo's Kaguya and Eishiro's Erlkönig were a combo that made the hunt easy, but doing it outside could potentially lead to several extinctions.

That problem didn't exist inside created dungeons like the Tomb Labyrinth, since there was no ecosystem and the monsters simply respawned.

There were, however, other problems.

"And using Kaguya's skills takes so much of my MP and SP. I can't keep them uuup."

Tsukuyo's level was low, and so were her stats.

As an Embryo, Kaguya was both a Maiden and a Type Invasion World from the Territory series. Unlike Guardians and the like, Kaguya used Tsukuyo's MP and SP for skills. Of course, being a Maiden, Kaguya also had her own stats, but her low MP only allowed her to use skills briefly — as she had demonstrated in the final battle against the two-horn.

And with Tsukuyo's current stats, she could barely use any of her Superior Embryo's skills right now.

If she could use her Lunar Divider Field and have Tsukikage finish them off, she would receive huge amounts of XP from her contributions to the battle, but even that was difficult right now.

"At this rate, it might take me more than a year to level back up," Tsukuyo sighed.

She didn't regret using the skill, but she wasn't prepared for the rehabilitation to be this long. "If only *this* could also be used on monsters..." she said, taking out a wand decorated with an eye.

It was the Superior special reward from the two-horn: Fatal Eye, Gloria β.

"It only works on humanoids level 100 and below... That's super weak compared to Gloria's head... But at least it completely protects me from attacks outside the field." It was worth noting that if the wand worked on monsters, she could use it in conjunction with Faint Light to instakill even UBMs. "What a hard nerf," she complained.

It was also possible that, due to the power limits of the special reward, its Resources went into recreating the defense effect first, and the instakill effect with whatever was left.

"Ah. But with this, I'm really safe now. You're unbeatable at mid-range, so no one gets close when you're protecting me; between Kaguya's night and Erlkönig's shadows, my defense is now perfect."

“Indeed,” Eishiro agreed. “You are safe as long as no one faster than me closes in on you and uses something like... I don’t know, maybe a breath of light that banishes all night and shadow, or something like that.”

“That example is disturbingly specific...” Chatting about this and that, the two continued Tsukuyo’s rehabilitative grinding for quite a while.

Side note: a little over a year later, Tsukuyo Fuso would be defeated by Figaro in the exact same manner Eishiro described.



The outskirts of the imperial capital, Triangle of Wisdom headquarters

“Yeah, you can’t read its stats at all. I really hate that all the scout monsters I sent out died within one kilometel of it. And even if you ignore that...”

In the headquarters of Dryfe Imperium’s largest clan — Triangle of Wisdom — the leader, Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin, was watching recordings and pondering.

The recordings were of the battle against Gloria at Claymill.

“I had some scout monsters accompany the armored battalion to figure out how powerful the kingdom was, and I did get *some* data out of it, but it’s, well...” Most of the recordings were cut off after a wave of white light. The monsters, just like the battalion, were evaporated by Gloria’s Overdrive.

The other recordings were those taken by the Babylonian Battlegroup and presented to DIN to ensure their spread and assist anyone trying to defeat Gloria.

“Hmm... Well, there’s still a few things I managed to deduce from those recordings.” Tapping his notes and desk with the pen in his

hand, Franklin continued talking to himself as if to properly arrange his analysis.

“That thing doesn’t have high base stats. I think even His Excellency’s unbuffed Zero Exceed has higher everything, except HP. What makes it such a problem is all the powerful skills it has, one of which *does* increase its stats.”

Writing something down, he continued to consider the dragon.

“Looking at how much the abilities vary and how great their output is, I’m guessing it has several sources of power as a UBM. I haven’t seen one like it myself, but there’s records of such a UBM appearing in The Era of the Peerless Three, so it shouldn’t be impossible.”

Six hundred years ago in *Infinite Dendrogram* time was The Era of the Peerless Three, when King of Kings, Draconic Emperor, and The Lynx battled for dominance. Records spoke of an absurdly powerful UBM with various abilities appearing in this era, and Franklin believed it to be the same kind of creature as Gloria.

“Could... Could I do something similar? Maybe not something quite that insane, but as I add more and more parts... I could give it as much as possible... In that case, I should give up on using a pure animal base and instead make a hybrid with machine attachments and the like right from the start... Yeah, that sounds good. Let’s go with this plan. For that, I’m going to need...”

Muttering to himself, Franklin left a memo on his note.

Suddenly...

“Heya Fran, whacha doin’? Rubby-rub!.”

“Hyahn?!”

...Someone called out to him and began fondling his chest, making him yelp.

Of course, Franklin's avatar was male, so there wasn't much to fondle.

"AR-I-CA..." Franklin wrung out each syllable as he glared at the person responsible.

It was a woman with heterochromia... specifically, one artificial eye... Ace, AR-I-CA. She was a member of The Triangle of Wisdom and a good friend of Franklin.

"I did knock, y'know?" she said. "You didn't reply and just kept muttering to yourself, so I just up and did that!"

"You don't just just 'up and do' that! Ugh..." Now that he was alone with a close friend, Franklin's tone changed. He was talking more like his player, Francesca.

"So, whuzzat? Somethin' to do with the unit for the singing engine ya made?"

"It's something different. The unit will be done in about a month."

"Oh, okay. I guess I'll save it for after I see it."

"Hm?" Franklin tilted his head. He didn't understand what AR-I-CA meant by that.

"So, what idea're ya writing down now?" she asked.

Leaving his own question aside, he just answered, "That over there is a recording of the SUBM that attacked the kingdom. I was wondering if I could use it as a reference for my own monsters."

"Oh yeah. Your Embryo feels like it comes from a different game."

"...I can't deny that. And yeah, I might have to use Pandemonium for this. But..."

"But what?"

“It probably doesn’t have enough output yet. I can’t get the abilities I want while it’s still in its sixth form.”

At this point in time, Franklin’s Embryo was still just a high-rank. A non-Superior Embryo was unlikely to create a monster that would meet his standards.

“Then why not just make it once you’re a Superior?”

“You say it like that’s *easy*... But yeah, I suppose I don’t have a choice.”

“For now, just put it on your list of monsters you’ll make someday and think of a name for it.”

“A name, huh? It would involve machines... Add a powerful-sounding word to that... Yeah, and also...” Franklin spent a few moments thinking before saying, “How about... ‘Mechanical God Dylan?’” It was a mix of term for its main trait, a word for the extent of its power, and the name of a pet Francesca had once had.

“That’s cool! By the way, Fran — you’re from France, aren’t you? Why do you always make English names?”

“...Because you said that you don’t understand them at all when I make them French.”

“Ahahah? I did?” AR-I-CA laughed awkwardly as Franklin stared at her. His eyes were annoyed, but his mouth was curled into a smile.

This all happened half a year before the war between Altar and Dryfe, and a little while before AR-I-CA left Franklin’s side.



Royal Capital, Altea, noble district

An old residence stood in Altea’s noble district.

An ordinary passerby would only see a building that could be perhaps centuries old, but those skilled in magic would notice that it

was covered by layer upon layer of spells that prevented any intrusion.

It was the residence of perhaps the kingdom's most distinguished person, the Arch Sage.

At the moment, the place was completely sealed. The windows were shut tight and covered by thick curtains. Once the matter of Gloria was solved, the Arch Sage vowed that he would mourn his lost apprentices and locked himself in his residence. He'd stopped visiting the castle, but those who knew the circumstances figured that even the Arch sage had to rest sometimes and thought little of it.

However, right now the Arch Sage was neither mourning nor resting. In fact, he was probably working harder than he had in a long while.

"Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria... It was a terrifying creature, but to the incarnations, it was nothing but another pawn. Those monsters..."

In the basement of his manor, the Arch Sage muttered this to himself before resuming his work.

One might think that, as a powerful caster, he was working on something magical, but that assumption would be wrong. He was actually working on machines — something that was more typical of the neighboring country's engineers. Even though he was doing something that didn't suit the image of "Arch Sage" whatsoever, he did it with a proficiency that rivaled even the greatest masters of the craft.

"There's also the few Superiors who slew the dragon," he spoke to himself again. "Superiors and incarnations... not even a fully complete No. 1 could win if it had to fight them all."

He input some data into a device, which went through the process of sending it off somewhere.

“...But thanks to this incident, I discovered that, even though the incarnations observe the Superiors, they don’t control them.” Masters were free to do what they wanted, and not even the incarnations — control AIs — that the Arch Sage viewed as his enemies could restrain them.

“Things would be different if I could get a Superior on my side,” he muttered. “I wonder if there are any skilled Superiors who are hostile to the incarnations...”

After thinking on it for a moment, the Arch Sage chuckled wryly.

“...Heh. As if things would ever be that convenient.”

Resigned, he resumed his work. The device he was working on displayed the code “Anti-Incarnation Superweapon, Argus Magna.”

“No matter. I will achieve my goal... Fulfill my dying wish.”

His words were wrung out through his teeth, carried with the heat of boiling blood.

“We... The Arch Sage... We, the Flagman, will surely... destroy the incarnations and those who side with them.” The man who’d built the prosperous pre-ancient civilization, destroyed by the incarnations two millennia ago, voiced his resolve once more.



Gaol

News of Gloria’s defeat became a hot topic even in the gaol.

Though they were stuck in their cells, many were curious about what was going on outside. It was especially hard to miss these news due to the fact that the local celebrity, King of Berserk, Hannya, was walking around all smiles and broadcasting the involvement of her beloved Figaro to all who heard.

“But man, that’s huge. I wonder what kinda rewards The Big Three got.”

“Aw, man... I was from the kingdom, too. If I was still outside, I could’ve become an MVP...”

“...You’re barely over level 200. You couldn’t have done shit.”

The gaol’s Masters chatted as they watched a recording of the battle against Gloria. It was something like watching a fire on a far-off island, and they were treating it as a kind of festive occasion.

The mood was upbeat, but then...

“Help! Help...!”

...A Master ran down the main road, shouting.

Those around him understood the problem the moment they saw him.

They couldn’t see his right arm.

Infinite Dendrogram players could choose between realistic, CG, and anime graphics; all three options always worked perfectly in all circumstances.

However, the man’s right arm looked like sequenced ones and zeroes mixed with static. It wasn’t limited to his arm, either. The noise was spreading further, breaking up his avatar as it did.

Upon seeing that, the other Masters instantly understood what happened.

“Help! What the hell’s this?! My avatar and stats are a mess! Even my name looks wrong!” the man panicked

“You’re new here, right?” an onlooker asked. “Didn’t anyone tell ya not to go to *that dungeon* when ya first came here?”

“I-I thought they were hiding some juicy XP fodder...”

"You dumbass. 'Don't enter that dungeon,' 'don't talk shit about Figaro,' and 'don't flirt in public' are actual warnings ya gotta listen to!"

"H-How was I supposed to...?! C-Can anyone do something about this?" the man cried, displaying his deteriorating right arm.

The one he was talking to shook his head, "Give up. You get hit by his skill, you're basically done for. Hell, you should go try and get the death penalty *before it's too late.*"

"Eh? What do you—?" A moment later, someone behind the man cut off his head, killing him instantly. The Master responsible didn't do it just for enjoyment. In fact, he felt like he had helped or even saved his target.

"...Did I make it in time?"

"It'll be fine. The area isn't glitching yet, so it probably wasn't bad enough to leave any *after-effects*. The newcomer's level and Embryo's form must've been pretty high."

"Last time, we managed 'cause Hannya crushed the whole block along with the guy, but that can be pretty hard without her around."

"If we don't get more Superiors like Hannya, who are reasonable at least most of the time, we might be unable to hold them back."

"...Fu'uta, huh? How can a Master like that even exist...?"

The gathered Masters frowned bitterly and looked outside the residential area... in the direction of a certain dungeon.

Or, to be more precise, to the direction of a Master who was simply a walking disaster.



Currently, there were two Superiors in the gaol.

One was King of Berserk, Hannya. As long as you adhered to certain taboos, she was a reasonable person, and most of the gaol's inhabitants liked her a lot.

The other Superior was always in a certain dungeon.

At the moment, two people were standing next to each other.

One was a young boy, approximately ten years of age. He was wearing ragged *starting equipment* and sitting on the cave floor with his head resting on his knees.

The other person, standing next to the boy, was a man wearing a hood and a completely featureless mask, lacking even eye holes. He was standing there as though protecting the boy, not saying a single word.

“Another player arrived...” The boy silently muttered while remembering what just happened. “He was smiling, enjoying himself as he walked...” As he thought of that, he bit his lip so hard he drew blood.

“What the hell is so fun to him...?!” Unable to hold himself back, the boy punched a wall.

His frail arm did nothing besides shake off some dust.

But then, the wall changed. Ones and zeroes danced across it and static spread through the stone; finally, it transformed into a monster that was essentially nothing more than a wall with eyes and a mouth.

It was a strange monster, though. Its graphics were quite crude, didn't really fit in with the appearance of *Infinite Dendrogram*'s creatures. Perhaps it was a strange thing to think about something within this world, but it looked like a monster *out of a game*.

“I’ll break this game, no matter what...” Not minding the fact that his attack had turned the wall into a monster, the boy continued spitting out his curses.

“I’ll destroy this world if it’s the last thing I do...” With all the hatred he could muster, he spoke to the empty space... to the very world itself.

“No matter what...” There was murderous intent in his eyes.

He glared at the world with the kind of hatred one might normally reserve for the man who murdered one’s parents.

He was Fu’uta, the Astray Glitch.

At the edge of the gaol, the *level 0 Superior* without a single job, continued to sharpen his fangs. His Apostle Embryo — The Encroaching Demise, Apocalypse — stood by his side.



Control AI no. 4’s workspace, vault no. 4

Jabberwock wordlessly walked through a hallway of a strange material.

This was vault no. 4 — the UBM storage vault managed by control AI no. 4, Jabberwock.

Just recently, he’d watched the demise of Gloria — which was perhaps his greatest masterpiece. The original had achieved the highest recorded stats, while its vessel for rebirth had almost opened up entirely new horizons. And yet, they had both been defeated by Superiors.

At that moment, the control AIs felt nothing but relief.

Queen did give Jabberwock a considerate look, but he didn’t seem to pay attention to it. He’d released Gloria with the goal of creating more Superiors, and the fact that it had been defeated before it

could do that even once meant several things to him. First, that the current Superiors were more powerful than he had expected, and second, that he had effectively wasted his trump card, and what was more, he'd lost his *teaching material*.

Considering the various drawbacks, Jabberwock continued to walk through the vault.

On each side of the hallway, there were several giant objects that looked much like battleship docks. They were labeled in various ways, but with one key similarity.

Tetra-Beast of Creation, Suling.

Penta-Phased Destroyer, Horobimaru.

Hexa-Portal Unsealed, Gate of Six.

Seven-Star Command, Elemental Order.

They were the SUBMs that would eventually descend upon the continent and cause immense destruction.

Jabberwock, however, didn't stop in front of any of them. He only kept moving forward until he came to a particularly well-sealed... coffin.

"Gloria lost." Jabberwock's words made the coffin slightly shake.

Suddenly, a part of it — the window through which one might see the deceased's face — opened up to reveal a giant eye looking down at Jabberwock.

"What a shame," Jabberwock continued. "If the timing was right, this all would've ended with Gloria."

In response to those words, the eye frantically darted to and fro. It was hard to tell what that meant. It could be interpreted as an expression of surprise, sadness, anger, or maybe nothing at all.

“The kingdom’s... no... *Planet Earth*’s Masters are truly exceptional. I guess I shouldn’t have expected any less of them. Limited progress on the plan notwithstanding, I’m actually somewhat *enjoying* this.”

The word “enjoying” made the eye glare at Jabberwock in clear protest.

“Don’t be upset. This also means that there’s still a window of opportunity to strive for even greater heights. Be glad... *my other half*.”

Calling the thing inside the coffin a part of him, Jabberwock smiled.

“For now, just wait. Eventually, there will be a chance to become stronger than even *before the reset*. Your time isn’t far off. It won’t be more than ten years, I’m sure — which is nothing compared to how long you’ve already waited.”

Jabberwock closed his eyes, as if to remember something.

He might’ve been looking back at the staggering amount of years that had led to this.

“...”

“In the worst case scenario, we can undergo an enhancement using the data of another Infinite. Though, our enhancement is mostly orthogonal to the overall plan — the crux of the matter is something else. It’s okay. This was a painful failure, but not a real setback. We will gather them all, no matter what.”

Jabberwock opened his eyes.

“I’ll get back to work, then. You keep sleeping for now... Evolution.”

He then turned around and walked away from the coffin. The creature within... Evolution... saw him leave, then closed its eye.

The coffin’s window followed suit, and the entity inside went back to sleep.

Infinite Progression, Evolution.

This was Jabberwock's other half, and the original UBM.

And at least for now, it silently slumbered...

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Royal Capital, Altea, deep inside the castle

"I'm... here?" Shu opened his eyes to see a familiar ceiling.

It was the room of the third princess — the place he'd visited just before fighting Gloria.

He quickly understood that he was lying on the bed.

After Fainting, he wasn't able to discern what was happening, because while Unconscious, Masters had their minds locked into an empty space and couldn't even log out. If he absolutely *had* to return to reality, he would've been forced to use the Suicide system. However, since Shu hadn't died or received a message that would make it necessary for him to log out, he simply waited it out.

Though, the fact that he found himself in the third princess' room puzzled even him.

He looked around and saw the little owner of this room using Dormouse as a makeshift bed. The hamster had natural fur all over, and his body was as warm as a hot water bottle, making him a truly pleasant surface to lay on.

Dor himself was awake, though, and he was looking right at Shu.

"Hm?" Shu suddenly felt strange and looked down to find out why.

While he'd been unconscious, someone put an animal costume on him. It was the bear costume sold at the capital — the same one he'd bought right after starting *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Shu didn't know whether they'd prepared it ahead of time or if Dor acquired it while carrying him back to the castle, but he was wearing it right now.

This reminds me that, for a bunch of reasons, I was also in a bear costume back when I first met Theresia, Shu thought.

As he pondered whether that might've been the very reason they'd put this particular outfit on him, Dor shook Theresia awake.

Shu and the girl stared at each other for a good few moments before he broke the silence. "I won."

"I know," she replied. What a simple exchange.

"The castle is so loud and lively right now," Theresia continued.
"Father and Altimia must be really busy."

"I see." With that, Shu understood why there were no other people in the room.

"Did you get Dor to look fur me and bring me all the way back here?"

"Yeah." Theresia understood that Shu would go to face Gloria the moment he walked out of her room, so when Dor returned, she asked him to bring Shu back after his victory so that his identity was not revealed. "Thanks to you, we're not over yet — not me, and not what I'm harboring... Though, I'm not sure if that's a good thing."

"...Did you want to be over?"

"Who knows?" Theresia tilted her head in curiosity, as if she herself didn't know the answer to that question.

"But... well..." She remembered something and strung a sentence together. "Up until a few moments ago, Altimia was protecting us." The eldest sister, Altimia, was with Theresia and Elizabeth, protecting them both.

Though, perhaps she was merely preparing to help her sisters escape in case the capital was in imminent danger. Altimia herself was strong, but she was powerless against Gloria's Fatal Field. Gloria was channeling it passively, so even The Primeval Sword could only split it open for a single moment. Even if Altimia did intend to let her sisters escape, Theresia couldn't leave this castle.

That was why she was wondering what her sister was planning to do when push came to shove.

Had Altimia been considering ways to let Theresia escape, or had she intended to stay by her side and fight with her blade until the bitter end?

Given that Altimia had entrusted Elizabeth to her childhood friend, Liliana, it might've been the latter.

"And when she found out that Altea was safe, Altimia actually hugged me." When it had become clear that the menace of Gloria was no more, the first princess embraced Theresia, wept , and said, "I'm so glad you're safe now."

As for what Theresia felt within her sister's warmth...

"I did think that it was nice that I wasn't over."

"All's well, then."

Then we really did seize the opportunity, Shu thought.

He was certain that he couldn't have reached this point on his own, even if he had given it his all.

Foltesla and his Babylonian Battlegroup had exposed Gloria's powers, Figaro had defeated the all-destroying one-horned head, and Tsukuyo Fuso had finally destroyed the annihilating two-horned head.

All of this was why Shu had been able to emerge victorious in the final battle. If even one element had been missing, he would never have won.

For all he knew, there might have also been those who played a part in achieving this outcome in ways he couldn't see.

This moment was only possible because everyone had given their all to seize this opportunity. They had all contributed to this moment, where this girl was able to say she was glad it didn't have to be over.

"You're thirsty, right?" Theresia asked. "I'll make some tea. The castle's water is very good."

With small hands, but plenty of skill, the girl began handling the tea set.

"Fur sure it is," said Shu. "Yeah, I'll have some."

Shu got out of bed, sat in a chair and waited for Theresia to finish.

Dor also lumbered into a chair and waited for the tea.

While waiting, these two... the Superior and the control AI began to talk.

"Dormouse. The kingdom won't be getting any more SUBMs, right?" Shu asked.

"If the general rule still applies, yes," the hamster replied. "But thanks to this incident, I discovered that Jabberwock is truly ruthless. If he thinks it's necessary, he might do something excessive."

"Can't you control your colleagues?"

"Hm... We're programmed in a way that makes us unable to say much about what the others are doing with their areas of influence. We can give advice or argue, but in the end, they themselves have the final say. Though it's a little different when we have some

overlap between us. Cheshire is a good example. He's in charge of miscellaneous jobs, so he's involved in a great many areas."

"You sound like you're all arranged like a government office."

"That's more or less how it was originally. Though, even aside from that, the kingdom has a lot of problems piling up. The issues Gloria caused will greatly affect the fate of Altar. There are a lot of incidents on the horizon. And that's just with the actions of tians and Masters... Without us doing anything at all."

"...That so?" That meant that there would be events... tragedies, rather, that could potentially decide the fate of the kingdom. Shu pondered what he would do then and considered his little brother, who would join him in *Infinite Dendrogram* in a year here... or four months in reality.

"I wonder what he would do." Shu got lost in thought...

Knowing how he is, I'm sure he won't be able to ignore all the suffering.

That's why, if I told him all that I know, I would basically be like making him run a mile after piling a heavy weight on his shoulders, and one that he can't put down.

That's why, when he comes here, I won't tell him anything that I'm privy to.

I'll let him start out free and choose what to feel, think, and do all by himself.

I'm sure that that's the only way he can find the possibility he's supposed to seize.

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"Oh my. It's like a page out of a picture book." Theresia returned with a pot of black tea to a fairytale-like scene, where a bear and a giant hamster sat politely at a table, waiting to be served.

It made her giggle.

“Ohh, I’m pawsitively parched. Theresia, give me teaaa,” Shu playfully requested.

“Just a second,” she kept giggling as she filled his cup.

“Thank you very much.” Even if what had just happened was an event that would change everything for the kingdom and the continent, this moment was nothing if not peaceful.

Thus, Shu decided to sit back, smile, and enjoy a nice cup of tea.

Episode Gloria: End

Afterword

Dearest readers,

Thank you very much for your purchase. I am the author, Sakon Kaidou.

Due to the composition of this volume, I only have one page allotted for the afterword, so I have to refrain from incorporating the usual gimmick.

Those of you who are disappointed by the lack of Cheshire and friends, please take a look at the currently-running “The What and Why of Dendrogram” YouTube series. They’re similar to the usual afterwords in tone, and they’re also fully voiced!

Though, I believe Cheshire and the rest will return here with volume 12, set for Japanese release in February 2020.

Besides that, I would greatly appreciate it if you considered checking out the manga adaptation by Kami Imai, as well as volume 1 of the Crow Record side story by La-na, both of which are already out in Japan.

January marks the start of Infinite Dendrogram’s anime adaptation. It has been about a year since the announcement, and I thank you all for your patience. I give my sincerest gratitude to the staff, cast, and everyone else involved in its production, as well as all of you who support my work.

Please look forward to more Infinite Dendrogram!

—Sakon Kaidou

Bonus Short Stories

Powerleveling

December, 2044

A few days had passed since the battle against the Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria.

“Leveling is soo boring...” grumbled Tsukuyo Fuso, one of the kingdom’s Superiors and the leader of its largest clan, The Lunar Society.

She was currently wand-bashing monsters in the Tomb Labyrinth.

Her secretary both in game and out, King of Assassins, Eishiro Tsukikage, was binding said monsters with his shadows. He would prevent them from moving, and she would beat them — a highly orthodox way to raise a newbie’s level.

The reason why she, who was far from a newbie, was doing something like this was because her level had been reset as a result of using a potent skill that had that as the price. She was now working to recover her lost levels.

Some would question why she was bashing them instead of using skills, and the answer to that was because she’d ran out of MP and SP needed for spells and the like. She’d drunk so many MP and SP potions that they barely had an effect anymore, so she had to resort to this newbie-like method of leveling.

Being a Superior Embryo, Tsukuyo’s Kaguya was very demanding in terms of MP and SP, and at her now-low level, she didn’t have nearly enough of either, so she ended up doing this quite often. Any new levels gained did little to fix the problem.

“They say time is money, and I’m here doing this...”

As contradictory as that may have seemed, she thought about how effectively she could've leveled up before her level was reset.

In *Infinite Dendrogram*, there were two basic ways of leveling up — killing other creatures or completing job quests. Both methods provided the person with shapeless data energy called simply “Resources,” and crossing a certain threshold of it gave them a level.

Levels gained through fighting were easy to understand for all those familiar with video games — you received Resources from enemies in the form of XP. Some of the loser’s Resources went to the victor, and some returned back to nature. With monsters, Resources could also become items. This was especially obvious with UBM.

The distribution of XP in group battles was directly related to performance. Attacking, defending, supporting... everything you did in battle influenced the amount of XP you would receive. This distribution was why Eishiro was only doing the binding and Tsukuyo was doing the attacking. Though, whenever Tsukuyo had the MP and SP for it, she would contribute to the battles by debuffing or supporting instead. In parties, it was actually possible to turn on a setting that made the distribution equal, but it was unusable due to the immense gap in levels between Eishiro and Tsukuyo.

Now, as for job quests, the other leveling method... the way they made people level-up was actually unknown.

Job quests were arranged by the guilds for the respective jobs and offered to those who had them. While the source of physical rewards for completing these jobs was very clear, it was still a mystery where the Resources that caused level-ups came from.

It definitely wasn’t the guilds distributing these Resources. Completing job quests just seemed to imbue the achiever with

Resources from the natural world itself. In fact, some guessed that that was actually the case — that it was part of natural law to give Resources to those who completed job quests.

This was actually one of the foundations for the many job-based religions on the continent, including the kingdom's state religion. "Those who fulfilled their duty today will be given the power to live better tomorrow" was quite a popular idea among them.

"My case is pretty troublesome..." Tsukuyo grumbled again.

Many would reset their levels to improve their builds, and they would generally have an easier time leveling than before. After all, level resets were often focused. Losing a single job would mean losing only a small amount of stats, meaning that fighting to regain the levels would be fairly simple.

Tsukuyo, however, dropped down straight to level 0. Even if she tried to make up for it with the equipment she had, items that increased by percentage weren't that effective at low levels, while items that gave fixed bonuses weren't that potent. Naturally, she couldn't be all that effective at powerleveling.

Job quests were another option, but that was difficult, as well.

In fact, it was impossible for her.

Tsukuyo was, after all, the High Priestess and the leader of The Lunar Society, and the kingdom's job guilds for the priest grouping were owned by the state religion. It would be bad for her reputation if people heard that she, the leader of The Lunar Society, was working for a rival religion. Even if the magnanimous state religion wouldn't care, the onlookers would.

Another thing that would be bad for her reputation was the very fact that she was now low level and desperately trying to climb back up.

“Lady Tsukuyo,” Eishiro tapped Tsukuyo on her shoulder.

“Ah. Gotta hiide,” she replied as she sunk into his shadow.

Eishiro did the same right after finishing off the bound monsters.

They’d done this to hide from an incoming party of Masters.

About a minute later, Tsukuyo and Eishiro rose from the shadows.

“Let us go elsewhere.”

“Okay.”

Tsukuyo was the leader of the top-ranking clan, one of the country’s Superiors, and thanks to her role in defeating Gloria, one of Altar’s Big Three. She enjoyed that reputation, but it made it all the more difficult to show herself in the state she was now. That was why she always hid when people came, then moved elsewhere.

It was a chore, but she had to maintain her majesty as one of the kingdom’s greatest. She wanted to hide herself as she was not just from the general public, but also her own Lunar Society. The only ones she trusted enough to help her level were Eishiro and maybe Ichiro Shijima.

Though, Ichiro couldn’t leave Torne right now, so he couldn’t be here to assist her. Not even Tsukuyo was cruel enough to take away the family time of a man who was said to have not long left to live.

Eishiro, on the other hand, had to put up with her business in and out of *Dendro*. He’d actually been helping with her inefficient leveling for several dozen hours now, all while making time for college work and chores in real life. His loyalty was equal to steel.

“...I know this is all we have, but just how long will it take for me to get back my levels at this rate?” Tsukuyo sighed as she thought about how many hours of this she would have to go through.

“Let us progress patiently. We have time,” said Eishiro, standing next to her with a gentle smile on his face.

Eishiro collapsed in real life just three days later.

The End

The Overworked Control AI

A Certain Day of a Certain Month

The term “control AI” had a different meaning in *Infinite Dendrogram* than it had in real life. The control AIs outside were artificial intellects using the processing power of supercomputers to their full capacity. The control AIs inside, on the other hand, were actually Infinite Embryos — Embryos above even Superior.

However, due to their immense calculating power and unique abilities, they were able to manage *Infinite Dendrogram* well enough to be considered control AIs. They had their own set roles and managed various phenomena. One managed the Embryos before they were implanted in Masters, one created the UBMs that would act as barriers spurring Master evolution... they each had their own field and played a part in keeping things running smoothly. All the jobs were necessary.

Since what they were responsible for differed so greatly, there were natural differences in difficulty, as well. The most notable example was control AI no. 7.

“Ph...ew...”

A gloomy-looking woman with profound bags under her eyes. This was the avatar of the Duchess.

She didn't appear the way she had because she wanted to. The clothing was her choice, yes, but the bags under her eyes and the general gloominess was the result of her extreme fatigue.

Her job was maintaining Master vision and translation. The latter job was basically the same as any translation software's. She would translate the many languages spoken by the cosmopolitan Masters from all over the Earth into the language used in *Dendro*, and do the reverse when it had to be done. Nuance, tone, volume... all was always done perfectly, but it was relatively simple. The problem was that she was doing it for potentially millions of Masters at once, which would be more than enough to overheat the usual supercomputer.

However, if asked, she would surely say that it was the easy part of her job. What kept her busiest was the management of Master vision.

A Master could choose between three types of vision: realistic, CG, and anime. She had to create the visuals for potentially millions of Masters in real time and project them into their visions, which would instantly make the usual supercomputer explode. Even this Infinite Embryo was on the verge of dying despite her supreme calculation abilities.

“Sakuga is... so hard...”

The greatest burden came from drawing for those who'd chosen the anime style visuals. It demanded far more effort than either realistic or CG visuals, and had to be delivered without a split-second of lag. It was actually the least used of the three kinds of visuals, but the users were extremely vocal, complaining on the internet about how the food didn't look right or how they didn't like the artstyle. It was quite disheartening, considering how hard she was trying.

“...Whose idea... was this... again...? Who said... that we should add... anime visuals... to reach a... wider audience...?”

For a moment, she tried to remember which colleague was responsible for her hardships, but even that required more calculating power than she could afford, so she just stopped thinking.

“...Meow...”

On her knees, there was one of Cheshire’s clones, sitting there like a plush toy. No colleague could help with her work, so he was there as small source of comfort. This was basically animal therapy. Cheshire actually knew who suggested adding the anime visuals, but he didn’t say anything to prevent a potential battle between colleagues.

Anyway, thanks to the hard work of the control AIs, *Infinite Dendrogram* continued to run smoothly.

The End

A Story for Another Time

August, 2043, Noz Forest

It happened on a certain day, in a certain forest. There was an adorable little princess. Her name was Theresia. She was the third princess of the kingdom, so she was very much a princess. She was now in a forest because she’d been kidnapped by an evil slime.

“I will now commit serious crimes in the kingdom to become a villain. I thought about what would be a ‘serious crime’ and chose to kidnap you,” the evil slime spoke pure insanity as he committed the crime and kidnapped the princess.

But there was a scary monster in the forest many would call an “UBM.” She was in big trouble. The princess prepared for the worst,

but it turned out that she didn't have to. A man in a costume and a hamster showed up to save her.

The details made it an intense, breathtaking adventure, but that was a story for another time. The chaotic battle ended with the monster's defeat and the evil slime's retreat after he fixed his sights on the man in the costume. Since this event, the man in the costume would be targeted by the evil slime many times. Slimes sure were sticky, huh?

The incident had been resolved, and the princess was now riding a big hamster while a man in a wolf costume was walking next to her.

If you ignored certain factors, this would be like a page straight out of a fairytale. However, it might actually be a psycho-horror scene. After all, the man in the costume walking next to her was in an awful state.

The fight against the evil slime and the monster left him without an ear, made his right eye dangle out, and opened a hole next to the left eye that showed the man inside. There was also blood in many places on him. Some of it wasn't his, some was. Honestly, he looked like a slasher straight out of a horror game, and the mere sight of him could make children cry.

However, the princess, who was quite tough for a few reasons, didn't show much of a reaction. The problem now was that, even though she was okay, if he was to take her to the city, they would think that he was responsible. In fact, they would probably arrest him even without the princess.

"Hrmm..."

Despite acting like a goof most of the time, the man in the costume was actually perceptive enough to know that himself, so he did something to fix it.

"Lemme change. Woof," he said before changing into a store-bought bear costume.

It had a bow tie on it, making him look like an amusement park mascot.

"..."

The princess looked unexpressive, but upon closer look, you could see a faint smile on her face. She wasn't bothered by a costume straight out of a horror flick, but she couldn't hide her preference for cuteness.

Maybe I should ask, she thought, deciding to ask her father for similar costumes.

The princess would go on to do exactly that, and since it was extremely rare for her to request for things, it affected not only her father, but sisters, as well. She received a huge number of costumes, but that was a story for another time.

At any rate, the princess was safely brought back to the castle. This was how the fates of the princess, the man in the costume, and the evil slime began to intertwine. As for what it would eventually bring... that, too, was a story for another time.

The End



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by Sakon Kaidou

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