



Sakon Kaidou
Illustrator: Taiki

Infinite End Program

17. White Cat's Cradle

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Infinite Dendrogram

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**"LET US
SHARE
OUR LOVE
UNTIL WE
BREAK!"**

*Overcome with
bloodlust and affection
both, the fourth in
Tenchi's duel rankings
bared her fangs at me.*

**"My fave... I want
to cut and be cut
by you, kill and be
killed by you, love
and be loved by
you...."**

*She was less human
and more asura now —
a being from Tenchi
enslaved by pure
passion.*

Character

Ray

Ray Starling / Reiji Mukudori

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



Nemesis

Nemesis

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



Juliet

Juliet/Juri Kurosaki

The fourth in Altar's duel rankings and bearer of the Fallen Knight Superior Job, she fights by wielding many kinds of curses. Her manner of speech is difficult to understand, but Ray somehow has no trouble with it whatsoever.



Chelsea

Chelsea

The eighth in Altar's duel rankings, she is Juliet's closest friend. Her luck with men is so abysmal that her love life is DOA. Originally from Granvaloa, Chelsea's main job is Grand Pirate.

Max

Great Genocide Max

Another girl in the Altarian duel rankings. She challenged Juliet and was defeated, leading to her becoming Juliet's cutesy clothing dress-up doll. Before coming to Altar, Max was a Master from Tenchi.

Shion

Manjushage

Shion Manjushage

The thirteenth in all three Altarian rankings: duel, kill, and clan. She loves ominous things to the point of being dubbed "The Misfortune Collector." Shion also insists that she is Juliet's rival.

Prologue: At the Water's Edge

March, 2045, A Certain Place in Infinite Dendrogram

A silent shoreline stood beneath the veil of night.

Unlike its counterparts in reality, this sandy beach was completely free of garbage, and the way the moonlight fell upon the rolling waves perfectly captured the essence of what a night should be.

Some distance away, there was a seaside path with not a single pebble on it, flanked by trees that were similar to pines. As a whole, the entire scene looked stunning—a truly otherworldly sight.

It would've been perfect if it weren't for the single person who spoiled the image slightly.

Sitting on the sand as though they had fallen backwards in surprise, they looked ahead with eyes wide open.

However, there was nothing there *besides a couple of dents in the sand.*

Gradually washed away by the coming waves, these two sizable depressions were spaced apart as though some gigantic, unseen figure was simply standing there.

“...What do I do?” A voice cut through the silence of the night.

The voice belonged to the person sitting on the sand, their words seemingly an expression of panic and confusion at having “messed up” in some way.

Alas, there was no one there to help them with their predicament, and the panic ultimately drove them to flee, leaving only the gorgeous evening scenery behind them.

When the next morning came, the fact that there was *nothing there* shook the locals, as well as the entire country.

Chapter One: The Invitation

Scout, Ray Starling

Infinite Dendrogram was a VRMMO in the action-RPG genre.

Apparently, the standard activities here consisted of taking on monster-hunting quests from the Adventurers' Guild, delivering packages, or perhaps engaging in crafting.

Using the word "apparently" implied that none of this had anything to do with me, but that was the thing—my activities here were far from standard.

First, I'd gone to search for someone, taking me to a dungeon out of my level range; then I tried to level like the newbie I was, only to get PK'd. After that, I took a delivery quest, only to run into a UBM on the way and, by complete chance, I ended up fighting the kingdom's most infamous bandit gang and the UBM *they* spawned. Right after that I got caught up in a Superior's act of terrorism, and he actually targeted me specifically—and just when I thought I was finally going to get some time to chill, I was kidnapped by *another* Superior. Then I escorted a boy looking for his dad, only to end up fighting a flying UBM that happened to awaken at the same time, and when I went to get a job change, I ended up running into yet another Superior—and an ancient superweapon. When I tried to relax at a festival in my hometown, I ended up fighting a pre-Superior who planned to stir up trouble by meddling in someone's love life. Most recently, I took on a bodyguard role for the peace talks between Altar and Dryfe, only to fall into Dryfe's trap and end up fighting one of the Apices of all Masters.

Yeah... Even I could tell that my activities here weren't exactly conventional.

“With all that in mind, though...things are kinda chill right now,” I said.

“Consider the scene before you, and think if that description is truly fitting,” Nemesis retorted.

There were currently scores of wooden golems burning to cinders in front of me. The source of the fire was the Purgatorial Flames from my left Miasmaflame Bracer.

I was currently in a forested mountain region, tossing flames onto an army of wooden golems. I couldn’t blame any clueless onlookers for thinking I was just a pyromaniac.

As to how I ended up in this situation, well...

◇

It was April 18th—a Tuesday. Several *Dendro* days, as well as real-life ones, had passed since the chaotic peace conference.

Having come back from college, I logged in as I’d always done.

Because of various things, I hadn’t yet returned to Gideon and was still at the capital, Altea.

I first hit the shops to replace my broken gear and stock up on consumables. Then, it was time to do some leveling. I may have had a unique Embryo that allowed me to turn the tide of difficult battles, but to grow stronger in the proper sense, I needed some levels.

“We are still lacking in raw power, after all,” said Nemesis.

“Yeah. We just learned that the hard way.”

Our clan had fought King of Beasts—the Physical Apex—and despite all our combined efforts, we didn’t manage to come out on top.

I was told that Azurite herself would’ve been in danger if it wasn’t for Fuso’s negotiations.

"If we'd just had a little bit more power back then, we might've been able to seize a different possibility," I said. "We really need to level up so that we can reach them next time."

"Indeed!" Nemesis replied.

And so, with renewed resolve, I switched my job back to Scout so I could finally max it out. Then I figured that if I was gonna be leveling, I might as well kill two birds with one stone and do a hunting quest at the same time. I couldn't team up with my clan members because of time differences or in-game distance between us, but I figured I could handle the quest solo or just get a temporary party together.

I headed to the Adventurers' Guild, checked the catalog, and found a quest that was just perfect for me—a large-scale quest for the elimination of a monster type that had suddenly grown in number.

It was the kind of quest anyone could pick up, and the reward was based on how much you contributed to the extermination. The location was between Altea and Gideon—the now-nostalgic Sauda Mountain Pass.

The targets were the boss monster known as "Afforest King Golem" and its related species, the Planting Golems.

Affrests weren't UBMs, but just like Goblin Kings and King Basilisks, they were always seen as major threats and targets for immediate elimination. Apparently, they were a troublesome monster type that appeared in fertile wild areas and incessantly spawned their kin—the Planting Golems—recklessly draining the land's nutrients in the process.

Normally, they wouldn't be somewhere like Sauda Mountain Pass, but recently, there had been an increase in dormant UBMs like Monochrome suddenly awakening, which had led to major disturbances in monster habitats all over.

It was kinda like how the lab coat maniac messed up the ecosystem around Gideon...but worse, since we now had a high-level boss monster and its kin making themselves cozy around the main path linking Altea and Gideon.

With the current situation in Altar, it would be pretty bad if this trade route was disrupted, so the authorities of both cities had teamed up to create this large-scale quest.

◇

And so, we were now here, exterminating the Planting Golems.

“...Live trees aren’t supposed to be *this* flammable,” I said.

“Might this cause a forest fire...?” Nemesis asked. Being monsters, the golems themselves disappeared the moment they died, but since their loot was wooden, their fires continued to burn.

I really didn’t wanna follow in Shu’s footsteps and create a scorched wasteland...

“Hey, should I be worried about this?” I asked as I looked at the flaming golem loot.

“Nope! I’ll put ‘em all out!” I heard someone say, right before a mass of water crashed onto the burning remains.

The flames were silenced, preventing them from lighting the surrounding trees.

“See?” the person said, giving me a thumbs up. They...or rather *she* was a baby-faced girl in a pirate hat, and her name was Chelsea. She was an Altarian duel ranker in the eighth spot as well as a sparring partner of mine, and we were currently doing the same quest.

“If you just break or cut ‘em up, these things just grow back from whatever’s left,” she said. Now *that* was obnoxious. I could see why they had been targeted for elimination. The damage they were capable of doing to local towns and villages was something else.

“I’m useless against them, so I’m glad we have you and your flamethrower here,” Chelsea added.

“Right back at you. I’m glad we have you too,” I said. This was an impromptu party, but she and I actually made a good team.

It was because of her that I could use Purgatorial Flames like I was. If I couldn’t rely on anyone to put the fires out, I’d have had to fight these things using Nemesis and her skills, which wouldn’t have been very efficient.

“Lemme check if they found it yet,” Chelsea said before using Telepathy Cuffs to contact our other party members.

I’d joined this party after running into her group by chance while doing this quest. On the party window, I could see the main stats and names of the other two members—Juliet and Max.

Chelsea and I were the only ones here. Juliet was using her wings and Max was riding her Type Sentinel Embryo to patrol the area and look for the Afforest. Since it was the source of these golems, this quest wouldn’t end until someone defeated it.

But since we had Juliet the Black Crow—fourth in the duel rankings—I was sure that we’d—

“Ray! They found it! It’s past the ridge, to the east of here!” Chelsea said, cutting my thought short.

“All right! Hop on Silver! We’ll get there by air!” I said. Just as I would expect, they’d located the monster.

Some time later, we arrived at the spot...

“UuuUrRraaArrrrgHhhh...”

...where we saw a giant golem made of dirt and roots, with nearly a hundred trees growing out of its back.

“...Damn, it’s huge,” I said. Maybe I shouldn’t have expected anything less of a “boss monster.” It wasn’t as large as Leviathan, but it easily surpassed sixty metels, easily putting it in the “kaiju-sized” category.

Though, it *was* weird that something this big had gone unnoticed until Juliet spotted it...

“Julie! Where was *this thing* hiding?!” Chelsea called out to Juliet, who was currently flying around Afforest.

The Fallen Knight fired a dark magic spell at the monster before saying, “The wood itself stirred. Thus did the mind’s eye perceive from my skyward vantage.”

Oh, so that was how it was. Basically, “It was hiding in the ground, disguised as the forest itself, and moved along with the terrain. I could see it moving from the sky, but it must’ve been hard to spot from the surface.”

“...That translation is nearly thrice the length of what was actually said,” said Nemesis.

“Anyway, this is the real deal! Let’s chop it down!” said the other duel ranker present, Max. She was riding her bear-like Sentinel with countless blades growing out of its back. “Maddened Blade, Sip Their Blood—Ipetam!”

Following Max activating her ult, the blades on Ipetam’s back were released. They then spread out in the air around Afforest before flying straight towards it.

The dozens of blades pierced into the giant golem’s body, but...

“Ngh...! It barely did anything!”

...just like Max herself had said, the giant mass of trees and earth was largely unaffected.

“I’ll do it up close and personal, then...!” she then said as she used Laser Blade—the Swordmaster job skill Azurite had used. But since the blade was sized for a human, the damage to Afforest was minimal. “Damn it!”

“Don’t rush it, Maxie!” said Chelsea. “You’re specced against people, not monsters!”

“I know th— Don’t call me that!” retorted Max. Despite talking like a rowdy tomboy, Max was wearing a frilly dress. I thought she looked good in it, but when I’d actually said that to her once, she got mad at me for some reason.

“Whoa!” I cried out as a shadow fell over me and I made Silver back away.

A moment later, a leg the size of a building crushed the place we had just vacated.

“Don’t think we’ll go down without a fight!” I said as I aimed my left Miasmaflame Bracer towards the wall-like limb and showered it in Purgatorial Flames.

The superheated fire lit up Afforest just like the golems it had created...

“...High Fire Resistance.”

...but then, a veil of light appeared around it, greatly weakening the flames.

“That’s the skill B3 used...!” Back when we were fighting Monochrome, B3 had used this skill to weaken the heat and flames from its beams.

“Oh, right! Ray! Normal high-rank bosses aren’t like UBMs!” Chelsea called out to me.

Normal high-rank bosses... This was actually my first time fighting a monster like that. So far, I'd always ended up facing stronger Masters or UBM's...

"Unlike UBM's, they almost never have broken one-of-a-kind skills, but they get a bunch of utility skills! Figaro said that lots of them are stronger than some weaker UBM's!"

"I don't think I know what a 'weak UBM' looks like!" I said. Still, I got the gist. This thing not only had stats to match its size, but also possessed a defensive skill that let it overcome its weakness to fire.

I looked and noticed that the wounds opened by Ipetam's blades were closing, meaning that it probably had Auto Restoration as well.

"...Not being unique doesn't make it a pushover, huh?" I said. Maybe this monster was nothing compared to my last big enemy—KoB—but it still far surpassed me in power.

The four of us were going to have to combine our efforts if we wanted to seize victory.

"Though the barrier stands vast and impenetrable, the champions arrayed against it act as one." Juliet had basically read my mind and said, "This boss is very big and strong, but let's work together and do our best to beat it!"

"Yeah! Let's do this!"

And so, we all faced the Afforest King Golem.



"We...won..." I sighed.

"The battle was more intense than I expected..." said Nemesis. It sure had been.

The battle had lasted nearly an hour and cost us all of our Counter Absorption uses as well as nearly all the grudge in my Grudge-Soaked Greaves.

At one point, Afforest had used a Purge Treant skill to create a tough golem army, then used Geo Drain to make the land wither and restore its own HP. After that, it had absorbed sunlight to attack us with Glint Pile, which was a high-rank ultimate job skill.

“Would you not say he was stronger than Gardranda and Gouz-Maise were at the time we fought them?” Nemesis asked.

“...Well, we beat those guys before they could mature.” Having just been born, Gouz-Maise was almost completely out of grudge, while Gardranda as I could summon her now was probably stronger than this boss—if she didn’t have a time limit, anyway.

Regardless, Afforest King Golem was really tough, and I could easily see what Figaro had meant.

As for how we beat it...Chelsea bound it using her Golden Bull Tsunami—Poseidon, then Juliet shattered the hardened chest-piece using her Corpse-Eating Bird—Hraesvelgr, then Max rode Ipetam close to the chest to tear it open. I finished it by using Vengeance on its core.

But man, if *regular* high-rank bosses were this tough and there were so many of them...wasn’t *Dendro*’s natural world just a little *too* terrifying?

“What about the remaining golems...?” I wondered.

“Leave them to the other peeps who took the quest,” said Chelsea. “We took most of the reward with this one. Anyway, I’m gonna open the loot now.”

“Yeah... Wait, ‘Open?’” I said in wonder, glancing over and noticing she was holding some sort of treasure chest. “‘Treasure Coffer of the Tree King?’” I read its name.

Oh, right. This was how normal boss monsters dropped their loot. I almost never fought them, so I’d completely forgotten about it—and this one in particular was bigger than any treasure chest I’d seen so far.

“After a savage battle, a pure droplet of salvation. (It was strong, so we’ll probably get something good from this!)” said Juliet.

“I did some research on the Editing Division’s site and they said that these boxes can give items you can exchange for money, a staff, or a shield—both of which will be made of wood,” said Chelsea.

“...A wooden shield? Sounds like it’d burn easily,” said Max. Overall, though, the girls seemed pretty excited about what they might find.

“The guild will reward each of us based on our contributions, so this is like a bonus,” said Chelsea. “But since none of us use staffs or shields...we’ll probably just sell them and split the money. You okay with that, Ray?”

“Yeah. Fine by me,” I replied.

Chelsea had experience as the leader of a fairly prominent clan, so she immediately knew how to handle this loot. As the leader of a clan ranking second, I had much to learn from her.

So far, the only quest we’d taken as Death Period was our peace conference bodyguard duty. It’d be great to find more activities for us to do as a clan.

“All riiight! Here I gooo!” Chelsea said, her eyes shining as she vigorously threw open the chest.

At its bottom, there was...nothing but four pieces of paper.

“...Wha?” The unexpected items made Chelsea freeze in shock.

The rest of us were surprised too. We all stared at them like we'd never seen a piece of paper before.

"Hm...? They have names on them," I said. The pieces of paper all seemed exactly the same except for the names written on them.

I reached inside to get a closer look and picked up just one of the four—a *ticket with my name on it*, saying...

Anniversary Participation Ticket: This is an invitation to the developer-organized special event, The Anniversary.

If the owner of this ticket is online at the midnight of April 20th, JST, they will be transported to the designated event area.

This ticket can only be used by "Ray Starling."

"A special event...? The Anniversary?" I said, confused. It seemed like a strange time to be having any sort of anniversary.

"Ohh! I get it! These are for an exclusive event... YAY!" Chelsea cried as she unfroze, her eyes shining brighter than before.

"Exclusive?"

"A feast solely for those chosen by fate, obtained only through trials unnumbered and pursuit most relentless. (An event you can only participate in if you randomly get the ticket for it from a boss or a dungeon chest. They're very rare!)" Juliet explained.

"Ohh? And we went against the odds and got them, huh?" I said.

"Luck must have been on our side," said Nemesis. "...Not that I understood what Juliet just said."

A dev-organized event, though...? I thought.

"The Clash of the Superiors, Windstar Festival, Love-Duel Festival, and the tournament that's gonna start this weekend were all organized by tians, so this dev thing is kinda new to me."

"Most dev events are just seasonal things where you get special event monsters and stuff. These exclusive events are *very* exclusive, but as far as I know, their rewards are great too," Chelsea explained.

Well, I now understood why her eyes had lit up like that.

"The feast's appointed hour draws near. Will fate bring us champions together once again? (The day of the event is close... Will you all make it?)" Juliet asked.

"Well...yeah, I'm good for it," I said.

The event started at night, so I felt like it might impact how I felt the next day, but that wasn't a deal-breaker.

"I'm a-okay for it too! We're going to an event together! Let's form a party! And if it's an all-out battle royale, let's gank everyone!" Chelsea said with obvious joy.

"Heh! Sounds like a good time!" Max said, clearly excited.

"...I'm so glad," Juliet, standing by me, whispered silently, but not silently enough for me to not hear it.

I turned to her and asked, "What's wrong?"

"Ah!" she yelped in surprise before falling silent for a moment, then saying, "Umm... Chelsea's having a good time...so I'm happy for her...things have been pretty rough for her."

"...Ohh," I said. That was certainly true. Chelsea was met with a bunch of misfortune recently.

First, the clan she led collapsed because of a twenty-fold cheating scandal that she wasn't involved with in the slightest (worth noting that it had been exposed by King of Light, F). Then, she'd taken a bodyguard quest to rebuild her confidence, only to get PK'd by The Rabbit, Chrono Crown.

Talk about kicking someone while they were down.

But now, having scored a ticket to an exclusive event, she was extremely happy. I could understand why a close friend like Juliet would feel glad about it.

“Let’s hope the event’s good, then,” I said.

“Yeah... It should be...fun,” said Juliet.

“Hm...?” Something about Juliet caught my eye again. It seemed like she was worried, but this seemed different from her concern for Chelsea.

“Is something bothering you? I’ll hear you out if you want.”

“Ah?! N-No! Nothing’s worry...ing... Ngh...”

She hastily denied it at first, but then slowly put on a troubled expression before looking at me with resolve in her eyes.

“U-Umm... Ray...you’re...in college, right?” she asked.

Now *that* was a question I didn’t expect.

“Yeah. Starting this year, anyway,” I answered.

“...Was it hard to study for the exams?” Wondering why she was asking that, I went ahead and answered honestly.

“Well... Yeah, I guess you could say it was hard. I had to cut off basically all my entertainment and I studied pretty much nonstop starting the summer of my second year in high school. My brother kept inviting me to *Dendro* all that time, but I couldn’t even think of starting it.”

“...I...see,” Juliet said. For reasons I couldn’t understand, she looked downcast.

I wanted to listen to her worries, but it seemed like I’d only added to her uneasiness.

“Juliet?” I asked.

“I’m...fine... Yeah... I’m fine.”

I wasn’t able to ask anything more before we split up and I logged out for the day.

◇◇◇

Reiji Mukudori

It was noon on the next day, April 19th.

I was in my college’s cafeteria, sandwich in one hand, mobile device in the other. Displayed on the device’s screen was the site of the Editing Division, showing info about the exclusive event I’d be attending tonight.

There had been a bunch of such events so far, and they seemed to be different every time.

What they had in common was that you got tickets for them as rare boss loot or from chests in created dungeons, and that there were no tians involved at all.

The participants were transported to special areas like abandoned islands or unique dungeons and had to fight or cooperate with other Masters—or monsters—to come out on top.

I appreciated the fact that I wouldn’t have to worry about the safety of any tians.

...I felt like I had to do that in every single incident since Milianne’s.

Thankfully, the Altar-Dryfe situation had calmed down a bit after the peace conference. Thanks to Fuso, even KoB, the person we were most worried about, couldn’t do much against us right now.

It was currently peaceful, so I felt like I could participate in this *properly* game-like event without worrying about anything else.

I was confident I would get to enjoy this with a clear mind.

“Rei, what’re ya lookin’ at? A porn site?”

“Natsume... Is that really your first guess?” I was just sitting here, embracing the joy of getting to participate in a normal game event for once, only for a fellow freshman—Soprano Natsume—to come by asking slanderous questions.

“I mean, you look really chill. That’s not like you. You okay? Wanna play some cat’s cradle?” she said, quickly making a cat’s cradle butterfly and extending it to me.

“No,” I said. I couldn’t even comment about her cat’s cradle obsession at this point. “And what do you mean it’s not like me? I can’t relax now?”

“I mean, you always look so concerned. It’s like troubles and worries are part of your personality.”

...I couldn’t deny that.

“...I’m checking the *Dendro* wiki now. See?” I said, showing her the page I was looking at, proving that I wasn’t on some inappropriate site.

“Ohh? Ohh. Hm?” Natsume put a hand to her cheek, the one that had a bit of face paint on it, and tilted her head slightly. “Exclusive events?”

“I got a ticket in *Dendro*, so I’m looking up what I’m getting myself into.”

“Seriously? You too?”

“You too?” I echoed.

She put away the cat’s cradle, took out her phone, and showed me a picture.

It seemed to be a CG-style *Dendro* screenshot and...

“...A ticket?”

...it displayed a ticket just like the one I'd received.

The name was blurred out, probably for privacy reasons, but there was no doubt that it was the same item.

"Yep! I got a ticket too, and I'm on an event high tonight!"

"Oh? We might see each other there, then," I said.

I was in Altar while Natsume was in Tenchi, meaning that there was an entire continent between us. Since *Dendro* had no fast travel, clearing this distance and meeting up was difficult for us, but since all the event participants would be transported to one place, we actually had a chance of seeing each other tonight.

"Wow! Wait, your Ray is famous! If we meet there, please lemme take a screenshot with you! No wait—you know what? Let's do the event together!"

"Yeah, sure. But only if it allows co-op," I said.

This was making me feel kinda awkward, but it was a rare chance to play with a fellow UTokyo freshman, so I ignored it.

With me, Juliet, Chelsea, and Max, we still had room for her in the party.

"YAAAYY! I can't wait for tonight!" Natsume said with a joyous expression...all while doing high-speed cat's cradle for some reason.

"What's up with you two?" someone besides us asked.

"Oh, Fuyuki. We—"

"Rei and I are gonna spend all night together!"

"HUH?! Since when do you two have that kind of relationship?!"

"What she said isn't *wrong*, but not *right* either!" As I cleared up his misunderstanding, the lunch break came to an end.

...Damn. I'd forgotten to ask for Natsume's avatar's name.

Interlude: Outside and Within

Reality, Kurosaki Household

On the evening of April 18th, Juri Kurosaki—Juliet’s real-life counterpart—came back home thoroughly excited to go on a quest with her friends Chelsea and Max.

“Hm-hm-hmm...” Juri silently hummed a tune. In *Infinite Dendrogram*, she may have been the famous Altarian duelist, the “Black Crow,” but in reality, she was a fairly normal—although perhaps a bit introverted—second-year middle schooler.

Through her avatar in *Dendro*, she was able to express her eccentric style and worldview to the fullest, and nothing was more fun for her than entering that world and going on adventures with her closest friends.

“I’m baack!” Juri cried in high spirits as she entered her home and rushed to her room.

“Welcome back,” her mother replied. “Juri, I need to tell you something. It’s about your tutor.”

“...My what?”

“You’ll have one starting the day after tomorrow. I think it would be really good for you to learn from someone who passed the UTokyo entrance exams on their first try.”

Hearing those words made Juri’s heart skip a beat.

A full day had passed since that sudden announcement; it was now April 19th. Juri returned from school in a *completely* different mood than she had the day before.

The cause of her dampened mood was all the things she’d heard from her mother and Ray.

“Ughh...” She let out a sigh as she flopped facedown on her bed.

Her mother had told her a while ago that she would find her a tutor when she entered her second year of middle school. Juri had been able to avoid getting one during her spring break, but it was now over halfway through April. She couldn't push it back any further.

Her grades were neither particularly good nor particularly bad, but knowing how intense high school exams could be, it was a good idea to start studying now. Juri herself understood that.

She still found it hard to accept, though, because lessons with a tutor would take up time she could otherwise spend having fun with her friends.

Time in *Infinite Dendrogram* passed three times as quickly as it did in reality, meaning that every hour spent with her tutor would be three fewer hours spent with Chelsea and the others.

If the tutor only took up a small part of her week, that would be okay. But what if the tutor was strict and made her spend most of her free time on studying?

What if they put a limit on her *Dendro* playtime—and her mother agreed?

What if...she ended up like Ray and had to quit *Infinite Dendrogram* entirely until her exams were finished?

In that case, the upcoming event might be her last chance to play with the others for a very long time.

“Nhh...” Lying with her face buried in her pillow filled her head with all these negative thoughts...

“Ngh!”

...but after a moment, she roused herself and got up from her bed.

There was nothing Juri could do about the tutor at this point, and there was no telling how things would change tomorrow. So, she

gathered her resolve and decided to prepare for whatever might come.

She turned her thoughts towards the event, dedicated to enjoying it to the fullest.

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A Certain Place in New York

It was late at night on the east coast, but Chelsea was wide awake.

Unable to sleep, she was sipping on brandy while sorting her *Infinite Dendrogram* photo collection.

In it, of course, were photos of the clan she'd recently lost.

"...Haah," she sighed. Chelsea never would've thought that the clan that had lasted since their days in Granvaloa would collapse because of a twenty-fold cheater...who hadn't even *tried* to go for her.

"And these were the same people who joined me instead of staying in Granvaloa..." she said, gazing at a photo from her clan's golden age.

Back then, the clan had been over twice as large as it had been just before it disbanded, and it had been a well-known entity among all Masters of Granvaloa. Chelsea looked through the photos—among them a shot of her standing with a girl bandaged like a mummy—and said to herself, "I can't even say anything to Leon anymore... I'm just like his Eldridge."

Those were both the real and in-game names of a friend. When that thought had passed, she resumed organizing her photos chronologically until she came across her first photos from Altar.

I kinda remember having a hard time getting used to Altar's dueling rules, she thought.

Duels in Granvaloa were different than in other countries. While Altar, Dryfe, and so on had 1v1s, Granvaloa's duels—if they could be called that—were naval group battles.

Since the victory conditions were so different, as a new Altarian Master, she had a lot of trouble standing out at first. Still, she'd gained a friend and rival in Juliet, so she'd been able to enjoy herself in spite of that.

“...Ah,” she murmured as she noticed a photo showing her and three of her friends after they’d won an event in Gideon called “Water Survival.”

This reminds me that I haven’t shown it to her yet, she thought. Chelsea’s fighting style had changed since she’d moved from Granvaloa to Altar, and since she hadn’t acquired a Superior Job yet, the height of her power was actually in the past now—before the move.

Looking back on the past as she was, Chelsea couldn’t help but wonder what would happen if she were to face her friend using her previous fighting style.

If I get the chance in today’s event, I should probably try that...or maybe I should just try it no matter what, she thought.

“Anyway, that’s it for the photo sortin’. I’ll go get some shut-eye.” On the east coast, the event would start on April 20th, at 11 in the morning. She really ought to get some sleep for now.

The device Chelsea left behind still showed the many photos she’d just been sorting.

Among them was one shot of a vast naval battlefield, with her own pirate ship involved in the fray. Her vessel leisurely floated through a stretch of ocean crowded with wooden debris—*the remains of over a hundred other ships.*

This had been the result of a certain battle royale event in Granvaloa—a feat Chelsea had achieved in a time when she'd been called by a different nickname.

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Control AI No. 13's Workspace

“An eveeent, an eveeent! So much to dooo, so little tiiime, but I'll dooo what I caaan...”

In a space filled with countless floating screens, a number of cats dressed in clothing—all of them Cheshire—were singing as they worked.

Some other Cheshires were visible on the screens, as well. They were someplace far away, burying stone slates with something written on them.

Each cat looked both busy and happy at the same time.

“I see that somebody is hard at work.”

“Wooow! You sure are busy, Cheshy!”

Two other entities entered the space and spoke these words.

Both of them were control AI No. 11—Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

“Yep. After all, this event's my ideaaa,” said one of the cats.

“I handle miscellaneous chores, so I sometimes take charge of eveeents,” said another.

“Gotta work haaard!” said a third. Perhaps because this multitasking forced him to distribute his processing power, the Cheshires spoke in a manner that was somewhat...slower than usual.

“Well, we will leave most of this event to you. Although...” said Tweedledum.

"Ain't this event a bit easyyy? And doncha think you're abusin' your authorityyyy?" continued Tweedledee.

"Ngh," the Cheshires let out as all of them stopped what they were doing. "I mean...I want this event to be fun...and I got Alice to cooperate...a-and I asked you to give out the tickets, just like you always do..."

While Cheshire was in charge of miscellaneous tasks and chores, the twins were the control AI who handled events. As well, they were also the AIs best suited to selecting the people who would participate in them.

"Yes. Once again, we have focused on Masters with sixth-form Embryos."

"Yep! The main point of these events is to get more Superiooors!"

The goal of *Infinite Dendrogram*'s control AIs was to increase the number of Superior Embryos. The means to achieve that were many and varied, ranging from UBM from Epic to Superior, as well as the presence of powerful dev-side Masters like Tom Cat or Chrono Crown.

This event was another means to that end.

"Well, I knew it'd be like thaaat," said Cheshire. "But we've held a lot of events with pre-Superiors and not many of them evolved, you knooow?"

"Indeed," said Tweedledum as he adjusted his glasses.

"That's whyyy, to spice things uuup, we got participants from a wider range of fooorms!" added Tweedledee as she spun around with her eyes closed. Though their actions were very different, both of them had confident smiles on their faces.

"...You mean like Ray? He just recently became high-rank, didn't he?" Cheshire said, remembering a familiar name that had recently gotten

onto the list—one of the Embryos that was on it despite not being in its sixth form. “Or do you mean...?” he added. There was an entry on the list simply called “Top Secret”—a participant not even Cheshire himself knew anything about.

“You will find out when the event begins,” said Tweedledum.

“It’s gonna be sooo exciting!” said Tweedledee.

Cheshire looked at them in silence. While the twins may have seemed like polar opposites, they were actually one single Infinite Embryo. On top of that, they were perhaps the most dedicated of all the control AIs to the cause of creating Superiors, and that was exactly why Cheshire couldn’t help but worry about what they were planning to throw into this event.

...This reminds me of the Love-Duel Festival, he thought. Though I guess it's not quite as big a deal.

Thanks to the twins causing Hannya to lose it, Gideon had yet again been brought to the verge of destruction.

However, in this event, there was no possibility of tian casualties. After all, it would take place in a special area meant specifically for it.

On an isolated island, far from the continent, the Masters would take part in a battle royale.

Chapter Two: The Rules

Paladin, Ray Starling

With college classes over for the day, I finished dinner and logged in to *Dendro*.

It was evening in real life, but here it was still just past noon.

“The event will begin soon, but we seem quite well prepared,” Nemesis said, glancing at the consumables and such that filled my inventory. I’d done various things in preparation for the event. Yesterday’s quest had given me some Scout levels, and today I’d switched back to Paladin so I could use more of my skills. “It is a shame, though, that your armor could not make it in time,” Nemesis added.

“Well, this’ll have to do for now,” I said. The VDA that B3 gave me had been completely destroyed at the peace conference, and the replacement I’d ordered hadn’t made it in time for this event. Left with no choice, I just bought some decent armor I’d found in a shop.

It seemed like a bit of a waste, but I had the money, so whatever.

“So, what have you learned about events such as these?” Nemesis asked.

“None of the previous ones had the same name as this one,” I said. “They were all totally different from each other too. There’s been battle royales, puzzle competitions, monster hunts, and so on... Like Chelsea said, the rewards were often rare items, including consumables that give you levels.”

There were even items that instantly max out low-rank jobs, which is pretty attractive for a guy whose build is incomplete, I added in my head.

“So that is the situation,” said Nemesis. “Well, regardless, you should try to enjoy this without fretting about much.”

We spent the daylight hours preparing, and soon enough, night fell in *Dendro*.

The moment it was time for the event to begin, we were whisked away from the capital and transported somewhere else.

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The very next moment, I found myself in a vast, white space.

Looking around me, I saw other Masters; more and more appeared as I watched.

“Huh... So this is how these things go,” I said. Figaro, who’d started out in Legendaria, had told me of these “Accident Circles” that occasionally sent people to other places, sometimes across insane distances. Perhaps this was how one of those felt?

“Is that...The Unbreakable?”

“The newbie who faced off against just about every Dryfean Superior...?”

“Heh heh heh, imagine the rep you’d get for kickin’ his ass...”

“Come on, you can’t be *that* proud of beating a guy who’s not even maxed out. We should wait a bit.”

“True that.”

Some of the other Masters talked amongst themselves while staring straight at me. I recognized none of them, and many of them were equipped with gear that looked totally different from any of the items I usually saw.

They must’ve been from places other than Altar or Dryfe. The eastern-style clothing on some of them particularly stood out.

Wait, I gotta find Juliet’s group and... What does Natsume’s avatar look li—?

“There you are!”

My thought was cut short by someone calling out. I turned to the source of the voice and saw...



...a ponytailed woman dressed in a vividly colored kimono.

The upper and lower halves of her clothing were unbalanced—the top had long sleeves, but the bottom was just a miniskirt. Overall, it seemed very cosplay-like.

She pointed at me, a smile spreading across her face that was decorated with a spot of paint.

Wait, I thought. Face paint?

“Found ya, Raaay! Man, seeing the real deal, your set’s so dark and shadowy! The boots and coat alone make it a total home run at darkness! I’m loving Nemesis’s ‘blali’ thing too!” the woman said as she approached me and slapped my back a few times.

“It has been quite some time since someone called me that,” said Nemesis, her eyes becoming distant.

Anyway, it was fairly easy to guess who she was at this point.

“...Are you Natsume?” I silently asked. In response, she took out some string from her sleeve and said, “You okay? Wanna play some cat’s cradle?”

...Yep, that’s Natsume.

“Oh, and call me ‘Alto’ here!” she added.

“Sure thing,” I said.

“Hm, so you are Ray’s friend from school. A pleasure to meet you,” said Nemesis.

“Same here, Nemmy!” Alto greeted her with a peace sign and a wink.

On her raised right hand I spotted a Jewel, so she probably used a tamed monster or two.

“Alto,” huh? I thought. *From Soprano to Alto... How straightforward.*

“Not as straightforward as you, I would say,” Nemesis commented.
“Your name is practically the same both here and there.”

...*You got me there.*

“Wooow, she makes quips! That’s sooo cool! Maidens are so awesome—I’m kinda jealous! My Embryo isn’t cute or anything like that, so I can’t make outfits to match it.”

“...Wait, your words imply that my apparel is on the same level as Ray’s. How can you even say that?!” said Nemesis.

“Huh? Speaking of which, your armor is different than it was in the Hell General vid,” Alto commented, pointing at my clothes and ignoring Nemesis.

“That gear broke, so I’m making do with this for now,” I said.

“You gotta be more prepared! I didn’t even log in until I finished all my prep for my part-time job!”

“Part-time job?”

“Haven’t you got one? People are crazy for UTokyo’s tutors and stuff, y’know?”

“Well, I’m all right as far as money goes...”

“Oh, how I’d love to be able to say that!”

Living in one of Shu’s apartments meant I had no rent to pay, and my tuition and other college-related expenses were covered by my parents. I had an allowance on top of that, and since most of my free time was dedicated to *Dendro*, it was more than enough for me to get by.

...Though, thinking about it now, it might’ve been a good idea to start saving up. With Rook and Figaro being from the UK, I could

totally see myself wanting to fly there for an offline meet-up or something.

"Ah, there you are, Ray. Is this somebody ya know?" a familiar voice said.

I turned towards the source and saw Chelsea with the others...including someone who wasn't with us when we'd gotten the tickets.

Next to Juliet there stood a woman dressed all in black. Her outfit looked very much like a mourning dress. I'd seen her in a couple sparring matches with some of the rankers I hung out with, and if I recalled correctly, her name was "Shion Manjushage."

"Yeah, she's a friend from my college," I said.

"I'm Alto! I hope we get along! Wanna play some cat's cradle?"

"Aha hah hah... I don't think so."

...Natsume tries to play cat's cradle even with people she just met? I thought before saying, "Alto here happened to get a ticket too. She usually plays in Tenchi, but since this is a good opportunity, she wants to handle the event with us. Can she join the party if it's co-op?"

"Well, we just met up with Shion too. That makes six people total, which works out just fine," Chelsea said, and the others nodded.

"...This gathering...'tis truly fate," said Juliet.

"Excuse me?" Alto said, raising an eyebrow.

"She's saying it's fine by her," I said to her. She didn't seem to have caught Juliet saying, "Let's have fun together."

Speaking of Juliet...I couldn't help but feel that she seemed different than usual, just like she had yesterday.

“Ohh, that’s good to hear,” said Alto. “By the way, Ray, you’re basically in a harem party full of pretty girls. How’s that make you feel?”

“At peace...”

“WOW! What a total chad thing to say!” The fact that I wasn’t with Milianne, Louie, Azurite, or anyone else I had to keep alive at all costs really did make me feel more relaxed though.

With the introductions done, the only thing left was waiting for the event to start.

“Man, there sure are a lotta people here,” said Max.

“Seriously,” I said as I looked around the empty white space. At a glance, it seemed like there were at least three hundred Masters here. It was hard to tell what the people in the distance even looked like.

“You might not be the only rankers here,” I said to Juliet’s group.

“Hey, don’t act like you’re not second in a ranking,” Chelsea retorted.

“Well, that’s for clans. It doesn’t say much about my personal power level...” *My battle style is still far from reliable*, I added in thought.

“You should start dueling,” she said. “Be like me or Shion and take a spot in both the clan and duel rankings.”

The clan that Chelsea had recently lost was one of the kingdom’s top thirty clans, while Shion was an interesting case, being thirteenth in all three rankings—duel, clan, and kill.

“By the way, Shion...how’d you get a ticket?” I asked. She hadn’t been with us on the quest yesterday, so I was curious about it.

“Well, I obviously got it in the gacha! I’m actually quite surprised that all of you were able to get one as well! How many times did you pull?”

“Gacha?” Juliet’s trio all said in unison, clearly confused.

I, however, fully understood what she was talking about. It had to be the thing I’d gotten Silver from and had been visiting fairly regularly—the gacha machine at Alejandro’s.

So the tickets could come from the gacha too, huh? If I’d gone to pull from it after getting mine, I might’ve gotten a dupe, just like I had with the Exploration Permit.

...I haven’t pulled it in a while, though. I really wanna do it now, I thought.

“You have quite the distant look on your face,” said Shion.

“Please do ignore it,” said Nemesis. Soon after that, a rather old-timey chime rang out throughout the space.

“Oookay! With thaaat, all the currently online participants have been transported heeere! From this moment ooon, no one else may jooooin!”

The sound was followed by words spoken in a familiar, drawling voice. It seemed to have been spoken through a megaphone, but it was no doubt the same voice I’d heard during character creation and in the wasteland that used to be Noz Forest.

A moment later, the lights—assuming there were any to begin with—went out, plunging the space into darkness.

Then, after several seconds, a single bright beam like a spotlight focused on a space in midair. There I saw Cheshire, standing on a floating platform while wearing a tuxedo—his formal wear, I assumed.

“Welcome, everyooone! Thank you for participating in today’s event, the Anniversaryyy!” Cheshire said with a bow. His proclamation was followed by the sound of many photos being taken.

There must be some Cheshire fans here, I thought. Or maybe just cat lovers.

“I will now explain the ruuules, so please keep it down for a momeeent,” said Cheshire, prompting a large flat hologram screen to appear in the air. It displayed a photo of a circular island surrounded by empty ocean.



The island featured forests, mountains, and rivers, but I didn't see a single sign of civilization. It seemed like the perfect example of an uninhabited island.

"This will be this event's areaaa. The island, I mean, as well as the area five hundred metels above it and twenty metels into the surrounding sea. Touching the barrier around this zone will disqualify you, so be caaareful."

The screen then displayed the boundary exactly as Cheshire described it.

I didn't see myself wanting to get away from the island, but I'd have to be careful not to ride Silver too high.

Juliet was nodding in understanding. She had wings she used to fly around, so she was probably thinking the same thing as me.

"Your goal is the gate at the peak of the mountain at the heart of the islaaand," Cheshire said, making the screen display a large gate. It had no doorknob or anything like that, but there were eight strange sockets on it. "As you can see, the gates have sockets that are meant for keys. These keys drop from the event monsters scattered all over the islaaand," he said, taking out ten plate-like objects and holding them like cards.

...How does he do that with those cat paws? I wondered.

"The keys are plates that each have a number from 0 to 9 on theem. The gate opens when you put them in the sockets to make the correct eight-digit number. Hints for the answer are scattered all over the islaaand."

So we were meant to defeat monsters, gather the plates, and input the correct answer at the goal.

It seemed like a very “adventure” kind of event, mixing both monster hunting and riddle solving.

“Attention!” Cheshire exclaimed as he made the plates vanish, held up his equivalent of the index finger, and looked over the participants. “If you put in the *wrong* answer, the plates you used will disappear and be transported to a random place on the island, and you’ll be forced to climb the mountain all over again.”

That also meant that even if you put in the wrong answer, you could still gather the plates again and climb up the mountain for another try. I had Silver, so climbing mountains wouldn’t cost me that much time. If we did this as a party, then between my Silver, Juliet’s wings, Max’s Ipetam, and Shion’s “Prism Crawler,” as I believe it was called, we wouldn’t have any trouble getting around.

“Also, this event comes with a little bonus,” Cheshire continued. *A bonus?* “Instead of getting the death penalty, the players who die in this event will simply be teleported to their save points.”

“Wait, seriously?” Those words escaped my mouth, but who could blame me.

Dendro’s death penalty was particularly harsh even among games that had similar mechanics. It prevented players from logging in for a day of real time, which was three days in the game. However, that didn’t exist in this event, meaning that we could enjoy it without worrying about losing anything at all.

I heard some nearby participants say things like “Make that a standard feature. Holy shit...”

“Oh, but any broken gear that doesn’t have a self-repair function won’t come back, so be carefuul.” My MVP rewards wouldn’t go anywhere, but I’d have to take care that Silver didn’t get destroyed. Just like normal, then.

As that thought crossed my mind...

"You also won't drop any random loooot—you'll only drop the plates."

...Cheshire said something that completely changed the nature of this event.

It seemed like this was another mechanic to lower the riskiness of player death in this event, but that wasn't the only implication.

He'd just basically said that plates could be gathered by killing players who had them.

It was both a riddle-solving adventure event *and* a direct clash between the participants—a fight for survival between Masters.

Cheshire then went on to reveal several more rules.

First, wild monsters unrelated to the event were incapable of entering the event area.

Second, participants were unable to equip Lifesaving Brooches.

Third, each participant would start in a random location within the event area.

Fourth, all participants would start a certain distance away from each other.

Fifth, the plates possessed by those who cleared the event would vanish.

"...And finally, the event can only be cleared by *the first three peeeeooople.*"

That last one was perhaps the most important rule of all. It completely ruined our plans to party up.

"You will be transported to the area in five minutes! Use this time to prepaaare!" Cheshire said before he vanished and light returned to the space.

“So, what now?” said Chelsea. “Only the first three can clear it. That’s only half of us at most. If other participants make it, it’s even less than that.”

“Well, we said that we’re gonna team up *if* it’s a co-op thing,” said Max. “It clearly isn’t, so I guess we’re just gonna do it solo now, aren’t we?”

The sulky tone of her voice made me think that she was upset that we couldn’t do it as a group.

It wasn’t like we had to do it completely solo, though. If three people could clear it, we could do it as a party of three.

Since our starting points would be random, though, the people we ended up near would be totally up to chance.

“So...it’s not co-op, huh...?” said Alto, sounding troubled but still playing cat’s cradle. And Shion...

“Hm? Hmm? Umm?”

...She didn’t seem to have digested the rules yet.

“Well, it’s all gonna be luck, I guess,” said Chelsea. “But Julie, don’t ya think this is the perfect chance?”

“Huh?” Juliet blurted out. Chelsea was smiling, but not in a cheerful way—it was a smile of someone gazing at her biggest rival.

“No death penalty. No dueling rules or barriers. A chance like this doesn’t come often,” Chelsea continued.

“Ah!”

“Let’s go all-out and fight each other with everything we’ve got,” Chelsea said, pointing at Juliet.

“...Yeah!” Juliet replied with a strong nod. Her expression now showed none of the slight grief I’d picked up on before.

"We will now start the transportatiooon!" Cheshire's voice rang out through the space again.

The event would soon begin.

"Nemesis," I called.

"Of course," she answered as she transformed into a greatsword and I prepared for the transportation.

"Oh, one last thing before you gooo..." I felt the same sensation I'd had when I'd been sent here. "...Don't forget the name of this eveeent!"

And with that, we were all sent into the event area—the battlefield.

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The next moment, I found myself in a dense forest. Looking around, I saw nothing but trees, the ground, and a sky mostly blocked out by leaves.

"It appears we have been flung into the forest we saw in that image," said Nemesis.

"Yeah. And it doesn't seem like there's any monsters nearby."

We had to beat event monsters and collect the plates, but I couldn't see any of them. Cheshire had said that there'd be distance between each participant, so for now, I didn't see any other players either.

"Though, another forest... Will you use Purgatorial Flames again?"

"...I know I don't have to worry about the collateral damage this time, but a forest fire would stand out too much." The PvP aspect of the event probably wouldn't escalate until the participants gathered more plates, but you could never be too careful. "First, I'd like to take a look at the surroundings and find out where I am," I said.

"Silver!"

I took out my Prism Steed and hopped onto his back.

I figured I'd ride up into the sky to look around and *then* decide what to do.

I'd also like to meet up with the others as soon as possible.

"All right, so let's go up and—" I prepared to gain altitude, but then I heard a noise like a helicopter in flight. "Ah!"

I quickly made Silver dive into the foliage. Then, hiding between the tree branches and leaves, I looked up at the sky.

The source of the sound turned out to be a bird-like flying machine with two sets of whirling helicopter blades. It was either an Embryo or a Dryfean vehicle, and it had taken to the skies before I had.

"What do we do now?" Nemesis asked. Going to the sky now could result in a battle.

Is the informational advantage worth the risk? I wondered, but before I could make a decision, I heard a loud explosion.

Someone had shot down the flying machine.

A line of light—a beam—flashing up from the surface pierced right through the vehicle, bringing it down from the skies. Penetrated by the light, it caught fire, fell to the ground, and transformed into motes glowing particles—making it obvious that the Master flying it had been disqualified.

"That might've been us if we'd gotten there first," I said.

"...It is best to avoid the skies, then," said Nemesis. "At the very least, we cannot fly as long as those with such powerful anti-air capability remain."

"Yeah." I spurred Silver out of the foliage and downwards, deciding that we should move on the ground, using the forest as cover from those beams.

This event might turn out to be harder than I expected.

Interlude: The Strongest Pieces on the Board

Event Area, North

Atop a small hill, there stood a multi-legged machine.

Having just fired, its muzzle was hot, releasing white smoke into the air.

It wasn't a cannon, however. It possessed legs in the most literal sense, and the "muzzle" of its weapon was actually the end of its *tail*.

On top of that, the unit had pincers installed on its front, overall giving it the look of a mechanical scorpion. It was the very superweapon that had just brought down a participant using its magically charged particle cannon—a weapon dating back to the pre-ancient civilization.

"...A hit," said the woman within the mechanical scorpion's cockpit.

The upper half of her face was hidden by a visor that linked her to the scorpion, but it was still obvious that she thought very little of her kill.

"There is...no data on that enemy," she said. "I saw both The Unbreakable and Black Crow in the lobby. It would've been great if that was them..."

She was a Dryfean Master.

Of course, this event had nothing to do with wars or any squabbles between countries. The participants came from all over the world.

Despite that, here was someone who looked at it from a different angle.

"I got no idea how good the reward is...but for Reinhard's sake, I...should probably prevent it from ending up in Altar's hands."

Speaking the name of the imperator—as well as the person who did maintenance on her unit—she nodded to herself.

“I’ll aim for victory while still taking them down. Let’s go, Citrine.”

This was the woman who rode her cherished Prism Crawler No. 2—Citrine Obliterator.

Fifth in Dryfe’s kill rankings, she was Flow Princess, Juba—a pre-Superior from the imperium.

Event Area, Southeast

On an expansive plain, two Masters faced each other.

One was a bald man of rather advanced age with two different battle-axes on his back.

The other was a youth in a cowboy hat—someone who wouldn’t look out of place in a western film.

They sought each other out fully intent on fighting, but their hands were now completely still. Though their expressions were full of animosity, they seemed to have no intention of attacking each other.

“So, cowboy...you’re also participating in this event.”

“That’s *my* line, lumberjack. I thought I was lucky to be chosen, but it’s lookin’ like it might’ve been *bad* luck.”

Despite clearly not enjoying each other’s presence, they were actually not only part of the same country, but the same clan, as well.

“Stand aside, seventh. I will be the one to bring the reward to Lady Huili.”

“That’s *another* one of my lines. And this ain’t no arena, partner. I’ll crush ya, fifth rank or no.”

They were respectively the fifth and seventh in Huang He's duel rankings, as well as two of the "Five Generals" of Huili's Army of Fools—the empire's top clan.

They competed in duels as well as in their contributions to Huili, who was said to be one of the most beautiful women in *Infinite Dendrogram*. Because of this, they had never gotten along.

It wasn't uncommon to see them squabble just like this, making Xunyu often say things like, "Man, whY's basically every one of our top duel rAnkers like *this*? Why can't thEy be more like me and Cang?"

They threatened each other, but neither raised a hand to fight.

Though their clan leader allowed rivalries, sabotaging other members was forbidden, so neither of them was able to take action to remove the other from this event.

"Tch... Just drop out after clearing the path for me."

"You really can't stop stealing my lines, can ya?"

The two then turned around and went to search for other prey.

Fifth in Huang He's duel rankings—King of Axes, Wan Zihao.

Seventh in Huang He's duel rankings—King of Cowboys, Jamie Crescent.

They were both pre-Superiors from Huang He.

Event Area, South

"Hmmm-hm-hmm, hmm-hmm-hmm..." A woman was walking by a river while cheerfully humming the Japanese children's song "Kagome Kagome."

While her features were those of a proper noble lady, her expression was closer to that of a child overjoyed to go on a picnic. This contrast

had a strange sort of charm to it, but that was where her charms ended.

Below her neck, under clothing that resembled an oddly modified kimono, there were countless scars, both large and small. Growing from her shoulders were two extra pairs of metal arms, which, combined with her own natural limbs, gave her a total of six.

Most importantly, she was surrounded by other participants who at that very moment were dying and becoming bits of light one after the next.

“AGHHHHHHH...”

“S-STO—?!”

“GUHHH...”

There was death and blood all around her, yet her steps were light, as though she couldn’t be happier.

But suddenly, her smile vanished, she stopped humming, and turned around.

“Whooo is behiiind youuu nooow...? No one, it seems,” she said, sounding disappointed, with a serious expression on her face.

The only things left moving were her weapons.

“I was having so much fun that it ended before I could even finish the song,” she said. “How troubling that you would stop moving just because you are dead. Isn’t there at least *one* Death Soldier among you?”

Receiving no answer, she let out a regretful sigh.

“Hmm. Well, no matter. I will surely come across a strong individual if I merely keep on killing. After all, this is a festival with Masters from the world over,” she said, composing herself and cracking a smile again. “This is not the island full of those I know well. To be

part of a murder spree as enthralling as this... It is only natural that it would uplift me as it has."

Resuming her singing, the Asura of Tenchi began to stroll around the island.

Event Area, Middle

He said not a single word. Post-transportation, he'd realized that he was in the island's central mountain that he'd seen on the screen.

Whether it was someone's intention or by mere chance, he'd appeared close to the gate that served as the goal of the event. However, since there were none of the plate-dropping monsters nearby, he would have to go down the mountain to gather them.

Still, being here let him read the hint that was emblazoned on the gate itself.

Not saying a word, he chose to change his equipment right away. Since his gear was so well known, he'd taken it off in the lobby so as not to stand out.

Using Instant Wear, he switched to the full-body armor he usually wore. After changing, he did some meddling around the gate, then began walking away.

The footprints he left behind looked like those of a cartoonish bear.

Chapter Three: The Dark Knight, the Nukenin, and the Fallen Angel

Paladin, Ray Starling

So, it turned out the monsters we were supposed to kill during this event were called “Plate Holders.”

They looked like puppets made from some kind of ore—and one of them was attacking me right this very moment.

“Ngh!” I let out a groan as I switched Nemesis into the Black Mirror’s twin swords mode. The trees surrounding us made it hard to fight with the greatsword.

To avoid forest fires, I wasn’t using my Purgatorial Flames and judging by how the thing looked, I doubted that Hellish Miasma would do anything, so I was left with no choice but to fight using Nemesis.

The creature’s stats didn’t seem to be that great, though.

It was like one of the Planting Golems from the other day, just without the regeneration. I figured I’d have no trouble beating it.

Well, you needed a minimum of eight plates to clear this event, multiple people could do it, and you could try again if you got it wrong, so making these monsters too strong would probably have ruined the game’s balance.

“Whoa.” Before I knew it, the Plate Holder was dead, and it had dropped a plate with the number “2” on it.

“Mhm. So we must gather eight such plates,” said Nemesis. “Though, an eight-digit number? That could be...”

Yeah, there’s only a few types of numbers that have exactly that many digits, I thought.

“...It could be a date of some kind,” I said. “Day-month-year.”

“Even if it is, there are a myriad of dates to choose from. And there still remains the possibility that the correct number has nothing to do with the calendar at all.”

“Yeah. That’s where the hints scattered across the island come in, I guess.”

We had to gather plates from these monsters, find the hidden hints, and watch out for the other participants who may or may not have anti-air weapons.

...This event sure will keep us busy, huh? I thought. Though, the lack of real risk makes it less mentally taxing and stressful than what I usually do.

“Do not let your guard down,” Nemesis warned. “You have no Brooch this time. That makes one less lifeline keeping you here.”

“Yeah. Be ready to put up Counter Absorption if you sense any danger.”

“Certainly,” she said as she turned back into her greatsword form.

Black Mirror was her fourth and newest form, but she couldn’t use Counter Absorption while she was in it, so the greatsword was better when we had to watch out for ambushes.

With the preparations done, we resumed traveling through the forest.

I encountered a couple more Plate Holders, but I hadn’t yet met a single other participant.

I can hear sounds of fighting, though, I thought.

“They might have noticed you and retreated before you spotted them,” said Nemesis.

“...Why aren’t they approaching me?” I wondered.

“They might have decided that fighting while so few people actually have plates is meaningless, or...”

“Or...what?”

“...Your apparel scared them away.”

“Whaa...?” My gear was the same as ever—Nemesis in hand, Storm Visage, Black Warcoat, and Grudge-Soaked Greaves.

Hell, without my VDA, my look was actually kind of toned-down from the usual.

“You scare away even tian brigands,” Nemesis added.

“Everyone here’s a Master, though...”

“In that case, they might be aware that you successfully faced Dryfe’s Superiors and that your combat style is not well suited to endurance battles. Who in their right mind would fight you at the point where you have all your cards in hand?”

“...Good point.”

I actually *didn’t* have all my cards in hand, though.

Since I’d used my boots at the peace talks to summon Gardranda, the grudge levels in them were still low, while Monochrome was still far from fully charged. Other people wouldn’t know that, though, so it made sense that they’d be wary of me .

“...Whoa!” Suddenly, I heard the sound of someone running ahead of me, coupled with the noise of trees being destroyed.

Looking beyond the trees in front, I saw something that deviated from the scenery of the forest I’d been seeing so far.

It looked like smoke—a white cloud on the surface, spreading out and *flowing towards me*.

“WAAAAT! I DON’T HAVE ANY! I GOT NO PLAAATES!” a familiar voice screamed.

“HYAHAAAH! I SEE, I KILL! WINNING’S GONNA BE A CAKEWALK WHEN I’M THE ONLY ONE LEFT!” another person yelled in response, making me wonder if the guy was RP’ing some battle-crazed lunatic.

“Ah!” the first person—Alto—cried as she leaped out of the smoke, her eyes widening in surprise when she spotted me.

“WHOOO! ANOTHER ONE!” the other person said, rushing to follow after her. He was a mohawked, muscle-bound man with a metal plate covering his face and a comically large gauntlet on his left arm.

A gauntlet that was currently being thrown directly at me. “Counter Absorption!” Nemesis and I cried in unison, preventing the gauntlet from even touching me.

I couldn’t afford to worry about wasting my skill uses or waste time calculating if I could withstand the blow without it—every participant here was a Master, and there was no guarantee they *didn’t* have skills that could instakill me.

My decision turned out to be correct, as the barrier of light we’d created immediately cracked upon impact, threatening to break.

“WHAAAT?! THAT WAS MY ‘LEGEND OF THE STRONGEST FIST—POLYDEUKES’! HOW THE HELL'D YA BLOCK IT?!” The moment the attack came, I’d launched into a motion that was basically muscle memory at this point—the Impact Counter.

Nemesis touched the enemy at about the same moment the attack had landed...

“Vengeance is Mine!”

...and without the Brooch to protect him, my retribution skill pulverized him instantly.

The attack that had nearly broken Counter Absorption was probably an offense-enhancing ult, just like B3's Atlas. Returned to him twofold, all of this damage turned the mohawked Master into motes of light before he even realized what was happening.

A moment later, the several plates he'd presumably gathered from monsters fell where he'd once stood.

"That was rather perfect," said Nemesis.

"It would've been pretty bad if he broke through, though." Knowing that Counter Absorption could presumably handle up to 300,000 damage, it was impressive that he came so close to its limit.

Assuming there were tons of Masters that powerful here, this event might've been more high-level than I thought.

"Oh yeah, Natsu— I mean, Alto?"

"Raaayyy! Thank you sooo much!" Alto said as she grabbed my hand and shook it up and down. "I told him I had no plates, but he just kept chasing me! I tried using a smokescreen to escape, but he was *this* close to catchin' me..."

It seemed that the smoke I'd seen was the product of one of her skills.

"So, what now?" I asked.

"Huh?" Alto looked at my face, then Nemesis, then the place where the mohawked, masked musclehead had become bits of light and said, "I'm not fighting you! It's too scary!" As she said this, she shook her head vigorously. "So let's team up!"

"...From fighting straight to teaming up. Quite a leap, that," said Nemesis.

"Hey, a whole three people can clear it and we're friends, so there's no reason not to!"

...Well, that's more or less exactly how I see the situation, I thought.

“And on top of that, you’re not the type who can fight a lotta times, right? You used up one of your barriers just now too.”

I said nothing. She’d watched the recordings, so she seemed to know what I could and couldn’t do.

She was right—that punch had cost me one of my three Counter Absorption uses, leaving me with just two.

“I’m a Nukenin, so I got a bunch of skills that can help ya escape!” Alto said.

“Nukenin? As in, a runaway ninja? I knew there was a ninja grouping, but didn’t think there’d be a Nukenin job,” I said.

Is that really a “job,” though...? I wondered.

“I would say that your Death Soldier is no more of a ‘job’ than her Nukenin,” said Nemesis. *Point taken.*

“The skill I used was Art of Smokescreen,” Alto continued. “It spreads smoke that messes with perception skills. It does blind both friends and enemies, though!”

So that was why that mohawked musclehead hadn’t noticed me until it was too late.

“That’s a powerful skill,” I said.

“Yep-yep. Nukenin is one of the ninja grouping’s high-rank jobs! It’s not very strong in fights, though!”

...So it is a high-rank job, I thought. Well, I guess if you aren’t a decent ninja, you can’t last as a runaway one.

“So yeah, I come with the added bonus of letting you avoid useless battles! How about it?”

This event was partially about survival. With that in mind, her skills might've been more useful to me than some additional mediocre firepower.

"I'll throw a game into the mix too! It's okay! Let's play some cat's cradle!"

"What's with your passion for cat's cradle?" That aside, though... "You can hold off on the game, but I'm fine with teaming up," I said. I couldn't keep fighting endlessly, so I had to pick and choose my battles. Alto, on the other hand, was great at disengaging, but didn't have much raw combat potential. We would both benefit from teaming up.

"YAAAYY! I got a bodyguard!"

Hey, you can fight the monsters yourself, can't you?

Anyway, we resumed the search—now as a duo. The both of us watched out for other participants while hunting the monsters we came across.

Despite what she'd said, Alto actually did participate in the battles. Like the ninja she was, she fought by throwing kunai and shuriken from mid-range.

They really didn't seem to do much damage, though.

"Normally, I make these poisonous or explosive, but it doesn't look like poison would work on them, while explosions would attract the attention of other players—and we don't want that, do we?" she explained, and I could actually see her point. I myself wasn't using Purgatorial Flames to avoid starting a forest fire that would attract everyone on the island.

Since basically everyone was an enemy, the only ones who could afford to stand out were the ones powerful enough to deal with the

consequences of that. Anyone else would be brought down just like that Master with the flying machine.

"Oh, Ray, you should put this on," said Alto, handing me a folded piece of cloth.

"What's this?" I asked.

"Some cloth."

"I can tell that much. Why are you giving it to me?"

"You should use it to hide your face."

"...Why?" It wasn't a piece of gear and didn't seem to give any stats...

"I mean, you're a retribution build, right? Plus you're famous and tons of people know your face, so I think you'll have a hard time landing counters as easily as you did back there."

...She had a point.

"It's not gonna do much against those who'll still fight you even knowing who you are, but no one knows *everyone* in this event, so it'll help a bit, doncha think?"

"I do. Guess I'll use it, then. Thanks," I said as I took the cloth from her and wrapped it on my face.

I thought I'd have trouble breathing with it, but thanks to Storm Visage, I was just fine.

"How's this?" I asked. The silence I got in response was deafening. *Hey, what the hell?* I thought.

"You went past 'dark knight' and straight into 'undead' territory," said Alto. "Like one of those corpse-things that lost its face."

"The cloth and oxygen mask combo makes even your breathing sound terrifying," said Nemesis. I responded by breathing even more

heavily. "...Well, I suppose it would do the job of concealing your identity," she added.

"Oh yeah! It's perfect!" Alto approved of that, at least. Well, if it was useful, then all was good. I needed to increase my chances of winning as much as possible, so every little bit helped.

Now done with my..."transformation," we resumed walking.

"Hm? Oh yeah..." I said, realizing something.

Alto knew of our skills and was worried that other participants would know about them too. However, I knew barely anything about what *she* could do...particularly, her Embryo.

"Hey, Alto," I said.

"Cat's cradle?"

"No. You still haven't told me about your Embryo."

"Ohhh..." she said, her eyes darting to and fro as though something was bothering her. "Hmm... Ray, have you got a good head on your shoulders?"

"...We go to the same college." What kind of question was that? And from her, of all people?

"That's not what I mean. Are you good at riddles and stuff?"

"I'm about average, I guess?" I couldn't recall dabbling in them all that much.

"Then let's just leave it at that. If the riddle thing goes wrong, it could be all over for us."

"...Are you implying your Embryo can't be used if your friend doesn't solve a riddle?"

"It's kinda like that, yeah."

“I see...” Knowing how Embryos worked, it wasn’t that far-fetched that there might be ones that really were that weird. Honestly, seeing as Natsume was the kind of person who asked everyone if they wanted to play cat’s cradle, it would only make sense for her Embryo to be particularly bizarre.

“By the way, Ray. What’s our plate situation?” she asked.

“With the one we just got, we have exactly ten.”

There were three that said “2,” three that said “4,” two that said “0,” one that said “1,” and one that said “5.”

“...Seems a bit unbalanced, doesn’t it?” said Alto.

“I see what you mean, but it’s still just ten plates,” I replied. “Though, if there’s a meaning to this lack of balance, then I guess it’d suggest that the answer uses both ‘2’ and ‘4.’”

“It’s eight digits, so maybe it’s a date?”

She thought of the same thing we did, I thought.

“It’s possible, but we can’t be sure just yet. We need to find the hints.”

“Yep-yep. But wouldn’t it be easier to search while flying? You *can* fly, right?”

Oh yeah, I haven’t explained that to her, I thought.

“It’s...not a good idea right now,” I said. “There’s someone with some crazy anti-air powers, so if we go up...”

Before I could finish my explanation, another beam of light pierced through the small bit of sky we could see through the forest canopy.

“...We’re gonna get shot down like *that*.” *Looks like they’re still at it,* I thought.

“Wooow. That looks like it’s from a sci-fi anime. We can’t deal with *that!*” said Alto.

Well, it sure was easy to get her to understand... Hm?

“Is that the sound of something falling from above...?” asked Nemesis. Her words, combined with the rushing noise of the air parting, made me look up again.

A moment later, something broke the branches above our heads, and a black object fell onto the ground ahead of us.

Before crashing to the ground, it created a gust of wind and scattered feathers everywhere, which then slowly floated to the ground like black snow.

The feathers surrounded a black-clad girl, now lying unconscious in a small crater.

“...Juliet?” Indeed—it was none other than the Altarian duel ranker and the friend who was participating in this event alongside us. Her body and gear were both badly damaged, and most importantly, her Embryo-wings...Hræsvelgr had lost most of its feathers.

“Ray! A girl fell from the sky!” said Alto as if she had been waiting her whole life to say that.

“Shut up for a second,” I said as I considered Juliet’s situation.

I didn’t know for what purpose, but she’d taken to the sky to examine the landscape before the anti-air beam-shooting Master had brought her down.

“And since the feathers are all over the place, I guess she used Molting to reduce the damage.” She’d used that skill with me during our sparring matches. It was one of Hræsvelgr’s skills, and it basically functioned like reactive armor. It caused it to release its feathers with a burst of wind and dark magic, making it a combination of a defensive skill and ablative armor.

It did, however, have a drawback—losing its feathers made Hræsvelgr unable to fly for the three hours until they came back.

“So, Ray... You gonna finish her off?”

“Hell no!” *I know this isn’t a serious event, but I’m not the kind of scumbag who attacks his friends when they’re unconscious!*

“But duel rankers are the kind of people who go around the battlefield singing and turning people into mincemeat, aren’t they? Isn’t it dangerous to leave her be?”

“The duel rankers I know aren’t...well...yeah. They aren’t like that. Probably,” I said.

“It is troubling that you cannot say that with certainty,” said Nemesis.

...Well, I did see Figaro churn through all of Mad Castle like a blender, I thought. Wait, did Alto just imply that there’s a lot of people like that in Tenchi?

“All I know is that you don’t have to worry about that with Juliet. Anyway...”

Leaving her here Fainted would’ve left a bad taste in my mouth, so I decided to take her with us.

◇◇◇

???

“I messed up...”

Juliet was in the place where Masters who had Fainted or were under the effects of Forced Sleep were taken to. It had many names, but Juliet’s group referred to it as the “waiting space.”

“Was I panicking?” she wondered, her head bowed. She was worried that this might’ve been her last day to play with her friends, and because of this, she rushed to search for Chelsea and fulfill her promise—to seize this opportunity and use it to the fullest.

Chelsea was Juliet's longtime rival and closest friend, and this might've been her last chance to battle her. It seemed that the sentiment had overwhelmed her, making her overlook the possibility that there could be Masters present with anti-air attacks.

As a result, she was caught off guard, and though she was able to use Molting to avoid a direct hit, she was still shot down and had lost consciousness.

"I know I'm the *Fallen Knight*, but this is too much... Though, since I'm here in the waiting space, I guess I haven't gotten the death penalty..."

There was no telling when someone would finish her off, though.

"Chelsea..." Feeling apologetic towards her dear friend, Juliet was at a loss as she waited for the death penalty to come.

However, a whole five minutes passed, and she was still alive.

"What's going on...?" she wondered—right as the so-called waiting space around her began to dissolve.

Juliet knew that meant that she was recovering from her Fainting, and the next moment, she found that her body was swaying back and forth rhythmically. She couldn't open her eyes yet, but she could hear sounds—particularly the sound of a horse's hooves hitting the ground.

"We haven't run into anyone since then, huh, Ray? Not like I really want to run into anybody."

"Yeah, so far, I've just met you, the mohawk guy, and Juliet. This island might be pretty big."

Juliet then heard the voices of her friend, Ray, and Ray's friend, Alto.

She realized that they must have saved her and began to consider something else—specifically, the situation she was in.

Ah. Wait... Is this...?! she thought as a certain image came to mind—an illustration from a children's tale she'd read in elementary school, showing a prince astride a white horse with the princess clasped in his arms. That mental image made her wonder if she was currently in the exact same situation as the princess, with Ray holding her as they rode.

Hm...! Hm...?! she thought, flustered. Juliet had a high opinion of Ray. He was a friend who shared her taste in clothing and a sparring partner with a shockingly good sense for combat.

To her, he was "more than a friend, but less than a bestie"... Even if she did like him in a different way, there wasn't much to it.

Still, if he went and treated her like a princess straight out of a fairytale, she couldn't help but tense up and...

"By the way, Ray... Isn't this the kind of situation where you oughta princess-carry her? Or give her a piggyback ride at least?"

Huh? Juliet thought. Alto's words made her realize that a princess-carry would put her facing up. However, her senses were telling her that she was *facedown*, and that she was on top of something.

"Hey, it'd be pretty bad if we got ambushed and I couldn't use both of my arms, wouldn't it?" said Ray.

"Alto, although Ray tends to be the voice of reason, he may sometimes do strange things," said Nemesis.

On top of that, Juliet also felt that she was tied to something at her waist.

That was when she opened her eyes.

"Oh, she's awake. You okay, Juliet?" Ray—who was wearing a dark-looking mask—questioned her with a worried tone, while Alto looked at her with pitying eyes.

And so, Juliet found out that she'd been put on Silver's back belly-down and tied to him so she wouldn't fall.

Ah. This is how they carry bags of rice, not princesses...

The reality was so far from what she'd envisioned that Juliet couldn't help but feel a little shocked.

Chapter Four: Another Team Up

Event Area, Southeast, Plains

An hour had passed since the event's beginning. The surviving participants were now enacting their plans to come out on top.

Some were focusing on hunting monsters and searching for clues to the puzzle, while others found advantageous positions and lay in wait to ambush other participants.

And then, there were some who attacked monsters and people without care or restraint.

"All right. Time to get this rodeo started," said King of Cowboys, Jamie Crescent. He was among those who chose to fight indiscriminately. "C'mere, Matanga," he said, making his crest glow and release his Embryo.

"PHOOO!" The creature made a loud noise as it manifested its form—a seven-trunked white elephant named "Elephantine Cloudscape, Abhra-Matanga." It was based on an entity from Hinduism that went by many names, among which were "Airavata" and "Elephant of the Clouds."

"Pale-Clouded Field of Unsight—Abhra-Matanga," Jamie said, unleashing his ultimate. True to its name, Matanga began releasing dense clouds from its seven trunks. So white they blocked sight of the land below, the clouds spread until they engulfed Jamie himself. They soon reached as far as four hundred metels in every direction.

And then, those same clouds assumed a form similar to that creature that had created them—a massive, seven-trunked elephant.

"There we go. That's a good size," Jamie said as he sat down on the heart of the gigantic cloud-elephant—Abhra-Matanga's actual body.

Having activated his ultimate skill, he then began enacting his plan for victory—crushing everyone else.

“All right, Matanga. Move,” he said. Obeying his command, the Embryo began to push forwards, *causing the cloud-elephant to move at the same time.*

Like a thunderhead that had fallen from the sky, the giant cloud-creature walked on the surface of the ground. However, it was nothing but vapor, so it lacked the weight to do much harm to the land below.

Still, its majesty was enough to invoke terror in the other participants.

“An enemy! Disintegrating Bow of Divine Lightning—INDRAAAAA!” a Master ahead of the cloud-elephant roared, unleashing his Embryo’s ultimate skill.

A bolt of lighting that rivaled a Superior Job’s ult in power struck the massive being, despite the fact that it was made entirely of clouds.

“That’s one helluva skill, partner. Man, 500,000 damage sure is somethin’,” Jamie said, showing no surprise that his elephant had been hit.

This was simply how Abhra-Matanga functioned—the cloud-elephant that echoed its true form was now part of its body.

“It took a whole 1% of HP outta my boy. Got a few tough guys here, huh?” he added—implying that his Embryo had 50,000,000 HP.
“Trample ‘im.”

With those words, the clouds moved to crush the Master who had exposed his location. Each step made far less noise than its size would indicate, but it was still enough to crush trees and monsters below.

And, perhaps most importantly, the cloud-elephant would never stop.

Attacks on it had almost no effect, so it was easily able to approach its target and begin stomping on him over and over again. For something as big as it was, Abhra-Matanga didn't seem to do much damage. However, since it did not respond to retaliation, it could just repeat its weak attacks until its enemies were dead.

Unable to escape or withstand it, Indra's Master soon fell.

King of Cowboys, Jamie Crescent was a member of the top clan in Huang He, Huili Yuminjun, and his role there could be summed up with the word "tank." His cloud-elephant had the immense HP to weather any attack and carve open the path for his teammates.

This was made possible by his Embryo and job combo.

Abhra-Matanga's base stats were on the level of a Pure-Dragon. It had 100,000 HP; 5,000 END; and an AGI score that didn't even reach four digits.

However, the clouds it released with its ult allowed it to grow in size, increasing its HP by a factor of 50.

This ult was essentially a skill that gave it HP in exchange for increasing its size. It did nothing to Abhra-Matanga's other stats, so its attack and speed remained the same. However, it greatly increased its hitbox, making it difficult to dodge *any* attacks—opponents had difficulty evading the giant creature's strikes, and in turn it struggled to avoid anything aimed its way.

On its own, the skill would lead to Matanga being pelted with attacks and dying in spite of its vast HP.

That was where Jamie's skills as King of Cowboys came in.

Found in the eastern parts of the continent, King of Cowboys was a hybrid Superior Job mixing the rider and tamer groupings, and was somewhat like the polar opposite of King of Chariots.

Whereas King of Chariots enhanced machines and other similar devices, King of Cowboys enhanced living creatures. One of the job's skills, Cattle Lifeforce Enhancement, multiplied the HP of King of Cowboy's tamed monsters by 10.

This skill was originally meant to help with stock-farming or subsidize a job's ultimate skill, but when combined with Abhra-Matanga's own skill, its HP went above and beyond.

Despite being a Sentinel—a high-rank Guardian—in its sixth form, it could achieve HP totals that surpassed those of Mythical UBMAs.

With the addition of Lifelink diverting all damage suffered by the tamer to his monsters, you couldn't even kill it by targeting Jamie himself.

Few tanks were as potent as a fully enhanced Abhra-Matanga.

“If only I could do this at duels. I sure wouldn’t be stuck at seventh anymore.” Indeed—Matanga’s ultimate could only be fully utilized in open fields. The confines of the duel barriers made it impossible for the combo to work as it did now, so the other duelists could overcome the limited buff to its HP.

In fact, Matanga had once been burned away completely by the second in the duel rankings, Xunyu.

“This here’s *my* pasture, though. I’ll crush the rest, win this little shindig and go git my praise from Lady Huili,” he said with a smile even as his cloud-elephant was being continually pelted with attacks. Everyone nearby had immediately decided he was the greatest threat and had focused their spells, arrows, and thrown weapons on Matanga, who didn’t seem to care all that much.

"These folks here are all hat, no cattle. They're showin' me exactly where we gotta go to crush 'em," Jamie said, directing Matanga towards the source of all the attacks.

Crushing his enemies one after the other, he advanced to the north of the southeastern plains area until he came upon a river.

Beyond the river stood a dense forest. The river was by no means small, but the cloud-elephant could traverse it in a single step, and the trees of the forest were little more than blades of grass to its massive legs.

Jamie considered moving forwards and crushing any enemies that might be hiding inside...

"...Stop."

...but then he ordered Matanga to freeze in place.

Seated on the massive elephant, he looked down into the forest, where he spotted a particular element of scenery.

"...I saw that in a picture," he said. "Heard of it too. Seems like we really *do* have Masters from all over the world here. All righty, then..."

He hesitated a moment, wondering whether he should change course or press on...

"Matanga...we'll go on a Rodeo Drive."

...and decided to charge ahead.

"BHOOOHHH!"

"Rodeo Drive" was the name of King of Cowboys' *final* ultimate job skill. It multiplied all of his mount's stats aside from HP by 10 in exchange for draining HP at the appalling rate of 10,000 per *second*.

This HP drain would kill most mounts, but with fully enhanced Abhra-Matanga boasting a whole 50,000,000 HP, it was merely a drop in the bucket.

It was difficult to use in duels due to the aforementioned limitations the dueling rules put on Matanga's ult, but there were no such restrictions holding them back now. Jamie prepared to unleash it while charging into the forest...

"If they want a rodeo, then I'll give 'em one! Rodeo—"

...only for Matanga to vanish before he could do so.

"...Dri— Huh?"

The cloud-elephant vanished as Matanga's true form became bits of light.

Left hundreds of metels above the surface, Jamie began to fall.

"What in tarnation...?" he cried, moments before he hit the ground and died instantly.



Upon witnessing the disappearance of the massive elephant and the death of its Master, another Master—a beautiful woman clad all in black—puffed out her chest.

"Oh ho ho ho! And just like that, it is done!" She was thirteenth in every ranking in Altar—Dark Princess, Shion Manjushage.

"...This feels like a bit much. You actually made me feel *bad* for Jamie," another person replied, in a pitying tone of voice. This other voice was Max.

"That big thing was an Embryo, and my Judas is an Embryo too!" Shion replied. "That makes us even and this battle was fair!"

"Judas" was the name of Shion's Embryo, and it was exactly what had caused the cloud-elephant to vanish—or rather to instantly die.

It was a Type Rule which gave all of her attacks a high chance to apply status effects. Normally, the status effect applied was randomly picked from a pool of thirteen, but her ultimate skill guaranteed that the target would receive a Death Sentence.

Shion's build combined her spells as the Dark Princess—a dark magic Superior Job—with the high-probability debuffs from her Embryo, Judas.

"That thing was so huge and tough that he probably didn't even notice the Death Sentence debuff," said a third person—Chelsea—with a wry grin on her face. "Funny, since there was a countdown right above it."

She'd been watching Jamie's defeat alongside Shion and Max. The three of them had met up some time before the cloud-elephant appeared, and as a result, they'd agreed to team up for the time being.

Chelsea was in fact the one who'd told Shion to attack the elephant. The Dark Princess had then used her Embryo's ult, Kiss of Death—Judas, and fired a controllable dark magic projectile. Using that projectile, she had been able to land a hit on the creature that appeared to come from a different direction.

While using that tactic to misdirect Jamie, they waited for the curse's countdown to reach 0 and kill the elephant.

It's not like it'd have helped him if he knew where we were, Chelsea thought. *Once it hits, Shion's ult can only be canceled by convincing her to do it herself.*

It was widely believed that Judas's Death Sentence could only be undone by Shion's own will.

Is that really the only way, though? Does she really have to just land it like that? Honestly, it's so broken that it makes me kind of uneasy. Well, even a dummy like Shion wouldn't answer an

incriminating question like that...and she probably hasn't consulted anyone else even if she doesn't get it herself.

Regardless, nobody in a battle royale would want to deal with an unavoidable one-hit-kill ability like Judas had.

It's a reliable thing to have on your side, though, Chelsea thought. This had been why she'd chosen to convince Shion to try clearing the event as a group of three.

I'll have to pass on Ray and his friend. I'm not gonna make an enemy out of Shion. And Maxie has info on eastern rankers we don't know anything about.

Max had started out in Tenchi and had even become a duel ranker there, so she knew about rankers from the east—Jamie included.

If I'm gonna fight Julie, these guys are my best bet in terms of reliability and power... It's the best way to clear this event and have an all-out fight with Julie.

Being a duel ranker and ex-leader of a ranking clan, Chelsea calmly and thoroughly analyzed the situation.

Though, maybe we should've kept that elephant alive a bit longer. Shion would win against it ten times outta ten just 'cause of the compatibility... Wait, that aside...

"...I wonder why that elephant stopped moving," she said, thinking back to the massive cloud-creature stopping before a river.

"Perhaps it was in preparation for a skill?" Shion said.

"If that's the case, there must've been somethin' there that made him think to use it."

"Well, it ain't like we can figure out what's goin' on in the forest from here," Max said.

“...True.” Jamie could see far and wide from his Matanga, but Chelsea’s group had no means of finding out what was beyond the dense trees.

If Julie were here, we could’ve had her fly up and look around, but that’s not somethin’ we can count on this time, huh? They had little info on the forested area, but if the giant elephant had stopped and tried to charge into it with a skill, it was probably best to avoid it.

“Let’s go to the opposite side of the forest. We still got no hints or plates,” Chelsea said.

“Huh? What about the plates Mr. Elephant dropped?” Shion asked.

“Leave ‘em. Everyone could see ‘em drop, so there’s probably tons of Masters fightin’ there now.”

“Well, that makes me a sad panda...” Shion was disappointed, but she understood the risk and did as she was told.

And so, the group went away from the northeast forest and headed southwest instead.

...I wonder where Julie’s fightin’ now. Chelsea’s thoughts wandered to the friend she had promised to face with all her strength.



Juliet, meanwhile, was near the center of the forest Chelsea’s group were currently avoiding, in a space surrounded by trees that had been cut down in a strange manner.

“Ugh...!” she let out. Her expression showed how tense she was better than any words could.

“This woman...!” Nemesis said.

“...This reminds me of when I first met Figaro. I wonder why,” said Ray.

“Wh-Wh-Wha?! Wh-Wh-Wh-Wha?!” Alto replied, if something like that could even be called “replying.”

“Oh, it appears I have stumbled upon quite an exciting group,” said the fourth person here—their opponent.

Both a woman and an asura, she wielded different weapons in both of her hands as well as the two extra pairs of prosthetic arms sticking out of her shoulders. On top of that, a whole six more weapons floated around her.

She was like a many-armed deity depicted in some eastern religions.

“A-Ahhhhhhh... Th... Asu—?!” Alto had been trembling in fear from the moment she’d seen her.

However, she was somehow able to weave together a few specific words.

“King of Asuras...Jubei Kaga?!”

This was the woman’s job, as well as her nickname. Fourth in Tenchi’s duel rankings, she was King of Asura, Jubei Kaga the “Multi-Asura,” and she was no doubt one of the strongest participants in this event.

Interlude: The Scorpion, the Axe, and the Costume

Event Area, North

Flow Princess, Juba was riding the mechanical scorpion named “Citrine Obliterator” from the hill in the north of the island towards the mountains in the center. Up until now, she’d held her position in the north, shooting down anyone careless enough to fly above her section of the island.

Now, she would hunt in the south and gather their plates.

That elephant Embryo... Juba thought. Just like many others, she'd witnessed Jamie's Abhra-Matanga, as well as the moment it vanished.

One of those attacks must've had a slow-working instadeath effect. I do know someone who can do that... Altar's "Night Spider."

The person who came to Juba’s mind was in fact exactly the Master who’d brought down Jamie—Shion Manjushage.

She was fairly famous in Altar for taking a spot in all three rankings, so she was somewhat well-known in Dryfe, as well.

The owner of the first unit...Amethyst Captor. Besides that, Juba knew Shion as a fellow owner of a Prism Crawler—an elder sibling to her Citrine. It was obvious that Shion was someone to fear.

I shot down the Black Crow. I didn't go to take her plates since she fell into the forest, but even if she survived, she'll be easily hunted down by someone else in that condition. That means that the Altarian I need to look out for the most is the Night Spider. Seeing how skillfully she took out the elephant, she must be pretty sharp.

It might have been, however, that Juba was attributing *too* much to Shion. If Chelsea or Max had heard Juba’s thoughts just now, they

would've certainly said something along the lines of "I wouldn't be so sure. Especially about the 'sharp' part."

Her own allies saw Shion as a bit of a silly goose.

...There aren't many easy flying targets now...so I guess I should make Shion Manjushage the "Night Spider" my priority target. And so, Juba and Citrine moved to search for Shion and her Amethyst.

Event Area, South

Deep inside a grove, a man looked up at the sky and sighed.

"This is what happens when you don't listen to warnings, cowboy," he said as he watched Abhra-Matanga vanish.

He was King of Axes, Wan—another member of Huili Yuminjun—and he couldn't help but be exasperated by how Jamie had retired from the game.

When at maximum size, Abhra-Matanga certainly had immense HP, and Rodeo Drive gave it plenty of attack power. Even Wan himself would have a hard time fighting against it.

However, the consensus among members of Huili Yuminjun was that being such a large target made it far too vulnerable to "less obvious" attacks.

Embryos were all unique, and many of them might have powers that could kill something in a single hit.

I suppose the only one who could pulverize it in a head-on battle is Lady Huili herself, Wan thought as he pictured the most powerful and beautiful Master he knew. The thought brought a smile to his face.

The top of Huang He's duel rankings was the Draconic Emperor, and the second was Xunyu. However, Wan and the other members of Huili Yuminjun knew that the strongest Master in Huang He was without a doubt Huili herself.

Though The Arts, Ming She might be able to defeat her, that didn't change the fact that she was indeed the strongest.

This was a truth that all Masters of Huang He would agree on.

"Anyhow, with my 'comrade' defeated, I suppose I will have to fight by myself. *Do you not think so as well?*" Wan spoke as though he was talking to himself, but he turned around as though there was someone there.

And indeed, there was a Master there with a spear held at the ready.

Based on his clothing, Wan assumed that he was from Tenchi.

"So you knew I was here," the spear-wielder said.

"Do not act like you were intending to ambush me. If I had not called out to you, you would have done so first," said Wan.

"Heh. I am no ninja or nobushi. As a martial artist, I will fight you fair and square—and I will win the same way."

"I like that. I will fight you, yes...but I will not let you have the victory."

They were both Masters, but their words certainly didn't seem Master-like. Most people would have dismissed this as just a bit of RP, but they were both genuinely elated to have found a strong enemy who shared their aura.

"HIIYAAH!" The Master from Tenchi rushed towards Wan while brandishing his weapon—a "jumonji yari" or "cross spear."

Wan equipped his battle-axe and prepared to intercept him.

A moment later, the sounds of clashing metal filled the grove.

"Hm... I see that spear is an Embryo."

"And your axe, while a work of art, seems to not be so."

Indeed, Wan's axe was not an Embryo.

It was a custom-made weapon forged by the clan's blacksmiths. One of its blades was focused on pure toughness, while the other was built to break through resistances, making it a versatile weapon fit for many situations.

Lumberjacks changed their axes depending on the trees they were cutting, and this axe worked on that same principle.

"An Embryo must have a power or two," Wan said.

"Of course!" the spear-wielder replied as he made the weapon's blade shine red.

Wan could now feel heat flowing through his axe as it clashed with the glowing spear.

So it heats up and releases the heat, Wan thought. The spear even launched small fireballs as its wielder lunged.

Wan was able to evade them, but the heat they gave off made him realize that they were likely as powerful as the ultimate skill of a high-rank flame magic job.

How very like Tenchi—simple, but usable and strong... Although...

"Erupt!" the spear-wielder cried as he thrust his weapon forwards, making it release a chain of fireballs.

Wan evaded them, and the fireballs instead struck the trees behind him.

A moment later, the trees exploded, and Wan was consumed by the flames.

"...Huh?" A voice of pure surprise rang out—not from Wan, but the spear-wielder himself.

He'd used his fireballs on trees many times now, but this had never happened before.

To escape the blast, he leaped away—only for his back to hit a tree.

What?! There was no tree here before...! he thought in shock. The man was a skilled Master from Tenchi, and he wasn't the kind of fool who would fail to properly examine his surroundings to know if they were fit for spear-fighting.

The impact of him crashing into the tree dislodged one of its ripe fruits. At the mercy of gravity, it fell on the spear-wielder's shoulder, broke open, and released its juices.

What followed were the sounds of sizzling flesh and a stomach-churning smell.

“GAAAAAHHH?!” The juice melted away the spear-wielder’s armor and burned straight through the meat of his shoulder.

An explosion, a crash, and severe burns—the chain of unexpected events had completely distracted the spear-wielder.

“This is the end,” Wan said, emerging from the blast to split the spear-wielder in half at the waist, along with the tree behind him.

Before his guts could spill onto the ground, however, the tree released a torrent of sap, which instantly caused another explosion.

The spear-wielder was completely annihilated, reduced to nothing but ash. Many martial artists from Tenchi had Death Soldier as a sub-job, but it meant nothing if the body was completely destroyed.

“My apologies for the underhanded tactics,” said Wan. “But while I did say I would fight, I said *nothing* about being fair.”

Despite being in the center of the explosion, not only was Wan himself unburned—there was not even a hint of fire damage to his clothes.

That made it obvious that there was a link between him and these strange trees.

“Now, the plates... Ah, here they are,” Wan said, looting the plates that had been blown away by the explosion. They had neither been destroyed, nor had they been damaged by the plant’s caustic sap.

“...So they *are* tougher than they look and feel. If I could bring this back, it would make a good souvenir for the blacksmiths,” he said with a smile before walking away. “I suppose I should go look for more. This event can be cleared by the first three players who solve the puzzle, but it is better to be early than late.”

In good spirits, he began hunting for his next prey.

Whether it was a monster or another participant didn’t matter to him. His goal right now was to fight to show the power of Huili Yuminjun and to present the final prize to the lady he so revered.

Thus, he walked away, leaving strange fruit-bearing trees growing behind him.

Event Area, Middle

The Master who’d started the game next to the goal—the one in the bear suit—was gazing up at the sky, watching as the giant cloud-elephant vanished.

Everyone was currently busy doing their own thing, but in the end, they would all have to head to the goal to insert their plates.

That meant that if someone set a trap here, then even flying participants would be caught in it.

That was exactly what he was doing now.

He was so focused on setting his trap that he didn’t even notice *the enemy stealthily approaching him*.

Ninja-like, but closer in appearance to a desert assassin, he was using multiple presence and sound-hiding job skills as he used a cloth to apply a special poison, produced by his Embryo, to a black dagger.

A single stab to the bear-man's back with this poisoned knife would instantly bring him down.

So careless. This is why you always need to be on guard, the assassin thought mockingly as he brought his dagger down.

It was aimed straight at the bear-man's neck, but it only softly sank into the fabric, not even breaking through to his target's body.

"Ah?!" Feeling as though he'd landed a punch on an overstuffed pillow, the assassin was overcome with shock.

However, that told him the gear had a higher defense than it seemed to.

But there was something else that shocked him—the bear-man's speed.

Just a split second after being attacked, he had grabbed the assassin by the neck.

Nghh...! But this ain't a problem! he thought, taking the same cloth he'd used to apply poison to the dagger. It was still drenched in poison so potent that it didn't have to enter the bloodstream to have an effect—it was plenty useful when merely touching the skin, as well.

He should faint in less than a...se...cond...? he thought, but reality was quite different—the power of the bear-man's grip wasn't waning as he continued to strangle the assassin.

H-Huh? It didn't...work...? As he wondered why his poison had been so ineffective, he heard the bones in his neck begin to crack.

That was when he finally realized something.

Ah, so that's how it is. He wasn't...careless... He just doesn't have t—

Before he could finish his thought, his neck snapped, and his head rolled to the ground.

Silence. The assassin transformed into bits of light, and the bear-man gathered his plates.

Done with the ambusher and the placement of traps around the goal, he then began walking towards his next destination.

Chapter Five: The Asura

Paladin, Ray Starling

The attack came in a flash.

We'd moved into the dense forest at this point, so we dismounted Silver to make it easier to traverse. Before long, however, multiple daggers shot towards us.

"Ngh?!"

Juliet and I reacted just in time. She'd used her partially recovered wings to fly backwards, while I covered Alto and used my second Counter Absorption. The barrier of light stopped the attack from the flying blade—a grudge-clad spear.

"This is..." I was able to react to it in time because the weapon was cursed. Before I'd even seen it, I'd felt my Greaves begin to absorb its grudge, which alerted me to the enemy's presence.

Having overcome the preliminary attack, I scanned our surroundings and noticed that the blade Juliet had evaded—a tachi—was still moving.

"Ah!" Seeing that made me realize that this wasn't a simple thrown projectile, but a homing weapon much like Max's Ipetam.

Counter Absorption was a powerful defensive skill, but it only prevented *one single* attack, so a follow-up strike would easily break through.

"Tch!" Nemesis clicked her tongue as she prepared to expend the third and final use of the skill, but then...

"My, what a pleasant group."

...we heard a joyful voice, after which the flying tachi stopped moving entirely.

"Finally, I've found people who survived my first attack... People who can give me a true bloodbath!" The beautiful voice was thick with happiness, plain for all to hear.

A moment later, I saw blade-trails arc through the air—which were followed by the surrounding trees crashing to the ground.

Between them, in this newly created passage through the forest, there stood a single woman.

She was dressed in clothing that resembled a kimono, and her exposed skin was covered in countless scars. Four prosthetic limbs jutted out of her shoulders, each of them grasping a bladed weapon, and there were six more weapons *floating* around her. Two of them were the spear and tachi that had attacked us.

She was clearly just another participant, but the aura of strangeness mixed with familiarity that surrounded her filled me with terror.

"This woman..." said Nemesis.

"...This reminds me of when I first met Figaro. I wonder why," I said. She seemed as threatening as Figaro had back at the Tomb Labyrinth, while her prosthetic limbs, although different in shape, reminded me of Kashimiya.

"King of Asuras...Jubei Kaga?!" Alto blurted out what I assumed were the woman's job and name.

"...King of Asuras?" I asked.

"Oh? Are you a Tenchi-dweller? You look like a kunoichi, but..." KoA said with a glance at Alto.

"Aaahh?!" Alto cowered and shook under the woman's gaze.

So she's the kind of person that can turn even this simpleminded, lighthearted cat's cradle maniac into a cowering mess, huh? I thought.

“...Some of that sounds a bit rude,” said Nemesis telepathically.

“I do not recall ever seeing you,” said KoA. “Odd, since I believe I would at least recognize the kind of Tenchi-dweller who would be *chosen* for such an event.”

“Please don’t mind me! Unlike them, I’m just a nobody!” Alto said, moving behind us so we would serve as a shield.

...Well, I am the tank of this group, so it’s whatever.

“And this is not even the first time you’ve been used as a shield. Rook did so as well just recently,” Nemesis added.

Yeah. And this honestly feels a lot better than trying to be a damage sponge against the goddamn KoB.

“I do recognize the winged lady here, though,” KoA said as she tilted her head, presumably trying to recall exactly who Juliet was.

Though her actions seemed quite casual, I couldn’t see any openings in her guard. The six floating weapons were still orbiting her like satellites.

“Truly, ’tis the hide of one hardened by battle... (She has so many scars...)” said Juliet.

“I have not died in a while,” said KoA. “The scars have accumulated.”

Changes to your avatar, such as scars or lost limbs, were removed when you recovered from a death penalty—but if you didn’t die, they would stay with you until dealt with. I knew this painfully well from my own time spent without an arm. Assuming the same was true of KoA, it meant that she’d been in countless deadly battles...yet survived them all.

And that was exactly what Juliet was referring to.

“Oh, I remember now,” KoA said as she clapped her unarmed *real* hands together and looked at us. “You are an Altarian duel ranker.

The fourth from the top, to be precise—Juliet the ‘Black Crow.’ Am I correct?”

“...You speak the truth,” Juliet said with a nod. I guess she thought that there was no point in trying to lie now that the enemy had seen her face, name, and even her Embryo.

“Eh heh heh,” King of Asuras chuckled. “I feel so lucky to meet a famous westerner. I am Jubei, a duel ranker from Tenchi. And I am the fourth, just like you. This coincidence can only be a sign that we will have a fruitful crossing of blades.”

Though her words were unsettling, the smile on her face was charming.

“The fourth, huh?” I said. That was definitely the same number as Juliet’s, but...

“The duels of Tenshi are fierce and zealous, far beyond the contests waged within our own lands.”

Yeah, just like Juliet had said, Tenchi had over double the number of duelists that Altar had, so for a more accurate comparison of ranks between our countries, you had to cut a Tenshi duelist’s rank in half.

“That means she’d be a match for the second in our rankings...Kashimiya.”

In that case, the odds were against us even if we had strength in numbers.

Though, if this was an easy battle for her, then why...?

“Why didn’t you just keep attacking us until we died?” I asked. We’d been able to deal with the first attack, but she had a whole six floating weapons to work with. She could’ve easily defeated us...or at least defeated me.

“A chance to talk to Masters from the other side of the world comes rarely, does it not?” she asked in response. “I cannot talk to you *after*

I slice you up, so I am doing so now merely to give me something to remember.”

...The mix of friendliness and bloodlust was disturbing, but it helped me understand what kind of person she was.

Still, this was something I could play along with.

“Can I ask something, then?” I said. Figuring it was our best bet, I was going to try to find out more about her.

“Ask away. Though I will ask you something in return later.” King of Asuras...or rather, Jubei readily gave me the go-ahead.

I actually hadn’t really expected this to work, but now that I had her attention...

“...Are those weapons floating because of an Embryo skill? Your Embryo’s the arms growing out of your shoulders, right?” While Embryos like Figaro’s replaced a part of the body, the arms seemed to be more like Juliet’s wings—a so-called “Fusion-Arms” type Embryo that *added* new body parts.

“Asura is indeed my Embryo, but the weapons float due to a job skill. It is called ‘Asuran Battle-Mounts’ and to put it simply, I suppose you can say that it adds extra equipment slots for weapons controlled by telekinesis.”

“Telekinesis...” I knew of skills that added equipment slots through Figaro, but I didn’t think there was a special variation of such skills that let you equip things without *actually* equipping them, so to speak.

“As you can see, Asura also gives me extra slots, so I can wield quite a large number of weapons,” Jubei added.

An Embryo called “Asura,” and a Superior Job called “King of Asuras.” They both had “Asura” in the name, and they both added equipment slots.

Well, now I totally got why her nickname was “Multi-Asura.”

“This allows me to cross blades with others as much as I desire. I like it quite a bit,” Jubei added.

“...I can see that.” Extra equipment slots didn’t seem like a very strong Embryo ability just by themselves, though. There were Embryos with abilities that could kill in an instant, so this was actually kinda mundane in the grand scheme of things.

That meant she probably had an ace or two up her sleeve.

For now, I would look at her stats and...

RESISTANCE.

“Huh...?”

My Reveal skill was blocked...? I thought, confused.

“Oh, did you just try to look at my stats?” Jubei asked.

...Yeah. *Crap. This is gonna end the conversation and start the battle...* I thought.

“My apologies,” said Jubei, contrary to my expectations. “Asura denies things like that.”

What? Denies things like that...? “You mean, it negates skills that target you?”

“Umm, not quite. Asura’s always-active ultimate skill nullifies any phenomenon at all that does anything to me without trying to harm me. Assuming you are the Dark Knight you appear to be, your cursed weapons would still curse me if they managed to cut me—so please try your best to do so!”

...I wasn’t a Dark Knight, but I understood how the Embryo worked now. She would be affected by debuffs and the like that were accompanied by damage, but she would resist things like Reveal or Fuso’s ranged curses.

It was a power meant to shift focus onto pure battle...or maybe embody the motif of the Asuras—entities from Buddhism associated with justice.

If the resistance is the ult, then the Embryo probably doesn't have any powerful secrets I can't see, but...

“...The ten weapons we *can* clearly see are fearsome enough,” Nemesis said telepathically, and that was exactly what I was thinking too.

I also had learned another thing about her—the fact that she had no intention of hiding anything.

Revealing her Embryo or job skills didn't put her at any sort of disadvantage. She laid out exactly what she was capable of and sought direct confrontation.

Her build *as well as personality* were both all about pure combat.

“...So this is what Tenchi is like, huh?” I'd heard about it from Fuyuki and the others many times, but man, seeing it like this sure was scary.

I'd got the info I needed, at least. It was time to put it to use and find a way to defeat her.

“Now, it is my turn to ask questions...” Jubei said. Suddenly, I felt like fate itself was mocking my plans. “...Oh?” she added, her expression changing.

As though she'd just noticed something, *she was staring right at me.*

“Oh my. Oh my. Oh my oh my oh my...”

The next moment, *she was right in front of me.*

“Ngh...?!” I tried to jump away, but my body wasn't responding.

Her prosthetic arms had let go of their weapons, and three of them were pinning me by my arms and neck.

“...Ah!” Juliet cried out. I heard the flapping of her wings. Bound as I was, I couldn’t see what she was doing, but I could tell that she was either trying to use a skill to free me or at least attempting to approach.

“Please wait a moment,” said Jubei, warding Juliet off with her flying weapons.

As for Alto...she was kept in place by the one prosthetic that wasn’t busy with me.

“I apologize for acting so rough,” said Jubei. “I have a question...or rather, there is something I wish to confirm...”

She then pulled the cloth away from my face, taking my Storm Visage with it.

“Ahh!” she gasped in surprise. My hair and face were now exposed...

“You’re *the* Ray Starling!”

...and her eyes lit up even brighter than before.

“The’?” I, Nemesis, Juliet, and Alto all said in perfect unison.

What’s so “the” about me? I wondered, but Jubei ignored us and kept talking.

“I saw the videos! They made me shake with excitement! Those were some of the most perfect, crazy, fantastic battles I’ve ever seen! I’m a *huge* fan! Carve your autograph on me! Please!” She set me free, keeping hold of my open hand and hopping up and down like a giddy child. She was acting like a totally different person.

“H-Hold on a sec...”

“The battle against Hell General! The way you rush-rush-rushed through those devil hordes...and the moment you bit into one of them! Then the battle against KoB! I saw it this morning! It was

amazing! You stabbed and almost killed KoB even after you'd been reduced to just a torso! It moved me to my very core!"

"...Huh? What the hell, Ray?" Alto said, and I couldn't help but feel that she was freaked out by this.

"A slice-and-dice carnival! The counter-attacker and giant-slayer everyone's talking about! Ray Starling the Unbreakable! I gave up on ever seeing you because you're an Altarian, but now you're standing right here! Next to me! I feel like I've already won this event!" She seemed to be completely overjoyed and it didn't look like an act, which meant...

"...It appears that you have a fan," said Nemesis. "This seems like something to be glad about."

I had a fan despite not even being a duel ranker...?

"Ohh, I'm so happy...so, so happy...!" Jubei said in absolute ecstasy. It seemed like she was slowly returning to how she'd been acting before she'd found out my identity.

"I was worried for a moment, but it appears that we may be able to avoid battle here," said Nemesis. Unfortunately, I was getting the complete opposite impression.

"...I never thought I'd get to fight Ray Starling himself!"

The next moment, she unleashed her bloodlust upon me with the force of an explosion.

"Ngh...!" I used Nemesis to deflect the blade she'd swung at me while kicking off the ground to put some distance between us.

I instinctively knew her STR would allow her to easily split me in half, so I reduced the damage by letting myself be knocked back.

It went exactly as I wanted...

"Ah-HAH!"

...but then I spotted a floating weapon in the exact spot I was headed towards.

“Gh!” She’d either read me like a book or this was just her regular fighting style.

The same tachi that had been aimed at Juliet was about to cut into me...

“Blackwing Orchestra!”

...but then Juliet released a black wind magic spell straight towards me. It blew me off course—and away from the range of Jubei’s floating weapons.

“Ray! Are you okay?!” Nemesis asked.

“...Yeah.” Juliet must’ve aimed at me because she’d already seen the tachi in action before. She felt that her skill wouldn’t work on the weapon, so she aided me by blowing me out of the way instead.

“Thanks, Juliet,” I said.

“...No problem!” Even as we spoke, Juliet and I were on high alert.

Jubei had stopped moving once again. Instead of attacking us...

“Eh heh, ah hah, HA HA! Amazing! Is that your instinct? The super defense that transcends even AGI... I finally saw it live...and it’s wonderful”

...she seemed to be *relishing* what had just happened. Her smile was even wider than before.

As for Alto...it seemed that Jubei wasn’t interested in her. She’d escaped her range without any trouble.

“...Ray, does she not hold you in high regard...?” Nemesis asked, confused as to why Jubei attacked us.

“That’s exactly why she’s doing this,” I said.

“What?”

“It’s pretty obvious by now that she’s a real battle junkie, right?”

“It is.”

“Then it’s only natural that she’d want to fight the person she’s most interested in. Everything Jubei said about me relates to what I’ve done in battle.”

“...Oh.” Just like someone would start attending an idol’s concerts after falling in love with their singing, someone who was charmed by my fighting would obviously want to fight me.

...Man, did that comparison feel weird.

“More...I want to see more. Slowly. Thoroughly. Until the end, until the final cut, until one of us expires,” Jubei said.

I had a feeling that until she’d realized who I was, she was still partially playing around—as though she wasn’t serious about any of this. But now, the purity of her bloodlust and fighting spirit was on another level.

It wasn’t because her opponent was strong, but because she wanted to have a taste of battle against *me*.

She wouldn’t hold back. She wasn’t the kind of person who would ever do that. She was going to go all out, push her limits, and try her best to kill me.

It was almost as though she was trying to experience a live reenactment of my battle against KoB.

“...It’s not like I did all that stuff on my own,” I said, fully aware that she wouldn’t listen.

“My fave... I want to cut and be cut by you, kill and be killed by you, love and be loved by you...” She seemed less human and more asura now—a creature from Tenchi enslaved by pure passion.

"LET US SHARE OUR LOVE UNTIL WE BREAK!" Overcome with bloodlust and affection both, the fourth in Tenchi's duel rankings bared her fangs at me.

If she was actually on Kashimiya's level, she was no doubt stronger than us.

However, unlike with Kashimiya, I could still *see* Jubei's attacks.

The Unsheathe sliced at speeds so far above supersonic that I couldn't even understand, let alone sense any of them, but King of Asuras was far slower than that.

However, speed wasn't what she specialized in.

Even now as she laughed with manic joy, there were six weapons floating around her.

Each and every one of them was the kind of weapon you'd expect to see in the hands of a vanguard Superior Job. With the addition of the four prosthetic arms, she could wield a total of ten potent tools of death at once.

Most importantly, those weapons were...

"Alto," I said.

"...Yyeess?" She looked like she really didn't want to be here. Well, being a Tenchi Master, she must have understood the danger far better than me or Juliet.

But that was exactly why I had to ask her...

"You know anything about her?"

"...They say that Asuran Battle-Mounts has a range of 25 metels, but that's info people got from her dueling, so it's hard to tell if that's true," Alto explained, not daring to look away from Jubei.

For whatever reason, though, she wasn't making a move.

Apparently still in a trance, she was looking at me with her fleshy hands pressed against her cheeks.

“As for the flying weapons, I only know about four. A defense-breaking tachi that negates defensive skills, ‘Peerless Excess, Hora.’ The slow-killing shortsword that prevents all healing for 100 minutes after it cuts you, ‘Death-Bearer, Kubigawara.’ A maddened curse-spear that can slice and kill even spirits, ‘Anguishbloom, Higanbana.’ The retaliating katana that moves at insane speeds to inevitably strike anyone who comes too close, ‘The Denying Blade, Dankajin.’”

“...Now that’s something.” That was four special rewards, which was already more than I had.

The one Juliet had helped me evade must have been Hora. If it really did negate defensive skills, using Counter Absorption against it would’ve been certain death.

The other weapons were probably also MVP rewards or something close to that.

The two others that Alto hadn’t named were a chakram and a large hatchet. Like my Miasmaflame Bracers and Grudge-Soaked Greaves, they had a unique shape, making it likely that they were MVP rewards.

She was both stocked up on special rewards and had a bunch of extra slots to use them in, which was very...Figaro-like.

“Ah ha ha ha.” Jubei didn’t seem the least bit shaken that Alto had revealed all of that information. The joy in her face hadn’t faded one bit.

“So, have you said everything you wanted?” she asked Alto as her smile grew wider.

“EEP?!”

“Hm...?” Jubei sounded like she might be on the verge of killing Alto for revealing all of that, which had made Alto panic.

However, I got a completely different impression. To me, it felt like Jubei had actually been waiting for someone to explain everything about her.

“...I get it now,” I said. It finally made sense. She was both a Tenchi-dweller and a duel ranker—this was probably just how they were.

“You were waiting for Alto to tell us what you’re capable of...weren’t you?” I asked.

“Huh?” Alto was confused, but Juliet and Nemesis seemed to understand exactly what I was getting at.

Jubei’s smile widened again.

Information was a powerful thing. And in *Infinite Dendrogram*, where individuals could have unique powers, an informational advantage was more important than in any other game. That was exactly why Alto had recommended that I hide my face.

Jubei had answered every question I’d asked about her Embryo abilities and job skills, and that was before she knew who I was.

“Yes, exactly! I want those who withstand my preemptive attacks to be as well prepared as they can possibly be! After all, battles are at their most fun when they are close!” She didn’t want to just massacre people before they knew what was going on—she wanted a fair fight.

That was Jubei Kaga’s philosophy of fighting.

The scars on her body must’ve been gained through battles where she’d revealed everything about herself.

It seemed like a manifestation of carelessness or arrogance, but I felt that ultimately that was far from the truth. She was like Figaro or Kashimiya, in that she abided by certain self-imposed rules.

And, most notable of all, she'd been through many battles after revealing her hand, yet she still hadn't gotten the death penalty. She'd won against many powerful opponents even after she gave them all the information they needed.

She was an Asura like no other—truly King of Asuras.

"It seems you are well prepared now, so...let us begin!" Jubei said with a smile before kicking off the ground.

She moved at supersonic speeds as though it was the most natural thing in the world. I didn't know if it was because of her levels, stats, or a buff from some weapon, but she was a great deal faster than me.

"Blackwing Requiem!"

Before Jubei could get close, Juliet fired an orb of dark magic towards her. However, before it could land, one of the floating weapons—the chakram—flew towards it.

It traced a path over the dark orb, making it vanish in its wake.

Dark magic was supposedly hard to defend against, yet Juliet's black shroud had disappeared without a trace.

"Huh...?!" An MVP reward that broke any magic it touched... It was just like Rook's Touch of the Silencer!

Chakrams were weapons that were either thrown or wielded in hand. Using this particular weapon in the former way would've meant letting go of it, while the latter way would come with the risk of getting hit despite its anti-magic properties. But since Jubei used telekinesis, she didn't have to deal with either of those problems.

"Purgatorial Flames!"

I welcomed Jubei with fire from my Miasmaflame Bracer. But then, her floating hatchet spun around and slashed through the blazing torrent, *splitting it in two*.

“So that one kills fire...no...breath attacks!”

An anti-magic chakram, an anti-breath-attack hatchet, and an always-active ult that canceled all effects that weren’t coupled with damage.

It seemed that she wanted to do everything she could to ensure her battles would be physical.

“Entryyy!” After extinguishing our spells and fires, Jubei came close enough that we were in range of her floating weapons.

The tachi, the shortsword, the spear, the chakram, the hatchet...all of them approached me and Juliet with different trajectories.

The katana...the retaliating “Dankajin,” or whatever it was called, was still floating next to Jubei.

The weapons coming towards me were the tachi and the hatchet.

I could only use Counter Absorption to block one attack, but since the tachi was that defense-breaking Hora, I couldn’t even use that.

And since my AGI wasn’t high enough for me to evade both of them, there was only one thing I could do.

“Chaser From the Mirror!” I switched to the fourth form, and Nemesis instantly activated Chaser with Jubei’s AGI as the target.

My speed became equal to hers, and along with that we now experienced time the same way. That slowed down the weapons heading towards me.

“Agh!” I read the trajectories of the weapons and evaded them both.

They tried to reverse themselves and attack me again, but this time I dodged them by rushing forwards.

“All that sparring against Xunyu is finally paying off!” said Nemesis.

“She always gets me in the end, though!” Still, these floating weapons were easier to dodge than the golden prosthetics that had chased after me until I had nowhere to run and no option but to die. Jubei, however, was far more than her floating weapons.

While attacking me, she herself had closed the distance between us. The four prosthetics were all holding blades, all heading towards each of my limbs.

It was like an approaching prison of sharp edges. No matter which side I dodged towards, I couldn’t avoid attacks from someone who was just as fast as I was—and behind me there were the tachi and hatchet, still hurtling towards me.

That left me with only one choice—to step *forwards*.

I put power into my legs and rushed towards her with all my strength.

This was perhaps the most dangerous thing I could do, since this meant that I’d activate her Dankajin.

However, the katana didn’t fly towards *me*.

Juliet, who’d evaded the flying weapons as well, had approached Jubei before I did and was now keeping Dankajin distracted.

So the superspeed counterattack can only happen once before it’s unsheathed! I realized. Because of this, I was able to approach Jubei without resistance.

I thrust the twin sword in my right hand towards Jubei.

“Ah hah hah hah haah!” Amused by something, she laughed as she grabbed *Nemesis’s blade with her bare hand*.

“Huh?!”

It was a technique that everyone even mildly interested in swords had fantasized about.

While I was completely immobilized by the surprising move, a total of seven of her weapons all hurtled towards me.

However, it was too late for that.

“Vengeance is Mine!” Nemesis and I both roared. She’d touched it, so our skill should work.

A shock wave erupted in Jubei’s hands, and blood splattered all over.

Just like her tachi, my attack ignored her defense—it was a fixed damage counterattack. As long as I had damage stocked up, it could hurt anyone as long as the attack connected.

Free from her grip on the Nemesis in my right hand, I prepared to thrust the one in my left...

“Ah...”

...but a chill ran down my spine that made me reflexively jump to the side.

I leaped straight onto a blade held by her prosthetic and basically just took the damage to my right upper arm.

However, the sheer amount of attacks that landed on the place I had just been standing was several times greater.

“Mmgh...”

“So this is it... This is the thing I’ve heard so much about... Eh heh heh...” said Jubei.

While I had made distance between us, she was frozen in place, staring at her bleeding palm with an ecstatic expression.

The wound was far from deep. It hadn’t even severed any of her fingers—ultimately it was nothing more than a gash on her palm.

“Thank you for your *autograph!* Mmm...!” she said, licking at the blood before turning back towards me. “What a strange feeling. It

was as though that power just burst out of my palm from the inside. Eh heh heh... Though, this is far from enough, as I am sure you know. It's only double the damage you received, and the only damage I dealt to you before you activated your fourth form was from my preemptive attack. And since you copied my AGI, you can't possibly have a great deal of damage stored up to return to me, can you? Or is it because your twin swords are split it in half? Regardless, the damage is less than I was expecting."

I said nothing in response. Jubei had only seen my battles in videos, and Nemesis's fourth form had only appeared in my battle against KoB.

Had she seriously figured out how my skills worked by just watching those? Not just that, but she'd actually grabbed my blade just so she could get me to use Vengeance...to mark the occasion with a scar on her body as though it was an autograph.

"...Ray, would I be correct in thinking that...?"

"You probably would be," I said, knowing exactly what Nemesis was about to say. Everything that had happened so far went exactly as Jubei had wanted.

She'd actually *intended* for me to use Chaser, then just barely make it close to her...and then use Vengeance to land a blow on her, all while preventing Juliet from interfering.

"...The fourth in Tenchi's duel rankings, huh?"

She wasn't as fast as Kashimiya or as strong as Figaro.

However, she was *good*. As in, extremely skilled.

She simultaneously controlled ten weapons, analyzed her enemy, engineered the battle she wanted to have, and finally got the results she desired.

Though her eccentric appearance and behavior didn't show it, she had an extraordinary amount of control over her technique.

"This was exactly as I anticipated," she said, smiling in satisfaction at the theatrics she'd just directed and starred in.

Her words could only mean that she'd crafted the exchange we just had with the expectation that I would pull it off—all based on what she'd seen in the videos.

If I hadn't met her expectations, I would've surely died somewhere in there.

"But...it was not *more* than I anticipated," she said as her smile vanished and she looked at me. "It did not draw out everything good about *the Ray Starling*."

It didn't seem that she was disappointed in me exactly. It was like she was confused more than anything else.

"What am I lacking?" she asked as though the flaw clearly wasn't with me, but with her.

Regardless, I had no answer to her question.

I felt like I had pushed myself to the limit and done everything I could.

If there was something I could do to be stronger than I was now, I would have liked to hear it myself.



Event Area, East, Forest

Just what am I supposed to do here...?!

A high-level battle had unfolded before her eyes.

Her friend, that friend's friend, and King of Asuras were fighting, and Alto was at a complete loss as to what to do.

Jubei Kaga is like the worst person to run into...we even work for the same daimyo...! she thought.

Though Jubei didn't recognize Alto, Alto certainly knew Jubei.

This was because they were both serving the same daimyo family in Tenchi—Toseiden, one of their big four.

That was why Alto was so hesitant to involve herself in the conflict.

If she did, there was a chance that Jubei would set her sights on her after the event ended.

Jubei Kaga...she's such a battle junkie that she sided with Toseiden despite acting like a stereotypical Shimazu type from Nashumon...just because she wanted to fight against Nashumon...! Alto had actually refrained from giving her name because she didn't want anyone like that to actually remember her.

In fact, she wanted to use her skills as a Nukenin to get out of here as quickly as possible.

However, since she'd promised to cooperate with Ray, that wasn't an option.

I can't abandon an IRL friend! It's gonna leave a mark on our friendship and my mind...! That was why she couldn't run. She didn't want to fight, but running just wasn't in the cards.

But just letting him die would be basically the same thing...! I wanna do something, but what can I even do...?! This is so stressful... I wanna play some cat's cradle...! She wanted to calm her nerves with the game she loved so much, but someone would have to be quite off their rocker to play cat's cradle in this situation. An absurd act like that would have definitely jogged Jubei's memory.

There really was nothing she could do here.

Compared to Jubei, her attack power was practically nonexistent, her Embryo actually had a chance of *benefiting* the enemy, while *the*

very reason she was chosen for this event wasn't something she could use in the presence of other people—especially ones from Tenchi.

The most I can do now is create a smokescreen to help everyone escape, but...

There was a chance that the hatchet would disperse the smoke just like it had dispersed Ray's flames. Even if the smokescreen worked, Jubei was the kind of person who would keep attacking even if she couldn't see anything.

If only there was something to distract her while I put up the smokescreen... In this situation, that just wasn't a reasonable hope.

Jubei was currently speaking to Ray, but it was only a matter of time before she flew into action again. Once that happened, they would have almost no hope of winning. Juliet knew that as well, and that was why she was mostly incapable of helping, aside from the fact that she was still recovering from her use of Molting.

God! Buddha! Cat's cradle! Gimme a helping hand! Hell, I'll take even the devil here! Cornered, Alto's thoughts had begun to race...when suddenly, there was a sound of a twig breaking.

Jubei was the first to react.

As though to swat down this nuisance getting in the way of her joy, she sent the defense skill-negating tachi, Hora, towards the troublesome target.

And so, the unfortunate intruder to the Kingdom of Asura died with just that single strike.

...Or at least, that was what one might expect would happen.

"...What is this?" Jubei asked, staring in confusion at her target, which clearly had her Hora blade stuck into it.

However, it seemed that this blade that was supposed to negate defense skills had actually landed in the target's body—assuming it was fitting to call it that.

The silhouette it had wasn't that of a human. It was a rather rotund *costume* covered in long fur.

The animal it was based on was...

"Ah. A bear." The words escaped Alto's mouth.

I asked for a devil and got a bear.

While that casual thought crossed her mind, the other three were *overcome by terror*.

"Shu...? No. You can't be him...!" At first, Ray immediately associated this unique appearance with his brother, but this was not him.

This was certainly a bear costume, but not Shu's Hind Bear.

It was also wearing an ushanka on its head and a gas cylinder on its back...and its fur was pure white.

Most notably, Ray felt no familiarity in the gaze of whoever was inside the costume. Instead, it felt like the bear was a hunter evaluating his prey.

"...The one who treads upon divine ground and answers the call of predation's chains." Though spoken in her own language, Juliet's words implied that she knew who this was.

As for Jubei...

"Eh heh. Eh heh heh... I did not know that this event also had your kind...*Superiors*."

...she had shifted her divided attention away from Ray and Juliet, and was now focused entirely on the person in the costume.

Her words, specifically *Superior*, made Ray remember something Shu had once said to him.

“Costumes are more useful than you’d expect. I ain’t the only one using them, that’s fur sure.”

The Granvaloan “Human Bomb,” Antimicrobic Soy Sauce.

The Tenchi-dwelling “Ironman Mechanicus,” Bachigo Fatae.

Legendaria’s most wanted, “Hypersomnia,” ZZZ.

And the person standing before them now.

Ray used Reveal and saw his name listed among the stats.

“God Hunter, Carl Lourlou!”

A member of Caldina’s strongest clan, Sefirot, as well as the bearer of the title “Multifariously Invincible.”

This was the spice that the control AI had prepared for this event—the Superior said to have the strongest defense of any Master in the world.



Interlude: The Ranker Known as Chelsea

Event Area, South, River

After taking out Jamie Crescent and his Abhra-Matanga, Chelsea's group decided to look around for any hint that would help them solve the password at the goal.

As the number of people in the event dropped, those remaining would be carrying more plates—and those with enough would start heading towards the gate. Knowing that only a total of three players could win, it was all but certain that some were already rushing to the goal.

Since incorrect answers at the gate would send you to some other place on the island, though, taking the time to look for hints about the right answer was a better plan than rushing to make a guess.

Because of this, Chelsea's trio decided to split up and search the island's south for clues.

"Hmm..." As Chelsea walked beside a river, occasionally dipping her hand into the water, she was lost in thought.

Another river, much like the one on the island's east side. Good for drinkin' too. Despite the isolation, the island's got some really diverse plant life and tons of water. Dunno if it's related to the event itself, but I wouldn't mind knowin' its coords.

An ex-Granvaloan like her couldn't help but see this island as one big treasure trove.

Granvaloa was a nation of linked-together seacraft drifting over the waves, but they, too, wished to have land of their own, be it a bit of coast or an island. One merely had to look at their adventurer's guilds to see this—Granvaloa *always* had search quests for habitable islands posted.

Just showin' them this island would make ya filthy rich... she thought. That reminds me... I haven't seen any familiar Granvaloans here. I guess the ones who made it here must have joined after I left?

She checked the relevant info windows, but found nothing about this island's location.

If this was any other game, one might simply assume that this area had been created specifically for this event and would disappear when it ended. But seeing as this was *Infinite Dendrogram*, the island was more likely to be a naturally occurring part of the world that had been remodeled to suit the purpose.

Well, whatever. I got Julie and the prize to worry about, sooo...
Chelsea thought as she clasped her hands together before spreading them apart, creating a fist-sized orb of water.

“Here ya go,” she said before throwing the water-orb spawned by her Poseidon’s skill towards a tree growing on the riverbank.

The moment the orb touched the tree, *it immediately exploded.*

“Figured it was a trap,” she said. “Come on out, then.”

“Hmph. I suppose you saw right through it.”

From behind another tree stepped a bald man with a double-headed battle-axe on his back—King of Axes, Wan Zihao.

“How did you know the tree was a trap?”

“It’s obvious when ya look at the flora around it. I’ve been to a riverside in the east of the island, and though the temperature and altitude’s the same in both places, you got a tree here that’s nothin’ like what I saw over there. Thought it was a hint at first, but I gave it a little tap just in case and it went boom.”

“A sharp-sighted girl, aren’t you?” Wan said in understanding as many trees exactly like the one Chelsea had just blown up sprouted all around him, giving the surrounding forest a new color.

"You don't look like a craftin' job. I'm guessin' the trees are your Embryo?" Chelsea asked.

"Indeed. This is my Embryo, Zaqqum."

Type Legion, "Orchard of Hell, Zaqqum."

It bore the name of a cursed tree said to spring up from the Islamic hell of Jahannam. When consumed, its fruits made the body boil before tearing it apart in a geyser of bodily fluids.

Based on something like that, it was no surprise that the Embryo was highly toxic as well.

It manifested as a Legion of trees growing fruits ripe with juices that were both acidic enough to melt through gear and flesh...and explosive enough to blow them up. And to top it off, if the trees were destroyed, they released acid and explosions even stronger than those of its fruit.

The drawback was that Wan had no direct control over the trees, forcing him to scatter them about and wait for the enemy to trigger them, but...

"Sure are a lot of 'em. Isn't this dangerous to you too?" Chelsea asked.

"No need to worry," Wan grinned, punching the nearest of Zaqqum's trees. The tree exploded, but Wan and his gear were completely unscathed. "Zaqqum does no harm to me."

This was the most terrifying thing about Zaqqum. It wasn't its toxicity, explosiveness, numbers, or range, but the fact that Wan was completely immune to its effects, giving him an advantage in any area where his Embryo was summoned.

"Hm...? Looks like it'd be hella useful in duels," Chelsea commented.

“It is! I am fifth in Huang He’s duel rankings—King of Axes, Wan Zihao! The third of the Five Generals gracefully serving the great and beautiful Huili!”

“That so? I’m Chelsea, a Great Pirate and eighth in Altar’s duel rankings.”

Following these introductions, the two equipped their double-headed axes and faced one another.

Their entire exchange so far was only meant to buy time. Wan needed to grow as many of Zaqqum’s trees as he could, while Chelsea had to prepare herself for combat and find out more about her opponent.

“What a coincidence,” said Wan. “We are both duel rankers and axe-wielders.”

“Yep.”

“But there is one major difference between us. Do you know what it is?”

“Nope. Haven’t the slightest. How ‘bout a hint?” Chelsea said playfully.

In response, Wan roared, “I am...a Superior Job!” Not a moment after this declaration, he rushed towards her.

“Thought as much!” Chelsea replied, just barely managing to block Wan’s axe. The force of the strike sent her backwards.

Well, his stats are obviously better than mine, that’s for sure. Oh! she thought as she kicked off the ground to sidestep one of Zaqqum’s trees.

However, Wan then rushed closer and cut down the very same tree that Chelsea had just evaded, sending a rush of fire and acid towards her.

“Whoa!” she cried, creating a water barrier just barely in time to block the attack. She then retaliated with a water projectile, but Wan deflected it with just a swing of the axe.

“A water-wielder! Such a weak power!” he remarked.

“Maybe it is!” Chelsea said. Pushed back by Wan’s ceaseless offense, Chelsea had moved closer to the river. While she had a Great Pirate skill that let her walk on water, Wan had to get soaked to his knees.

However, he wouldn’t be a vanguard SJ if he were slowed down by something as puny as water.

Making Zaqqum grow even in the river, he kept closing the distance between him and Chelsea.

I knew it’d be like this, Chelsea thought. She wanted to sigh with resignation at how expected this whole situation was. *He can grow them in water and there’s a whole lotta them now. Both my ult and World Reversal Waterfall are a no-no. They’d just make the trees explode.*

The skills she favored in duels generally had a bigger area of effect. With her combat style focusing on weaponizing the liquids she summoned, she needed all the volume she could get.

Here, however, doing so would cause a chain reaction between all the Zaqqum trees, quickly showering her in acid and fire.

And since coming too close would mean being overwhelmed by Wan’s stats, she was forced to keep her distance while firing off ineffective bolts of water.

Ultimately, though, it didn’t matter if Chelsea was wary of Zaqqum.

“HA HA HA HA HA HA!”

If she didn’t start the chain reaction, Wan could simply do it himself. Cutting down a single tree with his axe was enough to instantly cover the area in acid and explosions.

This was actually his primary mode of fighting, which was why Jamie had called him “lumberjack.”

His ult allowed him to instantly create enough Zaqqum trees to blanket the entire arena stage, letting him start the chain reaction on command—a move too overwhelming for AGI builds to dodge, and too acidic for END builds to withstand.

His rival, Jamie, had to content himself with a lower duel ranking, because this move was enough to burn up Abhra-Matanga even when it was the largest size it could reasonably reach on the cramped dueling stage.

Zaqqum was a fearsome Embryo that could turn an entire area into one giant acid-explosion trap.

It was the reason why Wan was well-known and widely feared.

The info didn’t lie. It sure is a duelist’s Embryo, Chelsea thought. She’d actually known about this power before going into the battle. Everything she’d said when asked how she’d noticed Zaqqum had been a bluff—she’d actually recognized the tree’s shape the moment she saw it.

He can summon tons of the trees and choose who’s affected by them, but he can’t detonate them from a distance. They only drop their fruits on impact and explode only if destroyed. Those are their flaws.

Chelsea even knew a few limitations Wan hadn’t disclosed to her.

Shortly after she’d found out she would participate in this event, she’d gone on the internet to check out combat videos of duel rankers from all over *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Her reasoning was that if she and Juliet were chosen, other duel rankers would be chosen, as well.

And it's lookin' like he doesn't know either of the ways I fight, she thought. Chelsea knew Wan's fighting style, but Wan didn't know hers.

There was nothing strange about that. While most duel rankers would spend a lot of time researching the fellow rankers of their own countries, there was little point in doing the same for foreign duelists, especially if they weren't the top champions. Being from Huang He, it wasn't unusual at all that Wan didn't know anything about the eighth-ranked duelist in Altar.

Knowing about Chelsea the Altarian Duelist wouldn't have meant much in this situation, in any case, because *that wasn't the Chelsea he was fighting right now*.

"Your endurance is impressive, but...it is time to end this!" Wan cried. Chelsea used water to shield herself from the acid and fire while keeping a distance from Wan, but his immense stats and the time she spent on defense allowed him to draw closer and closer with every passing moment.

Wan created a Zaqqum forest and immediately detonated it in order to force Chelsea to defend herself, opening her up for an attack. The explosion, of course, would never deal even a single point of damage to him.

Wan then rushed through the inferno of acid and explosions to finish Chelsea off...or, at least, he *tried* to do that.

"...What?" Before he could approach her, he found himself lying on his back in the river.

At the unpleasant feeling of water rushing into his nostrils, he tried to stand up, but found himself unable to. After all, *it was hard to stand without legs*.

His were gone from the knee-down, as though blown away by an explosion.

What the hell?! Zaqqum ain't supposed to hurt me! he thought in shock, breaking character for a moment inside his own head. He tried not to show it on his face, even though the incomprehensible situation he found himself in made this difficult. Ultimately, though, it was obvious he was completely baffled.

At that moment, another explosion rang out—this time blowing away the arm holding his axe.

“This isn’t...! It’s *not* Zaqqum...!” Though it was too late, he realized that the explosions weren’t caused by his Embryo.

“...So it finally hit ya, huh?” Chelsea said, looking down at him. Wan stared back at her, his vision filled with a cute, smiling face whose eyes were nonetheless icy cold.

And in her hand there was a Gem—a spell-storing consumable.

“Gems...? But...when did you take them out? And how did you hit—?”

“Not tellin’.” Chelsea cut him off and threw the Gem at him.

The resulting Crimson Sphere burned away Wan’s already half-dead body with little fanfare. The many plates he had collected scattered into the river, and all the remaining Zaqqum trees vanished.

Just like his rival before him, the duelist from Huang He found himself sent back without even knowing what had happened to him.

After gathering the plates, Chelsea quickly left the scene and headed downriver. The sounds of their battle might’ve attracted other participants, and she didn’t want to risk dealing with them.

Mitigating risk was also the reason she hadn’t answered Wan’s questions and proudly explained how she’d managed to win—that might have inspired him to take up a mission of revenge in the future.

Chelsea knew that a brief feeling of superiority simply wasn't worth revealing your hand.

Right now she had none of the cheer she showed her friends, nor the mischievousness she showed her enemies. She only calmly weighed the pros and cons of her decisions.

He was a pain, but I've got some plates now. This should be enough for one attempt at an answer, so now I gotta find some hints. I wonder if those other two are having any luck, she thought.

Thinking of Max and Shion brought back a little of her usual cheer. The only things on her mind now were the plates she'd collected, her two friends, and the rival she would soon fight; Wan had already been forgotten.

The fact that she took out a top-ranking duelist who held a Superior Job didn't move her in the slightest. This wasn't anything unusual for her, after all.

At least, it wasn't unusual for the person she'd been before moving to Altar.

Chapter Six: The Asura and the Hunter

Paladin, Ray Starling

All of a sudden, we were joined by God Hunter, Carl Lourlou.

I didn't stop to wonder why he was here—after all, this was an event involving Masters from all over, so it wasn't that much of a surprise to run into a foreign Superior.

The real problem was the situation. We already barely stood a chance against just Jubei. With a Superior joining in, things were probably going to go from bad to worse.

"Carl Lourlou," said Jubei. "You once served Tenchi's Seihakuto clan. I heard you had left for the continent by the time I became a Superior Job... I certainly did not expect to meet you here."

She seemed to have a decent degree of interest in him.

The God Hunter, on the other hand, was looking not at her, but us. I could tell that even through the beady eyes of his bear costume.

Was he targeting us because we were the easier prey...? Weaklings were the first to die in a battle royale, so it *would* make sense.

More importantly, how do we deal with this...? I wondered.

"Eh heh heh," Jubei giggled, interrupting my thoughts. "I suppose I shall start with him, then."

Then, she rushed straight towards GH.

"Reasonable" meant nothing to an asura—the one who embodied strife.

All her weapons at the ready, Jubei Kaga turned to face Carl.

"Huh?!" I couldn't hide my surprise.

“Ray Starling,” she said. “Let us meet again later. Until then, please think about what it was I lacked. I will do so as well... Ah ha ha ha HA HA HA HA! ENTRYYYYY!”

After giving me the smile of someone in the throes of delirium, she let out a mad laugh and began to attack GH repeatedly.

This was no bluff—Jubei actually *had* shifted her sights from us to him. However, it didn’t seem that she just wanted to fight the stronger foe first. It was more like...she was saving the main dish for later.

The God Hunter, on the other hand, was standing in place, not saying a word. The flying weapons had touched him many times by now, but his suit remained undamaged.

“FANTASTIIIIIC!” Jubei let out a cry as she raised up the katanas held in her four prosthetic arms and swung them down at GH.

For the first time since the encounter began, Carl did something to defend himself, raising his “arm” to block the attack.

Once again, the costume wasn’t even scratched, but the weight of the impact cracked the ground beneath him in four directions.

These attacks were nothing like the ones she’d used on me—Jubei was really going all-out.

I didn’t know whether I should be more afraid of her power...or Carl for withstanding it.

Regardless, this was likely a clash between two of the strongest Masters in this event, and we honestly had no business just sitting around and watching it.

“...Hey! Ray! Juliet! Let’s get outta here!” Realizing that there was no better time, Alto gathered her resolve, raised her voice, and threw out a mix of smokescreen and firecrackers.

She’d basically read my mind.

“...Yeah!” I said in response. The smoke hid us from sight and the firecrackers drowned out the sound of our movement.

Her two-layered escape art allowed us to run away without issue.

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Event Area, South, Forest

Still silent as stone, Carl watched as Ray’s group ran away, while Jubei paid no heed and continued to slice at him.

This marked a parting with her “fave,” but she was absolutely certain that they now shared a bond—and that it wouldn’t be long until they would enjoy a much better fight.

So for now, she would enjoy a battle against this unexpected behemoth of a foe.

“My beloved curseblaaades, rise and shiiine!” She barked out an order to the four katanas in her prosthetic arms.

The curseblades began to release a dark purple aura which soon enveloped Jubei’s entire body.

A moment later, her stats rose at an explosive rate.

“Ah-HA!”

The four blades weren’t MVP rewards, but some would say that they were more powerful and dangerous than some Epics or Legendaries.

In the past, all of them had been counted among the hundred most famous blades in Tenchi, but over the centuries of their existence, they had been stained by an immense amount of curses and grudge. As a result, they had been turned into “curseblades.”

They greatly buffed the user’s stats, but at a great cost. The user would lose control over their body and be rendered unable to unequip anything, as well as suffering continuous HP drain and eventually self-destruction.

The price was far too great for most to pay, and these curseblades had driven many swordsmen of old to go on rampages that ended in their death.

However, Jubei was an exception. Asura's ultimate skill negated all effects that weren't accompanied by damage, and this fully applied to the curseblades' debuffs.

This allowed her to use them however she wanted without any drawbacks.

"Hi-Fu-Mi-Yo-I-Mu-Na-Yaaa!" While chanting as though performing an invocation, Jubei continued her onslaught.

All floating weapons besides the retaliating Dankajin and the breath-dispersing axe, as well as the four curseblades held by Asura—a total of eight weapons—were absolutely showering Carl in attacks.

This chain of blows, each of which might easily cut apart even a vanguard SJ, were completely deforesting the area just from the shock waves.

The weapons' speed combined with their sheer number made their assault impossible to evade or deflect.

Carl, however, wasn't attempting to do either of those things.

He simply took every attack...yet there wasn't a scratch on him.

"Toughness? Hardness? No, this is something else!" said Jubei. Her excitement was rising, but she was still able to analyze the situation calmly.

My attacks aren't ineffective! His HP is dropping! But the damage is lower than expected! He also isn't getting any debuffs! His bones aren't breaking and I see no bleeding! His movements are hardly hampered at all! And there is still not a single tear on his costume!
Jubei's relentless onslaught was more dangerous than that of an

ordinary pre-Superior, but despite that, she hadn't managed to harm a single hair on the God Hunter.

There were no cuts on the suit—only short-lived little holes that soon snapped closed. It was as though her blades weren't cutting into him, but merely brushing against the plush costume.

By now, she'd done enough damage to kill ten vanguard SJs, but Carl wasn't even flinching.

What kind of skill is letting him withstand this? His HP isn't 0, so it's not a Death Soldier situation. Rear Soldier's Last Stand allows you to survive with 1 HP, but that skill would have expired by now. Is it some sort of spell? Doesn't seem to be. Jubei was attacking him with her chakram, but it hadn't broken any spells.

She didn't know how, but it was clear that Carl couldn't be killed by mere damage.

If this was some sort of defensive skill, the fact that the defense-negating Hora didn't work could only mean that the nature of the defense was different than anything she'd ever seen.

"I cannot see your wounds. This is not to my taste," Jubei muttered in dissatisfaction, never ceasing her attack.

She found joy in cutting and being cut, giving and taking wounds. An enemy who couldn't be harmed no matter how hard she cut him was no fun for her. It didn't take long after this for her to lose her interest, then excitement, and finally calm down entirely. Her ideal opponents were those who struggled to win tooth and nail no matter how many injuries they suffered or limbs they lost.

Even though Ray was far below Carl in power, there was no doubt that he was Jubei's main dish.

Carl did not respond to any of her attacks or her complaints. Instead, he pulled out a hose linked to the gas canister on his back.

The flamethrower-like weapon was aimed straight at Jubei—and a moment later, it released a scarlet spray.

“I expected as much.” It was easy to tell what kind of attack this would be just by looking at the weapon, and Jubei was prepared to launch her breath-dispersing axe towards the crimson mist.

Split apart, the spray vanished...but the trees it touched all decayed at an extreme rate.

“Poison...? Since you only just used it, I assume the strength of the poison is based on the damage you’ve received?”

Carl neither confirmed nor denied that, but Jubei’s analysis was indeed correct. The weapon was “The Scarlet Brewer, Drag-Blood,” and the power of the spray it released depended on the damage the wielder had suffered.

With how much Jubei had attacked him, the power of the spray was now so great that it made the run-of-the-mill Poison effect seem inconsequential. Even if she’d dispersed it, the tiniest droplet in the air would be enough to give Jubei a crippling debuff.

However, she seemed completely unaffected.

“Poison I breathe in or drink doesn’t work on me. After all, they only start dealing damage *after* they apply their debuffs.”

Carl once again said nothing. She’d basically revealed part of her capabilities, but he didn’t seem to think that she was bluffing.

Taking as much damage as possible, then using that to clear the area, was one of his go-to techniques—and if that didn’t work, his compatibility against Jubei was terrible.

Jubei couldn’t cut Carl to death, but Carl’s poison didn’t work on Jubei. Neither of them could put an end to this battle.

While Jubei found Carl to be “against her tastes,” Carl found Jubei to be “bothersome.”

Still silent, Carl switched his weapon from Drag-Blood to an unusual staff shaped like a deer's antlers. He then swung around like a Druid mid-ritual, making new trees sprout in place of the ones he'd withered with his poison.

As eerie as this sight was, the lingering spray didn't seem to harm the trees.

Realizing what Carl was trying to do, Jubei tried to close the distance between them again, but he used the new trees and spray as cover for his escape.

"A Superior—running away! Your deviousness is irritating!" Though her face showed no anger, she voiced her honest thoughts.

However, this was an event with a well-defined objective—and for everyone but Jubei, confrontation was a means to an end, not a goal in and of itself. Because of this, avoiding bothersome opponents was the wise thing to do, especially if you'd seen easier prey—and a three-for-one deal, at that!

Naturally, Jubei wouldn't tolerate having her main dish taken away from her.

She couldn't let him flee or hunt down Ray, so she sliced through the trees and poison to chase after him.

Being faster than him, she caught up in no time...

"Ah...!"

...but that was when her battle instincts flared into life.

The moment she turned and jumped away, a heavy, metallic sound rang out behind her.

The noise had been made by a closing bear trap—perhaps one of the most well-known tools for trapping animals. Its maw-like blades were coated in some sort of poison—and its presence wasn't the only change to the environment. The sounds of some mechanism

activating could be heard, as though in response to Jubei triggering the bear trap.

“...You *are* the God Hunter, after all.”

It was one of the hunter grouping’s Superior Jobs, and it was focused on “hunting” rather than “combat.” The job granted toughness that kept the owner active for long periods of time without food or water, superb tracking capabilities, and, most relevantly to this situation, trap creation.

One of the God Hunter’s skills was called “Quick Trap.” Just as the name implied, it allowed high-speed creation of traps using the items in its user’s inventories, and Carl had used it to set countless traps on the path he traveled.

He’d obscured Jubei’s sight and pretended to chase after Ray’s group, leading her straight into a death trap.

Asura’s ult, “Speak of Strife by Blade—Asura,” negated all effects that weren’t accompanied by damage, but if she was targeted by so many traps at once, she would surely be hurt and collapse.

“Impertinent.”

However, that couldn’t happen when Asura’s Master was Jubei.

Her blades deflected any and all traps coming towards her from every direction. The poison arrows, spells, explosions, spike pits—she broke through everything.

This was only to be expected. Jubei *was* King of Asura. She *manually* commanded six flying weapons, with nothing whatsoever to support her.

The kind of processing power she employed for this was beyond the capabilities of a normal person.

Because of this, none of the traps could take her life...but they did *overwhelm her brain*.

Not missing the opportunity, Carl had approached her from behind. Instead of the bear costume, he was now wearing leaf-covered clothing, like a hunter's ghillie suit.

This outfit had a forest-exclusive camouflage effect, which, when mixed with the scent- and presence-eliminating skills he had as God Hunter, had allowed him to approach Jubei undetected.

He'd lured her into this trap-filled space not to buy time for his escape, but to set her up for a sure-kill attack.

Only Life Can Pay For Life: Drag-Pain

The large knife in his hand was a Legendary MVP reward that accumulated the damage he'd received and stored it in the weapon's tip as fixed damage. In a way, it was much like Ray's Vengeance.

"Ah..." Jubei finally felt the destruction approaching her from behind. However, it was too late to evade or even turn around. Because of this, she twisted one of her prosthetics in an inhuman way to swat the approaching knife aside.

At the moment of impact, destructive energy began to spread out from the blade—but before it could reach her, she *purged the prosthetic*.

The obscene amount of fixed damage instantly made the freed prosthetic vanish, but that was the extent of the destruction.

Shock overcame Carl. Jubei reacting to his surprise attack and the disappearance of the thing he'd struck had put him off-balance, opening him up for a counterattack.

Like a sonic whirl, Jubei turned back to Carl...

"Hidden Blade..."

...and with her own flesh-and-blood hands, she swung a single katana.

This was the strongest weapon she had—the Mythical “Amasser’s Woundblade, Kasanehime.”

It had the terrifying power of *releasing a strike that dealt damage equal to all damage dealt to others in the past sixty minutes.*

“Scatter Like Mist: Unsan-Musho.”

Indeed, it was a sure-kill weapon that grew stronger without limit the more she attacked.

The hunter’s deadly strike had missed the asura, and now the asura had landed her own deadly strike on the hunter.

Considering how much damage she’d distributed in the past hour, the damage this attack would deal would utterly destroy even vanguard SJs.

And yet...the Multifariously Invincible was still standing.

Not even the ace up Jubei’s sleeve could harm this costumed anomaly.

“...My, my,” she said. Her countless attacks, the defense-breaking Hora, and now even Kasanehime all had failed...and this made Jubei realize something about Carl. She now understood that he was protected by some sort of “law.”

It was most likely the power of his Superior Embryo.

Will I figure it out first...? Or...? Until she discovered the trick behind his invincibility, she wouldn’t be able to defeat him no matter how hard or long she attacked him.

It didn’t even matter how high her attack power was.

“Or will I break through it before then?”

Of course, the maddened embodiment of strife didn’t care how pointless her struggle might be. Her enemy was desperately overwhelming, yet Jubei smiled wide and cut at him.

And so, Carl turned out to be the first person who became fed up with their battle.

“Huh?!” Jubei exclaimed, shocked. Carl had turned his back on her and began running away—this time for real.

Poison hadn’t killed her, traps couldn’t catch her, the ace up his sleeve had only destroyed one of her arms, and his invincibility didn’t scare her in the slightest.

Realizing that this battle junkie wouldn’t give up until the event had ended, he figured that the best course of action was to just leave.

Carl switched into his escape gear, activated all the surrounding traps to keep Jubei busy, and ran as fast as possible.

He could hear her insulting him, but he didn’t care one bit.

He wasn’t a knight, but a hunter. To him, victory meant getting results.

And beyond just his pride as a hunter, the prey that had escaped him earlier were much more worthwhile targets than the battle maniac he just left behind.

Thus ended the battle between the hunter and the asura. The former retreated, leaving the latter feeling exceedingly sour.

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Paladin, Ray Starling

“...Did we get away?” I asked.

“It seems so,” said Nemesis.

An asura in front, a Superior behind. Talk about a rock and a hard place. It was a downright terrifying situation, but thankfully, we’d been able to get away.

If Jubei hadn't made the suggestion she had, our group might've been completely destroyed. It was the kind of situation you'd expect in a battle royale, but you could say that the very fact that this *was* a battle royale had saved us in the end.

One thing was certain, though—as we progressed through the event, we would surely run into at least one of them again.

When that happened, we would have to beat either an overwhelming harbinger of strife...or a Superior everyone called invincible. Our chances against either seemed pretty slim...not that that was anything new for us, I guess.

"I-I thought I was gonna dieee...!" Alto dropped to her knees at my side, breathing raggedly.

"Thanks for the smokescreen," I said.

"Y-You're welcome! Wait, why're you so calm?! We just ran into a Superior!"

"Well, that isn't all that rare for me." Starting with Figaro, I'd already met more than I could count on one hand.

It was kinda weird, actually. Superiors were like an exclusive club with less than a hundred members, yet I ran into them fairly regularly.

"Wooow, *someone's* used to trouble. That's our Ray the devil-eater," Alto said.

"Don't make that a thing," I retorted.

"Well, that *is* the most notable scene in the videos," said Nemesis.

I wonder who actually recorded our fight against Logan...? I said in thought.

"What about you? You okay?" I asked Juliet.

"No wound has struck true. My wings may yet still take to the skies."

No problem, huh? Good to know.

“Anyway, we didn’t think much about *where* we were running, and we’re now at...” I said as I looked around and compared the scenery to the full view of the island shown to us by Cheshire.

We had bolted out of the forest and arrived at a shore—the outer edge of the island. There was a rocky area facing the sea, and based on the location of the forest and mountain, we were in the event area’s southeast.

“Anyway, let’s keep moving,” I said. “Someone will catch up to us if we stay in one place, and we sure won’t find any hints by just standing around.”

“Indeed,” Nemesis nodded before starting to walk. “But what do these hints look like, anyway? Cheshire certainly did not explain tha—AAT?!”

Her words were cut short by her tripping over something and falling to the ground.

“Ugh! Who put *that* there?!” she complained with her hand over her nose, glaring at a drain-like formation in the ground.

After a closer look, I realized that around where Nemesis tripped, there was some strange pale rock.

“Hm?” The thing Nemesis had stumbled over was far too square to be natural. It was as though it had been masterfully carved out by human hand.

“...It should be fine if I don’t go too high,” I said, still wary of the anti-air weapon I’d seen, as I jumped on Silver and rose up a bit.

I slowly gained altitude until I could look at the pale rock from above, and I saw something had been carved into it.

And so, below me...

“I see.”

...I read the letters “YYYYMMDD.”

The thing Nemesis had tripped over was part of one of those letters.

This was the first hint we’d found, and it confirmed to us that the eight-digit number was, indeed, a date in the Gregorian calendar.

Interlude: The Crawler-Riders, the Magic-Spinners

Event Area, South, Beach

Shion Manjushage was a fairly famous Altarian Master.

Being thirteenth on a single ranking would have been impressive enough, but she was thirteenth in *every* ranking.

Duel, clan, and kill rankings—Shion was a rare person who had taken the same spot in all three of them.

She was powerful enough to go higher, but she *chose* to remain where she was.

In fact, she was actually making her clan members—all of whom were her family’s servants in real life—keep an eye on other rankers so she could adjust her kill count and clan score to maintain her position.

Her reason for going to such lengths was, to quote her, “Because the number thirteen is so ominous and cool!”

There was nothing more to it than that.

For that very same reason, she was after the position of the fourth—a more prestigious number which was also ominous in certain Asian cultures—which had made her proclaim herself to be Juliet’s rival. Some other duelists and parts of the audience did also see it that way, so it wasn’t entirely unfounded.

Because of this, she’d felt somewhat left out when Juliet and Chelsea promised to have an all-out battle. To quote her directly, “What about me?!”

From Chelsea’s perspective, though, Shion and Juliet had already had their showdown during the Exodragon King incident—and in a quite

troublesome manner, at that. Chelsea had told Shion as much when they'd met up again.

All of that aside, Shion was now focused on the event.

One reason for this had been Chelsea's words to her: "It's not like you'll become fourth in the rankings or something if you *do* beat Julie at this event. Doncha think it's better to focus on winning that prize, using it to get stronger, and then challenging her?" Shion herself had said something similar during the Exodragon King incident, so that comment had been more than enough to convince her.

Chelsea's true intentions in saying that, though, had been preventing Shion from interfering in her fight against Juliet—while also getting Shion on her side. The Dark Princess's abilities made her a potent force against even the strongest players in this event.

After seeing Shion eliminate King of Cowboys, who could have become the greatest threat here, it would have been fair to assume that Chelsea had definitely made the right choice.

Dominating the event's battles like this, they'd managed to acquire a fair number of plates; now they were searching for the way to use them—the hints.

To make the most of their abilities, they'd split up to make the search more efficient. They might have been more powerful as a group, but since only the first three through the gate could clear the event, they had to make a compromise between their combat potential and speed of investigation.

Thinking along those lines—or, rather, having been persuaded by Chelsea to think that way—Shion went to look for clues...

"Hm?! I found something strange!"

...and eventually found one.

This one, though, would have been hard to miss.

It was a white stone monument poking out of the sea about twenty metels from the shoreline. Its size? As tall as a five-story building. It could be seen from just about any point on the island's southern beach.

"Hmm... There *is* something written on it, but I don't wanna get too close..." Behind the monument there was the open sea, teeming with aquatic monsters warded off by the event area's barrier. Shion had a distaste for octopuses and krakens and the like, so she didn't want to come anywhere near them.

"Read it for me, Amethyst." Because she was disinclined to approach the ocean, she made her Prism Crawler mount—the Amethyst Captor—do the job for her.

"Acknowledged," said the mechanical spider as it turned its multiple sensors on the monument and read the text. "Each person's answer may differ."

"So that is the hint...is it?" The cryptic, almost philosophical statement made Shion put one hand to her cheek and tilt her head. The gesture was very refined, but the thought running through her mind was, *I've got no clue what that means.*

"...Amethyst?" Shion asked.

"Insufficient information for analysis," Amethyst replied. The Prism Crawler was often called "Shion's external brain." In this situation, she tried relying on it like she always did, but not even an AI could figure out the correct eight-digit number from this hint alone.

"Hmm... I will take it back to Chelsea, then," Shion said. "She is a college student in real life, so she ought to be at least a little bit smarter than me!"

If Chelsea were to hear that, she would likely say something like, "Being 'a bit' smarter than you wouldn't even be enough to get

accepted to my college,” but Shion was right to bring this information to her teammate.

“Time to go to the rendezv—”

“Emergency evasion.”

Shion, all smiles, was about to order Amethyst to move, but the mechanical spider used its eight legs to jump away on its own.

A moment later, immense heat and light sliced through the place they had just been.

“What?!”

“Analyzing the enemy,” said Amethyst. “Applicable data discovered. Magically charged particle cannon—a weapon of the Obliterator.”

While Shion was surprised by the completely unexpected attack, Amethyst had seen it coming and even knew what they were being attacked by.

Amethyst focused its sensors on the light’s origin point, but there was nothing there.

“Camouflage.”

Nothing *visible*, at least. The unit’s sensors could easily detect something hiding there using Optical Camouflage.

Amethyst then aimed its tail towards that location and released multiple nets. Some of them struck parts of the scenery and, in a flash of purple lightning, removed some of the coverage afforded by Optical Camouflage.

Behind it, there stood a mechanical scorpion with a cannon for a tail. This was the unit controlled by the Flow Princess, Juba—the one who’d shot down Juliet.

“Identity of the enemy unit confirmed—Prism Crawler No. 2, Citrine Obliterator.” It was a machine in the same category as Amethyst.

“...I should’ve expected this from Altar’s strongest player in this event,” said Juba. “Neither the ambush nor the camouflage is going to work against her...”

As Juba traveled, she had chanced upon Shion while she was still looking for hints on this southern shore. Since she was one of the strongest participants as well as an Altarian, Juba resolved to take advantage of this chance to take her out of the game. Using Optical Camouflage to hide, she tried to ambush Shion using her charged particle cannon.

And now, since that hadn’t worked at all, Juba knew that Shion posed an even greater threat than before.

Of course, Amethyst was the one to actually react to the ambush; Shion hadn’t expected it at all. In light of this, perhaps Juba was giving her more credit than was warranted...

“Yes! I am Altar’s strongest lady duelist—Dark Princess, Shion Manjushage!”

...but Shion was willing to take it all anyway.



Amethyst, however, didn't argue. It was a particularly loyal support mech.

"And that's why...I'm gonna take you out..."

"Bring it on!"

Juba wanted to beat Shion because she was a strong opponent, while Shion faced Juba for no other reason than Juba had challenged her. Their motives might have been very different, but they would both fight nonetheless.

And so, the two Masters and their units rushed into battle.

"Initiating evasive patterns."

"Initiating artillery patterns." Amethyst began leaping around to avoid the cannon fire, while Citrine checked its memory banks for data regarding this enemy.

Amethyst then used webs to accelerate its movements, while the unmoving Citrine repeatedly fired its charged particle cannon, quickly turning the smooth beach into a pockmarked battlefield.

A spider fighting with webs and a scorpion fighting with its tail—they were much like the creatures they were based on, and the fight seemed evenly matched for a moment.

"Is it just me, or are our designs similar?" Shion belatedly realized.

"Affirmative. Both myself and the target—Citrine Obliterator—are Prism Crawlers built by the same creator. I am No. 1, while Citrine is No. 2."

"Wow, you have a little sister?!"

"We have no gender."

"But it has a girl's voice."

“Conjecture: that is the voice of No. 2’s pilot. No. 2 is a boardable unit.”

“I see! We’re both using bug robots... Let us find out which one of ours is the true king of insects!”

“...Neither scorpions nor spiders are insects.” Even Juba couldn’t help but comment on Shion’s words.

“If there is an actual person inside, I can kill it! Gloom Stalker!” With those words, Shion activated a skill. The result was a number of black homing projectiles—a manifestation of black magic that sought out living creatures, passing through anything inanimate. Combined with Judas’s Kiss of Death, they could deliver unavoidable death even through the toughest armor.

“Defense.”

But then, Citrine created a barrier of light around itself.

“Huh?! That barrier better not be dark or holy!” Shion exclaimed. Dark magic could only be influenced by other dark magic effects or its opposite, holy magic.

However, Citrine’s barrier didn’t look like either.

“No. 2’s barrier works on both offensive magic and physical attacks. It can only be penetrated by attacks with a greater output.”

“No fair!”

In exchange for being able to break through most defenses, dark magic wasn’t particularly strong. It seemed her only option for breaking the barrier would be her ultimate job skill, but that took some time to prepare.

“Amethyst!”

“I am a light support unit specialized in trap placement and three-dimensional mobility, while No. 2 is a heavy combat unit equipped with extensive armor and firepower. The enemy has the advantage.”

Though they were both Prism Crawlers, the gulf between them was wide, like that between a utility vehicle and a tank.

However, that was exactly what made the current situation so unusual.

“Operating both the charged particle cannon and the barrier at full capacity would be taxing even for magic-focused Superior Jobs. It is likely that No. 2 is receiving some form of special support, either from a Superior Job or an Embryo.”

The Prism Crawlers were famous weapons even older than The Era of the Peerless Three. A mechanic who'd inherited the title of Grand Artificer of the pre-ancient civilization built them, inspired by the Prism Horses and Dragons.

Their base capabilities were a match for the originals built by the Grand Artificer himself, but there was one drawback—the mechanic had failed to reproduce the reactors, making the Prism Crawlers completely reliant on the user's MP for energy. The amount of MP drained was different for each unit. No. 1, Amethyst, was the most balanced in this regard, but the combat-focused Citrine was a true magic hog.

Despite this, Juba had some means of ignoring this limitation and could run Citrine at full capacity for long periods of time. An experienced fighter would notice this and immediately understand that discovering what made this possible would be key to victory.

“I see I have no choice...”

And now, Shion...

“I will have to just keep shooting until I break the barrier!”

...unfortunately not the brightest player around, decided to do it by force. Like an aggressive monkey, she chose to merely keep attacking, sparing no thought to the possible source of her opponent's power.

Just as one could never reason with the embodiments of strife that were the asura, reason wouldn't work on idiots either.

Shion then did exactly as she said she would, repeatedly firing her dark magic while leaving all evasion to Amethyst. All of her spells were blocked by the barrier, failing to reach either Citrine or Juba.

Despite that, she just kept on casting.

Seemingly obedient, Amethyst continued to evade while closing the distance or repositioning to give Shion an angle that would let her shoot past the barrier.

However, there were no gaps in the half-sphere barrier, so in all honesty, Shion was merely wasting her time and energy.

What is she planning...? Juba wondered, still overestimating her opponent. She never presumed that the fearsome Master who'd taken out the giant cloud-elephant would perform such a wasteful assault without purpose. Thinking that Shion must be planning something beyond her comprehension, Juba became a bit paranoid.

I have the upper hand in both firepower and armor. She can't hit me as long as I keep up the barrier... Wait, is that why? Is she forcing me to use the barrier?

Normally, Juba didn't talk much, and when she did her words were slow. However, that was because most of her mind was entirely focused on analyzing her surroundings. She analyzed her enemies and the battlefield around her to gain full control over them and achieve victory.

Thus, her thinking right now...

Are these useless attacks meant to shift my energy distribution towards defense? Is there a reason she wants to shut down my full-power cannon fire?

...was actually more like *overthinking*.

Shion certainly hadn't put nearly that much thought into it. In fact, she hadn't even noticed Citrine's design flaw.

Citrine was a heavy tank, powerful in both defense and offense, but there was a cap on the amount of magic per second it could convert into energy, making it impossible to simultaneously use the charged particle cannon and the barrier at full power. Right now, to defend against Shion's attacks, seventy percent of its energy flow was directed to the barrier, with only thirty percent powering the cannon.

It's still enough to kill her, though. She's using Amethyst to evade my shots, but unlike me, she doesn't have any means of quickly restoring MP. Actually, all those attacks and my influence should mean she's going to run dry soon enough... I think.

Since she thought Shion was still hiding something, Juba couldn't be confident about her thoughts. The power of someone who held thirteenth place in all rankings was hard to gauge. It wasn't just about her personal power—one couldn't maintain all three positions without great leadership, thorough organization, and immense amounts of data about other rankers.

Because of this, Juba couldn't help but assume that Shion had incredible charisma and could analyze a situation with the best of them.

Again, she was *overthinking* it.

Her clan members were all her servants in real life. They were organized because it was their job, and data was gathered by the members who were best at it. They simply approached Shion every

week and told her, “Milady, this is how many you have to defeat to maintain your current ranking.” Shion herself had no analytical ability whatsoever.

That was why a UBM was able to take advantage of her during the Exodragon King incident.

I can't let my guard down. Just what is she planning...?

Juba outmatched Shion in terms of compatibility, but failed to realize that her greatest enemy was her own wariness.

...Well, more accurately, there was one other problem she had to worry about.

“Ngh. It's not working...!”

It had taken her nearly a hundred spells, but Shion finally began to realize the futility of her incessant casting.

The Weaver-Spider’s Wand that she so loved was a luxury, custom-made item equipped with the “Halve MP Use” skill, but the sheer number of spells had taken their toll, leaving her MP at less than 20%.

“I feel like my MP is dropping faster than normal,” she said. “I’m so tired that I feel like I am seeing two suns...”

“...”

“Oh?”

While Shion had begun to complain, Amethyst extended a thread to her. The non-damaging thread allowed for communication between them and them alone, somewhat like the two cans tied with a string.

“This message is top secret. I request that you do not change your expression to prevent the enemy from noticing,” said Amethyst. Shion nodded in response.

“I propose a strategy that will make it possible to win.”

"Huh?! Have you come up with something?!" Shion exclaimed, instantly forgetting Amethyst's request.

Amethyst then proceeded to present its idea.

"...Huhhh?" Upon hearing it, Shion couldn't hide how unpleasant she found the prospect. Then, after about ten seconds of thinking coupled with light groaning, all while Amethyst was still evading Juba's beams...

"...I guess I have no choice!" she hesitantly agreed.

On the other side, there stood Juba, who felt that the end of the battle was close.

Reveal tells me that she has less than 10% MP left. Even using her Prism Crawler should be too much for her, she thought.

Shion had already ceased her magic attacks and was now doing nothing but evading Citrine's beams. However, that would stop once she ran out of magic to power Amethyst.

Juba had fought as carefully as she could, and now her victory was close.

That was when Shion *returned Amethyst to her inventory*.

Juba couldn't believe her eyes or even begin to understand that action. Shion had put away the one thing keeping her alive.

However, looking through Citrine's optical sensors, she saw Shion holding her wand towards her unit.

That made her realize two things.

First, Shion had put Amethyst away to focus her magic on attacks.

And second...Shion's incessant spellcasting didn't have a single thought behind it.

“She was...just an idiot the whole time...?!” Juba shouted in exasperation, shock, and anger. As if channeling her sentiments, Citrine fixed its sights directly on Shion.

The dim-witted caster who’d thrown away her only means of evasion had no way to escape the impending blast.

“Obliterate!” Juba shouted, using a skill of the same name. Shion didn’t even try to evade the light that engulfed her.

The beam’s impact blew away even the patch of beach she was standing on.

“A direct hit...!” Even from her cockpit, Juba could see that Shion had been struck by the beam. The charged particle cannon had no doubt made short work of her.

“Hoo... That was scary.”

“...Huh?” However, once the light faded, Shion was still standing there, completely unharmed.

“Huh...? Huhh...? Huuhh...?” The figure standing in that spot clearly had Shion’s face, but her silhouette was nothing like it had been before.

“It was so bright that my eyes are all watery...”

The once-humanoid silhouette had been replaced by that of a soft, rounded form based on a skeleton of a bipedal carnivorous dragon. Shion’s face was about where the dinosaur’s neck would be.

She was now wearing a type of animal costume.



The Exodragon King incident was something that had happened in Gideon some time after Franklin’s Game.

At its core, it was a battle between two UBMs: Armordragon King, Drag-Armor and Exodragon King, Drag-Mail. The former led

armordragons, while the latter commanded maildragons, and none of this would have been an issue if humans hadn't been caught in the crossfire.

Juliet, Chelsea, Max, and Shion had been deeply involved in it, and in the end, Shion was the one to finally defeat the Exodragon King, putting an end to the incident.

Being the MVP, she had received a reward—Ultimate Costume Series, Drag-Mail.

It was a costume-type MVP reward just like Shu Starling's Hind Bear. Despite its appearance, it was an Ancient Legendary treasure—and as such, it had a powerful skill.

“Antimagic Exoskeleton” reduced all incoming magic-based damage by 100% in exchange for increasing physical damage to the exposed face by 1,000%.

While alive, Exodragon King had used its exoskeleton to negate all and any magic damage, and although the conversion to MVP reward had given it an extra weakness, this power was still as effective as ever—as evidenced by Shion withstanding the charged particle cannon attack like it was nothing.

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A defensive MVP reward?! Strong enough to negate Obliteration...?! Though the attack hadn't been the strongest it could possibly be, Juba was shocked that Shion was completely unharmed.

Wait... Then...why didn't she use it before...?! If it was that easy for Shion to nullify Juba's attacks, she could've done so at the start.

What's her plan...?! I don't get it! I just can't understand her...! Completely unable to read her, Juba was at a loss.

As for the reason why Shion didn't use it...she simply didn't want to wear something she thought was “tragically un-beautiful.” Her

fixation on fashion had made her partially forget she even had it. If Amethyst hadn't reminded her, she would have gotten the death penalty before she remembered it.

It hardly needs to be repeated, but Shion was what one might call a silly goose.

Is there some sort of risk to wearing it? Is there a time limit? Or a reduction to physical resistance? Despite her confusion, Juba tried to understand her enemy and in the process came upon the correct answer.

Indeed, while Shion was now strong against magic, her physical defense was unchanged, while any physical damage to her face would be increased tenfold. Juba could win by just crushing her with Citrine's tank-like frame.

She silently considered doing just that. It would be a risky move. There was a chance that ramming Shion with the magic-based barrier wouldn't do any damage, meaning that she would have to hit her with the unit itself. Since Shion wielded material-passing dark magic, this would leave Juba open to her spells.

It would all depend on what happened first: Juba crushing Shion, or Shion's spells reaching her.

"I'll...do it!"

Juba did not hesitate to enact her newfound plan. Trusting her piloting and Citrine's power, she would charge towards Shion.

The mechanical scorpion's many legs displaced the sand as it approached Shion...*only for it to suddenly screech forwards on its back legs, like a bike doing a wheelie.*

"Huh?!"

"...?!"

Both Juba and Citrine were shocked. They had no intention of doing anything like this.

To them, it seemed that for completely unknown reasons the unit had flipped over, *and they realized its legs were caught in some kind of thread.*

That was when Juba and Citrine immediately figured out what had happened.

“A wire trap?!” It was the exact trap that Amethyst Captor had left behind before being returned to Shion’s inventory.

Amethyst Captor was Prism Crawler No. 1. It was not designed to have much combat ability on its own, instead being intended to support the Superior Job riding it. It specialized in three-dimensional mobility, web-slinging, trap-placing—and most relevantly, tactical support using its high processing power.

Amethyst had the best analytic and strategic abilities among all the Prism Crawlers. And though a flat beach wasn’t a good place for taking full advantage of its three-dimensional mobility, it was *perfect* for burying traps.

Though No. 2 was a fearsome foe, Amethyst knew all of the other unit’s strong points and weaknesses. While its foolish owner was fruitlessly wasting time and MP, it used the chance to set up traps unnoticed. While fighting, it had also analyzed Juba’s personality and realized that if she couldn’t use her trusty charged particle cannon, she would likely elect to dash straight in for a physical battle.

The result of all that strategizing was now plain to see—the mechanical scorpion had been flipped over, *exposing the unit’s undercarriage, unprotected by the half-spherical magic barrier.*

“Gloom Stalker!” Not missing the chance, Shion used her remaining magic to release multiple high-rank ultimate job skills.

The winged, black homing projectiles easily passed through the armor of Citrine's underside, reaching the cockpit and battering Juba over and over.

I...lost...! Juba thought dimly, finally fully grasping the fearsome intellect of the one who had crafted this plan.

Juba had been defeated by nothing other but Amethyst's processing power...

Shion Manjushage... She pretended to be an idiot while she was inventing this thorough strategy... The kingdom has some truly terrifying players...

...but until the very end, Juba failed to realize who she should *actually* be afraid of.

Thus, the Dryfean pre-Superior, Flow Princess, Juba, retired from the event, with the mystery of her combo still unsolved.



“VICTORY! IS! MINE! Ah ha ha ha ha!” Switching from the costume to her dress, Shion burst into a fit of refined laughter.

“Oh? I’m feeling pretty good about myself right now, so why do I feel like things are suddenly getting dark?”

There was something she hadn’t realized yet—the fact that there had actually been two suns in the sky until now.

Amethyst had noticed this fact and guessed that one of the stars was Juba’s Embryo, which must’ve been the thing helping her cover Citrine’s heavy MP costs. However, there was nothing they could do about it, and facing it hadn’t been necessary to achieve victory, so Amethyst hadn’t even pointed it out to Shion. It simply wasn’t high on its list of priorities.

“So many plates! And I have a hint now too! I am the *best!*” Having achieved victory, Shion was joyously gathering the plates Juba had dropped.

Alas, she was a bit *too* happy, and as a result she raised her voice a little too much.

The joy had also made her forget to redeploy Amethyst.

A crushing silence. Unbeknownst to her, a hunter in a presence-hiding ghillie suit was standing right behind her.

He...or rather, God Hunter, Carl Lourlou was holding a harpoon gun.

While Shion was still gathering the plates, he fixed his sights on her...and pulled the trigger.

A moment later, the sound of an explosion mingled with the roars of the crashing waves.



And so, Shion Manjushage retired from the event.

She had been taken out by a third party while looting the enemy she'd defeated—a common enough occurrence in battle royales.

Chapter Seven: A Hint

Paladin, Ray Starling

“So the answer is a date on the Gregorian calendar,” I said.

“Yep,” Alto nodded. “That seemed likely since it was eight digits, so this just confirms it.”

“Yeah.” Having found our first hint, we were now walking along the shore looking for more of them.

On the one hand, we had nowhere to hide out here...but on the other, neither did anyone approaching us. I looked around and didn’t see any place our potential ambushers could be lurking. There were some trees growing around a nearby river, but not enough to act as cover for anyone waiting to attack us. On top of that, Juliet was flying right above us, looking out for any potential threats. I told her that those AA beams made it dangerous, but she insisted that she could evade them now that she knew about them.

“...The hint we were given before we were transported here was ‘Don’t forget the name of this event,’ wasn’t it?” I said as I remembered the event’s name—The Anniversary.

“Yeah,” said Alto. “If that’s a hint, then I guess the answer might be...*Dendro*’s release date?”

“Perhaps there is a hint that reveals exactly *which* anniversary they are referring to,” said Nemesis. “We need to gather more.”

Right now, it felt like we only had one point of a polygon. We couldn’t know the true shape without getting a couple more points.

“Mine eyes bore witness to a guidestone pale as death—one that may yet deliver us to glory.”

“You found the next hint, huh?”

Juliet just landed and said, “I saw a stone that looked as white as the rocky area from earlier. I think it’s a hint.”

Flying really *was* useful for looking out for enemies and searching for hints. Maybe there were other hints that could only be seen while on the ground?

Anyway, Juliet led us to the place she’d spotted—a sandy beach in the event area’s south.

However, it had already been destroyed.

Patches of sand had been melted by some kind of heat attack, and the resulting glass was still warm.

It was clear that someone had fought here, and I had an idea who it might have been...

“...The Master with the anti-air attacks,” I said. This damage had probably been done by the very same person who’d shot down one Master right before my very eyes and had later brought down Juliet.

He, or maybe she...they’d probably fought here and been defeated. If they’d won, Juliet would’ve obviously been shot at again.

The fact that we could safely take to the sky now was good news for us.

“And the hint you mentioned is...over there?”

We drew closer to the sea, where there stood a large stone monument. On it, there was text, just like there had been in that rocky area.

“Each person’s answer may differ,’ huh?”

“Well, then it can’t be the release date!” said Alto. “*Dendro* came out at the same time worldwide.”

“The feast marking one’s first breath,” said Juliet.

“Yeah. Most people have different birthdays, so it may be that. The fact that plates with ‘2’ or ‘0’ seem more common might’ve been because most of the playerbase was born in or after the year 2000.”

There were a few born in 1999 or earlier, of course, but talking overall proportion, players born after that were the majority.

However...

“The number ‘4’ also seems more common though. Taking that into consideration, maybe it’s not our birthdays, but the days we started playing *Infinite Dendrogram*? ”

That could be anywhere between July 15th, 2043 and today—April 20th, 2045. All of the numbers in that range would have 2, 0, and 4 in them which would explain why they were more common.

“That *is* true,” said Nemesis. “What do you think, Alto?”

“Hm? Me? I’m combining those answers into one *super* answer.” ...A *super answer*? “Hey, Ray. You know how Embryos don’t always hatch on the day you start the game?”

“Oh.”

“It *can* be the same day, but there’re people who create their characters one day, then stop and return and hatch their Embryos some other day. That’s why my guess is...the answer is the participant’s *Embryo’s* birthday. Whaddya think?”

That...was actually pretty likely. Your own birthday, your starting day, and your Embryo’s birthday were all worthy of being “anniversaries,” though, so it was hard to be certain just yet.

“We can try out all of ’em if we want,” Alto continued. “We each put in a different answer and then just go by whoever passes.”

If one of these answers turned out to be right, that method would let at least one of us pass—and if it was the first one who tried, then the other two would pass, as well.

Wrong answers would mean getting teleported to some other part of the island, though.

More importantly...

"I'm not sure if we'll have enough plates for that," I said. "Since that's personal info, I won't ask for your birthdays, but what are your starting days and Embryo birthdays? Mine is March 16th for both."

It had now been over a month since I started, but it really didn't feel like that.

"The path I now walk began upon the day celebrating the world's first full revolution, and upon that very day were my black-plumed wings bequeathed unto me."

"...Pardon?" asked Alto.

"You mean you started on the one year anniversary event and your Embryo hatched on the same day. That's July 17th, 2044, right?"

"Indeed." Shu had told me that had been a good time to start, with tons of events to keep you occupied. Apparently, that was also when he'd gotten the King of Destruction job.

"I'm impressed you understand her... I started on February 14th, 2045. Same day for the Embryo hatchin'."

"All right, that means that the plates we need are... Hm?"

Alto was a fellow newbie, yet she'd started on February 14th, which was...

"...You got into the game right after the UTokyo secondary exams?"

"Yyyep! When the exams were done, I got all hyped and bought the gear for it!"

"You didn't even wait to hear the results...?" *I only got my set after I found out I'd made it in and moved to a new place,* I thought.

"You speak of...the Palace of Knowledge?!" cried Juliet in shock, surprised that both of us were UTokyo students.

...*Crrrap*.

"Wooow, look at Ray, revealin' personal info in an MMO! You baaad, baaad booooy."

"...Sorry," I said. "I'm really, seriously sorry."

"Buy me lunch next time!"

...*It feels like you always settle debts with lunch*, I thought.

"Keep it a secret, will ya, Julie?"

"V-Very well..."

"Hm? What's wrong? You look kinda tense... You okay? Wanna play some cat's cradle?"

"Umm, I-I'm fine, thank you." Juliet was acting strange again. It started when I mentioned UTokyo... Did she have some real life circumstances related to our college? Would I be overstepping any boundaries if I asked?

...Well, for now, I would just count our plates and see if we had enough for all our dates.

Keeping in mind our starting dates and Embryo birthdays, we looked over the plates...and realized that we didn't even have half of the amount we needed. Only one of us would be able to finish the event with these, and that only barely.

"Not enough, but..." I said.

"Hm? If there's not enough, we just gotta beat the monsters and get more, right?" Alto asked.

"...How long has it been since we last ran into a monster?"

I had a pretty bad feeling about this.

“This event is a survival-battle royale... So, honestly, it wouldn’t be surprising if there were a limited number of monsters on this island.”

The frequency of our monster encounters had dropped significantly, which supported this theory.

If I was right, the plate-gathering part of this event was really about gathering up the “right to give your answer.” Even if we wanted to test one of our potential solutions, the plate limit made it difficult.

“This means that the number of times *all participants* can input an answer is limited. Those who defeated a lot of other people can do it many times, while those who haven’t can barely do it once...”

This event was designed to eventually funnel participants into battles against each other. I had no idea why they’d felt it necessary to include these quiz elements and hadn’t just made it a regular battle royale, but...

“We need to beat other Masters to clear this,” I concluded. “And the ones who will make it to the end will be the strongest...which will be the likes of Jubei and GH.”

“Hmmm...” Alto let out a sigh like she lost all hope, and I couldn’t blame her.

Honestly, though, I felt like those two were better targets than most other participants.

First of all, they’d probably have an obscene number of plates. No matter which one of the two managed to win the event, all of those plates were still in the hands of a single Master. If that Master went on to give a correct answer, all of the extra plates they were carrying would vanish—which meant we would never be able to get them.

That suggested actually fighting them would give us *higher* chances of clearing the event.

“...Hey, Nemmy, what’s with all the resolve on Ray’s face?” Alto asked.

“That is how his face looks when he is preparing to fight against the odds. He makes it all the time.”

“All the time, huh...? Well, putting Jubei Kaga aside for now... Carl Lourlou is so invincible that you hear about him all the time even in Tenchi... How do you plan on beatin’ him?”

I was also aware of the “Multifariously Invincible.”

And that was exactly why I could say this with certainty.

“We can win against him *this time*.”

“Huh?” Juliet and Alto both said at the same time. No one would blame them for being surprised.

I went on to tell them something I’d once heard from Shu, as well as providing some conjecture of my own.

Three minutes later, after listening to everything I’d said, they were thinking deeply about God Hunter’s powers and counters.

“I see... That *is* one way to do it...” said Alto.

“A rule hardly familiar to most...”

“But, Ray, would that actually work...?”

“Well, it depends on how it goes, but...I think that Juliet and I could pull it off.”

If the situation called for it, I could maybe do it by myself too.

“That sooo...? Ummm... Will I just drag you down, then?” Alto said with a sad look, pointing at herself.

“Hey, we’re just dividing roles,” I said. “You’re a great help while we’re moving around, and it’s thanks to you that we were able to get

out of that situation so smoothly. If we're up against some big shot, though, Juliet and I are better for the job. That's all there is to it."

"I see... But I... Umm... Yeah... Never mind."

She was deep in thought about something. Was it something to do with her Embryo she'd told me about? "I see... Well, in that case, let's leave it at that and go looking for more hints."

If we're gonna fight them, it won't hurt to lower the chances of getting wrong answers... Huh?! As I was thinking about all of that, I felt a presence. I turned towards it, away from the sea. Juliet had noticed it before me, while Nemesis and Alto followed my lead.

It was a river about a hundred metels away from us.

On the bank of the river flowing into the sea, there stood a familiar-looking girl wearing a pirate hat.

"Chelsea..." Juliet had found the very person she'd promised to fight, and Chelsea was staring back right at her.

The pirate girl waved at us before running closer. She wasn't doing this at combat speed, but the speed of someone hurrying to greet a friend.

It seemed like she was trying to suggest she didn't want to fight...but that wasn't it at all.

"Heyoo. So you formed a trio too," she said.

"Too?" I asked.

"I teamed up with Shion and Max. We agreed to meet here, but I don't see either of them, so...didja beat 'em?"

So our group of six became two parties of three, huh? I thought.

"No. There was no one here when we showed up... There were signs of fighting, though."

"Hmm. Really? I guess they fought someone, anyway, and either lost or the battle went to a standstill. Shame."

To me, she didn't seem too upset about her companions' fates. Well, unlike the peace talks, this was an event where nobody risked anything, so maybe it was fair to not feel too strongly about losing a teammate.

Or maybe there was something she wanted more than victory.

"Anyway, there's somethin' I'd like to ask you three."

"Wha—?! You wanna join this team?! As in, you want me to leave?!" Alto said with a fearful voice.

"...Why would you think that?" I asked.

"I mean, in *Dendro*, you've spent more time with them than with me! I'm basically an outsider here! I'm also not a ranker! I don't eat devils for breakfast like you do! And I haven't dated you IRL either!"

"Huh? Are you two a thing?" Chelsea asked.

"No. We're just friends," I answered. *And what does "eating devils" have to do with anything? Let go of that already*, I thought.

"You're gonna make me leave to take in somebody you like better! 'Sorry, Alto, this event can only be cleared by three people.' That's what you're about to say, right?!"

"No, damn it. Who do you take me for?"

This event was really making me realize that, despite normally being a cheerful cat's cradle fan, Natsume became a real downer when she was at her wits' end.

In a way, her thought patterns were like...cat's cradle, actually—all tangled up.

"If I'm left alone, I'll be taken out of the event in seconds!" Alto cried, flinging herself onto the ground to roll in the sand.

"Ah ha ha! Your friend's funnier than I thought," laughed Chelsea. "Don't worry, though. That's not what I want." Her smile then vanished in an instant. "Sorry for messin' up your trio, but..."

She fixed her gaze on Juliet.

"...Can ya let me fight Julie one-on-one?"

"Let's go all-out and fight each other with everything we've got."

"...Yeah!"

"Oh..." The words they'd exchanged in the event's lobby came rushing back to me. Chelsea was here to try and have that promised fight.

However, Chelsea wasn't smiling, and even Juliet was hesitant for some reason.

"I planned to have Shion and Max keep everyone else from gettin' in the way, but neither of them are here and Julie ain't alone either, so asking nicely is about the only thing I can do."

If a team wanted to win this event, it was best to fight as a team instead of letting one of your members fight one-on-one. Chelsea had probably considered that when she made her request.

"Hey hey hey, that would be a bit too much," said Alto. "I mean, Juliet is our heavy hitte—"

"Why not?" I said, cutting her off.

"Whoa... Mr. Ray?"

Don't "Mr." me, I thought.

"I knew that they wanted to fight before we teamed up. Also, do you really wanna make your teammate focus on victory when there's obviously something she wants even more than that? Wouldn't it leave a bad taste in your mouth?"

“...I guess it would,” Alto said with a nod, covering her face with both hands.

I didn’t know if she was ashamed of what she’d said or if she was grieving what she thought was the inevitable end of our team up.

“You wanna fight her too—right, Juliet?”

“...Yeah!” she said. She’d clearly only hesitated because she was being considerate of me and Alto. But now that we’d given her the go-ahead, she was all smiles—a way more fitting expression for her, if you asked me.

“Heh. I was actually plannin’ on negotiatin’ with ya, offerin’ this and that for the privilege of a fight. I guess you’re just too much like us duelists, Ray,” Chelsea said with a grin.

“Well, I’ve sparred with a whole lot of you.”

“Ah ha ha ha. When things cool down, try joining the duel rankings too, will ya?”

“I’ll think about it. Anyway, we’ll head off to the west so we don’t get in the way.”

I’d seen them duel before and knew that their fights could cause lots of collateral damage, so it was best to keep a distance.

I turned away from them and walked towards the west, with Nemesis and Alto following after me.

“So yeah, Juliet...”

But there was still one last thing I had to say to my teammate before I left.

“...Meet up with us later.”

I believe that you’ll win, I added silently.

It wasn't because her rank was greater or because Juliet had won in the duels I'd seen. Even I could tell that Chelsea now wasn't the same Chelsea I'd seen at the arenas. She had some powerful ace up her sleeve, and she was now gonna use it against her dear friend and rival.

But I still believed in Juliet's victory, because...that's what being a team was all about, right?

"...Acknowledged!" Hearing those words behind me, I left the beach that was about to become a battlefield.

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Since it was clear by now that the Master firing the anti-air beams was out of the game, we were riding Silver through the air over the shoreline. It only took us a few minutes to make it to the west shoreline of the event area. It was as beachy as the south had been, and the shallow water below was crystal clear.

"This would be a nice place for a resort," I said.

"A resort, eh...? That does remind me of the time your plans to visit the seaside fell apart," said Nemesis.

"Yeah. Back when Fuso kidnapped me... I'll never forget the encounter at school afterwards..."

It was weird to think that had happened just a short time before I'd headed off to college. I felt like it was forever ago.

"'Fuso?' You mean Fuso Tsukuyo, the Superior? And what encounter in school?" Alto asked.

"...You'll find out eventually." Fuso's name and face were the same here and in real life, so Natsume would run into her sooner or later.

I was currently wielding Nemesis in her greatsword form, and Alto was sitting behind me. I asked if Alto had any means of flying, and

she said that the whole “flying on kites” thing was from a different job in the ninja grouping.

“It just hit me that there’s only one type of monster in this event,” I said. “None of them can fly, and wild monsters... Ohh, right, they can’t enter because of the barrier.”

While flying around the kingdom, you might have a hard time dealing with the occasional avian monster or dragon, but that wasn’t the case on this island. Looking outside it, beyond the barrier, I could see some bird and fish monsters, so I assumed that the local creatures had all been removed for the event.

“Oh yeah. Alto, what about your Jewel? Don’t you have a flying monster in there?” I asked, remembering Rook and his avian servant. Many Masters used tamed creatures for flight.

“Uhhh... Um, the monster inside can’t fly... Yeah. It just can’t.”

“I see. Hm? That’s...”

Looking down, I saw something that stood out from its surroundings—a “landmark,” as they were called in battle royales.

It was a wooden shipwreck—a ruined vessel wasting away on the sand.

It stood out on its own, but as I looked at it, I quickly noticed a familiar white color to the sea-facing side of it.

A stone monument much like the one in the south had been placed at its bow.

“That’s gotta be the third hint,” I said. I couldn’t read it from here, so I descended towards it.

When close enough, I jumped off Silver and approached the monument.

"I hope this helps find the right answer," I said. Now, let's see what's written on... Ah!

"...RAY!" Nemesis called out right as I jumped to the side.

A moment later, something crashed into the shipwreck, breaking its bow and sending the white monument splashing into the water.

"Ahh?!" Alto cried out at the sight, but none of us could do anything about it.

After all...the one who targeted the monument—and us—was still attacking.

Jumping away had left me open to a follow-up attack, and the next projectile was already streaking towards me.

"Silver!" I called out, bringing my trusty steed to pick me up and help me evade the incoming attack.

As more of these attacks followed, I realized they were actually massive harpoons—spears whose tips exploded on impact, launched from a whaling gun.

Who was firing all of them?

The silence provided the answer...along with the polar bear standing on the deck of the wrecked ship.

"Eep...!" Alto yelped.

"God Hunter...!" I said. He'd appeared seemingly out of nowhere, but that wasn't the most important thing to worry about right now.

This was the Superior that we'd left behind to fight Jubei.

I didn't know if he'd won against her or if he'd simply run away, but I knew that we were now going to fight a Superior who was often described as "invincible."

"...It's happening *here and now*, huh?" I said.

A couple days ago, I'd fought one of the "Apices" of all Masters. The result there had pretty much been a draw even though I'd gone at her with my whole clan; without Fuso, it would've been a heavy defeat.

So what would happen if just Alto and I were to fight someone considered "invincible"?

Our chances of winning a direct fight were so low they might as well be at the bottom of the sea.

"...Sir, Mr. Ray-man Sir, is this sudden altercation in any way winnable without our heavy hitter?" Alto asked, clearly in a panic.

Well, I *had* told her that "Juliet and I could pull it off." Perhaps Alto hadn't expected us to encounter GH when it was just the two of us.

As for the answer...

"...It is *now*," I said, boldly declaring that I could emerge victorious against an invincible opponent.

"Whuh?"

"..."

While Alto was shocked by my declaration, God Hunter didn't say a word. However, I could practically feel his fighting spirit ramping up. It seemed he took my words as a taunt.

And maybe they were, but I certainly wasn't bluffing. I was absolutely sure that at this moment, in this exact situation, I had a fighting chance against an invincible Superior. This wasn't just unwarranted arrogance.

"Nemesis," I said, transforming her into the Black Shield. "Let's win this."

"Certainly!"

Thus began yet another of my battles against a Superior.

Interlude: Blade-Dance

Event Area, Middle, Base of a Mountain

Great Genocide Max—the girl bearing this over-the-top name had originally been a duel ranker from Tenchi, counted among the top thirty martial artists from that land of strife.

She'd since left this prestigious position and moved to Altar to become a duelist there.

The reason for this was the existence of someone who was essentially a *direct upgrade* of her—King of Asuras, Jubei Kaga.

Max's Embryo, Ipetam, was a high-rank Guardian—a Sentinel—with countless blades growing out of its back; it had the power to levitate them and direct them at Max's enemies. Jubei, on the other hand, had a *job skill* that let her control six levitating weapons.

Both of them commanded floating armaments, but the gap in their overall power was evident to anyone.

Although Max had Jubei beat in quantity of her armaments, Jubei was superior in both quality and technique. Despite that, Max had challenged Jubei for the position of fourth-ranked duelist in Tenchi, in order to gain the right to face the top three.

As Jubei was still ranked fourth, the outcome of her confrontation with Max should be painfully obvious.

To make matters worse, their battle had taken place in public, which had made the gap in power that much more obvious. Max now seemed like the weaker version of Jubei.

She'd left Tenchi because she couldn't bear being called that.

Max had then moved to the main continent, traveled to Altar, become a duelist again, and then finally met Juliet and her group. After all that, she'd grown as both a fighter and a person. And

perhaps *this encounter* was the chance she'd been given to confirm that.

"...Jubei."

"Maxie. It has been so long."

Max had once again crossed paths with the physical manifestation of strife—her direct upgrade.

Max had split from Chelsea and Shion to search for hints, and on the way to take a look at the goal, she'd run into Jubei.

King of Asuras was surrounded by pieces of metal and event plates.

"...Oh? Have your tastes in fashion changed?"

"One more word about the outfit and you're dead."

Max wearing frilly dresses was a fairly recent thing. She'd challenged Juliet to a duel for fourth place—and to get her to agree, Max had said that if she lost, she would do anything Juliet wanted. It was clear how that had turned out: Max had become Juliet's dress-up doll.

Max was used to the way Juliet dressed her by now, but having an old acquaintance comment on it still annoyed her.

"Eh heh heh. We'll be fighting to the death regardless," Jubei giggled.
"I must say I am surprised to see that you are in this festival as well, Maxie."

"Don't call me that... What's with all the loot, anyway? This your handiwork?"

"No. It appears that someone set traps all over the mountain, and half of what you see was caused by people triggering those. Though...I sliced the other half apart," Jubei explained with a smile as she showed her old acquaintance her floating weapons and the three curseblades clutched in her prosthetic arms.

That was when Max noticed something.

“...That’s one less arm than I remember,” she said.

“Yes. A certain Superior in an animal costume took it from me.”

“Hm...?” That description made Max think of the bear who’d been selling popcorn in Gideon. But if that was the person Jubei was talking about, the destruction to the island would’ve been far greater.

It also made her think of Bachigo Futae, a Superior from her old home of Tenchi who wore a crochet animal costume. Maybe the costume thing wasn’t so unusual after all.

Regardless, that wasn’t the important thing right now.

“Jubei,” said Max as she looked into the eyes of the asura who had surpassed her in every way.

“Yes?” Jubei replied.

“...Having one less arm ain’t an excuse for losin’.”

“I knooow.”

Max’s gaze and the words they’d exchanged were the signal. The two old enemies fanned out their blades and prepared to face each other.

“Maddened Blade, Sip Their Blood—Ipetam!” Max called.

“GRRAH!” Ipetam answered, releasing over a hundred blades from its back.

“It has been so long since we’ve fought,” Jubei said, widening her smile and causing her weapons to orbit her at high speeds. She was now prepared to deal with anything, no matter how many attacks were launched or from what angle.

“Heh!” Understanding that, Max put on a smile that was joyous, belligerent, and fearful all at the same time.

Their combat style was quite similar, but Max had lost against Jubei every time she had challenged her.

How much had she changed since those defeats? Since Jubei's SJ had no level cap, had Max only fallen further behind?

The answer to that would yet again become obvious in the next few moments.

As Jubei prepared her six floating weapons and the three curseblades, Max rushed towards her.

Her combat style was simple. She used Ipetam's floating blades to attack the enemy from every direction in order to overwhelm their capacity for defense and evasion, then used the blades fixed to the sheaths on her legs to launch herself towards them for an attack using Laser Blade—the Swordmaster's ultimate job skill.

This was a constant barrage that could exceed a hundred strikes per volley. It was an onslaught that few could withstand.

However, Jubei wouldn't be a duelist from the land of strife if she wasn't one of those few. Moving by Jubei's will, her six floating weapons flew to shatter Max's hundred.

Ipetam's blades all had a *direct* trajectory towards the target, so someone like Jubei had no trouble predicting all their paths and cutting them down.

Max had expected this, however.

She's still not using her arms! she thought.

Jubei was in the habit of primarily fighting with her floating weapons. Strikes made with the blades held in her arms, prosthetic or otherwise, were stronger, but since they broke her stance, they opened her up to attacks that she might not be able to counter. By contrast, she didn't have to move her body to move the floating weapons, so she always relied on them first while keeping her actual

physical arms ready to defend against any attacks that may come her way.

Just five of her floating weapons had brought down over twenty times that number of blades that Max had launched her way, while she herself remained completely unengaged. If Max were to rush her now, the last floating weapon—the counterattacking Dankajin—would strike her down, leaving her open to a quick death by Jubei's own hands.

That had happened to her many times back when they'd fought in Tenchi, which implied that nothing about Jubei had changed much since then.

And that was why Max's true advantage—the value of the days she'd spent outside of Tenchi—would be tested *now*.

"HIIYAAH!" With Ipetam's blades in each hand, Max rushed into the range of Jubei's floating weapons.

Dankajin was instantly unsheathed, launching a high-speed counterattack on Max.

Before it reached her, Max stuck out her left hand and *cut it off at the wrist*.

"Hgh...!" Though discomfited by the feeling of losing a hand, she made the blade in her now-disembodied extremity fly towards Jubei.

The blade, still held tightly clutched in her severed hand, did exactly that, and a moment later it was struck by a counterattack from Dankajin, now distracted from the rest of Max.

Dankajin was a counter-focused weapon that always hit anyone who entered its range. However, it was automatic, and it always went for the nearest living entity—meaning that a freshly sliced-off hand functioned as a sufficient distraction.

I see she has not forgotten Dankajin's effective attack range, Jubei thought. The scores of Max's blades kept five of Jubei's floating weapons busy, while the last one was distracted by Max's hand.

Max then closed on Jubei, coming into her melee range.



However, no amount of her high-rank ultimate job skills could match the strikes from Jubei's curseblades. Max was also inferior to her in raw strength, speed, and the amount of punishment she could take. Having lost a hand, she also now held only a single blade, as opposed to the three in Jubei's prosthetics.

Max had managed to close distance with Jubei, but that had only made her death more inevitable.

The thing she chose to do in this desperate situation was *letting go of her single sword*.

"Oh!" Shifting to flying mode, the blade entered the range of Jubei's curseblades, where it was quickly struck down.

This seemed like a bad move on Max's part. A surprise attack like this would have no effect on Jubei when she was ready for it.

"RRHAAGH!"

But what if Max layered it with two *more* such attacks?

Max even let go of the sheathed blades on her legs that she used for propulsion before sending them against Jubei. Again, they were countered by the two remaining curseblades.

Max's flying blades could reach Jubei even from a close range. Forcing Jubei to use her three curseblades made her lose her footing slightly, but the opening it created was small. Whether Max equipped a new blade from her inventory or had Ipetam manifest a new one, Jubei would be fully ready to counter it by the time it was in her hand.

And that was exactly why Max accelerated towards her unarmed. The girl who commanded a hundred blades moved in to fight with none.

Jubei was caught off guard by this, and the momentum Max had built up allowed her to approach her before she could swing her curseblades.

And so, the two fingers Max had managed to extend towards her foe *tore out one of the asura's eyes*.

"Ngh..."! The prosthetics didn't move fast enough to prevent the attack, while using the Kasanehime she was holding in her own arms wasn't an option. That weapon built up power without limit, so she had to think carefully about how to employ it when it had accumulated *too much* of said power. In a situation like this, slightly off-balance from intercepting the blades, using Kasanehime could even lead to her own destruction.

Max was well aware of this, and guessed that destroying half of the blades that made it to her would have made Kasanehime's power too great for Jubei to use it in this specific situation.

This was a move Max had carefully crafted just to deliver this single attack—this *repayment*—to Jubei.

It was something that Max would never have been able to do in the past—and right after it, the three curseblades sliced Max to pieces.

"...Heh," Max chuckled as she fell.

She'd expected this outcome. This happened to anyone who entered the range of this asura—this embodiment of strife. But she wanted to challenge Jubei even if it cost her her life.

She wanted to measure the distance between her and Jubei, as well as weaken the asura for her friends.

I did...what I could... she thought. This would at least increase Chelsea's and Shion's chances of winning against Jubei, which was another reason why Max hadn't hesitated despite the odds.

Though, for all Max knew, they might not end up being the ones to finally face Jubei. It might even be the winged Altarian duelist who'd once defeated her but was now her friend.

Regardless, Max had carved her mark upon this embodiment of strife, and for that alone, she was satisfied.

Max died, and Ipetam's floating blades vanished.

After that, all that was left were Max's plates and Jubei. She touched her now-gone left eye and cracked a grin.

"Max is *as strong as ever*."

Overjoyed, she said something she'd truly believed for a long time now. That had been her honest impression of Max since her days in Tenchi.

Max had a combat style much like Jubei's, but was a *direct upgrade* to hers, controlling many times more weapons. Despite being but one Master, she could completely overwhelm Jubei's processing power.

So far Jubei had always won against Max thanks to her Superior Job and quality equipment, but she always wondered if her victory would be so assured had they been equal in those regards.

Jubei had always considered Max a rival and had been saddened by her departure from Tenchi. And now, having learned that Max had continued to improve since that day and had even become good enough to take out Jubei's eye, she was filled with glee.

Even though she now had only one eye to perceive the light, she nevertheless felt as though the sun was shining twice as brightly.

"I am meeting Ray Starling soon, so I should probably bandage it up," she said before starting to hum a song and walking away from the place where she'd fought Max, certain that this wouldn't be the last time she would fight her truest rival.

Chapter Eight: To Beat the Invincible

Several Minutes Before Ray Starling and Carl Lourlou Began Fighting

After defeating Shion, Carl headed to the goal in the middle of the island.

His objective was to clear the event. With the plates from Shion, Juba, and those he'd defeated before them, he now had enough for a whole four answers. Because of that, he had elected to give it a try.

Standing before the input device, he began to insert the numbered plates.

He'd found two hints so far: "The answer may differ for each person," and "204Y."

The latter made it obvious that the answer was a date in the decade of 2040, while the former meant that it was something personal, like the day you started *Infinite Dendrogram* or the day your Embryo hatched.

Having narrowed it down to just those possibilities in his mind, Carl figured that it wouldn't hurt to try at least one of them.

With that in mind, he had input the day he'd started playing...which turned out to be the wrong answer. That had flung him to a random part of the island.

Despite that, Carl wasn't panicking. No matter where he'd been sent, he only had to trek as far as the mountain in the center to get back to the goal.

Now, the place he'd been teleported to was *the deck of a shipwreck to the very west of the island*.

He'd actually appeared at the very moment Ray had descended upon the ship's bow and prepared to read the hint inscribed there.

Realizing that he stumbled upon an enemy, Carl had reflexively attacked him using ranged weaponry. Not even he had expected to meet another participant immediately after being teleported.

However, this actually wasn't coincidental.

Wrong answers at the goal teleported the player to a random place *next to hints that they hadn't yet found*.

Cheshire hadn't mentioned this detail, and it could only be discovered by getting a wrong answer once. It was actually insurance on the control AI's part, meant to prevent scenarios where none of the participants could manage to arrive at the correct answer.

This consideration from the control AI's had now led to a battle between Ray and Carl.

Ray fought to survive against this immense foe and take his plates for himself. Carl fought to hunt down the person he'd once marked as prey, to teach him a lesson for his conceit in thinking that he could win...and to not lose against the little brother of *the one who'd defeated him*.

Thus, their clash began.

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Paladin, Ray Starling

The God Hunter fired the harpoon gun in his arms.

It seemed to be an MVP reward that automatically created the harpoons it fired, but the trajectory was so direct that Silver was able to evade the shots.

Leaving evasion to him, I rushed towards God Hunter.

"EEP!" Alto yelped.

"Don't bite your tongue or anything!" I told her. This was no situation to make her get off of Silver. If I did that, GH would target

her instead, so I had no choice but to make her deal with the steed's erratic movements.

"Purgatorial Flames, full power!" I roared, releasing flames that consumed the God Hunter below. A direct hit from these could set aflame even Pure-Dragon-tier creatures and above, but the white bear below was completely unaffected.

Not a single strand of fur on his costume was even singed.

"U-Um, he's not burning at all!" Alto exclaimed.

"...I figured this would happen." There was no way the God Hunter's gear would burn because of something this basic. Actually, even Xunyu's Baolongba wouldn't be able to set him on fire.

After all, Carl Lourlou's equipment *couldn't break*.

It wasn't a matter of the gear's quality—it became indestructible *because he was the one wearing it*.

"...It's just like Shu said." My bro had told me about the Multifariously Invincible and his gimmick.

He'd also told me how to counter it.

I recalled the conversation I'd had with Alto and Juliet before Chelsea came along.

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"His Embryo, 'Indestructible and Everlasting, Nemean Lion' makes his gear indestructible," I said.

"So, what—it just doesn't break no matter what?" Alto asked.

"Yeah." The gear he had equipped just never broke—that was the secret of his invincibility.

"But even if his gear doesn't break, he can still die, right? So... Oh."

“...That precious treasure which preserves life.” Realization had hit Alto while she was talking, and it seemed Juliet had gotten the gist too.

“Yeah. His Embryo works even on the Lifesaving Brooch.”

The Lifesaving Brooch was a well-known accessory, but it wasn’t the only one relevant in this case.

There was the Lifesaving Brooch, which prevented any fatal damage but had a chance to break upon activation.

There was the Cameo of Health, which prevented any debuffs...in exchange for a chance to break upon activation.

And then there was the Thiefsbane Bracelet, which prevented any thievery attempts...also in exchange for a chance to break upon activation.

Nemean Lion’s power prevented them *all* from breaking, making them usable indefinitely.

The Cameo prevented hampering debuffs like Bone Fractures, while the Brooch prevented attacks that would reduce his HP to 0. He would be in good health no matter how much HP he lost. He would be invincible in any and all situations.

That was God Hunter, Carl Lourlou—the Superior whom no one could destroy.

My Vengeance ignored defense, but not even that could reduce his HP to 0.

“That’s just broken!” said Alto.

“Yeah,” I nodded. “There’s probably no one who can beat him on a *normal battlefield*.”

“What do you mean?”

“...He speaks of the law of the arena, as well as those of this very fete,” Juliet said.

I would expect no less from a high-ranking duelist.

Alto spent a few seconds thinking about what we might mean, but then clapped her hands together as she realized.

“Oh yeah! This event doesn’t allow you to use Brooches at all!”

That was indeed the answer. People in this event couldn’t wear Lifesaving Brooches.

Knowing my combat style, that was a pretty big negative for me, but it was even worse for GH. He wasn’t wearing the thing that had made him truly invincible. Even if he had some sort of substitute, it likely wasn’t a fully functional replacement.

That was probably why he also never participated in duels.

“So we *can* beat him now! Yaaay! Let’s vince the invincible!” Alto said with obvious joy. Juliet and I were silent, not sure how to break it to her. “Huh? Did I say somethin’ wrong...?”

“No, Alto,” said Nemesis. “You are not wrong, but...”

“If we meet him again, it would mean that Jubei wasn’t able to beat him,” I explained.

“...Oh.” When we escaped that forest, Jubei and Carl had begun a one-on-one fight. If Jubei, with her immense combat ability, wasn’t able to beat Carl, it would mean that he was near-invincible even without the Brooch. In fact, it wasn’t out of the question that he had some kind of MVP reward with a similar effect anyway, just like Rosa did.

If that was the case, our chances of beating him were slim.

“Nnngh... It’s your fault for gettin’ my hopes up. You implied we were on a battlefield where we can actually beat him...”

“Sorry,” I said. “But there’s one other way this event area is different from a normal battlefield.”

“Which would be?”

“Look,” I said as I used a finger to draw a warped circle—the outline of this island.

Then, I drew a circle of the same shape just around it.

“This is...”

“There are no rules in the field, but there *are* rules in the event.” If we were to fight GH, we wouldn’t target his HP. Cheshire’s words came back to me.

“This will be this event’s areaaa. The island, I mean, as well as the area five hundred metels above it and twenty metels into the surrounding sea. Touching the barrier around it will disqualify you, so be caaareful.”

“We’d make him lose by taking him out of bounds.”

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And then, we’d unexpectedly encountered GH himself. Juliet wasn’t with us, but we still had a chance of winning.

We’d been traveling along the coastline to make it easy to push him out of the zone in case we encountered him.

If Juliet was here, we could rely on her Hræsvelgr’s wind powers to send GH flying about twenty metels. I’d heard that she’d successfully done that once against some large dragon during the Exodragon King incident.

However, there was something that I could do as well.

“Now!” I called, making Silver rush towards him.

The white bear readied his harpoon. The flames hadn’t harmed his gear, but they had harmed something else.

I could sense his shock as *the shipwreck he was standing on collapsed.*

The shipwreck was already on the verge of breaking, and my Purgatorial Flames had weakened it to the point where it could no longer support him.

“I burned a whole lot of trees yesterday! Tough luck, huh?!” Fighting against Afforest King Golem and its Planting Golems had given me a good grasp of how fast burning wood collapsed.

With his footing gone, GH dropped his harpoon gun and was hurtling towards the ground in midair.

That was the perfect time for us to charge him. He had nothing to grab on to and was completely at the mercy of gravity.

And even if his weight exceeded a hundred kilograms...

“SILVER!”

...my trusty steed’s horsepower would be more than enough to push him out of bounds! As GH fell, I made Silver intercept him with the boundary of this event behind him.

And so, my Prism Steed slammed into the white bear’s body...*and stopped in place.*

“Huh?!” The shock wasn’t mine alone. Nemesis, Alto, and even Silver seemed to be equally surprised.

I timed this perfectly, going in to push GH when he was most defenseless.

However, the white bear simply *didn’t move from his place in the air* and gazed down on me with the lifeless eyes of his costume.

Next thing I knew, he was holding on to Silver’s head with his left hand. In his right hand was a dagger, poised to strike me right in the face.



About the Polar Bear

Ray Starling wasn't aware of this, but the costume his opponent was wearing was the MVP special reward for beating the UBM known as "Polaris Bear, Polar Star."

Polaris—the star that never moved from its place in the sky.

Called "Ultimate Costume Series, Polar Star," the item born from this creature had the effect of *negating knockback*. No physical power, no pressure from skills, and not even *gravity itself* could move the God Hunter against his will when he was wearing this.

Ray Starling was also unaware that the reason why Carl Lourlou had received such a reward was *his own brother, Shu*.

After the First Knight-Machine War, Shu Starling had been traveling to Tenchi when he'd clashed with Carl Lourlou during a certain incident at the Harshwinter Mountains.

Shu's Right of Destruction was put to the test against Carl's indestructibility. The ultimate offense faced the greatest defense, but back then, Shu's STR had been too low for Right of Destruction to negate Nemean Lion's effects.

However, in spite of that, Shu had emerged victorious.

His path to victory against Carl had been the same as the one Ray had chosen—to take him out of bounds.

Except while Ray only wanted to take him out of the bounds of the event, Shu chose to take him out of the bounds of *the planet's gravity*.

Indeed, Shu had achieved victory by literally kicking Carl into outer space.

Carl hadn't died, but he had no means of returning—or doing anything, for that matter—so he'd had no choice but to use the suicide system.

The one who was called invincible had been utterly defeated, and he had never forgotten this. He still wanted to get back at Shu Starling for it.

Because of this, the Polar Star that he'd defeated later was adjusted to fulfill his need for knockback resistance—and because of this, he had no intention of showing mercy to the one who faced him now: the younger brother of the Master who'd beaten him.

And so, he swung the hurt-returning dagger down towards Ray's face.

◇◆◇

Paladin, Ray Starling

"Gifted Quiz!"

"Question: The creature that is four-legged in the morning, two-legged at noon, and three-legged in the evening would be man, but what is the name of the three-legged bird from Japanese mythology?"

Suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, I heard a familiar voice, followed by an unfamiliar one.

Looking ahead, I saw God Hunter's dagger hovering right in front of my eyes—but he himself, seemingly shocked, wasn't moving one bit.

"Ah!" I used the chance to take Silver back to my inventory. Alto and I almost fell into the sea, but I was able to summon Silver again at the very last moment and ride him along the surface.

While we did all of that, GH never moved an inch.

"Th-Th-That was toooo close..." Alto said. Looking at her, I noticed that she now had a cat's cradle string in her hands. It was the same one that she'd shown me here in *Infinite Dendrogram* earlier, but it was now emitting a golden light. Inside the complex netting, there was a semitransparent projection of a polar bear.

"Alto, is that...your Embryo?"

"Yeah...it is. It's called 'Gordian Knot'... You know what that means, right?"

Gordian Knot...a famous legend about Alexander the Great. It was a knot tied to an oxcart, and a prophecy stated that the one who could untie it would become ruler of all Asia.

"Gifted Quiz gives a question and freezes the target in place until they give the correct answer. In exchange, giving the correct answer doubles all of the target's stats. I got no control over the question and it's all random..."

"Now that's...a difficult skill to use." It was a combination buff and binding ability that Alto herself had almost no control over. If she used it on an enemy and the question was easy, it would just help them, and if she used it on a friend and the question was hard, she'd just incapacitate her allies.

If she'd used it on me and that had happened, it would've been over for us. In a survival-battle royale like this, you could never know when you'd be attacked.

I understood why she hadn't used it until now.

"And you didn't use it on Jubei because...?" I asked.

"...Imagine *her* stats getting doubled." *Good point*, I thought.

"But isn't GH wearing the Cameo? It negates debuffs, so..."

"Ray, this ain't a debuff, but a setup for a buff!"

“...That makes sense.” So although debuffs didn’t work, buffs with...questionable usefulness still did. I never thought about it that way.

“But, uh...umm... I... Sorry.”

“Huh?” Alto, who had just saved us from a real tricky situation, was becoming all negative again.

It took me only a moment of wondering to realize why.

“That question...was probably too easy... Again, sorry!” she said, looking up at the polar bear with almost teary eyes.

“...Yatagarasu,” he said, speaking for the first time since we encountered him.

“...If you knew the answer, you could’ve said it earlier,” I said. Or maybe the minute or so he’d spent without saying anything was just him preparing to speak?

Regardless, GH was now blessed with Gordian Knot’s buff, giving him a golden aura. We were now faced with a strange creature that could only be described as a golden polar bear.

He descended from midair and stood on the water’s surface. I could only guess that he was using that skill or whatever it was that had held him in midair earlier.

“Well, damn...” Stats-wise, we had no chance against him even before the buff, and now his stats were double, along with the weight of his intimidating aura.

“...By the way, it lasts ten minutes...and it can’t be used on the same person twice in the same day...so...” Alto explained. The polar bear projection had vanished from the cat’s cradle in her hands.

I didn’t expect her to be able to, but apparently she couldn’t freeze him again.

"Out of the frying pan and into the fire, eh...?" said Nemesis. "Well, that's nothing new for us...!" I replied. With his stats doubled, though, GH was truly a menacing enemy.

If we couldn't push him out of the event area, what could we even do to beat this Superior?

We had the option of giving up on both his plates as well as the sunken hint, but I didn't think he would let us escape.

"Hey, Ray..." As I fixed my gaze on GH, walking on water towards us, Alto talked to me in a tone of voice I hadn't heard from her yet. It was still negative and full of fear—but rather than fearing something in the present, it seemed like she was anxious about the future.

"...What?"

"Can you promise to never, ever, *ever*...tell anyone?" She was a friend, and I had no trouble promising her things, but...

"...Tell what?"

"*About what you're gonna see now.*" Those words tore my attention away from GH and towards her.

She was holding up the back of her right hand...the Jewel.

"Promise?"

"...Yeah," I said with a nod.

That seemed to have made her relax, if only just a little bit. During our exchange, GH had come uncomfortably close to us...

"Get him, *Horobimaru.*"

"GOD HUNTER, SIGHTED."

...but then something *punched him away.*

The entity that had appeared from Alto's Jewel was larger than the bear, and its fist had sent him flying even though Silver's charge hadn't been able to make him move a single inch.

The polar bear went on to spring off the water's surface, then slightly sink into the water.

Unexpressive as he was, his shock was still evident. The being that had appeared left me, Nemesis, and clearly even God Hunter himself at a loss for words. Even if he was normally talkative, the surprise would have rendered him speechless.

The entity looked like heavy armor from Heian-period Japan, but it also had some qualities reminiscent of a western suit of armor.

It was all clad in metal, and its joints were knit using tiny metal fibers. On its shoulders there were large Japanese-style armor plates, which, combined with the tassets of a similar theme, made it overall look more like a samurai than anything else.

However, the armor had no helmet at all, and I didn't see even a skull or anything there. It was like an armored warrior without a head.

I had heard the name of a being with this unique appearance.

"Penta-Phased Destroyer, Horobimaru."

It was the name of the SUBM that had appeared in Tenchi.

Interlude: The Closed Sea

Event Area, South, Beach

This was the same battlefield where Shion defeated Juba, only to fall to Carl right after.

Two famed Altarian duelists now stood upon it: Juliet the Black Crow and Chelsea the Wandering Golden Sea—respectively the fourth and eighth in the rankings.

They were besties, combat partners, and rivals all at once, and now they were facing each other in single combat.

“...I came to Altar right about when Gloria did her thing, right?”

Putting her battle-axe, Poseidon, down in the sand with its bladed side first, Chelsea began to talk about her memories.

“Hm?” Juliet, facing her from some distance, found Chelsea’s attempt at conversation strange, but listened to her regardless.

“It was right after my closest friend also left Granvaloa,” Chelsea continued. “I left to look for an SJ I could take and went to Altar ‘cause it was closest.”

Saying nothing in response, Juliet recalled the time she’d first heard that.

The friend Chelsea spoke of was none other than Zeta—the now-wanted Superior. They had once been part of the same Granvaloan pirate crew.

“After the move, I decided to try my hand in Altar’s duel scene...and that was when I met you, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah,” nodded Juliet. Back then, Rosa and the rest of K&R hadn’t arrived in Altar yet, so the country didn’t have many female duelists. As fellow girls of the arena, they’d noticed each other, and Chelsea had struck up a conversation.

“I never had any idea what you were saying back then.”

“Ngh...” Chelsea was now Juliet’s closest friend, but unlike Ray, she didn’t have the strange ability to instantly understand her as though she was speaking normally.

“I eventually figured it out, but by that time, you’d started talking to me like a normal person.”

“Yeah. I did...” Juliet used her own, natural manner of speech with those she was close to. She’d slowly gained a few such friends over the years, but Chelsea was and always would be the first.

“It’s a bit embarrassing to say this, but...we really *are* friends, aren’t we?” Chelsea asked.

“I really feel that way...” said Juliet with a light blush and a nod.

“We’re friends, but also rival duelists,” Chelsea continued as she caressed her axe. “But there’s a side of me I haven’t shown you yet.”

A second later, their surroundings sank into the sea.

Or rather, the water flowing freely between the grains of sand on the ground raised the local sea level precipitously.

Surprised, Juliet flapped her wings and rose above the water.

“By that, I mean...you’ve never met the ‘me’ from the past, when I was at my strongest.”

With over half of her body now submerged, Chelsea continued speaking.

“You...or rather, the strongest girl in Altar *needs* to see it.” She pulled out her Poseidon and leaped out of the water. “I am the Great Pirate, Chelsea—the eighth in Altar’s duel rankings, nicknamed the ‘Wandering Golden Sea.’”

She then used her skill as a Great Pirate to stand on the water’s surface and introduced herself properly.

"And I was the second in Granvaloa's duel rankings, nicknamed the 'Closed Sea.'" That was who Chelsea used to be—someone many thought to be the strongest woman in all of Granvaloa.

"Bestie...you're about to get a taste of my *real* fightin' style," Chelsea declared as she stood atop the rising sea. "Hope it ain't too much for ya, Julie."

"...Try me!" Juliet replied, all smiles, and commenced the battle.



Type Weapon, "Panthalassic Axe, Poseidon."

That was the name of Chelsea's Embryo, and its abilities were centered around the concept of "liquid summoning."

The skill that probably stood out the most was its ultimate, Golden Bull Tsunami—Poseidon, which summoned a flood of liquid gold. Besides that, there was World Reversal Waterfall, which created a massive pillar of water that could be used for both defense and offense.

However, neither of those pushed her "liquid summoning" theme to its limit.

She could also summon simple seawater, the volume of which easily surpassed the amount of the liquid gold she could conjure up; given enough summoning time, it could even exceed that of the World Reversal Waterfall.

Chelsea had been preparing to summon water from the moment she'd put her Poseidon into the sand, and by now, the water had already submerged their battlefield and still continued to flow unabated.

Liquid summoning with a long precast? A flooded surface doesn't mean much to me, though... Juliet thought. Being capable of flight, she could easily avoid the water below.

The height limit for this event was a whole five hundred metels—far higher than that of the arenas. And since Juba had been dealt with, she didn't have to worry about being shot down from the sky.

Juliet could easily win this by simply attacking Chelsea from above over and over until she died.

As she became puzzled why this “all-out battle” was going in that direction...

“Julie.”

...Chelsea looked up at her and smiled. “*You sure you’re high enough?*” A moment later, continuous explosions resounded over the beach.

“Ah?!” Juliet’s intuition drove her to rise higher for an evasive maneuver as trails of light pierced the sky. *Flare bombs!* she thought as she looked down to see a large object.

Its silhouette was all too familiar to her.



“Your ship!”

It was the pirate ship that had been parked in Gideon’s fifth district—the place that had once been the HQ of the Golden Pirates.

“Yeah. We had dessert parties there, so of course you know her,” said Chelsea.

That was a pleasant memory between her, Juliet, and Max—but right now, Juliet found the ship, with its proudly displayed Jolly Roger, absolutely terrifying.

“With the clan disbanded, I can carry her around like this. She’s my property, y’know?”

Just like Caldinans with their sandships, Granvaloans carried their vessels in large inventories. The size of these ships and regulations around dueling prevented them from being used in Altar’s arenas, but the only item disallowed inside this spacious event zone was the Lifesaving Brooch.

“So you raised the water because...”

“Ya guessed it. To let this baby float. Twenty metels from the coastline just ain’t enough.”

While Ray and Alto were incorporating the event’s barrier into their fight against Carl, it was nothing but a limitation to Chelsea.

“Here’s another thing about my Skyanchor here—*she’s fitted with an anti-air loadout.*”

As Chelsea proclaimed this, the ship revealed a number of anti-air guns that did not match at all with its wooden hull. Energy then flowed from the magic tank within, activating every single one of them.

“So yeah, flyin’ around like that ain’t very safe.”

And with that, the sky was torn apart by a flood of light. Explosions resounded and overlapped, playing an orchestra of destruction.

“Gh...!” Even Juliet found it difficult to evade the barrage. Gaining altitude wasn’t an option—five hundred metels was far too little before these powerful AA guns.

Instead, she spun around as she went down and...

“Blackwing Orchestra!”

...used the black feathers she released while evading to power an offensive skill. Each of the plumes released jet-black blades of wind, raining down on the Skyanchor.

“Julie, here’s something you may not know about Granvaloan ships...”

However, the wind-blades barely did any damage.

“What?!”

“Their surfaces have anti-water and anti-air coating. We go sailing through storms, y’know? You’d have to use your ult to break through this resistance.”

Chelsea was right, but Juliet would have to stop moving to prepare her ult, which would leave her open to the anti-air barrage.

To avoid this AA fire and buy time to use her ult, Juliet had to go not above Skyanchor, but *below* its firing range.

Thinking that to be the best course of action, she quickly descended.

The automated AA turrets followed her, but she continued to go down as though falling until...

“Welcooome.”

...she was right next to her friend—and her friend’s axe was swinging towards her.

Though caught by surprise, Juliet parried the axe with her cursed sword, using the force of the collision to slow her momentum before flapping her wings to readjust her stance.

"Julie, didja think about why I'm bein' so talkative right now?" Chelsea said with a joyful tone. It seemed as though she'd expected Juliet to deflect her surprise attack.

Juliet had missed the moment Chelsea had left her ship, but the girl had somehow known exactly where Juliet would go and water-walked right to that location. That, along with the precise targeting of the flare bombs and the guns made Juliet realize that she'd moved exactly as Chelsea expected.

"You were talking to lure me down for a battle on the sea...weren't you?"

"Yep! I suggest you don't go up again. I set the guns to attack any livin' thing that's too high up there."

Chelsea knew Juliet's combat style almost as well as her own. With her analysis skills, it wasn't hard to make Juliet act as she wanted.

Their surroundings were covered in water, but with the job skill that let her walk on water, that wasn't a problem. Juliet, on the other hand, couldn't go too high because of the AA weapons, forcing her to fight in low altitudes.

She could no longer bring death from above even if she wanted to.

"Now, here's a question for ya: why do ya think my ship is specced for AA?" Chelsea asked.

Juliet realized that she was once again funneling her into acting a certain way, but she couldn't tell how.

She carefully observed both Chelsea and Skyanchor when suddenly...

"Hm...?"

...she felt something odd.

Juliet had Danger Perception and Killing Intent Perception as job skills, but neither of them were active. Instead, her pure combat intuition was telling her that she was in grave danger.

"The answer is..." Chelsea said as Juliet flapped her wings to dodge to the side. "...because I'm strongest on the sea."

A moment later, an explosion erupted right under where Juliet had been floating just moments earlier.

Though overcome by shock, Juliet instantly understood that this attack wasn't caused by Chelsea's Embryo or job skills. The explosion was quite obviously a Crimson Sphere, and there was only one way Chelsea could use something like that.

"Gems...!" Looking down, Juliet saw countless Gems floating in the beautiful water below.

This was a strategy that would never appear in an Altarian duel.



Upon moving from Granvaloa to Altar, Chelsea was deeply troubled by the stark differences in dueling rules.

What made Granvaloan duel rules different wasn't the lack of duel barriers—that was a difference in environment, not the rules specifically.

Was it the fact that you won by sinking the other side's boat, then? That was a major difference, but there was something even bigger.

It was *the use of items*.

Since there were no barriers, Granvaloan duelists were allowed to use Brooches to ensure their survival, but more importantly, they could also use many items that were banned in Altar's duels.

HP recovery consumables—allowed.

Artillery shells and Gems made by other people—allowed.

Special gear that ran on MP from magic tanks or similar outside sources instead of the user's own—allowed.

Granvaloan duels were based on naval warfare, so there were almost no limits on the items that could be used in them.

That was the main difference between Granvaloan duels and the ones held in other countries, and it had taken a long while for Chelsea to adjust to that.

Indeed, her true combat style was one in which she utilized countless offensive consumables as sea mines.

This particular style of combat was also extremely compatible with her Embryo.

Poseidon could summon a crushing wave of liquid gold that could be used both offensively and defensively. However, those who knew Chelsea as she had been in the past would understand that the most fearsome thing about her wasn't her flashy skills, but her seemingly minor techniques and trickery.

She had a skill called "Creek," which created a weak flow of water from any nearby spot in space. It dealt almost no damage and only barely exerted enough force to knock over a toddler, which made it unable to even trigger Danger Perception.

In exchange for this weakness, however, she was able to create water in any place within a range of several hundred metels.

She could do it in deserts, in the air, in the sea...and at riversides.

Indeed, this was the exact skill Chelsea had used against Wan. She'd walked downstream alongside the river while preemptively and secretly arranging Gems in the water. All the while she'd used Creek to move the Gems, leading them to Wan and then detonating them right when Zaqqum exploded, seizing the chance to blow off his legs.

Her true power was in these precise and silent “sea mine attacks.”

She also had a strong predictive ability that had allowed her to dominate Granvaloan naval battles.

Her keen analytic eye and control over conversation were both weapons she incorporated into her fighting style. Sometimes, she provoked her opponents to infuriate them; sometimes she used the truth to push them to act exactly like she wanted.

Chelsea funneled her opponents into situations advantageous to her, where she would silently attack them with her sea mines and sink their ships.

Even the Granvaloan Superior, Antimicrobic Soy Sauce, had been no match for her back when he was still in his sixth form. He could turn the surrounding water into explosive material, but Chelsea would just see it coming and use it against him.

Avoiding the minefield and approaching it from the air was made impossible by the excessive AA armaments on Skyanchor, forcing everyone to fight on her home turf.

On top of that, Granvaloan duels weren’t one-on-one, but crew versus crew—meaning that she had multiple crewmates supporting her and protecting the ship.

Because of this, back when there had been no Master Superiors or Superior Jobs, she and her Skyanchor had managed to rise to second place in Granvaloa’s duel rankings.

Since the number one spot was held by Grand Captain and the capital ship—Granvaloa itself—it was fair to say that Chelsea was effectively the duel champion.

Because of this, she was once known as “the pirate fleet’s most fearsome woman.”

However, with the increase in SJs and Superiors, other Masters increasing their boating skill, and her lackluster performance after the move to Altar, that title had been all but forgotten.

But that was the very woman Juliet was facing now.

The environment, the lack of death penalty, and Chelsea's mentality were all exactly as they had been back then, and she was ready to bare herself to her friend and rival.

The Closed Sea was unleashing her entire being upon the Black Crow.

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"...Chelsea," Juliet said. She'd never seen her friend fight like this.

Chelsea had prevented her from using her most powerful techniques and was aiming to win by dragging Juliet into her own battlefield. It was a chillingly fierce, yet quiet and fearsome strategy.

If Juliet didn't have her wings, she might have already lost without so much as scratching Chelsea.

However, she could still fly and hadn't drowned yet—and that meant she could still fight.

"Yeah, that's about what I'd expect from ya, Julie..." said Chelsea as she observed Juliet settling into her now-familiar combat style.

She used her well-rounded strength to the fullest, reaching for victory no matter the situation or what enemy she was up against. It was beautiful, dazzling, and charming to the point of being emotionally moving.

Now that Chelsea had her ship and sea mines, there was the possibility that Juliet could be defeated with little resistance.

But she was still alive—she hadn't sunk yet.

And that one fact was why she could still fight. Her time having fun with her friend wouldn't end just yet.

Both of them had cracked a grin without realizing it as they took their fight to the next stage.

“Blackwing Requiem!” Juliet launched a remote-controlled dark magic spell at Chelsea. Neither water nor explosions could defend against it.

But there was something that *was* able to block it—dozens of winged black spheres surfaced from the water and welcomed Juliet’s spell.

Gloom Stalkers?! she thought in surprise. The dark magic spell that she’d seen Shion use countless times now was a high-rank ultimate job skill.

And it had just been launched en masse from the sea—or rather, from Chelsea’s minefield.

The Great Pirate had actually thrown every single Gem she had into the water right as she raised the sea level, and there were more than just Crimson Spheres among them.

“I went around and bought tons of dark magic Gems just in case I fought you or Shion,” Chelsea said. “There aren’t many of them on the market, though, so it cost me a whole lot.” She held her hands out and waved them lightly as though to say “I’m broke now.”

However, she had managed to gather more than enough of these Gems for her purposes. She’d always thought that a chance like this would come sooner or later.

I don’t know how many dark magic Gems she has, Juliet thought. / might run out of MP before she runs out of them... Also...

Also, Gems didn’t use Chelsea’s MP, and she could activate many of them at once. It wasn’t impossible for her to completely overwhelm Juliet.

“In that case...!” Juliet said as she flapped her wings and flew towards Chelsea, intent on fighting with something other than magic.

“That’s exactly what I thought you would do!” cried Chelsea as she braced herself for Juliet’s approach.

There was no longer any room in the fight for her silver tongue or Skyanchor’s aerial domination. The battlefield was now limited to the surface of the water, and the winner would be decided by pure fighting technique.

“Up you go!” Chelsea said as she swung her finger like a conductor’s baton, directing serpentine jets of water upwards into the air.

Countless such flows aimed straight for Juliet, and all of them carried Chelsea’s sea mines. Juliet’s friend and rival was planning to detonate one Gem when Juliet got too close, leading to a chain explosion that would completely consume her.

The trajectories of the water flows were such that it was difficult for Juliet to evade them all—a fact that made it obvious how well Chelsea knew Juliet.

She can only do this because this fight is right above the water...!
Grazed by the exploding Gems, Juliet considered the differences between the Chelsea she knew and the Chelsea she was fighting now.

It wasn’t merely the presence of Skyanchor or the Gems she used as sea mines—Juliet also couldn’t see *where* the flows that she commanded actually began.

On land, Chelsea’s liquid summoning was somewhat telegraphed, so Juliet could easily spot them and counter the attack. That was always how it had gone in their duels.

But just as you would have trouble finding a specific tree in a forest, you couldn't spot a water current in the sea. Until the flow broke the surface, it was hard to tell where the liquid Chelsea summoned was coming from—and where it was heading.

Actually, Chelsea had found it necessary to attack her with flows that shot *out* of the water exactly because she was fighting Juliet in particular. In battles against other ships, she could simply sink them without ever breaking the surface of the sea.

As she is now, she's clearly a pre-Superior...among the best of them too! Juliet thought. Perhaps if the battle against Chrono Crown had been on water, Chelsea might've been able to prevent him from evading or accelerating, quietly ending the battle with her silent sea mine attacks. That was how powerful she was right now.

But still...! Even despite the dire circumstances, Juliet was having tons of fun fighting Chelsea in her current state.

She couldn't ascend upwards and was always in danger of being blown up by the mines in the water below, which trapped her between sea and sky.

But still...she was having *tons* of fun.

After all, this was her first true all-out battle against her dearest friend.

It was so much fun that she wouldn't regret it if this turned out to be her final duel in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

And so, with a smile on her face, she flew towards victory.

You really are somethin', Julie, Chelsea thought. She knew Julie well and had made her water flows as difficult for Juliet to evade as she possibly could.

However, Juliet had the combat skill and adaptability to dodge them regardless.

She was closing the distance between them, but Chelsea knew what she was planning.

She can't use her ult, Chelsea thought. Juliet's Corpse-Eating Bird—Hræsvelgr was a powerful mixed-magic spell, but to prepare it, Juliet had to move her wings to her arms.

It came at the cost of mobility, which would spell certain death in Chelsea's minefield.

Because of that, what Juliet was about to do was...

Cursed Phalanx Disorder, Chelsea thought. It was the Fallen Knight's ultimate job skill that turned her cursed weapons into missiles flying towards the enemy.

Being merely a high-rank job, Chelsea didn't have the stats to survive a direct hit from even one of them. However, since cursed weapons were physical, they could be deflected by things other than dark magic.

She's closin' the distance to deplete the Gems I'd use to intercept her attacks. She'll break through half my minefield and use her job's ult when I run out of Gems to counter it.

However, neither of them knew exactly where that divide was.

Chelsea didn't know how many cursed weapons Juliet had prepared, while Juliet didn't know how many Gems Chelsea had floating around.

Victory would belong to whichever one of them turned out to have the greater number.

Though, to reveal the answer to this question, there *were* more of Chelsea's Gems than Juliet's cursed weapons.

That was exactly why Juliet was closing the distance.

Despite the danger of being shot down before she could use her Cursed Phalanx Disorder, she was approaching her rival. It was more or less a strange game of chicken.

Neither of them were saying anything anymore. The battle itself had their full attention.

Juliet was focused on heading forwards and looking for the best moment to strike, while Chelsea was focused on preparing for Juliet's ultimate job skill—and bringing her down when it came.

Their AGI was different, and thus the time they experienced was different. Their intense focus had made it feel like time was slowing down.

It seemed almost as though this moment would never end.

The both of them were indeed hoping that this thrilling split second would last forever—but alas, that was impossible.

When the distance between them was only fifteen metels, an explosion singed Juliet's leg...

Now!

...and in response she took a small pouch from her sleeve—the inventory holding her weapons.

“Cursed Phalanx Disorder!” With that, she destroyed the inventory with her own hands, spreading the many weapons into the air.

Then, following her command, the weapons used the grudge stored within as fuel to propel them towards Chelsea.

“...Now,” Chelsea said out loud as she activated all of the Gems she had prepared.

Magic lights began to appear beneath the surface of the ocean between them...and below where *Juliet had just passed*.

This was Chelsea's plan—to prepare enough Gems so that she could not only counter Juliet's Cursed Phalanx Disorder, but also surround Juliet completely and defeat her once and for all.

Their attacks were unleashed at the same time, and the sea was soon swallowed up in a massive burst of power.

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She wondered what had led to her defeat.

Had it been overconfidence? No—her plan had been solid and her execution had been nearly flawless.

Had she not adequately prepared? No—she'd been ready for this battle long before it was imminent, and she'd expended every resource she'd stocked for this exact scenario.

Had it been some sort of mistake? No—although her strategy did have one weakness, it shouldn't have posed a problem.

Explosions from below the water surface could always be evaded by going upwards. However, that meant becoming the target of Skyanchor's AA cannons. If Juliet took to the sky to escape the magic of the Gems, they would quickly shoot her down.

Because of this, Chelsea's plan was as good as flawless.

However...*Juliet had actually flown upwards despite the danger.*

She just barely escaped the inferno below her and increased her altitude, all the while weathering the fire of the AA guns.

Being burned and shot out of the sky should have been inevitable.

However, she was still alive—and she was *right in front of Chelsea*.

“HEEEAAHHH!” Juliet swung her sword as she fell. “Fell” not merely because she was descending, but because she no longer even had the wings to fly—they had been completely consumed by flame, having become her shield through her Molting skill.

Chelsea had obviously known about that, but she believed that Juliet would've been shot down regardless.

Juliet, on the other hand, had wagered that she'd make it through the barrage with a tiny sliver of her health remaining.

Whether due to her own incredible battle intuition or the influence of a teammate who was known for recklessness, she'd charged straight through the cannon fire, made it to the other side, and reached Chelsea.

Gotta use my water flow control to make a wall! Chelsea's heyday had really been back in her time in Granvaloa, but that didn't mean that she was weaker now in *every* way.

"Ah...!" Back when she'd won all her battles using her sea mines, she didn't have the *close combat technique she'd honed under Altarian dueling rules*—the fighting style she'd developed to stand her ground against her rival.

However, she couldn't move her axe fast enough to block Juliet's sword. Her reaction was delayed by her overwhelming focus on her *old* fighting style.

The golden axe failed to stop the black blade, and the winged girl's sword sliced into the seafaring pirate.

Being a high-rank job, Chelsea didn't have the bodily strength to withstand the strike of a vanguard Superior Job. The sword entered her left shoulder and cut diagonally through her body, the edge finally exiting at the right side of Juliet's waist.

It was a fatal blow. The beautiful blue sea was now stained red with fire and blood.

Without a word, Chelsea looked down at her wound, then at the friend who had sunk into the water right at her feet.

Unlike Chelsea, who had a water-walking skill, Juliet—now wingless—had sunk beneath the surface of the sea. Having clearly overextended herself, she didn’t seem to have the strength to get up again.

...If I'd left a mine under my own feet, I might've been able to make this a draw, Chelsea thought. With a wry smile on her face, she created a flow that brought Juliet to the surface.

“Ughh...! Chelsea...?” said her nearly drowned friend, coughing.

“Here,” Chelsea said as she reached into her inventory and gave Juliet the life jacket she’d used during a previous event, hoping that it would keep her friend from sinking.

Now... Is there anythin’ else? Chelsea thought.

Her pain was set to “off,” so she could still move, but certainly not much. She had only seconds left until she would receive her death penalty.

“Next time...” With great effort, she opened her mouth to speak.

“Huh?”

Chelsea had spent a moment thinking what she ought to say in this exact situation. “The next time we get a chance to fight like this, I’ll have developed a fighting style different from the one I had *and* the one I’ve got now.” She cracked a faint smile. “So fight me just like this again, will ya?”

It was a promise.

Juliet had defeated the Chelsea she was now and the Chelsea she’d used to be—and yet her friend would still challenge her again in the future. Maybe that was just Chelsea being a sore loser, but duelists were just like that. They found joy in competing for victory against people who were simultaneously their bitterest enemies and dearest friends.

Chelsea had continued living this lifestyle despite Altar's different duel rules exactly because she found it so much fun. And it was made even more fun by the fact that she had forged a strong friendship that helped the both of them improve each other.

That was why Chelsea would never tire of this.

"...Sure!" Juliet said, readily accepting Chelsea's promise. She was worried that this might've been the last duel she would ever have, but this promise thoroughly overshadowed that fear.

Thus, she smiled, believing with certainty that the two of them would play together again.

The two girls smiled at each other as one of them vanished, ending their duel.

Until next time.

Chapter Nine: Invincible Versus Invincible

March 15th, 2045

A month ago in real time and three months ago in *Dendro* time, a particular individual was walking on a beach at night.

“So I’m finally movin’ to Tokyo tomorrow, huh? Guess I can’t stay up all night this time.”

Listening to the waves and feeling the wind, Alto was strolling along the beach. She’d passed the UTokyo entrance exams and was now preparing, with her mother’s help, to move to Tokyo.

Alto...or rather, Natsume didn’t have much to bring, but her parents, overjoyed that she’d made it into UTokyo, had bought her enough furniture and the like to make the move a daylong affair.

“Huh?” As she imagined what her new life would be like, she noticed the entity standing on the beach with her.

It was the suit of samurai armor that had been making waves across Tenchi for the past few months. The creature had drifted to this country’s shore about five months ago and, upon arrival, said:

“Who here craves my arms and armor?

Challenge me in combat.

What I still bear is a longbow, naginata, and this armor itself.

I am a Superior Unique Boss Monster.

I am called Penta-Phased Destroyer, Horobimaru.”

Superior Unique Boss Monster—SUBM. A highly exclusive group of monsters containing the likes of “Biframe White Whale, Twin Moby Dick” and “Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria.”

Horobimaru was one of these creatures, but he was an odd example, never engaging in battle unless challenged. He simply presented his

rewards and merely stood in place, waiting for those who would face him. Anyone who attacked him would be deemed a challenger, and he would quickly deal with them—and *only* them.

He brought no harm to anyone besides the martial artists who dared to fight him, making him an extremely peaceful SUBM.

Fighters from all over Tenchi had gathered to try and defeat him, and out of the thousands to face him, only two had ever actually bested him—King of Brigands, Bigman, and The Gun, Sauer Urgaur. Both of them were Superiors.

Following both defeats, Horobimaru instantly revived himself and granted them weapons. Bigman received the naginata, while Sauer was given the longbow.

Since Horobimaru hadn't come equipped with a helm or a tachi, it was rumored that those items had been taken before he'd arrived at Tenchi.

And now, the only thing left was the headless suit of animated armor.

However, despite losing all of his weapons, Horobimaru was now stronger than ever before.

Bigman and Sauer had lost the right to challenge him again, but he had become so strong that even the other Superiors seemed to be completely powerless against him. His strength and toughness had even driven some to deem him completely invincible. Fighting him now seemed so hopeless that it didn't take long for the number of challengers to start dwindling. Even Superiors and pre-Superiors who spent a long time preparing for the battle were defeated, while everyone else had already given up.

There was a time when this stretch of coastline had been bustling with people challenging Horobimaru around the clock, but now he might not even see a single combatant per day.

Tonight was no different—Horobimaru stood in the same spot, but Alto was the only person around.

“A headless samurai, standing on a beach at night. I can’t tell if this is picturesque or something straight out of a horror film,” she nonchalantly commented before an idea popped into her head. “I’m not gonna be able to log in tomorrow anyway, so let’s give him a little test! Just for funsies!”

If she was going to be too busy to log in the entire day anyway, getting a death penalty didn’t mean anything. She planned to try fighting him and maybe get a screenshot or two to post on her social media accounts.

“All right, the camera’s set, so...Gifted Quiz!” Thus, with little thought behind it, she used her Embryo’s skill on Horobimaru.

Alto’s Embryo was called the “String-Weave of Chance, Gordian Knot.” It was a buff that posed a random question to the target and held them in place while they answered.

Alto knew that an SUBM would immediately get it right and attack her. However, she hoped that before the answer came, she could at least get a picture she could caption with something like “I caught myself a Horobimaru!”

“Question: What is the capital of Japan?”

“Whoa, that’s so easy I’m gonna cry...” Alto said, cursing her misfortune, expecting Horobimaru to answer right away and kill her instantly.

Silence.

“Whuh?” Contrary to her expectations, Horobimaru said nothing and did not move whatsoever. She found it strange, but she didn’t miss the chance to get close to him and snap the picture.

“All righty! I can see this gettin’ a lotta likes!” she said excitedly.

“...Hmm?” However, when Horobimaru continued to stay silent and unmoving, she started to become confused.

Huhhh? I mean, the answer’s obviously Tokyo. It’s one of the most famous cities in the world, isn’t it? Don’t Dendro’s servers have this data stored somewhere? she thought, not realizing how off the mark she was with that assumption.

The question was only easy for *Masters*—any of them could answer it in a split second.

However, for tians and monsters, it was information from a different world they could never know.

No matter how much Horobimaru thought about it, the answer could never come to him.

Five minutes passed, then ten. Alto was actually about to give up and log out, when...

“I have been immobilized,” said Horobimaru. “I will never break free of this by my own power.”

“Huh?” Alto was surprised that he’d said anything that not only wasn’t the answer, but also sounded like words of someone thoroughly defeated.

However, the surprise was nothing before the shock from the words that followed.

“Thus, I recognize you as the final victor.”

“Huh? Wait. HUH? Hold on. Whaddya mean?! Say that again!” As Alto became more and more perplexed, Horobimaru knelt before her.

Gifted Quiz was now undone.

“I am no longer Horobimaru,” he said. “I grant you this body of mine, ‘Prototype Horobimaru-Star Armor.’”

The reason Gifted Quiz had ceased to affect him was that his nature had changed. He was no longer the target of the skill or even an SUBM at all—he had become Alto’s property.

Indeed—through her Gordian Knot, Alto had just *defeated* the SUBM that many of Tenchi’s strongest were powerless against.

“When champions with Superior Jobs stand before you, I will wield my powers against them for three minutes once a day. Grant me much strife and many battles, and I shall grant you victory.”

Without even waiting for Alto’s response, Horobimaru took out a Jewel and placed himself inside of it. The Jewel then moved by itself to take its place on the back of Alto’s right hand.

Horobimaru was gone, leaving only Alto...who was so shocked she had fallen backwards onto the ground.

“...What do I do?”

She had just defeated Horobimaru and taken him for herself. If anyone found that out, Tenchi’s battle junkies would be hounding her every moment she was online. Smart as she was, she instantly realized how terrible this was, and the joy of beating the SUBM was quickly crushed by fear.

Before anyone could see her, Alto logged out, certain that she simply couldn’t let anyone know about this.

After that, Tenchi had held a countrywide event to celebrate Horobimaru’s final defeat, and Alto didn’t log in once for the entire event.



Paladin, Ray Starling

My college friend had just summoned an SUBM.

I would say that I was pretty used to shocking things by now, but this was enough to render even me speechless.

Still, I managed to call out to her.

“Alto, this is...” She turned back towards me when she heard my words, and she looked like she was on the verge of tears.

“...Keep it a secret, okay...? Never ever ever tell anyone about it...”

“Uhh... Sure.”

“If this comes out, my *Dendro* life will be over for good...” She seemed to be caught in that downward spiral of negativity again.

“This guy says that he’ll only fight SJs, and if people in Tenchi find out I have him, I’ll have no future there! He’s a real problem child! I have no idea how to use him... Hell, this is actually the first time I’ve summoned him! I’m scared of what’s gonna happen after this!”

...I could see her point, though. And I could understand why she hadn’t summoned him in front of Jubei.

I wasn’t the only one surprised by this turn of events, though. God Hunter seemed just as, if not more, shocked. He also seemed hesitant to come closer, standing at a distance and observing us.

Who could blame him, honestly? A newbie to the game had just used a Superior MVP reward to summon the actual SUBM itself. For someone who’d gained all his strength through normal means, this was completely unheard of.

I thought that GH might even decide to retreat now. Instead of fighting such an uncertain battle, he could choose to head for the goal instead.

However, contrary to my expectations, he brandished his dagger and advanced towards us.

He wasn’t Shu, so I couldn’t read his emotions through his costume just yet. However, there was something I *could* understand.

His intention could be translated into one simple phrase: *Like hell I'm going to run.*

These feelings of pride and resolve were so great that I could sense them even behind his bear costume.

"Nemesis, Alto...Horobimaru." This Superior, driven by his strong will, was now approaching us completely intent on victory.

In this case, the best thing to do was respond in kind—not back down, but step forwards.

We were here to win this event. There were Masters from all over the world here, and if we were to break the tape at the finishing line, it would be better to do so after facing our enemies head on, not through underhanded means. The latter would have certainly left a bad taste in my mouth.

"Let's win against the invincible Superior!"

"Certainly!"

"O-O...Okay!"

"Fully understood!" The three of them answered my call in their own ways, and thus began the final round between us and God Hunter, Carl Lourlou.

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Event Area, West, Coastsides Cliff

If he wanted to strive for victory like the hunter he was, Carl should've chosen to retreat.

Ray's group had yet to acquire too many plates, and it would've surely taken them a while to find and read the hint that had sunk into the sea when the shipwreck was destroyed.

Even though they could fly using the Prism Steed, if he moved at top speed Carl would still reach the goal and input the correct answer before they could.

It had been the same situation with Jubei—to Carl, it was better to run away from enemies who were too much trouble.

However, there were some things that he couldn't run away from no matter *how* much trouble they might be.

He couldn't turn his back on the younger brother of the man who'd defeated him. He couldn't run from the "Invincible" SUBM when he was deemed to be "Invincible" himself.

Jubei was too much trouble, but *nothing more than that*.

These two, however—his pride wouldn't allow him to ignore either of them.

Thus, no matter how uncertain his victory seemed, Carl chose to stay.

Giant-slayer? SUBM? It doesn't matter. Come at me. I am invincible—the "Multifariously Invincible." Even if the entire world is against me, not one of them would be a worthy opponent.

Those weren't exactly his thoughts, but an approximate translation of his emotional state as he charged towards his prey.

The prey, of course, were not content to simply let themselves be hunted down.

The headless armor samurai kicked off the sea's surface and rushed towards Carl. What followed was something like a cross counter—both of their attacks landed at the exact same time. Carl was punched, while his dagger fell on the armor samurai.

The exchange was like a replay of the battle's first strike, for it sent Carl flying backwards yet again.

This was in spite of him wearing Polar Star, which had the power to nullify all knockback.

And on top of that, the skill of his Drag-Pain—the dagger which returned damage dealt to him in the form of fixed damage—had failed to activate.

In fact, the dagger was now half broken.

Carl said nothing, but he wasn't fazed by this. In fact, he'd expected this by now.

I knew it. So it is true. How fiendish. My gear no longer functions.

Having been attacked by Horobimaru, the Superior now knew exactly what made the creature so powerful.



The headless samurai, Horobimaru—otherwise known as “Prototype Horobimaru-Star Armor.”

He had two special traits that made him what he was.

First was his sheer toughness. His defensive power, endurance, and all of his resistances were so high that not even END-focused SJs could match him. Even SJ ultimate job skills were like mere scratches to him, and only Greatest One exceeded him in magic and debuff resistance.

In terms of pure toughness, Horobimaru ranked second among the SUBMs.

However, that trait paled in comparison to the second one—his skill, which was quite ironically called “Anti Skill.”

This ability made it so that *anything* that touched him would be rendered unable to use skills for 999 seconds.

People, monsters, armaments, consumables—anything Horobimaru touched would lose its active and passive skills.

Polar Star had lost its knockback negation with the first punch Horobimaru threw at Carl. And now, the Drag-Pain he'd used against him had become nothing but a mere dagger.

Both MVP rewards had temporarily lost their indestructibility, but while Polar Star had the endurance to withstand the damage, Drag-Pain had broken.

Tenchi's martial artists wielded many job skills as well as powerful blades, blessed or cursed with all manner of special powers. But while facing Horobimaru, none of those skills meant anything, rendering them powerless against him. All offensive magic and curses were also more or less negated by the armor's pure toughness.

The only thing you could rely on while fighting the armor were your own stats and techniques that didn't rely on skills to be effective.

That was the final form of the SUBM that had appeared in the land of strife—Penta-Phased Destroyer, Horobimaru.

The fact that this invincible monster had been defeated by a skill that *didn't touch him and couldn't be negated by resistances due to being classified as a buff* was a great example of the power of compatibility.

The entity that had created Horobimaru certainly hadn't anticipated such a pitfall.



Physical contact negates my skills, meaning that my Drag-Pain is of no use.

All skills that had to touch Horobimaru to work were useless solely because of that. Drag-Pain had been one of the aces up Carl's sleeve, but it was no exception to this rule.

This, too, was an example of the power of compatibility.

Then again, one might say that he had already done a great deal to swing the compatibility of this battle in his favor by simply wearing a full-body costume. If his skin was exposed and Horobimaru touched it, Nemean Lion's skills would vanish, making all his gear destructible once again. It was exactly *because* his entire body was covered that Horobimaru's blow had only negated the skills of Polar Star.

However, that was little consolation. To Carl, facing the armor samurai meant a thorough defeat.

Carl was invincible through a skill combo, while Horobimaru was invincible through a combination of pure defensive power and a skill that *negated* the skills of anything he touched—which included Carl's invincibility combo.

The Prototype Horobimaru-Star Armor was Carl's natural enemy.

And what of it?

Despite that, Carl moved with determination.

So what if he is my natural enemy? I am invincible—the Superior who was called invincible and who strove to live up to that name. There is no reason for me to back away from anyone, even my natural enemy.

Carrying those feelings in his heart, Carl made a move.

The hunter that had felled many a powerful quarry considered his options.

Drag-Blood's AoE poison was not viable. Not only was it useless against nonliving animated armor—Carl knew that its debuffs and the like could end up empowering Ray Starling. The third one could easily withstand it with just an Elixir.

Only a debuff as powerful as a Superior Embryo or SJ ultimate skill would be useful here, but Carl hadn't yet taken enough damage for Drag-Blood to have reached that level.

Having been just sent here, he also didn't have any traps set up in the area. Thus, he couldn't use the same strategy he'd used against Jubei.

Carl put away his dagger and equipped a weapon that was perhaps most appropriate for his role as a hunter—a bow.

He pulled the bowstring back and fired into the sky.

"That's...!" Ray was familiar with this technique. It was a Heavy Bow Samurai skill that he himself had weathered back when K&R had attacked him—Early Summer Arrow Rain. It turned a single arrow into a hundred. The hunter grouping was obviously capable of using bows, but the skill was only a high-rank ultimate job skill.

However, the *user* was Carl—a Superior.

If someone like him dedicated one of his two high-rank job slots to Heavy Bow Samurai, it could only mean that there was more to it than the skill itself.

As though to confirm that fact, the arrow that split in midair became a *meteor shower*.

And that was no poetic exaggeration—the arrows had all become actual meteors.

This was because the bow itself was an Ancient Legendary MVP reward—Star-Summoner, Meteoloader. Any arrows this bow shot to a certain height would fall back down as meteors with greatly increased toughness, weight, and heat.

This also applied to the arrows created by Early Summer Arrow Rain, which meant the skill summoned not a hundred arrows, but a hundred *meteors*.

This was Carl's wide-scale extermination combo. It was so powerful that not even he could avoid it, but his defense made that irrelevant.

Also, what he was aiming at wasn't actually Horobimaru himself.

“...Whuh?”

Instead, he'd aimed at the woman who was now staring at the meteors above with a dumbfounded expression—Horobimaru's owner, Alto.

No matter how tough he may have been, Horobimaru was ultimately her summon. If she were to die, Horobimaru would vanish as well.

She had no means of defending herself against this, and the meteors would soon overwhelm her...

“Not happening!”

...but a knight stood to protect her.

The man on a silver steed, clad in a black coat, grabbed Alto and rode off, zigzagging between the meteors. Before the meteors landed and the shock waves reached them, he spurred his horse downwards while evading any superheated rock that launched their way.

“EEK! EEEEEEEEEP!” Alto shrieked at every meteor that nearly grazed them.

“Ray!” Nemesis called out.

“It's fine. They're slower than lasers, and the shock waves aren't as bad as the ones from that whale thing!” Ray said, relying on his combat experience to evade the meteors. The falling rocks went on to crash into the ground below, creating many repeated impact explosions.

Carl and Horobimaru were standing in the middle of it all, both thoroughly unharmed.

He instantly found the only weakness in my meteor shower. I suppose I shouldn't expect any less from his brother. Though, he just broke it all with his fists.

Seeing Ray counter this attack made Carl crack a smile under his costume.

Horobimaru was still facing him, seemingly indifferent to his owner's predicament, and the armor's movements made Carl realize something.

Given what I know about the owner, she would definitely use Horobimaru to protect herself. The fact that she isn't must mean that she cannot. This thing is not being controlled by her. And from what she said, Horobimaru would only take action to fight and destroy Superior Jobs... It makes one wonder who is being used by whom.

Carl's conjecture was correct. Horobimaru was Alto's property, but she couldn't control him like a regular tamed monster. He could only be Called in battles involving Superior Jobs, and once summoned, he would do nothing but fight the SJs. Alto herself wasn't aware of this specific fact, but if there were SJs on her side, Horobimaru would attack them as well.

Defeating—no, *fighting*—Superior Jobs was the very purpose for Horobimaru's existence. Upon accepting his defeat by Alto, he had released his Resources as an SUBM and was no longer counted among their number, but that purpose had never changed.

After all, this was part of his nature before Jabberwock had even given him the designation of “UBM.”

“98 Seconds remaining.” However, some things *had* changed after he'd stopped being a UBM—most notably, the time he could be active.

Horobimaru's Anti Skill constantly drained an immense amount of SP. When he'd had the vast Resources of an SUBM, he could use it and fight without needing a moment of rest; but having become a living armor summon that was merely *based* on the original SUBM,

he would exhaust his SP in a mere three minutes. Once that time ran out, Horobimaru would automatically be sent back to the Jewel.

Because of this, Carl could win not by defeating Alto, but by merely focusing on defense and waiting for the summon time to expire.

He had done something like that against Jubei, and Carl fully understood that he would also have to do it here.

I am not doing that.

However, satisfying his feelings was more important than following the optimal course of action right now.

This was a battle against another “invincible.” His first fight against an SUBM...and the SUBM was being used by a newbie.

These facts made it impossible for Carl to take the easy way out.

This wasn’t a matter of haughtiness or scorn, but pure pride.

“Destroy Superior Jobs!”

“...Come.” He spoke his second word today and prepared to welcome Horobimaru.

The armor charged at him with more speed than ever before. With Polar Star’s knockback negation nullified, the incoming attack would surely send him flying outside the barrier, especially since he was only a metel away from it.

With over half of his body submerged, the Superior didn’t move as he waited for Horobimaru to come closer, *only for the armor to be sent flying.*

Horobimaru’s shock was apparent. Before the armor had even realized it, there was a ring of wire encircling his right leg.

It was the end of a snare trap—one of the most basic traps imaginable.

Carl had been waiting for Horobimaru to come closer just for this.

He had thrown the materials for the trap into the water ahead of time and waited for the armor to approach before using Quick Trap to create the full snare right under his feet and catch him.

Horobimaru no longer had the upper hand.

You should never underestimate a hunter, SUBM. You cannot negate traps of this kind, can you?

A snare this primitive had no skills for Horobimaru to cancel, and Carl's traps were meant to be used on creatures Pure-Dragon-tier or higher, meaning that it had no trouble catching this empty suit of armor.

Pure physics took over as the momentum from the snare trap flung Horobimaru behind Carl.

And so...

I am not the only “invincible” who would lose by going out of bounds.

Horobimaru touched the barrier...and vanished.

Carl had used himself as bait to trap his prey—a strategy employed by many skilled hunters.

Silence fell over the battlefield. Having defeated the greatest threat, Carl was taking in the moment...

“SILVEEEERRRRRRRR!”

...when suddenly, someone seized that very moment as an opening.

A black wall was rushing towards Carl.

It had been created by the skill called “Wind Hoof.” This was the power that allowed the silver Prism Steed to gallop on compressed air while also permitting the rider to create barriers using his own magic.

And now, right in front of the steed, there was a barrier of air so heavily compressed that not even light could pass through it.

Ray didn't have the time and his Grudge-Soaked Greaves didn't have the magic to create an omnidirectional barrier like the one he'd once used against Franklin. The small barrier right in front of Silver was the most he could manage right now.

However, that was enough. This barrier wasn't actually meant to protect anyway.

Ray didn't intend to win against someone "invincible" with defense. He was doing what he'd been planning to do from the start.

Shock overcame Carl as he realized what was about to happen. Having been defeated by Shu, he'd been investigating Ray since the moment he'd revealed his power during Franklin's Game and the events before it.

For Ray Starling, the black air barrier was not a means of defense...

"Wind Hoof, cancel!"

...but a compressed air bomb.

A moment later, an explosion would erupt in front of Carl, and with his knockback immunity nullified, the pressure would send him flying outside the barrier.

However, there were still a few moments left before that happened.

Not bad. Not bad at all. You sure are something else, Shu's brother. You were waiting for this the whole time, weren't you?! Very well—then I will show you the ace up my sleeve. Another way to be invincible is to kill everyone who threatens you, and that is exactly what I'll do. My Burst Mode is gonna blow you away—along with your explosion!

With that surge of emotions, Carl activated the accessory with the Clothing Switch skill and prepared to swap Polar Star for his offensive gear when...

“Blackwing Requiem!”

...he received a direct hit from a spell coming from the right.

His surprise was evident as he turned towards the source of the attack and saw a heavily injured girl with black wings—Juliet.

She had finished her battle with Chelsea and had rushed back to the side of the teammate who'd believed in her victory.

Her spell delayed Carl's counterattack by just a few moments, and his defeat was now inevitable.

The wind unleashed from the black barrier landed directly on Carl, throwing him back to the edge of the event area...and making him vanish.

The invincible Superior was eliminated.

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Kingdom of Altar, East

Carl was sent back to his nearest set save point—a particular town in Altar.

He was in the exact same position he'd been in when he touched the edge of the event area, so he fell backwards immediately after arrival.

“You are back. Why the strange posture?”

A colleague who had accompanied Carl on a quest westward posed that question in a tone that suggested he wasn't even a little bit worried. It seemed that he'd been waiting for Carl to return.

Not saying a word, Carl slowly stood up. A keen eye would notice that his hands were slightly shaking.

“Did the event end already? I certainly do not believe you lost, but...” The colleague—a fellow Sefirot member, God Hand, Yumeji Iryo—adjusted his glasses.

He had no idea how deeply those words might have stung Carl right now.

Still shaking from the bitter humiliation, Carl somehow wrung out a response.

“I lost. I hate this. I’m so sad. I’m going off. See you tomorrow.”

“Huh? Oh. Sure, see you then.”

Leaving his confused colleague behind, Carl logged out and went to sulk in his bed.

God Hunter, Carl Lourlou was not very sociable and a Master of few words. Any words that he did manage to speak did not nearly measure up to the complexity of his emotions.

Chapter Ten: Event Cleared

Paladin, Ray Starling

As God Hunter vanished into the edge of the event barrier, it finally dawned on me that we'd actually *won* against him.

It was hard to call this a real victory, though. We couldn't have done it without the event's rules or Alto's completely broken summon—Horobimaru.

Juliet had also been a major factor. If she hadn't made it in time, it might've been over for us.

"Juliet...?" I said as I noticed her descend to the beach, halfway in free fall, and then drop to her knees. Worried, I ran up to her and realized that she was completely out of MP. "Are you okay...?!" I asked as I reached her and cast a healing spell—which for some reason did absolutely nothing.

The battle against Chelsea had done a number on her, sure, but there was clearly something else at play here.

"Wait...!" That was when I remembered who we'd fought before that—as well as the weapon the person used against her.

Jubei had hurt Juliet with her Death-Bearer, Kubigawara—the shortsword that prevented all healing. Even though Juliet had only been scratched in that battle, at least one of them must've been from that blade.

It hadn't been a problem then, but as we could clearly see, Chelsea had left her covered in heavy wounds. That had suddenly made the sword's healing prevention a *serious* problem.

Honestly, I was surprised that she'd even managed to make it to us in her current state.

"The Bleeding status seems to have made her consciousness hazy," said Nemesis.

"I-I heard that Kubigawara's effect lasts 100 minutes...but if she's *this* hurt..." added Alto.

Only about half of that time had passed since we fought Jubei. The continuous damage from the injury-based debuffs would kill her before the effect expired, so to win at this event, she'd have to reach the goal and put in the correct answer during what little time she had left.

"...For now, Silver and I will dig out the hint in the shipwreck. You two gather up Carl's plates."

"Very well," said Nemesis.

"R-Roger dodger!" said Alto. With that, we split up and went to get what we needed for the goal.

Despite having lost by going out of bounds, God Hunter had dropped his plates like anyone else who'd been defeated in this event. He'd had so many that we didn't even have to count the plates Nemesis and Alto gathered to know it'd be enough for all three of us.

As for the monument in the shipwreck...it said, "Day of Anniversary."

"...Hm?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Huh? Kind of a weird clue, isn't it?" Alto said, done with the plate-gathering. We seemed to be thinking the exact same thing.

Nemesis, however, was more puzzled by our reaction than we had been to the hint.

"What's so odd about this? That hint suggests the answer is an important anniversary for you, does it not? That means the answer must be either the day you began the game or the day your Embryo hatched, just like you said."

My Embryo's general knowledge was exactly one-to-one with mine or vice versa, but...

"Nemmy, it's the specific *way* they wrote it. Just 'anniversary' by itself would tell us that—the 'day of' part is extra,'" said Alto.

"‘Day of Anniversary’ would mean something like...‘Day of Special Day.’ It’s redundant," I added.

"I see..." Nemesis said thoughtfully.

I thought "Anniversary" here could be the name of this specific event, rather than just the general word. "Day of Anniversary" would make more sense in that case—and the answer would be today's date.

But about the other hints? While the "YYYYMMDD" one would still apply, it would contradict the one that said that "The answer may differ for each person."

That doesn't add up, I thought. I mean, the event starts at the same time for every...one...

"...Oh," I let out as I realized the true meaning behind the second hint.

"Ray?"

"Raayy?" The two looked at me with curious faces.

In response, I said, "I know the answer. Let's hurry to the goal."

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"First of all, you know the most obvious hint? The second one we found? That was a trap."

"A trap?"

As we headed to the goal, I began explaining what I'd realized.

Juliet still wasn't able to move much, so I was supporting her as we rode on Silver's back. This meant Alto had to walk, but as a Nukenin with an AGI build, she was able to keep up as long as I didn't go too fast.

"Yeah. It's a really obvious hint that basically anyone with eyes can find. That's exactly why there's a trick to it."

The stone monument could be seen from basically anywhere in the southern half of the island. I didn't see one myself, but I wouldn't be surprised if there was one just like it in the north, as well.

Such an obvious hint was no doubt the best way to mislead the participants.

"Though, it being a trick doesn't make it a lie," I continued.

"Whaddya mean?" Alto asked.

"Well, consider the fact that *Dendro* runs on a single worldwide server." No matter where they were in the real world, any players who logged in to *Dendro* would be in the same world as every other player. Even in my clan we had Rook and Figaro, who both lived in the UK.

"It does, but what about it... Oh."

"Exactly. Although we can all be here at the exact same time...our times in reality may be different." The Earth was a sphere, obviously, and the distance between different countries had spurred people to develop a particular concept to deal with it. "Our time zones may be different depending on *where* we are logging in from."

In our time zone, JST, the event started at midnight of April 20th. But for someone in the UK or the US—Chelsea, for example—the starting time was actually April 19th. This meant that...

"So that's the trick. The second hint is actually about the date the event starts for you," Alto said with a nod.

“Yeah. That’s gotta be it.” If we hadn’t found that hint at the shipwreck and figured out the trick, we might’ve been wasting our time giving personal anniversaries—all of which would have been wrong.

For all I knew, that might have been the exact mistake that had teleported God Hunter directly to us.

Anyway, we now had the solution.

“So yeah, the correct answer for all three of us should be ‘20450420.’”

“Doesn’t this seem a bit...I dunno...malicious? And kind of a weird solution?”

“Well, from what I heard, this wouldn’t be the first event that seemed kinda weird.” A good example was last year’s Valentine’s event that led to Figaro and Hannya meeting for the first time. Apparently, it had been an event where only couples could participate, and the enemies were succubi that threw chocolate at you and healed for 3x the damage dealt. If that wasn’t weird, I didn’t know what was.

I still couldn’t be sure if that was all there was to this “anniversary,” though. Maybe it wasn’t just the name of the event and it actually *was* a special day for someone?

“Anyway, we know the answer and got all the plates we need!” said Alto in a cheerful, carefree tone, distracting me from my thoughts.

“Now we just gotta clear the event! I wonder what we’re gonna get! This whole thing was a heap of trouble, so I hope it’s somethin’ super nice!”

“Same,” I said. “I hope it’s worth the effort we put in.”

Juliet had fought so hard she’d been left in this awful state, while Alto had been forced to reveal her secret weapon just so our team

could win. I really wanted them both to be properly rewarded for this.

“...By the way, your, uh...*friend* disappeared. You sure that’s all right?” I silently asked Alto as I remembered the suit of samurai armor that had vanished while we were fighting God Hunter.

“It should be fine,” she replied. “Maybe he’ll come back once the event ends... But what if he doesn’t...? Wait—that might actually make my life easier...”

She folded her arms and tilted her head in thought.

“...Things aren’t as easy as they seem for you, are they?” I asked.

“...Ever since getting Horo— *him*, I haven’t had a single chance to party up with someone and go on quests together. In Tenchi, there’s no telling when somethin’ could happen to reveal the secret, and even if I let him go I might be attacked by people angry at me for stealin’ their chance to beat him,” she said as she gazed back at the barrier where Horobimaru had vanished. “You’re all from another country, so I got to play with you without worryin’ about things like that. It was so much fun...”

“We’ll play again someday. Here *and* there,” I said.

We met in real life basically every day, but as for *Dendro*...maybe I could go to Tenchi after all those problems with Dryfe were taken care of.

“...Eh heh heh. Well, that makes me happy. Ah! Oh yeah! We should go to the beach in the summer! And bring the rest of the *Dendro* freshmen!”

“That’s a good idea.”

“Wait until you see me in my swimsuit! Hee hee!” she said, all smiles. The anxiety was completely gone from her face.



After ten more minutes, we were running up the mountain path leading to the goal.

Alto was a bit out of breath, but not enough for it to be a problem. Juliet had less than 20% of her HP left, but she was still alive. It seemed like we were going to make it to the goal.

...But I was certain that it couldn't possibly be this easy.

"Ah! Ray! Look! I see the goal!" Alto said as she pointed ahead.

I could see it as well. At the heart of the mountain, there was a gate as tall as a three-story building. On it there were three lamp-like devices, and none of them were lit up. If they represented the number of people who had cleared the event, that meant that nobody had done it yet.

"Yay! This means that all three of us can clear...it..." said Alto before falling silent as she caught sight of what else lay ahead of us.

"I have been waiting for you."

To be specific, the embodiment of strife itself was standing right in front of the gate.

"...Jubei." I said her name. Once again, we were face-to-face with the many-armed Master who commanded six floating weapons—King of Asuras, Jubei Kaga.

I wasn't the least bit surprised that she was waiting for us here. I knew that if Carl hadn't taken her out of the event, she would obviously go to where everyone else would be heading.

And, of course, there was no chance that she would just try clearing the event before we got here. When we left her in the forest to fight Carl, she'd said that she wanted to fight me again, and I had no doubt that she was serious about that.

Her goal for this event had already shifted from winning to *fighting me*.

"Haven't seen you in about an hour," I said. "And it looks like that time's been...pretty hard on you."

One of her prosthetic arms was gone, while her left eye was covered with a bandage.

Juliet had fought Chelsea, Alto and I went up against Carl, and it seemed that Jubei got into some fights herself.

"It doesn't exactly seem to have been easy for you either," she replied. "Though all three of you survived and gathered enough plates in spite of that. The Nukenin accompanying you does not seem strong enough, however... Does she perhaps hide something interesting I am not aware of?"

It was unlikely that she'd somehow found out about Horobimaru, but the way Jubei sized up Alto as she spoke made my friend turn pale.

"The final...trial..."

"Juliet...!" Juliet had come to, dismounted Silver, and brandished her sword. However, there was no power in her arms, her wings were gone, she was bleeding all over—she was barely even standing.

Needless to say, she was in no state to fight.

"I would have preferred to fight Ray Starling and Ray Starling alone, but I suppose I have no choice," said Jubei. "I will fight all three of you instead."

She seemed to completely disregard the state Juliet was in. Perhaps this Tenchi-dwelling manifestation of strife simply saw such injuries far too often to care by this point.

For a moment, I said nothing and simply pondered Jubei's words until an idea came to mind.

"You wanna fight *just me?*" I asked her.

"Well, of course. I enjoy fighting many people at once every now and again, but nothing brings out the real *flavor* of a fighter like single combat."

"That so...?" I said with a nod before giving my proposal. "Let's do that, then. One-on-one, with me."

I offered to do exactly what she wanted.

"Huh?" Jubei, Alto, and Juliet all simultaneously voiced their shock.

Nemesis, however, didn't seem that surprised. The only thing I could sense from her in her blade form was a sigh.

"Before we do, though, I want you to let these two put in their answers."

"Ray?!" Juliet and Alto voiced their surprise again.

Juliet was in no state to fight; Alto wasn't a combat build to begin with and her Horobimaru had vanished at the barrier, though she probably wouldn't use him against Jubei even if she had him.

I was the only one who could still fight. My Grudge-Soaked Greaves were depleted, and my Black Warcoat wasn't charged, but I could still do *something*.

There was another reason behind my proposal too.

"I certainly would not mind," said Jubei. "In fact, it is a very, *very* welcome proposition."

Well, *someone* was happy with my suggestion, at least. Jubei seemed to be a fan of mine and she just plain enjoyed fighting, so it came as no surprise that she'd be interested.

Juliet, however, didn't seem to agree. She moved to stand in my way.

"Ray...! I...I can still fight...too!" she said with desperation. "You can't...fight her alone...! We're a team...!"

She probably thought that I was sacrificing myself to let her and Alto win. The tears in her eyes told me as much.

I hopped off Silver and laid my hand on her shoulder.

“Juliet, I suggested that because I want *all three of us to reach the goal*,” I explained.

We’d made it this far together, so the best outcome would be for us all to clear this thing together too. If we all fought together, Juliet would be taken out right away and that would leave a bad taste in my mouth.

However, that wasn’t my only reason for suggesting single combat.

“Most importantly...I wanna do this because it’s *her*,” I said.

“...Huh?” I looked over Juliet, right into Jubei’s eyes, staring straight at me with both glee and longing.

“She said she was my fan and she wants to fight me directly.” It had manifested in a disturbing way, but this was no doubt a kind of fondness on her part. “Not giving her what she wants wouldn’t sit right with me either.”

And so, I had resolved to fight her with all I had and try to defeat her fair and square.

She was much stronger than me and I probably had only the tiniest fraction of a percent chance of winning, but I’d give her the one-on-one battle she wanted.

“...Okay,” Juliet said, understanding my point.

She then looked me in the eyes...

“Meet up with me later.”

...and said the same thing I had said to her.

Just as I had believed that she'd win against Chelsea, so too did she believe that I would win against Jubei.

"Sure," I said with a nod. "You go on ahead and wait for me."

With that, the promise was sealed.

Juliet smiled, approached the gate, and put in the correct set of numbers—today's date.

Then, one of the three lights on the gate lit up and a fanfare resounded as she vanished.

Looks like I was right about the answer, I thought.

"Imagine how embarrassing it would have been if you were not," Nemesis said telepathically.

"Seriously." *That would've been pretty damn bad, yeah.*

Anyway, Juliet had cleared the event and now it was Alto's turn, but...I was suddenly struck with an idea.

"Jubei," I said. "I know I offered a one-on-one fight, but is it okay if I get someone to buff me?"

"Why, certainly," she replied. "I will enhance myself with my curseblades as well."

All right—so there's no problem if I do this, I thought as I looked at Alto.

"Alto," I said. "Hit me with a Gifted Quiz."

"Huh? But..."

"I wanna make sure I've got the best possible chance of winning. There's a risk I won't be able to answer the question, but doubling my stats is worth the gamble."

"...Oh," she said, apparently realizing something. "You...haven't given up?"

"Like I said, I want all three of us to clear this thing."

No matter how strong Jubei was, as long as I didn't give up, my chance of victory was never zero.

I had absolutely no intention of just *giving* her the win. That would be rude to my teammates as well as Jubei herself, who had so kindly accepted my proposition.

"So I'll fight as hard as I can... That's all there is to it."

"...You're so optimistic... I'm kinda jealous," Alto said with a wry smile before activating her Gifted Quiz.

"Question: Recite the digits of π up to ten decimal places."

"3.1415926535." I gave the correct answer, and my stats were instantly doubled. Good thing I'd gotten an easy one.

"There. Do your best! If all goes well, I'm treatin' ya to a helluva lunch at school tomorrow!"

"I'll hold you to that." Following that exchange, Alto headed to the gate, put in her answer, and vanished.

With that, only Jubei and I were left.

The silence stretched out between us. It felt as though we were the only participants left on the island.

"Sorry for the delay, Jubei," I said, finally breaking the silence.

"You did not keep me waiting too long," she replied. "Also...some things are better the longer you have to wait for them, no?"

"Maybe." I'd been studying for my exams while yearning to play *Infinite Dendrogram*, and though the wait was excruciating at times, I was really happy when I finally got a chance to do it.

The world was full of such things, and for Jubei, *this* was one of them.

“Let’s get started, then,” I said.

“Yes. Let us have some fun.”

This would be my final battle in The Anniversary.

My opponent was King of Asuras, Jubei Kaga, and our fight would now begin.

Chapter Eleven: The Knight and the Asura

Event Area, Middle, Front of the Gate

Two Masters were facing each other at the gate, neither of them moving.

Ray was considering the situation to pinpoint any paths to victory, while Jubei was merely relishing even this tense moment.

It could not last forever, though.

Ray had ten minutes until Alto's buff expired and his chances of winning became even lower than they were now.

Jubei Kaga fought by commanding her ten weapons with extreme precision—which made her the one-man equivalent of a coordinated squad of warriors.

Currently, she wielded six floating weapons, three curseblades, and the single sword she held in her real hands. All of them were MVP rewards or greater, and Jubei herself was a combat-focused Superior Job.

Fighting her meant facing the assaults of nearly a dozen lethal weapons at once. King of Asuras was armed ten-fold.

To top it off, her Embryo, Asura, had an always-active ult that nullified all debuffs which weren't accompanied by damage.

There were no flaws in her defense or offense—this asura was defined by her sheer power.

Her opponent, Ray Starling, on the other hand, was a retribution-based fighter—a counter-attacker.

Instead of attacking his enemies first, he fought by suffering damage and returning it multiplied by using his unique skill, *Vengeance Is Mine*.

He used his own HP—his life—as a bargaining chip, gambling it all on the possibility that he could manage to survive even the most lethal attacks and go on to defeat even those far stronger than himself. It was perhaps an even more insane combat style than that of the asura he faced, who was fairly straightforward despite her overwhelming power.

If these two were to fight now, the odds of winning would be just barely less than a hundred percent in Jubei's favor.

Even if Ray were somehow able to build up the damage for his retribution, he couldn't use Vengeance without somehow drawing Jubei into the range of his own blade. However, that would mean passing through her six floating weapons as well as the three curseblades, and that was a true fool's errand.

During their first battle, Jubei had been curious about what it would be like to get hit by Vengeance—but this was a serious battle and she would surely fight him with all she had.

Ray also had his ranged counterattack—Payback Beyond the Stars—but it took an entire minute to charge, which was far too long against an opponent like this. Besides that, his MVP rewards—the pillars of his power—were also currently unusable.

The gap between them was obscenely wide. Normally, Ray's only option would be to give up. However, he wasn't someone who would resign himself to fate just because he was facing a superior opponent.

He stared at Jubei in silence, looking for a pathway that could lead to his victory.

One disperses breath attacks, one extinguishes magic, one ignores defense, one prevents healing, one can kill spirits, and one moves at insane speeds to attack anyone who comes too close, he thought, looking at each of the six weapons that floated around her.

He knew the effects of some through experience, while others he'd learned from Alto. All of them were powerful weapons and each seemed wildly different from the rest, but Ray could find one thing in common between them.

...They're all her meta against specific situations, he thought. It was especially obvious with the katana that apparently attacked and landed a hit no matter how fast the enemy moved. Even Ray could guess whom, exactly, it was meant to counter.

All of these abilities were extremely useful, though he couldn't help but notice something.

They're all effective against specific opponents, but not so useful against anybody else. And that includes me, he thought—and indeed, he was right. The weapon that prevented healing meant little in a battle that would no doubt be short, while the one that canceled magic was even more useless in a clash where magic would barely be a factor.

In fact, the cursed spear that killed spirits could even *help* Ray by feeding his Greaves or giving him a chance to use Reversal.

She's not going to change her gear, even though I'm the only one she's fighting right now? Wait, no...

As that thought went through his head...

"Heh heh... Did you finally come to a conclusion?"

...Jubei, looking at Ray's preoccupied expression, posed a question with a smile on her face.

In response...

"Yeah. The KoA skill that gives you the floating weapon slots doesn't let you change them at will, does it?"

...he exposed one of her secrets.

"Oh my..." Jubei was both surprised and overjoyed at his insight.

Asuran Battle-Mounts was a skill that allowed King of Asuras to telekinetically control a maximum of six weapons. However, those weapons had to be chosen at the start of each day, and they couldn't be switched for any others unless one of them was destroyed.

While Over Gladiator also increased their available weapon slots, the player using it still had to actually hold the weapons in their hands. Asuran Battle-Mounts, on the other hand, basically created six new arms—all with the same stats as the user—to wield its full arsenal and this limitation was the price of that power.

Jubei had actually been diverting attention from this particular limitation by being so open about everything else about her power. Ray, however, had seen right through it.

...Looks like I'm right, he thought, based on her reaction.

Jubei's floating weapons couldn't be switched. To account for the variety of participants she would face in this event, she'd opted for a wide variety of hard counters. That had come at the cost of focused power against a single opponent. If this had been an arena duel, for example, Jubei's loadout would surely be far more aggressive.

That means...I can break through those floating weapons. Ray's build already favored END; with his stats doubled, he would be tough enough to withstand non-critical attacks from any of Jubei's weapons except the defense-ignoring Hora.

That fact alone made it so that Jubei was effectively wielding not ten weapons against him, but five.

I can let those hit me as long as the hit isn't lethal. That'll just give me more damage to send back to her. Ray's thought process might have struck most people as indicating a few screws loose in his head, but he braced himself for a chance to take action.

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I suppose I should have expected this, thought Jubei. He saw right through me.

Their previous battle was the first time Ray had ever seen her, and he was too overwhelmed by her fighting style to think too deeply about it. However, that single battle was enough for him to unravel even information that she had yet to reveal herself.

Perhaps this was a power that someone needed to have in order to win against those much stronger than themselves.

Experiencing it firsthand made Jubei shiver with happiness.

Even his very aura has changed completely, she thought. Jubei had watched the videos where he'd fought Giga Professor, Hell General, and King of Beasts many times over, and right now he seemed closer to how he'd been in that footage than he had before.

The battle against King of Beasts... He only throws his heart and soul into the battle when it's truly mortal combat.

The man who had overcome all the odds to shatter Giga Professor's plot, defeat the Hell General, and fatally wound King of Beasts—that was the Ray Starling Jubei wanted to see.

Though...this is still not quite enough.

With the battle against KoB behind him, Ray had been slowly returning to his usual self—but his battles against Jubei and Carl as well as the promise to his friend were gradually driving him back to the brink, where Jubei wanted him.

Despite that, he was still a step away from being the person who would do what Jubei really wanted—someone who would exert far more power than she'd anticipated.

She silently reflected back upon what had happened an hour ago. *Ray Starling. Let us meet again later. Until then, please think about what it was I lacked. I will do so as well.*

That was what she'd told him before they parted ways after their first battle.

Just as she'd promised, she'd spent some time considering what she was lacking, doing so even as she cut apart the other participants.

The videos of Ray's battles had been burned into her eyes, and as she'd watched them over and over, she had vaguely begun to grasp what it was she needed—what was necessary to force the Master known as Ray to take that final step.

...He might despise me for this, she thought. Jubei now understood him well enough to figure out how she ought to do this, and that was exactly what made her hesitate.

However... She was Jubei Kaga. An asura. An embodiment of strife that loved herself more than she cared about being hated and who valued mortal struggles above all else.

"Ray Starling, allow me to give a little...*prayer* for this battle," she said.

"A prayer?"

"Yes." The sweetest smile then appeared on her face as she continued to say, "*If I win against you, I will kill that Nukenin the moment I return to Tenchi.*"

"...You *what?*" Seeing Ray's fierce glare as he spoke, Jubei realized she had successfully set him off.

"Y-You...! What nonsense is this?!" Nemesis exclaimed.

"Consider it compensation if Ray Starling fails to entertain me sufficiently. She is among the powerful few who managed to clear

this event. Perhaps if I kill her enough times, I will force her talents to bloom...perhaps even to the point where I might find her diverting."

This was no bluff—she had every intention of acting on those words. If Ray wasn't able to defeat her, she would spawn-camp Alto over and over, caring nothing for her reputation or their feelings.

The most important thing for her right now was to fight Ray at his most serious, and those words were the means of bringing him out that she'd come upon after thoroughly analyzing his battles.

Ray Starling was a Master who went above and beyond when faced with situations that had tragic consequences.

"I had not seen much of what she was capable of, so...that would be something I could enjoy in its own right in the future, I suppose."

And so, the result of Jubei's analysis...

"Don't worry... *That future ain't happening.*"

...was more than enough to make The Unbreakable take that final step over the edge.

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Their exchange ended, and they both made their first moves.

The knight kicked off the ground and jumped onto the steed at his side. His legs wouldn't carry him fast enough—instead, he mounted his silver horse to advance as fast as he could.

This meant exposing his precious mount to the asura's blades, but he chose to do so regardless in order to protect his friend's future in the game.

The steed followed his owner's will and galloped as fast as he could.

This unity of horse and man was heading straight into the range of five floating weapons. The tachi, the spear, the shortsword, the

chakram, and the hatchet all flashed towards them on strange, complicated trajectories.

Only Jubei knew what path to take to avoid the coming pain.

Heedless, the knight only charged ahead.

He cared nothing for the pain he suffered or damage he received—he only aimed to break through Jubei's defenses without dying.

The only thing he'd actually evaded was the tachi.

The spear dug into his stomach, the shortsword pierced his chest, the chakram tore open his upper arm, and the hatchet sunk deep into the body of his steed.

It only took a moment to bring him to the verge of death.

Despite that, his mount kept galloping onwards.

Thanks to his doubled HP and END, the attacks that might have been fatal under ordinary circumstances had become bearable.

The last weapon to welcome him was the retaliating katana—the bane of all those who boasted supreme speed, which Jubei had acquired from a UBM after being defeated by the boy who was unparalleled at the art of unsheathing. It activated against the oncoming horseman as well, unleashing an attack that couldn't be evaded and always hit its target without fail.

Thus, the blade struck home...

“Ghh!”

...and hit the object clutched in the knight's arms—a large, black, round *shield*.

He'd made his greatsword transform into that, figuring that if he couldn't evade the oncoming attack, he could simply *block* it.

The knight already had a good idea of the blade's range from their previous battle, so he was able to prepare the shield in the nick of time.

And with that, the horseman had broken past the barrier of floating weapons arrayed against him.

"Hellish Miasma, full power!"

At that moment, the rider released a dark purple smoke from his right arm. Worthy of its name, it was the miasma that inflicted three heavy debuffs at once.

The breath-dispersing hatchet was still stuck in the steed's metal frame, so it could do nothing to defend against this new threat. Thus, the smoke flooded the space around them almost instantly. The poison did nothing to the asura, so it was nothing but a smokescreen. She knew that was enough—using the miasma as a cover was one of his favorite tricks.

However, what awaited beyond the miasma was pure pandemonium.

"AHAH!" the asura laughed with a demonic grin as her three prosthetics brandished her curseblades. Each of them could sever a dragon's head. With three such weapons arrayed in front of him, the knight was no doubt faced with a certain kind of hell.

One blade to the right and two to the left. An open right eye and a closed left eye.

Faced with this hellish choice, the horseman went *left*.

Although the eye on that side was sightless and there was the smokescreen all around them, he would still have to deal with the two murderous blades.

The asura couldn't see, but she could still hear. She was, after all, a superhuman being who could fight with her multiple floating weapons using only sound.

Thus, the steed's galloping hooves were more than enough to expose the knight's position. She could sense that he hadn't dismounted either, so she swung her left curseblades despite being unable to see her target. Their aim was true, but the sound that followed wasn't that of flesh being cut, but the clash of metal on metal.

"Ah!" The two curseblades had been stopped dead as the asura's wrists slammed into two black blades.

These were the knight's weapons—the form assumed by the shield after blocking the asura's katana.

And the asura herself was reflected in the mirror opposite her.

At this moment, her speed was *his* speed.

Her left eye was blinded, her vision was smothered, and he was free to strike her prosthetic arms with his twin blades.

"Vengeance is Mine," the knight and his blades roared in tandem, severing the two prosthetics.

A fixed amount of damage, delivered back twofold after suffering enough damage to nearly die.

It was more than enough to completely destroy the Embryo-arms.

"AH HA HA HA HA HA!" Despite more than half of her prosthetics being destroyed, the asura laughed. This was exactly what she wanted, after all. The knight had overcome the gap in their power—he'd truly done more than she'd been anticipating.

Engaging in mortal combat with someone like this made her heart tremble with joy. Her right prosthetic hand twitched, yearning for blood.

The knight's twin blades were not much of a defense. Their speed was equal to hers, but the knight's movements were limited by his position on horseback.

Thus, the last curseblade had no issue splitting him in half at the waist.

It was a fatal blow. Nothing human could survive such a wound.

Despite that, the knight's advance did not stop.

His power as a Death Soldier let him keep moving even after he expired. In fact, he'd actually taken the curseblade's attack on purpose so that he could once again channel the power of retribution.

“...Vengeance is Mine.”

The blade in his left hand destroyed the final prosthetic. The many arms of Asura were now gone, leaving the owner with only her own body.

The asura no longer spoke. The combination of joy, shock, and sheer battle fever had driven all words from her head, just as gone as her prosthetics.

Despite that, she kept on fighting...and swinging her blade.

She still had the ace up her sleeve, Kasanehime—the murderous sword that turned the wounds it inflicted into power.

“Counter Absorption!”

The knight turned his twin blades and mirror into the greatsword and prepared for the attack with a barrier of light. He intended to block this attack and win by returning the damage twofold.

However, that simply could not happen.

Following the battle against the hunter, the asura had dealt more than 1,000,000 points of damage.

The barrier could only withstand 300,000 points, so it would easily shatter and the knight behind it would vanish without a trace.

Blocking the blow was surely the misstep that would result in his defeat.

“...Scatter Like Mist: Unsan-Musho.”

The deadly swing broke through the barrier of light like it was nothing. However, it failed to touch the knight or his steed.

“Huh?”

It was as though the horseman and his mount had evaporated like mist.

Despite her blade not touching them, they had completely vanished. The asura’s sword sliced through nothing but empty air.

The knight and his steed were nowhere to be seen, swallowed up by the miasma.

However, a moment later, *they appeared right behind the asura.*

Shock overcame her. She had no idea what had just happened.

In fact, the knight and his blade didn’t know either. But the knight didn’t actually need to *understand* anything to take action. His powerful will drove him forwards, intent on what needed to be done.

“VENGEANCE IS MINE!” he roared as he swung down his greatsword, wiping away the asura without a trace.

And that was the end—the final conclusion to the battle between the knight and the asura, as well as the finale of the blood-soaked event.



Chapter Twelve: The Promise

???

“...Eh heh heh.” With her body having completely vanished, Jubei’s consciousness was now in a dark area—the place Chelsea’s group had called the “waiting space.”

She had Death Soldier among her sub-jobs, but its effect was meaningless when there was no body left to control. She might have been able to move the floating weapons in her Asuran Battle-Mounts, but the weapons had all vanished when she used Kasanehime.

They were all MVP rewards that would come back in time—but until then, she couldn’t use them in any way.

Thus, the battle ended in her defeat. However, she wasn’t the least bit dissatisfied with this outcome.

On the contrary, having experienced a battle against *the Ray Starling*, she was completely ecstatic.

She couldn’t even bring herself to care about the event anymore. She hadn’t been gathering hints or plates to begin with, so in a way Jubei was playing an entirely different game all by herself.

“I wonder if he made it to the goal in time.”

Instead of being upset, she was sincerely worried about whether the man who’d just defeated her had managed to reach his goal.

This had been a very fruitful event for her regardless.

All that was left now for her was to wait until her Death Soldier skill expired and she was sent back. But before that happened, a certain thought passed her mind.

"It is surely a coincidence, but...he is rather similar to them," she said out loud, picturing the one who'd defeated her. "The ones who saved me back then."

The visage bore resemblance to the ones who'd helped her—the ones who saved her from a speeding truck.

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Paladin, Ray Starling

We were now in some strange, sparkling space where you couldn't tell which way was up or down.

"...I thought I was gonna die," I said.

"You were certainly close to it." Nemesis nodded. We managed to beat Jubei in time, but I was uncomfortably close to getting a death penalty once my Last Command expired. I might've not cleared the event if Nemesis hadn't been there to turn back into her human form and put in the correct answer fast enough.

"...The wounds are all gone now that we're past the finish line, though." Before, I'd been riddled with holes and my body had even been cut in half at the torso, but now I was in perfect health.

Without this aspect of the event, my battle against Jubei would've ended in a draw.

Silver still had the wound he'd received, though.

"Oh... If this won't fix itself, we might have to ask Blue Screen."

"Indeed. I feel like your steed helped us greatly this time as well."

Silver gave no sound or movement in response to our words. I was certain that the battle had only ended in my favor due to his efforts.

"Rayyy. Good work back theeere."

My thoughts about Silver were cut short by a drawn-out voice. I looked towards the source of it and saw Cheshire, wearing the same tuxedo he'd had during the explanation.

"Cheshire."

"Congrats on clearing the eveeent. The final stretch suuure was something."

"You're telling me. Thanks... By the way, what about the two who cleared before me?"

"I gave them the reward and seeent them on their way. They wanted to stay, but rules are ruuules."

"I see..." Well, they probably hadn't anticipated that all the people who cleared the event would be members of the same team. Only the first three could do it, after all.

It had probably turned out like this because we'd beaten the other players who were closest to winning—Jubei and Carl.

Alto and Juliet were already sent back, though, huh? I would see the former at school, while meeting up with the latter would probably have to wait until I returned to Gideon.

"Anyway, lemme give you the reward toooo!" said Cheshire.

"Sure. What is it, anyway?" I asked.

"A fine dining catalog, perhaps?" Nemesis asked.

...I really doubt this is the kind of event where we'd get little souvenirs like that, I thought.

"Here it iiis. This is the rewaaard. Congratulatiooons," Cheshire said as he gave me...a ticket.

"A ticket? Is this an invitation to another event?" Was this like a qualifying round for the real deal? I doubt I can handle battles harder than the ones I fought here, I thought.

“Nuh-uhh. That’s a gacha ticket.”

“...A what?” I really hadn’t expected to hear such a familiar term here...

“You probably know it already, but places like Gideon have these gacha machines that let you pull for money.” Oh yeah, I was *very* familiar with that. I’d actually planned on pulling once I got back there.

“The ticket is for those... It just *guarantees an S-rank pull*.”

Ohh? A guaranteed S-rank, huh? Cool, I thought...and then his words began to actually sink in. *Wait, WHAT?!*

“You mean, like Rook’s MVP reward?!”

“Oh, you should know that S-rank doesn’t necessarily mean that you’ll get thaaat. Please understaaand.”

Ah, so Rook’s pull was lucky even for an S-rank. Still, a guaranteed S was a big deal.

“...Indeed. You have pulled so many times, but have yet to have a single one.”

“...True.” Looking at it that way, I kinda wanted to save it until I got a natural S-rank pull.

“Well, it’s up to you when you use iiit.”

“Yeah. I’ll think about it.”

Honestly, a guaranteed S-rank gacha ticket felt like a very fitting reward for an in-game event.

And that thought jogged my memory about something I wanted to ask.

“Hey, Cheshire,” I said.

“Yeees?”

“Why’s this event called ‘The Anniversary,’ anyway? I thought it was just to make the answer a trick question, but I feel like there’s gotta be more to it.”

“...Uhhm...” Cheshire looked up at me, looking slightly bashful.
“Today’s uuhh...birthdayyy.”

“Whose?”

“Mine.”

...*The control AIs had birthdays?* I thought. Regardless, the naming made sense now. It felt like kind of an abuse of authority on Cheshire’s part, but...

“Well, happy birthday.”

“Thaaanks. I’ll send you back to Altea nooow,” he said as light began to shine beneath my feet.

“All right,” I said. “See ya, Cheshire.”

“Take care,” said Nemesis.

“Until next tiiime!” And so, seen off by a white cat waving at us, we returned from the tumultuous event.

◇

After the teleportation, we found ourselves in front of Altea’s save point—the fountain. This wasn’t the place I’d been when I was whisked off to the event, but I felt like we were probably told at one point that we’d be sent back to the save point instead, so I didn’t worry too much about it.

In my hand, I held my reward—the gacha ticket.

“Well, I’ll just keep it for now,” I said. I wanted to save it for something special. A guaranteed S-rank deserved that much.

“Hrmm... The sky is turning brighter.”

"It was the dead of night when we left. That whole thing sure took a long time."

There weren't many people around the fountain at this hour. Looking up at the sky, I saw dark clouds being gradually painted in lighter colors by the morning sunlight.

"Hm...?"

And between them, I spotted something that looked a little like a bird. It grew larger and larger until I recognized the shape as someone I knew well.

"Ray!"

She flew right towards me.

"Juliet..." I said.

"I suppose she could not wait for you in Gideon, so she flew all the way here," commented Nemesis. I knew Juliet could fly at supersonic speeds, but this was a bit much. She must have been *really* eager to see the outcome of the event.

There was only one thing I had to tell her, then.

"I won," I said as I showed her the ticket, fulfilling the promise I'd made.

"...Yes!" And so, with a joyous expression, she landed; we exchanged a high five.

Epilogue

Control AI No. 13's Workspace

“Phew...” With the hard work of the event behind him, Cheshire returned to his workspace.

The uninhabited island that had been used for the event could be repurposed for another one in the future, so he requested that the environment AI—Caterpillar—store it away.

Everything else related to it was done and dusted, as well. They didn’t get any new Superior Embryos this time, but that was hardly unexpected. They’d had Alice prepare spare avatars for all the participants in this event, though, in order to provide them with a healthy new one once they were disqualified or emerged victorious, so the preparations had taken up more time than usual.

They had gone to all this trouble because the event might have been less enjoyable if it was too risky.

A thought came to Cheshire’s mind and he pulled up a display showing one of the photos in the database. This particular photo was more than two thousand years old, and it depicted a little girl with a white cat.

The little white kitty was curled up in a small cradle. The girl had prepared it for her *friend* who was soon to be born.

However, the white kitty was an Embryo. Although he had indeed just been born, he was no baby. Because of that, he certainly didn’t need the cradle, but he slept in it regardless just because it made the girl happy.

Closing his eyes allowed him to remember those times as though it happened yesterday.

“We should have a festival for your birthday.”

"People don't normally throw entire festivals for personal birthdays. Also, I'm an Embryo, and there's the birth celebration for all the Masters."

"Hey, c'mon. We all have the same birthday, but you're all born on different days. That makes you all pretty individual."

"You think so...? But if we have a festival for every Embryo's birthday, then every day would be a festival..."

"That sounds fun! You should do it sometime, Tom!"

"Well, I tried...but it was probably a bit too bloodyyy..." Tom said with a wry grin as he thought back upon the festival he'd managed to set up.

Regardless, the participants had enjoyed it. To him, that meant it had all been good.

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Reality, Kurosaki Household

April 20th, a little before 4PM.

Juliet...or rather, Juri Kurosaki had spent the previous night participating in The Anniversary event with her friends, but now it was evening after a long day at school.

She was currently sitting on the sofa in her living room, waiting for her tutor to arrive for their first meeting. Her mother said she'd found a UTokyo freshman who'd made it in straight out of high school.

Juri imagined her tutor must be diligent and incredibly focused on education, which meant that she might very well be banned from any form of entertainment.

But...Ray and Alto are UTokyo freshmen... If I had either of them as my tutor... A twist of fate like that would certainly allow her to keep playing Infinite Dendrogram and hanging out with her friends there.

As that thought crossed her mind...she shook her head.

...No! It doesn't have to be them! I need to assert myself no matter who it is! She told herself she'd gather her courage and claim the future she'd promised to her friends. Just like she had during The Anniversary, Juri resolved to fulfill this promise.

As Juri steeled herself, the intercom rang out.

"Excuse me—I am from the tutor's association. I was meant to be here at four."

"Just a secoond. Juri, your tutor is here."

Urged by her mother, who had prepared some black tea for the tutor, Juri went to greet the person at the door.

As her mother opened the door, she momentarily imagined she might see her two teammates from *Infinite Dendrogram*, but...

"Pardon the intrusion."

The person at the door was a diligent-looking woman with glasses and a suit. She was too much of a woman to be Ray and too serious to be Alto.

Nrgh... No. I knew it'd turn out like this. It's fine...

This almost took the wind out of her sails, but she didn't cave in just yet. Instead, she psyched herself up, fully intent on asserting herself so she could keep playing *Infinite Dendrogram*. Saying that to her new tutor on their first meeting, though, would sound so ridiculous that her mother might step in and ban her from playing before the tutor even had time to say anything.

She had to bide her time.

With the introductions done, they moved to the living room, where Juri's mother and the tutor began discussing the length of her lessons and what days they would meet. Juri's mother was worried

about Juri's declining grades and tried to set her up for as many tutoring hours as possible. Part of the reason for her academic problems was that Juri had been staying up late playing *Infinite Dendrogram*, so it wasn't unlikely that she would be banned from it entirely.

Since she was at such a disadvantage, Juri couldn't figure out how to approach this discussion.

"Considering her grades, may I ask for visits five times a week?" Her mother's suggestion made Juri's face tense up as she thought, *You have to be joking*. However, the poor grades were partially her own fault, so she couldn't argue.

But then, help came from an unexpected source.

"Mrs. Kurosaki, once or twice a week—for a total of about six hours per month—should be sufficient," said the tutor.

"But I'm worried about her grades..."

"Merely increasing her study time would make it difficult for the young lady to maintain her focus. Instead, I recommend that you give me a few intensive hours where I teach her the proper methods of learning and problem-solving, which will in turn allow her to study on her own more effectively. Also, giving her too many tutoring hours would only reduce her own desire to learn by making her feel all her studying can happen while she's being tutored."

"My! Is that how it is?"

Perhaps it wasn't "help," exactly. The tutor convinced Juri's mother against setting her up for endless hours of tutoring, but she was serious about education and was fully intent on making Juri study on her own time.

If this tutor was so good at convincing people, how could Juri possibly win any *Infinite Dendrogram* playtime out of her?

A-An hour a day...? No, that's just three hours there... Juri was at a loss.

However, the tutor was sharp enough to notice. The girl's expression seemed to spark some thought in the woman, and she took out an object that might make Juri feel better.

"You okay? Wanna play some cat's cradle?"

With those familiar words, she presented her with a cat's cradle string.

"...Huh?"

"Cat's cradle makes for a good mental exercise. It can help soothe your nerves as well." The smile on her face as she spoke those words also suddenly looked very familiar.

"...Alto?"

"Wheuh?"

The tutor—Soprano Natsume—had put on a suit, glasses, and wiped off her customary face paint to leave a better impression on Juri's parents, and the sound she made when Juri called her by that unexpected name completely clashed with her current appearance.

For the record, Juliet wasn't forbidden from *Infinite Dendrogram*—or any other kind of entertainment, for that matter.

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Paladin, Ray Starling

I logged in to *Dendro* right after I got back from class.

When I met Natsume there, she'd told me that Horobimaru returned to her—and that she'd used her ticket right away. She was lucky and got an MVP reward, but instead of being happy about it, she'd put on a distant look and said, "...Will having stuff like that make people think I'm powerful? What if it gets me attacked...?"

I started to feel like the problem wasn't just her being overly negative, but the land of Tenchi being...the way it was.

If Alto was right, though, I had three MVP rewards, so I would be attacked all the time. I couldn't even imagine what kind of life Jubei would lead carrying around a whole seven of them. And that was just off the top of my head.

"Anyway..." I ducked into a fairly open alley and took Silver out of my inventory. I wanted to check on how the minor damage he'd gotten from Jubei was doing.

I only needed a moment to realize that the wound was much smaller than before, which made me guess that it would be gone in no time.

"What a relief," said Nemesis.

"Yeah." That was one less thing to worry about.

There was something else regarding Silver that we had to consider, though. It was the teleportation ability that he'd used against Jubei—the third skill that was still locked.

This was the second time I'd seen it, with the first being the battle at Quartierlatin, but I still didn't know its activation conditions or effect. I tried asking Silver himself about it, but unlike Gardranda he didn't give an answer either in reality or in my dreams.

"If only there was some specialist we could ask..." With Silver being a weapon of the pre-ancient civilization, that was a tall order. The person who'd taught me the most about Silver so far was Mario, but he was a Dryfean, so I couldn't go to him again.

Besides him, there was Blue Screen, who'd fixed up Gold Thunder and was involved in SMPS production...but I hadn't heard of him coming across any new information regarding the Prism Steeds.

"How easy this would all be if we could only talk to the Grand Artificer who made Silver," said Nemesis. "Flagman, was it?"

“Yeah, but you sure as hell can’t speak with a tian from 2,000 years ago... Hm?”

...I feel like I heard that name recently, though, I thought.

After that, we did various things in the city before returning to the inn we were staying at.

“Oh. Mr. Starling, we have a letter for you,” said the innkeeper as we entered.

“A letter?” I opened it to see a collection of dates and time intervals, accompanied by the words, “If circumstances allow, please come visit me at any of these times.”

However, the most notable thing to us was the sender’s name.

“Ray.”

“Yeah. Mhm. Seems like we had the right person here in Altar all along.”

The letter was from Integra Sedna Clarisse *Flagman*.

She was the childhood friend of the first princess as well as the current Arch Sage.

And so, I accepted the invitation from the one who had inherited the name of Grand Artificer.

To Be Continued

Afterword



Cat: "All right, time for the afterwoord! I'm the 'Cat,' Cheshiiire!"

Bear: "..."

Cat: "I got a good bit of spotlight in this volume, complete with my own illustratiooon!"

Bear: "..."

Cat: "Heh heh. It was my birthday, so I even got into a fancy tuxedo to celebrate the occasiooon!"

Bear: "..."

Cat: "Hm? Brother Bear, you're being oddly quiet right now... AH!"

Bear(White): "..."

Cat: "Wait, you're Carl?! Well, I guess you're the 'Bear' of this volume, but still!"

Bear(White): "..."

Cat: "Huh? Wait, am I supposed to speak enough for the both of us? Seriously?"

Bear(White): "..."

Cat: "Oookayy... I guess this is my punishment for abusing my authority with that eveeent... But how can I pad out the page count without banter...? You know what, I'll just talk about what led to this! Specifically, this event's background and the reason why Carl was in it!"

As was mentioned in the story several times now, our goal is to increase the number of Embryos in their seventh forms. Because of this, we often do things that might help sixth forms evolve. SUBM attacks, my dueling, Chrono's PK, and events like this one are all among our strategies. Though, as you can tell from the fact that we don't even have a hundred of them yet, we didn't have many successes. Because of that, for this event we tried expanding the range of participants, inviting standout sub-sixth forms like Ray and Alto—as well as Carl, who's already in his seventh. We hoped that this change of selection standards would spice things up a bit."

Bear(White): "..."

Cat: "Carl's role in this was basically the same as a creature in a horror game—the 'Invincible' monster that you'd never want to encounter, especially not on an isolated, uninhabited island. The twins expected the presence of such a menace to accelerate the evolution of the other participants and personally, I do think that it was a good punch to those who don't butt heads with Superiors very often or at all.

In the meta sense, this was the first appearance of a character who has been mentioned since the very first volume, as well as Ray's Superior encounter that wasn't in the web novel. The author wanted his entrance to come as a bit of a surprise.

Though, as you have surely read, in spite of his status, he was defeated as the volume's mid-boss. The existence of the barrier, Horobimaru's skill-canceling, Ray's 'explosiveness'... There were several reasons for his defeat, but if there's one thing to be said about this, it would be that if someone is called 'Invincible,' you can safely expect them to be beaten in one way or another."

Bear(White): "..."

Cat: "That said, Carl is a Superior with many aces up his sleeves that he didn't show, so do look forward to his next appearance.

Anyway, it's time for the comment from the author."

Thank you for reading volume 17 of this series. I am the author, Sakon Kaidou.

This was the first volume of all-new content, so I'm curious whether or not you're satisfied with it.

The most extra content I have written before this were additions to the previous volumes, the digital-only Fairytale Squad story, and the story that came with volume 1 of the anime, but this was the first time I'd ever written a full volume exclusively for the light novel series.

It was a lot of work and I spent a lot of time dealing with the typos, but I feel like it made me grow a bit as an author.

This volume covered an event that was particularly game-like and a little laid-back.

Up until now, Ray had been involved in battles that had tian lives, cities, and even countries on the line, but this was all about an event that he could thoroughly enjoy alongside his friends.

You could say that this is represented by the bright, cheerful, and wholesome cover Taiki had drawn for this volume. It is quite unlike what we had so far and I personally like the aura it exudes. Alto in all her yellow glory looks great, as well.

This volume 17 also gave a spotlight to the four stars of *The Crow Records*.

The scenario for this volume had a foundation in the plot of that series, so they really stood out here.

Out of the four, I personally found Shion especially easy to write. Silly gooses are the best gooses.

Though, since she did not do one iota of combat analysis, Juba's gimmick was left unrevealed. You will have to wait until her next appearance to find out more about it and Juba herself.

Anyway, volumes 15 and 16 were centered around people other than Ray, and this volume had him cooperate with an unusual bunch, but with volume 18, we will finally go back to the familiar members of Death Period.

Do look forward to the events that will unfold when Ray returns to Gideon.

Also, volume 9 of the manga has been released, as well. It features Kami Imai's amazing depiction of Marie and Veldorbell's battle, so do pick it up if you are so inclined.

Please continue supporting Infinite Dendrogram.

Sakon Kaidou

Cat: “There. With the author’s comment out of the way, it’s time to announce the next—”

Bear(White): “VOLUME 18 IS SET TO COME OUT IN JAPAN IN MARCH, 2022!”

Cat: “Huh?!”

Bear(White): “...”

Cat: (*Did he only keep quiet all this time because he was building up the energy to make the announcement?*)

Cat: “A-Anyway, see you in the next voluuume! Goodbyeee!”

Bear(White): “...Bye.”

Bonus Short Stories

The Ones From Tenchi

Tenchi

Jubei Kaga.

Capricious and belligerent, she was a person who exemplified the spirit of Tenchi, holding the very fitting “King of Asuras” job as well as the seat of the fourth in the country’s highly competitive duel rankings.

Just like in Altar, the top three in the rankings could only be challenged by those just below them, so Jubei’s position as the fourth led to her being regularly challenged by duelists trying to take a shortcut to the top. In fact, her renown as a fighter had driven some to challenge her *outside* the duels, as well. Some even tried to ambush her instead.

A life like hers would be too much for most, but she was among the few who thoroughly enjoyed it.

However, there had recently been a change in her that had greatly shocked the battle junkies of Tenchi.

Jubei’s strife-filled existence had resulted in her being covered in countless closed wounds—scars that doubled as medals gained from defeating so many skilled warriors.

The change that shook the country was the fact that *every single one of these scars had vanished*.

That could only mean one thing—that someone had defeated her, resetting her avatar back to its default, unscarred state.

Many of the country’s fighters went on to speculate about the identity of the powerful champion who subjugated King of Asuras.

She herself, however, seemed to be busy looking for someone.

All of those battle junkies were certain that the person who'd defeated her and whoever she was looking for were one and the same, and that her goal was a rematch.

But the truth was quite different from that...



On the afternoon of a certain day, Alto was munching on dango at a particular tea house in a mountain pass.

In real life, the scenery alone would make this a tourist hot spot, but instead of enjoying it, she was merely doing her utmost to ignore the slight commotion around her and keep eating her snack.

"...I got nothin' to do with this. I just wanna eat my dango. Dango are good..."

One could say that she was engaging in a form of escapism.

The reason for her willful detachment was that a short while ago, in a grove not too far away, she'd tested out the MVP special reward she'd received using the ticket she'd won at The Anniversary.

Although it had guaranteed an S-rank pull, getting an MVP reward using the gacha still required some degree of luck, and she wasn't assured an item that would suit her build. MVP rewards received by defeating UBMs were adjusted to suit the player they were awarded to, but MVP rewards received through the gacha were simply hand-me-downs from deceased tians who'd once had them.

Alto needed even more luck than usual for the reward to be something that fit her playstyle. Now, as the owner of what was left of Horobimaru—perhaps the biggest bombshell in Tenchi—she had a playstyle that prioritized keeping a low profile and running away if needed.

Because of this...

"Hey! What was that explosion! I heard it from behind the goddamn mountain!"

"It didn't sound like explosion magic. Maybe it's a new UBM!"

"WOO-HOO! Let's go beat its ass! And if it's beaten already, let's beat whoever beat it!"

...an MVP reward that summoned thunderous sounds and unbridled destruction was useless to her.

What am I supposed to do with that pile bunker?! I tried it out on a tree and it blew away the entire grove! How am I gonna use somethin' that's both dangerous and makes me the center of attention?!

She'd used the weapon away from any people, but it had so much presence that its activation had been heard across mountains. It had once been the cherished armament of The Ram from a distant land, but it was completely at odds with Alto's playstyle. More importantly, she now had to wait until things cooled down without any of the battle junkies realizing that she was the one who'd caused the loud sound.

A dozen minutes passed as she did nothing but eat her dango.

The commotion caused by the battle junkies was growing more distant, filling Alto with relief that the danger had passed...

"I found you at last."

...only for someone far more dangerous to replace them.

"Eep..."

King of Asuras, Jubei Kaga.

Alto's group had encountered her at the event and gone on to defeat her. The fact that she was speaking as though she'd been looking for Alto filled her with immense fear.

“Oh, please give me a moment!”

In her panic, Alto tried to either initiate the log out process or use her Nukenin disengagement skills, but before she could, Jubei’s prosthetic arms grabbed her by the shoulders, making it impossible for her to escape.

“Ah ha ha ha ha...”

She’s here to settle the score! Alto thought, bracing herself.

However, Jubei was merely looking at her with a smile on her face. That might not have meant much, though—she was the kind of person who smiled and hummed happily even as she turned people into mincemeat.

“I came to you today with a question,” she said.

“Whuh?”

So she won’t kill me right away, Alto thought. This wasn’t enough to make her relax, but she did calm down a tiny bit.

“It is about Ray Starling,” Jubei said.

“Ray?” Alto repeated as the reason behind this encounter became clear to her.

Jubei was a fan of Ray and he had defeated her at the event, so she would obviously be more interested in him than Alto. She now understood that Jubei had been looking for her to ask something about him.

“Yes. I was thinking that you might be a real life acquaintance of his.”

However, what she said was both far beyond what Alto’d expected—and uncomfortably accurate.

“...Wh-Why would you think that?”

“In that event, you, Ray Starling, and Juliet formed a party. Juliet being with him is understandable because they are from the same country, but I find it hard to believe that you—someone from Tenchi—had ever been involved with him prior to the event. I feel like that is reason enough to believe you might share a real-life social circle or even be friends. Would I be wrong?”

“W-Well, it could be that he just fell in love with me at first sight...”

“Oh? Is that how it is?”

“We go to the same college!”

Alto tried to dance around the truth—but when Jubei tightened her prosthetics’ grip, still smiling, she instantly revealed the truth.

“My, that is most fortunate. Now, for the main reason I contacted you. There is something I would like you to ask him...”

Alto’s answer seemed to have put Jubei in a good mood.

Oh no. Oh no...!

Alto, however, was back in her downward spiral of negativity as she pictured what would happen now.

What if she’s gonna ask for his real name and address so she can stalk him IRL and eventually chop him up and kill him out of her infatuation with him...?! If that happens, I’ll appear in some weekly mag with only my eyes censored as “Friend S: the one who gave info to an internet stalker” and then I’ll be shunned and expelled from college and my life will be over and...

“RAY, I’M SORRY! KING OF ASURAS IS AN E-DATING MANIAC!”

Her negative thoughts took over and she blurted out those words, tears welling up in her eyes.

“...Eh heh heh. I do not believe I have ever received an insult greater than that.”

Hit with the kind of disparagement she had never built up any resistance to, even Jubei couldn't help but be taken aback.

However, she quickly recovered and said, "This is not about meeting him. I wish to ask Ray Starling about an accident that happened about ten years ago—"

She wanted Alto to ask Ray if he was the one who'd saved Jubei from a traffic accident...

"Oh?"

...but before she finished her sentence, she let go of Alto and turned around.

She was now surrounded by fierce-looking Masters.

"We heard a scream and rushed here, thinking that someone needs help, and here we find you...King of Asuras!"

"Heh heh heh. Looks like your luck has run out!"

"WOO-HOO! WILDY MATCH! LET'S GOOOO!"

These were the very same battle junkies who had gone to search for the source of the loud sound (Alto's pile bunker MVP reward).

"Oh my," Jubei said, still smiling, as she spread out her floating weapons and unsheathed the curseblades with her prosthetics.

When those who thrived in strife faced each other with bloodlust coursing through their veins, there was only one thing that could happen next—all-out combat.

"EEP...!"

As the battle began, Alto used the opening to put up a smoke screen and run away as fast as she could.

Jubei's opponents were no easy prey, keeping her busy long enough for Alto to escape.

However, this was only the beginning.

Jubei, still wishing to have her message passed on to Ray, would keep following Alto, who would escape yet again.

This game of tag would continue for quite some time and take them all over Tenchi.

They would eventually go on to become a duo...but that was a story for another time.

Shion's Stresses

Gideon the City of Duels

“HuUhh?”

One day, during her visit to Altar, the Huang Hean Superior and second in Huang He’s duel rankings, Xunyu, entered a store to buy materials for her Fu, only to see something strange.

“I hate this! I hate this so much! Neeeeeenngggghhh!”

There was Shion Manjushage, making odd, angry noises.

Xunyu wasn’t close to Shion, but they had met when she’d attended an Altarian social gathering for duelists.

What she was doing as she made those noises was...pulling on the gacha machine. This was the store owned by a certain Alejandro—the same one equipped with that curious device—and Shion was endlessly making pulls that cost a hundred thousand lir each.

Normally, the store only allowed one pull before making the puller go to the back of the line and wait for their turn again, but Shion’s intensity had rendered everyone unable to object.

“Guess I gotta get involved,” said Xunyu, feeling she had to do something. “Hey, doncha think you’re botherin’ the other customers?”

"Leave me alone!" Shion said before she realized something. "Oh, wait. It is you."

"You know yoUr wailin' can be heard all acrOss the store, right? Just whAt the hell happened to yA?"

"Oh, it is simply unbelievable! I lost the event I was in before I even realized what was going on! And I am not getting anything good from the gacha!"

Shion went on to explain what had happened at The Anniversary.

Although she'd been able to defeat a powerful enemy, she'd somehow lost while gathering her spoils.

It had been a surprise attack from Carl that had defeated her, but she still had no idea that was the case.

Being disqualified right after winning a fight had left her sour beyond belief.

Afterwards, she'd went on to talk to Juliet, who'd said that she'd won and received an S-rank gacha ticket. That had motivated Shion to come here and get a natural S-rank pull, which was what she was trying to do right now.

"I came out of all that with nothing to show for it! That is so stressful!"

"I seE..." Xunyu said.

Though, doncha think you'll get even more stressed if ya burn your money on the gacha? she added in thought.

"All this after I beat a scorpion and a huge elephant! It's like a compound fracture on my breakable bone!"

"What's thAt supposed to...? Wait, 'huge elElephant?' Was it mAdE of clouds?"

"Yes! And I beat it splendidly!" Shion said proudly.

Those words made Xunyu realize something.

Huang He's strongest clan, Huili Yuminjun, had the so-called "Five Generals," each of which took a spot in the duel rankings ranging from third to seventh.

From the highest ranked, they were King of Gardens, Saimei Takanashi; Beast General, Anthropos Farma; King of Axes, Wan Zihao; Kidnap Princess, Clobbergirl Fanatic Pie; and the one Shion had defeated—King of Cowboys, Jamie Crescent.

Despite being the lowest in the ranks among them, Jamie Crescent was said to be extremely hard to defeat in open fields, so Xunyu was surprised to hear that Shion had done exactly that.

It sparked her curiosity as a duelist.

"Well, I'm intErested. All right, we're gOin' to an open arenA."

"Whuh?"

As she was caught off guard by what she just heard, Xunyu extended her prosthetics and wrapped them around her.

"Pullin' the gachA won't help ya with strEss, anyway. Hang oUt with me for A while."

And so, Xunyu dragged Shion to an arena and made her spar with her.

Once they were done, Shion's pent-up competitive spirit was all but exhausted, and she looked thoroughly refreshed.

The B and the C

Gideon the City of Duels

"Huh?"

On a certain day after The Anniversary, Chelsea, who was lost in thought as she was stocking up on consumables at Alejandro's store, saw a familiar, spectacled woman looking over the shields on sale.

The person considering the gear was none other than B3, or Barbaroy Bad Burn. Once the leader of the PK clan known as "Mad Castle," she was now part of Ray's Death Period, as though she was cursed to always join clans with sinister-sounding names.

Though, it's not like Ray's clan is focused on PK... Anyway, Barbaroy, huh? Chelsea thought.

To Chelsea, she was "an acquaintance of a friend" in a whole three ways.

She was acquainted with one of Chelsea's sparring partners, Ray; fellow duelists, Kashimiya and Rosa; and an old real-life friend, Eldridge.

They weren't friends, really, but neither were they complete strangers—but having so many shared acquaintances, each from a different angle, made it hard for Chelsea to gauge how close the two of them actually were.

She hasn't noticed me and it looks like she's seriously thinkin' about what to pick, so I won't bother her, she thought before shifting focus back to her own shopping and problems.

The thing on her mind right now was the promise she'd made to Juliet.

A new combat style that makes me more powerful than I used to be and more powerful than I am now too... Well, I already know the most obvious way to get stronger.

That was, without a doubt, getting a Superior Job.

The very reason why she'd come to Altar in the first place was to search for a Superior Job that was different from the ones she may have been able to get in Granvaloa.

Getting an SJ would let her finally break through the level 500 wall.

It's not that easy, though, she thought.

Securing an SJ was simultaneously the most obvious and the most difficult way to grow stronger. For each job, it was a race that only a single person could win, and with nearly five in-*Dendro* years having passed since release, there were far fewer jobs available than there had been at the start.

The deaths of tians with Superior Jobs opened that job up to any capable candidates, but Chelsea couldn't rely on that to get hers.

King of Blaze, Bug General, and King of Venom were opened up that way during the recent incident in Altea, but none of them synergize with my build.

As she pondered her predicament, the store was suddenly filled with commotion.

The cause of that was B3, who had used Instant Wear to switch to a huge suit of armor. Apparently, she'd only done that to see if the available shields were the right size, but it was scaring the other customers nonetheless.

...That's her MVP reward. "Gunhammer Plate, Magnum Colossus," I think.

Both Chelsea and B3 were prominent high-rank jobs that counted SJs among their friends, but that suit of armor was something that clearly separated them. MVP rewards had special skills and extremely high regenerative abilities, making many of them akin to extra Embryos.

Unfortunately, Chelsea still had none of them.

During her time in Granvaloa, she'd almost never encountered UBMs, and even if she had, they were the kind who'd fought from deep below the surface instead of her turf—the sea level.

However, securing an MVP reward now seemed like a far more reliable way to grow stronger than finding an SJ to take.

There's been a change in the local monster habitats. That's the reason why the Afforest was where it was. Maybe a UBM from some unexplored area wandered somewhere more accessible?

“...You know what? I'll look around.”

Encountering and winning against UBMs required a good deal of luck, but luck wasn't a problem if you simply tried enough times.

Having realized what separated her and B3—who was on the same level as her—Chelsea had found the path she would take to become the newer, stronger version of herself.



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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 17

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