

Say you had to die for the sake of the world. What would you do?

There was a girl who had to make this choice. She had to die to save her doomed planet. That's what a god told her, and she agonized, fought, wept...and finally, she made a choice. She wanted to save the world, the land where those dear to her lived—as well as the one she loved. With a heavy heart and trembling lips, she staggered before the god. She had chosen to die. But then: “I will die in her stead.”

A man stopped her and stepped before the god. He was the person she had chosen to save at the cost of her life, one of those dear to her—and their love was mutual. The god asked her beloved: “Dost thou not fear death?”

The man smiled. He would rather die than allow his beloved to perish.

“There are more frightful things than death.”

Thus, he died amidst thunderous acclaim, and their world was saved. The girl he left behind shed a single tear and vowed to live enough for both of them in this reclaimed world. With that tired line, their heartwarming story came to a close. But the brother and sister pair just watched this ending apathetically. As the game's credits started rolling, they thought: “There are more frightful things than death.” Yeah, I'm sure.

But why didn't anyone say this to the protagonist before he died in the heroine's stead?

“Are you going to impose a fate worse than death on your beloved?”

So that's what they call “self-sacrifice.” Such pretty words... A real tearjerker. The boy with black hair and eyes produced a smile as twisted as his personality. The red-eyed, white-haired girl frowned sourly. They shared the same thought: Looks like the world's been saved by a single male protagonist's death.

A single sacrifice prevented the deaths of billions of others, and the cute heroine survived. How wonderful. A real bang for their buck.

Such a stunning achievement!!

Okay... Now.

So what had the girl who got left behind thought of all this? Her beloved himself had mentioned things more heinous than death— and proceeded to foist on her that very burden of surviving at the cost of her beloved's life.

...That guy definitely had a death wish. After the heroine had made clear she'd rather die than lose him, what did she get out of it?

The brother and sister exchanged glances as they reached the same conclusion.

—What a coward. Sure, I guess you could write it off as “self- sacrifice.” Sure, he could put it as just a matter of his ego, and likely no one would argue. Besides, who could argue...when there'd be no one left to do so? The siblings felt the real choice was not which one would die, but rather... They both die.

They both live.

...it should have been between those two.

So let's say it's just a case of ego. In that case, be consistent and see it through. If the choice of them both living means their world would be destroyed— —then just let it be destroyed.

So you think this is irresponsible? Then here's a rebuttal: Whose responsibility are you talking about? Say the world was ending and was pulled back from the brink by their love and courage and those sorts of things. That's all well and good. But who are you to take their kindness for granted? If it's responsibility we're talking about, then how about the responsibility of whoever made the world this way?!

...Try thinking about it like this. If the world was doomed in the first place, wouldn't its destruction be expected? It's already fated that the world's going to end, so what difference does it make if it ends now?! In that case, why shouldn't those two just keep on laughing and running away to the ends of the earth? If you complain this is an issue of “ego,” then no offense, but that's invalid. Because even if you were

planning to complain...the whole world would be gone!!

...But be that as it may, here is what the raven-haired older brother thought as he laid down his sleeping sister: Say you had to die for the sake of the world. What would you do...?

Between him and his sister, who would die? Either was clearly out of the question.

What if they both died? That's a little better, but they'd rather not.

So what if they both live? ...That would be the preferred option.

But still.

Sure, he could just blurt out, I don't care about your stupid world! You can all rot!! and run away. As he stroked his sister's hair, he thought...she definitely wouldn't be laughing with him. Then how would they go about saving themselves and the entire world, too? To gain everything without a single sacrifice... Still young, the boy laughed derisively at himself as he gazed at his sister's sleeping face.

The means to accomplish that might not exist in this world.

It had been thirty-eight days since the start of the game. The spiraling land floating in the heavens—the sugoroku board built by the Old Deus. In and of itself, this alone was enough of an unhinged marvel. But now, on the 296th space, there was a nauseating sight that blew the hinges clean off.

“Ee-hee, ee-hee-hee... Soooooaa?”

Through the dim candlelight of a small cave, three voices resounded.

“This was just as planned, too, wasn't it? Please, please tell me it was.”

“Heh, if you insist, then I'll say it—but who the hell would plan something like this?!”

“...Brother... It's, not turn-based... W-we gotta, give a command...”

There was the hollow laughter of the young redheaded girl who, thanks to having two dice, was now age 3.6: Steph. The shrieks of the young toddlers, who, by virtue of having one die each, were ages 1.8 and 1.1: Sora and Shiro, respectively. And...several back-to- back thunderous blasts that

foreboded the world's destruction.

"And on top of this, we gotta play in real time?! What the hell?!"

This is nuuuuts!!" Sora screamed before closing his eyes and contemplating: What kind of joke is this?

"...Calm down. Nothing's gonna get done unless you get a handle on the situation...!"

Sora managed to squeeze out a few words as his mind began faltering, his thoughts almost frozen. Jibril's Task appeared before them: —Immediately accept a game by the Covenants proposed by a party of at least two members—other than the one who assigned the Task—and win.

They'd been made to swear by the Covenants and start a game that simulated the ancient Great War. Sora looked around. First, he had to size up the situation and the game's rules.

They were in a dark, cramped space surrounded by exposed rock. On the table in the center, a map was spread. But this ragged, old, faded map was blank—no, rather, it was blacked out all over.

They needed that field map, but there was almost nothing on it.

Instead, the map, which resembled blacked-out parchment, bore something resembling a computer interface...ticking away with the game information.

July 184 BT, 03:45.

BT probably stood for Before Testament, that is, before the Covenants. There were Units represented by triangles, and Cities represented by squares... With the information this map provided, Sora could gather that the small cave they were in was what was labeled the "Capital" at its center. It seemed the map only showed the periphery of their Capital and the areas patrolled by their respective Scout units. Next to the map was a mass of paper and pens, and slightly farther away was a beat-up wooden mailbox. It looked as if they were supposed to write their commands on the paper and stick it in the mailbox to move their units.

Steph stood, perhaps distressed by the blasts that were descending one after another beyond the cave.

"I—I...I'll take a look outside, all right?!"

"H-hold on! ...Let's try adding an armed Scout unit."

Sora scribbled out a command.

The time displayed on the map progressed eight hours for every second they experienced. If this cave was their Capital—the player base—it wasn't a sure bet they could step out into the game proper. But even if they could, who knew what they might run into?

Each unit's information was displayed on the map when tapped—but no age, sex, combat stats, or the like. Not very user-friendly, to say the least. In any case, Sora wrote the unit ID displayed and dropped the command in the box. With that, a unit armed with an ax was dispatched through the exit and onto the field at eight hours per second—a 28,800× data writing speed, too fast to see with the naked eye.

"...Brother, what's the point, of arming a Scout? ...Won't it just...slow him down...?"

"HA-HA-HA! Therein lies your brother's cunning, little sister of mine!"

Sora shook his head in exasperation at his sister's point.

"He might encounter another race. If we don't give him a chance to survive, how will we know what the game's conditions—?"

But just then, the climate shifted, blowing in a wind that could be felt even inside the cave. The unit that had gone on the field just seconds ago vanished from the map like melting snow.

".....The hell was that?"

When Sora tapped the map, it showed this was a "dead spirit wind."

"...Good thing you didn't go outside."

Steph froze, her face pale, as Sora—Wait a second.

"Whoaaa! What—what's up with that field?! It's got those blue instant-death lava tiles!!"

Sora shrieked his "conclusion."

Although, "conclusion" wasn't quite the right word... From the very beginning, Jibril's cold, unfeeling eyes, which seemed to speak to how little she cared about the three of them, had indicated as much. Sora was just accepting a fact he'd resisted.

This is no joke.

Sora ground his teeth, tapped one of the Scout units on the map, and zoomed in. The Scout's field of vision was projected in the air like a screen, showing what it looked like outside: a wretched spectacle. Everyone gasped, and Sora forced a hoarse laugh.

"...Ha-ha, this is the Great War? C'mon, Jibril, you're going way too far with this."

This could by no means be called a war. Every postapocalyptic setting they had seen looked utopian in comparison. If Sora's group could summarize it in a single word, it could only be: hell.

...I see, thought Sora. This game simulated the ancient Great War. It was a realistic strategy game. Jibril's Task had produced another world on the 296th space. Space had boundlessly expanded...or perhaps compressed. He didn't know how it worked exactly, but it seemed the entire planet had been reproduced on a ten-kilometer square.

The crimson sky was blocked out by ash, burned by the fires of war that engulfed the planet. Blue "dead spirits" fell endlessly from the ruinous sky, which looked as if it might collapse at any moment.

The wind that had in a single gust wiped out their scouting unit—and humanity itself—was rife with dead spirits and dust and ash. This substance formed the "black ash" that blanketed the land as far as the eye could see, like snowfall that would never melt. Explosions further devastated the already tomb-like wasteland; the deafening roars that rocked the small cave without respite were the flashes of warring Ixseeds prior to the Covenants' ban on violence. Land and sea were transformed with each flash and sound, like a kaleidoscope.

...So this unending cataclysm is the Great War? Surely you jest.

“How did Immanity survive this inferno...?!” Sora wailed, but he knew... There was no reason Jibril would lie. So this was surely the Great War, the world the human race had survived. What’s more, according to the history Jibril presented, the human race had put an end to it themselves.

“You gotta be kidding me! A combat unit vaporized by a gust of wind?! In that case—”

The sky flashed once more in time with Sora’s outburst. The barely visible terrain on the map changed.

Presumably a consequence of the wind swallowing up their Scout unit, the video cut out, and things went black.

“This isn’t even a goddamn strategy game!! Strategy, my ass— the hell are we supposed to do?!”

Sora ranted, but he knew...it went without saying. He knew how strong those nutcase Ixseeds were without the Covenants, just not exactly how strong. It was patently obvious, though, that even a billion Immanities all together would be no match for Jibril, who could part the sea with five percent of her power and walk away from a direct hit from an H-bomb unharmed.

“...B-but, Brother...if we make a death stack...we should at least, make it through...one attack—”

“Against these bastards who can warp anywhere?! Against these bastards whose area attacks shift the planet’s crust?!”

As another blast flew by, Sora pointed to the map.

“The terrain changed again! Make it through one attack? Our Capital’s gonna get crushed by a single stray shot!”

Jibril said this was like Civ, Sora thought. Okay. That’s fine, then.

So let’s treat it like Civ.

They were stuck in the Ancient Era, while the other races were already in the Modern Era with superpowered units. Those units could nuke their structures flat and destroy the map

itself with no penalties. Rapid-fire.

Difficulty on max, barbarians raging, and you can’t even hurt the barbarians. Neither can you produce bonus structures like World Wonders.

In other words, there’s no way to even construct a regular structure. Every civilization on the map starts at war with you. If you’re unfortunate enough to build a city on one of their borders, in comes the death stack. Attacking would be suicide, and on top of that, the only victory condition is capturing the enemy’s Capital. If the enemy finds your Capital, you’ve pretty much lost already. And your enemy is Flügel. On top of all this, you’re a total n00b at this game.

...How about that? It’s enough to earn this difficulty level the title of craziest ever. Only a select few masochistic gamers wouldn’t rage at the devs of a game like this. But that’s not even the real issue here. The real reason the rules suck beyond all belief is because — —if you lose, you die.

That’s right: Even if they managed to clear this earth- shatteringly impossible game and seize the epic victory...all that awaited them was Jibril’s death. Sure, they might also get a few extra dice, but so what?

With that, Sora finished analyzing the setup of this insanely hard game.

He asked himself: Can we win?

And he answered himself: Like hell we can win.

“In a game where one of us has to die, nobody wins!!”

What would be the point of winning?

Sora cried out, his face tinged with more anger than ever before. Steph hesitantly asked, “I-in that case, why don’t we just resign?!”

She pointlessly suggested they use “that rule.”

“Sh-she’ll take our dice, but we won’t die, right?! Sora, didn’t you say yourself that it’s okay to resign as long as someone makes it to the goal?! Then as long as we let Jibril—”

Yes, that rule—the rule that you could resign from a game.

They’d forfeit all their dice to Jibril and

tell her how to win against the Old Deus. That was the only scenario in which no one had to die.

Yeah, good point, Sora thought. Even if they forfeited all their dice—their “time of substance”—they’d just lose their physical bodies and turn into ghosts. That was why he hadn’t argued when Jibril asked, “It is permitted that I win, is it not?” In fact, Jibril...probably could make it to the goal.

However.

“So you’re using your own life to threaten us into admitting defeat?”

“...Your jokes...make no, sense... And, they’re...not even, funny...”

Even in the best-case scenario, someone would die. Sora sat in a chair and cast his gaze downward with his hands folded in his lap.

The bizarre atmosphere silenced Shiro, and even Steph. They held their tongues and waited for Sora’s answer.

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Several seconds (or was it several minutes?) later, Sora finished his contemplation and lifted his head. It felt as if several hours could have elapsed in that time. Steph suppressed a shriek at the savage smile plastered on his face, warped with malice.

“It’s simple after all. She’s telling us, if we wanna win, kill her.”

As he spoke, it occurred to Sora that this didn’t really seem like a joke. This wasn’t some bluff or lie on Jibril’s part; it was a serious demand. Even worse... “—That’s some sass she’s giving us... Like, ‘If you don’t think you can win, feel free to quit.’”

How kind of her to offer them the “easy way out.”

“Fine, then... Shiro—let’s go.”

As Sora slowly got to his feet, Shiro searched her brother’s threatening glare for his true intent— “You think we’re gonna let her have her way?”

“.....Mm, got it...”

—and seemed to grasp what lay behind. She nodded solemnly, resolute.

“How did humans survive the Great War, she asks?” Sora grumbled.

He and Shiro sat in the chairs, faced the map, and gripped their pens.

"We'll give her all the answer she needs..."

"A-are you serious about this?! I mean, can you actually win?!"

Steph alone worried— No, she was asking if they even had a chance in the first place. Sora and Shiro answered with dark smiles on their faces.

"—No sweat. We could win this with our eyes closed."

"...Piece, of cake..."

They didn't know what Jibril's deal was pulling this game, but no matter. If she'd decided she either had to beat them in this game or die— —then that left them only one option. Sora grinned... At the same time, on the 308th space, a young beast stood staring at the video feed of Sora and the others projected in midair.

The young girl with fennec fox-like ears was a few sizes smaller than usual, having only two dice left.

"Why...? Why's everyone doing this shit, please?!"

This was Izuna Hatsuse, barking at the one displaying the image for her— someone sitting atop an inkpot floating in midair, her presence cold and inorganic, yet overwhelming.

Izuna fixed her gaze on the Old Deus and continued in a panic, almost questioning or even blaming. I thought we were playing sugoroku with you?

And yet... "Why the hell're we picking someone to die, please?!"

...the Old Deus did not answer her outrage. Rather, she didn't feel an answer was necessary. It was as if what she projected to Izuna was enough.

Her projections were the natural conclusion of events: Sora's team versus Jibril, competing in a game in which the loser would be sacrificed. Chlammy and Fiel, arriving to seize the Eastern Union amidst the confusion. Plum, taking advantage of the ensuing situation to use a Werebeast sacrifice as a stepping-stone to another sacrifice.

In or out of the game, nothing ended without someone's sacrifice. But it

wasn't the Old Deus Izuna had chastised who'd orchestrated these circumstances. This was all their own doing. That was the answer.

"What a strange question. You, there. Accomplice, conspirator.

Why do you ask?"

Her voice carried not a hint of blame or disappointment or despair and wholly lacked any desire.

"The respective Old Deus is obligated to fulfill the victor's every demand."

The god spoke indifferently, unfamiliar with loss or hope.

"The conceit that one would usurp the almighty power of an Old Deus...can only end thus."

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They'd tried to take everything from her; in other words, "you started it." Izuna gulped as she picked up the implied blame in the Old Deus's words.

...In that case, even if they did manage to make it to the goal...what about this Old Deus?

As Izuna pondered, the Old Deus considered her with vacant eyes, as if she'd never had any interest in Izuna anyway.

—This is merely what happens when everyone seeks their own benefit. The truth is, no one can gain without taking from another.

The Old Deus's gaze seemed to indicate as much. Izuna could say nothing, but only hung her head... At the same time, outside the game, someone in one corner of Kannagari, the Eastern Union's capital, poked her head out of the window of an inn. She looked up at the spiraling land that blocked the moonlight—the sugoroku board created by the Old Deus—where people both inside and outside the game had lapsed into chaos, caught up in confusion, fear, impatience, and their own machinations.

"Hmm, I don't really get it, but it looks like the Elven fleet's arrived. I'm soooo bored, though."

The figure spoke with utter indifference, as if wholly unacquainted with tension, then retrieved a single sheet from a large bundle of papers

and nodded. She was convinced that everything was truly in place.

It had been thirty-eight days since the start of the game with the Old Deus. Everyone had either been betrayed, deceived, usurped—or killed.

—This is merely what happens when everyone seeks their own benefit. The truth is, no one can gain without taking from another.

Let's say that, if you thought about it logically, this was as obvious as an object tumbling down a hill... Then just don't think about it logically.

Things had happened just as intended by those who had said as much, the ones who'd left her this sheet.

Word for word, precisely as written.

Feeling relieved and slightly chilled, the figure left the inn, a heavy knapsack on her back.

"Hey! I'm still in the backpack, aren't I?! Just who do you think I am?! Hey!!"

As she who dwelled in the water-filled, overly heavy knapsack noisily asserted herself, the one entrusted with the sheet recalled what she'd asked herself: —Say you had to die for the sake of the world. What would you do?

"If it would save the world, then I'd have to die."

However, they had all smiled bitterly at her response.

"Then if that didn't save the world, you'd have died for nothing."

And they'd continued.

"One sacrifice, two sacrifices, a thousand, a billion—it's not much difference."

If you're fine with sacrificing a few people in order to save many more, then one day, the number you sacrificed will surely surpass the number you saved.

Small sacrifices and self-sacrifice will never save the world.

They'll only help it survive—help it carry on unchanging, looking for its next sacrifices one by one, until the day it all finally ends... If you're gonna prattle on about saving the world, then you'd better refuse to allow even a single sacrifice. That's what they'd

said: This world is a game. If you accept a single sacrifice, the game will go on forever. In this world, such ludicrous rules are neither necessary nor absolute. And that's why we're going to put an end to this right here... No longer in anyone's memory, the figure who had been entrusted with such proof therefore carried their weighty move forward— "Hey! Could you be a little more careful with how you're carrying me?! How dare you treat me so roughly when you're not even my darling! Do you want to make the sea your enemy? Excuse me, are you listening? Hello?!"

—their literal weighty trump card, complaining from inside the backpack.

Step by step, she staggered up the endlessly long hill to the Chinkai Tandai District.

CHAPTER 1 PREPARATION The Great War. The time when the gods and their relations fought for the throne of the One True God. A stain on history, where they rent heaven and earth and trampled the world as if sneering at the decaying planet and the transient souls who inhabited it. Sora and Shiro, now engaged in a simulation of this war, continued to madly scribble out commands. As they kept scrawling these immensely über-Herculean tasks for the sole purpose of staying alive, though, Sora suddenly stopped and shouted — "—?! Shiro, I just got a great idea!!

"Wouldn't it be funny if we tried the command 'Bang your neighbor's wife'?!"

Pow.

There was another flash...and a mountain vanished from the map, right where their Capital had been seconds before. The destructive light would have surely blown them away along with the mountain had they not read the attack in advance and commanded a Settler to move the Capital. Shiro was unbothered and gave a thumbs-up in response.

"...Good job, Brother... But, your commands, need to be...specific..."

"Ohhh... Wait, so how do you go about banging the neighbor's wife—?!"

He hadn't banged anyone before—had never even had a real girlfriend who existed outside the confines of his own imagination.

This could be considered a feat even more grueling than living. But in the midst of Sora's agony— "I've been wondering just what you're up to— why are you being so casual about this?!" Steph screamed as she shuttled their commands to the mailbox. "If—if you'd been a second late, we— we'd be dead... C-can't you take this seriously?!"

Steph went pale at the prospect of their Capital getting captured, but Sora merely said to himself, Whatever, it's fine.

It was a strategy game convention— your Capital isn't considered to have "fallen" until it's been captured. And considering what Jibril was after, it was all the more unlikely that they would die even if they took a direct hit. The player space they were in was undoubtedly isolated from the outside world. After all, right now, the sibling gamers weren't even two years old: Sora was 1.8 and Shiro was 1.1. Steph was 3.6. The table was so high for them, they couldn't even write their commands without standing on a chair. Steph, the oldest, could just barely deposit their orders into the mailbox by standing on her toes. Kids like that, in a hell like this, would have been long dead if they weren't isolated. It was true that if they lost all their cities they'd run out of Immanity units and be screwed. But hey.

"Hmm. Hey, how d'you think I should go about getting the neighbor's wife to fall in love with me?" Sora asked Steph casually.

"Oh my, you're asking me? Well, let's see, if I may speak from personal experience... Why don't you con her and force her to fall in love with you?"  
"—Wha...?!"

Steph was beaming at her biting retort, and Sora was momentarily dumbfounded. "D00d, you're sharp! That's right, I just gotta con her!!"

"That was all the sarcasm I could muster! Can't you at least react a

little?!"

Steph responded to Sora's sincere praise with an equally earnest plea. Then— Whap, Sora wrote out two commands without a moment's hesitation as Steph pouted.

"With a head like yours that's capable of coming up with such manner of vile abuses in mere moments, can't you think of anything productive?"

"...Productive, you say. What do you consider productive?"

"...S-sorry?"

Sora paid no mind to Steph as she deposited his orders, and he continued with a stern expression.

"You're right... Why don't I do something productive, like diplomacy?"

Diplomacy. The building of fiduciary relations by contract. Sora and Shiro had little to bargain with, but it wasn't as if they had nothing. They had their knowledge of their old world, their information as players, their food...and so on and so forth. Could they put that up to get some kind of promise of cooperation or trade from another force?

"...If you look at that and still think any such promises will be kept, then should we give it a try?"

"That" ... In other words, the scene outside as projected in midair by their Scout. A raging storm that shattered the earth.

Looking at that grotesque spectacle, Steph could hardly be convinced: In a world that conquered by killing, contracts...meant nothing.

"Well, how about I do something else productive, like combat?"

Combat. The securement of territory by force. The odds weren't in their favor, that was for sure, but it wasn't impossible. Of course, if they took things head-on, they'd be steamrolled...but Sora and Shiro knew more than a little about the characteristics of some of the Ixseeds, such as Werebeasts, Elves, Sirens, and Dhampirs. They could use this knowledge to mobilize their units, strategically encircle the enemy, and

then pull off an ambush. If Sora and Shiro robbed the opponent of their advantage through limited confrontations and used the terrain's features against them...then hey, they might win.

They'd destroy one or two enemy units, and if all went particularly well—"We might even be able to deal a fatal blow to one race—and then what? Where will that get us?"

It would only make them targets and drive others to take revenge, needlessly increasing their risk. So neither diplomacy nor combat would be productive. In fact, if they made any faulty moves or attracted attention leading their opponents to identify their Capital... "They'd crush us on a whim and game over. The end, literally."

So for starters... Sora chuckled bitterly. "If you think in terms of common sense—we start in checkmate, don't we?"

How had Immanity survived this war at all? Sora, of course, had no way of knowing the truth.

"There aren't many ways humans could survive under these conditions."

And, among these limited choices, only one stood out as the most realistic.

"—Run like hell and hide... That's it."

They would need to act so as not to be noticed, not even acknowledged. Like a small animal, like a worm, like a leaf, they would snuff out their presence. Their most feasible option was to run and run, forever. However... "Even that won't work when Jibril already knows about us... Will it?"

Right. They were screwed if the enemy took note of them, but she knew about them from the start. Under these conditions, they could barely even move any of their units. If Jibril so much as spotted one stray, she'd find their Capital—and it would all be over. "....."

Sora nodded, continuing to chuckle bitterly at Steph as she blanched and made a gurgling noise in her throat.

What could they do to be productive? Right now—jack squat.

The most they could do was send out Scouts to track enemy movements and relocate their Capital to avoid stray fire. Or they could secure food supplies or send Jibril letters to troll her.

"We can't fight! If we send a unit out, it'll die, and then it's game over! So how 'bout we risk our gamer pride on this totally undiplomatic, piece-of-shit game and try to enjoy it?!"

"You've got your priorities mixed up! It's not your pride we're risking, it's our lives!!"

Steph's panic was quite reasonable, but Sora was perfectly aware of all that. That was why he was experimenting. Yes, for example—"...Brother... It looks, like...he...banged her."

—this.

When Shiro spoke up, Sora grinned, leaped onto the table (the map), and zoomed in. It seemed to indicate the two units had successfully pulled off the experiment, but—"Whoaaa... She really went and did it... Women are freaky..."

"...Yeah... Brother, women...are scary, aren't they...?"

"Why're you weirded out when you're the one who made her do it in the first place?!"

There were the two units, the man and his neighbor's wife, repeating their rendezvous in secrecy from the husband. Sora was repulsed, and Shiro was practically hypnotized for some reason.

Steph shouted at them, but—"Made her?! Pshaw! Have you forgotten what I wrote in my commands?!"

Sora had given Steph two commands to deposit. What he'd written was: —Command 1: Unit c1fe436 "Neighbor's Wife"

For the next twenty days at 2200 hours each day, you shall be panged with hunger and proceed to coordinates x765 y9875 "Food Storeroom," where you shall covertly embezzle provisions.

—Command 2: Unit b3fc412 "Wife Banger"

Starting in fifteen days, at 2201 hours, you shall encounter Unit c1fe436

"Neighbor's Wife" at coordinates x765 y9875 "Food Storeroom." Then you shall demand carnal relations in exchange for overlooking her embezzlement.

So basically—!! Sora announced: "I ordered her to steal food! I used that to pressure her into doing it once!"

True, he'd made the Neighbor's Wife snatch the food. The Wife Banger had been forced to blackmail her.

"But! And yet! Howeverrrr—!!"

Wham. Sora pointed at the map where the two units, despite the command period having already terminated, were yet sweetly "rendezvousing..."

"The ones who decided to keep it up...are these two!"

No, he had not ordered the Neighbor's Wife to fall in love with the Wife Banger. Neither had he ordered the Wife Banger to demand repeated carnal relations. And more importantly, Sora summed up, that meant one thing!

"I didn't even order the Neighbor's Wife to submit to the Wife Banger's demands!!"

This proved that although Sora had been the one to provide the opportunity, the responsibility for this infidelity fell entirely upon the perpetrators themselves!!

".....No... No, there's something wrong with your theory—"

"Gahhh, it's the naughtiness, isn't it? Does cheating on your husband feel so damn good?!"

"Uh, if I may! I still think there's something wrong with you for making her cheat and then getting pissed off when she actually does it!"

But never mind Steph's protests. Sora and Shiro smiled at each other contentedly, nodding at the results of their experiment. It seemed this game was fuzzier than they had expected, insofar as units decided of their own free will whether or not to cheat—in which case... "Whatever. Next! We're in a race against time, so hurry up and mail this now!"

Sora ceased his melodramatic wailing and handed Steph two commands he'd

written in advance. Steph jumped to do it and then asked the two siblings suspiciously as they stared at the map: "...What sort of mischievous commands have you issued this time?"

"Mischief? How dare you. This is a perfectly legitimate experiment in diplomacy and trade negotiations." Specifically: "The Neighbor's Wife tells the Husband they're being blackmailed for embezzlement, and she passes on hush money to the Wife Banger. The Wife Banger takes it and flees to the third city. Those were our commands."

"That's not diplomacy, that's extortion!!"

I suppose so, Sora thought in response. It came down to this: "Your precious broad is mine. Pay up if you want her back."

If that wasn't extortion, then what was? Sora certainly thought it was. And thus— Sora watched as the Wife Banger got his hush money out of the Husband and was now on his way to the third city. A wide grin spread across Sora's face as he replied, "When you take off all the window dressing, diplomacy is really just extortion, isn't it?"

"...Brother, you look...like you're thinking, something dirty again... It's so cool...!"

Shiro gazed at her brother reverently, but Sora's bold assertion was also met by the expression on Steph's face, as if she were looking at raw garbage. Sora didn't seem especially bothered by this, as his grin only widened further. You could con units without even issuing commands.

In that case, diplomacy between other races should be possible after all, huh?

As Sora reached this "breakthrough," Steph glared at him and mumbled, "Th-this is savage... Oh, but at least it'll bring harmony back to the household." However, Shiro made an observation.

"...? ...Brother, there's an...unemployed, citizen..."

Sora squinted and tapped the map to zoom in...and what he saw was the Husband roaming the streets

penniless. Incidentally— "...Sora? Is it just me, or is that the Neighbor's Wife with the Wife Banger?"

—Sora, deep in thought, considered the units that had moved to the third city. Indeed, he intentionally hadn't written exactly how much hush money was to be paid. He just wanted to see how much the Wife Banger could wring out of the Husband, whom he wasn't commanding. As Sora surmised it... "...So she conned her husband out of all his property...and ran off with...the neighbor?"

.....

"—W00t! Never mind that, we've found our breakthrough, Shiro!"

"...Mm, with...this, there's all kinds...of stuff...we can do!"

"How callously you avert your eyes from the calamities you have brought upon your subjects..."

Sora and Shiro tossed Steph and her incomprehensible gibbering aside and began furiously scribbling commands. Steph muttered as if to verify, "So you're...not going to resign...?"

"...Huh? ...What, for?"

"Things just got interesting, right? We're gonna be busy!"

Sora and Shiro grinned and quickly sprang into action.

Meanwhile, the hall of another player space like Shiro and Sora's cave was draped in silence. In the center of the fictional Avant Heim executive office was another beat-up mailbox, and in front of the table where the map was laid out sat Jibril. She had ten dice floating before her chest but was doing nothing. Just looking down, waiting— No, praying. Praying that Sora and Shiro, her masters, would resign.

"...I don't wanna...lose..."

This game alone I must win, by any means necessary. Jibril had resolved and declared as much, but— "I don't wanna lose, I don't wanna lose, I don't want to lose... Masters!!"

Sora and Shiro—no, anyone who knew Jibril—would be shocked seeing her like this. She clutched the book that continuously preoccupied her: her journal. Her back, shoulders, and even

her voice shook, as if she was pleading. She continued muttering furiously, her body curled up into a ball.

...If it was going to be like this, then perhaps she shouldn't have restored her dice to ten before the start of the game. She didn't know how to handle these unfamiliar "emotions." Her trembling fingers touched her journal.

The cover read, in the Flügel tongue, Every time you lose your memory, read page 3205. As her eyes fixed on these words, she considered: ...If it was going to be like this, then perhaps she'd be better off having no memory at all. With something like a feeling of regret, Jibril slowly opened the book to page 3205, a page she knew not how many times she had turned to since the sugoroku game's start. It was covered in countless notes Jibril herself had scrawled out, for instance: Ino Hatsuse: Werebeast. Male. Safe to condescend to by default. Creepy.

Plum Stoker: Dhampir. Gender ambiguous. Functionally equivalent to a mosquito.

Such sloppy scribbles were followed by: Stephanie Dola: Immanity. Female, red hair. aka Dora. Sora and Shiro's servant. In love with Sora, but in vehement denial.

The list went on to include height and measurements, various anecdotes, and all kinds of other details.

She'd essentially written down the traits of everyone she knew.

But there was one section written much larger than the rest. It was circled, double-underlined, and marked as critical information.

Sora: Immanity, black hair. Shiro: Immanity, white hair.

A brother and sister from another world. A harmonious, inseparable pair—and my new masters. The "answer" I have sought since the day of my birth... Jibril looked down, tracing the shakily scrawled paragraph with her fingers. She recalled the time she wrote it, how she'd felt back then, just after the game started, thirty-eight days earlier. That is, on the first move. She no doubt remembered the first time she rolled the dice... ?

“...Goodness! Where am I?”

As a breeze brushed her cheek, Jibril tilted her head in a daze and mumbled. All of a sudden, she was alone on a sea of grass that rippled in the wind. There were nine white cubes by her chest, and surrounding her was an unfamiliar landmass whirling in a spiral. Jibril stood up, entirely ignorant of where she was and why. The crosses in her amber-colored eyes glowed as she looked around and then, using her space-bending vision, confirmed the existence of several entities moving along the spiraling land.

“One unsightly bloodsucking insect, two cheekily bipedal beasts...”

And — She furrowed her brow and muttered.

“...Three worms of even less value... My word.”

Jibril wondered what she was doing among such lower orders.

She couldn’t, after all, figure out what was going on.

“Hmm, I am perplexed. But surely there is someone who can explain it to me!”

Indeed, all she had to do was to make the obvious inquiries.

Though it did rankle her to think she might have to take the role of a pilgrim in a fairy tale, asking a beast or worm to show her the way... “Then I shall be sure to slay the source of this indignity. After all, it’s clearly not my fault!”

All would be settled once the bastard who had humiliated her kicked the bucket. Satisfied with her assessment, Jibril spread her wings and hastened her halo’s spinning.

—A Shift.

This warped space, connected coordinates—it was a more or less infinitely fast manner of movement. But it was still movement, so— “Meep?!”

—if something was in her way...then this is precisely what would happen. The silly sound she uttered bore no resemblance to the ferocity of the collision she’d had with something in that void at an almost infinite velocity. There was a booming thud as she stuck

to the air like a frog against a windshield. And then...slowly, slowly...she slid down, before finally getting stuck in the ground.

“...Heh, heh-heh... To entrap me by spatial isolation... Heh, heh- heh-heh—”

She rose to her feet, an enormous bump on her head...laughing all the while. This was a kind of power that even a Flügel such as herself could not detect. And, come to think of it, the spiraling landform was enough of an obstruction that even she couldn’t shift past. Who could achieve such things? If it was an Old Deus, that would make sense, but— “—That takes quite some nerve...doesn’t it?!”

—in that case... Well, why don’t you just go ahead and die?

For the sake of form, she fired a few Heavenly Smites, blasted off a space destruction spell, and so on until her bile subsided.

..... “...Huff...huff... I’ll I-let you off with...that much...”

At last, Jibril reluctantly acknowledged that this seemed futile.

She assumed there was an Old Deus ahead of the people advancing through the spiraling land. She pressed onward bitterly, thinking about how she’d have to hold off on the killing for now. She still didn’t know what was going on, but it only took her a few minutes to cross the mysterious darkness of the spatial barriers through forty- two spaces, and then — —Prepare a vessel containing four liters of water before you are swallowed by the lava.

As the unbearably pretentious voice resounded, before her very eyes appeared a fountain, two vessels respectively marked “five liters” and “three liters,” and...a flood of lava charging at her like a tsunami.

...Jibril had no idea what any of this meant. That is to say, she did, of course, understand the meaning of what had just been said.

She was supposed to measure exactly four liters of water using two different vessels. But she was already in the worst mood imaginable, and now this childish problem was being thrust at

her.

It sounded more like, Try to solve this before the lava gets you, if you can.

“...What sort of insolent braggart is responsible...? Here—”

Jibril sneered and went ahead and solved it. In short: She concentrated all the moisture in the air and earth, along with the water in the fountain, and smacked it against the lava. Thus, an explosion of steam gave way to a torrential downpour. Then Jibril magically created her own four-liter vessel and watched it fill with rain. As she reveled in her too-perfect answer — —The Task is deemed fulfilled.

—the pretentious voice spoke up again, and the number of cubes at her chest increased by one. She gazed at them suspiciously, and the next moment — “?! ”

—Jibril clutched her body as if her knees were about to crumble beneath her... “...What is...happening...?”

...and, shaking, just barely managed to get the question out.

What had happened...was clear as day. The questions with which she’d been plagued till just now—Where am I? Why am I here?—melted away. She was on the sugoroku board of the Old Deus, playing the game. For a time...she’d forgotten. That was all.

But she felt an indescribable chill that threatened to sap her dry, a shock that rattled her teeth and made her want to run from everything.

Just what was happening to her?

“...Calm...down... Think...”

Jibril desperately talked down the incomprehensible thoughts driving her to distraction. She went over the rules, carefully, and began considering them objectively, starting with what had happened. That is— Why did only she lose her memory?

01: The seven are granted ten DICE that apportion their TIME OF SUBSTANCE.

Time of substance. Yes, however long they possessed a body.

That didn’t include the soul, which contained no mass. Jibril had



recognized as much from Sora's provocations since the start of the game. She knew her masters had contrived so that they could continue to move even if they dropped out of the game. In other words, they'd split their vessels and souls, wagering only their bodies. Still, there was one highly likely hypothesis that came to Jibril's mind. Once more, Jibril surveyed the area with her vision that transcended space. On the game board: Plum, Ino, Izuna, Dora, and Sora and Shiro...her masters. As Jibril watched them continue without issue despite having lost some of their dice, her hypothesis changed to conviction.

She alone—not a living thing, but an entity, a Flügel— —had no clear boundary...between her soul and its vessel... “—Oh... This is—”

Jibril finally grasped what was happening, and she struggled to cling to her consciousness, which threatened to abandon her. Teeth chattering, hands shaking, she took out her journal and began writing furiously. She jotted down her memories of the two players moving along the board, the ones she had until recently considered beneath her: her masters.

These memories should have been more precious than anything. They'd been lost with a single die, and she hadn't even realized... Jibril experienced something she'd never known in her 6,407 years: "...I see... So this is—fear...?"

She'd finally learned to understand it, yet, as if frightened of it, as if to run from it, she attempted to record in her diary every single thing she had seen and heard.

Jibril thought that, even if she lost her memory, as long as she read this journal, she should be able to recall.

The constant silence in the fictional Avant Heim executive office was interrupted only by the sound of Jibril languidly turning the journal's pages.

All right, so losing dice made her lose her memory. It was because she was a Flügel, whose vessel and soul were not clearly demarcated. Even her masters must have overlooked this pitfall when

they set the rules.

No. Her masters—in fact, living things in general—could not be aware of this. If anyone were to spot this problem in the rules, it should have been her. More importantly, Jibril thought as she turned another page.

If that were the case...then what would happen if she lost all her dice?

The other players would be left as souls—in other words, ghosts. But what about Jibril? The next page had a hypothesis: Perhaps... ..only my core rite shall remain, and then reboot.

Yes. That was it. She wouldn't die like the others, because the minimum unit that composed a magical being such as herself, an insubstantial "rite," would remain. However, in that case, all her memories would be reset, in which case, all she had to do was write everything in her journal. Even if her rite rebooted—even if she were "reborn"—Jibril would still be herself. Rather, it was much like the question, If you lost your memories, would you still be you? As long as she recorded in this journal all her thoughts, her memories, everything—even if she lost all her dice, Jibril would surely continue to adore her masters. Of this— —she had once been convinced.

“Yes... Until my master casually handed me his dice in that bath...”

On the second move, as soon as she'd rolled the dice once more and lost one, everything written in her journal—its meaning, its sentiment, its value—came to elude her.

It was surely some sort of mistake that she adored the base likes of Immanities as her masters. They must have tricked her in a game and planted some convenient memories. Why don't I have a look at these arrogant apes? And why don't I kill them when I have an opportunity? With this conviction in mind, she'd gone...to meet her masters.

That day, after her masters had handed her those dice in the bath—after all her memories had returned—she'd asked them if they believed in reincarnation as clones. Would someone with exactly the same soul

still be you?

The soul. The core rite. If the constituent elements were all the same, would that still be you? When her masters responded...Jibril at last understood.

The way she'd felt. The past she had recorded in her journal.

This page which she now looked at with a single involuntary chuckle.

[illegible]

[illegible]

You could reason all you wanted about souls and such, but the fact was that the person who'd lost all her memories, the one reading this journal where all those memories were inscribed—could only regard it as the journal of a stranger.

This was another person altogether. And could you become that person by reading their journal? Of course not. It was just like how, no matter how many books you read, you could never obtain more than knowledge. Books could never tell you how their authors felt when they were written.

Having reached this conclusion, Jibril found herself unwilling to return the dice Sora had handed her. If she were to forget everything again, then she was inclined to refuse even rolling the dice another time. Given the choice, she'd even prefer dying right here. But that would mean she'd drop out with ten of the dice in her possession.

And that was no laughing matter, for it could forfeit her masters' victory—perhaps even their lives.

Thus, Jibril asked her masters if she might win.

“...How absolutely dreadful of me...”

Seeing the next page and what she’d

written after making off with the dice she'd "borrowed," Jibril couldn't help but grimace in self-loathing.

She'd detailed on this page exactly how to set up this game.

If any of them could win this sugoroku game against the Old Deus, it would be Jibril. But she knew full well that wouldn't suffice.

Of all people, those two—her masters, her lords, Sora and Shiro— would never permit just anyone to win or themselves to lose.

Therefore, she'd also made them bet their actual method for defeating the Old Deus and set it up so they had no choice but to resign. Jibril looked at the page where she'd laid it out, right down to the particulars, so she could carry it out even without her memory.

"Still... I beg of you, Masters...", she whispered, her head low.

They would scorn her. She would be content to accept any punishment. They could simply tell her to die... No.

If they would only let her die, it couldn't come too soon... And yet!

“...Please, please, just once... I beg of you, Masters... Won't you allow me this victory...? Just this once... Please—I!”

She'd admit it: She was afraid.  
Helplessly afraid.

“...If someone not myself had my face,  
my voice...”

Everything she'd written in her journal—everything she'd seen, heard, learned, felt in these 6,407 years; the victory she was stooping to such depths to extort; the undeserved entreaty she'd made, the tears of shame—she had even forgotten their meaning.

“...If my masters called that person ‘Jibril’...and that person were not I...”

Recalling her most precious memory, being summoned to the side of those dear to her— “...If that person treated them as worthless...I could never accept it...!”

—she imagined another in her place. Never before had Jibril experienced a fear like this... .. It took a while. Then Jibril, who'd collapsed in tears, looked

up at the flurry of activity displayed on the map and chuckled.

“...Of...course... My masters,  
Blank...would never...accept defeat,  
would they not?”

Surely, her masters had no mind at all to resign. That meant they would take up the challenge, and Jibril would be allowed to win.

Just look at this mountain of letters she'd received from them; they were nothing but taunts. They could have just written "Resign" or "Die," and as their property, Jibril would have had no choice but to obey.

“...I thank you, my masters, for this opportunity to test my mettle.”

With that, Jibril once more took up her pen and began issuing commands.

Victory would be hers, no matter what. Her masters would have no choice but to resign if she had them completely cornered.

Still—Jibril took one last glance at her journal.

I cannot but think that my masters will win regardless.

This inscription made her think: Were this the case, at least she would like to lose to her masters...and die.

Were this her last game, she would like to get some answers: about that day the War ended, that time everything changed, how the world changed. Neither could she be sure of those answers herself, nor could she witness for herself the moment the world would change once more by the power of Immanity. How this game with the Old Deus might end, Jibril herself couldn't be sure of, either.

But once she knew these things for certain and wrote them all down... It was at the edge of the 308th space.

"Let! Me! Through! Damn it! Please!!"

A scarlet beast roared in a furious attempt to shatter the surrounding space. Izuna's fists descended in trails of boiling blood, each hit an explosion. Her bloodbreak transcended physics, allowing her vision to capture the battlefield far away.

From that edge, Izuna could see how the space was compressed to its

utmost limit. The game simulating the ancient Great War—the power of the Old Deus made such things possible.

Izuna had no hope of breaking through this space with her fists, yet still she burned with rage and threw herself into a frenzy, her fists, claws, and fangs piercing the void.

She had to go back and stop it. This was a game—a fantasy.

Even Izuna understood as much. Still, she grasped the scene before her, where life was treated like dust and heaven and earth were torn apart like mere toys. And then there was Tet's story, perhaps different in the details, but still tracing the same plot and the resulting conclusion... "—Screw this shit—please—!!"

...Izuna was aware of that, too. She knew the answers that Jibril sought but did not know: how the Great War of old had ended and how the game before her would end.

Put simply: Someone would die.

"What troubles thee? Give but one name," it proposed coldly.

Izuna turned at the sound of the robotic voice, still swinging her fists so frantically that she might vaporize the tears spilling from the corners of her eyes.

"With that, victory will be yours—and all at once shall end."

It just sat on the inkpot floating in emptiness, as if it had been doing so for all eternity.

The same one who'd asked, What is it to believe? the question she now had no interest in answering. The Old Deus who looked down on all confronted Izuna with a Task.

—Select one of the seven souls held by the Old Deus to be killed, whereupon thou shalt be transported to the final space.

Namely, who Izuna would sacrifice to finish this game.

"."

Something different from confusion struck Izuna. She averted her gaze and trembled, gasping for breath. She simply had to sacrifice this Old Deus who viewed these circumstances with

such disinterest, along with one more person — —and everything would end. The game below her where Jibril and Sora and Shiro were killing each other; the game outside where Ino and Plum and Chlammy and Fiel were killing one another; the game here where, even if someone made it to the finish, the Old Deus would die. Everything. So what was one more? Then what if Izuna...sacrificed herself to win—? Would that not prevent any further sacrifices ?

?!

"...Cut the crap, please... That's bullshit, please—!!"

The hell's this shit?! Izuna howled, baring her fangs. But she wasn't addressing the Old Deus. She was addressing the biggest dipshit of all: herself.

At first, Izuna had thought this game didn't require any complicated thinking. They'd all betray one another, yet ultimately cooperate, and someone would make it to the goal. She thought that once she'd exposed that logic with her childlike and consequently sharp sensibility, she would be the winner.

Then her plan had been to demand, Save everyone, including the Shrine Maiden. But now Izuna shrieked in frustration at what she herself had failed to notice.

"Doesn't that just—bring us back to square one, please—?!"

If she finished, everyone would be saved? And that was why she was supposed to finish? If she just wanted to save everyone— then why play in the first place—?! On top of that, even if she did finish the game, this Old Deus would be sacrificed? That wasn't even square one; it was more like square zero! And now, there apparently had to be another sacrifice in order to clear this Task?!

"—! Don't! Get! It! Please—!"

Izuna shook her head and, in childish petulance, thought: No way. No chance. That's not possible. She'd never have agreed to that!

If you couldn't save everyone, then even if you made it, what were you

supposed to wish for?! If someone had to be sacrificed in this game, there was no way she'd ever have started it in the first place! In that case, Izuna glared at the Old Deus.

"To hell with your numbers, please... You're a goddamn liar — I hate you, please!!"

Answering the claim that one or two sacrifices was all the same, she shrilly denounced it as a lie.

There was no question it was a lie. Izuna racked her brains at the innumerable mysteries. What was with this Task in the first place? The Task had stayed the same since the 301st space—why were they so close together?! No, let's get straight to it: Who the hell even wrote this Task?! No—no, no, thought Izuna as she shook her head. In the first place... In the first place... The Old Deus held seven souls...? Whose souls—? Sora, Shiro, Steph, Jibril, Izuna, Ino, Plum; sure, that made seven. But if you included the soul of the Old Deus, didn't that make eight? And what about the Shrine Maiden—wouldn't that make nine—?! No. That wasn't it. That was definitely not it—!

"...I frickin' swear to you...I'm not gonna name anyone, please!!"

Something was wrong; Izuna didn't know what, but she had a hunch.

Hell no, that's not it!

That much Izuna was sure of as she wept and cried, but... "Acknowledged. Thy defeat is certain in any case."

...the ever-emotionless voice of the Old Deus gave a response.

True, if she went for seventy-two hours without fulfilling the Task, Izuna would lose one die, leaving her with just one—which meant she couldn't advance. But — "...I don't care if I lose, please. I just hate you, please! ...But!!"

Izuna glared tearfully at the Old Deus.

"Even so—I'm sure as hell not going to let you die, please!!"

...After all, if nothing would change or cease without someone's sacrifice, then why—?

"—Why'd Tet...tell me that terrible story...please?!"

Then this world...hadn't changed at all, had it...please...?

It had already been sixteen hours since the start of the game with Jibril. The date 132 BT appeared on the map, which meant that, in-game, almost fifty-two years had already passed—  
“—Done! Next! Hurry!!”

“...Too slow... Mail them, faster...!”

—and it had already been ten hours since they'd discovered they could deceive units. During this time, Sora and Shiro had been scribbling out commands without pausing for a second— “Y-you know how to make an effort when it pleases you! You're quite...mercurial, if you ask me!”

—while Steph was forced to sprint back and forth to the mailbox. It was close enough that under normal circumstances, Sora, or even Steph, could have reached it seated. However, now that the three were kiddie-sized, it was quite far.

“A-and of course...you have a good reason...for making me run like this, don't you?!” Steph demanded.

“Of course. If there's one factor that's critical to winning games—”

Sora tapped his fingers on the map and projected it in midair.

“—it's data, right?”

Steph gaped at the world map Sora showed her.

“We're on Lucia?! H-how did we get to see so much—?”

The field map had been almost entirely black except for the city periphery and the modest range of a few Scouts. Now thousands of Scouts had exposed the continent's entirety.

“H-how did you do it?! How do we have so many—?”

Indeed, it was no wonder Steph was surprised. Previously, their Scouts had died in at most a few minutes of subjective time (a couple months of game time). Yet now, in this hell where deathly ash fell from the sky and an encounter with another race would prove fatal, the map demonstrated that they'd managed to maintain thousands of Scouts—that is, increased their rates of survival. So how—? Steph

gaped, to which Sora smirked: “We made a telescope.”

“Oh... I should have known it was some such trickery or cunning...”

Steph was deeply disappointed. Discouraged, Sora offered a rebuttal: In a world that put nuclear warfare to shame, how could she call a telescope cheating?

“I can't believe you! This is pretty much within the specs, you know?! What's so wrong with doing something that's well within the rules?”

“...Glass, the material, for...lenses...is in almost, infinite...supply.”

Even in present-day Elkia, glass transparent enough for lenses was by no means cheap or abundant. Steph eyed Shiro suspiciously.

“Yeah. Besides, these morons will make us as many as we want!”

” Sora scoffed.

There was another flash in that instant powerful enough to bore holes into the earth... In other words: “...Extreme high-temperature, high-pressure shocks... The power to vaporize deserts, mountains—and even mines.”

Like an ancient nuclear war that turned deserts into glass. That glass came from lead-based cerussite, thanks to their favorite morons. With a little polishing, they now had plenty of the stuff transparent enough to use for lenses—and in infinite supply.

“Now all we have to do is order our d00ds to buff the hell out of that shit and build it to spec.”

Then the units wouldn't need optical technology. They just had to follow Sora and Shiro's commands, or “blueprints,” and voilà, these non-sentient units constructed a 50× field scope combining four convex-concave lenses. This broadened their reconnaissance and map display range, but of course, that alone wouldn't be enough to dramatically improve the survival rate of their Scouts. They had to calculate relatively safe movement routes and establish the tech for survival. They had to develop agriculture to work even on this waste of a world, experiment with food preservation tech, and so on and so

forth. The two of them fumbled in the dark to reveal the answers, sent off a massive number of commands, and now... “...Brother...I've found, them...!”

Sora leaped upon the map on the table at the sound of Shiro's voice. Little by little, the projected world map now revealed...a group of foreign units, the ones they'd been looking for. Sora grabbed hold of them.

“I knew it—the sons of bitches are hunting.”

He chuckled as he watched them moving back and forth on their fixed route, then tapped on a Scout and pinched out to project its field of vision into the air. With outstretched arms, Sora broke out into a wide grin at what the telescope showed.

“Wellllcome, Werrebeast. We're friends, aren't we?”

“...I would be loath to take on such a friend...,” Steph groaned softly. Sora's tone implied, I'll strip you of everything down to your ass hairs, so come on!

This was a land polluted by black ash, a world where everything might vanish in the next second. If you weren't one of the top-ranking races, you wouldn't have room for settled agriculture; it wouldn't even be worth it. Given their physical abilities on top of that, there was no question Werebeasts would be hunter-gatherers.

What remained unknown were their routes and frequency.

“...Brother... I've calculated, the routes...”

Ohm, a peaceful sigh of relief. Shiro had figured out the patterns in the blink of an eye and showed Sora her notes. The Werebeast stack went back and forth on six routes about every three seconds. Three seconds... According to the time in-game, that was pretty much every day, which meant— “Just as I thought... They're starving. All right, Shiro, time for some good, old-fashioned diplomacy!”

Look at this world. It stood to reason that prey would be scarce, and that meant... ...these guys were one of the few races that gave them an opening. Sora and Shiro smirked at the developments unfolding just as they'd

anticipated. They had a command on standby and would just add the coordinates before handing it to Steph. Once again, she sprinted to the mailbox, and on returning, she asked: "Wh-what exactly are you, doing? ...Are you making an alliance...with Werebeast?"

Sora and Shiro merely frowned as they answered Steph, who was panting for air.

"...What would be, the point...of an alliance...with starving, Werebeasts?"

"You wanna tell these hungry Werebeasts we got some tasty Immanity goodies for them?"

Sure, they'd demonstrated that you could con units. But still — promises and contracts meant nothing in this world. And if the Werebeasts knew Immanity existed, they'd be done for; that wouldn't change.

So, Sora announced with an evil grin that hardly suited a 1.8- year-old.

"First, we're gonna get...an Elven unit."

"...E-excuse me? I thought you were...negotiating with the Werebeasts?"

Sora and Shiro responded with a glance at the projected map.

There was a Scout moving across it. When it arrived at the Werebeast hunting route...it turned back.

Steph seemed as if she wanted to ask what was going on, but Sora managed to explain things before she got the chance.

"We left some food —along with a love letter."

Fortunately, their infantile attempts at improving agriculture and storage technology had paid off in a modest food surplus. They'd left smoked chicken and pickled tubers... A banquet, as far as the starving Werebeasts would be concerned. They'd utilized the black ash to cover their scent and taken every possible precaution, then left the food on the route the bastards would take six days from now.

About eighteen seconds later in real time, the stack would pick it up.

And then they'd read Sora's "love

letter."

"A love letter... By that you mean a regular letter, surely. What did you write?"

"A trade proposal." Yes, written in the Werebeast tongue—a proposal for exchange between races. Specifically, "We told them we'd give them twice as much food for each Elf they kidnapped."

His face plastered with a grin, Sora was, in short, proposing human trafficking. This would normally be where Steph would let loose a few revilements, but — "...Huh? You can even kidnap an Elf?!"

In this case, her first question was if it was even possible. Elf was the race most skilled in magic. Werebeasts might be fearsome, but could they really kidnap an Elf?

"Sure can."

Sora dismissed Steph's reasonable doubts and continued. "It's a piece of cake. A stroll through the park... Easier than breathing."

He'd even provided detailed instructions in his letter. Sora smiled darkly. Ah, yes. The lofty Elves, most acclaimed users of magic in the world... "Say they've got magic, say they've got power—it makes no difference."

Why, you ask? His sneer deepened.

"We're not gonna let them use magic. We're not even gonna let them resist, because we'll create the conditions."

That was the foundation, the quintessence of gaming. In other words— "That's enough to render everything useless. Today's games and yesterday's wars, it's always been like that."

—never let your opponents have their way. Do everything they don't want. This was the one universal truth, even in war.

"So... First, we're gonna use the Werebeasts to bring over one Elf."

"...Then...we'll use the Elves...to sell us...another race," Shiro finished explaining drily.

If they scored just one Elf unit for their team, they could use it for their next "negotiation," during which they'd

exploit that darling magic—then everything would fall like dominoes. Thus, the two of them would hold the reins over everything. Their devilishly cruel conclusion so starkly contrasted with how young and innocent they looked. It sent a slight shiver down Steph's spine, and she looked at the map projection with the pair.

It was as if everything had been preordained. As if reality itself was dictated by Sora's and Shiro's thoughts. Just as they'd predicted, a party of Werebeasts showed up at the appointed spot with an Elf.

Indeed, they strolled in so idly, so easily, as if it were only natural.

Steph's eyes widened at the unfolding scene, and Sora's and Shiro's grins expanded.

That's when it happened.

".....Huh?"

The Werebeast stack vanished from the map.

Panicked, Sora projected the field of vision of a Scout unit out on reconnaissance off in the distance. The Werebeast party had disappeared without a trace, along with the surrounding scenery— and the Elf trudged back the way she'd come.

..... "...Sora? You did give instructions how to kidnap her, of course?" Steph asked, breaking the stunned silence.

"Uh, yeah!! I mean, look, they kidnapped her, right?!"

"...Brother... How, did you intend...to get...her?"

Sora tried desperately to argue, but Shiro saw right through him, her eyes vaguely cold...and doubtful. They seemed to ask, Sure, that's all well and good, but how were we supposed to get her on our side?

"Huh? Well, I mean... We just crush her spirit and her pride, show her the joys of this and that, and then she'll do anything we tell her. That's why I told them to kidnap a woman in the first place."

"...Y-you're the absolute worst!!"

Steph's eyes flew open when she picked up Sora's meaning, but he just stared back blankly in response.

"Huh? ...Don't Elves usually break after a bunch of orcs, like, do stuff to 'em?"

Orcs, i.e., pig-men, i.e., a group of Werebeast pigs. Sora's assumption had been unclouded by doubt, as if he were stating something as obvious as how the sun rises in the east.

..... He was subsequently met with a silence deeper than the sea and an ice-cold stare, but seemingly oblivious, he pounded a fist on the table.

"Unbelievable...! What did I do wrong? What did I overlook?!"

It's a staple of gaming for an elf to get captured by orcs and be like, 'Just...kill me!' only to surrender two frames later! It's a universal, divine law of providence! All I had to do was make some sex-starved, O-faced woodland erof our puppet! Just how and where in this incredible, perfect plan did I go awry—?!?!"

"...Brother, that's not a gaming thing... That's in...doujinshi,"

Shiro mumbled in disbelief. It seemed her brother was seriously, genuinely, from the bottom of his heart, anguishing over his failure.

"By the way, Sora... Orcs aren't Werebeasts, you know."

.  
—Say...what...?!"

Sora grabbed his tablet with trembling hands to prevent himself from collapsing in a heap. He opened the entry on the Ixseeds and gazed skyward.

"Son of a bitch! Orcs are Demonias?! No wonder we failed!"

"No! That is not why you failed!!"

But Steph's cry fell on the deaf ears of one preoccupied with cursing his failure. What a simple mistake... He'd chosen the wrong race—?!"

...No, save the grieving for later, Sora told himself. First, we'll need to figure out how to fix this. He bit his nails and ruminated, his face racked with urgency.

"—Negotiate with Demonias... How should I even use them to our advantage?!"

Demonia: one of the races they'd still

never met and about which they lacked sufficient intel. Finding an exploit wouldn't be easy... "Hey! Don't you feel sorry for the Werebeast units? ...I mean, can't you at least pretend to?!"

Steph appealed to him for restraint but was promptly ignored.

Those Werebeasts must've had a pretty good time with the Elf unit if they'd managed to bring her along... So they oughtta be satisfied. It was their turn to go screw themselves. But then they kind of had, so really—  
"...Brother... Isn't this...an orc?"

The unit Shiro tapped lay just south of the Elf's path back home. Its name appeared to be Demonia Orc 8.

"A fine play, Shiro! We'll use the Scouts to lead them over to group-assault her!!"

Sora's pen flew without hesitation, issuing commands at an incredible pace.

"Hey, wait a second! Aren't you losing sight of the goal?!"

Steph pointed out how this would prevent Sora from kidnapping the Elf, but— "Silence! As an elf, she's destined to be trapped by orcs and say, 'Just...kill me!' then transform into an erofu—a sexy elf! The game may try to deceive providence and call them by some other name, but I say, Ha! Meet the iron hand of judgment!!"

"The one who should meet the iron hand of judgment is youuu!!"

Steph clasped her head and shrieked, only to be tossed aside by Sora, who added, "Well, anyway!"

Having mailed the rest of his commands, Sora calmly plotted their next steps. If things went well, they'd get a feel for the Demonias' movements despite lacking cogent information about their kind. And when that Elf reached the climax of her... Well, at the very least, she'd be exhausted, so capturing her should—  
—And anyway, most importantly.

Sora leered at the map with his smartphone at the ready. It's safe to say there was some serious 18+ debauchery unfolding. He tapped on a Scout unit who should have been

watching through a telescope and prepared to zoom in on its field of vision, but... "...Brother, right now, you're 1.8... 18+ stuff...is off-limits..."

"Heh, heh-heh-heh, mwa-ha-ha-ha!! I thought you'd say that, my dear little sister! However!!"

As Shiro blocked his hand, Sora erupted in a stunning example of maniacal laughter.

"One second of real time equals eight hours in-game!"

Something incomprehensible to the naked eye!"

However, Sora crowed, smartphone still in hand.

"Suppose I shoot it in super-slow mode! Then, when I'm eighteen again, I can break down the individual frames—it'll probably be in at least one of them. Anyway, it should be fine. Any objections?!"

Sora spoke so loudly and so eloquently that it finally dawned on Steph... "Y-you... This was what you were after all along?!"

"Heh, I know not of what you speak! I always take the necessary precautions!"

Sora, feeling triumphant, zoomed in on the Scout.

"However, I have no intention of letting the fruits of my labor slip—"

—past me, was what he'd intended to say, but... "...Huh?"

...he now questioned what the map was displaying.

The orcs' numbers were gradually dwindling. At first, Sora, Shiro, and Steph all thought they must have been getting butchered by the Elf. They soon realized this was not the case, however, and the three of them tilted their heads in befuddlement. One by one, each orc disappeared within a full two seconds, or sixteen hours in-game. There was no way the Elf could put up a fight that long, in which case—what the hell was this...? Sora was the first to come up with a theory, and he gulped: "No way... She beat the orcs to a pulp? My God..."

His face twitched as he spoke, and sure enough, just as he suspected, the Elf

dragged the last remaining of the eight orcs back on the road home.

It was as if time had stopped. How many seconds, how many minutes did that silence last?

Shiro piped up.

“...Brother... The Elves...have started, hunting...orcs...”

As if taking Shiro’s observation as a signal, the Elven stack began engaging the Demonia in battle across various locations and abducting them.

Hmm... Now, what could this mean? pondered Sora, nodding.

As a spectator, his view was godlike in scope.

“I see. Now I know why Elf practices slavery... For that.”

Now fully in possession of himself, Sora remembered that Chlammy was Fiel’s slave.

...He spent several seconds deep in thought, giving flight to his fancy, a big smile spreading across his face... “I have never heard of such a thing!!”

...until Steph interrupted him, thrusting her finger at the map so hard you could hear it cut through the air.

“Is it not your foul deeds that made the Elves—um, e- eloofs...just as you wanted them? How shall you atone for this obscene perversion of history? Miss Fiel would kill you if she were to witness this!”

Steph somehow managed to muddle the term “erof.” She persistently insisted that Sora claim responsibility, to which he furiously rebutted, “Whaaat?! Sure, I plotted to transform one erof’s life—that much I’ll admit! However!!”

This time, it was Sora who audibly thrust his finger at the map as he pointed to an Elf.

“For the whole race to go erof means they had it in them all along, right?!”

“Ng—gh!”

“Yeahhh, I thought Fiel looked oddly self-satisfied! Now I know— underneath that smiling exterior lies someone really kinky!!

Oh, man, I can see it now: Fiel and

Chlammy in hot yuri escapades!!”

Sora hollered but then had a thought.

...Maybe all the races are like that, really. Look at Jibril: She might have a unique way of expressing it, but the inclination seems to be there. And you know what they say—sadism and masochism are two sides of the same coin. When you look at all these sadists smashing up the world, damn, there are some seriously perverted— “...Brother... The orcs’ numbers, keep falling... They’re gonna go, extinct!”

While Sora was lost in his own little world, the battle continued. Demonia were getting steadily destroyed as orcs were abducted one after another— “...Hngh, what is this...?!”

Sora hung his head in deep lamentation.

“Have they no respect for the balance of ecosystems? How indistinguishable will they prove themselves from the fools in our old world...? Damn it, how could they...? Just because the orcs are built for rapid reproduction and active nights, what kind of excuse is that to take everything they have...?! Are these the actions of an intelligent life-form?!”

“Do you even remember that this is all your doing in the first place?!”

And just when he thought he’d spotted a ray of hope in his erotic theory... Ah well. Now his hopes were being crushed, along with an entire race... So this is war... How brutal. Sora hung his head in disillusionment, but— “...Oh.”

Shiro’s tiny utterance made Sora and Steph lift their faces.

Then...the three of them were dumbstruck.

They saw everything transpire in just under an hour, or what had taken over three years in-game. Their mere meddling had set off something larger: Total, full-scale war between Demonia and Elf. The latter’s continued overhunting of the orcs spurred Demonia’s creator, the Demon Lord, to intervene. The Elves sustained massive losses in the all-out counteroffensive and were forced to mount a strategic withdrawal. Then they deployed Áka Si Anse, the weapon of their creator, and

annihilated the Demon Lord. The war seemed over on that front—until reinforcements from the Dwarves came to Demonia’s aid. They panicked at the sight of the Phantasma killer, along with several Phantasmas themselves. The front only grew from there. The Elves were once more pushed back, but other forces saw the Dwarves as a threat. Certain Dragonias, along with the Fairies, melded with the Elven contingent—and the flames of war spread, snowballing as they left massive casualties in their wake... Utter pandemonium, it seemed... Never to end.

But then suddenly, without warning, it all came to a close. A light descended out of nowhere upon both armies, passing through them very much like some sort of disaster. The indiscriminate onslaught of the Flügel wiped out the main forces of both sides.

..... With that, the feed cut out, presumably because the Scout had vanished in the blast. Not even sixty minutes had passed, yet the spectacle had been so grisly, the three of them could only stare into space, dazed. Sora nodded to himself several times... Mm-hmm, mm- hmm... “...Shiro, I think we should blame it all on Jibril. Agreed?”

“...Nooo objections, here...”

“All right, that concludes the show! Court adjourned, meeting’s over! Now, let’s get back in the game!”

“...Yeaahh!”

The two of them nodded as if nothing had happened, instead laying the blame for the calamity they’d caused squarely with Jibril.

“Anyone, is anyone here?! The war criminals are escaping! Is there no justice?!”

Steph alone spoke up for what was right as the brother-and- sister war criminals calmly resumed writing commands.

However.

“Mmmngh... Shiro, we’re cutting it closer than I expected. Time to crank it up.”

“...Mm...!”

Both Sora and Shiro got back to business furiously dashing out orders, their expressions mixed.

“Soraaa? Soooraaa? If you’re going to say, ‘Just as planned,’ now would be the time!” Steph didn’t seem keen on letting them off the hook, as she pressed further. “If you act now, I’ll even throw in a belly laugh at you!”

This Task had been a mistake to begin with, what with having to fight with Jibril for their lives. Then they’d made the misstep with the erofus that had led, through some arcane process, to this massive conflagration. Steph intended to hold them accountable for every one of their missteps, and even Sora was starting to sweat.

“Mm, mmm, well... Yeah, I guess it’s not really just as planned, very much, at all... Yeah.”

He had to admit it; there was no use in denying. He averted his gaze. It wasn’t just Sora who felt this way—even Shiro seemed to have mixed feelings.

“—But it is as expected. And our expectations weren’t too great.”

“...Anyway, if Jibril wants, to beat us...this is, her only choice...”

Steph must have noticed the impatience in their faces.

“.....”

She decided to keep quiet and stare at them a little longer.

Sora humored her, his pen still busy. “...You know how I said...we could beat this game with our eyes closed?”

If they just wanted to win—just wanted to beat Jibril—they wouldn’t have to bluff. It’d be a “piece of cake.” Even easy-peasy games have their limits. In particular — “—Seriously, we could beat this game with our eyes closed.”

“...Mm. ’Cos...if we just wanted, to win...”

If that was all—if they just went along with sacrificing someone— “We wouldn’t have to do anything. That alone would lead to Jibril’s defeat.”

Yes, Jibril’s actions—like that indiscriminate slaughter she’d engaged in, which proved she knew about

Immanity, about Sora and Shiro—all led to that result, to that fate.

“...That’s why we gotta hurry. Go mail this.”

Sora’s expression seemed to have lost all composure, and it urged Steph on as she dashed off once again to mail the commands.

It had been twenty-two hours since the start of the game with Sora and Shiro. The map showed the date to be 112 BT. Almost seventy-two years had already elapsed within the game.

Having finished her business on the continent of Lucia, Jibril went east, to the sky above the continent of Ariela. The office of Avant Heim, a living Phantasma, served as Jibril’s Capital. She gracefully, but quickly and precisely, wrote out a command and suddenly— “.....”

—swiped the map to project the outside world into midair.

The Flügel were free to move throughout all the planet’s lands, whenever and wherever they chose. Their all-encompassing vision had revealed the world map without leaving a speck of black.

Everything...indeed, of the world of the Great War, which she held so dear. The sight, filled with death and destruction, should have made her heart race, yet her expression was mixed as she gazed at it.

Back when they’d started the sugoroku game with Old Deus, Sora had provoked her: “It’s not like she would even think of presuming to get ahead of me, her dear, dear, master, right?”

He’d implied, You’re gonna betray me, right? and If you’re gonna do it, make sure you do it right, okay? Then, when she wrote her Tasks, it had occurred to her: If the contents of the spaces were molded to the Task’s image by the power of the Old Deus, she could use that power to challenge her masters in a game that reproduced the Great War.

Jibril had applauded herself when she’d come up with the Task and written it down. How had someone so overwhelmingly weak defeated someone overwhelmingly strong—and

changed the world?

Jibril would give it her all, and if she was defeated... She looked forward to the yet-unknown answer, still undecided...like never before. Yes, it should have been the most thrilling game ever... Looking at the scene that carried that anticipation, Jibril instead— “I have no right to complain after ruining it myself...”

—swallowed the words that escaped her lips. She looked back at the situation projected on the map and got back to work.

All those Elves and Dwarves who’d kindly gathered on Lucia... All that foolish rabble... What sitting ducks they’d been. They’d saved her quite a bit of time. She checked that the indiscriminate onslaught she’d ordered had wiped them all out. Without their Demon Lord, Demonias was as good as gone. Elf, Dwarf, and Fairy, too, had lost all their major forces. Moreover, Jibril had slain eighteen Phantasmas and seventy-eight Dragonias. Quite respectable results however you looked at it.

They’d taken on just about every single race as almost an afterthought, and still Jibril’s Flügel piled up the achievements. But there were no tactics involved; there was no strategy. Just as in the old Great War, they’d done exactly what the strong side does and trampled all underfoot. Besides, her allies were not just the Flügel, but also Artosh and his messenger, Avant Heim. Their power existed on an entirely different plane. Should they swarm in numbers, even destroying an Old Deus would be a cinch. Things could have been this easy back in the old Great War if they hadn’t just been playing around, if they’d only given their full effort... Or so it seemed to Jibril as she let out a sigh of something not quite dismay or despair.

Indeed... This wasn’t meant to be play, any of it. Not that she had the time—or even the right—to play. Sora and Shiro; her masters; “ ”. She had to beat them, no matter what it took.

And so Jibril went on inscribing commands in a methodical, businesslike fashion.



“—To lose, after all this, would be out of the question...”

Sora and Shiro could just write a letter containing a single command—“resign” or “die”—and the game would be over. But they didn’t. Though she’d threatened them, they were taking her up on her game. The very least Jibril could do was to take this seriously. She had to win. If anything, that was her duty, and as she wrote, she considered.

Immanity. Her masters were outstandingly talented individuals, of that much she was well aware. But however talented they might be, there was only one move they could conceivably make with such a large gap in military strength: Pull off perfect maneuvers in secret, manipulate the strings from behind. That was all. Imagining it, Jibril thought that sounded just like her masters, and she became half-certain. Immanity—a race no one had noticed during the War, to an improbable extent. This must have been the reason, the true meaning.

...What came next? What came last? There were several things she still didn’t know. The final move, how they’d ended the War, and what Ex Machina had to do with it— But in any case— “...It is quite clear what I must do, then...”

Yes—she had to exterminate all the other races. If there were no other races to use, her masters would have no room to maneuver, and even they would have no option but to resign. That’s what Jibril thought, but then... “Oh my...? It seems something has changed...”

The words slipped out when she sensed movement across the map illuminated by the Flügel units—the situation had begun to shift. Races who to that point had acted disparately, on their own agendas, were beginning to coordinate.

And with clear hostility toward Jibril and the Flügel.

“Well, I suppose they would... Yes, yes... It’s quite understandable...”

Jibril gave a subtle smile and sped up

her writing. This game, the Great War, was her home turf. So her masters were indeed coming for her, face-to-face—!!

She didn’t want to lose... She needed to win. But if she were to bring to bear all her deadly force—and yet be defeated... Yes... Jibril’s smile was full of emotion as she thought about the moment the world changed, which she hadn’t been able to see, and the moment the world would change, which she’d never see.

If, with one last indulgence...she could observe it at the end— then—then... “Then will that really be enough...Jibril...?”

Jibril found herself wondering.

She feared losing her memory. If she was going to be so afraid, she’d prefer to die. Jibril prayed she would die by her masters’ hands as she viewed the future those same hands wove. That was how she felt. But...this game was supposed to have been the most exciting of all... ..But it was so... Though she knew perfectly well how little she deserved to say it, still she thought it: How could her final game be so...boring?

Is this really...? Am I really enough...Masters?

She looked down, completely out of sorts, then wiped the tears from her command and kept writing.

Then a roar shook heaven and earth.

“—Mmhyaaghaaah?! What in the worrrrrld?!”

It had been fifty-one hours, forty-three minutes since the start of the game. The map showed the date to be 14 BT. Steph had been roused after having fallen asleep for about four hours.

“Oh. You’re awake? It’s okay. Our Capital from before we moved blew up again, that’s all.”

She’d been woken by an impact that had reduced the site of their Capital as of a few moments ago to a crater, apparently.

Steph looked as if she was about to ask just what part of that was okay, but— “Weak sauce, man... Forty-seven hours is as long as you can go?”

“...Anyone who sleeps...for more than five minutes, during a game...lacks discipline.”

Sora and Shiro made this pronouncement without so much as a glance or pause.

“A n-normal person sleeps once a day! Also—” Steph was usually pretty good at pulling all-nighters, but right now she was only 3.6 years old. “If you make me run around like that, I’ll pass out.”

Wait, what is this?!” She shrieked at the mass of paper covering the floor and then added apologetically, “...U-uh... I-if you’d only woken me, I’d have done my best to—”

Steph seemed to think she had backed up the flow of orders, but Sora and Shiro, still scribbling away, answered cheerfully.

“Ohhh, those. They’re not going in now.”

“...Half of them...are my...equations...”

“...W-well... Then what are you doing...?” Steph asked gingerly.

The two siblings neglected to pause for even a moment to answer.

But— “Mmm, yeah. I guess you’d call this game Si\*City.”

“...I’m playing...Harvest M\*on...”

“—Pardon? Wait... The map— When did...?”

Instead of answering, they gestured toward the map—the field map that showed the whole world. Yes, it displayed the entire world with abnormal clarity. They tapped on a Scout to project its vision in midair.

The equatorial region of central Ariela. It would have been a tropical region were the sky not closed off by ash, but in this world bereft of the sun’s rays, it was frozen over just like everywhere else.

Still... “Wha...? What is this...?”

There stood a City so grand, Steph couldn’t contain her amazement. It was built of stone and ancient concrete; it even engaged in Agriculture. The ones building and plowing throughout this city so reminiscent of the Roman Empire were— “H-how did you—? You made

the Werebeasts your allies while I slept?!"

Yes. Steph gasped in astonishment to see Werebeast units doing the work. Sora replied, still not missing a beat.

"We can't make them allies...but there are a few races we can get to effectively cooperate with us."

Indeed, because it could be problematic if certain races found out about their existence. So, Sora said as he scratched his head with an ineffable sense of bashfulness: "...See, we just helped them a little... I mean, you gotta feel sorry for them."

"Since when do you—? Oh. So what's your scheme this time?"

Steph eyed Sora skeptically, having apparently lost interest in appealing to his humanity. He answered in a bit of a huff.

"What's your problem? Don't you appreciate that we saved them from being destroyed by the mean old Elves' heartless revenge?"

"I highly doubt there's anything meaner than you, the cause of that heartless revenge!!"

It had been 118 years of game time since the incident where they'd mistaken the Werebeasts for orcs and gotten them to kidnap an Elf. Yet even now, the Werebeasts were still facing occasional reprisals from the Elves, and as a consequence, they'd been deprived of their villages and food supplies. Thanks to Sora's anonymous instigation, the Werebeasts were now on the brink of extinction. In short—It's all your fault, you bastard. Steph's blame was well-placed, but now she continued as if pained.

"B-besides... If you have so much food, shouldn't you be giving it to Immanity—?"

The Immanity units now numbered over 450,000 strong. They held nine cities on the continent of Lucia alone and spread out across every other continent. Meanwhile, it was hard to deny that, given the population, food was in short supply. But— Sora turned, stopping his pen for the first time.

"So you're saying we've gotta sacrifice someone—'cos that's the only way?"

".....!"

"That's what everyone's been telling themselves, and look where that got us: war."

Steph hung her head, not making a single retaliatory sound. If anything, Sora was the last person she wanted to hear that from... Steph glared at him, ready to protest, but Sora ignored her and tapped the map before continuing.

"A good deed is never lost. To give is to receive... Observe!"

He projected another unit's field of vision and announced that this was a step toward peace.

"After one hundred seventy years of trial and error! At last, on this doomed world—"

Yes, a feat that had required over a century.

"With the use of vermiculite and chemical fertilizer!"

"...Through hydroponics... We've succeeded, in large-scale...agriculture...!"

Steph gasped in amazement as Sora and Shiro boasted. It was only natural. After all, it really was, without a shadow of a doubt, an epic feat.

Here they'd been on a frozen land, beneath an ash-covered sky that let barely any sunshine through. The ground had a bit of heat from the blazing salvo of war, but otherwise, the planet was nearly frozen solid. Practically speaking, the soil was useless; almost all the potential farmland they might have been able to use was polluted by the ash of death. Under these conditions, they'd relied on the information in their tablet computer to dedicate a full century to nothing but trial and error. They'd used ameliorated soil and chemical fertilizer and located land free of the falling ash. With the application of hydroponics (a concept as shut-ins they'd never even heard before), they'd succeeded.

"But the only ones who can manufacture and supply vermiculite and chemical fertilizer are Immanity!"

No. Strictly speaking, even Immanity didn't know how to manufacture them.

Sora and Shiro gave the orders and thereafter enforced confidentiality by consistently wiping units' memories of the process—so!

"We have the Werebeasts work for their sustenance, and provide us with food—at rock-bottom prices!"

After all, they were the ones providing the Werebeasts with the fundamental technology. The Werebeasts had neither right nor ability to refuse.

"Thus! We have established logistics and economy. This is fair trade!"

"...It's win-win...a friendly relationship...based, on capitalism..."

"Now, don't hold back. Extol us to your heart's content! In this shitty, war-torn world, we have used capitalism to build economic prosperity! Sing our praises! This is a triumph for civilization. This is peace!"

Sora loudly lauded himself while Shiro looked on proudly, but... ..After thinking carefully on it for several seconds, Steph objected.

"That's not cooperation, that's oppression!!"

Steph's expression seemed to indicate she'd almost been tricked, but Sora just heaved a gloomy sigh.

"Yeeesh, so you don't even get the basics of capitalism? ...Our prime minister would be so ashamed."

Sora shook his head and thought, Oppression? Yes, of course... That it was. The foundation of capitalism, however, is to pretend not to see such things!

But let them say what they like. Sora sneered. Regardless, this was peace—an unshakable fact!

"There is one drive that no living thing can defy. Do you know what it is?"

It was— "Hun,ger...!"

" !"

Steph reacted in shock as Sora and Shiro peered at the world map together.

"Clutching our ultimate weapons—our stomachs—we shall take on the world!!"

"...He, who controls food...controls...the world...!"

"If they're hungry, they'll have no choice but to bargain with us. But we're the ones with the initiative." The glint in Sora's eyes was virile and powerful, like that of a supreme ruler. ...Glrgh.

The grumble in Shiro's tummy was cute and short-lived, like a small animal. .... A moment's silence passed, and Steph sighed before chiming in.

"...You can be frank with me... I'll understand how you feel..."

"—We're so hungry, we can't take it anymore!"

Sora slammed the table and howled, his attitude totally shifted by Steph's words. "It's been fifty-one hours! We can go without sleep, sure, but we're goddamn starving!"

".....I want...Sp\*Ohs...instant spaghetti... Drool..." Even Shiro was slurping her drool, following something invisible with her eyes.

"...I might as well say it, but you'll be just fine. This game, it's an illusion."

"So?! Maybe if we drew a picture of some mochi, that might still taste good!"

"...We'd at least...taste, the paper, and...paints... Drool."

Steph stood up to the intimidation of their ravenous eyes: "Um... One second for us is eight hours in the game, isn't it?"

Perhaps the four hours of deep sleep had refreshed her mind.

She pointed out a fact far beyond Sora and Shiro's ability—no— willingness to grasp.

"If it takes five seconds to eat something...it'll spoil, you know?"

.

It felt like the already-frozen world grew even colder. They stiffened for several full seconds as if facing reality was a laborious task itself— "...All right. Forget it, then... Some free time just opened up in our schedule."

"...Brother... Can I sleep, just...five minutes?"

"Go for it. Oh, drop these commands around here in the box.

Wake me in five minutes, all right...?"

Steph was in no position to argue after having just slept four hours and did as she was told.

She went back and forth, unable to carry all the commands at once. Lulled by her footsteps, Sora mumbled, almost to himself, "...But, man... If this is really what happened in the past..."

Rolling over with Shiro in his arms, Sora stared into space where the map was projected. He let out a chuckle full of mixed emotions at the world it showed.

"Those humans did a nice job surviving... Tough little bastards."

He thought back to all the postapocalyptic games where humans managed to survive in their world. Indeed...if they could endure this hell, then nuclear winter was nothing to worry about.

Sora's muttering seemed to remind Steph of something, and she paused from stuffing commands in the mailbox.

"Come to think of it, didn't Jibril say Immanity had slain a god or something?"

Yes. They hadn't just survived. Jibril had for sure said as much: Excluding the gods themselves, only two races had achieved decide: the Flügel and the Ex Machinas, who had slain their lord, Artosh.

But she'd implied that it had been Immanity who'd used Ex Machina to slay him.

And if the world had changed because of that decide, the implication was that Immanity had ended the War...

"...What did she mean...?"

A grand tale. An epic poem hidden within Immanity. This is what Jibril had hinted at. Steph timidly inquired what Jibril had meant, but Sora and Shiro grinned boldly... "Who knows? It's a mystery!"

"...Jibril was just...half-asleep..."

Steph's shoulders slumped at how confidently they'd answered.

"Uh, wait, but didn't you say it would be easy to win the War?!"

That was definitely what Sora had said. But— "That's talking about a game. You think you can win a real war using gaming strategies?"

Sora stood and looked back at the projected map. He and Shiro carried their knowledge from their old world, their knowledge from the future of this world, and their knowledge of the Ixseeds. Even so, what they'd been able to accomplish with all that was extremely limited, as evidenced here.

It had been fifty-three hours since the start of the game. In- game, about 177 years had passed. It was true they'd done a pretty good job under the circumstances. But had this been reality, their life spans would long since have run out, and they'd be returning to dust by now. But more than anything, the greatest issue was— "All war-themed abstract games, from RTS games to chess and shogi, make one extremely fundamental yet implausible assumption.

Do you know what it is?"

"...Ummm... That you can see it all top-down or that your subjects are faithful to your orders?"

Steph racked her brains and offered up all she could.

But too bad. She was wrong.

"It's that there are clear victory conditions—that it is definitely going to end."

That's why Sora had appraised the humans...as tough little bastards. Because Immanity must have realized something.

"This Great War can't end by anyone's hands."

"...Huh...?"

Sora delivered his conclusion without regard to Steph's dumbfounded expression. This war couldn't conceivably end.

Immanity must have realized this, and still they'd tried to survive.

And they had survived... No amount of praise sufficiently covered this.

"Using another race to end the War? Don't be stupid..."

Sora was sure the sky would fall before such a thing happened.

"B-but you could use another race, and...do it if you felt like it, couldn't you?!"

Sora and Shiro looked at each other and smirked at Steph's plea.

No. It wasn't a question of whether they could. Most importantly, to begin with— "If it was Immanity who ended the war, wouldn't the One True God be Immanity?"

"Aghhh....."

Yes, from the jump, the winner of the Great War...was Tet. And if they were talking about the old War—the real War— "Besides... That shit's not even worth doing. There's no point."

Were this not a game, but a real war— "If you kill the strongest enemy, you're just next on the chopping block. There's no end."

Indeed... Games and real life are different, as they say. Sora elaborated as if mocking the smart-asses who smugly stated the obvious.

"Okay then, let's go ahead and assume Jibril's 'misunderstanding' is true, for argument's sake."

Suppose that somehow Immanity had used the Ex Machinas and managed to steer the course of the war perfectly. No one would have nearly enough lives to do this, but let's say they still managed to stay on the tightrope... "Say they worked their asses off and worked some more and somehow managed to slay a god... Then what?" Sora's eyes grew dark, and he posed a question to Steph, who seemed puzzled: "...Then what happens next?" "Ah..."

Just what would this feat change?

Absolutely nothing.

The ones killed next would be Ex Machina, or Immanity, who held them by the reins. Then, whoever killed them would be killed, and so on, and on...to eternity. It would continue until, at last, only one was left standing...or until no one was left. Just as in their old world.

"—So! You get the picture. My fine-tuned game senses declare it so!!"

Sora burst out laughing, his eyes no longer dark. He flopped onto the

ground and summed it all up.

"Screw Immanity. No one can end this damn War."

Jibril had said this was a simulation of the Great War—but it wasn't at all. At this rate, there were only two options: for it to stay unresolved eternally or for only one race to remain.

"And Jibril says she wants to see what we would have done?!"

How you would behave? she'd murmured. Sora and Shiro smiled in resignation and announced their answer.

"In a War like this, we'd only have one option: to keep running together to the end of the universe!"

"...Nod, nod."

"...Well, how should I say this?" Steph looked disgusted—no, defeated.

"Don't you feel like, 'I shall be the one to save this world!' or—"

"Ummm, hell no!"

"...Screwwww...the world..."

"You wouldn't, right? ...I expected as much... Sigh..." Steph was at a loss before their enthusiastic smiles.

"This game's for chumps. If someone out there wants to play, they can knock themselves out."

If the world's gonna end, then let it end. We'll do what we're gonna do. Besides, it's gonna end anyway. So what's anyone got to complain about if it happens now? Sora gloomily recalled his old thoughts. Steph, however, was still puzzled.

"But...the War did end, and the One True God—"

"Yeah. Exactly. That's why..."

If, despite all this, the old War had ended...and if this game version of the War would never end... "There's got to be something that Jibril overlooked."

"...Something...? Like what?"

But Sora closed his eyes and didn't answer. He couldn't.

All he could say was that this couldn't be historically accurate.

Because this game didn't have it, that thing they'd searched desperately for in their old world and never found.

That thing this board had and Earth

didn't. That they needed to go beyond the convention of the world, which permitted only sacrifice upon sacrifice.

The groundwork.

"I dunno... But hey, if you try thinking of it like a game..."

So frivolously, Sora just...made something up.

"Maybe there was some kind of convenient flag, where if you fulfill certain conditions you win?"

You know, like a science victory or diplomatic victory in Civ. As Sora spoke, his thoughts began dozing...

Plink—like a drop of water—

"...Brother, was it...Ex Machina, who slayed the Flügel's god...Artosh?"

Shiro's voice spilled in. "Yeah, I guess," replied Sora, his mind almost in a trance.

Ixseed Rank Ten...Ex Machina... A race of machines that has become extremely scarce...right?

".....In, that case... Why..."

Another drop penetrated Sora's sluggish thoughts.

"...hasn't Ex Machina...perished...?"

Plink .

"Ngwhuhhhh?! Wh-what is it nooow?!"

Steph screeched as Sora hopped onto the table like a spring.

But he had no time to respond, instead madly manipulating the map, zooming in and out. He pored through all the data, every nook and cranny—and muttered: "...There are sixteen..."

Yes, he'd checked the races moving along the map—the number of races the units belonged to. There were sixteen—"sixteen seeds."

There were no unknown races—!!

Look at this war... No, this series of cataclysms. This was a conflict that couldn't end until either all the races perished or only one was left. That being the case, it would be strange if not one of them had gone extinct. So could it be—could it be, could it be, could it be—?

"The War ended without a single race being destroyed— For real?!"

Bullshit. How the hell—? thought Sora. Oh. Oh, I get it. Shiro met his gaze and gently nodded.

According to Jibril, Ex Machina had slain Artosh. And would the Flügel lose the will to fight after their lord was slain? Yeah, right.

Now, that was bullshit. Think of Jibril and Azril... Would they go and cry themselves to sleep? No way. The only way they'd lose their will to fight, would be after exacting their revenge. That is—destroying every last one of those machines—!!

Okay, so the Ex Machinas had slain Artosh. Were they too strong for the Flügel to claim vengeance? Even so—the Flügel would've gone down trying, wouldn't they—?!

If neither Flügel nor Ex Machina had perished... That was it.

...Yes, indeed, only one gamelike scenario remained: Subsequent to Artosh's murder but either side able to be destroyed—in that brief interval—the Great War had ended abruptly. It must have.

"...Ha-ha... Are you friggin' serious? There was a flag that convenient?"

Despite Sora's grumbling, he was half-sure there had indeed been such a thing. Of course, neither Sora nor Shiro had any way of knowing what it was. Given that it wasn't represented in this game, probably Jibril didn't, either. But that something must have to do with the "throne of the One True God." And that something must then have tied into Tet, the One True God.

—What the God of Play showed when he gave the Ten Covenants.

—What this board had and that Earth lacked.

That they needed to go beyond the world's conventions, which provided only for sacrifice upon sacrifice... — That groundwork had been laid by someone... "...Brother... When you...play me, in an RTS...," Shiro said to her half-dazed brother, "...and can't, defeat me...you do that...a lot."

Immanity had survived this hellish war, a war that would send aliens scurrying barefoot back to their mother planet...and yet.

If they couldn't fight, they wouldn't.

If they couldn't kill, they wouldn't.

They'd use another means to win.

If Immanity still couldn't win, they'd leave it to whoever was next.

They'd pass it on...until, at last, someone stood victorious.

The fools who'd resorted to such a mess as their go-to tactic— "...Hey. Are you serious, Tet? D00d—who gave you that?"

—they were the ones who'd made up their minds that this hell—the real War—was a game. And they'd win it... ...with zero sacrifices.

"You're saying there was an Immanity gamer who was just one step away...? Who the hell are we talking about here?"

That gamer had put his or her faith in a probability infinitely approaching zero—but wasn't zero. Everything had to be put on the line then left to whoever came next... Even so, there'd be no choice but to try. Surely, such extreme yet lovable fools— Sora looked down and smiled bitterly at his "I PPL" shirt.

"...My God... Shit..."

Yes, truly—those fools were exactly the kind Sora admired, he muttered regretfully. The kind like Steph's grandfather, the previous king, or that nameless d00d. That was the sort, but...yeah... Sora turned his gaze to the map projection.

"There's no way my life could ever be as cool as you guys'..."

Shiro and Steph followed Sora's gaze. The map showed the date 7 BT. They saw masses of units, a front woven of the forces of any number of races. Jibril's Capital, Avant Heim, was under siege by these units' saturation attack. One by one, the display showed units dropping off with each passing second...on the Flügel side.

"Wha—wh-what's happening? Why is Jibril losing?!"

Steph was the only one who struggled to grasp it. She was answered by Sora's and Shiro's grim smiles.

"...This is what happens...when we don't do anything. Jibril's self-ruin."

Sora and Shiro had indeed been under Jibril's watchful eye. Had this been the real War, that alone should have spelled checkmate.

However, if Jibril was aware of them and focused on getting them to "Abstain"—that is, if she wasn't out to kill them by capturing their Capital—and if, in addition, she assumed that Immanity had won the War using Ex Machina, then it was clear: She'd think Sora and Shiro would exploit the other races. Consequently, she'd use the most reliable means available to prevent that from happening—by wiping out all the other races. However... "...No matter how strong you are, you'll stir up this much hate, y'know..."

This was symptom number one of a strategy game n00b. A n00b would cheese. A n00b would make too many enemies.

And a n00b would get ganked... But.

"...W-won't Jibril die, then...?"

Yes, at this rate, her Capital would fall. She'd die; game over.

Jibril was the one who'd pushed them into a game of life or death.

Steph didn't know whether she should defend her.

"Huhhh? You think we're gonna play right into her hands?"

"...What do you, think...we've, done all this...for...?"

All she did was get herself laughed at.

"Beat the game with our eyes closed? Sorry, we're not into that casual shit."

"...We're gonna impose, even more brutal...restrictions...on ourselves!"

Sora sat down, overjoyed, albeit drenched in a cold sweat.

"Shiro, we are who we are. Let's be what we are, lame—and break a taboo."

Yes, if their lives could never be cool, then they'd do what they could do. They'd go all the way, do it right, and follow through with being lame— So he declared.

A taboo in the online games of their old world. Even by the most generous and magnanimous interpretation, it

meant defeat— or worse. The most childish and scrubby play that would even make a cheater plead, Don't lump me in with that! In other words—  
“...Ready, Shiro? This'll be our — Blank's—first loss.”

Sora made a point to check, but Shiro showed there was no need.

“...If it's harder, than winning...”

She beamed and nodded.

“...and it's fun...I'll...just...follow you.”

Sora, too, flashed a delighted grin and scribbled a command.

“Then here we go—the lamest shit of all: We're gonna ragequit!!”

He entrusted the command to Steph, who deposited it into the box. Sora's orders flew out to the units as he laughed.

“It's our chance to lose! Might as well live it up!”

His laugh echoed as he gave the order to move the Capital one last time.

Jibril had been in the Chamber of Restoration when the War had ended, so she knew the details only through hearsay. But what she'd heard had been broadly consistent with the map she saw— which had revealed the entire world until a few hours ago.

The Flügel units had been nearly decimated, whittled down to a mere handful. It was just them, Avant Heim, and Artosh. She could still just barely see something near the Capital on the rapidly darkening map: the combined forces of the Elven and Dwarven Alliances battling against a united front.

That front was the Union of the two key races, along with Dragonia and Phantasma, respectively. Fairy and Demonica, too, had joined in and hadn't escalated to an all-out collision. Áka Si Anse and the E-bomb had been deployed strategically, and the Flügel units were steadily weakened. Though there might have been some small differences, the scenario conformed largely to history, down to the date shown on the map.

November 9, the year 2 BT. It looked as if the end of this War would fall on that same historical date.

“...Splendid work, my masters...”

Jibril lowered her face and ceased scratching out commands.

Instead, she shifted her pen to the journal she produced.

She wanted to win, whatever it took. She'd been willing to threaten them, urge them to resign, and if that wasn't enough to make them accept defeat, she'd force their surrender. Her masters had greeted such vulgar tactics with a taunt, Come at us. They'd taken her head-on and just straight-up—beaten her. And so Jibril, satisfied...set down her final journal entry. She wrote confidently how the ones who had ended the War...had been Immanity after all.

The possibility—the hope—she had seen in her masters had indeed proven true. Now that she had witnessed and recorded this, she had nothing left to... regret ?

“.....Truly, to the bitter end...”

But then Jibril realized, albeit reluctantly. It was true her masters would win and she would lose...but what about after that—?

“...I remain terribly unworthy of you, my masters...”

This wouldn't end the War. She'd overlooked something.

Unable even to record her final hope, Jibril, disgusted with herself, looked at the ceiling.

“...Masters, how did the world change?”

Jibril, finally about to disappear without ever coming to know the past, asked those two who wove the future. But all she heard... At the end of the earth, at the peak of a giant chess piece, the One True God who reigned over all the world—Tet—was the only soul to hear it all.

Some think the world is simple, easily understood by a child.

Some think the world is complex, eternally denying meaning.

Some think the world has not changed and never will.

And some think the world keeps changing and is about to change again.

Both the past and the present—  
“Nothing's changed! ...Did Tet...lie to me, please?”

There was a beast who possessed a youthful sensitivity—and, therefore, an aversion to killing—wailing in sorrow.

—Indeed. Naught hath changed, and naught will change.

There was a god who answered in resignation; a young girl who doubted everything, who no longer believed even in herself.

There was a pair of wings, and there were people— Which held the truth? Could it be—?

Tet's face stretched into a wide grin. He watched as one of them asked all sorts of questions and the other answered.

There were two who used to think the world had not changed and never would.

Now these two thought the world would keep changing and was about to change again.

That day, way back then—those two had tried to change it.

And their successors were answering, the two who would fulfill their will...

“—How'd the world change, huh?  
...Sorry, but we've got no answer.”

The voice sounded from behind Jibril. Bewildered, she turned.

In Jibril's Capital—in the Avant Heim executive office, in the hall enshrouded by silence—they'd suddenly appeared.

“Well, all right. We'll show you how the world changed. I mean—”

They'd brought along their map, spread across a table, as well as their mailbox.

“—we'll show you what kind of world it changed into, so let us off the hook with that.”

Two children, a pair in black and white, were at a table, writing their commands.

“Eh-heh... Just dropped by!”

“...We, missed you... Hee-hee, nyah!”

Sora and Shiro stood on their chairs, blushing and fidgeting in fake theatrics.

“—Wha...? Huh?! Wh—wh-wh-where are we—? Wait... Jibril?!”

Steph was there, too, looking every bit as baffled as Jibril.

Speechless, Jibril's thoughts raced confusedly, but Sora and Shiro sneered.

"No one ever said you couldn't move your Capital into your opponent's, now did they?"

"...It was tough...distracting you...while we sent a Settler unit... V!"

Shiro formed a peace sign with her fingers. She and Sora looked like two kids who'd pulled off a prank, but... "So now, if the Capital falls, all four of us are gonna commit suicide together, aren't we?"

At their next words, Jibril— "You used our lives to threaten us. Of course we're gonna get you back."

—became distracted by the illusion of the blood she wasn't supposed to have pooling at her feet.

"Oh, heavens! I—I shall Abstain immediately, so please just go—"

"Thaaaat's what I've been saying! Why doesn't one of you just Abstain?!"

Steph wailed at Jibril, who'd sputtered a lie to convince them.

"For heaven's sake, Jibril! Certainly, you must realize!"

Steph thrust a finger at her, though Sora and Shiro were too busy to even answer with a smile... "Don't you realize that even if you lose your dice, you'll only drop out of the game, not die?!"

"Sheesh, get a load of this, Shiro. The one who didn't get it to begin with is acting all superior now."

"...She's, gotta be...the only one...besides the old fart...who didn't."

As beads of sweat ran down Steph's cheeks, and Sora and Shiro whispered about her behind her back.

"Whyyy did you make a rule like 'You kill yourself if you lose'?!"

.....Jibril suddenly decided to engage. She reconfigured all the spirits in her body, forced them under control up to her terminal nerves... "W-well— You see, ummm, ah-ha-haaa!"

...and struggled to...manufacture an awkward, comical grin.

"I just thought that if I wanted you to give me your best, I ought to make it so your life depended on it!"

Steph couldn't help but go limp and silent at Jibril's expression and tone.

"Is that so? Then we'll watch, so why don't you go and Abstain?"

"...Please go ahead... Don't mind...us."

Sora and Shiro just smiled back. They didn't even look two years old, but their beaming faces alone were enough to overpower Jibril.

"—You think you can pull a fast one on me...? Get real, man."

"...You can't even...fool me...with a lie, like that..."

"Huh? A—a lie? What is this lie?"

But Jibril hung her head and chuckled. They'd caught her after all.

"I see now...why you didn't...command me to resign."

"Well, yeah. After you gave us those glaring hints about whether you'd be the same if you were reborn and stuff."

The rebooting of her rite, the accompanying loss of memory, their various principles—even her masters could not conceivably have known of such things. Regardless, they had easily inferred from indirect evidence that, if she lost all her dice—even if the game ended—her memory would never return. This realization cowed Jibril once more. When would she learn better than to underestimate her masters?

"So neither of us can Abstain or achieve Victory—then let's get started!"

"To what...are you referring...?"

Though Jibril hung her head, Sora sauntered briskly toward her.

"What do you think? You're the one who wanted to see it, right?!"

Responding with the utmost joy, he passed her by—and laughed at himself.

Sheesh, he'd thought he was the world's ultimate idiot. But there's always someone greater, as they say. And so a god-tier idiot had breathed life into their dream of another world—and this world was the result.

Sora didn't know how the world had changed, but he did know what it'd changed into.

"...It's this."

When Sora spread his hands, he was showing—not the old War.

"In this game world, no one will die, nor will they be allowed to.

Not you, not anyone."

"...It's more...fun, that way, right...?"

Having skirted the stock-still Jibril, Sora and Shiro gently, so smoothly and casually, as if it were only natural and expected... ..grabbed Jibril's map and command sheets.

"Now, Jibril. Just to warn you, we're the ones losing this game."

"...I—I beg your pardon?"

Compiling a list of the units on Jibril's command sheets, Sora elaborated.

"The reason being that, from here on, we're gonna get our asses kicked—and ragequit."

Yes, ragequit. In other words... "When seventy-two hours pass—we'll run out of time and have to split. Shiro, how much time do we have?"

"...Sixteen hours, twenty-two minutes, forty-eight seconds... Approximately nineteen thousand six hundred fifty-six days in-game, fifty-three point eight five two...years."

Sora chuckled at her answer as he jotted down a command.

"We're facing a bunch of psychos who could run down Flügel at their peak. They have ultimate weapons of go-do-it-in-space caliber that put the Heavenly Smite to shame. Plus, even unarmed, they're already monsters. And we, mere humans, are gonna outrun them— for over half a century."

It was pointless to fight. It was effectively impossible to move their Capital now that they had Jibril in tow. And if their Capital was identified, they'd all be taking a fun trip together to the great beyond. On top of all this—they weren't allowed to win, apparently.

"Shiro, we're playing at the highest difficulty level ever on an über-impossible game that's designed for us

to fail. Whaddaya think?"

Even to this question, Shiro's answer for her brother was the same as always—one word.

"...Sweet...!"

"Right?! It's exciting, ain't it?!" Sora hollered as he approached Jibril's mailbox. "Maaan! I just can't stand that we gotta lose this game. God damn iiiiiiit!"

"I knew there was something wrong with you two! There's no way you could—"

Steph was the only one screaming as Jibril remained in a daze.

"Jibril. If you're enjoying all this, then how 'bout you give us a li'l something—two dice. "

Sora put the command in the mailbox, and boom—!

"—All right, here's where it gets real... Let's have some fun!!!"

Light and sound rocked the planet and drowned out Sora's and Steph's voices.

There was someone else who, like Sora and Shiro, thought the world kept changing and was about to change again. No—he believed it. He'd wished to believe it and had been waiting forever.

"...It'll change. You'll be the ones to keep changing it! Even today, at this very moment!!!"

For over six thousand years, he'd waited for this time, this day, this moment. Tet flapped his arms and legs—and took it all in. A world that had already been destroyed. A world that had long since ended. A convention long gone.

And the move that had bid it to rest in peace.

Yes, just as Sora deposited his command, Tet watched as everything before Avant Heim flew to dust, a world falling straight to its doom—and he let out a belly laugh.

CHAPTER 2 - HANDOVER Nestled away within a corner of the island of Kannagari, capital of the Eastern Union, was the Chinkai Tandai District. And in its reception chamber... A sinister, glittering apparition beyond description, which one might even call

vaguely human-shaped. Ino Hatsuse and his ghastly fluorescent muscles loomed atop the balcony. He was now a specter who had dropped out of the game, a stranded soul who glimmered, swaying in the wind. If one were to avoid direct eye contact with this strange phenomenon and look into the distance, a giant landmass could be seen swirling in the heavens. And behind him— "...For goodness' sake! What in the world is happening...?"

"Eheee, Chlammyyy, your short stature must come from your temperrr."

The black-haired Immanity Chlammy Zell clicking her tongue in annoyance, and Fiel Nirvalen the Elf goading her, apparently drunk.

They had pounced on the Shrine Maiden's absence to force a game on the Eastern Union, but now they were out of sorts.

"...What I want to know is how long this will go ooon. This is boooring," grumbled the Dhampir girl—actually, a boy who looked like a girl—Plum Stoker. Thanks to his intrusion, even if the Eastern Union won, they would have to offer an Ixseed sacrifice. Win or lose, the game could not end without one—for both the challenger and the challenged. But they all looked up at the same sky and murmured much the same complaints— !!! went another shock, a sound outside the range of hearing, spirits pulsating through heaven and earth. With it— — Poof.

"Again?" Ino sighed.

The Chinkai Tandai District reception chamber had lost all light and fallen into darkness. No, not just the CTD—the whole city, all of Kannagari, was enshrouded in a blackout.

The land spiraling into the sky was the Old Deus's game board.

These shocks had been shaking the Eastern Union over and over for two days, beyond all normal reckoning. Under these conditions, it was no wonder their games wouldn't work, as they relied on the power of the Shrine—the power of the Old Deus. Even streetlights and candles were extinguished by the massive spiritual

disturbance.

Fiel herself was disturbed as well.

"Ehhh-hehhh, I'm quite fiiine. Oh, how about I partake in some finger food? "

"...Hey... Fi. I'm not sure what you're trying to do, but..."

Fiel was holding Chlammy, grabbing her breasts. Chlammy continued in a slightly chilly tone.

"If you're saying these are small enough to hold in your fingers, I'll lose it!"

".....Hic, Chlammy was mean to me! Hic, sniff!"

"Whaaa?! You're seriously crying? Fi, Fi! You're way too drunk—"

Fiel, not only an Elf, but moreover a hexcaster, had an overwhelming magical aptitude that in this case might have worked to her disadvantage. The roiling flood of spirits had made her drunk with spirit sickness. No, that didn't even... "Chla-Chlammy, hic...doesn't, like me anymore, hic, eaaagh..."

"Th-that's not true! I'm sorr— Wait, why must I apologize?!"

Then suddenly, whoosh, Fiel's smile shone from the darkness: "Ohhh, Chlammyyy, I know you love me! You needn't speak! "

"Someone! Someone do something about her! Is there a cure?!"

Now Fiel was rubbing her face against Chlammy's. Nasty drunk.

"....."

What was happening was uncertain. But for Ino Hatsuse, it was a lifesaver. He considered silently as he looked up at the board presumably born of the Old Deus's power.

Each time the heavens roared, all of Kannagari experienced a blackout before the lights were eventually restored. Whenever this occurred, these crooks couldn't use the VR game they so desired. In fact, it must have been due to the flood of spirits blocking their rite.

Neither Plum nor Fiel were in any hurry to start the game, so— ...I can only hope that this situation will continue... Ino prayed for the Holy Shrine



Maiden's swift return. But— "D-Diplomatic Commissioner Hatsuse! Excuse me, but this is urgent!!"

A woman smashed through the door of the reception chamber.

She was a Werebeast woman with a squirrel's ears and tail, panting, out of breath... "First-Class Secretary Chitose Kanae... I thought I gave notice that I must decline all inquiries for a time?"

...Ino had a guilty look on his face as he admired her heaving, bulging melons. Chlammy shot her a lethal glare, but Chitose pressed on: "I—I am aware, sir! H-however, there is a guest who has insisted on being seen before you begin the game!"

·  
"...Huff."

At Chitose's report, Ino let out one short breath, and then: "Who the hell is it now, huh?! Which asshole's betrayed us now?!!"

The fluorescent meathead's booming voice was enough to send a tremor through the entire fifty-floor building. Chitose and Chlammy shrieked as Ino finally reached poltergeist status.

Oceand? Or Avant Heim?! Who cares? Why not just forget it all and kill them? was Ino's immediate thought—but no... ".....Wha...?"

It wasn't just Ino. It was Chlammy, the drunk Fiel...even Plum.

They all gaped at the figure putting down a heavy pack; their thoughts froze. Water spilled from the pack as she emerged messily— "Ta-daaaa! Where's my daaarling?! His beloved Laila has come all the way from deep beneath the sea to see him! Pun intended, of course."

—the queen of Siren, Laila Lorelei. She ignored the dazed assemblage and took in her surroundings as she spoke. "But just what is this? I've been in that knapsack for two days, and— Oh, I see, kinky."

The blackout should have taken out the infrastructure. Yet Laila had arrived despite all forms of transit, even elevators, being repeatedly paralyzed and restored. The group was speechless; what was the queen of

Siren doing here? No—never mind that—!! Ino screamed to himself, and he looked up—at the Old Deus's game board.

"—Impossible... Then what is that ?!"

It began with a pledge that took just shy of fifteen minutes of in-game time. In real time, though, it finished in less than a thirty-second of a second.

The Phantasma Avant Heim faced the Old Deus Artosh and the Flügel, together the most powerful faction in the world. Amidst the hail of the flame of the Union, his voice reverberated out of the blue.

"Once, I inquired of my brethren... Thus:"

That voice, which thundered across the entire planet, was neither in the tongue of Elf nor Dwarf. Rather, it was in the tongue of no one at all. Yet, strangely, everyone who heard it grasped its meaning immediately.

"Why were we able to survive this war?"

The product of Phantasma—it was the universal tongue.

"We lack superior physical prowess. We have neither magic at our disposal, nor do we possess any longevity. And yet, in spite of all this, we were able to survive this war—and why?"

The speaker was clearly someone other than Avant Heim, so they sought the source behind the words of the Phantasma— "I answered our brethren: 'It is because we are the weaklings.'"

—and the battlefield went silent.

"We, as powerless weaklings, devise ways to flee like cowards!!

We fools, so lacking in wisdom, hence learn the means to survive in subservience!! The methods and teachings we continue to amass, one after the other, are the wisdom that allows us to survive!!' ...Thus was mine answer."

The battlefield—strafed by weapons and magic from this direction and every other, crushing heaven and earth to dust—now went cold like an unlit furnace, with this voice alone resounding throughout the silence.

"...I now recall those words—with bitter shame."

Everyone foresaw it. Smelled it. Sensed it. Something would happen...

Something was about to happen—or could it be...?

"They were the ravings of a fool! A lack of imagination! But then, how could we have imagined this?! Surely, we failed to even entertain the thought! To put it simply—"

Yes—could be it be, they'd wondered? It was.

"—you peons were incompetent beyond belief."

It had already happened.

As if to prove it, a majestic shaft of light erupted to plunder heaven and earth of their horizon. A massive, unthinkable power had been launched—or released? All who had spirit corridor junction nerves could not help but understand.

There was no room for doubt. It was a demonstration that the god of war, the most powerful of the gods, the Old Deus Artosh— had been blown clean of his ether. What had happened—no, what was happening—lay beyond anyone's comprehension as the one who seemed to have slain Artosh continued.

"You are not fools! You lack any thought at all. You are not weaklings! You don't learn. 'Then what shall we call you?' I wondered... Even beasts possessing only instinct cannot bear droning on about their own wisdom. And so I pondered... And indeed, I decided to grant you a name."

Specifically: "You pitiful, meek—pigs."

Then once more, as if prompted by the voice, the light burst.

"I applaud you all for your hard work. It took some time giving you a name."

As Avant Heim fell to ruin, at last everyone understood. The ones who had vanquished the almighty Artosh, the Flügel, and Avant Heim had used them, opposed them. They introduced themselves as they heralded death.

"We who pledge to annihilate you...are Immanity."

Then came the last words from

tumbling Avant Heim before the reverberations of its impact ceased: "Come, pigs—dance. Dance in our palms. Dream of being able to one day escape."

The ensuing flashes crushed heaven and earth to dust, and then... The entire incident took less than two hours in-game. But to those watching— ".....Wha—...?"

—Sora, who had deposited the command, and the rest, glued to the map projected in the air, it was all but instantaneous, lasting less than a quarter of a second. They saw the Union that had faced Avant Heim perish completely, down to the last. Only Sora and Shiro understood they had been annihilated.

The Elves had used Áka Si Anse, the Dragonias their Far Cries, the Fairies their Sprite Tunes. The Dwarves had used the E-bomb, the Phantasmas their Arma Qualia, the Demonias their Bloodbornes, and so on... Every race in the confrontation, every unit, played its respective trump card. When all were played at once—everything returned to dust. The shattering force of the exchange and the ensuing collision took half the continent of Ariela along with it, thus leaving behind a storm of death—a whirlwind of dead spirits—over Avant Heim's corpse. It turned Sora, Shiro, and Jibril's Capital into a natural fortress that would turn away anything.

Just as planned. Sora and Shiro smirked as they watched.

"M-Masters... Just—what did you just do?!"

They'd incited friendly fire. That much should have been obvious, in which case, Jibril's shriek of consternation must have been asking, How'd you do it? The Union—the common front of the Elven and Dwarven Alliances. The two Alliances had indeed originally been enemies. But they were deadlocked, each possessing weapons of instant doom—mutually assured destruction. For them to engage would require a preemptive strike from one side. So how and from whom had Sora and Shiro incited a strike? That was Jibril's question.

"...We didn't do anything. It was...you, Jibril. Right?"

Sora answered ironically.

"The erofus were battling over their lust for orcs—and you interrupted them."

Yes, the conflict between Demonias and Elf had sparked the division of the world into two. It precipitated full-scale combat, a quagmire of attrition.

"...And it's not like their primary target was you—or Flügel."

Indeed, Jibril—the Flügel—had merely interrupted them. So Demonias and Elf temporarily joined forces to bring down the Flügel... "If nothing had gotten in their way, they'd have gotten back to it. Those two races were each other's original enemies."

Sora swiped his fingers over the map. "To begin with," he said, projecting the corpse of Avant Heim—the environs of their Capital— into the air.

A "death storm." Apparently, it was a sort of glowing blue whirlwind of dead spirits produced by a reaction within the black ash. In this case, the collision of forces had produced a fusion reaction among the dead spirits that thundered like clouds. Flashes of light like lightning, one after another, gouged the planet's crust.

...Stone-faced, Sora asked: "...So everyone possessed these crazy weapons that would freak out even the lowest circle of hell. If they were really gonna go all out— Just checking, but you Flügel would have something even crazier than that?"

Not that comparisons even mean anything at this point, he added to himself. Jibril answered: "...I believe that, with the combined power of Artosh and Flügel—that is, with the Godly Smite—we would be able to hold our own...just barely."

But would they? It was becoming more and more mysterious how this planet had managed to maintain its shape... Anyway, so Flügel also had held firepower capable of instantaneous doom. Then what if the Union had instead deployed their arms strategically and cornered Flügel before crushing them?

"They must have been biding their time—and thinking about what would happen after they took down Flügel."

That was a staple of war in the history of Sora and Shiro's old world. The warring parties didn't think about how they could win the current war, but rather its aftermath—how they would win the next.

Yes, after the strongest were laid low, it was a lottery for who would follow suit.

"Okay—but then suppose out of nowhere, Artosh and Avant Heim were defeated."

Both camps would be freed of their hypothetical enemy and left with power to spare. They'd both realize the following: "Someone had beat them to the punch and destroyed Flügel— a traitor."

"...And...it couldn't...possibly...be themselves, right...?"

Who struck first?

It didn't matter. It made no difference. Anyone could have fired the first shot. From the start, both sides had joined forces, anticipating betrayal. So one needed only give a veneer of evidence to their faith in doubt.

For example, what Sora'd done: One could use Jibril's map, Jibril's command sheets, and Jibril's mailbox to issue commands to two of Jibril's units— Avant Heim and Artosh. Just give those two a little message ordering them to kill themselves. Yes, in short— "— Ready? Fire!! ...That sorta thing. "

A message to all the morons that it was time for them to get back to killing one another.

"...Looking back to the root cause, I suppose this was all because of your erofu kink, yes?"

Steph seemed to have collected herself, as she cast an icy glare at the ringleaders of this disaster, Sora and Shiro, recalling their absurd motive.

"Heh, that's what I'm talking about. The Elves in this world are too damn prissy. A real Elf should be covered in viscous fluids, gasping for more as her face screws up in ecstasy."

"Brother... You've read...too many,

doujinshi... And way too much, hardcore stuff..."

Steph rolled her eyes, but Sora and Shiro, the criminals responsible, were busy bashing out commands and added frivolously: "Besides... We just gave 'em an excuse, that's all. Come on, this is where it gets real!"

"...The most powerful force...the Flügel camp, is gone... Both of the two great factions...have been crippled..."

Then what would happen? Their map made it clear.

"—Now, then. It's time to see just who'll be left standing once everyone else is gone."

Sora watched as all the races began to clash, grinning with the utmost contempt.

...Wait.

"...B-but, Masters, at this rate if they attack our Capital, we'll be—"

Jibril spoke up, finally recovered from her trance, snapping Steph to as well.

"Y-yes, she's right!! You said we'd be doomed if they catch wind of us, so why did you tell them?!"

Indeed, should Immanity's existence be detected or investigated—their Capital identified and invaded—they'd be goners.

Avant Heim, whom they'd all made their capital, had self- destructed. Flügel had no units left and, without its lord, found itself incapable of production—which, of course, meant it couldn't move to a new Capital, either. Practically speaking, the same went for Sora and Shiro. No Immanity unit could even get close to their Capital's environs, now reduced to a murderous wasteland. Even if Sora and Shiro controlled their units remotely to establish a new Capital, they couldn't leave Jibril behind. So here they were—in the hollow shell of a common Capital. Utterly defenseless. Someone could just walk in and immediately capture it, and as soon as it fell, they would all die.

But... "They're not gonna attack us... None of 'em."

Sora dismissed Steph and Jibril's fears.

"Cos what they're gonna do, how

they're gonna move, and where they're gonna go is clear as day."

At least, it was to Sora and Shiro. They knew everything: where the enemy would go, where they'd strike, where they'd be waiting, where they'd fight. Steph looked puzzled as she shuttled their rapid- fire commands at a continuous sprint, but Jibril must have figured it out, because her eyes flew open, and she gasped.

"Master... You don't mean... Of all things—?!"

Even given that Sora and Shiro were in charge, the map was filled out with unnatural detail.

"Yeah. That's how we start. Man, Plum's ancestors really come through."

"Plum's...ancestors?! You brought over Dhampir?!"

Despite Jibril's and Steph's cries questioning his sanity, Sora smiled and kept writing.

There were few races with whom they could negotiate, and hoping for cooperation was out of the question. But there was, at least, one race they could count on until they started to lose. A race that, even if aware of Immanity, would see no value in it and pay it no mind. With Sora and Shiro's intel, though, they'd be able to steer clear of the ravages of war and scavenge the spoils.

A race glad to have its fill of Elven, Dwarven—any kind of blood they wanted—would come through.

"With Dhampir's intel, it's as if everything was outlined for us.

Plus—"

Their enemies' secrets were bare; everything was practically in the palms of their hands. What's more, they'd be able to clearly predict the other races' next moves. It was simple. After all—"All their doctrines, all their strategies... They're all the result of our teaching!"

Yes, Sora and Shiro could just tell them what to do. Sora and Shiro were the only ones grinning, as Steph and Jibril stood speechless.

To Immanity, modern military theory

was useless at best. It was worthless if they lacked the weapons and technology, and in any case, they couldn't count on theoretical knowledge without experience. On top of that, with these monsters as their opponents, they could gather all the firepower on Earth, and it wouldn't make a difference.

"All our military strategies assume they'll be used on other humans."

None of the theories from their old world anticipated these nutcases, in which case—"—These strategies only have value for other nutcases."

They'd provide the Elves, who excelled in individual ability, with elastic defense and mixed formation techniques. To the Dwarves, proficient in armored weaponry, they'd provide the techniques of land and air infiltration and blitzkrieg strikes. They'd supply the shit and the fan—and watch what happened.

"...It'll be a full-on quagmire, won't it?"

A back-and-forth struggle—the world map plunged into a war of attrition, and inevitably—"H-hey— Sora?! The Werebeast city— It's under attack!!"

The Elven stack was now descending upon the city Sora and Shiro had made the Werebeasts build. Without thinking, Steph stopped rushing back and forth to the mailbox and let out a panicked shriek.

After all those full-scale clashes and battles of attrition, it went without saying that food would start to run scarce. The Elves advanced to seize what was now the world's greatest breadbasket.

"Huh? Uhhh, yeah, I know. So?"

"...That's why...we had them...build it."

Without so much as a glance back at Steph, Sora and Shiro wrote commands and recited aloud as if some sort of prophecy.

"August 8, year -2 BT: Food shortages escalating, Elf moves to secure agricultural land."

No. They mumbled them indifferently as if reading off past events.

"Seven mixed divisions accompanied by four Dragonias approach from the

northern mountains to subdue the agricultural city.”

“...For the same reason, Dwarf...intercepts from, the same mountains...and they engage for, nine days.”

Sora had a thought as he kept on writing without pause.

The d00ds in this world—no, this age—sure do have some awesome tech and weapons. Enough to kick modern Earth’s ass.

Their tactics, though...are pathetic.

...Then again, they were fighting nutcases with equally nutty weapons. It was understandable that they’d have trouble formulating cohesive strategies and fall back on raw numbers, mass, and force.

But that won’t do. Sora smirked. Button-mashing was actually the hardest tactic to read. So they’d have to teach them.

“...The Dwarves are unable, to exercise their mobility, in the mountains...and lose forty-two point seven percent, of the forces they invested.”

“And the Elves, with five divisions left, resume their march upon a strategic victory—”

Once these n00bs got their hands on some half-assed intel and wielded those pretentions... everything would be in the palms of their hands.

“But they end up in a strategic defeat. Why, you ask?”

With that, the corners of Sora’s and Shiro’s lips twisted into creepy smiles.

Flashes burst across the map. The Elven forces in the northern mountains—along with the surrounding terrain—had suddenly been wiped clean off. Sora grinned wickedly.

“...Because Áka Si Anse detonates. All five remaining divisions get blown to smithereens.”

Incidentally, this also cut off the land invasion route for Elf.

Steph and Jibril were dumbfounded.

“M-Mas-Master... Why would Elves fall to an Elven weapon?!”

Jibril cried out, confused as to why the

Elves’ own weapon had been used against them.

“Well, that would be because I made them do it.”

Steph and Jibril froze at Sora’s casual, preposterous remark.

“I failed to turn the Elves into erofus and bring them over to our side... But hey...,” Sora continued placidly, still writing out more commands.

“I did succeed in getting the Werebeasts to kidnap Elves— right?”

“...Y-yes... No, wait! You never explained how—did you?!”

How had he stopped them from using magic and kept them from resisting? He explained the very simple, extraordinarily guileless, easy-as-breathing truth.

“It’s simple. You find an Elf who has a kid, take their kid, and say the following:”

Sora, his radiant smile full of youthful innocence, revealed how he’d done it.

“‘If you try anything, the kid gets it. ’ — That’s all there is to it!

One willing slave, fresh and ready!”

“You scum!!”

“Why so blunt?!”

Steph’s swift condemnation pierced right through Sora after he revealed the brutality instilled in his entire being.

“Don’t tell me this is the only reason you gave food to the Werebeasts?!”

“O-of course not! You know we wouldn’t do something as stupid as that! Look!”

Steph had him by the collar as he pointed to the map in a panic.

Having lost their land invasion route, the Elves were now approaching from the air.

“W-we released the Elf who triggered Áka Si Anse! And we had her report all the stuff the Werebeasts had made her do—in great detail—so just retribution would descend!”

“Ohhh, now I see! Allow me to correct myself: You sick bastard!!”

However, Shiro ignored Steph’s indignation.

“...But this time...the Dwarves...will win.”

And in the same moment—the newly onrushing Elven stack vanished.

...Battling on extreme terrain such as mountains fettered Dwarf’s maneuver warfare, but in a dogfight, they and their airships were unrivaled. After all, they’d applied the doctrines of naval theory to the flying ships to their utmost ability.

“This is one of the world’s few regions for food production, and we spent a generation on it. You think we’re just gonna give it to them?”

Dazed, Steph released Sora’s collar, and he went back to the table.

“We’re gonna have them squash each other over the food awhile longer. Didn’t we tell you?”

“...He who controls, food...controls the world...!”

They continued savagely but with infinite pleasure.

“There’s gonna be a looooooot more dyiing! ...People and non- people, tonnnns of ’em!”

“...Kill ’em all...”

“Gee, I wonder who’s gonna make it through all this and still have time to worry about Immanity?”

“...This is so sick, I don’t even know what to say...”

Steph, having apparently lost the verve to instruct them in the error of their ways, gave up and went back to mailing their commands.

..... They’d used Dhampir to gain vast and precise intelligence. For 184 years, Shiro had observed the various races’ every movement and calculated how the war might progress. For 184 years, Sora would use an elaborately devised strategy to con that progress into actual events. Jibril watched her masters, Sora and Shiro, as they turned everything over in their little hands. But sweat was appearing on their cheeks and foreheads, Jibril thought. Even for Sora and Shiro...it was impossible to read through the entirety of the Great War. They could not perfectly anticipate the involvement of, say, Gigant or Lunamana—races

whose actions were not so clear-cut.

And, no matter how far they plotted, no matter how deeply they calculated, there would always be events they could not predict.

They must have accounted for this.

They must have predicted the unpredictable—but.

Just one fatal misreading.

Just one fatal instruction.

That would be enough for their Capital to be instantly identified, whereupon, without question—death awaited. Sora and Shiro must have known that better than anyone, yet they only grinned—savagely.

“Ha-haaa! If we can make it through this and lose—our brains are totally gonna melt!!”

“...Mine’s...already...about, to melt...!”

Had they ever played a game as killer as this? This had to be the highest difficulty level they’d ever seen. They smiled in elation—but Jibril looked down uncomfortably, her hands quivering as they clutched her journal.

..... “...Ah... The world is ending,” Steph mumbled as she rushed back and forth to the mailbox. Projected in midair was a dying planet, collapsing chess pieces, an ending world, but — “Yup, it’s ending. Screw this moldy old world. Let it end!”

As he spoke, Sora’s writing hand stopped, and he took a look at the map.

...A dying planet—that had once been reality.

...Collapsing chess pieces—that had once been human lives.

He’d threaten, kidnap, kill; he’d throw away and use and deceive and betray and torment—Sora would use most any means, even dirty tricks, swindles, and frauds if no one would find out—but.

“...You wanna play with no regard to means or sacrifices at all— anyone can do that shit.”

Yes, it was simple. And proven by everyone as they’d carried on and on with no regard for the world. So just what was it they were looking for at the end of that mountain of sacrifices?

An ending where they died, someone else died, or everyone died—did they really want it that badly? Sora didn’t see the point—and had a feeling he never would.

“This world is a game. It’s become a game.”

As those goons had carried on with their mundane play— someone had sneered. Someone had refused to accept even one sacrifice. Sora looked at Jibril and smiled.

“—No one will die, nor will they be allowed to. Not you, Jibril, not us, and not anyone—”

How had the world changed...?

“The world’s changed so that you can get away with throwing that tantrum—and you might even get what you want.”

Then the least they could do was to say a last prayer for this old world.

—Hey... Whoever you were... Seventy hours had passed. Izuna sat on the 308th space, watching. Many races had perished, and the world, the planet, was being destroyed, too far gone to come back. Just as the Old Deus had predicted, Sora and Shiro were cornered, and their faces were starting to show strain. But Izuna’s expression as she watched them held no tension, only nostalgia. Tet had told her—the old story, the untold story.

Those two who had ended the previous Great War were kind of like Sora and Shiro. They had achieved an incredible feat, yet their older sister had asked... “Why, am I so...frustrated...?”

Tet, the Suniaster in hand, had spoken as if in reply.

“Because the game’s not over.”

Long, long ago, that day, Tet had grasped the Suniaster and laid down the Ten Covenants. Tet, the one who claimed to have remade the world—but this was what he’d said next. No matter how many times Izuna reviewed it in her memory, he had surely said: “Come, then—let the games continue.”

Long, long ago, the game—had not begun. It had started long before that

and just—continued, so the unsung defeat could continue into a sung victory. The previous pair had sought and missed it, passing it along—all the way to the future pair... For that one victory—that would take that infinite string of defeats and give them meaning.

For that one victory—that no one yet, not even Sora and Shiro, had achieved.

For that final victory in which no one could be sacrificed.

“...Tet, I went and called you a goddamn liar, please... Forgive me, please.”

Izuna bowed apologetically, her long ears and head drooping.

Sora and Shiro were like those two—but only kind of. Sora and Shiro weren’t as strong, and that comforted Izuna. She knew—these two wouldn’t make the same mistake as their predecessors.

“.....”

And Izuna saw the inorganic, emotionless face of the Old Deus tremble just a little.

“...Sorry, please. I’m not smart... So I can’t give you an answer, please.”

“What is it to believe?”

Izuna didn’t know how to answer or how to reach the goal, but still, her intuition told her for sure she wasn’t wrong.

“I won’t win if you die, please! I believe that’s total bullshit, please!”

Met with only silence, Izuna looked back at the projected scenery. The end of the world. Izuna smiled, So let it be. After all— they were the ones who’d destroyed that world for them... The boy recalled among his racing thoughts: Say you had to die for the sake of the world. What would you do? That was what he’d thought that day, and he’d sneered that there was no point in winning all by himself. But it still wasn’t enough for both of them to win—so how could they win it all? He’d half resigned himself to thinking that perhaps no such method existed in this world.

But there was such a method in that world. That day he’d heard the ten

rules, he'd stood where he could look out to the giant chess pieces in the distance. The erstwhile boy—the black-haired, dark-eyed young man—had held his sister's hand and cracked a smile.

They'd finally found the method. There it was—the Ten Covenants. Convention had dictated that nothing could be done without sacrifice. This groundwork led beyond.

What a convenient fantasy, eh, this world? He felt both happy and bitter about it, but—it wasn't just convenient. It was convenient, but for a reason. Someone had faced what he'd run from and given everything to finally make convenient...could you buy a story like that? Were it not for the Covenants and the fact that the Great War had ended, he would have dismissed it with a laugh. Whoever it was had been some hell of a human, the young man thought, humbled—but now he also thought...whoever it was... —No.

Hey, you.

Was that really good enough?

No matter how I look at it...I don't feel that way..... The impact cut short Sora's speeding thoughts. The projected map displayed the date -53 BT. That meant they had twenty-eight minutes left until the time limit. Meanwhile, the light that had passed right by them had evaporated the earth's crust straight up to the stratosphere— —and the "death storm" that had covered Avant Heim—had been stripped away.

"Hey! What are we going to do? What's going ooon?!" shouted the teary-eyed Steph, who'd lost her balance and fallen to the ground from the impact.

"Hell if I know! It's a perfect storm of everything we expected to be unexpected!"

".....Mmnggh...I so thought...we had it...!"

Sora and Shiro yelled back at her and furiously scrawled out commands then stared at the map, the map that, fifteen hours earlier, had rendered the entire world as plain as day and

showed them the course of the war. Now it was back to black, showing almost nothing. What it did display eloquently was how the war was going.

"Well, we knew from the start this game was impossible! You gotta enjoy this kinda game understanding that in advance, right?!"

"...When a game's, impossible...it's all about, challenging yourself...how far, you can go!"

Sora and Shiro repressed their panic and forced smiles together as they kept writing.

They had been aware that they couldn't perfectly predict the movements of races they lacked intel on. But—for God's sake, Sora ground his teeth silently. Lunamana, the race about which they had the least intel, the race said to have already been on the red moon as of the Great War, had arrived. The quite unpredictable convulsion had been caused by the same factor that spelled doom for the two races around which the war had heretofore revolved, the Elves and Dwarves. The moon had fallen and opened up the sky, whereby the Dhampirs—their Scout units—were also crushed by the upheaval of heaven and earth and subsequently perished. Dwindling remnants of Immanity units and Cities still remained, and as if searching for something or trying to corner them—surrounding Sora and Shiro's Capital, now stripped of its death storm, and closing in—were a few enemy units. The gamer siblings had been deprived of mobile units, and even races they might have been able to move indirectly were done. They were practically out of options, and then— "...Masters. You have done enough. Please command me—"

Jibril looked down and murmured, but Sora and Shiro cut her off.

"...STFU. "

"...Jibril, sit. "

Jibril was forced into a sitting position before— "Mmgyaughhhh?! What was that flash? Hey! That flash!!"

The projectiles were coming so close they couldn't hear them anymore;

perhaps they weren't within the range of their hearing?

The only movement came from flashes, shocks, and Steph, who dashed back and forth to the mailbox.

"...At this rate, you'll die, Masters—even little Dora, too...!"

"What do you mean, even me? I'm about to burst into tears!!"

Steph, the only one still ignorant of the situation, put her life on the line running back and forth to mail Sora's, Shiro's, and Jibril's commands. Even Sora and Shiro were moved to shivers by her fathomless magnanimity, her naive benevolence, but— "Please order me to hand over my dice and die—!"

Jibril's tearful wail shook the room. It froze Steph, and she couldn't believe she was hearing what came after.

"...I am, afraid...! Please... I beg, your indulgence...!"

Her journal tightly in hand, Jibril shivered as she begged, soaking the floor. Sora and Shiro did not respond. Steph couldn't say anything.

A deafening silence was the sole reply...and then.

A loud VOOMP broke the long silence—another impact of the light. Steph jerked as it reminded her of her imminent death, and Jibril kept mumbling: "...I am well aware that you have embarked on risks inconceivable for my wretched sake... But please."

She wiped her tears and tried to compose herself.

"As your undeserving servant, it would be an honor beyond all imagination... Please consider the circumstances."

Jibril held out nine dice from her chest.

"...As a Flügel, I feel nothing toward death. Please give me the order..."

If she gave them her dice, she'd lose her memory—and be unable to kill herself. She would need the binding command of Sora and Shiro, her owners. That would be enough, and then this game— Jibril's selfish death game—would be over. Satisfied with this, she smiled and said: "There is no need for you to die, Masters. Please let me be the—"

"Shut the hell up!! Just shut your trap and be quiet! You're distracting me, damn it!!"

The roar of Sora cutting her off rocked the hall more sharply than the devastating shock waves. Finally, Sora and Shiro set down their pens and looked— No. Glared.

Their seething eyes took Steph's and Jibril's breath away. The next moment, they were back to writing commands while Sora ranted.

"Let you die 'cos you're scared?! 'I'm not afraid to diiiiie!' STFU!!

We're all afraid to die! We're not even worrying about pissing ourselves but something much bigger and stinkier than that!"

"...Brother... When's the last, time...we went...to the bathroom...?!"

Oh. No wonder they were about to soil themselves! Shit! Sora slammed new orders into Steph's hand— "And you just keep talking and talking and talking and talking!!

You just wanna look cool, don't you?!" —and cut Jibril down.

I'm afraid to lose my memory, so I want to die. —But? But?

I don't want to be a burden. I want to win. If I can't I want to die. —But! But! It's my fault. It's not your fault, Masters. —But! But! But! But!

It's the only choice. Live for my sake, too—!!!

"Who the hell do you think you are, Jibril?! Who's your master?!"

"...If you're...the property, of a couple of shut-in...loser, gamers..."

"Then fly right! Do it right!! Be true; be like us—be a dweeb!!!"

As Steph falteringly slid a command in the box— Suddenly.

One of Immanity's Cities—literally disappeared. They'd intentionally revealed and drawn attention to it, and now it was gone from the map, along with its label.

"Say you don't want to die! You don't want us to die! You don't want to lose your memory, and you don't want us to lose our memories of you! Say 'Save me'!! If we fail, we'll all die—but say it:

I don't wanna!!"

Still furiously scribbling commands, Sora and Shiro were shaking, screaming— "Why don't you learn a thing or two from us and bawl like a pathetic dweeb!!"

" !!!"

With that, Jibril's face distorted, tears in the corners of her eyes.

Seventy-one hours, forty-five minutes.

"You're saying one death's enough?! Then what difference does it make if it's one or three, a billion or a trillion?!!"

"...B-but! At this rate, if the Capital falls—"

Sora and Shiro and Steph— No, in the worst-case scenario, everyone involved in the Old Deus's game would perish with it.

"W-w-we'll cross that bridge...when we come to it?!"

"...I-it's not like...it's gonna, fall...?"

But Sora's voice cracked, and Shiro's eyes moistened as they rebutted Jibril's argument with uncertain shrieks. Not counting the Capital, two Cities remained, and they'd tossed one entirely as a decoy in order to buy a few minutes—not even fifty days in-game— before the enemy loomed once more. Not allowing their hands a single break, Sora and Shiro merely thought: Seventy-one hours, forty-nine minutes.

...It wasn't as if they had any proof. All they had was circumstantial evidence upon which they'd laid layer after layer of conjecture. Yet somehow, Sora and Shiro felt strangely certain, as if they'd seen it.

...Some complete idiot had decided that this hell was a game.

That it was time to take this world scorched by battle, submerged in despair—and change it with zero sacrifices. To go beyond convention—and follow a dream too fatuous to mention. To take on the world, to struggle, to claw—and then to miss.

And to say, next time...next time.

Some super badass gamer had said it until his dying breath.

But—!

"You think we can be that strong? You think we can manage to live such badass lives?!"

At Sora's command, another City was gouged by light and perished. But this time—it had taken the enemy that had erased it along with it. The E-bomb secured from the fallen Dwarves had been set off by the enemy's own attack. The land that no longer even deserved to be called a continent crumbled, and Immanity was left with one City and 177 units. Even so, Sora and Shiro still thought in tandem: Seventy-one hours, fifty-one minutes.

That god-tier badass gamer—had failed. That great and noble hero who had ended the war and opened the way for the Ten Covenants! Yet, ah, we shall say it as many times as we must—the hero had failed—!!!

"Right?! If we were gonna be cool, we'd beat you now, right?!"

Glancing at the formula Shiro passed him, Sora inscribed what it implied without a hitch.

"So! What if I was all crying like, 'Jibril, I won't let your death be in vain!?' I'd be a real badass if I lied to you like that, wouldn't I?! I'd be such a stud! Go on, shower me in praise! And while I'm showing my ass here, I might as well ask you this one thing!!"

As if demanding it of all the obnoxiously cool protagonists who ever were, he shouted: "—Tell me, after you finish being so cool, what's left?!"

What future lay in store for the teary-eyed Shiro, the running- scared Steph, the floor-gazing Jibril?

"You skip out! They cry their eyes out!! And the virgin has to live with all your karma— WTF?! I'm gonna get a fever, this is so screwed up!"

Yeah, sure. There were other things. Like the world where everything was decided by games—where no one had to be sacrificed next time. The hero had left the Ten Covenants—the groundwork—you could say that. Sure, that was crazy. They couldn't even dream of pulling that off. But— What did the hero think about it—?!

What was that godly gamer hope to accomplish by going to such lengths?! To end the Great War?! To save the world?! Hell no! You're saying a dumbass of astronomical proportions who would dream up something so psycho and then actually do it—a proud fool such as few humans had ever rivaled—did it for some goody-two-shoes reason like that?

Get outta here!!

"You're looking at a shut-in loser gamer who has one more year without a girlfriend every birthday, who asks with a straight face what a friend is, whose only special skill is lying! 'People can change,' you say? Shit, a water flea isn't gonna turn into a whale; there's a goddamn limit, y'know!! —So!!"

Sora took a deep breath, pausing from his rant to distract himself from his fear. Then he spoke quietly and calmly. "...Why don't we live our own way...?"

"All or nothing. We won't even say sorry."

His voice was resolute, yet shaky. He gripped Shiro's hand firmly as his feet tapped the floor.

That was who they were. The siblings smiled to each other.

They didn't wanna die. They didn't wanna let Jibril die. They didn't wanna have regrets. Didn't wanna, didn't wanna, didn't wanna!

They'd rejected everything to come to this world.

"If somehow—not that it'll happen—we die, we're going with everyone."

"...So...shut up...and suck it. At least..."

They wrapped up their tantrum, sufficient to make even a spoiled brat want to behave, with unabashed dorkiness: "Let's enjoy it to the end!! It's a pretty damn thrilling game, when you think about it!"

As if in response to Sora's laugh, one more City went down, taking enemy units with it. They'd used the nuclear option in their own territory—the famous "Belkan defense"—No, actually, they must have just reached the point of blowing themselves up and saying, if we die, we're taking you

with us.

- Five minutes, forty-two seconds remaining.

Still hanging her head, Jibril mumbled, but only Steph was able to make it out.

"...Even, so... I, was responsible for..."

"Mmm... No... Those two are just a bit touched in the head... I think."

Jibril looked up to see Steph—smiling.

"They think if someone must be sacrificed, then we should all die indiscriminately. That kind of irrational thinking is enough to make your head hurt."

Steph was exasperated, yet clear, as she spoke before dashing off once again.

"—But that's why we shall sacrifice no one! This is a line of reasoning I'm willing to stick with to the end!!"

She inserted the latest command.

- Seventy-one hours, fifty-eight minutes.

By now, they didn't have to look at the map to see that the enemy was coming. Besieged by the conviction that each of them would end the moment those guys took that last step into their Capital, Sora and Shiro still searched frantically for a way out—but their hands stopped.

Nineteen Units remaining. No Cities left but the Capital. No viable tactics. They couldn't think of even a single effective move.

Even so, the two accelerated their thoughts boundlessly in search of an opening. Sora saw his sister beside him, her face twisted in distress, tearing at her hair—and suddenly.

He felt he knew what the gamer who'd ended the Great War had been after. Somehow—as if it had been Sora himself.

...After all—no, all along—that gamer hadn't cared about the world. It was merely of no interest to him...that's it. He'd just chosen to live as he wanted. That had led to the end of the War—a magnificent means— ".....!!!"

Seeing his sister Shiro's face racked by frustration and panic as she bit her nails, Sora thought. That gamer had

just wanted to see her smile. If he ran away from everything, let the world do as it pleased, she wouldn't smile— — he wanted...this someone—to—... Sora's thoughts accelerated unfettered.

Until.

...Are you gonna fail again?

Someone put this question to Sora as if standing right in front of him. He and Shiro both looked up, and when they saw who was there, they chuckled with a strange calm. Their racing thoughts, their flooded data, had fused into an image—a hallucination: two silhouettes, as dusky as shadow, faces indistinct...standing apart... Yeah, maybe we'll fail.

Sora shouted— "But we're not gonna fail the way you did!!"

"...Mind, your own...business—!!"

Realized they'd released each other's hands, Sora and Shiro grasped them firmly again. Ignoring their startled audience, they targeted a unit that flickered over the map. The gamer siblings grinned savagely and wrote a command, together, at the same time, on one sheet. Shiro selected the unit that had moved for an instant: the Ex Machina, whose movements were a mystery to Sora. But as she had no idea what to do with it, Sora instructed it in her stead.

The two of them scribbled out a command they didn't fully comprehend—and tossed it to Steph.

- Seventy-one hours, fifty-nine minutes, fifty-nine seconds.

Their thoughts had reached their limit; their vision, focused outside the Capital, lacked all color, and there was no sound.

Eight hours per second—it went by at almost thirty thousand times real speed—yet they felt they could see it. A Dragonia enormous even by Dragonia standards closed in on the Capital, all manner of rabble in tow. It had only to open its mouth, and a moment later, everything would pour into the Capital.

Countless flashbacks raced through Sora's mind. Memories he didn't want to remember but couldn't allow



himself to forget. Still—the firm feeling in his hand of his grip being returned—Shiro's smile made him think. She'd held his hand when it was stained crimson—and still, he couldn't do anything. He'd turned his back on that world to come here, to this world where everything was laid out for him.

This time. Here. If we can't do it here, then— So they'd gone for it. The two of them wrote it all into their command—which Steph delivered— And then.

“Ha-haaa!! Behold, Laputa's thunder!!!”

“...Destroy them...—!!”

From the corpse of Avant Heim, their Capital, Sora and Shiro delivered the number-five and number-eight ranked lines they wanted to say in real life.

Then their shouts were blotted out by an unfaltering direct hit.

A shock rumbled straight through their Capital as if they'd been bombarded from orbit, directly above them. An extraordinary flash of light pierced straight through the planet, enough to elicit a shriek from heaven and earth itself. The flash reduced the onrushing hordes, the Dragonia's Far Cry, and everything with them to nothingness. If the player base hadn't been isolated, not a particle would have remained, which elicited— “...S-Sora, Shiro! Just what kind of instructions did you giiiive?!”

Just what, Steph wondered, had finally broken the planet, engulfing them in light? Sora and Shiro checked the time using the wonders of the smartphone before answering, unperturbed: “...Dunno... But figured, it was what...Ex Machina...would do.”

“If Shiro says so, then it's gotta be. So I dunno, either, but hey.”

Sora revealed the command they'd given the Immanunity unit.

“We told Ex Machina the Capital's coordinates—like, ‘Try and end this, why don'tcha?’ ”

In other words—they just felt like it. Sora and Shiro's admission was greeted by the sound of something cracking. The fissure raced through the planet before their very eyes—an

impact far beyond even the force that had just pierced it.

• Seventy-two hours.

Then Sora and Shiro looked back at the vague silhouette and smiled.

“I promised... To never again let go of this hand—”

“...And I won't accept...regret, and death...anymore...”

If you did what we can't, then you don't have to worry.

Next time—we'll take on what you couldn't.

The two shadows who spoke seemed to have a hint of a smile in their eyes, but it must have just been their imagination... The space that had compressed a whole planet was released.

The laws of physics that had been bent seemed to remember what they were. In the white void, as if gravity and time had stopped, the four drifted. Jibril listened to Sora and Shiro's mumbling, the two of them holding each other's hands and laughing.

“.....”

She thought about what she should say—but couldn't think of anything. Look what she'd forced upon her lords. A thousand deaths could not atone for such an affront... No, the very consideration of it was an insult like no other, she realized... An apology was out of the question. Feelings she'd only known as words until she'd met them raged within: self-hatred, remorse, inadequacy, neglect. In that case—how in the world might she face them?

“...Siiiiiiiiiiiiigh... O-kay...”

A sigh escaped from Sora's lips that practically took his soul along with it.

“Mm... Yeah. That was pretty fun. I'll say you pass, Jibril.”

His expression soured, and he forced himself to smile.

“...You got us into a game where we had no choice but to lose.

And then—we got annihilated.”

“.....It was, fun...but, next time...we'll win...”

Shiro showed no inclination to blame or castigate her, either.

“—It's no small feat to give Blank their first failure—but watch it.”

It was just— Yes... “Your ass is goin' down a hundred, a thousand—ten thousand times, and don't think we'll stop there!”

Their faces bespoke only an infinite chagrin at losing. Seeing her masters talk bigger than ever before as they flaunted their wounds, Jibril—was baffled...bemused.

“Annihilated”? “Failure”? Whatever were they saying? The game was supposed to have been the last...the worst. They hadn't let it be the last, and they had turned it into the best... And then—to her—they'd said, Let's do it again. Was that what they were saying?

They'd achieved a loss beyond all victory. Yet they bemoaned the loss as a loss. Jibril finally caught on to what she should have said sooner, how she should have faced them from the start.

“...Thank you, Masters. How little I deserve your words...!” she mumbled, her feelings welling up inside her. Then she remembered.

“If you're enjoying all this, then how 'bout you give us a li'l something—two dice.”

For when they lost the dice for failing to fulfill the Task, two of the three of them would disappear—that must have been his meaning. A li'l something? How meager, thought Jibril as she plucked the dice from her chest.

Seventy-two hours have passed. The Task is deemed unfulfilled.

She heard the voice...but it didn't mean anything to her anymore... ?

“...Goodness! Where am I?”

As a breeze brushed her cheek, Jibril tilted her head in a daze and muttered. All of a sudden, she was alone on a sea of grass that rippled in the wind. There was one white cube by her chest, and surrounding her was an unfamiliar landmass whirling in a spiral.

Entirely ignorant of where she was and why— “...Oh my.”

—she moved to stand and noticed a journal neatly placed on her lap.

Every time you lose your memory, read

page 3205 is what the cover had read. This had been sloppily crossed out, though, and under it...was this: The back cover's good enough for chumps like you.

...Hmm, I should identify who wrote this and kill them! She thought carefully for zero seconds, then flipped it over.

"...Is this...the Immanity tongue? What a quaint choice of language..."

It was clearly not her handwriting and not a language she saw often. Two lines.

It's all good. Wait.

Jibril, sit.

Such mysterious words scrawled there. Who had written them, and what did they mean? She didn't know, but... Something slid down her cheek. She opened her eyes wide.

"...What?! Wh-what is this?!"

She cried out in surprise, but she knew what it was. If she remembered correctly, they were called tears. A liquid eye protectant generated by some organisms. A handful of living things were also said to excrete them with emotion. A Flügel certainly needed no eye protectant, and such emotion— "...Hm... Mmm, well, I don't quite understand it, but..."

—should have been foreign to them— "...it seems...something very fun has occurred."

It wasn't unpleasant, so she decided not to do anything about it. She broke out into a big smile in spite of herself as big tears slid down her cheeks. Still, she hadn't the faintest inkling what was going on but had a feeling she might as well obey those words, whoever had written them. It was all good. If she just sat and waited patiently on her best behavior...then surely... something much, much more fun awaited. Without rhyme or reason, Jibril clutched the book lovingly and laughed, as if bursting into song.

And—on the 308th space. Several adorable small birds were perched atop a little girl's head and shoulders. It was a peaceful sight as she gently swayed her large tail and the birds whistled their song...but.

"...You bitches are welcome, please."

Izuna, too, had dropped to one die after failing to complete her Task in seventy-two hours. Despite her even smaller than usual size, she caught the birds in an instant, announcing as drool spilled out of her mouth: "Guess who's on the menu now."

"Ngom-ngom... Pisses me off, please... Time to scarf some grub and hit the sack, please!"

Izuna looked extremely sullen as she wolfed down her prey.

The Old Deus who until just recently had been sitting there self-importantly—was gone. She'd made another complicated expression just before she left, which was rather curious, but... .....Gurrrrrgle... "...Shit, I can't win anyway, please! I'm eating this shit, please!"

Izuna opened her bag and dug out her provisions since her stomach insisted the birds hadn't been enough. She was down to one die... She could not advance. And anyway, if winning meant the Old Deus would die, then she was trapped. She took out her frustrations by plowing through her food.

...To put it bluntly, Izuna was stress eating.

As ever, Izuna didn't get all the complicated stuff. Why this Task kept appearing, why she'd win if she chose to sacrifice. Why, even if she chose to forget about that and win—it would then require the Old Deus to die. What should she do? Of course, Izuna didn't know— but.

"I know those assholes must know, please! Please!! Please!!!"

Izuna was happy, yet also somehow unbearably angry. She flopped back on the ground and beat her arms and legs, shrieking.

"Sora, Shiro. I'm not—gonna lose to you, please..." Izuna had boasted so confidently.

Those two had answered: "You'd better think again" "We're the ones...who are gonna win."

Anyone could win, but only those two actually would—was not what they'd

meant. Even if Izuna went for it, she probably still couldn't win. That was because the game was set up so you couldn't unless you accepted someone's sacrifice.

Unless you were Sora and Shiro. They would win without a single sacrifice, without letting anyone die. They'd put their own lives on the line to show that Jibril was no exception. They understood what Izuna didn't: how to win this game.

".....Pisses me off, please."

She said it again. Because seriously. The point was— "It was all—just as they planned, wasn't it, please?"

It pissed her off—yet had somehow also become entertaining, so she smiled.

Strangely, losing to Sora and Shiro didn't make her feel so bad.

Must be 'cos no one would die or suffer. Maybe the answers to everything were simpler than expected... Maybe that was all there was to it. After all, this world—was just a game.

"Ngghh! Then I shoulda played! I shoulda taken Sora and Shiro on, please!"

...What a waste. It pained her from the bottom of her heart.

"Ngmhhha, I'm so damn full, please. Time to hit the sack!

Please!"

She'd gotten her ass kicked, ate her feelings, and now she was going to sleep. Without further ado, Izuna hugged her tail and assumed the passing-out position.

".....?"

But as her awareness faded, suddenly...Izuna realized something. She realized why Sora and Shiro were only kind of like Riku and Schwi. Sora deceived people, but— Riku had deceived himself. Riku's "strength" had been his ability to deceive even himself in order to win. Just as Jibril had intended to destroy herself—perhaps his strength had been his downfall, the reason things had ended in a draw.

Perhaps he'd told a lie he never should have...and that was why he'd failed.

"...Mm...Sora and Shiro smell good, those assholes, please."

A liar who would never lie to himself. Remembering their scent, Izuna giggled and felt her consciousness wash away.

"What is it to believe?"

This game's destination must be the answer, Izuna vaguely reflected. Those two back then hadn't made it there—to the ending.

Everyone would smile as they finished the game...and started again in the ending. That must have been...where the answer was..... Meanwhile—on the 297th space, at about the same time. Sora and Shiro had been asked by Jibril to command her first to give them two dice, and then to hand over the rest but one. Thus, they'd rolled a total of eleven dice. It was their sixth move. They'd advanced one space, the wind brushed against their bodies pleasantly, and they were smiling.

"...Brother... Can I...cross the finish line?"

"Yeah... Go ahead and lie down... It's time, we found, peace..."

Their faces spoke of readiness to become ash, carried aloft by the thousand winds. Their pleasant smiles—welcomed the ending of this life.

Just one space after their epic game with Jibril, stuck between loading screens, the two had looked up to the heavens—and at last remembered. Their game with Jibril—had only been a Task. There they'd been, whisking off in triumph from a mere mini-game. Just what did they think they'd accomplished? Now here they were, lying flat on the ground, smiling at the evanescence of life. It was back to the survival game from here on out, the painful reality. Perhaps it was time to look into some new parts for their brains, which had conveniently forgotten them.

"You really had forgotten..."

Unable to bear Steph's eyes bearing down on them, the duo averted their own.

"Yeah... Frankly, I was all ready to go straight back home..."

"...I could see...my futon...in front of me..."

They'd been immersed in an impossible game sans food, drink, rest, or sleep, in which one wrong move would spell death. A game where they had children's bodies and needed to maintain extreme alertness and concentration—for seventy-two hours. Anyone would fall apart under these conditions, and on top of that— they'd lost. Yes, " " had just tasted their first defeat. They'd put on a brave face but lacked even the energy to throw a tantrum over it. They'd rather have gone home, passed out, and plotted their comeback once they recovered. Sora and Shiro had already laid it all out between them silently—but what was this?

Present number of dice: Sora, three. Shiro, Steph, two each.

Current roll: eleven.

The goal was a good hundred kilometers away.

They'd exhausted their provisions and still lacked any effective means of transport. It would be time for them once more to return to the wild, except that their loss had drained them not only of the willpower to survive but, in fact, to move at all.

"—So hungry... God, how many days has it been since we ate?"

"...I'm tired... When's the last time...we slept?"

"...Uh, uh, er, um— Ah! L-look! It's eckgrass!"

Steph whispered hoarsely, perhaps realizing they really were going to die at this rate and conscious of being the only one who'd slept, albeit only for four hours. Though she went and gathered the mysterious herb—  
"...Grass...? At least...get us some protein or carbohydrates..."

"...I want...phenylalanine, tryptophan...lysine, and glucose..."

In other words: Gimme meat, fish, rice, and essential amino acids. The two of them pleaded for their lives as their eyes began clouding over like those of a fish out of water.

"Y-you can't eat meat now! It'll make it

worse!! I'll boil this, so be sure you drink it!"

Immediately, Steph searched for materials for a fire.

"It's a medicinal herb that'll restore your strength! Once you've had some, we might have a bit of smoked meat—"

—left over, she was about to say as she rummaged through her bag, but then stopped. She looked around, then muttered, "...? If eckgrass is growing here—are we near Elkia?"

Shiro pulled out the tablet with an unsteady hand and opened the Old Deus's game board map—in other words, a reproduction of the land itself.

"...Brother... In two spaces...there's the edge...of Elroble...a city...!"

Shiro's eyes, in which faint hope had been restored, made Sora think. Elroble. Formerly of the Eastern Union, now of Elkia, a gateway for overland trade—a city of merchants. There they might... "...They might have a real carriage and some food there... But it's twenty kilometers..."

Sora and Shiro wrung out the last of their courage and stood up. Though they walked as unsteadily as newborn gazelles, nevertheless— "L-let's think positive! It might be over in twenty kilometers...!"

"...I hope...this'll be, our last spurt..."

As they rebuked their spirits that threatened to break at any moment—no, that had long since broken and were now a cobbled- together mess—Sora and Shiro managed to make at least a show of composure.

"...Last? By the way, could I have a word with you?"

Steph spoke so suspiciously, and suddenly, Sora's eyes were a gleam. As a flash of light raced through his already-graying brain cells, Sora cried out.

That means—!

"What?! You'll take five of the dice and carry us on your back?!"

So we won't have to walk at all!

"...A, goddess...! ...She's a...goddess...Brother!"

"H-huh?! Even with five dice, I'll still only be nine years— Hey, listen to me!"

It might sound unreasonable to ask Steph, age 9, to carry two toddlers aged 1.8 and 1.1, but you never know until you try, now do you?! They threw their dice at her and clambered up her back, but she shook them off and shouted, "Sh-Shiro! That 'ritual' of which you spoke... You did it, yes?!"

The ritual of roll manipulation, the rigging of random numbers.

On that sixth roll, Shiro had first rolled three dice of eleven, one at a time—to come up one, one, and one. Then she'd mumbled, "Random number analysis complete." Then she'd rolled the rest to bring up her desired result: eleven.

"Why would you roll eleven?"

Why not roll sixty-six so they could go straight to the goal? Why eleven? Steph wondered, but Sora and Shiro...stared blankly.

"...Huh? 'Cos, we can't, do that...right...?"

"Like... We hacked the numbers so we wouldn't get there, y'know?"

They answered as if stating the obvious, and now Steph was dazed.

"Well, never mind that! Why don't we play rock-paper-scissors?"

Dismissing Steph's discomfiture, Sora moved on—back to what was important: not wanting to walk.

"The loser has to take five of the dice and walk to space 307 carrying the winners, without rest or sleep—so let's do it! Ready, go!

Aschente!"

"...Agreed... Aschente..."

"Why, certainly! Aschen— Wait a minute! You'll kill me!!"

Space 307 was ten spaces, or one hundred kilometers, away.

Without rest or sleep, that would kill even an unencumbered adult.

"Besides, you're assuming I shall carry you, aren't you?! Why would I do such a thing?!"

Let's imagine this scene with sound effects; basically, Sora and Shiro's

grinning faces were filling the whole screen with their evil laughter, HEH-HEH-HEH.

Their smiles made it so clear they were plotting something, Steph's suspicion turned to conviction. She sighed, perhaps figuring they were teasing her.

"Sigh... You've got the strength to make jokes, have you...?"

Then about that roll—"

But.

"Jokes? What're you talking about?"

Suddenly, Sora's voice shed its clowning. The voice of the toddler seemed to look down on the nine-year-old Steph...but that voice, seemingly rumbling from the bowels of the earth, and those eyes—froze her.

"We're gonna lose this Old Deus game. Intentionally. Okay?"

.

"...We're...what...?"

"Best-case scenario: one person dies. Worst-case: everyone dies. If you don't want that—I'll say this just one more time."

Now Sora's vibe—no, everything about him was different. As Steph stood stunned, he wrapped it up and cornered her.

"—We'll play rock-paper-scissors. Accept it. If you don't, someone will die."

His words were imperative. He conveyed this without giving Steph time or space to think. Whatever they were plotting, they wouldn't give her the opportunity to devise countermeasures, the right to choose, the right to refuse—none of that. He added mockingly: "Don't worry. If you somehow win—either Shiro or I will die.

It's only fair, right? "

And then — "..."

Sora went quiet and waited as Steph merely shook.

"I don't...understand... What's the point of doing that?!"

Steph's outcry was quite natural. What purpose did this game serve? It was like Russian roulette with no prize. All that would come of it was someone's

death. If the only prize was survival, then you might as well not play in the first place.

Therefore—clap.

"Yeah! There is no point. So let's not do that. "

Sora dropped the vibe he'd been giving as if it had been fake all along—which it was. His expression changed from that of a devil to that of a smiling, carefree child. Scratch that — "....."

—a damn brat you really wished you could punch. He continued as if trying to escape Steph's stern glare and broke out in a cold sweat.

"W-well! Still!! If I did actually do that, you wouldn't be able to refuse... Right?"

"...Well, yes... I suppose... Siiiiigh..."

Steph's eyes narrowed even further, but she looked a bit relieved to learn it was a joke and sighed.

Unfortunately..., Sora thought, and he went on to crush that sense of relief.

"That's what happened to the Old Deus. Let's say it happened to the Shrine Maiden—what then?"

Yes. That was the only way everything would make sense. In other words: "I tell you for a fact. The Old Deus is playing us under duress."

That alone would explain it. Nothing else. Why the game made it possible for the Old Deus to lose; why there were so many rules that served Sora and Shiro; why a god, of all beings, would stake everything against such lowly creatures. We'll grant that all the participants—Sora and Shiro, Plum, Jibril, the Shrine Maiden, Ino, Izuna—had to stake what only they could, but even so.

That explained it all. Except one thing.

"Now, if you don't wanna die or don't want someone else to die, accept the game."

Let's say the game began with a threat like this. Sora smirked.

"If the one being threatened—that is, the Old Deus—were to lose... what would you normally expect to happen?" he asked, to which Steph didn't reply, as it was unnecessary. Quite unnecessary.

One would expect—the Old Deus would die. And that was the issue.

To spell it out: “The issue is: Why are we playing a pointless game?”

Why had the Old Deus been forced to play Russian roulette with no prize? Sora and Shiro, for their part, had no mind to sacrifice anyone—but.

14: The Old Deus shall be bound to fulfill the demands of the VICTOR to the full extent of her authority and power.

The “victor” could supposedly demand anything, but only to the extent of the Old Deus’s authority—and how far did that go? If someone had coerced the Old Deus to start this game, it was doubtful whether the Old Deus could even fulfill the demand Don’t die. Even if they did attain divine power, what were they supposed to do with it? If they sacrificed someone, they’d have lost anyway—and who wanted that kind of power in the first place?

“Yeah. The real question isn’t why the Old Deus accepted this game.”

Sora plopped onto the ground cross-legged.

“—The question is what we demanded.”

Since their memories had been collected before the start of the game, they had no evidence by which to determine that. Except...the memory of one of their number hadn’t been collected—the traitor’s.

Even so... Sora and Shiro exchanged looks.

“If we didn’t intend to sacrifice anyone, then what did we figure the correct move would be?”

Even without their memories, it was easy to figure that out.

They grinned.

If they thought about it logically, they would die. So that just meant they had to not think logically.

“—In other words, don’t win logically. No finish line for us.”

Steph seemed miffed, presumably because she didn’t like how Sora was beating around the bush.

“Anyway, just kidding about the ten

spaces. Let’s play rock- paper-scissors for who’s gonna carry Shiro two spaces.”

With that, Sora took one look at the utterly exhausted Shiro, raised his hand along with Steph, and the two shouted in tandem: Aschente.

And thus, ah...how inevitable is fate.

“Well, now you also see why it’s not a prisoner’s dilemma, right?”

As humans breathe. As rivers flow, as the wind blows. Like providence, like nature itself, Steph had of course lost the bout, and now Shiro—though not just her— “Are you...?! Talking about...why you set me up?! I don’t see, why, why anything, really...!”

Sora rode on Shiro’s back, and she on Steph’s. Per the Covenants, Steph walked the plain with both siblings in tow.

...At least they hadn’t said she couldn’t rest. She should be fine.

Let’s move on.

“When we first suggested playing rock-paper-scissors, you figured we must be plotting something, right?”

“I did, I did! And that was why I let my guard down the second time! Pant, pant...”

“We were plotting something, both of us. And you saw through it and refused the game... Everyone’s got their own plan.”

Yes—everyone had their own plans, their own intents, their own objectives. Naturally.

“That means the Old Deus—is the detective, too... Right?”

Sora thought back to the prisoner’s dilemma.

A detective offers Prisoners A and B a plea bargain.

I. If they both keep silent, both serve two years.

II. If one confesses, he will go free while the other serves ten.

III. However, if they both confess, both serve five.

If the prisoners trust each other and keep silent, each achieves a better outcome: two years. But if they both pursue their own benefit, they will

invariably serve five years. If one betrays the other, he goes free while the other serves ten. This means that the option to keep silent is effectively nonexistent. One must confess, betting on the possibility the other will keep silent. In doing so, one avoids the worst-case scenario of ten years, while allowing for the best-case scenario of freedom.

So yeah. This was a pretty standard example of a prisoner’s dilemma... But there was one thing keeping this scenario from being an actual dilemma—the detective.

If the detective had his own plan, then this wasn’t a dilemma.

“It’s just a game where the prisoners and the detective are all players.”

If we go by this example. Sora sneered: “You gotta ask, why did the detective bring this plea bargain to begin with?”

The idea of the prisoner’s dilemma was that neither of the prisoners had any choice but to confess. So how was it that this unlikely result was presented with the bait of “freedom”? No—why, after all, was the detective so desperate to make them confess? If you could read the detective’s plan, you could see the hole in it. In this case— “The detective has no intention of letting you go free. The plan is to make you both confess and get to know each other better in the slammer.”

If they could read into it, the prisoners had no need to defend each other. No need to arrange things, no need to remember arranging things. The detective’s desperation laid the scenario bare.

Indeed, there was only one person in trouble here: the detective, who couldn’t get them to confess. They only had to seek their own benefit and betray each other—to work together toward victory.

“You always see it in the TV shows in our old world, when they use the prisoner’s dilemma.”

It was always when there was a huge new crime about to be committed. The detective wanted to extract confessions from the suspects in

custody to prevent it.

"The one who's in a bind is the detective, and the ones with the upper hand are the prisoners."

Yes. In fact... The detective had no way to win unless the prisoners undid themselves.

"The correct strategy to beat this game, this smart-ass spouting off about how it's a prisoner's dilemma, is to have unwavering faith—that everyone's gonna stab each other in the back."

That's right—we need you to betray us. Sora snickered. Especially Plum and Chlammy and their group, all of whom must be ready to blow a fuse by now. From his perch on Steph's back, he concluded: "So basically, it's a game where we can win if we trust each other. Wholesome as fuck, amirite?!"

But his words stopped Steph in her tracks.

"...E-excuse me, but I have some unpleasant news..."

She turned her head with a creaking sound like a poorly oiled machine, shouting.

"I—I haven't prepared very much in the way of betrayal!! Sh- should I start betraying you now, or—? Wait, can you even ask someone if you should betray them?!"

Sora and Shiro chuckled at Steph as she fretted that she might blow it for them.

"It's not like we had any faith in Steph from the beginning... She's been a huge burden this entire game."

"...Steph would never, betray anyone... Which makes her...totally useless."

".....Should I be happy about this? Or should I be depressed?"

Sora and Shiro exchanged glances and smirked at Steph's vivid distress.

Steph wouldn't betray them. She was someone whom, in the original sense, they could trust implicitly. And ironically, in this game, that was exactly the kind of person least worth trusting.

"However, we do trust you."

The sudden, creepy pronouncement

from her back made Steph turn—to find Sora and Shiro wearing plastered smiles.

"We can't trust that girl we ever called Steph—but."

"...We can trust...you... So...no problem..."

There were three rules, which only the Old Deus could have made. Sora and Shiro thought of the third and leered. They looked at this girl—and assured her.

"You'll betray us. You'll betray us for sure. That's because the rules...anticipated as much!"

CHAPTER 3 - DISCLOSURE On the island of Kannagari, capital of the Eastern Union, nestled away, lay the Chinkai Tandai District. In a fifty-story CTD skyscraper, ten stories belowground, there was, contrary to public reports, a floor one story lower: the eleventh floor. The sprawling hall held a national secret of the Eastern Union, their trump card against other races: a game. It was a VR machine located deep in a vast subterranean hall—or it was supposed to be, at least. That dark underground chamber, which should have been filled with equipment, was now — "What's thiiiis? I knew you were pathetiic, but you just go plummeting beneath my expectatiooons."

—occupied by a Dhampir dancing airily. In a broken scene, a patchwork of morning and night, of heaven and earth, of here and there, Plum smiled seductively (despite being male).

"Oh...perhaps it's just that I'm too powerfulll? Eh-heh-hehhh, sorry about thaaat."

With each of his deliberate steps, the broken scene transformed boundlessly.

"—I hear a fly buzzing about... Why, that sound is intolerable."

Facing Plum, Fiel's smile grew wider and more murderous. Each time the scene changed, everything changed, down to the flowing spirits; the very spirits with which Fiel attempted to weave a rite— compile a spell— vanished like mist. It was almost like— no, it probably was exactly like—Fiel was trying to weave with threads that

mocked her for thinking they were ever there.

"If you ask me, it's high time—we restored some silence—to this place!!" she cried in a rage as the gem in her forehead flashed.

Light traced a geometric figure through her body and discharged throughout the space. It shattered Plum's magic (which had disguised the scene), the space, the spirits, and restored the gadget- filled hall.

A four-thread rite "omit cast." A spell launched instantly, virtually bypassing compilation—a feat of extreme difficulty for even the finest of Elf's mages. It was with this that Fiel smashed through the spiritual deception, while with two more threads in parallel, she rushed to compile the rite she was after.

She was after her rite to beat the game, her rite of hacking, designed for the Eastern Union VR system. If she could just compile that one rite—and launch it once—the game would be theirs.

Chlammy's victory against Ino Hatsuse would be assured. Fiel Nirvalen, rare among Elves as a hexcaster, was putting all her resources into this parallel compilation. Despite the extreme complexity of the rite, it wrapped up in seconds, and— "Oh, don't tell me, don't tell me... You're going easy on meee?!"

"—Wha...?!"

But that laugh, which lied that seconds were an eternity, made Fiel's thoughts cloud over. The scene had once more been the underground hall, but now, far from underground, they were high in the sky, plunging... "I thank you for your kindnesss. But please don't worry about my feelings! Let's see what you really have to offerrr."

As she watched Plum descend with them, merrily beating his little wings, Fiel gasped in astonishment.

—Impossible! He'd recompiled and redeployed the magic she'd dispelled faster than she could cast? His casting speed transcended Elf? It couldn't be..... But Plum had been waiting for her to get there.

"Did you finally figure it out? Your memory, too, is so breathtakingly pathetic!"

The comment came not from the Dhampir before her— "Let's think back carefully! I believe I told you—this!" —but from what she touched with her fingers—her own mouth. She realized this only as—snap—the scene shattered again.

"Please believe that you will be able to use at least one spell against meee!!"

Still in a patchwork space of indeterminate location, Plum recounted.

"That will make crowing over you as you waken to reality even more enjoyable! And nowww..."

Fiel's fists trembled in anger when she saw him reclining on a sofa, sipping tea.

"How many spells have you caaast? The answer, for your information, is zeroo! Ah-ha-haaa!"

She hadn't even pulled off the omit cast. He'd made her think she had. Plum had the enraged Fiel twisted around his finger like a baby, and— "Oh, Mr. Inooo? It's time I gave you some new target dataaa!"

In the game—the one persistent image within that swirling madness— "Very well, Sir Plum! I trust it will serve me well!"

"Hey, Fi?! These assholes are blatantly announcing they're interfering with the game!"

—Ino received data from Plum as Chlammy protested.

"...Interfering? Why, I can't demonstrate the presence of a rite..."

"Ah-ha-haaa, it breaks my heaaart. I can scarcely hold back tears watching your futile toiil!"

..... Outside the game, Plum and Fiel were engaged in an unhinged magical battle. Inside the game, Ino and Chlammy were engaged in...what one might call an unhinged physical battle.

"Die, Soraaa!" "I'll smash you into pieces, you monkey bastard!" Their voices volleyed back and forth as NPCs that looked like Sora flew through the air, one after the other. Meanwhile,

watching this spectacle unfold— "Hey, what do they think they're doing to my daaarling?!"

What's going on?!"

—and furiously making a ruckus in her water bowl was the queen of Siren, Laila. Somehow managing to force a strained smile was a redheaded girl— Stephanie Dola. What was going on? Laila asked. Steph answered the question in her head: It all started seven hours ago... It was when the island of Kannagari was flickering under the roaring shock from the Old Deus's game board. Laila had popped out of the bulky backpack, along with a splash of water, but everyone instead gaped at the figure delivering—well, carrying her, we should say. No wonder the bag had looked so heavy. But wasn't she still supposed to be in the Old Deus's game—?

"Pant... Pant... I relied too much...on the Eastern Union's infrastructure...its power..."

A red-haired Immanity girl sank to the floor in exhaustion.

"—M-Miss Stephanie—! Why are you here?!"

"P-pardon?! I've merely brought over Miss Laila and a letter!"

Steph snapped back, misinterpreting Ino's outburst as censure.

"A I-letter, you say?"

"Y-yes... The King and Queen of Elkia... I mean, Sora and Shiro— Eek!"

"Yesssss! My daaarling!!! Hey, are you just gonna ignore me?!"

The only one allowed to humiliate me is my beloved daaarling... Oh... Oh, goodness, my heart... It hurts..."

Laila noisily interrupted Steph with a few good slaps of her tail only to swiftly grow weaker—and smile brightly. ".....Oh... Is this—?

Surely this is what they call...love..."

"Gyaaaaaah—! Ah, no, that's not iit! You're just out of water and dyiing!!" Plum shrieked to see Laila, a Siren, incapable of living without water, had spilled the water from the bag as she leaped out and now looked to be on the verge of passing on, dying with a peaceful smile... A moment later.

"Y-Your Majesty, wh-what do you think will happen to us if you d-diie?!"

Out of nowhere—skipping the intermediate process—Plum put Laila back in a bowl as he wailed. Despite his spectral state and unlimited access to his magic, Plum was exhausted. Only Fiel understood: He must have disguised time to keep it still as he desperately hunted for a bowl of water and carried it over. She shot him an icy glare. But Ino couldn't have known this. No—Ino didn't give a shit and roared in confusion.

"M-Miss Stephanie, weren't you over there—in the game of the Old Deus?!"

Then who the hell was that—or was this...?!

"Oh, you werrre the fake. Phew... I was scared out of my wiiits..."

"—The...fake?" Ino howled, but Plum answered casually.

"Oh, but of couurse, a traitor who hadn't lost their memories?

That's impooossible."

Impossible. Ino mulled over Plum's strident declaration. Back in the bath, Sora had been saying something about impossible lengths for a cheap trick... "For one alone to get aheaaad, holding on to memories no one else possesses, would anyone agree to thaaat? Nooo one wouldd... I know I'll wouldn't. So then, it's simpllle."

00b: —Among the die-bearers is one traitor whose memory hath not been collected.

A traitor whose memory...hath not been collected... "You can't collect a memory that was never there to begin with, can youuu?"

So she was a fake—a fabrication of the Old Deus. Ino wondered: If the Steph up there was a fake, then why would Sora and Shiro—?

"I meaaan, look at it... Even if you count King Sora and Queen Shiro as one, that still makes six players in total. There are only five Race Pieces—so one of them wouldn't logically be playing, would theyyy?"

But— Plum continued, cutting Ino's thoughts short.

.....Wait.

"So at least one who shouldn't be there was there... Personally, I figured it must be Miss Stephanie or Miss Izunaaa... Wasn't sure which one."

—Wait. Wait, wait—wait!

What was this son of a bitch...? What was Plum saying?

Race Pieces?

"...Wait, what are you...? Y-you couldn't mean..."

Now then, calm down, Ino told himself. He asked, his voice trembling, "...that the players—must each wager Race Pieces?"

Tell me it's not so. Tell me I've misunderstood, he prayed in vain.

"Oh, is that not so? That's what Sora told me. That's why I brought this letter—"

Steph's quizzical answer made Ino reel.

...Ha-ha-ha... Wait just one moment, now. Don't be ridiculous.

That couldn't be, certainly not, not in this world. It must be a joke or, failing that, a dream. Ino's head—well, technically, as a specter, he didn't have a head—managed to withstand the phantom pain, and he persisted.

"W-well, now... If you could please pause for a moment. Even given these premises, wouldn't they be one Race Piece short?"

It was true the players were all VIPs of their respective races.

Sora and Shiro of Immanity could bet The Immanity Piece.

Plum of Dhampir could bet the Dhampir Piece.

Let's say Jibril, a Flügel councilor, could bet the Flügel Piece.

The Holy Shrine Maiden, agent plenipotentiary of Werebeast, could bet The Werebeast Piece. Suppose either Ino or Izuna had been entrusted with it.

Stephanie— All right, she had to have been a fake.

But, then, still—we were talking about Ino or Izuna! Even if you counted Sora and Shiro as one person and discounted Steph, there were still five players and four Race Pieces... It didn't

add up!!

As Ino refused to face the harsh reality, he was interrupted by an incessantly cheery voice. Under normal circumstances, someone speaking with such intoxicating allure would have been enough to enrapture him.

"Oh, oh, guess what! My beloved darling said he'd step on me if I lent him the Siren Piece! He called me an 'important trump card'! Squeeee!"

But under these circumstances, it elicited only rage and cut him off mercilessly.

"So where's my darling?! He promised he'd step on me and kick me and tie me up—"

Well, then. Ino nodded and accepted reality.

The bimbo plenipotentiary of Siren could bet...the Siren Piece.

Ino's eyes went dead, and everyone looked at him...with pity.

"...What's the point of the Old Deus taking our lives?"

"...Seriously? You really didn't see it?"

"Why, Chlammy, you mustn't expect too much of the big ol' puppy dog. Don't be mean!"

Chlammy then repeated the condition she and Fiel had set down.

"...We demanded all the territory of the Eastern Union and everything on it, didn't we?"

Indeed. "All the territory of the Eastern Union and all the personnel and resources in it."

"Even if Sora's bunch loses, they'll become Fi's property. So even if she takes our Pieces... We have insurance, see?"

In other words, if somehow they all lost, then their five Race Pieces would be lost. But in that worst-case scenario, Fiel, whose Race Piece would not be lost, would still secure everything in the Eastern Union—including personnel.

"...Well, of course our main goal was to win and teach those jerks a lesson. However..."

They also could prepare for a comeback from the far-removed

prospect of disaster, she added. Meanwhile— "...Uh, um... Mr. Ino...?"

As if Plum, Chlammy, and Fiel were not enough... "Did you...really not think we put in enough for the Old Deus to play?"

!!!

As if to illustrate Ino's state of mind, a shock that rattled heaven and earth once again took out the lights, casting darkness over Kannagari.

...Even Miss Stephanie was embarrassed for him. An indescribable mental shock made Ino feel as if his soul would melt away any moment.

"Oh, cooome. There's no need to fuss over details like thaaaat."

"

But no one paid much mind to the fluorescent meathead, who began fading like a dying glow stick.

"Now you see why we need to hurry up and take the Eastern Union... When will these accursed shocks stop—? Hey, Fi?! Are you drunk again?!"

"Whuuut? Why, Chlammy, you're quite small-minded, toooo... I'm not drunk!"

"—'Too'?! What do you mean, 'too'? Small-minded and small- what-else? Why don't you say it?!"

"Huhhh? Obviously she means small-chested, Miss Board."

Tee-hee! "

"You wanna talk boards? I'll throw you onto the chopping board and make a fillet out of you, fish-girl! What kind of moron would give up her Race Piece to get stepped on? You should feed your brain before you feed your ches— Come to think of it, Stephanie Dola!"

Tears in her eyes, Chlammy screamed at Fiel and Laila, possessors of racks that brooked no argument.

Then she turned her glare to a fellow member of the unfairly endowed class.

"What are you even here for?! Did you just come to flauuuunt it like these bitches?! Do you only care about your boobs?! Is it so wrong to live modestly? Is it a sin?!"

Steph screamed back, at the latest victim of Chlammy's indiscriminate rage. "I said I came to deliver a letter!"



Won't anyone listen to me?!"

...But no one seemed interested enough to do so. Steph looked up at the ceiling as a single tear rolled down her cheek.

Nope, no one was listening. Ino, for his part, wasn't ready to listen to anything. The sound didn't even enter his ears; he was about to dissolve into ash—or rather, ectoplasm, the spectral meathead. As he gazed out the window at the coiled sky, he became lost in thought.

...So all the players in that game had not merely bet their lives.

They'd put their entire races—and their fates—on the table...?

Though their memories might have been erased, they'd all agreed, even the Holy Shrine Maiden and Ino himself. Why? How could everyone—how could he—take that kind of risk?!

Ah... Holy Shrine Maiden. You had faith in Sora and Shiro, faith that they would betray each other and win. All without a single sacrifice... Ino had thought he'd had faith in the Holy Shrine Maiden's convictions. Yet all it had come to was killing—not just that, but destruction, this spectacle of doom. O Holy Shrine Maiden, what did those siblings see, what did they plan when they bet our Race Pieces?

Where is the plot? Where is the scenario in which no one will be sacrificed?

And then someone answered Ino's silent plea.

".....Oh, forget it. I'm just going to read the letter, all right?!"

This was by no means according to the plan of the resigned reader... "I shall follow the script Sora has set for me—a-all right? These are not my words, all right?!"

...but exactly according to the plan of those speaking through her.

"My dear muscle-bound abomination and all you fine n00bs."

.

Steph read—no, was forced to read—that opener. It was enough to cast a pall of silence over the boisterous scene as Ino's thoughts were brought

back from beyond. Amidst a torrent of piercing gazes, Steph braved on.

"If Chlammy and Fiel lose, Blank will humbly accept the pot."

"What? ...Wh-what the hell is she—?"

"Oh dear... Why? Is she going to cherry-pick all the best parts?"

The second line. Chlammy listened suspiciously; Fiel was still drunk. The pot: one state of Elven Gard, their persons, the rite of hacking, etc., etc.—all that had just been bait. The one who had exploited it to close off their escape had been Plum. And Plum, who now held the reins in this game, would hardly accept such— or so Ino thought, but the recitation continued, snatching away Plum's reins.

"And to Chlammy and Fiel's demands: we're adding Laila, so be good to her!"

"Ohhh, Darling, I would do anything for youuu! I swear by the Covenants!!"

"—Hey... Um— Wh-whaaaaat?!"

The third line. Laila listened with hearts in her eyes while Plum wailed and Ino remained fixedly silent. Plum had been in charge precisely because he didn't care if Ino lost. But now if that happened, if Laila was taken—Dhampir had the noose around their necks... "So now, if Ino loses, there's about one little d00d whose race's fate is gonna hang in the balance—"

Everyone listened to the fourth sentence quietly, as if in a trance.

Yes...that one little tweak was enough to reverse Plum's position completely. Ino could just say, "Who needs Plum's help?! I'll kick your asses by myself."

"As such, you can laugh off his pathetic demands. Work his ass for free! "

And Plum would have no choice, even if all his demands were rejected. He had to ensure Ino won. Even if Chlammy and Fiel refused, he'd have to cut off their escape, just as he'd originally planned. And so.....silence. The collective silence answered Ino's questions. Whose plot was this? Where was the scenario in which no one would be sacrificed?

It was their plot. That scenario was right here, right now.

They'd sent Laila along with a little

message. That was all. It was enough to sweep aside everyone else's plans, exploit them, and block their exit. It was unbelievable, enough to give them all chills.

Everyone was silent. And so the siblings—through their speaker—continued.

"A-and then... Ummm! Before I read the last part, there's this."

In the darkness of the blacked-out reception chamber, no one could see the others' expressions. Only silence, wordless, heavy, weighed over the suffocating space.

"It's an appeal addressed to Miss Chlammy and Miss Fiel... They say the rest of you can read it as well."

Steph mustered up every bit of courage—and finally held it out.

"....."

Fiel shone a light, which illuminated Chlammy's creepily insipid face as well as the equally creepy object that Steph proffered: a tube.

Decked in snakeskin, decorated tastefully, yet sufficiently for anyone to recognize its dignity, it was clearly the work of a master. When the official-looking tube was opened, inside—was a slip of paper.

Chlammy and Fiel peered inside using the light, as did Ino and Plum.

It was a formal diplomatic document.

It bore the seal of the Commonwealth of Elkia as well as that of the Kingdom of Elkia. It even included the signatures of Their Majesties the King and Queen of Elkia. A proper national missive.

The handwriting was orderly, as magnificent as could be. And it read...as follows... My dear friends Miss Chlammy Zell and Miss Fiel Nirvalen: We thank you from the bottom of our hearts for your trouble in wending all this way from a distant land when surely you must be pressed for time. We cannot but appreciate the immense effort and struggle it must have taken to prepare for this assault in such a brief period. Though it may be presumptuous, even impertinent, we are compelled to use these words to express our wish for continued deep

friendship and our boundless appreciation— Suckahhhz! LOL With love, Sora and Shiro The 205th Monarch of the Kingdom of Elkia Steph then fulfilled her duty by reading aloud the end of the letter: “I knew you’d all betray us. Love you guys!”

“...Good job, everyone... Or, as we say—GG!”

A hush enveloped the world. Contrasted with a stillness as if time had forgotten to flow, the glow of dawn peeked through the long night. The world slowly brightened. Ah, daybreak... It was a long, long time coming. The chirping of birds, the rustling of leaves, and the roaring of waves reverberated throughout the chamber.

“.....How elegant...hee-hee.”

Steph whispered, beaming madly, despite the persistent muteness of all present. Ino chuckled as Steph reached enlightenment—or rather, resignation—and came to a greater understanding of the situation at hand.

In summary...it had been a whole load of nothing. Just like Plum, Sora and Shiro had read ahead to a certain extent about the game with the Old Deus before their memories were erased. And they’d had faith in everyone—in their betrayal, their mistrust— beyond a shadow of a doubt. While the Shrine Maiden had trusted that Sora and Shiro would certainly, better than anyone else, by means conceivable only to filthy, repulsive, twisted, broken lowlifes such as themselves, so grossly defective in personality and deplorable in both mind and face— —succeed in betraying and beguiling everyone to win.

The Shrine Maiden had believed it. They themselves had believed it. Even Ino must have believed it. And so it was. That was all there was to it—a magnificent performance indeed.

“—Well, then.”

The two had betrayed and used them so thoroughly that it was somehow refreshing. Like everyone else, Ino squinted toward the rising sun as it started to flush the sky and thought:

That said, when it actually happens to you, it’s annoying as hell, you monkey bastards.

“Let us proceed with the game. I propose that we play Love or Loved 2. Have you no objection?”

Ino started walking with a cheerful smile on his face, and everyone else likewise proceeded with equally cheerful grins.

“No, that’s fine. But by the way, Mr. Ino, may I make a request?”

Everyone, questioner and questioned alike, kept smiling, but— “Could we change the NPCs to resemble Sora? And as realistically as possible?”

“Why, I concur. I, too, would like to make such a request.”

“Oh, me too! I’d be delighted to see you blow him to smithereens!”

—behind their smiles, the four of them shared a rage that roiled within. Yes.

“Ha-ha-ha, that is no trouble at all. The game has stored specs on Sora from his last play, and from that, we can build a perfect avatar. But it would hardly be interesting if he were to perish too quickly, so let us set his endurance to the maximum value!”

Yes, we are friends. We were allies all along.

“Excuuuse me, Mr. Ino. I swear on my race we shall win this game, buuut...”

“Prince Plum, please be assured that no words are necessary between comrades in arms such as ourselves.”

Yes, now that they had gained a common enemy— “I pledge to devote all the strength of my nation to hang King Sora up by his feet and smash him.”

—the comrades in arms walked off together as Steph and Laila saw them off.

Thus, at last the shocks from the Old Deus’s game board subsided, and the VR battle began. On that urban battleground where the continental domain and the Immanity Piece were once contested, this time the Eastern Union and a state of Elven Gard were up for grabs. Sora’s personal data from his last login was combined with Chlammy’s memory to simulate him as

realistically as possible—in the form of a teeming throng of NPCs.

—Perhaps this was a mistake, Ino Hatsuse thought as he ground his teeth. Having long been away from the front lines, it was no surprise he’d lost his edge, but this—!

“Hey, old fart—I mean, man among men...”

Behind him! To think an NPC with Immanity specs could catch him unawares... That’s what he got for using Sora’s personal data to spin up a lifelike representation. Just like the real thing, the nonplayer Soras read his movements to appear everywhere he didn’t expect. Ino clucked his tongue and spun his barrel around with lightning speed to spy... “...Wh-what do you think...? I wanted to look like you even just a little bit. Does it look good on me?”

“Damn you!!”

There stood Sora, squirming and blushing with love in his eyes—in a loincloth. But the next instant, Ino’s fist moved with quantum quickness to deny his eyes from taking it in. That thing soared tens of meters like a cannonball and smashed into a building across the main road. That thing had eaten Ino’s fist, the boom from which, having transcended the sound barrier, was heard about the same time.

“...Dear me, I did it again... I must be more careful...”

In the heat of the moment, he’d forgotten his Lovey-Dovey Gun—and launched his fist of justice, bound to purge all the evils of this world.

Touching an NPC decreased your Love Power. This being a one- on-one battle against Chlammy, running out of Love Power would spell defeat. Though the contact had been brief, Ino ran in panic at the attenuation of his Love Power. He went to find the NPC Sora, now stuck in the wall like a stake, and pull the trigger to finish him (in a nonviolent sense, of course) and regain some energy. Ino leaped out into the street— “Hey, you!! I never said you had to go that far!!”

—only to be greeted by Chlammy,

screaming as she relentlessly fired at the raging Sora hordes.

The rules of the game, of course, had not changed. It hardly bears saying that if Chlammy hit Ino once or Ino hit Chlammy, the game would be settled. And in a one-on-one battle between an Immanity and their Werebeast, it was a given who would win—and yet— “O—M—G! Look at that! It’s Ino! Squee! ”

“I can’t believe you guys! Weren’t we chasing Chlammy? What kind of sluts are you?!”

“What? It’s not like either of them have boobs! Go for the pecs, duh!”

Each and every Sora NPC—Sora A, Sora B, Sora C, and many others—caused quite a ruckus, all the while dressed in all sorts of outfits, from skirts to culottes to shorts. A rich variety of costumes, all designed for ladies.

—Just then, a whirlwind and a crash rushed past Chlammy, a storm she herself couldn’t even fathom.

“...Indeed, it is quite difficult not to punch them in this state... This was, after all, a mistake,” Ino groaned remorsefully as the Soras stuck into the ground and walls and soared through the air. But he smiled in inverse proportion as he shot them, blowing them away.

Chlammy glared at him as she yelled, “And you didn’t really have to give them these actions and costumes, did you?!”

“I grieve to inform you, Miss Chlammy, that those are entirely the choices of the NPCs’ artificial intelligence.”

Yes, even the AI had been made as realistic as possible. In other words, even as a software simulation, Sora could not help but troll them.

And Ino could not help but punch him.

“Mr. Inooo, there’s [secret]! Kill them, kill them all— I mean, take them ouuut!”

To those outside the game, it sounded like Plum had said “secret.” Ino, however, heard “twelve Soras, eight o’clock, distance six hundred.”

“Heh, this will make sixty-four Soras. I leave the outside to you, Sir!!”

“Leave it to meee! Let’s make this as

big and bad as we can! It’s so goood!”

Ino ran off, accompanied by a shock wave, as Chlammy shouted, “Fi! I’ve still only got twenty-four Soras! How can I catch up?!”

“...I’m, just...trying to do something...! Just a bit more—”

At some point, this game had turned into a contest to see who could take out the most Soras. And it was only natural, Chlammy admitted, biting her nails.

Plum was so confident he couldn’t lose to Fiel, instead of finishing the game with a snap as he very well could, he chose to enjoy whaling on Sora first. Ino went along with it, buoyed by his trust in Plum. Chlammy couldn’t ask for more; it would give Fiel more time to get her rite through. All Chlammy could do, meanwhile, was run.

“...Honestly... I can’t believe how useless I am...”

“Yeah... Jeez, Chlammy, you’re such a dumbass.”

“!!”

One of the Soras responded to Chlammy’s self-deprecatory remark as he appeared behind her—but her reaction was a moment too late. Though she swung her gun around, he grabbed the hand holding it and pushed her against the wall. She was now trapped and unable to move, and the NPC continued. “...You drive me crazy.

Don’t you realize your own competence and cuteness?”

“My—what...?”

Flustered, Chlammy tried to resist, but he plucked up her chin: “—You’re just so innocent. Do you really think I’m the only one who’s after you?”

.

“...Uh, uh... Wha—what are you...on about...?”

He’d said all this to Chlammy with a straight face and so close that she could feel his breath, throwing her thoughts into chaos.

No one had ever called her cute except for Fiel. And to think that, of all people (well, of course she knew he was an NPC), Sora would say it... It made her

blush and only furthered her confusion.

Help came from outside the game.

“Why, Chlammy, you’d best kill him now. Remove his fingers and toes one by one until he dies.”

“And what are you on about, Fi?!”

It came fully armed, in the form of Fiel the ruthless executioner.

Notwithstanding, Chlammy couldn’t shoot him when she was being held up against the wall. Sure, she was trying to resist, but this avatar of Sora’s had the specs of the real thing, that is, a man’s strength. She couldn’t break loose; she couldn’t overpower him—and that somehow made her heart skip a beat.

“That silky black hair... That porcelain white skin—”

Ffp... Chlammy couldn’t help but be entranced by the sensation of him brushing against her skin... “Yes. That delicious flat chest is all mine—”

And suddenly, her jumbled thoughts came back together.

He’d just been trolling her. The moment she realized this, she moved like a machine. Stone-cold, unhesitating, and precise, she lifted her knee and thought she heard a cylinder smashing into a set of bearings. Sora writhed and fell over. Chlammy dug her heel into him, regarding him as if he were no more than a stain on the floor.

“Fi, you concentrate on that rite... I’ll take care of myself...”

“Why, very well! Chlammy, you hang in theeere!”

Chlammy, now free of emotional distraction, knew what “hang in there” meant. It meant, Hang in there and murder the shit out of that Sora—which no one needed to tell her. Chlammy, eyes now completely void of light, answered the NPC by directing her muzzle at the thing under her foot. “I have two bits of news for you... First, you’re about to die.”

In the meantime, her Love Power was dwindling, but screw that.

She fired repeatedly. The bullets tore into and ripped apart one garment

after another, leaving Sora stripped naked. She kicked him onto his knees, inviting cheers from Fi and Ino and Plum.

"Second, how many times do I have to tell you...? They're not done growing!!!!!!!!!!!"

She fired again. Sora disappeared in a blaze of pink, and she turned and thought.

Plum and Ino couldn't lose if Laila was on the table. But even if they won, the spoils would fall right into Sora's and Shiro's hands; they couldn't be too eager to wrap it up.

As for Fiel and Chlammy, the tables had already been turned all the way on them. Their plot to tear Sora and Shiro a new one—to beat them—had already failed. And look how Sora and Shiro had even used Plum, who'd tricked Fiel and Chlammy. The two of them had tried to prepare for the unlikely but dire event of Sora and Shiro's loss, but what could they do?

...If those two were going to lose, it was beyond them.

"So if we can't win...we might as well let it all out... Heh-heh—"

Yes, now it was simply a game of four—a two-on-two diversion.

Having understood that at last, Chlammy's smile grew more disturbing.

"We might as well enjoy ourselves... We'll kill you all, Sora!!"

And so the NPCs that looked like Sora sailed into the sky, the ground, the walls—and exploded.

Steph could do nothing but twitch as she observed this ghastly spectacle occurring both in and out of the game.

"You call this realistic as possible?! How stupid can these people be?! Don't they know my daaarling would never say anything like that? He'd only use the most foul-mouthed insults ever!!"

Meanwhile Laila, the stupidest of all, complained in her turbid bowl.

One perhaps couldn't refute that it was natural, Steph thought.

But seeing them each display their malice toward Sora so openly: "S-still...

A—at least no one has lost... Right?!"

Despite her fear of this unhinged assemblage, Steph summoned the courage to put forth her opinion, and yet— "I wonder! I am losing years off my life to stress at Mach speed!"

"Look at how I've lost all the charisma I managed to buiild! "

"Why must I endure this physical toil? I feel it's lost all meaning!"

"As for me, I feel my pride waning by the minute!"

The four promptly and roundly rejected it. Even so—no, for that very reason—Steph cracked a smile.

"But you all...look like you're having so much fun."

.

"If Sora hadn't stopped you, I don't think you'd ever have been able to play with those expressions on your faces."

Steph looked down, and then— "Miss Stephanie, may I ask just how much you knew?"

Ino spoke from within the game, and everyone awaited Steph's answer.

Steph had been cloned and kept outside the game. How much did she remember? What did she know of the past—or the future?

Steph answered: "...I don't remember what happened just before the game, myself."

As one might well have guessed.

They turned their thoughts back to the game. Not even an Old Deus was above the Ten Covenants, which protected the Ixseeds from all injury and violation of rights. It was not possible to view or alter the contents of one's mind without permission, and unauthorized reproduction was out of the question. So Steph must have agreed to be cloned, right there at the start of the game. And it could reasonably be assumed that her memory had been collected just as theirs. But— "I do remember what Sora and Shiro said when we left Elkia."

Yes, when Steph had left Elkia with what Sora called his "trump card"—that is, Laila—in her backpack, he and Shiro told her: "—'There will be some

haggling over the game's content' ..."

They hadn't known exactly what the rules would be, but conversely, it meant the two of them had known the rules to a certain extent.

"Then they gave me this sheet...and told me to read it when that time comes."

Taking out the paper Sora and Shiro had given her—the directive—Steph remembered. Yes, that time, forty-one days earlier.

Steph had stood alone in the Garden of the Shrine, bemused.

Laila must have woken up; Steph could feel her kicking through the backpack. But Steph had no idea why she was here—and realized she must have lost her memory. She rushed to open the piece of paper entrusted to her, and— "...I nearly fainted. I am sure you can guess what was written."

Steph's sigh was met with a silent but universal chuckle. They could guess, all right. Everything. Every single thing from these last forty-one days was written there.

That it would be a game of deceit and betrayal. That their Race Pieces would be demanded as the buy-in. That Plum would betray them, and correspondingly, Fiel and Chlammy would attack. That, therefore, it would be a long game and that it was possible to leave in the middle. That the Shrine Maiden would surely have some trick up her sleeve, and thus, there would be no normal way of winning.

Everything. It's not hard to guess how Steph felt after reading all that.

"Mad, isn't it? ...Hee-hee..."

How in the world had she permitted this before she'd lost her memory? Was she just as insane as them? After all— "I didn't know why we should be playing a game of betrayal against each other, in which five races would be doomed if we lost, when someone might die in any case... I didn't understand any of these things. None of it."

She'd been torn with anxiety and bewilderment, when — "Then...I remembered what Sora and Shiro had said."

Don't worry. It'll be okay, Shiro had told her.

No one's gonna die, reassured Sora.

They'd made up their minds.

"—'Trust us... Trust that we'll all betray each other...'"

But remembering that, in itself, hadn't told her much. Trust? In betrayal? They couldn't be serious. And she couldn't be optimistic. At least someone, at worst all five races, would be sacrificed...she'd thought. Anxious and worried—shaking uncontrollably—day after day, she'd looked up at that sky. From outside the game...all she could do was wait, week after week... Yet, among all the things she couldn't trust in, there was one thing—just one—that she could: her faith in the end of that slip—her orders: "Steph, we're counting on you to stop it all so no one loses."

"Don't let us down, Steph. Sorry, for leaving you out, but..."

She trusted in their faith in her.

That was what had brought her this far—but now... "—Now, looking at you all, I'm finally able to feel relieved!"

Steph shook her head and laughed: "You're all—having fun!"

Anyone seeing Steph in that moment would be captivated by her smiling face. And yet, that smile harbored just a twinge of loneliness... "So now I have faith that the Old Deus's game will be fun in the end."

While Steph spoke so reassuringly, she thought about why she hadn't been allowed to play. She could guess.

It had been because they couldn't trust her to betray them.

That...should be something to be proud of. To delight in. But seeing the gamers before her, she felt a little jealous. A little...just a little mad she couldn't play.

In-game, Ino smirked at Steph's words. Well, now. Sora's final message had been honest and true.

"I knew you'd all betray us. Love you guys!"

It implied that, without a single sacrifice, he'd trust them all to the end—and take down the God. Now Ino

felt he had glimpsed what it was the Holy Shrine Maiden had seen in those two that he himself couldn't. What she had chosen to believe in.

"...But that still leaves some questions..."

Such as, of course, what the Shrine Maiden's plot was. No, what the true purpose of this game was. There were so many riddles.

Ino took on the most inexplicable one of all.

Why had Sora and Shiro worked with the fake? They could conclude that Sora and Shiro knew she was fake from the moment the game began, and yet— "Would they truly give their dice to a fake of unknown provenance and uncertain faith...?"

Ino thought back to twenty-three days earlier. In the bath, Sora and Shiro had handed the fake Steph their dice without compunction. We're all in the same boat, he'd even said. An act that could hardly be more dangerous... Why would he do such a—?

"E-excuse me... Mr. Ino?"

"Yes? Whatever is the matter, Miss Stephanie?" he responded with unprecedented cheer as Steph's voice echoed from outside the game. Steph, as if somehow uncomfortable with the goings-on, inquired quite sheepishly: "W-well, if I may... To punch Sora while sitting on his face... I just think it just seems a tad inappropriate! I—I mean, this is just my opinion, mind you?! Oh—oh-ho-ho..."

She spoke with such courage as Ino continuously pummeled the Sora NPC. Every punch shook the ground. The road cracked; it was turning into a crater. With no regard for his dwindling Love Power, Ino went on filling the air with thuds: "Miss Stephanie, have you ever heard the phrase 'two separate issues'?"

Sure that this was the very moment for which this VR machine had been born, Ino gave the smile of the century.

"Uhhh, well! Y-you know, they say the more two people fight, the closer they are..."

"In thaaat case, everyone must have been the best of friends during the

Great Warrrr. "

Plum, likewise outside of the game, responded to Steph's desperate attempt to patch over the situation.

"U-ummm— And Sora himself said something about how, you know, with enough stupidity, you'll end up a genius!"

"So...", Steph continued. "If you hate each other enough, then perhaps you'll end up the best of friends! Perhaps that's how just about anything works, don't you think?!"

As the thud of Ino's fists continued filling the air— "I—i-i—in the first place, didn't you all betray one another?!"

—her words stopped him, made him think.

"Sora said it himself! He trusted you to betray him!!"

00b: —Among the die-bearers is one traitor whose memory hath not been collected.

...One traitor. Not one fake or one liar—one traitor. Sora had indeed said so—I knew you'd all betray us. If that was how just about anything worked—if there was no greater faith than that knowledge— "Could it be—? Could it truly be, O Holy Shrine Maiden? Could it be—it's...?"

The words hit Ino. The words Sora hadn't said, back when the game had just begun, as he had trolled him.

Who really gives a shit who's the traitor?

So Sora had implied. Now Ino could see why. Who was the traitor? Ino himself. They all were. Everyone had betrayed everyone.

Everyone knew they'd all betray one another. Then the Old Deus bothered to identify "one traitor" in the rules. Just who on earth— —was the "traitor" the rule referred to?

It was expected that they'd all betray one another. But then, if someone they didn't think would betray them did— ...There it was—the answer.

..... Forty-two days since the start of the game: the 306th space. On the stone-paved road west of the El kian domain's capital echoed the sound of

hooves and wheels. Sora smirked with Shiro on his lap as the carriage they'd obtained in Elroble jostled them. Another sign passed by with exactly the same words he'd become so accustomed to seeing— —Select one of the seven souls held by the Old Deus to be killed, whereupon thou shalt be transported to the final space.

This Task, which had repeated for six spaces— No. Rather, this Task, which surely repeated from the 301st space all the way to the end, had been written with who knew what intent, concentrated by who knew what means. In fact...when you got down to it, it was just a cheesy play on words. Sora chuckled.

—Let's go over the rules.

03: The result of the roll of the dice shall be determined randomly, whereafter ONE of the dice used shall be lost.

10: Each TASK shall be transcribed upon a sign, and these signs shall be placed upon the spaces of the board in random order.

The roll of the dice was random, according to Shiro's random number analysis.

Yet the order of the Tasks was arbitrary, not random.

01: The seven are granted ten DICE that apportion their TIME OF SUBSTANCE.

06: Each player hath the right to create fifty TASKS at the start of the game.

The dice were granted to seven.

Yet, the Tasks were written by players.

Now, there were three rules only the Old Deus could have set.

First—the leader alone would be saved but wouldn't gain anything.

Second—the one with the Shrine Maiden would maintain the lead.

Third—this traitor rule. Yes, in this game into which the Shrine Maiden had coerced or tricked the Old Deus, there was a traitor such as none of them could have conceivably allowed—one whose memory had not been lost. From the fact that these rules had made it through, what could one infer—rather, conclude? Let's run

it down.

Who had written these Tasks, and how had they been lined up?

"That one's pretty obvious, ain't it?"

As Sora snarked, the carriage rolled on—to the 307th space.

After the load screen, they found themselves at their destination— and there she was. As Steph and Sora (Shiro in his arms), climbed down from the carriage, they saw her just ahead of them. She looked back without reaction, without a flinch, just there. Who was she?

"It has to be you. Player 7, the nameless God."

Yes. She who held a dried-up brush against her cheek, sitting atop an inkpot about her own height, floating in the air, in the guise of a young girl. Her steel-colored eyes now looked back at them and reflected not a thing in the world. There she was, her presence filled with an intimidating air as if a cataclysm were drawing near. And yet...despite all this, Sora felt her entire being seemed illusive— hollow. Like some sort of prop or doll. Sora dared to continue speaking as if to provoke her.

"This Task requires someone like you— not a die-bearer, but always in the lead—who can move anywhere and anyone but is still a player."

Pretty cheap trick for a god.

"You wrote it, and you put them all at the end while calling it arbitrary. What other possibility is there?"

Just as he was sneering, the Task sounded.

—Select one of the seven souls held by the Old Deus to be killed, whereupon thou shalt be transported to the final space.

—All right, let's go with this answer. Sora smiled more deeply.

"If someone finishes normally, probably, almost certainly—this chick's dead."

The game had been started under duress; therefore, that would be the logical result. And even suppose they were to finish and make a demand to avert that. What kind of demand

would work? They'd had their memories collected before the start of the game, so they had no way of knowing. But if Sora and Shiro hadn't allowed that—a sacrifice—then it was simple: They just had to not think logically.

"Whoever knows what demand will prevent the Old Deus from dying is the one who has to finish the game."

"...S-so you're saying...you know?"

Steph asked from behind, but Sora just cocked his head and looked back at her, his smile carved into his face like a crevasse: "Not me. You're the one who knows."

Sora's portentous words weighed on Steph. No, rather, on the one whose memory had not been collected, the one who knew what to demand—

"That's your cue, Traitor... Or should we call you Fake?"

".....Par...don ?"

The one who looked like Steph stepped back, her face wrenched with fear and confusion.

"—It's you. You're gonna fulfill this Task and make it to the goal."

Sora stepped forward as if chasing Steph, almost commanding her. And Steph, seemingly uncomprehending, gave a parched cry: "Y-you're asking me to name someone—to kill them...a-and finish?!"

"Not someone. The one who won't die if she releases them."

—Now for the final answer. Sora grinned. Release one of the seven souls held by the Old Deus? Which seven souls? One would think it would be the seven die-bearers'. Their bodies had been divided among the dice, and their souls lived on under the protection of the Old Deus. If she released them, they'd die. However! Steph was a fake! And the Old Deus was a player?! And, wait, what about the Shrine Maiden?! Ah, just which seven souls did she mean?!

Goodness, who to sacrifice—?!

...Should we at least pretend to worry about it like that? Sora and Shiro sneered to each other.

One would say the question was: Who

should die?

They would say the answer was: No one, dumbass.

If they weren't going to sacrifice anyone, then they didn't have time to worry about it.

"You just need to cancel out the existing sacrifice—bring back the one who's already died."

Yes. The Old Deus had even gone so far as to shove in that rule that the leader be spared to protect her. She carried her body with her always. This one's body hadn't been divided into dice—and the soul could, therefore, be released without leading to death.

One who was already dead and thus could die no more. One who was invisible to Sora and his companions but had disappeared with the Old Deus at the start of the game.

One undoubtedly at the side of the Old Deus who floated aloof.

One of the seven—the seventh.

"You can just say 'the Shrine Maiden.'"

Reaching his conclusion, Shiro looked at Sora as if to say, Of course, while Pseudo-Steph looked dazed. No one spoke, except for Sora, who amped things up.

"And thus! The Shrine Maiden's soul returns to her body, and we've revoked one sacrifice!"

As if dancing, as if singing, he gestured to the traitor.

"You shall be transported to the final space, and— Congratulations!! You are the winner!! Take your victory lap, savor the taste of success, bathe in champagne on the podium, and make your demand—I!"

He froze—then said it.

It was the third rule only the Old Deus could have made, the demand that could be known only by the fake Steph—one whose memories and actions had been tampered with.

"...The demand only you, the traitor, could know: the demand to keep the Old Deus alive!"

. Confusion and bewilderment left a silence. The traitor shook her head and gave the obvious answer.

"I—I don't know...what you're...talking about... F-first of all— you're saying, I'm a fake...?"

Yes. Sora and Shiro themselves knew the fake would not know herself for one. Then she must be the clone, created with the authorization of Steph herself. That made it all the clearer: She'd do Steph's will—Sora and Shiro's will. She'd betray them. So Sora calmly stuck it to her.

"—D00d. You remember depositing those Tasks? If there are only 350 spaces, and we've got Tasks only the Old Deus could've written—where are yours? Can you tell us what I said before we left Elkia? Where's Laila? Where's the letter, the instructions we gave you?"

Of course she couldn't answer. But Steph could have.

".....L-let's just suppose you're right... Hypothetically, mind you!"

She tried to argue.

"I-if I get to the goal and say the Old Deus's demand, won't that mean the Old Deus wins?! Sh-she could be demanding all of our lives, everything we wagered! In the worst case, everything—"

"Nah. Thing is...it doesn't mean she wins."

Sora cut her off. Look at the rules: 13: The die-bearer who first reacheth the goal shall be the VICTOR, whereupon the game shall end.

14: The Old Deus shall be bound to fulfill the demands of the VICTOR to the full extent of her authority and power.

The full extent of her authority—didn't impinge on their rights.

"...That's right. Simply put, you, the traitor, are the victor.

Didn't I tell you?"

If someone who would never betray them were to actually betray them—

"You'd betray me, Shiro, Jibril, Plum, Ino, Izuna—even yourself.

You'd betray everyone's betrayal."

The demands of the Old Deus—the Race Pieces, the Shrine Maiden's life, everything. Without letting her have any of it, they'd just...make it through,

without sacrificing anyone.

That was all they'd sought when they began the game—for everyone to make it.

"You're even gonna betray the Old Deus's faith that we'd never let the traitor make it to the goal!"

..... There was a long silence but for the howling of the wind and the overwhelming presence of the Old Deus, who remained disinterested in everything, her expression vague. This all went on for who knows how long, until the downcast girl who looked like Steph whispered, "Sora... Shiro... Am I...a fake?"

Her voice trembled as she asked, but Sora and Shiro replied with aplomb: "...Yeah... I mean... Look—"

"It's not like we ever had any intention of letting Steph play."

The real Steph would be in the Eastern Union by now, with Laila. Just imagining the faces of those sorry bastards made Sora smirk.

"In that case... Who am I...?"

Still downcast, "she" cried out: "Am I just a pawn?! A puppet?! What will happen to me once the game is over?!"

She shook, letting out the weakness she hadn't shown even in the battle with Jibril.

"—Did you rely on me to win the game...?"

Sora had declared that there would be no sacrifices, and if there were to be any, then they'd all go down. Steph had been impressed, and that had been why she'd desperately repressed her fear all this time.

"Did you think...since she's a fake...it's fine if she disappears...?"

But as she shouted her resentment, Sora merely said: "Uhhh, uhhh, um, th—that's— It's not, uh, whaaa?! Sh-Shiro, help!"

"...Brother... Whenever, a girl cries...you...lose, your cool... Dumb virgin."

He was truly at a loss for what to do. Shiro glared at Sora as he panicked. It seemed he wanted to say it really wasn't like that, but Steph was still

looking at him with tears in her eyes.

"...You won't, disappear... You won't, die... Don't worry."

Following Shiro's pronouncement, Sora took several deep breaths, cleared his throat, and continued: "Uhhh, let me repeat myself. We're not gonna sacrifice anyone."

For starters—why had she been excluded from the list of souls held by the Old Deus?

"...The Old Deus doesn't have the soul of Stephanie Dola.

According to the Ten Covenants, you wouldn't have been made without Steph's permission. And look! Me, Shiro, and Steph wouldn't agree to toss out a fake once the game was done! C'mon."

So, you know, they'd presumably dump her memories from this game into Steph outside or something... "Uhhh, how do I say this...? Look... Steph wouldn't betray us... So—"

Sora averted his gaze just slightly and grumpily, bashfully, explained.

"—as long as you're a traitor, we can't call you Steph."

In exchange, Shiro gave a thumbs-up and added: "...We'll see you...on the outside...! Say... 'I'm home.'"

"Yeah... Right, and then—we'll respond with your name, 'kay?'"

.....Heh. Heh-heh.

She broke out in giggles.

The traitor who was apparently not Steph took a step toward the Old Deus, her limbs trembling ever so slightly—as were Sora and Shiro, who couldn't keep themselves from giggling. Even she who was apparently not Steph could see why. Sora and Shiro themselves had no proof that they were definitely right. In fact, they'd made a lot of mistakes in this game, for instance with Jibril.

What if she made it to the goal but she didn't make the right demand? What if she chose the Shrine Maiden and the Shrine Maiden died? What if, after the game ended—she disappeared after all? And what indeed if the Old Deus had set it up so they all lost?

Countless anxieties rushing through her head, the traitor...raised her lips into a smile. She trusted them. She had been selected as the traitor because they trusted she'd never betray them.

That must have been why they'd entrusted everything to her on the last move, trusted her to betray them. Look at what they'd done for Jibril, all for the sake of preventing any sacrifices. Everyone would be smiling at the end of the game...so the traitor made her decision.

She looked straight at the Old Deus—and named the soul to be released.

"The...Shrine Maiden!"

Then, with a whoosh, the entire landscape slid. But in that moment, the face of the Old Deus, cold and emotionless as always...somehow...looked like that of a child...about to burst into tears.

A bell jingled.

In place of the girl who'd disappeared, they were teleported to a grassy knoll overlooking the sea. A pleasant voice rang out, clear as a bell, accompanied by the sound of wooden sandals.

"...Phew... 'Tis been forty-nine days since last I had a body... Scarce do I recall it being so heavy..."

From behind Sora and the others...came a figure with two large tails, clad in Japanese-style garb, swaying into view... The golden fox. I'd rather not get old... The Shrine Maiden seemed to smirk.

Sora and Shiro inwardly breathed a sigh of relief.

"Mmmm-hmm!!! Looks like we win—amirite?!"

"...I'm so...tired... I wanna, get in bed...and sleep..."

Meanwhile, they stretched theatrically and showed off their fatigue.

That same moment— Whoosh, the last two dice disappeared from each of their chests. Now back to ages 18 and 11, respectively, Sora and Shiro looked to the sky, where, presumably, the final space lay forty-four moves ahead.

Fake Steph must've made the right demand. The landmass rumbled, swayed, and crumbled... Clearly, the

game was over.

"Well... Considering we tasted defeat, I guess we can't say we kicked ass... Sigh, I missed a bunch of things, didn't I?"

"...It's not...your fault... I made...a lot of mistakes...too..."

Sora and Shiro were sullen as they reviewed their results, grieving their loss. Eventually, they would sulk off to bed and talk about it tomorrow.

"Heh-heh! Well now, you two, you've made it through all their traps, even hers—"

But the Shrine Maiden butted in with a merciless— "And yet you've forgotten all about mine? Poor me! "

—and wicked laugh, which grabbed their attention.

Expressionless, emotionless, lifeless as ever, the Old Deus sat atop her giant inkpot floating in the air, but— "...Why did ye not seek thine own victory...?"

"....."

Sora and Shiro frowned dubiously in unison. There was the Old Deus, much the same but somehow different. Her words, formerly etched directly into their brains, now reverberated in their ears. Her presence, before a menacing tidal wave, now seemed like a mere stage setting, surreal.

As if she'd quit being a god.

"...Why did ye not seek thine own benefit...?"

Even her tone seemed somehow different—childish. But Sora didn't seem to get what she was asking.

"Sorry, I'm not following. We won, right?"

They had sought their own benefit and thus won. They had gained the advantage. There was no doubt in Sora's mind. But the Old Deus's expression shifted, and she held her head as she lamented.

"...Why did ye not take it from me? Why did ye not permit me to die...?"

"...Uhhh... 'Cos, I mean, look... This is a game, right?"

Sora checked, as if unsure for a moment, and took a breath.

"Why the hell would we kill such an



epic gamer?! It's, like, 10/10, would play again!! Besides, if we let you die, that'd be a huge- ass weight on our conscience! No way we'd be able to handle that!"

"...It wouldn't be, fun... We'd feel really bad... Plus, we're totally chicken..."

"You bet your life without a second thought, and you're chicken... Quite an amusing joke!"

Though the Shrine Maiden teased him, Sora turned and yelled, his expression dead serious: "For real, man!! I can't take it anymore! I'm just gonna say it, all right?!"

He'd been planning to tell Jibril later, but instead he clutched his head and shouted: "You guys! Listen to Tet just a liiittle bit more, at least!! I can't even freakin' believe how you're just leaving him out like this!! Sure, he might be an obnoxious little bitch, but when you get this far, you gotta shed a tear of sympathy for the li'l guy!! The Tenth of the Ten Covenants. C'mon, guys!! Repeat after me!!"

—Let's all have fun together.

"What'd happen if you killed each other?! I'm starting to think I'm the one who's messed up, so lemme ask you somethin'!"

Sora recalled what they'd seen when they played Jibril: That world that bounced between taking to being taken, killing to being killed, hatred and despair alone repeating in an unlimited cycle; a world Sora's old world could have devolved into with one false step— "—Is that shit really so goddamn fun?!"

...Silence. Then... "...I understand it not— I understand it not, I understand it not, I understand it not, I understand it not, I understand it not, I understand it not, I understand it not!"

Each time the Old Deus whispered as if about to clutch her head, the game board broke further and the rumbling grew more intense. At last, her voice shaking— "If that be so, then indeed— What is it to believe—?"

"—? It's to doubt, right?"

Sora answered her blankly and without hesitation. It's all kinda fuzzy...but didn't we just prove that when you can

trust someone once you know they're gonna betray you? Sora looked confused.

At last, the Old Deus gritted her teeth and shouted tearfully, very much like a child throwing a tantrum.

"If that be so— Then answer me this!!"

The crumbling of the board reached their feet.

"Why did my host betray me? Answer, ye lowly beings!!!"

As if her shriek was the last straw, everything broke down, with just one person offering a parting thought.

"Well then, do take care of my troublesome friend here. If I'm to borrow a phrase from you—," said the Shrine Maiden, smirking devilishly like a fox, and just then... "—This is where it gets real. How exciting! "

...something black swallowed Sora and Shiro up.

The island of Kannagari, capital of the Eastern Union. Deep in the basement of the Chinkai Tandai District. Plum and Ino versus Fiel and Chlammy—the epic game that had unfolded inside and outside virtual reality had ended. The difference between winner and loser was laid out cruelly, as clearly as in a diagram.

On one hand, the winners were wreathed in joy.

"Tell meee, how does it feel? Tell meee, how does it feel knowing you couldn't pull off a single spell? "

"Heh, heh-heh-heh, ha-ha-ha-ha! I, Ino Hatsuse, look back on my life without a smidgeon of regret!"

Ino looked completely satisfied as Plum flitted through the air and riled up their opponents.

Ino wouldn't be able to do it again now that he had a physical body—that NPC massacre for which he'd utilized his bloodbreak. He gave himself over to the glorious sense of achievement, experiencing such rapture that he would hardly mind if he were to keel over at that very moment.

Plum, for his part, had used his incorporeal form to send off a barrage of magic without regard to the

attenuation of his soul. He'd bombarded Fiel with the full force of the true form of Dhampir, shutting her down—and not only that, he'd plunged her into manifold layers of waking dreams and made a perfect fool of her. He was beside himself with glee.

On the other hand, the losers were cloaked in despair.

"...I lost to a mosquito... I lost, I looost... Hee-hee— Just kill me."

"...Pant, pant— Fi... There was nothing you could do... After all, they cheated...!"

Fiel mumbled and let out a hollow laugh as Chlammy panted and consoled her.

It would have been futile to expect Chlammy alone to compete with Ino in physical prowess, let alone with his bloodbreak.

Meanwhile, Fiel had pushed her magic to the limit—no, beyond the limit. She'd resorted to a multilayer rite that incorporated a seal rite... She'd used her trump card, the seventh rite, and now the gem in her forehead was muddled, clouded darker than ever before.

And despite this, she'd failed to surpass Plum even once.

Hence, compared to the dullness of her eyes, her gem looked crystal clear.

"...Why, if I'd known it would be like this, I'd rather have been born a flower... Chlammy? If you see me in the next life, don't put me in a vase... Please nurture me in a bed full of natural fertilizer..."

"Hey, what do you mean? Where are you going, Fi? Fi!!"

The scene was divided between joy and despair, light and darkness. Steph's face was drawn as she watched this deciding moment, this literal split between light and darkness. But at this time, she still didn't know that this was better than what was to come. Thus— it all happened at once, bringing about chaos mingled with light and dark.

"?! ...Huh? Wha...? Where—am I?"

Like a muddled stream, Steph's mind flooded with memories from the past forty-two days. As she was thrown into

confusion by her contradicting memories from having been in two places at once, the shrieks of two others rang out with far more urgency. “Ghuhh?! Wh-what is this blood —? I-I’m not ready to die! I retract my previous statement!”

“Eeeee!! I-it buuurns! I’m dying, I’m dying, I’m dyiing!! My queen! Blood, blood, I beg you!!!”

Apparently, Ino and Plum had also returned to normal at the same time Steph regained her memory. They had a physical tab to pay. Ino retched up blood and started begging for his life. Plum flew to Steph’s side, descending on Laila’s wrist as she slept in her bowl. And then “...It seems my masters have prevailed after all— Oh?”

Jibril’s passionate comment as she casually shifted in had suddenly turned into a puzzled head tilt as she took in the spectacle.

Steph was shouting ironically, having remembered the game and the unending fear and abuse she had suffered at Sora’s and Shiro’s hands. Plum looked on the verge of evaporating as Laila was refusing his sudden demand for blood, Fiel was chanting Die! Die! as Ino was convulsing deep in a sea of blood, while Chlammy, too exhausted to move to help him, wailed... Hmm.

“You all seem to have thoroughly enjoyed yourself, given your smiling faces! ”

“I wouldn’t call this look on my face a ‘smile’!!!” Steph insisted before suddenly asking, “...Wait... Jibril, where did you come from?”

“The Shrine. Ah yes, and Miss Izuna is on her way as well, but more importantly—” Jibril gestured casually, and they were able to view the scene outside.

It appeared to be a cataclysm. The spiraling sugoroku board, a carbon copy of the planet created in the firmament, seeming to reach into space itself. Now it was breaking, crumbling, collapsing under the power of gravity as if the natural order was being restored.

Measuring over 350 ten-kilometer squares across, these were better considered landmasses than rocks. If even one were to fall into the ocean, it would cause a massive tidal wave, and if one touched down on a city, the damage would be catastrophic. The landscape crumbled and began melting away, as if it had never existed... ..but. “...Where are Sora and Shiro? ...And the Shrine Maiden...?”

Steph had finished the game, and as the game board crumbled...her memories had flooded in, her physical body restored.

“Would it be accurate to say the game has concluded? Where are my masters...?” whispered Jibril.

But suddenly, amidst the deluge of memories, Steph recalled what the other Steph had been compelled to wish for at the final space.

Return the ether possessed by the Shrine Maiden to the Old Deus.

...That was it. That was all. She’d been compelled to wish it.

Steph didn’t know what it meant, but it appeared that things had ended with no one dead, without a single sacrifice... “—The game’s not over yet, is it?”

“...Pardon?”

Looking at the black specks far out on the crumbling board, Steph murmured: “Because...that girl...the Old Deus...still hasn’t smiled.”

#### CHAPTER 4 - WHO ARE YOU?

It couldn’t have lasted for more than a moment. But in that moment, Sora and Shiro were stormed with hundreds of millions of memories. Unfathomable time, beyond human understanding except as eternal. Foggy, like a dream, as if about to doze off—they saw it.

Once upon a time, there was a girl who was all alone. It was an ancient, ancient time, before the world had taken shape, so long ago it would make your head spin. The girl was a god. But she didn’t know what a god was or why one should be born. And she had no one, nothing to answer her.

The world still lacked any intelligence. The girl had been born to ask “why” on

behalf of those who lacked consciousness. Doubting everything—even her ether—the girl took up her pen and kept asking: What is it to be? What is the world? Who was she who asked? Yet, however many questions she had, there was no one to ask. However many hypotheses she formed, there was nothing to respond. Amidst time perpetual, the lonely philosopher girl went on asking “why” about everything. And because she was alone in the world, she did not know just how lonely she was.

She vaguely sought someone to talk to. She created five small mechanical cubes. There were units for observation, analysis, validation, and adaptation, and a fifth to oversee and command them. It was her attempt at creating intelligence in this yet insensible world. Independent agents of reason, her wish for someone to talk to—someone to answer her infinite questions. But the mechanical wits—asked their own questions in turn.

—What am I? What art thou? What is a question?

The machines had intelligence but lacked something the girl possessed. Something she did not even know she had, because she was alone. For this reason, in that primordial world, that girl who was the first to have a “heart” despaired. She neither knew what hope was, nor did she understand it. And so, at the end of the more than ageless silence, the girl at last thought of a single means—a method to answer those questions that bubbled up infinitely within her. The lonely god, having come to doubt the truth of her very existence, at last came— —to deny herself and gouge herself of her ether.

At least she had found one answer: She had existed. She held that close to her, the answer obtained at the cost of her death.

But that day, she was denied even that answer.

On a remote hill in what would come to be called the Eastern Union. Its scarlet moon set as if on a stage, the sky wreathed in night.

The girl’s question went unheeded by a

young golden fox who seemed to be on her last breath. That fox doubted everything in the world: the Ten Covenants, the One True God, convention, destiny, all of it. The fox concluded that convention was unassailable and forced a despairing grin, to which the lonely girl who was supposed to die, her ether still dormant— —asked, Why?

The dormant girl inferred that she'd failed to die. She'd denied herself, gouged her ether with all her might—and yet, it hadn't disappeared but had only come loose. She'd merely rendered herself temporarily inert. Too lethargic to recognize her own despair, the girl asked again— "Answer me. How dost thou deem convention unassailable?"

—as if blaming the one who had roused her from deep, dreamy sleep.

When the golden fox answered that history itself was the basis for her conclusion, the girl then asked how she had determined that the fallacy of composition, the part implying the whole, was valid.

When the golden fox replied that no basis was needed for something as self-explanatory as "the strong ravage the weak," the girl then asked what weak meant and how the fox could prove that the supposed obvious needed no proof.

The fruitless argument went on and on, until—for some reason—the moribund fox smiled. She boldly stood up and asked: "—This is all quite ridiculous. What's your name?"

The girl thought—and answered: Unknown. She explained that the "you" the fox referred to and the "self" who should respond were both open to question. She told of her ether, her infinite questioning, and her self-denial at its end—everything. And finally, she concluded that she'd never even given thought to a name.

"Ah, so we're comrades in namelessness. Never mind then.

So—"

The young golden fox's smile deepened. The despair was gone.

"—you want me to prove it?"

All there was— "You want me to prove that conventions exist to be broken, that everyone, even the One True God, is assailable... That one can break convention after convention to infinity to change the world, remaking it with one's own hands?"

—was one rising fervently to reshape the world. But the girl didn't care either way. She just wanted to sleep. Proof can always be disproved, the girl told her, but the golden fox looked mightily displeased.

"You get me started and now that? You're coming with me, whether you like it or not."

The girl tried to ask Why, but the fox boldly and arrogantly interrupted her with a grand declaration: She'd unite all the races and build a convention by which no one would be sacrificed, use it to vanquish the One True God—and take his throne.

"So—let's: Aschente."

?

Though the fox raised her hand, the girl responded with only silence. She had been quasi-inactive through everything, through the end of the War and the binding of the Ten Covenants. Even now, she denied herself, so this could not be more than a shallow, transitory reactivation. She would likely return to quasi-inactivity any moment now and certainly had no power to speak of as an Old Deus. She dozed, the past and future—even the present—obscure to her... "Say it after me. We're going to play a little game."

Nevertheless, the fox continued.

"You beat me, you get this body. I'll be your host till I die."

And then, once all of the fox's grand schemes reached fruition, the frail creature remarked she wouldn't need it, so— "—Once I have the throne of the One True God, I'll pass it to you, so help yourself."

Her words astonished the girl, still entirely unaware of things.

The throne of the One True God... Did she mean the Suniaster?

Somewhere in the midst of those hazy memories of hers, had that Great War

truly concluded?

The Suniaster: the omniscient, omnipotent conceptual device.

Were it true, if she had that, even these infinite questions of hers could be— Afterward: "Nggghh, you! Thou, thou, host! Hast thou not deceived me?!"

"Eh-ha-ha! The one who's fooled is at fault. Everyone shall know that!"

Yes, if the girl won, the fox's body would serve as her host until the fox died. And so, the victorious girl found her ether bound inside the fox. Until the fox died or— "Now you'll be in me till you get the One True God's throne."

The girl's mind raged, but the fox just kept laughing merrily.

The girl didn't even realize: She was showing emotion for the first time. The god of doubt, who wasn't even sure she existed, had unintentionally given the fox courage, the will to take on the world— and they became each other's first friends. For as long as they shared a body, by the Covenants, they could never be apart.

"...Be at ease. I know well I've lost. I'll keep my promise."

By trickery unheard of in any age, the fox had made a friend who could never leave her. She looked keenly out at the giant chess pieces beyond the horizon.

"Keep asking your questions. I'll listen and do everything I can."

Strangely, the girl didn't find that she minded.

"Until I get the Suniaster and you quit denying yourself, just stay put and watch."

But the experience of talking to someone did make the girl feel something... Something.

Thus, the Eastern Union was born. Not from the girl's power as an Old Deus; it wasn't needed. Every time the fox said No, the girl asked Why. That was all.

We cannot defeat another race.

Why can ye not?

We are nothing without magic.

Why hath magic import?

We can never change reality.

Why would thou deem that so?

The girl asked Why, inspiring the fox—to create a country in the blink of an eye.

The blink of an eye to the god, mind you. To the fox, however, it was sixty years... And it ended just as suddenly.

“...My time is up. Sorry, love. It’s time you got out of me.”

The golden fox, once young, broached the subject the night they took the city of Siren. She flicked the Werebeast Piece up with her finger as she broke the news to the girl inside her. Of course, the girl didn’t know what she meant...but she could guess.

“Is it they? The Immanities?”

The fox had apologized to her before when she’d expressed uncertainty that she’d be able to obtain the Suniaster before she died.

Unable to find what she called “the end of the conventions,”

the fox told the girl she’d “entrust the game to someone.” The girl hadn’t minded particularly or even understood why the fox felt she needed to apologize. Certainly, the fox could never have been serious about uniting all the races and defeating the One True God.

But the fox had changed ever since those Immanities appeared, the girl thought. Or had she only reverted to the way she once was?

It seemed the fox truly intended to obtain the Suniaster.

“Really, though. There’s no sense in us living together forever.”

The fox flicked the Piece, smiling. “In essence, with you and I both as the agent plenipotentiary of Werebeast, there’s no betting the Race Piece.” Her next words took the girl aback:

“...Betting my life alone should be enough, so next time, I’ll leave it to you.”

“.....”

Had the fox really intended to give the Suniaster to the girl?

She was saying, If I can’t do it in my lifetime, I’ll let someone else. But she’d sworn to the girl, I’ll be your host till I die. Neither the fox nor the girl had the

right to revoke that. But what if the fox reached the end of her lifespan...?

“That being the case, we must make a new covenant to supersede the old. We must play another game.”

The fox made a proposal: Before she died and the girl disappeared with her, the girl must play a game with another and pass on the covenant. However, the girl refused. You were the one who promised to see things through, she’d insisted— “—Therefore, I’ll just cut my life short here.”

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“...The one thing I won’t do is to let you die...,” muttered the fox, casting her eyes downward, but the girl mused silently.

She was a god but also a helpless girl, existing within the fox and doing nothing more. For her ether to be passed on, the covenant required the fox’s death. Were the fox to die, were the chain of the Covenant to be severed, the girl would deny herself and enter quasi- inactivity. But perhaps, in the brief time after she was released from the Covenant, she could use her power as an Old Deus to seize the fox’s soul, grant her perpetual life, and put her soul back where it belonged. In that case, all she had to do was play the fox’s game— and win—and once again use the Covenants to place her ether within the fox.

“...I consent... O Host... But not to thy death.”

It was for that reason the girl announced that she would consent to the game and apply all her power. What she failed to mention, though, was that she had no intention of passing her ether to anyone but the fox And the girl was, in fact, unbound from the Covenant. But once she descended—once the fox’s death released her divine power— while the Immanities, Dhampir, and foxes all made up rules to suit their own needs, she realized something.

Now that the Covenant had concluded and she held the fox’s life, she no longer had the option to withdraw even from a game that put her at a

disadvantage. She now understood.

The fox had never intended to die. Neither had she meant to pass the girl’s ether to someone else. Her goal had simply been to be rid of the girl.

She’d been betrayed again.

All the girl could do was ensure that whoever won would do so at the cost of her ether’s destruction. She’d have them bet as many Race Pieces as they had players and take hold of their souls... “...Sorry, love. In spite of it all, I trust you.”

“Having betrayed and deceived me, will thou manipulate me to trust in thee?”

And she’d twist the rules to protect the fox whether she won or lost. That was all she could do.

The girl still could not fathom why this was necessary, but... “I’ll manipulate you, sure... ’Tis time you stood on your own two feet.”

Yes, this game would prove it. In other words— “’Tis time you realized... Trust the traitor. Faith and doubt are one and the same.”

If they could send the traitor to the goal, she wouldn’t destroy her ether. But one way or the other, she was sure she’d disappear.

Thus, the game began with those who longed to kill her. Or was it...? She watched them placidly and reflected.

She wondered what she had done wrong, but she didn’t ask.

The Suniaster—the omniscient vessel one might obtain by collecting all the Race Pieces and defeating the One True God.

It was perfect. She would begin by obtaining the Pieces of these five races. She would ascend to the throne of the One True God and gain the answers to all her questions... And then. And...then— ...I shall learn...why she abandoned me... So the girl thought, but she didn’t know what they meant—her trembling hands, her downcast eyes, these swirling emotions... What is it to believe? It can never be proven.

If you say it can, if you insist there is an answer... After making me feel this

way, give me a good answer.

If you can prove it, then do so... Such were her thoughts, but she didn't know what it meant.

And so, as if waking from a daydream, Sora and Shiro took in their surroundings, their thoughts still cloudy. Both they and the Shrine Maiden beside them saw the same thing. The grandeur of the land that had been swirling in the air was gone. It was a black room.

Narrow, dim, cold, stark—a space that rejected the world in its entirety. In its center was a nameless girl, an Old Deus, all alone and clutching her knees. It was...a place they knew, a sight they recognized. It was back there—their old world. This room was just like the one where they'd locked themselves away, turning their backs on everything. It felt the same. The world was closed. The girl opened her mouth.

"What is it to believe? Thou so boastfully claim it is 'to doubt'..."

Her voice wavered, scared, far removed from her divine dignity.

But Sora and Shiro...knew.

They knew this was the girl's original form.

Having seen the memory— No, even before that. Sora and Shiro had known ever since the game began, since they first met the Old Deus.

Sora and Shiro recognized her eyes ever so slightly peeking through.

Those eyes had a familiarity unbefitting of a higher race, a god.

Sora and Shiro knew those eyes...long ago... They were the same...the eyes they'd seen staring back at them in the mirror.

Not the eyes of a god or a human. The eyes of someone betrayed, hurt, struggling. A child who did not yet know what she could do, how she could live. That was why... "—What am I...?"

She could only ask. Begging. Pleading. Blaming.

Born knowing nothing, wishing nothing. Knowing nothing, yet pressed to question infinity. Knowing nothing,

yet living, trying to know, and dying. Knowing nothing, yet roused, used, fooled, cheated, and betrayed... And finally, of all things—To doubt is to trust? Were that the case... What meaning had she as a god of doubt...? As she studied this joyful lot and put forward her question laced with loathing... "Uhhh... Hey, Shiro. Actually, I guess I should ask you, Shrine Maiden."

...Sora couldn't take it, so he turned to his sister—and then to the Shrine Maiden.

"I know it's a bit late, but—let me confess. There's one thing I never got, all this time."

Sora sneered at the Shrine Maiden, his gaze reproachful. Sure, he'd managed to figure out this game's real victory conditions. While there were things he'd failed to predict or straight-up flubbed—he'd even suffered a loss—despite all that, he'd more or less gotten it. But even so— "What's the point of the Old Deus playing? I never got that part."

Well really, you didn't need a point to play a game, he thought.

You didn't even need a purpose. Prizes and awards? Those were just bonus achievements. You played because you wanted to—no more, no less. So if he had a chance to play with a literal god-tier gamer, he'd instead ask what point, what purpose, there was in not playing.

Sora had begun to consider, though, that it seemed this was not the prevailing view (a revelation that fueled in him the proud belief that these days he was becoming more and more mature). Despite his own filter, he realized the Shrine Maiden had bamboozled the Old Deus into participating.

But what had made the Old Deus play? He just didn't get the point. Why had she gone to such lengths to create this practically cosmic-scale game—?

"...Now, this is crazy, but let me check..."

Sora took a breath.

"Could it be that your friend betrayed you, all, like, I still believe in you, love,

pompous as all get out, and you were, like, The hell is that?! You hurt me so bad, and you're saying you trust me?!

Whaddaya mean, trust?! What do you think I can trust? You'd better bet your life on it if you want to prove it to me!! If you're not gonna, I'm gonna become omniscient and omnipotent and get the answer myseeelf!!" He adopted a convincing impression of a female lead, right down to the dramatic gestures, then switched back. "Right. So don't tell me that's all it was, was it?"

"Huh-heh-heh... See? She's a troublesome one."

Sora and Shiro shot icy glares at the Shrine Maiden as she cackled.

Sora'd asked the question but already knew the answer. The game was now over, and he'd gotten back his memories collected at the start. His memories indeed verified that, before the game, he'd been asked, What is it to believe?

Baffled as to the question's meaning, he'd answered, as a matter of course, To doubt. Doubt and faith were synonyms, yet, of all things—she'd demanded he prove it. Figuring she must have been setting them up to smash each other all "prisoner's dilemma" style, he'd proposed: How 'bout, if we get the traitor to the goal, your ether stays intact?

It was a game that assumed everyone would betray one another. He'd sarcastically made mention of all kinds of conundrums like the prisoner's dilemma, but could it be...? Had the detective's plan, the Old Deus's plan, been nothing more than a test of the prisoners' —Sora and Shiro's—faith?! Come on!

Sora heaved a sigh, his eyes glossed over like a dead fish's.

"...Grown-ups sure are geniuses at complicating things, huh?"

"Aren't they? It truly boggles the mind... Huh-heh-heh-heh- heh!"

"What are you laughing about?! You did it to us, didn't you?!"

"...The root...of all, this evil...was the Shrine Maiden..."

The Shrine Maiden looked away and

laughed self-deprecatingly as Sora and Shiro flung accusations at her.

"...You said it. I went and snarled it up. Stupid ol' me."

The dusky room creaked in response to her self-mockery. They noticed that with every creak, the room's master—the girl cowering on her knees—flickered in and out like a candle about fade away.

"...Right, then. Didn't I say this is where it gets real?"

Having seen the girl's memory, Sora and Shiro knew what was happening. Now that her covenant with the Shrine Maiden had been severed, she was starting to deny herself. Her finite divine power had been released just for a bit and was now attenuating without end.

"I gave her back the ether I chained by the Covenants. Yet—"

At this rate, she'd disappear again...becoming a sacrifice. That's why the Shrine Maiden calmly threatened Sora and Shiro, her face bent into a twisted grin.

"If you don't pull apart this mess we've made—you lose."

"—Not that I'm one to talk, but you're actually an awful person, Shrine Maiden..."

"I'm certainly no better than some gamer... Still—"

In a sudden reversal, the Shrine Maiden dropped her voice and looked downcast as she continued, "I was wrong... But even now, I don't know what I should have done."

Of course. As long as she was in the Shrine Maiden, the Old Deus wouldn't disappear. But in the end, all that meant was that she was hanging by the Covenants. She lacked any awareness or perception or answers to her questions—and as soon as the shackles of the Covenants were removed, look what happened. They'd been two in one. Just like Shiro and Sora themselves, the siblings thought.

But—there was one critical difference. "—I still want to help her; I do." The Shrine Maiden no longer knew if she deserved to call herself a friend, but...

"Even if mine were the hand she ultimately reached out for...I still want her to choose whose to grab. But if I don't know how to get her to do that, and if I can't—"

Finally, in that splintering room, the Shrine Maiden admitted, "—then I'll use someone who can, even if it means getting you two mixed up into it."

Even if, in the end, it isn't my hand she's holding... "She's too troublesome, too much of a child to even be tossed aside... Say something, will you?"

Even if the girl berated, scorned her, the Shrine Maiden still had something she couldn't concede. And if she was sure there was someone who could hold that girl's hand, then she wouldn't care what anyone thought of her.

Sora and Shiro smirked at the Shrine Maiden.

"Very well, then. I'll say it as many times as I want: Don't screw with us. We got this."

"...Props...for not...tossing her, aside...this time!"

Sora and Shiro never intended to let the Old Deus die. The Shrine Maiden didn't have to beg or threaten them. In fact... "This is some real casual shit to end with. Goddamn anticlimactic."

Groaning in condescension, Sora and Shiro approached the girl... The Shrine Maiden watched with slight apprehension as the two of them stepped forward, brimming with confidence. Was it really as simple as they thought? An Old Deus's very being, their time scale, the depth of their definition of the world—these were all fundamentally different from "living things" such as herself. The polar opposite, even.

That was why, way back then...the Shrine Maiden had been unable to say anything to the girl struggling with questions. She'd bound them together with a complex promise, a winding covenant, that only became further entangled with each exchange they shared, twisted in the chains... And thus was born their bizarre symbiosis, this complicated relationship. She wanted her friend—or, at least, the girl

she considered her friend—to laugh, even cry now and then, of her own volition, without the constrictions of the covenant binding her. The Shrine Maiden wanted the girl to have fun in spite of it all. That was why she'd severed that chain—just for that.

She'd had no choice but to make things so complicated.

And yet, the Shrine Maiden still had no idea what she could do after unlocking the shackles. All she could do was to dig her nails into her palms, tighten her fists, and watch as her friend cried pathetically, disappearing. They'd been through the worst together, their lives on the line so many times—for over half a century—and still... The one thing she knew was that this would be the biggest gamble of her life, perhaps her last. As she stared at Sora and Shiro, the two on whom she'd bet it all, practically praying — "...Uhhh. So you were asking what a god is—what you are, right? Simply put—" Sora let out a slow sigh, then crouched down near the girl. "Why were you born? What's your purpose in life? — Pffft!! "

His countenance was so serious, then suddenly...he broke into hysterics. Belly laughing, tears streaming from his eyes, Sora continued—making the Shrine Maiden wonder, Ah... "The hell kinda person says that?! A god-tier dumbass, that's who!!"

...Perhaps I got ahead of myself? She glared at the void above.

"The hell, man? Is your head stuffed full o' beans?! Flour and red beans?! Would you be better off living in a world where even a loaf of bread has it better?! Maybe you oughtta get yourself a new face and you'll feel a hundred times better!!"

You could practically see the snark emanating from Sora's body. As the girl gently shook, a large crack emerged within the room, shattering the narrow, dusky space... Perhaps she'd lost the power to maintain that small, dark hideaway. Sora, Shiro, the Shrine Maiden, and that so-called god teetering on the edge of existence were flung into the open sky, leaving behind the shards of that dusky space. As they plunged toward the ground,

seized by gravity's pull, Sora and Shiro kept their hands interlocked. Both of them gazed beyond the horizon—to the giant chess pieces—and broke out into smiles.

It was like their introduction to Disboard, the world of the Ten Covenants, the world some crazy son of a bitch had invented, where everything was decided by games. It reminded them of that day they'd arrived under similar circumstances.

"What, you mad?! You real mad?! Pissed off?! Hya-haaaa!!"

"...Brother, all this, just looks like...you're picking on...a little girl..."

Sora and Shiro did their best to distract themselves from the ever-popular cord-free bungee jump. This was the most basic of all gaming tactics—trolling.

"—Silence..."

"Whaaaaat?! Sorry, can't hear you!! The wind's super loud!!"

"I said—silence—!!"

At last, the girl screamed and cried, covering her ears.

"Whuuut?! We ask you a question, and your answer is 'silence'?! Where are your girlish feelings?! Are you fickle of heart?!"

Sora continued rubbing it in, making the girl wail. Or rather, as she shook her head, screaming, her face seemed to shriek: What in the world is going on?

What did I do? Why do I have to go through this? Answer me. If you won't answer—at least let me die.

...Sora couldn't help but think she looked exactly like Jibril once had.

It appeared the higher races, the Old Deus not least among them, each had their own problems. Perhaps that was because they were just far too superior? Perhaps they could see too much, know too much? It seemed they dealt with worries so elevated that lowly humans couldn't dream of them. But honestly...for her to be so superior to the point that she was now — — bawling her eyes out like some lowly human child... Gimme a break—!!!

"Hey, you!! Girl who's so smart that

she's dumb!!"

"Silence! Silence! Silence— Silence, I say...!"

A concept that gained an identity constituted a god—an Old Deus? The concept of doubt obtained selfhood—and so doubted everything? Her ether gave her no choice but to keep doubting? So that, in the end, she'd doubt and deny herself?

—The hell's that—?!

"So just what the hell are you?! I'm a total dumbass for even answering, but I will, so you'd better listen gratefully!!"

Why were this girl and the Shrine Maiden getting so serious over something so stupid? Why couldn't she understand something so simple? Sora howled in profound frustration. This girl was a god who could only doubt everything?

—Bullshit!!

"I'll tell you one thing—you're not a god of doubt!!"

His shriek denied the very principle of their argument. The so-called god of doubt and the Shrine Maiden both opened their eyes wide, asking, And your proof? Their question was met only with a condescending cackle. Proof. Proof, you say? Don't make me laugh.

—Who the hell needs proof?!

"If you doubt everything—then why are you looking for proof?!"

"!!"

If you're gonna ask something...you must think—believe—that there's an answer. If you're really gonna doubt everything, you won't even be able to ask.

"If you doubt everything—then first, doubt that you doubt everything, duh!!!"

Will you believe if there's proof? Where's your proof that the proof is valid? Will you believe if there's proof of the proof? Where's your proof of the proof of the proof?

It's an infinite regression. There is no answer. A god that doubts everything, huh? Let's throw them a bone and suppose there really is such a thing.

But even if you throw them two bones, ten bones—hell, let's just throw them the whole skeleton—even so, that faint girl right before their very eyes...

"Would she be crying herself ragged, all hurt and yelling and screaming?!"

"! Oh... Oh...!"

If we have to grant that she's a girl, bewildered by this question, crying, then here's your long-awaited answer: Are you for real? End of story.

All right. So it seems she was the first entity in the world to have a "heart." She was all alone, so there was no one to see her, and she couldn't even see herself. If the "heart" was born from questioning and curiosity, then fine. But no heart's gonna be born if you're just gonna doubt everything! You wouldn't even need one!!

" , if that is so... Then what am I?" The transient girl now glimmered like a shimmering haze on a scorching hot day, close to disappearing. Her voice was plaintive, her eyes like those of Sora and Shiro when they were children, as she held out her hands—her entire self—to ask, "If it be doubted that I, this thing, am even a god of doubt... Then—"

If even her minimum definition of herself had been wrong, then what could she trust? No... Then how would she live? No... Then, just—what should she do?

The girl asked each question, begging for an answer. Sora tightened his grip on Shiro's hand.

He did his best to ignore the wind buffeting his body, the lethal ground inching closer and closer. He had to answer this girl asking what they themselves had asked. Sora related an undoubtedly true story as if it were a fairy tale.

"Once upon a time— Well, not that long ago, actually. There was a lame-ass dumbass."

He was such a dumbass, he didn't even know how to live. Such a dumbass that he thought it would be better just to give up—to live the way they wanted him to.

"The dumbass randomly decided he was a puppet. And the next thing he

knew, he ended up as one.”

No happily ever after here. “On the other hand...,” he continued.

“Once upon a time— And this actually was a really long time ago. There was a kick-ass dumbass.”

He was such a dumbass, he wouldn’t be content living in despair in the Great War. His slightly overboard dumbass thoughts led him to think he could just create the world he wanted to live in.

“The dumbass randomly decided the world was a game. And the next thing he knew, he made it one.”

The end, happily ever after, et cetera— Except the story wasn’t over: “At the end of the day, the two dumbasses were both dumbasses. And they both made mistakes.”

The former had been too weak, the latter too strong. They both failed. And regretted it.

“—So in the end, they came to the same lame-ass resolution— that next time, they wouldn’t screw up.”

I think, Sora added silently with a chuckle. He was reflecting on this someone of whom he’d recently become aware, who seemed too familiar to be a stranger, when— “...B-Brother... I—I know you’re busy, acting cool... But, look...!”

Shiro pointed below them with a trembling finger.

Sora was inclined to screech “Eek!” but managed to keep his screams at bay.

“H-h-h-how— How ’bout I try not acting cool?!”

He panicked, his voice trembling in a way that was decidedly uncool, and quickly rambled to his conclusion.

“Just admit it!! ‘I’m a dumbass!! I know nothing!”

And yet, even if she didn’t know anything... “Say, ‘All I can do is desperately fumble around, trying this, that, and the other!! I’m so freakin’ incompetent that no matter how much thought I put into it, the only answers I can come up with will be overturned tomorrow anyway!!’ You don’t have to be ashamed.

It’s all good!!!”

And even if she couldn’t understand anything... “Give it a try—you’ll sound lame as hell, but whatever!!”

All you had to do was wishfully assume: It’s gotta be like this.

Once you realized you were wrong, you’d just stick out your tongue and take it back. You’d say, Wow, can’t believe I said some stupid shit like that! You’d drink mud, eat sand, get drenched in shame—screw your pride!

So how ’bout you go on and say that shit forever?!

And if you didn’t like it... Yeah. Exactly. Say you thought the world was flat and discovered, to your chagrin, it was round. Try saying it’s a brane world instead!! Not too shabby, huh?! Someone managed to turn the world into a game. How hard could that be—?!

“Anyway, we’re running outta time! Let’s move on to the answer!!”

Their faces stiff, bodies shaking like leaves, Sora and Shiro joined hands.

Question: What am I?

“—Thus, it all comes full circle—!!”

Just as suspicion leads to conviction, and overconfidence reverts to misgiving; just as insurrection leads to collaboration, and solidarity reverts to resistance. As the weak overcome the strong, and as the wise are also foolish; as all exists only to be qualified, and all exists in contradiction. As antonyms like black and white are only a matter of picking which shade of gray is closest for convenience!

Like a god, when exalted too high... ...is brought to tears by a human like Sora... “No matter who you are! You go far enough in one direction, you’ll end up on the other side!!”

As they spoke, Sora and Shiro reached out their free hands— the ones not in the other’s grip—to the girl whose eyes sought what they, “ ”, had once sought.

That girl was lonely and hollow, wise to the point of foolishness...and lacked even a name. The girl who might not even be the god of doubt, who questioned her ether. The girl who still

begged for an answer, hoping and wishing and longing and praying for a paradoxical doubt— “If you’ll take our hands, we’ll tell you you’re the once-lonely god of wisdom—”

“...And we’ll call you...Holou... That’ll be...our answer.”

Sora and Shiro granted her the echo of their own name—from the word hollow. The question’s answer was another question.

Question: What am I?

“If you’re gonna play us again, answer that you’re Holou, the up-and-coming god-tier babe gamer!”

“...If tomorrow, you’re gonna question again...answer that you’re, a different gamer, Holou.”

Answer: What do you want to be?

The indecisive girl vacillated for a few seconds. Then—as if afraid, as if, despite being a god, she were praying—slowly extending her unsteady, flickering hand, the girl— No.

The god— No... “ Holou.....”

...Holou...spoke.

..... Then, the Shrine Maiden came to rest on a rock the girl...no, Holou, as the god had declared herself...had awkwardly constructed in midair. Holou’s once-flickering form now grew solid and tangible.

“...Sh-Shiro... How ’bout it? Your brother figures we’re alive.”

“...I—I...agree... Hi—c...”

Holou’s gaze was on Sora and Shiro as they fell over the rock, hugging each other, verifying that they were alive, and crying. She wordlessly stepped toward the two as the platform she’d built crumbled bit by bit, descending gently. She’d called herself Holou— chosen to be Holou—stopped denying herself. But even so, the Shrine Maiden, knowing that ether was the power of the gathering of concepts, of ideas— “...However many hypotheses Holou formeth... She will nonetheless doubt.”

—she knew the reason why Holou averted her gaze in fear, why she looked even more ephemeral than ever. Holou’s divinity had stopped just



before quasi-inactivity. It probably wasn't even up to the base. She no longer had the power to create a landmass that spiraled through the heavens. She couldn't even maintain this one rock. In fact— "...Even ye...must doubt thine own words..."

Yes, even if, just as Sora said, everything went full circle—still, it was equivalent, synonymous, binary. Doubt required belief, strength contained weakness, and wisdom coexisted with folly. Whether you called Holou's ether doubt or faith, its nature was the same. And if it conformed to this hypothesis she'd begged for, hoped for, chosen— this hypothesis of wisdom... If the words she was now forming as the weakest of all Old Deus could never conclude anything, but merely list off one hypothesis after another... Holou wondered, her head drooping.

"Yet, still—is there meaning in your taking Holou's hand ?!"

"All riight! I finally got it—the low-angle shot!"

...It was a serious question, and yet, just as one would suspect, Sora interrupted her. Sora, the one suspected of being afflicted with a disease that would kill him if he got serious. He leaped up with unbelievable speed, the snapshot he'd taken from Holou's lower- right in hand.

"Gaaaah, how your looks have tortured me! For forty-two days, I have been unable to sleep, wondering what delights may lie beyond that slit by your thigh! And now, at last, I shall be at peace..."

It seemed he'd manage to capture what he'd been aiming for ever since the game began. He held his nose and, grinning in everlasting bliss, closed his eyes as if ready to sleep for all eternity.

"...Brother... That's not just...18+, it's...illegal—"

"Heh, I thought better of you, my sister! What law do you suppose may govern the photographing of a female who is millions— billions—of years old?!"

"...It's secret photography, with

indecent intent... A misdemeanor, under the, Minor Offenses Act... And an infringement on her, rights to use of her likeness..."

"Heh-ha-ha-ha, how naive of you, my sister, how naive!"

Sora shouted with such verve, it was a wonder that mere moments ago he'd looked to be on the verge of death.

"Those laws are all written for people—homo sapiens! So—!!"

"...! If she's, a god... We can do anything, we want...to her...?"

—Exactly!

At Sora's cry, they both leaped at Holou, and— ..... ".....O ye... Ye... Immanities... Homo sapiens... Mmph?!"

Sora stroked Holou's head as Shiro rubbed her face cheek-to- cheek against her own.

".....Common names: Sora and Shiro."

"Yup. Hey! Don't say 'common name'!"

Having finally grasped that one did not answer unless called upon by name— "Holou. She was once an Old Deus. Dost thou not remember?

...Ye must answer my—"

She spoke bashfully, seemingly unsure how she ought to respond. Her face turned beet red before, suddenly... "— Don't look so worried. It's not about whether it has meaning."

"...If you...just, call...yourself...Holou... That's enough."

Hollow. Empty, ready to be filled.

"We gave you part of our pride. Don't worry about that shit—"

"...Worry about, what you'll do...if you disgrace...our name..."

Looking at their childish smiles, Holou finally realized they meant to provoke her. Or perhaps she hypothesized.

"O ye of Ixseed Rank Sixteen—the lowest race." She shook them off, likely unaware of the chagrin on her face. "Though it be but an analogical inference from facts presumptive, though it be a hypothesis likely to be overturned tomorrow—"

Despite this disclaimer, Holou made a bold declaration. If she presumed Sora's assertion that everything comes full circle to be true (though it seemed

to the Shrine Maiden that Holou was simply vexed by how the pair smirked at her): "Hypothesis: As hers is the highest race—and if transcendence doth travel far enough—then next time, Holou will defeat you."

Sora and Shiro laughed in satisfaction.

"...Bring it, on... We're, ready."

"Yeah, good luck. We'll take all the questions and challenges you've got. " Perfect. She seemed to recognize her own name, so Sora and Shiro gallantly turned on their heels— —However.

Holou grabbed Sora firmly by the sleeve.

"Are thine words true? If so—"

Just as Sora began getting a bad feeling from the hole Holou's dazzling eyes were boring into him— Whomp.

She unfurled a vast scroll that wrapped around the heavens, inscribed with the questions she'd been compiling for millions, billions of years... "Thou shalt answer them all."

Her eyes prodded Sora in anticipation.

"Uh... O-one at a time, okay...?"

Soon, almost half an hour had passed. Only the Shrine Maiden noticed that the final piece of descending rock had stopped.

"—Look, I'm telling you! You're Holou! What's the problem?"

"The problem is clear. Holou asketh how she shall define herself as Holou."

"You call yourself Holou, don't you?!"

"No. Holou hypothesized that what ye called Holou was Holou.

The scope of the self is another—"

"I'm looking at you! Touching you! Talking to you! I even have this awesome picture I took of you, which, by the way, thanks very much for that!! This you is you! Holou! Any objections?!"

"Yea. These eyes thou viewest, this body thou hast touched—"

She paused seriously, as if to emphasize this important point. "This immature nether region thou hast visually recorded and gone so far as to express thine gratitude for... Those all existeth outside the definition of self."

“—Hey, you’re making me sound like some nasty-ass criminal sicko...”

.....And you claim you’re not? the Shrine Maiden quietly wondered at the objection of this unsightly lolicon, who could hardly excuse himself now. She distantly regarded his futile impasse with Holou. Holou was right. Her present form was not her true self.

“Holou’s ether lieth here.”

“.....Uh. You mean...that thing you’ve been sitting on? The inkpot?”

“—Nay. That, too, is incorrect. The appearance of an inkpot is an illusion borne of the extent of thine understanding of my divinity.

An Old Deus properly hath no physical form. This humanoid form, likewise, is but an illusion for the purpose of—”

“HA-HAAA! OKAY, ENOUGH ALREADY! WATAAAH!!”

“.....O thou? Thou. Thou. Why hast thou karate chopped Holou’s head?”

“Your head! You admitted it!! So this and that are all you, Holou, right?!”

Holou gasped. As she muttered at the apparent revelation, Sora figured it was their chance and started inching away. The Shrine Maiden snickered as she watched complacently.

Long ago, a certain fox...had made a terrible mistake. She’d thought that the god of doubt, born to doubt everything, questioning eternity—her first friend—wanted evidence to support herself as she went on doubting. Having made this mistake, the fox could hardly call herself the girl’s friend. What the god had actually wanted was just someone she could trust, who would believe in her— — and now, that someone strode up to the Shrine Maiden and whispered: “So I’d say we win, wouldn’t you, Shrine Maiden?”

Holou had ceased denying herself and stood on her own. Sora had sailed right over the Shrine Maiden’s trap.

“Heh-heh! Watch yourself, lad. Grown-ups have their own way of winning.” She chuckled. That’s right. I’m a grown-up. I ended up an adult. The Shrine Maiden smirked. She’d turned into one of those boring folks complicating the

world, the ones who’d given up on so much— But still. “...You accomplished what I couldn’t...” Yes. She’d bet that they could free Holou. He’d made the gamble of her lifetime—and won. “From the very beginning, I bet on my loss... So wouldn’t you say I win?”

She let herself be a sore loser to see what would happen.

“...Shrine Maiden... If you bet...on your own loss...”

“That’s where you lost—so we win, d00d.”

“.....?”

“A word to the wise: You’ve got something you’ve gotta say before you start on the details, right?”

Sora and Shiro laughed at this rather ominous remark and waved at the Shrine Maiden with a flourish. She eyed them suspiciously as they headed toward the edge of the rock that was just about to arrive on solid ground.

“O Host, O Host!”

Holou had scrawled something with her brush, then suddenly cried out and ran for the Shrine Maiden.

“Holou—is Holou! Hast thou any objections?”

..... “What sort of expression is that?! Dost thou not understand?!”

Holou was like a philosopher who’d just made a great discovery only to be confounded by the ignorance of the masses.

But that wasn’t the case.

“I propose that the present condition in which an observer which defineth Holou’s self perceiveth and addresseth Holou as Holou implieth that Holou can be provisionally confirmed to exist as Holou—and thus that Holou may call herself Holou!”

The reason the Shrine Maiden looked so dazed was that Holou had run to her—and confidently taken her hand.

Has she forgiven me? Is it appropriate for mine to be the hand she holds of her own volition? In the end, I couldn’t do anything. Am I really good enough—?

“You’ve got something you’ve gotta say before you start on the details!”

“...Sorry, love, I tricked you... Will you forgive me...?”

“Holou cannot forgive you,” Holou shot back doubtfully.

The Shrine Maiden averted her gaze, but Holou continued.

“For Holou hath yet to hypothesize what it is to forgive.”

“However, thy deception hath wrought what thou didst say would come. It hath changed the ending, changed the conclusion, yea, changed Holou herself.” Holou thought for a bit as if checking something and nodded several times. “And it doth seem that this change be not particularly unpleasant.”

Holou smiled subtly, probably unaware of it herself.

—Gong... A slight swaying.

They had landed—in the Garden of the Shrine, greeted by the smiles of Steph, Jibril...and Izuna. The three of them looked at Holou’s, the Shrine Maiden’s, Sora’s, and Shiro’s faces one by one.

“We’re back—I suppose one should say.”

Steph was beaming more radiantly than anyone. Sora and Shiro gave her a thumbs-up.

“Sure thing, Steph... And sorry to bring the bad news...”

“...But, Steph... Now...it’s good-bye...”

Weighed upon by fatigue, tension, and hunger, among many other things, Sora and Shiro fainted.

IDEAL END Clatter, sploosh.

Within the Great Bath of the Shrine resounded the echoes of wooden buckets clattering to the ground, among other heavenly noises. Like a reverie, the Peach Blossom Spring filled the space... Well, presumably. Unable to view this paradise with his own eyes, Sora put his faith in the power of science (i.e., cameras).

“O thou! Thou, thou, thou! O so-called Sora!”

“Don’t make me sound like some cheap knockoff! I am the one and only, universally recognized Sora— Hey!!”

On the other side of the screen, Sora was angling his camera, painting the

paradise in his mind's eye—when paradise came before his body's eyes, transcending space as if it were only natural. This particular paradise apparently constituted some crazy shit of an even higher order than Jibril, despite her having lost most of her powers.

"Holou?! For a fair maiden to let it all hang out—! Learn some modesty, please!!" Sora quickly averted his eyes.

"...Thy logic is utterly inconsistent. Were thou not quite of late visually recording Holou's nether regions?"

Verily so. She was probably at least hundreds of millions years old. She wasn't even human, and on top of that, this wasn't even her proper self, but an illusion. Who'd have thought this world had such a perfect, unblemished legal Loli? —However!

"Damn it! This is the problem with gods! Lust without shame can scarcely be considered lust... Wait a second... Maybe that's how a Loli should be? ...Mmm, uhhh, but I'm not thaaat—"

Sora muttered in deliberation of this quite critical global issue, only to be interrupted by the stark-naked deity advancing on him.

"Holou will hear thy troubles at a later date! But now a more vital question is upon us: Answer, thou so-called Sora! Hast thou defined Holou as Holou?"

"...Are you still going on about that? And d00d, I'm not 'so-called'!"

"...? But are not the cells that define the individual named Sora variable? It followeth that the Sora observed by Holou from her dimensional point and the Sora presumed to exist at the current dimensional point are separate entities, and thou art a so-called Sora! Thus, the question is from what dimensional point the monogenetic intellect Sora which defineth Holou as Holou defineth the polygenetic intellect Holou—"

"Eeyaaah, I didn't know you'd be this much of a pain in the ass!!"

"Art thou, after all, a so-called Sora? Sora hath promised to answer Holou's questions!"

As Sora snapped and shrieked at her indecipherable words, the butt-naked

Loli goddess advanced on Sora, causing him to frantically cry out. Holou jumped back, her eyes slightly uneasy.

".....Sheesh, just where the hell do you get all that energy...?"

The exasperated query echoed through the dreamlike Peach Blossom Spring... It was a sight far beyond anyone's wildest dreams: Soaking in the steam-filled bath were Fiel, despondent, and Chlammy, leaning on her; Plum, immobile and under a feminine guise, still on the verge of evaporating if he stopped sucking blood, and Laila, on whom he chomped; Shiro, taking advantage of the exhausted Shrine Maiden and Izuna's defenselessness to fluff and wash them to her heart's content; Steph, soaking in the bath, her mind drifting to a better place; and the last two participants, who never seemed to grow tired—Azril, in good spirits for having lent out the Flügel Piece, who washed Jibril, herself in not-so-good spirits.

...And lastly—Holou, moving restlessly about.

Immanity, Elf, Werebeast, Dhampir, Siren, Flügel—and Old Deus. Seven of the sixteen seeds that had hated and slaughtered one another and fractured the very planet were here. Who could have dreamed of or even imagined this? Very few. One of that number, Sora, was currently bursting with boundless vigor at the thought of all those beauties his camera was capturing.

"All right, then!" he shouted, checking that his camera was in working order before raising a glass. "So! To the Commonwealth of Elkia and its new Elven Gard domain!"

"...And... Let's not forget... To...Holou..."

The two who had overcome the vast game raised their juice glasses.

""Cheeeers!""

Jibril, Azril, Holou, the Shrine Maiden, Laila, and Steph followed suit.

""""""Cheeers...""""""

Their cheer was somewhat lacking, but to the victor go the cheers.

Note: Mr. Ino Hatsuse is absent today for critical medical treatment. We

appreciate your understanding.

"O thou, the presumed Sora."

Holou poked her head right through the dividing screen. Sora scolded her with a quick No! Bad!

"Holou, you have to address people properly. It's called manners."

"...Holou is a god. Very well, then. Hypothesis: 'Sora.'"

At Sora's overly serious admonishment, Holou puffed out her cheeks slightly, rewording things, having decided to provisionally assume the so-called Sora to be a "confirmed Sora," and asked: "Holou considers herself to have understood her host's objective—to instigate Holou's independence..." Holou must have felt guilty for failing to grasp this much. She was probably unaware, but her voice was glum. "But ye two. For what purpose did ye engage Holou in that game...?" Nervously, she was inquiring as to their motives.

Yes. A fundamental question. What had they sought so earnestly as to engage in a game of that scale?

A game with the Race Piece on the line had only one precedent: their showdown with the Eastern Union.

And this matchup bet five Race Pieces. Multiple agents plenipotentiary had put up their Race Pieces to take on an Old Deus.

Immanity, Werebeast, Dhampir, Siren, Flügel—one wrong step and five races would have perished. And they'd managed to survive this unheard-of game, coming out on top. And in the end, what Sora and Shiro and all those races had to show for it was the rescue of one lonely Old Deus—one helpless girl.

That was all.

It had yet to be determined whether Holou had such value—or any value to speak of. Putting her query to Sora and Shiro, her voice shook uncertainly as to what could justify going to such lengths on her behalf, but— "Huh? To have fun together, right, up-and-coming babe gamer?"

"...Mm. To game...and game...and, like, game...and stuff?"

The immediacy of Sora and Shiro's response left Holou suspicious—rather, speechless. They'd said as much when they'd extended their hands to her...but could that seriously be all? Though Holou was baffled, Sora and Shiro's next words were the coup de grâce.

"Well, I guess you're gonna be pretty busy gaming for a while as part of your idol career."

"...Holou suspects Sora has used a word in a sense yet unknown to her. What was thy meaning just now?"

The few seconds of contemplation it took to frame her question, from a divine perspective, would have been comparable to a few years to a human.

"I said, idol career. A god is an idol, right?! Gotta spread the word!"

Even so, Sora's answer, with Shiro chiming in, continued to baffle the girl.

"Prepare yourself, Holou! You're gonna be busy! We've even got candidates ready for your costume design!"

"...We've got...your concert venue...and even...a good composer!"

"We're sorting out all the merch manufacturers and cross-marketing ventures, so relax!"

Sora's and Shiro's motor mouths brought even Holou, an Old Deus straddling dimensions capable of communicating without language, to tears.

"...Why?! Holou is a being of manifold intelligence! Why can she not comprehend a single term?!"

Rather than a response from Sora and Shiro, though— "It is no surprise that a god (lol) would be unable to understand the grand designs of my masters."

—Jibril likewise poked her face through the screen, apparently having shaken off Azril.

...Sora felt sorry for the poor, unheeded laws of physics, but no one cared.

"Allow me, their humble servant Jibril, to explain in a manner that even a dumb god such as yourself can understand."

Jibril beamed before elaborating.

"First of all, my masters are in the process of deposing that fuck—pardon me —the One True God."

...She could have said aiming to depose or planning. But no, she stated it as a fait accompli. Holou looked cynical, but Jibril's assertion hardly surprised her. She'd heard about it when she was in the Shrine Maiden, and anyway— "...Holou is aware, though currently dubious of their sanity."

—while it may largely have been a flight of desperation, Holou herself had had the same plan. But Jibril seemed to mock such thoughts: "Then surely you must know—you can't take any of the Race Pieces."

"Hwa?"

Holou, who had known no such thing, made a funny noise and froze. Hell, had she known, why would she have demanded their Race Pieces? Jibril knew this all too well. She smiled giddily with the elation of looking down on a god.

"It is the opinion of my masters that, rather than take the Race Pieces, we must unite the Ixseeds under a common will and together challenge Tet, each race of its own will, its own Piece in hand."

"....."

Holou's expression asked why. Sora answered: "—You want us to take their Pieces and be like, 'Look, just shut up and do as I say'?"

He chuckled. "Wouldn't you say that kind of domination and coercion falls under the conventional definition of war?"

If they were just going to dominate, enslave, and trample everything, it'd be no different from the Great War. The words of the one who asserted that the world had changed—who had proven it— silenced Holou.

"However, having avowed we shall not take it, we do require an agent plenipotentiary to assume possession of the Old Deus Piece," continued Jibril.

Hmm, muttered Holou. Aware that it might sound hypocritical, she laid out

her hypothesis skeptically.

"—Hypothesis: Those fools will never select an agent plenipotentiary."

An agent plenipotentiary was supposed to represent a group in a conflict. Old Dei didn't form factions; they didn't even congregate.

There was no reason they would designate an agent plenipotentiary.

"What? Who says they need to select one?"

Sora regarded Holou blankly, tilting his head and adding: "You're Old Deus's agent plenipotentiary."

"S-Sora... Holou is a fool. Such is her hypothesis. B-but could she truly be such a thickheaded babe...?!"

Holou, utterly unable to follow, seemed to have begun doubting her own intelligence. Her face, peeking through the screen, slid down toward the floor.

"All of the Commonwealth of Elkia's victories so far—and those to come—are thanks to you, Holou!"

"Indeed, Holou must be...a thickheaded babe..."

Holou sank even further as Sora cheered, but he went on regardless.

"No one would believe that shit, right? But who cares!"

Sora pointed meaningfully beyond the dividing screen. Holou looked. It was the Great Bath, where key personnel of various races bathed.

"What if Old Deus joined this multiracial commonwealth?"

At Sora's knowing smirk, even Holou could guess. The whole world, the breadth of nations, regardless of race—would spiral into paranoia.

"That's where I, your humble servant Sora, come in! Master of Idolm\*ster, L\*ve Live!, 7\*h Sisters, Aik\*tsu! and more!"

"...Together, with Shiro... Collectively dominating, the global leaderboards, for all these idol-raising games...as Blank...!"

"To produce a sensation! To debut Holou, a literal idol! We'll have her singing, dancing, doing meet-and-greets—and reaping the profits!!"

With that, Sora peered delightedly into Holou's eyes.

"...The god of doubt and yearning... The god of wisdom." If the power of an Old Deus was determined by the strength of a concept—if that was her ether... "Doubt, longing, rejection, hope... All these things, Holou—will be your bread."

"!"

"Yes—!! All the emotions that congregate around an idol will be your power!"

"...H-Holou did not comprehend the latter statement...but dost thou mean...?"

At last, Holou arrived at understanding, though she doubted her interpretation. Sure, her Immanity hosts and the like had succeeded in bringing down an Old Deus—Holou—together.

Everything and nothing was possible... But this was just too... Holou considered, wide-eyed, but Sora proceeded to affirm her inference.

"All you gotta do—is declare you're Old Deus's agent plenipotentiary." His smile brimmed with unfathomable joy..."Then, if any other Old Deus has a problem, they've just gotta bring it on."...but was also full of something far deeper than hell itself. "Then all these prayers who think they're players—will fall on the board."

He then extended his hand to Holou once more: "Does that sound awesome or what? If you'd like that, then let's play together."

Staring, Holou took his hand again, but it made her wonder: Does this man...truly understand what he's accomplished? It had certainly been a grand game. There had never been one like it, on which five Race Pieces had been wagered. But with this game, promising no reward but Holou's independence, this man—no, his sister must have plotted with him as well—Sora and Shiro...these two... With one move.

With one game.

Had defeated just Holou.

And in accomplishing that alone...

...they had placed all of Old Deus in checkmate.

Holou, though, was the only one surprised by this fact. From the very beginning, all the participants had entered the game with some degree of prior knowledge. That was why, though his scheme hadn't worked out, Plum had bet the Dhampir Piece. It was why Azril had entrusted the Flügel Piece to Jibril.

To take those smug Old Dei and yank them down by their roots... For the gamers gathered here, that was motivation enough to risk their doom.

"...Saaay, Chlammy? Why, it's just as predicted." A trace of light returned to Fiel's hollow eyes. "This day—today—the world has quietly...turned on its head!"

Yes, it seemed everything had gone just as they'd imagined before leaving Elven Gard. But Chlammy continued Fiel's train of thought by inquiring beyond the dividing screen: "Yes, but we've fractured Elven Gard, and now there's even an Old Deus... We can't go back now." Quite so. The world would surely be plunged into a crucible of fear. Few would have the gumption to declare war on Elkia—but some would. Elven Gard, for example, couldn't possibly take it lying down, nor indeed— "...It wouldn't surprise me if your 'grumbling Old Deus' came busting in right now.

Can you manage? After you cut us off, I won't take no for an answer here."

The siblings answered Chlammy's piercing question blankly.

"...Manage? ...With pleasure... If they, bring it... We'll bring it, harder..."

"Not to mention, on top of Immanity, we've got Werebeast, Flügel, Dhampir, Siren, Old Deus—even Elf. If anyone thinks they can beat this crew, I'll say a prayer for them. "

Fiel furrowed her brow at Sora's giddiness.

"...Why, is it my imagination, or did you casually include me?"

The response she received, though, sounded surprised.

"Huh? I mean, you two have nowhere

to go back to now, right?"

?

Sora shattered the brief silence himself.

"We sent Elven Gard a royal notice of your renunciation—or should I say, we went and narced on your treason. Oh, we've got a great place for you to live, so relax. You'd better be grateful to Steph for her skills! Oh, you little..."

Chlammy's and Fiel's gazes turned so sharply in Steph's direction that one could practically hear their eyes make an audible creak. Steph turned her head away with similar effect.

"...U-ummm... S-Sora ordered me to, you know? O-oh-ho-ho- ho..."

There was a splash as Chlammy emerged from the water furiously, screaming in Sora's direction.

"Y-y—you! Just what have you done to us?!"

"Huuuh? I mean, it was obvious you were gonna lose... Think about it, it was the most considerate thing to do."

"I'm gonna tear you a new one!! But anyway, how are we supposed to undermine Elven—?"

"No, I mean—that's not necessary anymore, y'know?"

"" .....Huh?""

As Chlammy and Fiel froze, Sora, in high spirits, enlightened them.

"Y'see, not only did I tell them what you did, I told 'em all kinds of shit—everything I could think up. "

"....."

Chlammy's fists quivered as she grasped Sora's meaning. Apart from whatever lies he might have mixed in, Chlammy and Fiel had, indeed, contrived to bet an entire state. Considering the scope of their actions (which included manipulating memories and the fact that the territory had been swiped in the end), the paranoia that could result would be— "Leave 'em to their own devices, and pretty soon—Elven Gard's gonna split!"

..... "Man, a civil war in such a big country... It's gonna be brutal..."

"...In other words, totally sweet..."

Frivolously and flatly, Sora and Shiro chirped their amusement.

—Bam. Chlammy's fist smashed into the wall as she ground her teeth and thought, This is why... The more little folds and twists you built into your plot, the greater the chances for something to go wrong.

Like this. They'd sent it all crumbling with one blow and ran off with the spoils without a second glance. It was the move for which she and Fiel had been searching forever—and now it made her guts boil. They'd done it just like that, right in front of her, and had acted like it was nothing. She wanted to kill them.

"...Chlammy... Why, we must be strong!" Fiel, her eyes now full of life, comforted the trembling Chlammy. "Next time, why, we'll deliver it back to them a triiillionfold... Nor will we forget that poor excuse for a mosquito!"

Fiel's face seethed with rage, and Chlammy uttered another unsettling laugh.

In the noisy and boisterous bath, Steph sat soaking in the hot water. Complaints. Objections. Grievances. Despite all these, they seemed to be enjoying themselves.

"...I'm glad you all appear to be having such fun."

Perhaps this was just the kind of scene she'd hoped and wished for, as she managed a small smile.

—However, the next moment— "O thou. Thou, thou! Individual of indeterminate name!"

"Yeeeeeeek?! Hey, I get the feeling you just called me the meanest thing ever!!"

Steph shrieked to find Holou, out of nowhere, suddenly bathing right before her. Holou tilted her head, though, as if she'd intended no malice—or, perhaps, didn't know what malice was.

"...? But thine monikers are far too great in number. Which shall Holou hypothesize?"

"I have a name! Stephanie Dola! That's my name! True and pure of pedigree!" Holou appeared to recall how Sora had

told her proper address was important for manners, and she seemed to be mulling it over very seriously. Holou nodded, addressing Steph.

"Be that as it may, there is none who doth address thee so.

Holou will limit herself to the scope of consensus. Hypothesis: 'Ste.'"

"Can you at least make it to the end of the first syllable?!"

But, apparently satisfied with her hypothesis, Holou ignored her and moved on to the "main topic." Which was— "Ste— What is fun?"

"Wh-wh—what? Uh, well, I mean... A-aren't you having fun...now?"

Let's have fun. Isn't this fun? Holou remembered Sora, Shiro, and others saying such things, but she hadn't been able to define the term precisely. With Holou's innocently serious eyes boring into her own, Steph took a stab at it.

"U-umm. I-it's about whether or not you're happy, isn't it?"

But Holou still didn't seem to get it.

"...If it be a matter of being pleased or not, then, well. Holou finds the current state not unpleasant. However—"

"...You don't know whether this'll continue. Therefore, you're unable to form a unified hypothesis. Right?"

"—S-Sora— Thou! Canst thou read the thoughts of one whose intellect is manifold?!"

Sora answered in Steph's stead, prompting Holou to shout, almost shivering in fear.

Sora had quite keenly intuited that it must be nerve-racking for Holou to exist in a future even an Old Deus had been unable to foresee. The Shrine Maiden stifled a laugh and listened with Holou to the rest of her master's lecture.

"So you don't know what's coming. Think about that."

"Is it unpleasant?"

".....Nay. But why?"

Holou inquired as if confounded to her very core, and yet... "Dunno, man! But maybe it's that you don't know what's gonna happen now or in the future, but—"

...her expression as she asked wasn't nervous.

"—you've got a feeling it'll be just as fun as this, or even better.

Don'cha think?"

"O Host! O Host!"

Fwoosh. Holou crossed space again, this time calling upon the Shrine Maiden, who was swigging sake all by her lonesome. She didn't answer Holou aloud, merely responding with a look.

"Hypothesis: It seems that, for Holou—the current state— —is fun!"

Holou was all smiles, and the Shrine Maiden closed her eyes in profound emotion. She couldn't remember how many years it had been since she'd last smiled this gently, but more surprisingly, it had appeared so naturally just now. She had just one thing to say.

"...That so?"

That was her answer—to her friend..... And so, several days later.

"Well, then... What is thy purpose, O holder of the Suniaster— Correction."

Holou sat atop the peak of the giant chess piece at the end of the world.

"...Tet... It is best to address thee by thy name... Is it not?"

She glared at the one who'd suddenly proposed, "Let's play chess!" Her power no longer sufficed to call upon Tet, much less to resist his direct summons. This seemed to sour her, but— "It is! Oh, and in return, I'll call you Holou, too! Cool?"

Tet, the shameless One True God who had gone and summoned her anyway, keenly brushed her off. He wasn't one to mind such unspoken protests.

"...Holou permits it not. For she hypothesizes thee to be the enemy of Holou—and Holou's allies."

Her looks turned even more sour as she plonked down a chess piece.

"...Hmmm. I see... So, 'Holly,' you still want that Suniaster?"

Ignoring this refusal as well, Tet placed his own piece and addressed her with uncomfortable familiarity. It was a question he obviously knew the answer to, it being so obvious... "...O

Tet. Didst thou not say...thou viewest only the past?"

Indeed, he'd once bragged about his "no-spoiler policy." Now he just smiled. Holou sighed.

"—Hypothesis: Verily this may be a fine policy."

"Oh, I'm so glad you understand! But, hey, that's not a very good move. Boink! Check."

Tet smirked as he watched Holou's mood sour even further.

He could tell that Holou no longer wanted to know the future, the answers. He didn't need the Suniaster to see that much. Her face was enough. The thing was—it wouldn't be fun. Holou made clear as she looked at him that her ether, the union of doubt and yearning, no longer sought such things.

"But thou didst also say...that thou wished to see Holou howl."

"Mmm... Yeah, I guess I did. Not, like, you specifically, but—"

Tet laughed it off. He didn't really want to see this Holou howl.

In fact, seeing her now, he'd rather— But Holou interrupted his thoughts.

"—Hypothesis: Thy wish will not be fulfilled."

There it was.

"...For it is thou, O Tet, who will howl."

She was wearing just the smile he'd been thinking he'd rather see. She'd returned his check. Tet seemed deep in thought but asked merrily: "—Is that precognition? Or just hope?"

Another question he obviously knew the answer to: It was hope. He narrowed his eyes at the Holou who had embraced it.

Holou still smiled—though she was unaware of it—as she continued: "It is precognition. Holou hath hypothesized that she is one who sees the future thou doth not..."

—Oh my! Tet searched for the meaning in Holou's unexpected answer as he placed her back in check. She smiled with an even greater lack of self-awareness than Tet had anticipated— "That she sees the future

by which thou wilt howl, along with those who created it."

—and returned his check to her perfect satisfaction.

"...Huh. Sure. Can't wait to see it... For real!"

He closed his eyes as if seriously unable to wait.

"Kay, then here's some quick advice. Holly, you've gotta learn to be a liiittle bit patient."

With that, he stopped going easy on her and played his first serious move.

".....Whut?"

Holou made an odd sound in spite of herself as she saw all the forces of the board reverse at once. As she pondered her next move, Tet continued his attack—that most basic of gaming tactics, psychological warfare—unabated.

"Holly, you just get so carried away. If I may be frank—you're just so easy! Ah-ha!"

Holou might not have known just what that meant, but she should've been able to figure out he was making fun of her. With each word Tet spoke, he could see her mouth straining further. For instance: "Hmmm, first. You got suckered by the Shrine Maiden twice, right?"

—Erk.

"And our friends Blank just had to be a liiittle nice to you and wham, you're all over them."

—Errrk.

"Plus..."

He watched Holou brace herself.

"...You were always just in too much of a rush... When it came to developing a heart, or creating a race—or despairing..."

This time, it was Tet who looked away.

"If you'd just waited a little longer...I think your girls would have answered you."

Though Tet whispered, Holou could probably not yet understand. She only tensed herself as if doubtful, as if suspecting a hidden insult. Tet looked up, his expression mixed.

"...It looks like you've always fretted over why you were born."

Old Dei—ether—arose of concepts, of thoughts and prayers, as Tet had arisen. But the primordial gods...from back when there was no awareness... No one knew what had wished for them. So they had to choose for themselves, just like people. That's what Sora had told Holou.

"...No one knows why you were born. Probably not even the Suniaster."

But— "I guess I'd kinda like it if you just remembered there's someone who thinks this..."

The first god in the world...to have a "heart." The god who'd given birth to that girl—who'd given birth to Tet by virtue of her hopes, her wishes, her faith. He'd called her here just to tell her this, so he did.

"...Thanks for being born—y'know?"

Holou couldn't possibly know what he meant. But now she might be able to see that the words came from his "heart." Holou, rattled, gingerly placed a piece on the board.

"Oh, right, right. Of course, finally, one more thing—!"

Tet's face lit up as if to distract her.

"You think you can beat me? Now, that's what I call getting carried away."

He didn't even give her time to react. There she was in checkmate, dumbfounded.

"—Welcome to my game. I've been waiting for you forever."

As he spoke, he waved bye-bye to Holou.

"You're six thousand years late, but I'll give you a pass for having been the first Old Deus."

Holou found herself dismissed as arbitrarily as she'd been summoned. Tet gave her this parting shot.

"Oh, but you know, you're way too weak to beat me now, so you'd better work on those skills. If you don't at least get good enough to earn a draw against Blank, there is no future where you see me howl! Ah-ha-haaa!"

"Oh, there you are, Holou. We've been looking for you."

"...What, happened? ...You just, disappeared!"

In the Elkia Royal Castle, Sora and Shiro had been looking everywhere for the vanished Holou. They'd found her standing in a corridor, staring at the floor. Holou asked: "—O ye. Ye shall answer Holou just what hath occurred."

".....Huh?"

"...Holou feels unpleasant. An indescribable something hath welled up as her body, despite being an illusion, seems to tremble.

Her heart delights in fantasizing of the destruction of the one who hath planted this feeling. What is this?"

Holou asked plainly as if explaining her symptoms to a doctor.

...Well, that's... Sora and Shiro weren't doctors, but they could see the answer on Holou's face.

"...You're angry? What happened?"

"—Ohhh... Indeed! Provisional: Holou is angry!'" Holou looked as if she were recording the discovery of the century on her scroll, and bearing the same expression, she inquired further, "Well. When is your plan to destroy Tet?"

"Uh?"

"Ye will vanquish Tet, will ye not? Ye will destroy him? Will it be tomorrow, tonight, perhaps even now?!"

Holou carried on with a masklike leer on her face. As Sora and Shiro rushed to calm her, far away—at the end of the world— someone watched and smiled.

Once upon a time, it had started with the convention "Once upon a time." And it had ended without being told... That was the old myth. Now it was being carried forward into a new myth, not once upon a time, but in the near future. It had started with that convention, and now the story was finally making the transition into a myth that would be told.

"Come. Let the game that stopped that day—continue."

The God grinned as he scribbled into the empty book—the myth that had not ended— That, properly speaking, this game—the most enjoyable since

the creation of heaven and earth—had begun here.

Finally able to write of it in past tense, the God spread his arms in full satisfaction, as if welcoming every nook and cranny of this world, the old myth in tow, to loom over its edge— "—I'm not gonna give you a draw this time, nor do I intend to lose. You'd better be ready. "

"Seher report: Resolution of game of Old Deus confirmed."

"Prüfer report: Casualties: 0. Condition met."

Jawohl.

"Notify all units: Space-time distortion observed, estimated to approach deviation value."

Checking instrumentation—54,355,146 hours since War's end, huh?

"—Disconnection from Nur-Cluster and restart authorized."

Having waited for so long, at last...

"Confirm whether it is our awaited entity."

...the machine walked forth to confirm proof of their will. They moved toward the northwest of the continent of Lucia—toward that distant commonwealth... Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

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