



**Haruki Kuou**

Illustration by  
**konomi**

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# *Liar, Liar*

The Lying Transfer Student

Is Bossed Around by the

**Delusional Middle School Genius**



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Is Bossed Around by the

Delusional Middle School Genius



C O N T E N T S

# **Liars & Lies**

The Lying Transfer Student Is Bossed Around  
by the Delusional Middle School Genius



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Epilogue  
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# ***Liar, Liar***

**The Lying Transfer Student Is**

**Bossed Around by the Delusional**

**Middle School Genius**

**Haruki Kuou**

Illustration by konomi

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 **YEN  
ON**  
NEW YORK

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# ***Liar, Liar***

The Lying Transfer Student Is Bossed Around by the Delusional Middle School Genius

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**Haruki Kuou**

Translation by Kevin Gifford Cover art by konomi

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FURIMAWASARETEIMASU.

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**Hiroto Shinohara (Seven Star)**

A new transfer student to Eimei School who's become the Academy's (fake) Seven Star. He has no choice but to keep lying to stay on top.



**Shirayuki Himeji (Four Star)**

Hiroto's utterly flawless maid who uses all sorts of unfair cheats. Leads the Company, the group helping Hiroto maintain his rank.



**Sarasa Saionji (Six Star)**

The Empress, an all-powerful (fake) rich heiress. Her real name is Rina Akabane. She goes to Ohga School and helps Hiroto with his schemes.

**Noa Akizuki (Six Star)**

The Little Devil of Eimei. Clever and cute, but vicious during a Game. She has a thing for Hiroto.

**Senri Kururugi (Five Star)**

Student at Tsuyuri Girls' Institute. Nicknamed "Hell's Priestess." She's capable of defeating her foes in one shot.

**Shinji Enomoto (Six Star)**

President of Eimei School's student council. Nicknamed the "All-Seeing." He's been friends with Nanase since they were young.

**Toya Kirigaya (Six Star)**

Shinra High School's Demigod Dictator. Winning is all that matters to him. Notorious for his underhanded moves.

**Nanase Asamiya (Six Star)**

One of Eimei's three Six Stars. A beautiful and athletic young woman. Constantly bickers with Shinji.

**Mikado Kurahashi**

Former provost of Seijo School. Has sworn revenge against Hiroto for beating him.

**Suzuran Kazami (Three Star)**

A reporter for Libra who attends Ohga School. Often does commentary for Games on the island.

**Tsumugi Shiina**

A girl Hiroto met at his hotel. Lives in her own little world, but also helps run the MTCG game.

**Seiran Kugasaki (Five Star)**

Nicknamed "the Phoenix." Worships the ground Sarasa walks on. Attends Otowa School.

**Natsume Ichinose**

Provost of Eimei School. The woman who set Hiroto up as the best on the Academy, she provides regular support for his missions.



## Interlude

### Summing Things Up

#

It was the night after the third day of the May Interschool Competition's ASTRAL Game. The members of Team Eimei were gathered in a conference room on the second floor of the Shiki Island Grand Hotel. This was the first time we'd assembled in around half a day.

"...Okay. Let's take a brief look back at everything that's happened so far."

Shirayuki Himeji, the girl sitting next to me in a maid outfit, stood quietly. She walked gracefully toward the windows, then projected an image from her device.

"We are competing in ASTRAL, a large-scale Game played by twelve teams, each composed of five students selected to represent their school on the Academy. The Game began in the morning two days ago in the Special Development Zone of Ward Zero...a vast empty space turned into a computerlike world through augmented reality."

As Himeji spoke, she brought up a few more images showing the basic rules of ASTRAL, some promo videos, and so on. This was a huge event, something that only select students from each ward were allowed to join. It was a Game, too, so of course stars—the units in the absolute ranking system that decided a student's class—would change hands. Basically, unless a team finished in the top five, each of its members would lose a star. Nobody in this Game could afford to lose.

We were all on the same page when it came to that much, so Himeji continued.

"Now let's begin with the first day, when the event began. Nothing particularly noteworthy happened for us. We spent it feeling out the Game

space with the other teams, and we didn't run into any combat."

"Right, right."

Noa Akizuki, the Little Devil with the bouncy ponytails, kicked her legs idly in her seat beside me. I guess her feet didn't reach the floor. She nodded along with Himeji's recounting of events.

ASTRAL was, in essence, a strategy Game wherein teams tried to capture as much territory as possible. Each team also needed to strengthen itself and eliminate enemies in the way. Most of that was achieved by securing bases, which naturally became the focus.

Himeji's silver hair swayed a bit as she calmly went on.

"Next came the second day. Our team did engage in one battle against Ibara School of the Fifteenth Ward, which was ranked fourteenth in last year's school rankings."

Himeji displayed footage of the scene taken off ITube that highlighted our encounter with Ibara School and the subsequent battle. Nanase Asamiya (the blond former model on our team) had instigated that fight by launching a Magic Missile Spell. We'd nearly reached an agreement with the Ibara team, but things devolved into combat after that.

By the way, Spells were the consumable skills used during ASTRAL. A team's bases generated them, and they were shared across the entire team. There were four Attack Spells and four Support Spells available. Using Spells was the only way to damage enemies. The number of Spells in a team's stock was one way to gauge its strength.

"Phew..."

Shinji Enomoto, the student council president of Eimei School, sighed deeply from his spot across from me as he watched the video playback.

"From this angle, it's pretty clear that Nanase took out her device after someone from Ibara took action. She wasn't being rash at all. She was reacting, but I misread the situation..."

"Aww, cheer up, Shinji. I'm just a little bit quicker on the draw than you, that's



all. Besides, I'm a little at fault for not explaining everything..."

"You're right. Anyone else would've apologized by now."

"Hey, I think I deserve one of those, too, y'know!"

Asamiya leaned forward, all but snarling as she bickered with Enomoto. I still couldn't tell if they got along or hated each other. They were undoubtedly childhood friends, or frenemies, but they fought constantly. They couldn't have been less compatible...yet they were always together. The pair had long been notorious around Eimei.

"...Ah-hem!"

Himeji softly cleared her throat. Nanase and Enomoto looked away from each other, each giving a "Hmph!" Everyone else regarded the scene with exasperation.

"Regardless, Ms. Asamiya's quick thinking paid off and won the battle against Ibara School. In ASTRAL, the winning team in a battle seizes the losing team's territory and Spells. This allowed us to enhance our fighting powers in every way...but then *we hit some trouble.*"

"Ohhh... The Chameleon, huh?"

Akizuki took over from Himeji.

"She's that one girl playing solo for Seijo School in the Twelfth Ward. She began playing as the Clone, a girl who looked exactly like the Empress, but it looks like that was just a front to conceal her true goal, 'cause it turns out she can transform into anybody she wants to. Then she used that power to utterly destroy the Eighteenth Ward's team in the blink of an eye. We saw all that unfold yesterday afternoon."

"Yes, Ms. Akizuki, exactly. The shameless Clone, or Chameleon, who took advantage of the Empress's good name, went on the offensive. She disguised herself as a member of a rival team, destroying it from the inside. When that incident went public, all of ASTRAL went into chaos."

"...Yeah," Akizuki muttered with a nervous expression. "And I get why. There's no telling if the person next to you is real or not. The idea of Hiroto no longer

being the Hiroto I know... That's just..."

The way Akizuki nonchalantly pushed closer to me made me worry she was about to smother me with her chest.

Anyway, let's focus on the Chameleon. She was our true enemy, the one using the May Interschool Competition to cause trouble for Saionji and me specifically. I figured she had to be one of Mikado Kurahashi's accomplices. The former provost of Seijo had been ousted for meddling during the Fourth Ward Challenge and had it out for me. He must have sent the Chameleon, who'd chosen to impersonate Sarasa Saionji, the fake rich girl I shared lies with. The Chameleon had challenged Saionji, declaring that whoever beat me was the true Empress and the other was an imposter.

However, as Akizuki said, that wasn't even the Chameleon's true goal. Pretending to be Saionji was just a bluff. She could mess with ASTRAL's displays to make herself appear like anyone she desired. That added a new wrinkle to the Game. A single faker's presence made it hard to trust anyone. That was the real threat of the Chameleon.

"Yes, exactly." Himeji nodded in agreement with Akizuki.

"The trouble caused by the Chameleon is quite apparent now that ASTRAL's third day is over. This morning, three teams were defeated, either by the Chameleon directly or by another team seizing on the confusion she caused. Our team is still in the running, but we're in a difficult spot."

"Yeah. The big fight between Miya and the president... After that, the Blackout skill knocked out our vision, and each started suspecting the other was the Chameleon. They wound up leaving for the afternoon. I guess you can chalk all that up to the Chameleon, too, huh?"

"...Not necessarily." Enomoto quietly shook his head at Akizuki. He folded his arms, relaxing in his chair. "I don't want to just sit here and place all the blame for it on her. Everything I did was my choice...the result of my ego. My intention was to protect Nanase, but instead, I wound up hurting her."

"...! Oh... Ah..."

"What's wrong, Nanase?"



“! Um, nothing. But, like, Shinji, why are you trying to act all cool about it *now*, you dumbass? We’re past that, okay? You don’t have to keep bringing it up, idiot!”

“?! S-sorry...”

“Oooh, Miya’s pushing the president hard. Eh-heh-heh! That’s kind of rare. ♪”

Akizuki watched Enomoto and Nanase for a bit and turned to me once she was apparently satisfied.

“Um, so...anyway, with Miya and the president out, it was just the three of us. I guess it was no surprise we got surrounded by two teams.”

“Yes,” Himeji replied. “Tsuyuri Girls’ Institute from the Sixteenth Ward and the Kagurazuki School from the Ninth caught us. Kagurazuki just happened to be nearby and jumped on a chance, trapping us in a pincer strike. Our team split up, with Ms. Akizuki handling Kagurazuki and my master facing Tsuyuri.”

“Eh-heh-heh! I got kinda serious. ♪ I showed up a lot in the coverage, too. Maybe I have a bunch of new fans now. ♡”

“I suppose that’s possible,” Himeji said quietly, averting her eyes. She seemed to want to say more, and I could guess what.

Akizuki had certainly given a stellar performance, but she hadn’t played in the conventional sense. She’d relied on Predict Behavior, the green star’s special Ability, along with a whole bunch of mind games and behavior prompting. She was more like a true monster than a Little Devil. It would attract fans, yes, but maybe not the sort Akizuki would like.

Speaking of hideous behavior, Senri Kururugi, leader of the Tsuyuri Girls’ Institute team, nearly rivaled Akizuki. She had an Ability called One-Shot Kill that could take out a player on the spot. Everyone agreed you needed to run from her immediately. Hell’s Priestess was closing in on the Empress’s record for Games on the Academy, and she’d single-handedly raised the Tsuyuri Girls’ Institute’s ranking from sixteenth to ninth in the course of a year.

Our fierce battle with her had concluded only a few hours ago. Kururugi was a second-year, just like me, and she was so cute, too, despite her vicious personality. Just thinking about her was enough to make me sense that

domineering pressure emanating from her.

“Thanks to my master and Ms. Akizuki, we made it through a situation that seemed hopeless. However, our standing in the Game has barely improved, if at all. Ms. Kururugi fled on us, so we couldn’t steal her team’s territory. And for some reason, I suspect it’s related to the Chameleon that we couldn’t take the Kagurazuki School team’s hexes, either. In fact, we had a great deal of territory stolen from us during the fighting. Here’s what the latest data tells us.”

Himeji flipped her hand up and changed one of the projected images to a chart of assorted stats following the third day of ASTRAL. Eimei currently possessed six bases, 174 hexes, and 275 Spells. According to a live poll, only a little more than 7 percent of all students on the Academy expected us to win.

“Hmm... So we’re the weakest out of the eleven surviving teams?”

Remorse colored Enomoto’s tone. He was right, though. According to Libra’s figures, Eimei was fourth from last in territory size. Bases supplied Spells, and we were last on that front. The gap between us and the Chameleon was so enormous that I almost wanted to laugh.

What’s more, I—Hiroto Shinohara—had already bowed out of this Game.

“Master, just before this afternoon’s gameplay ended, you took all of your own Life Points and left ASTRAL. However, you had several reasons for doing so. The first was your disagreement with Mr. Enomoto over the Commander role.”

“Yeah.” I nodded lightly.

ASTRAL ran on a job-based system, sort of like the classes you’d see in RPGs. Jobs granted certain effects and had strengths and weaknesses against particular Spells. Out of all of them, the Commander had the worst Action Level, an important stat that decided the cooldown time between actions. In exchange, the Commander was the only job with access to info-gathering skills. Enomoto and I had argued over who would take the role.

“We had an agreement that if I couldn’t beat three Commanders by the end of the third day, I had to give up the Commander job. I took down the ones from Ibara and Tsuyuri, but Kagurazuki didn’t have a Commander. So I decided to defeat myself instead.”



“Yes. But that wasn’t the main reason you eliminated yourself, was it, Master?”

Himeji’s clear blue eyes peered right at me. I answered her gaze with a nod.

“Yeah, enough recap. It’s time to get to business. Asamiya, have you noticed anything odd in how the Chameleon acted on the first day compared to now?”

“Odd? Hmm, I’m not sure how to answer that... Sorry. Did you see something?”

“Geez, Nanase, at least try to think a little,” Enomoto chided. I didn’t mind Asamiya’s response at all, though.

“Well, by ‘odd,’ I’m talking about two different things. One, why didn’t the Chameleon make any moves until the second half of the second day? Her transformation power has to be an Ability, and with such an incredible skill, she should have taken action immediately. However, she didn’t make any plays until yesterday, and only truly got involved today. What was she doing in the meantime?”

Asamiya frowned. “...Napping?”

“Come on, Nanase,” Enomoto said. “She was obviously gathering data.”

“That’s right.” I grinned at Enomoto. “The Empress is famous. There’s enough public video out there for the Chameleon to gather and create a disguise. That’s not true for the other players, though. I think she pretended not to do anything initially, but she was actually gathering image data of all the other participants.”

“Ahh... Yeah, that might be the case,” Asamiya agreed. “Actually, that’s got to be it. Geni-Shino!”

“Geni-Shino?”

“Yeah, it’s short for the Super Genius Shinohara Strikes Again!”

“...”

She seemed perplexed that I hadn’t grasped the meaning immediately. I decided not to question her on that.

“Anyway, assuming that’s true, it explains the Chameleon’s actions so far.

She's got a super-powerful Ability, and she gathered image data to make the most of it. It's a pretty standard way to set herself up for victory. However, that leads to something else odd about her. Enomoto, do you remember Libra's broadcast from yesterday?"

"Of course. I recall everything perfectly. For example, I know the precise number of times I've reminded you to call me 'Mr. Enomoto.' I have the number branded on my brain."

"Um, yeah, that's great. Would you tell us how the Chameleon's attack on the Eighteenth Ward's team went down?"

"Well...the Chameleon transformed into a guy who called his teammates over and suggested they switch up their Spells. Everyone unequipped their Spells, leaving them defenseless, and then the Chameleon launched a surprise attack, defeating all four of them. Then, in the blink of an eye, she went right back into her Empress disguise..."

"Yup. That's exactly what happened. And what about Libra's announcer?"

"Hmm? Oh... Yes, you're right, that *was* a bit strange." Enomoto frowned and crossed his arms.

"When we first saw the video, there wasn't any commentary at all," I explained. "There were only muffled, excited voices in the far background. All of that was cut out during the evening recap broadcast, however. Instead, the announcer made an effort to hype up the Chameleon as a big dark horse in the Game."

"Right." Akizuki nodded. "They reedited that whole thing in such a short time."

I found that suspicious. Watching the live feed made it clear that Kazami had been surprised by developments in the Game. The broadcast hadn't looked right at all. It seemed more like a blooper reel. Yet that was all cleaned up by the evening. What's more, the media's stance on the Chameleon had shifted quickly and dramatically.

"Isn't that incredibly strange? I suspect that the Chameleon is cheating in a way that's even throwing Libra for a loop. Her transformation skill might not be

an Ability at all, but something more illicit. She's been using it to mess up ASTRAL, and it seems like Libra is trying to cover for her now."

"Hm? But wait..." Akizuki evidently understood what I was getting at and voiced a concern. "Maybe you don't know this since you're still new to the island, Hiroto, but...Libra's got a strict neutrality policy. People call it the fairest organization on the whole Academy."

"Yeah, I know that much. Libra wouldn't have been chosen to run such a large event if it wasn't trustworthy. Still, there's something weird going on. Libra changed that footage for a reason. A serious one. It wants to keep this evening rolling as though nothing were wrong. Until we can figure out why, nobody will be able to stop the Chameleon's rampage."

"You're right," Himeji said as she took the reins of the conversation. "And that presents an issue. Since Libra is also helping to run this large-scale event, it's not allowed to make contact with any of its participants. I'm sure Libra must have an office somewhere nearby, but I haven't seen anyone from the organization in the past three days. Active participants in ASTRAL can't interact directly with Libra members."

"Yep. And that's why I decided to leave the Game for now." I gave my teammates a grin. "Now that I'm not in the Game, I can reach out to Libra and ask directly what's happening. Hopefully, I'll be able to use an unconventional method to take back the Game for us, too."

"Take it back?" Nanase Asamiya repeated. "But you're already dead, Shino."

"Yeah, kind of...but don't forget about MTCG, the secondary event for all non-ASTRAL contestants. Its top prize is a wild card entry spot in ASTRAL. I'm sure the intended purpose is to encourage talented students from each ward to join and become a sixth player for their school team. However, it's also a chance for me to come back."

I spoke as boldly as I could. Basically, that wild card was my ticket back into ASTRAL. I'd asked my classmate Tsuji, who was participating in MTCG, and he'd told me that Mayu Minakami, our best shot at an extra player, had already bowed out. It seemed like as good a chance for me as any.

"Wait. Isn't that a little overly optimistic? I know you're my darling Hiroto, but



do you think you'll win it that easily?" Akizuki said.

"Calling it easy is definitely wrong. I don't think it's impossible, though. Libra runs MTCG, remember? It oversees the rules, the gameplay—everything. If I can get in touch with some Libra members, maybe we can work together. Arrangements like that are always a possibility."

"Wow..." Akizuki stared at me, mouth half-open, like she couldn't believe what she'd heard.

Enomoto, meanwhile, offered his thoughts. "You took yourself out of ASTRAL so you could contact Libra, get its support, win MTCG, and then return to ASTRAL? You saw that the Chameleon upset the Game and planned all of that out? Truly?"

His voice trembled slightly.

I smirked, maintaining my Seven Star facade all the while.

"How about it? Still think I'm not cut out to be the leader?"

# Chapter 1

## The Signal for the Comeback

#

It was nine in the evening when Suzuran Kazami's message arrived.

All it said was *I want to explain the rules of MTCG to you*. Libra did the same for everyone eliminated from ASTRAL. She asked that I report to a meeting room on the hotel's second floor, different from where the Eimei team had held its meeting.

"Um... Have a seat, meow."

Although smaller, the room wasn't too different from the other one I'd been in. This one had single plush seats instead of a sofa.

Suzuran Kazami sat at the far end. She was a Three Star and attended Ohga School with Saionji. A cap rested on top of her chestnut-colored hair, and she had on her armband with the words *Ace Reporter* written on it. Kazami was an honest girl who put her all into everything. Her boyish style and energetic demeanor gave her a cute charm. Pretty much anyone would've enjoyed having her around.

That usual bubblyness was conspicuously absent today, however. Something downtrodden lurked in her eyes, and she rested both hands on her lap. She stole little glances at me like a wary animal. It was extremely out of character.

"Um... Aren't you gonna sit down? L-like, if you wanna stand up, Shinohara, that's fine, but..."

"I guess I can sit, then."

Kazami timidly offered me a seat, showing none of the revved-up excitement I'd come to expect from her. I took a chair across from her and got down to business immediately.

“So...you were going to explain the rules of MTCG to me, right?”

“R...right. Yes, you’re free to join, of course, and if you win, you’ll be allowed back into ASTRAL. Oh, but you already know that, right? We tell this to everyone who qualifies...”

Kazami flipped through some papers. My simple question had really flustered her. She pretended to act unaffected, but her face was quite obviously tense.

“Kazami...is there something else you want to tell me?”

“...!”

Her shoulders twitched at my question. I couldn’t blame her for the reaction. Right before I dropped out of ASTRAL, I had given Libra a pretty direct message. Kazami had to know I was here with some kind of ulterior motive.

“Um, I don’t know what you’re talking about... Heh-heh...”

She shook her head, refusing to make eye contact with me. It was a pretty feeble lie, but she was clearly trying to tell me not to press any further.

*But your being here must mean you want to help, right?* I thought as I watched Kazami.

That had to be the case. Her message claimed she wanted to explain MTCG rules, but plenty of other people besides Kazami herself could do so. Had some unknown Libra member greeted me in this room instead of her, I would’ve known she didn’t want me to get involved. Surely she knew that as well as I did.

*So she’s refusing to help on the surface, but there’s some part of her that wants to be persuaded. She wants to tell me everything. Okay... If that’s her wish, I’ll make it come true.*

“...Shinohara?”

I smiled and slowly stood from my seat. Kazami looked confused, but I paid that no attention. I maintained my composure as I walked to the door. The latch clicked as I pulled it open.

“Oh, Shinohara. I sure didn’t expect to see you here.”

Sarasa Saionji, the greatest (fake) rich girl on the island and former Seven



Star, had arrived, just as planned. She was my partner in crime. I lied about my rank and she was pretending to be a different person. If either of us got exposed, we'd both go down together, a situation that had resulted from a very unusual string of situations that had forced us to make an alliance. Saionji needed to defeat the Chameleon to prove her identity, making that imposter our common enemy.

However, Saionji was here primarily because she was a student at Ohga School and friends with Suzuran Kazami. That's why I'd asked Himeji to send a note inviting Saionji over.

After greeting me with her typical superior act, Saionji looked around and whispered, "Just let me in, Shinohara. What'll you do if someone sees us?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know."

I shrugged at those ruby-red eyes staring at me from point-blank range and beckoned her inside. It was a little unfair for her to complain after she'd kept me waiting for ten minutes outside her room early this morning, but whatever.

Saionji's shoes tapping on the floor provided the only sounds in the room for a while. She looked at the glassy-eyed Kazami from across the glass table and rested a hand on her hip. Ultimately, Kazami broke the silence.

"S-Sarasa...? Um, you can't just come in here. Libra members aren't allowed to talk to ASTRAL players..."

"So what? That's not written in the rules. Besides, I just want to have a fun chat with my friend, and I don't think anyone has a right to stop me."

"F-friend? O-okay, but..."

"What's wrong? Do you not think of me as a friend?"

"O-of course I do! You're very dear to me..."

"Oh? Heh-heh! I am, huh? What an honor."

Kazami's reply prompted Saionji to cross her arms haughtily. Although she maintained her better-than-you tone, I caught the hints of a pleased smile on her face.

"...Don't get too worked up, Saionji. You usually act a lot more like a queen."

“Sh-shut up! I can’t perform as well as you. And I only act that way around you.”

With our eyes still on Kazami, we held a whispered conversation.

“So...why are you here, Sarasa? Did Shinohara invite you...?” Kazami asked.

“Yeah, I called her over,” I answered with a nod. Normally, I wouldn’t volunteer that information, but there was no need to keep it hidden this time. “I’m sure you know that the Chameleon declared war on the Empress, creating a ridiculous race to see who can beat me first, right? I have no intention of losing to anyone, but the Chameleon is getting obnoxious. It hardly feels like she’s even playing the same Game anymore. So Saionji and I decided to call a truce for now. The enemy of my enemy is my friend, and all that.”

“Right. I can’t even *begin* to explain how reluctant I am to join forces with Shinohara, but my hands are tied, so...”

“I—I see...”

Kazami nodded, accepting the story we pushed on her.

“Basically, we need to do something about the Chameleon. Regardless of whether she’s cheating or not, it’s on us to beat her. And I think *your* help will be indispensable,” I explained. “I suspect you know something about the Chameleon, perhaps even her actual identity. It’s the only reason why a historically neutral group like Libra would favor that imposter so heavily.”

“...”

“Tell us, Kazami,” I urged. “Are you in trouble? Has the Chameleon got something on you, too?”

“...! N-no, not really. I appreciate the worry, but you’re barking up the wrong tree.” She shivered a bit, and her hands were clenched tightly. Kazami looked as though she was in pain, yet she still shook her head.

“We...we just can’t! I can’t let you get involved, no matter what. This is strictly our problem...Libra’s problem. You guys are very nice, but accepting your help would be cheating. We can’t do it!”

Kazami’s refusal unintentionally revealed that there was indeed something

going on with Libra and the Chameleon. She obviously wouldn't give us any specifics, though, so it was time to move to my next tactic. However, Saionji took a step forward before I could say more.

"Listen, Lily..." Saionji ran a hand through her gorgeous hair.

Kazami's eyes went wide. "...! That was my nickname in middle school... Why do you know it?"

"Why wouldn't I? I was your fan well before I got to know you at Ohga. I watched you commentate on my device all the time, even back in your earliest days with Libra. I'm still pretty fond of your old nickname."

Saionji wore a nefariously disarming smile as she approached her friend. She leaned forward to look Kazami straight in the eye. Her red locks swayed in the air.

"But don't insult me, okay? You don't want to involve us? It wouldn't be fair to let us give you a hand? Don't be silly. Who decided all of that for you? That guy over there and I aren't the types to get crushed simply because we chose to help with your problems."

"B-but..."

"No buts. Weren't you listening? Shinohara and I have to do something about the Chameleon...and we need your cooperation, all right? We're the ones making a request. All you're doing is helping a friend. So how about it?"

"That...that's not fair..."

"Heh-heh! Maybe not. Outside of Games, I don't really care how unfair people are."

Saionji reached out to wipe a tear off Kazami's face. It was a rather bold thing to do, but it seemed perfectly appropriate when she was in Empress mode.

"...All right, meow."





I don't know if that gesture was what sealed it, but Kazami finally nodded.

"If you promise to trust Libra...I'll tell you everything."

We gave Kazami a little time to collect herself. Once she was ready, she walked us through the whole story, bit by bit.

"So...first off, the Chameleon is an illegal player."

Kazami lowered her head as she spoke. She was sitting with Saionji while I leaned against the nearest wall, arms loosely folded. Saionji had jokingly invited me to sit next to her, but I'd politely turned her down.

Kazami stole a glance at me before continuing.

"The account name is unknown. It's written as three question marks. The owner's not from any ward on the Academy. She's got no right to join a Game with stars on the line, but she created an account and forced her way into ASTRAL."

"That's kind of what I figured," I said.

"Right? But...it's not like there was nothing to be done about that. Fake accounts are a violation, and Seijo School had already announced it wouldn't participate in the May Interschool Competition."

"So why is the Chameleon still allowed to participate?"

"Well... Heh... I hate to admit it, but it looks like the Chameleon has some allies among the administrators running ASTRAL. The Academy's Event Management Committee answers directly to the Board of Regents. Some bad guys must've wriggled their way in at some point."

*Ah... Maybe that's how Kurahashi got involved?*

Kazami wasn't in a position to give names, but her explanation left me confident Mikado Kurahashi still held influence with the Academy's Board of Regents. Sticking his own handpicked player into the Game must have been simple for him.

"An extra player should've been fine. That's what I thought anyway... But that was a big mistake."

“Really?” I asked.

“Yeah. We...edited a lot of the ITube video, so I don’t think anyone’s picked up on it, but the Chameleon’s account data is completely bugged out. Her Action Level is one. One! And her job’s listed as ‘Transcendent,’ which is basically a combination of all the perks of Commander, Soldier, Mage, Spy, and Guardian. Plus, her bases give her new Spells every sixty seconds... All her parameters are broken.”

“Huh...?” Saionji blinked in surprise. “Th-that seems a little...”

“We had no idea about any of this!” Kazami protested. “Libra’s only operating in a support role. The event committee is running ASTRAL. Some of its members are connected to the Chameleon, and they’re letting everything she does slide. They’re providing the video data she uses for her transformations, too.”

“Are you the only one who knows something’s up?” I asked.

“No, the rest of Libra definitely knows.” Kazami gave us an empty, resigned smile. “The Tokoyo School team’s breakdown on day two made it pretty obvious that the Chameleon was going too far. We all watched that with our mouths wide open—the committee, too. I couldn’t even do any announcing! We all just sat there panicking...”

“Hmm... Okay.”

That would certainly explain why Kazami had sounded so frantic on the live feed.

“So you and the other Libra members became aware that the Chameleon wasn’t playing the Game fairly by that point. Why hadn’t you done anything about—”

“We can’t,” Kazami interrupted, her voice weak. “By the time of the trouble with the Tokoyo School team, the Chameleon’s pals in the committee were already long gone. I guess that’s when we realized how serious this is. But it got even worse. So much worse...”

“How so?” I questioned.

“Um... Well, what about you, Sarasa?” Kazami’s eyes went to her friend.

“What if you were the leader of the event committee, and you discovered that some of the other members were involved with a rule breaker in the middle of a Game?”

“Me? Well...I’d kick the rule breaker out of the event, for one. Then I’d root out anyone involved with them while keeping the Game going with the remaining players. I suppose I’d try to make up for any damage caused by the cheater as best I could, too.”

“Exactly the sort of strong response I’d expect from you. That’d be the perfect solution...but the event committee can’t do it. The Game’s already underway. If its members banished the Chameleon now, how would they explain it to the other players? How would they calculate the amount of damage done to each team? And how would they treat the Eighteenth Ward now that its participating school has been eliminated? I think it must be too difficult to really create an appropriate response.”

“Hmm, I guess I understand... What will you *do*, then? Because it’s only going to get worse if you don’t act,” Saionji replied.

“You’re right. Normally Libra would remain neutral, but that’s clearly not an option. There’s no fixing what’s already done, but we’ve gotta stop it from getting worse. That should be a given, right? But, Sarasa, you have to understand that we can’t. The Chameleon’s got us trapped.”

“Huh? Oh. You mean...”

Saionji went quiet upon realizing the full scope of the situation. Meanwhile, Kazami laid it out for us, her voice no more than a whisper.

“Libra’s carrying everything now. It’s all been pushed on us. The post-Chameleon cleanup, the criticism from the public—everything. The event committee’s definitely frightened. The Chameleon’s done too much. Banning her won’t solve the problem. Had she been removed on day one, it’d be a different story, but things are too far gone. The event committee knew that people would complain no matter what action it took, so the members have abandoned their duties. They’ve left Libra to run this huge Game by itself.”

“ ... ”



“We couldn’t think of anything to do but keep the Game running. The Chameleon’s completely screwed up ASTRAL, but we decided to make it look like it was still going as planned. We played the Chameleon off as this exciting contestant with mysterious and exciting Abilities. ‘Look at her go!’ and all that. We made sure to silence anyone who brought up the Chameleon’s cheating. Heh... It was the worst possible choice. All it’s doing is delaying the inevitable.”

“How so?” I asked.

“Well, if the Chameleon wins, it’ll only be because the committee running ASTRAL allowed her to get away with a bunch of illegal stuff. And what do you think will happen if that gets out? It’ll be the worst mistake in May Interschool Competition history. There’ll be a huge outcry, and Libra will get all the blame.”

The picture Kazami painted of the future seemed positively grim. And if things didn’t change, her prediction would come true.

“That’s...all I really know.” Kazami began to tremble, but she put on a bold face. Her eyes went to the floor as she said, “I have no idea why it turned out like this... The whole point of the May Interschool Competition is to make a fun and exciting event. Libra worked so hard to turn this into an Academy-wide party. We spent so much time preparing for it.”

“...I see.”

“We did our best, but...look what happened...”

Kazami’s words came out haltingly. She was struggling to keep herself together and wiping away tears with both hands. No matter what she did, they continued to run down her face.

“And I hate it... I can’t stand knowing this might destroy Libra. My happy little corner of the world is going to be ruined by all this unfair nonsense... I’d rather die! Shinohara, Sarasa... Please... I want you to help Libra!”

Her plea was straightforward, lacking all artifice. I wasted no time accepting with a nod.

“Kazami, you already know I have to take down the Chameleon, and Saionji and I are ready to work with you on this. If you don’t want Libra to be destroyed, then we’ve got to strike first, understand? You’ve got the Academy’s

top player and a spoiled rich girl Six Star on your team now. All the Chameleon can do is change her appearance. She doesn't stand a chance against us and the all-powerful Libra."

"Ah... Y-yeah... You're right..."

I tried to give off as much confidence as possible, and Kazami finally managed to smile through her tears. Meanwhile, Saionji leaned back in her chair and grumbled something about not being spoiled.

After so long, things were finally starting to look up.

#

"...Nnh!"

An alluring sound echoed gently through the dark, cramped space.

"H-hey, Shinohara... Just because it's dark doesn't mean you get to touch me wherever you want."

"Huh? What're you talking about, Saionji? I'm not touching anything."

"Yes you are! What else could be hitting m— Ahh! H-hey! Cut it out!"

"I'm not anywhere near you! Himeji's behind you, remember?"

"Huh? No way. Yuki wouldn't do something like— Nnh! Y-Yuki?"

"Sorry, Rina. With all three of us stuffed in here, it's unavoidable."

"R-really...? I guess I understand, but... Ah! Nnh, ngh... It feels more like I'm being squeezed from behind than touched. And you're sure it can't be helped? You're sure about that?!"

"Yes. Absolutely," Himeji replied immediately, even as she continued to embrace Saionji. I had to wonder if things like this had been common when Himeji worked for the Saionji family. I needed to stay focused, though. I couldn't let some squeaks and moans distract me. We were supposed to keep quiet.

The three of us were in the middle of a stealth mission. Our goal was to infiltrate Libra's office undetected. A large shipping container was our choice for a hiding place, so Himeji, Saionji, and I were holed up in one. Kazami was

disguised as a worker and hauling us in a cart.

Himeji had received permission from Kazami to join us after I gave the excuse, er, the very valid reason that she was my right-hand girl. We'd be meeting later to discuss whatever we learned after this operation, and I'd thought it best that the leader of the Company tag along for the infiltration.

When I'd suggested Himeji come with us, Saionji had complained, "So you mention her and not me? Hmph..." What did she expect? She wasn't my assistant. Saionji was more like a fellow fighter who covered my back while I covered hers.

She was the top VIP on the Academy, the Empress, the strongest in histor—

"Ahn...! N-not there, Yuki... Ahn!"

"..." I did my best to shut out the moaning I was never meant to hear.

"Um, Sarasa? I can't hear what you're saying, but quit mumbling, okay? It'd really help if you could stay quiet," Kazami whispered from outside the container. If not for that, I might've been in big trouble.

We reached the Libra office not long after.

It was on the basement floor of the Shiki Island Grand Hotel. You wouldn't find it on the hotel map. It could only be accessed by tapping a special code on the elevator panel—real secret-hideout stuff.

Once we were free from the container Kazami had delivered us in, Himeji, Saionji, and I were met by a truly bizarre sight. An enormous monitor had been set up in the middle of the room with desks, computers, and other equipment around it in all directions. Honestly, it resembled a mission control center from some sci-fi movie, except it was dim. Most of the lights were apparently turned off.

Most bizarre of all, though, were the young men and women I saw all across this landscape. There were more girls than guys, all dressed in an assortment of school uniforms, but judging by the matching armbands, I assumed they were Libra members. There wasn't a lot of life to any of them, though. Some were sprawled out on their desks; others were sitting on the floor, heads down.

“...They’ve been like this for a while now,” Kazami said mournfully, her voice strained. “We can’t stop ASTRAL now, but the longer it goes on, the worse it gets. No matter how hard they try, it’s never going to get any better... And we all know that, so they just keep losing more and more hope. That’s why it feels so awful in here...”

“I understand,” I replied.

If what she’d told me earlier was true, then honestly, this much was to be expected. Not all of the Libra members had completely passed out yet. A few noticed us and regarded us with disinterest initially. However, when they saw Himeji in her maid outfit, they blinked a bit, and then their jaws dropped at the sight of Saionji next to her. When they realized that the Academy’s Seven Star was here, too, they shouted, “Whaaa?!” Suddenly, the dimly lit room was bustling with concerned and bewildered voices. Naturally, all of this confusion was funneled at Suzuran Kazami, the only visitor they recognized.

All of Libra focused on her. She didn’t waver beneath the weight of the attention, instead taking a deep breath and steeling herself.

“Sorry, guys!”

She bowed her head so quickly that I was afraid her cap would fly off.

“Don’t tell anyone, but I told these three about what’s going on, our current situation, and stuff. And I asked them for their help!”

“Uh... But, Suzuran, that’s...”

“Yes! This was entirely my call. If this makes things worse, I’ll take the fall for everything! So...so please, you’ve got to let them help!”

“””” ... ””””

Kazami was ready to shoulder all the blame. Maybe this was her way of taking responsibility. The other Libra members reacted in various ways. A few nodded, while others thought things over. By the look of things, I’d say around two-thirds of the audience were in favor of the plan and the remaining third were still ambivalent.

“Take the fall? You don’t need to worry about that,” Saionji declared,

sounding invincible. She smiled a little as she took a step forward, her gorgeous red hair swaying. As usual, she had her right hand on her hip.

“Lily... I, Sarasa Saionji, fully recognize your determination to set this right. And I want to assure all of you that you’re in good hands now. No matter how complicated this situation is, it’s still just a Game, deep down... Heh-heh! Remember, I’ve got a perfect record excluding *him*.”

“Ah...”

I couldn’t tell who, but I heard one or two people gasp gently. I took that to mean they were coming around to our side. Saionji’s argument (pep talk?) had paid off. Now we had all of Libra ready to work with us.

Kazami gave us a quick tour of the Libra office, the so-called control room. The room was for the ASTRAL event team. All programs used in the Game were run from here, and the Control Section kept tabs on everything going on in the Game.

We decided to check all Chameleon-related data first.

*“Whoa... This is just awful.”*

Kagaya’s sad sigh came through my earpiece. I couldn’t blame her for being depressed. According to the information on the monitor, the Chameleon had the maximum Action Level the system allowed, and she accumulated new Spells fifteen times faster than other teams. She had all the advantageous features of every job in the Game, and the crystals representing her Life Points practically filled the whole screen.

*“I know I’m in no position to protest since my entire job is to cheat, but I would have thought the Company would take a more graceful approach than this. Anyone who does a little video analysis is bound to pick up on all this cheating before ASTRAL ends.”*

Kagaya sounded pretty exasperated. The Chameleon sure wasn’t holding back. Someone on the outside would indeed notice before long. I could only imagine how awful the Libra members felt as they watched someone trample all over the Game they’d been forced to take over.

One other element about the Chameleon caught my eye as well.



“‘United Force’? Is that an Ability?” I asked.

Apparently, it was—one directly linked to a question I had about today’s events. During our battle against the Kagurazuki School team members from the Ninth Ward, we (Akizuki, really) had completely wiped them out, yet we hadn’t been awarded any territory. Before the Kagurazuki School team members were removed from the Game world, they mentioned something about an affiliation with the Chameleon. United Force was the answer to that riddle.

United Force was an Ability that worked like an upgraded version of Truce, the ASTRAL in-Game option. It allowed the user to absorb another team’s members—with their permission, of course. It wasn’t a truce so much as a semihostile merger. All their territory was subsumed as well, along with their Spells and poll percentages.

Teams incorporated in this manner were allowed to leave the United Force as long as doing so didn’t immediately put them in last place, which was basically the same as being kicked out of the Game. However, there was little motivation to make that move. After all, if the leader with United Force came in first, all other affiliated teams would be treated as tying for second place. That was true even for competitors who didn’t survive to the end. In ASTRAL, where finishing in the top five was as good as winning to most, the temptation of such a deal was irresistible.

“It wasn’t supposed to work this way...,” Kazami said regretfully as she pointed at a monitor. “United Force should only be able to recruit one team. But it’s been modified, and now the Chameleon’s got *seven* working for her... Really, it’s only four, though, since a few have been defeated.”

We watched as Kazami pointed out a list of players currently allied with the Chameleon. Currently, the number of active players totaled thirteen.

*I wondered why she was operating alone...but I guess it never mattered to her that she started with no teammates. She can add as many as she wants.*

Finally, I understood how it all worked. I ground my teeth from the frustration.

I recognized a few names on the list of United Force members. The first was

Senri Kururugi, Hell's Priestess herself. She was the leader of the Tsuyuri Girls' Institute team and the girl who had nearly taken out our team a few hours ago. I'd been confused about why she'd used her ace-in-the-hole Ability to escape. Knowing how United Force worked provided the answer. Kururugi hadn't run away without a plan. She had been determined to join up with the Chameleon. Even when things turned dire, she calmly considered how to win.

There was one other name I knew on the list.

"Wow... Not a person you want to see up there." Saionji's face tensed a bit as she spoke, her voice betraying her concern. She was pointing at the name of another major threat—Toya Kirigaya. He was a Six Star from the Seventh Ward's Shinra School. People called him the Demigod Dictator because of how he crushed people's souls as he beat them. Given his history, and the way he'd chased some players off the island entirely, he was clearly a guy to watch out for.

Despite Saionji's reaction, Himeji remained calm, although a little puzzled.

"Is that so, Miss Sarasa? I didn't think you had a particularly heated rivalry with Mr. Kirigaya," she said.

"I've never personally played him in a Game...but he likes getting in my hair during group events like this a lot. He's the kind of guy who hates it whenever he's not number one at something, whether it's test scores or star ranking. I think he kind of has it out for me. There were at least a few Games where Ohga missed a chance at winning because Kirigaya got in our way. He's got a special color star, too. He might even be more trouble than Hell's Priestess."

"Wait. Kirigaya's got a Unique Star, too?" I asked.

Saionji nodded. "Yeah. He doesn't really show it off or anything...but he loves being at the top. That's what he gets off on. He's got the worst personality."

I fell silent. A Six Star with a Unique Star. I needed to be just as wary of Toya Kirigaya as I was of Kururugi, perhaps more so. If I let my guard down, he could take me out in an instant.

*And Kugasaki's in the United Force, too...*

I shook my head at the list of names. Kugasaki deigning to serve someone else

was a little hard to picture, but knowing him, he was plotting something.

Senri Kururugi, Toya Kirigaya, and Seiran Kugasaki—a core team that was already extremely strong, and they weren't even the only members under the Chameleon. That imposter had absorbed seven teams, making her territory absolutely massive. The area shown on the monitor totaled 2,245 hexes, 48.1 percent of all nonneutral hexes. Ohga School's team was in second place, yet wasn't even close to that figure.

*That's not good...*

I had to think on this. From what Kazami had told me, the things we could do from this control room were actually rather limited. Cameras could be positioned as needed for streaming purposes, and we could review Game statistics and message players. None of that would stop the Chameleon, though.

*Plus, if I want to take her on, I also need to join MTCG and earn that wild card. I'll be out of ASTRAL in the meantime. If I win, I'll have a chance to turn this around, but will the others be able to hold out until then? This might end while I'm wasting time trying to make it back...*

I closed my eyes as I fought back a pang of anxiety while sitting in my chair.

"It's all right, Master," came a familiar voice.

I looked up and saw Himeji and Saionji standing there. Himeji smiled lightly at me with her hands clasped in front of her, while Saionji was scowling with a hand on her hip.

"Don't wimp out now, Shinohara. That's not like you."

"Miss Sarasa is right. I understand if you have some concerns, but we'll have Mr. Enomoto and Ms. Asamiya back in ASTRAL tomorrow...and I promise you that we'll keep the Chameleon in check while you're gone."

"Right," Saionji agreed. "So all *you* need to think about is winning MTCG as soon as possible, all right? Eimei and Ohga aren't weak enough to collapse while you're busy with other stuff... So make sure you come back, you idiot." She blushed slightly during that last bit.

“How pushy of you,” Himeji remarked. Neither of them was offering empty encouragement.

Apparently, my worries were laughably misguided.

#

It was a little past ten PM on the third day of the May Interschool Competition. Now that we had a grasp on the situation, we needed to begin strategizing for MTCG.

“First, I think we could do with a little break, meow!”

““...A break?”” The abrupt suggestion prompted Saionji and me to raise our eyebrows.

“Yeah! A break! A chance to kick back and relax!”

We must have looked like we had no idea what she was talking about, because Kazami, who was looking more chipper than before, adjusted her cap and put her hands on a desk.

“The three of you have been working nonstop since the second half of the day ended, right? You haven’t even eaten or bathed yet! How’re we going to come up with any good ideas if you’re exhausted, huh?”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right...but we can’t go use the hotel’s bath facilities. We’d have to go up and back down in that container.”

“*Non!* I got some big news for ya! Heh-heh! It turns out the hotel has a public bath on the first floor and here on the basement level, too! No other Game participants are in there, making it perfect for talking about all kinds of secret stuff. So don’t worry! Go in there and warm yourselves up!”

“Oh...that doesn’t sound like a bad idea. I guess we’ll take you up on that offer,” Saionji replied. She looked pleased at the idea.

“Good, meow!” Kazami had both hands on her hips, nodding in approval. Then she flashed a cheeky little smile. “By the wayyyyy... Unlike on the first floor, the basement bath isn’t divided by gender. It’s unisex!”

“...What? Wait, Lily. What did you just say?” Saionji asked.

“It’s unisex! Unisex! The Libra guys go in at different times than the girls, but

we don't have that much free time right now... So there's only one solution, meow! I'll lend you some bathing suits, so all three of you can go in at the same time!"

?! ...?!??!

My expression didn't change at this bombshell, but I wasn't able to give a coherent reply, either. Just because we'd have swimsuits on made it okay for all of us to share a public bath? It was beyond reckless.

"Wha, wha, wha...?" Saionji took this worse than I did. Her face went bright red as she stammered. Eventually, she folded her arms and fired back with a frantic tone. "What are you talking about? Himeji and I going in together is one thing, but there's no reason for Shinohara to join us. It's only a quick little dip in the bath, right? We'll just take tur—"

"...I'm afraid we can't, Miss Sarasa."

Surprisingly, it was Himeji who cut her off, not Kazami. Her silver hair swayed a little as she shook her head, her gaze pointed straight at Saionji.

"We can't afford to turn down a golden opportunity like this. I will gladly wash both of your backs. Please come with us, Miss Sarasa."

"Whoa! Wait, wait! I'm gonna see him naked! You're okay with that?!"

"In a swimsuit, not naked. You allow the entire general male population of the island to see you at the beach in a bikini. I don't see what the problem is."

"You sound like you have a problem with that... It's not like I rub my bikini in their faces or anything! I...guess it's okay if he sees me in a swimsuit, but..."

"It's fine, it's fine! C'mon, Sarasa, you gotta do your best! You gotta join your boyfri—"

"Sh-sh-sh-shut up, Lily!"

Saionji instantly tried to silence Kazami's joking remark. She still looked apprehensive, but between Himeji's approval and the fact that some girls from Libra were already choosing suits for us, she had no choice but to relent.

"Fiiiiine...", she conceded in the softest voice possible.



And that settled it.

*Guess I'm about to be dragged into a bath by a super-elite rich girl and my personal maid...*

Honestly, it didn't sound too bad on the surface.

"This feels good..."

My voice echoed through the large bath chamber.

The basement bath Kazami had guided us to was, unsurprisingly, a bit more cramped than the main one just outside the lobby, but it was still almost too big for three people. The bath itself was semicircular and set in a room with tiled walls. I wasn't a powerful swimmer, but it felt like there was space for a breaststroke.

Himeji and Saionji were still changing. Since there was one bath, there was only the single locker room. There was no way we could share that simultaneously. Apparently, I was obligated to go in the bath first and leave last. That was the only way Saionji would agree to this. I guess I could understand why.

"Using a locker room with their stuff still in it...would've been difficult."

Just imagining it brought heat to my face. I rubbed the space between my eyebrows with my palm.

"!"

I heard the door behind me slide open. Two sets of footsteps made little splashing sounds as they entered, teasing my ears. I unconsciously held my breath and quietly turned around.

"Wait! ...Y-you can't look yet."

Saionji's voice stopped me before I saw anything, though. Her voice was heavy with embarrassment. Honestly, it was almost cute.

"O-okay," is about all I could say back as I locked my eyes in the opposite direction.

"*Whew...* My apologies, Master."

Himeji sounded entirely unaffected. Maybe Saionji's presence was helping her keep it together. That damp echo you hear when people talk in bathhouses made my pulse quicken.

"I tried talking things over with her in the locker room, but I'm afraid she's too embarrassed to show herself to you in a swimsuit. She views the contextual meaning as different from hanging out at the beach," Himeji explained.

"Erk... Well, I'm not wrong, am I? If we were at the beach, pool, or someplace where everyone's *expected* to wear a suit, that'd be fine, but here in a public bath? It's...weirdly p-perverted, somehow," Saionji replied.

"So it wouldn't be a problem if we were all naked?" Himeji countered. "That is quite a revelation, indeed. I will need to drum up some courage for tha—"

"That's not what I meant! Ugh!" Saionji cut off Himeji as firmly as she could. Judging by her footsteps, I surmised she was going to use one of the shower booths by the bath before getting in.

"One moment, please," Himeji said. Then I heard both of them moving away from me.

A moment later, the familiar, comfortable sound of two showers filled the room. That delicate splashing, the noise created by moving water buckets around, and all the other sounds the two of them made...were slithering into my ears.

*What is happening? They're just shower sounds. I'm staring at a blank wall. Why is my heart racing?*

I tried to relax and act unaffected, but on the inside, I was in head-spinning agony. A strong-willed, slightly shy, perfect rich girl and my cool, docile, silver-haired maid... Two girls with looks rivaling any idol on TV were showering right behind me. I was sure they were both wearing swimsuits borrowed from Libra, but that was a trivial detail. My vision being restricted like this meant that my thoughts and ears were attuned to every sound.

This torturous limbo dragged on for some time before two sets of footsteps approached me again. I heard someone take a deep breath, but I wasn't entirely sure whether it was Saionji or me.

“...Excuse me.”

I suppose I should have expected Himeji to enter first. Her foot made a gentle sound as it entered the water beside me. The rest of her body soon followed. When I say, “beside me,” I don’t mean that we were rubbing shoulders or anything, but we were close enough that I could’ve easily reached out and touched her if I wanted to.



Once Himeji was in up to her shoulders, she turned to me and gave a quick smile.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Master. Hee-hee! The water certainly is very comfortable.”

“! ...Y-yeah. Yeah, it is. Yep.”

Her hair was damp, and her sleek shoulders were only barely visible beneath the water. The shoulder straps of her swimsuit were visible, although only just. Even though the water only allowed the haziest of contours, I could still tell the suit emphasized her chest. The sight of her was so perfect in so many ways that I couldn't figure out what to say. Recently, I'd been thinking that my maid was too cute, and this was proof. The way she cupped both her hands to scoop up water... If someone painted this picture, I'm sure it would be worth millions.

“Umm...”

I was captivated by the sight of Himeji for a while, but soon realized it would be rude to stare at her, so I decided to make conversation.

“So, what's up with Saionji? Is she not—”

“I'm over here...”

Before I could finish, a voice popped up behind me, a hesitant one that only made itself known after extended deliberation. Realizing it was safe to turn around now, I looked back.

“!! Oh...ah...”

The sight that greeted my eyes made me yelp instinctively. Saionji was there, crossing her arms over her chest like usual. Her peeved eyes were turned away from me, and I could tell that pretty much every inch of skin from the neck upward was a shade of red almost as vivid as her eyes and hair. Her folding her arms like that emphasized her breasts a little, and I couldn't help but watch the droplets of water running down her collarbones. Her upper arms, usually covered by her school uniform, were bare for all to see, and honestly, the sight of them was pretty dangerous.

“Wh-what, Shinohara? Don't just quietly sit there. Why don't you actually say



something?”

“Uh...you mean...like, ‘It looks good on you’ and stuff?”

“...You’re not even looking at my swimsuit.”

My agitation kept me from saying much of anything else. Himeji was one thing, but thinking of Saionji as captivating wounded my pride a bit. Ultimately, we exchanged glares at point-blank range, creating an endurance match to see who’d break down first.

“Um, Miss Sarasa...or should I say Rina? You are free to flirt with my master all you want, but you’re showing off far too much... I find it unfair.”

““!!””

Himeji’s somewhat pouting tone echoed through the room. Saionji and I quickly turned away from each other and sat bolt upright in the bath.

“You know...”

A little time had passed since we’d entered the bath. Saionji was still flushed around her cheeks, but she must have been getting at least a bit used to this, because she finally spoke up.

“What will you do once you make it back to ASTRAL? Assuming the rest of us hold out until then, that is.”

“Mm? Oh, well...”

I gave the question a light nod. I’d shared part of my plan with her, but we hadn’t been able to talk in detail about what I’d do after MTCG. I hadn’t told Himeji, either, and she looked at me expectantly. Her face was a little red, too.

“Well, Master, you seem confident you’ll win. Should we take that to mean things will be different once you do? We have Libra’s support now, but that seems to be the only difference so far.”

“Yeah,” Saionji agreed. “The Chameleon’s got thirteen players in her United Force, and Hell’s Priestess and Toya Kirigaya are among them. She’s got nearly three times the territory my team does. Having access to a little more data won’t change things much.”

Saionji lightly played with the water as she spoke. She and Himeji were right. Defeat looked inevitable. Neither Eimei nor any other school had the power to take down the Chameleon. If the Game continued along this trajectory, then ASTRAL was as good as over already.

“Try looking at it another way. For example...the United Force controls two thousand, two hundred and forty-five hexes right now, forty-eight point one percent of all territory in the Game, excluding the neutral spaces. That means the Chameleon’s got a little less territory than all the other schools combined, right?” I said.

Saionji cocked her head. “...? Well, mathematically speaking, yes. But so what?”

“We can’t win right now because we’re all fighting as separate groups. If all the remaining teams in ASTRAL banded together, we’d have more than enough strength to take on the Chameleon.”

“But that’s just hypothetical. I guess it might be possible if all the other teams worked together, but not even you could pull that off, Shinoha—”

“You really think I can’t?” I interrupted Saionji with a bold grin. Her doubts were entirely reasonable. Anyone who wasn’t a teammate in this Game was an enemy. Teams would usually never cooperate.

“Remember that the United Force skill the Chameleon uses absorbs the members of other teams into her own. And if she wins, all her allies will tie for second. Now that she’s taken in seven teams, if she wins, there’s no way anyone else will finish in the top five.”

“...Oh. I see what you mean.” Himeji bobbed her head as she grasped my point. “Any teams that haven’t joined the Chameleon need to take her down. Otherwise, they’re guaranteed to finish sixth or below and lose a star.”

“Right. And I think that’s more than enough motivation for people to start teaming up. But if we want *everyone* to band together, I think they’ll need an extra push. Someone will need to serve as their guide, a leader, I guess. If we unite a bunch of disparate teams, things will fall apart without someone to keep them together, right? I think Saionji’s the best person for the job, but I’m not sure if she’ll be able to convince everyone.”

“It would be tough to keep everyone together against an unprecedented dark-horse threat like the Chameleon,” Saionji agreed.

“Exactly. Our leader needs some kind of powerful backstory that inspires confidence and assures everyone they can face the Chameleon. They need to instantly bring all other teams to their side and win over the viewer polls. For example, a Commander from the last-place team who left ASTRAL only to claw his way back with a wild card.”

“That’s your plan, huh? I guess if you managed to do that, it would make you a big hero. Everybody loves a comeback story, after all,” Saionji remarked.

I grinned at her. “I’m glad you think so, too.”

Saionji clearly felt a bit more confident now after hearing my idea. Against an unusual mystery competitor, we needed something just as eye-catching. Merely being the strongest on the Academy likely wasn’t enough. However, adding a comeback element to the mix could be enough to tip things in my favor. When you factored in that it would be a massive comeback from last place, it genuinely started to feel possible.

“I need to build that kind of legend for myself over in MTCG.”

And to do that, we needed a firm strategy.

#

Once we finished with the bath, Himeji, Saionji, and I relaxed with some bento-box dinners Kazami provided. After that, it was time to hold our strategy conference for MTCG, the Multi-Trading Card Game.

“Okay, meow. There are several aspects to the MTCG Game,” Kazami said.

We sat among the many desks in the Control Section and focused on Kazami’s lecture.

“These include cards, quests, and coins...and some other things, too, but those three are the most important elements. Let’s start with cards. MTCG is played with cards numbered from one to nine. These form your hand, which is kept inside your device, and everyone starts with three ones. The sum of your number cards is also the level of your familiar.”

“...Familiar?” I asked.

“That’s right, meow! Each player in MTCG is given a preset familiar. We use AR to display them in the Game field. The type is random, so you won’t know what you get until you start playing, but their looks don’t have anything to do with their strength anyway. Basically, an MTCG player uses a familiar with strength equal to the sum of their number cards. We good so far?”

“Okay. So that familiar just adds some visual excitement, I guess.” Saionji nodded lightly, arms crossed as usual. Then she raised an eyebrow. “Then what? Is he supposed to raise that level as much as possible?”

“Well, don’t get too ahead of yourself, Sarasa. MTCG isn’t all about raising your level. And on that note, let’s move on to quests.”

Between knowing the rules and doing announcer and referee work for Libra, Kazami was in her element here.

“Quests are the main aspect of MTCG. There are five quest tiers, and players must beat them in order, starting with the first tier. Beat the last quest, and you’ve conquered the match and get a reward!”

I bobbed my head. “Uh-huh.”

“Now, all of these quests involve the same basic goal of beating an adversary who’s at level something or other. Find a player who’s at the specified level, beat them, and you’re done. There’s one catch, though. In MTCG, beating other players means having your familiar be *the same level* as your opponent’s, meow! That’s the most important thing to remember!”

“The same level? Being higher than the other player won’t work?” Saionji questioned.

Kazami nodded at her. “That’s right. You’re trying to match numbers, not beat them.”

Your familiar’s level was decided by your three number cards, and you had to match that total with those of the players you were trying to take down. I guessed that meant I needed to know how to raise that level.

“This is where upgrading and trading come in.”

Kazami had apparently sensed what I was thinking. She put a finger in the air as she continued.

“First, let’s talk about upgrades. There’s a command available on your device that lets you level up your number cards in exchange for coins. Upgrading a card from one to two costs five hundred coins, two to three costs a thousand, three to four costs two thousand, and so on. Also, you have to keep in mind that upgrading a card takes more than coins. It also requires time—ten minutes times the card’s value before the level-up, to be exact. For example, upgrading from two to three takes twenty minutes.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Next comes trading, meow! This one’s simple. You’re allowed to trade cards with other players. If you, Shinohara, trade your two for someone else’s three, that lets you essentially upgrade a card without having to wait twenty minutes!”

“All right... Oh? But what would the other side get out of that?”

“Nothing, if it were only that. That’s why you likely also need to pay additional coins to complete the trade. If you pay more coins than it would cost to upgrade, the other side might accept!”

“Oh, that sort of thing...?”

So we’d be paying coins to make up the difference in value between cards. Based on the previous example, upgrading from a two to a three would cost a thousand coins plus twenty minutes, so in a trade, maybe paying the other guy two thousand coins for a three would be enticing enough.

“And how do I obtain coins?” I asked.

“Well, you build them over time, earn them for winning battles...and you can also earn them in trades, like I said, meow! The last two are self-explanatory, and I guess building them over time is, too. The amount varies depending on how far you are with your quests, but basically, your coin count’s constantly increasing. You’ll never be completely broke, so don’t be shy about upgrading your cards like mad!”

“I see... So it’s that sort of system.” Himeji gave a satisfied nod.

Kazami answered with one of her own, then returned to her explanation.

“You’ll want to level up the cards in your hand, upgrade your familiar, and fight with it. This mainly involves finding an enemy who matches the level requirement of your current quest and matching it. However, there’s another aspect to this, too, meow! In MTCG, there are skill cards in addition to number cards. They’re single use, and players can carry up to five cards in total. Typically, you’ll have three numbers and two skill cards at all times.”

Kazami projected an image from her device. It showed the three types of skill cards in the Game and what they did.

**Level Up:** Boost your familiar’s level by one for this battle only.

**Reward Up:** Boost your reward for winning this battle by 10 percent.

**Cancel Skill:** Invalidate a skill card used by your opponent before battle.

“Hmm...”

Himeji was the first to speak after we read the list. “At what point in the Game would these cards be used, exactly?”

“Good question, meow! Battles in MTCG start with a card phase, then a showdown phase. During the card phase, the player who requested the battle goes first, selecting the card they want to use, and then their opponent does the same. Then the challenger plays one more card, so two in total. It’s challenger, opponent, then challenger again. Get it?”

“Hmm... And you have no idea what card your opponent’s playing?” I asked.

“Um, you can’t see the type, but you can tell whether they’re playing a skill card or not. You could do things like keep a Reward Up card on hand as a bluff, or play two Level Up cards at once to boost your familiar... That’s the real essence of MTCG!”

Kazami spun her index finger in the air as she happily chatted away. I’m pretty sure she was involved with the creation of this Game. She looked like she was thoroughly enjoying this.

“Once the card phase is over, it’s time for the showdown. If both levels are equal, the challenger wins! They’ll receive coins for their victory, and their quest



tier will go up by one.”

“All right. So you get rewards up to the tier-five quest? Are all the rewards the same?”

“No sir, meow! All MTCG players are tasked with beating all five quest tiers, but each one has a few difficulty levels. There are three branches for every quest tier, and players must decide which they’ll take. Your prize is based on how difficult a route you completed. You could earn limited-edition Abilities or even Academy currency. Beating the most difficult route in the Game gets you the wild card.”

“Ahh...”

I sighed a little. The prize I was after waited at the end of the toughest route possible. That being the case, it was my only option. From start to finish, I’d be taking the toughest quests available.

“But, meow... But...” Kazami adjusted her cap and stared right into my eyes. “There’s a problem with the most challenging route... If you tackle it normally, it’ll take you at least two days, I think. Earning coins and upgrading cards takes time, so finishing the Game quickly is tough.”

“Two days? There’s no point to this, then,” I said. “We just finished the third day of ASTRAL. I don’t have two days to spend on MTCG.”

“Well, yeah, that’s true...but what else are you gonna do?” Kazami gave me a worried look.

I decided to stop talking and start thinking a little. The toughest route would take two days to complete, and that was if I hurried. I intended to leverage the Company’s support to the fullest, of course, but I had little hope I’d make it back to ASTRAL on time.

“Hey, Kazami... Libra is all about being neutral, right? You can’t cheat or play favorites with anyone or whatever, yeah?” I said.

“Hm? That’s correct, meow! I have a bad feeling about what you’re going to say next, but yes.”

“Do you think you could bend that just this once? Because honestly, I need to

get that wild card no later than the end of the first half of tomorrow. The Game begins at nine in the morning, so basically my limit is twelve hours from now—three hours of gameplay, really. There’s no way I’ll make it on time if I play normally. I’m gonna need some system-driven interference, no matter what.”

“Ohh, but...”

“Please, Kazami. Look, it’s just a matter of how you think about it, right? The other side cheated first. Playing fair and losing for it will be horribly frustrating. I’d much rather do everything we can and worry about giving excuses later.”

“...”

Kazami thought for a bit while tugging at her armband. She seemed to reach a decision before too long, fixing me in her gaze and nodding.

“All right... Meow! I’ll explain things to the rest of Libra. Leave this to me!”

“Great. Thank you.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. Beating the hardest route possible in MTCG wasn’t going to be easy, but if I had Libra and the Company helping out, it was surely possible. I’d need to act prudently to keep other players from noticing all the cheating, but I’d grown accustomed to acting that way daily. It was normal for me.

“Hmm. Hang on.” A question floated through my mind. I looked up a little. “You said it’d normally take at least two days to beat the toughest route... That seems kind of strange. Today’s the third day of the May Interschool Competition, but nobody’s earned the wild card yet.”

“...Oh, right, I forgot to explain that.” Kazami frowned a bit, then shook her head. “To tell the truth...unlike other routes you can take in MTCG, you can’t clear the hardest one just by beating the fifth quest tier. There’s this final exhibition match... I guess you can think of it like a secret final boss. Anyway, there’s this Sixth Assassin you need to beat in the end.”

“Sixth Assassin? I’m guessing they aren’t a normal player.”

“Nope! Meow! They’re an external assistant for Libra. Technically, they’re still in middle school, but...”

“A middle school kid’s helping you out? Wait... Is her name Tsumugi Shiina?”

“Huh? How’d you know that, Shinohara?!”

“I thought so,” I muttered, shrugging as Kazami stared blankly at me. I explained my run-ins with Shiina, loosely anyway. We’d met, we’d spent time at the arcade, and she’d told me she was participating in MTCG to help out Libra.

“Hmm...”

Saionji gave me a dissatisfied look when I was finished.

“So you ran into a middle school girl in the hotel, in the middle of the night, and then you played around with her until morning, huh? Hmmmm...”

“Please don’t interpret things in the most evil way possible, Saionji.” I didn’t care what she thought, but if Himeji got the wrong idea about this, too, it wouldn’t be funny anymore. “Let’s stay focused on Shiina, okay? She’s the sister of a Libra member, isn’t she?”

“That’s what I heard,” Kazami replied. “There’s nobody with the last name Shiina on the Libra member list, though, so maybe there was a mix-up somewhere. It doesn’t really matter. Anyway, Tsumugi’s the Sixth Assassin. And her familiar’s level is all the way up at thirty!”

“Thirty? Wait. Don’t the individual number cards only go up to nine? If I upgraded all my cards to nine and coupled that with two Level Up skill cards, that’d still only add up to twenty-nine.”

“Hmm, yeah, that’s normally true. You’re going to need a *special* skill card to beat Tsumugi. There are one-time super skill cards that are unlocked with the tier-three quest. You’ll have to use one of them, called Limit Breaker, to turn all of your nine cards into tens. That means you’ll have to hold on to that special card until the end. But, um...there’s a problem.”

Worry entered Kazami’s expression for the first time during her high-energy rundown.

“So like I said...if you can keep that special card, you’ll be able to beat Tsumugi no problem. We suggest as much in the official rules we show all MTCG players, so I’m sure most of them have noticed that the fifth tier isn’t the end of the

Game. But the three players who've completed the fifth tier on the hardest route so far have all lost to Tsumugi. One of them did keep a Limit Breaker for the battle with her, too!"

"..."

"I think it's pretty clear something's up with her, although we're not sure what..." Kazami trailed off. Not even she could provide an answer. I worked out my own thoughts on this while watching her.

#

"Ooooooooooh! I lost again!!"

It was presently one in the morning.

After wrapping up the strategy meeting down at the Libra office, I snuck into Shiina's room to pay a visit. The night proceeded much like the last one I'd spent with Shiina. I brought her dinner, she challenged me to a fighting game, and the hours wore on as she did her best to keep me there for as long as possible. Nothing at all had changed from last night, except that I was beating her in the game more than before. It's not like I was bullying her. Shiina seemed too distracted to focus.

"Ugh..."

"Hey, what's up with you?" I asked, a bit exasperated, as I tossed my controller aside. "It's been all bark and no bite for a while now, huh?"

"Fu-ha-ha-ha-ha! Uh-uh! That's not true! I'm just having too much fun!"

"...Are you sure you're not getting too carried away? We're only playing a game. Has any of it really been *that* exciting?"

"Ha-ha-ha... No, it's because of something else!"

Shiina laughed and kicked her legs as she lay back on the bed. She wiped tears from her eyes before using the momentum of her fall to bounce right back up. She clapped her hands and leaned toward me, heterochromatic eyes gleaming.

"Listen! Guess what happened today at the event! It was such a blast!"

"The event? Oh, did something exciting happen during MTCG? But that was during the evening, right? You're still amped up about it?"

“It was just sooooo fun! You know that I’m a denizen of darkness, so you could say I only live for battle. Also, having you bring me food makes me reeeeeaaally happy, too!”

“Oh... Well, great.”

I shook my head lightly at what seemed like an honest expression of gratitude. That’s when I chose to broach the important subject, motivated partly by my creeping fatigue.

“Hey, Shiina, I heard you’re some kind of last boss in MTCG.”

“Yeah, that’s right! If this were an RPG, I’d show up after you beat the demonic overlord and be all like ‘Mwah-ha-ha-ha! That one was merely the weakest among my minions!’ And stuff!”

“A demonic overlord’s just a minion to you?”

“Oh, you didn’t know? I’m the Dark Defiler of God! Heh-heh!”

Snickering, she picked up Lloyd the Cerberus plush and struck a pose. Then she quickly returned to her usual innocent demeanor and gave me a puzzled look.

“Hey... What’s going on? Why’d you suddenly bring up MTCG?”

“Oh, I’m joining it, so I thought I’d ask.”

“Huh? But don’t you have ASTRAL? Wait, did you get kicked out?! When?!”

“This afternoon. Why do you sound so surprised?”

“W-well, yeah, I mean... Wow. Really? That’s what happened? That’s kind of a pity. Or...maybe not? Hmmmm...”

Shiina muttered to herself for a bit. She seemed more interested in my joining MTCG than in my elimination from ASTRAL. She quietly stared at me with her mismatched eyes.

“Hey, um, you’re really strong, so you might beat your fifth quest in MTCG really fast...but you’ll *never* beat me, okay? No matter how good you are, I’m *never* gonna let you win. I like playing with you a lot, but this is different!”

“Oh yeah? You sound pretty confident.”

“Of course!”

She flopped onto the bed, hugging the Cerberus plush tightly. With her eyes narrowed like a happy cat’s, she said something that struck me as rather important.

“Heh-heh! I’m invincible.”



## Chapter 2

### The MTCG

#

I spent the morning before the May Interschool Competition's fourth day in a meeting with the rest of Team Eimei.

"I'm joining MTCG to obtain that wild card we just talked about... That means you four will have to hold out in ASTRAL for the first half of the day. I'm not exactly happy about it, but Enomoto will be calling the shots for the time being."

"That's *Mr.* Enomoto to you. You really need to learn some manners, Shinohara."

"Who cares about that? If you're gone, Shino, does that mean I need to start listening to Shinji...? I guess I can deal with it..."

Enomoto grumbled about my lack of formality, while Asamiya kicked her legs and complained about him being in charge. Despite what she said, I don't think Asamiya minded this arrangement too much. Hopefully, they'd both give today their best and really showcase their talents.

"Hee-hee-hee..."

Akizuki, meanwhile, sidled up to me after I finished giving my outline. She wore a cloying smile.

"Good luck, Hiroto! ♪ And don't worry. You've got Noa, Eimei's ace, handling things in ASTRAL! ♡"

"I see. Yes, perhaps having my master participate in MTCG isn't so bad, since it will keep Ms. Akizuki away from him."

"Hey! Quit bein' so mean! Oh, but a long-distance relationship might be nice, too... ♡"

“You certainly know how to put a positive spin on things.”

Himeji and Akizuki kept up their usual friendly banter. It helped keep the mood light. Now that we’d gone over everything we needed, Enomoto straightened up in his seat, which was across from mine.

“Okay, we’ll be holding down the fort while Shinohara is gone. As a Six Star and president of Eimei School’s student council, I will take command of this team and keep our battle line firm. Shinohara, you are safe to focus entirely on MTCG. In fact, if you waste too much time, we might beat the Chameleon by ourselves.”

A joke from Enomoto was a true rarity.

It was now nine in the morning. The meeting had ended a little while ago.

“Oh, it’s pretty close...”

After loading the map data I received from Libra, I had my voice assistant (actually, it was Kagaya) lead me to the MTCG site.

MTCG was the May Interschool Competition’s open Game. It was being held in Central Garden, an event hall in the middle of Ward Zero. It was a roughly ten-minute walk from the hotel and pretty big, capable of holding five thousand people.

Once inside the main-floor arena, I checked in at the front desk and saw that there were still nearly a thousand high school students gathered, despite this being the fourth day. The hall was large enough that things didn’t feel cramped, but the sheer size of this event floored me.

The arena itself was just a large empty space, nothing too noteworthy about it. There were screens on the outer edges showing live footage from ASTRAL, and nearby booths sold drinks, snacks, and so on. A “battle stage” stood in the center of the area, clearly delineated from the rest of the arena.

“...?”

A question surfaced in my mind.

*“Meow! Let me explain!”*

Something flashed, and then a calico cat appeared out of nowhere. And it had

Kazami's voice.

Yes, this was my familiar, one of the more unusual elements of MTCG. It was just an AR projection, nothing tangible, but its vision and hearing were linked to Suzuran Kazami, who was working behind the scenes, which allowed her to be with me in the arena without anyone knowing.

The cat jumped up on my shoulder and let out a few cute meows.

*"That spot in the center is reserved for the final battle. It's only for when someone challenges Tsumugi. Other than that, it's basically empty space!"*

*Shiina sure loves to stand out...*

I sighed a bit. She'd seemed like a painfully shy girl at first, but I guess bashfulness didn't mean she couldn't also be a massive show-off. Talking one-on-one with someone was different from addressing an adoring audience, after all.

I looked around while Kazami gave me her rundown. Evidently, my mere presence attracted attention. I guess my self-elimination yesterday was still fresh in everyone's mind. I sensed a lot of eyes on me, some questioning, some wary, and some angry. An innumerable number of gazes pierced through me mercilessly.

My fingers traced across my device's screen unconsciously while I was lost in thought. If I hoped to speedrun MTCG (as discussed yesterday), the most crucial element would be how well I could gather coins. To provide an extreme example, an infinite coin glitch would make it hardly require any time at all. Unfortunately, that was unrealistic. Teaming up with a few other players would let me take advantage of the trade system to speed things up, but I was bound to hit a wall with that tactic eventually.

Thus, I was going to tap into a little trick.

*I thought I'd wait a bit before diving in...but I'm a magnet for attention either way, so maybe I ought to get things moving.*

Before I started, I opened the MTCG app from my device's main menu. It displayed my current stats.

*Coins: 1000 Quest Tier: 1 Level: 3*

Since I'd be taking the toughest quests, my first target level was six. After confirming that, I strolled forward, and that's when it happened.

"Heh... Heh-heh... Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! What a hilarious sight!"

*Hmm?*

Someone near the front desk was calling to me. I saw a group of five or so people hanging out there, and their leader looked familiar. I'd faced him in ASTRAL the other day. He was Kanade Yuikawa, the Five Star from the Fifteenth Ward's Ibara School. He brushed his hair back with a laugh, clearly enjoying every moment of this, and beamed at me from ear to ear.

"Hello there, Hiroto Shinohara! What's it been—two days? Do you remember me? I'm Yuikawa from Ibara School, and I got kicked out of ASTRAL thanks to you!"

"Yeah. I mean, it wasn't that long ago, so..."

"Oh, you do! Excellent. I couldn't be happier. You've finally fallen down to *my* level, so I can finally crush you."

Yuikawa let out a scornful laugh, as though it wasn't already obvious he wanted to get a rise out of me.

"I know you're the hot-blooded type, so I'm sure you're after the wild card... but you're too late. *Far* too late. You've come into MTCG so late... How are you ever going to beat the toughest route? Looks to me like you've got no plan."

"..."

"Meanwhile, I came in here prepared. I set up a group to divert coins and cards to me as a safety net to secure a comeback if I was eliminated from ASTRAL. Thanks to them, I'm just about to tackle the fifth-tier quest. You'll *never* catch up to me, Shinohara."

He spread his arms wide, smiling as he hurled his words at me. His strategy was the most efficient way to tackle MTCG. Pooling resources with friends or schoolmates was best. It would lose efficacy as the Game went into the second half, but it was still a good tactic.

Yuikawa's smile widened at my silence.

"Heh... Now that's the face I like to see! You're trying to keep all composed, but you're probably panicking on the inside, right? Just being here to see that is a huge win for me!"

"...Were you always this obnoxious, or is it an act?"

"There's no need to get so angry and insult me, you know. I'm just commenting on what I see. So, Shinohara, are you looking for a three card? Or maybe a four? If you're in a rush, I could be convinced to trade with you. Of course, you'll have to go a little above the normal rate...say, one hundred thousand coins."

"..."

"Oh, but I'm sure you don't have the resources for that yet, right? Hmm, that's a problem... Okay, how about you get on your hands and knees? Do that where everybody can see you, and I'll give it to you for free. Man, I'm too generous for my own good."

He kept trying to rile me up, and his smile slowly started to resemble a mad grin. I had known I'd run into guys like him, since trading was all about players trying to win out over each other. Admittedly, calling myself the best on the Academy all day had made me a lot of enemies, so I couldn't be too upset.

*Maybe other Eimei students will lend me a hand...but they might not have the cards I need. Either way, I gotta start laying the groundwork.*

I sighed a bit as I gauged the situation. Fully ignoring Yuikawa, I decided to leave and go ahead with my plan.

"...Hey."

A girl stepped right into my path before I got far. She didn't seem to care at all that Yuikawa was talking to me. She wore the Tsuyuri Girls' Institute uniform, which I was pretty familiar with by now. If memory served, she was one of Hell's Priestess's teammates. She'd been with Kururugi until the end of yesterday's battle.

She peered at me from behind her bangs.

“What number card do you want?” she asked.

“Huh? Four. I need a four.”

“All right. I’ll trade my four for your one, and...let’s say a hundred coins.”

“Whaaat?” Yuikawa reacted to the offer before I could. He stormed up to the girl, his voice lower than before.

“First you barge into our conversation, and now *this*? We were in the middle of something, you know. You sure you want to go through with that trade? If you help him, Ibara School will do everything possible to destroy you.”

“Is a hundred too much for you?”

“Hey! Don’t ignore me!” Yuikawa grabbed the girl by her shoulder, speaking more roughly now. She didn’t move a bit, her eyes still fixed on me. I was surprised at how collected she was.

“...I’d normally need three thousand, five hundred coins and about an hour of wait time to upgrade a one to a four. If you’ll let me skip that for a hundred coins, then great, but can I ask you why first?”

“Do you need to know?”

“Yeah. Kururugi got away from me, but I did take out half of your school’s team. It would make a lot more sense if you resented me as much as she does.”

“...”

The girl lowered her head, acting like I’d asked her a difficult question. When she looked back up, she had an eyebrow raised.

“You’re...trying to beat her, right? The Chameleon?”

*Why does she know that...?*

I gasped internally. My leaving ASTRAL and joining MTCG was a huge topic of conversation on ITube and STOC, but my goals were still unknown—and nobody had much information to go on. No one knew except for Libra and Team Eimei, yet this girl calmly laid it all out like it was common knowledge.

“It looked like you abandoned ASTRAL...but if you’re here in MTCG, looking for a wild card, I have to assume you have a plan to take on the Chameleon,



right? I knew that much the moment I saw you here.”

“Oh yeah? Well, what is it, then?”

“That’s easy.” The girl stood firm against my attempt to skirt the topic. “Senri—my leader—went and joined the Chameleon for Tsuyuri Girls’ Institute. Senri’s always so strong, calm, and logical... She never makes mistakes. I’m sure she’s made the right choice this time, too. At least, I think she has. But there’s something weird about it. Knowing she was forced to join the Chameleon because we’re so weak is frustrating. We don’t need some fake second-place finish won by bowing our heads to someone else. We need to rise up. Tsuyuri needs us to.”

“...”

“I...want you to go back into ASTRAL. I want you to let Senri rest easy for a change. I...I don’t think anyone else deserves that wild card but you.”

Her heartfelt statement silenced me, Yuikawa, and everyone else nearby. Amid this atmosphere, I took out my device and executed the card trade. I selected one of my cards and entered a hundred coins as my payment, and in an instant, the card left my device and was replaced with a four.

After ensuring the trade went through, I waved my device at the girl as a gesture of my appreciation.

“Thanks. And keep your eye on me, okay? I’m not fighting for Tsuyuri or anything, but I’m taking down the Chameleon. *And* Senri Kururugi, too.”

“...All right. That’s fine.”

The girl from Tsuyuri smiled a bit as she left. Yuikawa let out a peeved groan and returned to his friends. This was an unexpected development to be sure, and an extremely fortunate one. That trade gave me a hand of two ones and a four, bringing me to level six. The hardest route of the first-tier quest required targeting a sixth-level opponent, and now I was ready.

*“...Meow! Now you just need to stock up on skill cards.”*

Kazami showed up again in cat form, whispering in my ear.

*“The player who challenges someone to battle gets to use one more card than*

*their opponent. If you have a Cancel Skill card and start a fight, you can use that to basically guarantee a win, but they're pretty expensive, so you can't go using them willy-nilly. Generally speaking, you'll want to have at least one Level Up card on hand—then you'll read your opponent to see whether you need to play it or not!"*

She was giving me a quick recap of the rules, along with a little basic opening strategy. I had no reason to defy that custom, so I purchased one Level Up and one Reward Up card on my device. Then, as Kazami had instructed, I brought the device up to face height. It projected little marks on the heads of some of the students in the crowd, like the destination marks on a map app. This was a special search function Libra had set up for me. The marked students were all level six.

I grabbed one of them at random.

"Hey."

"Huh? Ah! Sh-Shinohara?! Wh-what do you want with me?"

"What do I want? Isn't it obvious? I'm asking you to battle me."

"Battle you?! No way! You joined MTCG less than ten minutes ago..."

He stared at me blankly, shaking a little. Despite his agitated panic, his device accepted my request and lit up a shade of blue along with mine. The battle participation fees (five hundred coins for a first-tier quest) were paid automatically, and with that, our familiars appeared. I had the cute calico cat that also served as Kazami's avatar, of course, and my opponent had a snake with sharp-looking fangs.

*"Okay, this is your first step to victory, meow! Show him what you've got, Shinohara!"*

With those quiet words of encouragement, the cat gracefully hopped from my shoulder to face off against the snake. It looked a lot stronger than my familiar, but their appearances were random and had nothing to do with stats.

A total of five cards appeared before me, my three number cards and the two I'd purchased a moment ago. The last two were both lit blue, indicating that I could tap them to put them into play.

“...”

I quietly considered my options while glancing at my opponent. The only thing worth deliberating over was whether he was going to use a Level Up card. We were both level six, so I'd win if neither of us played a Level Up. In MTCG, you were informed when an enemy played a skill card, but not what type. This guy would definitely play one, but for all I knew, it could be a Reward Up, a bluff.

*Just being challenged to battle seemed to surprise him... He must think I'm getting ahead of myself by plunging into the fight this early on. If so, there's a pretty good chance he'll play a Level Up card. He must think it's safer to boost his level against a beginner.*

I made this assumption while keeping utterly cool on the outside. Then, for starters, I decided to play my Reward Up card. My opponent had the right to play a card next, and he made his choice quickly. Unsurprisingly, he did play a skill card. I added my Level Up card to finish things.

“Okay, that's the end of the card phase. Now we just gotta wait for our levels to be revealed.”

“Y-yeah. I'm sure I'll beat someone who started ten minutes ago...but let's see.”

Considering his attempt at confidence and the way he warily eyed his familiar, he had to be flustered. A moment later, we proceeded to the showdown phase, and our skill cards went into effect. Our familiars flashed blue for a moment, a bright seal appearing on each. They were displayed over my cat's head and on the tip of the snake's tongue, and both sported the Roman numeral VII.

“We have a match. I win,” I said.

“What?!”

My opponent must have used a Level Up card after all. He collapsed in utter shock.

According to Kazami, players earned bonus coins according to how many challenges they successfully defended against in a row, but the number was reset to zero when they lost.

This had proved a decent tutorial for me. With my tier-one quest completed, I obtained some coins, and my new quest tier appeared on my device. Twenty minutes had passed since the start of MTCG.

*Not bad... But I can't exactly take it easy. It's time to start making some real moves.*

Luckily, all preparations for my cheating were already in place. After sharing a nod with the cat, who'd returned to my shoulder, I set off for a certain place in the arena.

#

MTCG had an official known as the Fixer. Quests could only be completed by defeating players with a matching level, meaning there was a chance no player in the arena matched what you needed, especially in the later stages. To deal with that, Libra had inserted a single Fixer into the Game who could adjust their level up or down as necessary.

In addition to stepping in as needed in case of emergency, the Fixer had another role. They functioned as a sort of shop. If you purchased a card by accident or had some unnecessary ones, you could trade them to the Fixer for something else, as long as you paid, or were paid, the correct fee. I'd just used all my skill cards in the first round, so I had nothing to trade. For the tier-two quest, I needed to defeat a thirteenth-level player, and there were plenty of those, so I didn't have any reason to seek out the Fixer. Despite that...

"Are you the Fixer?"

...I hurried to a screen on one side of the arena and spoke to a girl sitting on one of the bleachers.

"Yes, you can call me Alpha Fixer. Did you need something?"

After the discussion with Libra last night, she must have known that I'd come here, yet she blithely greeted me like nothing was unusual. I took a seat near her and nodded.

"I'd like to request a card trade."

"All right. When trading with the Fixer, any difference in card value is made up for with coins, following the official going rates in MTCG. I cannot raise or

lower the price associated with any card in a trade. Is that all right?"

"Sure, no problem."

Her stock lines undoubtedly served to help her deal with people quickly, and I didn't argue. I wasn't going to cheat *that* blatantly. If the Fixer gave me a discount on cards or set me up with a coin loan, people would notice immediately, and Libra and I would be in a heap of trouble.

*There's no need to break the rules at all...*

If trades were conducted based strictly on the going rates for cards...then no matter what kind of insane trade you asked for, you were guaranteed to receive a standard exchange.

"Okay, I'd like to trade this one-value card here for a Reward Up card, please."

"..."

""""Huh?""""

The Alpha Fixer blinked a couple of times at the offer, and a few people watching started exchanging whispers. I could see why, too. Normally, a player would only trade number cards for number cards or skill cards for skill cards. You could only carry three number cards at most, after all. Dumping one of them offered no advantage.

"Are you...sure about that?" The puzzled Alpha Fixer gave me a questioning look. "I'm not officially a player in this Game, so I'm allowed to carry four or more number cards if need be. But if you do that, you'll have only two number cards left. The maximum value of a number card is nine, so the maximum level you could hope to attain is eighteen. That would make it impossible to beat the Game, unless you took the extremely easy route."

"Yeah, that's fine. So will you do the trade?"

"The exchange itself is possible, yes. And the value difference between the one card and a Reward Up is...?!"

"What? How big's the difference?"

"E-excuse me. As I was saying, the value difference between a one card and a Reward Up is ninety-nine thousand coins. Are you okay with that?"

Everyone watching was taken aback by the Alpha Fixer's words. Ninety-nine thousand was obviously a lot. Since I was on tier two right now, I was awarded a thousand coins per hour. I was about to instantly earn what would normally take me ninety-nine hours to get.

It made sense within the rules of the Game, though. Like the Alpha Fixer had suggested, number cards were worth far more than skill cards, since the latter could be easily purchased. It was only natural that the former was worth so many coins.

*Still, this isn't entirely fair...*

I boldly smiled. Until yesterday, Fixers had been treated like regular players in the Game. Apart from their sliding levels, they had been subject to the same rules, and they could only possess three number cards. I'd asked Libra to change that for me. Perhaps it was a bit much, but no one had tried to gain an extra number card or trade one away to the Fixer yet. That meant they'd never know this was cheating.

"...Sounds good. Let's go for it."

After a curt nod, I held up my device. One of the one-value cards disappeared from my hand, and I received a Reward Up and ninety-nine thousand coins.

"Great. Thanks, Alpha Fixer."

"No need to thank me. I'm simply following the set rates...but making that trade has just exhausted my coin count. I'm afraid I will have to refrain from trading with anyone for a period of time."

After saying as much without even the slightest hint of a smile, the Alpha Fixer turned away from me. You couldn't exactly call it excellent service, but she was probably trying to keep a straight face. When Kazami tapped her for this role, she'd seemed incredibly nervous. Himeji had even given the girl playing the Alpha Fixer a lecture on maintaining composure, I think.

*"Meow-heh-heh... She did great! I'm so glad Libra's got so many young members with big potential!"*

The cat that was the avatar for Libra's top ace looked rather pleased with herself.



##

“Right, sure. I’m not asking you to do anything you can’t...but can I count on you?”

It was 9:52 AM. After obtaining a small fortune by trading with the Alpha Fixer, I quickly began throwing money around, requesting trades one after the other. It allowed me to reach level thirteen in a flash, getting me past the second tier without any problem at all.

In that time, my cards had gone from one and four to six and seven, which had cost me about seventy thousand coins. Had I upgraded my cards the usual way, I would’ve needed fifty thousand and two and a half hours. Considering the time I’d saved, it seemed entirely worth it to me.

“Roger that. See you later, then.”

My call ended right after I completed my tier-two quest. I returned my device to my pocket. I’d been talking with someone to do some...well, I suppose you could call it prep work. None of it benefited me immediately. I was laying the groundwork necessary to pass some later quests.

“Okay...”

With that done, I refocused myself on the present. Normally, I’d be utterly helpless against the tier-three quest. On the toughest route, the target level was twenty-one, a value impossible for me to reach with only two number cards.

However, there was a work-around.

Every player’s level was managed in real time across MTCG. The data was updated whenever someone’s level changed via trade or upgrade. Accessing that system was how I knew which players to target.

However, changes in level during a battle weren’t recorded in the main database. Since a skill card could temporarily change a player’s level, the system didn’t officially update their level until after the battle. That made sense, of course. If an opponent kept changing their level in a fight, it would be impossible to complete a quest. Basically, a quest’s target level only mattered for issuing a challenge. And in MTCG, participants were perfectly free to trade

cards during a fight, too.

Armed with that knowledge, it wasn't difficult to figure out the rest. I simply needed to find a target with no winning streak who was part of a team. Once the battle began, I'd negotiate with one of their teammates to trade with them so my target's level went down. They wouldn't do it for free, of course, but I still had over thirty thousand coins left.

Finding players that met the necessary conditions took Kagaya only a few minutes.

"Huh? You want me to drop my level? Why would I ever say yes to that?"

"What? You'll give me thirty thousand coins if I agree? Really? ...All of it?"

"W-well, umm... Okay. I mean, if you're sure?"

And with that, I cleared tier three without upgrading my hand at all.

#

Now I had a six card, a seven card, and four thousand coins remaining. My resources were dwindling, but after passing the first three tiers of the hardest quest route, I hit the arena's break lounge and took out my device.

"Looks like I've unlocked some special cards...?"

That's right. As Kazami had mentioned during her rule rundown, there were special skill cards in addition to the three standard ones. These finisher-type moves were automatically unlocked after a player beat a third-tier quest, and I was allowed to purchase whichever I liked.

According to Kazami, Tsumugi Shiina—the "last boss" of the toughest route—was set to level thirty, so I'd need to grab that Limit Breaker card to have a chance.

*"...Meow! Don't forget, there's a chance that her level isn't actually what it seems,"* the cat sitting on my shoulder said. *"In fact, I think it's safe to say something's up. I mean, if Tsumugi's level really was thirty, someone would've beaten her by now."*

"Yeah. There's definitely some meddling happening. I don't know if it's Tsumugi or an accomplice, but someone's got to be altering her data. She told

me that she'll never lose. I doubt she'd say that if her level really was locked at thirty."

I recalled her use of the word *invincible* late last night and shook my head. The cat on my shoulder let out a meow of (I think) sadness.

*"It's weird, isn't it? We created this Game, but someone's accessing our server and rewriting data... And we can't even do anything about it..."*

"Why can't you? Shiina's part of the staff, right? She's not a regular player. Shouldn't you be able to fix whatever's wrong? That doesn't seem like it would hurt anyone," I said.

*"Yeah... Meow! But Tsumugi's data has a lot of really tough protections placed on it. Libra's supposed to have the original access permissions, but we can't break through for some reason... It's awful! I really wish Libra was more than just a media group. If only we were really good at computers, too..."*

*"Hmm? Did someone call for me?"*

*"Huh?!"*

The sleepy interjection that made Kazami the cat jump came from Kagaya, of course. Presumably, she'd also sent her audio from my earpiece over to Kazami. The sudden interference must've surprised the cat a little, given how it was hissing with its hackles up.

*"Wh-who's there? What are you?!"*

*"Mmm, I can't really give my name, but I'm not a bad guy, okay? I'm just a kindly helper who happens to be passing through. I heard you mention something about needing access but someone's keeping you out. Is that right?"*

*"Y...yes, um, Ms. Good Guy..."*

*"Mmm... Okay. I'll have you know I'm great at cracking protections, but, oh, would you look at that? I don't have access to the relevant data. Do you think you could help me out, little kitty?"*

Kagaya gave a rather nefarious laugh. Kazami was pretty suspicious, and she had every right to be, but after steeling her resolve, she nodded in agreement. With that, the Company and Libra formed the greatest tag team there was.

For all our success, none of it meant much until I made it to Shiina.

“...I lost.”

It was 10:49 when I defeated my fifth-level target to clear the fourth tier of MTCG’s toughest route. That’s right. My opponent was at level five.

It turned out that the tier-four quest in MTCG was a little unusual, because it was the only one where the target had to be of a lower level than on my previous tier. That seems like it would be easy, but this Game didn’t offer any way to deliberately weaken yourself, so if you wanted to downgrade your cards, you had to trade with a bunch of other players. Between that and the Fixer being out of service, it was actually quite difficult.

But, of course, that only applied to those playing the Game normally. By relying on the Company’s help to see exactly what cards each player was looking for, I made the impossible fourth-tier quest more like a bonus stage. It took no time at all to change my hand from a six and a seven to a two and a three.

*All right. So far, so good.*

While playing it cool on the outside, I gave myself a pat on the back in my mind. Two hours had passed since the start of the fourth day of the May Interschool Competition. I was lagging a bit behind my goal, but I thought I was still doing well enough.

*“Okay, next up is the fifth tier... The hardest route’s target level is twenty-seven...”*

Inamura had taken Kagaya’s place while she was working on that protection. He didn’t sound as pitiful coming through the earpiece as he had in the past.

Twenty-seven was the standard maximum level, barring interference from skill cards. It required a hand of three nines. Considering how the Game had forced me to drop my level really low on the previous tier, this was positively fiendish.

*“Don’t forget...you only have two number cards, Shinohara. And you don’t have the coins to pull something off like you did during the tier-two quest.”*

“Yeah, you’re right...”

Without the right compensation, I’d never convince anyone to lower their levels for me. Besides, there were hardly any players at level twenty-seven anyway. I’d almost definitely be playing against the Alpha Fixer, and there was no negotiating with her.

*Hopefully that prep work from before has gone through okay...*

The pressure began to creep into my mind.

“...Shinohara!!”

I heard rapid footsteps behind me. There was a tap on my shoulder, and then a girl stepped in front of me. Her short ponytail bounced around, and her high skirt swayed gently.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Shinohara. It’s me, Fuuka Tatara, the most dependable class president out there!”

That’s right. After beating tier two roughly an hour ago, I’d called Fuuka Tatara, the energetic Three Star president of Class 2-A. I had known before the event began that she was participating in MTCG.

I nodded in greeting to Tatara and quickly got down to business.

“Thanks a lot, Tatara. I didn’t think you’d get here so quickly.”

“Oh, it’s totally fine, Shinohara! I gotta help a classmate in distress! That’s my mission as class president!” She gave me two thumbs up to emphasize her point. “Um, so...like you asked, I looked for someone who might be able to help. You wanted three people with a nine card, right?”

I bobbed my head. “Yeah.”

Basically, I needed to rely on friends to boost my level for me, like with Yuikawa. I’d reached out to my classmates and everyone else at Eimei School, looking for anyone willing to give up a nine for me. I knew people would be reluctant to help. It was an extreme request, after all. However, the right motivation would help.

“Unfortunately, I can’t pay the going rate for those cards in coins, but if I win MTCG, I’ll get that wild card, and that’ll boost Eimei’s winning chances in

ASTRAL... In other words, Eimei will get more stars coming its way. I was hoping that might be enough to persuade a few people.”

“I getcha! Personally, I’m perfectly okay with giving you my nine! I’m class president, after all!”

“...That’s not really a valid reason.”

“Oh, it’s fine! In my opinion, the ideal class president is the sort of person who kinda just goes with the flow! So don’t worry, Shinohara! Just take the help!”

Tatara gave me a carefree smile as she espoused her extremely self-serving theories on leadership. So long as I got the cards, I didn’t mind too much. While I breathed a sigh of relief, Tatara looked around.

“Tsuji said he’d help out, too. He should be here soon...”

“Actually...I already am.”

*Whoa?!*

The reply came from behind me. I turned around, yelping internally a bit, and saw Yuuki Tsuji, a guy I wasn’t sure whether to describe as handsome or beautiful.

“I got excited wondering when he might notice me, but you spoiled it, Tatara.”

“Oh! Sorry, sorry. You were totally hidden behind Shinohara, so I didn’t notice!”

“It’s fine...and I guess I hid a little too well.”

Tsuji stepped out of my shadow, smiling a little.

“Anyway, I’m your second assistant, Shinohara. Actually, I guess I’m your second and third.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, uh, where to begin? I talked a little about the sixth player for Eimei School before, right?”

“The sixth player? Oh, right.”

I nodded at Tsuji. Enomoto had mentioned a sixth player before the May Interschool Competition began. Essentially, Eimei had a strong player working inside MTCG, the idea being that she'd win the wild card and join ASTRAL as a powerful sixth team member. Her name was Mayu Minakami, and she was supposed to be a ringer. However, Tsuji had told me she'd already dropped out of MTCG.

"Yeah, Minakami," Tsuji said. He shrugged, looking a little crestfallen. "She has a lot of talent, but zero competitive drive. She was in MTCG since the first day, zooming through quests faster than anyone else, but she didn't show up on the second day. She said her favorite commentator was doing a marathon stream on ITube, so..."

"Uh, really?" I asked.

"Ha-ha... Yeah, Minakami's been out of the Game for a while. However, she allowed me to borrow her device for this event, saying, 'Do whatever you want with it.'"

Tsuji spoke like all of this was a little funny to him. Despite Minakami's attitude, why had she given her device to someone else? It served as a smartphone, wallet, and ID. That was beyond laziness. It was more like carelessness as an art form.

"Anyway, Minakami has a nine in her hand, so like she suggested, I'm going to do what I want with it. Trade me some skill card you don't need for it so you can fill up your hand again. Then I'll give you my own nine so you'll have three."

"You sure you want to do that? I can take Minakami's since she's not in the Game anymore, but..."

"Tatara's helping you out, so I can't just sit back and watch. I like to think of myself as your first friend on the Academy."

"Thanks."

"Not at all! For a regular person like me, MTCG's just a fun social event more than anything. Even if I somehow win, I'd only earn an Ability at most. But if you take it, you'll get back into ASTRAL. Eimei might even get a huge comeback, and I want to see that. So don't worry about it, okay?"

Tsuji smiled sweetly as he spoke, and for a moment, I thought I was talking to a lovely girl.

*What a cute—I mean, what a help this is.*

Thanks to Tsuji, Tatara, and Mayu Minakami, whom I had yet to meet, my hand went from a two and a three to a set of nines. All that remained was to take all of Minakami's coins and purchase some useful skill cards, and then I'd clear tier five without any trouble.

While I was busy with all the exchanging...

*"...Hey, Hiro, got a minute?"*

...I heard Kagaya's voice and brought my right hand to my ear.

*"With a little help from that kitty, I've managed to access Tsum-Tsum's data—Tsumugi's, I mean. We can't quite get past this one final bit of authentication, though. It needs a password, and I think it'll lock us out permanently if we try to brute-force it... So could we ask you for some help with that, Hiro? The final password is supposedly Tsumugi's actual level."*

*"..."*

It was rare to hear Kagaya ask me for help. I thought on the problem quietly.

#

It was time for my final MTCG challenge.

The fifth-tier quest flew by without any significant trouble. I'd used a Cancel Skill card to breeze past the Alpha Fixer, who played as a twenty-seventh-level adversary for me. With that, I'd reached the end of all the MTCG quests. Normally, that's when I'd receive a prize, but since I was on the toughest route, it wasn't going to be that easy.

*I need to beat Shiina, the secret boss, and then I'll have completed the Game... Hmm. That's weird. The target data on my device isn't updating.*

*"Ha-ha-ha-ha!"*

A powerful laugh broke off my train of thought. Unsurprisingly, although I admit it was a bit strange that I'd expected it, the sound came from Kanade Yuikawa. He stood on the battle stage, the platform in the middle of the arena



reserved for the final battle. His hands were raised in triumph.

“Shinohara! Awww, Shinohara, you were so close! You played well but weren’t fast enough to catch up with me! Now you just sit tight, and watch in despair as I achieve my ultimate victory!”

Yuikawa was getting pretty stoked on himself, presumably because of the large crowd.

A young girl stood on the battle stage with him, ready to fight. Her small, delicate frame made it easy to guess at her age. She wore a long robe over her usual gothic attire, and the hood was drawn so far down her face you could hardly see it. Complex patterns covered the robe. Between that outfit and the glimpses of red from one of her eyes beneath the hood, she was undoubtedly Tsumugi Shiina, the girl in her edgy fantasy world and loving it.

Yuikawa shifted his focus from me to Shiina. “Hello there, last boss,” he said, more confident than ever. “Good to meet you. Are you a girl? Sorry in advance. I’d hate to make a girl cry, but there’s nothing I can do. This is war.”

“...”

“Not interested in chatting? Too bad.”

With that, Yuikawa took out his device with a flourish, as though he were drawing a sword. In apparent response, the MTCG AR system generated a ferocious-looking black dragon above his head. It was huge and terrifying. Yuikawa grinned at the sight of it.

“My apologies if this startled you...but this is my familiar. The rules say these are selected at random, but maybe those in charge were kind enough to match me up with something suitable. Meanwhile, Hiroto Shinohara has a house cat! A cat! It’s pathetic!”

“Be quiet...”

“Huh? Oh, sorry. Maybe I got a little carried away. If you’re that ready to finish this Game, then let’s get on with it.”

Yuikawa sounded a little miffed as he took a step forward. He pointed a finger straight at Shiina like a detective in a mystery novel accusing the killer.

“Many players have made it to you, the last boss of the hardest quest route. Yet none of them have won, even those who brought special cards to the fight. The reason has to be because you’re stronger! Thirty is the highest level achievable with a Limit Breaker card. Combined with two Level Up cards, that brings the highest possible total to thirty-two. I believe your actual level must be thirty-three!”

Yuikawa was shouting more to the audience than Shiina, sporting all the swagger of a pro wrestler. His logic was reasonable. If being at level thirty-two wasn’t enough, then Shiina had to be higher.

“But I’m going to surpass your insurmountable level! Did you know that the special card Limit Breaker not only transforms any nines in your hand into tens but also removes the limits on your cards’ maximum values? That’s right. It only applies during a battle, of course, but it basically means there’s no maximum level. You also have to remember that the upgrade command is available during battle. MTCG doesn’t place any time limits on fights, and you’re allowed to upgrade cards during a fight!”

A stir ran through the audience. Shiina, meanwhile, said nothing, keeping her head lowered and her eyes on the ground.

“Ha-ha-ha! Too afraid to speak now that your plan has been ruined? After using Limit Breaker to gain three tens, I upgraded all of them! Now I hold a set of elevens for a total of thirty-three! I hope you’re ready, final boss!”

After revealing his strategy, Yuikawa let out a boisterous laugh.

*His logic’s not bad, but unfortunately for him, he’s got it wrong,* I thought while watching Yuikawa. There were no clear misconceptions in his reasoning, but his whole perception of the situation was incorrect. I’d considered relying on Limit Breaker and boosting my level in a similar way, but if winning was that simple, someone else would’ve done so. I was confident she wasn’t playing that fairly.

“...No. I don’t wanna wait that long.”

The moment Shiina muttered that, there was an audible *boom*, followed by an intense wave of heat and wind. I instinctively shut my eyes as it rushed over my body. I figured it was just part of her performance, but it was so real that I

had to keep myself from staggering back a step.

After a moment of silence, I carefully opened my eyes and saw that Shiina had pulled back her hood to reveal her heterochromous eyes. What's more, a three-headed Cerberus stood proudly before her.

"...You're wrong. You're completely wrong," Shiina declared. "You think I'm only level thirty-three? Of course not. I'm not that weak at all. Let's end this little contest. I can't wait forever, you know."

"Wha...? W-wait. I'm not ready ye—"

"Just be quiet."

Shiina threw a hand forward, commanding her Cerberus to attack. It leaped into action, lunging at the black dragon and catching the creature in its mouths. The dragon roared at this sudden strike, but it was clearly no match for the Cerberus's speed. Before long, it was helpless and wounded all over.

*"Rrr...rrgh..."*

Yuikawa's black dragon slumped to the ground in no more than thirty seconds.

Shiina watched all of this unfold in silence, sighing when it was over. "Ugh... You're not allowed to stall all day, you know. It's not good manners to waste time when you've got no chance of winning."

"M-manners? No, this was a perfectly valid strate—"

"I told you you can't beat me that way. Better luck next time."

Shiina laid down her judgment without even bothering to look at her opponent. Given how painfully shy she was, maybe she was too nervous to meet his eyes. Ultimately, I guess it didn't matter.

"O-oh..."

Yuikawa dejectedly stepped down from the battle stage in a daze. Shiina watched, and as soon as he was gone, she turned her attention to me. A grin spread across her face, breaking her dark and mysterious persona. She folded her arms in an attempt to look as strong as possible.

“Come on up... I’ve been waiting for you.”

#

Shiina and I stood on the battle stage.

“I’m so glad I’ll get to fight you!”

Shiina stood across from me, dressed in her anime-villain-esque clothing. She was all smiles. Her expression had noticeably softened from earlier, and her voice bounced a bit when she spoke.

“Hey, how about we place a bet on this match? Let’s say the loser has to do whatever the winner says, just like before!”

“Still as confident as ever, I see. Don’t forget that you lost pretty spectacularly two days ago.”

“Oh, I’ll be fine! There’s no way I’d lose *this* Game!”

She patted the Cerberus’s three heads as it sidled up beside her. She looked entirely sure of herself. Meanwhile, I was deep in contemplation.

*“No way I’d lose.” She’s said so to me a few times now. Beating Shiina is absolutely impossible. She seems to think so, anyway.*

That much was clear. And if that was the case, it narrowed down her possible level quite a bit. Yuikawa had just demonstrated that it was possible to reach levels beyond thirty. Shiina was powerful, but couldn’t be invincible.

“You can only beat quests in MTCG by starting the match with the same level as your opponent. Raising your level doesn’t help much in that respect. It could be thirty-three or ninety-nine, and it wouldn’t matter. A Limit Breaker can raise your total after the battle starts, but no matter how much you upgraded your cards, an opponent could do the same. It would never make you totally invincible.”

Once I understood that, the solution was clear.

“It’s negative, isn’t it, Shiina? Your level is less than zero. I don’t know the exact number, but it’s definitely not zero or higher. That’s why you keep saying no one can beat you.”

“...”

I'd waited for just the right moment to lay this out. Shiina gawked at me for a second, seemingly stunned.

"...Wow." Her voice was barely above a whisper. "You really are amazing. You're right... This puppy's level is negative ninety-nine. Lloyd's the guardian of hell, after all, and levels work in reverse down there."

"Yeah... I figured it was something like that. Lloyd's pretty clever."

"Of course he is! He's my treasure! And you gave him to me!"

Shiina didn't hesitate to reveal everything. Her level was negative ninety-nine. There was no beating that. I could sell all my number cards to reach a value of zero, but MTCG didn't offer any mechanisms to push it lower. Shiina really was invincible. From a player's perspective, this was a fight they were doomed to lose.

*Negative levels... That's just the sort of thing Shiina would think up.*

She acted sweet with me, but there was nothing cute about her deviousness. Still, I couldn't help but smile with her. Now that I knew the truth, I had everything I needed. The conditions for my victory had been met.

I took a step forward, tapping on my earpiece twice.

"All right, Shiina, let's finish this."

"Um, okay...but I'm gonna win, you know. And when I do, you're gonna play games with me for the rest of my life, okay?"

"That sounds really unreasonable...but all right. I'm not going to lose, so it doesn't matter."

I waved my device to summon my familiar. The calico cat linked to Kazami waved back at me and nodded, as if to say, "Ready to go!" After receiving that confirmation, I brought my device up.

"Let's begin. I've got three nines in my hand, and I'll use Limit Breaker to upgrade them to tens for a total of thirty. I've got a Cancel Skill card, too, so no matter what you play, our levels are locked where they are."

"Wh-what? That's all?! B-but my level's negative ninety-nine, so—"

“What’re you talking about? I know that’s a lie.”

Shiina quickly grew flustered as I laid out the truth.

“Listen, Shiina, you claim your level’s in the negatives because it fits your story. If everything you said was true, no one would ever be able to beat you. And I doubt Libra would approve of that.”

“B-but it’s tru—”

“It’s not. My level’s thirty. Let’s see what you’ve got, Shiina.”

“Oooh...”

I was in my element, even as Shiina let out a disapproving groan. Very reluctantly, she brought her device to her eyes, and then her expression changed. It went from puzzled to utterly shocked in an instant.

She had every reason to be surprised.

“Wha...? Why?! Why is Lloyd level thirty now?!”

That’s right.

The whole setup was quite simple. Libra oversaw MTCG, and Shiina had broken into the system to adjust her level. Her strong protections had kept Kazami and the others from doing anything about the altered data.

However, I had both Libra and the Company in my corner. Once I knew Shiina’s level, which was the last password we needed to access her modified data, it was a simple thing for my friends to return the value to what it was supposed to be.

“...Who knows? Maybe you only thought he was invincible this whole time.” I smiled dauntlessly as I spoke.

With a wave of my arm, my cat, surrounded by a blue aura, leaped at her foe. Her claws ripped into the Cerberus like a scratching post, and it wasn’t long before Lloyd dissolved into a cloud of luminous particles. A moment later, the original plush Lloyd dropped back into Shiina’s arms.

And with that, I had cleared the toughest route in MTCG.

“ ... ”

I worried that Shiina might take this poorly. She stared at me blankly. Eventually, she squeezed Lloyd tightly, looking positively elated.

“Wow... Wow! Wow, wow, wow! You really are the best!”

“...”

“Ohh, this makes me so happy! Spending time with you has been so much fun, and this is even better!”





She shot for me like an energetic little fireball, grinning bright and wild. There was something innocent about her expression, but also something a little crazed, like she was obsessed.

“I thought for sure you couldn’t win, but you did anyway! Oh, wow! And I’m actually totally fine with this, too! You really do need to get back into ASTRAL, you know! Right now!”

“Why?”

“Just do it!”

Shiina was all bright smiles and adulation, but there was a firmness to her voice. Something about her had always struck me as a little off, and I finally knew why. She’d challenged me to a bunch of games and dragged me around the hotel. And after a few days of that, she was sending me back to ASTRAL. I knew someone else who liked to mess around with people, too.

“Hey, Shiina...if I recall, you said that whoever wins gets to make the loser do whatever they want, right?”

“Oh, yeah, I forgot... Sure. What’s your wish?”

Shiina raised an eyebrow at me as she held the Cerberus close. Right now, she didn’t seem like anything but a cute girl, maybe a younger sister.

“Answer this question—you’re the Chameleon, aren’t you?”

“...!”

Her mismatched eyes shot wide. The crowd began to buzz over this. No one else knew all the details, so this had come out of nowhere from their perspective. Shiina stared at me, seemingly ignorant of all the whispering.

“Is that...is that an order? Do I haaaaaaaave to answer it?”

“Yep.”

“Mmmmmgh. All right. That was the bet.”

She didn’t seem to mind very much, if her smile was any indication. She twirled, her robe flowing in the air like the wings of some hellish monster. Her delight reached its peak.

“That’s right—I’m the Chameleon. Congratulations! You’ve beaten the toughest route in MTCG! But this is where the real game begins. This was all just a preliminary, a little ritual to get you back on track. Next time, we’ll be fighting in ASTRAL, okay? I wanna keep playing, and playing, and playing with you until we finally crown a winner!”

This girl was the Chameleon, the one dominating ASTRAL and stomping all around the Game, yet there wasn’t a hint of malice in her eyes. They only held pure joy.

#

“H-hurry up, Shinohara! There’s not much time left...”

“Ah! Yeah, I know!”

Shortly after beating MTCG, I hurried back to the Shiki Island Grand Hotel in a taxi I’d booked in advance. From there, Kazami took me to Libra’s headquarters in the basement. It was 11:47 in the morning, and I’d managed to finish MTCG in time, but only just barely. I would’ve liked a bit more time, but this would have to do. The first half of the fourth day hadn’t ended yet.

“Meow! We’re here!”

The moment we stepped into the control room, Kazami announced our arrival as loudly as she could. All the Libra members instantly turned our way. Presumably, they’d been keeping tabs on MTCG while running ASTRAL. Their eyes all held a faint glimmer of hope that had been absent yesterday.

“*Huff...huff...* Okay, I’m gonna run the wild card program to get you back into the Game, Shinohara. You can use any of the stuff over there if you like. Let me know if something comes up!”

“Sure. I’ll do that. And thanks.”

“No problem, meow!”

Kazami nodded briskly, then sat at a nearby desk and started pounding away on the keyboard. Meanwhile, I walked up to the large monitor in the middle of the control room, the main screen that displayed what was happening all across ASTRAL.

“...”

Things had hardly improved since I'd been away. The black area indicating Seijo School's territory now occupied over half of the nonneutral region of the map. The Chameleon—really Tsumugi Shiina and her United Force—now had an overwhelming amount of power.

If Shiina was truly the Chameleon, that meant she'd been playing ASTRAL and MTCG simultaneously. I supposed that was doable enough. She was only projecting herself in ASTRAL anyhow. There was no need for her to be physically present. She could join from her hotel room, the MTCG lounge, or just about anywhere else. It must have been like playing a video game to her.

Meanwhile, her United Force had been slowly acquiring more territory. Eimei's turf hadn't changed all that much since yesterday.

*Good. I made it in time.*

Relief welled up from deep inside my heart. With the Chameleon's team taking everything over, I wouldn't have been surprised to see Eimei had been swallowed whole by now. Simply maintaining what we had was more than enough.

Once I had a grasp on the situation, I decided to ask a Libra member how to work these desk monitors. Following her instructions, I attached my device to one of the computer setups in front of me, and a window on the monitor displayed a list of parameters and actions in ASTRAL. There was one command in the middle of the screen that I didn't remember seeing in the Game, however.

*“Admin Contact,” huh?*

Kazami had told me about it last night. It allowed someone to forcibly communicate with players inside the ASTRAL Game world. This was the whole reason I'd wanted to finish MTCG before the first half finished today. I needed to tap into this admin feature.

“...Hey, guys. Can you hear me?”

“““?!?!?!”””

The audio went out to every player who wasn't part of the Chameleon's force, and I was trying to make myself sound bolder and more domineering than usual. Nearly twenty players visibly reacted on-screen. A few looked scared, while others were confused. Saionji seemed relieved, although she was doing her best to hide it. And Himeji remained completely emotionless, but gave a little nod. The reactions really ran the gamut, but the common element was surprise.

I guess I couldn't blame them. Contacting other teams wasn't supposed to be possible in ASTRAL, yet an eliminated player was reaching out to everyone. It almost resembled a horror movie setup.

Realizing that, I decided to play it up a bit, even grinning, although only my voice was being transmitted.

"It's me, Hiroto Shinohara. Sorry I missed out on this morning's action. How's it been going?"

*"Wha-wha...? What's going on here?!"*

Numerous responses came in, but an exclamation from a Tenth Ward player cut through the rest, his voice cracking. He didn't sound angry, just incredibly astonished.

*"Hiroto Shinohara?! Why are you... Wait, are you the Chameleon?!"*

"You think I'm the faker? Normally I'd praise your deduction, but unfortunately, you're wrong. Besides, why would she impersonate me? If she pretended to be someone who'd been eliminated, you'd spot her instantly."

*"Y-yeah, I guess...but if it's really you, then this is crazy! You just said you're out of the Game! How are you talking to m—"*

"Oh, you want to know how I'm still accessing ASTRAL?" I interjected. I looked at Saionji and the Eimei School members through the monitor.

"Well, it's because I've finished MTCG and gotten my wild card. I won't actually be able to rejoin ASTRAL until the latter half of the day, but I've got my ticket back."

*"Wha...? Are you serious?!"*

"I sure am. And this little chat we're having right now is the proof. ASTRAL doesn't normally let players communicate across teams, yet that's exactly what I'm doing. My voice is going out to around twenty people. I bet you're wondering how, right? Maybe you think it's because of a job-based Ability. Well, that's right. My revival after clearing MTCG has changed my job from Commander to Ghost/Commander."

*"Ghost/Commander...? Oh. Was that your reward for earning the wild card?"*

The Tenth Ward guy swallowed nervously as I explained with as much bravado as I could. He didn't voice any doubts about my claim, which was useful since it was all a lie. Libra would change my displayed job on my device later, but I was still just a Commander. Obtaining that wild card hadn't awarded me any new features.

To be honest, that didn't matter. Only one person could win their way back into ASTRAL by competing in MTCG. No matter what kind of junk I made up, there was no way to know I was making it up. The important thing was that it was an enticing lie that everyone wanted to believe.

"...Okay, listen, everyone."

I took a deep breath before addressing my audience again.

"Now that you understand what's happening, I should tell you that Ghost/Commander has another feature that permits me to see detailed information on opponents. I can only use it once, though, so I tried it on the Chameleon, and I found something very interesting."

*"Interesting...?"*

"Very interesting. It turns out that the Chameleon isn't even officially participating in this event. She's a straight-up enemy the administrators inserted."

*"Huh?"*

*"Ahhh!"*

Players raised their eyebrows on the screen, skeptical of my claim. Kazami was panicking, along with the rest of Libra, but I gave them a reassuring look

and continued with a grin.

“That’s right, she’s just an enemy for us all. Check the MTCG highlights later and you’ll see she’s a middle schooler named Tsumugi Shiina. She’s not a standard ASTRAL player or even part of the star system. Her presence is just meant to stir up trouble in this competition.”

*“Huh? No, but... That’s crazy...”*

“Do you really think so? None of this strikes you as weird? Seven teams have joined the Chameleon under that United Force Ability. It clearly goes way beyond what the rules would allow, but the admins have continued to let it slide. There’s only one explanation—those in charge created the Chameleon. It explains why she hasn’t been exposed yet.”

*“...!”*

“Are you all fine to let her keep kicking your asses? At this rate, she won’t have any trouble winning ASTRAL. The truth will come out during the closing ceremony, and no one will be named the winner. I doubt anyone wants that, right?”

I watched everyone’s reactions on the monitor while I spoke. Naturally, I couldn’t reveal the entire truth, but hopefully, they would believe this story. The Chameleon didn’t respect the rules because she wasn’t a player in the same sense that we were. She was an unfair enemy the admins had devised.

“There’s still a chance for us,” I said.

*“...!”*

A hush fell over the players. They all wore somber looks. When I told them all wasn’t lost, a few of them lifted their heads. I knew they couldn’t see me, but they stared at their devices, almost clinging to them.

As I watched them, I asked the Libra team to stop all cameras set up inside ASTRAL. Then I outlined my plan to the players still in the Game, talking like I was sharing a guarded secret.

“Here’s the deal. At the moment, the Chameleon has two thousand, four hundred and eighty-eight hexes. That’s forty-nine point two percent of all

nonneutral hexes. In other words, if we all work together, maybe form a Truce, we'll have a bit more power than her."

"However, we're not a United Force like what the Chameleon has. We're more of an alliance, I guess. We're fighting for different schools, and we've all lost a lot of popularity in the polls."

"But we can win back fan support anytime we like. People only support the Chameleon because she was an unexpected twist. With all the attention she's garnered, it's no wonder votes favored her. But it's gotten so one-sided by now, she's starting to turn off some people. Opinions are splitting. So where are those votes going to go now? If the audience is sick of seeing the overpowered Chameleon dominate the Game, who will they support instead?"

"Well, think about it. I'm the kind of reckless Commander who left ASTRAL to prepare to face that crazy-strong character the admins created. And let's not forget that the Eimei School team is currently in last. A comeback seems impossible. If you were watching things, what would you think? Would you prefer a bland conclusion where the Chameleon blows everyone away or a major upset where the biggest underdog of all works with everyone else to beat her?"

"""" ... """"

The players on the other side of my monitor had fallen silent. I assumed they were trying to work out what to do. Would they submit to the Chameleon or trust me? They had to choose one or the other. Sitting on the sidelines wasn't an option anymore.

*"I'm not exactly thrilled that Shinohara will be in charge...but I guess we've got no choice."*

While most waited to see how others would react, Saionji accepted a Truce with Eimei. Ohga School, which stood a distant second to the Chameleon, was joining the alliance. That proved to be the trigger. Players joined one after another with all the speed of a dam bursting. With that, we had our Truce, and the alliance was united to bring down the Chameleon. We had twenty people across six teams, giving us slightly more players than the Chameleon's United Force.

I watched things unfold on the screen with a pleased expression.

“Heh! Glad to see we’re on the same page. Listen, our Game—our ASTRAL—starts now. We’re not at the Chameleon’s mercy anymore. She’s nothing but an unfair enemy mob, and anyone working for her is a traitor. We can’t let them get away with this anymore. We can’t afford to lose. Let’s show them...”

I paused to take a deep breath, lifting my device in front of me and acting as powerfully pretentious as I could.

“...that it’s *our* turn now.”

I grinned through the whole act.



## Island Tube comments / end of MTCG

---

11:35 Oh maaaaaaan, Hiroto's way too awesome...

11:35 Huh? Did Shinohara seriously beat the MTCG while I was making lunch?

11:35 Hilarious how much he dominates. The Seven Star is nuts.

11:35 He didn't even take three hours. Think about that. It's insane. My friend's been in it since day one and he's still on tier three.

11:35 The wild card sure went to the right dude.

11:35 Yeah. But the Chameleon reveal is even bigger news to me.

11:36 [BREAKING] The Chameleon's a cute middle schooler...!

11:36 Tsumugi's so cuuute! I wanna pat her on the head! I'm sure she'd kill me if I did, but still!

11:36 Despite her looks, she picked a fight with the Empress and completely took over ASTRAL. She's way too strong... I think I'm in love. Libra really knows how to put on a show!

11:36 Now we know why it looked like she was cheating.

11:36 Right, she's not even a player... Hey, not to bring this up after the fact, but was Yuikawa from Ibara always such an asshole?

11:36 Yeah.

11:36 Totally.

11:36 I thought so, too.

11:36 Lol. It's unanimous.

## Chapter 3

### Hell's Priestess and the Demigod Dictator

#

"Welcome back, Master."

The fourth day's lunch break had arrived. I'd reunited with the rest of Team Eimei, and we were hanging out in the conference room we'd reserved on the second floor of the Shiki Island Grand Hotel.

Himeji bowed deeply to me and gave a soft smile. She fixed me in her clear blue eyes and spoke with a touch more spirit than usual.

"Of course, I always believed you'd return to us, Master. I assumed you would storm through MTCG and make it look easy, but I never thought you'd set a record for the fastest win in the process... It was a great surprise. You constantly exceed my wildest dreams, Master."

"Well... Libra helped out this time. But I am the Seven Star, you know. I'd lose my reputation if I couldn't back up what I said."

"I agree, but living up to your word every time can't be easy."

A carefree little grin floated across Himeji's face. Then she gave me a quick recap of what had happened in ASTRAL while I was away.

"There have been no major events today, Master. There was only one battle to speak of. Two players attempted to attack us, but we easily repelled them. They likely belonged to the United Force. Regrettably, they fled before we could finish them off."

"That's fine... It's enough that we didn't lose anyone. I know not having a Commander dropped everyone's Action Levels, so it must have been tough. Good job."

"Not at all, Master. I merely did what I had to as your teammate and maid.

Also...I was hardly the only one fighting to keep things in order for you.”

Himeji threw a glance over to her side. Standing there was Noa Akizuki, whose twin ponytails perked up a little when she noticed my eyes on her.

“We waited *forever* for you, Hiroto! You stupid late idiot! Making someone as cute as me wait for hours... If it were anybody else, I’d *never* forgive them!”

“...What’re you upset for, Akizuki? It only took a little while. I set a speed record.”

“I don’t care about that! I was lonely! None of that matters when I’m lonely!”

Akizuki lowered her head, trying to hide her wavering voice and watery eyes. Surprisingly, Shinji Enomoto praised her.

“Let me just note that while you were gone, Akizuki was every bit the ‘ace of Eimei’ she claims to be. You can be sure of that.”

“Indeed,” Himeji agreed. “In particular, the way she read and exploited the male players’ behavioral psychology and used it to trap them with very few Spells was masterful. I’m sure Ms. Akizuki, the Little Devil of Eimei, has traumatized more than a few people in this Game.”

*Wow... I dunno whether I should be upset I missed that or glad.*

I winced internally. Akizuki’s exploits (whatever they were) had kept the United Force’s invasion at bay. That much was clear. While I was petting Akizuki’s head (she demanded I do so as a reward), Asamiya cleared her throat. She played with a lock of her vivid blond hair with a few fingers as she glared at Enomoto.

“You’re being weird, Shinji. I know Noa-chi did some great work and all, but the rest of us did our best, too. Why are you only praising her? You’re not secretly in love with her, are you, Shinji? You trying to put the moves on her?”

“Why would you jump to that conclusion??”

“Oh, really? Hee-hee-hee! Well, thank you! ♪ I don’t exactly hate you, either, President... But, mmm, I don’t really see you as boyfriend material. I’m faithful to my man! ♡”

“I’ve already been dumped?!”

Enomoto folded his arms, his irritated expression worsening at Asamiya's scolding and pouting. Akizuki happily played along with that devilish smile of hers. Enomoto mumbled to himself, saying, "I swear..." and so on with a sour look on his face. After a moment he lifted his head.

"...Looking back, I suppose Nanase wasn't completely useless. Her contribution is likely trivial compared to mine, but on a scale of zero to one, I think she's earned a one."

"! Th-thank you... Wait, no! What the heck?! That's the worst praise ever! If I'm a one, then you're a negative fifty billion! You owe all of us big time for carrying you!"

"I said on a scale of zero to one, didn't I? Don't tell me your memory skills are zero, too?"

"Quit...messing...with...me!"

Asamiya leaned forward to get in Enomoto's face as he continued to needle her. This was routine for them at this point. Akizuki watched the scene with a smile on her face. I guess there was no point in getting worked up.

"All right... Let's take a look at our current situation, then," I said, keeping my voice calm. I hoped to shift the conversation back to a serious discussion about ASTRAL.

I'd shared the general plan with everyone during that call to all the teams not under the Chameleon, but I'd skipped the details since there was so little time. This felt like a good time to clue in Team Eimei on the specifics.

"Just before the end of the first half today, I contacted all players who haven't joined with the enemy. I pretended that was a new feature of my Ghost job, but really it was only possible with Libra's help. Our alliance of six teams is made up of Suisei from the Second Ward, Ohga from the Third, Eimei from the Fourth, Ohmi from the Tenth, Murakumo from the Thirteenth, and Soken from the Nineteenth."

"That's right," Himeji said. "And adding up the number of active players on each team, we get a total of twenty."

"Twenty, huh? Hey, how many players are in the Chameleon's United Force,

Shirayuki?” Asamiya asked.

“Fourteen, including the Chameleon herself. I’m not sure that the teams involved matter much anymore, but in addition to Seijo, Shinra from the Seventh Ward, Otowa from the Eighth, St. Rosalia from the Fourteenth, and Tsuyuri from the Sixteenth have all joined the United Force. Originally, their side was a bit larger, but three teams have dropped out of the Game, so the enemy has a rather modest-sized group.”

“Yeah. Nothing modest about their fighting power, though.”

I had to agree with Asamiya on that point. Threats like Kugasaki and Kururugi definitely counted as more than one average enemy team member each.

And there was one other thing we had to take into account, too.

“Before we go any further, I need you all to understand that the Chameleon, Tsumugi Shiina, is just an illegal player. She’s not some special enemy the Game’s managers inserted. She broke into ASTRAL using illicit means and made herself the strongest in the Game. Given that we’re working with Libra, I thought it was best not to make that public for the time being.”

“True. If people learn that the Chameleon’s an illegal player, the whole event could come crashing down, and Libra would take the blame. That’s far from the ideal resolution,” Himeji remarked.

“Exactly. No matter how you slice it, Shiina’s still way too strong. She has the highest Action Level, the quickest Spell resupply, all the positive aspects of every job in the Game, and the whole map’s been revealed to her from the beginning... And as if that wasn’t enough, her maximum LP is nine hundred and ninety-nine.”

“Nine hundred and ninety-nine?!” Akizuki was taken aback. “I—I think even I might have trouble beating someone that overpowered.”

“This goes beyond difficult. It’s actually impossible, isn’t it? She’s basically invincible,” Asamiya said, frowning.

Akizuki and Asamiya didn’t seem too hopeful. Enomoto, meanwhile, had his arms folded, looking the same as usual.

“No, Nanase,” he replied. “Being invincible and having nine hundred and ninety-nine Life Points are two completely different things.”

“Huh? How? There’s no way we can whittle down that much LP.”

“Correct. *We* can’t. However, Hell’s Priestess is participating in ASTRAL. If the Chameleon truly had infinite LP, she would be unstoppable, but she doesn’t. There’s a very good chance that Senri Kururugi’s One-Shot Kill can defeat the Chameleon.”

Asamiya’s eyes widened a bit. “Oh...”

“Yup. That’s what I was thinking, too.” I grinned widely, and internally, I praised Enomoto for his clever observation. “With Senri Kururugi’s One-Shot Kill, we stand a chance against the Chameleon. Honestly, it’s our only hope. That means our first mission is to capture Kururugi—to separate her from the United Force.”

How would we go about it, though? Persuasion or intimidation? Kururugi undoubtedly held a grudge against us. It wouldn’t be easy to sway her at all, but we couldn’t let that stop us. We needed her cooperation. Members of the United Force could leave whenever they wanted, as long as they were okay with finishing in last place. Friendly fire was permitted in ASTRAL, so there was no mechanical issue with teammates turning against each other.

*Finding a way to exploit Himeji’s Replace skill could work as a plan B, but meeting the required conditions for One-Shot Kill will be a challenge, to say the least. I guess I can talk to her about it, but we’d best save it for a last resort.*

While I thought that over, Asamiya nodded in agreement with what I’d said about winning over Kururugi. “Hmm... I guess that would work. But there are more than a dozen people in the United Force, right? It’s gonna be really tough to convince a single one of them to betray the rest...”

I opted to reply to Asamiya’s anxious comment in the most matter-of-fact way possible.

“Yeah. That’s why what we need to do is wage an all-out war. Trying to single out Kururugi and get her to attack Shiina is pretty unrealistic. Her followers will definitely get in the way. However, our side has more players. And most of the

Chameleon's territory is in the center of the Game map, while we've been pushed out to the edges on the north and south. If you think about it, we're set up perfectly for a pincer attack."

I launched a projection of the ASTRAL Game map as I spoke. The center of the hex-based chart was filled in with black, Seijo's color, from east to west. Six different colors marked scattered territories above and below. It really did look like six teams poised to strike from the top and bottom.

"According to Libra, the United Force is working in three groups. For simplicity, let's give them names. On the right side of the map we have Team A, led by the Chameleon, Tsumugi Shiina. To the left is Team B, led by Hell's Priestess, Senri Kururugi. Finally, Team C stands in the middle of the map. That's where Kirigaya and Kugasaki are."

"I see. Each one sounds pretty tough," Himeji said.

"Definitely," I agreed readily. "And now that the United Force has lost a few members, the remaining ones are basically all nothing but top-rank players."

Honestly, if Himeji and I didn't have Akizuki, Asamiya, and Enomoto, I would've been losing it by now, laughing nervously nonstop. We were up against a merciless illegal player, a one-shot killer with a supremely unfair Ability, the Phoenix, who was beyond obnoxious, and the Six Star Demigod Dictator. There were monsters every way I looked.

We had no choice but to face them, though.

"So we're going to attack all three of these teams at the same time. I'd prefer if we had the time to really work out who will take each group, but we'll have to work with our current positions."

"In that case...it'll be the Third and Thirteenth Wards against Team A on the right side of the map, the Second and Nineteenth against Team C in the center... and then it's us and the Tenth Ward against Team B on the left," Himeji explained.

"Right. But like I said, we can't do anything against the Chameleon unless we've got Kururugi on our side. So we'll need the Empress—really, all of Ohga and Murakumo—to fend off Shiina's advance and keep her from generating

fakes elsewhere in the battle. While that's going on, we'll get Kururugi. Meanwhile, over in the center, we'll need the Second and Nineteenth Ward teams to stop Kirigaya's group in its tracks."

I couldn't ask them to beat Kirigaya. He led a powerful group, for one, but the Second Ward's Suisei School was also somewhat infamous for not deploying its best players for events like this one. In fact, there weren't any third-year students playing for that team. Suisei would be paired up with Soken School, which occupied the bottom half of the school rankings, so asking them to defeat Team C would be unfair.

"Once we successfully recruit Kururugi, all we have to do is have her use One-Shot Kill on Shiina. Then our task will be complete, and ASTRAL should return to normal."

"Hmm... Are you sure we'll be okay, Hiroto? Not that I'm doubting you, but I feel like we could have teammates drop out or sabotage each other..." Akizuki said.

"Ah, I think we're good on that front, probably. Truce or not, we'd normally have to be on the lookout for that...but no matter how we feel, it makes no sense to betray us right now."

She cocked her head. "...? Even if someone wants to finish a little higher in the ranking?"

"Sure. The way the United Force works, if the Chameleon finishes first, all the teams affiliated with her finish second. In other words, unless we beat the Chameleon, we're all guaranteed to lose stars. Nobody has any choice but to side with us. They have to ally together whether they like it or not because there's no other way to beat the Chameleon."

"Oh, you're right...! Heh-heh! You really are the coolest, Hiroto! ♡"

Akizuki squirmed alluringly as she sighed the words. Enomoto and Asamiya didn't offer any disagreement, and when I looked to Himeji, she gave me a nod and a slight smile.

"All right. The second half of ASTRAL's fourth day will feature all-out war with the Chameleon's United Force. Our six teams will break down their firepower,



and then we'll have Kururugi attack the Chameleon with One-Shot Kill," I declared.

"Right, right." Akizuki bobbed her head.

"Team Eimei's job is to take down Team B, led by Kururugi. We'll work with Ohmi School from the Tenth Ward and take Kururugi as soon as we can. We'll have to be fast; otherwise the center of the front line will break, and we'll have to deal with Kirigaya. Or the Chameleon might defeat the Empress. Honestly, we've got the most important role. If we fail, it means the end of the Game."

I looked to each of my teammates in turn as I laid out the facts.

*This is it. This'll decide everything. Shiina's enough trouble, but considering that Kurahashi's backing her up, dragging this out would be a terrible idea. I really want the Chameleon out of the picture quickly, before we see any more external meddling.*

To be exact, I wanted her gone by the end of today. Fully defeating Shiina so Kurahashi wouldn't try messing with us was really the ideal resolution. I continued as boldly as I could, a smile on my face.

"Let's go, guys. This time, we've got to give it absolutely everything we have."

b b

The moment the second half of ASTRAL's fourth day began, several battles broke out immediately.

*"We...we—we're seeing monumental events here, folks! Meeowww!"*

Suzuran Kazami, commentating for Libra, was already worked up, and no one could blame her. After all, twenty players across six wards had joined together for a tandem uprising. It was a coordinated assault featuring every single player who hadn't joined the Chameleon's United Force. This gamble of a full-on clash would determine if we stood any chance at beating the Chameleon.

*"N-no one could've seen this coming! An allied force has been hastily put together to stop the Chameleon's rampage! Who could have engineered such an insane turn of events in the midst of this battle royale?! Perhaps that's a silly question, because only one person could ever be capable of something like this, meow!"*

Kazami's commentary was heating up with every word. Her enthusiasm was infectious as it poured itself into the devices of everyone watching the stream, exciting them all. After bringing a finger to the microphone part of her headset, she let out a cheer from the bottom of her heart.

*"Hiroto Shinohara, the invincible, all-powerful transfer student, has crawled back up from the abyss of death! The world's fastest Seven Star, the man who made the Empress taste defeat, is now attempting to take down the greatest threat he's ever faced!!"*

She hyped Hiroto up as much as possible, doing everything she could to attract the eyes and ears of her viewers. At the same time, Hiroto Shinohara's stats appeared on the ITube video display. His territory, Spells, percentage of the popularity vote...everything was either dead last or close to it. And his ragtag allies didn't fare much better. He'd left ASTRAL at one point, only to speedrun his way through the toughest route of MTCG and work his magic behind the scenes of not one but two Games at once. There was no doubting his potential genius any longer.

Stirred by Kazami's commentary, viewers on ITube sent in comments at an astonishing pace.

*Huh? Shinohara?*

*Really? He planned all of this? And he's got Ghost as a job now, too... I didn't know you got a bonus job going through MTCG!*

*This is way too exciting! The best in the Academy really lives up to his name!*

*Whoooooooooa!! Can he really come back from last place?! Is that even possible?!*

Not all of it was high praise, of course, but a large number of viewers had grown fed up with the Chameleon trampling everything in her way. The battle hadn't actually begun yet, but already the vote counts were starting to shift.

*Please, meow. Please...*

Watching the numbers change by the second, Suzuran Kazami prayed quietly.

*This is about all I can do for you at this point, meow. Shinohara...it's all up to*

*you now, meow!*

#

The northwestern section of ASTRAL's AR world was mostly occupied by Ohmi School from the Tenth Ward. To the south was Eimei's small territory, with Seijo School's land dividing them horizontally.

My group would have to protect this region, facing off against the Chameleon's Team B, which had four members. The Libra database told us they were made up of two Soldiers, a Mage, and a Guardian. One of the Soldiers was Senri Kururugi herself, and the other three were all from the Seventh Ward's Shinra School.

"I don't know why Kirigaya is off somewhere by himself, but his Shinra guys are enough of a handful already," I remarked as we made our way toward Team B's base. Shinra School had come third in last year's school ranking, and it had a rep for being extremely aggressive and belligerent in Games like this. It was home to Toya Kirigaya, the Demigod Dictator, so perhaps that was to be expected. Our opponents were no exception to that rule. Their Ability loadouts were geared heavily in favor of offense.

"They have a Mage with Expand Range, which gives them more reach, and Eagle Eye to give an attack near-perfect accuracy. Meanwhile, one of their Soldiers has Disperse, which lets them damage foes across a wider range. They're both suited for long-distance attacks, and the Guardian's probably meant to support them. Her Abilities are all about defense and enemy recon," I said.

"Hmm... Yeah, that'll make them a little tough to approach." Akizuki pouted as she reviewed our enemies' data. She was right. That Mage had enough range to make long-distance combat a bad idea. However, blindly charging in would let the Soldier's wide-reaching attacks destroy us. Between that and the support Guardian, this would be a tough wall to break down.

Plus, even if we broke through that trio, we'd have Senri Kururugi from the Sixteenth Ward's Tsuyuri Girls' Institute to contend with. She was just as good as the Empress in group battles. Everyone knew to run from the One-Shot Killer.

*But...she's the only player with any chance of defeating the Chameleon.*

I swallowed nervously just as Team B's base came into view. Undoubtedly, the enemy knew about our declaration of battle by now and was on high alert. A small girl and two guys all had devices in their hands, and they stood in a triangular formation to meet us. Senri Kururugi, sporting her trademark ponytail, stood in the center of the defensive grouping.

"Ah, I see," Himeji whispered from beside me. "It's a classic intercept formation. They have no interest in moving at all. Their only mission is to watch what's going on and counterattack as needed."

Asamiya hummed. "Yeah. You're definitely right about that... Hmm. Hey, Shino, do you know their Action Levels? Am I still way below them?"

"No, not at all," I replied. "They ought to be about the same, even counting their territory and poll ranking bonuses... Kururugi's going to be a bit tough, though. Even with Abilities, we can't match her."

"Shoot..."

Asamiya brought a hand to her hip and sank into thought. She clearly didn't think we stood much of a chance. Her core Action Level was better than our opponents', but being in enemy territory put her at a significant disadvantage.

"We can make it work," I said. "This is only bad for us because we're in Seijo School's territory, right? We can just overwrite the hexes and take them for Eimei."

"Huh? Yeah, but... You make it sound so easy, Shino. You're not starting to lie to my face just 'cause I'm not very smart, are you?"

"Of course not. Listen, Asamiya. We're in Seijo territory right now, but if we move north we'll be in Ohmi's, our ally's. If its members let us take one of their bases, we'll claim all the hexes south of us."

"Oh... Right, yeah..."

Asamiya seemed taken aback at first, but then nodded emphatically. A team's territory in ASTRAL was every hex within the area of their bases. Eimei's and Ohmi's territories were bisected by Seijo's, so if Ohmi allowed Eimei to take a base, it would claim the land between them.

“But, Master...” Himeji’s face was stoic as usual, although I thought I saw a little doubt. “Someone will need to run across Seijo School’s area to reach and claim an Ohmi base. They’ll likely get hurt if they’re discovered, and that Shinra Guardian is equipped for support and enemy detection. Won’t they find whoever goes rather easily?”

“Yeah, probably. But finding someone sneaking around has gotta be tough when there are other enemies right in your face.”

“Oh, I see. You mean a distraction?”

Himeji only needed a second to get my gist. She bobbed her head, causing her silver hair to sway. Just as she said, we would employ a bait strategy. First, a few of us would confront the Shinra group and hold their attention. In the meantime, our other members would cast Stealth and make their way around to take an Ohmi base.

“Yeah. Distraction or not, though, one of us still has to walk through Seijo territory. We’ll need to send our Spy, who can detect Traps. That means Akizuki. And Enomoto should go with her, I guess,” I said.

“Leave it to me! ♪ Hee-hee! I’ll do my very best for you, Hiroto! ♡”

Akizuki took a step toward me, speaking in her alluring tone as she looked up at my face. Not a moment later, Enomoto voiced his thoughts.

“Wait. What’s the point in sending both of us? With the Ohga and Murakumo teams keeping the Chameleon occupied, and our distraction for the Shinra group, Akizuki going alone is better. One person is less likely to be noticed.”

“What’re you talking about, Enomoto?” I replied. “You’re critical to the plan. I need you to go with her to be the negotiator. Temporary or not, we’ll be claiming an Ohmi base. We have a truce going, but the Ohmi team will still be reluctant to give up their land. If talks go poorly, there might even be some infighting in our alliance. That’d be bad news for us.”

“Then why don’t you negotiate? Hmm. Actually, I suppose that wouldn’t work. The distraction needs to look like a serious threat, and without the Academy’s strongest present, Team B might not take the bait.”

“That’s true, but honestly, I think you’re a better mediator than I am,

Enomoto.”

“Hmph. If you want to flatter me, you should at least address me as ‘Mr. Enomoto,’ you know.”

He maintained his usual grumpiness but cast Stealth on himself before I could say anything more.

“Huh?!” Akizuki exclaimed. “Wait, President! Leaving me behind is so mean!” She, too, quickly turned herself invisible.

I nodded as they left. “Okay. The rest of us should get moving, too. We’ll be the bait, and when the Seijo territory becomes ours, we’ll go on the offensive. Keep in mind that the territory bonus will make the Shinra students vulnerable, but not Kururugi. I think we’ll need you to take care of her, Asamiya.”

“You got it!” she replied. “It’ll be revenge for yesterday.”

“Thank you, Ms. Asamiya. I will do my best to support you,” Himeji said.

“You’re *such* an angel, Yukirin... If only Shinji had a hundredth of your kindness...”

Asamiya frowned a bit but remained in high spirits as she nodded at me.

It was time for us to spring into action. Walking as confidently as possible, we approached Team B’s base and stood just out of range of its Mage.

“Huh?”

Team B had kept a careful eye on the surroundings, so its members naturally picked up on our presence pretty quickly. The Seventh Ward students—a Mage with black hair, a Soldier with brown hair, and a female Guardian—all looked our way. Kururugi did the same.

*Hmm...?*

I couldn’t help but sense that something was off. Kururugi looked weird to me. She watched while surrounded by her three teammates, but her eyes weren’t the sharp daggers they’d been during our encounter yesterday. Her gaze felt somehow cold. I had to assume she had a grudge against us, yet she didn’t show much hostility.

*Is she not going to hurl Attack Spells at us? Maybe she can't? Someone might have gotten her with an Ability that negates Spells during a fight, but there hasn't been any combat this session.*

I shook my head to dismiss that idea.

*Their whole formation is weird. Having the Shinra students surround Kururugi just blocks her from attacking. Do they not want her to fight? Are they keeping Kururugi from using Spells?*

Normally, there'd never be a reason to shut down a fighter as powerful as Senri Kururugi. Not everyone in the United Force was bound to agree on all points, though. Perhaps they weren't on the same page. Team B's formation certainly suggested as much. Three students from Shinra school surrounded Kururugi, yet their leader, Toya Kirigaya, was conspicuously absent. It looked very intentional.

The first person to speak up as we approached was the dark-haired Mage standing in front of Kururugi.

"Yo. Based on what I've heard, you've gotta be the Eimei team, right? What's up? Don't tell me you're hoping to join us."

"Join you? Wow. Will you let us in if I ask nicely?" I said.

"Of course not. Are you kidding me? Our United Force already has over a dozen people. If we let in any more, there won't be anyone left to lose. This isn't intramurals, you know. We need someone to crush."

The Mage sneered at me. Kururugi's eyebrows twitched a little, but she said nothing. She grabbed her left arm with her right hand, as though trying to hold herself back. Clearly some kind of restriction had been placed on her.

I grinned as I watched her from the corner of my eye. "Ah, well, that's fine. Want to know why we're here? I guess it's pretty obvious, right? This is a battle royale, so we're here to beat you."

"Yeah, I suppose you are. Hate to break it to you, Seven Star, but we're Team Kiri. We were specially selected to represent Shinra School in this Game. Our group is designed to ward off attacks so that our powerful leader, Kirigaya, can use his skills to the fullest. He's not here right now, but our defense is still

perfect.”

“Oh? You seem pretty confident about that. What about the elusive Chameleon, then? Why’d you bow your head to her?”

“You know...I *really* don’t like you. You think talking down to people is fun, huh? Laugh while you can, dumbass. It doesn’t matter how we do it, we just want *him* to come out on top. If you can’t understand that, then feel free to brag to the empty stands all you want!”

My taunting was ticking him off, but he wasn’t a high-ranking student for nothing. The dark-haired Mage stayed strong, never moving out of position. I did succeed at getting him to focus entirely on me, though. With a feint from Asamiya here and there, I made sure their attention never strayed from me for a moment.

While the Mage clicked his tongue irritably at our back-and-forth...

“Huh?”

“!”

“Wha?!”

...all three Shinra members reared back a little, surprised. Anyone else would’ve done the same had they not seen what was coming. After all, the entire territory, including the hexes they were standing on, had changed from jet black to a vivid green.

*That was fast! Damn, that guy’s good!*

Outwardly, I played it off like I’d been expecting this all along, even as I mentally praised Enomoto. That guy hadn’t become student council president without winning plenty of battles, and this proved it. He’d secured the territory transfer five minutes earlier than I expected.

“Damn... Did this shit have to happen now?!”

The Shinra Mage was cursing up a storm, clearly ruffled by this sudden shift. Behind the Shinra group, I saw someone hurrying to join us. It was a Mage from Ohmi. Presumably, he was the advance charge while Enomoto secured our new area. He launched a surprise attack at the Shinra Mage’s back.



“...Behind you!”

“Huh? I see ‘em!”

Shinra’s Mage reacted swiftly to the Guardian’s warning. (Despite looking so frail, she was good at detecting opponents.) The Mage spun and immediately fired a Magic Missile. He and the Ohmi student had the same job, but the Shinra guy had Expand Range, which gave him superior reach. One shot, two shots, three—he used his high Action Level to launch a trio of projectiles. In the blink of an eye, the Ohmi Mage had been defeated, leaving only the visual effect that confirmed as much. None of the Shinra Mage’s attacks had missed. He’d defended expertly.

And things didn’t stop there.

“...!”

The moment Shinra’s Mage defeated Ohmi’s, the brown-haired Soldier seized upon the disarray and closed in on us, swinging his device in the air. He was casting a short-range Sword Flash, yet with the Disperse Ability also active, the area of effect was significantly broadened. Asamiya nimbly jumped away in time, but anyone with an average reaction speed would never have been able to evade.

*Huh? Whoa! Hold on!*

“Too slow!”

Just as it seemed the attack was about to do me in, Shirayuki Himeji, my Guardian, intercepted, her silver hair billowing. She held out a white-gloved hand as she created a Defense Wall, wholly stopping the Soldier’s attack.

“That was very close, Master. Are you hurt at all?”

“I’m fine. Thanks, Himeji.”

“A maid’s duty is to protect her master,” she stated with an easy smile. Then she turned back toward the enemy. The clash had ended as quickly as it had begun, and now each side was back to staring the other down.

*Right...*

We’d captured this territory, and although I wanted to engage in a close-

quarters fight, we had a problem. Shinra's formation was clearly designed for defense, and the team was obviously dedicated to it. Undoubtedly, it had placed a bunch of Traps to keep us from moving in. Akizuki, our Spy, was still absent, but I hardly needed her to confirm there were Traps.

*It doesn't really matter whether there are Traps around or not. They're single-use Spells. Setting them off is as good as defusing them.*

I took out my device and sent a message to Enomoto, who was likely on his way back. After quickly changing apps, I contacted Libra. I was answered by a girl—I didn't know her name—who served as my contact while Kazami was busy commentating, and I asked her to do something for me.

Not long after, Enomoto and Akizuki showed up on the far side of the Shinra students, accompanied by a Spy from Ohmi. The Shinra Mage exhaled sharply, and although he kept his device ready, he waited, gauging our moves before attacking.

"...Hmph. I'd hoped to wrap this up cleanly. Don't hold this against me," Enomoto said. He approached the Shinra students without any hesitation, only stopping as he neared the Mage's range.

After asking Akizuki and the Ohmi student to step back, Enomoto raised his device to cast a Spell. He was out of range, so naturally, the attack didn't hit anything. A ray-gun-like streak of light struck the ground near the Shinra trio, right where they'd presumably placed a bunch of Traps. No one took any damage.

But...

"Huh?"

...the moment Enomoto's Magic Missile landed, a system message appeared that stated the Trap on that hex had been activated. Before the Shinra team had time to react, Enomoto released a volley of Magic Missiles. Each one set off another Trap that had been laid with careful calculation. Each exploded without affecting anyone.

The Shinra Mage watched in disbelief. "Wha...what's going on here?! You can't just set off our Traps!"

“You’re right,” came Enomoto’s voice. “Traps in ASTRAL don’t go off unless a player steps on them. It’s up to the Game’s programming to decide when that happens, though... That means an Ability can trick the system into misfiring, detonating Traps no one has touched. The system thought a player touched all your Traps, not Magic Missiles.”

“Some kind of system tampering? Are you using a Block Detection Ability or something? Damn it...”

The Shinra Mage gritted his teeth. Enomoto smiled at his irritated gaze.

It was all an act, of course. Enomoto didn’t have Block Detection or whatever. We’d just asked Libra to redefine the conditions necessary for a Trap to go off. The truth of it didn’t matter, though. Our opponents believed that Shinji Enomoto the All-Seeing had brought Block Detection thanks to his incredible foresight.

“Hfff...”

Nanase Asamiya inhaled and sprang into action, her dazzling blond hair dancing in the air as she ran across the former minefield, dashing for Team B.

“Heh... We’re not done yet, you little bitch!”

The Shinra Mage launched a Spell using Eagle Eye to ensure a hit the moment he saw Asamiya’s charge. The enemy Soldier similarly launched another wide area-of-effect attack. However, Asamiya used a Defense Wall to neutralize the Mage’s strike with ease and then ran right through the Soldier’s, not bothering to dodge. Suffering a little damage to get in close was a worthwhile trade.

“My name’s not ‘little bitch,’ you know. It’s Nanase Asamiya. Remember it.”

“...!”

With a boost from her job, Asamiya blew away Shinra’s Mage with a Sword Flash. Her cooldown timer reset in a blink, and she bounded gracefully for the Soldier next. It was quite the show.

“Heh...”

I don’t know if she wanted to rest for a moment or just act smug, but Asamiya paused to watch Senri Kururugi and the Shinra Guardian with a hand on her hip.

“So that pretty much guarantees we win... What now? Wanna surrender?” she called.

““...””

Our two remaining opponents met Asamiya’s question with silence. Kururugi kept eerily docile. The Guardian, meanwhile, seemed to be agonizing over something. She bit her lower lip, then pointed her face up, trying to shake away her self-doubt.

“...R-releasing the Binding Thread!”

Nothing happened right away, not that I saw. Something about Kururugi changed, though. It was all in her eyes. The atmosphere around her was different. She’d been freed from something.

“Kirigaya’s lust for the limelight really is a pain sometimes,” she said. “He’s part of the United Force, yet he saw fit to lock me up to hog all the glory.”

“...‘Lock you up’?” I asked.

“Yeah. Toya Kirigaya is running the United Force for the Chameleon. He ordered me not to use my Attack Spells. He had that Guardian use Binding Thread, an Ability typically for capturing enemy players. I don’t know if he was afraid I’d turn on him or if he just wanted all the prestige. Actually, I’m almost positive it was the latter. Anyway, I was locked out of doing much, but now I’m free.”

Kururugi’s ponytail bobbed as she quietly took out her device. With a twist of her right hand, the Ohmi Spy, who I guess was unlucky enough to be just within range, was instantly defeated by a Magic Missile. That was One-Shot Kill—the Ability that immediately took out anyone she attacked. The Tenth Ward was now completely out of the Game, and Seijo had that much more territory.

I know it sounds mean, but...it didn’t really matter. Not for us, anyway.

“Phew...”

Kururugi brought her device to her waist, as though holstering a pistol. She turned her sharp gaze to me. The girl cut a completely different figure from earlier. The real Senri Kururugi, Hell’s Priestess, the girl who had almost taken

out Eimei, was back.

“I owe nothing to Toya Kirigaya...but now that I can do what I want, I think I’ll have a little fun. I owe you guys, and I’m going to pay that back with interest.”

“Y-you owe us? Interest? Um, I don’t know what you mean...but sure, let’s do it!”

Asamiya was perturbed by Kururugi’s sudden change, but she raised her device regardless. Shinra’s Guardian moved to intercept Himeji and me, making it harder for us to back up Asamiya.

“...!”

It was Nanase Asamiya, a girl with superhuman perception and reflexes, versus Senri Kururugi, who could kill anything in a single hit, alone. Enomoto was nearby, giving Asamiya the edge in fighting power, but that hardly guaranteed a win.

*Enomoto and Asamiya... Kururugi’s scheme took both of them out of the Game yesterday. They’re a poor match against her, and she definitely knows that.*

“...Heh!” Kururugi snickered as though she’d read my mind. “Shinji Enomoto and Nanase Asamiya, huh? I have to hand it to you—I never thought the pair that sabotaged themselves so gloriously in the past would ever team up against me. It’s pretty funny, actually.”

“Huh? It’s no joke. And that was last year!” Asamiya shot back.

“Did you forget how you ran for your life against me yesterday? You two are no threat. I’ll finish you off quickly to take on Hiroto Shinohara. Burying him is all I care about now!”

“Ugh...” Asamiya was obviously irritated by Kururugi’s calm dismissal of her and Enomoto. She slowly raised her device. “Shinji... I’m gonna do my own thing. Back me up, okay?”

“I see that even now, you’re still crazy, Nanase. That’s not a valid strategy, nor do I have any reason to listen, but...fine. Do what you want.”

“Roger!”

Asamiya took off, firing a barrage of Magic Missiles and heading straight for Kururugi. With the territory bonus, her Action Level was two against Kururugi's four. Asamiya was physically faster, too, so she could easily overwhelm her foe. Hell's Priestess wasn't about to let that stop her, though.

"Stepping right into my range? How foolish!"

Right as Asamiya's rapid-fire attack died down, Kururugi whipped her device out like a quick-draw artist and cast Sword Flash. With One-Shot Kill in effect, it was deadly on contact, forcing Asamiya to go on the defensive.

"Dodging really isn't my thing...!"

"Huh?!"

Rather than evade, Asamiya kept attacking, not letting up for a minute. It was an off-the-wall, crazy choice, one that took Senri Kururugi entirely by surprise. Still, her Sword Flash connected and drained Asamiya of all her LP. At least, it *should* have.

"?!"

The Sword Flash visual effect twisted around to fly into empty air instead of striking Asamiya. The change of direction was so abrupt it nearly seemed someone had grabbed it and spun it around. Out of everyone present, only one person could've pulled off something like that—Eimei's student council president Shinji Enomoto, the All-Seeing Six Star.

"That's Lightning Rod, a support Ability. It forcibly makes me the target of an attack in progress. I'm out of your range, so it obviously couldn't reach me," he stated.

Kururugi looked dumbfounded. "Wha...? Why would you bring an Ability like tha—"

"Isn't it obvious? Because I have a partner who charges her enemies like a freight train, no matter what they might do. I'd be foolish not to take an Ability that can save her."

"...!"

"...Ohhh? Is that how you see me, Shinji? I'm your *partner*, huh? Hee-hee..."

“! ...Come on, Nanase. Quit with that eerie, disgusting grin.”

“You’re supposed to tell me I’m cute when I smile, you idiot! I hate you!” Despite Asamiya’s complaining, she was beaming. Enomoto’s support had helped her to finally land an attack, and Kururugi’s LP dropped by three.

“Ngh... I’m not done yet!”

Hell’s Priestess turned gracefully and leaped away before Asamiya could land another Sword Flash. She shifted targets from her to Enomoto.

“The best way to deal with a supporter using Lightning Rod is to defeat them first. Based on that damage, Nanase Asamiya must be a Soldier. She doesn’t have any Spells to protect her teammates. Which means she can’t help Shinji Enomoto!”

Asamiya’s expression tensed. “...!”

“Heh... You did all right. But teamwork doesn’t mean much against me.” Kururugi sounded confident of her victory. Asamiya ran to stop her, but she had already reached Enomoto. Kururugi’s ponytail danced in the air as she slashed horizontally with her device.

“You fail to see how we’ve grown. That’s why you’ve lost.”

Kururugi’s attack never activated. Judging by the visual effect, it looked like a Magic Missile had struck her. A quick check with Sight Mode confirmed that all but one of the crystals indicating her LP had shattered.

Kururugi slowly turned her gaze back to Asamiya. She was clearly struggling to understand what had happened. “You... What did you do? How did you land an attack from that distance?”

“Huh? I obviously used an Ability. It’s called Cornered Mouse. It lets me specify a player, then it boosts my stats whenever they get in big trouble. It probably detected that Shinji was in trouble, since you’ve got One-Shot Kill, so it boosted my attack range.”

“You made Shinji Enomoto the Ability’s target? You wanted to protect *him* if he got in trouble?” Kururugi was incredulous.





“Ah... Um, y-yeah. Is that a problem, or what? It’s not like... I mean, I don’t care what happens to *Shinji*, but it’d suck if I lost a supporting teammate... That’s all...”

“You two have grown quite intimate with each other... I didn’t expect this...”

“We’re not *intimate*!!” Asamiya violently shook her head, her cheeks red. She approached Kururugi slowly and took both of her hands, restraining them.

“...What are you trying to do?”

“Don’t you get it? I cast Magic Missile on you. Had I used Gunfire instead, my job bonus would’ve killed you. I chose not to.”

“I see... This is one of Hiroto Shinohara’s schemes, then?” Kururugi sighed a bit, her sharp eyes going to me. Now that Hell’s Priestess was all but defeated, Shinra’s Guardian had given up the fight. Akizuki, who’d been lurking around undetected, had already eliminated her.

With Kururugi’s ability to attack now physically shut down, I decided to approach, with Himeji joining me. Asamiya held Kururugi’s hands behind her back, making her look like an actual prisoner. It did nothing for Hell’s Priestess’s indomitable spirit, though.

I grinned as I spoke to her. “Hey. First time we’ve met since yesterday, huh, Kururugi? How’s it feel to lose to a pair you looked down on?”

“It’s awful. Maybe it would’ve been different had I beat you first, at least.”

“I guess. But I don’t think you stood a chance with that Shinra team.”

Kururugi averted her eyes a bit. Team B had never been set up to make the most of Kururugi. In fact, it had been devised to shut her down. It was no wonder she’d lost.

“Listen, Kururugi. You really *are* a powerhouse. One-Shot Kill’s an unbelievable menace. Even without it, you’re one of the biggest threats among all the Five Stars. That doesn’t change the fact that you lost, though.”

“...Your bragging means nothing, Seven Star. Your team outnumbered mine.”

“It did, yeah. But I remember you mentioning that you’re stronger when you

fight alone. I think we played fair.”

“...!”

Kururugi fell silent. She couldn’t refute her own words. One-Shot Kill only worked if all of her teammates were out of the Game. That’s why she was at her strongest fighting alone.

“You know...I think you made the wrong choice, relying on your Ability. That much is clear between yesterday’s battle and today’s. You were much stronger when with your friends from Tsuyuri Girls’ Institute.”

“No, you’re wrong... That’s not possible. The Tsuyuri team was built to be a one-person force from the start. The other members were just there to fill out our roster, and they knew that. They didn’t want to get involved with all this. That’s why I always have to work my hardest...even when I’m alone. It’s the reason Tsuyuri wins.”

Kururugi seemed to be talking to herself more than me. I gave her a light smile.

“You think they don’t want to pitch in? I’m not so sure. When I left ASTRAL to join MTCG, I ran into a Tsuyuri student in the Game area. We talked about you a little bit and... Well, she was kind of angry, actually.”

“...Angry?”

“Yeah. She wasn’t upset with how the Game was turning out. She was more frustrated that you gave in to the Chameleon. She told me she was upset her leader felt like she had no choice because her teammates were so weak. And she mentioned that she wants Tsuyuri Girls’ Institute to get stronger collectively, so it won’t all fall on you next time. This whole ‘go it alone’ attitude kind of sounds like you’re oblivious to those around you.”

“...!”

Senri Kururugi’s eyes opened wide. To her, this was probably like taking an unexpected punch. She was known as a top contender in group events, but the spotlight almost never shone on any of her teammates. Kururugi was just too dominating. There wasn’t room for any of her schoolmates.

A random squad chosen just to fill out the numbers would never have gone as far as the Tsuyuri Girls' Institute's team. If Kururugi's strength were all that mattered, she wouldn't have made such a name for herself in *group* events. Whenever she won, her teammates were always right there with her.

"Oh..."

Kururugi's ponytail swayed as she lowered her head and bit her lip in frustration.

"So...I was wrong? Was I only able to become Hell's Priestess because of everyone's support?"

With those words, it felt safe to assume Kururugi had lost the will to fight. At the very least, I didn't think she'd take orders from the United Force anymore.

Once Kururugi calmed down a little, she said, "Can I ask you a favor, Seven Star? Please defeat me and...end this. The next time I challenge you, I want the entire Tsuyuri team with me."

"Heh. You're not making this easy for me," I replied, smiling. "Unfortunately, I can't do that. I need your help with something."

"...?" Kururugi raised an eyebrow at me.

It was time to bring her into the plan.

b b

Meanwhile, on the east side of the ASTRAL map, the joint force formed from the Ohga and Murakumo teams, part of Hiroto Shinohara's alliance, was fighting to survive.

"Oof..."

Sarasa Saionji, Ohga's leader, leaned against a pillar, wincing.

She hadn't let her guard down. Not for a moment. Rather, her group was facing the squad of the United Force led by the Chameleon, the greatest threat of all. Sarasa had known going in that she couldn't beat the Chameleon, so she'd hoped not to overexert herself or her team. Holding her own until Shinohara's secret plan paid off would've been enough.

Unfortunately...

*That faker is just too unfair...*

...the Chameleon was firing on all cylinders today. Right after the alliance clashed with the United Force, the Chameleon instantly wiped out Murakumo. The strategy they worked out during the lunch break had vanished, forcing Sarasa into a chaotic struggle she didn't want to be in. And now there were only two players from Ohga School remaining.

Ohga School had taken the top spot in last year's rankings, and for good reason. Its battle formation during this Game was perfect. It had maintained a comfortable lead this year, too, until the Chameleon got in the way.

*What can I do against a foe who doesn't go down no matter how much I hit her? Her LP, her Action Level...every stat is ridiculous. Shinohara was right to paint her as some kind of admin-inserted enemy. Anything else would've made it obvious that she's breaking the rules. Kurahashi must have predicted that Libra would feel obligated to cover for the Chameleon...*

Sarasa gritted her teeth.

"Wh-what are we gonna do now, Miss Sarasa?!"

"Well..."

Momo Asuka, Sarasa's last surviving teammate, was all but clinging to her. Sarasa folded her arms. She didn't need much thought to reach an answer.

"It's obvious. We need to keep our distance and stall for time. Make sure she doesn't catch us from behind, but keep her in your sights."

"...?! A-are you serious? That's impossible! We should run! We'll both be knocked out if this continues! She's too strong!"

"Maybe...but that's why we can't give up. The Chameleon *is* too strong. We need to work together to beat her. That's why we're out here. If we fail now, we might never get another shot at taking her down."

"Er...I—I know that, but..."

"Heh-heh! Don't worry, Momo. I don't think we'll have to keep at it for much longer."

Sarasa Saionji did her best to keep a lid on her own worries, flashing a sweet

smile while using an investigation Ability to gauge the Chameleon's distance from her and her teammate.

"He'll be here with reinforcements soon... Let's hold out for him."

b b

"*Hahhh*. Wow, what a waste of time."

Suisei School and Soken School had launched a pincer attack on the center region of the Chameleon's territory...only to be fully repelled. With no one else on the way to replace them, the fight was a resounding victory for the United Force.

The group Hiroto Shinohara had dubbed "Team C" was packed with talent. First among its members was Toya Kirigaya. He held his hands behind his head as he yawned in evident boredom. He was a third-year student at Shinra School in the Seventh Ward and had earned the nickname the Demigod Dictator. Many had expected him to be a deciding factor in how this Game would turn out. As a Six Star with a special color star, he was by far the best Shinra School had to offer.

Yet for all that, he sounded utterly disinterested in ASTRAL.

"The Nineteenth Ward's full of amateurs, so I never expected much from them, but wasn't the Second Ward ranked fourth last year? Why did they put up such an awful fight?"

"...Good question," Seiran Kugasaki replied listlessly. He was another Team C member and leader of the Otowa School team from the Eighth Ward. The Five Star known as the Phoenix let his trademark black cloak flutter in the air as he offered his thoughts. "I heard that Suisei prefers to keep its main talents ready in reserve. Some schools aren't all that interested in putting their very best into these team events. Amanezaka School in the Seventeenth Ward almost always plays first-years, for example."

"*Tssh*. Yeah? Man, I hate that more than anything. It's like a built-in excuse for losing...or maybe they think they're better than us? What do you think, Phoenix?"

"Ha-ha! So long as I win, it hardly matters to me. Now, if my opponent and I

have a history, that's a different story..."

Kugasaki brought a finger to his silver-framed glasses, pushing them up a bit.

"Besides...you said they didn't put up a fight, but it's not like we emerged unscathed. We started with six people, and now we've got three."

"Haah..."

Another teammate, an inconspicuous-looking girl, sighed a bit when Kugasaki mentioned the losses. Her name was Shizuku Minami, a Four Star from St. Rosalia Girls' Institute in the Fourteenth Ward, and while she didn't exhibit the kind of flashy plays that had earned Kirigaya and Kugasaki their nicknames, she had still managed to survive this long in ASTRAL. She looked downright depressed about it, though.

"This sucks," she grouched. "I can't believe I'm the only one left. I only joined because they said I could watch on the sidelines. Now it's like I'm a main character. Ugh..."

"...Are you serious, Rosalia girl?" Kugasaki replied. "Don't you have a color star like us?"

"And now boys I've never met are calling me 'Rosalia girl'... This *suuuuuucks*... I wanna go home."

"Hey."

Minami sighed, ignoring Kugasaki. She'd never wanted this. Minami kept herself as a Four Star to avoid attention. She never revealed that she held a Unique Star and always tried to present herself as a nice, average girl. Yet somehow, she'd become one of the final survivors. She had no interest at all in hanging out with two hardcore players like Toya Kirigaya, the Demigod Dictator, and Seiran Kugasaki, the Phoenix. It just wasn't her thing.

Despite Minami's wish to remain unnoticed, Kirigaya had his pompous, curious eyes fixed on her.

"Yeah, you *were* pretty good, weren't you? You never stood out, but used your Abilities and Spells better than most others. Depending on how things go, I might fall in love with you."

“...Oh yeah? Sorry, I...um...yeah, I only like girls, so...”

“Hya-hoo! Nice! Now I’m into you even more!” Kirigaya’s expression twisted ferociously.

Minami responded with a gloomy groan and turned away from him.

Rebuffed but not deterred, Kirigaya returned his attention to Kugasaki.

“Anyway... Yeah, we lost three pawns, but we also beat seven guys from the Second and Nineteenth Wards. Seven kills for three deaths. That’s not a bad ratio at all. Plus, we still have the perfect lineup and tons of resources. We can’t possibly lose.”

“Oh? I’m not sure if that’s a bluff or you really are that confident,” Kugasaki replied. “Remember that we’ll be taking on the Empress and the Seven Star.”

“I know, I know! It’s the perfect chance for me to climb higher than ever before!”

Kirigaya beamed as he tossed his device into the air, catching it without looking. That little tool held all the data for the United Force. The Chameleon wasn’t issuing the direct orders. Kirigaya had that responsibility. He managed formations, the state of battle, and how Spells were distributed.

“That’s why I used the Shinra guys to nerf Senri Kururugi. She’s like a living catastrophe. If we let her go all out, I wouldn’t get any attention at all. Man, I’d be so humiliated if she beat Hiroto Shinohara. *I’m* the only one that deserves to be the star here.”

“Heh! Those Shinra guys certainly were the right choice to get that done for you. In that case, how about we go hunt down Eimei?” Kugasaki suggested.

“Hya-hoo! Good idea! That’s what I wanna hear!”

Kirigaya quickly grew excited, emboldened by the offer. Seiran Kugasaki matched his bold smile, although he was not nearly so cheerful internally.

*He wants to grow his legend, huh? He’s already plenty famous enough. He doesn’t need any dirty tricks to climb higher. Toya Kirigaya, the Demigod Dictator of the Seventh Ward, is the one guy I’d never want as an enemy. He beats his opponents so terribly they never join Games again.*

#

Not long after our victory over Senri Kururugi and Team B, I contacted Libra to see how things were going in other areas. As if to provide an answer, I found some new opponents waiting for me just ahead.

“Hey there, Seven Star.”

One of them, a good-looking guy with slicked-back hair, took a step forward. He was the leader of the Shinra School team, the Six Star Demigod Dictator. Enomoto had told me that more than a few players had left the Academy entirely after fighting him. That’s how horribly this battle junkie thrashed his enemies.

“My name is Toya Kirigaya. Sounds like you’ve been having some fun with my Shinra friends.”

“Maybe? I didn’t really bother to check what school everyone was from,” I said.

“Nice. I like guys who’re all about the Game. I don’t care about my teammates, either. I’m not here to get revenge for them. I’ve just got a glorious reputation to uphold, you know? And you’re gonna be how I do it.”

“Yeah? I heard you were pretty aggressive, but you don’t pull any punches with trash talk, either, I guess.”

“Hya-hoo! You’re right about that. Can’t waste too much time. My job is to take down you and the Empress.”

...?!

My eyes widened at Kirigaya’s remark.

*His job? Defeating Saionji and me is his job? If that’s true, then there’s no doubt he’s in league with Mikado Kurahashi.*

I clenched my fist slightly, making sure to keep Kirigaya from noticing. The United Force was all about recruiting people from other wards, so it wasn’t surprising that he’d placed his schoolmates into other groups. However, if he was working with Kurahashi, he’d been meant to team up with the Chameleon from the start.



*And that'd explain why he's here leading the United Force around... It's just like Kururugi said. Ugh... This has suddenly gotten a lot more annoying.*

Kirigaya was the de facto commander of the United Force, the number two in charge after the Chameleon, a guy working for Mikado Kurahashi, and now I had to face him. The danger and vital importance of what was about to happen were staggering.

"Kururugi!" I quickly turned and shouted her name. "Please go on ahead. Things will still work out more or less like I told you. Try to avoid leaving the United Force until you absolutely have to. It'll affect the final standings."

"Huh...?" she answered, blinking in surprise. "Wh-what about this fight?"

"Your LP's at one. If you die here, we're done for. Don't worry about it. Just get moving!"

"...! Okay. I'm on it!"

Kururugi looked me in the eye, nodded, and cast Stealth. There was no guarantee she wouldn't betray us. I could only trust that my talk with her had been enough. Kirigaya and the rest of Team C being here could only mean that Suisei School's and Soken School's teams had been crushed. We had to stop this now before the whole operation fell apart.

"Hya-hoo!"

Unbothered that Senri Kururugi was gone, Kirigaya let out a ferocious laugh as he pulled out his device. While clearly enjoying every moment of this, he declared to the world:

"No more stupid talk... Let's go."

So began the avalanche.

Toya Kirigaya rushed at us, accompanied by a cool, mature-looking girl. Her name was Shizuku Minami, and according to Kagaya's research, she was a Four Star from St. Rosalia Girls' Institute in the Fourteenth Ward. Kirigaya's job was Spy, while Minami was a Mage, which probably made them Team C's main attackers.

Seiran Kugasaki joined the charge, sporting his usual silver-framed glasses and

black cloak and a daring smile. I was a little surprised to see him take the rear, given his aggressiveness and typical spot as the leader, but he was a Guardian, so his focus had to be support.

*“Oh, wow... I knew the Phoenix was in the United Force, but this is really an all-star roster. Guess it was too optimistic to hope our enemies would hold back a little, huh?”*

I understood what Kagaya meant. These three were bound to work well together. Their power as a team was naturally going to be off the charts.

That only became more apparent once the battle began.

“Ah, whoa! What the hell! Quit it! You’re pissing me off.”

Asamiya took advantage of her Soldier job to attack Minami with a few Sword Flash Spells. However, each one was stopped by a Defense Wall, even though Asamiya only attacked when Minami was on a cooldown.

“Aww... I thought this girl was cute, but she told me I’m pissing her off... I should just throw myself off a cliff...,” Minami muttered.

“No! I didn’t mean it like that! And thanks for calling me cute! But curse your Defense Walls!”

“You react fast... That’s kind of a pain.”

Minami sounded pretty sleepy, yet her moves were refined. Asamiya should’ve been able to outclass her in mobility, but they were a pretty even match. Whenever Minami looked like she was in danger, a sudden Defense Wall appeared to save her.

There was no way she was putting them up. There was only one guy here who could.

“Heh-heh... You know some people like to call me the Phoenix, right, Shinohara? I didn’t pick up the moniker for this, exactly, but a role like this is where I shine. I’m never going to die...and I won’t let my allies die, either.”

Kugasaki pushed up his glasses with a finger as he delivered his statement. His pretentiousness was getting beyond annoying, but he could definitely back it up. Presumably, he was using a coordinate-shifting Ability to cast long-range

Defense Walls. Those incredibly tricky Support Spells kept Asamiya from landing a hit on Minami.

Worse, Shizuku Minami wasn't even their main offensive force.

"Hya-hoo! Launch Compound V2!"

Kirigaya's voice was a mixture of composure, ecstasy, and wickedness. Thrusting his device in my direction, he kept talking, like he had a special present to reveal to me.

"The special Ability Compound V2! This one's a blast, you know? It was once just a boring general-purpose Ability, but I modified it with my black star's special effect. Now this thing's beyond good. It can even hold its own against the Abilities of Unique Stars!"

"Sounds like a pretty big threat," I replied. "You're mass-producing Abilities on the level of *†Jet-Black Wings†*?"

"You could say that, sure. Among Unique Stars, mine is probably the most versatile."

Kirigaya smiled. I guess I'd reacted as he'd hoped.

"Compound V2's a helpful kind of support Ability that takes an Attack Spell you can normally use once and shoot it over and over again on the same cast. As long as it's the same type of Spell, I can power up the strength and range all I want, and I can even mix a few different Spells to create new ones. Here, lemme give you an exclusive demo. Magic Missile and Sword Flash, combined... I call it Magic Sword. Hya-hoo! Have fun trying not to die, Seven Star!"

*A-a combo Spell?! Wow, that's so cool...I mean, so devious!*

I couldn't help but marvel a bit while Kirigaya bragged happily. Compound V2 let him combine multiple Attack Spells to create new ones, and he could pour a bunch of Spells in at once to boost the resulting attack's strength, expand its range, and strike at the weaknesses of any job he chose. The Ability was a creation of his Unique Star and was every bit as powerful as that suggested.

"Look out, Master!"

One of Kirigaya's many Magic Swords zipped by me, raging like a storm. It

missed by inches. Had Himeji not pulled me aside, I definitely would have been hit.



“...! Sorry, Himeji. Thanks.”

“I’m just glad you’re all right, Master. This Ability is quite a handful, though...”

Himeji had her head close to mine to whisper in my ear. She was right. And Magic Sword had to be just the beginning. If Kirigaya crafted Traps with extra concealment, we might be done for.

*Crap. I wasn’t expecting this...*

I silently cursed my bad luck. This had come at the worst possible time. I had known Toya Kirigaya was a tough enemy, but my priority had been to win over Kururugi. That had taken so long that we hadn’t prepared any real strategy (or cheats) for Kirigaya. Plus, I wasn’t really a Seven Star or the strongest on the Academy. Without any plan, I was entirely at my opponent’s mercy.

*If I just had a little more time...*

“Hmph...”

Enomoto, who’d been supporting Asamiya, suddenly turned around and walked straight for Kirigaya. It was so abrupt that it even made Kirigaya glare at him.

“Huh? You’re Eimei’s student council president, right? What’s a stupid Mage like you doing on the front lines?”

“Well, *you’re* just a stupid Spy, aren’t you, Kirigaya? I don’t see how that sets you above me.”

“Oh, here we go. You just don’t get it, do you? Bein’ a Spy’s the most stable job there is. You have access to the most Abilities, and in ASTRAL, Traps are way stronger than the three other Spells. Don’t underestimate the Spy, or you’ll pay for it.”

“I disagree. It all depends on the talent of the player. There’s no clear hierarchy among the Spells. Don’t you realize that in a clash between a Mage and a Spy, the Mage is far superior? It’s a classic rock-paper-scissors-style weakness setup.”

“So what? My strength overrides type advantages like that. Here, I’ll show you.”

The two of them stared each other down. Each was in range of the other. Both sides talked a big game as they readied their devices. When Enomoto spoke again, it was to me rather than Kirigaya.

“Shinohara... You need time to consider how we’ll make it out of this, right?”

“...! Y-yeah... Yeah, I do.”

“Then I’ll get it for you. Make sure you do your job.”

“...”

Enomoto spoke quietly and kept his face turned away from me, revealing nothing. He’d known I was in trouble and stepped in. What keen intuition. It left me speechless for a moment. However, I quickly grinned and replied confidently.

“Right... Thanks. Don’t lose *too* quickly. It’ll make the rest of us look bad. Got it?”

“You could say please, at least. I keep telling you to mind your manners around upperclassmen, Commander.”

Enomoto couldn’t have been more direct. Having said all he cared to, he fired Magic Missile with a sweeping motion of his arm. Kirigaya, on the other hand, relied on Kugasaki to block with a Defense Wall, then used Compound V2 to place hidden combo Spells around himself. Normally, that would’ve made our situation much tougher, but they didn’t stop Enomoto at all. He deduced where they’d been placed and avoided all of them to go on the offensive.

Two top-ranked students, regular participants in events like this one, were locked in a fierce battle. I watched their fight from the corner of my eye while puzzling over how to proceed.

*What are we going to do? How can we beat these guys?*

That was all I needed to think about. It was clear that we had a significant disadvantage. We had fewer Spells and viewer votes and worse Action Levels.

But...

*All we need is a single moment. Team C has two attackers. We definitely need to defeat Minami, but we only need to stop Kirigaya for a second. A decisive*

*opening like that will be enough to win.*

I felt confident that was our best shot. Beating Toya Kirigaya wouldn't be very difficult if I used a certain trick I'd set in place before ASTRAL began.

That was a tall order, though. No matter how many attacks we threw at Kirigaya, Kugasaki's Defense Walls blocked them. Even without the help, Kirigaya would probably dodge.

*If we could make Kirigaya use up all of his Compound V2 resources... Hmm. Speaking of...*

Remembering something, I took out my device and sent a message to Libra. Really, it was just an emoticon, but it was the signal to execute a plan we'd discussed earlier. I'd originally prepared this for a different situation, but I was pretty sure it would work here, too.

My device's vibration was all the reply I needed.

"..... Get that, Himeji?" I whispered in her ear.

"Huh? But they... Oh. I see."

Himeji gave me an understanding nod. She ran a finger across her device's screen and activated her Replace Ability rather than a Spell. It allowed her to swap one Ability with a teammate. During our battle against Kagurazuki, she'd passed my Predict Behavior over to Akizuki, who'd worked some incredible magic with it. Himeji was using her Ability a little differently this time, though.

"Replace, target my master...and Mr. Toya Kirigaya," Himeji said quietly, her voice cool as her silver hair swayed.

One Ability disappeared from my device to be replaced with Kirigaya's Compound V2. The trade had been successful.

"Wha...what the hell did you do?!" Kirigaya almost choked as he angrily spit his question... I'm sure I would've been just as surprised. No Ability could steal others from opponents, even temporarily. No *legal* Ability could, anyway. It would've made strategizing impossible.

However, Libra's assistance broke down the Game's delineation between friend and foe for a brief instant. From the program's perspective, it was a trade



between friends, no robbery involved.

*I actually prepared this to steal One-Shot Kill in case we couldn't persuade Kururugi, but this works fine.*

This wasn't how I'd envisioned using this trick at all, but I didn't really care. I took a step forward while meeting Kirigaya's irritated gaze with a bemused smile.

"It's exactly what it looks like. I used Replace to swap Abilities with you. Usually, that's restricted to teammates, but..."

"Then why did it work?! I don't remember you joining the United Force!"

"You can blame your boss for that. The United Force Ability is constantly left open. Any player participating in ASTRAL can join anytime they like. It makes the whole concept of a team pretty vague."

"Ahh! This is all too damn cryptic for me!" Kirigaya complained, clearly irritated.

Whether my explanation made sense or not, the exchange had happened. He had no choice but to accept what I said. By the way, the Ability I'd sent to him couldn't even be used right now. Its conditions hadn't been met. I had no worries about him using it against me.

Anyway, after taking Kirigaya's Compound V2, I tapped my earpiece and got to work supporting Asamiya, firing Sword Flashes off like rockets, setting Traps that triggered Magic Missiles from behind, and trying whatever else I could think of.

*"Haah... You're wasting your time."*

Minami remained unbothered, only sighing in annoyance as she fended off my attacks and Asamiya's.

"I've seen all this before, okay? You can't beat me like this. And that goes for Compound V2 stuff as well," she said.

"But you've never even fought me!" Asamiya replied.

"Mm. Yeah, that's true. Hey, you're fast. Real tough, too. And those glimpses of your belly button I've been getting are cute. One hundred and twenty

points.”

“Stop embarrassing me! You gotta pay to see that! Argh!”

The two seemed evenly matched, for the moment, but Asamiya was having a little trouble. Perhaps it was because Enomoto had left to confront Kirigaya. If this continued, Minami would win out.

*Come on, come on...*

*“...Okay, Hiro! Mods complete!”*

Just as I started to panic, Kagaya’s voice came through the earpiece. The job I’d requested was finished. The Company sure was efficient. I couldn’t help but smile a bit.

When Asamiya and Minami reached a short break in their clash, I stepped forward.

“Hey, Minami,” I called.

“Huh? Why do you know my name? Creepy...”

“I’m the Seven Star. I can see anyone’s info. Anyway, you mentioned earlier that Compound V2 isn’t a problem to you because you’ve seen it all before, right?”

“Sure,” she replied. “I mean, I know about it. And I can avoid anything I know already.”

“Wow. Quite a bold statement. But I think you’ve forgotten something important.”

Minami gave me a questioning frown. Kirigaya, still busy with Enomoto, paused to look at us. I watched him from my peripheral while I continued.

“Every Ability has its own level. If someone with a low star count uses one, the effect will be modest. But on my device, an Ability’s full power is unleashed. Basically, the same Ability can have a huge difference in power depending on whether Kirigaya uses it or I do.”

“Right, yeah. Everyone knows that.”

“Good. In that case, let me show you that difference in action. Invisible Magic

Sword!”

The moment I spoke those words, Minami was blown backward like a rag doll without any warning. Neither Kugasaki’s Defense Wall nor her own evasion skills were quick enough for this punishing attack. Minami looked stunned. She had no idea what had happened, but all her LP was gone, and she disappeared from ASTRAL.

“Simple logic. See?”

I tried to gloat as much as possible to provoke Kirigaya.

“Unlike you, I’m not stuck at Six Star. I can maximize the effect of all my Abilities. The Compound V2 you created actually carries the latent power to forcibly combine *all* Spells, not just Attack ones. So I fused two Magic Missiles, three Sword Flashes, and a Stealth. This created the most powerful attack ever, like nothing ever seen in this Game.”

“Damn, you’re a real piece of shit!” Kirigaya shouted furiously. Losing his strongest asset in the Game undoubtedly drove him up the wall.

Of course, I wasn’t being entirely truthful. I definitely thought that a Seven Star with Compound V2 would be able to fuse anything, including Support Spells, but I was technically only a Three Star. In actuality, Minami had been defeated thanks to some meddling from the Company.

“Aghhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

I didn’t know whether he was enraged over losing Minami or my provocation, but an incensed Kirigaya began to overwhelm Enomoto, hurling Spells at him faster than before. Maybe he’d taken it easy until now, thinking this would be a breeze. This upset had broken his composure, and now he attacked almost blindly. The crystals representing Enomoto’s LP were rapidly vanishing.

“Shinji!”

Asamiya’s face paled as she beheld this tremendous onslaught. With Cornered Mouse activated, she had extended range and firepower, so she hurried to step in front of Enomoto. However, Kirigaya was completely unfazed.

“I never thought you’d make me use this one... *Dual Wield!*”

Two Sword Flashes went off at the same time. One was aimed at Enomoto, while the other was for Asamiya. They moved no differently from regular attacks, but both targets were already so weakened that another hit would bring their LP to zero. Enomoto and Asamiya would have to dodge or defend, and the choice created a momentary delay in their responses. That hesitation proved decisive.

“Ahhh!”

“Oh... This is it?”

Two voices overlapped. A large blue aura, the visual effect for a player leaving the Game, followed almost immediately. A quick check of the Eimei team’s status in Sight Mode confirmed it.

“*Tsk...* Finally, they go down. What a workout...”

Kirigaya shook his head irritably from the other side of the blue aura. Then he narrowed his eyes at me.

“Hey, Seven Star... I gotta say, I thought it was shameless to call yourself the strongest, but maybe you deserve to. I assumed hunting you would be easy, but this has turned out to be damn tough.”

“You look pretty calm, considering,” I answered. “Seems like you hoped to save that Dual Wield Ability for me, right? A little surprise to crush my spirit.”

“Yeah, more or less. I love to win, but totally dominating from start to finish isn’t any fun. I like to string opponents along, and just when they think they’ve won, I smash them. It’s great.”

“Wow. That’s quite a hobby. So did you plan for Minami to be eliminated?”

“No, no, not like that. Losing Compound V2 was completely unexpected. I haven’t felt this way in ages. This is exactly why I can’t get enough of Games, man... Shizuku wasn’t some disposable pawn, though. She did exactly what I needed. Taking her out made you use up all of Compound V2’s uses. No more fusing Spells!”

“...”

“Hya-hoo! You see? This is what happens when you get carried away and start

firing it all over the place. You might've had a chance with that Invisible Magic Sword, but not in a normal battle. All my Abilities are tuned for battle, unlike yours, which I gotta guess are spread out to cover a bunch of situations. I have a ton more resources than you. There's no way I can lose!"

Kirigaya wore a belligerent smile as he raged at me. Just as he'd claimed, my last attack had used the final charge remaining on Compound V2. I had known that while using it, but that didn't change the fact that I was going to have a tough time against Kirigaya.

"..."

"Ohhh, nice. It's kinda fun to see you act all tough and above it all, even now. That won't save you, though. You're gonna be my stepping stone to the top. It's a pretty big honor to be involved in such a grand moment in my life!"

Kirigaya approached me with absolute confidence. Himeji stood in front of me with her device ready, but he obviously didn't care. With his Dual Wield, he could ignore a Guardian entirely as he hunted me down.

"Huh?"

Suddenly, another figure inserted itself between us and Kirigaya—one with a small frame and hair in twin ponytails. She had been laying Traps and supporting us during the fight with Kirigaya's group under the cover of a Stealth Spell. It was Noa Akizuki, the Six Star Little Devil.

"Wha...what are you doing, Ms. Akizuki?!" Himeji exclaimed. Surprisingly, she seemed the most astonished. "It's dangerous here. Why did you remove Stea —"

"Eh-heh-heh! No you don't, Shirayuki! ♡ You can't act all cool and hog all the time protecting Hiroto! That kind of responsibility belongs to me, his rightful wife!"

"I don't know who'd be the wife and who'd be the mistress, but please step aside!"

"Uh-uh! ♪ Hey, Hiroto! Will stopping this guy for a bit help you out?"

"Huh?" I froze for a moment when faced with this abrupt question. The

answer was obvious, though, and I gave it quickly.

“Of course it would. It’s what I need more than anything.”

“Really?! Woo-hoo! Now I’m Hiroto’s number one... ♡”

“I’m not sure that’s the case, Ms. Akizuki... What are you trying to do anyway?” Himeji asked.

“Oh, you just watch, Shirayuki! ♪” Akizuki gave me an alluring smile before turning her attention to Kirigaya. “Toya Kirigaya,” she began. “The ace of the Seventh Ward’s Shinra School, a Six Star with a black Unique Star... You’re not all that great with these action-oriented Games, are you? I think you prefer ones where you use your brain more, psychological warfare stuff.”

“Huh? Oh, I never really thought about it... Hey, what the hell? You tryin’ to seduce me with all this praise?”

“Bzzzzt! I’m really cute, so I get why you wanna believe that, but you’re wrong. Last summer, I think it was. There was this one girl in my class. We weren’t really friends, but she was sweet to me. She was really nice and respectful...but after she played a Game with you, she left the island. I never saw her again...and, um, that’s the end of the story, I guess.”

Akizuki spoke rather quietly. She claimed that was the whole story, but for someone like her, who’d had no friends at the time, that girl’s departure must have been a real shock. Toya Kirigaya, the Demigod Dictator, had been responsible. I wondered if there were a lot of students who held grudges against him for similar reasons.

The guy himself didn’t care at all.

“Oh, really? Hey, sorry, but I can’t remember every little thing. I don’t see the need to get sentimental about that stuff.”

“That’s fine! ♪ I’m just mad, so I thought I’d get a little revenge. That’s all! ♡”

“That right? Well, die, then.”

The moment he said that, Kirigaya took out his device with a natural motion and used Dual Wield to fire two Magic Missiles at Akizuki. After using Cancel to eliminate his cooldown time, he moved in close and followed up with a Sword

Flash.

“M-Ms. Akizuki?!”

Akizuki didn't defend against any of them. All the damage went through, and her LP crystals all shattered. Akizuki fell to the ground, looked up at me, and smiled a little. A moment later, she was just a bunch of luminous blue particles.

As I stood there, stunned, Kirigaya let out a disappointed sigh.

“Aw, man, she calls *that* stopping me? She didn't even fight back, much less attack, huh? I was hoping for a little more, but I guess a wimp's a wimp.”

However, as his laughter died down, the color began to drain from his face. That helped me realize that something was off. Kirigaya wasn't moving from the spot where he'd defeated Akizuki.

*“Cancel Action...! It's exactly what was used on Shirayuki!”* an excited voice squawked in my earpiece.

“Huh?”

*“It's Noa! I'm sure of it! I think she had some kind of retaliatory Ability in advance, the kind with a powerful effect when its owner is eliminated! It's really limited like that, but super useful!”*

My eyes opened wide at Kagaya's explanation. I guessed that's what Akizuki had meant about stopping Kirigaya. She'd definitely created a lethal opening for me. Now I could take him down.

I thought I could, anyway.

“Whoa, whoa, don't tell me you think you've won.”

“...!”

Kirigaya's voice never lost its composure. A translucent, spherical shell covered him. Akizuki should have stopped all action on his part, but he'd still created a barrier of some kind.

Internally, I couldn't have been more upset. Kirigaya gave me a dauntless smile.

“I swore that I'd beat you, so of course I've got something to deal with a

surprise attack. This is Canceling Barrier V2—an invincible wall that shuts out any attack I couldn't block on my own."

He was so matter-of-fact about it. Like Compound V2, he'd presumably created this Ability using his black star. He'd concealed it until now to break my will, like he'd said earlier. Breaking out another potent trick during a life-or-death struggle would definitely make most people fall to their knees in despair. However, the corners of my lips curled up in a smile, and I stepped forward.

"That's number three, Kirigaya. Compound V2, Dual Wield, and Canceling Barrier V2. You've used up all your Abilities. No more hidden tricks."

"Huh? Well, yeah, but Canceling Barrier V2 isn't just for show, okay? As long as I have this up, you can't land a scratch on me unless you have Senri Kururugi's One-Shot Kill or something. Meanwhile, I can attack you all I want. Get it? I don't *need* any more tricks."

"You can attack all you want from within the barrier? Wow. Thanks for letting me know."

"...Huh?"

Kirigaya scowled with confusion. No sooner had he done so than...

"Heh-heh..."

"?! Ah...gah...?!"

...a soft laugh caressed my ears. Before Kirigaya had time to scream, his body was blown away. Canceling Barrier V2 should have saved him, yet the attack treated it like it wasn't even there. Of course, such a feat would be impossible under normal circumstances, but with the right Abilities, anything was possible. After all, if a player could create Defense Walls anywhere they liked, they could also trigger attacks from within the Canceling Barrier V2.

The blow came from the leader of the Otowa School team from the Eighth Ward and leader of the Self-Styled Holy Knights, the Academy's largest unofficial organization. He was arguably the most famous Five Star in the history of the Academy, and definitely the strangest—Seiran Kugasaki, the Phoenix.



“Heh-heh-heh... Ahhh-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!”

His shrill laugh climbed into the air as he looked down at Kirigaya on the ground. While pushing up his shiny, silver-rimmed glasses, he threw back his jet-black cloak. He smiled at me, the expression asking, “How was that?”

That’s right. Kugasaki and I were working together for this Game.

“Damn...it...” Kirigaya’s LP had been reduced to one by the sneak attack. “You’re gonna betray the United Force, you bastard? You’ll pay for this...”

“Betray? Me? What is this nonsense you’re spouting?” Kugasaki shrugged as he cast Kirigaya a mocking look. Spreading his arms in a pretentious gesture, he assumed his classic theatrical tone. “Consider the very premise of all this. Your United Force is headed by that Chameleon. She posed as the real Empress, and this whole group is meant to help her steal the Empress’s position during the May Interschool Competition.”

“Huh? What the hell? So what?”

“Heh-heh! Silence, you! Did you forget how I earned my nickname? I adore Sarasa Saionji—the *current* Empress—from the bottom of my heart. She has my utmost respect. That’s why I’m the Phoenix, the one who challenges her again and again. And I will have you know that I will *never* tolerate anything as abominable as a *fake Empress!!!*”

“Huh...?! Wait, so you... From the very start?!” Kirigaya gritted his teeth hard at Kugasaki’s impassioned speech. “...! You sure about this?! If you side with Shinohara now, all that talk about you becoming my partner is dead in the water, okay? Serve me, and I’ll even make your ‘Self-Styled’ whatever an officially sanctioned group—”

“Heh-heh! Such talk will not sway me!”

Kirigaya’s remark got me wondering what sort of behind-the-scenes negotiation he’d engaged in. Kugasaki, meanwhile, shook his head. He brought a finger to his glasses with a stylish gesture and grinned.

“Don’t you ever show your face around me again. Now, and for all time, my group shall always be mine alone.”

“...!”

Kugasaki’s attitude made it clear to Kirigaya that there was no talking his way out of this. Kirigaya lay there on the ground as Kugasaki approached to deliver the final blow. The Phoenix prepared a Sword Flash and quietly raised his device.

“Well, so be it... You beat me this time. I’ll just sit back and...” Kirigaya trailed off. Then something changed in his posture. “...What, give up? You think I’d do that? Hell no! You’re going down with me, you bastard!!”

Kirigaya lifted his head, revealing a victorious smile. Then he used Dual Wield to break out all the Magic Missiles and Cancel Spells he had left, unleashing a surge of attacks all aimed at me. Kugasaki finished Kirigaya off immediately afterward, but that didn’t stop his attacks. The many Spells were about to pummel me.

“...! Master!!” Himeji jumped in front of me. She’d been too surprised to create a Defense Wall, to even pull out her device. Instead she just stood in front of me with her arms outstretched. Before I could say anything, Kirigaya’s attacks struck her slender body.

“Ah...?!”

“Himeji!”

I finally sprang back to motion, stirred from my astonishment. It was already too late, though. Himeji fell into my arms. Her LP was already gone. As her body faded, she looked up at me, smiling apologetically.

“I’m sorry, Master... Forgive me for not remaining with you until the end.”

“What are you talking about? Why’d you do something that rash?”

“It’s hard to say why, exactly. Ms. Akizuki just looked so cool to me. Perhaps I wanted to be sure she didn’t steal your heart.”

“...Can you tell me the truth, please?”

“That...wasn’t a lie...but I think the reason is obvious. You’re the key to our attack on the Chameleon. The plan would fall apart if you were knocked out of the Game now.”

“...”

“And...even if I lose the Game, there are still things I can do.”

Those were Himeji’s last words before disappearing into a cloud of blue particles and leaving ASTRAL’s digital world. She was the fourth member of Team Eimei to be eliminated. I was the only one left.

“Hey, sorry to interrupt your tender moment, Shinohara, but can I talk to you one second?”

I slowly turned to face the guy behind me, forcing a calm expression. It was now me and Seiran Kugasaki, the Phoenix and Five Star.

“Thanks, Kugasaki. I couldn’t have beaten Kirigaya without you.”

“Oh? Well, you’re definitely right about that. You’ve certainly put in quite a performance, too, Seven Star. Just like my rival should! You’re not just some face in the crowd, you know!”

“Ha...”

“Heh-heh...”

*“You two have really similar evil laughs,”* an exasperated-sounding Kagaya remarked. Still, I didn’t see the harm in playing along with Kugasaki a little. We’d formed an alliance before ASTRAL began, after all. The Chameleon threatened the Empress herself, which made her a common enemy for us.

Naturally, I’d been surprised to learn that Kugasaki had joined the United Force, but he’d infiltrated it to get in close and launch a surprise attack against his hated enemy. Toya Kirigaya was the acting commander of the United Force, and considering his influence and how dangerous he was, having Seiran Kugasaki as an ace in the hole was a big help.

Kugasaki stood in front of me, his jet-black cloak fluttering in the air. “Looks like...you’re the only one left on your side?” he remarked quietly.

“...Yeah. Eimei and Ohmi were the groups covering the west side of the map, and now I’m the only remaining member. Suisei and Soken took the center, but they’re all gone. I don’t know what’s going on with Saionji to the east, but it looks like Murakumo was eliminated pretty quickly. I’m not sure she’ll hold out

long enough for Kururugi to arrive.”

“I see. Hell’s Priestess is your secret weapon, then? We’ll just have to pray it works out.”

Kugasaki shook his head as he checked the state of the Game with his device.

“The United Force took plenty of losses, too. The only remaining members are me, Kururugi, and the Chameleon herself. If Seijo School is disqualified for its nonplayer participant, that means there’s only four schools left in the running—Eimei, Ohga, Tsuyuri, and Otowa. It looks like Kirigaya managed to drop out of the United Force at the last minute, meaning Shinra will make it in the top five. Now that I’ve betrayed the Chameleon, I suppose I shouldn’t expect any more Spells from Seijo School. I think I’ll follow in Kirigaya’s footsteps and drop out of the United Force. My team’s secured a top spot in the Game, so I suppose there’s nothing for me to do but drop out.”

“Fine by me. I hope you enjoy Libra’s commentary as you watch the final moments,” I said.

“Heh-heh... I hate that dismissive tone, but I can take a hint. Listen well, my rival... Since I can no longer protect my Empress’s good name, it’s up to you instead.”

Kugasaki took out his device. Grinning, he fired a Magic Missile at himself and disappeared from ASTRAL.

“...”

As I watched him dissipate into particles of light, I thought about Kururugi. She should have reached Saionji by now. Presumably they were battling the Chameleon.

*It took a lot of sacrifices, but everyone who joined her United Force is gone. In other words, everything’s falling into place. Now I just have to hope Kururugi can defeat the Chameleon for me.*

With little else to do but hope, I took out my device and contacted Libra.

b b

“What...?” came a groan, colored with astonishment and despair. That would

be her last word. By the time it faded, Senri Kururugi's body was a mass of blue particles. She had been defeated. Hell's Priestess, one of the most powerful players, had left the Game.

*This...this is just...*

Sarasa Saionji, leader of the Ohga School team, was at a loss for words.

Things had started out so well. By cooperating with her teammate Momo, she had somehow avoided the Chameleon. They'd even managed to defeat her allies with a few Ability-driven surprise attacks. It had been a great battle. Moments ago, Senri Kururugi had even arrived.

Yet things had rapidly taken a turn for the worse.

"Heh-heh! Betraying me, huh? How sneaky! I expected something like this, though."

"Ngh...!"

Sarasa clenched her fists as the Chameleon smiled at her. Senri Kururugi hadn't made any real mistake. She'd launched a Magic Missile at the Chameleon while Sarasa and Momo supported her. One-Shot Kill had definitely activated. Yet it had somehow failed to deal any damage to the Chameleon.

This final ray of hope had failed to reach the enemy. And if One-Shot Kill wasn't enough, then there was surely no way to stop her. In moments, Senri Kururugi's and Momo's LP were obliterated.

*Where did we go wrong? If we can't beat her with that Ability, then how...?*

Despair weighed heavily on Sarasa's mind. No matter what route she considered, it always led to defeat. The Chameleon was only a few paces away, wearing her face. Before she could do anything, however, a bell chimed, indicating that it was five in the evening. The AR world vanished. The fourth day had come to an end. Somehow, Sarasa had skirted defeat.

*But that's... It's like I didn't even do anything!*

It frustrated her to no end to survive thanks to a stroke of luck. She could hardly stand it.

Sarasa bit her lip with her face lowered. The Chameleon smiled at the sight.

“Aw, that’s too bad. I guess you can keep calling yourself the Empress until tomorrow, then.”

#

I was alone in the basement control room. Libra had vacated it for me. I stared up at the oversized monitor in the middle of the room.

The screen showed the results of the fourth day—Senri Kururugi’s defeat, most notably. Hell’s Priestess had failed to beat the Chameleon.

A lot had changed in ASTRAL following today’s all-out war. Almost all players in our alliance and the Chameleon’s United Force had dropped out of the Game. The United Force was no longer a coalition of any kind. The Chameleon was the only member left. Likewise, all schools but Eimei and Ohga were out.

*Normally, we’d be safe among the top five already, but...*

That was only true if the Chameleon didn’t finish in first. If Saionji or I won (I wasn’t sure whether Seijo would be added to the final ranking), Eimei and Ohga would be the top two, followed by Tsuyuri, Otowa, and Shinra. But if the Chameleon won, it would be a different story. With the way the United Force worked, all affiliated schools, like St. Rosalia, would be tied for second. Eimei and Ohga would be pushed out of the top five.

The situation was looking bleak.

“...Yeah, it’s about what I figured.”

I sighed while staring at the monitor... The Chameleon had been growing in strength throughout today’s battle. Her territory occupied around half of the map and nearly 90 percent of the nonneutral hexes. She also had 77.3 percent of the viewer vote, completely dominating Eimei and Ohga.

If asked whether this was unexpected, I would’ve said, “Not really.” Our enemy ruled the United Force. Unless we beat the Chameleon, we’d never be able to seize any of her Spells or territory. On the other hand, we were nothing but an informal alliance, so every time one of our teams was defeated, its territory became the Chameleon’s. Knowing that, we’d tried to win the Game quickly with a coordinated assault. That would never happen now.

“Man, this really is awful...,” a familiar voice remarked from behind me.

Turning around, I saw Sarasa Saionji in her school uniform. She looked completely invincible, her long, luxurious red hair flowing and her ruby eyes shining in the dark.

She folded her arms beneath her chest and shook her head gently.

“I should probably apologize. Sorry we couldn’t beat the Chameleon.”

“Huh? How is that your fault, Saionji?” I replied.

“I know, but...” She peered up at me, possibly to gauge my expression. Whether it was this rare, vulnerable expression from her or the silence of the room, my heart skipped a beat.

“Hm?” Saionji looked confused for a moment, but continued, ignorant of my feelings. “I’m a little surprised. I thought you’d be a little more depressed after today’s failure.”

“Were you hoping to come mope with me about it down here? Sounds like you’re the one who’s depressed,” I said.

“Well... Yeah, I am, all right? Is that so wrong? I’ve never felt this completely helpless in my life. I almost want someone to pat me on the head and tell me everything’s going to be all right! Ugh!”

“...Should I?”

“! ...N-no! Never mind. I mean, if *you* did, it might be okay...”

Saionji’s face shone red, and she looked away from me. She was acting unusually timid. Regardless, if she was here in the control room, it meant she was searching for a way to turn this all around, just like me. I met her ruby eyes, which seemed to be burning hot.

“Listen, Saionji. There’s actually something important I need to tell you.”

“S-something important? From you, Shinohara? To me? W-wait, wait. My heart’s not ready for this...”

“Sorry, can you go hide somewhere for a minute?”

“...What?”

Saionji’s mouth hung open for a second, but she recovered quickly to pout at

me.

The other members of Eimei's team arrived at the control room not long after.

"Um...Hiroto? Are you here? A Libra girl led us to this place..."

"Yeah, this way," I called, waving from in front of the monitor. Four people walked over: Noa Akizuki, Shinji Enomoto, Nanase Asamiya, and Shirayuki Himeji. They were all part of the Eimei School team but had been eliminated from ASTRAL during the battle with Kirigaya.

"I'm sure I don't need to tell you all that our assault on the Chameleon this afternoon to win ASTRAL in the normal way ended in failure. Not even One-Shot Kill could defeat the Chameleon... Meaning it's probably impossible to defeat her head-on."

"Mmm, yeah, probably," Asamiya agreed, sounding distressed at my conclusion. "So do we just have to give up?"

"Give up? Why would we do that?" I replied.

"We're not? You just said it's impossible to beat the Chameleon."

"No, I didn't. I said it'd be impossible to do so head-on. Today, we kept things strictly within the Game, but if she's playing this unfairly, to the point that One-Shot Kill isn't enough, then I don't need to worry about following the rules, either. We'll go outside the Game and do whatever's necessary to beat our enemy."

"Wow... I like that. I'm getting pumped up just thinking about it!" Asamiya sounded a little more hopeful than she had a moment before, even smiling slightly.

By "our enemy" I meant the Chameleon, but it could also refer to Mikado Kurahashi, honestly. I really wanted to beat the Chameleon so I could focus on the battle against that man, but we had to handle one crisis at a time.

"But what're you going to do, *exactly*?" Enomoto asked me, watching the monitor with a scowl. "Whether you take it outside of ASTRAL or not, I don't think it'll be easy to make up for the difference in power."



“Right, true. That’s why I’m thinking that I’ll challenge her to a Game,” I replied.

“...A Game?”

“Yeah. A Game within the Game—one that’s linked with ASTRAL. There’s that difference in power like you said, Enomoto, but the big problem is that there’s no way we can win in ASTRAL. We can’t reduce her LP or take territory from her. Quite frankly, we’re cornered... But what if we change the rules so we *can* win?”

“...”

Enomoto went quiet. He spent a few moments thinking before addressing me again.

“I have three questions about that. First, isn’t the Chameleon already playing a side Game with the Empress from the Third Ward? You can’t take on multiple Games at once, an event like ASTRAL notwithstanding.”

“Ah, I think we’re okay on that front. Her account name’s three question marks, which probably means she’s not part of the whole star system. She forced her way into this, so those kinds of rules shouldn’t apply to her. And since her ranking is unknown, the Seven Star should be able to challenge her without an issue.”

“Hmm, yes, that sounds right to me... Okay, second question. If you do challenge her, what sort of Game will it be? You hardly have the time to devise a rule set right now.”

Enomoto was right. I could have the entire Company devote itself to this, and maybe they’d come up with something quickly enough, but such a thing was normally impossible. People devoted a lot of time to fine-tuning the rules of a Game. They didn’t just make one out of thin air.

But even so...

“That’s not a problem, either. We’ve got someone who can help us with that.”

I snickered a bit as I looked down at my device. I’d already reached out to the person in question—Natsume Ichinose, provost of the Fourth Ward’s Eimei

School—before Saionji came down. Her relationship with Mikado Kurahashi ran really deep, and when I called her up, her side of the conversation had gone something like this:

“...Mm? What’s up, Shinohara? Aren’t you in the middle of a huge Game right now? I’m in the bath, by the way, and that’s far more important to me than your life.”

“...You wanna talk about something? Okay, I’ll hear you out.”

“Oh, I see... I see, I see! A Game within the Game that can stamp out Kurahashi for good, huh? You have such a creative mind, you know that?”

“In that case, I’ll expend every effort to help you. I’ve investigated Mikado Kurahashi so much, I could practically write a book on how to defeat him. I’ve been after him far longer than you have, y’know.”

“Right. In that case, Shinohara, let me provide you with a Game I created back when I was a student. You’ll need to adjust it a bit to make it compatible with ASTRAL, but I think you’ll find it to be a pretty neat Game.”

Basically, she agreed to help out.

“I’ll keep the details under wraps for now...but someone I trust has already given me a Game rule set. We need to adjust it somewhat, but there’s no need to worry about that part,” I explained.

“Ee-heh-heh! Great job, Hiroto! ♪ This is perfect! ♡”

“I see. I sense that old vixen’s presence...but okay.”

Akizuki gave me an alluring smile, while Himeji sighed, seemingly having deduced that the provost was involved. She didn’t look all that enthused, but she offered no objection.

“All right. One more question, Shinohara,” Enomoto said. “How will we make the Chameleon participate in this Game of yours?”

“Yeah... That’s gonna be the tricky part.”

I shook my head a bit at Enomoto’s hounding question. Himeji brushed her hair back as she indicated her agreement.

“Indeed... As of right now, the Chameleon will clearly run away with ASTRAL. All she has to do is run out the clock. Would she be at all interested in playing another Game with you?”

“Not normally, no. She’d need some kind of compelling reason.” I paused, turning my attention to Saionji, who was hiding nearby. “But I’m pretty confident we’re good on that front, too. For now, if you guys can trust me on that, I’d really appreciate it.”

“Sure, yeah, of course... What should we do?” Akizuki looked curious. Honestly, the whole group seemed unsure how they would accomplish anything after being eliminated from ASTRAL.

I gave everyone a confident smile, looking to each of them in turn. Tomorrow was the final day of ASTRAL. No matter what I did, Mikado Kurahashi was bound to get involved. He had to be desperate to win to make up for last time, and he would undoubtedly try whatever he had to. I needed to account for all of that interference in my plan and make certain he and Shiina lost. And I’d do it with this outside-the-box Game that would enable a side bet carrying enormous consequences.

“You’ll all be handling behind-the-scenes stuff during the Game tomorrow. There’s a few things you’ll have to take care of while I’m playing.”

b b b

After Team Eimei and later Saionji (who seemed peeved with me for some reason) agreed to the plan, I decided to head back to my room.

*How to invite Shiina into the Game...?*

Secretly, I agonized over the question. If I wanted to stage a miraculous turnaround, I had to pull her into a separate Game, no matter what. There were a few tools I could use to help, but I needed something that would give her that extra push to make it a surefire thing.

*What should I do? Hmm...*

Right as I passed by the first-floor restaurant, I spotted Tsumugi Shiina out of the corner of my eye. She wove around the tables, head swiveling around like she was searching for something. Seeing the Chameleon I’d just spent so much

time talking about made me stop in my tracks.

“Ah... Oh, hey! Great! I finally found you!”

Ignorant of my internal turmoil and wariness, Shiina skipped right up to me. She looked no different despite my exposing her in MTCG that morning. I wondered if she might try something.

Yet as I nervously swallowed, Tsumugi Shiina said, “Hey, I want to play a game with you right now!”

“...Huh?”

It was almost like she’d read my mind.

**May Interschool Competition: ASTRAL—Day 4 Complete**

**Largest Territory Taken:** Seijo School, Twelfth Ward (4,828 hexes)

**Most Votes:** Seijo School, Twelfth Ward (77.3%)

**Surviving Players:** 3

## Final Chapter

### Defeating a Pure-Hearted Monster

#

“Aww, I lost... *Grr!* Okay, let’s play this game next!”

It was eleven thirty at night on the fourth day of ASTRAL. After I’d run into the Chameleon, Tsumugi Shiina, at the hotel restaurant, she’d challenged me to a game for some reason. It put me on high alert, but I followed her to her room, determined. However, it turned out she just wanted to play some fighting games.

“Ooooh! ♪ Yah! Take this! Hyah!”

Shiina was lying on her stomach on the bed, kicking her legs as she moved her character around. Her clothing was getting more casual by the day. When we first met, she’d worn a gothic dress. Now she just had some dark-colored pajamas on. She still used colored contacts to give herself heterochromia, though. I saw her red eye stealing glances at me occasionally.

*I can’t believe we’re just playing like we usually do...*

YOU WIN flashed on the screen. I couldn’t help but feel a little odd. Honestly, when Shiina spotted me at the restaurant, I’d panicked pretty heavily, yet it had been for nothing. I’d thought she wanted to challenge me to a Game, but she actually just wanted to play regular games with me. My disappointment felt entirely justified.

Wondering if I’d made a mistake somewhere, I decided to ask, “Um... Hey, Shiina, you really are the Chameleon, right?”

“Huh? Yeah, that’s right. I didn’t know people were calling me that until recently, though. I’m playing in ASTRAL as a member of Seijo School!”

“...And that’s all?”

“That’s all? Oh, wait, no! I originally hail from the world of demons, but I rescued this human that fell into that realm, and the devil who rules that domain punished me by banishing me he—”

“I wasn’t asking for your backstory.”

I shook my head at Shiina as she wove a contrived tale, her mismatched eyes gleaming. I sighed, feeling like an idiot for ever being wary of this girl. Shiina didn’t seem like a villain at all.

I set down my controller and faced her.

“Listen... If you don’t mind, could you tell me more about what’s going on with you? How’d you get involved with this Game anyway?”

“Mmm... How? How I got involved? Hmm...”

Shiina sat up and crossed her arms, her Cerberus doll close at hand. She stared up at the ceiling for a bit, then began counting something on her fingers. Occasionally she frowned and groaned. Eventually, she nodded to herself and brought her face close to mine.

“Okay, I got it all worked out,” she said.

“I think you have the wrong idea about all this, but go ahead,” I replied.

“You bet. Okay... I think I’ve told you before, but I don’t like school very much. I hate studying, and I’m not too good at talking to a whole bunch of people at once. Plus, I’m a specially chosen messenger of darkness. So instead of going to school, I stay at home, playing games and doing stuff on my computer.”

“Right, you mentioned that before.”

“It’s been that way for me since halfway through my first year of elementary school, I think.”

“Wow, you’re quite the dedicated shut-in.” I couldn’t help but make a joke. I’d had no idea she’d closed herself off from the world so early in life. “Sorry. That’s fine and all, but what’s it got to do with this Game?”

“Well, I stayed away from most people in elementary school and for middle school, too, so far. Once I’m done with that, I won’t have any more compulsory education. I thought that meant I’d never have to study again...but around a

year ago, I think, I realized something bad was happening.”

“Something bad?”

“Yeah! The island has that whole star system that people fight for, right? Students do it for all three years of high school here. It’s the perfect way to decide who’s the best. I’ll never be able to join in if I don’t get accepted to a high school!”

“Oh... Yeah, that’s true.”

Come to think of it, she was right. The Academy’s star system was meant to rank schools and students, not the general population. Someone unaffiliated with a school wouldn’t have any access to Games. Presumably, an Academy resident who dropped out after middle school would be kicked off the island, too.

Shiina hugged Lloyd tightly, her lips pursed.

“Once I figured that out, I prayed to God...um, I mean, my devil overlord. I wished upon a star that I’d be granted a special exception to join Games. I called up the administration headquarters and yelled at them, and even tried to make #letshiinaplay trend on STOC. But they said that I couldn’t. They were like, ‘Please just go to a high school like a normal student.’”

“Well, yeah, what else did you expect?”

All the schools on the Academy were free to attend, thanks to monetary support from the Japanese government, Masamune Saionji, and the administrative funds each ward maintained. The competition to secure a spot at any school on the island was intense. Earning the right to join one meant turning down the prestigious offer wasn’t an option.

“If it’s that important to you, can’t you join a school and just not attend?” I said.

“Mmm, maybe... But I really don’t wanna. I’d feel a little guilty if I was part of a high school I never went to. I’d just be denying a spot someone else deserved. I just don’t want to go to high school, you know? I don’t want to study or work. Yet...I can’t miss out on the whole star thing, either!”

Shiina brought her face close to mine again. Her eyes, one jet black and the other dark red, were right in front of me, and the aroma of her fresh-smelling shampoo filled my nostrils.

“You understand, right? I would be so famous if I was allowed to join! People would stop me on the street... Actually, I don’t think I’d like that. But I’d wanna see people talking about me on STOC! It’d make me so happy! And I wanna rank high enough that I can get a fat stipend and party it up on the Academy!!”

“You realize how greedy you sound, don’t you?”

“Of course! You’re no different, though. The genius Seven Star transfer student, the most powerful presence in the Academy...you’re so cool, and it makes me so jealous.”

“...”

I’d been forced into that position, but there was no need to mention that. Shiina raised an eyebrow at my sudden silence. After a moment, she returned to the topic at hand.

“Anyway, I wanted to join the star fun however I could. I couldn’t take it anymore... That’s when my two-hundred-and-fifty-six-color brain came up with the most brilliant idea. Since I couldn’t join the normal way, I just had to sneak in!”

“...Huh?”

This very sudden leap in logic made me frown deeply. Clearly, Shiina thought it was entirely rational.

“I thought to create a feature that’d let me join in people’s Games. Everybody’s got devices on this island, right? So I took mine apart, and I shoved a star and Game app in there to imitate the real thing perfectly!”

“You shoved it in there...? How?”

“...? I forced it in. I connected the device to my computer, typed in a bunch of commands...poked around the program a whole bunch...and with just a few more clicks, I was on my way!”

*Great. I have no idea what she’s talking about.*



I brought my right hand to my forehead as I listened. Shiina was the sort of person you'd call a conceptual genius, I guess. Given how much she hated studying, I doubt she had much expertise with devices and computers, but she sported more than enough enthusiasm to make up for it. Somehow, she'd actually copied the Game access framework onto her device to create the Academy's first spoof account, with the username???

"Hee-hee! What do you think? Pretty cool, huh? Aren't I really cool?"

"Yeah, you're amazing, I'll grant you that... But didn't you get what you wanted after creating your account? Why go through all this trouble with ASTRAL?"

"Right. About that..." Shiina pursed her lips again. "I successfully made an account, but there was a problem. When you play a Game with someone, your account ID appears, doesn't it? If anyone saw that mine was three question marks, they'd report me, and the cyberpolice would get really angry."

"There's no 'cyberpolice.' At least I don't think so. Anyway, you're right. Someone would definitely notice, and your account would be frozen."

"Yeah. And I don't want that, so I couldn't get too careless. But I worked so hard to make that account and wanted to play Games so badly... That's when I got an invite in an email. From some guy named Mikado, I think!"

I flinched when she mentioned his name. I'd known about his involvement for a while, but hearing it from Shiina herself felt so heavy. Just as I'd guessed, Kurahashi was behind this. Shiina went on, unaware of what I was thinking.

"I was really, really happy. He said so many nice things to me in that email. He talked about how amazing my fake account was, and how he wanted me to join him, that he needed my talents... It all sounded so suspicious! He said that if I wanted to accept, I needed to go to the top floor of some building at a specific time of day, and that I'd need a pass to get in... It felt like an evil syndicate!"

"...Was it?"

"Oh, totally! My gut told me it was trying to destroy the world or something. Heh-heh! A group like that praised me... I really am awesome!"

Shiina joyously kicked her legs as I fell silent. Mikado Kurahashi had appealed

to her dark-fantasy tastes to win her over. It certainly felt like something he'd do.

"So then guess what happened? Mikado told me all about this plan. He introduced me to ASTRAL and told me I could use my ID without anybody suspecting a thing. He also gave me a Unique Star that lets me create a perfect copy of something, exactly like the real thing. It's the perfect weapon for posing as different people and causing upsets in the Game! In exchange, he asked me to send that 'declaration of war.' You know, the one where I said I'd beat you and the Empress—the Academy's number one and two!"

"Oh... So that's what that was..."

I chewed over Shiina's story. Finally, I had a complete view of all this. Shiina was functionally an outside assistant whom Kurahashi had scouted for this job. Presumably, she didn't know about my situation or Saionji's. She'd just been lured into joining ASTRAL to use the fake account she'd created. No wonder I never detected any malice from her. She was just having fun and had no idea of the impact her actions would have.

Shiina snickered to herself, clutching her Cerberus doll. "Tomorrow's the final battle! The last day I'll get to play with you in that event... I'm so excited, I can't even sleep... Mmh..."

"You look exhausted to me," I remarked.

"N-no I'm not! I'm not at...mmm...all..."

Shiina shifted a little, placing her head right on my lap. A few seconds later, she started to snore slightly, her innocent face turned up right at mine.

"...Is she sleeping?" I heard Kagaya ask over my earpiece, following a quick bit of static.

I placed a light blanket over Shiina's body, then quietly answered, "Yeah. Considering all she said, she doesn't seem the least bit wary of me."

*"I guess she trusts you, Hiro. Probably. And why would she be wary? To her, ASTRAL is nothing but a game. A game she'd be overjoyed to win and sad to lose. I don't think she sees it as any different from the fighting games you guys were playing."*

“This is kind of hard to deal with.”

*“I know, right? An innocent genius... She’s exactly the type I have trouble handling.”* Kagaya seemed to earnestly agree with me. *“Um... So what’ll you do, Hiro? Not to sound ruthless or anything, but if Tsumugi’s device is in her room, you could physically destroy it. Then she wouldn’t be able to log in tomorrow, and you’d win easy. That or give her some sleeping pills, but I guess that’d be even worse, huh?”*

“I suppose getting rid of her device is an option...”

Kagaya’s suggestion was valid, yet I was reluctant to try it. Getting rid of her device would likely assure our victory in ASTRAL. However, it wouldn’t guarantee it.

“Something I’ve discovered over the past four days is that Shiina’s not particularly attached to games she knows she’s lost. But if the game’s still ongoing, she’ll fight to the bitter end. As long as she thinks it’s not over, nothing will stop her from finding a way to play.”

*“Ah, yeah, I see what you mean...”*

“When you consider it from Shiina’s perspective, beating her in some way outside of the Game doesn’t mean anything. She’d probably just challenge me to some other Game instead. I’d be stuck in a loop forever. We need to make her think she’s thoroughly lost, or it’ll never end.”

*“Hmmm... Sounds like a tough one, Hiro.”*

“It is,” I replied casually, a wily smile on my face. “But I think I’ve figured out a way forward.”

b b

*“Okay, guys... Is everyone ready? When the morning session begins today, I’m going to invite the Chameleon into the Game we discussed. We already discussed what happens after, and where everyone should be. I’ll be expecting everyone to follow the instructions I gave, okay? To be honest, none of us can mess up here... Every role is vital. But you’ve come this far with me, and I absolutely believe you can all pull it off. This Game was set up to be unwinnable, but I know we can turn the tables...even if we have to force it. So how about we*

*show them just what Eimei School's capable of?"*

#

It was the first half of ASTRAL's final day. From the middle of the Game field, the landscape was black all the way to the horizon. I watched my device quietly.

The final match was about to begin. I'd done everything I could. At least, I hoped so. I'd called upon everything I could to defeat Tsumugi Shiina and Mikado Kurahashi, and somehow it had come together into a plan.

*Now it'll come down to whether she'll take the bait for me... Oop.*

As I thought that to myself, I heard soft footsteps and turned around. There, I saw the red-haired Sarasa Saionji in her Ohga School uniform.

"Sorry to keep you, Shinohara. I know we were supposed to meet up earlier... but I started today in the exact location where I ended yesterday, with the Chameleon breathing down my neck. It took some time to lose her."

"That's fine. I didn't wait that long. Great job losing her."

"I'm not incompetent, you know. I'm the Six Star Empress."

Her ruby eyes watched me as she brought a hand to her hip and gave me a mischievous snicker. I answered that with a small nod.

"All right, let's do this just like we discussed. First, I need to make contact with the Chameleon," I said.

"Right. Then the true final battle will begin." Saionji looked right at me. Every word from her was sincere.

I had already shared today's strategy with her. The Game I had prepared wasn't a one-on-one between Shiina and me. Rather, all three remaining teams—Eimei, Ohga, and Seijo—would join. I couldn't cut it alone. Saionji had a vital role in securing this ASTRAL comeback.

"Heh-heh! Well, shall we get going? We don't have much time to waste."

Saionji sounded a bit haughtier than usual as she turned around and gracefully walked away. I caught up to her, and soon we were walking shoulder to shoulder.

“Say, Shinohara, can I ask you something?”

“...? What is it, Saionji?”

“Well... There’s actually something I was hoping the two of us could discuss, perhaps.”

Her voice was hushed, and she practically whispered into my ear. Nobody was around, of course, but I suppose she was afraid a Libra camera might catch our conversation. Her silky red hair brushed against my cheek. Her breath caressed my eardrum.

“...Sword Flash!”

Saionji loosed a Sword Flash Spell right at me. It was a total surprise, an attack from point-blank range. No Defense Spell would save me in time.

At least, none should have.

“Ha... You’re late, Chameleon.”

Saionji’s attack was blocked by my Defense Wall and vanished in a puff of white smoke. I hadn’t suddenly developed superhuman reactions or anything like that. I’d just set up my defense in advance because I’d known an attack would come flying my way. An attack from the Chameleon disguised as Sarasa Saionji.

“...!”

Saionji, really the Chameleon, opened her ruby eyes wide. It was probably the first time anyone had seen through her disguise. There was clear confusion on her face.

“Wha...? How did you know? Do I give off too much power?”

“No, it’s simpler than that. Acting all formal and saying we needed to discuss something...Saionji never acts like that when no one else is around. Plus, it’s pretty hard to believe she eluded the Chameleon alone. If that were true, and she’d found me this quickly, she’d be early, not late.”

“Ugh...”

The Chameleon groaned in a way I’d never seen from Saionji.

“...So how did you take her place? Because I’m sure you two probably *were* close to each other at the end of yesterday,” I said.

“Oh! Yeah, we were. But when I logged in earlier, it looked like the Empress hadn’t shown up yet...so I placed a few paralysis Traps around where she’d be.”

I silently thought this over. Saionji hadn’t been there yet? No, it was likely the opposite. Kurahashi had likely messed with the log-in settings to ensure that Shiina could get in ahead of everyone else. The Chameleon herself didn’t seem to know that because she cocked her head.

“I think the other Saionji ought to be coming pretty soon,” she said.

“Yeah...you’re right,” someone answered, confirming Chameleon’s remark.

Looking over, I saw another girl who looked exactly like the one in front of me—Sarasa Saionji, the Six Star Empress and the *real* (fake) rich girl.

“You sure got me good today, Chameleon. That was a little unfair, don’t you think?”

“! Ah, ahh...”

The Chameleon fell silent, surprisingly unable to reply to Saionji’s comment. Maybe this was just Tsumugi Shiina’s natural shyness coming into play. Unlike actual players, she was just a 3D projection. She was controlling an avatar, like someone playing a VR game, yet even still, she struggled to talk.

“H...help me...!”

“Help? Well, Chameleon, how about you return to your original form?” I suggested. “Having two of the same person here just complicates things. And I think it will be easier for you, too, right?”

“Oh...right, yeah, maybe so! Okay, I’ll do that...!”

A mysterious light enveloped her body. I don’t know exactly what was going on, but it likely involved undoing her Unique Star-driven copy skill and returning to her original appearance. The silhouette visible through the light grew shorter. A few seconds later, we were greeted by Tsumugi Shiina in a gothic dress.

“Hee-hee! Well? This is what I *really* look like!”

“What do I think...?” Saionji echoed dryly. “I already knew what you looked like. I saw the MTCG footage.”

“Huh?! Well, you could at least *pretend* to be surprised! I’m revealing my true form and everything!”

Shiina puffed out her cheeks, held her chest high, and threw her hood back to show off her heterochromatic eyes. However, just like Saionji said, Shiina had already revealed herself during MTCG, so being shocked and surprised at this point would be something of a tall order.

I sighed. “Come on, Shiina. Quit being silly. Also, isn’t that outfit a little too big on you?”

“I-it’s *fine*! It looks cooler this way! Quit raining on my parade! We’ve already had a bunch of *fun* together.”

“A bunch of *what*...?”

*Oh crap...*

Shiina’s choice of wording made Saionji glare at me. Her eyes felt like a gust of arctic wind. Internally, I began sweating like a waterfall...but I didn’t allow that to show. Instead, I tried to change the subject.

“Oh, that doesn’t matter. Anyway, I think this is the first time we’ve seen each other in the Game, Shiina. Thanks for that eye-opening ambush earlier.”

“Aww, quit bragging... I’ve decided that I’m not gonna lose today, no matter what. I’ll beat you and the Empress, and then I’ll be the ruler of darkness!” Shiina’s eyes shone as she made that statement.

Saionji and I exchanged glances, and then I took a step forward. This was it. I had to invite her to my Game. The strategy we had come up with, the off-the-board tactics...none of it would be worth anything unless Shiina agreed.

“All right, don’t get too excited. Listen, Shiina, let’s go over things really quick.”

“Huh? You mean in ASTRAL?”

“Yeah. Today’s the final day of ASTRAL, which is part of the May Interschool Competition. There are only three teams still playing—Eimei, Ohga, and Seijo.”

“Uh-huh! And the Seijo School, me, has the most territory! My Spells, my votes...they’re all way above yours!”

“True. If this keeps up, you’re pretty much guaranteed to win,” I said.

“Mm? Oh no, not at all. I’m not *pretty much* guaranteed. I *am* guaranteed!” Shiina frowned at me a bit. I guess she didn’t like how I phrased it. “I don’t have to do anything to win. I tried to ambush you to look cool as I won, but that wasn’t even necessary. If I just sit here and wait for today to end, I’ll win because I have the most territory... Heh-heh! You understand, right?”

“Of course I do,” I replied. “ASTRAL’s a battle for territory, so whoever has the most will obviously come out on top. But are you sure *you* haven’t forgotten something, Shiina?”

I tried to sound profound as I spoke. Shiina stared at me like she had no idea what I was talking about. I grinned back at her, maintaining my bold front.

“Last week, before the May Interschool Competition began, you tried to pick a fight with Saionji here. You went on ITube and declared war on her.”

“Y-yeah...”

“Don’t tell me you forgot the nature of the Game you challenged her to. Because I don’t think it was anything as simple as deciding a winner by whoever placed higher in ASTRAL. What was the exact contest you said you’d have with Saionji?”

“Um, whoever beats you first is the winner...? Oh...”

Shiina’s eyes opened wide when she realized what that meant. I took a quiet step forward, coming in for the kill.

“That’s right. You were playing a Game to see who could defeat me first. Strictly speaking, your place in the ASTRAL rankings doesn’t matter at all. Whether you’re in first place or last, if you beat me, you win. Don’t forget, you said that if no one beats me, I’d be the sole winner and I could decide what to do with you.”

“Huh?! I—I— Did I say that? I...think I did?!”

Shiina began to babble, in a clear state of panic. She’d definitely said that. I



knew because I'd checked the video yesterday. Shiina had never discussed what would happen if I "defeated" myself, as I had a couple days back, so that hadn't hurt me at all.

"Yes, in your struggle for the title of Empress, I'll win if no one proves capable of beating me. All I need to do is escape. ASTRAL is a different story, of course, but for our little contest, I don't need to beat you to be victorious."

"B-but... Then I just won't let you escape! I'll beat you as hard as I can, and it'll all be good!"

"That might be more difficult than you think. To tell you the truth, pretty much my whole hand's nothing but Defense Walls and Stealth cards. Even if you attack me the whole rest of the day, I'm pretty confident I can hold out."

"That's not fair!"

"What? Of course it is." I shut down Shiina's childlike whining and pressed my advantage. "As long as I keep running, you'll never triumph against Saionji. However, with the field in its current state, I have no hope of winning ASTRAL. And the same goes for Saionji."

"That's right." Saionji nodded, arms loosely folded in front of her. "As the real Sarasa Saionji, I'm not handing over my identity as the Empress. I'd be happy to let Shinohara run away all day, but ASTRAL is just as important to me as the side bet between the three of us. If you win ASTRAL, Ohga won't finish in the top five, and I refuse to let that happen. I'm the only one left representing my school, after all."

Saionji pointed her powerful ruby eyes at Shiina. This was our story. Saionji and I couldn't afford to lose to this faker. That was why, despite being enemies, we had to join together.

"So, Shiina...would you like to play a Game with us?" I offered.

"...What?"

"A Game. The three of us will play a Game, one totally separate from ASTRAL. You can see how things are, right? At this rate, you'll probably win ASTRAL, but you'll lose the side bet. On the other hand, I'm pretty sure I can protect Saionji's Empress title, but I definitely can't win ASTRAL. Do you see? If things continue

like this, we'll all lose. I don't think anyone wants to see that."



“I...! No, I don’t...”

“Right? We need to settle this right here, right now. I just sent the rules of my Game to your device. It’s a three-player board game that connects to the ASTRAL world. Beat me, and you win in ASTRAL and get your victory against Saionji. You’ll start with a big advantage, but we’ll have a chance for a comeback.”

“Heh-heh! How nice and easy to understand. I like the broad outlines of this plan, at least,” Saionji remarked.

“Mm... Hmmmmmm...” Shiina hugged her stuffed Cerberus tightly as she looked into the air, wavering. This wasn’t a strategically sound offer to accept. However, she had to if she wanted to beat Saionji in their side bet. Otherwise, I was all but guaranteed to survive to the end of ASTRAL.

Still, my proposal was a bit of a stretch. Thankfully, I had another weapon at my disposal.

“Shiina...if you’re going to refuse, make sure it’s what you want. I’m inviting you to the exact sort of Game you’ve wanted to play for so long. There will be real stars on the line and you’ll be up against a genius Six Star and the all-powerful Seven Star. If you let this chance go, you may never get another one your whole life.”

“You’re...you’re *right!*”

Shiina’s eyes shot open. This was the biggest reaction I’d gotten from her. After learning more about her last night, I was confident this argument would convince her.

Shiina smiled while spreading the cape of her robe like a pair of wings. It looked like she was enjoying every moment of this.

“All right. You’re on. Let’s settle it all with a Game, then!”

She accepted. This was a momentous shift. Shiina had agreed to forfeit her massive advantage and meet us on a much more even playing field.

*Okay! We’ve made it this far,* I thought while watching Shiina. We’d made it to the Game within a Game against Tsumugi Shiina, the Chameleon. This was

my only shot at winning, a new challenge I'd forcibly shoved into ASTRAL. Kurahashi was bound to interfere as much as he could, but I'd accounted for that. I knew I'd claim victory in this Game and in the behind-the-scenes negotiation.

*Bring it on, Kurahashi. Because this is much more than just a Game... It's an off-the-board war.*

I smiled boldly at the crafty devil undoubtedly watching from somewhere.

#

## **“CROSSBOARD”**

### **MAY INTERSCHOOL COMPETITION AUXILIARY GAME RULES**

Crossboard is a board game within the virtual world of ASTRAL. It takes place on a one-hundred-hex board, a compressed version of the ASTRAL field map, and the hexes are automatically colored at the start of play to match the current territory sizes in ASTRAL. If hexes in Crossboard change color, this will also be reflected in the ASTRAL field map.

The number of hexes of a player's color represent their force. Lose all of them, and that player will lose. In addition, each player has a single hex called their “core base.” A player that loses their core base to another loses automatically, no matter the size of their territory.

Crossboard is played in turns. During each turn, a player can perform a main action and a subaction, in that order, before the next player takes their turn.

**Main actions:** Players select one of two types of flags and places it on the board. Flags can only be placed on squares adjacent to that player's territory.

- **Control Flag:** Immediately turns the hex the flag is on to that player's color.
- **Infect Flag:** Turns the six hexes around the flag to that player's color at the start of that player's next turn.

**Subactions: Players select one of the following three actions to execute.**

- **Intel:** Tells the player whether a selected hex in an opponent's territory is their core base.
- **Move:** Lets the player move their team's core base up to two hexes away from its current position.
- **Jamming:** Blocks any opponent's attempt at using Intel on the player for one turn.

**Notes: Since Crossboard is linked to ASTRAL, actions can be affected by a player's job. Intel works better for Commanders, etc. All Abilities active during ASTRAL gameplay are available in this Game as well.**

Crossboard began with Tsumugi Shiina taking the first turn.

"Hmm..."

After stepping onto the AR board that appeared once the Game began, Shiina carefully examined the map before her. She looked deadly serious. Maybe she was going over the rules in her head.

If I could do the same quickly, Crossboard was a territory-taking Game similar to Go or Othello. Players took turns placing flags with their team's color on them, using their effects to claim territory from other players. You could say it was a vast simplification of ASTRAL, with the combat aspects removed. The most unusual aspect was how it linked to ASTRAL. Jobs and Abilities carried over, and the territories of all the teams were reflected on the Crossboard field. This Game definitely wasn't starting with competitors evenly matched. Territory percentages factored into the initial setup, so out of the hundred hexes on the board, Eimei had three, Ohga had twelve, and the remaining eighty-five were all Seijo's.

"...Okay, I'm ready!"

Saionji and I watched carefully as Shiina picked up a black flag representing Seijo School. It was a Control Flag, which instantly turned the hex it was on to her color.

"The way things stand, I don't really need to think too hard, huh? I'm not

gonna go easy on you!”

Shiina cheerfully smiled as she placed the flag on one of the Eimei squares. The formerly vivid shade of green gave way to an inky blackness.

“Not your core base, huh? Too bad,” Shiina said.

“I wouldn’t let this end before I even got a turn,” I replied. “Okay, that was your main action. Now for your subaction. Pick one of the three.”

“Oh, right! Hmm, what to do...”

Shiina’s innocent eyes shone as she read over the Game rules again. Ultimately, she picked Intel. This subaction told a player whether a selected hex was a core base—the heart of the team, something that would cost them the match if they lost it. However, when a Commander executed this action, it let them examine a broader number of spaces. And since Shiina functionally had *all* jobs, that applied to her.

“I’ll put this on the Empress’s area... Oh, no dice, huh? Okay, it’s your turn now!”

The moment her turn ended, Shiina spun around to face me. Eimei was down to just two hexes. My setup ensured that I didn’t have my core base taken in the first turn, but that wasn’t much comfort right now. I mean, I only had two hexes, and the location of my core base didn’t really matter, because Saionji and Shiina could each take a hex from me on their next turns, and I’d be out of the Game. Using a Control Flag to keep three hexes on my side was the obvious move.

““Huh...?””

Saionji and Shiina both gasped when they saw the flag in my hand. I couldn’t blame them. After all, I hadn’t chosen a Control Flag. I had gone for an Infect Flag. It would let me take six hexes at once, but it didn’t take effect until the start of my next turn. I guess you could call it the patient choice.

“Wait, what?! Have you lost your mind?! You’re not expanding your territory now? Are you trying to let me win like a big brother would or something? Are you messing with me?!” Shiina exclaimed.

“Of course not. I’m not your big brother,” I replied.

“B-but look at the board! That’s all the proof you need! My evil, black, corroded brain cells say so!”

“If that’s what your brain’s like, you should see a doctor... There we go.”

I kept a joking tone with Shiina as I tapped *Predict Behavior* on my device, activating an Ability that worked like the green Unique Star. This was totally a cheat Ability, available only three times per Game, and I was going to use my final charge to predict what Shiina would do—read her thoughts, in other words.

“...Got it.”

Then I placed my Infect Flag on a hex adjacent to Eimei’s territory, right next to where Shiina had placed her Control Flag. I reached out farther and pointed at a location around five hexes away.

“That one’s your core base, right?” I asked.

“! H-how did you know?! Don’t tell me *you’re* versed in arcane magic from ancient times to—”

“No. It’s just an Ability. You know, like the United Force one you used to mess up ASTRAL?”

“Mmmh...!”

Shiina squeezed Lloyd hard as she fumed. My mentioning her unfair United Force Ability left her with little room for rebuttal, so she offered no complaint.

“For my subaction, I’ll use Jamming. For one turn, you can’t use Intel on my territory...and that’s the end of my turn.”

While I explained my moves breezily, Saionji looked at me like she had something to say. I’m sure she did, too. Whether I knew where Seijo’s core base was or not, I still only had two hexes. At this rate, I wouldn’t see another turn.

“...That settles it, then,” Saionji stated. It nearly sounded like a declaration of victory, but it was actually the opposite. She glared at me with a touch of dissatisfaction. Her features tensed with the frustration of defeat, and she sighed.



“...?” Shiina wasn’t sure what to make of this. “Um...what do you mean?”

“Don’t you see? Shinohara’s just guaranteed that neither of us can attack him.”

“Huh? Why not?”

“Consider it from my perspective. Eimei has two hexes left, but I don’t know which one’s his core base. It’ll be Seijo’s chance to place a flag when my turn ends. Will you be gutsy enough to use a Control Flag on one of his hexes?”

“...Oh.” Shiina stiffened at Saionji’s question, but after a bit she relaxed. Her eyes opened wide. “I can’t place one, can I? It’s true. Wow, I really can’t!”

She was right. I didn’t have much territory at all, but that gave me a kind of unique advantage.

“Crossboard’s a real battle royale.” I waited for Saionji and Shiina to look at me before I calmly continued. “A huge, chaotic battle between three groups. The Empress title’s on the line, too. Both of you have reason to defeat me. It’s not about just getting me out of the Game, either. Being the one to strike the final blow against me and Eimei is important. Both of you need the decisive move, but Crossboard is turn based. As long as I keep myself in this position, if one of you claims one of my hexes and it isn’t my base...the other is guaranteed to win.”

“Oh, man...”

Shiina’s mouth opened and closed a few times. I was glad that I’d spent the past few days observing her habits. As a player, Tsumugi Shiina was a classic example of someone who liked to go all out from the start. She didn’t take a sluggish pace, preferring to dive in guns blazing. Knowing that made her easy to deal with.

“Basically...neither of you can attack me anymore. In fact, you have to protect me to make sure the other player doesn’t take all my territory.”

“...W-was this your goal all along?!” Shiina shouted.

“Of course. I’m the one who adjusted the Crossboard rules and all.”

That wasn’t the only trick I’d inserted, but this was indeed part of the plan.

“Hmm. I don’t think this is a problem for me at all.” After keeping silent for a while, Saionji shook her head and offered her opinion. She chose an Infect Flag and placed it on a hex that directly threatened Shiina’s core base instead of mine.

“For my subaction, I’ll go for Jamming. Now you’ll need to attack the Eimei School’s territory first.”

“*Grrrh...*” Shiina let out a frustrated growl. She was under attack from both sides, but Saionji and I had used Infect Flags, so she still had a supreme advantage.

“Well, what now...? I could place an Infect Flag in Shinohara’s territory, but he’ll have a lot more hexes after my turn ends... Oh, but both of you picked Jamming, so Intel won’t work at all, either... Hmm...”

Shiina’s face contorted a bit, yet she looked like she was having the time of her life. She loved games, I suppose, enjoying them whether she dominated or not. She wasn’t the type to do anything to win.

*Maybe I should try pushing my luck and getting a bit more aggressive against her territory.*

“...Huh?” Saionji looked uncharacteristically concerned about something. It was just a little interjection, but it summed up the questions and concerns of everyone on the board. “What’s going on...? Why am I losing territory?”

She was right. Shiina hadn’t chosen a flag yet, but the board was changing. Two of the red hexes in Ohga School’s territory had just been turned black, the color for Seijo School.

No one was more surprised about this than Tsumugi.

“Wh-whaaaa?! Whoa! What’s this all about?! The colors just changed by themselves?!”

“It wasn’t because of an Ability you used? Maybe Multiply or something?” Saionji suggested.

“One of my Abilities? Hmm, you think so? Maybe... Ah! Maybe my dark force is so powerful, it’s converting the whole map to the dark side?!”

“...Sure. Let’s go with that.” Saionji let Shiina keep her fantasy and looked down at the board. Shiina definitely hadn’t taken any actions this turn, yet her territory had grown.

Struck by a hunch about the answer, I decided to check ITube on my device. The Crossboard Game was being broadcast on Libra’s official channel, while a second stream showed ASTRAL.

*What’s going on?!*

I did my best to keep from shouting as much aloud. Players who should have been eliminated from ASTRAL were running around. Kugasaki, Kururugi, even Yuikawa was there. And they all looked...pixelated.

*They must be inferior copies or something... Huh.*

I watched as they claimed Ohga School hexes for Seijo on the ASTRAL map. More territory for Seijo School in that Game meant more in Crossboard, too.

“This must be the same gimmick you use as the Chameleon,” I said to Shiina.

“Huh? You think so?”

“Yeah. You use that Unique Star effect to recreate the looks of other players, and this is no different. I guess they appear rougher because there’s a bunch of them at the same time, but since they can’t run into their real counterparts in ASTRAL, it doesn’t matter. The clones are forcibly expanding your land.”

“Ohh! I get it! I’m a super genius!”

Shiina held her head high. This was pretty obviously the work of Mikado Kurahashi. Copies of eliminated players were helping Shiina win. He wasn’t even trying to hide his cheating anymore.

“Okay! Now I really *can* win this! I’ll just do this...and this!”

Shiina, emboldened by the sudden assistance, started attacking Saionji’s territory. She selected an Infect Flag and placed it on a red hex.

I was still in the toughest spot, of course. Saionji still had ten hexes, whereas I had only two. I didn’t know how the copies were receiving orders, but if someone told them to take Eimei School spots in ASTRAL, and I lost my hexes in Crossboard, I was done for.

“...You okay, Shinohara? It’s your turn,” Saionji said quietly while I stared at the ground. No worry came through in her tone, but I knew she was sweating on the inside. Normally she’d would be trying to rile me up right about now.

*Don’t worry, Saionji.*

I looked into her ruby eyes and gave her a quick little smile. Without bothering to reach for a flag, I confidently explained matters to her.

“The two Games are linked. Things that happen in Crossboard are reflected in ASTRAL and vice versa. Earn more territory in ASTRAL, and you will in Crossboard. I didn’t expect him to resort to those weird player copies, but given the situation, it’s not surprising he’d try to abuse it.”

“Then why did you create that rule at all?” Saionji questioned.

“Why do you think? It offers a ton of return for very little risk.”

I looked back to the projected screen. It was nearly time. A huge change was going to happen in just a few moments. That wasn’t a desperate prayer for divine intervention, just the knowledge of a result already set in stone.

“After all...I’ve got the best teammates out there.”

A chunk of hexes near the middle of the board turned a vibrant green. Saionji and Shiina looked astonished as a girl with short blond hair defeated the player copy.

b

“To the right, Nanase. Get a little lower. Attack coming in three seconds. He’ll be frozen after firing. Get him.”

*“Stop with all the orders!”*

Back in the Libra base in the Shiki Island Grand Hotel basement, surrounded by a large number of Libra members running the final stages of this ASTRAL Game, Shinji Enomoto was barking a barrage of orders into his headset.

Nanase Asamiya was on the huge monitor in front of him. When Kirigaya had been about to do her in with Dual Wield, Enomoto—who saw the attack coming—had used Lightning Rod to point both of those attacks at himself. Then, through a well-timed casting of Stealth to coincide with the player-dead visual

effect, he'd made it look like she had been eliminated. Libra had manipulated the data and logs to reflect that. And now the tactic was paying off.

*I must hand it to Shinohara. Working this into the play at the last minute...*

The face of his Commander crossed Enomoto's mind. Shinohara really was that strong. It was Enomoto who had stepped up to protect Nanase, but he hadn't given any thought at the time to how to use her presence. Shinohara, on the other hand, had immediately built a path to a comeback.

*He truly is worthy of respect. I wish he'd be a bit more polite with me, though...*

Enomoto smiled a little while someone panted restlessly.

*"Haah...haah...oof!"*

"Ugh. Do you think you have time to rest, Nanase? There are still enemies out there. On your left in three seconds."

*"Y-you could at least give me a moment to catch my breath! ...Yah!"*

Despite her complaining, Nanase fended off attacks from the player copies quite energetically. The Libra members couldn't help but gawk at this duo in action. Enomoto's gifts for intelligence gathering and Nanase's amazing reflexes and physical gifts were astounding. The Six Star partnership from Eimei School was crushing all the enemies in its way.

"Pretty good moves, Nanase. But they'll be coming from both directions next. Use your pivot leg to jump, roll forward to dodge, then Gunfire to your right. Bring up a Defense Wall to block the follow-up from your left as you fire a barrage of Magic Missiles."

*"I can't do all of that, Shinji! Hah... Oop! Hohh! ...Okay, they're down!"*

"See? I told you, Nanase. Just quit complaining and follow my instructions."

*"Wh-why are you so damn annoying all the time, Shinji?!"*

"Why? I hardly think I need to answer that."

*"What? I mean, obviously it's because you're perfectly fine with using and abusing m—"*

“Because I think you’re about the only person in the world who can execute my orders with total accuracy.”

“...?!”

Thrown by Enomoto’s remark, Nanase gasped silently. Her cheeks turned a bit red, and her ears similarly flushed. She looked at Enomoto through the camera.

*“Dumbass... You make it sound like I actually trust you or something.”*

“...You don’t? That’s kind of a disappointment...”

*“S-stop sounding all sad, you idiot!”*

Nanase griped at Enomoto, who brought a hand to his forehead. Then she looked away.

*“I’ll only say this one time,”* she muttered. *“If I didn’t trust you...I’d never let you watch my back.”*

This was Nanase Asamiya’s hot-and-cold personality at its finest, and it got the viewers liking en masse. This moment would later become the stuff of legend, earning untold numbers of views...and she meant every word of it.

As for Enomoto...

“Oh, really...? I have a question, Nanase. Am I really watching your back if I’m sitting here, giving you orders from a safe location? It seems like something of a fallacy to m—”

*“Shut up! Seriously, just shut up, you moron!”* Nanase took out another player copy even as she shouted, then returned to capturing hexes.

b b

*“Tsk... You and your stupid damn tricks...”*

In a dim room somewhere in the Shiki Island Grand Hotel, Mikado Kurahashi cursed under his breath at his monitor. This had caught him by surprise. He’d had no idea there was still another survivor. It hadn’t been in the data yesterday, meaning Libra had sided with Hiroto Shinohara.

Turning his attention back to Crossboard, he could tell that the Chameleon was starting to struggle. The player copies Kurahashi had inserted into the

Game had been swiftly crushed. Eimei presently had the momentum, which infuriated the man to no end. The Chameleon was still ahead by nearly sixty hexes, but this wasn't a welcome trend at all. It was all the fault of that kid, Tsumugi Shiina. Kurahashi had scouted her as a potential rare talent, but she was so foolish it wasn't even funny. She was practically useless.

"Nanase Asamiya, the Golden Demon... Copies could never beat a Six Star like her. I don't have any pieces left to work with... Was this Hiroto Shinohara's intention?"

Kurahashi's lips curled into a smile. He understood that he and his opponent were thinking the same way. If all remaining players were busy with Crossboard, another player in ASTRAL would be free to do whatever they wanted. Hiroto Shinohara had left a real player in the Game, expecting Kurahashi might do something.

"Too bad it's child's play for me to create fake wild cards."

He practically spit the words. The wild card was the reward for beating the hardest route in MTCG. It was a ticket back to ASTRAL, and Mikado Kurahashi had made one himself. He'd given it to Toya Kirigaya, his most useful servant. The Demigod Dictator was undoubtedly lurking somewhere on the map, waiting for Kurahashi's instructions.

"Is that the best you can do, Shinohara?" Kurahashi said with a sneer. "Everything you try is just so half-assed."

He chuckled to himself. Then he opened a channel with Toya Kirigaya's device, relishing every moment.

"It's time, Toya. Make them understand just how strong we are!"

"Nah, that's an impossible order, I'm afraid."

"Wha...?!?!"

The reply hadn't come through his headphones.

The voice had come from within the room. Kurahashi felt like everything was falling away around him. This made no sense at all. He couldn't understand.

"Why...? Why the hell are you *here*, Toya?!"

Toya Kirigaya, Kurahashi's last resort, had just opened the door and let himself in. He should have been in ASTRAL but was here instead, in a well-worn school uniform. He looked down at Kurahashi.

"Why? I dunno. Nobody said I couldn't come by."

"S-stop screwing around with me! Toya Kirigaya... Why aren't you in ASTRAL?!"

"Huh? Why would I be? I ain't stupid enough to join a Game I know I can't win."

"Wha...? You know you can't win? No! With the wild card I gave you, you—"

"Wild card? Oh, *that* piece of trash?"

"Tr..."

Kirigaya brushed off all of Kurahashi's rage, standing casually with his hands stuffed in his pockets.

"Yeah. It's trash. Completely destroyed, inside and out. If I used it, it would've wrecked my whole device. Guess there was some pretty nasty copy protection on the real wild card program."

"Impossible. There's no way those Libra fools could craft something like that—"

"Ahh, I'm sure Shinohara gave them a hint or two. Not long after I realized the copy you gave me was no good, the Little Devil of Eimei came over to tease me about it. I was still gonna try to get back into the Game, but after dealing with her, I lost all inspiration."

Toya shrugged, not very enthused about admitting this.

"She walked right up to me, so the Eimei team definitely knows all about your plan. They know about your fake wild card and that you would try to get me back into ASTRAL. Hiroto Shinohara figured it all out. So what's the point? We can't recover from this unless we catch them by surprise, and that's impossible now."

"...!"



“Hiroto Shinohara’s the first real Eight Star candidate we’ve seen in history... and he’s real interesting to watch. Forcing a useless Ability on me with Replace was impressive. I was kind of doubtful about that guy at first, but now I know he’s got the talent to entertain me.”

“What the hell are you— No, enough arguing. I can hack into the system to get you back into ASTRAL right now. Lend me a hand, Toya. Don’t forget, you work for me!”

“Work? For you? Hya-hoo! Hilarious!” Toya laughed as he strode up to Kurahashi. He was so close to the man’s face, he almost saw the panic in his eyes. Grinning, Toya said, “Y’know, all I care about is reaching new heights. You were just a way for me to climb another step. I don’t have any interest or concern for you. You’re worthless to me.”

“...!”

“You lose this time, Mikado Kurahashi. That’s two failures now, which means you’re done for good. Noa Akizuki last time and Tsumugi Shiina this time—in a mobile game, they’d both be SS-level cards, y’know. You just didn’t know how to use them. You can’t work the way Hiroto Shinohara does. But, hey, don’t worry. I’ll take over your position for you. Enjoy it while it lasts, okay?”

With one final sneer, Toya turned around, having lost all interest in this discussion.

Kurahashi watched his former servant leave. “...Damn it! *Damn* it! These stupid kids!!” He was close to falling into despair, yet turned back to his computer anyway, a light shining in his eyes.

#

Crossboard, the May Interschool Competition Game within a Game, was now on its fifth turn.

Things had changed dramatically because of what Kurahashi and I had been doing. Seijo School’s black territory consisted of thirty-five hexes, while Eimei’s green area contained thirty-seven. Ohga School wasn’t involved in our antics over in ASTRAL, but some clever use of Abilities had given it twenty-eight hexes.

*Saionji’s definitely the best player today. She’s kept up without using any*

*cheats...*

The Empress was putting her full talents on display. I turned to Shiina. She was quite a different story, staring at the board and humming to herself. My green hexes quickly ate away hers, which clearly stressed her out.

“Ooooh! You’re just too good at this!”

“Well, I can’t afford to lose,” I said with a grin. “This isn’t a normal Game.”

Toya Kirigaya still hadn’t reappeared in ASTRAL, meaning Akizuki had likely come through for me. Seijo School wouldn’t be getting any reinforcements.

*So, assuming nothing else happens...*

Naturally, that’s when something *did* happen.

“...Oh?” Shiina said, still hugging her Cerberus plushie. “Mm?” Her eyebrows rose as she froze in an unnatural position. “I think...something’s wrong.”

“Wrong? Wrong how?” I asked.

“Um, it’s like I can’t move... I can’t control my— Yow!”

Despite her words, Shiina suddenly rushed for the floor. She seemingly threw Lloyd away and threw out her right hand to catch herself. And when her palm touched the ground...

“...?!”

...the hexes around her turned black instantly. Shiina wasn’t holding a flag. A simple tap of her hand claimed a huge swathe of territory. Saionji’s area and mine were being devoured.

Shiina’s eyes went wide at this inexplicable event. “Huh...? Whoa, what’s up with this?! Anything I touch becomes my territory!”

“Why do you sound so surprised? It’s pretty obvious that’s what’s happening,” Saionji replied.

“Y-yeah, but I didn’t do anything! Whoa, whoa, whoa?!”

Before Shiina could explain further, she thrust out her hand like someone was puppeteering her. Everything she touched turned black. I suppose it could be called God Hand, a cheat Ability that allowed the user to steal territory

regardless of anything else going on. From what I could tell, this wasn't Shiina's doing at all.

*Yeah, Shiina's the type who just enjoys playing Games. This has to be Mikado Kurahashi in action. He's tapping into the Chameleon's controls to take over her body.*

"Wah! Hey! Ouch!"

Shiina forcibly expanded her territory while Saionji and I watched helplessly. The advantage I'd won over the past five turns was gone in an instant, and now the board was a somber black again. Just like at the start of the Game, I could count my hexes on a single hand, and the same went for Saionji. We were back on the ropes.

"Man... This guy just does *not* know when to quit." It was Saionji who cut through this state of despair with a sigh. With an elegant motion, she stepped behind Shiina and held her arms back to keep her from moving.

"An Ability that lets you conquer any hex you touch is quite powerful. However, it's worthless the moment you're restrained. Cheat all you want, but put a little thought into it at least," she chided.

"It—it wasn't me!" Shiina insisted. "My genius lets me do much more amazing things!"

"Oh, I know. I was talking to a certain shameless man who's listening in behind you." Saionji cast a look at me, her red hair flowing. "Okay, Shinohara. I've done my best to guess at your plan and take advantage where I could. You were waiting for this, right?"

"Man, they definitely call you the Empress for a good reason." I chuckled a bit at those crafty ruby eyes. Saionji was right, I had nothing to complain about. My aim had been to irritate Kurahashi enough that he would do this sort of thing. Now that he was controlling Shiina's avatar directly, everything was in place.

"Launching the Ability Line Trace!"

With that, I activated my final Ability, one I'd been saving since the beginning. It traced non-Game interference aimed at another player's device, interrupting it and taking it over. My actual rank was low enough that normally there'd be a

bunch of limits placed on Line Trace, but all of those had been replaced with the stipulation that I could only use a full-powered Line Trace on the final day.

Now that the Ability was working...

“Hey, Kurahashi. Can you hear me?”

...I grinned as I spoke to the real mastermind who’d interfered with ASTRAL.

b b b

*“Hey, Kurahashi. Can you hear me?”*

Mikado Kurahashi sat back in his chair in the dimly lit room, stupefied. He saw his sworn enemy’s goading smile on the screen. He looked sure of his victory and ready to strike the final blow. Perhaps he deserved to act so confident. He’d managed to shut down Kurahashi’s last-ditch effort. There was nothing Kurahashi could do.

*“I’ve beaten you completely this time. You won’t be getting away like you did during the Fourth Ward Challenge. I’ll make sure you atone for everything you did.”*

Hiroto Shinohara kept grinning.

*Not yet... I’m not giving up yet.*

Kurahashi reached out, careful not to make any noise that might betray his intent. He couldn’t afford to lose. Toya Kirigaya had been right when he’d stated that this was Kurahashi’s last chance. Failure now meant he’d be cut from the upper echelons of the Academy for good. He’d never be able to set foot on this island again. He’d be banished forever.

*Damn it... I’m an elite! How was I bested by children?!*

He gritted his teeth. All he needed was a single moment. If he could escape the Empress’s grip for a second, he could wipe Ohga School’s territory off the board. Then everything would be fine.

*No matter how smart Hiroto Shinohara is, he can’t be hiding any more tricks. I can still win... ASTRAL is mine, Shinohara!!*

Kurahashi’s lips curled upward, like his excitement was reaching the breaking point. Then, on his monitor screen, Shinohara made a face like he had just

remembered something.

*“Oh, by the way... That Ability I used just used, Line Trace, does more than force open a communication channel. It leads me to where you’re hiding.”*

“What’s that matter to you? You’re in ASTRAL.”

*“Ohhh, finally feel like talking, Kurahashi? Well, let me clue you in, then. There are four other players on the Eimei School team. I think you know what two of them are doing. Where do you think the other two are?”*

Kurahashi thought over Shinohara’s obviously leading question. However, he had very little time to.

“...?!”

The door burst open, and a figure charged in. Her monochromatic maid outfit billowed with her movements, and her silvery hair danced like a light snow flurry.

What was her name again?

“I am Shirayuki Himeji, and I apologize for interrupting your scheming.”

“Oh. You. I know you. You’re Hiroto Shinohara’s servant.”

“Yes. I’ve been looking all over for you, and now I’ve finally found your hiding place. My master told me there’s a new VR game here that lets someone control the Chameleon. Do you think I might try it for a while?”

“...Ha. So you, a girl, came in here all by yourself? You must think I’m the biggest pushover in the world.” Kurahashi laughed mockingly at her. The girl, meanwhile, only raised an eyebrow.

“By myself? Of course not. I am not at all confident when it comes to dealing with men. Speaking to you gives me goosebumps, in fact. There’s no way I’d come here alone.”

“So what are you—??”

Before he could finish, Shirayuki Himeji removed the white glove from her right hand and snapped her fingers once. A large number of people, led by Noa Akizuki, stormed into the room. It was the entire player base of ASTRAL.

“Eh-heh-heh! I brought along a whole bunch of friends! ♡”

Thirty students crowded the place. There was no way Kurahashi could fight through a crowd that large. And as his face paled, Shirayuki Himeji calmly addressed him, her voice cold as ice.

“So...will you come quietly?”

###

Once Himeji and the others took over Kurahashi’s hiding place, everything changed in the blink of an eye.

Previously, Kurahashi had been piloting the Chameleon, but now Himeji was in control, and she used that God Hand cheat Ability to change all the hexes to Eimei green. This was exactly how I’d hoped things would end. I didn’t know how Shiina’s Abilities operated, but my aim had been to force Kurahashi out of hiding and rob him of any possible way to win. Despite it being the clear leader for so long, Seijo School’s hexes were gone. The Game of Crossboard ended with a loss for Tsumugi Shiina.

“...”

The Game disappeared, and we were thrown back into ASTRAL. The field looked vastly different than it had a few hours ago. Since the results of Crossboard were reflected here, Eimei currently held 9,220 hexes. Seijo had zero. We never managed to deal the Chameleon any LP damage, but she didn’t have a single base remaining.

In other words, she was out. Seijo School was no longer in ASTRAL.

As for Tsumugi Shiina herself, she stood before me, doe-eyed.

“So it’s over now? It’s all over?” Her tone made it obvious she was struggling to accept this as real.

“Yeah.” I nodded to her. “You lost, Shiina. No matter how much LP you have, if your territory disappears, you’re out of ASTRAL... You’re gonna have to give up. You played against the wrong opponents this time.”

“Ohh... Yeah. Yeah, I guess so. You and the Empress were both really good... I lost ASTRAL. That’s fine, but...”

Shiina lifted her head, her differently colored eyes wavering nervously. She squeezed Lloyd hard against her chest.

“Hey,” she began nervously. “Did...did I do something bad? I had a lot of fun... but was that wrong of me?”

Her face scrunched as she worked to choose her words carefully. She looked ready to cry. I think Kurahashi had left her in the dark about a lot of things. I’m sure she didn’t think that posing as other players was cheating. She didn’t seem to realize how close she had come to destroying ASTRAL, either. The raucous end of Crossboard must have opened her eyes. Now she understood, at least in part, what she’d done.

*She’s not entirely blameless in this, but... Hmm. Tough call.*

Kurahashi was clearly the main perpetrator, but Shiina had enacted most of his plan, so it was hard to call her innocent. I didn’t think she’d consider herself guiltless, either.

*“Huh? ...Hwah? Wh-what the heck?!”*

I decided to contact Libra with my device. Two Games had ended at once, so I’m sure the stream commentators had their hands full. Suzuran Kazami was quick to answer anyway. Either I was lucky enough to catch her between shifts, or the producers had kindly let her take a break.

This conversation wouldn’t get broadcast on ITube at all. Confident in that knowledge, I didn’t bother keeping my voice down.

“It’s me, Shinohara. Sorry, Kazami, do you have a moment?”

*“Shinohara...?! O-of course, meow! More than a moment!”*

“Good, good. I wanted to ask what you, all of Libra, think of Tsumugi Shiina. How would you guys like to see this whole thing conclude?”

“...”

Kazami held her breath. I’d called specifically to ask that question. Libra was clearly the biggest victim here, so I thought Kazami was more qualified to answer Shiina’s question than I was.

After collecting her thoughts for a good minute or so, Kazami answered.

*“Um... Well, first, I’m not the one who decides what happens. We managed to keep ASTRAL going thanks to you, Shinohara, but the Chameleon kicked a lot of players out of the Game. She’s gonna have to deal with the Board of Regents.”*

*“Mmm... Yeah, I guess so.”*

*“But apart from that, let me ask you this, meow. Did Tsumugi have fun?”*

*“...What?”*

*“In ASTRAL. Was it a fun experience for Tsumugi? Or did she find it boring...?”*

“N-no, not at all. Of course not!” Shiina, still looking a little lost, shook her head briskly. “It was really, *really* fun! ASTRAL, MTCG, and Crossboard at the end... It was all just tons of fun! I’m just sad that it’s over. It was so much fun, I wish I could’ve kept playing forever!”

*“I see... Good, meow.”*

Kazami sounded vaguely embarrassed over the phone.

*“We all worked hard to run ASTRAL so everybody would enjoy it. It was pretty tough a lot of the time, but a villain as strong as the Chameleon got people super excited. I was a little worried that Tsumugi herself found the whole thing a chore or something. I’m very glad she doesn’t. That’s a ten-out-of-ten answer!”*

*“Ten out of ten! Wow, great...”*

Kazami meant every word of what she said. A relieved Shiina sat herself down on the ground. Then she looked up at me, wearing the sort of innocent smile I’d expect from a girl her age. I’d worried things would get complicated, yet we had reached an amicable conclusion.

*So that means Eimei wins ASTRAL and Crossboard. Wait...*

Amid this warm, fuzzy ending, I suddenly began to have some worrisome thoughts. If the Game had truly ended with Eimei School’s victory, then the ASTRAL AR world should’ve disappeared by now. Yet it was still very clearly active.

*Oh no...*

I hurriedly scanned the map of ASTRAL, gripped by a certain fear. For a



moment, I worried there was another hidden threat, but all I found was a tiny bit of red that signified Ohga School's territory.

"Hee-hee!" I froze as the red-haired girl nearby laughed a little. "I figured something like this would happen, so I kept Ohga's core base protected with a level-five Cancel Interference. I think I'll have to give up on winning ASTRAL, but I'm not going to let you end it with every hex on the board."

"...Eesh."

I frowned at Saionji's taunting. That rich girl was such a handful. She was sly, she was bothersome, and, worst of all, she looked cool while doing it.

We traded glances, trying to look as bold as possible while playing out the final minutes of ASTRAL.

### **May Interschool Competition: ASTRAL—Final Results**

**Largest Territory Taken:** Eimei School, Fourth Ward (9,533 hexes)

**Most Votes:** Eimei School, Fourth Ward (89.2%)

**Final Ranks:** Eimei *Ohga* Tsuyuri *Otowa* Shinra / *etc.*

(Seijo is excluded from the ranks due to having no qualified participants)

## LNN Special Feature:

### May Interschool Competition's – ASTRAL Final Results

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#### > 1st: Eimei School (Fourth Ward)

**Max bases: 114 Max hexes: 9,533 Surviving players: 2**

Eimei School, led by Hiroto Shinohara, is king of the ASTRAL mountain, meow! From conquering the MTCG in a flash, to forming an alliance to destroy that United Force, to that last Game against the Chameleon... everything was amazing! You won't hear any complaints from me about this masterful performance, meow!

#### > 2nd: Ohga School (Third Ward)

**Max bases: 24 Max hexes: 891 Surviving players: 1**

Ohga School took the second-place spot, meow. Sarasa Saionji's accurate direction and nimble play helped her team overcome the United Force, making it clear why her school's still ranked number one overall, meow!

#### > 3rd: Tsuyuri Girls' Institute (Sixteenth Ward)

**Max bases: 15 Max hexes: 477 Retired: Day 4 afternoon**

Senri Kururugi, Hell's Priestess herself, was as strong as ever! Her hard work only netted her a third-place finish this time, but here's hoping she leans more on the support of her whole team in the next event, meow!

#### > 4th: Otowa School (Eighth Ward)

**Max bases: 11 Max hexes: 384 Retired: Day 4 afternoon**

Led as always by the irascible Phoenix, Seiran Kugasaki, Otowa showed excellent teamwork in the first half—and taking advantage of the United Force at the end guaranteed them a place in the top five, meow!

#### > 5th: Shinra High School (Seventh Ward)

**Max bases: 3 Max hexes: 79 Retired: Day 4 afternoon**

Shinra, led by the Demigod Dictator, Toya Kirigaya, managed to squeak into fifth place. After joining the United Force early on, Toya Kirigaya kicked some major butt serving as its main source of firepower, meow!

## Epilogue

### After the Party

“Boy... I have to admit I didn’t think we had a chance of winning that.”

A week had passed since the May Interschool Competition, and the members of Team Eimei were back in the same student council meeting room where we’d first met each other. We were here to celebrate, kind of. The school was apparently going to hold some kind of ceremony later. That’s what the provost had told me anyway. However, a little celebration among the players didn’t seem like such a bad idea to me, so Akizuki had set things up for us.

Akizuki herself was to my left, trying to snuggle up with me.

“Eh-heh-heh... Pretending to drop out, joining hands with Libra, ruling the Game behind the scenes, then coming back big at the last minute! What can I say, Hiroto? What can I say? ♪ You even beat someone who was cheating so much! I might be even more in love with you now... ♡”

“You are too close, Ms. Akizuki. Please keep a prudent distance from my master.”

“Huhhh? I’m not even touching him yet.”

“Of course not. If I saw that you were, I would be forced to take more drastic measures.”

Himeji cranked up the iciness in her voice to keep Akizuki in check. However, she was unconsciously violating my personal space, too. I was cut off on both sides, worried that one of them would catch on to my accelerated heartbeat.

Whether she knew how I felt about it or not, Himeji thankfully changed the subject.

“Thanks to my master’s great performance, Eimei School won ASTRAL. The rest of the top-five list was rounded out by Ohga School from the Third Ward,

Tsuyuri Girls' Institute from the Sixteenth Ward, Otowa from the Eighth Ward, and Shinra from the Seventh, in that order. Suisei from the Second Ward and Amanezaka from the Seventeenth both scored high in last year's school rankings, but they lost stars after this event. We might have a chance at beating them this year."

"Agreed, and as the president of Eimei's student council, I need to offer my thanks as well. Shinohara, your impact on this year's May Interschool Competition was incalculable," Enomoto said.

"Ahh... It was nothing." I quietly shook my head at Enomoto, who was staring right at me. "I know I came up with the strategy, but it only worked because all of you worked together. It never would've happened without you all. There's no need to cheer for me alone."

Enomoto nodded. "Mmm. I understand. I take back my thanks, then."

"You're way too quick to retract your praise, Enomoto," I said.

"You're still not calling me *Mr.* Enomoto."

He smiled a bit as he joked with me. I hadn't been sure how a team event would go at first, but somehow I'd made it through without anyone learning my secrets. Enomoto still bickered with Asamiya beside him. I guess I was used to it now because it just seemed like pleasant background noise.

Asamiya paused to lean over toward me.

"Hey, Shino, did you hear how they'll distribute the stars? *We're* not getting any, of course, but one player had a Unique Star, right?"

"Oh, right. That." I lightly nodded at Asamiya.

Team-based school events featured stars as rewards, and they were distributed strategically by the school administrators. As a rule, though, any students with five or more stars didn't get anything, since the number of stars to distribute was limited. Someone might get lucky if there was an extra one, though. We wouldn't lose stars, but none of the Six Star students in this room would go up to Seven Star.

"Well, Himeji's definitely receiving a star. A lot of guys went from five stars to

four following this event, so she'll absolutely get one. And if I had to guess, the one Unique Star belonged to Shizuku Minami from the Fourteenth Ward. Since her team didn't make the top five, that star's going *somewhere*. Apparently, it hasn't been decided which of the top five teams will get it, though," I said.

Eimei, Ohga, Otowa, Tsuyuri, or Shinra. Honestly, if it went anywhere besides Eimei, I just knew it would cause me untold trouble later on. What if Kirigaya got it? Or Kururugi? Or Kugasaki, even? Each of those scenarios was too painful to contemplate for very long. For today, I wanted to keep a positive spin on things.

"You know, if that star is awarded to Eimei...I think *you* deserve it, Enomoto."

"...What?" Enomoto winced. He must not have expected that at all. "Why me? You're clearly the MVP of ASTRAL, Shinohara."

"Like I said, that doesn't matter. The May Interschool Competition made that pretty clear, I think. Individual strength is important, but if we wanna win events like this, we need everybody to improve for Eimei. The best way to do that is to give the Unique Star to the president."

I was pretty adamant about that, no matter how much Enomoto shook his head at me. I knew full well how tough it was to obtain a Unique Star, but there were few opportunities to boost the strength of a school. I had a lead on a different Unique Star at the moment anyway. Giving this one to Enomoto would likely pay off later, not that I knew if he'd get one at all.

"...I see. I suppose I'll concede that to you." Enomoto arrogantly folded his arms as he quietly nodded at me. "If I do obtain a Unique Star, I promise I won't let it go to waste. I swear on my title as the All-Seeing, Eimei School will be ranked first this year."

##

After wrapping up our party, Himeji and I headed back home. At least, we meant to.

"Truly...*truly*, thank you so much, meow!!"

Kazami intercepted us just outside the school gates. Evidently, she'd been waiting. She guided us to one of Libra's offices, where she bowed deeply.

“Without you, Shinohara, I really don’t know what we would’ve done, meow! The whole event would’ve fallen apart, Libra’s reputation would be in the gutter, and honestly, I was prepared to get kicked off the island. Instead, ASTRAL became the biggest blockbuster of an event we’ve ever held...! Thank you so, so, *soooo* much, meow!!”

“It was nothing. Our goals aligned. That’s all. I don’t deserve so much gratitude.”

“I can’t let you act all modest, meow! I’d gladly give up an arm or a kidney or something to pay you back!”

“What kind of a man do you think my master is, Ms. Kazami?” Himeji rolled her eyes in disgust, her silver hair swaying a bit. “By the way...what happened to Mr. Mikado Kurahashi, the root of all this?”

“Hmm? Oh, um, yeah, about that...” Himeji’s question snapped Kazami from her excitement.

According to what she told us, this whole incident had finally spurred the Board of Regents to conduct an investigation. As a result, Kurahashi and his group, the source of a lot of problems for a while now, had been completely removed from Academy administration. The event overseers who had left Libra to handle ASTRAL were also given stern warnings.

“...So Kurahashi’s lost all his power, huh?” I said, frowning.

His losing his position as provost of Seijo School and all connection to the Board of Regents meant he likely had no place left on the island. Still, I couldn’t rest easy. I was now aware of a new enemy in Toya Kirigaya. He’d definitely come for me again.

The Board of Regents had also investigated the Chameleon, Tsumugi Shiina... but she had been released before too long. It was clear that Kurahashi was the main criminal. Shiina wasn’t devious enough to hatch all those nefarious schemes. She was too purehearted. That was likely why she had been acquitted. The board was bound to keep a close eye on her, though, and her fake account had been confiscated. If she remained determined not to attend high school, she might have to leave the Academy.

*Still, with her talent, I bet a bunch of people will try to recruit her...like the provost.*

I shook my head lightly as I thought about that. The other Unique Star I was keeping tabs on was Shiina's, of course. I'd have to wait and see what the Board of Regents did with her first, though. Since Crossboard was a three-team Game, there wasn't a completely clear winner. I wasn't too sure what would happen to that star of hers.

"Thanks, Kazami. You helped us out a lot," I said.

"No, no, thank *you*, Shinohara, meow! Oh, do you mind if I ask you something? It concerns you and Sarasa, the Empress..."

?!

My pulse quickened. Given how involved I'd been with Libra during the May Interschool Competition, I had worried that people might notice my relationship with Saionji. I thought I'd explained it away well enough, though.

*Oh crap. Oh crap, oh crap, oh crap...?!*

Now that I was caught, my brain was running on empty. I couldn't think of a decent excuse!

"Are you guys maybe secretly dating, meow?!"

"Huh?"

"*What?*" Himeji's hard-edged response overlapped with my dopey-sounding reaction. Kazami, sensing no emotion in my maid's voice, kept smiling at us.

"I've been wondering about it for a really long time! Ever since April when you first arrived, Sarasa's looked much happier, meow. I was just reminded of that during the Game, you know? If you were actually a couple, that'd be so cute, meow!"

"You asked just because you want it to happen?" I asked dryly.

"Oh, of course! I mean, Sarasa, the ex-Seven Star who never lost, and Shinohara, the Academy's new number one, the guy who finally beat her... Sparks fly whenever the two of you so much as look at each other. It's hard to imagine you ever getting along! But it'd be nice, don't you think? And I'd love to



feature you guys in a Libra special, meow!”

*No, seriously, don’t!!*

Kazami leaned toward us, eyes sparkling, as I tried to give her the biggest no I could. If she ever published something like that, I was done for. I’d crumble to dust even before the lies got exposed.

The proof was standing right next to me.

“Uh-huh...”

*H-Himeji, you’re scaring me...!!*

Her face was terrifyingly blank. It made my face go rigid.

b b b

*“Hmm hm hmmm... ♪”*

A girl hummed happily as she watched her device’s screen. She’d just come out of the bath, there was hot chocolate waiting for her, and the new sofa was wonderfully comfortable. That was enough to make her happy, yet her eyes were fixed to her screen.

ASTRAL, the main event of the May Interschool Competition, had concluded a few days ago. She hadn’t watched all of it. In fact, her unique environment meant she only learned about it a short while ago. However, she still marveled at the final rankings.

“...Yep! Hiroto really is the best.”

Hiroto Shinohara was answering interview questions on-screen. She remembered him looking much younger, but after so many years apart, it was natural that he’d changed. She’d know him anywhere, though. He was the most important man in her life, after all.

And she’d get to meet him soon. He’d finally find her.

“Just you wait, Hiroto...”

The girl’s beautiful fingertips tapped against the screen as she whispered to him.

## AFTERWORD

Hello, good afternoon, or good evening. This is Haruki Kuou. Thank you very much for picking up *Liar, Liar, Vol. 4: The Lying Transfer Student Is Bossed Around By the Delusional Middle School Genius!*

This is the second volume to be released in as many months in Japan. What did you think? It featured a huge Game with much more content than usual, including a bunch of cheating, subterfuge, and out-of-Game action. I mixed lots of everything I like into this, so it would be great if you enjoyed it and the third volume as a set.

I don't have much space left, so I'll get straight to my thank-yous. First, to konomi, my illustrator. You've done another outstanding job. Shirayuki and Sarasa were great as always, but the new characters Tsumugi and Nanase were so cute, it was just agonizing... A delight for the eyes!

I also want to thank my editor and all the others at MF Bunko J editorial. Producing two volumes in rapid succession wasn't easy, but the sheer dedication from everyone was an enormous help. I gotta keep improving!

Finally, the greatest thanks of all should go to all the people who read this book. I'm going to work as hard as I can on the next volume, so keep an eye out for it!

***Haruki Kuou***



A mysterious girl who  
knows Hiroto appears...

Is a rom-com storm on the horizon?!

VOLUME 5 COMING SOON!

# *Liar*, ⑤ *Liar*



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