



Haruki Kuou

Illustration by
konomi

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Liar, Liar

The Lying Transfer Student
Hunts for the Impostor Rich Girl



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Hunts for the Impostor Rich Girl

C O N T E N T S

Liar liar

The Lying Transfer Student Hunts
for the Impostor Rich Girl



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NEW YORK

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Liar, Liar ③

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Haruki Kuou

Translation by Kevin Gifford Cover art by konomi

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Prologue

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...I was eternally jealous.

I loved having fun in my life. In fact, I didn't even need anything else. The more fun things circulating in the world, the better. That's how I've lived my life, and that's how I intended to keep living it.

Leading that kind of existence has kept me from getting my hands on something, though. Something blindingly bright, sparkling in triumph. There's no way I'd ever have the right to obtain it, and that's annoyed me for so long.

But...

But now, even someone like me has been given a chance at it. A possibility to touch this brilliant object. And maybe the sheen to it is artificial, not genuine at all, but it still sparkles just as brightly.

"Finally... At long last..."

I was overjoyed and looking forward to it so much that all I remember from yesterday was kicking my legs excitedly while lying on my futon. There were so many preparations I needed to make, but I was riding an emotional high, and I didn't know what to do with myself.

The May Interschool Competition—a huge event that all but took over the whole Academy. I'd always sat on the floor and watched it on my device in the past. But this year, it was going to be *mine*.

"Ooooooooooh...!"

The mere thought threw me into spasms of ecstasy. I mean, come on, it was the biggest event on the whole island. All the top-ranking star hunters, the people who'll become the stuff of legend someday, will be participating. It's

going to be so fun, so exciting, that it'll make the mind go blank.

I reached out as far as I could with both hands, gazing at the fluorescent light beyond them. A guy had been sending constant messages to the device by my pillow... But I could deal with that later. What mattered the most was steeling my resolve—putting words to it. I'd been granted a miraculous chance, after all. I might never get another one again. There's no way I could waste it.

"I'm gonna stir things up so bad...and I'll have *sooo* much fun doing it!"

I grinned, looking cunning as the thoughts of upcoming Games against yet-unknown powerful foes danced in my head.

Chapter 1

The Impostor's Impostor

#

“Haah... This really sucks.”

It was after school, near the start of May. I was seated in my living room, facing a girl who'd let out a depressed sigh. We usually met up at our favorite basement café, the one where devices don't work inside, but thanks to certain events today, I had her come to my mansion—a place the Company always kept fully secure. The girl was in her usual disguise, a jacket with the hood pulled low.

Why was I going through all this trouble? Well, because we had something of a *unique* relationship.

“...”

Yes, the girl was Sarasa Saionji. A thing of beauty, with her magnificent, long red hair and ruby-colored eyes. Anyone who saw her for the first time was guaranteed to sigh and marvel. And that wasn't due to her cuteness alone. She's the only granddaughter of Masamune Saionji, the grand headmaster of the Academy, and until recently, she was a Seven Star—the highest rank, placing her above everyone else on this island where your star count decided your entire life. She was the Empress, the greatest of VIPs. Everyone on the island knew her name. She was the undefeated champion—the former one, that is.

I, Hiroto Shinohara, handed the Empress her first defeat right after I arrived on the Academy about a month ago. I came here after the provost of the Eimei School in the Fourth Ward saw some kind of overwhelming talent in me, and the moment I transferred here, I beat Empress Saionji in my first Game and became king of the mountain, the quickest rise to Seven Star status in island history.

That's how it appeared anyway.

To everyone else, that was the story, but most of it was a lie. Plus, the girl sitting in front of me wasn't even the real Sarasa Saionji... Saying that by itself probably wasn't enough for anyone to understand what was going on. Simply put, this girl was standing in for the actual Sarasa. She was a spoiled rich girl, but an entirely false one, not at all the real thing. The immense power of the Saionji family sustained her lie.

My beating this impostor-Saionji led me to discover the truth about her. To justify my victory over the biggest Academy celebrity, I'd been forced to pretend I was the new strongest student on the island. In other words, we were both liars. Saionji wasn't some fabulously wealthy little heiress, and I wasn't number one at anything. We were both liars deceiving the entire island, and that's why we maintained a sort of colluding relationship. We were fierce competitors in public, sparks flying at all times, but we cooperated behind the scenes. Thus, even organizing informal chats required the utmost caution.

"...Ugh," I groaned after taking a sip of the iced lemon tea provided by Shirayuki Himeji, my silvery-haired maid. She'd taken the hint and left us alone for the moment. When Saionji and I met like this, we usually wound up griping to each other about how our day-to-day lives required tricking everybody all the time. Things were different this time, though. Naturally. We'd gathered to discuss strategy, not complain.

As for today's primary topic...

"That other 'you' out there has already become a pretty hot story, huh?"

That's right. Our latest shared headache was a set of videos posted to ITube, the Academy-exclusive video-sharing site. They were nothing fancy—just a girl talking away to a camera, not singing or commenting on a video game or whatever. Nothing exciting at all.

Her identity was the issue. That flowing, dazzling red hair; those ruby eyes that radiated will. She had one hand on her hip, sticking her modestly sized chest out and boldly exposing her eye-popping thighs—a pose of intrepid resolve. This girl who'd appeared on ITube out of nowhere was an exact copy of Sarasa Saionji, a perfect clone.

Worse yet, she wasn't just a dead ringer looks-wise. Here's a choice quote from the first video she uploaded:

"...What? Am I a fake? Oh, don't be silly. The fake is the one calling herself the Empress in public. I'm the real one—the actual Sarasa Saionji. Hee-hee... Besides, do you actually think the real Empress would lose to some random transfer student?"

"Ugh... Do you *have* to keep playing it, dumbass?" Saionji grouched as she tapped the video to stop it. She collapsed onto the table in a show of utter exhaustion.

"The *real* Sarasa Saionji? You have to be kidding me... This doesn't even make any sense."

"...You look pretty shaken," I remarked. "Have people been giving you trouble?"

"Of *course*. There are a lot more eyes on me now. Whenever someone talks to me, *she* always comes up. Some people are even delving into my past Game data to see if there's anything abnormal they can point to. It's exhausting. My mental capacity is draining three times faster than usual."

"Wow. That sounds rough. Guess your popularity is kind of backfiring on you."

"Exactly. And I know a lot of this attention is justified... But I've been masquerading as Sarasa for a good year now. How could anyone think that *she's* the real one after she popped up out of the blue. Yeah, I'm not the real one, either, but still!"

"...Yeah. I know. But this makes things a lot more complicated, doesn't it?"

That much was apparent. Two impostors were claiming to be the genuine article. It was a lot to wrap your head around.

Ignoring that for the moment, Saionji was right. It was impossible for some poser to claim they were the real Sarasa Saionji when the "real" one already existed. It was good for some attention on STOCK, the island's social network, but it'd only earn a few laughs and nothing else. Yet this was gaining traction somehow. The buzz had been nonstop ever since the first video appeared over a week ago. It was starting to affect Saionji's life. The main quality adding

credence to the impostor's claim was her looks. People had already uploaded several comparison videos, but without close-ups and extra on-screen arrows highlighting the minuscule differences, the two false Sarasa Saionjis looked indistinguishable. They were so uncannily close that people had taken to calling this new one the Clone. People understood logically that this faker had to be lying, but her looks really were tricking everyone emotionally, seeding doubt.

However, that alone wouldn't do anything to damage Saionji's rep on the island. All personal information on the Academy was stored and managed on people's devices, so there was no doubting that the girl in front of me, the owner of Sarasa Saionji's account, was the real thing. And yet...

"...Her claims are still going to make people suspicious."

"My account was stolen from me by the girl currently passing herself off as Sarasa Saionji..."

That's right. The Clone dropped that allegation in her very first video. A person's account was the foundation of their identity on the Academy, and the Clone asserted that Saionji had stolen hers, leaving her without a name or school affiliation.

That was totally impossible, of course. Academy accounts were kept under the strictest of security. They couldn't be transferred between people—or copied or deleted at will. At least, they typically couldn't. However, the Clone had presented some evidence. She revealed in her video that her account had no ID number. The eight-digit code that should have been in the relevant section of her profile had been replaced with three question marks.

It was clearly a bug or anomaly. Stranger yet, there was no precedent for this occurring before. That lent authenticity to the Clone's story.

Saionji and I met today because the Clone planned to hold a live stream tonight at eight. Her announcement of the stream had been pretty sudden, coming after two or three days of radio silence. The stream was titled "Declaration of War," clearly hinting at something important. All of ITube was chatting about it.

Saionji and I sat waiting with bated breath, ready to rise up in response to whatever happened.

“Phew...” I looked up, bringing a hand to my glass to quench my anxiety-driven thirst. “It’s almost time. You ready for this, Saionji?”

“Yeah. Of course I am. I have no idea what kind of demands she’ll make... But the Empress isn’t about to kneel to a fake like this.”

“You’re a fake, too, you know.”

“Did I *ask* for your opinion? Shut up! Now isn’t the time for that!” She leaned toward me a little and gave me a “stop it” kind of pout.

“Sorry, sorry,” I replied, checking the time and looking at my device’s screen. Saionji did the same with her device.

At eight o’clock sharp, the stream began.

“...Good evening to you all. I’m Sarasa Saionji.”

The Clone was on-screen, an arrogant hand on one hip. “The spitting image of Saionji” was the only way to describe her. She gave a light smile as she turned her ruby eyes toward the camera.

“As the title of this stream suggests, I’ve got quite a controversial topic to discuss with you all tonight. Hee-hee... I wonder if my fake is watching this right now?”

“...I sure am. Not that I’m imitating *you*,” Saionji fired back, head propped against her arm on the table. The girl on the screen didn’t react.

“But you know,” the Clone continued blithely, *“if I could address my fake for a moment... I think you understand what I’m trying to say by this point, don’t you? You took my identity from me, and I want it back. I had my entire life snatched away, and I’m not some pushover that’ll smile and laugh it off forever. So... would you like to stage a Game with me? A single Game to decide who the real Sarasa Saionji is, once and for all? Hee-hee... What do you think about that? Pretty good idea, wouldn’t you agree?”*

“...”

The Clone let out a refined sort of giggle as Saionji squinted at her. But we expected this much. On this island, “declaring war” on someone could only mean challenging them to a Game.

“As I think you know...” The girl crossed her arms beneath her small chest. *“There’s a big event scheduled to be held in Ward Zero in exactly one week. I’m talking, of course, about the May Interschool Competition. A large-scale Game featuring carefully selected teams from every ward on the island. I’d like to use that opportunity to settle this for good.”*

“Oh, so that’s why she’s streaming tonight.”

I nodded at her observation. The May Interschool Competition was a huge occasion, one of the major yearly events on the Academy’s calendar. Up until a little while ago, I’d been meeting with Himeji and the rest of the Company to discuss tactics for it. The event garnered a lot of attention, so it was the perfect time to stage a duel.

“I’m sure you’ll join as Ohga School’s team leader, but if you’re not, then I’ll reconsider the timing of my proposal. I doubt that’s the case, though. As for the rules... Let’s see... I suppose something like ‘whoever’s highest ranked overall wins’ is reasonable enough. Or maybe ‘whoever wins in a direct showdown’? But why don’t we spice things up a bit? Let’s say that ‘whoever’s able to beat Hiroto Shinohara will be crowned the winner’?”

“...Huh?” I hadn’t expected to be name-dropped. What was that all about? Why did she rope me into this?

“Whoever beats you...?” Saionji’s ruby eyes flicked to me, looking just as confused as I was. *“But you don’t have anything to do with—”*

“Hee-hee! And maybe some viewers think that Hiroto Shinohara isn’t involved in this drama, but he is. He’s become a Seven Star quicker than anyone in history—the first person ever to beat me. Or quote-unquote ‘me,’ anyway. You could call him my fated rival. And I think it’s fair to say that whoever has the capacity to beat him must be the real Empress, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Ugh...”

“Okay, let’s go over the details. The duel will be held during the May Interschool Competition, which is part of the Interward League schedule. Our Game is about beating Hiroto Shinohara. If I do it and win, you will immediately transfer your account to me on the spot. You’ll give Sarasa Saionji, and the device in your hands, back to me. On the other hand, if you beat him, then you

win, of course. If I lose, then I promise I'll never make any claims like this again, and I'll do whatever you instruct me to, within reason.



“Now, if Hiroto Shinohara winds up being defeated by someone besides the two of us, I’m going to count that as a victory for myself as well, all right? Hee-hee... And why wouldn’t I? If Shinohara turns out to be a wimp who can’t even best some random no-name out there, what’s that say about the so-called Empress who lost to him? And finally, if no one beats him, I’ll declare him the winner of our duel, and he can decide what to do with me.

“...Whew! All this rapid-fire talking sure tires me out. What do you think? That’s my full declaration of war for you, impostor. You can turn it down, of course, but don’t forget: I look the same as you, and I’ve been under a lot of stress lately. If you refuse this perfectly reasonable request, it’ll make me so anxious that I think I’ll need to take off some of my clothes to cope... Understand? ITube’s regulations won’t stop me, either. I’ll show the tens of thousands of viewers all kinds of things... And I might want to have some ‘fun,’ you know? Hee-hee... Anyway, I’m looking forward to your acceptance!”

With a final provoking little giggle, the Clone ended the live stream.

““ ...””

A heavy silence fell over Saionji and me as we stared at the dark screen. A declaration of war... I thought it sounded exaggerated. Essentially, the impostor was challenging Saionji to prove who was the real Empress at the big event next week. Whoever defeated me would become the true Sarasa Saionji. If the one I knew lost, she’d have to abandon her device and account.

“Ngh... Hnnnngh... Ahhh! Damn it!”

Saionji was frozen there for a moment, slack-jawed, but then she snapped up, her beautiful red hair swaying. She slammed both fists on the table, standing as she leaned toward me.

“What’s with that? What’s *wrong* with her?! What could possibly be going through her mind, huh?!”

“Um... Well, maybe you should try to calm down.”

“How can I calm down?! She’s going to make all this porn—uh, I mean, she’s going to take a bunch of suggestive videos with *my* body and spread them all around the island! Are you *okay* with that?!”

“Why are you asking me...? I mean, no, but...”

“Huh? Oh. Um, thank you?”

Saionji’s cheeks reddened a bit for some reason as she averted her gaze. I turned my back as well, feeling a bit awkward. We really didn’t have time to waste on this.

“So...that declaration of war just now... You basically have to accept, I guess,” I said.

“...Seems like it.”

“Your reputation as the Empress basically makes it mandatory. And that blackmail certainly doesn’t help. I know ITube’s limited to Academy residents, but if there were, um, racy videos of you posted, they’d spread pretty quickly. I know the Academy clamps down on things like that, but there’s no telling if it might leak to the internet at large.”

“Mmm... I guess so...”

“Hey, can you stop acting so embarrassed, please?”

“*You’re* the one who brought it up! Stop dwelling on it! Geez...!”

“Er, okay. Having those videos spread around the Academy is bad enough, but if they reach the Japanese public, things will get a lot worse. A scandal for someone famous like you will make the news. It’ll kill the Saionji family’s reputation,” I said.

Saionji nodded gravely. “And it’d just be a matter of time until the real Sarasa heard about it, too.”

The actual Sarasa was a pampered rich girl who’d been “kidnapped” and taken to mainland Japan to enjoy a blissfully normal teenage life. She had no idea about the lies this Saionji told everyone. All she knows is that this Saionji stepped up to make her dream of an average life come true. She was ignorant to the fact that her friend had stepped up to pose as her. But if this challenge went poorly, and nasty videos made it to Japan because of Rina Akabane, the genuine Sarasa Saionji would come running back to the island. Even if she only came back out of concern for her friend, the actual Saionji’s return would

expose all the lies.

On top of all that, it'd be a huge blow to my life if the girl across the table from me was outed. I'd maintained this facade as a Seven Star to retain a social status on the level of Sarasa Saionji, the rich and talented young genius. Provost Ichinose of Eimei School played along with these crazy lies because she thought we could profit from them. Plus, she wanted the Saionjis, the managers of the island, off her back. If Rina Akabane stopped acting as Saionji, the Provost no longer stood to benefit from helping me.

"Haaah... I can't believe this. An insane Game, and I have no choice but to accept it..."

Saionji slumped onto the table and sighed. I tried to gather my thoughts.

"You know... I'm willing to bet that this has a lot to do with the whole Mikado Kurahashi thing," I said.

Mikado Kurahashi was the mastermind who used a girl named Noa Akizuki to try crushing me about ten days ago. He was the former provost of Seijo School in the Twelfth Ward—a high-powered elite if there ever was one and a true gentleman in public. However, behind the scenes, he was a devious monster and the constant subject of unpleasant rumors.

He'd attempted to meddle in the Fourth Ward Challenge, but I'd managed to survive and free Akizuki from his clutches. After stepping down as Seijo School's provost, Kurahashi disappeared from the public eye and hadn't been heard from since. Losing must have worsened his grudge against me. At least, I assumed as much. I wouldn't be surprised if he launched some new attack.

"Mmm... I'm sure it does, yeah." Saionji lifted her head just enough to nod. "The timing's too perfect to be unrelated. The Clone first showed up right after the 4WC ended, and Kurahashi knows I worked with you during that event. I bet he's realized that we're more than just rivals."

"Definitely. This time, he's gunning for both of us at once."

"Looks that way... And if so, maybe modeling the Clone after my appearance and not the real Sarasa is kind of a relief. This would be hopeless if she were made up to look like the actual Sarasa."

“Oh... Yeah,” I said, wincing a bit. Saionji had a point. The Clone mimicked Rina Akabane’s appearance. That meant nobody knew that Rina was posing as Saionji. That lie was still safe. Still, though, we understood now that Kurahashi was using this event to attack both of us simultaneously. We didn’t know what he’d get from that, but clearly he was after something.

This promised to be a tough event already. Now they’re just adding to the pile of worries...

I shook my head despondently.

“Hey, Shinohara...” I heard this faint, forlorn voice, or I thought I did. Slowly, I lifted my head. There I saw Saionji peering at me. “You’re...gonna help with my Game against her, right? We’ll be facing each other in the event, but you’ll pitch in to stop the Clone, won’t you...?”

“...”

“Hey...hey, why are you staying quiet? You know the stakes, right? If I get caught, you’ll pay for this, too. We’ll both get punished, we’ll both go down together, and then—” She was speaking at a high-paced staccato. I cut her off, flashing an embittered smile.

“Uggggh. You don’t have to get that anxious just because I was quiet for a couple seconds, Saionji.” I kept one corner of my lips upturned. “I’m just sick of all this, okay? We’re coconspirators, right? I never considered abandoning you.”

“Ah...” Saionji’s mouth hung half-open. Then she let out a little “Hmph” and turned away, playing with a lock of hair around her ear.

#

“Okay, that’s all I needed to report! We’re finally diving into the long-awaited big event, but don’t overdo it out there, okay, kids? Keep it in moderation, but make sure you have a ton of fun, too! I’m looking forward to it just as much as all of you! For now, class dismissed!”

Thursday, May 4, only a bit after my clandestine meeting with Saionji. Ms. Nanachan, my teacher, was waving the class away from homeroom with her usual bubbly enthusiasm. With that, Class 2-A of Eimei School was free.

As a transfer student, I had only learned recently that the Academy didn’t

have the usual Golden Week break that most Japanese schools and workplaces enjoyed. The typical national holidays didn't seem to apply here because we'd still had classes like usual.

Instead, the second week of May each year was dubbed Event Week, and as the name suggested, it involved activities that pulled in all the island's schools. That included the large-scale Game I'd be joining, but there was also a set of informal events that students were free to join or spectate. All Academy students had off for Event Week, of course. Shops offered sales to celebrate the occasion, and the Libra news team's content was streaming on pretty much every screen around. It was really an island-wide party, and everyone was excited to kick it off.

"Hey, Shinohara?"

The girl sitting at the desk in front of mine turned around to speak to me. This was Fuuka Tataru—2-A's class president and a Three Star who was always bursting with energy. She had her hair in a smart-looking ponytail, the kind you'd see on girls who ran track. It typically bounced as she spoke.

Today, though, she had her hands clasped above her skirt, like something was bothering her.

"Kind of a rough scene yesterday, huh? You doing okay? It sorta feels like you're being dragged in against your will."

"...Oh, that?"

I kept it cool, resisting the urge to wince. Tataru was presumably talking about yesterday's live stream, the challenge to decide the real Empress that would be fought during the May Interschool Competition. Everybody was talking about it. People excitedly predicted winners and offered theories about what was going on behind the scenes.

If the question is "Am I okay?" the answer is a pretty solid no...

I shook my head, though. "Ah, I'm fine. Maybe I'm being dragged in, but I kind of planted the seed for this anyway."

"Y-you're okay? Are you sure? 'Cause if you need someone to lean on, you got your class president right here."

“I certainly appreciate the offer. And not to disappoint the Clone, but I’ve got a responsibility to uphold as a Seven Star. I won’t go down that easily.”

“Wow...! I don’t know how you manage to act so cool, Shinohara, but you always do! You’re like some invincible hero!”

Tatara unconsciously leaned in closer to me as she spoke. A refreshing aroma tickled my nose as I saw my reflection in her pure, sparkling eyes, now just a few millimeters from my face. At the same time, though, the sound of someone trying to clear their throat as loudly as possible caught my attention.

“Yeah... I’m sure Shinohara won’t need any of *our* help to beat the Clone. But I am a little worried about the team we have.”

...Oh?

Yuuki Tsuji approached from the next seat over, smiling as he spoke. He was a handsome, pale young man with looks that put him somewhere in the middle of the spectrum between macho man and feminine beauty. He wore a boy’s uniform, but if not for that, it might be tough to guess he was a boy.

The team he mentioned was another May Interschool Competition tradition. Apparently, the wards sent groups of five to tackle each challenge. In other words, four other Eimei students would compete alongside me. Like Tsuji, I also had concerns about a couple of them.

“...When you say ‘worried,’ are you talking about the two Six Stars on the team?”

“Yeah, them,” Tsuji replied with a wry chuckle. “They’re really talented, but eccentric in equal measure. Maybe more so. In a way, they’re the most famous people in this whole school.”

Tsuji put his right index finger up in the air.

“The first is Shinji Enomoto... He’s supersmart. I think he scored the best in the nation by far during our last practice exam. They say he’s got a photographic memory or something. People call him Shinji the All-Seeing. Plus, he’s a really popular guy. He’s been the president of Eimei’s student council for the past two semesters.”

“...Wow,” I muttered.

“Yeah, Enomoto’s a big deal. And the other one’s pretty much the exact opposite of him. Nanase Asamiya’s so beautiful. I don’t think she’s the best student out there, but I’ve heard that whenever she plays a rhythm game, she completes most songs on the toughest difficulty on the first go!”

“...Neat.”

Oh, man, are you kidding me?! Are all Six Stars freaks of nature?!

I pretended to listen to the conversation casually, but inside, I was reeling. I had read up a little on my teammates, but I didn’t realize they would be so off the wall. Between them, Saionji, and Akizuki, it was like Six Stars lived in an alternate dimension from the rest of us.

Of course, if that was all, I could still view Enomoto and Asamiya as potentially reliable teammates. But it didn’t end there, of course.

“The thing is, though... Both of them get along really poorly with each other.” Tsuji shrugged as he spoke.

“They’re both extremely talented, easily the best the school can offer. But when they’re put together, they constantly try to drag each other down for some reason. I think they were paired up for some other interward event, but they lost big to a clearly inferior team. They practically defeated themselves.”

“...I see. Sounds like I’m getting the short end of the stick.” I sighed a little to indicate my agreement with Tsuji. I didn’t have the full picture of the two Six Stars, but given the stakes of the upcoming trials, I couldn’t afford unreliable teammates.

“Ha-ha-ha! Well, I’m sure they’ll perform just fine with a Seven Star like you, Shinohara. Tatara and I can’t compete in the May Interschool Competition, so I’ll probably join in Event Week’s open Games instead... But as your classmate and friend, I’ll root for you, Shinohara.”

“Thanks...”

“Oh, sorry. I gotta go to my clubroom.”

With a sweet, alluring laugh, the sort you’d expect from a supermodel or

something, Tsuji waved and bid me good-bye. I didn't wave back—that's not something the personality I'd crafted for school allowed—but I quietly nodded as I saw him go.

That guy really is cute sometimes... Hmm?

I felt someone tugging at the sleeve of my uniform, the girl at the desk to my left.

"..."

Shirayuki Himeji—a classmate who'd recently transferred in, just like me. She had shiny silver hair, blue eyes you could practically see right through, and a cool demeanor that rarely faltered. She was also the leader of the Company, the support group helping me maintain my lies. Himeji was the perfect maid, and a master cheater, providing backup for my Games and everything else in this strange new chapter of my life. It wasn't too much to say she was necessary to my survival on this island.

"...Um, Master?"

She didn't let go of my sleeve, even when I looked at her. Her other hand was at her lips, and her head was angled down for some reason. Her expression didn't look particularly different, but I got the feeling she was worried about something.

"What's up, Himeji? Something happen?"

"No... Not exactly, no..."

It was unusual for her to trail off like that. She lifted her head slowly, pointing her clear eyes straight at me. Then she pulled herself in, bringing her lovely face close to my ear.

"Excuse me, Master," she whispered, her words breathy.

Huh? Wh-what?! What's up with you, Himeji?!

"It's just that—you seemed to react more to Tsuji than Fuuka during your conversation. Is that...where your preferences lie?"

"..."

I was at a loss for words. Unsurprisingly, Himeji tried to walk back and defend her question afterward while Tatara wasn't paying attention to us.

"Well, then..."

It was around half an hour after Ms. Nanachan concluded afternoon homeroom. Himeji and I quickly put the 2-A classroom behind us and headed for the school courtyard.

"This way, Master."

Himeji found a free bench for us, wiping the seat down with a white cloth she produced from somewhere. I had been a fake Seven Star for nearly a month now, so I was getting used to this sort of treatment, but she was in her school uniform, not a maid outfit, and we weren't at my private manor. Adding that to the equation certainly made this seem like a fresh experience.

Having her do this in a school uniform... I'm not sure how I feel about this...

As I waffled on this, Himeji raised a questioning eyebrow, wondering why I was standing there frozen without a word.

"Is something wrong, Master?"

"Huh? Ah, no..."

"Did you want to rest your head on my lap instead? If so, I will humbly sit down first."

"No, thanks."

I lightly shook my head. If I didn't immediately reject the offer, Himeji really might do it, so I decided to just sit on the bench. Himeji almost sounded a little disappointed when she replied "All right." Still, she sat beside me without any complaint.

Himeji gazed at me, eyes locked on mine.

"I know the teacher touched on it during homeroom, but the rules for the May Interschool Competition have finally been released."

The May Interschool Competition, the Academy-wide event that decided which ward would reign supreme, had come up in our classroom conversations

several times already. It was a major event that involved all twenty wards on the island, not counting the officially neutral Ward Zero. The sheer scale of the Games involved meant that a lot of stars were about to change hands. It was also going to be the site of the hideously unfair struggle for the title of Empress that the Clone sprang upon Saionji and me.

Apparently, the exact type of Games played for the May Interschools changed on a yearly basis. What's more, the rules weren't announced until just before the event began. That meant that, until yesterday, I hadn't known about anything besides my team roster... Now we had all the details revealed at once.

"I dunno," I said, scratching my chin. "Everything about this seems so rushed, kinda. The event starts next Monday, right? I'm sure many teams won't be able to prepare much at all."

"You're right. I think that's part of the organizers' goals—to keep teams on their toes. The way I see it, the May Interschool Competition is meant to be a little rough. To put it another way, it's supposed to emphasize a kind of festival atmosphere. There will be Games, of course, so people will gain and lose stars, but I think the organizers want players and onlookers to have fun."

"I see..."

"Not that *you* have that luxury, Master."

Just when I thought I had a handle on this, Himeji shot me down with her usual expressionless face. Honestly, I should've been used to that by now. I was using the power of my red Unique Star to tell a whopper of a lie. If I lost, everything would be exposed. Losing a single star would bring my lies crashing down. Even if I managed to avoid a regular loss, there was that whole Clone situation. This definitely wasn't some low-stakes party game. I couldn't afford to lose.

Himeji watched me take a deep breath before she continued.

"So let's go over the event one more time. As you've heard by now, the May Interschool Competition is a hallmark event in which students from every ward participate. It's not open to everyone, however. It's only available to groups of specially selected students from each ward."

“Right. Teams of five from the twenty wards, so it’s a total of a hundred people.”

“Yes, exactly. You might have heard the announcement that Seijo School in the Twelfth Ward is sitting out this year because of the scandal involving Provost Kurahashi... But I did some investigating, and it looks like the Clone is going to be using their spot to worm her way into things. In other words, Seijo School will be represented as a one-person team.”

“Wow. Anything goes during this event, huh? I’m amazed the organizers gave the okay for that.”

I sighed, a tad exasperated. How did some girl from parts unknown convince anyone to let her join in this event? The question weighed on my mind. If her account number was listed as three question marks, then maybe it meant she didn’t belong to any school and could be assigned to any that suited her purposes. It was too much to think about.

“The selection process for these teams is generally left to each individual ward. The standard approach is to pick the top five students of the school, but different institutions take different approaches, since stars are on the line. Take Eimei School, for example. The Fourth Ward Challenge was used to select the five participants.”

“Mmm... Right.”

Like Himeji said, Eimei had the top five from the 4WC serve as the team for the May Interschool Competition. A student’s school rank didn’t matter as much as their recent performance. It was a very Eimei-like approach, or very much in character for our provost, I guess—a totally rational but also highly aggressive selection process.

“Yes,” Himeji said with a nod. “I think it’s an effective approach. It gives everybody a chance to participate, one that everyone can accept is fair. However, Master, allow me to remind you again. The format of the May Interschool Competition—and by extension, any team-based event—does you very few favors.”

Himeji leaned toward me a little, staring right at me. Without waiting for my response, she put her right hand, covered in a white glove, up in the air, index

finger out.

“Am I clear about this, Master? You must remember, above all else, that you are a wimp. When this semester began, you were admitted as a One Star, the lowest rank. You’ve since risen to be a Three Star, in effect, but you haven’t obtained a single star through fair means yet. The rest of the May Interschool Competition’s participants are handpicked by their wards. The teams will undoubtedly be made up of Four to Six Stars. If you had to face them head-on, I don’t think you could beat any of them.”

“Ouch... You’re right, but still. Ouch.”

“Indeed. So as usual, the members of the Company will support you... Unfortunately, there are some obstacles this time.”

“...Yeah, I know.” I nodded, smiling a little. I’d been lectured about this to no end already. “For example, Akizuki is going to be an ally this time, but we can’t reveal the Company’s existence to her, right?”

“Correct, Master. Teammate or not, the types of cheating you deal in cannot be revealed to anyone else, as a rule. But it’s also clear that you can’t win fairly. In essence, you’ll have to navigate Event Week while keeping your teammates in the dark about our methods.”

Himeji kept her voice flat and emotionless while she spoke. She was right, but I didn’t need a reminder about how illicit everything I did was. My lies could turn the entire island against me. Of course I couldn’t tell my teammates about them.

“That’s what we are dealing with.” Himeji ran a hand through her silvery hair. “And that’s why you should typically avoid team events, Master. They demand more lies from you. Given all the unpredictable things that might occur, you could do everything right and still lose.”

“Yeah...”

I groaned at the thought but couldn’t refute it. This was a team event, so I’d be working with teammates the whole time. And that would prevent me from discussing matters with Himeji or communicating easily with the rest of the Company. It was a massive disadvantage.

“Oh, but wait.”

“...? What is it, Master?”

“About the Clone... She’s been assigned to Seijo School, but she’s participating by herself, even though everyone else has teammates. I’m not sure what she’s after, but if she’s trying to get rid of Saionji and me, going it alone isn’t really the best way to do it, right?”

“That’s a fair point, now that you mention it.”

Himeji brought her right hand to her lips in a cute little motion. But given how little information we had on the Clone, we wouldn’t reach a conclusion about that now. So with a light sigh, we took out our devices and reviewed the rules for the event.

#

It was Friday, May 5.

We dissected the May Interschool Competition’s rules and discussed strategy well into the night, so I was fighting to stay awake today. Fortunately, I managed to navigate the day’s classes until I could hear Ms. Nanachan’s refreshing, bubbly voice at the end-of-day homeroom.

School had ended, and I wanted to go home and nap before anything else. Sadly, that wasn’t in the cards. I was supposed to meet with my teammates for the first time soon. Shinji Enomoto, the Six Star student council president, had contacted me about it. He wanted to work out our strategy before the weekend started. I had no complaints about that, so I’d readily agreed.

“Good afternoon, Master.”

I heard a clear voice accompanied by the light tapping of a pair of shoes. Facing the sound, I spotted Himeji in her school uniform, hair flowing.

“Are you heading over now?”

“Yeah, I am.”

I nodded and stood, preparing to join Himeji and leave the classroom. But before I could...

“Eh-heh-heh! ♡ Hello there! ♪” came a voice I was all too familiar with.

The door slid open, revealing the Little Devil on the other side, twin ponytails dangling down.

This was Noa Akizuki, a third-year at Eimei School and a Six Star. Her chestnut hair reached down to her shoulders, and as usual, her uniform barely adhered to the dress code. She was small, and her face still seemed a bit childish, but she had extremely well-developed breasts. When she looked up at you longingly from the right angle, the destructive force was simply immeasurable.

Until a few days ago, Akizuki and I had been enemies. She'd dealt with an inferiority complex for years, and it drove her to abuse the rules during the Fourth Ward Challenge just so she could take my Seven Star crown from me. However, we later discovered that she'd been goaded into it by Mikado Kurahashi; some might even call it manipulation. After the 4WC, she hadn't been hostile to me at all.

Not hostile, but...

She'd taken to visiting the 2-A classroom whenever she had a chance. Between that and her suspiciously quick responses to my messages, I got the impression that she had a favorable opinion of me, much to my horror. All the touchy-feely stuff she did during the 4WC made her blush now, too. I honestly wasn't sure how to take it. Anyway, after scoping out the classroom while wearing her usual cunning smile, Akizuki spotted me and beamed.

"Whoa! Hiroto! What's up? Were you waiting for your pal Noa?"

"No, not really. We just happened to be heading out."

"Aw, you don't have to be so shy about it! C'mon, we're close, aren't we? ♡"

"If I may, Ms. Akizuki, you and my master are merely students attending the same school, and that is all. This is not a romantic relationship or anything like that."

"Wow, Shirayuki, you never relent, huh? Eh-heh-heh! But you know..."

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Himeji asked. "With that evil grin, no less?"

"Oh, noooo reason! But if you're willing to let us be 'friends' despite all your

gripping, well, I find that kinda cute, y’know? ♡”

“I didn’t say that. I simply forgot to mention my objection. I haven’t given my permission for anything—Ah! G-get off of me, Ms. Akizuki!”

“Eh-heh-heh! I don’t wanna! ♡”

Akizuki was giving Himeji a playful, full-body hug. Himeji, meanwhile, had her arms straight out and struggled to get free. Every move she made with her body—I won’t specify which parts—led to soft, jiggly motions that were truly a sight to behold.

“...”

This was pretty much how Himeji and Akizuki always interacted lately. Himeji played it cool while Akizuki basically latched on to her, all but forcibly trying to dominate her. Last month, at the 4WC, Akizuki took Himeji hostage and made all sorts of threats, but she’d since reached out to apologize. I hadn’t been present, so I wasn’t sure how it went, but Himeji told me it changed her impression of Akizuki, if only a little. I don’t think Himeji had been that angry to begin with. I guess they’d put all the chaos from the 4WC behind them.

“Okay! Just the recharge I needed! ♪”

Akizuki’s words all but bounced. Finally, she released poor Himeji to march straight up to me. She peered up at my face with flushed cheeks.

“Eh-heh-heh... So, Hiroto, are you ready to go? Can I...hold your hand?”

Suddenly, her words became much stiffer, and her eyes darted around as she offered her right hand. Being so blatant about it made me self-conscious, but I kept cool as I pondered how to respond.

“Yes, let’s go, Ms. Akizuki.”

“Huh? Ah... Shirayuki?! Wh-whoa, wait!”

Before I could do anything, Himeji stepped between us, grabbed Akizuki’s proffered hand and started walking, pulling the girl along. She wasn’t taking no for an answer yet maintained her usual grace. Akizuki pouted and tried to struggle but soon matched Himeji’s pace. It was hard to tell if they were friends or enemies.

If they're willing to hold hands, I guess they can't be bitter adversaries...

I snickered internally a bit as I grabbed my bag and followed them.

The conference room we were scheduled to meet in was on the second floor of Building L—the office center. This smaller structure contained student council chambers, meeting rooms, and other business spaces for students. It was more of an office building in design than a school facility. Students not involved in council business generally didn't come in here much, but Enomoto was the president, making this practically his second home.

"Hey, aren't you in the same class as the other two team members, Akizuki?" I asked as we stepped inside.

"Yep! That's right! ♡" Akizuki was on my left now. She held Himeji's hand for a while, but I guess she grew embarrassed after a bit. I could almost see sparkles shooting out of her as she eagerly nodded back at me.

"The partnership between the president and Miya is super famous. I'm the ace talent in Eimei, so they don't quite match me, but they're both Six Stars and ranked *way* up there! ♪"

"Sounds like it. People talk about their photographic memory, their superhuman reflexes... Even my classmates know all about their legends," I said.

I recalled how Tsuji and Tatara spoke of the two Six Stars. While Himeji, Akizuki, and I were on our way up the stairs to Building L's second floor, and I decided it was time to ask about something on my mind.

"You know, I've also heard they have serious problems getting along with each other—Hmm?" A faint sound from above stopped me short. I looked up. "What was that?"

"I heard something. From above, I think." Himeji looked just as confused when we exchanged glances. For now, we decided to keep climbing the stairs. We examined the second-floor landing from the hall, trying to be cautious, and we discovered the source of the noise quickly. It came from a small meeting room in the very one we were heading for.

"Shinji—Shinji, listen to me! Are you listening? Huh? Are you listening?!"

I sighed at Akizuki's evaluation, frowning internally. Tsuji and Tatara had told me that my teammates would be a major handful, and it seemed they were right.

Come on, guys...please?

I pushed the door as I prayed silently. As expected, two people wearing Eimei School uniforms waited inside. One was a male student with a calm demeanor. He'd taken the far corner of this six-chair table, where he was pouting with his arms crossed. The other person, a girl, had her back turned to us as she thrust both arms at him. Unlike the guy, you could tell she was loud and flamboyant even without seeing her face.

"Hmm...?"

As I took in the sight from the entrance, the pouting guy realized we'd arrived. His eyebrows went up.

"Nanase."

"What? Why so serious? You finally gonna give up your seat?"

"I'm never gonna give up *anything* to you. Ever. But that's not what this is about." The boy shook his head at the girl as though to crush all her dreams. He motioned toward us with his chin like some high-rolling CEO, then waited for the girl to turn around before quietly adding "...Looks like our teammates are here."

#

"So as I was saying..."

A cool voice caressed my ears. It really wasn't an exaggeration to say it freshened the air better than most products at the store. It was Himeji's weapon of choice as she surveyed the room from beside me. She stood with her hands clasped in front of her.

"I'd like to thank all of you today for coming to this May Interschool Competition member introduction and strategy session. Time is of the essence here, so I'd like to launch right into the rules of the Game... But before we do, how about we all introduce ourselves? It'll be difficult to work as a team if we hardly know each other at all."



“Sure, yeah! I’m all for that.”

The girl sitting across from me was the first to agree to Himeji’s proposal.

“Right,” she continued, hands close to her face as she waved. “My name is Nanase Asamiya. I’m in Class 3-A with Noa-chi here, and my current rank is Six Star! Not quite as good as the new transfer I heard all the rumors about, but still, it’s great to be with all of you!”

Nanase Asamiya flashed a bit of a knowing smile as she spoke. The first impression I had was that she was...well, *conspicuous*. Her hair, cut short to her shoulders, was a brilliant shade of blond; a large hair band tied up her bangs. Her reddish-brown eyes were large and round, her nose well-defined, and overall, I couldn’t see any notable flaws in her face.

And she wasn’t just beautiful; she had a modern teen’s fashion sense, something you saw hints of from head to toe. Just one look, and you could tell she knew what style was all about. From her long, slender legs to her tight waist and the volume of her chest... Well, it was like all the ideals one might have for a girl in a single package.

“So this is the real Nanase...”

“Huh?”

Asamiya raised an eyebrow at Himeji’s remark. She immediately brought a hand to her lips. Apparently, Himeji hadn’t meant to say that out loud, and she couldn’t really explain it away now. She shook her head instead.

“N-no, um, I apologize for changing the subject... But, Ms. Asamiya, you used to be a model for *MELTY* magazine, didn’t you?”

Oh, that?

I remembered something I’d been told earlier. *MELTY* was an incredibly famous fashion magazine, one with a brand name big enough that even a fashion-unconscious male teen like me knew about it. It was a top publication across Japan, not just on the Academy. If Asamiya had posed for it, then of course she was beautiful.

Asamiya sat up a bit, face sparkling as she realized the conversation was

about her now. “Oh! Oh, wow! How did you know about that?!”

“Um... Just for research purposes, I subscribed to it for a little while so I could keep up with fashion trends... Er. I’m still subscribed, I guess, but...”

“Wow! You are, huh? Oh, but I’ve only been published in that magazine two or three times, though. Yet you still remembered me? ...Wow, this is really exciting...”

“...Is it *that* exciting?”

“Heck yeah, it is! It’s a really nice feelin’ to have younger people look up to you! It makes my heart skip a beat! Like, whoa, people really *are* watching me, and stuff!”

Asamiya’s face flushed slightly as she leaned forward in her seat, fervently expressing her excitement. I got the feeling that maybe this girl was nicer than I’d expected. From that conversation I’d overheard, I’d anticipated a killjoy who loved griping about everything. Now that we had a chance to speak with Asamiya properly, she was quite friendly.

“Oh...um, thank you very much...?”

Himeji managed a graceful bow at Asamiya’s unexpectedly warm reaction, even though she still looked a little thrown by it. After a moment to collect herself, Himeji said, “By the way, Ms. Asamiya...was there a reason why you decided to give up modeling? You were given a lot of space in the magazine. It seemed as though people liked you a lot.”

“Huh? Oh, *that*? You wanna know why?”

Asamiya received the question with an odd sort of smile and looked to the male student beside her. He didn’t react, just sitting there and quietly pouting as usual, but Asamiya didn’t let it stop her.

“Well, Shinji wouldn’t stop harping on me to quit modeling. Whenever I got comments from some guy on social media, he’d get insanely jealous, like he wanted exclusive access to me. Oh, but Shinji’s not my boyfriend, just my old childhood friend.”

“Nanase, don’t tell lies about me to people we’ve just met. I’ve never felt

even slightly jealous of anyone. All I suggested was that maybe you shouldn't pose in so many skimpy outfits all the time."

"I *told* you, Shinji, if you're too much of a prude for hot pants and a camisole, how the heck am I s'posed to be a model? You know they were planning to do a swimsuit feature with me front and center in the next issue, right? Ugghh... I had the chance to get really popular, too..."

"Why should that matter to me? I think *you* were a lot more reluctant about the swimsuit photo shoot than I was."

"I... That...th-that's not true. Just introduce yourself already, Shinji! Geez!"

Asamiya turned away from him with a grunt and picked up her device, trying to make us forget about her awkwardness.

Shinji turned his gaze to us. "Well, my name is Shinji Enomoto, a Six Star in Class 3-A. I'm the current president of the Eimei School student council."

"Right, yeah. I heard a lot of rumors about you," I said.

"Rather a rough way for a new transfer to address me, isn't it? Is that as far as your manners go?"

"No, no, I respect you, so please forgive me. I'm not looking down on you or anything."

I kept it as light and breezy as possible while sizing up Enomoto. I'd already learned a lot about his amazing achievements—his near-perfect memory and his genius-level top performance on the national practice exam. And he wasn't just smart, either. He was also popular and respected enough to serve as council president for two straight semesters. *Definitely not the kind of guy I'd want as an enemy*, I thought as I quietly exhaled.

Anyway, now it was our turn to introduce ourselves. Himeji and I kept it simple, giving a basic profile of ourselves and expressing our interest in the event to come.

In terms of first impressions, Asamiya definitely seemed like she was friendly to everybody she met... But the "strictly business" Enomoto barely reacted to anything people said. I noticed Enomoto pull back in his chair when Himeji

bashfully stated that she had issues with dealing with people of the opposite sex, so he was paying attention, at the very least.

“Okay, and I’m the last one! The ace of Eimei, the proud Little Devil, and Hiroto’s lover, partner, and future wife! The supercute idol of Class 3-A... Hee-hee-hee! You can call me Noa Akizuki. ♡”

Akizuki placed her index fingers against her cheeks and flashed that cunning smile of hers. Himeji silently fumed at the scene, but that didn’t faze Akizuki at all.

Then she tilted her head to one side, twin ponytails dancing in the air. “So! Now that the intros are over...why don’t we brush on up the rules? ♡”

“Yes, I *do* agree that’s a good idea, but...” Himeji seemed dissatisfied, but she strode up beside Akizuki and placed her device on the table.

“The May Interschool Competition organizing committee has sent out two releases. One is a promotional video, and the other is the basic set of rules. I imagine you’ve all gone over these already, but while we’re all gathered here, let’s take one more look at the video.”

With that, Himeji’s fingers danced across her device’s screen. A moment later, countless screens were projected around the room to form a wraparound display that took up all the wall and ceiling space as the promo video began.

It featured a digital game field, colored blue and white, that appeared more functional than stylish. Inorganic summed it up pretty well, like an old sci-fi “world inside your computer” setting re-created in real life.

The floor was a repeating pattern of hexagon tiles, laid out like a honeycomb. An avatar representing a player was displayed on-screen. When the avatar swung the device in its hand to one side, all the hexes around it were doused in red. There were similar swaths of purple and yellow hexes here and there, little territories in the honeycomb that grew larger over time. Soon, the entire computer world was painted in an array of colors as players conquered the realm and stole land from each other... And that’s where the video ended.

“ ... ”

I sat back, thinking about the video I’d already watched several times last

night. *This is a little too fragmented to draw a conclusion. However, it's clear we'll need to expand our territory as much as possible. Each team will likely be assigned a color, and we'll fill the grid with that color as we progress. If we encounter another team along the way, we'll need to fight them off, I suppose.*

It seemed logical to assume that this year's May Interschool Competition's main event was a sort of turf war. We'd build our team's strength as much as possible while increasing our domain, like a classic kind of strategy war game. The only difference would be that instead of moving pegs or game pieces, we'd be the actual soldiers running around the game field.

After confirming we were all on the same page, Himeji said, "Now, here's a rundown of the rules released to the public so far. The complete text contains a lot of complicated background story material, so I boiled all that down to a quick summary."

The screens around us changed. The surround-style 3D video gave way to a single display that outlined the rules.

May Interschool Competition: Main Battle Rule List

Event Week will play host to a Game built on top of the Academy's star-hunting system. It is called ASTRAL, short for Active Steal-Territory and Recover-Area League.

The Game will be held from Monday, May 8, to Friday, May 12. It will be divided into ten periods, with two periods occurring per day—one in the morning (nine to noon) and one in the afternoon (two to five).

The Game will be played in Ward Zero of the Academy, within an area called the Special Development Zone. Players will download an event-specific AR app to their devices, which will let them access the augmented-reality ward built over this zone and log in to ASTRAL.

The ASTRAL game field is a grid built with six-sided tiles called hexes. On this grid are several spots known as bases, which may be occupied by players who perform a certain action on a base. As a team occupies bases, they will be connected by straight lines. If you have two bases, every hex the lines touches will be painted in your team's color. Three or more bases, and every hex within the resulting polygonal border will turn to your color. This is referred to as your

team's territory.

Every base will produce Spells at regular intervals. These are divided into Attack and Support Spells, and Attack Spells are the only way players can damage others in ASTRAL.

The game utilizes a cooldown system. When you cast a Spell or perform certain other actions, you will be temporarily prohibited from taking further action. The length of this cooldown period depends on the Action Level of the player, which is calculated from their stats. The better your Action Level, the sooner you'll be able to act again.

In addition, ASTRAL features five different jobs for players to take. These jobs affect your compatibility and resistance to Attack Spells, and no team can have two players with the same job. The job you take also affects the number and type of Abilities you are allowed to bring into the Game.

Victory Conditions: Conquer the entire game field or defeat all other teams. If neither condition is met after ten periods of play, the team with the largest occupied territory wins.

Defeat Conditions: When a player loses all their LP (Life Points), they are kicked out of the ASTRAL game. A player may have up to five LP. These are restored after each period of the Game. If all players in a team are removed from the Game, or that team no longer controls any territory, they lose.

Rewards: The members of all teams that finish the Game in sixth place or below will lose one star. Players in teams finishing fifth or above will receive stars based on the table provided separately, along with event-exclusive Abilities and a sizable amount of Academy currency. However, star awards and promotions will be determined based on the policies of each team's school administration. Players cannot receive a double promotion through this event. Since the number of students ranked Five Star or higher is restricted, no promotions to Five Star or above will be awarded unless another student is demoted from these levels.

Notes: In addition to the main ASTRAL event, the May Interschool Competition will play host to MTCG, an open-invite Game available to all students. The top prize in MTCG is a wild-card spot in the ASTRAL event, allowing the winner to

become a sixth member for their school's team.

“...That is all,” Himeji said with a light cough. “Only a limited amount of information has been released regarding Spells and other Game details, but this covers all the basics. I think the most important elements to remember are threefold—territories, jobs, and Action Levels.”

“Mmm, I see... Hey, Shirayuki, do we get to see our Action Levels?”

“Yes, of course, Ms. Akizuki.”

Himeji nodded, swiping across her device's screen. The number 9 appeared on the display.

“The event app has already been released, and when you open it up, you'll see your Action Level displayed at the very top of your profile. It comes in fifteen different ranks, apparently. The smaller your number, the better. May I ask you all to check your own devices, please?”

“Mm, sure.”

“Eh-heh-heh! I'm on it! ♡”

Asamiya and Akizuki reacted almost simultaneously, tapping away on their devices. Enomoto kept silent, but he acquiesced anyway. We all quickly logged in, and a few seconds later, we had a complete list of our Action Levels.

*Noa Akizuki—Action Level:
6*

*Shinji Enomoto—Action
Level: 5*

*Nanase Asamiya—Action
Level: 5*

*Shirayuki Himeji—Action
Level: 9*

“ ... ”

I fell gravely silent as I looked over my teammates' numbers. Action Levels were, in a way, grades for players. They were calculated on your rank and

performances in previous Games. Students with the same star count were generally rewarded with an identical Action Level.

I suppose that explained my number well enough.

*Hiroto Shinohara—Action
Level: 3*

“Whoa! That’s, like, way high up, isn’t it?” Asamiya leaned across the table to peer at my screen, forcing me to turn to avoid looking straight into her cleavage. She boggled at the number on my screen. “Boy, Shino, people sure rate you high around here, huh? That must be what bein’ a Seven Star does for ya!”

“Yeah, thanks,” I replied. “But why ‘Shino,’ if I may ask?”

“Huh? Why? It’s just a nickname. Not a fan?”

“I’m not saying no or anything.”

“Oh, good.”

Asamiya gave me a self-satisfied grin. Every little gesture seemed to suit her innate beauty. Resisting the urge to stare at her, I turned my attention to Enomoto and couldn’t help but feel a little anxious.

“...”

My worry wasn’t without good reason. After all, the Action Level I’d shown the group wasn’t the true value. It wasn’t three at all. In fact, it was nineteen. The Company had hacked into my app and had it display an incorrect Action Level. In reality, mine was far below everyone else’s.

Evidently, this event didn’t run on rank data taken from the Academy’s system. The stat calculations had to be automatically performed on each student’s individual device. That’s why the system treated me like the Three Star I was, not an indomitable Seven Star, and why my Action Level was so awful. Unfortunately, as a fake Seven Star, I was obliged to at least *act* like I had better stats than anyone—or else my story would fall apart.

We’ll just have to see if people fall for this little trick...

I secretly gauged my teammates’ reactions. Akizuki would always be on my

side, and Asamiya was surprisingly friendly, too—but what about Shinji Enomoto, the genius council president with the mega-memory? I could definitely see him picking up on how fishy this was, and I was prepared for that. But...

“...Hmm. All right.”

That was all he had to say before quietly turning away from my screen. I guess he didn’t doubt the veracity of my Action Level. I owed the Company a lot.

“Phew...”

Next to me, I heard Himeji exhale a little, sounding just as relieved as I was.

“Right.” She nodded, letting her silvery hair flow out behind her. “Now, I’d like to talk about our strategy and how we’ll proceed with this Game. What do you all think? Leaving the details aside for now, I think we should take this opportunity to work out our general direction, at least.”

“Smart idea,” Enomoto replied flatly. “If we don’t, gathering will have been for nothing. So...let’s take care of the small stuff first. This sixth member, someone we might earn if a student from our school wins the MTCG event... I think we already have a good candidate. Her name’s Mayu Minakami, and she didn’t qualify for this team during the 4WC, but I believe she’s a hidden talent. Enough so that she stands a fair chance at earning the single wild card spot, even. But I heard that the open Game portion of the May Interschool Competition usually attracts over five thousand participants, so we probably shouldn’t count on her assistance.”

“Yeah, true. If she makes it, we can consider that a lucky break, but it’d be a bad idea to rely on it,” I said.

“Exactly,” Enomoto agreed. “And it seems to me that there are two basic ways to win in ASTRAL. Either we prioritize expanding our territory, or we focus more on knocking other teams out of the Game. But we need Spells to fight, and we only earn them through building more territory. Both objectives basically lead us to the same tactic. No need to see the two of them as very different.”

“Yeah, I agree with you. So we should decide on team organization, then—or

which jobs we take.”

As discussed in the rule rundown, this Game features a job system, much like what you’d see in some RPGs. The job I picked would change how good I was with certain Spells and which Abilities I could bring into the match. Abilities, within the world of the Academy’s Games, were akin to battle tactics, and we needed to figure out which to bring before we decided anything else.

By the way, the list of jobs looked like this.

- **Commander:** The team member giving orders. Best suited for special-purpose Abilities. It’s also the only job that can use data-gathering Abilities. While a team’s Commander is alive, all members receive a -1 bonus to their Action Level and an extra Life Point. However, the Action Level of the Commander themselves is locked at 25. The Commander can also swap jobs with another team member once per game.

Master Spell (2× damage dealt to opponents): None

Weak Spell (2× damage received from opponents): All Attack Spells

- **Soldier:** The team’s sword-wielding melee specialist. Gifted in speed-up and attack-oriented Abilities. Receives a -1 Action Level bonus while actively in combat. This makes them highly mobile and dangerous in a fight, but they cannot use any support or defense-type Abilities.

Master Spell (2× damage dealt to opponents): Sword Flash

Weak Spell (2× damage received from opponents): Gunfire

- **Mage:** The team’s ranged suppression specialist. Gifted in attack and buff-oriented Abilities. Their cooldown time is always cut in half when casting Support Spells. This makes them good both on the front lines and for providing backup, but they can’t use any Abilities that alter their Action Level.

Master Spell (2× damage dealt to opponents): Magic Missile

Weak Spell (2× damage received from opponents): Sword Flash

- **Spy:** The team’s espionage specialist. Gifted in support and buff-oriented Abilities. Made less for direct combat and more for indirect subversion tactics. It therefore cannot use any attack or speed-up Abilities, but it’s also

the only job that can detect nearby Traps without an Ability.

Master Spell (2× damage dealt to opponents): Gunfire

Weak Spell (2× damage received from opponents): Magic Missile

- **Guardian:** The team’s defense specialist. Gifted in buffing-and defense-oriented Abilities. They provide protection for their fellow teammates and bases. All damage dealt to them is automatically reduced by 1, making them very tough to defeat, but they cannot employ any attack or speed-up Abilities.

Master Spell (2× damage dealt to opponents): None

Weak Spell (2× damage received from opponents): None

“ ... ”

I put the job list on the projected screen as I looked to the three other people in the room besides Himeji and myself. I kept it cool on the surface, of course, but the job-selection phase was the first of many hurdles I’d have to deal with. To put a finer point on it:

The Commander... I need to take the Commander job.

It was my only choice. The Commander was a vital data-gathering character, weak in a fight but capable of strengthening the entire team. As the one giving orders, they naturally assumed a leadership role in the team, but that didn’t matter to me much.

What did was the supposed “drawback” of reducing the player’s Action Level to a locked twenty-five. Having such a large number was meant to be a huge disadvantage in this Game. The program used that value to calculate cooldown time, so it’d be nothing but a huge drag during gameplay. However, it would give me a huge advantage. If I played as Commander, it’d explain the Action Level stat discrepancy I was dealing with. The Commander was already going to have a terrible Action Level, whether they were a Three Star or a Seven Star.

On the other hand, if I’m anything besides a Commander, I’ll have serious problems. Everyone else in the game is probably gonna be a Five Star or higher, and I’ll be joining with a Three Star’s stats. Someone could call me out on my lies

in an instant.

I swallowed nervously.

Yes, I was trying to cover my ass here... But even discounting that, if I seriously wanted to make any headway in the May Interschool Competition, I needed to be the Commander. Using data-oriented Abilities meant I'd always have the Company's assistance to count on, which was undoubtedly a killer advantage. Scoring the Commander job was an absolute must to ensure victory.

I'll be safe with that Action Level, but...

Would the others let me have it? I thought a prayer for myself. The Commander was an important role, but it was also a pretty thankless support one, useless in battle and likely to get booted out of the Game first. If I sat quietly and waited, I should be able to claim it.

"So, um...?"

Asamiya peered at me as she brushed the blond hair away from one side of her head.

"I think the Soldier job suits me the best. When it comes to athletic skill and perception, I'm probably gonna be the top one in the room. I can be the girl who zooms in and kicks ass and stuff! And my base Action Level isn't bad at all, but I bet I could use an Ability to boost it a little more."

"Right, right," Noa chimed in. "Me... Well, I'm the ace of Eimei, but I dunno about being Commander. It doesn't look very fun. Erm, I mean, it doesn't look too suited for me. So maybe Spy, then? Going undercover, laying Traps... That *totally* speaks to me! ♪ Eh-heh-heh... I'm gonna make a big splash out there! ♡"

The two girls wasted no time picking jobs. Himeji remained composed and politely silent for now, but if things went as we discussed yesterday, she'd pick the Guardian job after I secured Commander. It seemed about time for me to speak up.

"All right, in that case, I'll take—"

"Commander."

""...Huh?""

Himeji and I looked up, thrown by the matter-of-fact voice interrupting me. It belonged to Shinji Enomoto. I should have seen it coming.

“I’d like to be Commander. Did you have the same intention, Shinohara?”

Wh-whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, is he serious?!!

I could feel his eyes probing me as waves of panic spread across my mind. Still, I couldn’t display my alarm.

“Well, yeah,” I calmly began, my gaze trained on him. “Why do you want to be Commander, Enomoto?”

“That’s ‘Mr. Enomoto’ to you. Or ‘President.’ I am older than you, remember. And do you need to ask? The Commander is the most vital job in the bunch. If you don’t have a competent Commander, winning in ASTRAL will be completely impossible.”

“Okay... But either of us would be fine in the role, right?” I asked.

“Incorrect. The Commander’s Action Level is locked at twenty-five, which would be a far greater negative to you than me, given your superior stats. Plus, a Commander needs to gather intelligence, analyze his team’s combat capabilities, map out the game world, and issue orders. These are all areas in which I excel. I think that makes me the most qualified person for the job.”

“So you think I’m not qualified, Enomoto? I dunno how you see me, but I’m a Seven Star and possess Unique Stars. If you value data gathering and analysis that much, it’d be far wiser to leave the task to someone with powerful Abilities best suited to the position.”

“Well, who can say? Being a Seven Star and having Unique Stars doesn’t make you innately more talented. My skills have already been proven. I should know, because I’m the one who’s demonstrated them to the world. Am I making it clear to you, transfer student? Also, that’s *Mr.* Enomoto.”

“...”

I mulled over my options while verbally sparring with Enomoto. This was my worst nightmare realized. Enomoto, the guy I was vying with for the Commander job, probably liked judging people based on their latent merits

instead of their base résumés. He knew I was a Seven Star, but that didn't inspire him to treat me as anyone special. He'd fairly judged his own proficiencies, according to his own logic anyway, and he wasn't going to relinquish his claim easily.

"Ugh..." As we argued, Asamiya beside me propped her head against her arm, looking fed up. "Why're you being such a stickler about this, Shinji? Why not just let Shino be Commander? It's not like I want *you* ordering me around."

"We're not talking about whether you like it. We're simply discussing who's better qualified for the job."

"So you think you're more qualified than Shino the Seven Star? How self-absorbed can you get?"

"...You think he'd fare better than me, Nanase?"

"Huh? Well, duh," Asamiya replied without hesitation. Then she turned to me and said, "So yeah, thanks, Commander!" with a smile.

Himeji was bound to take my side on this issue, so if we brought it to a vote, I was guaranteed the win, but it'd be an empty victory.

Himeji got it right. I have to trick everybody during this event, friend and foe alike. But "tricking" here means getting my teammates to trust me and having them believe I'm superior in every way. They need to accept that I'm the real thing. Otherwise, I doubt Enomoto will work with me.

Enomoto promised to be a powerful teammate, but he could also be difficult to keep under control. He'd doubt me more and more by the day, and given enough time, he might just figure out the lie.

So...

"...Look, Enomoto."

"'President' would work fine, too, Shinohara. What is it?"

"How about this? The Commander can trade jobs with another teammate once during the Game, so let me be Commander to start, and if you're dissatisfied with my performance after a while, I'll hand the job to you."

"Hmm. I'd prefer if I took the role from the beginning... But I suppose a

mutual compromise would be best for the team as a whole. Very well.” He shook his head as he relented. Then he fixed his dark-blue eyes on me and said with a composed voice, “In that case... Let’s make it your mission to knock out three opposing Commanders by the end of the third day. Fail to do that, and I’ll take the Commander job beginning on day four. How does that sound to you?”

“If I may, Mr. Enomoto.” Himeji reacted to Enomoto’s proposal before I could. She stood behind me and spoke as clearly and as sharply as she always did. “Those conditions seem a little unfair. What if you, as his teammate, decide to stop cooperating with him or drag the group down in some other way?”

“...Shirayuki Himeji, was it? I appreciate your politeness, but I think you’ve made an error.”

“...An error, sir?”

“Yes. A fundamental mistake in judgment. All I care about is winning. As the student council president of Eimei School, I simply refuse to fail while representing my institution. I don’t personally resent Shinohara in any way, and even if I did, it wouldn’t overpower my drive to win.”

Enomoto paused for a moment to quietly take a deep breath.

“The schools on this island are ranked against each other. This hierarchy is based on all the star transactions that took place the previous year. It’s the easiest, most accessible way to judge each school. For the past several years, Eimei has been stuck in fifth place. And I want to push us upward. Last year, I failed. In fact, I nearly cost us a spot and brought us down to sixth. But now we have *you*, Shinohara—a Seven Star. We have the potential to rise. So I swear to you all that I will never do anything to deliberately sabotage Shinohara.”

“...I see. I apologize, then.” Himeji gave Enomoto a polite bow and took a gracious step back. Enomoto certainly looked serious. I didn’t think he’d made up a story to defend himself. As the president, and as a member of this specially chosen team, he really did want Eimei to win.

“All right, then. That’s perfect.”

I grinned at Enomoto, even as he tried to stare me down from his seat.

“We’re gonna take down three Commanders before the third day ends. If we

fail, I'll give you my job right then and there...and I'll even call you Mr. Enomoto for the rest of my life."

"I look forward to that." His lips curled into an ever-so-faint smile as he responded. I couldn't tell if he was angry or excited, but either way, it was a pretty ominous conclusion to our strategy meeting.

#

"So...yeah... Help me, Kagaya!"

"Oh, great, Hiro, you shot your mouth off again, didn't you?!"

That night, I was seated in the luxurious living room on the first floor of my manor, all but begging on hands and knees to the woman in the sweat suit seated across from me. This was Kagaya. She was a bit older than me, I think, and a valued member of the Company, just like Himeji. She always looked like she just woke up, constantly wore sweats, and her hair was ever a frizzy mess—the classic "before" shot in a beauty makeover show. However, when it came to coding, she was a genius who'd saved me a bunch of times.

"Um...so what were we talking about again?" Kagaya asked, bringing a hand to her messy hair. "Oh, right. You need to join the May Interschool Competition as the Academy's strongest player, you need to be the world's most perfect Commander in the Game so all your Six Star teammates don't sniff you out, you need to beat three other team leaders by the end of day three, and you need to stop that Clone."

"Uh...yeah."

"Well, you've certainly set the bar high for me, Hiro... Urrrrgh..."

Kagaya groaned like the dead as she brought her head down to the table. When listed out, it sounded completely impossible. I had to deceive my teammates, mainly Enomoto, while doing something to prepare for whatever the Clone sprang on us. Plus, I obviously needed to win this Game.

A question occurred to me. "Will you be able to provide your usual Company assistance? I heard they're holding this event in some rental space in Ward Zero," I said.

"Wha? Oh, that..."

“That won’t be a concern, Master.”

Himeji answered before Kagaya could, entering from the kitchen and placing a cup in front of me. After serving Kagaya as well, Himeji stood holding the silver tray to her chest.

“Administration reportedly sent out an event rental request for the Special Development Zone in Ward Zero, but every other section of the ward will be open to the public as usual. The Company mainly provides you with long-range support, and I’ll be on the scene as a participant, too.”

“Yeah, what she said,” Kagaya added. “I’ll be on standby and ready to do whatever we need, so if you ever long to hear my voice, just let me know on your earpiece, okay?”

“Um, all right. I’ll remember that.”

For as sleepy as Kagaya sounded, I bet she’d stay up and talk if I ever had a bout of insomnia.

“Anyway, let’s go over what we know,” I said. “This game is called ASTRAL, and it’s basically a massive turf war. We have to take bases on the game map to expand our territory while building up enough fighting force to mow down everyone in our way.”

Kagaya nodded. “Right, that’s what it sounds like.”

“And as far as we can tell from the rules, there are three main elements to this Game. First, the Action Level that decides the length of your cooldown time after doing anything. Second, the jobs that affect your Spell compatibility and which Abilities you can bring in. Third, the voting system.”

Himeji’s blue eyes stared right at me as I spoke. I stared right back.

The Library News Network had announced the voting system just a short while ago. As the name suggests, it was a ballot to determine who students think would win the May Interschool Competition, with voting rights given to everyone not participating. The problem with this thing was that an individual was free to change their vote anytime they liked, and the ongoing results had certain unspecified effects on the Action Levels of the relevant teams. Basically, the more votes the viewers gave you, the more of an advantage you’d

potentially wield.

This system seemed to be suited pretty well for me. Perhaps I'd even be able to take advantage of it.

"But... I don't think this voting system will play a major role until the latter half of the Game," I commented. "For the first portion, a team's approach with their jobs and Abilities will decide things a lot more."

"You're likely correct, yes," Himeji agreed. "If more votes can buff a team's stats, all the students are probably going to vote for their own schools to start. I don't expect it to make much of a difference initially."

"Yeah, exactly. So moving on to jobs... The Commander role lets me view team info, search and build upon the Game map, and use the intelligence I gather to give orders to my teammates. That means I'll naturally need to come equipped with Abilities suited to that."

"Yes. It's a searcher and supporter sort of position. You won't have much fighting strength, but given the espionage element to this Game, this job is indispensable. It's also the only one with access to data-oriented Abilities. Your standard picks would be Espionage, Seize Data, and Psychology. Scan Area will likely be useful, too," Himeji explained.

"Right, those were the sorts of Abilities that came up the most in my research for what was best. But even if I filled my slots with those Abilities, I'd still be operating at a disadvantage compared to other players."

That was a perfect demonstration of how critical a student's rank was on the Academy. A Six Star could do stuff with one Ability slot that I could only replicate by filling two or three slots with lower-powered skills. That'd keep me from loading in any more Abilities, a huge blow to my arsenal.

However, that's where the cheating came in.

"...Kagaya?" I said.

"Mmm. Once the event begins, the rest of the Company and I will sneak into the May Interschool Competition server to borrow the kind of data you'd *normally* be able to access in your position. Then we'll relay that over to you in real time. Is that what you're looking for here, Hiro?"

“Yeah, but... Do you really think you can manage it?”

“Oh, you know me. Plus, if I can dig into the main server, I think I can keep an eye on the Clone’s moves, too... That much shouldn’t be an issue. Nothing too serious has happened since the 4WC, so it’ll be my first chance to show off to you in ten days or so!”

“...Heh-heh.” Himeji giggled. “How exciting. Do your best, or we’ll fire you.”

“Huh?! Aw, but I provide remote support to Hiro every day!” Kagaya cried.

“Yes, and I’ll repay you with some of my homemade specialties tonight.”

“A barter system?! Ugh... Hiro, help me out here. I need a little more than that...” Kagaya raised her arms to the heavens in an exaggerated manner, entreating me with the eyes of an abandoned puppy.

“I’m just joking, of course,” Himeji said, snickering at the older girl. Then she returned her attention to me and raised an eyebrow. “The Company will assist you with your Commander duties... But which Abilities are you considering, Master?”

“Hmm... That’s a good question.” I quietly brought a hand to my mouth. “This is likely gonna be a drawn-out battle, so I think we need moves that offer as much flexibility as possible. †Jet-Black Wings†, the Ability granted by my blue star, feels like an obvious pick. It lets me alter the presentation of anything in the Game. ASTRAL will run in an AR world, so I’ll be able to change the landscape and plenty more.”

“Mmm, yes, it certainly will be powerful in this scenario. For your second slot...how about utilizing the green star you were awarded from the 4WC?”

“Hmm... But that’s not really an Ability, right? Just like the red star, it gives me access to a specific computer program. And didn’t Kurahashi modify it? Using it now feels super illegal...”

“Indeed, it would be. However, it’s possible to extract the effects of the star and implant them into an Ability. Think of it like a Predict Behavior sort of Ability. It won’t be quite as powerful in that form, of course, but I think it will be a great help anyway.”

“Oh... That’s possible? In that case, it really is a viable choice. I’m sure I won’t be able to use it as freely as Akizuki did, but it’d be a good weapon against opponents and Enomoto.” I nodded a little. Preparing weapons for use against my allies seemed nonsensical, but this would be a good card to have in my deck if it could earn me Enomoto’s trust. Plus, it sounded powerful. I saw no reason to let it go to waste.

“Hmmm...” Kagaya typed something into her computer. “Yeah, two Unique Star Abilities would be a pretty obvious selection for Hiro right now. So then the real question is what to choose for slot number three.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “I’d like to think about that one a little more. We have some time to work with.”

“Mmm, all right. Guess we can’t just choose something at random, huh? My Ability specialist is super talented, so you could probably ask him to come up with an original Ability on Sunday night, and he’ll figure out how to get it done.”

“*Huh?*” came a voice over my earpiece.

“...He sounds rather surprised by that,” I remarked.

“Oh, he’s fine, he’s fine. That’s Inamura for you. He’s got, like, no self-esteem.”

Kagaya waved a dismissive hand. Meanwhile, Inamura, the guy on the other end of the earpiece, mumbled, “*Well, I can give it a try, but...it’ll be an all-nighter for sure...*,” sounding every bit like a tragic hero. I thought it best to order something from him as early as possible to give him more time.

“Um... So what about you, Himeji?” I inquired. “You decided on your Ability pack yet?”

“More or less.” Her blue eyes were pointed at me as she nodded. “We have to assume that we won’t know what the Clone will try until she acts. So to start, I’m going with Cancel Interference, the classic defense Ability. Next, I’ll put in the general-purpose Variable Control, since a lot of Game elements like Action Levels and votes have a numerical aspect to them. That’s a pretty standard build for a Guardian so far, but I’m saving my best Ability for last.”

“Your best?”

“Yes. It’s called Replace, a buff that lets me swap one Ability with a team member. Used correctly, it should be a pretty strong asset, but it’s not very well-known, since it’s only useful for team Games. That’s why it hasn’t been added to the illegal skill list yet—for now anyway. What do you think? That ought to make a lot of neat things possible, right?”

“...Definitely,” I agreed.

I couldn’t help but smile back at Himeji’s mischievous giggle. A trading skill like that was pretty attractive, yeah. With the right combinations, it would open up a practically infinite array of strategies.

“Unfortunately, Replace is a pretty expensive Ability on the market, so instead of actually buying it, I’m thinking about having Inamura re-create it for us,” Himeji said.

“Ah, the leader’s piling work on my desk, too...? Um, like, it’s an honor and all, but...”

I was starting to feel bad for him, but it was better not to get too involved. It’d just be asking for trouble.

Regardless, Himeji and I had decided what Abilities we’d bring along. Beyond that, there wasn’t much more we could do until the Game actually began.

This’ll be my first large-scale event. The Clone’s gonna get involved real soon, and I have to deceive my teammates the whole time. This could get rough...

A sudden pang of helplessness shot through my mind, and I began to feel sorry for myself. Himeji suddenly took my hand, as though she’d read my thoughts. I could sense the soft warmth through her glove. Her gentle eyes peered at me.

“...It’s going to be all right, Master.” Her hair bounced a bit as she whispered in my ear. “It’s not going to be like the last time. No matter what situation we find ourselves in... No matter what happens... I’ll be with you, Master.”

“...!”

There was a slight sultriness to her voice. Her breath massaged my eardrum. I could sense a heartbeat, and I didn’t know where it was coming from. I

searched my mind for something thoughtful to respond with.

“Ah, um... Not to butt in, but you guys know that I’m right here, don’t you?”

“...And me.”

““!!””

The embarrassed response from the other Company members snapped us back to reality. I pulled my hand away hurriedly.

##

“Hmm... I see.”

It was a bit after my chat with the Company. I was back in my room, sitting on my bed and speaking with Saionji over my device.

Since the May Interschool Competition pitted the Academy’s wards against each other, participants were prohibited from contacting members of other teams during Event Week. You could interact with them in real life once the Game was underway, but seeing opponents in public was bound to garner attention. Besides, Saionji and I were supposed to be bitter rivals. It’d be hard for us to converse with other people around, much less ask her for advice. So I decided to give her one final call before things kicked off.

“So it’ll be just like we decided, then. We’ll work together behind the scenes to fend off the Clone, but apart from that, we’ll just compete against each other like normal. If it looks like either one of us will finish out of the top five, we can adapt as necessary.”

“Yeah,” I replied. “Pretty much. For us, the Game against the Clone will be trickier and more dangerous than the event itself. If you can help with that, it’d be more than enough for me. Honestly, we need to act like rivals during the main event, or things could seriously backfire on us. Forming some kinda weird alliance without any warning won’t get us anywhere.”

“Mmm, that’s true... Heh-heh! Well, in that case, I’ll try not to trounce you too much on my way to victory. Ohga School’s got a reputation to uphold, and there’s no way I’m gonna give Eimei a win.”

“Right, yeah, sure. Don’t come crying to me later, though.”

We smiled a bit as we riled each other up. The unpredictable Clone was breathing down our necks, but that was a different matter. I was the Seven Star, the best on the Academy, and Saionji was the queen of Ohga School. Neither of us could afford to lose. We had to finish in at least fifth place. That was a given, really. Plus, we carried a duty to claw our way higher than the necessary minimum.

“Anyway, that’s what’s going on right now.” I fell back onto my bed, stretching my arms out. “I do have one idea we could use against the Clone... But honestly, there’s not much we can do until the Game begins. We’ll be working without a net.”

“Right... Ugh. This is depressing me a little. All my Ohga teammates look at me like I’m some goddess. It’s mentally exhausting.”

“Oh? Isn’t that par for the course for a celebrity like you?”

“Well, yeah, but usually it’s only during class. During the Interschool Competition, I’m gonna be with my team morning, noon, and night. I’ll only get alone time while I’m sleeping. I doubt I’ll get to talk with you, either...”

“...”

“...B-but um, it’s not like I’ll miss seeing you or anything, all right?! It just sucks that I won’t have anyone to vent to! Don’t misunderstand!”

“I didn’t say anything.”

I half chuckled as I answered her. Going without our usual shared complaint sessions for a while would be hard, but I couldn’t expect everything to be easy. Losing to the Clone would allow that faker to take over for Saionji, and she and I would be booted out of society—the ultimate bad ending.

“Listen, Saionji... Don’t lose, all right? For my sake and yours.”

“Ah... Hmph! If you want me to do well, try protecting me a little more.”

“That doesn’t sound much like you. Are you tired?”

“No!” My honest question was met mostly with anger and frustration. “Ugh...,” she continued, muttering at me for a bit... But she soon recovered and flashed her usual, invincible smile, her voice more confident than ever.

“Ah, I’m just kidding. Ha-ha! No way will I fail! An Empress doesn’t lose her throne that easily!”

b b b

“Hello? Yeah, it’s me, Shinohara. Listen, there’s something I’d like you to lend me a hand with real quick...”

Chapter 2

#

“Hello and good afternoon to everybody who came to see this! I’m Suzuran Kazami from Libra, helping the May Interschool committee organizers with their work! Monday, May eighth has finally arrived! And as you can see, it’s sunny, dry, and totally cloudless! Almost a little hot, even! But no need to worry about that, because the next five days are gonna be a lot more than warm. We’re gonna bring you a Game so scorching, so blazing, that you’ll be reaching for your oven mitts! We’re going full throttle from the start, so fasten your seat belts and let’s! Get! Started!!!!”

ASTRAL kicked off in grand fashion at nine in the morning with Kazami’s announcement.

“Hmm...”

We’d just been guided to the Special Development Zone of Ward Zero, and right now I was taking a moment to scope out the surroundings. Unfortunately, there really wasn’t much to see. We were presented with a bare, vacant lot, just like the ones we’d walked through on the way here. It didn’t look a thing like the video promo.

While I blinked in confusion...it happened.

“Wow!”

Akizuki, standing beside me, was the first to exclaim out loud. She looked ready to burst into tears of joy, and I really couldn’t blame her. All jokes and metaphors aside, our surroundings had transformed before our eyes in an instant.

“Wow, wow, wow! I feel like we’re on an alien planet!”

“Right? I didn’t have very high expectations, but this has to be some top-level

tech, huh?” Asamiya, following the giddy Akizuki’s lead, was having a blast surveying the landscape. I was giving it another look, too, not that I was letting it distract me the way it was distracting them.

Whoa...

The overall impression was about what I’d expected—a computer-looking kind of virtual world, a seemingly boundless artificial landscape of blue and white. But it wasn’t barren. I spotted tall columns here and there, their tops too high to be visible. There were a few semi-translucent walls as well. But we hadn’t been whisked off to a fantastical world like Akizuki had suggested. It was all the work of the May Interschool Competition app distributed to participants. The program self-activated the moment the Game began, displaying these structures for the players.

So the app adds game elements to the real world, huh? Kind of an advanced Poké-Go sort of thing?

The vacant lot had become a sci-fi cyber landscape. The cybernetic columns and walls were the Game’s way of hiding Libra’s cameras and recording equipment. The only things that still looked ordinary were the participants.

“This...is impressive.”

I turned at the soft whisper. Himeji had her hands clasped in front of her and marveled at the landscape. The atmosphere and realism must have overwhelmed her because I wouldn’t have expected her to make a comment like that otherwise. Not wanting to interrupt her awe, I decided to set off and examine this world in detail. However, I hardly took a step before I noticed a white line near my feet. Multiple lines, actually. They formed a hexagon drawn around myself and Himeji. There were other hexagons around it, forming a honeycomb pattern across the entire region.

“I suppose these are the hexes we use in the Game, then,” Enomoto remarked, tapping at the ground with his right foot. “Each side of these hexes is about ten feet long, which means every hex covers a little over two hundred square feet in area... And the entire space is filled with them. It’s a bit like a chessboard. *That* game uses squares, but...”

“Yeah. Maybe Othello might be a better metaphor?” I suggested. “The

number of hexes we have defines how strong a force we are.”

“Mmm, good point. And also...” Enomoto lifted his right hand and pointed behind us. We turned around to find a rather unexpected sight.

“Hey, is that one glowing?” Asamiya was the first to say it. The hex Enomoto indicated was emitting a soft light. It was green with a tinge of blue, not the standard white or orange that you’d expect. The shade matched that of my green star.

“That single hex,” Enomoto said with his arms crossed after waiting for us to settle down, “was a different color from the rest of the field the moment we arrived. The rules of ASTRAL state that the territory under our control will be shown in our team’s color...which means Eimei’s been assigned that green color, and it’s already being treated as part of our territory.”

“Hmm... Oh, but isn’t our territory defined as the area located between the bases we occupy?” I asked.

“Exactly. So this hex must be Eimei’s only current base. Your definition of ‘territory’ is correct, but we only have one base, so we control no hexes except the actual starting one.”

“So why do we have a base to start with anyway? ‘Cause nobody’s taken it yet?”

“Can you think a little before you speak up, Nanase?” Enomoto shrugged as he chided her. “Look, we lose this Game when we have no territory. If ASTRAL began without anyone owning any bases, every team would instantly lose.”

“Mm...”

Asamiya listened meekly until Enomoto finished. Then she put her hand on her exposed hip underneath her blouse and looked away.

“I know what you *meant*,” she spit back, “but I don’t like your attitude, Shinji. Zero out of ten.”

“Oh, sure, you idiot. Pretend it didn’t happen.”

“I’m not pretending!”

Ugh...

Mere seconds into the Game, and they were already squabbling. I ignored them and focused on the nearby glowing green hex. There was a large flag stuck right in the center of it, presumably symbolizing that this was a base location. A closer look revealed that it bore the seal of Eimei School.

“So if this is our only base,” Akizuki said as she peered from the adjacent hex, “then we lose instantly if somebody takes this... Right?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “I guess so. We need to find another base and expand our territory quickly. And just as a reminder, taking a base is an action we conduct by pressing the *Occupy* button on the event app. That’ll put our school’s seal on the hex, and we’ll take control of it.”

“Okay... In that case, why don’t we go test things out?” Himeji suggested, her silver locks bouncing slightly as she spoke. She had a point. There was no reason to keep conjecturing when the Game was underway.

If I had to guess, the standard strategy in ASTRAL seemed to be having the Commander (me) use their search Abilities to locate unclaimed bases. However, there was already another large flag visible from our starting point. I don’t know if that was a coincidence or just a freebie to help teams get underway more quickly, but the base was clearly neutral, with no school seal on it. We headed over to that hex.

“Okay, Himeji, when you open the event app, there should be a button called *Actions* on the top page. Tap on that for me,” I instructed.

“Right away, Master.”

“Wow... ♡ Eh-heh-heh! I feel like we’re about to do something forbidden here, Hiroto! ♡”

“Why? We’re not.”

I shook my head, brushing Akizuki’s remark aside. If something like that was enough to get my heart racing, I’d never be able to look Himeji in the eye.

“Okay, moving on... Himeji, can you keep the app open and try getting closer to the base? That should automatically bring up the *Occupy* button.”

“Right... Ah, there it is. So I just use that command here at the base?”

“Yeah, that should do it. If we were stealing a base from another team, we’d need a Support Spell called Neutralize first, but otherwise, one command is all it takes.”

As I went over this, I waved my right hand to the side, like I’d read about in the detailed rules. The event app on my device reacted, projecting an information display of Eimei’s current stats. This feature, called Sight Mode, showed me that Eimei currently had five members, our color was green, and our territory consisted of a single hex.

“All right, here I go... Occupy.”

The moment Himeji made her calm, composed declaration and tapped the button, the neutral flag glowed green, Eimei’s team color. However, it took a bit for the light to spread across the entire flag. It spread like an infection. After just over a minute, the flag was painted entirely green, Eimei’s seal drawn large on the surface. In seeming response, our two bases pulsated in unison. A moment later, a bright-green line of light formed, linking the two. Then all the hexes covered by the line turned green.

“...”

I checked our stats one more time, a bit overwhelmed by the display. The update was already visible. Our territory had increased to fifteen hexes. Just as the basic rules said, all the hexes in a straight line between the two bases were now Eimei’s property.

One base, and we only claim the hex that it’s on. Two, and we claim all the hexes in a straight line between them. Three or more, and it’s all the hexes in the resulting triangle or square or whatever. At least we won’t get insta-killed now, I guess.

I shook my head a bit as I went over the Game rules in my mind.

“Well, I guess that’s how occupying bases works. Not all that hard to do. Himeji, what did your device say while the base was in the process of being claimed?” I asked.

“It brought up a window saying *Cooldown time*. I tried using a couple of the Abilities I have installed, but neither worked,” she answered.

“I thought so. The cooldown must begin the moment you use the Occupy command, and then all your actions are disabled. Then, once the occupation is complete, you’re free to act again.”

“I see... That’s how it appears, yes. So while a command’s in progress, I’m left completely helpless.”

“Yeah. When we’re occupying a base, I guess we’ll all have to guard whoever’s claiming it.” I gazed into Himeji’s eyes while considering this. In this Game, you were free to use Abilities, cast Spells, and occupy bases without having to spend a resource like magic points or the like. However, every Game choice came with a cooldown, the length of which depended on your Action Level. In other words, actions were paid for in time.

“Your Action Level was nine, right, Himeji? Oh, but we have a Commander, so it’s eight now,” I said.

“Yes. The cooldown window on my screen said *eighty seconds*, so I guess the time it takes to occupy a base is ten times my Action Level.”

“Ten times, huh...?”

Himeji’s conjecture seemed valid. If she was right, it meant every team member besides me would require roughly a minute to claim a base. That was fine for now, at the start of this Game, but such a long cooldown in the midst of an enemy attack would be pretty scary.

“If anything, we should be glad it isn’t worse.” Enomoto, apparently done arguing with Asamiya for now, offered his thoughts. “Occupying a base isn’t a problem as long as we can keep an eye on the surrounding area for threats. It’s really the *other* options at our disposal we should be concerned about. Using Abilities, for example. Those come with cooldown times in ASTRAL as well, and players can’t perform any other actions until a cooldown expires. We might try to go on the attack, only to find ourselves unable to dodge any counter maneuvers. We need to keep an eye on that, or we’ll find ourselves with no way to escape.”

“...Yeah, true,” I replied.

That’s what attaching cooldown times to every single action meant. Even if

we were stuck in the middle of enemy territory, we'd be defenseless until that timer expired.

"Well," I said, "the first thing is to look into exactly how long everyone's cooldown times are. Chances are they'll all be linked directly to our Action Levels, but maybe some choices have different multipliers attached compared to claiming a base."

"Perfect! In that case, allow Noa, the super ace of Eimei, to step in! ♪"

Akizuki all but jumped at the chance. With a light step, she went over to the hex I occupied, looking up at me as she spoke. "Variable Control! ...Eh-heh-heh! I'm gonna set your affinity for me to max, Hiroto! ♡"

"Um, Akizuki, that's not gonna trigger any Ability."

"Aw, why not? You're so *mean*, Hiroto. Oh! But wait! I think I made a big discovery! Is this your way of saying 'My affinity for you is already maxed out, so it won't go up any further'?! Aw, what a sweet way to propose to me—"

"No."

"Boooo... Well, fine. Someday I really *will* charm you to death..." Akizuki grinned evilly as she tapped on her device. I guess she really did invoke an Ability during all that, because a countdown had appeared on her screen. "Um... Yeah, that gave me a five-second timer. My Action Level's currently five with your Commander bonus, so there was no multiplier that time."

"That's nowhere near as long as taking a base... But considering that could happen during combat, five seconds might still be a pretty severe restriction," I remarked.

"Yeah. It sounds really tough, huh? Eh-heh-heh! ♡ But you know, when I think about you holding me close, protecting me that whole time, I'm pretty glad for that cooldown... Ohhh! ♡"

Akizuki was sidling up to me, her cloying voice low. If I indulged in her game, it would make me blush—er, that is, it'd just encourage her. So I ignored it.

"Okay, we know how bases operate now." I focused on what we'd learned, if only to take my mind off Akizuki's full-on attack. The world of ASTRAL was built

on a field of hexes. When our team occupied the bases around this field, we also took over all the hexes within the area surrounded by those bases. Capturing a base demanded a long wait period afterward, though a player's Action Level multiplied by ten in seconds.

This cooldown time will be applied to other choices, too, and in assorted ways. Invoking Variable Control costs your Action level in seconds, with no multiplier.

While I mulled this over...

"...Hiro, Hiro... I thought you should know, um... Enomoto's his name, right? He's been looking at you for a while now, like he wants to say something. I think you might be overlooking something at the moment..."

Huh?

The sudden warning from Kagaya in my earpiece got me to glance at Enomoto. She was right. He was giving me a pretty stern look. In fact, it seemed as though he was judging me for not mentioning something critical.

"..."

My mind sprang into action. What was I supposed to pick up on that I hadn't already? *Was* there anything? We hadn't gotten to Spells yet, and I think we'd covered territories and bases well enough. I couldn't think of anything else, really.

Damn it... I really wanted to hang on to this for a bit longer, but oh well...

I decided to use one of my secret tricks—Predict Behavior, the special Ability ported over from my green star. I could only invoke it three times per Game, but it allowed me to learn what Enomoto was trying to convey.

Oh. I see. That's what it is.

"Also, there's one more thing..."

I kept my voice calm as I walked forward, trying as best as I could to attract my teammates' attention. I was headed for the new green-tinted Eimei hexes we'd gained. Using that act to run down the cooldown time on Predict Behavior as naturally as possible, I then invoked another Ability, †Jet-Black Wings†.

Wasting no time, I smiled and held up my display.

“Cooldown time, *twenty-three* seconds. My Action Level’s supposed to be locked at twenty-five, but now it’s twenty-three.”

Akizuki cocked her head. “Oh, you’re right... But why? What’s going on?”

“It wasn’t explicitly laid out in the basic rule sheet, but with Games like these, you’re usually given some kind of advantage when you’re inside your own territory. In this one, it looks like we’re given an Action Level bonus. It seems as though we get a minus-two to cooldowns within our hexes. It’s not much more than a blip, given my current Action Level, but if it brings Asamiya’s down from five to three, that’s a huge difference. So the more territory we can claim, the more of an advantage we’ll have in battle.”

“Ah, I see... Yeah, it makes perfect sense... Hey, how come Shino is so much smarter than you, Shinji? Do we even need you? You’re as unwelcome as, like, sales tax and stuff,” Asamiya said.

“Oh, come on. You’ve been useless to us so far, Nanase. What right do *you* have to complain?” Enomoto shot back.

“Huh?! I’ve been *super* helpful! Just *being* here gives people something nice to look at!”

“I got sick of that view long ago.”

“Shut up!”

Asamiya tried desperately to get the rest of us to look at her while Enomoto made every attempt to thwart her. They continued to argue for a little while... But once Enomoto got free of Asamiya’s grip, he politely adjusted his collar and turned to face me.

“Hmm. I suppose you’re more than just another big mouth,” he said.

Wow, scary...

I’d need to be cautious. My teammate was constantly assessing me.

#

ASTRAL was scheduled to run over five days from Monday to Friday, but each day was divided into a first half from nine to noon and a second half from two to five. Between reviewing the rules and getting our team together, the first

half of today went by in a flash. The break ended just as swiftly, and we were on to the second portion.

With the Game starting up again after two hours, I promptly waved my right hand to go into Sight Mode. We had taken a third base during the final minutes of the first half, so our territory currently encompassed forty-five hexes. That seemed like a pretty good pace so early on... But that wasn't what I focused on. Instead, I looked at the Spells section below the territory count.

"...All Spells are generally obtainable from bases," I said, projecting my screen for the group. "We went over how we can take bases to build our territory this morning, but that's not all bases are used for. In ASTRAL, they also generate one new Spell every fifteen minutes. That's one a pop if you have just one base, two if you've got two, and so on. With each base you earn, your Spell supply expands."

"Hmm... So we can't get any Spells unless we pick up some bases? That feels really mean," Asamiya commented.

"No, we have the base we started with. It'd never be zero. A single one wouldn't be a great position to be in, though...", I replied.

"Oh, right, yeah... Boy, Shino, you really are a genius, huh? You're such a kind teacher, too, unlike Shinji here."

Asamiya shot a look at Enomoto, obviously hoping to get a reaction from him. However, it looked to me that Enomoto was more focused on observing than falling for Asamiya's ploy. He kept that stern gaze on me at all times. It certainly didn't make me feel very comfortable.

Still, it was my job to trick him. And everyone else.

"...Ahem."

With a light cough, I checked my device again.

"Knowing that, I actually just used my Information Control: EX Ability to scan the local area. I only have data on a region of around a seventy-hex radius from here, but I've mapped out all the base locations. With this knowledge, I think it'll be much easier to decide on a future direction."

I sent out my map data to the rest of the team. The ASTRAL field map was set up to expand as a player obtained new information. It was totally blank at the beginning, but now a chunk of the bottom-left side was visible to us.

“ ... ”

The data I’d obtained from my Seven Star–level Information Control—that is, the data Kagaya mined for me—actually extended out slightly beyond what I’d revealed. However, if I gave out too much info, people might get suspicious. It was essential to maintain a certain pace.

“Eh-heh-heh! You never fail to amaze me, Hiroto! ♡” The sweet-toned Akizuki had her hands clasped behind her, and she gazed up into my eyes. “So is everyone okay with concentrating on seizing bases for now?”

“I guess that’s fine. I’m assuming the bases are positioned at random, but now we can see two bases to the north and another pair in the east. I suppose we might as well pick one of those directions to start with.”

“No, forget about going north. East is the only move to make here.” Enomoto shot down my seemingly sensible proposal immediately. I gave him a questioning glance.

“Isn’t it obvious?” he asked flatly, his shrewd eyes sizing me up. “You said they were positioned at random, but from what I can tell by this map, they’re located at roughly equal distances from each other. I’m sure the placement formula’s been adjusted to make the event more exciting. Based on that assumption, we can predict where we’ll find bases beyond the scope of our current map. The nearest base to us is likely to the east, outside the range of Shinohara’s chart. Don’t you think that’s the best way to head first?”

“ ... ”

I mean, he’s right, but how does he know that?! He’s so scary!

I scowled internally, recalling the map data I hadn’t shown to the team yet. This was Shinji Enomoto, the All-Seeing Six Star who ran the student council. His mind circuits were so beyond comprehension that no normal person could ever keep up with him. But I didn’t reveal any of my trepidation, nodding like nothing was wrong.

“Yeah, I guess so. It’s not a lock, but that’s the most likely possibility. So if we’ve agreed on going east, let me get back on topic. Like I said, Spells are sent from each base every fifteen minutes... But we can’t actually use them as is.”

“We can’t use them?” Asamiya frowned. “So what’s the point, then?”

“Not as is,” I replied. “Once a Spell’s generated by a base, it’s sent over to what are referred to as team slots. You need to move them from the team slots to your own to make them usable. In other words, you have to load them into your own device.”

I began to explain how Spells worked, based on the detailed rules I’d read during the break. Actually, it was more like Himeji had crammed them into my head. Basically, the team slots were common storage that every team member had access to. If someone wanted to use a Spell stored there, they’d have to withdraw it and add it to their deck, their personal slots.

“Mmm...?” Akizuki scratched her cheek in confusion. “But, Hiroto, if we can move Spells from the team slots to our own, it doesn’t matter exactly where we store them, does it? ’Cause I think we could just leave them in the team slots for everyone... Or does moving a Spell count as an action, too?”

“No, it doesn’t. However, the rules state you can’t access team slots during battle. The only Spells you can access are those stored in your own slots when combat begins. Each player can hold a number of Spells equal to their team’s bases times three. So you need to make sure you’ve always got a deck of Spells handy.”

“Hmmm. Okay. But I don’t really know what kind of Spells there are yet. Guess I’ll just pick a few at random to start with! ♡ That’s the Noa-style approach, y’know? ♡”

“Hey, Noa-chi, don’t just take them all! I want some, too!” Asamiya complained.

As the two girls sifted through our Spells, Himeji and I checked our team slots. We’d gone over this during the break as well. There are a total of eight Spell types in ASTRAL. Here are their categories and how they all work:

CORE ATTACK SKILLS

Sword Flash—Range: 10 feet (approx. 1 hex). Base damage: 1.

Gunfire—Range: 33 feet (approx. 3 hexes). Base damage: 1.

Magic Missile—Range: 66 feet (approx. 5 hexes). Base damage: 1.

SPECIAL ATTACK SKILL

Trap—Sets a trap on the target hex. Triggered when a member of an opposing team steps on the hex. Place multiple Traps on a hex to deal extra damage and additional effects.

SUPPORT SKILLS

Stealth—Temporarily makes one player invisible.

Defense Wall—Temporarily makes one player invincible against damage.

Cancel—Skips cooldown time once only. (Can be cast during cooldown time.)

Neutralize—Transforms the target hex into a neutral, unclaimed hex. If used on a neutral hex, it claims the hex for your team.

“Hmm...”

I quietly brought a hand to my lips as I reviewed the Spell list. Ignoring the Support Spells for now, it was clear that our attack types were important. Spells were the only way to damage players, and that naturally made Attack Spells some of the most vital. The number you possessed mattered a lot, and so did your job-based compatibility.

Soldiers are good with swords and weak against guns. Mages are good at magic and weak against swords...and Spies are good with guns but weak against magic. It's the classic sort of rock-paper-scissors setup.

When battle broke out, we'd have to gather info on our opponents quickly, then distribute Spells and assign roles without making any mistakes. Each player starts with five Life Points, so it'd take five Spells to defeat them. However, the

right job could deal two or four damage per attack. Every strike incurred a cooldown as well. Minimizing the actions you took was critical.

However, the Commander wasn't good with any Spell type and was weak to all of them, so...

"..."

"Hey, Hiroto, how long's the cooldown time for Spell abilities?" Akizuki inquired.

"Mm? Oh, well, I think it'd be whatever your Action Level is, in seconds... Oh, but wait. Attack Spells come in three different ranges, so I bet the cooldown time changes in proportion with that. We'd better test it out."

"Oh, me, me! I wanna do it!" Asamiya, who'd been listening to my conversation with Akizuki, raised her hand. With a sweet yet aggressive smile, she pointed her device at Enomoto.

"I'm gonna try to slash you, okay, Shinji?"

"Whoa, wait, Nanase. What're you gonna do if it kills me?"

"Oh, it'll be all right! I can't tell you why, but I'm sure it'll be all right."

"No, it *won't*. You're a Soldier, and you're testing your blade against a Mage, who's weak against your attacks. I'll be near death at best... And if you use another damage-boosting Ability, you'll knock me out with one hit. So will you stop playing around, please?"

"Awww... You're really that against it? Isn't it every guy's dream to get killed by a cute girl?"

"I'm not going to comment on that logic... But it doesn't even apply to you, Nanase. Not with *your* looks."

"Okay, you're dead."

"" ...""

While keeping a prudent distance from the pair as they launched into their nth argument, I exchanged strained expressions with Akizuki.

Hang on...

“Hey, Akizuki, where’s Hime—?”

“Guess whoooo?”

I felt a gentle caress. Something slid over my face. The world went dark. It felt like someone snuggled up close to me from behind. A faintly sweet breath tickled my ear, but I couldn’t tell who it was. However, it didn’t take much to deduce the culprit.

“Himeji, right?”

“Heh-heh! You guessed it.”

She stepped back, removing her hands from my eyes. She was blushing a bit and looked embarrassed as she cleared her throat.

“Since we’re testing Spells, I tried using Stealth. The cooldown was sixteen seconds, which is twice my Action Level. I’m going to assume that applies to all Support Spells, but I’d like to test all the others out, just in case.”

“Oh yeah... That’s a good idea.”

“Um... Master? Have I made the wrong assumption?”

“N-no, no, it’s not that. I was the one who made a mistake, actually.”

“Sorry?”

“Wowww, Himeji. So gutsy... ♡ Eh-heh-heh! Even I’m blushing a little. ♡”

“Huh? What?” Akizuki wrapped Himeji in an overexcited death embrace, leaving the maid a confused mess. As cool as Himeji usually was, seeing her all out of sorts was a little novel.

Anyway, we proceeded with testing all our Spells in order. Attack Spells worked as I predicted. Sword attacks cost your Action Level in seconds of cooldown time, guns twice your level, and magic three times. Basically, the longer the range, the more time you had to sit exposed afterward.

We worked all this out as we explored the map, expanding our territory. In the end, we never ran into any other teams on the first day. Based on the auxiliary map data the Company fed me, our first battle would likely come tomorrow.

“ ... ”

Eimei School finished the day controlling 175 hexes' worth of map area. We'd claimed five bases, which provided us with a pretty ample supply of Spells. However, I had to assume that Enomoto was disappointed that I hadn't defeated any enemy Commanders yet. There'd also been no word from the Clone, which was troubling. Apparently, she'd shown up a few times on Libra's live feeds of the Game, but all she did was expand her territory, just like us.



I can't say I'm completely happy about how things are going... But we didn't run into any foes. This was more of a tutorial than anything. The real fight starts tomorrow, I guess.

With a light sigh, I watched as the first day of ASTRAL concluded.

#

All the participants in the May Interschool Competition this year were being housed at the Shiki Island Grand Hotel, located near the Special Development Zone. The six-story luxury complex came complete with pools and tennis courts out front. The entire hotel had been reserved just for the one hundred high school students in the Game, something you'd probably never see anywhere but the Academy.

The first floor of the hotel had the lobby, front desk, restaurant, and a large Japanese-style public bath. The second floor offered karaoke setups, game rooms, an indoor gym, and other entertainment facilities. The guest rooms went from the third floor up. The hotel restaurant provided meals for event participants, but we also had access to the lobby's convenience store and room service, all free of charge. We couldn't ask for much better treatment.

"Phew..."

The five of us returned from the field together, arriving at the restaurant at around six in the evening after the first day.

"Wow, pretty busy in here, huh?" Asamiya said, confidently leading the way for us. As we stepped in, a good twenty people looked our way all at once. Each of them had a similar reaction. Their eyes were wide with surprise, or maybe they were on high alert. I caught a few whispers, too.

"There's the Eimei team."

"Whoa! Hiroto Shinohara! Is it really him?"

"Well, yeah. It's about time the Academy's best showed up."

"He's not the only one, though. There's Enomoto the All-Seeing and Asamiya the Golden Demon."

"Damn... That's just too much firepower..."

“Huh? Hey, guys, don’t forget about Noa the Little Devil! I’m the top ace from Eimei! Woo! ♡”

“““Ooh...?!”””

Akizuki poked her face out from behind me, flashing her mischievous smile. Several students from other schools, all boys, suddenly clutched their hearts and slumped down on their tables. The eerie sight made me glare at Akizuki.

“What did you do?”

“Eh-heh-heh! What do you mean? I kind of forgot. ♡”

“Well... I think I have a good idea by now...”

Akizuki’s victims were likely people she’d destroyed in some old event with her Little Devil powers. They’d been enticed by that bewitchingly cute smile, only to have everything taken from them... I’m sure she was a source of trauma for a lot of guys out there.

“Heh-heh. You’re quite popular, Master,” Himeji said to me quietly.

“I wouldn’t call it that. Everyone’s wary of me,” I replied.

Since I was pretending to be a Seven Star, this kind of reaction from a crowd was better than bored indifference.

“Ohhh wowwww, it’s the Eimei team! Awesome! What incredible presence!”

I scanned the room for the outburst and spied a dark-haired girl at a far table casting me the most impassioned of looks. Her exclamation wasn’t too different from anyone else’s, but she wasn’t intimidated by me. Instead, she exuded pure excitement.

That set her apart a little, but there was something else distracting about her. Actually, it wasn’t her as much as the very familiar person seated beside her. That long, luxurious red hair; those large, sharp, ruby eyes. Sarasa Saionji was at the table reserved for the Third Ward’s Ohga School. She grinned at me smugly, arms crossed. It was bold, aggressive, and supremely composed—a classic act from the Empress.

“ ... ”

I looked back at Saionji, then lifted my right hand.

Hmm. What should I do? Given my usual performance, it'd be more natural to pick a fight with her, but would that look too contrived on day one of the event? Ah, but...

I hurriedly considered all the options. Before I could dismiss any interaction as too risky...

"...Well, hello! It's been a while, huh, Hiroto Shinohara? Heh-heh!" a familiar voice called from behind. It traveled across the room accompanied by the tapping of leather boots. When their owner caught up with me, he threw back his cloak, sending it billowing to one side. I recognized him instantly.

"Seiran Kugasaki..."

Kugasaki grinned as I spoke his name.

"Heh-heh! It's an honor to know you remember my full name, Seven Star. Allow me to thank you. You have graciously inserted yourself into this event, granting me the chance to gain my revenge..."

"Whatever. I'm not here for you."

"Heh-heh... I am unconcerned with your reasons. All I wanted was another chance to fight you. *Ah*. How long I have waited for the moment! Ever since I lost to you in Self-Styled Game #27—since that instant in time—you have ever been in my thoughts!"

"Well, thanks. I might've been happy to hear that if you weren't a man."

"Hah! Ridiculous! Feel free to act like you're above it all while you still can. You, Hiroto Shinohara, and your Eimei School as well, will be taken down by Otowa School in short order! I hope you're looking forward to that fateful moment!"

Kugasaki held his right hand up to his face for dramatic effect as he spoke, all but shouting so the entire floor could hear him. Then he whirled his cloak around once more and disappeared into the restaurant with a high, echoing laugh.

As I watched him depart, Himeji clasped her hands in front of her and said to

me, “Otowa School from the Eighth Ward... Despite the unique personalities who call it home, they only made it to tenth in last year’s school rankings. However, its team is built entirely from members of Mr. Kugasaki’s Self-Styled Holy Knights this time. For all his eccentricities, Mr. Kugasaki is an extremely charismatic leader, enough so to make his team one of the greater threats.”

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right.”

I sighed and shook my head at my maid’s cold, calculated analysis. After that slight delay, I decided to head to Eimei’s table.

I think you can tell a lot about someone’s personality by how they tackle a buffet.

Upon reaching my table, we spent half an hour enjoying dinner and chatting with each other. However, our individual approaches couldn’t have been more different. I try to maintain a certain balance with my selections. However, Akizuki took nothing but salad and pasta. Enomoto, meanwhile, exclusively ate little finger sandwiches. I wondered why, until I realized he was using his free hand to read an ebook the whole time. Asamiya beside me, on the other hand, piled her plate high with a little bit of everything. Then she got a second plate arranged just so for social media purposes. She ate every bit of it after taking pictures, at least, which I appreciated.

“Here you are, Master.”

Himeji, meanwhile, poured a cup of coffee for me. She’d picked up a good balance of food like I had, but she returned to maid service immediately after finishing.

“Maaaaan...” Asamiya seemed oddly enthralled by that. “You really *are* a maid, huh, Yukirin? Wow, I think I’m starting to get jealous.”

“Jealous...?”

“Well, yeah! You’re *sooo* cute, Yukirin! If you did that stuff for me, I’d be reduced to a pile of goo within, like, two hours, I swear!”

“Um... It wouldn’t do to let that happen to you...so I’ll decline the offer, thank you.”

“And you’re so adorable when you act a little distressed like that! You’re *such* an angel... Ah, but I get why you’d wanna serve someone as powerful and reliable as Shino. *Meanwhile...*”

Asamiya listlessly turned her head toward Enomoto beside her and rested her chin on a palm. Enomoto was too focused on whatever he was reading to react at all. Asamiya scowled a bit but then let out an alluring sigh, gave up, and directed her gaze to Akizuki across from her. In particular, she stared at the other girl’s meal.

“Noa-chi, aren’t you gonna get hungry later? It’s all just veggies!”

“Mmm, not really? I never eat much, and I had a bunch of pasta, too. You know, I was actually wondering if you do anything special foodwise, Miya.”

“Nah, I’m pretty physically active, so I conk out real fast if I don’t eat enough. Plus, I like eating.”

“Hmm... No wonder you’re one of the most popular girls in year three. But I’m number one, of course! ♡”

“Aw, there it is again! I love when you say stuff like that, Noa-chi...”

Asamiya gave Akizuki a pure, guileless smile as she sang the other girl’s praises. They were both pretty selfish in their own ways, but they got along surprisingly well.

“...”

With not much else to do, I listened to them chat while scanning the dining area. I spied a few others checking out other tables, too. With nothing but proven performers selected for this event, they all could presumably judge how talented a person was just by examining their faces.

Not that I really recognize anybody here, I groused to myself with a sigh. I really didn’t have enough necessary knowledge... And no sooner did I think as much than I felt someone tug on the pant leg of my uniform. I looked to my side and was met with Himeji’s clear eyes peering at me. That’s when I got an idea.

“Hey, Himeji, if you had to pick a handful of players I ought to watch out for, who would you choose?”

“Hmm. Let’s see...” Himeji frowned a bit. The other three people at the table must’ve been interested in the topic, because even Enomoto stopped reading to listen. “Based on my amateur opinion,” Himeji said quietly after clearing her throat, “in terms of reputation alone, Ms. Sarasa Saionji is head and shoulders above the rest. The Ohga Academy second-year from the Third Ward is also known as the Empress for a good reason. She’s a former Seven Star and a true genius who’s mastered every genre of game. The team she’s leading is generally acknowledged to be a strong contender. Ohga is always competing for the top spots in the yearly school rankings—last year they made it to number one, thanks in no small part to boasting a Seven Star like her. It should also be noted that nearly the whole rest of her team consists of the Empress’s closest associates... Her imperial guard, if you will.”

“Huh. That sure sounds tough.”

Tough for her, that is...

I silently said a prayer for Saionji. I’m sure that arrangement would help with teamwork, but given the tightrope she’s walking, it must make things incredibly difficult for her. She was constantly expected to be the perfect little rich girl all the time, with no safe haven.

“...Would that include the black-haired girl who was shouting at me earlier?” I asked.

“It would, yes,” Himeji said. “That was Ms. Momo Asuka. She actually went to middle school in another ward, but she idolized Ms. Saionji so much that she switched to Ohga Academy, which was hardly a straightforward task. Despite her obsessive nature, she is quite talented. She’s still a first-year in high school, but she’s already become a Four Star. People on STOC call her the Supernova.”

“Whoa...”

Frankly, I had trouble believing it. Her, of all people? But as I thought about it, it made sense. In this Game featuring teams from every ward, you’d never see anyone ranked Three Star or lower. Except for me, of course.

“...”

Himeji cleared her throat. “Moving on to other wards... Well, Mr. Seiran

Kugasaki, the man who gave that dramatic speech earlier, is worthy of note. He's a third-year Five Star from Otowa School in the Eighth Ward. People nicknamed him the Phoenix because he keeps losing to the Empress, only to rise back up and challenge her again later."

"...Yeah, I know *him* pretty well."

"Indeed, there's not much more I need to tell you about him."

After introducing Sarasa Saionji and Seiran Kugasaki a bit more to our teammates, Himeji shifted her position a little, her eyes on a table at the far end of the dining hall. Following her gaze, I saw three male students sitting and chatting. One among them stuck out. He was handsome, his hair slicked back, and this weird, intimidating aura surrounded him.

"Now I'll talk about a few people my master hasn't yet encountered. First, let's discuss Shinra School, located in the Seventh Ward. Aggressiveness in gameplay is that institution's credo, earning it third place in last year's list—its best performance in several years. Shinra School's star player is Toya Kirigaya. Winning means absolutely everything to him, and as his wild looks suggest, he's willing to do anything for it. He's a Six Star, and his nickname's the Demigod Dictator."

"...The Demigod Dictator?" I parroted back.

"That's right," Enomoto bluntly replied with a nod. "As the stories go, if you challenge him to a Game, he buries you with tactics, trash talk, and even some occasional violence. Those who lose to him suffer such terrible defeats that it's virtually impossible for you to get back into the ring again. I'm sure that's at least partly an exaggeration, but I am aware of at least a few people who left the island immediately after a Game with him."

Huh...? The hell's up with that?!

I could hardly believe my ears. It was hard to tell how much of that was the truth, but if Shinji Enomoto himself was willing to go that far, it certainly convinced me of his menace. I broke into a cold sweat while Asamiya raised her hand.

"Hey, hey! I just remembered—he challenged me to a Game a pretty long

time ago. Shinji kept bugging me to drop out, so I stalled for a while, but then he withdrew the request outta nowhere.”

“Pff. I never thought for a moment you were serious about accepting that invite, Nanase. Why were you in such a rush to hand one of Eimei’s stars over to him, you idiot?”

“Yeah, yeah, okay... But I’m *not* an idiot, all right?! I might’ve won, for all you know!”

Asamiya slapped her palms on the table to accentuate her point. Enomoto shot her a dubious look and shook his head several times before turning his attention back to me.

“Enough about Nanase’s rantings. You see the group of girls two tables to the right of Kirigaya’s?”

“Hmm? Yeah,” I replied.

“The one in the ponytail, sitting in the middle... Watch out for her. She’s Senri Kururugi. The de facto leader of Tsuyuri Girls’ Institute in the Sixteenth Ward. A second-year and a Five Star. She’s been participating in events constantly since she entered high school. She possesses far more experience than most other participants.”

“Mmm... I see. That doesn’t sound too exceptional to me so far, though...,” I said.

“Don’t be so sure. If you ask me, she’s something of a wild animal. If we’re unlucky enough to run into her during this event, I’d recommend keeping away from her as best you can.”

“...Huh? What do you mean?” I asked.

“He means,” Himeji quietly interjected while I was confused, “that’s just how vicious she can be. Just as Mr. Enomoto says, Ms. Kururugi participated in every event held last year. During the last May Interschool Competition, she claimed an impressive victory. However, the Ability she obtained along the way was, to say the least, a major problem.”

I raised an eyebrow. “A problem? How so?”

“It’s called One-Shot Kill, and under the right conditions, it can immediately knock out another player. For example, in this Game, she could add that to an Attack Spell to immediately take five Life Points in one hit.”

“ ... ”

“That is the unvarnished truth. And ever since she gained that Ability, Tsuyuri Girls’ Institute has built its teams around fulfilling the conditions for triggering One-Shot Kill as quickly as possible, so Ms. Kururugi can lay waste to the opposition. It’s proven to be a winning strategy across many events. They call her Hell’s Priestess for the sheer diabolical strength that Ability gives her. Her school reached ninth place in the rankings off the back of that power, despite being below fifteenth place until two years ago. Such a dramatic rise is unheard of.”

I’m not sure I would’ve believed that if Himeji wasn’t the one telling me. I was too shocked to reply.

Himeji tamed back a bit of her silver hair. “As a result, keeping your distance from Tsuyuri Girls’ Institute’s team is perfectly reasonable. It’s got an astonishing winning record in team Games. In fact, when it comes to such Games, it’s safe to say Ms. Kururugi is as powerful as the Empress. Master, I sincerely advise you to keep an eye out for her. She could take down Eimei and Ohga otherwise.”

Wow... That’s insane.

Himeji’s profile on Kururugi made me clench my hands. Kururugi looked like a serious-minded girl, the type who’d be on a school kendo team, but otherwise not too different from any other teen. After learning about her true nature, though, I couldn’t help but fear her.

“...Mm?”

Kururugi stood and left her table, walking straight for ours and stopping right in front of me. With one hand on the wooden sword she wore on her belt, she addressed me with a chiding tone.

“It is an honor to receive such high praise, Seven Star. However, talking behind my back is hardly appropriate. Even if the gossip is benign, it’s not nice

to spread rumors.”

H-help! I’m scared! And why’s she got that sword on?!

Kururugi looked down at me with sharpened eyes. I felt myself withering under the gaze, but I didn’t reveal any of that, naturally. Instead, I replied with a little shrug.

“Yeah, sorry if I hurt your feelings. I only recently transferred to this island, so I still don’t know too much about people from other wards. We were just talking about your past performances.”

“Ah, I see. My apologies, then. Speaking of accomplishments, you certainly seem to be a handful. They say you have powerful breakthrough skills—analyzing tiny amounts of information from your opponent to deduce a sure way to victory. People claim you graduated from a U.S. university at the age of five and were invited to an organization that subjected you to cruel developmental experiments...”



“Wait, Kururugi. Who told you...? I mean, where did you hear that?”

“Well, from Libra, of course.”

Damn them...

I kept it cool, but internally I seethed at what Libra—Kazami, really—was doing to my reputation. Kururugi promised to be a tough opponent, but she saw me as some incredible threat as well.

Kururugi shook her head. “But no matter what overwhelming strength you have, I will *never* lose in a team match. Tsuyuri Girls’ Institute *will* reign supreme in ASTRAL... And *your* team setup looks like Swiss cheese to me.”

With that foreboding statement, Kururugi gave Enomoto and Asamiya a pointed look. Both eyed her in return cautiously. She received their gazes with a little laugh.

“...Well, I look forward to having a bout against you.”

With that, she strode off exactly the same way she came in.

“”””” ... “””””

None of us could say anything for a little while. Here was Senri Kururugi, Hell’s Priestess and the living personification of one-hit death. The best strategy against her in battle was to run. I hadn’t fought her yet, so none of that seemed too real to me, but there was no doubting that she engendered worry. She was trouble. An enemy.

“Well,” Himeji said finally after we stewed in oppressive awkwardness, “I suppose nothing more needs to be said about Ms. Kururugi. If I could introduce one more person to you, Master... It has to be the girl playing for Seijo School from the Twelfth Ward. I’m referring to the Clone, of course, the villain who’s picked a fight with the Empress and pulled you into it. She’s undoubtedly a fake, but she does have supporters.”

“Yeah, I can see that.”

I certainly wasn’t a fan of all that, but I nodded instead of complaining in public about it. There were undoubtedly people who took the Clone’s side for fun, regardless of whether they believed she was telling the truth.

My eyes went to the tables set up against the walls of the dining room. A screen was on the wall above them, displaying Kazami as she covered the highlights from today's gameplay. I'd wondered if she might join us for dinner. She loved playing to a crowd, after all. However, Libra was providing refereeing and organizational support for ASTRAL, so I guess those in charge didn't want her mingling with the players. Regardless, the Clone came up in her coverage. That ruby-eyed impostor was presently front and center on the screen.

"By the way," Enomoto quietly stated, "she's gunning for you, isn't she, Shinohara?"

"Yeah. But I wouldn't worry. I'm not out to cause extra trouble for my teammates."

"Pfft." I thought Enomoto might argue my reply, but he only snorted in disapproval.

Asamiya frowned. "Geez, Shinji. Is mouthing off to Shino all you can do?"

"Aw," Akizuki cooed. "You can cause all the trouble you want to for meee... ♡"

In the midst of all this, Himeji—who'd been quiet for a bit—brought her lips to my ear. "You know," she whispered, "it goes without saying that no matter how many no-name Five or Six Stars oppose you, you're still the strongest, Master."

With that behind us, it was about time for us to return to our rooms. It was only just past eight, but the first day of this huge event had proven exhausting. I was honestly ready to take a bath and hop into bed.

However...

"So how're we gonna divide up the rooms?"

Just as everyone was about to get up, Akizuki's question rocketed us back to our seats. That's right. We had yet to decide on rooms.

The entire hotel had been rented out for the May Interschool Competition, giving participants nearly free rein on the place. There wasn't any set limit on how many rooms each team could use. All five of us had to get room keys at the

front desk, but we were free to divide ourselves any way we liked. We could each take our own room, even.

Akizuki bounced over to me with an evil smile. “Eh-heh-heh... I’d sure like to share a room with you, Hiroto. ♡”

With just a touch of redness to her cheeks, she gave a little tug on my sleeve. She acted more embarrassed about it than she used to, but that devilish cuteness was still alive and well. With her body slightly pressed against mine, she peered up at me. At this angle, I could just about make out her breasts beneath her uniform.

“Look, Akizuki—”

“You don’t want me?”

“Er...”

Those alluring lips all but ensnared me. I tore my eyes away, though, looking at the rest of my team to distract me. Enomoto responded with a despondent shrug.

“Hmph... What a ridiculous farce. We’ll just be sleeping. What’s it matter where we sleep? I’m happy with anything, as long as I’m not rooming with Nanase.”

“You call it a farce, but you’ve still got your own request! And you’re fine with *anyone* but me? So it’s perfectly fine for you to share a room with any other girl, huh?!”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You did! I can read between the lines! Shinji, you freak! You molester!”

I felt like Asamiya was trying to rile him up on purpose. She pouted and hurled insults at him without holding back. Himeji gave me a puzzled look as she beheld the scene.

“Mm... It’s a given that my master and I will share a room, so if Ms. Akizuki joins us as well, then doesn’t it follow that you two would share a room?”

“Wait! No! No way, I can’t! S-staying in a room with Shinji would be so embarrassing...Wait. I mean, it’s physically impossible for me! I’d rather stay by

myself!”

“I agree. How could I ever room with someone like her? She tosses and turns all damn night.”

“That was back in third grade!”

“You slept together in third grade...?” Akizuki asked, sounding a bit flustered. She brought both hands to her cheeks as if embarrassed for the pair. Then she returned to steamy romantic mode with me. “Eh-heh-heh... You know, Hiroto, you could use me like a body pillow if you want... ♡”

“No, I’m afraid I cannot allow you to take such a role, Ms. Akizuki. If he needs a pillow, I will be one for him,” Himeji stated flatly.

Now I was being pulled by the sleeves in two directions, faced with a decision as monumental as it was unwanted. I was dying on the inside, but on the surface, I kept calm and tried to figure out how to reply.

“...!”

During this absurd display, a girl stomped over with her long, gorgeous hair flowing behind her. She put her hands together, ruby-red eyes burning as she spoke.

“You really are clueless. Look, this was so obvious that I didn’t think it needed to be spelled out for you, but the floors are divided between boys and girls, all right? There aren’t any mixed rooms, and they have device sensors on all the floors so you can’t sneak to other levels.”

“Oh... Really?” I said.

“Yes, really!” Saionji’s body trembled with rage. I shrugged, rather than give any kind of reply.

“Hmph! Gotta watch you like a hawk all the time...”

She mumbled something while returning to her Ohga School teammates, but I didn’t catch it.

“...Well,” Enomoto said as he stood, “I guess that settles our room arrangements.”

This was an official Academy event; naturally, there were no coed rooms. Akizuki apparently knew this all along because she let go of me and stuck out her tongue in the most mischievously cute fashion. Himeji, surprisingly enough, proved to be the last holdout, but after Asamiya suggested “Hey, let’s all hit the bath!” her expression softened a bit—just a bit.

Asamiya’s already made friends with Himeji, huh? Impressive...

I had nothing but praise, and a little surprise, for how sociable Asamiya could be.

Following a tumultuous meal, we left the restaurant.

#

Enomoto and I were assigned Room 513 on the fifth floor. The Shiki Island Grand Hotel was all guest rooms from the third level up. During the May Interschool Competition, the third and fourth floors were reserved for girls, and the guys got the fifth and sixth. Sensors were in place to keep students off the wrong floors; high security, indeed. However, that wasn’t the only odd thing about the rooms. They were all astonishingly large and fancy, sporting super-plush beds, tons of space to relax in, and a big TV and refrigerator.

I really would have preferred my own room, I thought as I placed my device on the nightstand. Having to room with Enomoto meant I couldn’t contact the Company or discuss certain things with Himeji. Unfortunately, requesting a private room for myself could be construed as suspicious, so I had to make do. According to Himeji, Saionji’s teammates all fought each other for the right to room with her, but in the end, she got one to herself.

“...”

Enomoto had been quietly reading on his device for a while, lying in bed with his back against the headboard. He’d finished bathing and was in a modest set of sweats.

Something occurred to me.

“Hey, Enomoto, what are you reading anyway? You look pretty absorbed in it.”

“You can start calling me *Mr.* Enomoto anytime, Shinohara. If your family

never taught you manners, I'd be glad to beat them into you instead. Anyway, I'm just reading one of those 'light novels' right now. Mainstream media."

"A light novel? Wow, that's a bit of a surprise. I assumed you were poring through some kind of school text."

"What are you talking about? Why would I spend my free time on that?"

"Oh... I guess you've got a point."

"If you presented me with what amounts to a barren table of facts, I could absorb that in a few minutes, because there's nothing deeper to it than that. But novels don't work that way. A story isn't like an ore deposit you're constantly trying to mine resources from. It's an entertaining way to broaden your imagination."

"...Uh-huh."

What a reasonable answer. Yet at the same time, it felt intimidating. I flopped into bed while listening to Enomoto. The idea of him reading through a thick textbook in minutes was difficult to reconcile, but I guess it made sense he didn't spend his free time doing that.

I had only just closed my eyes when Enomoto called to me.

"Shinohara... You're not seriously just going to sleep as you are, right? You haven't bathed yet."

"Yeah, I know. I'll get to that after I rest a little," I replied.

"Oh? Well, all right..."

His attention returned to his device. Enomoto had a blunt, no-nonsense personality, and we'd squabbled over who'd take the Commander role, but he wasn't a bad guy. In fact, I would've put him in the "nice" category.

But I'm still gonna have to trick him this whole time.

I thought about that for a bit while lying in bed. Gradually, I grew more tired until I lost consciousness.

"Oh, crap, what time is it?"

I awoke at an obviously late hour. A quick check revealed it was past one in

the morning. My chat with Enomoto had been around ten, I think, so I'd slept for three hours. The lights were off, Enomoto was fast asleep, and there was a thin blanket placed over me.

"Wow, he really is nice," I said to myself as I got out of bed and stretched. I'd dozed for three hours, so I wasn't feeling particularly sleepy. I also remembered that I hadn't taken a bath yet. I at least wanted to take a shower... But it wouldn't be nice to wake Enomoto up that way.

"Well, a shower can probably wait until the morning... Oh, wait."

Then I recalled something, bringing my right hand to my lips. This hotel had a large public bath space that was open twenty-four hours. The woman at the front desk had gone on about how it was set up for everything from morning to late-night customers.

I decided to head to the first floor instead of the unit bath in our room. I'd been told there were towels in the changing room, so I only brought my device and a change of clothes.

It being so late, I didn't run into anyone in the hall. However, right after I made it down the stairs, just before I turned toward the bath...

"...?"

I sensed someone crossing in front of me, and I squinted. The lighting here had been dimmed, so it was too dark to know for certain, but I felt pretty confident there was another person there.

"Oof! Ngh! Huh? Oh, not quite... *Hnngh!*"

"..."

A girl was making a serious effort in the restaurant area by the cash register. Apparently, she was trying to stow a tray up on a high shelf, but between its height and her lack thereof, she was having trouble. The tray shook a bit whenever she stretched up, the dishes threatening to fall.

"Time to break out my secret powers!"

The girl glared at the shelf like she was about to avenge her parents' murder. Planting her delicate feet down, she prepared herself for a mighty leap...

“Hold on.”

“Fwah?!”

...but before she could jump, I swiped the tray from her. She looked at me, eyes wide with surprise, as I safely placed it on the shelf.

“There. I don’t know what you thought jumping would accomplish. That could’ve been a disaster.”

“...”

“Oh, did you want to do it yourself? Sorry about that. You can blame me for that one, so just head back to your room, okay?”

I waved at the girl, who watched me silently. Before I could leave, she grabbed my shirt.

“Um...,” she mumbled.

“Hmm? Need something else?”

“I, um... I didn’t thank you yet.”

She averted her eyes, all but forcing me to move a little to see her face.

Her appearance suggested she was in middle school. Based on her height alone I might have believed she was even younger than that. She was pretty compact. Her dark hair was cut in a bob, and her eyes were a piercing shade of black. However, her bangs were long enough that they nearly concealed her right eye, and she sported gothic Lolita attire. Nothing over the top—it was pretty simple in design, actually—but her fashion and cuteness melted together in a nice way. To put it in a less flattering way, I thought she was trying to seem older than she was.

Regardless, she bowed her head, her left eye peering up at me.

“Thank you very...much?”

“Why are you phrasing that like a question? You’re the one who stopped me.”

“I don’t know what you’ll do to me... I don’t want to carelessly leave myself open.”

“You don’t have to be *that* cautious!” I blurted out reflexively. What a

dramatic difference from the girl who'd been struggling to put a tray back. She wasn't much for making eye contact with me at all, perhaps because she was talking with a stranger. I thought it was more a general shyness, though.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Um... Are you asking about my life's mission or something?"

"No, nothing like that. This hotel's reserved for the May Interschool Competition, and you don't look high school age to me, so I'm assuming you're not a participant? I was just wondering what you were doing."

"Oh, that..."

The girl looked down, evidently disappointed with my question. Still, she nodded at me, her short hair bouncing.

"Um, I... I'm involved with the event. Sort of. My sister works for Libra and asked me to join MTCG, so..."

"MTCG? Oh, Libra's running that, right?"

"Um, yeah... I guess so anyway..."

She nodded, her expression vague. This girl didn't seem like a liar to me, so she probably didn't know much about ASTRAL or what I was doing.

Come to think of it, I forgot all about the sixth-team-member rule...

I crossed my arms. The top prize of MTCG was a wild card spot in ASTRAL, giving anybody on the island a chance at joining the main event. For Eimei, our best shot at getting an extra player was that Minakami girl Enomoto mentioned in passing. Honestly, the odds were too low to count on, though. It was best to assume it wasn't going to happen.

"...?"

I sensed the girl's pure, innocent eyes upon me and stopped dwelling on my thoughts. Now that we were on the same page, I decided it was best to leave her alone.

"Sorry to ask you a bunch of questions," I said. "Can you get back to your own room?"

“Mm... Yeah, I can, but...” She trailed off.

“But?”

The girl stared straight up at me, clearly struggling to tell me something. Her hair fell back, revealing a bright ruby-red eye.

Wait, red?

“Hey, is that...?”

“It’s a color contact. I mean, it’s proof that I’m the chosen one. I’m not like normal people, so my eye color’s really cool. See? I’ve got heterochromia. Pretty great, huh?”

“Yeah. If it’s a choice between yes or no, then I guess the answer is yes.”

“Y-you think so?! Yeah, I knew you’d understand. And guess what? My right eye’s an evil one. It can see everything in the past and future, and it’s telling me that you’re someone really special!”

“Really? Well, your evil eye’s pretty smart, then. So what did a superpowerful person like you want to ask me?”

“Oh! Listen, um...”

She paused, then took a deep breath.

“Do you wanna go out with me?!”

This middle schooler with a high-fantasy backstory flashed me a totally innocent look with her mismatched eyes as she hurled her question.

“Huh?”

#

It turned out the girl’s name was Tsumugi Shiina...not that I asked her. She looked desperate for someone to talk to, so I decided to indulge her. I didn’t like being stuck with her instead of getting to the bath, but there was no harm in knowing her name, at least.

Here’s a quick recap of how she introduced herself.

“Hee-hee-hee... I’m Tsumugi Shiina. THE Tsumugi Shiina!”

“...Are you important or something?”

“What? You don’t know?! My eye’s saved the world countless times, but I’m still not listed in any history books? Hey, what’s your name anyway?”

“Oh, I’m Hiroto Shinohara—”

“Ah! You mean THE Hiroto?!”

“Can we stop with the THE’s all the time, please?”

Shiina was stuck in her own fantasy world, and she wasn’t making a secret of it. Anyway, her name was Shiina, sister of a Libra member, although not any I was familiar with. She was in her third year of middle school, only two years behind me, although she looked younger. Initially, she’d seemed pretty shy, barely able to maintain eye contact with me. Yet as we talked, her nervousness melted away.

After chatting for an hour, Shiina sounded like this:

“Ha-ha-ha! Wow! You’re so amazing! *Super* amazing! But I won’t lose to you! Finisher: Ultra-Hyper-Little-Blaaaaaast! ...Oh, wait, I got the buttons wrong. Pfft! Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

She was having the time of her life, excitement knob turned all the way up.

It was now the dead of night, and Shiina and I were up on the second floor. There was an arcade up there, with crane games, slots, fighters, music games, shooters...pretty much the complete usual lineup. Just like everything else in the hotel, all the games were free for ASTRAL participants.

To sum up, when she asked to go out with me, she meant this.

I figured it’d be something like this, I thought, caught somewhere between relieved and dejected. Shiina had been with me for nearly an hour, and it would’ve been mean to brush off someone that friendly and excited to be around me.

“Hey! Let’s try that one next! I wanna try it!”

In what had swiftly become a habit, Shiina pulled me by the hand while pointing at whatever game claimed her interest. This time, it was a crane game filled with stuffed animals.

“Oh? We’ve been playing nothing but two-player competitive games. What a cute change of pace.”

“Yeah! I *love* crane games. Oh, um, I mean, I know this is just kiddie stuff, but it’s nice to take a break occasionally! And don’t you think that one over there would make a perfect familiar for someone as great as me? Right? Right? It looks soooo cool!”

Shiina had her face pressed against the glass, mouth open and eyes sparkling. She was looking not at a dog, cat, or panda, but a Cerberus. Desiring the guardian of Hades as her familiar probably said a lot about her future.

Shiina placed her device on the cabinet and immediately set to work. “Heh-heh... All right, Lloyd, come toward me and take a close look at my eye, won’t you? Let me show you exactly who you belong to!”

“You already have a name for him?” I asked.

“Of course I do! After all, it was foretold in the Book of All Knowledge that we were fated to meet. I think it was probably written in the *Kojiki*, or the *Kokin Wakashu*, or some other ancient poetry collection!”

“Lloyd writes poems, too? Boy, he can do everything.”

“Right? Whoa! Don’t drop down there! Hey, this arm is trying to twist the gears of fate on me!”

“You sure make everything sound dramatic... Here, let me try.”

I took over for Shiina, focusing my sights on Lloyd. To tell the truth, I had always been pretty good at crane games. I didn’t have a spotless record, but I could typically claim my prize within three tries. That proved true this time as well. The Cerberus was ours on my third attempt.

“Wowwwwwwww! Wow, wow, you’re awesome! I always saw great things in you, and now it’s all paying off! Excellent!”

“Thank you. Say hello to Lloyd.”

“Yaaay! Thanks a lot!”

Shiina hugged the plush, giving me an innocent, childlike smile, which made sense, since she was a kid. She was off in her own little world, but seeing her

like this reminded me she wasn't too different from any other middle school girl. Very "little sister," I guess you could say. It made you want to spoil her.

As that thought occurred to me, Shiina let out a long, cute yawn while admiring her new familiar. She'd been bouncing off the walls a moment ago, but I guess her fatigue caught up with her. She rubbed her eye with her free hand.

"Fwahhhh... I'm tired..."

"Already? The night's still young for the watchdog of hell."

"Well, I'm his master now... He's gonna be my watchdog. And my right eye sees all and knows all, so he'll be fine even in my dreams... Wait. Was it my right eye or my left?"

Shiina's voice drifted in and out on her, dwindling. Soon, she was just standing there, leaning against me and fast asleep.

"Pretty neat trick," I muttered as I tried to keep her from falling. I get that all that carrying on tired her out, but how could she sleep in this position? And why had she left herself so vulnerable after barely being able to look me in the eye initially?

"I need to put her to bed... But I can't just take her to her room."

I had no idea where Shiina was staying, and I certainly couldn't carry her back to my room. I didn't think I could go to hotel security with a situation like this, either, considering how it'd make me look. After a bit of consideration, I hefted Shiina onto my back and headed off.

"Sh-she's asleep...?!"

I had gone to the first floor of the Shiki Island Grand Hotel and knocked on the *Staff Only* door. Moments later, a woman in uniform answered, looking shocked at her visitors.

"Wh-what happened to that girl? Did you find her lying on the ground somewhere?!"

"Huh? No, it's not an emergency. I ran into her at the restaurant, and she dragged me up to the arcade to play some games... As you can see, she passed

out. Can I leave her with you?”

“Um...yes, certainly. But do you mind if I ask something?”

The staff woman seemed awestruck as she looked between Shiina and me. She pointed at the girl asleep on my back.

“Was that girl really that friendly with you?” she asked as though my story was difficult to believe.

“I don’t see why that’s so suspicious... But yeah, I think so.”

“No way!”

The staff woman, whose reactions had already been on the extreme side, threw her hands to the heavens.

At that point, I had to ask for details. Tsumugi Shiina was a pretty secluded person, apparently. Between her shyness and fantasy world, she had a lot of trouble building relationships with others and hadn’t opened up to many. She’d been staying at the hotel for two days, but she was so skittish around the staff that she’d been unable to pick up her meals.

“So...so if you don’t mind...” The staff woman paused to clasp her hands together, entreating me. “Would you be able to bring this girl her food starting tomorrow? Just her dinner... She usually takes it at around midnight. We prepared a meal for her tonight, but she didn’t come to get it until long after it was cold.”

“Well, I understand that she’s put you all in a challenging situation, but...”

“I’m sorry! I know it’s a pain and a lot of needless trouble, but please! Oh, I know! If you agree to help out, I’ll turn off the restriction preventing you from accessing the women-only third and fourth floors! How does that sound?”

“...What?”

The staffer’s offer made me raise an eyebrow. Free access to the girls’ floors was a must if I was going to bring Shiina her food. Setting off the alarm every time I went to her would’ve been a huge issue.

“Um... Are you serious? Can you even do that?”

“Oh, of course! I work here, so it’s no problem from a system perspective. I’ll set your device as an exception. As for the ethical issues... Well, if something happened because I gave you special privileges...”

“If something happened?” I parroted.

“...I will atone with my death.”

“Please don’t do that.”

Dismay entered the staff woman’s expression as she assumed from my deadpan response that I wouldn’t help.

“All right. I’ll give Shiina a hand starting tomorrow.”

I decided to accept. It was a purely calculated move, one with no ulterior motive. Gaining access to the girls’ floors meant I could contact Himeji and Saionji. I can’t trade info with the latter inside the Game, so having a chance to talk in person was fantastic. Spending time with this shy girl wound up being extremely useful.

I hoped to return to my room and mull over how to make the most of this.

Ah... But I’m starting to get tired, too...

I yawned a little. The second day of ASTRAL was rapidly approaching. I’d need some rest if I wanted to survive.

May Interschool Competition: ASTRAL—Day 1 Complete

Largest Territory Taken: Ohga School, Third Ward (221 hexes)

Most Votes: Eimei School, Fourth Ward (7.2 percent)

Libra Commentary: The May Interschool Competition is finally underway, and things got off to a slow, steady start. It’s the calm before the storm, with every team laying out the groundwork! At this rate, we can expect a lot of combat tomorrow, so don’t miss a moment of it!!!

LNN – Librarian News Network – Special Bulletin

The Top Players in ASTRAL

This year’s May Interschool Competition Game is called ASTRAL. Specially picked teams from each ward attempt to capture as much territory as possible! The detailed rules have been released. Now it’s time to introduce the players receiving the most attention!

Hiroto Shinohara (Second-year, Eimei School, Fourth Ward, Seven Star)

The year’s hottest player, a student who reached Seven Star status in record time after transferring in. However, his teamwork skills have yet to be tested!

Sarasa Saionji (Second-year, Ohga School, Third Ward, Six Star)

The Empress may have suffered a shocking defeat against Shinohara, but her dominant strengths remain just as fearsome. Her rivalry with the mysterious Clone is generating buzz, too.

Toya Kirigaya (Third-year, Shinra School, Seventh Ward, Six Star)

The Demigod Dictator has been hiding in the shadows, waiting for his chance to seize the top spot. It remains to be seen where he’ll strike first.

Senri Kururugi (Third-year, Tsuyuri Girls’ Institute, Sixteenth Ward, Five Star)

When faced with Hell’s Priestess, there’s only one tried-and-true strategy—run! Will her one-shot kill escapades define this Game?

Seiran Kugasaki (Third-year, Otowa School, Eighth Ward, Five Star)

The Phoenix is bringing all his unflappable charisma to the game field. He hopes to use his proven leadership skills to take revenge on Shinohara.

The Clone (???, Seijo School, Twelfth Ward)

The alleged “real Sarasa Saionji” appeared out of nowhere. Her provocative, crafty, and downright unnerving approach has made a big splash, but will the magic last?

Chapter 3

#

"...Pretty close."

It was the morning of the second day of ASTRAL. While my team continued to build our territory, Kagaya spoke to me over my earpiece. Her words were so abrupt that I wasn't sure what she was trying to say.

"What is?" I asked, tapping my earpiece.

"Oh, um... There's a member of another team pretty close in the direction you guys are going, Hiro. Based on their color, I'm guessing they're from the Fifteenth Ward. I think you'll run into 'em in less than ten minutes if you continue as you are."

This time, Kagaya took a little more care with her words. Our first contact with another team, huh? We were expanding east. If the other team was pushing west, we were bound to collide eventually. Considering that we were all aiming for the same bases on the game field, it was only natural that we'd run into each other sometime.

"The enemy force," Kagaya continued after clearing her throat, "consists of five members. They have a stock of seventy-three Spells, and it looks like they control eighty-five hexes at the moment. Eimei's Spell count is sixty, so they have a little more firepower than you."

"..."

I chewed over Kagaya's information. We had the same number of people, but our side was at a resource disadvantage. However, we had three Six Stars on our team, so in terms of pure fighting ability, I think we could still call it fairly even.

In that case, it's not like we can't try fighting. I have my concerns about our

teamwork, but winning would expand our territory quickly. It'd help with my battle with Enomoto for the Commander job, too.

When considered that way, there were few reasons to avoid battle. We were moving east because it offered the most efficient path to more bases. Change our route now, and we'd slow our growth.

"...Okay, guys, listen up."

I explained the situation to my teammates, pretending I'd noticed the approaching enemy by myself. The moment I told them they were coming our way, I could see Enomoto's and Asamiya's expressions stiffen slightly. Himeji didn't respond, since she had heard Kagaya as well. Akizuki gave us a devilish grin, like she couldn't wait to duke it out.

"Eh-heh-heh... ♡ Hey, Hiroto, which team is stupid enough to try picking a fight with the invincible, all-powerful Eimei School team I lead?"

"It's Ibara School from the Fifteenth Ward," I replied. "They were ranked fourteenth last year. I doubt they've noticed us yet, and we're not guaranteed a fight when they do, but..."

"Huh? But if we crash into each other, we *gotta* fight, don't we?"

"Not necessarily. There's a Truce command in the app, you know. If we're both aiming for the same thing, we could let them go or even fight together. In these early stages, we still don't have a lot of Spells to fight with, after all. We must consider the possibility that both sides will run out of resources before anyone is defeated."

"Ah yeah, that would suck. So are you lookin' to get through this without a fight, Shino?" Asamiya asked.

"Hmm..."

Instead of answering, I looked to Enomoto for his thoughts. He just stared back, silently judging me as usual. I didn't expect him to say anything useful.

"To be honest, I think we're better off fighting," I declared. "It's still early, but combat will get intense soon. Beating a team means taking their territory—double or nothing, basically. Once the fighting starts in earnest, a handful of

teams are gonna suddenly have a lot of territory. If we can't keep up, we're doomed."

"Eh-heh-heh! That's the Hiroto I know! ♪ Let's give these Fifteenth Ward losers a lesson on what happens when you get in our way. ♡"

"Yeah. Let's not get too hasty, though. We should maintain a wait-and-see approach. I don't know what Ibara School's strategy for the Game is yet. There's still time to try scouting them before opening fire. Of course, we'll need to prepare to engage them either way."

"I see. You want us to remain passive at first and then go on a big offensive once the battle starts?" Akizuki asked.

"That's the idea," I said with a smile. Basically, we'd let Ibara School's team make the first move. If they tried to negotiate with us, I'd hear them out, but once Spells started flying, we'd stamp out the enemy with all we had. And since that was the plan, advance planning was critical.

I faced my teammates. "There are a few things we need to take care of, but two are absolute musts. First, we have to get some Traps down. Second, we need to get our Spells in the right slots."

Himeji nodded beside me. "You're exactly right, Master. As we saw in yesterday's testing, the cooldown time after setting a Trap is five times your Action Level per Trap. That's a long wait, even if we place the weakest one, Spell Trap. Laying Traps during fighting isn't viable."

"Right," I agreed. "Contrary to instant moves like Sword Flash or Gunfire, dropping Traps is meant to be done in advance so enemies set them off later. We could take a pinpoint-placement approach or throw them around at random. Either way, they'll make a huge difference."

"Indeed. ASTRAL does have friendly fire, so a player can deal damage to their allies. However, Traps won't go off unless a member of another team steps on them. That was specified in the rules, so there's no reason why we shouldn't drop as many as we can. What really matters right now is our Spell organization."

"Right," I agreed while Himeji brushed locks of her silver hair back. Then I

crossed my arms. “I mentioned this already... But in these early stages, our biggest challenge could be a lack of resources. Our team currently has sixty Spells, but only eight Sword Flashes and seven Gunfires. That doesn’t seem like enough to defeat a team of five, does it?”

“The ASTRAL rules state that all standard Attack Spells cause one LP of damage. A player starts with five LP, so if you do the math, we clearly don’t have enough potential damage. We’ll need to consider which players are best to knock out as we go.” Himeji was providing some helpful backup. Her clear blue eyes on me filled me with encouragement. She was right, too. Three of the jobs in this Game—Soldier, Mage, and Spy—had a rock-paper-scissors triangle of strengths and weaknesses. A Soldier was good at Sword Flashes, dealing twice the damage, but weak against Gunfire, receiving twice the damage from it. Taking advantage of those pluses and minuses was an excellent way to conserve Spells.

Unfortunately...

“No, that won’t be enough.” I quietly shook my head. Asamiya, in particular, looked confused. Adopting a serious tone, I explained, “Jobs and Spell compatibilities are important, yeah. But there’s something even bigger—the Commander. We have to beat the enemy Commander before anything else, or we’ll never get anywhere.”

It made perfect sense if you thought about it. With a Commander alive, all their teammates received stat bonuses. A decrease in Action Level and an increase in LP. The presence or lack of a Commander could totally change the number of Spells needed to beat a single enemy. Clearly, the Commander had to go down first.

“But, Shinohara...” Enomoto finally broke his silence. “We don’t know which opposing team member has which job, do we?”

“That’s true. I used my Abilities to look into that, but it seems the data’s kept strictly private. We’ll just have to observe our enemies and infer from there.”

“Hmm... I see. It’ll come down to the Commander’s talents, then.” It felt like Enomoto was egging me on a little, but I just smiled in agreement. We appeared to be evenly matched, and neither of us had all the weaponry we

wanted. In a scenario like this, the competency of the team leaders counted for a lot. If I wanted Enomoto to accept me, I couldn't afford to embarrass myself with a huge mistake.

Seems like there's one thing I better check on right now. If I want to use that Ability right, I certainly can't have anything looming over me.

I looked around the field, glancing at the columns spread out here and there. It was time to prepare for our first battle.

#

"Hello there, Eimei School! Good to make your acquaintance."

Around ten minutes later, just as Kagaya predicted, we had our first encounter with another team. We weren't lined up neatly to receive them, though. Himeji and I stood out in front, with Akizuki and Asamiya one hex behind us on the left and right sides. Enomoto brought up the rear. Simply put, it was a four-hex diamond formation.

Our Fifteenth Ward enemies took a different approach. There was a single person out in front, a relaxed male student. The rest of his team was in the two hexes behind him, a boy and a girl pair in each. By the way, I stood on a glowing green hex, and there was a sea of dark-blue spaces ahead of us. We were meeting on the border. I don't know if it was the positions of our respective bases or what, but there was a single line of neutral hexes in between, twisting its way across the field to demarcate the edges of our territories.

The guy who greeted us flashed a friendly smile. "We're from Ibara School in the Fifteenth Ward. I'm don't plan on introducing the whole team, but I'm the leader, Kanade Yuikawa. I certainly didn't expect to run into Hiroto Shinohara's team so soon, but maybe this is a stroke of luck, huh?"

"Oh? Why is that?" I replied.

"Well, you know..." Yuikawa shrugged and raised his hands in a classic indication of surrender. "Honestly, we're not here to fight. Since we share a border, I thought we might come to a friendly agreement."

"An agreement? How about you cut the nonsense and get to the point?" I shot back.

“Sure thing. Basically, we’re looking to negotiate, or well, to be more direct, we want to sign a truce. We aren’t aiming to win. Landing in the top five would be more than enough for us. If possible, we’d really prefer if we didn’t have to clash with you. Ibara School’s kind of a minor player, fourteenth in last year’s ranking. We’re not in any position to dream big.”

I could sense the melancholy in Yuikawa’s voice as he explained his team’s plight. He spread his arms. “I’m sure you already know this, but this Game has a Truce command. It’s basically like signing a contract with another team, right? You can set any terms you like, but we could say something like ‘The Eimei and Ibara School teams agree not to invade each other’s territory’ or something. We’d also set a penalty if someone breaks the truce, making it more than a spoken agreement. What do you think? I think it’d help a lot if we didn’t have to watch our backs.”

“I see.”

I rolled Yuikawa’s proposal around in my head. It didn’t seem bad to me. As he said, ASTRAL was a sort of battle royale with nothing but enemies in all directions. You had to keep your head on a swivel, so having a bit of safety on a single front was extremely valuable.

So the question becomes whether he’s serious about this...

The Truce command allowed us to forge a temporary armistice or alliance, but it would only hold if we shared a common mission. Trusting that Yuikawa wished to help simply because we shared a border was difficult. No matter how little his team cared about winning, it was odd that they were so keen on reaching an agreement. Taking out a nearby threat before we built our strength seemed better.

“ ... ”

“Hmm... Maybe not? Are we too weak of a team to be worth considering?” Yuikawa scratched his cheek with his right index finger as he asked that self-deprecating question. I looked into his eyes and lightly shook my head.

“I didn’t say that. If I agree, should I take that to mean we’ll go in different directions?”

“That’s the idea, yeah. We won’t mess with each other’s territory, and we definitely won’t attack you.”

“Okay. And how long do you want this to last?”

“How about until the end of the second half tomorrow? We can consider that a test run. If it works well for us, we can talk about extending it until the end. We definitely wouldn’t mind helping you win and ending up in second place.”

Aha. Well, that makes sense...I think?

Reaching that conclusion, I decided to accept Yuikawa’s offer on the condition that our side got to define the penalty for breaking the truce. I quietly stepped toward the neutral hex in front of me, projecting my device screen for everyone to see. I was now within range of a Sword Flash from Yuikawa, but Himeji was there to guard me. I didn’t suspect any surprise attacks.

“Um...”

When I checked my device, it seemed that the Truce had already activated because its conditions were listed on the screen exactly as Yuikawa had given them. There was a box at the bottom for me to customize the penalties, along with a flashing box asking me to agree or disagree to the above agreement. Apparently, both sides had to tap in the affirmative for the truce to take effect.

I chose the standard penalty—the truce breaker had to hand over their territory to the other party. Yuikawa smiled at me.

“I tell you, though, it’s so reassuring that you’ve agreed. We couldn’t ask for a better development. Let’s do our best until the end of tomorrow...or perhaps for the whole Game.”

“Mm? Yeah. I don’t intend on being close friends with you, but hopefully, this will help... Huh?”

The moment I attempted to enact the Truce, I heard something *whoosh* lightly through the air. I shut my eyes for a moment, unsure what was happening. At the same time, a girl standing behind Yuikawa suddenly yelped. I reflexively turned on Sight Mode as she fell to one knee. Now there was a Life Point display, represented by a row of colorful crystals above her head. One of them shattered.

W-wait, what?! What happened just now...?!

I was already panicking, but I kept it from showing in my expression and whirled around silently. Asamiya looked like she'd cranked up her intensity by three orders. Unlike Enomoto or Akizuki, she had her device ready for battle. She must've been the culprit. Mere seconds before we signed a deal with Ibara School, Asamiya had launched a Magic Missile that completely ruined the whole arrangement.

"Ah... That's too bad. I guess negotiations have broken down."

Yuikawa wasted no time activating a Sword Flash, still wearing that calm smile. It sounded like he was having the time of his life.

#

The cooldown system in ASTRAL had a couple of unique quirks. It applied to all actions, the length of its effects depending on your Action Level, and while it affected exploration and territory acquisition, it took on special importance in battle.

Impulsive moves were not rewarded.

That was the issue. A single Spell or Ability cost at least a few seconds of waiting. An unwise attack could leave you immediately exposed. A team had to cover all the bases to address this, planning out backup for players in cooldown mode.

Ultimately, this led to one logical strategy. In ASTRAL, people almost exclusively fought in pairs.

"Ngh...!"

That much was clear from the current battle situation. Himeji and I were facing off against Yuikawa and a petite girl who stood behind him. Asamiya, who'd already charged into the enemy territory, was locked in a fight with another coed pair and the wounded girl. Enomoto was backing up Asamiya from a distance. Akizuki, our Spy, wasn't suited for combat, so she quickly cast Stealth and went invisible, no doubt providing support for us somewhere nearby.

"..."

Asamiya was the biggest issue. She'd boldly moved into the dark-blue zone with no one following her. Being in enemy territory meant she suffered an Action Level penalty. I knew she'd equipped Lightning Speed for this Game, an Ability that granted her one of the best Action Levels possible, but she still wouldn't be able to keep up with the barrage of attacks.

Another serious problem was her complete inability to work as a team with Enomoto, her main support.

"Damn it... Don't just blindly rush in, Nanase! ASTRAL's got friendly fire! Do you want my attacks to kill you?!"

"Oh, like *that'd* ever happen, Shinji! Just aim so you don't hit me, dumbass!"

"I can't! You keep moving around too damn much!"

As a Mage, Enomoto was suited to long-range strikes, but Asamiya, his alleged ally, was distracting him so much that he couldn't use any Spells properly. Asamiya, meanwhile, was completely ignoring Enomoto's pleas to stop, moving even farther into enemy territory.

"No, you don't...!"

The Ibara School team wasn't about to let that chance slip by. They attempted a barrage, aiming for Asamiya to send her packing in one unified blow, but she dove and rolled into an adjacent hex, evading and loosing a Sword Flash Spell.

"Hah! You see? I'm doing just fine by myself! You're just getting in the way, Shinji, so help Shino and Yukirin or something!"

"You're not doing fine at all! Nanase, you're—Damn it! That idiot can't even hear me anymore. Sorry, Shinohara, but I have to go after her. You'll have to take care of those enemies!"

Enomoto, too flustered to even spare me a glance, hurried into the dark-blue hexes in pursuit of Asamiya. Seeing the rift between them manifest itself in the middle of battle was a bit disheartening. Still, they were Six Star players, among the best on the island. Their jobs made them extremely capable in battle, and overall I felt safe leaving things in their hands. For now, we needed to defeat the opponents before us.

“Whew...” Yuikawa whistled, marveling at Enomoto as he dashed off. “Way to sneak in an attack. Was that your call?”

“I’ll leave that up to you to decide.”

“Sounds like you’re not too worried. No wonder you’re the best on the Academy... But you made one mistake.” Yuikawa smiled a little, brushing back his hair in an attempt to act superior. “I’m sure you know this, but the most vital winning tactic in the early stages is to deduce which jobs the enemy team’s members have. Without that, you could waste valuable Spells. And the most urgent business of all is finding the opposing Commander. Beat them, and the whole team is weakened. However, it’s typically impossible to know who a Commander is.”

“Right, sure.”

“But this is no typical situation. That maid of yours... She’s been constantly focused on you, always on standby, so she can quickly step in. Isn’t that weird? You’re a Seven Star with incredible Abilities—and presumably the best Action Level in the Game. She has no reason to be that protective of you.”

“...”

“And yet she is. That can only mean one thing. You’re the Commander, Hiroto Shinohara. And the maid’s your Guardian, right?”

Great... He got it right.

I clapped at his guess. He’d hit the bull’s-eye.

“And that was your mistake,” Yuikawa declared, grinning. “You can’t go around revealing information that vital just because you’re the greatest Seven Star in history. Finishing you two off now that I know you’re the Commander and Guardian won’t be tough. We better do it fast so we can go deal with your Soldier and Mage over there.”

Yuikawa was in his element now. He and the girl with him approached. I moved backward a bit, and Himeji stepped out in front of me.

“H-Hiroto, Hiroto!”

“...Akizuki? What’s up?”

"I think Miya's in trouble! A Trap caught her in enemy territory, and she's surrounded by three people... The president's keeping them distracted for now, but he's starting to get pushed back!"

"All right, thanks. Go help them out and find a way to buy us some time. Don't worry about conserving Spells."

"O-okay... Got it!"

Akizuki sounded more desperate than usual. If she was around, our line wasn't likely to break too quickly. At least, I hoped not, but everyone except me and Himeji was in enemy territory. That would extend their cooldown time, so they might not be able to hold out for long.

"..."

The worst possible outcome flashed before my eyes, and I nearly fell into complete panic. However, danger also gave me a kind of calm focus. I quietly pondered my options.

Why did Asamiya suddenly attack?

That was the first question that came to mind. We were close to an agreement, but she stormed in and singlehandedly ripped it up. If there was a justifiable reason—in other words, if there was a way for our opponents to shoot at us from their territory—then the girl Asamiya attacked was likely a Mage or a Spy. Both were good with ranged Spells. Asamiya's Magic Missile had hit for one damage, so that girl definitely wasn't the Commander.

Next, I had to consider Kanade Yuikawa, my chill opponent. He'd played mediator for his team, but chances were good he wasn't the Commander. As he'd pointed out, a Commander was the prime target in any fight. Marching up alone to negotiate with me would've been daring for someone with such a critical job, even if it was a bluff.

You know, he said that revealing myself as the Commander was a mistake... But I don't really think that's the case.

My lips curled into a small grin.

Now, yes, uncovering the enemy Commander was key. Any team that did

could alter their tactics to take down a key foe and gain an advantage. However, if an enemy team discovered your Commander, you could use it to your advantage. It made opponents more predictable. In fact, it was almost worth exposing your Commander for that strategic edge.

Yuikawa saw us split into two groups, and then he did the same thing. He already knew at that point that Himeji and I are the Guardian and Commander—two jobs he thinks he can kill off quickly. He sees them as the least dangerous jobs.

That much was clear from his statements. Yuikawa had his eye out for the Soldier and Mage, and both of ours had run off.

Unbeknownst to him, I was fine with Asamiya and Enomoto being decoys. The Guardian and Commander duo's strength paled against the potential damage of a Soldier, Mage, and Spy combo. If Yuikawa saw his team get split up and had to decide where to position the Commander... Well, the answer is obvious.

Yeah... She's the Commander.

I locked my gaze on the dark-haired girl hiding in Yuikawa's shadow. She was our target.

Locating the opposing Commander was all well and good, but the question was how to defeat her. She couldn't fight very well, but Yuikawa surely had a battle-oriented job—Soldier or Mage, in all likelihood. I'm sure he'd also taken some aggressive Abilities that'd let him defeat Himeji and me in one fell swoop. It'd be tough to tackle him with any standard approach... But I'd known that from the start.

"Casting Defense Wall."

Himeji protected me while we retreated into our territory. We wanted to lure the enemy in, staying outside Magic Missile range but not going too far away, either. Our destination was a certain spot we'd designated earlier.

Yuikawa just shrugged at our behavior. "Could you be more obvious? It might look like you're fleeing at random, but I know exactly where you're headed. You set some Traps over there, didn't you?"

"We'll just have to see, huh? Take a step over here, and I bet you'll find out," I

replied.

“Forget it, Seven Star. We’ve got a talented Spy on our side. Clearsight, level five. I’ve applied that to my entire team. It lets them see all Traps placed on the field.”

“...Huh.”

Being so disastrously outgunned in Abilities made me go pale internally.

Yuikawa smiled, then pressed forward. His steps had a breezy elegance, like he believed he’d won already. The girl with him followed suit. She activated Sight Mode as she tried not to fall behind. This was the moment I’d been waiting for.

“Ah...”

Suddenly, the girl let out a slight groan and stopped cold. Her shoulders trembled, and she stared into what seemed to be empty space. However, she clearly saw something in Sight Mode. The blood gradually drained from her face.

“Hmm?”

Yuikawa took a moment to notice. While keeping a watchful eye on us, he turned to his partner.

“What’s wrong? Don’t tell me you’re chickening out now.”

“N-no. No, I’m not. This is just...”

“...Huh?”

The girl’s gesturing made him realize what was up. Instantly, he waved his right hand to access Sight Mode. I didn’t know what was on his display, but I had a good idea.

Trap laid by Eimei School activated.

The two target players will receive a noncancelable thirty-second cooldown time.

It was five Spells’ worth of time. As Yuikawa and his companion stared agape, he clenched his hand into a tight fist.

“H-how...?! Don’t give me that crap! There shouldn’t be any Traps on this hex!”

“Really? I’m not so sure.” I moved to a hex adjacent to theirs, smiling confidently. “It’s not that there *shouldn’t* be... It just *looked* like there weren’t. They sound similar, but they’re quite different. I have an Ability that alters displayed information. More precisely, it lets me use visual effects to deceive my opponents.”

“Oh... The Ability you took from the Phoenix! †Jet-Black Wings†!” Yuikawa exclaimed as his eyes shot open. He was right. Just as he’d said, this zone had several Traps, and I’d lured him here to make use of my little minefield. I’d also invoked †Jet-Black Wings† to rewrite the enemy’s Sight Mode data, just in case. Now that they were caught, they couldn’t take any actions.

That sure would’ve been cool.

Sadly, it was all a lie.

It kind of had to be. With my Action Level, if I invoked †Jet-Black Wings† twice, I’d be stuck with nearly a minute of cooldown time.

In other words, suggesting I’d used †Jet-Black Wings† was a bluff. Such a famous Ability was perfect for tricking people, but I’d never used it. I guess that begged the question of how I’d lured Yuikawa and his teammate here.

“You really are a good actor, Hiro... I’m the one who hacked into their devices to put up that false display, but you’re the one keeping them there.”

Exactly.

That was the truth. Essentially, there was no Trap on that hex. The Company had messed with things to black out the *Spell* and *Ability* buttons on Yuikawa’s and his teammates’ command lists. That, combined with the fake-out text display, was all there was to this. No genuine cooldown time had been placed on them.

An outside observer could easily tell all this was a farce. It’d be obvious to them. Worse yet, people would suspect me of cheating the system. And that was the actual reason I’d lured my opponents here. Yuikawa had suspected it was because our minefield was nearby. However, the actual reason wasn’t so

fair.

It's because there were no pillars with Libra cameras around.

With a bold grin, I approached the girl and quietly lifted my device. Naturally, I chose the Spell Sword Flash, which had the shortest cooldown time.

“See ya, Commander. If you wanna blame anyone, blame that guy over there.”

“Ah...”

With a burst—no, two bursts of light—my attack combined with Himeji’s delayed Magic Missile instantly removed her remaining four LP. Her body vanished from the AR world without a trace. I heard a slight sigh of relief as Himeji quietly took care of Yuikawa, who was panicking after losing his Commander.

“Hahhh...”

Once I confirmed the victory, I let out a deep breath and had a seat on the ground. Panting a bit to calm down my pulse, I wiped the sweat off my brow with a sleeve. This was proving to be incredibly exhausting. Using this cooldown system instead of a standard turn-based one meant never dropping your guard.

“...”

It was a good thing no cameras were on me as I sighed with a depressed expression. Himeji walked over. “Well done, Master,” she praised gently. “Heh-heh... You looked so cool doing it, too.”

#

After wrapping up our fight with Yuikawa, Himeji and I returned to the border zone and found things settled over there as well. The Ibara School team was gone, and all our members were fine. The dark-blue mass of land repainted itself a fresh shade of green, marking the end of the fight. This was fine, but when I had a closer look, there was clearly something wrong.

“...!”

Enomoto and Asamiya were by one of the tall blue pillars that rose too high to see the tops. Enomoto had Asamiya crouched down helplessly with her back to

the column. It was like a scene from a torrid romance film, but Enomoto clearly wasn't in the mood for love.

"...Why did you do that, Nanase?" he growled.

Asamiya turned away from him.

"Do you have any idea what you did? This is a team Game, Nanase. You're not playing by yourself. Rushing in without orders endangered all of us."

"..."

"I haven't fully accepted him yet, but Shinohara is the Eimei School team's current Commander. He's our leader, and he decided to negotiate with those guys. I don't think that was a mistake, either. But *you* decided to act on your own."

"B-but we won, didn't we...? Seriously, give me some space..."

"We did, but not because of you, idiot. ASTRAL is a strategy game, all right? It's not about just beating up the person in front of you. And yes, like you said, we beat Ibara. That is great news for us, but how much of a chance did we have going in? Who was the person who had to chase after you when you ran into enemy territory without any plan at all? And who defeated their Commander to turn the tide for us?"

"Hey, Enomoto, you don't have to go that far—"

"No, Shinohara, let me have my say. Look, this is exactly what happened last year. During the last May Interschool Competition, we constantly dragged each other down and blew it badly against a team we should have outclassed. I don't want to repeat that mistake ever again. I can't. This isn't a game for me, all right? And when you force us to play along with your stupid crap, we're the ones who pay for it!"

"...!"

The moment Enomoto finished, Asamiya waved her left hand, slapping his arm away. Then she stared right at him, eyes reddened from holding back tears.

"But...I...tried...to... But..."

"Huh? Speak up for me, Nanase."

“Shut up! If you’re gonna talk to me like that, you dumbass, then don’t speak to me ever again!” With that, Asamiya turned her back to Enomoto and ran off, never looking back.

“Ah... Um...” Akizuki was the most shaken by this scene, but after a moment, she opted to chase after Asamiya. “I’ll take care of this! ♡,” she said with just the right sort of suggestive wink before scurrying off.

“...”

As for Enomoto, he just stood there for a while, not moving at all. Then he shook his head, as if letting out a held breath, and he quietly turned toward me.

“Do you think I was wrong, Shinohara?”

“...”

I could still sense the emotion in his voice. Was he wrong? From an impartial point of view, the answer was clearly no. Things wound up working to our advantage, but Asamiya had directly defied my orders as Commander. I doubt she did it for no reason, but considering this was a team sport, her actions definitely hurt us. Enomoto had lost his temper, but he had good sense on his side.

However...

“I don’t think so, no... But I’m not so sure you were right, either,” I said.

“Oh...,” he replied, voice gravelly. So despite completely dominating our first battle with no team losses, the first half of ASTRAL’s second day ended on a gloomy note.

#

“Right...”

After time ran out on the first half, and the AR world flicked out of existence, the members of the Eimei School team returned to the Shiki Island Grand Hotel entrance. The hotel offered all the participants a breakfast and dinner buffet every day, but we were free to do what we liked for lunch. The mornings and evenings were meant for rest, but these lunch breaks were more like a halftime for each day of action, a chance for teams to talk strategy, and so on.

That was how we'd spent our lunch yesterday... But Asamiya was upset, so that wasn't likely to happen now. When we reached the entrance, she put her hands together, said "Sorry!" then ran back to her room in the girls' section of the hotel. Akizuki chased after her like before, and then Enomoto disappeared at some point as well, leaving Himeji and me milling around in the lobby.

I knew going in that they didn't get along well, but...

I stopped myself before I sighed. Extremely talented individual players who were difficult to work with. Tsuji and Tatara had warned me, and now I understood perfectly. This morning, even, we found ourselves at a disadvantage chiefly because of their poor teamwork. They had no interest in working together, which brought us all down. Someone watching the Libra coverage would think we were being overwhelmed by our opponents, despite them being all Four or Five Stars.

Our teamwork sucks... But I guess we've managed so far.

I reflected on our encounter with the Ibara School, my feelings teetering between relief and a certain anxiety for the future.

"Oh?"

I heard an all-too-familiar voice come from behind. I promptly frowned, dreading what was coming. Still, I retained my above-it-all confident facade and turned around. Himeji did the same. A girl with dazzling red hair was approaching us. I made eye contact with her for an instant. Sarasa Saionji spoke up first.

"Heh-heh! Well, this is certainly amusing, Shinohara. You don't seem to have your team with you right now. Having some communication problems, maybe?"

"Yeah, good afternoon to you, too, Saionji. Sorry, but unlike you, I don't think of myself as such an exalted, fearless leader that I demand my teammates follow me at all hours."

"Oh? I don't force anyone to do anything. It's more about whether your team's loyal to you, isn't it? Heh-heh! I suppose that's a lot to expect from a new transfer like you."

"Sure, sure. Isn't your team nothing but girls? They call you the Empress, but

your fandom's pretty much devoid of guys, isn't it?"

"Ohga's team was selected by our automatic system. There are standards, of course, but nobody's personal opinions interfered. Anyway, look at all the women *you've* been associating with during the event, Shinohara. You're quite dangerous to be around, aren't you?"

Saionji crossed her arms and gave me a little snicker. I, meanwhile, had one hand in my pocket and sneered back. We were in the middle of the lobby, and I sensed a few curious stares, but I was well accustomed to that level of attention.

"Mmm..." After that little exchange, I changed the subject. "How're you doing in the Game, little lady? Figured out a way to beat us yet?" I asked.

"Huh? What, you think I'm just going to tell you? That's classified information. We're making a serious bid for the championship, you know... You seem to be doing well so far, huh?"

"Yeah. Although I could've done without the little sub-Game you dragged me into. The one where the Clone will take over for you if you lose... Your fans are gonna kill me unless I take that seriously, I bet."

"Well... It's not like I don't feel guilty about that..." Saionji brought her fingers to her chin, her red eyes fixed on me as she considered her words while making sure to maintain a calm public face. "But honestly, this has been pretty anticlimactic so far."

"Anticlimactic? What, too insignificant a challenge for the Empress?"

"Will you stop treating me as some kind of dominatrix? I'm really kind to most people who aren't *you*, okay? What I mean is that the Clone has been a disappointment. After all that threatening before the event, she hasn't done anything since the Game started. She's kept quiet and expanded her territory, and she's been doing it alone, so you can imagine how inefficient her play's been. That's why I called it anticlimactic."

Saionji shrugged a bit, arms crossed lightly underneath her chest. I understood her point. By this time during the Fourth Ward Challenge, Mikado Kurahashi and Noa Akizuki were making all kinds of moves against me. The

Clone, on the other hand, had shown us nothing. It was almost eerie.

“ ... ”

“Heh-heh!” Saionji chuckled elegantly at my stern silence. “Sounds like a lucky break for you.”



I raised an eyebrow. “A lucky break?”

“If I knew that the Clone was really tough, I would’ve taken the most efficient approach and just stormed your territory to kick your ass immediately. Isn’t that wonderful for you, that I don’t have to do that?”

“You know, I’m starting to have a sneaking suspicion that the Clone’s the real you, after all,” I said.

Saionji scowled. “Well, that’s mean. I would have thought you’d know the real me better than anyone else. Anyway, that’s all I have to say about the Clone. Keep expanding your ASTRAL territory for me, okay? That way, my team will get to seize more turf when we finally absorb you. And if you let someone else beat you, I’ll never let you hear the end of it, all right?”

“Yeah, yeah, you don’t have to tell me twice. But don’t come crying to me if my team claims all your red hexes.”

“Funny joke.”

“Laugh all you want. I’m serious.”

We were griping at each other from point-blank range. Then, as if on cue, we turned away and concluded our conversation. Encounters like this with Saionji had become something of a tradition by now. Himeji, who was quite used to this, didn’t bother trying to interrupt during the argument. I’d grown so comfortable with it that I could devote my mind to other things as Saionji and I yelled at each other. For example, I’d never noticed before how long her eyelashes were.

So the fake still hasn’t taken any significant action... That bothers me a little, but there’s not much I can do about it right now...

I was all smiles and bluster on the surface, but internally, I worried a bit. There’d been no one seated at Seijo School’s table in the restaurant last night or this morning. And we still didn’t know what the Clone looked like in person, making it impossible to search for her. I didn’t like how we had no choice but to react to events as they came. Until the Clone took action, there was nothing we could do.

And of course, I didn't have any idea at the time that such a move was coming much sooner than I expected.

#

The second half of ASTRAL's second day had begun. The two-hour break had given Asamiya time to compose herself somewhat. She still wasn't talking to Enomoto, but she was willing to take Game-related orders.

The Eimei School team's current territory totaled 184 hexes. We now enjoyed control over eleven bases, and our total Spell count was 147. Absorbing Ibara School's area in today's first half gave us far more resources compared to before, and taking down a Commander also did a lot for my side competition with Enomoto. I honestly wanted to keep on the offensive, especially before any other team grew more powerful, but sadly, the Company's radar didn't show any enemies near our position.

"Hey, Hiroto?" Akizuki turned around and looked up at me. "I was thinking... We have a pretty big territory now. Don't you think we should start defending our bases a little?"

"Hmm? Ah... Yeah, you're right."

I nodded a bit. Any claimed base could be made neutral again by casting Neutralize, a Support Spell. A team's territory was defined by its bases. If one was neutralized, the team would lose a section of its territory.

There were several ways to prevent this, but the most basic approach was for a Guardian to use Defense Wall. Establishing a barrier on a hex with a base would deflect any Neutralize attempts. Of course, a single Defense Wall would only block a single Neutralize, so an attacker could still take a base with multiple attempts. However, attempting to use Neutralize incurred a lengthy cooldown. In the meantime, the defending team could travel to the contested base and fight off the invasion.

"We're in the second half of day two, so we're likely to face a string of battles pretty soon. Other teams will try to pick at our sides while we're occupied. We do have a few Traps in place, but it'll be hard to devote time to our bases during battle. Shoring up our defenses before things intensify is a good idea," I said.

Asamiya's eyes lit up at my comment. "Right? Also, why don't we add a whole

ton of Traps while we're at it? If enemies step on our turf, they shouldn't come out alive!"

"Eh-heh-heh! That's the spirit, Miya! ♪ I'm gonna bash some heads this afternoon! ♡" Akizuki broke into a cloying smile. The two girls were using some pretty violent phrases, but their reasoning was sound. Protecting a base was a better use of resources than trying to steal one. It was better than simply attacking all the time.

"..."

Enomoto, who presumably still felt bad about Asamiya, stood at a prudent distance behind us, but I don't think he disagreed. He offered no complaint, at least.

So I turned my attention back to the Game.

"Wait a minute, Master." Himeji stopped me, a certain rigidity to her voice. She was rooted to where she stood, eyes on her device. It was clearly unusual behavior, enough to give everyone else pause. When Himeji looked up from her device, her clear blue eyes were pointed right at me.

"I just received a notice... It looks like something a little strange is happening."

Himeji was watching the Libra feed of the event.

ASTRAL had a viewer voting system running alongside the Game feed on Libra's official ITube channel. It wasn't a live feed. There were some video and audio adjustments to ensure teams weren't disadvantaged by being recorded. However, the editing job still created a suitably "live" effect. This Game featured the top players from every ward, so the potential audience was huge.

I checked the stream regularly for reference purposes. Apparently, the channel viewership had skyrocketed abruptly. It had been stuck at around thirty thousand until this morning, which was already pretty large. Now it was well over one hundred thousand. The chat stream moved at such an explosive pace that I couldn't follow it. Something had definitely happened.

"..."

Keeping it cool despite the intensely bad feeling I had, I gave Himeji a

reassuring nod. The sudden viewer uptick began around twenty minutes ago. Himeji pulled the progress bar back a little, projecting the screen so everyone could watch.

“Okay, I’m hitting play,” she said.

“All right. If something’s happened, I guess we should know,” Asamiya replied, swallowing nervously.

“Eh-heh-heh! This is sooooo exciting... ♡” Akizuki took advantage of the tenseness to wrap her fingers around my hand. I glared at her while Himeji tapped on her device’s screen.

A section of the Game field appeared on the projection. I couldn’t be sure where our team was in relation to this area, but Kagaya hadn’t mentioned anything about it on her radar, so it couldn’t have been close. A group of five students stood in the middle of the scene, their school uniforms on the chic, stylish side.

“That’s the Tokoyo School team from the Academy’s Eighteenth Ward. Their school took thirteenth in last year’s ranking,” Himeji whispered to me the moment she spotted the seal on their hexes.

Given that she didn’t say more, I figured the Eighteenth Ward had no famous players. Judging by the video, the Tokoyo School team was making steady progress. They were keeping an eye on their surroundings, aiming for the nearest bases, and slowly expanding their lavender-colored territory—the basic approach most teams were taking.

“Hey! Hey, guys!” one of the people on-screen turned around and shouted. He had a carefree smile as he gestured to the others. *“Our bases just generated more Spells, right? Our team slots are pretty full, so how about we redistribute our Spells a little?”*

“Yeah... Good idea.”

“Right? I’m the Mage, so I want more Magic Missiles handy.”

“Hmm...?” I raised an eyebrow, confused by the footage. This was a snippet from the Libra stream, but the audio wasn’t censored. Broadcasting this kind of info hurt the team. Normally, nothing like this would be allowed.

Barring some kind of broadcast glitch, this implied that the broadcast wouldn't hurt the Tokoyo School team. In other words, its members had already been wiped out by the time this part was shown.

But it's only been a few minutes since...

"Okay, for now, let's put all the Spells in our possession back into our team slots."

The team, ignorant of my trepidation, began working their devices. We couldn't see the Spell types and quantities involved, but I imagined all the team members were emptying out their slots, replacing them with Spells better suited to their jobs and play styles.

"We have nearly twenty Stealth Spells, right? I'd like to stock up if that's okay."

"Sure, take all you want. As long as I can get some Cancel Spells, I'm fine with anything."

"Hold on, we need to talk this over before we commit to anyth—"

"...Huh?" I blinked, trying to understand the inexplicable shift that happened on the ITube stream. "'Start of Battle'?"

A *START OF BATTLE* graphic was slapped on top of the Tokoyo School members on-screen. It was probably part of Libra's production, but it was clearly out of place here. As though to prove that point, garbled noise came through Himeji's device, along with a bit of Kazami saying *"What's...?"* or the like. If a stream admin like her was confused, I could only imagine how baffling this was for the Tokoyo School team.

"Huh? Wait, what happened?"

"It says we're in battle... But that can't happen unless someone attacks us or we attack them, right?"

"That shouldn't be possible. There're no enemy teams around us. And nobody's even made an—"

"'Nobody's made an attack yet,' right?"

One of the people on-screen—the first guy who spoke in this clip—

interrupted his teammate. His carefree smile was a little creepy. He seemed so innocent yet inscrutable. Holding both hands behind his head, he casually strode toward his four teammates.

“Boy, this is no fun at all, you know? Even after revealing myself, you guys are barely worth hunting down. Can you at least open Sight Mode to see what’s going on?”

“H-hey, what’s up with you...? What are you talking—?”

“Just open it!”

“...”

At the smiling boy’s insistence, the rest of the team waved their right hands to trigger Sight Mode, still clearly unsure what was going on. Immediately, all their faces went rigid—and for a good reason. All four of them had the words *CANNOT MOVE* projected in front of their eyes.

“C-cannot move?!” one guy, presumably the leader, shouted in a shaky voice. *“Did we hit a Trap...?! When did you do that?!”*

“Well, when you guys were too busy chatting about something completely pointless, of course. That’s the strength of this Trap. It doesn’t have an immediate effect, but since it goes off long after the fact, it doesn’t come with a cooldown. And in this Game, Traps are counted as Attack Spells. The moment you get caught in one, that counts as entering battle mode.”

“Y-you... You’re betraying us?!”

The team leader took a step toward the apparent turncoat. He thrust out his device, attempting to cast a Spell.

“Sorry, you don’t have any. Not a single one. Did you forget? You just put them all back in the team slots.”

“Wh...? You thought that far ahead? Y-you’re kidding! I had no idea you were that cunning...”

“You think I’m kidding? Just look around. As long as you’re in battle mode, you don’t have access to your team slots. You guys can’t use a single Spell.”

“...”

The traitor flashed a twisted smile at his quiet teammates. He strolled toward them as someone might while walking on the beach and activated a Sword Flash. The other four were quickly wiped out by the flurry of slashes. Once he was done, the traitor looked directly at the Libra camera.

“Okay... Time to reveal the trick.”

Another anomaly occurred. Just as the traitor raised his arms, static covered the screen like a sandstorm, obscuring him. The camera went inactive, as though something was jamming it.

By the time the static subsided, the traitor boy had become someone completely different.

“Heh-heh!”

“What?!” I exclaimed.

That long, dazzling hair. Those strong, arrogant ruby eyes. It was Sarasa Saionji—the rich little ex–Seven Star who went undefeated last year.

She spent a few moments smiling at the camera. Then, out of nowhere, she tapped on the ground with her right hand, as if to say “Hey, look at this.” Honestly, it was unnecessary. After all, the moment the Eighteenth Ward team was defeated, the color of its territory changed. It went from Tokoyo School’s lavender to Seijo School’s jet-black. It was such a dazzling, awe-inspiring, one-sided defeat. An act of pure domination. And it had all been done by one person.

The girl snickered, looking comfortable in her new domain. “Hey,” she called to the camera. *“Why don’t we get the real competition started?”* Then the screen faded out.

An almost-painful silence hung over my team. I stared intently at the Libra feed, unable to speak. I remained still for a while, even after the playback concluded. Video had cut out on the Libra stream, but the sound was still going. We heard a commotion in the background and someone shouting *“Wh-what’s happening?!”* Apparently, the broadcast team was terribly confused.

That’s how shocking, unexpected, and utterly mind-blowing this development was. Someone had transformed into another person before our eyes. It defied

reason. I had absolutely no idea what had happened. At least, I wished I didn't. Unfortunately, I did, and that made this worse. Clearly, this was the Clone's work. Someone who'd made herself look exactly like Sarasa Saionji could've managed this easily.

But why didn't anyone notice?

The Tokoyo School team should've caught on. The Clone knew how to take Sarasa Saionji's appearance. More specifically, she altered how she was perceived to seem like she was Sarasa Saionji. Whoever the Clone was in real life, she showed up as a totally different person on-screen. Undoubtedly, she could pose as many more people than just Saionji. She could become anyone she liked within a video feed or an AR world.

Once I came to that conclusion, I quietly lifted my head, hiding my astonishment. "Hey, Enomoto. I'm sure you memorized the names and faces of all the players in this Game, right? When do you think the Clone switched in for that guy?"

"I'm...not sure," Enomoto admitted. "I certainly couldn't tell the difference visually. I can promise you that my eyes and memory tell me that the person we saw wasn't different appearance-wise from yesterday."

If even Enomoto couldn't tell the difference, it was fair to conclude there was no way anyone would spot the impostor based on visuals alone.

"..."

This duplicate of Sarasa Saionji was proving to be much more than that. She was an unknown, someone who could become whoever she wanted, like some kind of virus destroying the Game from within.

Damn it. I never thought Kurahashi would go this far...

He had to be involved. That devil had hurled this Game into chaos out of nowhere. It made me grit my teeth in disgust. My hands clenched into tight fists.

Tell Me, Himeji!



What are the school rankings?

In addition to ranking individual students, the Academy maintains standings of the schools in all twenty of its wards. The Fourth Ward’s Eimei School, which Master and I belong to, placed fifth last year. But with my master, a Seven Star, joining the student body, the school’s been subject to more attention than ever before.

#1: Ohga School (Third Ward)

The undeniable leader. Empress Sarasa Saionji was a Seven Star last year, so there’s certainly no controversy about this school’s standing.

#2: Amanezaka School (Seventeenth Ward)

A new, up-and-coming contender in the ranks. Much of its student body remains a mystery to the outside world.

#3: Shinra School (Seventh Ward)

A school with a very aggressive reputation, exemplified the most by Mr. Toya Kirigaya. I’d love to have a look inside sometime.

#4: Suisei School (Second Ward)

This school has always been in the top ranks since the Academy’s earliest days. However, it rarely makes much of a name for itself in interward events.

#5: Eimei School (Fourth Ward)

The place my master and I call home. With my powerful, invincible master among the students, I’m sure we can expect the school to rise higher in this year’s list.

#6: Seijo School (Twelfth Ward)

#9: Tsuyuri Girls’ Institute (Sixteenth Ward)

#10: Otowa School (Eighth Ward)

#13: Tokoyo School (Eighteenth Ward)

#14: Ibara School (Fifteenth Ward)

Chapter 4

#

May Interschool Competition: ASTRAL—Day 2 Complete

Largest Territory Taken: Ohga School, Third Ward (642 hexes)

Eimei School Stats: 12 bases, 401 hexes, 322 Spells in inventory

Given all the chaos and confusion that dominated the latter half of the second day, we couldn't do much but push forward and expand our territory. We were released from the AR world at the same time as yesterday, and we wasted no time hitting the Shiki Island Grand Hotel's restaurant hall afterward. The atmosphere was completely different from yesterday.

"People sure are worked up, huh?" I muttered while scanning the table. I certainly couldn't blame anyone. Seeing the Clone's transformation and her proud declaration of war would rattle anyone. The threat was obvious. And now everyone was left to ponder over countermeasures.

"Hey, Hiroto, look over there..."

Akizuki pointed to a table deeper inside the hall where the team from Tokoyo School was seated. Each member was slumped in their chair like they'd been drained of life. One of them was profusely apologizing to the others.

"I'm really sorry, guys! I didn't betray you, of course, but still!" I didn't think he needed to defend himself. How could anyone blame him after seeing that video? He was the biggest victim of all.

"We...we've had unprecedented upsets today, viewers!" came a voice that cut through the clamor of dinnertime chat.

Kazami was hosting her daily highlights show on the restaurant's screen. Unsurprisingly, most of her airtime today was devoted to the Clone and her

recent plays. The clip was playing on repeat, and Kazami emphasized elements of it for effect as much as she could.

Huh... That's weird. It seems a little different from what I saw...

I raised an eyebrow. When Himeji played back that portion of the live stream during the Game, there was no Libra commentary excluding Kazami frantically asking her crew what was happening. This clip, however, had everything reedited into a slick package like it was all according to plan. I guess they wanted to sweep those technical difficulties under the rug.

But it feels like Kazami's a little off her game today, energy-wise. Her voice is as clear as usual, but she's not smiling as much.

I considered the little differences, but honestly, I didn't have the capacity to devote much thought to anything besides the actual event. The Clone was obviously a threat and an obstacle—for both players and Libra. We all needed to work out a strategy to deal with her immediately.

After watching the crowd a bit more, we decided to go up to one of the meeting rooms on the second floor to hold a strategy conference. The room had a glass table with six seats, three on each side. Himeji sat beside me as she had yesterday, while Enomoto and Asamiya took corner spots on opposite sides. Akizuki, reluctant to get between them, opted to sit on my left instead.

“...”

This meant I was in the middle facing an empty chair, which felt more than a little odd. I'd get over it, though. After clearing my throat to gather everyone's attention, I launched into our evening discussion.

“This afternoon, the Clone revealed her true nature to the world. Before we start talking about countermeasures, I think we first need to understand exactly how her trick works.”

“Right! I've been wondering about that! What's with it, huh? How the heck is anything like that even possible? Some kinda bug, maybe?” Asamiya said.

I shook my head. “I don't think so. We're dealing with an outsider rebel claiming to be the true Empress, and she's launched an attack on the entire event. Her account number is three question marks, and she looks exactly like

the Empress... However, a moment's consideration should be enough to know that's impossible. This isn't a girl dressing up like Saionji. The Clone is copying her voice and looks on a video screen. I admit the quality is astounding, but with advanced AR tech, it's entirely possible."

"Oh... But hmm...? So what's that mean?"

"It means the Clone could take anyone's appearance in the AR world, not just the Empress's, and no one would know the difference."

"Oh, right... So you're saying she could even turn into me or Yukirin? Wow, that's really bad, isn't it?" Asamiya sat up and put her hands on the table as the threat finally dawned on her.

"Why do you think all the teams are so stressed?" Enomoto muttered under his breath. Asamiya stayed upright for a moment before relaxing back into her seat. I wasn't sure whether she caught Enomoto's remark.

"Hmm... You've said she can look like someone else, right? But it's not like she can take over their device, yeah?"

Himeji nodded. "That's correct, Ms. Asamiya."

Asamiya's question seemed offhanded, but it helped emphasize the point I wanted to make.

"The Clone," Himeji said, "is simply imitating others' appearances. If we rely on a nonvisual method of confirmation, like a data-gathering Ability, we should be able to expose the fake easily. Additionally, I don't believe her transformations are possible without a few key conditions."

"Huh? What d'you mean, Yukirin?" Asamiya questioned.

"If you want to pretend to be someone else, the presence of the real person is a hindrance. For example, if a copy of my master appeared in here, you wouldn't suddenly believe he was the real one, would you? The real one's already here, after all."

"Mm-hmm..."

"But if my master left the room, and then an exact duplicate posing as him came in later on, what then? I get goose bumps whenever a man besides my

master approaches me, so I'm certain I'd notice... Normally, though, there'd be no way to tell at all."

"W-wow, you're making this confusing really fast... But yeah, I think I get what you're trying to say, Yukirin. Essentially, we can't give this faker any opportunity to stand in as one of us?"

"That's right." Himeji nodded as she brushed back her silvery hair. No matter how much of an exact copy the faker might be, she could never deceive the real person they were trying to imitate, and she'd never get the chance to replace them if we didn't give her one.

"So as far as our team strategy goes, it all comes down to making sure we keep visual tabs on each other at all times. The Clone can only impersonate someone while the AR app is active. As long as none of us goes off on a solo mission, the Clone won't have any chance to blend in. When we're in the Game, I want us to always work in groups of at least two and constantly pay attention to your partner's location," I said.

"Eh-heh-heh! Aw, that's easy! ♪ I'm *allllways* looking at you, Hiroto, so you keep looking at me, too, okay? ♡" Akizuki agreed with me, even though she tried to seduce me as she did so.

"Hmm. That seems reasonable, I suppose. Having to stay on constant alert sounds taxing, but barring *someone* running off without warning again, we'll have no issues." Enomoto, seated across and to the right of me, crossed his arms as he made his little barb. Whether he meant to sound sarcastic and aggressive or not, it still made Asamiya grunt irritably.

"Why are you talking all roundabout like that? You just want to complain at me, don't you? 'Don't go runnin' around like this morning,' right?"

"I didn't say anything like that. *You're* the one dredging up that topic, Nanase."

"You are *such* a liar. It's so obvious how sarcastic you're being. That's how you talk when you're *really* angry."

"If that's what you think, how about showing a little regret for a change?"

"Hmph."

Having Enomoto act morally superior made Asamiya turn away, listlessly propping up her head with one arm. She kept quiet for a while, eventually letting out a light sigh.

“Look, I *know*, all right? I don’t care about Shinji, but I know I caused trouble for everyone else.”

Asamiya only grudgingly admitted to it, but that was still more than what she’d offered before. I supposed I should take it to mean she understood what she did wrong. Probably.

Once we’re in battle, it could be tough to maintain visual contact with each other. We’ll need to stick close...

Despite realizing as much, I couldn’t think of any brilliant strategies to deal with that issue. Now that our discussion was finished, we filed back downstairs so we wouldn’t miss dinner.

It was past eight in the evening. I looked around the dining hall. It wasn’t nearly as busy as before. But as I went to sit back and let out a sigh...

“H-hey, Hiro?”

“...?”

“This might not be anything important... But you’re being watched again. You know, by that ponytailed girl you wanna be rid of. She’s staring right at you.”

Huh?

Kagaya’s warning interrupted a sigh and prompted me to look around. It didn’t take long to find who she was talking about. Senri Kururugi, Hell’s Priestess from Tsuyuri Girls’ Institute in the Sixteenth Ward, was watching me. She was the master of the one-shot kill, and when it came to team events, she was as feared as the Empress.

“...”

She looked like a serious-minded member of the kendo club. I couldn’t tell if she’d noticed my gaze on her. Her almond-shaped eyes trained on me unwaveringly—as if trying to dominate me or perhaps adjust her crosshairs for the final shot.

Hahhh... Man. All these threats popping up out of nowhere...

I finally completed that long, drawn-out sigh that was cut short a moment ago. I resolved to gather as much info as possible on Kururugi tonight.

#

The late-night hours, when I was away from my teammates, were a time of restful relaxation for me. Unlike during ASTRAL, when I had to deceive all my teammates except Himeji, I could finally take a breather at night. I hadn't expected rooming with Enomoto, but all he did was read. He didn't interfere no matter whether I reviewed Libra footage, gathered intel on STOC, or took a nap.

When presented with this unstructured free time that I wanted to make the most of...

"I know! If you win, you can make me do anything you want!"

...I spent it taking orders from a middle schooler in gothic-Lolita clothes.

"Ahhh, noooo, Hiro's going to become a sex offender... Ohhh..." Kagaya groaned sarcastically through my earpiece, which I kept on for certain strategic reasons. I wasn't doing anything inappropriate, though. Yes, I was sitting on a bed where I could feel Shiina's body temperature. Her clothes and underwear were tossed in a heap in one corner of the room. However, the latter was because she'd changed attire before letting me in. And while I did think she was cute when she flashed that playful smile, Kagaya had the wrong idea.

"Hmm? What's wrong?" Shiina pointed at me, still holding the Cerberus from last night, with the purest expression on her face. Not erotic, not bewitching—just innocent.

How do I explain this situation? I'd come to fulfill my task of delivering dinner to Tsumugi Shiina, as assigned by the hotel staffer last night. Unsurprisingly, Shiina didn't let me leave easily. She insisted I play her in a huge number of different fighting games, and whenever I thought my big chance to leave came along, she begged me for "one more game" under some other set of esoteric conditions.

"Ugh..." I shrugged a bit, cursing my fate with a wry grin. "Aren't you getting sleepy at all? It's almost two in the morning."

“No, not really. I’m an ancient and honorable member of the Darkness Clan! I function a lot better when the sun goes down, you know.”

“...When the sun goes down, huh?”

“Ah! Hiro’s imagining something dirty!! Call the police!”

“Er, you know, you said the same thing last night, but you wound up falling asleep before me,” I said. “And *on* me. Not that you were heavy or anything, but I had a lot of trouble carrying you around.”

“L-last night was, um... My mana was going a little haywire, that’s all. It wasn’t my fault.” Shiina averted her eyes and started petting the head—sorry, heads—of her Cerberus to distract herself. Then she turned her eyes, or the visible one at least, to me.

“Hey, are you going to play one more game with me? Or do you...not want to?” There was an audible drop in her voice. She wasn’t trying to be unreasonable. She wasn’t begging me, or going full doe-eyed, but seeing her wither like this after being so excited left me feeling guilty, despite myself. It was like a reflex.

“...All right. Just one more game, okay?”

I picked up the controller I’d tossed on the bed. And then...

“Ohhhhhh... You’re just so *good* at this... Do you have a world rank?”

I’d tried to prolong it as much as I could, but I pretty much dominated her in the game.

Shiina wasn’t bad with the controls or anything, but she got so excited whenever something flashy happened on-screen and was always a beat behind. She also enjoyed calling out her moves in real time, so it was fairly easy to tell what was coming. I got pretty good at fighting games back when I was in Japan. Really, it would’ve been harder to lose to Shiina.

After a long string of defeats, Shiina dropped the controller at long last and stretched. “Why can’t I win at all? I’m the best out there in online play.”

“Because you keep getting too excited. If you just played like normal, I bet you’d be quite good.”

“Aw... I can’t help it. It’s too much fun! I get to join Event Week during the day, and then you come in here at night... Unlike yesterday, I’d give today a full ten out of ten!”

She collapsed into bed, yawning a bit as she spoke with a broad smile. Seeing her reach out and play with her plush was so boundlessly cute. But...

Hmm... That was kind of a weird thing to say.

Something about Shiina’s words felt odd, but I couldn’t deduce what. There was just this vague sort of trepidation that I couldn’t quite identify.

Shiina, ignorant of my doubts, cocked her head. “So what’s your order? You can ask me for anything, remember?”

“Huh? Ah... Oh. Hmmm, let’s see...”

I quietly considered it. Kagaya said, *“If you’re going to push her into bed, do you want me to turn off communication?”* However, there was no need to react to that nonsense. Instead, I decided to ask Shiina something I’d been wondering since yesterday.

“Well, you don’t have to answer this if you don’t want to, but...you’re a really shy girl, right, Shiina? Enough so that you don’t even want the hotel staff to bring you meals. What do you do about school?”

“Oh, I don’t go to school.”

“Huh? Not at all? You don’t take online classes or whatever?”

“Uh-uh. I belong to a normal school, but I haven’t gone in...like, half a year, I think?”

The unexpected answer silenced me temporarily. From what I could tell, Shiina didn’t have any deep reason or dark background preventing her from attending school. She listlessly kicked her feet around while lying in bed, as though bored.

“It’s just more fun to play games at home than go to school. When I’m outside, I have to talk with people and go with the crowd.”

“Ah...”

“I think you understand. I’m probably in my hundredth reincarnation as a human being. That’s how much of a genius I am, and superpowerful, and full of this overflowing dark power, so why do I need compulsory education? I don’t. I just wanna keep doing fun things forever.”

Shiina spouted all these crazy notions with complete sincerity. I was a bit exasperated, but I had to praise her ability to take those childlike impulses and actually make them her reality.

As such, I had another question.

“If you don’t like interacting with people, then why am I okay?”

“Why not? Of course you’re okay.”

Shiina raised an eyebrow, like she didn’t understand the meaning of my inquiry. She sat back up, stretching her arms before leaping at me.

“After all, I loooove you!”

“Whoa! Hey...”

“Fwahhh...sssp...zzz...”

“Don’t just pass out!”

She gripped me tightly, like a daughter hugging her mother. Once again, I had to support all her weight. Yelling at her did nothing, of course. I know I was loud, yet she gave no indication of waking. She was just slumped there, looking completely at peace, breathing rhythmically. I guess there wasn’t really an issue.

“It’s super late anyway...”

I carefully placed Shiina in bed, watching to make sure her outfit didn’t get wrinkled. *She* went to bed at around four, so I needed to hurry.

“...Okay, good, Hiro. Now sloooowly push open the door.”

A few minutes later, I was following the instructions from my earpiece as I attempted to escape Shiina’s room after two hours of fighting-game nonsense.

All right...

Bracing myself, I quietly pushed on the door. The third floor of the Shiki Island

Grand Hotel was normally open to girls only. I'd forged a secret pact with the front desk to keep the alarm from going off, but it'd still be a huge problem if someone spotted me. It could even torpedo my rep as a Seven Star, so I'd enlisted the Company's aid in keeping me safe.

"Um..." came Kagaya's eternally sleepy voice in my right ear. *"Your destination is Room 318, about two hundred and thirty feet straight ahead. You'll pass by two stairwells along the way."*

"Stairs? The fourth floor is girls only, too. They could come from any direction, huh?"

"Right. The second floor's open to the public, too. It's late, but you never know who might come by, right? It's all over if you're discovered..."

There was more than a hint of worry in Kagaya's voice as she trailed off. Between hearing all that in my ear and being on a girls-only floor, I was starting to get a strange feeling in the pit of my stomach.

"!!" Kagaya let out what sounded like a silent scream. I immediately fell silent, tapping on the earpiece to ask for more information.

"Oh... S-sorry, Hiro, I just panicked a little. I'm sensing a device from one floor above. Two of them, actually. And one of them belongs to..."

"What is it? It wouldn't happen to be the Clone or something?"

"No, um... You better sit down for this, Hiro. They're both... They're both supercute!!"

Do I really need that intel right now?! I shouted internally. Recomposing myself, I decided to head downstairs, creeping slowly along to avoid making any sounds. There, I waited to make sure this pair wasn't following me. Once they'd passed, I returned to the third level, thankfully encountering no other trouble on the way to Room 318.

"Thank you very much, Kagaya. I'll contact you later."

I was about to have a conversation that I didn't want the Company listening in on, so I shut off our link for now. Then I cleared my throat and knocked on the door. A few seconds passed with no reaction. Right when I started to get

worried, I heard a voice from the other side.

“Who is it? I don’t remember calling anyone in this late...”

The questioning, the anxiety, the bold front...and a slight bit of expectation. I knew she couldn’t see me, but I smiled a little anyway.

#

“C-come in...”

I was invited into Saionji’s room after about a minute. That might sound like an oddly long time, but if anything, that was quick, because she refused to open initially. In fact, the first thing she said upon recognizing me was “G-give me ten minutes!” Sitting out in the hallway of this girls’ floor threatened to give me a heart attack, though. Following my impassioned plea, she reluctantly allowed me to enter.

“...”

Her room was, as expected, pretty much the same as mine. She had only occupied it for two days, so things were still neat. However, I was met with the oddest sweet aroma upon stepping inside. The school uniform hanging on the wall and the backpack that I’m sure she’d hurriedly zipped up moments earlier looked so strangely vivid. My heart raced.

“H-hey... Don’t look at my stuff so much, you weirdo.”

As I surveyed her room, Saionji crossed her arms, looking embarrassed. She was dressed pretty casually, to say the least—a sheer camisole with a pair of white shorts, topped with just a cardigan and nothing else. The shorts were practically concealed beneath the rest of her outfit. I could almost picture her thighs provocatively pushing out from underneath the camisole.

“H-hello...? Hey!” Saionji stood there squirming like she’d do anything to escape my gaze. “Look, Shinohara, I know I told you not to look at my room, but that doesn’t mean you should just ogle *me* instead! You didn’t give me a chance to change clothes or tidy up... I’m embarrassed about all this, okay?”

“Uh... W-well, what do you *want* me to look at? Should I put on a blindfold?”

“That’s not what I mean—Uh... Here, why don’t you just look at the city from

the window? The First Ward looks really pretty from here.”

“I’d love to, Saionji, but if I open the curtains, I’ll be visible to people outside. If I’m spotted, I’ll have a lot more to worry about than the Game. The Seven Star transfer’s tryst with the genius rich girl will be the talk of the Academy.”

“?!?! *T-tryst...*? S-s-stop saying nonsense! I’d never have a relationship like that with you!”

Saionji’s cheeks burned red as she tore across the room and shut the curtains tight, all but panting as she glared at me. The whole process was so cute that I couldn’t help but smile. It made her cross her arms and grunt at me again.

“Ugh. Hey, how did you even get on this floor?”

“Mm? Oh, well, I had some help. My device doesn’t set off the alarms now. Can I sit down? I want to talk a little.”

“Oh, right... Okay. Can you sit on that desk chair?”

“All right. Not that I mean anything by this, but why is the bed off limits?”

“Why do you think? If you leave your body heat on it, I’ll get so worked up that I won’t be able to slee—”

“...”

“I mean that in a bad way, understand?! Having your stink all over the mattress would be so awful. I’m sure I’d have the worst nightmares ever! My heart would race so badly that I’d probably jump out of bed and hit the ceiling!”

“All right! I get it!”

Saionji hurled insults at me to keep me from her bed. I guess she was still dealing with the shock of my abrupt arrival. Her thoughts were as unorganized as her wardrobe. It’d be fun to tease her a little more, but this wasn’t the time.

“Whew...”

I exhaled, sat on the desk chair, and took out my device. Seeing that must have calmed Saionji down a little, because she retrieved her own device from the nightstand, spun around, and sat on the edge of her bed. We faced each other, knees almost touching, and the angle was such that I had to consciously

avoid looking at her chest through her camisole.

“I think you already know this...but I’m here to talk about *her*.” Naturally, I was referring to the Clone—the third Sarasa. It hadn’t even been half a day since the incident this afternoon, but she’d gone beyond viral on the Academy. STOC, the anonymous forums, the comments on ITube—every conversation about her was ridiculously active. Some people heaped praise on her astounding sneak attack, some derided it as a cowardly move, and more speculated about all the potential exploits to come. Everyone had their thoughts on the Clone, but they all agreed she couldn’t be ignored.

“Hey, Shinohara...can you look at this real quick?”

Saionji showed me her screen. It displayed an STOC account with ??? as the username. Apparently, it was created a few hours ago, and there was only a single post.

I am someone, but also no one—and that is why I can be, and transform, into anyone.

Saionji leaned forward and sighed. “She can be anyone, huh? This is such an annoyance. She started by copying me, so every time someone brings her up, all these eyes stare at me even harder.”

“I don’t think anyone suspects you’re the fake one... I guess this is part of Kurahashi’s plan, too. He’s trying to wear you down mentally.”

“Yeah. And I hate how good of a performer she is. Posing as other players, getting teams to distrust each other, destroying them... You’d think it would engender universal disapproval, but the reaction’s fifty-fifty on STOC. People are criticizing her, but I’m worried her diehard fans will drown them out.”

“Yeah. You saw how her nickname’s shifting from the Clone to the Chameleon on STOC and ITube, right? It was on the trending word list.”

“The Chameleon... I think that suits her pretty well.”

Saionji solemnly nodded. That nickname was pretty apt given how ASTRAL was played by color-coded teams that expanded their territories across the battlefield. It also meant that the whole “I’m the real Sarasa Saionji” backstory was one of a hundred faces the faker could take. Maybe that claim was just a

cover? The Clone claimed she would take the Empress's throne—an easy-to-follow, headline-grabbing declaration. But perhaps it was a smoke screen to distract from her real intention.

“I think I let my guard down. She likely intended to take things in this direction from the start,” Saionji said.

“Yeah... I'm sure she did.” I felt obliged to agree, as much as it clearly frustrated Saionji. That put a damper on things, but I'm not sure what we could've done differently. The Chameleon's strategy in this event was just too strong to deal with. ASTRAL took place in augmented reality, a virtual world mixed with the real one. Everybody knew going in that it wasn't wholly real, but it was still impossible to figure out who the Chameleon was posing as. Worse yet, the team breaking and body swapping was a unique tactic sure to garner attention. Whether people praised or slammed her, it didn't really matter. In a Game this big, whoever built the most buzz could seize an advantage.

““ ... ””

With a single move, the Chameleon had disrupted the Game, and this was undoubtedly only the beginning.

“You know what, Shinohara? After such a big opening move, she doesn't need to do anything else. Her shadow will manifest in other teams even if she does nothing.”

“Her shadow? What do you mean?”

Saionji fixed me in her ruby eyes. “You can't tell her from the real thing, right? Everyone's trying to think of ways to deal with her, but I doubt there's a foolproof method. Starting tomorrow, I bet you'll see a lot of teams lose their trust in each other. Players won't know who to believe; they'll feel more and more constricted. Remember, this Game has friendly fire. We might see teams self-destruct without the Chameleon even lifting a finger.”

“You're right... That's totally possible.” I nodded gravely. Teams breaking down, teammates trying to take each other out—honestly, it was probable. That's how badly the Chameleon had upset everything.

“Phew...” Saionji sighed gently. She placed her device on her thigh and shook

her head. “We have no idea who the Chameleon is or how she’s going to work her way through this Game. We’ve got no choice but to hold out for the time being. Things are going well with the Ohga School team. What about you guys?”

“Judging by our territory and resources, we’re doing all right, but...”

“But?”

“Well, I got caught in a side competition with one of my teammates. I have to take out two more Commanders by the end of tomorrow, or I’ll be forced to trade jobs with him. Then everyone will see that I’ve got the Action Level of a Three Star, and I’ll have a lot more to worry about than winning.”

“Huh?”

“Plus... I think this Chameleon thing will affect my team more than others. I’ve got two members who are constantly at each other’s throats on a good day. Stir them up a little, and they’ll go crazy. It’d be like an airplane breaking up in midair.”

“Whoa... Don’t sound all casual when you say that!” Saionji was evidently surprised by my candidness. Turmoil, worry, and a little bit of irritation churned in her eyes. Given our relationship, I suppose it was a pretty natural reaction. However, it wasn’t like I had no options.

I had a certain “magic wand” in mind. It still needed some working out, but if it succeeded, I’d solve both problems at the same time. Depending on how things went, this secret move could even let me beat the Chameleon at her own game.

“W-wait a second, Shinohara. Do you have some plan for making it through all that?”

Saionji leaned in with eyes wide, as though she’d read my mind. Now her ruby-red hair was even closer to me. Our knees brushed against each other. Ignoring that, or pretending I did, I nodded.

“Yeah. I wasn’t going to risk sneaking onto a girls’ floor just so I could whine about the Chameleon to you. I wanted to hear your thoughts. The Chameleon’s made her move, and the whole ASTRAL event is suffering from the aftermath. However, I have a plan to ensure this ends with us as the winners.”

“Um... Are you sure? Because we’re supposed to be rivals in the Game.”

“I know. But we’re joining up to fight the Chameleon together, right?”

“...Heh-heh!” Saionji let out a soft chuckle. Brushing her dazzlingly red hair back, she grinned slightly. “There’s just no stopping you, huh, Shinohara? Well, all right. I’ll lend you a hand...just for now!”

Her expression was so bold I had to fight to keep from being captivated.

#

So here we were, in the first half of ASTRAL’s third day. This marked the halfway point of Event Week, and just as Saionji predicted, it was a massacre.

Two hours were all it took for three teams—*three*—to get knocked out. Each one was for a different reason, too. The Chameleon only directly struck at one team, annihilating it with ease. One of the others was nowhere near her, but they were so rattled by the Chameleon’s presence that they fell apart and descended into all-out mutiny. The final team was done in by an inspired player who took advantage of the Chameleon craze and used an Ability called Mimic, which temporarily scrambled people’s visual displays to make him look like someone else, to copy her tactics. It would’ve been funny if it wasn’t so scary.

Clearly, the Chameleon was a huge wrench in the works. Libra’s viewer count grew by the second all morning, making it clear just how much attention the Game commanded.

Undoubtedly, more spectators were interested now because ASTRAL was heating up. Teams seized the territory of enemy teams they defeated. The longer the Game went on, the greater the risk with every attack. Seijo surpassed Ohga in territory size today, and Ohga held three times what my group had.

I really wanted to expand our territory before we got left behind in this inflation race, but...

“Whoa! Nanase! You’re running too far ahead!”

It was now 11:42 in the morning, and I couldn’t even pretend that the mood among our teammates was bright. I couldn’t blame anyone for it, though. We knew the Chameleon was lurking around, which meant we carried suspicion for

our teammates constantly. Our decision to keep in sight of each other was essentially a method of monitoring everyone. It didn't exactly contribute to morale.

Asamiya stopped cold at Enomoto's words "...What?" she asked. Brushing her blond hair back, she turned around, obviously annoyed. Placing a hand on her hip, she frowned at Enomoto. "I'm not going completely out of sight or anything. I'm the best suited for combat, so I'm just trying to help out the team, okay? Where do you get off?"

"You're still in view for now, but given how you never think about anything, I'm sure you'll run ahead on a 'surveillance mission' or whatever. I just want to remind you of your role before you make a lethal mistake," Enomoto replied.

"Oh, really? And it's not your fault for failing to keep up with me, Shinji? It's the Mage's job to support the Soldier. Stop whining at me all the time!"

"..."

Enomoto silently shook his head at Asamiya as he marched forward slowly. His pace stalled because he regularly checked the map data I sent him to survey the area. Asamiya was probably too worked up to realize that, though.

"Ughhh... Man, this is pissing me off... That dumb Chameleon, too. It's all just so stupid!"

Asamiya griped to herself before looking back at Enomoto again. She traipsed along without going into Sight Mode or checking the map, so she moved pretty quickly. However, that meant she steadily moved farther from the rest of us.

"Hey, Asamiya! I know the Chameleon's irritating you, but can you calm down a little? The team needs to stick together, or we won't be able to handle any surprise attacks. Akizuki hasn't checked these hexes for Traps yet, either!" I called.

"Huh? But... Yeah, okay. Sorry, Shino. Thanks for the tip!" Asamiya was about to fire back at me but thought better of it, putting her hands together in apology.

Enomoto snorted with clear dissatisfaction. "Hmph... Nanase listens to all of your orders, Shinohara..."

“Huh? What’re you, jealous of him? This is a team battle, so of course I listen to our Commander’s instructions. Besides, Shinji, Shino’s way more reliable than you,” Asamiya said.

“I’m not going to complain about your personal preferences. I’m just saying that you’re rocking the boat too much. Now isn’t the time for stubbornness.”

“You’re the one being stubborn, Shinji!”

The Game hardly seemed to matter to these two upperclassmen any longer. It’s like the game system automatically debuffed them whenever they were together. Their total lack of compatibility was no longer a joke.

“...What should we do, Master?” Himeji whispered in my ear. She and I shared a hex. I guess she’d had enough of the bickering. “If this keeps up, it’ll affect our progress. If you like, I could intervene...”

“Mm? Nah, if we do that, I should be the one, so—Huh?”

“Agh?!” Himeji exclaimed in surprise, jumping. She put all her body weight on me. Her white-gloved hands were against my chest, and her silver hair brushed my cheeks. A gentle scent flooded my nostrils. These weren’t the main problems, however.

“Why’d it go dark?” I muttered.

This AR world was usually bathed in bright light, but out of nowhere, it had been encased in a deep jet-black darkness. It was like someone put a lid on the whole Game or we’d jumped forward in time to late night. That’s how quickly the dark had fallen.

“S-sorry, Master... I, um, I was kind of startled.” My whispering must have snapped Himeji out of it. She hurriedly removed herself from me, cheeks flushed. As cool and expressionless as she typically was, I guess she wasn’t immune to all surprises.

Kind of cute... Wait, this is bad, isn’t it? This darkness... I have a bad feeling...

I tapped my earpiece while a cold shiver ran up my spine. I got an answer immediately.

“Hello! Hello! Your wish might not be Kagaya’s command, but she’ll take it as

a suggestion, at least! We genies aren't omnipotent, you know!"

"..."

"Are you ignoring me?! I worked so hard at that greeting, too... All right. I'll just have Shirayuki heap praise on me afterward!"

Kagaya sounded legitimately irked. I could hear Himeji softly answer "No, I won't," but Kagaya didn't seem to care.

"So here's the deal. I did an analysis on my end, and in all probability, this is the work of an Ability. Probably the general-purpose one called Blackout. You use it to make a designated area dark and blind everyone inside. It's active across a pretty decent range, so we're probably talking level five or higher."

"...Mmh."

"But Blackout affects the user, too, so it's not easy to abuse unless paired with another Ability. We'll have to see what happens."

Kagaya muttered to herself while tapping on her keyboard, accessing some kind of data. I didn't need to know any more. My body tensed.

Damn. This is the last Ability I wanted to see.

Kagaya said the Ability only really worked when paired with another one, but in this case, I wasn't so sure. We had just decided last night that we'd keep our eyes on each other as an anti-Chameleon tactic. But now that our whole world was dark, I couldn't even see Himeji, and she was supposed to be beside me.

Clearly, this was an attack.

I don't know if it's the Chameleon or some other team capitalizing on her success, but...

I bit my lip, bringing a hand to my chin.

Eventually, the Blackout Ability faded away, and the usual AR scene returned. Unfortunately, it was exactly as I'd feared. Things were completely different. Asamiya and Enomoto were in front of me, facing each other. The former languidly played with her hair, while the latter had his device out, ready for battle.

“Answer me one question,” Enomoto demanded. “Nanase, what is your birthday?”

“Huh? July seventh. So what?”

“A Blackout on us at that exact moment was clearly suspicious. We four were bunched together, so we could make each other out, but I lost sight of you, Nanase. None of us had a visual on you.”

“Huh?! You tryin’ to say I’m the Chameleon?! You’re delusional, Shinji! This is the falsest accusation ever!”

“I’m not accusing anyone,” Enomoto said. “I’m only saying that if there’s any doubt on the table, we need to clear it up as soon as possible. Next up... This one’s a little more obscure. What did you do for my birthday last year?”

Asamiya scowled. “I don’t remember! I don’t remember, and I don’t have to tell you! If you lost sight of me, that means I lost sight of you, too, Shinji! And now you’re trying to kill me! You sound a lot more like the Chameleon to me!”

“That’s ridiculous... I just told you that we all were in a group except for you, Nanase.”

“So what? You saw how dark it was. You could claim you saw anything!” Asamiya sniffed at Enomoto’s accusations. It clearly riled him, judging by his clenched hands. However, he had to admit that Asamiya wasn’t being illogical. He offered no further objections.

Ah, I saw this coming...

I gritted my teeth as I watched. That Blackout was engineered to create this exact situation. I was certain of it. The Ability user had created a chance for the Chameleon. It didn’t matter whether someone was actually replaced. The idea was enough. A couple of taps on a device was all it took to tear a team apart.

“It’s not me, all right? It’s you, Nanase.”

“You have got to be kidding me. Spouting wild accusations makes you way more fishy, Shinji.”

This argument was like a lit match. Both sides were ready to fire Magic Missiles at a moment’s notice. But thankfully, the clock struck noon, marking an

end to the first half of the third day. All the relevant apps closed on our devices, releasing us from the AR world. I looked around, feeling oddly exhausted. Enomoto and Asamiya were unchanged. Neither of them was the Chameleon.

“...!” Asamiya stomped off. She shoved Enomoto while wearing a terrible expression. “Move. I’m done, okay? If that’s how Shinji’s gonna be, I’m staying in my room. I’m sick of people doubting me, and I’m not joining the Game this afternoon.”

“What? Don’t give me that. What’s wrong with you?” Enomoto shot back.

“You’re the one spouting a bunch of total bullshit. If you’re gonna constantly fight with me, then it’s better for the whole team if I’m not around, right? We’ll all be better off... I know that’s what you think, Shinji!”

“Hey! Nanase!” Enomoto tried to stop Asamiya, but she wouldn’t be swayed. Once she was out of view, he brought a hand to his forehead.

“This never works,” he muttered. “I’m sorry,” he said to me. “I need to go cool down, too. I’ll do my best... But I’m not sure Nanase and I can participate this afternoon. Perhaps it’s for the best that we don’t.”

“...”

Given their horrible relationship, I had worried something like this might occur, but it still left us in a tough situation. Two Six Stars were temporarily leaving our team. If I allowed that to happen, we’d be fighting through an entire afternoon with only three players, never knowing how the Chameleon might strike. It was an impossible ask.

“Wait one minute, please, Mr. Enomoto.” It was Himeji, not me, who spoke up. She took a graceful step forward, her clear blue eyes looking straight at him. “I understand that you and Ms. Asamiya are not in peak condition. Leaving this event for now might indeed be best in the long run, but have you forgotten about your competition for Commander with my maste—?”

“Oh, right... Well, what’s the point of that now? Whether Shinohara’s qualified for the job or not, if I leave now, that pretty much proves I’m not up to the task.”

Enomoto sounded terribly dejected as he walked off. I suppose he had no

intention of taking back his words.

“Hahhh...” Akizuki heaved a theatrical sigh at the scene. “Boy. I really wish those two could learn to suck it up a little.”

“Suck it up?”

“Like, if they really hated each other, why would they always hang out? You can call them frenemies or whatever, but it’s obvious they don’t despise each other deep down... Eh-heh-heh! ♪ But this means you and I are all alone now, Hiroto! ♡”

“Are you purposefully ignoring me, Ms. Akizuki?” Himeji asked.

“Huh? You’re just his maid, aren’t you, Shirayuki? Shouldn’t you support your master’s love exploits? ♡”

“No. My role as a maid is to swat down the gnats flying around my master.”

“The *whats?!* ” Akizuki used all her devilish wiles to act as surprised as possible. Himeji brushed it off, face clear as daylight. I watched listlessly, my mind on our two wayward teammates.

They don’t hate each other deep down, huh...?

I could believe it. Given the right situation, perhaps they’d forgive each other. There was nothing to do but try.

“Phew...”

We’d made it to halftime on the third day of ASTRAL. The second half was fast approaching, as was the deadline for my promise with Enomoto. The Chameleon was bound to cause more havoc this afternoon, too. It was going to be a critical second half for us.

#

My two-hour break was mostly spent talking strategy with Himeji and Akizuki. It wasn’t really a conference, though. Mostly, I told them about my plan. I’d feared this might happen since yesterday, so I’d considered how we’d fight without our Soldier and Mage. It put us at a big disadvantage, of course, but at long as we weren’t facing a monster like Hell’s Priestess, I thought we might still take down a team or two.

Ultimately, Asamiya and Enomoto followed through on not joining the afternoon session. I guess expecting them to fix their broken relationship in two hours was a little unfair. They weren't allowed to rejoin us in the middle of a session, though. They wouldn't be able to rejoin the Game until tomorrow morning.

And...well... Things started happening the moment this session began.

"Hmm... Looks like a pincer attack."

It was 2:12 in the afternoon on the third day of ASTRAL. Kagaya's voice in my ear informed me that she'd detected enemy activity nearby. It wasn't just a single team, either. One approached from the north, while another was moving in from the south, aiming to crush us as we proceeded eastward.

I told Himeji and Akizuki. Neither of them looked pleased.

"Oh, wow. At the worst possible time, too. It's totally spoiled our date," Akizuki remarked.

"If that's how you see this session, feel free to consider it ruined," Himeji replied. "A pincer attack is certainly no laughing matter, Master. Do we know how strong the enemy forces are?"

"Yeah. I can't see which schools they're from yet, but the northern attackers have a full group of five, fifteen bases, and four hundred and seventy-seven hexes under their control," I said.

Himeji nodded. "I see. A little bit more than us, then. What about the south?"

"That team appears to be on its last legs, actually. Just two people remaining. I think they're taking advantage of the northern force's attack to swipe at us. I can't see what they got in their arsenal, though. Must be Cancel Interference at work or something."

"A team of five and a team of two... Seven in total. Sounds like trouble to me. We're down two members, too..." Akizuki pouted. I certainly agreed with her that the timing was rotten.

"I mentioned this already during the break, but I suspect this is all part of the same scheme. That Blackout occurred only half an hour ago in terms of active

Game time. We didn't detect any nearby teams then, meaning these two must have mobilized as soon as the lights went off. They couldn't have done that unless they predicted our team breaking down. Someone in one of those two teams has to be responsible for the Blackout," I said.

"Oh... B-but how did they read us so expertly? All Blackout does is turn the lights out. I don't think it's a guarantee that we'd start arguing," Akizuki replied.

"Not normally," I agreed. "Even with the Chameleon in the mix, losing your eyesight for a little bit wouldn't typically be enough to cause players to quit. However, Enomoto and Asamiya's sour relationship is famous, right? They dragged each other down and lost to an inferior team last year, too. I'm sure a lot of the players here know about that."

"Ahhh... Yeah, that makes sense." Akizuki flashed a vague sort of smile as she nodded. Committing to that Blackout strategy would've been tough for anyone going on rumors, but those who'd seen Enomoto and Asamiya lose last year had to realize it was viable. That was especially true of the top-ranking monsters who joined all the interschool events.

Someone like Kururugi, for example. Something tells me she'd be the first to take advantage of all this Chameleon disarray. She's been prodding me since the start of Event Week, and for all I know, she could be the Chameleon. What a nightmare that'd be...

What a sobering thought. Did the Chameleon orchestrate this pincer attack, or was it the work of a third party? Either way, the threat didn't change.

"So...um, what're we gonna do, Hiroto?" Akizuki took a step toward me, peering up at my face like she wanted to cling to me for warmth. "If they were trying to run the president and Miya out of the Game, that means a battle's on its way."

"Guess so, yeah. Their Blackout strike went perfectly. They'll want to finish this today, before Enomoto and Asamiya return," I said.

"H-hey, do you really think our plan will work? I mean, you and I are the strongest couple ever! ♡ And the maid along for the ride is pretty useful, too, but if it's three against seven... Shouldn't we run for it?"

“I will explain to you in detail why I am not ‘along for the ride’ later, Ms. Akizuki. Regardless, I generally agree with you. We are outclassed in resources... and we are facing an extremely crafty foe.”

Akizuki was clearly nervous, as much as she tried to hide it. Himeji, meanwhile, had her ever-loyal eyes on me. She’d admitted that things looked grim, but I could tell she had no intention of running.

“Hmm...”

Taking this in, I ruminated for a moment. We were definitely in a tough spot. Our enemies were fully prepared, and we weren’t at all. Could this even be called a fight? It promised to be a one-sided stomping.

From a different point of view, I actually don’t think it’s looking too bad for us...

We undoubtedly faced a terrible situation, and that’s why it seemed like a great opportunity to me. Even if we weren’t pitted against the Chameleon, if I defeated both of these teams, I’d obtain enough resources to fight that impostor on an even level. Plus, if both teams still had their Commanders alive, beating them would put an end to my competition with Enomoto. With his trust secured, getting him and Asamiya to reconcile wouldn’t be too difficult. Three birds with one stone. If I failed, I’d lose it all, but this promised to propel us to a commanding lead if it worked.

That’s why escape was absolutely unthinkable.

“...Yeah.” I smiled slightly. Himeji and Akizuki exchanged a look at my odd behavior, but I didn’t care. “All right. Before the enemy reaches us, we better go over some strategy. I’ve got the perfect way to turn the tables on both teams.”

#

Nightmares can be categorized a few different ways. The worst type was the one that made you wish to escape reality entirely.

“Well, well, Seven Star! What’s it been? Two days?”

Approximately ten minutes after Kagaya’s warning, we encountered our second enemy team of the Game. I didn’t mind that on its own. The issue was the team in question. Those sharp eyes pointed straight at me, that dark hair in

a ponytail. A nearly invincible girl stood with four teammates behind her.

Ugh, it just had to be you...

I had to stop myself from saying it out loud. Senri Kururugi, Hell's Priestess herself, the second-year from the Tsuyuri Girls' Institute in the Sixteenth Ward, was here. She was a born talent who had pushed her school to a shockingly high ranking in the space of a year. Enomoto had advised me to run if I saw her.

However, I'd expected her to come. With everyone feeling the pressure from the Chameleon, it took someone truly clever to use that fear as a weapon. Or maybe Kururugi was the Chameleon. Either way, I'm sure she knew about Enomoto and Asamiya's falling out.

"..."

I took a step forward, my mind focused.

"Well, thanks for coming. I really wish we could have taken you on when we had everybody. It's kind of rude to be two players down when we are hosting such honored guests."

"I don't see the problem. I'm the one who set things up so they wouldn't be here, after all," Kururugi said.

"So you're fine with admitting it, huh?" I replied. "Guess you're not as smart as you look."

"People say that a lot. But isn't that part of the fun of a Game? That trial-and-error process as you test the limits of the rules? You may not think I'm being serious, but when it comes to winning, I'm *dead* serious. Trust me."

"Oh, I believe you."

She seems so utterly calm even as she tosses out threats. A berserker with good looks, I guess.

I scowled internally at just how much of a dominating "boss character" type Kururugi was proving to be. Then I concentrated my attention on what was happening behind me.

"Eh-heh-heh! And who are you two?" came Akizuki's voice.

“Uh... Um, we’re from the Kagurazuki School, in the Ninth Ward... Y-you’re from Eimei, right? And is that...Hell’s Priestess?!”

“I told you this was a bad idea! L-let’s get outta here! They’re gonna kill us!”

“Ahhhh...”

“Wow, you two came all the way here to say hi to ol’ Noa, huh? ♪ Eh-heh-heh! Boy, I’m so delighted! ♡”

“N-no, I didn’t say that—wait, ‘Noa’? Are you the Little Devil of Eimei...?”

“Sorry, guys! I have to disappoint ya. I’m glad you dropped in, but I’m already in love... Eek!! ♡”

“Sh-she’s not listening...”

Ignoring the nature of that conversation, it sounded like Noa Akizuki was dealing with the team behind us. She was grinning in her usual, devilish way. Although up against two Five Stars from the Ninth Ward, a boy and a girl, she didn’t flinch. The pair from Kagurazuki School had hurried over after spotting the Blackout, only to find themselves caught in an Eimei and Tsuyuri grudge match they desperately wanted out of.

Once I’d confirmed that Akizuki would be all right, I returned my attention to the scene before me. Kururugi was wasting no time marching over, her sharpened eyes cutting into me. She was the face of pure tranquility as she spoke, as befit her title of Hell’s Priestess.

“I think it is about time to begin...or should I say, to end this. After all the groundwork we’ve laid, the rest isn’t much more than simple mechanical labor. But don’t ever let your guards down. I want to see everyone’s full power on display,” she said.

“Heh... I’m looking forward to this,” I replied.

Kururugi was born for this role. I’m sure she knew Libra’s cameras were rolling, as she all but welcomed us to our imminent doom. I knew that One-Shot Kill was in her arsenal, but I couldn’t get swallowed up in the story she was weaving, or I was dead. My expression told her I didn’t believe for a second that I was in danger.

Neither Kururugi nor I made the first move. That went to Noa Akizuki.

“Eh-heh-heh... I think I’m gonna cheat a little. ♪”

Miming a kiss on her device, Akizuki invoked an Ability titled Predict Behavior. It had been derived from the green Unique Star in my possession—a special power with potency depending on the user’s compatibility. For Akizuki, it was beyond a perfect match, all but letting her read her opponent’s minds, truly a fearsome Ability.

The actual star had made its way over to me after the Fourth Ward Challenge, begging the question of why Akizuki had access to Predict Behavior.

“All right, Master... The rest is up to you.”

The answer could be found in Replace, one of Himeji’s Abilities. Akizuki and I had just swapped a single Ability, giving Predict Behavior back to the Little Devil, its most experienced user. Himeji spun around and made a beeline for Akizuki. I’m sure the Ninth Ward duo never expected we’d devote two fighters to a couple of stragglers, because they promptly turned and ran.

“...You can’t be serious,” Kururugi muttered. “You want to take my team on all by yourself...?”

She sounded doubtful, but the Eimei School team did only have three people, and two of them were chasing down the fleeing players from the Ninth Ward. That meant I alone had to take on the full Tsuyuri force.

It was because of this, I presume, that the vote numbers began to shift on my Sight Mode display. Paring it down to just the three teams present, Kagurazuki was in last place by a mile, with Eimei in second with twice as many votes. However, Tsuyuri commanded a powerful lead with double our votes. It made perfect sense. I was a Commander, a role not suited to combat, and I was outnumbered in opponents and resources.

But I knew that going in.

I smiled softly at Kururugi, who stood only a short distance from me, and took a step forward. Perhaps the normal thing would’ve been to keep a prudent distance, since Kururugi’s Attack Spells could have One-Shot Kill empowering them. I paid that no mind, however. I played it off quite naturally, because none

of the Tsuyuri Girls' Institute team's members reacted.

Well...except for one.

"Not one step farther." Senri Kururugi's honed voice commanded me to stop. She held out her device. "Do you not realize your situation? You're alone, and we're five people. This is neutral territory, and we beat you in every kind of resource. Whether you're the best in the Academy or not, I really don't think you can turn the tables on us."

"Are you sure about that? Because against you five, I alone am more than enough," I replied.

"What?"

Kururugi clearly hadn't expected that response. Her eyes widened a bit, and her ponytail bounced as she looked down. I took advantage of this brief falter, giving her as bold a look as I could, despite the seemingly desperate five-to-one predicament.

"Hah! What's wrong? You have a tremendous advantage, and you're hesitating? Any one of your Spells could kill me in one shot. You could lob a Magic Missile at me from a few hexes back and still win."

"..."

"Or would you prefer to finish in style with a Sword Flash? That seems fitting for someone who's into kendo. I've got a Defense Wall or two I could break out, but they won't hold forever. What's the harm in giving that a shot? That's assuming you don't mind if the Game ends for you immediately afterward." I curled my lips into a sneer as I delivered the foreboding message.

Let's be honest for one second. Everything I said, from start to finish, was both completely made up and a total bluff. I was passing myself off as having some sort of clandestine knowledge, but attacking me wouldn't have triggered anything extraordinary. I'd take damage and lose before too long. My heart beat so hard I was surprised I kept myself standing upright.

Despite my anxiousness, I was certain of one thing.

Himeji mentioned that Kururugi's One-Shot Kill only works with the right

conditions. Kururugi always sets her team up to meet those prerequisites as quickly as possible. Which means she can't set off One-Shot Kill alone. She needs her teammates' support.

That much was clear from the Tsuyuri Girls' Institute team's performance at past events. I'd gone through the data on Hell's Priestess yesterday, and in every example I found, Kururugi had required her teammates to meet the conditions. As a result, or perhaps it was just her natural approach, Kururugi always placed her team's needs first. I stood there with nothing to stop her. She ought to have been able to defeat me singlehandedly, yet she couldn't take the leap for fear that my words and attitude concealed a Trap. After all, how many could stare down Hell's Priestess so calmly? Any who did surely had something up their sleeve. She didn't know what but obviously felt confident I had something planned since I was the most powerful student on the Academy.

Attacking me had to be a bad idea.

That's what you're probably thinking, right?

I smiled just a bit harder while Kururugi was evidently lost in thought. After waiting for just the right moment, I raised an arm into the air.

All right. Have fun drowning in your delusions... Please, I'm begging you!

I snapped my fingers, looking as smug as possible. Immediately, one of Kururugi's teammates lost her balance. The Sight Mode readout told me she'd just lost two Life Points, and I followed that up with a Magic Missile, bringing her to the brink of death. The next moment, this mystery attacker struck again, their cooldown time having expired quickly. Kururugi's teammate disappeared from the AR world in no time.

Once I was sure it all went without a hitch, I smiled. "There's the first one down... That Magic Missile sure worked well, huh? Guess that one was your Spy?"

"Damn... Damn youuuuuuuuuu!"

Losing an ally made Kururugi fly into a rage. Himeji, the key to that attack just now, quickly ran back to my hex to escape Kururugi's attack range.

"Phew... I'm back, Master."

“Great job, Himeji.”

That’s right. If you don’t mind me spoiling the trick, Himeji hadn’t gone to aid Akizuki. With Predict Behavior at her disposal, Akizuki wouldn’t have had any trouble defeating a couple of weaker opponents. Considering the difference in firepower between the Tsuyuri and Eimei teams, having Himeji’s support was pretty much a must.

It was still four on two, though, and sitting here waiting to be beaten wasn’t a winning strategy. As Yuikawa from Ibara School had said, a Commander and Guardian were about the least effective combo out there when it came to offense. If we tried a frontal approach, we’d be wiped out without taking anyone with us.

So I’d come up with a plan. Akizuki would take on our Kagurazuki attackers from the south, while Himeji and I dealt with our main enemies. Himeji pretended to support Akizuki to divert Kururugi’s attention away from her. She quickly returned under the cover of Stealth, and at my signal, she cast a few surprise Spells to remove whoever would go down the easiest. That was the basic idea.

“...!”

Seeing Himeji must have helped Kururugi realize what happened. Her face twisted in frustration as she glared at me, her eyes sharper than ever.

Now for the big question. Did taking one teammate down make the conditions for One-Shot Kill impossible?

I met Kururugi’s hard gaze while secretly praying. I’d done all the research I could. Unfortunately, the requirements to activate One-Shot Kill appeared to differ depending on the Game. I couldn’t tell if defeating one of her teammates would affect it at all.

“Master, look out...!”

Suddenly, Kururugi raised an arm in a natural motion as she cast a Magic Missile. If One-Shot Kill had been triggered, I was done for. Thankfully, Himeji’s Defense Wall somehow caught the attack in time.

However...

“?!”

...at the moment of impact, Himeji let out a gasp...and I couldn't blame her. Her Defense Wall had gone up in time, yet four LP crystals above her head shattered.

“Hmm... So it can't finish someone off while they're under the effects of a Defense Wall?”

Kururugi placed her device in her hip pocket, as though sheathing her sword after a lightning-quick strike. All she did was launch a Spell, but I could almost see the whip-slash of her blade in the air.

She took most of Himeji's LP even though there was a Defense Wall in the way! That's crazy!

I kept it cool on the outside despite my internal incredulity. Defense Wall's description claimed it rendered the user impervious to damage, but in actuality, it must have reduced incoming damage by a high value. Apparently, Kururugi's One-Shot Kill did an even more massive amount of damage, making this a case of the unstoppable spear striking the impenetrable shield. In the end, the Game engine let Himeji survive but cut her LP down to one.

This was sheer, overwhelming power. There was no defending against Hell's Priestess at all.

“...!”

I knew just how fragile our situation was, but I didn't let that show on my face as I moved from hex to hex. I wasn't merely running, either. I moved in a random pattern, doing everything I could to keep my distance from Kururugi.

In short order, a transformation spread across the field.

“Hmm...?”

I stopped for just a moment to survey the scene. Although not every single one, many of the hexes I'd crossed were turning bright green, a total of twenty.

“Nice trick,” the frustrated Kururugi spit. “You're using Neutralize to claim part of this area to try building an advantage.”

“I might be. Or maybe I've got some other motivation,” I replied.

“Some other... It doesn’t matter. I’m not here to argue with you. You’ve already wasted enough of my time.”

Kururugi approached me again.

Certainly, claiming at least a little bit of this neutral territory helped expand our options considerably. Using Neutralize for that purpose was a perfectly viable strategy. However, Kururugi’s assumption carried two mistakes.

We’re trying to build an advantage, huh? Don’t be stupid. Even if this whole area was Eimei territory, it still wouldn’t make us any more powerful than you.

I wasn’t trying to reengineer the battlefield. Those green hexes I’d spread around while getting away from Kururugi might have seemed random, the effort of someone desperately trying to squeeze some advantage from a tough situation, but I’d actually followed a set pattern. No army would deliberately move into a region where it knew it would have a disadvantage. And I’d taken advantage of that thinking to lure Kururugi and her team south.

If I can keep this up, then the bait should do its job just fine... But we’re not out of it yet. We haven’t disabled Kururugi’s One-Shot Kill. I really want to take another one of her teammates down soon...

I kept a watchful eye out for deadly strikes that could come at any time. Suddenly, a cool, reserved voice spoke in my ear.

“Master, do you have a moment?”

“What is it?”

“I believe I have an idea, something we can execute right now that might take down one of Tsuyuri’s members... However, it’s not guaranteed to work. Failure will likely mean I will be retired from the Game. Would you mind leaving this to me? Can you trust me?”

Himeji kept her focus on the Tsuyuri Girls’ Institute team behind us as she spoke. Her tone was mostly the same as always, yet I couldn’t help but feel she was forcing it a little. Still, my answer was obvious.

“Of course. I’ve believed in you since my first day on the island.”

“Ah... All right. Thank you very much.”

Himeji sighed with evident relief, then spun to face Kururugi and the others, politely bowing to them.

“Ms. Kururugi and team members from Tsuyuri Girls’ Institute, I’m going to bring you to a standstill for a little while. In so many words, I won’t allow you to go a single step farther.”

“Oh?” Kururugi enjoyed a laugh. “Do you really think we’re so incapable? Trying to bluff against us twice in one battle...”

“That’s not my intention at all. However, if you believe I’m lying, then why don’t you try striking me? That should clear things up.”

“Uh-huh. Let’s do it, then.” Kururugi must have been pretty worked up by all this. She wasted no time grabbing her device and activating a Spell. Judging by the distance between the two, I had to guess it was Magic Missile, but the exact type didn’t really matter. As long as One-Shot Kill was in effect, all of Kururugi’s attacks were lethal.

“...!”

The moment the Spell struck, I spied Himeji tense. There was no indication she had a Defense Wall up; I’m sure she knew it’d be pointless. I feared the worst for a moment, wondering if she intended to sacrifice herself.

“...What?” Kururugi sounded baffled, and I understood why. Her Attack Spell had hit Himeji dead-on, yet it didn’t claim her remaining LP. Instead, it reduced one of Kururugi’s teammates’ LP to zero. The victim froze, mouth open in shock, but flickered out of the AR game world before she could say anything. We never found out what job she had.

Kururugi narrowed her eyes at Himeji. “You... What did you just do? That was beyond suspicious...”

“Suspicious? Oh, don’t say that. All I did was use Variable Control.”

“...That’s ridiculous.”

“No, it’s not. Allow me to explain. Attack Spells in ASTRAL are programmed to deal a set amount of damage to any player located in the targeted coordinates. It’s all numbers. They’re not real-life gunshots or artillery fire.”

“Yes, that much is obvious.”

“So the rest is quite simple. The attacker’s positional data, the target’s position, the timing of the Spell invocation, and where you wish to redirect the Spell—if you can calculate all of it, using Variable Control to rewrite the relevant values and forcing an attack to hit another location should be doable.”

“.....”

Kururugi looked aghast. I’m sure I would’ve been, too. Himeji’s explanation sounded spot-on. She’d pulled off an exquisite maneuver, using Kururugi’s overpowered strikes against her. It had been a tremendous gamble, though. A slight miscalculation, and it would’ve likely failed. Plus, the required timing was so pinpoint that Himeji couldn’t have relied on Kagaya for help. Only Himeji, head of the Company, could’ve pulled it off—and all she’d required was the device in her hand.

“...”

Kururugi shot her a dirty look, having recovered from the initial shock.

“I never saw that coming... Who *are* you?”

“Me? Well...” Himeji gave me a quick glance. “I am a maid. The personal maid of Mr. Hiroto Shinohara, the Academy’s best.”

She delivered her response with a polite smile.

b

“...Damn it.”

Senri Kururugi was peeved—and understandably so. No one would remain calm after being wound up by such a smug, self-important-seeming boy. Even his maid got a shot off on her. What an embarrassing battle.

The Tsuyuri Girls’ Institute team had three surviving members, including Kururugi herself. To trigger One-Shot Kill in ASTRAL, she needed to have more team members remaining than her opponents and employ an Action Level of three or higher when using a Spell. If she lost one more teammate, her ace Ability would be gone. Worse yet, she’d just lost her Guardian, who’d been providing support buffs to the team. Kururugi’s Action Level was nearly below

three.

I didn't expect it to be this tough...

She quietly reflected on her predicament. That trick with Variable Control was quite a surprise, but now that it had been revealed, she could take the appropriate countermeasures. That maid had only one LP left. Kururugi wouldn't need One-Shot Kill to finish her. The maid would have to defend against every attack, and that was bound to leave her open somewhere.

We can win this... Those Neutralized hexes are a pain, but it's costing him resources, so it's not all bad.

Kururugi pursued Hiroto Shinohara, avoiding the green hexes he'd created. She would've preferred not to go to the effort, but getting caught in Eimei School territory would reduce her Action Level and deactivate One-Shot Kill. The chase led her south.

Hmm...? Come to think of it, why is he going south anyway? There can't be anything there—

By the time the question crossed Kururugi's mind, it was too late.

#

There was a flash—and then the hex next to Kururugi's current one exploded.

"Wha—?!"

Shocked, she immediately activated a Defense Wall. The teammate next to her, who'd been trying to access her device, was instantly removed from the Game. A single Trap wasn't powerful enough to deal five LP of damage at once. That hex had several placed on it.

I watched this unfold from a prudent distance. "Gotcha," I stated flatly. "That's number three."

"...! I'm guessing that was no accident." Kururugi was visibly shaken.

"Doesn't look that way, does it?" I replied. "I don't know how much intel you have on Eimei students... But do you know anything about the Little Devil who's taking on the Ninth Ward team right now? She's really good at reading people's thoughts and actions. It makes her more effective at setting Traps than using

normal Attack Spells.”

Kururugi sniffed. “So what?”

“Don’t you get it? She’s been laying Traps this whole time. There’s still a ton you haven’t set off. There’s some you didn’t hit as we’d hoped and a few in now-irrelevant locations... That’s why we lured you into following us south. These are the remains of the other battle.”

“I see... So you chased the Ninth Ward team away just to bait us into this minefield?!”

Kururugi had finally figured it out. I practically heard her grinding her teeth in disgust. She went silent and stared at the ground for a moment but soon returned her sharp gaze to me.

“I’m not sure why I didn’t notice sooner. I understood you were leading me somewhere, yet for some reason, I couldn’t deduce your intention.”

“Not sure, huh? Well, maybe some Little Devil took over your mind,” I said.

“...Are you serious?”

“Half,” I replied nonchalantly. I’m sure a lot of it was thanks to Himeji’s Variable Control being so good that Kururugi had been too distracted to consider my little trick. But honestly, now that Akizuki was in a kind of “awakened mode” with Predict Behavior back in her possession, I would believe she had mind-control powers.

“...”

Kururugi went quiet again. I felt confident that losing a third teammate had sealed off One-Shot Kill. She sighed a bit, rubbing her right hand on her forehead.

“Whew... You’ve really done it, Seven Star.”

“Thanks. You’ll make me blush if you keep staring at me like that, though.”

“Quit with the banter, please. Are you still playing dumb? You don’t have the advantage here. My team is still overwhelmingly in the lead.”

Senri Kururugi took a big step forward, a fearsome smile masking her wrath.

“Losing three of my friends fills me with humiliation and resentment, but now you’ve made the lethal flaw to your scheme crystal clear.”

“Really?” I said.

“Yes,” Kururugi replied. “You’ve obviously been using Neutralize too much. Maybe that was part of your performance, but if you really filled your slots with Neutralizes, I doubt you have any Attack Spells ready. That’s why you had to rely on Traps from your Spy to land that hit. You’re acting all calm and composed, but I know you’re not. Your whole strategy is desperate.”

“...You’ve been paying close attention.” I gave a passing compliment to her observational skills but continued grinning at her. “But I doubt you know how many—”

“Thirty-five. You’ve used thirty-five Neutralize Spells against us in this battle. And according to our Commander, who just got blown up, Eimei controls twelve bases. Since each team member gets three times their base count in personal slots, you can’t carry more than thirty-six Spells at once. So including the Magic Missile you used early on, that means you have nothing left in your personal slots—not even a Defense Wall.”

“...”

Kururugi’s keen deduction silenced me. Senri Kururugi, the One-Shot Killer. After so many interschool events, I guess she was used to exchanges like this one. She was right. I’d claimed thirty-five hexes for Eimei. Despite getting frustrated, Kururugi had still maintained her composure enough to count. That took real skill.

“Have you forgotten, Ms. Kururugi?” Himeji took a step forward. “Even if he loses all his weapons, my master still has me by his side. Did you think you could lay a finger on him without defeating me first—?”

“No, I certainly didn’t.”

The moment Kururugi cut off Himeji’s question, her single remaining teammate swiped a finger across her device. Himeji gasped soundlessly, suddenly rooted where she stood. I tried to figure out how it happened. Kururugi grinned.

“My team builds itself to take advantage of One-Shot Kill as best we can. And I chose this girl because she has an Ability called Medusa’s Gaze. It prevents her from attacking, but she can freeze anyone within sight of her for one minute. Pretty useful, don’t you think?”

“...Wow. Yeah, sounds like a convenient tool to have,” I said.

“I’m glad you think so. Now, you have no Spells remaining, and our little troublemaking servant can’t move. All in all, I’d say we’ve just secured victory.”

“Oh? But your One-Shot Kill’s been stripped away, hasn’t it? Without that, you’re just another Five Star. I don’t think you’ll win that easily.”

“...We’ll see.”

Kururugi’s gaze strayed down to her feet, like something had upset her. Then she lifted her right arm and pointed her device at her final teammate.

“Sorry, everybody... Forgive me for being such a coward.”

With a loud *bang*, the girl took Kururugi’s Gunfire at point-blank range, not trying to run. The attack instantly banished her from the AR realm. I watched on in disbelief.

“I’ve never revealed this before,” Kururugi began quietly, “but One-Shot Kill was originally an Ability meant for fighting alone. It only takes effect once all my other teammates are defeated... But isn’t that terribly sad? So I used an Ability called Substitute Conditions to change the requirements to something more to my liking. That way, I could use One-Shot Kill with my friends around. In fact, they needed to be around. Really, I’ve always been at my strongest when fighting on my own. I just don’t enjoy it.”

...*Huh?!*

“Perhaps this is overkill against someone with no Spells left... But I owe you quite a bit now. You better regret toying with us all today.”

Kururugi raised her device high in the air... Undoubtedly, the ITube chat was going crazy. Senri Kururugi, the One-Shot Killer, was on the ropes and had been robbed of all her teammates. Yet the cut of her Sword Flash hadn’t dulled one bit, and she was ready to cleave me in two.

I wasn't going to give her the chance, though.

"I wouldn't call it toying, really."

Wearing a half grin, I took a few quick steps backward. Then I selected Magic Missile—a Spell tucked inside my allegedly empty personal slot and fired it straight at Kururugi. Then I used a Cancel Spell to skip my cooldown time, took a step forward, and unleashed a Sword Flash.

"...Huh?"

Kururugi seemed more stunned with surprise than fazed by the actual damage. She'd been convinced that I didn't have any Spells left, yet I'd fired off a barrage of them. It would've been odd if she wasn't a little shocked.

While I stood there, composed with device in hand, Kururugi demanded, "Wh-what's going on?! Do you have infinite slots or something?!"

"Well, I'd like to claim that it's my Seven Star status at work, but not even I can do that. The slots work the same for all players."

"So why?! You cast Neutralize so much that you should've run out ages ago!"

"Nope. Sorry, but your whole line of thinking is faulty. Listen, a little while ago, I turned a few hexes green while keeping my distance from you. You assumed this was an attempt to give myself the battlefield advantage, but that wasn't the case."

"Pff." Kururugi snorted irritably at my casual explanation. "I know that. You were trying to lure us south. You wanted to bring us into the minefield."

"That was one aspect of it, yeah. But there was another goal. I had to trick you, Kururugi. My whole mission from the start was to make it look like I was blowing through all my Spell slots."

"Make it...*look* like? What do you mean?"

"What do you think? I've barely used any Spells at all since we started fighting. What's more, I haven't used any Neutralize Spells to expand our territory. All I did was employ an Ability to change how the hexes appeared."

"Ah!"

Yup, it was all thanks to †Jet-Black Wings†, the Ability provided by my blue star. I'd pretended to use it to fool the Ibara School team yesterday, but this time I genuinely activated it. That's how I'd made it look like some of the hexes I stepped on changed color. I'd been repainting the Game world, as though seizing hexes with a bagful of Neutralizes.

However, it was all just for show. The green hexes luring Kururugi south were green visually, but they weren't part of Eimei's territory.

"Heh!" I grinned confidently, driving home that the tables had been turned. "You've had the wrong idea the whole time. †Jet-Black Wings† can alter some visual quality of the Game, but it doesn't change anything else. I never held those hexes, so my slots were pretty much untouched. As it happens, they're full of Spells to defeat you."

"..."

"How the mighty have fallen, huh?" I said with a sigh. My quick combo strikes had brought Kururugi's LP down to two. Based on that damage, it seemed she was a Soldier. One more Magic Missile would end this for good. At this point, the One-Shot Killer had nothing, and it was time for me to conclude this battle. I lifted my device up high...

"?!"

...and with a discomfoting *bzzt*, it started vibrating heavily. I hurriedly checked the screen. The familiar interface was gone, replaced with *LOCKED* instead. Fortunately, it only lasted for ten seconds, but that was still enough time for Kururugi to recover.

"Damn it...!"

She ran off, deploying a Defense Wall for insurance. I thought she might go back on the offensive, but she only shook her head at me.

"Electronic Interference. I save that Ability for when I'm *really* in trouble. I can't lose, you know—the reputation of the Tsuyuri Girls' Institute is at stake. This is terribly humiliating... But I'm out of here for now."

"Huh? Hey!"

I shouted for her to stop, but it was a futile effort, of course. Kururugi hurried into the distance. I could have pursued her with the Company's assistance, but then I really would run out of Spells. Kururugi was so close to being knocked out, but she still had One-Shot Kill. This wasn't the time to go chasing her all over the map. Letting Kururugi go meant that we couldn't seize Tsuyuri's territory, which was a big problem. Still, in times like this, you couldn't ask for everything. I'd managed to nearly wipe out a team far more powerful than us through bluffs. That was a win in its own right.

"...Well done, Master." Himeji, now free from Medusa's Gaze, walked up to me. "How should I put this...? Ms. Kururugi is certainly a hardened veteran. She's got a powerful Ability and first-class intuition and adaptation skills. I understand why she achieved Five Star status in just her second year."

"Yeah... But don't you think her running away was kind of strange? That Ability, Electronic Interference. If she'd followed up with an Attack Spell, she definitely would've beaten me. Who knows if she would've won against you and Akizuki afterward, though... I guess that's why she ran. But ASTRAL's all about taking other people's territory. Even Hell's Priestess will have a real tough time winning alone, don't you think?" I said.

"Hmm... Now that you mention it, that does sound odd. I'd think she'd want to strike back at you instead of fleeing with no real destination. Do you think there's something else at play here? Perhaps there's a reason she had to stay alive even though she's the only member left on her team," Himeji replied.

"Yeah..."

I thought over this for a few moments while Himeji tapped a white-gloved finger on her cheek, but I couldn't come up with a believable reason. All I could say for certain was that Kururugi wasn't the Chameleon. If the Chameleon had One-Shot Kill, this game would've ended a long time ago.

"Hiroto!" I turned at the loud voice and saw Akizuki bounding toward me. After screeching to a halt in front of me, she let out a strangely alluring exhale and looked up at me.

"*Huff, huff...* Eh-heh-heh! ♡ Guess what, Hiroto?! Noa here defeated those other two guys for you! ♡ Isn't that really great? Huh? Isn't it? Aren't I the

best?”

“Y-yeah... Thanks. You helped a lot.”

“Aw, whoo-hoo! ♪ Eh-heh-heh... It sure would be nice if you gave me a few love pats as a reward... *Eek!* ♡”

“...Fine.”

I placed a hand on Akizuki’s head as she leaned toward me impishly. I ran my fingers down one of her bouncy twin ponytails. That was really all I did, but every time I moved my hand slightly, she made little “Ohhh... ♡” moans. Himeji glared so hard I all but felt it.

“...Eh-heh-heh! Thank you! ♡”

After a short while, Akizuki was apparently satisfied with my reward. She hopped back, then used both hands to fan her face, as if to cool her flushed cheeks.

“You know,” she said, “it’s kind of strange. I beat both of the Ninth Ward guys, but we didn’t gain any territory from them.”

“Huh?” I checked for myself. “Oh, you’re right. So maybe their team isn’t wiped out yet?”

“Did they split into two groups? Hmm... Would anyone do that? I don’t really see the point...”

I rubbed my chin while listening to Akizuki. She was right. Team members were critical in ASTRAL. Dividing them was a needless risk, something only for desperate measures, like what we’d done.

“But...” Finding myself at an impasse, I decided to verbalize my thoughts to help organize them better. “If the Ninth Ward’s team wasn’t split up, then why didn’t we take their territory? Kururugi got away, but we should have wiped out the other team.”

“Right, yeah,” Akizuki agreed. “Hmmm... Oh, before I beat them for good, they did say something kinda weird.”

“Weird? How?” I asked.

“Um, like, ‘We’re affiliated with the Chameleon,’ or something like that.”

“?!”

I gasped a bit at Akizuki’s sudden revelation.

What could that mean...?

A connection with the Chameleon, unclaimed territory, and Kururugi running away. None of these qualities meant much on their own, but when taken together, it was clear they were connected. This was the Chameleon’s doing. I felt an intense cold shiver up my spine. Uncomfortable sweat ran down my neck.

Could we have done anything differently? We’d managed to escape the pincer attack but hadn’t acquired new hexes from either enemy team to show for it. In terms of cold, hard results, we’d spent a bunch of valuable Spells. In fact, we’d actually lost a few bases since the start of the fight. Another team must have sneaked in and stolen some territory while we were distracted. Out of the eleven surviving teams in this Game, we were now eighth in territory size and dead last in base count.

Meanwhile, Seijo School stood head and shoulders above all other competitors in both categories.

“...”

I looked down at my device. Viewers didn’t think too highly of losses, either. Our vote percentage was plummeting. The comments on the Libra feed were starting to include some criticism of me. *So much for the Seven Star. He’s useless in team battles.* And so on—and I had the clear impression people were jumping ship.

And I haven’t finished my competition with Enomoto, either...

Our deadline was the end of the third day, and that was rapidly approaching. I hung my head.

Things were desperate, so impossible that I didn’t have any idea how I was going to make a comeback. However, I’d kind of expected this. I’d assumed things would go poorly from the start, and that’s why I’d taken all that risk to

discuss things with Saionji last night.

Her image floated across my mind.

I'm not sure of it yet... But at this point, I don't have much choice.

This was a gamble. Admittedly, there was a decent chance it'd work out in my favor, but it still wasn't a guarantee. It'd be a coin flip with my life on the line.

I looked at Himeji. There was absolute trust in her gaze. Then my eyes went to Akizuki, who peered up at me like a clingy puppy. When I spoke, I was as calm as I'd ever been.

"Listen, you two, this is going to sound bizarre. You might have trouble believing it, but suspend your disbelief and hear me out."

May Interschool Competition: ASTRAL—Day 3 Progress

Calculating data. Please wait...

###

"I'm really sorry about this."

The second half of the third day had finished. Enomoto called us to a corner of the first-floor hotel lobby, where he apologized profusely.

"..."

I could certainly understand why he felt so remorseful. Hell's Priestess engineered the situation, but Enomoto had ultimately chosen to bow out of the second half of the day, resulting in the dire situation we'd fought through. He definitely wasn't blameless.

Enomoto, back straight like he was facing a firing squad, continued before I could say anything.

"This afternoon, I was watching the Libra feed with Nanase over in the lobby restaurant. I wanted to watch it alone, but...I guess both of us were ashamed of ourselves. At the very least, we wished to know how the Game was proceeding."

"Yeah," I said.

"I saw everything on-screen. No, that's a lie. I felt so awful that I couldn't

watch to the end. I fled into my room midway...and I just sat there shaking, unable to bear seeing you lose so many votes.” Enomoto quietly bowed his head again. “Again, I’m deeply sorry. My selfish, egotistical behavior has besmirched Eimei School and you. I thought I was the most qualified for the Commander role before the Game began, but I was sorely mistaken. None of this was your fault, Shinohara. Once things settle down, I’m going to visit the provost and work out a way to explain my actions in public.”

He sounded as serious as possible. Clearly, this wasn’t a hollow apology or him playing it up. He must have spent time reflecting on his actions before we returned.

I stared at him for a moment.

“Hey, Enomoto,” I said.

“What?”

“Be honest with me. Did you seriously believe Asamiya was the Chameleon?”

“.....No.” It took him a moment to shake his head and admit it. “No, I didn’t. There was a theoretical nonzero chance, but I had no reason to doubt her apart from that. I mostly accused Nanase to rile her up.”

“Rile her up?” I repeated questioningly.

“Yes. She’s just such an idiot. She’s stupid, oblivious, gullible... And you’ve seen how susceptible she is to being antagonized. I thought she’d ruin our chances if she stayed on the team. I was sure she’d drag us down with her, and I wanted to avoid that, no matter what.”

“...”

“What’s with that look, Shinohara?”

“Nothing. I just thought you’re being unusually honest with me for a change.”

“...Hmph. I’m simply telling you what I think of her. I typically keep it to myself to prevent complicating things needlessly.”

He sounded a bit hesitant, and he couldn’t look me in the eye. I snickered a little as I watched him.

“...A-ah?!”

Before I had a chance to say anything, there was a loud clatter, and someone charged into our conversation. It was an all-too-familiar sight. Enomoto hurriedly searched for a hiding spot but didn't find one in time. The girl barreled for us despite a reluctant expression on her face. Nanase Asamiya, the blond girl who toyed with her hair instead of paying attention, had arrived.

“S-sorry, Shino. I didn't mean to listen in on you guys or anything, but...”

She trailed off, and Enomoto inserted himself between Asamiya and me.

“How much did you hear?” he inquired.

A pause.

“...I want an answer to this, Nanase,” Enomoto said, his voice low. “Depending on your reply, I might need to erase all your memories.”

“Huh? What's up with that? Um... Up to the part where you shouted ‘Damn, I love Nanase so much!!’ I think.”

“I didn't say anything like that. And I don't exclaim ‘Damn,’ either.”

“Okay, from the point where you said ‘I think about her all the time...’”

“I never said that!”

“Huh?! You definitely did!”

Their faces were centimeters from each other as they bickered. It wasn't nearly as fiery as what I saw this morning, but I couldn't deny that things remained tense between them. I wasn't too enthusiastic about intervening, but I had little choice.

“During the lunch break, I watched some Libra footage while trying to work out a strategy...,” I began.

It was time to reveal a certain truth to them.

“Remember when I spoke with Yuikawa from the Fifteenth Ward? We were close to signing a Truce, but one of his teammates tried to use a Magic Missile on us. I didn't notice it at the time. Honestly, I missed it even when I reviewed the video for the first time. I had to slow it down to about one-tenth normal

speed to even detect it. And that player was the guy you attacked, Asamiya.”



“What...?” Enomoto looked stunned.

“Ah, Shino, that...” Asamiya seemed equally surprised, although for a different reason.

Enomoto recovered first. “Is that true?” he asked. “She wasn’t just running headlong into danger like usual? There was an actual reason for it?”

“...You don’t have to sound so blown away,” Asamiya groused. “I told you I wanted to help the team, didn’t I? We’ve got Shino the Seven Star, the most trustworthy guy out there; and Noa-chi’s real cute and smart; and Yukirin’s mega adorable and talented. And Shinji... Well, Shinji isn’t very cute, but he does bring the whole team together, right? I’m not smart at all, so unless I help with the fighting, there’s no place for me on the roster...”

“...So you shot that enemy faster than a speed requiring footage slowed to a tenth of its speed to see?” Enomoto said, incredulous.

“Sorry!” Asamiya shot back. “I saw her try to attack, so I reacted, okay?!”

Neither of them was going to come out and say it, but I think it was safe to conclude that they’d made up. If they wanted to make it a truce that only lasted through Event Week, that was fine with me.

“Mmm... You know, Shino...” Now that her argument with Enomoto had simmered down, Asamiya turned back toward me. “I’m sorry if this sounds rude after you helped us, but... This really can’t go on, can it?”

“Can’t go on how?” I asked.

“Uh... We can’t really stage a comeback at this point.”

She shrugged apologetically at me.

“I mean... We’ve got no territory, no Spells, our support’s dropping hard...and you dropped out, Shino.”

“Ah yes, you’re right..... Wait, what?” Enomoto nodded along with the conversation until he heard that last part. Once his brain acknowledged it, he winced. “Shinohara dropped out? Wait, what do you mean? I didn’t hear anything about that.”

“Yeah, because you ran off halfway through the afternoon broadcast, Shinji.” Asamiya sighed a bit, exasperated with Enomoto. Then she gave me a furtive look.

“Shino here,” she stated with some obvious reluctance, “dropped out of ASTRAL at the end of today. That ponytailed girl didn’t knock him out... He did it by himself.”

She was right. Around an hour ago, just before the end of the second half, I used a Sword Flash Spell to reduce my own LP to zero. I was the first Eimei School student knocked out, a baffling suicide move. ITube and STOC were going crazy over it. However, I’m sure none of those commenters and viewers were as baffled as Enomoto.

“He dropped out...? Shinohara? Hiroto Shinohara’s already out of the Game...?”

“Yep. That’s right. Asamiya’s right. If you don’t believe it, check your device.”

“I—I believe it and all, but—but why did...? Ah.” Enomoto must have realized the reason, because he cut himself off. “Wait.” His voice trembled as he paled. “Was it because of me? Did you do it to win our competition?”

“...”

I replied to Enomoto’s question with silence. He and I were warring for the right to be Commander. To win, I had to beat three Commanders by the end of the third day. The way things had gone, there was no way I could have met that condition. By the time we fended off that pincer attack, we’d only defeated two Commanders, and there hadn’t been enough time remaining to eliminate another team by the deadline.

So I’d decided to sacrifice myself. ASTRAL allowed friendly fire, after all. And since my job was Commander, knocking myself out completed the challenge.

Once this dawned on Enomoto, he winced again and grabbed me by the collar.

“Why did you do something so stupid, Shinohara?!”

“...”

“I know it’s selfish to be angry at you over this. I get that it’s kind of my doing, but without you, how are we going to...?!”

Enomoto’s voice shook as he raged at me. I could sense the anger in his words. That made it clear he’d accepted me as the winner. He’d patched things up with Asamiya, too. Somewhat anyway. After three days in ASTRAL, Team Eimei was finally acting like a true team.

Which was nice, although a little late.

“...Don’t misunderstand.” I gave Enomoto the boldest grin I could. “Yes, my competition with you was one part of the decision, but there was more to it than that. I’m the Commander, remember? I’m wouldn’t let myself get so distracted by internal drama that I’d let it destroy us.”

“...What are you saying? Are you seriously trying to tell me that you being knocked out will lead us to victory?”

“Something like that, I guess.”

My words seemed free of all worry. I decided a quick recap of our current situation was in order. The Chameleon had completely wrecked the setup of the May Interschool Competition. Her team was dominating the Game with seemingly no way to beat it, and she even had mysterious “affiliates” working for her. Meanwhile, Eimei School was nearly at the bottom. Unlike the Ohga School team, which was still doing well and looking for a chance to strike, we weren’t in any position to significantly impact the Game any longer.

But so what? If anything, that was why...

“...this is our chance, the only possible way we can win. The way the Game’s going, there’s barely any point at all to playing normally. We gotta use backdoor methods, play outside the Game boundaries, and utilize whatever we can to get back in the running. We need to destroy the Game’s entire framework. So don’t worry, all right? Our low standing, my elimination—I’d planned on these from the start. Honestly, everything’s gone perfect so far. Every bit of it’s following the plan.”

We were the only ones left who could conquer the Chameleon.

May Interschool Competition: ASTRAL—Day 3 Complete

Largest Territory Taken: Seijo School, Twelfth Ward (2,245 hexes)

Most Votes: Seijo School, Twelfth Ward (38.3 percent)

Notes: Hiroto Shinohara (Eimei School) out of the Game

Interlude

b

“Heh-heh... Heh-heh-heh... Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!”

In Ward Zero of the Academy, on the top floor of a certain building near the Special Development Zone playing host to Event Week, Mikado Kurahashi, former provost of Seijo School, laughed aloud. How could he not? Hiroto Shinohara, the student who’d made a fool of him during the Fourth Ward Challenge, had taken himself out of ASTRAL, practically surrendering to the Chameleon. The response on social media was still more chaotic than anything, but the masses were bound to lose all faith in the Seven Star before long.

“Ah... I tell you, my own genius scares me.”

Kurahashi enjoyed some expensive wine from the Japanese mainland as he smiled and traced a finger across his device’s screen. It gave him access to a full overhead view of the ASTRAL Game map. He could tell that the Chameleon’s forces had covered a good quarter of the entire field by the end of the third day. The Eimei School team’s territory was negligible by comparison. The idea of them clawing back up the rankings at this point was simply inconceivable.

“I wasn’t entirely sure that little brat would actually give me the time of day, but for now, that doesn’t look like much of a problem...”

Kurahashi gave a passing thought to the Chameleon, his “partner” this time, then sighed quietly. He’d wanted to be more thorough in his brainwashing than he’d had the time for. Unfortunately, her thought circuits were too stubborn and closed off. She did his bidding for the time being, but he didn’t feel like he had full control.

Still, when presented with such magnificent results, it didn’t much matter.

“Regardless of how it turns out, she’s still my pawn in the end. If she starts

rebellious, I'll just dangle some nice little treats in front of her. So please keep it up, won't you, Chameleon?"

Wearing his typically aggressive smile, Mikado Kurahashi began working his device, preparing his next orders.

b b

"..."

It felt cold to her.

She was on the first basement level of the Shiki Island Grand Hotel—kept pleasant by the air-conditioning. However, the girl felt liable to freeze to death. Perhaps it was because she hadn't slept at all since yesterday. Or maybe it was due to her sitting on the bare floor for so long? No, it was probably neither. This kind of cold was all mental.

She felt hopelessly isolated, in total despair. The more she advanced, the more it felt like she plunged into darkness—an inscrutable sort of terror. If she dared to look up, she'd be greeted by a ton of computer equipment. She couldn't bear to look at it anymore. Those monitors only showed her—and them—sheer hopelessness.

The Chameleon had irrevocably influenced the very core of the Game now.

"Ah..."

A notice appeared on one of the monitors. Another player had been eliminated from the Game right before the end of the third day. There had already been far more dropouts today than she wished to count, but such was the duty of the administrators in this room. This event was teetering on the brink of collapse, but they had to make it work—if only on the surface. She had to take action, no matter how much she hated to.

Thus, she put a wobbly arm forward and stood. Her sunken eyes peered at the monitor in an almost trancelike state as she worked her machine. Then, after about a minute of work, she lifted her gaze, thinking to check the name at least. Immediately, her eyes shot wide.

"Ah... Shinohara?"

Hiroto Shinohara—the undefeated strongest Academy student. Everyone believed he'd last to the end of this Game, but for some reason, his name was now among those eliminated. It shocked her. Confused beyond repair, she almost fell back down to the floor. Even Hiroto Shinohara couldn't win? Was the Chameleon really that strong?"

"...!"

She worked her device with unsteady fingers, tapping erroneously many times over as she replayed the archived footage. The Eimei School team was attacked on two fronts, likely part of the fallout from the Chameleon crisis. However, Shinohara and his teammates had fended off both enemy forces. He'd dropped out after that. He'd knocked himself out of the Game with a bold smile.

"This is...just..."

It was impossible. There was no way such a move would achieve anything in this event. Not normally, anyhow.

The girl couldn't help but think that perhaps Hiroto Shinohara had a way. He'd made it to Seven Star quicker than anyone in history. Maybe he'd devised some crazy, unthinkable solution to this problem. Kicking yourself out of the Game normally wouldn't achieve anything. There was no merit to it at all, yet there might have been a reason, if not a merit. The people down here couldn't make contact with ASTRAL participants... But someone removed from the Game could reach out to her.

"...No. There's no way..."

She pieced together words of denial, her mind too accustomed to the desperation for anything else... Still, her heart couldn't help but hope. It raced in her chest. Then, as if to affirm that anticipation, the Academy's best gave her his dauntless smile from across the screen.

"Hey. You watching this? I'm talking to you. Or maybe 'you all' would be more appropriate. I know it's a bit late, but I'm heading over there now. Don't bother objecting, all right? I've already made up my mind. So quit sitting there scared forever."

“It’s time...for a comeback.”

AFTERWORD

Hello, good afternoon, or good evening. This is Haruki Kuou. Thank you very much for picking up this volume!

Some time's passed in real life between the second and third volume, but what did you think of it?! This time, we have a team match, a first for the series, and I tried to pack in as much competition between all these titans from other schools as I could! Also, word might have already come out by the time you read this, but we're actually putting out two volumes in the space of two months, so readers can expect the fourth volume next month...! Fast, right?! It'll pick up right where this book left off, so I hope you'll enjoy it as much as this one.

I don't have much space left this time around, so here's some quick thank-yous.

First, to konomi, my illustrator, thanks as always for providing art that's just too good every single time! I love all of it, including your take on a certain character showing up in the next volume!

Thanks to my editor and everyone else at MF Bunko J editorial. I appreciate all of you for being with me every step of the way through this volume's revisions! Let's keep it going, all right?

Finally, the greatest thanks of all must go to all the people who read this book. The next volume will be on its way soon, so keep an eye out!

Haruki Kuou



Liar, Liar

④

Hiroto Shinohara
is back on the attack!

VOLUME 4 COMING SOON!

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