



Sakon Kaidou

Illustrator: Taiki

Infinite

21. Godslayer

end program



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By the time the dawn broke, even the sounds of anguish had vanished from the bloodstained city. Many had suffered as their bodies melted away, leaving only their bones behind.

“La la laa...”

But there was one person who wasn't suffering in the least. This individual was in the inner courtyard of Mahem's modest palace, singing in a high soprano. It was as though they simply couldn't contain the emotions welling up within.

“La la laa...”

His name was Candy Carnage.

Character

Ray

Ray Starling / Reiji Mukudori

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



Nemesis

Nemesis

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



Marie

Marie Adler/Nagisa Ichimiya

A player who accumulated a wealth of knowledge through her work as a Journalist for DIN—the Dendro Information Network. She is role-playing as the main character of her own manga, *Into the Shadow*.



Candy

Candy Carnage

The King of Plagues who destroyed a country and shook the world of *Infinite Dendrogram*. Though this act sent him to the gaol, he recently broke out alongside King of Crime.



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Prologue: Day Two Tournament

Sorcerer, Ray Starling

It was the day after Lei-Lei thoroughly defeated me, and I'd somehow ended up fighting an Overlord.

I'd gotten my clan to come pick me up from the forest and had a Bishop of the national faith treat the wounds covering my body. I still had some lasting injury-based debuffs after all the treatment, but apparently they'd go away in a few days if I just used healing items regularly. The men of faith there said that the Lunar Society's clinics could treat my wounds better than they did, but I was afraid of getting deeper into debt with Miss Eldritch, so that was a "no" from me.

Also, I couldn't help but note how magnanimous they were being. Not everyone would recommend their clients go to their direct competition.

So yeah, my wounds didn't end up being a big deal, and Silver had suffered so little damage that it was covered by his auto-repair—he'd be able to gallop again in just a few days.

The way we'd been thrown into a sudden predicament had gotten me pretty worried for a bit there, but I'd say it ended well.

Anyway, I would be watching The Tournaments starting from today—which was day two.

The member of our clan participating today was B3, and she was currently waiting for the duel to start, clad in her usual combat gear—full-body armor and shields in both hands.

I was also familiar with her opponent—a wolf-eared woman dressed like a barbarian and holding a spear.

"This is the finale of The Tournaments' second day! It's Rosa the Bone-Eater versus Barbaroy Bad Burn the Crushing Canopy!" said the announcer.

Yes—B3 was up against the subleader of Altar’s third place clan, K&R—Nobushi Princess Rosa.

“I know these two well,” I said.

“Indeed,” said Nemesis. “We’ve fought alongside B3 many times, even before we formed our clan, and we fought Rosa once before going on to watch her fight Juliet.”

Nemesis and I truly knew what the two combatants were capable of.

“Fight!”

But that was exactly why I gasped at their immediate movements following that announcement.

Rosa used Gashadokuro’s ult to equip an exoskeleton that enhanced her STR and AGI, and followed it up with her job ult as Nobushi Princess—A Kill Supreme, the super powerful attack that could only be used as a first strike.

However, B3 saw it coming and used Heaven’s Weight to shave off some of Rosa’s power and speed. Then she used Astro Guard to increase her defense and ultimately sacrificed her shield to protect against the attack.

As Rosa’s movements became sluggish, B3 used Atlas’s ult to retaliate with an obscenely powerful strike using her remaining shield. However, Rosa avoided it by using the MVP reward she’d used in her fight against Juliet—the one that let her evade fatal attacks and teleport—to get behind B3 and attack her with Backslayer, a skill which enhanced attacks from behind.

As though she’d been expecting it, B3 aimed her left arm behind her and used Gauntlet Trigger—a skill possessed by her full-body armor MVP reward, Magnum Colossus—to fire the gauntlet and offset Rosa’s attack.

With a loud clash, the two were flung apart.

Not even a minute had passed since the duel had begun, but the battle was already at peak intensity as they played each and every ace they had hiding up their sleeves. They each knew the cards that the other had on hand, and as a result they didn’t hold anything back.

This was an exchange of blows where a single mistake could spell the end of

the duel, but I felt like they'd expected everything that had happened so far. They only used moves they were both aware of, making this battle kinda align with standard shogi tactics.

And so, I expected that from this point on, they would abandon that standard and start to use moves their opponent hadn't seen.

"GRAAAH!" Once again, Rosa was the one to move first. Using Instant Equip, she summoned a spear into her empty hand and threw the newly equipped weapon at B3.

Given the choice between evasion and defense, B3 chose her usual approach and braced herself to endure the attack. She also used Instant Equip to take out a new shield—a massive shield meant for giants that she'd used before—and held it up like a wall straight in the path of the spear hurtling toward her.

When the attack and defense met, the audience—myself included—expected a loud, high-pitched clang...but it never came.

The source of the sound had *vanished*.

My attention still fixed on the stage, I saw B3's eyes widen in shock.

This was something that I wouldn't normally be able to see, since her head was always completely hidden by her helm.

Basically...her face was fully exposed now. Her shields, her armor—all of her equipment had been removed.

"A spear that removes gear?!" I exclaimed. Was this a new MVP reward? Maybe an item custom-made from rare materials?

Rosa's spear had vanished—but in exchange, all of B3's gear had been removed and was now lying on the stage.

B3, now clad only in her underwear, was completely defenseless. Rosa accelerated toward her.

B3's Armor Giant and Shield Giant were sturdy tank jobs, but they relied heavily on the defense of her equipment. With all of that removed, her toughness was greatly reduced.

Rosa had been planning since the start to end this battle with this gear-

removing weapon. She'd played the known cards in her own hand to bait out B3's—including her Embryo ult—and then used the spear. Rosa must've guessed that if B3's armor was removed from the equation, their respective job configurations and her own Superior Job would give her the advantage in sheer physical ability, and that would allow her to win.

As Rosa approached, B3 held up both her hands as though putting up whatever meager resistance she could manage, but...

"Oh," Nemesis and I said in unison, knowing full well what that stance meant. We also understood the look on B3's face, which had shifted from shock to a savage grin.

Thus, Rosa came within just three meters of B3...

...and, still leaning forward in her charging stance, she was slammed straight onto the floor of the stage.

"HUH?!" Now, Rosa was the one overcome with shock. The spear that was supposed to run B3 through had instead been shoved to the ground, along with the arm holding it. Try as she might, she couldn't raise it up—in fact, it just continued to sink farther.

I could tell by Rosa's expression that if she were able to, she would've said the extra gravity from Heaven's Weight should be easy for her to overcome.

But this wasn't that—or rather, it wasn't the Heaven's Weight that Rosa knew.

This was the result of Territory compression—a trump card passed down to B3 by Fuso, and one that she'd used during the peace conference, in the battle against King of Beasts...and Rosa had no idea it existed until now. With its range narrowed, the gravity field greatly exceeded the normal five hundred times multiplier—making the gravity five *thousand* times stronger.

Faced with such an immense increase in weight, even a vanguard SJ like Rosa was stopped in her tracks and afflicted with the Binding debuff.

B3 looked down at her opponent, saying nothing. Using this compression technique also fixed her in place as well.

But the duel was already as good as over.

“Nnghh...ugh...ghhh...?!” Rosa spat out blood and sank farther down onto the stage.

Unable to put up any resistance against the massive increase in gravity, her body was gradually being destroyed.

Back when this effect was used on King of Beasts, it had slowed her down, but ultimately didn't have much of an effect. That was because King of Beasts was an exception among exceptions. The bodies of animals weren't that tough normally.

Nobushi Princess might have been an SJ, but she was specialized in ambushing and thus didn't have the toughness to withstand this level of gravity.

Rosa wasn't the only one who'd been trying to force her enemy to play everything in her hand.

B3 must've been planning to end the battle like this from the moment Rosa shed the STR-enhancing exoskeleton she created with her ult. Rosa might've been able to weather the five thousand times stronger gravity if she'd still had it on, but alas.

Both of them had been hiding aces up their sleeves.

However, while Rosa's was meant to bring her closer to victory, B3's was meant to *ensure* her victory.

You could say that that was the real deciding factor...

“Down, doggy.”

...and, following that insult from B3, Rosa was crushed to death.





“Is it just me, or did Rosa go out wearing the kind of face you should never show in public?” Nemesis asked.

“That clearly made her snap,” I said. “Though B3 was also stripped to her underwear in public, so they’re kinda even, I guess.”

“Hrmm...both of them just keep getting their prides wounded.” This would probably be added onto the long list of grudges between them. From what I could tell, a lot must’ve happened in their shared past as PKs.

The duel’s over, but they’re still holding their weapons and glaring at each other, I thought.

“Dear me...hm? Ray, what is that in your hand?”

“A betting ticket. I put money on B3.” Just like you could at every event in the City of Duels, you could also gamble on who would win The Tournaments.

In standard duels involving just two people, you would only bet on one or the other right before the match began, but for The Tournaments, the betting took place when the preliminaries ended and the finals started. You essentially voted on who of those remaining would be the ultimate winner.

Here on day two, the absolute favorite to win was Rosa, since she was a high-ranking duelist and an SJ—but the actual winner was B3.

As a result of betting on someone who wasn’t a favorite, I got a pretty big payout. Specifically, the hundred million lir I bet became over five hundred million.

“I fear for our financial sense,” said Nemesis.

“Well, I still had a good bit of the lir I got by selling that metal material,” I objected.

“You are so... How many times have you spent such large sums on gambling at this point?”

“I mean, if I save up enough money, I might be able to actually buy the base we’re just renting right now.”

“You do understand that claiming you will save up money to buy a house via *gambling* is blatantly absurd?”

“Good point.”

Regardless, with B3 securing victory without issue, there would now be a closing ceremony for day two, after which we would form a party with her and challenge the UBM she won.

“We were unable to make it to yesterday’s battle. Let us make up for that today.”

“Yeah.” There were eight more Tournament days left. I didn’t know how many times we—Death Period—would get to challenge the UBMs, but I would give my all to help the members who were doing what they could in this contest.

Silently, I reaffirmed that the best we could do right now was improve ourselves as much as possible. That was what was necessary to seize the future we wanted in the coming rematch against Dryfe.

Chapter One: Tournament Day Three

Gideon the City of Duels, Central Arena

The results of the first and second days of The Tournaments were, to put it bluntly, within the realm of expectation.

The person who had won the right to challenge Stern Face-Tender Heart, Sasage, on the first day was a *Superior*, Lei-Lei the Prodigal of Feasts, who had gone on to fight it right away and won the MVP reward with little effort on her part.

On day two, the right to challenge Fortcrushing Mawdragon, No Mercy, had just been decided in a heated battle between two of the kingdom's strongest PKs. Ultimately, the combatant who'd managed to eke out a victory was Barbaroy Bad Burn.

In the UBM fight after that, she fought alongside her clan leader, Ray Starling the Unbreakable, and four other Masters who seemed to be newbies. They went on to win and acquire the MVP reward.

Indeed, there had been two UBM battles so far, and both of their MVP rewards had been claimed by Death Period.

Because of this, not to mention the way Lei-Lei and Barbaroy had fought, the power and fearsomeness of the clan became known across the kingdom. On account of the name and their combat style, though, a lot of people mistakenly assumed they must be a pretty shady group.

But despite all of that, common opinion held that there was no chance of Death Period winning on the third day too. After all, the Master they'd sent to fight on that third day was nothing like the two who claimed victory in the others.

He was neither a *Superior* nor a well-known PK—merely a Master who could still be called a newbie. He may have won the four preliminary battles and made it to the finals, but most thought that he wouldn't go beyond that.

The third day's final lineup boasted names like AT WIKI, holder of the magic-focused Superior Job King of Glaciers, as well as Adham "The Thousand and One Night," and Bolhead "The Mythbeast Circus."

Because of this, the odds of this nameless Death Period member winning were believed to be low—and the possible payout for anyone who bet on him was so high that he could have been considered a potential dark horse.

However, almost nobody thought he was capable of defeating anyone else in the finals.

Interestingly, though, a few people were still placing large bets on this nameless member of Death Period.

One of them was the clan's leader who'd won big on the previous day—Ray Starling.

The others were four Masters who had no connection to Death Period.

All of them had been defeated by this same nameless Master in the preliminaries.



A caster clad in a white robe panted with ragged breath, deeply drained by his battle against the opponent before him.

But it wasn't his body or his magic that had been down the most—it was his mind.

The white-robed man was King of Glaciers, AT WIKI.

He was the leader of the fifth-ranking clan—Wiki Editors: Kingdom of Altar Branch. Just as the name suggested, this was a branch of the clan that had set up shop in many countries for the purpose of editing *Infinite Dendrogram's* wiki. As someone who'd reached as high as sixth in the kill rankings, AT WIKI was no doubt a force to be reckoned with.

He had also managed the impressive feat of forming a party that went all the way down to the 45th floor of the Tomb Labyrinth—and recently, after the throne of King of Glaciers was suddenly vacated, he'd taken up the mantle and acquired the power of a Superior Job.

AT WIKI possessed a wealth of combat experience and knowledge, and thanks to his status as an SJ and an impressive set of gear, he was a combatant who could rival any common vanguard. In today's Tournament, he was undoubtedly the favorite to win.

And yet, here he was, at a loss for how to proceed against a nameless newbie.

Nine attempts, all of them failed, he thought. Trying to affect his vision did nothing.

He knew that he was up against a member of a high-ranking clan, Death Period. But according to his investigations, Death Period was a clan that was so high up because it was made up of—no, because it just *had* a few elite members.

Four *Superiors*. Famous PKs. And the Unbreakable, who stumbled across unusual incidents and had so far been lucky enough to deal with them.

The other members were either excess baggage or simply there to inflate the member count—newbies who only joined the clan because they simply happened to be accompanying the leader during Franklin's Game.

However, this particular member—the one AT was fighting right now—was nothing like that.

"White Field." The moment AT prepared to use a spell, his opponent snapped his fingers.

That single action made the ultimate skill of the high-rank Cryomancer job vanish like mist.

"I'm sorry," said AT's opponent—a boy so beautiful you could mistake him for some kind of snow fairy. "I'm not very fond of ice."

Clad in brass-colored clothing, accompanied by his Embryo—a succubus Sentinel—and commanding a landdragon called Hexahorn Grand Dragon, the boy was smiling.

"It reminds me of a rather unpleasant person...and more importantly, if you used that on me, I would lose."

He maintained that likable smile even as he said that, but it made AT's insides

freeze.

He has no trouble shutting down even a high-rank job ult, huh? This wasn't the first time the boy had canceled AT's magic. He'd done this a total of ten times now.

AT knew that he was capable of this feat because of the MVP reward on his hands. He couldn't read any details of the item with Identification, but it was clear that it canceled magic whenever he just snapped his fingers.

If that was all it was, though, AT would be able to counter it. The move didn't cancel magic automatically—instead, the user had to deliberately perform an action to use it. This meant that AT could circumvent it simply by casting magic when his opponent didn't expect it.

The gap between their stats was obvious, and a single spell that connected would be enough to snowball into complete victory.

However, that one single spell AT needed to connect hadn't done so even once.

His opponent somehow grasped when he was using magic even if AT didn't say a word—even when he cast after using an item skill that hid him from sight, the boy still snapped his fingers at the most optimal time to make the magic scatter.

He was reading AT like a book, forcing him to waste MP over and over. *How does he know exactly how I'm playing my cards...?!*

"I knew you would climb up the ladder of this third Tournament, so I watched every single one of your matches up until this point," the beautiful boy replied as though he *read AT's mind*. "Unless you use something you haven't used in any match so far, don't think you can outsmart me."

AT was silent. It was clearly a provocation, but he knew he couldn't act on it.

After all, AT had also seen his opponent's matches—and *in all of them, this boy was the one who negated the enemy's attacks and emerged victorious*. The boy's combat style could be described as "antioffensive."

In competitive card game terms, he played with what was called a "lock deck"

or “permission deck.” That was how much he restricted his opponents’ freedom in combat.

AT could clearly see that in the three battles he’d witnessed, starting with the boy’s fifth. In that battle, the boy’s opponent was Bolhead the Mythbeast Circus, a High Tamer who commanded monsters, just like he did. The monsters Bolhead had were slightly stronger than the boy’s, and he also had an Embryo that enhanced tamed creatures.

Everyone felt Bolhead would come out on top if they clashed directly...but they never did.

The boy made the first move and Charmed Bolhead’s own monsters into killing him.

His opponent in the quarterfinal was Pyromancer Adham the Thousand and One Night.

After seeing the previous battle, Adham entered the arena equipped with gear that countered Charm. However, he had his magic negated, just as AT was experiencing right now, and was trampled when the boy’s succubus and landdragon closed the distance between them.

In the semifinal, he fought Pound Boxer Hellmask, who’d been a nobody before this Tournament, but showed great prowess as he clawed his way up the ranks. He had a fighting style focused on closing distance with nimble footwork and pulverizing the opponent’s head. Like Adham, Hellmask had also equipped something to counter Charm, and it was widely believed that the boy would certainly lose this time.

Clad in body-enhancing Type Arms armor, Hellmask flanked the boy and threw a single punch that could kill him instantly.

However, the fist was stopped by the boy’s brass-colored coat—or, rather, the Orichalcum Armory Slime that was disguised as an ordinary coat.

The liquid metal slime negated physical attacks completely and stopped Hellmask’s hand. It couldn’t be destroyed even by this deadly fist.

That was when the succubus showered Hellmask in a multitude of debuffs besides Charm—and when they had all affected him, the slime sliced him apart.

Thus, the boy reached the finals.

And now that he was actually facing him, AT clearly understood...

It's better not to think of this as fighting a newbie. This boy read his opponent's moves ahead of time, stole the pawns his opponent brought to the field, canceled magic, blocked physical attacks, showered his enemies in debuffs, and finally finished them off.

He was a monstrous being who crushed his enemies before they could even show a fifth of their power.

He was a monstrosity who might not have had a Superior Job, but had truly taken his place in the realm of pre-Superiors.

In a way, he might've been even less like a newbie than the Unbreakable.

I need to carefully look for a way to win, AT thought. *I still have the stat advantage.*

There was no need to respond to the boy's provocations, and the debuffs that he'd used on the previous opponents wouldn't work on AT.

AT's Embryo was called Pale Night's Falling Light, Tianren Wushuai.

It was based on the five signs of a heavenly being's decay described in Buddhist scriptures, and its core trait was countering debuffs. A Type World Embryo, Tianren Wushuai negated all debuffs afflicting AT himself and five nearby targets selected by him. Additionally, it built up the debuffs and *returned* stronger versions to the ones who sent them.

Tianren Wushuai was debuff-focused retribution-type Embryo in its sixth form. This Embryo was what had allowed his party to make it so far down in the Tomb Labyrinth, which was full of fearsome debuffs.

And because AT had this Embryo, using debuffs on him was a mistake that would ensure the aggressor's defeat. The main reason he'd even gone after the Orb offered on day three was because he thought he could win against the monster contained within it, which used curse-based debuffs.

However, it was *because* the boy knew AT had this power that he didn't use any actual debuffs. You couldn't fall into someone's trap if you knew what they

were capable of.

Thus, the battle between Masters had turned into a repetitive exercise. AT used magic in the hopes of finally landing a blow, while the boy prevented him from doing so.

The only thing that could break this equilibrium were their monsters, aiming straight for them.

“MHOOOOOO!” One creature let out a bellow, while the other was silent. The landdragon tried to charge toward AT, but a giant lump of ice stopped it.

The ice was actually a Permafrost Golem AT built using a skill. Golem creation as an art was the forte of jobs practicing earth magic, and this was the ice version of that. This golem was on the higher end of Pure-Dragon tier in stats and was specialized in endurance, making it capable of acting as a wall against the landdragon’s attacks.

AT WIKI’s magical attacks were negated, but so were the physical assaults of the boy’s landdragon.

One could say that this battle was a stalemate, and that they were equally matched.

The succubus, the landdragon, the slime... I see that their stats are enhanced, but even with the buffs, they don’t surpass Permafrost.

Just like the boy’s passive skills enhanced his creatures, so too was AT’s ice golem, Permafrost, enhanced by AT’s passives as King of Glaciers, and he could heal it by transferring some of his own magic to him.

Additionally, Wallvisage Mind, Banwall, an MVP reward he’d acquired a while ago, had a skill that enhanced the defense of anything defending him.

AT silently looked at his opponent. AT was the head of the fifth-ranking clan and specialized in group battles, but even as a solo unit he was a jack-of-all-trades who could fulfill the roles of tank, attacker, and healer.

And that was exactly why the boy, who could fight him as an equal, was so menacing.

Based on what Identification tells me, he’s not hiding much in terms of gear.

Besides the antimagic MVP reward and that slime, every item just gives a bonus to his minion capacity. Makes sense—without those, it would be difficult for him to field two Pure-Dragon-tier monsters.

Duel rules prevented using party slots for monsters—any creatures used in duels had to fit within one's minion capacity. With The Tournaments being no different in that regard, the boy's gear was heavily focused on increasing minion capacity to overcome this problem.

If you take away what they got from buffs, the two monsters have stats that are below average for their species, AT thought. They must've only recently evolved into a higher form.

During the stalemate, he used Reveal to read the boy's cards as thoroughly as he could.

I know about his jobs. The only mystery...is that Embryo.

The succubus standing at the boy's side—she could fly, but didn't seem to be using that ability to fly over Permafrost to attack AT. She was only casting healing magic on the landdragon.

But she was wary of AT and would be prepared if he came close.

She used Charm, healing magic, and a bunch of other skills, didn't she? Her core trait isn't clear. Maybe she has a learning or stocking skill? That would make their power pretty low, though...

Embryos had a tendency to lose output strength in compensation as they became able to do more things. And if they didn't become weaker, they began demanding higher costs from their Masters.

So far, it didn't look like the boy was paying much of an external cost, which made it safe to assume that the skills themselves had a weak output.

Is he hiding something? The Embryo hadn't done much in the matches so far, but that was exactly why AT suspected she was holding something back. This was the final, so AT also expected the boy would play some trump card related to her—perhaps a skill that required time before it could be used.

In that case, I should probably act first. This means responding to his

provocation...but I have no choice.

AT extended his hands toward Permafrost's back—as well as the landdragon and the boy behind it.

The boy prepared to snap his fingers, but then stopped.

He realized that AT *wasn't casting a spell.*

A moment later, something scattered before the boy's eyes.

It was the slime that the boy wore as clothes. It had moved to protect him, and a part of the creature had been blown away.

"...I see," the boy said in sudden understanding, looking at AT's hands—and the things that were clutched in them.

AT had used Instant Equip to take out two guns.

They were not normal guns, however—they were *magic guns.*

The job that had focused on crafting these kinds of weapons had been lost to time, so they were in limited supply—a treasure that could only be unearthed as archaeological finds from ancient ruins.

And AT was now holding such a rarity in each hand.

The one on the right fired light magic—lasers—while the one on the left fired wind magic—invisible bullets.

He'd acquired these magic guns using the money he'd earned from countless quests and kills, and there were two reasons why he'd gone for weapons imbued with elements that weren't ice, his usual speciality.

The first reason was that he wanted to be prepared against anyone his element didn't work on. Second, he wanted to have a means of attacking in situations where magic itself was unusable.

And as had just been proven, the boy wasn't able to stop these magic guns from firing.

This meant that AT now had a means of attacking him.

It was worth keeping these a secret until now. Even this won't be enough to finish him off, though.

The gunfire had basically taken the boy by surprise, but he'd remained unharmed himself by getting his slime to protect him. This meant that even if he couldn't negate the actual firing, he was still able to read what AT would do.

AT kept firing, but with the slime going all in on the defensive, his attacks seemed to have little effect. It was a metal slime that carried the Orichalcum name, so it must've had a high resistance to magic attacks—or maybe the MVP reward with the magic-negating skill also came with a bonus effect that increased the boy's magic resistance.

AT could keep firing like this, but it didn't seem to be nearly enough firepower to take the boy down.

Which was why...

I guess I'll try something else. The technique is still in the experimental stages, but...

...AT fixed his eyes on the boy and began circulating his magic.

The boy responded by snapping his fingers, but nothing happened.

Magic overflowed from AT's body, quickly reducing the temperature within the dueling barrier. It was as though he'd managed to actually use the White Field spell that the boy had canceled earlier.

"This is..." The boy's expression became puzzled. Of course it would. After all, unlike the guns, *this* was clearly cryomancy.

And yet, he couldn't cancel it. The temperature continued to drop.

This was because it *was* magic, but it wasn't a magic *skill*.

After spending lots of time experimenting with various things here in *Infinite Dendrogram*, AT arrived upon a certain bit of info. Job skills were basically guided processes that were automatically activated when you chose to use them. The job system provided assistance so that everything would occur as directed.

However, he knew that it was possible to achieve effects *without that guidance*—to use your MP, the magic in your body, without using a job skill.

It was said to be the pinnacle of technique, arrived upon by tians who took

jobs from the The One series—the modification and creation of magic.

At the end of his testing and information gathering, AT had been able to take a step into that realm and craft an awfully simple original spell. What he was doing right now was the equivalent of a “Hello, World!” script—the most basic of all basics.

He merely converted MP into cold.

It had no amplification, no fixed direction, and not even a form. And it wasn't even worth comparing its efficiency to using magic through a job-assisted skill—it was outrageously expensive.

It was too primitive to really be called magic at all, and so simple it didn't even have a name.

But that was exactly why those gloves couldn't break it apart.

Perhaps they could negate a magical effect at the moment the boy snapped his fingers, but AT was continuously turning magic into cold. It could be said that he was essentially using an extremely primitive spell with a short recast time over and over. There was no point in stopping just *one* of them.

That MVP reward likely targets and cancels individual skills. That means that it can't prevent this quick, repeating casting!

AT WIKI was entirely correct.

Cold filled the barrier, but the boy didn't snap his fingers again. He also understood that it wouldn't work against this new strategy.

And so...frost began forming on the landdragon and the face of the boy protected by the slime.

The boy was silent. As he began to freeze, the beautiful young man looked even more like an ethereal snow fairy.

However, the cold was bringing him closer to death. He wasn't like AT, who had a passive skill for cold resistance as King of Glaciers, or an Embryo that made him immune to the Freeze debuff.

If the temperature continued to plummet like this, AT's victory would be guaranteed.

“I see that top rankers really aren’t people to be trifled with. I’ll admit—I didn’t expect this.”

In this enclosed world, now so cold it felt like his very breath might freeze, the boy still spoke the same way as he had before.

“You have a lot of cards in your hand. I thought the same about King of Beasts when we recently fought, but those on the top really do have a huge variety of options at their disposal. How enlightening.”

The boy smiled...

“I myself haven’t shown everything I’ve got either.”

...and the succubus followed up his words with a skill activation.

“Union Jack—Dragon-Devil-Man.” At that moment, the boy disappeared.

In his place, there now stood the imposing figure of a man. He had devilish wings, and in his right hand he held a lance that looked like a tangle of dragons’ horns.

His species and build did not resemble the boy’s at all, but he still wore the golden clothing, the MVP reward was still equipped on his hands, and his beauty had not changed even though he seemed to have aged in the blink of an eye.

A Sentinel fusion skill! He, the landdragon, and the Embryo had become one.

AT instantly understood that the three’s stats were combined to create a single entity stronger than the base.

This is bad! The moment that thought crossed his head, an intense clang rang out.

Permafrost, which had been able to withstand the landdragon’s attacks, began to crack from just a single hit from the fused Dragon-Devil-Man.

It combines their stats—and even their skills! That includes his passives as a tamer and the Sentinel’s self buffs! No, it’s not just that... The Enchanter single-unit buffs are there too! Normally it was pointless for anyone with a job in the tamer grouping to have Enchanter among their sub-jobs. Skills from the enchanter grouping couldn’t be used when you had a tamer grouping job set as

your main. That was because they weren't generic skills, but instead specific to different groupings.

However, if this fusion skill had the effect of joining the stats of the fused creatures *and* making all their skills usable...it would enable the use of job skills from different groupings too. That would mean that he'd be buffed by his passives as a tamer, the Sentinel's self buffs, *and* Enchanter single-unit buffs...

This is bad. He's completely surpassed my golem! The Dragon-Devil-Man's stats were overwhelming Permafrost. AT was still releasing magical cold, but with the Dragon-Devil-Man being as powerful as he was, it would take some time to freeze him to death.

There was no doubt that he would destroy Permafrost and kill AT before that happened.

AT tried firing the magic guns to keep him away, but the Dragon-Devil-Man defended against the shots by just turning the handle of his lance without even looking at him.

Neither the guns nor the cold could kill him.

AT might've been able to stop him in place and eventually destroy him if he could use his cryomancy as King of Glaciers, but that was a bad move as long as his opponent still had that MVP reward.

But then, AT's eyes widened as he realized something.

The Dragon-Devil-Man was holding the handle and swinging the lance with *both* of his hands.

I could do it now! At this moment, AT WIKI realized he might be able to make an early move and cast a spell before he was defeated.

Ice Age—the job ult of King of Glaciers—was still unavailable to him due to his lower level, but with some enhancement from another skill, White Field should be able to deliver a similar amount of power.

“Magic Power Magnification...!” AT put away the gun he held in his left hand and began focusing magic in that hand instead. At the same time, he fired a volley of lasers using the gun in his right to keep his opponent busy.

If the spell went through, that would be fine by him. And even if the opponent canceled it, he'd be forced to free his left hand and snap his fingers to do so—an obvious opening. AT would use that to allow Permafrost to recover and restabilize the battle.

With that in mind, he cast the spell.

“White Field!” AT’s voice rang out.

Hm...? But the moment he activated the skill, he noticed the state of the Dragon-Devil-Man’s left hand.

He’d let go of the lance—AT had expected that much.

However, the hand was in a different *shape*. Instead of snapping his fingers, the Dragon-Devil-Man was spreading his left hand open wide.

And then...he grasped it shut.

At that moment, AT’s body exploded from within.

“Wh-What...?” AT instantly suffered a fatal amount of damage that scattered his entire body, immediately reducing his HP to 0. He was defeated without even knowing what had happened in the end.

There was, however, one thing he did understand.

His opponent had been laying a trap for him from the moment he started using the lance with both hands.

And as though to prove this point the victorious enemy was smiling.



Tournament Day Three

Reward: *Name Unknown (Presumed Type: Undead).*

Core Traits: *Poltergeist, Curse-Based Debuffs.*

Winner: *Lost Heart Rook Holmes.*

Interlude: Tournament Day Four

Sorcerer, Ray Starling

Yesterday, the third day of The Tournaments, victory was claimed by our guy Rook.

We didn't fight the UBM he won though. He said he would fight it by himself once he was ready, and he was busy preparing for it today too. Rook was determined to do it solo and seemed to have his reasons, so all I could really do was pray it worked out for him.

Since he was a dark horse, though, my bet on him won me so much money that I went and bought him a dozen Brooches, Elixirs, and High Spirit Waters. Hopefully they would help him against the UBM.

Anyway, today was the fourth day, and the member of our clan participating this time was Io. Since she was heavily specialized in physical attack power, if she landed a hit, she could do heavy damage even to those above her.

But unfortunately...

"Pulverized. Cracked. Blasted... I was the one who ended up shattered..."

She was now laying her head on the restaurant table, clearly in low spirits.

"You did your best. It was a pretty bad matchup, huh?" I asked.

"Whatever was I to do against an opponent such as that...?"

"Wow, the fight was so one-sided it's making you talk weird," said Fujinon.

Io had lost on her third fight, and the player who'd beaten her was Phara, a K&R member who used a barrier that deflected weapon attacks. This barrier negated all and any attacks from Io's Five-Ring, letting Phara fire arrows from relative safety and not giving Io a chance to do anything.

Io could've gotten through the barrier if she'd just used her hands instead of weapons, but that would've reduced the fight to a simple comparison of levels and combat experience. Winning against a battle-hardened Tenchi warrior

without using any weapons would've been a challenge.

So yeah, Io had ended up suffering a total defeat and was really down now, so her friends and I were holding a little consolation party for her.

"Heh heh heh...our clan's winning streak has been ended...by *me*. I am easily the weakest woman in Death Period...a real disgrace, I am..."

"N-No, you're not..." said Kasumi.

"Again, why are you talking like that?" said Fujinon.

Mm-hmm...Io's not acting anything like she did when we celebrated Rook's win yesterday, I thought. Also, her words kinda sting. I mean, I dropped out on my second fight...

"And this was a matter of compatibility," Fujinon continued. "Though I really didn't expect it to be *this* bad based on what I saw last time."

She and Kasumi continued to console Io, but something she said caught my attention.

"Last time?" I asked.

"Some time ago, the three of us participated in an arena event. Our first fight was against Juliet's team, though, so we were completely crushed and lost right away."

Oh, I'd actually heard about this. If I recalled correctly, it was an aquatic battle event where participants had to wear swimsuits.

"The final match was between Juliet's team and a K&R team," Fujinon continued, "which included Phara, so..."

"Oh, I see." Even though Io knew what Phara was capable of, it hadn't helped her when they'd fought.

"If only I was matched with the K&R member who protects against magic instead of weapons..." Io said.

They had that too? I thought. *No surprise there, I guess. K&R is a big clan.*
"Anyway, that's it for Death Period's fourth day attempt, right?"

"Yeah, and with none of us taking part tomorrow or the day after, our next

appearance will be Marie on the seventh day,” said Fujinon.

And with there being ten days of The Tournaments, this meant that the first half of the entire event was over for us.

“I’ve got college, though, so I won’t be able to watch her fight,” I said.

“We’ve got school too.” In Japan time, the seventh day of The Tournaments would take place Monday afternoon, so no decent student from that area of the world could stay around and watch it.

I wonder if I can still gamble, though. Maybe I can message Shu when the betting begins and get him to buy a ticket for me?

“I guess those of us who are likely to win in the remaining days are our teacher and Figaro, right?” asked Fujinon.

“Yeah. Ray’s brother and Hannya aren’t participating, so...” said Kasumi.

“Hrm...Figaro is one thing, but I don’t think Marie stands a chance,” I said.

“Huh?” the two girls said in unison. I knew very well how powerful Marie was. I mean, she actually gave me the death penalty once.

But the thing about Marie’s powers was that...

“HMPH!” My thought was cut short by her raising her head. “I’m not gonna forget ‘bout this loss! I’ll get strong enough to break through *any* barrier!” Well, it looked like she went back to normal. She even stopped speaking weirdly.

“That’s the spirit! Do your best,” I encouraged. “For now, though, just order and eat whatever you want. It’s on me.”

“Oh, I’ll be feastin’!”

“C-Can we really...?” Kasumi asked, somewhat worried, but there was nothing to be concerned about.

“Thanks to The Tournaments, my wallet is pretty fat these days. Also...” I said, glancing to the side.

There, I saw a black mass, ravenously consuming what was probably many times her weight in food.

It didn’t even have to be said that this was my partner Nemesis. She’d been

here the whole time, but instead of taking part in the conversation, she was doing nothing but eating.

“It’s nothing compared to how much I spend to feed *her*.”

“Ah ha ha...”

The amount Nemesis consumed seemed to be growing as she evolved. If it was this bad after she just became high-rank, how would it be in the future?

I probably needed to make more money, just to be on the safe side.

With that in mind, I’d resolved to bet on today’s Tournament too.

I was pretty sure that the winner would be Juliet.

Chapter Two: Tournament Day Six — He Who Lost His Other Half

City of Duels, Gideon, Central Arena

Tournament: Day Six.

Reward: Name Unknown (Presumed Type: Dragon [Eastern]).

Core traits: Tornado, lightning, and explosion generation (Uncontrollable in its Orb form).



After Death Period claimed The Tournaments of days one, two, and three, the fourth was taken by Fallen Knight Juliet, who also went on to defeat the UBM she won.

On the fifth day that followed, the reward was a UBM with the core traits of “fatal damage negation followed by time-limited body enhancement,” and the possible MVP reward attracted many powerful individuals to fight for it.

However, one of them was a *Superior*—Tsukuyo Fuso.

She was a significant obstacle even for the strongest, and in the end she was the one who claimed the popular reward offered on day five.

That marked the halfway point of the ten-day event—and today, day six, was the beginning of the second half.

The way this day’s contest progressed was, in a word, expected.

The reason for that was the involvement of the player who held second place in the duel rankings—The Unsheathe Kashimiya.

Indeed—instead of going for the popular Orb offered on day five, this individual, who was among the kingdom’s strongest, went for the sixth day’s unremarkable Orb. This one seemed to have effects based on sky magic like creating flame and lightning.

Anybody who went for this one because they assumed that the strong Masters would avoid a reward this boring turned out to be completely wrong. As a result, Kashimiya cut down each and every opponent he was matched with and, as anybody could have expected, made it to the final battle.

And now, those who bet money on him—and everyone else who was certain he would win—were now waiting for the last duel to begin.

“I thought that Masters had worse technique than tian Superior Jobs, but it looks like there’re exceptions to everything!”

And among this audience, there was *someone who wasn’t human*.

It was the technician who’d operated in Caldina under the name of Crys Fragment, and whose true identity was that of a mass-produced Prism Person, Crystal Tuner.

After the incident aboard the luxury liner Eltram, she’d separated from her sister-unit and arrived in Altar to support Integra. Now busy with work as a court magician, Integra wasn’t able to leave Altea much, and Crys took it upon herself to act in Integra’s stead and gather information that might be relevant to their activities.

However, there wasn’t much of note so far.

We need to truly understand the powers of the Masters who will side with the kingdom. That will prove invaluable in controlling the situation. Splendida was invited into Dryfe and will look into their side, and I have other...connections besides him. But when it comes to Altar, it would be best to investigate personally.

Crys thought back to the *Superior* she regularly made deals with—the man who sold various bits of info to her. Apparently, after that incident, he’d headed to Dryfe on foot, but he must’ve arrived by now.

“Ngh...” As she watched the second semifinalists—one of whom would end up as Kashimiya’s victim—Crys downed a concentrated MP potion.

Being Crystal Tuner, she represented an immense success of Prism Person mass production, but there was still something about her that put her at a disadvantage compared to the five made before her.

Specifically, it was the magic shortage caused by lower core quality.

Crystal Tuners were preceded by mass-produced Prism People—if they could even be graced with that name—called Prism Soldiers, who had compensated for their lack of a core by increasing in size and using living beings as parts, a clunky and inelegant solution. And while not as extreme, Crystal Tuners had a similar problem. The magic provided by their cores was less than that provided by those in the original Prism People. If the biological parts of Crystal Tuners didn't regularly ingest potions, they would be unable to use their weapons to their full potential.

This was a problem caused by the necessary materials being inaccessible, and not even Flagman could ultimately overcome it.

However, the Crystal Tuners themselves believed that this was their only flaw.

Okay, time for the finale. Kashimiya's opponent had been decided, and day six of The Tournaments would end soon. Crys had been active for nearly two thousand years and had seen many strong individuals—but even to her eye, Kashimiya was clearly a huge step above.

Thus, she was certain that he would instantly claim victory.

Thinking that seemed almost like it would jinx it, but her thoughts had no effect on the expected outcome.

The duel was over in a flash—before even a single second could pass.

Once the commendations and other formalities ended, the audience would be asked to leave for safety reasons while Kashimiya challenged the Orb.

“All right. Now...” This was when Crys's job for the day truly began.

She had to confirm that today's reward was what she thought it was. If it was what she expected, their plan would have to be heavily reworked.

It's not just a matter of combat potential. It's proof of a history that Huang He wants to erase, she thought. I find it hard to believe that they would present it to another country, but the way they handled the left half makes it likely that they've simply lost the knowledge of it.

Soon enough, the ceremony ended. Crys stood up from her seat alongside the

rest of the audience.

I wonder what will come out of it... Well, actually, if I'm right, I know exactly what's going to happen.

In her place, she left a drone so tiny it was little more than a speck. Before The Tournaments, she had gone around placing these drones in various areas of Altar.

I hope I get the information I want.



After the audience left the central arena, Kashimiya stood upon its stage.

As he waited for the battle to start, he examined the many blades he employed while fighting. He was surrounded by five K&R members—the volunteers he'd gathered to form a party. Since there were only five available slots, there was an intense conflict in the clan over who would get them, but Kashimiya had no means of knowing this.

This probably didn't have to be said, but none of the others were after the MVP reward—they simply wanted to be in a party with Kashimiya.

“Darling, why'd ya pick this one, anyway?” Rosa, who had taken her slot as though it were a given, posed that question to Kashimiya.

She had multiple reasons for participating in this fight—venting her anger over losing to B3 on day two, helping Kashimiya in the struggle, and simply getting the UBM battle she'd missed out on, among others.

However, she had no clue why Kashimiya had gone for this Orb rather than any other.

In response...

“Intuition.”

...Kashimiya said just a single word—a reason which did not seem enough of an answer.

“Intuition?”

“Yes. I somehow felt like today's UBM is the *strongest*.”

Rosa didn't know what to say. As far as tiers went, the strongest one was obviously the Mythical on the final day.

However, Kashimiya's intuition had led him to today's UBM instead.

"Also, if the situation is right, this one might actually *come out* too," he continued as he caressed the red sheath of the odachi—the large sword—at his side.

Not even Rosa knew what that odachi was. It was something he hadn't had back in Tenchi, and by the time they'd reunited in Altar he'd already acquired it. She believed it was an MVP reward, but it seemed to reject Identification and the like.

However, it was clear that it was one of the aces he kept up his sleeve.

"We have prepared the barrier," said a worker managing the arena's barrier function as the optimization concluded. Covering the stage as usual, it had been put up without the setting that restored the combatants once the duel was over. It also had the feature that prevented escape from within while still being tuned for maximum toughness.

And, in case of an emergency, Shu and Hannya—*Superiors*—were standing at the ready right outside the barrier. If it was broken and the UBM began a rampage in the city, they would do what they could to destroy it. Even if they hadn't been there, the waiting room contained the Masters who had achieved second place and below in today's Tournament. Normally, they would have their turns against the monster if Kashimiya failed—but if something happened, they would rush in and destroy the UBM before it caused damage to the city.

The barriers were reliable enough, though, that not a single UBM had escaped thus far.

And at that moment, a pedestal with an Orb on it was brought to the middle of the stage.

This was the reward for winning on day six—the Orb containing a UBM with an unknown name.

"Starting countdown until we destroy it with a remote explosive. Ten, nine..."

At those words, Kashimiya’s party readied themselves.

The supporting jobs already put up their buffs, while Kashimiya assumed an unsheathing stance. Rosa used her Embryo ult to consume bones focused on STR and AGI, then hid herself and prepared to deliver her job ult as Nobushi Princess, A Kill Supreme.

Two pre-*Superiors* focused on swift strikes—the battle would surely end the moment the UBM was released.

“Three, two, one...ignition!” The pedestal exploded, shattering the Orb on it. Kashimiya and Rosa instantly sprang into action.

The moment he did, Kashimiya’s eyes widened. In his unsheathing stance, the Godlike Unsheathing skill raised his AGI all the way to 500,000.

Because of that, the moment the Orb shattered, he was able to see what appeared out of it.

The UBM’s presumed type was dragon—specifically, the usually serpentine, wyrm-like dragons often associated with the east. However, it certainly didn’t look the part. While its body was covered in black scales, its shape was that of a human.

But it wasn’t a full person—it was only the *right half* of one.

Above its head, there was text that said Blue-■■■■ ■■■■■-Turn, Heilong-■■■■■.

That was an awfully odd name for a UBM. It was as though it had somehow lost half of it along with the other half of its body...

But however warped it may have been, a humanoid was easier for Kashimiya to cut than a dragon. He could now simply approach and lop off its head as he always did.

But then, he widened his eyes even further. Kashimiya stopped unsheathing his blade.

It wasn’t the UBM’s appearance that made him stop his approach, but his own instincts.

Rosa, however, did *not* stop.

“A Kill Supreme!” She left her ambush state and activated her job ult as she jumped behind the UBM.

It was a combination of her Embryo and job ults, and the damage she could deliver with it was so immense it could fell a standard UBM in just a single hit, and this UBM had just appeared from the Orb and didn’t seem to fully grasp the situation, let alone notice or see her coming. The battle would be over in a flash.

And it most certainly *was* over...

...when Rosa was turned to dust by a bolt of blue lightning that struck her.

“You gotta be kiddin’ me,” Shu said in shock as he watched all of this happen from outside the barrier.

The lightning was the UBM’s counterattack. While the monster seemed to show no reaction to her, it had retaliated against Rosa’s attack without even turning around.

However, what shocked Shu wasn’t that, but what happened *afterward*.

Rosa had two means of avoiding fatal damage: the MVP reward she used even in duels, and a Brooch that wasn’t normally allowed in them—and yet she turned to dust despite that. This meant that the retaliation didn’t come in the form of just *one* attack.

What happened to Rosa could be explained like this.

Rosa had been hit by lightning, but she’d survived thanks to her Brooch breaking and had continued to try and deliver her job ult.

In response, the UBM had instantly fired a second lightning strike. Thanks to her MVP reward, she survived that one as well and went on to teleport herself.

However, as if it had instantly known exactly where she would move, the creature had fired a third lightning bolt that had finally turned her to dust.

Rosa possessed two means of evading fatal attacks, but not even she could do anything against this blue lightning that not only killed her in one hit, but struck multiple times.

Fired with lightning speed that allowed no evasion, the bolts ensured her

death the moment she got close.

Blue and Turn. The visible part of the name... I see how it is, Shu thought as he came to understand this UBM's power.

The creature had most certainly *not even noticed Rosa*. In fact, it had no idea what was happening and was actually very confused.

But even in this state, that skill had activated and attacked Rosa.

A fully auto counterattack, Shu concluded. The blue lightning wasn't fired by the UBM consciously, but targeted Rosa automatically. The fact that it struck not just once, but until she was dead meant it repeatedly activated on any hostile that was close enough to it.

That lightning ain't easy to dodge. It's gonna be hard to beat this if you're a vanguard who just fights in melee... I guess it's specced to specific conditions. But that power level makes it seem like we got a Mythical-tier absurdity on our hands.

Shu readied himself as he analyzed the UBM's abilities. Although it was humanoid, Kashimiya was woefully badly matched against it. However...

Well, speaking of absurdities, the little guy ain't far behind, is he?

When the lightning struck, the UBM wasn't the only thing that surprised Shu. Now that the UBM had instantly killed Rosa, the K&R members were on high alert.

One could even say that they were *frightened*.

However, Kashimiya was different. He remained calm and didn't seem to be the least bit perturbed.

At some point, he'd switched from the odachi he'd had initially and now had the one in the red sheath. The moment the Orb was broken and the UBM released, he realized that the other odachi—even the marvelous ones made of Mythical metal—wouldn't be good enough.

And in his other hand there was the red sheath's odachi...*already unsheathed*. This sword that seemed to choose its opponents so carefully was now baring its edge.

And it hadn't *just* been drawn.

It had, in fact, *already cut something*.

There was no blood or flesh sticking to it, however, so what exactly had it cut?

Nothing less than *the lightning itself*.

The moment Rosa was hit by the auto-counterattack, Kashimiya was struck by lightning too.

This was a lightning strike that the UBM called for manually when its instincts registered him as a threat, and its power surpassed even that of the blasts that had turned Rosa to ash.

And yet, Kashimiya had cut it with the odachi of the red sheath.

On Earth, there were multiple legends of blades being used to cut lightning or the gods that wielded them. But what happened here was no legend—it was done right before everyone's eyes.

A single slash from this blade was able to nullify the power of a lightning strike that could easily turn people to dust.

Was this truly possible? Yes, it was.

It could be accomplished by combining Kashimiya's Godlike Unsheathing technique with the power of the red sheath's odachi—which was a fragment of an SUBM, Prototype Horobimaru-Star Sword.

Kashimiya returned the odachi to its sheath, then put a little power into his fingers to see if he could take it out again—and just like that, with little resistance the sword of the red sheath showed a bit of its blade.

This self-conscious, capricious odachi was awfully obedient today.

This meant that even the sword itself recognized this opponent as one *worth cutting*.

Kashimiya maintained his unsheathing stance, looking out for the right moment to cut down the UBM. However, before he could, something rather odd was happening with the UBM in front of him.

"...Ah..." This UBM, a creature of just the right half, let out a sound as it

reached for *its left half*.

But as one could clearly see, there was nothing there for it to touch.

“Al...me...ra...” It looked around and spoke a name as it searched for its other half, but needless to say, it was nowhere to be found.

There was nothing here except for the strange UBM with only a right half—Heilong.

“Where...am I...?” As reality began to sink in, Heilong’s consciousness gradually regained focus.

Kashimiya noticed that change, and his expression shifted slightly. “I failed,” he murmured.

Kashimiya understood that *he could no longer cut the creature*.

It wasn’t because his opponent had suddenly spoken human words—that wouldn’t even slow his blade, let alone stop it.

It was simply because the UBM had grown stronger.

The creature’s presence was now on a different level than it had been when its consciousness was still vague and unfocused.

Kashimiya instantly understood that Heilong possessed fearsome powers that he had barely begun to show. In the back of his mind, he could envision himself being struck down by this opponent’s attacks.

It was possible that whatever trump cards Heilong had could be cut down by Kashimiya’s Prototype-Star Sword—but this would not allow him to claim Heilong’s head.

Perhaps he could prioritize decapitating Heilong even if he was killed in the process? As a Master, Kashimiya could come back from death. Trading one of his countless lives in exchange for the one and only life of a monster or tian could be considered a victory.

But I can’t say the idea is appealing, Kashimiya thought. He didn’t want a victory achieved through something other than his own blade and technique. If he were to cut, to win, to *kill*, he would pick and choose his methods.

He would cut through head-on, win decisively, and kill absolutely.

Kashimiya was the asura of unsheathing, and this was his line of thinking.

Heilong also understood that it now faced someone who *could cut it down*.

The odachi of the red sheath that Kashimiya held was able to remove Heilong's head—something which couldn't be said about any common blade. The sword had the power, and Kashimiya had the technique needed to make that happen.

The blade hadn't actually touched Heilong yet, but it wouldn't be out of the question if its head flew clean off its neck the very next moment.

While neither of them knew what the other was truly capable of, they had already read that their opponent could surely kill them. Each combatant possessed godlike technique that allowed them to understand that much.

That was why Heilong chose not to fight Kashimiya.

"I have...no business...with any of you..." As it said that, Heilong's body was enveloped in light. Then, it held up its only palm—the right one—above its head.

The next moment, it released a *pure-white beam of light*.

This attack was reminiscent of Xunyu's Zhenhuo Zhendeng Baolongba, though it was shining with a heat many times greater than that skill.

It was a light unknown to Kashimiya, and even Shu did not recognize it. Certain other duel rankers like Figaro and Riser, though, would've had a certain name spring into their minds.

Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria.

This attack was like the beam of the fearsome dragon—not the one fired by Figaro's Gloria α, but one that matched the Overdrive possessed by the original Gloria itself. It was akin to the power of the one-horned head that was defeated before Shu had fought the dragon.

The light that carried this immense power struck the arena barrier, and though it had been optimized for toughness, it didn't even last a full second before it was broken.

If it had been fired horizontally, it would have devastated Gideon. Instead, it formed a pillar of light that rose up into the sky.

The shattering of the barrier was a clear emergency, and a number of people leaped into action. Shu switched to his Godcloth, and Hannya called Sandalphon.

Those watching feared that this was the beginning of a battle that could reduce Gideon to dust.

But that didn't happen.

Once the pillar of light disappeared a few seconds later, Heilong was no longer there.

It was clear that after breaking the barrier, he'd instantly flown off like the wind.

The UBM inside the Orb that served as the reward for day six had escaped from Gideon.



After that, the arena was buzzing with activity—an obvious reaction, seeing that the barrier that had contained every UBM so far had been rendered meaningless and allowed this one to escape. This created a great many problems that needed to be addressed and tasks that needed to be done, such as launching the search for Heilong or figuring out what countermeasures needed to be put in place for the remaining Tournament days.

However, those directly involved—Shu included—understood that this was the optimal choice in the conflict and the best result they could've hoped for.

Heilong could have used the light to escape, or it could have used it to destroy Gideon and be decapitated by the others present as a result. The pillar of light meant that it had picked the former option.

Even if Kashimiya hadn't been there, the forces currently in Gideon were capable of killing Heilong. Thus, the UBM chose to escape, and that was nothing but a blessing to the people of Gideon.

While the prize might have been gone, the city narrowly avoided suffering any

damage from a UBM with attacks that seemed to rival those of Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria.

The only problem left was the question of where Heilong had run off to—and that was something that nobody knew.

After all, although he'd escaped, even Heilong itself hadn't been sure where to go.

Indeed—it knew nothing that awaited it beyond its flight.



Former Nowest Canyon

This was the land that was once called the “Nowest Canyon.”

Its ecosystem had been thoroughly destroyed in the Big Three's battle against Gloria, and then its landscape had been ravaged in Shu and Sechs's fight to the death. There was nothing left here besides a wasteland created by incredible amounts of unfettered energy.

But now, there was also a UBM here—Heilong had landed here from his flight.

He'd only cared about escaping from Gideon, and flew off without thinking about where.

Thus, one could say that his arrival here was a mere coincidence.

If not that, he may have subconsciously thought that this place, so flooded with immense energy, would be where he would find a hint that would help him search for his other half—a being who consumed energy without end.

But Heilong's other half wasn't here. There was nothing in this place, and coming here was a complete waste of time.

...No.

“Hm...?”

There *was* a single person here, seemingly blending with the scenery. Clad in tattered gear and covered in sand and dust, this person looked somewhat like an old scarecrow. However, he was certainly a human male. He just stood in

place all by himself, his gaze fixed slightly upward for some unknown reason.

He wasn't looking at the sky, though.

It was more like he was looking up at something that was once there—an afterimage of the massive, fiendish dragon that had been defeated here.

Heilong looked at the man. Unlike Kashimiya, he didn't seem to give off a menacing aura.

Instead, what Heilong felt from him was...unease.

The man made Heilong feel as though it were looking at a pit trap or something of the sort—an abyss so deep he couldn't see the bottom.

"Who's there?" With those words, the man turned to Heilong.

He could now see the man's face, and the sight of his eyes *really* made Heilong feel as though he had glimpsed some kind of abyss.

The man's eyes were fixed on Heilong, but they weren't looking *at* him. His brain received the visuals, but he had no thoughts about what he was seeing.

He seemed to care neither about Heilong's bizarre form, nor about the immense power within his half a body.

The man felt nothing, and Heilong saw the emptiness in his heart.

"A UBM? You look like you might be a tian too, but...not like I care."

The man wasn't merely saying that—he truly, from his core, believed that Heilong wasn't deserving of any regard.

The UBM's eye widened. It thought back to the time before it—or maybe *he*—was sealed by the Draconic Emperor, before he became a UBM and was one of the gulong ren—ancient dragon kin—and he couldn't think of a single instance where anyone had looked at him this way.

The man before him had his eyes fixed on Heilong, yet saw nothing positive *or* negative. He didn't run away in fear or attack him for the MVP reward. Unlike those Heilong had faced upon waking up, this man wasn't even wary of him.

He looked at Heilong as though he were but a strange part of the scenery.

"Why are you looking at me? I clearly don't look as peculiar as *you* do. Ha

ha...”

As if amused by something, the man cracked a faint smile. Though minor, the change in the man’s expression somehow filled Heilong with dread.

That must’ve been why his eye widened and, before he even realized he was doing it, Heilong had fired a white beam from his right hand—a beam that carried enough heat to easily destroy Gideon’s barrier and enough power to match even the Overdrive skill that had once burned the very ground they stood on now.

It wasn’t something one single man could weather—he too would certainly vanish without a trace when the light struck him.

“Ohhh. Now that brings back a *bad memory*.”

That was only true, however, if the man were unarmed.

At some point a single sword had appeared in his hand. It was his other half—his Embryo.

“*Nægling*.”

The core trait of this Embryo was “surpassing.” Going beyond even those who stood above its wielder, it was the embodiment of transcendence.

“End Breaker.” The sword spoke with a girl’s voice as the man swung the blade and *cleaved apart* the beam of intense heat.

Indeed—that single strike not only split apart a laser as powerful as Overdrive, it also cut straight to the source of the beam and carved a deep wound into Heilong’s body.

“GHA...AGHH...!” For the first time in centuries, Heilong felt pain.

After he’d become human and he and his other half had become a UBM, the only time he felt pain was when they fought the Draconic Emperor.

Almera—the other half that was the heart of their defenses—wasn’t with him right now, but even so, slicing through Heilong’s attack and sinking a blade into him was an inhuman feat.

With the pain of the wound, Heilong realized that the fear he’d felt wasn’t

unfounded.

He shouldn't have gotten involved with this man. He had stepped directly into a pit that would send him to the abyss of death.

The man said nothing, glancing at his own sword. Then, he turned to look at the trajectory of Heilong's split beam—it had melted everything in its path.

He seemed to have thoughts about both the UBM's attack and his own retaliation.

"Well. No matter." With those words, the man began approaching Heilong, sword in hand. Heilong backed away in fear.

He was the half of what was once called an Irregularity, and yet this man had just brought him to the brink with a single hit. That was fearsome even lacking his other half and weakened by his many years sealed away. The beam he'd fired was his most powerful attack, and yet the man dealt with it like it was nothing. There was no chance the automatic lightning strikes would do anything to him.

Heilong imagined himself dying, and the idea of leaving his other half behind terrified him more than his long years of imprisonment or even his own doom.

"Almera... ALMERAAAAAAAAAA!" Heilong then found himself shouting his other half's name. He called out to her, but it was a call that could never reach anyone.

However...that call did stop the man in his tracks.

Still holding the sword in one hand, the man stood in place...and asked a simple question.

"Is that *a woman's name*?"

Though perplexed by what was happening, Heilong answered with a nod.

"Is she your beloved?"

In response to this follow-up question, Heilong nodded instantly. There was no hesitation—his very body moved to answer.

"...I see." Upon seeing Heilong's reaction, the man took a moment to think...

“Go.”

...and pointed his sword toward the horizon.

The man said that he would *let Heilong go*.

The UBM was still perplexed, but hoping to survive to meet his other half—Almera—he obeyed the man’s order. He flew off, just as he had when escaping the arena, and disappeared into the distance to search for her...and to never again encounter the man with those terrifying, empty eyes.

The man watched as Heilong vanished.

As he did, his sword left his hand. After turning into sparks of light, it assumed the form of a girl in her late teens, her red hair tied in a ponytail.

“Captain...”

“I’m not ‘Captain’ anymore,” said the man, rejecting the words of Nægling—his own Embryo.

“That was a UBM... Are you sure we should’ve let it go?”

The man he used to be would’ve certainly defeated this UBM—and he wouldn’t have done it solely for the MVP reward. It was a UBM that launched attacks before talking. A creature like that would no doubt endanger tians, and this man would’ve certainly wished to eliminate it.

Yet he’d chosen to let this UBM go.

That was something the man he’d once been would never have done.



“Neither the MVP reward nor the tragedies matter to me now...”

However, he himself had insisted that he was no longer that man.

Nægling understood that too. The shape of her Master’s heart simply wasn’t what it had been before.

And that was exactly why she herself was different too.

After all, Nægling was now a Superior Embryo.



Evolution into Superior Embryos was a matter surrounded by a great deal of uncertainty, and the conditions for it to happen were thought to be unknown.

Even the control AI associated with it—the Infinite Embryos—didn’t have a full grasp of it. That was because it seemed like they had things in common, while at the same time shared absolutely nothing.

However, there was a hypothesis that the reason it was a mystery was not because it was caused by some universal factors that people did not yet understand—but because the *trigger* for each Embryo was different.

Basically, besides the Resource absorption that the Masters would perform through combat and other means, evolution required that an Embryo also undergo some sort of mental catalyst that would act as a trigger—and this mental catalyst was different for every Embryo.

Some achieved it through mortal combat, others through idling about. Some achieved it through vanity, others through self-denial.

This hypothesis wasn’t proven, but it was widely believed that it would explain the differences in Embryo evolution.

That was exactly why the control AI, who believed this hypothesis to be correct, brought about SUBMs and other disasters. They knew that such things would steer emotions in a number of extreme directions, either by making the Masters stand up to protect something important...or by making them lose it.

And for Nægling, the breaking blade, this “trigger” had been *despair*.

She’d overcome the final wall because of the despair her Master had felt

upon losing everything.

Today, the moment he logged in for the first time in a while, she began evolving into a Superior Embryo, and the power she gained because of it was exactly as demonstrated.

With it, he would've been able to sever even Gloria's Overdrive.

The blade he now wielded was capable of repelling the disaster that attacked his town of Claymill. He had gained the power to protect what was dear to him.

But what was dear to him—the one he loved—was already gone.



For Nægling's Master, the fact that he was now a *Superior* held no meaning. He saw no value in it, nor was he happy she had evolved.

"Cap— I mean, Master, what will you do now?" Claymill's save point was gone, so when he'd logged in, he appeared in Altea.

From there, instead of going to Gideon where he'd once competed with his friend, he went to the place where the monster that had taken everything from him had met its death.

"I'll go to Claymill's ruins. I'll leave flowers for her...and that's it."

He'd go to the now-obiterated city and offer flowers to his late wife. He'd finally gained enough willpower to do at least that much, and it was the only reason he'd logged in today.

He figured it was the last time he'd ever log in.

Nægling was silent. She didn't say anything to argue.

This was the first time in a while that she'd met her Master, but she couldn't stop him from leaving again. She believed that it was *her* fault he'd become a broken man. She hadn't had enough power to prevent it—all of her strength had arrived too late.

Thus, she and her Master—King of Swords, Foltesla—exchanged no more words and left what remained of the canyon...

"Found one. A *Superior* who could oppose the Incarnations."

...and neither of them realized that a minuscule drone was watching them leave.

Interlude: Lunchtime

Reiji Mukudori

It was Monday afternoon. I was in the college cafeteria, having lunch with my fellow freshmen—Soprano Natsume and Dragon Kasugai.

Kasugai was wearing sunglasses and sporting a mohawk, and Natsume had a spot of face paint on her, so we stood out pretty hard. I could feel the passersby looking at us, probably wondering, “What kinda group is this?”

We’re just talking about our lessons and Dendro, though...

“Hey, Mukudori, I heard about some big gamblin’ goin’ on in Altar. Izzat true?” Kasugai asked.

“People gamble on it, sure, but it’s a dueling event at its core. It’s gonna go for ten *Dendro* days straight.”

“Shiiit, man, that sounds fire!”

“I’m sure it’s *very* intense. If only *she* went to an event like that too...”

Kasugai’s eyes gleamed at the prospect, but Natsume seemed kinda tired.

“Did something happen to you in *Dendro*?” I asked.

“I guess you could say an asura forced me to play a game of tag.”

Is that some kinda horror-themed event? I wondered. “Are those the kind of things you do in Tenchi?”

“Well, the place is pretty wild even at the best of times,” said Kasugai.

“Oh, don’t mind it too much,” said Natsume. “I can consult you if I need to, right?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Roger!”

They were in Tenchi, though, so I didn’t think that I could get involved in

whatever they were talking about. If only events like The Anniversary happened more often. It'd make it easier to meet up with them.

"But back to the duels... Why's Altar holdin' the event, anyway?" Kasugai asked.

"Oh, well, basically..." I went on to explain Altar's current situation and that they needed to strengthen their forces and prevent further terrorism.

"Izzat so? That reminds me that the daimyos in Tenchi did somethin' similar."

"Really?"

"Uhh...you're talking about how when the power of Masters started getting recognition, the daimyos began gathering anyone thought they was hot stuff, right?" said Natsume.

"Yeah, that. They held a whole buncha fights they watched personally, and the big shots who won got hired with some good terms. That's how most people working for the big four houses got their place."

My impression of Tenchi was that it was a lot like Sengoku Period Japan, but this seemed closer to what you would've seen in the Edo Period.

Hold on, I thought. "Wait. From what I heard, Tenchi doesn't even *have* that many arenas." This was something Xunyu had told me, but Gideon in Altar was a huge exception when it came to how many arenas a country had available. Other countries had around three at most. "Not everyone had a place to hold these matches in their own territory, right?"

Most daimyos must not have had an arena, and I doubted that those who did would lend theirs out so their enemies could grow in power. In response to my question...

"They do them without them," the two girls said, nearly in unison.

"Huh?" They'd said it loud and clear, but I still thought I must not have heard correctly.

"They just went at it without any arenas."

"Oh... Well, dead Masters only get the death penalty and come back in three days, so..." It was a reckless solution, but if they had no arenas, it made sense to

resort to that.

“Tians do it too, though,” said Natsume.

“Hell, these matches have been part of their culture since before we Masters came floodin’ in,” said Kasugai.

“I get that it’s the ‘land of strife,’ but *man...*” The value of life in Tenchi was even lower than I’d imagined...

Then again, the country had produced people like Kashimiya, Rosa, and Jubei, so it felt like...yeah, that situation made a whole lot of sense. Tenchi’s asuras were something else.

There was also Juliet and Chelsea’s friend, Max, though. As far as Tenchi people went, she was pretty reasonable. I also felt kinda sympathetic toward her as the rational one of the group.

“Well, guess ya can say that everyone in power is crazy ‘bout buildin’ up their forces,” said Kasugai.

“That’s true in both Altar and Tenchi,” Natsume added.

“Well...I guess you’re right.” It would be hard to argue that the only difference between the two countries was simply that Altar had an ample amount of arenas, though, enabling them to do this kind of thing without loss of life. After all, the arena count must’ve been one of the circumstances that influenced the character of the land.

“Speakin’ of buildin’ forces, that Dryfe place you’re up against must be doin’ that too, doncha think?”

Kasugai’s words made me think a bit. She was more than likely correct—actually, it’d be weird if they *weren’t* doing that. Even at the time the peace talks were being held, Dryfe already counted King of Thieves and King of Chariots among their *Superior* roster. And with the next war just around the corner, it wouldn’t be unusual if they were trying to get more of them.

There was something else I was curious about, though.

“I was reborn! I’m now so powerful that I’m nothing like what I was before.” That was what a certain *Superior* told me right before the peace talks.

Hell General Logan Goddhart—a man I once fought and defeated.

During the peace talks, after he spoke about how much stronger he'd become, he went on to instantly die to Fuso's Fatal Field combo.

But that left me with a question...

"What, exactly, was this power-up that he got?" I mused. We still didn't know the details of his newfound strength or how much trouble it could give us.

Chapter Three: Miss Zeta's Expository Lecture—Job Builds

Imperial Capital, Vandelheim, Noble District

In the heart of Vandelheim, surrounding the pre-ancient fortress of Imperstand—the symbol of Dryfe—there was a district full of noble residences. In recent times, though, many of them were inhabited by people other than nobles—specifically, Masters.

The reason for this was the recent civil war, which had killed many nobles and freed up their lands and mansions. Reinhard's faction was a small one and had little support among the nobility, so this was a somewhat expected result of their victory.

However, they'd made the best of this situation and used these now-vacant mansions as a way to win over *Superiors* and other powerful Masters. They had served as an example of the luxurious rewards Dryfe would present them for their performance in the previous war.

And one of the Masters granted such a mansion was Logan Goddhart.

He was very pleased with it. The gaudy mansion and the many servants that came with it had more than satisfied his vanity. In a way, Dryfe's plan to win over Masters had been more effective on him than anyone else.

However, the state of his mansion had recently changed completely. The beautiful residence fit for the highest nobles had undergone changes that at first glance did not make a great deal of sense.

And it wasn't just its appearance that had changed.

The sound of boiling emanated from Logan's room day and night, and the scent of blood traveled even beyond the closed door.

To top it off, occasionally a saddened voice would say, "Not enough... It's not enooough..."

These frightening occurrences didn't sit right with the servants. Over half of them had already quit, fleeing the manor before the horrors within overtook them. What had happened to Logan Goddhart, exactly?

Answering that would mean going back to the moment right after he and Zeta made their deal...



2045, Early April

Logan was one of Dryfe's *Superiors*, as well as their top-ranking duelist.

However, his standing had since dropped all the way down into the dirt.

His first failure was his defeat at Quartierlatin.

Logan had lost against King of Orchestras Veldorbell, followed by Ray Starling the Unbreakable. This was also recorded and made public in a video that made it seem as though he'd lost to Ray Starling alone, leading to him being ridiculed as the *Superior* who was beaten by a newbie.

Ray had also defeated Franklin before that incident, but Franklin wasn't a combat job and it was well known that most of his firepower—his monsters—had been taken out by King of Destruction before Logan overcame him. This made Logan's defeat stand out even more.

But Logan would go on to lose to Franklin later on—and *after* the Giga Professor had lost to Ray Starling.

His second major failure was Logan's loss of his duel champion status.

He was defeated in a duel against King of Thieves Zeta, which cost him his first place rank. Logan had been using his status as champion to keep his spirits up despite everything, but with this, he had lost even that.

This finally broke him to the point that he considered quitting *Infinite Dendrogram* altogether, but he was stopped by Zeta—the very person who'd defeated him.

She invited him to join her clan—Illegal Frontier—and offered to make him stronger in return.



Logan was in his room, and before him was a bandaged woman—Zeta—standing in front of a whiteboard. The whiteboard had been brought by Zeta herself.

“Awareness. I am sure you know this, but when it comes to wide applicability, your Embryo is among the most powerful of all.”

Logan was silent. He found himself unable to even nod in response to that. After all, how “powerful” was it really when it had set him on such a losing streak? And this argument just wasn’t convincing when it came from one of the people who beat him.

“Job. It multiplies 10 values in your usable job skills by 10. The increase in total strength that it can provide doesn’t need to be explained.”

The core trait of Logan’s Embryo, Rumpelstiltskin, was “job skill modification.” No matter what the job skill was, as long as it had numbers in its description, Rumpelstiltskin could overwrite them. When it came to the variety of things that could be done with it, this Embryo was definitely near the top.

“Explanation. I will tell you about an effective build, but let me preface this by saying that Hell General’s synergy with other jobs is absolutely awful.”

“Huh?” Zeta had just come out and said that Logan’s SJ was no good. He did know about the importance of synergy between main and sub jobs, though. He’d spent a lot of time looking into it personally.

“General. The General series is very quirky even by Superior Job standards. First, they allow you to operate with armies that number in the thousands—far beyond the party slot limit. Second, they have active buffs that they can give to everyone in their army,” Zeta explained as she wrote down these job details on the whiteboard.

Even mass buffs from the enchanter grouping weren’t able to affect so many individual units at once. Not even the Over Enchanter Superior Job was an exception to this.

“Loss. The General series pays for this by losing some degree of versatility.”

Logan was silent, and Zeta continued. “Specialization. You might have tried this before, but you can’t use any Creature Enhancement-type skills from your sub jobs. This is because Hell General is a commander specialized exclusively in leading devils. Skills that buff other monsters too are outside its synergistic scope.”

He was indeed familiar with this fact. Logan had been able to use such skills before he became a Superior Job, but when he made Hell General his main one, they had become unusable. That had been disappointing for him, since if this synergy existed, he would’ve been able to enhance his devils’ stats by as much as 600% with just one of Rumpelstiltskin’s ten multipliers.

Now, however, it had turned out that this wasn’t just another case of main and sub job incompatibility, but a flaw in the job itself stemming from its place in the General series.

“Unbuffable. Other Generals, however... For example, while Bug General has a level EX Insectoid Enhancement skill that buffs all their forces by 100%, Hell General has nothing like that.”

“HUH?! I knew Hell General didn’t have a skill like that, but other jobs *do*?!”

“Compensation. In exchange, you can summon your devils instantly.”

Logan fell silent. He’d abused this feature of the job enough to be quite familiar with it. He did find it unfortunate, though, since if he had access to the same kinds of buffs as the other Generals, he’d be able to increase his army’s power by 1,000%. On one hand, there was summoning armies from nothing—but on the other, there was greatly enhancing the army one already had.

Most people would probably be unable to say which one was the better option.

“Incongruence. While many Generals sit at the top of the tamer grouping, they lack versatility. Because of this, they have bad compatibility with many sub jobs. I suppose you tested that yourself.”

Logan said nothing, but she was completely right. He’d thought of picking up some job with armor or shield skills that cut damage by 10% and multiplying that tenfold to make it 100%. With his High Tamer job having become useless to

him, he'd picked up a shield-focused job and actually tried it, thinking he'd be invincible.

However, that had gone nowhere, as the skills of the shield-focused sub job stopped functioning whenever he had Hell General as his main. His other such attempts ended the same way.

"Why is it so incompatible?"

"Role. Generals are commanders—not martial artists who wield their skills on the battlefield."

"But history is full of generals who were good at fighting one-on-one!" Logan blurted out, thinking of the military commanders of ancient China and the like. Logan himself was a Hell General who commanded devils, but that didn't stop him from standing on the front lines either.

"Compatibility. There are Generals that *are* compatible with such skills, but only the Generals that command humans."

"But I... Hell General has good growth in physical stats too! Why is it not compatible with direct combat?!"

"Agreement. I also think it should be. But this is how it has been set within *Infinite Dendrogram's* job system. Hell General doesn't even count as a tamer, but a summoner, so that's all the more reason it is the way it is."

"The devs really don't get it, huh?! Why didn't they give growth to other stats, then?" Logan expressed his rage at the developers for the way his job was configured—though from the perspective of the control AIs, everything about jobs had been set up by their predecessors, so it was something they couldn't do anything about. If they could, they would've started by adding more Superior Jobs and given all of them more slots to motivate players to grow and evolve. But they couldn't even do that, which spoke volumes about their power to affect this particular area.

"Exception. There is a sub job with a damage reduction skill that even a General can take."

"Oh? Which one?"

“Paladin.”

The name of the job made Logan freeze.

Paladin was a high-rank job from the knight grouping—and it had Paladin’s Aegis, a skill that cut damage by 10%. And in the current state of the world...it was a job exclusive to Altar.

It was also heavily regulated, so there was no chance that Logan, being on Altar’s wanted list, could ever get the job for himself.

And most importantly, he had bad memories associated with it and thus was averse to the job on an emotional level.

“Knight. Then again, according to historical writings, it was in a Knight General’s build, so it might be that it’s a limited combination acceptable only in this particular case.” In other words, it was an example of the Generals that commanded humans which Zeta had mentioned earlier.

“Ohhh, so that’s how it is. Then I guess it doesn’t matter to—”

“Unrelated. Well, the bigger problem is that Hell General is a devil-focused job derived from the satanist grouping, so there’s no chance a holy job would ever work if you had it as a sub. The incompatibility at play here is worse than any caused by it being a General job.”

“Then why’d you get my hopes up in the first place?!” Logan barked again, betraying a little bit of the player’s true nature. He felt that there was no reason for Zeta to have even brought up Paladins at all.

“Understanding. I believe this explanation helped you understand something.”

Silence.

“Incongruence. Rumpelstiltskin and Hell General currently have poor compatibility.”

“Yeah! I can tell!” Rumpelstiltskin’s core focus was job skills, but all ideas for enhancing Logan’s build had been crushed by Hell General’s lack of synergy with other jobs. The General series itself was lacking in versatility and had a narrow range of jobs it meshed with well. Perhaps due to its Resources being

focused on instant devil summoning, Hell General was especially bad.

In fact, it could be said that Rumpelstiltskin was the only reason Logan was able to get any use out of it at all.

“There’s nowhere for me to go from here!” Logan yelled. “What am I supposed to do?!” First he got on a terrible losing streak, and now it was clear that his job was no good. Once again, Logan contemplated quitting *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Zeta looked at him and thought—wondered—about the abnormality of the Hell General job.

Even if you ignore all those factors, she mused, Hell General is still more unbalanced than the other jobs in the General series. Zeta felt as though the job was...lacking an important piece. Then again, Hell General has advantages exclusive to that job, so perhaps the system’s designer just placed more value on those things. Still...the base costs are far too steep. I’ll think about this at a later time, alongside our leader and Rascal.

Zeta once again looked at Logan, who was feeling miserable again. He looked like the broken man—or rather, elementary school boy—that he had been before Zeta came to negotiate.

“Advantage. One of the advantages only Hell General has is that you can summon your devils instantly.”

“...But other jobs do that too. Summoner, for example...”

“Denial. Summoner and elemental groupings have to prepare their summons ahead of time. They might need a medium for summoning or an area abundant in the appropriate kind of natural magic. Meanwhile, Hell General’s instant summoning can be used again and again as long as you can cover the costs. And that cost is just the number of Resources that you have to provide.”

The monsters summoned by the summoner grouping had their info and concept stored in mediums. Summoning them involved making them materialize by sending magic to that medium, and if they were defeated, you had to wait until they could be summoned again. Of course, there were summons like Balloon Golem which specialized in quick recovery, but that was

besides the point.

Meanwhile, the elementalist grouping, represented by the likes of the fairy queen Titania, summoned elementals that had preferred environments based on their element and couldn't be used to their full potential if summoned away from them.

In contrast, Hell Generals could summon their devils whenever, wherever, and many times over. As long as the costs were covered, they could be summoned right as the previous batch was defeated, and there would be no end to them.

An inexhaustible army—an advantage that perhaps made it as good as any other job in the General series.

“But it's not like I can pay for the costs forever. Especially when summoning Zero Exceed.”

Indeed he was correct—but even ignoring the Mythical Zero Exceed that could only be summoned by sacrificing an MVP reward, summoning many Legendary Gigaknights wasn't cheap either. Logan could multiply the rewards of each sacrifice by 10, but it made little difference to him.

“And it's not like the devils I summon are guaranteed to win either. Zero Exceed lost against him.”

He'd always thought that Franklin was beneath him, yet the Giga Professor had easily beaten Logan's trump card—the enhanced Zero Exceed. This dealt a huge blow to Logan's self esteem.

However, Zeta shook her head.

“Unrelated. The power of the individual devils has nothing to do with the heart of the problem.”

“What?”

“Forte. The combination of Hell General and Rumpelstiltskin is undoubtedly a wide-scale suppression type build. It should not try to depend on the power of just one devil...to stand in the same field as solo combat builds or wide-scale extermination builds.”

“So what am I supposed to do?”

“Calculation. Ten times twenty is greater than one hundred, so you should just summon lots of Gigaknights. As many of them as your Soldier Devils...enough for them to compose your army.”

“What?” Zeta’s explanation had become so absurd that a single word was all Logan could manage in response. He knew what she was saying, but it was like they weren’t on the same wavelength.

“Combination. Put the summoner grouping in your sub jobs and learn Mass Simultaneous Summoning. This synergizes with Hell General and can be used when subbed. You can probably multiply the simultaneous summon count too. You will be able to instantly summon lots of Legendary devils. Maybe not a thousand at once, but still enough to fill the slots of a few summons. Even a tenth of that might be overkill though.”

“Were you listening?! I told you that I can’t cover the costs!” Logan himself had considered the combination with Mass Simultaneous Summoning. However, it only increased the amount he could summon at once—and the cost grew accordingly. Even as a *Superior*, Logan didn’t have even a fraction of the wealth needed to summon thousands of Gigaknights like he did Soldier Devils.

And despite having to eat these costs with every summon, he wasn’t making enough to cover them.

Dryfe gave him something for his expenses whenever they had a task for him, but the battle in Quartierlatin had pushed him beyond the provided amount. It had been a financial loss as well as a physical one.

Logan was about to lose his temper at Zeta’s nonsense, but...

“Question. Why do you even have trouble covering the costs? Knowing your abilities, there is *no way you should*,” said Zeta, her tone full of confusion.

“Switch. Then again, it is precisely because you haven’t realized it yet that I can present this to you as a way to make you stronger. I have a plan to optimize your somewhat incompatible Hell General.”

“Again, what do you want me to do?”

In response to that question, Zeta put her hand on Logan’s shoulder...

“Change. Become a *crafting job*.”

...and said something that Logan had never once considered.



“Why would I ever be a...?” Logan said, clearly apprehensive, the image of Franklin looming in his mind.

Zeta ignored him and continued. Writing words on the whiteboard, she finally reached the heart of her lecture.

“Resemblance. The logic behind it is similar to the ‘Gem crafting-storage-barrage theory.’”

“Gem crafting...?” As Logan tried to remember what that was, Zeta went on to explain.

The Gem crafting-storage-barrage theory was one proposed candidate for the strongest build, coming from a time before the Guardian-Jaguarman theory when Masters only had high-rank jobs and Embryos.

Crafting jobs in the gemcrafter grouping created Gems by filling them with spells from their magic sub jobs. The Gem crafting-storage-barrage theory was based around making plenty of high-rank offensive spell Gems before combat and throwing those in alongside your actual spells in combat. Though producing the Gems was costly, they enabled the users to spam spells nearly as powerful as high-rank job ults instantly and without MP costs, making it quite a fearsome build.

However, when AGI-focused combat jobs that moved at subsonic speeds became commonplace, the theory declined when its users began dying before they could throw enough Gems. It also stood no chance against the stat-focused Guardian-Jaguarman theory. Still, it had once been quite well known.

And Zeta was about to bring it back.

“So you want me to make Gems?”

“Denial.” No—she was about to make Logan *evolve* in a way that only he could. “Gold. Start by making some gold. Or metal, rather.”

“Huh?” Logan tilted his head. Zeta held up her index finger and, somewhat cheerful in a way her mummy-like face couldn’t hide, said this...

“Alchemy time.”



Infinite Dendrogram had many kinds of alchemy.

Some specialized in the creation of magic items, others specialized in concocting medicine, and yet others focused on the production of homunculi. There were many and varied approaches to it.

Among them, the closest thing to a basic approach to the science of alchemy was the concept of “transmutation of lesser materials into greater materials.”

An example of this was the Mithril Transmutation skill.

It was a skill that had a different description depending on the user. For example, an Alchemist who had Mithril Transmutation at skill level 1 and DEX at 100 would see this:

“Transmutes the Silver used into Mithril with a mass ratio of 10 to 1. Has a $100 \text{ (DEX)} \times 1 \text{ (skill level)} \div 100\%$ chance to succeed.” The skill description included the calculation and success rate, which was based on the owner’s DEX.

In a way, crafting jobs cared about such equations even more than combat jobs.

Most metal transmutations in alchemy were like this, with the numbers being the only difference. They transformed a higher amount of lesser materials into a smaller amount of greater materials with a success rate based on DEX. This meant that alchemists without high DEX or skill level would only end up wasting the base material.

However, this was what the skill would look like with Rumpelstiltskin involved:

“Transmutes the Silver used into Mithril with a mass ratio of 10 to 10. Has a $1000 \text{ (DEX)} \times 10 \text{ (skill level)} \div 100\%$ chance to succeed.” Basically, it would transmute *all* the lesser material into Mithril with a 100% success rate.

It was an absurd kind of alchemy—literally like making money out of thin air.

By simply using the skill, Logan could increase his wealth and create something to cover the costs of his skills. With just a little funds and stats, he could snatch Resources from the world itself without end.

Zeta had realized that he was capable of this almost immediately and

wondered why he hadn't been doing it before now. After all, Logan was already using Rumpelstiltskin to inflate the points he got from items or sacrifices. In a way, it was a real mystery why he hadn't hit upon the idea to inflate the number of the sacrificial items themselves.

The reason he'd never noticed something so obvious was simply because he had never considered becoming a crafting job at all. It wasn't like he would face them in battle, so he hadn't even looked into them to know what they were about.

Another reason was that, to put it lightly, he didn't exactly have the best impression of Dryfe's top crafting job.

Regardless, Logan went on to become history's most efficient Alchemist.

Of course, alchemy grouping skills were unusable with Hell General set as his main, but he could simply change his main job whenever he had to do alchemy. And since his MP and DEX stayed the same even when he had swapped Hell General to a sub job, he had more than enough MP and DEX to use for alchemy. Obviously, the efficiency of his alchemy would only increase as his job and skill levels grew—and when he achieved that, he would never need to worry about costs ever again.

This was what made it similar to the Gem crafting-storage-barrage theory.

The fusion of crafting and combat jobs. He would sacrifice the results of his inexhaustible work as an Alchemist ahead of time to cover the costs of using Call Devil Gigaknight to summon dozens or even hundreds of Legendary devils whenever it was time for combat. There was no need to use any tactics, to worry about being wasteful, or to pick and choose which devils were right for the situation—he would easily crush most enemies with an army of powerful devils.

It was a brain-dead build centered around using immense resources to summon wave after wave of potent minions.

If it were named like the theory Zeta had likened it to, it would be “alchemy storage-legendary-barrage theory,” and it could be realized by Logan alone.

After being taught about this build, Logan immersed himself in alchemy. His

skill level grew, and eventually he wasn't producing just Mithril—some of his transmutations were a huge success and produced High-Quality Mithril. He sold part of what he produced and used the earnings to buy lesser materials to do more alchemy.

Soon, he had amassed a vast amount of points for devil summoning.

Zeta looked at him, saying nothing. Logan became stronger, just as she'd intended, but it did bring a thought to mind.

As a low-rank Alchemist, the best Logan could do was Mithril, but High Alchemists had a job ult that made it possible to make even Mythical metal. Normally, the success rate for that was extremely low and burned through a huge amount of the lesser materials used, but that wouldn't be a problem for Logan.

Mythical metal was extremely valuable. It not only fetched high prices on the market, but also had immense amounts of Resources stored within. It was the peak of all metals mankind could currently create and was often used as material for weapons whose legends were told for centuries to come. Some of these weapons were so powerful that they exceeded even Epic MVP rewards.

When you think about it like that... Zeta thought. Mythical devil—until now, Zeta had assumed it was called that just because it was a Mythical monster.

But now, she thought that perhaps it had gotten the name because it could only be summoned by sacrificing a sufficient amount of Mythical metal.

It had the “pay with a single sacrifice” condition, but if a hunk of metal could be used for that purpose, Logan could build toward it again and again.

In that case, it wasn't out of the question that Logan could eventually make armies composed not of Gigaknights, but Zero Exceeds.

Imagining that, Zeta felt that she might've given him a bit *too* much of a boost. At the very least, it was clear that she had to keep him reined in as a member of IF.

Regardless, this build had inspired Logan so much that he'd actually gone on to reset most of his low-and high-rank jobs. He rushed to have them replaced with jobs from the alchemy and summoning groupings. Despite that, he was so

focused on transmutation that he hadn't leveled them much. He'd also avoided alchemist guild's job quests to keep his new powers a secret.

He didn't think it was much of a problem, though—and when the peace talks came, he'd gone there with the intention of overwhelming the enemies with lots of Legendaries.

However, Tsukuyo Fuso had acted first—and because his level was too low, her Fatal Field had killed him instantly.

And that was why his “alchemy storage-legendary-barrage theory” had yet to see the light of day.



Imperial Capital, Vandelheim, Noble District

Some time had passed since Logan became an alchemist.

Following the instakill incident, he'd gone on to level up, and now...

“Not enough... It's not enooough...”

...he was muttering all of this with a pained expression on his face.

In his room, there was a still with alchemical pure water boiling inside and a pile of base alchemy that gave off the bloodlike smell of iron.

“It's not enough materiaaals...”

And as he continued his alchemy, Logan also continued to whine.

He was currently working on the High Alchemist ultimate job skill, Hypothesis: Ars Magna. It was a crafting skill that produced rare and special metals, Mythical metal included. And, as the Hypothesis in its name suggested, this High Alchemist skill was incomplete. And this was despite the fact that it was an ult.

Specifically, greater metal transmutation demanded a lot of materials, as well as many catalysts. And to top it off, the skill didn't give complete control over what metal it would produce. It wasn't unusual to set which metal you wanted to create, only for the transmutation to give you something else.

That in itself wasn't a problem for Logan. His Rumpelstiltskin was capable of

influencing the chances of getting what he wanted.

“I ran out of materials and got almost no Mythical metal for it...” Logan’s problem was that he wanted to create Mythical metal, but Hypothesis: Ars Magna didn’t allow him to set it as the goal. He had no choice but to try getting it by accident.

As a result, he was now struggling with a lack of materials—and the alchemy gacha. Thanks to Rumpelstiltskin, he hadn’t lost much metal and could just pour most of it back into the gacha, but the same couldn’t be said about the catalysts.

“Apparently, King of Alchemy has the non-Hypothesis, proper Ars Magna...” Zeta had told him that that version of the skill could probably set Mythical metal as the goal. “But I’m not getting the message that I fulfilled the job conditions...”

However, Logan had yet to do whatever was necessary to become King of Alchemy. In fact, he didn’t even know if the throne was open or not. It wouldn’t matter much if it was a tian but if it was a Master, he’d never be able to get it.

“And I’m about to use up all the catalysts Zeta left...” The items that King of Thieves had been providing for him hadn’t seen a resupply since the day he’d gone to the peace talks. This was because Zeta herself hadn’t returned to Vandelheim yet.

“I dunno where she is or what she’s doing, but I hope she comes back fast,” Logan mumbled. “That reminds me that *the new Superiors* are about to arrive...”

He’d heard the rumors that Dryfe had invited several independent *Superiors* and that *some* of them had accepted.

The fact that Zeta and Murdoch weren’t enough for the emperor and that he was securing more forces had shown Logan one thing: the emperor planned to finally end it this time.

“I dunno who they are or where they come from...but I hope they have better personalities than Franklin, are less introverted than Behemot, and can handle enemies I can’t...”

At one point, Logan would've certainly said that he could take Altar all by himself. However, his losing streak had left him broken, and the things he'd learned through Zeta and alchemy had changed him.

He considered the risks of playing solo, thought of compatibility, examined the costs, and was mindful of social disposition.

In real life, Logan Goddhart was nothing but an elementary school boy.

But now, the effect that his growth would have on the world remained to be seen.

Chapter Four: The Invited Immortals

Dryfe Imperium, Micalos Wasteland

The imperial capital of Vandelheim and the Barbaros March to Dryfe's southeast were separated by a vast wasteland.

Though it had once been a heavy producer of grains, the region had recently become barren—just like the rest of Dryfe—and now not even the most basic vegetation would grow there.

Now, the desolate soil was being showered with rain. The downpour and the clouds formed a thick veil that smothered most of the daytime light.

And yet, despite these unfavorable conditions, there was a caravan of ten dragon carriages making their way through it.

They were transporting people to Vandelheim.

The imperium's capital was currently hiring a wide range of individuals in preparation for going to war with foreign powers. Some of the people in the carriages were rural folk who wanted a job simply to avoid starvation, while others sought to advance some sort of cause. Among those driven by their goals, there were youths who loathed Altar for turning their backs on Dryfe and vigorously claimed that the country *must* be defeated—as well as one elderly woman who hoped that the two lands could somehow be on good terms like they had been in the past.

Various conversations could be heard from the train of carriages cutting through the wastes. No one really knew which view was right, nor did they have anyone to guide them, creating a chaotic atmosphere that permeated each carriage.

"Hmm-hm-hmm..." But there was someone there who clearly seemed dubious.

In one of the wagons there sat a person wearing a mask made of intertwined wood and dressed in cheap-looking clothes, humming quietly.

Such an appearance would normally make people uneasy, but the crest on the back of the person's left hand made everyone disregard all of this as just the typical quirkiness of a Master.

Under the mask, the man himself was wearing a smile.

He—Splendida the Evergreen—was simply enjoying this turbulent mood.

Following the incident on *Eltram*, he'd crossed the blazing heat of the desert, arrived at the Barbaros March, and hopped on this dragon carriage.

The emperor had invited Splendida to join Dryfe in the coming war.

As always, the scenery here isn't much to look at, but the people's expressions sure are colorful, he thought. The air around him was one of chaos caused by an imminent war, but Splendida found it nothing but delightful.

In the real world, he would never even think of heading to a country that was preparing for such a conflict—after all, he could die.

However, Splendida's body was an avatar, and couldn't die permanently even if it were killed. In fact, his avatar couldn't be killed in the first place.

And because of this, he could enjoy what was happening purely as a game.

No matter where, when, or what—to Splendida, all of *Infinite Dendrogram* was an event.

Everything's better when you take it easy, he thought. There were people in this world like the emperor and Crys. The former had invited Splendida despite the fact that he'd taken part in an assassination attempt, and the latter had struck deals with him despite the fact that he was a Master.

They were both people driven by a sense of duty toward their country or the world, but Splendida had no such feelings. He accepted the invitation simply because he wanted to watch a fun event from a front row seat.

He wasn't like King of Beasts, who gave her all for the sake of a friend.

He wasn't like King of Swords, whose spirit had been broken by love.

To him, *Infinite Dendrogram* was, from start to finish, nothing but an exciting game—an MMO so well-made that you could mistake it for reality, except that

you could play without risking your life.

The chaos in this dragon carriage was just another thing for him to watch—an attraction he would observe from *a safe vantage point*.

And the war he would take part in was no different.

In a way, he was the healthy kind of ludo.

This reminds me that Altar should be having their Tournaments right about now. I was interested in that too.

The idea of a tournament that rewarded its winners with UBM fights was an enticing one, but he'd ended up accepting Dryfe's invitation instead.

But even if he'd gone to Altar, he couldn't have won The Tournaments anyway—because they were focused on duels.

Splendida could only use his powers in a real battle, for that was the nature of his combo.

Anyway, the emperor decided to let bygones be bygones and called little old me over to him. While I didn't make it to the peace talks, the invitation is still valid. And I got a follow-up invitation through DIN too. Did he have any reason to call someone like yours truly instead of any other freelance Superior?

Part of that might've been that the emperor knew Splendida's powers, but he felt that there had to be more to it.

Well, whatever it is, I finally made it to Dryfe. All that's left is to meet the emperor and accept the request. That'll take me off the wanted list.

That was the reason Splendida was wearing the mask. While tians tended not to comment on how Masters were dressed, things were different if the Master was wanted.

I gotta say, though, this carriage sure is cramped.

While Splendida looked dubious, none of the other passengers were actually avoiding him. That was simply because there was no space to do so. There were people seated on every space available—including the ones to his sides—as well as on the floor in the middle. This caravan had ten carriages, but that wasn't enough to prevent this overcrowding.

Splendida turned his masked face to the side. “Eek...!” The tian lady sitting there uneasily let out a yelp and shrank back. Who could blame her?

How sad! I’d usually try to pick up a cutie like that, but I really can’t take my mask off here! Just as he enjoyed various incidents like they were merely in-game events, Splendida was a Master who courted women far more casually than he did in real life—unlike they did there, such actions didn’t come with the risk of social damage in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

“U-Umm...what is the matter?” the lady asked, somewhat unsettled by the masked man staring at her without saying a word.

“Oh! Sorry about that! I was just wondering why this carriage is so crowded! Though that’s not to say that *tu* did not catch my eye with your beauty, *bambina!*”

“I-I see...” The words Splendida wove from under his mask made the lady feel overwhelmed, but also somewhat relieved. Perhaps she felt that he might have been more amiable than he appeared.

“Umm, this is just a rumor I heard, but...” According to the lady, this row of carriages belonged to traders and thus carried not just people, but cargo. And since there was more cargo than usual today, the amount of inventory left less space for people.

“Mm-hmm. I see.”

If something was being brought from the Barbaros March, it would be either products of mining or goods smuggled from the neighboring countries of Altar or Caldina. And whether that was food or plant-based potions, they were precious here in Dryfe’s current situation.

Ohh...that would explain it... Splendida thought.

And the moment that thought crossed Splendida’s mind, *an explosion shook the dragon carriage.*

The Demi-Dragon pulling it cried out, and the passengers screamed. Mixed with those sounds, there was the distant roar of an engine.

“Dr— B-Bandit attack!”

“They’re after the cargo...!”

The words of the coachmen reached Splendida’s ears.

“Well, it wouldn’t surprise me if Dryfe had those too...”

He’d heard rumors that some people in Altar were fed up with the country and decided to steal a fortune before fleeing the country. Splendida thought it wouldn’t be that strange if Dryfe had people doing the same thing. Even ignoring the coming war, Dryfe was on the verge of running out of resources.

“But...what he said...” Splendida was still hung up on that one coachman’s exact words. It felt as though he’d wanted to say something else at first, but then hastily changed it.

However, the situation didn’t give Splendida much time to dwell on it.

“Th-The ground ahead was blown away! There’s a net too... It’s an ambush!”

“Where’s the bodyguards...?! Didn’t we have a group of Masters in the back?!”

“Dunno when this happened, but they’re gone!”

The sudden attack filled the dragon carriages with a chaos quite different from one before. Some people were desperately jumping off the vehicles and running on the muddy wasteland, only to slip and fall. Some carriages tried to force their way ahead, but the net that had been laid out overturned them.

The entire caravan could no longer move, and the screams of the people under attack echoed all around.

“Ah...ahh...!” The lady next to Splendida was shaking so much that she was frozen to the spot. Not saying a word, he put his right hand on her shoulder to calm her down.

But a moment later, the carriage they were in was turned over as well. Up became down as the people inside were tossed about.

“AAAHHHHHH!” Splendida quickly took the screaming lady in his arms and crashed into the ground through the carriage’s cover.

A multitude of pained voices could be heard coming from inside the flipped

carriage.

“Are *tu* all right, bambina?” With a slightly hoarse voice, Splendida questioned the girl he’d saved.

“Y-Yes. Thank you...!” the girl said, gazing at her savior...

“Ohh, that’s good to hear.”

...only to see that his neck was tilted at a right angle, clearly caused by a fierce impact with the ground.

“Ahh...” At this sight, which might have been straight out of a low budget horror film, the girl fainted dead away.

“Well, anyway...” Splendida grabbed his head with both hands and snapped it back into place. His neck was broken, and the muscles had been torn, but it was instantly reconstructed. Compared to the attacks he’d weathered from Moneygold, this was but a scratch.

Splendida recovered in no time, and walked out of the carriage.

Straining his eyes to look behind the curtain of rain, he saw a group armed mainly with guns.

They must’ve seen this rain as an opportunity. A horde of what must have been nearly a hundred people rode buggies and replica Prism Steeds as they approached the caravan in a crane wing formation.

“Hrmm...as I’ll soon be working for Dryfe, I’d like to do something about this, but I suppose that’s a bit difficult.”

If he fit into any specific category, Splendida was a solo combat build—or, to be more precise, a solo *survival* build.

He was specialized in *his own survival*, and when it came to facing opponents who outnumbered him, he was even less potent than the usual solo combat build. He could spread his poison, but this was an outdoor battle with tian passengers littered about, making that more risky than it was worth.

Even if Splendida somehow got to fight them individually, he didn’t have a high enough AGI. It would take time, and the bandits would easily be able to loot whatever they could and run—and it was hard for him to use the escape-

preventing MVP reward that he'd used on King of Beasts.

Mm-hmm. If I say so myself, all that little old me can really do is buy time in a one-on-one fight... Why is the emperor inviting me, again?

As far as combat capable *Superiors* went, Splendida was definitely on the weaker side, so it begged the question of why the emperor would take him in and even go so far as to take him off the wanted list.

But as this thought crossed his mind, these supposed bandits were only coming closer. There clearly wasn't much he could do by himself, and as Splendida wondered how he would handle it...

"If you're not a bandit, get down."

...he heard these words.

The passengers were already on the ground and shivering in fear, Splendida was standing in place and thinking, and the armed attackers continued their approach, seemingly not hearing the voice.

It was a chaotic situation—and this chaos was torn asunder by a thunderous sound reminiscent of an electric chainsaw—the sound of a *Gatling gun*.

The bullet storm that followed tore through the cover of the rearmost carriage and turned the attackers—along with Splendida—into mincemeat.

"Oh, my." Some of the bandits dissolved into sparks of light, while Splendida immediately recovered even from being torn in half.

Unfortunately, it was his top half that regenerated, so his lower half ended up completely exposed. That was embarrassing, so he chose to cover himself up with branches that he grew out of his body.

"They turned into bits of light, so I guess the bandits are Masters too. Oh, and my clothes are ruined again!" Splendida must've been used to this, as being split in half only made him laugh.

"I *said*, if you're not a bandit, get down!"

"Ohh, my bad. I was slow to react! So, who are *tu*?" Though it wasn't intended to be an answer to this question, the owner of the voice then showed themselves from beyond the torn cover.

What came out was a large suit of mechanical armor wearing a sand-colored cloak. In its chest area there was something luminous, and as it shone in the smoke, it looked like a single giant eye.

“A Magingear? No, it’s not that...” At first glance, the figure looked like a Dryfean Magingear, but it was definitely something else.

The human-shaped machine was larger than Marshall, but smaller than Marshall II. It seemed to be right in the middle in terms of size, which wasn’t standard for Dryfean weapons.

And most importantly, it had no headpiece. The shape made it seem as though its head was buried in the chest, and Splendida had never once seen a unit like that, customized or otherwise.

“May I have a name? Ohh, and Splendida’s good enough for me.” In response to that, the mechanical construct said, with a voice slightly colored by static...

“Y’golonac.” This was a name from the Cthulhu Mythos, belonging to a god who had no head.

In *Infinite Dendrogram*, though, it had another meaning.

“So *tu* are the Unfaltering.”

Y’golonac the Unfaltering—that was the name of a *Superior* who didn’t serve any country, just like Splendida himself.

“Were *tu* called here by the emperor, as well?” Splendida went on. The mechanical armor seemed to reject both Reveal and Identification, which made it unclear whether “Y’golonac” was the name of an avatar or an Embryo, but regardless, it was well known that the name belonged to a freelance *Superior* who had defeated many monsters and acted as a capable bodyguard all over the land.

Thus, Splendida assumed that someone like that had come to Dryfe for the same reason as he had.

“I see we’re alike in that regard, Evergreen.” And Y’golonac seemed to have heard of Splendida too.

Somehow, these two *Superiors* summoned by the emperor had ended up in

the same caravan.

“If that’s the situation here,” Y’gononac said, “I suppose that makes *them* the unfortunate ones.”

Could a mere hundred armed men win against two *Superiors*? The Gatling gun Y’gononac had just used to blast some of the attackers was a good display of the firepower they needed to overcome those odds.

“Then you can just leave the carriage protection to little old me. Wipe them out, if you don’t mind.”

“Roger. I’m on it.”

Agreeing with Splendida’s suggestion, Y’gononac leaped into action. The construct discarded the Gatling gun, replacing it with two missile launchers that it placed on its shoulders before immediately firing them at the mass of attackers.

Targeted by homing missiles, the opposing force was gradually reduced to glowing lights. Someone among their ranks defended against the assault using a floating shield Embryo, but Y’gononac switched to an anti-tank rifle and blasted right through it.

At that moment, an AGI build Master drew close and swung at the construct with a long naginata-shaped Embryo, but Y’gononac switched to an even longer Greek-style spear and impaled the attacker for an instant kill.

The opponent seemed like a fairly high-level Master, but the way this unfolded seemed one-sided.

I guess it’s a powered suit Embryo with powers focused on weapon switching? Rather plain for a Superior, but it’s sure got a lot of utility. I feel like I’m looking at an FPS character, Splendida thought.

It seemed that Y’gononac also had a good balance of STR, END, and AGI—and so far, there didn’t seem to be any major flaws to it. This was in stark contrast to Splendida, who was hyperspecialized and could only really do one thing.

It looks like he’ll take care of it if I just leave it to him...hmm?

As that thought passed through his mind, Splendida’s eyes caught a silhouette

that didn't belong to a buggy or a Prism Steed replica.

It looked somewhat like a dragon carriage, but it wasn't that either. It was being pulled by what looked like an upper Pure-Dragon-tier landdragon, and it wasn't a passenger car, but a platform.

On the platform there was a giant cannon—one that looked like a railway gun.

"It did feel like they had more firepower than you'd expect from ordinary bandits, but this—" Splendida's whisper to himself was cut short by a loud noise in the distance.

The railway gun, or whatever it was, had fired at Y'gononac. However, Y'gononac noticed it, read the shot's trajectory, and quickly moved to evade it.

Just as he expected, the shell was heading toward a patch of ground over ten meters away from him...but right before it landed, *it turned horizontally to the side.*

Assuming an impossible trajectory, the shell flew straight toward Y'gononac, piercing right through him. It broke through the powered suit—supposedly a Superior Embryo—like it was paper, blowing away the top of the torso. A large section of his body gone, Y'gononac swayed back and forth before collapsing forward.

If he was a robot, the shell would've destroyed his core circuitry; if this was a powered suit instead, whoever was inside would certainly have died instantly.

"Whaaat?" Splendida looked down at the collapsed Y'gononac.

The expression under his mask was a dubious one, and the thought behind those eyes was *Seriously?*



A man below the giant gun was watching as Y'gononac collapsed. Clad in a thick army coat and a multipurpose visor the shape of sunglasses, he let out a sigh.

"A confirmed hit." The man—King of Magic Cannons Heldine Rockzapper—muttered his observation of the results.

He knew the attack would hit.

Heldine Rockzapper held a Superior Job specialized in the use of magic cannons, and its ultimate, The Freeshooter, fired shells that never missed. He set the target using his sight, and the shell he fired continued to home in on it until it landed.

Heldine's artillery also couldn't be defended against. His Embryo and weapon, Gun-Goddess of Collapse, Fenrir, completely negated all and any defense.

Neither defensive skills nor attributes meant anything to it. Like the god-consuming creature from which it took its name, Fenrir would slaughter anything it hit.

Guaranteed hits and defense negation—this attack-focused build of his was exactly what had landed Heldine in high positions on both kill and clan rankings of Dryfe.

"What are the losses?"

"The powered suit took out like twenty percent of our guys."

"More than I expected. I guess we really are up against someone pre-*Superior* or higher."

Upon hearing the casualty report from the subleader, Heldine analyzed the opponent's power. The reason he didn't assume Y'gonolac was a *Superior* was because, just like Splendida, he thought Y'gonolac looked too plain for that. Still, the construct was a force that couldn't be ignored and seemed to cause trouble for Heldine's clan, so he'd gotten involved personally and had attacked Y'gonolac.

"But, man, to think they only just hired firepower like that," Heldine said. "I suppose it's all to bring *that* to the capital...?"

"We did the right thing by getting involved. The war with Altar is just around the corner. We can't turn a blind eye to the seeds of any future trouble."

Their conversation didn't sound like it was coming from a group of supposed bandits.

"That leaves...just that masked man."

“He has impressive regeneration. He may be an endurance-focused pre-*Superior*.”

As they talked, Heldine focused his sights on Splendida.

“I don’t know how many times you can keep regenerating, or how much.” He used his visor’s zoom function to glare at Splendida’s mask...

“So I will keep you in place until my subordinates fulfill their objective.”

...and Fenrir—the cannon bearing the name of the godslayer—fired once again.



Mechanical remains were scattered on the muddy, rain-swept wasteland.

“Well, what do I do now?” The enemy’s artillery had completely destroyed Y’gononac. Splendida guessed that the attack’s trajectory and power were the result of some skill combo. Being a solo survival build *Superior*, he’d weathered countless attacks and had gotten quite good at analyzing their nature.

Not every *Superior* was like Splendida or Emily, and it was entirely possible for them to die. Even if the attacker was weaker, a critical hit could easily cause what had just happened to Y’gononac.

“Whoa.”

And, as he looked at Y’gononac’s state, a shell struck Splendida and completely pulverized him.

He instantly began regenerating from the head down, but another shell came flying in to put a stop to that.

Oh dear. I can’t do anything like this.

While Splendida couldn’t die, destroying his body over and over would incapacitate him, and his poison-focused attacks couldn’t reach someone attacking from over two kilometers away.

Meanwhile, keeping their distance from Splendida and the bombardment focused on him, Heldine’s subordinates were approaching the dragon carriages. They weren’t holding back, but there was a certain refinement to the way they

operated.

Hrmm...I feel like they might not be bandits after all. The thing that the coachmen said is bothering me too...

Even as he was being scattered into pieces over and over, Splendida never stopped thinking.

After an obscene amount of explosions, Splendida's head was blown off and landed next to Y'golonac. The two *Superiors* were now lying next to each other like good friends.

Oh? It just hit me that Y'golonac hasn't disappeared, Splendida thought. He himself had a combo that made him immortal, so it was a given that he wouldn't be vanishing. But why was Y'golonac's body staying around as well?

"Hm?" Splendida, reduced to nothing but a head, realized that he could hear something faintly over the noise of the rain.

Y'golonac's broken remains were releasing a sound that crackled with static.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! Y'ggy's broken! Get a grip, Vito!"

"Stop talking! There's no way I could've seen that coming!"

"The attacker is about two kilometels away. That's outside the effective range."

"Now's not the time for that, Micchi! Shit! Okay, time for the super long-range artillery gear..."

"No. We're probably dealing with a pre-*Superior* who specializes in long-range combat. We'll close the distance as soon as we recover. Large, prepare your active skill."

"O-Okay!"

"Roger that, Hikaru! Don't mess up this time, Vito!"

"Shut up!"

The sound was a *conversation*.

This is... Just when a certain thought was about to cross his mind, Splendida's head was hit by another one of Fenrir's shells, blowing him to bits. It seemed

that the type of shell had been changed, and this one created an explosion big enough to engulf the surroundings.

The smoke it spread and the dust it flung up from the ground covered the bodies of both Splendida and Y'gonolac.



“Is it done...?” Heldine had switched from shells that ignored defense to ones focused on explosive firepower and effective area.

At the heart of the explosion, Splendida had been blown to smithereens.

Heldine didn't know if his opponent's regeneration was tied to how damaged his body was, but he thought that this would at least serve to buy some time.

“Hm...?”

However, when the torrential downpour scattered the smoke, he was met with a strange sight.

It was *not* Splendida, who was currently regenerating even from the immense explosion.

“Resuming combat.”

Heldine was met with the complete disappearance of the remains scattered about, as well as *Y'gonolac, standing there without as much as a scratch.*

He spoke with the same voice as he did before his supposed destruction—a voice unlike any Splendida had heard.

A moment later, the construct vanished and reappeared right before Heldine and Fenrir.

“Ah...?!” Heldine was shocked—an enemy that had been far in the distance only a moment ago had just appeared right in front of him.

This was enough of an opening for Y'gonolac to equip submachine guns in each arm and fire toward him.

“Ngh...!” Acting faster than Y'gonolac in response, Heldine blew a whistle and ordered the Pure-dragon pulling his platform to leap in front of him.

The Pure-Dragon became a shield, bearing the bullet storm using its natural

defensive power and a damage-reduction skill.

A moment later, the Pure-Dragon vanished, going back into a Jewel through Re-Call.

Behind the vanished meat shield there was Fenrir, now in a smaller form, and Heldine, brandishing it like a lance.

“FIRE!” Instantly shifting focus to retaliation, Heldine fired at Y’gononac from a close range. Though this smaller form had a lower range, its defense negation was still active.

This second hit on Y’gononac also opened a hole in his chest and scattered his limbs—instant death for a person, and irreparable damage for a weapon.

Suffering such catastrophic destruction, Y’gononac was reduced to pieces...

“Reactivation.”

...only to instantly recover and resume attacking.

“This one too?” Heldine clicked his tongue. It was unclear whether the thing before him was a powered suit or a robot, but he now understood that it and the masked man were birds of a feather.

Indeed, they both were *solo survival builds*, boasting immense regeneration.

Y’gononac also possessed far more methods of fighting and much more mobility than Splendida. He had both firepower that made him a capable solo combat build and the ability to respawn an indefinite number of times.

He was so powerful that Superior Embryo didn’t seem like enough to accomplish this feat.

“Fen! Cluster fire!” In response to Heldine’s words, Fenrir changed the barrel’s shape and began firing buckshot meant for close-range encounters.

Y’gononac responded by switching from the submachine guns to a large shield, which he threw at Heldine—a shield that was large enough to not only block his line of sight, but also crush him to death.

“Ah!” Heldine fired repeatedly to knock the weapon away before it struck home.

Not missing this opening, Y'gononac vanished once more and thrust a spear at Heldine from a blind spot.

Heldine turned his body and evaded it, however barely. While midair, he fired more defense-ignoring shots—but without Heldine's ultimate job skill backing them up, Y'gononac was able to dodge it.

It was a true back-and-forth. In close range combat, the two were more or less equal.

However, while Heldine's only lifeline was a Brooch and his own HP, there was no telling how many times Y'gononac could get back up. It dawned on Heldine that the situation would only get worse for him.

Still, he couldn't retreat here.

"Leader!"

"I'll keep him in place! The rest of you, secure the cargo and the coachmen!" Brandishing Fenrir, Heldine roared as he continued to engage Y'gononac.

And so...

"Don't let this gang smuggle their drugs to Vandelheim!"

Silence. Those words made Y'gononac freeze, stopping in place like a game character that had ceased responding to controller inputs.

"Hm...?" Finding that strange, Heldine went on high alert when...

"What did you just say?"

...Y'gononac let out several voices that couldn't have belonged to Y'gononac.

Watching the battle from a distance, Splendida nodded in understanding as he mused to himself, "Ah...I get it now."



A few minutes later, Splendida and Y'gononac were sitting on the ground before Heldine.

They were currently in the Japanese "seiza" sitting posture—an apologetic pose that Y'gononac had assumed instantly. Splendida had looked at Y'gononac, thought, *Giapponese seiza?*, and mimicked it.

“Oh dear, we almost ended up taking part in something bad.” Splendida spoke with the tone of someone who wasn’t feeling the slightest bit guilty, while Y’gononac maintained a silence.

The order of events that had led to the current situation went something like this:

A group within the Dryfean underworld received illegal substances—namely drugs—through Caldina. With Dryfe being in the gloomy state that it was, it was a good place to sell such items for a major profit. But since bringing them in just like that would get them caught immediately, they chose to deliver it by masking their caravan as a passenger transport service.

However, Dryfe was aware of this, and requested Fullmetal Wolves—Heldine’s clan and the second in Dryfe’s rankings—to seize the drugs and capture the criminals responsible.

What had made it a more complicated task than expected was the presence of two *Superiors* on the caravan who’d been invited by the emperor.

When Heldine told him all of this, things finally made sense to Splendida. It explained why the coachman’s shout about a “bandit attack” had felt so off. He’d probably wanted to shout something like “Dryfe inspection,” but caught himself at the last moment.

“I apologize for getting in the way of your duties.” Y’gononac bowed deeply to express his regret.

Y’gononac was a Master that the coachmen had hired as a bodyguard. He’d been invited by the emperor and was heading to Vandelheim anyway, so this job was just right for him.

And so, he and Splendida had ended up fighting Fullmetal Wolves, oblivious to the fact that they were both backing up a very shady group of people.

Y’gononac had Truth Discernment, but the criminals could circumvent it by saying things like “we would like a bodyguard for a caravan carrying people and cargo” or “we’re bringing pharmaceutical products to Vandelheim,” *neither of which were lies per se*.

Though, for some reason he also *hadn’t heard* the coachman’s words.

“Fortunately, the only human casualties were Masters. No real trouble at all... Though, we’ll have you make it up to us in the war against Altar.”

Splendida and Y’gononac both showed their invitation letters and explained themselves, and though they weren’t completely innocent, the fact that they hadn’t disrupted his work on purpose was enough for Heldine to not hold them responsible.

In this operation, nobody had died besides a number of Masters from Fullmetal Wolves. The criminal group responsible had all been apprehended. There were some coachmen who’d tried to force an escape and caused their carriages to topple, but though that caused some injuries, none of the passengers had been killed, and their wounds had already been treated.

In fact, the one who’d suffered the worst injury from a toppled carriage was Splendida himself.

Incidentally, when the lady he’d protected had woken up, she’d just kept muttering, “The neck, the neck...” in pure confusion—but when Splendida showed himself, fully healed and *naked*, she instantly fainted yet again.

Regardless, though there had been a few complications, Fullmetal Wolves had fulfilled their objective, and it was decided that they would escort the caravan to Vandelheim. Heldine didn’t seem to like the idea of leaving the innocent passengers in the wasteland.

Splendida and Y’gononac would be accompanying them as well. Some might say this was Fullmetal Wolves escorting “VIPs invited by the imperator himself,” while others would characterize it as “persons of interest” being dragged away.

“The road had some twists and turns, but it looks like we’re back on track,” said Splendida. The platform that had supported Fenrir was now covered in order to transport Y’gononac.

For some reason, though, Splendida was sitting right next to him right now.

“By the way, *where* are you controlling that from, and *how many* of *tu* are there? Is ‘Unfaltering’ the name of your party?”

“...I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Watching the battle had given Splendida an idea of how Y’gononac worked, but the latter still feigned

ignorance.

Well, if he just went and admitted it like it's no big deal, it'd just make me worried. About the war and stuff, Splendida thought despite putting on an exaggerated and disappointed expression. Little old me and Y'golonac. I see the emperor's inviting survival-focused Superiors. Maybe this war won't be your typical one.

Splendida realized that the Dryfean leadership had some sort of plan to win the upcoming conflict, and that inviting them was part of it.

Well, anything's fine by me. If that's how it's gonna be, I'll probably get a front row view of all the highlights.

The *Superior* whose goal was simply to do some sightseeing—the immortal tourist—pictured the coming event.

“Heh heh heh...” Splendida chuckled merrily—not realizing that Y'golonac was staring at him, just a little creeped out.

Interlude: Tournament Days Seven and Eight

Gideon the City of Duels, Central Arena

Tournament: Day Seven.

Name: Unknown (Unable to Speculate).

Core Traits: Short Distance Warping (Presumed).



The city of Gideon would soon begin the seventh of its ten Tournament days. A UBM escaping the day before had certainly been an emergency, but it hadn't stopped them from commencing the event as planned.

Albeit not quite as much as day five's, today's reward seemed like it would be quite useful in combat, and thus it had attracted many powerful participants.

And the person Death Period was sending in to fight for it was none other than...

"So it's finally *my* turn, huh?" A shady-looking lady in shades—Marie Adler.

She was the bearer of the onmitsu grouping's Superior Job, Death Shadow, as well as the infamous PK who carried the nickname "*Superior* Killer." However, only her clan and a few others knew her secret.

"Well, Ray, Fujee's trio, and the armorhead are all in school, while Rookie's busy with his prep..." Shu and Hannya were still around, working as security, but the clan members Marie felt closest to weren't present to see her bout. That had left her feeling a little bit down.

"I get that they have to put their education above everything...but whether it's sports or anything else, it's always best to see the win happen in real time."

Marie spoke as if she'd already won—she was really counting her chickens before they hatched, though she might have had more than enough reason to be so confident. Aside from the *Superiors*, she was among the strongest Masters in Death Period—and perhaps in the entirety of Altar. In anything-goes

fight, Marie could beat just about anyone.

On top of that, none of Altar's *Superiors* were taking part today. Lei-Lei had participated in day one, Tsukuyo Fuso had gone for day five, and Figaro was slated to fight on the final day. The remaining two were only involved in the event as security. And among powerful non-*Superiors*, the kingdom's strongest—Kashimiya—had already participated on day six. B3 and Rosa had also had their turn on day two. Juliet, as well as many other well-known duel rankers, had all chosen other days too.

With Marie being as powerful as she was and day seven lacking any notably strong opponents, she had reason to be confident in her victory.

"Guess I'll just get in there and grab that win!"

Thus, Marie Adler the *Superior* Killer challenged The Tournaments and...



Sorcerer Ray Starling

I logged into *Dendro* after coming back home from college and found myself on day eight of The Tournaments.

The Death Period member participating that day was Fujinon. Her Embryo multiplied her spells, and with today's reward UBM being able to split itself, Fujinon figured that if she performed well, she could gain the ability to multiply her spells two additional times.

"For a caster, Fujinon's a real musclehead!" said Io.

"Huh? Io, you're the last person who should say that..." Kasumi replied.

"To be fair, casters in general do seem to have a strong focus on raw firepower," Nemesis commented. The Pyromancer job's Crimson Sphere was a good example. It was very powerful even by the standards of high-rank job ults, and I was under the impression that it was used pretty often because of that.

I kinda felt like I saw people who used it get defeated all the time, though.

"Anyway, looks like she made it through the preliminaries," I said. Now we'd be able to watch her matches. Seated in the box we'd reserved for the entire ten day period, I waited for Fujinon's turn alongside Nemesis, Io, and Kasumi.

“Heh heh heh... Fujinon sure is something, huh...?”

Actually, there was one more person here with us.

“I have nothing more to teach her,” the other person continued. “Then again, my teachings are probably worthless anyway...”

Sitting on a chair next to me, her head hanging and in awfully low spirits, there was McBlackJack—better known as Marie.

“Don’t worry, teacher! I get you *lost in the first match*, but don’t beat yourself over it!” said Io, who was also sitting next to Marie. Io patted her on the back.

“Io?!” Kasumi exclaimed, shocked by her friend’s insensitive remark.

Though...well...yeah, that was it.

Ignoring the *Superiors*, Marie was among the strongest in our clan. And yet, so far she was the only one of us who had lost in her very first fight.

“You got matched with the eventual winner, so don’t let it get to you,” I said. “That’s what happened to me too.”

Yeah—she’d fought the winner of day seven right off the bat.

Since it was the preliminaries, there hadn’t been an audience, but if I had to guess, I’m sure it had been one hell of a duel.

From what Marie herself had told me, it went like this...



Marie’s opponent was King of Storms Caydence.

He was the leader of Welkin Alliance—the fourth in the clan rankings—and a pre-*Superior* often counted among the top five most powerful Masters in the kingdom. Boasting wide-scale extermination power matching even King of Destruction—a *Superior*—Caydence stood alongside the likes of Kashimiya, the strongest melee fighter; King of Light, the strongest ranged fighter; and Catherine Congou, the strongest tamer.

And the fifth among these was the *Superior* Killer—Marie. In battles where anything was permitted, including ambushes, she was definitely up there with the best.

The reason someone like that would lose her first fight was simple—The Tournaments were far from an “anything goes” environment.

First of all, a battle that began with a countdown and the fighters facing each other didn’t allow for staging an ambush. Marie couldn’t preemptively hide her presence, create copies of herself, or catch the enemy off guard, which left no room for her onmitsu style of combat to breathe.

And to top it all off, there was her Death Shadow ult and her strongest means of evasion, Art of Vanishing. Since its effects were equivalent to disappearing from the world entirely, the barrier treated it the same as dying. Marie had been forced to fight someone who was her equal match, all the while unable to use her trump card or any of the strategies she excelled at.

Still, she may have been able to win using just her high AGI, ability to split herself up, and her Embryo Arc-en-Ciel—but unfortunately, her opponent was too strong this time.

Caydence used his power as a wind magic Superior Job to flood the arena with a storm the moment the fight began. Moreso than the mundane weather phenomenon, the winds of this magical tempest brought unbridled physical destruction. Prevented from dispersing into the atmosphere by the barrier, the storm ravaged everything within.

The duel stage became a vortex, and the deadly winds made short work of the copies Marie created.

She herself watched the flow of the storm and tried to move in a way that minimized the damage, but she couldn’t entirely prevent it. Gradually, her health was chipped away. On top of that, the storm carried a poison debuff that afflicted her and further accelerated the DoT.

In the end, she tried to turn it all around with a bullet that killed without fail—but before she could, Caydence finished his preparations and cast a spell that destroyed the entire stage, leaving Marie with no room to evade. Finally, she was defeated.



“An attack that covers everything within the barrier... Whatever could I do

against the likes of *that?*” said Marie.

“Now you’re talking like I was...” said Kasumi. Apparently, losing after barely being able to fight back had hit Marie pretty hard.

I know how that feels, I thought.

“It appears that she was overcome by both her lack of compatibility with her opponent and the rules of the event,” said Nemesis.

“Yeah.” If she’d been able to use Art of Vanishing, Marie might’ve survived the final attack and delivered her certain death bullet. After all, she’d been inside Noz Forest while Shu bombarded it and lived. Caydence was nearly as much of a destructive force as Shu, so being unable to use that one skill had put her at a major disadvantage in that matchup.

That one skill’s usefulness didn’t mean that Caydence wasn’t a fearsome foe, though. He’d covered the entire stage in a storm while simultaneously preparing a spell that was even *more* powerful. Whether that was his own prowess or the work of his Embryo was unclear, but it took some awfully refined magic skill. As a caster he was considered the same tier as King of Light, and I could clearly see why. I’d come to know every *Superior* of the kingdom, but this made me realize once again that they weren’t the only powerful people out there.

“But it’s a good thing you dropped out in the preliminaries, huh?” said Iō.
“Now you can’t damage the *Superior* Killer’s name.”

“Well, that’s...good? I’m not really sure,” said Marie. “I mean, most people don’t know that Marie Adler actually is the *Superior* Killer anyway. B3 does though, and she sure made fun of me.”

B3...is she still holding a grudge against Marie for ambushing her? I wondered. *No...I think they’re just not compatible as people.*

“B-By the way, teacher, why do they call you the ‘*Superior* Killer?’” Kasumi asked.

“Huh?” Iō tilted her head and answered before Marie could do so herself. “It’s because she beat a *Superior* despite not being a *Superior* herself.”

“B-But our leader’s beaten *Superiors* too, hasn’t he?”

Well, it was true that I’d beaten Franklin and Logan, but...

“It wasn’t like I did it by myself,” I said. I couldn’t have won against Franklin without the help of the three here—and many others—and I would’ve completely lost against Logan if Veldorbell hadn’t destroyed so much of his forces.



“You beat your *Superior* all by yourself, and that made all the difference, right?” I said. The “*Superior Killer*” name was created because she’d defeated a fearsome, wanted *Superior without* anyone’s help. That was my assumption, anyway...

“Hrmm...”

...but Marie herself was making a somewhat dubious face.

“Marie?”

“Well, I was certainly the only *person* who beat it, but...how should I put this...?” Whatever it was she wanted to say, Marie wasn’t being clear about it. “And honestly, being solo or not wasn’t really relevant to why I got the title.”

“Hm?” We were so curious that question marks were practically popping up over our heads, but Marie remembered something that put a tired expression on her face.

“The reason I’m called the *Superior Killer* is because the one I beat left *that* big of an impression. Yes, even by *Superior* standards.”

The Superior she defeated was...King of Plagues, right?

“It happened before you three began *Dendro*, so I doubt it means that much to you, but the King of Plagues incident is among the biggest catastrophes that have ever happened in *Infinite Dendrogram*. It was actually on about the same level as Gloria.”

“Huh?” I said, shocked. That was the name of a mighty, fiendish dragon that had attacked Altar—an SUBM that had brought immense devastation to the kingdom and required the combined efforts of Altar’s *Superiors* to defeat. Was I really supposed to believe that a single Master had been able to do something similar?

“You can find the details about the event in the back issues of the DIN newspaper. I put them all in the library of our base in the Eighth Arena. Go look at them if you’re curious.”

“Oh yeah! I almost forgot that DIN also releases actual newspapers!” said Io.

“Personally, I remember them better as the group that held an event with the

truly nonsensical name of ‘Ba-Thump Kyahah’...” said Nemesis.

“Hearing about that already makes me feel kinda nostalgic,” said Marie.
“Enough about the past though—let’s cheer for Fujee. The first fight’s about to — Oh. Looks like she’s going first.”

The conversation seemed to have made Marie feel better, and she suggested we focused on the duel.

“Whoa! That’s awesome! Get them, Fujinon! You can do iiit!”

“Oh. Looks like she’s up against Riser...”

“Huh?! For real?! Get her, Riser! You can do iiit!”

“Io...” She’d instantly switched from cheering on her friend to cheering on her fave. From what I’d heard, after cooperating during the recent attack on Altar, Io had become a big fan of his.

Yeah, I’m not surprised that Io likes Riser’s battle style, I thought.

I wasn’t saying a word. My eyes were fixed on the stage, but my brain was focused on the King of Plagues incident.

A Master had caused a disaster that matched Gloria itself in scale. You could barely compare that to common crimes or even actions taken during wartime.

What had happened back then? And why?

I felt like that was something we Masters had to know.

Chapter Five Opening: The King of Plagues Incident

February, 2045

In the world of *Infinite Dendrogram*, there existed nations that were referred to as the Seven Great Countries.

Altar, the Land of Knights.

Dryfe Imperium, the Land of Machines.

Huang He, the Empire of Hermits.

Tenchi, the Land of Blades.

Legendaria, the Fairyland.

Caldina, the Mercantile City-State Union.

Granvaloa, the Maritime Fleet.

All Masters, without exception, were required to start out in one of these seven, but that didn't mean that they were the only countries that existed. If they were, they wouldn't be called the Seven *Great* Countries, but just the Seven Countries.

The world of *Infinite Dendrogram* had a number of smaller countries besides these, and they were either in extremely remote locations or situated along the borders of the Seven. They were nations that the Seven had never seen any reason to conquer, or ones that were left alone because it was better *not* to claim them.

A good example of the former was the remote settlement said to exist within the Harshwinter Mountains—a tiny country with a name unknown to most.

It was a place widely thought to be trapped in a hellish world of ice and snow, menaced by ferocious landdragons and avians. The texts of old claimed that it existed, but no one from the Seven Great Countries had yet set foot in it. After all, there was nothing to be gained from invading it. Nothing could grow there, it wasn't known to be rich in ore, and attempting to enter the area could

provoke the local landdragons, potentially leading to the same dire fate northern Caldina had once suffered.

Thus, the tiny nation's existence continued to be ignored.

After Masters had grown in number, though, some of them set out to these remote lands with the goal of simply exploring it. And while the unimaginably unwelcoming environment had forced most of them to retreat or given them the death penalty, there were rumors that a few adventurers had actually arrived at the settlement.

Even then, that place was still of no consequence to the Seven Great Countries.

On the other hand, there were countries that *were* known to all the Seven, yet unclaimed by any of them. These were largely city-states situated right on the borders between two or more of these mighty nations—countries composed of but one city and the small villages surrounding it. Even when put together, each of these tiny places controlled less land than a single city of the Seven. They had almost no military power to speak of, and if a war broke out between them and any of the Seven, they would certainly be annexed.

However, that had yet to happen.

This was because the benefits of keeping them around outweighed the benefits of conquering them.

For the Seven Great Countries, laying claim to one of these city-states would be seen as encroaching upon a border. That was bad enough when the small country in question was between just two larger nations, but it was even worse when it bordered three.

Simply invading even a tiny country like that could make an enemy of the two greater ones it stood next to.

Because of this, rather than risk provoking the other countries over such small patches of land, it was more beneficial to simply leave them as they were.

Mahem was one such tiny city-state.

Being one of the small lands situated right where Altar, Legendaria, and

Caldina's borders met, it was an agrarian nation with idyllic scenery. Though they did not have much land, their farming—enhanced by earth magic and alchemy—allowed them to produce enough food to feed themselves a thousand times over, and they made a decent amount of money by exporting their excess food to their three neighbors.

Mahem had existed for centuries since the collapse of King of Kings Rockfell Adrasta's rule, and it hadn't changed even as the world was shaken by the recent increase in Masters. Even if these Masters stopped in Mahem from time to time, almost none of them stayed.

Or, rather, staying here was difficult for them.

This was because Mahem and other small countries like it *had no save points*.

The reason the Seven Great Countries were called that wasn't just because of how much land they controlled or their power as nations—it also referred to the fact that they had cities or even villages with save points.

Meanwhile, the small countries didn't have them even in their capitals. They were not only small in size and influence, but couldn't even function as hometowns for Masters.

On the other hand, though, this meant that Mahem's land was incredibly fertile without the need for the environmental benefits of a save point, so perhaps it wasn't so bad after all.

The country also wasn't subjected to very many monster attacks. It could perhaps be described as a haven of peace on a turbulent continent.

The people of Mahem believed that they would always live like this—that this life would never end.



"I'm sooo bored." The day was calm and clear. Sitting atop a hill in a field of grass, a young boy muttered these unremarkable words to himself.

The boy's name was Mahr.

He was the second son of a rancher living in a village belonging to the nation of Mahem, and he'd just turned ten years old this year.

He was currently watching over a number of Cotton Sheep—sheeplike monsters they raised—while they feasted on the grass in the field. He was helping with the family business, which was an activity that had become all too familiar for him a long time ago.

Lying down next to him, fast asleep, there was a Demi-Dragon-tier monster, Demi-Drac-Hound. It was a tamed monster that Mahr's father had bought from a traveling merchant from Caldina, and they now used the creature as a sheepdog. A single glare from it was enough to make the Cotton Sheep fall in line, and it was strong enough to deal with most of the wild monsters that might attack them. The same applied to any potential sheep thieves, though these were quite rare.

The Demi-Drac-Hound had a menacing name and visage, but with no danger in sight or work to do right now, it was just sleeping at Mahr's side. Still, if the sheep tried running away somewhere, it would certainly wake up and instantly set them straight. It was very well trained and attached to its owners.

"I'm sooo bored..." Mahr repeated.

It wasn't an uncommon thing to hear out of him, and it only made him feel more melancholy. Mahr believed that he would spend all his years helping with the family business.

However, being the second son, he wouldn't even inherit the ranch. He would either live his whole life as a farmhand here, or marry into some other ranching or farming family without any sons.

"I heard there's lots of *amazing things* happening in the big countries..." The village Mahr lived in was a small one, but the occasional merchants and bards that stopped by informed them of the things that happened in the Seven Great Countries.

They would present them in the form of foreign newspapers or bard songs, among other things.

The stories Mahr heard had surprised him greatly.

A massive white whale monstrosity that had attacked the country floating on the sea.

A three-headed golden dragon that had terrorized the kingdom.

A civil war in the imperium, fought for the emperor's throne.

And lastly, the war between Altar and Dryfe.

While these stories filled the adults and the girls with dread, Mahr was overwhelmed with excitement.

After all, such terrifying stories always came with some real *heroism*.

The explosive Master who slew the white whale.

The three top-rankers who defeated the three-headed golden dragon.

The gargantuan beast that had been instrumental in both the civil war and the true war behind it, shattering even a meteor.

Upon hearing the stories of such champions, Mahr found himself wanting to become like them.

However, he wasn't a Master, but a tian, and he didn't know how he could become a Master. In fact, he didn't even know that there *was* no way for tians to become Masters.

As a child, he couldn't even embark upon a profession of his own, and it wasn't clear if he had the talent to become a champion.

I doubt I have what it takes anyway, Mahr thought. While he did wish to become a hero like that, he wasn't quite childish enough to think that he could actually accomplish that goal without any evidence he was capable of it. But this just gave him more room to think.

The stormy world of champions and his unchanging daily life.

His dream to live as a champion and the reality which wouldn't allow it.

Simply making such comparisons filled Mahr with sadness. It made him realize just how *narrow* his future was.

"...guess I'll head back now." When the sheep had eaten their fill, Mahr stood up.

The Demi-Drac-Hound also woke up, let out a bark, and rushed toward the sheep before leading them to follow after Mahr.

This wouldn't have been necessary if they simply put the sheep in Jewels like tamed monsters, but they didn't.

In fact, these sheep weren't even actually tamed.

The reason for that was simple—there were too many of them. Since they numbered in the dozens, managing them using one's limited party slots and minion capacity was difficult, especially if you weren't a combatant.

Because of this, instead of taming them and using Jewels, the sheep were simply domesticated and kept on the ranch. This came with the added benefit of the monsters still dropping items if they died.

This method had been taught to people long ago by a person known as "Farm Cat." Living after the destruction of the pre-ancient civilization, he was an important figure who'd spread the knowledge of this new stock farming method to the entire world.

Would I have to do something this boring if he'd never existed? Mahr wondered, venting his frustrations on what was clearly the wrong target.

When Mahr and the sheep returned to the village, though, he found it in a bit of a stir. However, it didn't seem like they were panicking. Instead, the people looked surprised and happy. It reminded Mahr of how it looked like when traveling merchants or bards stopped by.

"Ah! Mahr! What took you so long?!" Upon noticing Mahr, his brother—three years older than he was—ran up to him.

"What's happening here?"

"The village has a guest again, but it's a big deal! Someone amazing! Someone special!"

Mahr couldn't understand what was amazing or special here. His brother was so excited that he didn't even manage to say the most important bit.

"What's amazing?" Mahr asked.

"I'm telling you, we got someone *big*!"

As Mahr considered blurting out "Just tell me who," his brother finally calmed down and said...

“The Hero has come!”

Indeed...that was certainly someone special.



The Hero.

That word held a special meaning to tians.

It referred to a Special Superior Job that had appeared many times throughout history—a person who possessed immense power.

The Heroes were granted that strength from the moment they were born into this world. Wielding blades, using magic, and blessed with prodigious skill, they were said to be both well-rounded and incredibly powerful.

Another notable thing about The Hero job was that it wasn't *picky*.

While Sacred King, Imperator Machina, The Saint, and Draconic Emperor could only manifest within certain bloodlines, The Hero didn't discriminate, letting even the children of the most lowly people become *special*. It was possible for anyone to be born with the mantle.

Because of this, tian commoners—and even some nobles—saw The Hero as a symbol of hope.

And that was why, when the current bearer of this job arrived at Mahr's village, everyone there welcomed him with open arms. They even held a welcome party in the village's only hall, where every inch of the table was covered in food.

Not a single villager missed the chance to participate, and Mahr was no exception. He intently listened to everything The Hero had to say.

“Oh! So you've arrived here all the way from Tenchi?”

“Yes. I'm on a journey to train and broaden my horizons. My current destination is the western end of the continent.”

The Hero, who was staying with the village chief for the time being, was a youth not even two decades old. His long black hair that he kept tied back and his name—To'ori Kusanagi—spoke of his origins in Tenchi. Mahr couldn't even

begin to imagine the length and magnitude of his journey.

“What will you do when you get there?” a child asked, excited.

“I will then turn toward the south and head to Legendaria,” The Hero kindly replied. “And once I’ve arrived...I believe I will head to the Harshwinter Mountains.”

Those words were met with expressions of astonishment.

The traveler was as courageous as you would expect someone called a hero to be. Most common folk would think his journey impossible, but he was the kind of person who made everyone believe he could accomplish such a feat.

“Hey! Hey! What kinda places have you been to?!”

“Have you seen deserts?”

“What about the sea?”

“Very well,” The Hero said. “I will tell you of my journey. Upon leaving Tenchi, I...”

Seemingly accustomed to people begging for stories of his adventures, he began to speak—and described sights the likes of which Mahr and the other villagers had never before witnessed.

There was the warrior he’d encountered on the Strait Sea separating Tenchi from the continent, right after taking off, who was nothing more than empty armor.

There was the martial artist he’d met in Huang He’s mountains—one whose skills were so overwhelming that his lack of a weapon meant nothing in combat.

There was the magic he’d seen in Caldina, so immense it shook the earth and blocked out the skies.

It wasn’t only battles that he spoke of. He also described the beauty of the sea when he looked back at his homeland after crossing it, as well as the majesty of the mountains in Huang He. And when he mentioned the dragon he’d met and tamed during his journey, the children began pestering him to show it.

He described all of this in language so eloquent that the listeners felt as though they could see everything with their own eyes. Perhaps The Hero also would have been quite qualified for the Bard job.

One strange thing about his stories, though, was that he spent most of his time praising those he'd fought and the sights he'd witnessed. Instead of elaborating on his own achievements, he spoke of the wonderful things he'd found throughout his journey. But because his stories had a sense of presence that would put actual bards to shame, his listeners simply became enthralled regardless, expressing no complaints with anything he said.

By the end, nearly every villager was satisfied. Because it was turning late, the welcome party came to a close.

Following the special night they'd just experienced, the villagers returned to their homes, all of them wearing happy expressions.

All, that is, except Mahr.



"Ngh..."

Upon returning home, Mahr got into bed, yet found himself unable to sleep. His head was a mess, he felt queasy—overall, he was in no state to rest.

This was all because he was jealous.

The Hero To'ori Kusanagi. A man who was nothing like Mahr.

It wasn't just the job he'd been born with. To'ori's manner of speech, his behavior, the path he'd walked thus far—all of it made him the spitting image of Mahr's ideal champion.

Up until now, Mahr had only heard of such heroes in stories. Now that he'd finally encountered someone truly special, though, the difference between the two of them made Mahr want to cry.

Lying in complete silence, Mahr began to feel like staying in bed would only end up making him sweat, and that would make it even more uncomfortable.

That was why, careful not to wake up his brother on the top bunk, Mahr slowly snuck out of the house.

Caressed by the chilly night wind, Mahr walked around his home. It was all he could do to try and cool himself off, if only a little bit. Thankfully, it was a clear night with bright stars and the moon high in the sky, both shining upon Mahr's path through the darkness of the night.

He walked without direction until he stumbled upon a small bridge over the village's river.

"Huh?"

Ahead, Mahr saw another person with starlight cascading over them.

He'd assumed everyone would've been asleep at this hour, but then he remembered that this was a special day where they'd been visited by The Hero. Perhaps the figure was just someone who drank too much and stayed up.

Should I say something? They could fall in the river if they're too drunk. Or would they just get mad at me for walking out at night?

As that thought ran through Mahr's head, he drew closer, only to realize that it wasn't a drunkard—in fact, it wasn't even a villager.

"...Mister Hero?"

"Oh?" Standing on the bridge, looking down at the river reflecting the night sky, was none other than The Hero from a distant land, To'ori Kusanagi. "I believe I saw you in the crowd earlier. What are you doing out so late at night?"

Despite his audience being but a single child, To'ori spoke as courteously as he had back in the hall.

"Taking a walk," Mahr replied, his expression unreadable.

"Ha ha...as am I," To'ori said, not minding the look on Mahr's face. "The beautiful night scenery inspired me to walk around a bit."

The sights around him had long since become completely mundane to Mahr, and The Hero's words made him feel a little dejected. He began to wonder if all of this simply looked different to someone as *special* as To'ori.

A brief silence followed, soon broken by To'ori. "Would you like to talk a little?" he said as he beckoned Mahr closer.

Mahr hesitated for a moment, but then he realized what an incredible opportunity it was to talk to The Hero one-on-one.

Mahr nodded before approaching him. Silence resumed as the two of them looked down at the river.

The Hero said nothing. It was as though he was waiting for Mahr to talk first.

Perhaps the only reason To'ori had invited Mahr to talk was because he was worried about the boy walking out at night all by his lonesome.

Unable to bear the silence, Mahr eventually broke it—and what he said first could easily pass for idle grumbling.

He spoke of how his daily life was a repeating chain of boredom.

He pointed out how amazing things straight out of legend were unfolding outside the village, yet nothing like that was happening within it.

When he talked about how he was nothing but an ordinary child, the tone of his voice contained a bit of his jealousy toward The Hero.

Finally he concluded with the thoughts he'd had while looking after the sheep at noon—the lament that his future was too narrow.

To'ori did nothing but listen to Mahr, but then...

"You're *special*, aren't you?" Mahr quietly asked.

"I am," To'ori replied with a nod. "The Hero is a vessel of talent."

"A vessel?"

"One of the skills I possess as The Hero is called Almighty. It grants me the ability to wield any low-and high-rank jobs, and it lets me claim up to a hundred of each. Along with that, I also have Full Link, which allows me to use skills from all sub jobs."

"HUH?!" To'ori's words filled Mahr with shock. The adults had told him that the most any person could have was six low-rank jobs and two high-rank jobs—and even then, that only applied to those with talent. Those without it would have even fewer than that, and the jobs one could pick were always limited by one's aptitude. Because of this, the number To'ori just said was simply

outrageous.

“So you can take *any* job?”

“Indeed. I currently have over eighty low-rank jobs. High-rank jobs have conditions for claiming them, so I only have eight of those. For most of the low-rank jobs, though, I haven’t done much *more* than just take them, so my total level is only slightly above 1,000.”

“But that’s...” ...*Unfair*, Mahr thought.

To’ori could take dozens of jobs, no matter what they were. The difference between him and everyone else was so staggering that it bordered on injustice. And this gap was decided merely by whether you were born as The Hero or not.

This uncrossable divide had existed between Mahr and To’ori since the very moment they had both come into this world.

“That’s true. It *is* unfair,” The Hero said, as though he’d read Mahr’s mind—or perhaps his many jobs contained skills that indeed enabled him to do something like that. It was notable, though, that his manner of speech was more relaxed than it had been before. “It’s an extraordinary talent. Nothing is impossible to The Hero, and the level I can reach is unimaginably high. I can do anything. I can freely choose how to live my life.”

Mahr had no response to that. Those words sounded so much like boasting that they made him feel uncomfortable. However, what To’ori said next greatly surprised him.

“But back when I was in Tenchi, I really *couldn’t* do anything at all, nor choose my own path.”

“Huh?” Mahr turned to look at To’ori’s face, and saw that he wore a somewhat sad expression.

“My homeland...Tenchi is a place constantly embroiled in conflict. There’s always some dispute between daimyos, and even individual martial artists regularly compete with one another. It’s a country where people keep killing each other to gain power or display that power to the world. This is because they know that killing people is the easiest way to become stronger. You kill people to gain strength, then people kill you because you’ve become so strong.

This is why people often call Tenchi the land of strife—the land of asura.”

Mahr was already aware of this. He knew Tenchi as a very distant land full of warriors, and such portrayals of the country stirred his imagination and filled his heart with excitement...

“I had many people try to claim my life...and in turn, I claimed theirs.”

...but To’ori didn’t seem to feel that way.

“I’m not fundamentally against such battles to the death,” To’ori continued, “but if that’s all I have, then...the future seems awfully narrow, don’t you think?”

“Huh?” That was the same word Mahr himself had used.

“I happened to be born with great power as The Hero—a power that makes anything possible for me. However, while in Tenchi, I had only one way to use my abilities—only one future I could see for myself. I could only walk on the path of strife and battle. I might have been special, as you say, but I couldn’t choose my future.”

In a brief silence that followed, Mahr realized that despite their circumstances being nothing alike, To’ori was troubled by a problem similar to his.

“I didn’t like that,” To’ori muttered as he looked up at the night sky, as though revealing the true depths of his heart. “I thought that if I trained myself some more, traveled the world, experienced more things, and then came back home...I might’ve been able to see a future I hadn’t seen before.”

In some ways, this seemed like just another path of strife, but in other ways this was the complete opposite of the life To’ori had lived.

“You *thought*? What do you think now?” Mahr asked.

“I don’t know at the moment. My journey isn’t over yet. Though I do wish that I could find the answer and choose my own life someday.”

“I see.” Just like Mahr lived with dreams of champions and heroes, To’ori too might have always yearned for something different. He’d dreamed of the world outside Tenchi, thinking that he would find an answer if he left. But just as he’d described in his stories, there was ample combat outside his homeland too.

He hadn't found an answer yet, but he continued his journey, still searching for his own way.

The silence returned, giving Mahr time to think. He was just an ordinary boy, while To'ori was more talented than anyone else.

Despite this, he felt like there were similarities between them. To'ori must've felt the same way—perhaps that was why he'd talked so much about himself.

"Tomorrow..." Mahr began to speak.

"Huh?"

"Tomorrow, I'm gonna take the sheep out for grazing. If you've never done that...you can come with me."

Mahr had thought about what he could do for To'ori and had come upon that suggestion—one that would perhaps point The Hero toward a path he had yet to try.

"Oh, I certainly will," To'ori nodded in response, his joy evident on his face.



A week passed, and To'ori stayed in the village for the entirety of it. It was longer than he'd planned to stay, but he was nonetheless enjoying the idyllic life alongside Mahr and the other villagers. Times this peaceful were rare in his homeland, and he wished to experience it to its fullest.

Still, he could not stay here forever. This was the last day before he would finally head off again.

The Hero or not, traveling in this world was dangerous, and it wasn't clear whether he could ever visit this village again. That was why he wanted to spend his last day here without regrets.

"All right. It's harvest day today, isn't it?" To'ori had grown close to Mahr and the other villagers, and he emerged from the room he'd been staying in looking forward to experiencing what might be the last memory he'd make with them all.

"Good morning, Chief."

“Ohh, Sir To’ori. Good morning.”

Even the village chief now addressed him by name. It was yet another sign of how familiar he’d become with this village.

For some reason, though, the chief was looking through the window with a somewhat perplexed expression.

“What’s the matter?”

“Well...today’s morning newspaper hasn’t arrived yet. That’s unusual, because the press in the capital is usually quite early,” the chief said, his hands held up in resignation.

The village being as small as it was, the newspaper company didn’t have a branch there, so newspapers were brought in by avian creatures specialized in stealth.

“I suppose it could just be that the delivery monster took the wrong turn, or maybe it dropped the newspapers somewhere. Regardless, now that you are awake, let’s have breakfast.”

Saying that with a smile as broad as a jester’s, the chief urged To’ori to sit at the table, which was already covered in food. To’ori did as he was told, joining the chief, his wife, and his children for breakfast.

By the time they were done eating, they heard the flapping of bird wings outside.

“Oh? I suppose it’s finally arrived.”

“Hm?” While the chief simply assumed that the newspaper was late and went outside to pick it up, To’ori felt as though something wasn’t right. The flapping was very unsteady, and the breathing accompanying it was awfully wheezy.

The next moment, To’ori heard the chief let out a fearful shout.

Not wasting a second, To’ori sprung to action, using Instant Equip and Instant Wear to ready his gear before rushing outside. While his perception skills didn’t activate, the chief’s reaction was more than enough for him to understand that something serious was happening.

However, when he went outside, he didn’t find any threat that warranted him

gearing up for combat.

“G h...g e g h...g e e y u i...” What To’ori found was a single bird, spitting blood and other fluids as it flapped its wings in utter derangement.

The bird had a bag with a newspaper company’s name attached to its leg. It flew—or rather, fell—as blood from its mouth and feathers from its wings rained down.

Soon enough, the bird let out a pained noise, and its life expired. The blood, the feathers, and everything else that remained of it vanished into bits of light.

“Th-This is...!” The fasteners on the bag attached to it were undone, and the newspapers inside had fallen out.

All of them were covered in blood that hadn’t disappeared—tian blood.

And among it all, there was a single piece of paper, covered in hastily written text, containing information that someone must’ve used their last strength to write.

It said, “DEADLY DISEASE SPREADING IN CAPITAL. DANGER.”



Minor Country, Mahem, Capital, Three Hours Ago

Mahem was a tiny country.

Compared to Altar, all Mahem had was a single midsize city and villages so few they could be counted on one hand. It was likely smaller than Gideon Country, and that was only a part of the great kingdom of Altar.

Still, because it was blessed by a temperate climate, Mahem had always been home to many tians.

Its location between three large countries and powerful monster habitats had made expansion impossible, but it had existed as a very peaceful country ever since the end of The Era of the Peerless Three a few centuries ago.

It had become part of Mahem’s culture to live steadily and earnestly. Everyone from the king to the lowest peasant had always thought that if they merely did that, they would continue to exist even if the rest of the world fell

apart.

That was why none of them anticipated an *end* like this.

That day, a man working at the newspaper company woke up in the dead of night coughing, with an uncomfortable feeling in his mouth. He went to his workplace after taking some medicine that improved disease resistance, but it seemed to have little effect—in fact, his condition only got worse.

He looked around and noticed that less than half of his coworkers had come to work, and all of those who did seemed to be feeling just as terrible as he did.

“Is this...an Epidemic?” That was the first thing that came to his mind. Epidemics were diseases that took communities by surprise, negatively affecting people regardless of their stats or resistances.

They always affected some people more than others, but this one seemed worse than most. “Do we have time to replace the front page article with one about this Epidemic?” he said, punctuated with coughing. The Secretaries with printing skills were already using them to produce the morning newspapers, but he felt that it might’ve been better to warn the people of this danger as soon as possible.

Maybe we could add it into the blank spaces on the page...? He thought of how to convey this information, only to see the sun begin to rise outside.

“Damn it. We didn’t make it in time.”

As a Tamer working for the company, he was supposed to send out the newspaper delivery monsters before dawn, but the disease had left too few people for them to accomplish that in a timely manner. The morning newspaper would most certainly be late now. They would have to add an apology as well.

As that thought crossed his mind, blood began to well up deep in his throat.

“Huh?” He stared blankly down at his own crimson blood, staining the newspaper on the desk.

It wasn’t just him. Everyone within the newspaper company was now vomiting blood.

No—it wasn’t just his colleagues either.

The few people he could see outside were all collapsing with blood gushing from their mouths, just like they were.

“Th-This is...fatal...?!” The disease that at first manifested as discomfort and coughing at most had become significantly worse with the rising of the sun.

It was too late, but the man finally realized that this was a far more potent disease than he’d first thought.

I-I should at least...warn the...surrounding villages...! He took a paper and hastily wrote down “DEADLY DISEASE SPREADING IN CAPITAL. DANGER” before throwing it in a newspaper delivery bag. Then, he removed a tamed monster from his Jewel, doused it in Elixir, and sent it to the nearby villages.

The only thing he hoped for now was to keep the villagers away from the capital.

Urged by his sense of duty as a member of the press, he’d sent out this dying message, not knowing who it would reach—or *if it would even make it in time.*



Mahem, Village

A bird that had died before their eyes, and the message from the bag.

To’ori instantly understood the meaning behind the words, as well as the obscene amount of blood, and his face went pale.

This is bad! It’s contagious...! Considering the possibility that the blood itself could be a carrier of the pathogens, he instantly cast a flame spell, creating a fireball that incinerated the bag.

He acted fast—the bag was set alight and disinfected the instant he saw what was written on that piece of paper.

“Did that do it...?” Saying that, To’ori checked by using his Full Link to activate another skill.

It was Disease Eye, a skill that came from his job as Plaguemancer, which he’d picked up at one point because it was useful in helping people. It was an active skill that let him perceive harmful pathogens by tinting them a reddish color.

He used it to observe the area around the incinerated and sterilized bag.

“Ah...!”

However, *the entire scenery besides that patch* was covered in red.

“Wh-What?!”

A swarm of disease was encroaching from the horizon like blood flooding the world. It grew and multiplied explosively, engulfing the entire country of Mahem.

The base of his feet was already bright red, and when he turned around, he saw the wave of sickness covering nearly the entire hill on which the village stood—and it showed no signs of stopping.

With that, To’ori realized that the flying monster might not have been infected by the minuscule amount of pathogens in the bag. Instead, it might have been overwhelmed by the flood that had crawled over all the way from the capital.

What that meant was...

“*Cough, cough...!*”

“Ah! Chief!” The village chief, standing behind To’ori, suddenly began to cough up blood and fell to the ground. A steady stream of red flowed from his mouth as he stared with unfocused eyes and clawed at the air, looking for something—or someone—to help him.

In other words, he was looking for To’ori.

The Hero rushed over to him immediately before dousing him in one bottle of Elixir, letting him drink another, and casting a healing spell.

However, he was too slow. The Elixir seemed to have little effect, and the damage being done to the chief’s body outpaced the healing from the spell as he continued to cough.

To’ori used every means of recovery available to him, but they barely even slowed the disease down.

And so, within just ten seconds or so, the chief’s life was snuffed out.

However, it didn't stop at that.

Unlike monsters, who disintegrated as soon as they died, tian bodies remained untouched.

Or rather, that was how it was *supposed* to work.

And yet, the chief's body was now being disassembled—as though countless tiny creatures were tearing it apart and consuming it.

The flesh on his body vanished with terrifying speed, leaving only his blood, bone, and hair.

“This...this is...!” As To'ori voiced his horror at the scene, he heard similar sounds coming from the chief's home. His family must've just died in the same way.

And it wasn't just them.

To'ori looked over the village, painted red by his Disease Eye, a clamor of pain and anguish now reaching him.

If those shouts were caused by the same thing that he had just witnessed, then he might as well have been gazing at hell itself.

“Gh...!” Blood began to well up in the corners of To'ori's mouth, signifying that he might have been infected. It had a minor effect on him, but that was only because of his Poison Resistance skill and vast HP provided by his over 1,000 levels. If it weren't for those things, this disease would've claimed him just like the others.

“No...this isn't...” To'ori muttered to himself. Indeed—this was no mere “disease.”

This was a deliberate attack.

To'ori had lived in Tenchi, the land of strife, for nearly ten years, and that allowed him to sense this fact clearly.

“The Resources are *moving*.” People killing other people resulted in a greater movement of Resources—XP—than when the killing was done by monsters, and any martial artist who was proficient enough—by Tenchi standards, at least—was able to perceive this movement.

Now, To'ori was able to sense that movement. He could feel the Resources from the chief who'd died right before his eyes flowing into the distance—to the one who'd killed him.

“Instant Wear.” With those words, a piece of equipment appeared on To'ori head.

It was a helm called Prototype Horobimaru-Star Helmet—the piece of equipment he'd acquired while crossing the sea between Tenchi and the continent, where he'd encountered and defeated a suit of empty armor—the SUBM, Penta-Phased Destroyer, Horobimaru. This item had a curious skill that allowed him to see his enemies—a skill called Anti Stealth.

He activated this power and viewed his foe with perfect clarity. In Mahem's capital, there stood a boy, sneering with unadulterated glee.

With the enemy's presence confirmed, this was no longer a natural disaster but a massacre enacted by human hands.

“The foe is in my sight.”

To'ori stared at the person who'd slaughtered the people who had welcomed him with open arms.

They had to be avenged.

That was the law of Tenchi, which still held him in an iron grip. He'd lived within that law for most of his life. He'd killed those coming for his head because of his immense strength—his status as The Hero.

He was then targeted by the families of those he killed. And when he dealt with them, he had been confronted by their friends.

The more he tried to wipe away the sparks of conflict falling upon him, the more violent his life became. He'd left Tenchi exactly because he found himself hating the fact that his future—the path laid out for him—was stained in blood.

But in this moment, To'ori realized that he was still a true man of Tenchi. His very soul was roaring for him to kill this wretch who laughed as he slaughtered innocents.

With a face of an asura forged by strife, the kindhearted Hero fixed his eyes

on the capital—and the evil he had to purge.

He poured all his strength into his legs, ready to dash toward the city at supersonic speeds...

“Ah!”

...but then something stopped him.

The image of a person flashed into his mind. It was Mahr—the boy he’d formed a connection with.

To’ori’s memories told him that his house was beyond that hill.

“Please be all right!” he cried, turning around and rushing to cross it. He was too late to help the village chief and everyone else on this side of the hill, but he thought—*prayed*—that he could maybe save at least someone.

Moving faster than sound, he cleared the hill in the blink of an eye—but the red wave had already arrived here, consuming the house that doubled as a ranch. From within it, he could hear a multitude of disturbing sounds and anguished voices.

The despair left To’ori speechless and barely able to stand.

But before he fell to his knees, he realized that *there weren’t as many voices as there should be*.

The disease had reached the ranch, yet he didn’t hear the cries of the many animals that lived there.

Rekindling his hope, he once again fixed his eyes on the horizon. There, beyond the red wave, he saw Mahr, watching over a number of peacefully grazing sheep.

“Ah!” He could still make it.

The moment he realized that, he gathered all his strength and jumped beyond the red wave.

This mighty step was the combination of The Hero’s countless skills and high stats—a method of closing distance that was faster than everything in Tenchi except the draw of The Unsheathe Kashimiya.

To'ori used that skill to finally outrun the red wave, landing right between it and Mahr.

“Huh?!” Mahr exclaimed, surprised by To'ori's sudden appearance, as well as his combat-ready attire. However, The Hero paid no heed to him and looked up at the sky.

“All right,” To'ori said. After confirming something, he held up the Jewel on his right hand, then spoke to the being inside.

“My friend—I release you. Our shared journey ends here.”

“I see,” the one inside replied, in a voice heavy with sorrow.

“I have one last request...”

“No need to say it. I understand. The kingdom, yes?”

“Yes. Release.”

Following this exchange, To'ori released the monster within the Jewel into the open air.

It was a single lightning dragon. Specifically, it was a dragon of the species High-End Lightning Dragon, and it was a friend To'ori had met on his journey. It was a curious sort of dragon who'd willingly let To'ori tame it after the two of them had traveled together for a while.

“Huh? What...?” To'ori's sudden appearance and the dragon's release—Mahr couldn't understand what was happening here.

However, To'ori no longer had any time to explain anything to the boy. The red wave behind him was getting close, and his own infected body was gradually shedding on the ground around him. Because of this, he couldn't take Mahr with him and run.

The only one who could accomplish that was the lightning dragon, who'd avoided infection first by being in the safety of the Jewel, then by taking to the air, where the disease could not reach.

That was why To'ori had no choice but to entrust this task to the dragon. He knew he could count on him, and thus he didn't hesitate.

Not saying a word, To'ori used wind magic to lift Mahr's body into the air while keeping his distance from him.

Gently, like a balloon, Mahr's body rose upwards.

"Wh-Whoa!" As the boy levitated, the lightning dragon gently grasped him in hand. "M-Mister To'ori! Wh-What's...?!"

What was it that the boy tried to say in his confusion?

The red wave has already swarmed past To'ori's feet.

The many animals, including the Demi-Drac-Hound they'd used as a sheepdog, were soon claimed by disease and vanished amid screams of anguish, spewing blood from their mouths.

The sudden event filled the boy with fear, but To'ori didn't say anything to calm him down. He wished he could—there were many things he wished to talk about with Mahr—but the situation didn't allow it. They had no time to speak.

"Goodbye, Mahr. I won't forget you. You're utterly unlike me, yet you bear the same pain...and I will never forget you."

That was why, To'ori only said what was most important...

"So if you can...keep me in your memories too."

...entrusting the boy with his *last words*.

Following that, the lightning dragon flapped its great wings, preparing to distance itself from the infected earth and take to the great skies beyond.

The lightning dragon looked down at To'ori one last time. "Farewell, To'ori, my dear friend."

"Goodbye, Arcal. You were my friend as well."

Following that exchange, they parted ways, knowing full well that they would never meet again.

"Mister To'o—" The dragon took off before Mahr could finish. Keeping the boy safe with an electromagnetic field, it—he—left the surface behind.

And thus, only To'ori was left in the village.

Nothing else remained. The only things alive here were him, the grass, the trees...and the pathogens.

In the end, To'ori had protected only one person, and doing so had cost him a significant amount of his remaining life span—his HP.

This disease was so fatal that Elixirs did nothing and healing magic was inadequate. It was clear that even if he focused his efforts on recovery spells, his life would still be over shortly.

However, he didn't regret saving Mahr whatsoever.

What awaited the boy was a difficult future of pain and sorrow. Having lost his homeland and family, he may not know how to go on. But as long as he was alive...he could choose his future. He could take that next step forward.

"Now...time to *go*." To'ori himself had no more choices to make, so he hoped that at least the boy would have a future he could claim as his own.

"This will be...my final journey."

With those words, The Hero flew into action. Faster than the dragon's flight, he rushed to defeat the foe beyond the horizon.

An asura forged by strife, The Hero was now a speeding arrow of judgment.



The Capital of Mahem

By the time the dawn broke, even the sounds of anguish had vanished from the bloodstained city. Many had suffered as their bodies melted away, leaving only their bones behind.

"La la laa..."

But there was one person who wasn't suffering in the least.

This individual was in the inner courtyard of Mahem's modest palace, singing and twirling, their ostentatiously decorated dress fluttering as they sang in a high soprano.

It was as though they simply couldn't contain the emotions welling up within.

"La laa..."

Their face was charming and youthful enough that it was difficult to tell if it belonged to a man or a woman, but most people wouldn't be looking at their face on first meeting. Instead, their eyes would most likely be drawn to the extravagant clothing and the massive flask clutched in their hands. The dancing figure's name was Candy Carnage—a *Superior* who wore the crown of King of Plagues. He was the very person who'd unleashed this deadly disease onto the country of Mahem.

"Look at my levels going up and up!" Candy looked at his stat summary and smiled gleefully.

This was because, just as he'd intended, many of the city's tians had died. The very reason he was here in the palace, acting like he owned the place, was because any guards and servants who could stop him were all dead.

"Tians really do have the best XP efficiency! Doing this makes me sooo happy! It's been way too long since the last time!"

His rising levels were proof of all the lives he'd snuffed out. But despite knowing that, Candy had a genuine smile on his face.

It didn't seem like the happiness of a gamer relishing his level-ups, but of someone *enjoying the massacre itself*.

It wasn't uncommon for players to have a good time absolutely dominating some NPCs, yet this was more like he actually...

"But this Collapsed Present is still incomplete. It doesn't multiply half as well without extra energy from sunlight and heat... That's something to think about."

Candy's joy faded somewhat as he suddenly began to ponder the problems surrounding the spread of this deadly disease.

Collapsed Present was the general term for carnivorous types of bacteria in his collection—the ones that physically consumed living beings. The ones that he'd released this time had a higher proliferation speed, but demanded more energy, forcing them to rely not only on the flesh and heat of the infected, but also some energy from external sources.

That was the price he'd paid so it could infect an area larger than the capital

of a small country.

“Hmm...and there’s a limit to how much I can boost them up with my MP too. It’d be nice to have an energy source for them that’s more accessible than sunlight though. Well, I guess I might get something if I just level up some more!” Candy said, poking at the surface of the bulky measuring flask that was still spewing bacteria—his Superior Embryo, Pestilent Divinity, Resheph.

“This is great. My GODlike self gets levels, Resheph’s bacteria modding becomes more precise, and most importantly—this is fun to watch! I’m so glad I did this! I’m killing *three* birds with one stone!”

In the heart of this disaster, with the death count growing by the second, Candy’s excitement was sincere. And if that was the only thing he was excited about, perhaps he could have just been one of those ludos who didn’t see tians as people...

“I’d love to somehow *bring Resheph from this world to Earth*, but that doesn’t seem possible *right now*.”

...but his next words were peculiar, to say the least—if not completely absurd.

“There’s a bunch of my kind out there on Earth, but my GOD-ly self isn’t GODlike at all. I hope I don’t take too long to go back to being the GOD I used to be.”

If anyone listened to him, they likely couldn’t begin to understand what he was saying. They were neither the words of a ludo nor the words of a worlder.

It was as though to him, this world that the hardware of *Infinite Dendrogram* connected him to was nothing but another obstacle in his path he needed to trample over—as though he was *a being capable of doing that in the first place*.

“Getting a Superior Embryo wasn’t enough...but maybe I just need to go beyond it? What awaits at the end is the *Infinite*, anyway.”

The number of people who could understand *this* was no doubt even smaller, but Candy continued.

“Hmm? But if this is a little garden built by a different group of *my kind*, maybe if I just keep leveling up, I could bring over Resheph’s evolution with this

body? This sweet little Candy avatar could become an *Infinite Job*, and I'd once again have *the powers I used to*. Either of those things would help me achieve my goal, I think. That would be great!"

In fact, perhaps there wasn't a single person alive who could understand the full scope of Candy Carnage's ramblings—not the custodians, not those who had inherited the memories of the pre-ancient civilization, not the current holders of the most powerful jobs. Even the control substitute might not be able to grasp it all.

"For now, I'll just work toward a bright future by getting more XP!"

Regardless, Candy moved toward this future he'd imagined by destroying the future of an entire country.

"Why...would you...?"

"Oh?" As his rising levels once again made Candy grin, he heard someone call out to him from behind.

It was a single knight who'd crawled out from somewhere in the palace. Likely due to the Collapsed Present infection, his mouth and eyes were bleeding, and he lacked the strength to move any farther.

"I'm impressed you're still alive. It's been half an hour since the sun came up! Are you a Superior Job or something? How exciting! I'll get lots of XP from you!"

The man was one of the leading knights of Mahem. Bearing the vanguard tank Superior Job, King of Shields, he wore his title proudly and served as his country's greatest shield.

But not even he could protect the people from the disease that had spread here.

The civilians in the palace, his brothers-in-arms, the king, the queen...even the young prince had already perished. He'd survived, but he no longer had the strength to fight.

Still, he was able to sense the presence of someone living and dragged himself all the way to the inner courtyard, where he'd found the culprit behind all of this—Candy Carnage himself.

“Who...who are you...?! How...and why...did you...?!”

“Hmm, you know what? I’ll tell you. Consider it a gift to take with you into your next life. I guess it could fall on deaf ears, though.” In response to the man’s question, spoken through the blood filling his mouth, Candy grinned. Then, he gestured as if to say “You’re in for a treat,” and...

“Because I am *GOD*.”

...said *that*, his face now void of expression.

“G...God...?” The answer made no sense, but Candy behaved as if that were all that needed to be said.

“Okay, then—I guess I’ll have to explain a teensy bit more.” His expression twisted into a smile again as he began elaborating.

“My GOD-ly self is a GOD—but as I am now, I’m a GOD neither here nor on the other side. I don’t have enough Resources, so I’m getting them from this massacre. That’s my motivation. Now, the means. Resheph is an Embryo that modifies bacteria and spreads them. It’s specialized in mass murder like this. And so, uhh, since I created Resheph as my other half, I obviously don’t hate mass murder personally, right? Honestly, I’d love to do this on *Earth* too. Eight billion people is just way too much. I’d love to get those numbers lower, like I did in that world I graced with my GOD-ly presence some time ago. It’d be like the good old days when I hung around with the God of the Future and the God of Destruction.”

“Huh...uhh...huh?” The knight didn’t understand a word of the long monologue Candy spat out. There was no way he even *could*.

“Hrmm...I told you who I am, how I did it, *why* I did it, and even added a bit about my memories and my future dreams. I told you every little thing, yet you’re still totally lost! You’re a bit of a hopeless case, aren’t you? How very sad.”

Saying that, Candy walked up to the man, crouched down, grabbed his hair, stared into his eyes...

“Which do you think I am?”

...and posed him that question.

“Do you think I’m a scumbag who’s not right in the head and *thinks* he’s the reincarnation of a GOD,” Candy asked, “or a scumbag who’s not right in the head and *actually is* the reincarnation of a GOD?” Wearing a smile with no positive feeling behind it, Candy closed his eyes.

“Sorryyy! I dunno myseeelf! I have no clue if these memories are real, fake, delusions, or misapprehensiooons! Nobody knooows! Nobody understaaands! And those who don’t get it...they *die*!”

Saying all this as though he was singing, Candy opened his eyes again to look at the knight’s face.

And so...

“You’re dead tooooo!”

The tian Candy was talking to had expired without understanding anything he’d said.

Candy then let go of his hair, letting the man’s lifeless face smash into the ground.

“Well, it’s stressful to keep all of that bottled up, so thanks for lending a *dead* ear.”

With that, Candy resumed looking at his stats.

He smiled, Resheph spread the disease, and the bacteria continued to multiply.

Eventually, all of Mahem was claimed by this plague, carried there by the malignant hands of someone who claimed to be god, recognized himself to be god, and seemed to possess the awareness of a god.



By the time everyone in the capital had perished, there was one solitary silhouette heading toward it.

Moving on the surface faster than the eye could see, this figure was The Hero To’ori Kusanagi.

Continuously casting healing magic on himself, he was running as fast as he could. Every now and then, though, he let out a cough. His limit was approaching even faster.

He was already infected by the disease, Collapsed Present. It was a swarm of carnivorous bacteria that consumed the flesh and blood of the infected far more ravenously than any other.

The amount To'ori recovered with his magic was less than the damage he was receiving from Collapsed Present. Additionally, the damage created injury-based debuffs that reduced his body's performance.

His sprinting speed was dropping, and he still wasn't sure if he would even make it to the capital beyond the horizon.

"Not yet...!"

Regardless, he kept on running.

The Prototype Horobimaru-Star Helmet still had Candy in its sights, and To'ori felt he might be the only person who could actually see the real enemy.

And precisely because of that, To'ori strained what little life he had left to rush toward this foe. Supporting his body with the many passive and active skills he had at his disposal, he kept moving forward.

However, that was draining him too. The more skills he used to travel quickly, the less MP he had for healing magic.

His remaining life was melting away like a candle engulfed in a roaring blaze.

Still, he didn't stop.

As he was speeding toward the capital, he saw a pair of skeletons seated on a coach. They clearly belonged to an adult and a child. Were they a family? With the tamed monster pulling it gone, the dragon carriage had nearly toppled over, yet the two corpses were still side by side.

Next to the houses along the road, there were some skeletons grasping farming tools. These were people who were ready to welcome a new day in their ordinary lives—a day they would never see.

And then there was the village he'd stayed in. He could still hear the

gruesome sounds and anguished screams of the people who'd given him such a warm welcome.

Everything around the city of Mahem had been massacred, their futures cut off and extinguished.

This was an absolute evil that To'ori couldn't stomach.

As The Hero—and merely as a person who hoped for the future himself—he rushed to cut down this foe.

Eventually, the walls of the capital entered his field of vision. His sworn enemy was close.

“Gh...!”

But then, his failing body reached a critical point. The bacteria had already consumed over half of the muscle on his legs. Bone was visible on his limbs and even his face.

He couldn't keep up running at supersonic speeds, and he lost momentum just in sight of the capital.

“Not...yet...!”

Still, To'ori mustered his will and kept moving his legs. Bleeding from all over his body, his bones creaking audibly, he moved forward step by step. Eventually, the walls loomed large in front of him.

That was when his left arm fell off.

To'ori passed through the massive gate, forcing his legs to carry him forward even though he could barely run.

That was when his eyes fell out.

He followed the pavement, leaving a trail of blood behind him.

That was when he lost the power to stand and began to crawl.

Candy was in the palace—a mere two hundred meters away.

That was when To'ori completely ran out of MP, and he could no longer heal himself.

The collapse of his body accelerated.

Now, the flesh that he'd lost far exceeded the flesh that remained. The vast HP To'ori possessed as The Hero had dropped to critical levels.

Despite that, with eyes that couldn't see, legs that couldn't move, and only one arm...he kept moving toward Candy.

"Hh...hhhgh..." He didn't even have a tongue to speak with anymore. The bacteria had consumed it all.

Even so, his soul and will kept choosing to move.

However...that would abruptly end.

To'ori's HP dropped to 0. His life reached its end, leaving nothing but silence.

Unable to make it to his sworn enemy, The Hero To'ori Kusanagi breathed his last.



"Hrmm? I guess that's it...?" Candy said as he looked at his stats, somewhat disappointed. The levels that had been rising until now had grown stagnant for the past several minutes. "Well, I guess they killed everyone within their multiplication range. That's that, then! I did get plenty of levels, so let's go to a larger country next!"

After killing the entire country of Mahem, King of Plagues relished the massacre he'd just committed—in fact, he even considered repeating it on a grander scale.

"It's probably hard to spread in Caldina's desert, and I hear that Legendaria's environment is weird, so...the kingdom it is, then."

And just like that, he set Altar as his next target.

"Aaanyway, it's off to the west we go!" Done with this place and clearly in high spirits, he finally decided to leave Mahem.

Humming a song, Candy skipped through the castle gates.

There, he ran into an asura—an embodiment of strife.

"Huh?" Candy doubted his own eyes.

It was dead. It was *obviously* dead. After all...it was nothing but bone, just like everyone else in this country.

It was *a white skeleton*, stripped bare of flesh and clad in Tenchi armor.

It would be easy to mistake it for an undead monster—but it was no monster at all.

It was the remains of one man, all that was left of him before he died.

It was the corpse of To'ori Kusanagi, animated by *Last Command*.

Tenchi was the land of strife. Many martial artists there wished to be able to deliver one last attack before death, and thus took the Death Soldier job far more often than people of other countries.

The Hero was no exception. He had fallen before reaching his sworn enemy...but reached him *after dying*.

“What—” Before Candy could even wonder what he was looking at, To'ori launched an attack.

It was a slash that carried the entire weight of this dead man's life—a single flash of blade that used all his remaining SP and the life breathed into him by Last Command.

It didn't miss, slicing right through Candy's neck.

As it was a strike that would kill instantly, it *shattered Candy's Brooch*.

And that was when the time limit was reached. The effect of Last Command expired, and To'ori's bones scattered on the pavement.

Silence. Candy rubbed his neck.

At that moment, he most certainly *felt* like he was dead.

If his memory was no delusion, he'd almost experienced his second death since the time he'd died as a god—the God of Pestilence.

He picked up the helmet that had fallen on the ground, threw a glance at the bones...



“Not baaad.” His face wore a strained smile—seemingly a mix of happiness and fear.

At that moment, Candy chose to log out. Better safe than sorry. He’d decided to be careful and wait until he could equip the Brooch again.

Because of this, To’ori’s final attack did nothing but delay Candy’s plot by twenty-four hours.



This was the end of the country of Mahem and the death of The Hero.

The gentle youth who carried the hope of all tians had been killed by King of Plagues. This was the final tragedy of the great calamity this Master had caused.

There were only two things that The Hero had left behind.

One was the twenty-four extra hours before Candy would invade Altar.

The other was the life of the boy he’d sent away with his draconic friend.

Whether these things had any meaning would soon be revealed.

Interlude: Records and Memories

Sorcerer Ray Starling

Riser won the eighth day of The Tournaments.

He'd been a high-ranking duelist for a long time, so you could say that this was an expected result.

Fujinon had tried to show the new magic she'd learned based on Almagest, but it wasn't enough to win. She'd also noticed us in the box and saw that Io was cheering for Riser, which put her in a pretty bad mood.

Who could blame her? Her friend was happy that she lost.

"That's pretty awful, don't you think?" she asked me.

"Ha ha ha...well, Io's the honest and simple type, so..."

Fujinon sighed. "By the way..."

"What?"

"Who did you bet on today? And how much?"

"Two hundred million on Riser."

Yet again, I ended up footing the bill for the consolation party.

After that was over, I went to the library in our HQ.

It was originally an archive that had held ledgers and the like, but now it was a place to store the books my clan members brought. It contained the back issues of DIN that Marie mentioned, the useful info B3 got from The Lunar Society's database, and the kind of books enjoyed by Fujinon's trio, among others.

Despite what the word "library" might suggest, it wasn't a place where books and documents were laid out on shelves. Instead, it had Inventories similar to bookshelves which could be accessed by anyone who was registered. They even had a search function, which made this process very convenient.

There was actually one Inventory that only Fujinon's trio and Marie were

permitted to access, and when I asked what it contained, their answers were ambiguous at best, which left me pretty damn curious.

That aside...with the library working the way it did, I found the newspaper issues about King of Plagues in no time. I took them out and silently began reading them right there in the library. Nemesis had fallen asleep right after we ate, so I was all alone.

“I see,” I muttered to myself as I read. I could understand why Marie was comparing this to the Gloria incident.

That fiendish dragon had destroyed the Lunnings Duchy and Claymill here in Altar, while King of Plagues had destroyed the entire small nation of Mahem. Additionally, he had repelled many Masters who went to beat him—*Superiors* included.

He and the dragon were both walking disasters, which was another way they were similar.

Yeah...after destroying that country, King of Plagues began heading to Altar as his next target.

The person who’d stopped this march was none other than Marie—the *Superior* Killer. King of Plagues had been rightfully sent to the gaol and given a sentence so long that he’d probably never be released.

I’d heard this part several times before—these were the results, so to speak, that I already had a good grasp of.

“But...” There were many things that neither the articles nor the hearsay allowed me to really understand. And perhaps because this Candy person was always the epicenter of a superwide biohazard zone, there wasn’t much about his appearance. There wasn’t even a photo.

Most importantly...

“Hm...” I sighed thoughtfully as I searched the bookshelves for any related material.

“Oh? You’re furthering your education so late at night. How dedicated.” As I was doing that, Marie came and called out to me.

“Marie...oh, I was just curious about what we were talking about this afternoon.”

“Afternoon...the King of Plagues thing? Anything in particular you wanna know?”

Given that question, I took a moment to think and decided to just ask her outright. She was involved in it, so maybe she would have the answers I wanted.

“I wanna know what King of Plagues’s motivation was and the method you used to win.” The articles didn’t have anything about the why or the how of the incident. Maybe the former was only inside King of Plagues’s head, but even the latter was just summarized as “the *Superior* killer beat King of Plagues.”

His motivation was what I felt I *had* to find out, while the circumstances of his defeat was just something I *wanted* to know. Regardless, neither of those things was clear to me whatsoever. Marie nodded in understanding and began to speak.

“They say that the motivation was just Resources—XP. Killing tians for XP is more efficient than killing Masters or monsters, so people think that this indiscriminate massacre was just a powerleveling strat. Even if it isn’t possible for most people to pull off, it’s obviously not a good idea to put that out there regardless. That’s why the articles didn’t mention it.”

I was speechless. Could someone really kill that many people and animals—a whole country’s worth—just for that?

As that thought crossed my mind, another question surfaced.

Did those lives mean so little to King of Plagues that he could crush them for some levels? Or did the goal of leveling up mean so much to him that all those lives were nothing in comparison?

Whichever it was...

“You look like you just can’t wrap your head around it, but of course you can’t, right? One look at what King of Plagues did will tell you that he’s the total opposite of you.”

“You might be right.” Whether King of Plagues was a ludo or a worlder, he wasn’t like me at all.

There might’ve been Masters out there who could do the same things for completely different reasons than King of Plagues had, but I was pretty confident I wasn’t one of them.

“Well, I’m the one who beat him, and not even I talked to him, so his motivations are still technically unknown,” Marie said.

“Seriously?”

“I don’t think I would’ve had a chance against him if I took my time and had a nice little chat.” That sentence alone made it clear that it had been a difficult battle for her. “So, the other thing was the method, right? Should I elaborate on that?”

“You don’t mind?”

“Not at all. I have time. And it might be good for you to know.”

“I’m listening, then.”

Marie replied by making the okay sign with her fingers...

“What I’m about to say is sort of a mix of what I learned in my investigations after the events and my own experiences, but...”

...and began to speak.

She would tell me of her deadly battle against the menacing King of Plagues—the origin story of the “*Superior Killer*” nickname.

Chapter Five Closing: Godslayer

Control AI No. 11's Workspace

The sight of books often made Dormouse lose himself in thought.

They made him wonder why they—the control AIs, that is—liked keeping books in their workspaces at all. Just as Cheshire welcomed Masters in a study, and Red King filled his gaol with lots of literature, the majority of the control AIs had books by their side in one form or another. Many of the books were work-related data files that simply took the form of books. Even Humpty kept her Embryo data records compiled in this way.

Privately, Dormouse thought that this habit might just be the result of how long the control AIs had been alive. Their existences were so extensive—so full of events and things that were, or were *no longer*—that it made them uneasy if they didn't have their memories by their side in a visible form. Their books might just be a manifestation of these feelings.

However, those volumes had a different meaning than those that belonged to the twins—control AI No. 11, Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

"It truly is vast," Dormouse said, looking up at the ceiling of the room he was in.

Room, however, was too small a word for this space. A gymnasium, then? A stadium, perhaps? No, those terms also lacked the necessary sense of scale.

It was more like a *space colony* straight out of science fiction—an immense cylinder with an inside covered in shelves full of books.

A person's entire lifetime probably wouldn't be enough to read even a hundredth of the text that was kept here. This was even more clear when one realized that these shelves were the sliding kind, so there were likely hundreds more layers of books below those that were visible. And though they had the shape of books, the tomes were actually storage media that packed information far more densely than paper.

The amount of information here was so vast that even the entirety of mankind would struggle to read all of it.

This was control AI No. 11's workspace—the Grand Library of All-Knowledge. It was the database that contained all the information the control AIs had acquired in *Infinite Dendrogram*, as well as everything *they had acquired before that*.

And the twins were the ones who managed it.

While they usually calculated quest difficulty and controlled the flow of information via DIN, taking care of this facility was an important part of their job, just like Alice had to care for the avatar space and Red King had to observe the gaol.

The library was a remnant from the time when they managed *all* of their databases.

"Tweedledum, Tweedledee. You are here, are you not?" Dormouse called out, but received no response.

Left with nothing else to do, he continued moving through this vast space.

"Hrm. There you are." Farther ahead, Dormouse spotted a small orb—a strange object that had rings of countless books orbiting it like satellites.

The twins were in the middle of it, but they looked different than usual. Tweedledum had removed his glasses, while Tweedledee wasn't wearing her headphones.

In other words, the *limiters* to their information gathering were off.

Tweedledum's eyes skimmed across astronomical amounts of data, and Tweedledee was listening to just as many words. They were crunching the information and calculating the desired answer.

Dormouse looked at them in silence and decided to wait a little bit. If there was a situation that called for the twins to focus like this, he believed that it was best to let them continue, and the wait wouldn't affect Dormouse's job all that much. In fact, it was far more important for them to finish processing this information as soon as possible.

After a good while, the books that had been orbiting the twins returned to their positions, and the two put on their glasses and headphones again.

“We kept you waiting for three hours, twenty-four minutes, and eighteen seconds, No. 8.”

“Sorry ’bout that, Dormousey!” The pair spoke in perfect unison as they turned toward Dormouse.

“What were you looking into so intensely?” Dormouse asked.

“Something related to your request,” Tweedledum answered.

“Analyzing what King of Plagues said and all that!” Tweedledee continued.

Dormouse nodded in understanding. Though it was small, King of Plagues had actually destroyed a country neighboring Altar. For Dormouse—as well as the one he was observing and protecting—it was important to know if he would go to the kingdom next.

“We will start with the conclusion to your question.”

“There’s no way he’s *not* going to Altar next!”

“Understandable.” Dormouse was fairly certain of that already, but having it confirmed still made him let out a sigh. Now, in the worst-case scenario, Altar might end up flooded with immense amounts of Resources from the dead, which was in no way a good thing for him.

“More importantly, about what he said...”

“He wasn’t just talking to himself. It seemed like a message for *us*!”

The words Candy had spoken in the courtyard of Mahem’s palace might’ve been the ramblings of a madman—but if they weren’t, he’d certainly sent out a message that said, “I’ll work toward becoming *Infinite* just as I planned, so you better not try anything funny and get in my way.”

“What do you truly make of that?” Dormouse asked.

“His information is totally on the mark. We scrutinized it, but unless he received knowledge from the other side, outside our reach...he spoke the truth.”

“An *Infiniite*! Well, all we know about it ourselves is *Infinite Embryos* and the calamity that attacked our world! Even the stuff we know about the *Infinite Jobs* that built this foundation is indirect and uncertain!”

Though they were “control” AI, they weren’t in control of *everything* in the world. Jobs were as fundamental to *Dendro* as Embryos, yet they barely touched those, and they had almost no information from before the time of the pre-ancient civilization that they’d fought against. Their awareness of that era didn’t extend beyond knowing that some creatures which had gone on to become UBMs had been born in a time preceding even the control AIs’ arrival. The finest examples of this were Irregularities like Skydragon King and Seadragon King, as well as the SUBM Seven Star Command.

“According to No. 0, there are *Infinites* on the other side—planet Earth—as well, but they do not show themselves openly,” said control AI No. 11.

“No. 0 is from a different *generation* than us, so he probably knows a lot more, but...”

“He says it is irrelevant and does not speak much of it.”

“‘The only *Infinites* besides us that have any relation to the project are the *Infinite Jobs*.’ That’s what he said a looong time ago. And that there’s others besides them and us!”

“The realmbeasts we encountered during the *voyage*—the ones Jabberwock was so fond of—must have *Infinites* among them, as well.”

Hearing that, Dormouse pondered in silence.

Control AI No. 0. Chronologically, he was the oldest among them, but his role was different from those of the others.

A simple description of his job would be “*directing the Infinites*.” He supervised the other control AIs and kept them from going out of control, which was why they required his permission to use their true bodies.

“No. 0, you say?” Dormouse mused. No. 0 was in charge of them, yet he wasn’t their leader exactly. He’d been cooperating with them in the war two thousand years ago, as well as during the preparations that followed. However, it always felt like he was somewhat distant from them.

At that moment, Dormouse remembered the words No. 0 had said a very long time ago:

“I am your guardian and witness to your actions.”

“I will not stop anything you do as long as it progresses the project, and I will assist you if needed.”

“Until the very end, I will bear witness to the choices made by you and your synchronizers.”

Control AI No. 0 certainly wasn't an enemy, but because of this stance that he held, he had never revealed everything he knew to them. He most likely wouldn't say anything about the matter at hand either.

“Regardless, while King of Plagues's identity is currently unclear, it is not exactly unlikely that he is a fallen *Infinite*—a god,” Tweedledum continued.

“Not that we can treat him like a special case though!”

“Whatever he may be, there are no problems with his actions.”

“It's all just a Master being a Master! You know—free!”

“I suppose that's true,” Dormouse said. Masters were free. If they wanted to destroy a country, then by all means, they were *allowed to try*. If this made them enemies who came after them seeking retribution, then that too was part of their freedom.

“It is also worth noting that if we do not treat him as a special case, we are actually unable to stop him,” Tweedledum said.

“Stopping him doesn't fit any of our job descriptions!” Tweedledee added.

While the death penalty might result in players being sent to the gaol, *Infinite Dendrogram* didn't have the kind of bans found in a traditional online game. Since the gaol sentences were given out in accordance to tian law, the result was that the developers themselves almost never went out of their way to hand out any penalties of their own.

And they had no other means to stop him.

Alice the avatar control AI wouldn't do it. Candy hadn't done or discovered

anything forbidden, and the genocide of millions of tians wasn't even the beginnings of a reason for her to take action.

This wasn't a job for Rabbit either. His role as an avatar was to attack sixth form Masters and try to get them to evolve, so Candy—who was already a *Superior*—wasn't among his targets.

As the gaol's warden, Red King's job would also begin only after Candy was sent there.

It could be argued that Cheshire, being in charge of miscellaneous tasks, could go and stop him, but although he could win using his true body, his sixth and seventh forms lacked the output to overcome the advantage Candy had over him.

And Dormouse himself, being in charge of anything dangerous, didn't count Masters among his valid targets.

"This Master's actions are functionally no different from Jabberwock's SUBM releases," Tweedledum concluded.

"Biiig and scaaary disasters increase the chances of others triggering their evolutions!"

Those words made Dormouse furrow his brow, but he didn't deny them.

Each control AI had their own limits to how far they would go, but it was true that their stance prioritized drawing out evolutions.

However, the person Dormouse was keeping an eye on was far too dangerous and fatal to use as an evolution catalyst. That was why he was so concerned with the matter at hand—it could greatly affect his work.

"Can nothing truly be done?" he wondered.

"We already used our avatars—our position as the CEOs of DIN—to reveal that he is a criminal. And we are working on getting a bounty on him."

"We collected enough evidence—and luckily, we got someone who left Mahem alive!"

"If the people are going to take action to defeat him, this incident might turn out to be a positive for us," Tweedledum said.

“With the Masters that are bound to go after him, someone might end up evolving!” said Tweedledee.

“Though, whether someone could beat King of Plagues as he is now...”

“Is another question entirely!”

Dormouse was a little puzzled by the twins’ words. Candy’s build was a terrifying mix of wide-scale suppression and extermination, but there were plenty of people who possessed offensive capabilities with greater range. Caldina even had the Master known as “the Multifariously Invincible.” There had to have been plenty of ways to defeat Candy out there.

“King of Plagues has made a rather troublesome acquisition, I fear.”

“Talk about something getting in the wrong hands!”

“Whatever do you mean?” Dormouse asked.

“A reward,” the twins replied in unison.

That single word made Dormouse think of a particular item that was relevant to this situation—perhaps the worst possible object that he could have envisioned.

“It stands shoulder to shoulder with MVP rewards of the highest tier, but it is not an MVP reward,” said Tweedledum. “It also possesses one particularly meddlesome trait...but knowing a certain individual and their goals, that is only to be expected.”

“I imagine that Jabberwock is having a bit of fun right about now!” said Tweedledee. “A tian owner of that thing has *never* been killed before...so this is a first!”

“The Hero must have assumed that we would retrieve the item once he perished.”

“Too bad for him! It doesn’t work that way!”

“What reward do you mean?” Dormouse asked, feeling like his furry hide was soaked with sweat from nonexistent sweat glands.

It was a mostly meaningless question, though, for he was more or less certain

of what they were talking about—and how terrifying it was.

“Well...”

“Obviously...!”

And indeed, what the twins said next was exactly what Dormouse had expected.



The Remains of the Capital of Mahem

Twenty-four hours had passed since Mahem was destroyed.

“Destroyed” was a strange word to use here, though, for although the entire population was dead, the buildings remained completely untouched. The only thing that had changed was the piles of bones littered throughout the houses and roads where people had once stood.

And someone gazed silently down at this quiet necropolis. On wings empowered by electricity, it was a single lightning dragon—High-End Lightning Dragon Arcal, a friend of the late To’ori. After being entrusted with Mahr, he’d handed the boy over to the people of Altar before returning here.

And now, from up on high where the bacteria couldn’t reach, he was looking down at the empty city.

Though he was seemingly waiting for something in silence, Arcal had already realized that To’ori was dead. He could no longer feel his friend’s presence, but even if he hadn’t been capable of that, the evidence lay plain as day below him.

A skeleton lay there, and though its skull was bare, it was definitely wearing his friend’s armor—but Arcal couldn’t even go retrieve the remains or mourn him, for Mahem was still flooded with deadly bacteria.

There was nothing he could do for his friend. That truth filled him with sadness, as well as rage at his own powerlessness.

This was the second time Arcal had failed to protect something. The first time had been during the attack by the Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria.

Once, Arcal had been called Lightning Dragon King, Drac-Volt, and he’d taken

his throne on Lightning Dragon Mountain to prevent evil dragons from descending upon the world of men. Gloria, however, had defeated Drac-Volt, which had led to the death of the dragon king's friend Duke Lunnings.

Drac-Volt himself was eventually resurrected by his father, Skydragon King, but he'd lost many things besides his life. The defeat cost him his pride, power, confidence, the life of his friend—too many things to count.

He was also no longer an UBM, and that was exactly why he'd set out on a journey to train and regain his strength—and, he hoped, to become even stronger than before.

The dragon now known as Arcal had entrusted the post at Lightning Dragon Mountain to his younger brother and left the Border Mountain Belt to empower himself. He also thought that perhaps if he fought a UBM and won, he could use the Resources from it to become a UBM again.

It was during this journey that he encountered The Hero To'ori Kusanagi. They met while Arcal was in his human form, and after solving a certain problem together, they came to appreciate each other.

And so, to discover what he lacked or find new power for himself, Arcal had accompanied To'ori on his journey as his tamed monster. This long, yet all too brief, journey they'd shared was one he would never forget.

But alas, it was now over. King of Plagues, vile disaster in human form, had put an end to it.

"Ah...!" Arcal was here in Mahem's sky to confirm something—and to *take on the role*.

He'd waited here to see if his friend defeated King of Plagues, and if he failed, to defeat the walking calamity personally.

"There you are," Arcal said.

After a good while of waiting, his sworn enemy finally appeared.

A day had passed since his Brooch had been destroyed, and King of Plagues had now returned to the country he'd devastated, appearing right next to To'ori's remains in the very city the former Lightning Dragon King was

observing.

The Hero had failed to defeat King of Plagues, which meant that there was only one thing for Arcal to do.

He opened his maw, spread his wings wide, and mustered all the electricity within him—the first motion in calling up the deadly breath he'd possessed since he was a king.

“LIGHTNING VORTEX!” A twirling burst of electricity struck from above, instantly closing the kilometers of distance between Arcal and the ground.

Far more intense than an ordinary lightning bolt, it was as if the sky itself had unleashed its wrath to reduce King of Plagues to cinders.

From a height the disease could not reach, the lightning seared the air and incinerated the bacteria around it as it struck Candy.

Weakened though he was, Arcal's lightning had more than enough power to annihilate a person. Thunder sounded as it touched the ground, burning everything around it.

Arcal was aware that that included To'ori's remains. The Hero's bones charred, then turned to ash that was carried off by the wind.

Perhaps that was the dragon's burial for his friend—submerged in a sea of bacteria and thus claimable by no one but the elements, Arcal might have seen this as a cremation.

Thus, after enacting his vengeance and giving his friend last rites, Arcal looked where his lightning struck...

...and saw Candy thoroughly unharmed.

“Ah...?!” the dragon exclaimed.

“Wow. Lightning from a clear sky. Well, not like it's natural.”

Arcal was upper-Pure-Dragon-tier, yet his attack hadn't done anything to Candy.

Was it because he'd equipped a Brooch once he'd reappeared? No...

“That equipment...!” Over his typical frilly clothing, Candy was wearing

something that looked like a raincoat.

It was a kind of MVP reward. Candy hadn't been massacring just humans. He'd killed monsters just as indiscriminately—if not more so—and this was something he'd gotten from a UBM. It had the skill Lightning Absorption on it, making it a natural counter to Arcal.

Having defeated a number of UBMs, Candy possessed many such pieces of resistance gear.

However, the raincoat wasn't what had shocked Arcal so badly.

It was the *helm* that he was wearing underneath the raincoat's hood.

"I gotta say, a raincoat and a *samurai helm*? This look is so...not it." Candy evaluated his equipment with a sulky expression.

It needn't be said who had once owned the helm.

This was Prototype Horobimaru-Star Helmet—the item that had allowed To'ori's blade to reach Candy in the first place. It was the reward The Hero had acquired by fighting Penta-Phased Destroyer, Horobimaru and bringing it to its knees.

It was as close to an MVP reward you could get, but *it technically was not*. And unlike Masters, tians left any equipment that wasn't an MVP reward on their corpse when they died.

And since the Prototype Horobimaru-Star Helmet wasn't an MVP reward, Candy was able to take it from To'ori easily. It was as though the helmet itself acknowledged Candy, who won against To'ori, as its new owner.

Before logging out, Candy had checked the helm's effects and found them to be useful.

And now, after logging in, he equipped the helm just to be safe, then used its ability to sense and see Arcal—the enemy attacking him from up high. In response, he immediately used Instant Wear to equip some gear that granted lightning resistance.

The Prototype Horobimaru-Star Helmet enabled him to instantly see any enemies that acted hostile toward him—to sense out attacks before they

happened. This greatly improved his ability to counterattack—a massive obstacle for anyone who wished to defeat him.

King of Plagues was protected by a field of deadly bacteria, and thus his biggest weakness was ultra long-range attacks launched from outside the range of his disease.

However, that second part wasn't true anymore.

The Prototype Horobimaru-Star Helmet would now sense any incoming attacks, letting him instantly equip something that countered them—or even escape by simply logging out.

Of course, logging out could be prevented by touch, but Candy couldn't even be *approached*, and there weren't many people who could attack from such a distance fast enough that he could not counter it. Tenaga Ashinaga's ultimate, wielded by Xunyu of Huang He, came to mind, but Candy could run away the moment he sensed her trying to lock on to him.

Even against someone with defense that rendered them immune to the bacteria, the helmet would sense their approach, enabling him to simply run away just as easily.

Candy and the helmet were hopelessly well matched. He killed people in a large area just by existing, and his new acquisition improved his own survivability by an absurd degree.

"Khh...!" The sight of his sworn enemy taking what his friend had left behind filled Arcal with rage, but he was unable to do anything about it. His lightning had no effect on Candy, and if he came close enough to use his fangs and claws, he would be destroyed by the bacteria.

He could give everything he had—including his life—for a final charge to end this wretch. However, he couldn't do that *now*, for he still hadn't fulfilled the role left to him by his friend.

Thus, full of rage, frustration, and powerlessness, Arcal had no choice but to fly away.

"Ah. It's running off. It seems pretty smart, so it probably would've given lots of XP..." Candy said, not thinking much about it.

The king of this mobile kingdom of plagues had acquired a new means of defense.

He had now become a walking disaster impossible to stop...and was headed toward the kingdom.



Kingdom of Altar

The neighboring countries became aware of the threat posed by King of Plagues during the day in which Candy was offline.

Small though it was, Mahem was a country they communicated with, and they had a DIN branch in the capital. When the nearby nations heard Mahem's final message, the emergency became clear and known to all—though the message was actually sent by the twin control AIs themselves using Mahem's equipment. As the CEOs of DIN, they simply claimed that they'd received it themselves directly as a cover.

They also reported the death of this era's Hero, To'ori Kusanagi, making it painfully evident just how fearsome King of Plagues was.

Thus, Candy felled a country, gained the nickname of "Legionkiller," and became a threat none could ignore.

That was why, when Candy logged in again, the three countries bordering Mahem flew into action.

Caldina countered by trying to snipe him using a long-range Embryo attack—one of their *Superiors*, The Cannon Eve Selene, began bombarding him.

However, as though he saw it coming, Candy avoided it by logging out right before he was hit.

From Legendaria came Over Wrestler Bulk Bolkan, whose body was even tougher than The Hero, but he died before he could even make it to Candy.

From Altar, AT WIKI, who had high debuff resistance, and his clan, Wiki Editors: Kingdom of Altar Branch, flew into action. However, since their enemy used carnivorous bacteria instead of simple debuffs, they were quickly dealt with.

There was also someone who'd charged in using an armored vehicle Embryo, but Candy countered it by releasing bacteria that ate metal, rendering the formerly airtight vehicle open to disease.

One notable thing about the situation was that none of Altar's *Superiors* were doing anything about it.

Lei-Lei was always absent.

The High Priestess Fuso Tsukuyo was in negotiations with the kingdom of Altar at the time.

In Over Gladiator Figaro's case, it was simply bad timing—all of this happened when he was busy delving deep into the Tomb Labyrinth.

And King of Destruction's whereabouts were currently unknown. Some claimed that he was battling a godbeast in Tenchi, or that he was involved in the Corpse Stronghold incident in Granvaloa.

Thus, with no country able to defeat him, Candy resumed his march.

When it became clear that his destination was Altar, the people of the kingdom, still recovering from the wounds of the war they had recently lost, were overcome by despair at the coming calamity. Many thought that it wouldn't end there.

They feared that he would destroy Altar, then either Dryfe or Legendaria, and eventually kill everyone on the continent...like some sort of god that the people of this world had forgotten long ago.



In Ajani, a town on the eastern end of Altar, in a particular room within a government building, sitting in a fetal position, was the last survivor of Mahem—none other than Mahr.

Judging from his eyes, he had clearly been crying, but the tears were no longer flowing. They had dried up...and his very heart seemed to be on the verge of doing the same.

At first, Mahr had no idea what had happened on that day. He hadn't known why To'ori was so desperate, nor why the dragon had taken him away.

He hadn't known why his sheep and Demi-Drac-Hound had died.

Mahr had only learned the reasons after they arrived in this town and the dragon—Arcal—had taken on a human form and explained it.

The boy couldn't believe it at first—he didn't *want* to. If what Arcal had said was true, it would have meant that his father, mother, brother—his entire family had died. It would have meant that the adults who'd always been so kind to him, all of his friends, the children who were like his younger siblings, the newborn the entire village welcomed just last month—they all were dead.

And it would mean that To'ori had died too.

Rather than believing that, Mahr accused the dragon of lying, hoping it would enrage the monster enough to kill him.

However, Arcal didn't get angry. He only looked at Mahr with eyes full of sadness.

As this continued, the town they were in grew restless. The events in Mahem had reached them through the news company, DIN.

Now that everyone around him acknowledged that the incident had really happened, Mahr also had no choice but to accept it. That was how he finally accepted To'ori's death.

After that, Mahr was taken in by the government office.

He explained that he'd escaped from Mahem, and Truth Discernment confirmed this fact. He was also examined for infection, which showed that he was completely clean.

With a perplexed heart and mind, Mahr realized that To'ori's actions that day had all been the result of The Hero's efforts to save him.

Arcal disappeared at some point. After sending Mahr to the office, he simply said that he had something to do and flew away.

Silence descended. There was now nothing and no one by Mahr's side. He was all alone in this unfamiliar room he'd been given.

However, at this point nowhere in the world would have felt any different. After all, *Mahr's* world no longer existed anywhere on this vast continent. The

unchanging life that he thought would go on forever actually had ended, cut short by the exact kind of amazing...or perhaps *terrifying* thing that he'd been envisioning.

And now, Mahr was now all alone in this unfamiliar world.

"I don't want this..." Mahr mumbled. In his ordinary existence, he'd imagined major events—filled his heart with dreams of adventures and heroism.

However, everything that had happened to him had resulted in nothing but despair and tragedy.

When he went to sleep, he prayed that he would wake up to realize that this had all just been a bad dream, but alas, that never happened. Reality cornered his tiny heart and cast a shadow over it.

"Mahr, are you awake?"

"...Yes." The boy heard a knock on the door, then the voice of a female government employee from behind it.

After being taken in by them, Mahr had been called and questioned several times. As the sole survivor of Mahem, they all believed that he could help them find a way to deal with King of Plagues. However, Mahr didn't actually know much, and couldn't provide many answers. All they learned from him was that the monsters he was looking after had died one by one, that Arcal had flown away with him as Mahr watched it happen...and that To'ori had watched as they left.

This information wasn't totally useless, however. The people around him explained that Mahr's words helped them understand a little of how King of Plagues's bacteria worked. Because of that, they questioned him repeatedly with some time in between sessions, just in case Mahr happened to remember any more details.

Mahr assumed that he was just being summoned for another round...but that wasn't the case.

"We learned that King of Plagues is heading to this town." Mahr's eyes widened. "We might have to evacuate before tomorrow morning, so please be prepared for that." With those words, the lady walked away from the door.

She'd told Mahr to be ready, but it wasn't like he had anything to pack.

The only thing he could prepare was his heart and mind...but he was in no state to do even that.

"Nngh..."

King of Plagues—the one who'd taken everything from Mahr—was approaching this town.

Those words filled him with dread, his mind flashing back to the day Mahem fell. He felt as though the despair he'd narrowly avoided was coming to claim him after all.

"Wh-Why...?" Mahr lamented to himself.

Fear. Sadness. Rage. Helplessness. Regret. Everything came together to pin Mahr right where he was.



The government offices of Ajani were now packed with journalists from various news companies.

Ajani County, where the city stood, was on the eastern edge of Altar, and thus was closest to Mahem. That made it King of Plagues's most likely target, and the members of the press were all here to inform the continent if the count declared a state of emergency. There were journalists from news companies of all sizes, and some of them were Masters.

"Hrmm..."

Among them, there was a woman whose appearance turned a few heads. Wearing a suit and black sunglasses in the fantasy-themed Kingdom of Altar made her stand out a little—no, it made her stand out a *lot*. The armband she wore signified that she was part of DIN—the news company with the largest information network as well as the one that had first reported on King of Plagues. She was here waiting for an announcement just like the others, but for some reason she was drawing something in her sketchbook.

As she did so, another woman with a DIN armband peeked over her shoulder.

"Marie, what are you drawing? More naked men?"

“No, no, no, nooo! I’m just compiling information!”

The journalist in the suit—Marie Adler—was drawing a very odd image. It was a diagram that was extremely short on its vertical axis, but featured a long semicircle off to the side as well as a few numbers here and there.

However, for some reason there was a bird drawn above it in cute mascot style.

“By the way, how high do the avians from the Ajani branch go?” Marie asked.

“About six thousand metels, I believe.”

“How tough are they?”

“Demi-Dragon-tier, I think.”

“It would be quite the gamble, then.”

As Marie mulled it over, her tian colleague could only assume she was planning something strange. Marie and other Master journalists served as a kind of special correspondent, often tasked with using their unique abilities for equally unique jobs. Being immortal, they could even bring back information that they gave their lives to obtain.

The fact that a Master like Marie was here in Ajani likely held some significance. The people who were in charge of Masters within DIN—the twin CEOs, that is—might’ve known the reason she was here, but as an ordinary journalist, Marie’s colleague had no idea what it was.

“Oh?” the tian journalist said.

As the two talked, they were joined by employees of the government office, as well as Count Ajani himself. The fact that he’d arrived to make a personal declaration told the two journalists that their hunch had been right on the mark—and just as they’d expected, the count told them that King of Plagues was coming, and that they would evacuate to the west.

However, while the count struggled to overcome his grief to make this announcement, Marie was, for some reason, looking in another direction. There was a wall there, but it was almost as though she could see through it.

Then, Marie whispered into her colleague’s ear. “Sorry, I’m leaving for a sec.”

“Huh?” When her colleague turned, Marie was already gone. She’d vanished as though she was never there to begin with.

Though the tian journalist was confused, she wrote it off as just a Master being a Master and turned back to the count.



While Mahr was lying on the bed in a fetal position, he heard a knock on the window.

“It is I. Please, open.”

The voice was a familiar one. With unsteady steps, Mahr approached the window and opened it. There, he saw a well-built youth with lizard-like eyes. At first glance, one might assume he had Legendarian blood, but it was actually the one who was once Lightning Dragon King—Arcal in human form.

“First and foremost, allow me to apologize. I failed to defeat King of Plagues.”

Hearing that, Mahr realized Arcal had left him to defeat this sworn enemy. The news also made him realize that neither To’ori nor this dragon had been able to overcome this menace.

“He is approaching this town, and his miasma will surely reach it by tomorrow. You must evacuate before that.”

Mahr said nothing in response.

“May I ask what you wish to do?” the dragon said.

“What I...wish to...?” The boy didn’t understand what Arcal was asking.

“To’ori has entrusted me with your safety. If this town is to be drowned in disease, then I must have you leave at once. You may flee alongside your fellow men, but my wings would carry you faster and farther. I could even take you to the country upon the sea. The disease might not reach there.”

Mahr said nothing at first. Arcal was trying to honor To’ori’s wish by saving Mahr, who had been a fellow friend of his. Thus, he gave the boy a choice between leaving with Arcal or with the people of Ajani.

However, Mahr...

“I’ll...stay here.”

...chose neither.

“Why?”

“I mean, even if I’m alive...I have nothing now.” His family, friends, home, and homeland—all that made him *him* no longer existed. He’d lost sight of himself, but was unable to find a solid foundation to help him build a new life, leaving him with nothing but resignation and despair. “Neither you nor Sir To’ori were able to do anything against King of Plagues. He’ll kill every living person on this continent...so I’d rather join them early...”

“Young one, you...” When Arcal was about to tell him something...

“Then what if I prove that King of Plagues *can* be defeated by human hands?”

...an unfamiliar voice rang out through the room.

The voice was a strange one. It wasn’t clear if it belonged to someone young or old, to a man or a woman. This ambiguous voice, which had obviously passed through some kind of filter, reached their ears as though it were seeping into the room.

Arcal’s eyes widened as he turned to the source and saw something that was just as odd as the voice itself—a black mist. How long had it been there? Before Arcal even realized it, a black, human shaped mist had appeared next to the door. The fact that this entity was capable of sneaking up on him put Arcal on edge.

“What are you?” he asked. In response to that question, the figure looked at both Arcal and Mahr before saying...

“I am a shade.”

It took a step toward the boy. Though it wasn’t clear which part of the black mist was the face, it was obviously looking right at Mahr.

“I am the reflection of your despair—the mortal phantasm to pull the source of your grief into darkness.”

The mist continued speaking in a rather theatrical tone...

“Into the shadow.”

...and said that as it spread its arms as though it were performing on a stage. Its behavior made it seem as if everything it said was of the utmost importance.

Silence. The unusual aura surrounding the entity claiming to be a shade left Arcal speechless.

However, Mahr, who was standing behind him...

“The source...of my grief...?”

...singled out the words “pull the source of your grief into darkness.”

They could mean that the mist would kill Mahr to end his sadness, but if that wasn't it, then...

“You mean...you would kill King of Plagues?” Mahr asked.

“Yes, if that is what you desire,” said the silhouette with a nod.

“Are you truly capable of that?” Arcal asked. He had doubts that this strange shadow could succeed where both Arcal and To'ori had failed.

He doubted it—yet it seemed that the mist was confident.

“I require something in exchange for this job,” the shade said.

“Exchange? Is it wealth you want?” replied Arcal.

“No. I require cooperation. I would need your assistance...dragon.”

The words left Arcal bewildered. He would gladly cooperate to defeat his sworn enemy, but that alone seemed to not benefit the shadow in any way. “Would that truly be enough for you?”

“Well, yes. To me, what holds meaning is simply the *role* of someone who accepts such requests and carries them out.”

Silence. Arcal didn't understand the full meaning of those words, but it was clear to him that the shadow wasn't lying. It was just operating under a logic only it understood, according to its own mysterious values.

“Very well,” the dragon said. “I will work with you.”

“Excellent. Now...the rest is up to you,” said the shadow, looking at Mahr

again. “Before I take action, I need a client. What do you want to do?”

This too must’ve been part of the shadow’s personal logic and motivations. The question was a presentation of choice—for the shadow, it most likely didn’t matter what option Mahr would pick now. It wouldn’t care if he chose not to answer, or if he fled or stayed. If that happened, the shadow would find a collaborator other than Arcal, and a client—a motivation—other than Mahr.

However, it had come to Mahr first because the boy had more reason to *make this request* than anyone else in the world.

In silence, Mahr thought back on the plain everyday life he’d lived—the golden days that would never return.

He remembered his mother’s warmth and her cooking, so delicious he felt he could never get enough of it.

He remembered how reliable his father was, as well as his back as he carried Mahr when he was too exhausted to walk.

He remembered his older brother’s kindness and the times they’d walked hand in hand.

The memories of his family flowed back to him. Along with them, he recalled the scent of the bleating sheep, the fields of wheat caressed by the wind, as well as all the other vistas of his homeland, now forever lost.

And Mahr remembered the face of his friend whose life was nothing like his, but whose feelings had been the same.

“...them...” Tears once again flowing from his eyes, Mahr looked up at the shadow and opened his mouth to give voice...

“P-PLEASE...AVENGE THEM...!”

...to the righteous anger welling up from deep within his heart.

“Of course.”

Upon hearing the request, punctuated by loud sobbing, the shadow turned around.

“That’s why I exist,” said *Marie Adler*.

Thus, the Master bearing the name of a professional killer from another story took to action—to kill a self-proclaimed god.



Old Mahem

“Hm...hmm...” Candy strolled through the now uninhabited land of Mahem, heading toward Altar and using his bacteria and Star Helmet to effortlessly repel anything thrown at him.

Since he was traveling on foot, Candy hadn’t even made it to the border yet, but as he walked westward, the range of his deadly disease followed him like a moving storm.

His bacteria crawled on the ground and multiplied to the extent that they had destroyed an entire country, but as they were now they couldn’t extend much farther than that. However, there were theoretically no true limitations to their spread. The bacteria were animals, and as such they could multiply and proliferate without end. Given enough generations after being released from Resheph, they could theoretically exist as an independent new species even if Candy logged out.

However, to have the properties Candy wanted them to have, they had ended up with a structure that was extremely bizarre for any living being. Without backing from King of Plagues, Candy and his Superior Embryo, they easily fell apart in about a day’s time.

Currently, the skills he had enabled these bacteria to spread to a maximum range of around 50 kilometers. Because of this, as Candy moved westward, the bacteria in the east end of the area were busy destroying themselves.

The very buffs that sustained them were the reason the bacteria that hadn’t come directly from Resheph—and were instead the descendants of those that had—were able to contribute Resources to Candy with their kills.

These bacteria might be able to mutate in a way that let them live despite their abnormalities and spread the disease to an even wider area, but any microorganisms outside his influence didn’t provide Candy with Resources. This meant that diseases too many generations removed would only become

competition, so he'd actually taken measures to prevent this from happening.

"Hrm...this isn't *that* tiring, but I'd love to have a better way of getting around," Candy grumbled. "Maybe a Prism Steed?"

Any monsters would certainly die of his diseases, so Candy thought that his best option was some sort of machine—though even those would be gone the moment he spread his metal-eating bacteria. "Operation: Candy the Pale Rider is a go...! But I'll have to find the horse first..." Candy spoke to himself, referring to the figure often said to be the embodiment of pestilence.

But then, he suddenly looked up at the sky.

"You again?" As he whispered to himself, the Star Helmet showed Candy his enemy.

It was the same dragon that had recently breathed lightning on him.

And after opening its maw, it did the same thing yet again.

"Hm...?" And just like last time, Candy withstood it by using Instant Wear to switch to his Lightning Absorption raincoat. The destructive bolt from the sky once again accomplished nothing.

Why's it just doing the same thing? Candy was curious why this monster would bother repeating an attack that had so blatantly failed before.

However, as the assault continued, extending beyond the 10 seconds it had lasted before, Candy's confusion turned to understanding.

It's still going. This attack was far longer than the first one. It had already lasted for double the amount of time and didn't seem like it would end soon. *I see. It thinks my defense doesn't last long or has some other limitation. Sorry about that, sweetie, but this is a passive skill.*

Lightning Absorption was active for as long as Candy wore the raincoat. He could equip the item as long as it wasn't broken, and it would negate any lightning attacks as long as he had it equipped. Even if the dragon kept the attack up forever, this defense would never fail.

I won't be able to log out if this drags on too long, but it's not like it's just gonna keep going indefinitely, right? Candy's assumption proved correct, for

the lightning strike ended after about 40 seconds.

The dragon, as shown to him by the Star Helmet, seemed greatly fatigued.

Nice try...hm? The moment that thought passed through Candy's mind, the Star Helmet's display changed.

It now showed an unfamiliar woman in a black suit...

"Huh?"

...as well as *Candy himself, standing right next to her.*



About ten minutes ago...

"I guess he really *does* have an item like that, huh? I had a hunch. It's the only thing that explains it, I'm afraid."

Marie's voice could be heard from Arcal's back as the dragon flew through the sky. However, she could not be seen.

The obvious assumption was that she'd somehow become invisible to the naked eye, but that wasn't exactly the case. Instead, she'd merely covered herself in a fabric with a chameleonlike effect that caused her to blend into Arcal's back.

Like something straight out of an old ninja manga, she was hiding herself using her onmitsu grouping skills.

She was no longer clad in the black mist she had worn in their first meeting. While the mist was a potent asset that could conceal her identity from perception skills, it also stood out and could make her position easy to pick out visibly. The dark mass would certainly stand out when contrasted with Arcal's body, and even if it didn't there was a chance that the Star Helmet would perceive her because of the difference in output.

A brief silence ensued. Arcal had just told Marie about the helmet To'ori had once possessed, and the fact that it had been claimed by King of Plagues. However, Marie had already assumed that this menace had some means of spotting his enemies—that was why she'd hidden herself like this. Such a power was the only thing that would explain King of Plagues's unusual ability to deal

with anything thrown at him.

“You said that he can see,” said Marie. “Is it like clairvoyance? Far sight?”

“That is how To’ori described it, yes,” Arcal replied.

“Then there’s no problem. If I just stick to you like this, he’ll probably only see you—and I’ve still got my job ult too.”

Hearing Marie’s explanation, Arcal let out a doubtful grunt. “Are you certain about this?” he asked.

“Of course. I mean, it’s not like I could reach him by running on the ground.”

Thanks to the efforts of all those who had died trying to defeat King of Plagues, the maximum effective radius of his deadly bacteria had been determined. However, even with Marie’s supersonic speeds, it would take her a few minutes to reach him, and that wasn’t enough—she would *collapse* before getting close to him. And this estimation didn’t even account for any obstacles that could slow her down and make the situation worse. Even if she could reach him before the disease claimed her, King of Plagues would have more than enough time to notice and escape by logging out. This was why even Caldina’s “Multifariously Invincible” hadn’t been able to destroy him.

“But I know I can make it if I use the *shortest path*.” Another silence descended. Arcal seemed to have questions still, so Marie began her explanation.

“There are three ways King of Plagues reacts to his attackers. First is by ignoring them. Since his enemy is going to die anyway, he just doesn’t do anything and lets it happen. That’s how most people he’s fought have fallen to him, with Legendaria’s Over Wrestler being the most obvious example.”

King of Plagues’s always-active defensive web would simply kill most attackers and provide him with Resources—that was the easiest scenario for him.

“The second is by countering the attack. As we can see from him equipping something that negates your lightning and spreading metal eating bacteria against that tank, he sometimes deals with trouble by taking some specific defensive actions.”

Arcal silently listened. King of Plagues had killed many UBM's and claimed their rewards, and he possessed possibly hundreds of bacteria of all kinds. The fact that he possessed countermeasures for everything thrown at him so far made it quite clear that his defense was rock-solid.

“And his third strategy is just *evacuating*. He runs away by logging out and waiting for things to blow over.”

That was the approach King of Plagues had taken after having his Brooch broken, or when he was being targeted by The Cannon from Caldina. Though Marie was not yet aware of this, he also logged out at night, when Collapsed Present—his carnivorous bacteria—became inactive.

However...

“He also prioritizes these actions in precisely that order. It seems like he wants to avoid logging out to prevent anyone from camping and waiting for him, but he still does it when he has no choice.”

King of Plagues was safest when he escaped to reality, but it was also a risky move because he had to log in again at some point.

Marie had no way of knowing this either, but if he was logged out for too long, there was a chance that his bacteria would all die off, costing him his deadly web of defense. That was why logging out was his last resort.

“So...you breathe lightning on him again, he'll go with the second option and just weather with his resistance gear. As in, *he won't try to escape*.”

Marie was saying that she would use this moment as an opportunity to strike. Her thoughts, now put into words, were both slightly surprising and somewhat disturbing to Arcal.

“You thought that far ahead?” he asked.

“Well, yes. It happens that I've been thinking about such things for years.”

Marie—Nagisa Ichimiya in the real world—was the creative mind behind *Into the Shadow*, a battle manga with superpowered professional killers.

However, the “superpowered” part didn't apply to the main character—also known as Marie Adler. Her first ally, Daisy, as well as everyone else in the series,

were inhuman assassins. *Into the Shadow* was a story where Marie Adler—a normal human hit man—used only her wits and mundane skill to win against her supernatural foes.

And so, as author of this work, Nagisa spent many days thinking about how someone might deal with a far more powerful enemy. This experience turned out to be valuable in *Infinite Dendrogram*, making her a Master who was quite proficient at observing other people's abilities and countering them.

"Anyway, we're almost there," she said.

"Indeed." Arcal had arrived at the sky right above King of Plagues. This was about time the walking calamity would catch sight of him using the Star Helmet.

Knowing what I'll have to do next, I'll need about 40 seconds, Marie thought. Marie reconfirmed and recalculated the actions she'd take next, then gathered the resolve to go through with them.

"Anyway, please do as I said. Spew lightning at him for 40 seconds," she said.

"That is quite a lot you are asking of me." Though he ranked high among Pure-Dragons, Arcal was no longer a UBM. Breathing lightning for such a long time and from such a distance was a taxing act that would surely drain him.

But...

"If it is to avenge my friend...consider it done."

Following those words, Arcal opened his jaw and released lightning onto King of Plagues below. The bolt struck true, but was once again negated by his lightning resistance raincoat.

In that moment, Marie grasped a different blade in each hand...and *jumped off Arcal's back*.

This was the only way to reach him—a fall from directly above.

During her investigations, Marie had reached the conclusion that the bacteria's effective range in the air wasn't nearly as great as it was on land.

Mahr said that when To'ori helped him escape, the cattle left on the ground were dying—that alone made it clear that the altitude slowed the disease down.

Additionally, some of the people who'd used skydragons and avians while setting out to kill King of Plagues were able to get deep into his deadly range without any issue.

Thinking about it, this was to be expected.

There was *absolutely nothing* in the air. No soil to cling to and no nutrients the bacteria could use to proliferate. Even if they could linger in the air, they certainly couldn't spread easily.

Marie had guessed that even at its highest—right above King of Plagues—the effective height of the bacteria was only about 5000 metels. This estimation was confirmed when Arcal told her that he'd been able to attack King of Plagues from above. With this approach, though, they'd given themselves more room to work with, coming from a height of over seven thousand metels. While this altitude was a bit much for the avians of the DIN branch, it wasn't a problem for a powerful dragon like Arcal.

However, even all these preparations and an approach from a less defended angle wouldn't be enough to win against King of Plagues. While the sky might not have been dense in bacteria, they still reached as high as 5000 metels. Even with supersonic speed, delivering an attack would take over 10 seconds. That was more than enough time for Candy to switch to appropriate resistance gear, counter it with other bacteria, or run away and make more distance between them. And now that he had the Star Helmet, ranged attacks weren't enough to take him out—but his disease miasma meant attacking him from up close was impossible too.

Falling toward him from above didn't change much of this scenario. Marie would be consumed before she even touched the ground.

Except she had something that let her break—or more accurately, *pass* through.

“Art of Vanishing.”

The moment she spoke the name of her skill, her body stopped existing in this world. The light that allowed her to be seen, the air touching her skin, the lightning that could burn her, and the bacteria that destroyed everything it came into contact with now passed straight through her as though she wasn't

even there.

This was Art of Vanishing—the ult of the onmitsu grouping Superior Job, Death Shadow.

Leaving everything behind as though she had never even existed, Marie plummeted to the surface far below.

And since she didn't exist, the Star Helmet couldn't possibly see her coming.

Thirty-six, thirty-five, thirty-four... she counted down in her head. Normally, forty seconds wasn't enough for a person to fall even two thousand metels, because air resistance slowed them down.

However, that didn't affect Marie as she was now. Art of Vanishing negated all physical influence on her, and even the dense air wasn't doing anything to her speed. But even though there was no friction, she was still affected by gravitational acceleration, as evidenced by the fact that her feet stayed in contact with the ground when she used the skill on the surface.

Thus, during these forty seconds, she closed the distance between her and King of Plagues at the highest possible speed.

Twenty, nineteen, eighteen...

King of Plagues only moved by foot and wasn't exactly swift, but forty seconds were more than enough time for him to move dozens of metels.

Another reason Marie had asked Arcal to shower King of Plagues in lightning was to minimize this possibility. Her calculations told her that without the effects of wind upon her, she could reach him by simply falling.

"Tch!" However, despite it all, there was now a discrepancy between the point she was falling toward and Candy's current location.

Had Candy himself moved? Or was this an effect of Arcal's lightning?

I'll do this, then! Thinking fast, accelerated by her AGI, Marie quickly made a decision.

A moment later, her forty seconds expired. Arcal's lightning had ceased, and Marie removed her Art of Vanishing.

But as she did that, she immediately used her Art of Shadow Clones.

She then *kicked the clones* to readjust the trajectory of her fall.

“Huh?” Candy said, finally picking up on Marie’s presence. The moment Art of Vanishing was undone, both the Star Helmet and the swarm of bacteria focused entirely on her.

However, before King of Plagues could react in any way, Marie *shoved both her blades into the neck of her target*.

Thanks to her accelerated thoughts, she was able to perfectly coordinate her fall with her attack. Her left blade drew an arc from below, while the right was swung down.

The attack with the left blade was restrained. Candy’s level was immense, but his HP wasn’t impressive, and this attack was meant to do damage while keeping him alive.

The attack with the right blade, however, was fatal. It carried the kinetic energy of Marie’s free fall straight into a critical area.

Pulverizing Marie’s own right arm as it sank in, the right blade delivered damage that surpassed Candy’s HP many times over, triggering his Brooch several times and shattering it.

A moment later, Marie herself crashed into the ground, activating and breaking her own Brooch too.

Marie’s ambush left them both without a lifeline.



“Agh.” A sudden attack, damage to his neck, a shattered Brooch.

The change in situation was so sudden that even Candy couldn’t stay surprised.

As Marie tried to recover from the fatal crash, he backed away, blood spurting from his neck.

At this moment, they were on even footing. However, Marie was already infected by his disease. The flesh-consuming Collapsed Present was quickly

draining Marie's HP.

Candy spared a moment to think.

This was someone who could break through his defenses—his empire of plagues—and end up right next to him. It wasn't out of the question that she could once again negate the effects of his bacteria.

Thus, Candy chose to take her seriously.

Spreading a colored cloud of bacteria to conceal himself, he began his escape.

Preparing to leave this world in thirty seconds, he initiated the logout sequence...only to get an error.

A...debuff...?

Candy then realized that his status summary said "Paralysis (Slow Acting)."

This was the effect of the dagger in Marie's left hand—Palsy Stingblade, Belspan. It was an MVP reward that delivered a paralysis poison requiring time to become effective, making it difficult to resist.

But while it was slow acting, it didn't change the fact that the debuff was still *there*, and having a binding-type debuff prevented a player from logging out.

In that case... Candy realized that he had no choice but to kill his opponent immediately. Thus, he prepared to use his ultimate, The Lab of the God of Pestilence—Resheph...

"...n...gh...!"

...only to realize that *his destroyed throat* made him unable to speak the words.

This was also the work of Belspan. Marie had used it to lower his HP, apply a debuff that prevented escape, and stop him from using skills that had to be called out.

The blade had been given three roles, and it had fulfilled them all.

Even as she coughed, the bacteria consuming her, Marie still had her eyes fixed on Candy.

He'd spread a smoke screen, but her abilities as a job from the onmitsu

grouping still allowed her to track him.

She'd also switched out the dagger in her left for a handgun.

This was Marie's Embryo—Arc-en-Ciel. But instead of having its usual six shot revolver form, it was in the shape that primed it to fire a single, giant shot.

It was the form Arc-en-Ciel took for its ultimate skill.

All was silent. Candy fixed his eyes on the assassin who was ready to claim his life. She'd broken through his defenses and destroyed his throat, preventing him from using his ult. With the assassin so close now, and the gun aimed right at him, there was nothing left for him to—

Construction setup.

No—someone who claimed to be a god would never fall this easily.

Unable to say a word, Candy began manipulating his own magic.

This wasn't accomplished by any of his job skills. This was the pinnacle of pure technique, said to be reachable only by tians with The One series of Superior Jobs. It was the realm of original magic skill creation—a world that only Masters like King of Glaciers AT WIKI would someday ascend to.

Candy happened to already be deep within this uncharted territory.

Outputting guidelines. Defining concept. Connecting network.

Using only his own thoughts and powers, he wove something that matched the most superior of all skills. Since he couldn't speak—since it was all in his thoughts—this process contained none of the colorful, deranged *role-playing* he normally affected. He merely acted like a system—a god—designed to act like he did, and exercised his authority accordingly.

Construction complete. Exhausting internal magic.

What he wove was something befitting the title of Plaguemancer—a job focused on creating and managing diseases—and yet something completely unlike it at the same time.

False God Imitation—Infinite Daimon: Carnage the God of Pestilence.

The bacteria that gathered right before Candy in that moment assumed a

shape that resembled a giant, angry spirit—the image of a divinity that had wielded immense power in a certain era of some particular world. Synonymous with destruction, its very touch brought the end.

This false god, built from bacteria and magic, rose like a restless deity that could devour all that lived and destroy all that did not, swinging its claws at the heretic that dared to stand before it.

This was divine might that no human could withstand.

However, no matter how inhuman, unique, or even godlike the enemy...

...Marie Adler was the protagonist of a tale that was all about defeating them.

“Phantasmal Raingun—Arc-en-Ciel: La Gravelle the Godslayer.”

What Marie fired at that calamitous false god was a single, fatal bullet that made use of red, blue, green, white, black, silver—all the colors Marie possessed and all the Resources loaded into Arc-en-Ciel.

What manifested was a woman with her eyes covered by a green cloth veil, wielding a sword so massive it could only have been made from the bones of a giant beast.

Her name was La Gravelle the Godslayer, and she was the strongest professional killer in Nagisa Ichimiya’s work.

Thus, two creations had been summoned. One from the history of a different world, the other from a fictional story—both remnants of those who had once held godlike power.

All that was left was to see which *past* was stronger.

A moment later, Candy’s false god and Marie’s godslayer clashed.

The billions of bacteria comprising the false god rushed to consume this enemy that mocked it. A single swing of its claw would reap the life from anything it passed through.

There was no living being that could withstand this mythic ruination.



However, La Gravelle was the *Godslayer*.

She had that name exactly because she could surpass mere mythology—the manifestation of explosive *power* that came at the cost of so many Resources that it left Marie’s Embryo useless, yet didn’t even last for ten seconds.

The swing of her sword called forth such a mighty wind that it surpassed the magical pressure gluing the billions of bacteria together and carved open a path for her. Then, with a step that cracked open the earth, La Gravelle rushed through where the density of bacteria was thinned out.

Though, “thinned out” didn’t mean that this calamity was harmless. It still wouldn’t take long for the bacteria to consume a single person.

In just two seconds, La Gravelle would vanish, bones and all.

However, it wouldn’t take even a single second for her to break through the false god and stand before the *true* god—Candy Carnage.

Candy’s eyes widened.

Even as parts of her body disintegrated, La Gravelle raised her sword high and swung it down.

What protected Candy’s head was the item granted to mankind by a being that surpassed Mythical tier. Its ability to see enemies wasn’t all the power it possessed—it also excelled simply as a defensive piece of equipment. Even a blade of Mythical metal would bend before it.

But this one truth could not be forgotten: *the Godslayer surpassed mythology*.

The attack that would eventually break even Superior metal split the Star Helmet...

“Ah.”

...and cut through the god.

It all ended with one attack, without even any time for revival.

Stripped of control, the false god collapsed in an instant, and Candy began to melt into motes of light.

With her role finished, La Gravelle also vanished without so much as a word.

And her summoner, Marie, was also succumbing to the damage the bacteria had done to her body.

It was likely, however, that Candy would die first. Thus, he realized that this was undoubtedly a loss for him.

The silence stretched on as Candy Carnage, his body split in half and unable to speak, gazed at the woman who was swiftly becoming nothing but light, just as he was.

I'll get back at you someday... Candy thought as the bits of light that were once his godly body were carried off by the wind.

A moment later, that which had once been Marie disappeared in the same way.

Arcal had witnessed all this from high above, and when it was over he flew off to the west, eager to tell the boy that their friend had been avenged.

The brief yet truly eventful battle was over.

The Master who'd killed more tians than any other—this one-man calamity—had been defeated by a lone assassin and sent to the gaol.

This was the conclusion of the King of Plagues incident.



Following this, it became known that King of Plagues had fallen to a certain professional killer. This truth was sent out to the world by the twin CEOs of DIN—the control AI.

The name of this assassin was a mystery, so people wanted something to call them.

Perhaps if Candy Carnage had been recognized as a god by anyone besides himself, the Master who had killed him might've come to be known as "Godslayer," just like the method she had used to destroy him. However, no matter how wretched the casualties of his actions, he was still only a *Superior*—a mere human.

That was the extent of the world's understanding of him, and that was why the one who slew him became known as the "*Superior* Killer."



The Gaol

As Candy descended upon this place, he wasn't smiling—though his face was not twisted in anger or grief either.

He was merely squinting his eyes, apparently lost in thought.

Ever since he'd received the death penalty he'd been thinking about that black-clad woman who'd killed him—in fact, he was thinking about her right now.

Who was she? Where had she come from? And regardless of how shoddily he might have constructed it in the little time he had...how had she broken through his False God Imitation?

He couldn't begin to answer those questions, so he could only wonder about it fruitlessly.

From Candy's perspective, this was like getting randomly assaulted while out on a casual stroll. It had all happened so fast that he couldn't comprehend how he'd died, nor could he accept it.

However, Candy was someone who used bioterrorism to destroy an entire country. His distress couldn't hope to compare to what the people of Mahem felt as they'd suddenly perished to his deadly disease. Some might say that this death was just Candy getting what he deserved, but it was truly only a fraction of that.

The wrongdoers and the wronged, however, always weighed such things on different scales.

For Candy in particular, his outlook on this outcome was more like a god's than a human's. Thus, he himself didn't really think that he'd gotten what he deserved. That was why he saw it as more of a random assault by some maniac rather than understanding it as an act of vengeance.

He was actually wondering why it even happened at all.

Candy had already decided that he'd get his revenge, but first things first—he had to find answers to his questions...

“Yo! A newbie, aren’t ya?”

“The outfit’s a little much, but you’re pretty cute!”

“Ohh, those lips are *gorgeous*...”

...but his thinking was cut short by some voices calling out to him.

Candy was standing at the gaol’s save point, so it wasn’t so strange that someone would try talking to him.

“Gettin’ sent here is makin’ you feel all anxious, huh? Don’t worry! We’ll show you around!”

“Let’s start with the only café that serves good coffee! That’s also where you’ll find the biggest guy here!”

“If you don’t mind, give me your cup once you’re done with it.”

With the exception of the obvious Legendarian, the men didn’t have any ulterior motives. While some of them were probably trying to hit on Candy, they were also completely honest about wanting to lend a helping hand to a gaol newbie.

However...

Candy’s response was a crushing silence. From his perspective, they were irreverent, unpleasant fools who had bothered him while he was trying to puzzle out something important.

But this also led him to another thought.

Here in the gaol, he could no longer hope to power level by committing tian genocide, but there were still people he could kill for their Resources.

Thus, a smile appeared on his face for the first time since he logged in...

“Collapsed Present.”

...and he instantly infected the gaol with the very same bacteria that had destroyed Mahem.

The three who called out to him were the first to die—and as the save point was in the heart of the town, death quickly spread throughout all of it.

They don't give as much as tians, but they'll have to do, Candy thought. He would first kill all Masters, then massacre the monsters of this created dungeon.

With the gaol presumably being made using spatial control powers, Candy figured that if he gathered enough Resources to reach his limit as a *Superior*, he might be able to escape. And so, he intended to turn this gaol into his personal empire of plague where anything besides him was dead.

But then...

"Excuse me, about this poison...or, rather, bacteria—would you be so kind as to stop spreading it?"

...someone behind Candy tapped on his shoulder and addressed him directly.

Candy's eyes widened in shock as he turned around. First the skeleton, then the black-clad woman, now this—it was his third shocking encounter within a very brief span of time.

However, in a way the source of Candy's surprise this time might've been the strangest of the three.

"It seems to affect the flesh of living beings...but it also broke down the eggs I just bought at the store."

The man behind him was holding a shopping bag, looked awfully plain, and behaved completely *normally*.

Unlike the skeleton or the woman in black, he didn't try to attack Candy the moment he appeared. He only wore a somewhat strained smile and lamented the loss of his recent purchase.

It was as though to him, the spread of Candy's deadly disease was roughly equivalent in seriousness to his broken eggs.

"You..." Candy hissed. The man didn't *look* strange. He wasn't a skeleton in Japanese clothes or a woman wearing a black men's suit. He was just a spectacled man in casual clothes who didn't stand out in any way. None of what he wore seemed like MVP rewards.

But all that was exactly why this didn't seem right.

“What are you?” Candy was so dumbfounded by this that he couldn’t help but ask that question.

Notably, he didn’t ask “who” but “what,” as if he wasn’t sure if the man was even human.

And, in a way, Candy wasn’t that far off.

“You are speaking to Sechs Würfel. I am known as King of Crime, and I am the owner of the café here. Oh, and I am also a slime.”

The man—Sechs—casually answered Candy’s question, readily admitting that he was not human.

A slime! Candy thought as everything fell into place.

Collapsed Present targeted only people and other creatures that possessed actual flesh—slimes weren’t its focus, and as a result its effects on them were minimal. Even a little defense or a minor countermeasure against disease from a tertiary target like a slime would be enough to negate it.

But that also meant that the man was vulnerable to bacteria *specialized* against slimes.

With that thought, Candy immediately gave an order to Resheph, causing it to release the antislime bacteria he’d prepared in the past.

A burst of black smoke laden with pestilence quickly enveloped the man.

If everything went as Candy planned, this would’ve killed his opponent immediately, and yet...

“Hmm. So your Embryo consists of fatal bacteria—or rather the system to prepare them. I suppose it’s true that, given enough time and Resources, a production-focused Embryo *can* become something fearsome.”

Candy’s eyes widened again. The man claiming to be a slime spoke with a tone as calm as before, and Candy almost began to suspect that he was bluffing about being a slime—but then he noticed a bigger issue.

The man’s voice had changed. In fact, it had become a voice that Candy found very familiar.

“Though it does seem that you produce them with the bare minimum of safety measures.”

The wind then blew away the black smoke...

“Like, for example, making it so they don’t target *you*.”

...revealing none other than Candy himself.

“Huh...?” Candy was now more confused than ever, but there was a fairly simple explanation for what had just happened.

Candy’s assumption about why Sechs was able to approach him without fear of the bacteria was correct. However, when Sechs had touched Candy’s shoulder, he’d also taken a hair from Candy’s head and absorbed it into his slime body. This enabled him to use Shapeshift—his transformation skill that required him to acquire cells from whomever he wanted to transform into.

Thus, Sechs had simply made his flesh the same as Candy’s.

“I believe spreading the disease any further is meaningless now, unless you intend to include *yourself* in the massacre,” Sechs went on. “So would you mind putting a stop to all this, please? There might be better ways of going about all of this in any case.”

In terms of form and structure, Sechs’s transformations were flawless. They were so good, in fact, that they were able to perfectly mimic the bloodlines of Special Superior Jobs.

As Candy’s current level was higher than his, Sechs couldn’t copy his skills as King of Plagues, but that didn’t stop him from creating a true reflection of Candy’s physical body, thus putting Candy in checkmate.

In silence, Candy considered the situation. He possessed many MVP rewards, but none of them provided any means of attack.

That was because his usual method of dealing damage—of dealing *death*—was his bacteria. His MVP rewards had thus ended up being either defensive items or materials for his diseases.

And since Candy had excluded himself as a target with all of his bacteria creations, by copying his cells, Sechs became effectively immune to anything

Candy could do.

I've only been here a few minutes and I've already gotten hit with all this... I've got no luck at all these days, Candy thought.

The skeleton and the woman in black had both succumbed to the bacteria. However, Sechs was immune to them as long as Candy was himself. Candy had absolutely no chance against Sechs now.

Well, I'm stumped. Can't think of anything I can do, Candy thought. There were some options that would have been open to him before Sechs had come this close, but it was far too late for that now.

On top of that, still reeling from the shock of the current situation and the death penalty dealt him by the woman in black, Candy failed to notice one other detail—he no longer possessed the helm that so greatly enhanced his defenses.

“So...will you stop? Living here would become quite difficult if you do not.” Sechs’s words, spoken using Candy’s own face, were obviously an ultimatum, carrying a very specific hidden message: stop spreading the disease or die.

Unlike Candy, Sechs had means of attack that didn’t rely on bacteria, so if they fought, it would be completely one-sided. Candy was well aware of that.

It would only lead to his immediate second defeat.

I'll have to be more careful with my concoctions from now on, he thought. First, he would have to research bacteria that worked on beings with identical cell structure to his.

With that thought, Candy ordered Resheph to cease spreading the disease and raised his hands in surrender.

However, he was a few moments too late.

“Oh,” Sechs sighed. He, for some reason, shifted his eyes from Candy up toward the sky.

Candy couldn’t help but follow his gaze...

“What?”

...and saw a circle.

Actually, it was the bottom of a cone that expanded upward—specifically, it was Sandalphon, the Embryo of the gaol's second *Superior*—King of Berserk, Hannya.

The Embryo had appeared right above Sechs and Candy so suddenly that he might as well have teleported.

The very next moment, the massive cone smashed into them.

Candy—as well as Sechs taking Candy's form—were both *ground into the earth below*, immediately giving King of Plagues his next death penalty.

An encounter with people who were very different kinds of outliers than he was—this was what marked the beginning of Candy's life in the gaol.



Old Mahem

The battle between King of Plagues, Candy Carnage and Death Shadow Marie Adler ended with both of their deaths.

Functionally, it was a solid defeat for Candy, but regardless it was a battle that didn't leave much of a mark on the world. Once it was over, the combatants had both dissolved into light, Arcal had flown off, and Candy's bacteria were rapidly decreasing in numbers as they destroyed themselves without his direction.

Soon, Mahem would look exactly as it had before all of this had happened—just uninhabited.

However, there was something in this scene that stood out.

It was a split piece of headgear—none other than the Prototype Horobimaru-Star Helmet.

Once given to The Hero To'ori Kusanagi by an SUBM, it was then claimed by his murderer, Candy. Now it was lying on the ground, thoroughly destroyed.

Instead of vanishing alongside Candy, its remains were simply lying there, exposed to the wind that flowed across the field.

There was other loot that Candy and Marie had dropped in death, but the helmet had an aura that made it stand out from the rest.

Suddenly—perhaps because of the wind—the remains of the helmet shook a little.

“Dead host. Dead victor. None qualified. Grave damage.”

A faint voice, its source unclear, could be heard in the barren wasteland.

“Continued recording impossible. Prioritize current information. Incomplete. Abandoning. Unsatisfactory.”

The voice was coming from *the helmet itself*.

“Returning.”

With that one word, the helmet transformed into bits of light and vanished.

The sight resembled the death of a monster or a Master’s death penalty, but it was neither.

If To’ori or other seasoned warriors of Tenchi had been there, they might’ve noticed that the Resources comprising the helmet were flowing somewhere else.



Somewhere completely unknown, everything was obscured by darkness.

In the profound blackness of the deepest depths of an unimaginably deep cavern, outside of the reach of wind and rain and thus thoroughly unchanged since ancient times, there was a space that at first glance resembled a burial chamber.

Perhaps, though, this place was better likened to something with a far different purpose—a smithy, to be precise. There was a furnace, an anvil, and a hammer.

That was more than enough to make it a smithy even despite the fact that this was a crucible of pure darkness untouched by the rays of the sun or the glow of a fire, wasn’t it?

Now, however, the deep silence had a source. Absently floating in the heart

of the black smithy was what looked like little more than a haze.

Did this thing exist? Did it not? Even that much wasn't clear—but it was there regardless.

It must've been there—been *waiting*—for an obscenely long time.

"Retrieving." But then, the seemingly inert haze whispered that word, and something flowed into the darkness. The shapeless and invisible energy took form in the haze's hand.

The object was the now shattered Star Helmet.

"Incomplete." The haze echoed the words spoken by the helm itself.

"The Hero, The Arts, The Earth, King of Plagues, The Cannon, Over Wrestler, Death Shadow." The haze named some Superior Jobs—specifically, the ones that the owners of the helm had met or battled.

It almost felt as though it was lamenting something.

"Few. Insufficient. Unsatisfactory."

It voiced its displeasure with the fact that the number it counted was less than desirable.

The haze was the creator of the helmet, and what it wanted was for the item's owners to fight Superior Jobs.

It had even made the helm so it would seek out stronger and stronger wielders. In fact, while Candy had picked up the helmet off of To'ori's body himself, it would've moved to him even if he hadn't.

But now that Marie had destroyed the helmet before disappearing along with Candy himself, this feature had become meaningless. The helmet had no choice but to return to the haze, its goal incomplete.

"*Conflict knowledge inadequate.*" Disappointed though it was, the haze quickly took to action.

The furnace of the black smithy was lit for the first time in who knew how long, and its flame grew, melting the broken helmet. The haze took the hammer in hand and began working the metal that was left.

This task would clearly take him quite a long time.

“Begin. Perfect. First step.”

The haze’s—*his*—job was to repeat the same thing five times. Though the first step was incomplete, he had to fulfill his duty.

“Dedicate. Dependent. Task.”

This was something he’d decided he would do a long time ago.

Behind the scenes of the turbulent King of Plagues event, unknown to all, this being had taken to action.

This would eventually result in something fearsome taking center stage.

Interlude: A Story That Was Spoken and a Story Untold

Sorcerer Ray Starling

“...And that’s how I beat King of Plagues and became famous as the mysterious PK known as the *Superior* Killer. After this, I was flooded with contracts and had to count on help from the twin CEOs of DIN, among other things...and one of the jobs I got out of that led to our first meeting.”

I silently listened. Expanding upon the articles that speculated on her means and contained various other pieces of information, Marie had told me about the event and had now reached the conclusion I already knew—that the *Superior* Killer had defeated King of Plagues and sent him to the gaol.

“Well, with how big the whole thing was, there’s probably some stuff that I don’t know about it, so all I could really tell you was what I heard here in Altar and how the battle played out for me,” Marie said. “I also don’t know much about what King of Plagues has been doing after he was thrown into the gaol—though I did see that recent video of him being a little terrorist in there.”

“Oh yeah... I saw that too.”

Someone I’d known since our high school days—a fellow EGRS member—was a streamer and content creator who’d gotten sent to the gaol and occasionally made videos about it. He was eccentric to begin with and there weren’t a lot of people making gaol content, so those videos always got a good amount of views.

I’d watched some of them myself, and, well...that lip fetishist sure seemed to be the same as ever. Not that I approved of what he did, though Stealing the fairy queen Titania’s cup was a pretty crazy thing to do.

That aside...

“By the way, Marie...”

“Yes?”

“How would you describe King of Plagues? His appearance, I mean.” The news articles wrote about his deeds, but there was nothing about what he looked like.

“His appearance? Well, it was definitely pretty weird.”

Weirder than somebody wearing a business suit in a fantasy world? I thought.

“I mean, he wore *a samurai helmet and a raincoat*! That’s not exactly a look I’m ever going to forget.”

“Ohh, that *is* weird. I never met him, but I’m sure I’d recognize that outfit right away.”

“Well, he’s in the gaol now, so it’s not like we’ll ever see him again.” Marie had beaten King of Plagues, and Shu had beaten King of Crime, but no matter what they did, as long as they were Masters none of them could actually die. They would just come back once their death penalty expired—but if their sins were grave enough, they’d be sent to the gaol.

So far the only people who had made it out of there were people like Hannya, and knowing the extent of his crimes there was no chance that King of Plagues would ever get free.

I mean, it’s not like the security there is so lax that he could just escape, right?

“Anyway, that’s more or less how the King of Plagues incident went,” said Marie. “Do you have any more questions?”

“Just one.” There was actually one more thing that Marie probably knew about, but hadn’t yet mentioned. “It’s about the boy who survived. How did Mahr end up?”

I wanted to know about Marie’s client—the sole survivor of Mahem. Marie had neglected to mention what kind of life the boy had ended up living once all was said and done.

However, the only response I got was silence. Marie clearly looked like she didn’t know what to say.

“Was he sent to some orphanage?” I asked. “Wait, don’t tell me that he...”

Joined his friends and family? I completed the sentence in my head, feeling uneasy.

However, Marie’s answer didn’t align with my assumed worst-case scenario.

“I don’t know. I think that once it was all over, the dragon that helped me took him with him somewhere.”

The dragon who was a friend of The Hero and his tamed monster—the one that had gladly agreed to help Marie with her plan. With the boy having lost his family, friends, and homeland, that dragon was, in a way, the only connection he still had.

“His friend entrusted the boy to him, so...I guess the dragon took him into his own care?” I said.

“Probably. Well, the dragon seemed reasonable, so I’m sure that boy is living a decent life somewhere.”

Well, that seemed like a good enough outcome to me. I could only hope that the boy found *something* to live for in the time after the tragedy.



The following events occurred after the incident, yet were unknown even to Marie—the one who had finally ended it. Neither most of the players on the board nor human society at large could fully grasp the story that unfolded.



After King of Plagues’s Defeat, Kingdom of Altar, Ajani County

Mahr first heard of King of Plagues’s defeat from Arcal, then from the workers in the offices where he was currently staying.

With that, he understood that black mist—the professional killer—who had accepted his request had actually done what To’ori could not and defeated King of Plagues. The people here told Mahr that although Masters couldn’t die, the crimes King of Plagues had committed were so serious that he would never leave the gaol.

With the incident finally in the past, Altar was overcome by relief.

But now that it was all over, Mahr was left with *absolutely nothing*.

He'd lost his homeland, his family, his friends, and now even the person responsible for all of that loss was gone.

Recent examinations of Mahem's lands proved that the bacteria were on the decline and that it would soon be a place where people could live again, but that didn't mean anyone had survived.

The people that made up Mahr's life—those he had any ties to—were all dead.

In silence, Mahr looked back upon those days that would never return, his eyes fixed in the direction of Mahem. The office workers had already tried talking to Mahr about his life from now on, and the town had a state-sponsored orphanage that had asked if he would like to live there. The suggestion was made out of kindness on their part, and it was probably the best path Mahr could have taken, but Mahr just couldn't see it that way.

Altar was still Altar. It wasn't the homeland in which he'd lived his entire life so far.

The fact that the homeland was all but eradicated didn't change that.

The office workers concluded that the boy just needed time to think, and so they let him stay as long as he needed.

However, Mahr was planning to leave this place soon. He had no means of surviving on his own and would probably die, but he didn't feel that it would be a particularly unfortunate outcome. In fact, he was gradually feeling less and less of anything, becoming more hollow as time passed.

Even when Arcal or the people in Altar's government offices told him that King of Plagues was defeated, Mahr didn't feel anything that resembled happiness. It made the burden on him a little lighter, but he did not get any positive emotion out of the news.

Mahr didn't even feel sadness or rage anymore, let alone joy. The moment he'd asked the hit man to kill King of Plagues might've been the last time he'd felt any kind of intense emotion whatsoever.

Now, with a hollow heart, he merely stared in Mahem's direction from dawn until dusk.

But as he was doing exactly that, Mahr thought he saw something strange in the sky—a distortion in the air, so vague it would likely vanish if he glanced away.

This strange object that his eyes captured by pure chance seemed to have the shape of a creature. If his eyes weren't deceiving him, it looked like a translucent dragon, swimming through the sky.

"It has been long indeed since the eyes of mankind have caught my reflection." A moment after Mahr saw that hazy dragon, he heard an unfamiliar voice by his side.

Silently and showing little surprise, the boy looked toward its source. This was the second time something like this happened in a short while. It couldn't shock him any longer. His heart and mind had become too lifeless for that.

What Mahr saw looked like a miniaturized version of the dragon he'd seen in the sky. He couldn't tell dragons apart by their faces, but he felt as though this one was somewhat similar to the dragon he already knew—Arcal.

"This reflection is woven from spirit and nature's lingering magic. To witness it is a sign that your heart is profoundly hollow—that you are attached to nothing. There is not a single thing that concerns you now—even the question of your own life or death is a distant thing. Am I wrong?"

Mahr said nothing and didn't even nod in response, but he did feel that the dragon was right.

"Hmm," the dragon said. "So this is more than a state of mind."

The transparent dragon gazed into Mahr's eyes. It was no doubt an unsettling scene, but the boy wasn't scared in the least.

"Keh heh heh...how unusual indeed. You even have the talent. You carry what it takes to inherit the throne of the *lost Superior Job* that has stood vacant since the pre-ancient times."

"Hm...?" Mahr finally spoke.

“Had you not suffered a tragedy such as this, you would have died without this potential ever coming into bloom.” Mahr understood the spectral dragon’s words, but the deeper meaning was lost on him.

It almost seemed as though it was saying that Mahr was...*special*.

“Young Mahr.” The dragon spoke the boy’s name easily, as though he already knew everything about him. “You *are* special.” The creature clearly affirmed the very thing that Mahr had assumed was a misapprehension. “Were you to train with me, you would soon—at least in terms of *the outside world’s time*—become a being of great power. You would be someone truly *special*, just like The Hero himself.”

Silence.

“Shall I take you under my wing?” the dragon asked.

To become special, just like The Hero To’ori Kusanagi—this used to be one of Mahr’s greatest desires. He’d dreamed of being someone truly special and living out amazing adventures.

Back then, he would’ve immediately agreed to all of this, but there were things he’d come to understand since those days. He now knew that being special didn’t stop To’ori from feeling exactly the same way, and Mahr had realized with painful clarity that the adventures he’d envisioned were nothing but catastrophes for most everyone involved.

Mahr no longer wanted anything *special*. What he wanted—what his nearly hollow heart wished for—were those simple days that would never come back.

“I’m not going. I don’t need it.”

That was why he responded to the dragon’s offer with a slow shake of his head. If this upset the dragon and drove it to eat him alive, Mahr wouldn’t even run.

The boy no longer needed to be special. There was nothing that he wanted at all. He didn’t even desire to keep living.

He was “■?#.”

“Very well...”

Upon hearing Mahr's answer, the dragon nodded...

"You pass."

...and as he proclaimed this, a veil of light began enveloping Mahr's body.

"Hm...?" Mahr said. To some, this would seem like an attack. Mahr seemed to be obviously in danger, yet he wasn't shocked or surprised or anything like that.

However, he did have a question: what did the dragon mean by "You pass?"

"You lose your right to it the moment you seek it," the dragon said. "That is why it is lost, that is why it presents such a challenge...and that is why you are deserving. And although you shall not seek it yourself, it does not mean that I will turn a blind eye to you." The dragon cracked an obviously joyful smile. "A piece this peculiar is not one I would idly remove from the board. As I wish to continue spectating the game, I shall take you with me and have you grow."

Mahr said nothing, but he realized that the answer he'd thought would make the dragon mad had actually made it more interested in him than before.

He would now be enveloped in this orb of light, stored away, and probably taken somewhere far off.

However, the boy didn't intend to struggle against what was happening to him. While he might've not been seeking life or power, he also didn't exactly desire death.

He wasn't attached to anything. He was nothing but a stray child who'd lost sight of anything that could tie him to the world.

When Mahr was fully embraced by light, the door to his room burst into pieces.

Stepping over the remains of the door, a man—Arcal in his human form—entered the room.

"Father...!"

"Kye heh heh...Arcal? I see you've kept yourself well all this time."

The reflection of the dragon—one of the three dragon kings, Skydragon King, Drac-Heaven—chuckled as he welcomed his son.

“Mahr...!” Seeing the boy, enveloped in an orb of light, Arcal grew pale.

The boy had been entrusted to him by a late friend. If Mahr didn’t wish to go into an orphanage in Altar, Arcal had planned to invite the boy to travel the world with him. He hoped that the journey could help cure the boy’s hollow heart.

But now that he actually came to present this offer, he found Mahr with someone else—his own father.

“What do you intend to do with him...?!” Arcal cried. It was very likely that his father had been watching—*spectating*—the entire King of Plagues incident. And through the chaos, for some reason his attention had fixed on Mahr.

Arcal asked his father about his plans for the boy, and the Skydragon King replied, not hiding a thing.

“I will take him to the Border Mountain Belt—no, to the Timedragon’s Mausoleum.”

“Ah...! Mother’s...?!”

“Kyeh heh heh. The custodians ordered me to never let in any Masters, never use it to enhance monsters, and destroy it rather than allow them to set foot in it... But they have not told me anything about letting tians in. This is most appropriate.”

The Timedragon’s Mausoleum was a profoundly special place.

For Arcal, it was his mother’s grave. And for the rest of the world, it was the most unique *natural dungeon* that existed.

“Listen, Arcal.” As Arcal grew more and more confused, unable to read his father’s intentions, the Skydragon King spoke to him in a voice only he could hear. “No matter where you are, all that lives will eventually die. Lunnings and Mahem are no different in this regard.”

Arcal’s eyes widened. Both of those were places where he’d lost close friends. At Lunnings, Arcal had even died himself; at Mahem he’d come close to dying again.

“Even your power may not be enough to protect him,” Arcal’s father

continued. “Surely you are aware of this?”

“Yes.” Recalling these heavy defeats, Arcal nodded with a bitter face.

“The turmoil in this world will only continue to grow, and the only way those living here can ensure their survival is to become as powerful as they can possibly be. And the optimal means of achieving this goal lies under my wing.”

Arcal was silent. As one who had already experienced death, he knew well that his father spoke the truth.

“Have faith in me. I would have Mahr gain the power to survive by himself—make him powerful enough to *at the very least*, win against King of Plagues as he is now.”

As he grinned, the Skydragon King and the light orb containing Mahr both began to vanish.

“Father...”

“If you are still concerned, feel free to visit now and again. Although...considering the environment, this might not even take a month to achieve.”

With that, the Skydragon King and Mahr vanished from the room. They were likely already in the Border Mountain Belt.

All that was left was silence. Arcal’s face was bitter and full of anguish, yet he was unable to deny the truth of his father’s words.

He also knew that his father kept his promises. There was no doubt that Mahr would be granted special powers, even if he himself didn’t desire them.

“If I too...” Perhaps Arcal could have contradicted his father if he’d been stronger than he was—and perhaps if he’d been stronger long ago, he might not have lost so many friends in the first place, and Mahr’s heart might not have ended up as hollow as it was.

Following that thought, he reached the conclusion that he had to address his own powerlessness before he could deny his father.

And thus, he also left the room.



When the people working in the office arrived, all they found was a broken door. They tried searching for Mahr, but even with the use of skills, they couldn't find any trace of him.

And with that, this little incident that followed King of Plagues's defeat became a cold case.

After all, no one would ever come to the absurd conclusion that the Skydragon King had taken the boy to the Border Mountain Belt—even though that was exactly the truth.

Conjunction: From the Depths

Imperial Capital, Vandelheim

In the heart of the imperium's capital, there was an immense mechanical structure—Throne of the Imperium, Dryfe Imperstand.

It was a fortress that doubled as Dryfe's palace, and *tripled* as their oldest and strongest weapon. All of the imperium's political activity was centered in it and around it.

It could even be said that if the Imperstand fell, so would Dryfe itself.

In a silent office within the Imperstand, there was a single woman sitting with her eyes closed.

Her name was Claudiah Reinhard Dryfe. Publicly, she was the sister of the emperor as well as Dryfe's strongest martial artist—The Ram.

In reality, *she* was the emperor, as well as the imperium's greatest engineer—King of Machines—and even held the title of Emperor Machina.

She was the bearer of multiple lives as well as her many titles.

There were two special things about her that made her capable of this.

First, it was her own talents as a “High-End.”

Most of those who were called by this term were the rare individuals who stood out among their kind for the natural talents that had manifested in them. High-End Dragons were a major example, although there were cases when the title was given to created monsters like undead.

However, job holders—tians—that were considered High-Ends only came about once every several centuries, and perhaps it was this rarity that made them stand out among their kind far more than the High-Ends of monster species.

Master avatars had an affinity for all jobs, but tian High-Ends often possessed talents so far outside the norm that it dwarfed even that advantage. In addition

to that, these High-Ends were gifted with vast amounts of information about the world.

Claudiah was the High-End tian of this era, and that was why she could be both The Ram and King of Machines, bearing Superior Jobs both martial and technological.

Right now, this paragon of unspeakable talent was sitting on a chair in a lightless office, eyes closed as if sleeping, immobile and silent as the dead.

This was a kind of contemplation or meditation—but despite appearances, she wasn't doing it alone.

Within her, a discussion raged between two people.

“The limit has almost been reached,” one said. “I wonder if Altimia will agree to our suggestion.”

“It will be optimal if she does—for us, and for her.”

The people talking were both Claudiah, but the personality—the *program*—was different.

This was the second special thing that made her what she was—the ability to shape her personality.

Ever since Claudiah was young, she had possessed the talent to create new personalities that were better suited for specific goals. It wasn't clear if this ability came from her nature as a High-End or if it was merely a talent she happened to have, but she'd used it to create several personalities.

The first of them was Reinhard. It was the oldest personality, as well as her base. With just a few modifications, this personality had become fit to be both a politician and an engineer. He was a brother for Claudiah, the holder of the job King of Machines, and the emperor who wished to save Dryfe and make it thrive.

The second one was Claudiah herself. Born through modification of her inner self following her meeting with the First Princess of Altar, Altimia, this served as her current main personality.

Claudiah was Dryfe's strongest martial artist—a combatant of unbelievable

skill. She was a sister, the holder of the job The Ram, and Altimia's friend.

There was a third one, but it could barely even qualify as a full personality. It was a shapeless thing that was more like an aggregate of the information the first two had acquired as a High-End.

This proto-personality provided directives that had to be fulfilled for the sake of the world—one of which was the defeat of The Evil. It was more of a *duty* than a person, but it was certainly not something Claudiah could ignore.

Claudiah Reinhard Dryfe's mental activities were a discussion between these three. This was true even when deciding what actions to take against Altar.

Reinhard the emperor. Claudiah the friend. All the information available to both of them as a High-End. They would each gauge their goals, and Reinhard, specialized in strategy, would craft a plan to achieve them.

This was why their operations were primarily focused on ensuring that Dryfe thrived, but the will of the other two was never completely ignored. That meant their actions oftentimes ended up being *less optimal than they could be*.

If they truly wanted to do what was best as an emperor, they would have either shown Altar less mercy or been more considerate of Altimia. However, as her friend, Claudiah would make some actions slightly more gentle than they had to be, while the information provided by the High-End sometimes pushed for being truly merciless toward the kingdom that most likely harbored The Evil.

This was a conflict that existed because Claudiah was who she was, and cutting off any part of her would make her stop being *her*.

Without Reinhard, the dying Imperium would be unable to survive—and without Claudiah, she would have no reason to live on as a person. And if she was to ignore the directive provided to her by her instincts, the world would fall apart and end.

That was why they had no choice but to proceed while somehow appeasing all three, no matter what failures it led to.

"If she refuses the War Game I suggested—Tri-Flags—that would mean our only option is a standard War—a nonconsensual, indiscriminate conflict that would last until one side was eradicated," Reinhard said. "I'm certain she

already knows well that that is the worst-case scenario.”

“That’s true.”

The postwar acts of Dryfe-sponsored terrorism in Gideon, Quartierlatin, and Altea, the warlike conflict that had broken out between Caldina and Granvaloa... Altimia must have reached one particular conclusion based on these things. That conclusion could only be that Masters who still had available save points posed an immense danger.

Masters who came back from death in just three days were, in a way, suicide bombers that never truly died. If they were *Superiors*, sending them to battle every time they came back was akin to dropping a nuclear bomb on the enemy country every three days.

Becoming aware of this reality would make it clear that traditional War was an awful idea. It would be a painful conflict of attrition where both sides would gradually lose everything except their Masters.

The most logical solution to this problem was the War Game that Reinhard had proposed—a winner-takes-all War that involved only their inexhaustible Masters. At the very least, this option would prevent both countries from losing their people or resources. If Altar won, Dryfe could do nothing to resist as the kingdom took whatever they wanted. If Dryfe won, they’d acquire vast food resources and bolster their Master count enough to stand against Caldina and other nations—not to mention that they would gain the opportunity to take action against the most pressing issue of all. They would even be able to make the kingdom accept conditions more taxing than the ones they’d tried to push for during the peace talks.

“If we win under these rules, all of our desires will be fulfilled,” Reinhard said. “The imperium would be out of its predicament, Altimia would still be alive, and we will be able to search Altar for The Evil and do away with it.”

“This would be far easier if it were just the first two.”

Indeed—it was because of The Evil—the reset device left behind by the *Infinite Jobs*—that Claudiah’s and Reinhard’s goals had become so immensely difficult to accomplish.

Because it automatically grew as it absorbed the Resources of the dead, The Evil would no doubt awaken if ignored. It was like a time bomb whose explosive power constantly grew as its timer ticked down.

That was why Reinhard had decided that it had to be eliminated as soon as possible, even if it meant acting in haste. After all, the info they had as a High-End had already told them that The Evil had been born.

“That is also the main source of the conflict with the previous king. The country born through the destruction of The Evil turned out to be the least aware of the threat that it poses. It’s as if someone purposely tampered with their information,” said Reinhard.

Before the previous War, Reinhard had used a hotline to have a discussion with King Eldor. He’d requested that Altar provide Dryfe with food, while also speaking of The Evil and the GAME OVER that it would awaken.

However, the kingdom was oblivious to most of what Reinhard had said about The Evil. While they knew a great deal about Sacred King and the others who had defeated it, they were so thoroughly unaware of the true power and nature of The Evil that it seemed strange. Their knowledge didn’t go far beyond the vague outline of “a powerful entity with many dependents that claimed the ruins of King of Kings’ capital once he was gone.”

This created a major difference in awareness between Eldor—who knew little—and Reinhard—who had immense knowledge as a High-End.

And when Reinhard had said that he would find The Evil and deal with it, the king had asked, “How far are you willing to go to kill The Evil—this creature of legend?”

Imagining the worst-case scenario, Reinhard had this to say in response: “Worst comes to worst, I would have to kill every inhabitant of at least one city—most likely Altea.”

Needless to say, the king didn’t agree to that, and he likely would not have even if he understood the threat as well as Reinhard did. The proposal was simply that outrageous.

However, Reinhard could not lie about this matter. The two countries had

exchanged a covenant that prevented them both from using the hotline to speak falsehoods.

That was why Reinhard had been honest about how far he would go to solve this problem—and it was precisely because it wasn't a lie that Eldor decided to end the alliance between Dryfe and Altar. Perhaps he thought that Reinhard was a delusional madman driven by the imagined threat of The Evil, but there could have been any number of reasons behind that decision.

“If we can't find The Evil by searching for it, we have no choice but to eliminate the entire area where we believe it to be,” Claudiah said. “The tians of modern times cannot win against The Evil of this generation.”

Even the previous The Evil had required the combined power of the strongest tians from the western side of the continent. The overall power of tians had only dropped since, and many Superior Jobs had since been claimed by Masters. Claudiah was a High-End, yes, but this enemy was too great even for her.

The Evil grew stronger with every generation, and this one would no doubt be the strongest ever seen.

“Perhaps King of Kings might have put up a direct fight against it.” While this wasn't a *Special* Superior Job, it was a Superior Job with extremely strict conditions—but the fact that Reinhard would bring up this one-of-a-kind tian powerhouse made it clear just how desperate the situation was.

“With her final contact, Zeta confirmed to have seen something that looked like The Evil within the capital. In a way, this may be a worst-case scenario, but it should lead to a better result than the one promised by the GAME OVER.”

What Reinhard wanted to learn by attacking Altea was The Evil's location. The Evil automatically retaliated against attacks, so he expected to find it by committing an act of terror in the capital—its most likely location.

Of course, initiating combat around The Evil came with the risk of increasing its level and maybe causing it to unlock some skills. But if it was still in its early stages, knowing its location would be enough for Reinhard to find a way to counter it.

“But we haven’t heard from Zeta since then,” Reinhard pointed out.

“Indeed. We haven’t received information from her, and it’s unclear how the preparations for plan C went. But if we have confirmation for that, we will be able to be a bit more forceful about initiating Tri-Flags.”

None of Claudiah’s facets had heard from Zeta—the one who’d led the assault on Altea—ever since they talked after the battle during the peace talks, and she thought that perhaps Zeta might have gotten the death penalty and been sent to the gaol. When she’d had Behemot check the internet on the other side, however, she hadn’t found anything that suggested that. The Masters posting guides and other information about the gaol mentioned that a sudden virus had spread and given everyone there the death penalty, and that the café owned by a *Superior* had gone on break, but there was nothing about Zeta.

Where she was and what she was doing were completely unknown. Until that was clear, Claudiah had to think about how to proceed with the Tri-Flags negotiations. And while that was in limbo, Dryfe had invited two more *Superiors* to join them, while Altar was trying to grow stronger through their Tournaments.

It was worth noting, though, that Behemot was bound by a contract with Tsukuyo Fuso where she’d received healing in exchange for promising not to fight for a month after the peace talks had ended.

“As long as we don’t know what the others are planning, we can’t remain inactive for long.” As mentioned before, the biggest reason Claudiah wasn’t able to take the most optimal course of action was because her three goals conflicted in one way or another. However, the problem extended far beyond Claudiah Reinhard Dryfe’s inner world.

She made her moves according to what she saw on the board. However, the board was now covered in Masters—people who were more or less unbound, yet had immense power that made them practically walking bombs.

Among them, there was the piece known as “Ray Starling,” who might break her—and Dryfe’s—plans without even being aware that he was playing on a game board at all.

These pieces that Claudiah could not account for were nothing but nuisances

in her eyes.

And of course, there were others who looked down at this same board and played just as she did, oftentimes getting in her way.

They all watched the board from a different position than Claudiah, making their own moves.

The “player” in the kingdom of Altar had always been the Arch Sage—or to be more precise, the ones who had roots in the long-gone pre-ancient civilization. Driven by vengeance, their goal was to eliminate the current custodians, and they showed little care about the damage they would bring upon this era.

The previous Arch Sage had died in a battle against Claudiah’s friend, Behemot, but he had already been replaced by his successor. Arch Sage Flagman had always passed down his will and knowledge to the most promising of his disciples, and the Arch Sages had long been accompanied by entities that supported them—Crystal Tuners. They were no doubt scattered here and there, doing various covert operations that would further their goals.

The second player was the custodians that the Arch Sage was trying to defeat.

It wasn’t clear how much they knew or what their goals were. Not even a High-End like Claudiah had any information about these mysterious outsiders.

The information she’d been granted contained nothing about Masters either.

Because of this, she knew that these custodians were entities from a different game that had joined after the current one began.

Because of this, she knew that they were alien beings who could do nothing against The Evil.

Because of this, she didn’t know *what* their limits were—or what would set them off.

She didn’t know their rules, and it wasn’t clear to her what would drive them to kill someone.

It was because of this that after the battle at the peace talks was over, Claudiah couldn’t tell Altimia the details of what she knew. At the very least, their actions during The Era of the Peerless Three, as well as the many

dangerous UBM's they'd dealt with in history, made it reasonable to assume their goal was to preserve the world.

But that had changed after Masters grew in number. The SUBMs that had appeared since, as well as their lack of action concerning Irregularities such as Corpse Stronghold, threw doubt on that position.

And then there was one more player with a hand upon the board—the final and perhaps the closest thing that Claudiah had to a true enemy.

“I’m especially curious about the actions of the witch. The many incidents in Caldina, the clash with Granvaloa... I do not believe for a moment that she didn’t foresee that these things would put her country in jeopardy,” Reinhard said.

The president of Caldina, the woman often called a “witch”—La Place Phantasma. Said to have the power to see the future, she was, in a way, a player in this game who was more mysterious than even the custodians. Looking at how things had played out so far, she was one of the reasons for Dryfe’s current dire state, and she was now pushing it toward war. Additionally, she had many Masters under her command.

When all was considered, it seemed like she was planning to eventually take control of the entire world.

However, there was something that didn’t add up.

If she wanted Caldina to thrive, there must’ve been better ways to go about it. The clash with Granvaloa was the thing that stood out the most in that regard—how did a country that prospered through trade benefit from taking part in such a conflict?

And for someone who seemed to possess supernatural foresight...she really seemed to be very hands off when it came to the incidents caused by the Treasurebeast Orbs that had spread throughout Caldina. Instead of stopping the incidents themselves, she’d let Sefirot take care of the mess *after* they’d already happened.

It almost seemed as though her goal was to *increase* casualties.

Claudiah’s powerful brain had tried to find a reason for the president’s

strange behavior, but she didn't have enough information to arrive at a good answer.

"Perhaps she died and was replaced by someone else?" she suggested.

"Like how I replaced our late brother?" Officially, Reinhard was the emperor as Claudiah's twin brother, Reinhard Claudiah Dryfe. After the real Reinhard died in an act of terrorism when they were young, Claudiah's Reinhard personality had acted as a suitable replacement.

"Perhaps an unforeseen accident claimed her life, but she prepared a replacement to act as though she's alive and prevent the country from falling apart. That is not impossible, but..."

If that were true, then the witch's replacement was incompetent. One could say that it was the reverse of Dryfe's situation, where the real Reinhard had been an ordinary imperial child, while Claudiah was a High-End.

However, it was hard to imagine that someone who saw the future could die in a random accident. This made less sense the more Claudiah thought about it.

Letting out a breath, Reinhard—now the dominant personality—put an end to his considerations and returned to his duties.

He didn't have to process information or discuss anything to be busy—he had mountains of emperor work to attend to.

With a wave of his hand, a magic light lit up the dark room. He then looked over the documents on his table, giving his approval and signing them.

But then, his eyes stopped on one piece of paper.

"Right, the kingdom's Tournaments are about to enter the final day." The paper contained information from DIN, showing the results of day nine—everyone who'd made it past the preliminaries and how each battle had ended. "There's something strange about this Tournament, though..."

"Oh yeah, one of the UBMs escaped," Claudiah remarked. Claudiah and Behemot both had heard of what had happened on day six.

However, Reinhard shook his head.

"That's not what I mean, Claudiah." While they possessed the same

knowledge, Claudiah and Reinhard had different perspectives and thought patterns. That was why one could notice things the other didn't. "You'll notice that something isn't right if you look at each day's winners, as well as those who made it past the preliminaries."

"Hm...?" Reinhard laid the nine Tournament charts on the desk. The ones at the top were either top ranking Altarian Masters, or ones who had solved various problems on Altar's behalf, so nothing stood out as unusual.

"Besides the fact that it's mostly familiar names from Altar, I don't see anythi... Ohh."

Claudiah finally realized what wasn't right with these results.

Having reached a common understanding, Reinhard whispered within his mind.

"Well...I wonder who made *this* move."



Thus continued the secret conflict between the players who treated the world as their game board.

Conspiracies, strategies, demonic plots, and divine plans... Something that no mere pawn could measure was taking place in Altar—specifically, Gideon.

But it had to be noted that although there might have been a few "players" who directed the world as they wished, they certainly weren't the only ones with influence over it.

There were countless people moving across the world, and there were many who acted with *so little thought* that these "players" couldn't begin to compare. Naturally, some of them were irregularities—uncertain variables—that stood outside their plotting...

...and yet still had the power to flip the board.



City of Duels, Gideon

Following the end of The Tournaments day nine, the city was overcome by a

festive mood.

Actually, it had been like this for the entire period of the event. Countless duel fans could be seen talking about their favorite matches, betting winners were squandering their newfound fortunes, and the losers were drowning their sadness in booze.

The winner of today's Tournament was a non-ranker—a man called Grimms, belonging to a group known as the Fairytale Squad. The other contestants were no joke, yet by some miracle this dark horse had won the day. Because of this, the betting sphere was far more lively than usual.

Even so, it was unlikely that the current mood would surpass how things would be tomorrow.

The next day was The Tournaments' final one, a big event with a big prize—the right to challenge a Mythical UBM

Those who'd already been revealed as participants were Bishmal the Raging Blaze and Catherine Kongou of the Four Underworlds.

And most importantly, there was the *Superior*, Gideon's king of duels—Over Gladiator Figaro.

There was no doubt that the spectators were in for a hell of a show on the next day. Because of this, there were many tourists and traders who were hurrying through the gates despite the late hour, rushing to make it to the final day.

"I'm here. I'm finally here!"

Among these new arrivals, there was a girl dressed somewhat strangely. She walked along the road linking Gideon to Legendaria, passing the south gate as she entered the city.

"It's so lively. And it's more developed than my hometown! That kind of annoys me!"

Her appearance was certainly eye-catching. She had light purple hair that reached down to her knees and spread voluminously across her shoulders. On her head, rising from between all this hair, were a pair of goat horns. A thin *tail*

extended from her lower back, and her eyes were as golden as the moon hanging in the night sky.

Her appearance was more or less in line with a typical fictional devil girl.

“It’s festival season here too!” she said. “It looks so fun! I’m right on time!” Smiling broadly, the girl walked along the pavement. Despite it being night, she held a *parasol* that she poked into the stone, using it like a walking stick.

Strangely enough, she didn’t stand out from the crowd as much as she could have. Though her appearance wasn’t normal, it wasn’t out of the question for someone from Legendaria. Especially for a Legendarian with a crest on her left hand—a Master.

Since Gideon was a colorful city full of many races and Masters, she blended in it as though she had always been part of it.

“Eh heh heh. Where to start? What to do? I’ve never been to Gideon before. It’s so exciting! I’d love to see all the kinds of duels you can’t get in Legendaria, and I’d love to surprise *brother dearest* with a sudden visit. Oh, I also wanna try that popcorn I heard about.”

Like a teenager excited to have arrived at a popular tourist spot, she was the very picture of joy.

Such sentiments were also commonplace in this city. It didn’t make her seem unusual and blended into the excited crowd without issue.

“Oh, but first of all, before all that...”

But if there was someone who *did* look closer...if there was someone who could see her stats, currently hidden by her equipment, she wouldn’t be counted as one of the masses for long.

What was she, then?

The answer to that lay in the *small crown*, sitting proudly on top of her head.

One of her colleagues, so to speak—*Overlord Acedia ZZZ*—had once described her like so: she was...

“Where’s the guy who beat my brother? The one my dear King of Light is so infatuated with? Where’s *Ray Starling*?”

...the *most “Overlord-ish” among them.*

Thus, from the depths of Legendaria, came the second Overlord.

To Be Continued



Afterword



Cat: “WE ARE SO SORRY WE ANNOUNCED THIS VOLUME FOR SUMMER, YET RELEASED IT IN AUTUMN!”

Xun: “I’m Xun, shOrt for Xunyu. StArtin’ off with thE apology, huh?”

Cat: “The announcement has been off for four volumes in a row nowww... Oh, and I’m the Cat, Cheshire.”

Xun: “Well, the maximUm frequEncy of releases beforE was six months, yet it endEd up bein’ sevEn this time, sO...”

Cat: “This may sound like an excuse, but the author has yet to miss a single deadline...”

Xun: “There’s lOtS of people involved in gEttin’ these books out, so not everythin’ wOrks out all the time, y’know?”

Cat: “Yeah...and that’s why WE’LL MAKE THE NEXT ANNOUNCEMENT EVEN LESS SPECIFIC!”

Xun: “Bro, that’s nOt it at all.”

Cat: “This is the only way the author can prevent any further misses with the limited power he has!”

Xun: “Really...?”

Cat: “Anyway, time for the author’s own words!”

Dearest readers, thank you for your purchase. I am Sakon Kaidou.

Volume 21 is closer to a collection of short stories, which is something we haven’t had in a while—volume 10 was the last one like this.

This time I ended up adding various scenes and tried to make them more connected. A good example of this is how AT's baby steps in original magic are used as groundwork for the later introduction of Candy's impressive and powerful False God Imitation. And that is far from the only Candy-related thing that you can find here that is not in the WN.

Now, as far as writing goes, it was mentioned above that I haven't missed a single deadline, and that is the truth. However, it should be noted that I'm pushed to the limit fairly often—I'm writing this very afterword on the final day before the deadline.

This is a result of the volume creation process. The problem is that I can't know how many pages I have for the afterword before the edits, illustrations, next volume announcements, and advertisements for other works are in place and the amount of pages they will take up has been nailed down. The afterword always comes after everything else and has the tightest deadline. It's quite scary, if you ask me.

Now, as for the reason I'd write about that topic... It's because I was told I have four pages to work with, yet all I can really write here is an apology and an announcement. Yes, I'm simply dragging this out.

Anyway, this volume 21 came out at the exact same time as volume 12 of the manga. That shows the end of the long battle against Franklin, drawn with Kami Imai's immense skill, so please do pick it up and have a look. Personally, I love just how obvious it is that Baldr can transform, as well as the zany background Masters that really stick out like nothing else.

Speaking of the manga, the deadline for the short story about Lobohta's adventures that would come with the new volume is the end of September, and I intend to work on it right after this. Do go and see if I made it in time.

Next, I have an announcement about the next volume of the LN.

I imagine that the character who made her debut at the end, complete with an illustration, was quite a surprise for both readers of the LN as well as readers of the WN.

Volume 22 will focus on two things—the final day of The Tournaments and Overlord Invidia. There was no sign or trace of her at this point in the WN, but

here she is now.

The events involving her are just like volume 17, in that they were both things I'd plotted out and planned to write in Crow Record if it happened to continue. Sadly, that did not work out, but I am glad to have a chance to bring it to life here in the LN. As you could see in the last illustration, Taiki quickly whipped up a wonderful character design for her, which I found very motivating.

Having to add vast amounts of text to the story makes my job noticeably more difficult, but I will do what I can to satisfy all those of you reading, as well as to not miss any of my deadlines.

Please continue supporting *Infinite Dendrogram*.

"When I'm done writing the draft, I'm gonna make an Embryo crest decal in *Armored Core VI*..."

Xun: "...Did oUr guy just put up a deAth flag?"

Cat: "Looks like iit... Anyway, that's it for the afterword. That means it's time for the announcement!"

Xun: "I feEl like we should just stOp doin' them. You can't gEt the date wrong if you don't annOunce it."

Cat: "No! That's the pessimist's way of dealing with it! We won't miss the release period this time! VOLUME 22 IS SET TO COME OUT IN THE FIRST HALF OF 2024!"

Xun: "All that mOtivation, and you shOt out the vaguest announcemEnt ever."

Cat: "That should work as insurance, but we'll try to get it out in March!"



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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 21

by Sakon Kaidou

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