



Sakon Kaidou

Illustrator: Taiki

Infinite 4endrogram

7. The Shield of Miracles



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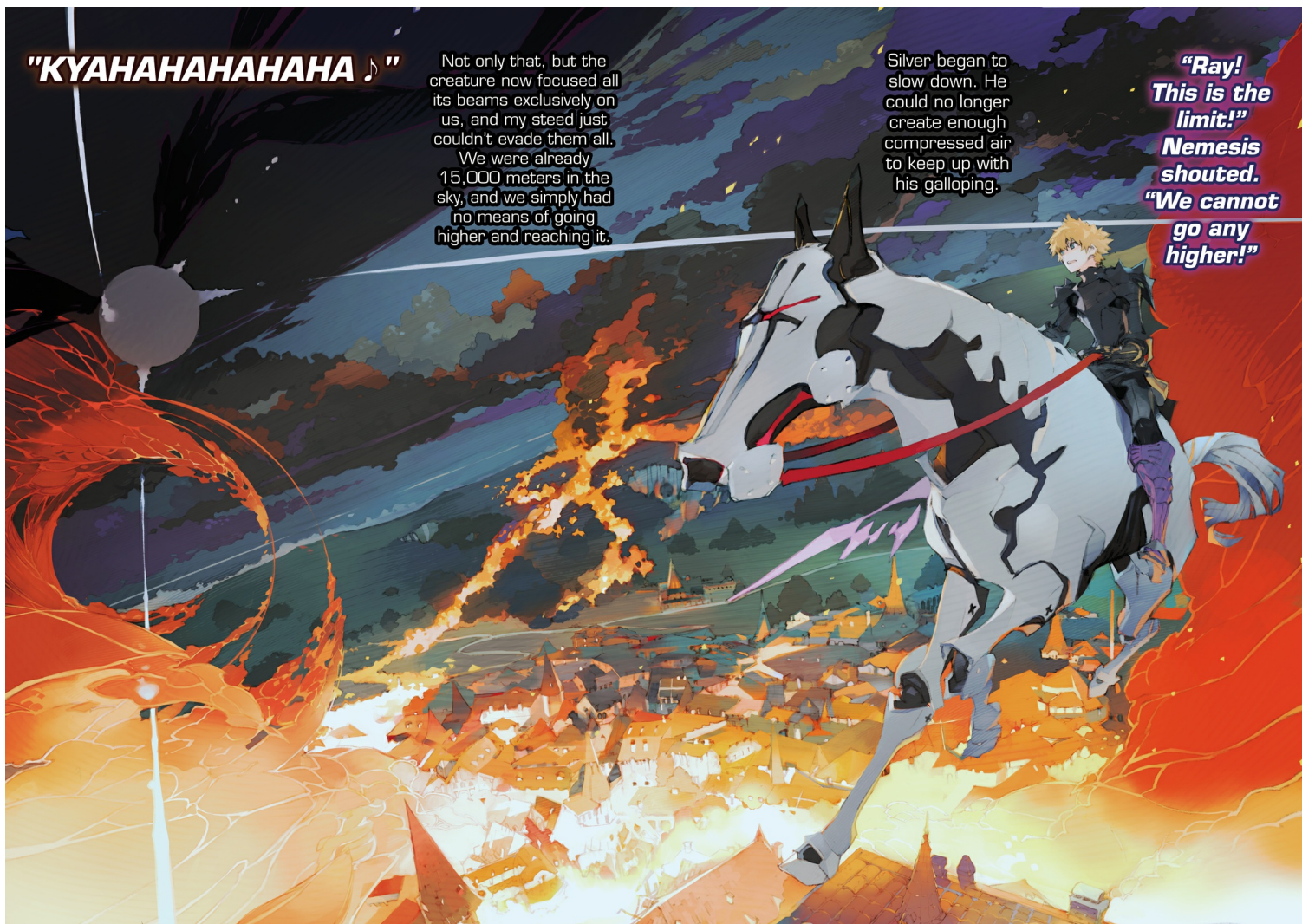
"KYAHHAHAHAHAHA ♪ "

Not only that, but the creature now focused all its beams exclusively on us, and my steed just couldn't evade them all.

We were already 15,000 meters in the sky, and we simply had no means of going higher and reaching it.

Silver began to slow down. He could no longer create enough compressed air to keep up with his galloping.

**"Ray!
This is the
limit!"
Nemesis
shouted.
"We cannot
go any
higher!"**



As Ray swung, the
five-bladed star was
disconnected from its
handle and soared
high into the sky.
It was both a shooting
star and a windstar.

A prayer to let it
reach far and wide.
And thus it flew.

***“Payback
Beyond
the
Stars!”***



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Conjunction Episode: The Tale of a Star

Centuries Ago

Long ago, something star-like floated high up in *Infinite Dendrogram's* night sky.

It was best described as a jet-black mass of rock hanging in the border between outer space and the planet. It spent its days bathing in sunlight, gathering it within itself, and then releasing any excesses come nighttime.

The light emitted allowed it to blend in with the countless stars brightening the night sky, and because it didn't seem to belong to any constellation, the astronomers of that era often described it as a "vagrant star."

That term couldn't be less fitting. It was no star, but a type of monster.

An elemental, to be precise. It wasn't even special enough to wear the crown of "UBM." Though the fact that it had never seen others of its kind might've made it "unique," it wouldn't have come as a surprise if it had been discovered that others like it were floating around in other skies.

But its mind was much like that of a plant, so the existence of its kin, or lack thereof, didn't bother it at all. It merely bathed in light during the day, and shone as a star during the night, paying no heed to anything around it and displaying no signs of consciousness.

No joys or woes, no friends or foes — it was a being made up of nothing but *itself*.

However, it eventually underwent a major shift.

It was caused by a light. Not one coming from the starry skies above, but from the planet down beneath.

For a shine coming from below, the light was unusually strong. So much so that it entered the creature's field of vision and caused it to become something entirely different. What it actually saw was lost to all but itself, but the sight's

effect on it was very clear.

It stopped being a mere decorative object up the night sky. Neither rock nor plant or animal, it became an entity. It became the epitome of fear.

Thus, with great dread in their hearts, the people began calling it “Blacksky.”

Chapter One: The Black Shield

Paladin, Ray Starling

Nemesis had revealed that she'd finally evolved to her third form. The long month of waiting since the battle against Gardrandia had finally paid off.

I wasn't really sure how to feel about just... waking up to this, though. It felt so anticlimactic.

Well, sure, I didn't want all our evolutions to be as dramatic and intense as the first one, but at the very least, it could've come after a battle or something, like the evolutions had for Rook and Babi.

I mentioned this minor peeve to B3, and according to her, evolutions that happened while the Master was sleeping weren't all that uncommon. Sometimes, Embryos needed a bit of time to do the required processing, and the completion could easily coincide with the Master's sleeping.

Basically, not every evolution was as flashy and instant as our first one.

B3 also added that "Evolutions like this often happen when you have more than enough experience and growth energy, but you aren't sure what kind of direction you want your next form to take."

That fit my situation. I was two forms behind Rook, so I definitely had more than enough EXP and energy. And the fact that the evolution had finally come could only mean that the "direction" had been set.

Anyway, let's check it out, I thought. I wonder if it'll have a theme. Undead? Demonic, perhaps?

I was probably just imagining it, but I thought I heard my right Miasmaflame Bracer respond with, "You have a demon right here, you know?"

Then we had breakfast and went outside to test the new form.

The sun was shining, there wasn't a cloud in the sky, and a pleasant wind caressed my cheeks. I couldn't ask for a better day for this.

We were standing on the Shijima family's grounds. While we were eating breakfast, I'd asked Farica if we could use this place. She'd gladly allowed it, but she'd also asked us not to turn the lawn upside down. Though Shijima was gone, Farica was doing her best to make sure both he and his mount, Gringham, would feel right at home when they returned, and we had to respect this sentiment.

"You ready?" I asked.

"Yes," replied Nemesis.

She was currently in her first form, a greatsword, and I was about to turn her into her third.

With us were B3 and Louie, who seemed visibly intrigued. Farica couldn't join since she had work to do at home.

"Nemesis, third form."

"Form Shift — []"

"Hm?" For reasons unknown, I couldn't hear her say the name of the form. It was as though it was drowned out by noise. "Wait, Nemesis, what did you just — oh?!"

She finished transforming while I was still confused by her words, so the thing she became caught me off guard and made me lose my balance.

"Whoa..." I was now holding Nemesis in her third form.

From the very first glance, it was obvious that it had a completely different nature than the other two forms.

While the greatsword and the halberd were clearly weapons, this was an object large enough to cover me whole.

It was a *giant, circular shield*.



“First it comes when I’m asleep, and now this,” I muttered. “This evolution is surprising in more ways than one.”

“I share your sentiment completely,” said Nemesis. “‘The Black Shield’ is apt for this form, I’d say.”

From a greatsword to a halberd to a... shield? Honestly, I wasn’t seeing the connection here.

I grabbed its lengthy handle and tried moving it around. Sure enough, the feeling was completely new to me. Handling a shield was nothing like swinging a sword or a halberd.

B3 had told me that mid-sleep evolutions often happened when the Master couldn’t decide the direction he wanted the next form to take. If there was any truth to that, this form might have become a shield because I’d watched B3 fight Rosa. It’d left an impression on me.

Then again, many of my battles so far had made me wish I had a means of defense that — unlike Counter Absorption — wasn’t limited by the number of uses, so this result might’ve been influenced by that.

“Though, if it actually considered my wishes, I’d have preferred it if it gave me a means of dealing with *hopelessly distant enemies*,” I muttered.

“Again, I share your sentiment,” Nemesis sighed as I recalled the time I had gone through a certain training course.



It was a standard morning in Gideon. I was going around looking for my acquaintances and asking if they were free enough to spar with me. When I chanced upon Marie, she asked, “Would you be willing to try an odd type of training?”

“Odd... how?” I asked.

“Odd in that it allows you to experience something no duel may give you — a battle against a long-ranged enemy.”

I totally understood what she meant.

Through my sparring, I've learned the Impact Counter technique — credit to Rosa for that name — and many other things. However, because I'd only sparred in arena barriers, where the area was limited and my opponent was obvious, all of my new tricks could be applied only to face-to-face single combat.

Marie told me that all of that training could cause my skill as a player to become biased toward a select few situations, and she suggested this training to make up for that.

The design was simple: we first went outside, away from any barriers. She created enough distance between us that I couldn't even see her, and then she started attacking me, taking care to keep me alive.

She said that I was free to fight back, so I got all fired up and readied myself for what I thought would be an exciting battle.

Instead, I got a cold dose of harsh reality.

I couldn't do *anything* against her. Sure, I could defend against her attacks, but I couldn't launch even the simplest of counters.

Marie attacked me from distances I couldn't hope to reach and moved at speeds I couldn't follow, even while riding Silver. The training ended without me landing even a single hit on her.

Considering I'd been doing relatively well in our arena spars, this result came as a bit of a shock.

As a result, Nemesis and I became aware of just how weak we were against long-ranged attacks.

I had no means of defeating anyone who constantly stayed at a distance I couldn't reach. Marie was fully aware of that, and she'd given me this training as a practical reality check.

With this realization, both Nemesis and I thought the exact same thing:

I hope the next evolution has a ranged attack.



And yet, what we actually got was a shield — pretty much the opposite of

what we'd wanted.

This made both of us somewhat disappointed, but not enough to complain about it. If anything, the fact we'd finally paid the price for the first evolution and reached the third form was a cause for celebration.

"So," I spoke up. "What skills do you have?"

"This form can use Counter Absorption," she replied.

Hmm, that goes against one of my earlier assumptions, but I guess it fits. It's a shield, after all.

"Does it get more uses?"

"Alas, no. Though, I feel as though it became slightly more hardy. It's... 1.5 times tougher, I believe."

If that was true, it meant that a single Counter Absorption could now sustain 300,000 points of damage, which was pretty big. For perspective, it could now take a punch from Shu. His kicks would still be beyond it, though.

"So, what are the other skills?" I asked. "It's not just Counter Absorption, is it?"

"I don't know," she replied.

...Excuse me?

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Exactly what I said: I don't know the other skill. It's there, most certainly, but I don't know what it is."

I had no idea what she was implying, so I brought up the menu and took a look at the "Embryo" section. There, I found this:



Skills:

Counter Absorption Lv3

■■■■■■■■ ■■■■■■■ ■■■ ■■■■■■: (Analyzing)

“What the hell?” I exclaimed.

The form name and the unique skill were both unintelligible, and the skill’s effect was still being analyzed.

“Nemesis, you mentioned some ‘bad news...’ Is this it?”

“Indeed it is. I’ve evolved and gained new powers, but *not even I know what they are.*”

“...How does that even happen?”

Despite my words, I had an idea why it had turned out like this. Nemesis’s first evolution had involved some sort of mystery function. It had greatly extended the time until she evolved again, and it wasn’t unreasonable to believe it had also influenced the result.

Upon closer look, I noticed that the shield was different from the other forms in more than just shape and purpose.

First, the lack of a black aura. With the greatsword, it came out from the hilt and wrapped around my arm, while with the halberd, it flowed out of the back of the ax part. The third form, however, didn’t have it at all, making it look like a normal — albeit huge and somewhat extravagant — shield.

Second, it wasn’t exclusively black. Its front had silver lines and curves forming a five-sided pattern. There was nothing like that on either the first or second forms.

“It says ‘analyzing,’” I spoke up again. “How long will that take?”

“It could be done today, but that might be too generous an estimate,” Nemesis replied. “Picture yourself being given a paper of text in a language you have never seen or even heard of. You are also given a dictionary and have to translate and read it all. Oh, and the dictionary translates not to Japanese, but English. That is how this process feels.”

That’s some weird homework you got there, I raised an eyebrow.

Whatever the case, it was safe to expect to see it revealed within the next few days.

I was about to let it go and just wait, but then B3 gave a comment. “Even if the analysis isn’t complete, you might reveal the skill by using it correctly.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I know someone who also had to wait for a skill to be analyzed, and the analysis sped up when he tried using the new form in various ways. Once done, the resulting skill turned out to have an activation method similar to one of the actions he tried.”

“Oh, so making the movements that activate the skill can make the analysis faster, huh?”

Borrowing Nemesis’s description of the process, it could be likened to a Japanese translation of the text. Anyway, I knew what I had to do now.

“Wait, Ray, what are y—NWHAAAAHHHHhhh...?!”

Ignoring her words, I mustered my strength and *threw Nemesis as far as I could*.

“You fool! You unbelievable imbecile!” she cried.

“Sorry! That was definitely my bad!”

Unfortunately, she happened to land in a local farm’s field.

All covered in mud, she returned to her human form, hit me with an intense dropkick, and drowned me in vocal fury. “Why did you throw me?! Who do you think you are, Captain America?!”

“Well, your third form was probably influenced by B3, so I thought that it might be related to throwing.”

Yesterday, B3 had killed a few K&R members by throwing her shield, so it wasn’t far-fetched to believe the skill would be based on that. Also, I had Counter Absorption as my main means of defense, so I didn’t really think the skill would be defensive.

Not to mention that I also want some ranged offense, I thought. And how do you turn a shield into a long-ranged weapon? Well, you throw it...

“Then don’t rush to act on that thought, you fool! At least tell me about it and

throw me where it's safe!"

"Again, sorry. I really regret that."

I'd just decided to throw her where there weren't any people, and it happened to be a muddy field.

"So, uh... Should I polish you?" I asked. Even her human form was covered in mud. *I do hope that cleaning her in her weapon form will clean all her forms.*

"Be thorough!" she said before returning to her Black Shield form.

I held her with my prosthetic, reached into my inventory, took out my cleaning supplies, and began polishing her.

"You seem used to this," commented B3.

"I'm sure I do. She always asks for this after we fight undead and stuff like them."

"It makes me a bit jealous. My Embryo is more Territory than any other type, so I can never touch it."

"Oh, yeah, now that you mention it, it *did* seem pretty Territory-like."

That means that all three CID members have Embryos of that type.

"Who told you to stop?" Nemesis asked grumpily.

"Okay, okay. Geez."

I went on to polish her for the next 20 minutes, making sure to be as thorough as possible.



We decided against doing any more third form tests.

Nemesis fervently insisted on analyzing the unintelligible skill by herself, and I wasn't in a position to argue — nor did I feel inclined to, really.

With that entire matter pushed aside, we decided to focus on why we'd come here in the first place: gathering information for the purpose of finding Mr. Shijima in real life. We approached Farica with the intention of asking some questions about him, but...

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I have to mend these clothes before noon.”

Apparently, she had a Needleworker work order with today as the deadline. She had been planning to finish it yesterday, but Louie’s disappearance had caused her to fall behind.

We couldn’t really bother her if that was the case.

“I should be done by midday,” she said. “Is it fine if we talk then?”

“Oh, yeah,” I nodded. “We don’t mind waiting.”

Noon was only three or four *Dendro* hours away. Considering our quest was a search for a real person and how little time that was in real life, there was no reason we couldn’t wait.

“Please enjoy the festival until then,” she added. “The main event is the fireworks show which happens after dark, but the stalls and plays should already be up and running.”

“Ohh?” Nemesis’s eyes lit up.

Oh, dear. The biggest eater I knew was thoroughly intrigued by the word “stall.”

Like, I knew she was hungry after skipping on dinner yesterday, but it didn’t stop me from fearing for my wallet.

But man, she sure is a gluttonous creature, I thought.

“Nemesis, are you familiar with the concept of the ‘seven deadly sins?’” I asked.

“Indeed I am,” she nodded. “It has nothing to do with me, however.”

“Reeeaaally?”

“What’s with that tone of yours?!”

Continuing to banter like that, we made our way towards the stall-packed main street.

The idea of festival stalls made me remember the ones I’d seen in events held by the local shrine near my family home or the ones set up near cherry blossom viewing spots. The ones here in Torne weren’t all that different from those.

However, there were about 400 of them, which seemed a bit much for a village with only about 2,000 people.

As I bought crepes for Nemesis, I asked the shopkeeper why there were so many stalls, and he said that many of their owners were merchants from Altea who'd come here just for the festival.

Well, this did seem like a good time to make a killing, but I couldn't help but respect the mercantile spirit of the people willing to venture the roads stalked by monsters just for this. Mind you, from what I'd heard, a lot of those shopkeepers grouped up, pooled their money to buy some skilled escorts, and arrived here first thing in the morning of the festival day.

Also, the village surroundings were inhabited by monsters only a little bit stronger than those you'd find in beginner areas. Sometimes you'd get herds like the one encountered by Louie and his mother, but they were a once-every-few-years event, if not rarer.

Because of that, the journey wasn't a big deal for the escorts, either. The trip was also only about half a day long, so even Masters could take the job. And with them at the ready, not even a herd would be a problem.

Tourists were also requesting escorts here, so it finally made sense why I'd seen so many quests like that back at the capital's adventurers' guild.

Looking around, I saw many Masters who'd come here as escorts and were now partaking in the festivities.

Also, countless Masters and tians were holding one of those five-bladed pinwheels they called "windstars." We'd seen many of them decorating the fences next to the road to Torne. The passersby who weren't holding one often had them fixed onto their clothing.

Nemesis, too, had the windstar she'd gotten from Louie placed on her chest. She liked it a lot, apparently. She couldn't hold it in her hands, by the way, as she had a crepe in both.

"Mmm..." she hummed gleefully. "A good meal right after an evolution is simply unmatched."

"If you say so," I replied in monotone.

“What to eat next? I have room for far more than that.”

The fact that she ate even faster than before and had gotten harder to fill up made me feel somewhat blue. *Please don't tell me her evolution made her an even bigger glutton.*

“Perhaps I should empty all the stalls here,” she said.

“...” I froze, completely dumbfounded.

“That was a joke.”

I found that hard to believe. There hadn't been a hint of falsehood in her eyes.

“Umm... there should be an ice cream shop there and a waffle shop over there,” said Louie as he guided us. “And if you go there, there's a small stage where they do a play about the story of the festival over and over.”

“Really?” I asked. “I'm interested.”

“Okay, I'll show you. Ah...”

As we walked around, Louie occasionally stopped in place, fell silent, and just looked around. His expressions as he did so were always somewhat lonely, so I could only assume he was remembering the festivals he'd spent with his dad.

“Hm? Those are remberries, are they not?” asked Nemesis.

I followed her gaze, and sure enough, I saw the familiar fruits. Except here, they were frozen in ice. The sight reminded me of frozen mandarin sorbets.

I bought enough for us all and handed them out.

“Thanks, Mister Ray,” Louie said before briefly falling silent. “Gringham also liked remberries...”

“Hm? Was he not a lion monster?” Nemesis raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah, he liked meat, too, but he could also eat fruit, and he liked remberries a lot. He only ate them peeled and cut into pieces.”

So, despite being a lion, this Gringham was omnivorous and had a strangely posh side to him.

“Oh, but Dad was the same,” the boy added. “He could eat the skin, but he always peeled it. He also took away the white parts from citrus fruits. Oh, and he never ate the seeds.”

Ah, so Gringham was just taking after his owner.

Shijima sounds like a fussy guy, I thought.

“He always used to say, ‘I know it’s all fine here, but I’m still a bit scared.’”

“Scared?” I raised an eyebrow. What could be scary about eating fruit? Was he allergic? But if that was the case, he wouldn’t have been eating them at all.

“Also, Juno couldn’t eat unless someone fed her. She said it was her ‘Maiden eating habit.’”

“How odd,” Nemesis commented.

You’re not one to say that. Your stomach capacity is more than a good match for that oddity.

“Ah,” Louie exclaimed and pointed ahead, cutting through my thoughts about Mr. Shijima. “See that stone stage? That’s where they do the Blacksky story play every year!”

I looked and saw a crowd of people surrounding a small stage where they were doing the play he was talking about.

Though B3 and I could see it just fine, Louie and Nemesis were a bit too short.

“Well, then,” Nemesis said. “I would like you to take me on your shoulder.”

“Sure, I don’t mind,” I shrugged. “You come here, too, Louie.”

“Eh? You can hold us both...?”

“Easily.” I took them both, placed them on each of my shoulders, Louie on the right and Nemesis on the left, and held them by the thighs so they wouldn’t fall.

As I was now, I had STR bonuses from Nemesis, my Miasmaflame Bracers, and a 1.2x STR accessory I’d gotten from the gacha, among other things, bringing my total STR into the quadruple digits. I was literally stronger than a 100 normal men, so holding two children on my shoulders was nothing to me.

“Ray, let me remind you that I am a lady, not a child,” Nemesis put in.

“No talking during the play, please.”

“Gnhh...”

Anyway, we were ready to watch the play, and thankfully, it was just about to begin.



A tale of olden times

Long, long ago, Torne was a farming village far smaller and far more peaceful than it was now. It was always caressed by gentle winds that made its windmills busily creak and turn, for hours and days on end.

But one day, the peaceful village was overcome by *blackness*.

It was a flying monster that came from the eastern sky. It ate the light of the sun, the shine of the stars, and everything else that was bright, making everything around it pitch black.

Seeing the blackness up above, the people were filled with fear and cried, “It’s a black sky!” “*The Blacksky!*”

Blacksky ate everything that was bright, looked down on the ground from the heights of the heavens, and laughed as it brought chaos and suffering as it pleased.

All humans and beasts who were seen by Blacksky were turned into “torches” and then consumed.

The people were too scared to be seen, so they closed their doors and windows and stayed in their homes in absolute darkness.

Every now and then, there would be knights and hunters brave enough to face Blacksky, but no sword or arrow could reach the heights it was in. Some even tried to challenge it atop flying dragons, but not even those large wings could take them high enough.

The knights, hunters, dragons and their riders — all were turned into torches and consumed.

What hope was there when not even a dragon could hurt it?

The monster left its challengers defeated, and kept the survivors hiding in fear. Everything below it belonged to Blacksky. Anyone who tried to escape would instantly be seen and turned into a torch.

The people had no choice but to hide, crushed by fear and hunger. The wind passing the village could no longer be heard, and it felt as if even the sky had died. All that entered the people's ears was Blacksky's malicious laughter. Everyone in Torne was grieving as they began to feel that this was the end.

That was when the heavens took pity on the people and shed a single tear for them.

It slid down the sky, leaving a trail behind as it became a shooting star and hit Blacksky with such force that it fell down and was buried beneath the mountains.

Under the cold rock, there were none of the bright things that Blacksky liked so much. Without its food, it lost its power and became unable to escape the underground.

And so, the people were saved by the heavens' tear, and Blacksky was sealed deep down within the cold earth.

As if to celebrate it, the wind returned to the village and the sky became clear again.

The menace of the Blacksky was no more.

Ever since then, the villagers had held a festival. Every year, on the anniversary of Blacksky's sealing, they would make star-like pinwheels and light up the sky with bright, vivid fireworks to thank the heavens that saved them.

And the people lived happily ever after.



Paladin, Ray Starling

"I see," I muttered.

The play was easy to digest, and I had no problems understanding how the festival had begun.

There was something I couldn't help but notice, though.

"So, B3, this play can be summed up as 'There was a really tough monster that got hit by a meteor and died,' right?"

"Probably," she nodded. "It was most likely a UBM. An astronomically unlucky one, at that. Then again, it only got hit because it made this area into its territory, so you might say it just reaped what it sowed. If the story is true, it didn't die and was merely sealed within the mountain. However, since it was described as a living creature, the lack of food and drink probably killed it centuries ago. "

Yeah, she was probably right about that, though some Masters around us seemed to think otherwise. They rushed towards the nearby mountains, and according to Louie, they definitely weren't the first to do so.

Every year, a number of Masters who'd seen the play would get the idea that the dying UBM might still be alive, and they hurried to look for it to dig it out and kill it for a special reward.

The fact that it still hadn't been found could only mean that it had already vanished years, if not centuries, ago.

Good riddance, I figured. A creature that could live for hundreds of years with no food or drink would be way more trouble than I'd like to deal with.

Following the play, we went exploring the stalls again. But this time, we didn't have Louie with us. At the play, the boy had bumped into a friend who'd invited him to enjoy the festival with him.

Though Louie had been hesitant about leaving us, I'd urged him to accept. We could find our way back to Farica without his help, and I thought that maybe playing with a friend would lift his spirits. Poor little guy seemed really down about his dad not being here.

Anyway, there were now only three of us: Nemesis, B3, and me.

"Are you thirsty, Ray?" asked B3.

"Ah, a bit, yeah," I nodded. I'd had a dry throat ever since the play started, but I couldn't have just gone and gotten a drink while it was still going.

“Then I’ll go buy something for all of us. I saw a good-looking place nearby.”

“Well, then I’ll get something, too,” I said. “Any requests?”

“Popcorn, please.”

“Roger.”

She walked away on the road we came from while we got in the line to a nearby popcorn stall.

The word “popcorn” made me recall the news about Shu’s business I’d seen on *MMO Journal Planter* before logging in.

I’d tested his prototype popcorn. Even though it had been really good, the fact he’d refused to reveal the ingredients had left me somewhat scared. I also had a thing or two to say about the jingle that Lei-Lei had composed. I mean, seriously? “Let your tastebuds be destroyed?” The lyrics completely killed the nice melody.

“Hm?”

As I pondered Shu’s weird song, some sort of trouble began at one part of the nearby road. I looked to see what was going on.

“Huhh?! Ya wanna go?”

“You’re the one who bumped into me, ya shit! Bring it on! The Mohawk League never runs from a fight!”

It was basically the most generic clash of delinquents imaginable.

One group was wearing clothes with a symbol depicting a black circle over a red one, while the other was a bunch made up entirely of people with mohawks. Obviously, both sides seemed like trouble, but this seemed like nothing more than a minor hoodlum squabble. Additionally, they had crests on their left hands, making them all Masters.

Hoping that this didn’t escalate, I carefully observed the clash.

“What the fuck’s goin’ on here?” Suddenly, a new character joined the scene, momentarily breaking the tense atmosphere.

The person was three meters tall and wore armor large enough to cover his

immense frame.

The full plate prevented me from seeing any part of his body, but it was easy to tell that he was huge.

At that moment, I realized that this was the same person I'd seen while waiting for B3 back at the capital.

"Sub-leader!" The circle symbol group welcomed him.

The mohawks were menaced. "Wh-Who the hell are *you*?!"

The armor guy then replied to the mohawks' question. "What? Ya can't tell just by looking at my armor?"

Uh... no, I can't, actually, I thought.

"W-Wait, you're the guy that... You're him!"

"I've Identified it... It's the real thing..." Unlike me, the mohawks instantly got his point.

I should get Reveal or Identification sometime, I thought.

"Got it now, huh?!" the armored brute roared. "We're Sol Crisis! You know what that means, don't ya?!"

"Go on, ya shits!" another person his clan yelled. "Drop a gold coin each or get ganked!"

So now it's a shakedown?

"Sh-Shit...!" one mohawk growled.

"Kh! All right, but don't get us wrong!" said another. "We just don't wanna miss this festival 'cause of a damn death penalty! We'll also have lots of cleaning to do after it, so we'll back off this time!"

Intimidated by the armored individual, the mohawks said something really weird, threw some gold on the ground, and scrambled to run away.

"Did you see that, sub-leader?!" one of the other group became excited.

"Khahahah! Pathetic shits! Anyway, we're off, boys!" roared the armor guyed as he got the circle group that was apparently named Sol Crisis to follow him

and leave.

But then he paused.

“Hm?” he murmured, as he shifted his gaze towards my direction.

Though the helmet slits were too thin for me to see his eyes, I could tell that he was looking at me.

However, instead of saying anything, he just turned away and walked off.

What am I supposed to make of that?

“First at the fountain, now here... Why is he always looking at me?” I wondered aloud.

“Because you’re simply *that* noticeable,” commented Nemesis.

“I’m not holding a sign anymore, though.”

Nemesis said nothing in response. For some reason, she put on a tired expression and just continued eating her popcorn.

“Is anything wrong?” I heard someone say.

Turning to the side, I saw B3 holding a plate — well, a spare shield, actually — with three drinks on it.

“Two clans were mouthing off at each other just now,” I answered. “They were ‘Sol Crisis’ and... ‘Mohawk League,’ I think.”

“Oh, Sol Crisis is that new PK clan. I’ve never encountered them, but I hear the name quite often recently. And Mohawk League is a humanitarian volunteer clan.”

“...Excuse me, could you repeat that?” I felt like I’d just heard some words that didn’t belong in the same sentence as “mohawk.”

“Mohawk League is a humanitarian volunteer clan that started on the Internet,” she said. “Someone thought it would be fun to go around doing good things while looking like generic bad guys, and many people agreed. They have divisions in all the main countries, and they’re harmless unless provoked.”

“But... mohawks? Seriously?”

“Well, not everyone with a mohawk is a Mohawk League member, so you shouldn’t judge a book by its cover. Even my PK clan had a person with a mohawk.”

Well, I could definitely agree that it wasn’t wise to make assumptions based on a person’s hairstyle...

“There’s one other thing about the whole situation that had me curious,” I said.

“Which would be?” asked B3.

“Sol Crisis had this guy in huge armor.”

“Armor?”

“Yeah. He was over three meters tall. Is it even possible to wear stuff like that?”

“It is,” she nodded as she gave us our drinks. “The easiest way is to start the game as a giant.”

Oh yeah, *Dendro* allowed you to play as races other than human. Rosa, for one, was a wolf beastman.

“Having a giant avatar doesn’t affect your stats, so the size is merely for show,” B3 continued. “Also, giants have a large hitbox, and the XL equipment they have to get is really expensive.”

It seemed the negatives greatly outweighed the positives.

“Also, the high-rank job ‘Full Armor Giant’ allows you to wear armor that’s too large for you as long as you have enough STR.”

“I’m guessing that’s the armor version of your Shield Giant job,” I commented. “But wait, even if you have the STR to wear large armor, wouldn’t you still have lots of empty space inside it, making it hard for you to move?”

“Full Armor Giants have the Armor Adjuster skill. It fills the empty space with a force field that feels much like highly viscous air, allowing you to move without minding the size. I would say it’s highly similar to powered armor from sci-fi movies.”

“Ohh...”

This world sure has some convenient skills, I thought.

Also, B3 seemed really knowledgeable about that job. She was a Shield Giant now, but perhaps she had been a Full Armor Giant before? Then again, B3 was versed in data relating to the game, so it was only natural for her to know about other jobs.

“Large armors are really great, by the way,” she added. “They make it easy to menace your enemies, and even if something pierces them, there’s a chance it will just hit the empty spaces.”

Well, that definitely sounds like firsthand experience, I thought. Yeah, she probably did play as a Full Armor Giant before.

“Though that means nothing when the ‘something’ splits your head in two,” she sighed and put on a distant expression.

Did she remember something she didn’t want to?



???

“When’re we doin’ it?”

“After the festival should be good. Someone might get in the way if we go now.”

“If the K&R shits didn’t cock it all up, we’d have done it on the road.”

“It’s not all bad, though. Now he’s got a Superior *and* K&R on his name.”

“Khahah! The prey got fattened up, eh?”

“Damn right. And yeah, just like you said, when he’s going back after the festival is the best time to go at it. Though, uh...”

“I know. If we get a chance to gank him while he’s here, we’re taking it.”

Chapter Two: Ichiro Shijima

Paladin, Ray Starling

By the time the sun was exactly south of us, we'd already experienced most of what the festival had to offer, so we decided to return to the Shijima family home. The fact that the sun was south during noon meant that this continent was in the northern hemisphere, but since it was also the *only* continent in the game, that didn't matter all that much.

"Welcome back," said Farica, seemingly done with her work. "Where's Louie?"

"We ran into one of his friends, and they went off to play together."

"I see..." she sighed. I couldn't really understand why, but there was relief in both her tone and expression. Would it have inconvenienced her if Louie was here with us? "I'm sorry, but I still have some mending to do. Just two more articles of clothing, and I'll be free to help you..."

"Ah, that's fine. Please don't mind us and focus on your job," I insisted.

And so, B3 and I ended up having to wait a little more.

Nemesis felt that she could make some progress in the new skill analysis, so she returned to the crest and focused entirely on that.

I thought of whiling away the time by talking to B3, but I noticed her taking a metallic cylinder out of her inventory and holding it tightly in her hand. Upon closer inspection, I realized it looked somewhat like a bullet cartridge.

"What's that?" I asked her.

"It's an add-on item for a piece of my equipment," she answered. "They have to be filled with MP before use, and I neglected to fill this one. I figured I'd do it while we wait."

An add-on item...? Why don't I recall her using it in her battle against Rosa? I pondered. Well, knowing her, she probably just wasn't using the equipment she

mentioned. From what I can tell, she switches between her countless shields all the time, so the item might've not fit the situation.

B3 and I continued to chat until Farica completed her work twenty minutes later. Then it was time for us to get to the matter at hand.

The three of us sat around the living room table, B3 and me on one side and Farica on the other.

B3 didn't waste any time. "Now, let us ask you some questions. Two, to be exact. First, did Mr. Shijima ever say anything about his life on the 'other side'? And second, did he do anything odd shortly before he disappeared?"

"Umm, before that, can I make something clear?" Farica asked.

"Certainly."

"I... I don't believe there's a need to search for my husband."

"Eh?" I voiced my confusion.

What was that supposed to mean? Shijima, her spouse, had been gone for half a year now. Why would she be against searching for him?

"But since Louie wants it, I am willing to tell you about him."

"Please do," I said.

Farica nodded, and then she began telling us what she knew of the man.



About Shijima

Farica's first impression of Shijima could be summed up as "a man who gives far too much."

Their first meeting was the dramatic moment when she and her son Louie were attacked by monsters in the Fadl Mountain Pass.

Shijima appeared out of nowhere, fended off the horde of beasts, and saved both of them, which was more than enough to make him a savior figure in her eyes. But that wasn't even the only thing he did for them. Shijima showed no hesitation as he used his own healing items to give Farica a first aid treatment, and he happily volunteered to guard them on the rest of the way to Torne.

Once they arrived, he helped them move into their new home, as Farica's leg injury made it a challenge. He even called a black-haired Bishop he knew to take a look at her leg and heal it.

After that, he continued visiting them at least once every two weeks, never neglecting to bring treats they enjoyed.

In a word, his consideration for them was "excessive."

Though Louie, pure as he was, thoroughly enjoyed all that Shijima gave them, Farica found it a bit strange, if not downright eerie.

After all, their relationship didn't go beyond that of a savior and the saved. There was no reason for him to care so much about them, and he definitely didn't treat everyone else as well as he did them. It was only natural for Farica to think that Shijima had some sort of ulterior motive.

She decided to ask about it the next time he arrived, even if it would bring an end to his boons.

As usual, he came in riding on his Gringham, bringing a lot of remberries, a luxury fruit, as a souvenir. Louie was overjoyed, and the boy's gleeful expression made Farica hesitate.

Still, she knew she had to make things clear, so she re-composed herself before inviting Shijima to talk in private.

Though the man found it strange, he left his Gringham and Juno to look after Louie and followed after her.

Once they were alone, Farica got straight to the point and asked "Why do you look after us so much? What do you want from us?"

Upon hearing her words, she regretted using such blunt language. The words got her point across, yes, but she felt that a bit of sugar-coating wouldn't have hurt.

Overly blunt or not, the words were honest, and Shijima instantly understood her question and why she asked it. For some reason, the man's expression became regretful.

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "I didn't mean to make you uneasy."

Farica couldn't understand what made her deserving of an apology.

"You're right," he continued. "I went a bit too far. I'm sorry. I just don't know the standard when it comes to this."

Another apology. It truly seemed as though he felt that he'd made a mistake.

"When it comes to... what?" asked Farica.

"I don't know how much I have to do for someone when expressing gratitude."

"Gratitude?"

Who here is deserving of gratitude? He's the one who saved us, she pondered.

The words he spoke next completely blew away that thought of hers.

"I only wanted to thank you for saving me."

Those words made her doubt her ears. *She and Louie* were the ones who had been saved by *him*, not the other way around.

His words didn't stop there, however.

"Getting to save you while you could do nothing but wait for death made me the happiest I've ever been. It... it meant a lot to who I am on the other side."

His words were dense with all sorts of emotions, and Farica wasn't able to read them all. Even so, there was something she could easily understand.

Back on that fateful day, Shijima had saved Farica's life, but that heroic act had also saved Shijima's own heart.

That meant everything he'd done for them was completely genuine.

She then noticed that Shijima was on the verge of crying, which made all her suspicions vanish as though they were never there.

"Again, I'm really sorry," the man said, seeming fully aware of his mistake. "I don't want to trouble you again, so I'll just..."

He readied himself to leave their lives forever, but Farica stopped him.

"Would you like to have dinner with us?" she asked.

"Eh?" Shijima exclaimed, completely stupefied.

“I’ve invited you to join our meals many times now, but you have yet to accept even once.”

“B-But I...”

“You have given us so much now... so please, let me give something back. In fact, I would like you to join us every time you visit.”

“Miss Farica...”

“You gave us your thanks, so now let us give ours,” she beamed, making Shijima smile in return. “Please wait while I prepare something. Oh, I should get Louie to help me.”

“Um! May I help, too?” the man asked.

“Of course. Please do.”

A short while later, Louie and Juno came back home to find Shijima and Farica preparing food together. Shijima seemed completely inept at it and made many mistakes, but both he and Farica were clearly having lots of fun doing it.

Though Louie found the sight strange, watching them laugh together made him happy.

Juno didn’t say a word, but she seemed proud, like a mother pleased by her child’s growth.

It wasn’t long until Shijima began living with Farica, and the year after that, they exchanged marital vows.

It was the 27th marriage between a Master and a tian.

Shijima, Farica, and Louie had become a family, and few could match them in peace and happiness.

Though Shijima was Farica’s second husband and Louie’s stepfather, there was little to no distance between them. Biology didn’t stop them from being a natural family.

Until a major change happened in their lives — Farica became pregnant.

It took a while for her to realize it. At first, she merely thought that she’d eaten a bit too much and that it was showing. No one could blame her. After all,

she'd thought that Masters and tians couldn't produce children.

But her stomach grew larger with every passing day, and she eventually got her first morning sickness. She'd been with child once, so she quickly realized that yes, she was pregnant.

Even the Doctor said that there were no two ways about it — Farica was going to have her second baby.

It made her happy beyond words. Even though Farica loved Shijima and didn't want anyone else but him as a husband, she'd always thought that their family would never grow bigger. She had been plenty satisfied with just him, Louie, Juno, and Gringham. But now that she knew that someone else would be joining them, she thought that it would make them all even happier.

Besides, she really wanted to see Shijima's joyous face when he heard the news.

She returned home and announced her pregnancy when they were all having dinner.

Louie was unreservedly gleeful. Juno didn't say a word, but she congratulated them with applause.

Shijima, on the other hand, was crying.

There was pure happiness in those tears, but at the same time, Farica felt as though he was lamenting something. Being his wife for over two years had made her perceptive of such things.

That night, the two of them talked in their bedroom.

Shijima repeatedly thanked Farica for bearing his child, but then, he spoke a resolution.

"Farica," he said. "I have something I must do on the other side."

"Is it related to our child?" she asked as she caressed her stomach.

He nodded vehemently and said, "If I want to meet our baby, I have to go through a certain trial. And it's... it's so dangerous that it might cost me my life..."

“Oh no!” she gasped.

“I would’ve been fine spending the rest of my days living the life we have right now. But I really want to see our child... I want to live in a family that includes him.”

And apparently, to do that, he had to take this “trial.” Farica could tell he was determined, and that the endeavor was unavoidable.

“If you survive the trial, when will you return?” she asked.

“...After a month, at best. No, wait, that’s three months in here. Well, it could be half a year, if not more.”

“That’s so long...”

“But no matter what, I *will* come back. Believe in me.”

No trial on the other side could separate him from his family. She believed that.

Farica nodded and said, “We’ll be waiting. Louie, I, and the child within me will wait for you for as long as we have to.”

“...Thank you.”

The two exchanged an embrace, full of love for each other and for the baby.

The next day, Farica woke up to find that Shijima had disappeared.

She asked Louie about him, and he said that Shijima had said goodbye to him and gone off somewhere. That was enough for her to conclude that he had gone to take his trial on the other side.

Farica didn’t tell Louie that Shijima could lose his life, as it would only make him worried.

Besides, she thoroughly believed that her husband would return to his family.



Paladin, Ray Starling

“He will definitely come back,” Farica concluded her story. “So I don’t think there’s any need to search for him.”

Both B3 and I had no clue how to respond, and had no further questions. After all, she'd just given us everything we needed to complete the puzzle.

Shijima had left his family and was now on the "other side," doing something that required lots of determination.

That, combined with the information we'd gathered so far, gave us a good idea of what kind of environment he was in.

"Sorry," B3 broke the silence. "Would you mind if Ray and I had a brief private talk?"

"Not at all," Farica replied.

"Let's go, Ray."

Unable to say anything, I followed after her as she left the house and entered the carriage.

"This whole matter might be impossible to solve," she said right after the door closed.

"But..."

"Ray. You have an idea what happened to him, too, don't you?"

Yes, I more or less had an answer to the mystery of Shijima's disappearance. It was a combination of several factors.

First, for a Master like him and a tian to have a baby, he had to have been online longer than it was biologically possible for any normal player.

Second were his feelings towards Farica and Louie.

Third was the so-called "trial" he had to do on the "other side."

And fourth were his own words: *I would've been fine spending the rest of my days living the life we have right now.*

I had all I needed to form a proper conclusion.

"Shijima is— Hn?"

Before I could finish, the carriage suddenly began to shake. It continued for a short while before stopping.

“An earthquake?” I wondered.

If so, it wasn't all that strong. If I had to gauge it, I'd probably put it at Shindo 3.

That wouldn't cause much harm to people, and though the buildings here had a medieval appearance, Altar's architecture involved the use of magic strengthening, so the earthquake wouldn't damage them at all. The festival could go on without any problems to speak of.

However, it was possible that a utensil or something would fall off and hurt Farica.

“Let's go check on Farica,” I said.

“Very well.”

Inside, we found an open cupboard with some of its contents lying shattered on the floor. Thankfully, Farica didn't seem to be hurt.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“Yes, none of it hit me,” she replied.

“Let us help clean up,” B3 said.

“But...” she tried protesting.

“You're pregnant, so please don't burden yourself. Ray, do you have any cleaning tools?”

“I do.”

We each took out a broom and dustpan and began cleaning up the shattered tableware.

By the way, my broom and dustpan came from a Cooking Set I'd hit on the gacha. Weird to see something I'd thought was a bad roll becoming somewhat useful.

I gathered the shards into the dustpan and put them in an empty bag.

“...Huh?” I noticed something mixed in between the shards.

The things that had fallen out weren't just plates, so it wasn't strange for

there to be more than porcelain. However, that particular piece struck me as odd. It was a small piece of silverwork, probably made using the Carving skill.

Though it wasn't unusual for a household like this to have such items, it felt somewhat off, as though it didn't really belong here. Also, I couldn't help but feel that I'd seen the design before.

"Ah!" I silently gasped as it came back to me. "Farica, have you seen this silverwork before?"

"Oh, that's something my husband used to wear before our marriage," she answered. "He stopped wearing it afterwards, so we just left it on top of the cupboard."

"I see."

Apparently, Farica didn't know anything about the group this piece of silverwork symbolized. No one could fault her for that, since she'd moved here from the capital about four years ago. And from what I could tell, this village didn't have any of their establishments.

"...So that's how it is," muttered B3 as she noticed what I was holding.

Naturally, she knew exactly what it meant.

"Apologies, but we have to leave for a moment," she said while facing Farica. "Oh, and we will finish cleaning up when we return, so please don't do anything."

"Eh? All right..."

B3 took me by the hand and led me out of the house.

"Ray, do you have a group talk app installed on your mobile?"

"I do."

"Then please log out and connect to the group with this ID. He should come soon, too."

She then told me the ID, and repeated it to help me remember.

I got it in my head and logged out.



Once offline, I went to my mobile, activated speaker mode, and turned on the app. A few moments later, I heard B3's voice — or rather, Fujibayashi's.

"Seems it went well," she said. "I've already contacted him, so he should be here in a moment."

A brief while passed, and I heard a man's voice.

"Apologies for the wait. I was told you wish to talk?" It was none other than The Lunar Society's second-in-command, the King of Assassins, Eishiro Tsukikage. "Lady Tsukuyo is busy at the moment, so I will speak in her stead."

"No, you are the better person in this case," said B3, and I couldn't help but agree.

"Tsukikage," I spoke up. "You knew all about Shijima from the very start, didn't you?"

"Yes. Indeed I did," he replied as though it was nothing. "Since you arrived at this conclusion, I assume the madam told you about... No, you found physical evidence, did you not?"

"A piece of silverwork. It had *a crescent moon and a closed eye* on it," I said. To my knowledge, there was only one group of people that used that symbol. "He... Shijima was a member of The Lunar Society, wasn't he?"

"Indeed he was."

And that was exactly why Tsukikage had suggested helping us search for him back at the guild. Of course he could find the man — he already knew the answer.

Now that I think about it, that was probably the only reason why he made the suggestion, I thought.

"If you knew it, why did you say it was a secret?" I asked.

"Privacy is something to be respected, no?" he replied, and I couldn't tell if he was serious or just blowing smoke.

"...All right, fine. But there's something I want to know, no matter what."

"Please, do ask away."

“How... How’s Shijima doing?”

“That is private information, as well... But then again, there is no reason to hide it at this point...” he said before momentarily falling silent. “Very well. Allow me to explain it all from the beginning. When this is over, you will know his background... and his relationship to us...”



Interlude: The Awakening

Torne Village, Outskirts, Underground, ■■■■ ■■ ■■■ ■■■■■ ■■■, ■■■■■■■■■■

It awoke.

Not because of the recent earthquake, no. The earth’s rumblings were of no consequence to it. Even so, there was no denying that its awakening was related to the quake.

Briefly after the tremor, a few rays of light began to leak through a crack in the bedrock burying its frame.

The earthquake had left an opening the size of a needle’s tip between it and the surface.

The amount of light was so miniscule it could barely be gauged. Its bedrock tomb was as still as dark as a starless night. But it just so happened that it made a huge difference for the creature.

To it, a darkness completely devoid of light and merely the darkest night possible were as different as one and zero.

“K y A h a A h!” it cried, as absolute darkness coated the tomb.

No — light was still coming through the crack, but *it was consuming it all*.

“K Y a h A H a h A H!” it cried — cackled — as it ate more light and turned it into energy.

It had slumbered for 300 years.

Buried within the earth, surrounded by unlight, with no food or drink for sustenance, still bearing the damage from the meteor, it had waited for light to

finally reach it.

Like a hibernating animal, or perhaps a corpse, it had silently waited, unknown to anyone.

Now, this monster dreaded as “Ancient Legendary” had tasted its first light in centuries, and it couldn’t have asked for a better appetizer.

The once-slumbering entity would soon turn the aboveground festival into a *feast*.

Chapter Three: The Real Ichiro Shijima

The Tale of a Certain Man

As I've already mentioned, Ichiro Shijima is one of our adherents.

Although young Louie does not recall it, Lady Tsukuyo and I met his family awhile ago. After all, Mr. Shijima was the leader of The Lunar Society's battle unit. We even went to congratulate him after he married Mrs. Farica.

Now then, of course we know of Mr. Shijima's current whereabouts. But before I reveal them to you, I must tell you about everything else. From the beginning to the end.

First, allow me to tell you of The Lunar Society's origin.

Now now, patience, please. No need for anger. I assure you, this is relevant. We cannot omit it if we wish to talk about where he is now.

Now, I'm certain Fujibayashi already knows this, but The Lunar Society was founded nearly a century ago, in postwar Japan. At the time, Lady Tsukuyo's ancestor and the person who would go on to become the founder of The Lunar Society, Master Gessei Fuso, was working as a doctor.

As you surely know, the postwar period was a very dark time. People lacked the materials they needed to recover from the damage, and death was with them at every step.

Some had battle wounds that grew more severe with every passing day, some became ill due to malnutrition, some turned mentally or emotionally ill and attempted suicide, and some were even worse. In a word, it was "hellish."

Master Gessei is said to have been a kindly doctor who treated people regardless of profit.

That, of course, attracted many patients to him, many of which brought even more death. Countless people lost their lives. Even those who could've been saved in optimal circumstances died because of a lack of food or medicine.

Eventually, he came to notice the abject despair in many of their eyes.

Some say that “health is a state of mind,” and if there is any truth to that, then the patients had a terminal illness. Their hearts were as good as dead.

Being the doctor that he was, Master Gessei spent a lot of time pondering how to help them.

At the very least, he wanted to give them hope.

Sadly, it was an age when there just weren’t enough material goods to remove their illnesses or hunger — the cause of their despair. Japan would need more time until it was back on its feet.

So, he figured that, if there was no hope here, he had to envision a different world. Even if the material world couldn’t save them, he could still try to save their hearts.

“Escape the shackles of flesh and betake yourself to the true world of souls. Embrace this free world and celebrate your liberty to your soul’s content.”

As you are aware, those are our teachings. Those teachings are what started The Lunar Society.

Our doctrine tells people that even if their bodies are impaired, their souls are always free to dream of a world where they’re unbound.

It was pure escapism. An idea based in fantasy, if not delusion. But even so, it made people think in terms their souls... effectively keeping their minds from yielding.

Indeed, our teachings can be rephrased as “Let’s feel good by thinking of nice things.” Many call it cult-like, but that’s all it is. It’s no different from modern mental health seminars.

Admittedly, the economic progress over the past century has turned Japan into a wealthy nation, and it’s hard to fault anyone for calling us a cult. Eventually, we gathered not only patients who had lost all hope, but also youths who were pessimistic about their futures.

Being the current spiritual leader, Lady Tsukuyo often worries if the foundation presented by Master Gessei suits the modern world. Things have

changed a lot over the years, after all.

Eh?

“If she’s worried about her cult’s state, she should reconsider kidnapping people, you say?

That’s unavoidable, I’m afraid. Lady Tsukuyo’s personality and disposition as a woman are a different matter than her worries.

The way I see it, she wishes to have someone she has taken a liking to at her side. Ha ha ha! You’re right. Truly, that doesn’t change the fact that it’s a bother to you, Mukudori.

Back to the matter at hand...

Even after founding The Lunar Society, the Fuso family continued to run a hospital. On the surface, it had nothing to do with our organization. Additionally, it specialized in something different from most hospitals.

The term for it was “terminal care.”

It operated with the purpose of caring for those ailed by the worst of illnesses and letting them live out their final days in peace. But of course, if it was possible, we never neglected to focus on prolonging the patients’ lives or curing them altogether.

Mr. Ichiro Shijima was one of the hospital’s patients.

Before you make any assumptions, we did not urge him to join us in his moment of weakness — he was already an adherent before his disease worsened, and when it did, he was taken to the hospital.

Indeed, we are not *that* dirty. The Lunar Society avoids doing anything that could get us arrested. Honest.

“The fact that you’re emphasizing it makes you look suspicious,” you say? Please, there’s no need to think that.

Anyway, let us go back to Mr. Shijima.

He was suffering from an incurable disease that set a limit on his remaining lifetime. He had been ardently seeking a cure ever since he was young, but alas,

he had no luck.

Four years ago, our time, he joined The Lunar Society. He probably saw it as a good way to divert himself from his imminent death.

“Wasn’t his family against it,” you ask? The circumstances of his upbringing are personal information we are not allowed to reveal, but we can tell you that he had no living relatives at the time of his joining. What matters is that he joined and became one of our adherents.

We have a century of experience at diverting people, so I would like to believe we were able to ensure that his last four years weren’t burdened by fear of death.

Yes, you heard it correctly.

He joined us four years ago, when he had four years left to live.

At the time, the present day was going to be his absolute limit. Oh, but two years ago, they discovered a means of curing his disease. However, it had only a 10% chance of success.

It was the type of treatment that the body could vehemently reject, resulting in an instant death.

Yes, he chose not to go through it *back then*.

He was continuing to live through his final days, trying to divert himself from his upcoming death, when a certain turning point changed his life entirely.

It was the release of *Infinite Dendrogram*.

By the way, you two, where do you think the true value of VR lies? Oh no, I’m not trying to change the subject. This is an important preamble to what I am about to say.

Well? What do you think?

Of course, I’m not talking of failures like *NEXT WORLD*, but fully complete, dive-type dream games like *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Yes. The best VR *transfers the five senses to the virtual world*.

This means that even those whose bodies barely function can dive and

experience being healthy as long as their brains and thoughts work as intended.

Because of this, at the turn of the millennium, we at The Lunar Society began looking into and funding VR technology. It was another thing our patients and adherents could look forward to. It gave them hope.

Of course, in the end, the perfected VR wasn't any of those we financed, but one we knew next to nothing about — *Infinite Dendrogram*.

...Oh, but that is unrelated to the matter at hand.

By now, you can imagine just how much Mr. Shijima craved that.

No matter how hard he tried to ignore it, his end was drawing closer with every passing day. It was impossible for any of us to gauge his will to live and to *feel alive*.

Now, since we were making sure to try out all of the VR technology on the market, we secured a number of devices from *Infinite Dendrogram*'s first batch. One of them was presented to Mr. Shijima.

Thus, he logged in to *Infinite Dendrogram* and became the Master known as Ichiro Shijima, all for the purpose of escaping his limited days in reality and being free in the “true world of souls.”

It released him from the distress of his fading life, the pain of the encroaching death, and the world with no hope for him.

Having gained a vigorous body, special powers, and a sense of fulfillment that could never compare with anything he could gain in reality, he went on to live out his second life for all it was worth. It would not be wrong to state that he was more content than any of us. After all, he was given everything he had not been able to gain in his entire life.

Having all but forgotten his state in reality, one day, he chanced upon a certain boy and his mother. They were overwhelmed by a horde of monsters — despair made manifest — and could do nothing but wait for death.

The sight likely made him feel like he was looking at himself in real life. Or perhaps it reminded him of his late family.

Whatever the case, Ichiro Shijima used his powers as a Master to save the

mother and child. He, who could do nothing but await death, saved those two, who were in a similar situation.

Though they had met by accident, to him, it was surely fate.

He kept on interacting with them, and it wasn't long before they became a real family.

According to him, those days filled him with a warmth he had never felt before.

Yes, those are his own words. Exactly as I heard them.

After that, he went on to be blessed with a child, which was another thing he couldn't experience here in the real world. The joy the news gave him was so immense that it made him *remember himself on this side*.

He was half-dead by this point, kept alive only by various kinds of life support, and it would've been a great surprise if he had lived for more than two months longer.

That was a mere half a year in *Infinite Dendrogram*. Needless to say, time was short for him.

He would die without growing old with his wife, without watching his stepson mature... or even seeing the face of his real child. It made him remember despair.

Words couldn't describe the regret he most likely felt.

However, it wasn't enough to break him. He found new hope when he remembered the treatment he had once refused, and this time, he decided to take it.

Of course, the illness had progressed since then. The chance of success had dropped, and it was a question whether it even reached 3% now.

He needed a miracle for it to succeed.

Even so, he was determined.

Lady Tsukuyo and I both asked him, "Why?"

He responded, "For a future where I live with my family."

Thus, he went on to return to reality and underwent the treatment.

With that, the story ends.

“How did it turn out?” you ask?

You likely already know, Mukudori.

Miracles are only miracles because of how infrequently they occur.



Torne Village

After parting with his friend, Louie began to walk back home.

One of the festival’s main events, the Windstar Dance, would soon begin at the village’s plaza, and he wanted to go there with his mother.

It was an event where families or lovers paired up and danced to their heart’s content. Many from the “other side” would call it a “folk dance.”

Last year, Farica had danced with Shijima, while Louie had danced with Juno. Sadly, Gringham hadn’t had a creature to pair with — not to mention he was too big — so he’d ended up just watching the event.

Remembering the somewhat-downhearted look on the lion’s face made Louie giggle.

Then he remembered Shijima’s excited dancing as Farica led him. Combined with memories of Juno’s weird choreography, it brought a pleasant warmth to his heart.

This year, however, Shijima wasn’t with them. That meant that neither Juno nor Gringham could be here, too, as they were his Embryo and mount. Farica, being pregnant, couldn’t dance, either.

Even so, the Windstar Dance, and the rest of the festival in general, was an event that reminded Louie of the fun times with his family.

If nothing else, he wanted to watch the dance along with his mother. Even if they couldn’t dance this year, he hoped that his whole family would be there next time: Farica, Shijima, Juno, Gringham, and his soon-to-be-born little brother or sister.

“...Huh?” he exclaimed, stopping. Something strange was entering his vision.

It was a mountain not too far from the village. A flash of light burst out of one of its corners, and a short while later, a black object broke out of there and rose towards the skies.

It sounded a voice that could disturb the sanity of anyone listening.

“K y a H a h A h a h A H a h A h a H!”



Paladin, Ray Starling

Right after our talk with Tsukikage, we logged back in to *Infinite Dendrogram*.

We’d talked for about 30 minutes, which was an hour and a half in the game. The Sun was still high up, and the festival still had a lot going for it. But neither I nor B3 were in any mood to enjoy it any further.

“...”

We were both completely silent. What we’d heard from Tsukikage was too damn grim.

Louie was searching for his dad, while Farica was awaiting for her husband to return. But the cold, harsh truth was that they would never see Shijima again.

“...This leaves a bad taste in my mouth,” I muttered.

“Looking back on it, we could have predicted this when Farica suggested that we not search for him,” commented B3. “She already knew that Mr. Shijima was risking his life for something on the ‘other side.’ And the fact that he isn’t back yet... means she probably realizes what happened to him.”

“...I guess so.”

In *Infinite Dendrogram*, Masters were immortal. But back in reality, we were only human, as prone to death as any living creature.

That was one of the harsh truths of life.

“Even if she had a feeling he was dead,” B3 continued, “she could still believe he was alive somewhere as long as she didn’t know the answer. Farica likely chose to merely wait because she wished to keep that hope alive.”

And that was exactly why she had been troubled by our accepting Louie's request to search for Shijima.

Farica's feelings weren't unlike those of someone whose loved one had gone missing in some calamity or accident. As long as the body wasn't found, she could keep hoping he was alive.

This reminded me of the time when the ship my sister was on had sunk in the Pacific Ocean. When I was told her death was all but certain, I'd cried my eyes out.

Then, after a whole lot of grieving from us, she'd returned back home with a cheery "Hellooo!" as if it were no big deal.

When we'd asked her to explain her survival, shocked to see her...

"Oh, I broke the wall of the sinking ship and swam around in the Pacific Ocean until I found another boat."

I just didn't know what to make of her. Her existence was an enigma.

That was only barely related to the matter at hand, but thinking of my sister lifted my spirits a bit.

"What shall we do, then, Ray?" asked B3.

"Well, we have to decide whether to tell it to them or not..." I said, and sighed. Regardless of whether I did or didn't reveal Mr. Shijima's fate to them, it'd still give me a bad aftertaste.

Both telling them the horrible news *and* hiding the truth from them were options that made me feel bitter, but...

I steeled myself. "I'll tell them."

"Are you sure?" B3 asked.

"...Yes. If we don't tell them, they'll never learn the truth. Mr. Shijima's fate will be shrouded in darkness for the rest of their lives."

If we didn't reveal it, they would never be able to properly part with him. They would forever be bound by the question of his whereabouts.

"It'll leave a bad taste in my mouth, it's cruel, and they'll probably resent me

for it, but... but still, it's something that must be done."

Despite my resolve, the fact that I would have to tell them of Mr. Shijima's death made my body shake.

It scared me. The idea of giving them despair frightened me to no end.

"If that is what you choose, then it's probably for the best," B3 said.

"B3?" I raised an eyebrow.

"You should be the one to decide this. I am not nearly as considerate of NPCs... tians... as you are." She looked to the festival off in the distance. Both tians and Masters alike were thoroughly enjoying the festivities. "I am what they call a 'ludo.' To me, this is nothing but a game."

I was silent.

"Same goes for tians," she said. "In my eyes, they are merely highly advanced Als. If it had been up to me alone, I never would have even answered the request. Learning the truth, I would likely have disappeared from their sight, never actually deciding whether to reveal it or not. But now..."

She momentarily fell silent and looked right into my eyes.

"But now, right here, I see someone who outclasses every player I know in terms of consideration for tians. You see them as lives, grieve for them, and sympathize with them."

She walked over to me and gently held my shaking hand.

"So please, don't be afraid of your decision. There's no Master who cares for them as much as you do."

Her encouraging words had caused my trembling to fade.

"B3," I muttered. "Thank you."

"A good senior helps her junior," she smiled in response.

Thanks to her, I was now ready. It was time to go and tell them. To reveal to them the truth about—

"K y a H a h A h a h A H a h A h a H!"

A maddened cackle suddenly resounded around us. It was akin to the sound of scraping glass, but it came out as laughter of the purest ridicule.

“What?!” I exclaimed and looked to where it came from — the skies above a nearby mountain.

There, I saw a—



Torne Village, Outskirts

A few minutes earlier...

“Shit! The assholes at SolCri cost us a bunch of money! We’ve gotta find something to make up for it!”

Ten-odd Masters were inside a mountain not far from Torne.

A group of them stood out, as they all had mohawks. They were the same Mohawk League members who’d faced off against Sol Crisis back at the festival. One of them was vigorously swinging a pickaxe, while another one heaved a tired sigh and spoke up.

“Hhhhaaa... but it’s not like we’ll find the UBM, right? The story is hundreds of years old, and people say that no one’s found anything in the last two years. And hell, it’s not like we can win against a UBM.”

In response, the vigorous mohawk put up an indomitable smile. “Heh heh heh, I’m not going for anything *that* big. I just want the meteor!”

“The meteor?”

“Don’t you know? In manga and light novels, the meteoric iron you get from meteors is a super strong weapon material. That has to be the same in *Dendro*.”

“Ahh, I see. Even if the UBM is gone, the meteor that hit the creature should still be there.”

“Exactly! So let’s keep digging!”

“All right, all right.”

Thus, they resumed their mining activities.

What they failed to realize was that, if the meteor had been large, all the villages around here would've been obliterated, meaning that the one from the story had to have been small. Even if they kept digging, they would leave empty-handed and return to the festival to try and lift their spirits.

Or so things would have gone, except... they were making a wrong assumption.

The thing they thought had disappeared *was still there*.

The thing buried beneath, now awakened by the meager amount of light, had realized that *there were "torches" above it*.

Not only that, but the "torches" it had drastically reduced 300 years ago had increased to incomparably great numbers.

Upon the moment of awakening, it hadn't had the power to escape to the surface. Since then, it had done nothing but wait while consuming the meager amount of light reaching it.

But its wait was now over.

Having absorbed enough light to regain some of its power, it recovered enough strength to escape to the surface.

"K y A h a H!"

It extended a tentacle upwards — towards the crack leaking light into its tomb.

Having transformed all the light it gathered into MP, it used the crystalline protrusion at the end of it to fire a heat ray reaching thousands of degrees in temperature.

It hit the mark exactly, melting the bedrock and widening the hole to the surface.

That wasn't all. On its way, it hit the unenthusiastic mohawk Master, piercing him through the crotch to the top of his head, instantly evaporating him and giving him the death penalty.

The Master didn't even have a chance to realize what happened, and his friend wasn't quick enough to even notice, much less help. All he saw was his

vanishing friend and the melting bedrock.

A moment later, *it* flew out through the hole.

It was a cracked, non-reflective crystal ball with a three meter diameter. It had black wings of an undefined shape. It had a set of four permeable tentacles with crystalline protrusions at the end.



It had no organs that could be used to express emotion... *and yet it cackled.*> It had no mouth or anything that made up a face, and yet its crystalline body creaked out maddened laughter.

“K y H a h A H a h A h a H a H a h K y a K Y a H!”

It spread its dark wings and absorbed all the light that reached it, instantly restoring its MP reserves.

It became rejuvenated and overjoyed at the same time.

After all, there were so, so many “torches” here.

It was as happy and pure as a child about to blow out the candles on his birthday cake.

“Attack!” one of the nearby Masters shouted.

They had yet to realize what it really was, but they had more than enough reason to believe it was a danger and try to stop it with their skills and Embryos.

“K y a H a h A h a h A H a h A h a H!”

But before they could do anything, *it flew up*. Up and up, higher and higher...

Ignoring all below, it rose to what seemed like thousands of meters above ground, if not more. Eventually, it passed the troposphere and arrived at the stratosphere.

To those below, it was nothing but a dot at this point.

“Did it just... run away?” asked one of the Masters.

The rest of them thought the same.

From there, the monster couldn’t harm them, nor could they attack it. They assumed the monster had felt cornered and escaped as high as it could.

But that couldn’t have been farther from the truth.

Suddenly, there was a flash of light from high above, and a few seconds later, one of the Masters on the surface was set aflame. His hair, the oil of his skin, the clothes on his back were engulfed in ultra-hot fire.

He stopped, dropped, and rolled to try and put it out, but since both his

equipment and flesh were melting, that was far from enough, and he soon received the death penalty.

The sight made the other Masters tremble and look up at the sky.

“Eh?”

“No way... From *there*?!”

It reminded them of what they’d heard at the play.

But no sword or arrow could reach the heights it was in. Some even tried to challenge it atop flying dragons, but not even those large wings could take them high enough.

That play was the very reason why they were here. The words they’d heard there had inspired them to mine this mountain.

However, they had *slightly* underestimated Blacksky’s altitude.

Still, no one could fault them for that, as expecting *this* would be insanity. After all, what madman could imagine *a UBM that has an offensive ability with a range of 10,000 metels and uses it to one-sidedly attack from high up in the atmosphere?*

“K Y a h A h a h A H a H a h A h A H!”

Safe from all harm, the creature spread its dark wings even further and consumed all sunlight shining on the planet, effectively turning day into night.

As it ate the light, it used its supreme vision to look at the surface and light the “torches” below.

The heat ray it fired distorted the air around it as it reached the ground and set another Master aflame.

The sight brought it great joy.

Of course it did.

After all, it *liked* watching the “torches” burn.

Indeed, that was the one thing the play always got wrong. It didn’t consume the light from the “torches.” Sun and starlight was more than enough to give it the energy it required.

As an entity that ate only light and survived with just that, it had *no need* to harm any creatures living below.

But it *enjoyed* burning the “torches.”

The sight of them burning, writhing, and dying always brought it great glee.

After all, that was its sole hobby.

“K y a H a H?”

Suddenly, it started to wonder.

If the creature had been human, the thought would have been something like this: *“This” has burned so much of them. But they don’t burn like the “torches” “this” likes. There’s not enough writhing and despair. Hey, but why? Why?*

The Masters’ sense of pain was disabled, so the agony of burning alive wasn’t there. And it wasn’t like they actually died, so their despair wasn’t that great, either.

It didn’t like that at all.

The torches with the funny patterns on the left hands are boring, it thought. *“This” has to burn the torches without them.*

It looked over the land below and instantly found what it was looking for.

The lively festival at Torne, bustling with tians.



The disaster that had once attacked Torne arose from its 300 year sleep and once again set its sights on the village.

Its name was “Void of the Black Sky, Monochrome.”

It was an Ancient Legendary UBM... and a creature that suspended itself in a domain none could reach.

Chapter Four: Void of the Black Sky, Monochrome

Paladin, Ray Starling

As the unnatural laughter resounded, the mysterious black object breaking free of the mountain rose up to the sky at an incredible speed. Like a rocket, it pierced through the clouds above and stopped when it was nothing but a mere dot in the sky.

A moment later, the heavens surrounding it winked into darkness.

Though evening was still a while away, it suddenly felt like the sun had set hours ago.

It made me recall the night summoned by the aberration, but this was probably the exact opposite cause. While her Superior Embryo had *created the night*, the dot in the sky was taking the light and effectively *robbing the day*.

B3 silently took out a binocular-like magic item and used it to look up at the dot. Her expression turned bitter.

“B3... what *was* that?” I asked.

“A UBM.” She handed me the binoculars.

I took a look at the dot and saw a monster that had the appearance of a cracked crystal ball with a set of dark wings. Above it, there was the name “Void of the Black Sky, Monochrome.”

““Black Sky?”” I muttered. “Wait, that’s...!”

It had to be “Blacksky,” the UBM from the play. The monster from history who’d become the origin of the Windstar Festival.

The thing had been hit by the meteor and buried underground 300 years ago. Had that thing really survived all those centuries without any food or drink?

“So it’s a light-eating energy life form... an elemental,” said B3. “In that case, it’s not too strange that it survived, but that doesn’t matter now. What *does* matter is what it’s planning to—”

Before she could finish, Monochrome made its move.

Still high in the sky, it began shooting beams of light. The first few went to the mountain it'd just exited, but then they started landing in the festival crowds. They birthed bursts of raging fire where they hit. Stands, households, and *people* were set ablaze.

And as though that wasn't enough, the beams didn't stop. They continued to drop like an unrelenting rain.

"K y a H A h A h a h A H a a H! ♪" the thing that caused them laughed. I could hear it clearly despite the distance between us.

The sound was thick with malice. It felt as though that was its way of telling the victims just how much fun it was having. The burning town, the terrified people, the children crying for their parents — all of it brought it great joy.

It watched the endless fear and tragedy and felt *nothing but glee*.

"You vile piece of..." I growled.

That monster made me feel exactly the same as when I'd found out about Maise's evils, when I'd faced Gouz-Maise, and when I'd challenged Franklin. My heart was pleading me, saying, *Do not stand for this*.

"SILVEEEERRRR!" Hearing my roar, my trusty steed appeared out of my inventory.

I jumped on his back, locked my prosthetic's hook on his reins, and used the MP stored in my Grudge-Soaked Greaves to activate Wind Hoof.

"Ray!" cried B3.

"You help Farica and the other tians find shelter!" I shouted. "I'll take care of that thing!"

Without even waiting for a response, I swung the reins and made Silver gallop towards the sky. A second later, the crest on my upper left arm began to shine.

"Ray!" cried Nemesis as she popped out of it, took her greatsword form, and wrapped around my right arm.

"You get the situation?!" I asked.

“Of course! We’re shattering that damned crystal, aren’t we?!”

“Yeah! That’s all you need to know!”

Silver dashed towards the sky at a nearly 90-degree angle as I resisted gravity by charging magic into my prosthetic and adding force to my feet in the stirrups.

“What?” I burst out as I noticed something.

The vertical perspective was giving me a good view of Torne. Looking at it, I saw the silhouettes of four other flying mounts: a gryphon, a hippogryph, a wyvern, and a large skydragon — probably of Pure-Dragon tier.

All of them were being ridden by Masters who’d probably come to enjoy the Windstar Festival.

And now, just like me, they were taking to the sky to slay Monochrome.

“Hey!” the guy on the hippogryph called. “Hey! Aren’t you Ray Starling the Unbreakable?!”

“Yeah! Who are you?”

“I’m Lang, just a Gale Rider without a nickname! Riser told me about you! He’s a long-time member of our clan!”

“You know Riser?!”

“Yes! Anyway, talk about raining on a parade, huh? Let’s join forces and—” Suddenly, Lang’s head completely vanished.

“Wh...?!” I gasped.

In but a flash and without a sound, a beam from above had evaporated his skull. The body left behind was turning to particles of light, while his hippogryph was automatically returned to his Jewel.

“It’s intercepting us!” roared the heavily-armored Master on the Pure-Dragon.

Looking up, I saw the monster’s tentacles twist as their tips were directed at our direction.

“Hah!” chuckled the lightly-armored Master on the gryphon. “It’s like we’re in a shoot ’em up! Getting up close’ll be tough!”

“HyaHAH! We’ve gotta do what we gotta do!” exclaimed the wyvern-rider with a mohawk. “I’ll avenge my clan bro and the tians! We never run from a fight!”

They both made their mounts speed up.

“The beams go straight!” shouted the Master on the Pure-Dragon. “It’s not hard to dodge them! Just watch when the tentacles flash!” He was completely right about that. Though the thing had an immense range, evading its attacks was no challenge, and if we kept this up, it wouldn’t be long until we reached and killed it.

“Whoa, dudes, be careful!” said the mohawk guy. He sounded loud, probably because of some sort of voice-amplifying item. “I was there when it came out! Back then, it melted the bedrock and my clan bro in one hit, but when it shot from the sky, it just made the target burn! It means the beam power is inversely proportional to distance!”

“Ah, so its effective range is lower than the 10,000 meter actual range!” shouted the Pure-Dragon Master.

Basically, the real danger would begin when we got close to that monster.

If the power of the beams is still low, that means that Lang was instakilled only because it hit his head... Man, what an unlucky guy.

I heard a sound behind me and turned to see what caused it. “Hm?”

There were fiery fumes floating somewhere around the halfway point between us and the surface. It looked somewhat like a missile explosion.

“That’s exactly it,” said Nemesis upon reading my mind. “Someone on the surface fired a missile — most likely an Embryo skill — but it was shot down by the fiend’s beams.”

Being in weapon form expanded her field of vision, so she could see what was happening both above and below us.

Though the few of us here were the only ones who’d risen to the sky, someone left on the surface was trying to do something, as well.

“The missiles aren’t the only attacks coming from there, mind you,” she

added. "But all the others, too, are being shot down by the beams."

"All of them, huh?"

And yet, despite that, the remaining four of us flying riders were in peak condition. It was probably because we could dodge the beams, but I still found it pretty odd.

It felt like the monster was prioritizing stopping the attacks from the surface, *as if there was no need to take care of us.*

"Geez... Just how far *is* the damn thing?!" complained the gryphon Master, and I shared his sentiment.

Monochrome had started out at about 10,000 meters up in the sky, and though we were nearing that altitude right now, the distance between us still seemed about the same. The thing was actually *rising even higher.*

"Keh! What's with its range?! It's insane!" the mohawk guy complained, but he was probably reading the situation wrong.

"Indeed," Nemesis agreed with my thought. "Its original altitude appears to have been the limit of its range. The beams have stopped reaching the surface."

Exactly. 10,000 meters was more or less the maximum distance those beams could reach before losing all their power and dispersing. But that had nothing to do with Monochrome's own maximum altitude. It could rise above that limit, and it wasn't hesitating to do so in order to avoid us.

There probably was a maximum height it could reach. At the very least, I hoped it couldn't leave into outer space, but even if it could, we had bigger problems.

"Ah...! Cra...p!" exclaimed the gryphon Master. His voice was starting to sound distant and meek.

Of course it did. We were 12,000 meters above the ground. The air here was many times thinner than on the surface.

"He...y, this is ba...d! My bod...y ca...n't hand...le this..."

This wasn't an environment that could support life. Even the jumbo jets in reality didn't go above 10,000 meters. The air beyond that point was way too

sparse to allow long-term flight. The air density, temperature, and pressure here were far too low to allow the survival of any living thing, and even majestic flying monsters like gryphons and wyverns weren't welcome here. Unless we were supported by high stats, we Masters would either faint or freeze to death.

Monochrome, however, was still 10,000 meters above us, *and it was only going higher.*

Again, there might be a limit to how far it could rise. But even if it couldn't leave the atmosphere and escape to outer space, the limit for living creatures came *far earlier.*

That was the reason why it had focused on the attacks from the surface — it had known that none of us could reach it.

"Khh...! Sorr...y, I'm backi...ng o...ut...!"

"Shi...t...!"

The gryphon Master and the wyvern-riding mohawk had no choice but to give up. The Pure-Dragon was still holding out, but its movements had become too dull to be able to dodge the beam storm. It roared in pain as they burned its body, eventually piercing its wings and making it fall.

"Khh! Reca...ll!"

The Pure-Dragon's Master prioritized the mount's survival and returned it back to the jewel. Without anything to keep him in the air, the Master began to fall.

Crashing from this height would definitely give him the death penalty, but he was probably more than aware of that. After all, the look in his eyes was basically saying, "I'm leaving it all to you."

"So we are the last ones," sighed Nemesis.

"...Yeah."

Silver was a Prism Steed, not a living being, so he could fly higher than the other mounts. Even I could survive thanks to his Wind Hoof. The skill created a faint membrane of compressed air that shielded me from the cold, oxygen-less atmosphere. But alas, our limit wasn't far away, regardless of those facts.

“Ah!” I gasped as Silver suddenly stumbled.

Or, rather, the compressed air beneath his hoof *collapsed under our weight*.

I’d known it was gonna happen eventually. After all, Silver’s “flying” was actually “walking on hardened air.”

Here in the stratosphere, 15,000 meters above the surface, the air was far too thin for his Wind Hoof to form footing strong enough to support us, and giving him extra magic wouldn’t be enough to help.

Even the barrier that protected my life was on the verge of being broken by the beams grazing it. The surrounding air had less and less oxygen and more and more hazardous ozone. Going any higher would put me in danger of instant death the moment the barrier broke.

“Tch!” I looked up and saw that the distance between me and Monochrome was still as great as before.

“K y A H a h A h a H a H!” It laughed raucously, and I couldn’t help but feel it was directed at us. Despite the overwhelming distance and the air around us being nearly nonexistent, I could hear its cackling all too clearly.

“That is most likely a skill,” said Nemesis. “One developed for the sole purpose of ridicule.”

“...”

Beams that could reach a whole 10,000 meters away, an ability to ascend into the stratosphere, a skill to mock its victims... All of its powers were focused on looking down on other creatures and completely extinguishing them.

“Ray! This is the limit!” Nemesis shouted. “We can’t go any higher!”

Silver began to slow down. He could no longer create enough compressed air to keep up with his galloping.

Not only that, but Monochrome now focused all its beams exclusively on us, and my steed just couldn’t evade them all.

We simply had no means of going higher and reaching the monster.

“Gh! We’re backing out!” I growled, trying not to give in to the rage storming

within me, and ordered Silver to travel back to the surface.

He quickly turned around and began half-falling, half-galloping downwards.

Of course, that wasn't enough for Monochrome to stop its attacks.

"K y A H a A a a A a!" it laughed, making me turn to look at it.

I saw all four of its tentacles flash and release the beams directly towards us. It clearly didn't intend to let us retreat.

I gasped slightly, then took to action and roared, "Third form!"

"As you wish!" Nemesis instantly turned into the circular shield, and I used her to block the beams.

Upon hitting her surface, the deadly rays were dispersed to the sides.

The residual heat grazed both me and Silver, but there was little damage to speak of.

As expected, the shield's defensive ability was on a whole different level than the greatsword's and halberd's. Though these beams were weakened by the nearly-10,000 meter distance they traveled, stopping them all without using Counter Absorption was no doubt an impressive feat.

"...What? It's charging? Because of something other than standard damage...?" Nemesis muttered, but I was obviously too busy to listen.

Our resolute descent was almost perfectly vertical, so I fervently held the reins and tightened my legs around Silver to keep me from falling off.

Soon enough, we were over 10,000 meters away from Monochrome and escaped the range of its beams.

A few minutes later, we were back on solid ground.

"...Gh," I vocalized my frustration. Sure, it was good that we returned alive and all, but that was synonymous with running away from that damn thing. It made me feel bitter, to say the least.

"The sheltering is... going well, it seems," I muttered.

There were no people in our landing spot, but at the village, I saw a bunch of Masters protecting tons of tourists, helping them find a place to hide. Other

Masters were looking up at the sky, thoroughly alert and ready for more beams.

There was no point in that right now, though, since the surface was still outside Monochrome's range.

"K y A H a k Y a h a K y a H a H!" Its laughter resounded despite the distance, bringing fear into the people's hearts.

I knew that better than most, since my Grudge-Soaked Greaves were absorbing the surrounding negative emotions and turning them into magic.

The monster laughed again to induce terror while preparing to attack the moment the village was in its range again.

"At least it's descending pretty slowly," I said.

On our way down to the surface, I'd realized that it couldn't go down as fast as it went up. Its descent was nothing compared to its rocket-like ascent. In fact, it was actually slower than free fall.

From what I could see, it would take about 30 minutes for it to return back to a range from which it could attack.

That was good. Considering that we now had more time to help people find shelter, our charge hadn't been in vain.

"It's grace, indeed, but we still have no means of shattering the crystal itself," said Nemesis upon returning to her human form.

In her tone, I heard both vexation... and an unyielding fighting spirit.

We couldn't even reach Monochrome, much less harm it, and yet she hadn't given up. I was with her in that regard, of course.

"There's another thing I noticed about it," I said. "The thing's probably not that tough."

It had been shooting down all the anti-air attacks heading towards it. That might've been its way of showing its superiority, but what if it actually *couldn't allow a single attack to hit it*?

"What's your basis for that?" asked Nemesis.

"There's a wound on the crystal ball making up its body."

Looking at it through B3's binoculars, I'd seen a pretty large crack, and since not one Master here had landed a single hit on it since it appeared...

"That has to be an old wound," I said. "It's probably the damage it got when it was hit by the meteor."

According to the play, it'd been shot down from the sky and buried deep within the earth for several centuries. However, the venerated meteor probably hadn't been all that large or powerful.

If it had been huge, it would've had obliterated both Monochrome *and* the surrounding villages, leaving no one to tell the tale. Therefore, it had to have been small enough to do next to no damage to the landscape.

Gouz-Maise or any of the tough UBMs Shu'd told me about could either bear such a meteor with their stats alone or easily regenerate from the wound it caused. Monochrome, on the other hand, had suffered great damage and hadn't even recovered from it yet.

From what I could tell, its fast ascent power, extreme range, and the ability to absorb light came at a cost of HP, END, and regenerative ability.

"This is just my intuition speaking, but I feel that a Vengeance with about as much charge as we used on Gouz-Maise would be enough to break it. Hell, even half of that might work."

And it was perfectly possible to charge that much by just letting the beams hit me and healing with consumables and my BR Armor.

"The problem is that we have no way to hit it," she said.

That was still the biggest issue with this monster. Even if it was one of the most physically weak UBMs, that wouldn't mean anything if we couldn't land a single attack on it.

"Living creatures can't get to it because it's up in the stratosphere, while attacks from the surface get intercepted. With that in mind, I can think of only two ways of dealing with it."

"Which would be?" asked Nemesis.

"Either we use an attack that ignores distance, like Xunyu's ultimate skill... or

we use an anti-air attack that can't be stopped by its beams."

We didn't have Xunyu with us, so the former wasn't an option, and based on the fact that all the anti-air attacks had been shot down, no one here had any skills that fit the latter requirement. And of course, we were no exception to that.

Because of that, I thought the latter method just couldn't be put into practice, but...

Nemesis was silent. She seemed to have something else on her mind. At last, she said, "Ray, may I return to the crest for a moment?"

"What?"

Why now, of all times? I wondered.

"I am about halfway through the analysis of the third form."

Wait, do you mean that... "...the third form's skill can work on that thing?"

"It's not impossible. Although I must admit that what I've analyzed so far has more holes in it than swiss cheese. But I made progress when we shielded against its attacks."

When we shielded? B3 told us that the skill analysis speeds up when doing actions related to the skill. Is that what happened?

"The third form's skill is most likely similar to both Vengeance is Mine and Counter Absorption," she added.

"Wait, so..."

"What I know for certain at this point is that it's an offensive skill that accumulates damage from enemies and can only be used once per day."

So it basically combined the limitations of both Vengeance and Counter Absorption, which made it safe to assume it was more powerful than Vengeance. We still didn't know if the skill could reach Monochrome, though.

"This will be a double gamble," Nemesis continued. "We need to pray that the analyzed skill can harm the fiend... and hope we can use it well. If either of those don't come to fruition, we will be left helpless."

“But the possibility is there, isn’t it?” I asked.

“Certainly.”

Her answer made me form a faint smile. “Then...”

“...Your answer is already decided, correct?” She returned a smirk of her own.

Man, it’s always the same with us, huh? I thought, drawing parallels between the current situation and our fights against Gardrand and Gouz-Maise.

In spite of everything at stake, the moments when Nemesis and I gambled on the future we believed in heartened and assured me like nothing else could.

“Get on that analysis, then,” I said. “I’m counting on you.”

“As you should. Expect only the best, Ray,” she replied as she returned to my crest.

I gently caressed the mark before looking up at the sky, where I saw the malicious black grain of sand that was Monochrome slowly descend towards the surface.

There were a little under 30 minutes left before Torne was in its range. I could only hope that the analysis would be complete before then.

“K y a H A h a H a h A h a H!” it cackled, as if to announce its approach.

I felt obligated to respond, and said, “I’ll shut you up... *for good.*”

The battle was only just beginning.



“Is this an air-raid shelter?” I muttered as I looked up at a half-spherical building that hadn’t been there before.

I could see two other structures exactly like it, too. They’d probably been made by the cooperation between people with earth magic skills or Masters with earth-manipulating Embryos. Their material was the land itself, so they looked like they were buried in the ground.

Additionally, the structures’ surfaces were emitting a faint light. That was probably the result of some sort of barrier skills they were channeling in preparation for the attacks.

I had no idea whether those structures could take Monochrome's close beams point-blank, but they could probably hold against its 10,000 meter range beams for a while.

I entered one of the shelters and walked around the crowds of tourists and villagers, searching for B3, Louie, and Farica.

We had about 20 minutes until Monochrome could attack us again, and Nemesis was still analyzing the skill, so I thought I'd spend this time by going to B3 and explaining the situation.

Finding her didn't take too long.

"Let me go! Please!"

She was with Farica.

"I'm sorry, but I cannot allow you to exert yourself and risk hurting your baby..." B3 said.

The woman was desperately trying to leave the shelter, while B3 was holding her back. As I tried to understand what was happening here, I discovered that Louie wasn't with them.

A bad feeling came over me as I walked up to them and called out, "B3!"

"Ray, how did it go with Monochro—"

There was a menacing cackle from outside.

"Oh, I see." She instantly realized that the problem hadn't been solved yet.

"And what's going on *here*?" I asked.

"It's Louie!" cried Farica. "We can't find him anywhere!"

"He's not in the shelter?!"

"Right," nodded B3. "We looked in the other shelters, as well, but he wasn't there, either. According to one of his friends, right before Monochrome appeared, Louie went to invite Mrs. Farica to the dance."

"Ah!" I gasped. That meant that Louie had been all by himself at the start of the monster's rampage. I imagined the worst case scenario, and it made a chill go down my spine.

“I’ll search for him!” I exclaimed.

“Let me join you,” said B3. “Please wait here, Mrs. Farica.”

“But Louie is...”

“For his sake, please don’t go anywhere!”

After making sure she wasn’t going to leave, we hurried out of the shelter.

Louie’s life was in danger, so we had to find him as soon as possible.

Not much time was left until Monochrome’s attacks would restart.

Please don’t be hurt, I thought as B3 and I got on Silver and began frantically searching the village.

Interlude: Family

Torne Village

Louie was in one of the village's stone windmills, curled up and crying in fear.

The moment of Monochrome's first attacks, Louie had been on his way back home. Thankfully, due to having been away from the festival crowds, he hadn't been targeted by the monster, and had made it out completely unhurt. Nevertheless, the sight of the burning village had terrorized him into a panic, spurring him to run for it until he'd stumbled upon this windmill on the side of the road.

Going inside it had been no mistake. It did a good job hiding Louie from Monochrome's gaze, and it was too far away from the other houses to catch the fire. However, this place was nothing but a dead end for him.

Though it kept him safe from the immediate danger, he would instantly be burned by the fiend if he went out. The mill was both his shelter and his prison.

"Ohh..." he cried, all curled up in the corner.

The resounding cackling of the monster terrified him to no end, and the solitude made him feel helpless, but more than anything, he couldn't stop worrying about his mother, who, he thought, was still at home.

"If Dad were here, he'd..."

He'd save us just like he did back then, he thought.

This actually wasn't a situation that Shijima could have handled, but young Louie wasn't in a state of mind to consider that. Like the child that he was, Louie just wanted his *father* to save him.

The boy had adored Shijima ever since they'd met four years ago. Being his savior and an ultra-strong Master, the man was a real hero to him.

However, Louie's admiration was the kind you'd direct at superstars or

famous sportsmen; Shijima definitely wasn't a father figure to him.

Because of that, he didn't know how to feel about Farica and Shijima getting married.

The boy's heart was rejecting the idea that Shijima was his dad now. His love and respect for the man was there there, but not his ability to see anything fatherly about him, which was perfectly normal for a child whose mother had just remarried.

That sentiment made it hard for the boy to idolize the man like before, and it started to create an awkward distance between them.

Shijima began living with them, and Louie behaved around him like a stranger, rather than the family they'd now become.

Neither Farica nor Shijima said anything about that. They believed that, regardless of how the boy went about it, Louie had to find the compromise by himself — by his own will. Because of this, Gringham and Juno were soon acting more worried than the parents.

After a whole month of awkwardness, the family came across a turning point — a visit to a certain grave at the capital.

It was the death anniversary of Louie's biological father, so they went to clean it up and decorate it with flowers.

The man had been a plain Carpenter who'd lost his life slipping off a roof and falling to the pavement below. The angle at which he'd hit the ground was so unfortunate that he'd died in an instant, not giving any time for healing magic to save him.

After cleaning the grave, presenting the flowers, and giving a prayer, Louie and Farica left the graveyard and prepared to return home, but that was when the boy realized they'd left their cleaning tools back at the grave.

"Wait here, Mom, I'll go get them!" he told Farica before speeding away.

Back at his father's grave, Louie found someone he hadn't expected.

It was Shijima, the man they'd parted from after traveling together to the capital. The man had told them he had business to attend to.

He placed some lit incense before Louie's father's grave, placed his hands together, and closed his eyes.

Shijima was so focused on his task that he didn't even noticed Louie hide behind one of the other graves.

After a long, silent prayer, the man silently spoke up, saying, "For as long as I draw breath, I will make sure they're happy."

Those were words directed at the person who'd protected Shijima's most cherished people before he'd come into their lives.

"So please... watch over us."

They were a promise to the man who was no longer with them.

Louie didn't come out of hiding and merely watched the scene, but it had a profound effect on him, culminating with a single thought:

Oh, he... he's a dad.

From that day forth, Louie slowly started to warm up to Shijima again, and they went on to become a happy father and son.

The Windstar Festivals the family visited after that were some of the best memories of Louie's life so far.

This one, however, was drastically unlike those.

"Why is this happening...?" Louie cried.

He was spending this Windstar Festival curling up, alone, and scared out of his mind.

Last year, he'd had his father with him, along with Gringham and Juno, but now, they were nowhere in sight.

He was even separated from his mother, leaving him shivering in solitude on the mill's cold stone floor while the dreadful cackling from above terrorized his heart.

"I want my mommy... a-and daddy too..." he continued to cry, with no one there to hear him.



???

You might end up being released. If that happens, I won't be able to give you any orders. But if you... if the days we spent here are as much of a treasure to you as they are to me... if you see us as your family... then there's something I want you to do.

As those important words went through his mind, he slowly opened his eyes to find himself in a highly familiar landscape.

He'd been asleep for a full two seasons. Much had changed. And upon examining his current state, he realized that he'd lost his bond to someone he deeply adored, which made him profoundly sad.

"Eh...?" He then noticed that something was wrong with the sky.

He didn't feel like it was night, and yet it was strangely dark, not to mention that there was an unpleasant laughter coming from high above.

Though the sound slightly annoyed him, he didn't care about it too much.

However, the cackling was mixed with another sound — one he couldn't ignore even if he tried.

After all, how could he disregard the cries of a child who was so precious to him? How could he act like he didn't hear the weeping of a member of his *family*?

"GROAAAAHHHHHHH!" roared the man as he kicked the ground beneath his four feet. He would give his heart and soul to run towards the voice. To protect his nearest and dearest.

Chapter Five: B. B. B.

Paladin, Ray Starling

“Where will we search for him?” asked B3.

“We’ll run around the festival plaza and the roads between the buildings!” I replied. “You keep looking around!”

“All right.”

We rode Silver as he galloped through the burning village.

Just an hour ago, it had been overflowing with people enjoying the festivities with bright smiles on their faces, but now, it looked completely deserted, and the only remnants of that fun were the countless windstars with their blades burned off.

Torne was filled with a blackness much like that of Monochrome itself. Burned and darkened remains were spread out as far as the eye can see. Homes, cattle, and even *people* had been bathed in fire and reduced to charred shadows of what they once were.

Hoping that Louie hadn’t ended up like that, I frantically searched for him.

B3 poked my side.

“...?” I raised an eyebrow. She seemed to have noticed something.

“My Killing Intent Perception skill is flaring up,” she whispered into my ear.

I gasped and asked, “Is it Monochrome?”

“No, it’s not. There are multiple sources, and all of them are approaching us.”

“Eh?” It took me a moment to process that.

Before I could ask her who could attack us *now*, of all times, I heard an odd set of words.

“Dreams of Electric Sheep — Gremlin!”

A moment later, Silver lost control of his legs and collapsed sideways, the running momentum taking him a fair distance forward.

I was still holding his reins with my prosthetic, so I fell along with him. B3, on the other hand, instantly jumped off and landed beautifully.

“Gh... what the hell just happened?” I let go of Silver’s reins and stood up. “Silver, what’s wrong?!”

Still on his side, he wasn’t moving. He didn’t even twitch or anything like that. It was as though he was broken, malfunctioning like the machine he was, and I couldn’t make sense of it at all.

“That thing won’t be moving for half a day,” said someone behind me. I turned around to see a malicious-looking man wearing a bandana with a mark depicting a black circle over a red one.

He wasn’t alone. B3 and I were now surrounded by a group of ten-odd Masters bearing the same mark.

“Gremlin’s this guy’s Embryo. It turns off machines and stuff,” the bandana guy said while scratching his chin and pointing at the man next to him, who formed a mean grin.

“So you’re the ones who stopped Silver,” I said. “What’s your problem?”

“We’ve got some business with you, Ray Starling the Unbreakable,” the bandana guy said.

It definitely wasn’t the first time I’d been called by that nickname. That Lang guy I’d met before had used it, too. Unlike him, though, this man here didn’t seem friendly at all.

“We’re Sol Crisis, the PK clan,” he said. “I’m the leader, Dum-dum Dan. Call me ‘Dum-dum.’ Not like that matters. We won’t know each other for long.”

Sol Crisis? I thought. *Well, now that I think about it, some of them seem familiar.*

They were the ones who’d wrangled with those mohawks at the stalls. The armor guy wasn’t with them, though.

“Guess there’s no point in asking what you want from me,” I said.

They were a PK clan, so it was kinda obvious that they wanted to PK me. They'd made it hard for me to escape, and then come out to introduce themselves to make it easy for them to prove they'd defeated the Unbreakable later. There would be no point in killing me in a surprise attack and making it hard to tell who did it.

Hell, some small man in work clothes was actually filming this, so their motive was all too clear.

"Can't you leave it for after Monochrome is taken care of?" I asked. "I've got something more important to do."

"Not happening," said Dum-dum. "Now's the perfect chance."

What?

"Sol Crisis is pretty well-known now, but we don't have any real achievements to our name, so we wanna do something big and make our name blow up for real."

"...Then why don't you just kill Monochrome?" I demanded.

"Come on, dude, tons of people have killed UBMs at this point. It ain't all that special. Not to mention that we can't even touch the damn thing. Trying to take it out is just stupid. I mean, really, even *you* ran away."

I had no counterargument to that.

Still, the fact that someone who was doing nothing against Monochrome was making fun of everyone who'd tried to fight it was seriously pissing me off.

"So yeah, we can't beat the UBM up there, but it's all good, since we've got some way better game right here. It survived against a goddamn Superior and the self-proclaimed strongest PK clan, despite not even being level 100. If that ain't top-tier game, I don't know what is." The bandana guy named Dum-dum pointed at me and grinned. "I'm talking about *you*, guy."

Well, I got their motive right, at least.

"Now's not the time for this, damn it!" I shouted.

"Kyah ha ha! You dumbass! It's the *perfect* time for this!" someone other than Dum-dum replied.

I looked over at the source of the voice and saw a guy in full armor surpassing three meters in height. The charred buildings at his sides were crumbling. It definitely wasn't the first time I'd seen that armor. I'd seen it back at the capital's fountain and here in Torne, during the wrangle between Sol Crisis and Mohawk League.

Wait, I think I've seen it elsewhere, too...

"When you were in Gideon, we couldn't take you out 'cause of all the rankers and KoD, but now, that woman's the only one with ya!" he laughed out loud. "And there's no one here to bother us, either! You're a really fucking easy target right now!"

He seemed pretty pleased about the situation.

"So yeah, that's how it is," said Dum-dum. "We also did our homework and found out you're not too hot when fighting lots of people and when the fight drags on. Think you can hold out against us?"

I was silent. He wasn't wrong about that. My defense had a limited number of uses, so prolonged fights against many people were my bane.

Damn you, Franklin. I'm too well-known now.

"Not to mention we've got a secret weapon — me!" roared the armor guy. "Name's Barbaroy! I'm the sub-leader of Sol Crisis and the strongest one here!"

"Hh?!" I gasped as a sudden chill went down my spine.

The moment he'd said those words, there was a surge of overwhelming rage and killing intent. However, it didn't come from the armor guy, but from my side. I turned and saw my only ally on the scene.

"Heh heh," she giggled.

Indeed — B3 was the source of the surge. I didn't know why, but she was emitting an aura so intimidating, it couldn't even be compared to the one she'd had when fighting K&R yesterday. It was strong enough to make me shiver, yet she looked as composed as ever.

...No, scratch that. I looked and noticed that her shield's handle was bent.

For some reason, the armor guy was making her *really* mad.

“That armor has a nice *design*,” she said.

“Kyah ha ha! I know, right?” laughed the armor guy. “It’s the one and only Gunhammer Plate, Magnum Colossus! A special reward I got from a UBM!”

“Oh my, that is quite impressive.”

The armor guy continued to flaunt his gear, completely oblivious to B3’s murderous aura.

“Now, if I may ask... who are you to be wearing such armor?” she smiled. I hadn’t known her for long, but even I could tell she was faking it.

“Kyah ha ha ha! I already introduced myself!” he laughed again. “And what, ya can’t tell by my armor? You don’t know much, do ya?”

“...Perhaps. So, may I have your name?”

Armor dude, please stop. B3’s murderous aura is turning so strong that she’s scaring me more than the aberration. I don’t know what’s going on here, but you’re clearly walking on a minefield.

“Kyah ha ha ha! I’m Barbaroy Bad Burn the ‘Crushing Canopy’! I’m the man who used to lead Mad Castle, and now I’m the sub-leader of Sol Crisis! There! Satisfied?!”

“I see.”

I have no idea how I am the only one here who feels the aura... I thought. Hm? Wait.

“Hold on. ‘Barbaroy’?” I muttered to myself. That name seemed familiar...

“Ah,” I exclaimed as I glanced at B3, then at my party’s stat summary. Suddenly, it all made sense. I understood why B3 was so mad, and what kind of person this armor dude was.

“Huhh? What’s up, Unbreakable, ya don’t know me, either?” he asked.

“Oh no, I do,” I replied. “‘Barbaroy Bad Burn,’ huh? Yeah, I know that *name* very well.”

“Kyah ha ha! Of course ya do! Try using Reveal or Identification if you want. See for yourself.”

The fact he mentioned those skills probably meant that you'd see exactly what he claimed you would, but I more or less knew what was happening here, so that didn't matter to me.

"Killing you will make my and Sol Crisis's fame skyrocket even higher! Man, am I glad I saw you back at that fountain yesterday!"

"Damn, dude, you sure are hyped," commented Dum-dum. "I gotta say, though, when you told me you'd seen that guy alone at the capital, I thought it was just an early April Fools."

"Kyah ha ha! C'mon, leader, you know you can trust me!"

Oh, yeah, it's April Fools' Day in reality right now, I thought. Talk about timing. This whole situation feels like a bad joke.

"Ray," B3 spoke up.

"Yes?"

"Leave them to me and go search for Louie."

"Well, we wouldn't want him to get hurt while we're dealing with these guys," I conceded. "Is it really a good idea to leave them all to you, though?"

"Yes. In fact, *let me have them*," she said as she lightly pushed me.

I nodded and went to retrieve Silver, who was still immobile. After putting him back in my inventory, I hurried away from there.

"Hey! Don't think you can escape!" shouted the armor guy. The whole of Sol Crisis moved to stop me, but before they could do anything...

"Heaven's Weight!" B3 activated the gravity field she'd used on Rosa, pushing the PKers to the ground.

They were rendered incapable of doing anything to me, so I quickly made my escape.

I left Sol Crisis to B3 and focused entirely on searching for Louie.

But man, some people sure have some weird ideas, I thought. I mean, there's just no way that trick can work for long.



Torne Village

“I... I can’t move!”

“What the hell?! M-My bones are breaking!”

“Is this a gravity field? Wait, don’t tell me that...”

None of the people Ray had left behind were moving.

To be precise, there was one person who *didn’t* move, while the rest of them just *couldn’t* move.

The latter were the Sol Crisis members, bound by a high gravity field, while the former was B3 — its creator.

She looked down on them as she reached into her inventory and took out a Job Crystal. It was a consumable that allowed the user to switch their main job.

B3 shattered the Crystal, changing her main job from Shield Giant to something else.

“Now then,” she said in a cool tone as she leisurely walked up to the armored man. “There are three things I feel I must point out to you, Mister ‘Barbaroy.’”

She gently touched one of the protrusions on his armor and just *tore it off*.

“Huh?! How the fuck are you do—?!”

“It’s not hard enough,” B3 cut Barbaroy’s words short and forced her fist into his abdomen.

She wasn’t using her bare hands. While no one was paying attention, she’d equipped a pair of gigantic gauntlets.

That description really was apt, for they seemed like a pair of metallic gloves a giant would wear. Not only that, but they looked *very much like* the gauntlets from Barbaroy’s armor set, which, by the way, now had a number of cracks around its abdominal area.

“The real Magnum Colossus isn’t nearly as fragile,” B3 continued. Her tone had little emotion to it, making her give off the vibe of someone telling an apprentice cook about their mistake. “Although the appearance is good, you should have used a tougher metal.”

In contrast to her mild mannerisms, her attack had left Barbaroy completely bewildered and barely able to breathe.

“Next point. I checked your name using Reveal, and true, it’s ‘Barbaroy Bad Burn.’ However...” she stopped for a moment and cracked a faint grin. “On my screen, in my language... It’s written in katakana.”

As Barbaroy, on his knees, groaned because of the punch, B3 placed her foot on his head and stepped down on it.



Barbaroy's helm sunk a bit into the ground, but it was unable to withstand the impact and shattered, revealing a feeble-looking man.

"Th-The hell are you talking about...?" he asked. Losing his helmet made his voice lose its echo and with that, its power.

"The real Barbaroy Bad Burn's name isn't written in Japanese katakana," she explained with an emotionless voice. "I know it's hard to tell when we have the translation feature, but it's nothing you couldn't find out with a little bit of research."

B3 opened a window and showed him her status summary.

"The real one's name uses the English alphabet," she continued. "Like so..."

The window displayed B3's — B.B.B.'s — full name.

Plain as day, written in clear English, was "Barbaroy Bad Burn."

"Huh?!"

"Ahh... Thought as much," B3 said.

"Eh?"

"Wh-What's going on here?!"

Some Sol Crisis members reacted with mere surprise, while others looked thoroughly confused. Barbaroy — or, rather, the one who claimed to be Barbaroy — and Dum-dum, along with a couple of others, were the ones who seemed merely surprised. The latter were far more numerous.

"Oh, I see you haven't told your entire clan that *you're a fake*," B3 commented.

"N-No...!" said the armor man. "I'm Barbaroy and I'm wearing the Magnum Colossus! Reveal and Identification can prove it!"

"Yes, and that makes the truth that much easier to see. You have an Embryo that lets you falsify names, don't you?" She exposed his lie with a forced smile on her face. "Swindler and similar jobs have the 'Falsify Name' skill, but that can be exposed with a high level Reveal or Truth Discernment. Your Embryo has a skill that's above those two. Simple as that. After all, an Embryo skill's effect is

much stronger when it's more restricted."

Ultimate superior job skills like Franklin's Analyzing Eye of Wisdom could probably expose the man, but luckily — or perhaps unluckily — the fake Barbaroy had never encountered anyone with such abilities.

"I considered that it could be a skill from a special reward," B3 continued, "but I cannot imagine someone wearing that fake armor ever becoming an MVP."

"Gnhh...!" The fake Barbaroy didn't know how to respond.

"It's a great skill for tricking people, and pretending to be an influential player to make your clan more prestigious is definitely a good application of it. However, there is a limit to how many members you can gain before the truth comes out. From what I can see, many of them here did not know about this."

Indeed, about half of the members present had thought that their Barbaroy was the real one, and many of them had joined just because of the name's reputation. Now that the truth had come out, they gave suspicious glares to the members who'd known about this.

"That's why you targeted Ray — you wanted the prestige." B3 continued. "And when you were done with him and had an actual achievement to your name, you planned to make up a reason why Barbaroy had to leave and make him do exactly that. The prestige your clan would have then would be just enough to fool people and make them come to you even if you didn't have him anymore."

"Y-You bi— Stop!" The fake Barbaroy tried to shut her up, but he couldn't move because he was far too close to B3, giving him the full effects of Heaven's Weight: ultra high gravity and the Binding debuff. He simply didn't have the STR to break free.

"The reason why you chose Barbaroy is simple — it's because you cannot change appearances. Be it a battle or a public place, Barbaroy is known to always wear full armor, and that made him an easy choice, correct?" She momentarily stopped and looked down on the fake. "Your other options weren't nearly as good. The Superior Killer was decent, but no one knows his name, so it would've been difficult to prove you were the real thing. The

Unsheath and King of Burglary's faces are too well-known for your plan to work, while the King of Crimes is in the gaol, so he is not even an option. You ended up choosing Barbaroy through simple elimination."

"N-No! Don't believe her! I'm the real deal!" shouted the fake.

"Well, let's see you prove it, then," B3 said as she freed him from the effects of Heaven's Weight.

Being able to move again, the fake slowly stood up, then gasped as he realized what she meant.

"If you're truly the real Barbaroy, defeat me all by yourself and turn this situation around. Of course, I won't be holding back, either."

"Ghnhh..."

The fake couldn't even bring himself to nod to that, and that was more than enough to show how unauthentic he was.

"I'm a fake..." he gave in and admitted.

The members who'd been fooled began jeering at him.

"You tricked us!"

"Fuck! I can't believe I let this faker act like hot shit!"

"S-Screw you! Don't act like you didn't use Barbaroy's name to extort tons of money from people!"

The ones who were in on the plan retaliated, splitting Sol Crisis into two sides. Their relentless arguing resulted in lots of noise.

"*Shut up.*" But all of it stopped with just those silent, yet extremely menacing, words.

Needless to say, the one who spoke them was B3 — the most infuriated person on the scene.

"Excuse me, but there's no need for you to quarrel. Regardless of anything you say, I'm about to *kill you all.*"

The ones who were tricked argued against that.

“W-We were cheated!”

“It’s not my fault! I don’t have anything to do with this!”

“But you *did* use Barbaroy’s name to rob people, didn’t you?” B3 pointed out. “The fee for that will be your life. In fact, I am a player killer, so I do not need such excuses. Someone opposes me? I merely *kill them all*.”

Her words made all of Sol Crisis, torn apart by the lie, unwittingly become one again. The gravity field made it impossible for them to escape, so they all were aware now that they were about to be massacred.

“Anyway, I suppose this isn’t something you say so deep into a conversation, but I am quite upset right now,” B3 continued.

Yeah, we can tell, they thought in response. The way she’d treated the fake was more than enough to see that she was furious.

“Do you understand why am I so angry?”

“B-Because we used Barbaroy’s name...?” asked the fake.

“No. I actually *don’t mind* that you chose Barbaroy as the imitation. Well, it’s true that the low armor strength, low stats, and general lack of research somewhat vexes me, but the fact that someone used the name means that it holds enough weight to be used, so it’s definitely not the focus of my anger.”

“Th-Then why...?”

“There are two reasons,” she said in an ominously gentle tone. “The first one is the fact that you used the name of the leader of Mad Castle on the *sub-leader* of your third-rate clan.”

The members of Sol Crisis needed a moment to process what she’d just said, but they instantly understood just how mad she was. Her ferocious expression and fiery eyes spoke volumes about her rage.

“Th-Third rate?!” howled the fake. “You makin’ light of us?”

“Heh heh heh. Yours is a clan that acts all big and tough when all you have is borrowed fame. If that isn’t third-rate, I have no idea what is.” B3 chuckled. “And despite being so lowly, you had the gall to disgrace both Barbaroy and Mad Castle, effectively putting that clan below your third-rate Sol Crisis.”

Indeed, the true reason for her anger was her feelings for the now-gone clan. She had nothing against someone else using her name, but bringing it down was simply unacceptable in her eyes.

“Barbaroy Bad Burn isn’t forgiving enough to ignore this.”

B3’s tone was composed, but the pressure she was emitting was immeasurable, making Sol Crisis realize what just kind of beast they’d been dancing with.

“As for the other reason why I’m upset...” she continued as she raised another finger on her giant gauntlets. “You stood in his way and ridiculed him when he earnestly struggled to stop this tragedy.”

The passion in her tone made it clear that this upset her as much as the insult to her clan — if not more.

“And that’s why *I’m gonna trash you all*,” she changed her tone as a large set of armor covered her from neck to toe.

It looked exactly like that of the fake Barbaroy’s, but the aura it exuded was incomparable, for it was the real Gunhammer Plate, Magnum Colossus.

“Oh, right, I forgot to point out the third thing,” she said as all the bloodlust and anger vanished like mist.

“Th-Thing?” the fake meekly repeated her.

“Yes. I said that I have three things to point out, but I’ve only pointed out two so far.”

She’d mentioned two of the mistakes the fake had made, namely the armor durability and name display, but she’d yet to tell him the third.

“The third thing...” she said, still with a calm expression, as she took out the headpiece of the Gunhammer Plate from out of her inventory. “The third thing is that Barbaroy Bad Burn *turns on* his PK mode when he hides his face.”

She then placed the helm over her head.

“Oh, I just realized that I haven’t properly said it yet.”

The moment the plate covered her whole face, she declared, “The big boy

Barbaroy Bad Burn we're all talkin' about... is *me*."

Thus, one of the kingdom's leading PKers, Barbaroy Bad Burn the Crushing Canopy, was reborn.





About Sol Crisis

It all began with the Embryo of a Master known as “Vermin.” Its name was “Amanojaku,” and it had the ability to change the names of his items and himself.

Unaware of the Urikohime folk tale, Vermin wondered why it was a name-changing Embryo, but he liked its ability a lot. He figured that Amanojaku could work wonders for him if he used it well.

Infinite Dendrogram was a game where the system itself prevented name changes, so having the privilege of actually being able to do that gave him a great advantage.

Vermin used that power to swindle countless Masters. He avoided targeting tians because he didn’t want to end up in the gaol, but that would never happen with his fellow players, so he went wild scamming them one after another.

Eventually, he met up with a pair of other Masters who also went around doing bad deeds: Dum-dum, an ambusher PKer, and Blue Screen, a player who’d gotten on Dryfe’s wanted list for breaking too many machines.

They all found each other to be kindred spirits — or, rather, people they could use — and went on to join forces.

That was the start of the Sol Crisis clan.

Later, the new partners in crime wanted to do something big, and they eventually got the idea to fake an infamous PKer.

By using the name of someone feared and powerful, they could menace and coerce tons of other people, and if someone doubted the fake PKer’s identity, they could freely show them the name, which would be changed by Amanojaku.

The stronger and more feared the PKer, the more it would frighten those who saw it.

Though the Embryo didn’t allow appearance changes, they could still imitate PKers that didn’t show their faces. Not even MVP-exclusive special rewards

would be a problem if they just made items that looked similar and changed the name to make them appear real.

Additionally, upon reaching the sixth form, AmanoJaku became able to fake not only names, but stats, as well.

They definitely had the means to pull off the lie, and after a short investigation, Vermin found the perfect PKer to fake — Barbaroy Bad Burn.

Before the Superior Killer settled in Altar, there were a total of five PKers who were particularly feared:

The sole Superior was the King of Crimes, Sechs Würfel.

K&R's leader, The Unsheathe, Kashimiya.

K&R's sub-leader, Nobushi Princess, Rosa.

Goblin Street's leader, King of Burglary, Eldridge.

Mad Castle's leader and the sole high-rank job among them, Full Armor Giant, Barbaroy Bad Burn.

These PKers were greatly feared by Masters all across the kingdom. Of course, the KoC was dreaded by the tians, as well, and since he was quickly put on the country's wanted list, it was hard to consider him a Master belonging to the kingdom.

If Vermin wanted to pretend to be anyone in the kingdom, these five would be the most effective, as they were the most infamous PKers there.

Kashimiya, Rosa, and Eldridge were still actively playing, so they were instantly excluded from the possible choices.

As for King of Crimes... right before the war against Dryfe, he'd fought against someone *unknown*. They'd both ended up defeated, and KoC had been sent to the gaol, so he wasn't even an option.

Besides, even if he had still been here, taking up his name would just be far too dangerous, since the slightest mention of him would make the kingdom's officials instantly jump into action.

The kidnapping of the third princess, the massacre at Count Friebe's mansion,

the deprivation of The Saint, et cetera... The many crimes committed by KoC had turned his name into a sort-of taboo word in the kingdom.

Because of all that, Barbaroy was the only real choice, and as luck would have it, his current situation was just perfect for Sol Crisis's plan.

After being defeated by the Over Gladiator, Figaro, Barbaroy's clan was dissolved, and he himself seemed to have disappeared.

There were rumors that he'd quit because of the shock from the defeat, making him the perfect person for Vermin to fake.

So Vermin did just that, becoming a Barbaroy Bad Burn that couldn't be exposed by any Reveal or Identification, letting them pressure other Masters like never before.

It didn't take long for the fake Barbaroy to uplift Sol Crisis and make it a relatively well-known PK clan. The fame attracted many new members, making it a highly popular underground option.

With that, however, came a certain problem.

There were now far too many members who didn't know that their Barbaroy was a fake. If he was somehow exposed, the entire clan would be at risk of collapsing.

So their countermeasure to that was to get fame from something other than Barbaroy.

Specifically, they decided to PK Ray Starling the Unbreakable — the famous Master who, despite being a newbie, hadn't broken before a Superior.

Achieving that would be proof that their Barbaroy was more than just for show, and the clan would no longer be in danger of collapsing. In fact, it would only grow bigger.

However, Ray Starling was almost always surrounded by duel rankers, his weird comrades, and even *the* King of Destruction, making him a scary target to attack.

There were probably many other PKers who wanted to take out the Unbreakable, but were giving up for that very reason.

But then Vermin saw Ray Starling at the capital's fountain. He was accompanied solely by Nemesis, so they figured it was a golden opportunity for them to take him.

Dum-dum used his trailing-specialized Embryo to track where he was going, then gathered the members and went after him, looking for a chance to PK him.

They planned on attacking him when he was at the Fadl Mountain Pass, but then their attack coincided with K&R's hunt.

Two of their members ended up getting the death penalty, but they figured that K&R's interference was actually worth it, since now the Unbreakable would also be known as the one who not even K&R could defeat.

If Sol Crisis managed to succeed where they'd failed, they would become an even bigger name than K&R.

With that positive, yet misguided mentality, they used Monochrome's attack to assault Ray Starling. Since next to no other Masters would interfere, they figured this was a perfect opportunity for them. The incident was working in their favor, and things couldn't be going any smoother for them.

However, they neglected to consider three things:

One — no matter how many tricks they used to make Sol Crisis appear strong, it would never be representative of their own strength.

Two — the one they thought had quit the game was still very active.

And three — they never pictured just how badly the real one would *snap* when their actions were uncovered.

Those were Sol Crisis's fatal mistakes, and retribution was dealt back to them in the form of an enraged juggernaut — the third strongest PKer in the kingdom.



Torne Village

Sol Crisis was now looking at the real Barbaroy Bad Burn, clad in gigantic armor and donning a full helm that covered her entire face.

Putting on that helmet was what made Barbaroy “turn on” to her PKer mode.

Scared as they were, upon being told that, the members of Sol Crisis had wanted to laugh at her manga-like roleplaying. But once she actually equipped the helm and became the renowned PKer, all their amusement was blown away.

Even though she looked exactly the same as their fake had, the intimidating air she emanated and the ferocity leaking out from her armor were on a completely different level. Her presence was so intense that anyone who knew what it felt like would have easily been able to tell the fake from the real one, even if the fake wore her name.

“Right, then. Like I said, you’re all about to get trashed.” Barbaroy’s words echoed within the armor. Her voice sounded somewhat masculine. “You can’t move for shit right now, so I could take my time and kill you slowly.”

Sol Crisis shivered in fear.

Each and every single one of them were currently bound by the high gravity field spread out around Barbaroy. Depending on the distance from her, that field multiplied their weight by a minimum of 200 and a maximum of 500, so they couldn’t make any significant movements. The wide reach of the skill had allowed her to catch the entire clan.

At the edge of the field, the gravity was 200 times higher than normal, so those located thereabouts could move if they had 2,000 STR, which was 200 times higher than a normal person. It was a burden that most capable vanguard roles with low and high-rank jobs could carry with little trouble.

However, those positioned further away from Barbaroy were either ranged attackers or supports. And since magic, archery, or gunnery didn’t scale with STR, they didn’t have enough of it to be able to escape the 200 times greater than normal gravity.

And that was only for those who were at the edge of the field. Those who were closer could be exposed to 300, 400, and even 500 times greater gravity, and even, to top it off, receive the Binding debuff. Even max level high-ranks with good stat growth bonuses from their Embryos would find it hard to escape that.

Not to mention that merely *being able to move* wasn't enough, as the extra weight would still dull their mobility and make it impossible for them to fight properly.

For these many reasons, Heaven's Weight was a truly terrifying skill.

Of course, it wasn't absolute. During the capital blockade incident, Figaro had been able to break out of Barbaroy's maximum gravity field.

But if you looked at it another way, Figaro was the *only one* who'd succeeded at that, and he was a Superior.

The mix of Barbaroy's Heaven's Weight and ultimate skill had even killed Superior Jobs like Rosa and Eldridge. In fact, Figaro's feat had only been possible because of the powerful buffs from his Embryo and skills on his special rewards.

Naturally, Sol Crisis had nothing that could overcome this. So great was the gravity that some were forced to the ground and had their bones break.

Man, shame I'm not closer to the outside, thought the leader of Sol Crisis, Sneak Raider, Dum-dum. He was regretting setting the clan's battle arrangement to what it was, and the reason for that was simple. *I might've been able to escape after she ran out of MP taking care of the rest. Just my luck.*

Indeed, he would have liked to avoid the death penalty by using his clan members as decoys, and it wouldn't exactly have been impossible, either.

Though Heaven's Weight was strong, it also drained a lot of MP.

According to Dum-dum's Reveal skill, Barbaroy now only had about a third of her max MP left, and he expected it to run out before she PK'd everyone.

Thus, Dum-dum could have survived if he'd been at the edge of the gravity field. However, as a vanguard fighter, he'd been placed at the front of the encirclement.

He gave up and just hoped that he wouldn't drop any valuable items, but then... Barbaroy said something that made no sense to him or the rest of Sol Crisis.

"I'm gonna cancel this field now." The armor giant ignored their confusion and continued. "It'd piss me off something fierce if you started whining and

telling everyone that you only got beaten 'cause I took you by surprise and crushed you when you couldn't move... so I'm giving you all a fighting chance."

Barbaroy began to slowly walk through the barrier.

For some, that made the burden lighter, while for others, Barbaroy's approach increased the gravity and made their bones break. However, those who could more or less move now chose to stay still and watch what Barbaroy did next.

"The rules are simple," she said. "You all come at me, and anyone who can take a tenth of my HP within five minutes gets to go."

"What do you mean by that?" Dum-dum asked.

"If you can manage that, I'm not gonna attack you at all. Hell, I'll even write a Contract for this. 'I will not attack anyone who, within the next five minutes, damages me for a tenth of my health' or something should do the job."

"Wh-Why five minutes?" Dum-dum ventured.

"What, you don't see the shitty UBM up there? I've gotta go and help my boy Ray deal with that damn thing."

In other words, five minutes was the approximate amount of time it would take for Monochrome to resume its attacks, and that was all the time Barbaroy was willing to waste on Sol Crisis.

"You can try and run, but I already looked at you all with Reveal," she added. "Got all your names and stats in my cranium. Not gonna forget your mugs, either. My memory's pretty damn good."

So even if they escaped here and now, she'd kill them some other time — and probably more than just once.

However, Sol Crisis saw that her conceit was giving them a chance.

The fifteen members of the clan looked at each other. Both the deceived and the deceivers put their antagonism aside and became united again.

"Hey, you said that a tenth's fine, but, uh..." said Dum-dum, the leader. "We *can* kill you, right?"

“Sure. Do that, and you’re all free to go.”

With that, they had a verbal promise, and Barbaroy didn’t neglect to fill out a Contract, either.

The sight made just about all of Sol Crisis silently chuckle. Dum-dum was no exception.

She only has about a third of her MP left, he thought. If we all attack her at once, she’ll lose all of it before the fight ends. That’ll be my chance. If I let the other guys distract her, I might become a PKer who’s killed the real Barbaroy.

He tried to keep a serious face so that no one would realize what he was thinking.

Others might be picturing scenarios similar to his. Barbaroy was probably aware of that, but she showed no interest in it.

“By the way... Do you numbskulls seriously think I’m givin’ you this chance just so you wouldn’t have any excuses?” she said with a voice thick with frightening bloodlust.

Dum-dum faltered. “What... What do you mean?”

“Yeah, I bet you’re curious. Anyway, just get ready to be broken in more ways than one,” she said, causing a chill to go down each of their spines. “All right. I’ll cancel it in three seconds. Threeeee...”

The countdown to the battle began...

“Two. Stronghold Pressure!”

...but then, before she was done counting, she canceled the gravity field and used both her shields to crush two of their casters.

Stronghold Pressure was a Shield Giant skill that turned defense into offense. Though she’d switched her job to Full Armor Giant, she could freely use the skill because she was using the appropriate weapon type — a shield. Of course, the damage dealt was more than enough to make short work of the casters’ low HP and END.

If the expressions on the halves of faces that they still had left were anything to go by, the two unfortunates had no idea what had just happened.

After the first attack pulverized a large part of their skulls, Barbaroy confirmed that they were still conscious, then crushed them again.

This time, their heads were reduced to mince meat, and it didn't take long for the two to get the death penalty and vanish. One of them was a central figure of the clan and the one who'd stopped Silver — Gremlin's Master, Blue Screen.

"Huuuh?!"

"Th-That's so unfair!"

Sol Crisis' members stood up and distanced themselves while telling Barbaroy off, but she didn't seem to care in the least.

"Huhhh?" she sneered. "I said I'd cancel it in three seconds, didn't I? What the hell're you callin' unfair?"

Indeed, she'd canceled the skill exactly three seconds after saying that. She wasn't lying at all. However, she had purposely begun a drawn-out, purposeless countdown to make Sol Crisis believe that the battle would begin the moment she finished counting.

Also, they just hadn't been able to imagine that a person who wanted to fight after undoing her highly advantageous field would actually fight unfairly.

"And hell, what's wrong with a PKer being unfair?" she continued. "Got taken by surprise? Well, that's your own damn fault. If you want a fair battle, go and get your head lopped off by Kashimiya. Kyah ha ha ha!" Her belittling laughter was dense with cunning. "By the way, about why I canceled the field and gave you a chance..."

She'd chose to turn a slaughter into a fight, and the reason for that was...

"You dumb shits went and faked me, so I wanted to show you Barbaroy's *style* and DRILL IT INTO YOUR DAMN HEADS!"

And to that end, she was willing to discard her overwhelming advantage.

Her roar made all of Sol Crisis completely forget the notion that they could win if they just waited for her to run out of MP. It made them aware that they had to go all-out or be mercilessly PK'd.

And if they were to fight seriously, the fact that they'd just lost two casters

was a huge problem.

“That bastard went and started with our magic attackers!” Dum-dum shouted.

“Who’re ya callin’ a ‘bastard’?!” roared Barbaroy.

When fighting Full Armor Giants, who excelled at physical defense, magic was your strongest weapon. Barbaroy was fully aware of that, so she’d promptly and preemptively taken out the casters, not letting them do anything.

Having lost his offensive casters, Dum-dum focused on the next best thing. “AGI dudes, move around and confuse her! She’s an END type!”

But alas...

“N-No dice... My leg broke while the gravity field was active.”

“A-And I broke a hip.”

Those two were both specialized vanguards with high AGI, but low STR and END. Their bones had broken while Barbaroy was walking around with an active barrier.

“She even took out our AGI builds...!”

Barbaroy herself had said that she’d learned all their names and stats through Reveal. It seemed she’d finished analyzing Sol Crisis’s builds and preemptively crushed the weak END members with her gravity field.

“Get our Bishop to heal the—”

Before Dum-dum could finish his sentence, something flew through his vision. It was a shield.

Barbaroy used the Flying Shield skill to throw one of hers *towards the Bishop*.

It hit him directly and, making short work of his low HP and END, cleanly split him in two.

“Damn, you’re slow at makin’ decisions,” said Barbaroy. “And I know he’s low level and all, but you’re seriously underestimating my boy Ray. I mean, not one of you so far has had a Brooch. Are you dead broke or something? Also, you could at least get a maxed-out support.”

After all, a max level Bishop would have had good chances of surviving a single Flying Shield. Though, in that case, Barbaroy would've taken care of him some other way.

"Tch..." Dum-dum voiced his frustration.

The battle had just begun, but he'd already lost three members — five, if you included the incapacitated AGI builds. And they weren't even fighting a player with a Superior Job or anything else that deviated from the norm. Barbaroy was a high-rank — on the same tier as them — and these results were caused by nothing but her precise and ruthless tactics.

That was Barbaroy's style.

She roleplayed a vulgar, violent, murderous, and antagonistic PKer while using well-crafted tactics that utilized the enemies' job configurations and mental openings.

This was the reason why, despite being a high-rank, she was always grouped with the Superior Job PKers in Altar.

According to her, "Player battles aren't all about differences in levels and stats. Preventing your opponent from using their powers while using your own cards in the best manner possible is far more important," and she embodied these words well.

After all, she had been able to act on those words to crush both Rosa and Eldridge, solidifying her position as the third strongest PK in the kingdom.

Not only that, but *she was now stronger than she had been back then.*

"Gh... No! We can still win!" Dum-dum roared with more power in his words than usual. "She has less than a fifth of her MP! Same for her SP, too! Just keep attacking, and we'll win! Don't let her rest!"

He'd realized that his clan's spirit was on the verge of breaking and saw the need to enliven them.

Some members who'd been fooled by the fake Barbaroy were still antagonistic towards Dum-dum, but they knew that he was telling the truth. If Barbaroy ran out of MP and SP, she'd be unable to use any skills, giving Sol

Crisis a huge advantage.

“We’ve got no choice!”

“Eat THIS!”

Two members — a Strong Swordsman and a Strong Lancer — simultaneously used stat-buffing skills and rushed Barbaroy to make an attack.

They both excelled in terms of STR, so they could’ve dealt damage to her directly through her armor. However...

“Astro Guard!” Barbaroy activated a skill, repelling their weapons and protecting her from even the smallest bit of damage.

“Huhhh?!”

“Wha—? No way!”

The two were thoroughly dumbfounded by what’d just happened, but to Barbaroy, things were going exactly as expected.

Thanks to Reveal and Identification, she knew their stats and jobs, so she was fully aware what kind of damage they could deal.

Not to mention that Barbaroy was now even tougher than she had been back when she’d fought Figaro. After all, following her defeat, she’d gone on to reconfigure her build.

Picking Shield Giant as her sub high-rank job had raised her base defense from 3,000 to 5,000, so using Astro Guard, which quintupled the user’s defense in exchange for rendering them immobile, increased her defense to 25,000.

As the leader of Mad Castle, necessity had required her to keep one of her two high-rank job slots dedicated to Commander, which increased the stats of her party and clan. Thus, back then, even if she’d boasted battle prowess that could make most non-SJs envious, she definitely hadn’t been the best solo fighter she could be.

Things had changed since then. Following Mad Castle’s dissolution, she’d repurposed her clan leader build for solo battle.

There was no need for her to lead anymore, and she wanted to become

strong enough to hold herself against foes like Figaro.

She'd been so invested into perfecting her build that she'd accepted Tsukuyo's invitation to CID in order to gain access to their data.

As a result, she'd acquired the Shield Giant job, which now gave her new skills and greatly increased her stats.

Additionally, she still had skills from before the reconfiguration, such as Damage Decrease and Damage Reduction.

Due to all that, to damage Barbaroy in her Astro Guard state, one had to break through the 25,000 defense, make up for the 20% decrease, and still deal more than 500 damage.

According to her calculations, the only ones who could do that purely with stats and job skills were the two level 500 offense casters... the ones she'd crushed when the battle began.

Therefore, Sol Crisis could only damage Barbaroy if she ran out of MP and couldn't uphold her Astro Guard anymore, or if they had some sort of Embryo capable of that.

While considering what they'd do next, Barbaroy decided to continue reducing their numbers.

Thus came the ultimate skill.

"Emancipated Giant — Atlas!"

It was the ace up her sleeve — an ability that, for 10 seconds, multiplied her defense by 10 and transformed it to attack power.

A tenth of a second after using Atlas, she deactivated Astro Guard, and used her immense, greater than 250,000 offense to pulverize both the Strong Swordsman and Strong Lancer in one hit each.

Eight left, she thought, and it was hard to tell whether she was referring to the enemy count or seconds remaining for her ultimate skill.

Once Emancipated Giant's effect was over, it could only be used again after an hour-long cooldown, so Barbaroy didn't want to waste a second of it.

She took to repeatedly using the Flying Shield skill and throwing her 250,000 damage shields towards Sol Crisis members.

Though it lasted for a mere ten seconds, her ultimate skill gave her attack power that matched the one and only King of Destruction.

Under its effects, Barbaroy was a messenger of ruin. She pulverized her surroundings and ground Sol Crisis members into dust, one after the other.

True to her nickname, she *crushed* them before they could even scream.

And by the time the ten seconds were over, there were only three people left on the scene, Barbaroy included.

“So *one* of you survived, huh?” she said.

As the dust raised by the destruction began to settle, Barbaroy saw two other people. She’d *purposely let one of them live*, but the other had survived despite her trying to kill him.

The one she’d let live was the faker, Vermin, who was now cowering with his hands on his head, while the one who had survived was the leader of Sol Crisis, Dum-dum.

He wasn’t in a good state, though. Barbaroy’s attack had lopped off his right arm.

Dum-dum had his pain set to off, so it didn’t hurt at all. Nevertheless, the feeling of not having a limb made him break out in a cold sweat.

“Damn monster,” he spat out. “And you’re supposed to be a high-rank like us?”

“It’s all ’cause of the difference in our Embryo traits and the effort I’ve spent on developing my build and learning when to use my skills.”

“You ain’t wrong there. Not wrong at all.” Dum-dum formed a self-deriding, wry grin. “Man, the devs keep talking about possibilities or whatever, but Embryos are just straight-up broken. There’s weak shit like this guy’s — only good for cheating people — and then there’s beastly stuff like yours, which lets you fucking demolish everyone by yourself. It’s just unfair. But still...”

He momentarily stopped talking and turned his grin into an indomitable smile

before continuing.

“...I do like my Embryo. I’m not tough enough to win this, but this baby should at least let me take a tenth of your HP.”

Dum-dum took out a billhook-like blade and brandished it with a backhand grip. That weapon, too short to be a longsword and too long to be a shortsword, was his unique Embryo.

Thus, the ex-leader of Mad Castle and the leader of Sol Crisis faced one another.

Dum-dum moved slowly, while Barbaroy was completely idle.

An AGI build looked for an opportunity to strike, while the END build prepared to counter it, making it a highly standard *Dendro* battle.

However, there was a great difference between the two players.

Barbaroy’s MP is almost out, Dum-dum thought while using Reveal on Barbaroy. I’ve got a chance.

Using Astro Guard and her ultimate skill had nearly emptied Barbaroy’s remaining MP, while all the Flying Shields had reduced her SP to below the tenth of her maximum. In just a few seconds, her passive skills would reduce her MP to 0, and that very moment would be Dum-dum’s only chance.

He waited for it as Barbaroy waited for him.

Soon enough, the time came.

“OAAGH!” Dum-dum let out a war cry as he charged directly towards Barbaroy, who responded by preparing to pulverize him with her shields.

Dum-dum hit the shield like a bunted baseball, and...

“She Stands Behind You — Bloody Mary!”

...vanished.

He next appeared in the air right behind Barbaroy.

That was the ultimate skill of his sword Embryo, Bloody Mary. It made him teleport behind his target and raised the power of his next attack. Additionally, he was a Sneak Raider — a high-rank job from the raider grouping — so the

damage he dealt increased even further when he was undetected by his enemy.

I've got her now! he thought as he swung his Bloody Mary, certain that he'd take away a tenth of her HP.

Without any MP, Barbaroy would be unable to use any defensive skills like Astro Guard, and Dum-dum was sure that she was just bare enough for his attack to damage her.

But that conviction of his disappeared the moment something cylindrical flew out of Barbaroy's armor.

Being an AGI build, Dum-dum could make out that it was actually *a bullet case*.

It dropped out of her armor as if flying out of a shooting gun.

What was that? Dum-dum thought, but before he could reach a conclusion, Bloody Mary's blade reached the back of Barbaroy's neck...

"Astro Guard!"

...only to be deflected by a skill — one that she supposedly couldn't use because of a lack of MP.

"What...?!" Dum-dum exclaimed, but Barbaroy made her move before he could make any sense of the situation.

She turned around, let go of her shields, formed spear hands, and directed them at Dum-dum. Being in mid-air, he wasn't capable of evading what came next.

"Double Gauntlet Trigger!" she roared, causing two more bullet cases to fall out of her armor, accompanied by a thunderous sound akin to a cannon shot.

Following that, *her gauntlets were fired forwards*.

Barbaroy's aim was perfect, and they cleanly hit Dum-dum's stomach.

"Gh-ah...!" he exclaimed. The attack was both unexpected and powerful. Though he'd withstood the first with his Lifesaving Brooch, the second one split him in half. "Wh-What...?"

"If you're gonna fake my armor, at least learn its skills," said Barbaroy as she

looked down at Dum-dum's separated halves and re-equipped the gauntlets. "Well, not like you could. I didn't leak 'em anywhere."

Exactly. Both the MP regeneration and the attack had happened because of her special reward: the Legendary Gunhammer Plate, Magnum Colossus.

The reason why it was titled "Gunhammer" were the bullet-shaped cartridges it used as the price for its unique skills. Their content was the MP that Barbaroy had channeled into them ahead of time.

One of the armor's skills was "Gauntlet Trigger," which used all the MP in a single cartridge to fire a gauntlet which dealt damage almost as great as that of ultimate skills.

The other skill was "Charge Trigger," a battle ability that injected the MP in a cartridge into Barbaroy, restoring her MP much faster and more effectively than Potions did. A single use gave her half of her maximum MP.

She could have a total of six cartridges, and she'd finished charging all of them just this afternoon.

That meant that she'd had enough to completely restore her MP three times, *so there had never been a chance she wouldn't have enough of it to take care of Sol Crisis.*

While they'd believed they'd have a chance if Barbaroy ran out of MP, she herself had never worried about it at all. If her MP reserves had been an actual problem for her, she wouldn't have wasted time examining them all with Reveal or undoing her Heaven's Weight.

In fact, she'd intentionally made them believe that her MP was her weakness and had them act accordingly. There was logic behind it.

"Ah, shit," Dum-dum grumbled. Despite being split in half, he could still talk just fine. "I thought I had it."

"Well, Mary sure ain't the only thing that's 'bloody' here anymore," Barbaroy commented. "I've gotta say, for someone lookin' like a Teke Teke, you seem pretty good. That a skill or something?"

"Nah. I have a bit of HP left, but this Bleeding'll kill me in seconds."

He wasn't wrong. It wouldn't be long until the death penalty took him and made him vanish.

"Oh, maaan," Dum-dum muttered with slight regret in his tone. "The scheme is over, the pretense is off, and we don't have any prestige anymore. Guess that's that for Sol Crisis... Shame. It wasn't too bad."

Looking at his state, Barbaroy, being an ex-leader of a PK clan herself, felt like she had to make a comment, so she said, "Create a proper PK clan next time. If you ask me, you can easily make it to second-rate."

Her words were barely any consolation.

"Ha ha..." Dum-dum chuckled wryly. "What the hell's a 'proper' PK clan?"

With those words as his last, the leader of Sol Crisis received the death penalty.

"And that leaves just you," said Barbaroy as she turned around and looked at Vermin — the fake.

"...Kh." He was silent. At first, Vermin just lay on the ground and lightly shook. The quivering gradually grew stronger until, it culminated in a thunderous, out-of-control laughter. "KYAH HA HA HA HA! Dumbasses! They all lost like the weak shits they are! I knew it! Without my skill, Sol Crisis was just a bunch of hopeless parasites!"

"Kyah ha ha!" Barbaroy chuckled. "You really think *you* can say that?"

"Shut up! You should've just retired like the loser you are! You just *had* to show up now, of all times! Fuck you!" Vermin stood up as his shattered armor made a clanging sound. Then, he pointed at Barbaroy and said, "And what the hell are you planning?!"

"Whaddya mean?"

"You weren't attacking me at all!"

Barbaroy heaved a sigh before replying, "That's because you were dialing defense skills like there's no tomorrow."

Indeed, Barbaroy hadn't left Vermin alive because the fake made her sentimental or anything. He'd used nothing but defensive skills throughout the

whole massacre, increasing his defense so much that she'd figured it was best to take care of the others before dealing with him.

"You're a Full Armor Giant, too, so you can also use Astro Guard. And you were squatting and cowering for your sub job skills — Beast Boxer's Turtleshell Stance and Monk's Prostration Barrier. All of them multiply defense several times over, so even I can't do much when they're stacked."

"Well, aren't you a know-it-all," said Vermin. Though it didn't show, the fact that she'd pointed out his skills so precisely made his heart rate intensify.

"Well, I just barely redid my build. I considered takin' those jobs, so I looked 'em up."

They had been a decent choice if she wanted to buff her defense and maximize the damage of Emancipated Giant. However, she'd decided against them because they had worse limitations than Astro Guard. Turtleshell Stance would only activate when placing your hands on your head, while Prostration Barrier could only be used when you were prostrated on the ground.

"So, why'd ya finally decide to stop tanking and stand up?" Barbaroy asked.

"Cause I'm done preparing to kill you!" Vermin shouted as his left hand began glowing and something appeared in his palm.

It was a pen — a fountain pen made of something that emitted an amethyst-like gleam. That was Vermin's Embryo.

"The False Bride — Amanojaku!" he exclaimed as he crushed it in his hand.

That was the activation of his ultimate skill — the ace up his sleeve that he'd even hidden from the other Sol Crisis members.

A moment later, Vermin's body was engulfed in a purple light similar to Amanojaku's.

"I'm winning this shit!" he shouted.

"I see what's goin' on here," Barbaroy said as she noticed a change in what her Reveal skill was showing.

Vermin's stats and job config were now the same as Barbaroy's.

With the exception of offense and defense, which also gained bonuses from equipment, he had *the exact same stats* as her.

Considering Vermin's track record, it would have been fair to assume that it was just more fakery, but Barbaroy was experienced enough to tell that it wasn't.

"So it's a skill that lets you go beyond descriptions and perfectly copy the actual abilities, huh?"

"You got it right! It's like copying and pasting! I now have the same powers as you! Including your Embryo!"

Barbaroy took a moment to consider whether he was bluffing, and concluded that such an ability was, indeed, possible.

The fact that he had to destroy his Embryo to activate it says a lot, she thought. There are probably other limitations, as well. For example, copying people with a higher total level or Embryo form would probably make the result incomplete. And there might be a time limit, too.

Barbaroy was assuming right, and that was exactly why The False Bride was functioning so well. After all, since she was in the middle of leveling her new build, her total level was lower than Vermin's — who had it maxed — and their Embryos were both in their sixth forms.

"I watched you fight and now know how to use your skills!" Vermin shouted with excitement. "Your crazy powerful ultimate skill, the Shield Giant attack skill, the Binding gravity field — I know them all!"

"So you focused on defense to watch me for as long as you could."

"Exactly! And that's why I can fight like you now! But there's one difference!" He reached into his inventory and took out a shield. "While you're still on your ultimate skill cooldown, I can use it just fine! Heaven's Weight!"

Vermin used the gravity field that he'd been subjected to just minutes ago on the original user herself.

The distance was such that the gravity around Barbaroy became 400 times greater. Though it wasn't enough to bring her to her knees, it rendered her

immobile.

Despite being a copy, the field was about as strong as Barbaroy's.

"Astro Guard!" Vermin howled as he traced the steps taken by Barbaroy when she'd used her ultimate skill. "You're done! Emancipated Giant — Atlas!"

Vermin activated it the same way she had. In an instant, the great defense he'd earned through Astro Guard became even more immense offense.

Not wasting a moment, he charged towards Barbaroy. His extraordinary attack power made every step he took pulverize the ground beneath him.

Having gained such great damage potential made him shake with excitement.

The stat summary at the edge of his vision said that his current offense was over 100,000. It was lower than Barbaroy's due to the difference between their equipment bonuses, but it was still more than enough to break through her Astro Guard.

Vermin was assured of his victory.

Because of that, Barbaroy's next move amused him.

"—avity!" she shouted a skill, but he couldn't hear it well. "Looks like you'll need a *fourth* pointer. Heaven's Weight."

The fact that she'd activated the gravity field made him laugh. "You 'tard! Like that'll be enough to stop *this* powe—!"

Vermin had pictured himself pushing through the field like it was nothing and crushing Barbaroy with little effort.

However, what actually happened was that he stopped in place before getting to her.

"...Huh?" he exclaimed as he became immobile the same way as Barbaroy had just moments ago. "H-How?! I've got *this much* power! This shouldn't stop me!"

The seemingly impossible situation perplexed him. He struggled to break free, but Emancipated Giant's ten seconds expired before he could.

"Wh-Wh... Why?" he muttered, still utterly confused.

"You know how you said the word 'power'?" Barbaroy said as she sighed.

“What the hell’re you *actually* talkin’ about?”

The question puzzled Vermin even further. “A-Attack power! Offense, damn it! It was so high, so why couldn’t I move?!”

While under the effects of Emancipated Giant, Vermin had an attack power of over 100,000. Though it was lower than Barbaroy’s because he couldn’t copy her equipment, it was still more than 10,000 times greater than a normal person’s.

There was no denying that it was immense. However...

“Yeah. Attack power,” she replied. “*Not STR.*”

“...Eh?”

Barbaroy showed her stat window and continued, “STR increases attack power, but offense doesn’t do shit for STR, and Emancipated Giant is a skill that raises attack power *directly*. No matter how high your offense gets, STR won’t increase a bit. Here’s a good comparison for ya...” She paused briefly and waved her finger. “If a guy gets a crazy powerful weapon, does his STR grow any higher?”

“...Ah.” Vermin finally understood it.

Though Emancipated Giant greatly increased the user’s attack power — their influence on the outside — it did nothing for their own physical strength. Naturally, since STR was the stat necessary to resist the effects of the gravity field, the ultimate skill didn’t help dealing with it at all. If the person whose stats Vermin had copied couldn’t move, it was only reasonable that he would be immobile, as well.

“Huh?” he suddenly realized that Barbaroy actually *was* moving in the field. “Y-You’re...! How?!”

“Yeah, I bet you’re curious,” Barbaroy laughed.

The reason for this mobility was another skill that she had used in conjunction with Heaven’s Weight. It was “Anti-Gravity,” which, true to its name, reduced the gravity of whatever she used it on.

During her battle against K&R, she’d used it to throw a shield, but she could

also use it on herself to cancel out the effects of Heaven's Weight.

"I-If you can do it, so can I!" said Vermin.

"Well, yeah, you can," she replied. *"If you know it, I mean."*

"...!" Vermin responded with just a gasp.

"Your ultimate skill lets you copy the abilities, but *your windows don't give you the details about them.*"

"Whuh?!" Vermin was at a complete loss for words. He had no idea how she'd figured that out.

"If you'd had descriptions and stuff, you wouldn't have screwed up like you just did, and you would've known how to escape the gravity."

She wasn't wrong. Vermin really did have Anti-Gravity among his copied abilities. However, he had no idea which skill it was. After all, Barbaroy hadn't used it during her fight against Sol Crisis.

Vermin could never know it, nor speak its name.

It was as difficult as trying to figure out a password with an unknown number of characters.

That was the limit of Vermin's copying ability. He'd thought he'd understood what he was copying after seeing just the surface of what Barbaroy could do.

It was less about the skill and more about his own nature, and that was exactly why he'd ended up being nothing but a cheap knock-off.

"Another thing," Barbaroy continued. "The defense skills you've stacked up are all there to help you take a beating while you figure out what skills the enemy has before you copy them and retaliate, right?"

He was dead silent.

Vermin knew little about Barbaroy's tactics, while she knew all about his. That was a clear difference between them that was in an entirely different realm than mere stats or Embryo powers.

"All right, time to wrap things up," she said as she walked through the gravity field as if it had no effects on her. "The five minutes are almost done."

Instead of holding shields, she formed spear hands and prepared a Gauntlet Trigger, the same skill that'd ended Dum-dum.

It would be enough to break through Vermin's Astro Guard and fatally wound him.

Barbaroy's approach made him imagine himself getting split in half, so he gave in to fear, and...

"C-Cancel! Turtleshell Stance! Prostration Barrier! Astro Guard!"

He deactivated The False Bride and returned to his original configuration before stacking his three defense skills and dropping to the ground.

"This again? You like prostrating *that* much?"

"Y-You can't hurt me when I'm like this! This defense is perfect!"

It had been enough to prevent Barbaroy from attacking him with her ultimate skill, so Vermin thought that she was now incapable of doing anything to him.

"You serious? Breaking through this is easy," said Barbaroy, not worried about it at all.

"Y-You're just bluffi—" Vermin tried to say something, but Barbaroy cut him off by *picking his body up and throwing him into a nearby irrigational aqueduct.*

The water inside was only up to the waist of an adult man.

"Ghbh! Thhellrudoohng?!" Vermin tried to get up and shout "The hell are you doing?!" but he was unable to do so. As if pushed down to the bottom, he couldn't rise up from the water.

Needless to say, it was caused by Heaven's Weight. Vermin was sunk to the bottom and held there by the ultra-powerful gravity.

Barbaroy looked down on him and said, "PKing ain't all about duking it out. Even if your defense is huge, you can still lose HP and die by suffocating. And that's why your 'perfect' defense is flawed. You're screwed the moment someone tries to hurt you with somethin' other than physical damage."

It was hard to tell whether Vermin was hearing her words. All he did was lie immobile at the bottom of the aqueduct and leak air out of his lungs with an

anguished expression on his face.

“By the way, I’m speaking from experience here... suffocation is pretty bad,” she said. “Unless you mess with the settings, this game turns all pain into basic impacts, but it can’t do the same for suffocation. This does wonders to break people’s spirit. That’s been confirmed by both me and the Over Gladiator. Sure, diving without a parachute was pretty damn bad, too, but I can’t pull it off as well as that guy. Also, I dunno if you can even hear me, but a faker like you deserves a fifth pointer.”

As the original, she felt that there was something she just *had* to say.

“Whether you’re studying, doing tea ceremony, or playing a game, starting by imitating someone else ain’t a bad thing. Everyone begins as imitators, but as they put effort into polishing the art, it gradually becomes their own.”

It was the like the concept of Shuhari. In fact, Barbaroy’s own build and tactics included many features from the builds of those who’d come before. She’d imitated them, using her gathered data to polish her config, and eventually made it complete.

That was why, even though she’d found it malicious, she wasn’t actually mad about Vermin faking her shape. The things that *had* made her mad were the devaluing of her clan and the fact that they’d gotten in Ray’s way and ridiculed him, even though she was aware that she’d probably have said similar things as the leader of Mad Castle.

“But get this...” she’d said. “Effortless imitation won’t get you anywhere.”

Vermin had the form, but not the substance. He wasn’t giving his all to the falsehood; he was satisfied with just using Barbaroy’s name and appearance while imitating the target’s crudeness.

In her eyes, that was exactly why he’d ended up at the bottom of this aqueduct.

There was one other thing Barbaroy wanted to add. “Oh, yeah, about the way you fought... Though all your ultimate skill does is imitate, it was clearly an original tactic you made up to make the most of it. There are flaws, sure, but it has good synergy with your Embryo. If you polish it a bit, you could...”

But Vermin wasn't there to hear it anymore. His body had changed into particles of light, leaving behind a significant amount of items.

"The suicide function, huh?" she murmured.

Indeed. Instead of suffering suffocation for a few more minutes, he'd chosen to escape it by suicide. Vermin's spirit had been shattered.

With the last one of them having received the death penalty, the battle between the real Barbaroy and the fake Barbaroy's Sol Crisis now reached its conclusion. Despite being outnumbered, the real Barbaroy had achieved an overwhelming victory.

The only thing that had damaged her was Dum-dum's ultimate skill, and that hadn't hurt her for as much as a tenth of her HP.

Despite it all, Barbaroy came out with the impression that Sol Crisis wasn't a weak bunch. She had no idea how the battle would've gone if she hadn't started by taking out the offensive casters.

If she hadn't incapacitated the AGI builds, they might've held a bit longer, too.

If Dum-dum had had more attack power or a special reward with strong debuffs, the tides might've been completely turned around.

If Vermin had had a better grasp of Barbaroy's powers and had done more research on how to wield them, she might've ended up thoroughly defeated.

And most of all, things would've been completely different if they'd had the cooperation and tactics of a proper PK clan.

Those, among others, were the reasons why they'd lost.

What Vermin and the rest of Sol Crisis had done could all be fixed if they listened her fifth pointer. If they truly wanted to be a big-shot PK clan, they had to put effort into their imitation.

Sol Crisis had gotten too big with too little work and ended up being crushed because of it. As the one who'd done it, as a PKer, and as an ex-leader of a clan, Barbaroy felt slightly conflicted about it overall.

However, it wasn't the time to think about that.

“Well, I’m done here, so I’ll just hurry to Ray now.”

It wouldn’t be long until Monochrome’s attacks restarted.

Barbaroy herself had no means of dealing with the UBM, but she figured that she’d be a good tank for her junior.

A man like him, so kind and prone to getting in trouble, could definitely use some protection from his senior, she thought as she rushed into the village to search for him.

Chapter Six: The Shield of Miracles

Torne Village, Windmill

It was difficult to tell just how long Louie had been holed up in the windmill. Perhaps the minute hand on the clock hadn't finished a single rotation yet. However, Louie felt like he'd been in there for many hours now.

All he saw were stony walls and floor, and all he heard was the laughter from above.

Whether it was a coincidence or a side effect of Monochrome's influence upon the environment, no wind was blowing upon the village. So, naturally, the boy couldn't even hear spinning from the windmill he was in.

"...?" Louie became confused as the laughter from above suddenly stopped. The monster's malicious laughter could no longer be heard.

Louie wondered what had happened to it.

It could've been defeated, or it might've flown off to a different area.

Regardless, with the laughter gone, Louie was now sitting in absolute silence.

The *one* thing he could almost hear was his own heartbeat.

"This reminds me of that time..." he murmured, recalling the morning when Shijima disappeared.



On that day, Louie happened to wake up before sunrise.

It was the first time he'd ever awakened before the cries of the village's roosters.

Too early for anyone to be awake, yet too late for nocturnal birds and bugs to make their sounds, this time of the day had a kind of silence to it that made it feel like the whole world was asleep.

There were two beds in the house's children's room. One was occupied by Louie

and the other by Juno, who was still sleeping soundly, wholly unaware that he'd woken up.

Outside the window, he saw Gringham asleep, spreading his large body upon the ground.

There was nothing strange about that scenery, but a short distance further, on a slightly taller hill near the house, there was a person he knew very well — Shijima.

He was standing still, all alone, as he observed the panorama of Torne before dawn.

Louie was somewhat concerned, so he walked out of the house, making sure not to wake up Juno or his mother.

When he opened the door, Gringham woke up and silently raised his head as if to ask, "What's wrong?"

Louie gestured to him to not mind him and keep sleeping, then walked up to the tall hill Shijima was standing on.

Once there, he called out to him, "What's the matter, Dad?"

"Oh, Louie," Shijima said, slightly surprised. "You're up early. Good morning."

"Good morning," Louie replied. "Why are you up so early?"

"...It's nothing. I just felt like looking at the village."

"Mh?" Louie tilted his head in confusion.

"I've been living here for more than two years, but I've never had the chance to take a good, long look at it. So I felt like burning it into my memory while enjoying the gentle wind here." Shijima looked down at Torne, which was still shrouded in darkness.

All Louie could see was the village's outlines, so he said, "But you can't see anything. Shouldn't you wait for morning?"

"Ha ha," Shijima laughed. "Don't you worry. I see well in the dark. Once, I even had to ride Gringham through a forest at night. It was the time I fought a UBM that'd wandered into Noz Forest."

“That happened?” Louie asked.

“Yes, it did. I was with many other Masters back then, but the enemy was very tough. He looked like a normal goblin, but he was faster and stronger than Gringham. And if you lost sight of it, it could attack you after transforming into something else, like a wolf or a bat. It was a very hard battle for all of us, but we were able to surround it and give a chance for Tsukikage — a person I know — to finish it off.”

“Wow!” Louie exclaimed. Although brief, Shijima’s story was enough to move and intrigue a child like him. “Hey! Do you have any more stories like that?”

“Ha ha. Of course I do,” Shijima laughed. “Now, which one to tell next...? Here’s a good one. It happened after I married Farica, but my friends called me over to help defeat *the* Tri-Zenith Dragon!”

“EEH?!”

Thus, Shijima and Louie talked.

The man spoke of his memories, while the boy listened with wonder, surprise, and a gleam in his eyes. The conversation fully befitted a father and son, and it lasted until the sun began to rise.

“...Oh. It’s the sunrise,” said Shijima. He’d just finished speaking one of his tales, and now he merely watched the sun rise from the eastern sky, looking both dazzled... and regretful.

“Dad? What’s wrong?” Louie asked, worried about his father.

Shijima looked into Louie’s face, seemed to think of something, and tried weaving the words. “Louie. I...” he said, but then fell silent again.

“Dad?”

“Louie... Juno, Gringham, and I have to go somewhere for a while.”

“Will you fight another UBM?” the boy asked, still thinking of the tales he’d just heard.

Shijima shook his head, “No, but... it’s an even bigger adventure.”

“Really?! Then do your best!” At this moment, Louie felt nothing but

admiration for his father.

The fact that Shijima was going on an adventure gave the boy relief. After all, being a Master, his dad was immortal, so he would come back home, no matter what.

He'd even died a few times in the stories he'd just told, yet he was still standing before the boy, alive and well. There was no reason for Louie to worry.

But...

"Yes... I'll do my best," Shijima said with a weak smile on his face.

The man's expression, combined with the sight of Juno riding Gringham up the hill, made Louie feel like something was off.

"Grooaoh," Gringham added.

There was nothing strange about the situation itself. It was only natural for Shijima to head out on adventures along with his trusty mount and Embryo.

Yet, for some reason, watching them prepare made Louie feel uneasy.

Spurred by the feeling, he held Shijima by his sleeve, looked up at his face and said, "You'll come back, right?!"

The boy didn't know why he was acting with such urgency. The worry coming over him was just so strong.

When asked, Shijima looked like his expression was about to crumble, but then, he formed a smile and patted Louie on the head. Then, with a voice as though he was doing his best to not to sound teary, he said, "Of course. I'll surely... I'll surely come back here. I'll return to you and Farica... no matter what."

Louie could tell that his voice was dense with emotion.

"Okay... All right," he said as he let go of his sleeve.

He saw the man off with the words, "Later, Dad."

"I'm off."

The words weren't rare or special in any way.

They were what people commonly said when a family member was going out somewhere.

However, they left an impression on Louie, as they were the last words the two had ever exchanged.



Being in this silent windmill reminded Louie of that time before dawn.

No light was leaking inside, and no sounds could be heard.

But Louie hadn't feel nearly as helpless then as he did now, which was surely because he didn't have his family with him this time.

As Louie thought about things like that...

"Someonnnne! Anyonnnne! I'm here to hellp!" a voice came from the outside. "Heeey! Anyonnnne! Are you heeere? Come out if you aaare!"

It was a loud voice calling out for survivors in the vicinity.

"It's all fine nowww! The monster is gone! Run while you caaan!"

Hearing that relieved Louie, as it made him certain that the laugh had stopped because the monster in the sky was gone.

"I'm saved... Oh right, if it's gone, I have to go find Mom!" the boy cried. As glad as he was that he was saved, he found it more important to go to his mother and show her that he was okay. "I'm sure they kept her safe..."

Louie was certain that his mother was unharmed. After all, she was with Ray, Nemesis, and B3. Those three had accepted his search request when no one else had. Not to mention that they'd taken care of all the trouble they'd encountered on the way to Torne. To Louie, they were heroes who almost matched Shijima.

"Heeey! Someonnnne! Are you therre? Say something if you aaare!"

"Ah, yes! I'm right here!" Louie replied to the voice and left the windmill.

The boy had failed to realize that, despite the laughter stopping, *the sky was still dark*.

"Eh?" The boy went outside and voiced his perplexity. He'd expected to see

the person searching for those in hiding, but he saw no one.

There were no people, the sky was black, and...

“Someonnnne! A ny o n N ne! A nY o N n Ne...!” the voice calling for the people became distorted and dense with *a familiar malevolence*. “F O U N D Y O U... K y A H a h A h a H a H A h A h a H a h!”

It soon became the evil cackle from before.

Void of the Black Sky, Monochrome’s laughter ignored distance and differences in speed as it reached the most far-off of creatures. That was all it did — it could neither deal damage, nor protect the monster.

However, it could be used for more than just ridiculing those below.

300 years ago, Monochrome had developed the skill to *lure out the people in hiding*, just so that it could burn them.

“Ah...” Louie uttered as he looked up at the sky and saw a beam coming from beyond the clouds go straight towards him.

A moment later, he felt an impact, a sudden heat, and smelled the reek of burning flesh and blood.



Paladin, Ray Starling

“Louie! Where are you?! I’m here for you!” I shouted as I ran around Torne in search of the boy.

All I got as a response was the crackling sound, coming from the burning buildings all around me. For some reason, a moment ago, Monochrome’s annoying laughter had stopped.

No matter how much I called, I couldn’t hear anyone.

“Shit!” I cursed. “I could cover so much more ground if Silver were all right.”

Sol Crisis’s ambush had deactivated my trusty steed, and he was still in that state. I was doing my best to run with my own two feet, but with my level and AGI, I definitely wasn’t very effective.

“That thing’s about to be able to attack again, damn it!” I swore.

Monochrome was almost back at the altitude from which it could fire its beams.

There was basically no time anymore. Every second counted. I had to find Louie as soon as possible.

“Ray!” Nemesis appeared out of my crest. She’d been inside because she’d been focusing on analyzing the third form’s skill, and the fact that was out now could only mean one thing.

“Nemesis! You’re done analyzing?!” I asked.

“Indeed I am! I’ve finished it!”

We’d gambled on the skill being something that could deal with Monochrome, and now, the results were in.

As we still ran around and searched for Louie, Nemesis gave her report.

“I will start with the conclusion,” she said. “The third form’s skill gives us *a chance to win against Monochrome.*”

“...For real?!”

“Yes. But be ready for yet another gamble. What the skill does is...”

Nemesis went on to give me the details of the third form’s skill.

Sure enough, it was capable of reaching Monochrome, but Nemesis was very right that it’d be a gamble. It would be a battle that would test my and Monochrome’s limits.

“It might reach it, or it might not,” said Nemesis. “It all depends on how long we can—” Her words were cut short by a flash in the sky.

A phenomenon like that could only mean one thing.

I’d become all too familiar with it and stupidly sick of it back during our rise to the sky.

It was a sign that Monochrome was attacking, meaning that *the surface was finally within range.*

“Ray!” Nemesis cried as she became the shield and tried to protect me.

But the beams didn't head towards me — they were directed at a stone-built windmill about a kilometer away from us.

“No way!” I'd shouted. The sight made a chill go down my spine, and I didn't hesitate to rush towards the building, pleading for Louie to not be the one there.



Torne Village, Windmill

Louie couldn't understand what had happened to him.

A voice had lured him outside, the sky had flashed, he'd felt an impact, a sudden heat, and then smelled charred flesh.

The change was so sudden and bewildering that he still couldn't grasp the state he was in.

All he knew so far was that he was lying on the ground.

He couldn't open his eyes because of the soot in them, but he felt the cold surface on his back, and a heat caressing his cheeks.

Louie had never been burned before, so his hazy mind could only assume that this was how it actually felt.

But... he thought as he realized he felt not just heat, but warmth, as well.

Louie was lying on the ground, and the warm thing was covering him.

It had a familiar, nostalgic texture and smell.

What was this, again...?

He worked his hazy mind, trying his best to remember, and it didn't take long for him to reach a conclusion.

“Groaoh...”

“Ah!” The thing covering him made a single sound, which was more than enough for Louie to realize what it was.

The haziness over his mind suddenly cleared, and he quickly rubbed his eyes to get the soot out of them, then open them and look at the thing.

“Gringham...” he uttered the name of a family member that was supposed to be gone.

The lion-like monster covered Louie, using his own body to protect the boy’s life from Monochrome’s beams. They were raining down on him in large numbers, yet Gringham shielded Louie without voicing any pain.

The only reason Louie had survived despite being targeted by the UBM was because his dear *family* was here to protect him.

It was an event many would think impossible.

Sure, one of the game’s laws made it so that the monsters stored in a Master’s Jewel would be released if the Master wasn’t online for half a *Dendro* year, but who could’ve imagined it happening here and now?

Then there was the fact that a released — freed — monster had returned to where it used to live with its Master instead of going back to the wild like they normally did.

Lastly, the idea that an untamed creature would risk its life to protect a person was simply absurd.

All of those seemed like things that could never occur.

And yet, they had actually happened and aligned to save Louie’s life.

The only word fit to describe this event was “miracle,” and the only word fit to explain it was a “bond.”

Shijima had disappeared from *Infinite Dendrogram* half a year ago, taking his Embryo and mount, Juno and Gringham, along with him. However, their disappearance hadn’t been nearly enough to sever the familial bonds between these two.

“Grin...gham...” the boy shed tears as he called out the name of his family member. His face was a mess, and he cried like he’d found a priceless treasure he thought was lost.

“Grooaoh...” Gringham responded with a mild roar.

The beams from above were burning his back and causing him great pain, but he wanted to be the same Gringham Louie had always known, so he acted like it

was nothing.

Two members of a family, once separated, were now reunited.

“K y A H a H a h A H a h A h a H!”

Alas, despite Gringham saving Louie, the situation hadn’t improved.

Monochrome laughed again, as though ridiculing the large “torch” that wasn’t avoiding any attacks and was just letting itself get burned.

If the laughter could become words, they would be, “I want both the big and small torches to burn and show me their despair.”

“Grrrrr...” the Aries Leo growled.

He didn’t have any way of dealing with the monster trying to take Louie’s life. Though strong, Gringham was but a land creature.

His claws and fangs were meant to be used on the ground, and they could never reach the skies. Being an animal prevented him from ever defeating Monochrome.

All he could do in this situation was to use his elephantine frame to cover Louie and protect him using his HP.

Again — Gringham couldn’t win against the UBM, and that wouldn’t change even if his owner, Shijima, was here.

They had no cards to play here. Gringham would eventually die and become particles of light, and then the beams would burn Louie.

They could only wait for their deaths, and only a miracle could save them now.

Thus, despite already having wrought a miracle, Gringham pled for more.

Ah, please... You can use my life if you have to... I beg you... Anyone... Give me a miracle that could protect my little family...

As if picking away at his plea, Monochrome fired another beam at Gringham’s back. The energy used in it was greater than in the previous ones, which immensely increased its penetrating power.

It was enough to pierce through Gringham’s large frame and burn Louie.

“GROOAAAOHH...!” he roared as he felt the energy from above and sensed that the incoming attack was incomparable to the ones before.

He braced himself in the hopes that the beam would stop with just him, but it was thoroughly meaningless.

A shield of flesh simply wasn't enough to stop this particular beam. Both Gringham and Louie would die.

However, right before it hit...

“Lend me your back for a sec.”

...a certain man said those words and jumped up on Gringham.

He then held the black shield in his hands towards the sky and stopped the devastating beam.



Unable to penetrate the shield, it scattered and rained on the surrounding buildings, either setting them aflame or downright melting them.

However, the heat from the beam increased the temperature of the shield the man was holding, leaving him scorched.

Though burned by both heat conduction and radiation, he continued holding the shield up to protect both Gringham and Louie.

Eventually, the beam stopped.

After protecting their lives, there was an interval in which Monochrome didn't fire anything, likely because it was charging another powerful beam.

The man used this opportunity to talk. "Do you hear me, Monochrome?!"

The UBM's laughter was still reaching his ears, but the man didn't know if *his* voice reached Monochrome.

"Your eyes look down on us all, but do they even *see*?" he continued regardless, presenting the monster with a question that came from his heart... and a declaration just as passionate. "There's *nothing* here for you to break."

Perhaps he was talking about the exact place he was in, the burning village, the miracle wrought by a certain family, or all of them at the same time.

"I won't let you take another life."

The pleasant time at Torne had ended with the advent of the tragedy above. It had brought pain to many and was endangering Louie's and Gringham's lives at this very moment.

The man claimed that he would put an end to that — that nothing would be lost now.

This man, Ray Starling, took a deep breath and gave his whole heart into the words he said next.

"Come, monster! *This is the shield of miracles!*"

They were the same words Louie had mentioned when talking about Shijima.

When Louie and Farica had been attacked by an inescapable despair, the man had spoken them before braving the horde of monsters in order to save the

mother and child.

He had no doubt been a miracle worker, and Ray thought it seemed right to start his battle against Monochrome by borrowing those words.

Just like Shijima before him, he was determined to destroy the sky-nesting despair before it could take Louie's life.

That declaration was the trigger that started the final fight between Ray Starling the Unbreakable and Monochrome, the Void of the Black Sky.

Chapter Seven: Soar High, Shooting Star

The Tale of a Star

Monochrome didn't know its own origin. It wasn't even aware if it had been birthed by nature or created by someone's hand.

The name above its head was something it was never conscious of, either.

The world called this monster the "Void of the Black Sky, Monochrome," but the creature never considered itself any such thing.

To it, the world was made up of only "this" (itself) and "everything else," so coding things with names was simply unnecessary. All that was important was the fact that it had a set of powers, and it was complete with nothing more than that.

As a being that gained all the energy necessary for its activities by merely absorbing light, Monochrome had no reason to do anything. And thus, ever since its appearance, it had done absolutely nothing. There was no necessity to do anything, so it didn't even think about doing anything.

In fact, it didn't *think* at all — nothing ever made its mind or heart budge.

That was its existence long before it was dubbed the "Void of the Black Sky, Monochrome."

It merely floated high up in the sky and did nearly nothing but "exist" — just "being there," so to speak. It ate all the light it needed to survive, and radiated any excesses come nighttime.

Those looking up at the sky would see it as just another star. All that made it different from the rest was the fact that it was slightly brighter than most and that it wasn't fixed.

That was extent of its existence, presence, and effect on the world.

It would have been entirely possible for it to mindlessly float in the sky as a faux-star for aeons and beyond, but somewhere along the line, it became

Monochrome.

The thing that caused the change inside it was a light it saw on the surface several hundreds of years ago: a fire burning throughout a city-state below.

Monochrome — or, rather, what it was before it got the name — looked down upon the scorching flames of war.

Man killed fellow man. Many were hurt, their homes were burned, and their lives were extinguished as the air became dense with anguish and despair.

But despite the horror, someone was looking at the scene while laughing with pure glee.

The commander of the invaders cackled loudly as the enemy nation burned to the ground.

A display of emotion so intense was something that the plant-like creature up in the sky wasn't familiar with, and looking down at the scene made something within it — something that had been dormant all this time — suddenly stir.

Heart, mind, core — there was no telling what it actually was, but the fact remained that it was moved, and it had no idea why.

Regardless, it was the first change the creature had ever experienced since the beginning of its plain, almost rock-like existence. Due to that, it didn't find it important whether the horrible scene's effect on it was positive or not.

It only cared that the presence of despair caused it to change, like it caused change to those in pain and those who laughed.

That realization was so fresh and unknown to it that it quickly took it upon itself to bring new despair.

It had already known that focusing its excess light allowed it to fire a heat beam that could reach the surface, and that was exactly what it did.

Mimicking those fighting in the war below, it used its own power to hurt and burn, starting with the one who laughed at others' despair.

The result?

The person anguished — showed *despair*.

“...Kya... ha.”

Watching the sight, the creature felt its core stir once more. Even its voice function, never used before, began to play a sound.

“KyA...ha...Ha.”

It fired more beams, creating even more people who drowned in anguish and despair, and they died without even realizing what was happening to them.

As the suffering grew, the creature felt something be born within its core, which had once been akin to rock.

“K y A h a H A h a h A H a H a h A h!”

Eventually, its voice function began releasing a loud laughter.

Pure and innocent, it laughed like an infant it had once heard while looking down at the world, making its joy known far and wide. It found pleasure in its changes and reassessed its consciousness.

Let’s burn more and more. Those are “torches.” When they burn, they light up this heart.

Somewhere down the line, it was given the name “Void of the Black Sky, Monochrome,” but it didn’t care about that in the least. Monochrome simply continued floating in the sky and burning animals to see them despair.

Every now and then, there would be those who’d challenge the creature, but they would all end up burned to death before they could even reach it.

Monochrome realized that its core was stirred the most when the determined faces of those who struggled against it became overcome with despair, and due to that, the entity eventually decided to stay in one place.

If “this” stays here and waits, “this” will get to see torches with determined faces show despair, right?

With that thought, it began nesting in the sky above the place that would come to be called “Torne Village.”

That eventually led to it being hit by a meteor and getting buried underground for 300 years, but those centuries would do nothing to change its

nature and modus operandi.

Monochrome continued to stay in place and wait for determined “torches” to challenge it, and it didn’t take long for its wish to come true.

After all, right now, right below it, there was a man who was struggling against it with more determination than anyone ever had before.



Torne Village

That man, Ray, was using Nemesis in her third form to defend against Monochrome’s beams.

The shield prevented all direct attacks, but part of the heat they carried reached Ray’s hand by conduction and left it hideously burned.

Even so, he did not yield or even consider letting go of his shield. He merely spammed his healing magic while intently listening to Nemesis’s words.

“27,210... 30,635...”

They were nothing but numerical values. Nemesis voiced a greater number with every beam that came. It was much like her usual damage counter, but there were a few differences.

Ray assumed the damage already accumulated was more than enough to defeat Monochrome, but even so, he continued taking the attacks.

Even when reduced by the shield and Paladin’s Aegis, the raining beams still dealt more damage than Ray healed with his magic and BR Armor’s Bloody Regeneration, but the difference wasn’t particularly great, so Ray’s HP was being scorched away only gradually.

“Mister Ray!” Louie cried, looking at him, still protected by Gringham.

Ray was no longer on the beast’s back, for Monochrome had already switched its focus away from Gringham over to the Master fighting it. That was clear because the beams weren’t raining down on the unshielded parts of the beast, but instead following after Ray.

Thus, he’d jumped off Gringham and faced the rain all by himself.

At this point, the beast was damaged so badly that he could barely move, but even so, he continued protecting his dear Louie, who was looking at Ray as he struggled against Monochrome and its beams.

“K y a H A h a H a h A h A H!” the entity laughed.

Its field of vision captured countless things on the surface.

It saw the armored “torch” running towards the windmill.

It saw the many torches hiding at the shelter built against it.

It saw the beast torch and the little boy torch it was protecting.

It saw the men and women torches hiding within the dark.

It saw a few torches preparing to attack it again from the surface.

It saw the mohawk torch preparing to take to the sky, only to be stopped by another torch.

But none of those torches mattered to it anymore.

Monochrome was now interested in and cared about only one torch: the one that was directing the strongest feelings towards it.

Indeed, that torch had captivated it, and that was something that had never happened before.

Until now, the creature had never paid much attention to torches separately. To Monochrome, the world was just “this” (itself) and “everything else,” where the latter were mere torches that burned in anguish and despair, and thus never had to be differentiated in any way.

This torch was on the verge of being the only exception. From the surface, it looked up at Monochrome with not a hint of fear or despair — only pure rage.

The creature gazed back at the torch that was Ray Starling, and pondered.

Yes. That’s him. He’s the one who came closest to “this.” What’s different about him?

It recognized the man as one of those who’d tried to approach it not too long ago, and despite having been brought down once, the man still looked at

Monochrome with a challenging expression, which the creature found highly peculiar.

All of those struggling against it in the past had had something they wholeheartedly relied on. Some had been skilled with the sword, some had had excellent archery skills, while some had fought alongside dragons.

Oftentimes, upon realizing that their favored arts, tricks, and beasts had no effect, their daring expressions would change into those of despair, and those faces were the ones that shook Monochrome's core more than anything else.

Ray, however, was still struggling. His heart hadn't yielded after failing to reach it by flight, after having his flesh seared by its beams, and even after having seemingly no moves he could play against it. He just didn't *break*.

Thus, he made Monochrome think, *Then let's go all-out*.

This would be its first time using its full power since its appearance hundreds of years ago.

It converted light into MP, changed the MP into beam energy, and continuously gathered it within itself.

After repeat converting and charging, Monochrome eventually had the maximum amount of energy it could sustain, and condensed it all in its crystalline body, rather than the tips of its tentacles.

The crack on the crystal began leaking waves of energy that evaporated the surrounding clouds and created a space of clear sky around the creature.

Monochrome's body began to shine so brightly that it was hard to believe how dark it had been just moments ago.

It was preparing to unleash its trump card — not just a powerful-yet-nameless beam, but a uniquely-titled skill.

The creature spoke its name: **"SHINING DESPAIR!"**

For reasons unknown, the pronunciation of the word "despair" was unlike that of Earth's, being closer to "disappear."

Nevertheless, the text was honest — the skill was most definitely a light that could end all hope, carrying energy incomparable to all the beams that came

before.

Before its might, even the loss of power due to distance was negligible. If it stormed down to the ground, it would not only evaporate people, but destroy and scatter an immense part of Torne itself.

People could feel it in their bones by simply looking up at Monochrome, as proven by all the despairing faces the creature saw.

“K y A h a H A h a h A H a H a h A h!” it cackled. The movement in its core made it far too happy.

Then, it looked at the face it wanted to see the most — Ray’s.

Did ya despair? Hey, did ya? Did ya... Huh?

However, Ray’s face was one of the few that showed no grief. He merely looked up at Monochrome with even more rage in his gaze than before.

Despite the abject dejection around him, his two eyes remained those of an unyielding challenger. If they could speak, they would surely say, “I will defeat you.”

Scary, Monochrome thought, the first time it felt something that wasn’t joy.

However, the sentiment was only momentary, as Monochrome quickly prepared to fire another beam of Shining Despair towards him.

Perhaps the creature was spurred into action by its first taste of fear. Even so, Monochrome was far too clueless. It didn’t know that the man was called “Unbreakable.”

Even when faced with countless tragedies and disasters far exceeding his own power, Ray had never even considered backing down.

Even when dealing with evil and despair that could bring most to their knees, he’d stood tall by the sheer force of anger alone.

And he’d seized miracles for every single one of those disasters.

Monochrome knew none of that, but now, it would become painfully aware of it.

“Gringham!” Ray shouted while looking at Louie. He could tell that the immense sky beam would soon be fired down.

With just that alone, Gringham understood what he had to do. He raised his hurt body, took Louie in his mouth like a parent cat takes a kitten, and dashed away to distance him from what will soon be ground zero of the massive beam strike.

“Gringham! Mister Ray!” Louie called out as he was taken away.

Ray didn’t say anything and instead responded by raising his shield to the sky.

And thus, Ray and Nemesis were the only people left in ground zero.

He wouldn’t run.

Even if he tried to, he’d only be caught up in the destruction, not to mention that the tians in the shelters would fall prey to the beam’s power.

He couldn’t back away.

“That must be the fiend’s ace,” said Nemesis. “I wonder how powerful it is.”

“Well, it’s clear that one won’t be enough,” replied Ray. “Two might do the trick, but I can’t be sure.”

“Do we not have Brooches?”

“I’m all out. I put my last ones on Louie and Gringham.”

Lifesaving Brooches prevented fatal damage, and before heading to Torne, Ray had had three of them in stock. However, having had used one up in yesterday’s battle against Rosa, and handing the rest to Louie and Gringham today, he currently had none left. Nevertheless, he didn’t regret the act at all.

“So... it all depends on us,” he concluded.

“Very well. You may count on me.”

“Yeah. I believe in you.”

They had two more uses of Counter Absorption.

If they, his shield, and his passive defense skills weren’t enough, Ray would surely receive the death penalty.

If that happened, he wouldn't be able to launch his *counterattack*, and Monochrome would reduce all of Torne to ash.

Out of all the gambles they'd taken today, this was likely the greatest.

Stats, skills, equipment, Embryo — this moment would test whether all they'd acquired during their time in *Infinite Dendrogram* would be enough to resist the despair about to rain down from the sky.

“SHINING DESPAIR!” Monochrome repeated the name of the skill again and launched the devastating beam of light directly from its crystalline body.

It was akin to a pillar linking heaven and earth, and it was dense with a heat so immense it could easily scorch the surface.

Were it to hit the ground, it would surely evaporate the area and turn Torne into a land of death.

The light made the many lives in the village be overcome with despair.

They, however, didn't break.

“Counter Absorption!” Nemesis shouted, calling forth a different barrier of light.

This new one momentarily stopped the might of the pillar, but then it was shattered. Even so, it was clear that it had an effect — the pillar's diameter had gotten smaller.

Then the beam was blocked by yet another barrier of light exactly like the one before.

It was a chained Counter Absorption activation — a technique Nemesis had acquired over the last month. One that they'd already used against Rosa.

The second barrier kept the pillar of light at bay longer than the first, but it, too, was shattered, letting the beam reach the surface.

The beam that was supposed to scorch a vast amount of land around it had lost most of its power to the barriers. What could have potentially annihilated the whole village had been reduced so much that it only affected an extremely small area.

Even so, the energy that made it past Ray was nothing to dismiss.

The ground zero of the explosion caused included the nearby windmill, which melted and all but vanished, while the surrounding ground became covered by an insufferable heat and turned red with fire. It looked akin to the depths of hell, and it was hard to imagine that someone could stand there alive.

And yet, there *was* one.

“We... did it...” Ray muttered, still alive in spite of it all.

His state was such that words like “hurt” or “injured” seemed too lax to describe it. It was a wonder he was even alive.

A person didn’t have enough fingers to count the debuffs he was affected by, while the heat was such that it colored his skin red or even black.

Some pieces of his equipment, too, shattered and fell into the lava below. These included his accessories and the prosthetic on his left arm.

His BR Armor was melting, but it still held well enough to continue bestowing its Bloody Regeneration.

Ray’s hellish state was not enviable in the least.

“...Heh,” Nemesis chuckled. “Its trajectory got knocked slightly off when it passed the second barrier. Most fortuitous. You probably wouldn’t be standing right now if it’d hit you directly.”

“Yeah,” Ray forced a reply. “What a stroke of luck.”

Even if the strike hadn’t been direct, Ray was still exposed to its aftereffects. He was currently surrounded by a molten, heated hell.

Of course, being a Master, he felt no pain, but he could still feel the searing heat touching his skin and taste the throat-scorching air entering his body. The red-hot hell burned his legs, but even then, his knees didn’t give in — and neither did his heart.

“*We’re using it*, Nemesis,” he uttered, and you could almost picture Nemesis nod in response.

“We have accumulated about 650,000...” she said. “That would be *65,000*

metels."

"Will it reach?"

"I shall make sure it does."

"I'll leave it to you, then."

Following that exchange, Ray began holding the shield in a different manner. Instead of making its surface face the enemy above, he held it in front — like a weapon.

"Nemesis. Third form β."

A moment later, the shield changed its shape.

The handle he was holding slid and extended to turn Nemesis into a strange *long-handled weapon with a shield at the tip*.

The shield itself changed, as well. The five-sided silver pattern on its surface emitted a light and *opened up*, effectively unfolding the shield.

It looked akin to a flower bud beginning to bloom — no, like a pinwheel spreading its blades. And with five blades in total, it was much like what those from Torne called a "windstar."

Indeed, this was a *convertible weapon* that changed from a shield to a star-like pinwheel.

"Form Shift..."

Thus, they declared the name of their new power — the title of Nemesis's third form.

"...Shooting Wheel!"

Fittingly, it was a mix of "Shooting Star" and "Pinwheel."



A few minutes before Ray jumped in to protect Louie and Gringham and went on to face Monochrome...

"In short, this skill is basically a ranged, homing Vengeance," Nemesis said.

Ray was still searching for Louie, and as he did so, Nemesis told him the

details of the new skill.

“Ranged and homing...?” Ray asked.

“The damage taken in shield form is stored as propulsive power,” Nemesis continued. “Then, once activated, it chases after even the most distant of enemies, hunting them down and dealing double... no, *triple* damage.”

It was clearly a strong skill. Not only did it make up for their weaknesses against distant and fast-moving opponents, it also carried more power than the standard Vengeance is Mine.

In fact, it was *far too strong*, even when you considered the fact that it could only be used once per day.

Due to this, Ray instantly assumed that it had other conditions, and he was correct.

“But there are two problems with it,” said Nemesis.

“Which are?”

“First is the fact that it bases not only its power, but also its speed and distance flown, on the damage dealt by the enemy.”

According to her, the skill used a tenth of the damage taken as the value for its distance and speed. For example, with 10,000 damage taken, it would chase the enemy for 1,000 metels at 1,000 AGI.

“Yeah... that *is* a gamble,” said Ray.

The highest distance Monochrome had reached during the pursuit was 25,000 metels, meaning that the damage they would have to accumulate to reach it with that condition was at least 250,000.

And that was only assuming that that distance was its absolute limit. For all they knew, the creature could be double that far away, and gathering enough damage to cover that distance would be no small task.

“Second, its activation takes *one minute* of preparation,” Nemesis continued.

“...Seriously?”

“During this time, you obviously won’t be able to use the shield, nor will you

have Counter Absorption as an option. We will have to survive the time in some other way.”

In other words, once they were done gathering the damage, they would be fully exposed to Monochrome’s beams for a whole minute.

Ray instantly remembered the moment of Lang’s head vanishing right before his eyes, but even that wasn’t enough to affect his choice.

Even if the minute would severely endanger him, he would still use the skill, so that definitely wasn’t wasn’t the main issue here.

“Regardless, that’s the only thing we have that can get through to the damn thing, right?” he said.

“Indeed,” Nemesis nodded.

So, what mattered the most was whether the skill would reach it or not.

This would be a battle between two decisive numbers — the maximum amount of damage Ray could gather without dying and the maximum altitude Monochrome could arrive at.



And now, after weathering many beams and the monstrous Shining Despair, the Shooting Wheel accumulated the greatest damage they could possibly expect in the situation.

“Start up,” said Nemesis, causing the damage gathered when she was in third form α — the shield — to become propulsive power for third form β .

The five black blades on the Shooting Wheel slowly began to turn and spin, gradually accelerating as though dancing with the wind.

Despite the air being still just moments ago, a fierce wind began to blow as though summoned or caused by the spinning wheel.

Ten seconds after the start, the blades were turning so fast that it was hard to see them with the naked eye, and Ray used his sole right arm to tighten his grip around the handle, as if to prevent the centrifugal force from taking it away.

The spinning was the very process of converting the accumulated damage

into the power needed to reach the target.

Ray's tooth and nail struggle had led to him gathering somewhere over 650,000 damage, meaning that the attack would be a supersonic seeker boasting a 65,000 meter flight distance and AGI of the exact same number. And upon landing on Monochrome, it would unleash nearly 2,000,000 points of damage.

No doubt, *if released*, it would be a decisive blow that would surely end the fight.

"K Y a a A a A A a A a a a A a A A a A a!"

Monochrome in the skies above no longer laughed or expressed joy in any way.

After all, Ray had survived the greatest beam it had ever released.

Not only that, but the man was facing the creature with an even stronger spirit while wielding a weapon bearing energy so immense that even Monochrome felt it.

It was overcome by an ominous certainty.

"That" cannot exist. If "that" exists, "this" will be broken. It will be ended.

The entity had given up on trying to make Ray despair. It felt only fear that it would be ended if it didn't end the man first.

It was the first time that Monochrome, the untouchable sky-dweller, had ever felt the danger of death. That feeling was something not even the meteor from centuries past had been able to give it.

"K y A k a K Y a A a k Y a A K a A a a A A a A A a!"

The creature charged energy for more beams.

Having attacked him many times by now, it assumed that weak beams, no matter how many, wouldn't be enough to defeat Ray. Regardless of what the truth really was, it just didn't think that the beams it used to light the torches would be enough against someone who hadn't broken after all the attacks so far.

However, Monochrome didn't have the time to fire another Shining Despair, so it opted to use the piercing beams it'd fired at Gringham.

They were quite powerful in their own right and charged much more quickly, so it thought to end the fight by firing them a few times.

"The fiend isn't firing... but it's gathering power!" yelled Nemesis.

Twenty seconds had passed since the spinning began.

Not a single beam had dropped during this time, but that definitely wasn't something to be glad about. Just like Nemesis had realized, Monochrome was preparing to instantly kill Ray.

She was also aware that her Master didn't have the power to avoid it anymore.

Even if they were all out of defensive options, he might have been able to survive if he could just move well enough.

But alas, Ray was far too heavily injured. It wouldn't be strange if he fainted right then and there, and the fact that he'd even activated the skill was nothing short of miraculous.

"What do we do?!" Nemesis panicked. "The charging will take forty more seconds! We don't have a means to defend against the beam!"

Just as the Black Shield was a form focused entirely on defense, the Shooting Wheel was a form focused solely on offense.

As she was now, Nemesis had the power to defeat the enemy, but not the power to protect Ray, and thus she thought that it was all over.

Her Master, however, seemed to think otherwise.

"Hey, it's fine," he said.

"Ray?"

A single look at Ray's face was enough to tell her that he wasn't just putting up a front. Despite being nearly thoroughly drained of power, he still seemed to believe in something.

"What do you mean, 'fi—'?" Before Nemesis could finish her question,

something above them changed.

Monochrome was done charging, and it prepared to release the piercing beams that would obliterate Ray.

“Ray!” Nemesis shrieked.

Ray, on the other hand, showed no fear or pain, and calmly said, “We’re making quite a show here. Anyone would notice this.”

There was no doubt he believed in something. In fact, he was so confident that he put on a smirk.

“And if she noticed... she’ll surely come.”

Then Monochrome fired a number of fatal beams. A single one of them was enough to make short work of Ray’s current HP and make his body evaporate, along with any chances of turning the tide.

Even so, Ray showed no fear, again looking like he believed in something... or *someone*.

“Right? B3?” he called.

“Ya don’t even gotta ask!” And *she* brashly answered.

“Fire Resistance! Astro Guard!” the three-metel giant named Barbaroy Bad Burn roared as she jumped in between Ray and the beams, protecting him from harm and becoming his shield by using skills that upped her fire resistance and defense.

“Tch...!” she shouted. “Damn asshole went through the elemental def like it’s paper! But hell if it’ll be enough to break through *my* defense!”

The hail of fatal beams continued for over twenty seconds, and yet, like an all-enclosing canopy, she shielded Ray from them all.

“Ha,” she chuckled, looking somewhat satisfied in spite of the white smoke coming off of her armor. “There goes almost a third of my HP. That shitty thing has power, I’ll give it that.”

Her words and state made Ray form a wry smile. Nemesis, on the other hand, looked thoroughly confused.

“B3...? Eh? This is B3?” she asked.

“Well, yeah...” Ray replied. “No matter how you look at her, it’s B3.”

““No matter how you look at it’?” Nemesis repeated. “But the armor design is the same as... oh, never mind. I must say, though — first Marie, now her. I’m quite impressed by how good you are at recognizing people.”

Despite her perplexity, Nemesis didn’t stop spinning the Shooting Wheel. Only twenty seconds were left until the third form’s power would be unleashed.

“Here ya go,” said Barbaroy.

“Ah...” Ray lightly exclaimed as she poured an HP Recovery Potion of the highest quality on him.

“So that skill’s gonna reach Monochrome, right?” she asked.

“...Yes!”

“Then you just think only about getting the stuff to the damn thing. I’ll eliminate anything that gets in your way.”

“Thank you!”

Ray entrusted his defense to Barbaroy and focused entirely on Nemesis’s skill.

Half-frenzied at this point, Monochrome continued raining down its beams towards the surface.

It had clearly stopped thinking about the balance between power and energy regeneration, and kept on attacking while breaking its limits.

The crystalline tentacles it used to fire were now heated and smoking, but Monochrome continued using them regardless.

Despite that, not one of the beams reached Ray.

“That ain’t enough!” shouted Barbaroy.

She was acting as the best tank Ray could possibly hope for in this situation — the beams couldn’t take his life, no matter much effort the UBM put into it.

Thus came the time.

“Ray! The preparation is done!” Nemesis declared.

“Give it hell, Ray!” Barbaroy encouraged.

“Yeah!” Ray answered.

As the Shooting Wheel stirred the air at supersonic speeds, Ray brandished it behind him as if preparing to throw a ball into the sky and began speaking a set of words.

“Payback...”

It was the Shooting Wheel’s unique skill — the crystallization of Ray and Nemesis’s hopes.

It was their oath to overcome their weakness and the manifestation of their wish.

It was the materialization of their desire to prevent tragedies that were outside their scope, and its name was a prayer to let it reach far and wide.

“...Beyond the Stars!”

And thus it flew.

As Ray swung, the five-bladed star was disconnected from its handle and soared high into the sky.

Being both a shooting star and a windstar, it made you wonder why it was so reminiscent of the legend of Monochrome’s sealing and whether it was a coincidence or not.

Leaving a trail of black aura behind, Nemesis, the supersonic shooting star, rose towards the dark star up in the sky.

“K y A a A A a a A A A a h A a a A a A A a A a A a a A a H!”

Upon seeing the shooting star flying at it at speeds several times greater than sound, Monochrome shrieked and began soaring higher.

It didn’t even consider shooting it down, for the shooting star’s speed was far too immense for its beams.

The creature flew away at full power — at speeds it had never even tried before — greatly exceeding its previous record.

Both the chaser and the runner stars rose to the sky with supersonic velocity.

To those on the surface, the sight would be akin to seeing two shooting stars fly from the earth to the heavens, rather than the other way around.

But reversed or not, shooting stars all shared the same fate — to flash through the sky, fade, and expire.

“K y A a A A a a a A A a a A a H a A a A A a a a A h!”

Monochrome flew upward — soared higher and higher.

It paid no heed to its MP reserves or even considered using any power to convert light into it.

It focused all of its functions and mechanisms solely on speed to escape the black shooting star behind it.

They were already far past the limit any living animal could bear, and yet, the chaser showed no intention of stopping.

The pursuit showed no sign of ending even as Monochrome itself surpassed the greatest height it had ever reached.

The altitude was now over 35,000 metels. The world beyond was alien even to the creature, and there was no telling how long its cracked frame would last. But even so, it continued flying, for stopping meant certain extinction.

Escape, it thought. Escape escape escape! “This” will end if it doesn’t escape!

What it felt right now was perhaps the very same feeling it had been causing all this time.

Despair — the sole source of its joy.

No, it wasn’t despairing quite yet, for it still had some hope.

With that speed, “that” shouldn’t be able to fly too far! “This” has a limit! “That” has to have a limit, too! “This” will not end if “that” reaches its limit first!

That was its hope, and it wasn’t wrong in the least. The Shooting Wheel’s limit was 65,000 metels — the distance it could fly after converting the accumulated damage.

The altitude had now exceeded 50,000 metels.

There were only about ten seconds left until the Shooting Wheel lost all its

propulsion power.

The outcome of this chase would surely be decided here in the thermosphere — the place where shooting stars are said to expire.

“Such beauty,” murmured Nemesis as she continued the vehement chase.

As an Arms type, she had a large field of vision, so she could both focus on Monochrome *and* see the world below.

She could now look at the planet without the horizon cutting off her vision.

Her eyes could now see far beyond the single kingdom she and Ray spent their time in. She could see some activity in the neighboring countries and even catch glimpses of the unique sceneries from those far away.

There was also something gigantic far off in the distant south.

Nemesis could now see both the extent and vibrance of this world, and she found it nothing but beautiful.

She hoped to someday get a good, long look at this scenery with Ray at her side.

“But now... there’s something I must do.”

She had to destroy the tragedy that had appeared before her Master. Ray had entrusted her with the role, and she wanted to do it, too.

The Shooting Wheel’s limit was close, but Nemesis still flew, swearing to make it reach.

“You could have just watched the world from here,” she uttered while looking ahead. The words merely escaped her mouth, but that was probably her final, ultimate sentiment towards Monochrome.

She forced out the last of her power.

The end! Monochrome panicked as the shooting star approached. *“This” will be ended!*

It had already lost all hope of escaping. With all its core, the centuries-old UBM feared the coming end — the gaze of death.

Because of this, it began to think things it had never considered before.

“This” will be ended! If it ends...! If it ends, then...? it thought and paused as an alien idea came to its mind. *Wait... What would happen if “this” ended?*

For the first time in its long existence, it thought a question that most minds would come across at their earliest stages.

It had never considered that back when it was plant-like, and ever since becoming Monochrome, it had done nothing but *cause* ends, but now...

Huh? Why doesn’t “this” want to end?

As a creature that had originally been nothing but a star-like *thing* hanging in the sky, it shouldn’t have had anything to feel about its own end.

Before becoming Monochrome, it hadn’t even considered whether it existed or not.

By witnessing a human conflict, it had learned of despair, learned that made its core stir, deemed it to be joy, and decided to mass-produce despair to please itself.

Right, if “this” ends, it won’t see more despair. And if it doesn’t see despair, it won’t feel joy.

It didn’t want to end because it wanted to feel more bliss.

But then, it suddenly began to question the centuries-old principle of its behavior.

But then... why did “this” enjoy it?

It finally realized that, in its first exposure to despair... the one who’d found joy in it wasn’t Monochrome, but some human on the surface.

The creature’s own joy was just a borrowed imitation, and it had misinterpreted that by thinking that it had gained a desire, despite the fact that it had absolutely no necessity to derive joy from despair.

Thus, the belated question made Monochrome slightly slow down its ascent, letting Nemesis catch up to it.

One of the Shooting Wheel’s five blades bit into the creature’s crystalline body...

“Farewell, star of the black sky!” she screamed.

...and returned triple the damage it had done to Ray and Nemesis.

The vast amount of damage delivered by Payback Beyond the Stars was too much to bear, even for an Ancient Legendary UBM — especially one that had sacrificed its endurance for other qualities.

Ah, then... Monochrome began to weave a thought, but it was cut off by its own extinction.

No one would ever know the conclusion it came to.



That day, there was a dazzling bright light in the sky.

It was the light stored within Monochrome, now released by its collapse.

However, it was nothing like the scorching beams it had fired when active — it was only a pure shine, much like the one the creature had emitted before becoming Monochrome.

In a certain village in Altar, a boy was looking up at the sky alongside his little sister.

“Wow! It’s so pretty!” she said joyously.

“Yeah! It’s sparkling!” he agreed.

Exposed to the unusual light in the sky, the innocent little children felt nothing but jubilation.

Such exchanges were common among those who saw the light, and there was not a hint of the despair Monochrome had once brought. Those who saw it merely reveled in the joy inspired by the beauty of the sight.

Perhaps this had been a common spectacle back at the age before Monochrome became a creature of despair.

The entity that had spent the last few centuries leading a false existence spent its very final moments lighting up the world as it had originally... and then vanished completely.

Epilogue

Paladin, Ray Starling

Upon confirming that Monochrome was gone for good, I passed out instantly.

I didn't *just* get the Fainting status effect, either — I actually became so relaxed that my consciousness turned off.

I felt like I slept the whole time I was inside that weird space you go to when you're out cold.

Also, it might've just been my imagination, but I thought I saw a blackish, reddish humanoid silhouette act all sulky, saying, "I finished it and you come here like this..." or something.

Anyway, upon waking up, I was greeted by several changes, with the first of them being the special reward, which, just like you'd expect, went to me.

It was called "Black Warcoat, Monochrome," and it was basically a crystalline, transparent greatcoat.

Upon seeing it, Nemesis... oh, right.

Speaking of her... after defeating Monochrome, she, still in her Shooting Wheel form, simply came back down to the surface like it was nothing, merged with the handle I was still holding in my hand while unconscious, and turned back into her human form.

Now, upon seeing Monochrome's special reward, she muttered something like, "How unexpected. Knowing you, I assumed it would be black and appear far more sinister," which I found very rude. Just what made her automatically assume that my gear would be sinister?

Anyway, the Black Warcoat had a passive skill called "Light Absorption," and when I equipped the coat and activated it, it instantly went from transparent to black. True to its name, the skill absorbed light, and it seemed to do it so well that the whole coat turned completely dark.

“I knew it,” said Nemesis.

That aside, Light Absorption wasn’t the only skill it had.

I expected the other skill to have something to do with flying or voice, but its name — “Shining Despair” — basically said it all. As expected, its description said that it fired a beam, and I could only assume it was a weaker version of the greatest one fired by the UBM.

However, it left me wondering about something.

When the monster fired that beam, I’d heard it say “Shining *Disappear*,” rather than “Despair,” so I was slightly curious why the pronunciation had changed after it became a special reward. Was it adjusted to me or something?

Come to think of it, in *Infinite Dendrogram*, certain English words were used or pronounced differently than in real life. Was there something going on with the translation function?

Regardless, on to the next change.

While I was out cold, everyone in Torne had been fully healed.

Like, even those with severe Scorches all over their bodies, and even those who’d lost limbs were now in perfectly good health — and *I was among them*.

Most of the wounds I’d gained in my battle against Monochrome had vanished, and not only that, but the left arm I’d lost before this incident had grown back. The arm worked as smoothly as it did in reality, and it honestly felt like it had never been gone.

According to Nemesis and B3, the healing had happened while they weren’t looking.

I’d call this a mystery, but I had a strong guess about who was responsible. After all, the kingdom had only a single person who wielded healing magic powerful enough to cure loss of body parts.

“So you were here, too... Miss Aberration,” I muttered.



A certain pair of people

“Ohhh, dear, am I tired. Weird, considering I didn’t do anything.”

“Most excellent work, Lady Tsukuyo.”

The spiritual leader of The Lunar Society, Tsukuyo Fuso, was in an empty part of Torne village, lying down on and rolling around the low grass as though it was the floor in her home.

Her Mythical junihitoe was now covered in grass stains, but she didn’t seem to care one bit.



“Hey, I didn’t do anythiiiing,” she said. “They just became healed for some reason. Oh dear, what a shame, and I was planning to have Ray join us in exchange for healing his aaaarm. Just what in the woorld healed them allll?”

“I fail to see the need to feign ignorance when I was there to see it,” he responded. “And I feel you are overdoing it with the monotone.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Very well, then.”

Despite being there to witness his mistress walk around the village and heal everyone, Eishiro Tsukikage was the first to give up.

Anyway, to answer the question of how long The Lunar Society’s top had been in Torne... they’d actually arrived here long before Monochrome had appeared.

Yesterday, Eishiro had told Tsukuyo that Ray was heading there alongside Shijima’s son-in-law.

At first, her reaction was just a lukewarm “Really now?” She didn’t seem to care at all.

But come morning, she said, “I wanna go see the Windstar Fest. Oh, but it’s got nothing to do with Ray,” and then went out to Torne.

This seemed to be something she’d decided on after a whole evening’s worth of consideration. Perhaps she wanted to see what kind of choice Ray would make when faced with the Shijima family’s problem.

Tsukuyo was accompanied by Eishiro, and for their means of transport, they invited a member of The Lunar Society — a Master who used a *Pure-Dragon-tier skydragon*.

Thanks to that, they arrived at Torne in no time. But right after they did, B3 called Eishiro on his real life mobile — yes, the same call in which she and Ray asked about Shijima’s relationship to The Lunar Society.

Eishiro had to log out to answer, while the Pure-Dragon’s Master had to look after his creature, so Tsukuyo ended up walking around the stalls all by herself.

Of course, with her being an infamous, stand-out beauty known to wear a junihitoe, there could've been many people noticing her and realizing who she was, but that was countered by the disguise Eishiro had given her before logging out.

Tsukuyo went on to have a decently good time walking around the stalls, and upon Eishiro's return, he told her about the situation.

Then, once Ray logged in again, they went on to watch him from the shadows — quite literally — and Tsukuyo was somewhat satisfied to see him resolve to tell Farica and Louie about Shijima.

But then she said, "Oh, dear. We should stop this. Kage, what did you even tell him?" and tried to call out to Ray, but that was exactly when Monochrome appeared.

Ray instantly took to the sky, and even their Pure-Dragon rider joined him and challenged the UBM.

Tsukuyo had heaved a sigh, but then, she and Eishiro had begun walking around the attacked places in order to heal the ones who'd been critically hurt.

"Oh deaaaar, I could make a really good deal with the first princess if she was here, but now I'm working for freeeee," she whined despite indiscriminately healing all those injured while still hiding in the shadows.

Thanks to her efforts, not a single tian died.

And during it all, she watched over Ray's struggle and *didn't do more than that*.

"Shouldn't we have been the ones to defeat the UBM?" Eishiro asked.

Though she'd helped the tians, Tsukuyo had done absolutely nothing to influence Ray's battle.

This was despite having the options to assist Ray directly or to defeat Monochrome by themselves and taking the special reward.

The reason why she didn't do that was simple.

"Ehh? But that would've been boring."

And there was nothing more to it.

She'd watched Ray the whole time — saw his resolve and the actions he'd taken — but not even once had she considered assisting him. She believed it would've sullied the purity of his behavior.

Tsukuyo wanted to see Ray at his most natural. In a way, she was continuing the observation that had been ruined by Figaro's intrusion back at their HQ.

The conclusion? Tsukuyo ended up liking Ray even more than she had after their conversation when she'd kidnapped him. So much so that she'd cast Mercy of the Holy on him, giving up on using it as a card in a deal.

"Oh deaaaar, Ray's healed and I didn't even do anything, so now I'll have to put off inviting him to CID until the next time he's almost dyiiiiing," she whined.

Eishiro gave her a flat look, not saying a word.

When it came to deals, Tsukuyo's style was to present the other party with severe conditions and wait until they had no choice but to accept them. In this case, however, she'd betrayed her style twice — first by lowering her condition to him joining CID, rather than The Lunar Society, and then by actually giving him the treatment for absolutely no reward.

Her strong, continuous, repeated assertion to Eishiro that she hadn't done anything back there was just her way of denying the reality that she'd departed from her principle and helped Ray for nothing.

She reminds me of herself when she was a child, Eishiro thought in response to the highly unconvincing and ineffective denial. He chose to say nothing more.

"But... well..." Tsukuyo continued. "At least Shijima's family is saved, and Ray gave me a good show. I guess that was his way of seizing miracles."

"‘Miracles,’ you say?" Eishiro commented. "I believe people consider wounds that cure themselves to be miraculous, as well."

"I don't know what you meaaaaan."

"Oh yes, of course, of course. I must say, though..." Tsukikage sighed at his mistress's obstinance before letting out a whisper. "Miracles are certainly commonplace nowadays."



Paladin, Ray Starling

One more thing seemed to have happened while I was asleep: Louie and Farica received a letter from Mr. Shijima.

It was from before he'd taken the surgery. Apparently, Mr. Shijima had put it in a metal pipe and given it to Gringham ahead of time so the lion could deliver it to them just in case he himself wasn't back after half a year had passed.

The man had entrusted it to Gringham, believing that his loyal beast would listen to his desire even after returning to the wild.

Mr. Shijima's letter said that he was fighting his illness and that the fact he wasn't back yet meant that it was lasting longer than he'd expected. However, he also added that he would *definitely* come back.

Aside from that, it contained his most heartfelt feelings for Louie and Farica.

Upon hearing that, I decided to call off telling them what I'd found out before Monochrome's appearance.

The letter contained Mr. Shijima's own words, so I had no business getting involved in this anymore.

Not to mention that there was a decisive *misconception* on our part regarding this whole situation.

When I'd asked Tsukikage how the man had ended up, the goddamn King of Secretaries had put on a depressed tone and said, "'Miracles' are called 'miracles'... because they're *unbelievably rare*."

Those words had seriously shocked me, but now that I thought about it... that sneaky bastard *hadn't said anything about the miracle not happening or the man dying*.

And to top it all off, when I'd logged out just a moment ago and ran a search for "Fuso hospital terminal illness" I'd instantly got a result for a medical article from two months ago, titled, "SURGERY FOR GLOBALLY INFAMOUS DISEASE SUCCESSFUL IN JAPAN FOR THE FIRST TIME EVER!"

It said that the patient would have to spend a few months in an ICU for

follow-up medical care, and that *the patient's condition was stable*.

Out of respect for his privacy, the man wasn't named, but it was more than likely that it was our guy.

The miracle... had actually happened.

"Man... I've been had," I muttered.

I knew today was April Fools' Day. And, well, I had clearly been fooled. Hook, line, and sinker.

Was I feeling bad about that, though? Nope. Not at all.

That evening, after thanking me for saving him and Gringham, Louie went on to withdraw his request, saying, "I'll keep waiting for Dad with Mom, Gringham, and my little brother or sister! He *will* come back!"

He made the right choice, if you asked me.

After all, the day he was waiting for wasn't too far away.



It was the first morning after the Monochrome incident.

B3 and I were about to leave Torne as Louie, Farica, and Gringham were seeing us off.

Oh, yeah. I forgot to mention that Gringham was tamed by Farica. If he'd stayed untamed, he might've been accidentally killed by someone, so yesterday, she'd gone out to get the Tamer job and made him hers.

Of course, an Aries Leo wasn't exactly a creature that could be tamed by a completely new Tamer, but it was different in Gringham's case. They were family, and he'd *wanted* to be tamed, so the process had been completed without a problem, and he was now lying asleep on their grounds like some enormous housecat.

Now, he too, would be waiting for his original owner alongside his family.

"Thank you so much for everything you've done," said Farica as she bowed her head. Louie followed after her. "You helped with Louie's request and even saved us from *that* Monochrome..."

“No need for that,” I replied. “I did those things because I wanted to.”

It would have left a bad taste in my mouth if I hadn’t done them, and having done them, I was feeling nothing but refreshed. That alone made it all worth it.

“Oh, right,” said Louie. “I canceled the request, but the money...”

“Oh, no need for that, either.” I raised my hand to stop him.

“Yes,” B3 nodded. “We never agreed on an amount.”

Exactly — we hadn’t decided on a reward. Not to mention that...

“Thanks to this matter, we chanced upon a windfall,” she continued. “And that’s payment enough.”

...Yeah, the reparations from K&R would do just fine.

I’d gotten a closer look at the contract and found out that the interest for delayed payment was insane in more ways than one. If Rosa didn’t hurry and pay up, she’d be in for a serious debt hell.

Anyway, we were about to depart, but before that...

“Louie,” I addressed the boy.

“Yes? What is it?” He looked up at me.

There was just one more thing I wanted to tell him before I left.

“Make sure to support your little brother or sister when he or she’s born, all right? Little brothers rely on their big brothers more than you’d expect.”

“...Okay!”

And with that exchange as our last, we left the Shijima household.

Silver, having recovered from the effects of that “Gremlin” Embryo, was pulling B3’s carriage forward.

Nemesis, B3, and I were all on the coachman’s seat.

Looking around, I could see people reconstructing the parts of the village Monochrome had destroyed yesterday.

A group of Masters with mohawk haircuts looked particularly enthusiastic about their volunteer work.

Can't judge a book by its cover, huh? I thought as I watched the scenery when I felt B3 look at me, both silently and intently.

"Is anything wrong?" I asked.

"No, it's just that... I find it strange that you aren't saying anything about me when I was in armor. Tone, looks — nearly everything about me was different, so I expected you to ask."

Yeah, she'd definitely been more manly back then. That was what she'd called being "turned on" or something. Nevertheless...

"Well... I'm used to it."

"Used to it?"

"I have two family members and a few friends whose tones and behaviors, like yours, drastically change depending on the situation, so I don't really mind it at this point."

"I... I see?"

Both of my siblings, Marie, Hugo... probably Rook, too. Looking at it like that, I realized I had quite a number of two-faced characters around me. But at least they were all good people at heart.

"By the way, may I ask you something?" Nemesis joined the conversation with a question for B3. "What should we call you from now on? 'B3' or 'Barbaroy'?"

"Oh, uh, please use 'B3' when I'm not wearing my armor and 'Barbaroy' when I am."

She separates them...?

"Hm... Why the separation?" asked Nemesis.

B3's face turned slightly red as she said, "Well... That makes it cuter... *and* cooler, right?"

Those words of hers made me suddenly burst into laughter.

She turned all sulky and lightly whacked my head a few times before escaping into her carriage.

Yep. She's an unexpectedly charming person, I thought with a grin. ...*Those*

hits took some of my HP, though.

“You have no one to blame but yourself,” said Nemesis.

Can't argue with that.

And so, our carriage left Torne.

I turned around for the last time and took a look at the village, now a small dot on the horizon.

“Now that I think about it... what will happen to the Windstar Festival now?” I muttered.

Monochrome, the origin of the festival, had awakened, greatly damaged the village, and vanished.

Though not many had been hurt or injured, the same couldn't be said for their homes, which were charred or even burnt to the ground.

Reconstruction would take a lot of time, and it wasn't certain whether they could continue the Windstar Festival tradition.

“It will go on,” said Nemesis, sounding certain. She was sitting off to my right.

“Why do you think that?” I asked.

“People are creatures that advance forward while etching their pain and grief into the past, so I'm certain they will do the same with this incident.”

I silently pondered, thinking that it seemed much like throwing a festival during the anniversary of an air-raid or some other calamity in order to comfort the dead and pray for restoration.

“You and I are like that, as well,” she added.

“You, too?”

“Indeed. I am an Embryo that changes your pain and sadness into *power that lets you keep moving forward*,” she said as she gently grasped my left hand — the one I now had again. “But the *will* to do that is none other than yours... and the same applies to everyone else. So if those calling this village their home have the will to move on, it will be restored in no time, and the festival will continue to happen as it always has.”

“...That’s true.”

We rode the carriage as it traced the road leading back to the capital.

A gentle wind was blowing over it, spinning the windstars decorating the fences.





The following year's Windstar Festival happened without a problem to name.

However, there was a slight, but noticeable, change — the windstar decorations were now being held up by small paper dolls, which seemed to represent the person who'd shattered the star of the black sky.

At the year's Windstar Dance, one could see a certain family dancing among the crowd — a wife with her husband, and a young boy with a silent girl.

Not far away from them, there was a lion with a baby sleeping on its woolly mane.

Though it was much like the scenes from years before, it was definitely new.

And that day, too, there was a pleasant wind that gently spun the windstars.

END. To Be Continued in the Next Episode...

Midword



Fox: “Lookie here, we got the good ending! Things like this make waiting for the new volume allll worth it!”

Cat: “Indeed they dooo. Now, if only *someone* didn’t destroy the aftertaste.”

Fox: “Eehh? Whoever do you meaaan? Ah, almost forgot. I’m the fox, Tsukuyo Fuso.”

Cat: “I obviously mean you. I’m the cat, Cheshire. And I didn’t have any scenes again.”

Fox: “Our presence in the story sure is strangely patterned, isn’t it? Where’s the bear?”

Cat: “...In jail.”

Fox: “...Huh?”

Cat: “For more about that, read the following side story! It takes place during the events of volumes 6 and 7.”

Fox: “...So this volume also has side stories shoved in after the main story, huh?”

Cat: “We have our reasons for this. Promise.”

Side Story: The Case of the Unknown Murders — The Situation

Lost Heart, Rook Holmes

That day, I was in Gideon's first district, carefully observing all the people passing by, immersing myself in deep thought while at the same time gathering information regarding my surroundings.

My father had trained me in that, along with other such skills as lipreading, lockpicking, and reading mystery novels in a... somewhat peculiar manner.

Specifically, rather than trying to unravel the tricks and mysteries within the work itself, I'd been trained to read while getting into the mind of the author and trying to understand his personality well enough to guess what kind tricks he would be inclined to use in his story, which... might be a sub-optimal way to read a book.

Regardless, on the day Ray was kidnapped and the day before that, I was undergoing a change in my schedule that had me skipping out on the training from my father.

I had to attend the hellish training prepared for me by Ray's brother.

Of course, "hellish" is not an adjective you use lightly, but all things considered, there was just no better word for it.

After all, I was told to *turn on my pain setting* and come close to the death penalty *over and over again*.

I couldn't even describe the pain I felt when I had only 1 HP left.

Most would surely think that anyone providing or accepting this training had issues with their sanity, but Shu had said, "You're the type of guy who's fine with this, aren't ya?"

And yes, indeed I was.

According to him, “It’s not guaranteed, but people-like Embryos sometimes have their evolutions influenced by the Master’s needs or intense feelings. The more hardship you face, the more likely it is that your Embryo will be able to counter difficult situations.”

And looking at Ray, I could fully understand what he meant.

Nevertheless, Shu’s training had been so hellish that Marilyn and the other girls became cross with him, and I couldn’t quite fault them for that.

I was supposed to be undergoing that training today, as well, but there had been an issue on Shu’s end, so now I was just sitting here in front of the knight offices, thinking about... his arrest.

“Rook,” Babi spoke up.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I was sleeping, so I didn’t hear the reason. Why did they arrest the bear man? Food fraud?”

“No. Nothing like that.” I could concede that the materials used in his popcorn were a mystery in itself, but that had nothing to do with his arrest.

The reason for that was...

“Serial burglary and murder.”

Indeed. Shu was suspected to be the one behind a case troubling the city.

It all began in the evening two days prior, when someone discovered the gory remains of a certain head of a merchant family.

It was in such a terrible state that they didn’t even realize it was him until they restored his body.

It was obviously no accident or suicide, so Gideon’s authorities instantly took to action, and as soon as they began the investigation, they discovered that all the money and goods in the hidden safe had been stolen. The evidence suggested that they’d been taken before the murder.

But they hadn’t been able to find a single trace of the culprit even after

mobilizing all those with investigative sense skills.

The household also had an alarm system with potential equivalent to high-rank magic, but there were no signs that it had been triggered.

They failed to find a single piece of evidence that the culprit had even been there.

The only exception was a *strange card placed next to the remains*.

None of those officers were able to read the language on it, so although it was an important piece of evidence, it wasn't quite good enough to be considered a clue.

The following evening, there was another burglary-murder at another merchant's household.

Like in the previous event, the remains were in a dreadful state, the money and goods had been stolen, the alarm had failed to activate... and there was a card left nearby.

That was more than enough for the officers to become certain that the culprit for both incidents was the same.

The details of the investigation hadn't been made public, so it was impossible for it to be a copycat killer.

Now, about the cards... they both had the exact same text on their front, but different text on their backs. However, the text of both the front and back were written in languages unknown to the investigators, so they weren't able to read them.

They created copies and spread them out to the relevant institutions, but no tian working at them recognized the letters or characters.

But then there was a ray of light. Marie happened to visit the offices due to Elizabeth-related business, and when she caught a glimpse of the card the Knights had, she read it aloud, saying, "I am Unknown?"

That was the nickname of Ray's brother, Shu Starling, the King of Destruction.

Though his identity had become unveiled during the previous incident, he had

yet to be given a new one. Then again, his face was still a mystery, so people were probably fine with keeping the nickname “Unknown.”

“Oh,” Marie continued, “and this weird character on the other side looks like a bear. Did the furball write this?”

With that new piece of information, the case moved from its standstill, resulting in Shu’s arrest.

He protested verbally, saying, “I’ve been fur-amed!” But he didn’t resist his arrest, possibly because he wanted to be considerate of the investigators who’d been given the absurd, unreasonable task of taking *him* — a Superior — in.

Their expressions as they did were both venerably resolute and heroically tragic.

Apparently Shu logged out every now and then, but he respected his situation and always returned to the knight offices.

Currently, he was being subjected to investigation and questioning using various skills.

Naturally, one of them was Truth Discernment, but its results weren’t considered all that important because they assumed that a Superior could have a means to fool the skill.

Ironically, the man’s status and the unknown extent of the power that came with it actually worked against him, keeping him as the prime suspect.

Truth Discernment was one of the most important factors in this world’s judicial system, yet even that was considered inadequate against a Superior.

Additionally, there was circumstantial evidence that suggested that he *was* the culprit.

First, of course, the card implied the connection. Second, his Mythical special reward, Kim-un-Kamuy, had camouflage and presence manipulation skills powerful enough to fool the alarm systems.

As for motive... he was currently short on money, so it was not unreasonable to believe he would commit burglary.

Due to all that together, he continued to be held as a suspect.

I had received all that information directly from Ray's brother by using Telepathy Cuffs. Thankfully, they hadn't confiscated his possessions.

"Considering the motive, means, and opportunity, Shu happens to be the only suspect the investigators have," I muttered. "Which makes him the prime suspect."

"But Mr. Bear wouldn't do that, right?" Babi asked. "Don't you think so?"

"Babi, detectives are human, too, and yes, we do have our share of preferences when it comes to people, but those shouldn't be incorporated into our investigative deductions."

In both reality and fiction, there had been countless cases of detectives believing that a suspect was too good a person to be the culprit, and then gone on to have that belief betrayed.

"Then... what's your deduction?" she asked.

"Shu isn't the culprit," I said. "That's far too obvious."

Indeed, I could take it for granted that him being the one who did it was downright impossible.

"If all he needed was money, then there was no need for him to kill anyone," I explained. "Not to mention that he wouldn't leave a card saying that he did it. He is not some phantom thief you'd find in fiction."

In fact, not even my mother would do work this... trifling, I thought.

"This is definitely a crime committed by a person who's trying to make it seem like it's Shu. The true culprit... is someone else."

The unknown murderer was still at large, laughing after having transferred the blame to someone else.

It was in my nature — in my genes from my father — to want to expose his identity and close this case for good.

I knew exactly what I had to do now.

Shu might've had told me all that information because he'd guessed what

course of action I would take. In that case, this might be part of the training.

Regardless, for the first time in a while, I once again had an objective.

When it came to using my parents' lessons, the only thing I'd been doing recently was teaching Elizabeth my mother's thieving techniques. But now, I would put into practice what my father had taught me.

"I'll expose the culprit... and bring him to light." *I swear that upon my father's honor.*

"Rook... That line is a biiiit..."

"I know. I regret saying it now."

Anyway, I began the investigation.

"First we have to find out how the culprit got in, right?" Babi asked.

"No, actually. The 'how' is thoroughly meaningless here."

This world had an awful lot of skills, including ones from Embryos that were unique to each Master, so the means of passing the alarm system were far too many. Even I personally knew of two people who could do it — Shu and Marie.

"So we will look into the method last," I said. "First, we have to work out the culprit's mentality."

"How will you do that?"

"I'm thinking on it now while I'm recovering my detective's intuition."

I sat on a bench in front of the knight offices in the first district, observing the people passing by. It was both preparation for my first detective work in a long time, and part of the investigation.

On the nearby notice board, the authorities had left a brief explanation regarding the murders.

This was true for many other incidents, and the text on them followed the format of "This and that happened, and this and that person was caught."

I was observing the reactions of the people looking at the board.

If the culprit was interested in how the case was proceeding, he might come

to take a gander at it, and depending on his reaction, I might find my target early in the investigation. Still, it wasn't too likely that the culprit would come here, so my hopes weren't high, and most of my focus was on recovering my intuition and gathering my thoughts.

"Male suspect,' eh?" I muttered, still on the bench, looking at the notice board several meters ahead.

The explanation for the murders described what had happened and ended it with just a "We arrested a male suspect."

Shu's name was nowhere to be seen, partly because it wasn't certain that he was the culprit yet, but mostly because the news of one of the kingdom's Superiors getting arrested would be far too shocking.

During the incident started by the Giga Professor, Shu had revealed his identity as the King of Destruction and destroyed Pandemonium and the horde of monsters attacking Gideon.

The significance of those feats couldn't be taken lightly. Just like the moment of Ray defeating the RSK, Shu's feats had given hope to the people of this declining kingdom.

In fact, that might very well be the reason why the culprit was framing him.

Arrest alone wasn't enough to send a Master to the gaol, and if they had save points in other countries, they could come back through those. According to Shu, he had marked save points in all seven countries, so that wasn't a problem.

However, if he was put on Altar's wanted list and lost his nationality, he would obviously disappear from the country's rankings, making it impossible for the King of Destruction, the top of Altar's kill rankings, to participate in the war.

And with him being the hope of the kingdom, his exit would mean far more than just a severe loss of war potential. It would be a severe blow to morale.

Then... was this another strategical move by the Giga Professor?

"...No," I murmured.

It didn't make sense for these murders to be part of a plot to remove Shu from the war.

If someone truly wanted to achieve that, they would have framed him for a crime grave enough to get him on *all* the wanted lists.

If that had been *my* objective, and I'd had the means to do it... I would have killed Elizabeth, who happened to still be here in Gideon.

If I framed Shu for *that*, he would instantly become wanted everywhere — no two ways about it.

His next death penalty would send him to the gaol, and the fact that their own Superior had killed their princess would drop Altarian morale to an all-time low, giving Dryfe a great advantage in the war.

“But as things are now...” I murmured.

Since this was *just* a case of two merchants being murdered and having their possessions stolen, it was likely that the country would suppress this whole event. The crime was certainly severe, but it was nothing compared to the future that would come if they lost their greatest force in the upcoming war. As the idiom goes, “desperate times call for desperate measures.”

From Shu's standpoint, it would be quite disgraceful to be released despite not being proven innocent, but even if it made him feel bad, he would become free nonetheless.

I found it hard to believe that the true culprit would be unaware of that, so I still couldn't tell what the culprit's goal was.

I needed more information, and quite a lot of it, as well, so I made my way to a place that could give me what I wanted: the local DIN branch.

I went inside and bought copies of the documents relating to the murders and the cards found on the crime scenes. The fact that the DIN had documents for an ongoing investigation as though it was nothing made me somewhat wary of their organization, but for now, I decided to use it to my advantage.

Besides, not even they seemed to know who the real culprit was, and they said they would pay a lot for that information.

It was pretty evident that they didn't believe Shu was the culprit, and according to the documents, many of the knights seemed to feel the same way.

Due to the incident's prime suspect being a Superior, and due to the crime having happened in Gideon, which was currently hosting the second princess, the Royal Guard were also taking part in the investigation.

Liliana and a number of other Paladins in the group were strongly asserting that Shu wasn't the culprit.

"Is this an example of that?" Babi asked. "That thing you said was bad?"

"Yes and no, Babi," I replied. "What I said was bad was for detectives to let their preferences warp their deductions. Everyone else should believe in whoever they want, so Liliana and her knights aren't mistaken to do so."

And that was why I'd taken it upon myself to find the culprit. I knew enough to assume that Shu wasn't the one who'd done it, but I would do my best to not let my investigation become warped if I discovered proof to the contrary.

"Rook, will you be on the lookout tonight?" she asked.

"No. I haven't the slightest clue where to go on the lookout. Not to mention that no murder would happen with things as they are now."

"Why? Shouldn't it happen tonight, too?"

"No. Because Shu is currently in jail."

If I was the culprit, I would never do anything while he was still arrested, for that would greatly reinforce his innocence.

The next murder would surely happen the next time he was released, or if he logged out and disappeared from jail. Shu was almost certainly staying inside because he was thoroughly aware of that.

"Instead, tonight, I will focus entirely on deciphering these cryptograms," I said as I looked at the cards in my hand — the copies of the ones left behind by the culprit.

They had cryptograms on their backs, and I would spend the night solving them to see if they had any hints.

Let's see what secrets you hold, I thought while eyeing the characters.



And so came the next morning.

Just as I'd expected, nothing special had happened during the night. I'd spent the whole time deciphering the cryptograms on the cards and, well... my silence as I looked at the results said all that had to be said.

"Rook, you look so displeased," Babi commented. "How rare."

Of course I'm displeased, I thought.

The cryptograms were basically sets of words written with their characters randomly switching between different languages. While the one making it had only needed to type it down into some dictionary app, I, as the solver, had to use all the possible combinations for every character.

The base was clearly the alphabet, and he replaced a lot of the letters with the corresponding characters from other writing systems, but every now and then, the rules of conversion changed, and there were some *actual mistakes*.

For example, despite using readings or order until that point, he eventually equated "E" with the Japanese hiragana for "i." Going by the rules used for the other letters, it had to be either the Japanese "ii," the "e" in their transliteration of Latin characters, "o" — their fifth character overall, or "ho" — the fifth character in the Iroha.

It'd taken me far too long to understand that part was nothing but a mistake by the culprit.

It wasn't the only mistake, either, and I'd spent a lot of time racking my brain trying to figure out if there was any meaning to those things, only to finally realize that they were nothing but pointless errors. Honestly, it made me more vexed than I had been facing that young lady back during the incident.

This person was highly insincere when it came to making cryptograms. He'd clearly intended to have someone solve them, but he'd also neglected to check how solvable they were, and that, in my eyes, made them some of the most abysmal cryptograms I'd ever encountered.

Insincere as these cryptograms were, however, I'd still solved them, which made me aware of an even more annoying fact: the culprit didn't care about them at all.

That was the reason for both the mistakes and for the actual content:

Card 1: “Today’s lunch is a hamburg steak at Tricellas.”

Card 2: “Today’s dessert is a pudding parfait at Café White Sugar Peach.”

And that was it.

Those establishments *did* exist here in Gideon, but the lines were clearly just some basic social network posts, turned into cryptograms for seemingly no reason at all. They had nothing to do with the incident, and all they did was irritate the one who solved them... but that was exactly what made me realize something.

Since these cryptograms used Earth’s languages, a tian could never, ever solve them, and if there was any non-tian who might lay his eyes on the cards, it would be none other than Shu.

The criminal had figured he might try to prove his innocence by solving them, only to get these meaningless words... and that would surely get on his nerves.

If there *was* any sort of purpose for these cryptograms, that was exactly it — to anger Shu after having framed him. That was the only real damage being done to him by this whole situation.

And, assuming that was the culprit’s intent, it led me to another realization.

The fact that Shu was the prime suspect was being kept hidden from the public, and the only ones who knew that he was in jail were he himself, the authorities, personal acquaintances such as me and Marie, the DIN, and the real culprit.

That knowledge would never have stayed contained if the reason for it was a personal grudge.

For example, if Franklin had successfully framed one of the Starling brothers, who were his sworn enemies, he would have made sure that all of Gideon and Altar knew about it. Then he would have followed it up by spreading vile rumors about them, both here and on the Internet, in order to make sure they never recovered.

If this was personal, the culprit would’ve done at least *that* much, and yet he

hadn't.

The framing, the disgraceful release that was sure to come, and the cryptogram wasn't quite enough to ruin Shu. It seemed as though all the culprit was doing was playing around with society and Shu in order to upset them.

"But what does he gain from all this?" I murmured.

Money was the first thing that came to mind, but if that was all the culprit wanted, he wouldn't have left the cards. They'd made Shu into the prime suspect, but if he hadn't left anything, there wouldn't have been any suspects at all, and the case would never have been solved.

Due to that, it was safe to assume that there was meaning in the very act of playing around with Shu — that the culprit's desire was to toy with the King of Destruction.

"It's as if he wants to show that the KoD is an entity so meager that he can get him to dance on his palm," I muttered. "Or perhaps it's the other way around? This whole plot would never come into fruition if Shu hadn't been powerful and famous. The framing itself would have failed."

In that case, this could be the culprit's way of asserting that he was above Shu.

"Is he merely trying to show someone who knows that he's the culprit that he can lead the KoD around by the nose?"

Is it a strange sort of sales promotion? I thought.

It wasn't certain if this assumption of mine was correct. With all the mental leaps I was making here, that deduction wasn't all too reliable.

However, it fit all the details I knew so far... not to mention that my intuition was telling me that I was on the right track, so I decided to search for the culprit from that particular perspective.

"Currently, the only clues I have are these cards," I said, looking at them.

The cryptograms on them had been written by the culprit, no two ways about it. I momentarily considered that he could've made a tian write this and then killed them to hide the evidence, but I quickly dismissed that idea.

The cryptograms used many Earth languages, so tians would find it extremely difficult to copy them properly, and I didn't see a single bit of hesitation in the writing. Despite the errors, this had been written with confidence.

Then perhaps the culprit had another Master partner-in-crime?

No, that couldn't be the case, either. After all, this culprit seemed to feel a dark sort of exhilaration due to playing around with someone as strong as Shu, so I found it unlikely that he would share this "great deed" with another Master.

Not to mention that Masters couldn't be silenced, and due to the risk of them revealing the truth on the Internet and the like, the culprit was most possibly a solo criminal.

Additionally, with these cryptograms, the culprit was both hiding *and* asserting his existence. That might seem contradictory, but it was evident due to the fact that the hidden text revealed what he was doing.

It seemed to me that he wanted to show that he was here while at the same time avoid being exposed.

Honestly, I could probably find him by waiting for a few more cryptograms and deciphering them, but it wouldn't be good to let the number of victims increase, so I needed to find the culprit before that happened.

"Sooo... will you analyze his handwriting?" asked Babi.

"Babi, that's only effective if you have handwriting you can compare it to."

Without any writing by the culprit, I couldn't match it to what I had on the cards. People had to give signatures whenever they took quests from the adventurers' guild, but if the person in question hadn't taken any quests here in Altar, that wouldn't mean much to us.

All I knew at the moment was that the handwriting on both cards was a perfect match.

"This would be far easier if there was an Embryo that could trace a person just by looking at their handwriting," I said.

"But Rook, wouldn't that be boring?"

“Babi, making things interesting is the domain of the phantom thief,” I said. “A detective’s sole interest is in unraveling the truth.”

To that end, I would do many plain, difficult, and yes, even outright boring things. I wouldn’t hesitate to request the help of a person with the aforementioned Embryo. Sadly, I wasn’t aware of anyone like that.

“Wait...” I murmured.

I actually did become acquainted with someone similar recently, I thought. Her Embryo’s power might prove to be a great help. I’ll have to contact her.

“To find anything that could lead us to the culprit, we should first take another look at what he did,” I said.

During the murder-burglaries, he’d stolen the goods and money from the hidden safes before going on to kill the heads of the households.

The murder had come *after* the theft to make it easier for the culprit to escape once the smell of the blood and the like led to the incident’s discovery.

This implied another fact about the culprit — instead of uncovering the locations of the safes by interrogating the victims, he’d known where they were ahead of time and had removed the contents before the murder.

Now that I think about it, I haven’t yet investigated anything about the residences besides the hidden safes and the alarm systems, so let’s try approaching this case from that angle.

I paid another visit to the DIN and bought the additional information regarding the two crime scenes. The organization knew so much that it felt as though its sole purpose was to make detectives’ jobs easier.

“So both of the hidden safes were coupled with something in the houses, eh?” I noted.

Apparently the walls slid open and exposed the treasure only upon pushing a bookcase or inserting a gem into the eye of a statue. Being a fan of retro games, Shu would probably call it a “Capcom-like design.”

Such mechanisms seemed to be quite popular among Gideon’s wealthy, and it was imperative that they were installed during the construction phase... and

both the households that had suffered the murders had been built by the exact same contractor.

I see, I thought as I considered the three possibilities of why the culprit had found the safes so easily.

One: he had an Embryo with such abilities. Since this theory left little room for a detective to work in, I skipped it for now.

Two: he'd decided which houses he would commit the crimes in ahead of time, and then gone in to secretly take a look at the blueprints in the contractor's offices. Considering how skillfully he'd snuck into the residences, that wasn't too far-fetched.

Three: he was an employee of the contractor who'd designed the houses.

Also, I asked the DIN, and they confirmed that the culprit couldn't have bought the info, like I'd done — I was the first one to ever show interest in it.

Anyway, the only real connection between the two murdered merchants was the fact that their houses had been built by the same contractor. What they'd traded in and the scale of their business had been entirely different.

If I were urged to name another similarity between them, I would add that both had dabbled in methods which, though not illegal, were definitely crooked.

They had probably been chosen because they seemed like people Shu *might've* targeted, but he certainly wasn't the kind of person to do it, and even on the off chance that he had, he definitely wouldn't have been secretive about it. In a way, this choice of targets was proof that the culprit hadn't observed Shu for long enough.

Additionally, according to the DIN, there hadn't been any recent assassination contracts in Gideon lately, so it was highly unlikely that the murders themselves were the goal.

In fact, the city was currently being patrolled by a group of ninjas hired by the count, and the intelligence network they provided made it extremely difficult for assassinations to occur, as they would quickly get wind of a disturbance of public order as major as an assassination plot.

...On the other hand, that meant that the culprit was above not only the house alarms, but the ninjas, as well.

Now, if it wasn't a hired murder, it could also be a personal grudge, but I'd already established that the link between the two victims was far too thin to think the culprit would kill them both two days in a row using the same method.

And according to the DIN, I was the first to acquire the info that both residences had been built by the same contractor, so if the culprit was someone uninvolved, he couldn't have known where they'd been designed or where to find their blueprints.

A part of me felt like he'd chosen his targets based on who had safes he could easily rob of gold and goods, and that would make the third theory highly likely.

"I should go for a little questioning," I said, preparing to pay a visit to the contractor in question.

Before going there, I first went to one of my contacts, little Elizabeth, and asked her to make me a temporary investigator.

She immediately replied with a lively, "Anything for my teacher!"

I went straight to the one in charge and asked if they had any Masters among their employees.

The answer was "No," and from his expression, it didn't seem like he was lying.

I followed it up by asking whether they had designers working at home, and he said that they had a total of eight, so I asked for their addresses and took my leave.

"Sooo... there was no culprit, huh?" asked Babi.

"We can't be certain of that yet, Babi."

"Ehh? But there aren't any Masters working for the contractor, right?"

Indeed, I thought back. At the very least, the chief was being honest about that.

“However, Babi, Masters may pretend to be tians,” I said.

Though it was a severe crime for tians to pretend to be Masters, there was no law or punishment for the reverse.

Consider Ray: he’d lost his left hand and now used a prosthetic. The left hand was where we Masters had our crests, and losing it made it move to a part of the left arm that was still healthy, be it forearm or — as it was in Ray’s case — upper arm.

I didn’t know what happened when a Master lost his whole arm right up to the shoulder, but I was certain that it moved in that case, as well.

Now, what if someone who’d lost their left hand began using a prosthetic that, unlike Ray’s, focused not on function, but on looking as much like a real hand as possible?

You would have a *person who didn’t have a crest on his left hand*.

Now, all he’d need to do was to proclaim himself a tian, and he would appear to be such, even under the scrutiny of Reveal. Though that skill had no trouble with names, jobs, and stats, it didn’t give any information about Embryos.

That person would look like a tian as long as you weren’t around to see the moment he summoned his Embryo from his crest.

“Oh, I get it,” Babi nodded. “But why are you only looking at those working from home?”

“No matter how well they fake being tians, Masters are still Masters,” I replied. “They log out every now and then, and if someone found that suspicious, it would invalidate the rest of what made up the façade. Because of this, a fake tian cannot work alongside others.”

They could only do jobs from home, where they were by themselves.

In that case, our culprit could easily come to see the plans of the houses he’d committed the crimes in if he’d just went and said something like, “I need to see the previous blueprints to help me with my work.”

“Wouldn’t he just quit right after seeing the blueprints?” asked Babi.

“Anyone would be able to see the link between a person who quit upon

getting a gander at the blueprints and the incidents that happened at the residences based on them,” I said. “The culprit should still be working there, in order to avoid that scenario.”

If all my deductions aren't off the mark, anyway.

“Also, there's probably another reason,” I added.

“Another reason? For pretending to be a tian and working at the contractor?”

“There *are* Masters that do such jobs and do them properly, but this time, we are dealing with someone who commits burglary and murder. For all we know, he might be planning something.”

If I was correct in my assumption that the culprit wanted to flaunt the extent of his power, it was likely that he had someone who knew of his situation — someone who, the culprit believed, would be impressed by his deeds.

In that case, there might be some sort of secret organization involved here.

“The culprit and his ally were planning something, and he began working for that contractor as part of the preparation for it,” I said. “These murders were a personal plot that had nothing to do with the original plan. That's what it seems like, anyway.”

That assumption gave me a decent idea of what the culprit was like. He was part of an organization, but his position there wasn't all that great. He was dissatisfied with that and didn't have the patience to hold back from acting on his own authority to prove his ability.

He was also so imprudent that he hadn't considered what it meant to use the blueprints he had handy for a crime. He'd thought leaving behind cryptograms would be more than enough.

“Hm...”

The really troublesome part about this person was that, despite all the flaws, he actually had an impressive set of abilities.

Just as I'd told Babi, the “how” of this incident wasn't too important.

Even so, his feat was such that I only knew three people who could do it: Shu, who had his Mythical special reward; Marie, a Superior Job from the onmitsu

grouping; and the King of Assassins, who'd kidnapped Ray.

That made it safe to assume that the culprit had powers matching theirs.

To summarize: our person was an extremely rash, thoughtless, Superior-tier fool with a strong desire to stand out.

"Oh, dear," I muttered.

I was capable of finding the culprit, but it didn't seem like I would be able to do anything about him.

The situation would turn quite dangerous if the situation became rough, so I had to think of someone who could fight against him. Marie, Figaro, and little Xunyu came to mind, but they were all outside of Gideon right now, so the only one I could rely on was... *him*.

At first I would have to handle the situation all by myself, but I was sure I could do it long enough for him to finish the culprit off.

I'll probably have to ask Elizabeth to help me with the legal process, I thought. This incident certainly has me relying on her a lot. I'll thank her by teaching her a high-level thief technique.

I couldn't imagine Liliana and her Royal Guard liking that, though.

"Ngh..." Babi groaned.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Your thoughts just now were either toooo fast or allll over the place. They're hard to understand."

"I don't feel that way myself, but I guess it might seem that way to someone else," I conceded.

Oftentimes, I had developed convictions that looked like far-fetched gambles to others — mostly my mother and father.

"But enough about me," I said. "Let's go question those working from home."

"Okay."

Before that, however, I had to go meet someone.

I'd contacted her ahead of time, so all I had to do now was go to the designated place.

"Hello, Kasumi," I greeted the girl. "I'm glad you could help me."

"I-It's nothing... I-I'll do my b-best!" she meekly replied.

The girl was Kasumi — a person I'd partied up with many times before.

Her Embryo, Taijitu, would be invaluable in this case.

It was capable of locating nearby Masters, and if it discovered one of them among the "tian" employees we were about to question, it would greatly increase the chances of them being the culprit.

"Rook, I feel that you're bringing something waaay too useful and boring to this mystery," Babi complained.

"Babi, just as I said, a detective's job is to unravel the truth. If a method is effective, it has to be used, even if it's excessively convenient."

Not to mention that I have no obligation to be considerate of a culprit who is so insincere towards the mystery genre.

"We should go, then," I said. "Oh, before that, though..."

There was another bit of preparation I had to do before walking around the houses.

"Babi."

"What is it?"

"Can you break my right arm?"

"Okay."

"Eh?" Kasumi became perplexed as Babi took my right arm with both of hers... and snapped it in the middle of the forearm, just like that.

It was now bending in a direction it shouldn't be.

"E-Eeeehhhhh?!"

"There we go," I said. "Looking good."

“N-No you aren’t!”

“No, this is good because I now have a reason to use my left hand.”

Assuming the culprit was hiding his left hand using a prosthetic or something else, it was necessary for me to touch it directly to check if there was anything strange about it.

A handshake was a good method to do that, and if I had a broken right arm, it wouldn’t seem unnatural for me to shake hands using my left.

Handshakes, questioning, Kasumi’s Master detection, and *one more thing* — I would search for the culprit using this four-layer check.

“Y-You could’ve just put on a cast...” said Kasumi.

“If the person has Reveal and takes a look at my stats, it would be off if I wear a cast while not having the ‘Broken Right Arm’ status effect,” I explained. “Don’t worry. I will definitely heal it after all of this is over.”

Kasumi looked at me like she didn’t know what to say.

I guess seeing an acquaintance break another acquaintance’s arm was a bit of a shock to her, I thought. That’s no good. I’ll have to make it up to her, somehow. Both for her help and for giving her a scare.

And so came the time to walk around the houses of those working at home.

I started by showing my investigator badge and exchanging a left-handed handshake with each person.

Not hiding anything, I revealed that both of the buildings in which the serial murders had happened had been designed by the contractor they were working for and that I was investigating the case from that angle. I then gave them a few questions made with the assumption that they weren’t the suspects and keenly observed their reactions.

Along with asking Kasumi if the person ever showed up as a Master, I repeated this process on seven out of eight of the employees. Some among them hadn’t known that the residences had been designed by their own, while some hadn’t even known about the murders altogether.

None of them seemed to be lying, and I never saw anything strange in their

reactions to my questions.

“Missing the mark this many times makes me think that my deductions were mistaken,” I muttered.

Or perhaps, like I’d once considered, the culprit might have an Embryo that could discover safes.

But since I had only one more employee to check, I decided to redo my deductions after finishing this.

And so, we arrived at the eighth person’s apartment building.

I looked at Kasumi, and she silently shook her head.

So she’s not detecting any Masters here, too, eh? I thought.

Nevertheless, I wanted to be absolutely certain, so I left Babi and Kasumi behind and made my way towards the employee’s apartment.

I rang the bell, heard a “Coming!” from inside, and a moment later, the door was opened.

“Ah... Umm... Yes? Who are you?”

The person behind the door was a young woman — probably in her late teens. Assuming she was a tian, she was clearly an adult by this country’s standards, and she didn’t have a crest on her left hand, either.

“Good day. I am Rook Holmes,” I introduced myself. “I am a temporary investigator on a quest to investigate the series of burglaries and murders that began three days ago.”

“Oh, my.” Despite the lack of crest, I didn’t see the need to shake her hand to confirm whether it was a prosthetic — it was obviously flesh and bone.

However, *this person was clearly the culprit.*

Upon first seeing me, there had been a brief moment of surprise on her face. Then she’d quickly put up an expression of confusion. It was obviously a reaction one would make if they recognized me, but tried to hide it.

And it wasn’t far-fetched to believe she would know me. She’d tried to frame Shu, so it was only natural for her to look into those around him, and since I was

being trained by him, I would definitely be among them.

As indelicate as it would be for me to say it myself, I didn't exactly have a face so plain it could be easily forgotten, and that was exactly why the last part of the four-layer check was *my own face*.

Her reaction to it had been far stronger than that of someone who'd merely caught a glimpse of it before, and she'd instantly tried to hide it. That was more than enough to make her seem suspicious.

Still, since I didn't have any positive proof, I had to dig deeper.

"The two residences that have been targeted were both designed by Fródi Construction — your place of employment," I said. "I am currently visiting the employees to see if you might have any useful information."

"Oh, I see," she replied. "We shouldn't stand around while talking. Care to come in?"

"...If you don't mind."

I walked through the door to her apartment, feeling like I was entering the lion's den.

The young lady introduced herself as Gerbera. As I sat down on the sofa, she presented me with tea and doughnuts, saying, "Here you go."

"Oh, thank you very much," I replied.

"Heh heh. Those are the new doughnuts from White Sugar Peach Café. They're delicious."

...Eh? But that was the name of the shop in one of the cryptograms. Why would she present me with pastries she'd bought there?

"Well, they certainly look like they are," I said.

"They're more than just looks, I assure you. The café had some great pudding parfaits, too, but their doughnuts are just amazing."

Was she aware that I was suspicious of her? Was she trying to confuse and trick me? Her expression didn't make it seem like it was so. Still, there was a hint of ulterior motive towards me.

Did she actually assume that the cryptograms still weren't solved? In fact, it almost felt like she wasn't even aware that the cryptograms and this conversation could be linked.

...No, surely she couldn't be *that* unobservant.

It made me wonder if I was just misunderstanding things, and she was just a simple tian.

"So, you wanted to talk about the serial burglaries?" she asked.

"Yes," I nodded. "Would you mind if I asked you a few questions?"

"Not at all."

And so, I began giving her the same questions I'd given the other employees.

Ten minutes later, I had to struggle to keep my eye from twitching.

Why? Because the thoughtlessness behind her answers was even greater than I'd expected.

During the first half of the questioning, I asked, "Have you seen the blueprints of the two residences where the murders happened?" to which she replied with a "Yes."

But then, during the other half, I asked, "Have you shown any of the contractor's blueprints to anyone not involved in the company?" to which she said, "No. I only recently became an employee, so I haven't seen any of our previous blueprints."

She was blatantly contradicting herself. From what I could tell, she'd made the decision to act like she didn't know the blueprints *while I was still questioning her*.

It was common practice in police inquiries to ask a question, wait a while, then ask a similar question in order to see if the questionee slips up, but this was the first time I'd seen a person contradict herself so quickly. Not only that, but she didn't even seem to realize she was doing it.

She could've at least prepared a proper, polished cover-up story, I silently lamented.

“Thank you for your time,” I said.

“Oh, it’s nothing. I’m glad I could help,” she replied. “But... this is awfully troubling, isn’t it? I mean, this incident got the King of Destruction arrested.”

“...Truly,” I said.

Lo and behold — what a finishing blow.

Once again, I momentarily thought that she was trying to trick me, but that didn’t show on her face.

She actually, honestly believed that speaking of the KoD’s arrest — *information currently unknown to anyone but a select few* — was good small talk material. She obviously hadn’t even checked to see how the incident had been described to the public.

This woman was thoroughly convinced that, because *she* framed and had him arrested, society *surely* knew about it already.

It was only natural to expect the public to show a far stronger reaction if that had actually happened, yet she’d failed to even check, feeling absolutely nothing strange about the unchanged state of the city.

I already knew from the cryptograms that the culprit lacked sincerity towards the mystery genre, but not even I could predict that the extent was *this* immense.

My deductions were mistaken. I’d pictured the culprit as “an extremely rash, thoughtless, Superior-tier fool with a strong desire to stand out,” but it also turned out to be “a person so exceedingly careless that she constantly piled up mistake upon mistake, yet never recognized them as such.”

Father... The situations you put me in during my detective training never had a criminal as hopeless as this. She’s a bit... beyond the boundaries of my hypothesizing.

Nevertheless, it was settled — this person going by the name “Gerbera” was definitely the culprit.

She didn’t have a crest and couldn’t be detected by Kasumi’s Taijitu, but that was probably just because her Embryo was specialized in concealment. All I had

to do now was leave her flat and prepare to corner her, but...

“To think that the King of Destruction would do such a thing...” she said.

Those words compelled me to respond.

“He’s not the culprit,” I said. Though my tone was plain, I probably wasn’t so composed on the inside.

After all — I wasn’t ignoring what I probably should be.

Careless as she was, this woman had definitely killed two tians and framed Shu for the crime, and the fact that she’d said such a thing as though she had nothing to do with it made me so vexed that I simply had to retort.

As evidenced by her twitching cheek, she was displeased with my response, which probably didn’t fit her plot, so she asked, “Then, in your opinion, what kind of person is the culprit?”

“An idiot.”

There was no hesitation in my response. It came out reflexively, not giving me a single moment to consider my words.

Apparently, this criminal’s insincerity towards the mystery genre had made me more irritated than I thought.

My response was so unexpected that her eyes were wide in shock.

However, I wasn’t able to take back what I’d said, so I chose to continue instead.

“An idiot with a poor grasp of the personality of the person he’s trying to frame. An idiot whose whole ‘steal, murder, leave a card’ schtick is nothing but a ridiculous mess. An idiot who doesn’t even realize that even a child could understand that this is merely a plot to frame Shu. An idiot who ciphered some of the most immature text on the cards. An idiot who made mistakes in his ciphering, but didn’t even bother to check. An idiot whose crimes are so basic that even leaving cards doesn’t make him seem like any less of an idiot. An idiot who might actually be idiotic enough to believe that *this* was enough to successfully frame Shu. An idiot who considers other people idiots to a downright unbelievable extent. An idiot who thinks other people are idiots

despite he himself being such an idiot that he doesn't even notice his own mistakes. An idiot who — and this is just conjecture, by the way — despite having such strong convictions regarding other people, doesn't understand why he's being thought of as an idiot, is thoroughly convinced that none of it is his own fault, and thus ends up going around in circles like the idiot he is. To summarize: he's an idiot."

With that, I released all of the frustration that'd been building up since I'd solved the cryptograms.

And yes... not even I had realized I was *this* upset.

Still, it was too late for me to take back what I said, so I just prepared to take my leave, leaving behind the culprit — who looked shocked beyond words.

"Apologies for the intrusion," I said. "I have to continue the investigation, so I will be leaving now. Thank you for the doughnuts and tea."

And so, I walked out of Gerbera's flat.

Right after I left, I heard an enraged scream and the sound of porcelain being shattered in a fit of rage.

Hearing that made me assume that, if I'd taken just a few moments longer to leave, she'd have attacked me regardless of the fact that it would've exposed her.

When I entered an alley that couldn't be seen through the apartment building's windows, I was approached by Kasumi and Babi.

"H-How was it?" asked Kasumi.

"If that's not the culprit, I'll give up on being a detective."

She was just *that* undeserving of any sort of investigative deduction.

"Also, I'll probably be attacked tonight," I added.

"Eh? W-Will you be all right?!"

"I should prepare for it, at least... She might prove to be troublesome."

"Ehhh?" Babi voiced her confusion. "But she's sooo hopeless that you easily found out that she's the criminal, right?"

Indeed — Gerbera truly wasn't suited for crime. Not because of her disposition as a person, but because she was just *that* inept.

"Even so, she made it past the alarm systems unnoticed and fooled the sense skills of many investigators," I said. "She herself isn't fit for crime in the least, but... I think that her Embryo is an entirely different story."

Its category was most likely in the Guardian series.

Other categories would've probably had her going out to the scenes herself, so there would've been even more mistakes on her part.

And assuming it was a Guardian, its current form would be...

"The situation could become even more dangerous than the night Franklin's Game happened."

Worst case scenario, we might've been dealing with someone on the level of a Superior... or an actual Superior.

"Still, it isn't like we don't have ways of dealing with her," I muttered. "Babi."

"What is it?" she replied with a smile. I couldn't tell why, but it looked like she was having fun.

"There's something I'd like you to do..." I said.

And I named *two* things I wanted done.



Dead Hand, Gerbera

"THAT SHITTY WEAKLIIIIING!" I shouted as I threw the cup with tea in it towards the wall. "That non-Superior weakling thinks he can say whatever he wants just because he has a pretty face!"

I really liked that part of him — he was a total freakin' cutie-pie — but everything else was a "no" from me.

I'd tried to soften him up with doughnuts and tea to casually seduce him, but no — he was no good.

I'd wanted to make him fall for me, but now, I just wanted to tear his insides apart.

“Heh heh,” I giggled. “He said he’s investigating it, but he still doesn’t know that it’s me.”

If he had, he never could have said all those insults straight to my face. But he could still get in my way and stop me from cornering the King of Destruction.

“I would be done with that in just a few more days, so I’ll give him the death penalty to take him out long enough for that.”

I’ll make him regret saying those baseless insults about the true culprit: me.

Of course, he would never know why he’d even gotten the death penalty. No one knew what my Embryo was, and no one could kill it.

“My Embryo... is the strongest,” I said before looking to my side.

Common people wouldn’t see anything there, but I did.

It had a body covered in hard leather. A set of bull-like horns. The teeth of carnivorous beasts. A head without any eyes. An arm similar to that of a praying mantis. A human-like, bipedal lower body.

It looked like a monster from a horror film, but that was very fitting for what it was.

This was my Superior Embryo.

Only I could see it. Only I could hear it. Only I could smell it. Only I could taste it. Only I could feel it. Only I could realize it was even there.

It was my very own “Ego Sublime, Alhazred” — the strongest Embryo that wouldn’t lose to anyone.

“Ahahahahahahah! I’ll rip you to pieces, you shitty weakling!” I yelled.

Tonight, I would repay him for that humiliation, and imagining the moment made me laugh out loud.

Side Story: The Case of the Unknown Murders — The Solution

Lost Heart, Rook Holmes

A few hours had now passed. I was having dinner at a popular restaurant. There were many customers here, but I was eating alone.

Kasumi and I had parted ways soon after I'd found the culprit, while Babi was out following my orders.

On top of that, Marilyn and Audrey were in my Jewel, so the only company I had right now was Liz, who, as usual, I wore as an article of clothing. Since it had gotten warmer over the previous month, she was a jacket, rather than a coat.

Ever since leaving the apartment building, I'd purposely stayed exclusively in crowded places. No matter how hopeless she was, Gerbera had powerful concealment abilities, and I wasn't neglecting to be wary of them.

Given that, I figured she wouldn't attack me if I was in an area with many Masters. After all, things would become quite dire for her if someone had an Embryo that could trace her.

I assumed she'd wait for when I was all by myself, and since I hadn't been attacked yet, I was probably correct about that.

Of course, she might currently be observing me with her Guardian, but nevertheless, I was glad to know she wasn't careless enough to attack with so many people... around... and...

"...Huh?"

The thought that "Gerbera wasn't careless enough to X," had just passed my mind, and now that I'd actually talked to her directly, it made me consider a question that had never come to mind before:

Just how much of an idiot is she?

Though it sounded like a casual insult, it was an actual question — I wanted to know the extent of her stupidity.

What I'd said before leaving was the equivalent of telling her, "I already know that you're the criminal." And yet, although my words had greatly enraged her, she hadn't chased after me when I left.

It wouldn't have been surprising for her to attack me in order to silence me, abate her anger, or because she believed I was already preparing to get her on the wanted list and to either arrest or defeat her.

The fact that she hadn't done that could only mean that she was trying to keep her identity as the culprit a secret.

Indeed — *she actually believed that she was still unexposed.*

It wasn't logical for her to stay unaware despite all I'd said, but in all honesty, she certainly *did* seem like an idiot foolish enough to stay clueless.

But now that I knew she had enough discretion to not attack me in public, it left me with a new question.

"Did the extent of her stupidity change...?"

She was certainly a careless idiot, and I was more than confident that the disgraceful behavior she'd shown me in person was no lie or act.

However, that wasn't quite enough to explain her excessive naïveté when it came to perceiving the situation as it was.

There was also her Embryo to consider.

The crimes committed made it safe to assume it was a Guardian specialized in concealment, and that was most likely based on the Master's personality, as was the case with most Embryo abilities.

Could the Embryo have truly developed into what it was if she was *just* an excessively careless idiot?

Of course, the relationship between a Master's personality and an Embryo's powers wasn't absolute, but considering the immense strength of her craving to stand out, it was pretty curious for her Embryo to have ended up having abilities that seemed like a direct opposite of that.

“The result is the same... but the equation is different,” I muttered. “That’s the impression this is giving me.”

Both “2 divided by 2” and “2 times 0.5” result in 1, but the nuance of those equations is entirely different.

Her actions were careless and foolish — no doubt about that — and they brought about fitting results. However, I might’ve made a mistake while deducing her thought process leading to them.

“Let’s think about this a little...”

The case had already been solved. There was no need for me to make any further deductions about that, so this was nothing but a superfluous extra — a deduction for the sole purpose of understanding her character.

Thankfully, I still had time until the moment she would attack me, so I immersed myself in thought and used all the information I’d gathered to reassess the nature of the Master known as “Gerbera.”



Dead Hand, Gerbera

It was a few hours after sunset. Through Alhazred, I watched that guy slowly walk over from the other end of the street.

He was the dumb, shitty weakling whose only plus was his pretty face. He probably didn’t even realize it, but I’d known him before our meeting today.

I’d seen him when I was investigating the KoD before starting the murders, so I knew the inn he was staying at, and could easily ambush him — like I was about to do right now.

Through Alhazred, I looked at him while standing in the middle of the road, and that shitty weakling didn’t even realize I was here.

My Alhazred was the strongest Embryo, after all.

Completely focused on concealment, he couldn’t be noticed by any of the five senses, and even skills like Danger Sense and Killing Intent Perception had no effect on him. He couldn’t be caught by machine or magic sensors, either.

No one could ever know that Alhazred was there.

He could sneak in anywhere and kill anyone, so, obviously, if he wasn't the strongest — no one was. But for some reason, *my clan members* couldn't see that. They really needed to have their eyes checked.

Remembering them made me a bit angry, but whatever. I had a plan to get back at them.

For now, I just had to wait for when the KoD left jail and then commit another murder. I'd keep framing him and lowering his reputation over and over until he became so angry that he'd stop caring about appearances and go out to search for the true culprit. And then, I'd gladly battle him.

He'd be crazy with rage, so he wouldn't care and would fight me here in the city — *where he couldn't use his full power*.

If my Alhazred had a flaw, it would be his weakness to random attacks that covered an area so wide that it didn't matter if they knew where he was or not — and those were the KoD's specialty. So, if I wanted my Alhazred to kill him, I had to limit his firepower.

He couldn't use his wide-area attacks in the city, because if he did, he'd get on the wanted list. I wouldn't mind if that happened — it'd still be clear that *I* was the one who'd pushed him to that point.

Anyway, if he wouldn't use his firepower, he'd only have his stupidly high strength. He'd be useless, and I could easily kill him with my Alhazred. No matter which one of those happened — the fact would remain that the KoD would be defeated by my planning and my Embryo's power. That would surely make my clan members rethink their opinion of me.

"Before that, I have to crush this annoying, shitty weakling," I muttered.

My unnoticeable Alhazred started walking towards him.

First, I'd slowly tear off his limbs, and when he started to bawl, I'd cut his face into pieces. My heart danced as I imagined that moment, and then I made my Embryo run forward.

But when he was only about 50 meters away, *the shitty weakling jumped*

away from Alhazred.

He was wearing the same metal slime he'd wore while training with the KoD. It grew tentacles that hit the ground and launched him to the other direction.

It almost felt like he knew my imperceptible Alhazred was here and was trying to escape him.

"It's just a coincidence!" I snarled.

He just couldn't have avoided what he didn't know was there.

I went after him again and attacked from a completely different angle. Alhazred's Resources were focused on stealth, so his speed stayed below the speed of sound, but it was good enough to catch up to this shitty weakling.

I quickly got close, and...

He jumped in the opposite direction right before I could attack, just like he'd done the first time.

"Again?!"

It wasn't just a coincidence. He was actually perceiving my imperceptible Embryo.

But how...? I thought. And even if he knows my Alhazred is there, how did he expect to be attacked by an invisible enem— Huh?!

"Gh?!"

Suddenly, my vision changed from Alhazred's to my own avatar's back in my apartment.

I came back to find the room on fire. The window was broken, and next to it, there was a red-haired devil — the shitty weakling's Embryo.

"Little Flare! Petrifying Breath! Grand Dash!" She launched skill after skill, not holding back at all. She was clearly treating me as an enemy.

Wait... does he actually know that I'm the culprit?!

How could he have realized that just from our talk?! The way I'd answered the questions and controlled the conversation was perfect!

Is the shitty weakling actually some sort of genius?!



A Few Minutes Ago, Lost Heart, Rook Holmes

It was a few hours after sundown. The sun's warmth had already faded from both the air and the ground.

I finished gathering my thoughts about Gerbera and made my way back to the inn I was staying at.

There was no one nearby, so I was walking this nightly street all by my lonesome.

"Hm..." I murmured.

I presumed that Gerbera would only attack me when I was all alone, and this seemed like a great opportunity.

"Liz," I whispered my slime's name inside my mouth, making sure to not make it audible, and she responded with a single tap on my arm inside my sleeve.

So there's nothing yet, then... I'd prefer it if she attacked me before I reached the inn. Breaking it would trouble those working there.

As that thought ran through my mind, Liz tapped my arm twice. It was a code we'd decided on ahead of time, and it meant "Something invisible is closing in."

A moment later, Liz jumped to the side opposite of whatever was approaching us. She was moving the same way she had when fighting that young lady during Franklin's Game — by hitting the ground with tentacles she extended from her jacket-like form.

However, they weren't the only thing that were reaching out from her. She'd also used the part of her that didn't make up the jacket to spread out *countless thin and shiny threads* all over the surrounding area.

Mithril Arms Slimes like Liz were capable of turning themselves into armor as well as weapons, and in this case, she'd turned herself into threads.

Of course, the focus on thinness and length came at the cost of attack power and endurance, making them break upon the slightest touch. However, that

was intentional. Their purpose was to detect, and *breaking* was how they did it.

I'd determined that Gerbera's Embryo was a Guardian focused on concealment, and based on the... better parts of her performance as a murderer, I'd made a guess that it was also invisible, soundless, and odorless. Considering the absurdity of Superiors, it was also likely that you couldn't be aware of it even if you touched it.

That was why I'd made Liz spread out a number of weak, easy-to-cut threads. Even if she couldn't see it or feel it by touch, Liz could still notice when *she lost parts of herself*.

This could only be done because Liz was a slime — a creature that could change shape and didn't seem to feel pain.

But the fact that I was able to counter that *wasn't* the actual crux of the matter. The very fact that I was even capable of thinking of such a countermeasure made it clear that Gerbera had already made a grave mistake.

An invisible Embryo was no doubt a scary concept. No one could defend against a creature that you couldn't even feel by touch. However, *that only applied if the target didn't know of its existence*.

Gerbera had committed crimes that were thoroughly based on an extremely high concealing and stealth abilities, and that was exactly what had allowed me to guess her Embryo's powers. By giving me the information that I was "fighting against an enemy with a perfect stealth ability," she'd made it possible for me to develop a functioning counter.

Such a power would lose half of its value if the target merely knew that it was there, and that was Gerbera's greatest error — even greater than leaving all the evidence I'd found.

She so confidently believed in her Embryo's "unknowability" that she'd effectively made me aware that an "unknown" entity actually existed. It was as though she'd colored everything surrounding something colorless, making its shape stand out.

If she'd tried to assassinate someone without trying to stir any sort of murder-mystery drama, her Embryo would have been able to accomplish that without a

flaw to name. Even the likes of royalty would've been easy targets. But now, the "colorless" existence was no longer imperceivable.

"Babi should be attacking her right now," I muttered.

After the questioning, I'd asked her to do two things. One of them was to observe Gerbera, which was easily done with the Optic Camouflage skill she'd gotten from a monster by using Drain Learning.

Babi was to observe the apartment building, follow Gerbera if she left, and be on standby to attack her if she attacked me using her Embryo.

Even if it was Superior, the fact that it was a Guardian meant that it had a certain unavoidable weakness: its Master. No matter how tough and strong the Guardian, it couldn't protect its owner if it wasn't at its side.

Due to this, Gerbera and I were tied now.

However, I had the advantage in the fact that I'd predicted her attack, while she hadn't even considered that could happen.

"Now, it's just a matter of which Embryo defeats which Master first."

Naturally, in terms of overall battle potential, their side was far above ours, but due to the excessive focus on concealment, her Guardian's speed and power weren't particularly great. By running away as I was, I could keep buying time for a decent while longer.

The only thing we actually had to worry about now was...

"...whether or not Babi can take care of Gerbera in time," I murmured.

She, too, wasn't a particularly powerful Guardian. Due to dedicating her Resources to charm, drain, learning, and the merging power, her base stats were lower than that of other Guardians in their fourth forms.

As an incognito employee, Gerbera might currently have jobs such as Carpenter, Architect, and Swindler, but even so, she was a Superior, and it was highly likely that she was max level.

It was a gamble whether Babi would be able to defeat her... In fact, it was best not to expect that to happen.

Babi's attack *wasn't the main part of the plan*.

I was suddenly overcome by a mild shock. Liz had just touched me in a way that said, "It's not coming after us."

The Guardian had probably returned upon realizing its Master was in danger.

That reaction was only natural, and I'd hypothesized that it could happen.

So now, to switch to the main part of the plan, I made my way to Gerbera's apartment.

Upon arriving there, I found her standing there with wounds covering her entire body, and on the floor next to her, there was a broken Brooch.

Looks like Babi did a good job cornering her, I thought.

"Mrrgh!"

My Embryo kept on attacking her, but all her attacks were stopped by something invisible standing before Gerbera. Apparently, the Guardian was focusing on staying in one place to protect its Master.

Even the way Gerbera used her own Embryo seemed to be greatly flawed. Gerbera should've simply made it drop defense altogether and just defeat Babi.

"So you're here... 'Rook,' was it?" she said while looking at me through her invisible Guardian. "I don't know how you did it, but you found out that I'm the true culprit."

"Yes..." I replied. "You're the one behind the serial murders here in Gideon."

Somehow, I *could* accept that she'd still believed she wasn't found out yet, but the fact that she didn't even know why I'd found her out had me at a loss.

No, wait. She was merely *acting* as if she didn't know.

In her mind, she already understood the reasons.

"Yes. That's right," she continued. "I am Unknown — the one behind those murders."

That certainly doesn't seem like a nickname you would use to refer to yourself, I thought.

Nevertheless, I now had the culprit's confession. My work as a detective was done. Case closed.

"It seems unbelievable, but did you also actually find out my Superior Embryo's... Alhazred's power?" she asked.

So the invisible Guardian was called "Alhazred," eh? Also, though I'd expected this myself, she'd actually just revealed that she was a Superior.

"Yes," I nodded. "It probably cannot be perceived by the five... no... the six senses."

"Exactly. Alhazred is an Embryo that only I can feel... Heh heh heh heh heh." Gerbera began laughing for some reason. Her smile was... ridiculously unpleasant. "You completely exposed my plan... You must be a real genius."

Though it sounded like it, she wasn't praising me. In fact — it was the exact opposite.

"Even if you raise me up, it will not change the fact that you were outdone by a newbie," I declared.

As long as she couldn't consider me a genius or something else outside the norm, it would *make her consider herself inferior*.

My words made her face, still displaying that unpleasant smile, turn stiff. She didn't speak a word in response.

Yes. Of course you'd react like that, I thought. I'd already developed a decent grasp of her mentality, the extent of her thoughtlessness... and the *essence* of the very core of her heart and mind.

"During this investigation, I considered you not just as a criminal, but as a person, as well," I continued. "When I visited you here today, I said that the culprit was an idiot. But now..."

I hadn't been mistaken, but that assessment wasn't quite complete, either.

"Now... I see that you're more than *just* a thoughtless idiot."

I'd arrived at a single conclusion that answered everything there was to know about her person.

It was the reason behind her excessive carelessness, the naïveté behind her evaluation of Shu, the mistakes in her cryptograms, the lack of caution in her words, and the fact that she hadn't realized that I'd found her out even when I'd basically spelled it out for her.

All of that stemmed from a single problem.

"You only see the world how you want it to be."

She stared at me, still not saying a word. However, something in her eyes had changed.

"You don't think you will fail, so when you *do*, you don't understand the reasons why," I said. "You don't want to believe that others are better than you, so you evaluate them as inferior to yourself. You think your targets will fall for your schemes, so you don't even try to confirm whether you're off the mark or not."

Yes, in order to see more value in herself as she appeared in her own mind, she averted her eyes from reality.

Of course, there was some actual idiocy in her, as well, but most of her failures had their roots in the fact that she always turned away from her own absurdity.

Because of this, others always saw her as an abject idiot, her plans always ended up being sloppy, and her behavior was always thoroughly thoughtless.

I was certain that she couldn't even listen to others without warping their words beyond recognition, and it was probably so bad that even the most reasonable of warnings seemed completely off base.

"However, your evaluation of *me* was correct," I continued. "I am certainly below you, and it's fair for you to see me as a weakling."

Gerbera hadn't warped reality when it came to me — I was, no doubt, inferior. But that was exactly why the truth-filled tirade directed at her had delivered such a powerful effect. She'd taken the words into her mind without warping them in any way, and they had become like venom to her.

She'd then hastily tried to mend her image, convincing herself that my words

were absurd and warping them to conclude that I hadn't yet figured her out.

"You tried it just now, as well," I said. "You're cornered by someone far below yourself, so you tried to convince yourself that I'm actually *not* below you."

It was all for the purpose of keeping her perceived reality in line with her ideal. Gerbera wanted to be free to believe that *she hadn't failed or made a mistake — she'd just encountered a really bad enemy.*

That was how she functioned, and it even showed in her Alhazred, which was based on her personality.

"That's why you are the only one who can see your Embryo. You only see the world as you want it to be, so your Embryo became a creature that can only be seen by you alone."

It was a being that only lived in the vision of one person — much like an imaginary friend. And yet it followed her whims and influenced the world like a sort of phantasmal beast. That was what her Guardian was, and there was much to be said about a mind that could birth it.

"That is the truth behind your Embryo... and you yourself," I declared. "You're no 'Unknown.' You're merely someone who avoids her own truth, senses, and even the nature of her mind. In other words — an *immense idiot.*"

If words could truly hurt people, then what I was saying was a double-edged sword, for they hurt *me*, as well. I, too, was avoiding my own truth and path in life. But even so, I spoke those words to her.

"Eh... No... I... That's... not..."

Gerbera was unable to refute what I'd said.

She swallowed all the responses she tried to speak. Although she was trying her hardest to ignore the inconvenient reality as she'd always done, my words were like a wedge keeping her from escaping it.

Unveiling the truth behind her heart made it impossible for her to subconsciously avert her gaze from her failure, stopping her every time she tried it.

The words had now been carved into her mind, and she would remember

them every time her escapism made an attempt to take over, forcing her back to reality. Having heard my words, her brain was correcting her every time she tried to avert her gaze.

For all I knew, she might even be remembering the many failures she'd committed throughout her life. Those were surely memories she'd rather have forgotten.

"Aaahh, aaahh, AaAAhHh!" Gerbera wailed as she strongly covered her eyes with her palms, as though to say that she didn't want to see this reality.

But alas, her mind had already seen it — her heart had witnessed the truth.

She could no longer convince herself that she was the greatest, or that she'd never failed.

"...AHhhH." Gerbera suddenly moved her hands from her face, and her eyes looked directly at me. They showed no emotions I could easily read — all I saw was an amalgam of countless feelings. However, they all converged into a single emotional vector, which was best translated into "*I have to erase him.*"

She now had a strong will to eliminate me.

"Who... a...m... I?" she asked. The words had a meaning, but it didn't feel like was actually talking to me... or anyone else, for that matter.

"You're Gerbera, no?"

"N o," she shook her head. "I a m U n k n o w n."

A moment later, she began *losing parts of herself*.

Not bleeding a single drop, she gradually vanished as though eaten by the air itself. No — she was actually becoming impossible to see.

Like the mad wizard her Embryo was based on, she disappeared as though she was eaten by an invisible monster.

"Total Eclipse of the Flesh — Alhazred." She spoke the name of her ultimate skill. The process was now complete, and Gerbera was nowhere to be seen.

I silently gasped as I realized the skill's effects. It was akin to Babi's Union Jack — the merging of Guardian and Master. It made Alhazred take in Gerbera's only

weakness — herself — and make them both imperceptible.

“Babi! Liz!” I shouted, giving them the order to attack the place where she’d just been.

Liz’s threads had already been spread out around the room.

None had been cut yet, meaning that Gerbera was still there.

If she tried to evade, I would simply refocus the attacks to where she moved.

She had no means of escaping this.

“Huh...?!”

And yet, it didn’t seem like any of the attacks were landing.

In fact, it was as though...

“Is this more than *just* imperceptibility?!”

[I am Unknown], [I am Unknown], [I am Unknown], [I am Unknown], [I am Unknown], [I am Unknown], [I am Unknown], [I am Unknown], [I am Unknown], [I am Unknown], [I am Unknown], [I am Unknown], [I am Unknown], [I am Unknown]

Before I realized it, the surroundings had completely changed.

The walls were now covered in carved writing, all saying just “I am Unknown.”

The term was repeated countless times, and it felt as though she was trying to assert the words to me, or perhaps even to persuade herself.

It was no exaggeration that the words appeared “before I realized it.”

I hadn’t seen the moment the words were carved, nor had I heard the sound of it happening.

Additionally, all of Liz’s threads had been cut as if they’d never been spread out.

“The concealment power is even greater than before...!”

Originally, it’d only concealed Alhazred, but now, it extended to *anything it influenced*, making it impossible to perceive the moment it changed something.

This was the apex of concealment. It affected the world and prevented

anyone from noticing any changes made.

“Good grief...” I muttered.

It was clearly among the most troublesome Embryo abilities I’d ever seen.

However, despite displaying such power, Gerbera was still being herself.

After all — there was no need to carve any letters on the walls.

Gerbera could’ve easily given me the death penalty and escaped this place, yet she was wasting time on this meaningless nonsense.

It was a testament to just how strongly she was clinging to her old self and wanting to get back at me.

She was asserting her presence while trying to imprint the “ideal Gerbera” back into her subconscious, which I found... terribly pitiful.

“Ah...!”

Suddenly, I realized my left hand had a laceration on it and was covered in blood.

It had obviously been inflicted a few seconds ago, yet I’d only noticed it just now.

“What’s going onnnn?!” Babi, too, was being tormented by wounds that increased without her even realizing it.

Babi and Liz were indiscriminately and randomly attacking the surroundings, but I couldn’t even tell whether the attacks were hitting or having any sort of effect.

Although it focused on concealment, we were facing a Superior’s Guardian that no doubt had its stats increased due to the merge with its Master. We, on the other hand, weren’t a particularly powerful group. There was no hope of winning for us if we didn’t focus our firepower, but we couldn’t do even that.

I momentarily considered using Union Jack to become a Metal-Devil-Man, but I realized the situation wouldn’t change in the least — in fact, I wouldn’t even be able to use it. We simply couldn’t win this.

“Looks like this is it,” I silently spoke. There was nothing more I could do.

Before I realized it, my Lifesaving Brooch shattered and fell from my neck.

Looks like she had enough messing around and decided to end it, I thought, realizing that it was over. Still, there's one thing I can say here...

"You truly are careless."

The very fact that she'd actually taken the time to corner me meant that she'd done the worst thing she could have. She might've been able to use her increased stats and concealment power to instantly kill me and run away.

But instead, she'd wasted precious seconds on me... *giving him enough time to make it here.*

"Sorry 'bout that, kiddo," said a voice coming from the outside. "I took the shortest path, but it still took longer than I thought."

A moment later, the wall facing the road was pulverized, and someone human-sized jumped into the room.

I knew full well what... no... *who* it was.

Today, I'd asked Babi to do two things.

One of them was to observe Gerbera, while the other was... to deliver a message.

She'd told it to Elizabeth, who'd then passed it over to the authorities, and it went: "I will expose the true culprit, so please release him once I'm done."

I looked through the window — or, rather, through part of the wall where the window was — and saw a flying eyeball with bat wings growing out of it.

It was a Broadcast Eye — a communication monster first created by Franklin, now salvaged and used by Gideon.

Through it, the authorities at the knight offices would've seen and heard our entire exchange here, so the investigators should already know that Gerbera was the true culprit.

She was probably already on the wanted list, and more importantly — Shu had been released and was now here.

"And so... the star of the show enters the stage," I said.

“Yep,” he replied. “Kept you waiting, huh?”

The moment I’d considered the possibility that Gerbera might be a Superior, I’d entrusted this incident’s resolution to him. For that, it had been necessary to prove that Gerbera was the true culprit, so I’d gotten her to confess to it.

The preparations were now complete.

A detective’s job is to expose the truth — not to arrest or defeat the culprit.

That role belonged to Shu — the real Unknown.

“I heard about ya through both the eye’s feed and the Telepathy Cuffs,” he said. “You’re still here, aren’t ya, Miss ‘Unknown’?”

He was not in his bear costume, but in the “Godcloth” he’d worn when fighting Franklin back on that day. It was proof that he was ready to fight with his full power — as both a Superior and the King of Destruction.

Thus, this would be exactly what had happened during Franklin’s Game — a Clash of the Superiors.

“As you clearly know, I’m the ex-‘Unknown,’ Shu Starling.”

There was no response to those words, and I couldn’t tell whether it was because we couldn’t notice it or if she actually wasn’t doing anything.

Still, it was obvious that she was listening. If she’d been the type of person to escape with Shu’s appearance, things wouldn’t have gotten to this point in the first place.

“I got tons of things to say to you, but it doesn’t look like we can have a conversation here, so I’ll just say one thing,” he pointed at his neck with his thumb. “I won’t run or hide, and I’ll fight you right here, so just bring it on, will ya?”

It was no mere provocation — he was completely honest.

And those words signaled the start of the battle.

Since Gerbera’s ability was perfect stealth, the thing she had to be most wary of from Shu’s arsenal was the battleship focused on wide-scale attacks. Because he couldn’t use it here in the city, this was probably the very situation she’d

been yearning for. However, she didn't attack him once even after a whole minute had passed after his words.

Did she escape? I thought. *No, that can't be it.*

"Oh, right," I said. "She's actually being cautious."

Gerbera was wary of how Shu could counter her attack. Although he was focused on STR, a single attack from her wouldn't be fatal, and even if it would be, he still had his Brooch. She, on the other hand, would die from just a single lucky hit by him.

For Gerbera, who'd already lost her Brooch, that wasn't a gamble she could take.

"Oh, you're worried about *this*?" Shu said while pointing at his Lifesaving Brooch. He too, realized the reason why she wasn't making her move.

He then took the Brooch in hand and...

"There."

...crushed it to pieces.

"I just have one life now. So come on, don't be shy. Kill me and take the 'Unknown' title."

A destroyed Brooch couldn't be replaced for the next 24 hours. With this, Gerbera and Shu were on even ground.

Part of his face was hidden by bear fur, but you could still see him crack an indomitable smile as he said, "*Bring it.*"

Those words seemed to work as a trigger, since the situation visibly changed, even if all I could see were Shu's movements.

The left hand he'd extended suddenly became a blur, and the next moment, it was tightened next to his neck.

"*There you are.*"

His whole body became filled with vigor as he performed a Kodachi — the roundhouse kick I'd seen him do many times during training.

From my perspective, it didn't look like he'd grabbed anything *or* kicked

something.

Suddenly, the scene drastically changed again.

Blood began gushing out of Shu's neck, a large hole opened up in the wall, and I could hear someone's — most likely Gerbera's — scream coming from far in the distance beyond it.

After that, there was nothing.

He didn't follow after Gerbera, nor did anything else break.

"Ow ow ow," Shu lightly groaned, and that was the sole notable thing about the situation.

As I silently watched, I could make a conjecture about what had just happened here, but it was difficult to understand and accept that as the reality behind it all.

The wound on Shu's neck had come from an attack by Gerbera.

The hole in the wall had been made by Gerbera when he'd blown her away with his kick.

And the scream had been Gerbera's voice after suffering so much damage that the Master-Embryo merge was undone.

Basically, Shu had perceived the attack on his neck, stopped it with his hand, and defeated her with just one hit.

As for how he could perceive the imperceptible... his groaning was an excellent hint.

"You turned on your pain?" I asked.

"Yeah," he answered. "I already heard that she had powers that made her hard to perceive, and I could somehow tell that she also hid her influence on other stuff, so I tried to see if that worked on pain, too, and sure thing, it hurt like hell."

Pain was something that most of us Masters had turned off, and we couldn't experience it here in *Infinite Dendrogram* unless we willfully turned it on. I hadn't known just how bad the pain could become until I'd gone through the

hellish training, and I was quite sure that Gerbera had never known any in-game pain, either.

It was quite reasonable for Alhazred — an Embryo that could only be felt by Gerbera — to be unable to conceal pain — a sensation that she couldn't feel.

"How did you know that pain was still there?" I asked. It was the only thing I still didn't understand.

It would make sense for him to turn on pain and confirm whether it was there after some time into the battle or after getting a scratch, but Shu had just arrived here, and he hadn't suffered any damage until the final attack.

Liz couldn't experience pain, so not even I had known about the fact that it was still there. His knowledge of this had me curious.

"I have a bunch of reasons... but they all boil down to *intuition and experience*. Rules of thumb and all that jazz," he answered, not giving a single proper detail.

I looked at him in silence. This was a man who'd turned on his pain to fight an enemy he couldn't perceive, gambled that it would work on her, and actually succeeded as though it was nothing.

He really is Ray's brother, I thought. They're very alike in just how absurd their methods are.

"Heh heh," I chuckled. All the thinking I'd done on this case suddenly seemed exceedingly comical.

"All righty then!" Shu said as he switched from his Godcloth to the bear suit. "The culprit's blasted off, so let's go get some chow! I'm beary hungry fur some non-prison food!"

"Ah, but I just ate, and—"

"Roook..." said Babi while looking at me with lots of resentment in her eyes. "I haven't had aaany dinner yet... And I worked sooo hard observing her... Nom nom!"

And thus she chomped at my head.

Err, I would prefer it if you didn't bite into my head. You remind me of

Nemesis.

“Let’s go eat.” I gave in.

“Hell yeah! It’s on me! Come on, I’ll take you around for a while! I couldn’t *bear* not to take you! Let’s go where I usually go whenever I eat out!”

From Shu’s voice, it was easy to tell he was enlivened. No one could fault him. The man was tasting freedom after being in a cage longer than a day.

Anyhow, all’s well that ends well, so... ah.

“May I ask you something?” I said.

“Hm? What?”

“Just what, would you say, are those holes on all those buildings?”

Beyond the wall he’d broken through, I could see countless structures with holes similar to the one we had here. It seemed as though *something human-sized had moved here while breaking through every wall in the way*, and it felt like it continued all the way to the offices in the first district.

“I was in a rush, so I went *straight* here.”

Well, he *had* mentioned using the shortest path. Though breaking walls slowed down most people, Shu was on such a level that they were barely a hindrance.

Merely by looking outside, I could tell he wasn’t lying about having come *straight* here. I also saw the people in the now-holed buildings start to evacuate.

“Sh-Shu Starling!” roared one of the investigators who’d just rushed in through the apartment’s door. “Y-You’re under arrest for property damage!”

“Gyaah! It was an emergency! Sbear meee!”

...It appears that he will stay in jail for now, I thought.

Alas, this was a case I could do nothing about.



A short while later...

Due to no one being injured, some mediation by Elizabeth, and the fact that it had been for the purpose of taking care of the culprit, Shu had ended up only having to pay for the damages.

I could recall him shouting, “This is gonna cost me all my bearnings!” as he continued vigorously selling his popcorn.

Thus, the curtain fell on the serial murder case that had shaken Gideon.

Although, it was still a mystery who, exactly, Gerbera had been trying to show off to by creating this incident.

Side Story: Epilogue — Outlaw

The Gaol, Dead Hand, Gerbera

I logged in after 50 hours of being offline and found myself somewhere that wasn't Gideon.

With dirt roads and dusty wooden buildings, it looked like a set for a western. The scenery obviously didn't belong to any of the seven countries.

"How unexpected," I said. "I thought the 'gaol' would be more... jaily. Like... an indoor institution with thick walls."

I looked up and saw a blue sky, but then I realized that there weren't any birds or clouds. It was also bright, but I couldn't see the sun anywhere.

Maybe this actually is indoors? I wondered.

"Well, at least it looks like a nicer place to live in than I thought it'd be. Then again, I'm breaking out soon, anyway."

Yep. I've been sent to the gaol, but I'd be leaving in no time. I could just use my Alhazred's ultimate skill and escape this stupid place, as easy as pie. And then I'd be the first Master to ever break out of the gaol!

That's my countermeasure to this situation!

"...Which is probably just another thought he'd consider to be 'warping reality into what I want it to be,'" I muttered.

This was the first time I'd even had the idea of a "countermeasure." I'd never thought I'd ever mess up, so I'd never even bothered to think of anything like that.

I now knew that I'd been warping reality to make it convenient to myself... and it was all because of him.

"Argh! I'm such a mess!" I shouted.

Ever since hearing Rook's words on that day, I'd started worrying all the time.

When I tried to think something that made me feel good, I always questioned myself.

It wasn't just for what was happening *now*, either. Even my fun memories and the old moments of thinking I was great were falling apart.

This had been happening ever since that moment. It was why I hadn't been able to log in right after the death penalty ended. I'd needed time to get a grip.

"I won't forgive him for this!" I swore.

I'd make Rook pay for digging into my mind and making a mess out of it.

I also had a bone to pick with the KoD for destroying me and my Alhazred, which should've been invincible even without my warping, but that grudge was nothing compared to what I felt for Rook.

Now that he'd said those words to me, I couldn't have even a bit of fun. I couldn't even become my ideal self back in reality. His sharp words prickled and bit me like a curse.

That was why I decided to do everything to escape this gaol and get my revenge.

It's the reason why I even logged in!

"First, I'll make Alhazred check up on the gaol's structure... But wait, if the rumors are true and it's a different server, then escape is impo— No, I should still be able to... cough!"

As I thought aloud, I suddenly started to choke on the dust in the air.

Ugh! I can see that this place is based on westerns, but the amount of dust is awful, I complained. I want to rest in a clean place somewhere. They do exist here, right? I've heard that prisons that charge you are like hotels, not to mention that this is part of Infinite Dendrogram, so there should be more proper places here.

If there weren't, I'd find and force someone with a building-related Embryo or job to make me one. I had taken some construction jobs for my infiltration, so I could make designs. All I needed to build something was labor and materials.

Yes — though it would only be a temporary home, I was a Superior, so I could

obviously stand at the top of this place.

Heh heh, becoming the queen of the gaol sure seems like tons of fun, I grinned. There might even be a hidden Superior Job for that! If I got it, my clan members would obviously think more of me!

“But... can I really do it...?” I began to worry again. “Argh, come on, now!”

“Hey there,” some man with a basic-looking avatar spoke to me. “Some new girl, aren’t ya? What’s with all the faces you’re making?”

His appearance made it clear that he was some sort of PKer. He was obviously a shitty weakling.

“Does it matter to you?” I snapped. “Get lost. You’re annoying.”

If you don’t, I’ll tear you up with my Alhazred. He’s right behind you.

“Whoa. Scary,” he said. “Well, I guess it’s normal to be mad when you arrive here for the first time. When I came here after the Prodigy of Feasts killed me at Wez Sea Route, I also...”

He’s actually talking about himself. I’ll just kill him.

“Oh yeah, by the way,” he said before I could do that. He then gave me a book. “You should have this.”

“What’s this? I’m not joining any cult.”

“Hey, it’s nothing like that. I’m not the damn Lunar Society. This is about that,” he said as he pointed at a piece of paper on the notice board.

[Every day of the month that is a multiple of 10 is for reading. If you read a book from the library and write a review, you will receive 100 of the gaol’s currency, jailir. Everyone is free to participate.]

[Note 1: When reading, make sure to do it in silence. And those who aren’t reading, please make sure not to disturb those who are.]

[Note 2: Reading enriches both mind and heart.]

- [The Gaol's Control AI, Red King.]

"...Is this a school or something?" I muttered.

And if 100 jailir were worth the same as 100 lir, that was just a miserable sum of money.

Also... me? Reading books? Do you think I'm stupid?

"Are the prisoners here *that* bored?" I asked. "If you are, why not just go stealing or something?"

You're all on the wanted list, so this place has to be crawling with thieves, right?

"Most of us don't actually care about the Red King and the guy's good conduct and morality events," he replied. "But you should still have a book, just in case. *He* is very passionate about this."

"'He'?"

"His name is Sechs. He's one of the four Superiors here in the gaol. The man's a model prisoner, and he's pretty big on these events."

"...Huhhh?" I let out a confused sound.

I obviously knew about the King of Crimes, Sechs Würfel, but... was I really supposed to believe he was a model prisoner enthusiastic about morality events? What kind of stupidity was that?

Just think about the job name, "King of Crimes." Why would such a person ever enjoy reading, writing reviews, and getting a little money for it?

"So yeah, it's better if you act like you're participating in the event. It'll reduce your chances of getting on his bad side and— GHEH!"

I grabbed the well-informed shitty weakling by the collar and asked, "Where can I find this 'Sechs' person?"

Using the info I got from him led me to a place that looked pretty clean,

especially for something in the gaol.

It looked like a café. Its white walls didn't have any dirt on them, and it seemed to be taken care of so well that it felt like it belonged in Gideon.

The place was called "Dice," which was probably why it had a wooden die as its front-door decorative feature. After getting a better look at it, I realized that all the faces on the die had six dots each.

Shouldn't cheat dice be four-five-six?

"Ah, now that I think about it..."

When making up the cryptograms for the cards, I'd used characters from several languages, so I remembered a few words from them.

If I recalled correctly, in German, "six" was "sechs," and "dice" was "würfel," which meant that "Sechs Würfel" was "six on a die."

Wait, so maybe the die isn't a café feature, but his own symbol? But why is it in front of a café, then?

"Maybe he uses dice to mark his territory?" I became a bit more cautious and opened the glass door leading to the café.

I was greeted by a mechanical waitress speaking in monotone. "Wel-come."

It didn't look like there were tians here in the gaol, so I could only guess that customers were served by these machine dolls.

Does nobody break those things and take what they have?

Also, this one was so well-made that I almost thought it was a person at first. All that made it obvious it was a doll were the spherical joints and the diamond-like gem buried in the forehead.

I became curious, so I used Identification on it and found out that its name was "Diamond Slayer," and that, according to the description, it was a "Prism Person."

?! I realized. *Wait... Forget about stealing what it has — the thing itself might be a crazy luxury good...*

Trying to imagine the market price of the doll made me all dizzy.

“Is a-ny-thing the mat-ter, miss?” the doll asked.

“...Huh?!” I quickly went back to my senses and did what I’d come here to do.

“Sechs Würfel!” I shouted as I stopped the doll from trying to take me to a table. “Is the King of Crimes here?!”

The customers sitting here and there looked at me like I was some weirdo, but I didn’t care. I didn’t know what Sechs Würfel looked like, so I couldn’t find him if I didn’t call for him.

He should be here somewhere!

“I’m Gerbera!” I shouted. “A member of Illegal Frontier! The clan you made! I came because I want to talk to you! Are you here?!”

Yes, Sechs Würfel was the leader of IF — the secret organization I was part of. It was a clan that only allowed Superiors who were on wanted lists.

I’d been picked up by the clan after he was jailed, but I’d heard lots of things about him from other members.

That was why I’d targeted the King of Destruction. If I’d killed the one who’d sent our leader to the gaol, it would have proved to everyone else in the clan that I wasn’t to be taken lightly.

Well, that hadn’t worked out and I’d ended up here myself, but I thought I should at least show myself to him.

None of the customers came out to claim they were him.

For some reason, they just sighed like they were relieved and began reading books.

Yes — all of them were reading books.

“What’s going on?! Is he even here?!”

None of the customers were reacting, but right as I was about to assume he wasn’t here, someone spoke to me, saying, “Err, may I have a moment?”

It was a plain-looking young man wearing an apron and black-rimmed glasses. He was probably the shopkeeper.

And here I thought the gaol didn’t have any tians.

“What?!” I shouted. “I’m not ordering anything! I just came here, so I don’t have a single jailir! Got a problem with that?!”

“No, I did not want to ask for your order. What I want to know is, are you really a member of IF?”

“I just said I am! So just bring the King of Crimes to me, and—”

“That would be me.”

“...Eh?” For a second, I couldn’t understand what he’d just said. But then I looked at the back of his left hand and saw an Embryo crest, making it obvious he wasn’t a tian.

“I am the King of Crimes, Sechs Würfel,” he said. “A pleasure to meet you. May I call you ‘Gerbera?’”

The plain-looking young man was nothing like what I’d imagined the King of Crimes to be.

A few minutes later, I was sitting at the counter and drinking coffee he’d prepared for me. It kinda angered me that it was actually good.

For some reason, the snack he gave me with the coffee was popcorn, and when I asked about that, he said, “A friend of mine has been absorbed in popcorn recently, so I tried my own hand at it, as well.”

The KoD had a popcorn stand, too. Was it trendy or something? Honestly, though, I would’ve liked doughnuts way more.

...Remembering popcorn and doughnuts made me angry again.

Damn you, Rook and KoD!

Once he showed me his stat summary, I finally accepted the truth.

“Wow... you really *are* our leader.”

His name was clearly Sechs Würfel, and his job was definitely King of Crimes.

His total level has to be some sort of glitch, though.

“Yes, I am,” he said. “But I find it rather questionable whether I am truly the leader.”

“What do you mean?”

“I only filled the position because Zeta and Rascal asked me to, so you might consider me to be a leader in name only. Also, I was sent to the gaol soon after the creation, so they are the ones doing most of the clan administration now....”

Rascal was the Superior who’d invited me to the clan, and yes, he was the one operating it now.

Uh huh, this man really is our leader, I thought. He didn’t act like it, and didn’t look anything like a “King of Crimes,” but it was definitely him.

I’d honestly expected him to be someone violent and wild-looking, or like a mafia boss with a cat on his lap.

“Why are you the shopkeeper of a café?” I asked.

“I had a lot of free time, so I thought I’d get a hobby. I’ve become quite good at preparing coffee over the past half a year.”

“If you’re this good without any skills, you should open a café in real life.”

“Oh my, I didn’t expect such praise... Thank you very much.”

He’s so... modest and soft. Is he really the King of Crimes?

“By the way... all the customers here are reading books,” I said.

“Indeed they are. This is a reading day, after all. They’re quite enthusiastic about it.”

“Mhm...”

I looked over the counter, saw Nightingale’s biography with a bookmark in it, and realized that he, too, was juggling work and reading.

It was obvious that he was passionate about it, but this choice of book made him seem *way* too well-conducted. There was a limit to just how much of a model prisoner you could be. Once again, I could hardly believe he was the King of Crimes.

...I’ll just ask about it.

“I heard you are a model prisoner,” I spoke up. “Why?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re the King of Crimes, so I thought you’d be controlling the gaol from the shadows and raising hell.”

“Oh no, that’s quite wrong,” he replied. “Criminals that serve their time are supposed to follow the prison’s rules. *That is why I am doing just that.*”

“I see... Hm...?” It seemed like his words were strangely nuanced. Was I just imagining it?

Because of Rook, I was starting to overthink a lot of stuff like this.

“By the way, you talk to Rascal and Zeta by mail, right?” I said as I recalled reading something like that in a clan notice.

“Yes. I have to rely on translation software a lot, though.”

“Next time you send something, make sure to tell them about me. That I’m ‘escaping this place soon.’”

“You intend to attempt escape?”

“Of course. My Embryo is... probably not the strongest, but it’s suited for this kind of thing.”

It hurt that I couldn’t say that my Embryo was the strongest.

Damn you, Rook.

“Then you should consider waiting a short while more,” he said.

“Why?”

“Candy... the King of Plagues is currently trying to defeat the Disaster Bioweapon. Once the preparations are done on that front, the three of us will definitely be able to escape.”

I’d heard of the King of Plagues. That was the criminal who’d killed the most tians ever and come here after being defeated by the Superior Killer. I was pretty worried about that one because our compatibility seemed really bad, and... wait.

“‘The three of us’?” I asked.

“Yes,” he nodded. “Hannya’s term will soon be over, and we couldn’t make Fu’uta cooperate with us, so that only leaves us three.”

Those were probably the names of the other Superiors here, but that wasn’t what I wanted to ask.

“*You’re* escaping, too? Aren’t you enjoying your life here?” I mean, he even had his own café.

“Yes. After all, felons obediently serve their time while at the same time trying to escape. *That is why I will do just that.*”

There it was again.

Something about his words felt weird, but I couldn’t really tell what it was.

“Oh, speaking of escaping, why are *you* here in the first place?” he asked.

“Well... I...”

It was hard for me to speak the reasons and details about that, because it meant speaking about my failures using my own mouth.

The “me” from before I heard those words would probably speak a tale of success, but as I was now, I really couldn’t do that, so I gave up and spoke objectively.

From start to end, I told the leader about everything that had happened in Gideon. He silently nodded while refilling my coffee every now and then.

Also, when we started talking about this, all the other customers read the mood and left the café. It seemed like they were used to this.

“Then, I fought the KoD to prove my power... and lost miserably,” I mumbled.

Talking about my failures made me very tired.

“That must have been hard,” the leader said while nodding. “I understand how you feel. I, too, am here because I lost to Shu.”

“‘Lost’? But I heard it was a draw...”

“No. I lost, fair and square. I received my death penalty because he gave it to me, while he got his death penalty because of a side effect to doing that to me. It’s definitely my loss.”

He spoke calmly while admitting his own defeat. It didn't look like he was the least bit frustrated about it, and I couldn't tell whether it was because he'd made peace with it while being here, or whether he had never been bothered by it at all.

But... for some reason, it felt like he was talking about the KoD with affinity instead of hostility.

"I must say, I do wonder how Shu noticed your Embryo," the leader went on, pondering something for a moment. "He perceived Alhazred despite it being impossible to perceive, yes?"

I'd already told him about Alhazred's powers. The other clan members knew them, so I thought I might as well tell *him*, too.

"Yes... and I still don't know how," I answered.

"I see... Let's test it, then," he said as he walked out from behind the counter. "Please attack me."

"Eh? Wait, but... Eehh?"

What kind of person just asks to be attacked? Is he a masochist or something?

"There's no need to hold back. It doesn't matter where. Please, do attack me with your Alhazred."

"Don't complain about it after that."

It didn't seem like our conversation was going to go any further until I attacked him, so I gave in and did it.

I made Alhazred move and stand next to him, and it didn't look like he knew he was there. Then I made Alhazred swing his sickle-arm to slightly cut his upper arm, when...

"Oh, we should also spread out some newspapers so that—"

"Ah! Don't move...!"

A moment later, the mantis arm that was supposed to just lightly cut into his arm *cut off his head instead*.

"AAAAHHHH!" I screamed as his head rolled on the floor and hit the glass

door.

The Masters outside who saw it also screamed and ran away.

“O-Oh no... Wh-What do I do...?!”

I accidentally gave the death penalty to our leader! Wait, is this really my fault?! What if the other members think that I killed him just to prove my power?! What do I do now?!

“The pain is still there, it seems.” I suddenly heard the same voice I’d been hearing until a few dozen seconds ago.

“...Eh?”

I looked and noticed that our leader’s headless body wasn’t turning into light.

Not just that, but it was actually speaking, even though it didn’t have a head.

“April,” it spoke again. “Sorry to bother you, but would you kindly pass me my head?”

“Un-der-stood, my ve-ne-ra-ble ow-ner,” the doll next to the glass door — April was her name, probably — replied as she took the leader’s head and threw it towards his body, which easily caught it.

“I figured it out,” he continued speaking without even connecting his head to his body... not like I knew if he *could*. “Your Alhazred doesn’t cancel pain.”

“E-EEHH?! Forget about that! Your head’s clearly not where it’s supposed to be! Are you okay?!”

“I am quite okay, yes. It’s normal for me to lose body parts or be blown to smithereens. Our clan member Emily is the same in that regard, no?”

“She is?!?”

I didn’t know that! I’ve never seen her become like this!

“A-Also, why are you talking without a head...?” I burst out.

“Vocal cords and lungs aren’t in the head, after all,” his body said. “Isn’t it only natural to speak through here?”

There’s nothing natural about losing your head and acting like it’s nothing!

And wait, "pain?!" Did he really just say that?! He was being so calm despite having his head cut off with his pain set to on?! Excuse me?! Is he some sort of monster in real life, too?!

"Allow me a moment to reconnect. I cannot even look you in the eye like this," he said as he placed his head where it had been. A moment later, it reconnected and became as normal.

The sight was more shocking than the decapitation. Pain and all that aside, though, as unusual as the scene was, it was probably possible if it was caused by an Embryo.

"...Gross," I muttered. "Is your Superior Embryo based on a Dullahan?"

"Dullahans, you say? That'd be quite the cool concept, but no, my Embryo is based on something else."

Then what other kind of Embryo can let you stay just fine without a head?!

"For now, let's keep talking about your Alhazred. Just now, when you cut off my head, I felt pain, most likely because Alhazred cannot hide it. Shu surely knew about that."

"How could I have expected *that*?" I exclaimed.

I mean, you'd have to be insane to turn on your pain. And wait, you turned on your pain and seriously asked me to attack you? Are you okay in the head?!

"This time, attack me with your pain turned on," he said.

"Okay," I replied as I prepared Alhazred. Swinging had resulted in disaster, so this time, I'd lightly pierce him, and...

"Oh, about what part of me you should target—"

"I told you not to move!"

The tip of the sickle was going for his upper arm, but then he turned around and it penetrated his heart.

Come on, now, why does this keep happening?

"I see. I understand now," said the leader. Like before, he didn't get the death penalty and actually looked pretty fine.

Is he immortal...? KoD, just how did you kill and send this thing to the gaol? You seriously freak me out.

“This time, I didn’t feel any pain,” he kept talking. “It seems to be based on your own senses.”

So, apparently, Alhazred’s ability to hide pain was based on whether I had my own pain set to on or not.

I’d never realized this. And I was Alhazred’s Master.

“But Masters who play with their pain on are rare, so it’s not really a weakness, right?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” he argued. “There are some Superiors who turn it on, depending on the situation. And some even have it on all the time.”

All the time...? Are they idiots? Or just a bunch of masochists?

“Then I’ll have to avoid Masters who might turn it on, and—”

“But you have an even simpler method. *You merely have to always have it on yourself.*”

...Huh?

“No no no no, not happening,” I insisted. “Are you even listening to yourself? Are you stupid?”

His crazy suggestion made me reply to him without any respect, but he didn’t seem to care and just placed his hand on my shoulder.

“No need to scared. There is a way to make you capable of living like that,” he said as if presenting the greatest idea ever. *“Training straight from hell.”*

Below the café, there was a stage that looked like a smaller version of the dueling arenas in Gideon.

“They only look the part, though,” the leader said. “Unlike in dueling facilities, we don’t have any convenient barriers here. Are you ready?”

“Yeah, yeah...” I replied with melancholy in my tone as I turned on my pain setting.

He would basically do to me what the KoD had been doing to Rook. Except here, it wasn't to influence Embryo evolution, but to make me get used to pain.

I didn't want pain, and I'd tried to resist, but in the end, the leader's words and his weird, intimidating aura had made me consent.

Honestly, at that moment, he looked more like a "King of Crimes" than at any other time.

"Also... I need this training to become stronger, I guess," I muttered.

Alhazred's weakness would stay if I didn't do this, and I couldn't have that. I wanted to once again believe that he was the strongest, and I was willing to bear some pain for that.

It's all so I can honestly claim that I have the greatest Embryo.

"I will begin, then," he said.

"Please don't make it too painful," I pleaded.

"Sorry, we cannot have that. I will begin by tearing out your tongue, so it should hurt a lot."

"Eh?" I couldn't react in time to prevent him from taking my jaw and, just as he said he would, *tearing out my tongue.*

For a moment, my mind became filled with pain and shock so powerful I couldn't even think anything.

"Wha har hou dhoinh...?!" I cried with a mouth full of pain. Blood flowed freely from my face.

"I did say it would be training straight from hell," he answered. "If you become used to the pain of losing your tongue or limbs, you will be able to fight without caring about any damage you take."

"Buh haht's...!"

Training that involves losing body parts?! Are you insane?!

"No need to worry about the damage done," he said as he took out and used a Job Crystal, changing his job to something other than King of Crimes before whispering, *"The Saint's Prayer.* I healed you just now. Please see for yourself."

I hesitantly tried to move my tongue. The feeling was enough to tell it was there again. I then touched it with my fingers and yes, all seemed to have gone back to normal.

“What was th—” I began. “Eh?!”

As I looked up, the changes on the leader shocked me way more than the healing. Up until a moment ago, he had been a plain-looking man wearing glasses. Now, however, though the clothes were the same, his chest was now big, his stature had changed, and his hair had grown — he had clearly become *a woman*.

My Reveal skill said that I was looking at The Saint, Sechs Würfel.

I couldn't understand anything that was going on here — I had no words for it. The fact that I'd had my tongue torn out, the healing that had instantly made the wound vanish, or the fact that the King of Crime had become The Saint.

This reminded me that one of the KoC's crimes was “the dispossession of The Saint.”

I had always thought that there was a strange meaning behind the name of that incident, but it might've actually been exactly what it said.

“With me here, even the heaviest of wounds can be healed without having to resort to the death penalty,” he said. “So please, be at peace and lose yourself in this training.”

Also, it made me come to understand another thing about our leader.

His demeanor was soft and he was definitely a calm person... but *every single one of his screws were loose*.

“Today is your first day, so let us start off with something lighter... *Loss of all four limbs. Ten times.*”

“A hah hah hah hah.” A dry laugh escaped my mouth.

Suddenly, I realized something. I'd always thought I was above other Masters and always acted like it, but ever since meeting our leader, I'd never once looked down on him.

It was probably because — as stupid as other people thought I was — even I

could understand, with just my instincts, that *I was no match for him.*

“Hhhhaaa,” I sighed, gave in, and prepared to go through the training.

Now that I thought about it, that Rook guy had gone through this, as well.

I will overcome this, too, become flawless, and get my revenge on him after becoming the strongest I’ve ever been!

“...Go easy on me,” I said.

“Apologies, but no. Going easy isn’t quite enough to cut it, you see,” he replied while raising his hand.

“Wait, you’re using a knife hand? That’s just sca— AAAAAHHHHH!”

And so began my life at the gaol... and my days of hellish training. A long road that would lead me to my new destination.

Damn you, Rook... I’ll make you pay for this someday!

The End

Afterword



Cat: “With the side story over, it’s time to jump into the afterwooord!”

Xun: “I wasn’t in thE midword, but I’m ‘Xun,’ fOR ‘Xunyu.’ So, where’s the beAr?”

Fox: “He couldn’t be here ’cause he’s still in jail. The afterword is related to where we are in the story, isn’t it?”

Xun: “Well, there *was* thAT time he wasn’t hEre ’cause he was waiting for his tUrn.”

Cat: “The afterword is a mystery space where the fourth wall doesn’t exist and characters who never interact in the actual story get to talk to each other, and it changes depending on what’s currently happening.”

Xun: “Is that hOW it is?”

Cat: “Yes. Anyway, it’s time for the customary serious comment from the authooor!”

Thank you for your purchase, dear readers. I am the author, Kaido Sakon.

With this *Dendro* volume, I’ve been able to conclude the first arc of the second part of the series.

In this part, you will see many more stories focused on tians. Volumes 6 and 7 were the first step into it, and they presented a story about close bonds between players and tians.

In *Dendro*, players are split into worlders and ludos, and I believe the same applies to the readers, as well. Many of the happenings in the story will likely

appear different depending on which kind of reader is reading them, and that too, is a very important part of this work.

Volume 8 will introduce a character who is very important for both the setting and the work itself. Little would give me more joy than your excitement for her first appearance on the stage of this story.

Fox: “Now that that’s done, can I ask something?”

Cat: “Go aheaaad.”

Fox: “Why did you add a side story after the main story? You did the same in volume 3, but still...”

Cat: “First of all, the reason why they exist in the first place is because there are things we can’t show if we focus only on the events that involve Ray. We have the side stories to compensate for that, and the information in them is necessary for the main story.”

Fox: “Oh, I can see why they’re important. One of the side stories in volume 3 gave us the identity of the Superior Killer, and heeere, we had the King of Crimes.”

Cat: “That’s exactly why we need them. However, as things are, we can’t release a book with nothing but side stories.”

Fox: “True.”

Cat: “That’s why we will be adding them next to the main one. It’s all so we can tell as many *Dendro* stories as possible.”

Xun: (He sounds a bit like the author’s serious comment right now.)

Bear: “I’M BACK IN THE WILD!”

Bear: “VOLUME 8 IS SET TO COME OUT AROUND OCTOBER, I GUESS, SO BEAR IT UNTIL THEN!”

Cat: “That was too sudden! And you completely ruined the flow!”

Bear: “We have a limited amount of space fur the afterword! Sudden or not, it’s time to announce the next volume!”

Cat: “That’s so meta! You actually can’t say that anywhere else but here!”

Fox: “Here I was thinking he wouldn’t appear here this time, but he barged in and took an important honor and the entire spotlight allll for himself...”

Xun: (This afterword sure had a lot of talk about the afterword itself...)

Bonus Short Stories

Signed

Paladin, Ray Starling

Normally, the monsters of *Infinite Dendrogram* had their names displayed above their heads.

As game-like as that sounded, however, the names were visible even to the tians who called this world their home. When you think about it, it was kinda obvious those names would be, considering they were by far the simplest way to differentiate human from monster. At the very least, not having them would definitely make things a lot more confusing and difficult.

I used “normally” for a reason, though. There were exceptions — monsters with names you didn’t always see, such as those who could use conceal, stealth, and similar skills.

Prime examples of this were the Mimics. These RPG favorites were present in *Dendro*, just as in many other games, and most of them had skills that hid their names. Indeed, you’d find many unfortunate souls lured and defeated by a Mimic’s promise of immense loot.

With all that in mind, I was currently faced with a certain choice.

“All right... Is this one safe?”

I was in the now-familiar Tomb Labyrinth, looking at the end of a hallway, intensely pondering the treasure chest placed there.

Unlike in other areas, the monsters in created dungeons automatically respawned, and the same applied to these treasures. They were scattered around randomly, and though they could be very hit-or-miss, the hits had the potential to be really great. Figaro, for instance, had gotten a Prism Steed from one of those.

That was all well and good. Treasure was always welcome. But that was

where the Mimics came in.

Mimics replaced some of these chests. Sure, you were about as likely to encounter one as you were likely to find a rare item, but even those on the lower levels were absurdly strong — about Pure-Dragon-tier.

“If only the others were here,” commented Nemesis.

Yeah, I thought in response.

Today, things hadn’t panned out according to plan, and I’d ended up exploring the lower levels of the Tomb Labyrinth all by myself.

That was how I’d chanced upon this treasure chest. Opening it without anyone to help me out was dangerous, but with these things, the one who’s first takes it all, so it definitely wouldn’t be here by the time I returned with my party.

“Ignoring it would be the safe choice here,” I pondered out loud.

“But that would be quite a waste.”

Yep. Leaving behind the first treasure chest I ever found would definitely sting.

“All right...!” I shouted. “I’ve decided! We’re opening that chest!”

“Then I shall prepare to use the Counter Absorption, just in case!”

We gathered our resolve, and I kneeled before the chest. Tightening my right hand’s grip around Nemesis, I pushed it open with my left and... found a single scroll inside.

“...Seems like it was no Mimic.”

“Yeah. No surprise attacks or anything.”

Overcome by relief, I took out the scroll, and the chest became light particles and vanished the same way Masters and monsters did. In a way, this scroll could be considered a drop from the chest.

“All right, let’s check this thing out,” I muttered excitedly. “Perhaps this is one of those item recipes I’ve heard about.”

I undid the string, opened the scroll, looked at the content, and saw the text with the largest font pop out at me, saying “Tomb Labyrinth Exploration

Permit.”

“GHAH...!” I exclaimed as I was overcome by shock and pain far greater than any Mimic could give me, bringing me to my knees.

“Oh dear... Just how many of these have we gotten by now?” asked Nemesis.

My daily gacha rolls had made me more familiar with these than I ever wanted to be. Unlike those, however, this one was diligent and automatically signed itself with my name before I even opened it.

“Why the hell would you give TL Permits to someone already exploring the TL?! Why would you auto sign it and make it worthless on the market?! No one could need this! Ever!”

My pained shout resounded, but gained no response, and I was now the not-so-proud owner of yet another Permit I could add to all those I’d gotten so far, making up a grand total of I-actually-forgot-how-many.

A Certain Interview at a Certain Contractor’s Office

Dunton Contractors

Three days had passed since the terrorist incident at Gideon.

The head of the Dunton Contractors, Rob Dunton, was thoroughly troubled.

“There’s so much work to be done, but I don’t have nearly enough workers...”

Gideon was currently overflowing with emergency requests. Countless residences, businesses, and even some arenas had to be rebuilt or repaired due to the damage they’d sustained during Franklin’s Game.

In a way, this was a great time to make a killing, but Rob didn’t have enough Designers and Carpenters to answer all the requests. Some had fled the country once the war began, and even more left because of the incident, leaving him with a lack of labor too damaging to accept all the jobs, and forcing him to make the painful decision to reject some of them.

“Well, at least there’s a new Designer coming for an interview,” he

murmured.

He intended to take what he could get, and he wouldn't hesitate to accept any new workers even if he had some issues with them. And so, an hour later, he was interviewing a certain woman.

"Let us start with your name," Rob said.

"Gerbera!" she replied proudly.

He found it strange that she didn't have a surname, but he didn't ask anything about it. There were places where surnames didn't exist, after all.

"So, Gerbera, do you have any experience working in other offices similar to ours?"

"Nope! This is gonna be my first job!"

Rob raised an eyebrow, unsure of what to make of her. She'd just proudly revealed that she had no work experience to speak of, yet was behaving as if the job was already as good as hers.

"May I have your statistics, please?" he asked. Levels, stats, and the presence of construction skills played an important part in getting a job in this field.

"Here!" She readily presented him a paper that showed her stats, and...

M-Max level...?! Rob was overcome by shock.

It showed that she was level 500 — a true rarity among tians. Each tian had different talents and maximum number of jobs they could take, making any tian who reached that level a product of both talent and hard work.

She... She is a tian, right? he pondered.

Level 500s weren't all that uncommon among Masters, but since Gerbera had no Master symbol — the crest on her left hand — he concluded that she had to be a tian.

I also feel that her AGI is strangely high.

Jobs like Architect Designer and Carpenter should've raised primarily DEX and STR, but her stats made her seem like a battle job.

Perhaps she was a fighter until now and just decided to settle down and get a

job?

People who raised their levels through battle weren't all that uncommon, after all.

Her DEX is higher than your usual Designer's, and I certainly don't see any problems with the construction skill levels...

All in all, Gerbera seemed like a highly promising individual, especially for an employer as desperate for new workers as Rob.

"So, Gerbera, do you have any requests regarding your employment with us?" he asked.

"I want to work by myself! From home!"

This interview so far was enough for Rob to realize that it was best to let her do her job alone, so he had no problems with that. He continued asking questions, and though some of her overly confident answers confused him, Rob became more and more certain that he would hire her.

"I will tell you right now — you're hired," he said as he extended his hand to Gerbera. "Let's make this a relationship that benefits us both."

"Okay! I'll benefit you!" she said as she shook his hand. "Also, I'd like to see the blueprints of the buildings you've built in the past. It's to help me with my work."

"Very well. I'll show them to you."

Gerbera's words greatly impressed Rob. *She talks a bit strangely, but she's clearly passionate about the work.*

With that, he finished welcoming the new employee into his workforce.

There's no shortage of work, and we just got a skilled worker... Things are looking up! he thought with nothing but certainty.

Some time later, the inquiries and investigations about the incident caused by Gerbera greatly affected his work, but that was a story for another time.



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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 7

by Sakon Kaidou

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