



No Game No Life

7

YUU KAMIYA



LOOKS LIKE
THE GAMER
SIBLINGS ARE
CHANGING
EVERYTHING!


No
Game

No
Life

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7





*“Collection of the life of
my host—known as the
Shrine Maiden—confirmed.
I deem that the conditions
to start the **game** have
been satisfied.”*

—her next words stopped him short.



Nowhere
left to run,
nothing left
to say, he
was certain:
This was
a verbal
assault.

They were
playing a game
of betrayal and
deception. But
why was it that
the one and only
person who'd
never betray
him, Shiro, of
all people—
had him so
trapped—?

“Now...
I no
longer
have,
an
underage
soul...”



THE TEN COVENANTS

The absolute law of this world, created by the god Tet upon winning the throne of the One True God. Covenants that have forbidden all war among the intelligent Ixseeds—namely.



1. In this world, all bodily injury, war, and plunder is forbidden.



2. All conflicts shall be settled by victory and defeat in games.



3. Games shall be played for wagers that each agrees are of equal value.



4. Insofar as it does not conflict with “3,” any game or wager is permitted.



5. The party challenged shall have the right to determine the game.



6. Wagers sworn by the Covenants are absolutely binding.



7. For conflicts between groups, an agent plenipotentiary shall be established.



8. If cheating is discovered in a game, it shall be counted as a loss.



9. The above shall be absolute and immutable rules, in the name of the God.

10. Let’s all have fun together.



Theoretical Start



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Inverted Form



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Practical End

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NEW YORK

Copyright

NO GAME NO LIFE, Volume 7

YUU KAMIYA

Translation by Daniel Komen Cover art by Yuu Kamiya

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THEORETICAL START

Imagine you're online, playing an FPS.

You're standing on a vista where you can see out onto a carefully designed stage, far off into the distance. Atop a low hill, overlooking all the chaos of gunfire: such an elegant sight. You can't help saying to yourself, "Aha, some human garbage," as you find in your hands—a sniper rifle. Those of you unfamiliar with firearms and their usage need not worry. A sniper rifle is exactly what it says it is—a rifle for sniping. If you were to look up *snipe* in the dictionary, you would see that it means "to shoot precisely from a distance," whereas a gun used in an assault would be defined as an "assault rifle." No matter how you spin it, a sniper rifle can only be a gun used to shoot precisely from a distance. Yes, a gun just for you, to snipe with abandon at the masses below—

Now! We've cleared that up, so slowly sink into position and ready your gun!

And now! Try shooting off the heads of the twenty or thirty suckers you see through your scope!

As soon as you're done, you are sure to be greeted by roar of thunderous applause!!

fu pussy sniper

punk-ass n00b

And so on and so forth...

A dreamlike chorus of diverse voices singing together in hot, passionate rage.

—What just happened? You used a sniper rifle to snipe, and they got mad at you—end of story.

You don't get it? You think it's absurd?

As it so happens, that is exactly what he thought back then as a pure and innocent boy. *WTF*...he wondered as he collapsed dramatically on his keyboard and wept.

However, as much as it pains me to say it, there is *nothing absurd about* this story. It is simply the story of one who *defied convention*—and for that was naturally rebuked.

All games have conventions: the best techniques that have been established, in theory, according to the game's rules and specifications. In their respective games, these are tantamount to inviolable precepts of courtesy—*and yet*.

Should one carelessly defy them and rashly fly in their face, what would happen? The answer...is *this*.

That boy who once wept at that passionate, raging chorus—by now he was a young man. Today, as ever, running around the game with a gun in hand...he thought to himself.

Indeed, to lie in wait and snipe people (called “turtling”) is an effective tactic. But if everyone thought that way and used that tactic—*there would be no game*. It was like how endlessly passing the ball among teammates was not against the rules of soccer. It was like how endlessly swirling pieces around to provoke the opponent was not against the rules of chess. But in a multiplayer game, there was an unspoken agreement: If you defy convention, you're going to piss people off.

If everyone did as they pleased, *the result would be inevitable*... There had to be such *conventions*. Should one casually defy them, isn't it only natural that one would be cursed out, even flamed—?! Manners, grace: These are essential to human beings. Say no to shooting corpses.

...Blah, blah, blah, whatever.

Perhaps if he had been raised properly, he might have agreed with them—these *conventions*. However, the young man had instead been hopelessly raised into the kind of deadbeat, shut-in gamer you wouldn't want to be seen with anywhere.

—*Then why did they even include sniper rifles?* He spat, gun in hand, wildly

scattering claymores and sentry guns as per usual. Amidst the slander from other players, he skipped from base to base and carried on turtling and sniping with a smile on his face. He didn't really give a shit for the conventions of n00bs who claimed that this killed the game.

A convention, by definition, is a move used by the weak to confound the strong—a strategy, and moreover—!

—At that moment, one überindividual came at him with a knife, having broken through his traps and sniper fire...

*...Uhhh, what was I just saying? Yeah, that's right! Convention! It exists only to be blown away to smithereens! **Just like this***— The young man looked at the person who had taken him out in one kill and burst out laughing before sending out a message:

d00d that was s1ck



All games have conventions: the best techniques that have been established, in theory, according to the game's rules and specifications. In their respective games, these are tantamount to inviolable precepts of courtesy—*and yet*.

Should one carelessly defy them and rashly fly in their face, what would happen? The answer...is *this*.

Over sixty years ago—on a remote hill in what would come to be called the Eastern Union. A small, golden fox girl looked up at the heavens with a wilted gaze and thought. The scarlet moon set as if on a stage, the sky wreathed in night—at its edge, the giant chess piece that pierced the heavens and cast its shadow over the earth, visible from any point on the planet. It was said that the God who resided at its peak had, over six thousand years ago, set forth the Ten Covenants—and declared:

The world has changed.

But the girl, her golden eyes clouded over, thought to herself.

You lying scallywag.

The Great War had concluded, war had ceased to be, and rights were assured to all. They would never again have to live in fear of violence nor suffer any

longer.

That was a lie.

It was a lie, all of it, the whole thing was a damn lie—! If war has ceased to be, then why are we still fighting each other?! If rights have been assured to all, then why is everything being taken from us?! If we no longer have to live in fear of violence nor suffer any longer—then why—?

—Why am I...so hurt, so afraid of violence, and suffering so much pain?

The girl clothed in bloodstained rags shed tears as if begging for an answer.

They formed herds based on the shapes of their tails or ears, on whether they had horns, on the color of their fur, and sneered at each other. Even if Werebeasts were exploited by another race, if it was a different tribe, they'd gloat, *Serves you right*. With this "theory" in place, Werebeasts had been playing games among themselves already for over six thousand years.

This is wrong, she said. *Werebeasts shouldn't fight each other; they should help each other*. The very young—and therefore wise—girl tried to speak out against the accepted "theory" with this kind of sensitivity in mind.

Weak pieces are to be seen and not heard, she had been told, their petty hostility trampling over her.

And so the girl, atop that nameless hill, robbed even of the power of life and death, lying drenched in blood...with the hazy remnants of her consciousness, stared at the giant chess piece—and finally understood.

The Ten Covenants said: Without permission, you shall not take, you shall not rape, you shall not kill. But there was no mention of protecting the weak, much less even allowing weakness. Swindle them, deceive them, threaten them—use any means necessary; once they are *forced to consent*, strike them, swindle them, violate them, kill them—that's all there is to it. The strong live, and the weak die. The winners take all, and the losers lose all. Right or wrong, the loser is not even granted the right to speak. If you don't like it—stop being a pawn and become a player. Expend your wiles and cunning, seize the ability to do with others' rights as you please—become a ruler, in other words.

Yes, these rules majestically held aloft by that so-called One True God

rewarded one's hands not for joining hands with others—but for striking them. It rewarded one's force not for shielding the weak—but for stomping them. This, indeed, was the “theory”—perfect play meant attempting as much mutual domination as possible. With these rules, it went without saying—had the world changed? Nothing had changed... There was merely *a new formality* before they murdered and robbed each other. Having finally grasped this reality, the girl simply—laughed.

A “convention,” by definition, was something used by the weak to confound the strong—a strategy. Which existed only—to be blown to smithereens. Even this vile and nauseating theory of fate is no exception. In that case, the girl silenced her body screaming in pain and stood.

I'll blow those “conventions” to smithereens myself.

*I'll build a “game-breaker”—overturn their accursed conventions. If my game-breaker itself exists only to be broken—**that's fine**. I'll break their conventions any number of times, have mine broken to infinity, until the very end.*

It's bound to be there.

A “convention” that rewarded one's hands not for striking—but for joining with others.

A “convention” that rewarded one's force not for stomping—but for shielding the weak.

A “convention” that rewarded everyone not for just being pawns under the control of others, but for being players of their own.

I'm sure to find it—no, I'll definitely find it—

And so, that day, that moment.

Those “conventions” that brought her down, that she discarded—the girl glared at those who had put them in place and made her decision. *If to carelessly defy convention was to fail—then I'll **cunningly defy it**. I'll swindle, deceive, threaten, act more underhandedly, adopt even baser tactics, be all the more cunning in every single way!*

I'll pull it off by any means necessary. Something even that arrogant fraud of a

God who boasted of changing the world couldn't do.

We'll change the world—with our own hands. Yes—a preposterous dream lay in her heart, such as those only allowed to children. Now, back then, on that nameless hill, beneath that nameless shrine, the nameless golden fox girl sneered that she'd use *everything permitted by the rules*, just as the one atop that giant chess piece wished. And she embarked on a move that would overturn every single convention—or, in other words—

—An unprecedented *ruse*.

And so there arose a storm—one that uprooted over 6,200 years of civil feuds. An irresistible storm that blew away all rage and hatred, grudges, and fetters. It even snatched away any room for struggle from those who tirelessly fought among themselves—and dissipated.

A new nation was born.

A nation that embodied a corner of her old dreams—her preposterous ideals. In a mere half-century, it came to be recognized far and wide as one of the world's greatest countries—the Eastern Union.

...The young golden fox was gone. Now she was called the Shrine Maiden, an entity feared by every Werebeast. And the *ruse* she had contrived in her younger days was now—

“All righhht—now, are you ready for the game to begin, you troublesome *god?*”

Where once the nameless golden fox had lain, on that nameless hill, at that nameless shrine, was now in Kannagari, capital of the Eastern Union—that spot was called by the name of *the Shrine*. Before the eyes of everyone who gathered there, the *ruse* they called a god—whirled forth pure and massive *force...*



I have heard your claims. It remaineth for you to prove them—however.

But it was not the Shrine Maiden herself who moved her lips to form words. It was the source of the force storm, which reached beyond the Shrine, no, beyond Kannagari—beyond even the sea, reached to encompass not only the

Eastern Union, but even Elkia: the *ruse* the Shrine Maiden had taken into her body in her young days—the *ether*. Through the body of the Shrine Maiden, now but a puppet, the one who controlled this will spoke.

O mortals who await all but certain death, I struggle to grasp your eagerness to die sooner.

The Shrine Maiden, housing in her body an Old Deus, saw through clouded consciousness the figures lined up. The seven shadows eager to die—according to the god whom they challenged to a game.

“Roll call!! Number one, Sora, virgin, eighteen! I shall present you with the awesome answer that I am *eager to live!*”

The young raven-haired man, Sora, shouted, jauntily curving his mouth into a smile. With a hand raised to his face as if the divine maelstrom before him were just an annoying breeze, he laughed and continued.

“I get to play with a god, man! I’d fail as a gamer if I missed this chance.”

“...Number two...Shiro, eleven... We don’t...have time...to wait...this time...”

His little sister, Shiro, her long, white hair disheveled, took her turn with half-closed eyes, as if she’d given up.

“Wh-whaaat?! N-number three, Stephanie Dola. I don’t want to die. I am firmly opposed—”

“Number four, Jibril, the humble slave of Lord Sora and Lord Shiro. I am heartbroken to the point of tears that you would overlook me as the only immortal among us—so I command you to *make amends*. 💔”

While their dear frame of sensibility, the Immanity girl Steph, shrieked piteously with tears, the Flügel girl Jibril interrupted her with an ominous smile to order a god.

“Number fiiive, Plum ☆... Renowned for my lack of presence, I will stay out of this and leave it to you guys...”

Next to answer was the Dhampir girl—correction, boy—Plum, his pretty, troubled face plastered with a smile parched by resignation. Followed by—

“...? N-number six, please? Izuna—hngghh.”

The flustered Werebeast girl, Izuna Hatsuse, tried to follow up, but her head was pressed down by the aging Werebeast man, Ino Hatsuse, who knelt beside her.

“Please put your mind at ease, O Holy Shrine Maiden.”

Lowering his head, not to the Old Deus but to the sealed Shrine Maiden, he said:

“While this bunch seems by no means worthy of trust, I therefore ask that you leave this to us.”

“Uh, w-we’ll totally kick that stuck-up god’s a— We’ll beat them, please!”

Izuna mimicked her grandfather’s penchant for smoothing things over, though her will to fight was still clearly present.

These seven. Devoid of dignity and remote from reliability. Each with their own bulky luggage, all different in age, race, and sex. Stepping up recklessly to challenge the god, they were fools you couldn’t help but love. To overturn the conventions of absolute truth built on the rules of the One True God.

Not as prayers, but as players.

Feeling a sense of affection from this truth, the Shrine Maiden formed a smirk upon her consciousness. But at the same time she thought—*she* would yet not understand.

Then swear ye. With your words etch your deaths into this foolish game.

As the Old Deus pressed them calmly to declare the oath that would lead them to their doom, however—

“Oh, before that, one thing.”

Sora spoke up in a nonchalant manner that was quite out of place, interrupting the group raising their hands to swear at the start of the game, and asked:

“Pardon me, but you still haven’t told us your name, have you?”

How is that of any concern to such baseless creatures as yourselves?

“Huh? Isn’t it, like, the very minimum of manners to at least learn someone’s

name before you pwn them?”

The atmosphere creaked from the shock. Everyone—even the Flügel Jibril—wincing at the god’s displeasure. The Shrine Maiden couldn’t hold back her laughter. It had already been over half a century since she had taken the ether into her body. In that time, had *she* ever shown displeasure so openly—much less—

“...Uh, wai— Did I say something especially bad?”

—at the casual banter of a puny Immanity, one who lacked any innate sense of self-awareness?

“...Brother, it’s...fine...you didn’t say...anything special.”

“R-right?! I mean, it’s not like I—”

Shiro signaled a thumbs-up to the flabbergasted Sora.

“...You just...piss people off...just by...breathing.”

“I-indeed, my master is wise! To make the god *explode*—what a revelation —!!”

“This is proof that even a god wants your ass kicked... Now, that takes talent.”

“Why don’t we forget about playing the game and just trash-talk the god to death? Sounds like something you could do, King Sora.”

“...Sora, you’re so badass, please...”

“You damn monkey... Do you have some kind of disease that kills you if you act serious for even a second...?”

In her clouded consciousness, the Shrine Maiden secretly smiled at the rowdy group. At the same time, her thoughts threatened to cut out at any moment—but she saw, her sight aligned with that of the god who began building the board, not even waiting for the oath: the Shrine—the skyscrapers of the capital spread out around it, and then the cities of the islands of the Eastern Union... Looking down at the country she had spent her life building, she thought:

Back then, the nameless golden fox girl had dreamed of that nation she’d built, endlessly breaking one convention after the other—and ever seeking the

next.

But that child was no longer within her. The girl who had *ended up* an adult, the Shrine Maiden, had one day...realized.

The breaking of convention...*had a clear end*. A game that had been thoroughly studied would end just like a game of tic-tac-toe in that *the first to move would always win*. No matter how a piece might struggle, it could never fly off the board.

Players and prayers. This world, however far you went, was a board on which players played with prayers as their pieces. That was the one convention—that could never be changed. The ruse the girl created in her youth had proved it. And yet, the Shrine Maiden who resigned herself to this in disillusionment—

—looked down and once again became aware of the Shrine Garden, where she saw a sight that had never appeared even in the dreams of the girl she was back then. Immanity, Flügel, Dhampir, Werebeast—in times of yore, they had killed each other with arms yet today hated and fought one another through games. But now representatives of these races, different in power, in life span, even in manner of existence, were coming together and laughing. Not only that, but though their intents might differ, their goal was the same—together in the mad folly of challenging an Old Deus, in peace...

“—All right, are you really good and ready?”

Whether from rage or from concentrating on the cosmic act of creation, the god had momentarily loosened control over the Shrine Maiden’s body, and a question emerged from her mouth.

“Will you take my error, take the mistake I committed back then—and correct it?”

The Shrine Maiden slowly raised her hand into the air. When she lightly turned over her pale arm, on her palm rested a shining pawn. It was unmistakably a Race Piece—the Werebeast Piece. *Correct the mistake I made that day—pay the tab I’ve piled up since then. Until I’m able to do that, I have no right to smile cheerfully with them. But if I could do that, then this time—*

“If you do so...the Eastern Union—the Werebeast will walk with you.”

Still in turmoil and anguish, the Shrine Maiden made this declaration, and yet...

“Hmm...quite frankly, I don’t know what kind of mistake you made that’s got you so serious.”

That man suspected of a malady that would prove fatal if he ever became earnest added pompously:

“If you’re looking for something to correct, why don’t you start with your *mistake* of getting serious with us?!”

Sora, who was challenging the very Old Deus who amounted to all creation, shouted a “serious rebuke.” The siblings, ignorant of the Shrine Maiden’s anxiety and turmoil—or perhaps well aware of it?—said, with their eyes gleaming in anticipation:

“We’re so lucky! We’ve been blessed with the chance to play against a god with these d00ds!”

“...And...when we play...we play, to win... Therefore...”

“Of course! Yeah, totally, naturally, and inevitably! We’re gonna get the Eastern Union and the Old Deus and every damn thing that comes with!! That’s it, no more or less—simple, right?”

Their faces were full of childlike emotion as if to say, *Gee, grown-ups sure do make things complicated*. Something no longer reflected in the Shrine Maiden’s eyes was without a doubt alive in theirs.

“Let’s skip all the boring stuff. This world we’re in—it’s a game, right?”

Their two pairs of eyes shone with intense determination—but merely in sheer glee.

“All you’re doing is competing to see who can be the biggest self-important asshat, right?”

“...If that’s, so...there’s no...way...we’re gonna...lose...”

“If we’re playing for the title of biggest asshat, I see no reason we should lose to gods.”

The game was that simple. Players and pieces, just challenging and being challenged—only reflecting on things later. Players and prayers, just *deciding what they wanted to be*.

If a thoroughly studied game ended just like a game of tic-tac-toe did, where the first to move would always win, then it was time to start the game to *determine who would move first*. With a single, clear, logical weapon, they cast away the Shrine Maiden's crafty despair. Watching the excitement grow among everyone gathered there, praising an end that would never end—

“...I hate to admit it...but perhaps I'm getting long in the tooth...”

—The Shrine Maiden joked and suddenly thought, *That “simple world” so clearly reflected in Sora's and Shiro's eyes—that which I was unable to see in my youth. Perhaps back then I couldn't see that world, one that only children are allowed to see? What if, just as these two said, the world really was that simple?*

And what if everyone else was making it complicated—?

“—All right, go ahead.”

Her words flew out of her mouth with a grin, and the god-challenging fools each formed their own smiles in turn. The game they had hoped for, anticipated, so plain and simple; the game that would decide who was the greatest of asshats—

“Come—let the game begin—!!”

The Shrine Maiden tossed up the Werebeast Piece while Sora shouted with glee. The piece sailed higher and higher above their heads—thrown as if to reach the Old Deus whirling in the distant heavens. Everyone once more raised their arms as if to stab open the narrow garden—

—*Aschente*—!

What echoed was a clamor of the oath to begin a game that was absolutely binding under the Ten Covenants, the signal that they would submit to the rules set by the lying “One True God” who boasted that the world had changed. In that instant, the writhing, built-up divine force burst. Her consciousness tossed idly by the raging power that surged like a tsunami, the Shrine Maiden thought:



*

Nothing in the world has changed.

That's how she felt as a young girl. *In that case, I'll change things myself*, she had hoped. This was her dream. The Shrine Maiden immersed herself in that dream once more, having grown older and eventually awakening from that youthful reverie.

When they were able to beat it—this game, the Old Deus, *her*—and prove it: then the world would change again. And when that time came...yes, she would accept it: that the words of he who had bestowed the Covenants long, long ago at the end of the Great War were no lie.

The world could change and be changed—and surely it had—!!

So.

...'Tis not time for apologies yet...Mr. "One True God"...

Were you just a liar, or was I just daft? When the answer comes, I'll be ready to apologize—just a little.

After cutting into you as a liar so many times...sure, I'll drop a "My bad!" and even stick my tongue out—

Leaving behind this hope and sarcasm, the Shrine Maiden's consciousness was washed beyond the light.



The entire world witnessed this phenomenon. The force originating from an island floating in the sea in the Far East was a "re-creation." Accomplished in the blink of an eye, strangely, it was even witnessed from the other side of the planet, as if the warped globe could not but let its cry be known to all of heaven and earth.

The dark of night was shattered, and the light of day was pierced. The brazen, absurd, outrageous phenomenon rocked the very planet. The force turned to a wave, and the wave into matter, and from it emerged defined concepts. Upon this microcosm of the opening of the cosmos, this reproduction of the creation, the earth arose *in the sky*. The land appearing above folded and twisted until it

formed a single spiral. Spinning like a whirlpool, ascending like a pagoda, reaching to the very moon—a corridor of heaven.

Even if one did not understand what was going on, it was enough to make one tremble by instinct.

For those unfortunate souls who did understand, reason forced shivering to their knees.

What entity could, against all logic, perform such a miracle? The question was etched into their blood, their beings, their souls, still unfaded after eternity—their memory. They were told by the vestiges of that which had once created the heavens and shattered the earth, defined all things—their memory. Therefore, that day, all those who witnessed this phenomenon—could do nothing but pray, *Oh...God...*



Meanwhile. At the end of the earth, at the peak of a giant chess piece, the One True God who reigned over all the world—Tet—

“Choo! Achoo, sniffle... This isn’t my doing. I’m just being talked about a lot.”

He was holding a trash can full of tissues while blowing his reddened nose... acting out a scene unnecessary for his divine personage: a runny nose—and complaints.

“...After calling me a liar so many times, now they’re ruining my reputation. Come on!”

You’re gonna make me cry. Tet flapped his legs discontentedly and gazed upon it—the new land created in the sky, the heavenly continent stretching over such a scale as to cover the land from the Eastern Union through Elkia. It was a vast game board assembled for a time by an Old Deus, but—

“—Ha-ha! ☆ This might be a bit unexpected. You really like to make things flashy, don’cha?”

Yes, even for an Old Deus, this was an excessive show of power, Tet muttered—no.

“—Question. Be this outcome thy artifice, holder of the Suniaster?”

A voice echoing from the void *called out*. To speak to the One True God was extremely difficult even with the power of an Old Deus—

“I’m not on anyone’s side—how many times do I have to tell you...achoo!”

But please answer when I speak to you! Tet compelled brazenly, yet with a casual smile, as he threw another tissue into the bin.

“—False. It is thou who hast called them from another world. Reveal thou thy meaning in entering the fray.”

If this was a game in which the Old Dei struggled for the Race Pieces to win the right to challenge the One True God, then what meaning could there be in the One True God himself joining the battle?—the voice asked, but Tet smirked.

There was no deceit. If he had to name it, all he had was *hope*—

“Why don’t we say it means I wanna see you guys’ howling faces since you’re the ones ruining my game with that misunderstanding?”

Contrary to his childish answer, Tet’s barefaced true motivation—was *hope*, but the voice of the Old Deus resounding from the void only continued placidly.

“—If such a convergence be, it should be known of the Suniaster.”

“...Can’t you put it in easier terms...like ‘You wanna see my face, see the future’?”

Chuckling at this, Tet raised a hand aloft.

“I don’t mean to brag, but unlike you guys—I have good taste.”

Floating in his hand was the evidence of the One True God.

“At least I have a no-spoilers policy, y’know?”

The Suniaster. The conceptual device that granted absolute rule—the vessel of omnipotence. All the power existing in the universe barely amounted to a drop that had slipped from this vessel. To Tet, who held free reign over it, neither time nor metaphysical causes held sway by now. Creation and destruction, the past and the future, observation and determination... All lay in his hands. It would be simple for him to see the future in which the faces of the Old Dei howled—or even to *create* it, but—

“Where’s the fun in cheating like that? Does *any good come of* seeing the future?”

Though not to the same extent as Tet, who possessed the Suniaster, an Old Deus should have been capable of seeing some way into the future, Tet chuckled sarcastically—

“—I only look at the past.”

With this mumble, he erased the trash can and produced a book and a quill. The book, bound and scribed by the God...was still filled with mostly white pages.

“That’s what makes it exciting—filling in the result of the game.”

And so lay the future anticipated by the God who refused omniscience. An account of a myth even the God knew not—a tale that did not yet exist.

.....

At the silence elicited purely of that intent to read to the end, Tet let slip a chuckle. There was no way *she* would take his words seriously.

Her ether, her quintessence would never allow it.

“—*Are such trifles thy reason for summoning me?*”

“Uh...yeah. Teasing and provoking you was just a *bonus*! But here’s the real reason—”

With a titter, Tet pointed to a blank page.

“*Even the Suniaster* doesn’t know your name, so can you tell me? ‘Cause I need to write it—”

—As Tet smiled, seemingly unaware that *even his real reason was trolling* (perhaps because he’d refused omniscience)—

—*Pft*. The line dropped, leaving an unpleasant crack of air.

“...Oh man...she *ragequit*... You kind of fail as a gamer, you know?”

Tet sighed and slid his quill along his pages.

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

Some think the world is complex, eternally denying meaning.

Some think the world has not changed and never will change.

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

Past and present, humans, machines, beasts—and gods...all wondered which, in the end, was true, or could it be...? Tet lowered his face and—as if to give the answer to everything, as if to plead to the facts that all doubted that they weren't lies—pondered alone.

That day long, long ago, the world really did change. With the Suniaster in hand, the god of games—I really did change it. Heaven and earth to a game board, laws to rules...I really did change it. But though I might change heaven and earth, there are things that won't change, things I mustn't change. I can't change the players of the game; them I mustn't change. Just as their will, the old myth, took life in me, in the Suniaster—and changed the world. These players, too, must want to change.

“You'll change it, right?! You'll overturn everything and come here, right?!”

Their will, the new myth, would now change everything, down to the players. Undoubtedly—with methods intrusive, troublesome, uncalled-for, they'd drag around everything, like the worst little brats—cornering everyone—to the point where *they would have no choice but to change*.

That would be when, at last, the game...would truly begin. Waiting for that moment when he'd surely be able to write that the most fun game since the creation *had finally begun*—past tense—Tet sat down cross-legged.

“...And I can't wait to call *you* by your name next time I see you.”

The only one in the world who knew she who warped the world before their eyes—the ether residing in the Shrine Maiden.

“To see you make such a face...as the very one who created that thoughtful machine—”

...But he swallowed his next words...and forced a smile. He peered deep into the giant game board, built by rocking heaven and earth, and gazed intently so as not to miss a single move of those ascending to a new myth.

If you're gonna watch a game, you always oughta cheer. It's great to root for your favorite players, but there's something to be said for an unexpected upset. Who should I cheer for?—wondered the One True God, but presently, he lifted his face, and as if to embody the essence of the world he had created with his hands—

“Go everyone! 🎵 I’m cheering for pretty much all of you...ah-ha-ha! ☆”

—he tossed out an extremely lazy and convenient cry of support.



—Awaken.

At this word piercing his slumber, Sora awoke. As he peeled his body off the ground, his eyes wandered, still not quite back from the land of dreams.

...Heh. Sora smiled. His ability to assess a situation was rather impressive, if he did say so himself. With a single, languid glance around, he’d uncovered the secrets behind *two issues*. Having even ranked their importance and priority, Sora considered them in sequence, his head cool as could be.

Issue One was a grave and pressing matter, a fluctuation in the Official Best Girl Ranking maintained in his head of a membership over three hundred strong. In other words, within the field of his swimming vision—was a girl as cute as all get-out. Floating in space, sitting on an inkpot about her own height, resting her chin in her hands, lounged a very young girl. Clad in elegant vestments reminiscent of the Far East, different in style from that of the Eastern Union—she held a well-worn brush in her hand. Countless scrolls unfurled behind her like wings or veils, her steel-colored eyes coldly looking down at—no. Her eyes, devoid of interest in anything, as if artificial, only emptily traced someplace that was not here. Her countenance was that of a doll—yet divine—and stole Sora’s eyes half by force.

For Sora, who had *seen his fill of beauties*, this was truly a grave and pressing matter.

...The hell was the damn virgin on about? You would be right to scold him thusly—but!! Of the ladies he had met since coming to this world of Disboard, every single one was peerless. A princess who would be well-advised to not stand next to a pop idol lest the latter be sentenced to public execution, an

angel who would sink a supermodel into a devastating inferiority complex, an animal-eared little girl who would awaken one's Loli complex, leading straight down the road to incarceration—one after another, each in this vein. And all the while, the young man was still updating his history of not having a girlfriend! But after becoming uselessly accustomed to being around women, *if nothing else*, Sora, by now, was not one to be flustered by a mere beauty.

There was a time when I thought that way, too, Sora grumbled. He started sorting the girl before him up the panel's ranks to the point where she began approaching the seat under the perennial favorite, Shiro, when he noticed that this touched on the next question, and he decided to think about that one for now. Not that Issue Two was too much of a problem. It practically sorted itself if uttered aloud—specifically:

“...Uh...? Where am I? Who's this girl? What am I doing here?”

The point being—that he had no memory to answer this.

.....

Sora gnashed his teeth in the realization that he had misjudged the priority of the problems. *You got it backward—! This is what any normal person would think about first!! The hell are you talking about, “ability to assess a situation”? Look at this—how can you put her at number two on the chart if you don't know her name—?!*

“.....Mm...Brother...? ...Where...are we...?”

Sora sank in despair as he reflected skyward and was called by the sleepy-eyed mutter of that top-ranked girl: Shiro.

—*Hmm*, he mumbled, looking around once more. The rest, likewise sprawled on the ground unconscious, came to one by one: Jibril, Steph, Plum, Izuna, and Ino. But as they all in unison surveyed their setting with faces befuddled, Sora revised his understanding. It seemed that Issue Two would not be solved no matter whom he asked. For *no one had any recollection*. However...

“—Mmm... Well, I don't get it, but it should be fine.”

Sora laughed it off. It still was no big problem. He took Shiro's hand, stood, and gazed upon the provisional number two before him.

He might not know *who* she was, but *what* she was was clear. When he'd first met Jibril, he'd felt an inorganic mortal terror as if confronting a heavy-caliber cannon. But the thing drifting before him—didn't even elicit that. Sora supposed this must be how people feel when faced with a tornado or a tidal wave. No despair or mortal terror. Only dazed defeat. A presence permitting not so much as an inkling of defiance. Embodied by single breath of the world, the answer was obvious.

This was a god. She stood at the peak of the sixteen seeds, a revelation of the cosmos, Ixseed Rank One—Old Deus.

But that makes things simple, Sora expounded grandly.

"Where are we? *In a game!!* What are we doing? *Playing a game!!* The end!"

Where were they? In a place they'd known—yes, *had known*. The Garden of the Shrine of the Eastern Union—but now within it stood seven simple doors. And, looking up, one saw floating over their heads a giant mass of land that seemed to be trying to blot out the sky.

—*Okay: Memory of beginning a game like this? Absent. Memory of leaving Elkia to challenge an Old Deus? Present. Then perhaps memory deprivation was a condition of the game with the Old Deus—but in any case, it's fine.*

"I—I by no means slight your ability, Masters, but the fear I feel now I have never—"

"...Your ability to stay calm before an Old Deus is impressiive... Where can I buy a heart like thaaat?"

Ambiguous cries rained down on Sora as he frolicked like a child in a typhoon—but he chuckled. An entity that transcended despair and fear, outstripping the limits of human understanding—! Whoa, that was deep...!

But Sora, with his human understanding, basically—*didn't feel anything*. What should a modern Earthling do when faced with a natural disaster such as a tornado or tidal wave? *Take a photo with his phone and spread it all over the Internet*, of course. Sora crawled to get his low-angle shot of the provisional number two, presumed to be a goddess or something—yet the girl, having spoken not a word so far, only swept along her brush with eyes that reflected

nothing. And coolly, emotionlessly, inorganically, she announced as mere confirmation:

“The first condition of the start of the game: collection of the challengers’ memories of the last twenty-four hours—confirmed.”

At these words that affirmed their assumptions, Sora and Shiro alone, together, grinned. It was just that they’d challenged that god—that being floating in the sky at which even Jibril blanched, that off-the-charts entity, that Old Deus—to a game. The buy-in having been their memories of the last twenty-four hours, here they were. Sora’s heart beat fast in anticipation at this most satisfactory opponent, but—

“The second: collection of the life of my host—known as the Shrine Maiden—confirmed. I deem that the conditions to start the game have been satisfied.”

—her next words stopped him short.

“—Whaaat...?! Th-the Holy Shrine Maiiden—?!”

Noticing a figure sprawled across unvarnished wooden stairs previously obscured by the overwhelming presence of the Old Deus floating above it, Ino let out a cry and bounded forward as if to smash the earth behind him, followed by Izuna. Lifting together the limp, motionless Shrine Maiden, they spoke to her, but...

With the senses of Werebeasts, they must have known before running to her. If she’d had breath in her body, if she’d had a pulse, they would have long since noticed. What it meant was just what the Old Deus had said—her life had been collected.

Unmistakably, these were the Shrine Maiden’s...remains.

What is this? Ino and Izuna trembled as Sora struggled to smooth out his thoughts.

Calm down. Memories aside, using the Shrine Maiden’s life as a buy-in? There was *no way* they’d accept such a condition...either the Shrine Maiden herself had willed it—or—

“Now...it shall be considered that the game for which ye have wished—has

begun, whereupon I shall reveal the rules.”

Exhibiting no interest in the quaking party—no, for nothing in this world—
with eyes emanating strictly a cold, inorganic glint, the girl calmly spoke—no—

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

02: The die-bearer may advance a number of spaces equal to the result of a roll of all the dice he beareth.

03: The result of the roll of the dice shall be determined randomly, whereafter **ONE** of the dice used shall be lost.

04: **TRAVEL IN COMPANY** must first be declared, whereupon the company may advance according to the roll of one representative.

05: A company of more than two shall, of the dice used, lose a number of dice equal to the **NUMBER OF MEMBERS OF THE COMPANY MULTIPLIED BY THE NUMBER OF FOLLOWERS IN IT**.

06: Each player hath the right to create fifty **TASKS** at the start of the game.

07: A die-bearer who landeth upon a space with a **TASK** may be forced to carry out any instructions.

08: The die-bearer may not move from the space until either he hath fulfilled the **TASK** or seventy-two hours hath passed.

09: A die-bearer who fulfilleth a **TASK** may seize one die from he who hath assigned it, but he who fulfilleth it not shall have his die seized.

10: Each **TASK** shall be transcribed upon a sign, and these signs shall be placed upon the spaces of the board in random order.

11: A **TASK** may change the environment of its space according to its content.

12: However, **TASKS** of the following kinds are **INVALID**:

12a: **TASKS** that specify
a party to whom they
shall exclusively apply

12b: **TASKS** that can

only be fulfilled by the assigner or cannot be fulfilled by any player
12c: **TASKS** that instruct the die-bearer to advance a number of spaces that conformeth not to his roll
12d: **TASKS** written in a tongue other than that of Immanity

13: The die-bearer who first reacheth the goal shall be the **VICTOR**, whereupon the game shall end.

14: The Old Deus shall be bound to fulfill the demands of the **VICTOR** to the full extent of her authority and power.

15: In the event that all players have lost their dice or **perished**, the game shall be deemed **IMPOSSIBLE TO CONTINUE**, and the game shall end.

16: If the game is **IMPOSSIBLE TO CONTINUE**, the Old Deus hath the right to **collect all possessed** by all participants except the foremost.

00a: The game board is a simulation of reality, but all events that should transpire there, including death, are real.

00b: —Among the die-bearers is one traitor whose memory hath not been collected.

—more accurately, haphazardly *imparted* the so-called rules—directly into the brains of all present, willy-nilly, including Sora.

What is this?

—*Seriously, what the hell...is this—?!*

“...Stop being lazy and explain it out loud... A sloth like you calls herself a god?”

Though he was talking smack, Sora couldn't hide his anxiety. Not just Sora, but all those who instantly grasped the rules imparted, without exception, looked at one another's expressions, racked by confusion and doubt, by panic—and at one another's *chests*. Yes, their chests, in front of each of which ten white cubes had, at some point, appeared.

It seemed that, just as the Old Deus had described, this was like...*a game of sugoroku*. With the spiraling land above their heads as the board, they would roll these dice to advance. Each time they rolled their dice, they would lose one, and the first to the goal would win. So it went.

But then—

—*The hell? Isn't this—*

—*one of those games where the players kill each other—?!*

“...Words, essentially, are a form of creation.”

But whether or not she knew—or cared—what Sora was thinking, the floating girl answered Sora's bravado with the same implacable, cold gaze, her eyes disinterested and mechanical, as if looking down at a pebble rolled at her feet. But she went on:

“Know that the words of a god are beyond the base likes of yourselves.”

Her stare fixed certainly on Sora and Shiro, as if to look through them, to something—someone—beyond.

“—?”

Flickering in those eyes for an instant, Sora...recognized something. A recollection unbecoming a transcendent race—unbetting the Old Deus, and yet

—
“Know, too, the weight of thy own words, and if thou hast the wit...”

—it vanished in a moment. The girl pointed the brush in her hand at the heavens:

“...I shall wait at the end. Vainly spend thy mortal life and crawl—up to me.”

Upon finishing this pronouncement, the girl vanished with the corpse of the Shrine Maiden. Like a dream, as if she’d never existed...just like that...leaving Sora and the rest of the seven with just seven doors, and—

—silence. Confusion, suspicion, perhaps rancor, unrest...all of these coalesced where the players were left. Between questioning glances this way and that, Sora bit his nails and interrogated himself once more.

What is this...?!

“.....Brother.”

Shiro called from behind him, but Sora had no space to answer. Dripping with sweat, he examined the rules over and over and over... Certainly, they included a lot of points that seemed strange, but *this whole scenario was what was strange—!*

“...Brother... Hey...Brother, I’m calling you...”

This game made it *theoretically impossible to reach the goal* without taking others’ pieces. If each person could write on 50 spaces, then there were 350 spaces in total plus the goal. But if you lost dice every time you rolled, even if you just rolled sixes, you could advance only 324 spaces. In fact, they were in a prisoner’s dilemma. The only way out was to take dice from each other. No, they couldn’t reach the goal without taking a *tenth of their lives* from each other.

Which meant *this whole thing* was—!

“.....Brother, if you keep, ignoring me...if you don’t, answer...then—”

This was supposed to be a game against the Old Deus, so why? How did the Old Deus get to be the game master while the *players ended up killing one another—?*

“...The panties...are going down...and the skirt’s, going up...”

“WWWUUUT?! HEY OKAY HERE I AM YOUR BROTHER I’M ANSWERING!!”

Responding to an emergency that took precedence over all manner of crises (namely, *protecting his sister’s maidenhood*), Sora shut down all other thought processes and turned with enough force to create a shock wave—

“—————Huh?”

—only to discover Shiro had pulled down *Steph’s* panties. As Steph’s skirt fell under the influence of gravity—in that miraculous, intervening instant—Sora, without a moment’s hesitation, pressed the X button in his brain.

Visual data saved to memory ftw.

“Wh—whhhaaaaaa...?! Wh-wh—wh—where in heaven’s name did that come from?”

Ignoring Steph, who wailed a moment too late and hurriedly attempted to hold down her skirt and right her underclothes, the sister who had granted Sora a momentary glimpse of the Peach Blossom Spring informed him matter-of-factly:

“...I didn’t say...mine...”

“...Ohhh, that’s right. You really pulled one over on your brother. Ah-ha-ha, youuu little...!”

Forgetting everything else in his elation, Sora bathed in needlelike looks from all directions, but even so...

Mashing the Remember command in his brain, the young man put the vision of the Peach Blossom Spring on loop, apparently too absorbed in his unprecedented deep contemplation to notice his companions’ disdain.

“Steph... I see you have at last given up concealing your exhibitionistic tendencies? Worry not. It bothers me not in the slightest!”

“Huhhhh?! Sh-she just snuck up on me and pulled them down!”

“There is no need to conceal your heart! The Ten Covenants provide that if

you do not allow and consent to such actions, at least unconsciously, your panties can never be plundered... Therefore, we can conclude that *this was your wi—*”

As Sora spoke Buddha-like, giving bloom to countless lotus flowers and ultimately starting to make seals with his hands—



—*whup*, he stopped.

...*Wait*.

—*Wait-wait-wait-wait!! ...Wait a second*.

“.....Why are you here, Steph?”

“You do this to me and then ask ‘Why are you here’? It’s safe to call this abuse by now, isn’t it?!”

Ignoring this teary accusation, Sora assessed each pair of eyes on him in order. Shiro, Jibril, Izuna, Ino—and Plum.....

—.

“...Brother, calm yet...?”

“...Uhh...Shiro. Could it be that your brother—was slow on the uptake?”

Sora denigrated himself with a smirk, which Shiro met with a confident smile. To Sora, worried he’d fallen behind in his role of sussing out the game, Shiro said:

“...I don’t know...what’s going on...either...but...”

Her brother had no reason to doubt his gifts.

“...if you’re just...like always...we’ll be...fine...”

Feeling Shiro’s hand gripping his as she spoke, Sora reflected earnestly.

He knew he was dumb. In fact, he prided himself on it. He possessed a certain pomp and dignity in his unrivaled tomfoolery. Considering this, even taking the situation into account—why the hell was he getting all worked up—?

Why so serious?

Grinning at the circumstances he’d finally digested, Sora turned back to Steph.

“Uh... I guess I shouldn’t even ask, but do you understand the rul—?”

“No, I most certainly do not! My mistake!”

Still leery, Steph held down her skirt as she snapped. There was that old,

reliable worthlessness, but now finding that comforting, Sora continued with a smile.

“Basically, it’s *sugoroku*. We roll dice to advance up there, toward the goal.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“And here, the dice. When you roll them, you lose one.”

“Yes, yes.”

Sora grasped one of the white cubes floating near his chest...one of the blank dice. Presumably, when rolled, the pips would appear randomly.

“So these dice? They’re your *age*—in other words, your life.”

“————Come again?”

Though Steph froze, Sora went on with his *usual* frivolousness.

“When they run out, you die. Rest in peace, ascend to the heavens, leave this world, pass to the great beyond—yeah. You good so far?”

“...Uh, pardon? I do not find any part of this ‘good’! What, we could die?!”

The rules spoke of their “time of substance.” To be precise, they’d presumably vanish. So to sum up, this was a game in which they staked their life spans, but that would be problematic with players without such limitations, like Jibril. Structured this way, though, if their “time of substance”—that is, their age—hit zero, the results were predictable.

“And it’s *impossible* to reach the finish with just ten dice, so you have to collect more.”

There were 351 spaces to the goal. But the farthest they could go with what they had was 324. It wasn’t enough.

“So you use the Tasks to take each other’s dice. Got it now?”

Effectively, this game was about...

“You have to steal your opponents’ lives—*indirectly kill one another to win.*”

In response to Sora’s summary, everyone’s darting, questioning eyes sharpened. This was a game against the Old Deus—*and yet*. The only way to win

was to whack the other players...

“That’s...not funny! How could we ever accept that?!”

“*Right?* Nobody wants to diiie. I don’t wanna diiie. So—*here’s what we’ll do.*”

Despite Steph’s outburst now that she’d finally digested things, Sora kept smiling.

“We’ll all turn in our Tasks blank, and one person’s gonna get nine dice each from everyone else.”

There was no rule prohibiting the transfer of dice. Which meant—

“Then we’ll have one bearer with sixty-four dice, and *wha-bam!* That allows up to three hundred and eighty-four in a single roll. We might even make it in one move! No one will run out, and no one will diiie... You can fall in love with me, you know!”

“—F-for the first time, I’m seriously almost ready to really fall in love with you...”

Though Steph, in pitiful shortsightedness, evidenced sincere emotion...

“H-however, Master...if we do not identify the ‘traitor,’ is that not...?”

Indeed, surely her master could not have overlooked this. The point Jibril hesitantly raised was surely the *root of this paranoia that had been afflicting them all.*

00b: —Among the die-bearers is one traitor whose memory hath not been collected.

The game had commenced under the express condition of erasure of the players’ memories. This could only mean that there was *something* only the traitor knew. And, insofar as *no one was volunteering* said information...the intent was clear: a trick to deceive everyone and make off with the victory—a literal betrayal. Who should be given all the dice? —No, that wasn’t even it. From the jump, how could they have agreed to use the Shrine Maiden’s life as their buy-in? Whatever it was the traitor who’d hooked them into this situation remembered *quite likely had bearing even on the conditions for victory...!*

Sora, too, had slipped off on this wild tangent briefly, but—

“Uh, about that. It’s kinda irrelevant.”

Sora’s cheery dismissal was met with wary frowns not just from Jibril but also from Ino, Izuna, Plum—yes, even Shiro—yet Sora chuckled nonetheless.

All right, so there’s a traitor. It’s that tired scenario where if only people would work together they could win, but they won’t, huh? They all get paranoid, trying to dig up who the traitor is, destroying their connections to one another—and everything goes to hell. Is she waiting for us to play into her hackneyed theory, the way that “game of liars” gets all heavy? If so, Sora really hated to break this to her. Back in gear, the young man sneered. That was the last thing that was going to happen here. Given the group they’d collected, that theory—would fall before anything else. Not to mention, Sora had lived this entire life this way, so he scoffed. *Screw your premise. Who’s the traitor?*

Who really gives a shit?

“To hell with it. Let’s just say—I’m the traitor!”

With a very chipper grin, Sora roughly upended it all.

.....

.....A silence deeper than the ocean. A stupefied, wary, doubtful silence that Sora interpreted as dissatisfaction.

“Wha—? Out of everybody we’ve got here, and you think I *wouldn’t betray you*?! A-all right, I’ll prove it...”

Gimme a second while I think of something. The brazenly self-professed traitor hurriedly cooked up some bullshit.

“Okay, when we’re talking about a traitor, we’re talking about somebody who played everybody else to come out on top, right?”

He took a breath and went down the line of them, pointing at each in turn.

“Then, first, Izuna’s clean. There’s no way she could ever beat Shiro and me at deception and chicanery.”

Boink. Izuna’s ears twitched as her eyes grew rounder.

“And Gramps is clean ’cause it’s not like he has the balls to put the Shrine Maiden’s life on the line to get ahead of us.”

Crk. Ino’s glasses cracked as the blood vessels in his face bulged.

“And Plum is clean ’cause he’s not gonna take that kinda risk after we already pwned the shit out of him.”

Fff. Plum’s eyes narrowed sharply as his mouth twisted into a thin line.

“And Jibril’s clean ’cause Shiro and me would just have to tell her ‘Fess up,’ and she would. Plus, it’s not like she would even *thiiiink* of presuming to get ahead of me, her dear, dear, master, righhht?”

Hhh. Jibril’s eyes widened and then warped into a leer.

“And you—out of the question, out of the picture, not even worth considering! QED!!”

“Hello?! Wasn’t your treatment of me uniquely dismissive?!”

“And lastly, Shiro and I are two in one. How ’bout that? Convinced yet?”

“.....Oh...”

As if realizing what he was doing, Shiro, too, dropped a faint smile. Yes...this was a game. There were countless things of which they could be sure with no regard whatsoever to the presence or absence of memory. For instance: Sora, virgin, eighteen. He, of all people—*would never play a game straight*. In this world where everything was determined by games, this world Tet had gone on and on about with splashy effects, claiming it was the utopia they’d dreamed of... These two were much better suited to all the heavy shit that came with a game for liars. Yes, this was the time to say it—

What’s wrong with being a pussy sniper?

“So with that! We have resolved the contradiction of players killing each other in a game where the Old Deus is supposed to be our opponent! We have proven that this is a cooperative game—one we can win if we trust each other! So rest easy as you turn in your Tasks blank and surrender your dice to little old me— Oh, let me put that more politely.”

Leaving off with his wild gesticulations and adopting a smile that would

beguile a god, he asked in a dulcet tone:

“Help me win. Gimme all your dice, bitches—as a token of trust. ♥”

On the heels of Sora’s request, each of the players repaired to their individual rooms beyond the doors to fill in their Tasks. And when they returned, Sora smiled breezily. This game was so simple. Who cared who the traitor was?

With this team of all teams, he knew.

He could be sure in his heart of hearts that they’d all betray him, right?

CHAPTER 1

CLOSED CIRCLE

INVERTED FORM

It had been almost seven hours since the start of the game with the Old Deus, and now Sora was running through an alley shrouded in night.

There were no stars in the sky above, framed into a square by the surrounding concrete. The hard asphalt was struck by the pitter-patter of a light rain and the pounding of his feet. In his hand was a gun, and his eyes reflected an approaching shadow—his enemy, alone.

—*Tsssk!*

He clicked his tongue. He leveled his sight with the enemy and, his thoughts mechanical, pulled the trigger. The hammer struck the cap, sparking a detonation within the cartridge's shell. His hands shook from the impact. The once-solid supersonic gas forced out and accelerated the contents of the barrel, and the lead from the muzzle ripped through the air. In the span of less than a millisecond, lead and light were transformed into a lethal weapon that flashed through the pitch-black night. Revealed in that ensuing flash was a shadow—the body of a small Werebeast struck down by gunfire.

Yes, the *body*... He wouldn't aim for the head. In a murky game like this, he couldn't trust the power of what appeared to be a handgun. No, even the handguns Sora knew from his old world carried the risk that, if the entry angle wasn't just so, the bullet would glance off the skull, the hardest bone in the human body. And here his enemy wasn't even human, but a Werebeast or some even greater monster. He'd aimed for the triangle formed by the chin and the chest. The bullet would incapacitate the target wherever it may strike, and if it landed true, he could hope for a fatal hit to the internal organs. Launched with such cold and calculated murderous intent, the surging bullet tore into the

small Werebeast, sending it skidding down the street with fearsome speed before finally rendering it a corpse.

He'd killed it. Yes, killed it.

This game truly is simple, Sora laughed darkly to himself.

It didn't matter if he didn't know who the traitor was. He could just rule out the one person it wasn't—his sister—and kill everyone else. Eliminating all those suspected of betrayal was the all-too-simple answer that formed this game's plot.

Yes, it's simple, Sora chuckled under his cover. Simple, yet easily beyond the "Very Hard" level, a game played on "Inferno" mode. After all, his enemies were all monsters, far beyond his ability to contend with. Even so, he couldn't lose. This determination had kept him alive this far. Sora circled his gaze about warily as he assessed the situation.

The game map, like that of the Eastern Union, resembled Tokyo—yet somehow it was different: gaps in height between buildings, complex alleyways, objects here and there. He'd exploited the countless advantages to put down a large Werebeast, a vampire, and a small Werebeast through sneak attacks. Feign alliance, then shoot them in the back. Deceive and lure them to you, then shoot them down. Though Shiro had called him cheap any number of times, he had exploited any means to stay alive this far.

And yet, that *would-be angel*, that *loathsome monster*. He felt utterly powerless against her alone. With a sigh, he hushed his breath in the alleyway and listened carefully to the situation around him. He could hear the footsteps of several people approaching from afar, slowly encircling him.

If I can at least rendezvous with my sister... No, I suppose I can't even expect that now.

A hopeless line, but in times like these, such a line set a flag for the game's ending. As Sora sat thinking, half in resignation, half in hope, his ears picked up footsteps creeping into the alley.

He reacted with his gun faster than he could even think. His aim involuntarily swayed toward a redheaded girl. There was something strange about her.

Something—no, it was hard to find anything *not* strange about her by now. But regardless of Sora's mixed opinions, his words came out clearly.

"Hey, how'd you end up in this siege...? No, that can wait. Did you bring my little sister? Did you find any—?"

"I did...I found a way."

No sound followed. Only an impact. A moment later, he understood; a bullet had sailed *past* the redhead and penetrated his stomach.

"It's what I should have done from the beginning...isn't it, dear traitor?"

"No... That was just a bluff—!"

His body refused to move as his clouding vision captured the source of the phantom bullet that had pierced him.

He gasped. The blush of the muzzle red-hot from the blast illuminated the shooter among the smoke. A white-haired girl...the one who had gone to find a way out of this hopeless game they were in. Standing beside the redhead was his little sister.

She disregarded the frozen Sora's slack-jawed stupor:

"Look at yourself. If you're not the traitor, going around killing everyone like that, who is?!"

"No," was his reponse to her enraged screaming. Or it was about to be, but instead, a glob of blood spilled out from his mouth and dripped onto the ground.

"It's...just, back then...it was the only way I could protect you, protect my sis —"

At that moment, Sora came to a realization, almost like a divine revelation. He'd accounted for the possibility that the redhead would betray him. But if his sister—the one person who would never betray him—had turned on him, that meant...

"It was...you... You were the traitor—you were a fake...all along...!!"

Yes, that *thing* was sneering back at her dying brother.

*“You got my sister’s looks, her face... Don’t gimme that goddammn loooooook
——!!”*

The redhead gasped at his wailing, but it was too late. The flash lit the alley again, mercilessly. Twice, three times. His vision, half blotted out already, caught the silhouette of the redhead as she fell to the ground.

“...It can’t be... You were the one person...who I—

—believed in.” Her lips stopped. Her dulled eyes never to regain light. The white-haired girl—the *thing* in the form of his sister—slowly approached him. At the sound of her shoes hitting the cold, hard asphalt, as death was closing in, Sora finally concluded:

—Oh. This game is a piece of crap.

Didn’t see that coming, I’ll give you that. But how the hell was I supposed to, you bucket of failsauce? Just when the hell was it foreshadowed that she was a fake? And where the hell did that line come from—“You were the one person that I believed in”? Say that shit earlier. You can’t call it foreshadowing if it happens the same damn time as the thing it’s supposed to foreshadow!

“I wonder...where I went wrong... What was the point of all I’ve...?”

The main character pushed forward with his douchebaggery even after the game had been confirmed fail, and Sora could only resentfully concur.

Yeah, just what *was* the point of all that effort? He’d only put up with this insanely difficult game for “his sister’s” sake. But if that one reason was an illusion, then why had he struggled? Why had he toiled? The plots, the tactics, the strategies he’d built up... What the hell were they for—?!

“...Bye-bye, Brother...”

Just one shot. The impact went through, but the end dragged on and on. It was that white-haired girl’s voice echoing through the darkness, robotic and cold:

“...Brother...how does it feel...to die, a virgin?”

.....

—Haaang on a sec.

No, seriously, hold up!

“Hey, Shiro, that can’t seriously be what she says! You’re just messing with me ’cause I don’t speak Werebeast, right? Don’t do that. How are you gonna take responsibility if I cry?!”

And with that, the raven-haired young man lost consciousness. Staring at the screen, controller in hand, Sora shouted uncontrollably, tears in his eyes.



Now, by this point, I suppose it should go without saying, but the personages on the screen were not Sora and Shiro, and certainly not Steph. And of course, this affair had nothing to do with the game of the Old Deus—of *sugoroku*.

It was after Sora, right at the start, had boldly declared himself the traitor and demanded everyone’s dice. Everyone had filled out their Tasks and emerged from the doors, and naturally—no, extremely naturally—told him, *You asked for it*. After expressing their feelings, each rolled their own dice and went off on their own. In a similarly natural fashion, Sora and company rolled, aiming for sixty-two spaces. But they advanced only *one*, whereupon they stepped on space two, looked up to the sky, and then turned to the nearest house before deciding:

—Oh. This game is impossible.

Nodding to each other, they cast all memory of everything blissfully aside and shut themselves into the house to dedicate themselves to games.

...With this first taste of defeat, the life of “ ” came to a close. Please look forward to Sora and Shiro’s next life.



The two had put the period at the end of their lives and entered the afterword. The siblings' dice had decreased to eight on the first move, consequently decreasing their respective ages by 20 percent and shrinking their limbs accordingly. Yet the memory of the game with the Old Deus had already receded beyond oblivion, much like their previous lives. They found an Eastern Union game console in the house where they holed up.

Were there games there? Yes.

Any reason not to play them? No.

After zero seconds of contemplation, the two silently turned on the console and turned their backs on reality with abandon. Sora, unable to understand the Werebeast tongue and now approximately 14.4 years of age, turned on the captions. Resting on Sora's crossed legs, Shiro, now approximately 8.8 years of age, messed with the tablet and voiced the captions out loud. His sister creatively interpreted the lines for all the characters with a remarkable range of theatrical expression. *Why doesn't she talk that clearly normally?* Sora kept wondering throughout the two hours or so before he finally chucked away the controller, grabbed the package, and moaned.

"I was all excited to see the Eastern Union had zombie games, too...but this one sucks ass."

Apparently, the title was *Living or Dead 3: The Price of Silence*. At least, according to Shiro. It was supposedly the sequel to the spin-off *Love or Loved*, that game they'd played with Izuna. They were hoping for some kind of crack like that, but instead, this is what they got. The setting was a big Elven experiment in resurrection magic, and, well, you know how that shit went down. The spell went out of control, the dead rose, it spread all over the world, blah, blah, blah. And the living dead disguised themselves among the living, and, yeah, this story was all kinds of bad. That was fine. Kitsch? Good stuff, but...

"How'd they decide to put in a musclehead Werebeast zombie with wings? Are they nuts?"

He recalled that none of the attacks did anything to that *would-be angel*, that *loathsome monster*. Yes, a loathsome monster. After all, he was half-naked—

no, pretty much naked. A loincloth and nothing else. This was just the tip of the iceberg of this wannabe-Western difficult-as-shit game and its crappy story, but that he could take. His sole conscience! The “little sister character”! The Loli-type girl with the adorable animal ears!

...And look where that got him. Then Sora remembered the main character’s line:

“Where did I go wrong? It was the brains of this game’s devs that went wrong —!!”

He hurled away the package, collapsed on the tatami, and howled. He’d gone through one thing after another for the little sister only to find she was a fake. And on top of that, she eyed him like a piece of trash as she killed—

.....Hey?

“Hmm... Well, whatever. Yeah. When I think about it, I can consider it a reward.”

“...Brother, where are you taking this...twisting it, even...further...?”

Seeing his real-life sister eyeing him like a piece of trash, he cleared his throat.

“...Mmm! ...W-well, I guess the problem’s with the setting...”

Still sprawled with his arms and legs out, he looked to the screen. There, the main character was showing off his plot armor. No matter how many death flags he set off, he had the ability to turn them all to life flags. True to trope, instead of dying, he instead woke up somewhere else. But Sora had already lost interest in what might happen next. He slumped over and looked at the ceiling. As he emptied his dazed head, he once again remembered that line:

“I wonder...where I went wrong...”

“...Killing all suspect...I wonder why he thought *this one bitch would never betray him...*”

According to conventional theory, everyone should think the same way.

“Betray and be betrayed. It’s practically destiny...”

Yes, just like they were so quick to betray me after filling in their Tasks. Sora

muttered while clicking his tongue. But at the same time, he thought about that game's conditions.

“Hey, Shiro, I wonder where I went wrong...”

“If you really mean it, I can answer *if you waaant?!?*”

Steph's answer came in the form of a rumble and a yell, and—

“After *betraying me while rendering me powerless to betray you!* And forcing me to come with you and do eeeverything for you, your question is ‘Why am I holing myself up?’ *Am I righhht?!?*”

A red-haired girl smashed through the sliding door into the room with a cart. Like Sora and Shiro, she had eight dice in front of her chest and had been reduced in age to 14.4.

Breathing heavily between outbursts was Stephanie Dola.

“Observe! I have brought the lever you requisitioned!”

“.....Uh...mm?”

“—What was that about again?”

“I believe you said I *couldn't get you to move without a leverrrr!*”

Regarding Sora's and Shiro's blank expressions, Steph tore at her hair and howled.

“So all I have to do is pull you like a horse—yes, literally like a horse!”

With that, Steph shoved the cart into the room, toward Sora and Shiro. Like a hydraulic shovel, she scooped up the surprised pair and deposited them in the cart in a literal demonstration of the lever principle. In a scene that would have been well accompanied by a dirge like “Donna Donna,” Steph mercilessly hauled the shut-ins out of the room...



On the second space, Sora lay on the cart pulled by Steph, his arms and legs spread wide and his body a bed for his tablet-prodding sister. He gazed vacantly at the game he had written off as impossible only two hours earlier while Steph berated him.

“So! Are you going to give me a convincing explanation yet?!”

“...Of what? What? You couldn’t mean...why I labeled myself the traitor? That was—”

“Yes, yes, it was to play me for a fool, wasn’t it? *I can see that much!*”

Steph shrieked as Sora denied the reality staring him in the face.

“Even I can see through pretense that thick... I can’t believe you would think I can’t!!”

Indeed, there hadn’t been a speck of truth in Sora’s declaration of betrayal. It was 100-percent pure, not-from-concentrate bullshit. You didn’t have to be a Werebeast to see through that ruse; even Steph could. But, for that very reason, Steph found herself at a loss.

“I cannot fathom what you truly intend...but...I know you won’t let us die or kill each other. I trust you.”

With these awkward words, she handed Sora nine of her own dice.

Blanching, shaking, she surrendered the time she’d existed—her life. How frightening to see your life span shrink... But if, in any case, this was a game in which one’s life and number of dice would decrease each time one advanced, would it be better to take them by force or kill each other indirectly? Weighing the balance, quaking in fear, Steph swallowed pathetically before resigning herself:

“Everyone looked askance at me as I bravely handed you my dice! And savagely declared *they would betray us!*”

“It’s on now, please!” Izuna had said cutely.

“To challenge you is an honor I hardly deserve,” Jibril had cooed reverently.

“You’ll regret having given me a chance, you knowww?” Plum had threatened ominously.

—And: *“Die”* had been Ino’s flat response with no further decoration.

“I just stared after them as they rolled their dice without so much as a second thought and went on ahead—all while you...!!”

All while Sora, accepting her dice and by extension nine-tenths of her life, watched Steph regress to the equivalent of the single die she had remaining: 1.8 years old. Conversely, having gained nine dice's worth of time, Sora had become 34.2 years old. He'd smiled—a smile so nice it was creepy—and looked down at Steph:

"Hmm, gaining or losing dice only affects your body, but having more than ten dice increases your age, huh?"

"... 'Kay, Brother...now, that we've...checked...it's all...cool."

"Yeah. A'ight—now then, we're gonna have you come with us."

"...If you don't, want to...you don't, have to...that is..."

"If you'd rather sit here alone with just one die—"

"...And wait, for everyone...to die...it's up, to you! ♥"

"Oh yeah. And if no one gets there, everyone but the leader dies. Cheers! ♥"

"So how do you think I feel being *experimented on* and *threatened* by you? In five words!"

Sora rubbed his chin as Steph howled at him... *Hmm*. Five words? That was quite the challenge.

"... 'I can't take this anymore'...probably."

"Whoaa, Shiro! Exactly five words!! No wonder you're a crossword master!!"

*"You got it *just right*! ♥ —Ahhhhh, I'm going to explooode!"*

Steph rattled the cart at the immediacy of Sora's answer, creating a racket.

"Gahhhh, wait, wait! I mean, think about it: What do you think we're gonna say there except bullshit?!"

"Yes, yes, now that I think about it, it's quite natural, isn't it—?!"

Steph took a breath, then shouted self-deprecatingly:

"After all, even if you collect all the dice, you can't travel separately from Shiro, can you, Sora?! There's only one person who would be dumb enough to take such bait! No, no—no one except meeeeeeee!!"

Yes. There had been two rules Sora and Shiro never touched on:

04: TRAVEL IN COMPANY must first be declared, whereupon the company may advance according to the roll of one representative.

05: A company of more than two shall, of the dice used, lose a number of dice equal to the NUMBER OF MEMBERS OF THE COMPANY MULTIPLIED BY THE NUMBER OF FOLLOWERS IN IT.

They *had* to use these “company” rules to advance. And if you held more than ten dice, you would get older. If Sora collected everyone’s dice, giving him sixty-four, he’d be 115.2: dead by ordinary reckoning. Thus, Sora had stripped nine dice from Steph, added nine dice from Shiro, and, following the rules, declared travel in company and rolled twenty-eight dice—two dice per person, a total of six lost.

“...Look, get over it already... I gave you back your dice, didn’t I?”

Sora redistributed them so that the three each had eight dice, but...

“Why did you make everyone betray each other?! I’ll keep up this caterwauling until you tell me!”

Sora’s objectives had, in fact, been consistent—to win over Steph...

...and, indeed, to encourage universal betrayal. Steph went on screaming to know why Sora had instigated the very event he had purported to avoid: mutual slaughter. Rather than answer, Sora simply did *this*—

“Hunh?! Wh-what...is it?”

He placed his hands on Steph’s cheeks and turned her face to look into his eyes. Gazing earnestly into her unconsciously blushing face, no longer full of rage, he said:

“Believe in me. With the power of love and courage and friendship—we can all win.”

—.

“...You await a punch line, yes? Why not reflect on your past?”

When asked why he'd lied about being the traitor, Sora had answered, "Believe in me." Steph's icy response mired him in a dilemma.

"Wh...wherefore believest thou not?! How could you doubt my pure, pure, so very pure heart?!"

"While you're at it, why don't you reflect on the present?! Especially the part where you are using me as a horse!!"

Steph's skepticism finally got to him, and Sora crumpled to the ground theatrically. He'd held her face in his hands and spoken earnestly... Sure, that sounded good, but what he'd actually been doing was forcing her to look backward as she pulled the cart.

As for what was supposed to inspire any faith in this situation—

"Yes. That's *it*. You got it."

—Sora spread his arms wide and boasted.

"Everyone agreed to a game where we can all win if everyone trusts each other and works together, *even though I'm playing*?! Everyone agreed to a game where the Shrine Maiden's life is on the line, trusting in love and friendship and so on? Despite the fact that only the one who makes it first wins and knowing full well someone's gonna ensure Blank wins—*because I'm here*?! Hmmm?!"

He emphasized his point twice: *You think everyone's gonna trust me*? From the very beginning, this game was predicated on distrusting him. When Steph realized how impossible it would be for them not to betray each other, she looked skyward and grumbled.

"What shall I do...? Your argument is unassailable..."

This game with so many strange points and seemingly complicated rules was, in fact, simple. Per the fifth of the Ten Covenants, "The party challenged shall have the right to determine the game." Since they didn't remember what happened before the game, they also didn't know whether the party challenged was the Old Deus or Sora's crew. But either way, the game required "unanimous consent" in order to begin. Had they all consented to a cooperative game in which the buy-in would be the Shrine Maiden's life and the loss of their

memories?

How could this condition stand?

“If the conditions don’t stand, then it’s simple, see—?”

Rolling once more onto his back on the cart, Sora laughed and placed Shiro atop his chest. If the rules were based on “improbable conditions,” then—

“That means *the rules themselves are a fraud.*”

“...Something was explained...the *first time*, but not...the *second.*”

“...The...second...?”

“We swore by the Covenants to start this game. We must have learned the rules before we started, but our memory’s been erased—so there are the rules that only the traitor remembers, and there are the rules she told us. But they *don’t match.*”

Sora’s answer was lighthearted. It wasn’t until *after* the game began and their previous memories were erased that they’d been told the rules. To top it off, the only one whose memory hadn’t been erased was declared the “traitor.” How could you not suspect something?

“But you know, frankly—who cares about all that?”

It didn’t matter who the traitor was. No, to be precise, they’d started this game under a mutual agreement—and now Sora and the others were wearing backpacks. Regardless of whether or not they had their memories, these facts said everything. Sora grinned. Rather than the impossibly asinine assumption that everyone would work together... Wasn’t *this* the more likely scenario?

“Everyone started the game *assuming we’d betray one another*, and so...”

If they were to agree on something, wouldn’t *this* have been it?

“...everyone filled in their own script where they would win! 🎵”

Sora grinned and grandly, loudly, nobly proclaimed:

“Therefore! With purity, propriety, and beauty! Overflowing with sincerity! Your humble servant, I, Sora, virgin, eighteen—with eight dice and aged fourteen point four years—had the privilege of pledging on behalf of the party!”

He stood up, waved his arms about in grand, theatrical gestures, and beamed.

“Just say ‘We hereby pledge, in the best of faith, according to the rules, to betray each other.’ Okay?”

Above all else, they were certain to betray one another. Sora had trolled them by way of a reminder.

Steph stopped pulling the cart, turned, and shouted:

“That I cannot accept... All it means is killing... I do not consent!!”

“*Right?* That’s how we know there’s something off in the rules.”

Sora sat back down on the cart, laughing, and answered sarcastically. Rules that none of them would agree to were necessarily false—which meant...

“We agreed to betray each other. In fact, it was our idea.”

...However.

“*We didn’t agree to kill each other.* That’s all there is to it.”

.....

The sounds of the cart rumbling across the plain echoed once more. At Steph’s silence, unable to argue but unconvinced, Sora chuckled to himself, *Yeah, that’s how it is.* It was only natural that a sensible person like Steph wouldn’t be swayed. After all, if you broke down Sora’s claims—

On her grandpappy’s name, he swore with fervent eyes:

“*I figured it all out—the culprit is us.*”

Indeed, mutual trust and cooperation would be futile with this group. But to jump from that all the way to *traitor* felt too much to Steph.

“See, we *have* to betray each other. It’s supposed to be some sort of prisoner’s dilemma.”

Having resumed her burden with the cart, Steph craned her neck to face the self-satisfied and sarcastic Sora.

“...Prisoner’s...dilemma?”

If the party worked together, someone would win, and everyone’s lives *might*

be saved.

But one who betrayed the rest could win alone.

Meaning if everyone approached the game that way, it was all the more likely that everyone would lose...

“It’s a famous scenario in our old world... Put simply...”

A detective offers Prisoners A and B a plea bargain under the following conditions.

I. If they both keep silent, both serve two years.

II. If one confesses, he will go free while the other serves ten.

III. However, if they both confess, both serve five.

If the prisoners trust each other and keep silent, each achieves a better outcome: two years. But if they both pursue their own benefit, they will *invariably* serve five years. If one betrays the other, he goes free while the other serves ten. This means that the option to keep silent is effectively nonexistent. One must confess, betting on the possibility the other will keep silent. In doing so, one avoids the worst-case scenario of ten years, while allowing for the best-case scenario of freedom.

Hence why it’s called a dilemma.

On top of that, in this game, the Old Deus kindly informed them there was a traitor. In this kind of situation, it was like saying *But someone already confessed*. Trust one another when there had already been a betrayal before the game had even commenced made no sense.

“Then you mean we should betray each other? Is that not precisely what the detective wants?!”

Okay, so trusting each other was pointless, leaving them with no option but betrayal. But if that was the case, weren’t they playing right into the hands of the detective: the Old Deus?

It was quite unlike Steph to reach the crux of a problem. She looked uneasy. Sora smiled and corrected her:

“Nope. It’s just what we want. Because this scenario *isn’t a valid dilemma*.”

“.....Pardon?”

“If you trust each other to betray you, you can get an outcome even better than the better outcome: the best outcome!”

Sora’s and Shiro’s thin smiles contorted creepily, and they continued.

Fundamentally, this game, like *all* their games, revealed their approach in its entirety—the philosophy of Sora and Shiro, the greatest gamers among Immanity, “ ” (Blank). The fact that, past or future, whoever the opponent might be, the reality of the present was immutable. Specifically:

“No matter what game it is, we have already—”

“...won, before it began... That’s all there is...to it.”

Everything was encompassed within the schemes they had already finagled and woven together. Nothing—not even a god—could escape their web. The pair who spoke so boldly and arrogantly caught Steph’s shoulders shaking.

“.....Well, if we can see the game through to the end, that is... Heh-heh, huh...”

“.....I’m...done, toooo... I...wanna go, hooome...”

The next moment, the siblings watched Steph’s shoulders drop. Their keen, bold eyes had drifted to the reality they’d valiantly tried to avoid: the board stretching across the sky. Their gazes instantly clouded over, leaving voices overwhelmed by life in their wake as the pair collapsed in the cart.

“...U-umm. If you’re going to act tough, could you please carry it through to the end?”

Suddenly bereft of strength, Steph began panting, her eyes half-closed. Deep down, Sora concluded: Losing all their dice—their lives...there was *no way*. And failure by betrayal, by pilfering...there was *absolutely no way*.

“Betrayal and killing are, like, whatever... We’ve got something else to worry about.”

His eyes glazed over. Having dismissed everything so far as “whatever,” Sora

gave Steph no time to object as he continued with a grim expression on his face.

“...This is the real shit. Of all things, our most likely path to defeat would be —”

He gazed upon the vast, endless game board and named it.

“—*starvation.*”

—.

He was serious.

“...Ehhh...? Um...what do you mean?”

“Heh, heh-heh... I vaguely suspected, but have you really not noticed...?”

“...Ignorance, is bliss... Those are...deep words...”

Steph tilted her head in confusion, and Sora and Shiro smiled—albeit with eyes like dead fish.

“Yes, all passengers, would you, ah, kindly direct your attention to your leeeft?”

The only passengers were Sora and Shiro.

Steph looked where Sora gestured like a tour-bus guide. There she saw, on the “surface”—floating on the sea, the islands of the Eastern Union.

To the left. Not below or above. There was land to their left.

“Oh, and neeext, would you please take a look to your righhht? Now what might this be?”

It was the all-too-colossal *sugoroku* board created by the Old Deus. Spaces of land spiraling, floating without support, piercing the clouds and yet stretching farther into the heavens.

You may have seen this more than a few times in video games set in fantasy worlds. Masses of rock that float in the air, heedless of gravity, and a stage where you walk on them. Like the last dungeon in *F*9*, or *The La*oons*, or *The Kingdom of Zea**, or what have you. So you walk up one of those rocks and gradually tilt ninety degrees to a horizontal position. Common sense would

dictate you should fall. But some kind of uncommon sense applies here that says you don't. Here was a gathering of such ridiculous rocks going around picking fights with gravity and natural law, swollen so that each was the size of the city and labeled a "space." Hundreds of them spiraled upward beyond the atmosphere— The audacity to claim this was a *sugoroku* board... Have you pictured it now? Given the circumstances, it's inconceivable that one's spontaneous utterance would be *How pretty*, but, more appropriately:

".....What a, screwed up, massive, game board..."

Yes, it was screwed up. And it was massive.

"Yees, on a freakishly huge game board! And after walking for *five hours*, where might we be?!"

".....The second space, I suppose."

Yes, the second space—in other words, the second rock.

"*That's righhhht!* With these facts in mind—now!—the question you broke down the door of a house to pose (specifically, why we were holing ourselves up!) is about to get its long-awaited answer!"

Fffff. Sora drew in a long breath:

"It's too friggin' big! It's too goddamn faaaar! We walked five hours and crossed one space after rolling a *sixty-two*! How many days or months is it gonna taaaake?!"

...aaake, aaake...

...aaake...

In the game space derided as "too friggin' big," Sora's cries echoed fruitlessly...and just as fruitlessly faded away.

"It's the game...of an Old Deus... Shouldn't you...expect it...to be out of this world?"

Sora sneered at Steph's halting derision as she hauled the cart. *I see.*

"Hunh!! That's true. I have seen shitty devs like this who think just making the map meaninglessly big and cool means the game will be fun. This is what you

get when you replace skills with budget, right?!”

It was the same impression he'd always had seeing fantasy worlds where someone had gone to all the time and trouble of building cities in the air. Sure, he couldn't even imagine how much power would be required to achieve this, but... *Why! Of all things! Did you have to! Float land in the air?!* Picking fights with gravity for no reason seemed a perfect example of a waste of energy. Faced with this literal divine feat, Sora still insisted:

Virtual life's good enough.

“Then, after making this huge damn environment, they tell us it's a one-track railway—and with long load times to boot...! This is the worst fake open world shit I've ever seen...”

It wasn't even load-free.

It had been about two hours earlier, before Sora and Shiro had holed themselves up after deeming their game impossible. They had walked for five hours toward the space indicated by the pips on their dice: sixty-two. Finally, they'd traversed one space to stand at the border, the end of the earth. From there, they were transported to the next space in roughly the amount of time it took to cook Cup Noodles. Then, standing on the second space, Shiro had faintly mumbled:

“...Number of steps, to this point...twenty thousand, eight hundred and thirty-four...”

Even to Sora, who was not the math specialist, no further explanation was needed. Shiro's current height was 131 centimeters and her gait approximately 0.48 meters. From that, you could extrapolate the size of one space: approximately 10 kilometers! They were automatically transferred the several kilometers between spaces. Even if you discounted that last bit under the assumption you didn't need to cross it, this board twisting through the heavens was 350 spaces, meaning...

“...It's thirty-five hundred kilometers to the goal... And she told us, *Get there on foot, bitch. No fast travel.*”

Sora smiled a *Ya don't say?* at Steph, who was slow on the uptake. Perhaps

this is a clearer way of illustrating: It was the approximate distance to *cross the US* or to *walk the entire perimeter of Honshu, the main island of Japan*. Wait... Maybe a better analogy for a resident of this world would be:

“...It’s roughly the distance from the western edge of Elkia to the island of Kannagari—that clear it up?”

Sora’s clarification extinguished the light from Steph’s eyes. Conversant as she was in politics, diplomacy, and trade, she had to have known just how far that was. Even Elkia’s fastest high-seas sailing ships would require, on average, half a month. Not to mention the trio would be traveling off-road, outside, in direct sunlight, and, since their dice were dwindling, *as children*. Under these conditions, Steph had the audacity to ask why they’d holed themselves up. To put it bluntly, that was no different from asking a mole why he’d dug himself a hole.

“...In this game, if you get down to one die, *you can’t go any farther*. In other words, until everyone’s down to one or zero, *it’s not gonna end*.”

It was one of those games that could go on forever... You really had to be in it for the long haul. And the longer it dragged on, the more everyone but Jibril (who didn’t need food or sleep) would languish. Sora smiled, his mouth so dry you could practically hear it chapping, and admitted why he’d dismissed everything, cast it all aside, and hidden himself away.

“Walking that distance isn’t even possible, is it?! We’re only flesh and blood, you know?! We get hungry; we get tired! From a biological perspective—from any rational point of view—that distance would kill a person!!!”

In days of old, it’s said that humans from the southern tip of Africa crossed the majestic Eurasian continent. They traversed Indonesia aboard wooden vessels and even made it as far as America. But the fortitude of these primeval humans had long since been lost to their descendants. In particular, the heavensent children of civilization, the two shut-in gamers, hadn’t a drop of it left. Walking one space for ten kilometers had delivered them to death’s door; this was modernity. Reality. No matter how their victory might have been

assured before the start of the game, that presumed *they saw it through*, right? Factors independent of the game such as their lacking fitness or the passage of time would destroy them. This was, by Sora's reckoning, the most absurd (and therefore the most realistic and conceivable) form of defeat. He looked at Shiro, who faced despair anew, and Steph, who had only now been plunged into it. Smirking, he was reminded once more of the line from that one game's main character:

"I wonder where I went wrong?"

Steph would have answered that they'd gone wrong when *they'd holed themselves up*, but that wasn't it.

They were challenging a god.

They were in the midst of betrayal.

If they lost their dice, they'd lose their lives.

If they lost the game, they'd lose their lives.

You could rattle off any number of fearsome-sounding statements like these, but the fact remained:

If they starved, they'd die.

Faced with the all-too-real—and therefore *easily understood*—threat of this singular sentence, nothing else mattered. At *this*, Sora asked:

Where did I go so wrong as to agree to these rules?



They were still on the second space.

It'd been nine hours since the start of the game. All was quiet. For a long, long time, the silence was broken only by the chirping of birds and the rustling of trees. The sound of wheels rumbling along was no more. Even Steph had fallen to her knees, no longer pulling the cart. Sora, too, lay motionless in the fading twilight as he faced reality once more. Contrary to the soothing landscape, if one were to paint this scene, it would be titled *The End*. But a small voice that resisted being hung in a gallery arose from Sora's chest.

All we've been doing is wandering aimlessly.

Shiro, who until now had been fiddling constantly with the tablet, waiting for the battery to die, said:

“.....Brother...I’m done...calculating...”

She showed her brother the glistening screen, but her smile sparkled many times brighter.

The tiny shred of hope more radiant than a star showed her brother—

“**Wrrrahh, all righhht!!** Screw that Old Deus! Screw Tet! Hey, who was it who said, ‘You can always find God in your heart’? —Specifically, in *my* heart!!”

“Yaaagh! Wh-wh-wh-what are you—? Oww! Th-that hurrrts!”

Uttering a strange sound, Sora lifted his sister, the goddess, onto the cart, causing it to lurch forward and give Steph a hard whack to her face with its handle. But as the injury was guaranteed by the Ten Covenants to have been accidental, any objections from her were spectacularly ignored. Sora put Shiro on his shoulders and beamed as he turned the tablet toward Steph.

Even accidents deserve an apology, Steph thought, but she appeared to have given up on the two who lacked any common sense.

“...A map of the world? What are these...*red slashes*?”

“It’s a map of the board—a map of the land areas the Old Deus copied!”

Shiro had compared the first space they completed and their current position on the second space with the remaining visible spaces along the spiraling landmass. She had also calculated the board’s relative distances and intervals, assuming there to be 350 spaces with a total length of 3,500 kilometers. The result was a map of the board that she had *copied from the land* from *start* to *finish*.

“...Is...this really all that amazing?”

Sora, aghast at the poor commoner incapable of comprehending the work of the goddess, exclaimed:

“D00d, look harder—there are no mountains or channels or deserts!! And this is dairy farming land, see?!”

Yes. According to the map Shiro had worked out, this board went from the former continental domain of the Eastern Union—the center of the continent of Lucia—to the north-northeast. It grazed the Sanctuary, cut across Elven Gard territory, ultimately reaching the land of Elkia. None of the terrain would be physically impossible for them to traverse with the equipment they possessed. What's more, their current location was dairy-farming land in Elkia's southeastern domain, formerly the Eastern Union.

"Which means there's still a route where we make it—!!"

Past despair and ready to march on, Sora held Shiro and jumped off the cart. Sure, it was still a journey of 3,500 kilometers...

...and, sadly, hadn't a drop of that fortitude of the humans of old—but.

"Let us go, then, like civilized folk. By *having the walking done for us!!*"

"You mean by *me*. You mean by me, don't you?!"

"Listen up, Cart Horse! What I propose is we grab a means of transportation to pull the cart for us!"

"So you *do* mean me, don't you?! You just called me a cart horse, and you've already caught me!!"

Sora ignored Steph's ranting and turned to the cart's contents, namely...

"All right, Shiro. A horse or an ox—we'll swipe 'em."

"...Roger, that...!"

With a rope and a hoe in hand, a frightening grin arose on Sora's face.

"Y-you're stealing?! That's— W-wait, it's not even about right or wrong... The Ten Covenants—"

The voice of reason was, however, merely met with that same nonsensical grin.

"...Hey, why don't we look back on everything we've done so far?"



Breaking and entering. Unauthorized use of private property. And to top it off

—

“As for you, there’s the theft of that cart you stole and the property damage to that door you smashed, right?”

“—Hn, gh! ...H-huh?”

Sora smirked as Steph seemed to come to this realization.

Had this land been created by the Old Deus from nothing, there *shouldn’t have been houses*. But stripping them from the land would have been a flagrant breach of the Covenants beyond any mere violation of rights. The Covenants were absolute even for an Old Deus, meaning:

“The Old Deus just copied and pasted the land onto the map... Everything here is a copy of what’s on land. It’s no one’s property—so the Ten Covenants don’t apply.”

Therefore, there were no Ixseeds in this land other than the game’s participants—no persons to whom the Covenants applied.

Conversely, there were living things to which the Covenants did not apply: birds and trees, and cattle and horses on dairy farms. Everything on this board, apart from the players, was free to be used as they pleased!

“That being the case! First thing we’re gonna do is grab a means of transportation to draw this cart.”

...Which isn’t as easy as it sounds, Sora kept himself from saying.

“Oh, so you *weren’t* actually planning to have me pull you the whole way...”

“...Look, do ya think I’m the kinda guy who would make a human being pull a cart thirty-five hundred kilometers?”

“Until just now, I had no doubt of it. You have elevated my estimation of you slightly.”

“C’mon... If I did that, you’d totally wear out...!”

If he made such an error—

“Then who’d pull the cart?! Think about it, man!!”

“How right you are! ❤️ I had best adhere to my prior estimation. 🎵”

In this world Tet called a utopia, where all was decided by games, it was by no means the desire of these two shut-in losers to agree to physical labor.

But if they had to in order to win at a game, then they had to, Sora was saying. Had the siblings demonstrated such flexible thinking in their old world, they wouldn’t have had to be shut-ins at all.

...Glancing at the sea to the left, beyond the game, Sora mumbled:

“Come to think of it, when are Chlammy and Fiel gonna get in the game?”

“Pardon? This is a game started by the Covenants, isn’t it? No one can intrude in the—”

“They’d better. Plus, *crashing* a game is a classic, right?”

Despite Steph’s skeptical query, Sora just smirked meaningfully.

“—Okay, which farm animal is about to become a noble sacrifice for the glory of Immanity?”

“...Brother...I like, horsies...but I like, moo-moo cows, even more...”

Snapping the rope, Sora and Shiro searched for something excluded from the Ten Covenants: some poor creature stripped of the right to live in order to become fodder for the Ixseeds.

“...Shiro, Shirooo... Will you please wipe your saliva...?”

Steph now regarded the two predators as if they had transformed into a pair of devils, but they ignored her. They’d work their prey hard to carry them, and when it starved, they’d devour it—!! That was why they’d specified horses and cattle. In this game, the first, absolute condition was survival... It was time to show the filthiness of human living...!



Large flowers blossomed across the open ocean. These massive blooms that sojourned over the waves, spreading their petals to cover the surface of the sea, were *ships*. They were silent and had neither masts, nor oars, nor

propulsion devices, nor even flags to indicate their nation. The arresting spectacle of these ships as they traced paths of flowers along the water's surface vividly articulated their affiliation.

Elven Gard.

These were *floating blossoms* woven by Elf magic that drifted on scent rather than water: *vá-lu-plums*. They wafted over land and sea, giving bloom to other flowers while still drifting along. There existed not just one, but countless *vá-lu-plums*, all gracefully traversing the rocky seas without a sound from west to east. Brilliantly colored, in perfect formation, at uniform speed; a giant garden stretching tens of kilometers from front to rear. Leading the fleet was a red rose *vá-lu-plum* larger than all the rest, and on its bow stood a dark silhouette. Her black hair and black veil flapped by the salty wind as she glared keenly ahead, the shadowy girl...

".....*Ha-chew!*"

...sneezed adorably, over and over.

".....*Ha—ha-chew!* It's—it's so cold... It's so cold here, Fi!"

"Chlammy? Why don't you quit putting on a show and come inside? You'll catch a cold!"

The black-haired Immanity girl shivering with a runny nose: Chlammy Zell. The blonde Elven girl spreading her shawl and embracing the former: Fiel Nirvalen. Descending from the bow, the black-haired girl inquired:

"Nghh... A-also, Fi? About how much longer is it to be?"

"Hmm, at this raaate...why, we may have the better part of a month left."

"! ...It really shouldn't take even a day to cover this distance...!"

"These are relics we're riding, you knowww? Why, it takes as much time to gather them as it does to ride them."

I know that, said Chlammy. Had they been traveling not by sea but by air—Elf's preferred mode of transport—anywhere on the planet would be "in the neighborhood." In Elven Gard, *seafaring vessels* had long since become disused antiques. But now they had no choice but to crawl along on these relics.

Chlammy clicked her tongue.

It had already been months since she and Fiel had started operating independently of Sora and company. They'd spent that time working tirelessly to undermine Elven Gard, and this was the final settlement. At the greatest port of sea trade in Elven territory—the state of Tírnóg—everyone who built the structures of power, the influential merchants, the relevant enterprises, even the state governor... The pair had challenged the lot of them to games, seized upon their weaknesses, replaced them with new faces, and quietly encroached. They'd even secured majorities in the Upper and Lower Houses and the guilds in order to fly over the Senate's heads and move the state.

All for this moment.

When *those two* would challenge the Old Deus.

The women had pushed themselves pretty far on behalf of those siblings who transcended expectations. There were countless shaky bridges they'd *run across* in doing so, but—

“...If we don't make it, it will all go to waste—and then everything will—!”

“Miss the boat... Why, I'm aware, Chlammy...”

Fiel spoke soothingly as she held Chlammy, who had worked herself up and was chewing her nails.

That's right. This game *couldn't end* without them. Chlammy scowled up at the giant landmass floating across the sky—the Old Deus's game board—and bit her lip. They were leading a massive fleet to arrive below it at the Eastern Union, the center of the spiral—the epicenter of the game they *couldn't let end* without them.

“...Fi, can you see what those two are doing now?”

“Why, that I can. Of *course* I can! 🎵”

At Chlammy's words, Fiel's irises and the gem in her forehead lightly glowed. Her tone and smile were rather haughty, yet she spoke with a confidence that was as natural as could be.

For a hexcaster such as herself, nothing on this side of the event horizon

could be out of sight.

...But.

“Why, I’ve seen them, but *what* they’re doing, it’s a liiittle hard to say.”

“...What? What do you mean?”

“Wellll, they poked a horse with a stick—ah, and a wild dog found them—and they’re crying and running awayyy.”

.....

“——Just what on earth are those fools doing?”

Even Fiel could not see the answer to that bitter question.



The thirty-eighth space...forty-two hours since the start of the game. Sora, Shiro, and Steph rode a carriage rapidly over a damp plateau. According to Shiro’s map, this was a carbon copy of the land even farther east of Elkia’s eastern edge. It grazed the Elementary territory of the Spirit Forest, commonly known as the Sanctuary.

Now, Sora had no way of knowing about such distant grumbling. Yet as he sat on that violently swaying carriage, he wondered what in the world he was doing. Playing a game with an Old Deus? Surviving in the wild? Nay. One might say he was philosophizing on the topic...of “rights.”

The Ten Covenants.

They guaranteed rights and forbade any physical injury or plunder, otherwise known as “violations.” But to live in and of itself was to violate another’s rights.

...No one could live alone. Being able to live somehow meant inconveniencing others or being responsible for little microtransgressions, but not without any give-and-take. In doing so, at some point, one invariably reached a line that could not be surrendered. Confrontation between two irreconcilable perspectives was unavoidable... This contradiction was what *the Covenants evaded*; it demanded people confront each other not by war but by games. But that did not resolve the fundamental contradiction inherent in life: that one must kill, infringe on another’s life, to stay alive. That was why *the Covenants*

determined that the guarantee of rights should apply only to the Ixseeds. Anything other than the Ixseeds could be killed or consumed, thus resolving that one basic contradiction. Yes, what glorious Ten Covenants indeed—!!

Wait, if you would, for a moment before singing such praise. Guaranteed rights work both ways, don't they? At the same time, unalienable rights are also unalienable duties, are they not? Thus, *rights that can be infringed* would also be *duties that can be reneged*, would they not? *Ah...how profound*, Sora thought rapturously. *Rights and freedom come with duties and responsibilities...* This concept was still debated on Earth, yet in this world, it could be distilled more clearly, more simply, into one sentence:

You can eat 'em, but don't complain if they eat you, right?!

"Rrrraughh! Come on! Can't this carriage go any faster?!"

"A shoddy contraption like this?! If we go any faster, it'll tip overrrr!"

"...B-Brother...! Fire, more...firre...!"

Behind the careening carriage, a *mob of monsters* charged after them with fangs and claws bared. *This could be our end*, Sora felt in his heart. He swung and tossed torches, then scrambled, struggling for dear life.

They'd chased a horse, then been chased by a dog, managed to fend it off, and finally captured the horse. They'd applied Steph's celebrity riding skills, Shiro's engineering skills, and Sora's shaky Sunday carpenter skills to jury-rig something together that could possibly have been called a carriage. By then, eighteen hours had passed. After enough toil to fill an entire book, Sora and Shiro had handed the reins to Steph and collapsed in the back. With the rhythmic sound of the wheels as their lullaby, the two of them drifted into a deep and inelegant sleep. They dreamed they'd broken past that tough part that had convinced them the game was impossible and now stood at the start of a fine journey... The Japanese character for "fleeting" is written with "person" on the left and "dream" on the right—and fleeting, indeed, their dream had crumbled a few hours back. Hearing Steph shriek, they'd turned to see a vision of hell. In this manner, they had been pursued to the twelfth space by a death mob, and here they were.

"D00d!! Don't tell me this world is actually one of those serious sword-and-

sorcery worlds as soon as you step out of the city?! ‘A utopia where everything is decided by games,’ my ass! I’m gonna report that damn Tet to JAR* for false advertising!”

Feeling for the first time all too keenly what it meant to live in a fantasy world, Sora wailed with tears in his eyes. An environment where even moving spaces was soul-crushing. He’d figured that, at least if there was no prohibitive terrain, they’d have hope...but nobody’d said anything about monsters—!! The gap between them was closing, and the screeching, makeshift carriage was liable to break down any moment. If that happened, only one route would be left to them—the “fodder” route...

“Monsters such as these are scarcely supposed to exist! Where are weee?!”

“...R-right now...we’re near...the Sanctuary...the Spirit Forest...!”

“Oh! Good news, Sora! These beasts only dwell in the vicinity of the Spirit Forest! If we just make it past, we’ll be— Listen to me! Don’t try jumping off the carriage, please!!”

“...Brother... Brother! You must, live...!”

Sora, unconsciously overtaken by fear, hyperventilated, having almost relinquished his grip on life.

Calm down. When an otherworlder gets tossed into a serious fantasy world, what does he do to survive?

...The tendency is to fight with the ultimate power of the chosen one or some cheat like that, I guess? But... Sora glanced at the hoard surging after them and chuckled. He and Shiro were shut-in sissies, free and easy loser gamers. They had no experience facing primeval bloodlust, not to mention being prey. In modern-day Japan, what kind of life would you have to lead to develop the guts to face monsters like these head-on?

OP swordplay? OP magic? Or straight-up superpowers? No, that’s not it; that’s off the mark. No, I say! We humans are not a race that fights in such ways, are we—?! Before their impending deaths, Sora gripped his sister’s hand.

“...Shiro. When we get back to Elkia...we’re gonna have them develop a sniper rifle...”

His eyes distant, he raised the flag.

They'd take the monsters down *from afar, one-sidedly, allowing no counterattack, sneakily, surely*. That was how humans fought, Sora was convinced. But...

"...Nope..."

Shiro curtly dismissed her brother's proposal.

"...Brother, *let's burn it...*? With high-powered explosives... Let's drop $C_6H_6N_{12}O_{12}$, every day?"

Her eyes strangely a gleam, she put forward her own suggestion, which made Sora shiver.

Firearms are for pansies.

From now on, let's burn the forest every day.

Till it with a good carpet-bombing until it's flat.

She was a genius, that darling little sister of his. Yes, that was how humans—

A huge crash yanked his fleeting thoughts back to reality: One of the monsters had just clawed through the wooden carriage like butter.

...Hmm. It appears we are indeed in some deep shit.

"My bad, Shiro... Looks like I did something wrong. It's pretty much game over."

Mumbling with lifeless eyes, Sora analyzed the factors of their defeat and summed up the results.

Where did I go wrong? Was it when I challenged a god? When I misjudged our survival as a handicap? Or could it be...when I was birthed into this world only to be a virgin? Shiro muttered at Sora's melancholic chortle:

"...Brother, how does it feel...to die, a virgin?"

"Ahh...to put it mildly, I am so chagrined I could die...heh-heh..."

Ah...humans are weak. They lose, and they lose and lose and lose, and they grind their teeth, and they look back with chagrin on why they lost. Even so,

they keep walking, saying, *Next time, I swear, next time*, until that day comes when, finally, they win. Sora compiled all the regrets and problems from his current life. In his next, he'd start by working to lose his virginity. Not that he had any idea how...but hey, he could leave that to the next him. Best of luck!

With this, Sora weakly flung out all four limbs and wrapped up the resulting tally of his life.

"Brother..."

Shiro whispered faintly as she straddled Sora, her breath so close he could feel it. She lowered her face to hide her flushed cheeks.

"...Okay...before we die...we might, as well..."

Pulling away her clothes to reveal her white skin, her eyes glistening passionately—

Now, then. Sora, virgin, dead at eighteen. Under normal circumstances, what would you do in this situation—? Easy: nothing. This was Shiro. His little sister. Age eleven—now approximately 8.8 after losing two dice. Amidst the insanity currently transpiring, would he even have the clarity of mind to chide her for showing some skin? But, facing the very real prospect of his death, not even aware how confused he was, Sora came to a realization.

He thought back to the American films shown on television every weekend.

Some normie would be having sex in the middle of a crazy life-or-death situation, completely taking Sora out of the movie. He had long doubted such scenarios; *They should've just died*—or so he'd thought—but now he realized that he'd been the one who was wrong. *I get it now—they...all of them—*

—they were all virgins!

If you were about to pass on to the afterlife, wouldn't you think of doing it before you died?! Sympathizing with Hollywood like never before, Sora extended his hand to the warm flesh before his eyes—

"Hey, youuuu! What are you doing back there at a time like—?"

At that moment, a *second* crash resounded. The carriage bounced, tossing Sora and company skyward. What had just happened—? Sora didn't even have

time to wonder as he reflexively wrapped his arms around Shiro. They crashed onto the ground, rolling with the momentum... And when they raised their heads amidst the pain—

There was the true monster.

A giant, circular crater had formed in the soft, black soil. In its center, knocked senseless, lay a monster heaving its dying breaths. Crouched atop it on all fours was a small, young, and adorable human-shaped beast looking puzzled.

“I-it’s my food! You don’t get any, please! I-it’s your fault, please!!”

She was a little girl in Japanese-style garb, swinging her large tail and fennec fox-like ears, a backpack on her back. Squinting down at Sora in displeasure was Izuna Hatsuse.

.....

“...Hey, remind me why you said monsters like these aren’t ‘supposed to exist’?”

Sora checked to see if Shiro, who had fainted in his arms, was hurt before checking his own condition. He concluded that, by some kind of miracle (considering they’d fallen from a runaway carriage), they were practically unharmed—at which point, he’d posed his unanswerable question to Steph, who likewise appeared to have sustained no major injuries.

“...Almost all large animals went *extinct* in the Great War... Also, as you can surmise—”

The situation spoke for itself. Izuna had rocked the ground with a single step. Then her single strike—no, single swat—had lifted the ground up and formed a crater. Perhaps because to “attack” what she called her “food” would render her food unrecognizable, the mob of monsters had all scattered like baby spiders. With Izuna at the top of the food chain, it was only natural.

“—the races other than Immanity...all have their own ways of lashing out in predation and defense... I mean, well...”

“...*I see*,” said Sora as he looked to the heavens. Rights worked both ways and were also duties. But whether such rights and duties could be guaranteed

without the Covenants...

“...Brother, this world...isn’t so nice...to anyone...other than the Ixseeds...”

Having escaped the fate of prey, Sora and Shiro thought: *Humans are opportunistic creatures*. To now feel pity for the monsters that had mere moments earlier been threatening their lives... Well...was this just the ego of the survivor...?



“R-really, you don’t get any, please! I-I’m sooo mad at you, please!”

...But if you insist, asshole, I might spare you a bite. Izuna’s eyes quivered while Sora and Shiro smiled and gave the thumbs-up.

“...Don’t worry, Izzy... You saved...our lives... Plus...”

“I think, as human beings—we gotta consider whether we wanna eat this until we’re at the brink of starvation, all right?”

Throwing the creature straight out of *Resid*nt Evil* into the fire, they gracefully declined to partake.

A few minutes later, as Izuna sat politely before her meal, Sora righted the carriage and asked:

“...Hey, Izuna. Why’d you only take one?”

Sora and company couldn’t have been the only ones flirting with starvation. Izuna was surely in similar straits. *Shouldn’t you grab as much food as you can when possible?* was the thrust of his question.

“It’s taboo to hunt more than you need, please... It’s shameful, please.”

Suddenly, Izuna joined her fists formally and bowed deeply in gratitude for the life she had taken. It must’ve been the custom of the Eastern Union. Seeing this, Sora, Shiro, and even Steph felt positively ashamed. Living surrounded by civilization, it was easy to forget that eating was partaking of life. What lovely table manners this child had... My goodness, was she a saint—?

They’d have earnestly been of this opinion had Izuna not ruined everything with her ensuing outburst.

“Pfff?! D-damn, this is some unbelievably disgusting shit, please! The hell do you have to eat to taste [bleep] as the [bleep] of a [bleep], please?!”

She’d only taken one bite.

“H-hey... No matter how many times I look at it, I really don’t think that’s edible...”

“I-if you hunt it down, you gotta eat it all, please! ...Ergh...”

Thinking it was the least they could do for Izuna, who’d just saved their lives and whose face was distorted by enormous teardrops, Sora and company took some seasonings out of their baggage and did what little they could...

“Prepare this...? ...Wait, to begin with, what is this even?! Wh-where do you cut—? I mean, are you sure this is edible?! Eeeegh, S-Sora! There’s some kind of blue mucus coming out!”

...Or rather, they made Steph do what little she could and listened to her shriek incessantly. If a Werebeast’s sense of smell said it was edible, then it probably was, though Sora and Shiro would have to bow out...

As they roasted the meat Steph had prepared on spits around the fire, Sora asked:

“...By the way, Izuna, why are you still around here?”

They were on the thirty-eighth space, just under 380 kilometers from the start. Even though there were nine dice at Izuna’s chest, reducing her age by one-tenth, those overwhelming physical abilities of hers...couldn’t possibly be outrun by a horse.

Izuna, who should have been well ahead, just squinted and groaned in response.

“I’m mad at you, please... ‘Name the first choice Sora made in the bride selection screen the first time he played *DQ5*’... It’s damn obvious you wrote this shit, please!”

Ahhh... Sora and Shiro laughed in recognition. She’d landed on the “Task” Sora wrote—in other words, here, the thirty-eighth space. Naturally unable to answer, Izuna was subjected to the grand prize of “not-being-able-to-move-for-

seventy-two-hours.” And after those seventy-two hours had passed, one of her dice would belong to Sora. As if the memory of it brought reignited her rage, Izuna stood and howled menacingly in a huff.



“What the hell, please?! At least follow the damn rules, please!”

12: However, TASKS of the following kinds are INVALID:

**12b: TASKS that can only be fulfilled by the assigner
or cannot be fulfilled by any player**

Indeed, so it had been set in the rules. However.

“Heyyy, hey... You’d better give respect where respect is due, my little animal-eared beauty. Shirooo?”

Shiro nodded and punched in her answer on her phone so that Izuna couldn’t see.

Rodrigo

“That’s *rihhht!! Even Shiro knows!* So that makes this Task valid. 🎵”

Tasks that couldn’t be fulfilled either by anyone other than whoever wrote it or by anyone at all were invalid. An example would be if Jibril were to write, *Use your own power to teleport*. Presumably, it was also intended to prohibit impossible commands such as *Correctly predict in which year you will die*. Conversely, though, *it was valid as long as at least one other person knew the correct response*.

“Which meaaans! What about ‘Answer with three mods where you can screw the bitches who ordered the murder of Paarthurnax,’ or ‘Answer with the titles of the first three porn games Sora ever bought, his heart pounding, as he celebrated turning eighteen years old’?! Questions like these, which, if you lack knowledge of another world—no, even if you have it—are über-questionable in terms of answerability are all okay!! Ya dig?!”

Sora danced around as he spoke, with a look on his face likely to provoke a slap from even the Buddha himself.

“...Brother, that’s über-cheap...über-epic...”

“—You are the worst... It’s no wonder Izuna is angry...”

Shiro and Steph regarded him with reverence and disgust respectively.

“I followed the rules... Meat’s done, Izuna. Hope it’s a little better now.”

Sora smiled and held out a skewer to the pouting Izuna, who spoke after a moment.

“...It’s a *little* better, please. It tasted like complete shit and now just tastes like shit, please.”

Izuna stuffed her cheeks with the skewer, instantly soothed, her tail swinging in good spirits.

“.....”


Sora keenly noticed Steph wrinkling her brow suspiciously and laughed.

He could read her befuddlement like the back of his hand. Following the rules

or no, the “Task” was one hell of a cheap trick. After seventy-two hours passed, Sora would take Izuna’s dice—her life. He was killing one-tenth of her, and yet Izuna, however you looked at it, had *helped him*. Why was it that rather than leaving him for dead, she was instead so chipper? Why was it that, just as Sora had hinted, they had betrayed but hadn’t killed each other?

“...Sora, Shiro. I’m not—gonna lose to you, please...?”

Izuna *was asking* them as if to confirm something, intoning her statement like a question. Sora and Shiro held out all the remaining skewers.

“We already thanked you for saving us. If you think we’re gonna give you some extraordinary compensation like letting you win, you’d better think again. ”

“...Izzy, you get the, consolation prize... We’re the ones...who are gonna win...”

“It is remarkable how you are able talk down to even the one who saved you just as you were dropping out, not simply from the game but from life itself...”

Steph groaned, past disgust and into awe.

“.....Mm! Bring it on, please!!”

Izuna, as if she’d found all the answers she sought in their faces, chomped down all the skewers at once and said, with a broad smile:

“*Ngom-ngom...* I’ll pass you fast, please. Get ready, please.”

Immediately thereafter, she hugged her tail and rolled into a ball, her mouth still full of meat. Sora and Shiro rose when Izuna informed them she’d sleep until the seventy-two hours had passed.

“Then I guess we’d better get a move on. Is the carriage all right?”

“Y-yes, somehow... Hey, are we just going to leave Miss Izuna here?! It’s dangerous!”

“Yeah...it’s really dangerous—*for us.*”

Hearing Sora’s remark under his breath, Steph’s face suddenly stiffened. If one listened carefully, it was practically audible—the presence of the monsters

that had scattered at Izuna's appearance and were now waiting for her to fall asleep. Their target, of course, was *not* the sleeping Werebeast. No sense targeting a predator. Naturally, the creatures' attention was fixed on the three asses in lions' skins.

"...Let's accept Izuna's kindness graciously—and get the hell outta here while she's still awake."

Izuna, not yet soundly ensconced in slumber and therefore still a threat to the monsters around them, smiled softly. Having caught that smile—and the slight tremor in Sora's voice—the three promptly hopped aboard the carriage and bolted.



The fifty-ninth space...seventy-eight hours since the start of the game. The carriage and its three passengers galloped along the edge of a vast cliff. According to Shiro's map, the terrain on this space was a copy of terrain far off Elkia's northeast border. As luck would have it, this was the largest gorge on Disboard, known as Oblivion. The lustrous blue crack in the earth that extended across an ocean and two continents was said to be a vestige of the end of the war, the Final Battle. Listening to the thunder still rumbling at the bottom of the gorge—the dregs of the power that carved the planet—Sora thought:

It's been twenty-one spaces since we parted with Izuna. The neighborhood of the Spirit Forest should be far behind us by now. According to Steph's intel, there shouldn't be any monsters except around there, so we oughtta be well out of the danger zone. We should be safe now. Should, should, should, should—!!

"I don't buy it! I don't buy this crap!! Who's on our tail? ...Nooo ooone—! Are they trying to catch us off guard?! Huh?!"

"...I won't, fall for that... Where are you? Where are you...hiding...?"

Sora and Shiro were on high alert and acting like wimpy players in the middle of a horror game, constantly freaked out by motionless corpses and never making any progress. They were still wary of monsters even though their cell camera's zooms revealed nothing.

"...I understand how you feel, but it's already been a day and a half! There's no need to keep worrying..."

True, it had already been thirty-six hours since they'd last seen a monster. Having ridden without any sleep or rest, the horses (including Steph) had reached their limit, and they'd had to squeeze in a few breaks along the way. In those instances, Sora and Shiro had each taken turns keeping watch, but no monsters had come. At last, Steph got fed up with their unending paranoia.

“—Shiro, what do you think? I feel I may be prepared by now to give our safety the benefit of the doubt?”

“...I'll trust...what you think...”

Hmm. Then it was settled.

“——We survived, Shiro.”

At this whimper, Sora and Shiro hugged each other and collapsed in the carriage. Large tears running down their faces, they exchanged nods as if reassuring each other they were alive.

...Ah, the sky is so blue. Even that loathsome sun now seems but dear. The two squinted.

“Let us forgive all transgressions—let all living be blessed...”

“...Hallelujah... So sleepy...”

“H—wh—excuse me?! We'll still be in huge trouble if you just fall right to sleep!!”

Aggrieved by the abrupt swing of their pendulum, Steph, still handling the reins, pointed ahead and yelled.

“We've got three more spaces to the sixty-second! Another danger—another Task—awaits us!”

Danger? A Task? —Hmm. Sora cocked his head. True, they had been advancing according to the dice toward the sixty-second space. Once they stopped there, they could expect a “Task” someone had written to activate.

“...Compared to being chased by monsters, any Task is an easy win...”

Sora had expended careful thought to arrive at this serious conclusion, to which Shiro nodded her earnest agreement. In this game of taking one

another's dice—their lives—and killing each other indirectly, the greatest threat was...the Tasks. Yet as far as they were concerned, compared to starvation, overwork, and predation, Tasks were pretty far down that list...

“.....I—I begin to be convinced, but there is still danger! After all—”

Steph's voice was cut off as her vision went black. The carriage must have reached the end of the fifty-ninth space. They were engulfed in a strange area filled with black mist.

One of the reasons Sora had concluded that this game failed was the loading time between spaces. It must have been to prevent desertion or unauthorized movement through the game through the use of magic or such. At the end of each space, they hit an invisible wall like those in video games, and from there, they were transported to the next. They couldn't go back. They could only move forward according to the roll of their dice. Worse yet, each time they moved between spaces, there was this goddamn long-ass load time. Jibril's shifting power had been suppressed, and in its place had been put a force to adjust their coordinates according to the rules. True, there must have been some really sophisticated shit working behind the scenes, but—

“...Brother...I finally remembered...what this is...”

“Ahh, what a coincidence, my sister—this slow loading and this sound. There's no mistaking it.”

It was beyond the comprehension of these mere humans, incapable of perceiving magic or spirits, much less space. But the scratchy noise, to them, sounded like nothing other than a disc spinning. If they stared silently into the amorphously warping space, they could swear they saw at the edge of their vision the words “NOW LOADING” and a juggling monkey. Sora and Shiro muttered to themselves murderously it came to them:

*This is Neo G*o.*

“...C-can I ask...a question?”

As the two siblings tutted and tapped their feet, Steph chimed in nervously, as if having realized a hidden danger in the rules. Trembling, she asked:

“Wh-what if there was a Task—that said *Die*? Would you...die?”

“Oh my... That’s not like you, Steph... Pretty sharp.”

07: A die-bearer who landeth upon a space with a TASK may be forced to carry out any instructions.

“Forced to carry out any instructions.” Yes, even an instruction *to throw away one’s life* could not be refused.

“This game is sooo full of wonders, isn’t it? Like in these rules about Tasks.”

Sora spoke coolly, as if irritated but somehow resigned to spelling things out.

“I told you, didn’t I? *We didn’t agree to kill each other.* You don’t have to worry—no one can tell you to die.”

“Wh-what are you talking about? I mean—”

12: However, TASKS of the following kinds are INVALID:

12a: TASKS that specify a party to whom they shall exclusively apply

“You can’t specify the party. What’s someone gonna do if they write an instant-death Task and step on it themselves?”

“———Oh!”

Sora smiled as Steph’s face fell, as if properly shamed as he chuckled at her.

That wasn’t all, Sora continued in his mind. *Sure, the game was sugoroku—however you sliced it, only one could finish. And if no one finished, the only one to be saved would be the player in the lead. Using conventional logic—the fewer opponents the better, right? Killing all the other players would be the classic and safest move, right?*

Wrong. Sora laughed. If you killed them, *you couldn’t take their dice.* And since it was impossible to finish without taking dice—

“Even if you used a Task to make someone die, as soon as they did, they’d have fulfilled the Task. The assigner would lose one die, and on top of that, the dead d00d’s dice would be irrecoverable— That’s one lamebrain move, the opposite of win.”

These Task rules allowed you to force any kind of absurdity upon another player, but if you were actually trying to win, the things you could write were truly limited.

“Instructions only you can follow are invalid. If you have to write Tasks that *have some possibility of being fulfilled*, there’s a risk someone may steal your chance to steal dice. So if you wanna give instructions that let you steal without being stolen from—”

And with that, the loading time long enough to render instant noodles soggy ended.

“Tasks like that are the most you can do.”

Pointing into their returned vision, Sora gave a little smirk. At the start coordinates of the sixtieth space, still beside the yawning abyss, was a sign. Glancing at what was written there, Steph mumbled:

“...What is that...?”

.....

“Hey, we’ve passed through how many spaces already, and you never noticed?”

10: Each TASK shall be transcribed upon a sign, and these signs shall be placed upon the spaces of the board in random order.

“Haven’t you seen them?! Every time there’s a sign with a Task!!”

“Do you suppose that prior to this I had a moment’s rest to pay attention to shabby signs such as these?!”

.....Yeah well, frankly, that was true. Both Sora and Shiro accepted Steph’s rebuttal without further ado. Even Sora and Shiro had only managed to read a few of them between all the running and sleeping. In any case, the sign Sora was pointing to read:

Count every damn hair on your body—including tail hairs—and answer that shit correctly, please.

...So Izuna even writes this way. Sora seemed pleased.

“Anyone can do this Task, but there are only a few who can do it in *seventy-two hours*.”

In the first place, the only ones with tails were Ino, Izuna, and Plum. Maybe those crazy Werebeasts could count their own hairs instantly. But those lacking such senses or even a tail—specifically, Sora and company—could only answer by counting every hair one by one, including the hairs on the tail of the horse hitched up to their carriage. They’d have to spend the full seventy-two hours... Actually, they’d grow more hair in the interim, so it was pretty much impossible.

...Pretty nasty Task, Izzy.

“But then Tasks like this are ultimately designed to stop you for seventy-two hours and take one die.”

For instance, a Task could hold them up for seventy-two hours by asking a question only the minimum number of people could answer, like the ones Sora and Shiro had written. Or it could give a command that few could fulfill in seventy-two hours, like this one.

If you were trying to win, in fact, these were the only two methods you could use.

“...The Tasks...so far...were pretty much all, like that...”

Shiro listed a few examples she could remember.

Travel from one end of the space to the other and back on your own feet a hundred damn times, please.

This had also been one of Izuna’s Tasks—walk two thousand kilometers in seventy-two hours, in other words. It sounded tough even for a Werebeast... but, to begin with, Izuna didn’t have to fulfill her own Tasks. Jibril could do it easily, Ino would drive himself half to death to do it, and everyone else would just be stuck for seventy-two hours.

Immediately accept a game by the Covenants proposed by a party of at least two members—other than the one who assigned the Task—and win.

That one must have been Jibril. Under most circumstances, it would be invalid and ineffectual, since, unless a third party was present, the premise wouldn't stand, and it would be impossible for anyone to fulfill the Task. But in any case, *if the premise did stand*, it would likely be a Task of the highest difficulty.

"Now here's another wonder. Tasks only you can fulfill aren't allowed—*why's that?*"

"...What? Because then there would be no game, right...?"

Ah, yes, that was the sensible answer. Sora laughed. How would it look if there were a quiz show where everyone asked each other questions that only they knew the answers to? That show would get its sorry ass canceled after the first episode, and whoever was responsible would be forced to resign. But Sora responded to Steph's sensible assertion with a sweet smile—and a dearth of sense:

"So? *Why* does it have to be a real game?"

".....Excuuuse me...?"

"If this game is hosted by the Old Deus so we'll kill each other, wouldn't this rule just get in the way? She might as well have us hurling impossible missions at each other, saying, 'You don't fulfill it, you die,' right?"

So why wasn't that the case?

And...just then, one more die each appeared in front of Sora's and Shiro's chests, as if sprouting from thin air. One die was from Izuna, who'd landed on Sora's Task, for Sora after the seventy-two hours had passed. Likewise, someone must have stepped on one of Shiro's Tasks and lost a die after running out of time. Coincident with each of their dice increased to nine, their limbs slightly extended accordingly. Sora, approximately 16.2, and Shiro, approximately 9.9, smiled gleefully together and announced:

"This I can tell you. The one who suggested that Tasks only you can do should be invalid—was *me*. 🎵"

".....Excuuuse meee?"

Sora made this admission without a hint of any normal feelings of guilt—just

like any devil would. These Task rules were far too convenient for Sora and Shiro specifically. As had been described to Izuna, Sora and Shiro traveling in company could assign problems only they could answer.

...W-well.

Considering the survival trek they'd endured, even this handicap seemed quarter-assed, but that aside...

"Now then, *imaaagine all the people!*"

Sora stood up grandly on the carriage:

"In our wiped-away memory, before the game started! Let's imaaagine yours truly has just checked the rules and is yelling, 'The hell, what are we supposed to do if Jibril writes *Shift*? That's friggin' broken!'"

At Sora's shriek, together they...imagined it.

Why was it? Even Sora wondered.

"And next I'm going 'Tasks only you can do are out, out, aaand out!' —Did you manage to picture it?"

That which should have been part of their lost memory, somehow...coalesced as vividly as if it had just happened. Shiro nodded deeply as if to say *That's my brother*, while Steph rolled her eyes.

"In this way, we can conclude that I secured rules that would be advantageous to Shiro and me alone—however!"

Elated, Sora boldly continued.

"Shall we think back once more? This game was started *with everyone's consent*. And within it—"

It was a premise not everyone could possibly agree to. Therefore, some falsehood had to have been hidden among the rules.

"However you look at it, there's gotta be something I slipped in... Isn't that fascinating?"

If this *weren't* the game in which the Old Deus led them to kill each other...

"Whose idea do you think this game was? Who started it? What were they

planning? ...Who do you think's got the initiative?"

Sora played with his dice and sneered.

Steph muttered glumly:

"...But if you die when you run out of dice...isn't it the same?"

If they took one another's dice, sooner or later, someone would be forced down to zero. So, in the end, weren't they just killing themselves by commanding one another's deaths? Steph's gaze pleaded with Sora.

"True. If we lose, we die. Besides that, if we starve, we die; if those reliable friends of ours back there eat us, we die; even if we eat them and get food poisoning, we die. Pretty much whatever we do, it's an instant ☆ *Go to heaven*, amirite?"

"...Brother...I think...we're going...to hell..."

Steph winced at their devil-may-care response.

"—But even so, that doesn't mean we're killing each other."

Steph faltered and stared at Sora's suddenly composed response. "How so?" Indeed, insofar as the rules worked with a force that transcended will, if they'd put everything of themselves on the table, it meant they'd consented. They could very easily die even without the involvement of the dice or Tasks—*but even so*.

"—'Cause come what may, Shiro and I are gonna win! 🎵"

...

.....

".....Heh-heh... Yes, a fine point, sir!"

It was just that our own scenario, which of course we'd win, didn't have that as part of the plot. The gall with which Sora spoke was so refreshing, there was no longer a care on Steph's face. For that natural fraud, Sora—and Shiro, who trusted him unconditionally—there was only one constant. They knew that *because of that* there was something Steph could trust, too. Just as they knew that was the reason Steph had entrusted her dice to them at the beginning of

the game.

“ ” didn’t lose. And if they were going to win, they were gonna win all-out—that was all they would allow. They would never accept a victory based on the death or sacrifice of someone else. Such an outcome would be worse than defeat.

“...We’re getting to the sixty-first space, just one before our destination. Keep sharp and check out the sign.”

Sora turned his face from the embarrassed gazes and pointed beyond the still-running horse. He pretended not to notice Shiro’s and Steph’s knowing, teasing looks.

“Know what? I’ll tell you who wrote the next Task the moment after I see it.”

Sora struck a pose, and at that same moment, the still-running carriage once more was enveloped by the usual black mist. From the sixtieth space to the sixty-first, they let the annoying noise pass through their ears as they waited for their vision to return. After the long load time, at their destination at the other side of the space border, what they saw—was indeed writing: an old sign with a Task scrawled on it, standing by its lonesome. Yes, a sign with the words.....

*Smile as you cut off your d*ck and be refreshed in death.*



_____.

Clop, clop, clop... Rumble, rumble...

Beside the yawning abyss, under the glorious sky, only the sounds of hooves and wheels were audible.

“Soraaa... It seems I must be exhausted! I thought I read something that completely contradicted what you just said. ♥”

Behind Steph, whose cheerful, singsong inquiry seemed oblivious to reality, Sora and Shiro, still striking a pose with tepid gazes, looked frozen in time.

W-w-well, well. Well, well, well, well, let's be ca-ca-cla-clam—calm.

Be calm, Sora, virgin, again at risk of dying at eighteen, approximately sixteen point two years of age! Uhhh, there must be something I should be doing first. Yeah...just as I said—

“Old faaaaart!! I know you can hear me! You did this, you bastard, didn't you? The hell are you writing? You finally gone senile? D00d, all you can do is talk dirty even when you're not opening your mouth, isn't it, you dog son of a biitch?!”

Sora raged to the heavens, instantly calling out the culprit.

His answer came from the rear of the vast, spiraling game board. The perpetrator's voice, apparently not far in terms of linear distance, echoed across the board.

Oh, what good news! Sir, you have indeed landed upon my Task—and what's this?!

They couldn't see him, but the Werebeast seemed to see them.

My goodness... To think that Queen Shiro and Miss Stephanie accompany you... I suppose it will be a grievous sight for you to witness a gentleman tearing off his member with a smile and subsequently being refreshed in death... But remember!! This is in service of the extermination of that vile King Sora, in

service of world peace!! Please consider it collateral damage—

“We didn’t land here; we’re passing through! What were you planning to do if you landed here, asshole?!”

“I was ready, sir. But you say you are bypassing— Tsk, what a stubborn pest...”

...Clap, clap, clap... Rumble, rumble... The carriage continued whisking away the still-frozen Shiro and Steph, who smiled vacantly. Sora, the only one who could still think, pushed through a headache to groan:

“Hey, old fart. Do you realize that if you did kill me, you’d still be losing out?”

He’d just explained how an instant-death Task was the worst possible move in terms of victory. But the answer he received was clear and simple:

Pardon? It seems clear that this game would be quickly resolved if only you, who deceived us and murdered the Holy Shrine Maiden, would perish, sir. Justice would be served, and the villain would be vanquished... In what way might you call this a loss?

.....

“Sora. Soraaa. This is, of course, all part of your plan...isn’t it? Isn’t it?”

Sora responded to the pleading voice silently: *This was definitely not part of my plan.* The pointlessness of orders to die, the validity of mutual betrayal, etc... All this was predicated—on the assumption that everyone was acting rationally. In any case, whether he was that much of a moron or the death of the Shrine Maiden was that much of a shock—probably both, actually—the ill-humored Ino must have blown every fuse in his brain. He, possessed of such senses that enabled him to see through lies, had heard the same bullshit even Steph had seen through—and taken it seriously!

“...I—I see. That’s some iron resolve you’ve got. Can’t compete with you there.”

But this was *no problem*. Regaining his composure, Sora furtively wiped away his sweat and spoke with equal parts retribution and self-interest:

“To be prepared to sacrifice even Izuna... You truly are the most loyal

subject.”

.....*Come again?*

The suspicion in Ino’s voice accounted for what little remained of his sense of reason—his belief that this Task would kill only men. He couldn’t *specify* a target, yet this would strike down Sora while sparing Izuna. Thus, had he constructed his Task to exploit what should have been the sole province of men... That must have been his intent, anyway.

It was a massive fail.

“If a female—say Izuna—lands on this Task, she’ll just have to smile while castrating some random animal before being refreshed in death... Gotta hand it to you. In some ways, that’s even sicker than telling somebody to dismember himself...”

...This Task didn’t limit its target at all. It was just like the “including tail hairs” bit in Izuna’s Task.

If you didn’t have your own, you just had to find them elsewhere.

.....

There was a long silence that seemed to say *Look at this dumbass*, followed by a cry that pierced through the noise of the galloping horse.

S-sir, what shall I do?! Izuna has no crime; please have mercy on her! Please apply the wretched wiles that you daily fritter away on idle trifles! I beg you, sir, for a plan to save Izunaaa—!!!

The pathetic entreaty, shaken by tears, echoed hopelessly throughout the void.

“...Very well. Confess every one of these lame-ass Tasks you’ve written.”

Yes, sirrrrr! Yes, sirrrrr! Gblblbl.

After parsing through Ino’s confession, Sora nodded solemnly.

“—Hmm, yes, I see. Be at ease, for I have discovered a method to avert Izuna’s death.”

O-ohhh...!! Sir, there has, after all, been meaning in the mistake of your birth!

Ohh, sir, my humble thanks!!

Shiro seemed to have reached the same conclusion as Sora, because she pulled a bag from their luggage onto her head and nodded along with him—

“Like hell I’m gonna tell youuu!!!! Eat shit and die!!!!”

“...Old fart...count your sins...besides being born...!”

Gedou Baby and Kam*n Rider—the two brandished their middle fingers by way of answer.

—.

The carriage proceeded to the tune of unintelligible castigation in the background.

“Hey, you two! Y-you’re not going to tell him?! What if someone—?”

“...He tried, to get *Brother*...to tear off *Brother’s*... That old fart, deserves to die, a million deaths...”

Steph frowned at Shiro’s 40-percent-serious, oozing intent to kill, but Sora, having elicited all the Tasks of one person, carved the following on the carriage in Immanity script:

That was a lie to get him to tell me his Tasks. No one’s gonna die from them.

All of Ino’s Tasks were the same: just plain subject, object, verb. They failed without exception to spell out their targets and time frames. They lacked force, like a contract that doesn’t spell out who, what, where, when, and how. You could just wait seventy-two hours and still easily fulfill the Task, ending with Ino’s die being stripped. This dumbass was a high-ranking official for the Eastern Union? ...*He should be fired.*

W-well then, let me make you an offer! I shall introduce you to a number of attractive morrrsels!

Even as this proposal rang out, Sora laughed it off.

“.....B—B-B-Brother, wh-wh—what’s wrong...?”

“Sora, a-are you all right?! Did you hit your head when you fell?!”

Shiro and Steph gasped with voices trembling as if they’d seen a ghost. But

Sora exhaled with a calm smile and shook his head gracefully.

“Please, damsels, be at ease. Young men are animals that grow from one day to the next!”

That’s right—not too long ago I’d have chomped down on this bait instantly. But I’ve annexed the Eastern Union! I’ve met animal girls like the light of heaven and been incapacitated by their fluffiness! Sora, eighteen, still on his path—but be that as it may! He was no longer the man to be caught by cheap bait!

There is an association that admires you, sir, and calls itself the I Wanna Be Glomped by King Sora Club, constantly troubling the Eastern Union with cryptic official stateme—

“Oh, my friend, why are you so distant? Aren’t we two who have sworn to stick together through thick and thin since just now?!!”

...This kind of expensive bait, however, was a different story.

Sora chomped on it instantly, pulling a 180 so fast as to kick up a gust of wind. Basking in the disgusted—or rather, relieved—looks of Shiro and Steph, he shouted:

“I shall provide you with whatever you need from my humble store of knowledge, so come, come, come, tell me what you know, my dear friend—!!”

His histrionics were merely met with...

.....silence. Only silence—wait, no. The darkness and disc spinning returned, now a tradition by the sixty-first time around. The carriage, still charging ahead all this time, must have at last traversed the sixty-first space and reached the edge.

“Loading in the middle of a cutscene?! The hell is this shit going for, the Fail of the Year Award?!!”

The ill-timed loading was met by a furious howl from Sora and, subsequently, a sarcastic query from Steph.

“...Never mind that. Have you forgotten that the next space holds our Task?”

“How many times must I say it, peasant! Did I not just tell you I don’t give a shit about that sort of thing?!”

“I just saw you fail to predict the last one would tell you to die. Do you remember that?!”

A trifle, a jest. Sora sneered. One moron was enough comic relief, and he’d already determined that all of that moron’s Tasks were harmless. Whatever this Task might hold, the worst outcome would be that they’d be held back for seventy-two hours—in which case, he’d have plenty of time to confirm the details of this intriguing organization known as the I Wanna Be Glomped by King Sora Club—! Now flying high, Sora and his two passengers in the carriage advanced to the spot on the board dictated by the pips of their dice.

As the sixty-second space finished loading—correction: once they were successfully transported and their vision returned—

.....

.....Uhhh, yeah.

“Ah-ha, ah-ha-haaa...! Graaamps? Could you tell me about these girls who want—?”

“...Brother...Brother...! Face...reality—!”

Reality. Well, in that case... Sora smiled with a troubled expression. Shiro, the genius little sister of whom he was so proud, occasionally said strange things that defied the understanding of dullards such as himself. It was his duty as her brother to try to understand, though it was often very difficult... And yet.

They were on a carriage. They were supposed to have been. Yet, suddenly and without warning, they had been tossed high, high in the open sky, with nothing on hand to save them. They were now literally toppling straight down into a bubbling lava chamber, like those free-fall events that were all the rage these days. Was Shiro actually saying this completely unrealistic scenario was real?

...Ha-ha-ha, n-n-n-no w-w-wa-waaa-waaayyy—

Sora’s thoughts spun idle as the announcement of the Task assailed his ears.

—The party assigned the Task shall immediately be transported into the open sky, fall into a lava pit below, and burn.

“Oh, I see! 🎵 Sora? Soraaa? It appears I’m not so stupid after allll!”

The same voice continued beside him.

“All they must do is make it so *you die if you can’t fulfill it*—like this. ♥”

Steph smiled with lifeless eyes, strolling in midair alongside Sora, who smiled back.

“Ha-ha-ha! You sure are stupid. It doesn’t change the fact that you can only recover one of the dice. By the way, Shiro, hear out your brother’s brilliant assessment... **We’re gonna die, aren’t we?!**”

“...Welcome back, Brother... But soon, it’ll be...bye-bye...”

They say that when facing death, people see their lives flash before their eyes. It’s a phenomenon in which your brain exceeds its limits, becoming abnormally active to search through all your memories and knowledge in a desperate attempt to find a way out of a crisis—so they say. Thus, it’s almost as if time stops.

Sora’s accelerating brain sprinted through its vast store of memories:

Animal-eared girls grabbing him, squealing, *We wanna be glomped by Sora!* The old fart, flexing a ripple through his beefy pecs. Sora himself, glomped by a shoving throng of animal-eared babes, while chuckling, *Now, now, get along, you guys.* The old fart, prostrating himself in a uniform fairly bursting at the seams from his muscles, enveloped in a glowing aura. The old fart, making the animal-eared girls massage his legs as he takes a drag from a cigarette. A swaying crimson cloth. A loincloth fluttering in the wind... The red—old—

Fuuuuuuuck! How’m I supposed to die with this flashing in front of me, you damn old fart? Aaaaaah!

Between the fake memories and the ones he wanted to erase, what was his brain trying to escape?! Amidst the raging waves of his chaotic flashback...

“...Brother...”

...It was as if a single drop of water had fallen. The voice was soft, but the hand in his was steady. The eyes looking into his...seemed to deny death.

Sora’s gaze assured her *I won’t let that happen*, to which Shiro replied:

“...Calm down, okay...?”

Time still static, Sora cleared his billowing thoughts. The heat radiating off the lava and crawling over his skin as it prepared to scorch him, he shouted instinctively.

You're in my way—GTFO! Sora commanded.

It was his answer to the warmth of the hand in his, the light of the eyes staring into his, revealing in an moment the implication of the unnaturally slow yet imminent cessation of life—the lava—

Bitch, you're in my way!

Sora ground his teeth as if to shatter them and, in an instant, reached a conclusion.

Generally speaking, it should have been possible to deduce who'd assigned the Task through the process of elimination, so what he should have done was list and verify the possible motives and solutions to suss out his options—but with less than a few seconds left before they were fried, the one capable of doing so in the time allotted was not Shiro, not Sora. So instead, Sora solved the problem his own way. In other words, he stared into the onrushing, boiling, bubbling lava...and recognized a certain malice in it—

“—You got some nerrrve, *asshole*! You'd better watch it!”

It was the boy who had guided them without a single lie, exploited them, and eventually plotted to devour them. The one whose face hid pure hatred plastered deep beneath his gloomy smile—the Dhampir.

Sora *assumed* it was *Plum's* smirk, leaving the proof of his hunch for later.

“Give me your panties.”

“—What?”

He spun around to Steph with a serious expression and yelled:

“Your panties, d00d, your panties!! Knickers, shorts, scanties!! Your panties—linen zero point eight millimeters thick with frills, a red ribbon, and a little natural pink dye. Those are your panties, right?!”

Baring his canines at Steph, he wasn't asking. Just verifying.

Having mashed the *Remember* command to sear the image deep into his mind, he knew it vividly—that scene. That moment. When Shiro had pulled down Steph's panties. He knew how they stretched, the shape of the wrinkles, the seams, even the thread—he couldn't be wrong!!

"You sexually harass me to the very end... It's quite lovely how you remain true to yourself even in the very face of death—"

"...Brother... You're a virgin... How do you know, enough to...tell—?"

As they felt the heat of the seething lava singeing their skin, flitting between resignation and shock, Sora said to himself:

*It's because I'm a **virgin**.*

"Just do it—shut up and give me those *highly flammable* panties, biiiiiitch!!!"

Before Steph could even respond to Sora's ghastly howl—

"Uhaaaaaaah?!"

Shiro, grasping her brother's intent, stuck her hands under Steph's skirt and tore off her panties. The added momentum sent Steph into a tailspin, but time was too short for Shiro to care. She wrapped some jerky from her backpack in Steph's panties and, with all her might—flung it into the lava rushing up at them.

As this scene unfolded in an odd slow motion, Sora's reason, finally catching up with his intuition, lined up the evidence for his assumptions.

Why had they been forced to commandeer Steph's panties?

Because they needed something that would burn before they impacted. This Task transported the party into the air and necessitated that they plummet, but it didn't spell out what had to burn—!

As soon as Steph's panties hit the lava—no, even *sooner*—the thin flax fiber was caught in the thousand-degree heat of the lava's smoldering surface. *Poof!* And the instant a tiny flame ignited on Steph's (meat-stuffed) panties—

—The Task is deemed fulfilled.

In concert with this resounding voice, the lava was replaced by a lake into which the trio splashed down. As he sank into the water, Sora grinned savagely at the final piece of evidence, the proof of Plum's intent.

These Task rules, contrary to how they looked on paper, were very limiting. Specifications only you could fulfill were invalid, but if you were going to design your Task to take others' dice and keep your own—if you intended to win—you could only assign things that would delay your opponents for seventy-two hours. But what if you weren't trying to win? There were only two reasons someone would assign a Task anyone could fulfill *instantaneously*. One was if they blew it (like Ino), and the other—

"I can't wait seventy-two hourrrs; please take my dice nooow"...is what I guess he'd say?

Yeah. Sora smirked, imagining Plum's face (*If you don't do it, I shall diiie*), followed by a heart symbol, as he scrawled out his Task with that miserable, irritating smile of his.

He was the only one. Plum was the only one for whom it was *more convenient* to have his dice *taken*—...

"—Guh! Hff... Hff... W-we're safe...right?!"

Steph's voice was scarcely audible as she surfaced, poking her face out of the water. Sora grinned and answered to himself:

—NO.

"Bubrbbrbubebubebubrbububrbubebubrbugubr—!!"

The bubbles frantically frothing the lake's surface translate as follows:

D-don't worry about meee! Just save my little sister... Save Shiro, pleaase!!

...I want...to stay, by your side...to the end...Bro...ther—

While the best at gaming, these two were the worst at everything else. Their lives, the veritable embodiment of fragility, were more delicate than traditional Japanese paper. And yet they sank smoothly like literal stones to the bottom of the lake.



“—Shiro. I promise you...I won't...run...from reality...anymore.”

“...Yeah... Yeah...! Brother, I agree... I won't, run, anymore...”

Thanks to Steph's valiant efforts, the sinking siblings had been narrowly salvaged. Embracing, their cheeks wet with tears, they swore solemnly that they would face reality together.

They would learn to swim.

“Wellll, Sora! What sort of braggadocio are you going to trot out now to explain away your error?”

Drenched and panting, Steph rose shouting, despite abject exhaustion. She'd hauled up not only the drowning Sora and Shiro, but their luggage, which had settled at the bottom of the lake. The astonishing lung capacity and inexhaustible energy reserves that enabled her to scream after all that demanded respect.

If only respect could replenish one's energy...

“Ah, just this... Exactly as I planned—”

“You're wheezing and sputtering up water like a fountain, shivering with your sister, and sobbing, ‘Exactly as I planned’?! Was your plan to turn yourself into an artificial reef to decorate the bottom of the lake?! You certainly love nature, don't you?!”

...Apparently serious this time, Steph's rebuke was several times keener than usual, but Sora grinned and spewed water from his upturned face, jeering.

“Why would we build a reef in a freshwater lake...? If we were trying to conserve nature, we'd build it in the—”

“That. Is. Not. My. Point. Sir!! Just how did you ‘plan’ this atrocity?!”

Wham! Steph thrust her finger at Sora, who considered the aforementioned atrocity.

He lay supine, Shiro on top of him, as Steph wailed. Though everything had sunk in the lake, their luggage—their backpacks—had been saved by Steph. The contents were likely more or less okay. The backpacks were waxed in anticipation of such events. Moreover, Sora's and Shiro's phones and tablet

were all water-resistant for use in the tub. And now, having fulfilled the Task, each had an additional die floating before their chest.

This was what Steph called an “atrocious.” So *where was the problem*—?

“Aren’t we *killing each other*...? How can you talk about this going ‘exactly as planned’...?”

Steph’s annoyed and reproachful tone made Sora realize he was a bit slow on the uptake. He’d said they weren’t killing each other, yet both Ino and Plum had nearly done them in. That was surely the “atrocious” to which she was referring.

“...Hmm, I don’t know how to explain *how* I talk. You do it with your mouth...”

Sora got to his feet muttering and faced Steph’s glare with his usual nonchalance.

“Maybe I’ll cough up water, maybe fish, but I’ll still talk just the same—it went *exactly as planned*.”

“.....”

Steph glared at Sora stone-faced, but he just continued casually, wringing out his shirt.

“The premise that we all agreed to start this game...doesn’t make sense.”

Yes, it was an unsound premise. For them to trust one another, not to betray one another, killing each other, bargaining with the Shrine Maiden’s life. There were so many conditions it was implausible they could agree on—and one more. Sora put his wrung-out shirt back on and gave a thin smile.

“A game with Old Deus...Shiro and I would be in on that without question. Jibril would obey our—I guess she’d play out of curiosity. If the Shrine Maiden was in, then Ino and Izuna would be, too. And you, Steph...you might just, you know, get dragged into it.”

“—And? What about Plum?”

...Steph could hardly get words out. The premise was implausible—but the game could only have been initiated by agreement under plausible premises. Even so, Plum had no reason, no motive, no duty to join.

“The one whose survival is most questionable in this game isn’t us—it’s Plum. Look around. It’s an open-sky environment with plains as far as the eye can see. The gameplay extended, and this is someone for whom exposure to sunlight is lethal. There’s no blood—heck, he doesn’t even have access to bodily fluids.”

With virtually no chance of finishing, there was no reason for Plum to join.

“What is he after? What condition would convince him to play? It’s simple, right, Shiro?”

They’d each wrung out and dried their clothes as best they could. Sora pointed to Plum’s dice by their chests, of which they had each gained one thanks to the Task anyone could fulfill. Shiro, seemingly finally caught up with her brother’s reasoning, happily answered.

“...Plum...wants to win...without finishing...”

Playing with the dice they’d taken—no, that Plum had given them—Immanity’s greatest gamers, “ ”, boldly and brashly declared through thin smiles...

If you’ve forgotten, we’ll tell you as many times as it takes.

“ ” doesn’t lose.

Everything was precisely as predicted, exactly as planned. What they did was win, as a matter of destiny.

“.....Yes. Hee-hee, yes, that’s right, isn’t it?! In that case—”

Steph mumbled, her expression no longer troubled. She beamed with relief as if having suddenly remembered something she’d forgotten, then she pointed at Sora and Shiro—no, behind them, *beyond* them.

“...I would love to hear *what’s next*—including what I should do for underwear, while you’re at it. Please elucidate your plan, O wise king and queen, pride of Elkia... Describe how the plot will unfold so my heart does not break. 💖”

She remained dead behind the eyes as she smiled hollowly, but she had also drawn the siblings’ attention to something. The scenery had been temporarily changed by the Task, and on top of that, they’d been transported into the air.

Now the horse they'd been using, along with the carriage, must have either run off or disappeared, for they were nowhere to be seen. Here they were in a world without roads, with no choice but to walk as the horizon still fanned out afar. Posed frozen and wordless, both Sora's and Shiro's cheeks glistened...with a single, silent tear.

WTF. This was the first move. They'd gone through all that—felt themselves at death's doorstep—just to stand on the sixty-second space. They'd have to roll the dice many more times and endure much more to reach their goal 289 spaces ahead.

This was one-sixth of the way...still the opening, for God's sake...? To be honest, Sora cursed the Sora in his absent memory who'd agreed to these rules. Couldn't he have done any better? The mode of transport, at least—?!

"A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step!! Come. Gimme your dice again, and we shall go forth as one!!"

Sora howled so as to lift his spirits, which were at their breaking point. They would travel in company just as they had in the first move. Leaving Shiro and Steph each one die, Sora gathered the rest.

04: TRAVEL IN COMPANY must first be declared, whereupon the company may advance according to the roll of one representative.

05: A company of more than two shall, of the dice used, lose a number of dice equal to the NUMBER OF MEMBERS OF THE COMPANY MULTIPLIED BY THE NUMBER OF FOLLOWERS IN IT.

Traveling in company required they use six dice in one move, but there was no helping that. The trade-off was the dice they could roll increased, allowing them to go farther and land on fewer Tasks. As Sora held out his hand, Steph took eight of the dice floating by her chest and handed over—

...Well, she intended to hand them over, but something came over her. She lowered her face.

"...It may be late to ask...but why are you bringing me?"

——Say...*what?*

“S-sorry... Frankly, I underestimated you... We’ve never even seen this game before, and you want us to go for it with the weakest characters alone and no leveling—? Daaamn! You are a professional masochist!”

“...Brother, the uploader, always...just makes an ass of himself, in those videos...”

“Y-your meaning is quite lost on me! I—I mean...”

Steph, having been forced to accompany them by what amounted to a threat in the first move, now frowned doubtfully.

“Considering the ‘company’ rules...you’d be *much better off leaving me*, wouldn’t you...?”

Why had they forced her to accompany them? Sora and Shiro looked at each other as she mumbled uncomfortably, apparently finally coming to a realization.

Sure is late to ask... They smiled at each other in mutual pity of the girl. At the beginning, they’d swiped nine dice from Steph that they’d used to threaten her. If they went in company, though, they’d each expend two dice for every move for a total of six. On top of that, if they failed to fulfill a Task, they each lost another. In the worst case, they could *be wiped out in one go*. Even if they were able to travel farther with more dice, they’d use up more; it was a net loss. Whereas—

“If you two went alone...you’d only have to use two dice to move, wouldn’t you?”

Indeed, the rules said “a company of more than two” would use up more dice. More than two—*more* than. Not “two or more.” *That didn’t include two*. If it was just Sora and Shiro, they’d only have to spend one die each, two total. Adding just one more person instantly tripled their consumption.

“So Shiro and I have to travel together, but there’s no point in anyone else using these rules. And Shiro and me aside, having one more person in our company immediately weighs on us. It’s an impediment to winning, so we should go without you—is that what you’re saying?”

“Uh, yes...”

Steph, flustered, heard the voice of the one who’d taken nine dice from Shiro and eight from her to hold twenty-seven.

“Well, hate to break it to you, but you’re wrong... Pity, huh?”

It was a sharp baritone booming with laughter—the voice of a man in his late forties.

“We can rest assured that the one who added these ‘company’ rules—was *me*. Which means...”

The “company” rules were totally meaningless for everyone except Sora and Shiro. Given that there was a traitor, there was no advantage for two to travel together, and traveling with more than two was just shooting yourself in the foot... There was no reason for anyone to use these rules. But if these rules (which Sora must have added because they were essential for Shiro and himself) were so convenient as to keep the two of them together without penalty, they must have been somehow convenient in this regard, too, huh, *god?*

“The way I see it, we *have to travel in company to win*—so declare it.”

He looked toward the so-called finish—far beyond the vast board—and chortled mockingly as if trolling the Old Deus who waited there. Having demonstrated (multiple times *already*) that a mere human could take down a god, his words, face, and voice, as if aged by years to come, made Shiro and Steph blush unconsciously. As he’d urged them, they took Sora’s hands and declared:

Travel in company.

As these words echoed, Sora plucked the dice of life from his chest and flicked them into the open space. They rolled over the ground, and once the numbers were displayed, the three of them were able to move forward accordingly, at the cost of their lives—20 percent. Abandoning the time they’d existed—their ages, their lives—to advance, what awaited them at their destination? Sora and Shiro sneered. Steph quaked. Together, they looked ahead to wherever their lives had rolled them...



Thirty minutes passed looking.

“I did ask this on the first move, as well...but what are you doing?”

“I think I answered you on the first move, too... This is a ritual!”

“...Random number analysis...”

The tension had long since departed. Steph, age 1.8, sat holding her knees before putting her question to and immediately shot down by Sora and Shiro. It was a strange scene: two little girls and a shirtless virgin loser shut-in gamer around age fifty doing a handstand. One brush with the police would be enough to get him arrested and indicted on the stench of criminality and circumstantial evidence alone. Rest assured, he would be found guilty.

“...Brother, for the next one...torch, crouch, move left, and right...then throw it.”

“Ah, um...I would appreciate it if you could explain in a little more detail, you know.”

Though for a moment he had looked like quite the slick older gentleman, when you looked at him now, it reeked of sad. It was just Sora.

“Only I would prescribe those Task disabling and travel in company rules. I told you, I must’ve set them up—”

And just as he had thirty minutes earlier, Sora threw a lone die.

02: The die-bearer may advance a number of spaces equal to the result of a roll of all the dice he beareth.

03: The result of the roll of the dice shall be determined randomly, whereafter ONE of the dice used shall be lost.

“It was probably us who specified these dice rules, too.”

“...Brother, for the next one...take a step, back...and throw, from...the bridge position.”

As Shiro instructed, her brother got in the bridge position and launched

another die, clearly uncomfortable but answering Steph's questions nonetheless. Not with words but with action. Still in the bridge, he rolled the twenty dice he'd been walking around with...

...and they all came up sixes.

"With a little technique, anyone can *manipulate a roll*...at least, this, much!"

...*Like hell they could!* Shiro felt as though she'd heard Steph's inner voice, but in fact, *anyone could do it*. Look at Izuna's and Ino's preternatural senses or Jibril and Plum's magic. It was unclear who'd first said it should be prohibited, but the older brother continued.

"But if we prohibit roll manipulation and trust that Old Deus with some fuzzy bullshit like 'randomness,' she could very well rig the dice so no one could finish. That's a trick you can't prove; we'd be doomed. You think I'd overlook that?"

"...Brother, for the next one...press yourself down...on the ground..."

As instructed, Sora dug his face into the ground and launched another die.

"Given that, someone must have *specified* a random number generator."

He turned his gaze to Shiro to emphasize:

"—Someone *here*."

Still staring at the number that dizzyingly appeared and disappeared on the rolled die, Shiro answered with a smug expression and a V for victory. If it were prohibited even for the Old Deus to manipulate the roll, then they would have to specify a pseudorandom number sequence—a randomization function. If memory loss were a condition to start, this would ensure that no one could game the randomization.

"But! If Shiro delineated it, she definitely incorporated some sort of condition!"

"...I made it so...if we figure out the seed...we can make the random numbers...the ones we want..."

Here's the proof this was our doing. The older brother smiled devilishly.

“You have to roll all your dice, but it doesn’t say you have to roll them *all at the same time*, does it?”

In which case, if they rolled them *one at a time* while changing the conditions, they could figure it out.

“Well, it’s not news to me...but you are disgustingly reliable frauds. Both of you.”

“...All right, Brother... Now, take off...your pants, and take a step, back...”

“—Shiro, I gotta ask: Would you really seed an RNG based on whether or not I was wearing clothes?”

Shiro answered her brother’s sarcastic quip internally—*Of course not*. Shiro would have used the routine from *Romanc*ng SaGa 3* with its marked quirks. In which case, the seeds would have been the number of steps and elapsed time, which she could remember perfectly. But—

“...Sure... That’s how I...roll...”

“What are you saying...? What am I supposed to do if I have to get buck naked for the sake of the numbers?!”

“...? Get, buck, naked...”

“A middle-aged man in his birthday suit with two little girls? Isn’t that totally asking for the cops?!”

...It’s probably already too late, Shiro thought. Steph seemed to have given up and was gazing at the blue sky, whistling through some grass she’d picked, the flat sound reverberating alone.

CHAPTER 2

WHODUNIT

OVERTHINKING

Floating in the liminal space of death, the Shrine Maiden had a distant dream. In distant memories of the old and faraway, which the dead can never reach, an unwanted girl drifted through eternity alone and at last went to sleep. That was her dream...

.....

The first thing of which she was aware was a world squirming into being. Watching heaven and earth writhe—not even in creation and destruction, but just painting creation over creation—the girl asked, *Where am I?* and *Who am I?* The world still had nothing that would answer her, but what did respond was her ether. It said: *This is the planet* and *Thou art a god*. But to the girl's following query, her ether did not respond, but merely went silent for eternity.

What's a god?

Through the everlasting silence, the girl simply took up her brush alone, continued to question, and continued to write. After waiting for just one word, a simple reply, what finally reached her were merely the fires of war. Looking to the gods who smashed the planet in conflict, the girl gleefully launched into her queries...only to receive empty answers.

Who are you? —I am a god.

What is a god? —A god is a god.....

The girl did not understand, but the Shrine Maiden floating through the memories did. The planet still had no *self* to ask why. The lonely philosopher, questioning eternity while hugging her knees, lost hope...and fell into an eternal sleep, clinging dearly to the one answer she at last had found at the end of

infinity—

Yes. Until thou awakest me.

The booming voice floated the Shrine Maiden's distant consciousness up to the surface.....

.....

...Gracious...? What's this? Am I still living?

The Shrine Maiden tried to look around only to realize that her eyes—no, none of her senses—worked. In the lightless, soundless void, all she could hear was a voice resounding within her consciousness, one she knew well.

Nay. Should this hand be loosed, thy soul will surely disperse at once, like the dew.

The words of the god whose ether she'd housed within her through many years. To that voice—ice-cold, emotionless, and inorganic as ever—*sound*:

I see. Be that as it may, if I'm dead, we can't chat, can we? Aye, it mustn't be reckoned so till I am dew.

It seemed she was literally in the palm of a god's hand, her soul in its grip. The Shrine Maiden laughed cacophonously, though she had no mouth or throat—or even a body. But this laughter was perhaps not well taken.

Mortal. Know thy place as one who hast deceived a god.

With that, the Shrine Maiden felt her consciousness flicker once. She must have indeed “died” in the palm of the god's tightened grasp, but even so, she remained casual. She'd deceived and exploited an Old Deus—that she'd admit. Defiantly. After all...

'Tis the rule of the world that the fault lies in falling for it, you know?

Once more her consciousness lapsed. Had she died for a moment again?

Blimey, if you'd stop killing me and bringing me back on a whim... It chills my guts, it does—or, wait, do I have guts?

Twice. Thou hast deceived me.

A divine pronouncement of guilt. Sacred words that but for the Ten

Covenants should spell doom in and of themselves. Still.

What, now, are you sulking? That must mean the game is coming along swimmingly.

Yes, if the deception was going fine. As if in place of an answer, the Shrine Maiden, till now bereft of senses, found her vision opened. She saw the spiraling land divided into spaces and the players making their individual ways. It seemed that *things* were all proceeding as planned.

Oh dear, you're gonna lose, you know?

Forgetting even that she was drenched in death to the top of her head, the Shrine Maiden laughed merrily.

Indeed. When a god may be deceived twice by her host—all may be so, and all may be not.

The god's face could not be seen as she spoke. Her voice contained no feeling, no involvement, no interest whatsoever. It was as though she wished for nothing, hoped for nothing, and dismissed all as equally valueless, meaningless.

I care not. Should I succeed or should I fail—only the ending will change. The conclusion will not.

Very much like...a petulant child.

Insofar as thou hast deceived, betrayed—sold—your god, the limits of the theory thou hast sought remain unchanged.

The Shrine Maiden snickered at the girl's lack of self-awareness. She knew. No, she couldn't understand, but she just knew that was how it was. To an Old Deus—to a transcendant being such as that girl—time itself appeared on a different scale than to the Shrine Maiden. The ending of this game—perhaps even what lay beyond—might appear as countless confirmed facts to that girl as she looked out across infinite branching futures, even potential worlds. But...

They'll change... The ending, the conclusion, and you.

It was no use. At the point *she'd been deceived by the Shrine Maiden*, it had become self-evident that even a god did not know everything—especially this girl. The Shrine Maiden extinguished the laughter from her voice.

I've misled and deceived and betrayed you. The first time accidentally, the second time purposefully. That said—

The Shrine Maiden's voice became tinged with a slight loneliness as she spoke with the deliberate intention to provoke.

—I've not lied to you. That you don't see that shows the limits of your vision.

In the instant the girl claimed the Shrine Maiden had sold her, it had been made plain. The scope of a transcendent race's knowledge and understanding, after all...only goes so far.

I—they—will take you beyond.

Armed with this surety, she could now be so daring as to assert:

Doubt is synonymous with faith. To usher in those things even you know not, that I myself once despaired of... To change the ending and the conclusion with the whole world in tow... The hands that bring in that future—do you not think they'll be a sight?

—.

What they bring in—appears, indeed, to be what ye would call a sight.

Yes, the scene glimpsed by the eyes of the god flashed in the vision she shared with the Shrine Maiden—the form of those soon to come.

.....

I—I think...mind... Ahh... Perhaps I got a bit carried away...?

It should be fine...probably. Should be, surely...somehow.



The 152nd space. Following their third roll, eighty-four, to the 204th... According to Shiro's map, this plain grazed the state of Highwest, in the Elven Gard domain on the continent of Lucia. The rocks had faded to teal and gave way to a barren plain on the verge of becoming a desert. Here, those watched from on high headed toward the *end of the possibilities* that even a god knew not... Now.

“Oh yeahhhh! Screw walking on foot; tools are where it's aaat!”

He shouted gleefully. *Human potential lies not in the body but in the mind!* Flying through the wind, tearing across the wasteland—on a Harley—toward the *full stop*, they threw the engine into high gear and sped off with literal abandon.

“S-Soraaa—?! What is thiiiiiiiis?!”

“...B-Brother...! S-slow...downwn...!”

The middle-aged man who’d crammed the pair of shrieking toddlers of about two years old into the sidecar howled.

“Prattle not so, my little sister! Can you not hear it? The voice of the wind telling us to become like liiight!”

At her brother’s cryptic assertion, the madness visible in his eyes through his goggles, Shiro thought, *It all started a few hours ago...*

.....

It had been eighteen days since the start of the game when they ran out of food.

“Aww man, this suuucks... I wanna go hooome... We’re so screwwwed... We’re all gonna diiie, ah-ha-ha-ha-ha.”

“...Brother...it’s...okay, to cross the goal line...isn’t it?”

“Oh, look at the flying pink elephaaant... We could just get on that, and we’d be there in a jiffy. 🎵”

The three of them were still on their second move, creeping along like ghosts across the fifty-eight spaces they’d rolled during their “random number analysis” ritual.

...In the first place, they’d been miraculously lucky to obtain a carriage early on. Having lost it, they’d intended to procure another vehicle or even build themselves a bicycle—except this off-road trail stretching 580 kilometers was too rugged for such shoddy contraptions. Every time they lost a mode of transport they’d suffered to round up, their hearts had cracked a fraction more, until finally:



God, why don't we just walk? Of like, defeated minds, the trio reluctantly set out on foot.

As players landed on Sora's and Shiro's Tasks, their dice increased steadily. Nevertheless, the three of them could only seek shade from the sun, endure the rain, and worry about wild animals as they walked and walked. So things went for over two weeks, until they ran out of food and were finally left moaning in despair. Just then, though, their vision suddenly went dark, and—after their 119th load screen—they finally reached their destination. Their roll of fifty-eight had led them to the 120th space...and a Task. Sora and company stood alone in the wide-open wasteland, where there likewise stood...a sign.

—Name the manufacturer of this motorcycle. If you get it right, it's yours!

It sat beside the Task Sora and Shiro had written: a large, high-displacement motorcycle with sidecar attached, tank full, engine humming. Predictably, this was a question that only Sora or Shiro—or maybe Jibril—could answer:

Harley.

After throwing the dice again, Sora straddled the Harley, grinning as if he'd just witnessed a miracle performed before his very eyes.

"Ha-ha!! Making over half my Tasks about vehicles finally paid off! Oh, roar, my V-type, liquid-cooled, DOHC Evolution engine!! Let us zoom across the spiraling horizon! Come—let us go, to the unyielding space beyooooond!!!"

And that's how this came to pass.

"...B-Brother, do you, have, a license...?"

Asking a question to which she knew the answer perfectly well was Shiro's attempt to distract herself from her fear as the wind beat against her face. Of course he didn't. A motorcycle license? The fastest thing he'd ever ridden was a mommy bike. There was no reason for a socially incompetent shut-in loser like him to have one.

"A license to ride a Harley? Ha! Sure I do—"

But as he jabbed his heart with his thumb, her brother's an answer defied her expectations.

“I have old-guy soul! And American spirit!! Right in my heart!!”

“...Brother! We’re Japanese...! We hardly even have, Japanese spirit... We’re shut-ins!”

Having collected Shiro’s and Steph’s dice, Sora *appeared* 43.2 years old—

“And that’s age fraud... Come, to your senses...!”

—but, looks notwithstanding, inside, he was still Sora, virgin, *actually* 18.

“Be calm, my little sister... Your elder brother’s heart is in an enlightened state heretofore unknown. Good enough?”

Shiro nodded uneasily at her brother’s Buddha-like smile. Such a illogical segue like this was the best proof that things weren’t “good” by any stretch, but —

“You categorize people according to their country of birth... Do you mean to say something so sad?”

We are the world, we are the children.

On the verge of bursting into song, Sora looked through his goggles into the distance.

“Do you mean to suggest that unless one is born in Japan one cannot understand the Japanese concept of harmony? To feel harmony, to respect harmony... Do you mean to tell me that unless one is born within the borders drawn on the map and labeled ‘Japan’ one cannot grasp this? Your elder brother disagrees.”

“...Uh...well...b-but, Brother—”

“America—a fine example. The only American race is that of its citizens—am I correct?”

“...Y-yeah...it’s a country, of immigrants...but...”

“But those merely born in America, or even those who have immigrated there, call themselves Americans with pride. It is to touch the heart; it is to know the heart. It is when one comes in contact with, not the borders, but the collective culture built by the people—that one finds the same heart in

oneself.”

Therefore, it is not a question of birth.

Another Buddha-like smile. Sora’s expression as he shouted made him look like the wrathful bodhisattva Vajrapani. Shiro was now certain—

“Within this Harley resides an American soul! ***Now I am America!!***”

What do I do...? Brother’s snapped...

“A-anyway, it’s not like it’s a public road, right? And Earth law doesn’t apply, right? And there are no cops, right?”

The man who proclaimed himself America stammered out a list of chickenshit qualifiers.

“Shiro, I’m not imagining it, am I? Sora’s broken, isn’t he?”

In the sidecar with Shiro, who was approximately 2.2 years of age, was a girl buried beneath their luggage. Steph, approximately 1.8 years of age. She dejectedly muttered her suspicion, and Shiro sympathized with her completely, albeit reluctantly.

“A-and also, we’ll soon encounter a serious problem...”

“Problem?! There’s no problem! From America with love—let it be!!! 🎵”

“...Brother...the Bea*les...were British...!”

“I will *not* let it be!! Sh-Shiro, you know what I mean... We must pick some flowers—”

“...I’m, a babe... Babes, don’t...pee...”

“Say what?! Can’t hear you over the wind and engine! Speak up!!”

Sora decided to leverage his sudden bout of protagonist deafness to get Shiro to repeat herself, but she ignored him. Drawing the tablet from her backpack and crushing Steph in the process, Shiro thought:

...For her brother to break so thoroughly meant he was *functioning properly*.

More than eighteen days since the start of the game... 436 hours and eighteen minutes, to be precise. They’d run out of food and grown increasingly

weary, having failed to manage to get any sleep. Even if there were no monsters, there could be wild dogs or insects or weather... Dangers *sufficient to kill a person* were abundant. Environments where they could relax and take a break were rare on this long trip... It would be abnormal *not* to break down.

...Except for someone who had the best portable bed, who could be carried on her brother's back or lie on his chest when she got tired of walking—*Shiro*. *In that case, now it's time for my job*, she muttered, commencing her analysis:

Start situation processing.

—Breakdown of dice counts and approximate ages:

- Sora: 24 dice—43.2 years.
- Shiro: 2 dice—2.2 years.
- Steph: 1 die—1.8 years.

The reason Sora had Shiro and Steph were so young wasn't, of course, for the sake of the old-man soul with the Harley license. Becoming small meant they ate less. When they walked, they prioritized endurance and distributed their dice accordingly. The reason Shiro had two and Steph had one was so Shiro wouldn't drop to zero if *by chance* someone overcame one of her Tasks. It was thanks to having consistently and appropriately adapted the distribution of their dice that they'd come this far. However, the elder brother was the one who had each time carried this burden without so much as a peep. As a result, it was no surprise he was the flagship, since, despite the amount of damage to his vessel, he never sank. All of Steph's considerations and demands were excluded.

Steph had resigned herself to proceed boldly with the mind-set, "I'm pantsless anyhow, so I can't be embarrassed."

...Urgent...must find, food for Brother...an environment, where Brother can sleep...

—Current location: Space 152. The west edge of the state of Highwest in Elven Gard. Dice: spaces left to destination, estimated time and fuel required—

".....Oh."

Shiro had zoomed out the map on her tablet. She gasped when she

discovered something just barely within their current space. Immediately she started crunching numbers—no, *calculating*—and whispered:

“...Brother...two point four kilometers east...in a...small town...there’s, an inn.”

“An inn?! An inn! That sounds wonderful after sleeping in the wild for over two weeks without a bath!”

Steph, crushed by Shiro and their luggage, had whispered with all her might even before Sora could speak.

Surely there’s a bathroom as well. Steph didn’t say it, but she glanced at Shiro, who nodded. But Sora furrowed his brow slightly in reluctance. *Of course he would,* Shiro thought—since the word *bath* had been mentioned and Shiro *hadn’t flinched.* However...

“Please! Let us hasten there! Hasten, hasten, to the flowers, the flowers!”

“...You’re awfully gung-ho about flowers at a time like this... Whatcha gonna do with the flowers, eat them?”

“Let us make haste there *now*! If you don’t go that way—I shall leap from here!”

“A-all right, all right already! Hmmm... Just when I was getting my groove on...”

Sora was in such fine form that it was hard to tell this was his last flicker before the candle went out. With a reluctant pout, he tilted the vehicle. It drifted spectacularly, the sidecar coming off the ground as sand flew up from his turn—

“Eeyaaaaah! Is this the only way you can get this contraption to turn?!”

“Y E P!!”

Shiro couldn’t help but be impressed by the way her brother lied without a moment’s hesitation.

“Is that sooo-ooo?! Then I suppose there’s nothing to be done about it—Aaaaaaaah!!”

The bike headed off into a small forest, Steph’s wail blaring like a horn.



As luck would have it, a man was likewise racing across the 152nd space on all fours faster than the sound of Steph's caterwauling. Cloaked in an aura of sooty red, it was Ino Hatsuse. With four dice, he was approximately 39.2 years of age. The crimson mist was the vapor of his boiling blood—the proof of his bloodbreak.

“Yes, well, it was my mistake, I suppose? My blunder, without a shred of an excuse?”

The rusty color was the proof of the murderous, sneering beast's boiling wrath.

Ino was pissed. Teed off like never before. Two moves back, he had landed on a certain space, where a booming voice had announced:

Shred that thing between your legs and die for the sake of the world, the Task he himself had written—death. Naturally, Ino had closed his eyes—one who killed might also be killed. He'd long been ready for this; he knew it had been coming to him, but for his soon-to-be-shredded, illustrious member, he shed a solitary tear. And so he'd accepted everything, awaiting death for a few minutes, a few hours—before finally realizing his vague Task was not binding.

At the same time, having been praying that Izuna would not land on his Task, Ino wept in relief. He'd prayed, even prostrated himself every hour and supplicated to the Holy Shrine Maiden. He'd repented, regretted, tormented himself...and for the first time in his life, he'd begged with bitter tears, sincerely and with all his heart, to that One True God. *O almighty smug little bitch above, please, for once, make a non-dickish move*. His prayer had been granted—his dear Izuna would not have to die for his folly. It had been granted not in benevolence, but rather with a *LMAO*. Thus, Ino had come to know that there was nothing in this world that would heed a prayer of charity. This world, rather, was filled with malevolence...which he had to correct, starting with that monkey who had surely been trolling him all along. Sora.

Here was what Ino had been thinking: Unlike himself, Izuna was clever. She would surely catch on to the true nature of this game and win. That had freed him *to make sure he wiped out Sora*, fully intending to give his dice to Izuna if the chance arose. But that would no longer do, Ino knew, so he shaved down

his life as he sprinted for the goal. If he made it, all demands would be granted—which meant...

He had to run toward victory for the world: the death of King Sora—!!!

His sense of reason told him he'd gotten what he deserved. For having tried to kill another, it was a proper—or rather, too generous—price. Why did people fight? They fought for peace. Wasn't this putting the cart before the horse? But now, in this situation, it was too late for him to be talking smart. Why did he fight? Because he was a fool. Clowns who put the noose around their own necks and then got mad at other people deserved to honk like clowns.

In other words:

"I just can't help wanting to sink my fist into your stinking mug, you know, ya damn monkey!"

That...was one thing—!!

This...was another—!!

"Ahh, I beg your pardon—purely as a figure of speech, you understand. Would you be Mr. Ino Hatsuse?"

Ino had just braced himself to carve into his life and break the sound barrier when he noticed Jibril calmly standing beside him.

"Ha-ha-ha! I suppose your birdbrained nature cannot be helped, but are you aware that even birds have decent eyes?"

Though his form might have appeared more youthful, there was only one male Werebeast in this game. At Ino's jab, Jibril looked at some book and gave a slight nod.

"My apologies... I have never paid particular attention to the distinction between Werebeasts and dogs, it being but a difference of bipedal versus quadrupedal locomotion, and now you bring up the sexes... Oh, how's this? If you simply remain quadrupedal as you are for eternity, then we can classify you both together as beasts and save an entry in the dictionary!"

Hearing Jibril's sunny suggestion, Ino unconsciously stopped running.

Quietly, he stood in a wordless gesture of defiance.

“Ahhh... What a pity... Well, that aside. 💔”

As if she really didn't care, the disappointment on Jibril's face only lasted an instant when—*whip*, she pointed to the forest.

“I sense three Immanities there. Two must be my masters, yes?”

“...? ...Why do you ask me?”

“Oh, I was just thinking I'd greet them...but please feel free to resume crawling along the earth as you were!”

I'm done here, so piss off, Jibril communicated telepathically as she flew off with a smile. Ino mumbled doubtfully as he watched her go.

“...Why is that bitch still here?”

That maniac could teleport all she wanted... Wait. The rules about advancing spaces according to the dice might have closed that off, but she was still able to follow Ino easily, despite the fact that he'd been running hard enough to achieve the speed of sound. Why would she still be here, much less take the time to tell Ino that she was going to greet Sora and Shiro...?

“...Cool your head a bit. Does she mean for *me* to ask?”

Ino still could not understand the true nature of this game, but there was something odd in courtesy so unbefitting a Flügel...



On the east edge of the 152nd space, just as Shiro had plotted out, there was a town. A remote rural town on the outskirts of the state of Highwest in Elven Gard—a *bit* of it, at least. Not long before their arrival, the space had broken. This fraction of habitation had just barely made it onto the map. Of a small slice of Elven Gard, this was an even finer sliver. But compared to Elkia—no, even their old world—this was a civilization on a completely different level. Uniquely honed style one hesitated to even call architecture. Residences and roads *woven* of trees blended gracefully into the forest. Flowers shaped like jellyfish floated through the air, glowing faintly and filling the place with color. A fantastical habitat had been copied by the god, but no one lived there. There were no Elves.

Anyone would stop to gawk at this scenery. For a game designer, this would undoubtedly represent their masterpiece. Despite this spectacle, a sound rang out that made no attempt to respect the austere atmosphere.

Puppuppaparararaa! 🎵

“Sora finds a mysterious herb— Not again! Gimme a break, you little shit!!”

Making his own sound effects, in one smooth motion, the middle-aged man yelled and threw the peculiar herb to the ground. *Who gives a shit about wonder and awe when you’re starving?* he asked. Scenery be damned, Sora, age 43.2, had skidded the Harley right up to the house and was rummaging through it.

“...Brother, the Elves...are vegetarian...”

“You shitting me?! Then where the hell does all that nutrition for Fiel’s boobs come from?! Even a cow doesn’t get fat unless she eats fat! There’s gotta be, like, meat or at least some rice somewhere!”

Judging from the *DQ8* sound effect, he seemed to be exercising his right as a *Hero*, that mysterious privilege of eminent domain that allowed him to shamelessly rummage through other people’s houses. In this grubby man’s case, he just looked like a pickpocket.

“...Can I, ask you...something...?”

“Eegh?! Wh-what is it now? D-do you want me to w-wash your clothes, too?”

The young girl discreetly drying the clothes she’d washed jumped at Shiro’s voice and laughed shrilly. Similarly ignoring the scenery, as soon as they’d slipped into the house, Steph, age 1.8, had run around looking for *something* when—

Waaaah!! she’d wailed, returning in just a towel. Shiro shuffled *away* from her and asked:

“.....Was it...a number, two...?”

“No, a number one—! Um, I mean, I—I don’t know what you’re— *Waaaah!!*”

Realizing she couldn’t keep up appearances, Steph fled from Shiro and sank

onto a bed. In seconds, she'd abandoned reality by sinking into a dream.

...They were, after all, exhausted. None of them had the wherewithal left to admire the scenery. Not Sora, not Steph—and, of course, not Shiro, either. Shiro, in fact, continued furiously filling her little head, calculating *something*: a formula to weave together the reason they'd come here, the reason she'd led her brother here, and what she'd said to Steph, having excluded the girl to *this point*—

—Starting verification of situational variables necessary for proof of theory. Induction of point B (Brother) to arrive at specified coordinates—confirmed. Truth of bathtub Boolean of specified coordinates—confirmed. Precondition of change in three die variables—confirmed. Precondition of determination of transfer values—24 at point B, 2 at point S (Shiro)—confirmed possible. Exclusion of random float Steph—confirmed.

—Verification complete. Validity of induction function—provable.

...Come, Brother—let the game, begin...?

Announcing this to herself, Shiro moved behind Sora wearing an evil smile just like his. Sora, keenly picking up on the dangerous aura, turned to see—

“—Huh, w-w-waiiit! Shiro, that's—that's dangerous!!”

Standing on a large pile of stools, Shiro extended her hand to reach a high shelf. As she wobbled as if about to fall any second, Sora hurriedly grabbed her, howling.

“—Ahh! The hell are you doing making a two-year-old work hard while you pretend to be a *DQ* Hero, ya dumb Sora, approximately forty-three! That's why you're over forty and still a goddamn virgin!!”

Until now, Sora had controlled the distribution of dice with perfect precision. This late in the game, though, he realized fatigue had overtaken him, and he'd forgotten about it, prompting an apology.

“...My bad, Shiro. I shoulda realized earlier...uhh...?”

Shiro, held aloft by her brother with her face downcast, smiled thinly. Her brother, looking up at the shelf she'd been reaching for, was wondering:

How many dice should I give back to her?

That's what he would think... That's what he'd have to think. Even if he returned eight to bring her tally to ten—and hence her original age—she still wouldn't be able to reach that high. Her brother, with his superior situational awareness, would grasp her intent—that she wanted to help with scouting and supply. And his conclusion would be: *The more hands, the better.*

“Mmm. All right. I'll keep ten. My eighteen-year-old body does the trick, so, Shiro, I'll give you the other fourteen, okay?”

Yes, this was what he had to do. Shiro nodded once and lowered her head apologetically...but only to hide the grin escaping her lips indicating that *everything was going according to plan*. The dice were their collective age, divided into equal parts. Each time they gained or lost one from the default value of ten, they gained or lost a *tenth of their age*. Thus, once Shiro, who now held two dice, took the fourteen dice Sora offered—

—she'd have *sixteen*. Shiro took the long-anticipated dice...and sneered.

...Bye-bye, Loli physique... Bye-bye, prepubescence—!

The next moment, Shiro's body was wreathed in light, her limbs rapidly developing and lengthening. Shiro imagined how tiny Steph, now sleeping peacefully, had looked originally. That little bitch Steph, with her jugs of fortune and bouncy, boinky, shmexy body. But now...*heh*. Shiro smiled scornfully to herself.

Sorry to put one over on you, but this is my game... I'll be going on ahead, Steph. Farewell, stunted brat Shiro... Welcome, shmexy bitch Shiro...! With this body, the first equation will be complete! All I have to do is seduce Brother, and then—!

.....And then...

“.....Huh?”

The one mumbling confusedly was the one holding ten dice, now age eighteen—Sora.

“.....Uh, um? ...? ...Brother, what's...?”

The bewildered Shiro looked up at her brother as if to ask, *Is it just my*

imagination? It felt as though her eyes were still taking in the view from the same height she was accustomed to, but that must've been her imagination..... right? Tilting her head and smiling, Shiro slipped her hand across her chest...

...Foop. Foop, foop foop foop...

“...Brother, I’m flat as a board... I’m literally, almost, flat as a board?!”

Feeling nothing but air where her chest should have been, the glint in Shiro’s eyes disappeared. She could now only laugh at her calculations as she was overwhelmed by a crumbling sensation that eroded the ground under her feet.

“C-c-c-c-calm down, Shiro! It-it’s fine; you *have* developed!”

This was the biggest shock since the start of the game—no, of her life. As Shiro’s already pale face burned down to the color of ash, her brother scrambled to reply tactfully.

“It’s, uh, you knowww... Yeah! It’s, like, not necessarily the case that everyone gains years uniformly when they gain dice, right?”

Her brother, up until just now a scruffy middle-aged man, tried lying—no, formulating a gentle hypothesis, but...

...I know. That’s not it. Shiro grimaced at herself more deeply. It was true, as her brother claimed, that she had “developed.” Her limbs were slightly longer, and the baby fat on her stomach had shrunk a tad.

Allow me to digress for a bit. Did you know that Japanese elementary schools don’t hold students back even if they’re chronically truant? Although Shiro hadn’t attended even a single day of school, on paper, she was still in the fifth grade. But let us consider the fact that she regarded herself as underdeveloped even for a fifth-grader. Now let us venture an interpretation as to what was now being described as “development.”

Multiplying her age by 1.6 had finally brought her *to the physical equivalent of a fifth-grader*. If they lined up the entire grade by height, she’d be at the head of the class. —Yeahhh!!

“Sh-Shiro, cheer up!! This just proves you were already a total babe!!”

“.....🎵 Whatever... Brother, I’m...tired...”

“Wait, wait, wait, hey, Shiro! Don’t gimme that thumbs-up! Don’t die giving me that nice smile! Hey!!”

—*Whish, whish, whoosh, whoosh*. As she felt her whole soul turning to sand and blowing away, Shiro cursed her brother’s voice, audible from afar—cursed all that had betrayed her, everything. She’d been sold out. By the future, by the world. She’d never have them, the bouncy, boinky, shmexy body, those jugs of fortune... She gave up completely and collapsed to the floor.

“_____?!”

“Whoaaaaa! Wh-what is it now?!”

Suddenly, as if to salvage her fading consciousness, something hit her like a bolt.



Shiro braced herself against the data tsunami that surged through her brain by stomping her foot through the floor.

They say people's lives flash before their eyes when they confront death. It's a phenomenon in which your brain surpasses its limits, becomes abnormally active, searching through your memories and knowledge in an effort to find a way out of a crisis—so they say.

...We'll set aside the question of whether her despair was sufficient to actually kill Shiro. She surrendered to the sensation of her brain circuits frying and wildly combed through the data.

I can feel it... There's something—there—that would correct the broken equation... A flash of light—!!

—List.

All the games, comics, videos, and other media her brother had played, read, or watched in the eight years she'd known him. 23,671 mainstream games, 1,852 porn games, 85,743 graphic novels and porno *doujinshi*, 2,465 anime, 4,867 dramas and live-action films and television.

—Sort.

Her brother's favorite characters among his 874 *waifu*. In her mind, she aligned every single entry, including video, images, and audio, and appended the data. Strategy guides, fanbooks, manuals, articles—in particular, the characters' *official ages, heights, and measurements*, among many others! Logically, methodically, she quantified, aggregated, graphed, and analyzed—!

“...Uh, Ms....Shiro? What are you—?”

Little did he know that Shiro's brain, probably one of the highest performing in all humankind, was now being taxed beyond its limits for perhaps the most meaningless reason ever. Frightened, Sora tried to rouse her as she stared ghoulishly at the floor, but in a few unresponsive seconds when she was oblivious to external stimuli, Shiro summed everything up.

—Calculate.

She numerically sorted Sora's—her brother's—tastes, preferences, and fetishes. Yes, numbers didn't lie... Her brother's likes were as follows:

Age—accounting for nonhuman characters in terms of average heights—mean: 12.344.

Measurements—bust/waist/hips—mean: 77.2/59.873/78.23.

Relationship—younger: 61.1%, little sister: 48.4%, big boobs—only 3.2%.

—Conclusion—!!!

“.....I’m so, glad...Brother...you’re a...total...lolicon!”

As though night were breaking to dawn, the world was filled with light. The future still held hope... Shiro fell to her knees and looked skyward.

“—My little sister. I am completely in the dark as to what’s going on, but did you just casually unleash a devastating insult on your big brother?”

Her brother, mathematically and statistically confirmed a deviant, groaned with half-closed eyes. An insult? Please, it was a saving grace. Shiro wiped away her tears and stood so Sora wouldn’t notice her true reaction.

Now she knew. No matter how old she got, she would always have a Loli body. It wasn’t clear whether this meant in real life or just this game—but!

...Bye-bye...jugs of...fortune... However—!

It’s...fine. Yes, it’s fine. Shiro clenched her fists, pretending not to notice her bleeding heart, and howled. *Now that I know my brother’s a lolicon, everything, is, fine—!!*

If Brother doesn’t like them—

If he doesn’t care about boobs, then—

——**Who needs boobs anyway—?!!!**

...Having reached this grand conclusion, Shiro acted calm and amended her calculations. The first equation had fallen apart cataclysmically. But—

“...Brother...I’m...tired... I’m gonna...take a bath...”

“Uh, okay... Stay strong, all right? Y-your brother loves you no matter how you look!”

Yes, that’s exactly what Brother would say. Before her dream—before her

future of a shmexy body—shattered, that would be his precise response. But for that very reason! The second equation...and the proof of the formula still awaited—!



...Sora followed behind Shiro as she hobbled along.

“H-hey, Shiro. They say you can still grow even after you’re seventeen. So chin up, okay?”

“...I am...soooo, fine...soooo, all right...”

Her voice was so very the opposite of *fine*. As Shiro, of all people, went to take a bath all on her own, Sora felt deep regret.

Shiro was 11...with one die, 1.1. With sixteen, 17.6. He shouldn’t have given her so many. He’d known she worried about her childish figure—even though she *was* a child. They’d already been playing this monstrous game for eighteen days. Anyone would be worn out in this situation, both mentally and physically. So what would happen if he carelessly gave her more dice than she started with...and she didn’t like how she looked?

Surely, it would be a shock. *You’re such a worthless piece of shit not to understand a girl’s feelings at least this much...* Sora ground his teeth, following his sister as she wobbled with hollow steps into the changing room.

“H-hey, I know what it is. You’re tired. You know? You gotta get in the bath—”
—*get a good night’s sleep, and then you’ll feel a little better.*

“...Mm...wash my...back...”

“Yeahyeahyeah! Wash your back! Then you’ll feel refreshed, right?!”

Sora did his best to smile and nod at Shiro’s requests as they exited the changing room.

“...Wash...my hair...”

“Yeah, yeah! After over two weeks of this sucktacular adventure, you gotta do something, right?!”

And then they were in the bath chamber...presumably. It was hard to tell with

the Elven style of architecture. There was steam in this open-air enclosure, though, and no roof, making it less of a bath and more of a—

—hot spring.

Until now, Sora hadn't had the energy to concern himself with things like scenery, but seeing this open-air bath, his heart raced. *Just relax in this bath and forget everything, and you should feel better in no time*, he thought.

“...And...while...you wash my...hair...”

While Sora stood entranced by the bathtub, Shiro continued.

“...Unleash...your pent-up...craving...on me...”

...

.....*Huh?*

“...Violate...me... It'll be like, a *doujinshi*...”

“.....”

“.....Like, a, *doujinshi*...”

“Yeah, I got that the first time, all right? Uhhh?”

Shiro had her back to Sora as he spoke.

“...Why'm I in here with you? You need someone to wash your back and hair. Who's—?”

Sora looked around, but all he saw—

“.....*who's, gonna...do it...?*”

—was Shiro, turning toward him with nothing on. With only a towel around his waist, Sora felt as if ice had been poured down his back. He finally realized that he was facing his naked sister alone in the bath.

“—Hey, hey, hey, don't be ridiculous! HA-HA-HA, come on, come on, hold up for a second, will you?”

Sora quickly averted his gaze as cold sweat poured down him like a waterfall.

“Sh-Shiro, you're seventeen! Think about the rating; what are you gonna do if this book gets ban—?”

“...Brother, you’re...wrong.”

Why?

With the most innocent of smiles, Shiro took a step forward at the same time Sora took a step back.

Why is Shiro’s smile so scary—?!

“...My dice...aren’t...1.1 years, each...?”

I see, understood Sora. Of course, Shiro’s wasn’t exactly eleven. She’d had her eleventh birthday, and then they’d come to Disboard. She was eleven years *and seven months*. So her dice weren’t 1.1 years each—they were 1.15833...years.

But so what? Wasn’t that within the margin of error? *Thp, thp*. Step by step, Sora retreated and wondered, but Shiro seemed to read his mind. She pursued him and smiled as if to say:

That’s right. It’s within the margin of error. That murderous margin that threw formula after formula into disarray. That margin made Shiro with two dice not age 2.2 but 2.3166...and then with sixteen dice not 17.6...

...but 18.533. An adult.

“My initial formula...my new body...failed...but...”

Oh, crap.

Sora finally realized he was too late. Seeing his sister whisper to him, he heard his instincts scream.

I don’t know why, but this—

“...Everything’s working out...just as I planned, Brother—”

—is critical.

Shiro’s voice was serene and had a pleasant lilt. A faint smile formed on her lips as she quivered in faint shyness. Exposing her flushed body, his younger sister slid closer, while *behind her—*

“...Now, Brother...you don’t have, any choice but, to get in the bath with me...do you?”

—Sora could swear he saw, leering with a sickle, the shadow of death itself. *Thp, thp*. The relentless advance of Death—pardon, his younger sister—dared Sora to put up a shrill attempt at resistance.

“B-but you still look pretty much...uh, I mean, t-t—to begin with, inside you’re —”

“...You had an *old-man soul*...you said so...so now...I no longer have, an underage soul...”

“No, nonono! Something’s wrong about this! You know, there’s some law or ordinance or authority or something!”

“...You said...Earth laws...don’t apply...and...F the police...”

But as Sora backpedaled, he finally hit the wall. Nowhere left to run, nothing left to say, he was certain: This was a *verbal assault*. Wielding Sora’s own words as weapons, Shiro advanced to entrap him.

“...Brother, nice job, screwing yourself over... You have, no excuse...to run away...”

Voilà, the long-awaited—*kabe-don*. The trendy “wall-bang” gesture of pounding both hands against the wall to trap one’s object of affection—though, in this case, her arms only reached the level of his hips. Looking down at her delighted ruby eyes, Sora thought:

Now what will you do, Sora, virgin, approximately and precisely age eighteen simultaneously? She’s sealed off your escape—no, taken advantage of the fact that you sealed off your escape—!! He’d be lying if he said losing to Shiro didn’t get to him, but that was the default. Realizing she’d beaten him in, of all things, *mind games*, though, he felt the ground crumble under him and—

...Wait. Wait, wait, wait—!

“—Hh...ha-ha, ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

A gleam of light that flickered through his mind made Sora roar with laughter. She’d almost had him there. Run away? An excuse to run away? Who needed that crap?

“Heh-heh! My younger sister, listen carefully! I shall grant your assertion that

we are both of age—however!”

Yes, it was still only check, not checkmate! After all—

—even if they were both eighteen, how did that require that they share a bath together?!

“For siblings to bathe together at the age of eighteen is the most unnatural of things!! And if you’re eighteen, you should be able...”

Sora crowed in the conviction he had destroyed her check, but—

—it had already been eighteen days since the game had started. They’d been in constant extreme circumstances, enduring fatigue, hunger, wild animals, Tasks—all of which they’d survived despite the constant sensation of Death’s scythe at their throats. And yet...

“...Brother...do you...hate me...that much?”

With the hurt echo of Shiro’s downcast murmur, Sora at last felt Death’s sickle peel a layer of his skin from his neck, and everything clouded over.

.....

Embraced by the naked Shiro, who kept her face averted, Sora...wondered.

After hearing this, what reason do I have to say no?

Because she was a child? He’d just conceded they were both of age.

Because she looked like a child? Then would he continue to call her a child her whole life?

Because they were siblings? Destroyed—by her words, destroyed! If they were siblings and he didn’t hate her, for that very reason, he should have been able to proceed, head held high and free of guilt.

Guilt?

...Something’s off here, Sora thought vacantly.

...What is it? This feeling I’m about to notice something I shouldn’t—and on top of that...

He felt Shiro’s heartbeat against his hip due to their height difference. She

was looking up at him as her heart pounded loudly, fiercely, like an alarm bell.

...The hell! What's with those eyes that say "Notice"?!

They were playing a game of betrayal and deception. But why was it that the one and only person who'd never betray him, Shiro, of all people—

—had him so trapped—? Just as Death's scythe seemed about to rupture Sora's windpipe...

"Pardon me, Master... King Sora—"

**"Whoaaa, young Jibril!! You-you-you-your dice, they're—
Good God! You have only two left!! What dire circumstances!
Come, come! Let me give you eight of mine! Come now, you
mustn't hesitate, or I'll kick your ass!!"**

"Huh? Um, what...?"

...a savage angel swooped down upon the equally savage bathhouse.

It seemed the number of her dice had no impact on Jibril's appearance. Regardless, the Messiah had arrived (glaring sharply for some reason) to find dice being thrown at her.

Her face immediately seemed to soften somewhat, not that it mattered to Sora, who nearly broke into a song and dance.

"Ah, what tragedy! To err indeed is human, but imagine the state of my heart, following my careless misjudgment that hath rendered me a minor! Now remote from all eroticism, cast into a hell devoid of hope, O God! That thou shouldst deprive me even of the opportunity to bathe with fair maidens—is my sin truly so grave?!"

Like a Shakespearean actor, Sora, approximately age 3.6, shivered in ecstasy.

I'm saved. I don't know what from, but in any case, I've survived. Sora displayed his gratitude to the heavens, but...

—*Doom*... The wind of a violent aura gave him goose bumps.

"...Jibril...get a...clue... I'm, gonna..."

Booming as if from the depths of hell was something coming from *behind* the small Immanity girl, Shiro. *It* could be seen clearly by Sora and Jibril as well.

“Oh, it seems I am to die... Master, might you know the nature of the grave sin I have committed?”

“Sorry, I don’t know, either. But it looks like it was pretty bad...”

It even made Jibril, voice trembling, count her sins.

You haven’t been saved, declared the shadow, its eyes widening at Sora. Death, with its great scythe and evil smile, seemed on the verge of twisting its expression maliciously, hoisting that same sickle overhead and hurling it at him.

.....

Sora didn’t know. Neither did Jibril. For Shiro, this had been a one-in-a-million chance—a once-in-a-lifetime gamble—to make her brother *notice her*. In the eight years since she’d met him, never before had the situation, the conditions, the stars lined up so well, and Jibril’s arrival had made it all for naught. Had Shiro had a few more hours—no, a few more minutes—she could’ve completed the equation and had “Brother” all to herself—! Shiro’s vision boiled over with rage—but, quietly, in the breeze...

...there swayed a red cloth.

“...Hmm. I must say, your nonchalance tends to dispel all grudges and resentment...”

The red cloth...of a young musclehead standing straight in the bathtub; a loincloth swimming in the wind...! *Ah, however I may grasp at straws, I am still but a child*, Shiro thought. It was an indescribably bizarre shock image. His muscles pulsed as if independent organisms. If to be eighteen was to have the right—the duty—to view indecency that eroded one’s psyche, then...

“.....I’m, okay...with a, child’s soul...”

With this last murmur, Shiro fainted on the spot.



“To swoon at the sight of my build at the height of its glory... Oh dear, it seems I have enraptured another one, have I?”

As that meathead Ino bathed, he recalled the trials of his youth, a time he was “way too popular,” which pissed Sora off to his core.

“...Hey, old fart. Can you answer a question that’s just hit me?”

Sora struggled not to look directly at the Werebeast as he asked in a low voice, though shrunk down to 3.6 years of age.

“Isn’t going naked in public an infringement of rights, a breach of the Ten Covenants?”

Hmm? Ino looked down at Sora, then answered with a smile:

“No one will trouble themselves over such a small thing as that. Why do you not live true to your desires?”

“I’m asking you if showing off the shock image you call ‘throbbing muscles’ is considered an act of violence! You never get sarcasm, do you? ...And don’t call it small! It’s just ‘cause of my age!”

Sora insisted that several of his parts had shrunk along with his count of dice.

A simple partition divided the bathtub. Shiro’s hand softly trembled as she held Sora’s underneath it, no doubt a consequence of having been deeply traumatized by the aforementioned act of violence.

“.....So scary... Euuugh, the muscles... They’re, coming for meee...”

The little sister chanted deliriously, having been punished more harshly than she deserved for cheating the ratings. Likewise, from the other side of the screen came another voice.

“...You roused me from my tranquil sleep to insist that I ‘wash Shiro’s hair.’ Is that not violence as well?”

“What could I do...? Shiro’s still all mad at Jibril, you know...”

Steph grumbled sleepily, dragged in by Jibril like the flow of a river. Sora couldn’t see what lay beyond the partition, but Steph, having received six dice from Shiro, was age 12.6 as she washed Shiro’s hair. The bubbling sound was surely Jibril getting stomped down to the bottom of the bath by Shiro.

“How lackadaisically you hand away your dice, sir. Do you not know they are

your life?”

Doubt, confusion... Ino's mumbling was filled with countless meanings. Feeling the gazes collect from the other side of the partition, Sora sighed.

“What's the big deal...? One or ten is the same as long as you don't go to zero. Plus—”

He waved his hand frivolously and gestured toward Steph with his chin.

“—we're all in the same boat. Our vitality is, like, zero. There's no way in hell we'd survive.”

A silence followed, suggesting a number of emotions and intentions, but Sora gave a light wave of his hand as if to dismiss it all. He changed the subject in an attempt to hide his embarrassment.

“Anyway, what are you guys even doing here? Especially you, Gra—Pops? What about you?”

Even though you two did end up being lifesavers, Sora thought.

“Naturally, I came to kill your punk ass, sir.”

“Hey, h-h-hey!! At least couch it a little! You're gonna make me cry, damn it!!”

Even if violence was prohibited by the Covenants, you'd be lying if—for instance, confronted by a body like Schwarzy's in his prime—you said hearing a robot tell you *You are terminated* wasn't scary.

“However, my mind has changed. Let us save your death for last.”

...Oh, I see how it is...I'll kill you last. Everyone knew what came next—I lied.

Shit. I'm next on his list—!!

“...Sir...may I inquire as to the extent of your knowledge of Eastern Union history?”

Though Sora had been furiously contemplating how to escape, Ino's sudden question made him redirect his train of thought.

...I bet this is one of those questions that gives you a chance to avoid the death flag.

“History, you say... Didn’t you guys cover up almost all your history...?”

Sora answered gingerly, choosing his words. Yes, the Eastern Union concealed from outsiders not only the content of their games but also *the details of their history*.

Probably because it touched on the process by which they’d developed their trump card, video games—but anyway.

“So all I know is a smattering from books. They say for over six thousand years you were a bunch of feuding island tribes—”

After the conclusion of the Great War, the Werebeasts split into factions based on their physical attributes—in other words, *whether they had dog or cat ears*—and continued fighting among themselves. In Sora’s view, this was a truly unforgivable travesty. Why must one be placed above the other? A wise man once said, “Heaven did not create animal ears above animal ears”! Dog ears, cat ears, rabbit ears—all are equal... Can one not love each for its own merits? Thus, let us envelop the world in love...for it is not met that such treasures should fight. That said, without naming names...

...isn’t there a world where people kill their own palette swaps? With this in mind, they were in no position to criticize. On the contrary—

“Then you got them all under your control in half a century to form the world’s third-largest country, the Eastern Union, which even had a game that could beat any other race for sure.”

This *inestimable feat*, for which *amazing* didn’t even cut it, was worth every word of exclamation and praise you could throw at it. Sure, in this world, there were sixteen intelligent life-forms—Ixseeds. Wouldn’t organizing just one of them be easy?

To conquer a karmic morass engulfed in discrimination and prejudice for over six thousand years, you say?

“If we just had someone like the Shrine Maiden back there, I bet some of those wars would end.”

“...How you surprise me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I thought you’d say it made sense that such a feat would be accomplished... with the power of an Old Deus.”

But Ino’s prattling was the real surprise.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! Whoa there, Gramps! You really *do* know some funny jokes!”

Slapping the water and laughing out loud, Sora looked up at the vast game board.

“We’re talking about subjugating a region that’s been in conflict for half a century here. If you could pull off a miracle like that by praying to *gods*, even our world would be a war-free zone by now!”

Sure, this game spoke to the power of the Old Deus eloquently. To copy the land and warp the law of heaven to place this spiraling terrain in the sky... If you calculated the energy required for this in terms of physics, what kind of numbers would we talking about? Sora had no idea, but they had to be close to infinite... The work of a god if there ever was one. Such unimaginable, world-rewriting, truth-decreeing power...

And yet, such things were *entirely useless*. In this world, no matter how much power you had, you couldn’t infringe on others’ rights. Moreover, in any world, *ending* conflict aside, there was only one way to *conquer*.

“Here’s what I think—if there’s an Old Deus behind that Shrine Maiden who can pull off such games...”

Sora spoke to Ino as though looking at someone he respected with all his heart.

“The Shrine Maiden’s the one using the Old Deus. By *outsmarting her at games*, of course.”

They were bound by the Covenants not to infringe on others’ rights—*both of them*. For the Shrine Maiden to use the Old Deus or for the Old Deus to use the Shrine Maiden required one to get the other to consent to a game—and win.

.....

“.....Is that it...indeed...O Holy Shrine Maiden?”

At the end of a long silence, Ino's gaze and shoulders fell, as if understanding something. He chuckled.

"...It seems I have bathed a bit long... I shall take my leave."

"Thanks, bro. After managing to find a hot spring, I'd really like to relax and enjoy it without your muscles staring me down."

Sora watched Ino climb out of the tub and make his exit. The young man silently heaved a sigh of relief at having apparently avoided the death flag. But...

"By the way, may I ask one last question?"

Sora's heart jumped as Ino suddenly turned and spoke. Pretending he hadn't noticed (though he must have), Ino asked—no, insisted:

"The traitor who has the memories... King Sora, it is you, isn't it?"

Steph could be heard gasping from the other side of the partition. If Ino was right, it would explain how Sora was able to expound about the game as if he knew it all. Wondering whether that was indeed what they were thinking, Sora smirked.

"Well, well! What evidence do you have that I'm the traitor?"

"My word, is evidence necessary?"

Ino eyed him keenly to say he needed no such thing.

"Were Tet to gather all the Ixseeds and say there was one traitor, in all cases, it would by necessity be you."

"Ha-ha! I like it. It's easy to understand! Nice deduction!"

Your presence is all the evidence I need, bitch, was Ino's contention, to which Sora clapped his hands, laughing.

Yes, they had all agreed to begin this game.

If you took the rules at face value, this "traitor" must have tricked everyone into validating the rules and *agreeing* to have their memories erased. *You're the only asshole who could pull this off*, Ino "praised" him. But...

"Well then, let me say I'd start off by *doubting Tet*."

Sora continued. *If I may expand on that...*

“There’s no way I’d go to such impossible lengths for such a *cheap trick*.”

Ino, as well as Steph and Jibril behind the partition, gasped in disbelief. Silently, they questioned his assertion that memory retention—and by extension, the knowledge of true conditions for victory—was a “cheap trick.” Sora smirked.

A lie should have been embedded within the second explanation of the rules, but between the first and the second, it *wasn’t possible to fit a grand falsehood*. Learning that their memories would be erased, everyone’s first concern would have been the same—the risk of being told that finishing made you win, only to discover it actually made you lose. They must have agreed in advance to *prohibit* such a grandiose deception. But in that case, what falsehood *could* there be...? No, *more importantly*—!!

“Don’t you think, before that, I’d worry about food and transportation?! If we hadn’t scored a Harley, then screw finishing, we might not even have survived to our next stop!”

“—Auggh... This is quite convincing indeed...”

Sora nodded, now cleared of suspicion by the pointed pain known only to those who’d survived the same dire straits.

Yes, a trick like that hardly assured victory, whereas “ ”’s method was always the same. Namely...

“If we’re gonna plant something, it’s gonna be *deadly*.”

Yes, that was it.

“It’s gonna make us win no matter what.”

Sora put his elbow on the bathtub, chin in hand, and stared straight at Ino. His words were bold yet amicable.

“That’s what I’d do... *It’s what anyone would do*, right?”

*Of course. Isn’t that what **you would’ve done**?*

“.....I see. You do have a point...”

Ino trudged away, no longer turning back, but Sora called rather timidly after him.

“—By the way. Can I ask you a question, too?”

“What is it?”

“.....That thing of yours. It’s, like, the size of my arm. Is it always like that? Or only in emergencies?”

Chuckling, Ino kept walking.

“Ha-ha-ha! Unlike you, King Sora, I have consideration for the feelings of others. As I have no intention of inflicting unnecessary wounds, sir, I shall decline to answer and leave it at that.”

“That *is* an answer, isn’t it? Isn’t it?!”

Sora howled angrily as Ino walked away, roaring with laughter, when—*poik*.

“Master, surely there is no need to lend your ears to the prattle of dogs.”

Apparently having finally been let off the hook by Shiro, Jibril peeked over the partition.

“Do they not also say in your world, my masters, ‘All things in moderation’? It is of no particular advantage to a woman for it to be *too* big. 🎵”

Sora could feel the ladies all nodding behind the partition, but...

“...I’m feeling an unprecedented sense of isolation. Could it be—?”

Good lord... Is it the case that I am, in fact, the only one lacking in experience? If so, I’ll never recover from such a harsh reality, he lamented.

“Please be at ease, Master, for I am myself in mint condition, while little Dora here is a font of merely academic sexual—”

“—What?! No—no, I— Wait, I can’t deny or affirm that, can I?! I—I mean, however you look at it, Sora’s arm, whether you’ve got experience or not—that would kill!!”

“...I don’t even, care... Everything, about that old fart...is creepy... scary...*shiver*.”

Sora's eyes narrowed as if dazzled by their responses. *Thank god... It wasn't just me...*

"May I also add that, prior its attenuation by the dice, your *original size*, Master, is nothing to grieve over."

"S-seriously...? I-I'm okay?"

Not two dice Sora—now 3.6 years of age—*Sora as Sora's* original metrics. Putting aside how Jibril'd come by such information, if this walking library—ahem, flying cataclysmic library—vouched for it, then perhaps he could...

"Yes. It's *fun-sized*. If memory serves, it should be perfect for a child. ♥"

"...Jibril...you're, forgiven... You just said, the best thing..."

"I'm done with this game. I quit. Back to character creation..."

Yes, let us begin life anew, Sora wept.

"Oh, Master, please wait! All your humble servant Jibril must do is reform her body into that of a child!!"

"...Jibril, you're, unforgiven... Sink in, the bathtub...and count, your sins...!"

Shiro's *command* was met with a loud splash. Jibril dropped like a cannonball from the top of the partition into the tub.

Grbrbrbrbubrbububub!

Ohhhh! ♥ I am being stomped by my master—what a thrill!

"...Jibril, where'd you go...?"

Sending up a flurry of bubbles—and going to the trouble of employing magic, apparently—Jibril shoved this report directly into their brains. Sora sighed, exhausted.

Their peaceful banter was ill-suited to this game of betrayal, deception, and murder.

"Aaah, I'm revived... The magic of Elven hot springs is said to do wonders for one's beauty and fatigue..."

Steph was the only one who seemed to have given up on thought. She went

on endlessly babbling *What a nice bath!* to herself as if fleeing reality.



Sora awoke and looked around. He scratched his head, thinking he must have been more spent than he'd realized. He'd gotten out of the bath and redistributed the dice among his company, but that's all he remembered. A human being enduring this unending string of trials could be expected to get so tired as to forget things, but what of the principal cause of his fatigue, the one who'd trapped him—Shiro?

“...Nghh... MuscIIles... Stay awayyy... Brother, save meee...”

As if it were only natural—no, it was natural—she was nestled in Sora's arms. Even in sleep, she was battling wounds it seemed would never heal.

...This is too cruel. How can such violence stand? Stroking Shiro's head, Sora contemplated whether he ought to submit a complaint to Tet, saying, *Get off your ass already.*

“Oh my? I apologize, Master, did I wake you?”

—*Hmm?*

“Seems like Shiro fell asleep in the bath, so I carried her to the bedroom only to run outta steam myself and collapse on the mattress...but her groaning in her sleep about rippling muscles woke me up. That pretty much cover it?”

“Your exposition is most admirable, Master.”

“What about you, though? I get the old fart, but what are you doing here, Jibril?”

Dimly lit by spirit light and the glittering of the two dice hovering by her chest, Jibril was seated in a chair writing in a book, also as if it were only natural. Apparently, Ino had come to *interrogate* Sora, but then what about Jibril...?

“Well... I witnessed you sleeping without so much as a blanket and felt it would be terrible if you were to catch a cold...”

Jibril answered Sora's queries with a tranquil smile.

“...and therefore took advantage of your slumber to provide you with warmth from my naked—”

“Goddamn it! How—? How could I have slept through thaaat—?!”

With Shiro snoozing in total darkness, I could’ve experienced, you know, all kinds of sensations legally—! How could I miss such a critical—? All alone, Sora shivered, clutching his head in shame.

“...I came to see your faces, my masters... That is all.”

In the dimly lit room, Jibril spoke quietly to Sora with a literal shadowy smile on her face. Sora, disconcerted, looked back at her, but she kept working on her book—her journal, presumably. Still, coming out of nowhere as usual, she posed a question.

“Master, what do you think...of reincarnation?”

“...? I dunno, are you saying you have it here...? Man, you guys got everything, don’cha?”

Reincarnation. A concept that many in the siblings’ previous world believed in but one which had never been proven. What was he supposed to say about the common sense of a world like Disboard—?

“Oh, no. We have it not.”

You don’t? Faked out, Sora squinted at her, but Jibril just kept writing and declared plainly:

“...A soul that has lost its vessel dissolves into the spirit corridors and loses its meaning.”

She was describing this world’s concept of *death*.

“...Just as there is no reason for water to gather in a broken cup, the soul without its body permeates into the earth, dissolves into the atmosphere, and returns to the planet... This world has no reincarnation. *However.*”

Then Jibril stopped writing. She faced Sora gently and continued.

While only an infinitesimal possibility...

...or as far-fetched as claiming monkeys typing infinitely could write a novel...

“It would be theoretically conceivable for people with *the exact same souls* to be born again.”

At some point, it had been established as common knowledge that souls really existed. Sora, at the time, had vaguely understood them to be something like DNA, but...

“...So what you’re saying is a clone could be born by coincidence?”

Let’s say these supposed “souls,” which contained more than just DNA, were reproduced under the exact same conditions. In that case, sure, maybe you could, in some ways, call that reincarnation.

“Master, hypothetically, if Lord Shiro were a reincarnation of someone else, what would you thi—?”

“I wouldn’t think anything. It’s irrelevant and makes no difference to me.”

Sora replied immediately to Jibril’s gentle probing.

“Shiro is just Shiro. She’s no one in the past, and even if there’s someone like her in the future, that’s not her.”

Suppose, for argument’s sake, such a clone did exist. It would only be some stranger who looked like Shiro.

“...Then allow me to pose a different hypothetical... What if something were to happen to Lord Shiro—”

...An unthinkable premise. *If you wanna make me cry, just say so*, Sora grumbled.

“—and then such a clone with exactly the same soul came to you? What would you think?”

Where does the self end and the stranger begin? It was a deep philosophical question, but Sora’s brain lacked such refinement.

“HA-HA-HA! Then your premise holds no water.”

“...Why do you say that?”

“‘Cause she’s a different person! Doesn’t matter what I think. *She wouldn’t depend on or care about me!*”

I have my little sister, Shiro, who cares for me and stays by my side...and how about that? Weren’t the chances of someone like her existing far scanter than

someone born naturally with the exact same DNA? As Sora asked this, the corners of his eyes glistened with tears. It seemed he hadn't given a satisfying answer. Jibril silently lowered her head, at which point, a voice suddenly piped up.

"...Brother...you're wrong..."

"—My sister, when did you wake up?"

"...The moment...she said, the words...*'warmth from my naked'...*"

The harsh glint of Shiro's red eyes in the dim light overwhelmed Sora. She took his place facing Jibril and spoke quietly, in her usual near-whisper.

"...I don't, get...what, you're asking...Jibril..."

It didn't seem that Sora (or even Jibril herself) knew, either. But Shiro, knowing herself to be dense to people's subtleties, declared, for that very reason, that whatever Jibril was asking *was of no interest to her*.

"...Reincarnation... I'll never, *accept it...*"

Probability and hypotheses be damned, she whispered in a tone that brooked no argument.

"...A clone of me...would go back, to Brother."

—.

"...No matter how many times, I'm reborn...every time, I'll look for Brother... and go to him."

Her red eyes scrutinizing him as she spoke made Sora question himself.

"...And...I know Brother...won't be able...to say no..."

Could he confront this white skin, this soft voice, these red eyes looking up at him and say, *That's not Shiro—it's someone else* and push her away?

"...But if there's someone, who looks like me...and sounds like me...and acts like me..."

Then it would be simple, Shiro insisted like a pouty, temperamental child.

"...being stroked by Brother and smiling...happily...but isn't me..."

She concluded with tears in her eyes:

“.....I will...*never accept it...*”

In the silence, Sora chuckled. *I see—that is simple. Think about it the other way around. What if someone who looked like me but wasn't were stroking Shiro?* It didn't matter how Sora or Shiro or others saw it. *It only mattered how you personally saw it. And that was that.*

As if satisfied by the answer this time, Jibril lowered her eyes, closed the book she'd been scribbling in again, and stood.

“Pardon me for interrupting your rest. I shall withdraw. Please enjoy yourselves.”

“...Hey. You still never told us why you came, did you?”

Jibril had started to leave, happily stroking the two dice by her chest, when Sora narrowed his eyes and asked the question.

“I came to see your faces, Masters... That truly is all. 🎵” Jibril laughed as she joked. “But I received more than I came for... Lastly, I have a report and a confirmation—one of each.”

I shall start with the report, she said with a somehow complex smile.

“I was correct to come here. It was an unsurpassably pleasant time.”

And now the confirmation, she continued with a suggestive smile.

“...In this game, it is permitted—that *I win*, is it not?”

It was a game of betrayal and deception. Whatever secret thoughts each might harbor, there was one solid fact.

Only one would finish.

Just as Sora had set things up so that he and Shiro would win—just as everyone had—Jibril, too, must have done the same *with her master's permission*. Her eyes seemed to confirm it.

“Of course. But also—we're not gonna let you win.”

“...Jibril, I'll...punish you...real good...”

Jibril bowed deeply at their defiant replies.

“...I beg your forgiveness, but this game alone I must win. *By any means necessary.*”

As soon as Jibril had said this, she turned and flapped out the window into the night sky. Looking at the spot where she had been before disappearing as suddenly as she had come, Shiro muttered:

“...Brother, how many dice...did you give...Jibril?”

“Hunh? I mean, c’mon, she only had two, y’know? I made her give them—”

—*back* is Sora was about to say when he stopped.

Do I remember her doing that? —Nope.

Considering that Sora and Shiro each had nine at their chests and Steph, asleep in another room, had one—

“Jibriiil!! What’s up with making that dramatic declaration of war and then *cheesing* us like that?!”

She musta disguised her dice with magic to make off with the eight she “borrowed”! Sora burst into tears.

“...Brother... You fail, at this game... You fail, at life...”

But from whence had this failure originated? A transfer made in order to escape Shiro. Her claim that it was all his fault left no room for objections, even from their allies. Sora merely clutched his head and wept.

CHAPTER 3

HOWDUNIT

MISDIRECTION

The 204th space—the fifth move. Dice remaining: three. Ino Hatsuse looked down at his hands, which were the same as when he'd been thirty. This space, lit by a moon so red it looked made-to-order, inspired a nostalgic chuckle. Yes... even the season had been the same when he'd met her on a night just like this. These islands that, at the time, weren't even yet called the Eastern Union were where he'd first encountered that raging storm...



"A nice moon, eh, *Hatsuse*? On a night so pleasant as this, what say we go and amuse ourselves a bit?"

Over half a century earlier, under a night sky lit by that same red moon, that small two-tailed fox had stained the night red more violently than the moonlight. The powerful storm that had laid waste to the East called Ino's clan's name in a voice like bells as she stood before him. He was then only the chief of a single island and had heard tell of this girl, the last survivor of the oppressed golden fox tribe—a girl capable of bloodbreak who had clawed her way up from the bottom of the island of Kannagari that oppressed her until, at last, she controlled it.

Using her staggering senses, intellectual agility, and cunning wiles, she had flown from Kannagari to bare her fangs at every tribe on every island of Werebeast. She'd become known as a storm that had engulfed the East, blocking off the sea, severing crucial trade lines, undermining and subverting the structures of rule, leaving her opponents no choice but to acquiesce to her games—through which she would crush them, without clemency or compromise, and subsequently seize control.

Before such a storm, Ino had no right to refuse.

“...I had hoped us to be kindred spirits in our grievances with the status quo... but it seems my hope was misplaced.”

Ino only sighed and stepped firmly onto the ground.

At first, the storm had brought him hope, anticipation, yearning. Finally, someone had come to put an end to the foul and fruitless strife among Werebeast.

But. The ground onto which he had stepped split and cracked into the air as the red forms that stained the night became two. One of the red monsters, blood boiling, tearing through the shackles of cosmic truth, spoke.

“Surely you do not believe that such power is your sole province. Not to mention...”

She thought that with such power she could bend all Werebeast to her will, her authority, her control—*and then*.

“...it is difficult to overlook the possibility that someone stronger will destroy the entire race—!!”

No one planned it. It was just a nauseating consequence...but, hard though it was to admit, the way the disparate Werebeast tribes fought endlessly among themselves was part of the premise. If Werebeast was united by force, under the whim of a single agent plenipotentiary—

—when someone stronger came along, *Werebeast itself would vanish in one move*.



It was a grim approach that allowed for the possibility that another race might conquer and enslave a segment of Werebeast as part of a game. A philosophy that gave them the freedom to say, *Who cares about that tribe? It's not our problem.* They even delighted in this. Power alone was insufficient to unite the race and overturn this theory. Something *more* was needed. This was the dismissal that Ino tossed at the storm of his hope, anticipation, yearning, and—ultimately—disappointment.

“Guh-ha-ha-ha! You talk well of tribes and the like, you mutinous dickhead who just wants all the pretty ones!”

...The storm laughed.

“——Dear me, what is this of which you speak?”

“Mate, there's no need to put on airs... You would defy the tribe under the basis 'I can't shag who I want,' and thus, you seek to build your harem while purporting to eliminate discrimination among tribes... 'Tis a breath of fresh air, perhaps the purest motive I've heard!”

Hmm, so she knows everything?

“Then let me be forthright. Hands off my bitches, or I'll rip your throat out, you little shit.”

Ino abandoned all pretense of keeping up appearances. The beautiful storm let out a sultry laugh and plopped down cross-legged.

“Then beat me. If you do, I won't lay hands on your bitches or your island ever more.”

And in exchange—

“If you lose, you become my underling. Not that you're free to refuse, of course. Sorry 'bout that. 🎵”

Ino subsequently regretted his earlier idiocy. The violent senses and speed of thought imparted by the power of the bloodbreak couldn't create a storm capable of swallowing up all of these islands... Nor had it. The girl had played her fellow bloodbreaker and knocked him down like a baby.

“This theory that 'tis better for Werebeasts to fight... That's the *first* thing

we'll smash."

She introduced herself to Ino, now her underling, as the "Shrine Maiden" and remained scarlet even as she dropped her bloodbreak.

"We'll snatch everything up, then dangle before them the opportunity to self-govern by forming a tribal union."

The golden fox girl would have outshone any treasure as she spoke of a future for which Ino had hoped, anticipated, and yearned.

"We'll found a federal Werebeast government—the Eastern Union... That will be our first overthrow of convention."

Ino gasped for breath at that all-engulfing storm's vision.

"...But that will merely invite someone else to overthrow us."

He was saying that after they'd united Werebeast, another race might make a lethal move.

"We'll *overthrow them right back!* If you speak of means to battle other races, I've already thought ours up."

First of all, she declared, looking beyond the union of Werebeast to the inevitable confrontation with other races:

"At the end of that eternity, once we've overthrown everything there is to overthrow, there should lie a certain convention I seek."

Her eyes gazed far off into the distance as she spoke.

"—A convention by which no one will be dominated by anyone—a convention *no one needs to be sacrificed to achieve.*"

Ino Hatsuse knelt before the one who challenged an unfinished dream—and an end that lay yet beyond it—and solemnly declared to devote his remaining life to her.

"If you but promise to incorporate into the legal system the institution of *polygamy*, I shall devote all my spirits to assist you."

"Eh-ha-ha-ha! Such is a man who woos all the pretty young things regardless of tribe or standing!"

The Shrine Maiden laughed and needled Ino, who knelt with an expression of absolute seriousness.

“What a relief. If you were the monstrous sort to attack more than just the pretty ones, I’d have to fear for my own chastity.”

“If you will, madam—might I ask you to retract that statement?”

“...Eh?”

“It is undignified for a beauty to debase herself.”

“.....Mate, I can see you must be popular.”

“I am proud to say I *am*. Also as a matter of pride, madam, I must inform you that I am, in fact, quite cognizant of matters of standing.”

Ino, having resolved to dedicate himself to her goal, smiled at the young girl who cast her eyes so high, who was so noble as to make the moon withdraw in shame.

“I shall forgo wooing you till I am a man worthy, O Holy Shrine Maiden.”

From that day began half a century of turmoil that felt like several centuries. Just as the Shrine Maiden had declared, they took on four digits’ worth of islands and nearly as many tribes. They spent night and day using games to resolve complex challenges—legal, economic, judicial—officially labeled matters of discussion and negotiation.

Meanwhile, they gathered experts to their provisional government and established a national research plan demanding a way to fend off other races: a game that left no room for interference by spirits or magic. The Shrine Maiden’s eyes fell upon the power that flowed from Kannagari’s shrine, now called “the Shrine.” At the time, no one (including Ino) knew what that power was. Thinking back...it must have been the power of the Old Deus. But the Shrine Maiden used it as an energy source and sought a machine that operated using code. There would be no point if other races were able to easily ascertain what was behind the root of their scheme and intervene, she said. So she created a program operated by switching that power on and off—the first video game. It took another twenty years before they were able to transform the algorithms to enable video and audio. And when almost sixty years since that day had

passed.....

“...’Tis been over half a century... So, Ino Hatsuse...”

Kannagari, the capital of the actualized nation of Werebeast—the Eastern Union. Who could have imagined their dazzling, gleaming developed city half a century ago? The golden fox sitting on the railing in the Shrine Garden downed her sake and suddenly grumbled.

“...where was it—that *I went wrong*...?”

Ino didn’t understand what she meant. The theory under which the Werebeast had quarreled had been overthrown entirely. Their game for other races, too, had been cultivated into a total-immersion experience that even routed the Elves.

“If I may speak, Holy Shrine Maiden, I believe you have achieved what no Werebeast could, overthrowing—”

“’Tis been over half a century. Look where I’m still stuck...”

Interrupting Ino, the Shrine Maiden laughed at herself as she spoke with her eyes. She’d broken one convention after another, pursing that end, running without ever looking back.

...You can’t govern through lip service. In order to alleviate discrimination among tribes, they had adopted the policy of scorning other races. There was no counting the times they’d abandoned the few for the sake of the many, no calculating the lives they’d taken indirectly.

And now, of all times, she had shaved down her life from two hundred years until only ten or so remained.

“...*This won’t get us there*, to the convention I wanted, without sacrifices...”

She realized all they’d done was change who was sacrificed.

“I was wrong... It must have been the first move... That *ruse* I used was wrong.”

Ino still couldn’t understand her.

“But still, *what should I have done*...? I don’t know...”

The Shrine Maiden laughed derisively as she played with that pawn woven in light—the Werebeast Piece.

“That’s why—this is the end of my dream.”

The Shrine Maiden flicked the piece, saying she no longer had the right to the dream of that day, but the man who had been close by her side for over half a century demurred.

“...Such idle courtesies you utter. With that face, they will persuade no one.”

“...If that’s...so—I’ll choose words better suited to a *sore loser*.”

She chewed the corners of her mouth as she struggled to smile. She had the face of a gamer, still wholly unconvinced of anything, unable to fully give in.

“What should I have done? I’ll save the match until I’ve found an answer... How’s that?”

He saw that face for the first time. Neither crying nor trembling, it was aloof and firm as ever.

That was what Ino decided to do.....



“...There you are...”

Sensing a presence, Ino closed his eyes on the past before slowly opening them to the present.

The 204th space.

Ino had paused in thought there, fifty-two spaces from where he had bathed with Sora. He’d been quietly waiting on the spot where Sora had mentioned he’d land next.

“—Oh? Is this, like...a *sorry to keep you waiting* kinda situation, Gramps?”

“...Nghh...I never...wanted to see, this old fart...again...”

“I’m sick of this. Can’t you drop out of this game? Will I feel better if I die?!”

Ino cracked a smile at the three who’d turned up, flippant, grudging, and noisy.

“Yes, I have been waiting for you...for quite a while, in fact.”

“Gimme a break... That was five hundred and twenty kilometers. Even a Harley runs out of gas, man...”

In hindsight, I should have stuck on a fuel trailer, Sora grouched.

Whatever had happened along the way, Sora was now wearing a straw hat, holding a bamboo spear, and panting. Shiro similarly bore a bamboo spear which she pointed, trembling, at Ino as if confronting a terrifying dream. Steph, meanwhile, was on the ground in the throes of a tantrum, wearing rags. Assembled in this manner, the Task was read to the trio:

—*Shred your thing for the sake of the world.*

Sora snickered at what was *Ino’s own Task*.

“...Hmm, so each of us just has to shred some random thing, then we’ll collect three of your dice, leaving you with zero and a view of the ‘game over’ screen... You waited to see us off, Gramps?”

“—Wha...?!”

Passing through the 204th space where Sora and company were to land and seeing the Task, Ino had decided to lie in wait. Sora ignored Steph’s reaction and subsequent speechlessness as he disdainfully assessed the situation. Ino just smiled at himself, though. Sora’s contempt was natural. Not only had he failed to specify when, but he hadn’t even specified what.

Just like Ino’s other Tasks, this one failed pretty hard.

Even allowing that he had lost himself in the wake of the Shrine Maiden’s death and was convinced Sora was the killer, such incompetence was indefensible, so he didn’t even try.

“I am mortified. I should have contemplated calmly, accurately, and surely a means to kill your ass, sir.”

“D00d, that’s the wrong thing to apologize for! And enough with declaring your intentions to murder me already, okay? You’re gonna make me cry!”

Sora howled tearfully at the *intimidation tactics* for which Ino had opted.

—Yes, it was a Task that lacked specificity.

—But it was still fulfillable and therefore *valid*.

——By all accounts, it *should* have been utterly meaningless.

“King Sora...or rather, should I ask Queen Shiro?”

Fffp... He lowered his center of gravity while exposing his fangs and claws.

“You remember the Task rules word for word, do you not, madam—?”

It was clear to everyone that Ino was *poised for battle*. Shiro furrowed her brow suspiciously in response—but only for an instant.

“——?! ”

Her eyes bulged, the blood drained from her already stark-white face, and she opened her backpack.

07: A die-bearer who landeth upon a space with a TASK may be forced to carry out any instructions.

The Tasks of this game had binding force despite clearly *violating the Ten Covenants*. Forcing action was, by definition, a violation of rights. Even so, if binding force was active, it was because they had all agreed to it. Because of this, though indirectly—they could take one another’s lives. If a time were specified—as in “Kill yourself *immediately*”—they would die. It was as if someone had asked “May I kill you?” and they’d answered, “Why, certainly.” Meaning...

“Now you see. Though it may be a foolish Task...as long as I am here—”

At that moment, the earth shook and the air cracked. The ensuing dust cloud obscured Sora and his companions’ vision. When they were finally able to reopen their eyes...

“—I can shred your thing, King Sora...!”

The crimson beast—spraying blood, baring his fangs—looked absolutely murderous. Shiro had caught on early and was rifling through her backpack, at which Ino sneered, declaring:

“I shall allow you a handicap.”

If they could find something to shred, thereby fulfilling the Task, they could stop Ino’s incipient homicide.

But.

“I wonder...which will take longer...”

“You shredding something...or me counting to five and then shredding King Sora?”

—*Five.*

“Uhh, err... What is the meaning of this?”

“...Hurry... We have to, shred something...before Brother dies...!”

Shiro’s urgent direction seemed to drill the message into the dumbfounded Steph. Like Shiro, she started rifling through her backpack, shrieking.

“...Hey, what—? Why is Mr. Ino going to kill Sora?!”

“Why? D00d, he’s been writing ‘die’ and shit in his Tasks since the beginning. He’s dead friggin’ set on doing me in, for cripes’ sake... I mean, I don’t expect him to like me, but when did I do anything to make him to hate me so much?”

“On a million or so occasions! Wait, that’s not even the point! Come on—!”

“...Come on? Come on and what?”

—*Four.*

“Look at *Gramps*. If we fulfill this Task, he’s the one who’s gonna die. We’re in the same boat.”

“Look at *you*! Why are you so calm?!”

The two girls retrieved food they’d procured at the inn and moved frantically to tear it apart. Meanwhile, Sora sighed placidly, as if exhausted, and cast his gaze to Ino.

“...Well, there’s no point. In the first place, there’s not even enough time.”

—*Three.*

Having wrestled natural law to its knees with his bloodbreak, the time it took

to count to five felt like hours to Ino. Shiro and Steph, ransacking their backpacks, seemed motionless. Meeting the gaze of the man calmly staring him down set the Werebeast down the path of memory...



It seemed like only yesterday Ino had just returned from Oceand, the trap laid by Siren and Dhampir. In the Shrine Garden, the golden fox perched on the railing downed her sake, just as she had *that day*...

“Ino Hatsuse. To tell you the truth, I was of the opinion we should abandon you.”

Ino had spent over half a century with the Shrine Maiden and knew her well. Were it for the sake of Werebeast...she wouldn't hesitate to cut off the few for the sake of the many. Her awe-inspiring decisiveness and ability had built the Eastern Union, but even so, she was not immune to emotion. Every decision was awash in pain and turmoil, yet still she did not bend. She faced what lay far ahead, reliant on no one. But *that day*, she'd revealed herself a “sore loser,” asking where she'd gone wrong. Since that day, when she said that she'd seen the end of the endless dream...

“A man who stayed true to himself, abandoning you not though I would have... Are you game to give him a chance?”

Hell no, Ino had thought. Though he didn't understand Sora, there was one thing he could say about him. At the very least, he was a man not to be trusted.

“—If it would allow *you* to once more dream.”

Lowering his head...that had been his reply.

Because, since *that day*—that day she'd stifled her bitter tears and stopped herself from breaking, that day she'd declared *I'm putting off the match* and turned her eyes from her dream—her smile had been so stiff.

Now it wasn't. Now she had what she'd had when first he met her, that girl looking out toward the end of endlessness. That smile before that precious jewels would fade.

The girl who'd put off the match until she could find her answer must have found it somewhere in Sora and Shiro...which enabled her to dream again. Ino

had spent over half a century with the Shrine Maiden and knew her well.

Or at least...so he'd thought.....

■■■

—Zero.

“—With that, *my friends*...this is good-bye.”

The company still frantically poised to tear up their belongings, Ino bid his farewell. Ignoring Shiro and Steph, who opened their mouths to scream, Sora interjected:

“...Look, Gramps...I hate to break it to you, but that's——”

Ino's feet kicked the ground, cutting Sora off, warping space, and splitting time itself. The laws of nature yielded to the violent energy of Ino's bloodbreak. One hundred meters became zero meters. Zero seconds became one hundred seconds. Sora, Shiro, and Steph, each with a different expression on their faces, were suspended in time as Ino flew through the gap opened only to the bloodbreaker.

A step forward. An outstretched hand.

That was all it would take for Ino's strength to vaporize an Immanity. His claws instantly ripped through the silence toward—

“——no use... You gotta pick your *gaming genre* well.”

—Sora, stopping at the very tip of his nose. The inexorable power of the Covenants, which governed all things physical and paraphysical, halted them in their tracks. After a few instants' lag, time seemed to finally remember it was supposed to flow. Everything Ino's actions should have set in motion—the boom, the gale, the shock wave—happened simultaneously.

“If you wanna match bluffs with me...you're in way over your head.”

Sora's voice cracked, but still he did his best to sneer. Ino smirked back, put down his hand, and dropped his bloodbreak.

“No specifics means *you can do anything*... What kinda bullshit theory is that?!”

...True, the rules by which they'd agreed life could be exchanged were binding... However.

"All that means is *nothing's on the table*...right?"

"...Hmm, so you were aware. Perhaps it was an overreach to match wits with a devil?"

Ino chuckled. Sora lazily set about tearing up an herb, ignoring Shiro and Steph, who were frozen in place.

Ino couldn't use this Task to kill Sora. *If Ino himself knew that*, thought Shiro...

".....Oh..."

Realizing a little late the true intent behind his actions, she cried out softly at what was in her hand.

"—Huh? Then...then, Mr. Ino, you...didn't intend to kill Sora?"

"Miss Stephanie...I entreat you not to disparage me."

To the one or so persons who didn't get it, Ino responded forcefully:

"I, Ino Hatsuse, have the mettle to kill King Sora anytime, anywhere!"

"Hey, old fart!! I know you're bluffing, but you'd better apologize to my now modestly wet pants!!"

"...Uh... Huh? What? But—"

Why bluff if he knew he couldn't kill him? Steph's face, a picture of befuddlement, elicited a pleasant smile from Ino, who—half earnestly, half in jest—enlightened her.

"If I am unable to kill him, surely the God will indulge me causing him grief?"

Tee-hee! He stuck out his tongue. It was an effect entirely ill-suited his chiseled physique.

"...Gramps, you really don't need to be *that* type..."

"Wh-what...?"

Steph was exhausted to the point of collapse, but Sora's groan held her back.

"If all three of us fulfill the Task, you lose all your dice..."

Sora regarded Steph and what she held in her hand as he spoke.

“...You figured at least one of us would refuse, so you set this whole thing up.”

“.....!!!”

Just like Shiro, Steph had shredded an herb, in exchange for which...

She gasped at the additional die that appeared at her chest.

“In other words, you wanted to give us your dice and let us advance.” Still slowly shredding his herb, Sora said sarcastically, “A *tsundere* musclehead? Do not want... No one wants that. It’s gross, so knock it off, all right?”

.....

.....*Hff*. Completely fed up, Ino muttered self-deprecatingly.

“You say you see through everything... That’s exactly what pisses me off, monkey bastard.”

Ino had spent over half a century with the Shrine Maiden, and yet he knew nothing about her. What she’d faced as a girl, grieved over as a Maiden, lamented when she said she’d gone wrong that day her dream was crushed... Not a thing. He hadn’t even known about the Old Deus behind her or so much as suspected its existence.

Yet this man and his sister, who seemed to see through everything, knew far more about the Shrine Maiden than Ino *before they’d even met her*. What she’d suffered, where she’d gone wrong, what brought tears to her eyes. Even...

...what had made her turn once more toward her dream, reigniting her smile...

It was a mere annoyance, a half-truth, a childish jealousy that had compelled Ino, and even now, he opened his mouth with juvenile petulance.

True, it was as though he barely knew the Shrine Maiden. *But there is one thing I do know*, he insisted.

“If you plant something, it must be deadly, ensuring your victory no matter what. That was your assertion, yes?”

That was what Sora would do.

That was what anyone would do.

And if that, too, was what Ino would do...

“...We can therefore conclude that *the Holy Shrine Maiden must have done the same...can we not?*”

Exactly, Sora seemed to say with a smirk. With that, he finally ripped apart the herb in his hands. As Steph gasped in bewilderment, Ino smiled. *That does make sense, if you think about it.*

If this was a game that began with everyone’s consent with the Shrine Maiden’s life as the buy-in, then “everyone” must have *included the Shrine Maiden...* Moreover, by asking them to trust Sora, she must have intended...

“...The Holy Shrine Maiden must have *believed* in you. She believed that you, King Sora and Queen Shiro, would certainly, better than anyone else—”

Once Sora had shredded the herb, Ino’s Task was deemed fulfilled. Having lost his three remaining dice, a whirlpool of light engulfed him as he spoke.

“—by means conceivable only to filthy, repulsive, twisted, broken lowlifes such as yourselves, so grossly defective in personality and deplorable in both mind and face—succeed in *betraying and beguiling everyone to win.*”

“That was one...no, about seven...more words than you needed, old fart.”

“.....Brother...a-am I...deplorable...in face...?”

“Agggh, Shiro! No, you’re not! He was talking about me!”

Shiro, nothing objectionable about her face, had been censured alongside Sora, who promptly reassured her. Grinning as he faded away, Ino answered his own question.

“And, *on that assumption*—she must have planned to set you up, do you not suppose?”

A game in which the players murder each other was only possible with unanimous consent. The only reason Ino would agree to a premise otherwise inconceivable, the cost of Shrine Maiden’s life at the outset—

“It must be the case that if you set things up to insure your victory...and

succeed...”

Ino now paraded before them the motive it had taken him so long to grasp.

“That is the means by which the Holy Shrine Maiden will ultimately win...and this I knew.”

One, two years were shaved off his life, and his body regressed. They’d all gone through this any number of times, but this time it didn’t stop. It kept going, down to *zero*—to *nonbeing*.

What would happen if your dice ran down to nothing? Everyone now saw the answer for the first time. Watching Steph, in particular, cover her mouth and weep in a muddled mixture of fear and pity, Ino told them:

“—Win. You must answer the hope on which the Holy Shrine Maiden staked her life. I shall tolerate naught else.”

As if spitting, *Don’t get cocky*, he faced Sora and Shiro. *I only end here to aid you asses in victory for the sake of the Holy Shrine Maiden’s triumph.*

“You don’t need to tell us that. Take care of yourself, Gramps—I mean, Kid?”

“...Hasta la vista, baby...not that, I wanna, but...good night...”

Though this was Ino’s desired outcome, the siblings flippantly sent him off to oblivion without so much as batting an eye. Steph ground her teeth, rather creeped out. Ino spoke once more.

“At this final juncture...may I beg one answer?”

“...Final juncture... Well, in *that* case, it depends.”

With only seconds before he vanished entirely, he asked aimlessly:

“...Why was I...not enough...?”

Even now, as he went to his death, he did not understand what the Shrine Maiden had found.

“...Why was it you...who made the Holy Shrine Maiden smile...?”

Those two, not Ino, had discovered whatever returned her smile to her. What was it about those two monsters, so apathetically capable of watching a man die? Throwing his envy and remorse to the winds, Ino begged them for the

answer.

“...Gramps. Lemme fill you in on the fundamental secret to winning games...”

Sora and Shiro regarded him with mixed expressions, as if unsure what to say.

“It’s not letting your opponent do what they want and doing everything they don’t.”

“...You say, we’re twisted...well...suck it...suckah...”

That’s why... Sora’s frown deepened.

“You might be a really great person...but you’re a suck-ass gamer.”

At the end of the day, Ino was a *good guy*.

“...I suppose I shall simply accept your kind intentions...”

Don’t let your opponent do what they want and do everything they don’t. As gamers, they were saying, we have no interest in giving you a real answer.

“On the other side with the Holy Shrine Maiden, I shall be watching you scream in her trap.”

He smiled as if completely refreshed.

“Kind intentions? What are you talking about? By the way, I’ve got something to say, too, at your ‘final juncture’ or whatnot, if you don’t mind?”

Through his fading consciousness, Ino was sure he saw it. Something extraordinary, as per usual, just like always. It would make anyone want to punch the guy in his face.

“This game. It’s supposed to be about taking dice, taking life.”

Sora’s smile, just as Ino remembered, asking him...

“...Why don’t *your memories* dwindle?”

—.

—.

“See ya! Let us know how it is on your precious ‘other side’—”

“...Later...we’ll be, waiting...! 🎵”



Ino was wrapped in light, regressing endlessly. In this game in which one's time of substance, their physical age, was divided into dice, zero dice meant a denial of one's existence. Back to a boy, to an infant, to a fetus, then to a cell, until all that was left on the ground where the one called Ino Hatsuse had once stood was the lie that no such person had ever existed.

"That's... kinda traumatizing..."

"...I...hate it... It reminded, me... Nightmares, again..."

It reminded them of a documentary about the origin of life or some shit they'd watched together once. Sora and Shiro disgustedly contemplated the spectacle unfolding before them.

Educational or not, spare us the reverse playback of a developing fetus...

".....How can...you two...be so calm?"

Steph was in a fit of tears.

"Have you truly gone mad?! You killed Mr. Ino—!"

"Uhhh, maybe you could spare a moment now and then to consider how Mr. Sora was nearly killed..."

Though she'd been led on, Steph had played a role in this. She felt wracked by guilt, but, horrified by Sora's lackadaisical response, shrank back in abject terror.

"...Remaining spaces, one hundred forty-seven... Consumption per move, six... Two more moves, by dice randomization analysis...! 🎵"

"We've been through a lot of twists and turns, but now Ino's safely out of the race. We don't have many dice left, but hey, it's all going according to plan! 🎵"

Sora and Shiro merely fiddled with their dice as they assessed the situation. They *eliminated* Ino and *one other player*, just like they'd planned. At last, their path to victory was clear... The two smiled faintly.

Ino, once he'd cooled off, hadn't done a bad job reading things.

If you were planting something, make it deadly. That's what Sora—what

anyone, even the Shrine Maiden—would do. That being the case, he was just one step away...

“All right! Whaddaya say we gather the dice once more and travel in company?!”

“...Okay...”

Sora and Shiro ignored the remaining—correction, the persistent—problem of transportation as best they could and raised their fists in the air—

“I refuse.”

—but they had a false start.

“I decline to travel in the company of individuals who can kill someone and smile about it!!!”

...

.....*Uh...okay?*

“...Brother, you’d better...tell her...”

“Uh...huh? You mean...?”

It was as if Shiro’s comment alone had tipped him off that the eyes fixed on him required an explanation.

“D00d, don’t you get it? We can’t even see the ground for the flags we’ve set! If this was a video game, we’d be filing a complaint against the writer, saying, ‘How long are you gonna drag on this blatantly obvious foreshadowing?’”

“...Brother...get...on with it...”

His sister complained, and Sora whispered into Steph’s ear—

—inducing a scream sufficient to rend heaven and earth.

“Mr. Ino was right! The world would be better off if you two went and died for a chaaaange!!!”



The Eastern Union: the capital, Kannagari. Somewhere within it was an organization called the Chinkai Tandai District (CTD). It had been established as

a military arm during the ancient Great War to deal with menaces from the sea. Now that the war was over, its location and organizational setup had changed drastically, but its name and mission remained the same. It was a foreign office to deal with waterborne threats.

Rumors of a *ghost* circulated within the present CTD. A perfectly preposterous story, especially in this world. It was an incontrovertible fact that ghosts didn't exist. Life was composed entirely of a vessel and a soul, and the state in which a vessel, due to injury, disease, or aging, became unable to hold a soul was called death. Maintaining the form of a soul without a vessel would require magic on a divine level. All those so-called ghosts lingering after death were, without exception, hallucinations. But recently within the CTD, whispers of this rumor had grown quite serious.

It was said someone could be heard groaning *Raaaaaaaaage...* in a vacant room. Some claimed to have seen a beefy mass of sinew pass through a wall, a truly nauseating sight. They said it shone dimly through this world, that fearsome...fluorescent musclehead.

In fact, it wasn't even on the level of rumor anymore. Here it was, right in front of the woman. In the vacant reception chamber, it writhed on the floor, a mass of meat groaning indistinctly, a sinewy lump of translucent muscle. — *Ohhh...* Indeed, it was the fluorescent musclehead! The woman's trembling lips parted as tears filled her eyes.

"...Are—?"

The one who'd spoken so gallantly... Oh, what was his name—?

"Are you...Diplomatic Commissioner Hatsuse, sir?"

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaagggge!!"

His name was Ino Hatsuse, that ghastly apparition from which all averted their gazes, the fluorescent musclehead. Having determined his identity, the frightened woman asked again.

"Th-the specter of Commissioner Hatsuse? P-pardon my impertinence, sir, but y-y-you're not dead, are you?"

"Err-hrr, err-hrr-heh-heh... No, no...for better or worse, it seems I am not!!!"

Yes, Ino had gone on to his “precious other side”—or rather, he’d returned. Having accepted his death and spewed his corny lines, Ino Hatsuse had awoken at the Shrine, looking just how Sora and Shiro must’ve hoped...

“I’m alive... What the hellllllllllll?!!”

With this roar, he flattened himself on the ground, clutched his head, and rolled around in anguish. No, he wasn’t alive, exactly. Actually, common sense dictated he had to be pretty damn dead, but he recalled the rules...

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

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

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

15: In the event that all players have lost their dice or perished, the game shall be deemed IMPOSSIBLE TO CONTINUE, and the game shall end.

16: If the game is IMPOSSIBLE TO CONTINUE, the Old Deus hath the right to collect all possessed by all participants except the foremost.

In the event they lost their dice, dropped to zero, *or* perished. It should have been obvious if you thought about it. If zero dice equaled death, there should have been no need to separate them with an *or*. As a matter of fact—!!

“Where in the rules does it say that if you lose all your dice you die? Noooooowheere!! The one who said you die if you lose them—was that *monkey baaastard!!*”

So he’d lost his dice, his “time of substance”—that is, his *physical age*. The result was that his body (his vessel) had disappeared, leaving only his transparent soul. Normally, this would mean death, but under these thoroughly abnormal rules—

—his life would only be collected at the end of the game.

Ino remembered Sora's and Shiro's expressions as he'd faded away. They were mixed, as if they didn't know what to say... Yes, that was it. Now he realized. They'd been stifling a laugh with *apathetic stares*.

It's supposed to be about taking dice, taking life. Why don't your memories dwindle?

The exchange of dice affected only the vessels. They'd realized that in this game, even if you lost your dice—

—*you wouldn't instantly die*. What bullshit rules—!

But that meant...

"So the Shrine Maiden's not dead, either?!"

He'd failed so abysmally that howling about it now was futile. Ino, having believed he was dying and subsequently gushing the corniest lines, finally caught up. *Ah...at last, I see. That monkey bastard's—no, that kind gentleman's—response was quite tactful*. The question had never even occurred to Ino... Would the Holy Shrine Maiden, the one who sought a strategy that wouldn't require anyone's sacrifice...actually *sacrifice herself*? Her gentle voice had called it out to him.

It's 'cause you're an idiot.

Ino put his spirit body to good use, sinking into the ground and clutching his knees below it.

I see. I have failed...so abysmally that I only now begin to appreciate the depths of that failure. But...what to make of this situation? he wondered, raising his head to look at the enormous celestial *sugoroku* board crafted by an Old Deus.

I see...the rules have consistently been explained misleadingly.

I see...the game is about taking dice, which is not equivalent to murder.

I see...that even if you lose your dice, you keep your life until the end.

I see...that this must mean the Old Deus is maintaining my soul.

But...why?

00a: The game board is a simulation of reality, but all events that should transpire there, including death, are real.

If this was true, then *death other than by loss of dice would be instakill*. Death inflicted by a Task or one's own negligence would slay, whereas loss of dice would merely eliminate. Was there some reason for the Old Deus to specify such a rule? Couldn't she just say, *If you lose your dice, you die immediately*? What would be the problem with that as far as she was concerned? Let's say, for the sake of argument, there was some issue... Couldn't she just lock up your soul somewhere? This eerie situation, these bizarre rules that let you wander around as a specter...

...were they *our ideas*...?

If one assumed that neither Sora nor Shiro nor the Shrine Maiden had the *slightest intention of losing*, this must have been what Sora and Shiro planted and what the Shrine Maiden intended to exploit.

The setup for victory—!!

...Probably.....supposedly. Perhaps...surely?

Still in a damp mood from his epic failure, Ino no longer had the strength to believe in anything. Staggering and groaning in shame, he made his way to the Chinkai Tandai District. Unfortunately, though, he caused a panic among the staff who, as Werebeasts, had the ability to sense his spirit.

“...*Hff*, my apologies. It seems I have startled you...”

“*Startled* isn't the... We've been crushed under a pile of resignations and transfer requests... I—I mean, Commissioner Hatsuse, sir, are you all...right...? *I'm not sure what's going on, but it's good to see you!!*”

...*Inexplicable* means just what it looks like, unable to be explained. Trying too hard to understand can lead to misunderstandings when one is confronted with a situation as inexplicable as this one.

Those capable of reciting the most magical of words, *Okay, whatever*, are strong. Ino addressed the strong woman who'd accepted this situation with an *I don't get it, but sure*.

“Ma’am, your name and position?”

“S-sir! Chitose Kanae, First-Class Secretary, Kagura Sea, Chinkai Tandai District, sir!”

Hmm. Ino narrowed his eyes and nodded deeply. Though quite young for such a high position, she looked capable—and alluring. She’d had the wherewithal and insight to make appropriate judgments when faced with a ghost and the nerve and purpose to speak to him. Also—and this was the most important thing—for a petite squirrel-girl, she had quite the ample bosom. Its voluptuous bounce was, indeed, perfectly ripe for the picking.

“...When things settle down, why don’t you come work at my office?”

Ino executed his peculiar brand of mixing business and pleasure with a straight face.

“—?! Y-yes, sir! I would be— W-wait! First...!”

Chitose Kanae’s face sparkled at the out-of-this-world promotion, but then shook her head.

“There is a matter that no one here but you can handle, Commissioner Hatsuse. Allow me to report, sir!”

Hmm. Calm and collected as can be... I like her. Furthermore, when she shakes her head, her arms and bountiful bosom sway in a most appealing manner. She’ll have to be my personal secretary. I’ll make the arrangements.

“The CTD is on Type 2 Alert. Today at ten hundred hours, in the west Kagura Sea—”

“...An Elven Gard fleet appeared...is that it?”

“—Y-you’re aware, sir?!”

Ino, thinking he’d better put the secretary business aside for now, nodded at her shocked gasp. He was aware. Well...he’d *seen* it. Freed from his vessel, the old Werebeast’s senses were as keen as if he were using his bloodbreak. He had even been able to see past the horizon, where Elven Gard were advancing through the wind and waves. From the north to the south, the massive fleet filled out the western sea.

It wasn't even necessary to check flags. A fleet of flowers bloomed brightly across the water. Only one country could make those ships. How they operated was a mystery, but their purpose was not.

"...A *sea blockade*, is it...?"

"That appears to be the case, but there's been no declaration... And those waters aren't under Commonwealth jurisdiction, so we can't really..."

Indeed, the official agreement was that those were international waters. No one had jurisdiction, but to line up such a fleet right on the hinge of trade between the Eastern Union and Elven Gard, physically blocking it off... This sort of economic attack was a gray area quickly approaching black. But never mind that—*why now?*

There was no reason right now for Elven Gard to impose a sea blockade on the Eastern Union, part of the Commonwealth of Elkia. The Commonwealth had marine resources from the Eastern Union, continental resources from Elkia, and submarine resources from Oceand. They were stocked to last. It would be years before such action impacted their economy, so it wasn't much of a threat. It certainly wouldn't force them into a game. On top of that, the details of the Eastern Union's game had been reported to Elven Gard *incorrectly*. This, in fact, was perfect for the Eastern Union, whose victory was assured.

What had Sora—or perhaps the Shrine Maiden—intended by inserting this rule that rendered you some kind of ghost when you dropped off the board? Ino had been wondering about this when the air in the reception chamber, noiselessly and without warning, shook. The next moment, two girls slammed onto the scene, each speaking in turn.

"...My goodness! I never thought I'd see a ghooost. Why, you never know what will happen in life, do youuu? 🎵"

"—?! F-Fi?! Wh—who are you talking to?! D—d-d—didn't you promise me when I was a child that you wouldn't scare me like that anymore?!"

An Elf with fluffy blonde hair and a plump bosom widened her eyes slightly in a smile.

Conversely, an Immanity with black hair and a piteous bosom looked around

the room slightly teary-eyed.

Fiel Nirvalen.

Chlammy Zell.

It was the first time Ino had been face-to-face with them, but he had seen and heard of them. They had conspired with “ ” to inaccurately report the specifics of the Eastern Union’s game. They were spies.

“Why, yees, but today we’re working. You mustn’t act *too* much like a chiild! 🎵”

Fiel snapped her fingers gently, and Ino felt the presence of spirits. She’d done something with magic, cast some kind of spell for the sake of Chlammy, who couldn’t detect him.

“—Ee-eeeuugh!! I was so much better off not seeing him! What is this disgusting creature?!!”

Boom. There was the formerly fluorescent, now sparkling musclehead.

“Oh my, but the Ten Covenants are lenient... Why, is even *existential violence* tolerated?”

“P-p—please don’t mind them, Mr. Hatsuse! I-I’d find your body burly—i-if it only wasn’t glowing!”

What uncivil ruffians surround me! Ino’s muscles raged at the unheard-of insult, but the two newcomers calmed him down with a “*Whoa, there!*” and he addressed them both.

“Am I to say...*I’ve been waiting for you?*”

And here was the point of the rule that had turned him into some sort of apparition: enabling whoever dropped out during the game to meet these two ladies! Ino still didn’t know what was behind it, but—!!

“Fi, let me just check one last time. He’s not a ghost...right?”

“Why, no. He does look like a ghost sprouting legs and fleeing, but that’s how it’s supposed to goooo.”

Supposed to. Chlammy stepped forward, murmuring affirmation of Ino’s

conjecture.

“Ahem, in that case... Mr. Ino Hatsuse, Diplomatic Commissioner of the Eastern Union, yes?”

“And you are Miss Chlammy Zell, correct? I have heard of you.”

“That will speed things up. This game accepts late entries—‘gate-crashers’—does it not?”

Interference from outside the board is their strategy for victory! Ino smiled at the arrival of these reinforcements, and Chlammy smiled gently back.



“Yes. Well then—shall we begin the game?”

But she followed that with...

“We demand all the territory of the Eastern Union and all the personnel and resources in it.”

...

.....

“—What...did you just say?”

Ino barely managed to get the words out, prompting Chlammy to muse, “Did I make that difficult to understand?” She smiled softly and reworded her position...to make it plain.

“This is a *declaration of war*. Hand over everything in the Eastern Union, bitch. Is that better?”

CHAPTER 4

WHYDUNIT

FUNNY TASTE

...The wind continued blowing across the parched wasteland. The sand roiled up by the dry breeze caressed two small shadows that did not flinch, but merely outstretched their limbs weakly like corpses.

Twitch. The ground trembled slightly, and the corpses—pardon, shadows—quivered, thinking *There's our prey*. Silently, breathlessly, one shadow signaled the other to move in. Like flowing mud, like writhing earth, they silently crept toward their quarry. But having the sharp ears of a weak beast, it retreated upon hearing their movement. Flight was a wise choice for a weak beast. Indeed, when faced with an unknown adversary, it was wiser to run away than attack. Little did the prey know, though, that this common wisdom led to its death.

Had it *been foolish enough to confront* its unknown adversary instead of making the wiser choice to turn tail, it could have easily survived. It assumed the two shadows—and anything weaker—*expected it to bolt*, clear proof the creature was, in fact, powerful.

Weaklings didn't flee...because they lacked the strength even for that. Weaklings instead planted a multitude of savvy tricks before making the foolish choice to attack.

As the screech of their prey resounded through the parched air, the shadows stopped creeping along like mud, broke into a run, and sneered: *You are wise, powerful beast. And that is why your intentions—the choices you will make, the path you will walk—are so transparent to us. Before your next wise step, we have placed a single trap. That will be enough...*

...to send you spiraling to your doom—!!

As the wooden trap bit into the leg of their prey, the weak beasts rushed it with nonexistent fangs—

...Over the parched wasteland still echoed the roaring of the wind and of two beasts who had challenged the laws of nature that claimed the strong ate the weak. They had won the right to live through this day; it was an affirmation of their existence. Their souls thundered in celebration of being the strongest beasts among all the weak ones. Indeed, they were primitive humans who had risked only the strength of their wits to survive—!!

“...S-Soraaa...Shirooo! A-are you all right?”

Civilization (also known as Steph) called out the names of the pair who were supposed to be modern humans.

“—Growl?”

“.....Screech?”

They cocked their heads and offered her their butchered prey—fawn meat.

“I—I certainly appreciate the gesture...but could you please first recall the Immanity tongue? And put on some clothes...”

Steph took a step back and groaned in supplication.

.....

It had been twenty-seven days since the start of the game. Sora, Shiro, and Steph were now on the 165th space, a nameless, arid wasteland resting on the eastern edge of the Elkia territory. Greeting the three who had exhausted both their food and endurance was Izuna’s adorable Task:

—Catch the one little ant that smells like fish without hurting him, bitches, please.

It was telling them to catch a specific ant. They had no way of even telling what an ant smelled like, so they couldn’t fulfill it. Consequently, they were stuck in a wasteland for seventy-two hours with no food. Basically, this was Izuna’s cutesy way of telling them to die.

Sora had pulled out the tablet and, using the survival guide he'd hoped would never come in handy, began hunting. They'd tried to capture at least the three days' worth of food and, if possible, enough to get to the next space...but had failed utterly.

...Which was no surprise. What kind of wild animals would let themselves be caught by a couple of totally amateur shut-in gamers with cursory hunting knowledge? Plus, they had only sixteen dice. No matter how they were distributed, their company could only consist of one adult and two little brats. But as the failure, exhaustion, and hunger mounted, Sora, with a parched smile, casually observed...

"Chasing and being chased...*is like a game.*"

The siblings looked at each other as if to say, *What are you smiling about, losing your ass off in a game?* They nodded silently and, with eyes glinting eerily, quickly sprang into action. They'd perfected traps in the blink of an eye, laid strategies, and in the end, reduced their clothing to a minimum after realizing their rustling was a hindrance. Spears in hand, they'd dressed themselves in strips cut from their backpacks. It had taken only two days to turn feral.

.....

"A-anyway, it seems we've secured enough food for a while, haven't we? Would you please come back already?!"



Civilization's call seemed to reach Sora, who stopped tearing into his meat and looked up vacantly...

"——Oh, okay. I guess...we've beaten the game, huh?"

...uttering the words to awaken from his trance.

"Whoaaa, my younger sister! What is a young—too-young—girl like you doing dressed like that?!"

"...Huh? ...Uh...no, I mean—y-you...w-were the one...who made, these...!"

Like that pair (who shall go unnamed) who ate of the fruit of Eden, the siblings returned to civilization and, suddenly aware of their shame, shrieked at the state in which they found themselves: nearly naked but for a flimsy excuse for cover.

"...I started a fire. Hurry up and change—or rather, scrub yourselves off first."

Steph flung some wet cloth to the two ex-feral children. Sora, caked in dirt, had another realization: The fruit of Eden, from the tree of knowledge...was *food*. It was when food and clothing were plentiful that they knew shame. How profound. Sora and Shiro both reached for the garments that would reacquaint them with modesty...



"Um... I am quite grateful that you have provided us with food..."

Watching the fire, Steph softly sighed. The smoke from the primitive smoking device Shiro had devised and Sora had built by digging a hole in the ground got in her eyes. Normally, Steph was in charge of food, but she had been completely outdone. Sora expertly carved and parceled out the prey they'd caught. Selecting the cuts that would keep best, Shiro deftly slid them into the smoker.

"...but don't you have human dignity, or pride, or something?"

Holding a skewer of scorpion, Steph mindlessly voiced her thoughts. Sora seemed to have forgotten what he'd said when Izuna had slain the monster. Something about how, as human beings, they should blah, blah, blah. Now it was if you can eat it, then eat it. *Heh!* He gestured with a smile.

“We shall slurp mud and devour sand!! We shall retract every last thing we’ve said, bathe ourselves in shame, and throw away our pride!! *And yet, holding on to the things most dear to us, we shall survive...* That and that alone constitutes the pride, the dignity that as a human one must uphold!!”

He was taking pride in throwing pride away.

“Everything else—we’ll sell if we can sell, we’ll eat if we can eat—we’ll throw away if it gets in our way.”

...

.....A momentary silence fell after Sora’s proclamation as he chomped into his scorpion.

“...Brother, you win at life...even though, you’re a loser...”

“...I was impressed for a moment there, but really, you just said something unforgivably preposterous, didn’t you...?”

Sora bathed in Shiro and Steph’s ardent and icy gazes.

He’d coolly declared that *anything he did evoked no shame*. Steph suddenly spoke up.

“...‘Unforgivably preposterous,’ that reminds me of something... *Sora.*”

Was that preface really necessary? wondered Sora, but he valiantly decided to let it slide.

“What?”

Ignoring his hammily affected tears, Steph regarded her skewer uneasily.

“...Mr. Ino’s really not dead, right?”

We’ll betray each other, but we won’t kill each other. Steph had at one point found comfort in this aphorism of his.

“Hmm? Sure. He’s alive. For now.”

...But yes, there was still a *yet* at the end, which made Steph’s face cloud ever darker. Meanwhile, Sora and Shiro giddily chatted as they smoked their meat.

“Don’t let it get to you. If our plans go awry—”

“...We’re all...gonna die anyway...”

“...Indeed, that’s true, isn’t it? If we don’t make it to the goal, everyone but the leader is going to die, aren’t they?”

16: If the game is IMPOSSIBLE TO CONTINUE, the Old Deus hath the right to collect all possessed by all participants except the foremost.

If the game reached an impasse, everyone but the leader would die regardless. Apparently recalling this rule, Steph renewed her sense of determination to finish the game. As she braced herself and bit into the gross skewer, Sora and Shiro cheered her on.

“Exactly! Everyone *but the leader, the Old Deus*, is gonna die, so we’ve gotta give it our best!!”

“...This is, no time, to be picky...! ...Eat it.”

“Wha—?”

“Wha—?! ”

“...? Wha...?”

Steph froze in place. Sora cocked his head to the side. Shiro tried joining their chorus for the heck of it.

“H-huuuhh?! Wha—? Why do you say *but the leader*—?”

“What? ‘Cause that’s what the Old Deus said at the very beginning. ‘I shall wait at the end,’ *just like that!*”

“...The Old Deus is, also...a *participant*... The leader...is always the Old Deus...*munch, munch.*”

Like a gentle breeze, Sora and Shiro’s response was swift. Her assumptions overturned, Steph erupted, but they just eyed her strangely.

“If no one makes it, screw who’s in the lead—we’re all done for. But who cares about that? It doesn’t change what we’re gonna do. We’ve got our plan, and that rule’s got nothing to do with us.”

“Wh-what do you mean?! It’s the whole reason everyone’s fighting to—”

“For *one person not to die*. I tell you, the two of us would sure as hell never agree to a rule like that.”

“.....!”

As Sora momentarily narrowed his gaze seriously, Steph took a breath.

“If anyone finishes, no one dies. That’s what we’d all have agreed to...what we all *had* to agree to.”

Because...

“Didn’t I tell you we’d have to betray each other to win? Look at Pluum, who’s in it despite having no reason to play or any way to win. He set things up so he’d *win without finishing*. Look at the Shrine Maiden, who, just like Ino said, has orchestrated things to steal our win—but *whose life right now is in the Old Deus’s hands*. Look at everyone... That’s what we had to agree to in order to *betray each other!*”

“.....”

Sora’s easygoing laugh was met only by a silent plea of incomprehension from Steph.

“All right, this is all you really need to know.”

Not asking if she understood, Sora lightheartedly summed it up.

“Everybody, everyone, eeevery last one of us set it up so they’d win...”

In this game, if anyone made it, no one died. But if only one could make it to the goal...

...then, given this crowd, it was inevitable that they’d all think: *Then the one who’s gonna win is me*, right?

“So the only question is—whose scenario is playing out now?”

“...Brother...we’re done, in two hours...”

“Whoaaa, man, hold on! We haven’t even smoked all this meat! Sh-Shiro, you pack, all right?!”

Having been informed by Shiro, phone in hand, that Izuna's Task would bind them for only two more hours, Sora panicked and fanned the flame under the smoker faster.

As they considered how best to distribute the dice after the three of them each lost one from failing the Task—

“Th-then what about the Old Deus...?”

—Steph interrupted their hustle.

“If everyone set something up...then wouldn't the Old Deus do the same?!”

So couldn't she arrange things so no one could finish? was the implication. Ignoring Steph's shrill (though uncharacteristically insightful) cry, Sora kept fanning the flame and asked:

“Hey... For starters, ever wonder what *an Old Deus is?*”

Steph stared blankly at this sudden question. Sora slowly raised his gaze to the spiraling land in the sky, divvied into spaces—the too-majestic board.

“...‘A concept that has gained an identity’...itself...”

“Y-yes...that's what I hear, too...not that I can make heads or tails of it.”

Yes, that was what was written in a book of Jibril's that Shiro had read. By a funny coincidence, neither Sora nor Steph had the slightest idea what it meant, and they clutched their heads.

It was a question Sora had roughly swallowed with the thought, *Here we go again, more unfathomable crazy shit*. These transcendent forces didn't form a group or have an agent plenipotentiary...which meant there was no way to take their Race Piece.

It wasn't a big leap to think that, in this world, the players were the gods and all others were equally just their pieces. *In that case...* Sora smirked. *...In this mysterious game, the biggest mystery was...*

“...Why's some pwn-storm like that doing playing pawns like us?”

Why is this game even happening? Alerted to this improbably fundamental quandry, Steph froze.

The Third of the Ten Covenants: Games shall be played for wagers that each agrees are of equal value. In this game, if anyone made it to the goal, none of them would have to die, while everything belonging to the Old Deus would be theirs. What would some god think they had that was of equal value to everything she possessed?

“Especially when it’s a game *she could lose*, which she knows that perfectly well...you know?”

“...Sh-she what?”

The Old Deus had no setup for certain victory. Steph was puzzled by this implication, but Sora just smiled.

After all, in this game, they couldn’t kill each other with dice or profit from killing each other with Tasks. They could all pursue their own gain and still very well win without dying when someone finished. What was more, most of the rules had been their idea. It was already a mystery why the Old Deus would participate in the first place, but in this particular game—

There were *some rules that could only have been established by the independent will of the Old Deus*: three of them. If these three rules constituted the Old Deus’s setup and, thus, her will...

“All right, question time! About that rule where only the leader is saved!”

Sora suddenly shouted excitedly.

“That rule none of us would agree to and doesn’t even matter because the leader is always the Old Deus! That rule that doesn’t even matter to the Old Deus regardless of who wins or loses! All that taken into account: Who *does* it matter to, I wonder?”

True, if no one finished, the Old Deus would take all. If anyone finished, the one who finished would take all. As such, this rule *served no purpose for anyone*... So why was it there—?

“Here’s a biiig hint! What vanished along with the Old Deus at the start of the game?”

As Steph struggled to remember that event already a month past, Sora

thought: *I'm somehow relieved—because I don't expect any sort of answer from Steph!*

“...Shrine Maiden's...body...vanished...with her...”

“*Ding-ding-ding*, that's right!! As your prize, you get a huuug!!”

Sora lifted Shiro up—her smoked meat in hand—danced, and shouted, ignoring Steph, who seemed upset she couldn't get the answer right or something.

“Suppose she didn't *vanish*...but was *taken somewhere* with the Old Deus...”

That would give meaning to that meaningless rule.

“Then *the Shrine Maiden would be with the Old Deus on the final space*, so no matter who wins—even if they lose—she gets saved...by this rule that only the Old Deus could have inserted of her own volition.”

Yes. Only the Old Deus, having collected the Shrine Maiden's life before the game, could do as she liked with it, but in setting this rule, what she'd actually done—

—was save the Shrine Maiden's life even if she herself lost. And as for the remaining two rules...if you considered their intent... Sora chuckled at his thoughts. He put down Shiro and lifted the freshly packed luggage onto his back.

“...What is a god? In our old world, we never met one, so all we know are rumors.”

For instance: A comedian who starts a bit with *Don't eat my fruit of knowledge, okay? You better not eat it.* and then flips out when they eat it. Or an attention whore who handles her duty as the sun goddess by shutting herself up in a cave and only sticking her head out when she hears a party. A guy who thinks with his lower half and has all kinds of extramarital affairs under the grand pretext that it's for the universe's sake... If the rumors were true, then every last one of these gods was, well, pretty damn human. In fact, it would suggest that they were *hopelessly human*...but...

“Still, since we've come to Disboard and actually met some gods, they do

seem like what we've heard..."

So the rumors back there might have some truth to them after all. Sora chuckled.

"Like, one of them's a forever-alone who loses to us at chess and then gets so pissed he summons us without so much as an appointment."

"...I thought...I was the best...forever-alone...until I met, Tet..."

"Sooner or later, you two are going to suffer divine retribution, you know... What do you think the One True God—?"

Just what even is a god? Sora and Shiro had no unearthly idea, and honestly, they didn't really care, either. But when that god was explaining the rules, the way she looked at them for a second made them think. She didn't appear concerned with victory or defeat at all, as though she didn't care about anything. But her eyes had the look of complaining about something, though perhaps she herself was unaware of it.

"And the other one's a little girl sulking after being *outfoxed* into playing this game..."

They didn't seem to remotely fit some magnificent definition like "a concept that has gained an identity." These gods were pretty damn human, just like the ones in Sora's and Shiro's old world.

What was that crying child trying to accomplish, and to what end—? Questions like that...

"...Don't seem to have *anything to do with winning or losing*...at the very least, don't you think?"

Walking side by side and looking up to the end of the sky, Sora and Shiro thought, *It must be terribly simple and self-abandoning—but, because of that, fatal.*

"It's set up so it's easy to win, but if you win easily, it's like you lost..."

"...Like...with *payback*...you know..."

Steph chased after the mumbling duo with her brow furrowed in puzzlement.....



So basically, they were cat burglars.

In the Eastern Union, in the Chinkai Tandai District reception chamber, Chlammy and Fiel were relaxing on the sofa across from Ino Hatsuse. Having originally identified them as backup, he'd concluded they were petty thieves. The girl who, at a time like this and in this situation, had demanded—*Give me all your Eastern Union territory*—continued.

"It's nothing difficult, is it? It's quite simple..." She laid it out with a smile. "A couple of dumb bitches *happened* to come when the Shrine Maiden was away, made some pointless sea blockade, and bet one state of Elven Gard. Diplomatic Commissioner Ino Hatsuse judged them to be chumps and took them on in a game he was sure to win (considering it had been reported to Elven Gard incorrectly), only to find out who the real bitch was. Surely you can follow that plot."

The sea blockade, the wager of a state, everything—

"*You can take us on credibly and lose credibly...* See? We've got the perfect role for you!"

"Why, I don't mind if you lick my shoes in gratituuude. Though if you do, I must have you sanitize them for me afterrr. 🎵"

Weren't they Sora and Shiro's accomplices? Their allies, their collaborators...?! Ino, unable to maintain his cool, found only questions spinning wildly in his head.

"Okay, theeen! 🎵 I am Fiel Nirvalen, who was forced to inaccurately report the game of the Eastern Union to the Senate, just as Mr. Sora wished. Why, I am a clown who has been used for all I'm worth and certainly not your frieeend. ♥"

Fiel beamed, apparently having magically read his mind.

No, she couldn't have. Ino shook away the chills running down his spine. No matter how advanced her magic was, viewing or altering someone's thoughts or memories was *injury*—a violation of the Covenants. *She must be magically sensing spirits, similar to Werebeast cold reading,* Ino surmised. After all, here he was at point-blank range, yet he couldn't read anything from them. Their

breath, heartbeat, temperature... It was all muddled by magic.

“I did report the Eastern Union’s game incorrectly to Elven Gard... However.”

With truth and falsehood utterly indistinguishable—

“No one said we couldn’t be the players to represent them.”

—the raven-haired girl clarified her loophole with a smile just like that man’s.

“Elven Gard will remain ignorant of the true nature of the Eastern Union’s game and our maneuverings, while the Eastern Union switches sides from the Commonwealth of Elkia—from those two—to us. This will be a foothold from which to swallow them up... Say, Fi, that doesn’t sound like much of a change, does it?”

“Why, it’s rather just a matter of one state of Elven Gard being added to *our Commonweaaalth*. 🎵”

“I wonder if my demands were too leniant...? Oh well, I suppose it’s fine.”

They could hardly have cared less about the Eastern Union. Their sole interest in was the entirety of the Commonwealth of Elkia—and those two siblings.

“Of course, if this plot does not suit you, we do have an alternative.”

Chlammy sneered darkly next to Fiel, who extended her hand and produced a ball of light. Ino shouldn’t have been able to grasp or even see this multilayer magical rite, but that she bothered to render it visible to him made its purpose clear.

It was an anti–Eastern Union spell. A rite for beating video games...

“I wonder if you’d prefer *this* leaked upstairs, though such a ploy would seem quite tragic to me.”

That would pit him not against the two of them, but Elven Gard itself. Those barbarians in the guise of gentlefolk would descend to rape, plunder, and pillage Werebeast like locusts. *If you don’t want that, play now and lose* was the message. Ino silently howled at these girls—no, these witches—who seemed unlikely to wait for Sora, Shiro, and the Shrine Maiden’s return.

Why?

Why now—?!

“Why, *because* it’s now, of couurse. You are quite the intellectually challenged little puppy, aren’t you?”

“In case you don’t know, I’ll tell you. I’ve got Sora’s memories.”

Sora had known from the start that the Shrine Maiden had the Old Deus behind her. He had been waiting all along for a chance to challenge the Old Deus to a game. Chlammy had likewise known all of this, and once the game with the Old Deus had begun—

“So I knew that the agents of the countries of the Commonwealth of Elkia and their key staff...would be away.”

—if Sora had orchestrated everything from the start, it should have been obvious that they could predict and exploit it all.

“...Well, it was a lucky accident you happened to be here, right?”

“We were prepared to face some deputy or deputy’s deputy in the absence of the agents plenipotentiary. 🎵”

“But it’s quite a bit easier to deal with someone we know...isn’t it?”

The cat was out of the bag, and now Ino Hatsuse, the “Diplomatic Commissioner,” functioned as the agent plenipotentiary of the Eastern Union. Everything was put in place for this moment, this instant.

“And we worked hard to bring it all together on time, I’ll have you know... But hey. 🎵”

“Why, it will have been a trifle if we get to see Mr. Sora howwwl. 🎵”

They spoke as if they had until now gone undetected and would continue to do so. The two witches from the world’s largest country, Elven Gard—home to the race most proficient in the magic arts—sneered, having totally swiped their territory.

“Without us, why, it’s not possible...to end the game with the Old Deuuus. 🎵”

“Indeed—*we won’t let it end*. Come. Shall we begin the game?”

Their smiles chilled to the bone as once more fact and fiction became

indistinguishable...but something was a little off. Ino urged himself not to repeat his mistakes in the game with the Old Deus. He calmed his thoughts.

It was a lucky accident that you happened to be here... Lucky—accident. He didn't know whether these witches were telling the truth, but the ghost rule wasn't crucial to their plan. It could have been anyone. In that case, it must have been Sora or the Shrine Maiden's idea. But why? Had they predicted this attack and trusted Ino to fend it off?

Could he win? —No. The Eastern Union's VR games should have been impervious to magical disruption, a guaranteed victory.

But if they knew that beforehand, they could adopt countermeasures. That was why the Eastern Union erased players' memories. And now here were two who knew the details of the game and had even claimed a rite for it.

Were they bluffing? —No. He couldn't see through their magical jamming, but if they were bluffing, they'd just lose...!

“What in the world...? Who drafted this scenario, and to what end—?!”

Ino unintentionally verbalized his dismay—whereupon a voice answered:

“Oh, yes? *I wrote this scenario for myseeelf...* Did you caaall?”

It was a high, girlish voice, beguiling and teasing. Everyone turned at once to the center of the room, where a girl—no, a boy so beautiful as to be mistaken for a girl—had been standing for who knew how long, wearing a somehow gloomy smile.

“M-Mr. Plum...?!”

“Yees, I am the majestic prince of Dhampir, renowned for my lack of presence, Plum Stoker.”

His form was translucent. He must have dropped out and had his death deferred, like Ino. The Dhampir apparently having employed some kind of magic, Chlammy glared at him keenly.

“—When did you—?”

“...Why, when did I get *theeere*...?”

Plum dropped his composure and interrupted Fiel, who was staring daggers at him.

“Ah-ha-haaa... That’s not exactly the right question.”

The malice in Fiel’s eyes was sharp enough to cut, but he brushed it off condescendingly as though tired.

“The question is, when did we get *heeere*? ♥ And the answer is—”

Just as Plum corrected them, the group that had been assembled in the Chinkai Tandai District reception chamber found themselves thirty-two floors down, deep in the basement in a vast subterranean hall with a VR machine. Suddenly and out of nowhere, the light had shimmered like a summery haze... and here they were, somewhere else. Even Ino, who now possessed keen senses comparable to his bloodbreak, had caught nothing—except that there had been some spirits. There was no table or sofa, and instead, everyone was simply sitting together on the ground.

“We were *always* heeere. You two never entered the reception chamber at allll, ah-ha-haaa!”

Fiel’s eyes widened as Plum floated around in the air by himself, and she wiped the smile off her face.

No further evidence was required to tell Ino what had happened. Here was an Elf...and of all Elves, a mage capable of undermining Elven Gard with a single accomplice. Plum hadn’t let her catch on or even suspect that he’d led them to the wrong destination. To alter others’ senses—to directly violate them—was impossible because of the Covenants. Which meant—

“As a gesture of welcome for my new acquaintances, I prepared a little surprise... Did you enjoy it?”

“.....”

—a high-level Elven mage had been completely outstripped in a match of magic. Fiel and Chlammy said nothing, their gazes piercing enough to kill.

“Hmmm... ‘Fi, what the hell is this guy?’ ‘Why, Rank Twelve, Dhampir.’ ‘The one who joined *them*?! What’s he doing here? Shouldn’t he be over there?’ Oh,

let me answer thaaat.”

“——?! ”

Plum saw through the layers upon layers of magic with which Fiel had undoubtedly concealed their conversation. His eyes and wings flushed a bright, blood-colored hue.

“But before that...could you please not be so cheeky as to whisper to each other in front of meee? Renowned for my good manners, I beg you to show some reeespect. 🎵”

Plum prefaced with his usual gloomy smile and began again.

“So where was I? Oh, yes: How could you *not* expect meee?”

The light wavered, and again their surroundings changed, this time to a windswept plain that extended as far as the eye could see. Only a single tree stood, and in its shadow, Plum smiled, sitting in a chair while sipping from a teacup.

“After all, who would plant a rule that says you become a ghost if you drop ouuut? It had to be meee.”

“Whaaaa—?! ”

“Oh, well, you know...it’s not as if I remember it... But, see, this rule...”

This time it was Ino who suppressed a scream, but Plum put his elbows on the table, his chin on his hands, and smiling ear to ear...crowed:

“What purpose would it serve for anyone but *me*, who *called these two*? 💔”

—.

Called...these two?

This time, Chlammy and Fiel were also at a loss for words.

“I mean, I just can’t understand why you think I’d play a game with an Old Deus, regardless of the ruuules... Why would I do such a thiiiing? I don’t caaare about the Old Deus at allll! 🎵”

Plum pouted, flapped his legs, and continued.

“But if you reaaally want me to give you a reason...it’s because I want to *gaiiin*. 🎵 And so!”

Hopping up from the chair as if dancing, he spun, their surroundings spinning with him to become the Presence Chamber of the Elkia Royal Castle.

“Renowned for my kindness, I shall not name names! But there were a couple of folks who got a liiittle overconfident...and let themselves be *fooled into thinking they themselves had found* the schedule details I gave them for the game against the Old Deus!”

Ignoring Fiel’s grimace, Plum spun again. Each time, the scenery spun with him. Now it was Avant Heim.

“Oh, you two who have traveled so long, so far to be here today, aaand, ummm, wellll, Mr. Ino, who we all knew would drop out sooner or later! Oh, you must be so very flustered at this moment, wherewith—!”

Now it was the Chamber of the Queen in Oceand, now the Garden of the Shrine in the Eastern Union; the scenery changed ceaselessly.

Swish. He struck what must have been the coolest pose he could come up with.

“Mr. Ino, sobbing in gratitude to me for showing up promptly to make short work of these two, you are most welcome. *However!!* Renowned also for my humility, I answer thuuus!”

Plum propped up his chin with his fingers, pretending to stare into the distance.

“...Heh! I only did what anyone should dooo. I’ve already received my thaaanks!!”

Your smile is my thanks, his face seemed to say—

“That is, a supply of fifty Werebeasts a year for their blood as an appetizer, and alsooo...”

—but his words were better suited to evoke despair than grins.

“...*that Elf right there* as the main course. What a treaaat...eh-heh-hehhh! 💖”

Add these two chips to the pot, he implied.

“If I have free rein to suck the blood of an Elf, the highest of all the races with blood that’s suuuckable...”

What would he do next? Need you even ask?

“...I’ll do whatever it takes to screw over those fishy Sirens in a game and free Dhampir from the chains of the Covenaaants! 🎵”

...Is this kid screwing with us? Ino was speechless, but Plum continued with a smile.

“So that’s the scenario I wrote into the game *before* our memories were erased at the staaart. As for thaaat game, I reaaally don’t care about it at allll... Once I had agreed and was in it—”

Yeah. He’s screwing with us. Ino ground his teeth. Plum was making deviant demands as seriously and earnestly as possible. This screwy Dhampir had even *used* the Old Deus’s game.

“—all I had to do was *get you to take my dice as soon as possible*. That was the one point I couldn’t back down ooon! 🎵”

If you don’t want the Eastern Union to be taken, offer an Ixseed sacrifice. He’d dragged them into his twisted scenario where they had no choice but to yield to such a screwy demand!!

“Bastard—!! If we lose against the Old Deus, you’re going to die, too. Do you get that?!”

Plum responded to Ino’s rage by making a show of thinking about it.

“Hmm... Welp, don’t you think King Sora and Queen Shiro, who are always talking so big, or someone else will wiiin? As long as someone finishes, I get all I can carry. *That’s how I set it up.* And anywaaaay! 🎵”

Sitting down in midair as if in a chair, he spoke without missing a beat.

“Isn’t it more fun to bet on the long shot? 💖”

The Dhampir’s rambling was the opposite of sane. If Sora and company won, he’d run off with spoils. If they lost, they’d all die together, and *that was that*.

“...Fi, let me ask you straight. Do you have a rite that can handle this...thing?”

Fiel responded to Chlammy’s question without bothering to hide their exchange.

“Chlammy, did you knooow? Mosquitoes inject anesthetic so you won’t notice them.” Fiel beamed. “Buuut,” she continued warmly, “why, they’re merely *recreational insects* to be squashed dead when you do notice! 🎵”

Contrary to her amicable tone, though, the four diamond shapes in her eyes glowed softly as though she was prepared to swat the Dhampir insect before her.

No problem, in other words. But...

“Ah-ha-ha! So you, with your poignant attempts to appear a quadcasterrr—”

Fiel turned and stared at the voice emanating not in front of but behind her.

“—think I, whom you *mistakenly think you’ve noticed*, am an insect scarcely worthy of recreation, do youuu? 💖”

There were two Plums, mirror images of each other with their fingers intertwined, sneering.

“A *mere* hexcaster, you think you can conceal your number of rites from me? Get into bed before you start dreamiing.”

Since when had he...? Maybe from the start. Or maybe still. Time had splintered and skipped forward to Fiel lying in a bed. A third Plum peered into her eyes, now wide with shock, as he rested his chin on his hands at her bedside.

“For the first time in six thousand years, you get to see the true power of Dhampiiir. 🎵 Are you impresssed?”

“.....Why, it does seem that a bit of a troublesome mosquito has slipped in...”

With this mutter, Fi took a breath and dropped her smile like a mask, flinging off the blanket and rising.

Ino, just barely able to sense magic and spirits as a Werebeast, didn’t know what was happening, but from the faint presence of spirits, he could get the

gist. Fiel was using magic that made spirits flow with a presence that was continuous, complex, and layered—even soothing, like the poetic flow of a river—whereas Plum had no presence. He was covering his magic, his spirits—no, his very existence, everything. He was concealing the presence of the magic to conceal the presence of the magic to conceal the presence of the magic...and so on, a rite that stretched to infinity without end. But Plum couldn't even use multiplex rites. He had to have been doing it all in a single shot.

“Didn't I mention that this rule that lets us be bare souls only benefits meee?”

Plum attempted to explain this bullshit to everyone as they panted in shock.

“That so very helpful god is guaranteeing my soul for now, so I don't have to drink blood. I can use my magic without worrying about the attenuation of my souuuul... I do feel a little sorry somehow, being the only one who gets to cheaaat...eh-heh! 🎵”

He stuck out his tongue and smiled in insincere apology. His wicked gaze crawled up behind them, before them, above them, changing coordinates in disregard of space. Ino—no, even Fiel and Chlammy—thought, *You cheater!*

They'd been transported to the time before the Dhampir had been enfeebled by restrictions on their bloodsucking. Before the Ten Covenants...

No wonder even Jibril had said, *In the Great War, they were, in fact, something of a threat.*

This was indeed the true power of Dhampir.

“...Nghh! The fact that you're so surprised is kind of depressing in itseeelf...”

Plum grumbled reassuming his usual, gloomy expression.

“Kept by the Sirens and outwitted by King Sora and Queen Shiro... I must look sooo pathetic... I can't complain if you think of me as just a sweat-loving, cross-dressing pervert boyyy...”

“—You were aware...?”

Ino was well aware it was rude but couldn't keep it in.

With a *thunk*, Plum kicked off the ground again, scattering the countless landscapes in the subterranean hall, which patched themselves back together.

In this mad space where day and night coexisted, Plum laughed as the color of blood flickered in his purple eyes.

“I am *suuuch a troublesome*, sweat-loving, cross-dressing pervert boy—the king of the night, Nosferatuuu! 🎵”

His clothes and wings, woven of darkness, dissolved with every glimmer and stained the space black as if returning it to nighttime. The blood pattern in his eyes ran down his arms and through the void, swallowing it up. It flickered unsteadily and spread: indoors, outdoors, through the sky, sea, and land. Morning, afternoon, night—*it’s all here*, he said.

Where was “here”—and when was “now”? *It’s your call*, taunted the certified pervert of a Dhampir with a bewitching leer. Without a hint of insincerity or bluster, he declared, *I’ll shut down Fiel’s rite*.

Ino sneered to himself at the sight of this spectacle. Plum was making a mistake, showing too much of his power. Chlammy and Fiel were now exchanging glances, conferring. *What shall we do?* If the game they’d proposed was looking bleak, *there was no reason to play*. They’d just have to withdraw, and that would take care of everything!!

“Oh, it seems you are thinking something disrespectfuul...but I won’t let any of you escape, you knooow!”

He spoke as if to reprimand them for such thoughts, and his wicked smile blocked their exit.

“If you do not commence the game at once, incorporating my demands as instructed, I shall avail myself of your trump card... Renowned as a gofer, I shall instead rat you out at oncce! 🎵”

“——!!”

Chlammy and Fiel clenched their teeth so hard, you could almost hear it.

...*What on earth is this?* Ino wondered. Plum regarded him patronizingly.

“They *can’t* play their trump card of revealing the riite... After all...”



...if they did thaaat—Plum’s sneer widened.

“No one would be able to take over the Commonwealth of Elkia, but the Eastern Union would be doomed. These two are operating without the knowledge of the Senate, concealing both the details of the Eastern Union’s game and their rite to beat it. *They’d go down with you!* 🎵 Sooo...”

His next expression drained the blood from Ino’s face.

“Since *I couldn’t care less about the Eastern Union or the Commonwealth of Elkia*, I’ll play the card foor them! Now come, my two lovely suckers who have brought the most delectable treats for me to suck! I hate looking like such a villaiiin, but as they say, if you’re going to do something, do it right—like this!!”

Here I go! Plum’s satisfaction was chilling...

“*I have nooooo plan B.* If you don’t want to be destroyed, then let’s playyy! ♥ Yeahhh! 🎵”

Gently and with a smile, he sentenced all present to their deaths.

“...Fi, worst case, if we can’t use the rite...”

“...Why, of couurse. I can and will shut down a relative of parasitic insects such as thiiis.”

“Yees, that’s the spiriiit!! Please believe that you will be able to use at least one spell against meee!! That will make crowing over you as waken to reality even more enjoyyyable! 🎵”

Their surroundings made it clear it was no bluff. Chlammy tutted, Fiel was expressionless, and Ino assessed:

All right. So according to Plum’s scenario, he could prevent the Eastern Union from being taken. He could even win part of Elven Gard in exchange for a small Ixseed sacrifice. Could you argue that this is equitable for a small expenditure? But having witnessed the true power of these monsters, Dhampir...Ino was convinced that a “small sacrifice” would result in their release from their symbiotic chains to Siren. It risked unleashing a race that, preposterous though it may seem, could potentially fly even beyond the reach of Elven Gard. It might take time, but it would inevitably mean catastrophe.

He could reject Plum's scenario and go down here or accept it and hang himself slowly.

Or he could get behind Chlammy and Fiel, lose on purpose, and hand over the Eastern Union.

No matter which he chose...it was just a matter of *when, who, and how many would be laid on the chopping block!!*

O...Holy Shrine Maiden. We should all have been able to survive if anyone made it to the goal in the Old Deus's game. But I, in my folly within the game, and Chlammy, Fiel, and Plum, in their wisdom without... In the end, we only succeeded in aspiring to kill. O Holy Shrine Maiden, did you or did those siblings, after all, foresee this...? Then where is the plot? Where is the scenario by means of which none will be sacrificed—?

PRACTICAL END

At about that same time, Sora was thinking, half-dazed, his mind almost frozen:

Who the hell wrote this scenario?

A few minutes earlier, on their fifth move and at the 296th space, Sora, Shiro, and Steph each had three dice. Arriving as children and looking every bit on the brink of death—

“I have been waiting for you, my masters, my lords, my commanders...”

—they found Jibril, pinching her belt and bowing politely, idling with her five dice.

“You swiped our dice, stalked us, and *waited for us*? You couldn’t just say you got here first?!”

The sarcastic Sora wore a stiff expression. Actually, Shiro and Steph did, too. They turned their eyes to the sign inscribed with the Task. It was one they’d seen *many times* along the way, word for word. On this space they’d wanted to avoid if at all possible, the Task resounded:

—Immediately accept a game by the Covenants proposed by a party of at least two members—other than the one who assigned the Task—and win.

It was the Task they’d dreaded the most, the most difficult one in the game. It applied only to a company of at least two, which could only be Sora and Shiro. Furthermore, this Task wouldn’t apply without another party present (Jibril), since the premise wouldn’t stand. She must have staked everything on this chance that might never arise, throwing away all other opportunities to seize dice in the hope that Sora and Shiro would land on her challenge, so she’d followed them.

The scenery altered bit by bit as per the booming directive of Jibril’s Task. The

space expanded, the terrain writhed and rolled, and the sky flowed. The world around them was transformed.

“All right, Shiro. You ready for this...?”

“...Mmm...I was...born, ready...”

“Miss Jibril’s game...truly...is nightmarish...”

Sora let the sweat trickle down his cheeks and grinned bitterly while Shiro licked her lips and Steph just gaped at the heavens. If Jibril was going this far, it probably wasn’t just a quiz.

Promising no hints nor help, Jibril stood upon the stage she’d constructed and dared her masters, *I shall give you all I’ve got, so let us see you win.*

“...Masters, are you aware...?” she murmured. “In all of history, the number of races that have dethroned an Old Deus and achieved deicide—excluding the Old Deus itself—totals but two.”

Jibril settled as she watched them and continued.

“They are we the Flügel...and the Ex Machinas, who slew our lord.”

Her amber eyes, gazing distantly, hollowly, as she muttered matter-of-factly, made Sora and Shiro tighten their grip on each other’s hands and break out in a cold sweat. Watching Jibril emotionlessly oversee the reconstruction of the landscape, they felt an indescribable...unease.

“...It has been over six thousand two hundred years since then... The world has changed.”

As Jibril vacantly droned on, Sora furrowed his brow and weighed the meaning of her words.

The world had changed—through the Great War, and the end of the War, and the Ten Covenants—into Disboard. War had been replaced by games. Now, in place of weapons and force, everything was resolved by reason and wit.

“And now you, Masters, are poised to achieve the third deicide in history.”

“.....”

“If it be that the world transforms each time a god is surpassed, surely this

time, too, it will change.”

*What...is this? I'm getting a really bad feeling...*the quaking in Sora's and Shiro's joined hands seemed to say.

“...However, for me to see that to the—”

Jibril cut herself off and shook her head.

“...My prelude has been excessive. Masters, allow me to present you...my game.”

As the scenery change concluded (with a backdrop of the collapse of heaven and earth), Jibril spelled out everything they couldn't refuse, as *they had not choice but to agree*: a game their Task bound them to accept unconditionally and win.

“The game recreates the Great War. It is a strategy game.”

She continued with Armageddon behind her, built with the power of the Old Deus.

“We shall commence the game with you three as Immanity...and myself as Flügel.”

Important Note - Download all ur fav Official and Fan Translation Light Novels from www.justlightnovels.com.
I am really Sorry for Disturbing u while ur reading pls continue reading..

.....*Hey. Hey, d00d.*

“Whaaa—? I was expecting the highest difficulty, but seriously, isn't this a little too much of an impossible sicko game?”

“.....Jibril...don't be...douchey...”

Like playing Civ with only Ancient units and beating Modern units? They'd actually done that... But Flügel would probably vaporize even Beyond Earth units! Quite the impossible challenge you've thrown at us. Sora grinned in resignation.

“We shall each have the same condition for victory—the fall of the opponent's capital. When this occurs—”

Her next words wiped the grin off Sora's face.

“—as soon as one’s capital falls, one shall renounce one’s life.....and perish by their own hand.”

—.

“.....Hey, Jibril...what the hell are you—?”

“Either side is free to resign. However, quitting...counts as defeat.”

Sora and Shiro gasped as if for breath, but Jibril proceeded unperturbed.

“The losing side shall forfeit all its dice to its opponent, and as an addendum for you, Masters...”

Her gaze was razor-sharp.

“...you shall tell me *how to win* this Old Deus’s game, in full and uncompromised detail.”

—.

“Also, at the start, I shall be restored to ten dice... I demand the transfer of five.”

.....

Forced to surrender their dice under scorched heavens on grounds stained with death. Facing the moribund planet they’d been shown once before during the game on Avant Heim, Sora was thinking, half-dazed, his mind almost frozen:

Who the hell wrote this scenario?

That Jibril would use the Tasks to challenge them was to be expected. But what the hell was this? This was above and beyond expectations—!

“...Well, Masters, as you can see, here we are in the Great War—unquestionably, *the field I dominate.*”

A broken world at her back, Jibril spread her wings as if to make this clear. *No shit! This must be the most impossible game of all time!* Sora howled to himself. *Victory is achieved by knocking over the opponent’s capital—and if yours falls, you have to kill yourself? No matter who wins, it still means either Jibril dies or we do, doesn’t it?! And quitting equals defeat...? Is Jibril forcing death on us?*



If you win, I'll die?

Using herself as a shield to intimidate us—?!

“...Jibril, are you screwing with us? What the hell is this supposed to beeeeeee?!”

Even Shiro, who'd never left his side for eight years, watched him scream with an expression she'd never seen before. *I don't get it!* Sora roared to himself. *After all the work we put into this, we have to kill her to win—?!*

“Pardon me, Master, but I believe I told you, this game I must win.”

Unlike the enraged Sora, Jibril—

“By any means necessary, in fact... This game alone I must win...”

—was cold and emotionless. Her eyes, with their amber-colored crosses, spoke to Sora, and he was at a loss for words. As she gently closed them, she whispered, “If that is not to be.....through this game called the Great War, I will observe this second decide.”

I don't understand.

“I will know how you would behave, survive, and—if my conjecture is accurate—slay a god.”

I don't understand. I don't understand. I don't fucking understand, Jibril!! What the hell?! What did I get wrong—?!

“Before the world changes once again, please entertain my humble wish... With that, the oaths...”

Where the hell—did I go wrong—?! Sora shrieked silently, but the binding force of the Task moved his hand and tongue, preventing him from objecting. Sora, Shiro, Steph...and Jibril: All four raised their hands and opened their mouths.

This is no good, Jibril. With these rules, I can't even quit. 'Cause under these conditions, these rules, even if I quit—

—at least one of us will still die—!!

But Sora's mouth didn't permit him to scream, and the four of them uttered

only one word:

—*Aschente*—.



Likewise, at about the same time, Tet, the re-creator of the world, watched it all—the Eastern Union and the board in the heavens—as he sat on the throne of the One True God atop the peak of the giant chess piece. With an empty book and quill in hand, he gazed upon everyone fighting among themselves and thought:

All games have conventions: moves that have been logically established, according to the specifications and rules, as being correct. Moreover, their inevitable fate is to be smashed to smithereens.

So to those wondering about the end while wishing for an end that's never-ending, the final solution...is this. Projected on separate screens within the ether was each player and their current status within the game. The two people facing him—no, the person he was showing on one of the screens...

She was on the 308th space, forty-three spaces from the goal.

“...The hell...? Bitch...please...”

Standing stock-still before an implausible mystery was a grumbling Izuna, two dice in her hand. Ever since the 301st space, she'd passed the same sign over and over and over. A Task she didn't remember ever having seen before suddenly kept recurring, word for word. It was suspicious that the Tasks, which were supposed to be distributed randomly, would *repeat with such bias*. On top of that, the Task would clearly be invalid in normal circumstances. Furthermore, there shouldn't have been anyone who could make it valid like this. Having finally landed on it, Izuna was overwhelmed by countless quandaries.

Who the hell wrote this Task?

Who the hell wrote this scenario?

Something floated before Izuna Hatsuse's eyes. Sitting in midair on an inkpot roughly her own height, her cheek propped on her hand as though nothing in this world was of interest, was...a girl. She projected a number of scenes in the air like screens.

Two against two, facing a game that seemed to have no end without somebody getting sacrificed.

One contender against three, starting a game that seemed to have no end without somebody winding up dead.

And one mortal and a god standing before a sign with a Task etched on it.

For all this, the girl distractedly addressed Izuna in a businesslike tone as if the lot of it hardly interested her.

“My host seeth an illusion. Its end is this.”

She was a girl of few words. Only far, faraway Tet, with his omnipotence to see through all, heard that silent voice saying that the convention free of sacrifice, the one the Shrine Maiden had dreamed of...*had been a contradiction from the start.*

“So long as all make the moves that benefit them most, such an outcome can never be.”

The game should have been easy. It should have let everyone survive. But the end to which it led was projected on the screens: visions of people killing one another, disregarding even the rules. The prisoner’s dilemma was not as simple as Sora had described. *It was inviolable.* As long as everyone wanted to be a winner and not a loser, the inevitable outcome was...

They played along. When the time came to reveal the *winner* and *loser*, it was clear which would be the inevitable sacrifice. And what was more...

“It is illogical to propose that the Shrine Maiden, who deceived a god and sold her ether to you, would omit a sacrifice.”

Therefore, the girl hypothesized, the world had not changed at all and never would for all the eons to come. The only things that would change were the labels applied to the excuses and tools they used to plunder and kill.

“Now, in this childish game conceived by my host, victory is easy. Fulfill the Task and gain all.

However, as sworn by the Covenants, I shall ask the question I have taken from thy memory—”

Still she exhibited no sign of having noticed Izuna, who stood frozen in place.

Nor did she show any indication of expecting an answer.

“The question ye contrived to settle by means of this game—I shall ask it once more.”

Some thought the world hadn’t changed. That was half-true and half-false. No matter how many thousands of times heaven and earth were remade, so long as the purpose woven into the world itself remained fixed, everything would stay the same. There were some who knew this.

It was long ago, before even the Great War, during the period people called *creation*. All things material and immaterial, living and lifeless, organic and inorganic, were being forged without purpose or consciousness. There was a goddess who had vaguely wondered about the absurdity of it all, who had come into existence to speak for creation, a concept. She was the first in this world, on this planet, to ask—*Why?* Within the infinite flow of time, she had an equally infinite amount of questions, but, as no one responded, she had merely wandered alone. That all-too-transient goddess, forsaken by everything, and constantly deceived by the Shrine Maiden—

The sneak peek is presented in the original right-to-left orientation, so please read it in that order.

“What is it to believe?”

—asked with empty eyes *why* the Shrine Maiden had betrayed her.

She couldn’t trust anything: her ether, the manifestation of the concept that formed the god of doubt, even herself. The Suniaster, too, was nescient. Even omnipotence could not know *that which was not*—the nameless god.

The same way the Shrine Maiden had chosen me as a sacrifice. The same way I had been forced into a game in which loss meant death, with my ether as a shield. Perhaps that was what the Shrine Maiden and Sora and Shiro defined as belief. Perhaps deceit and betrayal were what the Shrine Maiden called trust.

The same way she had given up on everything, lost all hope in anything, all she could do...was show the faint tinge of a betrayed child who blamed the adults.

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

Echoing the Task on that space, she pressed Izuna for an answer. Nothing would end without someone's sacrifice. *Come*, she said.

Pick one to join me. Choose who shall be sacrificed to decide the one who emerges victorious...

AFTERWORD

This is Yuu Kamiya, with the first new volume in a year and three months. Not only did I make you wait a very long time in the first place, but then I pushed back the release date drastically. I'd like to take this opportunity to apologize deeply to my readers and all concerned.

.....

.....

"...Huh? Where's the punch line?"

Oh, my third editor, "I," good to see you. There's no punch line this time.

"Ohhh, you and your jokes— (*serious*) Mr. Kamiya, did you hit your head?!"

No, you see, when I've made everyone wait this long...you know? I mean, if I was just late it was one thing, but then I pushed back the date. Yeah.

"W-well, it's true that you're always busting our deadlines, but this time is very... How did this happen?"

...Well, you see. There's a story behind this deeper than a bottomless pit.

Have you heard of...Friedrich Nietzsche?

"That's quite abrupt...not that that's anything new, I suppose. Yes, I have."

Nietzsche said that God—a fragile, illusory ideology—is dead. Regardless, people feared the judgment of others or the strain on personal relationships and still clung to the theory of God's existence. They sought a diversified and hollowed-out illusion that pandered to the biases of popular thought—and thus went without a defined self that would determine uniform principles of conduct. He reviled these people as the "herd" and contrasted them with one who would stand without God, one who would walk with independent will based on his own absolute values, unshaken by fear of others. In other words,

he said one should become an “overman.”

...O-or something like that.

“.....Probably.”

H-honestly, I’m not sure exactly. I got all puffed up and decided to give it a read, but it seems there’s a fundamental inadequacy in my brain capacity! H-however, let’s take this interpretation as a lens through which to view the situation after the publication of Volume 6.

The anime concluded successfully thanks to the audience’s warm reception! Meanwhile, Volume 6 raised the expectations for the next volume to the breaking point! My dear readers must indeed have thought:

I bet Volume 7 will be even more awesome!!

But at this juncture, I beg you to trace back through your memories. When you’ve been told *This game is friggin’ awesome*, has there ever once been a case when it actually was *friggin’ awesome*?! In the very best case, wasn’t it just *Well, I guess it’s all right*?! Thus, the readers’ expected values crossed Mach 1 to form a force field smashing past the Van Allen belt! As one of the “herd” whom Nietzsche so despises, I responded to that expectation with fear and a heart rate like a flea’s! As an ignoble member of the herd, I shook like an everyman—shook and broke like an everyman! I gasped in turmoil like any man! And then, in my throes of anguish, I thought thusly:

Look at those who fling out hits beyond compare to mine and who proceed as if the expectations or appraisals of readers—that pressure—were a hardly perceptible breeze, announcing future works without a hitch, without a break.

Ah...yes, look at them! They are those who Nietzsche lauded, the thunder of which Zarathustra foretold! Those who walk by their own firm will, swayed not by the masses! The overman—is they—!!

So I thought of that, then looked at my manuscript. I’m no overman; I’m one of the herd. How can you blame me if it was late? No, would it not be more aberrant for it not to be late?! This is just what I think, but what about you?! Hmmmm?!

“.....”

.....

“Could you summarize that?”

I got in my own way and wasted my own time and fell into a slump I’M SORRYYY!!!

“...The defendant is sentenced to deliver the manuscript for Volume 8 immediately. He is also forbidden from *rejecting an entire manuscript on his own* like this time.”

Hnk...ergh... Th-thank you for your merciful sentencing. B-but before that, well, you see—I have to fill six more pages with this afterword...

“And whose fault is that, I wonder...”

Huh? I thought you guys were the ones who said that printing conditions required.....

“(smiling)—We what?”

It’s my fault for writing an inconvenient number of pages! I’m sorryyy!!

B-but...I mean, you know, I’ve got nothing left to write.

“...It’s been over a year... Well, all right, let’s say we scratch all the time you were working on the anime bonuses and such. It’s still been over half a year... Nothing happened during that time?”

Huh? No, I mean, yeah, a lot of stuff happened. What I’m saying is I’ve got nothing left to *write*. For example—

—a sudden economic slump dragged down my parents’ business along with the whole of Brazil, and they called me from the other side of the world to go help them. And then soon after I got back to Japan, they told me my sister was getting married, so I had to return to Brazil again. But I told them my wife was giving birth so I couldn’t go to the wedding, and then they said to give them all the money for the honeymoon, with a little heart emoji at the end—

(rolls eyes)—but do you really want to hear about all this?

“Let’s keep it cheerful!! Uhhh... Right! What about that spin-off?!”

Oh, good point! That's a cheerful topic! A shamelessly cheerful plug, right?!

...Ahem.

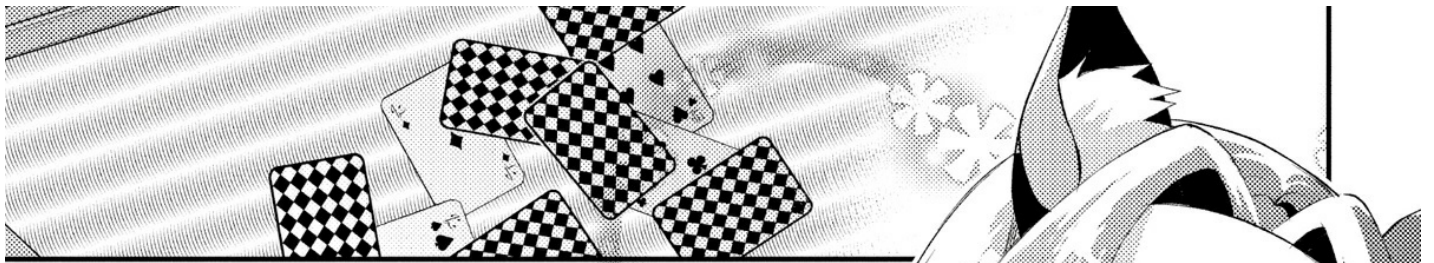
A new spin on *No Game No Life*! See the world of Disboard through Izuna's eyes—in *No Game No Life, Please!* It's in *Gekkan Comic Alive* (Monthly Comic Alive), starting in the July issue! The project launched last summer based on my sincerest wish and nomination... Uhhh.

A picture's worth a thousand words, they say. So here's a sneak peek!

The sneak peek is presented in the original right-to-left orientation, so please read it in that order.







PIKO (BOIKO)
BUT I LOST, SO I GOTTA OBEY THE COVENANTS, PLEASE.

SO!

PIKO
I D-DON'T GET IT, PLEASE.

KIMONO GIRL GETS BUFFED BY THE OCCASIONAL DRESS...

...CLASSIC EQUALS WIN...

PROPS.

L..... LET ME DO SOMETHING FOR YOU BITCHES, PLEASE...!

.....

HA HAAA!

AS YOU WISH!

So yeah, that's pretty much what it's like. Fluffy and relaxed, hot off the newsstands!! Mr. Yuizaki's the one coming up with the ideas and the actual story, but I'm also participating directly in plot conferences, canon oversight, and so on. It skips over all the tricky logic battles to show the pure world reflected in Izuna's eyes—a distillation of cuteness. I sincerely hope that you'll give it a look. Mr. Yuizaki's Izuna is adorable, as are the other characters! (*pushy*)

“By the way, I'll go ahead and share what the readers are inevitably going to say when we promote this.”

Uh, all right...yes, of course, go ahead.

“What's going on with the *original manga adaptation*...?”

I'll get right to that storyboard as soon as I finish this afterword! Mashiro Hiiragi and I let our production system fall apart after the anime and couldn't get it up again. But we're back on it and will make up for the time we've lost, so please bear with us!

“(smiling) Then, of course, the manuscript for Volume 8 will also be delivered in no time, right?”

Yes, it will! Once I finish that storyboard, I'll get to writing it in leaps and bounds!!

“...Wha—?”

...Wha—?

“Wait, isn't this the part where you pretend not to hear me and disappear...?”

If I did that after a fifteen-month gap, it wouldn't even be funny. For once, I sincerely regret what I've done... I won't make you wait so long for the next volume.

“—Ah—”

Considering the content as well, we do have to get it out soon.

“Mr. Kamiya, hold on there! You're—!!”

Don't worry! I've already got Volume 8 written to some extent already! Come

on, I'll make it back by Christmas!! Leave it to me!

“You're setting a flag! It won't even be a year! That's the flag for a four-year quagmire like World War I!”

And with that, I hope this volume proved to be worth the year-long wait. I'll be back in Volume 8—a raging rush of follow-up on all the foreshadowing in this volume. It is my dearest wish to meet you there. See you then!

I DON'T WANNA LOSE; I DON'T WANNA LOSE;
I DON'T WANNA LOSE! PLEASE, MASTER! JUST
ONCE, JUST THIS ONCE, PLEASE LET ME WIN.
—IF THAT IS NOT TO BE, AT LEAST DO IT
SIMPLY—I BEG YOU...!!

WHY, YOU STILL DON'T
UNDERSTAAAND? THIS WILL
DROP ALL THE OLD DEI TO THE
EARTH—AND TRANSFORM
THEM INTO PLAYERS.

—O ASCRAL GRAIL, O SOMEONE,
GIVE ME AN ANSWER...
WHAT ARE WE GOING
FOR JUST WHAT PURPOSE—?

...SORA AND SHIRO
ARE WEAR LITTLE
PUNKS, PLEASE.
"THOSE TWO" ARE
TOO STRONG—
THEY MUST HAVE
TOLD SOME LIE NO
ASSHOLE SHOULD
TELL, PLEASE...

—NOW WE'RE
GONNA LOSE,
SHIRO. IT'LL BE
BLANK'S FIRST—
FAILURE.

SO—THAT'S RIGHT, JUST
LIKE I PROMISED THAT DAY—
THIS TIME, NO ONE WILL
NEED TO BE SACRIFICED—
A GAME LIKE THAT, COME—
LET IT BEGIN FROM HERE!



THUS, EVERYTHING COMES FULL CIRCLE AND DOES AN ABOUT-FACE—TO THE END
OF "CONVENTION," FOR WHICH THEY WISHED BUT COULD NEVER REACH. TO THAT
SHOWN BY THE TENTH OF THE TEN COVENANTS, THAT BEYOND —!!

NO GAME NO LIFE, VOLUME 8
I'LL GET IT OUT SOON THIS TIME...

● OLD DEUS DESIGN ILLUSTRATIONS
(REDACTED FOR SPOILERS)

Concept Drawings



Main unit

God mode. Charismax enabled. This is what happens when you expand all the scrolls in her sprite. The ball she's sitting on is an inkpot, which I imagined as actually being the main unit. The scrolls are a symbol of infinite turmoil, writing infinite questions and hypotheses followed by contradictions, or something like that.

Since this was the first Old Deus to make a proper appearance, I tried focusing on making her look different from any other race.

Still, she's dependent on the Shrine Maiden for her ether, so although she's not a Werebeast, she's got a fox mask and vaguely Japanese-looking clothes... That's basically the idea.

[REDACTED]

● AGE-CHANGING PRACTICE SKETCHES
AND DESIGNS

6 dice
(age 6.6)

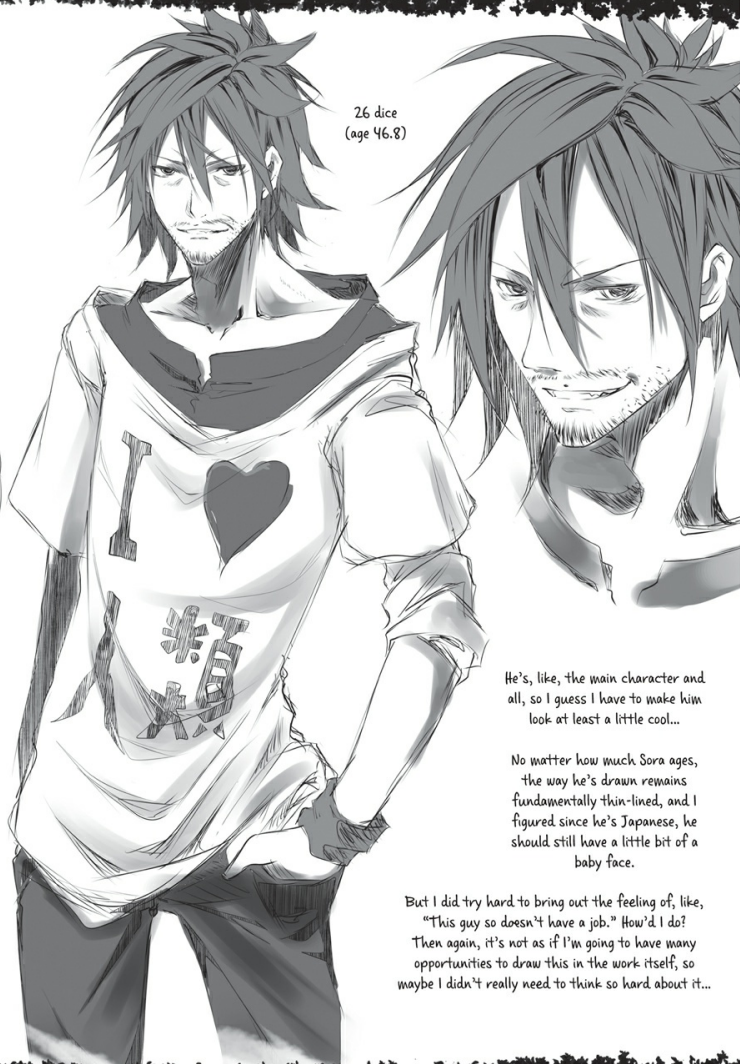


It's hard to convey Shiro's various ages...
To begin with, Shiro is poorly developed for
eleven, so I don't think a change of one or two
dice would be obvious...

When she was about seven, though, she
would have lacked developed abs and her
bones wouldn't have finished growing,
either, so that would mean a pretty
prominent squid-shaped belly and a round,
almost boneless figure—at least, in my
fanciful imagination.

It probably would've been easier just
to differentiate by hair length in the
book's final illustrations...

26 dice
(age 46.8)



He's, like, the main character and
all, so I guess I have to make him
look at least a little cool...

No matter how much Sora ages,
the way he's drawn remains
fundamentally thin-lined, and I
figured since he's Japanese, he
should still have a little bit of a
baby face.

But I did try hard to bring out the feeling of, like,
"This guy so doesn't have a job." How'd I do?
Then again, it's not as if I'm going to have many
opportunities to draw this in the work itself, so
maybe I didn't really need to think so hard about it...

A
WAY
TO
END...

"IT
WOULD
BE
BETTER
TO
STICK
YOU
MANURE-
REEKING,
WOODLAND
YOKELS
BACK IN
THE DIRT
AS
FERTILIZER!!"

ONE, A DWARF — A GENIUS CATALYST ENGINEER
WHO TURNED SPIRIT ARMS, WHICH HAD MERELY
BEEN CATALYSTS FOR EXECUTING MAGIC, INTO
A SCIENCE AND CONSTRUCTED A WEAPON THAT
WAS UNPRECEDENTED —

LONI DRACHNIIR

**NO GAME NO LIFE GARDEN:
PRACTICAL WAR GAME**

THIS WAR HAS ONLY ONE RULE — ANYTHING GOES — !!
COME — LET THE BATTLE BEGIN — !!

THREE FULL CENTURIES BEFORE THE
CONCLUSION OF THE GREAT WAR —
THERE WERE TWO WHO MANEUVERED
TO CROSS RACE LINES AND END THE
WAR, TWO WHO HAD THEIR OWN WAY
OF EARNING THE TITLE OF GENIUS...

"THERE
YOU
GRUBBY
MOLES
GO,
PULLING
YOUR
FACES
OUT OF
THE DIRT.
WHY,
YOU'D
BEST KEEP
THEM
PROPERLY
BURIED!!"

...THE
GREAT
WAR
—?

ONE, AN ELF — A GENIUS RITE COMPILER WHO
TURNED RITE COMPILATION, WHICH HAD BEEN
MERELY A PROCEDURE FOR EXECUTING MAGIC,
INTO AN ART AND OPENED THE ENTIRE SYSTEM
OF MAGIC DVICE —

THINK NIRVALEN

✖ **I LIED**

EDITOR FORCED ME TO FILL ALL THE PAGE(S)!!

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