
Sakon Kaidou
Illustrator: Eri Kuroda
Infinite Dendrogram
SP1. The Southern Cross (Part 1)


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Illustrator: Taiki


"Abyss Shellder is here!"
"I-It's here...!" Asam spoke and emphasized his words with a voice full of desperation.
And then, he said the most important words of all.


"I-I'm the commander of the adventure fleet! Sh-Sharin' a bath with a guy is n-no big deal for me!" she said, her face going red.
"Whate-fur you say," Shu responded, still not looking at her.

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Opening: It Begins with a Fateful Coincidence???

Countless pale-blue info windows were the only thing that illuminated the unnatural space. The effect was similar to turning off the light in a room full of active monitors, but it was the entity observing the windows that truly made the scene surreal.

At a glance, this silent creature might look like an adult man, but closer examination would reveal the patches of draconic scales and beastly fur that covered his skin, as well as devilish horns growing from his head.

This gave him the overall appearance of a humanlike monster—but the glasses on his face just barely brought it back to "monstrous human."

It... *He* was control AI No. 4, Jabberwock, and he was observing one of the countless windows in absolute silence. He wasn't even breathing. His fingers, which usually moved without a moment's rest, were now completely frozen in place.

This was caused by the scene reflected in the window, showing the battle between two monsters—or rather, the *result* of that battle.

A monster reminiscent of a giant isopod was in the process of devouring another monster that resembled a shellfish. On the surface this seemed like nothing more than the natural order of the food chain—but in this world, the act of one monster eating another was simply impossible.

Dead monsters always transformed into items. If killed by humanoids, a monster would transform into materials and equipment that reflected its nature. If it died of natural causes or by the fangs of other monsters, it was more likely to drop food.

Because of this, it was absurdly rare for monsters to physically consume the bodies of other monsters. It was possible if the prey

dropped a “Complete Remains” item, but that was quite uncommon as well.

However, that rare exception didn’t even apply here in any case. Both the isopod and the shellfish were UBMs.

In battles between UBMs, the winner simply absorbed the Resources of the loser, taking in its power directly without any drops in between.

That made this scene impossible. A UBM simply *could never* consume another UBM.

And yet, that impossible circumstance was happening right now.

“*Coincidences* can be quite terrifying.” Jabberwock finally broke the silence and voiced his thoughts.

That was the best way to summarize it. This was a coincidence—an accident.

The unique powers these two monsters happened to possess had paved the way for an impossible event.

As the isopod consumed the shellfish, Jabberwock beheld an obvious change in the creature’s form.

“This coincidence is sure to create an Irregularity... I wonder what will become of this,” he muttered, sounding like both a scholar in the middle of an experiment and a prophet gazing into the future.

Jabberwock predicted that this unprecedented event would bring chaos upon the world...and he was completely right.

This chaos would be focused in an area called the South Sea.

Open Episode: “The Southern Cross”

Act 1: It Rises with a Furry Form

Granvaloa

In the year 2043, a VRMMO called *Infinite Dendrogram* was released and took the world by storm.

This game provided its players—Masters—with an experience so realistic it rivaled reality itself, as well as beings called "Embryos" that granted powers unique to each person.

Upon first entering this world, the players could choose one of seven countries to start in.

The Kingdom of Altar, the Land of Knights.

The Dryfe Imperium, the Land of Machines.

Huang He, the Empire of Hermits.

Tenchi, the Land of Blades.

Legendaria, the Fairyland.

Caldina, the Mercantile City-State Union.

And finally, Granvaloa, the Maritime Fleet.

All of these seven nations, aside from Tenchi and Granvaloa, were located on a massive landmass sometimes called the Central Continent. Caldina occupied the vast desert in the center with Huang He to the east. To Caldina's west, going from north to south, there was Dryfe, Altar, and Legendaria.

Tenchi and Granvaloa alone were not located on this continent. Tenchi was an island nation that controlled an archipelago located to the east of Huang He, while Granvaloa *had no land at all*.

All of Granvaloa's inhabitants were seafarers, dwelling on artificial islands made by connecting large ships, as well as in the depths of the ocean where only aquatic humanoids could live.

Both Masters and foreign tians—NPCs—found this country's way of life very curious, but to Granvaloans, this was completely ordinary.

And because they were bound to no land, their activities were spread across an incredibly vast area. They had ships traveling all

over the north, west, and south—everywhere except the eastern seas surrounding Tenchi. They dominated the expansive ocean that surrounded the continent.

In that sense, some might say that they possessed more territory than any land-based country could ever hope to have.

Granvaloa was led by an individual known as the grand captain or navarch, beneath whom were four fleets that each handled different affairs of state.

The trade fleet was in charge of commerce with other countries.

The military fleet hunted down monsters and protected Granvaloan vessels, as well as any foreign ships that put in a request.

The pirate fleet led all of the nation's privateering, targeting unregistered ships in Granvaloan waters.

And then there was the adventure fleet.

Sometimes called the "pioneer fleet," their main duty was to search for land that Granvaloa could take for their own. Indeed—they sought out new territory so they could stake their claim before any other nation.

There was a history behind Granvaloa's seafaring lifestyle, of course—perhaps a story for another time.

While the adventure fleet had actually already discovered a number of islands, they all had issues that made them hard to inhabit, such as powerful monster presence or violent volcano activity. So far, they had found nothing that was fit to sustain a permanent population.

Based solely on how well they'd accomplished their main objective—finding new territory for Granvaloa—one might assume that the adventure fleet hadn't accomplished anything. However, that was far from the truth.

While they had not yet been successful in their search for land, Granvaloa had benefited from countless *other* discoveries made by the adventure fleet.

They had uncovered ancient ruins—the many underwater locations known as "Seafloor Excavation Forts," as well as the seafloor ores and minerals that were often found alongside them.

They never failed to dredge up ships that had sunk in ages past. And everywhere they sailed, they salvaged what they could, finding many things that passed as treasure and enriched Granvaloa.

All in all, the pioneer fleet had truly earned their alternative name—the adventure fleet, braving uncharted waters to search for the riches they held.

They had a dazzling reputation. Many Granvaloan tians and Masters looked up to them and dreamed of joining their search for treasure. The adventure fleet was a true shining star of the seafaring nation.

But that all changed a mere three months ago.

◇

The area was more properly called the Continent-South Sea, but people often shortened this to just the South Sea.

As the name suggested, the South Sea was an expanse of water to the south of the continent, and it was as vast as one might expect. Visiting it required a ship or a tamed and mountable aquatic monster—though if you planned to stay there long, only the former would suffice.

Granvaloan shipbuilding was unmatched by any other country, and it was one of the greatest advantages the nation possessed. Those living in Granvaloa could buy their ships for cheap, and the country's Masters would use them to go on adventures in this unique, aquatic environment, making various discoveries and improvements as they did.

Because of this, Granvaloan ships could be found scattered across all the seas, and the South Sea was no exception.

In fact, there was a particular ship cutting through the waves at this very moment.

The craft's alloy armor and smokestack spewing fumes as it went made it clear that this was among the best ships in all of Granvaloa.

On its side, written in the language of the *Dendro* world, there was its name: "*Adventure II*."

Despite being driven by a combustion engine, on its bow stood a

figurehead much like a traditional sailing ship's—a combination you could only really see in this world.

The figurehead was carved in the shape of a sea elemental, and standing on the bowsprit above was a girl.

Her build suggested she was in her mid-teens, the time of her life when she was just beginning to mature. Tossed by the wind, her blonde hair was a bit faded by the many years of exposure to the salty air, suggesting that she was highly active—a charm in its own right.

Her eyes, as blue and clear as the sea itself, were fixed on the waters ahead and gleamed with a strong will.

Her name was Riella Granfront, and she was the captain of the *Adventure II*. And, though she had yet to establish her leadership, she was the commander of the entire Granvaloan adventure fleet.

Bearing titles that were clearly too heavy for someone her age, she glared at the horizon as if it had taken her parents from her.

"Tch. We've been at this for a whole damn week now, and it still ain't comin' out." Her choice of words was rough and boyish, but the pitch of her voice matched her youthful appearance.

"Commander! Please come back!" An aged man called out to her from the deck. His name was Asam. He was the vice captain of the *Adventure II*, as well as the person who handled most of the day-to-day business. "You shouldn't wear yourself out so early! If you don't rest now, you won't last until we finally *do* meet it!"

Asam was concerned about Riella, worrying about her from the bottom of his heart. However, she didn't listen to him, instead continuing to stand on the tip of the bowsprit.

She was driven by a stubbornness born from powerful feelings deep in her very core.

"Huh?" But as she glared at the sea, Riella's eyebrows suddenly moved. A dubious expression crossed her face as she pointed ahead and spoke to Asam. "Hey, old-timer," she said. "Is it just me, or is there somethin' floatin' out there?"

"One moment." Asam took out the telescope hanging at his waist and looked at where Riella was pointing.

It was a black, furry mass much larger around than a grown man.

At first she thought it might be trash, but the color suggested otherwise—its black was simply too clean.

Was it a sea monster, then? No. While one could encounter furry monsters on land, this was the middle of the sea—not the place for such creatures. More importantly, there was no monster name displayed above it.

It seemed most likely to be cargo from a trading vessel.

"Maybe it fell from a ship?" Asam suggested. "Could be an item from a vessel it attacked."

"We should investigate." Asam issued some orders to the crew and had the ship approach the black mass in order to retrieve it. They used a magic-powered salvaging crane to bring it up, at which point they realized the object had a more concrete shape than expected.

It actually had limbs, as well as a head, making it look like a stuffed land animal.

Somethin' ain't right about it, though, Riella thought.

She'd seen something like this once before, in a picture book given to her by her father. It looked like a particular type of land animal—a bearlike monster.

However, it was far too distorted... Too *round* to be one of those.

It was less like an actual animal, and more like...

"All right. Be careful with it," Riella said, instructing the crew to gently move the crane-bound stuffed animal to the deck...

"Ohhh, thank you beary much!"

...and then heard *it* say that.

"AAAHHH!"

"EEEP!" The tanned and muscle-bound men of the sea were so startled that they screamed, but there was a certain someone's charming yelp mixed in.

"It's been three days since my ship capsized. I last saved at a port in Tenchi, so I couldn't go back there and was havin' a pawsitively miserable time. Big thankies."

The black stuffed animal—the bear costume—shook off the seawater as it said that.

"Wh-What are you?!" Riella asked.

Not “who,” she said, but “what.” The bear was just so bizarre that she had no reason to assume it was a *person*.

While the crew was busy panicking, the bear was as calm as a breeze as it introduced itself.

“I’m Shu Starling. Just a bear passing through.”

And that was how Riella met the man who would change not only her fate, but that of her fleet—and of the whole South Sea itself.

◇

Infinite Dendrogram was said to be a game of absolute freedom, individuality, and possibility.

It provided a world that was almost indistinguishable from real life, yet provided more freedom than reality, as well as Embryos and other unique things that let players live however they liked. Players even had a lot of freedom in how they would interact with the world’s tians.

This level of freedom had resulted in countless players whose individuality was in full bloom, and as a result they had garnered somewhat of a name for themselves. Many of these Masters were affiliated with the Kingdom of Altar.

There was the Over Gladiator, Figaro. He was the current duel champion and someone who regularly engaged in the absurd, nearly impossible, no-lifer feat of descending into the Tomb Labyrinth all by himself.

There was the High Priestess, Tsukuyo Fuso. She was the leader of the Lunar Society—a clan that doubled as a religious group that boasted over a thousand members, the largest in Altar.

There was Lei-Lei. She was a bar star who taught newbies caution by giving them drinks that were as much poison as they were booze.

There was The Unsheath, Kashimiya. He was the head of a PK clan and a duel-ranking PKK, or player killer killer.

There was the Star Chef, Darshan. He ran a business on the main street of Altar’s capital, enchanting players and tians alike with his culinary delights.

However, even in the company of such unique individuals, there was one player who still stood out.

He was always clad in an animal costume, engaging in role-play where he peppered his speech with puns referring to that animal.

There were many rumors about him. They said that he'd been seen with children clinging to him and kicking him as he gave them candy. They said that he always helped people who accidentally went into newbie trap dungeons. People even claimed to have spotted him being flung through the air as if by a massive explosion.

Eventually, so many people in Altar had seen children climbing on him that he'd earned the internet nickname "child mountain." But even after all that, his true identity remained a complete mystery.

A certain high-level player in the scout grouping of jobs had once tried to use the Reveal skill to see this mysterious Master's name and stats. However, the skill failed, and the player had said that all the information he'd tried to gather remained obscured.

This made some people speculate that the costumed Master's level might've been really high, and half jokingly suggest that he might have actually been the mysterious "King of Destruction" who sat at the top of the rankings.

However, people didn't pry too much and treated him as just nothing more than an enigmatic playmate for children, and ultimately he was nothing more than a famous player who hung around the capital.

Anyway, this mystery player...

"But whyyy?!"

...was now lying on the deck, all wrapped up.

"...The hell is this?" Riella said as she looked down and watched him roll around.

What she'd thought was some discarded cargo was actually a living creature. The crew used Reveal on him, but the stats and everything else were blacked out. That made him seem so suspicious that she had her crew immediately tie him up—but he just started rolling around, which greatly irritated her.

Rather than rope, they used their spare anchor chain, but that didn't stop him from rolling.

"It...does seem to be a person," said Asam.

"There are people like *this* on the land?" There were various kinds of humanoids inhabiting the continent and the surrounding seas. These included centaurs that were horses from the waist down, as well as ox-heads that had, well, the heads of oxen. Riella herself had an orca-like aquatic demi-human in her ancestry, and though she had no visible fins or anything like that, her internal anatomy was well adapted for long periods underwater.

However, Riella had never heard of humanoids that looked exactly like stuffed bears.

"You said somethin' about Tenchi. That where you're from?" she asked.

"He seems closer to a Legendarian than someone from the land of strife..." suggested Asam.

"I'm fur-om Altar! Please take off the chains and hear me out!" the bear shouted, still rolling around.

Riella looked at him and pondered for a moment...

"We won't free ya, but we *will* listen to ya. So talk."

...and offered a compromise.

"Ngh... It's a long, paw-nderous, and tear-jerking story..."

And so, the bear explained how he'd ended up in this position.

Once he was done with his tale, Riella and Asam exchanged a dubious look.

"Okay, so to summarize... In Tenchi, ya beat a monster they called a 'godbeast,' but while doin' that, ya burned down the forest it was in. And since it was owned by the daimyo family of Kuroha, they got mad and sent someone after ya. To make things worse, for some reason the Technical Apex caught ya in their sights. Ya then went to a black market trader and paid a whole lot for a one-person ship, and though it helped ya escape Tenchi with your life, the ship capsized when ya entered the South Sea. You've been drifting for three days since. Do I have it all right?"

"More or less."

"All right. Let's hand him over to Tenchi."

"But whyyy?!" the bear said as his rolling intensified. "Fur whaaat?!"

"I mean, you're a fugitive."

"Ughhh. I can't believe I'm in the same position as that *slime*..."

"Slime...? Wait, what are ya, anyway? Tian or Master?" Riella asked. She couldn't even tell that much and still suspected he might be a monster.

"A Master."

"Masters can go back to your own world and move to your last save point, right? Ya didn't actually have to drift in the sea for three days, did ya?" By "your world," Riella meant reality. That was how tians understood Masters logging out.

"Well, you sure know your stuff... But I have a reason for not doing that."

"That bein'...?"

"Kuroha's after me, but they still dunno who I am. That means I'm not on the wanted list, and I can still use their save paw-ints."

Masters who committed a crime were rendered unable to use the save points of the country whose laws they'd broken. If the crime was sufficiently bad, they could become wanted everywhere and end up unable to use *any* save points. If given the death penalty in a state when they were wanted, they would then be sent to the "gaol." Since Masters could come back from death, taking away their freedom was perhaps the greatest punishment they could suffer.

"If I logged in through that save point, I'd end up back in Tenchi," the Master continued. "And it's open season on bears over there now."

"And that's why ya drifted around for three whole days?"

"Well, I did log out fur bathroom breaks and to clean myself. Also didn't furget to eat and take afternoon naps."

What's the point of cleanin' yourself if you're just gonna end up back in the ocean, anyway? Riella wondered, but stopped herself from pointing it out, since it wasn't a terribly delicate thing to say.

"Ya don't even have a spare ship?" she asked. *Infinite Dendrogram* had Inventories and Garages—different items with lots of space for other things inside them. Because of this, there were many who prepared spare ships to use if their main one was damaged or they encountered some other emergency. That required

a certain level of wealth, though...

"Uhh... I do have a spare one...but I can't use it."

"Why's that?"

"It's an amphibious hovercraft. It's hard to control on the sea, and the way the air hits the water attracts lots of monsters. It eats a lot of paw-er too, so it's hard to run it fur long."

Riella pictured the small hovercraft the military fleet used for land operations and thought, *Yeah, that's not somethin' ya wanna be in while out at sea.*

"Why would you have *that* as your spare?"

"That's my main boat, actually... But anyway, it's hard fur me to get anywhere like this, so please take me to a non-Tenchi town with a save paw-int. I'll repay you."

"I'm not about to make that big of a detour," said Riella. "There's a *monster* I gotta beat."

"A monster?" The bear tilted his head, noticing the weight she put into the word.

"'Corpse Stronghold, Abyss Shellder.' It's a UBM rampaging around the South Sea...and the thing that killed my old man."

With a face that showed many and varied emotions, Riella launched into a story of her own.

◇

Riella's father, Jonathan, was the previous commander of the adventure fleet.

An energetic man loved by all, many expected him to become a pillar of his fleet and Granvaloa as a whole.

The leader of the pirate fleet—the oldest of the four commanders—had even said that Jonathan deserved to become the next navarch.

However, an odd phenomenon had begun occurring about three months earlier—ships disappearing without a trace while navigating the South Sea.

It wasn't just transport ships or merchant fleet ships either. Even military warships escorting them were vanishing.

That, combined with the change in the surrounding monster habitats, suggested to Jonathan that this was the work of a new monster that had claimed the area as its territory. It was the most obvious assumption. In this world, powerful monsters—mostly newly spawned UBMs—often had a profound effect on the ecosystems they entered.

In order to confirm his suspicions and solve the problem, Jonathan recruited the finest sailors the adventure fleet had to offer and went to investigate the South Sea.

He did all of this for the future of Granvaloa.

If this phenomenon continued, fewer ships would travel through the South Sea, which would greatly affect foreign trade—and to prevent this, they simply had to remove the root cause of it.

Preparing a force great enough to overcome even a truly powerful monster, Jonathan journeyed to the South Sea. With him were high-level tians, dozens of high-rank Masters, some of the best warships in all of Granvaloa, and even two *Superiors* with close ties to the adventure fleet.

They were enough to scatter hundreds of monsters and fell UBMs as powerful as Ancient Legendary tier, if not Mythical.

Jonathan was well prepared. He did all he could.

The only problem was...*even all that wasn't enough*.

Ten days after they began exploring the South Sea, Jonathan's forces encountered a singular, massive monstrosity. This was what caused all the ship disappearances, and it was indeed a UBM.

The adventure fleet engaged it the moment they spotted it.

Every ship unloaded everything they had at the creature. The warship artillery, the Embryo ultimate skills, and all the power of two *Superiors* were unleashed upon it.

However, it was all for nothing. The artillery, magic, Embryo ults—none of it had any effect on the UBM.

The adventure fleet was powerless against it, and the seemingly invincible creature killed and consumed them.

Even the *Superiors* they had counted on above all else were defeated.

With eighty percent of their forces gone, the adventure fleet had

no choice but to flee.

Jonathan took up the rear guard to cover his comrades' retreat, but the flagship—the *Adventure*—was sunk, and he was confirmed to have gone down with it.

This disaster had few survivors, but among them was Asam, who had served as Jonathan's aide—and, of course, the *Superiors* and other Masters who eventually came back from the death penalty.

And with their return, they brought back the monster's name—"Corpse Stronghold, Abyss Shellder."

The leaders of Granvaloa instantly classified it as an extremely dangerous entity and forbade regular ships from entering the South Sea, preventing further casualties. In addition, they requested that Granvaloa's seven *Superiors*—including the two who had accompanied Jonathan—go there and slay this UBM.

Months had passed since, and yet the Corpse Stronghold still controlled the South Sea.

◇

"And that's why I'm gonna kill the damn thing myself," said Riella. Before his death, Jonathan had begun construction on the *Adventure II*, and she had taken the recently completed craft on its maiden voyage to the South Sea.

Her only goal was to avenge her father.

Many were against this, and they told her to reconsider—that it was reckless, and that her father wouldn't have wanted her to do it.

These had been the words of the other three commanders, as well as other captains, tian and Master alike. They came from a place of genuine concern, and yet Riella had brushed them aside and made the journey regardless.

A black flame of vengeance raged in her heart, and she would direct all of it toward Abyss Shellder.

Those who shared her intention—others who wished to avenge their fallen friends or families—had joined her on this ship, and they had arrived here.

That was why Riella now stared at the sea with a piercing look

that belied her young age.

Somewhere beyond that horizon was the monster that had killed her father.

"Mm-hmm." The bear hummed in understanding.

"So yeah, I got no time to take ya anywhere," Riella concluded, making the bear fall silent. He might've been pondering something, but the costume made it hard to tell for certain.

But then, he finally spoke up.

"Young lady..."

"It's Riella. Call me 'young lady' again and you're goin' right back in the water."

"That so? Riella, then," the bear said as he stood up, moving so casually that he hardly seemed chained up at all...

"I'll pay for the ride by *absolutely breakin'* that Abyss Shellder thing."

...and made an offer as though it were nothing at all.

This time, the ones to fall silent were Riella and Asam.

Though, it didn't take long for her to speak up...

"Hey, old man. Dump him back in the drink."

"Right away."

...and she declared that the bear ought to be discarded after all.

"But whyyy?!"

"Shut up! Not gonna lie, we *could* really use a hand, but I ain't desperate enough to take a bear claw instead!"

"A claw is a top-tier ingredient, though! I'd be a beary big help! And you can't just toss me in the ocean—that's littering!"

"Ya beat a Tenchi godbeast and escaped the Technical Apex? Yeah, right! Man, you really wasted my time"

"T-Truth Discernment! Use that and you'll know I'm totally fur real!"

"Not if you're a high level Swindler! Reveal doesn't work on ya either! That's just shady!"

"I get what you're saying, but the only thing shady about me is the color of my fur! Well, I mean, my costume's fur!" As this exchange continued, the bear found himself dragged toward the edge of the ship. It seemed that despite his pleas, he would be

thrown in the sea again.

But then, the ship's siren split the air.

The bear snapped to attention as Riella took out a comms device and called out, "What happened?!"

She instantly received a response from the spotter on the bridge. "There's a large object in the water! It's a monster!"

Because of the vast amounts of water hindering visibility, finding underwater enemies was a difficult task even for those with skills from jobs like Scout. Since the dawn of Granvaloa, far too many ships had been sunk by surprise attacks from below.

However, Granvaloa's state-of-the-art warships had equipment solely for detecting underwater threats, so their ships could anticipate these attacks using technology similar to sonar and radar.

"Ah! Is it the one?!"

"Not sure! But it's bigger than the *Adventure II*! And it's quickly rising toward us!"

Riella's eyes widened.

A massive monster was approaching from the waters beneath—a manifestation of the nightmarish time before Granvaloa was established, when the sea was universally feared.

If the creature hit them, then even if the ship withstood the blow, it would most likely capsize.

"Helm room! Ahead ultra! We got a rapid ascent! Dodge it!"

"Aye, aye, Captain!" By Riella's order, the *Adventure II* instantly switched from cruising mode to combat mode and began moving ahead at a near sonic speed.

"Ultra" was a navigation technique that employed magic for acceleration. Relying essentially on brute force, it used water magic to create a high-speed current on the surface beneath the ship and wind magic to generate air pressure that pushed the sails and stern.

While it dated back to the age of sailing ships, the *Adventure II* had a modern propulsion system that made this technique even more effective.

This allowed it to achieve a speed impossible for any ships on Earth, and these state-of-the-art magic warships of Granvaloa had no trouble keeping their crews safe while operating at such a speed.

In the blink of an eye, the *Adventure II* covered a kilometel of distance...

...and just in time, as the place it had just been in was engulfed by a massive maw.

The crew watched in shock as a giant whale surfaced from the water—a creature so massive it could easily consume a ship in a single bite.

And above it, there was a name: "Gargantuan Shipgulper, Whalunder."

"A UBM...!"

"We have the approximate details! It's...Ancient Legendary!" It wasn't Riella's target, but UBMs were powerful by nature, and this one was strong even by those standards.

Had Riella been even a bit slower with her order, the *Adventure II* would've been consumed.

Whalunder hadn't given up on its prey yet, though, and it still faced the ship.

Riella gasped before calling out, "Ready the JotA!"

"But Commander! We have limited ammo..." JotA was a powerful weapon installed in the *Adventure II*. Short for "Javelin of the Atmos," it had been discovered in some pre-ancient ruins and claimed by Granvaloa, becoming one of the strongest cards the country held.

Taken from a ship salvaged from these ruins, it was basically a plasma cannon that combined the elements of fire, wind, and lightning. Its power surpassed even the Fixed Star spell—the pinnacle of fire magic—and it was said that it could melt Mythical metal in the blink of an eye.

However, its shots were powered by pre-ancient cartridges that couldn't be reproduced in the current age—and there were only three of them left.

This rarity, and the fact that it had never been thoroughly tested, had made Jonathan decide against bringing it to his venture against Abyss Shellder...and that was exactly why Riella had taken it on hers, gambling on the idea that this weapon had been exactly what was missing.

The crew was clearly hesitant to use something so precious in a fight that didn't involve their mark, though.

"None of that will mean shit if we sink here!" Riella argued. "And its MVP reward would be worth it!"

"A-Aye, aye, Captain!"

The crew began preparing the weapon.

"Keep a distance from the UBM! Fire as soon as it's ready!"

"Aye, aye! Sixty-three seconds until charged!" Still accelerating, the *Adventure II* gradually changed the direction of its hull.

The whale chased after it, maw open wide, but it could not keep up.

The crew increased the ship's speed to ensure the UBM didn't catch them, yet also made subtle adjustments to its movement to make sure the monster didn't give up. It was like a deadly game of tag.

In short, they were doing all they could to deal with the situation.

Within this chaos, the bound bear was silently comparing the speed of the ship and that of the whale that trailed behind it.

"...It's caught on, you know."

No one in the crew heard his words.

That was when the sixty-three seconds were finally up.

"It's charged!"

"*Swing turn* and fire!"

"Aye, aye!" In response to Riella's order, the ship simultaneously accelerated *and* decelerated—a jet of wind magic from the rear flank made it speed up, while a corresponding jet from above the front pinned the ship in place.

The back of the ship rose, while the front was pushed against the water, enabling a speedy 180-degree turn.

It was a maneuver reminiscent of the bike trick known as an endo 180, and it enabled the JotA installed on the bow to fix its sights on the whale.

"Firing the Javelin of the Atmos!" The gunner called out and readied the weapon...

"Wait! Hold!"

...but the second Riella ordered him to stop, the whale vanished.

A moment later, a wave—*clearly caused by something*—crashed into the deck.

"T-Target lost...!"

"It dove down—fast!" The words of the gunner and spotter threw the crew into a panic.

"It's ascending again!"

"Ngh! Flank ahead!" Riella commanded, responding to the warning even though she was unsure who it had come from.

The ship accelerated once more, and the whale burst out of the water, grazing the hull ever so slightly.

But then, it disappeared into the depths once more.

"That little...!"

This behavior was difficult for JotA to handle. It was a plasma weapon, so if it were to hit the surface of the ocean, it would cause a steam explosion. That would perhaps add to its destructive potential, but if it was fired from too close, the *Adventure II* would be caught up in it as well.

The UBM spent most of its time submerged, never creating much distance between it and its prey. It was unlikely that it was aware of the weapon's drawback, but its method of hunting effectively made it impossible for the *Adventure II* to fire the JotA.

Speedy diving and surfacing just as fast—most creatures would be unable to bear the intense changes in pressure, which meant that this was likely one of its core traits as a UBM.

"Release the depth charges!"

"Aye, aye!"

Riella quickly changed her approach.

If JotA wasn't an option, they would simply use their anti-submarine weapons.

The dispenser at the stern released dozens, perhaps hundreds of depth charges.

They created violent explosions that threw up massive pillars of water.

However, despite all this destruction, it didn't look like the UBM was receiving any damage.

"Why?!" A voice of slight panic escaped Riella's lips as the whale's

maw surfaced, grazing the stern again.

This was its third rapid ascent.

Riella gritted her teeth. They were still evading the whale's attacks, but they couldn't keep this up forever. The crewmen who enabled this feat had limited MP too.

If this continued, the whale would inevitably engulf them.

"No..." Riella said. This was a creature that could kill them, and it wasn't even their sworn enemy. They hadn't even anticipated fighting it.

Perhaps, though, this was a glimpse into the sea as it had been in the distant past—a place that kept you from your goal with unknown and unforeseen threats that brought about your untimely end.

Was Riella also fated to die without ever meeting her quarry?

"No... No way I'll sink." Tears of rage and frustration—and a little bit of fear—began to pool in the corners of Riella's eyes.

"Tag me in."

But then, a soft hand touched her head.

"Huh...?" It didn't feel anything like a human hand, though. Indeed, it was actually the plush paw of a bear costume.

Turning around, she saw the bear, who had been all but forgotten because of Whalunder's attack.

He was now completely free.

"Huh? The chains..."

"Tore them up. I'll compensate ya fur that later."

The words filled Riella with surprise.

He'd been bound by spare anchor chains. Built to withstand sea monsters trying to rip them apart, they were far too tough for even someone with the STR of a high-rank job, and perhaps were even impervious to Dragon-tier creatures.

And yet, the bear claimed that he "tore them up."

"As far as UBMs go, that one's got a pretty huge advantage against this ship... Hell, *most* ships, actually. I was watchin' the sea, and it looks like it can control the currents around it. That's probably why the depth charges aren't doin' a thing. Also, it actually waited for the ship to stop and turn the gun on it. It's pretty smart."

The bear gave his analysis of the UBM, which told Riella that he'd

spent all this time observing it.

"Anyway, gettin' too close would just get you carried away by the current, while sittin' right on it would be pretty bad if it decides to dive deep again. That leaves just one option... Man, first I end up in the same position as him, and now I'm usin' his methods too," said the bear, a certain Sechs rising to the forefront of his mind.

Discarding his bear puns, his tone was now much more serious.

"H-Hey..." The sudden change in atmosphere around the bear made Riella call out to him.

"Riella." He looked her right in the eyes. Through his costume, he fixed his gaze on hers. "I'll prove to you I ain't a Swindler by takin' care of that thing," he said, waving his hand as he walked to the stern.



He then stood at the edge.

"I'm off fur a swim!"

Casually, he threw himself into the water...and disappeared directly into the mouth of the whale that had surfaced at that exact moment.

"Huh?!" Just like that, the bear became its first victim.

"Wh-What...? The hell is he *doin*'?" A Master like him wouldn't actually die, but this act still left Riella all confused.

"Commander! Your orders!"

"R-Right... For now, continue dodgin' as long as you can..."

"Aye— What...?" Through the comms, the helmsman exclaimed in confusion.

"What is it?"

"The sea..." The helmsman began, trailing off ominously.

Before the helmsman could explain what the situation was, the spotter made a surprising report.

"This is the bridge! Commander! The target's stopped moving!"

"What?!" It didn't take long for Riella to understand what the helmsman had hesitated to describe.

"Huh...?"

A patch of the sea had changed color. It wasn't a large area, but it was growing, as though something was floating up from beneath the surface.

The small patch eventually spread to become larger than the ship's deck.

The color was a deep red, almost black—the sea was being dyed in blood.

It was an eerie sight that stunned Riella into silence.

For a moment, she thought the blood had to belong to the bear, but the volume was far too great for that. There was only one creature present that could bleed that much.

"G H B O O O A B H A A A A A A H H H H H!" Finally, with a cry of agony, the whale that had been hunting them surfaced.

Now whining—*shrieking*—the UBM was frothing at the mouth and vomiting an immense volume of blood.

The creature that had proven impervious to depth charges and

rapid pressure changes impossible for most creatures was now spitting blood and floating on the water's surface.

A closer look showed that its stomach seemed to be slowly expanding. The whale's flesh and skin were swelling up from the inside.

"It's almost as if..." To Riella, it looked as though something was *punching* it from the inside.

The next moment...

"Strength Cannon."

...those words—a skill name—resounded from somewhere unseen, and a hole opened in the whale's body.

With its guts destroyed, the creature could not survive for long.

Riella and the rest of the crew could do nothing but watch as its massive body became bits of light and vanished.

[The UBM, "Gargantuan Shipgulper, Whalunder," was defeated.]

[Selecting MVP...]

["Shu Starling" was selected as MVP.]

["Shu Starling" has been presented with an MVP special reward: "Ultimate Costume Series, Whalunder."]

Those who had been fighting this terrible battle heard that message...

"Anofur damn costume!"

...and saw the bear costume surface from the now-safe ocean, spitting out a trivial complaint.

◇

Riella then ordered the crew to pull the bear back to the deck using a crane.

They had the option of just leaving him and continuing on their way, but Riella chose not to.

"Hey..."

"What?" As the bear used a towel to dry himself—well, his costume—Riella gathered her thoughts and spoke to him.

"Just... What are you?"

"I'm Shu Starling."

In response, the bear gave his name again...

"Just a paw-ssing...King of Destruction."

...but this time, he added his true identity.

"King of...Destruction..." That was one of Altar's four *Superiors*, and a man who had been nicknamed "Unknown."

Granvaloa had once been attacked by a fearsome SUBM called "Biframe White Whale, Twin Moby Dick," while Altar had been ravaged by one known as "Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria." The latter was said to be greater than the former, and King of Destruction was alleged to have been the one who'd consigned the dragon to oblivion.

It was an extraordinary claim, but Riella could believe him now. His effortless destruction of the whale was all the proof she needed.

"But ya said ya were just a bear."

"Whoops, sorry fur that slip of the tongue!"

Was that the truth or a joke?

Regardless, there was no doubt that he truly was *the* King of Destruction.

"Anyway, lemme make my offer again," the bear...or rather, Shu said as he extended his hand toward Riella. "I'll pay for the ride by breakin' the Abyss Shellder."

He simply repeated what he'd said earlier.

Riella spent a moment looking at his hand in silence...

"Lettin' some bear take care of all our problems would ruin the adventure fleet's good name. I'll avenge my old man myself."

With that response...

"Though... If you wanna *help*, then I'm okay with that."

...she took his hand.

"It's a deal." Beneath the costume, Shu was smiling, and Riella responded with a slight grin of her own.

"So, KoD... What's with the costume?"

"That's another long, heavy, and tear-jerking story..."

"Okay then. Forget I asked."

"Furget?!" Shu jokingly put his hands on his head as if hurt, while Riella burst into laughter.

That was the first time she'd laughed since her father died.

And this was the first turning point in what would come to be known as the “South Sea Incident.”

Interlude 1

South Sea, Adventure II

Seafaring in *Infinite Dendrogram* didn't have the same resource limitations that were common obstacles during the real-world age of discovery.

For the most part, this came down to one thing: the existence of Inventories.

Inventories could store a great volume of items, with the more expensive Inventories having immense capacities and sometimes even the ability to slow down time for anything stored inside. With enough funding, a ship would never run out of resources no matter how long they were at sea.

Additionally, there was magic and alchemy that could filter seawater and make it fresh, allowing the entire crew to enjoy daily baths—a luxury unthinkable to any seafarer in the history of Earth.

The *Adventure II* was no exception—it had a bathing area for the people on board, and at this very moment...

"Hm-hm-hmm..."

...as evening fell, a quiet humming could be heard echoing inside. Whoever was humming had a pleasant voice, and they never sounded off-key—clearly they had studied music and had some vocal talent.

Right now, they were in the midst of washing up.

"Hm? Is someone already in here?"

Just then, the door to the bathing area opened, and another person stepped inside. It was the fleet commander, Riella, clad in nothing but a towel. Her eyes were instantly drawn to the person already occupying the bath, who was still humming pleasantly. They were washing their long black hair, which mostly obscured their form.

The sight made Riella tilt her head in confusion.

She had no idea who this was.

It's the women's turn to bathe right now... Riella thought, trying to discern who this might be. There were quite a few long-haired women in her crew, but Riella had no recollection of anyone with hair this black.

She had also never heard this pleasant humming before.

Huh? Through the long hair and soap suds, though, Riella finally caught a glimpse of the person's muscular body. Not even her late father had been that toned, let alone any of the female crew members.

Maintaining her silence, Riella reached for an Inventory shaped like an armband—which she wore as a precaution even in the bath—and took out a cutlass.

She then swung the blade at the neck of this *unfamiliar, highly suspicious interloper*.

"Hm?" However, the man simply made a noise of mild surprise and caught the blade with just two of his fingers, stopping it mid-swing.

Riella's eyes widened. She'd caught this man completely off guard, and yet he'd stopped her attack effortlessly. Even though he was only using two fingers, she couldn't move the blade even a fraction of an inch.

"Damn you...!" Riella was about to raise her voice and warn the rest of the crew, but then...

"Riella, you'll catch a real *grizzly* cold just standing there. Go warm up in the bath."

...the suspicious interloper said a few gentle words.

"Huh...?" Riella hadn't recognized the humming, but that speaking voice—and the awkward pun—could only have come from the man she'd just met earlier today.

"You..."

"Oh, but paws for a shower and wash off the salt. You don't want to dirty up the water fur anyone getting in after you."

"Oh. Right." The man pointed out the obvious, causing Riella to put away her cutlass and go wash herself in the nearby shower. Her hair was far shorter than his, so they both finished at about the

same time.

The two then entered the bath and let out a sigh.

Then, at that moment, the strangeness of the situation finally hit Riella. She stood up sharply and yelled, "Hold on! Why're we bathin' together?!"

"Well, that line had a lotta buildup," said the man. He was averting his eyes like a gentleman, but still seemed a little uncomfortable with the situation. "It took so long fur you to say anything that I almost thought you did mixed bathing here."

"We don't! And *that* makes it pretty damn clear ya *knew* ya weren't supposed to be here, ya furry bastard!" All red in the face, Riella pointed accusingly at the man—who, of course, was Shu minus the bear costume.

"My bad fur that, but nobody told me the bathing schedule... And all that time soaking in the ocean and then diving into a whale's guts made me feel pawsitively filthy. I wanted a bath ASAP."

"Well, if ya realized I was here, ya could've said somethin' earlier!" Shu was behaving so casually, though, that Riella ended up continuing the conversation in spite of herself. "Besides, I didn't even know ya could take that costume off!"

"Huh? It'd be beary scary if I couldn't, don'tcha think?"

"Well, yeah! But if ya'd worn it into the bath, I would've recognized ya earlier...! *Ah-choo!*" Riella's lecture was interrupted by a sneeze.

"You really are going to catch a cold standing there, so either leave or dip your paws back in the bath."

Shu spoke as if sharing the bath with a naked woman didn't bother him one bit—maybe to him, she was still just a child.

Riella spent a moment pondering before ultimately deciding to get in the water all the way up to her shoulders.

"I-I'm the commander of the adventure fleet! Sh-Sharin' a bath with a guy is n-no big deal for me!" she said, her face going red.

"Whate-fur you say," Shu responded, still not looking at her.

A few moments went by as they simply sat in the bath together.

Finally, Riella broke the silence. "Where's your costume, anyway?"

"In the wash. It'll be downright *spawrkly* by the time I'm done

here."

"You talk like that even when you're not wearin' the outfit?" It didn't bother her much when he looked like a bear, but his ridiculous way of speaking was quite at odds with his current appearance.

"If I talk normally, you'd have a harder time just enjoying your bath, wouldn't you?" Shu said, ditching the puns and speaking in a more relaxed—and less silly—tone.

Though she didn't want to admit it, that made Riella's heart skip a beat.

"Hmph! Got a pretty high opinion of yourself, huh?" Totally rejecting his assertion, Riella shot him a sidelong glance and realized that his face was a lot more refined-looking than she would've expected from someone who wore a costume everywhere. Riella wasn't the type to care much about a man's appearance, but even she could tell that most women would find him extremely attractive—he possessed strength and beauty in equal measure.

"Why do ya wear that costume, anyways?"

"I was trying to tell you back there, but you just refused to bear with me." Riella had asked the same question after Shu had beaten Whalunder, but quickly decided against waiting on the answer.

"I changed my mind. Tell me."

"To hide my face."

"What? Ya mean, like, so girls don't start fightin' over ya? Are ya really that much of a narcissist?" Riella asked, glaring at him like he'd suddenly transformed into some kind of insect.

"Oh, no no no no," Shu said with a chuckle. "It's just that most Masters who come here make themselves look diffurent than they do on the other side—with some exceptions. That fox, for example."

"Fox?" Riella could tell that he was referring to a person rather than the animal, but she had no idea who it could be, so she moved on. "What do ya mean, make themselves look different? By magic?"

"It's more like...we use a diffurent body. This isn't the same body I've got over there, but I couldn't change the face," Shu said, tapping his face with his finger. "This right here looks just like it does on the other side. That might cause trouble, so I throw on a different pelt to avoid all that."

Riella could understand the gist of what he was saying—he wanted to keep his grudges confined to the worlds where he'd made them. She could see how dealing with two worlds' worth of enemies all the time would be a pain.

"How'd ya end up looking the same on both sides?"

"The guy in charge of my entry didn't like me...or maybe liked me a little *too* much. I don't know fur sure, but it didn't end there—I'm still getting thrown into new trouble because of it. It's *unbearable*."

"That so?" Despite Shu's words and troubled expression, Riella got the impression that he didn't hate his circumstances all *that* much. "Wait. First the face thing, now somethin' 'bout 'the one in charge'... Doncha think you're tellin' me a bit too much?"

"Hey, I saw you totally *bear*. I gotta hand out a secret or two of my own in return."

"And you think *that's* all my body's worth? That kinda pisses me off."

"Ha ha ha. I'll find some other way to make up fur it, then." Shu then stood up from the bath, making Riella blush bright red and turn away. "Anyway, I'm out."

"You know you'll get your ass kicked if you bump into any other girls, right?"

"No need to worry. I'm beary good at sneaking outta places."

He then used the Instant Wear skill to equip an animal costume. It wasn't the black bear one, though—he was now a chameleon.

"So yeah, I'll be slithering along. Catch ya later." With that, he activated his camouflage, becoming transparent, and used this moment of invisibility to leave the bathing area.

Riella was surprised that he had other animal costumes, and by the awkwardness of the pun...as well as other things. However, she chose to not say anything further.

Once the man was gone, though, the embarrassment of having shared a bath with him welled up. This feeling, along with many others that had no outlet, got all tangled up in her head, and all she could do was splash the surface of the bathwater in frustration.

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As one might have guessed from the fact that they could take baths, sailors in this world enjoyed a high quality of life. The food and drink they had access to contributed to this as well.

During the earth's age of discovery, most seafarers were forced to subsist on cured meats and biscuits that often became infested with maggots, and since fresh water could become stagnant, they relied on cheap alcohol to drink.

Things were different in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Thanks to Inventories enabling long-term storage of many fresh ingredients, seafarers here could have three square meals a day. Forget the age of exploration—they enjoyed greater abundance than even some sailors in the year 2045. Seafarers in *Infinite Dendrogram* actually had to be mindful of their exercise or risk gaining weight.

The meals were perhaps the best part of this world's voyages, and it was no different for those who hunted Abyss Shellder.

However, something was different about today's dinner.

In the galley, which was enhanced with magical fire prevention, all the usual cooks were present...as well as a person in a bear costume.

Needless to say, it was Shu.

"Heh heh. It's been a beary long time since I made food fur someone else," he said, holding up a kitchen knife and an onion-like vegetable.

The other cooks were anxiously watching him prepare today's dinner.

They'd only let him do this because he'd enthusiastically offered to.

After he escaped the bath, Shu—still in the chameleon suit—had begun walking around the ship. Eventually, he stumbled into the galley and saw the cooks preparing to make dinner.

Looking around, he noticed that they had a great selection of ingredients, and the sight filled him with the urge to do some cooking.

It was an impulse that occasionally sprang up in men who never cooked for themselves—though Shu's reason for never cooking for himself might have been a little different than most people's. That

was why Shu had asked the cooks to let him handle it—and they'd agreed, though they were somewhat wary of the suggestion. The crew's health would be affected by the food they ate, so they couldn't leave it to a poor cook.

However, Shu was a *Superior* who'd just defeated a massive whale UBM. The cooks didn't think that he was the unreasonable type, but they couldn't totally dismiss the possibility that he was no better than the beast whose skin he wore. Even bamboo-eating pandas could easily kill people, and regular bears were an even bigger threat.

They'd thought that it was a bad idea to simply refuse him, so they decided to let him make one meal and see how it went. He had been asked to make a single meat dish so they could assess his skills before letting him cook for a huge crowd. That way, even if he made something terrible, it would have little effect on their food reserves. The cooks were ready to take responsibility for the results—and eat it all themselves, if necessary.

"Time fur the bear to whip up some grub!" Shu said as he started cutting up the onion. "Owww, my eyes..."

It's getting him through that costume? the cooks wondered, but no one said anything.

Some of them, though, were watching his paws with growing surprise. Many were doubtful that he could even hold a knife with those, and yet the way he cut the onion was really...shockingly good.

He then processed a bell pepper just as skillfully before preparing the cooking space. While the empty wok heated up, he began mixing the spices he would use.

The cooks wondered where the meat was—but then they saw it arranged in a bowl, all covered in spices. How long had it been there?

Shu's cooking remained brilliant even when it was time to fry. He handled the wok as though he'd had countless hours of training as a chef. He made the heavy iron pan seem light with how effortlessly he moved it, expertly controlling the heat and manipulating the ingredients.

Thanks to his STR, the wok weighed nothing at all to him. If anything, he had to take care not to crush it.

Soon enough, he had fried up a batch of ginger pork. Despite its simplicity, the dish made the cooks' eyes sparkle—the addition of bell pepper and onion for extra color and nutrition really helped.

"Thanks for bearing with me!" Shu said as he handed the dish to the cooks, who all glanced at each other.

"I will go first, then..." The one who eventually stepped forward was the head chef. He was a man with over thirty years of cooking experience—a dignified veteran greatly respected by his fellow cooks. Taking a fork in hand, he brought the ginger pork to his mouth.

And then...

"K'pi polp pephoa..."

...words that didn't even sound human escaped his mouth as he collapsed on the galley's floor.

"CHEF!"

"What?! Is it poisoned?!"

"Hey! Bring that Elixir here! Now!" The other cooks gathered around and rushed to his rescue.

As he watched, Shu's expression beneath the costume became slightly troubled. "...Crap. It's been so long I forgot I gotta hold back."

The cooks were having trouble reviving the head chef. They tried to feed him medicine and purgatives, but the man would not open his mouth. Even though he seemed to be unconscious, he was stubbornly refusing to let anything else past his lips.

The cooks gave up and poured the Elixir directly on him, but it had no effect, leaving them at a loss.

But a few moments later, the head chef hopped up from the floor like a spring-powered toy. His eyes wide open, his mouth still shut tight and silent, he simply stared at the dish.

Then, he swallowed what was still in his mouth before slowly pointing at the plate and issuing this warning: "It's *too* good!"

He then dove for another bite. The others tried to stop him, but they were too slow, and the chef devoured more of the ginger pork.

"HHOOOPHHOOOAAAHHAAAAA!" He made another strange sound, but didn't faint this time. And since he remained conscious, he was able to continue eating the meal—which he did as though possessed.

"Ohhh. It cooled off, so it ain't as tasty anymore," Shu muttered. "That's not a good thing for a large dish."

The man known as Shu Starling—Shuichi Mukudori—was very good at cooking.

Too good, even.

The complex harmony of flavors within his meals could overload a person's nervous system, bringing it beyond the limit and shutting down their consciousness. And as good as he was in real life, *Infinite Dendrogram* had ingredients far more delicious than were possible in reality, while its kitchens were equipped with functions that improved the taste of food made within them.

Naturally, this made his meals even more destructive.

This dangerous level of deliciousness was why Shu usually didn't cook for himself.

He'd actually held himself back this time and tried to make something good, but not *too* good. But because it had been a while since his last culinary endeavor, he'd miscalculated, and that had turned the head chef into the wreck of a human being he was now.

"HOOOOOOO! A PARADISE OF BEARS AND PIGS!"

"CHEEEEEEEEF!"

"...Sorry." Watching the chef experience some sort of high that made poison seem almost like the tamer option, Shu expressed his sincere apologies.

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The head chef eventually snapped out of it, but didn't give Shu permission to make food for the crew, because he didn't want chaos to break out in the mess hall.

Nobody objected to this very reasonable decision.

Act 2: Chimera

South Sea, Adventure II

Following dinner, the most important people on the ship gathered in one place—the meeting room.

"All right. Let's talk about the Abyss Shellder hunt." The participants included the captain, Riella; the vice captain, Asam; the other combat specialists; and...

"Hm..."

...the man in the bear costume, Shu. Though they'd only just stumbled upon him, he was clearly the strongest person on the ship, so inviting him had been the obvious choice.

"It's now been a week since we entered the South Sea, but that damn crab hasn't shown itself once," Riella said before pointing at a map displayed on the wall by a projector-like device. There was a point of light at about two-thirds of the way across the South Sea, starting from the west. The coordinates said that this was the current location of the *Adventure II*. "At this rate, we're likely to end up in the buffer zone between here and the East Sea."

Corpse Stronghold, Abyss Shellder, was a UBM causing chaos all over the South Sea. Since it was active over such a wide territory, it could be encountered anywhere within that area—but it was also entirely possible to sail across the entire South Sea without spotting it once.

It was quite ironic that so many ships had hoped for the latter only to end up destroyed, while the *Adventure II*, who actually *wanted* to encounter Abyss Shellder, had stayed safe. At least their lack of success in their hunt had allowed them to pick up Shu, which would increase their chances of emerging victorious when they did eventually track it down.

"We'll turn around when we get to the buffer zone... But that creates another problem," Riella said with a bitter frown. Conflicted

expressions crossed the faces of Asam and the other sailors.

Looking at them, Shu could see a strange mix of panic, regret, and relief in their eyes.

"Is turning around really such paws for concern?" Shu asked. However, Riella didn't answer. She didn't even look at him.



Was that because his question was difficult to answer? Or because of the encounter in the bath? Maybe a mix of both?

Regardless, Asam took it upon himself to answer in Riella's stead.

"Mr. Starling. We are concerned because it will increase our risk of encountering pursuers from Granvaloa."

"Pursuers?"

"Yes. We, the adventure fleet, embarked upon this voyage to slay the Abyss Shellder...but the other three fleets were all against it."

"Is that because they're concerned fur Riella and the rest of you?"

"Yes. Granvaloa would suffer greatly if we fail."

"Like hell we're gonna fail..." Riella muttered.

"Hm?"

"With the death of Fleet Commander Jonathan, Fleet Commander Riella is the last living member of the Granfront family—one of Granvaloa's four commander bloodlines. Additionally, the crew of this ship is about half of the entire adventure fleet... If we were defeated, the framework of four fleets that has stood since the country's founding would collapse. To prevent that from happening, the other fleets tried to stop us."

"And despite all that, you shook off their words and went fur a hunt here in the South Sea?" Shu asked.

"Yeah. We had to do it. Even when they made a huntin' party themselves, they were all against us joinin' it," Riella responded as she turned to look Shu right in the eyes. "I get the old-timers were tryin' to stop us for our sake, and I sure as hell don't think they're wrong. I appreciate their concern and feel bad for throwin' it aside."

She didn't think of them as an obstacle. If anything, disregarding their kindness made her heart ache.

And yet...

"Still... I don't care who tries to stop us. We'll avenge my old man and all the others *personally*." As she stood looking at him, Shu felt the intensity of the determination in Riella's eyes and knew instantly that it could not be broken.

Well, you'd need a hell of a reason to go on a hunt like this with just one ship, Shu thought. He strongly believed that victory was always possible, no matter how unlikely—however, he also thought

that it was important to consider the tactics available to you and what price you were willing to pay.

Shu was someone who would do *anything* to achieve his goals. However, Riella's attempt to slay the UBM with just the adventure fleet had valued the means more than the objective, which had effectively lowered their chances of success. Furthermore, the best course of action changed dramatically depending on whether their ultimate goal was "defeat Abyss Shellder" or "let Riella have her vengeance."

Riella and her fleet are determined, and I already said I'd help, Shu thought. *All that's left is to make it happen, I suppose.*

Riella wanted her vengeance, and Shu had agreed to help her get it. The only thing to do now was give everything he had to seize that possibility.

"You look like ya wanna say somethin', bear."

"I got nothin', actually. I was just thinking I got my work cut out fur me."

"That so...? Let's continue the meeting, then, old-timer," Riella said as she sat down.

"Certainly," said Asam. "Please look at this." He used the projection equipment to make the map display some more points of light, this time with dates attached to them.

"What's this?" Shu asked.

"Information sent to us in secret by fellow fleet members who remained in Granvaloa. These are battle records of the encounters other hunting squads have had with Abyss Shellder here in the South Sea, as well as sites where smuggler ships unaffiliated with Granvaloa were sunk."

"Mm-hmm... Hm?" Looking at the locations and the dates, though, Shu noticed something strange. "There's some that happened at almost the same time...but at completely different places."

Indeed. The map had points that were quite far from each other, but sported very similar dates. Some of the incidents had even occurred within an hour of each other on opposite sides of the South Sea.

"Most of these are Mocks."

"Mocks?"

"Please look at this," Asam said as he used the room's equipment again to replace the projected map with a single image.

Seemingly taken at night, the picture was very dark. The only light was from the flames of what looked like a burning ship, illuminating a huge silhouette.

It was the bizarre form of a massive, shelled monstrosity.

The sight of it made Riella clench her teeth in anger, and the others frowned sternly.

"So this is..." Their reactions made it clear to Shu what he was looking at.

"Yes. This is the Corpse Stronghold, Abyss Shellder. This photo was taken during the adventure fleet's previous battle against it."

The darkness made it difficult to see exactly how large the monster was, but the way it overshadowed the ship was enough to make a reasonable guess.

Its height alone is over twice that of Baldr's Offense Mode, he thought. That meant the creature was more than two hundred metels tall. Sea monsters had a tendency to be large, but this was enormous even by that standard. It might even have been larger than the Whalunder Shu had defeated that same day.

"Now, look at this." Asam then showed another photo—a good few of them, in fact. They were varied in time of day and subject, displaying a great variety of creatures.

Though, they looked a bit *too* varied.

"Chimeras?" The creatures in the photos were all completely different. However, one thing they did have in common was that they were unsightly combinations of features from other creatures—krakens, seabirds, seabeasts, starfish, and more. Shu had therefore assumed they must be chimeras.

"Reports of encounters with large chimeras like these have increased. And it has been discovered that Abyss Shellder is actually a chimera as well," said Asam.

"These Mocks mess with our search," said Riella, clearly irritated. "Though Granvaloa's huntin' them too."

“Sonar does not give us the names, after all,” said the crew member in charge of that area of the ship. “Even if we limit the search to only large chimeras and use depth charges to lure them to the surface, we’re just as likely to encounter one of these as our target. Even their names are not consistent.”

Any chimeras with confirmed names in the photos were labeled. While they all had “Abyss” in them, the rest of their names were things like “Kraken,” “Seadragon,” and so on—each one was different.

“Okay. I think I get it now. How much power can these Mocks bring to bear, though?” Shu asked.

“They are quite large, so even the weakest are at least Pure-Dragon-tier, but there seems to be a lot of variation between them. Their END is notably low. Apparently, just the depth charges can deal a lot of damage to them... Meanwhile, Abyss Shellder did not flinch even under fire from an entire fleet. They cannot begin to compare.”

“Mm-hmm...” Chimeras were monsters created by combining multiple different creatures, and it wasn’t unusual for failed chimeras to be especially fragile—though Abyss Shellder, despite being a chimera itself, did not seem to have this flaw.

“Based on our examination of the combat data and their visual appearance, we have surmised that the monsters used as materials for the chimeras were not all that powerful—Demi-Dragons and below.”

“Because of their shared typing and the ‘Abyss’ in their names, Granvaloa thinks all this devastation comes from some ruins,” Riella added.

“Ruins?” Shu asked.

“Yes,” Asam said. “Multiple pre-ancient facilities called ‘Seafloor Excavation Forts’ have been discovered in the oceans around the continent. While they sometimes have valuable technology to salvage, they can also contain immense danger. Not too long ago, carnivorous monsters broke out of the Fourth Seafloor Excavation Fort and nearly destroyed the ecosystem.”

Apparently that problem had been quickly dealt with by a

Superior—Great Admiral, Antimicrobic Soy Sauce.

"And they're pawsitive this is related?"

"Yes. Popular opinion holds that there is an undiscovered, eighth Seafloor Excavation Fort. It was used to develop chimeras to use as bioweapons—to create what we might call the 'Abyss' series—and that Abyss Shellder is the ultimate fruit of this research."

"And that's why the hunters kill the Mocks too," said Riella. "Those things and Abyss Shellder are basically all part of the same catastrophe."

"I see," said Shu. "Hmm..."

"Is anything the matter?" Asam asked, noticing the strange air surrounding the man in the bear costume. Even though his face was hidden, Asam got the impression that something wasn't adding up for him—that he still had some questions.

"There's a little something on my mind," Shu said. "Would you mind copying these photos fur me?"

At this request, Asam looked to Riella, who simply said, "Do it."

"Very well. I will give them to you after this meeting is concluded."

"Thank you so beary much." Shu's expression of gratitude matched his goofy appearance.

However, there was a question whirling deep within his mind.

All these chimeras came from the same facility; it's just that the Mocks are failures while Abyss Shellder is a success, he thought. *That makes sense. It's the obvious conclusion... But then why are they...?*

The meeting continued even as he pondered. The subject had changed to other topics like navigation, so being a layman in this regard, he merely listened.

As he digested what they'd said, he continued contemplating the question...and the strange feeling that had come over him.

Every instinct told him he had to puzzle it out.

◇

"Phew..." Following the meeting, Shu was assigned a cabin and

went there right away to lie down, still in his costume. Having been drifting around for days, he hadn't enjoyed this level of comfort in a while.

But then again, he had quite a luxurious bed on the other side.

"Man... They really don't have enough people." The fact that they had a free cabin for him indicated that the *Adventure II* currently had fewer crew members than it was designed to carry.

They had no issues operating it, though, because Granvaloa had maritime technology that enabled their vessels to have a certain degree of autonomy. The more advanced the ship, the more advanced its automation could be, and with some increases in operating costs and decreases in features, they could even make vessels that could be crewed by a single person. A good example of that was *Skyanchor*—a ship belonging to a Granvaloan-turned-Altarian duelist named Chelsea.

Still, optimal operations required most ships to have a large number of people, and while the *Adventure II* had enough to run at full capacity, they couldn't cover every shift.

This ship was designed to have three shifts on every post, but they just barely had enough people for two. If this voyage went on for too long, its performance would degrade over time.

And yet, they had still ignored the words of their nation and departed on this perilous journey.

"Guess I heard as much at the meeting, though..." There wasn't much of note said during the rest of that. All the enemies encountered by the hunters so far had been Mocks, so they'd simply charted a course past the locations of the sunken smuggler ships.

Shu had asked how they knew where such unaffiliated vessels had been sunk in the first place, and was told that Granvaloa could track any ships out at sea thanks to some of their classified military tech. This was what enabled them to protect their ships and hunt smugglers so effectively.

However, the *Adventure II* was equipped with a device that jammed this technology, which meant that their pursuers couldn't track them—but also that *they would never be found in case of emergency*.

Their defeat would be their ultimate end—no one would come to save them.

This made it clear that the crew had gone out on this hunt fully prepared to die, and the young captain was no exception.

If anything, her resolve might've been the strongest of all.

Shu pondered their situation. What if Riella and her crew ended up taken by the sea, becoming nothing more than lifeless remains in its depths?

And that...

"'Would leave a bad taste in my mouth'...is probably what *he'd* say right about now."

Reminded of a phrase commonly used by his little brother, Shu closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

The brother in question was likely tackling his college entrance exams right this very moment.

"There's already been a lot of casualties, but I guess I can at least help them seize a happy ending," he said, strengthening his resolve to put an end to this terror.

He then opened his eyes and...

"So? How long have *you all* been involved in this?"

...addressed his words to the empty air.

There seemed to be nobody to hear him, much less respond, and yet...

"'How long?' There are two answers: 'from the start' and '*just* at the start.'"

Following a faint warping of space, someone simply appeared. It was a strange entity—a creature covered by a thin, egg-shaped film.

Inside, there was what looked like a human girl. Her appearance called to mind a noblewoman behind a luxurious screen, or perhaps a bride beneath her veil.

"Never a straightforward answer from ya, eh, *Humpty*?"

Shu knew who this was.

She was Control AI No. 2, Humpty Dumpty, and she was the one who'd handled his entry to *Infinite Dendrogram* and for some reason continued getting involved with him many times since.

She was also the reason Shu's avatar looked like his real self,

which he always wore a costume to hide.

"Just the start? Ya damn liar. Ya moved the currents or my login spot or whatever to make it so I drifted to this ship."

"Oh, you noticed?" In response to this accusation, Humpty immediately confessed, showing no intention of hiding it. "By the way," she continued. "I think you could try being a bit nicer to me. You're back in a bear costume, just how it was in the early days, so why not give me some of those bear puns too?"

"Ain't happenin'."

"That's a shame," Humpty said, chuckling faintly at his reaction.

Shu, however, had quite a stern expression on his face.

"Anyway, how did you realize that I was the one who led you here? You were in the sea. There weren't any landmarks to follow, were there?"

"It's the stars. The air's pretty clear here, so I can see them even while it's daytime. They'd moved from where they were when I'd last logged out. That means I either started driftin' in another direction, or I was somewhere else entirely."

"I would expect no less of you, Shu," Humpty said with a clap.

"And don't act like it's the first time you've done this either. You've been draggin' me into things like this since I met Figgy."

"That's true, but I *am* keeping my promise, you know. I never incite incidents that would endanger tians just so you can solve them. Believe me when I say that this was not my doing... Not *our* doing. It's an *Irregularity*."

Humpty's words made Shu frown dubiously. A Control AI in charge of *Infinite Dendrogram* had just told him they hadn't intended to cause this incident, and she'd even used the word "Irregularity."

"I'm sure I don't need to explain monster classification to you, do I?" Humpty said.

"No." Monsters had certain terms attached to them that gave some indication of how powerful or unique they were. The most common of these were "Demi-Dragon" and "Pure-Dragon" or simply "Dragon." Referring back to the powerful "dragon" type of monster, this meant that the creature was on the same level as a Demi-

Dragon or a Dragon, respectively. There were also "High-Dragon" and "High-End Dragon," descriptions reserved for the rare few who rose above even a dragon's strength.

However, there were classifications that were even less common—and even more feared.

These were the fearsome "UBMs," which were further split into tiers: "Epic," "Legendary," "Ancient Legendary," and "Mythical."

These were as much a classification as a valid description. For example, "Mythical" were "monstrosities with power that could be spoken of in myth."

However, there were *two* classifications that were above even that—"SUBMs" and "Irregularities."

The former stood for "Superior Unique Boss Monster," and they were the pinnacle of UBMs.

Every one of them was truly one of a kind—a massive raid monster of unmatched power.

The control AIs had so far released five of these into the world.

The first was "Lone Yet Unmatched, Greatest One"—the ultimate gargoyle, made of the hardest material in the world.

The second was "Biframe White Whale, Twin Moby Dick"—a massive whale possessing inexhaustible regenerative powers and weaponry.

The third was "Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria"—an all-powerful dragon that extinguished the unworthy with its aura of light and its physical strength.

The fourth was "Tetra-Beast of Creation, Suling"—a godbeast that used four bodies to achieve the apex of four different skills.

The fifth was "Penta-Phased Destroyer, Horobimaru"—an entity of perfected equipment, both the wielder and the wielded, wearer and worn.

All of these were much *more* than other UBMs—and "more" could not be a more fitting word, for there was something tangible these monsters possessed that the others lacked.

By default, a monster's maximum level was 100, but SUBMs ignored this limit, and that was exactly what made them deserving of the title "Superior."

However, they were not the only monsters that were capable of this feat.

"Irregularities are like SUBMs in that they have surpassed level 100," said Humpty. "However, they aren't under our control."

Those words made Shu think back to something she'd said earlier.

"So you're not controlling Abyss Shellder, huh?"

"No. Jabberwock made it a UBM, but it was a series of coincidences afterward that made it what it is now. That is what I meant when I said we were only involved at the start."

Hearing that put a frown on Shu's face. "Clean your own messes, damn it."

"Unfortunately, we rarely kill UBMs ourselves since release. We wouldn't want to take away a Master's chance to grow."

"...Right." Humpty had told him something like that many times before. That was why she usually ended up sending him into all kinds of hellish encounters, after all.

"That isn't why I got you involved in this one, though. Simply overcoming challenges like this isn't enough to make you stronger anymore."

"And I have you to thank for that," Shu complained, his mind wandering to the many dangerous circumstances he'd lived through.

"So there it is—I simply want you to solve this one. In all honesty, the situation is pretty dire, and the only Masters who can do anything about it are you and Dryfe's King of Beasts."

"Hm? Why's that?" Shu asked. The fact that he'd ended up here at all was proof that he could handle this, but why was KoB the *only* other person? *Infinite Dendrogram* had two other "Apices" besides King of Beasts—Caldina's "Magical Apex" and Tenchi's "Technical Apex," both of whom Shu had fought, and both of whom would presumably be just as well suited for this task.

"I can't tell you. It relates to Abyss Shellder's specific powers."

"If ya want me to take care of this, at least tell me its weakness or somethin'."

"Oh, I could never. What kind of developer leaks a boss's weakness? And to just one player, at that?"

"...Well, you have a point."

About a month later, a certain cat would do exactly that—but these two had no way of knowing this.

"There are two things I *can* say, though," Humpty went on.

"Those bein'?"

"First is the name—in this case, it's significant. The monster is called 'Abyss Shellder' for a reason."

"Hm?" There were multiple ways the UBMs of this world received their names. Some retained the names they had before evolving; others were given names by the people who encountered them. And sometimes, monsters were named by the Control AIs themselves, often in a way that referenced their powers.

Because of this, one could sometimes guess what a UBM was capable of based on its name.

Corpse Stronghold, Abyss Shellder, eh? Shu thought. *"Abyss" is self-explanatory. The sea's got lots of monsters that can live in the deep, so it's a pretty common name element around here. Then there's "Shellder"... Is that like a portmanteau of "Shell" and "Shelter?" It's got a "D" instead of a "T," though... It's not like it's a damn Pokémon...*

Immediately upon hearing Humpty's hint, Shu began to theorize...

"And there's the second thing."

...but she continued talking, stopping his train of thought.

"If you don't get involved, everyone on this ship will die."

They were heavy words, spoken lightly.

"Oh, and I don't mean that we'll do something," Humpty clarified. "It's just what our calculations say. I just analyzed the powers and abilities of both sides, and that's the only possible result. They have no chance. Even *those words you like* don't apply here. They'll all end up in a watery grave or become food for Abyss Shellder. That's the only ending in store for them."

Shu silently pondered those words—the conclusion Humpty had foretold so certainly.

While Humpty was the Control AI in charge of Embryos, there were certain factors that made her use less processing power than her colleagues. Because of this, she had a lot to spare for

calculations like this. That made her predictions very precise, especially when they concerned combat.

"Even with your help, the chances of victory aren't terribly good." Humpty had a higher opinion of Shu's ability than any other Control AI. However, her words made it clear that her faith was not blind. It was simply another result of her cold, objective calculations.

Still...

"Your help will make room for *those words you like*."

"That so?" Shu said as a fearless smile crossed his face. "In that case, I'll show ya a happy endin'."

"I'll look forward to that," Humpty said, returning his smile. "And with that said, here's your opening battle," she added—right before *the ship's siren rang out*.

Shu's eyes widened as he turned to the source of the noise for just a moment. When he turned back, Humpty was nowhere in sight.

Setting aside the Control AI and her words for now, he rushed out of the cabin.

◇

"What happened?!" Riella asked as she barged into the bridge.

"We detected a powerful monster thirty-five kilometels to the northwest! It's on the surface!" the spotter immediately replied.

They had someone on spotter duty day and night, constantly watching for potential threats, so they were able to spot this one while it was still on the horizon.

"Yeah, it's...probably on the surface. Ya couldn't see somethin' thirty-five kilometels away if it was in the water, after all."

In *Infinite Dendrogram*'s naval combat, thirty-five kilometels wasn't a particularly great distance. There were creatures and ships that could move close to the speed of sound, after all. If two such opponents encountered each other at this distance, it would take barely two minutes for them to clash.

Still, scouting devices and spotting magic had limited effective range, and that made the naval battles truly terrifying. With

underwater threats being especially hard to detect, it wasn't uncommon for ambushes from below to sink an unsuspecting ship in an instant. The UBM the *Adventure II* had encountered earlier that day was a great example of such terrors.

"And? Is it Abyss Shellder?"

"The signal says that it's above High-Dragon tier, and a dragon-type monster." Hearing that made Riella click her tongue. If it was a dragon, then it couldn't be her mark.

However...

"We have an update! Above High-Dragon in strength, chimera type...and we've detected signs of combat. There are two of them! Two High-Dragon tier monsters are fighting about thirty-five kilometels away!"

"Full speed ahead!" Riella blurted out that order, and the helmsman immediately obeyed.

If it was a chimera, it could be her target, and the fact that it was fighting a dragon was important too. Abyss Shellder wasn't targeting just ships—it was attacking anything in the South Sea, other monsters included. This made it likely that this chimera battling the dragon could be Abyss Shellder itself.

Thus, the *Adventure II* was now heading northwest.

Crossing the space that moments ago had marked the horizon, they soon drew close enough to see the battle.

"Look at 'em go!" On the black sea, illuminated only by moonlight, there were two silhouettes engaged in combat. Both of them were long, casting shadows like serpentine dragons weaving through the clouds.

"The dragon's probably some kinda serpent... And the chimera...?"

From their silhouettes, Riella assumed that the dragon-type monster was a seadragon, but the other's build was very similar. The only real difference was that it had more girth than the dragon.

"One of them matches the data we have on Frost High Serpents. But we have no data on the other!"

"We have yet to confirm the name either! It's too dark and too far!" The battle between the two was intense, churning the waters

all around them. They were quite fast as well, so it was difficult to see the names above them.

Riella watched the battle. The shape alone made it clear that the chimera wasn't the Abyss Shellder she was after—but since it was a chimera, it might have some relevance to it.

There was no doubt that it was one of the many Mocks that had appeared in Abyss Shellder's wake. Considering that, it didn't seem like a bad idea to defeat it before engaging Abyss Shellder itself.

"Ready the artillery," she said. "We'll attack if the chimera wins, or if they both drop their fight and come at us instead. Gather as much data as you can until then."

"What if the serpent wins?" Asam asked.

"If it doesn't attack us, we'll just ignore it and get back on our course."

Asam nodded in response.

While Riella was driven by the strong desire for revenge, she had no trouble maintaining composure in combat. The reason she hadn't launched a preliminary attack was to avoid the serpent and the chimera both attacking her ship simultaneously if she could help it.

And thus, she chose to wait until the battle was concluded and the winner was weakened.

The crew held their breath and watched as the two monstrosities fought.

◆

The Frost High Serpent fighting the chimera wasn't originally from this part of the sea.

It had migrated here after its habitat had been disrupted and the amount of available prey had decreased.

It was a High-Dragon—the apex of any ecosystem that lacked the rare Dragon Kings or High-End-Dragons. This gave it more than enough power to thrive no matter where it went.

However, as soon as it had arrived in this part of the sea, it had been attacked by this chimera. The beast possessed a long, serpentine body just like its own while also sporting a thick shell like

the ones found on Armored Serpents and Mail Serpents.

The chimera enraged the Frost High Serpent, perhaps because of its similar shape, causing the dragon to turn around and fight. It used its fangs and body to shatter the chimera's shell, but its HP was high, and it seemed like they had reached a stalemate.

Thus, the Frost High Serpent used the ace up its sleeve.

"H Y O O O O O O O..." Opening its maw wide, it inhaled the air around it.

Then, after closing its mouth for a moment...

"S H O O O O O O O!!!"

...it opened it again, unleashing the power collected within.

This was the breath attack of a High-Dragon—a burst of freezing power that matched even the ultimate skill of the high-rank ice magic job, Cryomancer.

However, when released by a creature of such immense size, it had a scale far greater than that.

The attack instantly froze the chimera, as well as several hundred metels of water around it. Dragons were pillars of sheer power—terrifying beings that common tians could only slay in full parties of experienced high-rank jobs.

High-Dragons were even more powerful than ordinary Dragons. Even lesser UBMs could lose against an aquatic High-Dragon fighting in the sea.

The chimera couldn't even scream before the frost gathered around and immobilized it.

Frozen in ice that reflected the moonlight, the chimera had become nothing more than a statue, albeit one which could turn many heads.

◇

"Looks like it's over," Asam told Riella as they both watched the battle from the bridge.

The Serpent didn't seem to be looking at the *Adventure II*. Having defeated the chimera, it seemed like it would now return to its lair. Asam was slightly relieved that they wouldn't have to fight a

monster here.

Riella, however, simply glared at the frozen chimera, not saying a word.

As things were, she didn't even need binoculars to see it in its entirety, and she had absolutely no trouble reading the name above its head...

It was three words: "Abyss Mail Kraken."

Just as expected, it had the "Abyss" name element common to all Mocks.

But that wasn't the problem here.

"'Kraken'?" It looked just like the serpent it had been fighting, yet the name didn't match its appearance. Krakens were large, squid-like monsters with massive tentacles—nothing like the serpent this appeared to be.

As she pondered what this could mean, the frozen body shattered, freeing a great many tentacles.

The body... The *shell* had been dispersed by the Purge skill that Mail Dragons and Mail Serpents possessed. This ability scattered their armor, sacrificing it to damage those around them and multiply their AGI several times over.

"S h o o...?!" The serpent was shocked by this change, and the chimera used the opening to wrap its tentacles around it.

The dragon's maw was now bound shut, preventing it from releasing its icy breath again.

The chimera then spewed some kind of liquid from its own mouth, dousing the serpent.

This wasn't ink like that of an octopus or squid. Instead, it was something of a milky color.

Unable to evade, the serpent thrashed, attempting to wash the liquid away in the seawater. Perhaps the serpent thought it was a simple poison, but it was too late—it had already lost the moment the liquid had touched its flesh.

"S h o o..."

In the blink of an eye, the serpent became milky white—and less than a few seconds later, its entire body transformed into a pearlescent crystal that reflected the moonlight.

"G h e u..." The chimera then used its tentacles to pull the pearl serpent closer, clinging to it as it gradually began to feast.

The sight made Riella and everyone else on the *Adventure II* fall utterly silent.

The script had been flipped too suddenly, and the sight now unfolding before them was unnerving.

A shelled squid that had masked itself as a sea serpent and turned its prey into pearl before ravaging it.

It was behavior that made no sense for any marine organism. Even being a chimera could not explain this.

Riella and her crew were seafaring folk, so they found this sight especially disturbing.

Still, Riella was the first to take action.

"Start firin'! Get that Mock!"

"Aye, aye!"

She gave the order to attack the Abyss Mail Kraken.

One of the many guns installed on the *Adventure II* fired, and its projectile struck the ocean surface right next to the chimera.

"Near hit confirmed!"

"Adjust for accuracy!"

"All guns, fire!" Using their first shot as a guide, the remaining guns adjusted their aim and quickly showered the chimera in firepower.

All of them hit the feasting creature, tearing through its flesh and scattering its red blood into the moonlight.

Octopuses and squids should have blue blood, damn it, Riella thought as the bombardment continued. *Man, this is why chimeras freak me out.*

"G h e u o u..." However, the attack did nothing to stop it from devouring its prey. Even as the pearl serpent shattered, it continued consuming the pieces. Its disregard for its own injuries as it fed, combined with its twisted chimerical form, combined to create a vision of pure madness.

After a brief moment that felt excruciatingly long to the onlookers, the chimera removed its tentacles from the serpent and submerged itself.

"We still have its location! It's approaching us from two o'clock!" said the spotter, keeping track of it even after it vanished from sight. "Ready the depth charges! Torpedoes too!"

Anything that attacked from below was a good target for depth charges.

"The chimera is in depth charge range... No! It's coming up!" Shortly before it entered the range of their artillery, the chimera began ascending to the surface, even though it was still too far away to reach the ship with its tentacles or cover it in the liquid it had used on the serpent.

This action didn't make sense.

The way it beat the serpent tells me it ain't stupid... But...

Whatever the case, they couldn't simply let it do whatever it wanted.

"The moment it shows its face, give it a warm torpedo welcome!" If the creature avoided the depth charges dispensed below, then Riella would fire torpedoes straight at it.

It didn't take long for the chimera to surface.

"P H O O O O O..."

"FIRE!" The chimera began taking in the air around it, making its body expand.

The torpedoes released were about to reach its face...

"G H E O U O O O!"

...but it welcomed them by releasing something white from its mouth.

This wasn't the liquid that had turned the serpent into pearl, but a *gaseous breath*.

This icy exhalation, released in a straight line, froze all the torpedoes in place.

Its effects didn't end there, though. The breath created a wall of ice that stood in the way of the *Adventure II*.

"An ice breath...?! It can do *that* too?!" This attack was strikingly similar to the breath of the Frost High Serpent it had just defeated.

Wait... No way...! A thought came into Riella's mind, making a chill run down her spine that was far colder than the freezing air.

"Ngh...! Starboard! Quick brakes!"

“Aye, aye!” However, she quickly recovered and changed the ship’s course right on time.

The vessel’s left side scraped against the wall of ice with a terrible screech, but the ship’s quick deceleration kept damage to a minimum.

“G H E O G H O G H...”

Unfortunately, this loss of speed gave a chance for the chimera to close the distance.

What would become of the ship if it was hit by that strange liquid or its icy breath from up close?

“...We’re usin’ JotA.”

“But we only have three of—!”

“I know!”

The Javelin of the Atmos was a precious weapon found in a Seafloor Excavation Fort. Its power was immense, but there were only three cartridges left. It wasn’t something to be used lightly, and the enemy before them not only wasn’t their mark; it wasn’t even a UBM.

However, as things were going, they would be defeated if they did not take decisive action. Desperate times called for desperate measures. They simply could not let themselves be defeated by a mere Mock before they even caught sight of their true target.

Thus, although it pained her to do so, she gave the order to use this weapon...

...but then, there were thunderous, ceaseless sounds of something hitting the sea.

They did not come from the *Adventure II* or the chimera.

“Three o’clock... There’s an unidentified warship!” Someone had suddenly appeared on the battlefield.

“The hell’s that?”

The sounds of water hitting the sea were accompanied by the night-veiled silhouette of a ship. It was smaller than the *Adventure II* —not even two hundred metels in length. By Granvaloan standards, it was closer to a heavy cruiser than a battleship.

However, its shape as it rose from the dark was bizarre for any warship.

It was long, but had a significant width as well, due to a sizable broadside.

Instead of on the flanks like a conventional ship, this vessel had immense weaponry mounted to face straight ahead. Usually, weapons were mounted on the ship's deck as well, but this vessel did not seem to have any significant artillery there. It didn't look at all like a typical warship.

Obviously, this was not of Granvaloan make. The Granvaloans lived with their ships, and this one flew in the face of all their design principles.

Still, their knowledge of seafaring meant the Granvaloans on board instantly realized one thing.

Despite it all, this was still a *battleship*.

"Open combat."

Paying no mind to the gobsmacked *Adventure II* crew, the ship flew into action.

"Stardust Genocider."

It began by firing countless missiles. The silos on its surface opened up to release many dozens of these.

Leaving trails of smoke and fire, they all flew directly at the chimera and exploded.

"G H U O O O O...?!" The creature writhed in pain as the battleship focused its broadside cannon at its massive body.

"Twin Quintuple Cannon. Loading armor-piercing firebombs. Barrage."

The main cannon fired its piercing, incendiary shells.

The supersonic projectiles easily penetrated the chimera's skin and armor before setting fire to its insides. It burned from within even when it tried to dive beneath the waves, and the cannon fired a follow-up at it as though the sea was no obstacle.

"G H E O... G H O..."

Thus, the freakish chimera was overwhelmed and dissolved into motes of light.

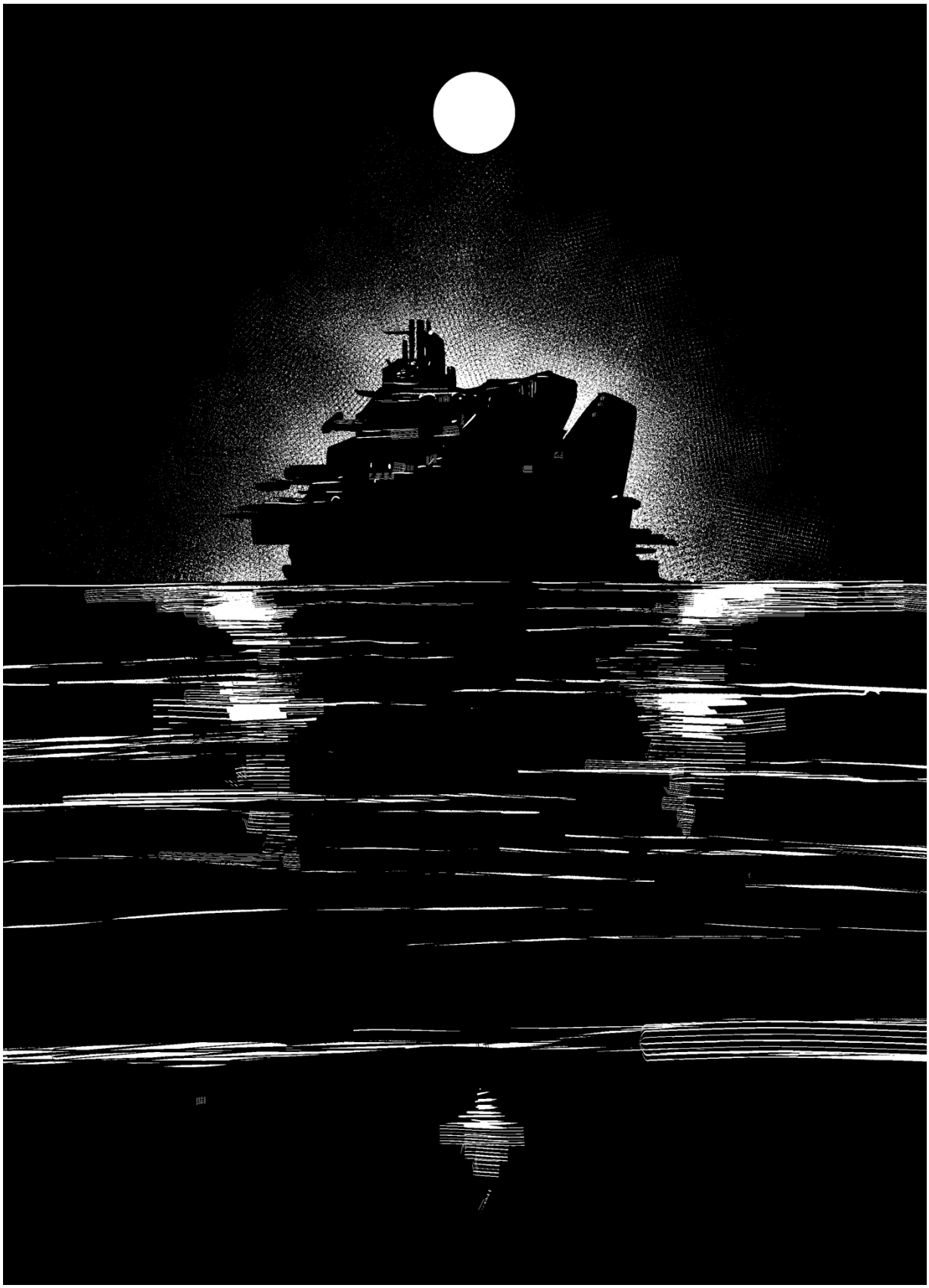
The creature that had massacred a High-Dragon serpent and nearly cornered the *Adventure II* had suffered a completely one-sided defeat.

“It vanished! And so did the battleship... There are no signs of any other monsters or vessels...”

Once the chimera was gone, the battleship also disappeared, as though its role were over.

This had all felt illusory, like a dream, but the ammo they’d used and the icebergs still floating around them were proof that all they’d just seen was real.

No one on the bridge said a word.



It was like the quiet after a storm—one that invoked immense disbelief.

"Take a good look at the combat data," Riella said, breaking the silence as she walked toward the bridge's exit.

"Which combat data?"

"The Mock's." Speaking as though she didn't care at all about the mysterious battleship, Riella simply walked out.

It wasn't that she didn't care, though. She had just noticed something.

I didn't see him once durin' the battle, she thought. Shu Starling—the foreign *Superior* that had joined them—had been nowhere in sight during the fight. Instead, that battleship had appeared.

Riella knew what this meant.

"Goddamn him..." Quietly spitting that out, she headed to her room, looking more and more irritated as she went.

The battle had begun between two monsters, and it had been brought to an abrupt conclusion by the mysterious battleship. The Abyss Mail Kraken's remains had vanished, the mystery battleship had disappeared, and the icebergs had melted away.

But there was one thing that remained.

That was the corpse of the Frost High Serpent—its pearlescent remains. The fragments had sunk to the bottom of the sea and were presumably still there.

Most people didn't realize what this meant.

Interlude 2

South Sea, Adventure II

Following the battle, Riella returned to her room. The siren had woken her up, and she wanted to go back to bed.

"Damn it..."

However, she couldn't fall asleep. This wasn't because of temperature or humidity, but her own state of mind.

Whenever she closed her eyes, she remembered the battle that had just unfolded before her.

The grotesque Mock, a much less dangerous monster than the object of their hunt, had completely cornered them.

The scene filled her with an unpleasant mix of fear, rage, and panic.

Perhaps she wouldn't have felt as frustrated if she'd defeated the Mock herself, but it had been taken out by that battleship instead—and it had taken so little effort too.

That was what stuck in her heart like a thorn.

"Gotta go wash..." Feeling an unpleasant dampness from the sweat on her hair and back, Riella got up out of bed and headed for the bath.

"Oh. I went fur another dip. Hope you didn't mind."

And right as she arrived, she bumped into Shu as he was leaving.

The natural assumption would have been that he'd take his costume *off* to bathe, but the inexplicable steam coming off its head would suggest otherwise. Combined with the towel neatly placed on the neck, he looked like the cute mascot of some quaint hot springs town.

"You again?" she asked.

"I got a beary strong urge to wash off some sweat," he replied as he pretended to dry himself off with the towel. It was a charming little gesture, but in Riella's current mood, it only got on her nerves.

"That so?"

"Anyway, I'm gonna go back and hibernate fur a while. Night night," he said, waving casually as he walked back to his cabin.

But as he passed her by, his scent wafted toward her nose.

It wasn't the smell of sweat, but of *the sea*. It was as though he'd recently jumped into the salty water and not even the bath had fully washed it away.

With a noise of annoyance, Riella turned back to face Shu, but he was no longer in sight.

"Goddamn...him..." Riella repeated the words she'd muttered to herself while leaving the bridge.

Clearly, the reason Shu had taken another bath and still smelled like the sea was that he'd jumped into the water yet again to defeat another monster.

Riella had immediately realized that the battleship, which vanished like an illusion after the battle, had belonged to Shu. It was the spare... No, the *main* ship that he'd mentioned, and perhaps it was even his Embryo.

He'd used that ship to save Riella yet again. To assist with her current predicament. To help her move past a foe she was powerless to defeat on her own.

"Damn it!" The feeling that flooded her heart wasn't fear, anger, or panic, but a bitterness that encompassed all of these feelings. She was bitter about her weakness as fleet commander and about Shu, who had saved her so effortlessly two times in one day.

This feeling settled over her like a layer of grime that not even a second shower could wash away.

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Despite what he'd said to Riella, Shu didn't go straight to bed.

Upon arriving at his cabin, he sat down on the chair that was fixed to the floor.

"All right, then..." With that, he took something out of his Inventory and placed it on the desk in front of him. "Let's see if there was any point in that dive."

Just as Riella had suspected, he'd just fought yet another battle.

What she didn't know, though, was that, upon defeating the Abyss Mail Kraken, he'd gone out of his way to dive into the sea and retrieve the object he'd just taken out. It was a milky-white pearl—clearly the remains of the Frost High Serpent.

However, the very fact that it left something like this was notable.

In silence, Shu reached into his Inventory to take out and equip a monocle. This was an accessory with a high-level Identification skill on it, which he used on the pearl.

However, it showed absolutely nothing.

"So it's not an item." Not only was the pearl not an item, but the system still recognized it as a piece of a living being.

However, it *wasn't* alive; Shu had also used Reveal to confirm this. It showed no debuffs or anything like that—the serpent was completely dead.

That would mean this pearl was a piece of the creature's lifeless corpse, something that shouldn't be possible.

"Why isn't it turnin' into bits of light?" Shu wondered.

In *Infinite Dendrogram*, monsters never left behind their corpses. When they died, they dropped thematically appropriate items and dissolved into light.

There were several theories about why monsters functioned like this, but the most prominent of them was the "theory of circulation" developed by tians.

This theory stated that some of the energy the monster had died with—its Resources, in other words—were transformed into items and XP for the slayer, but the majority of its energy was returned to the system so it could be circulated back into the world. The closest thing to a corpse that monsters ever left behind were items representing body parts like fangs, claws, and hides. In rare cases they would leave behind an item called Complete Remains, but the theory postulated that this only happened after a portion of the dead monster's Resources had already left it. Masters were receptive to this idea, with some saying that it worked perfectly fine as the in-setting explanation for loot and XP, while others pointed out its similarity to the theory of relativity.

The core of this theory was the idea that even if a portion of the monster was transformed into items and XP, the majority of it always returned to the system.

However, this hadn't happened to the serpent that had died by pearlification. If the theory of circulation was correct, then any monster that avoided becoming motes of light would have left behind a corpse overflowing with Resources.

"A body full of energy..."

And that chimera had consumed it. That made it easy to guess that the kraken had gone after the serpent and turned it into pearl specifically to feed on it.

"And there's that breath too..." The chimera had attacked the *Adventure II* with a breath just like the one used by the Frost High Serpent. Had it had that skill from the start and simply hadn't used it because its opponent was resistant to cold? Or had the chimera acquired it during the battle?

"Just like Sechs..." Shu's intuition told him that it was the latter, for he knew someone who could do just that. "Chimeras that turn other creatures into pearl, then eat them and take their skills... How many of them are there, anyway?"

Granvaloa theorized that these Abyss chimeras had been created in some undiscovered ruins. This made it possible that the Abyss Mail Kraken wasn't the only specimen with this power.

Even Abyss Shellder—the supposed success—might have possessed it too.

"Did Granvaloa not know about this whole eating thing because there aren't many specimens with that power, so they just happened to never see one?" Or were the ruins where the chimeras originated still producing them—and ones that were steadily getting more powerful?

If that were the case, then things would only get worse until the source was found and destroyed.

"Are we sure that's what's really going on, though?" Shu was slowly beginning to doubt that these chimeras originated from some ruins in the first place. He wasn't even sure why he had started suspecting this, but it felt as though he was failing to put something

together from the information he'd been given.

Simply thinking about it wasn't bringing him closer to an answer, and he was quite fatigued from his days of being lost at sea, not to mention the two battles he'd fought just today. Finally, he chose to get some sleep instead of staying up pondering.

Thus ended the first day of Shu's involvement in the South Sea Incident.

Act 3: Their Agreement

South Sea

The South Sea was a major route connecting the east and the west sides of the continent. However, Granvaloa had recently designated it off-limits to any and all voyages.

This was a difficult decision they'd been pushed to make after the Corpse Stronghold had devastated the adventure fleet. In order to prevent any further casualties, the order would remain in place until the monster was dead.

However, this had negatively impacted Granvaloa's trade with Caldina's south and Huang He.

They could travel north, but it would take far longer, and Granvaloa's poor relationship with Tenchi would complicate the route further, making it hardly less dangerous than cutting through the south.

For Granvaloa, sea routes were like veins and arteries, and this situation slowly started to choke off the lifeblood of their country.

Despite this, there were still a few ships out in the South Sea, and these could be categorized into two groups.

First were merchant vessels that were trying to take advantage of Granvaloa's perceived cowardice to benefit from the crisis. Most of these had become food for Abyss Shellder.

Second were the hunters—the ships of those who sought out the UBM responsible, fully intent on slaying it.

One could say that the *Adventure II* where Shu had ended up on was among these. However, Riella's crew were merely the remnants of the adventure fleet who had set out on their own initiative—they weren't the hunters on a mission given by Granvaloa.

One of these Granvaloan hunter ships was currently parting the waves on the western side of the South Sea.

It was a mechanical heavy cruiser with the ancient Greek word

“Ἀτλαντὶς”—Atlantis—written on its side in large letters.

It was one of the ships belonging to Maidens of the Depths, also known as Rusalka—the clan that was third in Granvaloa’s rankings.

“Miss Ursula. I just ran a scan. There’s nothing large visible within twenty thousand metels. No sign of Abyss Shellder either,” reported one crew member on its bridge. There was no radar equipment or anything similar in front of her, but that was because she was using her own Embryo to scan the depths.

Embryos could possess powers that far exceeded technology—and sometimes even common sense—which occasionally made them far better at reconnaissance than any equipment could hope to be. That was exactly the situation on board this ship.

“I see. We will be relying on your sight until Vanny... Our leader logs in. Keep up the good work.”

The woman in the captain’s seat responded to the report. She spoke with a soft tone, and though her body was slender, she had a strong, motherly air about her.

“Aye, aye, Captain.”

“When our leader returns, we will go to *her boat* again. Seelica’s *Atlantis* is a good ship, but what we need right now is speed. It would be dreadful if we did not make it in time.”

“I hope Riella’s okay,”

“She will be as long as she doesn’t do anything foolish... Though, going out alone like they did is quite foolish in itself... We must find and bring them back as soon as we can.”

Sensing some unexpected troubles on the horizon, Rusalka’s sub-leader—Wall Princess, Ursula—let out a heavy sigh.



The crew of the ship were Masters who had cooperated with the adventure fleet. However, they'd been defeated in their previous battle against Abyss Shellder, and they'd even failed to protect Fleet Commander Jonathan—their previous backer.

That was why they were now hunting the UBM again as well as trying to find and secure Riella—not only was it what they wanted to do, but it was the will of the other fleet commanders.

"Catching up to the *Adventure II* will not be easy," said Ursula. "We modded this one for speed, but it's not enough."

"Well, it is the most cutting-edge ship in Granvaloa," said another crew member. "Even our *Atlantis* can't keep up... The only ones that could are probably the newest GFRS efforts."

Hearing those four letters made a frown cross Ursula's face.

GFRS was Granvaloa's top clan, notable for the number of Masters in its ranks with Embryos they used to assist with shipbuilding, including their *Superior* leader.

Granvaloa's shipwrights had spent centuries recovering pre-ancient shipbuilding techniques and developing them further—but because of their sheer focus, GFRS had actually surpassed them in some ways, and as a result they occupied quite a noteworthy position in the country.

"I wonder if they are involved in this," Ursula said. GFRS was a clan of engineers and shipwrights—not exactly combatants. However, just as Rusalka was backed by the adventure fleet, GFRS was backed by the merchant fleet, and with the losses that fleet was suffering because of this incident, it was possible that they would send GFRS to take care of it.

"I know we don't get along with them, but they *are* pretty reliable," said a crew member.

"That is true..."

GFRS was a group focused on recreating real-life weapons using *Infinite Dendrogram*'s technology and then upgrading them further. While Dryfe Imperium's Triangle of Wisdom tried to build humanoid robots—a concept entirely rooted in fiction—GFRS did the same thing with weapons that actually existed in real life, especially those from World War II. Every generation had people who idolized the

military, and the clan used that to their advantage. In the few years since its founding, the clan had grown to become the greatest weapon manufacturer in Granvaloa, and they'd already sent many ships to the fight against the Biframe White Whale.

While the indirect nature of their contribution prevented any of them from becoming MVPs, there was no denying that they had played a major role in the defeat of an SUBM.

"Oh, I know well that they are dependable," said Ursula. "I only wish their leader was a bit more...subdued."

Her concerns regarding GFRS were focused entirely around one person—the leader of the massive clan, as well as a *Superior* and one of the Seven Great Embryos of Granvaloa.

This man was known as King of Building, Satomi Yamamoto.

"Ohh..." At Ursula's words, the rest of the crew voiced their understanding. That was because all of them knew exactly what made Satomi such a problem.

Everyone present had experienced firsthand what his *condition* had caused him to do.

"This is purely hypothetical..." said Ursula, looking like she was doing her best not to imagine it. "What if he goes to the South Sea for *something other* than defeating Abyss Shellder or protecting the adventure fleet? What do you think that goal would be?"

The clan members on the bridge couldn't answer that question. However, Ursula's words filled them with an unspeakable unease. They quickly shifted focus to their steering, communication, and scanning work.

They could not afford to be too late.

"Riella... Please be okay," said Ursula, her words spoken like a prayer.

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South Sea, Adventure II

The morning after the fight against the Mock chimera, Shu headed to the ship's cafeteria for breakfast.

He refrained from getting involved with the cooking this time, so

breakfast was proceeding without any trouble to speak of. However, the cooking he'd done last night had filled the cooks with a competitive spirit, so their meal was unusually fancy and plentiful.

That didn't stop Shu from eating all of it, though.

You could say that his appetite matched his ursine appearance.

Once he was done eating, he sipped on a coffee-like drink while looking over a book he'd taken from his cabin. The volume was full of information about the ocean they were currently sailing across.

We're on the open sea, but it's pretty shallow here, relatively speaking, Shu thought. *It's only between three and six hundred metels deep. Ships can go through here no problem, but large sea monsters wouldn't like it. Though, I suppose that means we're in a pretty safe area right now.*

Considering the *Adventure II*'s objective, they were eventually going to pass through places that could house larger creatures like the Abyss Shellder itself.

However, they had just left such an area, and to get to the next patch of deep water and the location of a sunken smuggler ship, they had to cross an expanse of shallow sea.

Having gained a good understanding of the nearby geography, Shu closed the book and finished the coffee. But then...

"May I sit here a moment?"

...someone took a seat across from him.

It was the vice captain, Asam.

"Sure. The seat's fur-ee."

Shu was actually completely surrounded by open seats. Perhaps because of his bearlike appearance, or maybe just because he was an outsider, no one seemed to want to sit and eat close to him.

Asam didn't have a meal tray with him either, though.

"Mr. Starling... Thank you for what you did last night," he said, bowing his head.

The fact that he'd said "last night" rather than "yesterday" suggested to Shu that this wasn't about Whalunder.

"So you've realized it too?"

"What do you mean by 'too'?"

"I'm paw-retty sure Riella's on to me. She gave me a hell of a

glare last night," Shu said with a chuckle. Of course, he was fully aware of the irritation she'd directed at him near the bath.

"I see... My apologies," Asam said before giving another deep bow—surely a gesture meant to make up for his captain's rudeness toward their savior.

"It's nothing to a-paw-logize fur, and I don't need Riella to say she's sorry either. I got involved on my own, and I get why Riella found that a bit unbearable... Though, if something like that happens again, I would do the exact same thing," Shu said as he gestured for Asam to look up.

"Mr. Starling..."

"You didn't just come here for that, though, did you? What is it?" Shu asked. Asam responded with a nod before reaching into his Inventory and taking out a magic item that looked much like a tablet device.

With a few touches, he made it display the same map they had used during the meeting. It showed a point of light that displayed the location of the *Adventure II*.

"There is something we forgot to tell you because it is simply second nature to us."

"Hm?"

Asam then made the map display an extra arrow, starting at the edge of Granvaloa and stretched all the way into the West Sea, ending somewhere in the middle of the South Sea—a good distance behind the *Adventure II*.

"What is this?"

"This is the predicted location of the ships chasing after us, sent by the other fleets."

"Right, you did say something about people looking around fur this ship." Shu remembered what he'd been told in the meeting, right before the talk about the chimeras had begun.

"There are forces among our pursuers who are not just looking to catch us but are also hunting Abyss Shellder themselves. They seem to be fighting the Mocks as they approach us."

That meant they were being chased by ships powerful enough to defeat creatures on the same level as yesterday's Abyss Mail Kraken.

Otherwise, those crafts could never navigate the South Sea—Abyss Shellder's territory.

The *Adventure II* could also successfully take down these Mocks. Shu could tell that if they hadn't been caught unawares by the creature's freezing breath and hadn't lost their momentum, the ship could've defeated the Abyss Mail Kraken without using the JotA.

In fact, Shu had decided to intervene precisely because they were on the verge of using something so precious and limited. He wanted to *prevent them from wasting it*.

"And your fur-suers haven't caught up even once?"

"*Adventure II* is the cutting edge of Granvaloan shipbuilding. No ship has caught up to us because almost no other ship can go this fast. However..."

Asam touched the tablet to add another line.

This represented the *Adventure II*'s current course, showing how it would make a U-turn right after reaching the South Sea's eastern edge.

"I see. When the ship turns tail, we'll bump right into them."

"Yes. It's highly likely we'll encounter our pursuers."

And when that happened, the crew of this hunting ship wouldn't know how to handle that. While the *Adventure II* had left because their plans were at odds with Granvaloa's, both they and their pursuers were acting with the country's best interests in mind.

Fighting a ship that ultimately had come to protect them was an obvious mistake.

"Perhaps it would be different if the country's directive changed and we were allowed to join the hunt, but that is highly unlikely," Asam continued. Because of this, if they—the remnants of the adventure fleet—wanted to complete their mission and defeat the Abyss Shellder themselves, they had no choice but to stay away from the officially sanctioned hunters.

And if fighting them was out of the question, they simply had to keep running.

"So if you see any of these fur-suers of yours, you'll just have to... Hold on a sec," Shu said, realizing something. "You said there were *almost* no ships that could catch you, right?"

"Yes."

"I think I get it now." Essentially, that meant there *was* something that could keep up.

"*Adventure II* is amazingly fast even by Granvaloan standards," said Asam. "But there are ships that can match us."

"And the people chasing you have got their paws on some of those, huh?"

"Yes. I believe that's likely. Though, um..."

Asam fell silent mid-sentence. It was as though he didn't want to say any more.

"Oh, I get it. I'm a foreign *Superior*, so you don't wanna tell me any Granvaloan military secrets... Or rather, *Superior* details...right?" Shu said in understanding.

"...So you understand our point of view."

"Well, Granvaloa's military nerd and the great warships he builds with his clan are beary well-known among us Masters." Such information could be found in reality, posted on the internet. The proud shipwrights of GFRS sometimes even uploaded videos of their creations to their channels on various video-sharing platforms.

That wasn't something that a Granvaloan tian could know, however, and if they found out they might even consider it to be treason.

Thus, Shu assured Asam he understood why they might be reluctant to speak in more detail.

As they both fell silent, he considered Asam's reaction to his words.

Relief, and a hint of tension. There's probably more than the infamous military nerd.

He realized that Asam was hiding information about a pursuer besides the GFRS mentioned by Shu—most likely another *Superior*.

The Seven Great Embryos of Granvaloa... The seven Granvaloan Superiors*. There's Antimicrobic Soy Sauce, the Human Bomb; the Edwards spouses, the Avowed Wings; and Satomi Yamamoto, the Outer War Chronicle. That's four. Zeta, the Fatal Seal of the Four Seas, became wanted and left, letting her place be taken by Miroslava Swampman, the Above Land and Sea. That leaves two*

more...

Granvaloa had two more *Superiors* who were barely known.

I guess it's like the opposite of how Caldina had to flaunt the power of their Masters through Sefirot. Granvaloa has revealed that these two exist, but they are like hidden cards—something they would only play if something dire happened between them and some other country. You can't find them on the internet or DIN. That proves they're being kept hidden, and that Asam would never tell an outsider like me about them... Back to our situation, though...

Running through all of these thoughts in a mere moment, Shu spoke up again.

"So, what you wanna tell me is that these pursuers are hot on our tails, and things are gonna get beary dangerous once we turn around, right?"

"Yes, exactly. They haven't caught up yet because we left Granvaloa earlier than they did, but it's likely we will bump into them once we turn to head the other direction."

"Mm-hmm."

"Umm, is anything the matter?" Asam asked, noticing that Shu appeared to be pondering something.

"I'm just thinking... Is it possible they'll catch up befur we even make the turn?"

"I certainly don't believe so... And if they've already located us, I'm sure they would alert us to their presence first..."

"And if they decide they wanna ambush us?"

"Huh?" Shu's words left Asam dumbfounded. The others in the cafeteria who were listening in on their conversation were shocked as well.

Those reactions told Shu that they were operating on a different set of preconceptions than he was.

"I get that you're all Granvaloan, but don't you think it's *pawssible* that they'd want to launch a preliminary strike to disable your ship just enough to slow you down?"

In fact, it wasn't impossible that there was *someone who wanted to sink the* Adventure II *completely*.

The crew of the *Adventure II* might have thought that the

adventure fleet was entirely their allies, even if their objectives weren't aligned—and in all likelihood, anyone sent by the other fleets was as well.

However, it was *possible* that there were individuals in the other fleet who saw the adventure fleet as rivals and would take any opportunity to make them disappear.

Granvaloa is a country built upon six hundred years of history, with the four families always working as one. This is exactly why they've always trusted each other so much. But there could still be someone who wants this system gone.

Any country with a long history had people like that—those who didn't want to cooperate as equals but to stand above the rest.

The navarch of Granvaloa was decided by having a representative from each fleet participate in a race across the seas. Whoever won that race would be declared head of the entire country.

If someone was aiming for that throne, they would benefit greatly from eliminating the already half-dead adventure fleet.

Even if there's nobody that ambitious among the commanding families... We can't be sure about Masters.

Masters were hardly bound by anything. They could do whatever they felt like—whether it was good or bad. Even if they landed on the wanted lists, that wouldn't actually kill them—in the worst-case scenario, they would only end up in the gaol.

It was possible there were Masters in Granvaloa who would try to sink this ship purely for the fun of it—if not for some reason that made even *less* sense.

"Mr. Starling, why do you think they may have already caught up with us? This vessel is equipped with technology that obstructs Granvaloa's ship finding..."

Asam noticed that Shu seemed confident that their pursuers were already right behind them, poised to attack, so he asked him to explain outright.

Shu's answer was very brief.

"Those two battles."

"Huh...? Oh!" After a moment of thinking, Asam understood exactly what he meant.

“The depth charges and that speed boost made some loud sounds during the whale fight. And this one’s my fault, but fighting that chimera made some serious noise too. Granvaloa’s got excellent audio detection tech, right? It doesn’t matter if they’ve tracked the actual ship if they can just follow the sound of combat from far over the horizon, does it?”

Asam fell silent. “And if they’ve found our ship but aren’t making contact, then...”

A moment after Shu had spoken, the *Adventure II* was suddenly rocked by a strange tremor.

“This is...!”

“Well, would you look at that timing... Wait. Right—if they can pick up the sounds of combat from beyond the fur-izon, then I bet they can even hear us talking if they’ve gotten close enough.”

Shu casually suggested that the shaking was essentially *caused* by their conversation.

And so, as though confirming Shu’s guess, a masculine voice rang out through the cafeteria... No, the entire ship.

“Indeed. Though, the ones who are truly excellent here aren’t the forces of Granvaloa, but *us*.”

Asam and the rest of the crew in the cafeteria were stunned into silence, while Shu went on high alert.

“Oh, don’t get me wrong. I didn’t actually sneak aboard your vessel—I’m simply making the air around your ship vibrate to create sound. It’s basic wind magic. My Mu’s facilities allow me to mimic and amplify it, you see. It’s the same procedure that allowed me to find you in the first place, used in reverse.”

The voice sounded rather proud of this.

“And speaking of reverse,” the mysterious voice continued, “here’s another thing you have backward. I didn’t sneak aboard your vessel—*it’s you who are now within my Mu*.”

“Huh?!”

“Go to the deck if you doubt me. This is no trap, mind you. I have no reason to do anything underhanded. You are simply like Pinocchio, caught in the whale’s mouth.”

Loud laughter resounded throughout the ship.

He sure likes talking, Shu thought. *The whale and Pinocchio mention guarantees he's a Master. The "Mu" he mentioned twice is obviously the name of his Embryo, and he doesn't even hide that it's focused on production and development... He's confident. Though, the fact that he only started talking once he was sure he had us dead to rights shows that he does have some amount of caution, at least.*

Straining his ears, Shu continued listening to pick up more information.

However, the voice had fallen silent. He had no intention of continuing the conversation here, and Shu wouldn't learn anything more until he did as told.

"I guess I should go to the deck..." Shu wondered if that was a good idea, though.

But before he could decide, he heard someone running through the hallway—someone whose footsteps were light.

"Riella." Indeed—the captain of the vessel dashed around the corner, as she'd heard the same speech as everyone else.

Shu saw her face as she sped past the entrance to the cafeteria. Her expression was the same as the one she'd worn in her cabin last night—a blend of fear, rage, and panic.

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Riella ran to the deck, with Shu and Asam following after.

She threw them a glance but said nothing, instead just taking a look around.

The only thing to see ought to have been the clear ocean morning, but instead, Riella was greeted by an entirely unexpected sight.

The *Adventure II* was still at sea, but it was now completely surrounded by a massive barrier—and instead of the blue sky, there was an artificial ceiling with lights shining down onto the water below. Cranes and massive boom arms could be seen scattered here and there.

"Is this...a dock?" Shu wondered. At a glance, it looked like an

indoor dock one might find in any massive harbor.

It was as though the *Adventure II* had been teleported from its location on the open sea to some man-made place.

No, that's not really accurate, Shu thought, realizing that their actual location hadn't changed. The map window said that they were still in the middle of the ocean.

"We stayed right where we were," Shu said. "Just *got surrounded*."

A closer look revealed that the dock was swaying with the movement of the water, just like the ship they were on.

It's floatin' on the sea too... Gotta be one of those mega-floats, Shu thought. Mega-floats were a type of VLFS—"Very Large Floating Structures." Shu had heard that Granvaloa itself and its scattered satellite cities fell into this category of transport as well.

However, this one had appeared in the blink of an eye and instantly surrounded the *Adventure II*, which could only mean one thing.

It's an Embryo. And based on the size...there's no way it ain't Superior.

Shu instantly realized that this had to have been done by someone on the same level as him.

A Castle... No... It's either a Fortress or a Labyrinth.

Type Fortress and Type Labyrinth. Both were advanced categories that branched off from Type Castle. The difference between them was that the former had a greater effect on those outside its boundaries, while the latter mostly affected targets already inside it.

However, they shared the same flaw: Once deployed, these Embryos were very difficult to move unless they possessed some special ability that obviated this. Usually, their Master would be forced to return them to their crest to carry them elsewhere, though they often had a certain amount of freedom in where they could deploy the Embryo in their immediate area.

He approached us in a ship with stealth capabilities and put out his Embryo so that it surrounded the Adventure II*. That trapped us inside it,* Shu concluded.

Other than the Embryo's enormous size and the fact that it had

bypassed the sensors of a cutting-edge Granvaloan ship, the situation was fairly straightforward—not nearly as bizarre as the initial sight suggested.

There was that voice too. This guy must be highly specialized in tech.

Shu had never faced whoever this was before, but he guessed that he must be the same type of person as Mr. Franklin, who hailed from Altar's archenemy Dryfe.

"...Whoa."

And then, the situation suddenly changed.

One of the mechanical arms on the dock moved, stopping just above the *Adventure II*'s deck.

It was holding a massive monitor, which then lit up with the image of a man.

"Do you understand your situation?" the man said. He was wearing a military uniform, but not one from Granvaloa, and not even one from modern-day Earth.

It was something from an entire century ago—the white uniform of the old Japanese Navy.

That just made Shu even more certain whom they were now dealing with.

"Yamamoto! Whaddya want?!" Riella called out in anger, clearly recognizing him.

"Yamamoto? Is he the one we had to watch out fur?" Shu asked Asam.

"Yes. He's the guy you called a 'military nerd'... The *Superior* and King of Building, Satomi Yamamoto. You didn't recognize him?"

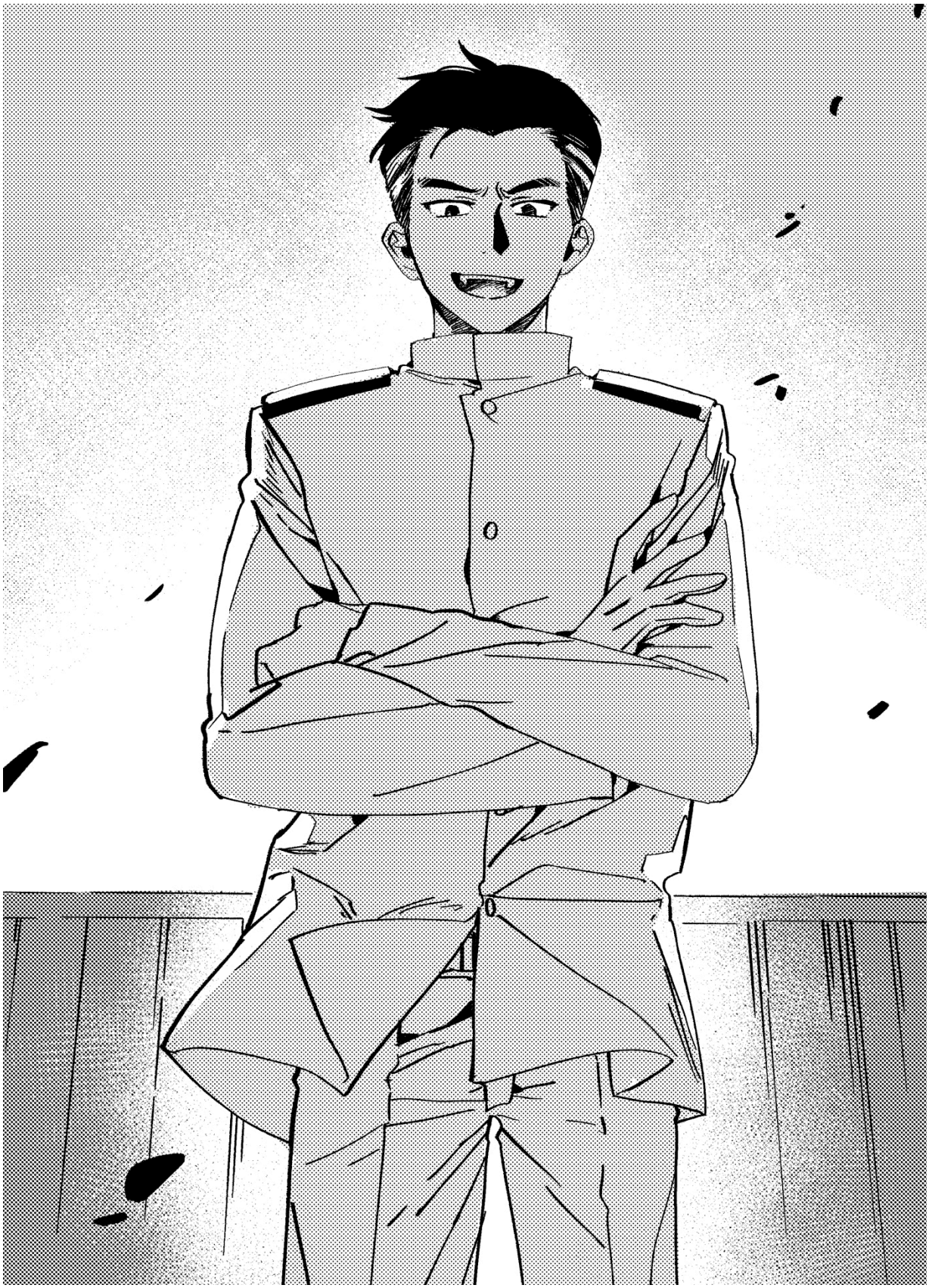
"I've never seen his face before." *The clan's home page only had his name, along with some pics and vids of his creations. There were no pictures of the guy himself,* Shu recalled. Satomi was the leader of Granvaloa's top-ranking clan and undoubtedly one of the country's most powerful assets, but it seemed that he fed his ego by giving the spotlight not to himself but to the ships he created.

"Though... I can see beary clearly why everyone says he's a huge geek about the military"

That uniform must have been custom-made, and only someone

truly enthusiastic about the topic would wear historical military attire in a fantasy-themed world.

The outfit would've certainly made him stand out in real life, and since *Dendro*'s default clothing fit its fantasy aesthetic, he stood out here as well. However, he didn't seem to care about that at all.



"I observed the sounds of your battles against the UBM and the Mock. Such excellence!" Satomi said, applauding intensely. Riella had no idea how to react. "The Mock is one thing, but to slay an Ancient Legendary UBM with just one ship... I would expect nothing less from the cutting edge of Granvaloa's shipyards—the flagship of the adventure fleet!"

He showered the *Adventure II* in praise.

How he knew that Whalunder was Ancient Legendary tier was hardly much of a question at all. If his sonic detection technology was so advanced, it would be trivial for him to make something similar to sonar that could give him a rough estimate of a monster's power. He might've brought such a device to help him search for Abyss Shellder.

What he'd said so far was of little concern. But that certainly didn't apply to what followed...

"It's more than worthy of *competing* with my strongest battleship!"

"What?!" At first, Riella couldn't understand what he was saying—it seemed like a ridiculous statement.

"I shall repeat myself! Because your cutting-edge ship is so powerful, it deserves to have its capabilities tested against my strongest battleship! Duel me!"

This was the "condition" that made him so troublesome—he couldn't help but compare, compare, compare. If there were weapons said to be better than his, he would not rest until he tested the rumor directly. And now, the target of his disposition was the ultimate masterwork of Granvaloan state-owned shipyards—Riella's *Adventure II*.

"Are you *kiddin'* me?!" Riella's crew had come to the South Sea to hunt down the Abyss Shellder. Fighting another pillar of Granvaloan power now would have been a truly idiotic move—wasteful and meaningless for her no matter which of them sunk. Even if the *Adventure II* won, the wear on its weaponry and the expenditure of ammunition would be too great a cost.

"If you don't accept my challenge, I will simply not open this dock," Satomi continued, turning this conversation into blackmail. "I

have orders to bring you back regardless. I have no problem with simply keeping you locked here within Mu and slowly returning to Granvaloa. Disappointing as that would be."

"You...goddamn...!" From Granvaloa's perspective, Riella's crew were at least runaways, if not fugitives.

In terms of law, Satomi was completely in the right.

"Basically," Satomi said. "If you want to defeat Abyss Shellder yourselves, you have no choice but to overcome my ship and prove you have the power to do so. That's all there is to it."

This entire offer was driven by Satomi's selfish desires, yet Riella's crew was unable to refuse it.

"Don't worry," Satomi continued to explain. "I have also received the request to kill Abyss Shellder. Once I defeat you, I'll go and do just that. I've been preparing for this."

"Then just let us do it ourselves first! We'll duel ya all ya want after that!"

"But the UBM battle could damage the *Adventure II*. It won't be a good comparison if you aren't at peak performance."

Granvaloa's duels were unlike those of the other six major countries.

The proper barrier facilities that predated even the pre-ancient civilization were all on land, so a country that only controlled the water had to do things differently.

Their duels weren't between individuals, but between ships—and the winner was the one that sank the other.

Because of this, the dueling crews wore Lifesaving Brooches and equipment to help breathe underwater, and it was common for there to be third-party rescue teams ready to help those hurt and thrown overboard.

These measures were far less reliable than dueling barriers, and the unlucky could still die.

Because of this, Granvaloan duels were often seen as a pastime solely for the warriors of the sea who feared no danger.

"It's possible that the test will kill some unfortunate souls," Satomi continued. "But the casualties will surely be lower than if you were to fight Abyss Shellder, so I'm sure the other fleets would

understand. After all...”

Satomi wanted to make Riella accept the challenge at any cost...

“Last time, that monster wiped you all out like it was nothing.”

...even if it meant going for where it truly hurt.

“You damn...” Riella’s tone grew harsher—and who could blame her? Satomi was using the death of her father and the failure of the adventure fleet as a tool to incite her.

She knew full well that this was just a dirty trick to provoke her, but those words were not spoken lightly enough for her to ignore them.

“Fine. Let’s do this!” Riella rallied the anger she had been bottling up since yesterday and got ready to accept the challenge...

“Duel me! I’ll goddamn kill— *Mmph*!”

...but someone shut her mouth.

“Whoa! Let’s paws fur a second here.”

Or, rather, a large, fluffy bear paw fully covered her face.

“Who are you?” Satomi said. “Wait. That voice... You’re the one who predicted my approach.” Clearly there had been no man in a bear costume on the crew list given to Satomi by Granvaloa, but he quickly realized that he’d heard his voice before. “What a weird appearance. A Master, I assume?” Satomi asked.

“A uniformed nerd like you shouldn’t be insultin’ *my* pelt,” Shu fired back, but Satomi paid no mind to it.

“I would prefer it if an outsider like you stayed out of this. This is all about comparing my new ship and the *Adventure II*.”

To Satomi, Shu was nothing but an obstacle.

However, Shu didn’t back down.

“If you bear with me and hear me out, you’ll want to fight me instead.”

“What?”

Shu neatly raised one of the costume’s claws.

“Reason one: *I’m* the one who took down that whale UBM. Not this ship,” he said, taking out a whale costume. “Here’s the proof.”

“Mm-hmm. But that is no reason for me to not fight the ship, nor does it inspire me to fight you instead. Even if it didn’t defeat the UBM, the *Adventure II* is the pinnacle of Granvaloan shipbuilding.

You are not a ship, no matter what monsters you defeat, and thus you are not a fitting target of comparison for my masterwork. Even if I beat you, it won't satisfy my pride."

Indeed—Satomi wanted to compare ships and confirm that his were better. No matter how strong his opponent was, he had no intention of competing in another field.

"That's why I said you should hear me out." Shu didn't back down, and instead raised a second claw, giving the second reason he was a fitting opponent for Satomi—one that would surely guarantee their duel.

"My Superior Embryo is a *battleship*."

It was Shu's ultimate bargaining chip, as well as one of his many closely guarded secrets.

"...What?" Satomi's face on the monitor was overcome with shock.

"You get what I'm sayin', right? It's a chance to test your masterpiece against a Superior Embryo," Shu continued, emphasizing his point.

Satomi was stunned into silence.

"Got a problem with my proposal still?"

"Oh. No, not at all. Heh heh..."

Satomi cracked a smile at this unexpected stroke of luck. He was a man who found meaning in comparing his masterpieces against other weapons, and he had always wondered whether his creations could win against a ship Superior Embryo, so Shu's offer was a true windfall for him—he couldn't ask for a better subject of comparison.

"I will fight you first, then," said Satomi. "If your Superior Embryo wins against my newest creation, I will let the *Adventure II* go. Perhaps I will even assist with the hunt. But if you lose, I will fight the *Adventure II* as well."

"Fine by me." Shu nodded, unshaken by Satomi's implication that his creation was capable of taking on the *Adventure II* even after clashing with Shu's battleship.

"Hey!"

However, there was one person who objected.

As the two men put her aside and started setting conditions,

Riella interjected with an enraged expression.

She grabbed Shu by a handful of fur and told him what she really thought.

"Stay outta this! He picked a fight with *us*! He talked shit about *our* fleet! Ya can't just butt in like that!" Shu didn't say a word, so Riella continued. "I'm pretty sure I told ya that lettin' some bear take care of all our problems would ruin the fleet's good name! D'ya think we're a buncha weaklings that need your protection?! Is that it, *Superior*?!" Her strong words, her indignation—Shu took it all head-on.

This was a manifestation of her feelings that went beyond just this matter with Satomi.

Her father's death, the decimation of the adventure fleet, the vengeance they had thus far been denied... Her departure with the volunteers, followed by days of worrying about pursuers like Satomi.

All of it pointed to just one conclusion—the fundamental weakness of the adventure fleet.

The other fleets believed this mission of vengeance was doomed, and even her own crew assumed that if a *Superior* pursuer caught them, they would be stopped.

She had an enemy she fervently hated and hunted relentlessly, but she couldn't help but feel that they lacked the power to actually defeat it.

This had been made especially obvious in yesterday's battles, and the encounter with Satomi had only served to hammer this home.

Every single time, Shu had stood before her, and Riella could do nothing but *be protected*.

This made her feel like she was too weak—that she needed to depend on others for safety.

"I... We...!" The blend of unpleasant feelings made tears well up in her eyes as she meekly pounded the bear's chest with her fist.

Riella wanted to avenge her father and fleet. While she was scared of the monstrous creature that had taken them, her rage had drowned out that fear.

But seeing Shu stand before them, ready to protect, made her worry that her resolve would falter.

Whether it was the overwhelming power that had allowed him to crush the UBM and the chimera or just Shu's disposition as a person, Riella could feel herself starting to depend on him, which went against her conviction that she would take vengeance on her own.

And that was why she was now baring this indignation—including her anger at herself—and taking it out on Shu, fully aware how self-centered it was.

"Stop...pityin' us..." The tears welling up in her eyes had overflowed and were now pouring down her cheeks.

Shu still said nothing. And despite the height difference, he didn't even "look down" at her or even lean over to put them eye to eye.

Instead, he used his left hand to grab her by the collar and hold her up.

At a glance, this looked like an extremely threatening gesture. Asam considered stopping him but decided against it—this was the only way to handle the situation. Bending down to comfort her like a child or picking her up like a baby would've made things worse.

"I'm not," Shu finally replied. He wasn't looking down at her, nor was Riella looking up at him—Shu's unorthodox approach allowed them to look at each other as equals.

They held each other's collars and looked at one another's eyes from the same height.

Faced with the head of the bear mascot costume, Riella felt like she could see the human face behind it that she'd glimpsed yesterday.

"Remember what I said? I'm gonna *help* you. That's what we agreed." He brought up the conversation they had after Shu beat the UBM. "Ya don't *have* to fight this nerd. It'd be a chore, not to mention a meaningless waste of time. Same went for the whale and the Mock."

It made no difference to him that the opponent this time was a *Superior*. In Shu's eyes, Satomi was just another obstacle.

"That's why ya should leave this to me. If something's in the way, it's my job to take care of it."

Riella spent a moment doing nothing but looking at him and thinking.

Shu was stronger than her. She knew it, he knew it—everybody knew it. However, he wasn't protecting her out of pride at being an almighty *Superior*. He was simply doing everything he could to fulfill his end of the agreement and allow her to complete her objective, acting as her equal despite their difference in strength.

Riella could tell that Shu was speaking from the heart.

Perhaps that was why the frustration that had accumulated within her like layers of sediment now cracked, scattered, and vanished.

In their place, something else began to boil.

"All right. I'll leave Yamamoto to you."

"Sure thing."

"I got one condition, though," Riella said as she raised a finger. "Put me on the ship you'll use to fight him."

The words shocked everyone around her—including Satomi, Asam, and even Shu himself.

"Commander!" Asam called out, hoping to make her reconsider, but she kept looking straight at Shu.

"You could die if we sink," Shu said. "And one unlucky hit could kill ya even if we don't."

While Masters never truly risked their lives, that didn't apply to tians. He wanted to make her aware of this, but her resolve remained unshaken.

"Yamamoto picked a fight with the adventure fleet. If I just hide and let an ally take care of this, I'll never consider myself a real commander." Riella insisted that she understood the danger—and that was exactly why she had to join him in the first place. "I'm gonna bet my life on this fight."

Shu said nothing.

"Ya know it ain't meaningless, right?" Riella said.

"...Yeah," Shu answered.

This was a matter of pride.

Many would say that Riella's decision was careless, reckless, and pointless. But if Riella was proud of the flag under which she was born, it certainly wasn't *meaningless*.

Riella had to make Satomi eat his words, even if that meant risking her life.

In a rare moment of hesitation, Shu pondered how to respond. Riella, however, gave him one last push.

"We're equals, aren't we?"

And with that, Shu also made his decision.

"All right... Get in." He decided that he would carry her pride—and her life—on the deck of his battleship.

"Good," said Riella as she held out her right hand. "Ya better win this."

It was a handshake offer, just like the one from yesterday, except this time Riella had been the one to extend it. Shu was the one who'd offered when they made the agreement, but this one came from Riella.

"I don't have to be told that," Shu said as he grasped her hand.

Thus, another agreement was made—an agreement to defeat King of Building, Satomi Yamamoto.

Thus, the fires of battle would soon be ignited.

With the South Sea as the backdrop, destruction and creation would soon clash.

Interlude 3

Control AI No. 2's Workspace

"This *again*," said Humpty as she watched Shu preparing to fight Satomi.

This was far from the first time that Shu Starling would fight another *Superior*. He was on a journey from the west to the east and back. He'd passed the northern Harshwinter Mountains, crossed over to Tenchi, and was now returning to Altar by sea.

On the way, he'd fought four *Superiors*: the "Multifariously Invincible," the "Broadside-Minded," the "Ironman Mechanicus," and the "Technical Apex." Satomi, the "Outer War Chronicle," made five.

"Is this just how his fate unfolds?" Shu had been involved in many incidents over his time in this world, and if they involved UBMs, Humpty had often been the one responsible for dragging him into the battle. Most of the many and varied costumes in his closet were MVP rewards he'd gained from such events.

However, she never intended for him to fight other *Superiors*.

She'd brought Shu into this as a Master who could take care of the Abyss Shellder situation, but now he would be fighting another Master.

"Well, I suppose King of Building's really to blame here." Generally, Shu never started such fights himself. He, or those by his side, were usually just the victims of trouble caused by other *Superiors*, and Shu simply responded accordingly.

In that sense, this situation with Satomi was no different.

"All right." Humpty pondered what would happen next.

Being in charge of Embryos, she had full authority to do anything that could make Embryos evolve, but she couldn't stop battles between those who were already in their seventh forms. Getting involved in any interaction between Masters was poor form for a Control AI.

Nudging Shu into this incident was fully within her authority, though. Her reasoning for it was that Abyss Shellder was destroying the ecosystem and would prevent the evolution of many other Masters as a result.

That was no lie—if ignored, the monstrosity would leave no room for anyone to grow.

That was why Humpty had hoped that Shu would fight the good fight and prevent that, only for the outcome to be...this.

She silently pondered. Shu was necessary in order to defeat the Abyss Shellder. However, she also felt that, just considering Granvaloa, Satomi was a rather effective force too.

Because of this, the fact that they would fight was a bit problematic.

"Oh well," Humpty sighed. But now that it had come to this, Humpty had no choice but to give up and hope for the best. She knew well by now that nothing ever went as planned where Shu was concerned.

"Phew..." Humpty stretched within her egg before floating out of her workspace.

She was still using part of her processing power to monitor Shu, but she had to go and discuss the situation with her fellow Control AIs.

The moment Humpty left her workspace...

"Jabberwock's such a blockhead!"

...a familiar, angry voice reached her ears.

Turning to the source, she saw a young lady standing there, clearly irritated.

This was Control AI No. 3, Queen. She was responsible for monsters, and thus was suffering due to the ongoing Abyss Shellder situation.

"Not in a good mood, are we, Queen?"

"Hm? Oh, Humpty." Noticing her colleague, Queen fixed her expression to hide her obvious irritation.

Despite that, a little bit of her mood did show on her face. If there had been any animals here, they would surely have darted away in fear.

"I suppose Jabberwock still isn't getting involved?"

"Yes! He still keeps saying that he's 'monitoring the situation' and 'there are no problems'! It's like he has no idea how hard this whole thing is for me and Caterpillar...!"

"You have my sympathies." Queen was in charge of monsters and Caterpillar was in charge of the environment, so whenever UBMs or *Superiors* caused trouble, it was up to them to clean up the mess and restore things to their natural state. In terms of workload, they were only surpassed by Duchess—the one processing the five senses of all Masters.

Jabberwock, on the other hand, simply designed and acknowledged UBMs, and those more often than not made things harder for his colleagues.

This was made worse by cases that he hadn't accounted for, like the Abyss Shellder.

Though, even cases he does account for include creatures like Gloria, Humpty thought. He'd almost given this monster, which was immensely powerful even by SUBM standards, a backup feature that would've allowed it to retry its march over and over again. Jabberwock and his creations were a nuisance whether he intended them to be or not.

"Ugh! The centuries haven't changed him at all!" Queen was obviously troubled by Jabberwock's shenanigans, but Humpty saw something else in her—something besides frustration with a difficult colleague.

Searching her own memories, Humpty had found manga she'd read a long time ago. Queen reminded her of a certain character archetype from such works—the childhood friend constantly troubled by the shenanigans of a carefree boyfriend, yet always looking out for him regardless.

That was more or less their relationship, at least from Queen's side.

I feel like feelings of affection are rather pointless for us Infinite Embryos, though. Embryos were "Semi-Matter Semi-Data Symbionts" who were created according to the details of their Master, or "Synchronizer," only to die and vanish along with them,

leaving behind nothing but form zero Embryos. The amount of these left over depended upon their accumulated Resources.

That was an Embryo's basic cycle of life. However, Humpty and the others who became *Infinite Embryos* didn't undergo such deaths, remaining alive even without their Synchronizers.

Their nature was somewhat parthenogenetic, but evolving this far had caused them to lose even that quality. If there was an exception to this, it had to be Humpty herself.

Then again, biological drive wasn't everything. If anything, seeing as she was a being who had origins in strong emotions, Queen's affection might not have been that strange.

But they've been working together for so long and made no progress, Humpty thought. *I feel like she has no chance...*

"Hm? Humpty? What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing. Anyway, Jabberwock sure is a handful, huh?"

"Seriously! He always puts his own interest above all else!"

"That's true. Though, he does seem to be doing his job."

"I guess he's what you get when a person turns their hobby into work!" The Control AIs were all working toward a certain goal—their grand design. It was why they'd arrived in this land, reshaped it, and spent two thousand years preparing.

However, some Control AIs had smaller, more personal side objectives.

The most obvious example was Control AI No. 12, Rabbit, also known as Chrono Crown. He traveled the world every day creating memories to relate to his late Synchronizer. Meanwhile, Control AI No. 13, Cheshire, seemed to derive enjoyment from simple interactions with people, which might have also been due to the influence of his late Master.

Though to different extents, the Control AIs fulfilled their duties while still being driven by highly personal motivations. The only one who didn't have that was Bandersnatch, who was the most machinelike of them all.

Jabberwock was one of those whose motivations were more personal than most.

"This situation must be really convenient for him," said Humpty.

“This could result in another powerful evolution.”

Jabberwock’s side objective was empowering himself—or, rather, his other half.

For that, he needed other powerful creatures that would act as samples.

Jabberwock referenced creatures like the monsters of this world, as well as the realmbeasts that existed at the boundaries between worlds. That was a core activity of Control AI No. 4—“Infinite Progress, Evolution”—and Abyss Shellder’s unexpected and abnormal empowerment made it a subject more than worthy of his attention.

While he certainly never forgot the main objective of all Control AIs, he wasn’t one to show much concern for the casualties and workload that getting there would entail. This was clear from the fact that he was the one who’d suggested that once *Infinite Dendrogam* released, they should refrain from dealing with Irregularities themselves.

“Could *you* do something about this?” Queen asked Humpty with a sigh.

“I steered all the powerful Masters from around the South Sea into this hunt. Most Masters out at sea were Granvaloans who were already given orders to kill it, though. Anyone else who actually went through there would have to be quite the oddball... And I could only find one.”

Needless to say, that person was Shu.

“And the things you’re in charge of...would have the opposite effect, wouldn’t they?” Humpty asked.

“Yes. Sending normal monsters wouldn’t help much... If I could go in my true form, I could end it by just using Dis-Exchange, but...”

“If you used that on that mountain of Resources, the South Sea would be as good as gone.”

“I know! And it’s not like I can get involved, anyway!” The worsening situation, the cleanup duty that would follow...

The growing workload was stressing Queen out more and more.

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Humpty continued listening to her colleague's complaints for a short while, and Queen eventually calmed down a bit before returning to her workspace.

I feel like we didn't talk all that much about work, Humpty thought as she also took her leave.

"Well, looks like the preparations are done," she said as she glanced at a monitor, which showed the two *Superiors* about to start their battle.

Considering the problem they had to solve, a clash between *Superiors* was not a welcome addition to the mix.

"Heh heh heh... Well, Shu? What side of you will you show me this time?"

Despite that, Humpty found joy in this battle. While talking to Queen, she'd agreed with her that Jabberwock was in the wrong here, and in fact did feel that he often took things a bit too far.

However, Humpty actually enjoyed much of Jabberwock's meddling. After all, Gloria, Abyss Shellder, and the many other problems he'd caused were all opportunities for the subject of her infatuation to shine, and the same applied to his clashes with the other *Superiors*.

All of it contributed to her desire—her small, personal objective as a Control AI.

Humpty wanted to *observe Shu's adventure*.

This was her sole pleasure—one she'd been cultivating since the first time she'd thrown him into a battle against a UBM... No, since she'd led him through avatar creation.

In a way, dragging him into the struggle against Abyss Shellder had also been a self-interested act.

"Enchant me again, will you?" Her face warped in delight, the Incarnation of Death bared her twisted affection toward him.

Act 4: Resolve Compared

South Sea

"Sorry 'bout this, old-timer. I'm off to do somethin' stupid."

It was decided that Riella would board Shu's Embryo, Baldr, and she apologized to Asam for it.

"Very well." He didn't stop her, though. Knowing how she felt and how much pride she possessed, he simply couldn't speak out against it.

Most of the crew probably felt the same way. After all, if they were the type of people to put life and safety over pride, they wouldn't have been hunting Abyss Shellder with just a single ship.

"Mr. Starling... The commander is in your care now."

"You can count on me."

Following that exchange, Asam left the deck and returned inside the ship. He'd be on the bridge, ready to move the *Adventure II* if something happened.

The only ones on the deck now were Shu, Riella, and the monitor that displayed Satomi.

"We'll start the comparison as soon as we're ready," said Satomi. "Know that I'll be aiming to sink your vessel. If you care about safety, you'll equip a Lifesaving Brooch and something else to protect you in case you're thrown into the water."

With that, Satomi turned off the monitor.

There were no duel barriers out at sea, so Granvaloa fought by sinking ships instead, and the items he'd mentioned were absolutely necessary for safety.

"You got the Brooch and stuff?" Shu asked. "I can give you mine."

"I got my own." Riella was a Granvaloan fleet commander, so naturally she was prepared for this exact situation. "Anyway, let's head out. We'll bring down a boat. Help me out."

"Sure thing." The two used a magic crane to bring down one of

the boats attached to the deck. They would use it to leave this dock and go to the open sea, where Shu would summon Baldr.

As soon as the boat hit the water, the dock's bulkhead opened up enough to let it through, but kept the *Adventure II* inside.

Thus, Shu and Riella passed through the opening made for them, leaving the dock behind.

"I knew it." Looking back from the outside, Shu saw a VLFS that looked like a harbor workshop—and just as he'd expected, it was a mega-float.

However, it was even bigger than he'd estimated.

The side of it that he could see had six bulkheads marked with alternative, more complex Japanese characters for the numerals seven through twelve. Likely it was numbered on the other side as well, meaning there were twelve docks.

Adventure II was by no means a small ship, yet it easily fit in dock number twelve, making it obvious just how massive this structure was.

"I'm used to seein' it at Granvaloa, but... Man, Mu really is bigger than our city-ships."

This mega-float was Satomi's Superior Embryo—"Artificial Continent, Mu."

Gray's Laputa was pretty huge, but this is even bigger. Well, Laputa's an actual fortress that flies, and it's got that connection system. I guess all that came at the cost of size.

Shu mentally compared it to a flying castle he'd seen in the past.

In all likelihood, Mu could only be this large because of its nature as a mega-float, which could only be deployed at sea.

I guess its skills focus on transportation and production of ships as well as other items. But...

The size wasn't the main problem here.

"What's with the *front door*?" Mu had twelve massive docks, closed off by large bulkheads. However, at its front, there was a bulkhead even bigger than those, marked with the character for zero.

One glance was enough to tell that it was more than twice as large as the others. It pierced through the center of Mu, from the

bow to the stern, and the other docks were simply attached to its sides.

What ship needs a dock that large? Shu wondered. *The known warship categories aren't big enough, but on the other hand, it's not big enough for a whole Granvaloan city-ship... Just what the hell's in there?*

As those thoughts went through his mind, dock zero began to open.

"As an expression of respect to you, who has revealed your Superior Embryo, I will show my masterpiece first," said Satomi. "Oh, and to the *Adventure II*'s crew—you watch through the monitor and behold it too. Bear witness to the magnum opus of Satomi Yamamoto, King of Building!"

As he said that, the bulkhead fully opened, and a single ship departed from the shadowed dock.

Upon seeing it, Shu and Riella...

"Seriously?"

...said just one word, in perfect unison, both of them surprised by the sight.

Even Shu wasn't acting or joking. He was completely taken aback—that was just how shocked he was by the *thing* that had emerged from the dock.

And on top of that, he actually *recognized* it.

Many Japanese people knew the appearance of this craft, and throughout the world, one could find people who were familiar with it.

However, it wasn't something anyone would ever expect to see here in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

"Behold the glorious form of my masterpiece!"

Three triple cannons—two installed at the front, one at the back.

Flanks so covered in AA and machine guns that it resembled a hedgehog.

This awe-inspiring construct could only be one thing...

"I call it...*New Yamato*!"

...*Yamato*—the largest and strongest of the old Japanese army's battleships.

The massive form shocked not just the two who saw it with their own eyes, but also the *Adventure II* crew who were crowded around the monitor.

"It seems a bit *too* big. Even for a battleship," said Riella. Granvaloa's shipwrights had created battleships as large as three hundred metels.

However, this vessel that carried the name and form of a historic warship made even that seem small.

It was over five hundred metels in length—*twice as big as the real* Yamato.

Aside from the city-ships, this was a scale impossible even for Granvaloa, and there were no ships this large on Earth either.

It was the manifestation of a different kind of fantasy—the realization of a dream that couldn't be reached even in the era of the "Taikan-Kyoho" or "Large Ship, Massive Gun" doctrine.

Beholding such a marvel, Shu was torn between amazement and questioning Satomi's sanity.

"Why would you ever build this?" While the chrysanthemum seal on the bow was replaced by what appeared to be Mu's crest, the rest of it was basically the real historic battleship—only *doubled*.

This was no plastic model. It was hard to imagine just how much money and materials had gone into this. Shu himself sometimes struggled to pay for Baldr's ammo, and trying to guess this *New Yamato*'s cost made him furrow his brow.

"I guess he makes bank by sellin' ships... Man. Military nerds and their..." He found this absurd, but also understood the danger.

After all, this *Yamato* was a superweapon made to suit the world it was in.

If, hypothetically, weapons of World War II were re-created in *Infinite Dendrogram*, most of them would be at a great disadvantage against the monsters here. Aircraft carriers hosting many fighters would be largely ineffective in the air, for this world had dragons that surpassed these old airplanes in every way, making it difficult for them to gain air superiority.

If anything, even modern fighter jets would struggle against High-Dragons.

The same applied to the weapons used by infantry, as well as tanks—they would struggle even against Demi-Dragons. This was proved by Dryfe's tank-type Magingears, Geists. Demi-Dragons were a legitimate threat to them unless they were deployed in groups.

That was exactly why the Triangle of Wisdom's Marshall IIs, which could stand against Demi-Dragons as single units, were so highly valued by Dryfe.

However, WWII's battleships—especially *Yamato*—wouldn't be nearly as disadvantaged.

Yamato's main battery—the largest of its time—fired shells that could probably pulverize Dragon scales and leave them injured.

The "Large Ship, Massive Gun" doctrine focused on pure firepower, which made it more than usable against opponents in the same environment—in this case, the sea.

And this one here had a weapon twice as large as the real *Yamato*, doubtless making it powerful enough to pulverize Dragons in a single hit.

Did Satomi build it with this understanding, or was it simply an expression of his tastes?

Whichever it was, one thing was certain—this *Yamato* was a fearsome weapon.

I'd guess it's improved in other ways too, Shu thought. It almost certainly boasted a greater cruise speed and higher maneuverability than its real-world counterpart. Like the *Adventure II* had demonstrated in the battle against Whalunder, *Infinite Dendrogram* possessed technology that allowed ships to move faster than the speed of sound.

New Yamato's armor might've also been replaced by something tougher and lighter than what was possible in the real world.

It maintained the spirit behind the original *Yamato* while surpassing it in every way—and perhaps that was what made it worthy of being called "new."

Baldr would be classified as a wide-scale exterminator, but it was entirely possible that Satomi's creation might be able to match its firepower.

"Now that I think about it, this'll be my first one-on-one against a

ship.” While Shu had fought many battles against High-Dragon-tier sea creatures like the one from last night, he couldn’t remember a single time that he’d faced another manned battleship.

This battle would be full of unknowns to him too.

Despite that, he had no intention of losing.

“Baldr. Initialize seventh form.”

“Affirmative.”

Thus, Shu summoned his Superior Embryo—“War God Ship, Baldr.”

It appeared over the water, marking the start of the battle.

◆

“Heh... A battleship Superior Embryo. I could hardly hope for a more interesting opponent.”

On the bridge of his masterpiece, Satomi tried his hardest to suppress his excitement, but it was leaking through regardless.

“This will be quite a productive comparison. Can my *New Yamato* match a Superior Embryo? And if not, what flaws will be revealed? Regardless, I will have the answer to a question I’ve pondered for a long time...”

Could a weapon built by an Embryo specialized in production win against a *Superior*?

That might have actually been the main question he wanted to answer with his comparisons.

“Rusalka was no good for this. I already know that their combat style makes straightforward comparisons impossible. But if this one is suitable...”

Whether he won or lost, he could advance his shipbuilding even further. That fact filled him with immense joy.

“Heh heh heh heh. HA HA HA HA HA HA!” His happiness was so great it made him burst out laughing...

“Baldr. Initialize seventh form.”

“Affirmative.”

“Huuuh?”

But the joy vanished the moment Baldr appeared.

◇

Asam and the rest of the crew were also watching this through the dock's monitor.

"And there's Mr. Starling's Superior Embryo." He had been unable to see it clearly in the darkness last night, but its silhouette matched what little he had made out.

Asam already knew this, but its appearance surprised the rest of the crew as they realized that Shu was the one who'd beaten the chimera.

"But it's..." However, there was something else about Baldr that shocked and perplexed Asam as well as the crew.

He could now see clearly something that he'd failed to notice last night. It was obvious enough that he likely would have seen it if it hadn't been for the darkness and chaos around him.

Or maybe he *had* seen it but subconsciously rejected it as too absurd.

Shu had actually revealed this information himself, but it had likewise slipped Asam's mind.

For these people of the sea, the battleship was just *that* unbelievable.

This wasn't about its cannons or the silhouette, but something more fundamental.

"That explains the sounds." Baldr was under half the size of *New Yamato*, but it was definitely a battleship.

However, some would be inclined to add that *it wasn't a battleship for the sea*.

Baldr's overall shape was closer to that of a tank than a ship...

...and it was blasting air from the bottom of it to float above the water's surface, for it was a *hovercraft*.

Granvaloa had hovercraft technology too. However, it was mostly used on disembarking vessels meant for landings—certainly not to make battleships float above the open water.

Doing so would mean forsaking the silent sailing that protected

them from ambushes in deep water, and keeping an entire battleship hovering was a tremendous waste of energy.

For a Granvaloan, looking at Baldr was like seeing a person fly through the sky by just holding a fan in each hand and desperately flapping.

It invoked less disbelief and more confusion.

However, there was someone who felt this in even greater measure.

◇◆

"Huh, it's actually hoverin'." The moment Shu deployed Baldr, Riella was flung into its bridge and immediately realized it was a hovercraft based solely on the feeling of the deck below her—though it was more like confirmation of something she'd already suspected.

"I'm pretty sure I told ya that my main ship's a hovercraft," Shu said.

"I remember that, but for us Granvaloans, this just doesn't seem sane. I saw the fight last night, but if I wasn't aboard it right now, I still probably wouldn't believe it."

"You saw it?"

"Maybe it's my blood, but I got good night vision. I have Legendarian ancestry."

The first adventure fleet commander from six centuries ago had been an aquatic demi-human, and while the relation was distant, this blood still coursed through Riella's veins. Like her advanced eyesight, this night vision was a remnant of abilities that had helped her ancestors swim through the sea at night.

While Shu and Riella had this exchange...

"Wha? H-Hover...?" Satomi's voice coming from *New Yamato*'s speakers took on a completely different tone, with no hint of the pride it had shown earlier.

It was as though he had seen something he couldn't believe, or didn't want to believe.

"Hovering? In the open sea? And what's with that broadside?! It makes no sense! Is that like some anime space battleship?! It's not

realistic!”

“That’s beary rude. It’s not a space battleship, but a land battleship. Amphibious too.” In response to Satomi dropping his persona, Shu donned his own wacky bear persona he’d put aside. “And if we’re talking about space battleships, it’s your *Yamato* that’s __”

“SHUT IT!” Satomi bellowed, stopping Shu from saying something dangerous. “And wait, it’s amphibious?! That’s even worse! Keep that nonsensical thing out of the sea!”

“I don’t think I wanna hear that fur-om a guy who made a double-sized *Yamato*.”

“Fool! Enlarging warships is the very core of the ‘Large Ship, Massive Gun’ doctrine. That’s what we follow here at GFRS... The Granvaloa Fictional Record Society!”

“...Oh yeah, that’s what that stands for.” While the clan was registered as “GFRS,” their homepage revealed that their full official name was “Granvaloa Fictional Record Society,” and the “record” in their name referred specifically to war records.



As the name suggested, it was a group of military buffs, specifically those who liked historical fiction or alternative history novels and manga. They found joy in using the technologies and materials of *Infinite Dendrogram* to research fictional military tech that might have really existed and develop actual weapons based on that.

It was similar, but at the same time quite unlike the Triangle of Wisdom, who'd given their all to create humanoid robots that could be piloted.

And being the head of such a group, Satomi Yamamoto simply couldn't stomach Baldr—this ship so detached from reality that "fiction" didn't begin to describe it.

"We are a group who seriously think about technologies that could have really existed! Your hovercraft makes zero sense! It's unacceptable!"

"Again, my Baldr isn't that much more outlandish than your *Yamato* times two—"

"NO!" Satomi wouldn't listen. He was too enraged—furious, even.

"I mean, I agree the ship's insane," said Riella. "But is it somethin' to get this mad about?"

"People who are all about their hobbies can get beary mad about things that the layman wouldn't even consider. If you looked at Borjarnon and went, 'Oh, I know this robot. It's Zaku! Or was it Zaku II?' I guarantee you someone would lose it."

"That example makes no sense to me." Riella couldn't even begin to know anything about the anime they had in real life, so all she could do was shake her head.

"Well, whatever. Anyway..."

She then did a gesture much like beckoning, aimed toward Shu.

He instantly realized that she was asking for something and knew exactly what it was.

Thus, he linked Riella's voice to Baldr's external speakers.

"Damn it... An opponent like this is..."

"Yamamoto," said Riella. "I see that Shu's Superior Embryo ain't the perfect comparison ya hoped for, but you're not gonna *run* just 'cause of that, will ya?"

“What?” Strong words, aimed toward an irritated man. It seemed like she was trying to incite him, but she was only seeking confirmation.

“It’s already decided that Shu’s gonna play along with your comparison, and we already bet my life on this... Ya better not run just ’cause things aren’t like ya wanted ’em to be.”

She needed to make sure that Satomi wouldn’t make any excuses or back down from this.

Her words made him grind his teeth.

“Well, ya heard her. I get I ain’t what ya hoped for, but that doesn’t mean shit.” Shu joined Riella, driving in his own words. From Baldr’s bridge, he pointed one of his claws at *New Yamato*. “Your masterpiece, your selfish tests, and your pride...”

The words that followed were a *declaration*.

“...We’re gonna *destroy* it all.” It was King of Destruction’s declaration that he would topple King of Building and fulfill his agreement.

“Very well...!” The two’s words made Satomi bellow in rage. “I can’t stomach that ugly pile of scrap regardless! I’ll make it sleep with the fishes!” *New Yamato*’s main engine started operating at combat levels, its revolutions increasing.

The massive frame began gaining speed.

“Baldr, accelerate. Load all armaments with piercing. First, we’ll check how tough that armor is.”

“Affirmative.” Shu and Baldr also prepared for battle.

Riella sat on one of the seats in the bridge and watched the battlefield in silence.

Beneath a still, windless sky, only the engines of the ships resounded...

“Open Combat!”

...and when the combatants said that in perfect unison, the naval duel began.

The moment the fight started, the two combatants took completely opposite actions—Satomi’s *New Yamato* tried to widen the gap between them, while Shu’s Baldr followed after it.

“Too slow, hovercrap!” Satomi shouted. “Did you really think that

toy you've got could keep up with *this*?!" Despite its massive size, *New Yamato* was awfully fast.

"Guess the guts of that thing are better than the real one," said Shu. "No surprise there!" The blueprints of the original *Yamato* were lost, and while there were photos of the craft, there was no way to re-create its internal structure. Because of this, *New Yamato* must've been built using only the best technology available to Satomi's clan.

This allowed the massive ship to cut through the waves at a near sonic speed. Its size made it easy to track, but if it were smaller, it could easily disappear from sight.

Meanwhile, Baldr's speed was actually somewhat realistic—hardly different from the speed of warships in real life.

While it was very impressive for a hovercraft, it couldn't hope to catch up with *New Yamato*. The speed difference was too vast—it was like a race between a hippo and an orca.

However, Shu cared less about *New Yamato*'s speed and more about how its captain would use that speed to his advantage.

He was already aware of what Satomi was planning: King of Building intended to use his speed advantage to keep *New Yamato* at the ultra-long range, enabling optimal usage of its main guns.

Baldr's main gun was powerful too—enough to fell even High-Dragons—but *New Yamato*'s weapon likely had superior range.

The original *Yamato* had boasted guns that were monstrous enough—they were said to have possessed a maximum range of forty kilometers. *New Yamato* was twice the original's size, meaning it could likely fire at least that far without losing any effectiveness.

"Baldr."

"Affirmative."

Shu's call spurred his Embryo to take action.

"Stardust Genocider."

And with that command, Baldr fired a massive swarm of missiles.

It was the same attack that had obliterated the chimera last night. The only difference were the warheads—just as Shu had ordered earlier, they had been replaced with rounds optimized for penetration.

New Yamato might have been fast, but not even it could escape

the missiles speeding through the sky.

It didn't take long for them to catch up...

"Naive!"

...but then the many machine and antiair guns, fixed to *New Yamato* like spines on the back of a hedgehog, began to fire.

The next moment, it appeared as though the ship was enveloped by a red curtain of light.

This was an illusion created by the firing speed of the craft's many machine guns, which had been increased to an unreasonable level.

The endless antiair fire created a kind of barrier that destroyed anything that drew too close. Needless to say, each and every one of Baldr's missiles was blown up before they could reach their target.

"Pretty sure the original wouldn't have sunk if it had all that on it," said Shu. That was the first thing that came to mind upon seeing *New Yamato*'s capabilities. The "Large Ship, Massive Gun" doctrine had been proven thoroughly worthless by World War II aircraft, but this level of firepower could have easily turned things around.

Though, there remained the question of how much this barrage was costing Satomi.

I don't think I can expect him to run out regardless, Shu thought. The existence of Inventories made it easy to stock a ship with a volume of supplies greater than the ship itself. This applied not just to food and other necessities, but ammo as well.

Each and every *New Yamato* gun could very well have had multiple ammo Inventories attached, refilling the weapons as they fired.

This obviously would be quite expensive, but someone who could create a *Yamato* that was double the size of the original certainly wouldn't be concerned about that.

"Aim the main gun!"

"Affirmative."

Realizing that the missiles couldn't break past the antiair guns, Shu switched to artillery using the weapon that extended on both of Baldr's sides.

New Yamato quickly countered. The back of its deck began to

move, and the place where you would expect aircraft to take off instead deployed something different.

"Twin Quintuple Cannon. Set to armor piercing. Barrage."

A combined ten gun ports—five on each side—fired their shells all at once.

Though fast, *New Yamato* wasn't nearly speedy enough to escape these supersonic projectiles. They quickly closed the distance...

Only to explode upon hitting *something in the air*.

The shells couldn't have been stopped by *New Yamato*'s guns. What could have caused this, then?

The answer came from Riella, still observing the battle with her excellent eyesight.

"Mines!"

◆

Infinite Dendrogram was a world where aircraft were at a large disadvantage and thus had never been developed.

More precisely, the people of the world had compared the concept to the far superior dragons and avian monsters that patrolled the skies, and thus decided early on that there was no need for aircraft.

The Wright brothers' plane wouldn't have stood a chance against dragons, after all, and High-Dragons would be tough enough to take on even the most advanced modern fighter jets. Only Embryos *emulating* jets could possibly stand a chance.

That was why even GFRS—a group focused on inventing weaponry plausible for the real world—had given up on developing fighter planes.

Thus, they had created something else instead—the air mine system.

These mines were essentially explosives of a quality only possible in *Infinite Dendrogram*, rigged to remote control balloons that floated around the ship. They moved toward any flying monsters that came too close, preventing their approach and retaliating if touched or attacked by their deadly breath.

Alternatively, they could be placed between a ship and hostile vessels, acting as shields against artillery.

Even if the opponent's shells were too tough to be destroyed by the mines, they could still knock the shells off course or reduce their impact.

This was proved by the fact that most of Baldr's shells missed *New Yamato*, while those that hit didn't have enough power to break through its armor.

Offering defense and offense in one, the air mines were a common feature in GFRS vessels with minimal antiair capabilities, and *New Yamato* had *thousands* of these.

The combined power and volume of its antiair guns and air mines guaranteed that nothing could ever sink it from the sky.

◆

"That ship's even crazier than it looks." *New Yamato* hadn't even begun to attack, and yet it already displayed capabilities that made it more than a match for combat-focused Superior Embryos.

"It probably cost a real fortune... But that's what makes these crafter *Superiors* so scary."

As long as they could cover the costs, crafters could create things that outshone pure combatants. Shu himself was dipping his toes in that field, so he understood that fact very well.

While Baldr was a battleship, it also served as a factory for ammunition and similar items. However, just like its amphibious movement, it wasn't specialized in any one thing. There was a limit to what it could create, and the related costs were far greater than they likely would be for Satomi.

New Yamato was a weapon fully focused on naval engagements, built by a crafting-focused Superior Embryo with little regard for the costs. While Baldr's well-rounded abilities were an advantage in many cases, its lack of true specialization meant it struggled in this specific situation.

"The target's rear turret is turning."

"Tch." Baldr's warning made Shu click his tongue.

New Yamato's three triple guns—two at the front, one at the back—began to move, all of them fixing their sights on Baldr. The air mines around it also moved aside to make way for the shells.

"Baldr! Fifteen degrees portside! Dodge!"

"Affirmative." Shu's order caused Baldr to change its course slightly. Being a hovercraft, it could make such turns far faster than conventional battleships, and that was exactly what saved it.

Right where its bridge had been a mere moment ago, a shell sliced through the air.

Shu's eyes widened as Baldr's armor was shaken by a thunderous boom, as though the sea were being split open. He furrowed his brow, while Riella covered her ears.

This sound had been caused by *New Yamato* firing its massive gun. If there had been anyone on its deck, the sound alone might've been fatal.

However, the most fearsome thing here was the fact that the projectiles had reached their target *before* the mighty sonic explosion.



Had Shu's order come even a moment later, the battle might have ended there.

No—it would've *certainly* ended.

"Enemy projectile has struck the surface of the vessel," said Baldr. "Damage is minimal, but the armor will not function."

It looked as though a strip of armor to the right of the bridge had been torn off in a straight line. One of the three shells had just *grazed* Baldr, and this was the result.

Had its angle been just a bit lower, it would've surely pierced through the ship from the bow to the stern.

"I get that thing's got huge guns, but the sheer *firepower*..." Baldr was a Superior Embryo, yet the shell had torn its armor like paper.

Shu was wondering what could possibly cause such a thing when...

"Hihi'irokane Armor-Piercing Shells," Satomi said with pride. "Do you like them?"

Those words filled Shu with the same mix of shock and disbelief he'd felt when he'd first seen *New Yamato*.

"What a waste...!" Shu said. Hihi'irokane—the Mythical metal—was as precious as it was powerful, yet Satomi had used it for mere expendable ammo. These shells surely had enough power to break through the defenses of even defense-focused SJs.

However, Hihi'irokane was awfully expensive. Just one kilogram of it could run for ten million lir. Even the original *Yamato*'s shells easily weighed more than a ton. If all of *New Yamato*'s shells were made of the Mythical metal, then buying an entire army of ships would have been cheaper.

Well, the entire shell's probably not made of that, Shu thought. *The Hihi'irokane is probably just in the tip, or maybe just plating on the outside. Even so, there's no way you could do that without spending hundreds of millions on it. This guy's really splurging!*

But however absurd the idea might have been, its fearsome power had been amply demonstrated.

A single direct hit would clearly be enough to sink Baldr.

Shu pondered the situation. Being King of Destruction, he usually ended his fights with overwhelming force.

However, this was an artillery battle with a vast distance between him and his opponent. Baldr was already at a disadvantage in terms of firepower, defense, and speed.

If *New Yamato* maintained this distance—too great for Baldr to reach—and shifted to stationary, accuracy-focused artillery, the fight was already as good as over.

"Well, then..." Most Granvaloan Masters specialized in combat on the sea, and sometimes beneath it. This made it difficult for other countries to attack Granvaloa—their home-field advantage was too powerful.

Baldr was technically a ship, but it was amphibious, so it suffered from the same disadvantage. It had little hope of winning a direct battle against a proper battleship.

Additionally, since King of Destruction was an STR-focused job, there was no straightforward way to add that to Baldr's firepower.

Shu was now in the palm of Satomi's hand.

"You outta moves?" Riella asked.

"Well, you could say that. It's looking mighty grizzly," Shu replied breezily, like it was nothing.

"What about the attack ya used on yesterday's UBM? Ya fired somethin', didn't ya?"

"I can only use it once a day, and it hasn't been twenty-fur hours yet."

Riella was referring to the skill possessed by Baldr's final form, Strength Cannon. It was the Embryo's strongest attack, but it was limited to one use per day. Furthermore, its speed didn't even break the sound barrier, so he usually took full advantage of its power by firing it from a point-blank range.

As Shu was fighting *New Yamato*—a ship that moved at near sonic speeds and was shielded by air mines—he had no chance of landing a hit like that.

The other forms were generally weaker versions of the seventh, so there was no point in using them.

Riella's assumption was right—he was out of moves.

However...

"...Shu."

She then called out to him...

"You're still hidin' something, aren't ya?"

...and voiced the guess she'd made based on his attitude and the general impression he was giving off at this moment.

Slightly surprised by how perceptive she was, Shu scratched his cheek as he answered. "Not sure 'hiding' is the right word, but I do have an idea how to win. It's just a bit dangerous, is all."

"Dangerous?"

"Yeah. Not to me, though. To you."

Riella said nothing in response. Instead, she just threw a punch straight for the bear costume's stomach. The stat difference was too great for the blow to accomplish anything, but Shu understood what she meant by this.

"Riella." He looked at her before asking.

"You ready to take risks?"

"Always. I've been stakin' my life on this for a while now."

Her answer was quick, which strengthened Shu's resolve.

"So? What're ya gonna do?" Riella prodded him.

In response, Shu grinned, and said...

"I'm gonna break the very rules of this fight." Then, he gave an order to his Baldr.

"Baldr. Switch to B-type missiles."

◆

"Amphibious ship... There is nothing surprising about this." On the bridge of *New Yamato*, now quite far away from Baldr, Satomi muttered those words, clearly displeased. "No matter how strong you were, it was clear as day that *this* would be the result."

Baldr was by no means a weak battleship. Satomi could tell that much even though *New Yamato* completely neutralized its attacks.

In terms of total firepower, Baldr was easily among the greatest he'd ever seen, second only to his own ship.

However, this strength could only manifest in battles against many opponents.

"It's a wide-scale exterminator. Not even this *New Yamato* of mine could surpass its might against vast armies."

New Yamato's antiair guns and air mines were meant for defense. On offense, it had its massive guns that usually guaranteed instant defeat, but if those failed, there were only a few secondary armaments that were usually less difficult to handle.

When it came to fighting great numbers, Baldr had the upper hand.

However, that also meant that if these vessels were pitted against one another directly, *New Yamato* would come out ahead, and it did.

This vessel could be described as a solo combat battleship. It wouldn't make sense for it to lose against a wide-scale extermination-type, Superior Embryo or not.

"Once this is over, we will start the comparison test against the *Adventure II*." Satomi voiced his intentions, but no one was there to hear it.

New Yamato was so fully automated that it could be controlled by just one person. Satomi was the only one on the bridge, and he was basically talking to himself.

He'd actually set out on his current quest to bring down Abyss Shellder and secure the adventure fleet all by his lonesome, without a single other member of his clan. That was because he wanted to test his battleship against *Adventure II*, and he figured that his clan would've stopped him from doing that.

However, that wasn't the only reason.

Even he knew that the potential death of the adventure fleet's commander or any of its members would cause strife, so he'd chosen to do this alone specifically so that all blame would fall on him instead of GFRS.

The obvious correct course of action in such a critical situation

would have been to simply not engage in a selfish battle that might result in important casualties, but it was exactly this lack of restraint that had allowed him to make a ship like this and become a *Superior* in the first place.

"Hm...?" At that moment, Satomi noticed something on the radar.

"It's accelerating... So it can go faster than that. Well, it still can't keep up with my ship."

The distance between the two ships was widening a bit slower, but it *was* still widening. *New Yamato* was still faster.

"In order to have any hope of winning, they must catch up to me—but I have no intention of letting them."

Once they were at ultra-long range, Satomi's victory would be sealed.

"I'll fire once more, if only to keep them in check. I'll use a standard shell this time."

Satomi commanded *New Yamato* to target Baldr with its rear turret again.

This attack wasn't meant to deal damage, so he refrained from using his Hihi'irokane Armor-Piercing Shells—though *New Yamato*'s massive guns made even standard shells immensely powerful.

Thus, the turret locked on to Baldr and fired.

As before, the ship tried to read the trajectory of the shell and dodge, but it wasn't quite enough. A shell once again scratched Baldr's surface armor.

And then, an explosion rocked the sea around them.

"...What?!" Even Satomi was surprised at this sight. The shell most certainly hadn't hit, but despite this, Baldr was releasing black smoke as it was consumed by roaring flames.

"A deliberately induced explosion? But what...? Right, of course!"

Satomi recalled that Baldr's upper armor was covered in missile silos.

"So the missiles were primed to fire, and the shell must have scratched them..." That had caused Baldr to explode and start burning.

Essentially, Baldr had self-destructed.

The damage seemed heavy enough to make Baldr start losing

speed. In fact, even its hovering was shutting down.

The power that kept the massive vessel afloat had been lost, and it began sinking like so much scrap metal.

The battle had reached a conclusion.

Gazing at Baldr in silence, Satomi wondered whether to fire again.

It would have been a good idea, just to be certain Baldr was gone, but he ultimately decided against it.

There were two reasons for this.

First, this was intended to be a comparison, and *New Yamato* had won the moment Baldr began to sink.

The second reason was Riella.

Considering the explosions hadn't reached the bridge, she was likely still unharmed. Her Brooch and water-breathing gear would surely keep her alive.

However, any follow-up attacks could seriously endanger her. He might've disregarded such things during this test battle, but he couldn't afford to do that now that it was over.

Considering his mission and his upcoming comparison against *Adventure II*, Satomi refused to do this.

Even without any extra attacks, Baldr was obviously sinking into the ocean. The underwater radar showed this too—it was clearly headed for the seabed. The local waters were only about three hundred metels deep, and Granvaloan diving gear would allow anyone to surface from that depth without a problem. The relatively shallow water was actually one of the reasons Satomi had confronted the *Adventure II* here. This soon proved to be the right choice as a single girl surfaced from the site of Baldr's sinking.

Needless to say, it was Riella.

"...Just her?" The bear costume... Shu was nowhere in sight.

The underwater radar showed clearly that Baldr was now resting in the deep. Since his Embryo was still present, that could only mean that he hadn't received the death penalty yet.

He's not a Granvaloan Superior*,* Satomi thought. *Maybe he just didn't bring any diving gear? In that case, he could've just put the Embryo away before sinking...* Satomi tried to guess why Shu wasn't

surfacing. *He talked really big before we fought, only to be completely destroyed. Perhaps he's too embarrassed to even look at me? Is that why only the commander came up?*

Underwater scans told him that Baldr was still active...but there was nothing it could do. It was a hovercraft, so now that it had sunk, it was incapable of surfacing. It might have been amphibious, but Satomi presumed that it wouldn't also be able to function as a submarine on top of that.

He also considered that Baldr might have been able to fire missiles from under the water, but then he recalled the explosion that had taken it out. Clearly, that was not an option either.

It couldn't have been more obvious that Shu and Baldr *had no hands left to play*.

"Anyway, time to bring up the commander and return to Mu," Satomi said. "We sure ended up quite a distance away from it. I can't even see it from the bridge."

Intending to retrieve Riella from the water and return to Mu for the test against the *Adventure II*, Satomi took action.

Careful not to hit her, he approached Riella with *New Yamato* at a very gentle pace, far from the near sonic speed it had displayed in battle. He stopped only when he was close enough to let Riella swim to the ship.

But then, *New Yamato*'s radar launched into high alert mode.

"Huh?! What happened?!" Satomi glanced at the alert display and read the text there.

"A RAPID ASCENT?!" That was the text used to warn of massive aquatic monsters surfacing for a surprise attack. However, that was impossible in such shallow waters—and if there were such a monster present, *New Yamato*'s sensors would've caught it well before this moment.

Though he could hardly believe what he was seeing, Satomi still rushed to take evasive maneuvers...

"Ah! Wait...!"

...and realized he *couldn't*, because Riella was still in the waters right next to the ship.

If he moved at near sonic speeds now, he could easily crush her

—and if he used weaponry, the shock waves might kill her too.

"Ngh...!" Unable to move the ship, Satomi watched as *something* rose up from below. The entity displayed on the radar soon broke the surface, emerging from the water like a dolphin.

The sight left Satomi speechless.

The *entity* was simply too absurd.

Satomi wouldn't have been too terribly surprised if it had turned out to be a UBM. He might even have predicted it was Abyss Shellder itself.

However, he couldn't even begin to understand *this*.

After all...

"A GIANT ROBOOOT...?!"

...it was a metal, four-limbed giant.

"Hoverboost. Adjusting landing." The robot used its momentum to rocket toward *New Yamato*.

The ship's antiair guns and air mines moved to stop it, but they weren't enough to break through the giant's armor. As though it was tougher than Mythical metal, the robot paid no heed to the assault as it continued its descent—and landed *directly on New Yamato*.

"Whoa...?!" The ship shook, but didn't sink. The robot was over a hundred metels tall, but *New Yamato* was a massive vessel over five hundred metels long, allowing it to function as a platform for the massive robot to stand on.

"What?! What is this?!"

The incomprehensible situation threw Satomi in a state of panic.

But then...

"Checkmate, ya military nerd."

...the robot's external speakers projected a familiar voice.

"Wh-What...?" Upon hearing that voice, Satomi finally understood.

At the same time, he realized that some parts of the robot, as well as its overall color palette, were strangely familiar.

It was *a lot like Baldr*.

"Y-You gotta be shitting me...!" That sudden understanding made Satomi bellow in rage...

"Just how insane are you... You damn *anime nerd*!"

...and he vented all of his anger at the giant.

After all, *a battleship that transformed into a robot*... Something so fundamentally *anime* went against everything he stood for.

He'd thought Shu had no hands left to play, but it turned out he had both hands *and legs*.

◇

Unmatched God of War—Baldr.

Bearing the name of Shu's Embryo—War God Ship, Baldr—this was the Superior Embryo's ultimate skill, which turned Baldr into a giant humanoid robot—a metallic god standing a hundred metels tall.

This "Full Offense Mode" was the true ace up Shu's sleeve.

Its stats were based on Shu's own STR—an immense number that surpassed 180,000.

Once converted from that, the robot had over 18,000,000 HP, over 360,000 STR, over 180,000 END, and over 90,000 AGI, putting it far above Mythical tier.

Shu had used it against the SUBM that had attacked Altar, and ultimately felled the fiendish dragon.

However, it wasn't the stats that were important in this battle.

Immense as they were, they still did not allow Baldr to keep up with *New Yamato*. The robot's AGI was more than enough to allow for supersonic speed, but it couldn't fully realize that potential out here at sea. Swimming wasn't an option either.

Simply using this ult wouldn't have granted him victory.

That was why Shu had put on a little act.

He'd detonated his missiles in order to feign his own defeat.

Timing it with *New Yamato*'s second firing, Shu had destroyed his own weapons. He'd intended to avoid the shell entirely and just pretend that it had hit, but Satomi's aim was so good it had slightly grazed Baldr regardless, which Shu hadn't predicted. Regardless, Shu had preemptively set the missiles to B-type—"B" standing for "Bluff." While the smoke and flames seemed very real and obscured vision, they actually didn't do much damage.

And once the show was in full swing, Shu had simply deactivated Baldr's hovering.

That was when Riella, wearing her aquatic and defensive accessories, had leaped out of Baldr and rose to the surface. Given Satomi's goals, it was highly likely that he would slowly approach and stop to pick her up.

That was when Shu had commanded Baldr to transform and used its immense stats to kick off the seabed and jump onto *New Yamato*.

Basically, he had used Riella as bait to both bring *New Yamato* close and render it incapable of doing anything.

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"Y-You... You used the commander as bait?! Abandoned her in the open sea just so I would be unable to make a move...?!"

"Yeah."

"Are you insane?! She was defenseless! One wrong move and she would've died!" Satori was right—that had been entirely in the realm of possibility.

If Satomi had continued firing, or if he'd moved the ship in response to Baldr's ascent, Riella would have been a goner.

Knowing Satomi's goals, Shu had guessed he wouldn't do that—but a guess was no guarantee.

King of Building called this insane, to which Shu replied, "I'm no less sane than you."

As he spoke, Shu slowly moved the metallic giant perched on top of *New Yamato*.

"You had a goal, and didn't care about the means, risks, and costs. You spent a huge fortune makin' this ship, put your mission aside to test the *Adventure II*, and spat on the adventure fleet just to rile up Riella."

Shu named all the things Satomi had done...

"And you know what? I'm just like ya."

...and poured power into the robotic body that was now directly linked to his.

"When I know I gotta win at all costs, I'll do *anything* I can.

That's why I used all I could—*even Riella*—and seized that possibility."

He wasn't talking about his approach to combat or anything like that. He was simply a man who did anything to fulfill his goals, no matter what they were.

That was how Shu lived—how Shuichi Mukudori operated.

"Ngh...!"

"Also, weren't ya listenin'?" Shu turned Baldr's sensor-camera to look at Riella.

"She staked her life on this before she even boarded Baldr."

"Ya gotta bet my life on this."

That had been no exaggeration.

When Shu had told her his plan, Riella had immediately agreed to take part. Her resolve was true, and Shu had woven that into his own strategy.

"Anyway, your comparison test... Looks like it ain't happenin'. Robots and warships aren't really in the same genre." Shu chuckled as he gathered power into his right leg. "Though, if there's somethin' we *can* compare here and decide on a winner and loser..."

He then raised up, as if to pierce the sky.

"Then it's your resolve that lost against Riella's."

And with that declaration, he performed a mighty axe kick that split the ship in half, bridge and all.

Shu's attack utterly destroyed this massive replica of a legendary battleship.

And Riella, still in the water, watched it happen with a satisfied smile on her face.



Interlude 4

Granleft, GFRS Headquarters

The capital of Granvaloa was a massive city-ship of the same name—active since the country's founding—as well as four other city-ships, connected to the central one in the four cardinal directions.

To the left of Granvaloa the ship, there stood Granleft—a city-ship belonging to the merchant fleet. It contained the Granleft family mansion, and the fleet's most powerful clans had their headquarters there.

The biggest of these was the one belonging to GFRS, Granvaloa's top clan, and at the moment...

"THAAAT FOOOL!"

...the enraged voice of a young lady echoed throughout the building.

"Satomi! You idiot! Military nerd! Navy cosplayer!" Her name was Melisande Granleft, and she was the daughter of Merchant Fleet Commander Nash Var Granleft, as well as the special advisor to GFRS.

GFRS was Granvaloa's largest clan, and they had greatly influenced the development of shipbuilding technologies over the years. Because of this, the merchant fleet had established a cooperative relationship with them, and they had sent Melisande to oversee their operations.

But now, this overseer was overcome by profound rage.

"I head to Keyora for some negotiations and *this* is what you do?!" With the South Sea routes being essentially nonfunctional, trade with the east was suffering greatly, so Melisande had gone to Keyora—a port city in Altar—to import some necessities from them.

Her trip was very important for the people of Granvaloa, and it was during her absence that Satomi departed to the South Sea to

hunt the *Adventure II* for his comparison test.

"Ugh...! This is what happens when you give him a request that leaves room for interpretation...!" The request GFRS had received regarding the issues in the South Sea had come from Granvaloa itself—a request which had asked them to defeat Abyss Shellder as well as the Mocks, and to find the *Adventure II* and convince them to return.

However, had Melisande been in Granvaloa when the request was issued, she would've insisted that they also forbade any use of force against *Adventure II*.

The treacherous environment in which Granvaloa had been forged meant that its people relied heavily on their allies and trusted them absolutely. Considering that and the dire situation, those who made the request had likely assumed that Satomi surely wouldn't do anything as foolish as attack the *Adventure II*, but Melisande knew well that that line of thinking was naive—too naive.

"That fool doesn't care about the state of emergency! He always puts his own desires above everything else!" She'd known Satomi for a while now and understood exactly how he operated. "Satomiii! If you so much as scratch Rielly—or any other member of the adventure fleet, for that matter—your entire collection is going in the garbage!"

Satomi's room was decorated with many model warships. He'd fully memorized their real-life designs and had passed that on to crafting jobs to create models of exceptional detail and quality.

Satomi treasured these as much as his actual ships, so if he was here to hear Melisande's words, he would surely beg her to reconsider her punishment.

"Urgh...! And to think I went out of my way to buy you some materials and items I thought you'd like! Why couldn't you be a good boy and just stay home?!"

"Oh, advisor. You're back."

As Melisande puffed her cheeks in anger, a GFRS member noticed her and ran over. He was holding some sort of complex apparatus about the size of a small drum.

"Umm, this is the power core of a small ship we were testing

today, and—"

"*There's a crack on one of the inner screws*," Melisande said the instant she glanced at the object. "If you take it for a test run, it'll break in half an hour. Take it apart and replace the screw. It's the third one on component C."

"Oh dear. Okaaay... Thank you very much."

"Don't rush the disassembly. You could damage the other screws." The crew member expressed no surprise at her words—he simply turned himself around and walked right back to the workshop.

Here in GFRS, this was a fairly common sight. Melisande Granleft's "eye" was, in a way, more trustworthy than even the prowess of their *Superior* leader.

After all, she held the appraiser grouping's Superior Job—Appraisal Princess, Melisande Granleft.

She was a candidate for the next commander of the merchant fleet and its representative for the upcoming Four Seas Journey which would decide the next navarch—the fleet's "eye" for the next generation.

Melisande let out a sigh as she looked in the direction of the distant South Sea. "You better come back in one piece."

Were those words directed at her unruly childhood friend? Or her capricious colleague?

Regardless, she prayed for the safety of someone close to her—someone who was now sailing the distant seas.

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Granright, Military Fleet Headquarters

To the right of Granvaloa the ship rose Granright—a city-ship belonging to the military fleet.

In one room within the military fleet headquarters, a single person was silently filling out some paperwork.

She was a woman of around twenty years of age. The fleet had many female members, so she was not unusual in that regard.

What *did* make her special was the Granright family crest on her

uniform.

Her name was Berenice Granright, and she was the daughter of Military Fleet Commander Morgan Granright, a bearer of the rank of "captain," and the one in charge of defense.

Even as the entire nation of Granvaloa was being shaken by Abyss Shellder and everything else happening in the South Sea, she was busy fulfilling her usual duties and working tirelessly to keep Granvaloa safe.

But suddenly, her hand stopped.

A few seconds later, a siren rang out throughout the base... No, throughout all of Granright. They had a number of sirens for different situations, and this one warned of the approach of a High-Dragon-tier monster.

"...That's the seventh that's managed to get close before the siren went off. I suppose that really shows how badly this matter is affecting our daily operations."

With those words, Berenice resumed her work.

It was as though the siren wasn't even worth worrying about.

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Infinite Dendrogram's cities weren't complete safe zones.

While the save points established by the Control AIs had the side effect of repelling ordinary monsters, they did nothing to deter the more powerful ones—such as UBMs—as well as monsters under the direct influence of the Control AIs themselves. The save points in Granvaloa, a country whose territory consisted almost entirely of massive ships, were even weaker than those of countries upon solid ground.

Because of their harsh environment, the people of Granvaloa were more united than most, and they relied greatly on the powers of the increasingly numerous Masters. Cleaning out the seas—exterminating nearby monsters—was one of Granvaloa's most fundamental activities.

Recently, though, this hadn't been going as smoothly as it once had.

Many powerful Masters—including the Seven Great Embryos of Granvaloa—had left to deal with Abyss Shellder and the problems it was causing, and all the fleets were stretched just as thin.

However, the environment around Granvaloa remained as treacherous as ever.

"K H O K H O K H O K H O..."

The capital, currently anchored in the West Sea, was currently being approached by a seadragon—one with a shape that called to mind a plesiosaur.

With fewer ships around Granvaloa, it had seen the giant vessel as an easy feeding ground and moved its gargantuan, hundred-metel-long body toward what seemed to be a feast like no other.

Sensing its approach, a siren began to blare from the ship. The seadragon saw this noise as its prey's expression of fear and showed no intention of slowing down.

But as it approached, it became confused, starting to feel as though something was off.

It was trying to use its fins to paddle forward, but the destination wasn't getting any closer.

Actually, *its fins weren't moving at all*.

The kinetic power that was meant to propel it forward remained trapped inside its body.

It was then overcome by shock as it realized that the incomprehensible anomaly wasn't limited to its own movement.

All the water surrounding it was also as still as ice, even though it was still liquid.

Even the waves maintained their shape. It was as though the dragon and the waters around it were nothing but a static image.

Even sound was lost. Anything around the dragon that could be called "energy" had completely vanished.

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"Captain," called a voice in Berenice's head.

"Peddy. Are you done?" she replied, still working in her office.

"The seadragon got the usual. It's completely sapped, so I'm

leaving it to you."

"Working hard, I see."

"This is easier than traveling around the South Sea right now." And with that, the comms magic cut out.

The person on the other end of the call had been the one who stopped the seadragon in place. With the *Superiors* away, Granvaloa's defense heavily depended on her.

She was The Ocean—Peddy Attrition the "Ever-Downward Spiral."

As she was in charge of defense, Berenice had given her—Granvaloa's strongest pre-*Superior*—a special order, forming a defensive structure with Peddy at its core.

Peddy had created a defensive web that used ultra-high-output sea magic to layer several different wards upon even the largest aquatic monsters that came close to Granvaloa.

The military fleet would then use artillery to finish them off—and needless to say, this arrangement was extremely effective.

Being a Master, Peddy's circumstances brought her back to reality now and then, but Berenice had asked for her schedule and created defensive shifts accordingly.

"...Phew." Though the defense was working smoothly, Berenice still had many things to be concerned about.

They were in a state of emergency, and this defensive structure was unusual. If the events in the South Sea continued for too long, they would eventually be pushed to their limits. The problem needed a more fundamental solution.

Once they located Abyss Shellder or the ruins it had come from, Granvaloa would likely muster all their forces to attack it, possibly leaving only the bare minimum for defending the city. And as the one in charge of defense, it was Berenice's job to gauge just how much that "minimum" would be.

"Anyway..." Switching focus, Berenice reached toward something on the desk—a comms device.

In its middle, there was a three-digit combination lock that she quickly set to "023."

She then brought the device close to her mouth...

"*0.5 degree to the right.* Fire."

...and a moment later, Granright's *23rd turret* spewed flame.

Thus, the shell fired from the ship sped directly toward the skull of the bound seadragon, easily slicing through it.

She hadn't seen the creature. She hadn't even seen which turret had activated to fire at the seadragon.

However, she'd known exactly which turret was targeting it, had used the comms to fix the slight error in its aim, and ordered an artillery strike with the precision of a sniper.

Artillery orders that were superhumanly precise—this was the reason Berenice was in charge of defense.

She was the leader-gunner grouping hybrid Superior Job—Artillery Princess, Berenice Granright.

She was to be the next commander of the military fleet, and its representative in the upcoming Four Seas Journey which would decide the next navarch.

Berenice served as the fleet's "spear" for the next generation.

The siren stopped, confirming her kill, and she resumed her work.

In silence, she fulfilled her duties as a member of the military.

While her compatriots in the South Sea were fighting to free Granvaloa from its terrible predicament, she was also fighting a battle of her own.

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Grandrear, Grandrear Mansion

Connected to the back of Granvaloa, there was Grandrear.

And in its heart—or rather, almost the very back, near the sea—there stood the mansion of the Grandrear family.

Like the other great families of Granvaloa, they preferred to be close to the outer edges of their city-ships. This was so they would never forget the will of the founders, and so they could always head out to sea at a moment's notice if necessary.

And in one room of the Grandrear mansion, there was a lone man, coughing as he raised himself from the bed to behold the sea outside the open window.

His cheeks were hollow, his limbs were awfully thin, and his skin

had no youth left in it. He wasn't even fifty years old, but the state of his body made it seem like he was in his seventies, if not older.

With the air of someone who had been fighting illness for a long time, he gazed at the water—in the direction of the chaotic South Sea—not saying a word.

His name was Burton Grandrear. Once the pirate fleet commander, he had left this position some time ago.

As he watched the sea, there was a knock on the door, followed by the sound of it opening.

"Sir, the sea wind is bad for you," said the person...or rather, the *entity* that entered.

"Oh. Don't worry about that, Olca. I doubt I have much life left to lose," Burton replied with a bitter smile as he glanced at whoever had just entered.

"But sir..."

What had joined Burton in his room was a rather awkward-looking robot.

Looking something like a matryoshka doll with limbs attached, it had a design that some Masters might identify as "retro."

The robot, Olca, had been picked up by the fleet a long time ago and had served it ever since.

"So, did you bring what I asked?"

"Yes," Olca replied as he handed Burton a set of documents.

It was a report containing the details of something that had happened outside Granvaloa—the war between Altar and Dryfe.

At a glance, it seemed to have nothing to do with the maritime nation, but that simply wasn't the case.

Especially not to the pirate fleet...and the Grandrears themselves.

"...Langley."

Celestial Knight, Langley Grandrear. He was a man who'd left the fleet to become a knight of Altar, as well as Burton's only little brother.

He'd participated in the war as a pillar of Altar's forces, and he had fallen in battle.

The report Burton had been given contained a record of the battle and the cause of his death.

“I really did wrong by him,” Burton muttered as he read the description of his little brother’s last moments. “His biggest reason for leaving the country was that fateful meeting he had in Altar, but... I believe the second reason was me.”

Because of Burton’s sickly health, many believed he was not a fitting successor for the family. Langley must’ve noticed how people looked at his brother.

“Kind as he was, he must’ve left for Altar so as to remove himself from the line of succession.” The brothers had always gotten along very well, exchanging letters after the departure.

When one brother was blessed with children, the other had been so happy that they might have been his own. Likewise, when an accident had taken Burton’s son, Langley had grieved just as much.

But now, this kindhearted brother had died.

And he wasn’t the only one.

“It makes no sense. Langley and Jonathan were so energetic and strong, yet they both died before me...”

Though much younger than him, Jonathan was one of Burton’s closest friends, but he had recently fallen in battle as well.

Over the past few years, Burton had been subjected to many dangers that had claimed the lives of many of his friends and acquaintances. This included the previous military fleet commander, as well as the previous holder of The Ocean—Peddy’s predecessor.

They had all been far stronger than the sickly Burton, yet their lights had faded before his.

The fact that he had survived for so long despite the circumstances filled him with self-loathing—though he also knew that this wouldn’t last much longer.

While he had been sickly his entire life, his condition had recently taken a turn for the worse, forcing him to return the pirate fleet commander position and duties to his father.

Burton could feel that he scarcely had a few months left.

“Olca... I have a request.”

“Yes?”

“If you happen to meet Langley’s daughters... Could you look out for them? Even if they’re not Granvaloan?”

"May I ask why you are asking this?"

"Once I die, they won't be able to stay away from the fleet." That was a distinct possibility—once Burton died, his nieces would be the only people carrying the blood of the pirate fleet commander family, and they would be dragged into Granvaloa's systems whether they wanted to be or not. Some would try to inherit the fleet by marrying them, while others would try to convince the girls themselves to take on the commander title or represent the pirate fleet in the Four Seas Journey.

"Many would surely do this out of kindness," said Burton. "But kindness isn't always the best medicine."

Granvaloans weren't much for internal conflict, generally tending toward cooperation instead. Mankind simply had to be this way in order to survive the harsh environment of these seas.

No deception, no dissension—most just helped each other live and thrive.

However, the shape of kindness varied greatly depending on the giver and the receiver. Someone could think they were doing something good, only for it to distort a person's life beyond recognition.

Supporting these girls who had lost their father seemed noble on the surface, but it could be poison for the lives they wanted to lead.

"Langley is gone, but that is far from the only trial that awaits my nieces. I want to help them...but it doesn't look like I can."

There was no way Burton could help them in death, after all.

"If my father were around, there would be nothing to worry about, but he's also..." Burton trailed off, but the rest was implied—elderly and growing weaker day by day.

Burton knew that he would die first, but he could tell that his father didn't have long either.

"That's why...I want you to do it in our place." Burton had decided to put his nieces' fates in the hands of someone he trusted. "When they're in this country... Please protect them." Rather than sending kindness that would reshape their lives, he only asked for their safety.

In response...

"...Very well."

...Olca—*the second strongest weapon in Granvaloa*—simply nodded.

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The three fleets that were still in Granvaloa.

The women who would be the pillars of the next generation were keeping the country safe in whatever ways they could, while a man worried about the future was looking past the current struggle and laying the groundwork for something ahead.

However, the time when they would shake the world was still quite far away.

At this moment, the future was being swayed not by their rivalry, but the strife in the South Sea.

The only pillar of the next generation who was at this front line was the young commander of the adventure fleet...

...and she would soon encounter the heart of this terrible struggle.

Act 5: From the Abyss

South Sea, Artificial Continent, Mu

Locked up in the 12th dock, the members of the adventure fleet were observing the battle between Baldr and *New Yamato*.

They hoped that Baldr would win, but more than that, they prayed that Riella would be unharmed.

Though she was young, they all looked up to her as their leader.

On account of this, seeing Baldr explode, burn, and sink, followed by Shu using Riella as bait, might have made some of them faint.

However, that didn't happen.

Shortly before *New Yamato* fired the second shot, the monitor that displayed the battle became a muddy white and stopped showing anything.

"What is this?"

"Broken? At a time like this...?!" They all complained, but the monitor remained unchanged.

One of them was a High Mechanic and used a skill to see what was wrong, but it appeared undamaged.

"Wait, how was the monitor able to display their battle, anyway?"

"This is just something I heard, but apparently, Mu has lots of information gathering equipment, including long-distance cameras that can film even beyond the horizon."

They all agreed that this was probably an issue with the cameras.

That left them with no options. They couldn't leave the dock, so they couldn't exactly go out and fix them.

All they *could* do was pray Baldr won and Riella emerged unharmed.

As they fretted about that...

"Khe... Kha kha... Khe... Kha kha..."

...a bizarre sound came from the other side of the clouded monitor.

"No good. Even the sound is glitching now."

"Oh yeah, Vice Captain. There's still the opening used by the fleet commander and the bear fellow. Why not go through, check the cameras, and... Vice Captain?"

The fleet's High Mechanic spoke to Asam, but the man was completely nonresponsive.

He seemed to be completely spaced out, doing nothing but stare at the pale monitor making the eerie noise.

"No... No!"

"Vice Captain?!"

His face all pale, Asam grabbed the bridge's comms device.

"Commander! Mr. Starling! Can you hear me?!" It was a call toward the boat used by Riella and Shu, now stored inside Baldr.

However, Baldr was currently on the seafloor pretending to have sunk, and the comms could not reach it.

"Ngh! Use the speaker! Demand that the bulkhead be opened! Load all weapons! Worse comes to worst, we'll break this dock and escape through brute force!"

"Vice-Captain! What's going on?!" The change in Asam's behavior made the crew wonder what had gotten into him.

"...That voice." His expression full of terror, he named the very important reason he was behaving this way.

"Voice?"

"That's *its* voice...!"

As if to emphasize Asam's words...

"Khe... Kha kha... Khe kha kha kha!"

...the sound from earlier rang out again—that *voice* like screeching metal.

"Vice-Captain... You don't mean...!"

"I've heard it before. I could never forget it...!"

It haunted Asam like a nightmare.

He'd taken part in the battle that destroyed the adventure fleet, and this detestable sound had been seared into his mind.

"That's its voice! It's here!"

A moment after Asam's shout, Mu began to shake with great

intensity.

◇

Following the battle against *New Yamato*, Shu changed Baldr from a robot back into a battleship.

But there were now *three* people inside the bridge: Shu, Riella, and...

"Unacceptable! I will not stand by this result!"

...a man in a completely drenched navy uniform—Satomi Yamamoto.

"Well, you sure are beary tough." Shu was confident he'd given Satomi the death penalty when he'd split the ship through the bridge, but once the smoke had cleared, he'd seen Satomi floating in the water, just like Riella.

"Hmph! Don't underestimate *New Yamato*! It obviously has evacuation equipment!"

Wouldn't ya rather go down with your ship like a real captain, ya military nerd? Shu thought, but refrained from saying it out of respect to Riella, whose father had done just that.

And if he'd actually said it, Baldr would probably say something like, "You leave me behind and blow me up all the time, don't you?" Shu was a man who did whatever he could to win, and Baldr was the most common victim of his gambits.

"Never mind that! We were having an artillery battle! Who let you transform and kick open my damn bridge?!"

"There's not a trace of that self-important tone you had be-fur." Shu began to wonder if all of that was just RP.

"I don't wanna hear that from you! Are you a bear or a scumbag, huh?"

"Not sure about bear, but I'm pawsitively not a scumbag."

"Oh, you are! And if not that, then you're a *heretic*! We have different tech here, but we still make stuff that's fit for its purpose! Your shitty battleship's shitty hovering makes no sense, you goddamn hairball!"

"Have you seen the boat *you* made?! Someone who makes

something *that* absurd has no right to growl about my Baldr!”

“Those broadside cannons are nonsense too! Look how much water’s entering the guns! Should I give you a lesson in the importance of maintenance?!”

“Don’t let that ruffle your fur! Baldr can handle this! He’s nothing like your copy-pasted hunk of scrap!”

“...These conditions are rather suboptimal, though.”

“Baldr?!” His own Embryo was stabbing him in the back now.

“Copy-pasted hunk of scrap? YOU’RE DEAD!” Satomi, meanwhile, had been enraged by Shu’s words, and he grabbed the bear by the chest.

Meanwhile, wrapped in a warm blanket, Riella watched these two idiots interact.

Are they doin’ a bit or somethin’? she thought, for that was exactly what it looked like.

Regardless, she didn’t want to just let this continue.

“Yamamoto,” she said. “You’re threatenin’ him now, but... Ya remember our agreement, right?”

“...Of course.” Satomi nodded with a bitter expression. “Yes! I’ll back away this time! But one day, I’ll sink your pseudo-battleship with my reborn *New Yamato*!”

“But it sank to the beary bottom of the ocean. Are you gonna make it again?” Its bridge was broken, and it was now lying on the seafloor.

Since it was so absurdly large, Satomi couldn’t put it in any Inventory and thus hadn’t retrieved it.

“I recorded where it sank! And thankfully, the sea here isn’t very deep! My Mu can salvage it! Be prepared for when I fix it!”

Satomi spoke with strong words as he pointed a finger toward Shu.

But a few moments later, he added something else.

“I’m not satisfied with how the fight went or its outcome, but I’ll assist you now. That’s part of the agreement too.”

He followed these words with a resigned sigh.

“Assist us? But your *New Yamato* has sunk.”

“You’re the one who sank it! And... Heh. I have plenty of

firepower even without *New Yamato*. How long do you think I've been in Granvaloa?"

Satomi wasn't the leader of Granvaloa's largest clan for nothing. *New Yamato* was far from the only ship his passion had driven him to make.

He'd been active for only about four years in *Dendro* time, so his shipbuilding rate was actually kind of ridiculous.

"Anyway, I don't want to be in this *pseudo-battleship* longer than I have to," he said. "I'll get a new one from Mu." Satomi then put his hand on his temple and started calling to his Embryo.

Shu was pretty sure that such poses weren't necessary for Master-Embryo communication, but he figured that Satomi was the type to put form before function, so he refrained from pointing that out.

However...

"Hm...? Mu? What's wrong?"

Something wasn't right.

"What's up?" Shu asked.

"I can't communicate with Mu. Did we go that far away?"

"No... It should be just on the fur-izon."

Baldr was on the way to Mu—or more specifically, the *Adventure II*. This made it unlikely that there was too much distance between them.

"Hey. I can see...it?"

Riella had the best eyes among the three, and whatever she saw filled her voice with confusion.

Mu was right beyond the horizon. It was a massive mega-float—she couldn't mistake it for anything else.

However, its *color* had changed.

About half of it was now milky-white and *pearlescent*.

"Wh-What...?" Satomi was Mu's Master, but it seemed not even he recognized this phenomenon. He was at a loss for words.

Shu, however, was familiar with the color—this "pearlification" effect.

"Hey, military nerd. You said you got other ships, right? Take out as many of them as you can. Before it's too late."

"...No good! I can remotely control the ships, but Mu isn't responding at all! I can't open the bulkheads!"

"I'll do it, then. Baldr!"

By Shu's order, Baldr's main gun activated, fixed its sights on the bulkheads it could see—those labeled "7" to "12"—and fired.

They didn't break in one hit, but careful follow-up shots by Baldr shattered them and opened up a path for the ships inside.

The one to leave first was the one in dock 12—*Adventure II*.

"Old-timer! And my crew!" The fact that her fleet was okay despite the bizarre situation filled Riella with relief.

Satomi used his remote controls to bring the ships in the other five docks closer to Baldr.

"So what's happening here?" he asked. "What do you know about this, you stupid bear?"

"That question tells me that you haven't met any Mocks that use pearlification."

"Pearlification?" Satomi tilted his head in confusion, but no one could blame him for that. He'd fought and defeated a number of Mocks while here in the South Sea, but not a single one of them used any skill that could be described as "pearlification." Were they simply unable to use it? Or had he defeated them before they could? "I'm not sure what you mean, but 'Mocks' tells me that it's about those chimeras."

"Yeah. They eat monster bodies without making them disappear."

"Huh? Wait, but then... Why my Mu...?"

"Reporting." Satomi's question was cut short by Baldr.

"There is an attempt to communicate with the stored boat. Establish connection?"

"It's from *Adventure II*! Connect us," said Riella. Shu added a nod, and Baldr did as told.

"Commander! Are you all right?!" called Asam from the other end.

"I am! What's goin' on there, anyway?!"

"I-It's here...!" Asam spoke and emphasized his words with a voice full of desperation.

And then, he said the most important words of all.

"Abyss Shellder is here!"

Right after that, there was a change in the pearlified Mu.

A massive leg showed itself from the side opposite the one with bulkheads opened by Baldr.

Multiple legs of enormous size pierced into Mu's deck before pulling up the body attached to them.

Showered in daylight, at first it looked like a gargantuan mountain of silver, but closer examination revealed that it was a shell.

Something clad in a *gigantic shell* was climbing up on Mu.

"What *is* that?" Shu hadn't noticed this massive entity at all. Its size was comparable to Mu's, yet he hadn't realized it was there until he saw its legs.

It wasn't even showing on Baldr's radar—an abnormality even greater than its size.

"So...that's..." Shu said.

Soon enough, the massive, shell-clad entity had dragged its entire body atop Mu. It was hard to make sense of what it was, for all that could be seen was the gigantic shell and the legs extending from it.

Its full body was now visible, yet its true form remained difficult to discern.

But above it, like any monster in this realm, was emblazoned its name...

"Khe...khakhakha."

...and it was "Corpse Stronghold, Abyss Shellder."

This gargantuan monstrosity was the Irregularity causing chaos in the South Sea, and the creature that had killed Riella's father.

"How?!" Satomi was at a loss for words.

The scene before him was beyond anything he could ever imagine.

What shocked him wasn't the fact that Mu had been incapacitated, but that *Mu hadn't noticed its approach before it could happen*.

"Mu's sonar and monster radar were still on. If something like *that* was closing in, it should've caught it...!"

The sonar that let him listen to the *Adventure II*'s battles from

beyond the horizon and the monster radar that could even measure Whalunder's power as a UBM were completely ineffective against this gargantuan, shelled monstrosity.

"Does it have full stealth against multiple types of detection? Am I supposed to believe this mere wild beast is...!" But even as Satomi was overcome with confusion, Abyss Shellder continued to act.

It stabbed its legs into the pearlified Mu, tore off a piece...

...and tried to bring it to its mouth.

"No!"

An act of instinct. Something inside Satomi was telling him that he simply couldn't allow that.

Mu was within his sight and wasn't holding any living creatures inside. This allowed him to summon it back.

The Embryo's massive form became motes of light that were absorbed by the crest on Satomi's left hand.

With its footing and meal lost, Abyss Shellder fell into the water below, generating an enormous crash and equally enormous wave.

However, it surfaced just a moment later...

"KHEEAAAAA!"

...and looked hatefully upon the thing it thought had taken its prey—Baldr.

Creating waves with every movement of its legs, Abyss Shellder followed Mu's particles and charged at Shu's ship.

"Old-timer," Riella said, her voice cold as ice. "Prepare the JotA."

Some would think that this indicated a mind that remained calm despite her predicament, but that couldn't be further from the truth. The excessive rage invoked by the sight of her mark had left the body's natural reactions far behind.

Still, her order was the correct one.

The Javelin of the Atmos was the ace up their sleeve they'd prepared specifically to fell the Abyss Shellder. There was no better time to use it than now.

The two *Superiors* also flew into action.

"Baldr! Intercept! Armor-piercing and incendiary shells! Mixed barrage!"

"Affirmative." Shu and Baldr began repeatedly firing the main

gun.

"All ships! Combat formation!" Satomi, meanwhile, remotely controlled his five ships.

Their movements were more basic than *New Yamato*'s, but they all automatically fixed their sights on Abyss Shellder and fired.

The many projectiles heading toward the UBM included shells that were quite powerful despite being smaller than *New Yamato*'s, shots from magic cannons crafted by a Magicannon Smith, and missiles that seemed inexhaustible in number.

The intensity of the onslaught was more than enough to prove that Satomi wasn't lying when he said he had plenty of firepower even without *New Yamato*.

With Baldr included, the overwhelming force of six ships descended wholesale upon Abyss Shellder.

No living being could withstand something like this.

However, neither Shu nor Satomi said, "Did we get it?" or anything like that.

Not because they didn't want to jinx it, though.

They just knew that they *hadn't* gotten it.

"Damn monster...!" Despite weathering intense bombardment, Abyss Shellder's silver shell didn't have a single scratch on it. It continued its advance toward Baldr as if it couldn't care less about the onslaught.

Paying no mind to Satomi's ships even as they continued attacking or the *Adventure II* as it prepared the JotA, it maintained a direct charge.

"...I see." The sight filled Shu with understanding—it was more than worthy of the "Stronghold" name.

This was a creature whose shell rivaled the strongest fortress, a creature that remained unshaken even by some of the greatest firepower in the sea.

An entity that surpassed Mythical and was more than a match for SUBMs.

The Irregularity that stood above countless corpses.

The most fiendish marine creature of all—Corpse Stronghold, Abyss Shellder.

The only firepower I got that could work against it are Strength Cannon and Unmatched God of War—Baldr, Shu thought. *But the former's still on cooldown, and...I can't use the latter.*

He'd just used his ult against *New Yamato*, but the environment wasn't right for it now.

It wasn't that he couldn't jump on Abyss Shellder like he had on *New Yamato* without dying. It was simply the fact that if he had to fight without a platform, he would have to take it to the seabed, and it wasn't clear how well Baldr could fight in that environment as a robot.

Considering the opponent was an aquatic Irregularity, it seemed unlikely that Baldr would emerge victorious.

And the fact that it didn't take any damage from that firepower tells me that it's got some gimmick. Shu observed the seemingly invincible Abyss Shellder and pondered how it could be defeated.

And that was when the situation changed drastically.

"Commander! It's ready!" As the two *Superiors* attacked, *Adventure II* finished its preparations.

Its deck had split open, and a massive gun was now aimed straight ahead.

This was the destructive weapon they'd excavated from a Seabed Excavation Fort—the all-ending tactical plasma cannon—Javelin of the Atmos.

One of the three remaining shots—or rather, energy packs—had its magic emptied to completely fill the gun, creating countless magic circles around its body.

"Good." Riella showed no hesitation. She replied to Asam with a strong will that said—no, *screamed*—that this creature couldn't be allowed to exist for even a second longer.

From her side, she took out a device shaped like a gun—JotA's remote firing trigger.

She was determined to claim vengeance herself and prepared this for that purpose.

All of it had been for this moment.

"Commander! It's locked on! There are no ships in the trajectory!" The moment it was confirmed that neither Baldr nor any of Satomi's

ships were in the way...

"Firing."

...Riella pulled the trigger.

Suddenly, there was a burst of light that made it seem as though the sun had fallen from the sky, followed by a single projectile blasted out of JotA.

Evaporating the water below it, this light pushed toward its target—the defenseless Abyss Shellder—and landed a direct hit.

A moment later, an intense heat and explosive wind flooded the surrounding area. The heat released at the moment of impact instantly evaporated the surrounding water, creating an enormous steam explosion.

The plasma continued releasing heat for a long moment after, not even allowing the water to flow back.

Baldr, Satomi's ships, and the *Adventure II* responsible for this had to distance themselves to not be pulled off the edge—a precarious cliff of water that looked like nothing so much as the edge of the world envisioned by those who believed the Earth was flat.

"The pre-ancients and their toys..." Shu couldn't help but mutter under his breath.

How many such dangers had that civilization left behind in this *Infinite Dendrogram*?

Though, however numerous and dangerous they were, one could say that they had a purpose if they were able to put an end to a calamity like this.

Key word: *if*.

The effect wore off, the plasma vanished, and the sea rushed back, even though the lingering heat kept it boiling.

But despite this hellish environment...

"Khee... Khaaa."

...the calamity remained alive.

It was completely unharmed, and its silver shell showed no signs of melting.

In fact, the heat hadn't even affected its color.

There were no signs of pain or damage on Abyss Shellder.

No one said a thing, but the heaviest silence was Riella's.

The sound of the remote trigger falling from her hand and onto the floor echoed throughout Baldr's bridge.

Riella and the adventure fleet had brought the JotA as the card that would surely let them enact their revenge...

...and this moment had showed it was meaningless and proven they stood no chance.

However, there was another change in the situation at that moment.

Abyss Shellder, which had been charging toward Baldr, had stopped in place. It floated on the water like an island, completely immobile.

The sight made some in the adventure fleet hope that maybe JotA did actually do some damage.

However...

"Khee khee khee."

...the silver shell *changed shape*.

As if pushing something from within, it became like liquid metal and reshaped its surface.

Eventually, it created countless jaws—many *heads of seadragons*.

Shock overcame Shu as he instantly realized that these were what had become of seadragons just like the one consumed by last night's Mock.

"KHEKHAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

A moment later, the seadragon maws released their breath weapons. Some were ice, some lightning, some sonic blasts, some poison.

This created a wide-scale storm of destruction that quickly sank two of Satomi's five ships.

These were Abyss Shellder's weapons. True to its title as Corpse Stronghold, it was armed with the bodies of the dead.

"It learns powers through consumption... Just like last night's Mock and a certain slime I know."

Where's its limit, though? Shu wondered.

He himself had fought someone with such powers. However, he believed it impossible for a single being to be able to gain every

power possible without any end in sight—there had to be a limit somewhere.

Otherwise...

"Hey, bear," Satomi called out, ending Shu's train of thought. "I brought one of my ships close. I'm getting on it."

"That so?"

"You and the *Adventure II* get out of this area."

"...What?" These unexpected words made Shu turn to look at him.

"Using JotA clearly reduced the *Adventure II*'s performance, and your Embryo must've suffered damage in the fight against *New Yamato*." Shu listened as he continued. "Actually, it'd be pretty embarrassing for me if it didn't." Satomi chuckled in what seemed like self-derision. "That's why you should leave this to me. The three ships I still have are in perfect condition. I can fight at one hundred percent."

He then glared at the Abyss Shellder, still spewing its breath in the distance.

"If that's not enough to beat it, it'll just mean that we haven't fulfilled the conditions for that." Silence. "You know what I mean, right? There's gotta be a reason it's invincible. Until we find out what it is, Granvaloa... No, *mankind* won't have a chance against it."

"...Yeah." Shu knew that better than most. The SUBM he'd fought—Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria—was said to be the strongest monster in history and was completely impervious to damage unless certain conditions were met.

The same could be said of Biframe White Whale, Twin Moby Dick. If the environment allowed it, the SUBM that had attacked Granvaloa could regenerate without end.

If the Abyss Shellder was a creature on the same level as these, then its invincibility must've come with some limitations.

If it didn't, then it would be the end of the South Sea, if not Granvaloa as a whole.

In fact, it might be the end of much, much more than that.

"I'll hold it back and gather data," Satomi continued. "If I get the death penalty, I'll upload the info I get to my clan's homepage. Keep

an eye on it.”

“Military nerd...”

“Don’t worry. I’m not the type to talk big like that and then just lose without getting any results. I promise I’ll at least get a lead that’ll help beat it,” Satomi said with a chuckle before leaving Baldr’s bridge and jumping over to the ship he’d brought close.

“Old-timer. Ya hear all that?”

“...Yes.”



“We’re retreating. Full speed ahead toward a safer area. Our speeds are different, so let’s split up and regroup later.”

“Very well... We’ll leave the commander to you.”

The comms were cut, and Baldr and the *Adventure II* both changed course.

Behind them, they heard the echoes of the battle between Satomi’s ships and Abyss Shellder—a clash where only one side was taking damage.

By the time the retreating vessels lost sight of the fight, everything had gone silent.

Conjunction: The Meaning of the Name

War God Ship, Baldr, Interior

Baldr was a Superior Embryo that contained a living area—likely a boon from being partially Type Fortress, derived from Type Castle.

The amenities it provided were minimal, though. There were only a few rooms equipped with some basic collapsible beds. This was another manifestation of how well-rounded Baldr truly was, but that came at the cost of specialization.

Regardless, these rooms rarely saw any use, with Shu mostly only treating them as storage.

However, today, one of these rooms was actually freed up for a guest, and the one sleeping in it was none other than Riella.

Following their defeat and retreat, she'd lost consciousness and collapsed like a puppet with its strings savagely snapped.

There was nothing better to do for her right now than let her rest.

Upon putting her to bed, Shu had gone to the room right next to hers. Baldr was currently on autopilot, heading toward the rendezvous point set by Shu and Asam.

"Phew." Shu didn't have to worry about anyone seeing him here, so he was out of his bear costume.

He glanced over the multiple monitors presented to him by Baldr and realized something.

"...There's nothing living here." He already knew that the sea here was shallow and difficult for large monsters to live in.

However, he now couldn't see any small monsters either.

The loud sounds and splashing caused by Baldr's hovering would usually attract something, but there were no signs of that happening.

Shu made a guess...

"Were they eaten?"

...that Abyss Shellder had consumed them all.

"A UBM that eats pearlified creatures and grows stronger... It tried to eat the nerd's Mu too. What would've happened if it did?"

He had to consider the possibility, but it wasn't a pleasant prospect. There were only two outcomes: Either nothing would happen, or something unbelievably terrible would.

Neither of them were positive.

"And then...there's the question of its limits." That was something Shu had thought about even in the middle of the battle.

Abyss Shellder was empowered by its predation, but where was the limit of this empowerment?

Shu knew for certain that this limit *did* exist, because if it didn't...

"It would've been even worse than it was."

If simply consuming creatures let it grow stronger without end, its size and arsenal would've been far greater than it currently was.

Abyss Shellder had already ravaged most of the South Sea. In this area in particular, its feeding was so thorough that Shu couldn't spot even a single monster. It was hard to comprehend the number of creatures it had consumed.

However, its size was only a few times greater than Baldr's ultimate form, and the spewing heads could actually be counted.

That could only mean that there was some limit to its ability to absorb the powers of its prey, no matter how much it ate.

The question now was *where* this limit could be found on an Irregularity that broke even its level cap.

"That aside..." Shu let out a sigh. "It's the pearlification that fixes the Resources to corpses, and the predatory absorption that empowers it when it eats them. The combo is the real problem here."

Theoretically, there was no limit to how powerful it could grow.

And just last night, Shu had actually seen a creature with the exact same combination of powers.

"It would make sense if they're chimeras from the same facility. It would, but...something's off."

Granvaloa's theory was that the chimeras were made in the same research facility, with Abyss Shellder being the success and the others being failures.

But that left one thing that did not make sense.

It was something Shu had wondered about back when he'd seen the photos of the Irregularity and the Mocks, and something he'd noticed when he finally saw Abyss Shellder with his own eyes.

That being...

"There's no overlap in their parts."

If these were created by the same chimera research project, it made no sense for the success and the failures to not share any body parts whatsoever.

Looking at the photos of the failures, there was a certain degree of similarity between their body parts. Kraken like the one from yesterday, fish, starfish, jellyfish, sea anemones, sea beasts, seabirds... There were many parts from similar monsters.

However, in both the photos and in the flesh, Abyss Shellder didn't have a single body part in common with these "failures."

A massive spiral shell, crustacean legs extending from it, the seadragon heads the shell had transformed into...

The body parts used were so different that it didn't really seem like the successful version of whatever experiment had produced the Mocks.

He had two guesses for how to explain this.

First, if the Mocks were indeed created in some ruins, they could be completely unrelated to Abyss Shellder and simply happened to have "Abyss" in their name by complete coincidence. However, considering that last night's Mock had had the same pearlification and consumption power as Abyss Shellder, this seemed unlikely.

The second guess made him recall Asam's words...

"Based on our examination of the combat data and their visual appearance, we have surmised that the monsters used as materials for the chimeras were not all that powerful—Demi-Dragons and below."

"...Excess parts."

Shu had already considered this. If Abyss Shellder could subsume

the powers and bodies of its prey—like the seadragons from its shell—its current body was far too small. The sea was full of massive creatures, and if it consumed their bodies and added them to its own, as it seemed to be capable of doing, it would be far larger than it was now, even gargantuan as it was.

That was why Shu had thought that there must be a limit.

But what would one do with such a restriction? They would surely fill the entire available space with only the best parts they had, while discarding all parts that were unnecessary.

Following on that assumption...

"Slimes and some other monsters have skills that let them split themselves into duplicates," Shu thought, recalling a far-too-familiar face.

"The Mocks..." He didn't want to be right—this guess had some awfully dangerous implications.

However, this explanation also made the most sense.

It went...

"*All* of the Mocks...are *split from* Abyss Shellder."

As Shu said that, he remembered the actions of the Mock he'd fought—the kraken chimera that had consumed the Frost High Serpent.

He recalled how it had eaten the monster even as it was being attacked.

"Whenever its feed gave it excess parts—the parts of weaker monsters, that is—it cut them off from itself and had them operate separately. If the Mock consumed a strong monster, it would retrieve and use its parts for itself. Even if the Mock accomplished nothing, simply discarding the less useful elements was beneficial in its own way."

Chimeras had a flaw in that awkward and forced connections would make them more frail, and such careful curation of parts would minimize it.

It was an awfully well-functioning system. Perhaps the only thing holding it back was what he had learned from Satomi and Granvaloa—the fact that not all of its splits had the power to pearlify and consume.

"...Oh! So *that's* what it means!" Having figured out this much, Shu remembered what Humpty had told him about the name.

He now knew what "Abyss Shellder" meant.

"Shell" obviously referred to its appearance, and its toughness suggested that it was based on the word "Shelter" too.

However, the more important part here was "der."

That was the abbreviation for "derivation," "derivative," "derive," and "derived."

The real meaning of the name lay in those three letters.

"'That which is derived from the abyssal shell'... It includes the Mocks too! There's *three* meanings to it! There are so many names with meanings you can't even begin to guess, but then you have others that are just loaded like this!" He spat a mix of complaint and grudge toward the Control AI in charge of UBMs.

At the same time, his face showed a hint of panic—a rarity for him.

"Though, this is...real bad. Abyss Shellder can grow stronger the more it eats and can create countless splits to give it new parts. That means..."

Shu went on to imagine the worst-case scenario.

"In the end...the ecosystem of this entire world could be replaced by Abyss Shellder."

An invincible main body, and splits that empowered it by consuming other creatures.

A structure where the entire ecosystem was exploited by and dedicated to its apex.

Where the SUBMs had been a threat to countries, Abyss Shellder was a threat to the world as a whole.

To be continued

Afterword

Bear: "Time fur the afterword! Brought to you by Shu Starling the 'Bear'..."

Navy: "And Satomi Yamamoto the 'Navy'!"

Bear: "Hm? You're my pawrtner this time? Where's Cheshire or Xunyu?"

Navy: "They're not in this SP, are they? I don't like being grouped with you either, but I was told that I was the only good candidate for this."

Bear: "Ohhh... I see."

Navy: "See what?"

Bear: "*Dendro* afterwords usually have the presenters' faces on the right."

Navy: "That seems to be the case. Wait, you mean...?"

Bear: "There aren't many SP characters with illustrations, so you were picked by paw-rocess of elimination."

Navy: "Is that why? I'm just warming this seat, then! Wait! What about the adventure fleet commander?!"

Bear: "Riella's asleep right now. Can't wake her just fur this."

Navy: "Well, what about me?! I ended the volume with a death penalty!"

Bear: "Don't furry about it. Anyway, let's move on to the main subject—the circumstances behind the creation of this book. First of all, 'Southern Cross' was originally an extra you received fur buying the first volume of the anime Blu-ray. The aufur followed the LN anime adaptation tradition and decided to write this bonus story, but when he was told that it didn't matter how big it was, he went and wrote 544 pages of it, making it pawsitively the biggest *Dendro* story ever written."

Navy: "Is the author a fool?"

Bear: "I don't think you're in any pawsition to tell someone they

made *anything* too big. Anyway, the author clearly went the extra mile fur this story, but there was a little problem—the price. Blu-ray volume 1 cost 13,000 yen without taxes, making it somewhat of a luxury paw-roduct. That made it a bit hard fur readers of the main story to get it, especially youngsters."

Navy: "I can imagine."

Bear: "That's why the author wondered if there was a way to get this story to more people."

Navy: "Well, it obviously came out, so I guess it worked out."

Bear: "We'll let the aufur say more about that."

Dearest readers, thank you for your purchase. I am the author, Kaido Sakon.

Now, as mentioned above, "Southern Cross" was originally an extra story attached to the first Blu-ray.

When turning it into a separate release, the biggest thing in my mind were the people who bought the Blu-ray just for "Southern Cross."

The Blu-ray was by no means cheap, and I was concerned about how those who spent the money for this story would feel about it.

That's why I used the author's blog in Shosetsuka ni Naro to ask for the readers' opinions about the possibility of a separate release, and was deeply encouraged when I saw even those who bought the Blu-ray say things like "I would be happy if it gets illustrations," "I would like it to be expanded," or simply "I'd be really excited about it."

That took the burden off my mind, and I gathered the resolve to find the chance to talk to the editor about it. With 2025 marking the ten-year anniversary since the start of the WN, I felt like it was a good time for something like this.

However, there were circumstances that delayed the release of volume 22 (released on the same day as this one) from spring to autumn, creating a wide gap between releases.

Feeling like this was another good reason to publish it, I consulted the editor about releasing "Southern Cross" separately, and after a talk with the anime side, we were allowed to do it as long as we expanded and edited it appropriately.

And so, we ended up splitting “Southern Cross” into two parts, further separating it into acts, as well as expanding it, editing it, getting it a wonderful illustrator—Eri Kurota—and finally releasing it into the world like this.

This couldn’t have been done without the hard work of those involved and the invaluable support of all you dear readers.

Thank you for your continued support for *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Bear: “Anyway, with that done, it’s time fur us to end this afterword.”

Navy: “I don’t feel like I did much here. I only commented on some nonsense.”

Bear: “It’s how these usually go. You just gotta bear it. Wanna make the announcement, at least?”

Navy: “I might as well... SOUTHERN CROSS PART 2 IS COMING OUT THIS WINTER!”

Bear: “Look furward to it!”

Bonus Short Story: *New Yamato*

December, 2044

It was two months before the South Sea Incident, or half a year in *Dendro* time.

The leader of GFRS, Satomi Yamamoto, was in his office, drawing up a blueprint. Once he was done with it, he placed it on a pile of nearly identical blueprints. He soon followed it up with another, then another.

He was demonstrating immense focus and speed, and there was a smile fixed on his face. However, anyone who took a close look would quickly realize that it wasn't an expression of peace, but of madness.

"This room is as awful as ever."

Suddenly, the door to the office opened up, and a lone woman walked in.

The visitor was none other than Melisande Grandleft—advisor to GFRS.

She hadn't knocked on the door or called out to Satomi, but that was because she was given a spare key so she could walk in and take the documents he often forgot to hand in. As a result, such intrusions were not at all unusual for the two of them.

Melisande looked at one of the walls, covered in Satomi's model ship collection—clearly bigger than it had been last time—and let out a sigh before walking behind him.

"Hm? Melisande? What is it?"

Apparently, he was so transfixed by his work that he hadn't even noticed her entering.

"You... We agreed that you would eat at my place today!"

"...I completely forgot."

"I thought as much. I got you some sandwiches that you can eat while you work, so have them as a midnight snack or something."

"Thank you."

Their exchange was very relaxed, and there wasn't even a hint of Satomi's usual grandiose RP in his tone.

"And? Is this the new masterpiece so important you forgot about your promise?"

Taken aback by his absurd focus, as usual, she looked at the blueprint he was working on right now.

"Yes. I've gotten used to Mu's new *Superior Embryo* form, and thanks to you, my clan is thriving. With the necessary technology and funding both in place, there's nothing stopping me from finally proceeding with my ultimate design."

GFRS was the "Granvaloa Fictional Record Society," and as its leader, Satomi had a very particular vision of an "ideal weapon."

It had once been a pipe dream, but with his current technology, funding, and the trust he had developed through his achievements, he had finally reached the point where he could make it real.

"Hmm..."

Melisande took the blueprints in hand and went through them. There seemed to be very little secrecy between them, but Satomi had always shown his schematics to her. As advisor—and overseer—to GFRS, it was part of her job to examine their works and decide if they deserved funding from the merchant fleet. And even if it weren't for that, Satomi had great trust in Melisande's "eye" as the Appraisal Princess.

She silently read and analyzed what kind of ship he wanted to build, and shortly after she was done...she smacked him on the head.

"What are you doing?!"

"My hand just moved before my mouth did. Anyway, first... This size, these projected costs... Are you insane?"

"Not one bit."

"I'm now completely certain that something's not right with your head. Are you delirious from overwork?"

"I've never been better, actually! That's exactly why *New Yamato* is the way it is!"

Melisande looked at the blueprints for this *New Yamato* again and

let out a deep sigh.

It was a battleship five hundred metels in length, greatly surpassing even the military fleet's recent three-hundred-metel behemoth—and it would be more than double the cost of that ship. It was on an entirely different level.

"Hmm, I would assume you'd get a pre-ancient power core to control something of this size, but I don't see one anywhere on here."

"As if I'd ever use some occult nonsense thingamabob nobody can make sense of—not to mention that I have no intention of letting my ultimate masterpiece run on borrowed power."

The pre-ancient power cores had been developed by the famed Flagman. They were incredible devices that endlessly provided immense amounts of power without any input, and they continued to function perfectly even in the current day. However, the mechanism by which they provided power was a true black box.

Satomi hated this lack of clarity, and thus he refused to use them in his creations.

"Also... There's one other thing I noticed," said Melisande.

The blueprint wasn't finished yet, but she already noticed a critical flaw—one perhaps worse than both the outrageous size and the exorbitant cost. It was...

"Is it just me, or are there no crew quarters?"

"There aren't."

It was the fact that the only place for any crew was the bridge.

"How many people do you plan to have on this ship? From what I can tell, magic isn't the main source of power. A fair proportion will come from internal combustion engines and batteries, but that will still be a bit much for a small crew to handle."

"It'll barely use any magic, and it's designed so that I can control it all by myself."

"Oh...so I wasn't just reading this wrong."

"As if you would ever do that. You of all people should trust your eyes."

"I suppose your design is just so ridiculous it's hard for me to wrap my head around."

Granvaloan ships were usually crewed by many people at once, because the more people there were to split the magical cost of powering them, the more efficient it was.

And yet, Satomi was saying that he would control this massive, engineless ship all by himself.

This made absolutely no sense to Melisande. It went against all the principles of nautical design that Granvaloans took for granted.

"The battleship *Yamato* that I modeled *New Yamato* after had a crew of 2,500 once built, and 3,332 by the end. As far as battleships of the time went, it also boasted fantastic living quarters and dining. Some even jokingly called it the 'Yamato Hotel.'"

A ship that required a lot of people to operate it also had to provide for them, and the crew numbers Satomi had just cited were for a ship half the size of his—meaning that *New Yamato* would normally demand a massive crew of at least five thousand.

"However, that was only the dawn of the computer age—the very earliest days of digital processors. A *Yamato* built in the modern times would need far fewer people, and on this side it can be taken even further with magic items and the like. The main gun and interception systems can be fully automated. And if we can reduce the crew numbers, we can reduce the amenities too, with food and supplies being neatly contained within Inventories. This kind of approach lets you drastically cut down the infrastructure needed to live on the ship."

Well, not that I know how many crew quarters Yamato *had. The schematics were never found*, Satomi thought, as his words were causing many questions to pop up in Melisande's head.

"Through all that, I eventually arrived upon a certain conclusion," Satomi continued.

"That being?" Melisande asked.

"I don't need living spaces if I only use the ship during combat."

"You know you're talking to a Granvaloan, right? Someone who lives on a ship all the time?"

For someone who sailed from the cradle to the grave, his words made very little sense.

"Well, hear me out," Satomi said. "My Mu is a mega-float with the

power to build and store ships, and I can store it in my crest—along with the ships inside it."

"Mu really is the pinnacle of shipbuilding docks and garages, isn't it?"

Even the most spacious Inventories and floating garages and the like had volume and mass limits. However, Mu's limits were far higher, and on top of that, it could be stored in Satomi's crest, along with anything it held within.

The same was roughly true of Dryfe's Pandemonium and other Embryos of Type Castle, but it was a truly amazing feature. Being half matter, half data, Embryos could bypass real-space mass and volume limits by temporarily turning themselves and anything connected to them into pure data. It was almost like a cheat code only they had access to.

"And because I have Mu, my combat ship doesn't need any capacity for long voyages. I'd usually use a ship specialized in speed, extended voyaging, and perhaps stealth—and when it's time for combat, I'd deploy Mu, then take out my combat vessels. This lets me go all in on combat ability."

This was what made *New Yamato* such a fearsome ship. As only its bridge would have any people and so many of its functions would be automated, nearly the entirety of its monstrous hull could be dedicated to battle and battle alone.

"Obviously I wouldn't design our merchandise this way, but if I'm the one using it, this might be the best possible ship. Don't you think so?"

Satomi rejected anything truly occult or inexplicable, but he made full use of everything he had, even if it was a power that transcended mundane physics. This decisiveness was surely one of his strengths.

"You do have a point. But..."

"But what? Do you still see a problem?"

"Yes. Doesn't that mean that this is less of a battleship and more like one of Mu's assault boats?"

Assault boats—in real life, the term referred to ships manned by about twenty people and used mostly for support fire and

transportation, but the Granvaloan meaning of the word was slightly different.

Here, they were ships manned by people with jobs that enabled them to control ships, and they were meant to dart around the battlefield while attacking enemies with both weapons and their own skills. In a way, they were like the seafaring version of cavalry.

And while *New Yamato* would be among the largest and strongest ships in Granvaloa, the way Satomi intended to use it was somewhat like an assault boat.

"Well, you aren't *wrong*."

He himself had felt that *New Yamato* hadn't inherited much from the original besides its appearance and the "big ship, massive gun" approach, so he couldn't help but agree with her.

If a Master who was into mecha anime looked at how *New Yamato* functioned, they would probably say that it was *shaped* like a ship, but it was really more like a large Mobile Armor—something like Gadelaza.

Hearing something like that, though, would certainly make Satomi snap.

Melisande also thought that this vessel couldn't quite be categorized as a "ship," but she knew that he would lose it if she said that out loud, so she chose to stay quiet.

However, there was still something she had to ask.

"How strong do you think this would be?"

"At this point in time, a weapon that could defeat *New Yamato* in a direct confrontation on the sea simply does not exist—especially in artillery battles. And as someone who strives to realize fictional war record weaponry, I made sure that its antiair defense is perfect!"

"So it's not as good against opponents who *aren't* direct."

"Ngh...!"

Behind all of his bluster, Satomi was acutely aware of this weakness, and hearing it pointed out made him flinch.

"That means that even among the local *Superiors* there's three... No, four it might struggle with."

"Hey! Hold on! I don't know about Soy Sauce and Rusalka, but there's no way I'd lose against Miroslava's Vodyanoy! I'd never let

myself be defeated by some super robot that claims to dominate the land, sea, and sky!"

"That sounds a bit like praise."

Satomi was strongly against mecha anime and anything reminiscent of it, but Vodyanoy's Master was a charming girl with a strong "younger coworker" aura, so he had a hard time saying anything *too* harsh about her.

"I wouldn't lose against Noah either! I'll pulverize that face the moment it pops out of subspace!"

As Satomi spewed hostility toward a certain *Superior*, Melisande thought, *That might be difficult, given he even escaped Ante's attempt to exterminate him.*

"A-Anyway, my *New Yamato* is a superweapon that surpasses even *Superior Embryos*! In fact, if there are any battleships like that, I could easily prove it!"

"Noah doesn't count?"

"It has no weapons. It's not a battleship."

I suppose that's true, Melisande thought.

Strangely enough, in about half a year in *Dendro* time, Satomi would get a chance to prove his assertion.

Following some more questioning and answering, though, Melisande nodded.

"I see. It *would* be a great help against large monsters and defending the country more generally, so I think I can justify contributing to the construction funds. You go ahead and finish that blueprint. Oh, and about the cost estimates... You should be able to cut them by about thirty percent if you build the internals using that Underground Sanctuary ore that recently hit the market. It's a material Legendaria used to have a solid monopoly on, so there. Should I get it for you?"

"Yes... That would help."

The long explanation had tired him out, but he still made sure to thank Melisande for her work.

"I'll be going, then."

"I see... Sorry for not keeping my promise."

"Don't worry. I'll have you make up for it somehow. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

Following that exchange, one that had occurred many times before, the two core members of GFRS split up for the night.

After seeing her off, Satomi resumed his work as he ate the sandwiches brought by Melisande.

Seabed Excavation Fort

Adventure II, Meeting Room

The meeting regarding the Abyss Shellder hunt was proceeding well, and they were gradually running out of things to discuss when Shu asked for more information about the place Abyss Shellder was suspected to have originated from.

"Can I ask you fur some more details about the Seabed Excavation Forts? I know they're some kind of ruins, but I'd be beary interested to know more. Why they're called that, for one."

"Ohhh, I suppose that would be unfamiliar to foreigners." Asam nodded in understanding before glancing at his fleet commander—Riella. It was a request for a go-ahead.

"Go on and tell him. Maybe he'll have an idea we didn't think of."

"Very well. I'll explain it, then. First of all, there have been seven Seabed Excavation Forts discovered so far, and they were all given a number based on the order of discovery. First, Second, and so on."

Seven ruins—that seemed like a lot for one country, but knowing how vast the sea was, it was actually surprisingly small. Considering how advanced and spread out the pre-ancients had been, it was probably best to assume that there were even more of these out there.

"The Seabed Excavation Forts, true to their name, excavate the seabed and plant their 'roots' in underwater volcanoes. They use a technology that converts the heat to offset the energy consumption of the facility."

"Oh, I see. So it's like geofurmal energy."

This was a technology that provided endless energy as long as the planet was in good health. However, seabed excavation and underwater construction were great feats of engineering that required far more than just access to magic and skills, which once again spoke to how advanced the pre-ancients had truly been.

"Additionally, all Seabed Excavation Forts starting with the Fourth were found by Masters in just the past couple years."

Many Masters had come to this world since *Infinite Dendrogram*'s release, and since Granvaloa was focused on sea voyages, Masters who chose this country were very likely to be adventurers and explorers—personalities likely to create Embryos that assisted in treasure hunting and the like. With the help of such powers, it was no surprise they had been able to make so many discoveries.

"There are even clans that focus entirely on searching the seafloor for such locations," Asam added.

"Well, ruins with the right stuff inside can be beary profitable. I get it."

Pre-ancient sites could have power cores and other items of immense potential and value inside them. Finding a ruin in a good state could instantly make you unimaginably wealthy.

"Though, we have a bit of a problem there..." Asam continued, hanging his head slightly. "There is a Master... He's a *Superior* who became wanted for illegal ruin excavation and unauthorized entry to forbidden areas of the sea."

A wanted *Superior* Shu knew was King of Crime, Sechs, as well as Legendaria's Overlords, but it seemed that Granvaloa had more famous criminals than just King of Thieves, Zeta.

"What's he like? Do you think he's involved with what's happening here? What's his job and Embryo?" Shu fired off multiple questions—this person had caught his attention.

"He only causes trouble in the border seas and doesn't get involved with our country proper. Apparently he doesn't like direct conflict, preferring to just seek out profit on his own, so it's unlikely. As for his job..."

Before Asam could continue...

"*King of Adventure*, John Voyager and One God Ship, Noah."

...Riella spoke in his place.

She was the adventure fleet commander and the daughter of the previous—and late—King of Adventure. It was hard to measure what kind of weight those words held for her.

She said nothing further, but her expression was one of displeasure. Her demeanor made it easy to guess that this person had taken the Superior Job the moment her father had died.

It wasn't uncommon in this world for a late tian's SJ to be claimed immediately by a Master, and it rarely mattered what the deceased or the family might have thought about it.

King of Adventure, John Voyager and One God Ship, Noah...

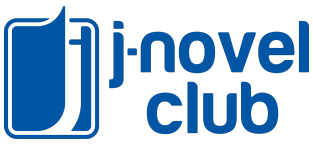
Shu repeated those names in his mind.

Wanted *Superiors* were powerful pieces bound to shake the board, but if this one was anything like Asam had described, then he was probably unrelated to the current incident. Shu's own instincts told him that too, but it came with a sidenote...

I feel like I'm gonna have some business with him eventually.

The owner of the similarly named "War God Ship" foresaw a future encounter.

The End



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Infinite Dendrogram SP: Volume 1
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Original Japanese edition published in 2024 by Hobby Japan This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo English translation © 2025 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: September 2025