
Sakon Kaidou
Illustrator: Taiki
Infinite Dendrogram
14. The Physical Apex


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"FORM SHIFT...
BLACK MIRROR!"
Thus, Nemesis transformed into a round mirror with a frame shaped like a pair of wings.


Maiden of Vengeance, Nemesis
High-Rank Embryo Form

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Interlude: First Contact

August, 2043, Vandelheim

Not long had passed since the release of *Infinite Dendrogram* on Earth.

The capitals of the seven major *Dendrogram* countries were swarming with players who'd been lucky enough to acquire the necessary hardware before it sold out, and most of them were beaming with excitement and wonder.

The imperium's capital was no different in that regard, and although the people here found these new entities — marked with gems or crests on their left hands — rather strange, they had no trouble accepting them. After all, these "Masters" had long been attested to within their recorded history, and had even played a major part in it.

Still, they were enough of a curiosity to attract a lot of attention.

There were some exceptions, though. Particularly, one little creature that had the build of a hedgehog, but the features of a porcupine.

It was wearing a cloak far too big for it, which dragged behind it.

There was no name above its head, so people knew it wasn't a monster. Most just assumed it was a tame creature and paid it no mind.

The few stares it did draw caused the creature to make a quiet, annoyed sound as it walked, keeping its distance from the road.

None of the passersby noticed, but the tiny body hidden by the cloak — specifically, the shoulder — had a gem on it... *an Embryo in its zeroth form*.

Indeed, it... or rather, *she* was not a monster, but a Master. She'd merely chosen the appearance of an animal and picked Vandelheim as her starting point.

"Hmm..." As she walked, she suddenly heard a lady's voice. At first, she thought that this was irrelevant to her, but then...

"Why are you pretending to be an animal?"

“Ah?!”

...The lady addressed her directly, making her gasp. After that, there was no question that the woman was definitely talking to her.

She quickly looked in the direction of the voice and saw a lady with golden hair in curls.

“Aha. So I was right,” the lady said, her tone analytical. She had no gem or crest on her left hand. This person was supposed to be an NPC... but she had trouble seeing her that way.

“...Who are you?” she unwittingly asked the lady, going against her intention to avoid using normal words at all.

Without showing a hint of surprise, the blonde woman answered, “My name is Claudiah. And yours is...?”

After a moment of hesitation, she gave her her avatar’s name: “...Behemot.”

“Can I call you ‘Betty,’ then?”

“...Please don’t.” She didn’t want to hear her real-life nickname here; for it would only remind her that the people who’d called her that were gone.

Behemot had come to *Infinite Dendrogram* in order to take a walk outside without having to actually interact with people. She’d thought that taking up the appearance of a harmless animal would make people ignore her, but Claudiah had seen right through her.

“Would you like some tea? You’ve certainly caught my attention,” the lady offered.

Behemot had found Claudiah very curious, and it didn’t take her long to accept. “...I can’t hold tea cups, though,” she added.

“We have small tea cups meant for the fairy folk of Legendaria.”

This conversation was likely the point where Behemot had stopped seeing *Infinite Dendrogram* as a game.

While they were having tea, Claudiah talked about herself before Behemot could really ask any questions.

She said that she was part of the imperial family, that she was among the strongest combatants in the country, and she was out in town to investigate these Masters that had begun appearing so suddenly.

She also said that she called out to Behemot because she was simply very curious about her.

"...Was it because I was the strangest one?" Behemot asked.

"Appearance-wise, yes," Claudiah replied. "But that is not the reason why I called out to you."

"Hm?"

"May I ask *you* a question now?"

"What is it?"

"Why did you choose this country? According to the other Masters, there were six others you could have appeared in, so why did you choose the imperium?"

Behemot was silent for a long moment. She didn't know whether her honest answer would be something she could say to a member of the imperial family, but ultimately decided that it didn't matter.

"...Because the city looked like it'd be really refreshing to destroy."

"I thought as much. I saw it in your face," Claudiah said without much surprise.

Hearing that, Behemot understood the reason behind this meeting. Claudiah had singled her out because, to her, she looked like the most dangerous of the new Masters.

"...You can tell by *this* face?"

"I can. I myself feel the way you do sometimes."

"You? A princess?" Behemot asked, somewhat surprised. Claudiah smiled at her, but then spoke with no joy in her voice.

"The burden I bear sometimes starts to feel like a nuisance. Even though I want to focus on the one thing that really matters to me, my circumstances

force me to constantly hold myself back. Every now and then, I feel like just breaking everything that ties me down."

With those words, she let out a somewhat gloomy sigh.

"To destroy everything that troubles me... to create an environment where I can focus entirely on one single thing... I wonder if the previous one... the King of Kings felt the same way."

Behemot didn't understand what Claudiah meant by those words. All she knew was that she was being completely honest — which meant that they were alike.

"Though, I really cannot afford to be as irresponsible as he was," Claudiah added.

"You seem to have it pretty tough."

"Indeed I do. Tough enough to want a friend who will help me."

"Hm?" Behemot tilted her head as Claudiah took her little paw.

"Behemot," she said. "Would you be my friend? Grow strong and help me."

Behemot was shocked to hear that. She hadn't come to *Infinite Dendrogram* to interact with people. In real life, people just annoyed her; merely seeing large groups made her want to crush them.

She'd only come to this world because she wanted to remember what walking outside was like.

Going by her original intention, the only real option for her was to refuse Claudiah's offer.

"...There's no guarantee that I'll actually become that strong, though."

However, that wasn't what Behemot did.

For some reason, she didn't find interacting with Claudiah irritating in any way.

Behemot hadn't known her for long, but she felt almost as close to her as she had to her late father. Perhaps Behemot felt some instinctive affinity towards Claudiah the same way the princess had easily seen Behemot's true desire.

“My Embryo isn’t born yet. What if it’s really weak?”

“I am sure you will become stronger than anyone else,” Claudiah said as she gently caressed the Embryo on Behemot’s shoulder. “*I can see it in your face.*”

Those words sounded like they were spoken by someone else.

◇◆

That day, the two girls became friends.

This was the birth of the Master who would eventually be called “The Physical Apex.”

Chapter Ten: Guardian-Jaguarman Theory

Paladin, Ray Starling

The peace talks had failed, and a battle had broken out.

Fortunately, the kingdom had considered the possibility that we'd end up fighting the imperium here.

King of Beasts, Behemot — the one we had to be most wary of.

Hell General, Logan Goddhart — another Dryfean Superior.

The Rabbit, Chrono Crown — the one who'd assaulted Riser and the others.

The Ram, Claudiah R. Dryfe — the Dryfean representative.

We'd considered their fighting prowess, and also come up with a way to deal with any unknown variables — namely, Tsukuyo Fuso's Lunar Divider Field: Faint Light and Fatal Field combo.

No one below level 601 could survive it. Anyone who wasn't a Superior Job didn't even have a chance, so this move instantly wiped out all the Dryfean high-ranks with Embryos we weren't aware of. We actually didn't expect that the Hell General would be affected by this combo too, so that was a really lucky break for our side.

King of Beasts' Leviathan had also been lured away from the battlefield by Shu.

And The Rabbit, whom we were pretty concerned about, showed no sign launching an attack. Tom had said that he had business with him, so perhaps he was keeping him occupied.

Regardless of what was going on elsewhere, right now the only Dryfeans we had to worry about were Claudiah and King of Beasts.

In other words, we were up against the most terrifying tian and Master the imperium had to offer.

The tremors caused by Shu and Leviathan's battle off in the distance shook the hall as both sides stood facing one another. One sudden movement would be enough to escalate things into an all-out battle. The lines had been drawn, and either side could make their move at any moment.

I was the one who challenged King of Beasts, so I could be the one to die first once the fight commenced in earnest.

"I won't allow that," Nemesis said telepathically. "Apex or not, I won't allow her to kill you."

Nemesis' words were reassuring.

The Death Period and Lunar Society members around me were preparing for KoB's next move.

Rook had already used his Union Jack to become the Liz-based Metal-Devil-Man, which ignored all physical attacks.

Marie had transformed Arc-en-Ciel into its ultimate skill form and loaded it.

B3 donned Magnum Colossus and prepared to use Heaven's Weight, or her ultimate skill if necessary.

Tsukikage had vanished into the shadows, and the other Lunar Society members I didn't recognize were also readying themselves for battle. A few of them were casting AoE buffs, so our stats were significantly boosted.

And finally, without so much as a word, Fuso herself had already made a move.

Using my Reveal skill, I could see that she'd switched her Lunar Divider Field: Faint Light from level to AGI.

Faint Light only affected stats, so it couldn't limit bodily functions like the standard Lunar Divide Field had done to me or K&R... but dividing AGI by six still had a huge effect.

Between that and everything else, we were fully prepared for this.

As for myself, I was ready to use my fourth form and Shining Despair.

Our side couldn't possibly be in better shape for this fight.

“Ugh...” And despite all of that... I still found myself breaking out in a cold sweat.

I’d fought many creatures a lot stronger than myself — Gardranda, Gouz-Maise, RSK, Monochrome, Gigaknight, and the pre-ancient civilization’s whale, to name a few. But despite that, I could tell that King of Beasts, even though she looked like nothing more than a cute little critter, was stronger than any of them.

Only a few seconds passed, but they felt like minutes as chills ran through my body and I looked for a chance to make my move.

These long seconds made me wonder about something: why wasn’t KoB doing anything?

The answer to that question probably didn’t have anything to do with her, but instead...

“Altimia! I have an idea!” Claudiah clapped her hands and said, breaking the tense silence of this 2 vs 87 face-off.

I almost launched into an attack at the sound of that clap, but I managed to stop myself.

“...What is it?” Azurite asked.

“If we stay here, we will only get in Behemot’s way. Your Altarian Masters will also find it difficult to fight while protecting you, will they not? In addition, this will be our first fight in quite a while, and I do not want anyone to interfere. With all that in mind, how about the two of us take our battle elsewhere?”

She said all of this with a smile, leaving me almost completely flabbergasted for a moment.

I considered the possibility that this was nothing but a distraction to shift our attention away from KoB, but she herself was looking at Claudiah and barely moving.

Fuso shook her head and spoke against Claudiah’s idea, “...No no no. Hold on. That’s no good. You’ll just lead her somewhere you can call in reinforcements and take her prisoner. It’s such an obvious trap.”

Her assumption was reasonable. We knew the extent of the Dryfean forces present here, but they also had two more Superiors — *that* Franklin and another one I'd never met before, Murdoch Martinez.

If either of them was lying in wait for Altimia, Altar would instantly lose.

"I did not solicit your opinion on the matter, but your concern is not unreasonable. Regardless, you need not worry," Claudiah said as she reached into her inventory and took out a large machine. "The stage of our battle will be visible to all, yet beyond their reach."

The object she'd removed from her inventory was *a jade green artificial horse*.

"That's..." Upon seeing that color, I recalled a certain name that Mario had mentioned back in Quartierlatin.

It was one of Grand Artificer Flagman's five Prism Steeds — the one that had been discovered in Dryfe.

The bicorn of the wind... Jade Storm.

"Let us fight to our hearts' content up in the sky, Altimia," Claudiah said, mounting the Prism Steed and spurring it high into the air.

Marie, B3, and Tsukikage tried to stop her, but King of Beasts blocked their way.

However, she didn't use this chance to attack us. Instead, she only looked at Azurite to see how she would respond.

"So that's her plan...!" I said as I gazed up at Claudiah. I immediately realized that she likely wanted to fight Azurite over 10,000 metels in the sky — the height at which I'd fought Monochrome. That was a height few living creatures could reach.

They *definitely* wouldn't be interrupted there.

Franklin's monsters wouldn't be able to go that high, King of Chariots fought with land-based tanks, and no matter how strong she was, I was pretty sure that King of Beasts wasn't capable of flying around freely. Well, maybe Franklin could conjure up some monster suited for high altitudes, but Azurite would

likely make short work of any creature whose abilities were all focused on that one thing. No one said that their Truth Discernment was going off, so Claudiah had to have been completely honest about just wanting a real one-on-one with Azurite.

She obviously knew about the kingdom's SMPS production, too, since she'd assumed that Azurite was perfectly capable of fighting her all the way up there.

Though, she'd probably also considered the gap in power between Jade Storm — an original — and the mass-produced SMPS units.

"Kh...!" The worst thing about this was that if we didn't go after her, we would lose our only means of stopping the acts of terror currently happening at the capital. Since Claudiah was the only one with the power to call it off, we simply had to capture her.

If we didn't go after her, she would merely watch us from on high and wait for King of Beasts to defeat us. And if by some chance we emerged victorious, Claudiah could just make her escape back to Dryfe. Seeing how fast she flew upwards, it seemed like it would be difficult to catch up to her.

That meant that if we didn't chase her down, we would be unable to stop the terrorism at the capital regardless if we won against KoB or not.

"How cunning," said Nemesis telepathically. "Also, while fighting at that height, a single mistake could mean plummeting to your death. That almost happened to us when we fought Monochrome, after all."

I wondered if that was part of Claudiah's plan too, but I couldn't come to a conclusion about that. I'd managed to see through her manipulation once, but I couldn't keep up with her thought process all the time.

To me, Claudiah seemed more like some inhuman creature that merely *looked* like a human being.

This whole thing might've been a trap, but...

"...It seems I am left with no other choice."

...Azurite had already gathered her resolve.

Even if this was a trap, she had to follow. This was the only path left. To

protect the kingdom and save her sisters back at the capital from deadly danger, she would face her dear friend at a precarious altitude few could survive.

“Azurite...”

There were only two things I could do for her now. First was to stay here and fight KoB. The second was...

“Silver!” My steed responded to my call and leaped out of my inventory.

“Ray?” said Azurite, turning towards me.

“If you’re gonna go there, ride Silver. You can’t really fight an original with an SMPS, right?”

Like Jade Storm, Zephyrus Silver was a proper Prism Steed. Although he wasn’t one of the five famous originals, according to Mario, Flagman himself had worked on this one as well. He was either an unofficial prototype or an experimental model, but if Azurite was going to have a mounted battle against someone riding Jade Storm, Silver was no doubt a better pick than the obviously inferior SMPS.

“...Are you sure?”

“Yeah... I can’t fight KoB while riding Silver, anyway.”

The moment she took to the sky, our battle against KoB would truly begin.

And it would be best if Silver wasn’t involved in it.

Therefore, handing him to Azurite would increase *both* our chances of victory.

“Oh yeah!” Fuso exclaimed as I handed Silver’s reins to Azurite. “Why not have the princess ride an SMPS while you come with her on Silver? You’ll win if it’s two against one, right? Oh! I can join too. That’ll make it three against one! Easy, right? Wait—maybe everyone with an SMPS can go! That’ll make it a real piece of cake!”

Silence ensued. I was fairly confident that Azurite and everyone in Death Period, myself included, thought that Fuso’s craftiness surpassed even Dryfe’s.

“...solo,” said KoB. It was just a single word, but it felt like she was saying,

“Your princess is the only one who’ll be going. Say something that stupid again and I’ll totally lose it. Quit making me wait. Roar.”

So there you had it.

Also, KoB didn’t seem inclined to do anything to Azurite as she was leaving, but I couldn’t tell whether she was just following her employer’s orders or if she also wanted Claudiah to leave the scene of battle.

Was she trying to set up an environment where she could fight us without restraint...? A situation where she wouldn’t have to worry about protecting anyone or be mindful of the one person she couldn’t kill?

“Very well. I’ll go alone,” said Azurite before mounting Silver and looking at me. “I’ll be borrowing him for a bit... Ray.”

“Yeah. Let’s meet again after the battle, all right?”

After that exchange, Azurite pulled on Silver’s reins, turning him towards the sky, where Claudiah was waiting for her.

The moment she left the hall...

“set.”

...King of Beasts moved like a monster finally freed from its chains.

In an instant, her silhouette transformed.

Vital areas, like the heart, were now covered by tile-like armor plating.

The hands and legs were covered by bands that looked like little pet socks.

Semi-transparent, crescent-shaped blades floated next to her forelegs.

There were rings around all four of her limbs.

And finally, there was a small cloth bag hanging around her neck.

A single look was enough for me to tell that they were all MVP special rewards or something on the same tier.

Also, the sudden change in gear made me realize that she’d used Clothing Switch. It was a skill used for costume changes in theater or switching from normal clothing to battle equipment in an instant. That meant that...

“All this time, she was wearing her ‘normal clothing’...” She hadn’t been taking us seriously so far, but now that she recognized us as actual *enemies,* she would face us with all her strongest equipment.

“...start.” Following that single word, KoB vanished... and the wind began to swirl with blood.

What had once been human beings had become nothing more than shreds of flesh and bloody mist before turning into bits of light and disappearing.

The unfortunate victims were the members of Lunar Society, who were standing at the very back of our group.

The only thing showing us where King of Beasts was and what she was doing were the ones turning into blood mist as she killed them.

“She’s fast! Gbwugh!”

“How?! Lady Tsukuyo should be lowering her AGI...! GHUH?!” I couldn’t see KoB — all I could see were the results.

The screams and panic continued as KoB reaped through them one after the other.

They were all no doubt wearing Brooches, but it didn’t seem to matter at all. Was she using a skill that nullified it somehow? Or was she attacking multiple times and I was just too slow to see it?

Regardless, KoB dashed through the bloodied air, the very embodiment of an unstoppable force.

“The Shades and Death, They Beckon — Erlkönig.” The shadows under their legs wriggled and moved to attack KoB, but even I could clearly see that they weren’t fast enough to catch up.

The Lunar Society members also had ultimate skills of their own, but they were hesitant to use them for fear of collateral damage.

“That doesn’t matter. Use them,” said Fuso.

And just like that, their hesitation was gone. Targeting their surroundings, they all used their ults or job ults.

Countless flashes and explosions followed, engulfing just about every Lunar Society member.

When it was over, none of them remained... and KoB alone stood there as if nothing happened.

"...clear," she said as she licked a wound on her front paw. She likely meant something like "Clean-up's done."

Her words, combined with the fact that she'd targeted only the lesser Lunar Society members while ignoring Death Period, Fuso, and Tsukikage helped me understand exactly what she'd done here.

She'd purposely paused her rampage only after we were the only ones left. My guess was that she'd eliminated the other Lunar Society members for the same reason why Fuso cleaned up all the Dryfean Masters — to get rid of unknown variables.

Fuso and Tsukikage were prominent figures, and both Marie and B3 were well-known PKs. Rook and I had also had our abilities exposed during Franklin's game and the Quartierlatin incident.

That was why she'd prioritized getting rid of the Lunar Society members, whom she knew nothing about.

"...Or it could be that she merely wants to save the cherry on top for last," said Nemesis telepathically. Seeing how KoB hadn't targeted Fuso, who was actively dividing her speed by six, that seemed even more likely. If all she wanted was a quick victory, Fuso would be her highest priority, and she wouldn't just be standing in place like she was doing now.

"Is she trying to show off how trivial all this is for her?" Nemesis wondered.

Perhaps, but she could have some other reason, I thought.

...Regardless, it was clear that to KoB, the battle against the Lunar Society members was but a way of adjusting the situation. She'd exterminated eighty veterans like it was child's play, and their retaliation had left only a single scratch on her.

Though they were all Masters, the gap between them and her was immense.

And I could see just *how* immense by using my Reveal skill.

Behemot.

Job: King of Beasts.

Level: 1156 (Total Level: 1656)

HP: 82015 (+23650050)

MP: 3350 (+0)

SP: 48980 (+0)

STR: 10050 (+216900)

AGI: 15315 (+210059) → 37563

END: 9980 (+232020)

DEX: 1502 (+1058)

LUK: 125 (+100)

The stats shown to me by Reveal were boosted by absurd numbers. Even her AGI, which had been cut to a sixth of its maximum by Faint Light, was still high enough to make her several times faster than the speed of sound.

The difference was so vast that it gave me chills.

This explosive increase in stats was also far above what any job could grant.

B3 had once told me the name of this phenomenon, and Shu had told me how it worked.

“So this is the Guardian-Jaguarman Theory in action...!”

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Altar-Dryfe border, mountainous area

There was a low, yet immense rumbling. The air itself seemed to vibrate over the expansive horizon.

The noise was like high-ordinance bombs blowing up over and over again.

It was definitely not caused by any explosives, however — they were actually the sounds of gigantic objects crashing into each other.

At a distance of over 10 kilometels from the assembly hall, two enormous silhouettes were clashing, causing booming impacts loud enough to drown out the nearby landslides.

One was a gigantic machine god.

With its entire frame focused on firepower, he was the pinnacle of weaponry. However, instead of using any of its many weapons, its wielder was using its fists like a master of the martial arts.

The figure's name was Baldr, and it was the Superior Embryo of the King of Destruction, shifted into his full-offense mode.

The second silhouette was the Queen of Beasts.

She was akin to a gigantic dinosaur from the depths of prehistory. With porcupine-like spines growing out of her back and limbs that seemed to be all muscle, she was violence given form.

Her name was Leviathan, and she was the Superior Embryo of the King of Beasts, shifted to her solo-full power mode.

The two giants surpassing 100 metels in height were exchanging blows, destroying the mountains around them.

Baldr launched a fist at Leviathan. She caught it with her right hand, only to have it shatter; she then used her superior speed to retaliate with her left.

It was an all-out battle — a violent clash straight out of mythology, and it was immense enough to shake the entire visible horizon.

...I guessed as much, but it turns out she really is a match for me even by herself, huh? Shu thought, realizing that he'd made the right choice by separating her from King of Beasts.

The fact that Leviathan was a match for Shu and his Baldr truly said all that needed to be said about how absurdly powerful she was. After all, Baldr was now significantly stronger than it had been back when Gloria attacked.

When Shu used The Unmatched God of War — Baldr, the power of the resulting transformation was based on his STR.

Currently, Shu's base STR was about 180,000.

Because of this, even AGI — the stat that was buffed the least— was over 90,000, while his END reached 180,000 and his STR was doubled to become 360,000.

His HP also broke the 10,000,000 mark, and not even Mythicals could hold their own in a fistfight against him.

In fact, even the Hell General's fully buffed Mythical devil wouldn't be much of a threat to him.

Yet despite all that, Leviathan was fighting against Baldr as an equal... *and she was separated from her Master, while Baldr's had used his ult.*

"GGHRAAAAAAAAAAGH!" Leviathan's violent assault made Baldr's armor creak, but Baldr fired back with a high kick — a kodachi — aimed straight at Leviathan's neck.

It was an attack that could knock someone's head from their shoulders, but Leviathan got away with only a bit of torn flesh.

The scale of this fight was the stuff of legends, but since they were equally matched, it seemed to them like a simple fistfight between two people.

...I used my ult and we're still just equal, Shu thought. *I guess this is 'cause of the direction she took as an Embryo.*

As Shu pondered, he came to understand the reason why this battle had no clear superior force.

Queen of Beasts, Leviathan was the Guardian who possessed the highest stats of all, and the reason for this was simple: she'd sacrificed everything else for it.

She had no skills besides her ult — which all Embryos possessed — and every ounce of her remaining Resources went to body size and physical stats: HP, STR, AGI, and END.

After all, that was the core of her Master's desire. She sought someone who could protect her and had enough sheer power to crush anything in her way.

That was what made Leviathan the apex.

Baldr might have surpassed her in STR, but she was above him in every single other stat. Her HP was over 20,000,000, while her STR, END, and AGI all broke

200,000.

She was an entity that could reduce entire countries to rubble merely by walking through them.

And she had become what she was through the hyper-focusing of Resources.

Endless buffing, forced debuffing, spatial manipulation... she had none of the unique abilities usually possessed by Superior Embryos. Instead she was specced solely into stats.

No other Guardian surpassed her in that regard.

That might seem contrary to the Maiden type's focus on "giant-slaying," but closer inspection would reveal that wasn't the case. This too, was a way to defeat those stronger than yourself — the ultimate manifestation of this one seemingly-unfair notion: *every giant will fall if you are simply bigger and stronger than they are*.

In fact, Baldr might have been the more impressive one in this scenario, simply because he was able to fight with her toe-to-toe.

KoD's Baldr's power wasn't as pure as Leviathan's. Wide-area firepower, ammo-production, dominance on both land and sea, an array of transformations... Dedicating all these Resources to this wide variety of functions left it with little left over for pure physical enhancement. Even after using its ultimate skill, its stats still couldn't match Leviathan's.

It was unheard of for an Embryo as versatile as Baldr to be a match for the manifestation of pure power that was Leviathan.

The abnormal thing here isn't actually the Embryo... but the Master, Leviathan thought as she fought.

She was genuinely impressed. She only knew two other entities that could match her like this.

My speed is higher, but he reads my movements and attacks me when he can minimize damage to himself. But these aren't mere tricks... he's just using his power in the most optimal way... I see... So this is what it's like to be awed...

Leviathan was surprised, but she also derived some enjoyment from this — in

spite of the fact that she was taking more damage as a result.

As things are, I could probably win even as I am now. Shu had predicted the overall damage and thus the ultimate result of this fight.

When it came to stats, Baldr was below Leviathan. However, it made up for its lackluster AGI with its flair for battle and ability to read the enemy, letting it deliver attacks using its superior STR. Baldr wasn't exactly coming out of this unscathed, but Leviathan was the one who was suffering more.

Also, at certain points of this battle, Shu could use Baldr's various armaments to give himself an advantage, while Leviathan had absolutely no means of expanding her range of strategies. After all, she didn't have a single skill she could use on her own.

Leviathan may have had the highest stats among Embryos. However, it had to be said — that didn't mean that she was the *strongest*.

The true power of Embryos and UBMs lay in their unique skills. When faced with special abilities that warped the universe itself, pure stats would always fall short.

And without skills, all she could do was use physical attacks. She was like an RPG boss that had max stats but could only use the "Attack" command, and it wasn't hard to counter those.

Again, her immense stats didn't mean that she was — or ever would be — the true strongest.

"Gh...!" Despite that, and the fact that Leviathan was currently being overwhelmed, Shu was starting to panic.

From his perspective, he had to defeat Leviathan as soon as possible. He knew that if he didn't, the consequences would be dire.

"Those left behind are worthless weaklings," said the Queen of Beasts with a muffled voice. "But Behemot, like myself, couldn't leave Gideon while we were busy keeping you there. I'm sure she is savoring her first taste of real freedom."

"...That so?!" Shu replied as he punched with Baldr's fist.

"I also haven't had a chance to enjoy something like this for a long time...

Let's have fun while Behemot's still playing around." Leviathan smiled—injured, but still full of vigor.

The two displayed opposite emotions, but the reason behind them was the same.

King of Beasts, Behemot was the source of both Shu's panic and Leviathan's confidence.

Leviathan was in some senses the "greatest," but she was not the "apex." "The Physical Apex" was the title given to Leviathan and her Master as a duo, and the reason for this — what really elevated simple excellence to the level of absolute apex — was the Guardian-Jaguarman Theory.

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The build known as "Guardian-Jaguarman Theory" swept the world of *Infinite Dendrogram* back when it was leaving the early stages of its post-release phase. At that time, absurd Superior Embryos were almost non-existent and nearly no Master had attained the uncapped Superior Jobs. The dominant Masters were level 500s with high-rank Embryos.

It was a time when everyone still considered and sought power that *made sense*.

Most of the player activity went into theorycrafting about what might be the strongest possible build, and many people conjured up numerous configurations worthy of that title: Nobushi Ambusher OHKO Theory, Sacrifice MP-Spec Theory, and Gem Production-Spam Theory, to name a few. Many discussions were had both within *Infinite Dendrogram* and the communities outside of it.

And out of the many that were considered, the one that came out on top as the "strongest possible build" was the Guardian-Jaguarman Theory.

The jaguarman job grouping didn't get much attention during the period when there were only tians. It had poor stat growth and only one skill. In that respect it was similar to Death Soldier, but not quite as absurd. Still, it wasn't a job you'd pick if you wanted to get stronger. The only tians who selected it were members of certain Legendarian tribes with traditions surrounding the job.

Jaguarman's only skill was Beastheart Possession, which gave the user a bonus to their stats based on the base stats of the monsters within their Minion Capacity.

The power of the bonus was based on the user's skill level, but even at level 10 — the maximum allowed by the high-rank job in the grouping, Beast Ogre — Beastheart Possession only granted the user 60% of their monsters' stats.

And despite having this as their only skill, the grouping gave a disproportionately small Minion Capacity. In order to employ the most useful monsters, you'd have to fill all your other job slots with options from the tamer grouping. However, doing that greatly limited the battle-focused skills you could take — so even if you used all your Minion Capacity on a Pure-Dragon, you end up with high stats and nothing else.

And "high" in this case was only 60% of a Pure-Dragon's stats. Since Beastheart Possession only used the monster's base stats, you couldn't even benefit from tamer skills that buffed your monsters. There was also the fundamental problem that capturing powerful monsters like Pure-Dragons was difficult, and the amount of people from the jaguarman grouping that were using them in any case was smaller than one percent.

As a result, tian Jaguarmen could only ever aspire to be a hybrid between a mediocre vanguard and a mediocre tamer.

The one exception was the jaguarman grouping's Superior Job, King of Beasts, which had a version of Beastheart Possession that gave a 100% bonus. Still, that didn't mean much when Pure-Dragons were the strongest monsters they could use. Because most well-developed Superior Jobs surpassed the Pure-Dragons' stats, King of Beasts was considered to be low-tier.

Even though it was a battle-focused Superior Job, no one believed it could ever be the strongest choice.

That all changed after Masters began growing in number.

One of the Masters researching builds once came a realization and made the following proposal: "Wouldn't Jaguarman's skill have crazy good synergy with Guardian type Embryos?"

The importance of this realization was not to be underestimated. After all, being Embryos, Guardians took *no Minion Capacity no matter how strong they were*, and it wasn't uncommon for high-rank Guardians to surpass Pure-Dragons in power.

Unlike a tian, a Master with a Guardian Embryo wouldn't have to worry about wasting job slots just to make Jaguarman work, and they wouldn't need to go through any trouble to get powerful monsters. This meant that they could fill their slots with battle-focused jobs and use the jaguarman grouping for a pure stat boost. Even if they used their Jaguarman job as their main, they would still have access to utility battle skills and item-based active skills.

Once people realized that this would almost certainly create the strongest frontline fighter, the argument about strongest build was, for the time being, considered settled.

The Guardian-Jaguarman Theory spread as soon as it was presented on discussion boards.

Many Masters with battle-focused Guardians chose to go with this build. They left their mark on every country's arena, displaying the build's power and making it even more popular.

The reason for its quick adoption was that it was extremely powerful and you only needed two things for it — jaguarman grouping jobs and a Guardian Embryo.

During this time, if anyone appeared on forums or discussion boards saying something like, "I'm about to start. What's a good way to be really powerful?" they would be met with, "Hope and pray that your Embryo's a Guardian."

Of course, there was an Embryo for each Master, and all of them were unique. Each individual Embryo synergized best with different jobs.

However, this was one of the easiest ways to become strong.

But even among those who adhered to the Guardian-Jaguarman Theory, some were working to improve their build even further. They wanted to follow this theory to its logical conclusion — to take the concept to the next level by finding the conditions to unlock King of Beasts and taking the job.

Unfortunately, the conditions were lost even to the tribes that traditionally used the jaguarman grouping jobs, so the Masters searching for them were faced with quite a challenge. Still, they pressed on, hoping to find the ultimate expression of this theory and claim the throne of “Physical Apex” as their own.

However, after nearly three *Infinite Dendrogram* years after Guardian-Jaguarman Theory had been uncovered, the Masters still using it were few and far between.

Of course, it was powerful enough to still see some use, but those who passionately searched for the best possible builds had cast it aside.

There were several reasons for this.

First was the increase in Superiors, who had powers so absurd that they made their Embryos look tame.

Second was the increase in the amount of Superior Jobs. The lack of level caps let those who had them grow stronger essentially without limit, so those who truly desired overwhelming power decided to search for SJs to take, even if they were unrelated to the jaguarman grouping.

Both were valid reasons, but they were not enough to truly kill Guardian-Jaguarman Theory.

The third reason was almost a combination of the other two, which made it the most compelling reason to quit this build.

A Guardian Superior Embryo fully specced into stats, and King of Beasts — the jaguarman grouping Superior Job necessary to complete the theory. The ultimate goal of the idea — the throne of the “Apex.”

That throne was already occupied.

Queen of Beasts, Leviathan and King of Beasts, Behemot — a Superior Embryo that was utterly devoted to stats, and a Superior Job that transferred all those stats to the user.

The throne of the King of Beasts had already been taken by the most suitable individual.

Thus, anyone seeking it had given up. They knew they couldn’t surpass her as

long as they walked the same path.

The “Apex” they were all heading towards had already been claimed, and the king would never relinquish it.

Some rerolled their build and began searching for other paths to power, while others lost all passion for the game and just quit altogether. Those who were serious about becoming stronger had long since left the theory behind, leaving only those who were satisfied with being *relatively* strong.

This was the ultimate end of the Guardian-Jaguarman Theory.

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Altar-Dryfe border, assembly hall

“Hmm hmm hmm...” Thanks to a skill that linked Behemot to Leviathan, Behemot could sense that her Embryo was having a great time.

Through this connection, she knew that Leviathan was truly enjoying her battle with Shu.

I also wanted to fight the bear... I mean, Shu, she thought. Thanks to information given to Dryfe by Zeta — information collected by Sechs himself — Behemot knew Shu’s skills, including his ultimate. Therefore, she knew that Shu was the only Master Behemot and Leviathan could fight with all their strength.

Leviathan was fighting him by herself now, and the joy reaching her made it clear that the information was reliable.

...Levia and I became a little too strong. That thought was correct — even Mythical UBMs couldn’t last long against them; humans didn’t even stand a chance.

She could hold back, sure, but she found that extremely boring.

Her high AGI made the time she experienced far too drawn out, and her STR gave her limbs more power than she ever needed. People shattered if she as much as slowly caressed them, but she found it boring to move like that.

Regardless if they went all-out or not, there just weren’t any enemies around that they could really have *fun* with.

Since Behemot became a Superior, she could count the beings that put up a fight on one hand.

When I think about that, Shu is a real rarity. She was convinced that he might've been the first Master she'd met who could withstand her full power.

It's not just battles, either... just talking and hanging out with him is kind of fun. Games and fights weren't worthwhile if they weren't between people who were on the same level.

Thus, to Behemot, Shu was in the truly precious category of "worthy opponent."

...He reminds me of dad a bit, though. That makes me feel sad at times. Behemot caught herself feeling a little down for a moment, but she quickly walked back that thought.

Also, I wouldn't expect any less of him... He went straight for our weakness.

Thanks to Beastheart Possession level EX, Behemot received the immense bonus of 100% of Leviathan's stats.

However, that also meant that Leviathan wasn't as strong as Behemot herself.

If Leviathan fell before her Master did, Behemot's stats would drop to normal levels.

Did he separate us because he didn't want us to have each other's backs, or because he has an idea what our ult might be? Regardless, Behemot couldn't join Leviathan's and Shu's battle yet. If the Altarian Masters were left to their own devices, they would go after Claudiah, like Tsukuyo had said they would.

Still, if Leviathan fell, beating Shu would be far more difficult.

To protect Claudiah, Behemot had to defeat all the Masters currently present before Shu defeated Leviathan, then go meet up with her Embryo.

...That's troubling, but...

"...fun." Her ultimate target here was Shu, but she thought that the battle she currently faced might be kind of enjoyable, too.

She particularly liked what Tsukuyo Fuso was doing. The High Priestess had

lowered Behemot's AGI to a sixth of its total value.

This is really good. She'd initially intended to target Fuso last, and this debuff was just another reason to do it.

After all, thanks to being slowed down, there were now Masters that could actually keep up with her even if she moved at full speed: Eishiro, Marie, and one other.

Buffed by the Lunar Society members before they got the death penalty, the three could keep up with Behemot as long as Tsukuyo's debuff was active.

Though, it looks like the shadows from Tsukikage's ult aren't as fast as he is. I guess their speed doesn't scale with his AGI. That's some new info.

Still, if he used them to surround her — like he was doing now — the shadows could at least support the others' attacks.

Behemot looked around. Nine were left. She subtracted the three tian officials.

Among those left were Tsukuyo, Eishiro, Marie, and Barbaroy — four famed rankers and PKs.

Besides them, there's Rook Holmes, who beat Franklin's favorite... and Shu's little brother, Ray Starling... I know most of what they can do.

Behemot now had a full grasp of who she was facing and quickly began to analyze the situation.

There are three ways they can beat me. First, they could go for an instakill by targeting and destroying my vitals and leaving the injury-based debuff to finish me off. They probably already know my buffed total HP. I'm not wearing any status-hiding gear now, since showing it off makes for good intimidation. Anyway, if they know how high it is, I don't think they'll try to slowly chip away at it.

That was a DPS check the Altarians would easily fail.

Thus, they would probably target her neck, brain, or heart to destroy it and kill her via injury-based debuffs.

If their second duelist, Kashimiya, was here, they would've gone for my neck.

I'd probably have to use different gear. The people who're actually here will probably aim to destroy some part of me using Ray's counterattack or the piercing and powerful laser... Shining Despair. Besides that, Adler could use Arc-en-Ciel to shoot me in the vitals. She's capable of using the Art of Vanishing to disappear and surprise me with a point-blank shot. I'll have to keep an eye out for her. If she vanishes, I'll prioritize moving around over attacking.

Behemot recalled everything she knew about the Altarian Masters and thoroughly considered how she would handle this battle.

Those are the only attacks I really have to watch out for. In terms of pure damage, there's also Burn's spam attack after using Emancipated Giant — Atlas, but knowing my defense, it wouldn't do much. Same as always. The only crits I need to avoid are the kind that use fixed damage, energy or magic damage, and anything that ignores defense. I considered that The Lunar Society might use the fixed damage item spam tactic they used on Gloria, but that's impossible now that I've thinned out their numbers.

Behemot was deep in thought, considering her opponents' pasts and achievements.

The second thing to be wary of is the High Priestess using Faint Light to divide my HP and then casting her ultimate final skill to take me out in one hit. Looking at her current level and the HP I'd have after the division, she'd blow away about half of my entire body. If that took out a vital point, I'd die right then and there. Though I doubt she'd be quick to use a skill that costs all her levels. After all, unlike with Gloria, she wouldn't gain much from beating me.

She knew them and was wary of what they could do, but that was exactly why she thought this particular scenario was unlikely.

Also, if she tried that, I'd just kill her first. That skill has a cast time, so there'll surely be a chance for me to strike. Even if Tsukikage protected her in his shadows so she could chant there, her speed debuff would disappear. I would just kill Tsukikage, then kill Fuso when the shadows spat her out after. That would be the end of that. It would cost me my backup plan, but it's a sacrifice I'm willing to make.

She also thought of countermeasures for every scenario.

Behemot already knew the powerful aces up their sleeves, as well as their weaknesses.

The third thing to watch out for are debuffs. There's Holmes' Charm, Adler's Arc-en-Ciel specced in debuffs, and Tsukikage's fatal King of Assassins skill. Though, I've got MVP rewards that counter debuffs.

The rings on her limbs were Sufferward Bands, Bourdrim.

Its passive skill, Sufferward Prison, gave her resistance to poison-type, mental-type, curse-type, and limit-type debuffs, and the effect scaled with her END.

With Beastheart Possession active, her END was so high that it was hard to imagine her resistance ever being overcome.

...Though, there's the goblin that Ray can summon. The compressed debuff she used to beat the second Gigaknight in Quartierlatin might be able to break through my resistance. Same with Fuso. I never heard of her using compressed debuffs while Faint Light is active, but she might *be able to do it. I'll have to be really careful if she compresses the night.*

Despite being deep in thought, Behemot was alert. She wasn't about to be overconfident.

That's all I need to watch out for. Those are the only things that truly defeat me here, so I better do my best to avoid them.

"What is it?" Tsukuyo suddenly spoke up. "You're just standing in place and giving us a mocking glare. Are you really that confident you're going to win?"

Mocking glare? Confident? I'm pretty sure the time we experience is pretty different, but I guess I was lost in thought long enough for them to notice. They totally misread me, though.

Indeed. Behemot had merely analyzed the battle and identified any factors that could cause her defeat.

Shu, who was fighting Leviathan; the Altarians here, ready to face Behemot; the rankers that could potentially come to their aid... She had memorized everything she could about all of them.

During her stay in Gideon, she had properly investigated the Altarian rankers

and what they were famous for.

You gotta know the meta... You gotta know how to counter your enemy. She gathered all the info she could find and thought of ways to deal with any situation. She was thorough when it came to this, and there was a solid reason for it.

I'm the King of Beasts, after all. I don't mean to brag, but I'm the strongest player in the three western countries... and that makes me the Master whose abilities are better known than anybody else's.

Behemot knew that the information about her MVP rewards and skills was more or less common knowledge.

The only exception was the accessory hanging over her neck.

Compatibility was an important part of battle. Some would say compatibility didn't matter if you were overpowered enough, but if the same could be said about your opponent, then that argument fell apart.

If my opponent knows me, I also have to gather info about them. Behemot knew that if she didn't do this, she would eventually be defeated.

Thus, this was the obvious course of action to her.

Despite being the strongest, she would fight weaklings with due care — and then some.

The phrase "Lions give their all when hunting rabbits" might come to mind for some, but that misrepresented the scale. This was more akin to a dragon analyzing an ant before challenging it to an all-out battle.

I don't wanna get the death penalty and be separated from Infinite Dendrogram for a whole day. Claudiah's clever, but reckless... and she's my friend. I have to do everything I can to protect her and what's important in my world.

Behemot looked up at the sky to see jade and silver lights drawing arcs between the clouds.

It seemed to her that Claudiah was having fun as well.

...Yeah. If Claudiah's enjoying herself, then I'll go and have a good time, too.

The unknown variables had been removed. She'd thoroughly considered all the ways she could lose.

This was how she began a battle that she intended to win.

Still, there were a few unknown factors.

Behemot only had the information that she had gathered. If anyone here had grown since she'd learned about them, there could be some unknown element at play that could potentially cause her defeat.

She knew and understood that well.

That was why she would enjoy herself... but never let her guard down.

She would enjoy this battle as a battle, this game as a game, and this world as a world while using *their* power to win against those standing in her way.

I will use my power to open up, create, and protect my world — the world I *like.*

She was King of Beasts, Behemot.

She was one of the "Apices" — The Physical Apex.

She was the imperium's strongest and its ultimate guardian.

And she was the first fang of the imperator.

"Ganking time. Rawr."

With that declaration to her enemies, she launched into battle.

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King of Beasts, Behemot was the embodiment of the Guardian-Jaguarman Theory, as well as its ultimate conclusion.

Her stats surpassed Leviathan's, she employed her battle skills with supreme refinement, and she wielded countless MVP rewards from the UBMs that she'd crushed beneath her.

One thing was certain in this situation: Ray and his friends were about to face an enemy of unprecedented strength.

Chapter Eleven: The Black Mirror

Altar-Dryfe border, assembly hall

The instant Behemot made her move, three Altarian Masters — Eishiro, Marie, and Rook — also flew into action.

Just in terms of pure status, the strongest Altarian here was actually Rook.

This was because Babi's merging skill, Union Jack, allowed Rook to combine with her and a select monster under his command — in this case, Liz. Babi was a high-rank Embryo who'd used her Drain Learning to gather lots of stat-boosting skills from the monsters they'd defeated, while Liz was a slime that excelled in both speed and toughness. Obviously, merging these two together would have fearsome results.

Despite being only a high-rank, Rook in this form had the stats and the skill repertoire of a Superior Job.

The way it worked was almost like an off-shoot of the Guardian-Jaguarman Theory.

Thanks to the buffs put up by The Lunar Society, his AGI was now a match for Behemot's.

Despite this, the moment he saw Behemot move, Rook realized something that made him break out in a cold sweat.

Ohh... This is not good, Rook thought.

He knew that he would be her first target.

The extraordinary perception Rook boasted both in-game and in reality didn't work as well when faced with a non-humanoid like Behemot — but since that tiny body hosted a human mind, he could follow some of her thought processes by observing her actions. One thing he knew for certain was that she would try to defeat him first.

Most would have expected Behemot to go after the debuffer who was the

only Superior here — Tsukuyo. Both Eishiro and Marie seemed deeply surprised to see Behemot charge straight at Rook, but he himself knew exactly why he was targeted.

It wasn't because of his stats. Though his were higher than those of the other Altarians here, Behemot wasn't the type to pick her targets based on such meager stat differences.

She was aiming for Rook first because she knew exactly what he was.

I suppose this was to be expected. If she really did eliminate The Lunar Society just to get rid of all uncertain variables, it only makes sense that she would target me for the exact same reason.

The skills Babylon had acquired through Drain Learning were numerous — easily surpassing the number of skills possessed by standard job builds. When fusing with her, Rook had access to all these skills, which would mesh well with his currently-insane stats. That made him an uncertain variable, and it was only natural that Behemot would see him as a threat.

However, the fact that he'd gotten Behemot's attention wasn't what really bothered Rook — it was something far worse.

The fact that she's targeting me means that King of Beasts knows what we've got up our sleeves... She even knows about mere high-ranks like me. How much does she really *know, then? Does she know all about our abilities and tactics?*

Moving as fast as Behemot, Rook retreated from her, occasionally winging his path.

He used this time to think.

Our strategy is based around King of Beasts attacking Ray and him surviving that attack. If she's only aware of our strategies that have already been exposed, she will likely stick to attacking... But if she knows about his skill... we might have to find some means to get Ray's damage counter up.

Rook observed their opponent and tried to deduce how much she knew about them based on her actions. He accelerated his thoughts and continued his examination, while the distance between him and Behemot was swiftly closing.

...Wait. From what I can tell, King of Beasts doesn't just want a simple victory here. She certainly wants to win, but unlike Franklin, she's not the type to go for victory at any cost. If that was the case, she would have attacked while we were still talking to Princess Claudiah, or included us in the rampage against The Lunar Society, or targeted Tsukuyo Fuso instead of me. She doesn't want to just win... she also wants to enjoy *this.*

As his thoughts kept speeding along, the distance between Rook and Behemot kept closing.

They were more or less equal in speed — or rather, Rook was slightly faster. The reason King of Beasts was catching up was because her movements were just better.

Part of her objective here is to win only after *fighting with all her might. She wants to put herself into a situation where she can bring her full strength to bear while also letting her opponents go all-out. That must be the primary reason she's not targeting Tsukuyo Fuso. In that case, what I ought to do here is...*

Although Rook had trained for this, he hadn't had much field experience with the high-speed movement of Metal-Devil-Man. He still hadn't quite gotten the hang of actually controlling this human-devil-slime chimera body of his.

King of Beasts, on the other hand, had been in *Infinite Dendrogram* for nearly five years.

The reason the distance between them was growing smaller was that immense gap in their respective experience controlling bodies that were totally unlike their real life ones.

This was particularly obvious in the timing with which Rook changed his direction.

...From my perspective, I have only three seconds left until she catches up. The moment when the distance closed... when the beast's claws would dig into Rook's flesh... was swiftly approaching.

And then, Behemot was right next to him.

"Hm...?!" she exclaimed, noticing that something wasn't right. Rook had

suddenly crossed his hands in front of his chest...

“Flash Eye.”

...And the *artificial eyes created on his arms* released an intense burst of light.

“Hh...!” The dazzling flash stopped Behemot in her tracks for a moment.

This was a skill that Babylon had acquired with Drain Learning from a monster called “Floating Spark Eye.”

The skill released a powerful flash of light from the user’s eyes, dazzling the targets and inflicting the Blind debuff. Rook had used Liz’s ability to create a number of artificial eyes on his arms before using the skill through them. Being a Mithril Arms Slime, Liz could change her shape — and he could now do the same thanks to Union Jack.

All this time, he’d been running away from Behemot in a winding pattern in order to get himself into a position where Flash Eye wouldn’t affect any of his allies.

A brief dazzle. The first condition is cleared. This chance will not last, however.

Rook knew full well that, to someone like King of Beasts, this would just be a momentary distraction. She didn’t even get the Blind status effect. The obvious conclusion was that at least one of the many MVP rewards she was wearing let her easily resist it.

Regardless, the intense light still briefly blocked out her line of sight. King of Beasts might’ve had something that helped her see in total darkness, but she wasn’t equipped to handle an abundance of *light*, since that would be a hindrance in more circumstances than not.

Despite being unable to see, Behemot wasn’t panicking one bit.

She couldn’t properly gauge the distance between her and Rook, but sound and presence alone was enough for her to know that he was somewhere ahead of her.

Thus, she decided to use a skill that didn’t care about a slight difference in distance.

Behemot swung her right hand. The arc of her swing created a claw-shaped

shockwave that barreled straight forward.

The skill was called “Winged Ripper.” It was a Claw Boxer active skill, and it created a shockwave with a range of a few dozen metels and had the same power as the user’s regular attacks.

She’d used this skill in order to keep Rook in check.

However... it was exactly what he had been waiting for.

[Now!]

Rook shouted through his Telepathy Cuffs, while at the same time moving his slime tentacle with his Metal-Devil-Man body. He’d grown the tentacle at the same time he’d used Flash Eye, and now he yanked it back towards him, dragging along the thing it’d wrapped around in the process.

The thing in question... or rather, *the person*... was none other than Ray.

Rook had drawn his friend closer so he could use him as a shield. He’d been running away from Behemot while carefully positioning himself precisely so that he could bring Ray towards him like this.

Though this seemed like the heartless actions of a person who would sacrifice his friend to save his own skin, it was actually a necessary step towards victory.

“*Counter Absorption!*”

After all... the damage counter was the source of Ray and Nemesis’ power. They had to be attacked by Behemot in order to use the damage taken as a Resource to power their own skills.

They had agreed ahead of time that Ray would use Counter Absorption the moment Rook signaled to him using Telepathy Cuffs.

And now, that barrier of light took the full brunt of the shockwave, adding the damage to Nemesis’ counter.

The dazzling burst from earlier was nothing but a step towards luring Behemot into attacking Ray — it would’ve been much more difficult to direct her attacks to the proper target when she could see everything that was happening.

“Gh...!” After Ray had just barely survived the attack, Rook used his tentacle to fling him out of range.

That was all he could do here... for Behemot had already launched her follow-up attack.

Although she couldn’t see, she’d realized that her attack had been blocked. That wasn’t a problem for her, though. If one of her attacks failed, she only had charge and attack again.

The only problem for her now was deciding who to prioritize — Ray, who’d absorbed her immense damage, or Rook, her original target.

As she considered that question, Rook suddenly raised his voice. “Ray... *Prepare that skill! Use it to match her stats!*”

He actually exposed one of his friend’s trump cards, revealing information about Ray’s skills that Behemot likely didn’t know.

This seemed like another betrayal, but again — it was not.

Rook merely did what he thought was optimal based on his assumptions regarding Behemot’s personality.

His words drew her focus towards Ray... not out of caution, but more out of curiosity. Rook had noted this. He had deduced that since Behemot wanted not only to win, but to also go all-out and actually enjoy this battle, she would allow Ray to use a skill that made him stronger. That was why he’d emphasized that it wasn’t a sure-kill attack, but a buff, leading her to make a decision that was ultimately beneficial to them.

If it was a skill like Tsukuyo’s Ulfaria Eltram, which could instantly kill her, Behemot would have certainly attacked Ray to avoid defeat. Rook, however, had deduced that King of Beasts’ desire to enjoy herself outweighed her desire to win at any cost, and that she would want to see what happened when Ray used his skill.

With Truth Discernment, it was even possible to tell that Rook wasn’t bluffing about the skill’s effects.

Rook saw clearly that Behemot was doing exactly what he expected her to do

— her interest turned towards Ray and away from taking Rook down. He was also relieved to see that Ray would actually be able to use his skill... but then, Rook noticed that Behemot had gotten close enough to attack him.

“Hhaah...” he sighed, having expected this exact outcome.

Rook knew that he’d end up getting the death penalty the moment he realized that Behemot had investigated all of them and had decided he was an uncertain variable. Since he was currently a slime-man, he could withstand most physical attacks, but he wasn’t optimistic enough to believe that he would survive here.

This is King of Beasts... the top of the Dryfean kill rankings. She must have at least as many MVP special rewards as Shu, and based on her equipment, she doesn’t have any limitations as absurd as his costume-only restriction. I think it’s fair to assume that she has one — or more likely a few items that let her break through resistances.

Rook’s assumption was correct. The semi-transparent claws Behemot had equipped were a Mythical MVP reward called “Twin-Moon Carvers, Crescent Glissando.”

It was an ethereal pair of weapons that *allowed the selection of damage type*.

One of its skills, Blood Moonrise, turned physical damage into *direct HP damage*. This damage was affected by the target’s defense, but it ignored physical resistance skills, so even the fearsome Metal-Devil-Man couldn’t stand up to it.

On top of this, Behemot was using the Claw Boxer’s ultimate job skill, Tiger Scratch. This allowed her to follow up every single attack she made with two additional strikes that inherited the nature, element, and power of the first one.

Not even a slime with a Brooch could survive three powerful blows that ignored resistances and were powered by Behemot’s immense stats.

Checkmate, I suppose... But I think I did everything I could. I helped Ray put some damage on his counter and gave him a chance to use that skill of his. All in all, I think I put up a good fight against her.

Calm and collected, he pondered the situation while staring straight at

Behemot.

Then, he canceled his Union Jack so that he wouldn’t lose Liz to the coming onslaught.

His stats dropped, and so did his speed. He could no longer even see Behemot’s movements.



The next thing he knew, he'd been completely pulverized.

He didn't even have time to notice if his Brooch had activated or not.

Rook's resurrection period was shorter than the blink of an eye, but it was enough for one last thought: *This is the first time I've gotten the death penalty, isn't it...? I suppose that is a bit frustra—*

And with that, he dissolved into motes of light and vanished, leaving only five Altarian Masters.

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"one." After taking care of Rook, Behemot didn't stop even for a moment, because she'd noticed that Eishiro and Marie were nowhere in sight.

She realized that, during the Flash Eye, the former sunk into his shadow, while the latter must have used the Art of Vanishing. She also understood that they hadn't attacked her while Rook was still alive because they didn't want to interrupt Rook's plan to help Ray fill his damage counter and activate his skill. Now that Rook was gone, it was clear that the two would take the opportunity to strike, so Behemot kept moving to avoid any ambushes.

She was prioritizing evasion over offense, not targeting anyone she could currently see. After all, Behemot wanted to see this skill Ray supposedly had, and she'd long since decided that Tsukuyo would be her final target.

The last opponent in Behemot's field of view — Barbaroy — was an END build, and if she used Dragonscale Wards or sacrificed shields for Fatal Defender, it would be difficult to get rid of her quickly.

Even Tiger Scratch might not have been enough to take Barbaroy out, and if it wasn't, Behemot worried that might leave her open to counter attacks.

Barbaroy herself was assuming a defensive stance, which made it likely that was precisely her plan.

From Behemot's point of view, there were no viable targets in sight, but although Eishiro had no trouble hiding in the shadows, Marie's Art of Vanishing burned through her SP very quickly. Because of that, she'd likely reappear soon, so Behemot kept running, biding her time until that moment.

That was when Ray, who was behind her in experienced time, made his next move.

“...Rook!” he cried as he watched his friend’s body dissolve into light. He understood that Rook had sacrificed himself solely to give Ray the chance to use his skill.

Ray’s teeth clenched in rage. He knew exactly what he had to do now.

Rook had shown them the possibility of victory, and it was time for Ray and Nemesis to bring this new strategy to bear against the Physical Apex.

Thus, he turned to his companion.

“Let’s do it, Nemesis... Fourth Form!”

“Certainly!” In response to his words, Nemesis canceled her greatsword form, melting into specks of darkness that floated to a point behind Ray and assumed a new shape.

“Form Shift... Black Mirror!”

And with that, Nemesis transformed into a round mirror with a frame shaped like a single wing.

Behemot, still wary of attacks from Eishiro or Marie, also witnessed this transformation.

Nemesis, now a mirror, was floating behind Ray. The surface of the mirror was like deep, black water, with no reflection at all...

“Designating target!” Nemesis declared. “Damage counter set! Designating stat... AGI!”

...But as Nemesis spoke those words, the mirror’s surface began to undulate, and when the ripples subsided, it reflected none other than Behemot herself.

While Nemesis finished her preparations, Ray was taking action as well. He turned the Monochrome he was wearing into the cannon that would fire Shining Despair and equipped it on his left arm.

Once both were done, they shouted in unison, “Chaser from the Mirror!”

It was a declaration of the skill they’d developed upon evolving to high-rank...

the skill meant to combat opponents far more powerful than they.

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A certain day in April, Death Soldier, Ray Starling

“I’ve evolved to my fourth form.”

“...I see.” Just like when she’d evolved to her third form, Nemesis simply told me about it shortly after I woke up at the inn.

This didn’t come as a surprise, though — primarily because she’d had no appetite last night, just like right before she’d evolved to her third form.

Apparently, during her normal evolutions, Nemesis would lose her appetite, then evolve while sleeping. It wasn’t a very flashy way to evolve, but as far as I knew all Embryos evolved differently, so... it was what it was. Her evolution from first to second form was the exception rather than the rule.

Though, I was told that her evolution to high-rank was a little more exciting... and I missed it because I was asleep.

“Anyway... Congratulations!” I said.

“Much appreciated! You can now count me among the high-ranks!” There was a time when Nemesis was really troubled by how slowly she’d evolved, so she looked pretty happy about it now.

“So, what changes did you get?” I asked. Well, one thing I could see for myself was that her clothing was different.

It seemed like something you could call “an upgrade” — her apparel was a bit more extravagant than before... Her body didn’t seem to have changed, though.

“Well, first off, I feel like Counter Absorption is stronger now,” Nemesis said. “I believe the damage limit now is 400,000.”

Now *that* was a useful power-up. It was rare to face anyone who could break the previous limit of 300,000, but our battle against Monochrome was proof that it could happen, so I could definitely appreciate this change.

“The conditions for Payback seem to be easier to achieve, as well. Now any damage can be used to charge it — not just the damage accumulated in Black

Shield form.”

“Oh, now *that’s* really good.” That would make it possible to fight using the less tricky forms before switching over to use Payback. “Those are some good improvements already. Is there anything more?”

“Yes, I have not yet told you of the main change,” she said before raising four of her fingers. “It gave me one more form... a fourth one.”

So her evolutions continued to prioritize variety, huh?

That reminded me of Io. She also had an Arms-type with several forms, but unlike Nemesis, its high-rank evolution had only improved the forms it already possessed. Just like signs and times of evolution, those kinds of changes were different for each individual Embryo.

“So, what is it like?” I asked.

“Like this,” she answered, transforming into a weapon right before my eyes.

Scratch that... it wasn’t a weapon, but a dark mirror with a frame shaped like wings.

“...That’s not exactly what I was expecting,” I said.

“Well, my third form’s windmill was already pushing the definition of ‘weapon.’”

“And now it’s completely broken free of that definition, huh?”

“No. This is *also* a weapon. The wing-like frame can be removed.”

After saying that, the frame separated from the mirror and passed into my hands. Though slender and with a unique curved shape, the frame served as dual swords when detached.

“This form does not allow Counter Absorption, but it can use Vengeance, albeit a slightly different version.”

“Different how?”

“The accumulated damage is split between each blade. That means you can deliver Vengeance twice.”

“Ohh?” I really appreciated this one. There were situations where it would

come in handy, such as battles against enemies with Brooches. It seemed to me that Black Blade was the way to go for giant monsters, while these dual blades were better against human opponents.

This had way better utility than the third form. Maybe that was just how high-rank forms worked?

“Hold it,” said Nemesis. “The blades are merely a bonus. If this form was only about striking twice, the mirror would serve no purpose.”

“Ah. Oh yeah.” She had a point.

“This mirror has a skill, as well... One that synergizes quite well with Vengeance from the twin blades.”

So, while the third form was split into two forms — α, which allowed Counter Absorption, and β, which allowed Payback — this one allowed the use of Vengeance and the new skill simultaneously, huh?

...This really was an “evolution,” wasn’t it? It built upon the principles of the previous form.

“And what’s the mirror’s effect?” I asked.

“Well, what it does is...”

Nemesis began describing what, exactly, she was now capable of...

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Altar-Dryfe border, assembly hall

The moment after Ray activated his skill, Behemot *lost sight of him*.

He hadn’t exactly vanished, however — he’d simply left her line of sight.

...Did he speed up? she wondered before turning her head to catch sight of him again, moving so fast she actually had to focus just to keep track of him.

Ray was moving with unbelievable speed, especially considering that before using the skill, he wasn’t even close to supersonic in spite of all his buffs.

In fact...

He’s about as fast as... No... He’s exactly *as fast as me,* Behemot thought, as

she used Reveal on Ray and saw that his AGI matched hers. *The skill was called... “Chaser from the Mirror,” right? I see...*

Based on Nemesis’ unique traits as an Embryo, Behemot could guess what kind of skill this was — and what it cost.

It matches one of his stats to that of the last opponent who dealt damage to him. He probably has to expend the damage counter to do it.

She’d reached this conclusion based on Ray’s current stats, Rook’s statement, and the fact that Rook had made sure Ray got hit even if it meant using him as a shield.

That wasn’t the entirety of her conjecture, though.

Does it take an amount of damage from the counter equal to the stat’s value every second after activation...? No, that’d be way too expensive. It’s probably every minute, then, and the amount depleted is likely equal to the amount that was added to his stat. I know for sure that it can’t be a fixed number, MP, or SP, at least. It’d be too cheap.

Based on her experience, Behemot could surmise the nature of Nemesis’ fourth form’s skill.

Most frightening of all... *she was completely right*.

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Chaser from the Mirror.

This was a skill activated by selecting a stat of an opponent who had contributed to the damage counter, and it set Ray’s corresponding stat to the same value as that of his opponent’s. There were a few other things of note about it:

1. At the time of activation and every minute after that, it would subtract an amount equal to the opponent’s selected stat from the damage counter.

2. If the damage accumulated on the counter dropped below the necessary amount, the skill would be automatically canceled.

3. If the target’s stats changed while the skill was active, Ray’s own stats would change, as well.

4. The stat affected by this skill couldn’t be increased by any other effects or skills.

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Chaser from the Mirror was the power Nemesis had acquired by evolving to high-rank.

She and Ray had fought many battles against opponents who were simply *stronger* than them both, and as a result she developed a skill that enhanced Ray’s stats... or more precisely, a skill that let him face foes who were far above him.

One of the reasons Ray had taken the Scout job was so he could use Reveal to see which stats were best for Chaser. *The job also gives Killing Intent Perception,* Behemot thought. *It helps prevent him from being taken out before he can use his skill.*

Naturally, this skill had far less utility and cost far more than it would have if Nemesis was an Embryo specializing in copying abilities or pure stat increases. As well, it could only target one stat at a time.

That didn’t matter to Ray, however. After all... he already had the power to defeat his opponents. The only problem was catching up to them, and this skill addressed just that.

...I see. So he increased his speed so he could land a crit on me with Shining Despair.

Shining Despair was a concentrated laser cannon that would certainly kill almost anything in its path. It could burn through just about any creature’s flesh. The only problem was that Ray couldn’t possibly have actually hit with it at his base speed — but he’d solved that issue by using Chaser and acquiring AGI to match Behemot’s.

Ohh, I see. So Holmes sacrificed himself to let Ray build up the damage counter and gave me all that info so I’d let him activate the skill... Not bad.

Behemot was actually aware of what Rook was doing and had willingly played along, but now that she’d seen Ray’s ability, she was half-delighted and half-sweating. As he was now, The Unbreakable was certainly capable of taking her

life, and that made her slightly restless.

You can counter this by waiting until his damage counter drops below the minimum needed to maintain the skill... or by taking out Fuso to cancel the AGI division. The cost to maintain the buff will become six times higher than it is now and force him to cancel it immediately... Those would both be pretty boring, though.

Countering the skill in that way wouldn't be any different from just not engaging her opponent's strategy at all. Behemot wanted to enjoy this battle, and doing that would be the opposite of fun.

Thus...

I'll fight him head-on. Behemot turned mid-sprint and faced Ray as he tried to fix his sights on her. Then, she dashed towards him, intending to pulverize his body with Tiger Scratch. She'd decided not to even give him a chance to fire.

However, Ray also flew into action.

"Hellish Miasma!" The moment those words left his lips, the right Miasmaflame Bracer — the one that hadn't been covered by Monochrome's cannon — spewed out an intense blast of deep purple miasma.

The triply-debilitating gas quickly permeated the entire hall.

...Debuffs that spread like this won't do anything to me in my current state, Behemot thought. *He probably knows that, so he's probably just trying to limit my vision, like that Flash Eye from before.*

Ray, his face covered by Storm Visage, had dropped down to the ground, hiding his body and the mirror behind him in the purple mist.

At the edge of Behemot's vision, she saw Tsukuyo drinking an elixir. The tian officials seemed to have been already evacuated, too, which made her realize that the use of the gas had been planned in advance.

He's wearing dark clothes, so it's easy for him to hide inside the similarly-colored miasma. But I should be able to figure out where he is if I just watch how it flows... Oh wait. They accounted for that too.

Behemot was about to watch for Ray's movements in the miasma and attack

him that way, but then she realized the mist was hiding more than just Ray.

I now can't see Tsukikage's shadows, either. While I'm on that, Adler's Art of Vanishing lets her pass through objects, so I couldn't see her in the gas even if I tried.

Thanks to Ray's miasma shielding them from sight, Tsukikage and Marie now had a much better chance of landing a surprise attack on her.

They're so perfectly in sync. I think they actually assumed this formation the moment Holmes used Flash Eye... And they did all of this just to defeat me*.*

Behemot realized that everyone present had thoroughly prepared for this moment. They had developed several strategies specifically to take down an Apex, created new powers, and they had all moved as one to corner her.

They had been preparing for this battle since the moment they'd found out that the almighty King of Beasts would be attending the peace talks as a bodyguard on the Dryfean side.

That was why they were here *fighting* her. They weren't merely buying time until Shu defeated Leviathan — they were all struggling to overcome an Apex.

That was certainly true for the members of Death Period, at least.

"...fun." And that was her honest opinion on the situation.

She could barely remember the last time any Masters had faced her with the intention of actually beating her.

Logan often tooted his own horn, but he was constantly avoiding Behemot anyway.

Franklin seemed to be developing a countermeasure against her, but he was so careful that he'd be unlikely to attack her until it was complete.

No one ever challenged her. No one even dared to claim they could defeat her.

She'd actually fought a Superior during the Dryfean civil war, but he was only stalling, so it wasn't much of a fight.

Because of all that, this moment was incredibly exciting for her.

It had been more than a year since her gamer side had been this enthralled.

...Yeah, I really wanna win this before *Ray's boost runs out.* Her opponents were facing her with all their might, and it made Behemot so happy that she wanted to respond in kind.

But if I go for Ray, Tsukikage and Adler would take the chance to ambush me... Levia's the one who specializes in messy AoE attacks, so I can't do anything like that right now.

If Leviathan was here, she could end this by just leveling the whole hall, and all their speed and stealth wouldn't save them.

Behemot was stronger than Leviathan, but the differences in their frames made one better at some things than the other. Together they were nearly flawless, and that was exactly why they had been separated.

...No time to worry about that. I'll just finish Ray off, then deal with the other two if they ambush me. That should be doable.

Having decided that, Behemot charged towards Ray.

She had already located him by watching the movement of the miasma. After closing the distance in a blink of an eye, she prepared to strike him down just as he was putting his hands on the floor beneath him.

That was when she sensed two entities approaching from two different angles behind her.

Ray and those two presences now surrounded her on all sides.

I see. So Adler stopped using Art of Vanishing at some point and hid in the shadows with Tsukikage. I was wondering why she wasn't attacking me before her SP ran out. This explains that.

Behemot was well aware that Eishiro and Marie would launch a counter-attack the moment she attacked Ray. The two of them would use the opening to score a critical hit on her.

The chances that she'd survive the hits were high, but she didn't want to bet on that 20% or so chance that they'd deal serious damage.

Thus, Behemot called off her attack and instead tried to dive *behind* Ray,

using her small frame to her advantage. With him in the way, landing a critical hit on her would become much more difficult.

I'll take Ray out with Tiger Scratch, then go for Tsukikage and Marie, in that order. That'll sort everything out.

With that in mind, Behemot prepared to finally go on the offensive... but then she saw *hands peeking out from beneath Ray.*

...Huh? For a moment, her mind went blank.

This was impossible, after all. She'd accounted for every single being present. She could clearly see all the still-surviving Altarian Masters. Ray was right in front of her, Eishiro and Marie had emerged from the shadows behind her, and Tsukuyo and Barbaroy were visibly standing some distance away.

She glanced around for just a moment... and that was all it took to understand what was *really* happening.

...Ah. Next to the wall, there stood a giant set of armor, assuming a defensive position.

This armor was *the* defining feature of Barbaroy Bad Burn — Gunhammer Plate, Magnum Colossus.

However, when Behemot targeted that suit of armor with Reveal... she got absolutely nothing.

That could only mean one thing: *Magnum Colossus was completely empty*.

...They outplayed me! When Rook had used Flash Eye to blind Behemot, Barbaroy had discarded her armor and hidden herself somewhere.

And it was obvious where: *the shadows*.

"Heaven's Weight!" Barbaroy... or rather, B3 wasn't a match for her in AGI, but she'd managed to emerge from her hiding place and hit Behemot with her skill thanks to the element of surprise.



Alas, gravity multiplied a measly 500 times meant little to the King of Beasts affected by Beastheart Possession. She might as well have just dropped a blanket on Behemot's back.

However...

...What's with this weight? It turned out the added weight was actually enough to make her feel discomfort.

Wait, is this...? Behemot had an idea of what could be happening here... and what B3 was doing.

At the edge of her vision, she saw Tsukuyo, smiling broadly, and Behemot noticed another thing she hadn't anticipated.

Atlas' gravity field is stronger than I heard it was. With Beastheart Possession, Behemot's STR was over 220,000. An avatar's base STR — the STR of an average adult male from Earth — was about 10. That meant that she had the strength of over 20,000 men.

Therefore, 500 times greater gravity shouldn't have meant much to her.

And the Binding debuff that came with it would've stood no chance against her immense STR, not to mention the resistance from Bourdrim.

In spite of that, Behemot was actually having trouble moving.

At first, she'd thought that Tsukuyo must have switched the target of her Faint Light to STR, and based on how she felt right then, she suspected that was indeed the case. However, even having her STR divided by 6 shouldn't have been as limiting as this. That could only mean that this gravity field was different than the one Behemot was familiar with.

That was when she noticed that B3 was extending her hands towards Behemot and clenching her teeth.

To her knowledge, Heaven's Weight required neither a hand motion like that nor such immense focus.

This wasn't the regular Heaven's Weight skill B3 had always used before.

This was a new power she'd developed — by means other than evolution.

The person responsible for this — Tsukuyo Fuso — smiled as she remembered a certain exchange.

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April, 2025, Tokyo University

“Hey, B — you ever thought about how weird Territories are?” It was a perfectly ordinary day in the CID clubroom when Tsukuyo posed that question to Kozue.

“Where’s that coming from?”

“Well, just hear me out. You know how most Embryos have a physical body, and their powers are tied to that body?” Tsukuyo continued her question.

Arms, Guardian, Chariot, Castle, and Territory — the five main categories of Embryos. Like Tsukuyo said, they generally had solid forms that were invested with various powers.

However...

“The Territory grouping is different from all the rest. It’s just a formless *space*.”

Territory type Embryos were composed solely of their skills and their resulting areas of effect.

The affected areas might physically change in appearance, but as long as the Embryo wasn’t any other category, Territories had no such thing as a “body.”

And even with hybrid Embryos, you had cases like Maidens and Apostles. Kaguya’s body completely vanished when using her Territory powers, so she was scarcely different from a pure Territory.

“Doncha think you’re missin’ out?” Tsukuyo asked.

“No, I don’t. Not having a body makes Territories hard to break. There are exceptions, like the Right of Destruction, but by default, Territories can’t be damaged like other Embryos and become unusable as a result,” Kozue said.

This reminded Kozue of her and Ray’s recent encounter with Rosa on the way to Torne. Once Gashadokuro’s body — her spear — was destroyed, Rosa was

unable to use her Embryo skill despite still being perfectly capable of fighting herself.

Kozue's... B3's Atlas was basically nothing *but* the power it wielded, so she would basically never end up in a situation like that.

"True, true," Tsukuyo nodded before saying, "What if I told you that Territories have another advantage?"

"...I'm all ears."

"Nheheh. Log in to *Dendro,* then, and I'll *show* you. I'll be waiting at my base."

Tsukuyo then casually hopped into bed, lay down, equipped the *Infinite Dendrogram* hardware, and logged in.

Kozue was slightly perplexed by how eager Tsukuyo was to get started, but she knew she had no choice but to join her.

She went to lock the clubroom's door, then put on another piece of hardware before lying down on the sofa.

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The two met up in The Lunar Society's headquarters.

Thanks to a recent attack by a certain mild-mannered meathead, the place was currently under repair and renovation.

They had even bought more of the surrounding land to expand the place, making changes that ranged from eye-catching to utterly staggering. As a result, Tsukuyo was dangerously low on funds, which had led to her causing the Hannya incident and ultimately becoming indebted to Azurite.

But that was irrelevant now. Tsukuyo was standing on the stage at the auditorium, while B3 was sitting in the audience. Aside from the two of them, there was only Kaguya, standing next to Tsukuyo with a faint smile on her face.

"You're familiar with Kaguya's Lunar Divider Field, right?"

"Yes."

"Here, let me show you from the base form of the 'night.'" When Tsukuyo said that, Kaguya transformed into her Territory form: the Lunar Divider Field.

It looked as though Kaguya had completely vanished, but actually, this shapeless space *was* her.

“Now comes the important part. First is the ‘swallow.’” Following those words, the ‘night’ vanished, and in its place there was a bluish-black mass that resembled both a swallow in flight and a crescent moon.

“And then there’s the Sunsleep Ink Shroud.” Then, Tsukuyo was wearing a blue-black coat that looked just like her ‘night,’ but compressed into a thin cloak.

Tsukuyo had used both the swallow and the shroud in her fight against Figaro.

She was flying the swallow and wearing the shroud at the same time.

“And here’s the ‘night’ again.” Her surroundings were once again veiled in darkness, but Tsukuyo was still clad in her Sunsleep Ink Shroud. “And those are my skills. Did you notice anything?”

“...Don’t you also have the ultimate skill and Faint Light?”

“Ohh. Yeah. I do have those, but the ult is kind of a bit special, while Faint Light requires all of Kaguya’s processing power and can’t be used along other skills, so that doesn’t factor in here. Hmm... Maybe I should make it a little more clear.”

Still wearing the shroud, Tsukuyo spread the ‘night’ again.

After that, she canceled the “night” to create the “swallow,” then instead created something that looked much like Eishiro’s shadow tentacles... although upon second inspection, it was closer to a “branch.”

That was when B3 realized something.

“The combos... You can’t use the ‘night,’ the ‘swallow,’ and the ‘branch’ together, is that it? But you *can* use any of them with the shroud.”

“Exactly. Now, why do you think that is?”

“...Based on what you said, it’s not *just* that they’re incompatible, is it?”

“Yeah. Why don’t I just tell you the answer?” she said as she canceled her skills. “The ‘night,’ the ‘swallow,’ and the ‘branch’ are all the same.”

“The same?”

“They’re all the same skill: Lunar Divider Field. They’re not new skills, they’re just different forms of the same thing. That’s why I can’t use the ‘night’ alongside the two compressed forms. I *can* use them with Sunsleep Ink Shroud because it’s a different skill.”

“Compressed forms...” B3 took in those words and thought about them deeply.

“It’s simple,” said Tsukuyo. “Pure Territories have no physical body— they’re just a space where their power is active. That means that you can change their shape, just like how I compressed Kaguya’s ‘night’ into a ‘swallow’ or ‘branch.’ And the best thing is — the more compressed it is, the stronger it becomes.”

All of these seemingly different forms were just the same Lunar Divider Field effect. The ‘swallow’ and ‘branch’ were just the ‘night’ reshaped to focus their effect and make it more difficult to resist.

Territories had no physical body... but that meant that there was a degree of freedom to the form they could take.

“I only realized this myself after getting the Sunsleep Ink Shroud. I was like... ‘Ah. If this skill gets stronger because the area it affects is condensed, wouldn’t Lunar Divider Field also grow stronger if I compress it?’” she said as she spread out her hands and pushed them closer together. “It did take a lot of practice, though. Also, I talked to Kage and some others about it, and apparently there’s Territory skills that aren’t that well suited for form changing like this. Powers that stick to the surroundings, for example, like Type Rule. But I think your Weight ability would be just right for it.”

Atlas’ Heaven’s Weight spread around B3 in a sphere, but if it was possible to concentrate it in a single direction, it seemed likely that its effect would indeed become stronger.

“Why are you telling me this now?” By joining CID, B3 had gained the right to access The Lunar Society’s database, but there was nothing in there about what Tsukuyo had just told her.

This was in fact a hidden technique that Tsukuyo had constructed herself.

Why, then, would she tell B3 about it now?

“Because you’re fun to watch lately.”

“Fun?”

“Yeah. You were always the kind of girl who cares about others, but you’re *really* going the extra mile for Ray, aren’t you? It moved me so much that I wanted to give you a helping hand.”

B3 said nothing in response.

“Also, you and your clan are now crafting a strategy against KoB, aren’t ya? Having an extra card to play won’t hurt. If you start now, maybe you’ll even learn how to do it in time.”

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Altar-Dryfe border, assembly hall

After that, B3 used the limited time left until the peace talks to acquire this secret Territory technique that Tsukuyo had taught her.

She started by transforming her usual sphere into a semi-sphere, then halving it again, and again, and again... until finally the field was a tenth of its original size.

This feat required extreme concentration, and the fact that B3 had to clench her teeth so hard to maintain it spoke volumes. It also came with its own physical dangers. The force exerted by this kind of control made the bones of her hands creak and blood vessels burst.

Even so, she was successfully compressing her gravity field.

The skill that once covered 360 degrees all around her was now limited to just the 22.5 degrees directly in front of her. It covered only 1/16th of the original, and in spite of the output lost in the compression process... this field was more potent than any Behemot had encountered before.

The gravity produced in that small area was 5,000 times greater than the norm.

“Gh...!” To Behemot, a field of 500 times greater gravity was merely like

having a blanket thrown over her, so even when that number became 5,000, it was only really like increasing that to ten blankets.

The gravity would instantly kill any normal person, but it didn't even cause Behemot any pain.

However, it is important to remember that *anyone* would be slowed down with ten blankets thrown over them.

On top of that, Tsukuyo was also dividing Behemot's STR by 6, meaning that she was now an entity with 3,600 times more STR than the average person fighting against 5,000 times greater gravity.

Here and now, for the first time, King of Beasts the Physical Apex collapsed to the ground.

This stillness was the chance at victory that B3... and Ray's entire group had been waiting for.

Ray turned to face Behemot, immobilized behind him.

"Shining..."

He leveled the cannon on his left arm towards her, and Monochrome began to shine a dazzling white.

Behemot's AGI had returned to its original value, but thanks to Chaser, Ray's AGI matched hers. Shining Despair would soon crack open her skull, killing her with all its various injury-based status effects.

Still, Behemot said nothing. Faced with the death penalty, she had nothing in her heart but honest praise.

They had acted as one to completely corner her. Just like Rook, they had never once given up on their collective victory even when faced with overwhelming violence.

Behemot found them profoundly dazzling, for it was a kind of strength she could never have.

After all, she was a person who'd chosen an animal avatar because it would let her get away with never properly talking to anyone.

I don't hate this side of myself, though. And yet, regardless of how she felt about it, this power that was so far beyond her had managed to reach her anyway.

That fact gave her nothing but joy.

She was beyond delighted to have faced opponents she could give her all against... enemies who could finally give her a good fight.

...I'm sorry.

That was exactly why she felt regret and silently apologized to them.

After all, it would soon be over.

...I'm sorry, Claudiah. Behemot also apologized to her friend fighting up in the sky. She'd have to break that promise she'd made to her.

Behemot was unable to escape the super-gravity, and the Shining Despair would soon be released. It wouldn't be long until the powerful and piercing concentrated laser would penetrate her head.

It was over.

Both Behemot's "fun time" and her "battle for victory" would now end. From now on, there would be only a "one-sided massacre" and "assured victory."

"DESPAIR!" Right before Ray's left hand unleashed the light that would bring down the Apex...

"Transformation... Soaring and Indomitable: Greatest Top!"

...The accessory hanging over Behemot's neck shimmered and released a golden shine.

Chapter Twelve: A Dear Friend

About the two girls

Six years ago, Altimia A. Altar the first princess of Altar was riding a dragon carriage to the imperium, en route to her stay as a transfer student there.

Back then, relations between Altar and Dryfe were so positive that cultural exchange between the royal families like this was a matter of course. Just a few years ago, Prince Hallon — the first son of the imperium's crown prince — had been a transfer student in the kingdom.

However, Altimia knew that there was more to this excursion than mere cultural exchange.

They are preparing to marry me off. Altar and Dryfe had been on good terms for a long time now, and the governing bodies of both nations had begun to consider forging an alliance or even merging the two countries through marriage.

Altimia was certain that this exchange was preparation for that. Her father, the king, hadn't actually said anything of the sort, but his trusted advisor, the Arch Sage, had implied as much.

The current imperator was growing old and his princes were nearly her father's age, so she assumed that she would be made to marry one of *their* sons, be it Prince Hallon or Prince Gaeczys — the second prince's firstborn.

Within the next six years or so, Altimia was certain she'd be the wife of one of them.

At this point, Altimia didn't think much of the situation. In this world, it was normal for princesses to have no say in who they married.

Though, if I marry outside of Altar, that will surely make Elizabeth cry, she thought. *Even my leaving for this exchange student period turned her into a blubbering mess.*

Altimia could not have guessed that her little sister would end up married off before she herself — and that she would be deeply involved.

...Ah, I just remembered that there was *another prince my age.* The third prince also had a son of his own. He almost never showed himself in public, and the people who even realized he existed were few and far between.

The reason for this was that he'd been bedridden for a long time.

A few years ago, the third prince and his wife, son, and daughter had fallen victim to a terrorist bombing. The parents were both killed, while the son suffered severe injuries that left him with limited mobility, and he was now undergoing treatment in Marquis Barbaros' — his mother's family's — mansion. They kept him there because that act of terrorism was likely related to the ongoing struggle for the throne, so if they kept him in the capital, he would likely be targeted again.

Because of these circumstances, he hadn't had a public appearance in years. Apparently the family was now represented by his twin sister — the only one who had escaped the explosion mostly unharmed.

Barbaros, eh...?

Remembering what she'd learned before transferring, Altimia looked out the window of the dragon carriage.

What she saw was the land of Marquis Barbaros. On her way to the capital, the plan was that she would spend a few days at the Barbaros mansion.

Maybe I'll get to meet the third prince's children, she thought.

Several hours later, the dragon carriage arrived at the appointed place.

At the mansion, Altimia and her entourage were welcomed by the elderly Marquis Barbaros.

The princess was accompanied by a number of maids and some members of the Royal Guard, as well as their captain — Celestial Knight, Langley Grandria.

The reason she'd brought such powerful bodyguards was an attack that happened over twenty years ago, by a Mythical UBM named "Edelvalsa." The monster had completely destroyed one of Altar's diplomatic envoys, and they

wanted to be prepared just in case something like that happened again.

A Mythical UBM would be a difficult opponent regardless, but Langley had possession of Gold Thunder the Prism Steed — so if worse came to worst, Altimia could at least escape. She had undergone training to ride it in case something happened.

Once out of the carriage, Altimia exchanged greetings and a bit of conversation with Marquis Barbaros before she was invited inside and led to the guest room where she would be staying for the next few days.

After getting comfortable, she began to wonder about something.

For some reason the marquis was acting very apologetic towards me... no... towards the kingdom itself. Even though there was nothing in his welcome that overtly suggested this, Altimia couldn't help but feel that he'd acted like he had a guilty conscience. Altimia didn't sense any malice in him, exactly, but his behavior somehow gave her that impression.

He did, in fact, have something to feel guilty about.

To their knowledge, Edelvalsa had killed everyone on the Altarian mission, but there actually was one single survivor — Emilio Quartierlatin. By sheer chance, he'd ended up with Edelvalsa's Mythical MVP special reward, and such a weapon was so valuable that the imperator had ordered that Barbaros raise Emilio as his own.

This made him feel apologetic towards the kingdom and, more specifically, the princess.

When he'd learned that Altimia would be staying at his mansion, he even considered telling her the truth — but he was unable to do so while the current imperator was still alive. If he went against the imperators will, he would endanger not only his family, but his adopted son Emilio and the children of the third prince he was sheltering.

Feeling torn apart on the inside, he'd chosen to remain silent about all of this.

The marquis would go on to pass away five years later, shortly after seeing the new imperator take the throne. Chances were that the mental stress of keeping up that lie played a role in his death.

“...I see no point in thinking about this much longer. I will go train.”

Altimia could not understand why the marquis was behaving the way he was, so she chose to stop considering it and went to practice her combat skills for a change of pace. She had already asked where to find the mansion’s training grounds.

He gave me quite the strange look when I asked... After telling the Royal Guard where she was headed, Altimia took her leave.

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When she arrived at the training grounds, however, Altimia found there was someone there already.

A girl about her age was swinging around a spear only about 2 metels in length — probably meant for fighting in close quarters.

This wasn’t all that strange to see — that was the purpose of the training grounds, after all .

The strange thing that caught Altimia’s attention was that the girl’s spearplay was *far* too perfect.

Her spear made no sound as she struck. She wasted no energy on “slicing at the wind”... parting the wall of air, so to speak.

Her movements were efficient, perfected, and utterly superb. It was as though the spear was flowing through the air without a single flawed motion. The placement of her fingers holding the shaft, her every single step, even the slightest shifts of her muscles and joints... not a single detail was out of place.

She had long blonde hair, but even the way her flowing locks danced with her movements didn’t seem disordered. Altimia felt like she was watching the flow of wind or water.

It wasn’t a mere dance, however — she was moving exactly the way she would have in a real battle.

Despite that, it was probably more beautiful than any martial dance.

As for Altimia’s thoughts on what she was seeing, she had only one word for it...

“Mechanical...”

...And that word escaped her lips.

The spear-wielding girl abruptly stopped.

Altimia suddenly realized her blunder, but she knew that she couldn’t take back what she’d said. It was her honest thoughts, after all. The girl’s spear-dance lacked any flaws and looked as natural as nature itself... but Altimia could see no emotion behind it. Feelings, it seemed, would have only disturbed the girl’s movements. The sight of it reminded Altimia of her music box with a spinning dancer doll on top, which Prince Hallon had given her during his visit to the kingdom.

Altimia couldn’t help but feel that the spear-wielding girl was much like that mechanical dancer. It was beautiful enough to move the heart... But the girl herself seemed to put no heart into it.

Though, perhaps no one else would’ve shared Altimia’s opinion on this sight.

Still frozen, the girl looked straight at Altimia. It was almost like she was evaluating her, but that wasn’t quite the right word.

She was looking at Altimia as if to *analyze* her, just like a machine might.

The girl then glanced downward and noticed the training sword at Altimia’s side.

“Care to spar?” she asked without any preface. Her tone was odd, as though she herself wasn’t sure why she’d asked that.

“Certainly.” Altimia instantly agreed. She knew that this girl wasn’t merely venting her annoyance at Altimia’s comment. Instead, she felt that the girl, as talented as she was, had most likely realized that Altimia was the Sacred Princess and possessed immense sword fighting talent.

Altimia, a born swordmaster.

This strange girl, the very incarnation of spear fighting talent.

Altimia didn’t even know her name. However, the two were drawn together as if by gravity, and now stood facing each other, weapons in hand.

It was unclear who would make the initial attack, but this was the first time they crossed blades together.

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"...It seems like... I've lost," Altimia said through ragged breaths, leaning on the wall after a full hour of fighting.

The other girl hadn't won because she was just more talented than Altimia. While the girl with the spear was giving the match everything she had, Altimia hadn't even used half of true skill.

She didn't have her powers as Sacred Princess without Altar, and since the blade was the greatest of the kingdom's national treasures, she couldn't bring it to Dryfe. Also, Altar's techniques were based on its ability to cut anything, so they couldn't be used with any normal sword.

Instead, she chose to fight using the pirate sword fighting technique taught to her by Langley, but ultimately she couldn't land a single hit on the girl.

But even if I ignore that and compare only our raw talent... I cannot say for certain that I would have won. That was how abnormally gifted the girl was.

Both her defense and offense were flawless, and no movement was wasted. That was probably why, despite having fought for a whole hour, she wasn't even out of breath.

She might be stronger than my teacher... Altimia thought that the girl, despite her age, might've been even stronger than the person who'd taught her swordplay — Celestial Knight, Langley.

"No. I am still below the Celestial Knight," the girl said as though she'd read Altimia's mind.

"Huh?"

"The knight possesses a power that protects, while I merely possess the power to wield a spear. The comparison is not apt. Even if I could best him in sheer martial prowess, I would still be below him as an *entity*... My apologies. Give me a moment."

After saying all of that in a flat voice, she fell silent before *striking herself in*

the forehead with the shaft of her spear.

"HUH?!" The sudden action shocked Altimia, but the girl just stood in place with the shaft still pressed against her forehead, not moving an inch.

The impact made such an intense noise that Altimia wondered if she'd damaged something inside her skull.

Blood flowed from her forehead, and about ten seconds later...

"...Apologies for the wait! Oh, and please excuse my rudeness thus far."

...The girl spoke up with a tone and voice quite different from before.

Her eyes sparkled as she rambled on and on.

"I tend to get a bit gloomy while training! It makes me come off as a little impolite... I am truly sorry for inviting you to spar without even saying hello!" She bowed her head, now brimming with the wasteful thing they called "emotion."

However, her movements were still as flawless as ever, so Altimia knew that this was the same girl as before.

"N-No need," Altimia said. "I should apologize for interrupting your training."

"Oh, it is nothing! In fact, I should thank you! Training with someone else makes for a better experience," the girl said with a full smile. "Also, this is the first time someone my age has given me such a rousing fight! That makes me really happy!"

"...I see." Altimia could relate to that.

She had been born the Sacred Princess.

No one her age had been burdened with a fate like hers.

She had friends like Langley's daughter, Liliana, and the Arch Sage's favorite disciple, Integra, but despite this she was constantly troubled by a small degree of loneliness.

Altimia felt that this girl was much like her. Their fates might be completely different in character, but they carried the same kind of weight on their shoulders.

That was why they'd sparred before even introducing themselves.

"Ah! My apologies! I have still not given you my name..." said the girl.

"Neither have I, then. My name is Altimia A. Altar, First Princess of Altar. I will be staying here for five days or so."

"I know you! I am Claudiah R. Dryfe. My father was the third prince, so I am the lowest ranking member of the royal family!" Upon hearing that, Altimia discovered that this girl was one of the children of the late third prince... not the son who was still bedridden, but the daughter who handled their official business.

Something about her words made her curious, however.

"You know of me?"

"I do! I will be your 'tuner'... your attendant at school!"

"You...?" Altimia was curious why a princess would be given such a task. Were they just being considerate of Altimia, or were there other circumstances, either for Claudiah specifically or the imperium in general, that called for this?

"That means we will be able to spar regularly!" Claudiah said with nothing but joy, beaming brightly.

"We will...?" Altimia asked.

"Ah. M-My apologies... I should have asked if you would agree to something like that..."

Claudiah's tone had a hint of fear in it — something you could hardly expect from a young woman with such immense talent at spear-handling.

However, it made her look more like a girl her age, and Altimia found that endearing.

"No need to apologize. This makes me happy, too."

"Oh?"

"I would gladly fight you again. I hope we get along during the coming three years... Claudiah," Altimia said, extending her right hand.

She was offering to shake on becoming friends.

Claudiah spent a moment looking at the hand...

“...Certainly! I am sure we will, Altimia!”

...But then grasped it with a blinding smile.

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Over the next three years, they did indeed become close friends.

They’d spent their days together, on the training grounds as well as in their everyday lives.

They would worry about upcoming exams, recommend books to each other, go shopping together... and eventually, they’d stopped being a pair of royal heirs or the menacing duo of the Sacred Princess and The Ram. Instead, they were nothing but ordinary friends.

They’d even continued to keep in touch even after Altimia had returned to Altar.

However, that ended following the shifts in Dryfe’s government and the ensuing war.

But on this day, during these peace talks, they’d met once again and fought to protect — or obtain — what they needed to.

Altimia now wielded the exalted blade she had never used in any of their previous duels, while Claudiah was armed with a mechanical body and countless MVP rewards.

This was their first fight in a long time... and it could be their last.

All of this was unfolding like a martial dance high up in the heavens.

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Altar-Dryfe border, the sky

Silver and jade winds drew circles in the air, clashing and separating over and over.

The silver wind was Zephyrus Silver, the Grand Artificer Flagman’s Prism Steed unit that wasn’t counted among the official five.

Astride it was the first princess of Altar — the Sacred Princess, Altimia A. Altar.

The jade wind was Jade Storm, the second of Flagman's official five Prism Steeds.

The one riding it was the little sister of the Imperator of Dryfe — The Ram, Claudiah L. Dryfe.

Zephyrus Silver galloped on condensed air, while Jade Storm flew through the sky by means of the wind ejected from its frame.

Their means of flight were wildly different, but the speed was more or less equal.

It was likely, though, that the riders were purposely matching their speeds so they could properly exchange blows.

They had clashed seven times since this fight began, but neither of them had suffered any damage yet.

However, that didn't mean that this was a true battle of equals.

By the seventh clash, the silver rider... Altimia... had broken out in a cold sweat.

She fended me off again...! Each of the seven attacks she'd launched at Claudiah had been deflected.

Perhaps this wouldn't have been surprising in an ordinary martial arts showdown. Claudiah was fully on the defensive, and some would say that meant Altimia had the upper hand.

But such reasonable thoughts didn't apply here.

After all, Altimia was wielding The Primeval Blade, Altar. This sword could cut through anything and everything, yet Claudiah was warding off all of her attacks.

Nothing — not even pure energy — could avoid being cut by this blade.

Deflecting its attacks should have been impossible, yet this supposedly impossible thing had happened *seven times* now.

She's knocking the sword aside by striking the flat of the blade...!

Altar's edge could cut through any defenses, but that ability obviously didn't extend to the *sides*.

That was how Claudiah could parry Altar — by applying force to these relatively harmless parts of the weapon.

This sort of parry was reasonable when dealing with any kind of sword —it could be considered a basic strategy, in fact.

However, even being able to *see* the energy-severing blade of Altar coming towards you while moving at nearly the speed of sound, and then deflecting it with a lance — all without letting the edge touch it — was an inhuman feat.

...She hasn't changed, I suppose. Altimia knew well that Claudiah's talent had long surpassed what was humanly possible.

She'd sparred against her friend many times, and she discovered something about Claudiah that would strike fear into anyone's heart.

It was related to the first sparring match they'd ever had.

Claudiah had completely bested Altimia back then... *despite having first picked up a spear only a month before*.

In a mere moon after taking up martial arts, she had become strong enough to overwhelm the well-trained Sacred Princess without even breaking a sweat.

She has not grown stronger, but neither has she grown weaker... Though, I suppose that is only natural — she had already peaked, after all.

As the person who knew Claudiah's skill better than anyone, Altimia was confident in her evaluation. Claudiah's technique was perfect, and anything that strayed from that would be rejected as a flaw.

Not even the giant lance she now wields seems to have affected her ability.

Masters had a saying along the lines of "a poor craftsman blames his tools."

Claudiah was the polar opposite of that proverbial "poor craftsman." Be it a spear or a lance — the tool didn't matter to her in the slightest. The girl was probably capable of acquiring a "The One"-type Superior Job for literally any

weapon she'd picked up.

She was no doubt among the five most skilled people in the entire world.

If Altimia's ability was born from the blood of the Sacred King — the first Azurite — coursing through her veins, then Claudiah's must be a natural, divine talent.

No... that was insufficient to describe it.

She was no mere prodigy. You couldn't even call her *phenomenon* without feeling like the term was inadequate.

The abilities of Claudiah R. Dryfe were best described as *something that shouldn't possibly exist*.

Truly... she is so skilled that fighting her makes me doubt my sanity, Altimia thought. She had once labeled Claudiah's spearwork as "mechanical," and that was extremely apt.

After all, Claudiah had perfected her combat style as easily as one might install software on a computer.

The people of this world didn't worship any gods based on concepts, but if such beings existed, then Claudiah was the kind of machine a divine engineer might create.

But Claudiah... if I let fear of your immense skill paralyze me, I would not be worthy of being your friend.

Despite facing such a fearsome being, Altimia wasn't the least bit frightened.

Even if Claudiah had warded off her deadly sword seven times, it didn't mean that she'd defeated her. Altimia's blade, her hands grasping the hilt, the burning soul within her... none of these had been broken, so this battle was far from over.

"That's quite the face you're making, Altimia," Claudiah's voice rode the wind as they clashed for the eighth time. "You were always wonderful with a blade."

The words reached Altimia even after Claudiah was a good distance away from her. This was likely achieved by some function of Claudiah's Jade Storm.

“This is thanks to you. It’s because you always faced me like this that I was able to keep myself from falling to loneliness.”

Altimia remained silent.

“No one could keep up with me. They would give up the moment they realized the immense gap in talent.”

This was something Claudiah had seen many times the day she’d first taken a spear in hand, as well as during her days in school... and the Dryfean civil war.

“But you were different. Even if you lost against me while sparring, your heart was never once broken. You never gave up in the face of my talents and you always thoroughly believed that you could win against me *next* time... And eventually, you did. Is that not true?”

“...I did,” Altimia replied, and again, despite the distance or speed, her words had no trouble reaching Claudiah.

“I’m really quite fond of you, Altimia.”

“And I of you. You are a dear friend.”

The two spoke like this even as they clashed for the ninth time.

“Ah, Altimia... Have you noticed? Right now, I feel three emotions about you.”

Altimia said nothing as they clashed for the tenth time.

“Friendship. You were my first friend, and one I will treasure for life.”

Eleventh clash.

“Passion. As the spear of the imperium, I want to fight you more than anyone else.”

Twelfth clash.

“And finally... love.”

The thirteenth clash... ended without any weapons touching.

The words alone rode the wind to reach Altimia.

“I cherish you more than anything else in the world, and I want you to be mine. Were you aware I felt this way?”

“I was. I have known since our school days.”

Altimia’s immediate reply made Claudiah’s eyes widen.

“...Eheheh. And despite that, you did not push me away?”

“Of course. That would be no reason to deny your friendship.”

Altimia had indeed noticed her dear friend’s intense feelings towards her about a year after they first became acquainted, but she had no intention of forsaking their friendship because of it. Claudiah had also never confessed her feelings like this, so Altimia had simply never brought them up either.

She wasn’t merely stalling, however — Altimia had already known how she would respond.

“I have already prepared my words for when you eventually revealed your feelings to me like this,” Altimia said, pulling Silver to a stop.

Claudiah did the same and waited for Altimia to continue.

“I am the blade of Altar and the representative of the royal family. We will be friends until the end, but I can never accept your love.”

“...I knew you would say that.” Claudiah had expected to receive such a response.

However, Altimia’s next words made her eyes widen again.

“My answer is the same as it would have been back then: that is why I cannot *marry* you and rule both our nations by your side.”

This wasn’t a mere rejection — Altimia had just implied something that shocked Claudiah to the core.

“Altimia... you knew?”

“I did, Claudiah... or should I say...” Altimia said before pausing for a moment, then declared, “Imperator of the Dryfe Imperium, Claudiah *Reinhard* Dryfe.”

Claudiah fell silent, not saying a thing in response.

Or more accurately, she *couldn’t* say anything... because Altimia was completely right.

“You are not denying it. Though, there is no point in that, I suppose. My Truth Discernment would see right through you.”

Silence was as good as confirmation here.

“...How long have you known?”

“Actually, this was all partially a trap. I was only half-certain of it, and only because of today’s peace talks in any case.”

“...Did you realize it when Ray Starling saw right through my plot?”

“No. It was some time before that.” It happened shortly before Ray had uncovered the imperium’s cunning plan... when they were adjusting the treaty to make it agreeable for both sides.

“Back then, when we were adding conditions and modifying the treaty, you never once contacted Vandelheim.”

Claudiah was silent.

“I realize that you’d predicted all our conditions as though you could read our minds, but this was an international agreement. If there are changes to be made, it is customary to leave the assembly hall and inform the head of state. With my father gone, I am the acting ruler of Altar... but you are a mere *representative*. Your brother, the imperator, still outranks you.”

Claudiah had full authority over the negotiations, but that did not mean she possessed the decision-making power of the imperium’s actual ruler.

That was what made everything so suspicious.

“You used no communication magic, and the capital is too far for Telepathy Cuffs to reach. Even I brought a comms magic agent... but you had no one.”

That could only mean that they had no intention of contacting the imperator in the first place.

“The reason for that is simple: you did not *need* to ask anyone.”

Silence.

“After all, you yourself *are* the imperator. Right... Claudiah Reinhard?” Altimia said, using her friend’s full name. “It is a Dryfean custom to give twins each

others' first names as middle names, is it not? You told me that when I asked for Reinhard's name."

"...I remember that." Altimia had met Reinhard at school once. After that, she went on to ask Claudiah what his name was, and that was when she had informed her of this custom.

Altimia finally arrived at a certain conclusion.

"The real Reinhard died in the civil war, did he not?" If her friend held the throne, then that could only mean that the Reinhard she'd met was no longer with them.

"Men are usually inheritors in Dryfe, just as they are in the kingdom. You hid the death of Reinhard — the *true* imperator — while acting as the imperator yourself. You told me once that the current head of the military — Field Marshal Barbaros — is your uncle, while the head of government — Chancellor Vigoma — was your private tutor. You were able to keep the death a secret by surrounding yourself with people you trusted."

The chances of this secret being exposed by Reveal were actually quite low, for high-ranking families generally had potent anti-Reveal equipment. A famous example was Zifu Longmian, the mask used by Huang He's Draconic Emperor to hide his name, but even Altimia herself had often slipped outside while wearing similar gear.

If Claudiah possessed something like that, she could easily pretend to be her late brother.

"You were thoroughly alike even in your school years. With slight adjustments from someone with a Cosmeticist job, no one could tell you apart."

That was the entirety of Altimia's conjecture.

Claudiah was silent for a good moment before making a troubled face and saying, "You are seventy percent right."

"...Seventy percent?"

"You were completely right until about the midpoint, but then veered off the mark completely." That meant that Altimia was right about Claudiah being the

imperator, but wrong about how she had acquired the throne.

As for how, exactly, she was wrong...

“My brother, Reinhard Claudiah Dryfe, did not die in the imperator accession civil war.” Altimia instantly began to assume that he had merely been severely wounded and was still recovering...

“After all... he died in the terrorist attack *nine years ago*.”

...But that idea was shot down by an explanation she had never expected.

“Huh...?” The idea that Reinhard had died nine years ago made no sense to her. He was supposedly alive and well during Altimia’s days as a transfer student six years ago. In fact, she had met him herself.

While a storm of questions raged in Altimia’s mind...

“Give me a moment... These talks are best left to my brother.”

...Those were Claudiah’s words as she put her lance against her forehead.

It was reminiscent of her strange actions on the day they’d met, but far less intense. Claudiah closed her eyes and froze for a few seconds before opening her eyes again...

“It has been quite a while.”

...With a face that seemed wholly unlike the one she had mere moments ago.

She spoke with striking fluency and her expression was now doll-like — completely devoid of any emotion.

Now, she really was almost like a machine... just like the Claudiah Altimia had first met.

“I am the imperator... the ‘elder brother, Reinhard.’” With the demeanor of an entirely different person, the entity that was once Claudiah introduced itself.

“Rein...hard...?”

“Indeed. I am Reinhard, the ‘elder brother,’ as well as the individual in charge of machines and governance.”

Claudiah... no... the entity before Altimia once again referred to itself as

Reinhard—and once again, *Truth Discernment did not trigger*.

This being most certainly saw itself as Reinhard and no one else.

“What is the meaning of this?” Altimia asked.

“Oh, where should I begin? Let us start with what we both know,” Reinhard said, pointing at Claudiah’s chest. “This person, Claudiah Reinhard Dryfe, is immensely talented.”

“...That is true,” Altimia agreed.

“One talent that you are quite familiar with is the ability to master any art.” Unlike Masters, who usually had the aptitude for any job besides a few Superior Jobs, each tian was only suited for certain jobs. And in terms of this raw talent, Claudiah was head and shoulders above the rest of them.

“Claudiah could do anything she wanted and become whatever she desired. She merely happened to take up the spear and become The Ram; she could have taken many other Superior Jobs easily. The fact that this body also has King of Machines is proof of that.”

Those words reminded Altimia of something. If Reinhard was Claudiah back when they’d met at school, then that meant that Claudiah was also King of Machines. Juggling both vanguard and crafting Superior Jobs at the same time was impossible for any ordinary tian.

“...You implied that you had other talents,” said Altimia.

“Indeed. Claudiah did have another talent, and it is the reason I exist,” Reinhard, indicating Claudiah’s face. “It is the talent to *modify* herself.”

“Modify...?”

“Claudiah was able to freely modify *her inner self* however she wanted. And in case you were wondering, the body modifications that you have seen were only begun a year ago.”

“...Well, I am well aware that you didn’t have strange hands that could move on their own after being severed.”

They had shared a bath several times at the student dorm, and Altimia could clearly recall that Claudiah’s body had been flesh and blood.

“Not even Claudiah could remain unharmed while facing Dryfe’s SMTF and the Superior they’d hired. Though it did turn out to be a good opportunity to test the artificial arms we made based on Prism Person remains and data we discovered in some ruins,” Reinhard said casually, moving the battle-ready artificial arm back and forth. “But back to the original matter... I, Reinhard, am a personality that Claudiah, driven by necessity, created by modifying herself,” he declared without any hesitation. “I am what you might call a split personality... or more accurately, a *persona*. The only soul in this body is Claudiah’s, and I am merely a personality that takes over when needed.”

“...A persona.”

“While Claudiah is heavily emotional, I discard emotion in favor of logic, and fulfill my role by crafting plots on behalf of Claudiah and the nation of Dryfe. Claudiah as she is now is simply not suited for such thoughts.”

That meant that the entrapment written into today’s peace treaty had actually been crafted by Reinhard — Claudiah’s persona.

There were a few benefits to having multiple personas.

Certain conclusions were just beyond certain people due to their differences in thought processes and intelligence, and this was a way around that. Masters had a saying that went “Two heads are better than one,” and Claudiah Reinhard Dryfe truly exemplified that.

“Claudiah’s persona...” Altimia said as she pondered this. She wondered how creating a persona was even possible, but the mere thought of Claudiah’s immense talents quickly did away with her doubts.

She couldn’t begin to understand *how* Claudiah had done it, but she could accept that she had somehow done exactly that.

Also, based on what Reinhard had said, Altimia believed the methods behind this were a mystery even to them.

“Do you understand what I am now?” Reinhard asked.

“...I do. Do you call yourself ‘Reinhard’ because your personality is based on that of the late Reinhard?”

Altimia wondered why they would use that name. She guessed that it was to pay respects to her real elder brother...

“No, that is certainly not the case.”

...But Reinhard denied that assumption.

“Reinhard Claudiah Dryfe was actually a normal child, very unlike Claudiah or myself as I am now. He was never a machine in human form like this.”

That might’ve been self-derision or a jest on Reinhard’s part, but the lack of emotion in his face or voice made it impossible to tell.

“Claudiah and Reinhard were also *fraternal* twins. They did look similar, but they were not completely indistinguishable. No one pointed that out, however. Everyone knew them as twins and had no doubts that they would grow up to have the same face. Though it probably helped that I first showed myself as ‘Reinhard’ a few years after the terrorist attack, before we had both gone through puberty.”

Altimia herself had thought little of “Reinhard” having the exact same face as Claudiah, because their personalities and behavior were so radically different.

“Also, this body does not house the soul of the late Reinhard Claudiah Dryfe. There is nothing necromantic about it. This has even been confirmed by a specialist... King of Tartarus. There is only one soul here. Reinhard’s seemed to be haunting the area where the terrorist attack occurred, so we had King of Tartarus take care of it.”

The persona of “Reinhard” spoke of the real Reinhard with absolute disinterest.

“So... why ‘Reinhard’?” Altimia asked.

“Are you asking about the source of the name... or the persona?”

“...Both.”

The person in front of her nodded before continuing “The idea to pretend the real Reinhard Claudiah Dryfe was alive came from our grandfather on our mother’s side — the previous Marquis Barbaros.”

This didn’t surprise Altimia in the slightest. Claudiah couldn’t have acted as

two public figures simultaneously on her own — she needed the help of someone close, and since she'd lost both her parents and her brother, her grandfather was the only candidate.

"He was thinking of Claudiah's safety," Reinhard said while pointing at Claudiah's body. "The conflict over the Dryfean throne had already begun at that point. I suppose you could call it a recommendation from our grandfather on our father's side... the previous imperator, in other words."

The first and second princes of Dryfe — Instead of naming either of them as a crown prince, the previous imperator had forced them to fight each other instead.

Xanafald was a man who did whatever he thought necessary to make sure Dryfe would flourish, even if that meant making his own family fight each other or appropriating Emilio Quartierlatin.

"The princes and their children were having a secret feud amongst themselves. And even though it was small in comparison, the third prince had his own faction as well. It involved Marquis Barbaros and his family, as well as several local noblemen."

The chances of the third prince taking the throne were minimal. It was likely that either the first or second princes would emerge the final victory, while the third prince would either be granted the title of duke or his son would inherit the Barbaros March from his mother's side of the family.

However, there was also the possibility that neither the first nor the second prince would actually emerge from this conflict alive — which would make the third prince the imperator by default. That was the reason he had supporters despite the fact that he would likely not win in open conflict.

"But then, that terrorist attack killed their father as well as his firstborn son, Reinhard Claudiah Dryfe. This was the final nail in the coffin for the third prince's faction. The marquis must have believed that if the truth were to come out, the remnants of the faction would somehow use the surviving sister to make themselves a place in the other factions."

That was what drove Marquis Barbaros to make his decision.

“That was why he claimed Reinhard Claudiah Dryfe was still alive, just recovering in the Barbaros mansion. This kept the third prince’s faction from dissolving.” By acting as if Reinhard was still alive, the marquis kept the faction’s hope alive.

“...I am impressed he was able to hide it so well.”

“It wasn’t easy. Only a few people knew the real truth. Those who did not have Truth Discernment were fed false information from Claudiah, who disguised herself as bedridden Reinhard. They believed the lie to be true and went on to spread those lies to other people. For false information to avoid detection by Truth Discernment, those spreading our lies needed to believe it unconditionally. Though, after doing all this, grandfather had to lock himself up in the mansion to avoid anyone using Truth Discernment on *him*.”

He had planned to keep the real truth hidden until the next imperator was decided. He would then go on to “reveal” that Reinhard had tragically succumbed to his condition and passed away, believing that Claudiah’s safety would be ensured.

However, there was one problem.

“The lie survived for about four years, but then people began to wonder why Reinhard showed no signs of recovery and had barely interacted with the other royals .”

This was only to be expected. In fact, it was impressive that it had taken four years for that doubt to set in.

“It became necessary to prove to the others that Reinhard was, indeed, still alive.”

“...To prove that a dead person was still alive?”

“That is why Claudiah ultimately needed to convince *herself*... to make herself believe unconditionally that she *is* Reinhard.”

Ultimately, that was the reason behind it all.

“And that is why I, ‘Reinhard’ the ‘elder brother,’ exist now. I stood before the rest of the royal family and proved that ‘I’ was still alive by stating, in no

uncertain terms, that I was Reinhard Claudiah Dryfe."

Altimia was speechless. This persona was so real that it even overcame Truth Discernment. The ability to artificially create something like that was far beyond any sort of hypnosis or suggestion that Altimia had ever seen.

"But you..."

"I know what you're going to ask. Back then, I wholeheartedly believed that I was Reinhard Claudiah Dryfe, but now I am aware that 'Reinhard' is a mere persona. The need to hide myself vanished once I became imperator, so Claudiah connected the two of us."

Reinhard matter-of-factly explained that he understood he was a constructed personality.

"But back when you and I met at school, I still believed myself to be the real Reinhard. I had not *been* Reinhard for long at that point, and lived a double life without even *myself* knowing about it."

Unlike Reinhard, Claudiah had always been aware of this arrangement, so she made certain to make sure he always had an alibi and clear up any confusion that arose. Most notably, she acted as Reinhard's "assistant" whenever he did work as King of Machines.

After all — they only had one body.

"What was not accounted for was the mechanic grouping."

"Mechanic grouping?"

"At some point, people began to believe that during his recovery, Reinhard underwent intense training as a Mechanic and became extremely capable at the job. It was but smoke without fire. For all we know, that was just a lie spread by another faction to make Reinhard look incompetent when the truth came out."

"You mean to tell me..."

"Yes. That is why I am King of Machines. It would be bothersome if the discrepancy between this rumor and reality lead to the *real* truth coming out, so I delved into the Mechanic grouping. By the time we met in school, I had

fulfilled the conditions for the Superior Job and became King of Machines. Though, as you know, that led to me being left in charge of many chores."

Acquiring a Superior Job for a reason like that was downright absurd. On top of this, by becoming imperator, Reinhard (or rather, Claudiah *as* Reinhard) had also acquired the related Special Superior Job, Imperator Machina.

Altimia once again realized just how extraordinary Claudiah's talents were.

"That's the reason behind my name. As for the personality..."

Reinhard fell silent for a moment, making a troubled expression for the first time since the conversation had begun.

"To begin at the conclusion, my personality is similar to the *original* Claudiah's."

"Hm?" Altimia couldn't understand what he meant by that... Though one might say that she was the one person in the world who was *incapable* of understanding it

"How would you describe Claudiah — as a person?"

"An innocent girl, brimming with emotion. She can be a bit overbearing, but she makes up for it with boundless charm."

"You mean the Claudiah who talks like a typical noble girl, yes?"

"She has been that way since the day we met, no?"

Claudiah had acted somewhat different during their first sparring match, but after that, she'd always been the girl Altimia had always known.

In response to Altimia's question, Reinhard nodded and said, "Yes. *That very day, Claudiah modified herself to be that girl.*"

"...Huh?"

"Until sparring with you, Claudiah's personality was more or less exactly like mine. That changed when she met you."

Altimia had trouble understanding what she was hearing, but Reinhard continued speaking regardless.

"You were the first person she *wanted* to befriend, as well as someone she

fell for at first sight. She was troubled by the fact that she was rude to you, and became afraid for the first time ever... *scared* that you might grow to hate her." Claudiah had never felt something like that before.

That was the first time she had ever experienced those fatal glitches of the brain... or more accurately, the soul... that were called "emotions," and that was exactly what made that moment so precious to her.

"Claudiah then went on to hit herself on the head and spent the next ten seconds reshaping her personality into the Claudiah you now know."

Altimia had no words.

"That personality was based on some noble girl who had tried to become Claudiah's friend before the terrorist attack. Not many people tried to get close to Claudiah, you see. In order to befriend you, she modified her personality by copying the girl's features and incorporating them into herself. It was the first time she ever tried to modify herself in this way, but it worked."

Up until then, Claudiah hadn't seen any purpose in such self-modifications. She knew that it was possible, but saw it as useless.

She passed her days living with a personality of a machine, detached even from the concept of gender.

But when she met Altimia, she *panicked* that she might become hated and for the first time *felt the need to change herself*.

Some would say that it was unease and fear that drove her, while others would claim that it was love.

"Since then, that became Claudiah's default personality. I, Reinhard, am nothing but a persona created based on her previous one, which she had grown accustomed to."

That explained why Reinhard reminded Altimia of Claudiah as she'd been on the first day they met. There was also the fact that, as far as Claudiah's personalities went, the 'elder brother,' Reinhard, was *old*.

The glitch-like stirrings of her heart had spurred Claudiah to reshape herself, and now she was making up for it by using her old, cold and calculating side as a

persona.

Reinhard, the calm and collected support, and Claudiah, the maiden in love — both were simultaneously running within the single machine that was "Claudiah's body."

That was the best way to describe the entity known as the imperator, Claudiah Reinhard Dryfe.

"This is what we are," said Reinhard. "Tell me your thoughts, Altimia."

Altimia was silent for a moment, processing the monumental secret that had now been revealed to her, as well as the fact that she was the one responsible for such a drastic change within Claudiah.

Ultimately, she said, "I am relieved."

These words surprised both Claudiah and Reinhard.

"...Huh?" As absurd as it seemed to them, Altimia was truly speaking from her heart.

Claudiah and Reinhard would be far less shocked if she was actually lying or reacted with disgust instead.

"...Relieved?"

"Yes. Relieved. I was feeling a bit overwhelmed when you began speaking as Reinhard, but I am now at ease."

"Why would you feel that way...? Are you not afraid of... us...?" Reinhard asked with confusion and unease in his tone and demeanor.

"Not anymore. I cannot say I am even the least bit afraid. After all... *I now know full well that Claudiah is truly Claudiah,*" Altimia said with no hint of falsehood or hesitation in her voice. "You said that you modified yourself because you were afraid that I would hate you. A bold move, at first glance, but fearful at its core. That is very much like you, Claudiah."

"What...? Also, I..."

"How long ago was it when you clung to me, only to jump away because you were worried that you reeked of oil?"

Silence.

“How long ago was it when you heard a frightening story from a minstrel and walked around my bed late at night, pillow in hand.”

More silence.

“You were so afraid of being hated, but you wanted to get along with me, and you always wanted to be closer. Always such a charming girl...” Altimia looked straight at Reinhard... or Claudiah... once again before continuing. “...and you are my dear friend. That is what you are now, and what you always will be to me.”

She said this without a shred of doubt. That was Altimia’s conclusion even now that she knew the whole truth.

None of these shocking revelations had changed the fact that they were close friends.

“...Huh?”

Suddenly, Reinhard... Claudiah... began to cry.



Whose tears were they? Which one of them wept?

...No, it didn't matter.

These were the honest tears of Claudiah Reinhard Dryfe.

Altimia gazed at her crying friend with a gentle look in her eyes.

That was when a particular question came to her mind.

"...I must say, I am surprised that you told me everything the way you did." Claudiah's Reinhard side had told Altimia what was perhaps the imperium's greatest secret — one known to only five people in Dryfe. "Why *did* you tell me everything?"

"...Because you asked," Reinhard timidly replied. "We *did not want* to lie to the girl we loved."

Reinhard seemed to be mustering all the emotions he could manage for that.

That answer made sense to Altimia.

She did not lie to me once in the peace talks, nor did she refuse to answer any of my questions, she thought.

"And we *have not* lied to you," Reinhard added.

"...I see." Altimia understood exactly what she was saying.

They had already bared their entire souls to each other.

"Claudiah Reinhard Dryfe became the imperator. As such, we must do whatever we can to keep the imperium alive, no matter how vile it may become. And besides that..." the imperator said, before facing Altimia. "...We will defeat you, take you away with us, and make you ours."

Reinhard repeated what Claudiah had already declared.

"As the imperator, we want to possess Altar... to help Dryfe survive. However, we want *you* out of pure selfishness. You are special to us, and we want you at our side until the end. That is the only selfish thought that dwells within this heart."

Separate from their plots to save the imperium, there was this sole bit of

selfishness... this one desire.

“And like anyone driven by pure selfishness, we have no intention of stopping. Therefore...” Reinhard said before putting the lance to his forehead again. “...Let us fight! Let us fight until one of us falls! Until there is a clear victor! Let us fight for the moment that will grant us eternity!”

Now, she spoke as the ball of emotion known as “Claudiah.”

“Of course,” Altimia replied, just as she had the first time they met. “I will not lose. I have to win — both for my sisters as well as those fighting on the surface. I will give my all... and fight with the intention of *killing you*.”

All of Altimia’s attacks thus far had been deflected, but that wasn’t solely because of Claudiah’s immense skill.

Altar cut through all it touched. It could not hold back, so Altimia was making up for that by targeting only non-critical parts of her friend’s body.

She would no longer limit herself.

Her friend had revealed everything to her, so Altimia also wanted to give this battle her all.

And... she also believed that this dear friend of hers would survive in spite of that.

“So... don’t you dare die, CLAUDIAH!”

“Certainly! Let us deal in death as best as we can! ALTIMIA!”

The two swung into battle again.

Having bared their very souls to each other, they now bared their blades, fighting a battle in which there could be no surrender.

There was no more need for words. They no longer had anything to hide.

Their hearts were now as one — and they would fight until all was settled.

After many a mock battle, Claudiah and Altimia would finally have a true fight to the death.

Altimia and Claudiah made distance between them in perfect unison.

Not to retreat, of course — they needed the space to build momentum and spur their Prism Steeds to their maximum speed.

In mounted battles in the sky and on land alike, the speed depended not on the rider's AGI, but the quality of the mount. Because of this, the standard *Dendro* mounted battles consisted mostly of trying to accelerate into an advantageous position before attacking the opponent using your own AGI.

Any attack that had any hope of defeating the target required the rider to accelerate to high speeds.

The fact that Claudiah had also prepared to do this meant that just like Altimia, she was also going on an all-out offensive, instead of merely deflecting Altimia's attacks like she'd been doing so far.

Claudiah could never bring herself to kill Altimia, so why she would aim her lance at the princess was anyone's guess. Perhaps she simply believed in her ability?

Regardless, this would be the start of a truly two-sided battle between them.

Now, having created some distance, the Prism Steed riders rushed towards each other.

"Storm Acceleration." However, one steed was the fastest, and it was Jade Storm. The steed's engines roared at maximum capacity, releasing an intense jet of air from his pipes, propelling him to the highest speed he could possibly reach.

Jade instantly broke the sound barrier and approached Silver in a second.

This was exactly Jade Storm's specialty.

Flagman's five main Prism Steeds were created based on No. 1, Gold Thunder, but they were each given unique qualities.

No. 3, Ruby Ignition, was focused on offense.

No. 4, Sapphire Wave, was focused on defense.

No. 5, Obsidian Earth-Edge, was focused on ground-based battles.

And No. 2, Jade Storm, was focused on mobility.

His element was wind and he was designed to release intense gales and control the surrounding air currents, making him the fastest among the Prism Steeds.

Silver expressed what might be described as shock — he was decidedly slower than Jade.

That was to be expected — a unit outside of the main five, created with a focus on specific special qualities, couldn't hope to outrun the fastest Prism Steed of all, especially when he couldn't even use those qualities that made him special in the first place.

"Be left in my dust, youngest brother," Jade said as he made their difference in speed abundantly clear. His voice was produced with his trademark control over the wind, and it was exactly what had allowed Claudiah and Altimia to communicate all this time.

Proudly declaring his superiority to his sibling, Jade flipped sideways... he did a barrel roll, so to speak.

"Brace for my first attack!" Claudiah cried after positioning herself right above Altimia. She was high enough to be outside the reach of Altimia's blade, but close enough to attack with her lance. Flipping herself upside down, Claudiah thrust her MVP special reward drill lance towards Altimia.

"*Hngh*!" the princess grunted, swinging Altar at the same time.

A lance that was already mid-attack couldn't be used to parry, and not even a special reward could resist Altar's all-rending blade.

Altimia swung the sword perpendicular to the tip of the lance.

But right before impact, the lance vanished... and struck at Altimia from a different angle.

"Ah...!" Altimia twisted her upper body to avoid it, but the lance just aimed for her lower body instead. Silver also moved to assist her evasion, but the lance still grazed Altimia's left leg.

She felt the impact clearly.

"*Kh*!" After that exchange, the princesses made distance between them once

again.

Altimia looked at her leg to assess the damage done.

“...Where is the wound?” She saw no injury — not even a drop of blood.

Claudiah’s hit had most certainly landed— Altimia had clearly felt that. She had felt no pain, but the fact that she was completely unscathed shocked her.

“...I... cannot move my leg at all.”

Altimia tried to move her left leg, but it wouldn’t budge. Everything below the knee was completely immobile. Even her toes were unresponsive.

It was as though she was afflicted by powerful paralysis.

“So this is the power of that special reward...”

This effect made Altimia realize two things.

First, she understood why Claudiah charged Altimia so violently, despite wanting to take her alive. Claudiah not only had faith in Altimia’s ability to survive any attack — she also was entirely certain that she wouldn’t kill her opponent.

And the reason behind her certainty was this drill lance MVP special reward.

Identification gave its name as “Vortex of Suppression, Drim Roeg.” The word “suppression” was enough to explain the state of Altimia’s left leg.

Despite its mechanical and destructive look, the special reward had skills that made it relatively non-lethal.

A special pre-ancient civilization golem built for riot suppression had gone out of control, but still maintained its essential non-violent nature. When classified as an UBM, it became the Frame of Suppression, Drim Roeg, which Claudiah had eventually defeated. After that, it had transformed into Vortex of Suppression, the lance she wielded now.

Its always-on passive skill, Drim Piercing, made the lance incapable of dealing any physical damage in exchange for putting the damaged body parts to sleep, with an effect based on the damage that would have been dealt if the skill wasn’t active.

Enough attacks from this would completely paralyze the target.

“I am glad that she only hit my leg instead of anything else.” If it had been her right hand, she would have dropped Altar.

If it had been her left hand, she would have let go of Silver’s reins.

If it had been her head, she would have already lost the battle.

While she was mounted on Silver, having her leg paralyzed wasn’t that much of a drawback. She could still hold on to his frame with her thighs.

Altimia was lucky that the battle hadn’t ended with that single hit, and that she now knew the nature of Claudiah’s special reward.

There was one more thing she’d learned thanks Claudiah’s lance strike... and it filled her with dread.

“...The trajectory of the lance was *not* due to the properties of a special reward.” The lance had disappeared when it began its attack, only to strike from a different angle.

If the lance’s non-lethality was a special ability of the weapon itself, then the changing trajectory had to be something Claudiah herself had done.

Altimia’s guess was correct.

The skill Claudiah had used was “Paradox Stinger.” This was an ability she’d crafted as The Ram, and it allowed her to change the initial angle of an already-thrust spear.

The previous Ram, Ronaldo Barbaros, had a skill called “Distortion Pile,” which focused the power and impact of a pile bunker onto the space ahead of it, increasing its range and length.

A job from another grouping, King of Destruction, also possessed a final skill that affected space itself — shattered it, to be exact.

It wasn’t unheard of for Superior Jobs to have skills that used or modified space itself, and Paradox Stinger was one of those skills.

The moment the spear was thrust forward, this skill warped the positioning of space, making the attack be delivered from a completely unexpected angle.

Claudiah was free to decide the direction of the warp, allowing her to almost guarantee a hit by attacking from where it was difficult for the opponents to protect themselves.

If she can freely choose the trajectory of her attacks, that makes it nearly impossible to evade even if you know the attack is coming, Altimia thought. It was a truly fearsome skill for anyone fighting at close range.

However, it wasn't without its flaws.

While Distortion Pile used by the previous Ram simply delivered the power and impact to the desired point in space, Paradox Stinger altered space more directly, meaning it used an enormous amount of MP and SP... especially the former.

Thus, not even The Ram could use it that frequently.

Though, that wasn't much of an issue for Claudiah.

"Here comes my second attack!" Claudiah declared, having flown in an arc behind Altimia and caught up with her.

Silver had once again lost to Jade's sheer speed.

"Is that so?" However, Silver wasn't without advantages of his own.

Since he was galloping on platforms of compressed air instead of flying, he was better at making midair turns. This allowed Altimia to quickly turn and launch a counterattack at Claudiah's torso with little effort.

Claudiah responded with a Paradox Stinger to Altimia's hand...

"I see!"

...But Altimia twisted her wrist, evading the tip of the spear before using that twist to direct Altar's blade towards the lance.

That was when the *third* Paradox Stinger struck.

The initial point of the thrust changed again, and the lance that Altar was about to cut simply vanished.

However, the lance yet again failed to strike Altimia.

This one did not come from a blind spot, she thought. For some reason —

probably due to repeated use — Paradox Stinger hadn't made the thrust as difficult to avoid as the first one.

The lance appeared at the edge of Altimia's vision and she was thus able to evade it, however barely.

After that, the two riders passed each other and once again made some distance between them.

She used it so many times... It seems like it must be such a costly skill... Though, I suppose that matters not to the likes of Claudiah.

Most of Claudiah's unbelievable feats could be attributed to her immense talent, but not this.

The reason Claudiah was able to accomplish this was written into the very laws of the universe.

She is not just The Ram, after all... Claudiah was both The Ram *and* King of Machines. The latter was a mechanic grouping job, which had stat growths in MP and DEX.

Even if Claudiah was now The Ram and couldn't use skills associated with jobs from unrelated groupings... she still had the stats gained from King of Machines. That gave her more MP than most vanguards, which made it easy for her to use Paradox Stinger many times over.

I did learn some valuable information here, though. This exchange of attacks had allowed Altimia to realize something.

If I attack her at the same time as she attacks me, she will have no choice but to use the skill for defense instead. This was due to the difference between the weapons they'd brought to this battle.

The all-rending Altar against the non-lethal Drim Roeg — if both of them attacked and landed a hit at the same time, the former would be far more devastating than the latter.

It didn't matter that Claudiah was clad in machine armor — the blade would cut through it like a hot knife through butter and rend her flesh just as easily.

To win this, Claudiah had to avoid Altar's edge at all costs.

She had spent most of the battle so far focusing entirely on deflecting Altimia's attacks.

However, no matter how talented she was, that was impossible for her to do while attacking.

Now that she'd gone on the offensive, she was unable to deflect Altimia's blade like she'd been doing thus far, and if she did try doing that in the middle of an attack, she would only damage her lance more and more.

That was why Claudiah had switched to a kind of offensive defense.

She now targeted either Altimia's right hand or head. A hit on the former would force her to drop Altar, while a hit on the latter would make her faint. If Claudiah went for any other body part... even if her strike landed, Altimia would merely counterattack with Altar.

The situation was now essentially reversed from how it had been before all these revelations — now it was Claudiah who was forced to choose where to attack.

To win, Altimia had to outdo Claudiah during these exchanges and incapacitate her by cutting through either her body or her steed, Jade Storm.

I cannot actually win *that way, though,* Altimia thought. In a pure exchange of blows, Claudiah would eventually figure out every option Altimia had at her disposal, and Altimia knew well that she couldn't win once Claudiah had that information in her grasp.

I won scarcely a tenth of the duels we fought in school, but... But all of Altimia's victories came only when she'd exceeded Claudiah's expectations.

Thus, that was exactly what she had to do now.

That was the only way to seize an unlikely victory.

"I must say, that is quite the treasure you have there," said Claudiah.

"What do you mean?" Altimia asked.

"Your steed. If you had come with a mere SMPS, the battle would have already been decided."

A part of Altimia had considered the possibility that Claudiah had invited her to fight in the sky because of the difference between their mounts, and this all but confirmed it. Claudiah did want to have a proper fight against Altimia, but she also wanted to win — so it was only natural for her to make such preparations.

But now, Altimia was riding Silver — almost an equal to Claudiah's Jade — so the intended gap between them was almost non-existent. As the fastest Prism Steed, Jade Storm was no doubt the better mount for aerial fighting, but the difference between him and Silver wasn't great enough to make the situation hopeless for Altimia.

"Is it a gift from that Master... Ray Starling?"

"He lent it to me."

"I see... Altimia, if I may ask..." Claudiah said before pausing, then delivering her question. "Is Ray Starling your lover?"

Her question was nothing if not unexpected. It shocked Altimia to such a degree that she faltered and almost lost control of Silver.

For a moment, she thought that she made a fatal mistake and that Claudiah would take advantage of her surprise, but that didn't seem to be the case. Claudiah merely circled on Jade Storm, waiting for Altimia's response.

"...No."

"So it remains one-sided, then."

"...I have no idea what you mean."

"Truth Discernment reacted to that, you know."

"Hh...?!" Embarrassed by the skill she herself so often used, Altimia flushed beet-red.

"I could tell even without Truth Discernment, though. I myself am a maiden in love. I can easily see that you are developing feelings for someone, however faint they may be," Claudiah explained, then paused for a moment before continuing. "Altimia. This battle is basically about who captures who... but if I win, why not come to the imperium *with* Ray Starling?"

“...What are you saying?” Altimia’s friend, who she thought she had figured out, had once again said something incomprehensible.

Claudiah’s response was very matter-of-fact. “I want to possess you, but I hardly mind if you have something for yourself. You and I both need offspring to continue our lineages anyhow. So I could simply take you as well as the man you love, and—”

“That is an insult I can scarcely tolerate, Claudiah.” Altimia cut her friend’s words short, clearly enraged by the idea she had presented. “I find that even more unforgivable than your attempt to kidnap me.”

“Oh, do you?”

“Yes. If you threaten his freedom, as well...” she said as she pointed the sacred blade towards her friend. “...Then Altar and I will sever those grasping hands of yours.”

“Aha! You make me green with envy, ALTIMIA!” shouted Claudiah, sounding strangely happy, before spurring Jade Storm onwards, even faster than before.

The third clash was imminent, and she was obviously ready to change the flow of this battle.

Altimia prepared to take her on.

“Silver, do you understand what I want to do?”

Silent as always, the steed replied with a nod.

“I see. Assist me with the timing, then.”

Altimia gathered her resolve and turned Silver to face Claudiah once more.

The distance between them quickly closed...

“CUT!”

...And Altimia swung Altar at the space in front of her. “Cut” was the unassuming name of one of Altar’s skills, and by using it, Altimia had declared that she would now *sever energy itself*.

This power cut apart the very heat within the space ahead.

At the same time, Silver, having sensed Altimia’s will through the reins,

shifted the position of the compressed air platforms beneath his hooves and changed his trajectory, as though taking a step back.

A moment later, Jade Storm crashed into a *wall* in midair.

The “wall” was actually compressed air that had instantly dropped to absolute zero due to the sudden loss of heat energy.

Right before Altimia swung Altar, Silver created a wall of compressed air right in front of them.

Once the blade was in motion, the heat energy within that wall of compressed air was severed, and everything within it had frozen instantly. It was still merely compressed gas, but the loss of heat had made it into a wall of various gases *turned into ice*.

Even Jade Storm expressed shock at the wall’s sudden appearance. He was unable to dodge and crashed straight into it at the speed of sound.

Still, as one of the Grand Artificer’s Prism Steeds, he was prepared even for this — the wind barrier he had created allowed him to make it out mostly unscathed.

However, it did cost him some speed, and the shattered wall of ice became like diamond dust that briefly obstructed the view.

Altimia used this opportunity to attack the rival steed from below.

“...I would expect no less!” cried Claudiah, having noticed Altimia’s approach a moment too late.

Despite the delay, she was already launching a Paradox Stinger towards the space ahead. Drim Roeg would overcome the principles of space itself to attack Altimia from somewhere she could not expect.

“Sgh...!” However, the slow reaction made her aim sloppy.

Instead of hitting Altimia’s right hand like she intended, Claudiah only grazed Altimia’s right side, while Jade Storm had entered Altar’s range.

Altimia swung her sacred blade before Claudiah could use her Paradox Stinger again.

Since she was below her, Altimia couldn't reach Claudiah herself, but she was able to slice through Jade Storm — as well as Claudiah's legs.

That would bring an end to this aerial battle, and without legs, Claudiah could not possibly continue the fight.

Altimia guessed that Claudiah would survive the fall thanks to the Lifesaving Brooch.

This single strike will turn the tide of battle! Altimia thought as she swung Altar... only to slice through empty space.

"...Huh?"

Which of them had voiced their confusion?

It could've been Altimia, who was no doubt taken aback — but Claudiah was just as surprised as her friend.

She was looking down in shock as Altimia had begun to *fall*, and the reason for this was immediately obvious — Silver had vanished.

Silver vanished... but... that means...! Altimia herself had said that she had been *lent* the steed.

The official owner was still Ray Starling, and *Infinite Dendrogram* had a rule that all of a Master's possessions would *vanish with them if they were given the death penalty*.

And with that realization, Altimia plummeted towards the surface.

Chapter Thirteen: Trails in the Sky

Quartierlatin County, ruins

This happened some time before Altimia's and Claudiah's duel began.

"The standards don't match," a man wearing shaded goggles groaned.

The man's name was Blue Screen. He was one of the few Altarian Masters who had the High Engineer and High Mechanic jobs, and he was hard at work completing quests here within this SMPS production plant within the ruins near Quartierlatin.

One of the quests was to produce more SMPS, but he had entrusted that to tian technicians he had trained a bit.

He was groaning because of the most difficult quest he had.

Placed on the work platform ahead of him, there was something reminiscent of a horse — one of the five Prism Steeds.

This particular steed had been broken in the previous war.

His remains had been left untouched for a long time, but once the SMPS production plant was discovered, some had suggested that he could be repaired using the relevant facilities.

The steed had since been moved here, and the few technicians Altar had — Blue Screen being foremost among them — were hard at work restoring him.

"So, how's it going?"

"Still about 80% done. There's ways in which this thing completely deviates from the SMPS standards."

Blue Screen was joined by Dum-Dum, his friend and the leader of their clan, Rising Sun. In his hands were containers of drinking water.

"Also, we already did some repairs using mass-production unit parts, so it already won't be as good as it used to be. It'll be like... 80% as good, at best."

Mid-repair, Prism Steed's appearance was different than it had been before he was broken.

The most notable change was the color. He used to be all gold, but since he had been repaired using SMPS parts, he was now steel-colored in places.

"So that's the situation, huh?"

"Well, my Embryo's machine-related, technically, but it specs in *stopping* machines. No matter how hard I try, I can't do as good a job as the Triangle of Wisdom guys who got ones that're all about *making* machines."

Triangle of Wisdom was a crafting clan that boasted many members who had knowledge of machines from real life.

Due to this, they had a number of members who had Embryos that could be used for machine production.

"I see, I see... By the way, this thing's worth a real fortune, you know."

"Dude, it's a national treasure. I don't wanna follow in the footsteps of the dumbass who stole some Caldinian treasure only to drop it."

There were several cases where Masters had stolen national treasures, and that particular incident was a well-known failure. The person had not only dropped the stolen treasure, but also got on every wanted list for doing so. It was downright comedic.

The criminal's name, incidentally, was Gerbera, and she was now moping in the gaol.

"But man, *Dendro* sure is somethin'. It's this kinda swords-and-fireballs magic fantasy land, but it's also got this sci-fi shit too."

"Hm..."

"What's up, Blue?"

"About that... You know how this was made by some 'Grand Artificer Flagman' from the pre-ancient civ?"

"Yeah. That's what it says when I use Identification on it."

"That guy made *way too much*."

“...Whaddya mean?” Dum-Dum said while tilting his head.

Blue Screen himself sounded quizzical as he continued “This ruin had records of the past, including some data about the history of the pre-ancient civ. Among them was uh... sort of a timeline for tech.”

“What about it?”

“As I read it, I realized that pretty much everything we Masters find in ruins that makes us go ‘whoa’ — Flagman was behind all of it.”

“Hm...?”

“There’s tons of tech he wasn’t *directly* involved in, but even those things have something that can be traced back to him. Besides that, there *is* tech that he didn’t touch, but it’s all low-quality.”

“So...?”

“That means the pre-ancient civilization wasn’t an advanced civ, but a civ that Flagman *made* advanced. Edison, Tesla, Bell... he did the work of many geniuses all by himself.”

“...Man, what is it with *Dendro* and over-the-top NPCs?” Dum-Dum thought as he remembered what he heard of The Era of the Peerless Three. “I can’t tell if it’s really well thought out or if they’re just making it all up as they go along.”

Blue Screen then...

“...But it’s not like you *can’t* do what Flagman did.”

...Went on to basically deny what he had just said.

“Huh? There’s no way anybody could start a tech revolution that insane.”

“Listen, the reason his tech revolution seems that insane is that—” Before he could present his hypothesis to Dum-Dum, a third voice reached their ears.

“Everyone! There’s an emergency!” one of the technicians shouted as he opened the door. “We were just informed that negotiations at the Old Lunnings Duchy have broken down! Her Majesty Altimia and the Masters under her command are now fighting Dryfe’s forces.”

The officials accompanying Altimia had sent out the message, and it had now

finally reached here.

The news made Dum-Dum furrow his brow.

“Whoa now, they’re not gonna invade through Quartierlatin, are they?” Quartierlatin bordered Dryfe, so there was indeed a chance that they would attack that way. The quest income here was good, and both Dum-Dum and Blue Screen were planning on growing their clan soon, so they didn’t like that scenario one bit.

What now? Dum-Dum thought. *If it comes to that, should we loot this treasure and some SMPS? Don’t think anyone’d notice us during an invasion.*

As such outrageous thoughts were passing through Dum-Dum’s head...

“...Huh?”

...Blue Screen was taken aback by a certain change before him.

“What’s wrong...? Hmm?!” Dum-Dum followed his friend’s gaze and noticed it as well.

The Prism Steed on the work platform had stood up.

It had been completely deactivated until now, but it was actually *moving*.

This wasn’t the only change, either. The materials they’d left near the Prism Steed while repairing it were floating in the air around him.

This is... magnetism? Oh yeah... I was told that this one’s lightning-element... It specializes in controlling electricity and magnetism.

The Prism Steed then went on to blast the floating parts with immense electricity from within his body.

The production plant was drowned in blinding light, but Blue Screen’s shaded goggles allowed him to see exactly what was happening.

“Plasma cutting and spark machining... Is it re-constructing the parts to produce what’s missing by *itself*? And machining using its own electricity?”

Within the blinding light, the material slowly began to change shape, assuming forms that fit perfectly into place. The Prism Steed had completely overcome the standardization problem that had had Blue Screen stumped.

The parts then gathered around the Prism Steed and joined with it.

Once the work was done, there was a complete — albeit multi-colored — Prism Steed standing there.

The sight had struck Blue Screen speechless.

The Prism Steed faced him... and gave him a slight nod of the head. It was as though he was thanking the engineer for restoring him to the point where he could move on his own.

A moment later, the Prism Steed looked up and released another burst of electricity.

The machinery in the facility reacted to the electromagnetic waves and opened up the retractable ceiling.

With that, the Prism Steed left, leaving behind only a trail of golden light and the still-open roof.

The Rising Sun members and the technicians were completely dumbfounded by what had just happened.

Eventually, Blue Screen asked, “...Am I responsible for this?”

“Let’s give an honest explanation. Given what just happened, you might not get any flak for it.”

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Altar-Dryfe border, sky

Caught in gravity’s inexorable grip, Altimia plummeted towards the surface.

The one thing dominating her thoughts was Ray’s current state. If Silver had truly vanished because Ray had received the death penalty, then Behemot had likely already turned the surface into a barren wasteland.

However, Altimia couldn’t believe that to be the case.

Ray would never just die for nothing...! She believed that even if he had gotten the death penalty, it was because that was what he had judged necessary.

And there were things Altimia had to do right now herself, so she could meet

him again three days later.

“There she is...” As she fell with her back towards the ground, she saw Claudiah and her Jade Storm diving directly down towards her.

Claudiah wouldn’t allow her beloved to fall — but not because she wanted to save her.

At this rate, she will attack me with the lance and I will not be able to defend myself, Altimia thought. The attacks would put her to sleep, and Claudiah would then take her. If that were to happen, Ray’s struggle and death penalty would be for naught.

“...Not yet!” Still falling, Altimia reached into her inventory and took out the SMPS.

Even if Ray had vanished, it was too early to give up. He certainly wouldn’t have given up, if their positions were reversed.

Surrender was never an option as long as there was the will to resist.

“Come to me!” Flung into the air, the SMPS instantly moved according to Altimia’s will. It was slowed than Silver, but faster than Altimia’s falling speed, so it quickly caught up...

“Destruction Sky.”

...Only for it to be utterly pulverized by the tornado-like spell from above, leaving only destroyed remains that fell to the ground alongside Altimia.

“Ah...!” Altimia voiced her shock before clenching her teeth in frustration.

“Against my little brother, that attack would have only left us wide open...” said Jade Storm as he and Claudiah drew ever closer. “...But a mere imitation had no hope of evading it.”

Ray had made the right choice by lending Silver to Altimia. Otherwise, Altimia would’ve lost right away.

Although Jade Storm specialized in mobility, that didn’t mean that he had no offensive ability — he could use tornado magic that rivaled the ultimate job skills of high-rank jobs.

Released with superb precision and as fast as the wind itself, it was simply impossible for an SMPS to evade it.

Basically, only another original could hope to defeat Jade in an aerial battle.

“Ah...!” Claudiah was drawing closer.

Altimia was helpless, and her opponent would attack her until she fell unconscious.

“Not yet...!” However, once Claudiah was close enough to attack, Altimia’s blade would reach her too.

She was not defeated yet.

It was still too early to give up.

“Altimia! This is the end!”

“...Claudiah!” Eventually, the distance between them had shrunk to nearly nothing... but then, a golden light akin to a bolt of lightning sped from the eastern sky and struck Jade Storm.

“What is this?!” Claudiah exclaimed.

“Ah...!” Neither Claudiah nor Jade Storm saw it coming.

The former was laser-focused on dealing with Altimia’s counter attacks once she was close enough, while the latter couldn’t see it because the light was disguised by the remains of the destroyed SMPS.

Having slowed down Jade Storm with the impact, the golden light swooped to catch Altimia’s body.

“This is...!” Altimia instantly understood what this golden light truly was.

The feeling of mounting it was much like the feeling of mounting Silver.

It was a golden unit wreathed in lightning, with steel-colored spots here and there.

Its most notable feature was the single horn growing out of its forehead.

This was the item that she’d had Liliana deliver to Quartierlatin shortly before the Love-Duel Festival.

Altimia could never fail to recognize what it was, and thus spoke its... or rather, *his* name.

“Gold... Thunder!” This was Prism Steed No. 1 — the one on which all the others were based, as well as the trusted mount of the founding king of Altar, the first Azurite.

Having been destroyed once, this relic of the pre-ancient civilization had returned to the battlefield to protect his lady... the new queen.

The national treasure had been revived and now claimed the new Azurite as his owner.

“So you came after all... Gold.”

Altimia patted Gold Thunder’s back, just as she had done years ago.

The steed said nothing, responding only with a shake of his head. Despite being made of metal, he seemed very much like a real horse.

“Recognized a unit of the same type. It has been a while, elder brother.” Jade Storm addressed the sibling he hadn’t seen in over 2,000 years.

Gold Thunder’s response was only silence.

“Wait... Are you...?” Jade said, seemingly having realized something.

Before he could continue, Claudiah began to speak.

“So Gold Thunder has been mended...”

“It appears so,” Altimia replied. “Our technicians did a fine job. Thanks to them... I can still fight.”

Mounting Gold Thunder, Altimia brandished Altar once more.

“Let us start again, Claudiah.”

“And again we are equal, I see... In all honesty, I prefer it this way.”

Thus they resumed their aerial mounted battle.

However, things were different from before, and it wasn’t just the steed Altimia was riding.

“I understand what you mean. Though, let us make one thing clear,” Altimia

said with an indomitable smile on her face. “For all of the kingdom’s recorded history, whenever Altar and Gold Thunder were together... they were never once defeated.”

This was the simple truth — as well as the main difference between the battle so far and the battle now.

The next moment, Altimia instantly closed the distance between them.

“Ah...?!” Claudiah gasped as she threw everything into her defense and deflected Altimia’s slash.

Alas, she was a bit too late, and Altar sliced off a bit of Drim Roeg’s side.

“Jade!”

“Storm Acceleration.” Responding to Claudiah, the steed charged forward as fast as possible.

They needed to increase the distance between them and buy time to recover.

Despite that, the golden steed that had once closed the distance between them in the blink of an eye *wasn’t* chasing them.

Well, he actually was... but not at the absurd speed he had displayed before.

Claudiah and Jade had known that it would play out like this.

Gold Thunder was Prism Steed No. 1 — the original model. Specialized in versatility, he was no match for Jade Storm when it came to mobility.

The moment he first closed the distance had been an exception.

“The Ram, this function you just saw was—”

“I know. That was Gold Thunder’s Rail Jump... This is the first time I’ve seen it with my own eyes.”

Rail Jump. This was an acceleration skill installed in Gold Thunder, and its effect matched Jade’s Storm Acceleration. Via control over electromagnetism, it created a kind of linear rail in the atmosphere and a barrier around the rider before firing Gold Thunder forwards.

The speed he reached while using it was far above mach 1, and for that moment alone, he was the fastest of all Prism Steeds.

“...Combining that speed with Altar is fearsome indeed,” said Claudiah. “I can see why it has never been defeated.”

An all-rending slash, delivered at the speed of lightning... Some would say Claudiah was the most overpowered thing present, simply for being able to *survive* that onslaught.

“The function can only be used across short distances and requires a cooldown,” said Jade. “Using it expends an extremely high amount of calculation power.”

Using Rail Jump was akin to firing a live human with a railgun. With all the safety measures and countereffect management involved, it was only natural that it should use a high amount of processing power.

“I see. We can deal with it, then. What about his offensive skills?” Claudiah asked.

“They are no threat,” Jade responded. “Before release, the enemy unit’s Plasma Smasher creates a difference in electric potential in the surrounding atmosphere. This unit can sense that change and read the trajectory before release. Moreover...”

“Is there anything else?”

“No. All else irrelevant to assessing the threat he poses.”

“I see. Regardless, we should settle this soon,” Claudiah said as she shot a glance downward. From this height, the scene below looked like a gathering of dots, but Claudiah was able to see one thing very clearly.

In a clearing far below, Chrono had been defeated by Kashimiya.

Due to their immense speed, Claudiah wasn’t able to see the precise moment of his defeat, but the fact that Chrono was the only one left spoke volumes.

Kashimiya has the highest chance of victory against Behemot, Claudiah thought. *It would be different if she used her trump card, but... as things are, he could be able to defeat her.*

With Silver’s disappearance, Ray Starling’s death penalty had been all but confirmed.

However, Claudiah didn't know what became of the rest of the peace conference entourage, including the two Superiors — Tsukuyo Fuso and Shu Starling.

If she didn't end this battle in time, Behemot might very well lose, which would leave them all free to assist Altimia.

"Our next attack will end this. We will assume an advantageous position over Rail Jump and defeat Altimia with a counterattack."

"Understood," Jade replied. Claudiah's statement was full of certainty, for she knew that they were fully capable of doing exactly what she'd just described.

She had thoroughly examined Jade Storm's capabilities the moment she'd discovered him, and she'd also investigated the Altarian treasure Altimia was now riding.

Thus, Claudiah knew that Jade Storm was capable of countering Gold Thunder's Rail Jump.

Waiting for the perfect time, the two riders flew while maintaining some distance between each other.

"Brother, I have a question for you," Jade spoke to Gold. "The Rail Jump you just used was somewhat slower than the speed written in the specifications. Your standard flight speed is also about 80% of what it should be."

Unlike their words thus far, these lines weren't riding the wind, but communicated to Gold directly using the comms function installed in all Prism Steeds.

The signal was separate from all others, well-compressed, and delivered at an extremely fast speed.

However, Gold Thunder said nothing in return.

"So you did indeed lose your communication function. I see that some of your parts have been replaced by imitations, as well. You cannot match a complete unit like myself in that state."

Silence.

"How disgraceful. As you are now, even the younger brother was a stronger

foe.”

Jade spoke of his brother with a contempt one would never expect from a machine.

He was not exactly wrong, either. Right now, Gold Thunder’s speed was higher than that of an SMPS, but below that of Zephyrus Silver.

“...Ha!” Gold Thunder let out a strange sound. It might’ve been merely some noise produced by the complex machinery within his body, but to Jade Storm, it seemed like a response to his words — a chuckle.

Upon hearing what sounded like mockery, Jade revved up the machinery within his body, as though to represent his anger.

This feeling seemed to be mixed with a strong resolve to make certain his brother suffered a second obliteration.

He was fully intent on breaking through Gold’s Rail Jump and using Destruction Sky to eliminate him once Claudiah defeated Altimia.

Jade waited for the opportunity, and it soon came.

This was accompanied by a distinct change in Gold Thunder’s rider.

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While Claudiah caught a glimpse of Chrono’s defeat, Altimia also had her eyes on the surface.

From this altitude, she could see far and wide, and there on the horizon was the city of Altea, sending up smoke and fire like a lit candle.

That was all she needed to know that time was short, so she resolved to end the battle as quickly as possible... *even if it cost her everything*.

“You are the boundary.”

She began to weave a certain ritual prayer.

“The boundary between what was and what will be.”

These words were older than the era of the founding king—older, even, than the most distant of written history—and they were given only to those Altar saw as worthy.

“You divide all that exists. All things are either ‘before’ or ‘after’ you.”

These were words for the skill called “Release,” which unleashed the power hidden within the holy sword.

“Fire, water, wind, earth, life, death, time, space... None can escape you.”

This prayer was the password to unlock the second safety lock on Altar’s true form.

“Carve into creation.” It was the Sacred Princess’ ultimate job skill, passed down to her by the blade Altar itself.

“*The Primeval Boundary!*”

And Altimia had just invoked it.

■■■■■■■■■!

A moment later, there was a rumble as though the world itself had begun to shriek, and Altar's blade vanished completely.

No... Not *completely*.

Altar had merely begun cutting *even the light that hit it*, making its blade impossible to perceive.

Without saying a word, Altimia moved the sword... and it cut through *space itself*.

But unlike with King of Destruction's World Breaker, the tears in space did not close up, but remained there. Once touched by Altar, the space that had been cut by the sword's edge became fixed that way, as though it was the true and natural state of the world.

There was no good or evil here — by merely existing, Altar now tore apart the universe itself, changing it on a fundamental level.

The Primeval Blade was often called sacred, but now it carried a power more fearsome than the most cursed of weapons. Its strength could not even be compared to the power of the "ordinary" Altar that Altimia had been wielding thus far. The princess hadn't used this final ability because it came at a cost that made the phrase "double-edged sword" seem lacking.

But she had been pushed into taking up this power to protect those she held dear.

"...Gh!"

Following the release, Altimia was overwhelmed by an intense dissipation of energy.

Her physical fatigue from the battle so far began to pale as Altar now consumed her magic, mental, and life forces — MP, SP, and HP — at an alarming rate.

Clenching her teeth to endure this life-rending side-effect, Altimia fixed her eyes on Claudiah.

"...Let us end this, Claudiah."

“...Yes! It almost seems a shame not to draw this out more, but I also intend to end this now!” Thus, the two riders and their steeds charged towards each other.

A moment later, Gold Thunder used Rail Jump once again.

Tearing apart the space she traveled through, Altimia moved into an advantageous position at a speed that was impossible to follow.

However, as though he had anticipated where their enemies would go, Jade Storm had evaded them with a blast of air.

“I see you!” he said. He could predict where they were going to go because of the many layers of wind he had placed around him.

Since Rail Jump essentially turned Gold and his rider into a bullet, it could only “shoot” them in a straight line. Because of this, Jade Storm was able to predict their final position by tracing their effects upon the many curtains of wind he had set up around them.

That allowed him to release a blast of air just in time to move himself slightly out of the way of Altimia and Gold’s final position.

A sword had a shorter range than a lance, so this deadly attack became a perfect opportunity for a counter.

And so, Claudiah used Paradox Stinger to attack Altimia’s head.

The word “victory” appeared in Jade Storm’s processing circuitry, but then...

“You are exactly as the specifications stated, Jade.”

...He heard those words on the Prism Steed comms channel.

“Your communication function is active...!” In the moment their riders clashed, the two steeds had this hyper-fast exchange.

“It is as you say,” Gold continued. “While I am no longer exactly what I used to be, you have not changed since you were constructed.”

“Of course. I was preserved perfectly, and not much time has passed since I was reactivated.”

“And that is why... you have lost, Jade.”

“What...?”

“2569 times. That is the greatest difference between you and I.”

“Hm...?” Jade Storm didn’t understand what Gold meant by that.

But that wasn’t the only thing that had him confused.

The more pressing problem was that Gold Thunder *had vanished from right before him*.

And the next moment, Altimia appeared in an advantageous position yet again, ready to swing her blade.

“How...?!” Jade Storm’s reading of the situation had returned only an error.

No one could blame him.

After all, the only possible explanation for what had just happened was that...

“...You used Rail Jump twice in a row?! Impossible! That cannot...!”

It was impossible indeed.

The intense calculations Rail Jump required made it impossible to use without a long cooldown.

Gold’s original specifications simply wouldn’t allow for something like this to happen.

However... Those specifications Jade Storm was familiar with were no longer accurate.

Gold Storm did indeed have a lower base ability due to the SMPS replacement parts all over him... *and he was more skilled than before due to the 2569 battles he had experienced*.

The latter was exactly what had allowed him to make this phenomenon a reality.

Prism Steed No. 1, Gold Thunder, was the oldest, the template for all other Prism Steeds, as well as the most battle-hardened of them all. As the national treasure of the royal family, he had fought many battles as the mount of Altar’s kings and their most loyal knights.

During it all, Gold Thunder had refined himself. He had improved his programming, sharpened his functions, and incorporated a strong intuition for battle into his calculations.

Eventually, he crafted techniques that allowed him to use Rail Jump without being influenced by his rider's use of Altar, as well as the ability to use Rail Jump multiple times in a row.

That was the greatest difference between Gold Thunder and Jade Storm — an immense gap in battle experience.

"Ah...!" The second Rail Jump was unexpected, but Claudiah was quick to adjust.

She instantly noticed it happening and moved to counter Altimia's attack with a second Paradox Stinger, but...

"...Ohh."

...As she thrust Drim Roeg, she noticed that *it only had half of its tip*.

A moment later, the other half of Drim Roeg's point fell from what had been the spear's initial position.

"...I see what's happening." Paradox Stinger was a peerless technique that changed the initial point of a spear's thrust by bending space itself.

Therefore, Altimia, who wielded a power even greater than that — a calamity in weapon form — was able to break through it.

She had cut both the lance itself and the space it occupied in the middle of the lightning-fast Rail Jump, never giving Claudiah a chance to deflect.

For one long moment, Claudiah stared at the remains of her weapon and the tip that had fallen far out of reach.

Her body trembled slightly.

Next to her, there was Altimia, whose blade had completed its arc.

"...So the battle was decided by the difference between the tools at our disposal," the princess of Altar quietly said.

It might've been her way of consoling her friend.

“No... You are simply far more capable than me.” Claudiah contradicted her friend’s words, assuring Altimia that it was indeed her own ability that led to this outcome.

A moment later, Jade Storm’s head and Claudiah’s right artificial arm were severed, and a blade wound opened up on her right side.

“I... have been defeated.” Admitting that she had lost this battle, Claudiah plummeted towards the surface along with the now-headless Jade Storm.

Chapter From the Past: The First SUBM

2044, July

A year had passed since *Dendro* had released, which translated to three years within the game.

It was only by chance that Behemot encountered it in one of the most remote regions of the imperium.

She was out on a quest from her friend, Claudiah — more specifically, Claudiah's alternate persona, Reinhard. He had requested that she investigate an area in the northern reaches of the country.

Due to an immense drought and its proximity to Harshwinter Mountains, the climate was extremely cold there, and the change in environment had attracted powerful monsters that some years ago had driven out the people who lived in the area.

There were no towns here that would be occupied by monster-hunting Masters, so as a result, the far reaches of Dryfe had become essentially uninhabitable.

To make matters worse, this problem seemed to be spreading deeper into the imperium, and Reinhard believed that it would eventually envelop the entire country.

There were two reasons why he had sent Behemot there specifically.

One was to look into the causes of the drought. She was to gather soil from several designated places and bring it to him for study.

The other was to investigate some local ruins. An old text he had acquired from a particular source said that there were ruins somewhere in the area, and Behemot needed to confirm if that was true.

Dendro's one year anniversary event was also in progress. There were event monsters everywhere, so Behemot also saw this as an opportunity to go

hunting in an area with no other players.

However, there were two things that neither Behemot nor Reinhard himself could have anticipated.

First was her encounter with a certain Master.

For reasons unknown to her, a vagrant Superior was occupying a destroyed village in the area.

And the other thing was... an SUBM.

It was a massive gargoyle, shining in a manner reminiscent of both gold and silver, and its name was “Lone Yet Unmatched, Greatest One.”

It had appeared here at the edge of Dryfe and advanced towards the center of the country.

This was not purely by coincidence. Most SUBMs were deployed away from any capital cities and moved towards the nearest one while fighting any Masters they encountered.

That was the standard, and out of the four that had come after Greatest One, only Penta-Phased Destroyer, Horobimaru was an exception.

Thus, Greatest One — the first SUBM — was deployed as part of the anniversary of *Dendro*’s release, and was meant to advance towards Vandelheim.

However, two Superiors were there to witness the deployment.

These two quickly understood that the SUBM was headed towards the capital, and at that point, they already knew what they had to do.

Behemot had no reason to ignore a colossal monster that would attack the city her friend inhabited, while the other Master had no reason *not* to stop a beast that would lay waste to anything in its path.

The two Superiors then cooperated to fight the Greatest One.

The battle was intense beyond description.

As the first SUBM, it was something of a test case. Greatest One was made out of a metal that could withstand any attack and surpassed even Mythical

metal in toughness... a Superior metal.

It was also immune to temperature changes, as well as all kinds of offensive magic.

Its powers weren't only defensive, of course. Its wings granted it the ability to break the yoke of gravity, its tail vibrated at a high frequency and pulverized all it touched, and its maw was a maser cannon that scorched any living creatures it touched.

Even The Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria, said to be the strongest SUBM, could only win against Greatest One by using its enhanced Fatal Field.

While Gloria had taken the title of strongest thanks to its special characteristics, Greatest One was, well... the greatest of them all thanks to its pure combat ability.

Being such a powerful creature, it was an excellent method of testing the Dryfean Masters trying to stop it from destroying their country — perhaps spurring them to evolve into Superiors.

Greatest One could have become an even greater calamity to the imperium than Biframe White Whale, Twin Moby Dick was to Granvaloa or Gloria was to Altar, maybe even destroying the country utterly.

However, this absurdly powerful creature wasn't recorded in history... for it had encountered *them*, and to make a long story short, following a battle that shook heaven and earth, Greatest One was defeated.

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"How fearsome. I can scarcely tell who the true monster is here," a half-sarcastic, half-honest voice spoke as the fragments of Greatest One dissolved into motes of light.

This was addressed to Behemot and Leviathan, who, now that the battle was over, had returned to her human form.

The speaker was a girl with purple hair. She had a slight build and wore a dress of ancient Grecian design as purple as her hair.

This was Behemot's comrade in arms... or rather, his Embryo.

“Hmm... both Master Dearest and the critter are the MVPs. I was not aware that there were UBMs that gave multiple.” She chuckled as she listened to the announcement in her head.

Since this was the first SUBM ever encountered, these were the first Superior MVP special rewards ever received, as well as the first time there were multiple MVPs for the same UBM.

“Master Dearest” was how this Embryo referred to her Master — a gaunt man with deep dark circles under his eyes. For an avatar, he didn’t seem to be in good health.

He looked at the reward he’d received before sighing in what seemed like disappointment and putting it away. Then, he turned away from the others and began looking around the completely destroyed, abandoned village, apparently searching for something.

“...That’s quite the attitude for someone who only got MVP because of us,” said Leviathan with a menacing tone, clearly irritated by both the Embryo and her Master.

During the battle, Behemot and her Embryo dealt the vast majority of the damage to Greatest One, yet the MVP special reward was split between Behemot and the other Superior — a fact which greatly irked Leviathan.

“I am not sure I agree,” said the purple girl. “There is more to battle than fisticuffs. The little critter here seems to understand that. A beast of your size surely has a bigger brain capable of comprehending *much* more than she can, no?”

“You’re *dead*.” Leviathan bared her fangs and prepared to attack.

“Levia, stay,” said Behemot, stopping her Embryo in her tracks.

The porcupine Master actually agreed with the girl here. Behemot and Leviathan were no doubt the ones who’d pulverized Greatest One’s metal body using their ultimate skill, but the girl and her Master were the ones who’d dealt with all the other problems... the many abilities that the gargoyle possessed as an SUBM.

Thus, Behemot fully agreed with the MVP special reward split.

“We were able to defeat that before it could do any damage anyhow,” said the girl. “We also received a special reward each. Let us consider this done and do what we came here to do. Master Dearest and I are looking for something in this abandoned village, while you have to investigate the nearby ruins. Oh, by the way, the entrance to them is about three kilometels to the east. Although... Our intense battle here seems to have collapsed it.”

“...That’s supposed to be classified information for the imperium.”

“That means nothing to us. Classified information for the living is common knowledge for the dead. Hm? Oh, did you find it, Master Dearest? Let us take our leave, then. May we meet again, if the fates so decree.”

With their business done, the girl and her Master — the Superior — walked away from Behemot and Leviathan.

The threat of the walking calamity known as Greatest One ended before it could properly begin, with no one but two people even knowing it.

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However, Behemot was left with two problems.

First, she couldn’t actually investigate the ruins.

They did indeed exist, but just as the girl had said, the shockwaves from the battle against Greatest One had completely buried the underground passage leading inside. Trying to dig it out could have resulted in even more damage, so they had no choice but return to Vandelheim without investigating the ruins.

Delving into these ruins would require more people now, and since Reinhard needed time to gather them, the operations were postponed and only ended up happening once he became imperator. The ruins also ended up being the place where Jade Storm was discovered, but that is a story for another time.

Behemot faced the second problem once she reported the Greatest One incident to Reinhard.

Upon hearing the story, he spent a moment thinking about it until he said, “Please keep this secret.”

“Hm?”

“This special UBM... An ‘SUBM,’ was it? Similar entities are bound to appear again, and I believe that they would have the observers behind them.”

“The control AI?”

“Yes. This was likely what you Masters call ‘an event.’”

Behemot quickly understood what he meant. Raids against massive world bosses had yet to happen in *Infinite Dendrogram*, but they were common in most MMOs — though it was rather disturbing that something like that would be released on the first anniversary.

“However, based on our information, nothing like it appeared in other countries, so I believe that there will be some time in between their appearances.”

“I see.”

“There is no guarantee that they would appear in the same country twice in a row, though. In fact the probability of that is low. It is more likely that the other will appear in one of the other six nations.”

“So it’s like a rotation.”

“That is why revealing this information is disadvantageous to us. The ludo Masters would not appreciate missing a chance to participate in a hunt for a special UBM.”

“I see. You want them to believe that we haven’t gotten one yet and that it might come soon.”

“Indeed. That would help us maintain our power as a country.”

People would leave if they found out that such a highly anticipated event would not be occurring in Dryfe.

Due to the drought and the associated change in environment as well as increases in monsters, Masters were highly useful to the imperium, so it would be most undesirable if they left.

There was the chance that the other Superior or his Embryo would reveal it, but through their cooperation, Behemot knew that neither of them were the type. Regardless, Reinhard was considering meeting them in person when the

time was right.

“Okay. So I shouldn’t use this special reward I got, right?”

“Indeed. You can use it against monsters, but please refrain from doing so where other people might see you.”

“All right. I promise I won’t use it, Claudiah.”

“Hm...? I am Reinhard.” Since this was before the personas shared information, Reinhard did not yet know that he and his “little sister” were one and the same.

“...My mistake. It’s a promise, Reinhard.”

Just like that, Behemot made a promise to Claudiah Reinhard Dryfe.

She kept it well, and there was never a need for her to break it.

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Time passed, and on the day of the peace talks between Altar and Dryfe, she was left with no choice but to do just that.

...I’m sorry, Claudiah, Behemot thought, gathering her resolve as she faced Ray Starling, who was about to release Monochrome’s concentrated laser from his left hand.

Not even she could survive an attack like this, and to avoid that, she could only use *that* special reward.

Thus, she resolved to break her promise.

After all, protecting Claudiah was more important than keeping the promise.

And so, right before Ray’s deadly strike was released...

“Transformation... Soaring and Indomitable: Greatest Top!”

...She unleashed her SUBM special reward.

Chapter Fourteen: Soaring and Indomitable

Altar-Dryfe border

The peace talks had gone awry, sparking a conflict between the kingdom and the imperium, and the people who had a solid grasp of all the simultaneous battles currently occurring were few and far between.

Those who were currently fighting had no attention to spare on the others, so the only ones who could observe them all were the spectators — Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin and King of Light, F.

Having been defeated by Ray, they now observed him from afar.

Their vision spanned the entire area around the assembly hall, so they saw the conclusion to the battle between the princesses, as well as the struggle against Behemot that had ended earlier.

Thus, they could understand the significance of both battles.

Although Altimia had defeated Claudiah, it had no bearing on whether she was ultimately victorious — even if Claudiah was defeated, it would mean nothing as long as The Physical Apex waiting for them on the surface wasn't also overcome.

Because of this, the Altarian Masters' fight would decide the true outcome of the battle in the sky... and it was already known that Ray Starling had fallen.

That had been confirmed the moment Silver vanished... or perhaps the very moment he had resolved to face The Physical Apex herself. Weaklings like him had no business fighting the strongest Masters that existed, let alone defeating them, so this outcome was only to be expected.

Even if challenging an apex meant that his death penalty was assured, though, it didn't mean that his resolve would ever be broken, or even bent.

After all, the conclusion to this conflict relied on more than just Behemot defeating Ray Starling.

Most people would only learn the true significance of this battle and its outcome in the not-so-distant future, but for now, it was only known to those select few who'd witnessed Ray's battle.

Let us now rewind time to see what transpired...

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Altar-Dryfe border, assembly hall

Ray's left hand, transformed into Monochrome's cannon, fired its Shining Despair at Behemot's forehead from point-blank range.

In terms of pure firepower, this was likely one of the strongest attacks that anyone present possessed. Their entire strategy revolved around this very attack, and Rook had even sacrificed himself to see it delivered.

"ND." Behemot spoke using her usual internet slang — this meant "no damage," and Behemot's current state clearly showed that she was correct — the attack had been blocked by something made of a metal reminiscent of both gold and silver.

"Wh-What...?!"

This metal appeared out of nowhere and seemingly *replaced* Behemot, but Ray's Reveal told him that she still stood before him.

The metal mass concealing Behemot's form had the head of a beast on the top, as well as wings and forelegs several times larger than her hind legs. At first glance, she now looked like a massive, top-heavy beast.

Behemot's transformation was reminiscent of equipment switching achieved via Instant Wear or the transformation caused by items like Kim-un-Kamuy.

Speculation as to the barrier's nature coursed through the minds of everyone who witnessed it, but one thing was obvious: *Shining Despair had failed to pierce the metal*.

The laser had struck the metal head, and despite the insane heat condensed into that single point, the beam hadn't so much as changed the metal's color. It was as though the barrier was completely immune to any changes in temperature.

This is actual immunity! And not just to light like Monochrome, but heat as well! Ray thought, remembering what B3 had told him about resistances.

He was right. The Superior special reward named “Sky Supremacy, Greatest Top” did indeed give Behemot immunity to heat—but there was more to it than that.

All special rewards reflected the UBM they dropped from; the reward Behemot had received from Greatest One featured its absolute immunity to changes in temperature.

Even in the depths of an active volcano or the freezing cold of the most desolate glacier, the comfortable warmth of the Greatest Top she was wearing would not change one bit.

“Gh!” Ray realized that Behemot did indeed know every card in their hand. That was why she switched to gear that could withstand his deadly Shining Despair. He was still channeling the laser, but it wasn’t inflicting even a single point of damage.

Still basking in the deadly light, Behemot moved to leave B3’s gravity field.

“No way,” someone muttered as they witnessed her actions. Behemot floated upwards using the wings she had grown using her special reward, seemingly ignoring the effect of the 5,000 times increased gravity. This was actually another effect she had inherited from Greatest One — the skill called “Nullgravity Wings,” which allowed her to forcefully reduce the surrounding gravity to zero, effectively letting her levitate.

No matter how powerful the pull of gravity was, these wings would never let her succumb to it.

Shining Despair and Heaven’s Weight.

By mere chance, Greatest Top had completely negated the combination that was supposed to annihilate Behemot.

But chance or not... the situation was now completely changed.

“Prez! Switch to AGI!” B3 shouted to Tsukuyo, realizing that gravity no longer held any meaning.

Nullgravity Wings, though potent, didn't allow for particularly speedy flight — Behemot wasn't even close to Mach 1.

However, the moment she escaped the gravity field, she could switch to moving with her own feet again—and her immense AGI, now undivided by Faint Light, would let her instantly slaughter everyone around her.

"I already did!" Tsukuyo shouted, fully aware of the danger.

At the same time, Marie and Eishiro prepared to attack Behemot.

Ray remained motionless, because Shining Despair was still firing, while B3 had to maintain her gravity field to buy more time.

The outcome of this battle would now be decided either after they regrouped once Behemot landed, or by Marie and Tsukikage's attacks before that.

That was what Ray's party thought, at least... but Behemot had different plans.

Still floating, she turned, and a portion of the metal head opened up towards Ray and B3, revealing and firing its *maser cannon*.

The cannon released a deadly wave that vaporized everything at the molecular level by vibrating the individual molecules until their structure broke down.

It sliced through the air, not even releasing any light as it destroyed even the water molecules in its path, the scenery refracting around the wave as it sped towards Ray and B3.

B3 gasped as the warped space made her realize what kind of attack this was —and that, now armorless, she couldn't withstand it.

In fact, even Magnum Colossus would be meaningless in the face of an attack like this.

I... won't survive this, B3 thought with certainty.

And thus, discarding her own chances of survival, she shoved Ray away with her left shoulder right before the maser beam hit.

Because of their difference in stats, pushing him was easy..

And the very next moment, the maser struck home.

“Ah—”

B3’s body began to sizzle and break down as though being microwaved. Though she didn’t feel pain, she acutely felt the sensation of her body boiling as her HP dropped to zero in a mere heartbeat.

Her Brooch was quickly shattered... and she received the death penalty.

“B3...!” Ray cried out. He was still alive thanks to her, but he wasn’t exactly unscathed.

B3 had pushed him aside, but not enough for him to fully escape the maser beam.

His right arm had caught in it, and the vibration wave had literally melted his flesh. Next to where B3’s body had vanished, he could see the steaming bones of his right hand — along with the Miasmaflame Bracer he’d been wearing.

“Gh...! Not yet!”

Monochrome had changed shape back into its usual coat form.

Shining Despair was no longer an effective option.

He had lost his trump card and a tactically important item.

Even so... just as he said, the battle wasn’t over yet, and Behemot fully agreed.

“R2,” she declared the start of round two. With B3 dead, the gravity field was gone, so she landed on all fours again before *instantly charging straight at Ray*.

“Ah!” he gasped before using his AGI — still boosted by Chaser From the Mirror — to back away from her.

Losing his right arm made it harder for him to balance himself, but for better or worse, he’d lived without an arm for nearly a month, so he had enough experience to compensate for the loss.

Since their speed was the same, Behemot could have caught up to him just like she’d caught up to Rook — but unlike Ray, she wasn’t accustomed to her current form.

She had kept Greatest Top a secret ever since acquiring it.

With Franklin possibly having eyes everywhere in the form of surveillance monsters all across the imperium, Behemot almost never had the opportunity to actually use the special reward, so she didn't have the experience needed to fight at high speeds while equipped with it.

On top of that, Greatest Top's form made her forelegs larger than her back ones, which would have made it difficult to move even if she was used to it.

Ray vaguely understood this as well — during their strategy crafting, B3 had never once mentioned this form, which could only mean that she had no data about it.

Also, she's not flying anymore...! he thought. *Running is faster, so I guess that's the obvious thing to do. Her flying was more like floating, and it probably wasn't even close to sonic.*

Behemot's "flying" was mere levitation. Compared to running at supersonic speeds, it was so slow it was almost *boring*.

If she was able to fly as fast as she ran, the battle would have already been over.

But even taking all that into consideration...

This piece of gear is way too powerful... It's past even Mythical level, so... is it a Superior special reward...? From the first...?

Without Identification, Ray couldn't even see its name, but based on its power alone, he correctly assumed that it was an MVP special reward from the very first SUBM.

But it's too powerful even for a Superior reward! Fire immunity, gravity immunity, the heat ray, that defense...! It's way better than what Figaro and the others got...!

Gloria α — a sword with a powerful light beam.

Gloria β — a wand that instakilled certain targets.

Suling Yi — a dagger that possessed potent enhancement powers.

When compared to the three Superior rewards Ray knew about, Greatest Top clearly had too many abilities.

It was overpowered even when you considered that it took up multiple equipment slots.

It has to have some drawback. One serious enough to balance out the power it gives...!

Ray was right to assume that, for Greatest Top most certainly had a fatal flaw.

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I guess I'll start by getting rid of Ray... then chase the other two out of the shadows, Behemot thought.

She was actually in a hurry.

Thinking through the process that would lead her to victory, the porcupine said to herself, *I have 4 minutes and 10 seconds left*.

That was the time limit for Greatest Top, which *could only be worn for five minutes*.

The skill to equip it cost no MP or SP, but in exchange, it would be canceled the moment its duration ended.

And to make matters worse, it had a cooldown of *500 in-Dendro hours*.

That was another reason why she had always refrained from using it. Greatest Top essentially ensured her victory in whatever battle she was currently fighting, but if this flaw became widely known, it would be used against her in every battle that followed.

That was why Behemot intended to end this within 4 minutes and 10 seconds, even if that meant taking seemingly reckless actions that might put her in danger.

"...Levia," Behemot spoke in her mind.

"Behemot!" Leviathan replied.

The distance between them was too great for Master-Embryo telepathy, but that was not a problem. They communicated using the ultimate job skill of the

King of Beasts. It was called “Beastheart, As One” and it allowed a direct exchange of will between all monsters under Beastheart Possession’s effect.

It was fairly tame for the ultimate job skill of something like King of Beasts, the Physical Apex, but that was the jaguarman grouping for you — a grouping focused on cooperation with their monsters... their true partners.

“You’re—!”

“I had to use Greatest Top. They’re strong, and I’m having fun.”

Leviathan was worried about her Master, but Behemot’s response wasn’t just a lie to calm her down. She’d been cornered... but that was a rarity these days, so she genuinely *enjoyed* it.

“Behemot...”

“I can’t just sit back and enjoy this, though. I’ll beat them all before Greatest Top’s time runs out. Hang in there until then. Once I’m done, I’ll come to you... and we’ll beat Shu with our ult.”

“...Understood.” The conversation ended, and they focused on their individual battles, uncertain how things would end.

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Altar-Dryfe Border, mountains... or rather, a wasteland

How long had it been since their battle began?

Shu and Leviathan had been fighting longer than Behemot and Ray’s group. The many clashes between these beasts of metal and flesh had leveled mountains, turning the area into a wasteland of dirt and rubble.

...She’s still standing, Shu thought, making a bitter face. It would normally be hidden by his costume, but here in the cockpit, it was fully exposed.

Leviathan’s vigor was the reason behind Shu’s bitterness.

Both Shu and Leviathan knew full well that if this battle continued in this manner, Shu would emerge victorious. With Shu’s stats, technique, and armaments, the chances of him losing to the kaiju were low.

However, there was a discrepancy in their predictions which showed that

ultimately, Leviathan's estimate had been more accurate

Specifically, it was about the time until Leviathan would be defeated.

Based on Shu's assumptions, Leviathan should have already fallen by now — but she was still in relatively good health and even still had about half of her vast total HP.

There were three reasons why Shu had miscalculated.

First was the fact that he hadn't gotten a single chance to finish her off. Both of them were prioritizing offense, but Leviathan always backed away whenever it counted — in other words, just when Shu would prepare to do a finishing move.

The moment he prepared to use his final skill, the moment he tried to make an opening for a decisive strike using his armaments, or when he was about to mix some limb-destroying techniques into his normal attacks... During every pivotal moment, Leviathan would always make distance between her and Baldr.

She was able to do this partially due to her greater AGI, but also because of her beastly instincts.

Leviathan was a Guardian with almost no actual skills, but as a beast, she had a natural sense for danger. His experience and perception was more than matched by Leviathan's instinct, preventing him from delivering the deciding blow.

...*What a pain,* he thought.

The second reason was Leviathan's equipment.

Normally, she only equipped conceal-focused accessories and human gear, and only while camouflaged as human. However, there was gear that could be equipped by tamed creatures and Guardians. Legendaria was a notable source for such items, but Leviathan was far too large to wear anything they produced — and besides, no equipment would be able to withstand being worn by her.

But there was one exception...

"...I didn't know you had a special reward that gives you regeneration."

...The existence of an MVP special reward adjusted not for Behemot, but

Leviathan herself.

The accessory was clinging to her immense frame, constantly restoring her HP.

“I wouldn’t wear it if I wasn’t fighting you. We’re too strong to easily hide everything in our hand, but we’ll still conceal anything we can.”

“Makes sense.” It was an obvious strategy for the pair to use, and because of this hidden piece of equipment, over half of the damage Shu had dealt had been restored by now.

I guess it periodically restores a portion of her HP, Shu thought. *Even if it’s like 0.1% per second, her total HP is so high that ends up being like 20,000 per second... Also, I guess drinking that potion back in Gideon was basically a bluff, huh?*

He had to attack her at least once every ten seconds to actually make a significant dent in her health.

Honestly, it was impressive that he’d even been able to take away half of her 20,000,000+ HP.

It’d be fine if this was just a matter of giving this fight a little more time, but...

Wild instincts and a special reward. If these two things were the only problems, Shu could still win.

However, that was where the third problem came in.

“...You sure got passive,” Shu commented. Leviathan said nothing in response. About when her HP dropped to 40%, Leviathan became significantly less aggressive.

No... in fact, she had clearly switched focus on *prolonging* this battle.

She attacked less and instead threw everything into defense, evasion, and healing.

...I guess I underestimated how clever she is, Shu thought. Leviathan had known from the start that she would lose against him, yet she still succumbed to her instinct for strife and fought with all she could... at least at the start.

Despite being beastlike and driven by instinct, Leviathan always put Behemot above all.

Nothing was more important to her than Behemot's orders and helping Behemot win.

Because of this, her top priority was to simply survive until Behemot's victory was assured — and her desire to enjoy the fight vanished by the time her HP had dropped to 40%.

She had also just communicated with her Master using Beastheart, As One, and this had made her even more cautious.

This is bad, Shu thought. Even with Baldr's ult, Shu had less AGI and END than Leviathan, so even he would have a hard time winning a prolonged battle against her.

At the very least, it was impossible to defeat her within these few precious minutes that she had bet everything on.

...What should I do? Shu had the option to ignore Leviathan and return to the assembly hall, but that was where he would find the King of Beasts, who was fighting her hardest for victory.

Their ult is probably like Rook's Union Jack... a fusion skill. That wasn't a rare kind of ult for Guardians. In fact, it was fairly common.

If the fusion skill just added their base stats together, it wouldn't be too different from Beastheart Possession; but if it was a skill that doubled the stats or added them together as they were pre-fusion, it would create a beast unlike any other and give hell to anyone who dared to face it.

It was only natural to expect an ult to be that potent — and with Leviathan being focused on stats, it was ludicrous to not consider this possibility.

After all, even the hyper-versatile Baldr had an ult that greatly boosted stats based on Shu's STR.

I drew Leviathan away from Behemot exactly because we expected their ult to be too much for us, but if she just keeps on stalling and Ray's party loses... Behemot will just chase us down and they'll still end up using the skill...

Shu was now faced with a choice.

He could fight a creature even stronger than Behemot, here or back at the assembly hall...

...Should I use γ?

...Or he could use everything he had to defeat Leviathan here and now, or to beat the result of her fusion with her Master, consequences be damned.

Shu silently pondered this.

If he used his ultimate weapon... the power that had brought down the King of Crime... he would definitely win against Leviathan alone.

Even if she merged with King of Beasts, he would still have about a 50% chance.

But if I do that and it turns out that Dryfe has something else waiting for us, Altar will stand no chance. If he used the power he was thinking of, Shu would have no more cards to play. In fact, he'd been holding back on using it because doing so would leave the others vulnerable.

I guess the worst thing is that this battle's being watched, Shu thought as he directed some of his sensors to the sky above.

They picked up the heat signature of a drone hidden by optical camouflage.

Looks like that King of Light guy that Ray beat up is watching this. That's not really a problem, though. He probably won't get involved, and Baldr and I are a bad matchup for him anyway. The real problem is...

Shu moved the sensors again, focusing them on a monster that was similar to an eye with wings looking down on this battlefield. This creature was somewhat familiar to him... one of the so-called "Broadcast Eyes."

The lab coat lunatic's recon monster... Honestly, I expected to see it here eventually. Shu was almost totally sure that Franklin had been the one to record Ray and Logan's battle in Quartierlatin, and there was next to no chance that someone like him wouldn't send his eyes to watch these peace talks for data on Shu, Behemot, and the rest of them.

Now, is it just his monsters... or is he hanging around somewhere himself, too?

If Franklin was also present, the situation would become even worse. If Shu gave everything he had to defeat Leviathan or Behemot, the others would be left to face Franklin's monster army without him, and while completely fatigued on top of it all.

Without Shu's firepower, the Giga Professor's horde was a terrible menace to them, and there was no guarantee that he wouldn't send everything in right after Shu used the ace up his sleeve.

That was why he hadn't used it yet.

And now, with an amount of hesitation that was quite rare for him, he was very seriously considering it.

Time passed, and once he was forced to make a choice...

"Baldr, Gloria γ, activa—"

...He had almost resolved to use his ultimate weapon, but...

"I'm leaving this to you."

"You can count on me."

...He suddenly remembered the words he'd exchanged with his brother right before he left.

"Would you like to initialize the Fatal Engine, Gloria γ?" Baldr asked.

"...No. I would not." And so, Shu stopped himself from using his ultimate weapon... the Superior special reward.

"...Hahahah..." He laughed as though something was very funny before rethinking the situation.

Let's look at this the other way around, he thought, an option he had ignored so far immediately springing to mind. *They're not the ones keeping Behemot in check... I'm the one keeping Leviathan in check. And they* will *go on to defeat Behemot.*

Once that happened, Leviathan would vanish... and Shu would still have the power to fight.

Even if Franklin attacked right after Behemot's defeat, he would have no

trouble facing him.

Altar had a path to victory, even in this hellish situation. Beyond that unlikely possibility lay the optimal outcome.

“Yeah. That’s the best possible ending for all of this...” he said to himself, considering the situation from another angle. “All right then...”

Shu now focused his heart, mind, and body on the battle before him.

“...You seem rather calm,” Leviathan said.

“Don’t have a reason not to be. My li’l bro and his gang are gonna beat Behemot. All that matters here is that I don’t let ya get in his way.”

“...You really believe they can do that?” Leviathan asked, her voice filled with rage, as she charged at Shu.

“I can’t *bear* to hear you dismiss my lil’ bro!” Shu shouted with confidence and honesty as he shoved Baldr’s metallic fist into Leviathan’s stomach.

“Gh...! Your eventual despair will be payment enough for enduring your foolishness.”

“Say what ya want! If he can’t do it, I’ll just have to try beary hard in his stead! That’s what big bros are for!”

Thus, the battle between Shu and Leviathan continued.

It was a battle that wouldn’t end until the struggle at the assembly hall was settled. Both sides were merely buying time.

Shu trusted that Ray would win, while Leviathan believed that Behemot would come out on top.

The actual outcome was soon to be revealed...

Chapter Fifteen: The Final Choice

Altar-Dryfe border, assembly hall

Having donned Greatest Top, Behemot had become even more fierce than before.

Chasing after Ray — the visible target — she occasionally fired her maser cannon towards the surrounding shadows in an attempt to drive out her two opponents in hiding.

In his remaining hand, Ray held one of the twin blades from Nemesis' fourth form — but instead of using it to attack, he was focusing on evasion. Though just barely, he was managing to evade both the attacks from her ethereal claws as well as the maser beams Behemot was firing at him.

Panic had started to creep into Ray's expression, and not only because of the onslaught.

"Ray! Three minutes since activation! The damage counter won't hold!" Nemesis told him telepathically.

Be more specific! Ray replied.

Chaser was a skill that subtracted an amount equal to the stat it copied from the damage counter.

With Counter Absorption, they had absorbed about 200,000 damage — but with Behemot's AGI being a whole 37,564 even under the effects of Faint Light, that wouldn't last very long. Ray losing his arm to the maser cannon had increased the damage counter by a little bit, but since his total HP was relatively low, it was only a drop in the ocean.

"There is only about 20,000 points of damage left in the pool! That won't be enough for the next check! Chaser will be canceled!"

Wait, that doesn't add up. 37,564 times 4 is 150,256... There should still be enough for one more check!

“Tsukuyo Fuso briefly switched the division target from AGI to STR, didn’t she?! It seems that the stat reduction for that minute was increased to the average between the two stat totals, relative to the length of the switch! I was unaware that this would happen, since this is the first time we’ve fought someone whose stats change so drastically and so quickly!”

“Well... I guess that makes sense!” Ray replied out loud as he barely evaded another maser beam.

He was starting to get more and more worried at this point.

...I guess we have no choice but to take another hit and refill the counter!

“But her Tiger Scratch hits three times... Can you withstand all of that? I cannot use Counter Absorption in fourth form.” Unlike at the beginning of the battle, Ray couldn’t use Counter Absorption because that would mean canceling Chaser, which would immediately let Behemot catch up to him.

Thus, Ray chose a different approach.

...I’ll just take it with my Brooch.

“That is impossible! It will be shattered by the excess damage from the triple attack! Did you even consider the damage threshold?!” Ray’s current HP was a little under 20,000.With Behemot’s attacks dealing about 200,000 damage in total, the roll to break the Brooch would happen at least 10 times — so for Ray to withstand all the damage from the triple attack, he had to win a gamble on 10% a whole 20 times in a row.

The likelihood of the Brooch breaking before the third attack was over 87%, so it was obviously ludicrous for him to expect to come out on top here.

No... I’m only betting on two times, Ray thought back to Nemesis as he put the twin blade he was holding between his teeth.

“Ray?!” With his only hand freed, he then reached into his side.

Even as he did so, Behemot closed the distance between them. She was wary of his strange actions — but not enough to stop attacking him.

“Oh, so that is what you have in mind,” Nemesis thought as she understood Ray’s intentions. “But this also relies on chance.”

I know that. It's luck-based and I won't be able to do this again, but there's no time like the present.

"Very well. I will say nothing more, then. This might be the optimal choice, given the situation. So you will let her attack you to increase the time for Chaser... With the time you secure, Brother Bear should be able to accomplish more, as well..."

Nemesis thought the damage they would add to their counter should be used to buy more time for Chaser, but Ray had another idea.

No, I'm sending the damage right back to her with an Impact Counter, he thought. Impact Counter was the technique Ray had developed — a Vengeance Is Mine counterattack he delivered the moment he received the necessary damage.

Naturally, it depleted his damage counter significantly.

"Ah...! I see..." Nemesis said. She was shocked by his words, but chose not to object. "But that won't be enough to defeat her. At most, you might crack that armor... but not fully destroy it."

That's fine. I mean, if she suddenly decides to get rid of Fuso instead, even 600,000 damage on the counter will only last us two or three minutes.

Behemot hadn't attacked Tsukuyo even after equipping Greatest Top.

The High Priestess was still dividing her AGI, so it wasn't clear why Behemot wasn't taking her out first. It could be that she was wary of some ace up Tsukuyo's sleeve — or it could be some other reason entirely.

Still, there was a chance that she would change her mind and target Tsukuyo at any moment. If that happened, only Ray would be able to keep up with Behemot, but even he would soon fall behind due to the increased cost for maintaining Chaser.

Because of this, Ray figured that the only path to victory was to attack Behemot immediately.

"What will you do after the Impact Counter?" Nemesis asked.

The fourth form's Vengeance is split between each sword — but with one

hand, I can only attack with one sword at a time. I'll use the remaining damage counter to maintain Chaser and support Marie and Tsukikage.

"Understood... Don't die, Ray."

It's still too early for that. Chaser would soon be running another check, and they didn't have enough damage on the counter to pass it. Once that happened, Ray's speed would return to normal, and Behemot would become too fast for him to even see in spite of the AGI division.

However, Behemot closed the distance to Ray long before the check happened.

In response, Ray... *came to a halt right where he was*.

Behemot couldn't help but be surprised by this action, but that certainly didn't stop her.

She swung her right ethereal claw down towards Ray, and the two follow-up Tiger Scratch attacks were close on its heels.

And so, the moment the first hit landed...

"Hm...?"

...Behemot felt that it had somehow not had quite the effect she was hoping for.

The same happened with the second attack.

That was when Behemot realized that something definitely wasn't right. Knowing Ray's HP, the excess damage should've already shattered his Brooch, at least.

It didn't take long for the explanation to show itself.

Something fell from Ray's side. It seemed to be a shattered accessory... but not a Brooch.

It had the appearance of a dragon's scale, and Behemot obviously knew what it was.

A Dragonscale Ward, she thought. It was an accessory that shattered when the wearer took damage, reducing the incoming damage to one tenth of its

total value.

Ray had used some of these items in his battle against the Demi-Drag Worm, and after that experience, he now carried them everywhere he went just like he always wore a Brooch.

Upon seeing two shattered Dragonscale Wards fall to the ground, Behemot realized what Ray had done.

He reduced the amount of rolls the Brooch will make...?

A tenth of 200,000 damage was only 20,000 damage. With Ray's HP, the Brooch would only be forced to roll for shattering twice.

Hitting a 10% chance 20 times in a row was ludicrous, but a mere 2 times was perfectly manageable.

So that movement was... When Ray had put his hand to his side, he was doing it to take out and equip the Ward. He'd had enough time to do that once before Behemot's attack.

But what about the other Ward? He couldn't have been wearing it from the start, because it would already have shattered from the shockwaves all over the battle, or the accumulated minor damage Ray had suffered so far.

And since that obviously wasn't the case, there could only be one explanation...

He used Instant Wear right before impact... He manually equipped one while using the utility skill to equip the other.

The moment Behemot figured out why Ray was wearing the Dragonscale Wards, the third attack finally hit him.

So far, he had only lost the Wards... his Brooch was still in perfectly good condition.

"UGHH!" he roared as he let the third attack hit him, negating the damage with the Brooch *while swinging the sword clutched between his teeth towards Behemot*.

"Ah!" she gasped.

Behemot knew that Ray's strategy revolved around counterattacks, so she'd intended to end the battle with an attack from her other claw before he could retaliate.

"Vengeance..."

But if their speed was equal...

"...Is..."

...It was only reasonable...

"...MINE!"

...That Ray, whose blade was in motion the very instant he was hit, would deliver his counterattack faster than Behemot swung her left claw.

As Ray's Brooch shattered from the excess damage, the Vengeance attack from his twin blade struck Behemot's neck.

"Gh?!" The burst of fixed damage knocked Behemot's whole body to the left. This wasn't the first time Ray had used Vengeance while holding his sword with his mouth, so he was able to hit his target even though she was small.

Ray's attack made Behemot's left claw miss, slicing through the air where Ray's right arm used to be.

However, despite taking a direct hit and losing her balance, Behemot was still in perfect shape.

"Gh...! It wasn't enough!" Ray said, taking the sword out of his mouth.

"It seems so! The metal did not shatter! Half its power was not enough!" The three attacks added 600,000 to his damage counter, and the Vengeance just now dealt half of that multiplied by two — but that wasn't enough to destroy Greatest Top.

There was a visible crack in the general area he hit, but Behemot was still fully armored.

This was the power of Superior metal — the strongest material in this world. It was the pinnacle of toughness... so hard that even Behemot and Leviathan had been forced to use their ult and pulverize it over and over until they finally

broke through.

Even if Vengeance ignored defense, a mere few hundred thousands of fixed damage was far from enough to shatter it.

...But it *did* crack it.

“One more hit and it’ll shatter,” Ray said. There was still 300,000 damage left on the counter. Creating distance between him and Behemot, he switched to the twin blade which hadn’t been depleted and, after passing Chaser’s fourth check, he waited for an opening to deliver his next attack.

Repositioning herself, Behemot thought about the Impact Counter she had just weathered.

She knew that Ray had this technique — but despite knowing about it beforehand, she wasn’t able to actually counter it.

Who could blame her? Ray was as fast as her and could begin his counterattacks *while* she was attacking him. Not even Behemot could handle something like that.

Or more accurately — she had never *had* to. Almost no one was as fast as she was, and even if they were, there was no way they could survive her triple attack.

But now, Ray — albeit thanks to Tsukuyo’s stat division — had done just that with pure skill.

Experienced as Behemot was, she had never encountered anything like this before.

Should I assume this won’t happen again because his Brooch is broken...? No... he can absolutely do this again.

Of course, Ray still had Last Command. Even if his HP was completely depleted, he could move his deceased body to deliver another Impact Counter.

Rosa had suggested that he pick up Death Soldier exactly because of this deadly — and *deathly* — combo.

...I didn’t underestimate him, exactly, but he still surpassed my expectations. That’s amazing. Behemot silently praised Ray for dealing her the most damage

she'd ever experienced.

At the same time, Behemot considered her own situation.

Three minutes left... Though time was effectively slowed down because of her supersonic AGI, the limit for Greatest Top was drawing near. Behemot was running out of time. Keeping her MVP reward's flaw hidden was no longer her top priority — now, this battle could actually end with her defeat.

Thus...

I'll get rid of the insurance.

...She changed her strategy and turned Greatest Top's head towards Tsukuyo.

"Ah?!" Ray gasped in horror. That was something they desperately *didn't* want Behemot to do.

The main reason Ray's party was able to put up such a good fight against Behemot at all was that she had so far refrained from targeting Tsukuyo. If she did that, the course of battle would change drastically.

The head opened up and the maser cannon locked onto Tsukuyo.

But the moment the beam was fired...

"Please excuse me, Lady Tsukuyo."

...Eishiro leaped out of Behemot's shadow and did two things simultaneously.

He used his shadows to grab Tsukuyo and move her where the beam wouldn't touch her — and also used an ace up his sleeve that would ensure Behemot's defeat.

Eishiro flung away his black twin blades and exposed his bare hands.

Behemot instantly knew that meant he was preparing to use a particular skill.

...There it is.

King of Beasts, Behemot the Physical Apex was only truly afraid of one person here, and it was the King of Assassins, Eishiro Tsukikage.

She was afraid of him because he possessed the ability most likely to actually kill her.

The final skill of the King of Assassins, “Death and Murder,” could instantly slay even Behemot. It killed any humanoid creature that the King of Assassins touched.

Although Behemot had the appearance of a quadruped animal, that was just the shape of her avatar as she’d made it during character creation. Despite her appearance, she still counted as a humanoid creature that would be affected by the skill, and his mere touch would result in her demise.

Bourdrim’s Sufferward Prison lets me resist poison-type and curse-type fatal status effects, but if Death and Murder is neither of those, or if it’s powerful enough to break through that resistance... I’m not sure what will happen.

She had heard of the skill from tians, but it had never been properly analyzed in all of tian history.

After all... *the cost for using it was the death of the user*, and it even prevented the effects of the priest grouping’s resurrection magic.

Naturally, no tian in history had ever wanted to analyze a skill like that.

Perhaps The Lunar Society, which had the current King of Assassins who was also a Master, had details about it, but Behemot wouldn’t know what they were.

No... They know about both Death and Murder as well as my Bourdrim. If they have all that knowledge and they’re still using it... it means that they think it can kill me.

With that realization, Behemot was suddenly as cautious as she could be.

Eishiro faced her with empty hands.

To use Death and Murder, he had to use them to touch the target — and once he did so, both he and his target would die.

It was already known that he would get the death penalty for this, but he cared little about that. If Behemot remained alive, she would defeat Tsukuyo — preventing his lady’s desire from being fulfilled.

Eishiro was ready to throw his life away just for that.

“Tch...” However, there was one problem that had to be dealt with before he

could deliver his final blow.

To use Death and Murder, he had to touch his target's body, and that wasn't something he could do while Behemot was covered in a Superior metal.

He had to focus on dealing with that first.

"All I need is a single opening. Please shatter it," Eishiro said.

"Got it!"

"On it!"

Two voices responded to him.

One was Ray, while the other was Marie, who'd just jumped out of a shadow opposite of Tsukikage.

Ray had just cracked Greatest Top and still had a method of delivering more fixed damage at his disposal, so he would definitely be up to the task.

The surprising thing was that Marie had also implied she had a way to shatter the Superior metal protecting Behemot.

She was only a pre-Superior, but she claimed that she could break a substance that even the Physical Apex had struggled to damage.

Some would assume that she was just ignorant of what she was dealing with. Most would be sure that she wasn't capable of such a feat regardless.

However... Marie was not speaking in vain.

She believed... no, she was *confident* that she could break it.

Marie aimed Arc-en-Ciel at Behemot before transforming it into the large-barreled shape needed for the ultimate skill.

And then, she voiced the name of the ace up her sleeve... *the sure-kill bullet that used all six colors*.

◇◇◇

About a certain character.

When Marie's Arc-en-Ciel received its ultimate skill, she decided that it should fire the characters from her manga.

Red and black summoned Daisy Scarlet the Explosive.

Blue and white summoned Lady Shirahime the Poisoner.

Green and silver summoned Ulbetia the Piercer.

Blue, black, and white summoned Upas-Kamuy the Crusher.

Red, green, and silver summoned Fanatica the Annihilator.

Using this framework, she drew her characters... her children.

However, there was one character that she could draw, but couldn't fire.

It was none other than the protagonist of her manga and the character she role-played in *Infinite Dendrogram*... Marie Adler.

Even with all six colors, Arc-en-Ciel couldn't bring Marie to life.

No matter how many times she tried it, she'd always failed. Marie Adler, frozen in the drafts, couldn't even be spurred into motion by the power of an Embryo.

Marie figured that the protagonist of her manga wouldn't be truly given life until she found an answer for herself, and had given up.

This was like homework for her heart and mind — homework she had yet to finish.

However, she still had to prepare Arc-en-Ciel's ultimate trump card... the result of firing all six colors.

The problem was that these six colors were the ones she used for Marie Adler. No other character fit the palette.

As she'd turned the problem over and over in her mind, she'd returned to reality and re-read her work.

"...Ah." And in doing so, she found that there *was* actually someone who fit these colors perfectly.

Marie also understood why it had been so difficult for her to think of this character, but now that *she* had found her way back into her mind, Marie realized that she was almost certainly the best candidate for her six-color ultimate skill.

◇◆◇

Altar-Dryfe border, assembly hall

To both Arc-en-Ciel and Marie, there was no turning back once they'd used that six-color ult. Using it came at the cost of all the "paint" she had, rendering her unable to use her Embryo for a whole day afterwards.

However, it was also the ability that had once destroyed a Superior.

It was the strongest bullet... the strongest *character* available to her.

And her name was...



“Phantasmal Raingun — Arc-en-Ciel: La Gravelle the Godslayer!”

From the barrel emerged a woman with a greatsword made from the bones of beasts and eyes covered by green bandage.

Her name was La Gravelle the Godslayer, and she was the strongest hired killer in Marie’s manga. Said to surpass even the protagonist, she was the most powerful character in the setting — and she had never debuted, since the magazine had stopped publication.

Because of this, only Marie knew about her. And her power as mimicked by the ult was...

“K i l l.”

...swinging her sword, just once.

This resulted in an attack both faster and stronger than Behemot, even as she was now.

The character’s basic concept was that she was “just super strong,” and dedicating the Resources of all six of the Embryo’s colors to this purpose alone resulted in a truly devastating strike.

Marie had almost never used this bullet.

In most cases, the attack would be taken by the target’s Brooch, leaving them alive to face Marie with her Embryo now unusable.

Even in this battle, Behemot’s HP was far too high even for La Gravelle, so Marie had been waiting for a chance to land a critical hit.

But now, she only had to shatter a part of Greatest Top. There was no better time to use La Gravelle than now.

And so, the Superior Killer had bet all that she had on this one single attack... and it shattered the Superior metal beautifully.

The part of Greatest Top that covered from the right side of Behemot’s head to the elbow of her right foreleg was now gone, exposing Behemot’s bare flesh.

It had already been cracked by Ray, yes — but Marie’s all-out attack had actually overcome the strongest metal that this world had to offer.

But as she bore witness to this victory... Marie's head fell from her shoulder.

La Gravelle had also been sliced in two and vanished before her summoning had truly ended.

Upon realizing that Marie's attack was inescapable, Behemot had given up on harm reduction and instead prioritized taking out both La Gravelle and Marie.

The Brooch... Oh, right. Tiger Scratch makes it meaningless, just like it did for Rook, Marie thought as her severed head hurtled through the air. *Well, it's not like I can do anything without my bullets anyway. I'm leaving the rest to you, KoA... and Ray.*

And so, her head turned to motes of light before it even hit the ground.

As Marie vanished, Eishiro hid in the shadows once again.

With Behemot now exposed, he could take her out using Death and Murder.

He's not a problem now... I think? Behemot thought. If this was a proper, chaotic brawl, it would've been difficult for her to escape Eishiro's hands, but the current state of the battle no longer allowed for that.

There were only three of them left. Ray would be easy to handle as long as she paid attention, while Tsukuyo wasn't much of a threat because she lacked direct offensive ability, so there was no one here that could reduce Behemot's chances of dealing with surprise attacks.

Even with her AGI divided, this was basically a one-on-one fight against Eishiro. And so, Behemot couldn't possibly lose.

At least, that was how it looked until a dark purple miasma flooded the area.

"Hm...?" Behemot was totally confused by the sight.

Ray lost his right arm, she thought. *He shouldn't be able to use his Hellish Miasm—... oh.*

That was when she remembered something.

Behemot had gathered data about everyone she could potentially be fighting, and Ray had something that had defeated one of her fellow Superiors.

There's one more... There were *four* left on their side, not three... and the

fourth one *could* use this skill.

It didn't take long for Behemot to find *her*.

She stood behind Behemot, near where Ray's severed arm had fallen.

The bracer that exuded blood vapor was gone...

"Wearing one half of an SUBM... interesting."

...And in its place stood a gold-copper-skinned goblin girl — Gardranda.

Looking rather delighted, she eyed Behemot's Greatest Top while she used the right bracer to fill the hall with her miasma.

It leaked through the holes in the walls and ceiling, but there was still enough of it to cover the floor. This was obviously meant to be a smokescreen, because Behemot was immune to its debuffs. She had Bourdrim constantly active, so mist-based poison-type status effects were too unfocused to work on her.

The carpet of smoke would only serve to help Eishiro deliver his surprise attack.

In a way, the miasma hid the "shadow minefield" under it.

Behemot actually found this situation a bit troubling.

To ensure that she evaded Eishiro's shadow ambush, she had to actually *see* the shadows, so she had to defeat Gardranda as soon as possible.

Using Nullgravity Wings to rise above the smoke might have seemed like a good option, but it actually would be a mistake. She would be far slower in the air than on the ground, which would make her an easy target for Tsukuyo's compressed debuffs. In the worst case scenario, Tsukuyo might even divide her resistances and END by 6, which would leave her vulnerable to the miasma's debuffs.

...She won't be that hard to deal with, Behemot thought.

Gardranda wasn't all that fast, comparatively. She could surpass the speed of sound, but she was slower than Behemot, Ray, and Tsukikage.

But getting too close to her is dangerous. Gardranda had assumed a stance where she focused miasma into her right hand and flame into her left. Behemot

theorized that if she approached her, Gardranda would counterattack simply with concentrated miasma and flame.

The Apex was right in her assumption, for Gardranda was Ray's right hand and thus had developed an excellent grasp of the art of counterattacking.

And if I focus too much on her counter... Tsukikage will use his final skill on me, Behemot thought. Gardranda's appearance wasn't her only problem, though — Greatest Top's time limit was drawing ever closer.

Gardranda was also on a time limit, but Ray had expended all the MP stored in Gouz-Maise to summon her, resulting in a summon time of a whole 600 seconds. That was significantly more than the two and a half minutes left for Greatest Top, and if Behemot wasted any time at all, those two and a half minutes would expire.

With Greatest Top gone, Tsukikage would be able to target not just the sliver of flesh that Marie had exposed, but Behemot's entire body.

Behemot couldn't run or stall any longer... her only choice was to fight Gardranda.

In order to have a chance at victory, she had to go on the offensive.

Thus, she gathered her resolve and really looked at Gardranda... as well as her surroundings.

Fuso isn't doing anything... and I can't see Ray. Is he hiding like Adler did? Behemot thought.

Tsukuyo wasn't doing anything noteworthy, but Ray was nowhere in sight. Behemot guessed that he was hiding in one of Eishiro's shadows.

She hadn't witnessed the moment he slid into them or the moment he summoned Gardranda, so she assumed that he'd done all of that while Marie used her ult.

If Ray was also hiding in the shadows, it meant that she had two ambushes to anticipate.

I still don't have any other options... I'll just do it, Behemot thought as she gathered her resolve and charged at Gardranda.

She didn’t use the maser cannon. Doing so would slightly limit her movements, and with Ray and Marie having cracked open a gap in Greatest Top, that would give Eishiro an opening he could take advantage of.

Behemot dashed towards Gardranda and attacked her with a Tiger Scratch from her left Crescent Glissando.

The deadly horizontal multi-attack wasn’t something that Gardranda, being three times slower than Behemot, could possibly evade.

However, dodging wasn’t Gardranda’s intention.

Instead, she took a step forward, sacrificing her defense in favor of getting close enough to attack.

A moment later, her left hand lit up...

“Purgatorial Flames: Zero.”

...And released immensely hot flames.

This was Gardranda’s trump card — the skill that had once instantly destroyed a Legendary devil.

It could easily incinerate any flesh it came into contact with, and Gardranda was thrusting it right towards Behemot’s exposed neck area.

This was a proper, unavoidable counterattack — just like the one her summoner had done in this very same battle.

But there was one difference now...

I knew she would do that.

...And that was the fact that Behemot had expected this the entire time.

Before Gardranda’s attack connected, Behemot used her speed advantage to raise her right foreleg and block the strike.

Gardranda’s face twisted in shock. Although the area around the right side of Behemot’s the neck was exposed, the foreleg was still fully armored, and its perfect resistance to changes in temperature completely nullified the effects of Purgatorial Flames.

A moment later, Tiger Scratch hit Gardranda and cut her in half at the waist.

Her lower half was pulverized by the two follow-up attacks, while the upper half was knocked all the way into the opposite wall.

During the brief exchange, Behemot had easily dealt with Gardranda's counterattack and defeated her utterly.

However, she knew that this battle wasn't over yet.

There they are. A moment after her attack on Gardranda, Behemot sensed two entities move at the exact same time from different directions.

She was aware that Gardranda's counter was ultimately only a distraction meant to give the others a chance to ambush her. With the goblin gone, the miasma would disperse and expose Eishiro's shadows, greatly reducing the chances of their ambush succeeding.

Because of this, the best moment to strike was while Behemot was still re-orienting herself after the exchange with Gardranda.

But I've seen this happen so often that I'm totally sick of it! Eishiro and Marie had simultaneously ambushed her from the shadows many times now and it hadn't once worked.

One entity emerged from a shadow in front of her, while the other came out from between 4 and 5 o'clock.

The person standing before her was the now-familiar blond youth clad in black.

I'll deal with Ray later! I need to get rid of Tsukikage first...! Vengeance was a potent skill, but she could survive it as long as he didn't strike anything vital. Eishiro's attack, however, would mean instant death, so the order of precedence was easy to establish.

Because of this, Behemot quickly turned towards the other attacker and launched Winged Ripper shockwaves towards it.

She chose this attack over Tiger Scratch to keep him from getting too close. Winged Ripper was a ranged skill which allowed her to deal with the menace before he even reached her.

She'd thought this through from all angles, and this was obviously the right

choice to make.

However, the one to be hit by the two shockwaves...

“Ugh...”

...Was indeed a blond youth clad in black — *Ray*.

Shock overcame Behemot. Her thoughts were too overwhelming to be put into words, but one thing was foremost in her mind: *They tricked me*.

She realized that she’d fallen into a trap.

When she looked back at the other attacker, she instead saw *Eishiro — who had just canceled his transformation into Ray Starling*.

Behemot simply wasn’t in possession of all the facts.

Once, The Lunar Society had hunted down a UBM in Noz Forest. It was the same UBM that a particular member of the clan had told his step-son about.

The UBM was a strange goblin that could transform himself into a wolf or bat, among other things.

And it was a UBM *whose MVP special reward had gone to Eishiro*.

The reward allowed him to change his appearance, and though Reveal would instantly see through it, the forms he could take were nearly endless.

Thus, after he and Ray hid themselves in the shadows, he changed his appearance to Ray’s and purposely charged at Behemot head-on, expecting her to assume the other person was Eishiro and prioritize him instead.

And that was exactly what happened.

Behemot gasped as Eishiro drew close. She didn’t have the time to retaliate.

A moment before she could defeat him, he would already be in touch range.

Being a combat veteran, she instantly knew that this minor difference in timing meant that there was no hope for her.

“Death and Murder.”

And so, Eishiro reached for the area where Behemot was exposed... *only to touch nothing but empty air*.

This was due to a difference of mere centimetels — a space about as big as the first two joints of a person's finger.

Eishiro hadn't misjudged the distance, nor was he too slow. Behemot had actually created this tiny distance herself.

She had *purposely canceled Greatest Top before its time ran out*.

The special reward could be equipped and unequipped in an instant, and by canceling it, she had lowered her height.

However slight, the difference was enough to decide the outcome.

Death and Murder failed to reach her... and a moment later, Eishiro flew by her.

This was the attack that would've landed had she not canceled Greatest Top.

The effects of Death and Murder killed Eishiro in an instant, and his body soon dissolved into light.

Marie's ultimate bullet. Ray's sacrifice, and Gardranda's.

They'd all given so much to make sure Eishiro's final skill was delivered... and it was all for nothing.

"...I won," Behemot whispered, with her own voice and in a human language.

Her tone made it obvious just how cornered she'd really been. Her heart was beating so fast it felt like it might jump straight out of her mouth.

In all her time as a Superior, she had never experienced such a desperate battle.

Behemot had once fought Dryfe's SMTF and a certain Superior. The possibility of Claudiah dying had really made her lose her composure back then, but this was the first time that she felt that way about her *own* life.

If she had been just a split-second late with canceling Greatest Top, she would've definitely died.

Being put in such a deadly situation had made her heart race at absurd speeds.

"Ohhh, dear. So it didn't work, huh?" Those words reached Behemot's ears.

They were spoken by Tsukuyo Fuso, the only Altarian left who was completely unharmed.

The High Priestess was now the only target Behemot had to deal with. She'd kept her around as insurance, but that was no longer necessary.

Tsukuyo was a Superior, but she was merely a support job, and there was no chance Behemot would give her the time to use her final skill in any case.

She would now defeat Tsukuyo to achieve her ultimate victory here in the hall, then meet up with Leviathan to defeat Shu; then, she could return to Claudiah.

If Claudiah had been defeated, Behemot would either face Altimia herself or take Claudiah and flee to safety.

"It's... too early... to say that..." Accompanied by the sound of moving rubble, she heard someone speak those words.

Shock overwhelmed Behemot's mind yet again. Though, this was something she had actually anticipated — she'd merely briefly forgotten it because of the life-and-death situation she'd just survived.

Behemot looked at the man standing there.

It was Ray, standing there with a massive wound in his chest. He looked like a shambling corpse.

Despite his awful state, he wasn't broken.

Last Command — the Death Soldier skill that allowed the user to move around after their HP hit zero.

This was the second time Behemot had faced someone with that skill, but it still surprised her.

After all... Ray shouldn't have been able to move. The hole in his chest had been opened by her Winged Ripper, and it had completely pulverized his left lung.

It was obviously a fatal wound.

...*How?* she thought, for this didn't make sense to her. Even if he didn't feel

pain, losing a lung had to make it difficult for him to breathe... he should've been suffocating.

According to tian accounts, the Death Soldier slaves who were dealt enough damage to lose all their HP couldn't move properly, either because they suffered unbearable pain or their bodies were too mangled.

Last Command did nothing but prolong their deaths. The most they could usually do was lay in place and use a self-destruct ability.

This was why Last Command had always been seen as a useless skill.

Despite that... Ray was still standing.

Bearing an agony that would continue for perhaps dozens of seconds more, he stood before Behemot, looking at her with eyes devoid of resignation.

She silently stared back at him.

Behemot had the option to ignore him. Ray would die if she just kept her distance and waited for Last Command to expire.

If Tsukuyo tried to resurrect him, Behemot could just take her out.

Due to the fatal damage that had been dealt to him, Ray's Vengeance would now deal significantly more damage than before.

If it hit Behemot in the right place, it might even kill her.

At the moment, fighting Ray now was both risky and offered no advantage.

Some would even call it stupid.

Even so... Behemot chose to face him.

If she ignored the challenge of a dying... no... an *already dead* newbie, she would be undeserving of her status as The Physical Apex.

Thus, she refused to run from him.

Though there was nothing to gain from this battle, there was still meaning in it.

If she wanted to remain King of Beasts, the Physical Apex...

If she wanted to live in *Infinite Dendrogram* while being truly herself...

If she wanted to be someone who wouldn’t embarrass her friend...

...This was a battle she could not avoid.

“I am the top of Dryfe Imperium’s kill rankings, King of Beasts, Behemot,” she said, in normal human words.

Ray fully understood why she introduced herself again.

He coughed up blood before responding the same way. “I am the leader... of the Kingdom of Altar’s second highest-ranking clan... Death Period... Paladin, Ray Starling...!”

They re-introduced themselves as opponents in a *duel*.

The Masters then once again looked directly at each other...

“Bring it!”

...And shouted to one another before charging forward.

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Last Command had 45 seconds left.

Ray Starling the Unbreakable and Behemot the Physical Apex.

These two would now have their final clash.

Chapter Sixteen: The Conclusion

What was he to her...?

He was someone who always filled her with worry.

The very moment she was born and met him, he was tattered and covered in blood — and that was far from the only time.

Once, he'd almost died standing against a colossal undead abomination in the mountains.

Once, he'd almost died facing a monster that a Superior had created solely to defeat him.

Once, he'd almost died while bathed in the deadly light of a black star scorching the land beneath it.

Once, he'd almost died fighting another Superior and his devilish legions.

And now he... had *actually died* struggling against an apex.

In spite of that, he was still moving — and still fighting.

Even though a part of her wished this wasn't the case, neither the agony of a lost lung nor a body so battered it was difficult to look at were enough to stop him.

Perhaps some who saw him, struggling despite his gruesome state, would say that he had a strong heart.

She didn't share that opinion, however.

In fact, she would say that that was flat-out wrong.

From her perspective, most of his many, many desperate battles were just painful to watch. To see him constantly jump into such conflicts hurt her heart even more than his thorough defeat at the hands of Marie.

This was because she'd figured out his true nature.

His death to Marie was nothing but an accident... a death at the end of a

battle where *his was the only life at stake*.

What she felt back then was the pain of loss and, as she had failed to protect him, the shame of her own powerlessness.

However, most of his other deadly battles, including the one in which they'd met, were fundamentally different from that one.

The first time she'd noticed that difference was when they had entered the dungeon in the bandit hideout... when Ray saw what had become of the innocent children that the vile necromancer had murdered and raised as undead.

She knew everything that was happening in his heart and mind, so she could truly understand just how badly that realization tore him apart.

When they'd first met, they had managed to rescue the one child he was trying to protect. But what they saw in the dungeon was the destruction of lives that no one had tried to save.

It broke his heart. His soul wept for them.

That was when she began to notice his true nature.

After the incident with the bandit gang, he fought to protect the people of Gideon. Later on, he fought to protect Torne and the boy he'd come to know.

Even later than that, he fought to protect the people of Quartierlatin.

His reasoning for doing so was always the same:

"I mean... it'd just leave a bad taste in my mouth."

Right now, she knew full well that those very words were the driving force behind his actions... the nature of his being.

From the moment she was born, she believed that at Ray's core, he was a simple young man with a kind heart who was always ready to protect someone... or someone who used pain as a motivation to advance forward.

Both were on the right track, but not completely correct.

She realized that Ray's nature was *to get himself hurt to protect others*.

It was too depressing to be called "kind," and too pitiful to describe someone

who was always advancing forward.

He was simply incapable of ignoring any tragedies befalling innocent children, those he was close to, or just people he wanted to protect — for ignoring them would cause him immense pain. If given the choice between ignoring a tragedy and hurting himself to protect someone, he would *always* pick the latter.

In exchange for the wounds he suffered, he would be able to prevent tragedies that would shatter his heart.

His nature was also reflected in her existence — his Embryo.

She didn't believe that Ray was strong-hearted. Someone with a truly strong heart would be able to *endure* such tragedies.

That certainly wasn't the case with him. He merely chose bodily suffering over the *emotional* suffering he could not withstand.

He just couldn't bear seeing someone close to him suffer and fade away.

It might've actually been more accurate to say that Ray's heart was *weak*.

If it would prevent a tragedy, he would give everything he had and more, even if it meant he suffered severely. That was just how he was.

She knew full well that he wasn't doing this solely because his avatar's sense of pain could be turned off. In fact, she was sure that he would do the same even if he *could* feel the pain.

As far as she knew, even being in his real body wouldn't stop him.

Despite all of that... he wasn't anyone special.

He was not some messiah trying to save the world, nor was he some avenger on a mission to change it.

He was *just an ordinary person* following his heart and protecting those he cared about. Just a person struggling against the tragedies before him so that they would not become memories that would haunt him.

That was his nature, and that was why there was something that she would never say to him...

That being the words, "You may close your eyes, cover your ears, and run

away.”

That would have been the easiest path, as well as the one most people would pick, but she would never recommend it to him. Sometimes she might question if he was certain about what he was doing, but she would never urge him to run.

As one who knew him better than anyone else, she simply couldn’t bring herself to do that.

She knew that his heart wouldn’t allow him to take the easy path and abandon his loved ones and anyone he saw who was suffering.

It was always hard to watch him destroy himself, but she knew that if he didn’t face the tragedies, the heartache would be worse than the wounds.

But that was exactly why he was so important to her.

He didn’t have a strong heart that could withstand the pain of tragedy. He wasn’t any more special than anyone else.

In fact, he had a delicate heart that was so easily hurt, yet he never ran away from tragedies, instead growing determined to face them head-on... and that was exactly what she loved about him.

That was why, here and now, she agreed to be a part of the only strategy he proposed that could perhaps lead them to victory, knowing full well what would become of his body... and *what she would have to do to him*.

She made her choice fully aware that it would once again lead to that feeling of powerlessness and the sadness of loss.

As a being born from Ray’s heart, she was compelled to protect the sole desire etched into her from her very first breath.

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Altar-Dryfe border, assembly hall

Ray and Behemot charged straight at each other.

They were equal in speed and each of them was fully capable of killing the other.

Behemot's offensive ability had been demonstrated many times in this battle alone and she could deliver more than enough to damage Ray to the point of incapacitation, while Ray had enough in his damage counter to deliver a critical attack. If he hit a weak spot like the head, neck, or heart, the injury-based status effects would do the rest and finish Behemot off.

I'll aim for his left arm! Behemot thought, fully aware of the danger she was in.

The torso and head were no good. Ray couldn't die while Last Command was active; if she targeted those areas, he could still launch an Impact Counter at her with just his upper half — or even his headless body.

Therefore, she would aim for the arm that held Nemesis, for he couldn't deliver the counter without the weapon that had all the damage stocked.

She intended to tear off Ray's left arm, send his wing-blade flying, and finally pulverize the rest of him.

That was her full path to victory.

Of course, she wasn't the only one thinking about how she could win this. Ray was also considering what he had to do.

The both of them were combing through the possibilities that would lead to victory and then giving their all to seize those possibilities.

After weathering a storm of thoughts that still lasted less than a single second, the two arrived at the fated moment.

"Hh...!" Ray's reach was slightly longer, so he was the first to act.

The moment Behemot entered his range, he swung his wing-blade at her head.

He only needed to hit the general area. Even though Behemot had an absurd 20,000,000HP, his Vengeance would take out a whole 5% of it, and if that 5% was her brain or any other vital organ, victory would be his.

The wing-blade flew at speeds equal to Behemot's. She hadn't faced an attack this fast since she'd become a Superior.

However, it was a direct attack, rather than a counter, so...

“...I can see it.”

...Behemot could use her immense experience to evade it.

As the blade shaved the fur on her cheek, she swung her left claw with the full might of Tiger Scratch.

The three attacks obliterated his left hand, turning it into a bloody mist, while the shockwave it created blasted the blade away with power that sent it crashing through the.

I wo—

... Wait, not yet!

Having taken away Ray’s means of attack, Behemot briefly celebrated her victory, but then realized that that was a dangerous line of thinking.

Behemot knew about Ray’s past battles. Even in this one, she’d seen him stand up despite losing a lung.

By now, she was fully aware that he wasn’t someone who could be stopped by an injury like this.

“OOOAAAAAAAGH!” Behemot roared as she began to swing both her claws.

The right one blasted away part of his face — the right side of his chin.

The left one tore through his legs — the entire thigh area.

All of his limbs, as well as a part of his neck, were destroyed now.

He had been reduced to little more than a torso

With Last Command active, even this wasn’t enough to finish him off — but now, just like the Death Soldiers of the past, he’d been rendered physically incapable of doing anything.

He couldn’t even stand, let alone bite into his blade like he’d done before or kick it towards his target. Ray was completely incapacitated now.

Now I wo—

But the moment that Behemot became completely certain of her victory, *something touched the base of her neck*.

...Huh?

It didn’t do any damage to her.

She was surprised, but whatever it was, it wasn’t strong enough to surpass her END.

However, the damage wasn’t what mattered here.

What mattered was the sheer fact that it touched her.

After all, it was something that could very well kill her — *one of Nemesis’ blades*.

Behemot’s mind was suddenly flooded with thoughts.

Impossible. I just sent it flying. Why is it touching me? Wait, more importantly... Why is the blade penetrating Ray’s body?



The blade had been sent flying into the ceiling, but somehow, it was now emerging from Ray's chest.

The answer to that question was simple — it wasn't the same blade.

Nemesis' fourth form was a mirror and *twin* blades.

Even if one was gone, there was still the other.

Even so, who...?! Ray didn't have the second wing-blade. Having lost his arm to the first maser beam, he hadn't been able to wield it — and even if he could, he couldn't possibly have pierced his own body like that.

It was completely impossible... *unless someone had thrown it from behind him*.

Shock overcame Behemot as she noticed something beyond the curtain of gore in front of her.

It was Gardranda, her lower body entirely destroyed, now frozen in a position that suggested the follow-through of a throw.

She was still alive...?!

Though she had been torn apart and buried under rubble, the summon was still in effect.

And now, she had thrown the first wing-blade and hit Behemot *through* Ray.

Behemot hadn't seen any of this. Her body was small, so Ray's larger frame blocked out anything that was happening behind him.

It was as though this had been planned out.

D-Did he...? Assuming Ray had anticipated this... that *this* was the possibility he gambled everything on...

Did he use himself... as a decoy?! Ray, holding the wing-blade in his left hand, was nothing but a distraction and a sponge to increase the damage counter.

And while he was fulfilling that role, Gardranda had thrown the other wing-blade at him.

Ray was holding the blade he'd already depleted to crack Greatest Top. The

one piercing through his chest was the main one, and the damage on its counter now, after being so fiercely torn apart by Behemot, was truly immense.

The moment his Last Command activated, he conjured up this desperate and precarious chance for victory. Swallowing his fear of being torn apart, he gambled everything to grasp for this tiny sliver of possibility that he could prevent a tragedy... and he reached it.

“Vengeance...” The skill didn’t require Ray to hold Nemesis in his hand — it could be used as long as the two were touching.

That was why it had worked the two times he used it while holding her in his mouth... and why it would work now that she had been stabbed straight through his body.

“...Is... Mine.”

Following Nemesis’ words, spoken as though she was holding back tears, Vengeance was delivered upon Behemot.

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[Last Command expired]

[Resurrection period expired]

[Death Penalty: 24 hour Login Ban]

Chapter Seventeen: Aftermath

Altar-Dryfe border, wasteland

At that moment, Leviathan's actions changed drastically, and Shu instantly noticed the difference.

After trying to prolong this battle as long as she could, she was now trying to shake Shu off and charge straight towards the assembly hall.

Shu realized what that meant and immediately tried to stop her from leaving.

"Get out of my way!" the queen of kaiju shouted, swinging both her arms to shove Baldr away.

The machine god grabbed her and pulled her into an armlock to keep her in place.

"Not happening," Shu said. "Looks like they did a good job."

Behemot — Leviathan's Master — was in a state she could not ignore. Her sheer panic was proof of that. Also clear as day, as proven by Leviathan *still existing at all,* was the fact that Behemot was still...

"Ah...!" Suddenly, an alert rang out in Baldr's cockpit.

"What is it?"

"Warning. New hostile, 3 o'clock."

Suddenly, a portion of the screen showed an enemy *other* than Leviathan.

It was some kind of giant monster... one that certainly wasn't there a minute ago.

From the monster's mouth came an indescribable sound. It was about the size of Leviathan, but while her animal-like form was balanced and streamlined, this creature was a chaotic abomination.

Its limbs, torso, head... it was as though each of its parts had come from different sources, giving it an outlandish look.

Most unsettling of all was its dragon-like head, which was a deep blue color like lapis lazuli.

Anyone could tell that this was not a natural being — and it was now drawing closer.

That... ain't a UBM, which can only mean that... Shu thought, before looking up to see what Franklin's eyeball-like recon monster was doing.

It was fully focused on Baldr and Leviathan, not even sparing a glance for the new combatant.

That alone was enough to reveal its affiliation.

"So you came here yourself after all, huh... Franklin!" Shu realized that Franklin must have switched from observing to interfering because Ray's group had finally cornered Behemot.

This monster was one of his creations — one far more powerful the Legendaries Shu had destroyed during Franklin's game.

His instincts told him that this one was Mythical, if not above that.

"They now have a numerical advantage," said Baldr. "Continuing this battle in our current state will likely lead to defeat. Would you like to initialize the Fatal Engine?"

"...Only if it seems hopeless," Shu replied. Franklin had only sent one powerful monster in order to keep his mass-produced creatures in reserve. Since Shu was a wide-scale extermination type, getting rid of him would allow Franklin to suppress the assembly hall using overwhelming numbers.

Franklin most likely didn't know the details of Fatal Engine, Gloria γ, but he must've been confident that this giant monster was capable of defeating Baldr as he was now.

"I gotta keep Leviathan here *and* fight this damn thing. I also can't let either of them beat me and can't use γ... Man, what a situation this is."

The strongest Superior Embryo and a monster-creating Superior's strongest creation.

This was too much even for Shu and Baldr.

“They have it even harder at the hall, though. I can’t throw in the towel before they do,” he said with an indomitable smile as he resumed the battle against the two gargantuan beasts.

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Altar-Dryfe border, assembly hall

A mere moment had passed since Ray and Behemot’s final clash.

The bloody mist that was once Ray had just become specks of light and vanished from the world.

“...Well, this went differently than I expected,” said the sole witness to the conclusion — Tsukuyo Fuso.

In her mind, the plan to deliver Tsukikage’s Death and Murder was their final chance at victory, and if that didn’t work, she guessed that their last hope was the bear swooping in to deal with the situation.

If it was night, even she might’ve been able to contribute somehow, but in broad daylight she was largely powerless against Behemot.

That was why Tsukuyo had only watched.

She hadn’t expected Ray to stand up, and the outcome of his actions surprised her.

Despite being torn apart, Ray had managed to reach Behemot with his blade and release the damage stored within it.

He then vanished as Last Command expired, leaving behind Tsukuyo... and Behemot.

Silence.

Behemot was maimed, but still alive. There was a sizable hole in her neck, but the more serious damage was in her forelegs: they had been completely blown away.

This was a result of her final decision in this battle.

Nemesis’ final Vengeance aimed at her neck had enough damage to blow away her entire head.

Thus, at the very last moment, a moment so brief that she couldn't even knock the blade away, Behemot had chosen to *touch Nemesis with her claws, splitting the damage*.

Vengeance is Mine was a skill that destroyed the target's body based on the damage dealt and where the attack landed, so by making it touch her claws as well as her neck, she divided the damage to her head by a third.

In that final moment, she hadn't had enough time to push the blade away, but she had just enough presence of mind to think of this stratagem and put it into action.

"Cough..." Still, the damage was severe. The wound on her neck wasn't quite deep enough to reach her cervical vertebrae, but it was still difficult for her to breathe. And with her forelegs gone, she couldn't wield her weapons.

Her high END prevented most injury-based debuffs, but she was still Bleeding fountains from all three of her major wounds.

It was the first time since becoming a Superior that she suffered such immense damage.

Still not saying a word, Behemot twisted her body to drop her custom-made, extra small inventory on the floor, then shatter it with a stomp of her foot.

A moment later, the space was full of potions and similar items. She began trampling over them and dousing herself in the contents or forcing it down her torn throat.

Her wounds began to release pale smoke as they healed and the Bleeding stopped, but her forelegs didn't regrow, and the hole in the throat didn't close.

Behemot didn't have anything potent enough to accomplish that.

Even with the Bleeding stopped, she was still heavily damaged. Either due to residual damage or because she wasn't used to being so incapacitated, she was still lying on the floor.

Tsukuyo looked at her, racking her brain for a way to defeat Behemot as she was now... and came up with nothing.

Even without her forelegs and despite all the damage she'd suffered, the

Physical Apex was still capable of running Tsukuyo through by merely jumping straight towards her.

She considered suffocation, but that wouldn't work, either. Though she had trouble breathing, it didn't look like she was suffering from it, exactly. It was either the effect of Bourdrim's debuff resistance or that of some accessory she'd replaced Greatest Top with using Instant Wear. Regardless, it was clear that something was making the effects of suffocation easier for her.

Behemot could probably move around just fine even in her current state.

Things would've been different if Tsukuyo wasn't the sole survivor on her side, but that wasn't how it had turned out.

"We needed just one more card to play, huh?" If there was just one more thing they could do to finish off Behemot, Altar would've won.

They were defeated.

Still, as a show of defiance, Tsukuyo reached into her inventory and took out a Gem.

Between two and three minutes had passed since Behemot's last clash with Ray. In her own way, Tsukuyo resolved to challenge Behemot — but the apex wasn't even looking at her.

Instead, she was staring at the patch of sky visible through the hole in the wall... and *the jade-green trail* falling down to the ground.

Still not saying a word, Behemot appeared to be thinking very deeply about something.

A few seconds later, though, she began to move and destroyed another one of her inventories.

As she trampled it underfoot, several pieces of paper appeared around her.

"Hm?" Tsukuyo watched in confusion as Behemot picked one out and, since she didn't have the forelegs to hold it, bit into it before throwing it in Tsukuyo's direction.

The paper, lightly stained with Behemot's blood, fell somewhere between them, facing up. Tsukuyo could read it from where she was, but what it actually

said made her tilt her head.

"...What is this?"

"A Contract." Presumably due to the effect of some accessory, Behemot could respond to Tsukuyo despite the hole in her throat.

Tsukuyo could tell with a glance that it was a Contract. What had her confused was the terms.

"...Are you serious?" To sum it up, the Contract said, "High Priestess, Tsukuyo Fuso will heal King of Beasts, Behemot, curing her status effects and restoring her HP. In exchange, Behemot, bearer of the King of Beasts job, as well as Queen of Beasts, Leviathan will not harm the kingdom's Masters or tians for 24 hours, *Infinite Dendrogram* time."

In exchange for being healed, Behemot and Leviathan would stop attacking Altarians altogether. The somewhat awkward phrasing of "bearer of the King of Beasts job" part was there to prevent Behemot from avoiding the Contract's terms by merely switching to a sub-job.

That meant that she was fully intent on stopping this battle completely.

"You didn't write this just now, did you? When did you prepare this?" Tsukuyo asked.

Behemot said nothing. She had actually prepared the Contract shortly after she found out that Tsukuyo would be participating in the peace talks.

The "insurance" that she'd had in mind for the battle was Tsukuyo's healing magic, though she'd expected to use this insurance on Claudiah or Altimia — the one Claudiah wanted to capture.

However, she'd also considered the possibility of fighting Shu and sustaining injuries so severe that she would be rendered unable to save Claudiah, so she'd also prepared a Contract for herself. That was the one she just presented to Tsukuyo.

"I never underestimated Shu or the others," Behemot finally said. "I knew I could be defeated or lose a limb or two, so I had this prepared just in case."

"...So that's the other reason why you didn't get rid of me first, eh?" With

Behemot counting as a beast, the only thing Tsukuyo could do against her was Faint Light, and Behemot figured that she could put up with the debuff during the fight and try to have her sign the Contract afterwards.

Though, if Shu hadn't lured Leviathan away and Behemot had been forced to fight both him and Tsukuyo at the same time, she would've certainly thrown away the whole idea of insurance and gotten rid of the High Priestess as soon as possible.

However, once Shu was gone, she figured she could face the rest of her opponents and keep her insurance handy even with the debuff up — that was exactly what led to her grave injuries.

But it was hard to say that she had miscalculated, exactly. There was certainly a large enough gap in power between her and the Altarians.

Despite that, they had given their all and then some, completely obliterating Behemot's expectations.

Because of that, Behemot genuinely felt that she had been defeated.

If Eishiro's reach had been only slightly longer, or if Nemesis' blade was only a bit closer to her brain or spine, she would've had the death penalty by now.

Still... Behemot had indeed survived, and the best thing for her to do now was to heal her wounds and save Claudiah.

If Claudiah's battle had still been going, Behemot would have gotten rid of Tsukuyo even if it meant leaving herself injured, but the jade-green trail was a clear sign that the outcome of the royal clash had been decided. Since Claudiah wasn't contacting Behemot, it was a safe guess that the imperator had been defeated.

With the outcome more or less already determined, Behemot no longer wished to fight.

The original plan had been abandoned.

In case of Claudiah's defeat, Behemot would struggle to help her — to devastate the Altarian forces, defeat Altimia, and take them to Dryfe.

This would be unnecessary if Claudiah had won, but since she hadn't, it was

up to Behemot to decide what to do next based on her assessment of the situation.

In emergencies like this, Claudiah had entrusted Behemot with all the decision-making power.

“So, will you sign it?” However, with that established, it was clear that if Tsukuyo refused, Behemot would do everything in her power to take her out and then target Altimia.

She was The Physical Apex even with only half her limbs, and her Superior Embryo, still in good health, was trying to reach her, as well.

Kaguya... How’s it looking over there? Tsukuyo asked.

“Shu is now fighting not just Leviathan, but also some other gigantic monster.” Those words made Tsukuyo fall silent and think.

Having become the night itself, Kaguya could look down on the world below her.

Baldr and Leviathan were fighting far outside of the skill’s area of effect — but they were so large that she could still see them.

...What to do, what to do...? Tsukuyo wondered, briefly picturing the person who had more than likely sent the giant monster.

If she signed the Contract before her, both Behemot and Leviathan would be removed from the battle. They would still be able to take Claudiah and escape, but based on the terms of the Contract, they would no longer be able to attack or even kidnap anyone for twenty-four hours.

And with Leviathan out of the picture, Shu would be able to focus solely on the monster, and she was fairly certain that he would win that duel.

If she didn’t sign, however, Tsukuyo would instantly receive the death penalty.

Then, Behemot would attack Altimia. Though dismembered, she was still King of Beasts, so it was still possible for her to defeat the princess and take her prisoner.

Shu would also be left fighting two opponents, decreasing his chances of

victory. And if he were to fall, Altimia would have to face both Behemot *and* Leviathan, assuring Altar's defeat.

It was fairly obvious that refusing to sign this contract would make things worse for the kingdom.

One might wonder why Behemot would offer up a Contract like this, but the answer was simple — there was a chance that Claudiah, having been defeated, would now be *killed*.

Altar needed her to stop the terrorist attack on Altea, but if the situation was sufficiently desperate, they might opt to kill her instead.

Regardless of whether Altimia would ever do that, Behemot feared the possibility.

If she was in perfect health, she could easily help her friend — but right now, she was maimed. Also, Behemot knew well by now that her partner, Leviathan, was incapable of doing tasks that required any sort of finesse.

With Claudiah defeated and Behemot heavily injured, she wanted to promise their retreat in exchange for Claudiah's survival.

...I don't really have a choice here, Tsukuyo thought.

Signing the Contract was the safer choice for the kingdom, as well. She really didn't have any other reasonable options.

Therefore, the only thing left to do was see how far she could push the terms.

"This isn't quite enough," she said while waving the Contract in her hand. "You'll need to give us more."

"Hm?"

"*24 hours isn't enough.* You know that it'll take 72 hours in *Dendro* time for our victims to come back, right?"

"...Then I'll make it 72 hours."

"That's not enough, either. *720 hours or nothing.*"

Silence. Tsukuyo just demanded Behemot and Leviathan wouldn't attack Altarians for a whole month of *Dendro* time.

Behemot pondered this, but Tsukuyo refused to back down. Even if Dryfe retreated now, if they were to invade Altar again with Behemot leading the charge, the kingdom would surely fall.

That was why Tsukuyo wanted to secure as much time as was reasonably possible... Enough to ensure that not only those who had died here would be back, but also that Hannya and Figaro would have returned.

Though the punishment for breaking the Contract can't be a death penalty now. That would actually be shorter. Guess I'll change it into a whole bunch of time-based status effects — ones that don't go away even if you die.

While Tsukuyo was pondering these things, Behemot finished considering her terms and said, "I... accept."

"Good, good. Let me just rewrite this. Now, for more conditions..."

"...There's more?"

"Of *course* there is."

Trying to get a sense of how much Behemot would tolerate, Tsukuyo continued attempting to change the Contract.

"Your boss will have to call off the terrorist attack on Altea within one hour after I heal you."

"...All right." Behemot instantly accepted this, for she knew that in this situation, Claudiah would have already done so.

"In exchange, I want you to heal her too," Behemot added. "Claudiah can't call off the attack if she's unconscious."

"Ah. Well, that makes sense."

"Also... heal her old wounds, too." Behemot cared about Claudiah, so she used this opportunity to restore what her friend had lost in her previous battles. It was a bit of greediness on her part...

"I can do that, but you're still not giving me enough, so you'll have to throw in a little extra for it, too."

"A little extra?"

“5,000,000,000 Iir.”

...But Tsukuyo was far greedier than her.

“...f*ck.” Conveniently bleeped profanity escaped Behemot’s mouth, and who could really blame her?

“...Tsukuyo?” said Kaguya. Even her own Embryo was put off by this display of greed.

Hey now, Kaguya — we should take what we can. And this also will reduce their battle potential! It’s all to help the kingdom!

Tsukuyo didn’t seem to feel any guilt about this.

“Hm? What’s wrong? You’re the top of the kill rankings, and unlike the bear, you don’t really use your wealth. You must have lots of money, right? Or, what... Is your money more important than your friends?”

“g2h” Behemot replied as she begrudgingly threw the inventory she used as a wallet towards Tsukuyo.

There was just enough power in the throw to keep the inventory from shattering, but also enough to break Tsukuyo’s fingers as she caught it... though, that was a minor issue to her.

“It’s a deal, then! Let’s start the healiiiing!” Tsukuyo said with a wide smile as she began to treat Behemot’s wounds.

As Kaguya looked down on the sight, she felt somewhat apologetic towards Ray, Nemesis, and all the others who’d given their all and then some to the fight against the Physical Apex.

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Altar-Dryfe border, grove

Right after the battle between the princesses ended with Jade Storm’s deactivation, Claudiah plummeted towards the ground below.

After some time of feeling nothing but air rushing past her, a sudden shock wracked her body... and then was canceled.

Lying on the ground, she looked up at the sky and whispered, “...I am alive.”

She realized that her Lifesaving Brooch had done its work and canceled the fatal damage from her impact with the ground. This meant that she just had a near-death experience, but on the other hand, if the damage *hadn't* been sufficient to activate the Brooch, she would be severely injured right now; so that was something to be glad about.

After she got up and looked around, she saw Jade Storm's head and body, lying separately where they'd fallen.

Aside from the obvious decapitation, it didn't seem too damaged. Flagman's designs wouldn't be destroyed by a mere fall.

Claudiah... or more accurately, Reinhard... concluded that Jade Storm could be fixed by merely replacing all the parts near the cut and letting the self-repair function do the rest.

"*This* is the real problem, though..."

On her side, there was a wound carved into her by Altar. However, it wasn't bleeding. Not because of anything The Primeval Blade had done, but because of the power suit she was wearing.

It was made using an MVP special reward material, and its name was Hemocycler. It provided life support, and if Claudiah lost a part of her body or suffered severe injury, her blood and any other vital fluids would avoid the injured areas in favor of circulating through the power suit.

Because of that, she wasn't bleeding, and her life was not in immediate danger.

She'd crafted Hemocycler based on her near-death experiences during the civil war and wore it in her fight against Altimia because she correctly assumed that it would work against Altar's incurable wounds.

Still, that didn't change the fact that merely *having* an incurable wound was a bad situation to be in.

"It appears I shall have to replace even more of my body with machinery," she sighed.

Though she had already replaced her arms with prosthetics, she still had some

degree of attachment to her flesh. There were things only a living body could feel, after all.

“Anyway...” Having finished checking on herself, she reached into her inventory and took out a comms device. It was a bit on the large side, but that was due to a unique design focusing on extending communication range and increasing its counter-jamming properties.

“Zeta. This is me.”

“Confirmation. Since you’re using this device, I assume there has been a failure?”

Claudiah received an instant response.

The person on the other line was Zeta — who was currently terrorizing the city of Altea.

“Yes. I lost. What is the situation on your side?”

“...Attempted. I found and confirmed the target you requested, but I am struggling to eliminate it. I thought I had it cornered, but it doesn’t feel like my Embryo’s attacks are even getting through.”

“Oh, I see. So that really *is* how that works. I wanted to determine that, as well. What about your personal goal? Did you manage to steal it?”

“Refusal. I will not answer that.”

“Very well.”

“Order. Elimination is impossible and your situation is no longer favorable, so I’d like to know what to do now.”

“We will now move on to Plan C. Please make the necessary preparations, then retreat from Altea.”

“Commencing. Deliver the reward by the designated method. Then, and only then, will I give you information regarding the target.”

Following that conversation, the call ended.

“That is done. Now...”

A moment later, something wove a path through the spaces between the

trees and landed before her.

It was a golden Prism Steed and a girl with indigo hair... Altimia.

“So you lived,” she said.

“Yes,” Claudiah replied. “I am glad to see you alive, as well.”

Altimia’s words made sense, seeing as Claudiah had just fallen from the sky, but some might have wondered why Claudiah had responded in kind.

Unlike Claudiah, Altimia hadn’t suffered any major injuries, but there was a reason why she was glad she had lived.

It was reflected in Altimia’s long, indigo hair — a part of which had turned white.

“Claudiah, call off the—”

“I have already ordered the retreat.” Claudiah had already done what Altimia would have requested her to do first and foremost, and Truth Discernment confirmed this.

“...Well, you are certainly fast.”

“Of course I am. I lost the battle we wagered all of our desires on, and I knew full well that you would want this done as quickly as possible.”

That was part of the reason why Claudiah hurried to order the retreat, but she also just didn’t want Altimia to overhear her conversation with Zeta.

“...What of my sisters?”

“I was given no information about them, nor did I ask. But if they had been killed or captured, surely I would have been informed, no?”

“Hm...” This act of terrorism was meant to destabilize the kingdom, so the death or capture of the princesses was a sub-objective. If Zeta hadn’t reported it on her own initiative, they must be fine.

Though, it was within the realm of possibility that Zeta simply didn’t care whether the princesses were alive or dead.

“I must say... You paid quite an obvious price,” Claudiah said, looking at Altimia’s hair. Altimia said nothing in response at first. “Using that ultimate job

skill eats away at your life, does it not?”

“...It does.” The Sacred Princess’ ultimate job skill, The Primeval Boundary, drained a great deal of things from the user. Besides obvious stats like HP, MP, and SP — life, magic, and mental forces — it also targeted her life itself... specifically, her *lifespan*.

Essentially, Altar was a double-edged sword — and not just because of its all-rending blade.

“I did not use it for long, though... My hair will return to normal sooner than later,” said Altimia.

“This time, at least. But you should refrain from using this power any further. You know his legend better than I do, no?”

The Sacred Princess was silent.

“The legend of the Sacred King... the first Azurite. He used this power to conquer The Evil from the previous era, which almost led to his death. No... some say that he actually did die once. However...”

“The Saint of that era sacrificed her own life to save his. This is the most famous of his legends.”

“But the current Altar does not have The Saint. That job was taken by Sechs Würfel. If you use that power too much, you will deplete your life... and die.”

“...I am well aware. That is why I will only use it when I feel it truly necessary.”

That meant Altimia felt her battle against Claudiah was something she absolutely had to win, even if it cost her a portion of her own life.

“...I am not sure whether to feel flattered or not.”

“You can figure that out later. I have some questions for you.”

“Such as?”

“Why did you set a trap for us in the peace contract and order an attack on the capital? Surely there must have been a better way for you to do this.” In exchange for a complete ceasefire, Altar had offered to give Dryfe the Old Lunnings Duchy and remove certain persons from the wanted list.

As evidenced by the fact that the Covenant had nearly been signed by both parties, those conditions were favorable for both countries.

Of course, Dryfe's famine was severe, and there was also the matter of Caldina — but simply leaving the Covenant in its current state would have left plenty of room to solve those matters peacefully.

However, Claudiah had instead chosen to attack Altea and destroy Altar, and Altimia wanted to know why.

"I suppose the best answer is that the Covenant as it was would not fulfill all of my wishes."

"All of your wishes?"

"...There were three things I had to acquire at any cost." Claudiah had slowly begun giving her answer. "First is something that Dryfe needs... The Old Lunnings Duchy that would solve the imperium's famine."

Dryfe had effectively been controlling it since the previous war, and with these negotiations, they would've become its legal owners.

"The second thing is what I need... You, my dearest Altimia."

Acquiring her had proven to be difficult... but ultimately, they were to remain friends.

"And lastly... what *this world* needs." Claudiah strongly implied that this was the reason why she arranged an attack on Altea. However, it was hard for Altimia to picture something that could be important for *the world*, something supposedly bigger than either of their entire nations.

"Did you not tell me that the purpose of the assault on Altea and our battle here was to capture me and my sisters or take our lives to split the kingdom apart? That was no lie... was it?"

"That was part of it. After all, to acquire what is needed, it would help to have control of the kingdom... more specifically, its capital. Also, what we would receive from Altar would help immensely in preventing Caldina from doing anything... unnecessary."

"...Just what *is* this thing 'the world needs' that you speak of?"

Claudiah fell silent for a long moment before saying, “I have no wish to hide anything from or lie to you, but this is something I hesitate to speak of.”

“What do you mean?” Altimia could tell that Claudiah wasn’t merely avoiding the question — she was truly unsure if she was capable of describing whatever she had in mind.

“After all... *you might be erased by the supervisors*.” In response to Altimia’s question, she made it clear that she was refraining from speaking out of fear for her safety.

“...Supervisors?”

“Perhaps they would not eliminate key figures like you and I. I am aware of the thing in question, but I have not yet been neutralized. However, if this spreads... they might change their stance. That fear keeps me from speaking it to anyone.”

“But I do wish to hear it from you. I must know what made you go this far.”

“I see... Then I will tell you as much as I can. Though, even that much may be dangerous,” Claudiah added as she looked up at the sky and began to describe her reasons. “Do you not think that this world is odd?”

“Hm?”

“Does it not feel akin to some kind of game where the board and the pieces have been gathered from different boxes and mixed up? Do you not perceive this mismatch?”

Claudiah’s words were hard for Altimia to understand, but for some reason, they reminded her of her father’s statement that Masters were somehow special.

“*Originally*, there should have been only one set of pieces on the board, but due to intervention from the current supervisors, new pieces and mechanics have been added. The chaos and Resources in the world increased, and they are now trying to use it to fulfill their own desires.”

She paused for a moment and confirmed that both she and Altimia were still alive before continuing.

“But they have only added new things. The thing leading to this world’s original conclusion... *the calamity left behind by the previous supervisors* had not vanished. And yet... this era is simply too lacking.”

“Claudiah... what are you talking about?”

“...The Saint was stolen, The Hero was murdered, The Vanguard is nowhere in sight, Titania and Conquest General are not what they used to be, while the Imperial Crown from the middle of the continent... Caldina... is lost. The Imperator Machina and Sacred Princess... you and I are the only ones who still stand tall.”

Altimia understood that Claudiah was talking about the Special Superior Jobs associated with the various countries... themselves included.

...But why did she not mention Draconic Emperor? she wondered. That was Huang He’s Special Superior Job, yet Claudiah hadn’t included it in her list.

But before Altimia could ask about that, Claudiah resumed speaking.

“And many standard Superior Jobs no longer belong to tians. I am not certain that the tians who are currently alive can win against the coming calamity... The ‘DEMISE’... The ‘GAME OVER.’ Thus, I staged an attack on the capital, where it supposedly resided. I thought that doing so would ensure that I would *find* it...”

With that, Claudiah had finished explaining her reason.

However, she had said a great many things that Altimia didn’t understand. Perhaps Claudiah had purposely made her explanation hard to comprehend out of fear of these “supervisors” she’d alluded to.

Altimia understood that Claudiah was planning to fight against some kind of oncoming danger, though she failed to understand what she meant by “DEMISE” or “GAME OVER.”

With that in mind, there was something Altimia had to ask.

“Why are you not including Masters?”

Masters — especially Superiors — were extremely powerful. Many of them were more than a match for Special Superior Jobs like Altimia herself.

No matter who — or what — they faced, they would likely win with enough

such powerful entities on their side. Claudiah herself had Behemot and many other powerful Masters as allies, so she should've been more than capable of getting them to fight for her.

"...That is impossible," Claudiah replied as she shook her head. "After all, this is the one thing they are... thoroughly unrelated to."

"Unrelated?"

"The GAME OVER pertains to this world's original objective. That is why outsiders like the Masters are not fit for the purpose of fighting it. They cannot even take part in this. Otherwise, the supervisors wou—"

She stopped herself before she could finish that sentence, believing that she was about to say more than was safe. The look in Claudiah's eyes told Altimia that she could say nothing further.

Altimia silently pondered what she had just been told. The information given to her was frankly beyond her understanding.

However, she could tell that it was important to this world and that there wasn't a single lie in Claudiah's words.

How did Claudiah know about "this world's original objective" and this entity she had called the GAME OVER? And just what were they, anyway?

Altimia felt that the answers to those questions could be found in Altea... the Altarian capital which had just been the target of a terrorist attack.

"...Just *what* is supposed to be in Altea?" She looked to the horizon, in the direction of the city — but of course, from this far away she could see neither what happened nor what mysteries lurked there.

"Claudiah!" Suddenly, two people appeared before them — Behemot and Tsukuyo, both in perfect health.

Altimia stared at them in silence, noting the lack of the other Masters and the fact that Behemot looked freshly healed.

From that, she drew a particular conclusion.

"...So you betrayed us, you parasite." She didn't know how Tsukuyo had avoided the consequences of the Contract, but knowing her, Altimia concluded

that she was a traitor.

Faced with Altimia's bare killing intent, Tsukuyo hastily shook her head.

"Y-You've got it all wrong! I fought with Ray and the others and we won! We're the only ones who survived, and we made a Contract that I heal Behemot in exchange for her promise to not move against us! She's not a danger!"

These words made Altimia lower her sword.

One reason for that was Truth Discernment telling her that Tsukuyo wasn't lying, but there was another...

"So... Ray really did die." She had a hunch that might be the case when Silver vanished, but having it confirmed filled her with a sorrow that even she herself found strange.

"He's a Master, though. He'll be back soon enough," Tsukuyo said.

"...That is true." That made Altimia feel a bit relieved, but also reminded her of certain words Claudiah had said — words which she couldn't fully understand right now. Something about Masters being outsiders that could not take part in matters concerning the GAME OVER...

"...So, what are the terms of the Contract you signed," Altimia asked.

"The King of Beasts and her Embryo won't be able to harm Altarian tians or Masters for an entire month. Also, your royal friend over there will have to stop the attack on the capital — though I'll have to heal her in exchange."

Tsukuyo didn't mention the 5,000,000,000 lir she took as payment. Withholding information didn't count as lying, after all.

"I see. Claudiah seems to have already put a stop to the terrorist attack... So now, you will heal her, and the two of them will run away, eh?"

Altimia wondered how that tiny body could possibly take Claudiah away from here, but perhaps that wasn't much of a problem for The Physical Apex.

It didn't seem like she could stop Behemot, either. Altimia was too drained from using her ultimate job skill.

"This seems like a draw to me. Anyway, time to heal," said Tsukuyo as she

began to treat Claudiah.

In response to those words, Altimia whispered, “...This is not a draw.”

The peace talks had ended in failure.

The meeting that was supposed to stop the war had instead become a battlefield, and even the capital had been caught in the crossfire. Even if Altimia and her sisters were unharmed and they forced Dryfe to retreat, it was fair to say that Altar had lost simply because their casualties were greater.

“Altimia,” Claudiah spoke to her, ending her train of thought.

“We cannot back down yet. Now that we have confirmation, we have even more reason to take control of the kingdom.”

Altimia listened intently.

“However, let us avoid an all-out war or any further human casualties.” Saying that, Claudiah took something out of her inventory and tossed it to Altimia.

It seemed to be a rolled-up piece of paper.

“This is... a Covenant?” The most powerful form of Contract... used in agreements between entire countries.

“Indeed. This is our Plan C. Plan A fell apart when a certain someone saw right through it, while Plan B failed when I lost to you. Plan C is what we prepared in the event that happened.”

“...What trickery have you set up this time?”

“None,” Claudiah said while looking right into Altimia’s eyes. “No tricks or lies... *This is a declaration of war.*”

As her Truth Discernment did not activate, Altimia looked down at the Covenant in her hand.

“But I understand that you do not want to lose any more tian lives,” Claudiah continued. “And since we found what we’d come to find at the capital, there is no longer any reason for me to attack your people — so let us follow the terms the Covenant lays out.”

She pointed at a part of the Covenant which said...

“‘A war between Masters only’? What...?” The text greatly shocked Altimia.

“Yes. A war where we agree on a time, place, and rules, and let the Masters serving us fight it out... A war where no one has to die.”

Silently, Altimia pondered. This seemed like a reasonable proposition. If Dryfe had no intention of calling off the war, this was a far more preferable shape for it to take.

Altar had fewer Masters than Dryfe, but this would still give them a higher chance of victory than an all-out war involving tians, and the overall casualties would be drastically reduced.

However, this made Altimia feel a certain sense of discomfort. Was it because this essentially meant they would be using Masters as tools of war...? The very thing her late father was strictly against?

“It would be like a contest,” Claudiah said. “I imagine that Masters would have an easier time seeing it that way.”

Upon hearing that, both Behemot and Tsukuyo thought similar things. As Masters of Maiden type Embryos, they both did not see *Infinite Dendrogram* as a game, but Claudiah’s proposed war seemed extremely “game-like” to both of them.

Still, they both thought it was a decent idea.

“Also... both countries would wager *everything* on this war,” Claudiah added.

“...This is not a decision I can make here and now.”

“I understand. Take your time. We still have to set the rules and choose a location, anyway. We will figure out the details over the hotline at a later date.”

And so, she stood up, fully restored. She’d fixed the wound Altar had made by cutting out the flesh around it and letting Tsukuyo do the rest. This wouldn’t have been possible if the High Priestess wasn’t there and if the wound was in a more vital area.

Her arms had also been restored.

“Ohh... It has been so long since I felt warmth with my fingertips,” she said, picking up Behemot. She then set Behemot on her shoulders and took out a

spare spear. “And the *spear feels just right*.”

Those words made Altimia realize that it was possible Claudiah hadn’t actually been fighting at her peak, due to her prosthetics.

“Altimia, it might be unfair to say it now... but you do not have to wait for the war. You may try to capture... or even kill me here and now.”

Altimia would’ve been lying if she said that she hadn’t considered capturing Claudiah.

It might’ve been difficult to prevent their escape, but it wasn’t impossible. Though Claudiah had fully recovered, her Prism Steed was broken, and Behemot couldn’t harm Altarians.

By contrast, Altimia was merely fatigued, while her Gold Thunder was ready for action, and Tsukuyo was completely unharmed. A conflict between the two sides could go either way.

“I will not do that,” said Altimia.

There was no telling what Behemot would do if she were to do anything to Claudiah.

King of Beasts couldn’t harm Altarians for a month, but if Claudiah was dead or captured by Altar, there was a chance that she would ravage the kingdom regardless. She would come back over and over and do it time and time again, without any consideration for international relations or what was beneficial to Dryfe.

Behemot had proven just how fearsome she was in the very conflict that had just ended. Despite being separated from her Embryo, she devastated a Superior and several other Altarian Masters.

If harm were to come to Claudiah, Dryfe also wouldn’t put King of Beasts on the wanted list no matter how bad her rampage was.

In fact, it could even lead to an all-out war — the worst-case scenario that Altimia wanted to avoid with the peace talks.

Since that had failed, all she really had left was to win in the unique war Claudiah had just proposed.

...Oh. I am already thinking as though I've already accepted the Covenant.

Claudiah might've said all that she had precisely because she'd known that all along.

She was Altimia's friend, who loved her, as well as the imperator of Dryfe — and a cunning, cool-headed manipulator.

"Then I will take my leave, as befits a defeated foe..." Claudiah said before falling silent and looking at Altimia.

"What is it?"

"Oh, I merely wanted to burn your lovely image into my eyes. I imagine it will be quite a long time before we meet in person again."

"I see." Altimia had no response to that.

Though, if she were to say something, she would note that in that moment, Claudiah briefly seemed more like the girl she knew from their school days rather than the cunning imperator.

"Farewell, then," Claudiah said before putting Jade Storm's remains in her inventory and leaving alongside Behemot.

Altimia said nothing. Claudiah was a dear friend as well as a rival.

However, their next conflict would not be between them as combatants... but as rulers.

With that in mind, she watched them disappear into the horizon.

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Altar-Dryfe border, wasteland

Claudiah had ordered Franklin to stay at Vandelheim in case of any unforeseen circumstances.

Shu believed that Franklin had sent out his monster while hiding somewhere near the border.

However, he was neither at the capital nor anywhere outside.

"In a way, this is an expected outcome..." Franklin was actually *within the*

cockpit of the giant monster he'd sent to fight Baldr, known as MGD — Mechanic God Dylan.

Franklin was acting on his own intuition and decisions.

He and King of Chariots, Colonel Murdoch Martinez had been ordered to stay at the capital in case other countries did something during the peace talks.

However, the countries in question *could not function* as though they were enemies right now.

Dryfe was surrounded by three countries: Altar to the south, Caldina to the east, and the seafaring Granvaloa to the north and west.

However, two of them, Caldina and Granvaloa, were in the middle of a conflict surrounding the Treasurebeast Orbs taken from Huang He.

Granvaloa had dispatched all of their Superiors that were capable of fighting on land, so the chances of them attacking Dryfe now were extremely low, while Caldina's forces were tied up in dealing with those Masters.

And since when it rains, it pours, the chaos in Caldina had led to even greater disorder. It had been confirmed that two major players from Legendaria had entered the country in search of the orbs.

One was a Superior and the leader of their top clan, YLNT Club.

He was a shotacon *and* a lolicon, as well as the pervert people often called "most Legendaria-like."

He was King of Curses, LS Ergo Sum the "Child's Play."

The other wasn't a Superior, but she was famous for having carved out a place in all three rankings.

Commanding enough power to match Superiors and a Master widely known as Legendaria's strongest pre-Superior, she was the Summon Princess, Yomiko Skydrag'in the "Duelist."

With the situation being what it was, it was hard to imagine that Caldina would have enough forces to spare for an attack on another country.

That was why Franklin had left Murdoch alone and traveled to this battlefield.

He wanted to gather data through observation, but his main objective was to make his final adjustments to this ace up his sleeve — this monster.

It was why he'd agreed to stay at the capital rather than join the peace talks, and this battlefield he was on right now might've been the perfect place to test it.

Franklin hadn't actually intended to come out into the open like this, but the change in the situation had given him the perfect chance to do so.

And now, he and MGD were fighting Baldr.

"KoD's Baldr isn't a valid target for *Chimeratech Aubade*, while KoB's Leviathan is. It'd have been nice if it worked on Baldr, but, well... it's not an animal," he said, using the Analyzing Eye of Wisdom to check on MGD's state. "Now, I know that when the war comes, I'll have to avoid 1v1s against Baldr. I guess I should be glad that I came here and learned at least that much. Joining their 1v1 was about the only way for me to do the needed checks with *safety margins* in mind. I already learned that there were no problems with the upper limit back when I had MGD fight His Excellency's Zero Exceed."

All of this was less him talking to himself and more him verbalizing the results of his analysis.

But he seemed to be satisfied with what he'd found.

"If I came out right at the start, I'd have been attacked by Leviathan for getting in the way of her battle, but now she's desperately trying to go and help KoB. She won't make an enemy of me when I'm protecting he— whoa!"

Suddenly, MGD's cockpit began to shake.

"Hmm... I guess KoD not only has high stats, but is also absurdly skilled at fighting." He spoke casually, as though nothing special had happened, but this was right after MGD withstood an attack from Baldr in its ultimate form.

This was the reason why Franklin was inside MGD rather than on Pandemonium. He was absolutely certain that he was safer within his finest creation rather than his Embryo that could be hidden with optical camouflage.

Besides, if he was killed while hiding, his MGD would vanish as well, and he

was thoroughly against such an absurd outcome.

However, since he was unable to keep up with MGD's and Baldr's battle speeds, he left all the fighting to his monster.

In fact, if the cockpit hadn't been designed with inertia reduction in mind, Franklin's frail body might've already been pulverized just by the shocks caused by MGD moving.

Not even AR-I-CA fights up close and personal at multiple times the speed of sound, he thought as MGD shook once more.

Wondering why these impacts had started occurring more frequently, Franklin looked around.

"...Hm? I just realized that Leviathan isn't moving much now. She's not attacking at all, in fact. KoD noticed that and is going after me now."

As though he only just caught up with what was happening, Franklin had developed a grasp of the situation.

Since he couldn't keep up with the speed of the battle, he wasn't able to see the super-supersonic movements of the two gigantic entities.

"I guess someone must've used a Contract that forced her to stop fighting." Franklin had seen Behemot do something at the assembly hall, but since he was observing that area from afar out of fear that Behemot would destroy it, he couldn't hear what was being said.

Still, Leviathan's actions were enough to guess what had happened.

"Now, how did all of that turn out...?" He carefully examined the information provided by his recon monsters and saw Claudiah and Behemot distance themselves from Altimia and Tsukuyo.

"Hmm... His Excellency and KoB are both out of the game. I guess it's time for me to retreat as well— whoa!"

Another shell, another shock. If MGD could defeat Baldr here, Franklin would've even been able to suppress the party of people at the assembly hall.

However, it was hard for him to guess just how well he would do in a 1v1 Leviathan didn't participate in.

“MGD does *win in terms of stats*, though. He endures Baldr’s weapons even if it’s his first time dealing with them... Man, what a troublesome enemy.”

Remembering what happened back in Gideon, Franklin spoke with hate in his tone.

“Dylan, what’s the current chance of victory?”

“Approximately 66%,” said Dylan, the operational persona of MGD. “While damage dealt to us is increasing, the same can be said about our opponent. We have confirmed the loss of the left forearm and operational failures in the armaments. However, the percentage is based solely on known information. Anything that is hidden has not been considered.”

“66%, eh? But this all depends on what kind of cards he holds in his hand... MGD can win against any creature that’s all about power and nothing else.”

If the fight kept going like this, they could win this, but then...

“Warning, Leviathan is leaving the effective range of Chimeratech Aubade.”

“Ohh, now *that* is bad. As things are, we’d only get killed the moment she left.”

The status quo of the fight had changed. One of the main conditions for the battle was about to leave.

When that happened their chances of victory would drop drastically.

“Well, we’ve shown ourselves enough. If they know that we still have something like this waiting for them, Altarians will hesitate to counter-attack. Let’s retreat too.”

“Are you certain? Based on the state of the battle, retreating at this moment might allow the enemies to analyze the nature of Chimeratech Aubade.”

“I’m certain. What are they going to find out just based on this one battle?” Franklin said with a grin. “Also, MGD’s function is something that no one can really do anything about even if they know what it does. This encounter let me figure out that MGD might lose against Baldr, but we’ll be fine against anyone else. Also...”

MGD’s optical sensors focused on Leviathan.

“...Next time, Baldr will probably be dealing with the full-powered King of Beasts.” That was how Franklin knew that he wouldn’t have to fight KoD.

He would have to face some other Superior.

Also...

“But this is troubling... He went and died before I could crush him,” Franklin said as he recalled the death of a certain newbie. “I recorded the whole thing, but there’s really no point to dragging him down now, is there...?”

He had recorded not just Baldr and Leviathan’s battle, but also the struggle at the assembly hall. It was hard to capture supersonic movements, but Franklin’s monsters were up to the task. Though there were many sections where the camera was shaky, the recording still presented a general idea of what happened.

With a bit of judicious editing and comments, Franklin could greatly lower the boy’s reputation, but he chose to refrain for now.

“All right. I’ll praise Ray-boy to the sky. ‘A Match for THE KoB!’ is a title that’ll get a *ton* of views.”

As an idea formed in his mind, Franklin grinned.

“I’ll elevate him as high as possible...”

And so...

“...Then drag him down to the abyss.”

...He whispered these words, his grin widening all the while.

Interlude: Another Story

Altar-Dryfe border

King of Light, F had ended up doing nothing but watching the battles unfold. Unlike the other spectator, Franklin, he hadn't intervened even once during the entire fight.

That was partly due to each battle being engaging in its own right, and partly because he prioritized organizing his impressions and thoughts regarding Ray's battle.

Though, primarily, it was because he didn't have the *means* to intervene.

Even now after all the battles were over, he was busy penning down text in his notepad.

I was right to come here. There was immense value in seeing something directly rather than as a recording. It allowed the observation of many more honest emotions than some footage sullied by the technique, worldview, and editing of the one who did the recording.

This was especially clear in the comparison between the video of Ray's fight against Logan and the fight against King of Beasts he just witnessed. The real thing had made the recording seem tame by comparison.

All the battles ended while he was still writing down everything he needed.

All right. I suppose I'll now have to investigate what happened at the capital. F had actually figured out that the capital would be attacked a whole two days ago.

The reason for that was simple: he was invited to join the group behind it.

Specifically, the invitation had come from the infamous criminal clan, Illegal Frontier. "Ideas" claiming to serve the Soul Trader, La Crima, asked him if he would like to be a supporting member of the clan.

Long story short, the negotiations had failed.

The ones who tried to invite him instead attacked him, but he defeated them all, and among all the chaos, he learned of their plans to attack the capital.

It was difficult for him to choose which place to observe, but he opted for the assembly hall because Ray was there.

I'm sure I made the right choice because of the number of Superiors that were here too, but I'm still curious about the situation in Altea... Also, just how many of them did I.F. release into the city?

F hadn't intervened in the battles around the assembly hall like he had with the Love-Duel Festival. One reason for that was the fact that he prioritized filling his notebook... while the other was his lack of reserve fighting power.

After all... his Embryo, Zodiac, was almost completely depleted of light energy.

He had used it all against the Ideas that attacked him after their failed invitation.

F was Altar's strongest ranged pre-Superior, yet they had given him that much trouble.

And now, such creatures had been released into Altea.

Hm... Overcome by curiosity, he elevated the Zodiac he employed to spy on his surroundings.

Once high enough to see Altea, he made it face the horizon.

Of course, he couldn't normally see what was going on over there from this distance, but there was now an anomaly that was visible even to him.

In the center of the capital, *there was a colossal pillar of fire*.

It was an abnormality far larger and far taller than even Xunyu's Baolongba. And, again, it was rising from the center of the capital.

It almost seemed as though it was the city's final day.

"Hmm..." He had chosen to observe these battles instead of the assault on Altea, but he couldn't help but wonder what was happening there.

◇◆◇

Control AI no. 1's workspace

"...Hhaah." While the battles around the assembly hall were still commencing, Chrono Crown... no, control AI No. 12, Rabbit... returned to the avatar space with a somewhat uncomfortable expression.

His current avatar wasn't the one he had made to look like his late Master — the one that had just been decapitated by Kashimiya — but the control AI he used to welcome new players.

This avatar was about what you would imagine a White Rabbit plush would be, clock and all. He was always in far too much of a hurry to welcome new players, but as the situation showed, there were times when he had occasion to use it.

"...So now there's gonna be a war," he said. "It'll cost me some time... but I suppose there's no way around it."

War took his Resources and his freedom. He did all within his authority to prevent it, but as a result, he had died in a way that perfectly fit his role... to a Master in his sixth form.

He was aware that he'd gone too far and that Alice wouldn't restore Chrono Crown for a while, so he could no longer stop the conflict.

At least he was able to witness the extraordinary boy known as Kashimiya and die to his impeccable technique, so he tried to at least be glad that he'd made a good memory to share with his Master.

"Hm...?" But then, he realized that something wasn't right in this workspace.

He expected to have encountered his colleagues and gotten some stern talking-to by now, but they were all somewhere else.

He looked around a bit and found them gathered in a single place. Besides Cheshire — whom Rabbit had just fought — Bandersnatch — who was too big for the space — and Dormouse, everyone was here, in the monitor room they'd used when deploying Gloria to the kingdom.

"Did something happen?" he asked one of his colleagues — The Queen, who had the appearance of a carnivorous beast-woman.

“Welcome back, Rabbit... That avatar really is cute.”

“Shut up. Anyway, what happened?”

“There’s a bit of a disagreement about how to handle a certain situation. Mostly between Dormouse and Humpty.”

Rabbit looked and saw the two arguing over comms.

While they talked, they sent each other info and argued over simulations.

“Ohh? Now this is something.”

By that, Rabbit meant that it was rare for Dormouse to quarrel over anything.

Though, as colleagues who worked together for millennia, the control AIs rarely squabbled in general these days.

His own encounter with Cheshire was quite an exception, resulting mostly from Rabbit’s relative lack of maturity — even though Cheshire was the youngest in terms of their numbering and interacted with people more often than most.

“What’s the reason?”

“Is eliminating a risk worth it if it brings another risk.”

“...That’s not an explanation.”

“Well, basically, there’s a chance to destroy the seed of the next calamity *along with all of Altea,* and they’re talking about what they should do.” Rabbit had no words, but he instantly understood that something big was happening at the capital.

“...You could’ve told me that before the peace talks,” he said as he realized that this could’ve prevented the war far more effectively.

He also understood that the incident surrounding the peace talks wasn’t isolated to just the area around the assembly hall.

Thus, the story shifted to the capital, where there was no Ray, and none of Altar’s Superiors.

This was far from over.

To Be Continued

Afterword



Bear: “Prebear yourselves for the Afterword! I am the Bear, Shu Starling!”

Fox: “And I’m the Fox, Tsukuyo Fusou! We’re the survivor duo, aren’t we?”

Bear: “...Hngh!”

Fox: “Hey?! What was that backhand for?! You’re taking this way too far!”

Bear: “This is the unbearable punishment that awaits those who casually make a killing in the main story.”

Fox: “I-I did, but that made KoB’s wallet thinner and damaged Dryfe’s econo __”

Bear: “No excuses! Kodachi!”

Fox: “Sunsleep Ink Shroud!”

In response to Shu’s kick, Tsukuyo donned the cloth of night.

Shu, however, didn’t miss a beat in his attack, figuring that he could break through it even if weakened by it.

But then, another layer... another wall of night was formed.

That was another one of the variations of the Lunar Divider Field — the “bowl.”

The wall of night that appeared between Shu and Tsukuyo was intended to surround him. If he tried to jump over it, she would surely attack him with her ranged “swallow” attack.

Despite that, Shu faced the wall closing in on him with an indomitable smile.

Then, after equipping the first form of his Embryo on his left hand, he—

Fox: “Hold on! This is an afterwooord! Stop stooop!”

Bear: “...Mrgh. We almost started a fantasy match-up that hasn’t even happened in the main story yet. That’d be beary bad.”

Fox: “How troublesome. You can be really over the top, you know that? Few people just burn down entire forests like you did.”

Bear: “I won’t bear such comments from someone who’s constantly greedy.”

Fox: “How ruuude. Ah. Look at that. While we were doing this, the time came for the author’s actual comments.”

Thank you for your purchase, dearest readers, I am the author, Sakon Kaidou.

Our world at large is still being ravaged by the coronavirus. Are you all doing well in spite of that?

Various events all over the country have been canceled, and *Dendro* was affected by it in some ways, as well, but I suppose that this truly is the time for perseverance.

I can only hope that our events will return to us next year or the one that will follow.

Anyway, this volume was about Ray’s first deadly encounter against an “Apex,” who also doubled as the strongest enemy he’s yet faced.

I will leave it up to you readers to decide whether the outcome was a victory or a defeat.

If there is something I can say as an author, it would be that Ray protected what he had to.

This is unrelated to the text within this book, but I would like to point out that both color pages in this volume show Nemesis as a high-rank Embryo — the change in clothes that came with the evolution, as well as her fourth form — The Black Mirror.

Taiki did a wonderful job on both pieces, and I cannot thank him enough for it.

14 volumes have been released over 4 years, and looking at Nemesis on the color pages made me really feel how much she's grown.

Though, she hasn't changed much on the inside...

Besides the main story, there is the side story, Crow Record, which recently completed its first major arc. In the newest release that just came out, there should be the start of a comical water survival arc with swimsuits included. I was quite tired of all the seriousness, so I will make this one as fun as I can.

The manga adaptation reached the end of Figaro and Xunyu's battle, paving the way for Franklin to enter the stage. There might be some enjoyment to be gained from reading his lines in Yoshitsugu Matsuoka's voice.

Please continue supporting *Infinite Dendrogram* in the future.

With that in mind, volume 15 should be coming early-to-mid 2021.

Please look forward to seeing what happened during the battles around the assembly hall.

Sakon Kaidou

Fox: "He went and announced the next volume by himself!"

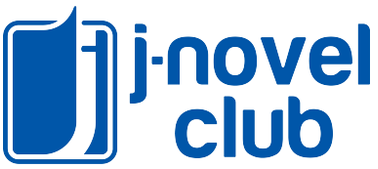
Bear: "Well, we both did it a bunch of times already. I can bear it... Speaking of which, where's Cheshire and Xunyu?"

Fox: "Cheshire couldn't come 'cause of some urgent business, while Xunyu told me that she's really busy with volume 15."

Bear: "...I'm gettin' some déjà vu here."

Fox: "Anyway, there weren't many people here this time, but just look forward to volume 15, okaay?"

Bear: "Get yer claws on it as soon as you can."



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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 14

by Sakon Kaidou

Translated by Andrew Hodgson Edited by Sarah Tilson

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