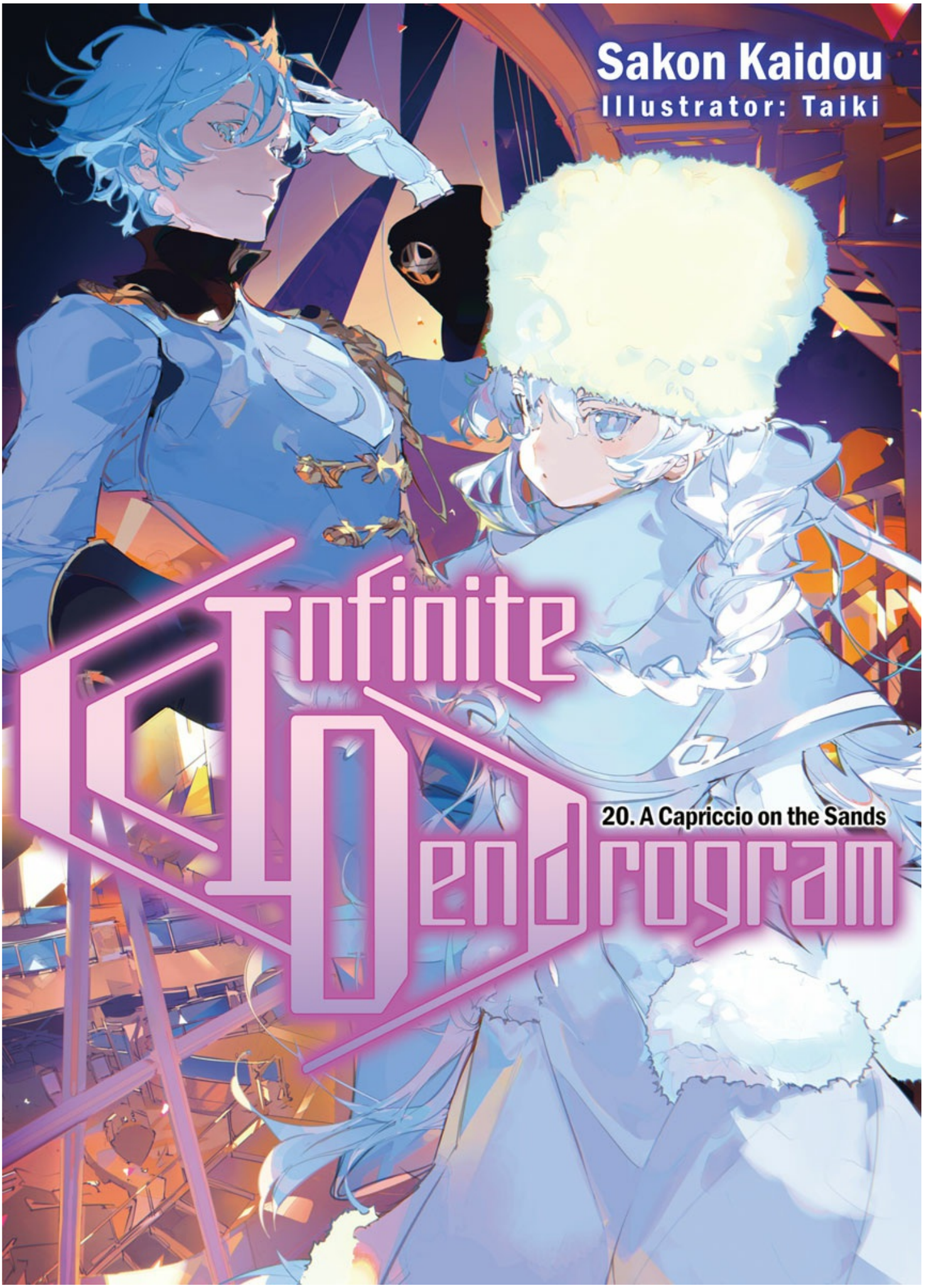
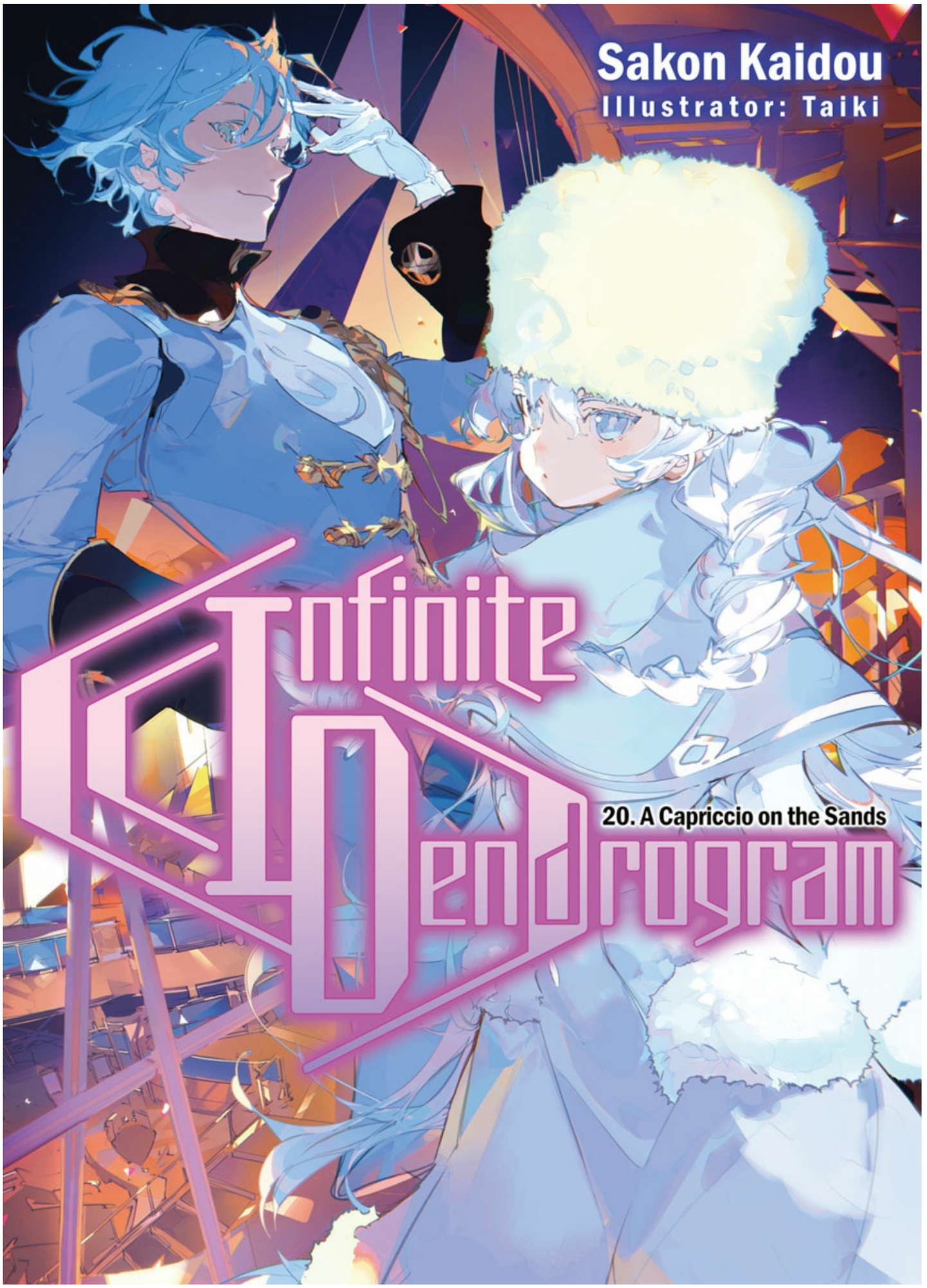

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20. A Capriccio on the Sands


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Prologue: The Three's Circumstances and a Single Stage

Yuri Gautier

"Yuri...where does all the money go?"

"What? What's this about?" It was nearly the middle of April, and I was sitting in the cafeteria of the prestigious Lorraine Girls' College when my friend—and fellow *Dendro* player—Sonya posed that question to me. This was a pretty wealthy school, so her words felt like they came out of nowhere and didn't really make sense to me.

I could only think of one reason someone like her would be laying her head on the table and whining about her finances.

"You wasted your money again, didn't you? In *Dendro*, I mean."

"Nooo, I didn't *waste* it... There was a gacha machine at a shop in Gideon. I saw someone roll a really nice piece of interior, so I tried rolling for something like that myself—and before I knew it, my wallet was empty!"

If that wasn't "wasting" her money, I didn't know what was. "Gideon's gacha has a possible drop range that increases depending on how much money you put in, doesn't it?" I asked. "There's basically no restriction on the kind of stuff it can give you, so I really doubt you can get what you want from it."

"I know that, but... Wait, I didn't know you'd been to Gideon."

"O-Oh. I mean, that's what I heard, anyway."

I need to be more careful. I didn't tell her that I was involved in Fran's scheme.

"Ughhh... Moments like this make me wish I could trade real money for *Dendro* money..."

"You can't. RMT is forbidden worldwide."

"NNGHH! BUT WHYYY, THOUGH?! I HAVE SO MUCH ACTUAL MONEY THAT I COULD TRADE FOR LIR!"

The Real Money Trading Ban—I felt like the full name of the law was slightly longer than that, but it had been in effect all over the world since the 2030s. It banned all and any exchange of in-game virtual currency and property for real currency and property or vice versa.The law was put in place shortly after the announcement of the first dive-type VRMMO, *NEXT WORLD*. Many people believed that the law's purpose was to make it so that the wealth earned in these kinds of games wouldn't have a strong impact on the real economy, since these new virtual worlds had the potential to become second homes for a lot of people.

While *NEXT WORLD* hadn't lived up to such expectations, *Infinite Dendrogram* had greatly exceeded them, so it was now widely believed that creating this law was the right move.

You had to make your own *Dendro* money even if you were wealthy in real life, and you couldn't trade your lir for real money even if you were rich in *Dendro*. And this allowed both reality and *Dendro* to have stable economies...at least according to Fran.

"Looking at you makes me glad we have that law," I added.

"Come ooon! Don't you get it?! It's not like I can go shopping in the dorms! I can't get that much new stuff! I can only really cut loose in *Dendro*, but I can't even bring my actual money there!"

"Whoa, calm down." My friend's frustrations with a lack of shopping and money in her life were obviously really getting to her, so I wanted to help her relax. "Teachers use this cafeteria too. You don't want to attract Miss Nina's attention, do you?"

Our sociology teacher was very strict—the true picture of the "ice queen" kind of instructor. She was also extremely serious about proper behavior, so she would definitely give Sonya a talking-to if she saw carrying on like this.

"Why's the school so strict about leaving the dorms, anyway? I wanna escape..."

"You really shouldn't do that. Going outside without permission will get you suspended."

We had soundproof private rooms where we were free to perform music, build models, and even log in to *Infinite Dendrogram*, but as a trade-off we were strictly forbidden from going outside. This was because one of the school's goals was to prevent the young ladies here from interacting too much with the wrong kind of people.

"*Gnrhh*...I guess I'm only really free in *Dendro*... Ugh, but I'm so poor there. The Love-Duel Festival is right around the corner, but I won't have enough money for anything."

"The Love-Duel Festival?" That name really didn't conjure the image of happy couples.

"It's an event in Gideon based on some romance from a long time ago. My party came to the city for some quest related to it...but my wallet isn't ready."

"Romance?"

"Yep. It's an event where you go on dates with a special someone and maybe even confess your feelings.You know, typical love festival stuff."

A love festival, huh? I thought. *Wait. Hold on. Why did Ray and that Rook guy who verbally abused me just pop into my head? No! No way! That's out of the question!*

"Yuri?"

"D-Don't mind me. I'm fine. Anyway, who are you going with?"

"I'll enjoy what the festival has to offer and do some quests on the side, but I don't plan to go on any dates."

"Not even with your party members?" Sonya was in a three-person party with two guys, and she'd told me lots about them and everything they'd done together. Granted, a lot of what she'd said were complaints, but the group seemed to get along despite all of that, so I thought there was a chance that something more had grown between them.

However, Sonya looked like she didn't know how to react to my question.

"Hrmm...Asuma is a kind, capable, and reliable gentleman with a good heart, but he doesn't talk and pushes around a baby carriage, so I'm not sure how a

date with him would even work. And Grimms is just a scumbag."

Wow, her opinion on the two sure is uneven, I thought.

"Speaking of Grimms, you won't believe this! He recently told me that he's actually the second prince of some country and that he's only a NEET now because it became a republic. I get wanting to brag, but 'prince?' Seriously?"

"Uhh...I get what you mean." If someone had told me that, I would've just been weirded out.

"I wish I'd used Truth Discernment. I'm sure it would've gone like, 'BEEP BEEP BEEP.'"

"Is that how the skill works?" Well, even though she called him a scumbag, at least they seemed to get along well enough to crack lighthearted jokes about it.

"That reminds me that while I was losing my money at the gacha, Grimms lost his at the arena. Asuma sure got mad at us for that...I'm glad he still gave us enough to cover our daily spending after that."

Poor Asuma...you two should really fix your lives so it makes his a little easier, I thought.

Sonya planted her face right back on the table and resumed her whining. "Aaahh... I'm so broooooke... I need more *Dendro* moneeeyyy..."

"Come on, now—Oh." With Sonya's head out of the way, I was able to see the person standing behind her—Miss Nina, the infamously strict teacher obsessed with propriety. She was looking straight at Sonya, who was still whining about having no money.

Sonya's really in for it now, I thought. I could already imagine Miss Nina approaching Sonya and saying something like "What do you mean, you 'have no money?' Did you break the rules and leave school grounds?"

However, contrary to what I expected, Miss Nina just stopped looking at Sonya and walked away.

"Uh...huh? Yuri? What's wrong?" asked Sonya, clearly unaware that she'd just escaped Miss Nina's wrath.

“Nothing,” I responded, and shortly after that, breakfast time was over.

The rest of the day went by in the blink of an eye, and soon the day’s classes were nearly at an end.

“That will be all for today’s lesson, but we still have 5 minutes of class time left, so I will continue a bit further,” said Miss Nina as she concluded her sociology lesson and looked us over. “Today, I talked about how climate and geopolitics influenced the history of industry and commerce all over the world. However, industry is not the only thing that changes in response to its environment.”

She then went on the computer whose display was being projected for the class, opened a paint program, and began drawing something. When she was done, the screen showed two...*bears*: one big and one small.

“The polar bears inhabiting the cold arctic have grown larger to retain heat, further supported by their thick fur. On the other hand, you have the sun bears, which have developed smaller bodies and have short hair better suited to the warm tropics.”

Bears seemed a little out of place as the subject, but Miss Nina’s drawings captured the quirks of the species. Personally, I thought they were very cute. My classmates probably thought the same, but then Sonya whispered “Regional forms,” making a few of the girls chuckle.

“These wild animals developed different features because of the environment they lived in. And this is doubly true for humans. Just like animals, we have certain broad traits we developed over a long time because of our natural environments, but we also have individual personality traits developed by the social environment we grew up in as individuals.”

Social environment and personality traits... I felt that this was the main subject that Miss Nina wanted to get to.

“In modern society, you are oftentimes required to adopt a personality that is suitable for the social environment you are in. People in roles like teacher or nun must possess the bare minimum amount of dignity that one would expect of someone in that profession. And the ‘bare minimum’ for students of this school is far higher than it is for boys and girls in society at large.”

Though it had become more relaxed since the previous century, Miss Nina emphasized that this was still a prestigious, serious school for high-class ladies.

“Last week, one of our students left her dorm late at night to fool around with male students from another school. Thankfully, it did not lead to any illicit sexual relationships, but it was still a serious violation of the dorm’s rules. Thus, the student in question was severely punished.”

Students who left school grounds without authorization were punished with suspension. I’d told Sonya that very thing this morning.

Miss Nina had gotten there in a roundabout way, but now it looked like the point of this whole thing was to give us a preachy warning.

If Fran was here, she’d probably say something like, “Miss Nina drew those little bears and talked about them just to draw you in and trap you in a goddamn sermon.”

Wait, that was more like Fran when she was role-playing Franklin...though honestly, I felt like my mental image of her was really starting to take Franklin as the default.

“‘Blend it with vermilion and it will all turn red.’ That’s an oriental idiom similar in meaning to the quote ‘he that toucheth pitch shall be defiled therewith.’ You must remember that the environment you are in is the Lorraine Girls’ College, and that your role is to be a student of this school. Please make an effort to live with modesty, propriety, and fidelity.” She looked over us again, her gaze lingering an extra long time on Sonya.

That was exactly when the bell of the in-school church began to toll.

“And there’s the bell. That concludes today’s lesson.”

Having said what she wanted with precision timing that almost seemed intentional, Miss Nina ended the lesson.

“Finallyyy...” Upon returning to my room, I jumped right onto my bed. It probably wasn’t good for my uniform, but I’d be handing it over for cleaning soon anyway, so that didn’t matter.

This was the last day of school before a short break. The week’s lessons were

over, and I could finally relax.

I grabbed my dog plushie next to the bed and rolled around a bit with it clutched tightly to my chest.

"'Blend it with vermilion and it will all turn red.' Hmm..." Somehow, the first words out of my mouth once the week's fatigue had started to subside were the exact ones said by Miss Nina.

Then, I remembered my current environment in *Dendro*. Modesty, propriety, and fidelity—there was a huge vermilion stain in my life there that was completely the opposite of all those things.

And by that, I really just meant Teach.

"I don't think she's rubbed off on me yet." There were things about her I found cool or worthy of respect, but I'd never, ever try to be as unscrupulous as her. Yeah—on that front, she was kind of an example of how *not* to behave.

"Well, we're separated for now, anyway." Teach had told me that she had an urgent matter to attend to and that we couldn't work together during my break. To make up for it, she offered me a part-time job. Apparently someone Teach worked with needed some help with something, and she suggested I take the job since it would also be a learning experience.

"She also said 'he's a piece of work, but he pays well.'" I wasn't sure what to expect from someone whom *she*, of all people, would call a "piece of work."

Unlike Sonya, I wasn't in desperate need of *Dendro* money, but maintenance for Fran's White Rose was more expensive than for Marshall II, so it wouldn't hurt to have more funds.

"And I'll be working on a fancy sand-cruiser..." Even though it was in *Dendro*, this would be the first part-time job I'd ever had.

And with the location being so luxurious, I was actually pretty excited for it.

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2045, April, Arizona

The hospital was located near mountainous forests, away from any urban area. The exterior of the building was spotless and well-maintained. In fact, it

was practically overflowing with beauty and cleanliness.

However, since there were no towns nearby that could provide it with patients, it could be argued that it didn't fulfill its fundamental purpose as a hospital. The moment anyone noticed the high walls and multiple fences surrounding the grounds, though, that impression would completely change.

The building looked more like a mix between a hospital and a prison, and a sign on the entrance read "Buer Mental Hospital."

That alone made the reason for its location obvious. This was not a place for emergency patients, and it was not a place meant to be seen by ordinary folk.

The facility's main gate—as secure as everything else about it—opened up, and a luxury car entered the hospital grounds. There were signs at the roadside, but the driver clearly had no need for them. The way the car headed straight for the underground parking lot made it obvious that they'd been here many times before.

"I'll be there for about two hours, as usual. Wait for me here," a young man in a nice suit said to the driver as he stepped out of the car. His apparel would not be out of place for a patient at a regular hospital, but this was a mental facility for people who had both sufficient wealth and circumstances. Knowing that, his clothes took on a different meaning—he wasn't someone who came to be admitted, but rather someone who had made it so that someone else was.

"Hello, Craig. We've been waiting for you," said a doctor who'd been waiting at the entrance for the appointed visitation time.

"Hey, doc. Thanks, as always," said the youth in response, his tone friendly. "Anyway, let's get down to business. How is she?"

"She's doing quite well. Her symptoms have subsided and she hasn't had any episodes."

Although it came at a great monetary cost, this hospital guaranteed state-of-the-art facilities, treatments, and privacy. The girl that the young man had hidden away here also had circumstances that made it necessary to conceal her from society at large.

Guided—and observed—by the doctor, the young man was led to a visitation

room. There, a girl waited at the other side of the special glass that divided the space.

Upon seeing the young man, her face lit up.

“Rascyal!”

“Hey, Emily. I came to visit you.” The girl—Emily—called out to the young man with a face full of joy and the inflection of a child not quite used to speaking.

However, the word she used puzzled the doctor. He knew this young businessman’s first name, and “Rascal” wasn’t it.

The young man—also known as Rascal the Bloodonyx, a sub-leader of the Illegal Frontier clan in *Infinite Dendrogram*—noticed the doctor’s confusion and, with a wry grin on his face, said, “It’s like a nickname.”

“I see,” the doctor said in response. *It sure is a mean one,* he thought to himself, but didn’t say it out loud.

He then left the room, leaving only Rascal and Emily, still separated by the glass.

“It’s been a while since we met here,” said Rascal. “You got any requests?”

“Shooboost!”

“Shooboost...? Shoe? And boost? You want rocket boots or something?” *That seems like something more to Machina’s tastes,* he thought. *Well, she definitely could make a pair in* Dendro*, but I don’t think they have those in the real world Or were they already talking about making something like that on the other side...? It wouldn’t be the first time that piece of scrap has used my money and mats to make new stuff.*

Rascal’s thoughts drifted to the one-eyed robot maid that he owned. She was in charge of the clan’s tech, but she was so goofy and gave him so much trouble that just thinking about her caused a look of exhaustion to cross his face.

“No. It’s not boots, but *sweets*!” Emily said, shaking her head.

“Huh...? Oh, do you mean ‘chiboust’?” Chiboust meant a cake covered in what was called crème chiboust—a mix of custard and meringue—that had its

surface caramelized by scorching.

“That!” said Emily, her smile growing deeper from getting Rascal to understand her. “Gerberya made some and it was very very tasty!”

“That dumba—that *simple girl* is delicate enough to make pastries?” Rascal muttered in surprise. He’d only known Gerbera before Shu had sent her to the gaol—though she’d actually had that particular skill even back then, before Sechs’s instruction. “All right. I’ll bring some next time we meet.”

“Yaaay!”

“Anything else you want? Doesn’t matter if it’s here or there.”

“Umm...I wanna...”

The two went on to speak with each other for about an hour.

“We’ll meet on the other side next time,” Rascal said as the conversation ended and he went to walk out of the visitation room. “And I’ll see you here again next week.”

“See youuu!” said Emily with a wave of her hand.

Instead of going straight for the exit, Rascal went to the doctor’s reception office. He sat down on the sofa, and the doctor waiting there handed him a collection of documents—the clinical files of the girl who had been here for over a year.

“These are her records for the latest month.”

.

“Still a long way to go until she’s fit for society, huh?”

“The episodes may have stopped, but her mental age is still only about half of her actual age...” Physically, Emily was just slightly shorter than the average girl her age, but her manner of speech still seemed unusually childish. However, both her mental age and height were not a result of something innate—they were something she acquired.

“Her condition isn’t just the result of the incident, but also the many years she spent in that family environment. It is not something that can be cured simply

with antidepressants or sedatives. It seems quite clear that what she needs most of all is time."

"No changes there, huh?" Rascal said, his face troubled and his eyes closed, before nodding and saying, "Very well. Please continue as you have. And please continue with the treatment that I've suggested."

"The VR game? Her condition has certainly improved since she began playing it. It does seem that meeting other people is a plus for her, even if it's in a game."

"Yes. I'm sure it is."

The doctor didn't play *Infinite Dendrogram* himself and didn't inquire about the details. He thought of it as little different from the video games he used to play in his own childhood.

"And she can't exactly kill anyone in a video game, can she?"

"...Yes. That is true."

The doctor's careless words didn't even make Rascal change his expression. He merely nodded—after all, the doctor was half right. At the very least, as long as she was logged in, the real Emily would never decide that someone was a "minus" or *commit any more crime*. Not even if, on the other side, she was the Murder Princess herself.

After talking to the doctor, Rascal returned to the parking lot and walked back to his car.

The driver fired up the engine. Rascal, seated in one of the rear seats surrounded by bulletproof and soundproof glass, took out a tablet device and scrolled through it, focusing on data files that had been added or updated.

"Nothing of note, huh?"

The data files were a map of a world and the happenings within it. However, it wasn't a map of the earth, but the world in *Infinite Dendrogram*, and the data on it had been gathered by Illegal Frontier's supporting Masters.

"Dryfe's preparing for those peace talks I heard about. Altar too, but they've also got the Love-Duel Festival. And Caldina's...initiating negotiations with

Granvaloa.”

Rascal had been prioritizing the info related to Caldina—the country that currently hosted his and Emily’s avatars.

“More localized info says that the armed organization calling itself ‘Dryfe’s Legitimate Government’ is becoming more active, and that Eltram, a luxury sand-cruiser that Crys Fragment worked on, is gonna be put into commission...” To Rascal’s eyes, he’d spotted a handful of sparks that could catch into a roaring fire.

“I wonder what the best course of action is for our clan’s development...and for Emily,” he said to himself. “For now, though...”

Rascal put away the tablet and took out the device he used for his real job. Though he had IF to worry about, there were also living expenses and hospital bills to pay, so Rascal couldn’t neglect his real company either.

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A Story From a Civil War

It was November of 2044 (reality time), and the imperial army base located in the outskirts of the imperial capital of Vandelheim was aflame.

The army that had sworn to protect the imperium had been torn in two, and now it was at war with itself. The burning base was littered with corpses of soldiers and the broken remains of disabled weapons.

And in the heart of it all, a battle raged between one giant machine and countless human-shaped entities.

The former was a Magingear with a generally humanoid body plan, but it stood out among the conventional Marshal II units because of the unusual feature fixed on its torso—a draconic head that made its overall silhouette look more like an upright dragon than a person.

The creatures it faced were wooden marionettes equipped with firearms.

“SMTF Captain...no...Marquis Barbaros! Your conspiracy with Reinhard ends here and now! Missile Darts!” The dragon-headed unit pointed its left arm at the marionettes—and then the armor on its forearm rose up to fire numerous missiles at the wooden marionettes, reducing many to splinters.

“Major General Eldona. You know the rules of inheritance established by the previous imperator. The throne of Dryfe now rightfully belongs to that child. There is nothing to be gained from any more fighting amongst ourselves.”

The marionette soldiers responded only with more gunfire, cooperating as though coordinated by but one mind.

The dragon-headed machine’s pilot continued. “The gall! My cousin, first prince Gustav—his son, Hallon...how dare you say that after killing them and so many other members of the imperial family...?!”

“I...” The machine pilot’s words had robbed the marionette commander of any ability to respond.

“Or are you simply arrogant because your side has King of Beasts, yourself, and Lady Claudiah?! Do you truly believe your power will be enough to claim

this land?! With the exception of Dryfe's strongest soldier, SMTF Commander Mord Machiné, you all *are* the strongest individual combatants in the country. However..." The dragon-headed unit thrust a close-range weapon behind it, skewering a marionette soldier that had tried to approach it from behind. "Not a single weapon here surpasses this unit I drive, nor is there anyone whose piloting skill exceeds my own!" The unit continued to destroy each and every single marionette that came too close, and it moved with flexibility and finesse that made humans look dull, fighting with technique that could pass for art.

"As long as I exist, our true imperium will never fall!"

"You were given that unit so you could *protect* this land. How shameful that you would instead use it to fuel a civil war."

"If this isn't protecting this land, I'd like to hear what *is*...usurper!"

"I know that trying to find any justice in this war is a fool's errand—and I suppose that is why we have no choice but to fight. But surely you know there is one thing at which I am truly unmatched. And that is *numbers*."

The marionettes around the dragon-headed unit had all been destroyed—but they were but a fraction of the entire army.

The marionettes dispersed throughout the base were starting to gather at the site of the battle, and new ones were being made from the metallic remains of the weapons scattered about. These innumerable puppets moved as one to overwhelm and destroy the hostile unit.

The strongest pilot in Dryfe—Over Pilot Curtis Eldona. The wielder of a Mythical MVP reward—Zero General Gifted Barbaros.

This was a deadly clash between the two extremes in the imperium's army: quality and quantity. It would all come down to which one of them would break through the other's offense and claim the life of his opponent. The two knew full well that it would be over for them the moment their enemy's attack reached them, so they gathered their resolve and prepared to face death when...

"The SMTF forces who assaulted the false imperator have been destroyed! And when the Superior...I mean, when Splendida realized that, he stopped

restraining King of Beasts and ran away!”

...Curtis received news from his forces that brought the battle to a sudden end.

“What...?!” Curtis could ask for no clearer indication that his side had been defeated. The soldier’s words had revealed the harsh truth—they had gambled everything on this operation, and they had failed.

“This is it, Major General. Let us end this civil war.”

“No! It’s *not* over yet! This doesn’t mean our ultimate defeat...!” In his heart of hearts, Curtis wished for the battle to continue, but as an army man, he understood full well the choice he had to make now that his forces were being overwhelmed. “I will retreat...for now!” Curtis said, activating the smoke screen installed in his unit.

“Major General!”

“Marquis Barbaros!” Even as Curtis retreated, he gave voice to the will still burning within him. “We will not accept the reign of a usurper! Never forget this moment, and one day, we will surely free...” Here, one of his words was drowned in the noise of an explosion. “...from your vile grasp!” Curtis cried before finally disappearing from the scene.

Those who heard Curtis’s words presumed the inaudible word must have been “Dryfe,” but the truth was unknown to all except the man who had said it.

Whatever his declaration may have been, the civil war sparked by the inheritance of the throne had reached its end, leaving behind only this one smoldering ember.

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April, 2045, Caldina

Curtis Eldona woke up inside his unit.

“...Another dream of that day.” It was more like a nightmare, really—the detestable memory of his escape from his homeland. “I suppose it’s on my mind because we’re preparing for a major operation.”

After losing the civil war that day, the group Curtis commanded—Dryfe’s First

Armored Battalion—had moved their operations to Caldina. Reinhard or his pawns would have easily found them had they remained, and Caldina was the only place where they could procure supplies.

These days, the Battalion did their maintenance themselves, obtaining the required parts from the Caldinan black market by either purchase or theft.

“Major General? Are you awake?” a subordinate asked him over the comms.

“I am. I must say, though, as dear as this unit is to me, it is certainly not designed for a pleasant night’s sleep,” Curtis replied, only half serious.

“There’s no need to sleep in the cockpit every night, is there? Why not use a bed?” the subordinate replied, sounding concerned.

Curtis was well aware that a bed would be preferable, but there were reasons he always chose his unit over a bed.

“Every warrior is at his most defenseless when asleep. If I am to die, I want to rest here, within this machine. *This* will be my coffin...my inventory.”

Merchants making long journeys, adventurers undertaking jobs given by the combat guilds, career soldiers, and other people in a similar line of work were at high risk of dying far away from home. Because of that, it was customary to store their remains in time-stopping inventories when the worst came to pass and bring them back to their homes for burial. That was what Curtis’s odd choice of words referred to.

Another reason he chose to sleep in the cockpit was that he was especially wary of some *specific* people coming for his head in his sleep.

His group—known as Dryfe’s Legitimate Government or DLG—was a known anti-government force in Dryfe and an armed militia in Caldina. As it was a nuisance to both countries, there was a high chance the group’s leader would become a target for assassination.

“Very well. Also, I am sure you are aware, but the briefing is in ten minutes.”

“I know.”

Curtis cut the comms and opened the cockpit. A leader like him had to look at least passable, so he stood in front of a mirror to get himself ready and caught

sight of the look in his own eyes—haggard, so unlike how he'd looked when he was still in Dryfe.

"I certainly have sunk low," he said in self-derision.

Curtis had lost count of how many crimes he'd committed here in Caldina in order to maintain his group and its power—but he had a goal he had to achieve no matter the cost.

"We will bring down Reinhard. And then..."

For the sake of the desire that he refused to name out loud, Curtis had resolved to accept a particular task.

Ten minutes later, the members of DLG had gathered in the warehouse that doubled as their briefing hall. There were hundreds of them, and they all wore the same clothes—the uniform of the Dryfean military. They were forming orderly lines, and before them stood Curtis's unit—the majestic dragon-headed Magingear.

"Comrades, we are about to commence our biggest operation since we moved here to Caldina," Curtis spoke to his subordinates, his Magingear behind him.

A moment later, multiple pictures were projected on the warehouse wall.

"Our target is the desert liner, Eltram. We will break into it, take the passengers hostage, and claim our target object from the energy block. An inside sympathizer has arranged the infiltration process for us."

The projection showed the ship's exterior and a sketch of its design, along with a photo of some sort of large device. Curtis used a pointer to indicate specific parts of the picture and lay out the details of the operation.

"If we keep going as we are, we will lose a large amount of our supplies. Because of this, I have sent Lieutenant Colonel Berlin's squad on a routine supply mission. Now, I am sure you have realized this by now, but this operation will endanger more civilians than any we have undertaken before."

That last sentence was received with nervous gulps from a few—if not more than a few—of his subordinates.

“But as you know by now, Caldina is our enemy. Do not let their casualties distract you,” Curtis continued, his voice hardened with absolute certainty. “While the false imperator Reinhard was a fool to start a war with Altar in the first place, Caldina intervened in it by attacking only Dryfe, directly contributing to our homeland’s dire situation. And this was not their only hostile action. They ceased food exports to Dryfe while our people were going through a famine and used that opportunity to hoard wealth for themselves. As far as the imperium is concerned, they are evil!”

Curtis justified their upcoming actions out loud in order to alleviate the psychological burden his battalion might carry as they embarked upon their mission. He’d been doing this since they’d begun taking people’s supplies by force.

“And this operation will reward us with something we *must* have! Something that will grant us power and will be indispensable in taking back our homeland! Indeed—this will be a weapon against the murderer of first prince Gustav and his son Hallon! The blade that strikes down the vile, tyrannical false imperator Reinhard!” Curtis’s assertion of their justice was deceitful, but he didn’t let them realize it—and if they did regardless, they simply looked away from it.

If they didn’t believe themselves to be just, they would be unable to carry out any military actions so far away from their homes.

“To empower our justice and to secure a future for Dryfe, we must make this operation a success even if it means sacrificing all who stand in our way!”

And so, the battalion replied with a passionate roar.

“This operation will bring us closer to our true goal! Victory to the true Dryfe!”

“VICTORY TO THE TRUE DRYFE!” The soldiers of DLG saluted in unison, and Curtis responded the same way.

They would soon carry out their operation—to them, it was righteous, but to others, merely criminal.

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Thus the capriccio set on a sand liner was about to begin.

Chapter I: The Part-Time Job and the Man Who Calls Himself Vulgar

Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

Eltram was a newly built desert liner that had just set off on its maiden voyage. Focused on providing a safe and pleasant trip to its wealthy passengers, it was equipped with a casino, a shopping mall, a pool, a theater, and a lot of other fancy amenities. It reminded me of the cruise ship we'd gone on in reality for a family trip back before our parents divorced.

There were two big differences between that ship and Eltram, though.

First, when looking outside, I didn't see a blue ocean, but instead a white desert—this ship was moving on the sand. This would have been an impossible sight in reality, so this view had a pretty big impact on me.

The second difference was on the sides of the ship, and in a way, it was even more startling than the first.

This ship was equipped with rows of cannons. That was *definitely* something that a real cruise ship didn't have, because it didn't have to deal with monster attacks, obviously.

The cannons were there to deal with giant worms and other aggressive creatures that would undoubtedly approach the Eltram. In addition to that, this ship was accompanied by a convoy of many smaller sand-ships ready to protect it if necessary.

This was a world where a "safe and pleasant trip" basically meant there would be a lot of force at the ready to protect you.

"Tasteless, isn't it?" said a person sitting at the same table as me, bringing my attention back to the inside of the ship.

I was seated at the best table in the ship's open-air restaurant. The man with us had said that we'd talk business once we'd eaten and invited us here for a meal.

“It is. Can the passengers actually relax like this?” I asked.

“The tians can. They were born and raised in a world full of man-eating monsters. They understand the necessity of protective power on a level we can’t comprehend. In fact, don’t you think that all these cannons would make them *more* relaxed?”

Good point, I thought. *This might look extraordinary to me, but I guess tians see it as completely normal.*

“But we aren’t like that. Even if the taste of food doesn’t change, these cannons make the *feeling* of the flavor a bit empty. Next.”

Despite complaining about the impact the defenses may have on food, he’d polished off the meat on his plate and was now asking for the next dish.

“Phew. This ship’s chef isn’t an SJ, but this still tastes great. Then again, skills generally don’t have a strong effect on cooking.”

“Really?”

“Cooking is a sense skill that lets you create food of taste you want to make with a degree of perfection based on the skill’s level. In the end, it all depends on your own sense of taste. If yours is awful, you will make terrible food even if your Cooking level is high. Conversely, if you have the technique, you can make delicious food even if you don’t have the actual skill. For example, my Isara here is also an excellent cook.”

“Thank you for your kind words,” said Isara—a tian woman and the man’s bodyguard.

“I see...” I said.

“There are exceptions, though, like the leader of our clan... Ah, next,” the man added as he emptied another plate.

It was strange how he could speak so fluently while eating. He didn’t even make any chewing sounds.

“Hmm. You’re not eating much,” he said. “Is there something in the food you don’t like? That slutty AR-I-CA girl told me that you’re a vegetarian and your companion here has a strange diet of only white things.”

“O-Oh, this is very good. It’s just...I’m a bit overwhelmed by how fast you’re eating.”

I’d already seen how Nemesis ate, and I wouldn’t have expected anyone to compare to her, but this man certainly gave her a run for her money. Also, with Nemesis, I could handwave it as one of those eccentric diets Maidens tended to have—but he was a Master, not an Embryo.

He didn’t really didn’t look like any Master I knew. He was, well...how could I put it...?

“You’re eating *too* much, fatty.”

“Yes, you’re very corpule...wait, CYCO?!” *That’s too blunt even by your standards! You do realize he’s our contractor and a Superior, right?!*

“Hmm. ‘You’re eating *too* much, fatty,’ eh? It’s true—I can’t deny it. Don’t you agree?”

“I do. You are indeed a gourmand, sir.”

Unaffected by Cyco’s verbal abuse, the man exchanged a few words with Isara.



Well, he was clearly obese. Coupled with his rather short height, it almost seemed like he was wider than he was tall. His stomach area was especially big. It looked like he was hiding a ball under his shirt...njo, it was more like his whole torso was one huge ball.

But despite that, he had a pretty face. It felt like he'd made a pretty-boy avatar and then gone on to get fat afterward.

"Umm...did you make yourself look like that in character creation?" There were people out there who gave themselves silly features like huge mohawks, and Fran and I myself were so different from our real selves we weren't even the same sex, so maybe it was a similar situation with him.

"Heh heh heh. No, actually. Be careful—if you eat too much and don't get a death penalty for long enough, you'll end up like this too. I'm actually the only person I know whose avatar got fattened up to this point, but it's not like I did it *just* to see what would happen."

Okay, yes, I'll keep that in mind, I thought. *This is another person whose mistakes I can learn from, just like Teach.*

"And even though it might sound like it contradicts the advice I just gave you, when you're on this side, don't be afraid to enjoy food to your heart's content. Unlike in real life, overeating and overdrinking won't affect your health at all, and even if you do die anyway, you'll just come back from the death penalty exactly as you were before."

That was an interesting way to think about it...

"Oh, and in *Dendro*, you can also have as many lovers as you want."

"...what?"

"No matter how many people talk behind your back about it on this side, it doesn't mean anything in real life. And there's many more beauties here than over in the real world. I have lots of lovers myself. Isara here is my favorite, though."

"Heh heh...and I wonder how many of the others you've said that to, hmm?"

Ohh, so that's the situation with these two. I get it.

“Ugh, how vulgar.”

“Cyco! Don’t just *say* that!” The way she just pointed straight at him as she insulted him shocked even me.

Yet, again, he didn’t seem bothered whatsoever.

“Indeed. I *am* vulgar. I basically play *Dendro* just to eat lots of incredible food and spend my nights with beautiful ladies. I don’t see it as anything to be ashamed of. I have the money for it, after all.”

He claimed to be vulgar—essentially *boasting* about it—and didn’t seem to feel any guilt or shame over it. It felt as if he was completely true to his job’s name.

After all, he was King of Revelry, Moneygold.

Just like Teach, he was a Superior who belonged to Sefirot.

She’d told me that he was “the man who’d created the most wealth” and that he was a person of debauchery and vulgarity—but on that second point, he was even worse than I’d heard.

“And if the RMT ban didn’t exist, I’d be better off in reality too...”

Sounds like he’s got the exact opposite problem of Sonya’s.

After saying that, he once again resumed eating as if to distract himself from something.

“Hungry, hungry, lewd fatty,” said Cyco.

“Indeed! Speaking of which, are you interested in being my lover as well? My starting offer is 10 million per month.”

“Hey! That’s my Embryo you’re talking to! Don’t make proposals like that!” *He dropped that bomb like it’s nothing! Even Cyco is so shocked she’s practically frozen solid!* “And why her, anyway?! Are you into little girls or something?!”

“A beauty is a beauty. Age is irrelevant. In fact, I believe that even species doesn’t matter. Legendarians and even some nonhumanoids aren’t off-limits for me.”

How is he so open about his sexual proclivities?! “Are you *sure* you’re not one

of Legendaria's Superiors?!"

"Don't joke like that. That'd make me a colleague ofLS Ergo Sum. I'd never want to be grouped with that degenerate."

My threshold for "Legendarian perverts" just keeps going higher, I thought. *Also, I'm pretty sure Teach said pretty much the same thing as him.*

"Wait, are you and Teach like that too?" I asked. She'd said that she was into both men and women, after all...

"Huh?" But despite what I expected, Moneygold made a *very* disgusted face. "Even *I* have some standards. Just imagining sleeping with that dumb slut sends a chill down my spine..."

Oh. I see how it is, I thought. When talking about Moneygold, Teach had told me that he was "a piece of work," and now I knew why—these two were just too similar to get along. At least when it came to sexuality, they were basically the same type of people.

"Oh, and unlike her, I have no interest in homosexual encounters, so I won't be offering a lover's contract to you."

"I wasn't planning on asking!" Actually, I really couldn't tell if he was worse or better than her. As he continued to weird me out with every new sentence that came out of his mouth, we finished our food and moved on to enjoying some post-meal tea. Cyco had also recovered from her shock and was now drinking a drink that looked like lassi.

"Anyway, let's get down to business. There's actually two matters I'd like to discuss," said Moneygold.

"Two?"

"First is the part-time job AR-I-CA told you about, while the second is just a trade offer. Let's start with the job. What I want you to do is protect me."

"Protect?" A *Superior* was asking for my protection? "Do you actually need that?" I asked.

"I do. I may be part of Sefirot, but when it comes to combat, I'm one of the weaker ones—just like that dumb slut, in fact." One of the weaker ones in

Sefirot—and similar to Teach? “My stats are especially low. I can’t keep up with people moving at the speed of sound, so someone with that capability would kill me right away. That’s why I have Isara, a combat SJ, as my bodyguard and lover.”

“Heh heh. Exactly,” Isara said with a smile and a nod.

This made sense. For a noncombat-focused Superior like Moneygold, the best bodyguard was a tian like her, since unlike us Masters, they were around all the time.

“But that seems like even more reason you don’t need me...” I said.

“We’ll be dealing with one of the Orbs here.”

“Ah!” I instantly knew that he was referring to one of the Orbs that had UBMs sealed within them. When one of them had been broken recently, it had released a giant monster in the middle of Cortana...

“Someone obtained the Orb by chance, and this ship is where we will negotiate a transfer to us. Now...it’s not clear how relevant she was, but Murder Princess Emily Killingston was involved in the Cortana incident, wasn’t she?”

“Yes...” The immortal Superior, Murder Princess Emily—the girl who had killed an unthinkable amount of people, though I didn’t know why. Just remembering her made my heart feel heavy, and I couldn’t help but wonder what her reasons were.

“Are you okay?”

“...Yes.” I suppose thinking about Emily had made me look so down that Moneygold had gotten concerned.

If you ignored his vulgarity and debauchery, he was probably a decent person after all.

“Then I will continue. The presence of the Orb here makes it possible that the Murder Princess or someone associated will show up here too. I heard that she is immortal, and it’s clear that not even my Isara can overcome such absurd odds. My matchup with her isn’t exactly good either.”

Murder Princess Emily could come back from the dead over and over, and she grew stronger every time she committed murder.

Logically speaking, there really was no way to win against her. But if anyone had a chance, it would be...

“Absurd as she is, though, there is one Master who *does* have a good matchup against her—you.”

“So...you’re hiring me in case she shows up?” Cyco could unconditionally freeze targets based on their kill count of their own kind, while White Rose had Boucliers Planetes, which would prevent Emily from committing suicide—both of which were a direct counter to her abilities.

“Exactly. Will you do it?” Moneygold asked.

I hesitated for a moment. I wasn’t sure if it was really a good idea to fight against Emily. But if she started a rampage on this ship like she had in Cortana, *someone* would have to stop her. And if I was the only one who could do it...

“I will.”

“It’s settled then. Thank you. I’ll prepare a reward that I’m sure will satisfy you.”

“Thank you. So, what was the other thing? A trade offer, right?”

“Yes,” Moneygold said before taking a sip of his tea and looking right at me. “Once you’ve done your job here, would you be interested in selling your White Rose to me for 10 billion lir?”

“No.” The trade suggestion came suddenly and out of nowhere, but my response was even faster. I was pretty sure it was reflexive at this point—faster than my actual thoughts—and that I would’ve said the same even if his offer had been a hundred times bigger.

He was already offering more than White Rose had cost to produce, but it wasn’t a matter of money. The Magingear had been Fran’s birthday present to me. I could never, ever sell it to someone else.

“Didn’t even have to think on that one, eh? All right, I’ll give up on that.”

“...Huh?” I knew that I was the one who’d refused, but it surprised me how

quickly he backed down.

“Are you surprised that I gave up so easily?”

“Well...yes.”

“I have principles—one of them being that I seek out anything I can get with enough money, but give up on things I can’t. I may make a bigger offer if I think it will work, but that’s not the case here, right? And I would never, ever try to take anything by force.”

He really was kinda like Teach. She also made a lot of propositions, but if they clearly weren’t interested, she never got aggressive about it.

“I’m satisfied with just things that I can actually buy. It’s also the reason I’m in Sefirot.”

“Hm?”

“So AR-I-CA never told you this, did she?” Having no idea what he was talking about, I nodded. “We Sefirot are a clan of Superiors gathered by demand of the Caldinan congress. Even those of us who were unaffiliated with any country before are now under this country’s management. We have to do personalized quests like this one, so we lose some freedom, but in exchange we are granted certain privileges.”

I did know that Sefirot was created by Caldina’s decree, but the fact that they’d gotten anything out of the deal in return was news to me.

“In my case, I got the right to participate in rare auctions and exclusive markets available only to certain merchants...though, I do limit my spending there. Overbuying causes problems and makes a lot of enemies. I want to be a buyer that the sellers can appreciate.”

“Is that what Teach got too?”

“I wouldn’t know—that’s no concern of mine. Prying into the perks the other members got would only cause trouble. I’m only revealing mine because I’m satisfied with it, and also because it’s relatively tame.”

Teach always seemed like such a free spirit. What could she have wanted that was worth joining Sefirot?

“Anyway, that’s it for business. Your period of employment starts tomorrow, when we’ll do the Orb trade, and ends when we make it to the final stop at Drac-Nomad.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yes. That’s when the party we’ll negotiate with will get on the ship. That means today is basically a day off for you, but if you can, use it to get a grasp of the ship’s structure.”

Moneygold then handed me a comms device.

“If anything happens, use that to contact me. You can judge whether or not something’s an emergency. Oh, and tell me if you have to log out to eat or bathe or anything else that takes a while.”

“Okay.”

“All right. I’ll be counting on you.” Moneygold then left me the key to our cabin and walked out of the restaurant. From what I could see, he paid for everything the both of us had eaten.

“That fatty’s lewd *and* lavish, it seems.”

“Yeah. He’s, well...quite the character.”

He also wasn’t shaken by Cyco’s insults, so it seemed like he was pretty big-hearted too.

“His heart’s not the only thing that’s big.”

It felt like Cyco was even more harsh with him than she was with Fran. Was she bothered by his offer to become his lover? No, she’d been acting that way before he’d said that.

“Anyway, we have work to do until we make it to Drac-Nomad. Let’s do a good job.” “Oui, ma’am.” Someone could come after the Orb. We had to be on high alert.

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Eltram

The day Hugo boarded the Eltram, it made a stop at a particular city after it

got dark. There, it picked up some new passengers and resumed its voyage.

On the deck, a group of three people who had just boarded were engaged in a conversation.

“We...actually made it on here, leader.”

“Yeah. We were clear even by the standards of a luxury liner. Looks like Caldina doesn’t even have us on their secret wanted lists... I guess that’s because they didn’t see our faces even when they defeated us.”

“That means we can do our thing without worryin’ about nothin’! Caldina really is the best! There’s so much money here! Oh...this actually kinda reminds me of when we went to Granvaloa and our ship broke and we all drowned. Hope *that* never happens again.”

It was a trio of one man and two women. They were all Masters, as indicated by the Embryo crests on the backs of their left hands.

One woman was a spectacled beauty with a stern expression, while the other was a girl whose scarred face gave her the look of a true bandit.

And finally, the man they called “leader” was a youth with fiery red hair. He was wearing a crimson jacket lined with fur that looked like a lion’s mane. While the red of his hair was a natural color, his jacket looked as though it had been painted in blood.

“Let’s find out how this thing’s built, then find what we’re here for. Neeala, Fey.”

“Yes.”

“Roger thaaat!”

The man then faced the two...

“This is where we’ll start rebuilding Goblin Street.”

...and spoke his will as King of Burglary, Eldridge.

Chapter II: The Luxury Liner and Its Troublesome Passengers

About Goblin Street

Goblin Street had once been an Altarian PK clan that was infamous even by the standards of PK clans. Unlike other well-known PK groups like Mad Castle or K&R, Goblin Street had not hesitated to rob tian merchants as well.

Of course, this had gotten them on the wanted list, but the clan had been composed of high-level Masters and boasted King of Burglary, Eldridge as its leader. His great power as a single unit was evident, but he also excelled at analysis and was a skilled tactician.

Because of that, Goblin Street had been a PK clan that many knew and feared.

However, it had since suffered through five failures that had reduced the clan into the dirt.

First had been the counterattack to the blockade at Altea they'd put up alongside other PK clans. While Eldridge was away, they were attacked by a Superior, Lei-Lei the Prodigal of Feasts, who destroyed the clan for the first time. However, it hadn't been a fatal blow to the group. Though many members who didn't have save points in other countries were lost to the gaol, about half of them were spared. On top of that, it wasn't as though Lei-Lei had defeated Eldridge—the strongest among them. Eldridge was a match for Superiors, and his clan still believed that he could win against them.

That belief had died with their second defeat, which came soon after they'd moved operations to the border between Caldina and Altar.

The members of Goblin Street had spotted a group that possessed a mobile save point carriage—an immense luxury only a few in Altar.could boast This treasure had both practical and monetary value that they simply couldn't ignore.

Because of this, Eldridge and the rest of Goblin Street had tried to attack

them, but luck hadn't been on their side. As it turned out, the group was accompanied by one of Huang He's Superiors—Xunyu. Her ultimate was a sure-kill skill that had torn out Eldridge's heart and quickly given him the death penalty.

The other members had not stood a chance after that, and Goblin Street was destroyed for the second time.

This was when people began to leave the clan of their own accord.

After that, their third destruction came when they simply happened to be too close to The Earth, Fatoum, as he was making his way back home to Caldina. The Superior had sunk them along with an entire mountain—a luxurious burial, no doubt.

This defeat had led to people quitting the clan en masse even if they hadn't been sent to the gaol. Whether they'd lost faith in Eldridge or simply noticed that their luck had run dry was uncertain, but there were still a few who stayed.

The next time was when they acquired a ship and tried their hand at piracy in Granvaloa.

However, right after they started, they stumbled upon another Superior, Great Admiral Antimicrobic Soy Sauce. The man nicknamed "The Human Bomb" had used his explosive powers to deliver Goblin Street's fourth destruction. With that, the clan had lost almost all of its members, leaving only Eldridge himself, Neeala, and Fey.

Then, they got their hands on another ship and tried to ply their trade in a part of the South Sea close to Tenchi—an area where Granvaloa had comparatively little influence. However, by some accident—which was starting to look like an inevitability—they encountered The Slash, Saki Muryo-Taisu, as she was rafting to the continent. This meeting ended quickly, with the Tenchi *Superior* splitting them in two along with their ship.

This was their fifth destruction.

All of these defeats came at the hands of Superiors, which made this entire sequence of events quite unusual.

Regardless, it had left Goblin Street absolutely destitute. Not only had they

lost their ships and dropped items upon each death—were also forced to buy replacements for what they lost and repairs for the items they kept. By the fifth defeat, they had almost completely run out of funds.

Without money to buy a new ship, they had no choice but travel by land to Caldina and spend some time making money through normal quests and monster hunts.

Odd as it might have been at this point, they suffered no absurd Superior encounters while doing this.

This had caused Neeala to put on a contemplative face and speak of “karma” and “retributive justice,” something she called an “eastern proverb.” Of course, this wasn’t really a “proverb” at all, but a concept originating in Buddhism.

Eldridge had spent those days lost in negative thoughts. He’d been killed in an instant so many times now that he was questioning if he was worth anything at all. Up until now, he’d been able to analyze the strengths of his enemies and figure out a good way to counter them. However, Superiors kept killing him so fast he had no time to cook up any kind of plan. His self-worth had dropped so low that he began to believe that he was only strong by pre-Superior standards, and that he had no chance against the Superiors themselves.

He’d also started to feel bad for the two women that continued to stick with him even after all these failures.

They stay with me cause they believe Goblin Street can make a comeback, but what if I don’t actually have the power to make that happen? He wondered. *Maybe the best thing to do here is to follow that armor-clad Barbaroy’s example and just end the clan?*

In reality, the reason Neeala and Fey continued to stick with Eldridge despite his recent failures had nothing to do with the clan—it was because of entirely different feelings. They would stay with him even if the clan stopped all its burgling activities entirely, but he had no way of knowing that.

Blind to their thoughts about him, Eldridge continued to worry about his *Dendro* future.

“Maybe I should talk to them about disbanding the clan? They’d probably be

better off somewhere else. With a leader that's not as pathetic..."

If he'd actually said that directly to them, the two might have revealed the actual reason they stayed around, and their relationships may have changed. Coincidentally, this was right about the time when their old country of Altar held the Love-Duel Festival.

Before he could actually convey any of that, though, something intriguing had reached his ears.

It was information that something of high value would be brought to the sand liner known as Eltram.

Eldridge had his doubts about the veracity of the rumor, but he also couldn't deny that the implications if it *was* true were tempting.

Since this particular item wpi;d certainly be worth a great amount of money, claiming it and selling it off would help revitalize the clan and finally let him make up with the two girls who had put up with him for so long.

With that thought in mind, Eldridge entered the ship, ready to take its treasure.

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The first night since they boarded had passed, and the three were now at a relatively cheap café here on the ship.

Last night, they'd split up and gathered information, but they had yet to find out where they'd find what they were looking for. Then again, it was possible that it just hadn't yet been loaded onto the ship.

Or maybe the info I got was false? Eldridge thought. If that was true, then there was no chance Goblin Street would make a comeback here. They'd have to return to doing simple guild quests again, and Eldridge feared that that would finally make the girls lose patience with him.

"Leader, I'm sure it will work out."

"...Thanks, Neeala." Her encouraging words genuinely made him feel a bit better.

"This place is so big, though... It's like a real luxury cruise ship," said Fey.

“It’s so luxurious that even the third class tickets cost us most of our savings,” said Eldridge. “This café is the cheapest here, but even that is so expensive I’m not sure we’ll have enough for all three of our daily meals.”

Their awful financial situation made the three of them sigh heavily.

“That’s exactly why we gotta get what we came here for, though. There’s still two more days left until we arrive at the final stop—Drac-Nomad. Everything will be fine as long as we find it before that...hm?”

Eldridge suddenly looked off in another direction.

“Leader?” Saying nothing, Eldridge signed to them to be quiet and crept closer to the pillar next to his seat, keeping his eyes fixed on one particular point.

There, he saw a Master who had a pretty face and a round, corpulent body.

That face, build, and crest... That’s Sefirot’s Moneygold. Eldridge was a man who gathered info about known Superiors and rankers so he could come up with ways to counter them. He’d obviously heard of Moneygold.

Why is he here? Is he after the same thing as us? No, I doubt it. But whether his goals were the same or not didn’t matter. What did matter was the fact that there was a Superior on this ship.

We go back to burglar stuff for the first time in forever and immediately, this happens... Maybe karma really does exist.

Overcome by a bad feeling and sensing an oncoming headache, Eldridge let out a deep sigh.

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Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

It was the second day since we boarded *Eltram*—the day Moneygold would negotiate for the Orb.

Currently, we were having a conversation over a late breakfast.

“By the way, do we actually know anything about the Orb itself?” I asked. Since they’d already discussed a possible purchase, it seemed likely they’d been informed about the particulars.

And as I expected, Moneygold replied with a nod.

“We do. Apparently, it’s sealing a UBM that turns nonhumanoids into humanoids—monsters into tians, basically. And they say that the resulting tian is always beautiful.”

“That’s a very...specific effect.”

“The previous owner of the Orb was a slave dealer who allegedly sold monsters he’d turned into humanoids. I guess turning common Little Goblins into attractive men and women must make for some incredible profit margins.”

“The previous owner...? So you’re negotiating with someone who *isn’t* that previous owner, then?” I asked. Moneygold nodded again, his chin wrinkling as he did so.

“Turns out that the transformation is temporary, and the humans turn back into monsters in about three days. Of course, that made the buyers very upset, which put the other slave dealers in hot water. And so, as punishment for messing with the market, the other dealers sent a hit man after the scammer, and that was that.”

“That’s...wow.”

“It also could’ve been a disgruntled buyer who sent the hit man, though. If a beauty turned into a goblin while we were doing the deed, I’d be mad too. That would be *traumatizing*.”

How am I supposed to comment on that? I thought.

“Anyway, the one who offered me—or rather, offered the Caldinan congress—the task of taking the Orb from him is someone who actually worked for the late scammer. In the chaos after his boss’s death, he grabbed the Orb and skipped town. Problem is, he didn’t know what to do with the thing, and it could make him a target, so he wants to sell it as soon as possible.”

“I see.” It seemed like this person had the right idea—the thing at Cortana made it obvious that the Orbs could cause some serious trouble.

“What will you do with it after you buy it?” I asked.

“Bring it to the congress. That’s my job here,” Moneygold replied. “Huang He would be pissed if we beat the monster inside it and turned it into an MVP reward, so we gotta be careful. I really don’t think they should act so big when they’re the idiots who let the damn things get stolen and spread all over in the first place, though.”

Looking somewhat irritated, Moneygold took out a cigar, and Isara, who was standing next to him just like last time, cut the tip using her *fingers* and lit it up with a lighter. The cut part of the cigar was completely smooth, so I could only assume that was because of a job or skill she had.

“It’s such a pain,” he went on. “Cortana’s change of mayor and rebuilding efforts and whatever else caused their auctions to shut down for the foreseeable future, so this Orb business affects me too, damn it...”

Moneygold took a long draw of the cigar and let it out with a sigh.

Caldina had had nothing to do with the Orb theft in Huang He, so you could say the country was just an unfortunate victim. Cortana was a major trade center, and now thanks to the mayor’s death and the giant hole in the city, it couldn’t fulfill that function anymore. That clearly made Moneygold upset.

“The congress is still negotiating with Huang He. If it goes well, maybe we’ll get to do whatever we want with the Orbs.”

“But there’s no demand for that lewd Orb, is there?” Cyco asked.

I’m pretty sure the human transformation Orb can be used for other things, I thought.

“On the contrary—the demand for lewdness will exist as long as humanity does. If we were allowed to break it, I’d want it for myself,” said Moneygold.

“I thought this yesterday too, but...aren’t you just a *bit* too open about stuff like that?!”

“Perverted, fat freak,” Cyco said.

“What I’m worried about is that AR-I-CA would probably want it too,” Moneygold added.

“You’re not wrong!” I said.

“So many perverts...” Cyco said. “I hope you all die.”

The power to create lots of beautiful men and women? I thought. *Teach would be all over that! And if they both want it...what if we get another Clash of the Superiors over something this stupid?!*

“Well, moving on,” Moneygold said. “If Caldina gets permission to break the Orbs, we’ll be able to make up for the losses they caused us. That’s why I hope our prez comes out on top in the negotiations.”

“I really don’t think a bunch of MVP rewards can make up for the casualties...” In the end, MVP rewards were just equipment and materials usable by only one person. A few of these couldn’t possibly be enough to cancel out the damage suffered by Caldina’s largest trade center being put in such a dire state.

“Oh no—they *will* pay for themselves and then some. We’ll eventually acquire lots of new trade routes thanks to them.”

“Hm?” *Trade routes? Did one of the Orbs have a power that makes it easier to travel on the desert?* I wondered.

“Anyway, I have a question too,” he said, as if he was trying to change the topic and bring the conversation closer to the job at hand. “Did you memorize *Eltram*’s structure?”“Yes,” I said. “I spent yesterday walking around everywhere that’s not off-limits and got a good idea of what’s where.”

“Well done.”

“It made me wonder, though...how many people are powering this ship, anyway?” *Dendro* was a world with magic and, specifically, magic power—

usually known as MP. MP was a colorless type of energy that could be transformed into heat, electricity, wind, and many other kinds of energy, which meant that technological advancements were also generally powered by magic. Caldina's sand-ships, Granvaloa's powered vessels, Dryfe's Magingears—everything like that required MP to run. Some larger ships were equipped with charged MP tanks, but if not that, the source of their energy was generally *people*.

And the more massive the thing was, the more MP it required to stay operational, so with *Eltram* being as big as it was, I couldn't even imagine how much magic power it was draining.

"Zero," said Moneygold. "This ship is powered by a restored core from the pre-ancient civilization."

"Huh? They actually found a core?" That was really rare. I knew that the pre-ancient civilization had advanced technology that enabled them to build cores that produced magic power by themselves, but I hadn't seen one since Ray's Zephyrus Silver. Even that had been a small one, though. I definitely had never seen one large enough to move a ship this big.

"I didn't even know they could be restored," I said.

"There's engineers that specialize in that," said Moneygold. "The specialist who restored this ship's core is particularly famous, though. If I remember right, the name is...Crys Fragment."

"You mean people like that actually *do* exist?" I suppose Dryfe wasn't the only country with skilled engineers.

"This person is mysterious and pretty damn weird, though. Crys has a knack for restoring all kinds of pre-ancient civ items and selling them to people right when they need it the most. For example, the large ship core installed here was sold to the biggest transportation company in Caldina. It's high quality and barely needs any maintenance. Crys even went the extra mile and threw in a blueprint with ideas on how to improve the ship itself."

Moneygold then took a break in favor of another smoke from his cigar.

"There were always plans to build gigantic sand-ships that would transport

both passengers and cargo, but they were always scrapped because no one could solve their energy problems," Moneygold went on. "Even I was surprised that someone restored and brought in a core that fixed it right away... Crys *really* should've sold it to me, though."

His expression as he said that was the same as it was when he'd offered to buy White Rose from me.

Talking about this energy core made me think, though. If I had something like that—a smaller version, least—wouldn't it solve White Rose's energy problem? Fran had made the robot for me, but because of its heavy Mythical alloy armor and focus on defensive skills, its biggest flaw was that I didn't have enough MP to keep it running for long.

"You look like you'd like one too," said Moneygold. "Be careful, though. The name 'Crys Fragment' is so famous that Caldina's full of scammers using it to sell garbage."

"I'll keep that in mind." I didn't have Truth Discernment, after all.

This reminded me that Fran and the others in the Triangle of Wisdom had actually told me that they'd worked with a pre-ancient civilization energy core once.

Before the civil war, the army recognized the clan's achievement with Marshal II and its mass production. They came to the Triangle of Wisdom with a well-preserved core that they had stored and requested that they create the strongest ever Magingear. They also provided limitless funding, letting the members go all out on their design...to which they responded by going *too far* and overloading the robot with gear and functions.

While my White Rose and Teach's Blue Opera were experimental units Fran herself had built with Marshal II as a base, that robot was the result of the concentrated efforts of everyone in the Triangle of Wisdom—a *golden unit* I'd only seen in photos from that time. Unlike Marshal IIs, which were designed with mass production in mind, that Magingear was a one-of-a-kind *super robot*.

Unfortunately, it had disappeared somewhere during the mess of the civil war, and both Fran and the other members said that it felt like a big loss.

Actually...I wonder where it is right now.

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The ship arrived and stopped at the next city and the other party came aboard, just like Moneygold had told me.

“So what you want in exchange for this is Drac-Nomad citizenship and 10 million lir so you can start a business, right?”

“Yes...that is all I want.”

Moneygold was negotiating with a man who was accompanied by a small child—the man’s daughter.

For a moment after I first saw them, I thought that they might’ve been Emily and that man who was always with her, just disguised as father and daughter like they had been back when I’d encountered them earlier. However, Moneygold had used some item he had to confirm that they were definitely the right people.

The negotiations were already approaching their end.

“It’s a deal, then,” said Moneygold. “We’ll also cover your living expenses here on the ship. We have a cabin for you too. You’ll get business funds and a place to live when you sign this and bring it over to a government office in Drac-Nomad.”

Moneygold then took out a coin pouch, a key, and a Contract and gave it to the man.

“You thought of everything...thank you so much,” said the man.

“I should be thanking *you*. I’m glad this went so smoothly.”

The two exchanged a handshake, concluding the trade.

“That’s one thing dealt with,” Moneygold said. The only ones here now were Moneygold, myself, and Cyco—Isara was leading the man and his daughter to their second-class cabin in a different part of the ship.

Moneygold was holding the Orb he’d just bought in one hand, using his other to smoke a cigar.

“You look like you’ve got a question,” he said, looking at me.

“Yes,” I said. “It’s about...the price you paid for that Orb.”

“The ability to open a business in Drac-Nomad, 10 million lir in funds to get started, and a place to live sounds pretty good, but I know what you’re thinking. You think I could’ve gotten more for it, right?”

“...Yes.”

“Well, here’s your answer. The Orb *is* worth way more than that, and I could’ve paid ten, if not a hundred times more. There’s really no limit to how much I can spend, and if he’d been planning to raise the price sky-high, I was ready to respond in kind.”

Moneygold took out a wallet like inventory and turned it upside-down, letting the contents spill out on the table. The whole surface was covered by a pile of coins—some of them so valuable that almost nobody used them. I couldn’t even guess how much money there was in that mound, but a single glance was enough to know that all this was worth many billions of lir.

“But that didn’t happen, did it?” Moneygold said. “And since negotiating a price raise on something I’m buying would be stupid, our deal ended exactly as you observed.”

“Why didn’t that man try to raise the price?” Cyco asked.

“There’s people in this world who don’t have it in them to be vulgar,” said Moneygold, breathing out a cloud of smoke.

“People who can’t be vulgar? Do you mean people who are *humble*?”

“This isn’t about humility...I’m talking about those folk who can’t let their greed take the wheel even when they’re faced with the opportunity of a lifetime. The ones who can be charitably described as careful, and uncharitably as cowards.”

His words made it seem like he was making fun of the man for his inability to be greedy, but his tone and expression showed a different feeling.

“But that’s a kind of virtue,” Moneygold went on. “Overall, you’ll be happier if you’re like that.”

“Hm?” Cyco looked at him with a look of confusion on her face, which made Moneygold chuckle a little before he began explaining what he meant.

“Your threshold for happiness goes up as you experience more luxury. More delicious, more fun, more pleasurable, more wonderful... There’s no limit to human desires, but satisfying them comes with a price. This is especially obvious with desires you satisfy by paying for them. The amount of money you have to shell out just keeps on growing.” The man who claimed to be satisfied with just things that he could buy took one ultra high-value coin in hand. “A person becomes rich, gets a taste of luxury, and their desires spin out of control. Then they reach for luxury beyond their means and are brought down to ruin. That’s a common story, isn’t it?” he said, now looking at me rather than Cyco—and I wasn’t sure why.

“It is,” I said.

“And that’s why I try to satisfy my desires *here*. In reality, I just came back from delivering newspapers.”

I couldn’t even begin to imagine this embodiment of vulgarity and luxury as a simple paperboy. The idea left me speechless.

“Over here, I’m the definition of excess. My desires are always out of control—I’ve completely cut the brakes on them. When you consider that, the guy we just dealt with was much more of a proper human being than me, simply because he still has working brakes he could step on to stop himself,” Moneygold said, looking somewhat amused.

If it was true that he was only rich here and his real self was actually living in poverty, those might’ve been his honest thoughts.

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There was something else that Moneygold’s words reminded me of.

It was my...I mean, Yuri Gautier’s father.

He also satisfied his wishes with wealth, as well as someone whose desires had no brakes on them. He’d amassed great wealth in his own generation, took an actress—my mother—as his wife, and lived an extravagant private life. He’d used more money than he had to, always boasted about it to others, and was

satisfied in being like that.

A vulgar nouveau riche—that was how most onlookers saw him. In fact, even mother had described him to me that way.

She'd hated him enough to tell her own daughter that her father was a bad person.

But contrary to those words, father had always been very nice to me. And I'd been told that after Fran disappeared and mother and I ran away, he'd actually changed the way he lived his life. I didn't know if that was because of loneliness or something else. We'd stayed in touch after mother and I had run away, but we'd never talked about that.

I could remember how his voice sounded whenever we talked by phone, and it always seemed kinda happy. I also liked him and I liked talking to him, so I always looked forward to seeing him again.

But the last time I'd ever heard hear his voice was some time before last year's Christmas.

That was because he...

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"This isn't really related, but there's something that bothers me about the guy himself. The one we just traded with, I mean," said Moneygold, bringing my attention back from the past to the present. He sounded more serious than he had when he'd been talked about his desires or himself.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "It's the fact that he even managed make it here. The power and presence of the Orb, and the desires and grudges surrounding them are no joke, but he—along with his daughter, might I add—were able to outrun it all and get to this ship in one piece. That confuses me. You know that, right now, both Caldina and its dark underbelly are really sensitive to anything related to those Orbs, right?"

The people of Caldina already knew that the horrible event at Cortana was caused by an Orb that had leaked into the country from Huang He, and that there were several other Orbs throughout the world. Teach had told me that people were already selling fakes that were made using modified Jewels.

“So you think there’s something suspicious about those two?” I asked.

“They themselves are fine. I can vouch for that. But...” Moneygold looked outside—toward the town growing distant behind us. “...Someone might’ve protected and led them here in secret.”

◆◆◆

Eltram, Stern, Deck

At the same time as Moneygold was voicing his concerns, a man was looking at the flowing scenery with a comms device against his ear.

He had an appearance that didn’t stand out from the crowd here on the luxury liner, but upon closer inspection one would notice that his right arm, hidden by a long sleeve, was completely covered in bandages without even an inch of skin showing.

“Rascal, it seems that the negotiations went through without a problem,” he—Great Soul Daoshi, Zhang Zangqi—said to the party on the other end of the comms line.

“I see. So you got them there just fine.”

“Yes.” The person on the other side was The Weapon, Rascal the Bloodonyx.

The one who’d secretly protected the merchant and his daughter until they’d made it to this ship was none other than Zhang—a supporting member of IF. This was the job he’d been given after he was done with his task in Cortana.

“You stay there and keep on gatherin’ data,” said Rascal, over the comm.

“Very well.” From this point, Zhang’s task was the same as it had been in Cortana—the Orb would create conflicts, and he was to gather info about the combat abilities of those who gathered, as well as any other valuable data.

“Odds are that our activities as IF will increase in the near future. I’d like to complete our list of unavoidable threats and possible allies while there’s still time to do so,” Rascal said.

“I am aware.” Zhang knew that well, as he himself was one of the people IF had picked up through a conflict caused by an Orb.

“Also, Machina and I are going there too.”

“You’re going yourself...?!” Zhang was keeping his voice down for the call, but he still couldn’t hide his shock. Rascal had entrusted Zhang with everything in Cortana and the protection of the Orb as it made its way to the ship, and yet he would still be showing up here in person—the significance was obvious.

“Why...?” he asked.

“Because there’s somethin’ there that’s gonna cause trouble for us later if we don’t completely destroy or retrieve it.”

“Why not leave that to me?”

“You’d have no choice *but* to destroy it. I wanna retrieve it if I can. It’s precious,” said Rascal.

“Huhh?” said another voice on Rascal’s end of the line. “But I could probably make it too. It’s probably just a Pure-Dragon-type.”

“You’re the one who said that it’d be ‘stupidly expensive.’ And this is right after you made *three* of the so-called ‘cheaper’ Demi-Dragon-type versions. Do you have any idea how bad of a headache I got once I saw the recipe? You used up several types of rare mats you can only get in Ruins.”

“OWOWOWOW! STOP GRINDING YOUR FIST ON MY HEAD! THAT’S STRONG ENOUGH TO KILL A SMALL CHILD, YOU KNOW! Oh, wait, maybe don’t sto-OWOWOWOW...!”

“And then you went and said ‘Oh. Just two would’ve been better for the unit’s balance. We didn’t need the third. Whoopsies!’ Seriously? Are you screwin’ with me?”

“NHHEEAAAAHH...!”

Zhang was conflicted, for he truly did not know whether to intervene in the ridiculous-sounding exchange on the other side of the comms unit.

“Anyway,” Rascal continued. “I’m going there, and that’s final. I’ll take care of some minor business first...and I should be there by tomorrow, early dawn, since it’d be a pain to get there when it’s too close to Drac-Nomad.”

“This vessel is set to arrive there tomorrow at noon.”

“If I get there at dawn, their reinforcements won’t make it. Everyone who can cover large distances fast had already been sent out. The only ones left are King of Toys, Grandmaster; The Fight, RAN; and their leader.”

“Sent out?” Rascal’s words made Zhang confused.

Drac-Nomad was the seat of the Caldinan congress, the country’s most important city, and Sefirot’s headquarters. How could it be that there were only three of them left?

“As you already know, King of Revelry, Moneygold is on that ship with you.”

“Yes, I’m aware.” Since he’d been in charge of protecting the man and his daughter during the negotation, he obviously knew who they were negotiating with.

“Then there’s the three who were sent to the west. King of Termination, Albert Schwartzkaiser; God Hand, Yumeji Iryo; and God Hunter, Carl Lourlou. They ran into some Legendarians on the way there, though”

Zhang was wondering how Rascal knew such details, but he quickly figured that IF probably had supporters like him all over Caldina.

“And The Earth, Fatoum; The Cannon, Eve Selene; and The Ace, AR-I-CA are all at Vennsayle the Lake City to the south.”

“Why are they there...?”

“Preparing for war. It’s not like they’ll activate the War Boundary, though.”

Most of Caldina’s combat power was focused in its Masters, and there were many clans of all sizes there. Because of that, unless Caldina was given a longer time to prepare than other countries, a sudden War Boundary activation would kick out an unusually high number of Masters. Even if it didn’t affect the country’s combat potential, it was worth avoiding its use for economic reasons.

“War? With who...? Wait, you said ‘south’...” Zhang was briefly befuddled by the sudden outpouring of information, but he soon came upon the answer.

“Yeah. When it learned about the Orbs, Granvaloa landed on Caldina’s shores. They actually sent all of the Seven Great Embryos of Granvaloa who can actually do shit on land.”

Those words shocked Zhang, since they meant that Granvaloa sent *four* of their Superiors.

“They’re negotiatin’ right now, but there’s no way it won’t fail. The south’s gonna be a hellscape dominated by wide-scale extermination specialists.”

That mental image made Zhang break out in a cold sweat—everyone involved in this conflict was extremely fearsome.

AR-I-CA rode a flying Magingear and used a Superior Embryo that granted foresight. Eve Selene had the Superior Embryo with the greatest combat range currently known. And then there was the man with unmatched magic power—the one the entire world knew as the “Magical Apex,” Fatoum.

All of them were known and feared in and out of Caldina. However, Granvaloa’s forces weren’t any weaker.

Miroslava Swampman had a Superior Embryo that was a gigantic amphibious superweapon. Scala Edwards rode a Superior Embryo that could break the sound barrier several times over, and

Maude Edwards fired a Superior Embryo with absolute homing ability.

And then there was the man who could turn any liquid into explosives, making entire patches of ocean vanish. Known as the “Human Bomb” or the “Apex of the Four Seas,” he was a man who’d defeated an SUBM—Antimicrobic Soy Sauce.

Zhang had lots of combat experience, but even he couldn’t imagine how the battle would unfold. The only thing he knew for sure was that the resulting storm of devastation would be something beyond human comprehension.

“Wouldn’t it be better for me to go there instead?” he asked regardless. The destruction that would surely hit the south wasn’t bad enough to convince him to abandon his duties. If it was his role to gather combat data, then Vennsayle would be the best place for that after the negotiations failed.

Needless to say, however, there was almost no chance that even Zhang could survive an area being ravaged by Superior wide-scale exterminators.

“You need to value your life more,” Rascal said. “Like I said before, if you feel

like you're in danger of dying, you're free to abandon your mission. I obviously wouldn't send you into an environment like that—the odds of your survival aren't ones I'd gamble on. I'll leave the south to some Ideas. They can be replaced."

"...Thank you," Zhang said, appreciating Rascal's consideration for his safety.

"Don't mention it. Also, that ship you're on may be attacked by a group of tians. They're probably after the same thing I am. I want you to intercept them if it comes to that."

"Understood."

"Then again, if that happens, Emily might take to action before you do... Speakin' of, is she wearin' the accessory I sent her?"

Rascal was referring to a piece of equipment that one of their go-betweens had delivered to them.

"Yes."

"It's an item Machina made as a counter to the kinda thing that happened in Cortana."

Zhang made a bitter face at those words. Back then, he had been rendered powerless—completely unable to help Emily in her time of need. That had made him even more determined to make sure something like that never happened again.

"Don't worry. Emily has only two weak points, and that accessory takes care of one of them."

Emily had almost no actual weaknesses to speak of. When it came to pure combat prowess, she was no match for the "Apex" Superiors, but she had a limitless ability to revive. Even the Apices would have a hard time killing her until she ran out of lives.

Because of this, there were only two ways to defeat her.

First was long-term binding, like what had been done to her in Cortana. If forced into a situation where she couldn't move or log out, she would have no choice but to forcibly log herself out using the Suicide function.

However, the accessory that Emily had been given completely nullified this weakness.

The other means of defeating her was achievable by so few people it was hard to call it a weakness in the first place.

“I’ll take to action as soon as I arrive tomorrow at dawn. Until then, keep an eye on Emily and try to keep her from going on a rampage.”

And so, the call ended.

A moment later, Zhang felt something pulling on his sleeve.

“Zhang. Are you done?”

It was Emily. From what he could tell, she’d been waiting for him to finish talking.

Looking somewhat drowsy and a bit gloomy, she was holding on to Zhang’s sleeve.

Emily was a wanted criminal, but nobody here on the rear deck was wary of her, for she was wearing an accessory created by Machina that made her look like someone else. They’d also entered the ship by means other than the main gate, so no one had given them a thorough check-up.

“Yes. Rascal said that he’s coming here tomorrow too. Let’s wait for him in the cabin.”

“Okay...I’m sleepy, so I’ll take a nap...”

The two then went to the cabin Rascal had prepared for them ahead of time.

And anyone who looked at them walk off saw nothing but a father and his child.

Interlude: The Test and the Mechanical Dragon

Caldina

The second-in-command of Dryfe's Legitimate Government, Lieutenant Colonel Berlin, was currently leading his men on an operation.

This particular excursion was the most common kind of DLG missions—one to secure supplies. The organization had acquired information pertaining to a ship smuggling Magingears and related parts, so they set out to attack it.

Operations like this were not an uncommon occurrence for the DLG. The weapons they used were damaged and sometimes destroyed upon use, so in order to compensate for that, the DLG was forced to acquire any materials leaking out of Dryfe that they could. At first, they'd used the funds they'd brought with them to buy materials, but after Caldina had stopped food exports to Dryfe and invaded it during the war, the DLG had begun seeing that country as a hostile force whose wealth should be plundered rather than purchased.

Thus, this operation really should have been routine.

"What...?"

However, what was currently happening was anything *but* routine.

"What *is* that...?"

It had turned out that the ship they'd assaulted was a trap. There was no cargo, and the crew on it had transformed into bizarre creatures that recent rumors had dubbed "Ideas."These monsters had quickly started to overwhelm the infantry that was supposed to take over the ship.

The Magingear pilots outside the ship were under attack, as well—but not by the Ideas inside.

"What is that?!" At first, Lieutenant Colonel Berlin thought that he was looking at a high-speed sand-ship crewed by either Caldina's guards or a group of Masters.

However, it immediately became clear that it wasn't a ship at all.

It looked like a dragon, but while its silhouette had a long neck and tail like a skydragon, it lacked wings. That would have made some guess it was a landdragon, but that wasn't the case either.

It had a body made of metal, as well as a single sensor-eye. The sunlight falling upon its crimson and white armor revealed a striped pattern all over it.

And finally, its open maw contained not a tongue, but a cannon.

This was no dragon, but a machine that merely looked like one.

The crimson-white machine dragon was *sliding* on the surface of the sand at speeds approaching sonic. And without pausing in its sliding—or maybe *hovering*—its headlike cannon fired at the unit next to Berlin.

"Ah...?!" Over the comms, Berlin heard the brief final gasp of a subordinate who'd been fighting with him since they were in Dryfe. The cannon had torn through the Magingear's heavy armor like it was paper.

The units used by this squad were the Marshal II DC model, where "DC" stood for "Desert Custom." Optimized for desert environments, they were dust-proof, airtight, air-conditioned, and equipped with the ability to hover. For better or worse, the original Marshall II lacked the attention to detail that characterized many player-made designs, and these DC units were a direct attempt to correct that. Their mobility in desert environments not only surpassed many weapons of their type, but also most AGI-focused high-rank jobs as well.

"Lieutenant Colonel! Lieutenant Colonel Berlin! AHH—!"

But now, these units couldn't even run away fast enough. The dragon's cannonfire mercilessly shredded the Magingears' cockpits, scattering the destroyed remains of both robot and pilot across the desert sand.

The DLG's pilots hovered in a zig-zag pattern in an attempt to avoid the dragon's assault, but the precision and the speed of their enemy's projectiles was just too great. On the other hand, their own attacks were all sidestepped by the mechanical dragon. It moved as though it could perfectly track every shot.

Before long, the dragon had destroyed five of the ten units under Berlin's command—all while the lizardlike Ideas were busy exterminating the infantry on the ship. The losses suffered by the DLG were already dire.

Is that a Prism Dragon?! Who's it affiliated with...?! Did Dryfe send hunters after us?! But...! Berlin's thoughts raced as he tried to make sense of the situation. The creature they were fighting reminded him of something he knew about from history—Prism Dragons.

Believed to be pre-ancient civilization technology, the Prism Dragons were among the greatest weapons of their time. Everyone who was familiar with ancient history, including Berlin, knew what they were.

However, this mechdragon didn't match the descriptions of Prism Dragons he'd found in historical texts.

For one, it was far smaller—only slightly bigger than their own Magingears—and it had no wings to speak of. It also didn't quite possess the fearsome extermination ability the old writings had emphasized.

And most importantly, the name shown by Identification wasn't found in any historical records.

Regardless, the dragon still outclassed the Marshal II DCs they piloted.

"Retreat! I'll bring up the rear!" Berlin ordered, moving out in front of his men.

His unit was a Marshal II HC, where "HC" stood for "Heavy Custom." Equipped with tough armor and immense firepower, it was a unit that would quickly drain the MP of any ordinary pilot.

However, Lieutenant Colonel Berlin was anything but ordinary. Tians were often limited to certain jobs and had level caps far lower than 500, but he was among the talented few who could reach level 500 solely with jobs related to piloting. He was a battle-hardened fighter who'd fought alongside Dryfe's strongest pilot more times than he could count.

"Come on, you foul beast!" he roared, brandishing an axe that was nearly as big as a Magingear by itself. This weapon was called Heatsplitter, Meltdown, and it was an MVP reward from a UBM he had felled.

When faced with this threat, the mechdragon fired its cannon, as though testing its opponent.

However, Berlin saw the projectile's trajectory and cleaved it out of the air with his axe. "TOO SLOW!" he shouted.

This feat of strength greatly bolstered his men's flagging morale. They let out a cheer...

"Wow, you're better than I thought."

...which was accompanied by praise from an unfamiliar woman's voice.

The sound shocked Berlin and put him even more on edge. The voice was coming through a speaker—and its source was the mechdragon.

"Hmph...it was lookin' like this shit...was gonna be just target practice... But it looks like...they got someone good enough for an actual test," said a different—male—voice.

"Master, why do you sound like you're in pain?"

"...'Cause the way you're pilotin' this damn thing...is crushin' my damn lungs..."

"Wait—you're barely breathing!"

The conversation coming from the mechdragon sounded like a joke. Berlin had no idea why they were letting it run through the speakers.

"Anyway, the rest are only good for testing out our weapons," said the man's voice. "Do it."

"Roger that! Rush Missiles!"

Following that command, sixteen missile silos appeared on the back of the mechdragon. Released one by one, the missles soared upwards until they reached a certain altitude, where they changed trajectory and descended at supersonic speeds.

They hurtled straight toward the retreating Magingears and infantry sand-boats—Lieutenant Colonel Berlin's subordinates—and immediately incinerated every single one of them.

“They all hit!” said the woman’s voice.

“Hold it. I’m pretty sure those were loaded with armor-piercing warheads, so where did the incendiary rounds come from?”

“Huh? I replaced them to make them more deadly.”

“You realize they just turned the loot into burning garbage, right?”

“...Oh.”

“You’re getting penalized later.”

“OH NOOO!”

This exchange between the man and the woman’s voices over the speaker seemed as lighthearted as the last, but Berlin—the last one left alive to listen—was in no state to see it that way.

His subordinates—DLG’s limited forces—had been reduced to ash in but an instant. He didn’t know anything about the enemy or their motivations, and yet they were about to take everything from him.

There was only one thing he could do now—and that was ask the question that consumed his mind. “Who...who are you?! Why did you attack us?!”“Our goal here’s to test this unit.” One of the people inside the dragon answered as though it were nothing.

“To...test...?”

“There aren’t many places here in Caldina where you can fight Magingears. That’s why we chose to practice on you guys—the DLG.”

Caldina was vast, but it contained surprisingly few groups that chose to use Magingears. DLG was more or less the only one, and that was apparently reason enough to target them.

“You’ve probably realized it by now, but we’re also the ones who sent out word about that ship. We made sure you’d catch wind of it, in fact.” The man inside the mechdragon casually admitted to being behind the trap they’d fallen into.

Ideas disguised as the cargo ship’s crew. A mechanical dragon that attacked

right after they came here.

It all connected in Berlin's mind now. Everything so far had been planned from the very beginning, and its sole purpose was to provide a test for that unit—and falling into that trap had cost Berlin nearly everything he had.

Berlin groaned in despair. "You...you don't..." The defeat in the civil war. The escape from their homeland. The hardships they'd suffered in this foreign land. The constant stream of terrible news from Dryfe. The hope that the DLG would make their comeback soon. The subordinates who had fallen so far from home.

All of that flashed through Berlin's thoughts in an instant...

"YOU DON'T DESERVE TO STAND BETWEEN US AND OUR GLORIOUS GOOOOAAAALLL!"

...before he spurred his unit into a suicidal charge toward this bitter enemy.

Hovering at full power, Berlin raised his axe high. The attack he readied had enough firepower to rival the ultimate skill of a high-rank job focused on fire magic, backed by the strength and weight of his custom heavy Magingear. It was enough to split open even the thick shell of the defense-specialized landdragons.

Faced with this deadly attack, the pilots of the mechdragon looked at the enemy unit through a monitor and...

"Machina. Final test."

"Aye aye, sir! Starting *melee mode* teeest!"

A moment later, sounds of clashing metal rang out in the desert, and the unit armed with a giant axe fell on the sand.

The axe, Heatsplitter, was then retrieved by a control AI and vanished.

There was no better proof that the pilot of that Magingear had died.

◆

After destroying Lieutenant Colonel Berlin's group, the two people within the cockpit had a conversation.

"Master! We just fought Magingears! Tell me your thoughts!" said the one-

eyed girl dressed like a maid—Machina—as she swung around her bare, obviously mechanical left arm.

The person she was talking to—Rascal—was a man in a gray suit and a hat that could have belonged to a gangster. He let out a sigh before answering.



“Using vernier thrusters is fine and all, but it takes a toll on the crew. My avatar’s not as tough as Emily’s or Sechs’s. You gotta be more careful.”

“I made sure to use shock-absorbing seats, though. I guess this baby may be a bit too heavy—or maybe it’s the weight of my love!”

“That so? Then drop the love by at least ninety percent.”

“That’s so mean! Wait, so you’re okay with the remaining ten percent?”

“I got a question, actually. Is it responsive to piloting?”

“Very! It doesn’t buckle even when I’m in control!”

Generally, machines in *Infinite Dendrogram* were controlled by the semi-sense skill known as Piloting. It improved the piloted machine’s stats and provided the pilot’s mind and limbs with awareness of the actions and movements needed to control that machine. Because of this, even Masters who were very ordinary people in real life could control these exotic weapons without a problem.

However, there were also people who could pilot machines without any skills—sometimes with inhuman proficiency far greater than Piloting could provide—and Machina was among them.

“It’s also got two of the landdragon-type cores I made, so energy’s no problem.”

“I see. And? Assuming we’re the ones piloting it, how powerful do you think this thing would be?”

“About as powerful as a solo battle type Superior, I guess. Not counting the Apices, of course.”

“That’s good enough for some controllable firepower,” Rascal said with a nod before looking at one of the monitors.

There, he saw the mass-produced lizard Ideas—Lacerta Idea—preparing to leave the scene.

“I don’t see any problems. Let’s head to *Eltram* and secure their core.”

“Roger!”

And so, leaving this battlefield behind, they moved toward another—their stage.

Once they were gone, the remains of the DLG soldiers were swallowed by the foreign sands. The unforgiving environment would soon claim everything that was left of them.

The desert didn’t discriminate against people based on their ideals, achievements, or even their crimes—but whether that was good or bad remained an unanswered question.

Chapter 3: The Search and the Encounter

Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

Now that Moneygold had the orb, my job as a bodyguard had officially begun. I had to be on high alert until we made it to Drac-Nomad tomorrow at noon.

“Hugo,” Moneygold said. “Cyco can sense the Murder Princess, right?”

“Yeah,” Cyco herself answered. “I can sense that insane *lisper* right away.”

La Porte de l’Enfer was a skill that checked the target’s kill count for their own kind and applied Freeze to them. As an additional effect, Cyco could sense that kill count on anyone in her effective range.

Apparently, this sense of hers used to be more vague, but after she’d met Emily—the person with the highest kill count we’d encountered so far—it had sharpened considerably.

“It’s possible she got onto the ship from the town it just stopped at,” Moneygold said. “You should go on patrol again.”

“All right,” I said. “Will you be okay, though?”

“Looking out for him is *my* job,” Isara answered in Moneygold’s stead. “No need to worry.”

“Yeah. Isara’s pretty used to this,” Moneygold added. “Oh yeah, while I’m logged out, I’ll give the Orb and the comms device to her. When I’m not here, she’ll be giving the orders.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll go look around, then.”

“Bye,” said Cyco. “You fat lunatic.”

“Cyco...” Yet again she insulted him right to his face, but yet again Moneygold didn’t seem to care.

A bit later, Cyco and I were walking through an empty passageway. With just the two of us here, I felt like it was a good time to speak about what had been on my mind since yesterday.

“Cyco, I think you’re being too harsh on Moneygold. Sure, he’s a bit *too* honest, but he’s not actually a bad person—so be nicer, okay?”

In response to my words, Cyco made a slightly grumpy face and fell silent for a bit before replying.

“...It’s because that fatty is in *second place*.”

“Second place?”

“Second place,” she repeated. We were just echoing each other now. Looking irritated, Cyco continued. “My count for him is the *second highest* after Emily.” By that, she could only be referring to the kill count of their own kind.

Emily’s was by far the highest, and there was no doubt about that. But...Moneygold was the second?

“You mean, he’s above Teach, Gideon’s duel rankers...and even the King of Destruction?”

“Yeah.” Her answer made me realize that you couldn’t get a kill count that high by fighting just Masters or in duels. It also did a lot to explain why Cyco was being so mean to him.

“That fat is probably a *wide-scale extermination type*. And he used his power on humans many times.”

“He doesn’t seem like someone who’d treat people’s lives lightly. But...”

“Seeming like a bad guy and actually *being* a mass murderer are separate things. The guy with the annoying *succubus* said something similar.”

Does that get in the way of him starting a massacre? The words that had been said to me in Gideon came rushing back. At the time, I’d insisted that Fran understood tians were living beings, he’d said with total certainty that this understanding wouldn’t stop her.

Soon after that, Fran initiated the secret Plan C and tried to massacre the people of Gideon with a force of over fifty thousand monsters.

That was proof that even if I didn’t *see* her as a bad person, Fran was capable of committing tian genocide nonetheless.

Now that I think of it, Cyco is a lot meaner to her too.

"I bet that pig is exactly the same way—the type of person who won't hesitate to pull the trigger if it serves his goals."

Moneygold had said that he would never, ever try to take anything by force, and I didn't think that was a lie.

However, that didn't mean that he would never use force for anything.

"And I think that..." Cyco began a sentence, but couldn't finish it.

I immediately knew who she wanted to bring up. "You think Teach is the same?"

"Yeah. I'm pretty sure Sefirot is totally made up of people like that...actually, no. *This entire country* is like this."

A country of people who can eliminate others for the sake of their own goals—looking back on it, I'd found conflict surrounding the Orbs when I'd tracked them down in both Hermine and Cortana. And even though negotiations had been attempted every time, they'd always come with the expectation that they would most definitely fall apart.

"I'm not really fond of this country," Cyco said as she stared at the desert outside the ship. This made me think of all the times she'd complained about the weather here, but I knew this wasn't the same thing at all.

"It's a dog-eat-dog country. Its people's biggest enemies aren't monsters, but other people, and they're probably used to that. This is a country where people want too much."

Caldina was in the middle of the continent, and it attracted more wealth and goods than any other country. Many people moved here simply because they wanted something it had.

"But satisfying them comes with a price."

I remembered Moneygold's words, and by now I was pretty sure the "price" wasn't just referring to money.

"To me, it feels so...oppressive," Cyco said. Cyco's ability to sense people's kill count of their own kind was hers alone—the rest of us could never understand

how she felt. The people of Caldina might be hard for her to tolerate. And neither Moneygold and Teach were exceptions to that rule.

Maybe Cyco had been feeling this way ever since we'd come here to Caldina, and she'd kept it hidden even from me, expressing it with only a bit of foul language.

But now, she was revealing it all.

"But this sense and skill...they're the reasons why I was born as myself."

"Cyco..." The reason Cyco was Cyco... I already knew where she was going with this.

"Hugo...I was born with this power because..."

She stopped in front of me, then looked me directly in the eyes.

"...Because your father was *murdered*."

We were alone, so I was the only one who could hear her.

◇

My father died near the end of last year.

I learned of it while I was at school, shortly before I was supposed to come home for Christmas.

I'd always felt that my relationship with him was good even after he and mother divorced. He called me every year and invited me for a Christmas dinner with him. He covered the tuition and other expenses to let me go to Lorraine Girls' College, saying that it was his mother's—my grandmother's—dream. He sent me birthday presents every year, always worrying if I'd be happy with what he got me.

He was nice to me—and only me—from beginning to the end.

So, upon hearing that he'd died, I actually collapsed from the shock.

The most shocking thing of all, though, wasn't the fact that it had happened, but *how*.

The cause of his death was clearly murder. Someone had shot him dead in his own home—the very place I grew up in.

The culprit might've been a burglar, or maybe someone with a grudge against him. He'd made many enemies while building his business, so the latter wasn't out of the question. The case was never solved—in fact, the police were still searching for the murderer.

However, at the time, I just couldn't believe it.

I couldn't believe that someone who'd always been so nice to me had been *murdered*.

When the funeral ended and it was time to bury him, not many people remained. The only ones present were his legal team, and some people from his company.

And as far as family went, *I was the only one*.

My father's parents—my grandparents from his side—were no longer with us, and he was an only child. Mother said that she didn't feel like going, while Fran was still missing after running away from home.

Rain fell as I watched his casket descend into the ground.

After that, the legal team talked to me about the inheritance. Apparently, someone would buy his company, but the money from that and everything else he had would be split between me and Fran.

In France, if there was no will saying otherwise, all the inheritance went to the children. And since he probably hadn't expected to die, father hadn't prepared a will—so according to the law, his immense wealth would be split between us.

That was when he gave me his final present.

The real gift wasn't the wealth itself, but what came with it—a reunion with Fran. Because they had to distribute father's money, the legal team hired detectives and investigative firms in many countries to find her, and when they did, I got to meet her for the first time in years.

That was how we got in touch again, and she ended up inviting me here to Lorraine Girls' College. Even in death, father had helped me with my life.

And that was why I could never come to terms with the fact that he was murdered.

Mother managed it, and even though Fran looked a bit sad about it, she didn't seem very shocked.

But I just couldn't do it. I just couldn't accept what had happened.

Perhaps mother and Fran had many different—and more negative—feelings about him. But he'd been a nice, caring father to me until the very end.

I just couldn't tolerate the idea that someone had killed him.

That feeling festered within me ever since that day.

In my desire to see that culprit punished, a part of my heart became as cold as ice.

And out of that was born Cyco—the frozen hell of Cocytus.

◇

"I'm an Embryo born from your *anger*," Cyco said.

This was the first time she'd ever spoken openly about the reason for her creation, but I'd suspected this was the case from the moment I first met her.

But however Embryos come out, they're always based on their Masters.

That was what Fran told me while she was explaining category-based personality analysis to me.

A Master's personality, skills, desires, life, nature...or maybe even their traumas and psychological complexes. Embryos referenced all of these things in order to assume forms and powers that reflected their Masters.

That was why Ray's Nemesis possessed the power to avert any tragedy he saw before him.

That was why Fran's Pandemonium commanded limitless, unrestricted creation.

And that was why Cyco was born as an Embryo that punished murderers —*kinslayers*.

"And since I'm the one who made you like this, I'm part of the reason you're feeling so uncomfortable," I said.

“Yeah,” Cyco answered with a nod.

She didn’t hide anything or try to sugarcoat it—she stated flat out that I was the reason she was who she was. The part of me that couldn’t accept my father’s murder had turned her into a bringer of judgment.

This was the first time she ever expressed this discomfort, and I was the origin of everything.

“But that *doesn’t matter*,” she continued. “You don’t have to let it bother you.”

“Huh?”

“There’s something way more important than that,” she said, as if to disperse the clouds gathering on my heart, and puffed her chest.

“Something more important...? What do you mean?” I asked. However, before answering, Cyco folded her arms and took a moment to think about something—specifically, it seemed like she didn’t know whether she wanted to say something or not.

“No. Not now,” she eventually said.

“Cyco...”

“I *will* say it someday—and there’s something I wanna ask you too. But now isn’t the time, so you’ll have to wait for it. For now, just focus on what you have to do.”

She was looking right at me as she spoke. As always, her face was expressionless, but I could see a strong will reflected in her eyes. I got the feeling that whatever she wanted to say, it was something she would never compromise on, and that’s why she wanted to wait for another time...

“All right.” And that was also why I chose not to push it.

“But I can’t just ignore how uncomfortable you feel right now,” I added. “If you really can’t handle it, I want you to return to the crest and rest.”

“Mhm.” Cyco nodded before touching my chest with her fist. I couldn’t tell whether it was her way of saying “I’m fine,” or “I’ll keep that in mind.” For all I knew, it could’ve been both.

Regardless, I would do as she said and focus on what I had to.

My role here was to reduce casualties in the event that Emily attacked the ship looking for the Orb—to prevent what had happened in Cortana from happening here.

And so, we resumed walking toward the part of the ship where the passenger cabins were.

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Eltram, Commercial Area

The luxury sand liner had many shops and other establishments in it, and there were many that offered the same kinds of wares and services as others. This was because there were several classes of passengers aboard. Those in first and second classes were generally far wealthier than the ones in third, and the establishments targeting a specific class provided quality and prizes different from those in other classes.

They might have been on the same ship, but they lived in totally different worlds.

Most passengers knew that well, so they stayed away from shops and services that didn't cater to their own class.

"Ohh..." That was why the scar-faced girl looking into a high-class boutique stood out like a sore thumb.

The girl—Goblin Street's Fey—stared at the expensive clothes with wistful eyes before checking the Inventory she used as a wallet and sadly shaking her head.

"What are you doing?"

"Oh. Niala."

Addressing Fey was a fellow Goblin Street member, Niala.

"Do you have any idea how badly you stand out? What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be looking for the thing our leader mentioned?" Niala went on.

"But that dress is so pretty...and there's gonna be a ball this evening," Fey

said with a sad sigh. “It’d be so romantic to wear that and dance with him...”

“I have three reasons why you should give up on that,” Niala said, holding up three fingers. “First, while first and second-class passengers have access to the ball covered by their initial fee, we third-class passengers need to buy tickets separately, and we don’t have the money for that.”

“Noooo...”

“Second, we *also* don’t have the money for the dress. I can’t even lend you enough to buy it.”

“Ngh...”

“And third, we don’t have the time. We still haven’t found what we’re looking for.”

“Guh...” While Fey griped and groaned, Niala continued to speak.

“There’s an Eastern idiom that goes something like ‘no leisure for the poor.’”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s a bit like the English ‘no rest for the wicked.’ We don’t have the wealth or the time to go to that party.”

“That’s so painful...” Unable to counter anything Niala said, Fey’s shoulders slumped as she succumbed to despair.

A moment later, her stomach growled.

“I *can* treat you to some lunch, though.”

“Thanks! You’re the best friend and rival I could ask for!”

“Whatever you say.”

By “rival,” Fey meant their role in the competition for Eldridge’s affection.

“Okay, so let’s have lunch at the open-air restaurant with the best food on the shi—”

“Don’t get carried away. We’re eating at the café terrace for third-class passengers,” Niala said, lightly tapping Fey’s head before she began walking. Fey rubbed her head and followed after her.

Once they arrived, Fey wasted no time stuffing a sandwich into her face. “Mghmgh...thish makesh me feel sho alive...” she said with a peaceful expression.

“Don’t talk while eating. It’s bad manners,” said Niala, politely eating a salad with a fork.

“Hrmm...I’m having a harder and harder time using my brain... I feel like I’m gonna starve and get the death penalty soon...” Fey whined. Niala thought that was definitely an exaggeration, but she also understood that their financial situation wasn’t anything to laugh about.

“There might be more Masters with financial problems than we realize,” she said. “Even in real life, I have a stu—an *acquaintance* who said something like that.”

“We can’t even buy food...and we used to eat so good before! The last time we had a feast was...oh yeah, when we got some delicacies from the port during the Altea blockade,” Fey said, sounding nostalgic.

Those delicacies they’d stolen were actually what had drawn Lei-Lei’s ire and ultimately destroyed their clan, but they didn’t know that.

“That is true,” said Niala.

“Huh? What’s wrong...? Ah! Don’t tell me you don’t even have enough to pay for this food we’re eating!”

“I do. I’m just a bit sad that our leader seems to consider himself responsible for this desperate situation we’re in.”

“Ohh...” Fey nodded in understanding. “Yeah, that guilty face he makes sometimes does make me feel down.”

“I understand.”

“And *down bad*.”

“That’s just you,” Niala smacked Fey’s head again before she sighed and said, “It’s true that we’re going through a rough patch right now, but it’s not good that our leader seems to blame himself for all of it. We’ve just had some unlucky encounters recently—it wasn’t like there was ever a problem with our

leader himself. Despite that, he thinks it's all his fault and feels terrible about it."

"Didn't you say something about it being karma?"

"That was just a figure of speech. It wasn't directed at him. Anyway, what we need to do now is to get this job done so he can regain his confidence," said Niala.

"Yeah!" Fey said with a nod. "And then I'll use the momentum to shoot my shot and we'll have ourselves a *Dendro* marriage!"

"I have no intention of letting you have him, but is that a real thing? A *Dendro* marriage, I mean."

"I'm sure it exists. There's probably someone out there who's done it!"

"I don't think it's common enough to be its own thing." This conversation was happening at the exact same time as the Love-Duel Festival in Altar, which had once culminated in two particular people becoming a coupole, but that was another story.

"Anyway, if we want to help our leader, we need to hurry up and find the targets," Niala went on.

"Maybe they're not on the ship yet?"

"That's possible, but we're arriving at Drac-Nomad tomorrow at noon. I don't think they'd cause an incident right at the doorstep of Caldina's congress."

"Since we're so close and they haven't done anything yet, maybe they already gave up? If that's the situation, we should give up too and just enjoy the cruise... I really wanna go to the ball."

"I'm telling you we—"

"Beautiful bambina and signorina! What's this I hear about wanting to go to the ball?" Suddenly, their conversation was broken by an unfamiliar—and awfully energetic—man's voice.

Overcome with shock, the two looked toward the source—Niala with wariness of how much he'd overheard, and Fey with pure surprise.

They were met with a sight that left them at a loss for words.

“Eugh...” A sound escaped Fey’s lips, and who could blame her? The man was wearing a shirt that barely covered his chest and his face was slathered in makeup—he looked like a real pick-up artist that had decided he wanted to really embody the visual kei style. People like him were a rare sight in *Dendro*.

“Perhaps little ol’ me can help?! I happen to have a few spare tickets!” he wheedled, tickets in hand, and it was soon clear that this situation was just as outrageous as his appearance. “What do you say, bambinas? Would you accompany me to the ball—as my dates?”

He said those words with a wink, but the two women had no taste for Italian visual kei playboys. They were both into a weird combination of an intellectual and a bad boy—specifically, they were both into Eldridge.

“No, thank you.”

“Not a chance. We’re already interested in someone.”

And so, they bluntly refused.

“Oh, what a shame! I envy whoever has stolen your hearts!” The man gave an exaggerated shrug, but he didn’t seem too shocked—perhaps he was used to rejection. “I see now that my very offer was terribly rude. Allow me to make it up to you with these tickets—as a gift. Ha ha ha! No need to thank me! Ohh, and there are dresses you can rent, so why not give that a try?” he said as he placed the tickets on the table.

“Oh, we really shouldn’t—”

“YAY! Tickets!”

Niala tried to refuse, but before she could, Fey gladly took the tickets.

“Ah ha ha! Well then, ciao!” the playboy said before pompously blowing the two of them a kiss and leaving the café terrace.

Left with no way of giving the tickets back, the two could only watch him leave.

“We got the tickets...! That guy sure was weird, though.”

“Fey, Take a moment to think. There’s an Eastern idiom that goes ‘nothing is more expensive than what is free.’ These tickets could lead to something bad down the road.”

“But it makes things so much easier for us. Now we just have to rent dresses and we’ll get to go to the ball!”

Niala sighed, realizing nothing she said would matter. The Eastern idiom “reading the sutras into a horse’s ear” came to her mind, but she didn’t say it.

Still, she couldn’t deny that they’d received a windfall here—a “bean mochi from the shelf,” as another idiom went.

Honestly, I also think the idea of going to a ball with our leader is pretty appealing, she thought. *And it looks like we could actually have enough for the dresses if we rented them...*

On the inside, Niala shared Fey’s desire—she’d only kept her cool because she’d put effort into doing so.

“Anyway, let’s tell the leader about this,” she said. “We’ll go to the ball if he says it’s okay... How many tickets are there, by the way?”

If there were only two, there would be no avoiding a catfight over which one of them would accompany him.

“Three,” said Fey.

“That’s perfect, then,” said Niala. “Wait, *three*?”

That number seemed strange to her.

She could understand if there were two, since Niala and Fey were the only ones here. She could also understand if there were four tickets, since the man might have given them tickets for each of their crushes.

But there being three tickets made it feel like *he knew that they both had a crush on the same person*.

“Maybe it’s his own ticket? These tickets could’ve been the only ones he had.”

“But if he went to pick up more girls after this, wouldn’t he want to keep at

least one?”

Or perhaps the number was just a coincidence?

Regardless, there was another thing that bothered Niala.

“That man also seemed kinda familiar...” she said.

“Huh? I don’t think you could ever forget a weirdo like that.”

“No, I just feel like I’ve seen his face somewhere... Also, for a passenger on this ship, his clothes seemed kinda...*cheap*.”

His gear was weak and certainly not made from high quality materials. The design was decent, but ultimately, he was wearing just a shirt and a pair of jeans—the kind of clothes you could buy in bulk.

It definitely didn’t suit the kind of person who would carry around multiple tickets to a high-class ball.

“You definitely have a better thief’s instinct than me...and I *am* a thief.”

“You could just say that I have a keen eye. Anyway, that’s another thing we need to bring up with our leader.”

Niala trusted Eldridge a great deal, so she assumed he would know something.

“All right! Let’s go pick out a dress to rent!”

“...Again, we need the leader’s permission first.”

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Eltram, Interior

While the two women were having their unserious exchange in the café...

What the hell’s going on here?

...Eldridge himself was sitting on an empty staircase near the cargo area, hanging his head and whining to himself about the current circumstances. *How am I this unlucky...?*

All of this was because of the people he’d spotted while taking a look around the ship.

It's not just Moneygold. There's also Fullmetal Princess, Isara—one of the best in her field in Caldina. Hugo Lesseps, who's rumored to have stopped the Murder Princess herself. And to top it all off...there's another Superior.

It was this gathering of big names that had caused Eldridge to lose hope. Once, this would not have affected his confidence whatsoever, but now that he'd lost so many times and had been left with only a tiny fraction of his original clan, this situation was an unbearable burden.

Why? Why are all these tough guys on this ship? Did I miss some important info about all this?

That assumption was correct, but Eldridge had no means of knowing what, exactly, he had missed. Regardless, the instincts he'd honed in his multiple brushes with disasters and his natural analytical ability told him loud and clear that this place was dangerous.

Things were looking so bad that Eldridge was starting to think it might be a good idea not to steal anything at all and just disembark at the next stop.

"It'd be real easy if I could do that," Eldridge mused. If they weren't successful here, though, it'd be over for good. His clan didn't even boast enough people to fill a party now, and this was most likely his last chance to fix its financial situation.

Despite that, he hadn't even *seen* his target yet.

If we don't finish this job...

Eldridge was bracing himself to tell the girls that he would disband the clan, if it came to that.

"...Hm?" Suddenly, Eldridge felt something strange and shifted his gaze toward a specific direction.

It was the large door he could see from here—the entrance to the cargo area.

The cargo area was a giant safe, and its inside was full of Inventories—their combined content no doubt bigger than the ship itself could physically hold. Many passenger ships in *Infinite Dendrogram* simultaneously served as cargo ships.

Focused, Eldridge looked at the cargo area's door.

He felt something strange behind it. The thick door made him a bit uncertain about it, but he could have sworn something else was looking around the area.

Eldridge readied his skills as King of Burglary on both of his hands, wary of whatever it was and ready to fight if need be.

A minute passed, and by that point the strange presence had completely vanished.

Was I just imagining it? Or was there actually an intruder in the cargo area?

It went without saying that *Eltram*'s cargo bay was filled to the brim with expensive materials and goods. If someone was planning to steal something from this ship, that would be the first place they'd go.

However, Eldridge wasn't planning on taking anything from the cargo area. You couldn't put Inventories into Inventories, so if he tried to take any cargo, he would either be forced to pick certain items to store in his own Inventories, or just run out with the Inventories in their entirety. He wouldn't have time for the former because of the number of powerful people he knew to be gathered here, and he didn't have enough allies to accomplish the latter.

And even if he did steal something and managed to flee the ship, he'd be stranded in the middle of the desert.

Things would've been different if he had a ship of his own, but Eldridge no longer had the money for that.

"I'm not suited for it, anyway." Unlike the thief grouping, which focused on stealing through stealth, the burglar grouping that Eldridge belonged to specialized in just taking things directly. If he tried something, he'd probably trigger the alarm right away.

His clan member Fey was a high-rank thief job, but she also didn't have proficiency to not trigger the alarm.

I guess Zeta...King of Thieves could do it, he thought. *That reminds me of the national treasures. Weren't they stolen by King of Thieves, actually?*

It was said Huang He's national treasures—some Orbs holding sealed UBMs—

had been stolen and spread across Caldina, where they were now causing trouble. It was rumored that King of Thieves was behind the crime—and as it happened, those rumors were true.

The Orbs, huh? Not interested. They seem hard to handle, so they probably wouldn't solve our money problem.

Eldridge figured that if they got an Orb and brought it before the Caldinan congress for a trade, they—as Masters and criminals in Altar—would just end up having it taken away from them by Sefirot. Maybe someone on the black market would buy the Orb, but he didn't know anyone who would deal in something so dangerous. He'd only recently come to Caldina and hadn't had enough time to establish himself here.

Not like I'll ever see any of those Orbs anyway, he thought. *This ship sure as hell wouldn't have one, that's for sure.*

Not even stopping to consider the possibility that this assessment was entirely wrong, Eldridge got up from the stairs and left. By then, he'd already more or less forgotten about the strange presence he'd felt from the cargo area, dismissing it as something not worth thinking about.

He then went to meet his clan members at their rendezvous point, where Fey—and even Niala—pleaded for his permission to attend the ball. Uncertain if this job would go well and feeling terrible about all the trouble he'd caused them so far, Eldridge agreed, wanting to give them at least a little hope.

That made Fey jump with happiness and rendered Niala unable to hide her joy, which filled Eldridge with relief and made him think, *They wanted to go that badly? I'm glad I agreed to it, then.*

And he remained as clueless as ever about the true reason for their joy.

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Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

We walked around the section with all the passenger cabins, but Cyco couldn't find Emily anywhere. Had we been worrying for no reason? Was Emily not even on this ship? Or...

"Is she offline?" I wondered. If that was the case, it would be impossible for us to find her at all. And if she stayed offline right up until the moment she did something terrible, there was no way we'd be able to counter her in time.

I thought that we could also try to find Emily by looking for someone she was traveling with, but that proved to be difficult as well.

According to Cyco, she could easily sense and locate extreme outliers like Emily, Caldina had no shortage of people with kill counts so high they could qualify as mass murderers.

But that was the problem—Cyco didn't know if they actually *were* mass murderers. She couldn't differentiate between tian-killers, player-killers, player-killer-killers, and regular duelists. That was exactly why Fran's plan had placed her against Gideon's Masters.

"The fact that she can't tell them apart won't make this any easier..." Cyco had actually sensed a big number on a Master wearing a crimson jacket with a lion motif, but again, we didn't have any knowledge to guess how he'd actually gotten that kill count.

Only Emily herself had a number big enough to be conclusive evidence that we'd found her. Without that, the only thing we could really do was investigate everyone we found suspicious.

"I don't think I'd be good at that." That seemed like a job for a detective...and that thought made me remember the boy who'd seen right through me, which just made me kinda upset.

"What now?" Cyco asked.

"Let's end the search for the time being," I said. "We'll resume when we stop at the next city."

There was one last stop on the route to Drac-Nomad. If Emily and whoever she was with were planning to get on this ship, that would be their last chance.

Maybe I should talk to Moneygold first, I thought.

“Umm, may I have a moment?” Someone called out to me just as I was thinking through all of that.

My attention instantly shifted to whoever it was—and I jumped in surprise when I saw who had spoken.

“Ohh! Please don’t be afraid!” said the person—a petite woman wearing a hood, probably to hide from the sun. Below the hood, wrapped just above her eyes, there was a piece of cloth covered in complicated patterns. It reminded me of some 19th century native costumes from central Asia that we’d seen in Miss Nina’s class.

More importantly, though, she had gloves on her hands, so I couldn’t tell if she was a tian or a Master.

“I saw you walking and looking around, so I spoke to you because I thought you were searching for something...” she said. “Umm, I’m nobody suspicious, though! I’m not your enemy!”

So I’d caught her attention because I was poking around somewhere that was mostly empty of people. *I’ll have Cyco check her anyway, just in case.* I thought.

When I looked at Cyco, though, she said nothing and shook her head. That was her way of saying that this lady wasn’t “it.” She wasn’t Emily wearing a disguise, nor was she a murderer. Cyco even held up her fingers in a circle to indicate that the woman’s kill count for her own kind was zero—meaning everything was okay.

“Umm...?” the lady said, probably unsure what to make of our silence.

“Oh, sorry,” I said. “Thank you for being concerned. I was just looking for someone.”

“Oh, then you should go to the information booth at the mall. If you make a request, they’ll use the ship’s speaker system to tell whoever it is that you’re looking for them and where they should go to meet you.”

That sounded like a lost child announcement...I didn't realize this ship had a service like that. I'd be really surprised if Emily actually showed up in response, though, and it felt more likely that making an announcement would just attract other trouble.

"Thanks for the advice," I said.

"Oh, you're welcome," she replied with a smile on her face—but it didn't seem like she was planning to leave.

"Uhh, is there something else?" I asked.

"Sorry if I am mistaken, but are you Mr. Hugo Lesseps? The one who distinguished himself so much during the Cortana incident?"

My heart skipped a beat before I remembered that the Cortana thing had indeed given me a bit of a reputation.

"I wouldn't say I distinguished myself," I said. "I just slightly reduced the casualties, and I wasn't the one who ended the situation anyway. That was King of Tartarus, Benetnasch."

"Don't be so humble! Benetnasch may have prevented the Orb from causing disaster, but *you* were the one who stopped the Murder Princess's slaughter, weren't you?"

She sure knows a lot about it, I thought. Newspapers might've summarized the events, but you'd only know those kinds of details if you'd bought them from DIN or something.

"This is who I am, by the way!" the woman said, handing a business card to both me and Cyco. On it, there were the words "Freelance Journalist: Stal Tune." "These days, I'm following all the incidents happening here in Caldina, and since you were so deeply involved in the one at Cortana, I was wondering if I could get an interview!"

"I'm sorry, but I'm working right now. I don't have time for interviews."

Being a journalist explained why she was so well-informed, but I couldn't spare her the time when I had my bodyguarding job to do.

"Noooo! Umm...are you...*really* sure that...you can't?" Stal looked up at me

with teary eyes, and honestly, it made me feel kinda guilty.

"My lady," Cyco said to me telepathically. "We shall stop your tears. I promise that you will greet tomorrow's morning with a smile on your face."

Could you stop bringing up my old lines like that? I thought. *It's true that ignoring a lady's plea is against my code of honor and it's going to make it hard for me to sleep at night, but we have to keep looking around. It's our job!*

"Umm, if just an interview's no good, what would you say to an info exchange instead?" Stal asked.

"An info exchange?"

"Yes. You answer some questions in exchange for my latest information about the incidents surrounding the Orbs! It's all precious intel I haven't even published any articles about yet!"

Okay, I'm a bit interested now, I thought. That information could be useful for my job—and maybe even Teach's Orb search as well. But...

"What do you think I should do?" I asked Cyco.

"You're free to decide yourself," she instantly answered.

"Okay," I said. "We can do the info exchange."

"Thank you very much! Let's go to the mall, then—there's a café with private rooms there! Oh! Don't worry, I'll pay for everything! Go go go go!"

"Uh, wha—?!" Dragged along by Stal, who was all smiles, I found myself led to the ship's mall area.

After almost half an hour had passed since she'd dragged me to the café, I was exhausted.

"Thank you for the interview!" Stal said.

"...You're welcome." She'd spent the entire interview asking me this and that about the Cortana incident, and now it was finally over.

And while I was getting a sore throat from all the talking, Cyco had been enjoying one of those lassi-like drinks again the whole time.

"Anyway, thank you for your time," Stal said as she prepared to walk away.

“Hold on. I never got the info you offered me,” I countered, grabbing her hand. She’d almost gotten away with a free interview and I wasn’t gonna let her do that, especially after I’d practically lost my voice talking to her.

“Ngh...I thought just ignoring that part of the deal might have worked, but I guess it didn’t...” Stal said.

“So, what info *do* you have?”

“Nnghh...okay. I’ll talk.” she said before sitting back down. “Umm, you’re gathering Orbs, right?”

“I’m really just helping with that, but yeah.” She’d already known that Teach and I were gathering the Orbs, so when she asked to confirm, I could only nod—especially since she probably had Truth Discernment.

“In that case...this is the info for you,” she said, reaching into her Inventory and taking out a document folder. “Take it. It’s a copy, so you can keep it.”

The document in question was a map of Caldina with six locations marked on it. Two of those were Hermine and Cortana, and another was the city that the man Moneygold had negotiated with came from.

“These are...the locations of the other Orbs?” I’d been told that stolen Orbs numbered seven in total, and this showed the locations of all but one. This would be totally new information to Teach—and Sefirot as a whole too.

“Yes. These places have eyewitness accounts of Orbs creating strange phenomena.”

We’d already found the ones in Hermine and Cortana, and the one from that third city was currently on this ship. That left three more markings on the map.

“Which one of these marks the Orb that turns water into land?” I asked.

“I believe that would be this one,” Stal said. She pointed at one of the markers.

That was the Orb Teach had gotten through a trade with Benetnasch. Now I knew where that one came from, so that left just two.

“Wintersorb the Northernmost City, and Vennsayle the Laketop City...” These two locations were at the opposite sides of the country—one to the north,

other to the south. It was possible that the Orbs may have moved since this map was made, but I could confirm that three out of six of these markers were correct. That made it likely that the rest of them were too.

"The Orb locations... This is some really important info," I said. "Couldn't you have made a fortune if you sold this?" I felt like this map was worth way more than the interview I'd given.

"Oh, I'm not playing with *that* fire," Stal said.

"Fire?"

"Imagine if I sold this info to someone looking for the Orbs and it turned out that they weren't in those marked locations. I'm sure the Orb hunters would get revenge by stealing everything from me, flaying me, and harvesting my organs before killing me outright..."

Well, that made a certain kind of sense—this really was a dangerous game. Four of those Orbs had already left the cities marked on the map, so not selling it was most likely the right call.

"I actually got my information on these events by trading for it with other freelance journalists who were looking into it, and...one of them was found dead recently..." Stal continued.

"That's pretty scary," I said. But it all made sense now—I'd been wondering how she knew Orb locations that not even Sefirot had uncovered, but if this was the result of many people's hard work, I could definitely understand it.

"And that's why it's best used for info exchanges like this," Stal said. "Also, if I give this info to the people who really need it, that might move the situation a little and lead to some events I could write articles about."

I nodded in understanding and thought, *I guess it's not just DIN's Journalists who are like this*.

"So...are you satisfied with this?" Stal asked.

"Yes. Very," I said. "Can I ask one thing, though?"

"What is it?"

"Do you know anything about the Orbs' powers? There's nothing about them

in the document.” Even though they weren’t listed, when I asked about one of the Orbs by referring to its abilities, she instantly showed me its location. That meant that, even though their powers weren’t written down here, she *was* actually familiar with them.

“Very well. Consider this a bonus. The one in the north is said to be a healing Orb, while I think the one in the south has a power related to frost.”

“I see...thank you.” A healing Orb and a frost Orb. They seemed way more straightforward than the maggot Orb in Cortana or the human transformation Orb here. Well, at least the lightning Orb we got first was pretty standard.

“So that’s all the info you wanted in exchange...?” Stal asked.

“Yes. Thank you, Stal.”

“Don’t mention it. Oh, but I gave you a bonus this time, so do talk to me the next time we meet!”

She then stood up from her chair and left the café, taking the check as she did.

For someone who had been planning to walk away without giving me any of the information she’d promised, she did seem to have a bit of integrity.

“Okay, I guess we should go back to Moneygold and talk to him about this and our job,” I said. We had to tell him that we suspected Emily was staying offline right until the moment she planned to do something.

“What a stroke of luck, though,” said Cyco.

“Yeah. We got some good information just now. Though...”

For some reason, this brought to mind an incident from the past. Specifically, the time Fran gave Ray a potion spiked with an Animal Ear Drug and a PPS—the Peeping Spy Slime.

“No way, right?” I shook away the worry that Stal might’ve had some ulterior motives.

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Eltram, Deck

Come evening, *Eltram* stopped at the final city before it set course toward the end of its route at Drac-Nomad.

Though this journey on the sands would only last until noon tomorrow, there were still many people boarding the ship at this city. Many of them were simply heading toward the capital, while some were the eccentric, wealthy elite who were solely interested in the ball that was set to happen that night.

Thus began the final night of this luxury sand liner's maiden voyage.

The ball meant to celebrate it would be an extravagant event that would leave its participants with no shortage of stories to tell. That was why the first and second-class tickets that came with an invitation to it were awfully expensive, and the separate ball tickets available for the third-class passengers were a luxury few of them could afford.

"Hm-hm-hmm..." And despite that, there was someone who'd given no fewer than three of these tickets away for free—the man dressed head to toe in visual kei who'd approached Niala and Fey earlier in the day. Right now, he was humming a cheerful tune as he watched the evening sun sink into the desert.

There was no one nearby—which was unsurprising, for he was taking in this romantic view not from the deck full of people, but from the vessel's very topmost roof.

"A trip like this wouldn't be complete if *tu* don't bear witness to something like this and inscribe it upon your memory. The scenery in Dryfe wasn't exactly pleasing to the eye. Indeed, a desert sun deserves a lingering gaze far more than the sun setting over a dying land." The man spoke as he watched the evening sunset with spellbound eyes. "Would *tu* like to join me in watching this scene?" he said without even turning around.

He was no longer alone. There was someone else standing there—a person wearing a long, crystal-colored woven cape and a mechanical mask.

"Unnecessary. This unit has witnessed the Caldinan twilight hundreds of thousands of times."

The mask changed the person's voice to give it a mechanical flavor. Despite that, it could still be construed as feminine.

“*Tu* have sure lived a long time, haven’t *tu*?” said the man. “But there is not a day in the world which is not unique, wouldn’t you say? And whether *tu* witness each day’s passing alongside someone else is important as well!”

“Still unnecessary. The core of your relationship with this unit is transactional, not friendly.”

“How cold of *tu*, Crys Fragment,” said the man, addressing the person using the name of the elusive engineer said to be the greatest in Caldina.

“Do not use this unit’s name lightly. I may be using a deception barrier that prevents us from being noticed by hostiles, but all risks must be minimized,” she said, checking the barrier made through imitation of the Incarnation of Dreams.

“Ha ha ha. I am well aware. That is exactly why I *trust* that I can say it out loud!”

“Tch...” the face behind the mask—Crys Fragment—clicked her tongue.

“Oh come now, there’s no need to be upset. We’ve known each other for so long, after all”

“Two years is not long by any means.”

“It’s still about half of my entire playtime. It’s a long, looong time. The people I’ve been acquainted with longer than *tu* are few and far between. Oh, wait, I guess that’s *not exactly true*!” the man said, right before bursting into an inexplicable peal of laughter.

Seemingly irritated by his attitude, Crys said just one terse phrase.

“Progress report.”

“I gave the tickets *tu* gave me to a few Masters I thought would make things interesting. I have especially high hopes for the remnants of Goblin Street. Though their leader is among them, so I suppose they’re actually the main force now!”

“And the Superior?”

“Moneygold? That walking bag of cash will go to the ball with or without my help. It’s a premium event meant to celebrate the last night of a luxury liner’s

maiden voyage. Someone as vulgar as him will be there no matter what."

"And you?"

"Hmmm? Little old me? Of course I won't attend. I may be here to see the sights—and I do *want* to go—but an evening party is just not it. I'm a morning and daytime person. I get very sleepy when night falls."

In response, Crys said nothing.

"Well, I suppose *tu* are already aware of the real reason I'm refraining—*it isn't safe*," the man continued, raising his hands in resignation. "It is rather unfortunate, though. If only they'd scheduled it for noon. I would've gladly been there in that case!"

"You would not participate even if this unit requests that you do so?"

"Of course not. After all, our relationship *is* a shallow one. I am simply a spectator who goes here and there to see the sights, while *tu* are my sponsor. I tell *tu* of things I see and learn, and sometimes fulfill a simple request like the one *tu* gave me today. There is nothing more between us." The man smiled before adding, "And the information I gather is good enough to make up for it, isn't it? There is no one who can draw out an opponent's power and learn all about it quite as well as little old me. My Apex info is especially valuable, wouldn't you say?"

"...Rebuttal impossible." Her words didn't suggest it, but Crys's mechanical voice held a hint of discontent.

"There is also the next job to keep in mind, so I don't want to stand out too much before that comes. I don't know the details, but *tu* are hiding a few cards, aren't *tu*? Like the *soldier has-beens* or the *thing* hidden in the cargo area."

"You..."

"Of course I would notice! My stance is to enjoy things from *a safe distance*! Though for now, *tu* are the only one I share them with." Silence. "I'm not lying, am I? Unlike *tu*, little old me doesn't have that *handy little feature*, so I can't hide my lies. I don't think I've told a single lie since I got on this ship, actually. That's why, well...I might've actually gone to that ball if I got a date, even if it wouldn't have been safe—and thus would be against my principles," he said, his

own words making him grin wryly.

That was when the sun finished sinking into the sands.

“Anyway, looks like it’s time for me to log out. I’ll come back when the night ends. I don’t know what will come of this plan *tu* have, but if *tu* have any simple errands for me then, I’ll be ready to accept them.”

“I will request as necessary.”

“Va bene! Anyway, ciao!” said the man, mixing Italian into his words as usual, before logging out and disappearing from the rooftop...and the world.

Once left alone, the other person—or *unit*, as she herself would say—clicked her tongue in frustration.

Crys saw the other Master as clueless, insolent, and hard to understand. Nevertheless, he was useful as a source of information, so she occasionally had him fulfill tasks for her. She knew that rather than despising all Masters and keeping them all away, it was better to make use of them wherever it was appropriate.

The preparation is complete for the things that will happen on this ship, as well as the things that will follow—the plan entrusted to us by Integra...and the Creator. Caldina’s environment and circumstances are favorable for the process of investigation. Though...“IF” was their name, wasn’t it? The fools who spread those Orbs throughout this land...

Just like the man who had stood there earlier, Crys lookedtoward the now-dark horizon.

“It will not be long before they learn what they were playing with...what the Orbs were seeded with.”

She looked over the world as though she pitied it.

“A *known calamity* will awaken soon.”

Chapter 4: A Party Battlefield and Terrorism

[Eltram], Special Hall

The luxury sand-liner, *Eltram*, was on its maiden voyage. And on its final night, in the vessel's special hall, a lavish, splendid ball would be held.

All along the walls of the ballroom, there were plenty of fancy foods and quality beverages anyone could eat or drink, letting the event function as a standing buffet party.

"Sho good...it'sh sho good... I haven't eaten thish good in shooo long..."

And glued to one of those walls, there was a girl wolfing down that food.

It was none other than Goblin Street's Fey. Clad in a rented dress and wearing light makeup to make her facial scars less pronounced, she was, in her own way, enjoying this party.

"Fey...didn't you say something about how romantic it would be to dance at this ball? Why are you all over the food now?" asked Niala. Dressed up nicely herself, she was rather perturbed by the way her fellow clan member was eating.

"I mean, it's not like our leader's here, right? I don't feel like dancing with anyone else. That's why I'm storing up energy for when I'll dance with him. Getting all those SP, you know?"

"'SP' stands for 'skill points,' not 'stamina points.'"

"Huh? But that's confusing, isn't it? If 'MP' is 'magic points,' then the opposite of that is gotta be stamina, right? 'SP' is also used for lots of physical skills, so 'stamina points' just feels right, doesn't it?"

Fey's a silly goose, but every now and then, she can be rather perceptive, thought Niala.

Thinking about it a bit more, while it did make sense to "use magic," it was hard to understand what was meant by "using skill"—as in, not employing individual skill, but some general measure of "ability." The help section said that

SP stood for “skill points,” but what quality did that refer to and what differentiated that quality from “magic”? Beyond the fact that the words used for them were different, she didn’t quite understand the distinction.

Well, it’s probably like that for some game reason, Niala thought. *If everything used MP, then even physical vanguard jobs would have to get high MP somehow.*

“Well, forget about SP and whatever it is,” said Fey. “I gotta prepare for when *he* arrives!”

“If you say so,” said Niala. “By the way...”

“What ish it?”

“Eating too much *can’t be good for your figure*.”

“Huh?” Upon hearing that, Fey looked down and froze as her expression transformed into one of shock. “N-Niala...when we were renting, you said that this dress would look good on me...”

“I did. That is an attractive dress that truly emphasizes a woman’s shape...at least, as long as the wearer doesn’t overeat and end up with too much belly flab,” Niala said as she adjusted her glasses and gave a slightly malicious smile.

“You planned this, didn’t you?! Wait—aren’t you going to eat anything yourself”

“A ball is no place for a lady to eat. Even if you ignore the risk to your curves, smelling of food when you’re dancing and your partner’s face is close is not ideal. This is common knowledge in the girls’ college I graduated from.”

“So that’s why you took so long to stop me! And what’s with the ‘I’m such a high-class lady’ act?! You show-off!”

“Our leader is a nice man, so he would dance with either of us. But you’re chubby and smell like all the food you ate, while I am slender and smell only of perfume. I wonder which one of us would leave a better impression...”

“You’re awful! That’s playing dirty, four-eyes!” Fey said, terrified of the cunning trap her rival had set before her—or rather, the trap she herself had walked right into.

Oho ho ho, Niala laughed, sounding exactly like a high-class villainess—in her own mind, anyway.

"I-I'll go buy a deodorant item!" Fey said, dashing out of the hall and rushing to the commerce area. She could reenter using the ticket she'd used the first time, but whether or not she could fix herself up before Eldridge returned was another matter.

"...Perhaps I overdid it," Niala said as she imagined her rival's struggle. "Anyway, I suppose I'll be alone until the leader and Fey return...hm?"

Niala looked around the hall, but her eyes stopped on one of the ball's attendees—a beautiful male Master. That wasn't an uncommon sight here in *Infinite Dendrogram*, so Niala didn't understand why this particular person had stood out to her.

He's taller. His hair color and face are different. They're not even the same gender... Niala thought, tilting her head. *So why did he make me think of Yuri?*

Niala...or rather, Nina was reminded of one of the students from the girls' college she taught at.

The man that caught her attention—Hugo—didn't seem to notice her gaze.

He had more important things to worry about.

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Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

After exchanging info with Stal, I reported to Moneygold and gave him the documents I'd gotten. He took a look at the information and used comms to report it to the president.

As far as Emily went, though, he came to the same conclusion as me: that there wasn't much we could do about her now.

Since it was likely that the Orb would attract some sort of conflict, he said that the only thing I could really do was stay by his side—and by extension, the Orb's.

"You said she may come after the Orb, right?" I asked Moneygold.

“Well, it’s more like she would cause an incident focused *around* the Orb. What about it?”

Sitting next to him, I was starting to get a bit irritated. It wasn’t just because of his words, but the whole situation we were in.

This was *Eltram*’s special hall. It was the largest space on the ship, the site of a massive ball...and a place full of people just having a good time, totally unrelated to this Orb business.

They were right here next to us—which made them Emily’s potential targets.

“Shouldn’t we...go somewhere with fewer people?” I asked.

“I get what you’re saying. If she came after me or the Orb at this moment, it’d be a real bloodbath,” Moneygold said like it was nothing. “This ball is full of wealthy people, celebrities, and the elite. It’d be pretty bad for Caldina if something were to happen to them.”

“Then why...?”

“Because this is, overall, the safest option.”

“Hm...?” Overall? The safest? I didn’t really understand what he was getting at.

“If Emily Killingston and whoever she’s with are after the Orb, then everyone here is a poor sap who’ll get caught up in all this through no fault of their own. But what if this place gets attacked for some other reason?”

“Some other...reason?”

“Consider the massacre in Cortana. You could assume that she simply lost control in the middle of a Caldinan city, and that it would have happened with or without the Orb. It’s possible that they’re not after the Orbs at all, but something else instead.”

I just sat and listened as Moneygold went on.

“In that case, this ship could *also* be attacked for some other reason. For all we know, they might just be planning to strike a blow against Caldina’s wealthy elite by slaughtering those gathered here. If that’s the case, they’d attack this hall. And if that happened, we definitely wouldn’t want to be far away like you

suggested we should be, since we'd be unable to counter that attack in a timely manner."

I was starting to understand what he was trying to say. "So minimizing casualties as much as possible is our secondary goal?"

"Yeah. It's not an all or nothing thing where we either prevent everybody from dying or nobody. It's about making sure it's *not as bad as they could be*. That's the choice we're making here."

That made sense...but it wasn't a choice I was comfortable with. It was too much like the decision I myself had made back when I was overcome by doubt—the decision to participate in Fran's plan so I could minimize both Altar and Dryfe's casualties.

My feelings back then and the feelings I was having now started to blur together, and I clenched my fist.

"Mr. Lesseps, please don't make that face. I am certain it will not be too bad," Isara said, gently reassuring me. "It could be that nothing happens at a—"

"Isara, don't waste your breath on useless reassurance like that. There's no way absolutely *nothing* will happen."

Isara's words were cut short by Moneygold, who sounded stricter than he ever had before.

"I apologize for crossing the line," Isara said before bowing her head and falling silent.

"What do you mean by that?" I asked Moneygold.

"There are three reasons I'm attending this ball. First is security, like we just talked about. Second is that I just wanted to, as a personal thing. And then there's the third reason, which is the most important of all."

"Which is...?"

"*The prez told me to.*" I could detect a hint of fear or awe on his face as he said that. The person those feelings were directed to must've been the president...the head of Caldina.

"How much do you know about the president?" he asked me.

“Her name is La Place Phantasma,” I answered. “She’s long-lived and has been serving as the head of the Caldinan congress for a long time. And, umm...”

“That she’s called ‘witch,’ ‘enigma,’ and a whole host of other names, right?” I nodded in response—that was the impression she’d seemed to have left on society.

From what I could tell, though, her skill as a politician left no room for doubt.

“People call her many names, but there’s one that hits the mark,” he said.

“And that is?”

“‘Clairvoyant.’”

“Clairvoyant? You mean, she can see the future? Like Teach’s Embryo, Cassandra?” Cassandra foretold the dangers approaching Teach and enabled her to dodge them, and I thought it was the only Embryo capable of seeing the future. That was the first thing that came to mind, but Moneygold shook his head.

“That slut’s *nearsightedness* can’t compare. I’d call the prez’s thing *far-sightedness*, but it sounds like something that happens to old people, and that’s a comparison I’m too scared to make. My point is that she tends to see things coming *long* before they happen—as far out as years away.”

“There’s no way...” I said in genuine disbelief.

“I get why you’re surprised. *Infinite Dendrogram* is full of Masters doing whatever they want. That should make such a power impossible, but I’m telling the truth. She uses her foresight to entrap many of her political opponents and...well, her political opponents.”

Moneygold was probably going to say “political opponents and *other countries*.” I’d been told that Caldina’s plotting had placed the imperium in an even worse situation than it had been previously. He must’ve refrained from saying it because he remembered where I was from.

“Anyway, a person who can see that far into the future told me to participate in this ball,” he said. “She hadn’t said anything like that for any of my previous boat trips, but she did this time. *There’s no way something won’t happen*.”

Those words seemed to be filled with a mix of awe and trust.

“You know, the prez had actually begun preparing to welcome Masters *before the game was released*.”

“Huh?”

“Seems impossible, right? Tians don’t know about the real world. There’s no way they could see us coming. Prez did, though. You know what that means?”

“...That she’s part of the dev team?” *Infinite Dendrogram* did have a few Masters like Altar’s Tom Cat who were believed to be associated with the devs. Was Caldina’s president also one of them?

“That’s possible,” Moneygold said. “We think she’s something else, though...it’s not like she told us, or that we asked her. Well, only Fatoum probably knows exactly what she is.”

“What do you—?”

Right as I was about to ask him to elaborate, multiple sudden explosions cut my words short.

I heard them from outside this hall—as well as *from within*.

The walls of the hall shattered as smoke from the explosion rolled in. And then, multiple towering figures came into view.

They were Marshal IIs—about a dozen of them. Painted to resemble the desert, these units had head shapes and joint covers meant to protect against the sands, which made them look quite different from the original. They were also wielding weapons that were probably made outside of the Triangle of Wisdom. The machines were accompanied by dozens of infantry—some of them equipped with armor-type Magingears.

The shattered wall, the dancing flames, and the menacing presence of these soldiers immediately told the passengers that this wasn’t some sort of act, but a real assault. Their screams resounded as they rushed to escape, filling the hall with an air of panic.

Isara stood before Moneygold to protect him, while he himself looked at me with an expression that clearly said, *Told you there’d be trouble.*

As chaos overtook the hall, words suddenly blared out of the speakers. “We are Dryfe’s Legitimate Government. We have an announcement for everyone aboard *Eltram*.”

“Dryfe’s Legitimate Government...?” I repeated to myself. The group bore the name of my own country, but I had never heard of it before.

“We request that you show no resistance while we do what must be done here. If you obey, we promise no one will be harmed. But if you resist, we will not hesitate to use indiscriminate force—even against civilians.”

Those last words were directed at Masters and other passengers who could fight. They clearly stated that if we stood against them, they would start killing any passengers they could—even women and children. It was the kind of ultimatum that could only come from someone truly vile.

And it reminded me that Fran had once said something similar.

“You will be released once we complete our objective. Until then, do not move.”

A moment after they said that, the door through which passengers were trying to escape was smashed open, and more units appeared through it. With that, multiple Marshal IIs were standing at every exit, keeping every passenger in the hall from leaving. It was probably the same all over the ship.

“...Tch. They’ve blocked it off,” said Moneygold, clicking his tongue in frustration as he placed a hand against his ear. I noticed that he had Telepathy Cuffs equipped and guessed that he must’ve tried to use them, but they hadn’t worked.

After a moment of thought, he looked at Isara. Then, saying nothing, he pointed at himself, Isara, and then me.

“Can you hear me?” Suddenly, I heard his voice as though it was ringing inside my head. My eyes widened in surprise. “Don’t talk through your open mouth. Just keep it closed and whisper and we’ll hear it.”

“O-Okay...what is this, though...?”

“We’re connected by Isara’s osteophony wires. Think of it like a phone made

of two cans and a string. Don't touch your temple—that's where the wire is. Even a brush from your fingers would break it."

There was a wire on my head? I really couldn't see it, though...

"Isara's the Fullmetal Princess. That's the earth and metal manipulation magic SJ. This is within her power. Oh, you can still move, though. Isara will adjust the wire's length."

I looked at Isara in surprise, and she gave me a gentle smile.

"Anyway, the trouble's finally arrived," said Moneygold. "That damn prez. I wouldn't be surprised if she actually knew that we'd be attacked by DLG specifically."

"Who are the Dryfe's Legitimate Government, anyway?" I asked.

"The remnants of the side that lost the Dryfean civil war, basically. The ones who didn't die, surrender, or get arrested ended up escaping here to Caldina. And they brought a lot of Marshal IIs with them."

The group's name and the Marshal IIs made it easy to guess, but this confirmed they really were from my country.

"What do we do about this?" I asked.

"What, indeed..." Moneygold said as he rubbed his double chin and hummed. "Isara, how far can you reach?"

"Long-range manipulation is a weakness of mine, so I doubt I can reach farther than halfway through the hall."

"Uh-huh. I see. Anyway, like I said before, Isara is a solo battle type and can't protect large areas in a fight. Conversely...I can only fight in a way that would also harm the civilians."

Those were the major problems with solo battle types and wide range extermination types. Fran brought them up pretty often. In a situation like this, where one side had to protect something, the ones that came out on top were wide scale suppression types—and those who simply outnumbered the other side.

"Could you suppress them all by Freezing them all at once?" Moneygold asked

me.

“Cyco’s La Porte de l’Enfer can’t differentiate well enough.” I could choose to target only tians, only Masters, only monsters, or several groups at once, like how I’d targeted both Masters and monsters while fighting Rook. However, there was no convenient setting for just “hostile tians.” The skill really worked closer to having me choose who *not* to target—back in Gideon, I’d had Fran and Veldorbell registered as exceptions before we set the plan in motion, making it so that the skill only targeted all *other* Masters.

Compare that to what had happened in Cortana—I hadn’t had time to register any exceptions and ended up freezing every other Master along with Emily.

“If I targeted just tians now, some passengers would Freeze too,” I said. Like Cyco had disapprovingly explained earlier, Caldinans had a relatively high population of kinslayers. If I froze even a single part of them in this situation, they would be at risk of getting shattered.

This wouldn’t be a problem with La Porte de l’Enfer Deuxième, which worked based on the damage the target dealt to me—but if I let them attack me, they would damage the passengers too.

“Well, most powerful skills have flaws,” said Moneygold. “Yours could even have some weaknesses that neither you nor Cyco are aware of.”

That was entirely possible too. I didn’t actually get that many chances to use it in battle, so I couldn’t deny that it could have quirks I hadn’t figured out yet.

“Anyway, I get the situation,” Moneygold said. “We don’t have enough people to take care of this while keeping the casualties low. Let’s *add* someone, then.”

“Huh?”

“Isara. Connect to one more person. Your target is...”

And with that, Moneygold pointed at one of the passengers in the hall.

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Eltram, Special Hall

Following the assault, everyone in the special hall was overwhelmed by chaos and confusion—but there was one man among them who was smiling.

...Jackpot! Niala! Fey! The gamble paid off! That man was none other than the leader of Goblin Street, Eldridge.

He was utterly thrilled by DLG's attack on the ship, because this was exactly what he'd been waiting for.

The DLG were Goblin Street's target. The Marshal IIs that the group piloted were luxury items that went for no less than 80,000,000 lir per unit on Caldinan markets, and that was without considering their equipment and other tech they might be carrying. Eldridge had happened upon information suggesting that this prize prey would attack *Eltram* and came aboard the ship to take them. When they'd entered the final night of the trip with no sign of the Marshal II units, he was worried that this was a waste of time—but it seemed the heavens had not abandoned them quite yet.

All that's left is the timing, Eldridge thought. *The situation after I rob them will change depending on when I do it.*

The robbery itself wasn't that difficult. Eldridge had the skills for it, and he'd come prepared with an Inventory which could store many Marshal IIs. Nothing could really stop him from beating the DLG and taking their goods.

The problem was that acting against them would lead to many tian deaths.

Eldridge didn't have much of a problem with that on its own, but it would have negative side effects for him.

If his actions here led to the deaths of any passengers—many of whom were Caldina's upper class—things might go badly in the future. He could even end up on the wanted list, or at least the trader blacklists, which would make it impossible for him to sell the Marshal IIs here in Caldina.

The grudge he'd invoke from killing so many tians might even make him a prime target for hired mercenaries like the Superior Killer.

Taking such risks into consideration, Eldridge waited for the right time to strike with all the care he could muster.

The best time would be the moment the people on the ship began fighting back. As long as he wasn't the first to strike, Eldridge thought, it would all work out.

During the chaos and conflict that would unfold, he would steal as many Marshal IIs as he could.

The best outcome for him would be one where he avoided responsibility for this incident while still profiting off of it.

All I can do now is wait, Eldridge thought. *I wonder where Fey is, though...*

He'd already looked around the chaotic hall and seen Niala, but the other clan member was nowhere in sight.

There's several kinds of jamming preventing us from using Telepathy Cuffs. How should I go about this...?

With timing being an important factor, coordination between them was invaluable. And while Eldridge might've been able to take the Marshal IIs, Fey and her Embryo were better suited for disarming the infantry.

I need to ask Niala or look for her myself...but we've been told not to move, so doing that could set them off, and—

"Hey, you're Eldridge, right? King of Burglary?"

His thought was cut short by a sudden, spine-chilling voice in his head.

"Ngh...!" Eldridge stopped himself from lashing out purely by reflex and slowly looked around.

There wasn't anybody suspicious close to him—everyone was actually cowering right now because of how stern Eldridge looked as he scanned his immediate surroundings.

But then, a fair distance away, he caught sight of someone who was looking right at him.

It was a man with a rotund, corpulent body—King of Revelry, Moneygold.

He'd gotten Isara to connect with Eldridge using her wires, just as they'd connected to Hugo.

"I'm talking to you through an osteophony wire. Don't touch your temple and speak without opening your mouth."

That gaze and those words made Eldridge instantly understand how this communication worked. However, there were still things that didn't make sense to him.

How does he know my name? Does Sefirot actually know our plans? Such suspicions whirled around in Eldridge's head, but he needn't have worried. Caldina had been the ones behind the Altean blockade in Altar, and Sefirot had simply been provided with details on all the PKs they'd hired for it—with the exception of the Superior Killer.

That was why Moneygold recognized Eldridge and noticed him in the crowd.

"I have a vague idea of what you're after, but you shouldn't do it just yet," said Moneygold.

"I know," replied Eldridge. Moneygold's words made him even more alert, but as Eldridge himself had no intention of making a move yet, he had no objections to staying put.

"We wanna keep the casualties low, you see. If you're gonna *do it*, match our timing and go after the ones we can't."

With that, Eldridge realized that Moneygold wanted him to join them in the counteroffensive.

That was something Eldridge would do gladly. If he mounted a counterattack on the orders of someone directly serving the Caldinan congress, there was no way Caldina would hold responsible for whatever happened afterwards.

Assuming Moneygold wasn't planning double cross Eldridge and make him take the blame, this was a fantastic proposal.

However, Eldridge hid the fact that this would benefit him from Moneygold, instead replying with, "And what's in it for me?"

If there was any advantage to be gained, Eldridge would go for it, and his

experience and instincts told him there was still something more he could get out of this situation. In a way, he was letting his greed take the wheel, and in response...

"*You won't make an enemy of me.*"

...he got only a few simple words that still spoke volumes.

The pronouncement left Eldridge speechless. It was borderline blackmail, but it was certainly worth the cost.

Eldridge was currently in a downward spiral after his repeated defeats at the hands of Superiors, and he certainly wanted to keep that from happening again.

Since it was Caldina who'd ordered the Altean blockade that had led to Goblin Street's first failure, though, it could be said that Eldridge's downward spiral had been caused by Moneygold's faction in the first place. Eldridge, however, had no way of knowing that.

"Of course, that only applies if your group doesn't go after the other passengers. Also...I'll hook you up with a buyer who'll pay full price for the stuff you farm up here."

Eldridge liked *that* offer quite a bit He still didn't have any contacts in Caldina's black market. If he could get one by cooperating with Moneygold, that would be well worth it.

There was no way Eldridge was going to refuse this proposal now.

"All right...I'll play along."

Thus, Goblin Street and Sefirot formed an alliance.

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Eltram, Commercial Area

DLG had taken control of Eltram.

Their primary target was the special hall, but many of their members had been sent to the other areas of the ship so they could suppress anyone who wasn't participating in the ball—and take hostages to prevent anyone attempting a counteroffensive from the ballroom.

There was an elevator leading from the cargo area to the mall, and the mall was now occupied by DLG forces. Among them were several Marshal IIs and infantry that had split up and headed out to the passenger cabin area.

And there was someone watching all this unfold from behind one of the planters that decorated the commercial area.

Wow, there's somethin' pretty big goin' on. The one hiding behind the planter was Fey—the girl who'd rushed here to buy a deodorant item. Currently, she was using Presence Manipulation—a skill available to jobs from both the onmitsu and thief groupings—to keep herself concealed. It wasn't strong enough to make her truly impossible to notice, but it was good enough to keep her from being spotted as long as she remained still.

Thosehave gotta be what we're after. That means we're eatin' good tomorrow too!

The Marshal IIs passing by were beginning to look like bags of money to her—but as things were, she was counting her chickens before they hatched.

Man, they really seajacked this ship, huh? Looks like the info I got in that back alley wasn't wrong, Fey thought, proudly nodding to herself over a job well done.

But then she silently gasped and looked up as though she'd just realized something important.

We're in a desert, so this isn't a seajack, but, like...a desertjack, I guess.

As it turned out, what she'd realized wasn't important in the slightest.

What now, though? I ain't very smart, so I don't really know what to do by myself. I wanna go back to the hall and ask, but I feel like I'll be found if I move...huh?

As she looked around the mall, she noticed something strange.

It was a golden, dragon-headed Magingear. Accompanied by two other units and some infantry, it was in the process of leaving the mall and moving somewhere else.

That one sure is flashy. It looks like a boss. I wonder if our leader could take

it... It's goin' somewhere, though. Hmm...

Fey felt that losing sight of that particular prize would be bad.

I'll make one follow it, she thought before poking the back of her left hand, which was emblazoned with a crest showing countless hands reaching out for something.

A moment later, a semi-transparent liquid flowed and dripped out of the crest.

Gespenst No. 1! Follow goldie over there! The liquid shook a little, then slid along the floor in the direction of the golden unit.

Wait—oh yeah. I can use this to contact our leader. I'll make No. 2 send a message.

She poked the crest again, making more liquid drop out of it.

"In the mall. Orders, please." There. This is like a secret message just between the two of us...eh heh heh heh...

All smiles, Fey wrote a short text and placed it on the semi-transparent liquid mass she'd calledNo. 2, which then began to slide towards the special ballroom.

Whew. Now I just have to wait. This is the point where Niala would say something like, "There's an oriental idiom that goes 'Fortune comes to those who rest."

Fey was satisfied with the work she'd done just now...

"Hey, a slime or something like that just came out of those planters."

"Whoever you are, you better show yourself or we'll shoot!"

...but her satisfaction was short lived, as she was soon discovered and found herself in the crosshairs of multiple guns.

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Eltram, Special Hall

At the special hall, Moneygold, Hugo, Isara, Eldridge, and Niala—who was added to the communication loop on Eldridge's suggestion—were discussing their plan of attack through Isara's wires.

DLG's soldiers occasionally passed the places the wires were spread, but Isara carefully manipulated them so that they weren't pulled out or spotted.

"So when do we start?" Eldridge asked.

"When conflict springs up in a different area of the ship," Moneygold replied. "If whoever's fighting back is successful, the casualties both here and there will be minimized. And if the DLG's warning wasn't a bluff, we'll know exactly how they'll act."

This plan made it possible for the counteroffensive to begin on two fronts, which would likely result in fewer casualties. And since the conflict would start elsewhere, they'd be able to reasonably say that they were fighting to protect the hostages from the DLG. Both Eldridge and Moneygold had the same thought.

"But there'll still be lots of casualties in every block, right?" asked Hugo, unable to fully accept the plan.

"Who knows?" Moneygold replied. "The DLG is made up of deserters from Dryfe's First Armored Battalion, and Dryfe already revealed their names and numbers. There aren't even two hundred of them in total."

The imperium had exposed the members of the DLG to make it clear that whatever the group would do in other lands, it was unrelated to their country of origin.

"That's not a small number, but this hall alone has over fifty of their infantry and a dozen of their Marshal IIs. Considering the importance of these hostages, this must've been where they focused most of their forces, so there's probably not as many of them in other parts of the ship."

Moneygold was right. Purely by numbers, about four-fifths of the DLG was present in this single location. Their strongest—Curtis—may not have been there, but that didn't change the fact that protecting this hall would be the safest thing to prioritize if they wanted to minimize casualties..

"And frankly—to Caldina, the people here in this hall are way more valuable than everyone outside it."

"Moneygold...!" The Superior's cold and calculating words filled Hugo with

rage. It was a miracle that he managed to avoid actually shouting Moneygold's name out loud.

"Calm down. Moneygold, you're acting like an asshole. And Hugo Lesseps, you're getting too worked up."

The one who stepped in to break things up between the two—or rather, to calm Hugo's growing anger with Moneygold—was Eldridge.

"Hugo Lesseps," Eldridge continued. "The reason Moneygold is waiting for someone outside this hall to fight back before making our move is because fewer people are likely to get hurt that way. Otherwise, we would've already taken action. Right?"

Moneygold did nothing but smile with his flabby cheeks, but that seemed like a "Yes."

"More importantly, we should think of what we'll actually do when it's time to act. We can't predict when the conflict outside will start. We need to at least come up with a simple plan before that happens."

"That's true..." Eldridge's words calmed Hugo down, and he nodded in agreement.

I don't know who he is, but he's really composed and has good judgement, Hugo thought. Unlike Moneygold, he hadn't been informed about Eldridge's identity. *Is he the leader of some powerful Caldinan clan or something?*

"I have a good idea of how we'll do this," said Moneygold as he looked at the four walls of the hall. "I'll *delete* everyone in front of the walls ahead of me and to my right."

Those words were spoken with absolute certainty.

"I'll also tank their attacks," he continued. "We'll catch them off-guard by striking first. While they're out of it, Isara will take the ones behind me, while Eldridge and his clan member will handle the ones to my left."

"Understood," said Isara.

"Three Marshal IIs and sixteen infantry, huh?" said Eldridge. "Sounds good to me. Niala, you take out the infantry away from the Marshal IIs."

“Roger that!”

We’re gonna catch less prey, but we got no choice, Eldridge thought. *The six units Moneygold will go for are gonna be gonex, but if I can, I’ll also try to grab the three left to the Fullmetal Princess.*

“What about me?” Hugo asked, realizing that he hadn’t been mentioned.

“You’re on standby,” said Moneygold. “Since Cyco’s skill won’t be effective here, we’ll hold it back for a situation where it’s useful. They don’t seem to care much about the passengers themselves and still haven’t noticed us, so that’s the best course of action for now.”

“You gotta be really careless to not notice a Superior,” said Eldridge, who knew firsthand how fearsome Superiors were.

With the DLG, though, this attitude was only to be expected. They only knew Superiors from the civil war, when Splendida—the one they hired—ran away without defeating King of Beasts—and Behemot, too, was unable to defeat Splendida. Because of that, they had a tendency to severely underestimate Superiors in general.

Furthermore, the usefulness of Masters in war had only really become obvious to the world during the First Knight-Machine War, which had been sparked by Imperator Reinhard, whom they hated, after the group had already left Dryfe.

Because of all this, the members of the DLG were in the unusual position of just not realizing how fearsom Superiors actually were.

Once the plan had been laid out and silence settled over them once again, Eldridge thought, *It’s a rough strategy, but it should work out. We can deal with the ones we were tasked to handle, and I’m sure the same goes for the Fullmetal Princess. Honestly, Moneygold alone could probably take care of them all.*

Eldridge had realized Moneygold’s intentions the moment he said he’d handle the ones before the front and right side walls. Eldridge had already memorized the ship’s structure, and he knew that *there was nothing beyond those walls but the outside*.

That alone explained everything.

“So the only problem left is whether anyone else will actually fight back.” Eldridge was concerned about the scenario in which no one outside the hall launched a counteroffensive, giving them no chance to act.

“You don’t have to worry about that,” said Moneygold. “Eltram is surrounded by escort vessels. They’re all made for combat and have hired Masters to protect this ship. Even discounting them, this ship itself probably has plenty of Masters with a strong sense of justice, but not enough brains.”

“...I see,” said Eldridge. The comms jamming alone made it clear to the escort vessels that something was wrong. It was possible that the vessel’s guards would take action—and even if they didn’t, some Master or other was likely to do something. That was always how it went with incidents like this.

“And we can’t forget the *time bomb* that’s probably around here too,” Moneygold added.

“Ah...”

Hugo instantly realized what the Superior meant, but Eldridge didn’t, and the word alone put him on edge.

“The time bomb? What are you talking about?” “It’s possible that the Murder Princess...Emily Killingston is somewhere on this ship,” Hugo said.

“What?!” That name belonged to the most fearsome PK in the whole continent, and just hearing it unexpectedly was enough to fill Eldridge with shock.

“What are the chances of this happening...? Is this really just karma...? Why would there be *three Superiors* here now, of all times...?”

Eldridge couldn’t help but mumble to himself, and he said something the others could not ignore.

“Three? What do you—” Moneygold tried to ask, but he couldn’t get an answer before *something happened*.

The comms carried the soldiers keeping watch on the hall suddenly blared out an emergency siren.

The everyone’s widened as they instantly realized that it must have been

caused by exactly the thing they'd been discussing—a conflict on a different part of the ship.

It'd happened earlier than they expected, but they weren't about to miss this chance.

They all launched into action before the soldiers could even raise their weapons.

"Do exactly as we planned," Moneygold said before standing up and rushing to a location in the hall that was free of other passengers.

"What?! *Take aim, men*!" The soldiers were quick to react. Moneygold was clearly showing resistance, so they all trained their sights straight at him.

However, drawing their focus was exactly what Moneygold wanted. That prevented them from attacking the other passengers, and let him do *something more important*.

"FIRE!"

Moneygold had no cover to speak of and was fully exposed to the DLG's weaponry. The Marshal IIs were equipped with pre-ancient weaponry presented to them by their collaborator, Crys Fragment. They fired shells that rivaled Crimson Spheres in destructive power, and all of them were heading straight toward Moneygold.

Those shells would be enough to instantly kill even endurance-focused high-rank jobs, and Moneygold's END wasn't any better than his AGI.

He would certainly die if they were to hit him.

"The Untouched Land of Gold—Jipangu."

But they wouldn't.

Explosions and smoke surrounded the place where Moneygold was standing. However, beyond the fiery-gray wall, the soldiers saw golden and silver lights.

The sounds of the explosions were mixed with the pleasant sound of metal clinking against metal.

And when the smoke cleared, they saw Moneygold still standing there—

completely unharmed.

Athis feet there were *piles of gold and silver*.

“Thank you for the *funding*,” he said with a grin spreading across his round face. “But I am already wealthy. I’m not the one who receives, but the one who gives.”

He then took one of his wallet Inventories and turned it upside down.

“So...let me *give* you something.”

The piles of gold and silver around him grew even taller.



Next, Moneygold held up his hand in the shape of a gun. Like a little boy playing a game, he pointed the two fingers mimicking the barrel towards the wall in front of him—and the soldiers before it.

"*Charge: 20,000,000*." Moneygold stomped on the floor, making the coins around him jump off the floor...

"Treasure Cannon."

...and then fly towards the soldiers ahead.

A moment later, several lights and sounds filled the space—shining gold, sparkling silver, shockwaves, tearing, crushing, and screams of death that lasted for but a moment.

In less than a second, the scenery of the hall changed completely.

The wall in front of Moneygold had vanished. Both the soldiers and the Marshal IIs that had stood there were gone, as well. It had all disappeared, leaving nothing behind but a hole through which the desert outside could be seen, covered in the veil of night.

"Wha—huh...?" The scene left the other soldiers paralyzed with shock, and Moneygold didn't miss the opportunity.

"Treasure Cannon."

He fired again, this time scattering the soldiers before the wall to his right.

In just a few seconds, half of the DLG forces present were completely obliterated.

"Flawless victory" did not even begin to describe it—Moneygold had crushed them like insects.

This was all possible because of Moneygold's status as King of Revelry, and his Superior Embryo—Type Another Rule, Impregnable Golden Bastion, Jipangu.

Jipangu was an Embryo from the Territory tree focused on but a single function. The skills it had developed were direct upgrades to the ones it had possessed since its creation, and the ultimate was no exception. In a way, it was like Logan Goddhart's Rumpelstiltskin.

And this sole power that Jipangu focused on was the transformation of damage into money.

This Embryo went beyond mere damage absorption by turning the damage it absorbed into currency. Using it drained a set amount of MP over time, but while it was active, it turned any damage received into money, no matter how great the amount. It was costly and thus couldn't be channeled for too long, but not a single point of damage could touch Moneygold while it lasted.

This defensive power was among the greatest in Sefirot, surpassed only by that of Carl Lourlou the Multifariously Invincible and AR-I-CA the Blue Sky Songstress.

However, if it only possessed this single skill, that would make this Embryo only good for defense—and even then it would have the glaring flaw of expiring if given enough time.

That was why Moneygold also had a means of attack.

This was the skill that had made the enemies vanish—the ultimate job skill of the King of Revelry, Treasure Cannon.

King of Revelry was the Superior Job of the playboy grouping, which focused on spending money, and the effect of its ult was simple—it launched an explosive attack that grew in power depending on the money spent.

1,000 lir created a 1,000 lir attack, 10,000,000 lir created a 10,000,000 lir attack, 100,000,000,000 lir created a 100,000,000,000 lir attack, and so on.

Not even Moneygold himself knew if there was a limit to how powerful it could be.

Defense that could create endless gold, and an offense that grew in potential without end—this was the heart of Moneygold's power.

"And that's that," Moneygold said as he took out a cigar, and Isara—who was already next to him—cut off the tip using her metal-covered fingers.

Isara had already taken care of the soldiers she was entrusted with. She'd used her power over metal to turn the guns they wielded into shackles and the Marshal IIs they piloted into coffins.

And though they were a bit slower, Eldridge and Niala also stole the three Marshal IIs and defeated the infantry they had been tasked with. The Martial II units were sent directly to Eldridge's inventory, leaving the pilots poised as if still in the cockpit before they fell to the ground, thoroughly confused.

"You do your job well, huh?" said Moneygold. "Thanks to the show you put on, I had enough time to load up another robbery." The King of Burglary skill meant for stealing items, Greater Pickpocket, could be loaded onto both hands at once, but after being used on two of the units, it had to be reloaded.

However, thanks to everyone's attention being focused on Moneygold, Eldridge was easily able to ready another Greater Pickpocket and take the third as well. He even had enough leeway to take some of the infantry's gear too.

The combined panic from the siren over their comms devices and the disappearance of their comrades had made the theft especially easy.

Well, that's the hall cleaned up, Eldridge said. *I guess we'll go support the other areas now? It'd be great if we could get some more of those Marshal IIs...*

Three was already a good haul, but Eldridge wanted to make the most of this opportunity.

It's pretty clear that Moneygold's gonna ask me to keep cooperating, he thought as he glanced at Moneygold. As a member of Sefirot—the clan directly serving the congress—Moneygold was explaining the situation to the passengers in the hall.

But even if I'm cooperating with him, I don't know what the other two Superiors are planning, Eldridge thought. *If I can avoid it, I really don't wanna fight them...though, I wonder who started that other conflict anyway. If that lead to anybody dying, they could be held responsible...hm?*

Suddenly, Eldridge felt something poking his foot and looked down to see what it was.

It was a familiar Embryo—Fey's Gespenst No. 2—carrying a message in Fey's handwriting that said, "In the mall. Orders, please."

If Eldridge had been speaking out loud, this would've rendered him silent. *What if Fey was actually the one who started the fight?* A cold sweat began to

form on his brow.

If that was the case, *they* could be held responsible instesad, and his cooperative relationship with Moneygold would fall apart.

Eldrige moved at supersonic speeds as he took the message and waved Gespenst No. 2 away, wordlessly telling it to “Go back! Hurry!”

“Is anything the matter?” Hugo asked, noticing the sweat dripping down Eldridge’s face.

“No, it’s nothing. Anyway, we gotta support the other areas, right? Let’s go,” Eldridge replied before he and Niala—who immediately grasped the situation just from seeing his expression—headed straight toward the hall’s exit.

Hugo had also decided that it was time to check the situation elsewhere, so he followed after them.

They looked back at Moneygold, who responded with a nod and also began to move toward the exit. He was done with his explanation to the people, and he’d entrusted the defense of the hall to the other Masters here.

Thus, their first battle on this ship ended as quickly as it began, and they all exited the scene.

However, none of them had any idea that this would be their *easiest* battle within *Eltram*.

Interlude: The Girl and the Spark

Three Minutes Ago, Eltram, Commercial Area

"Whoever you are, you better show yourself or we'll shoot!"

Hearing the voices and seeing the guns directed straight completely terrified Fey. *Oh ...! Th-They found me! Wh-What do I do?!*

From what she could tell, she was surrounded by four soldiers. She couldn't see anyone else around, and the two Marshal IIs positioned in the mall were'nt visible from where she was.

Umm...uhh...in a situation like this, I gotta...umm...! On the verge of completely panicking, Fey poked her crest over and over. That made multiple semi-transparent liquid masses drop out of it until they reached a total of eight.

I'll just put my safety first! Fey then raised her hands and stood up from the planters. "I give up! I surrender! Don't shoot!" she said, asserting that she had no will to fight...

"Truth Discernment picked up a lie! She's gonna resist!"

...only for that particular skill to expose her true intentions.

"AHHH! Seriously, *that* skill?!" she wailed. Most experienced people in *Dendro* always took the existence of Truth Discernment into account, so it was actually fairly rare for people to be caught by it.

And now, knowing that Fey was planning to fight, the soldiers started to squeeze their triggers...

"Steal!"

...just as Fey made use of her AGI advantage and activated her own skill before they could fire.

However, that was meaningless. The thief grouping's Steal was a skill that stole the target's items with a success rate based on skill level and the DEX stat —but it required the user to be close to the target. With there being 10 metels between her and the soldiers, there was no way she could touch them.

Thus, this skill was useless for her own two hands...

“Stehlen.”

...ut it wasn’t for the *eight hands* that reached out towards her target.

The eight *puddles* near the four soldiers’ feet spoke one single word—the very same semi-transparent liquids that dropped out of Fey’s crest.

However, there were now hands sticking out from each of them, and in their palms...

“Hm...? What?”

...were the four soldiers’ stolen guns.

Four hands held a gun each. Three of the remaining ones held nothing, while the last one clutched one soldier’s pants.

“Not a bad result,” said Fey to herself. “Wait, now’s not the time for congratulating myself! Sleeping Fang!”

“Schlafen Fangzahn.” Though satisfied with the results of her arms, Fey hastily used Sleeping Fang—a dagger weapon skill.

The arms then let go of the weapons they held and transformed into blades before repeatedly attacking the soldiers, who were still confused by the disappearance of their weapons.

The damage of the attacks was low, but after a few cuts, the soldiers received the [Forced Sleep] debuff and passed out. This was Sleeping Fang’s effect.

“Neutralized!” Fey proudly said, having rid the soldiers of their weapons, consciousness...and one pair of pants.

This wouldn’t have been possible without her Embryo: Type Legion, United Barrage, Schiffs Gespenst.

It was based on the Japanese yokai called “funayurei,” or “boat spirits”—hordes of wraiths created from people who had been taken by the water. They stuck out their hands seeking ladles, only to use them to sink other ships and and drag their passengers down to join them in their watery grave.

Schiffs Gespenst was an Embryo that used skills given to it by Fey. If Fey used

Steal, the ten arms she could create would also use Steal, and if she used Sleeping Fang, they would also use Sleeping Fang.

This was due to the Embryo's unique skill, Added Hands, which allowed her to multiply the effect of any skill that used her hands. Including her own activation, she could use such skills a maximum of eleven times at once—and she could do it from a distance as well.

These features came at the cost of making each Gespenst weak as far as Guardians went, and if defeated, they required some time to be restored.

Even so, their utility and versatility more than made up for that.

"Heh heh heh! I'll take these four pricey-lookin' guns—and the contents of your pockets! It's the winner's right!" she said as she began emptying the sleeping soldiers' pockets, living up to her name as a member of a bandit clan. "I'll be eatin' good for a while!"

But while she was doing that, the comms devices on their waists suddenly let out a siren.

"Gaaahhh?! What?! What's goin' on?! Was that me?!" Fey was terrified that she was the cause of the siren, just like Eldridge was worrying in the hall, but that wasn't the case. If these soldiers were the ones who reported the emergency, it wouldn't be *their* comms devices ringing.

The cause was elsewhere, and it had happened before Fey took to action.

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Five Minutes Ago, Eltram, Second Class Cabin Area

"Hic... Sniff..."

A girl was running through the cabin area's hallway. Tears were streaming down her face and falling on the carpet below, leaving tiny stains.

"Dad..." Her name was Doris, and she was the daughter of the man who'd made a deal with Moneygold.

Her father had long been stuck in a dead-end job as the subordinate of a slave dealer. Although such businesses legal here, society didn't look at them the same way as other merchants, nor was the income good enough to make up for

the stigma. Doris's mother had lost all love for her hopeless husband and abandoned him and their daughter a long time ago.

However, things had begun to change for them when the slave dealer Doris's father was working for acquired the Orb with the power to turn monsters into beautiful men and women. The monsters used as the base were easy to acquire, and the results were still more than good enough to satisfy human cravings.

The slave dealer instantly began using the Orb to make a fortune—but then it was found out that the humans turned back into monsters in three days.

The slave dealer quickly gained a reputation as a scammer, his store was destroyed, and his life ended soon after that.

The Orb that caused all this, however, ended up in the hands of his subordinate—Doris's father's—and he quickly crafted a plan.

Perhaps it wasn't complex enough to be called a plan, though. Seeing the fate of his boss, he had no intention of using the Orb for business—in fact, he wanted to get rid of it as soon as possible.

And that was exactly what he chose to do. Thus, he sent an anonymous letter to the most powerful entity in Caldinan commerce—the Caldinan congress—and offered to sell it to them.

The congress responded with directions telling him to board *Eltram*.

Fearing those chasing the Orb as well as those who weren't satisfied with only punishing the slave dealer himself, he and his daughter desperately rushed to the city *Eltram* would stop at.

And after they'd made the deal here, he'd looked at Doris and said, "I'll finally have my own business...a business in Drac-Nomad, at that. I'll be able to make you happier than you ever were...Doris..."

With those caring words, he gently patted his daughter's head. This had happened a mere six hours ago.

But now, Doris was all alone.

She and her father hadn't participated in the ball at the special hall. They'd

been on the run for so long that they chose to simply rest in their cabin instead.

But then they were awakened by the DLG's announcement ringing through the speakers.

The sudden voice made Doris's father jump up from the bed as if it put him on high alert, but he wasn't actually processing the situation that well.

A moment later, the door to their cabin opened up, and a military man rushed inside. He was one of the soldiers going around the cabins and gathering the passengers in one place to make them easier to watch.

Doris's father was instantly overcome by terror and panic, so he threw a flower pot at the soldier.

This might've been nothing but an irrational action caused by the residual fear from their life on the run. However, it was enough for the soldier to see him as a threat and quickly fire at him.

Struck by countless bullets, he was mortally wounded.

"D-Doris...run...away...to...M-Moneygold..." Spewing bloody foam from his mouth, he used what little energy he had left to leap on the soldier. Knowing he wouldn't survive this, he did it just so he could give his daughter a chance to escape.

Despite that, Doris didn't move at first...

"GO...!"

...but when she saw the desperation in his expression as he said that final word, she darted out.

"Hic... Hic..." She'd been running since then, sobbing all the way. Her destination was the room in which her father and Moneygold made the deal, but there was no telling how long it would take her tiny legs to bring her there.

The DLG's soldiers scattered throughout the ship would probably find her first. However, she was in no state to think about that and try to hide instead.

She merely listened to her father's final words and ran.

She cried, she ran, and she thought, *We were about to happy... Why...? It*

hurts... I'm so sad... Dad...

The hopeful future her father had told her about was no longer in reach, and the tears in her eyes made it hard to see even what was right in front of her.

That might've been why she soon collided with someone.

"Oh...I-I'm..s-sorry..."

"Oww...I fell on my butt...huh? Are you cwying?"

"...Oh."



The person she bumped into—a girl who couldn't speak very well—commented on Doris's weeping, and Doris raised her hands to her face..

The tears were flowing still, showing no signs of stopping.

"What's wrong? Do you have an ouchie?"

"My dad...was shot... He told me...to run...and..." Through the sobs, Doris tried to answer, but as she spoke, the sadness welled up once more and her tears flowed uncontrollably again.

At first, the girl did nothing but look right at Doris. But then, she abruptly took out a handkerchief and gently touched it to Doris's face.

"It's ok to cry. Cry all you want. Crying is what you do when you're sad," the girl said, talking slightly better than she had a moment before, as she wiped away the tears.

The two had a moment, but then...

"There! There's two children!"

"Get them! And fire if they resist! They could be Masters that just look young!"

...they heard the heavy footsteps of armed soldiers.

"Y-You should...run too...! The bad people...are here...!" Doris said, still scared and desperate. She was terrified that the ones who'd killed her father would also kill not only her, but also this nice girl she just met.

However, the girl she spoke to had *a completely blank expression on her face*.

With cold, mechanical eyes, she was *observing* the approaching soldiers.

"Raise your hands! And come with us! We'll fire if you resist!"

The girl then saw them aim their guns at her and Doris.

"*Minus.*" A moment after that word, a helmeted head rolled on the floor.

No, it wasn't just one.

A hatchet flew through the air in an arc, decapitating three of the soldiers.

"Huh?!" Another soldier voiced his shock—but not at his comrades who lost

their heads.

It was because a girl raising an axe above appeared before him in an instant—a sight that looked almost like she had dropped several frames in an animation.

“Minus.” With that word, she decapitated the soldier. Moving at a supersonic speed the eye couldn’t follow, she slaughtered them one by one.

“Ee-EEAHHH...!” A nightmarish scene was unfolding before the eyes of the screaming soldiers. A young girl wearing a dress was massacring these well-trained warriors.

But this was something they had predicted themselves: . *“They could be Masters that just look young!”*

Indeed. This girl was a Master.

In fact, she was among the worst they could ever have encounter.

Murder Princess, Emily Killingston had deemed them to be minuses.

“E-EMERGEN— Guhhh?!” The very last one pressed the comms device button announcing an emergency, but died before he could explain what was happening.

The siren alone rang out, spreading news of a disturbance, but not what or where it was.

“Emily...there you are.”

As the siren still rang, they were joined by a man with a bandaged right arm—Zhang.

Emily had logged in without warning, and he’d been looking around for her in the cabin area.

“This is...” A single glance at the remains of the soldiers instantly made him understand what had happened here. He’d heard the DLG’s announcement and had a feeling that it would lead to combat on the ship.

I hoped that nothing would happen before Rascal arrived, he thought. However, this was a sudden and unexpected event. Zhang didn’t have much control over it.

Anyhow, he figured that the best course of action now was to take Emily, hide somewhere, and observe the conflicts here unfold.

“Emily...hm?!”

However, he quickly realized that that wouldn’t happen.

Emily was *still in her killing mode*. Despite killing every opponent here, she was still ready for combat.

She’s like how she was in Cortana...but there are no hostiles or neutrals here! Back then, after eliminating the enemies, she’d continued the slaughter by focusing on neutral Masters instead, but things were different this time. The only ones here were Zhang and Doris—who’d fainted dead away when the soldiers pointed their guns at her.

That other girl is the daughter of the person we protected, Zhang thought. *I don’t know why she’s here, but Emily doesn’t see her as an enemy. She would’ve already killed her if that was the case...*

The fact that the girl was alive at all near Emily in killing mode was the only proof needed that she was no enemy. It slightly confused Zhang, but then Emily did something that confused him even more.

Still in her killing mode, Emily lowered her weapons and gently, with care, took Doris in her hands.

“Wha—?” Zhang was shocked to see Emily in this state do anything other than kill. If he’d been there to witness it, even Rascal would have been left speechless by it..

Then, not saying a word, Emily handed Doris to Zhang.

“Emily?” he said in question, but she ignored him, turned around, readied her weapons again, and walked through the hallway leading to the commerce area.

It felt as though she was saying, “I’m entrusting her to you.” The presence of her still-active killing mode was Emily’s way of expressing, “I’ll go kill some more.”

Zhang was more confused by Emily’s actions than he’d ever been, but figured that the best thing he could do now was do as she wanted and keep the girl

safe.

And so, he sent a jiangshi to watch over Emily and carried the unconscious Doris away from danger.

Thus, a giant spark fell upon the gunpowder keg that was *Eltram*.

Chapter 5: Cascading Chaos

Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

After leaving the special hall, we split up.

Moneygold went to the bridge where the ship was controlled, while Isara went to the cargo area with all the goods it was transporting. Both were important parts of the ship that had to be protected, and the captain on the bridge needed to hear about what had happened in the hall and the situation in general.

The rest of us were tasked with getting rid of the remaining enemies on the ship, starting with the commerce area.

Eldrige was actually the one who suggested we go there first. His reasoning for that was that the DLG had used the ship's information equipment to deliver an announcement, which meant that they had most certainly taken control of the commerce area. That made perfect sense to me, but...

"Hey. What are you hiding?"

...Cyco posed a question to him.

"Cyco?" I said.

"What do you mean?" Eldridge replied.

"You look like you're in a rush," Cyco then explained. "It seems like you've done something bad and are nervous that someone will find out."

Eldridge was silent at first. But looking at him, I felt like I could practically see cold sweat going down his neck.

"...One of my clan members is at the mall. I'm anxious to know if *there are any problems* on her end. Sorry for bringing personal stuff into this."

"It's okay," I said. "You're not wrong about DLG taking the commercial area." It didn't matter that he had his own reasons for suggesting we got there—we had to do it anyway. "Also, it's normal to be worried about your own," I added.

“Thanks. That helps,” Eldridge said with a relieved expression.

He really looks out for his clan, huh? What a good leader, I thought.

And with that, we left the hallway and headed into the commercial area.

“And there they are,” said Eldridge. “Get ready!”

We were quickly targeted by one Marshal II—a heavily customized one at that—and nearly ten soldiers. Eldridge instantly swung his right hand, trying to use his Skill to steal the unit, but it didn’t seem to work. Instead, it kept approaching us.

Why? I wondered.

“Looks like it has a high-level anti-theft effect on it,” Eldridge said, answering the question in my mind. “I used Greater Pickpocket twice and it failed both times. It doesn’t just *look* different than the ones at the hall.”

It wasn’t uncommon for Magingears to be equipped with modifications that gave them anti-thievery or anti-burglary skills. However, the very best of these protections from theft cost as much as the Magingear itself, so you’d rarely see mechs with such high-level defenses even in the Triangle of Wisdom. My White Rose and Teach’s Blue Opera were about the only ones that came to mind.

“I guess we gotta destroy that before we can move on,” said Eldridge. I could see a hint of impatience on his face—probably because he was so concerned for his companion in the mall.

“Leave them to me and go on ahead,” I said. “Cyco!”

“Oui, ma’am.” I used Instant Release to remove White Rose from my Inventory and immediately jumped in as Cyco merged with the machine.

“All right,” said Eldridge.

“We’ll leave this to you,” said Niala. “Wait...? ‘Ma’am?’”

With those words, the two of them headed in the opposite direction as our enemies.

After seeing them off, I joined the battle.

“Cyco, how’s La Porte de l’Enfer?”

“Good to go. They’re all in the double digits.”

If both the Marshal II pilot and the infantry had a high enough kill count of other people, this fight would not be a problem for me. I’d already marked Eldridge and Niala as exceptions, and I couldn’t see any other people nearby, so I could use it without worries.

“Reduce the effective range to 50 metels. La Porte de l’Enfer.”

The next moment, all infantry within 50 metels were covered in ice. Some only had it creep into their limbs, while others froze almost completely. A few were lucky enough to avoid getting any ice on them at all, but the situation still threw them off guard.

Those who could retaliate tried to do so, but the bullets from their gunpowder-based firearms were all deflected by White Rose’s Mythical alloy armor.

Unlike guns that used magic, traditional guns had the same amount of firepower regardless of who used them. Personal firearms of this type couldn’t hope to break through White Rose’s defenses.

There was only one foe I needed to worry about.

“The *contents* of the mech didn’t freeze,” said Cyco.

As if confirming her statement, the custom unit moved to attack us with mobility that was simply impossible for a mech piloted by someone whose body was encased in ice. I’d seen how powerful the DLG’s Magingears were when they’d attacked Moneygold back at the hall, and I knew that not even White Rose could withstand it unscathed.

That was why I evaded the attacks instead—I wanted to make sure I didn’t take any direct hits.

“Thirteen seconds.” As long as La Porte de l’Enfer was active, time was on our side. Once 13 seconds passed, the second tick came, expanding the ice on those who were already Frozen as well as Freezing those who had gotten lucky the first time. Many of them were completely encased in ice now.

Despite this, the custom unit moved just as well as it had before.

“Cyco, what’s the count on the pilot?”

“Probably around *80*.”

Failing with an eighty percent chance twice in a row was within the realm of possibility, but this still sent a strange shiver down my spine. I felt like something was off here.

“We’ll fight the normal way,” I said hesitantly.

“Oui, ma’am.”

Whatever the reason was, I felt like La Porte de l’Enfer wouldn’t work here. Instead, I equipped a firearm and an ice blade before charging in to face the custom unit.

And as I did, Moneygold’s words echoed in my head.

Most powerful skills have flaws. It could even have some weaknesses that neither you nor Cyco are aware of.

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Eltram, Commerce Area

As the siren blared, Fey took anything worthwhile off the sleeping soldiers.

“It’s so damn loud,” she said to herself. The sound had surprised her at first, but nothing new had happened since. She’d even hid herself again, but it didn’t seem that any reinforcements were coming. That was why she’d begun ignoring the siren and looting the soldiers—but by this point the sound was beginning to annoy her.

“Oh yeah.” She then Stole the blaring comms devices, silencing them forcibly by storing them in her Inventory.

“Having some kinda comms thing sure wouldn’t hurt,” she said. “Heh heh heh. I’m bein’ a real MVP here! The leader’s gonna love this—and *me*! My chubby belly won’t matter at all!”

Fey put on a bright smile and pumped her fist in the air victoriously—until a desert-customized Marshal II hovered into her line of sight.

“Whaa?! But I did a perfect job! Wait, is this *because* of what I did with those

sirens?”

“This is where the comms were cut!” The Magingear’s pilot said. It turned out that the enemy had been using the comms devices to track their allies, and upon realizing that the markers here had vanished someone had rushed to the scene. And of course, it *was* all because Fey put the devices in her inventory—so much for her perfect job.

Oh. This ain’t good, Fey thought. This wasn’t an enemy Fey could handle. Her build was AGI and DEX focused, and the dagger debuffs she used in combat couldn’t break through thick carapaces or armor. She could try to run, but based on the speed with which the Marshal II had appeared, it had to be faster than her. Likely whoever was controlling it had the Gale Pilot job.

On top of that, Magingears were far too big to be taken using Steal. The only reason Eldridge could do it was because he had access to Greater Pickpocket—a King of Burglary skill.

Wh-Wh-Wh-What do I do?! O-Oh yeah! Feeling cornered, Fey quickly bent down and picked up one of the soldiers affected by Forced Sleep.

“You better not attack me if you value his life!” she cried, placing her dagger against the soldier’s neck.

It was truly the act of a lowly scoundrel.

Heh heh heh. This should bring that pilot to a stop and...huh?!

The Marshal II stopped moving only for a second before training its gun on her.

“I’m holding your friend here! Don’t you see?!” Fey insisted.

“A proud army man would rather die than be taken prisoner by men who fight dishonorably!”

“Hey, you shouldn’t cut off your people so easily! And I’m *not* a man!” Her villainous tactic failed spectacularly, and the pilot was about to fire at both Fey and the soldier when...

“Kill your own people all you want...but I won’t let you kill *mine*.”

...a voice rang out from behind the Marshall II unit—which then *vanished.*

“What?” The pilot was completely unable to process the situation.

“You’re wide open now!” said Fey as she showered the unlucky pilot with debuff attacks, putting Forced Sleep on him just as she’d done to his allies.

When it was all over, Fey started to cheer. “Woohoo! Justice wins again!”

“Justice? We’re a bandit clan... Anyway, I’m glad I made it in time.”

Those words made her turn around to see Eldridge—the very person who’d just stolen the Marshal II and saved Fey.

“Leader! I wanted to see you so bad! I was sooo scared!” she said, taking the chance to leap into his embrace.

“I won’t allow that.”

Niala, however, intervened.

“...Oh. Niala. I wanted to see you too.”

“That isn’t the reaction you gave *him*,” Niala said. “I do understand it, though.”

They sure get along, Eldridge thought as he watched his clanmates.

“Anyway, Fey,” he said. “Now that I know you’re safe, I’d like to ask you something.”

“My favorite foods are hot dogs with lots and lots of sauerkraut!”

“Not that,” Eldridge said, and Niala merely smacked Fey on the head. “Did the siren go off before or after you did something?”

“Uhh...” *He’s gonna get mad at me if I tell the truth!* Fey thought. Even she could figure out that much.

“Let me rephrase the question,” said Eldridge, glancing at the soldiers lying on the floor. “Are *they* the ones who activated the siren?”

“No, they’re not! I took them out silently!” she said, speaking quickly as though she was seizing a chance to prove her innocence.

“I see. That means we should get away with it...hm?”

As Fey’s words filled Eldridge with relief, he noticed a change in the surface he

was standing on.

The ship just shook... Did its speed change? As he wondered what had happened, Eldridge heard heavy footsteps approaching them.

“Eldridge. Is everything okay here?”

The footsteps belonged to a pure-white Magingear—Hugo’s White Rose.

“Ah! Leader! Another one! Take it!”

“No. That one’s our ally for now.”

Eldridge’s words confused Fey, so Niala pulled her to the side for an explanation of the events that had led up to this moment, while Hugo and Eldridge had an exchange of their own.

“Sorry for leaving you back there,” said Eldridge.

“It’s fine. You had to hurry to find your clan member.”

“Yeah, and I only made it in time thanks to you. Though, uh...” Eldridge instantly noticed the state White Rose was in. The frame was still untouched, but the surface armor was damaged here and there. He could tell it hadn’t been caused by infantry firearms, but by Marshal II weapons. “Did La Porte de l’Enfer not work on it?”

Hugo had told him about this skill back when he registered them as exceptions. It delivered a Freeze effect that grew stronger the more of their own kind the target had killed, with a guaranteed full body Freeze when the number was 100 or above. Eldridge assumed that it would be quite effective on career soldiers who’d been through a civil war, so he didn’t expect Hugo to have this much trouble with them.

“Actually...there’s something I want to ask about that.”

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Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

The battle ended shortly after I chose to actually fight.

That was because the pilot of the custom unit actually Froze not long after the battle began.

It was on either the fourth or the fifth tick. As we were dealing damage to each other, 80% of the pilot's body Froze, making piloting impossible, and then the next tick Froze the rest. The most obvious conclusion would be that the pilot was just lucky enough to avoid Freezing until then, but I—Hugo Lesseps—was convinced there must be more to this.

I felt that there must've been something that had blocked La Porte de l'Enfer.

That was why I showed Eldridge the custom unit I'd fought. "What do you think?"

The Frozen Pilot had already been removed from it and placed next to the infantry that had turned to ice first. I imagined that I'd have to unfreeze them once we handed them to the authorities.

"This mech's got the highest quality anti-theft defenses," said Eldridge. "And way more comms equipment than I'd expect."

"Comms?"

"My guess is that this is the source of the jamming, and it probably also hosts their whole comms network." The commercial area was close to the middle of the ship, so it must've been the most effective place to set up a comms bypass. It played an invaluable role in coordinating the DLG, and that explained why it was equipped with an anti-theft skill.

However, we still didn't know why the pilot didn't Freeze when I used La Porte de l'Enfer. Anti-theft, comms jamming, and comms hosting—none of this seemed like anything that would affect my skill.

"Did you use the skill on Magingears before?" Eldridge asked.

"A number of times during tests with the clan." If I recalled correctly, that had been part of an experiment led by Fran. I was put up against duel rankers from our clan, and the skill Froze them just fine.

Looking back, it was probably a test to see if it would work on Gideon's duel rankers too.

"Then it has to come down to some difference between then and now."

"Well, that thing's just *different*, right?" said Eldridge's clan member—Fey—as

she knocked on the custom unit's chest armor. "It's nothin' like the Marshal IIs I saw on the internet. The color is different and uhh...yeah, it's just real different."

"Looks like they spent lots of money redesigning it for deserts," said Eldridge. "That's good for our purposes."

"You know so much!"

"I just did my research on what I was gonna take. That's all there is to it."

"But how did they modify it this much?" Niala asked. "They're just soldiers who escaped their country, aren't they?"

"They're a bit more than that, Niala," said Eldridge with a shake of his head. "They're deserters, sure, but they're also the First Armored Battalion. Aside from the SMTF with all their super special abilities and lore, they are Dryfe's most elite soldiers. They've been handling, repairing, and modifying Magingears for a long time. When it comes to the power suits and tanks, they're actually better at it than the Triangle of Wisdom. It's really no surprise that they can customize their units to better suit a different environment."

"...I see."

"Since my Greater Pickpocket didn't work, I would've had tons of trouble with it myself. I don't think I can aim for a Greater Takeover without breaking the armor."

Eldridge touched the custom unit's chest-armor exactly as Fey had done.

"By the way, Hugo," Eldridge said, pointing at what looked like a crack in the armor. "Did you cause this?"

"Yes. With this blade," Hugo said.

"Did the pilot freeze before or after you made this crack?"

"Huh? I think it was...after."

"Ah...I guess that must be the reason it didn't work before," Eldridge said as he began fiddling with the unit.

"Have you figured it out?" I asked.

“Yeah. The damage made all the difference. Figure out yourself what that means—you gotta examine your own abilities as best as you can. It’s important to have a good grasp of them and not just do things haphazardly. That’s what separates the first rate from the second rate.”

“Wow, you’re so right!” said Fey.

“You...know you use your skills more haphazardly than anyone in the clan, right?” said Niala.

“I’d say that’s part of what makes her Fey,” Eldridge commented. “Embryo traits are based on their users, after all...ah, there we go.”

As he talked, Eldridge removed a part of the custom unit—the part responsible for the anti-theft effect.

“Can I have this?” Eldridge asked, and after I gave him a nod, he thanked me and took the unit.

“Anyway, that’s the commercial area cleaned up,” he continued. “Should we go to the passenger cabin next?”

“Ah! Oh yeah—I just remembered,” Fey suddenly raised her voice. “There was a huge, golden, strong-lookin’ Magingear that ran by here recently! I made No. 1 follow it, so I know where it is!”

A large golden Magingear? I thought. *Could that be...?*

“Where is it now?”

“Umm...” Fey groaned, poking her temple in an attempt to focus before pointing diagonally down. “Over there!”

“That’s...the power generator?” I asked.

“Unless the mech’s gotten off the ship, yeah,” said Eldridge. “And this is just my guess, but that unit is probably the head of the DLG. I heard that they’re led by a Magingear that looks like that.”

“Should we go find it?” Niala asked.

“I’d like to meet up with Moneygold first. It probably has anti-theft measures on it, so I doubt we could handle it by ourselves.”

I nodded to that. It was possible that La Porte de l'Enfer wouldn't work on it, just like it didn't work on the custom unit.

"The cause of the jamming is gone now, so maybe you can contact him?" Eldridge asked.

"I'll try," I said as I activated the comms device Moneygold had given me.

"Hugo?" Moneygold instantly replied. His voice was clear and there didn't seem to be any problems with the device.

"Yes," I said. "We're in the commerce area and we just took care of the unit that was causing the jamming. Also, Eldridge's clan member said that the leader of the DLG went to the power generator."

"All right, I see. On my end, I retook control of the bridge. The staff are all safe too. The energy core was deactivated, and the ship's running on residual magic. It'll soon slow to a halt."

"Ohh, that explains the change in speed," Eldridge said as he listened.

"Did the DLG deactivate it?" I asked.

"That's the natural conclusion...but it's strange how they went through the deactivation process so quickly. It's as if they knew exactly what to do to turn it off."

"That's true," said Eldridge. "Maybe it's just because they're Dryfean? Regardless, I'll go there and—what?"

Suddenly, I heard panicked voices on the other side as well as the sound of an explosion, which was followed by an explosion I heard not through the comms device, but with my own ears.

"What...?!"

"The first escort ship was sunk!"

"The second one has been hit!" The people on the bridge were reporting the situation. They must've been talking about the escort ships meant to protect *Eltram* from monsters and the like.

"Forget what I said," said Moneygold. "I can't go there now. Try handling it

yourselves.”

“Moneygold?” I asked. We couldn’t see outside from the commercial area, so we didn’t know what was happening.

“The second escort ship’s damage is spreading... It sunk!”

“The third one was hit!”

“An unidentified entity is approaching from the horizon at four o’clock!”

But those words I heard over the comms told us that the situation wasn’t good...

“I-It’s a dragon! A *mechanical dragon* is attacking the escort ships...!”

...and that furthermore, it was about to change drastically.

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Five Minutes Ago, 20 Kilometels Southwest From Eltram

A crimson and white mechdragon rushed over the sands, veiled by night.

In its cockpit, there was a man and a woman. The man was The Weapon, Rascal the Bloodonyx. The woman was the goofy maid merged with his Embryo, as well as the creator of this unit—Machina.

“Master! We’re about to reach *Eltram*!”

“We’re here...faster than...I expected...” said Rascal, clutching his hand to his chest. He was doing that because his ribs were cracking—the price he paid for moving at supersonic speeds, which he hadn’t planned on doing. When their comms link with Zhang on *Eltram* were cut, Machina had said, “Oh! It’s an emergency! We gotta hurry!” and then pushed the mechdragon to break the sound barrier so they could make it there faster.

This had the unfortunate side effect of damaging Rascal’s bones.

They’d originally planned to move at a speed he could handle, so after such a massive boost, it was no wonder they’d made it here so quickly.

“Rascal.” As the unit slightly slowed down and Rascal administered a high quality Potion to heal himself, he heard a voice over his comms device. That voice belonged to Zhang.

“Zhang? Did comms recover?”

“Yes. I believe the cause of the jamming was eliminated by the ship’s forces.”

“I see. What’s the current status?”

“Dryfe’s Legitimate Government has taken control of the ship, but the special hall with all the VIPs was liberated by the Superior, Moneygold, and those working with him. They’re currently eliminating the rest.”

Just as they’d planned, there was a conflict in place that they could use as a chance to analyze the combatants involved. The conflict had nothing to do with the Orb, though, so it hadn’t gone *exactly* as they were expecting.

“Emily, however...”

“Did somethin’ happen to her?”

“She sees the DLG as enemies and is traveling the ship to eliminate them. Normally, she would have recovered from her kill state already, but it does not seem to be happening.”

“I see.”

Usually, Emily would return to normal the moment all the enemies in her immediate area were gone. But now she was wandering around and looking for more foes.

This was a definite increase in her combat capabilities, but it was hardly something Rascal wanted to celebrate.

Did her illness get worse? In that case, should I tell the hospital to take off her headset? But that would count as a Suicide in-game, though. It won’t help our overall plans if she goes to the gaol, Rascal thought to himself. *If she hasn’t overcome this yet, it’s not a good idea to stop her.*

“Rascal?” the voice over the comms asked.

“All right, I get the sitch. Just leave Emily like that for now. I’ll come pick her up later.”

“Very well,” said Zhang. “Also...there is something else I feel I should say.”

He then proceeded to tell Rascal how Emily had entrusted Doris to him.

“Emily asked you to protect the girl while in still in her combat state, huh?” Hearing that just made Rascal lose himself in thought once again.

The fact that she’s seeking out enemies makes it seem like she’s gotten worse, but this actually looks like an overall improvement. But...then again, is it really? It’s hard to tell. I should probably bring it up with her doctor later...but regardless, we should secure the girl.

“Zhang, keep the girl safe,” Rascal said. “You can even prioritize her over Emily—I’m sure Emily will be just fine no matter the situation. She’a got the gear for it now.”

“Very well.” With that order sent, Rascal switched off the comms device.

As if she’d been waiting for that to happen, Machina spoke up.

“Master, we have a teeny bit of a problem.”

“I don’t exactly *wanna* hear it, but I will.”

“Umm, *Eltram*’s power has been cut. The source is probably being removed...”

“Shit,” Rascal spat out a swear word he didn’t often employ, his face twisting in annoyance “So that’s what they’re after, not the Orb. Someone’s already laid claim to it, huh...? Damn it. Now we’ve got no choice but to charge in right away. There’s no time to observe the situation.”

“Uhhh...why?”

“Imagine if the DLG got their hands on that energy core. It’ll be enough of a pain if they manage to get away with it, but what if Moneygold defeats them before they can escape? Sefirot will have that core all to themselves, and they’ll be able to make *Eltram*’s owners believe that it was taken by the DLG.”

“That...sounds pretty crooked.”

“And there’s a certain someone with them who can do that without thinkin’ anythin’ of it,” Rascal said, picturing a face known by almost everyone in Caldina—the president. That mental image made him frown like he’d just tasted something bitter. “That’s why we gotta take it or break it before that happens...” After a deep sigh, he looked ahead. “Machina, get ready for a

preemptive strike.”

“Aye-aye sir! Sardonyx is ready to go!”

Rascal’s order received an answer from both Machina and Sardonyx—the landdragon-type Prism Dragon redesigned and freshly manufactured in the modern era. The hum of its energy cores echoed through the desert like a roar.

“Shift from Cannon Cruiser to Over Sniper form,” Rascal ordered. “We’ll use the Horizon Arch.”

“Oh! This is the first time we’ll be using the main cannon since the test! You got it! That ship’s a total goner!”

“Stop. Only target the escort vessels. Emily and Zhang are still on *Eltram*.”

“Aye-aye sir!” Machina began to enter commands on the keyboard before her at incredible speeds.

That caused Sardonyx to transform.

It still had the shape of a wingless dragon, but its neck was beginning to grow. Eventually it was so long and straight that when the dragon opened its mouth, its overall shape was reminiscent of a rifle.

“Shift complete! Launching survey buoy!”

The back of the transformed Sardonyx released a single missile as though it was a signal flare. Once it reached a certain height, the missile jettisoned its casing and became a sensor floating in place, overlooking a vast area and sending the gathered optical data back to Sardonyx.

“We have visuals. There are two escort vessels facing our direction...oh, wait, three if we really try for it.”

“Destroy them all. Knowing what’ll happen later, it won’t hurt to lower their numbers.”

“Aye-aye sir. I’ll fix the sights...there we go.”

After she said that, her seat began to transform. It turned around, going from a chairlike shape to a horizontal one. It was as though the rear seat became a mat spread out right above Rascal’s head. Machina laid down on it and took

hold of a device that came down from somewhere above the cockpit. This device functioned as both a trigger and a sighting device linked to the unit's camera-eye.

She looked through it, but there was nothing beyond it but the desert.

That was what she was expecting—*Eltram* was still beyond the horizon, after all. It was impossible to physically spot it yet. And considering that it was completely obscured, sniping it from this distance was an absurd idea.

However, the eye Machina used on the sighting device was certainly looking at *something*.

"The visual info we got from above is... The current location of the unit... The height of the dunes... The current location of the target...mhm. It all checks out." Machina gathered the visual data from the survey buoy above, as well as the data observed by the camera-eye, then ran them through her internal processor to calculate her aim.

"And here's...the first shot!"

The moment she said that, Sardonyx's angled cannon-maw released its first shell.

It flew slightly upwards at several times the speed of sound. Eventually, when it was at a certain point in the sky, the explosives set on the shell went off, changing its trajectory so that it rocketed downward—*straight toward the bridge of the first escort vessel*.

"It hit!"

"Beautiful. Is that what you wanna hear?"

"Eh heh heh heh! Say it again!"

"Hurry up and keep firin'."

"Hey, you could show me some more love, you know!" Machina whined, but she still sounded somewhat happy as she fired the second shot and hit the second vessel.

Horizon Arch—the most unique among Sardonyx's weapons, it was Machina's design for a long-range sniper cannon. Its direct line of fire had a radius of 50

kilometels—an incredible range matching that of a rail gun. On top of that, the shells it fired had explosives attached to them that could be detonated at a preset time to change the shell's trajectory.

However, that was only possible in a hypothetical best-case scenario. The shell would never hit if it wasn't fired from the right angle at an invisible target, and if both the initial firing and the explosives weren't timed perfectly—. Even rail guns from Earth, despite all the fanfare regarding their range, weren't actually all that *accurate*.

However, if fired by Machina a hundred times, all one hundred shells would strike their target.

The aiming angle, the moment at which the trigger was pulled, the timer on the explosives—she calculated all of that herself, and she did so without fault. Her processing power nearly defied belief.

This wasn't so strange for her, though. She was the eldest Prism Person—the DEX-focused Agate Designer often lauded as the pinnacle of them all.

Deactivated two thousand years ago, she'd been picked up by Rascal in one of the Ruins and given new life through a connection to his Superior Embryo—Deus Ex Machina.

And despite all the intervening years, her design skill hadn't dulled, and her handling prowess hadn't degraded one bit.

"The second ship sank. And I hit the third one too. Oh—the cannon's starting to feel the burn."

As a gunpowder weapon with such an incredible range, it suffered immense heat damage every few shots. Extended use of it would eventually cause it to break mid-shot, greatly damaging the unit itself.

"All right. *I'll fix it up*," Rascal said, touching the armrest of his chair and using a skill. "Rewind Weapon."

With those words, a light washed over Sardonyx.

And when it subsided, the cannon that had been overheating a moment before cooled down—and it didn't have a single scratch on it, as if it had never

been fired at all.

This was Rascal's skill as The Weapon.

"That blows my mind no matter how many times I see it!"

"I'm just usin' what I've got." The Weapon was a Superior Job specialized in the operation of weaponry, and the focus of its skills could be summarized in two words: restoration magic.

In other words, it was *a Superior Job that could use healing magic on machines*.

While Mechanics and the like focused on skills that enabled faster repairs through the replacement of broken parts, The Weapon fixed damaged machines magically.

Its abilities could accurately be characterized as "repair magic."It couldn't heal what was completely lost—such as Machina's left arm—it could take care of dents and cracks in existing parts, as well as instantly tune and stabilize any machines with damaged software that were experiencing critical errors.

This meant that as long as Rascal was riding Sardonyx, neither physical damage nor software failure could break it down.

That was the main reason he was riding it even though he risked breaking more bones in the process.

In fact, this unit was so unbalanced that it would likely be destroyed without Rascal's care.

"The Weapons of the past couldn't use it as well as you do, though!" Machina said.

The Weapon's repair magic was premised on—in fact, it necessitated—the user knowing the full structure of the target machine. But that wasn't a problem. Even if Rascal himself didn't know it, his other half—the Superior Embryo, Deus Ex Machina—did. It was because of this Embryo's ability to grasp the structure of any machine it connected with that Rascal was able to become The Weapon in the first place.

The Weapon, The Earth...it wasn't that uncommon for Masters to fulfill the

conditions for the The One series of jobs using their Embryos rather than mastery of their own skills as intended. In fact, Masters who achieved it through pure technical prowess—such as The Unsheath, Kashimiya—were the rarity here.

"And...boom! There goes the third one!"

"Shift back to Cannon Cruiser form. We'll get into *Eltram* and head to the power area."

"Aye-aye sir!" Sardonyx's extended cannon was retracted, Machina's seat returned to normal, and the unit began charging toward the now undefended ship.

"By the way..." said Machina.

"What?"

"There's no way Zhang and Emily are on the bridge, right?"

Rascal instantly understood what she was trying to say.

"*Fire*."

"Aye-aye sir!"

Rascal's one word was enough for Sardonyx's draconic maw to open up again. It was in a short-barreled mobile firing mode rather than long-range sniping mode, but Machina once again usedHorizon Arch. Though the target wasn't obscured by the horizon anymore, she still activated the skill while Sardonyx was moving at high speeds.

That was not a problem, however. Just like she hadn't missed the Magingears in Lieutenant Colonel Berlin's squad during the test, she didn't miss *Eltram*'s bridge.

"A hit...huh?" Despite the clean hit, Machina looked puzzled.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, it just didn't deal as much damage as I—evasive maneuvers!" Before she could finish her sentence, she grabbed and pushed the control column to make the unit dodge to the side.

The intense g-force once again jostled Rascal's body, making his bones creak and blood start to spill from his mouth.

However, he wouldn't complain about that—a large shining projectile passed right through the space Sardonyx was occupying just a moment ago.

"Treasure Cannon! It's Moneygold!" The familiar attack allowed him to instantly understand the situation. "So he's at the bridge. I guess he used himself as a barrier to prevent a direct hit."

"What do we do now?" Machina asked.

As they talked, multiple shining projectiles worth hundreds of millions flew toward them. Machina had the piloting technique to evade them, but the attacks left many new craters in the patches of desert where they landed. It was clear what would happen if one of the shots were to hit its target.

"Don't waste our ammo," said Rascal. "Our attacks won't work on him when that skill's active. Other than that, this doesn't change our plans. Advance. Treat this like an action game instead of a shootin' game. Look for openings in his attacks and use them to approach the ship. He won't be able to attack that freely once we're in."

Sardonyx was far tougher than the common Marshal II—in fact, it wasn't even a fair comparison. The firepower needed to destroy it was naturally far greater, and if Moneygold unleashed that much devastation inside *Eltram*, the consequences would be dire.

"It's gonna require some intense movements to get close... Are you sure you can handle it?" Machina asked, worried about her frail Master.

"I'm pretty sure I just told you to 'advance,'" he replied through the blood in his mouth, clearly indicating that she should keep going.

"...Aye-aye sir!"

That was all that had to be said. Machina obeyed the will of her owner and drove Sardonyx straight into the deadly bullet hell.

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Eltram, Commerce Block

Vibrations shook from the bridge, followed by quakes from the desert in the distance.

The situation moved fast, and Eldridge responded just as quickly.

“Niala,” he said. “The *owl*.”

“Right away.” Niala held up her left hand, which shone brightly. This was followed by six blue windows appearing around her. She touched one of them, causing a single mechanical owl to fly out of its other side.

At the same time, Eldridge stole a part of the wall with his skill, letting the owl fly outside.

A moment later, the window the owl had just exited began to display what was outside the ship’s walls.

This was Niala’s Embryo—Type Legion, Winged Omnipotence, Simurgh. It was an avian Type Legion with many uses based on which bird the user called forth. There was the survey-focused Spotter Owl that Niala had just used, the Group Crow for causing distraction and confusion, the Message Pigeon meant to deliver messages, the Cargo Pelican for transport, the Fighting Falcon for air battles, and the Genocide Condor meant for wide-scale destruction.

However, despite being a Type Legion, they relied on Niala herself to give them commands and control them, and her ability to do so limited the number of birds she could employ at once. Because of that, she usually used the owl by itself to survey the enemy’s location before sniping them.

This didn’t affect her ability to control multiple birds at once, but activating the ones with high combat ability incurred high external costs, so her recent financial state was another reason she rarely used them.

“This...looks like a battle,” Niala said, perplexed, as she looked at the owl’s window.

There was a mechanical dragon approaching the ship, and countless shining projectiles fired from the bridge were trying to stop it. The projectiles caused immense destruction where they landed—a single hit would be enough to sink the ship.

However, they were familiar with this sight.

“I guess a new attacker appeared, and Moneygold’s trying to fend them off,” said Eldridge. He figured that the attacker was a Superior too, but he wasn’t sure about that, so he didn’t say it out loud. The fact that Moneygold was having trouble with these new foes seemed like enough proof.

Another Superior...now I can’t say we’re safe even though we’re with Moneygold. Even if we ignore that new one, there’s still two others, and one of them’s the damn Murder Princess... I thought I’d finally succeeded at a job, and now this happens! Maybe we should look for a chance to pull out.

Eldridge was scared of what would happen if he ended the alliance with Moneygold and ran away, but he certainly didn’t want to fight and lose against yet another Superior either.

The head of the DLG down in the power area supposedly has the most valuable mech of them all, though. I can’t lie—I’d like to get my hands on it. Acquiring just that unit would make their profits from this venture skyrocket.

Now Eldridge wasn’t sure whether to retreat or advance.

“Little lady?! What’s wrong?! You’re all bloody!”

That was when he heard Fey’s worried voice. He looked over to see her approach a little girl in a bloodstained dress.

The girl had a crest on her left hand, making it clear she was a Master. It looked like she’d come from the passenger cabins. Niala and Eldridge both were so focused on the visuals projected by the owl that they’d fail to notice her approach.

At first glance she looked like a victim of the DLG. But a moment later, Eldridge realized what immense danger they were in.

It was because her face and crest were on his personal mental blacklist.

“Leader! She’s all hurt—”

“GET AWAY FROM HER!” Eldridge and Hugo shouted at the exact same time.

“Huh?”

However, before Fey could react to the warning...

The girl recognized her as an “enemy” who’d obstructed her path.

“...Minus.”

And with that one word, the Murder Princess, Emily, sliced diagonally at Fey’s torso.

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Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

I watched as her slender body collapsed to the floor, an enormous amount of blood and viscera gushing out from the wound.

“Cyco!”

“Oui, ma’am.”

I quickly did what I had to do—the reason I was on this ship in the first place. The reservations I had regarding Emily had no place in this desperate moment.

Just like during the final attack in Gideon, my body followed my will and moved without hesitation.

“La Porte de l’Enfer!” I jumped into White Rose again and instantly activated my skill.

And just like she had in Cortana, Emily Froze in but a moment. There were no failures like with the DLG’s custom unit—she was instantly encased in ice.

“And now...!” I did the same thing as I had in Cortana. Using Boucliers Planete, I trapped the ice sculpture, preventing it from being destroyed by her own axes. I’d done this before, and I could do it again.

The moment that thought passed through my mind, her left shoulder began to shine and *she dissolved into motes of light*.

“Huh?” The bewilderment made my mind go blank, but it did not last for long...

“Minus.”

...for Emily was immediately reconstituted and attacked me with her axes.

“Wha—?!” I activated the unit’s defense skills at full capacity and assumed a defensive stance. The Murder Princess’s attacks seemed heavier than they had in Cortana, and they echoed throughout the cockpit.

This weight of her attacks was the weight of all the lives she took. It was the same thing that let La Porte de l’Enfer trap her in ice, and yet...!

“Second tick.”

Thirteen seconds had passed, and with those words from Cyco, Emily Froze again.

However, yet again, her left shoulder shone, she turned into bits of light, and was reconstituted.

“No way...!” I’d anticipated something like this. I’d considered the possibility that she—or whatever allies she had—would create a countermeasure for this specific strategy that had once defeated her.

But I never expected...

“Every time she freezes...*she dies*,” Cyco says.

I never thought that she would *die whenever she got a debuff*.

It wasn’t a skill. She already had a Superior Embryo, so I doubted that she could gain new Embryo skills, and I couldn’t imagine any job would have such a terrible utility skill.

This was probably caused by a piece of equipment that stopped all bodily function in reaction to binding and curse debuffs.

It was an awful item that normally would never see any use. Debuffs were a problem, but they weren’t nearly as bad as dying.

But for Emily, it was the other way around. Just dying once was better than being sealed up for a long period of time.

But I wouldn’t have expected her to actually come up with something like that.

“Ngh!” Moneygold had hired me to deal with Emily, so this situation was really bad for me. Every thirteen seconds, I Froze her, killing her once.

But I couldn’t even imagine how many times she could revive. She would defeat me long before I could stop her.

There was also the problem with White Rose’s operating time, which was far worse for me than it had been in Cortana.

“Still...I can’t let her do as she pleases.” Where would she go if she got past this mall? Would she head to the bridge and attack Moneygold while he was fighting the threat outside? Would she head to the special hall and slaughter the people there?

Regardless of where she went, someone would die. Emily would slaughter someone once again.

“That’s why we have to stop her here!”

“Oui, ma’am.”

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Eltram, Commerce Area

“Fey...” After Fey fell to the floor, Eldridge rushed over and picked her up.

“Fey! Are you okay?!” Niala also dropped her composed expression, pulled out some healing items, and tried using them on her clanmate.

Fey’s HP, however, continued to fall. She’d already lost a great amount of blood, and some of her internal organs had spilled out of her body. A high-rank job from the priest grouping would be the minimum necessary to save her now.

Her breathing ragged, Fey looked down at herself.

“My dress is torn... Everyone can see my boobs...how embarrassing.”

“Fey, this is *really* not the time...” said Niala.

Fey chuckled lightly before somehow forcing her stiffening face muscles into a smile. Then, she looked at Eldridge, still holding her.

“I’m in his arms... That’s one good thing about this. You jealous, Niala...?”

“Ugh, you’re so...!”

Fey didn’t see this as a touching goodbye. Unlike tians, Masters were immortal. Fey would come back the moment her death penalty expired.

“Oh, but...it’s a shame... I wanted to dance with you at the ball,” Fey said, looking at Eldridge. Despite her satisfaction with the situation, Fey hadn’t gotten the one thing she actually wanted.

The fact that he couldn’t even manage something that small for a girl who had always stood by him even at his lowest filled Eldridge with self-loathing.

“Hey,” Fey said as she looked at him, smiling despite it all. It turned out she had one more request for him. “I want you to win.”

“Win...?”

“I want you to win against *her*.”

Eldridge instantly understood who she was referring to—Murder Princess

Emily, the one who had given her this fatal injury[Murder Princess] Emily. She was the owner of a Superior Embryo that made her immortal, powerful even by Superior standards, and wasn't remotely less dangerous than any of the Superiors who had already defeated Eldridge in the past. "But I..."

Because of that, he had doubts he could manage it—but Fey had none.

"You're strong..." She gave her beloved a natural smile. "*We* believe that not even Superiors can beat you."

With those words, Fey encouraged him to fight.

Eldridge was left speechless. Searching for how to respond, he looked down at Fey, then up at Niala—but both of them only gave him a trusting nod.

At that sight, Eldridge gasped as he recalled how even after Goblin Street's first major defeat by Lei-Lei the Prodigal of Feasts, the two girls had still believed that not even a Superior could beat them if their leader had been there.

However, they continued to lose to Superiors even when he was present, so the members of their clan gave up hope and left one after another.

But there were two left who believed in him even now: Fey and Niala.

Even though one of them was about to vanish, they both continued to trust that Eldridge could win even against a Superior. It was a simpleminded, pure, heartfelt belief that stayed alive despite it all.

And now, Eldridge could feel it clearly.

He then took a moment to think. The thing that he was scared of the most right now was another defeat by a Superior. He was afraid that if it happened again, even Fey and Niala would lose faith in him and leave.

But at this moment, he came to understand something important.

These two had stayed with him even when he lost, and kept on believing in him no matter how many defeats he suffered.

And that meant this was no time to let them see the side of him that was terrified of Superiors.

“Do your best...my leader.” With those final words to her beloved, Fey dissolved into light.

“...Yeah.”

Eldridge watched her vanish and let her final words echo within him. Once her motes of light were gone, he stood up.

Then he looked toward Hugo and Emily’s battle...

“Hugo...we’re switching.”

...and made a proclamation before swinging both his hands around.

A moment later, blood gushed out of Emily’s now-torn neck, making her back away. At the exact same time, another La Porte de l’Enfer tick activated, freezing her right as she reached for her throat.

Her left side began to shine and she transformed into light before being restored to life, but she had stopped in place for a moment.

“Niala. The falcon. Bury her.”

“Roger that!” Following Eldridge’s order, Niala summoned Simurgh’s fastest combat unit—the Fighting Falcon, which was shaped like a fighter jet. The mechanical falcon flew toward the ceiling right above Emily and *crashed into it*.

The ceiling collapsed and buried Emily’s frozen form. Even if she revived now, she would still need some time to get out of the rubble.

Eldridge used this time to tell Hugo everything he needed to know.

“Looks like they countered your La Porte de l’Enfer. I’ll handle her, then. You go to the power area.”

“But if we just take away the item that counters La Porte de l’Enfer...” *I could freezelock her again,* Hugo almost said, but Eldridge shook his head before he could finish his sentence.

Eldridge knew exactly what Hugo was trying to say, but that was also how he knew that Hugo’s proposal was impossible.

“That won’t happen. We can’t steal that item,” Eldridge said, intently watching the rubble Emily was buried under. “Notice how the light that shines

before she dies always emanates from different parts of her body? And there's never any noticeable gear in any of those places. That probably means the item skill is triggered *under her skin*."

Even while saying goodbye to Fey, Eldridge had paid enough attention to Emily to notice such details.

"What do you mean?"

"My guess is that the item is *inside* her—in her blood. And since I can't see it, not even I can target and take it."

"Inside...?!"

"Either someone injected a super tiny accessory into her, or they gave her a different item with an effect that allowed this one to enter her body. Whichever it was, it was done pretty thoroughly. Whoever set this up countered my abilities so well that I feel like they have to know someone who's also really good at stealing gear. I'm surprised they could even create something like this, but this is *Infinite Dendrogram,* after all. Nothing's impossible."

The item in question was called Euthanasia.

Developed by Machina—also known as Agate Designer, one of the greatest item creators of the pre-ancient civilization—it was a tiny accessory that flowed in the blood.

The purpose of the small size, just as Eldridge had suspected, was to counter theft—a feature based on the abilities of King of Thieves, whom the creator was familiar with. Referencing the skills of that specific Superior Job, Machina designed the item to activate an instadeath effect when the item was equipped and when the wearer falls under the effect of a binding-type debuff.

Though she was unable to include a feature that would hide the sign of its activation, that was largely irrelevant—destroying or stealing it was practically impossible.

That was the piece of gear Emily had been given to prevent any more unexpected defeats like the one she had suffered in Cortana.

"Maybe things would be different if we could incinerate her without leaving a

trace, but as far as I can tell, her other gear gives resistance to those kinds of attacks.” Eldridge had seen a recording of the battle at Cortana and knew that she barely burned even when hit by a Crimson Sphere.

“That’s why there’s no chance you can get rid of the item and take care of her afterward. Give up.”

“But...”

“I’ll say it again: go to the power generator. Your La Porte de l’Enfer should be more useful there. Maybe it won’t work at first for the same reason it didn’t work on the last Magingear, but I know you can figure that out and take care of the problem.”

Eldridge told Hugo to give up on Emily...

“Leave the Murder Princess to me.”

...and once again declared in no uncertain terms that he would fight the Superior.

He’d been avoiding this battle at first, but he was no longer afraid.

“I won’t make any big speeches ‘avenging Fey’ or whatever. I’ll be seeing her in three days anyway.”

Masters were immortal. Though most couldn’t come back as quickly as Emily, they could log in once again once their death penalty expired, which was only three days in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

“But that doesn’t mean I’m not mad about her getting killed,” Eldridge went on. Despite his anger, his hands weren’t clenched into fists. His combat-ready stance called for him to keep his hands open—and that was his real expression of rage.

“I couldn’t even fulfill that tiny little wish she had. That makes me mad—art myself and at the Murder Princess...and this anger needs an outlet.”

“Eldridge...”

“And if they believe I can win, then I gotta live up to their expectations.”

There was just one last thing Hugo had to ask before giving this battle to

Eldridge.

“Can you win?” A Superior and a pre-Superior—the gap between the two was obvious. It was so vast that Marie Adler had been dubbed the “Superior Killer” for merely defeating a single Superior with no aid from anyone else.

Eldridge himself knew well how powerful they were. People who’d been defeated by Superiors as many times as him were rare.

Despite knowing all that, he...

“I have a...seventy percent chance of winning.”

...announced his assessment of the odds as though it was plainly obvious.

The man who’d already lost to multiple Superiors confidently claimed that he could defeat the one who was immortal.

“You go support him, Niala.”

“All right.” Eldridge didn’t need Niala’s assistance in the battle against Emily, and Niala herself knew that she would only get in the way, so all she did was nod.

“Don’t worry—I’ll win this time.”

“I believe you.”

“Anyway, Hugo, that’s the situation as it stands. Leave this to me and go.”

“Very well...may you emerge the victor, then.”

“That makes you sound like a knight or samurai or something, but I’ll take it.” Eldridge gave a faint smile. Behind him, he felt Hugo and Niala take their leave. Hugo didn’t look back. Niala looked back just once, and then they both moved toward the power area.

That was when Emily dug herself out of the rubble.

“Minus.” Her emotionless, lifeless eyes quickly recognized Eldridge as an enemy.

She was a fearsome killing machine in the form of a little girl. There weren’t even that many Superiors who could defeat her.

“Caldina’s strongest PK, Murder Princess Emily Killingston.”

Despite that, the man calling her name showed no fear. He only *reconfirmed* the steps he will take to achieve victory.

He already knew how she fought from that video of her battle in Cortana.

“I’m King of Burglary, Eldridge.”



He calmly gave her his name...

“The man who was once known as *Altar’s strongest PK*.”

...and his old title.

At one point, that was how Eldridge had been known. With the likes of Sechs and Kashimiya rising to claim that title, though, the number of people who knew that it had once belonged to Eldridge was decreasing.

But there was no lie in his words—he was certainly the *first* person to have ever held that title.

Emily’s eyes were fixed on him. It wasn’t clear if she was capable of analyzing her enemy’s abilities while in her killing mode. However, she was clearly wary of him and whatever he was going to do.

Eldridge also looked at her straight on.

And thus, the goblin bared his fangs against the murder-demon.

Interlude: Pale Death

Eltram, Cargo Area

Several minutes before Moneygold began fighting Rascal, Isara had separated from Moneygold and gone to the cargo storage area.

Normally, a bodyguard like her would always stay by the side of the person she served, but this wasn't necessary while Moneygold was using his ultimate. With enough MP restoration, his defensive skill that turned all attacks into money could remain active for about an hour—and almost no one could harm him while it was up. Isara's role as his bodyguard was focused on preventing surprise attacks and supporting him in other ways. She'd lived as an assassin before, and Moneygold had sought her out and taken her in as a close aide precisely because of the skills she'd developed in that profession.

Her dream was to create an orphanage in Caldina to save young children from being forced to live the same way she had, and Moneygold had hired her by paying the immense sum of money needed to realize that dream. Isara was deeply thankful for that, since her old job had never been lucrative enough to finance it.

That was why she followed her benefactor's orders to the letter and went to fulfill her role elsewhere.

Eltram had four important places: the hall full of VIPs, the bridge that controlled the ship, the power generator that supplied all of its energy, and the cargo hold where countless precious goods were carried.

In Caldina, Dryfe's Legitimate Government was known to frequently plunder supplies. It was likely that they'd also gone to the cargo area, and that was why Moneygold had sent her there.

There are clear signs that powered suits have been here, she thought—just as Moneygold had predicted she would find.

They had been heading toward the cargo area, and it appeared there were six of them.

People equipped with guns or wearing powered suits were no threat to Isara. She held the metal manipulation magic Superior Job, Fullmetal Princess. With no resistances on them, equipment like that was nothing but another weapon for her to use.

It's safe to assume they're already in the cargo area. Preparing to ambush them using her powers, she looked down at the cargo area from the nearby stairs—the very stairs Eldridge had been sitting on recently.

...Huh?

But what she saw left her dumbfounded in spite of her vigilance. She might have even said something out loud if she'd had less experience in combat.

What she saw in the cargo block were items strewn about the floor—specifically, six sets of military clothing and six corresponding armor-type Magingears.

And all of them were covered by piles of white dust—*enough dust to make up a whole human body each*.

Isara's instincts told her that those were human remains, and that they belonged to the DLG soldiers who'd come here for the cargo.

Her eyes widened as she exposed the Mythical metal bracelet under her sleeve, and she instantly used her metal magic to turn the bracelet into a thin wire that she controlled using her mind. Then, she directed it into the cargo area, making the wire even thinner and spreading it out in all directions to create a spiderlike web.

She used the web to scan the space within the cargo hold and look for whoever—or whatever—had killed the soldiers.

However, all she learned from this investigation was that there was nobody moving within.

Isara gathered her resolve, stepped into the cargo area, and examined the remains.

"...Bits of ice?" Immediately she realized that the white powder was the result of a flash frozen body being shattered.

They weren't sapped of just the heat, but also their very life energy, she thought. *The effect is similar to the Vital Squeeze skill used by Blood Cavaliers...Legendaria's vampires...*

Vital Squeeze was a type of HP drain skill which was known to turn those it killed into ash, but the victims here had been drained of life far more thoroughly than that.

And it's just awful inside... Some Inventories within the cargo area had been shattered, and their contents were spread all over. It looked like there were offensive gems among them that had triggered upon hitting the floor and walls, leaving marks on every surface.

"Hm?" While looking around the broken inventories, Isara discovered something strange. One of them looked like the remains of a common Inventory at first, but a closer look made it clear that it was simply a box designed to look like one—it hadn't been made with the space expansion feature common to actual Inventories.

Did someone sneak it in with all the other cargo? But for what purpose? Besides that, there was something else among the scattered goods that caught her eye. She reached out to an object next to the fake inventory and picked it up.

"Ah! This is...!" Isara opened her eyes wide as she realized that the object looked like a shard of shattered glass.

A moment later, she was distracted from it by the sound of a massive machine activating somewhere in a neighboring area.

That's...the evacuation zone! The cargo area and the evacuation zone were right next to each other to make it easier to rescue cargo in an emergency. The sound coming from there was proof enough that something unexpected was happening.

Isara turned around, left the now-empty cargo area, and followed the strange noise.

When she arrived at the evacuation zone...

"The ramp...is down?"

...she noticed that the ramp meant to deploy evacuation boats *had been lowered*, and the desert night spread out before her in that direction.

Was that the sound of the ramp being lowered? Since *Eltram* was still on the move, the dunes visible from the now-open bay were quickly flying by. The ship must've traveled a fair distance since the point where the ramp was deployed.

This must've been opened by whoever—or whatever—killed the soldiers in the cargo area. It had come from within the cargo hold, killed the soldiers who'd opened the door, and just recently left the ship from this evacuation zone.

Isara took a moment to wonder whether she should follow it, but her duty was to protect Moneygold and remove any enemies within the ship. She didn't have the authority to abandon that post and chase after some unidentified entity.

Even if that wasn't the case, her instincts were telling her that *she would die if she chased it*.

And then, the situation suddenly shifted once again.

"The ship...stopped?" *Eltram* began to shake as it slowed down and finally stopped in place.

What happened at the bridge? Isara thought. Unaware that the DLG had removed the energy core, Isara assumed that something must've happened to the ship's controls.

Considering that and the odd occurance in the cargo area, she decided meeting up with Moneygold would be the best course of action.

With that in mind, she rushed toward the bridge. In her hand, she still held the shard she'd picked up at the cargo area.

Its texture was *exactly the same as that of the object Moneygold had bought yesterday*—one of the national treasures of Huang He, the Treasurebeast Orb.

There was only one thing, she realized, that could have come out of that cargo hold and exited the ship.

Chapter 6: The Goblin and the Murder-Demon

About Eldridge

Eldridge, otherwise known as Leon Philadelphia, had no grand reason for getting into *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Born as the son of one of the leading banking families in the States, he was guaranteed to inherit the business from birth. However, his parents had sent him to a top class university, and between his studies at school and preparation for his eventual succession, he was left with no time to relax and unwind.

During those busy days, he saw the advertisement for *Infinite Dendrogram's* release.

Of the many promotional taglines it had, the one that caught his eye the most was the claim that triple the amount of time passed inside the game as outside of it.

"If that's true, I'd pay hundreds of thousands of dollars for it." Leon wanted to triple his rest and playtime. It wasn't an uncommon reason, but with how little of his own time he had, he was nothing if not serious about it.

And once he had the product in his hands, he was more than satisfied.

In fact, *Infinite Dendrogram* moved him so much that even the tripled time wasn't enough. It began taking up more and more of his real hours, forcing him to work even harder in real life—which might have been a bit of a miscalculation on his part. He even immediately started assisting his father after he graduated university, so his life didn't become any easier once he was out of school.

He also didn't have a strong reason for being in the burglar job grouping. It wasn't that he felt like taking a job directly opposed to his real one—he simply thought the job sounded efficient.

As he continued to play like that, he joined up with people who did similar

things, and eventually created a clan. The analytical ability he'd developed in real life turned him into an excellent leader, and as his skills garnered more respect and awe, he soon found himself in charge.

His methods were clever. He secured save points in other countries, kept his risks low, carefully picked his burglary targets, and made sure to never do anything that would get him on every wanted list. He looked at every bit of information to analyze every situation, and in return he granted wealth and victory to his followers.

It wasn't long until he was feared as one of the game's greatest PKs, and he was deeply respected by his ever-growing clan.

He'd started playing simply to gain some extra time for himself, but now he was spending his *real* time on the game instead—to make himself stronger or think about what more he could do for his group. Spending his time on that, however, brought him far more peace than simply resting his weary bones ever could.

But now, most of that clan and the awe he had once commanded were gone.

Starting with Caldina's Altea blockade, they had continued to suffer defeats as he kept making the wrong decisions. The resulting downward spiral of failures, exacerbated by panic, caused people's opinions of him to drop precipitously and much of his clan left him.

Still, there were two things that had remained.

First was his reason for fighting—the two clan members who stuck by him even as everything else collapsed.

And the second was *why* he had inspired awe.

That had never changed no matter how many defeats he'd suffered. The power that had made him feared was as alive now as it had been back when he was thriving in Altar.

Just like the two women and his own Embryo, it was something that would never leave him.

◇◆◇

Eltram, Commerce Area

The destroyed mall was now host to a battle between a Superior and pre-Superior—and there was someone watching this one-on-one duel.

Eldridge is fighting her now? Not Hugo? The onlooker was Moneygold, who was still at the bridge. As Sardonyx waited for a chance to draw closer to the ship, Moneygold kept his opponent at bay with Treasure Cannon, all the while looking down through the hole Niala had opened in the ceiling of the commerce area.

Did Hugo lose? If that's the case, I might have to fight not just that mechdragon—Rascal, probably—but also the Murder Princess herself...and that's not good at all.

Moneygold had no means to even follow Emily's supersonic movements. As far as Superiors went, he was among the slowest. His perceived time fell far behind those of other creatures in combat.

Things would be different if he could use enough firepower to blow her away with the rest of the ship, but that wasn't really an option for him.

Eldridge's somehow putting up a good fight...but he's not on her level. They both moved at supersonic speeds, and though it wasn't easy for Moneygold to follow, he could clearly see which one of them was faster.

Though Eldridge was an AGI-focused Superior Job, his speed still fell behind Emily's. Thanks to the Kill Leader skill she had as the Murder Princess, the more people she killed, the higher her AGI rose—and it was far above Eldridge's. There was actually not a single stat in which Eldridge surpassed her. By focusing on evasion, he was just barely avoiding suffering a killing blow, but the fact that she cut into his skin regardless was all the proof necessary to show she was the more powerful combatant.

That was when a certain question sprang to Moneygold's mind.

Why isn't he taking out his Embryo? Moneygold wondered.

Back when Caldina had planned the Altea blockade, they'd gathered data on those they would hire. It was extremely detailed, covering almost everything anyone could want to know about the PKs, with only a few exceptions like the

identity of the Superior Killer. Moneygold had memorized this info, and he clearly recalled that there was nothing on there about Eldridge's Embryo.

Like Figaro had once been, Eldridge was a well-known Master with an Embryo shrouded in mystery.

If it's a Type Territory, you'd think you'd see some signs of activation. Is it a passive Rule like Carl's? Or does it have conditions like Hugo's?

With Eldridge being weaker than Emily, the only way he could hope to win against her was by using some trick his Embryo had—at least, that was Moneygold's assumption.

The only MVP reward on him is those clothes. Why's he fighting with his bare hands, anyway?

Eldridge was a burglar, not a fighter. The fact that he was barely evading Emily's attacks made it possible that he had a sub-job with a Martial Arts sense skill, but that was no reason for him to not equip any weapon at all.

Even if he had to keep one hand free for his burglary skills, he could still wield something in the other hand. *Does he want to use skills with both hands at once? He can probably do that using his Embryo or that MVP reward...but fighting without a weapon means he has to take every attack with his own body.*

Even though Emily hadn't landed a direct hit on him yet, given her immense speed advantage, it was only a matter of time.

This concern soon became reality when Eldridge was pushed to the wall, unable to run away any farther.

"Minus." Emily raised her hatchet and swung it down with the intention of splitting Eldridge's head in two.

In response, he only held up his left arm.

It was clearly a bad move. There was no way he could withstand an attack with nearly 40,000 STR behind it with nothing but his own body. The arm would be severed and the hatchet would go on to cleave into his skull.

The inevitable clash with surely fatal consequences occurred in a split

second...

...but then there was a loud clang, as though two metallic objects had met instead.

Emily's hatchet—the blade of the Superior Embryo, Youaltepuztli—stopped after sinking a bit into Eldridge's arm.

"You're wide open, Murder-Demon," Eldridge said. He swung his bare right arm and twisted the left that still had the blade embedded in it.

This was so he could use the skill he'd activated on both hands—the flesh-taking Greater Takeover.

Each of Eldridge's hands took Emily's opposite ankle, and her legs suffered heavy damage.

Emily's eyes widened as she quickly pulled the hatchet's blade out of Eldridge's arm and jumped back. Blood sprayed from her wounded legs at the motion, but she didn't care about that. To Emily, no amount of damage or spilt blood meant anything. She would be fully healed if she died.

Despite that, she didn't charge toward Eldridge again.

Her attack had been blocked, and that realization made even this perfect killing machine pause and assume a more cautious stance.

The thing that had blocked it wasn't a Brooch. It didn't feel as though the attack had been negated—it most certainly broke the skin on his arm, only to stop without severing it.

"There's a video of your battle at Cortana. I saw it on the internet." As Emily fell still, Eldridge began to speak. "You used your hatchets to attack Hugo Lesseps's mech tons of times, but you never actually managed to break it. That mech's armor is made of a Mythical metal alloy. With skills active, its defense is probably in the 40,000-50,000 range. That tells me that your attack power isn't high enough to destroy something that tough."

Eldridge, who had known all along that he could block Emily's attack, continued his matter-of-fact explanation.

"You've got no shortage of STR. So the problem's gotta be...your hatchets.

They've got that insane skill, but their attack power's real low to compensate. A lot of Type Arms are like that, so that's exactly what I expected from yours."

This was still a strange thing to say with such confidence. Even if Youaltepuztli weren't powerful weapons on their own, they were being wielded by someone with nearly 40,000 STR. There was no chance someone who wasn't an END-focused Superior Job could withstand the blow.

However, though Eldridge's left arm was bleeding, it was still connected.

"And that's why, as a weapon, my Embryo has surpassed yours."

The wound was deep enough that the bone beneath was visible. However, the bone wasn't white.

It was covered in blood, of course, but the crimson metal that composed it shone through nonetheless.

That was when Moneygold, still watching the battle, realized something.

I see! So he's just like the Over Gladiator, then.

Indeed, just like Figaro's heart, Eldridge also had an Embryo that was always inside him.

Blade Breaker Bones, Skeleton—a metallic full-body skeleton Embryo.

"My Embryo can easily shatter Mithril-tier stuff, but it looks like your hatchets are still really tough even if they don't have a whole lot of attack power. I wouldn't expect any less from a Superior Embryo. Shattering them won't be easy. I feel like I might *break something* with all the effort I'm putting in here."

Despite cracking a joke, Eldridge didn't even smile or let his guard down. That was because he knew this wasn't an enemy he could afford to show any openings, and because he himself excelled at survival.

While Eldridge had an AGI-focused Superior Job that let him move at supersonic speeds, his Embryo was as tough as Mythical metal, giving him defenses that equaled those of END-focused Superior Jobs. He was a hybrid build that excelled at both AGI and END—a Master focused on survival, just like Emily.

Recently, he'd suffered defeat from having his heart stolen by surprise,

suffocating after being buried beneath a mountain, burning up along with the very ocean around him, and being sliced in half by a ranged attack that ignored toughness. Under normal circumstances, though, death wasn't something that took him easily.

The difference between his END and Emily's wasn't nearly as great as the difference between theri AGI, but...

If END is all his Embryo has going for it, then he has no chance of winning this, Moneygold thought as he watched, and anyone would have been hard-pressed to disagree.

Emily still exceeded Eldridge in all stats, even after taking Skeleton into account. Fighting an endurance match with her was a fool's errand to begin with.

Emily looked down at her damaged legs that hindered her movement—before she cut off her own head.

After death, she was reconstituted from her motes of light and emerged unharmed once again.

She still has that, after all. There's no way he can win.

Emily could die over and over, while Eldridge, no matter how long he endured, would be defeated after just one death.

I would understand this strategy if he was just buying time until reinforcements came, but... No one was coming to support him, and that included Moneygold himself. While he could watch how the battle at the mall unfolded, Moneygold couldn't even move from where he was because all of his attention was occupied with keeping Sardonyx at bay.

Emily, perhaps realizing that Eldridge had no one to back him up, rushed toward him yet again.

Thus, they repeated exactly the exchange that had occurred at the beginning of the battle. But this wouldn't last, as Eldridge would surely lose this war of attrition eventually.

Hm...? However, Moneygold realized that something was different this time.

Though only slightly, he felt as though the gap in their speeds had become smaller.

Does he have a skill like the Over Gladiator's?

The Over Gladiator, Figaro's Superior Embryo, Cor Leonis, had three skills. One of them was Dance of Anima, which increased his power the longer he was in battle. It was an immensely powerful ability that became known far and wide after he'd fought Xunyu during the Clash of the Superiors.

Moneygold could hardly believe it, but the battle below was strongly reminiscent of that famous duel he'd seen recordings of.

He thought that Eldridge's Embryo must have a similar skill—but that wasn't the case. This phenomenon was caused not by his Embryo, but by his ultimate job skill as King of Burglary—Greater All-Drain.

This was a skill that *stole the enemy's stats based on damage he dealt to them*.

If he damaged his opponent for a tenth of their maximum HP, he received a tenth of their stats.

If he damaged them for half their health, he enhanced himself with half of their stats.

With the surprise attack on her throat and the recent strike on her ankles, Eldridge had taken off about a tenth of Emily's HP. And with this increase—or rather, decrease for Emily—the gap between them became smaller.

If he continued to take her HP, the gap would close further, and eventually begin to tilt in Eldridge's favor.

Greater All-Drain was a skill that ensured Eldridge would come out on top in any prolonged battle. It could only be used once per day and on only one target, but the stats stolen while it was active remained even if the target healed themselves from the damage.

Ultimately, it wasn't any different with Emily's revivals. While that restored her own stats that she'd lost when Eldridge took them, Eldridge still had the stats he'd *gained*.

Since he had never tried this skill on someone who would just revive after being killed, though, not even Eldridge himself knew it would work like this. One of the reasons he'd estimated that he had a seventy percent chance of winning was that he had considered the possibility that the revival would reset his stats as well as hers.

However, it turned out that it functioned in a way that was favorable to him.

Emily was beginning to develop a vague understanding of Eldridge's combat style and skills. She considered the possibility that he would keep growing stronger without limit and realized that she had to end this battle as soon as possible. Her attacks grew more intense as she began to slice through his skin and flesh, avoiding contact with his Skeleton.

"And that's a shortcoming of yours." Evading any fatal attacks, Eldridge downed a pill-like healing item and began to speak again. He considered words to be another technique in his arsenal for managing how his opponents behaved. "The way you fight is way too simple. You put so many Resources into revival that your Embryo itself doesn't have many other tricks, and your Superior Job does nothing but give you some stats. That's why your strategy doesn't go beyond using your immortality for reckless onslaughts. And *that's it*."

Based on what he'd seen, Emily's only other means of attack were her hatchet throws. He'd considered the possibility that she could use an ult, but it didn't look like it was happening—and he was fairly certain that she would never take the most straightforward option and just switch to some other weapon.

"The hatchets have a weak attack and limit the ways you can fight, but you don't switch to anything better. You're strong enough to beat UBMs and get MVP rewards, yet you still use only the hatchets. *Why is that?*"

As he spoke, Eldridge used an opening he saw to use Greater Takeover on Emily to take both her HP and mobility, enhancing himself in the process.

"Many Type Arms Embryos activate their skills through contact with their Masters," Eldridge went on. Ray's Nemesis could only use Vengeance is Mine if she touched him, for example.Xunyu's Tenaga-Ashinaga could only extend and

retract when she had it equipped. Eldridge's Skeleton and Figaro's Cor Leonis worked as they did only because they replaced a particular part of their bodies.

Most Type Arms could *only* use their effects when in contact with their wielders.

"And what about that Superior Embryo? Do you have to touch it for it to bring you back? No, you don't. Back in Cortana, you sometimes threw both of them at once. If you couldn't revive if they were both out of your hands, you would always hold at least one. But you didn't."

Eldridge explained his analysis of the combat video he'd watched. Even while under Emily's ferocious assault, he kept calm and examined her.

"Does that mean you don't need them to use it? No. If that was the case, you'd already be using some MVP reward or whatever. You'd throw those hatchets so they auto-attacked while wielding some other weapons yourself. Theoretically, that's the strategy that would make you strongest."

Eldridge had thought about how he would optimize for combat if he was in Emily's shoes—and considered the reasons she might not be doing those things.

The answer had come to him in no time.

"It's because...your *equipment slots* are occupied. If you're not the Over Gladiator or something, you only have one weapon slot for each hand—and both of yours are occupied by the hatchets. You *can* let go of them, but their skills won't activate if you don't have them equipped. That goes for both the throwing and the revival."

Those words seemed to cause an emotional reaction in Emily. She haphazardly swung her axe at him, but Eldridge sidestepped it and tore at her flesh again.

"Your combat ability is too reliant on your Superior Embryo. Without the revivals, you're basically just a wild boar with high stats. That's why it's obvious what I gotta do."

As though feeling a sense of urgency, Emily lashed out with all of her nearly 40,000 STR behind it. She'd abandoned all of her defense to launch an attack meant to break even through his metallic bones.

However, Eldridge didn't defend against or evade it.

He simply opened his hands, preparing to use Greater Takeover and ignoring the hatchet in her right hand coming straight toward his skull.

A moment later, they clashed, and the sound of shattering metal rang out.

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Skeleton. As the name would suggest, this Embryo was based on the creatures from many different mythologies that were all made solely of bone. Skinless and fleshless—they were the remains of the dead who had been *deprived of everything*.

Perhaps because of that, Skeleton's core focus was *empty-handedness*.

Eldridge himself had no idea why his Embryo had turned out like this. He'd started *Infinite Dendrogram* as a way to relax, so perhaps its theme referred to the fact that he'd seen his life back then as a *burden* he wished to let go of. It was even possible the reason was something Eldridge had not discovered about himself yet.

Regardless of where it had come from, this core trait of empty-handedness meant that all of Skeleton's skills required Eldridge to not wield any weapon or shield.

Its first skill, All That Is Left After Death, was a skill that increased the toughness of his metallic frame—Skeleton itself—as well as Eldridge's own END as long as he wasn't wielding anything in either of his hands. As had already been demonstrated, the combined defense matched Mythical metal, and not even the Murder Princess's almost 40,000 STR was enough to break through it.

The second skill, The Dead Have Their Husk and Will, was a skill that enabled simultaneous use of active skills as long as both hands had nothing equipped in them. This was what allowed Eldridge to ready his King of Burglary skills on both hands. As a bonus, it also reduced the skills' cooldowns.

The third skill was the Embryo's ult, and it had two conditions that needed to be fulfilled.

First, just like the other two, it required that Eldridge's hands were completely

free. And second, it required him to be in battle for more than five minutes. This was most likely to give him some time to analyze his opponent.

Eldridge had laughed out loud when he'd discovered this particular condition. He'd started playing *Infinite Dendrogram* to gain time, but now he was being forced to dedicate his time to the game instead.

This condition might've been a representation of that change in his point of view.

He'd found that very funny, and had fully understood why his Embryo's ult had come with that restriction.

Similarly, he fully understood why his ult's *effect* had turned out like it had.

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"Return, and Take Nothing to the Grave—Skeleton."

The moment they clashed, Eldridge activated his ultimate.

A moment later, Emily's right hatchet touched his head...*and shattered*.

Youaltepuztli, a Superior Embryo, let out a high-pitched metallic shriek as it broke against Eldridge's arm.

Emily looked at its scattered pieces, dumbfounded...

"That's one."

...and Eldridge used Greater Takeover with both his hands to tear out her eyes.

In shock, Emily covered her empty sockets and desperately jumped back. It was an unusual move for her, someone who was always on the offensive and never feared death, but who could blame her? This was something she'd never experienced before.

Although it was just one of two, the Youaltepuztli that ensured her immortality had been broken.

Skeleton's ultimate was a skill that *destroyed the opponent's weapon*.

When the battle lasted for at least five minutes, Eldridge could destroy any one weapon the enemy was wielding in either hand. Nothing was immune—not

even Superior metals or Superior Embryos could withstand it.

This was the reason he had once been known as Altar's strongest PK—Eldridge, the Arms Killer.

The driving force behind Emily's immortality was Youaltepuztli's auto-revival skill, Survival of the Fittest. Obviously, if Youaltepuztli was destroyed, her immortality would be compromised.

Although hesitantly, Emily used her remaining Youaltepuztli to decapitate herself.

A moment later, she dissipated into bits of light...and was successfully reconstituted. This restored her eyes and vision, but not the other Youaltepuztli—it was still broken.

"One more left," said Eldridge, declaring that he absolutely would destroy her immortality—in other words, that he could do this *again*.

Return, and Take Nothing to the Grave—Skeleton was an ultimate that could be used *twice* per day. That wasn't an unexpected amount of uses for a skill explicitly meant to destroy each weapon in an opponent's hand. The cooldown between daily uses was an additional five minutes.

That made Eldridge's words a declaration of inevitable destruction.

With shock in her fully restored eyes, Emily stared at the man in front of her.

He was the beloved of the girl she'd killed simply because she stood in her way, and the man who'd used to be Altar's strongest PK—the man who'd taken away half of her immortality.

"Don't underestimate the Goblin...murder-demon."

To Emily, Eldridge was an even more fearsome enemy than Hugo.

Chapter 7: The Jester and the Dragon

About Curtis Eldona

To end the reign of the false imperator, Reinhard—that was the goal of the Dryfe Legitimate Government, and it was also the goal of Curtis himself.

He was driven by a grudge against Reinhard for killing his cousins, among many others, and by a conviction that it was his duty to bring down the warmongering usurper who ravaged his homeland. Such feelings—especially the latter one—were shared by many those in the DLG.

However, those weren't the only things driving him. The grudge and sense of duty were matched—if not surpassed—by something else.

That was an emotion called "love."

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Six years ago, Curtis Eldona fell in love.

Before the increase in Masters, he was participating in a ceremony to celebrate those who'd taken part in defeating a UBM that had been ransacking the outer reaches of Dryfe.

On the dais stood the elderly, but still living, Imperator Xanafald as well as two more people. One of them was SMTF Captain Gifted Barbaros. As the adopted son of Marquis Barbaros, he had seen many battles and was already considered to be a pillar of Dryfe's military might despite his young age.

There was nothing strange about him defeating an UBM.

However, the person standing by his side was a girl who could not have been more than thirteen years old—and surprisingly, she clutched a red crystal, seemingly the MVP reward, in her hands.

That meant that despite her age, she had contributed to the battle more than Gifted.

"Claudiah Reinhard Dryfe, I commend you." In Dryfe, it was common for twins to each bear the other's name as their middle name, which resulted in the girl's

masculine middle name. That combined with the surname Dryfe made it obvious that she was part of the imperial family.

Indeed, she was the daughter of the late third prince and the granddaughter of the imperator bestowing the award upon her.

Though still young, Claudiah already held the title of The Ram.

“Beautiful...” The girl standing on the stage left Curtis enchanted. He himself was extremely talented and had already acquired a Superior Job, so he found himself strongly attracted to her.

Curtis continued to think about Claudiah long after this ceremony was over.

He intently and excitedly followed her activities by newspapers and word of mouth, and he spent many nights thinking how he might approach her and talk to her.

Curtis was like a fan and a young man in love all at once—his heart had nothing but Claudiah in it.

That didn’t change even after Masters came to the world en masse and began to reshape it.

When she became old enough to marry, he began wondering how they could be together. Although of less importance, she was still royalty. The first prince’s mother came from Curtis’s own family—Eldona—and they were fairly powerful as far as nobility went. He was, however, only the second son, so he didn’t know if he would be welcomed into the royal family itself.

That was why, instead of relying on his rank as a noble, he chose to prove his worth another way—by becoming Dryfe’s field marshal.

The current field marshal was elderly and would soon need to be replaced, and there were several candidates for the position.

First was Curtis himself. He had come from an important noble family and was the commander of the First Armored Battalion.

Next was the commander of the Second Armored Battalion. He was another man from a strong noble background who was known as a more skilled commander.

The second prince's faction also had soldiers who, while not as renowned as the two commanders, were still put forth as candidates.

Some also suggested Gifted Barbaros—the stepson of another important noble—but he was already in SMTF, and it was believed that he wouldn't take the role of field marshal and lead the entire army instead.

Thus, Curtis's biggest hurdle remained the commander of the Second Armored Battalion.

Just like Curtis, he was in the first prince's faction and was no doubt an excellent commander. That might have been the reason that the important diplomatic role of performing joint training with Altar was granted to him instead of Curtis himself.

With many UBM defeats under his belt, Curtis was by no means less skilled than his rival, but that achievement and the power involved was his alone. A field marshal, however, had to be someone who could manage and lead the army, and even Curtis himself had to admit that wasn't exactly his strong suit.

But just when Curtis began to worry he had no chance at the title, the situation completely changed.

The Second Armored Battalion was completely destroyed.

This was accomplished by the SUBM, Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria. The fiendish golden beast had attacked the kingdom and eliminated Curtis's rival along with his entire battalion.

As a soldier, Curtis was overcome by grief and saw it as a major loss. But as a man, a part of him that was filled with glee that his biggest competitor was gone.

The golden dragon that had brought about so many disasters had actually done him a favor.

Whether it was a blessing or a calamity overall, the fiendish dragon had greatly changed the course of his life and Dryfe as a whole.

And in order that he might never forget this fact, he christened his new unit with a name based on the creature.

With that, the only barrier between Curtis and the seat of the field marshal was gone. There were some candidates in the second prince's faction, but they were not a problem.

The next imperator was going to be selected soon, and the most likely candidates were First Prince Gustav and his son, Hallon. Regardless of which one it would be, though, Curtis would be the highest-ranking soldier in their faction, and would be given the title of field marshal.

And once he had that, he would be able to take Claudiah as his wife.

Thus, while the next imperator was being decided in the Imperstand—the pre-ancient civilization fortress at the heart of the imperial capital—he merely waited for the future he expected to arrive.

However, it never came—for the throne was taken by the son of the late third prince—Reinhard.

And with the exception of Reinhard's younger twin sister, Claudiah, the imperial family all ended up dead. The during meeting to determine the imperial inheritance, both the first prince's and the second prince's factions were massacred.

The means by which this was accomplished were nothing short of vile. As the Superior Job of the mechanic grouping, King of Machines, Reinhard had been put in charge of maintaining the Imperstand—a position he'd used to transform the fortress meant to protect the country and the royal family into the weapon that killed them.

It was as though he'd been planning all along to take the throne by violence.

And to make matters worse, he'd given the role of field marshal to his relative and confidant, Gifted Barbaros.

This outcome was so unexpected and terrible that it left Curtis at a loss for words.

His cousin had died, his future had fallen apart, his country was now in danger... There were so many things on his mind, but once he finally collected his thoughts enough to process what had happened, the first thing he felt was *rage*.

“What kind of joke is this?! Reinhard...what have you been doing all this time?!” *While your sister was out in public, fulfilling her role as a noble and fighting monsters all over the country, you didn’t even bother to show your face! You spent all your time messing around with machines!* he thought.

Reinhard had pushed his sister into dangerous roles and used dirty tactics to claim the throne for himself. To Curtis, as well as everyone else who knew as much as he did—in other words, most of the other nobles—Reinhard was scum of the worst kind.

“This...this is unacceptable!” Most of all, Curtis felt awful for Claudiah, who had been born alongside this filth of a brother. Reinhard had used her as his pawn, forcing her to commit vile deeds against her will. Merely imagining how Claudiah must have felt in her heart during all this brought Curtis to tears.

Even if she would never choose him, he silently swore that he would do anything to at least set her free.

And so, he stood with many nobles and military men to bring down Reinhard.

Thus began the Dryfean Civil War. In it, he defeated many soldiers who’d sided with Reinhard, as well as Masters with Superior Jobs that the usurper had hired. The only thing Curtis feared was the vile Reinhard sending his beloved Claudiah against him—but for better or worse, this never happened.

As a single unit, Curtis weathered the civil war without suffering a single defeat.

However, his side was the one that lost.

Many of the nobles were defeated, the all-or-nothing operation by SMTF had failed, and even his own family—his elder brother—gave up after their father was defeated.

The Civil War ended with Reinhard’s side victorious.

However, Curtis didn’t—*couldn’t*—accept this defeat.

Still burning with a desire to bring down the imperator and free Claudiah, Curtis left for another country to gather strength so he could one day try again.

But even now that it had come to this, there was still something that he didn’t

know.

Completely unbeknownst to Curtis, Reinhard and Claudiah were actually the same person. This was Claudiah's greatest secret, known only to her and the Marquis Barbaros family.

Curtis couldn't possibly have known this, for he had never met her when she was "Reinhard." Perhaps if he had, his love for "Claudiah" might have helped him realize who Reinhard really was.

However, the only things he knew about Reinhard were his name, his appearance in photos, and actions. Thus, he had no means of knowing that his two goals were at odds and that his actions and desired future were utterly contradictory.

And that was why Curtis Eldona was truly a jester with no equal.

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Eltram, Power Area

"Engine deactivation completed."

"We will proceed to remove it from the vessel." DLG soldiers clad in armor-type Magingears were hard at work in front of the core installed in *Eltram*.

Watching over them were two Marshal IIs and a golden unit with a dragon's head.

"Make haste. It appears that the situation is shifting against us."

From his cockpit, Curtis silently but firmly urged his soldiers to rush.

Their situation was growing dire. The comms devices suddenly blared an emergency signal with no one to respond and give reason for it, and the ones they'd sent to occupy the special ballroom—a key location—were now unreachable. They'd also lost the unit that had jammed the standard frequencies and hosted their secret comms bypass.

It was clear that they had enemies here, and furthermore that they would soon come to this area.

But those weren't their only problems—before their secret comms were

rendered unusable, they'd suddenly become unable to contact the soldiers in the passenger cabin and the cargo areas. Before commencing the operation, they'd also tried contacting Lieutenant Colonel Berlin outside, but received no response.

It was obvious that their situation wasn't good.

"Major General, completely removing it will require at least ten minutes... Wouldn't it be better for us to retreat?"

Curtis received this message from one of his accompanying Marshal IIs.

In this situation, a tactical retreat to prevent even more casualties could not truly be considered a mistake, but...

"Why not give up on the core and kidnap passengers to demand a ransom for them instead?"

This question from the pilot of the other Marshal II present made Curtis wince a little.

"A foolish suggestion. Never make it again."

With those words, the golden unit thrust its lance into the Marshall II unit.

"Aieee...?!" The tip of the lance had only missed the pilot's head by around ten centimetels. Curtis had missed on purpose, since it was only meant as a warning, but there was more to his attack than just that.

Besides the hole in its chest-armor, the Marshal II was *completely undamaged*.

The attack didn't trigger any shocks throughout the rest of the unit—it only punched a small hole through the mech's body, missing anything vital to place the tip of the lance into the space right beside the pilot's head.

Such a strike required unimaginable precision as a pilot, yet Curtis had enough skill to do it as though it was nothing.

"Neither a change of plans nor a retreat are viable options for us."

Tactically, a retreat wasn't a mistake—but strategically, it was something Curtis would never do. If they didn't secure this energy core, this assault would

be all for naught. They would have accomplished nothing except losing most of their forces. At that point, their hope of making a comeback would be as good as gone. They would need at least a decade to recover, if not longer.

Delaying Dryfe's liberation and Claudiah's salvation by that long was something Curtis could never accept.

"The forces we've already lost make it even more vital that we secure the core to make up for them. If we don't, Dryfe's Legitimate Government will be over here and now. Do you understand?"

He pulled out the lance and calmly but firmly posed that question to the other pilot.

There was only one way the soldier could respond.

"S-Sir, yes, sir!"

"Good. Continue to keep an eye out."

Curtis then cut the external speakers and let out a sigh.

Curtis's thoughts drifted to his old rival, the commander of the Second Armored Battalion. "*He* probably could've led them without any threats or deception." he said with self-derisionThough he had once been Curtis's biggest hurdle on his path to becoming field marshal, Curtis had deeply trusted him as a soldier. Perhaps they would've won the Civil War if he'd been alive for it. And even if they'd lost regardless, Curtis was certain that the DLG would be in a different, better state than the one it was in now.

As a man driven mad by love, Curtis was happy the Second Armored Batallion's commander had died—but as a soldier, he felt the loss heavily.

I suppose I cling to a plan like this exactly because I know I lack the ability to keep up with him otherwise, he thought.

This plan to steal the core had been suggested to him by a collaborator. This *engineer* had taught Curtis the structure of the vessel, how to handle the core, a way to sneak his soldiers inside, and even promised to use the stolen core to build a large mobile weapon for them.

It was a suspicious offer that seemed too good to be true. This collaborator

clearly had some ulterior motive. However, Reinhard's forces were so strong that Curtis had no choice but to accept it.

That was why Curtis had to win—to make this operation a success.

"They're here." And with that, the sensor eye on his unit's draconic head moved at high speeds before focusing on the door leading into this area, where it picked up something behind it.

"This size and pattern of magic use... It's another Magingear!" Almost as soon as Curtis said it, the door was broken down, and a pure white Magingear covered in frost rushed in.

"La Porte de l'Enfer!"

Upon hearing that skill activation, Curtis quickly assumed a defensive stance. However, the skill produced no attack, and instead of an impact, he heard screams from one of his accompanying pilots and the soldiers working to remove the core.

The camera on his unit's back saw men equipped with armor-type Magingears panicking as most of their bodies were encased in ice.

A wide-area freeze skill? But there's been no significant change in ambient temperature. One of the accompanying units is unaffected too.

The only one of Curtis's pilots who was screaming was the one whose armor he'd punched a hole through.

Curtis hummed questioningly, but as he did, he pressed something on the panel next to the control column and activated one of his unit's extras.

A moment later, the golden mech's sensor eye—the attached Epic MVP reward, Glaring Third Eye, Drac-Sight—modified its vision and observed the surroundings for changes.

By doing this, Curtis noticed that there was some sort of energy being released by the enemy unit, and that heat energy was flowing *toward* it from his Frozen soldiers.

The unit is generating a strange energy field. It seems similar to the power of the Scorchdragon King that I felled—the incineration skill that only worked on

living beings. I suppose that must be what's causing the freeze.

He looked at one of his accompanying units and saw that the strange field was flowing into its cockpit through the hole in its chest. However, for his own unit and the other one accompanying him, it only flowed on the armor's surface, not making its way in.

The difference lies in...the airtightness.

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"Tch...!" The result might have been expected, but Hugo clicked his tongue in irritation nonetheless. *They're not freezing...!*

After hearing Eldridge's hint, Hugo had been able to guess why La Porte de l'Enfer hadn't worked on the Magingear in the mall.

It had something to do with airtightness.

The infantry outside the unit had become Frozen, but the pilot within had not. However, the pilot had succumbed as soon as Hugo had broken the Magingear's armor.

That meant that his targets had to actually come into contact with air that had been affected by La Porte de l'Enfer in order for the skill to be effective.

Hugo could guess the reason for that.

Cyco's La Porte de l'Enfer not only Froze its targets, but also accumulated the lost heat energy within Cyco herself. That heat was meant to be used in her second skill, Purgatorial Slash, but that made it necessary for the heat energy to actually *move*.

And Cyco had no ability to absorb heat without consideration for the intervening space. She wasn't a Type Territory, after all, and could not bend spatial laws. Instead of influencing the surrounding space, she transferred the heat energy from the enemy to her *using the air as the conduit*.

Thus, her skill couldn't reach anyone who was completely separated from the outside air.

As long as Cyco and the target shared a common air, she could even steal the heat of someone like Bishmal when he transformed into fire—but if they didn't,

she would never be able to affect them.

And I know exactly why I haven't realized this until now, Hugo thought. Back when he had still been a member of the Triangle of Wisdom, Hugo, with Franklin's supervision he had taken part in various experiments related to La Porte de l'Enfer. Among these tests were a handful done on people inside Marshal IIs.

Since it had worked on the pilots back then, both Hugo and Franklin had assumed that La Porte de l'Enfer always worked against Magingears, as well.

But the reason it didn't work on the DLG units now was...

"...because our units weren't completely airtight."

Hugo recalled the day he'd left the Triangle of Wisdom.

The pool they'd used for experiments was occupied by an experimental amphibious unit. It had sunk to the bottom, its cockpit had filled with water, and everyone around thought it was a complete failure. If they couldn't ensure an airtight seal on an amphibious unit, *there was no way they could've done it for units meant only for use on dry land*.

The Triangle of Wisdom was a group of Masters, many of whom were engineers and the like in real life as well. They had even achieved something that had previously been thought impossible, creating the first humanoid Magingears.

But in the grand scheme of things, when it came to Magingears, they were still amateurs.

On the other hand, the DLG—the First Armored Battalion—were pros at handling power armor and tank-type Magingears. In terms of knowledge of magic technology, they were true veterans—the absolute elite—and if they wanted to make their units airtight for desert environments, they could do it flawlessly.

While they may not have had the same creativity, the DLG were unmatched when it came to technical prowess.

And compared to the data I saw...that golden unit has been modified too.

With the exception of the one that already had a hole in it, it looked like the pilots of the other two units weren't freezing. However, unlike the battle in the mall, Hugo had anticipated this result.

"What now?" Cyco asked.

"We do as we planned!"

A moment later, a hole opened up in the body of the Marshal II that was still unaffected.

"Hit."

The sound sensors of the machines picked up a faint voice from behind them. It belonged to Niala, who was lying on the floor as she aimed an extra long gun.

The weapon in her hands was a *magic* sniper rifle.

Unlike gunpowder guns, which didn't change in power no matter who wielded them, magic guns grew stronger according to the amount of magic put into them and the skill level of the user. When charged with enough MP and fired using an appropriate skill, they could break through Demi-Dragon carapaces—and that included the armor of Demi-Dragon-tier Magingears.

Niala was doing exactly as she and Hugo had planned while they were making their way here to the power area. If the enemies didn't freeze immediately, they decided they would simply have to do as Hugo had done in the mall and puncture the mechs' armor to let the skill through.

Niala had assumed the sniping position and prepared to fire before White Rose had even broken through the door.

"Ngh...!" The pilot of the unit Niala had fired at tried to groan in pain, but before he could do so, the second tick of La Porte de l'Enfer came, Freezing his entire body. He must've had a higher kill count for other humanoids than the other pilot.

The second tick also finished Freezing those who were only partially Frozen.

And thus, silence fell over the power generator.

The energy core was deactivated, now surrounded by ice sculpture and two units that weren't moving an inch. Nearby stood the pure white unit that had

done this, and outside the power generator zone Niala was still taking aim.

And finally, there was the golden unit that had stood still and focused on observation. Despite witnessing his soldiers being functionally eliminated, Curtis himself had never moved.

“Well...I have a question.” This had to be emphasized—it wasn’t that he couldn’t move, He simply *didn’t*.“Since you didn’t attack me first...i*s it only the two of you*?”

The moment he said that, Niala’s second shot hit the golden unit’s chest armor. However, her eyes widened as the bullet only made a faint metallic clink as it was deflected.

“I assume this Freeze requires you to break the cockpit’s airtight seal? The reason the sniper didn’t aim at me first was because you didn’t know how tough this armor was. Thus, you used the first shot on the Marshal II, which was more likely to break.”

Curtis verbalized almost exactly what Niala had been thinking.

“If there was another sniper or a different attacker with you,” Curtis went on, “you would not have missed the chance to ambush us all at once. The fact that this did *not* happen makes it clear the only ones here are you, with your Freeze power, and the sniper behind you.”

Curtis matter-of-factly described the extent of the opposing forces.

“Now, another question,” he said. “Why did *you* not ambush me when you had the chance?”

Hugo said nothing in response, but Curtis himself already knew the answer. “It’s because *you know this*. When you broke through the door and saw this unit, you instantly realized what it was. You are the kind of person who knows my Imperial Glory...in other words, you must be from Dryfe.”

These words made Hugo’s eyes widen. Indeed, Hugo knew of this golden, dragon-headed unit that went by the name of Imperial Glory. He knew it as the strongest unit ever built by the Triangle of Wisdom—a Magingear created at the Dryfean army’s request and equipped with an energy core. And it was because Hugo knew how powerful it was that right upon seeing it, he failed to

implement the planned ambush.

“And you have ties to the Triangle of Wisdom as well. I can tell by your Magingear—it’s an experimental unit that isn’t mass-produced. The quirks in the structure and the inadequate construction makes it obvious that it’s their work.”

Hearing his opponent disparage the Triangle of Wisdom’s work—the work of Hugo’s own sister—made Hugo slightly irritated, but he couldn’t bring himself to move. He had a feeling that if he did it would only make the situation worse.

“Based on its toughness, I assume it’s made of Mythical metal? No—Hihi’irokane is scarlet, and your unit is white. It’s an alloy with mical ore, then. In Dryfe, both are mined solely within the borders of the Barbaros March. I see how it is... Damn you, Reinhard.”

Despite not even touching or attacking White Rose, Curtis had gotten everything right. He spoke to himself and arrived at an answer, which made him click his tongue.

“This means he provided it back when Glory was being produced—he knew we would be enemies even back then? Was he planning to claim the throne for that long? That *filth*...”

The way he was vehemently cursing someone who wasn’t even here made Curtis look as though he’d dropped his guard.

“Now is a good time to attack,” Cyco told Hugo telepathically. “His kill count’s high enough for him to Freeze with a single tick.”

Hugo nodded in response. He didn’t have to destroy the unit—he would win the moment he broke its airtight seal. A slight distortion in the armor was all it would take.

Thus, Hugo rushed White Rose toward the golden unit...

“Ohh, if this is as fast as you can go, you made the right choice by not ambushing me.”

...and was instantly stopped.

The lance had pierced through White Rose’s right elbow and reached all the

way to the floor, pinning the arm down and rendering it immobile.

Shock overcame Hugo. Curtis had thrust the lance into his unit with movement reminiscent of a martial arts master—except it was done not by a nimble human, but a bulky, humanoid giant robot.

It was a sight too outlandish to be written off as merely the result of skilled piloting Moreover...

“How did he break through Rose’s armor?!” Made of a Mythical metal alloy, White Rose had the highest defensive power of any Magingear that existed.

How could anyone have pierced through that with such ease?

“This lance is an MVP reward of mine. It’s called Pinning Death, Drac-Stinger. I can reduce the diameter of its tip as small as 0.1 millimetels, and it never breaks. It’s a weapon I find very useful.”

Curtis casually revealed information about one of his weapons—the MVP reward he’d received from the Pindragon King. He did this because Hugo had ties to the Triangle of Wisdom, and because he believed Hugo already had information about Imperial Glory and Curtis himself.

However, that didn’t seem to answer Hugo’s question. So what if he could change the diameter of the lance’s tip? How did that enable him to pierce through White Rose’s armor?

As though anticipating that question, Curtis let out a sigh.

“As I said, the construction is inadequate.” First, Curtis repeated himself...

“There’s a *large* 0.2 millimetel gap in the elbow joints.”

...and casually said that he’d easily pierced through a hole smaller than the eye of a needle.

Blind to reality and unwittingly pursuing contradictory goals, Curtis Eldona was no doubt a jester.

However, if that was all he was, Curtis would not be standing here today.

He was the man who’d hunted down countless landdragons and Dragon Kings that approached Dryfe from the neighboring Harshwinter Mountains.

He was the continent’s strongest pilot, Curtis Eldona the Dragon Kingslayer, and he piloted a unit named after the most fiendish dragon of all—Imperial Glory.

Hugo was now facing the strongest pilot in the world, riding the world’s most powerful Magingear.

Chapter 8: The Three-Way Fight and the Final Choice

Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

The enemy was turning out to be far more trouble than I'd expected.

He'd used his lance to pin Rose through a gap in the armor of its right arm. I tried moving it and pulling the lance out, but nothing budged.

This was due to the immense gap between my unit's output and his. While my Rose had a Pure-Dragon-tier output, his was clearly above that. It easily earned the title of "Dragon King-tier Magingear."

"It's above its specs on paper...and they were already high..." I mused. That must've been due to the pilot.

That Drac-Stinger mention brought a certain name to mind.

It was an MVP reward that had belonged to the most famous pilot in Dryfe—one who had made a name for himself before I'd even begun playing *Infinite Dendrogram*—Over Pilot, Curtis Eldona.

"Fran said that she didn't know who took it during the civil war, but..." The answer to this mystery was now more than apparent—the one who'd taken the reward was the same person who had it now.And since he had a Superior Job from the pilot grouping, his unit's abilities were greatly increased.

The situation was looking pretty bad for us. Curtis was far above us in both piloting skill and unit specifications.

The biggest advantage he had over us, though, was in the *uptime*. We could only fight for about ten minutes, and even that was halved if I activated the second battle mode and Boucliers Planetes. Meanwhile, his unit had a pre-ancient civilization energy core that could keep it running essentially indefinitely.

He could win this battle just by keeping me pinned like this.

“Still...” Despite that, I had three advantages.

First, there was White Rose’s incredible toughness—the combined result of its Mythical metal alloy construction and my own defensive skills. Second, there was La Porte de l’Enfer. As long as this skill was active, I could win by simply breaking his cockpit’s airtight seal.

And third, there was Niala. It was two versus one right now. If we used our numeric advantage and stuck to the strategy we’d agreed to before we came here, we could still win this.

“You’re going to have to remove the spear first if you want to do that, though,” said Cyco, in response to my thoughts.

“Yeah.” I couldn’t win this if I couldn’t move, after all. If it came down to that, in a worst-case scenario I could free myself by purging the right arm from the elbow down, but I really needed the hand for what would come next.

“Let’s start by separating you. Then we can talk.” However, while I was thinking of how to escape, the hostile unit aimed its left hand at the entrance we’d come through. “Missile Darts.”

And with those words, the left forearm’s armor rose up, exposing many holes—tiny missile tubes—which then fired. They all struck the ceiling right above the entrance, burying the door in rubble. That blocked Niala’s vision, making this a one-versus-one.

“Tch...!” With one of my advantages gone, I clicked my tongue. But...what did he mean by “then we’ll talk?” Why did he attack Rose’s elbow joints first? If he could target the tiny fault in there, he should’ve been able to find some fault in the cockpit and just kill me outright...

As I was pondering that, it seemed like Curtis had something to ask as well. “Now that we are ready, I have one...no, two questions,” he said.

“What?”

“They are simple. I’m certain you know the answers.”

What? What did I know that the leader of the terrorists who’d taken control of *Eltram* would want?

“First question...how do you disable *this*?”

“You mean La Porte de l’Enfer?” Well, I was the only one here who knew about that, so it made sense he would want to know. However, he then shook his unit’s head and spoke before I could answer.

“Not that. Not now. This question is about *my* unit,” he said. “Being from the Triangle of Wisdom, you must know the way to disable the *limitation* placed upon Imperial Glory.”

Hearing that made my eyes go wide. *That thing’s already overpowering Rose. And you mean to tell me it’s doing all of that with some sort of limitation in place?* I thought. *What kind of beast did the guys create here...?*

“Do tell me if you know.” he said as the golden unit’s draconic head came closer. “How do I turn off its voice-based weapon activation?”

“...Huh?” *Voice activation?*

“The nonsensical limitation that you must speak a weapon’s name in order to use it. The unit doesn’t even care who says it, so it cannot even act as protection in case of theft. What is the purpose of this feature?”

Curtis’s question reminded me that just a moment ago, he’d actually said “Missile Darts” out loud.Unless they were especially quirky, Magingears didn’t usually require their pilots to say anything in order to fire their weapons—the Marshal IIs I’d piloted before had been the same way.

Imperial Glory was different, though, and I actually knew the reason.

It was a one-of-a-kind super robot the Triangle of Wisdom had built around a pre-ancient civilization energy core. There had to have been at least one person there who’d said something like, “Hey, if it’s a super robot, the pilot has to shout the names of all its attacks, right?”

“Why must they be named to be used?” Curtis insisted. “It isn’t simply *pointless*—it’s a clear negative. There is absolutely no benefit to doing it. The direct link between the words and weapons makes it impossible to feint or bluff. What were its creators thinking? Was it a way of getting back at me? I thought we had a good relationship when Glory was being built, but was Reinhard involved even back then? I find that very plausible. Without this

feature, I might even have won against Barbaros!”

Hearing his speech made me feel like the feature must have been a huge problem for him, but there had never been any real reason behind its inclusion. The Triangle of Wisdom was just a group of hobbyists—many of which happened to be the sort to prioritize beauty of form over function.

“The unit was built before I entered the clan. I don’t know how to turn it off,” I said. Perhaps I could’ve cut some kind of deal for the answer, but I actually didn’t have it, so that was all I could say. Knowing the clan’s members, I honestly wouldn’t have been surprised if it was actually impossible to turn it off.

“...I see,” Curtis said, clearly disappointed.

Had he only let me live so he could ask that question? In that case, my situation was now even more precarious than ever.

“Next question, then. The main one,” Curtis said.

Oh, so that was only a preface to the main question. I would get to live for a bit longer.

“Is the Freeze on my men removable? I confirmed their vital signs, but its state and waveform are different from a standard Freeze. Can it only be undone by your will? Will it vanish upon your death, or will your death make it permanent instead You are still alive precisely because I have no idea which is true.”

So it really was all about La Porte de l’Enfer.

Cyco’s Freeze certainly was different from the normal version—as long as the target fulfilled the condition, it ignored resistance items and couldn’t even be treated by restoration items. And it stayed active for an entire hour even if I deactivated La Porte de l’Enfer or got the death penalty. The only way anyone could be freed immediately was if I removed the Freeze myself.

“Answer me—and be wise not to lie.” That seemed like he was implying that he had Truth Discernment.

“If I die, it will be undone in an hour,” I said.

“That is too slow.” The Frozen soldiers had been working to remove the core

—probably engineers that had been brought here for that very purpose. If their goal was the core, they couldn't get it as long as those people remained Frozen.

They probably couldn't afford to stay here long enough for La Porte de l'Enfer to expire. "But the way you said that makes it seem as though you have other ways of releasing them," Curtis added.

"If I will it, they will be freed right away." I didn't lie. I didn't have to.

"So the only ways to free them are to kill you and wait an hour...or strike a deal with you."

"Exactly."

From his perspective, I'd essentially taken his people hostage. Waiting an hour wasn't an option for him—he was already aware of the problems happening all over the vessel.

I didn't know how much he knew about the situation exactly, but he must've been keenly aware that they had to hurry.

"I will ask just as a formality," Curtis said. "What are your conditions?" he asked.

"Leave this ship immediately. Take nothing, kill no one—just retreat."

He now had the choice to abandon his goal in exchange for saving his men. If he gave up here and ran, he wouldn't be any worse off than he was now.

When they all got outside, though, they'd probably be attacked by Moneygold, and his explosive attacks would likely exterminate them all as they tried to retreat. It felt like I was leading him into a trap. It seemed like something Fran would do...but if I showed them mercy here, that might lead to the death of a lot of innocent people. And that would make it hard for me to sleep at night.

That was why I chose not to lie and presented this offer—or rather, this trap. I would free his men and they would retreat before...

"Hm...?" My train of thought was interrupted by a realization "'As a formality?'" What did he mean by *that*?

"Yes, I expected an answer like that. I suppose I have no choice then," Curtis

said in a slightly annoyed voice as he *aimed the unit's left hand at his other soldiers*. "Missile Darts."

The small missiles spewed fire as they flew toward the Frozen soldiers at subsonic speeds, breaking them into pieces just like the ceiling he'd fired at earlier before the remains were burnt to ashes.

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

"Paint Napalm." When he said that, the dragon's tail extending from the back of the unit—the balancer—swung around.

The tip of the tail was covered in some sort of fiber, dampened with some sort of liquid. As it moved, the liquid sprayed out over the two other Magingears—the ones with Frozen pilots in them.

Two seconds later, the liquid caught fire, thoroughly burning both the Magingears and the frozen statues within their cockpits.

"Wh-What are you doing?! Why did you—?! They're *your* people...!" I didn't understand what he was doing. I didn't *want* to understand.

"You ask me *why*?" After I voiced my confusion, the dragon-headed Magingear's strange-looking sensor-eye focused on me. "Because we fight for a cause that must be fulfilled even if it costs us our lives."

Those words sent a shiver down my spine.

"If we fail—if we do not take this—we will not fulfill our goal. I will remove the core by force. That might damage it, but if a *certain someone* is as good as they say, fixing it should not be a problem," Curtis said, looking at the core.

He'd eliminated his own subordinates simply so he could get his hands on that thing.

"Weren't they your brothers-in-arms...?!"

"It is exactly *because* I command them that I must weigh their lives on a scale. The core and the weapon it would create is far more important than the people or machines we may lose during this operation."

I was too shocked to speak.

Curtis, however, was still speaking. “I would sacrifice whatever it takes to end Reinhard’s reign. My men joined me in this assault precisely because we share that sentiment. The necessary sacrifice ended up being their lives, but there was no other option.”

The way he stood before the corpses of his own people brought back a memory. It reminded me of one of the two leaders of the Gouz-Maise Gang—namely, Gouz himself.

He was my enemy back then—and the kind of man who hadn’t hesitated to eat the remains of his own followers.

Curtis was nothing like him on the surface...but I felt like deep down, they had some similarities.

“You...!”

“I have no more questions. There is no more reason to keep you alive.”

With those words, he swung the tail balancer. It was clear he was going to incinerate me while I was still pinned and immobile—.

“Ngh! Boucliers Planetes!” I quickly ejected the armor on both shoulders, turning them into floating shields I used as weapons to attack Curtis.

“I thought you’d have a gimmick like this. I could tell by looking.”

However, he caught both of them using his own unit’s arms.

“This too...?!” I thought I’d caught him off guard, but he countered it perfectly! I tried to control the floating shields, but his grip on them was too strong for them to move.

“Farewell, Pilot of the Triangle of Wisdom. I will get my answer to the first question once I make my triumphant return to the imperium. Paint Napalm.”

And so, the golden unit swung the tail covered in liquid fuel...

“Hm...?!”

...but then suddenly jumped backwards, retreating with everything it had. He even pulled out the lance keeping my unit pinned.

A moment later, countless missiles rained upon White Rose.

“Huh...?!” Explosions battered the armor, shook the frame, and caused static to appear on the internal monitors.

“Nghh...” After Cyco let out that brief sound, the ice armor shattered and White Rose collapsed to the ground.

“Cyco?!”

“...I’m okay. We can still move...”

She was right—while a lot of the ice had broken, the monitors told me that White Rose under it hadn’t been damaged much. Perhaps due to the Mythical ally plating, it could still function.

The explosive pressure had traveled through the insides, though, so fixing it would take a while.

“Turn off La Porte de l’Enfer. Keep the shattered pieces as they are.”

“Oui, ma’am.” Cyco obeyed my order and canceled the skill. Thanks to the shattered ice armor, anyone looking at White Rose would probably assume that it had been disabled due to heavy damage.

It wouldn’t convince anyone that I’d gotten the death penalty, but deactivating La Porte de l’Enfer would give the impression that I’d at least Fainted.

“But...what were those missiles?” I wondered. They clearly didn’t belong to Imperial Glory. And though they were primarily aimed at Curtis, the fact that whoever fired them didn’t seem to care about me made it obvious that it wasn’t an ally either. So...who could it be?

“What a quick reaction! I guess whoever’s inside has a Superior Job!”

My question was answered by a voice coming from a hole in the ceiling. That must’ve been where the missiles came from, and now a giant object used it as an entrance.

The voice was that of a cheerful lady, but what came through was nothing what you’d expect from hearing it.

It was a *white and crimson mechdragon*.

“That’s...” I recognized it right away—it was the thing shown by Niala’s owl’s screen.

The mechdragon that had been fighting Moneygold had arrived at the power generator.

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Eltram, Commerce Area

It was shortly after Eldridge had shattered one Youaltepuztli.

Emily was silent. Her Superior Embryo was lost. She still had the one in her left, but if she lost that one too, she would be unable to come back and be in danger of actually dying. And her enemy, Eldridge, was using his ultimate job skill as King of Burglary to close the gap in their stats.

To Emily, still in her killing mode, this was both unprecedented and more dangerous than anything she had ever encountered before.

She’d already recognized Eldridge as something worse than a mere “minus”—a *hostile*. He was now “bad”—someone who had to be eliminated at all costs, even if it meant using her ultimate skill.

Thankfully, it was currently night. The conditions for the skill had been fulfilled, and having just one of the two hatchets wouldn’t stop her. And when she used it, this entire ship would be crushed by her wide area extermination.

However, on this ship, there still was Zhang—an ally or “plus”—and Doris, whom she had temporarily marked as “good”—someone to protect. It was because she created such hard separations between her enemies and allies that she couldn’t—or wouldn’t—attack any of her friends.

But that didn’t change the fact that using the ult was the only way to deal with Eldridge—this natural enemy before her. If she wasted too much time, his ult’s cooldown would end, and he’d destroy her second Youaltepuztli.

This situation was worse than any she’d been in so far. But that was when...

“Qi!” That single word rang out—carrying the meaning of “rise”—followed by the sound of something large crawling on the mall’s floor.

Naturally, this caught the attention of both Eldridge and Enemy.

There, they saw a monstrosity that resembled a giant worm—a Pure-Dragon-tier worm jiangshi with a Fu on its forehead. Eldridge understood with a single glance that it must've been on Emily's side, come to help her out of this unexpected predicament.

Indeed, the Drac-Worm Jiangshi had been summoned by Emily's ally—Zhang. He'd used one of the few powerful entities he'd put under his command after Mirage's destruction. The Jiangshi followed the order inscribed on its Fu, recognizing Eldridge as an enemy and attacking him.

However, not even this Pure-Dragon-tier jiangshi was a threat to him. He was greatly empowered by the stats he'd stolen from Emily. And...

"There you are." Eldridge swung his right hand at the jiangshi. The skill set on it wasn't Takeover, but Pickpocket.

A moment later, the Fu on the jiangshi's head was gone. The creature crashed to the floor of the mall, causing the whole area to shake.

Jiangshi weren't autonomous—they were undead controlled by the Fu placed upon them. Thus, Eldridge knew that it would be rendered powerless if he simply took that away.

The Drac-Worm Jiangshi ended up only buying a little time, which meant nothing when Eldridge had all the time in the world.

That would only apply if this Drac-Worm Jiangshi was the only one here, though, and the jiangshi that had attacked Eldridge wasn't alone. The first one was merely bait meant to distract this major threat.

"What...? More jiangshi?" The second one was crawling on the deck and approaching the bridge where Moneygold was still battling Sardonyx to keep it at bay.

The jiangshi was approaching him as if intended to stop him. Moneygold had the ability to destroy it easily, but he couldn't do that right now.

The simple reason for this was the angle he was currently standing at—firing at the jiangshi meant firing *down*, which would mean destroying this ship.

"Zhenhuo Zhendao Xuanlongba." And after his hesitation, the jiangshi in the

mall and on the deck swelled up from the inside.

They then burst, releasing countless Fu.These were all the kind of Fu that daoshi made ahead of time in order to use their job ults. Filling jiangshi with Fu meant to activate his ultimate was Zhang Zangqi's signature move as Great Soul Daoshi.

The skill he used was a powerful wind spell that cut apart everything in its range—Zhenhuo Zhendao Xuanlongba. The scale of this one was smaller than the one he'd used on AR-I-CA, but it happened in two places at once. One of them briefly kept Eldridge in place, while the other cut diagonally *off* the bridge where Moneygold stood.

With a loud sound, the bridge collapsed, falling onto the deck and the desert.

Thanks to his Superior Embryo, Moneygold was completely unharmed by this. However...

"Ohh, this is bad." While he didn't sound like he was bothered too much, he thought he was in a really bad situation.

The collapse was too fast for someone with his AGI to react to, and after he fell along with the remains of the bridge, he crashed onto the desert and found himself buried under a large pile of debris. It didn't harm him, but it limited his movements. He couldn't even use his attacks to blow the debris away, since he may accidentally hit the ship and its passengers.

Incapacitated and closed off in a cage of sand and rubble, he was effectively removed from combat.

This, naturally, removed the hail of attacks keeping the enemy at bay.

"...Now." The obstacle in their path had been removed, and Machina wasn't one to miss this opportunity. The vernier thrusters fired at full throttle, making it hard for her to even change course. Moving at supersonic speeds, the unit instantly closed the distance between it and the vessel, using the momentum to break through the wall and enter.

They headed straight to the mall, where Eldridge and Emily were fighting.

The mech's sudden arrival would have startled anyone—Emily, Eldridge, or

both of them—into silence.

Regardless, Zhang's job ultimate had rendered Eldridge immobile. Not missing this chance, Sardonyx fired an incendiary shell at him.

Eldridge had defense that rivaled Mythical metal, as well as stats taken from Emily. But the shell that hit him precisely in the stomach—opening up a gaping wound and incinerating everything inside.

Now the only thing linking Eldridge's upper and lower bodies was the remains of his spine.

The wound was devastating, and Eldridge coughed blood as he collapsed backwards. As he did, he used Pickpocket on the unit that had just broken in, but it didn't work.

They countered it, huh? Must be pretty tough... he thought.

Though the wound was very close to fatal, he was still alive for the moment. However, that wasn't exactly a good thing. If this attack itself had been fatal, it would've been negated by the Brooch. But since this was just a heavy wound that left him barely alive, the damage over time from the injury-based debuffs it laid on him made his death an inevitability. The Brooch was useless in situations like this.

However, this was no accident—Machina had done this on purpose.

"Guess this is it." Eldridgetried thinking of something he could do before his time expired, but nothing came to mind. His ult's cooldown wasn't over yet, and with the crimson-white mechdragon standing between them, he couldn't use Takeover on Emily.

Eldridge realized that he'd done everything he could do here.

Another loss against a Superior, huh? It was no doubt a defeat for him.

However, IF had only defeated him because they had *two* Superiors and one tian Superior Job. If even one of them hadn't been here, Eldridge might've lasted until his cooldown expired and may have actually finished off Emily.

She was the strongest PK of all time—effectively immortal—and he'd come closer to actually killing her than anyone else.

In a way, that feat may have been more impressive than merely defeating a Superior.

“...King of Burglary, Eldridge, right?”

And there was someone here who acknowledged that.

Sardonyx’s high-speed movements had greatly damaged him, but he was still able to assess the situation through the outside monitors.

One of Emily’s Youaltepuztlis was broken. He knew that this man lying before him was the one who’d cornered her like this.

Eldridge’s name had been on his list, and he was aware of what King of Burglary had achieved thus far. Eldridge had led a notable PK clan, and his keen mind and leadership skills had brought them many achievements. However, his failures since the incident in Altar had left him mostly abandoned by his clan. Eldridge looked to be a man well past his prime.

It seemed as though Sardonyx’s pilot would have to re-evaluate that impression.

“Eldridge. I’m Rascal—Rascal the Bloodonyx of IF.”

Eldridge was familiar with that name. He was a wanted Superior who was functionally in charge of the world’s strongest criminal clan.

“I have an offer for you.”

“What is it?” Eldridge was wondering what this man could possibly want from him.

“When your death penalty’s over...join IF.”

It was an invitation.

IF was causing all of these incidents in order to gauge the abilities of unaffiliated people. Given their compatibility, Eldridge had been able to gain the upper hand against Emily, who was far above him in status—and he possessed an instinct that had led him to this ship seeking something that very few could even see coming. There were many past achievements attached to his name, and what he’d done here was proof that his skills hadn’t dulled one bit.

Rascal caused these incidents to specifically analyze the participants, and he'd deemed Eldridge to be someone they should add to their team.

"To your clan?"

"You'd start as a supportin' member, but we'll make it official once you're a Superior. Emily'll see you as an enemy for a while, so I'd have you work somewhere other than Caldina, but we can promise to support you with all the funding and items you need."

Eldridge said nothing as Rascal showed him the deposit he would receive. It was far more than anything he'd earned even when Goblin Street was in its golden age.

This wasn't a bad deal by any means. If anything, this was much more than a man on a losing streak like his could ever expect. One could say that luck was finally turning in his favor.



“... *Not a chance*.”

However, he rejected the offer without hesitation, shaking his head.

The faces of two women came to mind.

“There’s only one clan...I’ll ever have.”

Fey and Niala had supported him all this time, and not even this excellent offer could begin to outweigh their value to him.

Rascal said nothing for a moment. He’d thought that Eldridge might refuse, but there was less hesitation in his voice than Rascal had ever expected to hear.

“That won’t change...even if I lose.”

After admitting defeat, Eldridge’s body dissolved into light, and IF were the only ones left in this devastated mall.

“Shame,” Rascal said as he watched the lights vanish. He truly believed that it was unfortunate they couldn’t recruit Eldridge, and at the same time, he felt a little defeated himself.

But then he switched focus. This wasn’t the time to wallow in feelings like those—he had something important to do.

After Eldridge vanished, Emily was standing there with an empty expression on her face. She was neither in her killing mode nor her normal mode. Instead, she was in a state Rascal had never seen before.

Maybe she’s mentally exhausted or something? On this ship, she’d done a few things she’d never done before, and Rascal didn’t know whether this would be good or bad for her.

Regardless, he thought it was best to prevent her from fighting any longer. The odds of it were extremely low, but if there was another person aboard with a weapon-destroying skill, it would be over for her.

And so, Rascal decided that she had to leave here immediately. He called Zhang over the comms and told him to take Emily and retreat. The escort vessels were all silent, and with jiangshi protection they could leave with no trouble.

“What about you...?” Zhang asked.

“I’m goin’ to the power block. This thing here was unexpected, but I still gotta do what I gotta do there.”

After such a disaster, this voyage would definitely be *Eltram*’s first and final one.

That made it likely that the Caldinan congress would seize—or even buy—the energy core, and that was something that Rascal wanted to avoid at all costs.

“Hurry up, Machina.”

“Aye-aye, sir!” And so, they went to the power block, where they clashed with two Magingears.

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Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

“Master! That’s probably a really strong pilot!” The crimson-white mechdragon unit projected a cheerful-sounding woman’s voice.

“Imperial Glory...and Curtis Eldona...huh? That name was...on the list.”

The female voice was followed by the voice of a man who sounded like he was injured. It looked like there were two people inside it. It might’ve been a unit piloted by a Master-Embryo pair, just like ours.

“A unit that mimics a Prism Dragon...what *are* you?” Curtis’s voice as he asked the intruder to identify themselves was stiffer than when he talked to me. Maybe that was just his pilot’s instinct.

“It ain’t worth explainin’. I don’t have business with you,” said the man’s voice.

“Huh? He’s a Superior Job. You aren’t going to try inviting him?” the woman replied.

“We don’t need people who are *just* strong. We have Ideas for that kind of thing.”

That conversation made no sense to me and probably didn’t to Curtis either, but I could tell that they were being fairly disdainful of him.

That only made Imperial Glory's intimidating aura intensify.

"Oh, Master! I just checked and noticed something!" the cheerful woman said as though she couldn't care less how menacing Glory was. "That golden thing has a landdragon-type core too!"

"Ah, shit. This ship just can't stop wastin' our time," the man said, displeased, as the mechdragon began to move.

"Intrusion, insults, and such hostility...I see no reason *not* to presume you are my enemy." And with that, Imperial Glory also began to move.

The golden dragon headed unit's and the mechdragon's cores roared as they faced each other...and clashed.

The tiny point of Imperial Glory's lance stabbed toward into the mechdragon. As though seeing it coming, the mechdragon used its front left leg to push it aside. Imperial Glory then used that rightward momentum to swing its tail balancer to the side, releasing the still-active Paint Napalm onto the mechdragon.

As the liquid fuel flew toward it, the mechdragon lowered itself and activated its vernier thrusters to avoid the barrage, igniting the fuel as it sprayed behind Imperial Glory instead.

The golden mech, though, had already turned to face its opponent, and was now aiming its left arm at the mechdragon.

"Missile Darts."

"Rush Missiles."

Imperial Glory unit fired countless missiles from its left arm, and they were answered by a multitude of missiles launched from the mechdragon's back.

The two barrages clashed in the air, creating explosions that engulfed them both and drowning the area in an explosion of wind and destruction.

The fires were still spreading when they moved toward each other again. With thunderous sounds, they exchanged a new round of blows.

"Oh...!"

“N-Not bad!”

Over the sound of the clash, I could hear the rather gleeful voices of the pilots.

The two were equals—or at least, that was how it seemed to me. They seemed so evenly matched that I felt they might have exchanged countless attacks already that were just too fast for my eyes to follow.

Regardless, it was clear that I stood no chance against either in a proper battle.

“Hugo...can we win?” I was silent. The odds weren’t high, but they weren’t zero either.

If we could stick to *the plan* that Niala and I had laid out and use my advantages to their fullest potential...then yes. We *could* win this.

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Eltram, Power Area

“We’re at a slight disadvantage, huh?” While Machina used incredible piloting techniques to hold off the enemy, Rascal gave his evaluation.

When it came to their power cores, Imperial Glory lost out to Sardonyx even though it had been constructed without any regard to balance—Sardonyx, after all, was the work of Machina, the embodiment of the pre-ancient civilization. If anything here was unusual, it was truly Curtis’s skill—not many could pilot such an unbalanced and unwieldy unit so well.

“Normally, he wouldn’t have had a chance against us simply because of these power cores...but he’s got one too.” The biggest advantage the dragon-shaped Sardonyx had over other Magingears was its pre-ancient civilization cores. The energy cores of normal magic-based machines propelled them by transforming the MP of the rider into kinetic energy based on earth magic or electricity based on sky magic. They were more like converters than true energy cores, and that was why the output and uptime of those machines was strictly limited by the rider’s MP. Hugo’s White Rose was a prime example of this, being a true energy hog, but even normal Marshal IIs couldn’t last all that long in combat. Even the tanklike Geists only managed to extend their uptime by minimizing MP loss by

employing crews where each individual focused exclusively on one area, such as movement or weapons. As far as modern cores went, the most efficient one was Blue Opera's, but in exchange it produced an extremely loud noise while running—and it was an accidental creation that could not be reproduced.

However, even that one couldn't compare to Flagman's energy cores. Instead of converting people's MP, they provided their own magic and converted it into usable forms. Only the first Flagman knew where the magic was being drawn from—not even the Flagmans that had followed him and supposedly inherited his knowledge had actually had the relevant theory passed down to them.

Despite knowing how to build them, not even Machina—or more properly, Agate Designer—knew why they came out the way they did. In fact, there was a safety feature that specifically Iher from knowing.

Because of all that, it wasn't just the large skydragon-type cores used in original Prism Dragons that were obscenely rare—even smaller landdragon-type cores were uncommon too, and Magingears equipped with them had an immense advantage over those that didn't.

However, it just so happened that both units present were equipped with landdragon-type cores. One had a core created two thousand years ago, while the other's were newly created by Machina, but the difference between their performance wasn't significant.

"We'll be at a disadvantage if he notices..." Rascal said. Though Sardonyx had more cores, they were more or less equal. In fact, Sardonyx was gradually being overwhelmed.

That was mostly due to the presence of a Superior Job.

Machina was incredibly skilled—in fact, she'd worked on the base piloting data for all of Flagman's rideable pre-ancient civilization weapons.

However, she wasn't human, which made it impossible for her to claim any jobs. Her piloting had absolutely no support from job skills and or anything like that. She was riding with The Weapon, of course, but that was a job focused solely on making sure the unit's offensive capabilities were up and running. It had little effect on anything else.

Meanwhile, Over Pilot, Curtis had skill level EX Piloting, as well as skills that boosted his unit's stats.

If this battle dragged on too long, Sardonyx would win because it could be healed. However, if it was over quickly, Imperial Glory had a strong chance of defeating them.

Curtis had yet to grasp the full extent of Sardonyx's abilities and thus didn't try to finish things right away—but if the battle continued, he would surely begin to understand and go for the kill.

Rascal knew how bad it would be for them if Curtis used his ult first.

"Machina, we're usin' *Heilige Trinität*."

That was why he decided to play his most dangerous card.

"Are you sure?" Machina said in surprise, still battling Curtis as she spoke.

"Do it. Both that tasteless hunk of golden scrap and the core here gotta be destroyed, anyway."

Perhaps Deus Ex Machina—his Superior Embryo—may have been able to retrieve both with a touch, but that was impossible while Imperial Glory was active, and approaching the ship's core wasn't an option with Curtis here either.

No matter what he did next, Rascal had to destroy Imperial Glory first.

"Roger! And the limit is...?"

"*Just stop before I die.*"

"Aye-aye sir!" And so, Machina gathered her resolve...

"Setting up melee mode! Heilige Trinität...activate!"

...and she entered something into Sardonyx's console.

"To think that someone could match me at mobile weapon combat," Curtis said. "Not even Dryfe had anyone of this caliber." He didn't show it, but the fact that Sardonyx could keep up with him had left Curtis astonished. He'd been piloting Magingears for nearly twenty years.

He'd sat at the helm of Geists that had been modified to be used by one person, Outrail—the half-humanoid half-vehicle Magingear left in Eldona March

—and the Marshal II HC that he'd given to Lieutenant Colonel Berlin.

And now, this Imperial Glory.

Curtis had controlled many units in his life, but he'd never met a pilot who was truly his equal. He couldn't have imagined that he would run into one now, of all times.

It wasn't just the technique that moved him—the unit itself was perfectly constructed. He'd found a tiny fault even in White Rose's heavy armor, but he couldn't spot anything like that in Sardonyx.

"If this were an ordinary battle, my heart would dance..." However, Curtis had to destroy this enemy as quickly as possible and claim Eltram's core. He was weighing his joy as a warrior against the weight of his goal.

And when his goal was placed onto the scales, it was obvious to which side it would tilt.

He wouldn't relish this battle as a warrior, but instead defeat his enemy as a soldier.

"And since you it seems you have a core of your own...I will claim that as well." Based on the output and the fact that it showed no sign of weakening, Curtis had realized that the enemy unit must have a pre-ancient civilization core too. This wasn't a foe he'd expected to face, but if he could gain something from the confrontation, he would welcome it.

After that thought crossed his mind, he began to figure out a strategy that would defeat the mechdragon...

"...Hm?"

But then, a change in the enemy made his eyes go wide with shock.

The front legs...the claws that until now had only been used for anchoring the unit had grown in length, becoming obvious offensive weapons. The overall form had changed as well, with its limbs now elongated and its thruster placement adjusted to match.

However, the most obvious change was the color.

The unit was crimson-white before, but now, the white parts had heated up

until they glowed, making it a mix of crimson and bright red.

“What are y—?” Before he could finish what he was saying, Curtis quickly tilted the unit to the side, acting on subconscious reflex.

A moment later, something red flew right by him, too fast to see—and there was now a *claw mark* on the golden unit’s shoulder armor, marking that the dragon had passed and touched him.

Curtis’s eyes widened. His enemy was now so fast he struggled to describe it, and the claw strikes didn’t end at just one attack, instead slashing at him many times over.

The unit bathed in bright crimson was attacking him at speeds that greatly exceeded anything he had seen so far. During this assault, Curtis had swung the tail balancer for both defense and retaliation, but that had left it damaged and rendered Paint Napalm unusable.

“Th-This is...!” The unit’s current level of mobility was so high it almost seemed as though it had been merely toying with Curtis before. *A job ultimate?! An MVP reward?! Whatever it is, they pulled out a true trump card...!* Despite this extreme change in the nature of his foe, Curtis cracked a smile as he reconsidered his earlier choice to finish this quickly.His conjecture was mostly correct. This power was undoubtedly one of the aces up Rascal and Machina’s sleeve, but it was accomplished by neither a job ult nor an MVP reward.

Heilige Trinität—the Holy Trinity. Just like their mother ship, Tetragrammaton, it used a concept from earth’s most widespread religion as its name—and it was not a skill, but a *combination*. Emphasizing the concept of a “trinity,” this was a combo that employed Sardonyx’s power, Machina’s piloting, and Rascal’s job skills *all to their fullest, all at the same time*.

Both the cores ran at an output that could cause them to exceed their limitations and explode. The mechdragon’s control column was now being jerked to and fro so intensely that it had begun to shatter.

And all the damage this combination did was being fixed by The Weapon’s repair and error deletion skills, forcefully keeping the entire thing together.

Basically, they were *stabilizing the unit within its danger zone*.

As long as there was a balance between the self-inflicted damage from exceeding their own limits and the skill's ability to repair, this functioned as an extreme improvement to its performance.

"Ngh...ghhh...!" However, the many quick movements and collisions at supersonic speeds would ultimately be fatal to Rascal and his frail body. Already he was spitting blood, and more of his skeleton started to fracture with every passing moment.

This combination couldn't be used without Rascal and his job, The Weapon, but Rascal himself was its greatest weak point. Who would die first—their enemy, or Rascal himself?

Heilige Trinität was a double-edged sword.

"Master...!"

"Don't mind me," Rascal said, swallowing a healing pill along with a mouthful of his own blood. "If you don't want me to die, just beat goldie already."

"...Aye-aye, sir!" Machina said with a nod as she continued the relentless, limitless barrage.

"Heh...heh heh...heh HA HA HA HA HA...!" Curtis could feel the armor on his limbs peeling away, but despite that, he found himself laughing.

His heart was dancing. This was an encounter with a powerful foe that was the same as he was. This wasn't someone who wielded a spear in their own bare hands, the commander of a puppet army, the master of a powerful beast, or an entirely robotic killing machine.

This was his first time meeting someone who piloted a mobile weapon like he did—someone could match him at it.

Reinhard's defeat. Claudiah's salvation. Suddenly, Curtis found himself with a goal that matched those two obsessions.

His fighter's nature had caused him to instantly fall in love with Claudiah and her unfathomable talents—and now, he was drawing close to savoring this battle with the primal purity of a warrior's soul.

“Hah...hngh...!” But when he noticed himself laughing and enjoying this, he quickly restrained himself.

He wasn’t here to have fun. He had a goal he had to fulfill as both a soldier and a man who loved a woman.

That was the reason he’d killed so many people on this ship, including his own subordinates.

He couldn’t allow himself to fight for enjoyment alone.

The only words in his mind now were “Victory to the true Dryfe.”

“Man-Machine Interface...activate!” Gathering his resolve, he used a power that was restricted to one use per day—the ultimate job skill of the Over Pilot.

A moment later, Sardonyx’s claws approached Imperial Glory’s torso. However, Curtis used his spear to deflect them and sent a knee into Sardonyx’s chest armor.

This time, Machina was the one whose eyes widened.

Imperial Glory’s movements were nothing like before. And it wasn’t just in terms of pure speed. The golden unit’s steps and attacks seemed even more well-timed and elegant than they had a moment ago.

This was the power of the Over Pilot’s ultimate job skill—Man-Machine Interface.

It was an active—rather than passive—enhancement skill that tripled the STR and AGI of the user’s unit.

However, that wasn’t the skill’s most valuable effect by a long shot.

Man-Machine Interface was Piloting perfected—the ultimate form of the skill that allowed the user to control a war machine however they wished.

Now, the unit moved exactly as he willed it. He didn’t even have to touch the control column anymore.

At this moment, Curtis himself *was* Imperial Glory. He moved it as if the unit was his own flesh and blood. It followed his commands instantly, without any input lag.

“I can see! I can see them! I see your movements!” His mouth wasn’t moving—Curtis’s voice came directly from Imperial Glory’s outer speakers.

The metallic unit easily broke the speed of sound, yet its movements flowed more beautifully than any human being’s could.

“Adjusting enemy unit threat level. Forming patterns. Testing various counter plans.”

Machina responded to this by focusing all her processing power on combat and ran through all kinds of tactics meant to destroy the man united with the machine.

Once again, they were more than a match for each other, but both of them had time limits.

Though both units had cores that could keep them running semipermanently, there were certain things that couldn’t last. The damage sustained by Imperial Glory brought it ever closer to the limits of its endurance, while the vivid red mechdragon was at the risk of losing Rascal. Both of them wanted to end this as quickly as possible.

But if not even the trump cards they kept up their sleeves could create a gap between their capabilities, the two combatants had but one choice—an all-or-nothing gambit.

“Charge completed. Changing sniper cannon barrel to energy mode. Target...within range.”

The bright red mechdragon aimed the sniper cannon that doubled as its head straight toward the enemy...

“I will end it with this!”

...as the golden unit opened its dragonlike maw wide...

These two dragons faced one another...

“Blast Flare!”

“Draconic Burn!”

...and *both their heads* released superheated energy beams.

As an intense light flooded the power zone, the immense heat exploded between them.

Both of them widened their eyes in surprise. They had both fired a weapon that converted all the magic provided by the landdragon-type core into heat and launched it from a close-range. The word “armament” hardly seemed appropriate for something so powerful, so they were each shocked to find that their opponent also wielded such a power.

Machina had installed it on Sardonyx as a secret weapon against those who assumed that the mechdragon’s head was only good for sniping shots, while the golden Glory had it simply because its creators were enthusiasts who felt that a super robot just wasn’t complete until it could fire a huge beam.

And as strange as it was, they were more or less equal in this area as well.

Sardonyx was clearly the superior unit in terms of conversion efficiency and output simply because it was equipped with two cores. However, Imperial Glory’s output was enhanced by the Over Pilot’s skills.

As a result, their equally matched weapons clashed, and instead of instantly killing the other like they’d each hoped, the balance was yet again maintained.

However, they couldn’t *stop* firing these beams. If either of them did, they would surely be hit by the enemy’s shot.

And as a result, they were both gambling on the enemy units running out of energy before they did.

As this deadly balance was maintained...

“...Cyco.”

...the silent Rose saw its one chance at victory.

The pale unit stood up, covered itself in ice, and activated La Porte de l’Enfer once more.

The other two widened their eyes yet again. The third unit—White Rose—had more or less vanished from their thoughts by now. That was why they were in no position to counter it in a timely manner.

Neither Sardonyx or Imperial Glory could make a single careless move while

facing each other. White Rose, on the other hand, didn't have much besides La Porte de l'Enfer and its toughness. It was undoubtedly far less powerful than the other two units here, and it was unlikely that it had anything that could take both of the other units out. Even if it did possess such a power, White Rose didn't even reach speeds at the subsonic level, meaning that it could never hope to land a hit on these two mechs that had surpassed all limits.

That was why at this point, both Curtis and Machina saw White Rose as nothing but set dressing.

However, that soon changed...

"*Niala!*"

...when Hugo called out, causing a *fourth* unit to fly in through the hole in the ceiling.

All eyes widened yet again.

The two clashing units both spied a bomber plane that looked like a condor. The Genocide Condor was part of Niala's legion—Winged Omnipotence, Simurgh—and it was the one with the highest firepower.

Niala herself was also at the edge of the hole in the ceiling. After Imperial Glory had destroyed the entrance, she'd gone through the ship's hallways to arrive at that very gap.

And now, she'd fired her Condor, just like she and Hugo had planned.

"CAAAAWWW!" With a roaring engine that sounded like the shriek of a bird, Genocide Condor bird descended straight into the center of the power zone at an incredible speed...*and exploded*.



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Before Entering the Power Area, Eltram, Hallway

Just before Hugo, Cyco, and Niala entered the power zone and assaulted the DLG, they explained their combat capabilities to each other.

“My Embryo is a varied Legion,” said Niala. “Though only two of them are specialized in combat, and I already used one of them—the jet fighter, Fighting Falcon. That just leaves the bomber, Genocide Condor.”

“How destructive is it? Compared to, say, King of Destruction’s battleship.”

“Well, you could have picked a more reasonable point of comparison...” Hugo had looked into his memory and brought up the weapon Embryo with the greatest firepower that he’d seen yet, but it made Niala put on a strained smile. “It’s a sixth-form Embryo that’s also split among multiple functions, so it can’t really match a Superior Embryo. It probably wouldn’t do much damage to White Rose’s armor. That’s a Mythical alloy, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Taking defensive passive skills into account, the damage would be very light. That isn’t a bad thing, seeing as there’s the potential for friendly fire...but even if the target is made of lower ranked material than yours—Ancient Legendary metal, for example—it still wouldn’t do too much damage if they assumed a defensive stance.” Niala had experimented with her Embryo in an arena, and she had a decent idea of how powerful it was. “It is powerful enough to destroy a regular Marshal II completely, though.”

“I see.”

“And that’s it for what I can use in battle.”

“Thank you. That makes it easier for me to come up with a plan.”

“So, what do you intend to do if your skill doesn’t work on these enemies just like it didn’t on the one in the mall?”

“I’ve mostly figured out how all of that works,” They’d already talked about what they would do if La Porte de l’Enfer didn’t work on the enemies. Hugo had already guessed that it was because of the units’ airtight seal, so he continued

his explanation. “This is just a guess, but I think it didn’t work on the DLG Magingears because they were fully airtight. That’s why I believe I shall ask *you* to do something about that.”

“Me?”

“You can take care of that by sniping Marshal IIs. And if we encounter someone with stronger armor, please use the Genocide Condor you mentioned.” Niala did not immediately respond. “Holes made by sniping, damage done by bombs—if we break that seal,, La Porte de l’Enfer should work...assuming I’m right about the reason it failed earlier, anyway.”

Niala’s face had twisted into a bitter expression when she heard Hugo’s plan. “I can do the first easily...but there’s a problem with the second. The Condor has a high cost, so I can’t use it carelessly. Our financial situation will be better now that we took some equipment from the terrorists, but I’m hesitant anyway.”

They still didn’t know if Eldridge would be able to actually turn their spoils into money—and even if he could, the money they’d earned here was meant to be used for the clan’s revival. Personal payout would be something they’d talk about later.

“How much *does* it cost?”

“About 10,000,000. It’s already charged and I can use it, but...”

While significantly less than the costs some Superiors incurred, it certainly wasn’t cheap. They were already budgeting their meals, so Niala wanted to avoid using her Embryo.

“Please use it during our upcoming battle in the power zone. I’ll pay for it.”

“...What?”

In response to Niala, Hugo took 10,000,000 lir from his Inventory. This was part of the reward he’d split with Ray for defeating the *Gouz-Maise Gang*. He’d been using it to buy parts for repairs and the like, but even now could spare 10,000,000 lir.

“Are you sure?”

“I believe it will be necessary.” Hugo seemed to have no doubts.

“...Very well. I’ll take it, but I promise I’ll give it back if I don’t use it.”

“All right.”

“I’ll leave the timing to you, but how exactly are you planning to deploy Genocide Condor? Will you bombard enemies that have too much armor to snipe?”

“That is the plan. But...”

“But...?”

“I don’t think it will be enough.”

Holes opened by sniping. Damage made by explosions. Somehow, Hugo felt that even those measures might not be enough to overcome some foes.

“That’s why I’ll prepare a third assault.”

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Eltram, Power Area

With its crash, all the bombs within Genocide Condor were set off.

The power area was fairly cramped for Magingears, and the resulting destruction was enough to start a firestorm and drown everything in a chain of explosions.

However, the golden unit and the mechdragon were both made from Ancient Legendary metal. They could avoid fatal damage if they simply braced for it.

The blasts caused them to cut their energy beams at the exact same time and assume a defensive stance.

And White Rose was rushing toward them.

Plated in a Mythical armor stronger than the other two and controlled by a pilot with a job that boosted its defense further, White Rose could charge through the explosions without the need to actively defend itself.

And the other two didn’t—*couldn’t*—see its approach. The explosions engulfing the power zone had made optical and sound sensors unusable. Even

Drac-Sight's energy sensor was overwhelmed by noise.

The two units *couldn't see anything*. They might've been the Over Pilot and Agate Designer—the two strongest pilots in the world—but even they couldn't react to this. Perhaps AR-I-CA could've sensed something with her ability to foresee danger, but these two had no such ability.

However, the same went for White Rose. The unit's sensor was overwhelmed, showing only pure white static as though it were plowing through a blizzard.

Despite that, White Rose knew where the two units were.

After all...

"Forward. Six steps."

...Cyco's unique sense could see clearly Curtis and Rascal's immense kill count of their kin.

Even in this blinding, burning hell, this intuition that sprung from the core of her being allowed her to know the exact location of those she had to defeat—those murderers.

"Right. Seven steps." Within this blinding, deafening blizzard of fire, the white unit charged without hesitation, led on by the words of a girl who was the pilot's mount, friend, and true other half.

"Both sides. Now." Thus, White Rose used a skill—its own ace up its sleeve.

This was its second skill, Purgatorial Slash. It used the heat gathered by La Porte de l'Enfer and released it as a heat energy blade—the Embryo's only purely offensive skill.

It had been gathering heat since its last use in Gideon, and all of that would be released right here and now.

"Purgatorial Slash!" Blades of fire extended from White Rose's both hands, piercing the cockpits of the other two units.

If sniping wasn't enough to break the airtightness, they used bombs. And if that wasn't enough...they'd use a Purgatorial Slash. This was the three-layered plan Hugo had thought up.

The difference in defense, the fact that Niala was with him, and Cyco—

Hugo had used all the advantages he had...and as a result, his blade reached his targets.

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In silence, Curtis looked at his blacked out external monitor, showing a reflection of his own body.

The black screen that now served as a makeshift mirror displayed him as a frozen statue...with a hole where his stomach ought to be.

The heat energy blades that had pierced the chest armor of his unit had burned it out. The Freeze that followed instantly stopped the bleeding, but once that was undone, he would inevitably die.

Curtis quickly grasped the uncomfortable truth—this was the direct result of his carelessness.

However, Imperial Glory was still moving. Man-Machine Interface made him one with his unit, letting him move it even if his body was frozen.

Curtis could continue this battle—but fighting and surviving were two different things. Even if he could move his unit, the wound he'd suffered was so grave that he could not hope to escape death.

Curtis was a soldier. He'd killed dozens...no, hundreds of people, so he knew full well what was going to happen. His life, suspended by Freeze, wasn't long for this world. If the effect expired or Hugo realized that Curtis had been fatally injured, the Freeze would stop and he would die. Curtis already knew that Hugo was capable of that.

There was nothing that could be done—Curtis's death was now assured.

This realization made several different feelings well up in his heart.

His desire for combat. His shame toward his subordinates. His yearning for Claudiah. His hatred for Reinhard. All of these emotions mixed and swirled within him, and the coming death narrowed his thinking.

The amount of things Curtis had to weigh was rapidly decreasing. The exciting battle with his equal was over, and a dead man had no future with Claudiah.

That was why he made one final choice and placed it on the scales.

Perhaps this was inevitable. It was the goal he'd rallied for, and the flag beneath which his men died.

"Very well! I will die here! I accept it!" As his death was unavoidable, he accepted it. This beloved unit would be his coffin...

"*I leave the rest to you*, Glory! MACHINE SOUL, ACTIVATE!"

...and Curtis used the *final skill* of the pilot grouping.

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Machina saw that moment.

While all of Sardonyx's sensors were overwhelmed by explosions from the bomber, a white unit had approached them. The heat energy blade it launched just barely surpassed Sardonyx's laminated Ancient Legendary armor.

The energy blade entered the cockpit right next to Rascal's seat and burned off his right arm.

"Master...?!" Switching back from her combat focus, Machina let out a scream.

However, a moment after Rascal lost his right arm, his entire body Froze.

A moment later, Sardonyx's monitors were overwhelmed by errors.

With The Weapon, Rascal incapacitated, Heilige Trinität could no longer function.

"Ughh...!" Machina instantly returned the unit to its normal mode. Right after that, she quickly chose to leave the power zone entirely.

As a Prism Person, Machina was unaffected by La Porte de l'Enfer. However, Sardonyx required Rascal's skills to function in its unoptimized state. With him incapacitated, continuing this fight wasn't an option, and Machina cared far more about her disarmed and Frozen Master than any battle or core in front of them.

She fervently set the escape route and fled *Eltram* without showing any care for anything else, leaving behind the White Rose unit that had hurt her Master,

the woman who had summoned the bomber...and Imperial Glory, which was about to become something else.

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After Sardonyx retreated, Imperial Glory—which now had a large hole in its chest—retaliated against White Rose with maneuvers surpassing those it had performed while Curtis's ultimate job skill was active.

Imperial Glory was punching relentlessly. Combined with the damage Rose had already suffered, this was enough to break off the white unit's right arm and damage the leg joints.

A destructive barrage with overwhelming speed and precision—its power had increased more than it had while Man-Machine Interface was active, and it was now great enough to destroy even Mythical metal.

"Ngh...?! Wh-What...!"

"Looks like my *transformation* has made your Freezing powers useless."

Imperial Glory spoke with Curtis's voice. However, it felt functionally different than it had when he was talking through the speakers with Man-Machine Interface.

It was as though the one speaking was *the unit itself*.

"Hugo...he's already *dead*," Cyco said, as though to confirm what Hugo suspected.

"What?!"

"His *kill count is gone*."

Curtis had died within Imperial Glory's cockpit. His Frozen vital functions had ceased completely, and even the Over Pilot job he held had been released from his body. He wasn't attacking with the spear, Drac-Stinger either—because it was *gone*. Like all MVP rewards, it had vanished with its user's death.

Curtis Eldona had most definitely died here in *Eltram*'s power block.

Yet *Imperial Glory was still moving*.

"Indeed! I have abandoned life as a human! I *had* to!" Imperial Glory itself

responded to Cyco's words, its voice full of conflicting emotions.

All of this was happening because of the skill Curtis used right before dying—the *final skill* of the pilot grouping, Machine Soul.

If Man-Machine Interface was what waited at the end of the road that was Piloting, this skill was what happened if you strayed from that road. The pilot gave up their life, inhabiting their unit with just one goal—one dying wish—and greatly enhancing its power.

Originally, it was a skill used by a pilot who was low on magic in order to complete one last job—a sort of final command that lasted until the unit's energy expired.

However, the core was providing Imperial Glory with semi-perpetual energy that erased such limitations. And as long as the unit remained indestructible, its goal would be as well.

"Now, I-I-I can control this body far better than I did befo-o-o-re!" The Imperial Glory inhabited by Curtis's dying wish laughed as if to display its power, but its voice was starting to be overcome by static—though it was unclear if this was caused by the short-term skill being unnaturally extended or some kind of incompatibility between the skill and the core that sustained it. "I don't have to make a new weapon with the co-o-re! I-I'll incorporate it into this body, keep enhancing it, and kill everyone who stands in my wa-a-ay! I will become the machine-god protector of my homeland and defeat Reinha-a-a-ard!"

The one goal Curtis had granted to the unit while he still lived was Reinhard's downfall. Even if Curtis himself died, the unit entrusted with his will would carry that out.

"I feel so much more po-o-o-owerful than when I was alive! I will de-e-efinitely beat him like no-o-o-o-ow!"

As he was now, Curtis didn't remember Claudiah. The unit had Curtis's final will, but not his soul.

"KillKillKillKillKillKillKlililiillliiiil!"

As Imperial Glory kept moving, the consciousness within began to fade. Soon, it wasn't clear who was speaking anymore—Curtis, or the unit itself.

This was a machine given the sole directive of eliminating Reinhard. Carrying only the shattered fragments of a man’s grudge, it was a true monstrosity...

[Discovered a monster that fulfills the conditions to be set as a Unique Boss Monster.]

[Confirmed that there are no similar specimens within the records. Contacting UBM control AI.]

[UBM control AI’s agreement received.]

[Setting the target as a UBM.]

[Increasing target strength, applying post-death MVP reward transformation.]

[Target is Epic-tier. Corpse Dragon Mech, Imperial Glory will be its name.]

...a monstrosity that the world itself acknowledged as neither man nor machine.

Chapter 9: The White Rose and the Corpse of Glory

Eltram, Energy Zone

The current situation was the result of multiple factors.

A landdragon-type semi-permanent energy core. A unit built by the wealth of the imperium and the Triangle of Wisdom's technology—their Embryos included. The unprecedented development of a mind through the use of Over Pilot's final skill.

The combination of these had turned Imperial Glory into a monstrous creature like no other.

Being recognized as a UBM hadn't changed its appearance. After receiving the UBM designation, it still had the hole in its chest, along with all the other damage, and maintained the exact same functions as it had possessed before.

However, the Resource injection had increased its output even further.

This UBM was only a fledgling, but it was already far too strong for Hugo and Cyco.

Still...I can't just let it do as it pleases, Hugo thought. There was also something that flashed to his mind as he looked at Imperial Glory—the UBM made of the grudge and flesh of the dead—Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise.

He felt that the golden unit was now—a murderous machine-soldier driven by a dead man's grudge and powered by an inexhaustible source of energy—was extremely similar to that horror.

There was nothing for Hugo to hesitate about here. He knew had to stop Imperial Glory right here and now.

"Rose...!" Hugo's unit had been heavily battered by the barrage, but he somehow forced it to stand up againCyco also manipulated her icy armor to support the damaged White Rose. The injuries on its legs were so extensive that they were only questionably capable of supporting the unit's weight—and yet

they did.

It was as though Rose itself was trying to heed Hugo's will...as though it also wanted to prevent the rampage of its "sibling"—a fellow mech built by the Triangle of Wisdom.

"D-Do you think th-th-th-that hunk of scrap can d-d-defeat me?" Glory asked.

"I dunno," said Hugo. "But I can't just ignore you. Doing that would make it hard for me to sleep at night."

The power gap between their units was vast.

Imperial Glory was stronger than it ever had been. On top of that, Hugo's La Porte de l'Enfer was useless against it, and he'd already used Purgatorial Slash.

He had no advantage over Imperial Glory this time, but Hugo simply couldn't choose to *not* fight.

Think...! There has to be something...just one thing that might let me win...! he thought, but Glory attacked him ceaselessly regardless.

Glory threw its fists at Rose, fully intent on destroying it. This was an onslaught of pure power that didn't need any MVP rewards or armaments to be devastating—the attacks weren't even delivered with the incredible skill that Curtis had displayed in life.

"GHA-GHA-GHA-GHA-GHA-GHA-GHA-GHA-GHA-GHA-GHA-GHA!"

But despite all that, he and his unit were the strongest they'd ever been—and it wasn't even close.

One swing, and the Mythical metal alloy bent. Another, and it shattered.

There was no skill or special weaponry aiding anything here. The attack was nothing but pure STR—and it now exceeded White Rose's defensive capabilities.

A single hit would be enough to turn generic Marshal IIs into piles of scrap. Rose may have been the toughest Magingear, but not even it could withstand a hundred hits of that strength.

I need to...fight back...! Hugo thought in desperation. Alas, this monster *had*

just been born. With its kinslayer count at 0, not even La Porte de l'Enfer Deuxième could work against it.

He tried taking out and firing Rose's weapons, but they seemed to do nothing. They didn't even make it flinch, and it retaliated with another relentless assault.

Then, Glory grabbed and held up Rose by the head.

The sound of creaking metal filled the space as it began to bend.

"Damn...it...!"

"Mmrrgh..." Hugo and Cyco tried resisting, but swinging the ice blade in White Rose's left hand didn't seem to do anything. They hit Glory with it a number of times, but it broke before dealing any damage.

"I-I-I-It's o-o-o-o-over...!"

And with that, Glory pushed its left hand—the barrels that fired its Missile Darts—against Rose's cockpit.

A brief silence followed. And then, inexplicably, it retracted the tubes, straightened its hand into a spear-point, and raised it, ready to swing it down.

In only a moment, those metal fingers would most certainly pierce White Rose's chest armor and kill Hugo.

But, in that moment where Hugo thought it was all over for him...

As though they had arrived just to stop this attack, several silhouettes fell over Glory.

"G h e?"

The shadows belonged to a flock of mechanical birds. There was an owl. There was a murder of crows. There was a pigeon. There was a pelican as big as an airplane.

"That's...!" Hugo cried. The birds were all Niala's Embryo, Simurgh.

"D-D-Don't get in my way!" As the giant pelican tried to swallow Glory up into its mouth, the golden unit swung the left hand, instantly splitting the bird in half.

"Hugo—now!"

“Yeah...!” Cyco took that moment to undo the frozen armor she’d placed over the unit’s head and Hugo took control of Rose, using that opening to free its head from Glory’s tight grasp.

But at the same time, Simurgh’s flock continued to dwindle. The combat-oriented Falcon and Condor were already gone. The birds that were left could do nothing but buy time.

But that was exactly Niala’s plan.

She was standing at the edge of the hole above, aiming the magic rifle in her hands. As the metal birds distracted the hostile unit, she fixed her sights on it and pulled the trigger.

What she fired was an explosive bullet—the sniper round with the highest damage potential.

It sped between her birds’ many wings before striking its target and exploding on Imperial Glory’s head and neck area—the “barrel” from which it fired Draconic Burn.

Though it was heat-resistant, this location didn’t have tough protection of its Ancient Legendary outer armor, and the explosion was enough to make it crack.

“G h e g h e g h e...” But even this critical hit wasn’t fatal. Seemingly unfazed by this damage, Imperial Glory turned and jumped.

A moment later, it appeared right in front of Niala, over the hole she was standing next to.

Niala sighed. The sight of the mech made it obvious to her that getting the death penalty was inevitable.

That was when she began to wonder why she’d gone out of her way to help Hugo. She could’ve easily escaped if she tried.

However, she found her answer soon enough.

“You go support him, Niala.”

She was doing the job given to her by her dear clan leader, of course. But there was another reason—when she watched Hugo and talked to him, he somehow reminded her of a student she taught.

Because of that, helping him came naturally to her.

He's not even the same gender, Niala thought with a wry grin on her face. But as absurd as it seemed, she didn't regret her actions whatsoever.

A moment later, Imperial Glory swung its arm down, instantly crushing her.

"Niala!" Hugo screamed.

As she vanished into bits of light, so too did the remaining Simurgh mechbirds. With the nuisance gone, Glory once again landed in the energy area.

"I-I-It's o-o-o-ver-ver...!" Repeating itself, the golden dragonheaded unit once again approached White Rose.

Hugo's defeat, briefly delayed by Niala, was swiftly approaching yet again. The gap between them was evident. There was no area where Hugo outmatched it.

"Still...!" He knew he couldn't give up here. The chaos this creature would cause if left unchecked was unimaginable.

More importantly...

"Ray...*he* didn't run!" Hugo's newbie friend had not only stood his ground against a powerful UBM, but also turned aside the tragedy it threatened to unleash.

That's why...I won't run either...! Hugo—Yuri—had already decided not to hesitate on this point.

Thus, he thought about how he could seize victory against this monstrous machine.

"G h e, GHA-GHA-GHA-GHA...!" Even so, the massive dragonheaded unit approached him, bringing either certain death with it.

From its maw, Hugo saw sparks flying—the result of the damage from the explosive bullet.

"Hm...?" Hugo was on the verge of realizing something, but Glory then struck Rose, the blow deforming the chest armor.

A rain of attacks followed, shattering White Rose's armor further in a frenzy of utter destruction.

Why...? Hugo wondered. *Why is it only using its arms?* Weathering the onslaught, Hugo realized that ever since the transformation, Glory had been fighting using only its fists. Part of it was because its MVP rewards had vanished, of course—but it wasn't using the items it had installed either. Even when it had tried to use Missile Darts, it had stopped for some reason.

"G h A a a A h H!" With a roar, Glory thrust its left hand into Rose's right shoulder.

"I-It's...!" The arms of the dragonheaded unit possessed overwhelming attack power that could pulverize even Mythical metal.

However, even they were now cracked either from Genocide Condor's bombings or the battle against Sardonyx in Heilige Trinität mode.

The damage was immense, and it had affected the Missile Darts mechanism. Glory had realized that before firing and chose not to use it.

This meant two things...

As it is, Imperial Glory can't use its installed weapons...and it didn't know that until it saw for itself!

Hugo didn't know many details about the creature now that it had become a UBM, but given what he'd just seen, he could now assume that it couldn't gauge the extent of its damage through pain like living creatures did.

Even as a UBM, it's still a machine, so it doesn't feel pain. Hugo thought. *What else is there...?*

Hugo felt as if he was overlooking something important, but while he tried to remember what it was, Imperial Glory swung its shattered tail to attack Rose's torso.

The unit's chest armor suffered more damage, finally falling away. Even the internal armor holding up the outside monitors detached, and Hugo now saw Imperial Glory with his own two eyes.

"Ah...?!"

"H e h, H a h A h a h A h a H A h a h A h a H a!"

Glory laughed as it threw a sideways fist toward the cockpit. Hugo's eyes

widened before he quickly pulled up Rose's left arm, where Cyco then focused her ice armor.

The sound of the impact reached Hugo's ears at the exact same time as the sensation of floating washed over him.

After a flight that lasted less than a second, Rose crashed back-first into the wall of the energy zone.

"Guhh...!" Air rushed from Hugo's lungs. He didn't fall out of his seat thanks to the harness strapping him in, but the powerful attack still hurt him. It also damaged the internal systems, and the cockpit was now full of sparks.

Even so, Hugo made Rose stand up and face Glory. Even with hazy vision and fading consciousness, he looked straight at the enemy.

Just like Rose, Glory had a large hole in its chest area. Beyond it, Hugo could see its pilot—Curtis's corpse. He was already dead, and even the will he'd entrusted to his unit had begun to bend and shatter.

The dragonheaded unit was no longer his dear combat companion, but a monstrous creature—Curtis had become his own casket. The remains within had been heavily damaged by all the combat that happened thus far.

At the sight of the corpse, Hugo was lost in thought for a moment.

Curtis was someone that he had to defeat at all costs. That man was behind the terrorist attack on this ship that had resulted in many deaths already, and his DLG had almost certainly caused a great deal of destruction since it was formed.

Hugo didn't regret fighting him and fatally wounding him at all. However, Curtis knew about the Triangle of Wisdom and used a unit that they'd made. To Hugo, he was nothing but an enemy—but to the Triangle's members, he must've been something else.

Thinking about that and seeing Curtis dead in the exposed cockpit, knowing that he had dealt the final blow, filled Hugo with a sense of bitterness. And though he felt rage toward Curtis for murdering his own soldiers, Hugo definitely understood his complaints about the antics of the Triangle of Wisdom.

Perhaps this was the only way things could have played out between them, but Hugo couldn't help but find it disheartening.

That may have been what made Hugo think back to their conversation from when Curtis was alive...

"Ah...!"

...and sudden realization, caused by the memory of that conversation and what Curtis had said, snapped Hugo back into the present like an electric shock.

"Wait...! Is it actually...?" Hugo strained his eyes to look at the console near Curtis's body.

As someone with a pilot grouping job, Hugo possessed enhanced eyesight—and because of that, he could see the words "Installed Armaments. Currently Used: None."

Barely a moment later, Hugo took a deep breath and let out a scream.

"*PAINT NAPALM!*"

He shouted *the name of his enemy's weapon*, and his voice traveled through the hole in the armor and reached the console near Curtis.

"G h e...?" The dragonheaded unit was confused by the strange words at first and stopped for a moment...but then, its shattered tail made an activation sound.

The console within it now read "Installed Armaments. Preparing to Use: Paint Napalm."

Indeed, it had actually reacted to Hugo's words and began powering up the weapon. Obeying the voice activation, the tail of the dragonheaded unit tried to release its liquid explosives.

That had come up in the conversation Hugo had remembered—the words Curtis said while still alive.

It doesn't even care who says it, so it cannot even act as protection in case it gets stolen.

The weapons were activated by voice—and *it didn't matter whose*. This was

the intentional “bug” left in the mech by the hobbyist engineers of the Triangle of Wisdom.

Hugo wasn’t sure it would work, as it was possible that becoming a UBM would have removed this function. It was likely that becoming a UBM may have resulted in the loss of this function.

And yet, the “feature” was still active. Perhaps that was only to be expected, though, as it had been there since before Imperial Glory attained a will of its own—since its very creation.

UBMs that were “set” as UBMs typically did not change their essential natures.

And thus, Hugo’s voice could reach Glory’s cockpit and control its weapons.

“Wh-W h a t...?! S...Sto-o-op!”

But it could not be stopped. The Triangle of Wisdom engineers who’d installed the armaments hadn’t even *thought* about how they’d be stopped.

Perhaps Curtis himself may have been able to counter this somehow, but Glory wasn’t Curtis—only his shattered fragments. He was already dead—just a corpse inside his golden UBM coffin.

The knowledge needed to deal with this situation had already been destroyed, and the empty box that flailed its fists like a feral animal wasn’t able to replicate it.

Thus, Paint Napalm activated.

The tail balancer had been broken in the battle against Sardonyx, and the liquid fuel couldn’t even reach its tip because of that. Instead, it began spraying out through the cracks in the shattered balancer, flying in every direction.

The napalm quickly covered Glory itself and was set ablaze by the fires left by Condor’s bombing.

“Gh, a h...A a aA a aAa A aaA AA A AAA!” The fuel seeped in through the broken cockpit and ignited the remains within. The golden unit itself was starting to melt away.

“Paint Napalm!” Hugo spoke the weapon name, activating it once again. Even

more liquid fuel began spraying out as the fires followed it back to the tank and began burning the internal systems.

“G h oOo oa OOo OoA aAa A aA a Hhh HH h...!” Imperial Glory let out a sound that resembled both a dying scream and the howl of an engine. But despite looking like the victim of some hellish torment, the golden unit still charged toward Rose.

The flames didn’t stop it. It still sought to fulfill its swiftly crumbling goal, and would do whatever it took to destroy its enemy—this obstacle between Glory and its objective.

Imperial Glory raised its fist, ready to deliver the most powerful blow yet. However, the white unit braced for a strike...and withstood it.

It was as though White Rose itself was declaring it would not fall beneath Imperial Glory’s fist.

“Draconic Burn!” Hugo spoke and activated another weapon. A moment later, the golden unit transformed the energy in its core into heat.

However, the repeated battles and the roaring flames had left its internal systems heavily damaged, and perhaps most importantly, Niala’s explosive bullet had left a crack in the head cannon’s “barrel.”

The heat began to worsen the damage, spreading in every direction.

“G o o O oOoA AaA aaa A Aa aaA AA!” However, the Epic-tier Corpse Dragon Mech was able to prevent an explosion.

Despite being on the verge of death, it somehow retained control over its own body. The amount of heat should have been enough to obliterate the unit, yet it was somehow able to keep it at a manageable level and even subdue it.

Hugo gasped. Imperial Glory’s weapons were not equipped with a means to stop them once activated,, but Draconic Burn was the sole exception. As it had done when it had clashed with Sardonyx’s Blast Flare, this weapon *could be stopped at any specific time*.

Intense heat spread wildly throughout Glory’s frame, but it managed to restrain its spread.

The Corpse Dragon Mech was now like a dam ready to burst.

Hugo silently watched it for a moment. This was the watershed moment.

If he didn't finish it off right now, the golden unit would overcome this flaw, most likely by destroying the voice-activation system.

Or perhaps the flames and the energy leaks have destroyed it already.

Either way, this was his final chance.

"Cyco! White Rose! Let's go!"

"Oui, ma'am!" Cyco replied with an unusual level of energy, while Rose responded with a roar from its engine.

And so, despite their exposed cockpit, they rushed toward the golden unit, now surrounded by overflowing heat.

Frozen armor covered the cockpit just as it had during the final battle in Gideon, but the immense heat quickly melted it all away.

And when the heat began to rush into the cockpit, Hugo's skin began to burn.

"Hugo...!"

"Not yet!"

Hugo had a friend who pushed on forwards despite the flames raging all around him. That was why Hugo also couldn't—wouldn't—stop. He chose to keep moving ahead.

And this time, he wouldn't hesitate or doubt anything.

As Hugo moved, the damage on his unit exceeded the tolerable limit. The legs, heavily damaged by the Corpse Dragon Mech, finally lost their function.

"BOUCLIERS PLANETEEEES!" Before his unit fell to its knees, Hugo activated his skill.

The next moment, a floating shield that had fallen off returned to Rose. The pale mech then grabbed it with its left hand—the last limb that was still functioning.

"This...is the end!" Before its legs shattered completely, Rose poured the last

of its power into them...and jumped. “*Fly*...White Rose!”

The force of the unit’s final jump combined with the propulsion of the floating shield to grant it the power of flight, like a petal on the wind. It flew straight, carrying all its weight and power straight toward the golden corpse.

“G h e, g h a, g h a...”

The attack was weak—it couldn’t even compare to the golden unit’s ordinary punches. However, this attack that they had gambled everything on was enough to finally unleash the heat it had stored up.

“G h a A a A a a a A a a A A a A a a A A A!” With this final push, the Corpse Dragon Mech’s maw and every other part of its body released immense amounts of energy. Impossible to hold back, it consumed the entire unit...

And, as though it were in the center of a fiery rose blossom, the UBM that also served as a coffin was dragged into a burning embrace.

This was the end. The heavily damaged unit didn’t have the strength to withstand its own firepower, and the remains it carried were claimed by the inferno.

And with this act of cremation, the incident on Eltram reached its conclusion.

Interlude: The Third and the Crystal

Eltram

The long night was finally over, and the light of dawn fell upon the desert.

The ship was already devoid of people. Shortly after the incident, rescue had arrived while it was still dark in the form of sand ships and Pure-Dragon aviation services that took the passengers to the nearest city. They were on their way there now.

With its escort vessels gone and its own cannons rendered unusable after their energy source was deactivated, *Eltram* was now nothing but a tomb on the sands. If it happened to be targeted by something like a swarm of worms, there would be no hope for anyone left behind.

Thus, while the cargo was salvaged, the ship's hull itself was abandoned where its progress had halted.

That was when a certain Master logged in onboard it.

"Well, this place sure got a lot less lively." The speaker was a man wearing makeup and a shirt that exposed his chest—the same Master who'd given gala tickets to Niala and Fey, and who had had an exchange with Crys. "Either they were all destroyed, or I've been left behind by the rescue operations."

As he walked through the inside of the ship, he saw a large informational poster on the wall. It was directed at Masters who were logged out while the rescue was taking place, and it said that the people of this ship had been evacuated. If anyone wanted ticket refunds, they had to visit the offices in any city.

"Ha ha ha! And how do they expect me to...ohh, wait! It's obvious!"

Masters were able to log out and log back in at a city's save point. That didn't apply to those on wanted lists, of course, but they didn't deserve consideration. And that was basically it.

"What a predicament for little old me. I can't go back to any city...oh, woe is

me. This means I'll have to walk through the desert." Thanks to AGI, crossing deserts in *Dendro* was faster than it was on Earth, but it would still take a while. "I'll lose quite a bit of time. It doesn't look like I'll make it to those peace talks mentioned in the letter. But I guess it was never certain I would be there anyway!"

He reached into his Inventory and took out a piece of paper.

It was a letter addressed to him from Reinhard—the imperator of Dryfe. It offered him a place in Dryfe's military and, if possible, asked him to arrive in time for the peace talks that were set to happen soon.

"I would like him to remove me from the wanted list, but I suppose a down payment is a bit too much to ask!" This man had been involved in a rebellion against Dryfe, and that had landed him on every wanted list.

That was why he couldn't use any save points at all.

However, Reinhard knew how useful he was in battle, and that was exactly the reason he'd extended the invitation.

The man felt that it was a very bold move by the imperator, but nevertheless was thankful for it.

"Very well—I will simply walk there. Traveling on foot is nice every now and then."

He turned away from the poster and began walking into the desert when...

"Oh no, you're not *traveling* anywhere."

...his legs were blown off.

"Oh?" Having lost everything below the knee, the man collapsed on the floor.

Then, another man came into view, looking down at him—an obese man holding high value coins in both hands.

It was none other than King of Revelry, Moneygold.

After Zhang had buried him under the ship's debris, Isara had rushed to free him. Then, for his own reasons, Moneygold had decided to stay on the ship.

"Well, well, well. Were you also left behind just like me, Moneygold?" Despite

losing his legs, the man showed no worry or distress as spoke.

“As if. I was just waiting for you,” Moneygold replied.

“Waiting for little old me?”

“Eldridge said that there were three Superiors—me, the Murder Princess, and one other. And since Rascal only showed up later when the whole thing was already underway, it can’t be him.”

“Yes, yes. And?”

“I didn’t have time to ask Eldridge who the Superior was, but I had a feeling it was you.”

“Ohh! And why’s that?” The man was excited to know Moneygold’s reasoning...

“Because the people who attacked the ship were the DLG—Curtis Eldona.”

“Hm...hm?” Those words made the man tilt his head in confusion...

“Isn’t that right, *Splendida the Evergreen*’” And hearing his own name, the man—Splendida—adopted a stumped expression.

“You joined them at one point and participated in their failed plan to assassinate the imperator. That’s why I guessed that if the DLG were going to act now, you—someone connected to them—would act too.”

“Your calculations are a total mess in the middle, but you arrived at the right answer... I’m not sure how to react!” He was indeed Splendida the Evergreen, and he’d once joined forces with the Eldona family, taken part in the assassination plot, and bought time against the King of Beasts. That was all true.

However, the reason he was on this ship had nothing to do with the clients from back then. He was here to simply see the sights and run some errands for a different client—Crys Fragment.

Since it was Crys who’d led the DLG here by acting as their cooperator, though, that meant he *was* a little involved. This situation was very messy from his perspective.

“But I basically had nothing to do with this! Your time is wasted on little old

me! You're a busy man, aren't you?"

"Even so, there's value in making you tell me what you do know." Moneygold's Truth Discernment hadn't activated, so he knew Splendida wasn't lying, but that was a separate matter. He had no reason to let someone go who clearly had information about what had happened here.

"You're so violent..." Splendida muttered.

"I have a question."

Splendida let out a sight. "Well, let's sit down and talk, then. I don't have legs, you see." He pulled himself into a sitting position on the floor and waited for the question.

"So...w*hat did you put on this ship?*" Moneygold asked, taking out a single fragment—the Orb piece Isara had found.

"We've already interrogated the DLG survivors, so we know that Crys Fragment was the one who'd led them through a secret part of the ship. But why did Crys cooperate with them? And why did you put a *UBM* in the cargo area?"

Just as Isara had confirmed, the content of the Orb from the cargo block—the UBM—had killed the soldiers who were there before escaping outside. It didn't even involve itself in the other battles, so it was unclear why it was even on the scene in the first place.

"Based on the state of the remains in the cargo block, this must've been the Orb of frost—which was said to be in Vennsayle. That means this Orb was already on the ship back when we learned about it. And...Vennsayle *vanished* just a while ago. We were informed that it was blown sky-high right before the talks with Granvaloa. How much of this was *your or your group's* doing?"

Moneygold was certain there had to have been something more to this incident than the clash with DLG or IF.

"Heh heh heh...whatever do you mean?"

While Moneygold was convinced Splendida was involved, he acted like he had no idea what Moneygold was talking about...

Going through Splendida's head right now was, *I have no idea what Moneygold's on about.*

He really did have no idea at all.

Splendida knew that Crys had brought something to the cargo area, but he didn't know that the thing inside was a UBM, and this was the first time he heard about Vennsayle's disappearance at all. He felt like she could've just told him about this, but a part of him understood not trusting him with such information.

Splendida's assistance had been limited. For the most part, he was just a spectator. Still, he had managed to notice a few things.

"If there's something you can learn from little old me...it's that I don't think even my current client has all the information you want," Splendida said. He found it especially doubtful that she'd been involved in Vennsayle's disappearance. She'd certainly taken the Orb from there several days ago, but she had no reason to destroy the city afterward. That must've been someone else's work. "This 'game' has many 'players' making their moves, after all. There's my current client, my next client, your boss, and the devs," he said, referencing Crys, the imperator, the president, and the control AI, respectively. "With so many intertwining motives on the board, it's impossible to predict what will happen—and that's what makes it *interesting*."

Splendida had the same tone as someone looking down on events as they transpired from somewhere far above.

"Anyway, I still have many things to see, so if you don't mind, I'll be leaving now," Splendida continued...as he *stood up on his own two feet*.

His legs, blown away by Moneygold's Treasure Cannon, had already returned. His shoes and any clothing below the knee were all gone, but everything else was exactly as it had been before.

"Oh dear. This means I'll have to walk in the desert barefoot."

As Splendida laughed about his situation, Moneygold fired his Treasure Cannon once again. Not just once, however—he fired over and over, like a far more destructive Gatling gun.

Splendida's head, arms, torso, and his entire body was reduced to nothing.

In his battles against Rascal and the DLG, Moneygold had been forced to limit his powers, but now he attacked without caring if the ship was utterly demolished in the process.

With this firepower turned upon him, there was no doubt that every bit of Splendida had been destroyed completely. However, Moneygold's expression remained serious as he looked around, coins at the ready as though there was still a threat present.

After a few seconds of silence...

"'I'll destroy him until there's nothing left!' Everyone who's confident in their firepower tries that kind of thing at least once!"

...Splendida's voice spread across the area.

"If that was enough to kill me,though," Splendida's voice continued. "*She* would've done that too!" he said, referencing his encounter with King of Beasts.

Eventually, *a head grew* in the place where he'd once stood. Then, the head sprouted a torso and then a set of limbs, spreading out like a tree growing branches or roots.

Eventually, tSplendida stood before Moneygold once more, completely unharmed but lacking any of his equipment.

"This is why I can only ever wear cheap clothing. If only my gear was restored as easily as me," Splendida casually remarked, his face now devoid of makeup. That had been vaporized along with the rest of his head, and his face was now revealed exactly as it appeared on his wanted poster.

"Tch..." Moneygold clicked his tongue and fired Treasure Cannon again.

The last remains of the ship were obliterated, and Splendida's body vanished once more...only to be recreated yet again.

He seemed completely removed from the very concept of death.

"An Embryo that makes you immortal, huh?" Moneygold said.

"I suppose you could say that. Though it works different than little

Emily's...it's more like a combo."

"How are you coming back from having your HP reduced to 0, stacking up enough injury debuffs to kill you instantly...*and* even getting completely obliterated?"

"Try and guess. Treat it like a quiz."

"Tch..."

Splendida was alive even after having his body reduced to nothing. Unlike Emily, he had never transformed into bits of light. That meant he had never even died. While the Murder Princess was immortal because of her inexhaustible extra lives, Splendida was incapable of dying by some other mechanism.

This time, Moneygold fired a *low-power* Treasure Cannon. Instead of killing Splendida instantly, he tried targeting the heart, the lungs, the brain—parts of the body that, if damaged, would impede the activity of the rest.

However, even those wounds quickly closed.

"Don't you get it? That won't work. Right now, little old me is impossible to kill."

Despite being exposed to this devastating onslaught, Splendida maintained a smile...

"My Tír na nÓg will not fall."

...and claimed, with certainty, that he was as safe as can be.

"Your defense, though, has a time limit, though," he added. "You can't win against little old me right now...but will you still try?"

"I will. I can't just ignore you."

"I see...ny the way, where is *tu*'s lady bodyguard?"

"I gave her a job and sent her back. I couldn't keep her here without knowing what kind of *thing* you were." And as it turned out, Splendida was far beyond what Moneygold had expected.

"You made the right choice, then! Continuing this battle might be a mistake,

though!”

Splendida then spread his arms and released a cloud of poison from his palms as branchlike wings sprouted from his back and a wooden mask covered his face. “I suppose I’ve got to go on the *offensive*, as well.”

“So you’re *just like* Carl in that regard, huh? I guess that’s just how survival-focused builds end up looking.” Moneygold pulverized one of his Inventories, scattering the coins on the floor.

All right, let’s do this, he thought. *If I can at least figure out the cards he’s holding, this won’t be a total waste of time.*

A battle would help Moneygold discover Splendida’s strengths and weaknesses—perhaps giving him a hint toward eventually defeating him.

With that in mind, Moneygold faced Splendida, who stared back at him. Ready for battle though he was, Moneygold had already considered the possibility of defeat.

Two hours later, only one silhouette rose from the shattered ship. It turned and began walking toward the distant imperium.

◆◆◆

Caldina

In the desert, a good distance away from the ship that had played host to a DLG terrorist attack and a UBM release, there stood a single mobile weapon.

It looked like a crustacean, somewhat reminiscent of the Acra that had appeared in Quartierlatin, and riding it was the one behind this incident—Crys Fragment.

Wearing a mechanical mask, she was examining the surrounding monitors and checking the data they presented. This information had been gathered by the many observation devices she’d installed on the *Eltram*, and everything was related to her objective in causing this incident in the first place.

Crys was silent, but despite that and the mask on her face, it was plainly obvious what her feelings were.

“*That isn’t a good look on your face.* I can’t blame you, though!”

The one who said that was someone who was riding this mobile weapon with Crys.

She was a woman too, but unlike Crys, she wasn't wearing the mechanical mask. Instead, she was wearing a forehead covering reminiscent of 19th century central Asian native garb and gloves on both of her hands.

She was the journalist who'd interviewed Hugo, introducing herself as Stal Tune.

"Affirmative. I expected much better results from the Orb you retrieved from Vennsayle."

Those words had huge implications—they meant that while Crys Fragment had lured the DLG to the *Eltram*, it was Stal Tune who'd placed the Treasurebeast Orb on the ship.

This entire incident was born from their cooperation—they had deemed the results inadequate, though."The ship's core, the Over Pilot's core, and the cores brought in as extras—the ones made by our foolish sister who betrayed us and sided with a lesser Incarnation," Crys said, thinking of Agate. "I'd anticipated that the energy they provided would have been optimal in resurrecting the calamity...in allowing it to regain the power it had lost during its confinement. And yet..."

"There are two things we didn't expect! First was Huanglong Renwai's thoroughness!" Stal spoke the name of the Draconic Emperor before the last one—the one who had sealed away countless UBMs and left them in the world as Orbs.

Her gaze then focused on one of the monitors that showed a recording of the cargo and the surrounding areas. Specifically, it showed the moment the DLG soldiers had all their life and heat sapped away by a UBM.

"I didn't think he sealed the Irregularity after *splitting it in half*!" Stal said.

The UBM looked like just a silhouette of a person split straight down the middle. This bizarre creature that only had its left half also only possessed half a name. It was called ■■■■-Pale Death-■■■■, ■■■■■■■-Almera.

It was as though its body, its name, its *very being* was only half of what it

should be.

“Looks like not even six hundred years were enough for us to get a full measure of him!” Stal’s voice sounded cheerful, but it was warped by a slight hint of displeasure. It was as though she was saying, “He’s *always* caused trouble for us.”

“The second thing we did not expect was that half of the calamity prioritized escape over energy acquisition,” said Crys. “Is it heading toward Huang He, the place it hates more than any other? Or does it seek its other half? Predicting its movements from now on will be difficult.”

“That’s true. Unlike some entities I could name, we can’t see the future. Well, things like this just happen! This victory is all *hers*, I guess. Not like *she* is necessarily our enemy, after all.”

“If we take the most optimal path, she *will* be our enemy. Or our greatest ally, if we focus on our *second best* option.”

“Her worst enemies are the High-Ends like the imperator and King of Kings. For us, it’s the Incarnations. How we interact with the other players on the board depends entirely on our current stage of progression.”

The conversation they held was incomprehensible to almost everyone in the world. A moment later, Stal clapped her hands as if to signal that it was time to change the subject.

“We should talk about what we’ll do next!” Stal said.

“Indeed. On top of our usual activities in Caldina, we will be tracking that half of the calamity. I propose we separate for now. Do you agree?”

“I can handle Caldina by myself. After what happened today, operating here won’t be easy for you, will it? That’s why you should go support Integra. She’s an Altarian public figure now, so it must be hard for her to do covert operations there.”

“Reasonable.”

“Reconfigure your personality, though. Make it closer to mine. She doesn’t know that we are *us*.”

Crys nodded in response to Stal's words, took off the mechanical mask, and put on a bright smile.

"Okay! Is this good?" Crys said. It was as though the mechanical woman from a moment ago had never existed at all—Crys's words and expression were full of humanity.

However, her face was also now *exactly the same* as Stal's.

"Perfect! Anyway, good luck in Altar, Crystal Tuner!"

"Thanks! You have your work cut out for you too, but do your best, Crystal Tuner!" With the same face and the same personality, the two smiled and gave each other a high five.

"All by the will of The First," they said in perfect unison. Within their foreheads were crystalline structures—the energy cores that powered them as Prism People.

Thus, the Crystal Tuners—the perfected, mass-produced Prism People—made their next move as the representatives of the first Flagman—one of the most ancient players on the board of this world.

Epilogue: One Incident, Three Futures

Tetragrammaton

Tetragrammaton—the giant battleship IF used as their headquarters—cut through the desert sands.

After being Frozen during the battle in the energy zone, Rascal had barely escaped with his life. He was currently in his room on the ship. The Freeze had worn off about an hour after their retreat.

“Man, nothin’ about that went right. We couldn’t destroy *or* take the core. We got some good combat data, but we couldn’t get that guy to join us, which is what actually mattered. Emily lost one Youaltepuztli, so now she’s basically useless until it comes back. All the armor on Sardonyx needs replacement. And I got *this*...”

Rascal was sitting in the chair, leaning his head on his left hand. However, the right sleeve of the fresh suit he was wearing was just dangling empty.

Though the Freeze had worn off, his right arm, cut off by the Purgatorial Slash, hadn’t come back. He’d taken meds that made the wound close up, but it was lost from the elbow down.

“Looks like I’ll have to wait until Sechs escapes the gaol to treat this,” Rascal said. Complete loss of a body part could only be treated by the healing magic of Superior Jobs or respawning after taking the death penalty. But as a wanted man, Rascal wanted to avoid the death penalty at all costs, and the only Superior Job holder he could ask for a heal was Sechs, who was still in the gaol.

“Oh, right. He has The Saint, doesn’t he? I never actually met this ‘Trans Sexual Slime.’” said a voice right beside Rascal.

“Don’t talk about our leader like he’s a new monster type.” Rascal frowned; the way she’d phrased it, it kind of did sound like something that might exist in *Dendro*. “According to La Crima’s reports, our plans for Tenchi are progressin’ smoothly. Sechs should also get out before the season’s over. It ain’t comfortable, but I’ll deal with it until then.”

“Your leader also has my sister, doesn’t he? Diamond? Then I look forward to the day he and Gerbera escape.”

Prism Person No. 2, Diamond Slayer, was Sechs’s property, and was currently in the gaol with him. As No. 1, Agate Designer was looking forward to meeting her sister for the first time in two thousand years.

“Oh. But can’t La Crima heal you too? She can even give you more arms than you had before, right?”

“Just so you know, I *do* care about how I look,” Rascal said as he thought of King of Flame, Lazburn, who’d been turned into the four armed Ignis Idea, or King of Raids Morter, who’d become a humanoid bat with membranous wings.

If Rascal let La Crima treat him, ending up with one nonhuman arm would be the best possible result. Getting extra arms would be a bad one. And regardless of how it came out, they would do it out of the kindness of their heart.

“Body modding...big muscles...you could withstand my piloting...and have a body so tough we could go all night long!” Ignoring Rascal, who looked obviously unenthusiastic, Machina continued her delusional rambling.

“Well then. If ya got time to say stupid shit like that, maybe you got time to go out and scrub *Tetragrammaton*’s armor?”

“Whaaa?! C-Come ooon, I-I was just joking. Please don’t make me clean a 300 metel-long battleship... With all the sand getting on it, I’ll never be done with it...”

“Fine, fine...anyway, ya done with the thing I wanted ya to do?”

“Oh—yes. Just a little finishing touch and...there! Done!”

Machina faced the work table again before turning around and showing Rascal what was on it. Lying there was a mechanical arm—the kind that would replace a lost arm of flesh—at the exact length to match Rascal’s missing limb.

“Anyway, here’s your prosthetic!” Machina said. “It’s very easy to use! You can move the fingers without even connecting it to your nerves. You just put it on!”

“That so? Good to know I won’t have to open up the wound, at least.”

Urged by Machina, Rascal took off his suit and put the prosthetic up to the stump of his right arm. A moment later, he had control of it. Moving it felt as natural as using his own hand.

“The skill and speed of your craftsmanship is as impressive as always.” Only about an hour had passed since he’d ordered her to make this. The quality and speed of her work was almost shocking.

“Feel free to praise me more!”

“Wow. Nice. Good job.”

“YAAAYYYY! A GLOWING REVIEW!”

“That’s good enough for you...?” Rascal asked. Machina had reacted so strongly to his lukewarm praise that it actually made Rascal feel a bit guilty.

“Oh! I have a good idea!” Machina said. “If we mechanize your entire body, you could handle my piloting and—”

“Don’t.” As Machina’s train of thought took a dangerous turn, Rascal stopped her with the most serious expression he could muster. “Let’s forget about that,” said Rascal. “By the way, do you want anythin’?”

“Huh?”

“I wanna thank you for this arm...and for helpin’ me escape after I was incapacitated. You’re my property and all, but that doesn’t mean I can’t reward you.”

“Is that love?! You’re finally showing me love! WOO-HOOO!”

“...So you want the reward or not?”

“I do! Just let me think!” Machina put her finger to her forehead and began to think intensely.

“Se...no, slee...no, lay with...no...”

“Are your circuits fried or something?” Everything out of her mouth was lewd, which actually made Rascal a little concerned.

Machina continued to think until...

“I got it!”

“That so? What do you want?”

“Please go on a date with me!” Machina clasped her hands in front of her chest, the stereotypical image of a girl summoning up all her courage.

“A night date?”

“You’re such a perv! Ugh! Is that all you ever talk about?!”

Silence. It took a lot for Rascal to stop himself from saying, “I’ll throw you overboard, ya piece of scrap”...and then actually doing it.

“I meant a normal date!” Machina insisted. “One where we dress nice, eat something tasty, and see pretty sights...a *normal* date!”

“That’s good enough for ya?”

“Yes! I’ve never been on one!”

“That so?”

“Does that make you think that I’m some unlovable hag who couldn’t get a date for two thousand years?”

“It doesn’t. Fine, I can do that. That’ll be your reward.”

Wouldn’t you be more like an antique than a hag, anyway? a part of him thought, but he didn’t say it out loud, instead simply agreeing to fulfill her wish.

“Huh? Seriously? I didn’t actually expect you to...YAAAAAYYY! SUCCESS!” Machina began jumping up and down with her arms in the air, expressing her joy with her entire being.

“A date, though, huh...? Well, I guess it’s doable if we just get more disguise accessories.”

With Machina’s item creation ability, they could easily make things that would be rare finds otherwise. And since the ones she’d made previously were now proven to work, there was no need to worry about any new ones.

“Oh, I almost forgot.” Machina stopped jumping, faced Rascal again, and pointed at the prosthetic. “That arm has an extra feature.”

“A feature?”

“Bend the index finger twice and the pinky thrice.”

“Hm?” Rascal did as told and bent the fingers.

A moment later, the hand detached itself from the wrist and sped forward like a rocket, slamming into the wall facing the hallway and leaving a dent.

Silence. Rascal looked at the now-handless prosthetic, then at the damage on the wall before thinking, *What the hell?*

“The hand can fly. I call it the ‘rocket hand!’”

“And the point of it is...?”

“It’s a hidden weapon!”

“You know there aren’t that many people who can be hurt by a weapon that just *dents* a wall, right? It’s barely a distraction.” Rascal was actually quite surprised, but he did his best to remain calm as he said that.

“Oh. No no no, you got it wrong. Now try twisting the arm right two times and left four times.”

Silence. *I really don’t wanna,* Rascal thought, yet did it regardless.

A moment later, a ray of light burst from the wrist, melting a hole in the wall.

“The wrist fires a beam!”

“That so? And? What are ya tryin’ to turn me into? Ya wouldn’t even see prosthetics this crazy in a kid’s comic.”

Using his remaining arm, Rascal pinched Machina’s cheek and looked at her with a steady gaze.

“B-But I made it so we match...”

“Your prosthetic does this too?” Rascal was aware that Machina had made herself a left arm to replace the one she’d lost while deactivated, but he had no idea that it could deliver rocket punches and fire laser beams.

Rascal looked at her, not saying a thing.

“U-Umm, does this mean you’ll punish me by...?” *...Canceling our date?* she finished her sentence in thought, shivering and looking up right back at Rascal.

“Nah. It’s still happenin’. Fix this arm, though. The activation motion is too simple. I might trigger it by accident.”

“Ah. Okay.”

“Fix the wall too. And clean up around it.”

“R-Right!” With a salute, Machina instantly moved to clean and fix everything she’d been instructed to. *He’s so nice today,* she thought. *Maybe it really is love? He even promised me a date.*

Shortly after Machina began cleaning up, the bell at his door rang.

Rascal gave permission to enter, and Zhang stepped into the room. He’d come here to report about the girl he’d secured from the *Eltram*—Doris.

While taking Emily and retreating, Zhang had also picked up Doris. Emily had entrusted him with her, and at that point, he’d believed that it was dangerous to leave her on the ship with the situation being what it was.

He hadn’t made the wrong choice by any means. A battlefield that involved a wide-scale extermination Superior, the remnants of the DLG, and the collapsing ship—there were multiple things that could endanger the girl’s life. Thus, he’d chosen to take Doris’s unconscious body away, thinking that he could just hand her in to some office or facility later.

“And? What’s she up to now?” Rascal asked.

“She woke up not long ago. She panicked at first, but some calming incense helped. Emily talking to her may have also played an important part in that, though.”

“Emily, huh...?”

“It turns out that the soldiers killed Doris’s father back there.”

“I see...” The two fell silent.

There was no way to sugarcoat it—IF had played a part in her father’s death. They were the ones who’d spread the Orbs, and once he had his hands on one, they were the ones who had led him to the ship that became his grave.

Without them, Doris’s father would’ve avoided getting involved in this whole

incident. He might even still be alive.

“Don’t let it bother ya,” said Rascal. “The mission to protect him ended the moment he was on the ship. Ya didn’t mess up.”

“...But I still feel responsible,” said Zhang. “Making a girl that young into an orphan... I myself was like her once. And so was the lady I used to serve.”

Zhang spoke of the head of Mirage—the organization he had once been a part of. Zhang couldn’t help but be reminded of the group’s young boss, who must’ve been either imprisoned or executed by now.

“You know...for someone who was part of the criminal underworld, you’re way too much of a good guy.”

“If you don’t mind me saying so, those words apply to you as well, do they not?” Zhang had gotten the feeling that Doris’s misfortune had affected Rascal as well.

“I wouldn’t say so,” Rascal replied. “I’m a miscreant who’ll put his goals over the lives of tens of thousands of faceless, nameless tians.”

After saying that, he looked through the window. Beyond it, there lay a vast desert—the land of Caldina. It was the land throughout which IF had spread the Orbs—the cause of many casualties. “I put the wishes of those dear to me over the lives of those same faceless, nameless people.”

“Rascal...”

His words might have seemed cold, but they weren’t. They meant that Rascal did feel a sense of responsibility toward those whose names and faces he knew. But his expression said that there were still things that had to be done, and he wouldn’t hesitate to do them.

“So...what will we do with Doris? Put her in an orphanage...?”

“Let’s not. She’s seen too much. And it’s possible that Caldina has an Embryo that can peek into tian memories.”

What would they do with her, then? The many years Zhang had spent in the underbelly of society made him imagine having to “silence” the little girl. He tensed up. “How’s Emily with her?”

“To put it briefly: she’s attached to her. While Doris is still somewhat perplexed, Emily is already treating her like a good friend.”

After hearing that, Rascal took a moment to think...

“Look after her, then. A friend that age may be exactly what Emily needs to develop properly.”

“Very well...” Zhang said, somewhat confused.

Rascal was mindful of Emily’s development, yet he sent her to dangerous situations where she could kill people or be killed herself. Zhang felt that this was extremely contradictory, but also that there was more to it—almost as if these two things were linked somehow.

“And when we’re ready to leave this land...we’ll hand her over to someone trustworthy,” Rascal said.

“Very well.” Having decided how to handle the girl, Zhang turned around and left Rascal’s room.

This makes me wonder, Zhang thought as he left. *What is Rascal’s relationship with Emily, exactly?*

It was clear that she was more than just a clan member to him. He obviously treated her differently than others. Rascal had first described the girl as if she was some kind of volatile material and regularly sent her to dangerous places. But by now, Zhang had watched them enough to know that Rascal was genuinely concerned about Emily.

Perhaps...the ‘wish’ Rascal mentioned has something to do with her? Zhang wondered.

After Zhang left, Machina stopped the cleaning she’d been doing the entire time he was in the room. “By the way, I’ve been wondering about this for a while...” she said.

“Hm?”

“What is Emily to you? On the other side, I mean.” It was a similar question to the one Zhang was pondering, except it was focused not on their relationship here, but on their reality as Masters.

“What do you think?”

“Umm...uhh...ah! Wait! Is she your wife?!”

“Do you think I’m a goddamn sex offender...?” Rascal said with a thoroughly dumbfounded face.

“What is she to you, then?! I’m *very* curious!”

Machina’s question made Rascal think for a moment. He thought about whether or not to answer, and decided that he would.

“She’s a little sister...not mine, though.”

“Hm?”

“She’s my close friend’s little sister.”

“You had friends on the other side too?”

“Are you tryin’ to make me mad?” Rascal said, but it didn’t seem like he was any bit upset by the comment—even though he would be perfectly justified if he was. Instead, there was a wry grin on his face, and it seemed as though he was slightly taken by nostalgia. Perhaps the word “friend” was one that had a strong effect on him. “I was actually pretty social back when I was a student. Had no shortage of friends and acquaintances.”

“Well, I might’ve guessed.”

Rascal was by no means a bad communicator. If he had been, he wouldn’t be able to serve as the functional leader of a criminal clan or negotiate with various organizations.

“Still...there was only one person I could’ve called a *close* friend.” It was clear by now that this one close friend was Emily’s older brother.

“And this friend is...?”

“Already dead.” Rascal answered almost instantly—maybe he knew Machina would ask, or maybe it was the sort of memory that would’ve left him speechless if he let himself dwell on it too long. “He was *murdered* a few years ago.”

“So, you...”

Rascal said nothing more. As silence fell over the room, they could hear the faint voices of Emily and Doris drifting through the hole in the wall.

◇◇◇

Yuri Gautier

“Sonya...where does all the money go?”

“Didn’t I say the exact same thing recently?” It was Monday morning, and I was whining to Sonya while we ate breakfast.

“Wait, didn’t you say you were well off in *Dendro*?”

“That was in the past...” Ray had given me a share of the money he’d gotten for defeating the Gouz-Maise Gang, but that had finally dried up. This was because I’d given Niala 10,000,000 lir so she could use her Genocide Condor.

I still had *some* money on me. I personally could get by without the reward money just fine—but the sum wasn’t nearly enough to pay for Magingear repairs.

My White Rose was a luxury, one-of-a-kind Magingear, and now it was damaged so badly that I couldn’t even begin to describe the extent of it. Not a single part of it had escaped unscathed, so every ready-made part had to be replaced.

That alone was bad enough, but the real problem was White Rose’s original parts. When building it, Fran had given it a modest self repair function, but this was so bad that it couldn’t fix itself completely.

That was why I couldn’t even *imagine* how much fixing it was going to cost.

“Don’t you have any way to make money?” Sonya asked.

“I’m gonna get paid soon...but I have no idea how much it’ll be...” Moneygold had said that I would be rewarded for my job as bodyguard, but I hadn’t asked the exact amount. He said that it would “satisfy” me, but I didn’t know if it would be enough to cover White Rose’s repair costs.

I sighed deeply. With my unit’s destruction and everything else, the whole incident had been a huge ordeal. However, I had at least gained something from it. By defeating the UBM, I’d gotten an MVP reward—an energy core

called Mechdragon Heart, Imperial Glory.

I checked what it did and realized that it had two skills.

First was Perpetual Engine—Life and Death. The name was a bit unsettling, and I couldn't read parts of the description because I apparently needed a special skill for that, but what I could read told me that it acted as an energy core that produced MP on its own.

Yes—it was just like the thing Imperial Glory had been equipped with before it became a UBM. I didn't know the volume of the MP it produced, but equipping it could help solve White Rose's energy issues.

The other skill was Mechsoul, and I couldn't read it at all, so I'd put it aside for now.

I was really happy to get a core of my own. But there was another reason I was happy—one that had nothing to do with the MVP reward's abilities.

It was the fact that the *name* survived. Imperial Glory—the result of the creativity and imagination of everyone from the Triangle of Wisdom. The name lived on, even as it became an MVP reward. I was a little happy that their hard work didn't completely disappear.

And I felt that the MVP reward itself was proof that I didn't give up...just like Ray back then.

"Hrm...you look pretty happy for someone who's out of money," said Sonya.

"Maybe I do... Oh! Breakfast time is almost over. We got sociology with Miss Nina first. Let's hurry there."

I tried to quickly clean up our tableware, but Sonya told me to slow down and said, "We got a message saying that we've got self-study in the library before that."

"Why?"

"Because Miss Nina's out today."

"Huh?! Is she sick or something...?" I couldn't imagine any other reason a teacher that strict wouldn't come to work.

“I dunno. Heh...maybe she’s out on a date with some guy?”

“Hmm...I really doubt that.” Miss Nina, the serious and diligent ice queen, skipping work to go on a date?Yeah, I really couldn’t imagine that. But...

“But if it is that...it would be a pretty lovely date, huh?” I mused.

“Right?! There’d be so much passion in it!”

Sonya and I let our imaginations run wild.

◇◇◇

Caldina

It was the fourth day since the incident, in *Dendro* time. Eldridge was standing in a particular city in Caldina.

Though it was part of this desert country, it wasn’t one of the cities the *Eltram* had stopped at. Goblin Street had agreed to save in this city and gather here at a set time if at least one of them got the death penalty. They’d settled on a place that wasn’t one of the *Eltram*’s stops to make it harder for anyone investigating what had happened to track them down.

Surrounded by a crowd, Eldridge walked toward their meeting place as he thought back on the battle.

Fay had asked him to win, and Niala had truly believed that he would.

And yet, Eldridge had lost. He’d kept the upper hand throughout his entire fight against Emily, but when Zhang and Rascal got involved, he’d been instantly defeated.

He didn’t have any excuses for it, nor would he make them. It wasn’t a duel, but a PK battle. Third parties and unknown variables were a given.

He *had* been defeated. This was an unwavering truth.

Eldridge sighed. This was yet another one of his losses against a Superior—a betrayal of those who believed in him. If was the man he was before he’d gotten on the ship—the man who’d felt cornered after all his recent defeats—this loss would’ve completely broken him.

But strange as it was, this particular defeat didn’t make him feel any self-

loathing.

This must've been because he knew for sure that he'd fought using everything he had. His previous encounters with Superiors ended before they could even begin.

But this time, things had been different. This time, he'd managed to give his all for victory.

What dominated his heart now wasn't the *result* of his defeat, but the *process* of the fight he'd given everything he had.

"Next time..." Eldridge muttered without even realizing he was speaking out loud.

But before he could finish that sentence, he spotted the terrace where they'd said to meet. It wasn't yet the time they'd agreed on, but Niala and Fey were already there, having some tea.

"I wonder if he's comin' soon," said Fey. "Wait, didn't you have work today?"

"I took a break for personal reasons—for the first time ever."

As they talked, Eldridge called out to them.

"Niala, Fey...sorry to keep you waiting."

"Leader!"

"Good morning, leader."

"Yeah...ngh..."

Eldridge stopped and thought about how to tell them that he lost. He considered apologizing, telling them he was sorry for not living up to their expectations, but Fey spoke before he did.

"Hey! *You won, didn't you?!*"

Her words didn't seem to have a single shred of doubt behind them.

"What makes you think that?" Eldridge *hadn't* won, and he had no idea why Fey was assuming otherwise.

Fey then puffed out her chest and gave her reason.

“I can see it in your face!”

“My face?”

When Eldridge touched his face, Fey put on a smile and said, “You look just like you did back in Altar! So full of confidence!”

Those words made his eyes widen. That was something he himself had failed to realize. Eldridge had no idea that the repeated defeats against *Superiors* had affected his appearance that much.

And these two stuck with me even though they could clearly see how unconfident I was, huh? he thought, which almost made him tear up.

“What do *you* think?” he asked Niala, careful not to sound like he was about to cry.

“Well...” Niala spent a moment thinking...

“Me too. *I like you* as you are now.”

...and said that, mixing in a somewhat different meaning.

“Huh?! No fair! Me too! I like you too!” Feeling like Niala was running off, Fey also hurriedly revealed her feelings.

“Thanks, you two...”

The fact that they looked up to him so much almost made him tear up again, so he covered his eyes with his right hand.

That reaction made them realize that he didn’t understand that they were trying to describe the kind of affection a woman might feel toward a man.

But they didn’t care that much. After being down for so long, Eldridge was once again in high spirits. The two were simply happy that this trio had a future.

“I’d like to hear how you beat her!” said Fey.

“I didn’t, actually...I lost.”

Eldridge wiped away his tears, corrected Fey...

“But next time, not even a Superior will beat me.”

...and said those words with a smile on his face.

It was the smile of a person with nothing to be ashamed of—one more confident than ever before.

“You will!” the two girls said in unison, smiling themselves.

This day, they had no doubt made a comeback.

END

Afterword

Cat: “It’s time for the afterwooord. This one is brought to you by me, Cheshire the ‘Caaat.’”

Six: “And me, ‘Six’ or Sechs Würfel.”

Cat: “Oh. Haven’t seen you in a whiiile.”

Six: “Rascal and Emily were deeply involved in this one, so I will represent them here.”

Cat: “I seeee. Let’s start, then. Do you have any questions?”

Six: “I do. The afterword of the previous volume said that this one will come out in winter of 2023. Isn’t it March now?”

Cat: ...

Six: “Cheshire?”

Cat: “IT’S STILL SNOWY WHERE THE AUTHOR LIVES, SO THIS STILL COUNTS AS WINTER.”

Six: “I don’t feel it’s necessary to say that in all caps...”

Cat: “Anyway, stuff happened and you had to wait six months for it, but we believe that the quality of volume 20 is worthy of such a milestone! It’s the first one that places Hugo and Cyco on the cover! It has illustrations for many characters who never had one! And it even has something we’ve never done before: a mecha design illustration at the very end of the volume!”

Six: “Yes. It seems like something you would see in *Fullmetal Panic*.”

Cat: (He just went and named another company’s work like it was nothing...he truly is the King of Crime.)

Six: “Now, let us move on to the serious comment from the author.”

Dearest readers, thank you for your purchase. I am the author, Kaido Sakon.

This work has finally reached its 20th volume. This is something that wouldn’t

have been possible without you and everyone else involved in ensuring every release.

Dendro will not end anytime soon, so I would be deeply grateful if you'd stay for the ride.

Now, those of you who read the webnovel may have noticed this, but this volume went through a lot of editing. I have updated the writing to better represent my current ability and added things to it that I felt needed to be written. The updates include certain sections focused on the DLG, while the additions include Rascal and Emily's background in the prologue.

What is at the heart of that won't be revealed for a while, but Rascal is an IF member too, and he chose to commit crime in *Dendro* for the sake of a goal he wished to fulfill. *Infinite Dendrogram* is a place where the feelings of many people intertwine, and it would give me great joy if you stayed to witness where they lead.

On another topic, this volume is one that puts my personal obsession with mecha content front and center.

That of course includes the cutesy, goofy robot maid, Machina, who was drawn in this volume by Taiki's skillful hand, but it certainly doesn't stop there. The very climax of this volume is a three way fight between giant mechs. The editor, K, even suggested that we might as well add a mech illustration. That, combined with the fact that this was a milestone volume, made us decide to approach someone known for their mecha work.

That was none other than Tomofumi Ogasawara—the artist who provided the art for *Gundam W: Haisha-tachi no Eikou*. I actually had the MG Sandrock (Armadillo Unit) that appeared in this work.

Out of all the works he was involved in, the one I find especially memorable is the *Gensou Senki RuLiLuRa* reader-driven experience that was released in Hobby Japan's *Game Gyaza* magazine.

It was a play-by-mail type game where you wrote your characters and their actions on a card that came with the magazine, then sent it to later receive the character's results and achievements.

Back then, I was in middle school and a regular Gyaza reader who always filled in and sent the cards.

At that time, I couldn't have ever imagined that future me would release a novel through Hobby Japan or have the person behind *RuLiLuRa*'s art provide me with a mecha design.

That, as well as the fact that an avid *NEEDLESS* reader like myself could get Kami Imai to draw the manga adaptation of my work, left me in awe of all the ways that memories of the past could come back to me. Volume 11 of the manga, by the way, is set to come out on the same day as this novel volume, so please do check it out. It also includes an original short story.

I feel like I say this a lot, but *Dendro* is a product that can only continue to exist because of the support and effort of a great many people.

Allow me to once again say "thank you" to you all.

And please continue your support for *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Sakon Kaido

Cat: "Anyway, time to announce the next ooone."

Six: "IS IT OKAY TO ANNOUNCE THAT IT WILL COME OUT IN SUMMER, 2023?"

Cat: "...Why is it a question?"

Six: "Because these announcements have been off for a few volumes in a row now."

Cat: "You're not wrong..."