
Sakon Kaidou
Illustrator: Taiki
Infinite Dendrogram
22. When Stars Align


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Thus, she declared...
"The night comes! The stars align! The time of the Overlord begins!"
"The event begins... Playground of the Great Old One—R'lyeh!"
...and announced the beginning of her reign.
"That's why! Here and now! I'm starting a game! By me! For me!"
As G spoke, she became more and more excited.
"I'm so greedy they call me the Bottomless! I am a member of Desire and an Overlord who carves the whole world away!"


With the combatants both on the stage, the announcer swallowed his confusion and tried to do his job.
"King of Termination, Albert Schwarzkaiser."
He spoke the name of the Superior who could not possibly have belonged to the kingdom.

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Prologue: Star Guidance

April, The Channel of a Certain Streamer

At first glance, this room might've looked like any other charming, feminine room.

However, this one stood out for one reason: It was not real. Instead, it was modeled using CGI.

The room was currently empty, and the only thing moving was the chat box on one side, containing hundreds—thousands—of comments, silently flowing by.

But when the CGI clock in the room hit 9:00...

"All eyes on G! Welcome to my channel!" Flashy effects flooded the space as a 3D model of a girl appeared right in the middle of it.

The devil girl, complete with curved horns and a tail, struck her usual pose and greeted her many viewers on the other side of the screen.

```
I am LOOKING
GEEEEEE
G is so cute
```

Many similar comments appeared one after another as the channel's regular intro routine played out.

"Hello! We meet again! Maybe it's been a while...or perhaps you're new here? In that case, I'm G, the *Superior* streamer and *Dendro* content creator!" Punctuating her words with all kinds of gestures, the devil girl greeted her audience.

Being CGI didn't stop the avatar from being expressive. Even her face was full of life.

"Today we've got our weekly chat stream! I'm gonna reply to everyone and answer all the questions I can! Most of them are

about *Dendro*, though! Like always!" G held out a mailbox-like object and looked over the questions that she'd received as more comments flowed by.

No surprise there.
Yeah, you're the strongest content creator, and the most open in your group
Maybe a little *too* open
Give me back the items I dropped when you PK'd me!
Getting PK'd is a skill issue. Git gud

"All right, first question: 'Why are you and US committing crimes in Legendaria? You know you're being a real pain, right?' True!" G said with a nod. Though the question seemed to have come from a hater, she didn't seem the least bit bothered.

'True'? Lmao
Well, you cause a lot of problems...but it's for *them*, so...
The gap between Legendaria's pro-regime and anti-regime factions is deeeeep
Guess it's all about the values

"Well, yeah," said G. "I, my clan, and Desire all have our problems with Legendaria! They're kinda annoying—I like Titania, though! I'd love to meet her again!"

Chat was quick to respond:

They're kinda annoying *steals their land*
They're kinda annoying *kills all their Master bodyguards*
They're kinda annoying *takes all their tribe leader's slaves*
You don't go that far cuz you're 'kinda annoyed'...

The band battle against Titania was awesome! I'll be waiting for the rematch!

"Next question! 'Why do you look the same in *Dendro* as you do in your streams?' I get this one every now and then, but it's just because when I was creating my character, I went and asked if I could look the same as the G avatar I use for my channel. It was pretty funny that the control AI kitty knew about me, though."

The chat exploded.

Lul
You're a vtuber, where's your kayfabe?
Don't say 'avatar.'

"If any of you haven't started *Dendro* yet and dunno what appearance you'd pick, just go ahead and ask the control AI. That should make things easy. Oh, but I'm the only one who can look like this! If you use my appearance for anything lewd, I'll sink you for ten thousand years!"

She literally would.
You probably wouldn't surface until the stars align...
I never thought of that
If only I'd thought of that sooner... I already made my avatar.
Well, it's not like anyone can copy the second form...

The chat flowed on—half joking, half serious.

Eventually, it was time to end the stream...

"That's about it for tonight! It's time to go! But before that, I have a very special announcement!" said G, causing the chat to speed up with anticipation. "I'm making a new video! I haven't even recorded it yet, but I'll be fighting a very special guest!"

Oh, a fight vid?

If it didn’t happen yet, maybe we can find the filming location?
A ‘very special guest’? Girl, you just fought Titania. Who can match that?

“Whether I win or lose, it’ll be a premiere—so get ready to watch, like, and donate!”

Yyyep, that’s our Bottomless!
I’m new here. Is she always this obsessed with money? She doesn’t even try to sugarcoat it! We love that, though!
G is so cute

“Anyway, buh-byeee! See yaaa! Goodniiight!”

Goodniiight!
Goodnight
I still wonder who the big guest is...

[Today’s stream is over! Come see me again!]

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April, A Call Between Brother and Sister

“Hey! Hey! Hey! I’m actually thinking of going on a trip! Taking off on a journey!”

“Well, Golden Week is almost over, isn’t it?”

“No no no! I deny and defy that! I mean a trip in *Dendro*!”

“A little expedition with your clan, then? Who are you picking a fight with this time? Speaking of that, your recent ‘I Broke Into Titania’s Concert and Challenged Her to a Band Battle’ was a good one.”

“The view count is going crazy! I got lots of donations during the premiere too!”

“That’s good to hear. Though, I must say I’m surprised Titania accepted your challenge. I wouldn’t think the leader of a whole country would do something like that.”

“I lost and died, but I’ll win next time! I’ll recruit more musicians into my clan and challenge her again!”

“That’s one of the good things about you. You graciously accept defeat, but are strong-willed enough to try again.”

“Oh yeah! Since that video got me so much money, I’m thinking of giving Legendaria a cut by sharing some of my in-game wealth with them. Where do you think I should donate?”

“That’s not something you’d expect to hear from someone who belongs to an anti-Legendaria criminal alliance. Anyway, I guess you could donate through the YLNT Club? They’d use every single lir for children’s welfare.”

“...It’s weird how those absolute perverts are so gentle and sincere when it comes to children.”

“I imagine Legendaria thinks something similar about your clan.”

“We give fun times to our viewers! Good stories to the innocent! Annoyances to the authorities! And we take everything from the baddies who are above the law! We’re the Underground Sanctuary, and that’s how we operate! We’re basically righteous bandits!”

“Nezumi Kozo and Robin Hood would probably rush in and punch you for saying that... You take from innocent Masters too, don’t you?”

“Well, yeah! It’s PK! Wait, did we go off on a tangent? Did our talk get derailed?”

“It did. I think you said something about a trip?”

“Right! The trip! It’s not a clan event! I’m going solo! By myself!”

“Oh?”

“The lolicon and the card gamer aren’t in Legendaria at the moment. We’re also looking for the next person whose stuff I can take with my ult, so I got nothing to do right now.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“And ZZZ used our alliance connections to send us a request, so everyone in the clan is busy fulfilling that now!”

“Overlord Acedia? What did he want?”

"He said he needs materials for his thralls, and that he's paying 1.5 times the market price, so everyone just went and started digging away at the mountain we got from the greedy Dvergars! They're all mining right now."

"Short on materials?"

"He said something about getting attacked by three *Superiors* and an evil-looking prince on a silver steed."

"That description sounds really familiar."

"He lost a lot of thralls he used to defend his territory, so he needs some help making them again. But you won't see *me* gathering materials for him! I'm not a miner!"

"Well, you're not really that type of person, I guess."

"Yes! You're right! So I got nothing to do right now!"

"I see. And that's why you're going on a solo trip?"

"Yes! Exactly! And that's why, well... I have a question for you."

"Yes?"

"This has nothing to do with the trip, but... Where are you right now?"

"Hm..."

"Hello?"

"Oh. Sorry. I'm in Gideon for the time being. There's that tournament, and a few interesting figures I can use for reference."

"I see! So that's how it is! Good to know! That's perfect!"

"What do you mean, perfect?"

"N-Nothing! Don't mind that! Anyway, bye!"

And just like that, the call abruptly ended.

"...If she thinks that's enough to fool anyone, my sister really is a terrible liar," the man said with a sigh. He was an author who frequented the world of *Infinite Dendrogram* as King of Light, F—but right now, he was just a brother shocked at his sister's inability to hide her true intentions.

She was obviously planning to pay him a surprise visit—she'd done this in real life too.

"Though...she said 'perfect'..."

That implied that she had a goal besides visiting F.

Knowing her well, he thought about what his sister would do in

Gideon and quickly found his answer.

"Mm-hmm... Well, that will be interesting," the author said, speaking from an observer's point of view as he imagined the events that *would* soon unfold.

Chapter 1: The Fallen Angel and the Arch Enemy

Ninth Day of The Tournaments, Gideon, City of Duels

"Nnnh..."

On this day, the Fallen Knight, Juliet—the fourth in Altar's duel rankings—was faced with an unusual problem.

"There is no sanctuary where I might hone the darkness I wield... (I can't find an arena to rent...)"

Gideon had a whole thirteen arenas, and they were the very reason the city received its title. However, they weren't all being used for duels and events all the time. There would always be some that remained unused, and the local duelists would rent them for sparring matches or to test their new gear or skills.

But right now, there were The Tournaments that rewarded the winners with Orbs containing sealed UBMs. Many other powerful Masters had gathered from all over to fight for them and prepare for the fights. With tomorrow being the final day, their numbers were especially high, and because of that, not a single arena was left unreserved.

"My mortal frame has yet to acclimate to my newfound power... (And I still haven't figured out the MVP rewards yet...)" Juliet had acquired two MVP rewards recently: one from a gacha ticket she'd won during the Anniversary and one from the UBM she'd slain after winning the Tournament she'd participated in. They had no doubt made her more powerful, but she had yet to familiarize herself with their specifics.

The MVP reward she'd gotten from the UBM had been generated with her previous reward in mind. They now formed something of a pair, best used together.

To put it another way: They were awfully unwieldy if used

separately. They were, in fact, double-edged swords that would kill *her* if misused.

Before she could employ them in actual battle, she had to thoroughly test them within the barrier of an arena, where death wasn't an issue.

Juliet let out a sigh as she spotted a familiar face.

"Oh. Julie! Any luck on your end?" said Chelsea—Juliet's friend and rival—as she approached. "Goin' by your face, I'm guessing not, huh?"

"Yeah... You too?"

"Nothin' on the west, no. With a Mythical reward on the line, they're all really serious about tomorrow's Tourney."

They had split up to the east and west sides of the city to look for any open arenas, but everything was fully booked everywhere.

They usually had Max and Shion with them too, but they weren't in the city right now.

Max was out making money. There was an auction being held on the same day as the final Tournament, and among the items being sold was one of Tenchi's Hundred Famed Blades—the exact one she wanted most—so she was out hunting monsters to gather as much wealth as she could before it began.

Shion was currently offline because of a cold. She had come online yesterday and had looked just fine on the *Dendro* side, but her servants had hastily chased her over there and brought her back.

Juliet had told her to take care of herself, genuinely concerned, while Chelsea had privately thought something rude—along the lines of "So even idiots catch colds, huh?"

"Hrm... Maybe some of our friends have a reservation? We could join them instead..." Chelsea suggested.

"The ones who are participating in the final day are Figaro and Bishmal, right?"

"Yeah. But Figaro probably didn't rent one, while Bishmal said he wanted to 'recharge his batteries' and went to a maid café instead."

Chelsea's words made Juliet tilt her head. "Bishmal is one thing, but...Figaro didn't rent one?"

“I mean, Figaro is a member of Death Period. Their entire base is a— Oh.”

Chelsea stopped mid-sentence. She was looking at something ahead, causing Juliet to do the same.

There, she saw...

“Ray?”

...their friend, Ray Starling.

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Sorcerer, Ray Starling

Today was the ninth day of The Tournaments, but instead of watching it, I was just looking around the bazaar.

The clan member participating today was Kasumi, but she’d been eliminated in the preliminaries and I didn’t know any of the people who made it through, so I just didn’t feel like watching it.

Kasumi wasn’t the type to fight solo, so her loss wasn’t really unexpected, and we’d already held a little consolation party for her during lunch.

I really didn’t know who to bet on this time either, so I just went with a name that caught my eye—someone called “Grimms.” The sum I put down was smaller than any of my previous bets, but the multiplier was only behind Rook’s, so I’d still make some good money if he won.

Also, I currently didn’t have Nemesis by my side.

Well, actually, I did—but she wasn’t coming out of the crest on my left hand. She’d been meditating like this a lot more ever since our battle against that Overlord.

At first, I thought this was a sign that she was evolving, like what had happened in Torne. It didn’t seem to be a one-day deal this time, but there was no mistaking it: Having already evolved three times, she herself could now sense that her next evolution was drawing close.

There was something else she’d said about it too.

“Ray. This is conjecture, but...my next evolution will likely grant me the you-know-what.”

"Huh?"

"My *ultimate skill*."

Ultimate skills. Bearing the Embryo's own name, they were the greatest, most powerful abilities in any Embryo's arsenal, and the supreme manifestations of their core traits.

This meant that her next evolution—her fifth form—would set in stone her nature as an Embryo.

Nemesis was currently reflecting on herself in preparation for that, and instead of disturbing her, I decided to just walk around alone.

"Hm?"

But then I noticed a couple of familiar faces. There was Juliet, looking somewhat down, with Chelsea right by her side. They'd noticed me too.

"What's up, you two?" I asked as I approached them.

"The favors I carry, newly bestowed... They cannot yet be awakened," said Juliet.

"I wanna test my new MVP rewards, but no arenas are open," huh? I thought. *I get it.*

This reminded me that she'd been the one who won the Tournament on the fourth day, as well as beat the UBM to take the MVP reward afterward.

"Because of the Tourney, the arenas are bein' rented by people who don't usually use them," said Chelsea.

"I see..." That made sense—duelists weren't the only people participating in The Tournaments, and with the arenas being the perfect place to practice one-on-one fights, there were probably hundreds of people trying to rent them.

"And it's the final day tomorrow," Chelsea continued. "Not a single arena is open." With the prize being a Mythical MVP reward, it was no wonder the participants were taking this seriously.

But because of that, these two hadn't been able to do any training...

"Why not use our place, then?" I asked.

"Huh?"

My clan's base was the Eighth Arena, and it had the same barrier

that all the others did.

I'd even used it myself to test the axe that had blown away my arm.

"Can we?"

"Sure. It's not like it costs us anything. Someone else might be using it, but the barrier can be separated just like in the other arenas, so won't be a problem."

If there was someone using it now, it'd probably be Figaro. He was participating in tomorrow's Tournament. There was probably enough space for everyone there.

"Thanks! Maaan, there's nothin' like a good friend!"

"And so, we descend upon the citadel of the Light- and Dark-Wielding Hero Clad in Violet and Crimson... (We're visiting Ray's place...)"

"Hm? Juliet? What's wrong?"

"Oh, don't worry about it. She's just cute like that."

"I don't really get it, but okay..." Well, Juliet was still a middle schooler in real life, so it was probably best not to pry.

Anyway, that's how it was decided that I would let these duelists into our base.

"The Eighth Arena, huh? I've actually never been there," said Chelsea, prompting a nod from Juliet.

"Really?" I asked. "You two are proper duelists, so I kinda assumed that you'd been to all of them."

"The ranked battles all happen in the Central Arena, and there's more convenient places for warm-ups and sparring," Chelsea said. Well, looking back at it, whenever I joined them for sparring, we never did use the eighth.

"If we go to arenas besides that, it's usually for their events, but..." Juliet added.

"Ohh..." Right. Since the eighth was in a bad location, it never attracted much of an audience and was operating at a net loss, so it probably wasn't economically viable for them to do any big events.

That makes our base sound like some rural horse-racing track that was on the verge of shutting down, I thought.

"By the way, can you fill your arena with water?" Chelsea asked.

"I never tried, but I think you can." Not every arena in Gideon had this feature, but some could be filled with water for aquatic fights, and I was pretty sure ours was among them.

"I'll pay for the water... Actually, I'll just provide it myself. Would you mind if I did that?"

"I'm pretty sure it would take up the whole arena, so if someone else is using it, you'll have to ask them. If they're fine with that, then I see no problem."

"Thanks! That'll be a big help! I've been on a losing streak lately, so I need to do some serious training!"

"That so? Speaking of, what day did you participate in?"

I hadn't seen her name on any of the public rankings in The Tournaments, so I'd assumed she'd been unlucky and gotten a bad matchup during the preliminaries...

"...Day six. I got matched with Kashimiya in the prelims."

"Ohhh..." *Yeah, that'd do it,* I thought. *Even the public battles ended in seconds that day.*

"The reward didn't attract much attention, and I'm pretty strong against lightning, so I thought I had a chance," Chelsea added. "Though, looking back at the whole escape thing, that UBM was probably too much for me."

The UBM released on day six had broken the barrier and flown off somewhere, escaping not just Kashimiya, but all the *Superiors* present—Shu included. Thankfully, it seemed like the UBM hadn't caused any incidents since.

Still, there had been a serious counterplan meeting about it, and both Shu and Figaro had both been called to participate as observers.

"Speaking of Kashimiya, I wonder when he'll challenge Figaro," said Chelsea.

"Oh, Figaro himself actually asked him about that," I said.

"What did Kashimiya say?"

"'I will challenge you when you can duel me with all your strength.'"

"You mean...?"

"The sharpest fang in the Lion King's maw? (Figaro's ult?)"

Chelsea and Juliet instantly understood what Kashimiya had been referring to.

Indeed—while Figaro was the strongest duelist in the kingdom and possessed incredible power, he was actually handicapping himself by *never using his Embryo's ultimate skill*.

Figaro had sworn that he'd never use his ultimate skill in a duel until he got another chance to face his close friend and rival, who'd disappeared following some event in the past. Figaro was so serious about this oath that he hadn't even used his ult against Xunyu during the Clash of the Superiors.

"'Tis not that I do not grasp the desires of the great and powerful, but time flows ever onward toward its ultimate end... (I understand wanting to fight someone when they're at their strongest... But I wonder when he'll get to do that.)"

"Well, for Kashimiya, it's less about his duel ranking and more about overcoming a great obstacle," said Chelsea. "He just wants to fight someone powerful—becoming duel champion is kind of a bonus."

Looking back, that was more or less how he'd been with Tom. Even though it was a bad matchup for him, Kashimiya had challenged Tom again and again, until he eventually emerged victorious with the techniques he'd honed throughout it all. He improved himself by overcoming those who were strong—these great obstacles.

For Kashimiya, duels weren't the goal, but just a means to that end, and that was why he didn't care about staying second in the rankings.

He would remain there until the day he could fight Figaro at his strongest.

"But if that's how it is, I say let him keep waiting," said Chelsea. "I'll just beat Julie, Tom, and Kashimiya too, then challenge Figaro myself!"

"Our ambitions are equally matched—and yet, only one shall bear fruit. (I was thinking the same thing! I won't lose to you, though!)"

Those two really were duelists. I was looking forward to their fights as both a friend and as a spectator. If letting them use our

arena would help them on their path, then that was all the more reason to do it.

And what of you, as the leader of Figaro's clan? Nemesis asked telepathically. She must've woken up at some point.

Knowing Figaro, he'd just be really happy they got stronger and gladly fight them both, no? I thought back at her.

That is true, came her reply.

As far as *Superiors* went, Figaro was relatively normal as a person, but when it came to combat power and fighting spirit, he might've been the craziest guy around. Who else would keep fighting after literally getting their lung ripped out?

Continuing to gossip, we soon arrived at our base. Thankfully, no one was using the stage, so they could have aquatic fights just like Chelsea had requested.

I actually joined them myself, and sparring with them made me realize that they'd grown stronger too—especially Juliet.

She'd actually died more times than me, though, so I felt like it'd be a while before she mastered her two new MVP rewards—especially the one she'd gotten using the gacha ticket.

Once we were done, I told them that they were free to use the arena for practice anytime.

But man, Juliet's MVP reward... I honestly would've loved to have gotten it myself, I thought. *The Carriage House of Legend I pulled from the gacha isn't exactly disappointing, but the thing Juliet got would've fit my fighting style so well.*

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Gideon, City of Duels

After a few hours of sparring in the Eighth Arena, Chelsea said she had some business to attend to and logged out.

Juliet was thinking of doing the same. While it was evening in Gideon right now, it was almost dawn in real life—and since it was a regular Tuesday, a middle schooler like her had classes to attend.

But in all honesty, her heavy sighs clearly showed that she wanted to stay logged in.

In *Dendro* time, tomorrow was the final day of The Tournaments. It was the climax of a major dueling event, and yet Juliet had to go to school. Just thinking about that before she'd logged in had made her so disheartened that her head had started to feel strangely heavy.

Thus, she was now walking through the city wearing a rather gloomy expression.

Logging out right away was an option—but knowing that she'd get less than two hours of sleep before her mother came to wake her up, Juliet wanted to enjoy the festivities a bit longer instead.

Additionally, though she'd been logged in for a while now, she didn't actually feel all that sleepy. She'd taken a nap between day eight and day nine. Converted to real time, it was only about an hour of sleep, but it had spared her from feeling drowsy.

Juliet was actually full of energy and a desire to do something.

It's right before the final day, so maybe they're doing something in the first district? she thought. *It's a bit far, though. I'll just fly there.*

She spread Hræsvelgr—her Embryo—wide and prepared to leap into the sky when...

"Hey! You there! You, with those photogenic black wings!"

...someone suddenly called out to her.

Juliet turned around in surprise to see an unfamiliar girl running up to her, eyes glittering.

"Is that cosplay? Or are they the real deal? Oh! They move! Can you fly? That's amazing!"

"Hm? Huh? What?" Juliet was completely taken aback by the mystery girl's sudden approach. She didn't even manage to speak in her usual manner, instead only letting out confused exclamations.

"There's winged Masters in Legendaria too, but theirs don't really work! Everything in character creation is just cosmetic! But your wings *move*! Are they some kind of magic item? Wait, Identification doesn't show anything... It's an Embryo!"

"I-It is..."

"Nice! *So* nice! Wings that can actually fly! A fallen angel! This would get so many views! Tons of likes! Hey! Would you join me for

a photo shoot? I feel like we can take some great pictures together!”

“O-Okay... Huh?” Overwhelmed by the girl’s energy, Juliet found herself nodding.

Sh-She’s so pushy... Juliet thought. *I feel more pressured than I did with Max.*

In their first meeting, Max had challenged Juliet to a duel in the middle of the street—but in a way, this girl was more overwhelming. It was enough to knock the role-playing right out of her.

“Yay! That’s great! We’re like a devil and a fallen angel! This will look *great* together!”

“A devil...? Oh.” Juliet finally noticed the girl’s devilish horns and tail—though the horns were somewhat rounded, and combined with the hair color that matched her dress and crown, along with the closed parasol she carried, she looked more like...

“A cute devil girl...”

“Yeah! I know, right? Thanks! I’m proud of my avatar too!” Those words, along with the crest on her left hand—showing an image of what almost seemed to be an ancient underwater temple—were more than enough to confirm that she wasn’t a tian, but a Master.

While *Infinite Dendrogram’s* avatar creation let players assume all sorts of strange appearances, it was often difficult to balance the function and design of features humans didn’t have in reality. However, this devil girl pulled it off really well. The tail even seemed to move based on her emotions, however that worked.

“Oh! Right! Can I have your name? I wanna put ‘Me and Whoever’ as the title for the photo set!”

“Um... I’m Juliet.”

The fact that the devil girl had to ask her name made it clear that she was new to Gideon. Juliet was fourth in the duel rankings—the duelist who showed up in more matches than any others near the top. Nobody from the area who cared even slightly about duels would fail to recognize Juliet’s face or name.



Oh yeah, she did say something about Legendaria... Juliet thought.

"Juliet. Julie it is then! I hope we can be friends!" The devil girl grasped Juliet's hands and shook them up and down.

It was an awfully blatant expression of familiarity, but it obviously came from the heart.

"And, so... You are...?"

"Huh...? Oh. Right. Riiight..."

Juliet's question made the devil girl freeze mid-handshake. However, she quickly rebooted and gave Juliet a smile.

"I'm G! A streamer and content creator! Search for 'G Channel' and you'll find me!"

"Oh. A streamer..." Juliet mostly watched fashion and occult videos, so she didn't know much about streamers, but based on G's reaction to her lack of recognition, Juliet figured she must've been pretty famous.

"I-I'll have a look..."

"Please do! Check me out! Anyway, on to the photo shoot!" G said with a smile plastered across her face, making Juliet nod.

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"I saw a good photo spot! The moonlight really spices up the scene! Let's go there!" G said, pulling Juliet's hand.

The sight made them stand out, and some of those they passed by talked about them.

"Oh. Look at that devil girl. Pretty cute, huh?"

"Devil...? Which one do you mean?"

"C'mon. The one holding hands with the Black Crow, obviously."

"She doesn't seem all that devil-like to me." This made Juliet feel somewhat bashful, while G didn't seem to care.

But as they walked, the amount of people around them gradually dwindled.

"We're here! We've arrived!"

Eventually, they ended up inside some stone ruins—a property that had been destroyed during Franklin's act of terror.

Unfortunately, its rebuilding plans had been delayed, if not completely lost in the legal process, because it didn't have any inhabitants or owners to begin with.

"I think devils and fallen angels are best paired with the scenery of destruction! The absolute end! Not scenes of everyday life, but the desolation left after it's over!"

"Our minds are as one... (I totally get it...)" G's assertion was something that really touched Juliet's teenage tastes.

They had chatted a bit on the way here, and though Juliet had found G a bit much at first, she eventually decided G was actually very easy to talk to despite her unique tone and overwhelming personality.

"Let's get ready now! I'll set everything up!" G said as she reached into her Inventory and took out various photography equipment. There were floating orbs and mirrors that shone to function as lighting, as well as crystal balls with wings that functioned as cameras—all of them Legendarian magic items.

Appropriately for a content creator, G seemed very serious about her setup.

"Let's get started, then. It's photo time! We'll do each of us individually first, then pair up for the rest!"

"O-Okay." And so, the photo shoot commenced, beginning with Juliet.

G left the poses and expressions up to Juliet at first, but then began telling her where and how to stand, and what faces to make.

Juliet checked the photos on the spot, and seeing them was quite surprising to her.

G's photography skills were just incredible—even more than one might expect out of a content creator. Juliet was into fashion and taking selfies, so she could easily tell that G's photos did a good job of highlighting her charm. Juliet was already Juri Kurosaki's ideal avatar, yet these photos seemed to somehow make her look even better.

"Pretty..." said Juliet, so overcome by emotion and excitement that she could only manage the most basic statements.

"Well, I gotta be good at it for my job. I gotta know how to

captivate people. Not that I don't like the praise, though!"

"You made me look so gorgeous... Can I have these too?"

"Of course! I'll give them to you along with the pay!"

I'll definitely send them to the other side and put them in an album, Juliet decided.

"Oh. I forgot to ask... Would it be okay if I use my photos with you for video thumbnails or post them on social media? Would you be against that?"

"Not at all." Juliet was a high-ranking duelist, so there were already plenty of videos and photos of her duels. Agreeing to this wouldn't change a thing.

"Nice! Thanks a bunch!" G said with a bright smile.

The photo shoot continued, and they ended up taking dozens of pictures.

The ones where they posed together as a devil and a fallen angel were especially beautiful—breathtaking, even. The background shadows and lighting worked splendidly to create scenes that looked simply magical.

"Wow... I don't even feel like I'm looking at myself here..." said Juliet.

"Well, it's your avatar. It's important to make it look even better than it does normally," G replied as she sorted the photos. Some would be used in videos, some in streams, and some posted on social media. Her eyes as she did this were nothing if not serious.

"You content creator types are really amazing..."

"We're not all like this. There's a bunch of areas we can fall into. For example, the lip feti— I mean, someone I know gets viewers not through photography or recording skills, but just by showing interesting and funny occurrences. I don't have whatever weird predisposition makes that kind of thing happen to me on its own, so I set up my *events* myself and make some eye-catching screenshots and pictures to go with it."

"You're so good at this, though. You'd be a great photographer..."

"Oh, that's not happening. Not a chance. No way."

"Huh?" G's strong denial made Juliet's eyes go wide.

G, however, maintained a smile as she said, "I mean, the thing I

wanna photograph the most is me. *I want people to look at me*. I wanna shine brighter than anything else in the world! That's not the usual outlook for a photographer, right?"

"Umm... That makes you sound more like...a princess?" That was the first word that came to Juliet's mind when she thought of "someone who shines brighter than anyone else in the world."

That might've been kind of a childish answer, though, Juliet said, regretting her choice of words when...

"AHA! Yeah! You might be right!" Apparently finding humor in Juliet's words, G let out a laugh. "You really don't know *me*, huh? So this is what it's like to leave Legendaria."

"Hm?"

"Ah ha ha! Don't worry about it. Thanks for helping me out today. Here's your pay," G said as she handed Juliet a sizable sum of money and the copies of the photos she'd made on the spot.

"Thanks..."

"Oh! Right! Can I add you as a friend? You know, to celebrate those great photos we just took?"

"Okay!" Juliet said with a nod. She was happy to have a new friend on top of all the wonderful pictures she'd received.

After adding each other to their friend lists, the pair were ready to part ways.

G seemed to have somewhere else to be, while it was about time for Juliet to log out and prepare to go to school.

"I'll go check out your videos, um... Miss G?"

"Just 'G' is fine. 'Miss G' sounds like the name of a rapper or something, so just 'G' is fine. Anyway, Julie, whether here or on stream, let's meet again sometime!"

"Okay!" Her heart lifted by the wonderful photos and her new friend, Juliet logged out.

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Fully satisfied, she—now Juri Kurosaki—opened her eyes.

"Hm...?" But the moment she logged out, she realized that something was off about her body.

She was obviously sleepy, but it was more than that. Her head was heavy, her breathing difficult, and her joints ached here and there.

"Ah-choo..." A charming sneeze escaped as she woke up.

She then looked at the large mirror in the room...

"...Huhhh?"

...and saw her face, all red.

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Gideon, City of Duels, Eighth District

The Eighth District was chaotic even by Gideon's standards. It was home to many legally gray guilds and underground shops.

However, even this area had one place that even the lawless locals wouldn't dare approach.

It was Gideon's Eighth Arena—the base of the Death Period clan.

It was home to not only four of Altar's *Superiors*, but also the ones who had saved Gideon during Franklin's Game.

Immense power and a debt of gratitude combined to make the local criminals hesitate to do anything to this particular location.

Because of that, any outlaw who wanted to try anything funny here would almost certainly be a foreigner, not a local.

"So this is his house... So this is Ray Starling's base."

Having just split up with Juliet, G looked up at the Eighth Arena with those words.

On a wide thoroughfare, lit only by the streetlights and the moon, G opened her umbrella.

That made a rounded shadow fall next to her feet, which then rippled like the surface of water.

"I...can't do all of Gideon, obviously. That's too much. This city has way too many Resources. I guess it's all the arenas? I can *do* at least one, though. That's reasonable. And I guess it's gotta be this one."

G was muttering to herself as if confirming something. But then, she looked away from the arena and to the *sky* diagonally behind her.

“What a shame. I wanted to surprise you, but I guess you found me first.”

There was nothing there.

Actually, no—there was an optically camouflaged orb—a floating drone.

“Well, there’s a big event happening. I sent eyes all over, so of course I’d notice you.”

Following those words, a man wearing a coat like the night sky appeared before G.

In *Infinite Dendrogram*, this man was known as King of Light, F, but in reality, he was G’s blood brother.

“So this really was your destination, eh?” he asked.

“That’s my brother—such a detective. I’m amazed you could pinpoint where I was headed like that. Maybe you should try writing a mystery next.”

F said nothing, though he seemed to be thinking, *It’s worrying that she’s being completely serious...*

“So, do you also know what I’m here for? Did you see right through me?”

“Based on the fact that you’re here, I have a guess,” F said as he looked up at the Eighth Arena.

Knowing his sister’s personality and her Embryo’s ult, he could easily imagine what she was planning.

“I don’t think your odds are good, though,” he continued. “Death Period has four *Superiors*. They obviously can’t fight at full strength in the city, but it will still be a difficult battle. Actually, isn’t Figaro a hard counter to you? I don’t think there’s a Master who is as good at ‘clearing’ as he is.”

“Oh, come now, dear brother of mine. I’m not *that* careless.”

Silence. *Really?* F thought, but stopped himself from saying it out loud.

“Tomorrow is the final day of The Tournaments, right? That’ll keep the fabled Figaro busy until probably the final match, and I hear Shu and Hannya are on security duty. It seems like Lei-Lei doesn’t log in much in the first place, so I don’t even have to consider her, while the rest will probably watch the last Tournament.”

"Mm-hmm. So you'll take care of business while they're all away?"

"Oh, no no no. That won't make for a good video."

"Suppose that's true."

"But I won't fight any *Superiors*. My only target...is Ray Starling."

I thought as much, F thought, narrowing his eyes.

"While everyone's focused on the Tournament in the Central Arena, I'll summon *just* Ray Starling. This will be the stage for our battle! The filming location!"

"Mm-hmm... The public part of the final Tournament tomorrow will probably last from noon to about three p.m., JST."

G's words made her brother mutter under his breath and begin to calculate something. However, she ignored that and continued talking as though carried by the momentum of her own words.

"I'll get what I want, and by winning against someone who beat you and some *Superiors*, I'll show that I'm stronger than all of you. Those are my main goals this time!"

It almost felt like she was picking a fight with her brother.

"I see. I'll be looking forward to that."

However, F was unfazed and replied to her words from the heart.

He really did think it would be interesting.

He knew just how powerful G was, but he still didn't have a good measure of Ray's strength.

A conflict between the two would be as exciting as the final Tournament—if not more.

But there was one problem...

"By the way, Ginga."

"Hey! Not even you can say my real name here, okay?!"

"Oh, sorry. Then, G... I have a question for you..."

His little sister neglected to consider something important, so he chose to point that out.

"Yes?"

"Tomorrow is a weekday, right?"

"Yes! It doesn't matter much to us, though! People who've got day jobs and school sure have it rough, huh?" They were a content creator and an author, respectively. As far as professions went, theirs

didn’t have much of a set schedule.

That must’ve been why G hadn’t considered this particular issue, but...

“Do you think our friend Ray will be able to log in on a weekday at noon? Based on the times he comes online and the name of his brother’s avatar, he’s almost certainly Japanese.”

“...Oh.”

The standard Japanese work and school hours—an unlikely obstacle to G’s plans that nonetheless had thrown a huge wrench into her plans.

Interlude: Morning of the Final Day

Gideon, City of Duels, Tenth Day of The Tournaments

The ten-day event had now entered its final day.

The nine previous days had seen many contestants, but this final event had considerably more than any of them.

The reason for this was obvious: The UBM in the Orb that was today's reward was Mythical—the strongest tier of conventional UBM—meaning that the MVP reward it would provide would likely be very powerful.

Additionally, the duel champion of Altar, Figaro, was fighting today, attracting many challengers who just wanted to face him in battle, as they were usually barred from doing so by the rankings.

There were many spectators too. Like in the previous days, they would only get to see the fights from the contestants' fifth battles onward, but that didn't stop some from staying up all night near the arena waiting to be let in.

In fact, some probably had their sights set on this final Tournament for days now.

Naturally, the tians working in the arena were overwhelmingly busy with the preparations. Many in the offices were looking over all kinds of documents and calling various people using comms magic. The knowledge that it would all be over after today drove them to work as hard as they could.

"Hm..."

Among them, there was a young man—barely in his late teens—writing something in a separate office for high-ranking individuals.

His name was Aschbarray Gideon. He was the count of this great City of Duels, and he was greatly burdened by all the turmoil his city had a tendency to attract.

Following the events in places like Quartierlatin and Altea, though, he'd begun to think that maybe Gideon didn't have it that bad—which was, quite frankly, delusional.

Like everyone else here, he was hard at work attending to his duties. The Tournaments had pushed both him and his subordinates close to their limits. There was so much to do that he'd even had to get some of the ninjas from his intelligence agency to help out with the event.

He'd barely slept over the past nine days, and even now he was working while taking the occasional swig from a potion.

The reason he was in the arena was that he had to attend the event himself, and even the time it would take to travel there from his mansion felt wasteful.

The UBM's escape on day six hadn't helped at all. The overwhelming amount of duties, combined with the stress that the event had caused, was so bad that he'd even required healing magic.

But this soul-crushing work was about to reach its end.

"That should be that..." he said with a sigh as he looked at a paper tacked onto the wall.

It showed the results of The Tournaments thus far.

Day 1: Poison Fist, Lei-Lei.

Day 2: Armor Giant, Barbaroy Bad Burn.

Day 3: Lost Heart, Rook Holmes.

Day 4: Fallen Knight, Juliet.

Day 5: High Priestess, Tsukuyo Fuso.

Day 6: The Unsheath, Kashimiya.

Day 7: King of Storms, Caydence.

Day 8: Gale Rider, Masked Riser.

Day 9: Sneak Raider, Grimms.

These were the winners of the previous nine days.

Taking a small break, he looked over the list of names and tried to remember what the winners were known for.

Superiors*, duelists, that member of Death Period on day three...and day seven is the third in the kill rankings and leader of the fourth-ranking clan, Welkin Alliance.*

He began with the ones he knew best. Death Period had helped him a great deal, but caused problems as well, so he found himself feeling somewhat conflicted about them.

"I do not recall much about the winner of day nine..."

However, he couldn't remember anything about the person last in the list. The count thought that they might have been a foreign Master who'd joined the kingdom of Altar, but...

"Grimms is a member of the Fairytale Squad—a party operating on the western side of the kingdom. They contributed to the defeat of the Goblin King and resolving the exploding ghost ship incident in Keyora." His secretary—actually a female ninja dressed as one—volunteered more information about this character.

"I see."

It seemed that his intelligence agency had been gathering info about the west too.

With that, he now knew about this "Grimms."

"Looking at the results now, they are both surprising and expected." The list included everything from *Superiors* to people not on any ranking, showing that these Tournaments weren't just about pure power, but also luck in matchups.

Actually, even getting to participate in one of The Tournaments involved a great deal of luck. People in the duel or kill rankings, Superior Jobs, and those the kingdom gave express right to appear were given priority, but for everyone else it was a lottery.

For the record, all members of Death Period were given priority as well.

That had been Altimia's decision. The clan's core members had fought alongside her during the peace talks, while Kasumi's trio had contributed greatly during the attack on the capital.

They would've been allowed to participate even if they weren't Ray's friends—the Babylonian Battlegroup and K&R had also received this honor.

And, whether by luck or inevitability, these clans had all won Tournaments and the right to challenge their Orbs.

Even though the UBM fought by K&R had flown off into the sky and disappeared.

Additionally, following that incident, they'd temporarily stopped the UBM fights until they made sure something like that couldn't happen again, after which they would allow everyone else to face their UBMs. Because of that, the winners of days seven to nine hadn't challenged their Orbs yet. The winners of days three and five hadn't fought theirs either, so they would also be waiting for now.

"...I just realized that all the winners are Masters who were already from Altar." The count thought he'd see a decent amount of unfamiliar names—Masters from other countries—so this was a somewhat unexpected result.

He was in a position to know that there were quite a lot of Masters who'd changed their allegiance to Altar specifically to participate in The Tournaments and that many of them were considerably powerful.

But looking at the details, these new additions to the kingdom had either vanished in the preliminaries or had been defeated right after the public matches began.

The matchups were random, and the count was certain that there had been no foul play that had put them at a disadvantage. Had they all just lacked the luck or power to make it to the top?

As that thought went through his head, a worker entered with the latest report. "We finished the lottery for today's canceled slots!"

"I see. So the deadline is already past..."

The rules said that if a registered participant didn't show up at the appointed time, they would have their participation revoked and their slot put up as a same-day lottery prize.

That was how Lei-Lei—the winner of day one—had been able to participate.

That wasn't strange at all, but...

"Even the last day had cancellations?" While Masters chose the days they would participate on based on their plans, some would inevitably still be forced to cancel.

They obviously had their reasons. Masters had that strange habit of "disappearing to the other side," so it wasn't strange for them to cancel on account of "sudden real-life issues," as they described them.

However, there had been cancellations every single day. They didn't even amount to three percent of the total participants, but it felt like a lot to the count.

"Hm...?" Curious, he rummaged around for the documents detailing everyone who had registered but not participated. He quickly found them in an office drawer and looked them over.

"This..."

As he did, he noticed something.

Many of the registered nonparticipants were new additions to the kingdom, and among the strongest of them to boot.

They were, in fact, the very powerful foreign or freelance Masters that Altar actually hoped to acquire with this event.

"And here are today's cancellations," said the secretary-ninja as she handed him a new document.

"How dreadful."

Its content was even worse.

He'd thought that today's Mythical reward would attract a great many powerful Masters. However, a few of these had canceled their participation regardless.

Three pre-*Superiors* and one *Superior* had not shown up by the deadline.

"The rules of The Tournaments are..." The count mentally reviewed the very thing he'd checked over countless times before.

The Tournaments had four main rules:

1. The participant must be an Altarian Master.

2. The participant will be unable to switch countries for three years after The Tournaments.

3. If the participant commits a crime within Altar's borders that would otherwise be punished with one or more years of penal servitude, they will be rendered unable to use any save points.

4. The participant will receive the right to challenge a UBM depending on where they place in The Tournaments. Additionally, those who also sign the Contract declaring their will to participate in any war Altar may be involved in within the next three years will receive an extra prize in the form of the right to select a rare piece of equipment. The order of selection will also depend on placement

in The Tournaments.

Knowing the goal behind The Tournaments, these conditions were fairly ordinary.

But what about those who had registered, but didn't actually participate? Did these rules also apply to them?

The answer to that was no. Nonparticipants weren't subject to the Contract. Any legal obligation instead went to those who won the same-day lottery for their slots.

Maybe it would've been different if they signed the extra prize Contract, but the more powerful they were, the less they cared about it, so none of them had done that.

"...Is this intentional?" Had these Masters just changed their mind postregistration and decided that the conditions for participation weren't acceptable? Maybe some of them had, but it was unlikely to be the motive for every single one.

That made it possible that there was actual intent behind all these cancellations—that it was the result of someone's interference.

"S-Sir! W-We have a problem!" As that thought ran through his mind, a panicked staff member rushed into the office.

The secretary-ninja stood between them, ready to protect the count, but he told her to relax.

"Why the panic? Is another *Superior* causing trouble?" Franklin, Gerbera (and Shu), Hannya... With all these potentially dangerous *Superiors* in this city, they had become the first thing that came to the count's mind whenever there was trouble. After that, he thought of the second princess, and after her, he expected UBMs.

In response to the count's somewhat sarcastic question, the worker...

"Yes!"

...gave him a big nod.

"...Huh?"

"Well, actually, it's not really *a problem*, per se, but..." Hurrying to walk back the words that had just come out of his mouth, the staff member started to sweat a little.

"Tell me everything, from start to finish."

"O-Of course. We just finished the substitute lottery for today's

cancellations, and...”

Slightly more composed now, the worker gave a thorough explanation.

Upon hearing everything, the count could only let out a shocked cry of “WHAT?!”

Chapter 2: The Man Who Shouldn't Be Here

Reality, Kurosaki Household

"Your temperature's 38.5... You've got a cold," Juri's mother said, giving her a worried look as she checked her temperature.

Juri Kurosaki coughed. It seemed she'd caught a cold right before the final day of The Tournaments.

There seemed to be a minor, out-of-season epidemic in the area. Juri's classmate, Licorice Saionji, had also missed school due to this illness, and now she'd caught it too.

"I'll call the school and tell them you're not coming in today. Miss Natsume too. You can't be tutored like this," her mother said.

"O-Okay."

"Are you feeling all right? Should I take the day off to look after you?"

"I-I'll be fine by myself...! You should just head to work and not worry about me!"

"Really...? I'll make you an ice pillow, at least. And some porridge too—you can warm it up for yourself later."

With those words, Juri's mother left the room.

Listening to her footsteps, Juri let out a sigh.

"A cold..." She had felt like her head was strangely heavy last night, but it had gotten so much worse since then.

"And we're supposed to have pudding at lunch today..." While she could have pudding at home too, Juri felt that there was something special and different about the taste of school lunch pudding, so she was a bit sad she wouldn't get it.

Regardless...this was now a day off.

Juri looked at the headgear next to her bed.

It made her think of her friend who'd logged in despite having a

cold, forcing her servants to drag her out.

"I shouldn't play a game when I'm too sick for school... But..." Juri's desire to enjoy the event was at war with her own conscience.

And ultimately...

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Gideon, City of Duels, Eighth District

After her mother did a couple things for her and headed off to work, Juri caved and put on the headgear. She did feel some guilt, but it did not stop her, and her conscience had lost the battle.

Guess I logged in after all... Juliet thought. *Weird... I had a headache, but I'm not feeling anything now.*

Just like her sleepiness, all the malaise from her illness seemed to have vanished. Unlike Juri, Juliet was the picture of health.

There were several icons advising her about her condition in real life, but there was a setting to hide them, so they didn't bother her much.

Juliet wasn't aware of it, but that setting was commonly used by the Masters from The Lunar Society. Given their circumstances, playing without it would be quite inconvenient.

What do I do now...? Juliet wondered. She didn't actually have any plans. Since it was the final day, the event was at its peak—but assuming that she'd be at school during the actual Tournament on that day, she hadn't bought a ticket. And knowing the demand, she thought even the scalpers must have been sold out by now.

Maybe I should join Max and take a look at the auction...? she thought, when...

"Huh? Julie?! Why're you logged in at this hour?"

...she heard her friend Chelsea calling out to her with a face full of surprise.

"I caught a cold... No school for me today."

"You know you're bein' no better than Shion, right?" said Chelsea, casually taking a shot at Shion.

"Ngh... But I..."

"Ugh... Are you at least warm back in the real world?"

"I took some medicine, got an ice pillow, and logged in after covering myself up."

"Well, I guess a little bit of *Dendro* should be fine, then. But log out the moment you get a notif that you're gettin' worse, got it?"

"Okay...!"

After that exchange where she sounded like Juliet's mother or older sister, Chelsea seemed to just move on.

"What about you? Why are you here?" Juliet asked.

"I was thinkin' of borrowing Ray's arena again, but it just hit me that he's in college too."

"Oh..."

"And? Do *you* got any plans?"

"I thought I wouldn't get to see the matches, so I didn't buy any tickets..."

"Same here."

"Huh? You too?"

"It's the final day. There's gonna be lots of videos on the internet anyway. For now, let's go check out that auction Max went to. We can rent an arena after that. Ray's not here to let us use his, but there should be another one free today."

"Okay." The two then took off toward the hustle and bustle of the Fourth District.

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Gideon, City of Duels, Fourth District

The Fourth District was always a lively place full of bazaars and shops, but because of The Tournaments and the people they'd attracted from all over, there was even more excitement here than usual.

One major reason for that was the auction being held on the final day.

Many merchants had brought in some of their most impressive, valuable items, and the best of them were being separated into auctions based on their categories. Even the tickets and catalogs for the auctions were quite costly—you had to be very wealthy to even

participate.

For Masters who made it to the ranks, though, it wasn't all that much—and this included the duelist, Great Genocide Max.

"Is this enough?" Waiting on the weapon auction, she worriedly counted the money she had. She could easily cover the participation cost, but she wasn't sure if she had enough for the specific item she wanted to buy.

The weapon she was after was among the greatest in the entire selection—one of Tenchi's Hundred Famed Blades.

Its name was "Sekiun"—the "Cumulus Cloud." Barring MVP rewards that were adjusted to suit the specific player they were awarded to, it was probably the weapon that suited Max's combat style more than any other.

If I'm ever gonna fight Jubei again, I gotta get somethin' better, she thought. In a recent event, Max had indeed fought another battle against Jubei. She'd given her all and ended up getting close enough to Jubei to tear out her eye with her fingers.

Having used that opportunity to score a touch on her rival, Max now wanted something that would enable her to actually defeat her—a technique, a Superior Job, an MVP reward, or an Embryo evolution.

Sekiun was one of the things that had come to mind.

I could scrape up about fifty million lir...but that's not that much, she thought. That was far below the market price for one of the Hundred Famed Blades. While Sekiun was quite difficult to use effectively, it was hard to imagine that absolutely no one would outbid her for such a masterwork. If some wealthy merchant wanted it for collection or speculation, Max would stand no chance, and looking around, she saw many such bidders here.

You could tell by her face that she thought her chances were low, and yet she still waited for Sekiun to come up for auction...and that was when she heard a conversation.

"What about this one? A knight sword that uses mana to increase your STR by 50% for 30 seconds."

"Your STR is not that high, so I feel it would not have much of an effect. It's far more suited to Brother Bear."

"Apparently, weapons like this just break when he wields them..."

"I suppose that is a clear case of 'too much of a good thing.'"

"Oh. This next greatsword looks—"

"No greatswords. No halberds, shields, pinwheels, or dual swords either. I will not tolerate cheating."

"Your attitude is exactly why we can't ever find anything useful, you know... Besides, I doubt we'll even see a pinwheel here."

It was an exchange between two of her acquaintances.

"What're you two doing here?" Max asked.

"Oh. Max. Didn't see you there."

The people sitting behind her were none other than Ray and Nemesis. They'd been on quests together and had all participated in the recent event, so they definitely weren't strangers at this point.

However, Ray had defeated Jubei, succeeding where Max still failed, so her feelings about him were a little conflicted.

"We were just wondering if they had any good weapons for ordinary situations. Everyday use and all that," said Ray.

"The axe and the bracelet we got recently are far from *ordinary*," Nemesis added. "Though, in a way, the latter is seeing plenty of 'everyday use.'"

"KSHAAA!" A closer look revealed that there was a small demon girl—Gardranda—munching on Ray's hair.

"That ain't what I'm askin'," Max said. "Last we sparred, you said you wouldn't be on during the final day, 'cause of college."

"Oh. That? I did go to class today, but the afternoon lectures were all canceled. Looks like there's an out-of-season cold epidemic where I am."

That had apparently allowed him to participate in the events of the final day. He was also planning to meet up with Marie and watch the Tournament later.

"And? What about you?" Ray asked. "Chelsea said you're after something specific."

"I am," said Max as she showed him the catalog page for Sekiun.

Ray read it and instantly thought, *Yeah. This is perfect for Max.*

"I could allow a katana," said Nemesis. "But *this* certainly does not suit you."

“That’s true. Maybe if I used it with the axe...? No, you have to swing that to get any attack power out of it. I feel like the only ones who can make good use of this sword are Figaro, Max, and Jubei.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” said Max. As the three talked, Sekiun’s turn on the block came up.

“And here we have one of the Hundred Famed Blades from the far eastern lands—Sekiun! It has a rich history and is a beautiful work of art in its own right! We’re starting at ten million lir!” With those words from the auctioneer, the bidding war began, and the price quickly grew.

Many of the bidders weren’t swordsmen but mere merchants who only wanted it for its reputation as one of the Hundred Famed Blades.

“Ngh...!” The bidding wars leading up to this one had made the auction really competitive, and it didn’t take long for the price to go above the fifty million Max could afford.

“Max? Isn’t that the one you wanted? Aren’t you gonna bet?” Ray asked.

“...It’s already past my budget,” Max said, clearly disappointed.

“Should I lend you some money, then?” Ray asked.

“Ha... With the way it’s goin’, I don’t think ‘some’ would be enough...”

“You think five hundred mil wouldn’t do it?”

“Huh?!” Max’s eyes widened. That was ten times her own budget.

Ray ignored her reaction and handed her an Inventory full of high-value coins. It seemed to contain exactly as much as he’d said.

“You—! Wha—! Hey...!”

“Before coming here, I checked the results for yesterday’s Tournament. It turns out Grimms won, and he was the dark horse, so...”

“I cannot believe that you won such a careless and risky bet,” said Nemesis. “It is honestly quite ominous that you wagered on the winner every single day except the first one—and that was only because you missed your chance to bet. It makes me feel as though you will soon die once again.”

“Don’t say that. It’s creepy...”

Max felt that this gambler—this faux Paladin might've made more money from The Tournaments than anyone else. As a friend, she thought that she had to warn him that his financial senses were starting to get skewed, but instead, she silently looked at the Inventory with the five hundred million lir.

Borrowing that much would basically guarantee that she would win Sekiun. If she didn't get it here, she would probably never see it again.

And Max had already saved up fifty million in a short time. Even if she went hundreds of millions into debt, she could pay Ray back in a reasonable amount of time.

"One hundred eighty million, going once! Any higher offers?" the auctioneer called as the bidding war reached a new peak of intensity.

"Nnnngh...!" Her conscience and lust for power spent a moment locked in battle—but in the end, she found herself shouting, "Two hundred million!"

After a heated war, the final, winning bid was 350 million...and Great Genocide Max was now three hundred million lir in debt.

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Sorcerer, Ray Starling

In the end, we left the auction without a worthwhile weapon.

There were some good ones that came up, but they were all greatswords and the like—categories Nemesis was strictly opposed to.

We did help Max get the item she wanted, though, so I still felt that going there was worth it. She was now about three hundred million in debt to me, but as a duelist in the rankings, she shouldn't have much trouble paying it back. The ranker world was full of people like Shu, who'd once spent three billion on just a single battle.

Also, Max wanted to test her new katana, so I let her use our arena and gave her the key.

"I feel like that is far too much money to lend a friend," said

Nemesis. “Then again, it is certainly a better use of money than gambling. Without anyone to hold you back, you would spend everything you had betting on those duels.”

“Huh? I *am* about to do just that. I’m gonna put all my money on Figaro.” Silence. “He’s the clear favorite, so you gotta bet a lot to—Guh...!” My words were cut short by Nemesis’s fist sinking into my side.

“Gacha, duels, combat... What is your fascination with risky bets?!”

“You got it all wrong! This isn’t really gambling—Figaro is one of us! I just believe in him, that’s all!”

“Yet you did not bet on Fujinon. What would she think if she heard you say that?”

That was our conversation as we walked toward the Central Arena. There, we’d take a look at the people who made it through the prelims, set our bet, then watch the fights. Marie had reserved our clan a box for the whole ten days, so we didn’t have to worry about seats.

On the way there...

“There you go. Wow, you eat a lot.”

...we stopped and stared at something that we just couldn’t ignore.

The scene wasn’t all that special by itself—a man was just giving snacks and pets to a white dog.

The strange thing was the man’s appearance. He had black hair, a coat like the night sky, and kept one of his eyes closed.

That look was all too familiar to me. He was...

“...KoL. What are *you* doing here?”

King of Light, F—the pre-*Superior* who’d tried to cause an incident in Gideon and ended up fighting me because of it.

“Oh? Ray Starling,” he said. “It’s been a while... One moment.”

He gave the remaining jerky to the dog, patted it, and stood up with a disappointed look, as if he wanted to pet it longer.

The white dog grabbed the jerky in its mouth and ran off. It looked like it was shaking for some reason.

“Oh dear. There it goes,” F said.

"No, really, what are you doing here?"

"Oh, it just so happens that I've met that dog before, but I didn't have any snacks for it back then. I'd been carrying some in my Inventory ever since, and I finally got my chance to give it some."



"You like dogs?" I asked.

"I do. You?"

"We got a pug at my parents' place."

"Wonderful. There's something uniquely adorable about pugs. Even the way they snore is charming."

"I get what you mean." *Wait, what kind of conversation is this?* I thought. I decided to change the subject. "Why are you in this city again, anyway? Don't tell me you're planning something funny for the event."

"Perish the thought," he said. "I'm simply gathering reference material. I don't have to lift a finger to make The Tournaments worth watching, and this day should be especially diverting."

"That so? Well, as long as you don't do anything you shouldn't."

"Mm-hmm." He looked like he had something to say to me.

"What is it?"

"Oh, don't mind me. More importantly, are you sure you have time to waste here? They're about to stop taking bets for the day. If you're betting on the ultimate victor, you can't do it after the first match—and you're planning to wager a *lot* of money today, aren't you?"

"Ah!" His words made me realize that betting was going to close in less than five minutes.

A part of me wanted to ask how he knew about my bets, but with the first match drawing so close, I had to hurry up.

"You better not cause any trouble!" I admonished him as I left.

"Don't worry. *I* won't do anything today."

The way he said it made me raise an eyebrow, but we chose to ignore it and rushed to the Central Arena.

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Gideon, City of Duels, Main Street

"Take care," F said with a smile as Ray ran off. "*What luck*, though. He's actually online."

It wasn't clear what was going through his mind as he said that or who exactly was lucky in this situation.

Regardless, the setup was now complete. Now, with just a bit of *guidance*, the actors gathered upon the stage would put on a wonderful impromptu performance.

"His attitude toward me is quite interesting. I gathered as much from his relationship with the *Superior* Killer, but it seems that he doesn't cling to the past."

F had once used Hannya to cause a major incident in Gideon.

When Ray had faced him back then, he'd been overcome by a powerful rage, but it didn't seem that he felt any enmity toward him now.

"He feels anger, but doesn't hold grudges," F said to himself. "What really matters to him is your role in whatever tragedy is unfolding *at that moment, right before his eyes*—whether you're the one behind it or someone standing against it. That is what truly sways him... I see."

If they were on the side of tragedy, Ray wouldn't even hesitate to fight against those he called friends—like how he'd faced Hugo during Franklin's Game.

And if they stood with him against the tragedy, he could fight even alongside someone like Marie, who'd killed him, or Tsukuyo, who'd kidnapped him. Which meant that...

"If I approach him *from that angle* next time, I may see a new side of him."

F was in the process of arranging a new plan for Ray—this wellspring of inspiration and reference material.

"Well, today's event comes first. Though... Heh heh. How troubling. I can hardly decide what to watch with my own eyes."

Cracking a joyful smile, F looked at the Central Arena at the end of the main street.

"There are too many things to witness today," he said, thinking about the *wonderful surprise* that awaited there.

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Gideon, City of Duels; Central Arena; Waiting Room

The four preliminary matches were over, and the audience had

gathered to watch the fifth onward.

In the waiting room was Bishmal—the seventh in the duel rankings—meditating in preparation for his next battle.

He wasn't making a sound. The prize for the final day's Tournament was a Mythical MVP reward, and it wasn't hard to imagine that the fights ahead would be intense.

Figaro, the duel champion, was among today's participants too—in fact, that was the reason Bishmal had chosen to participate in this day's events. It was a chance for him to fight Figaro without getting past the third in the rankings, which he couldn't do because his matchup with Tom was extremely disadvantageous.

This particular Tournament allowed him to duel the champion in more than just a sparring match—and in a way, that itself was enough reward for him.

"Riser won his Tournament," Bishmal mused. In the Tournament two days ago, his friend Riser had put up a splendid performance and come out on top.

Some would say that it was only because, with the exception of Tom, all the duelists who were above him in the rankings had participated on the other days. But Riser's day had featured participants who were high up in the kill rankings, as well as the leader of the AETL Union, so it certainly wasn't easy. And yet, Riser overcame them all and emerged victorious.

Bishmal pondered his friend. They had both been stuck for a while now, but Riser seemed to be moving beyond that. He felt that Riser had advanced somehow during the assault on Altea that had happened while Bishmal was still away due to the death penalty.

Bishmal felt that he had to keep up, and so he chose today's Tournament to do that.

That was why he had to keep winning. He thought that if he was ever to advance, he had to purge all distractions and charge single-mindedly forward.

He hadn't even looked at the Tournament bracket today—all that mattered to him was fighting Figaro, and for that, he just needed to keep winning.

That sole thought had already carried him this far.

"Mr. Bishmal. It's time..."

"All right." Bishmal was soon called by the staff, so he stood up and headed toward the stage entrance.

He was so focused that he didn't even notice the worker's strange expression—a face seemingly full of pity.

"Hm...? What?" When he appeared on the stage, Bishmal instantly realized that something was off about the audience's mood. Some spectators did cheer when he appeared—but most of them just seemed bewildered.

He briefly thought that he'd made some sort of blunder while coming on the stage, but quickly realized that wasn't it. Most people weren't looking at him at all, but instead had their eyes fixed on the other entrance to the arena.

His opponent wasn't on the stage yet, but Bishmal could tell that there was something strange about them.

Am I fighting Figaro already? he thought. If that was the case, he would consider it a stroke of luck and find joy in the fact that he'd gotten the chance to go all out this early in the day.

...No.

But his instincts told him that that wasn't right.

This was not how the audience would react to a match involving Figaro. If that were the case, the arena would be drowned in joyous cheers for the champion and his opponent.

Bishmal had been matched to someone who attracted more attention than a high-ranking duelist like him, and yet sparked more confusion than excitement.

He didn't have a clue who it could be.

Bishmal was resolved to fight no matter whom he was up against, but this question had shaken his resolve a bit.

It didn't take long for him to get an answer, though—a man appeared at the other end of the stage.

Silence ensued.

It was a man with an impressive physique. He was wearing a leather jacket and trousers, but they did nothing to hide the defined muscles beneath.

A pair of sunglasses concealed his eyes but didn't obscure his

strong facial features.

Bishmal had a muscly avatar himself, so this matchup almost felt like a wrestling event. But neither the audience nor Bishmal were in a state of mind to think anything that flippant about the situation.

"What's going on?" Bishmal now shared the audience's confusion.

He'd never met the man before him, but he knew his clothes and appearance well.

He'd never seen him in the flesh, but he'd seen numerous videos of him on the internet.

He remembered his name—as well as two of the rules of this Tournament.

The participant must be an Altarian Master. The participant will be unable to switch countries for three years after The Tournaments.

Those rules made it so that this man shouldn't...*couldn't have been here*.

And yet, *he was*.

"Th-The first match of the fifth battle, on day ten of The Tournaments..."

With the combatants both on the stage, the announcer swallowed his confusion and tried to do his job.

"In the west, we have the seventh in the duel rankings, the Power Wrestler, Bishmal the Raging Blaze."

First, he named Bishmal.

"In the east..."

And then...

"We have the ex-second in Caldina's duel rankings..."

...he gave Bishmal's opponent's previous title. "King of Termination, Albert Schwartzkaiser."

It was the name of the *Superior* who could not possibly have belonged to the kingdom of Altar.

Chapter 3: GG

Past, Somewhere on Earth

"Checkmate."

One of his memories involved a particular board game. He'd played against the "mother" who'd created him, each taking turns moving their pieces on the board.

However, he wasn't able to win a single match against her.

He couldn't hold the pieces, so his "mother" moved them for him—and now she once again put his king into checkmate.

"And that's my fifteenth win in a row. Hrmmm... This is unexpected. In a way, the fact that I'm winning at all makes this a success. It implies very gradual growth—a growth process different from machine learning. It's probably faster when you consider the exponential curve, though."

He couldn't understand what his "mother" was saying here.

"This growth is organic. And that's why..."

He had no idea what she was thinking at this moment. His thoughts were still focused on the board game.

He was on a losing streak, but he was gradually getting the hang of it, and he wanted to play again so he could put up a better fight—no, he wanted to *win*.

"Oh? You want a rematch? That's new. Hmmm... Then I guess I should teach you some common courtesy for situations like these." Silence. "Before you start a new game, you need to end the last one. And when you do that, both players should praise each other's efforts. Let me give you an expression for that."

His "mother" smiled at "him"—*the screen that displayed his thoughts*—and said...

"'Good game.' Remember these words if you ever play with people."

Thus, the "mother" concluded her little lesson in how to interact

with people, hoping that her "son" would someday get a chance to use it.

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Gideon, City of Duels, Central Arena

Even though this was only the first public battle of the final Tournament, the venue was already flooded with emotion (mostly confusion) by the presence of King of Termination, Albert Schwartzkaiser—a participant who, by all accounts, could not have been here.

These Tournaments allowed only the kingdom's Masters to enter, and participants couldn't switch to other countries for three *Dendro* years after its conclusion—which was one year in real time. Additionally, the contract made it so that any participant who committed a crime against Altar that would normally be punished by at least a year of penal servitude would be barred from using any save points anywhere in the world.

That made it more or less impossible that a foreign *Superior*—a member of Caldina's very own Sefirot, at that—would participate in this Tournament.

Albert was known as perhaps the greatest contributor in the fights against Caldina's many UBMs and other notable monsters, as well as the second in their duel rankings, behind only The Fight. Even if this was all part of some scheme, he felt like too valuable a piece to give away to the kingdom for three whole years.

"What is the meaning of this?" said Altimia, the first princess of Altar, as she looked down at him from her royal box. *When did he align himself with the kingdom?* she wondered.

The princess was definitely not involved in this. Landowning nobles could also induct Masters into the kingdom, though, so one of them might have done it in secret.

His name was not among those who registered ahead of time, Altimia thought. *That means he must have gotten in through today's lottery.*

If Albert had been participating from the start, she would have

definitely noticed and at least talked to him—or done whatever was needed to prevent this from happening.

However, he had never actually registered. Albert was only participating now because he'd *happened* to win the lottery for the Tournament slots that had opened up today.

The odds were against him...but we have designed this competition to prevent any foul play.

The winners and losers of the lotteries were decided completely randomly. The staff working on them were even Contract-bound to not intentionally manipulate the results.

That was why this could only be a coincidence—and they could not take away his win.

But if there is anyone actually behind this... It can only be Caldina's president, Altimia thought. The Caldinan head of state was often said to be a witch who could see the future. Most people thought that this just meant she was excellent at thinking ahead, but it might have actually been far more literal than that.

If, for example, she could foresee *exactly when joining the lottery would guarantee a win*... Well, that would make her a truly terrifying and unprecedented force.

Someone like that was now likely getting involved in the war between Altar and Dryfe and had now sent Albert to this event. If these two things were true, the implications would be staggering.

Caldina has been offering us their cooperation for quite some time, Altimia thought. *I have always refused, so did they decide to make certain we were in their debt? By giving us not just temporary reinforcements, but a* Superior *for us to keep?*

Would Caldina benefit from this enough to make the loss of a *Superior* worth it?

Hm? Wait, when, exactly, was he...?

The moment a new question formed in her mind, Bishmal and Albert's duel began.

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"Fight!"

A booming voice declared the start of the battle, but neither of the combatants moved an inch. Bishmal had always been the type to charge in without hesitation, and Albert surely had the upper hand in this situation—yet both of them stayed right where they were.

"Ngh!" A bitter expression crossed on Bishmal's face as he realized that he'd frozen up when he ought to have been moving. The impossibility of the situation had perplexed him to the point that he hadn't launched into his golden combo.

Bishmal had disregarded checking the brackets to eliminate distractions, but that had ended up working against him.

Having lost the opportunity to strike immediately, he chose to wait and see what would happen instead of charging in. This unexpected situation had almost made him lose sight of himself.

Albert, on the other hand, was completely silent and showed no emotion in his expression. It was as though his face was carved from metal, betraying not a single one of his thoughts.

Maintaining the silence, Albert began walking toward Bishmal.

At first glance, he looked completely open to attacks, but a closer look revealed that his movements were smooth and stable.

Walking like a skilled martial artist or a precision machine, Albert closed the distance between them and, still eerily silent, *extended his right hand*.

He was offering a handshake.

Bishmal's eyes widened once again. It looked like a simple display of sportsmanship from a fellow contestant, but it caught him completely by surprise.

The obvious conclusion was that this was a trap, but Bishmal's touch could easily be lethal, so offering to shake his hand was an absurd move even if there was some ulterior motive behind it.

Neither Bishmal nor the audience understood what Albert was doing, but there were four in the venue who did. The Masters who had fought him in the preliminaries knew that he would do this once the match began.

Their responses to the handshake offer had been split between attacks and hesitant acceptance, but the reality was that this was no trap. It was not any kind of offensive maneuver at all.

"...Sure."

After a bit of thought, Bishmal accepted the offer and shook Albert's hand.

Albert's grip was like steel, lacking the fleshiness of a normal human hand, but the handshake ended without anything happening.

Instead of following it up with some attack, Albert simply turned around and headed back to his starting position. He seemed wide open to any attacks, and Bishmal felt like he could win by just launching his ult right now.

However, he'd decided against it.

Partially this was because Bishmal was hesitant to attack someone from behind, but it was also the danger sense he'd honed as a ranking duelist that stopped him.

Bismal had the feeling that if he attacked now, it would be over for him.

Nothing beyond the handshake happened as the two returned to their starting positions.

This was the true beginning of the duel, and Albert assumed a fighting pose...

"Hm...?"

...but seeing it made Bishmal raise an eyebrow.

Based on what he'd heard, Albert's combat style was wide-scale bombardment using heavy weaponry. He possessed immense firepower that he used to defeat countless monsters, and this was common knowledge thanks to an accidental recording of his battle against a UBM.

He was also known to use weapons—MVP rewards included—in duels like this.

However, Albert now stood before him unarmed and empty-handed.

"No weapons?" Bishmal asked. Albert only shook his head in response.

Most would think that he was mocking his opponent, implying that he wouldn't even need weapons to defeat him—but Bishmal noticed that behind his sunglasses, Albert's gaze was fixed on the audience.

Does he think that his attacks could destroy the barrier? Bishmal wondered. With the duels he'd fought in Caldina and Gideon, Albert was certainly familiar with arena battles by now, and all such battles typically worked the same way.

However, Gideon's barrier had recently been broken by a UBM. Albert might have been limiting his use of weapons on account of that.

Putting aside the question of whether that was a valid concern, there were two conclusions to draw from that fact.

First, Albert might just be *that* confident in his firepower.

And second, he was truly concerned about any possible harm he might cause to the audience, however unlikely that was.

It wasn't just weapons either—Albert hadn't activated any of his Embryo skills either.

He'd deliberately chosen to fight without his biggest strengths.

"I see," Bishmal mused. It was almost insulting, but he wouldn't tell Albert to change his strategy. Albert was free to choose how he wanted to fight, after all.

And so, Bishmal would do the same.

He charged toward Albert. However, he wasn't using Surt's firepower. Just as his opponent wasn't using his weapons, Bishmal faced Albert with nothing but his ability as a Power Wrestler.

He wanted to match Albert's handicap, but that wasn't the only reason...

I just can't bring myself to go all out if my opponent isn't! Bishmal thought. *That's why it's better if I just hold myself back too, get on the same page mentally, and fight him from there!*

Thus, their duel assumed a form rarely seen in battles between Masters. No weapons, no ranged attacks, no unique powers—just pure hand-to-hand combat.

The audience was surprised to see Bishmal fighting differently than usual, but Albert remained silent and unfazed. He dealt with all of Bishmal's punches and grapples using martial arts techniques that were mechanical in their precision. The eyes behind the sunglasses darted around, seeing all of Bishmal's attacks and blocking them with optimal movements.

The high stats granted by a Superior Job were perfectly complemented by his excellent technique.

"Not bad!" Every time their bodies clashed, Bishmal could feel how high Albert's STR and END truly were. While his friend Riser was a fellow hand-to-hand combatant, his AGI focus made fighting him quite different from this.

This guy's AGI's about the same as mine, but he's got a good eye! Bishmal thought as he used Reveal to check Albert's stats. *He's seein' through and punishin' everything I do!*

Each and every response to Bishmal's attacks was more or less perfect. Albert's defense in hand-to-hand combat was unmatched, but it seemed to come at a cost to his offensive capabilities. He focused so much on repelling attacks that he neglected to take advantage of openings that even Bishmal himself noticed.

As a result, the tiny amount of damage that did manage to get past Albert's defenses was starting to chip away at his HP.

Bishmal had the upper hand, which filled the audience with excitement, but Bishmal himself was growing increasingly uneasy.

He's gettin' faster!

Albert's responsiveness to Bishmal's attacks was only improving. It was as though he was learning the way Bishmal moved, allowing him to further optimize the speed and precision of his defense.

If this continued, Albert would eventually be able to see through everything Bishmal did, at which point Albert could go on the offensive and defeat him.

King of Termination was a job that emphasized attack power, and yet Albert was operating like an endurance build.

"In that case—" Bishmal cried, and jumped in front of Albert.

Albert tried to counter this, but the eyes behind his sunglasses widened a bit. His vision was briefly obscured by a burst of flame—and when it subsided, Bishmal was no longer right in front of him.

When the fire was gone, the only thing Albert could see was Bishmal's shirt, now removed.

He looked around to search for the man himself, but...

"Got ya!"

...before Albert could turn his head, Bishmal locked it in place

with a choke hold from behind.

Bishmal's equipment was custom-made to match Surt's powers that allowed him to turn him into flame. Even though they were made of cloth, they had built-in skills that allowed them to turn into fire whenever the wearer did.

Bishmal had just used that property of his equipment in combination with Instant Wear to remove the flaming shirt, then leaped backward, leaving the shirt behind. Since it was no longer equipped, the skill that transformed it into flame deactivated, turning it back into cloth.

Bishmal had basically used a double smoke screen of fire and cloth, allowing him to drop into a low stance position and slip behind Albert to grapple him from his blind spot.

"*Hngh*!" Bishmal grunted as he put all his strength into his grip, and with one strong move, snapped Albert's seemingly unbreakable neck.

Albert's head was now twisted over ninety degrees to the right. This usually conferred the Broken Cervical Vertebra status effect, which didn't kill instantly, but was an injury-based debuff that quickly led to death.

Case in point—Albert's HP was falling at an astonishing rate.

The unusual, gruesome conclusion to the duel filled the arena with not just cheers, but also shrieks of terror.

However, Bishmal didn't even think of letting go of Albert.

His senses told him that this wasn't over yet.

Despite the situation, Albert still wasn't making a sound. His neck still broken, he moved his eyes to glance at Bishmal's right arm before using both hands to grab it. Bishmal still showed no sign of letting go.

Eventually, Albert's HP dropped to critical levels. Like a countdown, it was fast approaching 0. It soon reached the point where he was just 1 HP away from death, but then it *stopped*...

"α: Dubhe."

...and, at the same time, the name of a skill resounded throughout the arena.

The voice was clear, as if the damage to Albert's throat were

absolutely nothing. This was the first time he'd said a word since the duel began, and doing so caused light to engulf his body.

A moment later, two things occurred.

Bishmal's eyes widened as he realized he could no longer feel Albert's neck under his arm—or, to be more precise, it wasn't that he couldn't feel it at all. It was more like he was suddenly trying to choke out a rubber tube.

And immediately after that...

"Gah...!"

...Bishmal's right arm was pulverized. The bones in his arm shattered, shredding the muscle and flesh around them—his arm was now little more than a bag of skin filled with blood.

Never losing his stone-faced expression, Albert tore off Bishmal's weakened arm and escaped the choke hold.

It seemed as though something invisible was bursting within both of his hands.

"Heh! Used an Embryo skill, huh?!" Bishmal didn't understand exactly what had happened just now, but by using Reveal, he could discern part of it: Albert's HP had jumped from 1 all the way to full.

"RRRAAAGH!" *Then I'll just bring it down again!* Bishmal thought as he positioned his now-maimed body for a fierce kick. Just as before, Albert assumed a defensive posture and held out his left arm to block the attack.

However, something was different now. Albert didn't even flinch, as though the kick didn't cause any damage whatsoever.

And, indeed, his HP total didn't change at all.

Bishmal's eyes widened again. He'd felt it the instant they collided—when his kick landed, the force of the impact was completely dispersed.

It was nothing like it had been before—Bishmal now felt almost like he was punching a slime.

By contrast, Albert's counterattacks now seemed to strike at Bishmal's very core.

The moment Albert's right hand touched his leg, a bone-shattering shock burst through him.

"Ghhh...!" Bishmal quickly jumped back to make some distance

between them. Though not nearly as bad as the damage to his right arm, the damage from that one touch had clearly been devastating to his right leg.

That single exchange was all Bishmal needed to know that he now had no chance of beating Albert in straight hand-to-hand combat. If he wanted to win, he would be forced to fight the way he always did—using his Embryo, Surt.

The audience was shouting for him to do the same.

Bishmal and Albert both fell silent, and there was a brief moment where neither of them moved. Albert seized the chance to take out a revolver-type grenade launcher and fire it toward Bishmal's feet.

Upon hitting the stage, the grenade created a red explosion highly reminiscent of the Crimson Sphere ability.

As Bishmal evaded the blast, he instantly understood what Albert was trying to convey: "I used my weapon, so stop holding back. Use yours too."

"Then I'll do just that! Burstflame Rise—Surt!" The next moment, Bishmal was engulfed in fire, and *became the flame itself*.

Appearing as something like a hybrid of man and elemental, he rushed toward Albert using his specialty—his charge.

Albert was quick to respond and fired another grenade at him, but the explosion meant nothing to a body made of fire. Bishmal closed the distance without issue, and Albert immediately dropped the grenade launcher in favor of using his right hand to deliver the same attack that had shattered Bishmal's arm.

But since Bishmal was now essentially an elemental, the touch-based shock waves coming off Albert's hands did nothing to him.

What's more, mere contact with Bishmal's body made Albert's arm melted instantaneously.

Unfazed, Albert tried to draw another weapon, but Bishmal unleashed a high kick before he could do so. The leg of pure flame melted Albert's left arm entirely from the shoulder down, the damage even reaching all the way to where his heart ought to be.

The severed arm fell to the ground, showing a *glimpse of the steel inside*.

"OOOAAAARRRGHHHHHH!" Albert's HP fell to critical levels once

again, but Bishmal did not relent, throwing even stronger attacks aimed at Albert's head. Even if Albert had a skill that healed and strengthened him, Bishmal thought—no, *felt*—that he could counter it by just attacking so fast and often that Albert would have no time to activate the skill in the first place.

Faster than any forethought, acting first and thinking later, charging nowhere but straight ahead—at this critical moment, Bishmal clearly manifested his true self and worth.

He thoroughly pulverized, melted, and burned Albert's head, making it impossible for him to announce any skills.

Albert's HP soon dropped to 1 again...

"β: Melak."

...and it stopped there once again as an emotionless voice echoed through the empty space.

"Aaagh!" Hearing the name of a skill didn't stop Bishmal's onslaught.

However, after just a handful of attacks, he noticed a change.

Having fully rebuilt his head and arms a second time, Albert was no longer affected by Bishmal's flames. Even as his clothes caught fire, his skin was not even singed.

When Albert retaliated with a knife hand strike, Bishmal's body, despite being made of flame, began to come apart.

The man who had been evaporating at Bishmal's mere touch just moments earlier was now obliterating *him* instead.

"...I see how it works now." This was enough for Bishmal to understand the power of Albert's Embryo. It restored all his HP, then granted him near perfect resistance to his opponent's means of attack as well as an offensive ability that was highly effective against them. It combined three incredibly powerful effects into a single skill.

Since he didn't use it right away, I guess it only works when he's nearly dead, Bishmal thought. The price for the skill's power must have been its harsh use condition—it could only be used at 1 HP.

However, there was yet another secret behind Albert's strategy.

Both times, his HP stopped goin' down right before it hit 0. Guess he must have some kinda "guts" effect active. There was a generic

skill like that... What was its name again?

The skill Bishmal couldn't remember was called "Last Stand." It came from Rear Soldier, a low-rank job from the soldier grouping, and it enabled those struck by a fatal blow to survive with just 1 HP for five seconds. It did not negate any damage, and though similar effects were often extremely good in traditional RPGs, in *Infinite Dendrogram* HP was usually tied to the physical state of one's body, so it was far less useful. The five extra seconds meant little when someone was on the verge of death and could barely move, and once the time was up, any injury-based status effects they had would instantly kill them.

The primary difference between this skill and Death Soldier's Last Command was that it could be treated by healing magic rather than resurrection magic, but the five seconds it granted were rarely enough for healers to make it in time. Considering its much longer duration, Last Command typically ended up being the more useful skill.

Since it kept one's HP above 0, Last Stand could technically be used in duels—but unless you had a Superior Job and wanted to use your final ult to turn a guaranteed loss into a tie, it was fairly meaningless. Duelists fought to win, so none of them would waste a job slot for the possibility of a tie.

But it's different for this guy, Bishmal thought. *If he can survive a few seconds longer—just long enough to use that skill he's got—he comes back stronger and with full HP.*

Bishmal guessed how Albert's combo worked, thought about the power of this synergy...and shuddered.

I dunno what to say. That's a Superior *for ya, I guess.* Bishmal now had a grasp of Albert's combat style. If pushed to the verge of death, he endured any and all attacks coming his way. Then, he used his Embryo skill to fully heal himself, become resistant to the attack that brought him to 1 HP, and even gained offensive abilities that would help him defeat his attacker.

This skill likely wasn't unlimited, though.

It didn't look like Albert's MP or SP was going down by much, so Bishmal assumed it had a limited amount of uses instead. If he used

them all up, he would no longer be able to come back from the verge of death.

However, this meant that you needed enough different methods of attack to force Albert to expend every use. If you didn't, he was simply undefeatable.

Bishmal himself didn't have anything besides hand-to-hand combat and fire, so now that Albert was resistant to both, there was no way he could win.

In fact, most duelists were hyper focused on a single thing, so even among the rankers there were few who could match him. Even Kashimiya had no chance, as he didn't have anything besides his sword-drawing arts.

"RAAAGGGHHHH!" Still, Bishmal didn't stop attacking.

There was no battle he would ever back away from. Even if he was up against an impassable wall, he would keep charging forward.

Whether the wall would break or not was beside the point—he would advance until it did.

That was the kind of man he was.

Albert, on the other hand, was still stone-faced and silent.

What was going through his mind as he watched this opponent relentlessly throwing out attacks that no longer worked? He certainly didn't underestimate him. Just as he had before he'd gained his resistances, Albert watched Bishmal's strikes, defended against them with optimal moves, and threw some counterattacks in between.

As this repeated, Bishmal was eventually brought to his limit. His ult had expired, and he'd sustained too much damage.

"...Ha." Looking solely at the result, one could say that Bishmal just went straight at Albert and practically handed him the win. But strange as it might seem, he had no regrets—for at least after the battle began, he kept on charging ahead, showing no fear of the *Superior*.

Bishmal fought like *himself*, and that was enough for him.

The match soon reached its end...

"Good game."

...and, after saying his first words that weren't skill declarations, Albert decapitated Bishmal.

Thus, the Raging Blaze was extinguished, and Albert advanced to the quarterfinals.

Chapter 4: Lunchtime

Gideon, City of Duels, Fourth District

"It takes a certain type to borrow that much, and a hell of a person to lend it out too..."

"Heavy are the chains forged in gold. (Being in debt seems pretty scary.)"

"Ngh..."

After getting saddled with enormous debt to acquire Sekiun, Max rushed to the Eighth Arena to test it—but on the way, she bumped into Chelsea and Juliet.

The looks she got when she told them about how much she owed Ray weren't exactly heartening.

"Seriously, Maxie?" Chelsea said. "That much debt? At your age?"

"I know, I know..." Being called "Maxie" used to make her mad, but recently she'd been learning to just accept it. Even if she hadn't been, though, she wasn't in a state to argue right now.

"Well, thanks to his big bro, Ray's sense for money needs to be seriously recalibrated," said Chelsea. Shu was an even bigger spender than Ray, and Ray earned a lot of money here, so he rarely hesitated to open his wallet. Someone who did wouldn't be spending a hundred thousand lir on gacha nearly every day. "Three hundred mil lir, though..."

That was a lot of money. If someone in real life got that deep in debt—the equivalent of three billion yen—it would be the shock of a lifetime.

However, lir was an in-game currency, and there was the anti-RMT law that functionally prevented any money flow between reality and *Dendro*, keeping the lir wholly separate.

And as a capable Master who'd made it into the rankings, Max could feasibly save that up in a short amount of time. Because of that, while she wasn't thinking too hard about how she'd get the

money to pay off this debt, she wasn't overly concerned about it.

Well... Chelsea thought. *As long as they're not as unlucky as Leon—well, Eldridge—anyone who makes it close to the top probably won't have many money problems...* Thinking of her childhood friend and his recent financial issues, Chelsea gave Max a sympathetic look.

"If you want hundreds of millions, your best bet is probably goin' to the deeper levels of the Tomb Labyrinth and prayin' for good drops," Max said. "It ain't easy to make full use of Ipetam's skills there, but this katana could change that."

"An expedition such as dreams are built upon... (Going there together could be a lot of fun!)"

"Well, then let's do that whenever our schedules line up!" And with that Chelsea concluded their future moneymaking plans and went on to talk about what they would do today.

Ultimately, they decided that they'd have a meal, then go sparring together.

"What should we get?" asked Chelsea.

"Why not just grab somethin' from a random stall?"

"Well, then let's split up, buy whatever we want, and bring it all to one place. I think the park in the Fifth District sounds good—the one with the tables and benches."

"I acquiesce. (Okay.)"

"Sounds good."

And so, having temporarily parted from her friends, Juliet began looking around for food stalls, wondering what to buy.

I guess it's better if we don't all get the same things... she thought. Chelsea insisted that it'd be more interesting if they didn't plan what each of them would get, and while Juliet agreed, she wanted to avoid buying the same things.

That meant she had to go for something she thought the others wouldn't, but nothing came to mind.

A big reason for that was the fact that Chelsea always got *so* much food that there was almost inevitably going to be some overlap no matter what Juliet got.

"I stand before a feast of the unknown... (What should I buy...?)"

Unable to find anything that caught her eye, Juliet found herself at a loss. Just then...

"Not here. Not there. I can't find it anywhere."

...she heard a familiar voice saying something similar to herself.

"G?"

"Oh? Julie! I haven't seen you since last night!"

When Juliet called out to her, G ran over with a spring in her step. It was daytime, so she was using her umbrella, but other than that, she looked the same as she had yesterday.

"What ails thee? (What's wrong?)"

"I heard about King of Destruction's popcorn. It's like this new big thing here in Gideon, so I've been looking for it all over. Just seeing a *Superior* selling popcorn could totally go viral! It'll do some big numbers no matter what!"

"Ohh..." Juliet was aware of the popcorn too. It was a snack being sold by none other than King of Destruction, Shu Starling—her friend's older brother.

However...

"That very sovereign of devastation now feels the burden of these festivities weighing upon his shoulders. (He's really busy during The Tournaments...)"

"Ohh. Right. He's doing security at the arena. What a shame..." said G, dropping her shoulders and letting out a sigh.

"...Mine own coffers, though, contain what you desire. (I have some stocked up. Do you want it?)" said Juliet, unable to watch G pout like this.

"Seriously?! You're sure?! That's great! That's *really* great!" G took Juliet's hand and hopped up and down in glee.

It made Juliet glad she'd offered, but...

Huh? Since she was surrounded by so many passersby, Juliet realized she'd defaulted to using her affected manner of speech —"Julietese," as some called it.

However, G didn't seem to be bothered by that. She'd carried on a conversation like she'd understood every word. She seemed basically like Ray in this regard, and Juliet found it strange.

"Weren't you also looking for something?" G asked, cutting short

Juliet's thought and bringing her back to the conversation.

"The path of a gourmand is endless, and I, too, tread upon its many twists and turns. (I'm also looking for a food stall...)" Juliet took the opportunity to tell G what she was doing, figuring that G might've seen something while walking around and looking for the popcorn.

"You too? We're in the same boat! What stall are you looking for?"

"Culinary delights few have laid eyes upon. (Anything rare and interesting, basically.)" Juliet asked if she'd seen any unusual foods that were less likely to overlap with Chelsea's haul.

"Well... How about a drink that goes through the colors of the rainbow as you drink it? They say the taste changes too."

That was enough to make Juliet's eyes widen and sparkle.

"Then I must make haste. Ah, and if thou art willing, a banquet with my companions and thy promised treasure awaiteth thee. (I think I'll go get it right away. Oh, I'm eating with my friends. Do you wanna join? I gotta give you that popcorn too.)"

"Sure! Thanks a bunch! Don't mind if I do!"

And so, the two went to buy the rainbow drink, along with some other food, and then headed to the park where their group was set to meet.

"Oh. You're the first one here... Wait, who's this with you?"

When the pair arrived at the park, they found Max sitting at one of the tables. Max immediately gave G a suspicious look.

"A companion brought to my side by the whim of fate, known to all as G. (She's G, a friend I happened to run into.)"

"I'm G—Julie's friend, G! I think we're going to get along great!"

"Uh... I'm Max. A pleasure."

So she's the type who's not at all bothered by how Juliet talks, just like Ray, Max thought. *Then again, she's kinda got her own weird way of talking.*

She then noticed that G was looking right at her.

"What?"

"Your clothes are really nice. Looks great on you!"

"My design, then, has borne fruit... (I know, right?! I picked them

out for her!)" Max had once challenged Juliet to a duel, lost, and been compelled to be her dress-up doll as punishment. These were the clothes Juliet had put her in, and for no particular reason, Max had just kept wearing them ever since.

"Julie! You really do have great taste in fashion! Can I take some photos of you?" G asked Max.

"Sure, I guess," Max replied, prompting G to clap in glee and pull out a magic camera. *Yeah, I can see why they're friends,* Max thought. *She's even got this whole devil thing goin' with her horns and tail.*

And thanks to her parents, Max was more than used to having her picture taken.

"So you understand all that Juliet's sayin', huh?" Max asked as she was being photographed. It was the same question Juliet had had on her mind earlier.

"I guess I'm just used to it. My brother's novels are also full of those weird turns of phrase."

"That so?" Max wondered if it was something anyone could *actually* get used to, but then she realized that she herself also had a better grasp of Julietese than she did when they first met.

"Thanks! I got some really good ones! Have some copies!"

"Sure, whatever... Wait, these *are* really good. You a pro?"

"She is one whose calling is to spread spectacle across the world. (G is a content creator.)"

"Really? That sure is somethin'."

Right as G finished taking Max's photos, Chelsea finally joined them.

"Sorry for the wait, you two! Wait, three?"

"A companion brought to my side by the whim of fate, known to all as G."

"I'm G—Julie's friend, G! I think we're going to get along great!"

"Those are the exact same lines you used with me," Max said.

"Oh? G, huh? As far as Julie's friends go, you're pretty...*normal*."

"Are you even listenin' to yourself...?" Max felt that was a weird thing for Juliet's *best* friend to say—but at the same time, another question popped into her head.

Is she really that *normal?* The horns, tail, and the crown felt like features that made her stand out even more than Juliet. *Well, maybe it's normal by Dendro standards. There's people here who wear animal costumes all the time.*

As Max rationalized Chelsea's statement, Chelsea and G shook hands, introducing themselves.

With everyone gathered, they showed each other the food they'd brought. Thankfully, Juliet was the only one who'd gotten the rainbow drink.

"It's so interesting! Tastes good too! This would get so many views!" G was already acting like a part of the group, enjoying the mountain of food Chelsea had brought while giving her thoughts on Juliet's rainbow drink.

"Views, huh...? If you're a content creator, what kind of content do you make, anyway? Food reviews?" Max asked.

"I do a variety of things. Singing streams, game commentary, events I set up with my *Dendro* clan, et cetera..."

"That so?"

"But recently, basically everyone in my clan has just been mining a mountain. It's not much of a show."

"Sounds like it'd make good background noise for people to listen to while they work or something..."

"That's not what I'm going for. I make content because I want people to look at me. That's why I came to Gideon. There's this whole festival going on, and I met Julie here," G said before taking a sip of her drink, looking really happy. Hearing her words made Juliet look slightly bashful.

But there was one here who was just watching the exchange in silence—Chelsea noticed something and couldn't help but ask.

"Hey, G, I have a li'l question..."

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"Why are you *usin' an umbrella*?" G had been carrying an umbrella ever since she'd met up with Juliet today. Even after she sat down and began eating, she was still resting the open umbrella against her shoulder, hiding the top half of her body from sunlight. However, the sun wasn't even that bright today, which made this a

little unusual.

"Oh! My face is weak against ultraviolet rays, so I use it whenever it's daytime. UV is the enemy."

"You worry that much about an avatar's skin? Is it like a restriction or somethin'?" There were jobs that had certain restrictions based on the in-game clock—those in the vampire grouping, for example, which suffered major stat reductions during the day. Embryos could have similar restrictions too. Chelsea assumed that there was something like that making G use an umbrella.

"That's basically what it is. You got it right!" G nodded, not denying the assumption whatsoever. "I get that it takes a lot of space, so I'm sorry about that."

"It's fiiine. It's a big table."

"Yeah. Chelsea bought so much food, but it all fits on it no problem."

"Quell thy fears. (Don't worry about it.)"

"Heh heh heh. Okay. Thanks."

The four then continued to have a fun lunchtime.

"Thanks for the lunch. It was really tasty! Seriously delicious. Especially KoD's popcorn..."

Having finished eating, G basked in the postlunch warmth, clearly ecstatic. As promised, Juliet had given her some of the famous popcorn, and she seemed to be very satisfied with it.

"I know, right? It's crazy good!" said Chelsea.

"Though I hear that the bear's actually holdin' back when he makes it," said Max. "He said that if he actually cooked for real, it'd shock your taste buds so much it'd kill ya. It sounds like a joke, but...yeah."

"And thus thou shalt be delivered unto the pearly gates... (So tasty it *literally* takes you to heaven...)"

The three of them agreed with G. Shu's cooking skills were simply *that* absurd.

"That sounds interesting! I'd love to try that! It might be difficult *for me*, though..." G muttered.

"That bear's... Well, that guy's elusive even now that his identity's

out in the open. At least he has a clan and a base now, so it's a little easier to get a hold of him."

"And he said he's been busy with security and farming materials and whatever."

Chelsea and Max expressed their agreement with G's sentiment.

"Hm...?" However, Juliet felt as if G's words held some different meaning. She couldn't find a way to express how, but she found something off about them.

"Anyway, we've eaten, so let's go sparring! I gotta test my katana too!" said Max, cutting off Juliet's thoughts before she could put them into words.

"Sparring?" G asked.

"Yeah. That's what the three of us planned to do after lunch. Wanna join us? It'll be a chance to fight against three ranking duelists!"

Chelsea's words made G tilt her head.

"Ranking duelists? You're gonna meet some?"

"Meet some? You're lookin' at 'em," said Max.

"Ah hah hah," Chelsea chuckled. "So Julie didn't tell ya, huh? The three of us are in Altar's duel rankings. Julie's in fourth place, I'm in eighth, and Maxie's in twenty-fourth."

"...I'll be near the top eventually," Max added, seemingly bothered by her comparatively low rank. She'd once tried to beat Juliet and skip ahead, but she lost. Ever since then she'd been going up the ranks one by one.

"So duelists aren't just naked wrestlers, their victims, and card gamers..." said G.

"The hell do you mean?!" Max shouted.

"Ohhh. You're from Legendaria, huh? Their top-rankers are known to be pretty...*colorful*," said Chelsea.

"Sounds to me like they give us a bad name!"

"Hey, it's just like how Tenchi's duelists are known to be battle junkies. It's a national thing."

"Ngh... But my old country's battle addiction peaks with Jubei at fourth. The top three duelists are way more balanced as people... Definitely not as fighters, though."

It seemed that the disposition of duelists varied greatly depending on where they were from.

"Thus, we now must make haste to our ephemeral conflict. Whither shalt thou go? (So yeah, we're gonna go spar now. What about you, G?)"

"I have something to do when it gets dark, so it depends on the location. Where are you going?"

"The arena in the Eighth District. A friend lets us use it."

"The Eighth Arena?" G put her hand to her mouth as if in thought and shifted her gaze. "...Okay. That place works for me. I'll come with you! I can watch," she eventually said with a nod.

"Thou art most graciously welcome indeed. (Sure, go ahead.)" said Juliet with a smile on her face.

"Hm? Wait, G, didn't ya come here for the final Tournament?" Max asked. "The public matches must've started by now. Shouldn't you go watch 'em instead?" She felt that if any outsiders came to Gideon at this point in time, they would likely be here for that, so it struck Max as odd that G didn't seem to care about it whatsoever.

"I'm here for a different reason. Well, I came to meet my brother too, so...two reasons, actually."

"Thou art bound to another by the ties of blood? (Oh? You have a brother?)"

"Yeah. He's with Altar, so...yeah. But he's now watching the final Tournament, so here I am."

Is that why she said she had something to do when it gets dark? Juliet thought. The final match of The Tournaments would start sometime late evening or after sundown. If G's brother was in the audience, he wouldn't be free until after that.

"I see," said Chelsea. "But if you're in Gideon, you can't leave without seein' some duels. At least watch us spar. If anything, things could get more intense than those Tournaments."

"Okay! I'll do just that, then! I'll enjoy myself, then!" said G, filled with unfiltered glee.

Her expression was very natural, clearly showing that she really was excited about what would happen next.

Thus, the four of them made their way to the Eighth Arena.

◇◆

Upon arriving, the four entered the Eighth Arena through the entrance once used by the spectators. They opened the glass door and went in as if it were nothing, which made G wonder.

"No keys? What's up with the security here? Why are they so careless?" she asked. In response, Max showed her the gold plate given to her by Ray.

"I borrowed a magic key," she said. "Entering without it activates the barrier, and breakin' through it sounds the alarm, so the security here is just fine."

Though this Eighth Arena was currently being rented by a clan, the clan's main members each had a key, and the leader—Ray—had multiple spares. One of those spares had been given to Max.

"I see. And just one is enough to let in everyone with you?"

"Yeah. You can also use it to change the stage's settings."

They continued walking as the two talked. Juliet and Chelsea were taking the lead, since they'd already used the arena yesterday. Passing what used to be a corridor meant for duelists, they arrived at the stage.

Just like last time, the members of Death Period were not present, so there was no one to greet them.

"I'll set things up, then. You mind if I use the aquatic fight setting again?" Chelsea asked as she began to manipulate the arena's controls.

"I don't mind," said Juliet. "What about you, Maxie?"

"It doesn't matter to me either way. I'm just here to test my katana," said Max as she took out Sekiun—the blade she'd won at the auction.

"Aquatic fight? You can fill this whole place with water?"

"Yeah. There's a setting for it. I'm gonna fill it up like *this* today, though."

Chelsea set the stage by taking out Poseidon and using its water summoning powers. It was a blatant brute-force approach—but it reduced the water bill, so nobody else was going to say anything about it.

“Oh? So it doesn’t spill and just keeps filling up!” said G.

“Legendaria doesn’t have aquatic arena fights?” Juliet asked.

“No. I don’t remember ever seeing one, anyway. They just fight like normal. On the stage.”

“Legendaria’s tribes can gain serious advantages based on their environment. If they don’t fight in the most generic setting, it’d just be unfair.”

Chelsea’s explanation made sense to everyone present.

“By the way, Julie, you’re talking different now. Why?” G asked.

“Um...”

“Julie’s a pretty shy girl, so she talks different whenever there’s lots of people around.”

“I see. That’s kinda cute.”

“Is it?” Max asked.

“Nnngh...” Juliet’s cheeks flushed a bashful red.

“Speaking of, the way you talk is different too, G. Like how you often say the same thing twice...”

“Oh. This is intentional. It’s on purpose.”

“Intentional?”

“I say the same thing in multiple ways so that my words are understood correctly and the nuance isn’t lost.”

“So it’s a ‘so important you say it twice’ kinda deal?”

“More or less. That’s about right,” G said as she nodded with a smile. “I want my words to get across properly. If you say something wrong, you can attract flames and drama.”

“That sounds like a peek into the dark side of being a content creator...”

“Actually, wouldn’t talkin’ more increase the risk of sayin’ the wrong thing?” Max asked.

“That is one way to see it. This is another. So yeah!”

“I’m dooone!” said Chelsea, putting an end to their exchange.

The stage within the barrier was completely underwater by now, and there were a number of Chelsea’s boats floating about, acting as platforms to stand on.

“All right! I’ll show ya how much stronger I’ve gotten! Ipetam! Let’s go!”

"Grrraaah!"

Following Max's call, her Embryo emerged from her left hand. It was Ipetam—a bearlike Sentinel with swords growing out of its back.

"Ah ha haaa! Well, *someone's* motivated. But I'm not letting ya catch up with me that easily!" said Chelsea, looking more than ready to face Max.

"You two go first, then," said Juliet. "G and I will spectate."

Chelsea and Max walked into the barrier, while Juliet and G went to the audience seating. It was a good bit higher than the stage, but Juliet was able to fly up, while G managed to clear the height with a jump. They then took a seat and watched Chelsea and Max's aquatic battle.

"I can't say I've seen many fights on the water, so this is pretty interesting," said G. "I am familiar with *underwater* fights, though."

"Really? Oh, but I guess even Altar doesn't have many places that use boats. You have to go to Keyora for that." Granvaloa was perhaps the only country where fights *above* the water were commonplace.

"You Altaran duelists are something else, though," said G. "They're fighting for real, and it's enjoyable to watch."

Her excited face as she watched the duel on the stage was proof that these words came from the heart. Chelsea and Max were both non-SJ max-level Masters, and the clash of their combat expertise was a sight to behold.

"Is it different in Legendaria?" Juliet asked.

"A lot of duels there are about forcing your own rules onto the other person. Skydrag'in actually turns it into an entirely different game. Well, not like I'm in a position to talk."

"What's your combat style, anyway? You probably have some high stats, don't you?"

"What makes you say that?"

"That jump you did. Also, your movements are very smooth, so I figured you fight a lot."

Juliet's combat sense was very high even by duelist standards, so she'd noticed many things while observing G since they met yesterday.

"Yeah. I'm actually *very, very* strong, if I do say so myself." Showing no humility, G answered as if this were an absolute truth. "My Embryo is in the Castle family, though, so it's not well suited for duels. I also fight using monsters that are above my capacity."

"I see..." Duel rules forbid the use of tamed monsters that didn't fit within the minion capacity and had to use party slots. And excluding exceptions like Lang's Halley, Castles were a rare sight in duels.

With that, Juliet understood that G was indeed powerful, but just not suited for arena fights.

"Oh, sorry. I shouldn't have asked you to talk about your abilities..."

"It's fine! It's completely fine! I revealed most of my powers in my videos. Though, this tells me that you haven't watched them yet."

"Ngh. Sorry..."

"Ah ha ha. You only found out about me yesterday. I get it, I get it," G chuckled as she patted Juliet's head.

That gesture made Juliet feel like, although their avatars were about the same age, G was probably older than her.

"By the way, about you borrowing this place..."

"Huh? Yeah..."

"Are the three of you on good terms with the owner... Ray Starling?" Though she found the change of subject somewhat strange, Juliet nodded in response.

"Yeah, we're...friends. Yeah, friends."

"I see. So that's how it is."

G put her hand over her mouth and shifted her gaze, just like she had at the park. It must've been a habit of hers whenever she was lost in thought.

"I wonder if I'll get to meet him today."

"...Huh?"

"Oh. Uh... I'm intruding in his place like this, and I'm just wondering if it's okay to do that without even introducing myself."

Juliet felt something slightly off about this, but ultimately brushed it off.

“Ray... He’s probably watching The Tournaments right now. I think he’ll come back here once that’s done...”

“I see. In that case...”

Whatever she said after that was too quiet for Juliet to hear. However, G’s eyes were shining with a light different than any before.

“Oh.” Then, as if noticing something, G looked up at the sky and, for some reason, began waving.

However, Juliet didn’t see anything there.

“Umm, what are you doing?”

“Mmm, nothing much. Just wishing upon a star.”

“Huh?” It was still daytime and stars were nowhere in sight, so Juliet found that very odd.

“Things are gonna get so fun soon. I’m so excited.”

“I see...” Juliet was happy that her friend was having a good time.

But at the same time, she felt that there was something strange about all this.

G’s behavior just now strongly reminded her of King of Asuras, Jubei Kaga—the powerful foe they’d faced in the recent event.

Chapter 5: The Night's Arrival

Sorcerer, Ray Starling

I was in the box that Marie had reserved for us, watching the matches of the final day.

There was enough space here for everyone in the clan, but the only one with me here at the moment was Marie. Figaro was one of the contestants. Shu and Hannya were on security duty. B3 was still in college—her classes were keeping her from leaving like I did. Rook was leveling to prepare for when he'd challenge his UBM. Kasumi's trio were simply in school. Nemesis was meditating again.

Because of all that, Marie and I were the only Death Period members watching The Tournaments.

"So that's a Caldinan *Superior*... Man, he's strong." King of Termination's Embryo had a really powerful skill.

He'd been matched first with Bishmal, who definitely wasn't a pushover. He was specialized in hand-to-hand combat empowered by fire, and the destructive force it delivered had kept him high in the duel rankings for a quite a while at this point.

However, it was precisely because he was so specialized that he was a terrible matchup against King of Termination.

The same could be said about the bout that followed. Even though these Masters excelled at what they did, there was simply nothing they could do.

"It heals him, gives him resistance and a new means of attack..."

It could be roughly categorized as a counter-type Embryo. Considering that its effects relied on the opponent's damage, you could even say that it had some similarities to Nemesis.

"What do you think?" I asked Marie.

"Weeell... Based on the stats, either the skill can only be used near death, or it gets stronger the closer he is to dying. Regardless, it's probably combo'd with Rear Soldier."

I nodded. Rear Soldier's Last Stand was a skill that let you survive with 1 HP for five seconds even if you took fatal damage or had damaging debuffs on you.

I had learned about it after taking Death Soldier and had even considered using it myself. However, it was a choice between five seconds alive and being active for ten times that long after death, so I'd picked the latter.

Picking both was also an option, but I'd prioritized jobs with other useful skills rather than the extra five seconds of action.

Another notable thing about Last Stand was that it had a five second cooldown. Last Command could only be used again after a resurrection—a rather harsh condition—while Last Stand would be ready again after just some healing.

But whatever flaws he had, defeating KoT after he was fully healed and granted resistances was a huge challenge.

"I think that healing power must have a limited number of uses," said Marie. "Do you have a guess how many?"

"Seven. Eight at most."

"Well, that was a quick answer."

"The skill names are a dead giveaway," I responded. The words KoT said right before healing were "Dubhe" and "Merak." Those were the α and β stars in the Big Dipper constellation—sometimes called the Septentrion.

If the skill names and the Embryo as a whole were really based on that, he could use the skill a total of seven times.

Even if you included *that one star* that was often mentioned alongside the seven, eight would be the absolute limit.

"It's the strict use condition and use limit that allows the skill to be as powerful as it is," I said. "Though, it looks like the resistances he gets cover a pretty wide range. Probably that's the most important factor when he's pushed to the edge of death, not the specific means of attack."

"Yeah, probably." When Bishmal almost killed him by breaking his neck, KoT gained resistance to not just strangleholds, but physical attacks as a whole—including Bishmal's kicks. It might have even covered more than that.

"It's really powerful in duels," I said. I would guess that normally, after he gained his resistances, some time needed to pass before the number of uses and resistances he'd gained reset. Nemesis was another counter-type, and her Counter Absorption recharged one use per day, so it was fair to assume KoT had something similar.

However, duels were special—once the matches were over and the barriers undone, the fighters returned to the state they had been in before the duels. Even if KoT fought multiple matches in a row, he could start each of them with all the uses of this skill available, and every one of his opponents would have to overcome his healing and buffs at least seven times, maybe more.

Experienced Masters had their ults and other aces up their sleeve, but usually not too many of them. In most cases, they just had two: their Embryo ult and a job ult. Only a small portion of them had MVP rewards and other things on top of these.

However, defeating KoT required a minimum of eight, if not *nine* different means of delivering lethal damage. While this was possible if you fought him as a group, that was really difficult to achieve in a one-on-one fight. Even all-rounders like Xunyu and Juliet would struggle.

"And I... I don't actually have enough either, do I?" I had one attack with fixed damage from Vengeance and the like, two with Purgatorial Flames, three with the lethal debuffs from Hellish Miasma, four with Shining Despair, five with the holy element from Grand Cross and Purifying Silverlight, six with physical damage from either Gardranda or copying KoT's STR using Chaser, and seven with a risky swing of my still-cursed axe.

Huh? Wait, I'm actually kinda close, I thought. My Wind Hoof bomb trick was physical damage, so that would overlap with some of the others, but...didn't I have something more?

...Ohhh. If the axe's element selection worked right, that might actually give me the upper hand against KoT.

"But..." I mused. That was really just if I was the only one attacking. I'd still have to withstand KoT's attacks and bring him down while my own attacks were being rendered useless too. "The way he's fighting in these matches isn't how he usually fights, right?"

"No, it's not," said Marie. "The way he normally fights is uhhh... Oh, he's like your brother's battleship, but human-sized." An unpleasant expression crossed her face as she remembered getting bombarded by Baldr in Noz Forest.

All that firepower in a human form, though? A wide-scale extermination type...the very *thought* of fighting like that inside a city like Gideon was terrifying.

That must've been why he'd fought Bishmal mostly empty-handed.

"When dueling in Caldina, that combat style allowed him to win without even using his healing and buff skill," said Marie. "He never lost a duel... Though, he also never had a public match against his biggest counter—The Fight."

I guess they settled who was stronger within the clan and didn't want to reveal their cards in a public match? I thought. *Though, that makes me wonder about The Fight's combat style too...*

"Is the arena situation there different than in Gideon?" I asked. It sounded that KoT didn't hesitate to use all his firepower back in Caldina, unlike here.

"Oh, it is. Everything is wide-open and there are fewer people. The duels breathe some life into their surroundings, but comparing it to Gideon is just unfair. Gideon is the greatest dueling location in the Seven Great Countries—it's even better than Tenchi in terms of providing a venue for duels, if not in the average power of its duelists."

"Well, it's got a whole twelve arenas... Thirteen if you count our base." That made me wonder why arenas were so concentrated here in Gideon. I'd heard that the city predated the Kingdom of Altar, but...

"Anyway, based on what we've seen so far..." said Marie. "Figaro is gonna win this."

"Yeah." My thoughts had gone off on a tangent, but I could only agree with that.

Figaro had a large arsenal of weapons—many of them MVP rewards—and his Embryo empowered them, making him the most well-rounded attacker in the kingdom. He could easily field more

than eight forms of offense, so he could overcome all of KoT's resistances and defeat him. Additionally, KoT was fighting with a self-imposed handicap that kept him from using his high-firepower weapons.

"Bad compatibility and holding himself back," said Marie. "With these two disadvantages, it's sooo clear who's winning this."

With his offensive powers curtailed like that, KoT had no hope of beating Figaro. As things were, it was obvious that our duel champion had this in the bag.

"Hm..." However, if both of them could use all their powers and weapons to the fullest—if both of them were capable of *actually* killing each other—then it could honestly go either way.

That was what I believed, and I was sure *he* thought the same thing.

The Tournaments' matches continued, and everything was going about as you'd expect.

KoT was climbing up the left side of the bracket as Figaro was rising up the right. Many powerful Masters were taking part in this, but they were all falling before the two *Superiors*.

In the quarterfinals, KoT had defeated a duelist in the middle of the rankings, and in the semifinals, he'd brought down Catherine Kongo—the second in the kill rankings.

She(?) had actually gotten pretty close to beating him. She'd first gotten him with Charm, then four times using her tamed monsters in their human forms, and then yet again in close quarters physical combat using her Embryo ult. That made a total of six times.

But once KoT had the resistances and the attacks that countered her monsters, she finally fell. The skill names he used for every heal were all stars in the Big Dipper, adding credence to my idea that he could come back at least seven times.

"By the way, why were her monsters in human form?" I asked.

"Oh. That's because their true forms don't fit in the barrier. The third maid—the one with the green hair—is actually a High-End Disaster Elemental. She's probably bigger than all of Gideon."

...I see, I thought. So she(?) was also fighting with a handicap. It was like how Shu's Baldr in its fifth form onward couldn't be used in

the arena either.

But man, I'd never thought that tamed monsters could be that big. "Weeell, if they weren't tamed, Catherine Kongou's four 'Nethermaids' are pretty much guaranteed to be UBMs," said Marie. "If someone goes around with a retinue this destructive, it's not at all surprising that they're only behind KoD in the kill rankings... Though, the third... The one who beat me could probably beat Catherine one-on-one."

I felt like I heard her say something under her breath at the end there, but I chose to ignore it.

Anyway, KoT had already advanced to the finals, and Figaro just beat his semifinals opponent too.

"It's getting pretty dark," I said as I noticed the twilight.

The finals had been delayed due to preparations, so by the time the match actually began, it would probably be night. The Masters of Cor Leonis—another name for the star called Regulus—and Septentrion would fight beneath the starlight, and I felt like there was a kind of romance to that.

"Hm...?" As that thought went through my mind, I heard a knock on the door to our box. Had some clan member logged in in time for this? Did the arena staff have something to tell us? Wondering who it was, I opened the door and...

"Hello again. We met just a short while ago."

Behind the door, there stood King of Light, F.

"Why are *you* here?" I asked. "And how did you know our seat?"

"Research." So he'd been spying on us using his drones again.

I swear he'll get arrested for this someday, I thought.

"As for why I am here... There is something I feel I should inform you about." *Inform us...?* "I'm currently using my drones to observe Gideon..."

That made me notice that his right eye was closed, and I wondered if his drone Embryo could be linked to his vision in order to give him a bird's-eye view of the area... It had been a real pain when I'd fought him, and I bet he was using it right now.

"And?" I prompted.

"There is trouble at your clan's base. Three of your duelist friends

have gotten caught up in it, as well."

"HUH?!" Both Marie and I let out a cry of shock. This had really come out of nowhere.

There's trouble at the Eighth Arena?! And three duelist friends... Right! I gave a spare key to Max! Who else would be...?

"Should you not hurry there?" King of Light interrupted my thoughts.

"What kind of trouble?!" I asked. "Are they all right?!"

"Please go and see it with your own eyes—I want to see your reaction."

"Nnngh...!" Of course—this guy was so obsessed with his research for inspiration and reference material that it was literally *criminal*. "Ugh... Marie! I'll get on Silver and take a look!"

"Shouldn't I go too...?"

"You stay and watch over this guy! He might be planning something—don't let him out of sight!"

"I see. That's definitely necessary," Marie said.

"I don't understand why you're so distrustful."

Remember what you did during the last event here in Gideon and try saying that again, I thought. Regardless, I left the two where they were and ran out through the arena's exit.

"Nemesis! You awake?!"

"Yes, and I know the situation. I wonder what that trouble he mentioned is..."

"I have no idea. For all we know, it might have something to do with KoT's appearance in The Tournaments. But whatever it is, we can't ignore it."

"Indeed!" Once out of the arena, I instantly took out Silver, jumped on his back, and flew off. I also shattered a job crystal and switched my main job to Paladin, just in case.

My destination: our base, the Eighth Arena.

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Gideon, City of Duels, Central Arena, Box Seat

Ray had stormed out, leaving behind the two pre-*Superiors*.

Neither of them knew what to do about this awkward situation, but the first one to break the silence was Marie.

"Standing at the entrance like that is a bit annoying, so why not come in and sit down? The seats here were reserved by our clan, and there's more than we need."

"Oh? Well, if you would offer, then I will do just that. The view here is really quite good, after all," said F as he entered the box and sat down *right where Ray had been sitting*. The sight of that made Marie grimace.

The conversation ended there, and they were now both just waiting for the final match, not saying a word. However, Marie felt that this really wasn't going to work out and broke the silence again.

"So? What are you plotting this time?" she asked.

"You're asking that now too? *I* am not plotting anything today, but I see that people around here really don't trust me."

"Of course—and it's not just because of the Love-Duel Festival either. Do you have any idea how many incidents you've probably caused?"

"Oh, but I help people too. My goal isn't crime, but *research*."

"Ha! An author who can't do 'research' without bothering people. What a laugh," said Marie—which was ironic, considering she herself had been engaging in commissioned PK in order to role-play as the protagonist of her own work. If her fellow clan members—especially B3—were here, they would've definitely told her that she was in no position to criticize F.

A brief silence ensued. F also knew that Marie was a player killer—the *Superior* Killer, no less—and did indeed consider retorting by pointing out that she was hardly better than him.

However, instead, he chose to attack her from a different angle.

"By the way, your avatar... That's the protagonist of *Into the Shadow*, isn't it?"

"Yes. What of it?" Though Marie had tried to hide it, F's question startled her. *Into the Shadow* was the title of the manga created by her real-life self, Nagisa Ichimiya.

"I read every volume," said F. "Though I do prefer the tankobon format, so I missed anything that wasn't included in those."

When the magazine it was published in was canceled, Marie's manga had gone on hiatus before it was finished, and the newest chapters had yet to be collected into the tankobon format. However, the fact that F was a tankobon-buying reader made Marie think that he might've not been so bad after all.

Hook, line, and sinker.

"Oh yes, I read it. And I enjoyed it a good bit," F added. "Though, I feel like the volcano eruption that helped defeat Upas-Kamuy the Crusher could've used a bit more buildup. The final scene *did* happen on a mountain, and I understand that when Daisy's doomed battle revealed that fire was effective, you intended that to be foreshadowing, but I still felt like there was a step or two missing in the lead-up to that eruption ending the fight. It would've been better if there was a little bit more information sprinkled around to preface it."

"Y-Yeah," Marie said. The harsh criticism of her work caught her completely off guard and hit her where it hurt. F had already guessed that she was a similar type of person and purposely picked a critique that would sting.

Trouble was brewing at the Eighth Arena, the final match of The Tournaments was about to start...and in the background of all this, a mangaka and an author waged their little passive-aggressive war.

◇◆◇

Gideon, City of Duels, Eighth Arena

As the sun began to set, the sparring session at the Eighth Arena also reached its end. The boats and water used for the aquatic battle vanished, returning the stage to its original form.

"Ngh... Once again, I didn't pull it off even a single time..." Juliet was the only one among the duelists who looked a bit down. That was because she hadn't yet been able to master her MVP rewards.

"Well, your new stuff is a bit hard to use under duel rules," said Chelsea. "It's nothin' like Maxie's new sword—that one's so simple and easy to wield. Only if you're Maxie, though."

"Yeah," Max said. "I'm pretty sure the only ones besides me who

could use it right are Jubei and Figaro."

With the sparring over, it was time to share their thoughts. The three duelists were talking about what stood out for them about their sparring match, and this sight seemed to impress G somehow.

"You're all so stoic!" she said. "I feel like I'm watching a shogi research society or something!"

"Well, our strongest duelist is *crazy* strong. If we don't work hard, there's no way we'll ever catch up to him," said Chelsea.

"I see. I can just feel your sporty passion! It's so hot! It's burning!"

G had just been watching a practice bout, but she pumped her fist in the air enthusiastically.

It was safe to say she seemed pretty excited.

"Oh, right. G, didn't ya have some business?" Chelsea asked, just now remembering what G had said.

"Oh yeah! Do you think you'll make it in time? I can fly you there if you're in a hurry..." Juliet said.

"Oh no. It's fine. Everything's fine." G shook her head, rejecting Juliet's concerned offer. "I'm already where I need to be. *This* is the stage of the event."

"Huh?" As G's words filled Juliet with confusion...

"Max! Juliet! Chelsea...! What happened?!"

"Huh?! Ray?"

...Ray and Nemesis descended from the air upon Silver's back and jumped down onto the stage. The girls thought that he looked unusually alarmed.

"What's wrong? Why the panic?"

"Chelsea—oh, I was just told that there was some trouble here..."

"Trouble? No, there isn't. We were just sparrin', that's all." And it was true that there were no problems here—the sparring had ended without any issue whatsoever.

"I see," said Ray. "Well, that's good to know."

"Indeed," Nemesis concurred. "But then, why did King of Light say... Hm?"

That was when the two of them noticed the unfamiliar face among the duelists.

“Uhhh... And you are?” Ray called out to the one person he didn’t recognize, and...

“Eh heh heh. Thank you, brother dearest. Your timing is perfect, oh brother of mine.”

...instead of answering Ray’s question, she only...cracked a grin.

At the same time, countless orbs began rising all over the arena.

She’d set them up without anyone noticing, and they—or rather, the magic cameras—now activated all at once.

“What...?!” Ray wasn’t the only one confused now—Juliet’s trio clearly knew nothing about this either.

“Aaall righty, then! All eyes on G! Welcome to my channel!”

Only one person was speaking now, and it was the only voice that showed no hint of shock at the situation.

Everyone’s eyes focused on the speaker—the girl now standing in the middle of the arena stage, surrounded by cameras.

Acting like the arena was her personal studio, she turned to every which way with an expressive, smiling face full of life.

“Hello! We meet again! Maybe it’s been a while? Or perhaps you’re new here? In that case, let me introduce myself! I’m G, the *Superior* streamer and *Dendro* content creator!”

“G...?” The smiles and words she excitedly spread in every direction felt almost like they were meant not for Juliet and the rest, but for an invisible audience.

G continued as though her friend’s confusion meant nothing.

“Remember what I announced last time? This premiere is for a battle against a very special guest! And my opponent this time is... Shock and awe! The strongest newbie! The one who beat multiple *Superiors*! Ray Starling the Unbreakable!” Saying that, she extended her palm toward Ray, and the cameras synchronized with her movements, instantly turning to film them.

Ray still didn’t have a full grasp of the situation.

However, he already understood that this had to be the “trouble” he had been told about.

“Oh, and would you look at that! Julie and her Altarian duelist friends are joining too! Meanwhile... I’ll be fighting solo! Huh?! Isn’t that bad news for me?! Won’t I lose?!” The cameras then panned

over Juliet's trio, and G faked a little panicked reaction. "Well, the results are still unknown! I'll go as hard as I can! I'll seize the possibility even if it's beyond the radix point! Yeah!" After copying Ray's words like that, she lightly moved her hand, stopping the camera sync.

"So, yeah. A pleasure to meet you. Good evening, Ray Starling."

Though still smiling, G addressed him by name while behaving completely differently than she had when the cameras had been filming.

Ray said nothing. The drastic change in her behavior perplexed him, but at the same time, something in his memory was nagging at him.

Before he found his words, though, Nemesis spoke in his place.

"Who are you?! And what do you mean, 'battle'?!"

"I'm G—I already said that, though. Let me introduce myself another way..."



She answered directly this time, first giving them her name, and then...

"You know King of Light, F? I'm his little sister."

...revealed a truth that told Ray and Nemesis all they needed to know.

Ray's eyes widened as Nemesis said, "Huh?! So he *is* the one behind this!"

"Oh, I just asked him to lead you here. He'll only watch now and not involve himself at all. This event—this stage—is all mine," G said as she spun around joyously.

"Event...?"

"Yes. I'm about to... Oh."

Before G could finish, the situation shifted.

Chelsea swung her greataxe at her, while Max rushed in with her katana.

What followed was a noisy clash. However, it wasn't the sound of blades slicing through a human body...

"So you went at me the moment you realized I was planning something," said G. "You work fast. That was probably the right move...though it looks like you can't get past my *bodyguard*."

...it was the sound of something abnormally strong deflecting their strikes.

A horde of octopus-like tentacles were now sticking out from G's shadow, forming a barrier of flesh.

"Huh...?!"

"An Embryo...? No! A tamed monster!"

The tentacles then moved to retaliate against their attackers. Chelsea and Max dodged by jumping backward, but the tentacles shattered the stone stage.

"And a pretty strong one, at that," said G. "I'm not sure how he measures up, but I wouldn't be surprised if he's as tough as your summon... 'Gardranda,' right?"

"Well... You sure seem to know a lot about me," said Ray. "Did you get all that from KoL?"

"He has nothing to do with this. I don't think you understand how famous you are. You used her against both Hell General and King of

Beasts—everyone knows about her."

Hearing that made Ray scowl. First Jubei, now G—his fame was really working against him.

"Though, you seem to *know me too*. So we're even on that count."

"What do you mean?"

"*This,*" G said as she closed the umbrella she had been using up until now.

The last rays of the setting sun shone directly on her face.

That was all. From Juliet's perspective, nothing had changed. Well, she was now wearing a choker that wasn't there before, but that was it.

But that little change meant a *lot*.

"Huh?!"

"*A disguise*?! So good that it ignores Reveal *and* Truth Discernment?!" Ray and Chelsea raised their voices as though surprised by something.

"Huh? What's with you two? She didn't change at all," said Max.

"Huh?! *She changed a ton*! She grew horns, a tail, and her face and clothes're all different! And wait... If she actually looks like this, and her name's G, then she's...!"

"What's going on...?" Juliet was lost.

Chelsea was talking about G's appearance as though she had only assumed this devilish form just now, but those features had been present since Juliet had met her yesterday. Why was Chelsea so shocked?

"Wait..." Juliet said as she was struck with a sudden realization. "Did *different people see you differently*...?"

Those words made G's smile grow deeper.

"Correct! I'm pretty well-known, and I got a lot of enemies, so I can't go outside without a disguise."

G put a hand on her neck and tore off the choker-shaped accessory. It was an *Epic MVP reward*, hidden until now by becoming one with her skin.

Its name was Nightcrawl Chaos, Netherface, and its effects were concealment and interfering with others' perceptions. It also only

worked when out of direct sunlight.

"Those who know me don't see me as *me*. The only exceptions are those who've just found out about me and anyone on my friend list. This is off-the-record, by the way. It's a secret I haven't even revealed in my videos!"

"Friend... Oh." The MVP reward obscured her true identity from everyone except those who didn't know her—and those who were on her friends list. Yesterday, Max and Juliet were the former. Today, Juliet was the latter.

And since Ray and Chelsea already knew her, they saw her as someone else.

If you knew G's appearance ahead of time, she simply assumed a different appearance, making you unable to recognize her. If you knew her job ahead of time, Reveal even displayed false stats. As long as she stayed in the shadows, no one could identify who she really was.

That was the reason G could walk around such a crowded city without anyone noticing her.

Juliet and Max didn't know her, and thus saw her true form—while Chelsea, who regularly gathered info about powerful Masters even if they were foreign, had seen her differently.

"Since you didn't see the real me, you must already know who I am, right?"

"Yeah..." Indeed—Ray knew too. Following his recent battle against Overlord Acedia, ZZZ, Ray had looked into the other Overlords and came across the one who revealed more info about herself than any other.

She was...

"A member of Desire, just like ZZZ... Overlord Invidia, G!"

"Yes! Exactly! That's me! I'm the Overlord!"

An Overlord and a *Superior*. One of Legendaria's greatest criminals who reveled in chaos.

That was G's true identity.

Juliet's eyes widened. The revelation of her friend's real identity filled her with shock.

"And why would someone like you come *here*?" Ray asked.

"I came to take the arena! I'm gonna steal it!" G answered, proudly announcing that this was indeed a theft.

"Steal...?"

"Yes! Exactly!" G clapped once and then spread her arms wide. "I want an arena! This facility itself! It's useful and rare even in this world, and I *want* it!"

She closed her right hand as if grasping something.

"I want to avenge my brother. I want to defeat the one who took him down—Ray Starling!"

She gave a thumbs-up with her left hand, then turned the gesture upside down.

"And I want to record my entire battle against you. This is my stage—my production—and I'm gonna bring it to the viewers!"

Finally, she drew her outstretched arms back and crossed them across her body, embracing herself.

"*Three* birds with one stone! That's what I want!"

"Well, aren't you *greedy*."

"Yes! Yes, I am! Exactly!" G agreed with Ray's comment, all smiles.

She once again waved her hand, syncing herself up with her cameras.

"I'm so greedy they call me the Bottomless! I am a member of Desire and an Overlord who carves the whole world away!" As she talked, she was becoming more energized. "That's why! Here and now! I'm starting a game! By me! For me!" As she spoke, the sun completely vanished beneath the horizon...and night fell upon the world.

Thus, she declared her final intention.

"*The night comes*! The stars align! The time of the Overlord begins!" G held up the crest on her left hand, showing a design like a sunken temple...

"The event begins... *Playground of the Great Old One—R'lyeh!*"

...and announced the beginning of her reign.

Chapter 6: The Fatal Fight, the Overlord's Descent

Gideon, City of Duels, Central Arena

While Ray's group was being dragged into the Overlord's event...

"By the way, did you not participate in The Tournaments? I don't believe I saw you in any of the public matches."

"Grrrgh... I-I don't think I saw you either."

...the two artists continued their verbal battle—this sarcastic back-and-forth.

"You didn't, because I didn't participate. Despite how it may seem, my face and identity are supposed to be a secret, so I wouldn't expose and embarrass myself in such a public setting. Surely you understand?"

Marie seemed to be losing ground here. Being defeated in her first Tournament fight was coming back to haunt her—and he knew her identity, giving F a huge advantage. He had a great many cards he could play against her, while it wasn't clear how Marie could approach him.

At some point, Marie had taken out her Arc-en-Ciel—and not the normal revolver form, but the single shot form meant for her ult. However, the mangaka side of her felt that fighting back against his words with violence would be a loss in its own right, so she was able to hold herself back...if only barely.

"Oh? Looks like it's time."

"Hm...? Ohh. It is."

But then, the end of their verbal battle arrived. The thing everyone here had been waiting for was about to begin—the ultimate match of the final Tournament.

The two *Superiors*—Figaro and Albert—were already facing each other on the stage, but the start of the match had yet to be

announced.

Perhaps because it was the final day, Altimia A. Altar—the acting ruler and first princess of the kingdom—was currently making a speech about The Tournaments so far.

"Hm...?" However, Marie, F, and some other members of the audience found it strange.

The speech was supposed to happen *after* the final match, yet the order had somehow been reversed.

F wondered why that had happened, and soon realized the reason.

He'd sent many drones all over the venue, and the information they provided let him know what would happen next.

"I see," he said. "So he'll lose the handicap for this one."

"What do you mean?"

The handicap in question was obviously the limitation on Albert's firepower. His consideration for the audience had rendered him unable to use his real combat style. If he fought Figaro like that, Figaro would have the upper hand in terms of both compatibility and sheer power.

Being from the same clan as him, Marie would've liked that, but it was unlikely that *Albert himself* would.

"Attention visitors. The stage will now undergo *maintenance* in preparation for the final match."

Shortly after Altimia concluded her speech, an announcement echoed through the venue. However, there seemed to be no damage to the stage, so what was the maintenance for?

The answer to that question came in the form of a person who parted the wind and flew in, stopping right above the stage.

Looking up at the sky, the spectators saw a lone woman. She was wearing a wizard's robe paired with a pointed hat, and she sat on a staff with both legs over one side, the classic picture of a witch riding a broomstick. The only thing that diverged from that image was the monocle over one eye.

Regardless, some people present already knew who she was.

"The maintenance will be done by the current Arch Sage—Integra Sedna Clarisse Flagman."

Integra—a friend of the first princess, and currently the only court mage. She was usually busy with work in Altea, so some wondered why she was here in Gideon.

Her sudden appearance made the audience look up at her in shock.

Meanwhile, Figaro was smiling, Albert showed no emotion, and Altimia made a face as though to say, "Finally, she's arrived."

The reason she'd pushed the speech forward was to buy Integra some time. This implied that the Arch Sage was necessary for the final match—and this was proven by what she did next.

"Miss Flagman will now reinforce the arena's protections." Following that announcement, Integra created a massive barrier over the existing one.

She was adding multiple new layers over the five that already covered the stage, resulting in a large number of magical barriers nested within one another.

This was in response to the UBM escape on day six. There had been a counterplan meeting where the likes of Altimia and Count Gideon had discussed how to prevent such a thing from happening again. Being an arena expert, Figaro had also participated as an observer.

One of the solutions they'd come up with was enhancing the barrier by adding extra layers on top of the ones already there, and this responsibility was given to the Arch Sage, Integra. While the Arch Sage could use magic of all kinds, Integra was especially good at barrier magic. They'd intended to use her powers to add additional walls and prevent more UBMs from escaping.

But now, contrary to their plans, they were using this solution in the final match.

The reason they were doing this was actually *Figaro*.

This many-layered barrier would reduce the risk of audience casualties even further—and that was exactly why, having listened in on the meeting, Figaro himself had asked that they use this in the final match.

Though he was participating in The Tournaments, he didn't actually want the MVP reward—those were just something he

received in the course of pursuing his true goal.

Figaro was someone who enjoyed battle from the bottom of his heart and always sought powerful enemies against whom he could burn away his spirit, body, and all that he was. Blessed with an opponent as great as Albert, Figaro would never allow him to bear such an unfair handicap.

"...Heh." Figaro stood on the stage with a smile on his face. His expression spoke more eloquently than any words could, saying, *The stage is set. Let's go all out*.

Even the audience felt like they could hear the silent invitation.

Saying nothing in response, Albert spent a moment looking at the enhanced barrier...

"Deploying armaments."

...and adorned himself in MVP rewards.

Figaro's smile deepened as he took a weapon in hand.

Thus began an all-out battle between *Superiors* armed to the teeth with countless powerful artifacts.

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Gideon, City of Duels, Eighth Arena

Legendaria had three Overlords—Overlord Acedia, ZZZ; Overlord Gula, Dis Satisfactory; and Overlord Invidia, G.

Overlord Acedia did nothing but sleep inside his realm. As long as no one threatened his territory, he did not partake in conflict against anyone. If sleeping dogs were left to lie, they wouldn't bite—and the same was true of Overlords.

Overlord Gula was wandering around Legendaria, going where the winds took her, and those who stood in her way were fated to be consumed. She was like a natural disaster, growing stronger day by day thanks to her *auto-leveling* as an Overlord.

Meanwhile, Overlord Invidia's activities were much more reminiscent of the dark lords and demon kings many players would be familiar with from fiction. She commanded an army—her clan, Underground Sanctuary—and regularly invaded Legendaria to take their rare items, riches, and territory, all while recording it and

creating videos to upload online.

Overlord Invidia, G was definitely the most "Overlord-ish" of the three.

There were two reasons why she'd taken action now.

First, her ult could only be used at night.

Second, it was because nearly all the eyes and ears in Gideon were focused in the Central Arena. The unexpected appearance of the foreign *Superior* had made it attract even more caution and attention than she'd anticipated.

On top of that, Figaro was a participant in the match, while Shu and Hannya were on security duty, drawing them away from any potential danger to Ray.

The uncertain variables that could interfere with G's plans had been reduced to an absolute minimum.

The only ones here now were Ray and Nemesis, as well as Juliet's trio—and G *couldn't have asked for a better cast*.

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"Playground of the Great Old One—R'lyeh!"

Following her skill declaration, the environment in the Eighth Arena changed drastically.

"Ngh...?! What...?!"

"The arena...is *sinking*?!" A transparent cylinder surrounded the arena as dark water began seeping in from the bottom of it, the level slowly rising.

The Eighth Arena—Death Period's base—was gradually sinking.

Ray and the others jumped high and landed in the audience seating, where the water couldn't yet reach.

"Liquid summoning?! Like Chelsea's Poseidon?!" Max exclaimed.

"Not exactly. Not quite," G said with a chuckle. "This is R'lyeh *rising up*."

"Huh...?!"

"It's something I gotta do to get the arena—and it's my win condition for this game."

"Right! I looked this up! So this is her ult...!" G's words made

Chelsea show a hint of panic, and Ray grimaced.

"'Game,' huh? You talk like this guy I know who wears a lab coat everywhere," Ray said with a scowl as he recalled an unpleasant memory.

"Franklin's Game, right? I know that! It went viral. I dunno if you realize this, but you're *very* famous. You're better known than even some *Superiors*."

"Can't say I'm happy about that!" Ray said before letting out a sigh. First Jubei, now this—becoming famous had gotten him nothing but trouble. If not for that, G wouldn't have targeted him in the first place.

"And that's why I think fighting you will make for a great video. Content, revenge for my brother, and this arena—I'm getting *so* much from this!"

G regularly recorded her activities and uploaded them on her channel. Due to her unusual role as both a *Superior* and an Overlord, as well as her personality, she had a lot of followers expecting to see something unexpected or entertaining. G believed, without a doubt, that "stealing an arena" and "fighting the Unbreakable" would amaze people as much as—if not more than—her previous escapades.

"Ya keep sayin' you'll take the arena. Whaddya mean by that?" Though Max now knew that G was an enemy, she still didn't know much about her, and nothing had gotten any clearer for her. Juliet was the same in that regard. Ray and Chelsea knew of G and seemed to be getting more and more worried, but Juliet didn't know why.

"That's G's skill, Maxie. It's Overlord Invidia's Embryo ult," Chelsea began explaining to them. "She already cut off a buncha Legendarian territories, but she didn't change the country's borders like what happens in a War."

"Then what *did* she do?" asked Max.

"The moment this ult is complete..."

"...The Eighth Arena itself will be *absorbed* by her Embryo," Ray finished.

R'lyeh was a fictional location from the Cthulhu Mythos.

Sometimes called an island, sometimes a city, it was always at the bottom of the ocean. However, it was said that when it rose to the surface, the Great Old One—Cthulhu—would awaken and subjugate the world.

Thus, R'lyeh's core trait was "domination."

When the rising waters of R'lyeh sank the targeted area, it would take control of and steal the land, the buildings, and any items within, turning them into a part of itself.

Basically, it was a Superior Embryo that forcefully claimed the very terrain in which it was summoned, cutting off parts of the world itself.

While this ult didn't possess any direct offensive power, to a country, this was more terrifying than any violent attack. Multiple Legendarian tribes had already lost their mines, castles, and towns to this Embryo, whittling away at the country as a whole.

After claiming whatever she set her eyes on, G released everything in her faction's base, creating her own land—the Overlord's domain.

That was the core of her Underground Sanctuary's strategy.

"Seriously?! That's some totally lawless shit!" said Max.

"It is. As an Overlord, I make my own laws," said G, not ashamed whatsoever. "Also, there's a limit to how big an area and how many Resources I can absorb, and the more I steal, the longer it takes. This arena will be consumed in...a bit over an hour, I guess?" She explained with glee as she gazed at the water filling the arena from the bottom and the "scale" etched onto the top of the cylindrical barrier around the arena.

The time needed for her Embryo's ult to complete scaled with the Resources of the target.

"Anyway, it's time to reveal the rules! The channel regulars already know them, but I'll make them clear to new viewers who came here just for the Unbreakable!" G once again spread her arms wide and raised her voice to ensure that the countless cameras all around could hear her.

In one of her hands, there was now an uncanny, unusual shape—a trapezohedron.

"The rules are simple! I lose if this trapezohedron breaks before R'lyeh consumes the Eighth Arena! This is the core of the ult!"

R'lyeh's ultimate skill provided other people with the means to stop itself. The fact that it could only be used at night, its long cooldown, and this "fail state" were harsh restrictions that allowed for its greatly empowered effect.

"Of course, you could just defeat me, instead! R'lyeh will disappear and that'll obviously stop the ult! But if you can't do either before the time runs out or all of you are eliminated, Team Unbreakable loses!" G then put her hand on her throat and called out to Ray's group surrounding her.

"Now! The Overlord's head is right here! If you wish to protect your land, then face me like real heroes! This is the start of a fight to annihilate the Overlord!"

Following those words, pillars of water rose up everywhere. From the water, now knee-deep, large tentacles burst out and attacked Ray and his friends.

"Ngh...!" Ray reacted instantly, jumping on Silver to rush to the sky, while the others evaded their attacks as well.

Thus, they weathered the tentacle ambush, and the only things damaged were the places where the four had been standing.

"First they blocked Chelsea's and Max's attacks, now they attack us... How are those creatures even fitting in that amount of water? It is not that deep yet!" Already in her weapon form, Nemesis couldn't make sense of this absurd scene.

But Ray and Chelsea knew exactly what was going on.

"The water is just *an entrance*."

"An entrance?"

"The surface of this water is a connection to her Embryo... A whole *other world*."

G had already revealed her abilities in her content. Ray had also featured in multiple public videos since Franklin's Game—G's powers were probably at least as well-known as his, maybe even more so.

However, G was a case where knowing her powers wasn't much help in defeating her.

"Heh heh heh. I'm happy you know me so well, but should you

really be doing this? Should you waste time just talking? Don't you think you'll run out the clock?"

With her legs in R'lyeh's waters, protected by countless tentacles, G cracked a grin.

Her ultimate skill was consuming the arena as they spoke, and if G wasn't defeated within the next hour, it would disappear entirely.

"Yeah," said Ray. "It's not like you'll stop if I just tell you to, huh? Just like your brother."

"Yep. I probably shouldn't say this, but I'm not nearly as reasonable as he is."

"Well, that's...a problem." King of Light, F had created a misunderstanding between a couple that had almost destroyed a city—yet Overlord Invidia, G claimed to be an even greater nuisance.

Coming to understand that with absolute clarity, Ray let out a sigh.

"But, man... I've fought a bunch of *Superiors* for a bunch of different reasons, but this is the first time one of them has attacked me for my *real estate*."

"This is a rental, though," Nemesis interjected.

"Hey! Don't forget that I'm also fighting to avenge my brother! It's an emotional endeavor!" G interjected.

"Be honest."

"You beat him, so if I beat you, it'll prove that I'm better than him, right?"

"Do you two hate each other or something?"

"We get along great! But that is one thing—this is another!"

"That so?" Ray realized that it wasn't just her motivation that was unique—she was nothing like the previous *Superiors* in terms of personality either.

The vibe here kinda reminds me of Mori-Mori, he thought, remembering the senior from his high school club. *I feel like she and G would get along really well.*

Regardless, he'd already decided what he would do. She was telling him to fight and defeat her, or else she would take what was his. He had only one response to that.

"Sure. Let's do this," said Ray, still mounted, as he brandished

Nemesis. "Beating an Overlord... That sure is a *quest*, all right."

Gathering his resolve, he declared that the quest had begun.

"This is good! Very good! I can see why my brother is so infatuated with you!" said G, her smile growing deeper at Ray's words.

But then, she turned away from him...and looked at Juliet, making her eyes widen.

Juliet had backed away into the air, but couldn't...*didn't* do anything beyond that. She didn't instantly register G as an enemy like Chelsea and Max did, nor had she gathered her resolve like Ray had when he'd realized G's true intentions.

Juliet was the only one here who was still perplexed by the situation.

While Chelsea was the oldest and most proactive of them, and Max was used to situations like this thanks to Tenchi's battle junkies, Juliet had never experienced anything similar.

This was nothing like the all-out battle against Chelsea she'd had in the recent event, or her disputes against Shion from before the Exodragon King Incident, when they were still hostile to each other.

A friend she'd just made was doing something bad to another one of her friends. Something like that had, thankfully, never happened to her before.

She'd never had enough friends for it to be possible.

And that was why Juliet was so perplexed she was frozen in place.

Though she'd only met G yesterday, they'd hit it off instantly, and albeit in a different way than with Ray and the others, G had quickly become a friend Juliet felt she could connect with. In this conflict, Juliet had no idea what to do.

She couldn't rush to eliminate G like Chelsea or Max, nor ask her questions like Ray. She was stuck acting like a child her age, doing nothing but watching the situation, lost in confusion.

"Ngh..." As a friend, the reasonable thing to do here was to join Ray and stop G from committing this crime.

She knew this in her mind, but her confused heart kept her body from moving.

Thus, Juliet was unable to choose...

"Julie! You fight me too!"

"Huh?"

...and the one who gave her the push she needed was the enemy—G herself.

"You are this video's guest performer! It might have happened by chance, but never mind that! I'll be really happy if you show me what you got!" G reveled in causing chaos and committing terrible crimes, and yet her words seemed to contain no guilt or shame. She was self-indulgent, self-centered, and selfish.

Despite this, her words melted away Juliet's reservations. There was no contradiction between her reasoning and her friend's words—and combined, they gave her the encouragement she sorely needed.

"...Okay!"

And so, Juliet flapped her dark wings and brandished her blade.

Her friend had asked her to stop her crimes, so Juliet would do just that.

Thus, the four-person party prepared to face the Overlord.

There we go, G thought. *Every good star has to know how to read the mood.*

She looked at the four, all ready to fight, and smiled in satisfaction.

I guess Julie isn't used to things like this. I feel like I did her wrong, but I also followed it up nicely, so I guess it's all good... But wow, this just makes me think how insane Legendaria's rankers are. When I went at that card gamer, she responded so fast it was like she knew the future.

Estimating Juliet by the standards of the rankers G knew had caused her to misjudge the girl's mental fortitude. G reflected on that, but she now had the matchup she wanted.

I want an arena. I really, really do. It'd really help my clan and my friends at Desire...but that's just one of my goals.

The second was defeating Ray Starling—and there was a third, which was far more important than the other two.

That was the reason she'd approached this situation like she had.

Instead of taking the arena like a sneaky thief, she'd gathered a cast of combatants before using her ult. She'd also explained everything so they could fight without confusion.

If someone present was confused and hesitant, she straightened them out with her words.

And if all this led to an exciting battle for her to record, nothing would please her more than that.

She wouldn't tell them to just lose—how could she?

All out and beyond—a wild dance of supernatural powers. A gleaming light that could only be found in this world.

That was the blueprint of the future G desired.

"Now! Let's fight! Let's play!" Thus, G spoke—sang—to the world.

"Let's go all out...and see what lies beyond!"

She faced the heroes who would challenge her and the viewers who would watch her—and let them all know that *she was here*.

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Such a curious coincidence...

At the same time, in the same city, but at different locations, Figaro and G—two *Superiors*—gave their own opponents exactly what they needed to give it their all.

Gideon was now a stage of two battles truly fought in earnest.

Chapter 7: Sunken Labyrinth

Gideon, City of Duels, Eighth Arena

"Anyway, let's get this started for real! Face me! Challenge me with all you got!" And with that, G fell backward into the dark water and began sinking into it—inside her own Embryo. But then...

"Blackwing Requiem!"

"You're not gettin' away! Bladescale Hail!"

Having resolved to fight, Juliet and Max attacked G, attempting to prevent her escape.

"Oh, what a barrage! So intense! Sadly..."

However, both Hræsvelgr's black light projectiles and Ipetam's blades...

"They can't reach *the bottom of the sea*."

...were deflected by the *water* and failed to touch her.

The water that covered G didn't seem more than a few centimeters deep—and yet it completely blocked the attacks, letting her sink within.

Juliet's eyes widened as Max shouted, "What's going on?!"

"The Superior Embryo, R'lyeh," said Chelsea. "It's not immediately obvious, but under the water is an entirely different world."

Type Invasion Labyrinth, "Encroaching Sea-Altar, R'lyeh."

Standing next to Tsukuyo Fuso's Kaguya, it was one of the few Embryos crowned with the "Invasion" type. Though Kaguya and R'lyeh targeted different things, they were similar in that they ate away at the world outside of their boundaries.

The water—in other words, its outer shell—acted as an entrance linking R'lyeh to the rest of the world and allowed it to consume things with its ult, but at its core, R'lyeh itself was an independent universe.

Even if the water *looked* shallow from the outside, there was no telling how deep of an abyss it really was.

Thus, attacks that *couldn't pass through its entrance* would never strike R'lyeh.

"That water is an entrance that only allows living beings through. It totally rejects attacks and stuff," said Chelsea.

"I thought Ipetam's blades could be counted as part of its body, but I guess they aren't."

"What do we do, then?!" Max asked.

"Basically, if we wanna beat the Overlord, we gotta enter her dungeon."

That was a classic RPG scenario. However, entering the enemy's territory was still a scary thing to do, especially when the entrance was a pool of dark water protected by tentacles and there was no telling what lay beyond.

"I guess that makes her basically the same as ZZZ in that regard," said Ray. "Still...!"

The man who'd already been dragged into an Overlord's domain and overcome it didn't back down a single step.

"I'm going in!" Ray dismounted Silver with no hesitation and led the charge.

Assuming that his steed's air-walking abilities wouldn't work underwater, he simply jumped in there by himself.

"Whoa! No hesitation at all!" said Chelsea.

"I'm going too!" said Juliet, jumping in right after Ray.

A moment later, the world completely changed.

"Huh...?!"

The second her whole body was submerged, she found herself very suddenly *out of the water*.

But she was no longer in the Eighth Arena where she had just been standing either.

She was now inside of a damp, dimly lit cave, filled with a fishy stench. There was a wall behind her, and the only way to go was a tunnel straight ahead.

"Where...?" Looking around, she saw that Ray was already there, and they were soon joined by Chelsea and Max.

"Huh?! We're not actually underwater!" Max exclaimed. She'd equipped an accessory to help her breathe in the water, but this

unexpected sight meant her caution had been all for naught.

"Ugh... I figured you'd choose *this place*, but man..." Meanwhile, Chelsea put her hand on her head as though she had just realized something unpleasant.

"What do you mean?"

"What does she mean? *This* is what she means!" G's voice resounded from somewhere unseen, responding to Juliet's question. G herself was nowhere in sight, and there were no visible speakers, but this place was basically the inside of her Embryo. Thus, it made perfect sense that she was able to talk to them like this. "My R'lyeh is unbelievably wide and deep! It contains many of the places I've helped myself to! It's like an amusement park! Is that a good comparison?"

R'lyeh was an underwater otherworld. Most of its vast area was a sunken seabed, but there were some places that were quite different. Those were the locations that she had "helped herself" to—or, rather, had *stolen* from people. The dvergar mountain mines, the lionkin citadel, the hidden elf forest—they were all places that were important to powerful Legendarian tribes, and they were most of the reason she was a wanted criminal.

"I can choose where intruders end up. Though, while the ult is active, the rules prevent me from putting you *too* far away from me or the trapezohedron. Well, regardless, this time you'll find both at the end of this dungeon! That's your goal!"

Like the Legendarian locations inside R'lyeh, this was another place that she'd cut out and taken for herself, but this one was different in one respect. It *didn't have a previous owner*.

"I had a really hard time in this dungeon. I'm sure it won't be easy for you too!"

"Huh? What is this place, anyway?" Max asked. G chuckled a little before saying...

"Ever heard of the Depths of Jealousy?"

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Gideon, City of Duels, Central Arena

In one of the box seats of the Central Arena, overlooking the raging-hot final match, F kept one of his eyes closed in order to view the scenery of another world.

So she did end up choosing that place, he thought. While his open eye watched the battle between Figaro and Albert, he simultaneously observed his little sister's own event.

Since only living beings and their possessions could pass through the surface of R'lyeh, F had asked her ahead of time to bring some of his Zodiacs inside. That had been his compensation for guiding Ray there.

R'lyeh's ultimate cuts off the land itself. It can steal entire mountains and castles, but that dungeon took it an entire night, and it still only managed to absorb a part of it... I suppose Overlord dungeons are just that exceptional.

Overlord dungeons—challenging, trial-filled labyrinths that bestowed a Superior Job from the Overlord series upon anyone who cleared them.

G was now using *this* as the challenge for her current game.

Her previous games had ranged from direct confrontations to speed mining events where her victims were forced to mine up the trapezohedron within the time limit. But this time, she'd chosen something that was not quite so straightforward, but also not particularly unorthodox either—a traditional dungeon full of challenges that Ray and Juliet would have to overcome.

She's very enthusiastic about this one, F thought. He knew his sister well enough to guess what she was thinking.

A dungeon with an Overlord waiting at the end didn't just make for a good spectacle—it was also the place where G could use her combat style to the fullest. It was clear that she was very motivated for this one.

That was exactly why F was somewhat concerned, though.

Will they be able to clear the dungeon in time? he wondered.

Because Overlord dungeons granted a Superior Job while ignoring prior jobs and talents, they were all extremely difficult to clear. The Depths of Jealousy dungeon that had chosen the current Overlord Invidia was no exception. Though she'd only cut away a part of it,

making the dungeon far more compact, F still wondered if they could make it through within the time limit.

I suppose I will just have to wait and see. Despite his concern for his own research and his sister's event, F continued simply watching things unfold.

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Paladin, Ray Starling

"Now—you have fifty-eight minutes left! Hurry up! Do your best!" Urged on by the dungeon boss herself, we started running. There were some things that didn't quite make sense, but we didn't have the time to hesitate and think about it.

The four of us were now rushing through a damp, natural-looking cave.

"Maaan," said Chelsea. "We talked about goin' to the Tomb Labyrinth to help Maxie farm up some money, but I can't say I expected to go to the Depths of Jealousy first."

"Now's not the time to say shit like that! Hell, I'm the one who borrowed the key, so this is my fault too! If she takes the arena, then forget about payin' him back! There's no way I could make up for that!"

"Same here..." The spare key I'd given to Max had let Overlord Invidia enter the arena, and Juliet was the one who'd brought her there. That meant they both seemed to feel pretty guilty about all this.

"Hey, don't let it bother you," I said. "She probably could've used her ult from outside the arena just as well. I do appreciate the help though."

"R-Right!" Juliet said.

"Leave it to me! I'll slice up her *and* her tentacles!" Max added.

As we talked, the cave seemed to change a little, and we arrived at a fork in the path.

"Left or right, huh? Pretty standard," said Chelsea.

"Hey! You two saw this place in her videos, right? Doncha know the right path?" Max asked.

"The problem with that is...this place's structure changes with time." I said.

"I saw about three videos, but one of them had a guy go 'Hey! I saw this place on G's channel once!' and then run straight into a trap, so..." Chelsea said.

"A reply truly scribed in crimson... (That makes me think of the Red Pen Teacher...)"

Shu had once told me that despite them both being in the category of "created dungeons," Overlord dungeons like the Depths of Jealousy were a good bit different from the Tomb Labyrinth.

Apparently, the Tomb Labyrinth was the newest of these dungeons, created shortly after the time of the first Azurite, while the others had existed since before the pre-ancient civilization. The Tomb Labyrinth was deeper and housed stronger monsters, but the Overlord dungeons came out ahead in terms of troublesome gimmicks and tricks.

Incidentally, Shu had actually destroyed an Overlord dungeon while fighting The Earth.

"Wait, you're tellin' me you can die by just pickin' the wrong path?!"

"Yes," Chelsea and I instantly replied in perfect unison.

This place really was just that much of a pain.

"Then again, we can't just stand still here," I said. "I'm gonna keep going."

"Huh?"

I took the left path and took a step forward. "Nemesis?"

"Certainly." Understanding what I was planning, Nemesis *prepared* herself.

And when I was about three metels into the passage, my face was instantly and fully obscured.

A blue-purple mist had burst out from every direction, completely swallowing me up. Through the air I breathed and even through contact with my skin, the mist inflicted countless debuffs on me.

"I see... These must be the debuffs of these Depths..."

The Depths of Jealousy was an Overlord dungeon specialized in debuffs.

It was especially rife with poisons, bindings, and curses. That single spray had given me a whole seven status effects: Poison, which drained my HP; Magic Drain, which sapped my MP over time; Soul Drain, which caused me to lose SP; Weakness that halved my stats; and finally Lethargy, Paralysis, and Frailty which further reduced my STR, AGI, and END respectively.

There were so many debuffs that conventional items and skills wouldn't be enough to deal with them, so most people would be forced to fight the monsters here while greatly weakened. That could easily kill anyone who was unprepared, and that made this dungeon really difficult—especially for tians, who only had one life.

Apparently, G had become the current Overlord Invidia by taking shelter in her otherworld, R'lyeh. ZZZ had probably become Overlord Acedia by using his dream invulnerability, so they were kinda similar in that regard.

Anyway... I'd just confirmed what we were dealing with.

"That was the wrong path. Past the trap, it's a dead end."

"Hey! Are you okay?! You look way too calm for getting all those crazy debuffs!" Max shouted, staring at me as I stood painted blue-purple by the mist. She had nothing to worry about, though.

"If anything, I'm even better than before," I said as I showed her Nemesis.

"Truly! It has been long since this form was useful!"

She was currently in her Flag Halberd form.

Indeed, if we were dealing with debuffs, nothing was more effective than her second form's "Like a Flag Flying the Reversal." This might've not worked in the original Overlord dungeon, but this whole area was now a part of an Embryo—in other words, an enemy. That meant that Reversal could function against these debuffs. And since these status effects weren't from a Superior Embryo *fully* focused on debuffs like Miss Eldritch's Kaguya, I could reverse them into buffs without a problem.

Because of that, my matchup with this dungeon was actually pretty good.

"Though, it hit us with over twice the amount of debuffs as Hellish Miasma right from the start," said Nemesis. "That feels unfair

—perhaps even illegal."

"No it isn't!" G insisted. She must've still been observing us. "That's just how the Depths of Jealousy works! Overlord dungeons become way harder the more people enter them! With four of you here, the dungeon will be going all out right from the start!"

Right. I'd almost forgotten that was a thing they did.

I feel like Figaro could totally get an open Overlord job, though, I thought.

"Anyway, I'm the right person for this. I'll be our canary," I said as I took the lead and advanced.

"Huh. A canary? Aren't you supposed to be a Starling? How did you mix those up?"

Ignoring G's comment, I considered that she had probably anticipated this. Her voice didn't seem to contain even a hint of surprise that I'd used her debuff traps against her.

That could mean that she had worse traps prepared.

We gotta stay cautio—

"Ngh...?!"

"Ray?!" Juliet cried.

"Ooof... A spiked ball just jumped from the ground and *went straight for his crotch*... Scary stuff," Chelsea commented.

G, you bitch! Couldn't you set up a more normal trap?! I've got pain turned off, but that almost felt like it'd been switched back on!

"Ray, are you okay...?" Juliet asked.

"I-I am. My gear's fine, and I'll heal the damage pretty quickly with the reversed Poison..."

It didn't hurt, but I did feel weird, like my insides had been flipped upside down...

"So there's physical traps too, huh? Not just debuffs," said Max.

"Well... Actually, these spikes *are* covered in poison," said Chelsea as she grabbed the spiked ball.

I would've liked her to stop touching it, in that case.

"Actually, while I kinda get the poison mist, I'm not sure if the Depths of Jealousy is supposed to generate traps like this spikey thing. It's just not what you'd expect from a place that looks like a natural cave," said Chelsea, considering the trap that had attacked

me.

"You're right! That one is different. Some of the traps here were gifts from our sub-leader."

G gave this answer like it was nothing, but...

"Who the hell gifts people traps?! And traps this messed up, at that?! It was so bad it reminded me of Mori-Mori from high school!"

"Who? That just makes me curious," said Chelsea.

"She was a senior who challenged people to games and set traps for them, only to have them all blow up in her face!"

"The fact that you refer to her using such an odd nickname makes it clear what kind of treatment she gets..." said Nemesis.

Yeah... Honestly, she was even more of a joke than Miss Eldritch. She deserves the nickname, I thought. *This trap, though... No way, right?*



Following that, I was subjected to several more traps, but Reversal's buffs and healing over time allowed me to withstand them all as we brute-forced our way through the passage.

And beyond it, the cave suddenly ended.

The oppressive ceiling and walls disappeared, revealing a large, open space. Within the dome-shaped area, there was a straight bridge extending from the passage we'd come from all the way to the wall on the other side. I could see an exit over there.

There was something wrong with this space, though—right below the bridge, there was water with the same blue-purple color as the mist from earlier.

Needless to say, falling off was probably an awful idea.

Also...

"Places like this always have some kinda surprise, don't they?" said Chelsea, saying exactly what I was thinking.

"Well, nine out of ten RPGs would either put an ambush here or make the bridge collapse," I said with a nod as I looked around.

I didn't see anything suspicious on the walls or ceiling, but the water was so dark.

"We should fly." With one person joining me on Silver and Juliet carrying another, all of us could fly past here. If we were in the air, the bridge collapsing wouldn't be a problem, and it'd be easier to deal with anything that came out of the water.

With that in mind, I prepared to summon Silver when...

"Ah. Hold on a sec."

"Chelsea? What's wrong?"

"I'm just guessin', but... Yah!" She took a Gem out of her Inventory and threw it at the empty space.

A moment later, *there was an explosion* that painted the walls and water in an orange glow.

The three of us were speechless.

"Ah, I knew it," said Chelsea. "Air mines—and they're even camouflaged. That military nerd from my old country used those a lot..."

I couldn't see a thing, but it looked like there was a trap that Chelsea had spotted. She herself was a bit of a mine expert, so

maybe it wasn't that surprising that she'd figured out something we hadn't...

G expressed no chagrin about this, though. Instead, she actually clapped and praised Chelsea. "Wow! You saw right through it! You're pretty good too, Chel! By the way, the mines will just keep coming back, so if you try to destroy them all, you'll just run out of time."

"That so?" I said.

"Also, the explosions act as a *signal*."

A moment later, something broke the surface of the dark water and leaped onto the bridge to block our path.

"GEH GEH GEH!"

"Wha?! The hell are these?!" The things that had emerged from the water, apparently immune to its poisonous properties, were dozens of monsters that looked like mermen.

"Monsters of the Depths of Jealousy...!"

"Bzzt! Wrong! When I absorbed this dungeon into R'lyeh, I didn't get its monsters or monster-producing mechanisms. They're just like those air mines—I procured and spread them here! They're not even tamed, but this is their territory, so they'll attack any intruders!"

G graciously told us about the mermen.

I was wondering why she was going out of her way to tell us so many things, but it could be that she wasn't doing it for our benefit, but for the viewers who would watch all of this once she turned it into a video.

Additionally, these mermen were armed with harpoons and the name "APM" was visible above their heads. It did look like they were immune to the poison, so...maybe that stood for "Anti Poison Merman?"

"Hey..." said Nemesis. "Is it just me, or is that naming scheme somewhat familiar?"

Oh, come on! There's no way that guy could be involved in...

"ALSO! Since this is the halfway point, I've placed a boss here!"

After G said that, the water's surface rippled, and there was a splash even larger than the one that the mermen had made.

"E a H e A h e a H E a h E A H!"

And that was the entrance of a freakish monstrosity that looked

like a cross between an octopus and a humanoid giant.

"What *is* that gargantuan thing...?!" said Nemesis.

"That's gotta be the main body of the tentacles that attacked us back at the arena!"

The creature was massive, with a size matching even the Afforest King Golem we'd fought some time ago.

This was a pretty large space, yet its octopus-like head almost brushed the ceiling.

The air mines were reacting to it and blowing up, but it didn't even flinch. Any damage they did rapidly closed. Its grandeur and size made for a sight that could definitely drive someone past the boundaries of sanity.

"Hmm?!"

But there was something that drew my attention more than anything else about it—something *above its head*.

"Hold on! G! I got a question!"

"What is it? What do you wanna ask?"

"It's about the *name* of this octopus thing!" I said as I pointed above its head—at the name hanging up there. I'd already seen the tentacles, but its name was a different—and *way* bigger—problem.

"Huh?" That was when the girls noticed it too, and their eyes went wide.

I couldn't blame them. After all...

"This is just a monster, not an Embryo, right?! Why is it named like that?!"

The letters above the octopus giant's head said "Cthulhu." This thing was the Great Old One from the Cthulhu Mythos—not just in appearance, but even in name.

"This world's got Cthulhu as a goddamn *monster*?!"

"I feel like a world with an ancient evil in it would be fated for destruction..." Nemesis said.

Well, Azurite's ancestor did beat something literally called "The Evil," so that part is real, at least.

"No," said G. "Cthulhu *doesn't* exist in this world—at least not in the wild. This one's not natural."

"Not natural... You mean...?!" Her words made a certain person

come to mind.

"Yes. I had him made special for me. There's someone in Dryfe who creates custom monsters for you. *His name's Franklin*... Oh, wait, it looks like you already know each other!"

"THAT LAB COAT SHITHEAD!" Hearing the name, I found myself raising my voice. *I sure as hell didn't expect my sworn enemy's name to show up here!*

"I mean, my Embryo is R'lyeh, and R'lyeh has gotta have Cthulhu, right? I brought in some materials and had Franklin make him for me. I even used an MVP reward."

Right. Franklin had used Dragon King mats to create a monster that could use the Dragon King Aura. Knowing that, it didn't seem out of the question that could probably make something like this too.

The fact that it was made using an MVP reward gave me a bad feeling about this, though.

"Oh, and I got the APMs at a discount for buying them in bulk. He said he didn't have much use for aquatic monster materials, so he sold them to me for cheap. I bought a lot!"

"You got those things because they were on sale?!"

What kind of Overlord army is this?!

"Hmm. I like that reaction. You're a fun one, Unbreakable. I can see why you went viral so many times."

"Is *that* what you're impressed by...?" said Juliet.

"Who gives a damn who made these and where?! If we can't get past the mines in the air, that means we can't get through if we don't beat that octopus and the mermen!"

"Ah! Right! Sorry, Max! This all just caught me off guard!" I remembered we didn't have time for this nonsense—we had to clear the dungeon.

G had said this was the halfway point, and we had about forty minutes left. It seemed like we were making good progress, but considering we still had to overcome this mid-boss and then G herself, we had no time to waste.

"Corpse-Eating Bird—Hræsvelgr!" Right as I finished my thought, Juliet besides me used her ult, starting the battle with a bang.

"GEH!"

“E e e a A a h H H!” The sideways tornado released from Juliet’s hands swept away the group of mermen on the bridge while also badly damaging Cthulhu’s upper body.

“Julie?! Wow, you act fast!” G exclaimed. Having her bargain finds... I mean, the mermen wiped out like that might’ve stung a bit.

“Well, Julie’s like this in duels too. She’s pretty proactive when she’s locked in,” said Chelsea.

“The fact that the bridge is still standing tells me that she controlled it properly too...” Nemesis added.

Yeah, when a bunch of enemies group up and block the path, few things are better than a wide-scale ult, I thought.

“Now...!” Juliet called.

“All right!” Urged on by Juliet, we ran on the bridge, now free of mermen.

“E a A h h H...” Though Hræsvelgr had gone straight to Cthulhu’s face, he wasn’t just still alive—he was quickly regenerating. It reminded me of the RSK I’d fought during Franklin’s Game, and I could really tell this Cthulhu was another one of his creations.

Regardless, he was still recovering, so he was completely immobile. Even if he fully healed, that large body would work against him, and he wouldn’t be able to chase us into the passage. Not even his arm would fit—the best he could do was a tentacle or a finger.

That meant that if we made it out of this space, we could just leave Cthulhu behind.

With that in mind, we kept running, and we soon passed the middle of the bridge.

“E a h... E a h... E a h.” Still recovering, Cthulhu was holding his head with his left hand.

However, the right one was being extended toward us.

He wasn’t trying to grab us, just reaching out his hand—and then it suddenly *began to shine*.

My eyes widened.

“E a h E A h e A H e a h E a H e a h E A H H H!” Letting out a screech in a voice both maddened and maddening, Cthulhu pointed his finger at us.

"Def— I mean, DODGE!"

As I alerted the girls, Cthulhu's fingers released a blue-purple beam.

The light was eroding and rotting away everything in its path. It was ruination made manifest.

We dodged just in time to avoid it, but the air it passed through was blackened, the bridge melted away, and even the walls collapsed.

"This is...!"

"It's like Gardranda's Purgatorial Flames: Zero...!" That was the terrifying power that had melted away Logan's Legendary Gigaknight. The destruction before me was more than enough to remind me of that.

"That's Cthulhu's Gandr—the Finger of Ruination! Whaddya think?! Do you like it?!" While we were overcome by terror, G proudly explained what just happened.

"Is that a skill from the MVP reward you used on him?"

"Yeah! It was originally a Legendary UBM that lived here in the Depths of Jealousy! He absorbs debuff particles, compresses them, and fires them as a beam! In fact, he's charging another one right now!"

So instead of negating the debuff-filled environment, he accumulated them and used them as a weapon. That explained why he was keeping his lower half in the poisonous water.

"Hm..." I couldn't expect to be able to Reverse *that*. Letting it hit me was a bad idea.

The worst part was that we couldn't just skip past it now.

From what I could see, the passage on the other side was a long, straight line that went on for quite a while. If Cthulhu managed to get even a finger into the tunnel and fire while we were there, it would hit us for sure.

"I guess we actually gotta beat this thing, huh?" I said.

"Yep! I won't let you skip the mid-boss! This isn't a speedrun!"

"Says the one who gave us a harsh time limit..."

"*That* is one thing! *This* is another! Oh! And here's a second helping of these guys!"

Following her words, the water rippled again, and dozens of APMs jumped onto the bridge again.

How many of these did that lab coat freak sell her?! "Ngh! Let's deal with the mermen and take out Cthulhu!"

Chelsea was quick to respond. "Okay! The harpoons look poisoned, so since you can handle debuffs, you go to the front! Maxie and Julie, use Ipetam and your magic to reduce their numbers from a distance! Maxie, you and I will fight Cthulhu! Julie, back us up if you find an opening to hit him hard!"

"Roger that!" we all said in unison.

"Gheow!" called Ipetam. Chelsea had more experience in group battles than anyone else here, so we flew into action according to her strategy.

"GEH GEH GEH!" Despite the previous group of mermen being unceremoniously wiped out, the new ones didn't seem to show any fear. They must've been made for combat, just like Franklin's suicide series.

Holding debuff-imbued spears in their webbed hands, they charged at us.

"No way you'll hit me!"

However, none of their attacks could land. The debuffs that halved and reduced my stats had all been reversed into buffs. My multiplied AGI let me read all their moves and slice the mermen apart with my Flag Halberd.

Even more of them then tried to attack me from a blind spot, but Ipetam provided cover, firing blades into their foreheads.

"Blackwing Requiem!"

As their movements started to slow, Juliet's black light projectiles overwhelmed and devastated them.

"Let's do this!" Max called out.

"All right! I'll give us some footing! C'mon, Skyanchor!" Chelsea held up an Inventory and released *an entire ship*.

It was the vessel that used to be the Golden Pirates' base, and a force to be reckoned with in Granvaloa's duels.

The antiair sailing ship, Skyanchor, landed on the blue water.

"She's coated, so she can handle the poison for a while!" said

Chelsea. “But maintenance could be a pain, so let’s settle this quick!”

“Hell, if we waste too much time, tentacle-face here is gonna charge up and blast us along *with* the entire ship!”

“Can’t say I’d like that!”

Skyanchor began moving as soon as they landed.

Riding the current created by Poseidon, they approached Cthulhu.

“FIRE!” At Chelsea’s order, the armaments installed on the ship began bombarding the monster. She herself contributed with Gems, showering the still-regenerating Cthulhu with explosions.

“E e A a a A a A A H H H!” He released a voice of anguish, but his tough body was far from fatally wounded. As though to prove that point, he extended his arms—not to fire a beam this time, but to attack with his tentacles.

They wrapped around the ship, creating a scene that was straight out of a classic high seas fantasy story.

“Ugh, it’s been a while since somethin’ like this happened, but it’s still as gross as ever! Maxie!”

“On it!” Responding to Chelsea, Max grasped her katana and ran onto the deck. Her eyes were fixed on a tentacle that seemed far too thick for a blade like hers to slice through.

“Heh! This will be the perfect test.”

Despite all of that, Max’s face was in a confident grin.

She then activated the Swordmaster job’s Laser Blade skill and took a swing.

Cthulhu didn’t react to it whatsoever, focusing instead on attacking the ship.

That was understandable. Back at the arena, Max had charged at Overlord Invidia, but her blade had been deflected by these same tentacles—it hadn’t been effective whatsoever. It wasn’t clear just how intelligent Cthulhu was, but it would’ve been reasonable for him to assume there wasn’t anything to worry about.

However, the situation now was completely different than before.

This was proven when Max’s attack reached the tentacle several times her own size and *sliced clean through it*.

“E E A A H H?!” Cthulhu was shocked by this, but who could blame him? Max’s blade had dealt far more damage than its

appearance alone would have suggested.

"Ha...! So it's good even when shit gets real!"

In her hands, Max held one of Tenchi's Hundred Famed blades—Sekiun.

Its skill was called Ungo-Musho—"Bladecloud Convergence"—and its effect was devastatingly simple.

It took the attack power of all the blades currently being used by the wielder and focused all of it into itself.

That was rather meaningless in most cases. Even if used while dual-wielding, it didn't result in much of an increase due to Sekiun's low base attack power, so it was more effective to just wield two katanas of equal power instead.

Jobs in the gladiator grouping could equip more weapons, and King of Asuras had the Asuran Battle-Mounts skill that added floating weapon slots, so they might've been able make better use of it.

But here stood an exception among exceptions—a duelist who used far more blades than King of Asuras and the Over Gladiator.

She was...

"I'll turn ya into sashimi, ya damn octopus!"

"Gheow!"

...Great Genocide Max, the twenty-fourth in Altar's duel rankings and the Master of Bladeswarm Beast, Ipetam.

Max was using *a hundred blades*, already released by Ipetam, and their metallic shine was now reflected by Sekiun.

Thus, just one of her swings was now a hundred times more powerful than they had been before.

And despite having just acquired it today, she was using it very effectively.

Max was sending Ipetam's hundred blades at the APMs attacking me, and in between she was slicing at Cthulhu's tentacles.

The swarming blades and the focusing blade—Max could turn the Bladecloud Convergence skill on and off just by thinking it, and so she switched attack power between the hundred and the one as she both repelled the APMs around me and fought Cthulhu on the ship.

Max was a powerful Master who'd once made it to the top of Tenchi's infamously stacked duel rankings. She was far stronger than

her current position suggested.

"E e A h h...! E a h e A H e A h...!" Cthulhu was tough enough to deflect Chelsea's and Max's attacks, possessed regeneration so powerful you could see it happening in real time, and even had a skill that let him turn debuffs into a devastating offensive weapon. I wouldn't have been surprised if he was actually a match for Legendary UBMs.

However, he could still take damage that surpassed his toughness, and Chelsea and Max were overwhelming him to the point that his regeneration couldn't keep up.

Cthulhu swung his tentacles in rage, but Max sliced them off so they couldn't do any damage, and Chelsea detonated so many Gems around him at once that he lost his footing.

I'd once said that not even *Superiors* could create perfectly invincible monsters, and that was true here, as well. Chelsea could use her optimal combat style here, while Max had just obtained an incredible new power—and together, they were overwhelming Cthulhu.

"E e E a a A h h h H H H!"

And yet, he still moved.

Was it because of the Overlord's orders? Or was it the pride of a creature bearing the name of the Great Old One? Regardless, Cthulhu pointed a finger at Skyanchor, fully intent on destroying all of his enemies.

But then, there was a break in the flowing horde of mermen, letting Juliet and I leap into action.

I hopped on Silver, Juliet flapped her wings, and the both of us flew forward, keeping low to avoid the air mines.

"Juliet! You get Max!"

"Ah...! Okay!" Juliet understood what I was planning and sped toward the ship.

I, on the other hand, stopped right between the ship and Cthulhu.

"You realize this is a gamble, don't you?!" said Nemesis.

"The usual, then!"

"Well, I suppose...! Form shift—Black Shield!"

Right as the menacing light on the monster's extended finger grew stronger, Nemesis switched from the Flag Halberd to her shield form.

With Reversal gone, I was now afflicted with a bunch of debuffs—but I held on to Silver and tried to bear it.

And then...

"E e E a a A a A A A A A A A H H H H H H!"

"Counter Absorption!"

...a blue-purple light crashed into my barrier of light.

"Ngh...!" The beam attack was so concentrated it caused physical destruction.

Weathering the seven debuffs, I gave my all to hold on to Nemesis and the reins.

The beam felt like it was never-ending. The barrier of light cracked, on the verge of shattering, and a blue-purple aura was leaking through, touching the surface of the Black Shield. My defense would be broken in just a few more seconds.

"...We win."

However, I knew what would happen next.

I saw Max, holding on to Juliet's hand as she flew toward Cthulhu.

"Hyakujin Itto!" With that shout, meaning "Hundred Blades in One," Max swung the single blade empowered by hundred and split Cthulhu in half at the torso.

"E a h...?!" With a pained sound, the monster's top half fell into the blue water.

Cthulhu still tried to move for a moment, but eventually he disappeared, flickering out of existence as though flowing back into something that lay elsewhere.

"It's over." Switching to the Flag Halberd, I let out a sigh.

Cthulhu was probably set to return to a Jewel when he took too much damage. It looked like not even G wanted to lose a monster that she had used an MVP reward on.

Regardless, the threat blocking our path was now gone.

We also had less than half an hour left. We had to hurry and...

"Huh?! They...!"

"GEH GEH GEH!"

We'd beaten the mid-boss here. However, these mobs—the APMs—were still swarming the bridge.

"They're still coming?! Just how many of them are there?!"

"Franklin said he wanted a bunch of metal from my mines, so I got a very good deal on these," said G. "There's a *whole* lot more."

Metal, huh? He'll probably use that for monsters or Magingears, I thought. *But man, my sworn enemy and current enemy really struck a win-win deal, huh...*

"I fear that whatever he makes will be used against us," said Nemesis. She was probably right, but we had to focus on what was in front of us.

We could just rush forward, but getting stabbed in the back would be pretty bad too.

"All right! Maxie and I will hold them off! You two go on ahead!"

As I thought about what we had to do next, Chelsea raised her voice.

"I'm doin' this too...?! Well, fine!"

"Chelsea...?"

"G's probably after Ray. She'd probably do somethin' funny again if he doesn't go. Also... You wanna face her yourself, doncha, Julie?"

"Yeah!" Juliet said with a nod.

"Then that's how we're gonna split! We'll catch up once we're done here, so leave this to us and go!"

"Hey! Stop settin' death flags for us...!" said Max as she cut down some mermen and pointed Sekiun at the passage. "Hurry up and go!"

"...Thanks," I said. "We'll leave this to you!"

"We're off...!"

Thus, Juliet and I turned our backs to them and advanced deeper into the Depths of Jealousy, where the Overlord was waiting for us.

Chapter 8: Beneath the Starry Sky

Gideon, City of Duels, Central Arena

Over Gladiator, Figaro and King of Termination, Albert Schwartzkaiser.

They were both *Superiors* and powerful duelists, but their similarities went beyond that.

For one, they were both record holders—each had the most MVP rewards in Altar and Caldina, respectively.

Figaro's Cor Leonis empowered his gear and made him an extremely well-rounded combatant, which had allowed him to explore the Tomb Labyrinth solo and defeat many of the UBMs the control AIs had placed there.

Albert's Septentrion granted him resistances and effective counterattacks, which was how he had defeated many of the Caldinan UBMs that were known to be dangerous opponents due to their unique means of attack or defense.

Either of them could be the bane of just about anything they encountered, so they had each overcome many unique challenges. As a result, they had countless UBM rewards adjusted to suit them, and any battle between these two Masters would serve as an exhibition of these powerful artifacts.

First, Figaro drew a pistol.

He rarely used this, as it wouldn't be suitable as his main weapon—but that was exactly why he'd picked it.

Albert could come back to full health seven times, gaining new resistances and offensive powers with each comeback. This meant that Albert would be at his strongest after his seventh use of this power, and Figaro had to reserve his greatest weapon—Gloria α—for that moment. Until then, he wanted to avoid slashing and light-based attacks.

That was why Figaro had started with the pistol.

Watching him in silence, Albert drew out a weapon of his own.

It was another firearm, but it was nothing like Figaro's. It was a cannon.

Albert held two enormous barrels—each one as large as his own enormous body—in each arm. These were not two different weapons, though. A serpentine cable extended from the back of each barrel, connecting the two into one single weapon that resembled a two-headed snake.

This was the UBM reward, "Serpentflame Purger, Firelyx."

The moment Albert pulled the trigger, a flash of fire sparked deep within the cannon's maws...and the flames that burst out pierced through three of the arena's barriers.

The easy obliteration of their protection caused a stir among the audience, but they relaxed once they remembered that there were still two unbroken barriers on top of Integra's extra wards. This also made Albert's behavior in previous matches much more understandable—if his firepower was this potent, it made sense that he had refused to use it.

It was a bit early for the spectators to accept that he really *was* that powerful, though. After all—this was only his first attack.

As the flames quickly approached, Figaro widened his eyes, stopped attacking, and focused on evasion.

Albert, however, was still able to see his target. He turned around, swinging the maws of the cannon around with him. The flames pursued Figaro, licking the stage and leaving *two heated lines* on the barrier.

If he'd done this to a horde of monsters, it would've surely exterminated all of them.

That's probably a Legendary MVP reward, Figaro thought, analyzing Firelyx as he dodged its flames. *It must be like Ray's Miasmaflame Bracers, except focused on firepower. Ray's a special case, though...*

Firelyx's offensive power seemed to rival that of a Superior Job's ultimate skill, but the fact that Albert could keep firing it for such a long time meant that it must not cost much to activate.

Figaro considered that the item might be immensely Resource

efficient because of its simplicity, but he felt that was too much for a Legendary...

Actually, it looks like his MVP rewards are a special case too, he thought as he looked at Albert and noticed something. *That one doesn't protect the user.*

His opponent's body was *burning* in the flames released by his own weapon.

Unless they were completely fired in the wrong direction, item skills like Gardranda's Purgatorial Flames usually minimized their effects on the wielder. However, such balances and safety measures cost Resources, often making the items weaker than they would've been without them.

Firelyx didn't have that. Its fearsome flames scorched everything around it—Albert included.

In exchange for reducing MP costs and increasing firepower, it burned its wielder to death.

It seemed like a useless failure of an MVP reward...

"ɑ: Dubhe."

...but not when wielded by King of Termination.

The flames burning Albert subsided as he instantly returned to his original form.

He was still overwhelmed by immense heat, but he was no longer actively catching fire.

The reason for that was obvious.

He's resistant to it now, Figaro thought. *I see. So it works on self-inflicted damage too.*

Albert had used his own MVP reward to acquire the same fire resistance he'd used in the fight against Bishmal and Surt.

Albert's Septentrion was a Superior Embryo with the core themes of "learning" and "overcoming." The chain of skills that started with "ɑ: Dubhe" activated when he was near death and gave him a resistance to whatever phenomenon had contributed the most to bringing him there—usually the element that had dealt the most damage.

That meant it could be used regardless of where the damage had come from.

Using the skill on self-inflicted damage, though, wouldn't give him a new means of attack. The new attack would've been drawn from the skill's target, which was Albert himself—and as he possessed a Type Body Embryo, he was *built* differently than most people.

This meant that this first use of the skill didn't give him any offensive abilities, but that wasn't much of a problem, since he could now use Firelyx without any risk.

That wasn't the only change he'd undergone, though.

"What...?" A murmur arose from the audience as they sensed that Albert's flames had become more intense after his first comeback.

However, there was no actual change in the intensity of the flames. He'd been firing them at full power since the start.

What had changed was the *temperature* within the barrier. Firelyx's flames had already increased the temperature to several hundred degrees Celsius. Arena barriers allowed air to flow in, so the area inside never became a vacuum, but it was already an environment that no normal person could survive.

The only reason Figaro was largely unfazed by this was because he'd switched one of his rings for another with fire resistance and empowered it. He'd experienced scorching environments like this in the flaming traps of the deeper Tomb Labyrinth. That was why he'd been able to counter Albert's attack so readily.

His strategy's good too, Figaro thought. Even though Figaro could negate the effects of the temperature, it effectively *forced him to use* one of his item slots, preventing him from removing it to empower himself. Additionally, the fire resistance ring meant little against the flames of Firelyx itself.

Thus, Figaro went on the offensive. Turning his body to evade the snaking flames, he aimed the pistol in his right hand at Albert.

The weapon wasn't made of metal. Its surface was colored like limestone, and it was decorated with a pattern of serpentine scales, giving it the appearance of a snake flowing between rocks.

That was a hint toward what it had once been.

Figaro's first weapon was "Lifefall Petrifier, Marbledrop."

It was what remained of a small venomous snake UBM that had

once been feared as an invisible peril to all exploring the Tomb Labyrinth.

Avoiding the flames, Figaro fired its bullets straight toward Albert. However, Albert saw the gun pointing at him and moved Firelyx to evaporate the bullets before it could reach him.

The snakes of flame lapped at the bullet flying through the air...

...and the bullet passed clean through them.

A hint of shock could be seen on Albert's face. Marbledrop had once been a UBM that passed through the walls and floors of the Tomb Labyrinth to approach its targets and deliver its lethal bites.

Because of this, the bullets fired by its MVP reward had the ability to pass through anything nonliving.

Like a dark magic spell, the limestone-colored bullet ignored the call of the superheated flames. It simply continued its flight and *hit*.

That was when its second effect activated.

Shock overcame Albert as he saw the point of impact transform into limestone. The material that comprised his body was being turned into stone—Petrification effect. Normally, this could be resisted with enough HP and END.

However, it was Figaro who had fired the bullet.

Empowered by Cor Leonis, the Petrifying projectile quickly began to affect Albert's entire body.

Not yet resistant to Petrification, Albert became a stone statue, unable to do anything to stop it. Taciturn at the best of times, he fell utterly silent as Petrification rendered him completely immobile.

This obviously also locked his Firelyx completely in place.

"HYAAAH!" Figaro closed the distance between them and switched to another weapon—Gloria α.

This was perhaps the strongest blade among all Figaro's many MVP rewards.

However, he didn't use it to attack Albert's statue, instead splitting the two maws of the Firelyx.

The flames within it were unleashed, creating a massive explosion. Figaro jumped away, but Albert's Petrification prevented him from doing anything to protect himself.

Even though he had fire resistance, the pressure of the explosion

overwhelmed him and blasted his body into bits.

"Now..." With his fire resistance ring and his skilled evasion, Figaro reduced the explosion damage to a mere graze.

By the time the fire was gone, so was the Firelyx.

Albert himself had been reduced to fragments too small to recognize. He was certainly on the verge of death now.

I wonder... Figaro thought.

While Petrification was a debuff that completely immobilized those affected, Figaro rarely used this pistol. It certainly delivered a lethal debuff, but Figaro had multiple ways of killing his opponents that were easier than landing a shot. Plus, though it did lead directly to death, the debuff didn't kill instantly, so it was a little slow in ending a battle.

Figaro had used it now for a few reasons. One was to force Albert to use up a resistance slot for an attack type that was unrelated to his main one.

Another reason was to confirm something. Petrification was an immobilizing status effect that also prevented the use of skills. Even if Last Stand worked, Figaro thought the debuff might prevent Albert from using his heal and buff skill at least.

He'd chosen Marbledrop to check if he was right.

The answer to that...

"...β: Merak."

...came from the empty space in the form of a skill declaration.

The tiny fragments pulled themselves together, instantly rebuilding Albert's body.

"...I see," said Figaro. This wasn't an unexpected result—after all, Albert had come back even when Bishmal had evaporated his head and when Catherine Kongou had used Charm on him.

With this, Figaro now knew that Albert would come back even if he was rendered completely immobile.

Maybe the skill activations had some trick to them, but Figaro didn't think that suited Albert very well.

Thankfully, Figaro had no shortage of ways to defeat his enemies. He simply thought, *I'll just beat him six or seven more times.*

Albert returned to life with shock waves bursting in his hands.

This was the same power he'd used after his first comeback against Bishmal. Likely, it was an additional weapon meant to cause immense damage to the organs within the human body.

Direct attacks against the body weren't very useful in this scenario—indeed, they weren't useful in many scenarios where Albert used his equipment-focused combat style. This was because, while monsters often had special resistances, humans were generally frail enough for his MVP reward firepower to finish the job.

Thus, Albert had already decided what weapon he'd use now that Firelyx was gone.

Figaro also put away his two MVP rewards and took out another weapon.

This was only the end of the first round of their duel. If either of them was at a disadvantage here, though, it would be Albert. He'd already suffered fatal damage twice, and his Firelyx was destroyed.

The item he equipped next was a pair of bracers with a mechanism on the back meant to release some kind of gas.

As Figaro was thinking about Ray's Gardranda, the bracers released an intense burst of white mist. It filled the entire stage, but it didn't obscure the vision of the audience, as it was less dense than expected. The spectators could still observe the fight without a problem through the thin haze.

It was clear that it wasn't intended as a smoke screen, and just when the audience was starting to wonder if it might have been poison...

...they suddenly noticed that Figaro was acting strangely. He turned his head this way and that, as if looking around for his opponent.

The problem with that was that Albert wasn't even moving. What was Figaro looking for, then?

As Figaro was on high alert—or perhaps he was just confused—Albert took out his third item.

It was a very typical cannon, and he aimed it right at Figaro.

However, unlike before, Figaro didn't evade his shot. He only stood in place and looked around.

It was almost as if *he couldn't see a thing*.

Soon after, Albert pulled the trigger...

"Nghhh!"

...and *that* was when Figaro finally moved.

He dodged the projectile by a hair's breadth, and it flew past him to strike the barrier. It pierced through the five arena wards and even shook those added by Integra.

Figaro kept running around without stopping for a second, while Albert targeted him wherever he went.

This time, though, Albert aimed his cannon a bit lower than he had for his first attack, as though he didn't intend to hit the barrier at all.

The mist was so thin that the audience could see the battle clearly—and yet, they couldn't help but feel confused about the way things were unfolding.

"That MVP reward is craaazy."

But some of those watching knew exactly what was going on. One of them was a woman sitting in a box seat—the *Superior*, Fuso Tsukuyo.

"Generally speaking, MVP rewards with major flaws have equally major benefits to make up for it." Eishiro Tsukikage, her servant and aide, also spoke as if he understood the situation. He claimed that this situation was the result of the bracer MVP reward that filled the arena with a seemingly pointless mist—and that that was actually its flaw.

"Yep. It's like how my *Superior* reward can only target humans, has a smaller range, and only works on lower-level targets, but in exchange it got to keep its defense against ranged attacks. With enough drawbacks to balance it out, MVP rewards can use some parts of the UBM's full power."

"This one has two flaws," said Eishiro. "First, you can easily see from the outside in. And second..."

"The big guy can't see anything either. The mist blocks out the senses of anyone inside, *including his own*. It's a flaw that ignores the wielder's safety, just like the other item he used."

While Figaro's behavior was obviously strange, Albert's own movements were a bit awkward too, so they both guessed at the

reason behind it.

And they were completely right.

The bracers were a Legendary MVP reward, "Toxicating Mistbringer, Drac-Mist."

This was an MVP reward that fully shut down the visual, auditory, and olfactory senses of anyone inside.

The item was useless against anyone outside the mist, and since Albert would almost certainly be in the middle of it, he was guaranteed to be affected.

It was an extremely flawed item, and anyone using it could easily be overwhelmed and killed by any opponents outside the effect's range.

Needless to say, the mist had no such flaws when used by the Mistdragon King, Drac-Mist. However...

"The fact that he has the MVP reward means that he must've beaten the UBM," said Tsukuyo. "He's gotta have something that lets him fight in the mist."

The more flawed the MVP reward, the stronger its effects. However, capable and cunning Masters were able to counteract the flaws—or find a way to use them to their advantage.

Tsukuyo herself had something like this. Kaguya's Faint Light skill could reduce enemy levels and turn Gloria β into a fearsome weapon capable of killing any non-SJ. Based on this principle, Tsukuyo and Eishiro speculated that Albert could aim at Figaro as well as he did because he also possessed some method of overcoming the mist's flaws.

Was it his Superior Embryo, then? Had he developed a resistance to this item's effects, just as he had with Firelyx?

No—Albert hadn't been brought to the verge of death. He hadn't gained a resistance to the mist, and it didn't deal damage, so he might not have even been able to in the first place.

The synergy here wasn't with his Embryo, but with his job. He was using the skills he had as King of Termination—the *kill-specialized Superior Job*.

The words "kill-specialized" likely brought a number of things to mind. Did it refer to immense firepower meant to kill many foes? Did

it grant some special powers that enabled his attacks to be more effective against a variety of enemies?

King of Termination actually did neither.

Termination in this context meant *extermination*.

When someone used immense firepower to wipe out a horde of monsters that threatened the people and their way of life, a small number was likely to survive. These monsters would run away, grow their numbers, restore themselves, and once again rise to become a danger to the people.

King of Termination would not allow this to happen.

The job had two skills besides the ultimate.

The first of them was "Countdown Radar." This allowed him to select a type of monster that he had defeated and immediately learn the locations of all other monsters of the same type.

The second skill was "Scar Marking," which told him the current location and stats of anyone he dealt damage to.

Indeed—King of Termination was actually a job focused on *pursuit*.

No matter how hard his quarry tried to hide or flee, the terminator would follow you to the ends of the earth.

Albert was specialized in extermination through *not letting anything get away*.

Figaro was currently affected by Scar Marking, due to Firelyx's explosion that had recently obliterated Albert. Figaro had jumped away and was equipped with a fire resistance accessory, so he hadn't taken that much damage. In fact, he was barely scratched.

That, however, was more than enough. Scar Marking had been activated the moment Figaro was touched by Firelyx's explosion.

Because of this, Albert could attack him even though he couldn't use his vision, hearing, or sense of smell.

This was exactly the strategy he'd used to defeat Drac-Mist. And unlike the dragon, Figaro couldn't sense a thing. The tide had turned overwhelmingly in Albert's favor.

"I am impressed how well he is handling it, though," Eishiro commented. Despite losing three of his five senses, and even though Albert could still see him, Figaro hadn't received a single hit yet. His

evasive movements were timed as though he knew when the attacks were coming, and Eishiro was wondering why that was.

"It's the hat," said Tsukuyo as she used a fan to point at the feathered hat Figaro always wore. "It's an MVP reward, 'Avian Windwatcher, Weather Feather.' It's got a juiced-up version of Killing Intent Perception or something. I think it reacts to dungeon traps too."

"I see. That explains his skillful dodging."

A versatile danger-sensing item—it made sense that a solo dungeon explorer like Figaro would wear such a thing all the time.

"And, well... There's something else he's always got on hand, right?"

The moment Tsukuyo said that, Figaro switched his equipment.

There was now a chain in each of his hands. The Crimson Dead Keepers—some of his most-used weapons.

A hint of shock came over Albert's face. The two chains attacked automatically—not by vision, hearing, or smell, but by locking on to the opponent's vital signs.

Their aim was true despite the mist, and they struck out. Albert's heart and head were pulverized.

Albert staggered as metallic parts tumbled from his damaged body...

"γ: Phecda."

...but this activated his third healing and buff skill, immediately fixing all the parts he'd lost.

The two chains continued attacking him, but they now bounced off him without dealing any damage.

In exchange for defeating Albert once despite his inability to see, Figaro could no longer fight him using impact-based physical attacks.

Despite that, he didn't put the chains away, instead choosing to continue his attack—or maybe his inability to see or hear had prevented him from realizing that Albert had already been beaten once.

"Hmm?" As Tsukuyo watched this battle, a question appeared in her mind. It wasn't directly about the battle in the mist, though.

"I've been thinking this since the fifth battle, but...that one's

kinda *fragile*, huh?" She was referring to Albert. Though they'd been launched by Figaro, who empowered all his gear, it was still surprising that the chains had dealt fatal damage to Albert, since they weren't MVP awards.

His skills that granted resistances made up for that, but it was hard to deny that Albert seemed fragile.

King of Termination was a job that granted mainly HP and STR. While END certainly went up slower than those, it still felt like he was receiving more deadly injury-based debuffs than he should have.

"Machine parts fly off when he's damaged, so maybe he's a full-body replacement...? A Type Body, in other words. If that's true...it would explain a lot." Tsukuyo's guess was right on the mark: Albert's Septentrion was a Type Body Superior Embryo that replaced his entire body with a mechanical one.

While Embryos of this type were extremely rare, the few examples that did exist had several things in common.

One of them was that they applied a negative modifier to any stats increased by jobs. In exchange for his transformation ability and the properties of a slime, King of Crime had a negative modifier on all stats, for example.

Similarly, Septentrion also had such a stat penalty—especially for END. As a Superior Job with a high level, he should've been extremely tough, but he was actually so fragile that even Bishmal—a mere high-rank job—could strangle him to death.

Some might have argued that Septentrion's resistance-granting skills made this flaw more like a feature, but...

Sechs gets negative stat mods in return for gaining the properties of a slime and the transformation thing, Tsukuyo thought. *It would make sense if this one gives him the resistance power, but also the properties of a machine.*

There actually was some evidence to suggest that. Albert could activate his skill even when his head had been crushed or he'd been turned to stone. The mechanism that allowed that might've been related to how his body actually functioned.

However, just watching the battle from the box seat wasn't

enough to let Tsukuyo figure it out.

In fact, even Figaro didn't know that, and he was the one fighting Albert.

"Hmm..."

"Kage? What's wrong?" Tsukuyo asked, sensing that Eishiro had a question.

"Figaro must've realized that his opponent is fragile by now."

"Well, of course. He's got Reveal and all."

"Then why is he not switching out the chains?" Now that Eishiro had brought it up, it *was* strange that Figaro did not seem to have realized he'd already destroyed Albert.

And yet, despite having already granted him resistance to his chains, the duel champion continued the attack.

"What's he trying to do?"

"He has also removed his footwear and is now barefoot," Eishiro commented. Indeed, Figaro had removed the Unbound Sabatons MVP reward that protected him from binding effects and was now fighting on his bare feet.

While lowering the amount of things he had equipped empowered his remaining items, it seemed like that wasn't his intention here.

"...No way." Tsukuyo realized what Figaro was doing, and it made her break into a cold sweat.

No way he's trying to pull something that absurd, right? she thought.

But she was exactly on the mark.

A moment later, despite having lost three of his senses, *Figaro ran toward Albert*.

He zigzagged to avoid the cannon fire, but he was definitely approaching him. He shouldn't have been able to see, yet it was as if he knew Albert's location with perfect accuracy.

Albert seemed a tiny bit shocked. He couldn't actually see Figaro's approach, but Scar Marking made it clear that Figaro was closing the distance between them.

How did Figaro know where he was?

Albert assumed that it was because of the attacks Figaro had

been making with his chains—or what Albert figured were chains, anyway, based on prior information.

Because of this, Albert changed into a coat-like MVP reward that released a shock wave around him and used it on the chains attacking him. This reward also didn't consider the safety of the wearer and would've pulverized himself too, but he already had resistance to physical impacts.

The chains that must've been guiding Figaro were shattered as they struck the shock wave barrier around Albert. If he came too close, Figaro would meet the same fate.

Blind, deaf, and unable to smell, Figaro charged toward Albert, *only to stop right before the shock wave*.

Scar Marking told Albert what he'd done, and the fact that Figaro had stopped moving right outside the shock wave's effective range really threw him for a loop.

He'd lost three of his senses—how could Figaro know Albert's location and predict his attacks with such precision?

The answer to that resided in things he *hadn't* lost.

Figaro had continued attacking with his chains even after Albert had become resistant to their damage in order to measure the distance between him and his opponent, based on the feel of the chains as they pulled him along.

As he did that, he also made himself barefoot to *feel the vibrations* on the stage.

Was Albert moving? Was he firing? Did his method of attack change? Figaro answered all these questions using only these vibrations.

Indeed—though he'd lost three of his senses, he was able to measure the opponent's location using *only the sense of touch*.

"HYAH!" And using this absurd tactic, the duel champion caught up to his opponent and equipped two new MVP rewards.

In his left hand was an Ancient Legendary MVP reward, the "Glacial Burstlance, Jökulhlaup."

Aiming this weapon—perhaps best described as a "gun lance"—at Albert, Figaro pulled the trigger.

The man was instantly overwhelmed by immense frost.

He couldn’t fend off the cold with his shock waves. The coat MVP reward, the cannon he was holding, the Drac-Mist on his wrists, and his own body were all Frozen in a split second.

Stepping on the freezing stage with his own two feet, Figaro thrust at the icy sculpture with the lance.

With Albert’s toughness greatly reduced by the ice, Figaro’s empowered attack instantly shattered him, reducing him to pale dust.

“δ: Megrez.”

As the MVP reward’s mist cleared, Albert used his fourth heal and buff skill.

However, Figaro was right in front of him, brandishing his next weapon.

Having equipped it alongside the lance, he was holding the Ancient Legendary “Scattering Spellblade, Paledin.” This was a shapeless energy blade that inflicted dark damage and a curse-based damage-over-time debuff, and Figaro used it to slash at Albert.

He was aiming to take advantage of Albert’s cooldown.

The Rear Soldier’s Last Stand skill couldn’t be used for five seconds after its effect expired. If brought to 1 HP within this interval, Albert wouldn’t be able to survive.

That was what Figaro was attempting to do.

Normally, killing Albert in just five seconds after he was fully healed was difficult. HP was easy to increase as far as stats went, and with him being an HP and STR-focused SJ, Albert’s HP easily surpassed 200,000 even with the growth penalty imposed by his job. Because of this, many had tried to kill him by destroying vital body parts or suffocating him, but no one had managed to do it before he could use Last Stand again.

This didn’t apply to Figaro, however.

Focusing his gear empowerment abilities on his weapon and AGI items, Figaro intended to use these five seconds to reduce Albert’s HP to nothing.

Once again, Albert was shocked. Far behind his opponent in terms of AGI, he wasn’t able to switch his equipment in time.

One second. Albert lost control of both his arms and a third of his HP.

Two seconds. Albert's head was disabled, and he lost two thirds of his HP.

Three seconds. Albert's torso was slashed horizontally, bringing his HP to 1.

Four seconds. Albert was split in half from the top of his head to the groin. This was an attack meant to take away that last tiny sliver of HP.

Five seconds. Albert *still had 1 HP left*.

Figaro's expression warped in confusion.

Albert hadn't activated Last Stand. After enduring all of those lethal attacks, there was no way he could have any HP left without using his job skill.

And yet, Albert still had 1 HP.

This could only mean that his combo didn't rely on Last Stand.

"ε: Alioth."

And so, he used the fifth heal and buff skill.

He'd come back yet again, as if nothing had happened.

"This is..."

It made no sense. Most members of the audience thought that Figaro simply failed to defeat him in time, but it was abundantly clear that he'd delivered more than enough damage to do that.

And yet, Albert had still survived with 1 HP and revived himself.

There has to be something more, Figaro thought. Albert's healing *wasn't* from the synergy between his Embryo and his job. Figaro was certain of that, and he guessed that it must be from yet another MVP reward—or something else entirely.

Having come back, Albert was as silent as ever, but he had leaped into action.

A new MVP reward had appeared right next to him. It was the item he'd tried to take out while being torn by Figaro's spellblade—a suit of armor as crimson as fresh blood, larger than even a man as imposing as Albert.

It had a different feel about it than any MVP reward he'd brought out so far. While it looked mechanical, it also gave off the impression

of something that labored under a dire curse.

In fact, it was the Ancient Legendary "Crimson Armor, Exademon"—perhaps the strongest MVP reward in Albert's arsenal.

"Crimson-Stained Steel: Exademon."

For the first time, Albert spoke the name of a skill other than his Embryo skills.

"O o o r r r g h h..." Responding to the call, the armor made a growl reminiscent of a carnivorous beast, then opened up like a maw and engulfed Albert whole.

A moment later, red liquid that looked like oily blood flowed out from within.

Some shrieks could be heard in the audience. They couldn't understand what was happening here. Some even assumed that this was some kind of attack by Figaro.

However, Figaro himself knew that wasn't the case. His eyes then widened, and he jumped back at the same time as Albert made his move.

"ζ: Mizar." Even though he hadn't been attacked, he activated his heal and buff skill for the sixth time.

As he did so, though, he moved. Clad in the strange armor, Albert raised his fist high and brought it down like a hammer.

The next moment, *the stage vanished*.

A thunderous sound akin to a meteor impact echoed even outside the arena. The stone of the stage was shattered, blasting debris into the air with such force that it broke through several layers of the barrier.

Some screams resounded from the audience, but Integra's barriers were able to keep them safe from the rocks.

That obviously wasn't true for Figaro, though. Shards of stone too numerous to evade had sliced open countless small wounds on his body.

Following this first impact, the stage became a crater, and within it stood Albert, clad in crimson armor, and Figaro, covered in his own scarlet blood.

This damage would've been far worse if he hadn't retreated as quickly as he did.

"...I see." Figaro now understood how Albert's armor worked.

Neither Albert nor the armor had performed any special attack.

He'd only swung down his fist *as hard as he could*.

The effect, however, had been as powerful as a Superior Job's ultimate skill. The full body armor MVP reward, "Crimson Armor, Exademon," had only one skill on it—"Crimson-Stained Steel: Exademon." It dealt fixed damage that reduced the wearer's HP to 1, then converted the damage dealt into attack power and defense.

Many of Albert's MVP rewards were unwieldy, but this one was a whole new level of difficult to handle. Having just 1 HP meant that even a scratch could kill you.

But in Albert's case, it was nothing but an advantage. It guaranteed a near-death state, and granted him resistance to fixed damage on top of immense attack power and defense.

In fact, when combined with KoT's own stats, Albert's current attack power actually exceeded that of King of Destruction in his Godcloth. Even Figaro would die in one direct hit.

And this attack power was matched by his defense.

Faced with this, anyone reasonable would simply give up.

"...Heh heh." However, Figaro didn't look remotely resigned or despairing.

This was an extreme situation where even a single hit would kill him, and yet he was laughing.

All-out battles like this were exactly what Figaro wanted. There was no cowardice or compromise here.

After all, there was still something he could do. While he had countless MVP rewards, there weren't many that would work against his opponent's current defense, but there was still one option.

"This is a bit earlier than planned," Figaro said as he took out a broadsword.

It didn't look all that impressive, but its overwhelming presence felt like it could burn anyone to cinder.

Gloria α—the strongest weapon in Figaro's arsenal, and the one he'd used to defeat other *Superiors* like Xunyu and Tsukuyo.

It was the second time he'd equipped it in this duel. But this time, he wouldn't use it on a weapon, but on the armor the opponent was

wearing. It would surely cut through not just the MVP reward, but Albert himself.

Instead of worrying about giving Albert a resistance to his strongest item, Figaro chose to focus on cutting him apart.

The Over Gladiator, brandishing a sword, and King of Termination, clad in armor.

The two faced each other as their battle entered its final stage.

Chapter 9: Paradigm Shift

Paladin, Ray Starling

We ran and ran down a long, straight passage.

Even though we were still activating traps, they were all the kind that came with the Depths of Jealousy. It didn't seem like we were encountering anything else that G added herself.

My guess was that since we got past the mid-boss, she had no intention of stopping us now.

It felt like she actually *wanted* us to reach the end of the dungeon—like she really did want us to come to her.

That was exactly what was strange about G—an ordinary thief would never act like this. If all she wanted was to complete her ult and take our arena, she could've done a lot more to stop us.

However, she'd set up the time limit and the obstacles in our way to make this as close as possible—almost like she was balancing a game.

I'd seen a few of her videos, and it never seemed like she was trying to create a situation where her enemies had no hope of winning. I got the impression that, while she didn't want to lose, she was also *prioritizing something over certain victory*. It was much like how her brother would do *anything* for his research.

But if that was the case, then what *was* G's main goal...?

"Hm?" As we proceeded, the passage drastically changed. Its cave-like appearance was suddenly replaced by man-made stone construction, and the lighting now came not from dimly glowing crystals, but magic lights that activated when we came closer.

The overall effect reminded me of a dark lord's castle from an old RPG, and the lights guided us deeper in.

"I didn't see this area," I muttered. One of G's videos I'd watched had been set in the Depths of Jealousy, but the Masters she'd picked a fight with had all been defeated by the fearsome traps and the

rest of G's clan.

At the end of the video, she'd said something like, "The defense has too much of an advantage here! I should really be more cautious about using this place!" It seemed like she'd decided we were the right opponents to challenge the Depths of Jealousy.

"Hmm... Lights and stone," said Nemesis. "I do not see any traps here, but this is quite a view..."

"This must just be what G likes," said Juliet. "It does look really good."

She wasn't wrong. If this hadn't been a path leading us directly to an enemy, I would have stopped to admire the style and beauty on display here.

The passage soon ended, though, and we arrived at our goal—a strange room that seemed like a mix of the natural and man-made sections of the dungeon. The floor and walls were entirely covered in dark-gray rectangles of stone, and the light of the eerie chandelier hanging from the ceiling disrupted the shadows cast by the tapestries on the walls.

But where the wall farthest from the entrance should have been, there was instead a plunge pool with a blue waterfall endlessly flowing into it.

And enshrined right before it, there was a throne too large for any human.

"Greetings, brave intruders! I bid you welcome! You are the first to ever make it to my throne room!" Overlord Invidia, G was waiting for us. Her legs dangled as she sat on the oversized throne and looked at us in glee. "Well? What do you think? Me and my clan worked so hard to renovate this place, but no one could make it this far, so I haven't even gotten to reveal it until now! Thanks for the opportunity!"

"Um... Uh... You're welcome?" G's genuine happiness made Juliet a bit perplexed. "Ummm... If you're satisfied now...could you please stop trying to take Ray's arena...?"

"That is one thing! *This* is another! We're playing this out until the bitter end!" G denied Juliet's request with a smile. "You got about twenty minutes left! That's enough time for a good climax! You've

got a dungeon! You've got an Overlord! It'd be a waste to end it now!"

G then hopped off the throne, stood up, and took out her weapon.

My eyes widened. It was a sinister-looking trident, perfectly suited for a devil.

However, it was *absurdly* large.

Its length exceeded five metels, making it over three times larger than the girl who held it. The edges and the grip were appropriately thick too—it seemed far too unwieldy for someone her size.

"What's her fighting style, anyway...?" Juliet wondered, and I couldn't blame her.

The Overlord series of jobs could be acquired by anyone who cleared the associated dungeons. This meant they had no prerequisite jobs, which made it difficult for Juliet to guess her powers. I'd seen some of her videos, but I wasn't that much better informed than she was. All I knew was her basic combat style and the fact that she stole locations and added them to her Embryo.

Based on the video of her breaking into Titania's live concert, her stats were about on the same level as a vanguard SJ, and she was a well-rounded combatant who fought using a mix of weaponry and magic.

But that also meant that she didn't have the kinds of standout combat abilities you'd expect from a *Superior*...and I hadn't seen her use that huge trident in any of the videos I watched.

"Well, I don't think the Embryo itself is the type that contributes to the battle directly..." I said.

"Oh? So you didn't watch all of my videos?" G asked, tilting her head.

"Sadly, I only started watching recently. I only managed to watch the newest ones."

"So... That means you saw the band battle and the recent dungeon raid I set up when I was bored. Well, that's understandable, then. I get it," she said as she let out a sigh, then smiled again. "That means...you'll get to see everything live!"

The relaxed atmosphere instantly became one of extreme

tension.

The aura of powerful creatures was something I'd encountered many times in this world. This Overlord had it too, and was directing it right toward us...

My eyes widened. Right—while she seemed like a fun-loving, mischievous type of person, someone we could have a casual chat with, there was now no doubt that she was also an Overlord.

There weren't even double-digit numbers of her kind in the world, and she—Overlord Invidia, one of Desire's *Superiors*—was among the most powerful.

"Action!"

With that word as the signal, G made her move.

She swung her treelike trident as if to sweep us away. As the massive weapon hurtled toward me at the speed of sound, I swung my halberd up to meet it.

I was empowered by seven buffs, but the weight of the attack still pushed me backward. It wasn't enough to break my stance, though.

But as if taking advantage of this moment, Overlord Invidia held up her left hand and cast some sort of dark magic, firing ten projectiles of black light toward me.

"Blackwing Requiem!"

They all failed to reach me. As I was pushed backward, Juliet fired a volley of her own dark magic, canceling out G's.

While their magic clashed, Juliet moved at supersonic speeds to close the distance between them.

The sight made G's eyes widen.

Juliet had great combat instincts even by duelist standards—only the likes of Figaro could match her. Even other SJs would have a hard time countering her movements. Now, she was trying to land an attack on G before she could swing that trident again. The Overlord didn't have enough time to intercept it.

"Ah ha ha ha ha! In that case... Take this!"

But it was Juliet's turn to be shocked as her flight trajectory was abruptly changed.

I noticed a thread of light extending from one of the three points

of the trident.

"Got you, little *fishy*!" G taunted, and the thread of light began winding back.

Juliet was forcefully, at a high speed, being dragged toward the tip of the trident.

"It pulls enemies into it!" That meant they could effectively negate the distance between allies and enemies—very useful in any battle.

Juliet flapped her wings, trying to fight against the pull, but then G pulled the trident back, preparing to skewer her catch.

"Not happening!" Using my enhanced leg strength, I stuck out my left hand and rushed toward G. "Purgatorial Flames!"

The bracer opened its maw, releasing scorching flames from within.

"Whoa?!" G jumped away before they could reach her, but that made the thread of light vanish, freeing Juliet.

"That was enough to break it?" The thread of light had appeared without even a skill declaration, and it had disappeared just as easily. Maybe it was the type of thing that only activated under certain conditions?

"It probably requires her to look at her target or stay still herself... I think." Juliet answered my question.

She'd actually experienced it, so she could probably *feel* a little bit of how it worked. The flames had blocked G's vision of Juliet, and she'd moved away to dodge them. It seemed pretty likely that either of those things had interfered with the thread's effect.

"That's a good guess, Julie! You're right! Harodihg Gnik's 'Attraction Anchor' requires line of sight to work!" And with that, G herself once again revealed the nature of her power to us—as well as the viewers who would watch the video.

It's rare to see people who reveal their hand so casually, I thought.

"'Harodihg Gnik,' though?" I said, after a moment. "That name's pretty hard to say... Hold on! Is that seriously what it's called?!"

When I realized what the name was when you read it *backward*, I couldn't help but make that comment.

"Hey, this was made for me by my clan members. What's your problem with the name? You're being rude."

"*I'm* being rude?! Tell that to whoever named it!"

"Hm?" G and even Juliet both tilted their heads, clearly not sure what I meant.

"You don't even get the reference?! Damn it! First the monsters, now the weapon... Do you have anything with a normal name?!"

I mean, I get that these weird names might spice up the video, but still...!

There was one conclusion we could draw from the battle so far, though—that G actually was a combatant who used both weapons and magic, much like Juliet. She wasn't the type who was impossible to counter on the first try, and she didn't have any gimmicks that made her pretty much unbeatable. Sure, she had advantages like R'lyeh blocking all attacks from the outside and her ability to choose our location when we went inside, but they were irrelevant now that we were inside and fighting her.

Though, again... If she really wanted to have the arena, she could've just dumped us right into some instakill traps.

It really did seem like the arena and avenging F weren't actually her top priorities.

"I already knew this from your videos, but you make a good comedic straight man! You'd be a great addition to my work. Would you like to appear in more of these? Julie can join too!"

"Nope."

"Huh?" *I sure as hell don't wanna deal with a mischievous criminal more than I have to, but... Juliet, why do you sound a bit disappointed?*

"Okay! I guess I'll have to make the most out of...this!"

Laughing at my answer, G charged at me.

"Juliet!"

"Oh. Right!"

Juliet instantly understood what I meant and released a barrage of dark magic. Launched toward G's head, it completely obscured her vision.

"You sure think fast! Already countering Harodihg Gnik, huh?

But...!”

Though her threads of light were disabled, G didn’t falter one bit. She used dark magic of her own and swung the trident at Juliet, who met it with her sword.

G’s eyes widened. Her trident clashed with Juliet’s blade—but unlike me, she wasn’t sent flying backward.

“That sword...!” G said. While the two of them were locked sword to trident, G and I both noticed that Juliet had at some point switched her weapon.

It was a sword of a pure black color—the new weapon she’d won in her Tournament.

Its name was “Spiritblade Gleam, Gradsoul,” and it had come from Spiritblade Rider, Gradsoul—Juliet’s reward for Tournament day four and an Ancient Legendary UBM that converted grudge into power, just like the Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise.

Adjusted to suit Juliet, the dark blade Gradsoul had two skills.

First was Curse Conversion. When cursed with the Fallen Knight’s “Darkness of Valediction,” it converted it into a buff for Juliet, giving a fifty percent increase to all her stats except HP, MP, and SP.

Clad in a dark, cursed aura, the sword had already activated this skill, empowering Juliet and giving her stats that brought her up to the Overlord’s level, if not higher.

“I saw you use that while sparring! It looks really useful! I’m kinda jealous!”

“Th-Thanks...!”

Now that Juliet was buffed too, we had the upper hand. G’s stats were very high. She was on about the same level as Juliet right now, as well as me with all my Reversed debuffs.

However...stats weren’t everything.

“G herself is not that skilled,” said Nemesis. Indeed—she was nothing like Figaro, Kashimiya, or other ranking duelists.

From our battle so far, I could tell that her fighting ability was limited by her use of sense skills—it was something that any regular player could have. Even if she had high stats, in practice she would lose against Juliet, who had both an SJ and excellent combat instincts—and her Embryo, R’lyeh, could hardly contribute to battles

like this.

If we both attacked G now, we'd definitely overpower her.

Juliet demonstrated this fact by slashing close enough to slice off a bit of G's hair.

G backed away, touching the now-shortened lock of hair. Her eyes widened as she looked at us.

"Yeah! This could be pretty bad for me!" G casually admitted that she was at a disadvantage.

"Could you stop this, then? If you turn off the ult..."

"Hm? You misunderstood, Julie. I said this *could be* bad for me. Not that it *is*." G shook her head as she denied Juliet's suggestion. "If anything, the fun is just getting started."

Her smile grew wider, and a moment later, she jumped even farther back.

She was headed behind the throne—to the blue waterfall endlessly flowing from the ceiling.

It had just looked like part of the decor at first, but it turned out that it was more than that...

"Ah ha ha ha ha!" G jumped into the plunge pool, and her skin started *melting away*.

It didn't end there either. According to Reveal, she was now afflicted with seven debuffs—Poison, Magic Drain, Soul Drain, Weakness, Lethargy, Paralysis, and Frailty.

"These debuffs... Wait, that waterfall is...!"

"Yes! It's a source of the debuffs flowing through the Depths of Jealousy! R'lyeh could only take one of those sources... But that's more than enough! That's exactly why this place is the goal!" Despite being afflicted by so many status effects, G was still laughing. Like an ascetic meditating beneath a waterfall, she exposed herself to the deadly torrent.

The scene made Juliet's eyes widen and her face turn pale. It felt like she couldn't wrap her head around what G was doing or why.

"When I first watched the Unbreakable fight the Hell General..." The Overlord didn't seem to care about her awful condition. Instead she just kept talking to me, or Juliet—or maybe to the cameras that were probably installed all over the place here. "This was before the

Unbreakable's fight against my brother, so I watched it like anyone would watch a viral video about a newbie. And it made me think..."

G placed her left hand on her chest and cracked a smile that only grew wider and wider.

"'Oh, *someone's doing the same thing as me*.'"

My eyes widened as I instantly understood those words.

"By the way," G continued, "do you know what dark lords in RPGs always have?"

"What?"

"Ah...!" Juliet seemed confused, but I knew exactly what she was saying.

The bad feeling I had quickly turned to panic, and I rushed toward G.

I got to the plunge pool, but before I could swing my halberd...

"*Paradigm Shift*."

...Overlord Invidia's form was engulfed in a sinister light.

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Altea, The Royal Capital, The Royal Castle

That evening, after having dinner, Third Princess Theresia was sitting alone on her bed. She was thought to be sickly, so neither the maids nor the knights who protected her questioned this.

However, she did have a specific reason for being alone now.

Both Altimia and Integra—Altar's strongest tian and most skilled caster—had left the castle to go to Gideon.

Situations like this were convenient for Theresia in many ways.

"You're here, aren't you? Come out."

She clapped her hands, prompting a man to appear in her room.

For a moment, he looked like a mix between a bat and a person, but he soon took the form of an ordinary human.

His name was Morter Cortana, and he was the former King of Raids, as well as a former Idea working for IF.

And now, he was a Dependent of the current The Evil—Theresia C. Altar.

"Did you finish the job?"

“The scary women leave, and you tell me to bring the info I’ve gathered so far... What’s this about?” Grumbling to his boss, Morter took out an Inventory full of documents and handed it to Theresia. From the outside, it might have looked strange that an adult was being ordered around by a child, but Theresia could actually kill him without breaking a sweat. In fact, she was so much more powerful that she might as well have inhabited a different dimension.

Also, it had been Morter himself who’d chosen to stop being human and obey Theresia to survive—he had no right to complain.

“Thanks. I can now make better future plans and think of something more specific.”

“That so?”

“I could call you here more often if Altimia and Integra weren’t around so much... Can you do something about that?”

“Please. They’re really powerful even by Superior Job standards. The only reason I could come here safely at all is because they’re both in Gideon now... It’s a real pain in the ass that your room is so deep in the castle.”

“Heh heh. Sorry. I’m all sickly and weak, you know?”

“As if. You’re like one of the most overpowered beings in the entire world...” The Dependent wasn’t amused by her joke. “Oh yeah, by the way, I heard in town that there’s been some trouble in Gideon,” he said.

“Oh? Do tell.”

“A Caldinan *Superior* joined The Tournaments. The gossip’s all about how he’s gonna end up fighting Figaro.”

“I see... I wonder if that’s another one of her plays. With all the scheming she does around me, I can’t help but find her troublesome.”

Theresia let out a sigh as a certain woman came to mind. She didn’t know the woman’s face, but she knew *what she was* all too well.

“Should I do something?” Morter asked.

“I don’t know what should be done, so no. And if the matches progress as normal, the Over Gladiator will certainly be winning this. Shu has often told me how strong he is. Though, this world is full of

things that one simply can't expect, so I suppose I can't be too sure about that."

"...You're not wrong." Through involvement with things he didn't even want to think about, Morter had fallen from grace, become a criminal, been captured, been turned into an Idea, and then become a Dependent of this girl before him.

He was starting to take the unexpected for granted.

"It is quite impressive, though," said Theresia. "Figaro became the Over Gladiator without taking any other Superior Jobs... All that really did for him was remove his level cap and give him some extra item slots."

"What do you mean?"

"The Over Gladiator is The Hero's *prototype Superior Job*."

"Prototype?"

"Yes. The prototype for The Hero, who can take lots of jobs and sub-jobs, then use them all together. Similarly, the Over Gladiator can use the skills of multiple Superior Jobs without regard for their groupings."

The Hero's "Almighty" skill let him take a hundred high-rank and hundred low-rank jobs, and on top of that, it allowed him to use all of their skills.

The Over Gladiator's "Complete" skill didn't add any job slots, but it allowed him to freely use the skills of his subbed Superior Jobs, and anyone could have as many of those as they wanted.

However, Figaro had no other Superior Jobs, so the job's biggest advantage was not currently active.

"Superior Jobs had prototypes?" Having been King of Raids, Morter was intrigued by this new revelation regarding jobs.

"All Special Superior Jobs have prototypes. No exceptions. For example, the 'General' series of jobs—oh, with the exception of Hell General and Heaven General—were all prototypes for Conquest General."

"No exceptions? Does that include your job?" Morter asked as he looked at the girl—the youngest and most fearsome Special Superior Job of all.

"Yes. My Special Superior Job is the key to The Demise, and my

prototypes are the Overlord series of jobs.”

As The Evil, Theresia couldn’t reveal much to other people.

However, that didn’t apply to her Dependents. She could tell Morter the many secrets she knew—and that might’ve been why, when they were alone, they always seemed to have conversations like this.

“The Infinite Jobs—the creators of this world—prepared those jobs to create and individually test the many functions of The Evil. The power to turn inorganic things into monsters that I showed when fighting you is based on Overlord Acedia’s ‘Enthrall,’ while the power that made your body into what it is now is based on Overlord Luxuria’s ‘Progress.’”

“I see...” Morter said as his gaze shifted toward his hand. He currently had the form of a person, but if he wanted, he could become something that was neither human nor monster. And this was made possible by that Overlord’s...and The Evil’s power. “So The Evil has the powers of all seven Overlords...?”

“Yes. Well... Actually, it’s not quite that simple.”

Theresia nodded for a moment, but then seemed to remember something.

“What do you mean?”

“There’s one function that changed between the testing and the implementation, so I have the powers of six Overlords and one power that’s entirely new.”

“So there was one prototype that turned out to be no good?”

“More or less.” If the purpose of a prototype was to pinpoint any problems in a design, then that one was a success in its own way.

“So, which Overlord job had its function replaced?” Morter asked.

Theresia let out a sigh...

“Overlord Invidia.”

...and spoke the title of the very Overlord currently fighting in the depths, ready to use the power of her job.

“Overlord Invidia’s skill is called ‘Paradigm Shift.’ It’s a power that strengthens you the more status effects you have and the more cornered you are. Envy from the depths... It turns all status effects into *inverted and empowered* buffs.”

It was essentially a direct upgrade to the Flag Halberd's "Like a Flag Flying the Reversal."

"I can think of lots of insane uses for that. Why didn't The Evil get it?"

"Honestly, I wonder about that myself sometimes. If I had it, I probably wouldn't have gotten kidnapped by Sechs... Though, that's how I met Shu, so maybe it was for the best."

As Theresia reminisced, Morter looked at her in shock and thought, *The boss of my old group kidnapped...this? Insane.*

"Though, the reason I didn't get it is simply because we'd *never get the chance to use it*."

"Never?"

"Things were different when we were younger, but once The Evil has grown enough, it's pretty hard for us to get status effects. We have really high stats and resistances."

By the design of the Infinite Jobs that created this world, The Evil and The Demise were a hurdle that those who lived here simply had to overcome. They were the final bosses, after all, and they were not made *weak* enough to be debuffed and turned into punching bags.

"It would've been completely useless as it was. That's why the Infinite Jobs didn't use Overlord Invidia's function and changed it, replacing it with a skill specialized against a status effect so bad not even The Evil could negate it—*Death*."

"Ohhh. So that's why..."

"Yes. That's why The Evil grows stronger after every death."

"I see. That sure seems different from the prototype."

"It is. Though, because of this difference..."

The Evil—the culmination of Overlord skills—looked at her hand...

"...Overlord Invidia is the only Overlord that's not just a weaker version of me."

...and spoke of the sole exception.

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Paladin, Ray Starling

“Paradigm Shift.”

Following that skill declaration, a burst of light in hostile colors like red, black, and purple enveloped the Overlord’s body like a cocoon.

The light didn’t last long, however.

As I tried to stop this with a swing of my halberd, a hand reached out from the cocoon and grabbed it.

“Ah...!”

“Eh heh heh heh. You can’t rush or interrupt moments like this,” she said as she tossed me away along with the halberd.

I flew *in a completely straight line* toward the wall opposite from the pool.

“Ah?!” She’d thrown my body with strength that was simply unbelievable. I desperately hooked my halberd into the floor to slow myself down and just barely avoid crashing into the wall.

“Ray...!”

“I’m fine! But...!”

G’s transformation wasn’t over yet.

The cocoon unraveled, starting from the point where her hand peeked out, and what was inside was now bared for us to see.

“AH HA HA HA HA HA!”

What emerged from the cocoon...wasn’t the Overlord she had been before.

But she also wasn’t in a disguise like the one she’d shown me or Chelsea.

She...

“You gotta dress well, you know?”

...she looked like a real dark lord...an Overlord straight out of a story.

The horns that had just been a tiny accessory had become larger than her head. The impish tail had grown to one that was dragon-like in size. The skin on her entire body had assumed a blue-purple hue that was truly inhuman. The clothes she’d been wearing were replaced with a bondage dress that had a bewitching gleam even in this dark seabed.

And her frame had grown to over three metels in size, while her

shape became more feminine.

"Eh heh heh heh heh. Ah ha ha ha ha! Surprised? Of course you are! I like those faces! This is so fun!"

If it weren't for certain familiar features on her face, you'd hardly believe she was the same person. She'd changed *that* much.

It was almost like she shifted into her *second form*, like a classic evil overlord from an RPG.

"Ah...!" Using Reveal, we could see that the transformation didn't stop at just her appearance—her stats were also completely different. She was affected by seven debuffs, but all of their effects had been inverted.

The HP, MP, and SP that she'd lost in the battle so far was regenerating, and the stats that the debuffs had greatly reduced were now over ten times higher than before.

"It's like our Reversal... No... It's stronger!"

"Ah ha ha ha ha! Like I said! We do the same thing!" Giving oneself debuffs, then flipping them for great power.

They *were* basically the same thing, but her buff multiplier was higher than mine...!

"So this is an Overlord!"

"Yes! Indeed! I am the Overlord! The most Overlord-ish of them all!" ZZZ's Dreamland let him control both dreams and reality, making him nigh-invincible, and while not by the same means, she also reached the realm of Overlords.

This was the combat style—the second form of the Overlord Invidia, G the "Bottomless."



Empowered and transformed by oppression and scorn.

As she was now, she was nothing if not an “Overlord.”

“Now! Let’s begin this! Let’s have fun!” She laughed heartily.

The liveliness and charm she’d possessed before had been replaced by fearsome, awe-inspiring power...

“Let’s enjoy this climax!”

...and the Overlord called us to dance with her.

Chapter 10: Star of Death

Past, Earth, Somewhere in Germany

Albert's "mother" was known to be a highly capable engineer. She specialized in artificial intelligence—specifically, the technologies surrounding the so-called "control AIs."

Her technological genius had once led a criminal organization to kidnap her, intending to use her knowledge to develop new weapons, but she and Albert had both been rescued by someone described as "a female agent with a first name containing a number and a last name referencing a type of bird." Ever since then, they had led an ordinary life in Germany.

Albert's "mother" put long hours into her research but still made time to play games with him.

But as they were living this peaceful life, a particular game rose to prominence.

Infinite Dendrogram—a true dive-based VRMMO claiming to offer unmatched realism.

Albert had taken notice of it himself, but his "mother" was even more interested in it than he was.

"There's clearly something bizarre about the technology they're using," she said. "But when I asked the higher-ups if we should look into it, they said they didn't have the funds. Maybe Germany's involved in this too?"

As Albert listened to her in silence, he couldn't help but wonder if their country really was part of some conspiracy, or if her bosses had just refused because investigating a video game wasn't part of her job description.

"There's been some strange rumors about it too. You know the US-based company Technorock? The massive game developer? They actually tried investigating *Infinite Dendrogram* at one point, but they never dug up enough concrete info to even analyze. They

couldn’t even find any servers.”

Albert found that very curious. What MMORPG had servers that couldn’t even be located?

“Apparently, even their communication system itself is unconventional technology... It’s not the usual electronic stuff. That’s why even Technorock couldn’t analyze or track it.”

This surprised Albert even more. How could this company have access to technology like that, but sell it so cheaply that even children could buy it?

“The team from Technorock could log in just fine, but they couldn’t bring in their analysis equipment. That’s why they decided to do something a bit forceful.”

Still, Albert listened intently.

“No one’s sure who exactly developed *Dendro*, but there are multiple companies scattered across the world that handle its sales and hardware production. In the US, it’s a pretty small company called simply ‘ID Supplier,’ so Technorock set their sights on them.”

The phrasing “set their sights on” made Albert expect they’d done something drastic...

“They hacked the company using Overture—their company data control AI.”

...and it turned out he was correct. A large company had hacked a rival firm.

Control AIs were supercomputers with processing power so immense they could manage all the data necessary to run a country or megacorporation. Hacking a smaller company that didn’t have one would be child’s play for them.

However, no matter how easy it was, it was *definitely* a crime.

“Was it the blueprints? The server location? I don’t really know what they were after...” Albert’s “mother” continued.

It was an under-the-table, underhanded, *unfair* approach.

But hearing all this brought a question to Albert’s mind. This was most definitely a peek at the dark side of Technorock—something that they simply couldn’t allow to come to light.

How did his “mother” know all this, then?

“And this is what happened next,” she said as she lightly waved

her hand to turn on the TV, which happened to be showing the news.

"Technorock, a massive US-based game developer, is currently in a state of collapse." Albert watched in shock as the news announcer revealed the details.

Recently, there had been trouble in their network which resulted in a leak of classified files stored on their servers. These files had contained not just the details of their latest hardware, but also evidence of the many cybercrimes they'd committed against rival companies.

This had resulted in the management being arrested and had flung the company into chaos from top to bottom. Their stock prices had plummeted, and today the business had finally fallen apart.

"And while the heart of the trouble was Technorock's control AI, Overture, the classified file leak was followed by an explosion of uncertain origin that—" That was where Albert's "mother" turned off the TV.

"So there you have it." Based on what she'd said thus far, Albert assumed that this must have been the result of a counterattack by ID Supplier—or more specifically, by *Infinite Dendrogram*.

But how could they have done something like this?

"Well, all this means is that the people behind *Infinite Dendrogram* have a control AI that can counter-hack and even break current gen corporate control AIs. Maybe it can even take on the cutting-edge stuff used by government agencies... Did the higher-ups not give me permission because they knew that? Or perhaps... Perhaps *Infinite Dendrogram* has something *fundamentally different* from the control AIs that we know?"

Her voice dropped to a whisper, and Albert couldn't hear that last part.

However, he had some thoughts about her idea that even the most cutting-edge control AI couldn't measure up. It made him wonder whether there existed *something beyond that*... Or *something of a different kind altogether*.

"Oh. I'm not letting you hack them, okay?"

It was as though she read his mind.

Albert had suspected she would say something like that. However, he couldn't have anticipated what she followed it up with.

"I just want you to play the game normally."

"...Huh?"

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Past, Infinite Dendrogram

A week had passed since his "mother" had told Albert about *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Now, he was inside the game.

Since he was somewhat differently shaped than the average user, connecting him had required some hardware modifications, but he'd been able to make it in.

He was now in a place that looked much like a lab. Ahead, he saw a man with a strange silhouette doing some sort of work. Although he had several inhuman features, he was humanoid in overall shape and wore glasses that gave him an air of intelligence.

"Hm?" The spectacled man noticed Albert, looked at him for a moment, then pensively laid a hand on his mouth and looked up at the ceiling.

"I'm surprised... Truly, I am."

Those words seemed to come straight from the heart.

"How much time has passed since No. 0 compensated them with those key technologies? They actually created an *information entity* capable of logging in, and that's even compatible with Embryos? I understand that they were provided *some* knowledge, but this... Even our own technology is partially... Wait. According to No. 10, the current publicly available technology is quite far behind this. Is it all due to this entity's creator, then? Is it the work of someone extraordinary?"

Voicing his astonishment at the sight of Albert, the man seemed to be gathering his thoughts.

"First the *outsider* welcomed by No. 3, now this... The environment there is quite different from that in our homeland... Hm?" The spectacled man then seemed to regain his composure and

looked at Albert again. “Apologies. This unexpected phenomenon had me a little shaken.”

The word “unexpected” made Albert a bit concerned. While he himself didn’t have a strong desire to play, his “mother” had asked him to provide reports about it.

“Oh. No need to worry. You logged in, which means you have a person’s... Well, the same qualifications as any other person. Let us proceed with the avatar creation.”

A few windows then popped up in front of Albert, allowing him to set his appearance.

He could hardly envision an avatar like himself, so he simply based it on a character from an old movie his “mother” had often watched.

Thus, he created a muscular man, received the necessary items, and had his Embryo implanted in his left hand.

But the moment he received his avatar, his entire body began telling him that something was *really wrong*.

An awful sense of discomfort consumed him.

“It will be difficult for you at first,” the man said. “But you are a rare entity indeed, so I personally hope that you will continue in spite of that. Though, being a Master, that decision is entirely up to you.”

The spectacled man—control AI No. 4, Jabberwock—spoke as if he knew what Albert was feeling.

“Regardless, welcome to *Infinite Dendrogram*. We truly appreciate your arrival.”

Following those words, Albert was flung into the air and plummeted toward the country he’d chosen as his starting point—Caldina.

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Thus, like many other players, Albert landed near Caldina’s largest city...

But he was overwhelmed by shock as the sensation from earlier not only did not go away, but actually got worse.

His sense of smell taking in the air, the tastes in his mouth, even the feeling of the wind caressing his skin—all this *impossible information* distorted his world.

The people behind *Infinite Dendrogram* claimed that it was profoundly realistic, but Albert's problem was far more fundamental than that.

Many users suffered immense discomfort while playing NEXT WORLD, but none of them had felt anything close to what Albert was currently experiencing.

The five senses themselves—the *fatal error that we call a human body*—had rendered him unable to even move.

Albert Schwartzkaiser was an anomalous *electronic life-form*, and to him, the very flesh and blood avatar he'd received was a source of errors that tortured his senses.

In real life, he was a mechanical computer that simply contained the information that made up his mind. With his avatar granting him sensations he simply couldn't have, Albert was overcome by a sense of discomfort that rendered him unable to even stand, and he collapsed on the sandy ground.

Assaulted by these unknown senses and unable to even activate the log-out process, Albert spent several hours like that.

However, the pain eventually vanished.

This was because his Embryo hatched, replacing his entire body with one that was fully mechanical.

The errors subsided as soon as that occurred.

Albert once again only had vision, hearing, and a degree of pressure sensitivity—senses he already knew well.

Thanks to the Embryo that had become his body, he was able to adapt to this world and overcome his suffering.

Having thus gained the ability to move, he proceeded to practice it. After about a week of such training, he could move as well as any other person and began operating like any other Master.

He engaged in the extermination of harmful monsters, tested himself in duels—he did much of what anyone might expect a Master to do.

Throughout all this, his body—Septentrion—evolved into a

Superior Embryo. This caught the eye of Caldina's president, and he was invited to join Sefirot. Since then, he'd followed her orders and continued to hunt UBMs, as well as battle wanted Masters.

The *final and greatest exception* to such work was his participation in The Tournaments.

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Gideon, City of Duels, Central Arena

Figaro was now wielding the strongest sword from his expansive arsenal.

Albert was clad in the most fearsome armor from his massive collection.

The two clashed, but Albert had the upper hand.

Though wielding Gloria α, Figaro couldn't use its Overdrive without getting close to Albert. If he used this powerful skill from a distance, he would have to fire horizontally—but with the barrier being right behind Albert, it was possible that it would break it and harm the audience.

Indeed—Albert wasn't the only one who had to worry about his MVP rewards causing damage to the spectators. That was exactly why Figaro had defeated Xunyu by firing the weapon vertically at point-blank range.

He would have to do the same thing with Albert, but getting close to him meant being in range of his fists. Even if Figaro used Overdrive first, the briefest pause during the firing would allow Albert to reach him.

And Albert could come back at least one more time. If he committed to a desperate retaliation, that would be the end of the battle right there.

Of course, even without its Overdrive, Gloria α was an awfully powerful blade that could be empowered with the heat of light.

Figaro might have been able to evade Albert's attacks and simply cut him apart—though that wouldn't change the fact that just a single hit would be enough to kill him.

A single impact—no, a single *scratch*—would be fatal.

To make matters worse, Figaro didn't know the extent of Albert's resistances. He'd already been brought near death by both fire and physical damage, granting him resistance to both. Light and slashing damage were both adjacent to those types, so Figaro's chances of a successful attack depended on how broad Albert's damage resistance actually was.

Regardless, each of them had fangs aimed at each other's throat.

All that really mattered now was how well they wielded them.

While Figaro silently tried to chart his path to victory, Albert took to action *immediately*.

This was an obvious move. Albert still had a life left, so if they clashed as they were now, he would most certainly emerge victorious. If anything, giving Figaro any time to find a way out of this predicament would be an awful idea.

"O o o r g h..." With attack power that exceeded even King of Destruction's capabilities, and with the defenses to match, the armor let out a devilish groan as Albert charged ahead—an all-consuming, devastating sprint, each step of which left cracks and craters in the remnants of the arena.

He wasn't even using any other MVP rewards.

Was that simply because nothing he had surpassed Exademon in pure attack power? Or was there some other reason for it?

For a moment, it looked as though Albert was going to charge directly at Figaro, but then Albert *kicked a stray rock*.

It shattered under the immense force, but the kinetic energy from the impact sent its shards flying ahead at supersonic speeds.

As though they were fired from a shotgun, they flew toward Figaro, leaving him nowhere to run.

Though his eyes widened, Figaro didn't even try to dodge.

Instead, he imbued Gloria α's blade with searing light and swung it, precisely cutting down and destroying all the rock shrapnel flying toward him. As unavoidable and deadly as it seemed, Figaro was able to defend himself against this dangerous attack.

However, this was well within Albert's expectations. In the brief time Figaro focused on defense, he closed the distance between them.

Just a few more steps until the armor's fists could reach his opponent.

If Figaro met the punch with his blade, both their bodies would shatter—and only Albert would be left standing.

That was what the entire audience expected, and when their eyes focused on Albert's raised fist, not even a tenth of them noticed how Figaro's appearance had changed.

"That's...!" What the more observant spectators saw was a new piece of equipment Figaro had put on using Instant Wear.

Actually, it wasn't quite accurate to call it "new." After all, it was one of the items that defined his appearance.

It was his blue coat—"Rendshield Cloak, Closer." Left behind by the first UBM he'd ever defeated, it had been with him longer than any other item in his vast arsenal.

One of its skills...

"Rendshield."

...briefly but completely shut off any attacks coming from the outside.

The barrier that went up was immediately struck by a blow so powerful it surpassed even King of Destruction.

The impact shook the very air as the shock wave spread throughout the entire venue.

However, the barrier didn't even shake. Despite the incredible power it had just been subjected to, it remained completely unaffected.

A split second after the impact, Figaro deliberately dropped the barrier...

"Fang of Gloria: Overdrive."

...and, just as he'd done against Xunyu, Figaro swung the sword upward to deliver the Overdrive to his enemy.

He'd retaliated against Albert's attack with his ultimate firepower, and everything was executed with flowing perfection. He'd negated the damage at the moment the punch had landed, canceled his defense right after the clash, and gone in for his slash without leaving any openings to take advantage of.

It was a technique much like Ray's Impact Counter but possessed

of even greater finesse.

Shock overcame Albert. He couldn't even react. Though his attack and defense were greatly increased, Figaro still had higher AGI, and the counterattack had been executed too brilliantly. He didn't have time to back away, launch another attack in response, or deal with the Overdrive in any way.

Though they both were entirely capable of killing each other in theory, in practice Figaro was simply on another level.

And so, unable to do anything about it, Albert was pierced by burning light.

It shot through the first layers of arena barriers, then the ones added by Integra, creating a pillar of light reaching toward the sky.

Any parts of Exademon that were caught in its wake evaporated, along with any of Albert's body that was inside.

It was as though his fire resistance was powerless before this scorching light—as though the difference in how the heat was *delivered* was paramount.

Whatever the reason, Albert's HP instantly fell to 1...

"η: Alkaid."

...and he finally used the seventh—Septentrion's final heal and buff skill.

"The Seven Stars—Septentrion."

But this time, it was followed by *another skill declaration*.

Figaro's eyes widened as he heard Albert's voice—and because he heard it, he instantly flew into action.

Figaro had let Albert use this final regeneration on purpose, hoping to use his speed advantage to finish Albert off immediately after.

Albert's body was now restored, and though clad in half-destroyed armor and empowered by a resistance to light-based heat, he couldn't stop a slash from Gloria α's naked blade.

Tsukuyo had called him "fragile," and he could do nothing to resist the attack aimed straight for his throat.

Shortly after being restored—before he could even move—Albert was decapitated.

Thus, King of Termination was defeated. Everyone was certain

that Figaro had emerged victorious.

But then, he was *attacked from six directions*.

Figaro's eyes widened. A bursting net of flames, a cannonball, a shock wave, a frigid blizzard, a dark mist, a fixed damage projectile...

The moment Figaro thought he had defeated Albert, six kinds of attacks rained down on him.



Even Figaro couldn’t respond to all of them in time, and he was soon consumed by this storm of destruction.

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“Huh?!”

Sandalphon—the Superior Embryo tasked with security—was watching the duel as well. This was only natural, as the man his Master loved was one of the combatants. Thus, as he made sure the venue was safe, he watched the duel alongside Hannya.

And of course, right when he thought Figaro had won, the battle was flipped upside down.

“What is this...?” There was perhaps no better reaction than that. It felt as though it wasn’t just the battle that had been overturned, but the very rules of the engagement itself. The scene before him was simply that shocking.

There were now *six Alberts standing on the stage*.

Albert had already used his final revival and had his head severed from his body, but there were now six of him.

This reminded the audience of a certain high-ranking duelist—Tom Cat, the ex-champion who dominated the battlefield using an ultimate skill that let him multiply and revive without limit.

However, what Albert had done wasn’t quite the same.

The Seven Stars—Septentrion. That was the ult of Albert’s Superior Embryo, Seven Star Turnover, Septentrion.

It could only be used after seven revivals, and its effect was to present the results of his learning and overcoming *all at once*.

The six doubles of Albert who were still standing and the one who had been decapitated were based on the skills he’d gained, starting with α: Dubhe and ending with η: Alkaid.

The fire-resistant Albert Dubhe.

The Petrification-resistant Albert Merak.

The physical-impact-resistant Albert Phecda.

The frost-resistant Albert Megrez.

The dark-resistant Albert Alioth.

The fixed damage-resistant Albert Mizar.

The light-resistant Albert Alkaid.

Turned over to reveal seven stars—seven bodies that had different resistances and means of attack.

This also gave Albert extra attack power. By having each version of himself wield weapons with penalties that were canceled out by his resistances, he became an even greater force of destruction. He didn't seem to have anything that took advantage of Petrification specifically, but every other weapon the duplicates wielded was much like the ones that Albert had used before—high-power MVP rewards that disregarded the wielder's safety.

Even Figaro would have a hard time if exposed to such fearsome attacks from basically every direction.

"Lady Hannya...! Umm, Master Figaro is..."

While Figaro's fiancée stared intently at the stage, silently clasping her hands together as if in prayer, Sandalphon gave her a sympathetic, almost panicked look.

"Calm down, Sandalphon."

However, the one to respond to him first was the person standing on the other side of Hannya.

It was another *Superior* tasked with security—Shu Starling.

"That's the kinda move Sechs would make, and it caught me by surprise, that's for sure... But Figgy hasn't lost this yet." As though to prove Shu right, the dust from the destruction began to clear.

Behind the curtain, Figaro was still standing. Though wounded all over and leaning heavily on Gloria α for support, he was still upright.

The outcome of this duel was yet undecided.

However, his situation was dire. Figaro was seriously hurt, and defeating the remaining six Alberts would be a challenge even for him.

"That just leaves five." But Shu's count of Albert's duplicates didn't match the number visible on the stage.

A moment later, one of them—the one with fixed damage resistance, Albert Mizar—swayed where he stood and collapsed backward.

Without even changing his pose, he shattered into pieces and *became nothing more than a pile of rocks*.

"What...?"

"Figgy's counterattack," said Shu. "When the six attacks came in, he fired that gun toward one of 'em."

Why had Figaro thought that Marbledrop would have any effect when Albert already had resistance to Petrification?

It was because he'd realized Albert's resistances had been scattered the moment he felt his blade sink into the seventh duplicate's neck.

Albert was supposed to have resistance to physical impacts, but Figaro had not felt any when slashing him. Combined with the fact that he'd instantly been targeted by six separate attacks, Figaro's instincts had worked faster than his mind to conclude that Albert had split himself into seven forms, each bearing a different resistance and mode of attack.

And so, with two Alberts having projectile attacks, Figaro spotted them both and retaliated against them with Marbledrop's bullets that passed through all inorganic material.

One of the Alberts he'd shot was the Petrification-resistant Albert Merak, so the attack was negated, but the other was Albert Mizar, who was only resistant to fixed damage.

It was this decisive action and reaction that allowed Figaro to survive.

Albert stared at him in silence. He'd realized that Figaro was still alive when he noticed that the barrier was still up. But after having timed his attack so perfectly and still suffering a loss to Figaro's retaliation, Albert decided to refrain from attacking further and assumed a more cautious approach.

This was the opposite of what he'd done earlier, but it was the correct decision now. The situation had shifted, and the barrage had left Figaro with multiple injury- and curse-based status effects. The Bleeding and Burning debuffs were steadily lowering his HP, while the Magic Drain and Soul Drain curses sapped his MP and SP.

The many items that Figaro could use to resist such effects only worked if he'd put them on ahead of time. With duels forbidding the use of recovery items, there were very few ways to remove a debuff that had already been applied.

Time was on Albert's side now, and he outnumbered Figaro five to one. Even if Figaro retaliated and destroyed one Albert, the remaining four would overwhelm him.

And that was exactly why Albert took the safe approach. Figaro might have managed to survive Albert's first barrage, but he had no means of turning this around. The countdown to his defeat had already begun.

The scales of victory were tipping in Albert's favor.

"Umm..." At that moment, just as the entire venue fell silent at the realization that their champion was going to fall, Sandalphon spoke up.

His Master, Hannya, still had her eyes fixed on Figaro with hands clasped as if in prayer.

"What?" Shu asked.

"Can he still win? Does he have anything to turn this around?"

Shu fell silent for a moment at Sandalphon's question. He knew that the Over Gladiator's job ult was useless for someone who had no other SJs, and he knew that Figaro wouldn't use Cor Leonis's ult here either. With how severe Figaro's injuries were, using it would only kill him.

"Will he... Will he lose...?"

Did all that mean that Figaro would be defeated?

"I dunno what he'll do about this... But there's no way he's losin'."

And yet, Shu still denied that possibility.

"But how...?"

Shu was really confident, but that wasn't a question for him to answer.

"Because...*he's him*."

Finally, Hannya broke her silence with an explanation.

It wasn't a reason that would make sense to anyone else. However, Figaro's friend, sitting by her side, thought she was completely right.

"Vincent *will* win this."

Hannya spoke with certainty as she declared that her beloved would emerge victorious.

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A question appeared in Albert's mind as he faced Figaro in this five-on-one battle.

Time was on his side, but as it flowed by, he couldn't help but wonder why *Figaro wasn't doing anything*.

The Over Gladiator must've been aware of the debuffs draining his HP, MP, and SP. Death drew closer every moment, and more and more of his skills became unusable.

Why, then, was Figaro maintaining this deadlock?

Albert had a guess, of course.

He knew that Figaro's equipment enhancement became more efficient as more time passed.

However, Figaro was barely going to last even a few more minutes. Just how great of an improvement could he expect in this short amount of time? And even if he *was* greatly empowered, what would be the point of it if he couldn't even use his skills?

Because of this, inaction had to be the wrong decision. Figaro had to defeat Albert while he still had the power to do so.

Figaro must've understood this—and yet he wasn't doing anything. Albert couldn't help but wonder why.

"...Phew." Breathing raggedly, Figaro seemed to be observing the Alberts surrounding him.

Was he preparing to respond in case they took action? Or was he searching for a path to victory?

The champion slowly looked around as if trying to sense something.

I can't see it. I can't feel it. It really doesn't seem like there's anything there. But...

Figaro was lost in thought. Defeat was drawing closer by the second, and he was searching for a way to repel it.

I couldn't see the moment he split into seven. I didn't even realize he was doing that. I didn't look away from the seventh for even a moment...but next thing I knew, I was surrounded.

Figaro was thinking as hard as he could. He replayed the flow of events that had led to this situation in his mind and let intuition do

its job.

He firmly believed that that was where he would find his chance at victory.

Right. The very first attack. He was turning the flamethrowers.

When using Firelyx, Albert had turned the fires to target Figaro, licking the entire stage with its tongues of flame. Figaro had managed to evade them, but it was still an area attack that was blasted in every direction indiscriminately.

I didn't see anything strange about the shape of the fire. There was nothing in its way. That means...

Figaro finally reached an answer.

"I see how it is."

His sudden words caused a stir in the five remaining Alberts...

"I finally see the last part of your *trick*."

...and the word "trick" caused a murmur to ripple through the audience.

If this was about Albert's healing and buff skill, then its workings had been clear for a while now.

If it was about him splitting into seven parts, then that was an ult—hardly a "trick."

What was Figaro referring to, then?

"Anyway... It's time to end this."

And then, the Over Gladiator took action.

The time that had passed, though, had ravaged Figaro's body. He could no longer use his devastating Overdrive.

Instead, the move he chose to make was...

"Liferend Shield Formation."

...another skill from Rendshield Cloak, Closer.

It was the ultimate move of the UBM it came from, and it created countless shield blades that both protected its wielder and sliced anything that came too close.

However, using it in this situation seemed like an awful idea. While it wasn't as costly as Overdrive, using this rendered Figaro unable to use any other skills. It also wasn't enough to block the Albert duplicates' immensely powerful attacks, nor did it have enough offensive power to destroy them.

No matter how it was used, the skill would not be enough. It didn't make sense.

"HIII-YAH!" Figaro swung his arm, sending the countless blades flying like a winter hailstorm.

They ricocheted within the arena, dealing damage to the five Alberts.

But just as he and everyone else expected, the firepower just wasn't enough.

Though frail as far as SJs went, Albert was still a combat-focused Superior Job. The blades did little if Albert just assumed a defensive stance, and each duplicate had high enough HP that most of this damage was irrelevant.

Most importantly, the attacks simply weren't concentrated enough. Split between the five Alberts, the blades simply weren't able to deal enough damage to end this.

In fact, despite all the Alberts being on the ground, some of the blades had been launched *into the air*.

The audience tilted their heads in confusion, the hardened fighters watched in disbelief...and Albert changed his expression for the first time.

Figaro's seemingly meaningless area attack made all five Alberts open their eyes wide.

They prepared to shift from defense to attack in order to stop Figaro's blades...when *a light thud could be heard amid the chaos*. One of the airborne blades had struck something.

"Oh. Guess I was right." And with that, Figaro instantly leaped into the sky.

This was something he'd done in his fight against Gloria.

Using the shield-blades as platforms, he rushed upward.

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There were a few things that Figaro had found strange in this duel against Albert.

The first was his second heal and buff.

Despite having been Petrified and shattered, Albert was able to

declare the β: Merak skill and revive.

That had made Figaro wonder how he'd been able to speak the skill's name despite being turned to stone.

Next were Albert's fourth and fifth comebacks. Figaro had most certainly delivered fatal damage to Albert while Rear Soldier's Last Stand was still on cooldown.

Despite that, Albert still survived with 1 HP and bounced back from it.

Figaro had been pondering how he was able to accomplish that when the job skill that supposedly made it possible was inactive.

And finally, it had been the ultimate that split Albert into seven.

Figaro had defeated Tom Cat, and he knew about King of Crime. Because of this, he was aware that duplicates created by such skills usually split off from their source.

However, that hadn't been the case for Albert.

Figaro had been entirely focused on the Albert that had possessed all the resistances to his attacks—but before he knew it, Figaro had been surrounded.

This untelegraphed split was the third thing Figaro found strange.

Only one thing could adequately explain these three phenomena.

Albert's main body had to be elsewhere.

Everything would make sense if he had *a separate body with only 1 HP*.

If his main body was elsewhere, he could declare skills despite Petrification.

If his main body was elsewhere, he would have 1 HP left even when he couldn't use his job skill.

If his main body was elsewhere, Figaro's focus on the opponent in front of him would have caused him to miss the split.

But if there really was such a main body, then where would it be?

It was Albert's own actions that had provided a hint.

While he used Firelyx to spread flames in every direction, covering the entire stage, it didn't seem like anything had been caught in them. That could only mean one thing—the main body had to be somewhere the flames hadn't reached. The only option was up in the air.

Figaro had used the Liferend Shield Formation to confirm this.

And now, having pinpointed its location, he used the blade shields as platforms to reach it.

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Albert—in other words, his main body—looked down at Figaro in silence.

The Over Gladiator's intuition had been right.

g: Alcor. It was a barely visible star close to the Big Dipper—Septentrion. Its name had roots in the Arabic "al-khawāri," meaning "faint one," and some cultures claimed that anyone who could no longer see the star was fated to die.

It was the skill that pointed to Albert's nature as a mechanical being, as well as the brain—the core—that existed outside his human-shaped body, Septentrion.

Being a machine enabled him to split his brain and his body. About the size of a golf ball, this metallic object floating about was where Albert's mind resided.

He had used all five accessory slots to both cloak himself visually and obfuscate his skills, and he'd used damage reduction to keep him safe from weak attacks like the blade shield strike.

Indeed—this was the truth behind Albert's near death and healing buff combination.

The job was a decoy. While Albert did have Rear Soldier, it was merely a bluff to lead his enemies to a false conclusion.

In reality, Albert would have survived death even without Last Stand. The secret behind his survivability wasn't that skill, but the way his own body worked.

This was the trick Albert used to become the powerful *Superior* that he was.

But now, the trick was exposed.

And Figaro, the one who'd seen through it, was now charging toward him, Gloria α in hand.

The Over Gladiator shouldn't have been able to see his main body at all, but there was no hesitation in his dash.

The moment one of the shield blades touched the core, multiple other blades swarmed to surround and cage it. Albert had nowhere to run.

The five bodies looking up at them all fired everything they had at Figaro.

This was an extremely close game. Would Figaro reach and split the core in time? Or would Albert's attacks finally bring him down?

Only one *Superior* could win this, and every single second counted.

But Albert soon realized that he was going to emerge victorious. Figaro was injured, so the speed of his ascent couldn't outrun the attacks from Albert's bodies down below.

Though the champion had made the first move, the gap was closing fast. Albert's attacks would hit Figaro before he reached the core.

And Figaro didn't have any means of attack besides Gloria α. He no longer had the MP or SP to use any other MVP reward skills.

Albert's victory was set in stone.

He calculated this future in the blink of an eye—but then he noticed something odd.

During this brief moment, something had changed about Figaro again—the weapon in his hand was different.

It wasn't Gloria α, or some MVP reward, but a long chain wrapped around his right hand.

A Crimson Dead Keeper—one of his most favored weapons, known for its immense reach. It could most certainly land a hit on the core before Albert's attacks touched him.

Albert knew that it wouldn't matter much if it did, though. Unlike the seven duplicates, the main body had all of its previous resistances. An attack from the Crimson Dead Keeper couldn't even take away its 1 HP.

With Figaro's final move rendered meaningless, Albert's victory would be completely certain.

And yet, it wasn't.

The moment the chain reached, Albert noticed...

Gloria α was tied to its tip.

Shock overcame King of Termination. An unorthodox use of weaponry—combining two items that were never meant to be combined.

The gladiator grouping granted multiple weapon slots for each hand.

This was Figaro's strongest weapon, combined with his most-used weapon.

Perhaps because of that, despite the bizarre arrangement, there was no flaw in the trajectory of the slash.

It was a brilliant move that rendered irrelevant the distance, the time, and the inherent weakness of his chains.

Albert was in awe. When had Figaro gotten the idea to do this?

When he realized that Albert's attacks would reach him first?

Or maybe when he dashed into the sky?

Or perhaps the moment he used Liferend Shield Formation?

Regardless, Albert hadn't seen this coming and could do nothing against it.

Though swung on the end of a chain, Gloria α carried more than enough power for this task.

Albert's core had no resistance to slashing attacks, and this blow would no doubt take away its 1 HP.

Figaro had used his own prowess to flip the scales of victory in his favor.

How? Because *he was him*, of course.

"Good game. You are the winner." With a mechanical voice praising his opponent *in English*, Albert's core was split in two, and all five of his remaining duplicates on the stage vanished.

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Tournament: Final Day.
Reward: Mythical "Night Sky General, O'oimimaru."
Core traits: Unknown (Space alteration?)
Winner: Over Gladiator, Figaro.

Chapter 11: Bringing the Climax

About G

Overlord Invidia, G. Real name: Ginga Fujiwara.

She was born in a rather ordinary Japanese household, but one could easily say she led a charmed life, as she had many friends and got along well with her entire family, including her older brother.

However, starting when she was very young, this same brother had given her a bit of an inferiority complex.

He wasn't exceptionally smart, nor was he terribly athletic. If anything, Ginga was the more capable one.

However, there was one thing that set them apart: Her brother had been recognized as a novelist at a very young age. He'd made his debut in his teens—when Ginga was still in elementary school—and his talents as a writer were immediately made clear.

Her brother might as well have inhabited an entirely different world, shining almost like a star, and looking up at him always made her feel jealous and miserable.

On an exam, a perfect score was the best you could do. Gym class wasn't exactly a place for breaking records and standing out, no matter how much effort you put in. Ginga was envious of her brother for having a talent that allowed him to go beyond what most people his age could achieve and shine so much brighter than she did.

He was a wonderful sibling, and she certainly didn't hate him—quite the opposite, really.

But that didn't stop her from feeling jealous all the same.

She wanted to shine brighter than he did—no, *brighter than anyone in the world*.

That was how she ended up on the path of a content creator fairly early in life.

She'd tried being a writer just like her brother, but she couldn't

reach his level, and she didn't think she was beautiful enough to make it as an idol or a movie star.

However, Ginga did have a talent for photography and film. She was a natural at bringing out her subjects' charms in her photos and videos, and she found she could easily hone this skill further.

Perhaps if she just focused on the path of cameraman or director, Ginga thought, she might be recognized artistically at a young age, just like her brother had.

But that wasn't what she really wanted either.

Though she did have a knack for making others shine, she wanted to be the brightest star in the sky *herself*. The problem with that was that there simply wasn't anything exceptional about her.

But that didn't stop her from trying—struggling, even.

A few people called her voice cute, so she tried to harness that. Eventually, Ginga looked into all the related technology she could find and eventually became a devil girl VTuber—G. She streamed gaming content, did karaoke, and made videos using her photography and editing skills.

While that did earn her some recognition, she never reached the level that she wanted.

No matter how she tried to shine like her brother did, he only grew brighter by the day.

She just couldn't reach him. As more time passed, the gap between them widened, and her jealousy deepened even further.

One day, for a change of pace, Ginga went on a trip to the sea and took a photo of it in the evening. The setting sun and its faint reflection upon the water made for a fantastic shot.

But the sight of it made a thought spring to her mind.

"...This sea is me."

No matter how beautifully it shone, it was just a reflection—the sea had no light of its own. Even the light it reflected never reached the bottom—all that was there was stagnation.

No matter what *the sea* did, it would never reach *the stars* above.

With that thought, she was about to give up on ever matching her brother...

"*Infinite Dendrogram* will provide you with a new world and your

one and only possibility!”

...and that was when she heard an advertisement for a certain game.

This new world—this new stage—would prove to be a turning point for her.

Ginga’s *Infinite Dendrogram* avatar was more than just a virtual form. It allowed her to live in this world as herself, but with an appearance completely unlike her own.

This was the chance to shine she’d always longed for.

G learned to use the magical filming equipment within *Dendro* to plan out and execute productions that she starred in.

R’lyeh—her studio—assisted her by painting the world as she wanted it to be.

As her *Infinite Dendrogram* videos gained a lot of popularity, she eventually joined a clan and started participating in various in-game activities with them.

She garnered more and more popularity, and eventually, the site she was active on sent her something—the silver award given to those who reached one hundred thousand subscribers.

The moment she saw its shine, Ginga—the girl who had always wanted to shine brighter than anyone else—felt as if everything had finally paid off. The next time she logged in, her R’lyeh had become a Superior Embryo.

It was as though that feeling had been the *trigger* for it.

That was how she became a *Superior*.

However, both the silver award and the Embryo evolution were nothing but milestones to her. She’d once considered giving up on her dream, but now she wouldn’t even consider it.

Becoming a *Superior* had given her new powers, and at some point she was made leader of her clan. She intended to use everything she could get her hands on to make videos that would make her shine.

For that purpose, she did a lot of things she had never done before and recorded it all.

She’d braved the Depths of Jealousy to become Overlord Invidia and claimed the throne.

She'd orchestrated plans to fight the corrupt order of Legendaria and rebelled against it.

She'd formed an alliance with other anti-Legendaria *Superiors* and collabed with them.

She'd challenged Legendaria's idol and head of state and battled her with song.

And now, she had picked a fight with the world's most famous newbie and tried to avenge her brother.

A girl who would do anything to promote herself—to make herself shine.

That was Ginga Fujiwara—Overlord Invidia, G.

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Encroaching Sea-Altar, R'lyeh, Depths of Jealousy

"Ah ha ha ha ha! Let's go! Let's do this! Here I come!" Brandishing her trident and filled with fighting spirit, Overlord Invidia charged at Juliet.

The girl's eyes widened. Juliet had a wealth of combat experience, but the largest opponents she'd faced thus far were the Armordragon King she'd battled during the Exodragon King incident and Rosa after using her ult to create an exoskeleton.

However, G was now larger than either of them—and had stats that surpassed them both. Her trident thrusts were more like the charge of a battering ram. They left her completely open to attacks, but the overwhelming strength of her massive form shattered the stonework whenever she moved. She was like a natural disaster in human form.

But she also had a technique that no natural calamity could possibly possess.

This was demonstrated by the thread of light extending from the tip of the trident and connecting to Juliet's body.

Ah...! The pull's even stronger than before! Juliet thought. Harodihg Gnik's force apparently scaled with the wielder's STR. Held by G in her second form, it could attract its prey with over ten times more power than before.

The fearsome pull left Juliet so unbalanced that she couldn't even cast her dark magic to block G's sight.

That thread of light was now a nigh unavoidable death sentence.

"Purgatorial Flames!"

Ray, however, would not let that sentence be carried out. Extending his left hand, he made his Miasmaflame Bracer spew its fire.

With G's vision blocked, the thread of light was severed, allowing Juliet to escape the charge.

But a moment later, the trident was swept sideways, tearing through the fire as it flew in Ray's direction.

His eyes widened. G's thread of light had only been a feint, intended to bait Ray into trying to block her line of sight.

Not minding the flames whatsoever, she broke through and closed the distance between them.

"Ah ha ha ha ha! What're you gonna do now?!" As her reversed and enhanced Poison debuff regenerated her bunt flesh, G swung her trident at Ray.

He didn't have the time to meet her weapon with his—and her mighty sweep would've simply shattered the halberd in any case.

"Counter Absorption!"

Instead, Nemesis quickly transformed into her greatsword form and blocked the attack using her barrier of light. Though the barrier creaked at the impact, the Overlord's trident didn't break it.

"There's more where that came from!"

But the moment both of them stopped moving, G reactivated the Attraction Anchor, connecting it to Ray this time.

Ray was abruptly dragged out from behind the barrier of light and flew straight toward the tip of the trident...

"I won't let you...!"

But this time, Juliet attacked G with her magic, severing the filament of light.

Ray used the opening to switch back to Nemesis's Flag Halberd and backed away from the Overlord.

"Ah ha ha! Almost nobody lasts this long after I transform! You two are pretty good!" G laughed and praised them, but neither Ray

nor Juliet were in a state to appreciate it.

One wrong move and a single hit would break them. G's massive stat increase had also made Harodihg Gnik far more fearsome than before.

If Ray and Juliet didn't coordinate to block G's vision continuously, defeat was inevitable.

"Your party's gotta be in perfect sync or you wipe," Ray said. "What is this, an MMO raid?"

"Huh? It kinda is, isn't it?" G asked.

"...Yeah, you've got a point." *Dendro* was definitely an online RPG, and G was very much like a boss monster, so Ray couldn't help but agree. "I can see why she's called the most Overlord-ish of them all."

"She really does look the part of a horrifying monster," said Nemesis as she looked up at G, now standing three metels tall—not quite sizable enough to be truly monstrous, but enormous for a person.

As though she'd heard that, G froze as if shocked and laid a hand on her chest.

"I mean, it depends on how bad my debuffs are, but this is generally how I end up. Whenever I transform, my clan and all the comments on my videos often tell me to change back. Personally, I think both my forms are fine..."

"I-I do think it looks cool and sexy, though..." For some reason, G was starting to look a bit sad, so Juliet couldn't help but share her honest thoughts in the hope it would make her feel better.

Ray, however...

"I mean, if they like the cute design of your first form, of course they'd want you to turn back. You really don't pass as a 'charming devil' right now. You're more like some kinda hulking demon or something."

...wasn't as kind.

"Thanks, Julie! Unbreakable, though... You're dead meat!"

"As if you weren't trying to kill me anyway! Bring it on!" G was in the middle of trying to PK Ray and taking his arena. His rebuttal was entirely reasonable.

But unfortunately... he thought. *Fighting her head-on might be a bit hard now.*

They had about ten minutes left until the arena was taken.

G had grown a lot stronger, and she quickly regenerated most damage done to her. If there was any way for Ray to defeat her, it was by using Counter Absorption to stock up damage for a fatal use of Vengeance, or...

Wait. If all I want is to prevent her from taking our arena, I should forget about G herself and go for...

"Oh? Are you looking for the trapezohedron?" G asked, noticing that Ray was looking around.

Ray's eyes widened. Indeed, that was exactly what he'd been thinking—if they just needed to stop her ult, they could ignore G and for that instead.

"If that's what you're planning, then I'll do..."

Reading his intentions, G took the trapezohedron from her chest...

"This."

...and *swallowed it whole*.

"Huh?!"

"Wha—?!"

"Aaand noooowww... You have no choice but to fight me! There's no escape!" As Ray and Juliet were struck dumb with shock, G flashed a mischievous—but belligerent—smile. "Now! Let's go! Let's do this! It's bombing time! Ah ha ha ha ha!" With a loud laugh, G resumed the battle, firing countless black light projectiles.

It was the same low-rank spell she'd used before, far from the strength of a job ult, but...

"Ah!"

"There's so damn *many*...!"

When released by G's second form, there were too many projectiles to count—easily hundreds of them. Ray's and Juliet's eyes widened as the projectiles flew toward them. Dark magic could only be blocked by dark or its opposite—holy.

Juliet began to throw out every dark spell she had while slicing at the bolts with her Gradsoul empowered by Darkness of Valediction,

while Ray fought the barrage with his halberd imbued with Purifying Silverlight.

"I can keep this up all day! How long will you last? What will you do next? I'm dying to see it!"

However, just neutralizing the attack didn't do anything to *stop* it. There was simply no end to G's hail of darkness, even without any chanting and with the ever-increasing MP cost she must have been incurring to bypass the skill declaration.

Normally, such careless magic would quickly use up the caster's MP, but she was an exception. As Overlord, she had high MP to start with, and not only had it been enhanced further by her transformation, but her MP was constantly regenerating thanks to the reversed Magic Drain.

Her spending and regeneration were perfectly balanced, enabling a perpetual barrage. They might've been low in power, but the volume of these projectiles made them into something fearsome indeed.

This is bad...! A cold sweat started to bead on the back of Juliet's neck. However barely, she was still holding on.

But if this went on for much longer, she would run out of MP long before her opponent, and the rain of projectiles would grow even more intense. Neither Ray nor Juliet would be able to withstand that—they would quickly be overwhelmed.

And this wasn't even the only thing G could do.

"Is it too much?! You can handle this, right?! I'm sure you can!" Still firing the dark magic barrage with her left hand, she used her right to ready Harodihg Gnik.

Judging by the way she charged forward, the buff from Paradigm Shift had only made her more excited.

Their hands full with the dark magic, Ray and Juliet were unable to dodge, and Nemesis's Counter Absorption would surely be wasted on the projectiles.

The Overlord cackled as she approached, looming over Ray and Juliet like a towering bear. She swung her trident at them.

As death drew closer, Ray prepared to make his final gamble...

"Maddened Blade, Sip Their Blood—Ipetam."

...but then, a hundred blades sliced through the air, aimed straight at the Overlord.

"Oh? Oh my." The blades failed to even pierce G's skin, but she still stopped and looked at where they'd come from—the mouth of the passageway leading into the throne room.

"Kept ya waitin', didn't we?"

"So she's not just stupid huge, but stupid tough now too! And I thought the octopus was bad!"

The two figures who appeared were people Juliet knew very well.

"Chelsea! Max!" The moment the barrage stopped, Juliet and Ray backed away from G.

The Overlord didn't mind and looked over the four with a smile.

"You took care of the mermen?!" Ray asked.

"Yeah!" said Chelsea. "They just stopped comin'!"

G had been manually sending out the APMs using R'lyeh's powers. However, when she started fighting Ray and Juliet, she wasn't able to keep the process up, and as a result the flow of mermen stopped. This allowed Chelsea and Max to finish any that were left and come to help Ray and Juliet.

"Eh heh heh. This is good. This is great, even! Things are heating up!"

The enemy received reinforcements, but the Overlord wasn't flustered in the slightest. The shallow wounds opened by the hundred blades had already healed, leaving only small drops of blood that she licked away with a smile.

"Everyone's here! The party that will fight the Overlord is complete!" Despite the fact that there were more enemies now, a change in circumstances that was entirely a disadvantage to her, G laughed as if she were truly happy. "Now! You have five minutes left! Gather your courage and fight me!"

At the peak of excitement, she shouted out loud.

"This is the climax!"

The preface was over—this was the real start of the battle.

G welcomed her enemies—her costars on the stage—with nothing but pure glee and anticipation.

This was her territory, and the pressure of the power she wielded

as Overlord made her a match for any *Superior*. Her voice alone was enough to shake the air and send chills down the spines of those before her.

"...Yeah." However, Ray remained unshaken, prepared to face her directly. "The arena, getting back at me, and turning all of that into content... You really just do whatever you want, huh?"

He held up a finger for each of G's goals...

"But you're right—this *is* the climax. The curtain's ready to fall on your stage."

...but in the end, he curled his hand into a tight fist.

"We're winning this game. I hope you're ready, Invidia."

"You're the best, Unbreakable!" G heard his declaration loud and clear. He was meeting and exceeding her expectations.

Thus, the final battle began, and G made the first move.

"Leeet's gooo! Harodihg Gnik... FULL DRIVE!" *Three* threads of light extended from the tips of the trident, capturing Ray, Juliet, and Max.

Their eyes widened. This was the weapon's secret trick—Attraction Anchor could be used on several targets at once. G had kept this hidden while fighting just Ray and Juliet, but she'd decided that now was the time for the big reveal. She knew how strong those two were, and she knew that Max had cut down her Cthulhu in a single slash, so she chose to pull and bind them by force—an effective move.

However, this could only bind three people at most...

"Ohhh? You're leavin' me free? Really underestimatin' me, aren't ya?"

And she had four foes.

G's eyes widened. She'd seen Chelsea's sparring and knew her strategy. Because of that, she didn't think that the pirate would be much of a threat where there was little water and she couldn't summon her ship.

It was important to remember, though: Chelsea hadn't needed those things to become eighth in the duel rankings of Altar—the holy land of duelists. Water or not, there were plenty of things she could do.

"Golden Bull Tsunami—Poseidon." A crushing waterfall of liquid gold flooded over G's head.

"This is pretty! A bit *light*, though, don't you think?" Despite sustaining a direct hit from an ult, though, G barely even missed a beat. Her immense STR and END made her far too powerful for this volume of gold to crush her. Its nature as a pure physical attack rendered it incapable of doing much damage here.

However, damage wasn't what Chelsea was aiming for.

"Next up... World Reversal Waterfall!"

"Oh?"

Chelsea topped off her ult by surrounding it with an upward waterfall veil. G's threads of light were undone, making it difficult for her to lock on again... But that wasn't all Chelsea had done.

The attack had reduced G's vision in every direction, giving Chelsea's companions a chance to land their most devastating attacks.

"Eh heh heh. It's...a bit too basic, I think!"

However, G remained unshaken. She held the trident by the butt end and *spun it* for one massive swing.

In one gigantic sweep of her oversized trident, the veil of water around G vanished. Anyone caught in the trident's arc would surely have been obliterated.

However, it was only water that sprayed in every direction. There was no blood to be seen.

"Your feet are wide open, ya *big* baddy!"

A voice rang out from the lower half of the scattered veil.

Accelerated by Ipetam's blades, Max approached G from a low trajectory, allowing her to avoid the trident's sweep and get close.

Then, she used Bladecloud Convergence to empower Sekiun and slash at the Overlord.

The Famed Blade sunk into G's lower leg...

"Not bad!"

...but it was stopped yet again by her muscles and tough skin—STR and END.

Max quickly let go of her weapon, but she was blown away by a trident strike. Sent flying to the wall, she suffered an impact

powerful enough to shatter her Brooch.

However, Sekiun was still stuck in G's left leg, hindering the Overlord's movements.

Now, if Maxie went for the legs...

The real attack would surely come from the other two.

"Here...!" The first of the two to take to action was Juliet. Brandishing her sword, she flew in for close combat.

"That's! A bad idea! Doncha think?!" G faced Juliet head-on, swinging her trident to meet Juliet's blade, and the two weapons clashed.

As a result, the sword began to creak.

Juliet's eyes widened. "This is obvious! It's just what you'd expect! My buffs are way superior to yours!" Forged by G's clan, Harodihg Gnik was designed to be tough enough that she could wield it after using Paradigm Shift. That was also the reason for its massive size.

And Paradigm Shift's buffs were far greater than that of Gradsoul's Curse Conversion.

Despite her lower stats, Juliet continued to struggle, avoiding the fatal trident strike, but this accumulated damage upon her weapon, and finally...

"Oh my..."

With those words from G and a widening of Juliet's eyes, the sword reached its limit and shattered.

Though a bit disappointed that it had ended this way, G knew what she had to do. She launched a finishing blow straight toward Juliet.

The battle between Overlord Invidia and the Fallen Knight was about to meet its expected end—with the latter speared upon the former's trident.

"I remain unbroken."

But that would not come to pass.

A moment later, with a roaring, metallic impact, the trident was knocked aside.

What had parried the fatal strike was...

"It's fixed?"

...the same blade that had broken just moments ago.

It was now completely restored, seemingly without a single scratch. In fact, it now shone with a light more sinister and powerful than before.

This was Gradsoul's second skill, "Unbreakable Blade." When it was destroyed, the wielder could pay half of her HP to instantly restore it.

"I didn't break it during the sparring match, did I?" said Juliet. G had watched Juliet spar, but this feature was still unknown to her.

No matter how many times it shattered, Juliet's sword would remain unbroken and rise again. Reminiscent of a certain someone, it was Juliet's new partner.

"That's a great weapon! Also..." The unexpected restoration had caught G off guard and allowed Juliet to deliver a hit.

A deep wound had opened in the Overlord's left side.

"Oh...! It's stronger too!" G said.

Indeed. In exchange for making Juliet unable to heal the HP she'd used to restore Gradsoul, Unbreakable Blade increased Curse Conversion's stat bonuses from 50% to 200% for ten minutes.

Juliet's weapon had shattered and she'd lost an enormous amount of HP...but this had only made her more powerful.

High risk, high reward builds—there were many RPGs that rewarded this kind of dangerous play.

"I can do this!" Juliet now had three times the stats of a typical vanguard SJ. Though she still didn't reach Overlord Invidia's level, her combat experience allowed her to come close.

"Not bad, Julie! You surprise me, Julie! But..." Though shocked that Juliet could keep up with her despite the vast gap in stats, G was still confident that she would win.

The wound in her left side had already closed. The reversed Poison was now a healing-over-time buff. While Juliet had lost HP to pay for the skill and was gradually losing more as they fought, G was quickly regenerating all the damage done to her.

It was simply impossible for Juliet's blade to outpace the healing and defeat G before her own life expired. Juliet's HP was critically low—it had dipped down to just ten percent of her total.

“Looks like you’re still fated for defeat!” G said. It almost felt like there was a question implied by her words: “What will you do, then? Can you still shine on this stage?”

“Even if I am fated to fade...” Juliet replied as she deflected G’s attacks. “Even if the ending of my tale has already been penned...”

She had only one response.

“That is merely one wave upon the vast sea of possibility.”

She wouldn’t even think of giving up.

“And beyond that...is the possibility I truly seek.”

Juliet’s shining eyes never wavered, fully fixated on the horizon past what was possible.

“Thus, here and now, upon this battlefield...the flames of life burn ever bright!”

And with that cry, something on Juliet’s chest began to shine.

It was a necklace hanging from her neck—the MVP reward she’d acquired in the event alongside Ray, before she’d even obtained Gradsoul.

It was the Ancient Legendary “Light of Finality, Climax.”

Once belonging to the Sacred Blazer, Aslan Faldreed, it was an accessory that could only be used at *less than 10%* of your total HP.

It had only one skill, “Like a Flash: Climax.”

Usable only in the most dire of situations, the skill tripled the final number of all the user’s stats, and dropped the MP and SP cost of skills to zero.

It was perhaps the ultimate ability for a risky low HP build like Juliet’s.

And now...

“What...?!”

“I can reach you...!”

...the Fallen Knight was finally on the same level as the Overlord.

Now evenly matched, their battle accelerated. Though Juliet had barely enough HP to survive another hit, with their stats being equal, she could now use her battle prowess to its fullest.

This was the biggest difference between them. Juliet was a natural duelist, standing next to the likes of Figaro and Kashimiya.

Meanwhile, G’s talents didn’t lie in combat. Her fighting abilities

were on the same level as that of most players—simply something given to her by high-rank sense skills.

So now that their stats were matched...

"HHAAAAAAAGHHH!"

...G's system-limited strength was outmatched by Juliet's system-*surpassing* skills.

Juliet's HP stopped decreasing, while G's HP began falling faster than it regenerated. The tables were turned. If this battle continued like this, Juliet now had a chance of winning.

"Ah ha ha ha! This is amazing! But is it enough to finish me off in time?!" G still thought that she could survive long enough for her ult to complete, winning her the battle.

But she also thought that would be *boring*.

Winning and losing was secondary—she wanted this to be even more exciting.

This stage was superb and the cast second to none. An anticlimactic finale was simply unacceptable.

"Not yet! It's not over yet! More! MORE! You still have something, right?!" The Overlord continued to insist that *they all could shine even brighter*.

"Yeah. We do."

It was the other knight who responded.

G looked up to see Ray, galloping through the air astride Silver.

"Juliet!" As he called out, Juliet backed away...

"Hellish Miasma!"

...and Ray closed the distance, taking Juliet's place as he held up his right bracer and released a dark-purple poison mist.

That's the... Well, it doesn't matter. It can't do anything to me now, G thought.

Indeed, this meant nothing to Overlord Invidia. The mist had three debuffs: Poison, Weakness, and Intoxication. She'd already taken on the first two herself, while Intoxication wasn't worth worrying about.

Hellish Miasma wouldn't do anything to her.

"Ah! Wait! This is a smoke screen...!"

But the fact that it was a *colored* mist made it capable of blocking

her vision. That made it effective at preventing Harodihg Gnik's Attraction Anchor.

But what will he even do if he gets close?! My stats are way higher than his! And I made sure not to give him ammo for his special counterattack thing!

G had only hit him once, when Nemesis had put up her Counter Absorption. Doubling that damage would barely scratch her.

Is he playing this like his other battles, then? Looking for an opening to take advantage of...? With that thought, G prepared for whatever trick Ray had in store for her.

However, there was no trickery here. None at all.

If anything, it was the opposite—he was fighting her face-to-face.

"I'm a bit late in saying this, but... Thanks for the buffs, Overlord."

And with that, Ray broke through the dark-purple curtain, equipped with a gas mask—his Storm Visage.

In his left hand, there was the Flag Halberd...

"Thanks to you, I can use this at least once!"

And in his right, there was the *nameless axe*, wrapped in curse-cloth, fresh out of his Inventory.

It was Ray's strongest weapon, and the world's greatest double-edged sword. When he'd tested it in the arena, simply holding it up was enough to tear his arm to pieces.

He was doing the same now—but although the flesh on his arm cracked and bled, it wasn't fully destroyed. Reversed by Nemesis's skill, the seven debuffs of the Depths of Jealousy enabled his body to withstand the price of wielding it.

Continuously bleeding, but healing just enough to keep going, Ray held up the axe...

"EAT THIIIS!"

...and swung it down as hard as he could.

G's eyes widened. Whether she actually felt the axe's power or if her sense skills had simply forced her to act was unclear, but she held up her trident to defend herself—only for the axe to cleave straight through it and sink into her right side.

"Ah?!" The axe opened a wound on her right shoulder, slicing

through her arm, the right half of her torso, her right leg, and even split the stonework beneath.

Ray gritted his teeth—the price he'd paid to destroy the Overlord's weapon and flesh was the absolute pulverization of his right arm.

But his eyes were still burning.

He knew what he had to do next—and who to call upon.

"JULIEEET!" "Right!" The unbreakable knight's call was answered by the knight with ebony wings.

At some point, she'd become surrounded by a vortex of countless black feathers. It was a sign that she was using her ultimate, but something was different this time.

Normally, Juliet's ult would release these black feathers after they circled her arms. Instead, the feathers now surrounded her as she flew through the air.

"Corpse-Eating Bird—Hræsvelgr..."

It was as though she herself had become the black wind.

"PENETRATOR!"

Putting all her power into the tip of her blade, she became an umbral vortex.

Her target no longer had a weapon to turn Juliet's sword aside. Faced with the vortex coming to pierce her, the unarmed Overlord...

"AH HA HA HA HA HA! YOU'RE ALL THE BEEEST!"

Even as she threw her left fist toward Juliet, she laughed and laughed.

The wounds—the injury-based debuffs—she'd received empowered Paradigm Shift further, making her fist even stronger than her trident.

This would no doubt be her last stand—the final exchange of the battle. Whoever's attack landed would shatter the other.

And so, not even a moment later, blade met fist.

It was an immense impact that shook not only the surrounding air, but all the waters of R'lyeh.

A knight and an Overlord. A pre-*Superior* and a *Superior*. Two girls shining with a dazzling light.

Only the *Black Crow* kept on flying beyond the horizon.

The dark vortex shattered the Overlord’s fist and pierced through her torso.

And, after a brief silence, R’lyeh collapsed.

Epilogue: Sea Light, Star Light

Paladin, Ray Starling

Right after Juliet fatally wounded G, we were sent straight back into the Eighth Arena.

Both the cylinder around it and the rising water were gone now. There was also no sign that the place had been submerged mere moments ago—it wasn't even damp.

And in the middle of the stage stood Overlord Invidia. She was back in her original form, but the damage she'd sustained was still visible.

"I looost... That really did feel like a true boss monster's defeat, though..."

She's got no arms and a hole where her heart should be. How is she so lively? I wondered—before an answer came to me. "Do you have Death Soldier?" I asked.

"I do. I took it so I could be sure to save all my footage before I die."

Well, that explained why she was still alive.

Wait, I just noticed that she's using her legs to operate the magic camera console. Man, she's dextrous.

Then, I realized that Juliet looked somewhat sad. G seemed to notice it too. "Oh? What's wrong, Julie? What's the matter, Julie?" she asked.

"I... I gave you the death penalty... That means you're going to the gaol..." That clearly explained what was bothering her. While fighting G, Juliet must've been completely focused on the battle—the time limit and the circumstances didn't allow her to think about anything else.

And now that we'd won, she'd realized what beating G really meant, which had made her upset. She felt guilty about sending her friend to the gaol.

There was one small issue with that, though...

"She's not going to the gaol," Chelsea and I said in perfect unison, denying Juliet's concerns.

"Huh?"

"What? She pulls this kinda shit and she's *not* wanted?" Juliet tilted her head, while Max became confused. I couldn't blame them. I wouldn't have known this either if I hadn't watched her videos.

"Oh, she is," said Chelsea. "She's like public enemy number one in Legendaria."

"Then why's she not goin'?"

"She's got an MVP reward that lets her bypass her wanted status and come back from her death penalties," I said. If my memory served me, it was a mobile save point called "Sevenfall Eightrise," and it let her come back from her death penalties eight times per year. I'd seen the video where she fought a music battle against Titania—she'd lost and died after it, but ultimately it had all ended with her coming back like nothing mattered.

"If you wanna know more, check out my video, 'Super Useful Item! G Tries Something New!'"

She's trying to get viewers even now! She's really on that grindset! I thought, but then I realized something. "Wait. Why *are* you still alive? We Death Soldiers don't get to live *this* long." I was pretty sure that a minute had already passed.

"I got someone to make me an accessory that extends the duration by minutes!" First Harodihg Gnik, now this... Underground Sanctuary seemed to have some pretty good crafters.

"I'd actually love to have that too..."

"Our desires align... (Me too...)"

"You're both way too excited about builds that involve dyin'."

C'mon, Chelsea. Juliet's a low HP build, while I'm, well...me. It's pretty important that we get to stay around for a long time once our HP's gone!

"I could give you some if you ever come hang out with my clan!" said G. "Consider it payment for today's performance!"

Wait, really? I thought. *Honestly, that might be enough for me to forgive all this.*

“I must say,” Nemesis spoke up. “For someone who was just soundly defeated, you’re acting quite upbeat...”

“I mean, I had fun. We were all shining bright. It’s normal to feel good after something great happens, right?”

The Overlord—G—said those words with an expression that showed she was telling the honest truth.

That basically confirmed my suspicions about her...

“Hey, G,” said Chelsea. “You could’ve destroyed us easily, right?”

“Huh?”

“Whaddya mean?” Juliet and Max seemed confused by Chelsea’s accusation, but I knew what she was saying. While G had fought us with all she had, she wasn’t putting everything she’d got into *winning*, exactly.

“I mean, R’lyeh’s got way worse places than that dungeon inside it, right?” The Depths of Jealousy was a terrifying dungeon and could be easily flooded with her monsters. However, the very fact that she’d picked a place that was possible to clear at all told me that she wasn’t just trying to kill us outright. R’lyeh could easily hold a lot of places where just surviving would be borderline impossible. I mean, if she’d dumped us into the deep sea, we wouldn’t have even been able to breathe.

The only reason we were able to win in the first place was because the dungeon she’d given us had both a start and a goal.

“Also... You’re holding up pretty well even at 0 HP. There’s something you could do even now, right? Something that would take us all out?” I asked. The damage to her torso might’ve destroyed the trapezohedron, but though her ult was canceled, it’s not like she *had* to take us outside like this.

If she really wanted to beat me, she could’ve used the time given to her by Last Command to do something else—maybe even that classic load-bearing boss move where you destroy the dungeon to take the heroes down with you.

Her answer to that...

“I didn’t want that. I mean... It would’ve been *boring*.”

...was brief and straightforward.

“Nobody wants to see a video where I just beat the crap out of

someone who can't fight back. And I clearly lost, so of course I'm not going to turn the tables and just make it a draw. I'm against that kinda stuff."

Indeed, the reason she did what she did—and didn't do what she didn't—was *that she was a content creator*.

For her, all of this was just *a gaming video recording session*.

G's attempt to steal the arena had just been a way to enable the game between us, while the stuff about avenging her brother was nothing more than something to spice up the narrative.

At the heart of it all, G wanted to make a video featuring herself.

To put it simply, if the resulting video was interesting and exciting, to a content creator like her, whether she won or lost was irrelevant. It was a victory regardless.

And her good mood told me that the battle we just had must've greatly exceeded her hopes and expectations.

"This turned out better than the stuff I made with Legendaria's *Superiors*. I honestly wanna say thanks. Seriously, I'm bursting with gratitude!" she said with a bright, blissful smile as Chelsea, Max, and I looked down at her with conflicted expressions.

Getting caught up in her shenanigans had been a pain, but she honestly didn't seem like that bad of a person.

"But if you'd lost, she would have taken your arena. Does that not make her a proper enemy?" Nemesis asked.

Well, I guess, I replied. *She's not bad at heart, but she is a real handful... I guess that makes her kinda like Miss Eldritch?*

"I don't mind being your enemy, but I will come back to record another video sometime!" G said. "Oh! But I want you to see through my disguise, so let's become friends!"

"What a wild thing to say..." Not seeing through her disguise seemed like it could be bad, though, so I just did as told and put her on my friend list.

"Friending someone who just tried to kill me and take my arena makes no sense," I muttered, "but it feels like it'd be worse if I didn't. Scary stuff."

"Don't worry about it. This is pretty common in Legendaria."

Seriously? That's actually kind of terrifying. Legendaria might be a

match for Tenchi.

"Suppose it's almost time." G's extended Last Command then expired, and she started to transform into motes of light. "Oh. Right. I almost forgot." As if she'd just thought of something, G turned to me with a cruel smile. "Heh heh heh. Don't think this is over... You may have defeated me, but I'm not the only Overlord you must face..."

Silence settled over the arena in the wake of G's stereotypical evil Overlord line.

Well, I get what she's going for, but there's one small issue...

"Umm... You're actually my second Overlord," said Juliet.

"Mine too," I added. That line only worked if G was the first we'd fought.

"Huh?! Can I ask who your first was?"

"Uhhh... I got caught up in a fight between Dis and Sechs..."

"I recently fought ZZZ..."

"Oh. So that's why he made that request. That explains it." G looked like this had made everything clear to her. "What a bummer, though," she continued. "I've been wanting to say that at least once ever since I became an Overlord..."

"S-Sorry," said Juliet.

"It's fine. I'm over it," G said, letting out a sigh and smiling at Juliet. "Let's play again sometime, Julie."

"Okay."

And with that, the last bits of G became light and vanished.

"She really did whatever she liked until the very end," said Nemesis.

"Well, I guess it's good to find out that there's Masters like her too." As far as *Superiors* went, she was honestly pretty all right.

"She did not endanger the country or any tian lives either..."

I feel like the arena's disappearance would've knocked Count Gideon out from the stress, though.

Anyway, that concluded the trouble at our base...

Which made me start to wonder how things had turned out at the Central Arena.

◇◆◇

Gideon, City of Duels, Central Arena

"...Heh heh."

"What? Why are you laughing? It's creepy."

The intense duel at the Central Arena had just ended, and F, seated in the Death Period box seat, let out a chuckle that made Marie look all weirded out.

"Oh, I just felt that I'd witnessed some excellent fighting." Using his own eye and Zodiac both, F was able to gather inspiration from two battles at once. Both were exhilarating fights and hardly everyday occurrences.

However...

"The fighting today was friendly, fun, and generally splendid..." F said of the battles at the two arenas. "*But not more than that*."

"What are you talking about?" Marie asked.

"Are you saying you don't agree? If it doesn't involve something that can be lost forever—tians, for example—then no matter how intense the battle, it's never more than a game, is it?"

Figaro vs Albert. Ray's party vs G.

While both battles had been truly something to behold, neither of them carried the weight of something that might be truly lost.

"Tragedies happen only when there is something that cannot be undone," F said. With mere games, an observer might find the tension somewhat lacking—but *Dendro* was both a game *and* a world, so it could offer a kind of heightened spectacle that could not be experienced anywhere else. And yet, F felt that there hadn't been much of that special tension in the battles he'd just witnessed.

It was as if they'd received perfect scores, *but nothing more*.

"Perhaps if only Masters are involved, their conflicts can never be deeper than simple fun," F concluded.

"You know you almost ruined a relationship, right?" During the Love-Duel Festival, F had nearly broken up a pair of Masters, and Marie couldn't help but point that out.

"Oh my. How harsh. But in hindsight, I really only helped bring them closer together, didn't I?"

“You’ve got a lot of nerve, saying that... Should I split your head open?” Marie clicked her tongue as she loaded Arc-en-Ciel with La Gravelle.

“Heh...”

Despite what F said, he had gained something from the incident at the Eighth Arena. He was sure that the Ray he knew wouldn’t have been able to fight as well as he did today. F could tell that in the short amount of time that had passed since their last meeting, the young man had experienced some tremendous growth.

Learning of this change in his research subject was certainly a good thing, but...

“Then again, neither you nor I will get what we want from mere games, will we?”

Marie said nothing in response. She couldn’t deny that the two of them were cut from similar cloth.

“I want to read more of your work, so please pick it back up as quickly as you can...*Nagisa Ichimiya*,” F said, flashing a mischievous smile before standing up.

Marie frowned—that had hit where it hurt—but just as F was about to leave...

“Yeah, yeah. You keep up with your own writing too...*Seigen Kato*.”

...she addressed him. Not by his avatar name, nor by his real name, but by his *pen name*.

It was the name of a certain author who’d participated in a publisher get-together from some time ago.

Marie was obviously trying to tell him that she’d realized his true identity.

“...Of course.” Grinning wryly at the unexpected counterattack, F walked away.

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Paladin, Ray Starling

Once that thing at the Eighth Arena was taken care of, I headed to the Central Arena to see how that had panned out—only for Shu

to tell me to come right to the conference room. There, I found Shu, Figaro, Hannya, Azurite, Azurite's bodyguards...and Figaro's opponent in the final duel: King of Termination, Albert Schwartzkaiser.

Apparently we'd all been gathered for *questioning*.

KoT's intentions were still completely unclear. It just didn't make sense for a well-known Caldinan *Superior* to suddenly join Altar and instantly be allowed to participate in The Tournaments.

The questioning had been postponed until after the event to preserve fairness, but it was now time to hear what Albert had to say.

The *Superiors* who were already in the city were present, as well. Shu had dragged me in here too, but that seemed to be at Azurite's request.

That made sense, though—I was the leader of their clan as well as her friend.

Honestly, I wasn't sure if it was a good idea for Azurite to be here at all, given we didn't know what KoT's intentions were, but she insisted on interrogating him herself. That was just how she was—in fact, that was exactly how we'd met at Quartierlatin in the first place—but if KoT was planning to assassinate her, this gave him a golden opportunity.

Though, we accounted for that possibility too.

In addition to the three *Superiors* that were visibly present, Fuso and Tsukikage were also hiding in the shadows, just in case. If something happened, she'd use Faint Light to cut Albert's AGI and they both would get involved.

With such preparations in place, Azurite began the questioning.

"Now, let us begin."

Silence.

"What is your reason for participating in The Tournaments... For joining Altar?" Azurite went straight for the big one. With Truth Discernment in place, KoT couldn't lie...

"Can I have an answer?"

...but that meant nothing when faced with someone who wouldn't say anything at all.

With a face that was almost robotic in how emotionless it was, KoT remained completely silent.

That made me realize that even in his duels, he hadn't said anything besides skill declarations and a short phrase at the end of his matches.

"Are you Contract-bound to not say certain things?" Azurite asked. I'd forgotten to consider Contracts, and yeah, that would certainly explain why KoT wasn't speaking. If he was Contract-bound to keep secrets, he'd have no choice but to remain silent.

Would breaking the Contract actually kill him, though? I wondered. *Wouldn't he just gain Contract resistance or something?*

However, as that thought was running through my head, KoT shook his head in response.

It was a gesture that clearly meant "no."

He and Azurite looked at each other in silence, but then the latter broke it.

"Did you come to Altar by the president's order?"

A nod—almost certainly a "yes."

"Why did she send you here?"

KoT tilted his head—probably the gesture meant "unknown."

"Oh..." I said. Now I understood—

KoT didn't speak, responding only with three gestures that meant "yes," "no," or "unknown."

Azurite's first question couldn't be answered by any of those, and that was why he'd shown no reaction to it. But why was he doing this, anyway?

"Are your answers limited by some sort of skill or Contract?"

He shook his head.

"You cannot speak?"

He shook his head.

"Are you just doing this because you want to?"

He nodded... *Wait, nodded?!*

"I see." Azurite placed a hand on her temple as though suddenly exhausted and slowly reached for Altar—the sword by her side.

"Whoa whoa whoa! Don't try to cut him down for that! Calm down!" I interjected.

"Oh. Sorry. For a moment, I felt like Caldina's president was using him to mock me..."

Well, I get she's the one who sent him here, but still...!

This felt like it was getting nowhere. We could ask just yes-or-no questions, but there was no telling how long it would take for us to get anything useful out of him.

"Oh," said Shu. "Looks like the help I called fur is here."

"The help?" The moment he said that, there was a knock on the door. It was followed by the voice of a knight from the outside.

"Rook, a member of Death Period, has arrived."

"Rook?"

Azurite gave permission, and he entered the room. His face and gear were a bit dirty, so I guessed he'd been doing a little training even though there was a big dueling competition going on.

"I'm sorry for the wait."

"It's cool. Anyway, we could use some interpretation." With those words, Shu moved a bit away from KoT's side, giving his position to Rook.

"Interpretation," though? How do you interpret someone who doesn't even talk?

"Fur now, continue the questionin' as you were."

"Very well," Azurite said as she resumed her interrogation.

Nodding, head shaking, tilting, silence... The questioning continued, still awkward and mostly uninformative, for nearly ten minutes until...

"I think I understand now," Rook said. "Please ask something other than yes-or-no questions."

Azurite gave a slightly puzzled expression before posing her first question again.

"What is your reason for joining Altar?"

"'I have concluded that if I want to gather information and test myself in various environments, staying in one place is suboptimal. The four years I spent in Caldina were more than enough, and I am now considering a stay of similar length here in Altar. The president also directed me to participate in The Tournaments, which made this transfer all the more convenient. I intend to assist the kingdom in

hunting dangerous monsters and pursuing wanted Masters as I have in Caldina. I hope we have a productive relationship.' That's his answer."

Rook's sudden speech made everyone except Shu look shocked.

He seemed to be directly reciting KoT's words.

Rook was almost like a mind reader sometimes and often knew what was going on in our heads, but it looked like the past ten minutes of questioning were enough for him to figure out Albert too.

Wait, I could kinda understand if Rook was observing someone who talked a lot, but how's he doing it with a guy who doesn't say anything? And how's he getting so much out of him?

"Is that all correct?" Azurite asked. KoT nodded in response, and you could tell by his raised eyebrow that even he was surprised by Rook's feat.

"He says 'More or less,'" Rook translated.

"Why do you not speak for yourself?"

"'There are personal circumstances that make it somewhat difficult for me to present information using voice. I am capable of it, but my efforts are inefficient. Even after several years here, I cannot say more than a few words at once. Additionally, the nuances of my language may cause difficulties with communication. Even if I were to write, my original language would be incomprehensible to tians. In the common language, all I can give are names and a few words. Because of all that, I generally communicate using gestures.'"

He sure says a lot for someone who doesn't talk! I thought.

"Did the president give you any other orders?"

"'No. I was only ordered to participate in The Tournaments. I was not even told why. She said I was free once it was over. Additionally, she said that if I went to the reception at her designated time, I would win the Tournament lottery.'"

His answer made Azurite fall silent, deep in thought. The president had sent him here almost like a blank slate, and had given him orders as if she knew the exact timing he needed to win.

That was just baffling.

"Do you know if there is anything else Caldina is doing in Altar?"

"'Fellow Sefirot members, Carl and Yumeji, accompanied me on

the way here, but in Caldina's west, we encountered Legendaria's King of Curses and Summon Princess. The resulting trouble separated us, and I have been operating on my own ever since. I am not involved in nor do I know anything about the orders the president gave to them.'"

"I see." Two more *Superiors* had approached the kingdom. That was important information, and it felt like a strategic move by Caldina.

It was strange, though, that he was giving us all this information without even attempting to obscure it.

KoT wasn't hiding a thing, but the president's intentions weren't becoming any clearer.

Also, I couldn't understand how Rook was picking up specific names and stuff like that.

I ended up asking about it, and it turned out that the deduction skills he practiced in real life had been greatly enhanced by *Dendro*'s mechanics. Rook regularly leveled up before I even realized he'd gotten stronger, but it looked like it wasn't just his stats that were improving. Honestly, this was basically another superpower at this point.

"If a war broke out between Altar and Dryfe, could we expect you to fight on our side?" Azurite asked.

"'I belong to the kingdom now, so I have no objections about aiding them in their effort. Though, war or not, I would like to refuse actions that cause tian casualties.'"

"What if only Masters participate?"

"'Then there would be no problems. I would gladly assist Altar.'"

After saying that—well, having Rook say that—KoT gave a nod.

That was nice to hear.

Based on Rook's translations, KoT seemed like a good-natured and diligent individual despite his stern appearance. Honestly, if you ignored the fact that he didn't speak, he might've been the most normal *Superior* in Altar.

"'Speaking of which, if I am to participate, I believe I need to join a clan. Is there any you recommend?' Oh, you can come to our Death Period. We're second in the rankings," Rook interjected before

continuing. "'Thank you. I will gladly join.'"

"Hold on!" Basically talking to himself, Rook had casually made a pretty big decision for us.

We're getting another Superior*?!*

"Oh? Do you object? I assumed you would approve."

"I do, but still!" Rook was reading every inch of my mind *and* personality! *This really is a superpower!*

"No it's not. Anyone can do this with enough training. It's similar to how you understand what Juliet is saying."

"But Juliet talks out loud! Normally!"

"Huh?"

That aside...

I really did have nothing against him joining our clan.

The Tournaments' goal was to keep the participants from committing crimes and attract foreign Masters to increase Altar's forces in the coming war.

For some reason, there were fewer foreign and freelance Masters than expected, but KoT was a skilled *Superior* who could hold his own against Figaro, and him joining Altar would be a great asset. While we didn't know what the Caldinan president was planning, I felt that we could trust Albert just fine. Rook and Shu would surely notice if he had some ulterior motives.

Azurite still seemed to be pondering something, though. She'd been lost in thought ever since Albert said how he ended up in Altar, and I could hear her whisper something like "When did...?"

"Azurite?"

"King of Termination... I have another question... *When* did you depart from Caldina?"

"'When?' Is that important?" I asked. "I know Caldina's pretty far, but still." Crossing the desert to travel all the way to Altar surely wasn't an easy task. AGI builds could get through it at supersonic speeds, but based on his duels, Albert seemed pretty slow. Did he travel in some sort of vehicle?

"Huh?" That voice of confusion came from Rook, and I assumed it was caused by Albert's answer to Azurite's question. With a dubious expression on his face, he went and translated it. "...'In terms of

time on this side, I was ordered to go to Altar *about a month ago*.'"

Shock filled the room. I finally understood what had Azurite so lost in thought.

A month ago in *Dendro* time... That was before even the peace talks—*before Altar had even gotten the idea to hold The Tournaments*.

Despite that, the president had already sent Albert to participate in the final day, and even given him the time that would let him win the no-show slot lottery.

Maybe she really could see the future...and that prospect made us all shudder.

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A Month Ago, Drac-Nomad, The President's Residence

Some time before Altar and Dryfe had their peace conference, in the president's residence atop the Caldinan capital of Drac-Nomad, a man and a woman were having a conversation.

Or rather, a woman with a thin veil over her face was talking to a large man who responded only with subtle gestures.

"Here are the documents to change your affiliation. Give them to the person you're supposed to meet in Altar, and you will belong to the kingdom," said the woman. The man responded with a nod.

The woman was the president of Caldina, La Place Phantasma, while the man was Albert Schwartzkaiser.

"You may be wondering how I did this. It's simple. There happens to be a territory-owning Altarian noble who borrowed money from me, so now they are in my debt. This gives me indirect authority to have a Master—even you—change affiliation. And make sure you go through the lottery reception at the precise time I gave you. *You will make it in*."

Albert nodded.

"Yumeji and Carl will accompany you for a while. Their goal is different from yours. Oh, and you will get into trouble with Legendarian rankers on the way. Make sure they do not kill you, and refrain from killing them as well."

Albert nodded.

"After The Tournaments...you will be free. Live in Altar as you will."

Albert...didn't nod.

"You don't have to worry about Sefirot losing a member. You came here to gather information and carry out some tests, didn't you? You don't benefit much from staying in a single country. You learned all that you could learn in Sefirot. This is my last quest for you—consider it your final operation test here in Caldina."

"I am grateful for your support," Albert said in English as he nodded.

"Good work on everything thus far. And good luck in your future endeavors, Albert."

"Thank you." Expressing his gratitude again, Albert left the room.

"That was the first time he's said two sentences in a single conversation. I suppose it just goes to show how grateful he was," La Place said with a wry grin before turning around to gaze off in another direction.

At some point, she was joined by a man of a darker complexion and clothes characteristic of a desert nomad.

"Are you sure you should've let him go? He's strong."

The man was the strongest wide-scale exterminator—Fatoum, the "Magical Apex."

"Yes. This is for the best. Keeping him around wouldn't be very beneficial for us," La Place said, not even slightly surprised by Fatoum's presence.

"It wouldn't?"

"If sent to fight Granvaloa or participate in *the battles that would follow*, he would likely switch sides or refuse to follow orders."

"Oh dear." Fatoum gave a wry grin, but he didn't disagree. If anything, it seemed he also suspected that that was exactly what would happen.

"He seems to think such actions are completely unlike dueling or fighting monsters and criminals, even though the only difference is that tians die."

Sefirot was a collection of oddballs, eccentrics, fiends, and

superhumans, but if you ignored Albert's origins and Embryo, he was easily one of their most normal and good-natured members. Even more than their leader, he served as the group's conscience.

"He's powerful, but too pure. How curious that a nonhuman would cling to humanity as he does."

"That might be the very reason he does it. His lack of humanity could be what is driving him to behave as *human* as possible. If a nonhuman was instructed to act like a human, I imagine that directive would not include the uglier side of humanity."

A nonhuman entity who looked at humanity with a positive eye, focused on its good side. Fatoum thought that if something like that learned what it truly meant to be human and tried to behave like one, it would most likely become someone virtuous—and La Place felt that he had a point.

"Regardless, sending Albert to Altar is enough to drive a wedge between Altar, Dryfe, and the rest." It would definitely shake the kingdom and make Dryfe feel uneasy. The increase to the ranks of Altar's *Superiors* would make the other countries look at them differently too. "This will also make it easier for me to crush the fools trying to attack me from the inside."

Being the president of Caldina—a city-state union—she had many enemies who wanted to claim her wealth and authority for themselves. However, whenever such characters appeared, she quickly mowed them down, increasing her own influence in the process.

The recent Cortana incident was a good example. With its mayor having essentially destroyed himself, Caldina's largest city was now fully within La Place's grasp.

"By the way, why did you send Carl and Yumeji too?" Fatoum asked.

"Their role is negotiation. They will talk to the powerful Masters who are considering going to Altar and offer them a better deal if they join Caldina instead. They are already willing to switch and have no attachment to Altar yet, so this is a great opportunity to expand our forces. I will not let it pass by."

"That makes sense."

"I would want a *Superior* most of all... Someone to replace Albert. Despite what I said to him, 'Sefirot' does refer to the ten sefira. It feels wrong to use that name when there are only nine."

Even if they'd already joined Altar, until The Tournaments happened, the Masters were functionally freelance, and La Place didn't hesitate to claim them for herself. Excessive interference with Altar's attempts to grow their forces would negatively affect the war, so she had gone and given them Albert—someone who would eventually stop working for her regardless.

In a way, it was a win-win situation. With Albert, Altar would gain the forces they wanted, while Caldina would get someone to replace the *Superior* they were about to lose anyway.

Caldina would likely also get some pre-*Superiors* and ex-rankers, though, so they were still the bigger winner in this exchange.

"I wonder if Albert will find his place there..."

"He's an honest sort. I believe he will fit in well, even in Altar." Albert was an agreeable person, but more importantly, he wasn't involved in any conspiracies. Nothing could be gained from interrogating him, and he possessed no secrets he could leak.

In terms of help Caldina could send to the kingdom, he was the best option they could ask for.

"When he enters The Tournaments, he will show his powers too. Though I suppose his victory is unlikely."

Albert was going to the same Tournament as Figaro, who was said to be Altar's strongest. If he won against Figaro, his power and value would become undeniable.

However, there was little chance of that.

"Well, as far as duels go, Figaro isn't a favorable matchup for him," said Fatoum. "It could honestly go either way, though. If we ignore the old-timer who changes the very rules of combat, Figaro is probably the only duel champion who can beat Albert."

"He does have a lot of weaknesses. That is exactly why I had him participate in that particular Tournament."

An Embryo focused on scouting would instantly notice Albert's main body, although those were admittedly somewhat unusual to see in duels, and outside of duels there were many ways to

circumvent Albert's powers. For example, one could simply gather eight Masters, each with their own means of fatally wounding him.

Albert was certainly useful, but these flaws meant he could easily be replaced. And that was the reason the president had sent him to The Tournaments.

He was now effectively *a foreign asset* they would never get back. Her last quest took him to The Tournaments specifically so he would *reveal his many weaknesses*.

By taking part in the competition, Albert would establish ties with the kingdom and gain their trust. That would make it easier for him to operate there, and it would certainly be a positive for him.

However, other countries would learn how to defeat him. That would obviously include Dryfe, and since Caldina wanted the Dryfe-Altar war to be as close as possible, that was a positive outcome for them.

"Not having Yumeji and Carl around might make some things a bit hard for us, though," said Fatoum. "Though I suppose that cannot be avoided right now. If we did not do this, it's likely that very few people would agree. If we use them as messengers, offer funding, provide a favorable environment, and have Sefirot help them hunt UBMs that I am aware of, they will be more than likely to accept our offer."

The reason La Place had used *Superiors* as headhunters was to give the offer more credibility, as well as make the Masters think that Caldina truly valued them and was serious about wanting their allegiance.

That wasn't the only reason La Place had sent *Superiors* to the west, though.

"This is no issue," she said. "Even if something unexpected occurs—something beyond my calculations—we can simply counter it with excessive force. And if we play all our cards, you and I alone can deal with *anything*."

"You think so?"

"Yes. If we are together, there is no tian or Master... No..." La Place paused for a moment. "There is no outsider Infinite... *No Incarnation we can't win against*."

She mentioned the Infinite Embryos—the strongest of all possible entities, hiding in the background of this world—and still claimed that she and Fatoum would win.



"That is why I chose you, after all," she said.

"It's an honor. As both a warrior, and your husband," Fatoum said as he smiled at *his wife*.

"Nothing unexpected will happen for a while, though. The changes to the peace conference, as well as the Eltram and Vennsayle incidents, will be very few. The same goes for The Tournaments after that. There will be some deviations, but they will be negligible overall. I had to be especially careful while calculating the time for Albert to join the lottery, though."

Altar and Dryfe would hold a peace conference. It would break down, leading to conflict which would end with Claudiah suggesting a Master-only war, which would in turn cause Altimia to set up The Tournaments to prepare for that.

At that point, there did not exist a single tangible sign that these Tournaments would even happen—and yet La Place was making plans as if they had already been announced.

However, Fatoum didn't even think of arguing against her idea. La Place was often called a witch who could see the future, and he had absolute confidence in this power of hers.

"I will not be wrong about this. Things are different this time." The smile on her face vanished before she continued. "A piece as eccentric as *Ray Starling* will not appear again."

A strong enmity could be seen in her eyes as she spoke that name.

"Are you still bothered by that?"

"Of course I am. It's rare for me to calculate so thoroughly and be so wrong."

La Place reached into an Inventory she had on her and took out some documents with text on them, reading things like "Altea Blockade Project" and "UBM Release Project."

Going through these documents, La Place continued talking.

"I consolidate all the information I receive and use it to paint an image of the future. I am confident that my overall world prediction ability rivals that of the Incarnation of Influence."

She then brought up one of the custodians—the twins claiming to be control AI No. 11. The power they'd demonstrated two millennia

ago was immense, yet La Place casually claimed that she was on their level.

"But there are some that render my calculations meaningless." Her fingers stopped as she came across a photo. It showed a single Master—a young man raising his right arm high before a creature engulfed in flames. "Those without *vessels* for me to read, and Masters who entered this world after the calculations—those who *didn't even exist here*—simply could not be included in the equation. Naturally, I failed to consider them. However, such entities usually did not have enough influence to affect my results...with some exceptions."

She glared at Ray's photo, clearly displeased.

"This is who we have to blame for the divergence of the Gideon incident, as well as the immediate disappearance of the Monochrome I had you awaken... Actually, he's also the reason the Altea blockade ended a few days earlier than planned."

La Place and her Sefirot clan had multiple schemes in place for the kingdom. Some revolved around Dryfe's acts of terror, while others were of their own devising. However, a good few of them—some of them very important—had been ruined by Ray Starling.

First had been Dryfe's plot to assassinate the Grandrear sisters. While their deaths wouldn't have had much of an impact on the war between Altar and Dryfe, they were qualified to inherit the Granvaloan pirate fleet, so their deaths would've exacerbated the turmoil that would occur there after the war.

That would have been successful, and all Caldina had to do was watch.

However, Ray's involvement had turned the assassination into a failure.

Next was the Altea blockade. Caldina had arranged this act of terror to make Altar's situation worse.

But after Ray's death, Shu had gone out to Noz Forest to avenge him. Then, thanks to Ray meeting Figaro in the Tomb Labyrinth, the blockade at the Sauda Mountain Pass had also been broken earlier than planned.

He was actually somewhat responsible for the destruction of the

western blockade too. When Lei-Lei learned her friend's little brother was having a welcome party, she chose to stay at the capital longer than originally planned. And then, when her order for the party was stolen by Goblin Street, she went to the Wez Sea Route to get back at them.

And while the east blockade hadn't been broken because of Ray directly, it was still the PK of a newbie faithful that had caused the Lunar Society to take action, creating a result.

It went without saying that the same applied to the events surrounding the Gouz-Maise Gang, Gideon, and Monochrome.

"Because of him, my calculations have been thrown off even now. The *damage to the world* has been less than it should've been."

She'd had a hand in many of the incidents in the kingdom—yet through Ray Starling's involvement, some of the more important ones had ended differently than she'd calculated.

"The worst of it was Altar refusing Caldina's cooperation offer. According to my calculations, they should have accepted it. And yet they didn't. It's as though Altar still stands unbroken."

That had been Ray Starling's influence. Through the battle in Gideon, he'd shown them hope, and through the battle in Quartierlatin, he'd formed a bond with Altimia. Without him, the board would have played out closer to how she predicted.

Her stern expression made it clear just how much this irritated her.

"It's not like you to be vexed by the past," said Fatoum. "You have always been someone who looks toward the future."

"...That is true." Her husband's words made her relax a tiny bit.

"Speaking of, what do you believe the future will be like?" he asked. "The ramifications of that miscalculation and the overall increase of variables in the world means that our window of prediction has been narrowed, but I foresee some significant incidents in the near future. Though, I have already told you about most of them."

La Place nodded before continuing.

"The ones that involve us the most will be the Eltram incident and the events at Vennsayle. And even with three members of our clan

sent to the west, we can still direct these in our favor. If anything, we won't even have to employ the two elders or Rainbow...our Prismatic Fortress."

"That is good to know."

"IF is involved in both, but I say we let them do as they please. Many of their activities are positive in terms of world damage."

"Should we tell that to Moneygold too?"

"No. All that matters is that he does not encounter the Irregularity there. We don't have to tell him to be considerate. He won't end up killing The Weapon, Murder Princess, or the Great Soul Daoshi regardless. I see the shadow of death upon him, though. You might get to see him lose all that weight," she said with a smile, presenting her prediction in a joking manner.

"Now that's something to look forward to," Fatoum said with a chuckle.

Her words would come true—Splendida would kill Moneygold shortly after the Eltram incident.

"So, what are the 'things that do not involve us' and the 'things you haven't told me about'?" Fatoum continued, noticing that his wife was omitting something.

La Place responded with a mischievous smile. "I saw something very interesting. It isn't confirmed to happen yet, but it would be good news for us if it does."

"Do tell."

"I looked into the future of Altea...and saw a large *crater*," she said with a hint of delight.

"You don't mean the King of Blaze incident?"

"No, it's not the act of terror during the peace conference. That one is bound to fail, anyway. Now, the disappearance of Altea would destroy both the save point and the barrier there. On top of that, it would cause many deaths and allow countless Resources to flow toward the vessel without any needless obstruction. If the vessel doesn't die when the capital vanishes, our victory might be guaranteed then and there."

"Perhaps I should head west too?"

"No. I'm already having you work against Granvaloa. If I changed

your objective now, I'll be unable to do much calculating for a while after that. Altea's disappearance would be simply a nice bonus... Ngh."

As she spoke, La Place clutched at her head as though struck by a sudden pain.

"...So there," she managed. "The three we sent will be our final interference with Altea... With the west. Once Albert's Tournament ends, Dryfe will surely swing into action. That High-End's...final struggle is..."

"La Place. *It might be time to switch*."

"You're...right. I might've done one too many repeats... I'll let the device...the brain get some rest."

La Place then sat down on a chair and closed her eyes. Fatoum watched over her, and it looked as though she had fallen asleep.

About a minute later, her eyes opened.

"...Oh. *She* went to sleep. I see she worked quite hard today as well."

There was something strange about La Place's words. Her manner of speech was different, her very presence had changed, and she spoke of herself as if she were someone else.

"She did. Does your head hurt, *Shashie*?"

As though it were the most obvious thing in the world, Fatoum called his wife by a different name.

"Oh, my brain is only a link... She does the calculations herself from the far-flung place where she resides."

"But none of this is within the capabilities of normal people. It burdens your brain too. You should rest... Do you think you can eat? If you can, shall we go have something together?"

"My... I would be happy to," La Place said, smiling like a cheerful young woman.

She had the same face as the cold and calculating clairvoyant witch she'd been moments before, but her behavior was nothing like it had been.

"Let me take the lead. I reserved a table at our leader's business."

"Oh my... I cannot wait."

Fatoum treated both of them the same way—it was as though to

him, both these personalities were one and the same.

After Story: The Viewer and the Streamer

Reality, Kurosaki Household

Right after the battle at the Eighth Arena, Juri logged out.

Her mother returned from work soon after that, so she just barely evaded being caught playing *Dendro*.

The cold she'd caught was making her feel pretty bad all over. Her head was hot and felt like it was stuffed with cotton, as though her body were basically begging her to get some sleep.

However, there was something she wanted to do before passing out.

"Umm... Japanese works for this, right?" Juri took her mobile device in hand, went to a video-sharing platform, and ran a search.

She found what she wanted right away.

"There... That's done. I'll do more...after I wake up..."

Finally, she'd reached her limit, and she fell asleep.

The mobile device was still in her hand, its screen showing a channel with a freshly clicked subscribe button.

◇◆◇

Reality, Fujiwara Household

"Yeah. This is good! It's done!"

G—Ginga Fujiwara—finished her work and stretched as if tired.

After she'd gotten the death penalty, she'd spent the entire day editing the footage she'd created in *Dendro*.

The fact that she could do this on zero sleep was a show of just how immersed she was in her work.

"This video's crazy good! And making it was so much fun."

Those were her honest thoughts as she looked over the

recordings and what she'd built from them.

The video had plenty of intense action, emotional moments, even some comedy from the Unbreakable's reactions. It was exciting all throughout.

She'd lost and hadn't managed to steal his arena, but she was more than glad that she'd gone to Gideon.

The actors had flourished on her stage, and she was shining bright even in defeat.

It was easily one of the best videos she'd ever made.

"Hrmmm... I'm still a bit upset that I lost, though. He did beat my brother, so if I'd beaten him, I would've finally become the better sibling... Well, come to think of it, he lost a one-on-one fight, while they outnumbered me four to one, so...maybe I'm still better than him?"

With those words, she set the finished video up for a premiere.

"Well... At least I made some new friends. That's something to be happy about."

A good video and a longer friend list—she'd gained more than she lost, so she couldn't complain too much.

"I got a good story to tell Shousen too... Aaaahhh..." G mentioned her clan's sub-leader—a name that might have rung a bell for Ray—before letting out a yawn.

Having been up since logging in for the recording, Ginga had finally reached her limit.

There was still time until the premiere, so she'd decided to get some sleep. She checked on her channel one last time and went to bed.

The subscriber count that she saw was slightly bigger than it had been yesterday...

END

Afterword

Cat: "Time for the afterwooord. Brought to you by Cheshire the 'Cat' and..."
Bear: "Shu Starling the 'Bear.'"
Cat: "Anyway... I'm exceedingly sorry for the waaait!"
Bear: "An apology, huh? A beary good way to start this."
Cat: "Heh... We said that this volume would come in the first half of 2024 and acted like there's no way we'd miss that deadline..."
Bear: "But it ended up comin' out a whole year after the last one, deep into the second half of 2024. It feels like every recent afterword announcement just keeps pushin' the date further and further back."
Cat: "The author never missed a deadline, though..."
Bear: "Books are made through cooperation between beary many people. Sometimes stickin' to your own deadline ain't enough."
Cat: "The author came to understand that things can be delayed even if no one's at fault and nothing bad happens..."
Bear: "We got some good news too, though. Fur real."
Cat: "Yes. There was the delay—but during the wait, we were able to try something new. Those of you buying from stores may have noticed that we released two volumes at once!"
Bear: "The other one is *Infinite Dendrogram SP 1: The Southern Cross Part 1*, where *I'm* the star of the show."
Cat: "We'll let the author tell you more about that."

Dearest readers, thank you for your purchase. I am the author, Sakon Kaido.

Let me echo Cheshire and extend my sincere apologies for the long wait on this volume. While certain circumstances greatly delayed the release, through some discussion with the editor, we were able to use that time to start doing something new.

We took the anime Blu-ray exclusive Southern Cross side story, gave it the subtitle of "SP," and released it separately from the mainline story.

Thanks to Eri Kuroda, the illustrator we got for SP, we were able to do something we've never done before—releasing two volumes at once.

Additionally, we are planning to release part 2 of *The Southern Cross* fairly shortly after this, and we are working on a continuation to the e-reader exclusive EX series.

I intend to do all I can to provide you with new stories to read and hopefully make up for the long wait for volume 22.

Now, with those announcements and advertisements out of the way, let's talk about this volume.

Those who read both the web novel and the light novel surely noticed, but this volume contained quite a few changes from the original. G's surprising appearance at the end of the previous volume allowed the creation of a new story that was centered around Ray, reminiscent of how King of Light appeared in volume 12. In fact, it was somewhat of a continuation from that storyline.

With the LN introducing F during the Love-Duel Festival—earlier than originally planned—G's introduction was also pushed to the forefront and happened during The Tournaments.

It was kind of like how an event in a video game sometimes requires a prerequisite event to trigger.

Thanks to Taiki, this volume also did an incredible job portraying G as both charming and a true Overlord. The work on the other characters was excellent too, and it made me really appreciate our illustrator.

Now, this volume will be followed by volume 23, which will take us back to Caldina for a continuation of the story from volume 20.

And just like volume 22, I hope that it presents you with something unknown and unexpected.

Please continue supporting *Infinite Dendrogram*.

—Sakon Kaido

Cat: "Anyway, it's time to wrap this up, but..."

Bear: "But...?"
Cat: "...You think we should announce when the next volume's coming out?"
Bear: "Ohhh. The delay this time was so bad that you're beary scared of doin' that, huh?"
Cat: "I mean, it feels like there's a jinx making it so we always miss the time frame we set!"
Bear: "Hey, the aufur said they're gonna pace their releases better now. Have some faith."
Cat: "O-Okay... Here I gooo...! VOLUME 23 IS COMING OUT WITHIN A YEAR! PLEASE LOOK FORWARD TO IT!"
Bear: "Hmm. Not saying *which* year, huh? So you went fur a wide range while also minimizing the damage even if it's late again."
Cat: "We'll still do our best to release it within a reasonable time frame...!"

Bonus Short Story: G Channel: Job Build

An Unspecified Day, A Certain Streamer's Channel

"All eyes on G! Welcome to my channel!" Accompanied by dazzling effects, a devilish girl appeared in a CGI room and announced the start of the show.

It was nine o'clock in the evening, so it was time for her weekly chat stream. Once she was done with the greeting, G began answering questions.

"First one! 'They say that it doesn't matter what job you had before taking an Overlord job. What were you as a high-rank?' Watch my older streams to find out!"

Her words sparked a fresh flow of comments.

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Lmao
Looks like we got more newbies who don't know...
Oh c'mon, tell them
```

"Okay, fine! My main high-rank job is Magic Spearmaster, while my sub is Shadowmancer!"

```
Never heard of those...
Holy low profile
How'd you clear an Overlord dungeon with that scuffed build???
Obviously because she's G you donut
```

"Magic Spearmaster is basically just Magic Swordmaster for spears. It lets me add my magic elements to my weapon and use my

sub-job spells, plus I get sense skills for melee combat. I don't really fight using IRL techniques, so I really need those abilities."

Makes sense
You say that like there's people who DO fight using their IRL skills
There's a buncha ppl like that in Tenchi
Those lunatics don't count

G's explanation was generally met with understanding, but there was another question mixed in.

But swords are more popular and would give you more options, wouldn't they?

"Well, yeah, there's more people who make and use swords, but I'll always use spears instead."

Ohhh?
Why the fixation...?
I sense a deep conviction here

"I mean, I can use them to poke my enemies from inside R'lyeh! And if they get annoyed and jump in, they're sitting ducks! People know not to do that now, though, so these days it only really works on monsters!"

LMAO devious
That's basically an attack from out of bounds
D-Deep conviction?
Uh, G friends? Is this really your great Overlord?
This was her playstyle before she got the job. It's all good.

"And Shadowmancer lets me suppress light levels! I can even block lasers!"

That's...pretty limited
Girl, save yourself from low-rank spell spam and grab Umbramancer instead
If you need defense, isn't Wallmancer the better choice?
I'm sorry, did you just call her chest a wall?
Hey, she's well-endowed... In her second form, at least

"Oh come on, you guys," G said with a chuckle. "You're making fun of it, but Shadowmancer is great! It's a must-have for me!"

But why?

Seeing that question—and a lot of similar ones—G replied, "It lets me easily manage light levels even when I'm recording outside."

...Those eyes are 100% serious
Well, recording is kinda her thing
G is so cute

"Also, it gives me an advantage against King of Light. If I take care of his lasers, it ends up just being a battle between our summons. That's a pretty equal fight even without my R'lyeh."

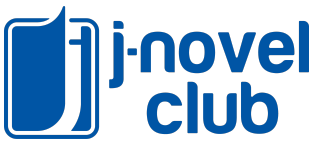
KoL? Did something happen between you two?
Did you get caught up in some trouble he caused?
Aren't you the one who usually causes trouble, though?

The audience wanted to know more, but she couldn't elaborate on this point. She wasn't lying about Shadowmancer being helpful for recording, but another significant reason she'd taken the job was

to oppose King of Light, F—her older brother, Seiga Fujiwara.

Even though she'd evaded the question, she had once again held a successful stream for her audience of enchanted fans.

The End



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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 22
by Sakon Kaidou

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